

## Inuit Mothers' Visions for Child and Family Wellness in Nunavut, Canada



### What this research is about

Indigenous and Inuit children and families have historically been overrepresented in social service and child welfare cases. Current child welfare and social service systems in Indigenous and Inuit communities often do not consider their cultural values, beliefs, and practices. In Nunavut, Canada, the current system that has been in place since the 1950s is rooted in colonialism and paternalism. Systemic racism persists as in most state institutions in Canada. Presented with a child welfare model designed by non-Inuit peoples, Inuit families find it difficult to understand, navigate, and cope with such a model.

This study interviewed Inuit mothers and other key informants from Nunavut about the current child welfare system. This study highlighted how the existing system is perceived by Inuit mothers as contributing to negative family wellbeing. It also put forward recommendations made by the mothers for changes to the system.

### What the researchers did

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 Inuit mothers and 12 key informants. The informants included current and retired social workers, managers, health care workers, and others familiar with child welfare practices in Nunavut. The study focused on mothers, as they are often the primary caregivers and the first point of contact for child welfare services. Participants were recruited through word of mouth, posters, and local radio advertising. The interviews were conducted in Inuktitut or English as desired by the participants.

The interview data were analyzed, added to, and expanded upon to discover themes and subthemes. Group analysis was conducted, including the researchers and the participant mothers to confirm,

### What you need to know

Government institutions like social and child welfare services were rooted in White, Western, colonial ideals and values. These services often conflict with Indigenous and Inuit cultural values, beliefs, and traditional ways of knowing and doing. This can lead to a lack of understanding and negative feelings toward social services by the families involved.

This study explored the experiences of Inuit mothers and information from key informants involved with the child welfare system in Nunavut. The findings indicate families are fearful of social workers, whose decisions to remove children from their home seem random. There is a lack of familial support and no desire by the system to work to keep families together. An overburdened system and insufficient social worker training also contribute to a lack of understanding and support.

describe, and explore the themes, as well as to ensure accuracy. The analysis also drew on archival data, text-based information, and other data sources.

### What the researchers found

Consistent with reported Indigenous experiences involving child welfare services in southern Canada, all Inuit mothers in this study expressed a fear and distrust of social services. Many mothers were unsure of the motivations and reasoning behind social workers removing their children from the home. Several mothers spoke of situations where social workers had taken their children without communicating the reason. This lack of communication and seemingly randomness in removing children from their home left mothers with

feelings of confusion and distress. Many saw the system as being unpredictable and dangerous.

Comments from some of the informants revealed surprise at the lack of communication. The informants stated that structural barriers like lack of proper training of social workers could contribute to the issue. Moreover, the current child welfare system in Nunavut is overburdened and does not allow for extra time to support individual families.

An important finding from this study was the theme of interconnectedness of wellbeing. The mothers saw their personal wellbeing as being connected to their children. Likewise, their children's wellbeing is connected to them. The mothers believed that child removals by social workers take place during times when mothers are in a crisis situation or needing support. Instead of removing their child, they stated that social services should help families stay together and work to be strong. Removing children was seen as weakening families. At a time when mothers may be struggling with financial or employment stressors, the removal of their children places more stress on their mental health. This makes them feel like they are being deliberately targeted by social workers.

The mothers in this study put forth their own recommendations for changes to the current child welfare system in Nunavut. The two main principles were: 1) a focus on family healing and strengthening, instead of removing children from their home, and 2) support-related decisions for families should be made with Elders in the community. The mothers described a culturally sensitive model based on Inuit worldviews and ways of life, instead of the current Western model, which addresses risk through investigation. This demands the recognition of Inuit cultural systems and Inuit decision-making and oversight.

### How you can use this research

The findings show that an institutional redesign with culturally appropriate supports should be introduced to the child welfare system in Nunavut. This would include replacing the current system based on an investigative model with a model centred on the knowledge and teachings of Elders. This model should

aim to improve both child and family wellbeing, while ensuring Inuit families are able to participate in decision-making and understand their rights.

### About the researchers

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*Research Snapshot by Erika Cao*

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