

Manitoba Centre for Health Policy

The Health and Well-Being of First Nations Children in Manitoba

Winter 2020

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A summary of the report *Our Children, Our Future: The Health and Well-being of First Nations Children in Manitoba*

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Where it Began

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission released a report about what happened in residential schools in Canada. The report told the stories of residential school survivors, their families and communities, and others affected by the schools. For many Canadians, the report was the first time they heard the bleak truths that First Nations people have been living with for many years. Residential schools caused great harm to generations of First Nations families. And in its Calls to Action, the report lists the things that need to change to begin to repair these harms.

Across many areas of First Nations families' lives, there is work to be done. Many First Nations children do not grow up learning their language and culture. They don't have the same access to health care, clean water, education, and family supports as Non-First Nations children. This results in a gap between First Nations children's health and the health of other children in Canada. Without equal access to the benefits other Canadians have, it is harder for First Nations children to grow into healthy and thriving adults.

The Government of Manitoba has read the Calls to Action. As part of their response to the Calls, they asked the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy (MCHP) to study the health and well-being of First Nations children. The results of this study can serve as a starting point, a way to measure whether new policies and funding decisions improve First Nations children's lives.

A team of researchers from MCHP, the First Nations Health and Social Secretariat of Manitoba and the Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre set out to do this research. They sought wisdom from the Knowledge Keepers of First Nations communities in Manitoba. The Knowledge Keepers, respected Elders in First Nations communities, said:

“We have a duty and responsibility to ensure that our children’s rights are protected, and that our children ‘live’ their rights fully and fulfilled. Learn from our Grandmothers and Grandfathers who walk this path in life with their sacred knowledge guiding them. Our children need us to act now.”

With these words in mind, the research team got to work.

The study uses data from the Repository at MCHP, which contains information on the population of Manitoba, including First Nations people. For example, the Repository has information on health services they access (e.g. doctor's visits), social services they connect with (e.g. income assistance), and their education (e.g. high school graduation). However, at

all times during the study, there were strict privacy laws protecting the identity of individual people. The data do not contain any names or addresses. They are linked together using 9-digit numbers that none of the research team can unscramble to identify any single person.

The study looks at many different aspects of First Nations children's lives. It includes measures of physical health, mental health, and pregnancy and birth. It also looks at education, contacts with child welfare, and involvement with the justice system. For each measure, the research team compared First Nations children to All Other Manitoba children, and they compared across all of Manitoba, between health regions and between Tribal Council areas. The full study report has all of these details, but here we provide a summary of the results for Manitoba as a whole.

