

Indigenous Peoples of Canada

History - The Sixties Scoop

Susan Blight:

The Sixties Scoop is a bit of a misnomer in the sense that it happened in the sixties but it continues today. So what the Sixties Scoop refers to is the child welfare system, and it's no accident that while the residential schools in Canada were starting to wind down and being closed down, and indigenous people were given a choice whether they wanted to send their children there, that more children were being apprehended at that time. It's no accident that those two things coincided.

So at this point in time there are more children in the child welfare system in Canada - more indigenous children in the child welfare system in Canada - than there were at the height of the residential schools. Indigenous people in Canada have their children apprehended at a higher rate, a disproportionately higher rate, than anyone else in Canada. The reason for that, we believe, is a legacy of wanting to assimilate indigenous people into the body politic, to assimilate indigenous people into the broader Canadian public and really take them away from their families, to take children away from their families; they don't grow up with their culture; it's a lot easier to assimilate an individual like that.

So what the Sixties Scoop refers to is the mass taking of children, apprehending them into the child welfare system in Canada, and then adopting them out to non-indigenous families. So for instance from my reserve I know of an individual who was taken from her family and given to a family in Scotland, so completely, you know, affected her life in a negative way in that she never had any connection to her home. That's now being rectified, but it's completely her work that's doing that; she's the one who's reconnecting with her Anishinaabe heritage. But that's not an uncommon circumstance. There were a lot of children taken and apprehended by the child welfare system and put into non-indigenous homes who ended up perhaps being abused there, but also not understanding their own identities as indigenous people, and not feeling connected to their communities. Not to mention the emotional impact on the families who had their children taken away.

And what we're finding now is that these children aren't being apprehended due to abuse, but they're being apprehended at a higher rate for something that the child welfare system deems as neglect. 'Neglect' is harder to interpret. It could be open to somebody's interpretation, and often times neglect comes down to being in circumstances of poverty - so things beyond parents' control. Beyond that there's also the issue of systemic racism in the child welfare system. So oftentimes the people who are working in child welfare systems are non-indigenous and have certain - have certain stereotypes in their minds or certain discriminatory feelings about indigenous people - things that they've learned and been indoctrinated into - and perpetuate that.

So we've now just won a huge case in the Human Rights Tribunal. Cindy Blackstock from the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society partnered with the AFN to bring a case against the Canadian government about discriminatory funding for on-reserve child welfare services. So these things are moving forward, and changes are happening, but at this point in provinces like Manitoba, Saskatchewan the rate of child apprehension of indigenous children by the child welfare system is unreal, and something really has to be done to stop it because it's negatively affecting our communities in the same ways that residential schools did.