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Our James Bay
Cree Indian
traditional lands,
Eeyou Istchee, are
located in sub-arctic
eastern Canada, where
we have survived and lived
for thousands of years

Photographs: Front cover: Indigenous people protest mass unemployment in Manitoba. Police use force and pepper spray against demonstrators (2000). © CP/Winnipeg Sun — Wade Andrew | Indigenous children engaged in traditional activities. Approximately 60% of all indigenous children in Canada live in dire poverty (see pp. 6-7). © 2000 Greg Locke/PictureDesk | Tanks and troops were deployed against Mohawk land rights defenders at Oka, Québec (1990; see pp. 16-17). © CP/Tom Hanson | Back cover: Hydro-Québec transmission lines cut through thousands of square kilometers of our James Bay Cree traditional lands, which were flooded and destroyed for hydro-electric development (see pp. 8-9, 12-13). | James Bay Cree trapper. Extensive non-indigenous development in our traditional lands has severely threatened our hunting, fishing and trapping subsistence culture and economies (see pp. 12-15). | All illustrations © Beverly Deutsch All photos not otherwise attributed: © The Nation, Montreal.
Facing page: Parliament Hill protest. © CP/Tom Hanson

Content: Andrew Orkin and Joanna Birenbaum (of Hodgson Orkin Post LLP, Barristers, Canada) with the Grand Council of the Crees (Eeyou Istchee). | Design: CôtéDesign, Toronto, Canada.

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Racism & Gross Disparities

A Message from an Indigenous leader in Canada

“[There is] gross disparity between Aboriginal people and the majority of Canadians with respect to Covenant rights. There has been little or no progress in the alleviation of social and economic deprivation among Aboriginal people. In particular, the Committee is deeply concerned at the shortage of adequate housing, the endemic mass unemployment and the high rate of suicide, especially among youth in the Aboriginal communities. Another concern is the failure to provide safe and adequate drinking water to Aboriginal communities on reserves... almost a quarter of Aboriginal household dwellings require major repairs for lack of basic amenities.”


Canada is one of the richest countries in the world — with one of the highest standards of living. Also, Canada presents itself as a world leader in respect of human rights.

The situation in Canada facing indigenous peoples is Canada’s hidden shame. The fundamental human rights of indigenous peoples in Canada are being violated on an ongoing basis. Indigenous peoples in Canada still endure landlessness, mass poverty and unemployment, ill health, “third world” living conditions, state violence and police brutality, disproportionate incarceration, and suicide epidemics.

These ongoing disparities are the result of decades and centuries of historic and ongoing racism, dispossession, colonialism and discrimination against indigenous peoples by governments in Canada.

A Matter of Survival — or Extinction

As noted by the 1996 Canadian federal Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Aboriginal peoples in Canada are being “pushed... to the edge of economic, cultural and political extinction”.

Addressing racism against indigenous peoples in Canada is thus nothing less than a matter of survival for our People.

Canada will say that its “Gathering Strength” initiative responds to the dire RCAP warning. Canada’s tiny program does not even begin to do this.

Time to Tell the Truth

As one of the many indigenous peoples in Canada, we have prepared this publication to make the truth about racism against indigenous peoples in Canada known to the world community. Racism cannot be eliminated until the problem is openly and honestly acknowledged by the government of Canada.

We hope that Canada – along with all other states – will at last openly acknowledge the racism within Canada’s borders, particularly the government’s own discriminatory policies, practices and laws affecting indigenous peoples. We hope Canada will now commit itself to broad-based, urgent action to eliminate racism against indigenous peoples in Canada and to end the “gross disparities” affecting us and threatening our survival.

Miigwetch! Thank you! Merci! Gracias! Giyabonga!

Grand Chief Ted Moses
Eeyouch — James Bay Cree People, Canada
“[O]n the whole gross disparities persist between the quality of life of Aboriginal people and that of most Canadians.”
Canadian federal Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) (which included a judge of the Supreme Court of Canada and a Québec Court of Appeal judge).

