**Sixties Scoop**

The Sixties Scoop & Aboriginal child welfare

The term *Sixties Scoop* was coined by Patrick Johnston, author of the 1983 report *Native Children and the Child Welfare System*. It refers to the mass removal of Aboriginal children from their families into the child welfare system, in most cases without the consent of their families or bands. Johnston said a B.C. social worker provided the phrase when she told him “…with tears in her eyes—that it was common practice in B.C. in the mid-sixties to ‘scoop’ from their mothers on reserves almost all newly born children. She was crying because she realized—20 years later—what a mistake that had been.”1  Although the practice of removing Aboriginal children from their families and into state care existed before the 1960s (with the [residential school system](http://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/home/government-policy/the-residential-school-system.html), for example), the far greater number of Aboriginal children in the child welfare system accelerated in the 1960s, when Aboriginal children were seized and taken from their homes and placed, in most cases, into middle-class Euro-Canadian families.  This larger percentage of Aboriginal children continues today.

An epidemic of Aboriginal child apprehension

The government began phasing out compulsory residential school education in the 1950s and 1960s as the public began to understand its devastating impacts on families. It was the general belief of government authorities at the time that Aboriginal children could receive a better education if they were transitioned into the public school system.  In 1951, twenty-nine Aboriginal children were in provincial care in British Columbia; by 1964, that number was 1,466. Aboriginal children, who had comprised only 1 percent of all children in care, came to make up just over 34 percent.3

In the 1960s, the child welfare system did not require, nor did it expect, social workers to have specific training in dealing with children in Aboriginal communities. Many of these social workers were completely unfamiliar with the culture or history of the Aboriginal communities they entered. What they believed constituted proper care was generally based on middle-class Euro-Canadian values. For example, when social workers entered the homes of families subsisting on a traditional Aboriginal diet of dried game, fish, and berries, and didn’t see fridges or cupboards stocked in typical Euro-Canadian fashion, they assumed that the adults in the home were not providing for their children. Additionally, upon seeing the social problems reserve communities faced, such as poverty, unemployment, and addiction, some social workers felt a duty to protect the local children. In many cases, Aboriginal parents who were living in poverty but otherwise providing caring homes had their children taken from them with little or no warning and absolutely no consent.4  In fact, it was not until 1980 that the Child, Family and Community Services Act required social workers to notify the band council if an Aboriginal child were removed from the community.5

An alarmingly disproportionate number of Aboriginal children were removed from the 1960s onward. By the 1970s, roughly one third of all children in care were Aboriginal.6 Approximately 70 percent of the children removed were placed into non-Aboriginal homes,7 many of them homes in which their heritage was denied. In some cases, the foster or adoptive parents told their children that they were French or Italian instead.8 Government policy at the time did not allow birth records to be opened unless both the child and parent consented. This meant that many children suspected their heritage but were unable to have it confirmed.

Many children floated from foster home to foster home or lived in institutionalized care. Physical and sexual abuse was not uncommon, but it was usually covered up, rendered invisible by the lack of social services and support for Aboriginal families and the affected children, a result of the general social reluctance to publicly acknowledge such abuse at the time.9 The Aboriginal Committee of the Family and Children’s Services Legislation Review Panel’s report *Liberating Our Children* describes the negative consequences for Aboriginal children:

The homes in which our children are placed ranged from those of caring, well-intentioned individuals, to places of slave labour and physical, emotional and sexual abuse. The violent effects of the most negative of these homes are tragic for its victims. Even the best of these homes are not healthy places for our children. Anglo-Canadian foster parents are not culturally equipped to create an environment in which a positive Aboriginal self-image can develop. In many cases, our children are taught to demean those things about themselves that are Aboriginal. Meanwhile, they are expected to emulate normal child development by imitating the role model behavior of their Anglo-Canadian foster or adoptive parents. The impossibility of emulating the genetic characteristics of their Caucasian caretakers results in an identity crisis unresolvable in this environment. In many cases this leads to behavioural problems, causing the alternative foster or adoption relationship to break down. The Aboriginal child simply cannot live up to the assimilationist expectations of the non-Aboriginal caretaker.10

Impacts of the Sixties Scoop

Children growing up in conditions of suppressed identity and abuse tend eventually to experience psychological and emotional problems. For many apprehended children, the roots of these problems did not emerge until later in life when they learned about their birth family or their heritage. Social work professor Raven Sinclair describes these experiences as creating “tremendous obstacles to the development of a strong and healthy sense of identity for the transracial adoptee.” Feelings of not belonging in either mainstream Euro-Canadian society or in Aboriginal society can also create barriers to reaching socio-economic equity.11

What is the situation today?

The Sixties Scoop refers to a particular time in history—roughly 1961 to the 1980s. During the 1980s the government changed child welfare laws so that bands could run their own social service, but problems similar to those seen during the Sixties Scoop persist today. A May 2008 report from the Auditor General of Canada found that Aboriginal children are still vastly overrepresented in care, citing that 51 % of all children in care in B.C. are Aboriginal, even though Aboriginal people comprise 8 % of B.C.’s population. The report further states that an Aboriginal child in British Columbia is “six times more likely to be taken into care than a non-Aboriginal child.”17

In 1989, Canada helped draft the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, an international instrument that set out the minimum standards of human rights for children everywhere. Although Canada helped draft the Convention, in 2007 UNICEF reported that “Canada has been slow to honour its commitment to uphold those rights and ensure the well-being of children.” The report addressed the situation of Aboriginal children in particular: “Improvements are urgently needed to ensure that Aboriginal children have adequate housing, safe food and water, protection from environmental contaminants and access to health care.”19

Policy continues to be reviewed and revised, but the complexities of Aboriginal child welfare are not to be underestimated.