

There is Much Work to do in Order to Undue the Harm Done to Canada's Indigenous Peoples

Indigenous peoples in Canada continue to experience many barriers to formal education including distance, poverty and lack of cultural welcoming in mainstream schools. A vicious cycle occurs whereby "low socioeconomic status promotes low educational achievement, and results in low socioeconomic status."¹ Many Aboriginal youth in Northern Ontario must leave home to attend secondary school. "First Nations youth commit suicide about five to six times more often than non-Aboriginal youth [and]... suicide rates for Inuit youth are among the highest in the world, at 11 times the national average".² Nearly half of children under 14 in foster care in Canada are Aboriginal children, in numbers now surpassing those removed to residential schools.³ Canada's 2001 census shows that "the median income of all persons indicating Aboriginal identity is 61% of the median income for all Canadians."⁴

Indigenous peoples are significantly overrepresented in Canada's criminal justice system.⁵ The incarceration of Black Canadians and Aboriginal women is on the rise.⁶

"There are numerous other indicators of the reality of racial discrimination in Canada. Racialized persons experience disproportionate poverty, over-representation in the prison population, under-representation in the middle and upper layers of political, administrative, economic and media institutions and barriers to accessing employment, housing and health care to name just a few."⁷

Part of undoing the harm is to keep in mind that the picture of those harmed is often used as a stereotype to represent all members of that group. Situating the outcomes of colonialism with the people who were impacted instead of working to dismantle the structural causes tends to push the responsibility further into the realm of the personal, toward the people and communities who are impacted, rather than toward the broader society where outcomes of colonization are held and maintained.

Most young Aboriginal people in Canada want to go on to post-secondary education after completing high school. The educational aspirations of Aboriginal people are not very different from those of other Canadians. A recent survey of First Nations people living on-reserve 4 shows that 70% of those between the ages of 16 and 24 hope to complete some form of post-secondary education.

At the same time many factors are holding back First Nations students: 53% agreed that the level of government funding is inadequate; 46% agreed that First Nations youth are not academically prepared through their high school education; and 28% agreed that First Nations people do not feel welcome on university and college campuses. Only 20% agreed that jobs in First Nations communities do not require post-secondary education.⁸

¹ Mendelson M, Aboriginal Peoples and Postsecondary Education in Canada: <http://www.caledoninst.org/publications/pdf/595eng.pdf>

² First Nations & Inuit Health (2013), Health Canada <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fniah-spnia/promotion/mental/index-eng.php>

³ The Canadian Press. (2014, October 20). Closing arguments begin in case of feds paying less for aboriginal kids in care. Canada: CBC News | Aboriginal <http://www.cbc.ca/news/aboriginal/closing-arguments-begin-in-case-of-feds-paying-less-for-aboriginal-kids-in-care-1.2806055>

⁴ OHRC (2005), Policy and Guidelines on Racism and Racial Discrimination, http://www.ohrc.on.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/Policy_and_guidelines_on_racism_and_racial_discrimination.pdf

⁵ The incarceration rate for Aboriginal adults in Canada is estimated to be 10 times higher than the incarceration rate of non-Aboriginal adults. <http://www.oci-bec.gc.ca/cnt/rpt/oth-aut/oth-aut20121022info-eng.aspx>

⁶ "Visible minorities, Aboriginal people and women are entering federal penitentiaries in greater numbers than ever before. Twenty-one percent of the inmate population is of Aboriginal descent and 9% of inmates are Black Canadians. Incarceration rates for these two groups far exceed their representation rates in Canadian society at large. In the last five years, the number of federally incarcerated women has increased by almost 40% while the number of Aboriginal women has increased by over 80% in the last decade." Sapers H, Annual Report of the Office of the Correctional Investigator 2011-2012: <http://www.oci-bec.gc.ca/cnt/rpt/annrpt/annrpt20112012-eng.aspx>

⁷ Sapers H, Annual Report of the Office of the Correctional Investigator 2011-2012: <http://www.oci-bec.gc.ca/cnt/rpt/annrpt/annrpt20112012-eng.aspx>

⁸ CHANGING COURSE: Improving Aboriginal Access to Post-Secondary Education in Canada https://library.carleton.ca/sites/default/files/find/data/surveys/pdf_files/millennium_2005-09_rn-2_en.pdf