...If they cannot obtain a greater share of the lands and resources in this country, their institutions of self-government will fail.
...Without adequate lands and resources, Aboriginal nations will be unable to build their communities and structure the employment opportunities necessary to achieve self-sufficiency.
...Currently, on the margins of Canadian society, they will be pushed to the edge of economic, cultural and political extinction. The government must act forcefully, generously and swiftly to assure the economic, cultural and political survival of Aboriginal nations.” (emphasis added)
Canadian federal Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996)

A Recent Chronology of Racism & Rights Violations
1996-1998
Canadian Federal Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) warns that aboriginal peoples in Canada are being pushed to the edge of economic, cultural and political extinction, and recommends fundamental reform in Canada to prevent this.

Canada does not substantively respond to this extreme warning. Instead it announces a minimal “Gathering Strength” initiative two years later which ignores RCAP’s systemic solutions, particularly regarding the broad restoration of lands and resources to indigenous peoples in Canada.
December 1998
The U.N. Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights rules that the government of Canada is violating various fundamental International Covenant rights of indigenous peoples in Canada.

1998-1999
Canada dismisses this international ruling claiming it was based on outdated data (the data was from 1991 – 98, much of it provided to the U.N. Committee by the government of Canada itself).

April 1999
The U.N. Human Rights Committee finds Canada in breach of its obligations to indigenous peoples under Article 1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and urges that “decisive and urgent action be taken toward the full implementation of the RCAP recommendations on land and resource allocation.”

1999 –
The government of Canada continues to date to fail to act on the findings of this authoritative U.N. human rights body.

2000
The Canadian Human Rights Commission (the highest domestic federal human rights body in Canada) states that “it is discouraging that many of the Canadian federal Royal Commission’s recommendations [with respect to the rights of Aboriginal peoples in Canada] have yet to be given the consideration they deserve.”

2001
Amnesty International condemns Canada for its violations of the human rights of Aboriginal peoples, particularly with respect to police killings of First Nations people.

Will Canada acknowledge the truth of the ongoing exclusion and discrimination against indigenous peoples in Canada – and take urgent steps to end it?

Will Canada heed the warnings and implement the recommendations of its own Canadian federal Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, its own Human Rights Commission, Amnesty International, and the U.N. – particularly with respect to land and resource allocation in Canada?

In our communities right now we need a lot of healing. There is a lot of hurt… it is hurt because of the way we, as a people, have been treated for the past 500 years. Those issues have to come out and they have to be discussed. We have to be healed so that we are no longer classed as second-class citizens. We are the Aboriginal people of this land, and we must be respected for that.

Rosa Wright, Fort Simpson, Northwest Territories, Canadian federal Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996
The “Two Realities”

The Canada the World Knows vs. the Canada Indigenous Peoples Live In


Yet, within Canada’s borders, there are two realities. Most Canadians enjoy adequate food and shelter, clean water, public safety, protection from abject poverty, access to responsive medical and social services, and the good health that results from these things. Aboriginal people are more likely to face inadequate nutrition, substandard housing and sanitation, unemployment and poverty, discrimination and racism, violence, inappropriate or absent services, and subsequent high rates of physical, social and emotional illness, injury, disability and premature death. The gap separating Aboriginal from non-Aboriginal people in terms of quality of life as defined by the World Health Organization remains stubbornly wide.” (emphasis added)

Canadian federal Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996)

Unemployment

Unemployment in Canada is 7.0%.¹ Unemployment rates of indigenous peoples are at least two to four times the Canadian rate. In 1996, the official on-reserve unemployment rate was 29%.² In many First Nations communities, the unemployment rate is actually as high as 85%.
Poverty
In 1995, at least 44% of the Aboriginal population and a full 60% of Aboriginal children under the age of 6 lived in poverty below Statistics Canada’s low-income cut-off rates.3

Education
The proportion of the non-aboriginal population in Canada with a university level education is more than double the “Registered Indian” population, at a rate of 23.3% and 10.7% respectively (see graph opposite).4
In some First Nations communities, over 40% of the population over age 15 has less than a grade 9 education, as compared to 12% of the Canadian population overall.5

Life Expectancy
The life expectancy of First Nations persons is on average 7 years less than Canadians overall.6

Infant Mortality
The Canadian infant mortality rate is 5.5 deaths per 1000 live births.7 The First Nations rate is 13.8 deaths per 1000 live births, more than twice as many infant deaths – a higher rate than the poorest neighbourhoods in urban Canada.8

