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ANTH 3390

August 12, 2024

Why do the Manitoba First Nations want to pursue self-governance plans?

Before the arrival of Europeans, First Nations had a self-governing system; however, after the Indian Act (1876) was imposed, they lived under the local administration of the Indian Act for 140 years. The Government of Canada, Crown-Indigenous Relations, and Northern Affairs Canada websites mentioned that according to the 2021 Census records, “Over 630 First Nations communities in Canada, which represent more than 50 Nations and 50 Indigenous languages”. The Census records highlight Canada's cultural diversity, showcasing the rich, deep-rooted legacy of Indigenous people in Canada. As each community has unique identities and traditions that deserve the best respect and preservation, it is a call for policymakers to take considerable action and implement policies on issues of Indigenous people.

This paper will focus on the reasons why the Manitoba First Nations want to pursue self-governance plans with the Keewatin Tribal Council. The Keewatin Tribal Council is a tribal council that represents 11 First Nation band governments in Northern Manitoba in Canada, which are looking for their self-governance administration control. Keewatin Tribal Council called for a state of emergency in 2023 due to system-wide failures caused by the government's inaction on First Nation issues. They were waiting for government involvement in their issues. However, after one year of waiting, the Keewatin Tribal Council plans to move to a transition of First Nations self-government to ensure the Aboriginal rights of the Indigenous community

function independently. After declaring a state of emergency in 2023 and receiving limited government support from the Canadian government for ongoing issues such as health and wellness, infrastructure and living conditions and systemic issues, Manitoba First Nations decided to transition into self-governance. To tackle these concerns, 11 Manitoba First Nations start a transition plan to Indigenous self-governance to ensure a sustainable lifestyle for the Indigenous communities under their own law decision-making to answer the current issues.

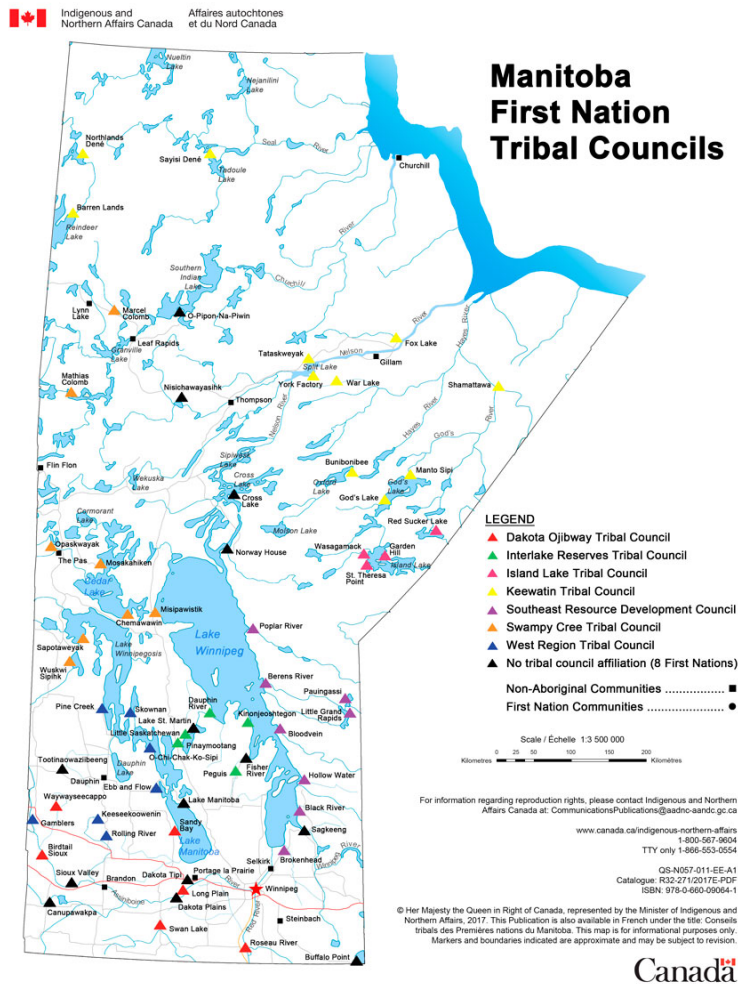


Figure 1: Manitoba First Nation Tribal Councils (Government of Canada; Indigenous Services Canada, 2021)

The reason for declaring a state of emergency in 2023 by 11 First Nations in Manitoba is the Canadian government's lack of intervention and attention toward the First Nations' health services, public safety, and infrastructure. The chief of the Keewatin Tribal Council believed that declaring a state of emergency would help the government to listen to the long-term issues and address them to improve First Nations communities' living conditions. The chief has mentioned that the “state of emergency” is a term they use to draw attention to the systemic racism they face every day.

