

How Colonialism Affects

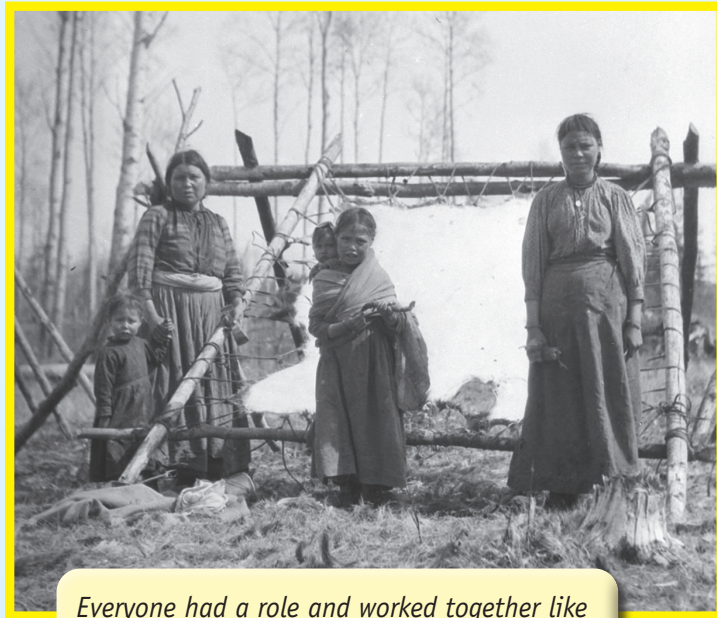
Indigenous Wellness

Before Europeans Arrived

Before colonization, Indigenous Peoples set up their communities in ways that helped them maintain good health. Communities had access to land, water, and ice. People were able to move to different locations whenever they wanted.

Each person had a close connection to local plants, animals, and features of the land. This gave them a sense of place and belonging. Children were cared for by everyone in the community, and people worked together to get things done. Each person had a role in the community, and a feeling that they were valued.

Indigenous Peoples also enjoyed good health. They had active lifestyles based on hunting, fishing, and gathering, which kept people physically fit. They also had healthy diets made up of plants, berries, fish, and wild meat—and they didn't have processed sugar! That means they had no cavities in their teeth and almost no diabetes.



Everyone had a role and worked together like these women stretching a hide.

Some people had health problems as a result of their work—for example, a person who made baskets or tanned hides all day might develop arthritis—but Indigenous oral history says that Indigenous Peoples lived long lives. This allowed elderly people to pass their wisdom to young people.

In the last 200 years, all this has changed. Today, Indigenous Peoples experience some of the worst health in Canada. Diabetes, tuberculosis, cancer, heart disease, accidents, and mental health conditions are all more common in Indigenous Peoples than in non-Indigenous Canadians.

So how did this happen?

It's complicated. There are many reasons. Some of these were intentional to break Indigenous Peoples' connections to their cultures, families, and communities. These are considered by many to be acts of genocide.

Genocide: deliberately working to destroy a group or what makes them an ethnic group

Many First Nations moved to follow their food and had homes they could carry or set up and take down quickly and easily.



This medal was given to the Chiefs who signed the numbered treaties 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7.

Treaties

Treaties Indigenous Peoples made with European or Canadian governments were used to secure peace and friendship, create mutual obligations, and share resources. Over the years, many promises were not kept, such as health care and education.

The Indian Act

The *Indian Act* which came into law in 1876 changed the way First Nations people live.

Ceremonies and ways of life became illegal. This separated First Nations people from their cultures and identities. First Nations also had to accept European forms of government and education. That meant they could no longer make their own political decisions or raise their children. This led to feelings of powerlessness, which had a very negative effect on health and wellness.

First Nations were forced to move to reserves. They could no longer move freely on the land. Hunting, fishing, and gathering became more difficult. When they farmed, laws were passed that prevented



Students participate in the Kyuquot Cheklesah annual school potlatch. Potlatches were banned from 1884 to 1951.

them from selling their crops to support their families. It meant living in crowded conditions, which also had negative effects on health and wellness. Some First Nations people began to use alcohol and drugs to forget their pain.

New Diseases

Many Indigenous people died from diseases the Europeans brought with them. In some cases, diseases were spread intentionally. For example, blankets infected with smallpox were given to Indigenous communities. Healers didn't know which plants could be used to treat the diseases or which ceremonies would help. When Elders or Knowledge Keepers died, much of their scientific and medical knowledge died with them.

