



CCPA
 CANADIAN CENTRE
 for POLICY ALTERNATIVES
 MANITOBA OFFICE

RESEARCH • ANALYSIS • SOLUTIONS

FAST FACTS

June 17, 2010

Child welfare devolution in Manitoba: a bumpy but necessary road to justice

For the past ten years Manitoba has been mapping uncharted territory in an effort to transform a child welfare system that will better serve the needs of children and families. In particular, through the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry – Child Welfare Initiative a new governance structure was developed to address Manitoba’s very poor track record of serving the Aboriginal children and families who are vastly overrepresented in the child welfare system.

It comes as no surprise that leaked excerpts from the recent report of the Children’s Advocate have resulted in political heat. Nonetheless many continue to support the Manitoba government for taking a very bold step in 1999 when they dusted off the 1991 Report of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry (AJI) report and moved forward with its recommendations. The report was shelved by the Conservative government in the early 1990s.

There is no doubt that the process has been a challenging one but this should come as no surprise given our tumultuous history.

Much of the dysfunction can be traced back to the placement of a generation of children into sterile and often abusive residential schools intent on assimilation. While many of these children excelled in spite of historical injustices, many others grew up to be adults who struggle with the

painful legacy of being torn from their parents and raised by detached and unloving strangers.

Another generation experienced the additional fallout of residential schools when the powers that be decided to remove children from their troubled families and placed them in non-Aboriginal homes, sometimes thousands of miles away. Many children who fell victim to the infamous ‘60’s scoop’ tell stories of lost identities that have led to a lifetime of pain, suffering, addictions and for many, poverty, despair and a host of related problems. This piece of history is well worth understanding to ensure that we don’t return down that very destructive path.

We have heard many horrific stories from residential school survivors and we will hear more as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) proceeds with its hearings in the coming months. Indeed, it is ironic that the Aboriginal CFS Authorities and agencies in Manitoba are coming under attack by opposition leaders and journalists at the same time that the Truth and Reconciliation task force travels the country to hear generations of Aboriginal people share their stories of how residential schools and misguided government policies have torn apart their lives.

We have a very long way to go to reverse the damaging history now recorded in the AJI and



CCPA
 CANADIAN CENTRE
 for POLICY ALTERNATIVES
 MANITOBA OFFICE

309 - 323 Portage Avenue
 Winnipeg, MB R3B 2C1
 T 204.927.3200 F 204.927.3201
 ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca
 www.policyalternatives.ca

The *Fast Facts* are produced and distributed free via email. They can be reproduced as an OpEd or opinion piece without obtaining further permission, provided they are not edited, and full credit is given to both the author and the source, CCPA-MB. Please contact CCPA-MB today to begin your free subscription.

FAST FACTS continued ...

being heard by the TRC. But Aboriginal control of child welfare is an important place to begin.

In Manitoba, about 80% of children in care are Aboriginal (First Nation, Inuit and Metis). As noted, this can be linked to the colonial policies that gave us residential schools and the sixties scoop, but it is also directly related to poverty. The stress that results from poverty, poor housing and lack of supports can lead families into crisis. That Aboriginal children under the age of 6 years had a poverty rate of 56 percent compared to 19 percent for non-Aboriginal children under six years of age is telling. Poverty adds an additional barrier for Aboriginal families who are over represented in the child welfare system.

As noted by McKenzie and Shangreux in *The Social Determinants of Health in Manitoba*, the disproportionate representation of indigenous children in care is common. For example, a study of child welfare rates in three sample provinces revealed that the rate of First Nations children in care was 102 per 1000 compared to 33.1 per 1000 for Métis children and 6.7 per 1000 for non-Aboriginal children. In Manitoba the number of Aboriginal children in care is 16.9 times that of non-Aboriginal.

McKenzie and Shangreux describe three important factors affecting child welfare outcomes. Cultural continuity, self-determination, and institutional capacity. They cite a 1998 study finding that communities that had taken active steps to preserve and rehabilitate their cultures had dramatically lower suicide rates than communities where this was not done. Self-determination is the primary means by which cultural continuity becomes integrated into service. Aboriginal self-determination enables the development of community-based services that incorporate Aboriginal values, beliefs, and traditions, including culturally appropriate practices, and is more likely to lead to capacity-building initiative at the

community level which can offer alternatives to conventional services models.

This is not to say that the journey to a more culturally appropriate model has been without challenges. McKenzie and Shangreux describe several issues, including very limited and inflexible federal government resources allocated for on-reserve child welfare service delivery.

But Manitoba is moving in the right direction. McKenzie and Shangreux describe new models of service delivery that have demonstrated success elsewhere and are currently being developed to better respond to Manitoba's needs. They, too, conclude that in addition to colonialism and racism, social exclusion and poverty are at the root of the current situation. Greatly reducing poverty, improving housing conditions, increasing economic and social inclusion is critical. But self-determination, cultural revitalization and community infrastructure and resources combined with more holistic models of service delivery can also serve to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and families. The key lies in providing adequate resources to put the right mix of policies into action.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission comes to Winnipeg between June 16 and 19th. This presents a much anticipated opportunity for Aboriginal people to share their stories.

But it also presents a chance for non-Aboriginal people to better understand those who have suffered deeply from colonial policies.

In turn, our understanding can lead to greater support of current efforts to thoughtfully construct a much needed culturally appropriate child welfare system developed through important lessons learned, that better responds to the needs of Aboriginal children and their families.

Shauna MacKinnon is the Director of CCPA-MB and co-editor of the Social Determinants of Health in Manitoba with Lynne Fernandez and Jim Silver



CCPA

CANADIAN CENTRE
for POLICY ALTERNATIVES
MANITOBA OFFICE

309 - 323 Portage Avenue
Winnipeg, MB R3B 2C1
T 204.927.3200 F 204.927.3201
ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca
www.policyalternatives.ca

The *Fast Facts* are produced and distributed free via email. They can be reproduced as an OpEd or opinion piece without obtaining further permission, provided they are not edited, and full credit is given to both the author and the source, CCPA-MB. Please contact CCPA-MB today to begin your free subscription.