Child Prostitution
90% of child and teen prostitutes in Canada are indigenous.9

Housing
First Nations dwellings are over six times more likely to be overcrowded than other households in Canada, posing acute threats to health and contributing to incidences of family violence.10 In 1999-2000, 43% of on-reserve dwellings were inadequate.11 In Toronto, Canada’s largest city, 1 in 4 homeless people are aboriginal, while aboriginal peoples comprise 1.1% of the population in the province of Ontario.
Aboriginal peoples have had great difficulty maintaining their lands and livelihoods in the face of massive encroachment. *This encroachment is not ancient history.* In addition to the devastating impact of settlement and development on traditional land-use areas, the actual reserve or community land base of Aboriginal people has shrunk by almost two-thirds since Confederation, and on-reserve resources have largely vanished... As a result, Aboriginal peoples have been impoverished, deprived of the tools necessary for self-sufficiency and self-reliance”.

( emphasis added)

Canadian Federal Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996)

**Discrimination: The Landscape Speaks for Itself**

- Canada is the world’s second largest country.
- 77% of all Canadians are urban dwellers, two-thirds of whom inhabit a narrow belt along the United States border.
- “Indians” constitute approximately 3% of the Canadian population. More importantly, since approximately 77% of Canadians are urban dwellers and 3/4 of the them inhabit a narrow belt along the U.S. border, “Indians” are the majority in the greater part of Canada’s sparsely populated land mass.
- Nevertheless, lands officially set aside for “Indians” make up less than one half a percent of the Canadian land mass.¹
- Moreover, much of the tiny portion of land set aside for “Indians” is marginal, non-arable, denuded or devoid of resources.
- In the United States, where indigenous peoples are a much smaller percentage of the total population, the comparable figure is 3%.

¹ “Indians” are one of three recognized “Aboriginal peoples” in Canada; we refer here only to “lands reserved for Indians”, which thus does not include Inuit or Métis lands.
As the map above depicts, the James Bay Cree People have been restricted to occupation and beneficial use of only a tiny portion (less than 2%) of our traditional lands.

Much of our land has been taken from us, against our wishes and without our consent, for resource exploitation purposes (hydro-electricity, forestry, mining, non-indigenous hunting and trapping). This wholesale encroachment and displacement of our people continues to this day.

To the extent that we have retained some of our lands by our Treaty, the James Bay Northern Québec Agreement (JBNQA), we have been deprived of all of the mineral and resource rights on the land.

Thus our hunting, fishing and trapping economies have been destroyed while at the same time the governments have denied us any substitute and sustainable benefits from the land.

Map Key:
- Thin red lines within red boundary: Family hunting areas, showing Cree Indian use of complete Cree traditional lands Eeyou Istchee and waters (~400,00 sq km)
- Black lines: Hydro-electric mega-project transmission lines
- Dark blue areas: Hydro-electric dam project flooded lands and waters (14,000 sq. km. of valley hunting and fishing grounds); diverted rivers not shown
- Brown & yellow areas: Forestry exploitation areas (present clear-cutting and assigned areas)
- Green areas: Small portion (less than 2%) of our traditional lands reserved by governments for our use (not including mineral rights)

Source: BGDA IM (MNR Québec), Trapline (CRA) prepared by CRA
Montreal, July 2001

Photos on facing page:
Dump: industrial waste is discarded all over our traditional lands. © The Ottawa Citizen
Flooding and environmental destruction of thousands of square kilometres of indigenous habitat as a result of damming for hydro-electric project.
Extinguishment of Fundamental Human Rights

“Extinguishment of rights is a concept that Canadian law has reserved exclusively for aboriginal peoples.”

Canadian courts and the Constitution of Canada confirm that Aboriginal peoples have “aboriginal rights”. And yet, the Canadian Government insists that we must accept “extinguishment” of our rights, as a condition of obtaining Treaties that promise to protect us and our lands.

“Extinguishment” seems to be designed to dispossess us of our land and resource rights that are based on our indigenous status.

“[R]equiring Aboriginal peoples to extinguish [their Aboriginal] title in order to benefit from the protection of a modern treaty ... serves to exploit the very vulnerability and impoverished condition of Aboriginal peoples that treaties aim to redress.”

