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The Overrepresentation of Aboriginal Children in Canada

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Introduction

When people started coming to Canada, it forced Indigenous people to struggle, with newcomers trying to take over and diminish the Indigenous population. As time went on, we saw Canada emerge and saw an increase in cultural genocide. Cultural genocide is the destruction of a culture by eliminating cultural traditions (Sinclair, 2020). Canada did this by introducing residential schools. Residential schools forced Indigenous children to attend by leaving their families and culture behind and learning the ways of Canadian life (Sinclair, 2020). With the closure of residential schools came the Sixties Scoop. The Sixties Scoop occurred between 1960 and 1980 when many Indigenous children were put into the child welfare system. Therefore, transracial adoption occurred, where the adoption of a child from one culture, Aboriginal, to another culture, Canadian. (Sinclair, 2020).

The introduction of residential schools and the Sixties Scoop demonstrates the unfair treatment of Indigenous people. In 2011, there were 392,100 Aboriginal children aged 14 and younger, representing twenty-eight per cent of the Aboriginal culture. In contrast, non-Aboriginal children represented seventeen per cent of the total non-Aboriginal population (Government of Canada, 2016). There were more than 14,000 Aboriginal children in foster care, accounting for seven per cent of all children in Canada, yet almost half of the children in foster care. Further, fifty-four per cent of Aboriginal children were living with non-Aboriginal foster parents (Government of Canada, 2016). We will discuss the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children compared to non-Aboriginal children, the history of Aboriginal people, and how the different cultural aspects lead to different understandings. We will see how the misunderstanding of Aboriginal people has led to an unfair life and that we need a better apprehension of their traumas that were faced with by political power and challenge these actions.

Literature Review

The article “The Adoption of Frances T: Blood, Belonging, and Aboriginal Transracial

Adoption in the Twentieth Century Canada" by Allyson Stevenson describes the case of Frances T. The government placed Aboriginal children into non-Aboriginal foster homes as a way to diminish the Indigenous culture. Allyson used the term Indian to refer to Indigenous people and described the Indian Act. The Indian Act was a way to ensure that any adoptions of Indian children were being integrated into the Canadian lifestyle, forgoing Aboriginal identity. Throughout history, there was an ongoing colonization of the Aboriginal kinship system, and the Indians Act desired to individualize Aboriginal people by assimilating Indigenous practices towards the Canadian norm (Stevenson, 2015).

Frances T was a mixed-ancestry child whose mother was Métis, and her father was white. She was legally adopted into an Indian family in the 1930s (Stevenson, 2015). Historically, officials prevented the adoption of children who were non-Indian by Indian families. However, Frances's case was not brought to the attention of officials, so her adoption went through. When the Branch realized this, they started proceeding with her case in an attempt to remove Frances from her adoptive family (Stevenson, 2015). Regardless of Frances being mixed race, she was considered primarily white until she was adopted into the Indian family, making her Indian. Many arguments were made, such as neither blood nor race was a determining factor in who identified as Indian, but these were ignored. The Branch, instead, imposed its definition of who can and cannot qualify as Indian and thereby restricted Indian's abilities to define adoption through their kinship (Stevenson, 2015).

Frances's case demonstrates the counter-narrative of colonization through kinship, race, gender, and legal status (Stevenson, 2015). However, through a joint partnership between the Canadian Welfare Council (CWC) and the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW), they agreed on a new role for social workers to help resolve the Indian problem. This Indian problem was the psychological barrier preventing close social and economic contact between Indians and non-Indians, and stated that the government should help Indians achieve this (Stevenson, 2015). The CWC and CASW suggested a goal to assimilate Indians into Canada's lifestyle, allowing them the same rights and opportunities as other Canadian citizens (Stevenson, 2015). As we can see, this did not help Indians pursue their cultural traditions and have the same rights; instead, they had to forsake their culture.

Despite this effort, Aboriginal children were still being colonized. The government and adoptive services elaborated that adoptive parents and children have strong relationships just as birth parents did; in some cases, they do, but when they dismiss the culture of young children, this would not be the case. In order to prove this relationship, the courts issued new birth certificates, indicating that the child would receive the same inheritance and legal rights as a natural child, and also sealing birth records, eliminating their cultural identity (Stevenson, 2015).

