

CHAPTER 8

MENTAL ILLNESS AMONG INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF CANADA

Indigenous communities often have quite different collective experiences to the ones that are commonly portrayed in media.

By and large, mental illness affects Indigenous Peoples in Canada disproportionately. Suicide is a leading indicator of mental illness, and First Nations, Métis and Inuit are, on average, twice as likely to kill themselves as the rest of Canadians. Among young Inuit living in their traditional homelands, the suicide rate is as much as 30 times the national figure.

But these shocking statistics hide an important truth. The crisis is not universal. There are Indigenous communities in Canada in which suicide is almost unknown, indicating extraordinarily high levels of mental health and wellbeing.

Journalists covering Indigenous people and mental health must recognize this reality to avoid framing their work in ways that increase prejudice and reinforce unhelpful myths. The stereotype of the “drunken Indian”, for example, belies the fact that abstinence from alcohol is higher among First Nations people than the rest of the Canadian population.

We all, often subconsciously, make assumptions based on stereotypes. It may surprise you to learn that there can be significant differences in the collective experience of communities we often lump together. Taking time to understand the particular experience of the community in which you are

“Many Canadians know Aboriginal people only as noble environmentalists, angry warriors or pitiful victims.”

Royal Commission on
Aboriginal Peoples (1996)

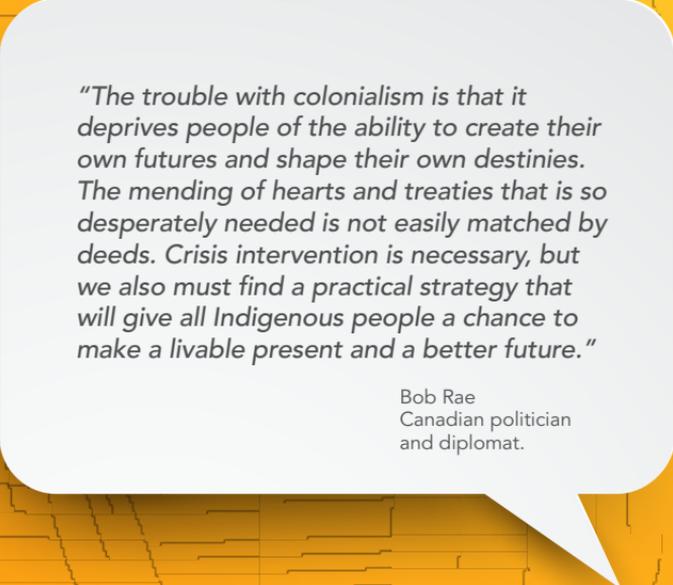
working will help you produce better journalism. But the guiding principles should be familiar enough: Don't generalize; don't stigmatize; look for systemic and underlying issues that provide illuminating context for the story; and don't let preconceived story frames make you overlook facts that don't fit.

Good journalism means going beyond the story you are telling and looking at the bigger picture and system that created it. If you are covering a rash of local suicides, provide context about the devastation that comes from detaching generation after generation from their roots. If other local communities are not similarly affected, ask why.

Appreciate the function of cultural identity as a promoter of mental wellbeing. Its loss can have devastating effects over successive generations. Its maintenance or restoration can generate extraordinary resilience.

Social devastation in the wake of such policies should not be surprising. Health Canada places 'knowing and taking pride in who you are' at the top of its list of universal indicators of good mental health. Evidence is growing that Indigenous communities with the lowest rates of mental illness and addiction are the ones in which people feel most in control of their own lives.

General assignment reporters who bear this background in mind when covering news stories involving mental illness or addiction in Indigenous contexts will likely take more care to look for case-specific facts and be less inclined to frame stories in stereotypical ways. In other words, they will do better journalism.



"The trouble with colonialism is that it deprives people of the ability to create their own futures and shape their own destinies. The mending of hearts and treaties that is so desperately needed is not easily matched by deeds. Crisis intervention is necessary, but we also must find a practical strategy that will give all Indigenous people a chance to make a livable present and a better future."

Bob Rae
Canadian politician
and diplomat.

Reporters may encounter a slogan sometimes adopted by people seeking to improve public perception of their group: *Nothing About Us Without Us*. This may be advanced in ways that run counter to journalistic principles, such as demanding the right to approve copy before publication. Journalists clearly cannot surrender editorial control in that manner, no matter who is asking. But it makes good sense, as well as good journalism, to include Indigenous sources to ensure that Indigenous perspectives are covered.