Extinguishment and Ongoing Dispossession

The Canadian Treaty-making process with First Nations peoples – over the past 30 years and today – is a continuation of Canada’s historic, discriminatory policies of dishonour, dispossession and colonialism:

- As a condition of Treaty recognition, Canada insists on “extinguishment” of our Aboriginal rights.
- As soon as the Treaties are signed, indigenous peoples have to struggle permanently with the government parties to obtain any meaningful implementation of the Treaty promises. Most treaties turn out to be “broken promises”.
- Treaties have never left Aboriginal peoples with a sufficient land and resource base to assure viable indigenous economies and communities. Instead, the Treaties usually take 95% or more of the land, and seem to actually be instruments of dispossession.

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The Canadian Policy of “Extinguishment”:
- requires Aboriginal peoples to “cede, release and surrender” inherent and constitutionally-recognized and affirmed Aboriginal rights and title to our lands in exchange for minimal conferred benefits.
- insists – in every “modern” Treaty – that extinguishment is non-negotiable. During the negotiation of our 1975 JBNQA Treaty, we were told in no uncertain terms that it was “extinguishment” of our rights or we would lose everything.
- is discriminatory because it applies only to indigenous peoples. No other group in Canada is forced to surrender its constitutional rights.

Canada Continues to Extinguish Rights Despite U.N. Rulings
- In April 1999 the U.N. Human Rights Committee, and in December 1998 the U.N. Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, ruled that the extinguishment by Canada of inherent Aboriginal rights is a violation of fundamental human rights.
- Nevertheless, Canada continues to seek extinguishment (under different names such as “certainty”, “full and final settlement”, “non-assertion – fall back release”) while purporting to have abandoned the practice.
- Cree Trappers Association: In response to the mass flooding and our dispossession and displacement, the government of Canada promised James Bay Cree hunters continuing support and development for our traditional subsistence economies. The government of Canada is now avoiding and seeking to extinguish this JBNQA treaty obligation.

Our 1975 Treaty with the governments of Canada and the Province of Québec: purported total extinguishment of our land and resource rights.

Human Rights

The Committee recommends that the practice of extinguishing inherent aboriginal rights be abandoned as incompatible with article 1 of the Covenant.

United Nations Human Rights Committee, Concluding Observations on Canada (April 1999)

National Post, December 1998

Globe & Mail, May 2000
“Indigenous and tribal peoples and vulnerable ethnic minorities have suffered disproportionate levels of displacement and negative impacts on livelihood, culture and spiritual existence...”; “…poor, other vulnerable groups and future generations are likely to bear a disproportionate share of the social and environmental costs of large dam projects without gaining a commensurate share of the economic benefits.”

World Commission on Dams, Final Report (November 2000)

Hydro-electric Dam Mega-Project Imposed on Us

- In the 1970s, a multi-billion hydro-electric dam project was constructed in our traditional lands. This project was undertaken against our wishes and without our consent, and without any prior environmental or social impact assessment.¹

Devastating Environmental Impacts & Dispossession

- The mega-project involved the diversion and damming of many major rivers and severe damage to our traditional lands and waters. Tens of thousands of square kilometres of our traditional hunting grounds and waters were flooded or rendered inaccessible.

- Our fish and waters have been contaminated with methyl-mercury; many of our family traplines and burial grounds have been submerged; our waters made unsafe for travel; and our economy, traditional subsistence activities, culture and society badly affected.

- Our people and some of our communities were dislocated or forced to be relocated, resulting in poverty, epidemic levels of suicide, substance abuse and diabetes.

Photos this page:
Once mighty Eastmain River in our James Bay Cree Territory, diverted by Hydro-Québec; now a muddy stream devoid of life (2000).
Massive spillway at La Grande “Project of the Century”; thousands of square kilometers of our James Bay Cree traditional lands flooded and destroyed.

Facing page
Hydro-Québec transmission lines over thousands of kilometers of our James Bay Cree indigenous lands.
Cree Indigenous people’s forest habitat flooded by Hydro-Québec for hydro-electric dams (1999).
Minimal Benefit and Broken Treaty Promises

“In the course of Canadian history, a notion persists that governments make (treaty) promises to induce natives to surrender their lands and other rights and then routinely break these promises, frequently hiding behind legal technicalities. Regrettably, the evidence supporting this notion is extensive.”

While the bulldozers were destroying our land, we negotiated under duress and entered into a Treaty in 1975 with the governments of Canada and Québec. The Treaty was supposed to assist us to cope with the devastation and flooding, and to maintain and strengthen our economies and ways of life.

