



Statement of Apology and Commitment to Reconciliation

Canadian Association of Social Workers
Fall 2019



Founded in 1926, the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) is the national association voice for the social work profession.

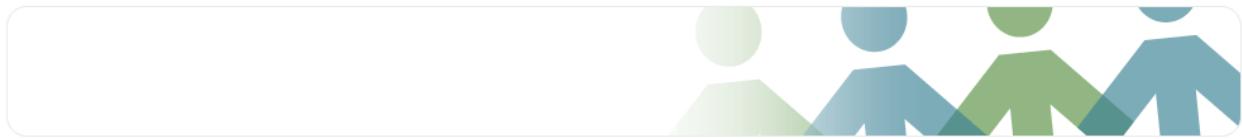
CASW has adopted a pro-active approach to issues pertinent to social policy/social work. It produces and distributes timely information for its members, and special projects are initiated and sponsored.

With its concern for social justice and its continued role in social advocacy, CASW is recognized and called upon both nationally and internationally for its social policy expertise.

The mission of CASW is to promote the profession of social work in Canada and advance social justice. CASW is active in the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW).



Ce document est disponible en français



Apology

The Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) acknowledges its role in supporting the implementation of residential schools and affirming the approach to child welfare that led to the 60s scoop through the promotion of discriminatory policies with the underlying motivation to dispossess Indigenous peoples from their land.

CASW deeply apologizes for contributing to the injustices imposed on Indigenous peoples and, in this statement, seeks to highlight some of the ways in which CASW was – and in many ways still is – responsible for the systemic denial and inequality that has been apparent in the field of social work.

CASW hopes that by publicly acknowledging, with humility, past and ongoing wrongdoings will begin an honest and transparent dialogue as we continue on the path of reconciliation.

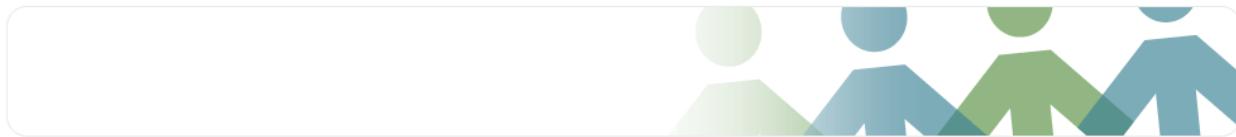
According to the TRC¹, “the importance of truth telling in its own right should not be underestimated; it restores the human dignity of victims of violence and calls governments and citizens to account” (p. 117). This is CASW’s truth.

Historical Account

The Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) was founded in 1926 to monitor employment conditions and to establish standards of practice within the profession of social work. The goal of creating a regulated profession was to protect the public interest as the creation of a set of standards provided a measure of accountability that prevented those unqualified from practicing. In this regard, professionalization has allowed for the protection of social workers and their clients through the development of a Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Ethical Practice. The CASW Code of Ethics² guides the social work profession in Canada and has undergone a series of changes throughout history to reflect the evolving needs and values of the profession. An alternative perspective argues that the desire to professionalize social work was to maintain its importance as a unique field, which at times superseded efforts to advance social justice.

Historically, CASW’s mandate to advance social work sometimes involved collaboration with government, which prompted support for state action to enhance the position of the profession at a national level—at times resulting in a lack of support for members promoting social justice³. As we commit to reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and communities as an ongoing priority moving forward, we must first consider how the actions (or inaction) of CASW contributed to the perpetuation of oppression, especially in relation to Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous membership in Canada is complex, and preferences in relation to identification vary. Typically, Indigenous peoples in Canada are divided into three groups: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. The TRC provides separate reports to describe the experiences of these three groups, which is why we have adopted this terminology throughout this statement. However, it is important to highlight that this statement of apology applies to all individuals who self-identify as Indigenous in Canada in accordance with article 33 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples⁴ (p. 24):



1. Indigenous peoples have the right to determine their own identity or membership in accordance with their customs and traditions. This does not impair the right of indigenous individuals to obtain citizenship of the States in which they live.
2. Indigenous peoples have the right to determine the structures and to select the membership of their institutions in accordance with their own procedures.

