

Over a third of indigenous Canadians struggling to pay for essentials during pandemic

By Alexandra Greene
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A recently released Statistics Canada report found that over a third of indigenous people in Canada are struggling to pay for essentials during the pandemic. The report, “Economic impact of COVID-19 among Indigenous people,” is part of a series of four studies published by Statscan in recent months that examine how indigenous Canadians have been affected by the social, economic, and health care crises brought about by COVID-19.

These reports seek to encompass the following: the effects on the health and social conditions of indigenous peoples in rural communities; the vulnerabilities they face in urban areas to the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19; the pandemic’s impact on their mental health; and the aforementioned study of COVID-19’s effect on their economic well-being.

Released between April 17 and July 14, the four reports show that over 36 percent of indigenous survey respondents said that the pandemic had a “strong or moderate” impact on their ability to pay for essentials, compared to 25 percent of non-indigenous Canadians said they were similarly impacted.

The reports also revealed that in comparison with the rest of the population, higher percentages of indigenous people say they are struggling financially, distrust the decision-making capabilities of the federal government, and have applied for federal income support.

The results of recent polls conducted by other groups, such as the Native Women’s Association of Canada, support this evidence. Their findings suggest that indigenous women, in particular, are experiencing greater financial struggles than many other Canadians, as well as increased domestic violence rates that directly correlate to this financial hardship.

If anything, the figures presented by Statistics Canada understate the horrific social conditions facing this very

oppressed section of the population.

The findings in the reports were gathered using a data collection method known as crowdsourcing. Crowdsourcing is the process of obtaining information and opinions from a large group of people who submit their data via the internet. In this case, Statscan had those surveyed participate in an online questionnaire. This method automatically excludes a large number of indigenous people who have no or extremely limited internet access due to poverty and homelessness.

A small footnote in the last report in the series makes a disclaimer to this effect, stating, “It is important to note that Indigenous people are often overrepresented among those experiencing precarious housing or homelessness. These populations may not be represented by these crowdsourced data.”

The method used to measure poverty in the report is also outdated. Canada’s official poverty line, the MBM or Market Basket Measure, is based on the cost of a specific “basket” of goods and services representing a modest, basic standard of living. It includes the cost of food, clothing, shelter and transportation, and other items considered necessary for a family to live in contemporary Canada.

The MBM in place at the time these recent studies were undertaken was last updated between 2008 and 2010. An update to this MBM was launched in 2018, but was not completed until June of 2020; the recent studies were published from April through July, and thus for some if not all of the reports, the referenced poverty indicator used was over a decade outdated. Canada has seen a countrywide inflation rate of 19.89 percent from 2008 until 2020, meaning the cost of living is certainly much higher than it was 12 years ago.

The second report in the series states that approximately

24 percent of indigenous people living in urban areas are living in poverty; by comparison, 13 percent of the non-indigenous population in urban areas are in poverty. A stunning example of misinformation, however, sees this data completely excluding those living in the Territories and in on-reserve communities, even though the latter absolutely meets Statistics Canada's own geographic classification standards for what constitutes an "urban area."

Statistics Canada justifies this exclusion by saying it is due to a "different context." Yet it is a very safe bet to assume that if data collected from indigenous peoples residing in the Territories and on reserves were to be included in their reports, the results would highlight a much more acute crisis.

Nunavut, for example, has the highest rate of food insecurity in Canada, with immense wage inequality and criminally high food prices leading 57 percent of the territory's population to experience severe food insecurity. The most recent census of Nunavut showed that 83.8 percent of the population identified as Inuit.

On-reserve communities facing the threat of COVID-19 are especially important to take into account when attempting to comprehend the effects of the pandemic on indigenous people. For example, 55 First Nations reserves across the country have boil water advisories, but a further six have "do not consume" advisories. Anyone living in this kind of environment will find it virtually impossible to comply with hand washing and sanitation recommendations intended to limit the spread of the pandemic.

If official figures indicate that First Nation reserves have fared comparatively well in preventing the spread of COVID-19 thus far, this can largely be attributed to their relative isolation and local officials deciding to largely seal them off from the surrounding area. Additionally, the lack of health infrastructure makes it likely that there are lower levels of testing among on-reserve populations.

The endemic poverty and social misery confronting the vast majority of native peoples is the direct product of Canadian capitalism. Having destroyed the communal forms of property of the indigenous peoples during the 19th century to establish the basis for capitalist expansion from coast to coast, the Canadian ruling elite shunted natives onto reserves, sought to eliminate their cultures, and starved thousands to death. More recently, the ruling elite's drive to access land that remains under native control has been intensified thanks to Canadian capitalism's reliance on resource extraction industries,

including oil and gas and the pipelines to export these products to market.

It was in pursuit of this policy that the Trudeau government announced with great fanfare a "nation-to-nation" policy of "reconciliation" with Canada's indigenous population. In reality, this policy amounts to a push to "reconcile" the increasingly restless native population with capitalist exploitation. To this end, the Liberals have worked since returning to power in October 2015 to cultivate a small but privileged native elite represented by the Assembly of First Nations and other groups with which it can do business. The fact that the horrendous levels of poverty and social misery revealed in the Statistics Canada reports persist provides a damning refutation of the Liberals' claim to be working to improve conditions of life for the majority of the native people.

Since the pandemic's outbreak, the federal government has provided only paltry additional support to native Canadians: \$303 million to help indigenous communities prepare for the virus in March, and a further \$285 million in May to "support the public health response." This is a drop in the bucket given that successive Liberal and Conservative governments have systematically underfunded health care and other critical social services for indigenous communities both on- and off-reserve.

The working class must mobilize as an independent political force in the struggle for social equality and for a workers' government that will reorganize the economy along socialist lines to meet the social needs of all, thereby ending the systematic oppression and ongoing mistreatment and disenfranchisement of indigenous people.

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