

First Nations Perspectives on Poverty: “It’s not in our culture to be poor”



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FNIGC is a First Nations-led organization committed to gathering and disseminating data that reflects the diversity of life in the 634 First Nations reserve and Northern communities across the country. It has a mandate to oversee data collection on First Nations reserves and Northern communities, and envisions that every First Nation will achieve data sovereignty in alignment with its distinct worldview.

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Executive Summary



Poverty studies in Canada are almost exclusively based on material income measurements focused on the affordability of goods and services. Recent research on First Nations poverty reveals a complex picture of the First Nations perspectives of poverty that are more inclusive of a holistic state of being with indicators reflective of culture and the impact of colonization. This report contributes to a greater understanding of First Nations poverty by reviewing the relevant literature and presenting the results of research interviews and surveys with First Nations Elders, Knowledge Holders and subject matter experts.

The literature consists of a review of early ethnographic accounts of First Nations poverty concepts, a review of First Nations language dictionaries, and recent research. Early accounts of First Nations poverty reveal its understanding as a state of inequality and not having adequate access to the basic necessities of life. Indigenous languages have words that express poverty describing this state of being, which relates to access to an adequate livelihood. Recent research on First Nations poverty emphasizes the effect of colonization and that deficiency of holistic wellness is a more appropriate descriptor of First Nations poverty.

Research on the perspectives of First Nations poverty took place during May–September 2019 and involved

semi-structured interviews both in-person and by telephone with 29 Elders, Knowledge Holders, and subject matter experts across Canada and a survey with 22 respondents at the National Gathering of Elders in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Results of a thematic analysis of the interviews indicate First Nations perspectives of poverty are different than mainstream definitions. Conceptions of poverty include indicators such as the impact of colonization; culture, as demonstrated by language fluency; connection to family and community; participation in a balanced economy; the effects of racism; and self-determination in overcoming or preventing poverty.

This report concludes with a conceptual framework for the determinants of First Nations poverty that is inclusive of culture, family, housing, employment, health, addictions, moderate standards of living, food, and education. A limitation of this research is the relatively small sample of Knowledge Holders interviewed, so their perspectives may not be representative of those in First Nations communities across Canada. It is recommended that additional research be done by interdisciplinary subject matter experts to build on the conceptual framework developed here to develop a multidimensional, culturally relevant measure of First Nations poverty.



Introduction



Studies of Indigenous Peoples' poverty and well-being are almost exclusively based on Western frameworks of analysis and measurement that privilege Western perspectives (e.g., Hawthorn, 1966-1967; United Nations, 2015; World Health Organization, 1948). A recent report by the Chiefs of Ontario (COO) (2016) examined First Nations perspectives of poverty and developed a working definition of poverty as being in a state of lacking wellness, holistic balance (mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual), and basic necessities and material goods. The report recommends additional and comprehensive examinations of the applications of the First Nations Information Governance Centre's (FNIGC) First Nations Regional Health Survey (RHS) indicators for Ontario First Nations and poverty. It focuses on implementing poverty indicators; federal, provincial, and First Nations coordinated approaches to poverty reduction; the development of a First Nations material deprivation index; exploring the First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework as a poverty reduction tool; an analysis of the Ontario provincial Poverty Reduction Strategy; and research on the deep root causes of poverty.

The United Nations has identified the elimination of poverty as the first of its 17 Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 (United Nations, 2015). The United Nations' goal number one is to "End poverty in all its forms everywhere" (n.d., subheading) and it encompasses many dimensions of poverty such as unemployment, social exclusion, health, and inequality. Further, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) Article 21.1 highlights the rights of Indigenous peoples to improved social and economic conditions, particularly in the areas of education, employment, training, housing, health, and social security (United Nations, 2007).

The federal non-profit organization Canada Without Poverty (CWP) (2019) reports that 1 in 7 people in Canada live in poverty, and racialized communities are

disproportionately affected. They also note that poverty can be expressed differently and can include food security, health, and housing (CWP, 2019). These facts notwithstanding, Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) (2019) states that overall, Canada has reached its lowest poverty rate in history. ESDC identifies the poverty rate in Canada to be 9.5%, or affecting 3.4 million Canadians as of 2017, using the Market Basket Measure as Canada's Official Poverty Line (2019). This measure consists of the affordability of a basket of goods and services for an individual or family and includes the cost of food, clothing, footwear, transportation, shelter, and other expenses (Statistics Canada, 2019).

Despite a national interest in poverty studies, there is limited literature on First Nations' perspectives of poverty in Canada. This report aims to contribute to a better understanding of First Nations poverty by reviewing the literature on the subject and profiling the results of interviews and surveys with First Nations Elders, Knowledge Holders, and subject matter experts. The analysis will show how First Nations articulate poverty in their own languages and its documentation in ethnographic records. Furthermore, First Nations perspectives are presented based on 29 interviews and a survey with 22 participants.

This research aims to understand how First Nations articulate poverty holistically with the objective of developing a conceptual framework for the determinants of First Nations poverty that will form the basis of recommendations for a measurement strategy. To meet this objective, the literature is reviewed in relation to First Nations poverty, and the methods and results of primary research with First Nations Elders, Knowledge Holders, and subject matter experts is profiled. The report concludes with a discussion of research findings, a conceptual framework of a First Nations poverty measure, and recommended future research.