What We Found

Pregnancies and Births

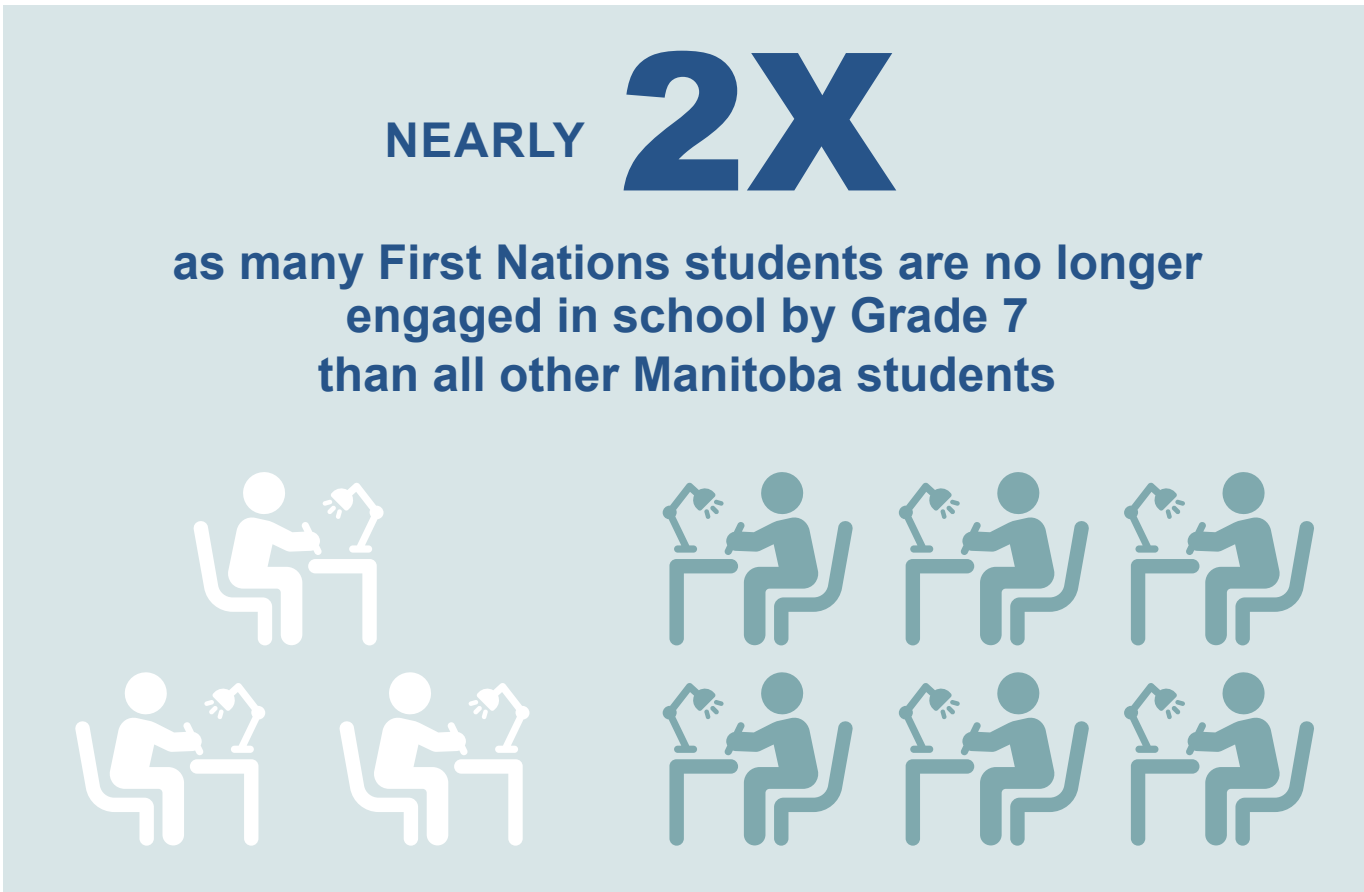
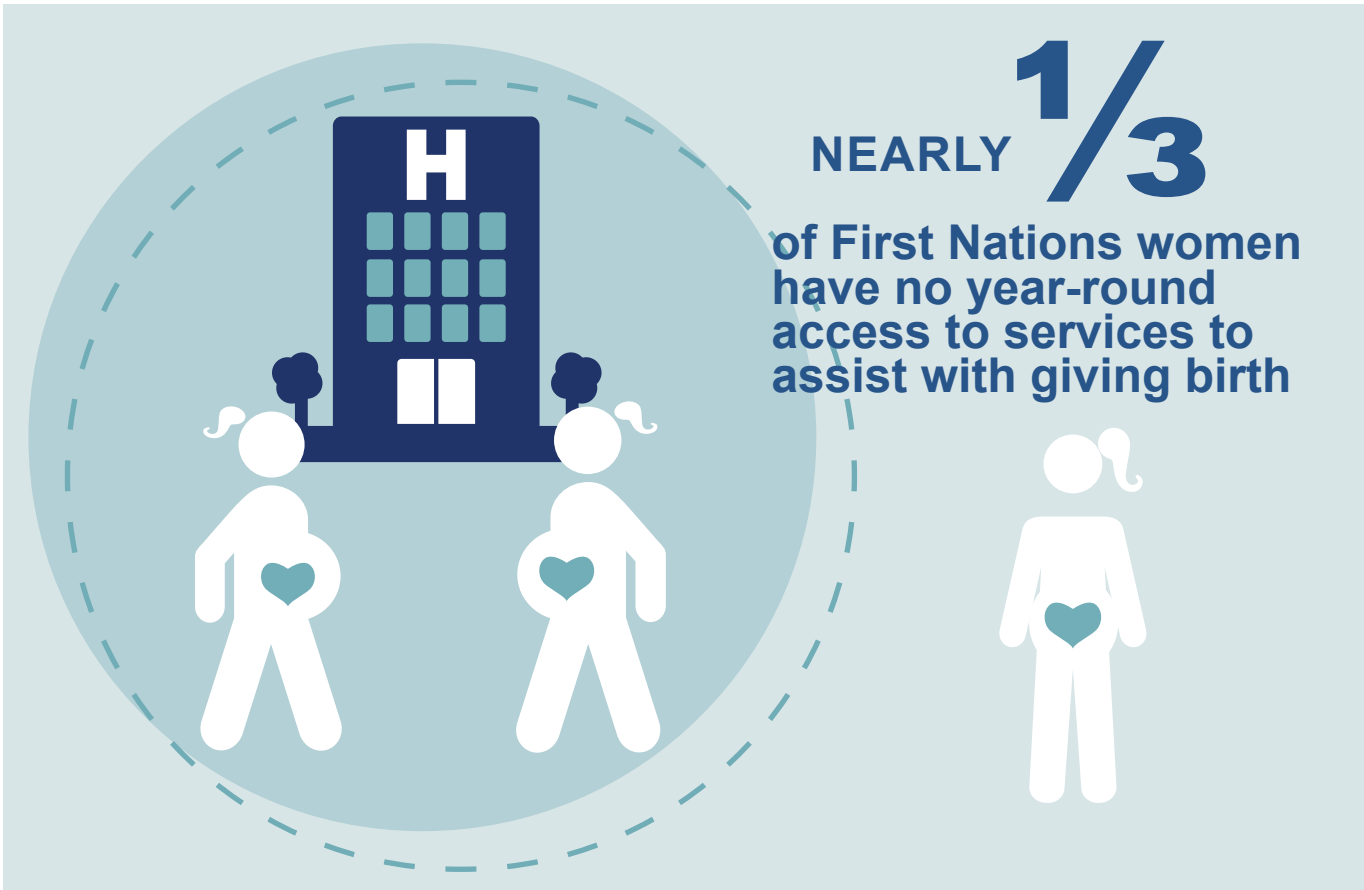
The study found that First Nations babies are more likely to be born early and to be born larger than other babies in Manitoba. First Nations mothers are less likely to breastfeed their babies than other Manitoba moms. Among First Nations teens, pregnancy rates and birth rates are higher than among other Manitoba teens.

