

Shameful neglect: Indigenous child poverty in Canada ^[1]

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Full report PDF ^[2]

Executive summary

A recent surge of suicide attempts in the Cree community of Attawapiskat, Ontario drew national attention to the effects that poor living conditions and housing shortages have on First Nation children. The outrageous reality is that the majority of children on First Nation reserves in Canada live in poverty and their situation is getting worse. This report includes poverty rates on reserves and in the territories, something never before examined using the 2011 National Household Survey data. The most recently available data show that child poverty rates for status First Nations children living on-reserve rose to a staggering 60% in 2010. By contrast, poverty rates among Indigenous children living off reserve have improved somewhat, while non-Indigenous children have seen little change to their circumstances since 2005.

Disaggregating child poverty by identity reveals three broad groupings, or tiers, of suffering in Canada.

The worst is among status First Nation children, 51% of whom live in poverty, rising to 60% on reserve. A second tier encompasses other Indigenous children and disadvantaged groups. The children of immigrants in Canada suffer a child poverty rate of 32% while racialized (visible minority) children have a poverty rate of 22%. Between these are found nonstatus First Nations children (30%), Inuit children (25%) and Métis children (23%). The third tier of poverty consists of children who are non-Indigenous, non-racialized and non-immigrant, where the rate of 13% is similar to the average among all countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Even among status First Nation children living on reserve, poverty is not evenly distributed, with shocking rates of 76% in Manitoba and 69% in Saskatchewan, easily the worst in the country. At the other end is Quebec where the poverty rate is 37%. This is largely due to the relatively low poverty rate (23%) among the children of Eeyou Itschee (James Bay Cree), who benefit from a resource revenue sharing agreement. If we break it down by cities, Winnipeg, Regina, and Saskatoon have the highest Indigenous child poverty with rates of 42%, 41%, and 39% respectively. At 19%, Toronto has the lowest Indigenous child poverty rate.

This report examines poverty as measured by income. In actuality, poverty can be exacerbated by other conditions, creating additional barriers for children trying to achieve their full potential. On reserve, these barriers include chronic underfunding of schools and child welfare services, crowded housing, and undrinkable water, to name just a few of many examples.

Canada's overall child poverty rate of 18% is among the worst in the OECD, putting it in 27th place out of 34 countries. That is more than three times higher than the Nordic countries, where child poverty rates average 5%. This clearly suggests that Canada could do a great deal more to address child poverty, regardless of its identity or location.

But the fact that status First Nation children living on reserve in Manitoba have a poverty rate fifteen times that affecting children in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden suggests a far deeper problem, one that should provoke outrage and an immediate policy response. By way of modest first steps, this report recommends action on the following priorities:

1. Report poverty rates on reserves and in the territories;
2. Improve direct income support;
3. Improve employment prospects; and
4. Begin to implement longer-term solutions.

These first steps will not eliminate the enormous gap in circumstance between children in Canada, but they may slow or reverse a worsening trend of increasing poverty among status First Nations children on reserve and increasing disparity between the three tiers of child poverty in this country. If we are to restore some hope to communities suffering from a pandemic of adolescent suicide, it is one place to start.

Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: aboriginal ^[4]

child poverty ^[5]

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