



Prairie Forum Policy Summary
February 9-10, 2006
Regina, Saskatchewan

Problem Areas

Decline in traditional social cohesion in Aboriginal communities

- In traditional Aboriginal communities, raising and socialization of children systems. These traditional systems differ sharply from mainstream North American values of individualism and entrepreneurship, that features the nuclear family. There is a strong sense of concern that traditional values have declined among many Aboriginal communities, and have not been replaced by other values that contribute positively to healthy communities. High rates of poverty, substance abuse, and other social and economic problems have led to the social fabric of some Aboriginal communities having been damaged.

Aboriginal children overrepresented in child welfare systems

- High numbers of Aboriginal children are being taken into child welfare care. The proportion of Aboriginal children in care in Canada is much higher than the overall proportion of Aboriginal people in the population as a whole. Research by Fuchs et. al., as presented at the forum on February 9, shows that in 2004, 69% of the 5664 children in the Manitoba child welfare system were of First Nations descent. One third of these children had a disability and many had multiple disabilities. Of the children in care with disabilities, 79% were of Aboriginal descent. Many of these children were disabled as a result of substance abuse on the part of their mothers: children with diagnosed Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder represented 11% of all children in care, and 93.6% of children with FASD were Aboriginal. The majority of the children in care are being taken into care as a result of the condition or conduct of their parents, not as a result of the condition or conduct of the child.

Priority Areas for Policy Change

Suggestions for Policy Change:

- *Building Healthy Families*
- *Community-based Cultural Support and Renewal in Aboriginal Communities*

- *Child and Family Service Agencies Practices*
- *Education Policy*
- *Child Welfare Research*
- *Jurisdiction and Funding Policy*
- *Advocacy*

Building Healthy Families

- Research results indicate that an effective strategy to prevent children from being maltreated is to support the development of healthy, self-protective family structures: in other words, strong, interconnected families need to be valued and public policy should overtly support this.
- Families need to be linked to community supports. The safety of children is to some extent in the hands of the entire community, not just the parents.

Community-based Cultural Support and Renewal in Aboriginal Communities

- Initiatives that support Aboriginal people reclaiming and celebrating their traditional culture and identity are essential in creating healthy communities and in developing community capacity to deal with social problems. These initiatives should be fostered and supported.
- Child welfare policy for Aboriginal people should be reflective of the individuality of each community and should be developed in consultation with people at the community level so that effective approaches can be suggested and verified by the people who will be affected.
- Although each Aboriginal community is unique, there are some universal values held in common such as community connectedness, kinship ties, the importance of the extended family and a communal interest in protecting children. These universal values can become part of a framework that may be seen as spanning communities. Each community may have a unique approach to implementing the policies that are based on, and emerge from, this framework.
- Collaboration and partnership are very important to Aboriginal people. Any change should happen in collaboration with the communities and be based on the principle of mutual respect and partnership.
- Support needs to be given to individual communities so that they have the internal resources they need to address their own child welfare issues.
- Community capacity building should be supported with a multi-faceted approach in two ways:

- 1) in broad ways such as providing funding and resources to build community togetherness and run programs such as general parenting classes, early child learning programs, etc.,
- 2) in targeted ways such as addressing addictions issues and programs for families at risk such as the 'Families First' program.

Child and Family Service Agencies Practices

- Innovative approaches to child welfare need to be examined, especially approaches that would allow child welfare agencies to deal with child welfare issues at the family level rather than at the individual level.
- The reporting load of social workers should be examined and reduced. Currently, child welfare workers spend an inordinate amount of time in documentation. More social work time needs to be spent in front line activities- attending to families who are struggling to raise their children, helping at the community level to keep families together, and child protection.
- Resources should be pooled to allow for flexible planning.
- There should be a response to every child removal- a check of records to see whether siblings have been removed and if so, where they are, so that they can be kept together. A Family Services Review Panel could also be brought in to look at options for permanency planning and maintaining attachments for children.
- It should be assumed that every child who is removed from home has been traumatized, either as a result of removal or from prior neglect or abuse, or both, and psychological services and support should be provided accordingly.
- Services should be provided from a perspective of wellness through measuring/supporting the determinants of health: health care, education, etc.
- Innovative practices in Aboriginal child welfare agencies should be examined and their effectiveness assessed. Many First Nations agencies in the Prairies are emphasizing traditional spiritual values and customs, and are involving themselves and their staffs with supporting traditional knowledge, community healing activities and community capacity building initiatives. They should be supported as they develop proactive ways to build protective structures within families and communities so that children are safe enough that they will not need to be taken into care.

