Position Paper

Canadian Council of Provincial Child and Youth Advocates

Aboriginal Children and Youth in Canada: Canada Must Do Better

It is to ensure that Aboriginal children grow up knowing that they matter - that they are precious human beings deserving love and respect, and that they hold the keys to a future bright with possibilities in a society of equals. Royal Commission Report on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996[1]

June 23, 2010

Background

The Canadian Council of Provincial Child and Youth Advocates (the Council) is an alliance of government-appointed children's advocates from nine provinces and one territory. Each operates under a legislative framework unique to their province or territory, and their titles differ. Nine of the ten members are independent officers of their provincial/territorial legislatures.

As members of the Council, we share a common commitment to further the voice, rights and dignity of children. We are engaged with children and youth on a daily basis, and promote better outcomes for children and youth, as well as encourage their participation and involvement in a better society to meet their needs and aspirations.

Although our roles vary depending on their statutory mandates, we generally provide direct advocacy supports to children and youth, as well as systemic advocacy for improvements to the system of services and supports. Our respective offices conduct reviews, and make reports to governments and the public.

We play an important role in informing governments and the general public of concerns regarding the rights, status and well-being of vulnerable children, such as those living in state care, and in encouraging and supporting governments to adopt more effective and responsive strategies, giving full expression to the rights and protections for children and youth.

Through our participation in the Council, we identify issues of mutual concern and strive to promote improvements nation-wide. It is in this context that we have prepared this position paper on Aboriginal children and youth. The current circumstance for Aboriginal children and youth in Canada is a significant issue of national importance that requires urgent attention.

Introduction

First Nations, Métis and Inuit children and youth (hereinafter identified by the collective term "Aboriginal") live in all provinces and territories in Canada. They are the population of children and youth in Canada that is increasing in number at by far the fastest rate of any identifiable group. The status and well-being of these children and youth, their rights and supporting their healthy development, is our concern today and into the future.

Aboriginal children, like all children in Canada, are rights holders. The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* has been ratified by Canada, and its measures at least partially implemented by each of the nations provinces and territories[1]. The *Convention* provides for a broad range of rights to health, safety, well-being and education of children. For Aboriginal children and Aboriginal communities in Canada, there is the additional imperative, enshrined in the *Convention*, of sustaining languages, cultures, and community strength.

The *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* also speaks to the rights of Aboriginal children. The *Declaration* has not yet been adopted by Canada.

Our view is that Aboriginal children and youth are a vital part of the social fabric of Canada. However, they are one of the most vulnerable populations of children. There are significant gaps between education, health and safety outcomes for these children and outcomes for other Canadian children and youth. Due to intergenerational disadvantages for Aboriginal peoples, their children require significant government support to achieve outcomes equal to their non-Aboriginal peers.

Aboriginal children and youth are overrepresented in the child welfare system. While estimates vary due to incomplete or inadequate reporting and information systems, analysis of data from the 1998 and 2003 Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect revealed that despite accounting for only 5 per cent of Canada's child population, Aboriginal children represent approximately 25 per cent of children in government care[2]. Indian and Northern Affairs Canada estimated that 6% of On-Reserve Registered Indian Children were in care in 2003-2004[3], substantially above the national rate of less than 1% estimated for the 2007 calendar year (9.2 children per 1000)[4].

While this in and of itself requires us to step back and consider the rights and well-being of this population of children, we know that in addition to this, the outcomes for

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[1] http://www.pch.gc.ca/pgm/pdp-hrp/docs/pdf/canada3-4-crc-reports-nov2009-eng.pdf
[2] http://www.irpp.org/choices/archive/vol14no7.pdf
[3] http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/webarchives/20071125233054/http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/pr/sts/bdd04/bdd04_e.pdf
[4] http://www.cecw-cepb.ca/sites/default/files/publications/en/ChildrenInCare78E.pdf

Aboriginal children and youth in key domains like health, education and safety is one of the largest national, provincial, territorial and regional challenges faced by Canadian governments and Canadian society.

