



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

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Winnipeg's Racism Challenge

The Maclean's article citing Winnipeg as Canada's most racist city has prompted a public conversation that may prove to be useful. It is important that Winnipeg's two solitudes get to know each other, at a personal and social level, and that non-Aboriginal people speak to and about Aboriginal people in a way that is respectful.

However, if our response to the city's racism is left at this level it won't be enough. As prevalent and as damaging as inter-personal forms of racism are, it is structural forms of racism that have produced the worst of the problem, and their solution requires more fundamental change.

Structural racism is reflected in a variety of data. Aboriginal people comprise about 15 percent of Manitoba's population, but some 70 percent of provincial and federal inmates. There are 10,300 children in care in Manitoba; more than 85 percent are Aboriginal. Unemployment rates for Aboriginal people in Winnipeg are double those of the non-Aboriginal population. The labour force participation rate for Aboriginal people between the ages of 15 and 24 is extremely low at just over 50 percent. Aboriginal adults are almost two and a half times as likely as the non-Aboriginal population to have less than a high school education, and are just over half as likely to hold a university degree. The same is the case for health—Aboriginal people experience a higher incidence of almost all forms of health problems, and have an average life expectancy eight years shorter and a premature mortality rate double that of the population at large. Winnipeg is the epicenter

of the ongoing tragedy of missing and murdered Indigenous women. The incidence of poverty amongst Aboriginal people in Winnipeg is about two and a half times that of the non-Aboriginal population, and what is worse, 49.4 percent, almost one-half, of Aboriginal children under the age of six years in Winnipeg are living in families with poverty-level incomes. These data reflect structural racism. These problems are the product, among other factors, of racism.

Why can we say that these problems are the product of racism? Because they are all directly related to the lasting effects of colonialism—the deliberate attempts to destroy Aboriginal languages and cultures and forms of spirituality, the crushing of Aboriginal economic and political systems, and the damage done by residential schools, all predicated upon the racist belief that Aboriginal people and their ways of life were inferior to European cultures and ways of life. Tens of thousands of Aboriginal children were forcibly confined in residential schools; many were abused; thousands died of communicable diseases; all were taught to be ashamed of being Aboriginal; few benefitted from the church-based European education—between 60 and 80 percent did not even get past grade three. In most cases families were badly damaged—indeed, that was deliberate, since the goal was to break up families so as to prevent the intergenerational

there is an alternative.

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transmission of Aboriginal cultures and languages. This, it was hoped, would “kill the Indian in the child.” The trauma experienced by individuals and families as the result of these racist-inspired beliefs and practices has rippled across the generations, contributing in a disproportionate number of cases to family dysfunction, poverty, poor educational outcomes, poor health and incarceration, all of which can today be described as racialized poverty. It is the racialized poverty that produces the all-too-common “blame the victim” responses that are at the heart of this city’s racism.

How can we solve these deeply-entrenched problems of racialized poverty that are now so predominant in Winnipeg? In fact, we know a great deal about how to do so. Many of the most significant efforts to solve our city’s racialized poverty are led by Aboriginal people. Here in Winnipeg outstanding anti-poverty work is being done by such organizations as the Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre, Ndinawemaaganag Endaawaad, Ka Ni Kanichihk, Urban Circle Training Centre and many more. A superb poverty reduction strategy—*The View from Here 2015: Manitobans Call for a Renewed Poverty Reduction Plan*—has just been released. It is the product of consultations across the province, and is endorsed by more than 95 organizations and endorsed, in principle, by the Premier of Manitoba. Among other virtues, *The View from Here* upholds the importance of poverty reduction efforts by community-based Aboriginal organizations.

But in order to turn around Winnipeg’s problem of racism—in order to get to the core of the problem of racialized poverty—we need to invest much more than we are now investing in poverty reduction strategies that have been shown to work, and we have to do so consistently over a generation or more. The problems of racialized poverty have been allowed to persist and to compound for decades, and are now so complex and multi-faceted that they are resistant to quick and uni-

dimensional solutions. But they are solvable, and we know how to solve them.

The question is: are we prepared to invest significant sums, consistently over a generation or more, in anti-poverty solutions that have been proved to work well?

This is the real challenge of racism in Winnipeg.

If we have the will to meet this challenge, within a generation or two Winnipeg will be a dramatically better place to live—for all of us.

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