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Sixties Scoop

The Sixties Scoop & Aboriginal child welfare

In the case of Aboriginal mothers, stories of government involvement in family life often go back generations. The legacy of removing children from their families and communities, first through the residential schools, and then through the child protection system, continues to impact the lives of these mothers, their children and their grandchildren.

—Pivot Legal Society, *Broken Promises*

The term *Sixties Scoop* was coined by Patrick Johnston, author of the 1983 report *Native Children and the Child Welfare System*. It refers to the mass removal of Aboriginal children from their families into the child welfare system, in most cases without the consent of their families or bands. Professor Raven Sinclair recounts that Johnston told her that a B.C. social worker provided the phrase when she told him "...with tears in her eyes—that it was common practice in B.C. in the mid-sixties to 'scoop' from their mothers on reserves almost all newly born children. She was crying because she realized—20 years later—what a mistake that had been."¹ The Sixties Scoop refers to a particular phase of a larger history, and not to an explicit government policy. Although the practice of removing Aboriginal children from their families and into state care existed before the 1960s (with the [residential school system](http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/the_residential_school_system) http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/the_residential_school_system), for example, the drastic overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in the child welfare system accelerated in the 1960s, when Aboriginal children were seized and taken from their homes and placed, in most cases, into middle-class Euro-Canadian families. This overrepresentation continues today.

An epidemic of Aboriginal child apprehension

The government began phasing out compulsory residential school education in the 1950s and 1960s as the public began to understand its devastating impacts on families. It was the general belief of government authorities at the time that Aboriginal children could receive a better education if they were transitioned into the public school system. Residential schools, however, persisted as a sort of boarding school for children whose families were deemed unsuitable to care for them. This transition to provincial services led to a 1951 amendment that enabled the Province to provide services to Aboriginal people where none existed federally. Child protection was one of these areas.² [\(# ftn1\)](#) In 1951, twenty-nine Aboriginal children were in provincial care in British Columbia; by 1964, that number was 1,466. Aboriginal children, who had comprised only 1 percent of all children in care, came to make up just over 34 percent.³

In the 1960s, the child welfare system did not require, nor did it expect, social workers to have specific training in dealing with children in Aboriginal communities. Many of these social workers were completely unfamiliar with the culture or history of the Aboriginal communities they entered. What they believed constituted proper care was generally based on middle-class Euro-Canadian values. For example, when social workers entered the homes of families subsisting on a traditional Aboriginal diet of dried game, fish, and berries, and didn't see fridges or cupboards stocked in typical Euro-Canadian fashion, they assumed that the adults in the home were not providing for their children. Additionally, upon seeing the social problems reserve communities faced, such as poverty, unemployment, and addiction, some social workers felt a duty to protect the local children. In many cases, Aboriginal parents who were living in poverty but otherwise providing caring homes had their children taken from them with little or no warning and absolutely no consent.⁴ [\(# ftn3\)](#) In fact, it was not until 1980 that the Child, Family and Community Services Act required social workers to notify the band council if an Aboriginal child were removed from the community.⁵

An alarmingly disproportionate number of Aboriginal children were apprehended from the 1960s onward. By the 1970s, roughly one third of all children in care were Aboriginal.⁶ Approximately 70 percent of the children apprehended were placed into non-Aboriginal homes,⁷ many of them homes in which their heritage was denied. In some cases, the foster or adoptive parents told their children that they were French or Italian instead.⁸ Government policy at the time did not allow birth records to be opened unless both the child and parent consented. This meant that many children suspected their heritage but were unable to have it confirmed.

Many children floated from foster home to foster home or lived in institutionalized care. Physical and sexual abuse was not uncommon, but it was usually covered up, rendered invisible by the lack of social services and support for Aboriginal families and the affected children, a result of the general social reluctance to publicly acknowledge such abuse at the time.⁹ The Aboriginal Committee of the Family and Children's Services Legislation Review Panel's report *Liberating Our Children* describes the negative consequences for Aboriginal children:

The homes in which our children are placed ranged from those of caring, well-intentioned individuals, to places of slave labour and physical, emotional and sexual abuse. The violent effects of the most negative of these homes are tragic for its victims. Even the best of these homes are not healthy places for our children. Anglo-Canadian foster parents are not culturally equipped to create an environment in which a positive Aboriginal self-image can develop. In many cases, our children are taught to demean those things about themselves that are Aboriginal. Meanwhile, they are expected to emulate normal child development by imitating the role model behavior of their Anglo-Canadian foster or adoptive parents. The impossibility of emulating the genetic characteristics of their Caucasian caretakers results in an identity crisis unresolvable in this environment. In many cases this leads to behavioural problems, causing the alternative foster or adoption relationship to break down. The Aboriginal child simply cannot live up to the assimilationist expectations of the non-Aboriginal caretaker.¹⁰ [\(# ftn9\)](#)