While we note the gap in outcomes in these key domains for Aboriginal children and youth, we do recognize from our work that these issues are complex and challenging, with uncertainties regarding which level of government bears primary responsibility for services, resources, or setting performance targets or measures for improvements for these children and youth.

However, we also know that the status of Aboriginal children and youth in Canada today is completely unacceptable.

> "To be an Indigenous child in Canada correlates with poverty-related barriers, including 'income, education and culture, employment, health, housing, being taken into care and justice.' The disparities among Indigenous and non-indigenous children and youth are alarming…[5]"

The information outlined in this paper is not new. However, as a society, Canadians and their governments continue to fail these vulnerable children. Despite spending millions of dollars each year, we see marginal, if any, impact on outcomes. Closing the gaps in at the current rate will take decades – far too long to meet our responsibilities to these vulnerable children.

We must act with urgency to provide effective supports, services and social conditions that will enable Aboriginal children and youth to achieve the developmental outcomes and level of well-being that all Canadian children should enjoy.

Leadership, coordination and sustained political will are required.

Understanding the Context

Aboriginal children and youth continue to bear the impacts of a "legacy of colonialism, racism and exclusion.[6]" In 1996, the Royal Commission report on Aboriginal Peoples acknowledged the numerous challenges that Aboriginal children face and advocated for collective efforts to address them. The Commission advised:

> The best interests of Aboriginal children will be served only by determined and sustained efforts on the part of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal governments,

[5] Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond. *Protecting Rights of Indigenous Children*, page 172 in Realizing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: Triumph, Hope, and Action.
[6] http://www.ncwcnbes.net/documents/researchpublications/ResearchProjects/FirstNationsMetisInuitChildrenAndYouth/2007Report-TimeToAct/PressReleaseENG.htm

institutions, and people to recognize and support each other's contributions to the common goal[7].

Indicators continue to show Aboriginal children faring far worse then their non-Aboriginal peers, and these trends have continued with few exceptions since 1996. Aboriginal children comprise an increasing proportion of all children in Canada[8], but they also comprise a population continually overrepresented in statistics that consistently show them experiencing poor outcomes.

Canada championed the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.* Additionally, in registering two reservations and a statement of understanding when it signed the *Convention*, Canada also demonstrated an awareness of Aboriginal children's issues[9]. The twentieth anniversary of the *Convention* was marked in 2009, and although the *Convention* has been used to raise awareness of the inequality and violations of Aboriginal children's rights within Canada, it has not resulted in profound improvements. Regrettably, the goal of addressing the rights of Aboriginal children and their persistent disadvantages remains unrealized.

It remains one of our most significant tasks to give the *Convention* meaning in Canada, as well as to ensure that Aboriginal children and youth have a measure of equality to that of other children and youth in Canada, as the human rights considerations involve international, domestic and local norms and standards.

Despite being a signatory of the *Convention* and being among the most livable countries in the world, the figures and statistics of Aboriginal children living in Canada are startling. The Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights report "Children: The Silenced Citizens" observed that Aboriginal children are disproportionately:

- Living in poverty
- Involved in the youth criminal justice and child protection systems.
- Face significant health problems in comparison with other children in Canada, such as higher rates of malnutrition, disabilities, drug and alcohol abuse, and suicide[10].

These indicators and many more paint a bleak reality and future for Aboriginal children and youth. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organizations have galvanized to address some of these concerns. The Federal government apology for residential

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[7] VOLUME 3 Gathering Strength; Chapter 2 - The Family http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/webarchives/20071218071240/http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/sg/si6_e.html

[8] http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-634-x/89-634-x2008001-eng.htm

[9] Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond. *Protecting Rights of Indigenous Children*, page 180 in Realizing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: Triumph, Hope, and Action.

