

Parent-Child Separations Among First Nations and Métis Families: Understanding Implications for Mental Wellness



What this research is about

First Nations children today are more than 17 times as likely as non-Indigenous children to be placed in the child welfare system. This continues a pattern of parent-child separation established under the Indian Residential School (IRS) system. The IRS has resulted in intergenerational effects that continues to impact Indigenous families, communities, and cultures.

While there is growing awareness of the destruction caused by exposure to the IRS system in Canada, there is little empirical data connecting the over-representation of Indigenous children in child welfare and the intergenerational consequences of the IRS system.

To address this gap, researchers conducted two studies that examined the relationships between having a family history of IRS, subsequent parent-child separations, spending time in the child welfare system, and mental health.

What the researchers did

In the first study, researchers used nationally representative data on youth from the 2015–2016 First Nations Regional Health Survey. Participants included 4,968 youth aged 12 to 17 living in First Nations communities. Psychological distress was measured by examining symptoms of anxiety or depression within the past month. A family history of IRS was defined as having a parent and/or grandparent who attended IRS. Youths' current living arrangements were examined to determine if they lived with at least one biological parent.

The second study focused on First Nations and Métis adults. In total, 433 participants were surveyed from across Canada. Participants' depressive symptoms

What you need to know

First Nations children today are far more likely than non-Indigenous children to be placed in the child welfare system. This continues a long-standing pattern of parent-child separation established under the Indian Residential School (IRS) system in Canada that is associated with significant harms to individual, family, and community wellbeing.

Researchers conducted two studies connecting IRS family history with subsequent parent-child separations, exposure to the child welfare system, and mental health. The first study found that First Nations youth with a parent who attended IRS were much more likely to not live with either of their biological parents, which is linked with much higher distress levels. The second study found that having a family history of IRS exposure was linked to increased time spent in the child welfare system and greater depression scores. Overall, parental IRS attendance increases the chances of the next generation being removed from their parents, both of which were important predictors of distress/depression among youth and adults.

were measured. Having a parent or grandparent attend IRS was considered a family history of IRS, and time spent in child welfare was measured.

What the researchers found

The first study found that parental IRS attendance was associated with significantly higher distress among First Nations youth. The likelihood of not living with either biological parent was higher among youth living with a parent who had attended IRS

compared with youth whose parents and grandparents had not been exposed to the IRS.

On the other hand, youth who reported that none of their parents or grandparents attended IRS showed lower levels of distress compared with youth with parents or grandparents with IRS history. Distress levels were higher among youth who did not live with either biological parent. The findings highlight that the cycle of separating First Nations children from their families and resulting harm continues, and that it can be linked back to exposure to the IRS system.

The second study explored the long-term impacts of parents' and grandparents' exposure to the IRS and child welfare systems on depressive symptoms of First Nations and Métis adults. The researchers found that time spent in the child welfare system was significantly more likely if they had a family history of IRS exposure. Those with a parent who attended IRS, and those with a parent *and* grandparent with IRS exposure, were more likely to have spent time in child welfare system.

Levels of depression were higher among individuals with a parent and grandparent who attended IRS, compared with those with no family IRS history. Depression scores were higher among individuals whose family members spent time in the child welfare system, compared with those who did not. The authors conclude that parents' and grandparents' involvement with IRS and the child welfare system are important predictors of depression among adults.

How you can use this research

This research provides empirical evidence on the negative effects on mental wellness of parent-child separations, including spending time in the child welfare system. This calls for First Nations-led culturally relevant interventions that address the root inequities resulting in the over-representation of First Nations children in care. Kinship adoption or customary care (i.e., when responsibilities for a child are shared between family and community members) can provide care and protection to children and youth while maintaining family and community connections. This could offer communities an alternative option to foster care. These studies suggest that systemic changes are

needed to break the cycle of parent-child separations to promote healthy families and wellness.

About the researchers

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Research Snapshot by Nathan Battams and Gaby Novoa

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