

24 Shaking Off the Colonial Inheritance: Homeless Indigenous Youth Resist, Reclaim and Reconnect

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Introduction

What does it mean and what does it look like for all members of a community to be a part of a child's family? What is involved in the raising of children when every person in a community has a role to play? Within Indigenous worldviews, this means that every individual has a contribution to make, not only to their biological children, adopted children, nieces and nephews, and children in their care at a particular time, but to all children who live around them or who belong to their community. Family includes the extended family, such as grandparents, aunts and uncles and members of the child's clan. This means that all community members have a right and a responsibility to care for all children, who are seen as gifts from the Creator. As stated by Greenwood and de Leeuw, "children, particularly young children, cannot of course be disentangled from the broader families, communities, and Nations that sustain them" (2007:51). In practice, communal care for children means that they often live in homes with both parents and grandparents; that they may live at times with their parents and at other times with grandparents or other extended family members to learn whatever such members may teach them; and, that if biological parents are struggling with raising their children for

any reason, not only family members, but also community members who are in a position to assist, will do so by taking in these children. There is no stigma connected to not living with one's biological parents. In fact, in the past, living with extended family members and moving from one household to another has always been viewed as the norm in Indigenous communities (Baskin, 2011).

Although these beliefs are still alive within Indigenous families and communities, they often are not put into action. This is the result of centuries of colonization, which continues to negatively impact Indigenous Peoples today. Many reports and publications by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers view the child welfare system as a strong arm of colonization (Bennett et al., 2005; Blackstock, 2009; First Nations Child and Family Task Force, 1993; Trocme et al., 2004; Thibodeau & Peigan, 2007). According to one report, women most likely to lose their children were poor, young, Indigenous, and came from families that had previous involvement with the child welfare system (Rutman et al., 2005). Another report states that young Indigenous women in Canada have the highest rates of adolescent pregnancy when compared to non-Indigenous females of the same age. In fact, First Nations female adolescents are four times more likely to become pregnant than non-First Nations adolescents, and Inuit adolescents are 12 times more likely than non-Inuit adolescents to become pregnant (Ordolis, 2007). Ordolis links the high rates of Indigenous adolescent pregnancy to socio-economic inequalities such as poverty, as adolescents may not be able to afford birth control, are not educated about effective methods of birth control, see having children as a way out of their family homes or as a way to create some sort of happiness and purpose in their lives, and have few role models who show them anything different (Ordolis, 2007).

Demographically, Indigenous women in Canada are more than twice as likely to be single parents compared to non-Indigenous women (19% vs. 8%) and typically have more children than non-Indigenous women (2.6 children over a lifetime compared with 1.5 children) (Niccols et al., 2010a). For women who occupy disadvantaged and marginalized social positions, the removal of children by child welfare agencies is most often based on "neglect" (Niccols et al., 2010a; Niccols et al., 2010b). According to Niccols et al., "neglect is a direct consequence of abject degrees of poverty, poor housing conditions and high instances of alcohol and substance abuse" (2010a:324). They also point to serious social and economic challenges such as homelessness, lack of affordable housing, and the struggle to provide "stable and nurturing" environments for children as barriers to women's ability to parent (2010a:324). This analysis is gaining attention as a perspective from which to examine how social structures and systems impact upon individuals, families and communities (de Leeuw et al., 2010; Loppie-Reading & Wien, 2009).

In order to understand the current struggles of Indigenous Peoples today, one needs to understand the history and treatment of Indigenous Peoples since the time of contact with those who came from European countries. It is crucial to acknowledge the historical and intergenerational impacts of colonization on the lives of Indigenous Peoples. Colonization can be understood as the settlement of Turtle Island¹ by French and British settlers in the 1500s, which signaled the beginning of troubling times for Indigenous Peoples (Miller, 2000). Colonialism brought disease, death, and displacement of Indigenous Peoples through forced settlement on reserves (putting an end to traditional, sustainable, nomadic ways of life), imposition of government legislation such as the Indian Act, legislated assimilation policies such as the loss of Indian status in exchange for the right to vote in Canadian elections or to attend university, residential schooling, harmful child welfare practices (such as the “60s scoop,” where thousands of Indigenous children were taken from their homes and communities by child protection agencies during the 1960s), and the ongoing marginalization of Indigenous Peoples (Miller, 2000). It is this long lasting colonial legacy that is seen as the major contributor to the contemporary social ills that plague Indigenous Peoples today (Bombay et al., 2009; Chanson-neuve, 2008; de Leeuw et al., 2010; Ordolis, 2007; Shepard et al., 2006).