A few months after declaring a state of emergency, the government approved \$300,000 in extra funding to address the ongoing First Nations issues. However, the Keewatin Grand Chief Walter Wastesicoot was not happy about the fund and stated that it was “very little” help compared to their actual needs. He complained about the substance abuse crisis, housing and fracture issues that include motels covert into homeless shelters, and ongoing frustration among the community that cannot be controlled by the \$300,000 received from Indigenous Services Canada. They believed government support and attention could solve this crisis for some existence.

Since the lack of intervention and the government's inaction to meet the needs of the First Nations community, the ongoing issues of opioid epidemics, insufficient healthcare funding and services, inadequate infrastructure, discriminatory system, daily tragedies of suicide, violence, inadequate medical services, and drug overdose, and the federal government has secret deals with the mineral companies without the First Nations' consent are some of the main reasons that 11 first nations want to move to the self-government. As Section 35 of the Canadian Constitution Act in 1982 mentioned, “35(1) The existing aboriginal and treaty rights of the aboriginal peoples of Canada are hereby recognized and affirmed.” Indigenous people have the authority to govern

their own issues and address their unresponsive daily issues rather than rely on the federal system.

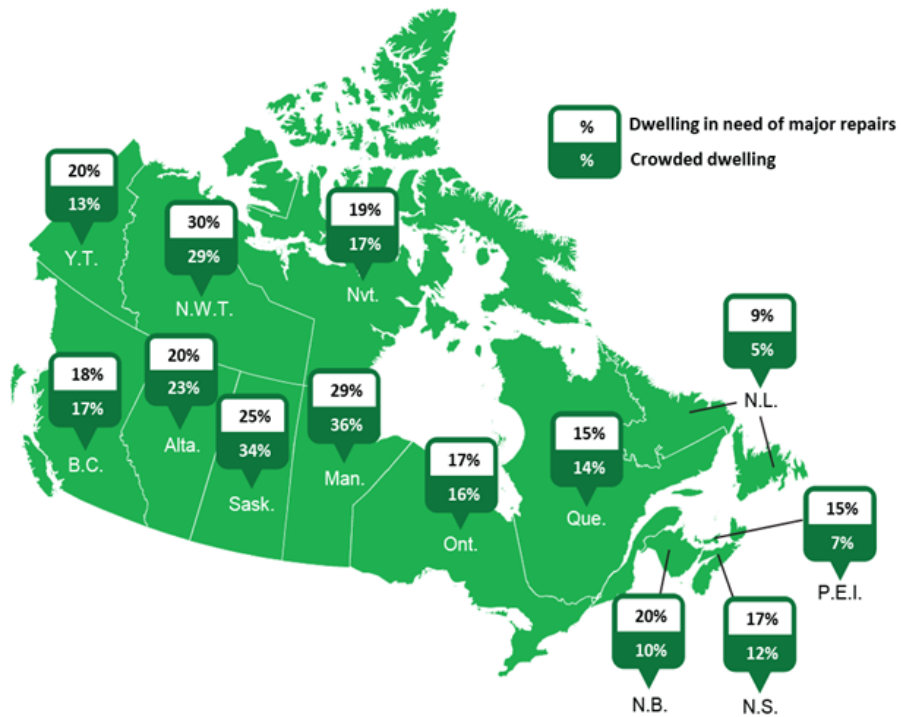
Because of poverty and unemployment, economic hardships make it difficult to cope with mental health, leading First Nation people to become more vulnerable to substance abuse and violence. According to Klingspohn (2018), they found out that First Nations women are nearly six times more likely to be killed and 2.5 times more likely to suffer from violence compared to the non-First Nation population of women. The Department of Justice, Electronic.

Communications in the Government of Canada show, “The proportion of self-reported spousal violence against Indigenous women was almost twice as high in the territories (19%) than in the provinces.” Significantly, domestic violence has directly affected Indigenous women's mental health, including depression, generating suicidal thoughts and substance abuse. Unfortunately, the support services only located in the big cities have been hugely affected in getting help on time to escape the situation.

