

Stepping Stones



THE SIXTIES SCOOP

Planning Your Learning Journey

What is the Sixties Scoop and how can understanding its impacts contribute to reconciliation?



[HTTP://ACTIVEHISTORY.CA/2017/10/SELLING-THE-SIXTIES-SCOOP-SASKATCHEWAN-ADOPT-INDIAN-AND-METIS-PROJECT/](http://activehistory.ca/2017/10/SELLING-THE-SIXTIES-SCOOP-SASKATCHEWAN-ADOPT-INDIAN-AND-METIS-PROJECT/)

Newspaper advertisements for the Adopt Indian and Métis Program, late 1960s, Saskatchewan.

FIRST STEPS



In the 1950s and 60s, compulsory attendance at federally governed residential schools began to be phased out, although it continued for children whose families were deemed “unsuitable” to care for them.¹ Indigenous children were expected to attend the provincial public education stream. This shift was coupled with a 1951 amendment to the *Indian Act* that enabled provinces to deliver child welfare services to Indigenous people where none had formerly existed. Indigenous children went from being forcibly removed from parents to attend residential schools to being forcibly removed from families by provincial child welfare agencies. The underlying root of the forced removals aligned with aggressive assimilation policies. Genocidal tactics of residential schools aimed at “killing the Indian in the child” continued with the transfer of responsibility to provincial child welfare agencies because of existing court structures and provincial policies. These child welfare policies have been identified as racist. The aggressive apprehension of Indigenous children between the 1960s and 80s is referred to as the Sixties Scoop.

Social workers at this time did not require training in working with or understanding the cultural or historical context of Indigenous communities, and often let their biases influence their decisions. Eurocentric views clashed with original child-rearing methods and ways of living that had




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 The forced removals directly correlate with socioeconomic impacts such as mental health issues, homelessness, incarceration, “high suicide rate, sexual exploitation, substance use and abuse, poverty, low educational achievement and chronic unemployment.”²

sustained Indigenous communities for tens of thousands of years. “When social workers entered the homes of families subsisting on a traditional Aboriginal diet of dried game, fish, and berries, [with no running water or electricity] as in typical Euro-Canadian fashion, they assumed that the adults in the home were not providing for their children.”³ Kinship systems rooted in community care were disregarded as negligent. Indigenous women were deemed as unfit mothers, and living off the land as uncivilized.⁴ Indigenous original methods of nurturing and living were disrupted and severed through assimilation policies and laws.

Child-rearing methods of shaming, belittling, violence and abuse were instilled at residential schools, thus resulting in a legacy of trauma. Colonization tactics such as the forcible confinement of the reserve system and other methods of oppression inflicted by policies and attitudes “influenced the severity of social problems many communities endured, such as poverty, unemployment, and addiction, [and] some social workers felt a duty to protect the local children.”⁵

“Power, privilege and poverty are complexly related to the disproportionate number of Aboriginal children who were removed from their own communities.”⁶ There was no requirement for workers to

inform the community if children were being apprehended or to provide information as to their whereabouts. Disturbing numbers of apprehended children were bounced between non-Indigenous foster homes, placed in institutional facilities, adopted or sold.⁷ “Scattering children across the globe undermined identification with the close-knit traditional Aboriginal culture and destroyed its kinship network.”⁸ Often family members would plead to the courts for the return of the child but would be left empty handed and empty hearted. Many Sixties Scoop survivors as well as families of scooped children continue searching for each other.

While there are stories of foster families nurturing Indigenous children, these families were led to believe that children had been abandoned, impoverished and unwanted by their families. More often, though, many survivors experienced horrific treatment from those in positions of power who claimed to be filling in the role of caregiver. “Slave labor, emotional, physical and sexual abuse was not uncommon, but it was usually covered up, rendered invisible by the lack of social resources and support for Aboriginal families and children, a result of the general social reluctance to publicly acknowledge such abuse at the time.”⁹

IMPACTS

Children were expected to assimilate into the culture of the foster or adoptive family while, most often, abandoning their heritage, which may have contributed to an identity crisis and a relationship breakdown between the caregiver and the child.¹⁰ There are cases in which children were told that they were anything but Indigenous.¹¹ “Conditions of suppressed identity and abuse result in psychological and emotional problems and these impacts may not surface for survivors who learned of their family or culture until later in life.”¹² Barriers to attaining socioeconomic equity coincide with the disparity of not fully belonging to either group.¹³ Children were forced to disconnect from families rich in love, land, language, status and, most important, ceremony. Some survivors express having nurturing adoptive or foster families and hold no ill feelings toward those who raised them. However, they also experience feelings of confusion and disconnection from their kinship network and cultural ways, as well as feeling guilty about being raised in a nurturing home, unlike the majority that suffered abuse.