It is our intention to adopt an inclusive definition, specifically one that speaks to the impacts of colonization. Anaya⁵ emphasizes the role of colonialism by indicating that “*indigenous* refers broadly to the living descendants of preinvasion inhabitants of lands now dominated by others. Indigenous peoples, nations, or communities are culturally distinctive groups that find themselves engulfed by settler societies born of the forces of empire and conquest” (p. 3). In this statement we use the term *Indigenous peoples* to acknowledge the diverse identities, cultures, languages, and traditions throughout Turtle Island.

As an Association, we deeply apologize for contributing to the injustices imposed on Indigenous peoples. Specifically, CASW acknowledges its role in supporting the implementation of residential schools and affirming the approach to child welfare that led to the 60s scoop through the promotion of discriminatory policies, and, in particular the Indian Act. According to the TRC¹, “the importance of truth telling in its own right should not be underestimated; it restores the human dignity of victims of violence and calls governments and citizens to account” (p. 117). This is our truth.

In taking this step, we aim to focus inward and explore how the Association has reinforced the colonial project—we aspire to engage in critical reflection by revealing some of the historical content and examining how CASW fed into a racist ideology that presented Indigenous peoples as *less than*.⁷ In many ways, CASW has benefitted from the harmful actions directed towards Indigenous peoples and we know that it is only through acknowledging and accepting responsibility that we have any hope of reconciling our past—we must not forget our beginnings as we work towards change.⁸ As we review these documents, we will adopt the same terminology used at the time to be truthful to the colonial mindset in both the language used and the actions proposed.

1947 Joint Submission of Canadian Association of Social Workers and Canadian Welfare Council to the Senate-Commons Committee on Indian Affairs

In 1947, CASW presented a joint submission with the Canadian Welfare Council to the Senate-Commons Committee on Indian Affairs⁹ proposing that provincial social services be made available to Indians to improve education, health, and welfare. Although the intent may have been to improve living circumstances for Indigenous peoples, it is clearly stated that “the goal for a national program must be the full assimilation of Indians into Canadian life” (p. 2). The recommendations highlight the inherent belief that Indigenous ways of living were deemed inferior and that they were seen as incapable of self-governance. Specifically, in relation to encouraging Indians to work, the brief stated:



There is a lack of community organization which would develop such incentives, and which, with good leadership, could help Indians, irrespective of their social situation, to raise their level of living above *primitive* conditions which still exist widely to a standard more in keeping with their dignity as human beings in a modern *civilized* country (emphasis added, p. 5).

There was a call for increased coordination between provincial and federal governments in the supervision and administration of Indian services. Despite a recognition that poverty and malnutrition were impacting the lives of Indigenous families, suggestions for change stressed the need for government intervention through education or “mobilizing their energies to deal effectively with their day to day problems of family and community life, and of carrying on productive economic activity” (p. 5). Throughout the joint submission, there is a presumption that what was invariably needed was full integration and participation in colonial systems in all aspects of social welfare, with a particular focus on education and child welfare.

Residential Schools and Education

The joint submission was somewhat critical of residential schools yet supported their implementation and funding for providing “the educational requirements of children of nomadic families” (p. 6). There appeared to be concern regarding the funding structure and the emphasis placed on residential schools as the main form of delivering education. Rather, there was a suggestion that day schools funded by the province be provided for children living on-reserve under the belief that it was in the best interests of Indian families that their children attend school with white children and that parents be provided community activities including parenting education. Emphasis was placed on addressing the needs of the entire community with the hopes of cultural assimilation.

Secondly, there was concern over the use of residential schools for child welfare and a call for “the abandonment of the policy of caring for neglected and delinquent children in educational institutions” (p. 9). Recommendations centred on improving the current child welfare services provided by the provinces, including foster care, and to expand their reach to Indian children.

Child Welfare and Foster Care

The 1947 joint submission underlined the importance for “normal family life” (p. 7) in relation to child welfare and the need for protection through social legislation. Recommendations directed towards foster care and adoption suggested that placement should follow similar legal expectations provided to white children, as Indian children are often “absorbed into the homes of relatives or neighbors without any legal status” (p. 5). Such an approach implied the need for increased surveillance from provincial authorities in the lives of Indigenous families despite a previous discussion in the brief describing housing, nutrition and health inequalities from poverty impacting the lives of Indigenous families.