Literature Review



This literature review consists of a scan of ethnographic research on First Nations perspectives of poverty in Canada. Some of this literature includes research in the United States for the reason that the same Indigenous nations occupy both sides of the border: for instance, Anishinaabe (Ojibwa, Odawa), Ongwehongwe (Mohawk), Lenni Lenape (Delaware), Niitsitapi (Blackfoot), and Tlingit. Thus, the Indigenous perspective within each nation is similar despite an international boundary. This review also includes a discussion of peer-reviewed literature and First Nations technical reports, and other First Nations-authored source material such as websites, dictionaries, and narrative accounts. It will begin with a mainstream definition of poverty, moving on to a review of First Nations language related to poverty, and then a review of the ethnographic literature. Lastly, contemporary studies of poverty in the academic literature, as well as non-government or First Nations literature on poverty are reviewed.

Definitions of Poverty Mainstream Definitions

According to Merriam-Webster (2019, para. 1), poverty is “the state of one who lacks a usual or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions.” In general, poverty definitions are classified into those measuring absolute poverty (i.e., insufficient income to sustain basic necessities of life, such as food, shelter, and safe drinking water), and relative poverty, which considers a household’s income in comparison to the average income or living standard in a society (National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health & Wien, 2017).

Until recently, Canada had no official definition of poverty, and often it has been measured by low income (Government of Canada, 2017). In 2018, the Government of Canada pledged to reduce poverty by 20% by 2020 and 50% by 2030 (Government of Canada, 2018). As part of the *Poverty Reduction Strategy* initiative, the government has based its Official Poverty Line on the cost of a basket of goods and services that individuals and families require to meet their basic

needs and achieve a modest standard of living (formerly known as the Market Basket Measure). A measure of absolute poverty, the basket includes healthy food, appropriate shelter, home maintenance, clothing, and transportation. It further comprises goods and services needed for community engagement inclusive of the needs of children, youth, parents, and seniors (Government of Canada, 2018).

Accordingly, the Government of Canada articulates poverty as being, “The condition of a person who is deprived of the resources, means, choices and power necessary to acquire and maintain a basic level of living standards and to facilitate integration and participation in society” (Government of Canada, 2018, p. 7). In addition to the Official Poverty Line measure, Statistics Canada measures low income using two other concepts: The Low-Income Cut Off (LICO) poverty measurement is the income below which a household spends 20% more of their income on basic necessities than the average family, and the Low-Income Measure (LIM) considers a household’s income to be low if it is below 50% of median incomes for households of the same size (Government of Canada, 2018).

A major challenge to measuring First Nations poverty is that Statistics Canada does not publish low-income data about First Nations on reserves. Furthermore, aside from income measures, the actual experience of poverty on reserves may be affected by the availability of band housing, bartering for goods and services, and access to hunting, trapping, fishing, and harvesting. If there is access to band housing on reserves, the cost may be lower than off-reserve costs; if there is limited access to band housing, First Nations families may be living in overcrowded homes. In general, on-reserve living conditions and available statistics on education and employment outcomes suggest the poverty rate on a reserve is higher than off of a reserve, and overall, First Nations peoples living on reserves and in Northern communities are living in poverty affected by access to housing, food insecurity, poor health, and exposure to crime (Government of Canada, 2017).

According to the United Nations (1998), poverty is much more complex than minimum amounts of money for sustenance, and at its core it is a denial of choices and opportunities, it is

a violation of human dignity. It means lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in society. It means not having enough to feed and clothe a family, not having a school or a clinic to go to, not having the land on which to grow one's food or a job to earn one's living, nor having access to credit. It means insecurity, powerlessness and exclusion of individuals, households and communities. It means susceptibility to violence and it often implies living on marginal and fragile environments, not having access to clean water and sanitation. (para. 3)

Consultation processes conducted by Statistics Canada and Employment and Social Development Canada in 2018–2019 as part of the *Poverty Reduction Strategy* examined additional public perspectives on the poverty line. Through these processes, it was revealed that there are also unique differences in how poverty is experienced among First Nations, Inuit, and Métis (Government of Canada, 2018). Indigenous peoples have been subject to policies and actions that have had direct negative consequences on their standard of living and perpetuated cycles of poverty and marginalization over many generations (Government of Canada, 2018). When examining poverty amongst Indigenous Peoples in Canada, it is imperative to consider the colonial history which they were subjected to and the impacts of that exposure. Participants noted that a strengths-based approach to poverty reduction that focuses on well-being, social and cultural connection and identity, and supports resilience would be more meaningful to Indigenous Peoples (Government of Canada, 2018).

In sum, it appears that mainstream definitions of poverty are limited to economic measures and to a lesser extent on the quality of life. The new initiative by the Government of Canada (2018) to reduce poverty and its enhanced approach to understanding the complexities and attributes of poverty is a sign that an improved understanding is forthcoming. Despite this, a First Nations perspective of poverty is generally absent from mainstream definitions.

The Meaning of Poverty in First Nations Languages

Perhaps the remaining purest form of First Nations cultural knowledge is in Indigenous languages. In this section, a selection of Canadian First Nations definitions of poverty in their own words is profiled. This examination of poverty in Indigenous languages is limited to online dictionaries and is not exhaustive. This review is limited to the published definition, and a complete understanding of the terms is only possible through speaking with a fluent language keeper.

There are expressions of poverty in Indigenous languages ranging from the east coast Mi'kmaq who express poverty or hard times as *ewle'juaqan* (Haberlin et al., n.d.) to the west coast Haida who express the quality of being poor as *iisaaniyaa* (Lachler, 2010). In central Canada, for the Blackfoot, *ikimmata'paopii* means to "live in poverty" (Frantz & Genee, 2019) and in eastern Canada, for Delaware (also known as Lenape), "I am a poor person (no money or possessions)" is stated as *ntashuki* (Delaware Tribe of Indians, 2019).