A memorial in Woodland Cemetery for Inuit patients who died at the Hamilton Sanatorium in the 1950s. Many Inuit were sent to the South for treatment when crowded conditions in new Inuit communities lead to high rates of tuberculosis. It is still a problem in many parts of Canada today.



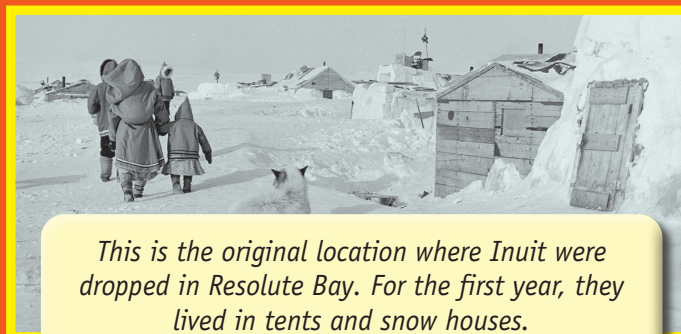
Residential Schools

When Indigenous children were sent to residential schools, they were told that their cultures were wrong, and they were forbidden to speak their languages. Being forced to speak English or French for most of the year meant that many children forgot how to speak the languages of their ancestors. When they returned home, they could no longer communicate with their parents and grandparents, and it was difficult to pass down cultural knowledge. Survivors of the schools often felt like outsiders in their own communities. They felt isolated from their families, communities, cultures, and languages. That made it hard for people to stick together. The family unit broke down, so children had no model of what a healthy family looked like. At school, some children were abused. Children were also not shown any love, so they became angry, afraid, and sad. When they became parents, some passed this anger, fear, and sadness on to their own children.



Students at a residential school in Shingle Point, Yukon, 1932–1933.

Forced Relocation



This is the original location where Inuit were dropped in Resolute Bay. For the first year, they lived in tents and snow houses.

Many First Nations communities were forced from their traditional territories, and Métis were forced from their homelands. This broke up families and communities. Later, Inuit were forced into permanent settlements, which also made it difficult to move freely on the land to hunt, fish, and gather their traditional foods. All of these things created poverty, starvation, hopelessness, and a lack of food security.

Change of Diet

Losing access to traditional sources of food forced Indigenous Peoples to eat a Western diet with more starch and sugar. Many people began to have problems with their health, such as heart disease and diabetes.



The traditional diets of Indigenous people were much healthier than a modern, processed diet.

The Sixties Scoop

The Sixties Scoop began in the mid-1950s and continued well into the 1980s. Thousands of Indigenous children were taken from their families and placed in foster homes or put up for adoption to White families. This disconnected kids from their families, communities, cultures, and languages.



Indigenous children were adopted by families around the world.

Ways of Resilience

It's still happening!

The negative effects of colonization didn't just happen in the past. Colonialism still affects Indigenous Peoples today. Discrimination, lack of clean water, food insecurity, poverty, and poor housing all have negative effects.

Indigenous Peoples are resilient. They are overcoming the challenges and reclaiming control of their lives. They are reviving cultural practices and traditional healing practices. Indigenous organizations are also using cultural knowledge to help Indigenous Peoples re-create healthy families and healthy communities.

Playing hand games in the community of Déline, Northwest Territories.



Friendship Centres

Indigenous Peoples living in urban communities can use healing and wellness services at friendship centres, which are staffed by Indigenous people in each province across the country. Friendship centres offer family support services, language and culture programs, appointments with Elders, counselling, and help locating health care services in the city.

Cultural Practices

Many organizations are using traditional healing practices such as sweat lodges, and cultural programs such as traditional food preparation, traditional toolmaking, and medicine gathering to improve the health of Indigenous Peoples.

Land-Based Practices

There is a focus in many communities on land-based practices such as hunting, gathering, and fishing. Young people in Indigenous communities are learning skills that were lost as a result of colonization. When Elders share knowledge of the land, water, and ice with young people, it creates pride in Indigenous identity. The positive feelings participants have when they take part in land-based practices show just how important culture is to wellness and healthy living.

Working With Elders

Many Indigenous health centres work closely with Elders and traditional healers. Indigenous communities are also setting up land-based healing programs, and Elders pass on the knowledge they have learned. Inuit Elders are teaching youth traditional hunting, fishing, and gathering. They are also preparing ways to help lessen the dependency on Western food and lower the cost of eating.