

First Nations children face large gaps in health, well-being compared to other Manitoba kids

Dec. 9, 2020 – From a significantly lower rate of being breastfed at birth to much higher rates of diabetes, teen pregnancy and substance use disorders, the health of First Nations children is far from equal to that of other Manitoba children, a new study shows.

First Nations children also face disparities in well-being, such as being seven times more likely to be taken into care by the child welfare system and about half as likely to graduate from high school, the researchers found.

“Our children need us to act now,” says the Knowledge Keepers’ Foreword to the study report. The foreword is an introduction in which Knowledge Keepers, who are respected Elders from Anishinaabe, Cree, Anishininew, Dakota and Dene Nations, interpret the study findings and make recommendations based on traditional teachings.

The study, *Our Children, Our Future: Health and Well-being of First Nations Children in Manitoba*, is a joint project by the First Nations Health and Social Secretariat of Manitoba (FNHSSM), the Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre (MFNERC) and the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy (MCHP) in the Rady Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Manitoba.

It was conducted for the Manitoba government as part of its response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action, which include a call for gaps in health outcomes to be identified and closed.

“The government asked us to look at indicators of children’s physical and mental health, as well as education, social service contact and justice system involvement, in order to provide a baseline measurement,” said Leona Star, a Cree woman who is director of research at FNHSSM and co-led the study. “We need an accurate picture if we’re going to measure progress toward closing the gaps.”

The researchers analyzed de-identified (anonymous) data stored in a repository at MCHP. Focusing on a five-year period (2012 to 2017), they compared the data for about 62,000 registered First Nations children and about 279,000 other Manitoba children. They also did regional analyses and compared children living on-reserve and off-reserve.

“We found inequities in nearly every area of the children’s lives,” said Dr. Nora Murdock, director of instructional services at MFNERC and co-leader of the study. “This is a result of First Nations people being disadvantaged by colonization in a multitude of ways, including having their traditional knowledge undermined and devalued.”

First Nations children and youth are more likely to be diagnosed with schizophrenia, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder or alcohol or drug use disorders than other children and youth, the study found.

“Despite this, we didn’t find a higher rate of mood and anxiety disorders among First Nations children,” said Dr. Mariette Chartier, assistant professor of community health sciences at UM and lead author of the study. “The Knowledge Keepers say this is because illnesses like depression are not being diagnosed, due to a lack of mental health services for First Nations youth.”

Other findings include:

- First Nations infants have higher rates of preterm birth, large size for gestational age, and being readmitted to hospital after birth. They are 33 per cent less likely to be breastfeeding upon hospital discharge than other Manitoba newborns.
- First Nations children's rate of diabetes is 20 times higher than that of other Manitoba children. Their rate of dental surgery is 28 times higher, reflecting their high rate of severe early childhood tooth decay. The First Nations teen pregnancy rate is six times that of other Manitoba teens. The rate of substance use disorders is more than five times that of other Manitoba teens.
- First Nations children tend to score lower on provincewide tests in schools. By Grade 7, they are nearly twice as likely to be disengaged from school as other Manitoba children.
- First Nations children are eight times more likely to witness a crime and six times more likely to be the victim of a crime than other Manitoba children.

The research team emphasized that future studies should include more strength-based indicators that measure cultural resurgence and positive change in First Nations communities. The study report includes a list of culturally informed programs and policies that show promise in supporting childhood health, education and social services.

The Knowledge Keepers' urgent calls to action include:

- Ensure that First Nations children have equitable access to all provincially funded health and social services.
- Fund and support culturally appropriate education. Implement First Nations language programs in schools, including language immersion programs on reserves.
- Overhaul the child welfare system and end the colonial practice of child removal.

The full study is available online

https://umanitoba.ca/faculties/health_sciences/medicine/units/chs/departmental_units/mchp/Landing_FN_Kids.html

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