[10] Canada, Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights, "Children: The Silenced Citizens: Effective Implementation of Canada's International Obligations with Respect to the Rights of Children" (2007), online: Standing Committee on Human Rights <http://www.parl.gc.ca/39/1/parlbus/commbus/senate/Com-e/huma-e/rep-e/rep10apr07-e.htm#_Toc164844427

schools in 2008 and the resulting Truth and Reconciliation Commission present new opportunities to work towards a path of healing, reconciliation and renewal. Yet the path must be directly engaged with the well-being of children and youth as the focus in order to be successful.

Some Key Indicators and Gaps

A complete statistical picture of the well-being of Aboriginal children and youth in Canada is not possible at this time as limited administrative data is collected or analyzed as to their health, safety and well-being at a national level. In some provinces, better administrative data and projects matching data and outcomes have produced snapshots of what it means to grow up as an Aboriginal child in that province.

We emphasize the importance of collecting data and identifying leading indicators arising from key domains of well-being (health, education, safety, justice involvement and family status). Without such data, we cannot measure whether we are making progress in improving the outcomes for Aboriginal children and youth, or which initiatives are having an impact.

Such data also helps give profile to those communities that are thriving, and where children and youth enjoy good outcomes. These examples can help point the way to a better path for Aboriginal children and youth by using evidence to inform sound policy and rigorous performance improvement.

Better national coordination and promotion of better measures and data practices is required.

Aboriginal children are disproportionately living in poverty

Incidence of severe economic hardship is dramatically higher for Aboriginal children and their families. Information collected during the 2006 Census of Population reported by Statistics Canada revealed the following:

- Nearly half (49%) of off-reserve First Nations children under the age of 6 were in low-income families, compared to 18% of non-Aboriginal children;
- 57% of Off-reserve First Nations children living in large cities also lived in low income families
- Compared against Off-reserve First Nations children not living in low income families, Off-reserve First Nations children living in low-income families were twice as likely to have parents or guardians dissatisfied with their finances and housing conditions[11].

The situation is not substantially different for First Nations children living On-reserve.

[11] http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-634-x/2008003/article/6500040-eng.htm

The Assembly of First Nations describes the poverty experienced by Aboriginal peoples as "the single greatest social injustice facing Canada[12]." While Canada's child poverty rate is higher than many similarly developed countries[13], Aboriginal children disproportionately experience its impacts. Bennett and Blackstock (2007) view poverty as a "contemporary legacy of colonization that undermines the ability of Aboriginal families to nurture and support their children[14]". The pervasiveness of poverty and its systemic impact has aptly been described as an "insidious poverty epidemic[15]".

The connection between poverty and child welfare involvement is well known in the literature and in experience. When deep intergenerational poverty persists, the default solution may become the child welfare system, with removals of children, inadequate opportunities to work to support family restoration or strength, and an acceptance of a rate of neglect or maltreatment of children that is unacceptable. Aboriginal children and youth in Canada have inadequate opportunities to exit the cycle of poverty.

Aboriginal children are disproportionately involved in the youth criminal justice system

In the area of criminogenic risk, which is related closely to safety, education and well-being, Aboriginal youth are grossly over-represented in the youth criminal justice system beginning at age 12 years. In Manitoba for example, Aboriginal youth represented 23 per cent of the provincial population aged 12 to 17 in 2006, but 84 per cent of youth in Sentenced Custody[16].

For Aboriginal children and youth in Canada, there is a greater likelihood of involvement in the criminal justice system, including detention in a youth custody facility, than there is for high school graduation[17]. This is a staggeringly negative outcome and appears to have increased, particularly in some provinces, over the past decade, even while youth criminal involvement has declined nationally.

