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# SUN NEWS Edmonton

Wed, February 27, 2008

## Alberta kids put in government care at alarming rate: study

### Aboriginal kids make up 59% of tally

By **ANDREW HANON**

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Alberta children are being plucked from their homes and placed in government care at one of the highest rates in the industrialized world, reveals a new study out of England.

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And native leaders are condemning the system — which they say targets aboriginal families — as the next generation of Indian residential schools, where for a century native children were taken from their homes and raised in boarding schools.

The study, by June Thoburn of East Anglia University in Norwich, analyzed child welfare data from 24 jurisdictions, including Australia, Japan, Wales and several U.S. States. In 2004, just over 8,500 Alberta kids were in care, or 111 out of every 10,000 children under 18 in the province.

Ontario's rate was nearly half, at 64 per 10,000. Washington State's rate was 58, the same as New South Wales, Australia. Japan's was the lowest at 17.

While only 9% of Alberta's children are aboriginal, they make up 59% of the kids in care.

"It's becoming another residential school system," said Trevor Gladue, vice-president of the Metis Nation of Alberta. "We have to act quickly to fix it."

The study comes on the heels of a campaign to launch a class-action suit against the government on behalf of kids who were abused while in care.

Edmonton lawyer Robert Lee, who's spearheading the campaign, said the child welfare system is poorly equipped and often places children in worse situations than their parents' homes.

He told of one case where a mother of four left an abusive husband with little more than her kids and the clothes on their backs. When she sought help from the government, her children were apprehended and put in a foster home, where her baby was shaken violently and left permanently brain damaged.

He recently hired an American child welfare expert to study Alberta's system. She found that the system "fails to meet the most basic safety, permanency and well-being needs of children in foster care."

"The answer," said Muriel Stanley Venne, president of the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women, "is for parents to take care of their own children."



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But she said that in the case of the poor, the system seems almost designed to discourage that. For example, foster parents are paid more than welfare subsidies for single parents, she said, adding that foster children have better access to counselling and other services than poor children living at home.

"That is so wrong," she said. "If you help the family initially, you'll have a good society."

Alberta Children's Services officials are waiting to see Thoburn's study before commenting.

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Spokesman Mary Lou Reeleder said they want to be sure the data from all jurisdictions is the same.

Reeleder said Alberta's numbers include both kids in permanent and temporary care of the government, and wondered if other jurisdictions' numbers are only those in permanent care.

**SUNshine Girl**



However, she acknowledged that the staggering proportion of native children in care in Alberta is troubling.

"We agree that the numbers are too high," she said.

In recent years the ministry has begun working closely with the federal government and native leadership on reserves to "work with families before things reach a crisis."

She added that half the aboriginal children in care were apprehended by native-run child welfare authorities on reserves.

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