The article "Indigenous Children's Rights: A Sociological Perspective on Boarding Schools and Transracial Adoption" by Madeline Engel, Norma Phillips, and Frances Dellacava researched residential schools in Canada, the USA, and Australia. However, we will focus on Canadian residential schools. As mentioned, residential schools were a process of assimilating Aboriginal children into Canadian culture, also known as acculturating (Engel et al., 2012). The residential schools were introduced in 1879 and peaked in 1931. However, from 1879 until the 1970s, there were over eighty residential schools, with the last school ending in 1984 (Engel et al., 2012). Because these are schools, we would think that they prioritized education; however, this was not

the case. In 1938, seventy-five per cent of Aboriginal children had a below Grade 3 level, and only three per cent passed Grade 6. However, it slightly improved in 1986, when almost half of Aboriginal children on reserves had below a ninth-grade education, and less than twenty-five per cent graduated high school (Engel et al., 2012). Through this, we see that education was the purpose, but rather, assimilating Aboriginal children into Canadian culture. If it was not to educate, how did the schools acculturate Aboriginal children?

Sexual and physical abuse was a massive theme seen in residential schools. In 1990, the "Indian Child Protection Act" was to provide background checks for employees at the school and have an abuse reporting system; however, this did not occur due to lack of funds (Engel et al.,2012). As a result, many children suffer from physical and sexual abuse by teachers. In British Columbia (B.C.), many girls were sterilized to avoid unwanted pregnancies that could result from rape (Engel et al., 2012). Along with abuse, they were also neglected. Many of the students were malnourished and had communicable diseases, a notable one being tuberculosis, which had a death rate of forty to seventy per cent in just one decade (Engel et al., 2012).

In 1984, the last residential school closed, and the closure of residential schools led to a mass increase in Aboriginal children in foster care. Nevertheless, many children fell between the system's cracks (Engel et al., 2012). People of power saw Indigenous for their weaknesses; their cultural patterns consisted of alcohol, neglect, abuse, poverty, and other poor conditions (Engel et al., 2012). They failed to realize that these weaknesses were a consequence of Canadian choices. They ignored the strengths of Indigenous families, such as valuing family over a single individual, relationships over careers, learning through imitation, and having an extensive family system, which meant more support (Engel et al., 2012). Because they overlooked their strengths and avoided helping them with their struggles, social workers scooped up, hence the Sixties Scoop, children without parents' knowledge or permission. As a result, between the 1960s and 1990s, there were over 11,000 Aboriginal children who were removed from their homes with no notice (Engel et al., 2012).

Today, Aboriginal children are still the main population in the child welfare system. Sinclair turned the Sixties Scoop into the Millennium Scoop for two reasons: first, the social workers are now Indigenous, and second, the children in foster care are with families or institutions rather than adoptive homes (Sinclair, 2020). This is quite different from the 1960s, as social workers were white Canadians, not Indigenous people, and children were required to enter the foster system (Sinclair, 2020). As a result, Indigenous tribes have become more involved in the adoption cases. They look for open adoptions, legalizing customary and kinship adoption, and an adoption registry to repatriate the adoption should the parent seek it (Engel et al., 2012). Due to past trauma, Indigenous people prefer to give their children to family members, tribal members, and other Indigenous people before looking at non-Indigenous people (Engel et al., 2012).

The "(Re) Conceptualizing Neglect: Considering the Overrepresentation of Indigenous Children in Child Welfare Systems in Canada," by Johanna Caldwell and Vandna Sinha, describes that the child welfare system is a persistent problem that has a long history of separating Indigenous families. Again, this all began with the use of residential schools, essentially "killing the Indian in the child" (Caldwell & Sinha, 2020). In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) came to light and called on all governments in Canada to annually report on Aboriginal

children in care, increase resources for family support and preservation, acknowledge the impact of residential schools, prepare workers to include community-based healing interventions, increase devolved power in Indigenous child welfare settings, and implement culturally informed parenting programs (Caldwell & Sinha, 2020). The call for action was significant and could allow Indigenous people to cope with past trauma.

As noted, the residential schools were an act to engage in cultural genocide against Indigenous people in Canada. Throughout this time, approximately 150,000 Indigenous children attended residential schools (Caldwell & Sinha, 2020). Many of the children experienced sexual and physical abuse, emotional maltreatment, and conditions of poverty. However, in the government's eyes, the removal of Indigenous children was justified due to the living conditions of Indigenous people. However, these experiences of Indigenous children resulted in unresolved grief, which is still present today among the new generations who are viewed as outsiders (Caldwell & Sinha, 2020). In the National Household Survey, the data demonstrates the overrepresentation of Indigenous children in foster care. In 2016, Aboriginal children were placed in child welfare thirteen times more than non-Aboriginal children. Further, First Nation children's is sixteen times higher, and Métis children were six times higher than non-Aboriginal children (Caldwell & Sinha, 2020). So, we have seen the government state the will for change, yet nothing has changed; Aboriginal children are still overrepresented in the child welfare system. Why? Many social workers see Indigenous parents as neglectful towards their children instead of understanding their trauma, which leads to different parenting styles.