Intergenerational trauma, also referred to in political terms as historical trauma, explains how traumatic experiences from colonialism have been carried over from one generation of Indigenous Peoples to the next (Bombay et al., 2009). Two of the intergenerational experiences that have impacted Indigenous Peoples in particular are residential schools and the child welfare system, which resulted in the breakdown of traditional Indigenous kinship and family structures, impacting parenting across generations and disrupting traditional systems of social support (Horejsi et al., 1992; Niccols et al., 2010a; 2010b; Rutman et al., 2005; Shepard et al., 2006; Thibodeau & Peigan, 2007).

The residential school system is an example of Canada’s shameful “Indian” policies used over a long period of time (Dion Stout & Kipling, 2003). These institutions, whose legacy continues to impact Indigenous families, disrupted and even destroyed many traditional ways of life for Indigenous Peoples. Residential schools removed children at an early age from their homes and communities, and forced them to live within these institutions, where Indigenous languages and cultures were forbidden. In recent years, many Indigenous people have disclosed their experiences in these schools, which include painful stories of sexual and physical abuse by authorities who operated the schools and the death of many children at the hands of these same authorities (Annett, 2007; Dion Stout & Kipling 2003).

1. A name that originates from the Haudenosaunee (“People of the Longhouse”) for the North American continent, which is now used by many Indigenous groups.

The purpose of this chapter, which is based on findings from four research projects that took place in Toronto, is to explore with homeless Indigenous youth the conditions under which they became homeless, including the impacts of historical trauma from the residential school and child welfare systems, how they can be helped today, and what can be done to prevent homelessness from continuing in the future.

Institutional Child Protection: Structural Racism

Indigenous People's history and experiences with the child welfare system often paint stories of troubling, discriminatory and harmful interactions that have left deep scars in the memory, and present day reality, of Indigenous Peoples. In Canada, there are three times more Indigenous children in the child welfare system today than the number of children in residential schools at their height in the 1940s (de Leeuw et al., 2010; Salmon, 2010). The child welfare system continues to be criticized for placing more emphasis on the removal of Indigenous children from their families than on addressing the root causes that impact Indigenous Peoples' ability to parent (Ordolis, 2007). A major area of concern is that the policy behind child protection work continues to push "the best interests of the child" (as defined by mainstream society) rather than seeking the well-being of the family (as defined by Indigenous worldviews) (Rutman et al., 2005).

Child protection is an extension of colonization in the tradition of residential schooling, as it has continued to remove children from their communities rather than providing the financial and social supports necessary to help families care for their children within Indigenous worldviews. For many Indigenous families, the impacts of colonization are often interpreted as individual psychopathologies, meaning that individual parents are seen as lacking parenting skills or misusing substances, rather than taking into consideration how colonization destroyed Indigenous economies and methods of collectively raising children. Such assessments, usually by professional social workers, may lead to the removal of children from Indigenous families. As stated by Blackstock of the Gitksan Nation, director of First Peoples Child and Family Caring Society, "the concept that we [social workers] can do harm or even do evil rarely appears on the optical radar screen of professional training, legislation or practice" (2009:31). Based on the assessments of mainly non-Indigenous social workers, Indigenous children are then placed in mostly white foster homes, which often lead to more white foster homes, adoptive homes or group homes.

The documented experiences of Indigenous youth involved in the child welfare system too often include histories of violence, sexual and physical abuse, mental health challenges, incarceration, poverty, homelessness, stigma, racism, and

struggles with identity (Baskin, 2007; 2009; 2011; BCCEWH, 2010; Bombay et al., 2009; Chansonneuve, 2008; de Leeuw et al., 2010; Fry, 2010; Horejsi et al., 1992; Niccols et al., 2010a; 2010b; NWAC, 2007; Ordolis, 2007; Pacey, 2009; Salmon, 2007; Smith et al., 2006; Shepard et al., 2006). All of these histories apply to Indigenous adults as well; however, an important difference between homeless adults and homeless youth is that youth are forced to leave home at an early age, before they have a chance to fully develop into adults (Cauce & Morgan, 1994; Fitzgerald, 1995; Golden et al., 1999; MacLean et al., 1999). Generally, many Indigenous youth who are homeless come from the care of the child protection system, such as adoptive, foster or group homes (Cauce & Morgan, 1994; Fall & Berg, 1996; Fitzgerald, 1995; Lindsey et al., 2000; Maclean et al., 1999; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006). In fact, according to one study, between 25% and 50% of homeless Indigenous youth were previously in the care of foster homes (Lindsey et al., 2000). This is supported by a 2006 report from the Public Health Agency of Canada that states that over half of homeless youth have gone through the child welfare system. In these foster homes, away from their families, cultures and communities, Indigenous children and youth are stripped of their identities (spirituality, languages and cultural practices) (Blackstock, 2008; 2009; Carriere, 2005; 2006; 2008; Carriere & Scarth, 2007; Fournier & Crey, 1997; Hughes, 2006; Reid, 2005; Richardson & Nelson, 2007; Sinclair, 2007; Trocme et al., 2004). Even without any form of direct abuse, this psychological, emotional and spiritual neglect may harm children (Blackstock, 2008; 2009; Carriere, 2005; 2006; 2008; Carriere & Scarth, 2007; Fournier & Crey, 1997; Hughes, 2006; Reid, 2005; Richardson & Nelson, 2007; Sinclair, 2007; Trocme et al., 2004). Once child protection takes over the lives of Indigenous children, the children are often worse off than with their biological families because of abuse and/or disconnection from their communities and cultures (Blackstock, 2008; 2009; Sinclair, 2007; Trocme et al., 2004).