Impacts of the Sixties Scoop

Children growing up in conditions of suppressed identity and abuse tend eventually to experience psychological and emotional problems. For many apprehended children, the roots of these problems did not emerge until later in life when they learned about their birth family or their heritage. Social work professor Raven Sinclair describes these experiences as creating "tremendous obstacles to the development of a strong and healthy sense of identity for the transracial adoptee." Feelings of not belonging in either mainstream Euro-Canadian society or in Aboriginal society can also create barriers to reaching socio-economic equity.¹¹

The shift in child welfare policy

Several factors came together to instigate a change in the state of Aboriginal child welfare in Canada. The influential National Indian Brotherhood's 1972 report *Indian Control over Indian Education* inspired Aboriginal leaders to take control of other social services as well. Some Aboriginal leaders, including Secwepemc leader Wayne Christian, helped draw attention to the disproportionately high number of Aboriginal children apprehended by child welfare services and to the need to act.¹² [\(# ftn1\)](#) In 1983, the Canadian Council on Social Development commissioned Patrick Johnston to undertake what became the first comprehensive statistical overview of Aboriginal child welfare. The results showed that Aboriginal children were consistently overrepresented in child welfare services.

In 1985, Justice Edwin Kimelman released a highly critical review of Aboriginal child apprehension entitled *No Quiet Place: Review Committee on Indian and Métis Adoptions and Placements*. In this report, popularly known as *The Kimelman Report*, Kimelman and his committee, after holding hearings and listening to oral testimony, made 109 recommendations for policy change. Kimelman concluded that "cultural genocide has taken place in a systematic, routine manner." He was particularly appalled at the tendency to have Aboriginal children from Canada adopted out to American families, calling it a policy of "wholesale exportation." Kimelman finished his report by expressing his thoughts on his findings:

An abysmal lack of sensitivity to children and families was revealed. Families approached agencies for help and found that what was described as being in the child's "best interest" resulted in their families being torn asunder and siblings separated. Social workers grappled with cultural patterns far different than their own with no preparation and no opportunity to gain understanding.¹³ [\(# ftn2\)](#)

Child apprehension became viewed as successor to the residential school system and as a new form of "cultural genocide." Under article 2(e) of the U.N. Convention on Genocide (1948), "forcibly transferring children of the group to another group" constitutes genocide when the intent is to destroy a culture.¹⁴

During the 1980s, the accumulation of the Kimelman report, the Johnston report, and resolutions by First Nations bands led provinces to amend their adoption laws to prioritize prospective adoption placements as follows: first, within the extended family of the child; second, by another Aboriginal family; third, by a non-Aboriginal family.

In 1990, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) created the First Nations Child and Family Services program (FNCFS), which transferred administration of child and family services from the province or territory to the local band. Under the program, bands administer these services according to provincial or territorial legislation and child welfare standards, and INAC helps fund the bands' child and family welfare agencies. Bands have increasingly taken control over their own child protection services. These services have also undergone some reform, such as expanding resources for single parents and establishing juvenile probation services.¹⁵ (# ftn4) A Métis Child-Family Services program based in Edmonton is another example of an organization which incorporates traditional values into its adoptive family assessments. In many provinces and territories across Canada, a child is now entitled to know its background, and cultural appropriateness is considered in the assessment and screening of potential caregivers.¹⁶ (# ftn5)

What is the situation today?

Sadly, the involvement of the child welfare system is no less prolific in the current era...the "Sixties Scoop" has merely evolved into the "Millennium Scoop."

– Sinclair, "Identity lost and found: Lessons from the sixties scoop."

The Sixties Scoop refers to a particular time in history—roughly 1961 to the 1980s. During the 1980s the government changed child welfare laws so that bands could run their own social service, but problems similar to those seen during the Sixties Scoop persist today. In June 2000, INAC and the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) conducted a policy review of INAC's FNCFS initiative and came up with 17 recommendations for improvements. A May 2008 report from the Auditor General of Canada found that Aboriginal children are still vastly overrepresented in care, citing that 51 % of all children in care in B.C. are Aboriginal, even though Aboriginal people comprise 8 % of B.C.'s population. The report further states that an Aboriginal child in British Columbia is "six times more likely to be taken into care than a non-Aboriginal child."¹⁷

In 2007, the AFN filed a complaint with the Canada Human Rights Commission claiming that INAC's funding provisions created inequality between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. In May 2008, Canada's Auditor General confirmed that "current funding practices do not lead to equitable funding among Aboriginal and First Nations communities."¹⁸

In 1989, Canada helped draft the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, an international instrument that set out the minimum standards of human rights for children everywhere. Although Canada helped draft the Convention, in 2007 UNICEF reported that "Canada has been slow to honour its commitment to uphold those rights and ensure the well-being of children." The report addressed the situation of Aboriginal children in particular: "Improvements are urgently needed to ensure that Aboriginal children have adequate housing, safe food and water, protection from environmental contaminants and access to health care."¹⁹

Policy continues to be reviewed and revised, but the complexities of Aboriginal child welfare are not to be underestimated.