Miyo Wahkohtowin Community Education Authority & Waugh's (n.d.) Cree dictionary gives more insight into Cree conceptions of poverty. The word "poverty" is *kitimakisowin*. *Kitimakan* means, "the situation is bad, there is poverty and suffering." *Waneyihtakwan* means "dire poverty" and a similar expression, *waneyihtamowin* also means poverty, but can also refer to "lacking the essentials." *Manesiwin* is another expression of poverty, and it also means to "want, (or) the state of being in need." Moreover, severe poverty is *kakwetamawin*, which can also translate as "dire need, being in need of the basic necessities of life" (Miyo Wahkohtowin Community Education Authority & Waugh, E., n.d.).

In East Cree, *chistimaachinaakun* means "it looks poor, pitiable," and *chistimaakin* means, "it is poor, in a state of destitution; the times are poor" (Junker, 2019).

In Eastern Ojibwa, Odawa, (Anishinaabemowin) *gdimaagzi* means to "be poor, be poverty-stricken," and *gdimaagenmaa* means to "think somebody, impoverished, think somebody poverty-stricken" (Naokwegijig-Corbiere & Valentine, 2019). Chief Vernon Roote of the Saugeen First Nation in southern Ontario provides

some additional perspective on what some related terms mean: *Ngidimaagiz* loosely translates as “[what] I don’t have,” as in “I don’t have what you have” or “I don’t have as much as you” (Chiefs of Ontario [COO], 2016, p. 11). According to Chief Roote, there is no explicit word in Anishinaabemowin meaning “poverty” in the strictest sense (COO, 2016).

It is evident that there are Indigenous conceptions of poverty in First Nations languages. This indicates First Nations have comparable understandings of poverty with mainstream Canada, mostly defining it with “have” or “not have” or to “live in” a state of “not having.” However, the conciseness of these translations limits a thorough understanding of these perspectives since the definitions do not offer elaborate detail.

Ethnographic Perspectives on First Nations Poverty

Anthropologists were the first scholars to study the practices, beliefs, and worldviews of the Indigenous peoples in North America. With the rise of Indigenous Studies as an academic discipline in the 1970s and to the present, anthropologists have come under heavy criticism for their scholarship for various reasons, including focusing on culture and assimilation in the early scholarship period rather than colonialism; mining data from Indigenous peoples in the contemporary scholarship period; and treating them as objects of research, failing to centre the Indigenous perspective (Coburn et al., 2013). Acknowledging this criticism, anthropological scholarship can nevertheless provide some insight into Indigenous conceptions of poverty given the anthropological objective to capture cultural perspective in writing an ethnography (description of culture) of First Nations. In moving towards research that centers First Nations’ perspectives, it is important to point out that the names used to refer to First Nations in this section come from the historical ethnographic sources and in some cases this differs from how First Nations choose to self-identify. The following offers conceptions of First Nations poverty as documented by anthropologists with the inclusion of Indigenous narrative accounts.

Assiniboiné

The Assiniboiné associated the consumption of alcohol with poverty since in many cases, all possessions were sold or traded and even women and children were subject to prostitution (Denig, 1930). A similar association with poverty arises with gambling (Denig, 1930). Wealth is associated with high status, demonstrated by the ability to give away horses and presents by parents seeking social approval for their child. Those not in this circumstance were considered to be in poverty (Denig, 1930). Rodnick (1937) observes this to be the case as well; more specifically concerning ceremonial gift-giving, parents who are not well off may struggle to offer gifts. Rodnick (1938) further observed economic poverty arising from failed colonial-imposed experiments at farming due to the semi-arid conditions, resulting in a heavy reliance on relief. In the past, the Assiniboiné relied on buffalo for economic survival for food, tipi covers, implements, and tools (Rodnick, 1938).

Bella Coola

McIlwraith documented Bella Coola conceptions of poverty in detail. The Bella Coola considered it a sign of poverty if berries are eaten without *olechen* [candlefish] grease (McIlwraith, 1948a). During the naming of a child, it is a sign of poverty if bestowing of the name and support could be provided only by parents and not by a circle of relatives. This social process remained the case with other child ceremonial rites. The ideal circle of support involved parents, brothers, and sisters (McIlwraith, 1948a).

It was possible for the Bella Coola to instill a feeling of poverty on others through success in gift giving. The recipient could either admit inferiority or repay with a more substantial gift (McIlwraith, 1948a). This gifting continued until one could not reciprocate with a more significant gift (McIlwraith, 1948a).

The state of poverty could have the effect of limiting the number of totem poles held by a chief, though it did not necessarily mean poverty or lack of respect (McIlwraith, 1948a). Elders told children, “Don’t laugh at cripples, blind people, or those who are poverty-stricken,” and “If you do, you will become like them yourself” (McIlwraith, 1948a, p. 368-369). Poverty furthermore could impact the choice of mate since parents informed the selection and avoided those in poverty (McIlwraith, 1948a). Potlatches¹ could lead one out of poverty and

¹ The word potlatch comes from the Chinook word *Patsbatl* and it refers to a wealth redistribution ceremony practiced by Northwest Coast and interior western subarctic First Nations. It confirms rank of individuals and clan groups and rights to hunting and fishing (Gadacz, 2019a).

make one a chief (McIlwraith, 1948a) or they could be used by a poor man to repay gifts (McIlwraith, 1948b).

Blackfoot

The presence of poverty among the Blackfoot is evident in the legend of Poïa, who lived in poverty among the Blackfoot. Poïa taught them Sun worship and then returned to the home of the Sun to become Young Morning Star (McClintock, 1968).

According to Conaty (1995), among the Blackfoot, knowledge and wisdom are associated with possession of sacred bundles² which functioned as a source of income and wealth. Even if one was reduced to poverty and no longer owned the bundles, they continue to be thought of as wealthy and powerful (Wissler, 1912).