Once a child becomes an adolescent, when issues of identity become extremely important, they begin to question and challenge their situations, and their behaviour can be seen as confrontational, rebellious and disrespectful. These responses on the part of Indigenous youth often lead to behaviours (i.e. not going to school, ignoring the house rules, staying out all night and projecting their anger onto family members) that are viewed as problematic by their foster and adoptive families. These behaviours build over time and become more frequent with foster and adoptive families not understanding the reasons for such “acting out” and responding in punitive ways, which leads to youth running away, or being told to leave the home. From a structural perspective, this is a direct result of an oppressive system that removes Indigenous children in the first place, rather than simply being the result of individual problems in the foster, adoptive or group homes. Perhaps a better way to decrease the rate of homelessness among

youth is to prevent them from being removed from their communities or from leaving adoptive and foster homes in the first place. To accomplish this, we must understand why so many Indigenous children are removed from their families by child protection and why youth feel compelled to leave their adoptive and foster homes before they are fully developed adults (Baskin, 2007; Fitzgerald, 1995; Maclean et al., 1999). Since Indigenous youth are overrepresented in the child welfare system (Blackstock, 2008; 2009; Du Hamel, 2003; Thomas, 2003) and likely make up a large percentage of the homeless population (Golden et al., 1999), it may be important to explore a possible link between these. Perhaps by examining the gaps in the child welfare system, including both Indigenous and non-Indigenous child protection agencies, areas for positive change can be found to better serve Indigenous youth who may be currently at risk of homelessness, and to prevent the next generation of children from becoming homeless.

Along these lines, one hopeful change lies in Bill 210 of the Child and Family Services Act (CFSA). Often referred to as the “Transformation Agenda”, this amendment, added in 2005, focuses on differential responses (more family centered so that children can live with extended family members rather than go into foster care with people they do not know), alternative conflict resolution (alternatives to court proceedings, which occur when child welfare workers apprehend children or need to make them permanent wards of the state) and planning for permanent care (care by extended family members, or adoption) (Ministry of Child and Youth Services, 2011). Bill 210 also requires child welfare workers to inquire whether the child has Indian status. Frankly, however, Indigenous child welfare agencies and their advocates have been suggesting these changes to the CFSA and have been using such practices for many years (Ministry of Child and Youth Services, 2010). Exploratory research from 2006 – 2010 on the implementation of the Transformation Agenda indicates that “generally less children are being admitted into care, more children are spending time in family-based care and there is less court involvement” since these changes were put in place (Goodman & Chung, 2011:3). Unfortunately, however, there are no references to Indigenous families in this research, and the authors caution that the results are still early and further evaluation is needed.

Youth Participants

Many sources state that there is no accurate data regarding numbers of homeless Indigenous people, let alone Indigenous youth (Golden et al., 1999; Layton, 2000; Native Counseling Service of Alberta, 2000; UNNS, 2001). In *Homelessness: The Making and Unmaking of a Crisis* (Layton, 2000), existing statistics show that Indigenous Peoples in general do have a high rate of homelessness as compared to the rest of Canadian society. The Native Counseling Service

of Alberta states that about 40% of homeless people in Canada are Aboriginal (NCSA, 2000: 3). Golden et al., report that Indigenous people make up 15% of the homeless population in Toronto and that “many Aboriginal Canadian youth from reserves and urban communities end up on the streets of Toronto” (1999:75). These statistics are troubling given that only four percent of the total Canadian population report some Indigenous ancestry (Statistics Canada, 2008a). It is important to note, however, that these statistics are usually taken from the number of shelter users, while many Indigenous people do not use the mainstream shelter system. The UNNS (2001) indicates that shelter users do not represent the entire Indigenous homeless population. Indigenous communities within cities are believed to have a high rate of concealed homelessness, and these numbers are not included in the official data. Concealed homelessness describes those in transition homes, jails and detox centers, and those who live in overcrowded, unstable, or inadequate housing. This also includes “couch surfing,” (when people stay with friends or family members for a short period of time, then move on to another person’s home). Another category that often goes unnoticed is people at risk of becoming homeless. This category consists of many Indigenous people who live in poor housing conditions and pay more than 30% of their income on rent. To completely capture the Indigenous homeless population, all of these categories of homelessness must be included (UNNS, 2001).