Here are some more steps journalists can take towards improving their knowledge of Indigenous communities and lifestyles, on or off reserves:

Get to know Indigenous people in various walks of life outside the context of news coverage. As with all reporting, the deeper the relationship, the more the trust, the greater the openness and the deeper the knowledge of cultural context.

Understand that Indigenous communities are not all the same. Take time to learn and appreciate the differences in approach and tradition between the ones you are most likely to encounter professionally.

Remember the importance of cultural nuance and sensitivity in dealing with people who feel they have lost control of who they are and who gets to define them.

When intergenerational trauma is a factor, treat interviewees with the care and consideration you would afford to any trauma victim.

Take time to listen carefully to what is said and avoid fitting what you think you are hearing into preconceived story frames.

Use cultural references to provide context that furthers understanding, not as stereotypical or gratuitous colour.

Bear in mind that safeguards you may believe to be universal may not apply on reserves. For example, Indigenous police forces are established under a federal program and are not subject to the provisions of provincial police acts, such as policing standards, complaints procedures and oversight mechanisms. And it is legally permissible to practice medicine on reserves without a licence.

Watch videos on the Mindset website (www.mindset-mediaguide.ca) for more nuances and insights from the extraordinary discussion at a town hall meeting in Edmonton in May, 2016.

Read Duncan McCue's excellent, informative, provocative and entertaining guide *Reporting in Indigenous Communities* available free online at <http://riic.ca/the-guide/>

"There is much to be fixed on reserves and beyond, from poor drinking water to child welfare, through to addiction and mental-health supports. Imagine if we took all the money that goes into crisis response and used it instead to facilitate Indigenous communities learning from each other, nation-to-nation. Imagine if we listened to young people's hopes and fears and helped them design solutions without there having to be an outburst of self-harm to get our attention."

André Picard, Health Columnist,
The Globe and Mail

➤ QUICK REFERENCE

INDIGENOUS /ABORIGINAL Before colonization, there was no collective term for the many distinct groups of Indigenous inhabitants of the land that became Canada. The first broad classifications were introduced for the administrative convenience of colonial authorities. These terms have evolved in a process not yet concluded.

There is a growing preference for the term Indigenous Peoples. CP style requires capitalization of both Indigenous and Aboriginal. These terms include First Nations, Métis and Inuit. Avoid using terms such as Canada's Indigenous Peoples, Canada's Aboriginal Peoples or Canada's First Nations, which some see as carrying possessive colonial overtones. Indigenous Peoples of Canada, or equivalents, should be preferred.

Using current, best-accepted terms not only shows respect, but can help reporters seeking contacts and understanding of stories in Indigenous communities.

FIRST NATION / INDIAN Although some Indigenous people still call themselves Indians, or even Natives, these terms are not generally acceptable when used by others. An exception is when referring to the Indian Act and the legal terms following from it. Under the Act, **status Indians** qualify for certain rights; **non-status Indians** are those of Indian heritage who don't qualify for, have not registered for or have lost status under the Act; and **treaty Indians** are those descended from people who signed treaties with the Crown and are registered with a treaty band.

A band is a First Nation community for which lands are set aside and for whom the Crown holds money in trust. There are about 600 bands in Canada. First Nation can be used as a noun or a modifier. Where more than one band is involved, use First Nations. In the 2016 census Statistics Canada counted 977,230 people who identified as First Nations. There were 1,673,785 Indigenous people in all - 4.9% of the total population, compared with 4.3 % in 2011. Comparable statistics from the 2021 census will be posted on the Mindset website when they are available.

The term First Nation includes both status and non-status Indians. In a unanimous decision in April, 2016, the Supreme Court of Canada declared that non-status Indians and Métis are to be considered 'Indians' under the Indian Act. The court largely left the implications of the decision to be worked out on a case-by-case basis.

In 2019 the federal government removed the last provisions of the Indian Act that had discriminated against Indigenous women by restricting the transmission of status in some circumstances to the male line. All descendants born prior to April 17, 1985 to women who lost status or were removed from band lists

because of their marriage to a non-Indian man dating as far back as 1869, became entitled to registration, bringing them in line with the descendants of men who never lost status. It is estimated that between 270,000 and 450,000 more people are now eligible to register as a result, with far-reaching implications for First Nations funding, governance and trust agreements.

MÉTIS Originally, the term was applied to descendants of French traders and trappers in the northwest and First Nations women. It is currently used to mean anyone of mixed Indigenous and non-Indigenous race who chooses that identity. In 2003 the Supreme Court of Canada defined as Métis anyone who self-identifies as Métis, has an ancestral connection to the historic Métis community, and is accepted by the modern community with continuity to the historic Metis community. In the 2016 survey 587,545 people self-identified as Métis.