The most complex conceptualization of neglect moves past caregivers' responsibility toward societal factors that shape how neglect is understood and experienced. In this way, neglect is understood through a bioecological framework where child development is a bidirectional proximal process influenced by both immediate and distal environmental factors (Caldwell & Sinha, 2020). They presented Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory to acknowledge the role of culture. Bronfenbrenner suggested that culture manifests in the macrosystem, which includes cultural beliefs, resources, and lifestyles (Caldwell & Sinha, 2020). However, others argue that culture lies in the microsystem, which looks at interpersonal relationships, while others state that culture is intertwined through each system (Caldwell & Sinha, 2020). Along with this idea of neglect in Indigenous families, they also looked at risk factors associated with families.

They used an actuarial risk assessment to assess risk factors, which estimated the probability of a critical event occurring using empirical evidence (Caldwell & Sinha, 2020). However, the use of this tool in assessing Indigenous families was inaccurate because it does not consider the cultural elements of child-rearing (Caldwell & Sinha, 2020). Different cultures have different parenting methods, and using a tool that does not accommodate these differences results in unreliable data. With the rise of research on Indigenous populations, there needs to be a tool that will accurately measure factors appropriately (Caldwell & Sinha, 2020).

The overrepresentation of Indigenous children in the system is driven by cases of neglect and risks, not in terms of actuality, but because of a misunderstanding of differences among cultures. The separation of Indigenous families has resulted in broken ties and trauma, which influences the development of children, thereby providing risks (Caldwell & Sinha, 2020). Aboriginal children were taken away from their parents at a young age, and instead of having

loving relationships, they were abused. How are they supposed to know how to parent when they never had any positive role models in life? If we understood this context, we could better provide support to Indigenous families instead of taking children away.

A research article "Navigating Structural Violence with Indigenous Families: The Contested Terrain of Early Childhood Intervention and the Child Welfare System in Canada" by Alison Gerlach, Annette Browne, Vandna Sinha, and Diana Elliot provides findings from a critical inquiry conducted in B.C., on Indigenous early childhood intervention programs, especially, the Aboriginal Infant Development Program (AIDP). They examine how AIDP influences the family and children's health and well-being and fostered child health equity by exploring the influence of, and relationships between, the child welfare system and Indigenous-specific early childhood intervention programs (Gerlach et al., 2017). In Canada, there are an estimated 1.4 million Indigenous people, making up 4.3 per cent of the population. In B.C., Indigenous children comprise eight per cent of the total child population; however, they are fifty-three per cent of the child population living in out-of-home care (Gerlach et al., 2017). However, even with the government stating change, Indigenous children are still being removed from their homes by social workers more than the peak of residential schools. First Nations are examined four times more than non-Indigenous children; the primary notion for investigation is neglect, which is closely related to poverty and household factors (Gerlach et al., 2017).

The policies associated with the child welfare system are constructed in normative standards, which are non-Indigenous, of parenting. As a result, when Indigenous parents are evaluated, they are considered to be non-compliance with normal parenting behaviours. However, the AIDP program provides workers with a background and training in early childhood education, home visits, outreach, and centred-based early intervention for Indigenous families (Gerlach et al., 2017). AIDP provides Indigenous families with the support that is needed when facing the welfare system. This research indicated that AIDP workers focus on having child protection workers with the resources needed to address risks beyond individual parents and help support parents by accessing basic needs. If there was failure to meet any means, it resulted in poverty, which, as we have seen, leads to a misunderstanding within the child welfare system by stating that the parents are being neglectful to their children (Gerlach et al., 2017). Ensuring the proper support to Indigenous families can help families be aware of what is going on and how to attend to the demands.

In the "Intersection and Parallels of Aboriginal Peoples' and Racialized Migrants' Experiences of Colonialism and Child Welfare in Canada" article written by Jennifer Ma identified the difficulties of Aboriginal children in Canada. It shows disparate outcomes across health, education, and economic factors within the welfare system. The Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect released that in 2008, for every 1000 First Nation children, there were 140.6 child maltreatment-related investigations. In contrast, for every 1000 non-Aboriginal children, there were 33.5 investigations (Ma, 2020). First Nations children were 5.1 times more likely to be substantiated, 6.7 times more likely to be opened for ongoing services, 8.7 times more likely to be involved within the child welfare court, and 12.4 times more likely to be placed in out-of-home care than non-Aboriginal children (Ma, 2020). We can see from previous articles and this one that the over-representation of Aboriginal children in the child welfare system is directly connected to the trauma of residential schools and the Sixties Scoop.

