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Children on reserves eight times more likely to land in foster care

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OTTAWA — Children on native reserves are eight times more likely to wind up in under-funded, poorly tracked foster care that appears to be failing them, says the auditor general.

In a report tabled Tuesday in Parliament, Sheila Fraser urgently calls on Ottawa and the provinces to work with First Nations on badly needed improvements.

Little is even known about how well services are working or how often they fail to meet provincial standards.

"Children are among the most vulnerable people in society," Fraser said. "Some of the most vulnerable children in Canada are First Nations children."

Between 1997 and 2001, the number of kids in care on reserves jumped 65 per cent to 8,791 from 5,340. It has hovered around the same level since.

Among the top concerns is the fact that Ottawa funds First Nation-delivered services using a formula dating back to 1988. It assumes that a fixed percentage of all communities served by an agency need that help - whether or not the real number is higher or lower.

The formula "has not been changed to reflect variations in legislation ... or the actual number of children in care," Fraser said, adding that its use "has led to inequities."

"The services are essential to protect these children from abuse or neglect. The over-representation of aboriginal ... children in care - and the indications that outcomes are poor - call for all parties involved in the child welfare system to find better ways of meeting these children's needs."

In British Columbia, just over half of all children in foster care are aboriginal, yet they comprise just eight per cent of the provincial population.

Poverty, poor housing and addiction lead more often to neglect in aboriginal cases, though rates of abuse are no higher than in non-native homes, says the report.

Fraser blames the disproportionate numbers in part on a lack of emphasis on prevention.

Indian Affairs Minister Chuck Strahl said Ottawa is working on new deals with the provinces and First Nations to put prevention first: "The system that we inherited is not a good system. It's based on an old model, really, of child apprehension."

Alberta is the only province so far to reach a new child-welfare agreement with Ottawa to reflect legislative changes - and funding to First Nation agencies is expected to soar 74 per cent by 2010.

Strahl said "two or three" more provinces will sign modernized deals in coming months. But he insists that more money isn't the solution.

The auditor general, however, said child-welfare funding hasn't kept pace with inflation since 1995. She also said Indian Affairs has covered growing costs by shifting funds from housing and other infrastructure budgets. Dilapidated housing on reserves is a common reason why children are removed.

Still, Strahl says early intervention is the key.

"If you can get in early and help the family ... then you can keep the child in the home in a safe environment."

Indian Affairs is also collecting results-based information from agencies that's expected to be in by December.

The number of on-reserve kids in care has spiked over the last 10 years along with program costs. As of the end of March 2007, about 8,300 - five per cent of all children on reserves - had been removed from their homes, says Fraser's report.

Native leaders say the number is closer to 27,000 when children off reserves are considered - a total that outpaces the number of kids removed from their homes at the height of the residential schools system, they say.

The First Nations Child and Family Caring Society along with the Assembly of First Nations filed a human rights claim last year to protest inadequate funding.

Indian Affairs spent \$270 million in direct support in 2007 along with \$180 million on operational costs, including prevention efforts. The Conservatives added another \$43 million in the last federal budget.

Cash crunches especially affect small communities and kids with special needs, says the report.

"We found that 55 of 108 agencies funded by (Indian Affairs) are providing child welfare services to fewer than 1,000 children living on reserve." Those agencies "do not always have the funding and capacity to provide the required range of child welfare services, and also have difficulties with governance, conflicts of interest, training and management."

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