Families and communities suffered as well. The loss of children caused mental, emotional and spiritual harm to individuals, families and communities.¹⁴ “Problems of alcoholism, emotional stress and low self-esteem were compounded with the increased formal scrutiny and likelihood that other children would be removed from the family.”¹⁵ Often families who “approached child care agencies in search of help for funds to supply food and shelter ended up losing their children ... Often times they were forced to relinquish custody

of the child.”¹⁶ The apprehension tactics “weakened the traditional family structure, and in doing so, weakened Aboriginal society as a whole.”¹⁷ The intergenerational legacy of grief and loss in relation to family, identity, culture, heritage and community continues into subsequent generations.¹⁸

CHILD WELFARE

In the 1980s, reports by Kimmelman and Johnston recommended sweeping policy changes. Kimmelman affirmed that “cultural genocide has taken place in a systematic, routine manner.”¹⁹ The reports, combined with decades of outcry from Indigenous rights advocates such as the [Voice of Alberta Native Women’s Society](#) and First Nations band resolutions, influenced amendments to adoption laws. Eighteen First Nations child welfare agencies were developed following the 1973 signing of the Blackfoot (Siksika) child welfare agreement, which was the first child welfare agreement with a First Nations community in Alberta.²⁰

In 1989, Canada played a key role in drafting the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#); yet, in 2007, UNICEF reported that “Canada has been slow to honor its commitment to uphold those rights and ensure the well-being of children.” The report featured the dire situation of the Indigenous context.²¹

It wasn’t until 1990 that Indigenous Nations had the authority to administer child and family services according to provincial legislations and child welfare standards, although problems reflective of the Sixties Scoop continued. In 2016, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal, based on a complaint filed by the [Assembly](#)

[of First Nations](#) (AFN) and the [First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada](#) in 2007, found that overrepresentation of First Nations children in child welfare was a direct result of discrimination and underfunding of children on reserve.²² Children’s rights advocates such as Cindy Blackstock continue to work tirelessly to uphold and uplift the rights of Indigenous children.

In 2016, the [Office of the Child and Youth Advocate](#) (OCYA) released a report that examined the continued overrepresentation of Indigenous children and families in the child intervention system in Alberta.²³ The Alberta Ministry of Children’s Services recognized “that the tragic reality of overrepresentation of Indigenous children is the single most critical challenge facing the child intervention system, and is working to make sustainable changes to support positive outcomes, family engagement, cultural connections, and increased community capacity. As this report and others have indicated, there are many complex factors at play that have contributed to the overrepresentation of Indigenous children including the intergenerational trauma of colonialism, the tragic legacy of the residential school system, and the ongoing effects of the Sixties Scoop. These, along with a host of other challenges, have resulted in profound socioeconomic disparities for Indigenous peoples and communities.”²⁴

RECONCILIATION

“Too many Canadians know little or nothing about the deep historical roots of these conflicts.”²⁵ Currently, there are many more First Nations, Metis

and Inuit children in care now than there were during the peak of the residential school era. Some declare the child welfare system to be a contributor to current issues such as the Missing and Murdered Women and Girls epidemic and high incarceration rates across the country. Canada has transitioned from the Sixties’ Scoop to the “[Millennium Scoop](#)” in relation to the child welfare system.²⁶ In Alberta, approximately 10 per cent of children are Indigenous, yet approximately 70 per cent of children in care are Indigenous.²⁷

On February 14, 2017, a narrowly defined [legal settlement](#) for loss of language and culture was announced for First Nation and Inuit survivors of the Sixties Scoop; the Métis Nation were excluded despite their inclusion in the policies of aggressive assimilation. On May 28, 2018, the [Alberta government formally apologized to Sixties Scoop survivors](#) as a first step towards reconciliation. Survivors may be compensated financially, yet wellness and healing initiatives to help repair the damage done are also necessary. The child welfare system in Alberta currently works with Indigenous communities to try to alleviate the problems that were evident in the past, although children in care and families continue to need further supports. There is a need for these supports to include Sixties Scoop survivors, because nothing currently exists. Education to build a foundation of knowledge, understanding and empathy will contribute to uplifting survivors and assist in motivating positive changes in policies and attitudes that negatively affect Indigenous children and families.

Under article 2(e) of the UN Convention on Genocide (1948), “forcibly transferring children of the group to another group” constitutes genocide when the intent is to destroy a culture.²⁸

Continuing Your Learning Journey

a) How can educators learn more first-hand stories of Sixties Scoop?

b) How does the legacy of the Sixties Scoop fit into the larger journey of reconciliation?

FURTHER INFORMATION

Sixties Scoop Indigenous Society of Alberta (SSISA) is “A non-profit society formed to represent survivors in Alberta, create dialogue and engagement and develop true reconciliation.” www.ssisa.ca/

NOTES

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Stepping Stones is a publication of the Alberta Teachers’ Association **Walking Together Project** intended to support certificated teachers on their learning journey to meet the First Nations, Métis and Inuit foundational knowledge competency in the Teaching Quality Standard. Walking Together would like to acknowledge the contributions of First Nations, Métis and Inuit community members within Alberta in developing these resources.

For additional resources and information on Walking Together, visit www.teachers.ab.ca.

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