Wealth was also evident by the size of one's herd, and success in raiding horses from enemies (Conaty, 1995). Knowledge of ceremony garnered respect, akin to old age security (Conaty, 1995). It was possible to experience poverty due to a harsh winter affecting one's herd (Conaty, 1995). Gambling also could lead to poverty through loss of property (Wissler, 1911).

Ewers (1955) notes that Blackfoot valued kindness and generosity, and those with these virtues never feared poverty, since they were awarded horses if ever they were in need. Charity is the expectation of the wealthy, and the loss of one's herd in an enemy raid could reduce one to poverty. It was possible to move out of poverty by successfully raiding horses, which increased wealth (Ewers, 1955). The extermination of the buffalo by settlers in the late 1800s led to dire poverty and increased government dependency among the Blackfoot. (Ewers, 1958).

Chipewyan

According to Smith (1982), the Chipewyan considered having hare skin blankets as a sign of poverty in the old days or evidence of an inept hunter.

Haida

Conceptions of poverty among the Haida are expressed through gender and food taboos. For males, there is a connection between low rank and poverty: for instance, inheritance of chieftainship could be denied to a male successor for the reasons of "poverty, laziness, incapacity,

low status, or non-residence in the village" (Murdock, 1970, pg. 20). Shellfish were relatively abundant, easy to gather, and at greater risk of toxicity compared to food obtained by fishing or hunting, and thus overeating shellfish was associated with laziness, low status, and poverty—this taboo held stronger for women (Blackman & Davidson, 1982). Incorrectly performing "the ritual separation of male and female clothing and the proper disposal of water used for washing dishes and for the human body" was also thought to lead to economic failure (Blackman & Davidson 1982, p. 140). Boelscher (1988) notes that contact with menstruating women could be seen as polluting to men, resulting in bad luck and poverty; thus, hunters and fishermen avoided contact with menstruating women and girls during their puberty stage.

Iroquois

The Iroquois associated poverty with losses in gambling (Beauchamp, 1896). If one put all at stake during games of chance or skill, a turn of the plum stone³ can result in poverty or wealth. Thus, games of chance provided much excitement due to the significance of the unpredictable outcome (Beauchamp, 1896).

Kaska

Honigmann's (1949; 1954) research among the Kaska reveals some complexity in understanding poverty in these First Nations. Among the Kaska, the rich and poor stood out in pre-contact society. The rich were successful hunters who were able to secure a large amount of meat and skins. This success resulted in the attraction of followers and dependents who accepted their patron's authority. As a result, rich men held positions of leadership. The poor were dependent on leaders for food and skins. It was not a requirement to return assistance. On the other hand, one could become temporarily impoverished as a result of losing hunting success or "luck." If a hunter aided another who lost luck in hunting, when luck returned, this generosity was repaid. Laziness was an attribute held in disregard. It could be a barrier to marriage, and social ostracism took place through public laughter and jeers (Honigmann, 1954). During the fur trading era, the closing of a post could lead to poverty due to the economic reliance on it (Honigmann, 1949).

² Also known as medicine bundles, these include spiritually significant items such as feathers, animal skins, roots, and a pipe in a rawhide bag (Gadacz, 2019b).

³ A reference to an ancient Iroquois game of chance known as "the game of the dish" (Beauchamp, 1896, p. 271)

Kutenai

The Kutenai held in high regard those who were from good families, competent hunters, hard workers, and rich defined by their social rank and class. If a rich family lost wealth, it signaled bad luck rather than it being perceived as their fault (Turney-High, 1941). Persistent poverty and worthlessness could result in the loss of a family's prestige. Having good ancestors was an asset, and if one had great warriors and men with strong powers in their ancestry, they were expected to be rich and valiant (Turney-High, 1941).

The Kutenai appreciated differences between the rich and poor (Turney-High, 1941). Men strove to be rich and to give wealth away since hoarding was not ideal. They considered a rich man a superior human who had strong healing powers. A poor man lacked power due to poverty and was deemed inferior (Turney-High, 1941). Being wealthy was not sufficient in itself; generosity was a necessary accompaniment. Though the wealthy were socially recognized, the real material difference between poor and rich was not significant. A chief acted to address poverty by giving to those in need. Giving was repaid with social prestige. It was expected that a rich man gives away his horses to those in need (Turney-High, 1941). Given the connection of wealth and leadership, "rich man" and "chief" were interchangeable terms and it was the duty of a chief to act akin to a public welfare officer (Turney-High, 1941, p. 197).

Mi'kmaq

The work of Le Clercq & Ganong (1910) provides a First Nations perspective of the European newcomers (French traders) and of poverty. The Mi'kmaq considered the French to be less wealthy than themselves for the reason that the French were motivated to leave their lands to exploit the resources of the Mi'kmaq. They furthermore considered the French to be simple journeymen, valets, servants, and slaves. This contrasted with the French view of themselves as masters or grand captains. In the eyes of the Mi'kmaq, the French reliance on Mi'kmaq beaver and cod fishery served as a comfort to French misery and poverty (Le Clercq & Ganong, 1910). For the Mi'kmaq, richness and convenience could be found on their existing lands and they considered it foolish to undertake long voyages from home for economic gain (Le Clercq & Ganong, 1910).

Ojibwa

Ethnographic studies of the Ojibwa reveal the effects of cultural change and poverty due to colonization. In the time before European expansion, the Ojibwa and adjacent Odawa provided for those who were too young or weak

to hunt (Tanner, 1830). The Ojibwa and Odawa believed the consumption of alcohol resulted in quarrels, hunger, and poverty (Tanner, 1830). Warren (1885) notes the Ojibwa valued good-will, charity, and hospitality to one another, and the widowed and orphaned were not permitted to live in poverty. The ability to name a child held importance and those without the power to name were considered impoverished (Landes, 1937).

