Research in Focus

Indigenous Employment Engagement in Niagara: Social Knowing, Discrimination, and the Importance of Indigenous Resources

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ABSTRACT

Our research confirms that when Indigenous peoples have access to cultural knowing, critical Indigenous education opportunities, and strong support networks (whether through family or Indigenous communities), they are better able to access and advocate for employment opportunities, well-being, and prosperity. The results of this study are organized into five major themes from which unique and crucial policy implications emerge. These are (i) the feminization of poverty, (ii) social circumstances and social knowing, (iii) mental health, (iv) discrimination, and (v) the importance of Indigenous resources. We argue that Indigenous peoples do, in many ways, access opportunities for employment, training, education, and/or wellness. Yet, they face challenges in navigating these resources and spaces due to "epistemic exclusion" and issues related to poverty, mental health, intergenerational trauma, and addiction, all of which are intricately connected to colonialism and the Canadian Federal Indian Policy. Our policy recommendations are also closely tied to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action (2015).

HIGHLIGHTS AND KEY FINDINGS

- Feminization of Poverty
  - Issues related to childcare, caregiving, and exposure to high-risk circumstances, which impact opportunities for prosperity, were evident among female participants.
- Social Circumstances and Social Knowing
  - Factors that contribute to an individual's ability for self-advocacy and successful navigation through mainstream systems include an awareness and applied knowledge of their Indigenous culture, critical Indigenous education, and/or significant support from family, an Indigenous community, and/or a wider community.
- Mental Health
  - Indigenous peoples face particular employment challenges due to mental health issues that stem from toxic work environments, intergenerational stress, and addiction, which are exacerbate by the stress of marginalization. Access to culture, Indigenous education opportunities, and adequate support systems are crucial to well-being and employment opportunities.
- Discrimination
  - Indigenous peoples in Canada can face racial discrimination on the job and from employers who believe diverse workforces are "nice to have," but not necessary.
- Importance of Indigenous Resources
  - Indigenous organizations such as Friendship Centres are vital resources for cultural access and general well-being. Community-focused resources, programs, and services tend to be developed and delivered by Indigenous peoples for Indigenous peoples. These resources provided critical support in areas of advocacy, employment, education, income, housing, cultural access, and childcare.

METHODOLOGY

- This research centers Indigenous community knowing and strength and acknowledges the harm of systemic and settler colonial policies in Canada, while avoiding damage-based research.
- Researchers from Brock University worked collaboratively with peer researchers and experts from the Fort Erie Native Friendship Centre throughout the entire project.
- The researchers conducted four focus groups/sharing circles (two youth, and two adult) and interviews with two local employers (one public sector, one private sector).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

#1 Addressing the feminization of poverty will require policy changes that reflect the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action (2015) and alleviate the burden on women to find affordable childcare, and in the case of Indigenous women, culturally relevant, affordable childcare. It is important that Indigenous women have access to maternity leave/parental leave to provide adequate resources for postnatal care. Reducing eligibility criteria (hours worked) to qualify for maternity and parental leave would benefit all Canadian women, but this recommendation is critical for Indigenous women, who have lower rates of employment compared to the wider Canadian population.

#2 Due to epistemic exclusion and divergence in social knowing, Indigenous peoples often do not possess the type of social capital required to navigate and benefit from mainstream Canadian systems. Therefore, it is important that Indigenous organizations are equipped to provide adequate advocacy and resources, such as communication services and transportation services, to assist in overcoming these challenges. Further, we stress the importance of action item #57 in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action (2015), to "provide education to public servants on the history of [Indigenous] peoples" to combat the epistemic oppression and exclusion of Indigenous social knowing. There needs to be a systemic change in Canada toward honouring treaties, land rights, and Indigenous values.

#3 Access to culture is a vital part of achieving wellness for Indigenous peoples. Friendship Centres often provide important ceremonial and cultural resources. Ensuring adequate funding for cultural events and activities will alleviate access issues for Indigenous peoples in urban areas and contribute to improving their mental health and well-being. More support is needed for culturally-relevant mental health services, especially amongst Indigenous peoples, who deal with elevated rates of trauma resulting from ongoing systemic issues, such as higher rates of incarceration, apprehension, and unemployment. The TRC called for action in the area of health, connecting it to issues caused by Canada's Federal Indian Policy. It is therefore important that this work be Indigenous-led, culturally relevant, and trauma-informed in its approach.

#4 This study found that some employers view diversity in the workplace as something "nice to have" but unnecessary or not particularly important. Our research found that some Indigenous workers have faced discrimination in their employment experiences (both explicitly and through the perception of some employers that a GED is a lesser qualification than a high school diploma). We stress that Indigenous-designed curriculum on the topic of treaty relationships and Canadians' responsibility as party to these relationships must become part of core curriculum, as per item #62 from 94 Calls to Action. In addition to Policy Recommendation 2, which brought forth TRC Action Item #57, we recommend developing incentives for the private sector to engage in the same cultural competency training that is encouraged for the public sector.

#5 We cannot stress enough the importance of Indigenous-focused, developed, and delivered programs and services for Indigenous peoples. Researchers and Indigenous scholars alike have long identified self-determination as a necessary component to Indigenous health, success, and well-being (Ladner, 2009; Deer, 2015; Fryberg et al., 2008). Indigenous organizations deal with high levels of need as the frequent use of programs like Apatisiwin and NPAAMB indicates. We recommend increasing allocations to Indigenous organizations to develop culturally-relevant, community-responsive programming aligned with the needs of the peoples they serve. We found that epistemic exclusion of Indigenous peoples has also contributed to a widespread lack of awareness about and access to services. We recommend increasing Media and Communications funding to Friendship Centres and other Indigenous organizations in order to augment awareness of resources.