



# 8

## Health of Indigenous Peoples

### Learning Objectives

In this chapter, you will learn to

- Appreciate the diversity of Indigenous people in Canada and the factors impacting their health
- Understand the process of social exclusion and the means through which it adversely affects the health of excluded populations
- Apply the concepts of macro, intermediate, and individual-level health determinants

### Chapter Overview

The chapter begins with the profile of Indigenous peoples and a review of the history of colonialization and its impact on the wellbeing of Indigenous communities. Residential schools had (and continue to have) an immense impact on the health of Indigenous peoples.

The second part of the chapter reviews the health status of Indigenous peoples and explores the role of racism and discrimination in shaping the lives of Indigenous communities. Segregation, exposure to unsafe living and working conditions, and lack of social infrastructure have negative impacts on the health of Indigenous peoples.

The final section deals with the macro, meso, and individual-level determinants of Indigenous people's health. Social structure, lack of support, and systemic discrimination are key reasons that Indigenous people continue to experience poor health. Although the current federal government seeks to improve its relationship with Indigenous peoples, it is evident that much more work needs to be done to achieve reconciliation.

### Key Terms and Concepts

**Birth rate** the total number of live births per 1,000 in a given population in a given time period (p. 215)

**Death rate** ratio of deaths to the population in a given society during a given time (p. 215)

**Discrimination** the unjust or prejudiced treatment of different categories of people (p. 212)

**First Nations** more or less synonymous term to “treaty Indians” (p. 210)

**Individual-level determinants** income, workplace quality, and level of remuneration from employment; housing conditions; exposure to environmental contaminants; and health behaviour ranging from food choices to smoking to use of alcohol to risk taking (p. 217)

**Infant mortality** death of infants under the age of one year (p. 215)

**Intermediate (meso-level) determinants** community capacity and opportunity structure (p. 217)

**Inuit** live in the high Arctic and are a distinct population (p. 210).

**Macro determinants** contextual and historical factors that include colonialism, social exclusion and racism, and community governance/self-determination (p. 216)

**Métis** persons who are culturally linked to Indigenous peoples and who self-identify as “Indigenous.” Mostly, they are mixed-race descendants of Scottish and French traders (p. 210)

**Non-status Indian** people of Indigenous ancestry who either never qualified for registration or lost their legal status under the Indian Act (p. 210)

**Status Indians** someone who has the legal status of an Indian under Canada’s Indian Act (p. 210)

**Treaty Indians** registered status Indians who have rights under a settled treaty (p. 210)

## Study Questions

*Scroll down for answers.*

1. Summarize the key issues with health of Indigenous peoples in Canada.
2. Summarize the pathways for discrimination of Indigenous peoples in Canada.
3. Define macro-, meso-, and individual-level determinants of health.

## Critical Thinking Questions

*Scroll down for answers.*

1. Explain how social exclusion impacts the health of Indigenous peoples.
2. Describe the emergence and the negative effect of residential schools on Indigenous population.
3. Describe the health status of Inuit peoples in Canada’s North.

## Annotated Multimedia Resources

1. Educating our youth: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRZYRIC69Bw> (4:09 min)  
A video by Alberta Medical Association that explores young people's vision of the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.
2. Sen. Murray Sinclair: How can Canadians work toward reconciliation  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j2Lv21Ktz84> (6:57 min)  
An interview by CBC News that explores what recommendations have been achieved following the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee.
3. Canada's cultural genocide of Indigenous Peoples  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w5Gi0ycmekE> (3:58 min)  
This short video by CBC News summarizes the cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples in Canada.
4. Ontario Indigenous politicians won't have to swear allegiance to Queen  
<https://torontosun.com/news/provincial/ontarios-indigenous-politicians-wont-have-to-swear-allegiance-to-queen>  
This article in *The Toronto Sun* explores why swearing allegiance to the Queen when being sworn for government office is problematic for Indigenous people.
5. Waiting on Ottawa's promises in Attawapiskat  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DyijOlwenD4> (15:24 min)  
The video by CBC News examines what has been done since 2016's suicide crisis in Attawapiskat.
6. Highway of Tears virtual reality documentary  
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/current-virtual-reality-highway-of-tears-1.3806459>  
This virtual reality documentary from CBC Radio One tells the story of Ramona Wilson, an Indigenous girl who has been missing since 1994.
7. Communities: Surviving Canada  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a6Vs7IcxaF0> (34:23 min)  
This debate highlights the role the Canadian government plays in preserving the status quo for Indigenous communities.
8. Mercury poisoning 50 years ago in the rivers around Grassy Narrows First Nation still affects youth  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ryBAz55B1FI> (10:05 min)  
In this video, Peter Van Duzen from CPAC is interviewing First Nation Chief Turtle and Dr Donna Mergler about the impact of mercury contamination on young people's health in the community of Grassy Narrows.

