

Canada: Federal and provincial governments underfund indigenous childcare

By Janet Browning
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Canada's federal government is coming under increased pressure from indigenous people's groups to comply with a 2016 Canadian Human Rights Tribunal (CHRT) decision that found the federal government is discriminating against indigenous children on reservations by underfunding services and failing to provide the same level of services made available to other Canadian children.

On Thursday, the Liberal government withdrew its legal challenge to the ruling by the CHRT, which has issued three compliance orders since its decision, which have to date been ignored. While the Liberal government cited its decision to drop the suit as a major step forward, it involves no commitment to additional government spending, let alone the resolution of the terrible social conditions facing indigenous children and their families across the country.

The government's own documents show that if sufficient money and adequate services were provided, many of the children in foster care could remain with their families, according to Cindy Blackstock, the executive director of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society. Blackstock launched the human rights case almost a decade ago.

"They get less funding for education, less funding for health care, less funding for basics like water and sanitation and less funding for child welfare to recover from the multigenerational impacts of residential schools," she said.

Prior to his election, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau vowed that a Liberal government would correct the underfunding of indigenous childcare services, but his government ignored the decision for close to 18 months. Similarly, the Liberals' much-trumpeted pledge to bring about "reconciliation" with the Native peoples has turned out to be a sham.

The federal government's flagship project in this area, an inquiry into missing and murdered indigenous women (MMIW), has been plagued by resignations of high-profile officials and accusations from First Nations groups and residents of lack of progress and incompetence.

Even in the unlikely event that the Liberals granted Blackstock's demands, indigenous children's services would continue to be hopelessly inadequate. Children's

services for all Canadians, regardless of their background, have been slashed to the bone, along with other social services, by successive governments, which have been determined at all costs to balance federal and provincial budgets. The more than three decades of cutbacks have produced ruinous results for the working class, which includes Canada's indigenous population as one of its most vulnerable and exploited sections.

In the 2016 census data, Canada had 1,673,785 indigenous people, representing 4.9 percent of the population, up from 3.8 percent in 2006 and 2.8 percent in 1996. Less than 8 percent of all Canadian children aged 4 and under are First Nation, Métis or Inuit, but indigenous children accounted for 51.2 percent of preschoolers in foster care in 2016. That was up by more than two percentage points from 2011.

The situation is aggravated by the legacy of a century-and-a-half of exploitation and discrimination by the Canadian capitalist state. The residential school system, which existed from the 1840s to 1996, tore 150,000 children from their familial homes and inflicted physical and emotional abuse on successive generations. Thousands of children died in these schools, but the exact number is unknown. Starting in the 1960s, systematically apprehending indigenous children and placing them with non-indigenous families was the norm, a practice known as the "60s Scoop."

First Nation communities on reservations struggle with inadequate, overcrowded housing and water that is not safe to drink. There are 16 boil water advisories on Alberta reservations alone. Mental health services are sorely lacking, amid youth suicide rates are 10 times higher for First Nation males and 21 times higher for females compared to their non-indigenous counterparts.

In most cases, children are not taken from their parents because of outright abuse, but because of "neglect," a condition more accurately described as poverty, which often includes a lack of permanent housing or day care. Working class parents who reach out to child services for social assistance often see their children simply taken from them.

The inaction of the federal Liberal government is compounded by the cost-cutting policies of provincial governments of all political stripes.

In October, the Manitoba Tory government of Premier Brian Pallister announced it was cutting funding to indigenous child welfare programs. Families Minister Scott Fielding told a news conference, “For sure, there’s too many children in care. There’s too much money being spent on intervention.”

Fielding said the province would in future emphasize “customary care,” a system in which indigenous communities play a significant role in deciding how to deal with children and families in their own community, as a cost-cutting measure. Manitoba will switch from paying agencies per child and per day for each child in care to a system of block funding. The Tories also announced a legislative review to look at all elements of child welfare legislation, including writing new legislation that will clarify how social workers take children into care. In Manitoba, with one of the highest rates of children in care in the world, 10,000 of the 11,000 children in care are indigenous.

Successive Conservative and New Democratic Party (NDP) governments in Alberta have pursued a similar agenda. Under Tory Premier Ralph Klein, social spending was cut and the child welfare system was contracted out to agencies, not-for-profit groups, regional offices and underfunded First Nations bands. The Tories also pushed “kinship-care,” i.e., keeping children together with extended families, a cheaper cost model that they could sell on the basis of identity politics as “politically correct.” The policy frequently caused children to be placed in homes that were not properly screened, with caregivers who were insufficiently trained and unequipped for the tasks of being foster parents.

Currently, substantial numbers of child care workers are private-sector contractors who are paid the minimum wage and have little to no training or experience working with children in difficult situations.

Between 1999 and 2013, 741 Alberta children died while in care or while receiving child welfare services. Reports of deaths or serious injuries to such children have more than tripled in the last five years. Between April 1 and Sept. 30 this year, the office received 49 reports of deaths or serious injuries.

One of the most horrific examples of the treatment of foster children was the death of four-year-old Serenity on September 26, 2014. At the time of her death, no one from Alberta Child Welfare had checked on Serenity or her two siblings for 11 months. The hospital’s examination of Serenity showed signs of significant physical and sexual abuse, severe brain trauma, a fractured skull, severe

hypothermia and malnutrition.

At the end of 2016 there were more than 10,000 children receiving child intervention services in Alberta and more than 7,000 children in care of the province, including 3,500 in foster care and 2,000 in kinship care homes. Indigenous children made up 59 percent of all children receiving such services, despite Alberta’s indigenous population being just 6 percent of the total population.

A steady stream of reports going back years demonstrates that, contrary to its stated mission of shielding vulnerable children from neglect and abuse, the Alberta government has failed to protect them. Vulnerable children are often being sexually exploited, with uninspected foster homes becoming feeding grounds for sexual predators, violent crime, drug trafficking and prostitution.

In the more than two years since it came to power, Rachel Notley’s NDP government has established a dismal record of failing to provide adequate help to children in care, housing them in unsafe conditions with no supervision and ignoring their relatives’ complaints.

In July, child and youth advocate Del Graff criticized the NDP government’s failure to respond to his recommendations on child care. Graff made the comments as he released a report documenting the deaths of three indigenous children, whose families lost specialized care support after the children were returned to them from government care.

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