

Deaths of children in government care skyrocket in Canada

By Riksen Stewart
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There is nothing so heinous as a government failing to support its most vulnerable citizens: young children. Yet due to government neglect and chronic underfunding of critical social services, the number of deaths and critical injuries of children in foster care in Canada has steadily risen in recent years.

In British Columbia alone, deaths of children in care jumped from 72 in 2008 to 120 last year, while critical injuries skyrocketed from 120 to 741. In Alberta, within the span of 14 years between 1999 and 2013, 741 children died while in care or while receiving child welfare services. Since 2013, another 71 children have died. These deaths and injuries result from suicide attempts, overdoses, sexual and physical abuse. But they are only the tip of the iceberg, as a far larger number of young children in care suffer emotional and psychological damage.

The childcare crisis is rooted in the unwillingness of Canadian governments to provide proper funding for social services and, more generally, in capitalist society's treatment of poor working class and, especially, indigenous families.

At the end of 2016 there were more than 10,000 children receiving child intervention services in Alberta, with more than 7,000 children in the care of the province. According to Statistics Canada, indigenous children made up 73 percent of those in government care, although Alberta's indigenous people comprise only 6 percent of the province's population. This is a pattern replicated across Canada, with indigenous children making up 48 percent of all children in foster care, even though indigenous children age 14 or under represent just 7 percent of all children in this age group.

Despite Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's promises of equal treatment for indigenous people, the living

conditions within indigenous communities are deplorable. Per capita funding for education, health care and other basic services on native reservations, where poverty is generally endemic and many lack access to proper housing and safe drinking water, remains far below the Canadian norm.

Successive governments at the federal and provincial level have starved indigenous communities of funding for physical and mental health services, resulting in suicide and drug addiction rates that are twice as high as in non-indigenous communities, and six to 11 times higher than the general population among Inuit people. All these factors lead to an increasing number of children being forced into government care.

Most in government care are placed with foster parents who, according to Wayne MacFarlane, president of the Prince Edward Island Federation of Foster Families, receive a stipend of between \$600 and \$1,400 per month per child to look after them.

Governments have consistently failed to provide foster parents and those in their care with adequate psychological, educational and therapeutic support, although many of the children have lived through traumatic experiences of abuse and neglect. Foster families are thus left to cope as best they can with complex care needs—needs which they are ill-equipped to manage.

While the stipends paid foster parents are tax-free, they are provided no additional benefits or assistance with paying for holidays for either themselves or those in their care.

The tragic results of this state neglect have been illustrated by a number of high-profile, tragic cases. Serenity was a 4-year-old girl who died in foster care in Alberta. At the time of her death, she weighed just 19 pounds and had suffered severe brain trauma along

with significant physical and sexual abuse at the hands of her foster parents. Two years on, no charges have been laid and six other children who were living in the same home as Serenity have been allowed to remain there.

In Ontario, the deaths of three First Nations children in foster care over several months late in 2016 and at the beginning of this year prompted the Ontario Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth to indict the government for reinforcing the legacy of Canada's residential schools, under which thousands of indigenous children died after being removed from their families and many more suffered abuse.

The chronic underfunding of social services is exacerbated by a shortage of foster parents. In 2016, the Canadian Foster Family Association declared that the nationwide shortage had reached a crisis point.

Governments often respond to this shortage by housing children and teenagers in group homes or motels, many of which are inappropriate for the purpose.

An example of this is the fate of 18-year-old Alex Gervais, who was placed in a BC motel after his group home was closed and ended up jumping through a four-story window. The teenager had been housed at the motel in virtual isolation for 49 days prior to his suicide. In BC at one point last year, there were upwards of 117 foster children being housed in cut-rate hotels and motels.

For years, Gervais had been shunted from one care-giver to another—a story all too typical for children in government care in Canada. In the last 11 years of his life, Gervais had lived in 17 different placements under the watch of 23 different social workers and caregivers. According to a report from British Columbia's acting "Representative for Children and Youth," Gervais suffered "profound neglect," and was unable to form lasting attachments with foster caregivers or support staff.

In some cases children's aid societies return children in foster care to a member or members of their biological families, after they secure proper housing and meet various tests, such as following parenting classes and entering substance-abuse programs. However, there is very little ongoing support or assistance for the biological parents after their children have been returned to them, even though they are

generally among the most socially vulnerable and frequently have to work through complex personal and psychological issues.

The terrible fate of Alex Gervais is also indicative of the prospects facing children in government care once they reach the age of 18, when all sources of government child-assistance are abruptly cut off. Due to the deterioration of social conditions under capitalism and the lack of educational support and decent employment, 60 percent of young people aged 20 to 24 in Canada are forced to live at home with their supporting parents.

Lacking family support and deprived of all government assistance at the young age of 18, "in-care" children usually end up fending for themselves on the street upon attaining adulthood. This results in myriad additional social problems, such as drug addiction, homelessness, and crime. In BC, 41 percent of young adults who previously lived under government care have been involved with the criminal justice system.

The high rates of indigenous children in foster care contribute to higher percentages of native people incarcerated. Twenty-four percent of federal prison inmates have an indigenous background, an increase of 84 percent since 2003. The current public inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women and girls is also examining the link between foster care and the disproportionate exposure of indigenous women to sexual trafficking, violence, and murder.

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