The Knowledge Keepers tell us that the loss of First Nations' traditions and way of life has had a huge impact on their moms' and babies' health. A disconnect from the land has led to unhealthy diets and less exercise. Teen mothers may not be well prepared to bear a child. And where First Nations women once gave birth supported by their mothers, aunties and grandmothers, now they are often sent to hospitals far away from home and family. The Knowledge Keepers know that a return to traditional ways would help their families thrive.

Physical and Mental Health

Compared to other children in Manitoba, First Nations children are more likely to have diabetes and to need dental surgery for tooth decay. The rate of mood and anxiety disorders among First Nations children in Manitoba is about the same as among other children. But First Nations children and youth are more likely than other children and youth to be diagnosed with ADHD or with an alcohol or drug use disorder. And they are more than four times more likely to be diagnosed with schizophrenia.

The Knowledge Keepers say that much of the illness in their children is a result of straying from their natural ways. Poverty and lack of access to fresh, healthy food has caused much harm to growing children.



They speak about ADHD and mental illness as an imbalance, a disconnect from spirit, language and culture. “Go back,” they say. “Go back to our ways, go back to the land, and reconnect to your spirit. You are here for a purpose.”

Education

First Nations children tend to score lower than other Manitoba children on tests given in all Manitoba schools. The gap in education between First Nations and other children is clear even from a young age, and it widens as they get older. The high school graduation rate among First Nations students is much lower than among other Manitoba students.

This gap in education is likely to remain as long as First Nations schools have less funding than other schools in Manitoba. Until very recently, the gap in funding between First Nations and other Manitoba schools was large. And for First Nations people, the Knowledge Keepers say, education is much more than what test scores can tell us. These tests don't take into account everything that First Nations children learn and experience during their upbringing. Life-long learning, they say, begins in the home, and includes culture, relationships, service to one's people, and land-based learning.

Family Supports

More First Nations families are in contact with child welfare, and many more First Nations children are removed from their families and taken into care than other Manitoba children. First Nations families are also more likely than other Manitoba families to receive income assistance.

For many years, Canadian policies and laws have excluded and harmed First Nations families.

Some of these policies were directly aimed at “killing the Indian in the Child”. The Knowledge Keepers urge the return of children to their families and communities with the supports and services needed to restore them to wholeness.

Justice System Involvement

First Nations children and youth are more likely to be charged with a crime, witness a crime, or be a victim of a crime than other children and youth in Manitoba.

The Knowledge Keepers say that without traditional ways and knowing, the Seven Sacred Teachings – Respect, Love, Courage, Honesty, Humility, Truth, and Wisdom – have been lost. They want their children to learn the Sacred Teachings and the Natural Laws of all things in balance. In this way, the fabric of their communities can be restored.

Where To From Here?

The study clearly shows the gaps between First Nations children and other children in Manitoba across many areas of their lives. There is an urgent need for supports and services that are planned by and put in place by First Nations people and funded at the same level as services for other Canadian children. Traditional First Nations knowledge, languages and values must be front and centre in this work.

The Knowledge Keepers remind us, “Our Children are gifted to us, as our hope for the future of our People and our Mother Earth”. Closing the gaps in children's health and well-being in Manitoba will require people in many roles to work together. By honouring First Nations ways of doing, knowing and being, we can clear the path for all children in our province to grow and thrive.

Manitoba Centre for Health Policy

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The Manitoba Centre for Health Policy is a research unit in the department of Community Health Sciences at the University of Manitoba's Max Rady College of Medicine, Rady Faculty of Health Sciences.

MCHP conducts population-based research on health services, population and public health, and the social determinants of health.

To View the Full Report, Please Visit

http://mchp-appserv.cpe.umanitoba.ca/reference/MCHP_FNKids_Report_web.pdf



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