In 2007/2008, over 4,700 Aboriginal youth were admitted to some form of custody and over 2,700 were admitted to probation[18]. In fact statistics indicate that since the implementation of the *Youth Criminal Justice Act*, this figure is increasing[19]. Aboriginal youth are overrepresented at various stages including remand, admissions

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[12] http://www.afn.ca/article.asp?id=3635
[13] http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/2008/cpho-aspc/pdf/cpho-report-eng.pdf 2
[14] http://www.fncfcs.com/pubs/vol3num3/Editorial_pp5.pdf
[15] http://www.fncfcs.com/pubs/vol3num3/Editorial_pp5.pdf
[16] http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2009002/article/10846/tbl/tbl08-eng.htm
[17] Kids, Crime, and Care excerpt page 2.
[18] http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2009002/article/10846-eng.htm#a9. Note: Probation totals exclude Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, Quebec, Northwest Territories and Nunavut; Remand totals exclude Prince Edward Island, Quebec, Saskatchewan and Nunavut, and Sentenced Custody totals exclude Prince Edward Island, Quebec and Nunavut.
[19] http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2009002/article/10846-eng.htm#a9

to secure and open custody, and admissions to probation.[20] When policies and changes in criminal law move the system in the direction of greater emphasis on detention have a more immediate negative impact on Aboriginal children and youth than on any other group in Canadian society.

Social supports and improved education are central to lowering criminogenic risk factors early in life. However, no adequate and coordinated strategies are in place in Canada across jurisdictions, or in most places, within provincial or territorial jurisdictions for an effective social policy response to the elevated criminogenic risk to Aboriginal children and youth.

Aboriginal children are disproportionately involved with the child protection system

Aboriginal children and youth have a right to be safe and supported in their homes and in their communities. Serious systemic issues set the stage for disproportionate rates of child abuse and neglect.

Within the child protection system, Aboriginal children are also overrepresented in another form of custodial care[21]. In British Columbia, Aboriginal children are six times more likely to be taken in care than non-Aboriginal Children[22], and as of March 2010, represent 54% of the province's In-care child population[23].

Societal causes "such as poverty, multi-generational trauma and social dislocation" are not well considered[24] and this leads to a system whereby "taking a child into care becomes the default system when government is dealing with a family in strained and deprived circumstances."[25] The Royal Commission report on Aboriginal Peoples concluded that "the continued high rates of children in care outside their homes indicate a crisis in Aboriginal family life."[26]

The causes of this over-representation are complex, but certainly there is an element of systemic disparity in the investigation, removal and breakdown of Aboriginal families to warrant new strategies more sensitive to these considerations.

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[20] http://www40.statcan.gc.ca/l01/cst01/legal42a-eng.htm
[21] http://www.cecw-cepb.ca/sites/default/files/publications/en/AboriginalChildren23E.pdf
[22] Office of the Auditor General of British Columbia, *Management of Aboriginal Child Protection Services: Ministry of Children and Family Development* (Victoria: Office of the Auditor General of British Columbia, 2008) at 2, online: Auditor General of British Columbia <http://www.bcauditor.com/include/view_file.asp?id=10&type=publication>.
[23] Ministry of Children and Family Development
[24] http://www.fncfcs.com/docs/ISGReport.pdf 8
[25]http://www.rcybc.ca/Images/PDFs/Op%20Eds/Van%20Sun%20Op%20Ed%20Aug%202009%20FINAL.pdf
[26] VOLUME 3 Gathering Strength; Chapter 2 - The Family
http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/webarchives/20071218071240/http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/sg/si6_e.html

Aboriginal children face significant health problems in comparison with other children in Canada

In the domain of health, Aboriginal children and youth again lag behind their peers as measured by key determinants. More Aboriginal children face dire situations and social conditions that not only threaten their birthright and future, but also contribute to unacceptable current living conditions.

A third of Aboriginal children live in low-income families where food security is a concern[27]. Aboriginal children disproportionately live in substandard housing that is characterized by "crowding, need for repairs and poor water quality.[28]" Infant mortality, obesity, respiratory illnesses all show Aboriginal children at a much higher risk compared to non Aboriginal children. These figures are compounded by geographical accessibility issues, cultural insensitivities and language barriers[29].