While there was a recognition that Indians had been disadvantaged from government services and benefits, there continued to be an overarching view that they were in some way responsible for their individual situations. It is especially troubling that there was a suggestion that “Indians may have a special racial susceptibility to tuberculosis” (p. 3) when describing the high death rate, which was found to be 14 times greater than the rest of the Canadian population and 16 times greater when “half-breeds” were included (p. 4). Implying that Indigenous peoples were



susceptible to health and social problems would have provided support for increased control and removal of children from their communities.

Current estimates suggest that 4,200 First Nations children died as a result of being in residential schools primarily from the horrific unsanitary and crowded conditions¹⁰ that exacerbated the spread of illnesses—prior to the 1950s, nearly 50% of deaths were attributable to tuberculosis.¹¹ This estimate will likely increase following the implementation of the National Residential School Student Death Register¹², which is currently being pursued by the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR). Parents were often prevented from visiting their children and in many instances, they were not notified if their child was sick, died, or ran away.¹³ Tuberculosis continues to affect many Inuit communities as the social determinants of health continue to be unaddressed. Specifically, overcrowding and inadequate housing, food insecurity, and limited access to effective and culturally-appropriate health care have all contributed to the spread of TB, which has been reported as 290 times higher than non-Indigenous Canadians.¹⁴

The Colonial Mindset

Moreover, much of the discussion in the 1947 joint submission focused on implications for provincial governments not having the control of services provided for Indians living on-reserve. The joint submission described the concern over health epidemics and “bad social conditions” stemming from reserves reaching neighbouring populations and provincial governments being helpless to address them. The formation of reserves was framed as a problem for provincial governments as stated, “The setting aside of large tracts of land as Indian reserves is itself a problem in relation to the development of the province and its resources” (p. 9).

Evidently, the problems observed were seen through the eyes of the colonizer and there was no understanding or recognition of the rights of Indigenous peoples and the reality that the provinces and territories rest on stolen land.

Social Work Promotion

At the core of the 1947 joint submission was the Association’s vested interest in promoting the field of social work through the delivery of social services. It was recommended that trained social workers be hired to work within each Indian agency to provide services in relation to “child welfare, family welfare, recreation and possibly adult education” (p. 10). As a profession, social work is faced with the ongoing contradiction that the field requires service to those most marginalized by society while advocating for the removal of social inequalities. The implications of this reality, coupled with the Western perspective held by the majority of non-Indigenous social workers at the time of the brief – a reality that persists today – is embedded throughout this 1947 Submission and the outcomes that ensued.

Implications

Following the 1947 joint submission, the Government of Canada amended the Indian Act¹⁵ (1951) to include section 87 (now section 88) emboldened by the recommendations.^{7,16} In the mid-1950s, the delivery of child welfare services on reserve fell within the responsibility of the province/territory however, they continued to be funded by the federal government through transfers. Day schools on-reserve started to increase as it was more economically viable;



whereas, in the Canadian North the residential school system expanded.⁷ What resulted, was that First Nations children were faced with two child welfare systems up until 1996 when the last residential school closed. Furthermore, non-Indigenous social workers tended to assess risk from a position of advantage that perceived Western approaches to care as superior and had little understanding of Indigenous ways and the structural barriers facing Indigenous families.⁶

Hearing the testimonies from residential school survivors is painful and unbearable as we are left wondering if history may have unfolded differently if the 1947 joint submission to the Senate–Commons Committee on Indian Affairs was framed from a position of humility rather than a position of privilege. The joint submission was received as a position of expertise in both social welfare and professional service delivery, which tightly aligned with the state's goals. It may be tempting to frame this joint submission in the context of its time and relinquish responsibility, yet it has been proposed that it provided the state with legitimization for the full assimilation of Indigenous peoples into the dominant Canadian society.¹⁶

Reviewing history allows CASW to identify recurring themes that continue to negatively impact the lives of Indigenous peoples. The dominant narrative of the Brief on Indian Affairs that equal treatment will lead to improvements in health, education, and wellbeing highlights the Eurocentric perspective that continues to prevail in Indigenous rights discourse today.¹⁷ Providing equal opportunity without an understanding of the unique needs and beliefs that characterize Indigenous self-determination, will inevitably result in a repeat of history at the expense of addressing social justice—until Canadians recognize and accept that our nation was formed by the dispossession of land and the brutality directed at Indigenous peoples through colonization, injustices will persist.