Since then, however, the governments have extracted billions of dollars of revenues each year from the Project – but have broken their Treaty promises to us. We continue to endure, after 25 years, environmental and social devastation, and crisis levels of unemployment, poverty, shortages of housing and poverty-related disease, while obtaining little benefit.

Economic Exclusion

Unemployment rates among our people are as high as 50% in some of our communities.

Our Treaty promises that we will have access to employment. There are over 700 hydro-electric project jobs in our Territory. While we are the majority of the population in our lands, our people have fewer than 1% of these jobs. Rather than hire Cree people, the government of Québec flies in non-aboriginal employees from southern Québec.

Future Projects

The government of Québec continues to plan further destructive hydro-electric mega-projects in our traditional lands.

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2 Canadian federal Cree Naskapi Commission, 1998 Annual Report
Destructive Forestry & The James Bay Cree Indian People (and others...)

“The adverse effects of forestry and hydro-electric development... are keenly experienced by Aboriginal people in small communities especially.”
Canadian federal Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996)

“We are drawing upon the world’s natural capital far more rapidly than it is regenerating. Rather than living on the ‘interest’ of the ‘natural capital’, we are borrowing from poorer communities and from future generations.”

Disproportionate Logging in Eeyou Istchee

- In our James Bay Cree indigenous traditional lands, multinational and other forestry companies have been granted near-perpetual timber cutting licenses over 70,000 km² – an area larger than Belgium, Denmark or Holland.

- In the rest of Québec, the average area leased to one forestry company by the government is limited to approximately 1,600 km². In Eeyou Istchee, our indigenous lands and hunting habitat, however, the average company forest land lease is more than double at 3,500 km².

- Since 1975, more than 5,000 km² of the forest habitat on which the animals – and our hunting subsistence economy – depend, has been destructively clear-cut. Our People are now losing the equivalent of two traditional family hunting grounds per year.

Devastating Environmental and Social Impacts

- As the photographs show, the environmental impacts of the extensive logging and clear-cutting in Eeyou Istchee have been devastating.

- These forestry practices have been unlawfully exempted from environmental assessment, in violation of our Treaty rights to economic, environmental and social protection.

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2 When we recently successfully challenged these violations as being unconstitutional, the governments acted to remove the judge who had ruled in our favour, depriving us of judicial recourse.
The boreal forest ecosystem, upon which our Cree families depend for survival, is being displaced by huge swaths of clear-cut land and road networks, driving our Cree families from their traditional territories and forcing us into welfare dependency and poverty.

We have been deprived of our natural wealth and resources and of our own means of subsistence, in violation of our most fundamental human rights.

Exclusion from Benefit

- The forestry industry on our lands is a multi-billion dollar industry, from which we Crees are almost entirely excluded – economically and in terms of controlling the forestry practices in our Territory.
- In 1998, for example, Québec exported $10.8 billion worth of forestry products to the United States, which represented 87% of Québec forest exports. A large percentage of these exports were taken from Eeyou Istchee, our traditional lands.
- Of the 3,350 jobs in forestry in our Territory, only 180 Crees have full time jobs (only 5%). Yet our people constitute a majority of the permanent residents in our traditional lands. Rather than hire our Cree people, non-aboriginal workers are flown in from southern Québec.
- While destructive and unsustainable forestry will never be acceptable to us, when such destruction is imposed on us, our complete exclusion from benefit (in jobs, royalties or otherwise) is a further injustice.
Even in a “liberal democratic state” such as Canada, the use of state violence and lethal force against indigenous peoples remains commonplace. The use of overwhelming force to prevent and quell assertions of indigenous land and resource rights in Canada is becoming systematic.

In 1995 hundreds of riot police and snipers were deployed at Ipperwash Park to confront 30 unarmed native men, women and children, demonstrating non-violently against their land dispossession by the Canadian military and the government of Ontario. Three demonstrators were shot by paramilitary police snipers when riot police confronted the demonstrators at midnight. One demonstrator, land rights activist Dudley George, was killed. Police failed to provide ambulances and transport for wounded indigenous people.

“... the [government of Canada] so far has failed to hold a thorough public inquiry into the death of an aboriginal activist who was shot dead by provincial police during a peaceful demonstration regarding land claims in September 1995, in Ipperwash. The [U.N. Human Rights] Committee strongly urges the [government of Canada] to establish a public inquiry into all aspects of this matter, including the role and responsibility of public officials.”