With the advent of increased European settlement, the natural environment declined for the Ojibwa in the 19th century, leading to a trend towards social individualism (Bishop, 1974). The effects of this are documented by Meyer (1994), who notes this disruption in hunting and gathering cultivated poverty due to a decline in resources, causing poor nutrition and declining health.

Peers (1994) further notes that poverty resulted from displacement from homelands, and without game animals, fur, and trade goods, this resulted in less opportunity for social prestige. Embarrassment occurred due to limitations on reciprocation and redistribution of resources that had been possible before the altering of access to resources. Altered connections furthermore compromised spirituality, with weakened connections to spiritual helpers who aided in hunting success. The Ojibwa's declining influence in the fur trade diminished supplies and affected trading leverage, and the growing presence and influence of Christian missionaries lessened the importance of Ojibwa spiritual leaders (Peers, 1994). In their oral history, contemporary Ojibwa blame poverty, disease, domestic violence, and chemical dependency on this dispossession (Meyer, 1994).

The Ojibwa were not without agency. With the decline of reliance on fishing, hunting and gathering, they attempted to compete in the new economy. Modern Ojibwa have adapted through the combination of natural resource development and wage labour (Doherty, 1990).

Vecsey (1983) further examines the devastating effects of colonization on the Ojibwa. Their state of poverty due to fur trade decline ended gatherings such as the Feasts of the Dead, dancing, games, alliances, and revelry. The religious change occurred when spiritual helpers could no longer offer relief, and worshipping Jesus did not give the Ojibwa the same prosperity it seemed to deliver to the settlers. The Ojibwa viewed Christianity to be useful for heaven (i.e., the afterlife) but useless on earth (Vecsey, 1983). In the shift to the new wage economy, the Ojibwa practiced a mixed economy, harvesting wild rice for personal consumption and as a cash crop for tourists (Vennum, 1988).

Stoney

Among the Stoney, Snow (1977) observed the incongruity between Indigenous and European economies. For instance, with profit, once all the needs are accounted for by everyone, any surplus was banked. Profits and banks were foreign to the Stoney. In the past, if two deer were needed, ten were not killed. The Stoney observed that white men built bigger houses than required. The Stoney had lived thousands of years without compromising animal herds, but the arrival of white men coincided with the destruction of the buffalo, water shortages, and seasonal food shortages. Poverty now abounds, and in the words of a Stoney Chief in Snow's study,

Is this what is meant when the white man talks of economic viability and profitability—a few very wealthy people who have more than their share and many very poor people who have much less than their share? This is not the way of my people. (Snow, 1977, p. 156)

Tlingit

Like the Haida, the Tlingit observed food taboos. Girls and boys were not permitted to eat fish skins since it could result in poverty, and this was the case with beach food (such as seaweeds and shellfish) as well (De Laguna, 1972). Emmons (1991) postulates food taboos are connected to the degree of effort in harvesting, and beach food's ease of harvest made it taboo. Emmons (1991) further notes that shamans and their families avoided beach food; generally, whale meat was associated with poverty, and dreaming of clams signified poverty (Emmons, 1991).

Laziness is akin to worthlessness and poverty for the Tlingit. Poverty was animate since taboos seemed to have agency associated with it. For instance, extended sleep in the morning could result in poverty since one could not collect wealth in this way (De Laguna, 1972).

The Tlingit observed a social class system; those in extreme poverty were dependent on others and thus constituted the lower class (Emmons, 1991). The potlatch regulated wealth. Tlingit men impoverished themselves through the potlatch to acquire a name, and according to Jones (1914), a man who does so becomes

an honoured member of the community, however low he was before he gave the potlatch. He and his will be given a seat of honour in all public functions and a liberal share of what is distributed in every feast to which they are invited. (p. 140)

For the Tlingit, a statement of poverty was used to indicate modesty and respect for guests. A grave house in a state of disrepair reflected poverty (Kan, 1989). Being a warrior who died defending family was preferred to living a life of slavery or poverty, and the failure to honour family through the potlatch could result in poverty (Kan, 1989).

De Laguna (1972) observed that the depletion of salmon had a domino effect among the Tlingit. It brought poverty through the loss of the potlatch, and it further led to a change in the size of large families. This led to a decrease in the influence of chiefs and the loss of ancestral chief lines, compromising the Indigenous class system.

A limitation of this ethnographic review is that poverty does not always form an element of ethnographies and thus only a sample of First Nations perspectives are available. However, it is apparent in the available ethnographic record that First Nations conceptions of poverty exist. Avoiding poverty occurs through social recognition of success in hunting, success with connecting to spiritual guides, being productive and generous, and avoiding taboos. Furthermore, it is evident that colonization and European settlement brought about a new kind of poverty due to the disruption of Indigenous lands and resources and a lack of control over livelihoods.

Contemporary Studies on First Nations Poverty

Contemporary examinations of poverty among First Nations in Canada move an understanding of poverty beyond the ethnographic record. Today, there is a significant gap in income, education, housing, and labour force activity between First Nations communities and non-Indigenous communities (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2014; Assembly of First Nations & Horn, 2017). The overall picture is grim: First Nations children experience poverty due to low wages of parents; inequitable access to housing, healthcare, clean drinking water, and government funding; and racism (Best Start Resource Centre, 2012).