According to Statistics Canada (2008a), the Indigenous population is increasing: it has grown by 45% from 1996 to 2006, as compared to 8% for the rest of the Canadian population. Furthermore, children and youth aged 24 and under make up almost one-half (48%) of all Indigenous people, compared with 31% of the non-Indigenous population (Statistics Canada, 2008b). Castellano (2002) found that over 50% of the Indigenous population is under 25. Thus, not only is it likely that there is a high rate of Indigenous-specific homelessness, but it is also likely that a substantially higher rate of youth are homeless within this population.

Four research projects were conducted with Indigenous youth experiencing homelessness or at high risk of becoming homeless in Toronto from 2005 to 2011:

Project 1: Indigenous research methods, including the Medicine Wheel, a well-known symbol within many Indigenous Nations (which includes four quadrants), and the sharing circle (where participants take turns speaking about the topic) were implemented with 30 youth aged 15 – 24 who identified as homeless. Youth were invited to talk about how/where they grew up (eastern quadrant on the Medicine Wheel), what led to their becoming homeless (southern quadrant), what/who was helping them at the time of the project (western quadrant) and what suggestions they had for preventing future youth from becoming homeless (northern quadrant).

Project 2: This project explored how homelessness affects food security and involved 21 young Indigenous mothers aged 20 – 30² years old. They expressed their responses to the topic through a sharing circle and arts based methods (the women and their children created a mural from their responses).

Project 3: Also implementing the sharing circle and arts based methods, this project explored the connection between homelessness and poverty through the eyes of 12 Indigenous youth aged 20 – 30.

Project 4: Through the Medicine Wheel and sharing circles, 40 young mothers aged 18 – 30, 15 child welfare workers and 9 substance misuse treatment counselors (in separate groups) discussed their thoughts and experiences regarding possible relationships between homelessness, child welfare involvement and substance misuse.

Within the four research projects conducted with Indigenous youth, the most common themes found in the youth profiles included: 1) most did not grow up with their biological parents, and 2) their grandparents and parents had involvement with residential schooling and/or child welfare system as children. Many of them did not have what mainstream society would consider a “traditional” family. Rather, they grew up in non-Indigenous families they did not know, moved from one foster home to another or went back and forth between their biological and foster families. Many of these youth were placed as babies and young children into homes where they experienced abuse, neglect and racism (as a young child, one female youth was nicknamed “squaw” in a foster home). Neglect and racism also include lack of contact with Indigenous cultures, spirituality and other Indigenous people (Baskin, 2007; Carriere, 2006; Carriere, 2008; Carriere & Scarth, 2007; Sinclair, 2007; Thibodeau & Peigan, 2007).

Based on the topics of discussion that were put to the youth who participated in these projects, they connected their present or recent homelessness to their personal experiences of childhood trauma and also to a community struggling with the ongoing effects of colonization. The majority of the Indigenous youth in these projects spoke about the ongoing relationship of their families with institutionalized “care” of children. Many told stories of their grandparents growing up in residential schools, and of their parents and themselves growing up in foster care. Some who are now parents shared stories of their own children’s involvement in the child welfare system. These youth are not only living with their own trauma, but they carry that of their parents and grandparents as well. This is historical trauma.

2. In Indigenous communities today, people are considered to be youth until the age of 30.

One of the youth framed the impacts of trauma from growing up in numerous foster homes in the following way:

I never had a childhood. I went from a baby to an adult. I had to do things on my own. If I did anything wrong, I was beaten....I was no good at school. I can't read or write. I try, but I can't do it and that's because of being in and out of foster homes – 17 different foster homes, 14 different schools (Baskin et al., in press).

A substance misuse counselor who was interviewed for one of the projects added, “the system is biased, but it’s biased in terms of it doesn’t even understand the healing process” when it comes to historical trauma.

Youth who participated in the four research projects clearly believed that the child welfare system was difficult for them, their families and communities because, according to them, it mirrored residential schooling. The impact of the residential school system is a significant historical trauma that these youth have inherited from their grandparents and parents. Youths’ suggestions on how to make the child welfare system more helpful for Indigenous youth fell into three categories, discussed below: 1) the need to keep families intact and accept alternative forms of family; 2) the need to incorporate Indigenous worldviews and Indigenous social workers into the child welfare system; and 3) the need to address the effects of colonization.