1993 Brief presented to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples

The recognition of cultural genocide imposed on Indigenous peoples through colonization was already presented in 1993¹⁸ in a CASW brief presented to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), which stated:

For many years, members of the profession assumed that the key to harmonious, multicultural co-existence was cultural assimilation or basically, a sense of sameness. That perspective has been rejected and today social workers are becoming cognizant of the insidious forms of racism and oppression inherent within such a philosophy and framework for practice. (p. 2)

The 1993 brief called for a fundamental change to social work education and practice with Aboriginal peoples, and emphasized that this change would best be achieved through the guidance of Aboriginal communities, “Social work practice which honours Aboriginal traditions and values is best developed and delivered by Aboriginal peoples themselves” (p. 3). It was under this perspective that CASW supported initiatives by Aboriginal social workers and service providers coming together as a group called Wunska (changed to Thunderbird Nesting Circle in 2006)¹⁹ to deliver training programs. Presently, the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE) includes collaboration with the Thunderbird Nesting Circle as one of their guiding principles.²⁰

The commitment of CASW in the brief to the RACP was to engage in inter-cultural sharing by improving social workers’ understanding with the aim of “dispelling ignorance and stereotypes in



eliminating racism” (p. 3), and by offering resources and knowledge that might be of value to Aboriginal communities.

Present Day Considerations

The consequences of CASW’s involvement in supporting and contributing to Canadian policies aimed at the cultural assimilation of Indigenous peoples cannot be minimized. The recent release of the report for the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG), *Reclaiming Power and Place*²¹, illustrates that the genocide towards Indigenous peoples “has been empowered by colonial structures, evidenced notably by the Indian Act, the Sixties Scoop, residential schools, and breaches of human and Inuit, Metis and First Nations rights” (p. 2). According to the United Nations²², genocide is defined as, “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group”. Colonial violence does not always reveal itself explicitly and is often found in the underlying narratives that characterize Indigenous peoples as inferior to maintain the status quo.

The tremendous damage that has resulted from discriminatory Canadian policy includes the intergenerational trauma from abuses and cultural shame experienced at residential schools; the creation of addictions as a coping mechanism to deal with the extreme trauma of being taken from their families, tortured, ridiculed and forbidden from identifying with their culture and communities; the internalization of these extreme injustices as guilt and shame with a belief that this horrific treatment was deserved for being Indigenous; the labelling of Indigenous parents as unfit, indifferent, and unable to care for their children as oppose to a consideration of the systemic factors contributing to family challenges; the removal of traditional practices of childbirth, parenting, educating children, and dealing with crimes or wrongdoing within the community; the prohibition of celebrating language and culture and common practices of healing resulting in the loss of some traditional languages and practices forever.^{7,23} At the root of all of these acts of discrimination are some of the greatest injustices of all: Canada is comprised of treaty and stolen land, and Indigenous land rights continue to be overlooked.

The long-term effects of these actions and decisions are revealed in the ongoing systemic discrimination towards First Nations, Metis, and Inuit communities. Systemic discrimination is experienced in all aspects of life, including social, political, economic, cultural, spiritual, and physical.²⁴ Every day activities may be experienced as unsafe with fear of judgment, misunderstanding, and conflict. Non-Indigenous Canadians are more aware of the devastating impacts of the residential school system, yet there continues to be a perception that First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples have a sense of entitlement about receiving special treatment from governments and taxpayers.²⁵

Despite increased understanding and exposure to information detailing the social and systemic issues facing Indigenous peoples, negative stereotypes linger leading to stigma. Western values continue to legitimize the removal of Indigenous children from their families and communities at an alarming rate—there are presently more First Nations children in the care of child welfare than there were at the height of the residential school system²⁶. Individualistic approaches to child welfare often characterize Indigenous parents as neglectful and unable to provide what is in “the best interests of the child” rather than recognizing the importance of the collective as central to Indigenous views and child-rearing practices.^{23,27} What is identified as “neglect” is often a



symptom of poverty stemming from the impact of colonialism yet the child welfare system is not designed to address structural risks.^{23,27,28}