A point of note is that health outcomes for Aboriginal children and youth are not as positive as for other children and youth, including for those living in an urban area with access to primary, secondary and tertiary public health care supports.
While some improvements have been seen in some regions of Canada, progress has been limited and in many instances stalled for some time[30].

Access to primary heath care, and prevention and support for children and youth with special needs such as developmental disabilities, is inconsistent, and not responsive to the need. Key health indicators, such as birth weights, infant mortality, progress in school, and teen pregnancy all suggest a gap with non-Aboriginal peers for these children and youth.

Many Aboriginal children and youth face the challenges and limitations of living with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD), and substance abuse is a factor in many young lives. Health Canada estimates that nine in every 1000 infants are born with FASD[31], and initial research suggests that occurrence of FASD is significantly higher among Aboriginal populations[32].

Opportunities for Aboriginal children and youth to participate in recreation and pro-social activity through sports, safe activity centres, and develop their physical strength and skills are limited in many respects. Poverty, poor facilities, and the absence of a national Aboriginal sport or recreation policy pose barriers for these children and youth to obtain key lessons in healthy living and self-care on an equal footing to other Canadian children and youth.

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[27] http://www.stmichaelshospital.com/pdf/crich/ichr_report.pdf 3
[28] http://www.stmichaelshospital.com/pdf/crich/ichr_report.pdf 3
[29] http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/2008/cpho-aspc/pdf/cpho-report-eng.pdf 3
[30] Add more here. BC Provincial Health Officer's reports 2004, 2009.
[31] http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/fasd/pdf/Factsheet_FASD_Feb_2009.pdf
[32] http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/iyh-vsv/diseases-maladies/fasd-etcaf-eng.php

Aboriginal children lag seriously behind other Canadian children in educational achievement

The educational achievement of Aboriginal children, on key measures like readiness to learn, progress in school and high school graduation rates dramatically lags other Canadian children.[33]. Closing the gap in high-school graduation rates is seen as a critical component to address the economic and social challenges of the Aboriginal population[34]

Utilizing data gathered by the 2006 Census, Statistics Canada reported that 34% of Aboriginal persons 25 to 64 years of age had not completed high school, while 21% of Aboriginal persons 25 to 64 listed a high school diploma as their highest educational qualification[35]. In 2006, the proportion of the Aboriginal population aged 25 to 64 years without a high school diploma (34%) was 19 percentage points higher than the proportion of the non-Aboriginal population of the same age group (15%).[36]

Historic trends in education demonstrate that, with some exceptions, consistent poor outcomes have not been adequately addressed through innovation, attention to these outcomes, or measures to support achievement over the past few decades. Clearly, we must do more and find effective means of redressing what is one of the most limiting factors to future well-being for these youth, and for our society. The loss to Canada in productivity is staggering, and the cost of this loss will remain a significant drag on our economy for generations unless effective national action is taken.

While some efforts at First Nations control of education have occurred in recent years, the gap has not closed and this alone does not appear to be an effective response. We note that the majority of Aboriginal children and youth live in urban centres and attend non-Aboriginal schools where they continue to lag behind their peers.

Education, like child welfare, is a provincial area of responsibility in Canada, although the federal government retains responsibility in areas where transfer agreements are not in place with provinces. In any case, the attainment of Aboriginal children and youth has important national dimensions. Education policy to support better achievements is patchwork and inconsistent. Strategies that work in some regions should be extended to others through positive social policy innovation, and national progress should be measured and promoted given the dimensions of the problem.

National attention and a consistent approach to improvement, with a strong emphasis on educational attainment and performance improvement in all regions are crucial to closing these gaps. No such agreement of national approach has been developed.

