

TAPPING INTO HEALTH DISPARITIES: CANADA'S INDIGENOUS WATER CRISIS



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THESIS

This research explores the inequity of safe drinking water within Indigenous communities and the effect this has on the health of this minority group. By analyzing the complex historical, cultural, and financial factors that have led to this water disparity within Canada's Indigenous populations, it is argued that health policies should enact multi-faceted and collaborative approaches to resolve this appalling injustice.

ABSTRACT

In Canada, many Indigenous communities experience environmental racism through their appalling inability to access safe drinking water. The health challenges these populations are disproportionately affected by are well documented and the denial of this basic human right is contributing significantly towards their holistic decline. The continuing oppressive impacts of colonization are evident given that current public perceptions and policy decisions discriminate against Indigenous peoples. Water system maintenance is a public health necessity and the government has recklessly offloaded this responsibility onto Indigenous populations despite their varying degrees of social, financial, and structural ability to manage this crucial task. By boiling down the overlapping historical and cultural conditions that have allowed this state to develop and perpetuate, this research explores how health policies can strategically enact multifaceted and tailored approaches to end this injustice. The results conclude that current top-down Indigenous health policy tactics are failing and will continue to destroy the lives of many people. Moving forward, policy planning needs to address the various social determinants of health that are disadvantaging Indigenous populations while collaborating with communities to develop approaches formulated to address their unique needs.



SPIRITUAL WELLBEING

- Water is considered sacred and can create and heal spiritual relationships
- Cleanliness of water is directly connected to the clarity of connection with faith
- Loss of spirituality and culture has negative health consequences

MOVING FORWARD

The perpetuated environmental discrimination against Canada's Indigenous population is a completely unjust betrayal of basic human rights which is deeply rooted in ongoing colonial oppression. As a result of limited access to safe drinking water, communities are suffering a variety of health inequities that only further marginalize their social capacity. Despite knowledge of this issue, there has been little progress to date and disparities continue to increase among these populations.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT:

I acknowledge my presence on this traditional land known as Tkaronto which has historically been cared for by Indigenous Peoples. This area has been home to the Anishinabek Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Huron-Wendat, the Metis, and the current treaty holders, the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation. It is under the agreement through the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant that the land is peacefully shared and respectfully cared for.

HISTORY OF OPPRESSION

- Initial segregation onto reserves with infertile land and poor access to water
- Marginalized physical capital created challenges for sustainable living
- Established dependency relationship between Indigenous communities and government
- Lack of community capacity to handles financial, technological, and educational requirements needed for water system management

PUBLIC PERCEPTION

- Has a significant impact on the urgency of which problems are addresses
- Media coverage of Indigenous water issues is incomplete due to underreporting
- Public attention almost non-existent during the Kashechewan water crisis
- Discriminatory tones re-affirm lack of sympathy with the notion that these problems are self-inflicted

POLICY APPROACHES

- The federal government assumes 80% of costs for water system infrastructure
- Indigenous communities responsible for operations and water quality
- Education and finances present major barriers towards safe control of water
- Current management approaches and policies guiding the implementation of systems are flawed

PHYSICAL HEALTH

- High risk of water-borne infection
- Increasing rates of obesity, diabetes, gastritis, stomach cancer, and influenza
- Mercury dumped in rivers near two First Nations communities resulted in 90% of residents presenting neurodegenerative disorders

MENTAL HEALTH

- Disconnect with spirituality and no tangible improvements create great mental anguish
- Suicide is the leading cause of death among Indigenous youth (10-20x higher than non-Indiegnous)
- Stress, anxiety, paranoia, and depression are common due to ongoing water challenges

Recommendations:

- Policy initiatives need to incorporate multi-tiered and collaborative approaches
- Acknowledge the complexity of the issue and stop pushing top-down "one size fits all" solutions
- Increase research to comprehensively understand how to assist each community
- Collaborate closely with Indigenous populations and respect the perspective and knowledge they present
- "Engage and build a generation of Indigenous leaders who can work within and between nations to achieve what is now only a dream" (White et al., 2012)

Segregated to live on infertile lands with poor access to water

Communities on "do-not-consume" advisories for 20+ years

Indigenous homes 90% more likely to not have accessible piped water

Media response almost non-existent for Kashechewan, Ontario

Almost 1/3 of reserve water systems at "high-risk"

