

Advancing Health Equity in Health Care

Cultural Considerations: Aboriginal Peoples¹ in Canada

A History of Colonization Has Sustained Impact on Health.

Despite efforts to improve Aboriginal health, in general, there remain substantial inequities in the health of Aboriginal peoples in Canada compared to the rest of the population.^{2,3,4} These inequities are due to a combination of economic, political and social disparities that have resulted from the complex history of relations between Aboriginal peoples and Canada.⁵

Local Geography: Of particular concern within our local geography are the existing health inequities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples.⁶ Saskatoon has the second highest percentage of Aboriginal residents of all major cities in Canada at just over 9% of the population, and this population is expected to increase.^{6,7} Unfortunately, over 45% of the Aboriginal peoples living in Saskatoon are living in poverty (below the Low Income Cut-Off) and likely in areas of highest deprivation (Q5) where health inequities are most persistent [[The Deprivation Index](#)].

A History of Colonization: The colonial legacy is engrained in the identity of Aboriginal Peoples and continues to act as a social determinant of health today. At the core of the colonization experience is the loss of culture, which includes the loss of language, land, resources, spiritual practices, political and personal autonomy.⁸ Aboriginal peoples were subjected to a system of forced assimilation that sought to destroy cultural identity through such things as residential schooling.^{9,10} Over 150,000 First Nation, Métis and Inuit children attended these schools between 1857 and 1996. The stress, isolation and abuse that stemmed from residential schools has affected generations of Aboriginal peoples and resulted in problems such as family dysfunction, addictions, homelessness, and violence, all of which contribute to poor health status.¹¹

Beyond Poverty: While there is a clear link to poverty and health, studies suggest that the severe health inequities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples cannot be solely attributed to socio-economic status (SES) due to the complex history of relations.¹¹ Individual choices and lifestyles that contribute to health risk behaviours are also unable to account for such inequity.¹¹ Research suggests that the historical stressors from colonization have led to intergenerational trauma and post-traumatic stress response (PTSR), collectively referred to as historical trauma, throughout the Aboriginal population. Such negative emotional states can have detrimental effects on the immune system and can change behavioural patterns affecting disease risk, leading to a greater burden of physical and mental disease and shortened life expectancy.^{11,12,13,14}

Microaggressions: A common form of racism faced by many Aboriginal peoples are microaggressions, “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color.”¹⁵ Microaggressions are commonly found in our society and many people are often unaware that they use them. Over time, being the target of frequent microaggressions can make people more vulnerable to mental health concerns, substance abuse, and alienation.¹⁶

“Canada’s relationship with the indigenous peoples within its borders is governed by a well-developed legal framework a number of policy initiatives that in many respects are protective of indigenous peoples’ rights. **But despite positive steps, daunting challenges remain.** The numerous initiatives that have been taken at the federal and provincial/territorial levels to address the problems faced by indigenous peoples have been insufficient. The well-being gap between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people in Canada has not narrowed over the last several years, treaty and aboriginal claims remain persistently unresolved, indigenous women and girls remain vulnerable to abuse, and overall there appear to be high levels of distrust among indigenous peoples toward government at both the federal and provincial levels. “

- United Nations Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Anaya, May 2014)

¹ Within the local context, the term Aboriginal is used to refer primarily to First Nations and Métis peoples, given the geography and demographic composition of Saskatoon Health Region. Nationally, however, the term Aboriginal includes all of Canada’s first peoples including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples.