Furthermore, a 2012 FNIGC report on 2008/10 data from the First Nations RHS Phase 2 reveals that, based on employment and income measures, a large proportion of on-reserve First Nations live in poverty, and it has an all-encompassing effect on health, well-being, and mental health due to lower incomes. The FNIGC report acknowledges this is not the case for all First Nations (FNIGC, 2012). More recent data from the RHS Phase 3, collected in 2015/16, showed a

similar employment rate (47.1%) to that in RHS Phase 2 (47.2%); however, this rate is significantly lower than Canada's overall 2016 rate of 61.1% (FNIGC, 2018, p. 24). At 56.8%, the Phase 3 proportion of the population with a household income under \$30,000 is also very similar to that in Phase 2 (57.0%), but considering that the cost of living has increased, and that the RHS Phase 1 (collected in 2002/03) proportion was 50.2%, it seems that household income in First Nations communities has been worsening over time (FNIGC, 2018, p. 25).

Alfred (2009) observes that with the advent of capitalism and the historic settlement by the white population in Canada, every aspect of Indigenous people's lives is now for the worse. Belayet & Lamb (2019) note that economic security and the attention required for basic physiological needs affects the psychological well-being of First Nations, and Bennett & Blackstock (2007) identify underlying poverty disparities in the health and wellness of First Nations children, youth, and families. Macdonald & Wilson (2016) document that 60% of Indigenous children living on reserves live in poverty. MacKinnon (2013) notes that in Manitoba, 62% of Indigenous children are living in poverty as the Indigenous population continues to grow and participation in the labour market lags behind the non-Indigenous population. Cornell (2015) identifies poverty as bearing a high capital cost since it is expensive to fund social services that mitigate but do not solve the problem. Poverty furthermore traps people in a state of dependency rather than being in a state of self-determination (Cornell, 2015).

According to Brittain & Blackstock (2015), the structural context of First Nations children living in poverty takes root in the history of colonialism and inequitable funding and infrastructure. Assembly of First Nations and Horn (2017) also assert that a number of government policies in Canadian history have contributed to intergenerational poverty in First Nations and that none has done so more than the Residential School system. Poverty measures furthermore do not account for these historical disadvantages and the diversity of First Nation cultures; thus, the measures do not capture the true extent and depth of First Nations poverty. Mainstream measures of poverty such as Statistics Canada's Low-Income Cut Off or the Market Basket Measure do not include First Nations data; moreover, these are culturally inappropriate measures since First Nations view richness and wealth as living in balance with physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual components.

Palmater (2011) states that economic poverty among First Nations results from the two conflicting objectives in Canada's policy toward Indigenous peoples: assimilation and self-governance. Despite well-established research on the ill health effects of poverty, the federal government has responded with a three-step approach that sustains First Nations poverty: defer (e.g., call for more studies); deflect (e.g., make funding announcements about unrelated issues); and deny the problem (e.g., through litigation or political positions) (Palmater, 2011). Within this colonial relationship with First Nations, the general public places blame on the victim (e.g., blaming corrupt Indigenous leaders). Palmater (2011) further identifies that the pathway to poverty reduction is through addressing inequities in economies, education, and land claims via policy reform.

In an economic development study in Atlantic Canada by Orr et al. (2011), a First Nations viewpoint on poverty is available from a community perspective. In this study, Chief Mi'sel commented on the context of being poor in the past concerning economic development. According to Chief Mi'sel,

We didn't know that we were poor. Everybody shared what they had. And everybody worked. If you went to the woods to cut firewood, everybody went out and cut firewood. Everybody had gardens, berry picking in the fall, collecting kelp along the beaches for fertilizer, so this was the work ethic that we had handed down by parents and grandparents. (Orr et al., 2011, p. 56)

The adults interviewed in the study were young children in the 1970s who had memories of growing up in poverty. One of the adults remarked,

The houses back then weren't insulated. You would be lucky to get sawdust put in the walls to keep you warm. The water and sewer wasn't through when I was a small kid [and] after 1970 that's when they started the work. Before we got our status and everything, we had a job to get a job. There's a good opportunity since we got our status. (Orr et al., 2011, p. 57)

The scholarship of Simpson (2012) provides a further understanding of poverty from a First Nations perspective. Regarding the Attawapiskat Cree of James Bay, Simpson (2012) states that while the West sees First Nations communities as economically weak, this is not the experience of First Nations. The people of

Attawapiskat are far from this predicament due to the richness associated with retaining the Cree language, their strong connections to land, their lands existing in the natural state, their placement in communities with extended families, and their reliance on non-material lifestyles as a source for happiness. Simpson observed that the Attawapiskat Cree have survived and flourished in spite of colonialism, and notes that the centrality of economic development as a cure for First Nations poverty is misguided. Simpson's critique, however, does not factor in cultural disconnection and chronic clean water issues, as well as other consequences of colonial dispossession of land, resources, and political structures that have come to light in more recent years (Hamilton, 2016).

In 2016, Chiefs of Ontario (COO) undertook a study exploring First Nations poverty. Their study identifies a need for First Nations-specific indicators to measure "deep-rooted, persistent structural poverty in First Nations communities" (COO, 2016, p. 33), as mainstream measures do not accurately reflect or measure poverty in First Nations. Poverty in First Nations is complex, multidimensional and not measurable by a single indicator (COO, 2016). First Nations poverty goes beyond money and is revealed in lateral violence; poor infrastructure; lack of safe water; insufficiency of recreation programs, fitness facilities, and youth centres; loss of traditional ways; and community economic development. COO notes that a "Circle of Poverty" exists in First Nations with the following elements being compromised: spiritual (e.g., spirituality, purpose in life); physical (e.g., food, infrastructure, health and development, income and security); emotional (e.g., belonging, relationships, self-esteem); and mental (e.g., self-actualization, community actualization, roles and responsibilities, identity) (COO, 2016, p. 13-15).