Today, we can see that the trauma experienced is still evident in Aboriginal people today. The TRC report indicated the long-term impacts, scars, present effects of colonialism, and the persistent tension between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people (Ma, 2020). Even with residential schools closing, children were forced to leave their homes, which, as we have seen, resulted in children being lost to their community and culture during the Sixties Scoop. As stated, the government felt that Aboriginal parents would neglect their children due to having alcohol in their homes and a lack of supervision, and this neglectful behaviour became the root cause of removing children (Ma, 2020). However, as we look deeper into it, we see that neglect was not the product of family life but from the colonization and systematic racism towards Aboriginals (Ma, 2020). However there has been some growth, but it is not significant enough to overcome the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in the child welfare system.

Canadian governments have lacked in providing sufficient support and protective measures for Indigenous populations. The Child and Family Service Act was to protect children; however, this was not the case. Instead, the act conceals the oppressive predisposition of the welfare system, demonstrating the assimilative acts that occurred during the Sixties Scoop (Ma, 2020). Instead, the child welfare system should look at the strengths of Aboriginal people and help to relieve other stressors that are present due to government decisions. If social workers were knowledgeable about Aboriginal people, they would learn to think critically and have self-awareness to ensure that colonialism does not occur (Ma, 2020). We could understand better how to help Aboriginal people and avoid repeating history. It is essential to eliminate racial biases and understand and respect the differences among cultures so that we, as a whole, can reach an anti-colonial and anti-racist practice (Ma, 2020).

The article “An Analysis of the First Nations Component of the Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect” by Vandna Sinha, Nico Trocmé, Barbara Fallon, and Bruce MacLaurin discusses the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children. In Canada, Aboriginal children represent five per cent of the child population, but eighteen per cent of maltreatment and seventeen per cent of substantiated investigations in 2003 (Sinha et al., 2013). As we have seen, for many years, Aboriginal children represented more than twelve per cent of the children in care, with over 11,000 Aboriginal children adopted between 1960 and 1990 (Sinha et al., 2013).

In 2008, there was an estimation of 140.6 maltreatment-related investigations for every 1,000 First Nations living in geographic areas; in contrast, there were 33.5 investigations for every 1,000 non-Aboriginal children living in the same area. This data demonstrates that the rate of investigations is 4.2 higher among First Nations than among non-Aboriginal children (Sinha et al., 213). Risk and neglect were the more frequent cause of investigations among Aboriginal children, and if these rates were equal among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, it would be 1.0. However, it is not. Instead, the ratios are 2.0 for physical abuse, 3.0 for sexual abuse, 6.0 for neglect, and 4.5 for risk investigations (Sinha et al., 2013). They also identified that the most common risk factor concerns for Aboriginals were substance abuse, 55.7% involved First Nation children vs 25.3% for non-Aboriginal children; domestic abuse, 43.7% for First Nation children vs 31.6% for non-Aboriginal children; and have fewer reports, 40.3% in First Nations vs 31.5% in non-Aboriginal investigations (Sinha et al., 2013). As for household risk factors, the main concerns were low income, 53.6% involved First Nations vs 31.8 % of non-aboriginal, and the caregiving resource strain, 56.3% for First Nations and 46.4% for non-Aboriginal children (Sinha et al., 2013).

Conclusion

Aboriginal people have been disproportionately facing more challenges than non-Aboriginal people. Neglect is seen as a risk factor for children and was the primary basis for removing children from their homes, but the understanding of neglect differs. As we look at Aboriginal children and families, we need to note that they live in a different environment with different beliefs than non-Aboriginal families. The history they have faced plays a substantial role in how they view and understand the world, and it has led to a difference in how they do things, like child-rearing practices. When we do not consider their cultural aspects and the difficulties they faced, it leads to a misunderstanding and the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in the child welfare system. Instead, suppose governments and social work programs could teach others this knowledge, providing a safe environment for Aboriginal people to engage with their cultural and belief systems. In that case, we can reduce, hopefully eliminate, this overrepresentation of Aboriginal children.

Throughout the paper, we have seen that the data indicates the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in each element mentioned. The need to break this historical and present pattern of removing Aboriginal children from their homes is essential. The child welfare system must educate itself on Aboriginal culture and provide the support needed to address the factors given to it. The Indigenous population has struggled for decades, and there is a significant need to challenge these ways by learning more about the differences and how we can help without including judgments or criticisms. When we do not provide resources to the Indigenous population, we are denying their rights and freedom. Then we take this by stating that they are failing as parents when there are differences in parenting, and the trauma they experienced affects what they know—being separated from their families as young children provided them with no loving or supportive relationships, just hardships. How are they supposed to know what is considered the ‘right’ way of parenting? By knowing more about their history and the trauma presented, we can better understand and help Indigenous people cope with their traumas and help provide basic needs. Overall, we need to do more to help the Indigenous population by learning about their history and helping in ways that represent their cultures and not the white Canadian view.

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