Education Policy

- Knowledge of child development and good parenting approaches should be incorporated into the school curricula at the elementary and high school level. Young people need to have this knowledge before they become parents so they can start their families with a basis of solid parenting skills in place.
- With Aboriginal children and youth disproportionately represented in child welfare agencies across Canada, social work faculties in universities and colleges need to educate all future child protection workers so that they have a knowledge base of information on Aboriginal culture, and have respect for, and sensitivity to, Aboriginal ways of bringing up children.

Child Welfare Research

- High quality research is essential to provide data for credible advocacy.
- Researchers should ensure that they:
 - 1) address questions that will result in serious suggestions for policy change, and
 - 2) involve partners who will be able to put policy changes into effect in the planning, data-gathering, data-analysis, and application of result stages
- Research needs are of two kinds:
 - 1) evidence-based quantitative research such as the '*Manitoba Children with Disabilities Involved with the Child Welfare System*' project of Don Fuchs et. al., and
 - 2) qualitative research such as the Eks/Frankel 'Families First' program to give a picture of solutions and a description of the problems.
- Child welfare research should be broadly fostered and the results disseminated widely so that best practices can be more generally known.
- Research centres should be in close contact with child and family service agencies so that work in the communities can incorporate a research element.
- We need case studies of situations in which the provision of family support helped to reduce rates of child maltreatment: it is often difficult to provide research evidence of the efficacy of proactive solutions to problems- "effective prevention of maltreatment is not visible", whereas the failure scenario (maltreatment) is visible and more readily documented. This results in a lack of funding for proactive approaches due to a lack of evidence that they work.
- National longitudinal studies of individual cases of children in child welfare placements are needed to determine outcomes of the various kinds of care and treatment available.

Aboriginal Child Welfare Research

The initiative for research should come from the communities themselves.

- Research in Aboriginal communities should emphasize collaboration and partnership, be respectful of the strengths of the communities, and recognize that each has unique protocol, traditions and customs.
- Some Aboriginal communities are feeling that they have been ‘researched to death’, yet despite all the research, positive changes have not happened and they are disillusioned. Researchers should take an asset-building approach: people within the researched community should be involved in the research; researchers should identify the many positive aspects of Aboriginal cultures and communities and build on these to support community health and cohesiveness.
- Aboriginal protocol should be followed when asking permission to do research: this means that the community leaders should be approached first and the appropriate authorities (band councils and Elders) should give approval.

Jurisdiction and Funding Policy

- The child welfare system is currently structured so that funding is available mainly on an individual basis for protection measures when a child is at risk of maltreatment. It would be more effective to take a two-pronged approach and provide funding support for community development and the development of healthy families in tandem with child protection .
- Fiscal policy for Aboriginal child welfare needs to resolve jurisdictional conflicts at multiple levels of government, and focus on proactive solutions that will be more responsive to needs. Support should be provided to families before situations reach the point of child removal.
- Communities need to be given more control over the management of their social development: they should have the funding and the self-determination to develop community-based solutions to child welfare issues.
- There needs to be a collective will to make changes to the current situation, in which many Aboriginal families live on reserves in poverty with over-crowded housing. These conditions compound the risk factors for child maltreatment.

Advocacy

- More advocacy needs to happen at the political level: every member of Parliament should hear from child welfare advocates regularly, and should be informed of the results of current research and their implications for the development of laws and policy.
- Child welfare research findings should be disseminated widely and boldly so that the Canadian public is more familiar with the figures and the situation.
- The impacts of colonialism on the Aboriginal peoples need to be articulated, acknowledged and regretted by the general public- these issues should not be entirely 'owned' by the Aboriginal people themselves.
- The National Policy Review should be implemented without delay.