INUIT This (not Eskimo, which is considered derogatory) is the name of Indigenous people who are neither First Nation nor Métis, whose traditional homelands are in northern Canada. The area is collectively called the **Inuit Nunangat**, a vast territory of land and sea that includes **Nunavut**, where almost half of the Inuit live, **Inuvialuit** in the Northwest Territories and Yukon, **Nunavik** in Northern Quebec and **Nunatsiavut** along the northern coast of Labrador.

The Inuit Nunangat is home today to nearly three quarters of all Inuit in Canada. Be aware, however, that the term is sometimes used to include traditional Inuit areas of Alaska and Greenland, as well as Canada.

One person is an **Inuk**, two people are called **Inuuk**, and more than two are referred to by the collective **Inuit**. Their most common language is **Inuktitut**, but other local dialects are also spoken. Together they are called the **Inuit language**. There are

eight main ethnic groups among the Inuit of Canada, who in the 2016 survey numbered 65,030.

Because Inuit means “the people”, it is considered redundant to write or talk about “the Inuit people”. Inuit generally prefer to be called, simply, the Inuit.

Be careful not to confuse the Inuit with the Innu, an Algonkian-speaking First Nation living primarily in northeastern Quebec and southern Labrador.

POPULATION GROWTH The Indigenous population of Canada is rising four times faster than the non-Indigenous. This is due both to natural growth and to more people newly identifying themselves as Aboriginal on census forms. Children under 15 make up 26.8% of the Indigenous population, compared with 16.4% for non-Indigenous.

RESERVES Most Indigenous people in Canada do not live on reserves. A majority of First Nations people, regardless of their official status, live off-reserve and very few Métis and Inuit have ever lived on them. Reservation is an American term, not used in Canada.

Health care and social services on most reserves are provided by the federal government. (In British Columbia, they are now provided by the First Nations Health Authority, under a self-government agreement.) The provincial systems covering most Canadians do not apply. In January, 2016 the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruled that First Nations children were victims of willful and reckless discrimination, because federal programs on reserves receive significantly less funding than equivalent ones off-reserve. Mental health resources, already scarce in most parts of Canada, may be much more so under these circumstances. Many reserves have small populations, making privacy in medical matters – including mental health

– problematic. This can complicate stories themselves and sensitive reporting of them.

RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS The residential school system in Canada was intended to convert First Nations, Métis and Inuit children to Christianity and aggressively assimilate them into Euro-Canadian culture. It was instituted in the late 19th century, and the last school did not close until 1996.

A total of about 130 schools were established, funded by the federal government and run by church authorities, in every jurisdiction except Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick.

Some 150,000 Indigenous children were forced to leave their families and most attended for 10 months of the year or more. They were forced to speak only English or French and punished severely for speaking their own languages or practicing Indigenous traditions. There were also many cases of sexual abuse.

In 2007 the federal government created a \$1.9 billion package to compensate victims of the system.

For more details, we recommend “*A history of residential schools in Canada*” on the CBC News website.

THE SIXTIES SCOOP Even as it began to close residential schools in the 1950s and '60s, official policy still held that assimilation through education was in the best interests of Indigenous children. Some 20,000 Indigenous children – including newborns – were taken away from their parents and placed in care. These children were then fostered or adopted by white families in Canada, the United States and Europe, and so generally educated in public school systems.

It was found that Indigenous children became 4.5 times more likely to be taken into care than the norm. The term “Sixties

Scoop” was coined by Patrick Johnson in a report in 1983 titled *Native Children and the Child Welfare System*.

INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA This refers to the impacts on later generations of aggressive assimilation policies, including the residential schools and the Sixties Scoop. These impacts can be both psychological and practical, affecting well-being and health and reinforcing social problems. One example of practical consequences would be the struggle faced by people raising children in communities with little or no experience of normal family life.

Be clear that the term does not imply any genetic predisposition to mental disorders among Indigenous people. There is no scientific evidence for any such predisposition.

➤ BEST PRACTICE CHECKLIST

- ✓ **Get to know Indigenous people.**
- ✓ **Appreciate diversity among Indigenous communities.**
- ✓ **Avoid stereotypical story frames and assumptions.**
- ✓ **Focus on underlying systemic problems.**
- ✓ **Appreciate the impact of intergenerational trauma.**
- ✓ **Recognize the importance of traditional culture to self-determination and emotional resilience.**