

Is racism to blame for over-representation of aboriginal kids in the foster system?



ASHLEY MARTIN, REGINA LEADER-POST

[More from Ashley Martin, Regina Leader-Post \(HTTP://THESTARPHOENIX.COM/AUTHOR/LPASHLEYM\)](http://thestarphoenix.com/author/lpashleym)

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Raven Sinclair, an expert on the sixties scoop, with her daughter Mercedes outside their home in Saskatoon. File photo *RICHARD MARJAN / THE STARPHOENIX*

Aboriginal children are statistically over-represented in the foster system in Saskatchewan, which one social worker attributes to systemic racism.

At least 66 per cent of Saskatchewan children in foster care last year were aboriginal, according to the provincial Social Services ministry.

That's 3,046 children who self-identified as First Nations or Metis.

A recent Statistics Canada report put the number much higher in 2011 — 87 per cent of foster children were aboriginal, though aboriginal children made up only 27 per cent of the child population. (Social Services' number from that year is 70 per cent.)

It's not a disparity that's unique to Saskatchewan, although it was the highest percentage among the provinces.

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In Canada that year, aboriginal children made up seven per cent of the country's child population, but accounted for 48 per cent of foster children.

There's an "uninterrogated belief on behalf of everyone involved in child welfare that indigenous people are not suitable to be parents," said Raven Sinclair, a University of Regina social work professor based in Saskatoon.

"That sort of predetermined bias is an inherent, intrinsic aspect of colonialism ... this propaganda that we are not fit to be parents. The discrepancy in those statistics tells me that there's something else in operation here."

Across Canada, "We're all seeing over-representation of First Nations and Metis children in the child welfare system," agreed Ellen McGuire, of the Ministry of Social Services' child and family program division.

She said the government is working to strengthen services and supports for foster children and their families; the No. 1 goal is to keep the children in the family home whenever possible.

The ministry works with First Nations child and family agencies to provide in-home support to parents.

When a child must be removed from the home, McGuire said the government tries to place the child with extended family, and tries to reunite the child with their parent as soon as possible.

There is cultural training for foster families as well as caseworkers, to ensure awareness and understanding of the children's culture, said McGuire.

But, said Sinclair, the system is made up of "primarily white, middle class social workers, who have not interrogated their own personal biases."

"I train social workers to be critically analytical, so times hopefully are changing (and) this is going to have an impact down the road."

Sinclair said she continues to hear stories of indigenous parents who are unable to regain custody of their child, even once they're prepared to care for them.

"(Social workers are) always going to see the non-indigenous family as the best one for the child," said Sinclair.

She calls it the “foster care scoop.”

Sinclair said the system should be put “under a microscope”: “Take a look at the decisions that workers are making and the decisions that supervisors are making, why they’re making them, and in all instances making sure that children go back to their families.”

According to Statistics Canada, 60 per cent of foster children in Saskatchewan were living with at least one aboriginal foster parent in 2011.

“We’ve done a lot of work on how we support connections to family (and) culture for children in the community, children who have involvement in our system,” said McGuire.

“I do believe that we’ve made really good progress in building new and collaborative relationships with our First Nations and Metis families and the community organizations that provide services to them.

“We’ve got more work to do, and I’m hopeful that the future will be brighter in that aspect.”

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- PETSMART**: A flyer with a red header 'ONLY 6 DAYS TO SAVE LOWEST PRICE OF THE MONTH'. It shows bags of pet food and text 'PetSmart has largest select of BLUE Buffalo GREENIES in Canada'. Below is a 'PETSMART' logo.
- NAPA AUTO PARTS**: A flyer with a blue header 'NAPA AUTO PARTS' showing various automotive products like a power drill, a CD, and a battery with prices like '119.99', '5.09', '18.99', '57.99', and '859.99'. Below is a 'NAPA AUTO PARTS' logo.
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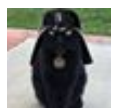
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Raven Sinclair · Fixer of things and Lifter of heavy objects at University of Regina

Yes, I can see how this reporting makes it sound like I am simply blaming and calling people racists but that is not what I said to Ashley. I probably overwhelmed her with info that includes many historical factors but I also acknowledged that there are many success stories and instances where the system is needed and does a good job at intervening. When I talk about uninterrogated bias as a systemic issue, I am also referring to my own biases that take work on a daily basis to check. I believe that there is a way of learning about and dealing these issues without blame and anger, so I welcome and invite you both, Colin and Shirley, to contact me for a conversation. I am in the Saskatoon Faculty of Social Work.

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Lynn Thompson · Portage Collegiate Institute

Instead of blaming the Government we need to stop blaming and look at the real problem and that

instead of blaming the government we need to stop blaming and look at the real problem and that is how we so easily turn to the wrong kind of help and need to build community which includes Elders, ceremony, education and reteach ourselves to take care of our own instead of looking for government help!!!!

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Daeran Gall · University of Regina

Deeper than racism, there are cultural differences... White Settlers typically have little idea of intrinsic self worth, so we work for our masters, bitter towards those who think they deserve better... there are important historical reasons for this, and it is not a slight. Just noting a deep unspoken difference in culture..

In 1607 Powhatan made a plea to John Smith: "I have seen two generations of my people die . . . I know the difference between peace and war better than any man in my country. I am now grown old, and must die soon; my authority must descend to my brothers, Opitchapan, Opec... [See More](#)

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Colin Anderson · Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

As a parent, what an offensive theory to put out. We all make mistakes as parents and do our best to keep going. Raise your own kids and stop trying to blame others for your issues.

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Daeran Gall · University of Regina

[#potashmafia](#) while money cant fix everything. there is 5 billion dollars missing that should have been part of the budget since 2011.. thats a lot of affordable housing...

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