The governments of Canada and Ontario continue to defy calls from the Ontario Ombudsman, churches, trade unions, Amnesty International, the media, and the U.N. Documentary evidence is emerging concerning the involvement of provincial cabinet ministers in bringing about the police use of lethal force, as well as the destruction of State evidence. In the absence of any other recourse, George’s relatives are forced to pursue justice in a private legal case. The government of Canada has refused to assist them in funding this extraordinary case, in spite of its constitutional obligations to protect Indians’ rights. The police sniper that shot George was found criminally negligent in 1997 for having “knowingly” shot an unarmed man; however, he received only a minimal community service sentence. Amnesty International stated the killing bore the hallmarks of an “extrajudicial execution.”


Photos:
Thousands of troops and military equipment were deployed against Mohawk Indians defending their lands rights at Oka, Québec in 1990. © CP/Bill Grimshaw
Canadian military tanks proceed toward site of Mohawk indigenous land rights protest at Oka, Québec. Overwhelming military force was deployed against small number of indigenous land rights defenders (1990). © CP Archive
Mohawk Indian mother and child being detained by police during Oka, Québec blockade of Indian sacred lands (1990). © CP/Ryan Remiorz
Police Brutality & Indian Deaths in Saskatchewan

“Police brutality... reports that members of Saskatoon City Police had for a number of years had an unofficial policy of abandoning intoxicated or “troublesome” members of the indigenous community away from the population centre of Saskatoon, thereby placing them at great risk of dying of hypothermia during the winter months.”

Indigenous peoples across Canada have reported countless incidents of beatings and excessive use of force at the hands of police. In 2000, two native men froze to death in the outskirts of Saskatoon apparently after being abandoned there by police. Police officers have been suspended in these cases, but there has been no national outcry.

4000 Troops and Tanks at Oka, 1990

In 1990, 4000 troops using tanks and helicopters were deployed by the Canadian Armed Forces against a small number of Mohawks asserting their indigenous land rights. The Mohawks had occupied a small sacred forest that had been unilaterally slated by a local government to be turned into a golf course. The Mohawks blockaded roads and a bridge as a ‘last stand’ for their land. One police officer was shot, the Mohawks say by “friendly fire.”

“How can we fail to be astonished that the municipal council did not consult the [Mohawk] Band Council with regard to the expansion of the golf course?... Despite various troubling, obvious facts, Mayor Ouellette ignored the recommendation that he not resort to the police to settle the municipality’s dispute with the Mohawks.”

Use of Force at Sea, Burnt Church 2000

In treaties of the 1790’s, the British Crown promised the Mi’kmaq that their fisheries, trade and economic livelihood would be upheld, in return for Mi’kmaq assurances that they would not side with the Americans in war. In the two centuries since the treaties, however, the Mi’kmaq have been shut out of their fisheries and trade.

In 1999, the Supreme Court of Canada re-affirmed the Mi’kmaq Treaty right to fish for subsistence, livelihood and trade. Mi’kmaq exercise of this right in 2000 was met with burnings of indigenous boats by white mobs. Government of Canada boats manned by officers in riot gear confiscated indigenous fishermen’s equipment and rammed their boats at sea, endangering their lives.


Photos:
Indigenous fishermen rescue fellow fisherman from icy Atlantic waters after government of Canada craft (in background) rammed and sunk his dory (2000). © CP/Jacques Boissinot
Police examine the frozen body of a native man, allegedly abandoned by police in the outskirts of Saskatoon in subzero weather (2000). © CP/Saskatoon StarPhoenix – Richard Marjan
Bloodshed © The Windspeaker
There is a blunt and shocking message to Canada in so many suicides: a significant number of Aboriginal people in this country believe they have more reasons to die than to live.


...the Committee is deeply concerned at the shortage of adequate housing, the endemic mass unemployment and the high rate of suicide, especially among youth, in the Aboriginal communities".1

"And of greatest concern is the high rate of suicide. Hopelessness, despair, self-destructive behaviour, substance abuse, suicide attempts, and completed suicides are all at tragically high levels. Underlying the problem of suicide are hopeless conditions: desperate poverty, poor and crowded housing, the absence of a consistent primary care-giver for children, lack of healthy recreational activities, lack of employment opportunities, isolation, easy access to alcohol and drugs."2

Epidemic Rates of Suicide

Aboriginal Youth Are Choosing to Die in Record Numbers

The rate of suicide among aboriginal youth is at least five to six times higher than among non-aboriginal youth and is three times higher for all groups than in Canada overall.3

Suicide attempts by aboriginal youth are many times more frequent than attempts by non-aboriginal youth.4

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2 Environmental Scan of Mental Health Programming, study conducted jointly by GOC, Health Canada and the Assembly of First Nations (1999).
Why are our People Killing Themselves in Record Numbers?