Need to Keep Families Intact and Accept Alternate Forms of Family

One of the counselors who participated in research project number four provided an example of how the criminal justice and child welfare systems as racist because they make it impossible for some extended family members to care for their young relatives:

If women say, “I want my children to go to my brother,” so then child welfare has this big screening process. Get the brother’s criminal [records] check.... When we look at Native populations and at the racist criminal justice system and who might have a criminal justice record... Oh well, he has a criminal record, so then he can’t take the children. So then the children are removed from their family.... Because he has a criminal record doesn’t mean he can’t parent. (Project 4)

This counselor means that the criminal justice system is racist towards Indigenous people as they are overrepresented in jails and prisons, are more likely to

be charged and sentenced than non-Indigenous people for the same crimes and receive longer sentences for the same crimes (Baskin, 2011; Ross, 2009). When child welfare conducts the standard criminal records check, chances are high that the Indigenous relative who has stepped forward to care for children will have a record and then most likely will be excluded from being able to care for them.

The youth agreed with this counselor, questioning the policies that govern who is allowed to look after children. They stressed that these policies need to be changed to better fit the circumstances of Indigenous Peoples. Youth agreed that permanency planning (i.e. keeping children in one home for the long term) should be key and that workers ought to try to keep children with other family members if it is impossible for them to stay with their birth parents.

The youth also emphasized that taking children away from their communities to place them in non-Indigenous homes with little or no contact with their families was a repetition of placing children in residential schools in the past. They spoke of their understanding of the impacts of residential schooling on Indigenous Peoples, including stolen identities, despair and internalized oppression (which occurs when marginalized people believe the stereotypes that are created about them), which led to poverty, substance misuse, mental health challenges, homelessness and self-destructive behaviours. They noted that these impacts of residential schooling are similar to the impacts of child welfare experiences on their birth parents and on many of them.

These youth also insisted that some Indigenous families' lack of money should not be reason enough to reject their ability to parent. They pointed out that many lower income families do a good job of raising children. Moreover, youth believe two-parent families should not be preferred by the child welfare system. They spoke of knowing many Indigenous families with one parent raising children in a positive environment. They also believe that more effort needs to be put into keeping siblings together if families have to place their children into care. One promising suggestion was to create a group of parents who had been through the child welfare system, but now had their children back, who could offer information, support and resources to other parents who are struggling with raising their children.

Some of the youth who participated in the research projects moved back and forth between their biological families and foster homes. When asked about the reasons for such movement, youth explained that when a biological parent complied with the demands of child welfare, such as staying in counseling for a long enough period of time or completing a substance misuse treatment program, they were able to go back to these parents. However, when the parent stopped complying (i.e. by drinking, dropping out of counseling or getting back

with an abusive partner), the child would once again go to a foster home. This response on the part of child welfare authorities can be linked to colonization in a number of ways. Often when Indigenous parents are placed in a position of having to comply with demands of the child welfare system in order to get their children back, they are being set up for failure. For example, they may not voluntarily participate in programs; these programs likely do not examine the structural factors that led to their current situation and they may not be culturally relevant; there may not be enough emphasis on support and resources for the parent; there may be too many demands on the parent; or, assessments may be biased because the values and worldviews of Western society are being applied to Indigenous parents. Workers should realize that everyone is different and what is “normal” for an Indigenous family may not be “normal” for a White one.

Incorporate Indigenous Worldviews and People into the Child Welfare System

Another point emphasized by both youth and counselors is that more Indigenous customary care homes (equivalent of foster homes) and adoptive families need to be recruited. Youth insisted there must be more Indigenous families to adopt or care for children, and that provincial and federal governments need to encourage and support this process through funding and legislation which will equip families financially to care for children and give them the legal right to do so. Youth also stated that non-Indigenous families caring for Indigenous children should be obligated to keep them connected to their cultures.

The participants also talked about child protection workers. They suggested that workers should be Indigenous or, if not, have intensive training in issues affecting Indigenous people. They stressed the need for greater consistency in what helpers learn in their training and education about colonization, its current impacts, the strengths of Indigenous communities and beliefs and how to work collaboratively with families. More specifically, participants emphasized how helpers need to learn about historical trauma caused by the residential school system, and take into account what families need and want, rather than considering the child in isolation.