According to Klingspohn, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation identified cultural safety is important for healing. Therefore, they recognized the five principles for ensuring Indigenous women's cultural safety is safe. The *2011 Community Guide to End Violence Against Aboriginal Women* mentioned the protocols to respect cultural forms of engagement, Personal Knowledge to understand one's own cultural identity and sharing information about oneself to create a sense of equity and trust, process to engaging in mutual learning and evaluating from the service recipient perspective, Positive Purpose to ensuring the process yields the right outcome for the service recipient according to *their* values, preferences, and lifestyle, Partnership to promoting collaborative practice with Ontario Native Women's Association (ONWA) are helpful to tackle the issue.

The other major issue was that the First Nations people focused on changing their way of life during colonization. As the study showed as an example, the colonial government convincingly took away the indigenous children from their families and sent them to the residential schools run by the church. However, in this background, affected children were easily physically, emotionally and sexually abused. After completing their school education, job opportunities were fewer and due to a lack of traditional job opportunities, Indigenous men were suffering from mental issues like traumas, which had to deal with discrimination, poverty, and social marginalization. To tackle this issue, the Breathing Life into the Calls for Justice article by the Assembly of First Nation Report states that developing culturally appropriate programs for men and boys needs strong funds and resources. They suggest the program should offer personal counselling and therapy to feel that their community think, cares and addresses the ongoing mental health issues within the male community.

Figure 1
First Nations people living in Manitoba and Saskatchewan are most likely to live in crowded housing



Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2021.

Figure 2: First Nations people living in Manitoba and Saskatchewan are mostly likely to live in crowded housing (Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, 2022)

The researchers Agrawal and Zoe (2021) discovered that homelessness and affordable housing occur because of the addition of alcohol and substances. Also, the private sector's involvement in housing buildings, bank mortgages and loans is unavailable or with strong conditions, and jobs are insufficient to afford housing rent. There were no proper water, heating, and electricity systems for houses, and more issues were often encountered during the First Nations housing crisis.

According to Lyeo et al.,(Fig 3) the Canadian federal government distributes through two organizations, Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), to consider the Indigenous housing issue as a primary funding source. Nevertheless, the First Nations government has a shared responsibility to work with the Canadian federal government to overcome the housing issue of the Indigenous community.

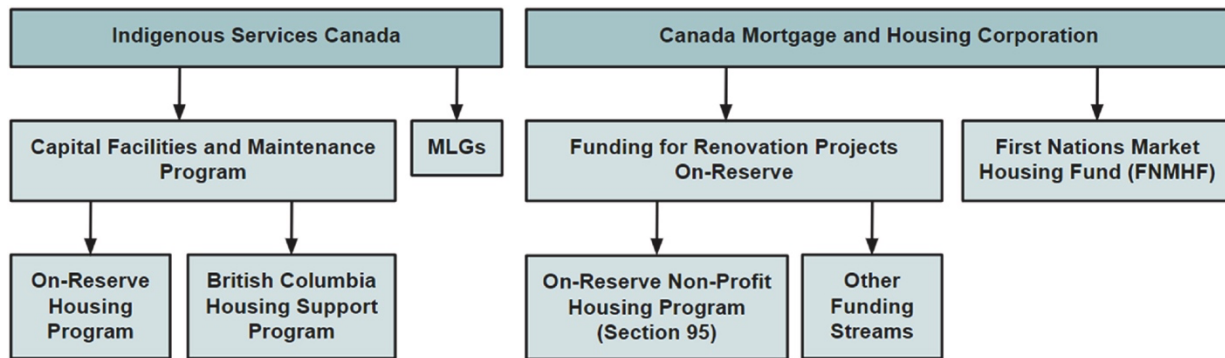


Figure 3: Distribution of funding for on-reserve housing through ISC and CMHC. (Lyeo et al.)

The research study of Agrawal and Zoe (2021) addresses the future directions to mitigate the housing crisis by implementing 24/7 opened emergency shelter services to support homeless individuals, implementing projects on energy efficient housing design innovations, offering good education and industrial training for the Indigenous youth community to support the housing maintained and as a group of new jobs which supports to reduce the youth unemployment, and reinstating the previous efficacious housing programs like 1980 HAP programs (Homeownership Assistance Program) which helps people to purchase houses cost-effectively.

Furthermore, the researcher's Firestone et al. showed that the usage of the excessive limit of substances is a complex social issue for individuals and the public in Aboriginal communities. The studies show that alcohol and heavy drinking consumption is highly increasing among

Aboriginal adults compared to the Canadian population. Additionally, tobacco use and illicit drugs (cannabis, cocaine and prescription opioids) significantly impact Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) during pregnancy, respiratory problems, high rates of overdose cases and higher amount of criminal involvement. These concerns challenge the extreme level of unemployment, poverty and inadequate infrastructure of the Indigenous community. Still, this study supports finding out the challenges of using substances and the harmful injection drug use to make awareness to address and make the community engagement and the policy implement and reduce the substance use for better health for the Indigenous community.

