

Child Welfare and Education



This report summarizes the findings from an environmental scan looking at literature about the involvement with the Child Welfare System, and the impact it can have on the mental health and education outcomes for Off-reserve, status and non-status First Nations, Métis, and Southern Inuit peoples.



QUICK FACTS

- Indigenous Children ages 0-14 represent 53.8% of those in foster care.
- Of the 14, 970+ Indigenous children involved with the child welfare system aged 0-14, approximately:
 - 81% are First Nations,
 - 13.1% are Métis and
 - 3.1% are Inuit
- 31% of those children do not have Registered/Treaty Status.
- There is no data available which differentiates between off-reserve, and on reserve statistics for Indigenous children in Care.
- 49% of Indigenous youth in the custody of children services are female, and 51% were male.

Many of these studies have found that Indigenous children in the child welfare system experience higher rates of mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, compared to non-Indigenous children. This can be attributed to the trauma and disruption caused by separation from family and community, loss of cultural identity, and the impact of intergenerational trauma.

Furthermore, research suggests that Indigenous youth in care have lower educational attainment levels and are less likely to pursue post-secondary education compared to their non-Indigenous peers. This is due to a range of factors, including disruptions to education and support systems, lack of access to cultural resources and supports, and systemic discrimination within education and child welfare systems.

Efforts to address these issues include the development of Indigenous-led child welfare systems that prioritize community involvement and self-determination, as well as culturally appropriate/safe services that address the root cause of family and community dysfunction, such as colonization. Additionally, promoting access to educational resources and support for Indigenous youth in care, such as scholarships and mentorship programs, can help to mitigate the negative impacts of child welfare involvement on post-secondary education outcomes.

Overall, the literature suggests that child welfare involvement can have negative impacts on the mental health and post-secondary education outcomes of off-reserve status and non-status Indigenous Peoples. Addressing these issues requires a holistic approach that prioritizes cultural revitalization, community-led solutions, and trauma-informed care.

It is important to note that this is a very complex subject matter which is multi-factorial. The following themes only represent the documents we had the chance to review. There are additional resources that may be beneficial to the current research topic. Despite diverse communities, overarching health disparity trends persist.



Figure 1. Thematic Findings

Thematic Findings

Philosophy of Childcare: Indigenous child welfare systems emphasize community involvement, self-determination, and cultural connection. They view children as spiritual gifts, with their upbringing a shared responsibility involving parents and the wider community. Euro-western child welfare methods, on the other hand, prioritize protective measures, often overlooking sociocultural factors, which can disconnect children from their heritage. These practices involve investigations, removals, and placements in foster homes, frequently causing cultural and spiritual harm. Indigenous methods underscore the importance of family and communal nurturing for holistic child development. The Euro-western approach neglects the spiritual and cultural aspects, leading to suboptimal outcomes for Indigenous children in care.

2.6 times higher

Proportion of Indigenous youth being admitted into care compared to the non-Indigenous population.

- > Bill C-92 inclusivity: Indigenous participation regardless of location, status, or cultural background (First Nations, Metis, Inuit).
- > Holistic approach needed for Indigenous child protection: collaboration among communities, health professionals, researchers, and policymakers.
- > Urgent need for comprehensive research (qualitative and quantitative) on constituent experiences, especially in urban contexts and across diverse gender identities.

Cultural Continuity: Indigenous children in child welfare face increased mental health challenges due to trauma and loss of cultural identity. Cultural continuity is vital for their well-being and sense of belonging. Solutions include integrating traditional healing, promoting Indigenous language and teachings, and placing children in culturally aligned homes. Indigenous parenting values autonomy and relatedness, contrasting with Euro-centric views. To mitigate adverse childhood experiences, it's essential to foster cultural identity, community connection, education, social support, and psychological resilience.

Adverse Outcomes: Child welfare involvement is strongly linked to negative health outcomes like addiction, depression, and anxiety. The Cedar Project found that Indigenous youth in Vancouver and Prince George who were placed in foster or group homes had higher HIV risks. Early childhood neglect in such institutional settings can lead to cognitive deficits. This involvement also predicts public homelessness, with Indigenous individuals being more vulnerable due to the system's adverse effects. Such adverse childhood experiences correlate with mental illnesses in Indigenous homeless populations, affecting education and future job prospects.

Power Imbalances: Indigenous mothers in Manitoba face power imbalances when dealing with the child welfare system, as revealed by themes such as feeling set up for failure, intimidation, and judgment. These dynamics suggest the system mirrors enduring colonial oppression. Similarly, in Quebec, Indigenous parents' interactions with child welfare and youth courts are predominantly negative. They underscore a significant gap in understanding Indigenous family traditions and the continuous detrimental impacts of settler colonialism. Both contexts show Indigenous parents grappling with systemic power disparities and a deep-seated injustice in how their knowledge and experiences are valued and understood.

Moving Forward in a Good Way

In examining the profound impacts of the child welfare system on Indigenous children, it is evident that historical colonial frameworks continue to impede the well-being of these youth. Disconnection from culture exacerbates mental health issues and hinders educational pursuits. The glaring contrast between Indigenous and Euro-western child welfare paradigms continues to reveal a systemic neglect of Indigenous values, fostering power imbalances and adverse outcomes. A culturally restorative shift is paramount—centering Indigenous perspectives, self-determination and recognizing intergenerational traumas. To ensure the flourishing of Indigenous children, Canada must prioritize community-driven, holistic, and trauma-informed solutions, transcending mere rhetoric to actionable change.