Youth understand that children have to be protected, but at the same time, Indigenous families have different needs that are often neglected by services that are supposed to assist them. With this in mind, youth talked about the importance of incorporating Indigenous cultures into their lives, no matter who their families are or where they live. They also emphasized that although having Indigenous family service agencies do the work of child protection services is an empowering idea, it does not work if these services have to use the same legislation as mainstream Children’s Aid Societies. Although Indigenous child welfare

agencies employ some or mostly Indigenous people and incorporate some Indigenous practices such as involving extended families as caregivers of children, they are required to follow the same legislation – the Child and Family Services Act (CFSA) – as all other child welfare authorities. This Act does not consider Indigenous values, particularly around collective responsibilities for raising children discussed above, nor does it acknowledge the impacts of colonization or the strengths of Indigenous Peoples and communities. It does not distinguish between parents who abuse and neglect their children, and parents who cannot provide for their children because of poverty, nor does it include prevention.

Addressing the Effects of Colonization

The youth who participated in these research projects also linked the current challenges of Indigenous communities, such as poverty, to colonization. They adamantly took the stand that if being poor is such a concern, the state should provide the necessary funds to support families. They strongly declared that, “after all, the government is the reason why so many Indigenous people are living in poverty in the first place” (Baskin, 2007).

They questioned the rationale for continuing to remove Indigenous children from their families and communities. They were all in agreement with one youth who stated:

Obviously, taking children from their communities and putting them in residential schools was a horrible thing to do. Everybody knows this and it's becoming public knowledge. Even the government has sort of acknowledged this by apologizing [Prime Minister Stephen Harper's statement of apology on June 11, 2008]. So why then are they continuing to remove so many kids today through what they call child protection and putting them in White homes where their experiences are pretty much the same as the survivors of residential schools? (Baskin et al., 2012)

Participants also expressed a need for more Indigenous policy makers to change child welfare legislation. They explained that hiring Indigenous child welfare workers without involving Indigenous people in policy-making would simply mean “putting a brown face on it”. This may “soften the blow” for some families, but will also continue to oppress many.

The Ontario government continues to blame a lack of cultural services, meaning Indigenous-run social services agencies based on Indigenous worldviews, for the problems of Indigenous youth. The government promotes cultural programming, such as the learning of Indigenous values, participation in spiritual cer-

emonies and healing circles, and mentoring by Elders, as the remedy to youth homelessness and other social problems (Wilson, 2011). Social inequalities, in the government's view, are not a political issue and do not require social change, but rather that individuals and communities take responsibility for youth seen as "at risk". Communities and agencies must adapt while government ignores the real inequalities of racism, classism and sexism. "Brown faces" having control of Indigenous child welfare will not lead to access and opportunity for Indigenous youth, but paying attention to the structural barriers to wellbeing might. Of most significance is the fact that the current CFSA does not address the sovereignty (i.e. control or authority over their own affairs) of Indigenous Peoples. What is necessary, then, is an Indigenous Family and Child Services Act.

Few youth in the care of the state experienced a positive home life. Many participants felt they were forced to leave their homes, explaining they were not wanted any longer by adoptive or foster parents because they were seen as rebelling, getting into trouble or questioning the rules. Others spoke of leaving their homes because of years of sexual, physical and emotional abuse. Even though some expressed how difficult street life was, none of them regretted their decision to leave home. In fact, youth sometimes spoke of how freeing leaving child protection was for them. One youth stated that her adoptive parents were abusive, which forced her to move out on her own. She viewed street life as tough, but easier than being in the care of the state because she "could make her own rules" (Project 1). Another participant stated that she was "sick of group homes... too many rules," and that she was constantly being moved from one group home to another. Leaving child protection and becoming homeless meant that she could begin to create a life that was more under her control. Some of the youth who were in care, adopted, or in group homes stated that they had lived in small towns and experienced a great deal of blatant racism. They believed that they could escape this by moving to a large, multicultural city like Toronto. As one youth explained, "some of us are able to blend in with all the other people and not even be seen as Indigenous." All agreed that even though there is racism in Toronto, "it is not as obvious all the time as it is in small places." A few of the youth stated that they came to Toronto for opportunities; in this city, they believed they had found the freedom to change their lives for the better.

Moving Forward

Despite criticism of the Ontario government's promotion of culturally specific programs and services for Indigenous youth as the entire solution to Indigenous youth homelessness, such programs are useful, as highlighted by several scholars and organizations (Chansonneuve, 2008; Niccols et al., 2010a; 2010b; NWAC, 2007; Rutman et al., 2005). Healing through "cultural renewal" is described in

the literature as reconnecting Indigenous people with their heritages, which may be facilitated by Indigenous-specific agencies and/or participation in Indigenous ceremonies and teaching circles (Chansonneuve, 2008; Rutman et al., 2005). The majority of youth who participated in these research projects emphasized the importance of Indigenous-specific services, as seen from the following quotations:

Youth 1: *Once I got involved with [Indigenous services], I got help with finding housing and returning to school.... Continuing to get services keeps our Indigenous cultures going.... Before, I didn't want anything to do with the Indigenous community [in Toronto]. I believed Indigenous people were all disrespected and disrespectful* (Baskin, 2011:165).