Child poverty rates for Indigenous children are estimated at 40% across Canada and reach as high as 62% and 64% for status First Nations children in Manitoba and Saskatchewan respectively.²⁶ As described by Baskin²³, “A family or community cannot give a child what they do not have” (p. 38). Furthermore, limited attention is placed on the importance of cultural continuity when determining what is best for the child despite the known consequences of separating a child from their heritage and cultural identity.¹⁷ The influence of a stronger sense of cultural identity has been associated with various prosocial outcomes for youth including a reduction in stress and depression²³, which highlights its importance over time. This is most visible in the many adopted First Nations children who have sought family reunification in adulthood in search of increased social identity.²⁹ As clearly articulated in the calls for justice from *Reclaiming Power and Place*³⁰ it is imperative that when determining what is in the “best interests of the child” that distinct Indigenous perspectives, world views, needs, and priorities, including the perspective of Indigenous children and youth be considered (call for justice, 12.3) and that children are not apprehended on the basis of poverty and cultural bias (call for justice, 12.4).

Residential school Survivors share memories filled with love, pride and freedom when describing life before going to residential school and express the natural passing down of cultural and spiritual practices from one generation to the next. A recognition of Canada’s interference leading to the disconnection of cultural practices and languages must be emphasized yet we must also honour the power and strength of Indigenous ways. As described in the TRC¹³,

They are also a reminder that these practices—and the languages in which they were embedded—are not things of the ancient past, but, rather, are vibrant elements of the childhoods of people who are still alive (p. 3).

In spite of the injustices that continue to permeate their lives, the ongoing resistance shown by Indigenous peoples speaks to the profound strength of these communities. The continued disruption on traditional forms of Indigenous governance has failed to impact the values of harmony, autonomy, and respect that are foundational to Indigenous approaches and underline the resilience of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples.³¹



Commitment to Reconciliation

Getting to the truth was hard, but getting to reconciliation will be harder. It requires that the paternalistic and racist foundations of the residential school system be rejected as the basis for an ongoing relationship.¹¹(p. VI)

Moving forward, CASW remains committed to reaching out to Indigenous communities to learn their perspectives as we navigate this journey collectively. To this end CASW has committed to applying a reconciliation lens to the re-visioning of foundational documents, to bring humility and accountability to social justice efforts, and to give precedence to Indigenous voices and causes. Social workers must have access to education and information to help advance reconciliation and decolonization in their own practice.

The history of social work in child welfare is tainted by colonial ideologies and racist beliefs that harmed Indigenous families. Many social workers continue to experience the challenges that come from working within a colonial structure that fails to acknowledge Indigenous rights in relation to child welfare. CASW supports the calls for justice in *Reclaiming Power and Place*³⁰ to provide Indigenous governments and leaders jurisdiction in this area with equitable funding and support (calls for justice 12.1, 12.2). CASW recognizes the specific role and responsibility it has in supporting the implementation of the recommendations provided in *Reclaiming Power and Place*³⁰ and we continue to urge the federal government to comply with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action. For our part, we move forward on our own path of reconciliation with solemn determination and hope.

Sincere apologies involve not only an acknowledgment of past wrongdoings, but also a commitment not to repeat the same harms—as an Association we are responsible for our past, our present, and our future relationships.³² Fundamentally, a commitment not to repeat the same harms requires concrete actions to restore justice. CASW is currently reviewing our association's foundational documents, the 2005 Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Ethical Practice, through a process grounded in the principles of reconciliation.

There is much work ahead for CASW and the profession of social work as a whole: CASW is committed to continuing this work, energized by the prospect of collaborating with other social work organizations in Canada to work collectively for reconciliation. With each step forward, it is vital to look back and not lose sight of the past. We recognize the role of CASW in furthering discrimination towards Indigenous peoples and we are committed to continuing to shift the narrative to respect the inherent dignity and worth of all persons as we reflect on past actions and commit to the ongoing process of reconciliation.



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