As noted by the Canadian federal Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, the reasons for the suicide epidemic include:

- ill effects of past and ongoing colonialism and dispossession
- racism and discrimination
- the fact that First Nations people “have to deal with a surrounding society that devalues their identity as Aboriginal persons”
- “poverty and economic marginalization”
- cultural and emotional stress related “to loss of land, loss of control over living conditions and restricted economic opportunity”
- “feelings of inadequacy and anger” from decades and centuries of ongoing and “past oppression”
- “assimilative policies of the past and the failure of public institutions to reflect to Aboriginal people positive images of themselves and their cultures”
- sexual, emotional and physical abuse in government or church-run residential schools
- Aboriginal youth are “the current generation paying the price of cultural genocide, racism and poverty, suffering the effects of hundreds of years of colonialist public policies”.

Suicide Rate (per 100,000)

Photos:
Nympha Rich, an Innu from Davis Inlet, Labrador pauses while speaking to the media about her gasoline sniffing addiction (2000). © CP/Jonathan Hayward
Graveyard and funeral of suicide victim, Tuktoyaktuk, NWT. ©1999 Tim Atherton/PictureDesk
Gross Disparities: Poverty,

“The economic disadvantages facing Aboriginal people [in Canada] are not a passing phenomenon. In fact, disparities between Aboriginal and other Canadians are increasing, and they will likely continue to do so unless policies are radically altered.”

Canadian federal Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996)

Crisis Housing & Community Conditions

“...The current state of Aboriginal housing and community services poses **acute threats to health**. Diseases spread by inadequacies of water, sanitation and housing (tuberculosis and infections, for example) are more common among Aboriginal people than among non-Aboriginal people. Dwellings are unsafe and there is a lack of fire protection services. On reserves, DIAND figures show that 200 dwellings are lost because of fire each year. In the North, solid waste dump sites and lack of sewage treatment create environmental hazards that contaminate country food consumed by Aboriginal people. **Such direct threats to health would not be tolerated in other Canadian communities. They must not be allowed to persist among Aboriginal people either.**”

(Emphasis added)

1. Since 1996, the First Nations housing crisis has deepened. At the same time, the overall First Nation population and the on-reserve population continues to increase.

2. For example, 33% of the James Bay Cree population is homeless and in need of shelter. Yet no government has declared a state of emergency regarding aboriginal housing and homelessness. (Major Canadian municipalities recently declared a homelessness state of emergency with far lower rates of homelessness.)

3. James Bay Cree housing is disproportionately overcrowded, with double the average number of occupants per house compared to Canadians in general. The situation for many other aboriginal peoples is even worse.
Crisis Levels of Poverty-Related Disease

“Canada’s Aboriginal people, as a group, are the most disadvantaged and have the poorest overall health status.”

- Rates of tuberculosis – a poverty-related disease extremely uncommon amongst non-aboriginals – is at least seven times higher for the First Nations population than in Canada overall. The cause: “continued over-crowding in First Nations and Inuit communities.”

- Rates of diabetes among First Nations peoples have also reached epidemic levels, as a result of the destruction of our traditional hunting and trapping activities and deprival of our traditional country foods. Less than fifty years ago, the disease was unknown amongst our people.

- While HIV/AIDS rates in Canada overall have dropped dramatically, there is a rising epidemic of HIV/AIDS among aboriginal peoples which “could have a devastating impact on First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities.”

- Our youth experience epidemic substance abuse and suicide as a result of poverty, hopelessness, racism, colonialism and dispossession.

Inadequate Access to Clean Water

“Access to potable water, adequate sanitation and waste disposal services has been routine for so long in this country that most Canadians take them for granted. The same access is not guaranteed for Aboriginal people, however, and their health suffers as a result.”

- 12% of aboriginal communities across Canada have water systems that pose a potential health threat.
Aboriginal peoples experience disproportionately high rates of crime, victimization, are over-represented in the court and the correctional system, and further, feel a deep alienation from a justice system that is foreign to them and inaccessible, and reflects both overt and systemic racism.