Youth 2: *Workers help me do productive things. They are people who care. I stay connected to these helpers* (Baskin, 2011:165).

Youth 3: *Going through [Indigenous services] helped me understand how the past makes the present: we need to see what has happened in the past, which can lead to harmful behaviours in the present. If we understand this, we can begin to make positive changes. It also helped me to look at what we've overcome, not just what we've done that's not good* (Baskin, 2011:166).

Youth 4: *I have housing and am in school now.... I go to spiritual ceremonies sometimes. Now I'm into everything Indigenous instead of how I was before, not wanting anything to do with it. We can relate to Indigenous people who come to speak about their experiences, how they got out of their destructive lives through their cultures and spirituality. We can learn from them; they're our role models* (Baskin, 2011:166-167).

Clearly, access to cultural services is crucial and wanted by Indigenous youth. However, it is highly important for child welfare workers and counselors who work with youth and families to develop a better understanding of the historical relationships between Indigenous Peoples and child welfare authorities (Horejsi et al., 1992). Research emphasizes the need to understand the “loss of trust” that can occur on numerous levels for some Indigenous people, including loss of trust in self, family, community, government, and in those referred to as “outsiders” (Thibodeau & Peigan, 2007). This loss of trust partly evolves out of child welfare involvement, which undermined Indigenous ways of raising children, leading to a lack of confidence in parents and other community members. It also led to the mistrust of the Canadian and provincial governments which outlawed Indigenous ways of parenting children, and to non-Indigenous people, particularly social workers, as the agents of the removal of children from their communities.

Research findings from these four projects similarly highlight the importance of a child welfare system that is sensitive to the historical trauma it has caused among Indigenous people. Child welfare workers who participated in the research projects spoke about the need for a system designed to address a wider “picture,” that recognizes factors that contribute to youth’s immediate circumstances:

You don’t just want to be meeting their immediate needs; although that’s what child welfare primarily focuses on. It’s having a good analysis of the overall picture, and what is impacting, what are the environmental factors that are affecting that client, or that are affecting the children. (Project 4)

The need for a wider perspective on the part of child welfare was echoed in this young woman’s remarks, “They’re always trying to fit people into boxes. [They] don’t really understand the complexities of our lives and don’t really understand the whole healing process.” This was echoed by the majority of youth who spoke about the need for a child welfare system designed to address its own historical failings and remodeled to incorporate Indigenous worldviews and values.

For those youth who are parents, a system is greatly needed that is aware and appreciative of the distance that many must travel to develop healthy ways of parenting according to Indigenous worldviews. These youth told stories of not having parenting models to guide them once they became parents. Instead of understanding their circumstances and the supports they need, they were blamed by the child welfare system for their lack of knowledge and labeled “bad parents”. A system that is designed to address these issues and to assist young parents in learning and experiencing Indigenous ways of parenting is needed. One former child welfare worker who is now in the area of substance misuse treatment added:

I think that we’re looking at who’s the client, and I find therein lies one of the biggest issues for all of us... this one sees the woman as the client, this one sees the child as the client. But again, isn’t that creating the silos that we’re saying that we don’t think are helpful? The clients, if you want to call them that, are the family. And why aren’t all agencies looking at the family as the unit that they’re trying to assist? (Project 4)

Approaches to services depend on which perspective child welfare workers take or are legislated to take. Perspectives arise out of one’s worldview. Indigenous worldviews tend to focus on the whole family and community, with an emphasis on collective rights. Eurocentric worldviews, which shape mainstream Canadian society and institutions, are more likely to focus on the individual, and highlight individual human rights. In cases of child welfare, views often become polarized between prioritizing group versus individual, parent versus

child, or safety plan (keeping the children in their home with measures in place intended to keep them safe) versus foster care (removal of children from their homes) scenarios. In practice, narrow, heterosexist views of what a family looks like and who raises children (biological parents) may lead to dismissing many people who can care for children. As one of the counselors emphasized, “I think that we really need to look at whose needs are we addressing here?” (Project 4).