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[33] http://www.cdhowe.org/pdf/commentary_276.pdf
[34] http://www.td.com/economics/special/db0609_aboriginal.pdf
[35] http://www4.hrsdc.gc.ca/.3ndic.1t.4r@-eng.jsp?iid=29#M_4
[36] http://www4.hrsdc.gc.ca/.3ndic.1t.4r@-eng.jsp?iid=29#M_4

Until such changes are realized, the "right to learn" for Aboriginal children and youth in Canada remains a hollow promise.

Aboriginal children are at high risk for sexual exploitation and violence

The adverse childhood experiences of many Aboriginal children and youth place them at high risk for exploitation and vulnerability into adulthood. For example, in British Columbia, there are estimates that the number of aboriginal sexually exploited youth ranges from 14% to 60%.[37] The Red Cross has cautioned:

> Intervention strategies and policy initiatives over the last 25 years have not helped in reducing the numbers, and there is a strong consensus across a broad spectrum of service providers and professional groups that the present situation cannot continue without serious consequences for both Aboriginal youth and Canadian society.[38]

The number of women in particular who have faced violence or unexplained disappearance is of great concern, and valuable campaigns for missing or murdered Aboriginal women have been launched in recent years. Many of the Aboriginal women who have been involved with the sex trade and many who have become victims of violence or homicide were formerly children in care, and had lives bereft of adequate support in childhood and youth. Many ended up in harm's way living on the streets of our cities.

We have come to understand their vulnerability as adults and have a greater awareness as a society of the opportunity to reduce these adverse childhood experiences to promote resilience and safer lives as they transition into adulthood, but must move from awareness to action.

Death and injury rates for Aboriginal children and youth are disproportionately high

The overall suicide rates for Aboriginal youth are high, although they vary significantly among regions and communities. Untreated mental health concerns and general feelings of hopelessness and despair lead to suicide attempts and completed suicides. Suicide rates are five to seven times higher for First Nations youth than for non-Aboriginal youth[39]. Inuit youth suicide rates are among the highest in the world, at 11 times the national average[40].

Aboriginal children and youth represent a disproportionately large incidence of child deaths and critical injuries reviewed by those provincial advocates with authority to

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[37] http://www.bcmj.org/commercial-sexual-exploitation-children-and-youth#Characteristics%20of%20children%20in%20the%20sex%20trade
[38] http://www.redcross.ca/article.asp?id=29873&tid=001
[39] http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fniah-spnia/promotion/suicide/index-eng.php
[40] http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fniah-spnia/promotion/suicide/index-eng.php

review and investigate or report on injuries and deaths of children receiving government services. These children suffer greater intentional and accidental injuries, experience neglect, and as adolescents may engage in more high-risk activities perilous to their safety, such as excessive alcohol consumption and unsafe driving.

Reviews and investigations of these cases tend to highlight service gaps and inadequate assessments and support to ensure better outcomes for healthy development at various stages of childhood and adolescence. However, the opportunity for learning and systemic improvement is limited by the lack of national strategies to champion them.

Addressing the Issues

In recent years there have been numerous initiatives to promote self-government and exercise of jurisdiction by Aboriginal governance authorities in the areas of education, child welfare and social services. These are based in the view that Aboriginal children's interests are best protected in "revitalized Aboriginal families, communities and nations."[41]

While it is likely that such initiatives will be an important component of a comprehensive approach, an effective response will require collaboration across governments and organizations, and it will require a shift from words to action to honor the rights of Aboriginal children and youth. An effective response requires that the focus be kept on the children. These children cannot be seen as the exclusive responsibility of one government or one organization. They are the responsibility of all Canadians, and they need our support.