## Answers to Study Questions

1. Conditions stemming from poor nutrition, poor housing, and overcrowding on the lands set aside for First Nations people, and social problems such as alcoholism and family violence arising from poverty, marginalization, and the residential school experience combine to create the poor health profile of First Nations people today. Diabetes, tuberculosis, respiratory diseases, heart disease, cirrhosis of the liver, and death by suicide and violence are all much more common among today's First Nations people living on reserve than among non-Indigenous people. Indigenous people have a lower life expectancy than the rest of Canadians (p. 210-211).
2. Pathways embodying discrimination include the following:
  - a) Economic and social deprivation such as unemployment and substandard housing;
  - b) Segregation, such as the reserve system in Canada, the United States, and Australia;
  - c) Exposure to toxic substances such as the tar sands pollution of the Athabasca River in northern Alberta;
  - d) Socially inflicted trauma such as residential schools and related assimilation policies;
  - e) Targeted marketing of unhealthy items, such as the historic targeting of Indigenous people by whiskey traders;
  - f) Inadequate health care, education, and social services (p. 212).
3. Macro determinants are contextual and historical. They include colonialism, social exclusion and racism, and community governance/self-determination. These macro-level variables create broader circumstances under which individuals live and come to understand their social world. The key intermediate determinants or meso-level variables are community capacity and opportunity structure: the availability of affordable high-quality food; access to primary health care; community infrastructure such as roads, potable water supply, garbage removal, and sewage treatment; and educational opportunities. The familiar individual-level determinants are income, workplace quality, and level of remuneration from employment; housing conditions; exposure to environmental contaminants; and health behaviour ranging from food choices to smoking to use of alcohol to risk taking (p. 217).

## Answers to Critical Thinking Questions

1. Social exclusion is associated with socio-economic status, ethnicity, religion, or race and has deleterious effects on human health due to the familiar impact on (1) social status and self-esteem (psychosocial factors) and (2) constraints on resources for healthy living (material factors). Indigenous peoples in Canada are socially excluded populations. Through historic conquest and colonization, they have experienced a process of marginalization, being pushed into small parcels of often remote and unproductive land. They continue to face racism and denigration (p. 207)
2. In the 1870s, Canada decided that education in general, and vocational training in particular, would be the most effective route to ending poverty and social problems in Indigenous communities, while simultaneously smoothing the way for the complete integration of the remaining Indigenous populations into Western society. Because schools and technical institutes were impractical in very small Indigenous settlements, the answer lay in building regional facilities, in this case residential schools. The initiative required removing children from their families. That was not an accidental, but rather an essential, part of the policy. Separating the children from their communities and families would divorce them from their language, culture, way of life, and ties to land, preparing them for assimilation into the English-speaking Christian market economy. The Canadian federal government turned to churches to undertake the work. Essentially contracting out Indigenous ed-

ucation to ecclesiastical organizations, governments took a hands-off approach, failing utterly to ensure proper standards and the respectful and safe care of the children, and ignoring completely the psychological trauma to families and their children embedded in the residential school model. The churches took full advantage of their situation to proselytize, justifying the approach as “saving souls,” but destroying Indigenous culture and spirituality in the process. In many schools, using Indigenous languages or following an Indigenous practice was met with punishment. Enormous damage was done to thousands of children and their families and its effect was cumulative. The historic uprooting and undermining of Indigenous people; the assault on their subsistence and culture; the decimation of populations by disease, famine, and genocide; the forced relocations; the sanatoria; the food-aid programs; and the residential schools worked synergistically to harm the mental and physical health of Indigenous populations. (p. 209).

3. The health transition experienced by the Inuit is shared by many other populations undergoing rapid socio-cultural change. Its key features are the precipitous decline in infectious diseases (such as tuberculosis), a corresponding increase in the chronic diseases such as heart disease, and the so-called social pathologies, such as violence, accidents, suicide, and alcohol and substance abuse. Conditions under which many Indigenous people live on reserves in Canada are more comparable to living conditions in impoverished parts of the world than to those of non-Indigenous people in their own country (p. 215).