The outcome of COO's study is a working definition of poverty as follows:

Not having the elements needed for quality of life such as mental, physical, emotional and spiritual fulfillment, and the basic physical/material necessities such as access to adequate, affordable housing; clean water for drinking and sanitation; affordable, healthy food; lifelong education; gainful employment; integrated health care; accessible transportation; and adequate financial means to achieve basic financial goals and manage emergencies. (COO, 2016, p. 27)

There is a recent national research initiative examining poverty in Canadian First Nations known as the Poverty Action Research Project (PARP), led by Fred Wien of

Dalhousie University. The PARP is a collaboration with the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), scholars across Canada, and five First Nations: Sipekne'katik First Nation (Nova Scotia), Eabametoong First Nation (Ontario), Misapwistik Cree Nation (Manitoba), Opitciwan First Nation (Quebec) and T'it'q'et (British Columbia) (PARP, 2019).

In the PARP study, Wien (National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health & Wien, 2017) observes that there is no word for poverty in the five First Nations, and they do not relate to poverty in the way the general Canadian population does; they do not see themselves as poor even though incomes are low. Wien states,

They suggested that the goal is not to maximize money and status but rather to earn a moderate livelihood and to live a life according to core values. In their strategies they were reluctant to focus on and stigmatize the poor identified in economic terms, preferring instead to use language such as "building our community together." (2017, p. 1)

The First Nations focus on interconnectedness and balance, maintaining group identity, preserving or enhancing culture, strengthening the family, protecting Aboriginal and treaty rights and enhancing self-determination (National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health & Wien, 2017). Furthermore, all five First Nations rejected the concept of poverty as defined in the mainstream society, which emphasizes income, employment, and related economic measures. Instead, they approached the task from a much wider and holistic perspective that seeks to achieve the good life, one that includes dimensions such as spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical health and well-being; emphasizes the idea of balance and harmony among the dimensions; and shows a preference for "building our community together" (as quoted in National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health & Wien, 2017, p. 1) rather than focusing on a disadvantaged subset of the community (PARP, 2018; Wien et al., 2018).

Dockstator et al. (2016) further remark on other objectives of the PARP study: reduce poverty, create a sustainable economic development base, and develop a foundation for community health and well-being. First Nations in the study view poverty as stigmatizing and, more specifically, "They view issues in a more holistic way that includes social, health, educational, cultural, governance, as well as economic parameters" (Dockstator et al., 2016, p. 22). The consensus of First Nations is to focus on health and well-being rather than the mainstream poverty concepts, which

focus almost exclusively on income (Assembly of First Nations & Horn, 2017; Dockstator et al., 2016).

The study also reveals there is a conception of cultural poverty relating to a lack of customs, beliefs, and language (Dockstator et al., 2016).

Contemporary studies on First Nations poverty emphasize the disparity in social, economic, and health measures in comparison to the mainstream population. Furthermore, there is consensus in rejecting mainstream definitions of poverty and an emphasis on a holistic description based on conceptions of physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and cultural well-being. A unique element of the First Nations perspective is a recognition of cultural features such as knowledge of language and traditions as being a determinant of First Nations poverty levels.

Summary

From the earliest documented accounts of First Nations poverty, there is a complex understanding of the concept that is intricately linked to forms of livelihood that vary across communities in Canada. With the onset of colonialism, First Nations observed a disparate settler economic system that was for the most part incompatible with the ways of life for First Nations. It is significant that early First Nations observed the social outcomes of inequality associated with settler capitalistic economies as illogical.

Contemporary First Nations studies reveal that there is a holistic understanding of poverty that incorporates materialism through the basic necessities of life. The concept, however, also includes immaterial elements such as culture, spirituality, and the negative health and well-being effects of colonization. The literature on First Nations perspectives emphasizes that poverty is not the preferred term and wellness is a more appropriate term.



Methods



The objective of this qualitative research is to address two overarching questions from the perspectives of First Nations: "How are poverty and wealth understood and defined?" and "How should poverty be measured?" To accomplish this, semi-structured interviews and brief surveys were administered to Elders, Knowledge Holders, and subject matter experts from across Canada.

In this research, an Elder is defined as one who either self-identifies as an Elder or who holds this community distinction. A Knowledge Holder in this research is flexibly defined, referring to one who has a high degree of life experience in one or more First Nations communities and may be approaching the designation of Elder. Subject matter expert means a researcher or academic whose focus has been First Nations poverty or a related topic area. However, the distinction between Elders, Knowledge Holders, and subject matter experts is somewhat arbitrary in certain contexts. For example, under these definitions, an Indigenous person of an advanced age with a wealth of formal and informal knowledge and a PhD could be designated an Elder, Knowledge Holder, or a subject matter expert. Indeed, an argument can be made that they are all the same categories at once; nevertheless, data was gathered from several individuals in each category, while prioritizing those who had first-hand knowledge of First Nations perspectives.

This research is informed by an Indigenous standpoint perspective (Foley, 2006), or more specifically, a First Nations standpoint. An Indigenous standpoint is essentially an understanding of the subject matter through the lens of the group in question. It explicitly incorporates a recognition that there is unconscious bias at work in academic inquiry that is dominated by those who do not self-identify as First Nations. This bias may construct an image of First Nations practices, perspectives, beliefs, and experiences as inferior or illegitimate, much like income-specific measures of poverty that do not factor in holistic

perspectives such as cultural measures and values (Foley, 2006).