Governments must confront institutionalized mechanisms that work against meeting the needs of Aboriginal children. One example is funding disparities. The First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada reports that on reserve Aboriginal child welfare agencies receive approximately 22% less funding than provincial agencies.[42] Concerns about the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada funding for on reserve child welfare led the Auditor General of Canada to conclude that it is inequitable, outdated, not adapted to small agencies, and not properly coordinated.[43]

Another example is jurisdictional disputes over funding services to Aboriginal children. The Council is pleased to see the adoption the child-centred Jordan's Principle. Jordan was a First Nations child born with complex medical needs. During his short life, federal and provincial governments argued over who would pay for this at-home care. Sadly, because of the discord, Jordan passed away far from his family home. Jordan's Principle is that when a dispute arises between two government parties

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[41] http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/webarchives/20071218071240/http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/sg/si6_e.html
[42] http://www.fncfcs.com/docs/CHRCFactSheet.pdf
[43] http://www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/internet/docs/aud_ch_oag_200805_04_e.pdf 19-23

regarding payment for services for a Status Indian child, the government of first contact must pay for services without delay or disruption. Jordan's Principle was adopted in the House of Commons in December 2007, but remains to be fully implemented.

We believe that it is the responsibility of all Canadians and their governments to close the gaps for Aboriginal children and youth in the key domains of education, health and safety, criminal justice involvement, and social inclusion. New strategies and approaches will be required, and new mechanisms created to ensure a national, intergovernmental focus on vulnerable children. Oversight and reporting on progress must be an ingredient of a successful national strategy.

Recommendations

We, the members of the Canadian Council of Provincial Child and Youth Advocates, call on national, provincial, territorial and Aboriginal governments to take urgent, coordinated immediate action to improve the living conditions and well-being of Aboriginal children and youth in Canada. We are not endorsing specific organizations or activities, but we suggest progress could be made on a comprehensive strategy for Aboriginal children and youth in Canada if we take some key steps to build the foundation of that work.

We believe greater work is required at the national, provincial, territorial and regional levels, and a national plan is required. We offer the following recommendations as a framework for such a plan.

We believe that the response to these recommendations should be evaluated by a joint committee of the House of Commons and Senate to determine if they have been valuable or effective in increasing attention to the issues and improvement in the lives of Aboriginal children and youth in Canada.

We recommend:

1. Creation of a statutory officer independent from the Parliament of Canada, but accountable to the Parliament, a "National Children's Commissioner" with particular emphasis on Aboriginal children and youth and the national dimension of the work on programs, evaluation and outcomes[44].

2. A national initiative to measure and report on child welfare, education and health outcomes for Aboriginal children and youth. This will require creation and coordination of data, and clear assignment of roles and accountabilities.

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[44] The Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse of Quebec agrees with this recommendation, insofar as the National Children's Commissioner's mandate respects the constitutional distribution of legislative powers.

3. Creation of a national Aboriginal children and youth participation initiative, with training on child and youth rights, leadership, voice, and civic participation, to fully implement the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* and reduce vulnerability.

4. That a special conference of Federal/Provincial/Territorial First Ministers, with Aboriginal leaders, and child and youth delegates, be convened to receive a report on outcomes for Aboriginal children and youth. A national plan to improve outcomes for Aboriginal children and youth would be a desired outcome of this process.

Conclusion

The healthy development of Aboriginal children and youth consistent with other Canadian children and youth requires dedicated and sustained efforts at the level of policy, resources and attention across all governments and communities in Canada. We emphasize that these are national issues, beyond any current intergovernmental process of forum. They require a clear, outcomes-directed, child-centred national plan. Additional supports for Aboriginal children and youth to protect and support their cultural identity, language and identity are required to fulfill their unique rights and freedoms.

As advocates for children and youth across Canada, we believe that urgent action required. We will continue to support Aboriginal children and youth in our respective roles in the provinces and territories.

We will support the recommendations identified above in any way possible and encourage a more fully informed debate of the issues that underpin some of the important campaigns and political efforts to draw attention to particular problems and concerns.

We will continue in our individual capacities to report on issues for Aboriginal children and youth and share these amongst our colleagues and governments to support and inform more effective responses at the level of the child.

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