Indigenous child protection agencies continue to be directed by legislation and social policies not based on Indigenous values and worldviews. Such legislation and policies do not incorporate the distinct needs of Indigenous Peoples. The creation of legislation and policies that are compatible with Indigenous worldviews in general, such as holistic approaches to health and well-being, spirituality, and respect for Elders, while taking into consideration the great diversity of Indigenous cultures, is needed. In addition, legislation and policies must take into account past injustices and the effects they have on the wellbeing of Indigenous Peoples today. As a youth in one of the projects stated simply, “If you want to work with Native people, you have to know and understand... the history of the people” (Baskin et al., 2012:33). This position was echoed by one of the substance misuse treatment counselors in this same project who noted, “there are aspects of the child welfare mandate and other mandates of other agencies and services that need to be re-addressed and need to evolve with the evolution of the healing path that Indigenous people are on” (Baskin et al., 2012:10). These comments from research participants support the literature on effective counseling with Indigenous youth, which states that the following skills and attitudes of counselors are seen as helpful: empathy, open communication, acceptance, role modeling, recognizing the impacts of trauma, supporting links to spirituality, and acknowledging the pasts of youth while assisting them on their path to a healthier future (Rutman et al., 2005).

The revision of oppressive legislation to include “culturally based practice” changes little (Anderson, 1998; Hudson, 1997; RAJIM, 1998). As Høglund advocates, both research and policies developed within an Indigenous context, by Indigenous people is crucial because in order to create programs that support the health and well-being of Indigenous children, “researchers, educators, service providers, and policymakers need to look beyond [mainstream] models of successful development” to those favoured by Indigenous communities and which also take into consideration the “historical, political”, social and economic circumstances in the lives of Indigenous children, families and communities (2004:165; 168).

Thus, insider views are necessary to develop social policies that reflect Indigenous worldviews and values regarding the importance of families and communities in the raising of children. However, there must first be an acknowledgement that

current systemic policies are unjust and that meaningful changes are necessary. Ultimately, the creation of an Indigenous Family and Child Services Act is a must.

Conclusion

The depth of these young people's knowledge and understanding of the reasons for their homelessness is amazing. They are insightful and clear. They are easily able to understand their life experiences, which included, for most, contact with child protection services and separation from their biological families and communities, within the framework of the realities of colonization. They clearly made the links between the residential school system and the child welfare system in terms of the historical trauma that they have inherited, which has seriously impacted the childrearing practices of Indigenous families and communities.

One of the legacies of colonization, residential schooling and child welfare involvement is poverty. A comment that stands out most, perhaps, is from a young man who said, "mostly we're taken away by child welfare because of poverty and this translates into neglect by them" (Project 1). For Indigenous Peoples, poverty is a direct result of the economic destruction of Indigenous societies caused by colonization. It may be, then, that the solution to parenting challenges is not child protection services that lead to the removal of children from their families and communities, but rather economic stability, healing and a return to Indigenous control of caring for children.

The youth who participated in these research projects also acknowledged that there may be times when it is best for everyone that children live with people other than their parents. However, they emphasized that child welfare blames individual Indigenous families for their situations and reinforces the colonial view that the mainstream way of raising children is the only acceptable way, while inflicting violence upon communities by removing children and placing them in the care of white families. As children are sometimes abused and almost always distanced from their families and cultures by having to live outside of their communities, the effects of colonization continue. It is the need to escape such ongoing oppression that leads young Indigenous people to leave government care for the streets.

These youth also recommend changes to legislation and social policy. They realized that the creation of Indigenous child protection agencies with Indigenous workers is not enough. Indigenous child and family service agencies are to be praised for picking up the responsibility of child welfare and attempting to incorporate traditional knowledge into their work. However, many colonial legacies, such as the Child and Family Services Act, which does not support Indigenous values and limits who can care for children, have been passed on to them and their

work. They must also face unrealistic expectations from both the Indigenous communities they serve and mainstream society and governments (i.e. serving high numbers of families with less human resources and funding than other mandated child protection services) (Hudson & Taylor-Henley, 1995; Bennett et al., 2005).

Prior to colonization, Indigenous people lived as independent nations. Their right to self-determination – which included affairs affecting their families and children – was never given up despite the policies and actions forced upon them by Canadian governments (First Nations Child and Family Task Force, 1993; Association of Native Child and Family Services Agencies of Ontario, 2001; Bennett et al., 2005). Indigenous responsibility and control must go beyond delivering child welfare services, to the creation of legislation and policies that incorporate traditional Indigenous forms of governance which favour the collective over the individual, include the guidance of Elders and insist that everyone is responsible for the raising of children. This is crucial since present legislation and social policies related to child welfare are based on Eurocentric values and worldviews, making them an ongoing tool of colonization. As suggested by the youth, Indigenous people must become policy makers or be involved in the policy making process. Without significant changes to social policies, based on processes of decolonization, the major demand from Indigenous people to keep families together and concentrate heavily on prevention (which includes eliminating poverty) cannot happen.

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