In the study, Cameron et al. illustrated that according to the Canadian Health Care Act, “access to health care services are universal to all its citizens.” However, Aboriginal people in Canada do not have equal access to healthcare services compared to non-Aboriginal people. The study showed that Aboriginal people experience chronic illness and disability at a young age due to social and political history, Lack of quality care, inaccessibility to health services, and inappropriate treatment, which causes disparity in the healthcare system. The study has mentioned that frequent discrimination leads to a negative impact on Indigenous people when they are looking for health care support. For example, researchers noted the Aboriginal man’s verbal statement about his language barrier when he was explaining his illness to the medical staff. It highlights the importance of indigenous speakers, translators, or interpreters, who are crucial components of the Canadian health staff. This study helps to understand the issues occurring in the health infrastructures in the Canadian health sector to develop and enhance their equal services to everyone, reduce barriers like discrimination and language barriers and deliver a quality and sensitive healthcare service to the overall well-being of all individuals. Lavoie (2013) states that the current system for Aboriginal health is a patchwork that is messy and

inconsistent across the territories. The main issues he showed are the not well-served subpopulation and cross-jurisdictional mechanisms.

According to the Keewatin tribal council chief in the press conference, many people of the First Nations go through mental and physical illnesses because of the main issues like:

- Opioid epidemics
- Insufficient healthcare funding and services
- Inadequate infrastructure
- Discriminatory system
- Daily tragedies of suicide, violence, inadequate medical services, drug overdose
- Federal and provincial governments deal with mineral companies without the consent of the First Nations.

Since the government neglected the basic human needs of Indigenous people, the Keewatin tribal council believe moving towards self-governance is the best decision. During the press conference, they provided successful examples of moving to self-government decisions, such as the First Nation in Saskatchewan, Whitecap Dakota, and the Five First Nations in Ontario signing their own self-government agreement with Canada. He mentioned that after signing the agreement, they had the power to make their own decisions on laws and regulations for leadership, citizenship, language, culture, and government operations. As Reed et al. (2020) mentioned, Indigenous government is about the way Indigenous people use their rights, knowledge, and authority to create solutions for their self-determination. Given that the root cause of all these situations is connected to health, it is essential to offer meticulous positive health practices by moving to self-government, as they can significantly benefit the First Nation community. As Wylie et al. show, newly implemented rules from the self-governance such as,

they can build trust between the health care service and the Indigenous patient by providing positive and respectful care, organizing the cultural and safety programs (eg: San'yas Indigenous Cultural Safety Training) to make awareness for the health staff about the Indigenous culture and basic understand about Indigenous lives and increase the Indigenous support through the promising Indigenous health practices. Social events like community awareness programs can address dealing with and facing challenges confidently without making quick decisions that harm their lives. The improvement of education and health services, development of clear agreements with the federal and provincial governments about mining issues and solid political representation that respects Indigenous values will ensure strong Indigenous self-government for the First Nations community.

Moving into self-government has a positive impact on the First Nations, as they have control of the administration of their own laws and policies according to the people's concerns and issues they are facing in real. According to the Government of Canada, Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada website, "self-governing First Nations can make their own laws and policies and have decision-making power in a broad range of matters. This includes matters internal to their communities and integral to their cultures and traditions".

Additionally, the website mentioned the self-government for Indigenous communities in Canada's rights to create the agreement to make their own decisions and affairs, which includes:

- No self-government agreement is possible without the approval of the Indigenous people through a community vote
- Self-government is negotiated within the Canadian constitutional framework and federal legislation is passed before the negotiated agreement takes effect

- Under self-government, Indigenous laws operate in harmony with federal and provincial laws. Indigenous laws protecting culture and language generally take priority if there is a conflict among laws
- However, the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the *Canadian Human Rights Act* and other general laws such as the Criminal Code continue to apply
- Community members and non-member residents on Indigenous lands will have input into decisions that directly affect them. (Government of Canada; Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada)

Self-government can provide the rules and regulations to preserve the First Nation's identity, and Canadian law can respectfully ensure a balance between cultural rights and individual freedom. It can also adequately address infrastructure issues, reduce the inequity and disparities currently occurring in their community lands, and ensure the history, traditions, language, and customs for future generations for an improved quality lifestyle. Moreover, this adds up to a solid traditional Indigenous community, which fits the Canadian legal system.

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