Disproportionate Levels of Incarceration

- Incarceration rates of Aboriginal people are more than 6 times higher than the national average. In the Province of Saskatchewan they are 25 times higher than the rate for non-Aboriginal people.
- Aboriginal peoples account for approximately 3% of the population, yet in 1999, 21% of women and 17% of men incarcerated in federal prisons were aboriginal.

Discrimination at Every Stage

First Nations accused:
- “are more likely to be denied bail.”
- “spend more time in pre-trial detention than do non-Aboriginal people.”
- “are more likely to be charged with multiple offences than are non-Aboriginal accused.”
- “are more than twice as likely as non-Aboriginal people to be incarcerated.”
- “are more likely not to have legal representation at court proceedings.”
- “often plead guilty because they are intimidated by the court and simply want to get the proceedings over with.”

Donald Marshall Jr. is an indigenous person in Canada who was wrongly convicted of murder because he was Native and spent 11 years in jail before he was released in 1982. A Commission of Inquiry into the wrongful conviction found that “there was a gross miscarriage of justice.” Mr. Marshall then went on to be arrested for exercising his indigenous fishing rights (see p. 17, Burnt Church).

Globe & Mail, February 2000
Native War Veterans

Our Veterans Returned Home to Continued Discrimination

Non-indigenous war veterans were received back in Canada with honour. Under the terms of the post-WW-II federal Veterans’ Charter, veterans and their families were richly compensated and rewarded for their sacrifices with substantial land grants, education funding or business capital. First Nations war veterans, however, returned only to discriminatory and racist treatment. While they had fought and died abroad as equals, Veterans’ Charter benefits were unlawfully withheld and denied to them by the federal government. The impact of this discriminatory denial of benefits to indigenous veterans has had triple impacts right to the present day – on veterans themselves, on their families and on their communities. In the absence of this substantial post-war economic boost, many veterans and their offspring have lived out their lives in poverty, and subsequent generations have failed to receive the many compounding benefits that accrued to non-indigenous veterans. First Nations veterans also continued to be denied basic civil rights that non-native veterans took for granted, including (for many years after their return) the right to vote, and their communities continue to this day to be subjected to land and resource dispossession, governmental neglect and even oppression. In some cases, indigenous veterans returned home to Canada to find that their people and communities had been forcibly relocated and dispossessed in their absence.

This Discrimination Persists to Today

To this day, indigenous veterans or their widows or families are struggling to obtain appropriate recognition for their contributions and sacrifices. In response to these efforts, the government of Canada has adopted an adversarial and intransigent stance, involving minimization of the harm, denial and delay. In the meantime, with each passing year, native veterans die without proper recognition, equal treatment and equitable post-World War benefits and compensation. Nor have they received redress for the discrimination and unlawful denial of veterans’ benefits that they, their families and descendants suffered and continue to suffer.
We are Eeyouch, an indigenous “Cree Indian People” in Canada. We have lived since time immemorial on the eastern shore of James Bay and Hudson’s Bay — in our traditional lands Eeyou Istchee. We are hunter-gatherers. Like all indigenous peoples in Canada, we have been subjected to a long history of racist and colonial laws, discriminatory policies, and oppressive acts of dispossession. In recent decades, large scale resource exploitation incursion into our traditional territories has caused our sub-arctic society to undergo forced rapid transformation.

The Grand Council of the Crees (Eeyou Istchee) is our elected governing entity. It speaks for our People. Along with the many other indigenous peoples in Canada, we experience the grave social and economic challenges of colonization, discrimination, dispossession and state violence against us that are still being inflicted on indigenous peoples throughout Canada to this day.

In the last few years, the United Nations Human Rights Committee, Amnesty International, leading Churches and Canada’s own federal Human Rights Commission have all condemned these injustices as violations of our fundamental human rights. We are therefore issuing this publication. Using mostly official sources, it tells our own story, and also presents the overall situation facing indigenous peoples nationally in Canada. In light of their isolation, mass poverty and unemployment, ill health and suicide epidemics, some indigenous peoples in Canada do not have the means to bring this national travesty to international attention.

We are grateful for this opportunity to present to Canadians and the world some insights into the harsh reality of the “other Canada” — the Canada experienced by indigenous peoples.