By Erin Hanson

Recommended resources:

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Walmsley, Christopher. *Protecting Aboriginal Children*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005.

Film

Richard Cardinal: Cry from the Diary of a Métis Child. Dir. Alanis Obomsawin. National Film Board of Canada, 1986. 29 minutes.

A heartbreaking film about a Métis boy who moved from foster home to foster home since the age of four. Richard committed suicide at the age of seventeen. Alanis Obomsawin uses the diary he left behind to create this tribute to Richard. It can be watched online at: http://www.nfb.ca/film/richard_cardinal/ (http://www.nfb.ca/film/richard_cardinal/)

Websites

Indian & Northern Affairs Child and Family Services Program: <http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/hb/sp/fncf/index-eng.asp>
(<http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/hb/sp/fncf/index-eng.asp>)

First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada (FNCFCS):<http://www.fncfcs.com/home.html>
(<http://www.fncfcs.com/home.html>)

FNCFCS First Nations Research Site: <http://www.fncfcs.com/projects/FNRS.html> (<http://www.fncfcs.com/projects/FNRS.html>)

FNCFCS Resource list: <http://www.fncfcs.com/resources/childwelfareResources.html>
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White, Lavina and Eva Jacobs. *Liberating Our Children, Liberating Our Nations: Report of the Aboriginal Committee*. Community Panel of Family and Children's Services Legislation Review in British Columbia. Victoria: Minister of Social Services, 1992.

Endnotes

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² This amendment specifically applied to Section 88 of the *Indian Act*. Pivot, 21 .

³ Liberating our children, 2; Pivot, 21

⁴ Fournier, Suzanne and Ernie Crey. *Stolen from Our Embrace*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre Ltd., 1997. 30.

⁵ Walmsley, Christopher. Personal correspondence, June 22, 2010. .

⁶ Sinclair, 66; Fournier and Crey; Johnston, Patrick. *Native Children and the Child Welfare System*. Toronto: James Lorimer and the Canadian Council on Social Development, 1983.23.

⁷ Sinclair, 66.

⁸ Lyons, Tom. "For more than 20 years, Canada took native children from their homes and placed them with white families. Now a lost generation want its history back." <http://www.wrcfs.org/repatriation/stolen.htm> (<http://www.wrcfs.org/repatriation/stolen.htm>)

⁹ Fournier and Crey.

¹⁰ Lavina White and Eva Jacobs, *Liberating Our Children Liberating Our Nations*. Report of the Aboriginal Committee Community Panel Family and Children's Services Legislation Review in British Columbia, 1992: 19-20.

¹¹ Sinclair, 66.

¹² Sinclair, 67.

¹³ Kimelman, Edwin C. *No quiet place: final report to the Honourable Muriel Smith, Minister of Community Services / Review Committee on Indian and Métis Adoptions and Placements*. Manitoba. Review Committee on Indian and Métis Adoptions and Placements, 1985: 274.

¹⁴ Sinclair, 67.

¹⁵ Manitoba, "Chapter 14: Aboriginal Child Welfare." *The Justice System and Aboriginal People: Report of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba*. The Aboriginal Justice Implementation Commission, 1999.

¹⁶ Canada. *Report on the Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples, Volume 3: Gathering Strength*. Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services, 1996. 30.

¹⁷ Canada. Auditor General of Canada. "Chapter 4—First Nations Child and Family Services Program—Indian and Northern Affairs Canada." In *2008 May Report of the Auditor General of Canada*, 2008. Accessed online at: http://www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/internet/English/parl_oag_200805_04_e_30700.html (http://www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/internet/English/parl_oag_200805_04_e_30700.html)

¹⁸ *Ibid*.

¹⁹ Ball, Jessica. "Promoting Equity and Dignity for Aboriginal Children in Canada." *Institute for Research on Public Policy Choices*. 14 (7). June, 2008: 21.

[credits](http://indigenousfoundations.web.arts.ubc.ca/credits/) [contact us](http://indigenousfoundations.web.arts.ubc.ca/contact-us/) [index](http://indigenousfoundations.web.arts.ubc.ca/glossary/)
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