Research methods embraced the First Nations principles of Ownership, Control, Access and Possession (OCAP®). OCAP® refers to First Nations community ownership, control, access and possession or stewardship of research data, "a set of principles that reflect First Nation commitments to use and share information in a way that brings benefit to the community while minimizing harm" (FNIGC, 2014, p. 4-5). FNIGC reviewed ethical procedures and participants reviewed a letter of information and provided signed or verbal consent prior to proceeding.

The recruitment method incorporated in this research included the non-probability⁴ methods of purposive⁵, convenience⁶ and snowball⁷ sampling (Bernard, 2011). Purposive sampling was incorporated in an effort to achieve representation from as many First Nations as possible and balance by gender and region, although there were no interview participants from Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick, Northwest Territories, or Yukon.

During the period of May–September 2019, 29 interviews were conducted. In addition to individual interviews, data collection involved visits to the Assembly of First Nations Annual General Assembly (AFN AGA) in Fredericton, New Brunswick, on July 23–25, 2019 and the National Gathering of Elders in Winnipeg, Manitoba, on September 9–11, 2019. Participants at these venues were recruited through a convenience sampling strategy. Snowball sampling comprised the dominant participant recruitment strategy. Telephone and email inquiries formed the basis of the initial outreach to potential interviewees. A portion of those contacted agreed to interviews, while some did not agree, or agreed to a later date that did not come to fruition. In all cases, each

⁴ Non-probability sampling methods are common in qualitative research and generally not intended to collect data that is statistically generalizable. In contrast, probability (or random) sampling allows each member of the target population an equal chance of being included in the sample, and the resulting statistics may be representative of the entire population (Gray & Guppy, 2003).

⁵ Purposive sampling relies on a researcher to use their own judgement to select participants (Bernard, 2011).

⁶ Convenience sampling is a method where participants are selected because they are easy to contact or to reach (Bernard, 2011).

⁷ Snowball sampling involves the recruitment or referral of new participants by existing participants, who draw from their own networks to do so (Bernard, 2011).

individual was asked to recommend another person to contact.

Most interviews took place over the telephone with the exception of those conducted in person at the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation, the AFN AGA, and the National Gathering of Elders. Each interview was digitally voice recorded and transcribed, and each interviewee received a \$50 Visa gift card as an honorarium for their time and effort in participating.

The methodological approach in interviews followed Kovach's (2010) conversational method in Indigenous research. This approach involves sharing knowledge through oral historical narrative and story. Each interview began with an overview of the project and the research objective and informal sharing of perspective prior to the start of the formal interview. The interviewer (Dr. Darrel Manitowabi) shared his personal background, community, and upbringing to provide perspective and sharing of knowledge through reciprocal conversation. This allowed for a flexible, open, and narrator-centred revelation through conversation. In some instances, interviews were customized to the availability of time the interviewee could spare, and in instances where time was not a factor, interviews flowed organically. For these reasons, interviews ranged from 15 minutes to one hour. Following transcription, interviews were qualitatively analyzed for common themes, notable insights, and illustrative quotations. Participants were given the opportunity to review, modify, and approve their contributions prior to inclusion in the report draft.

The interviews consisted of open-ended conversations guided by the following questions:

1. Can you tell me about yourself, community and nation?
2. What does poverty or being poor mean from your/ community/nation perspective?
3. In your lifetime how have you come to know what poverty means? For example, has it changed over time?
4. What is an appropriate way to measuring and/or understanding First Nations poverty?
5. What does it mean to be rich in your/First Nations community?
6. Is there anything else you would like to share that you think will be helpful for me to know?

A brief paper survey was also administered at the National Gathering of Elders (NGE) in September 2019. The survey was targeted at attendees, and the convenience sampling and recruitment strategy involved setting up a vendor booth with a poster advertising the study and an invitation to fill out a survey or participate in a personal interview. All completed surveys formed the basis of the data, and no survey recruitment restrictions were in place. It was assumed that all attendees were Indigenous Elders or were familiar with First Nations issues. Prospective survey participants were verbally informed of the research project and the purpose and a letter of information was given to all those who participated or considered participating. Surveys were self-administered and completed anonymously, although some demographic information was collected. Each individual who participated in completing a survey (22 in total) received a \$10 Tim Horton's gift card as an honorarium for their time and effort in participating.

The survey instrument was informed by the interview questions and emerging data and was intended to capture additional information in a more convenient method that did not involve a face-to-face interview. Essentially, the survey was intended to gauge the extent to which poverty and richness are perceived in fiscal terms versus other attributes, and it also sought to gather perspectives on poverty measurement with and beyond financial indicators. The survey consisted of semi-structured questions and comprised a mix of "select one" and open-ended question types. The full survey questionnaire can be found in Appendix A.

Results



Interview Results

In total, 29 interviews were conducted with a mix of Elders, Knowledge Holders, and subject matter experts on the topic of poverty in First Nations. Of the 29 interviewees, 12 were female and 17 were male. The First Nations and organizations represented in this research are listed as follows⁸:

First Nations:

- ✦ Alberta: Bigstone Cree Nation, Blood (Kainai) First Nation, Dene Tha' First Nation, Maskwacis, Siksika Nation
- ✦ British Columbia: ʔaq'am First Nation, Ahousaht, Uchucklesaht Tribe
- ✦ Manitoba: Mosakahiken Cree Nation
- ✦ Ontario: Akwesasne⁹, Eelūnaapèewii Lahkèewiit (Delaware Nation at Moraviantown), Garden River First Nation, Six Nations of the Grand River, Whitefish River First Nation
- ✦ Nova Scotia: Eskasoni Mi'Kmaq Nation, Malagawatch First Nation
- ✦ Quebec: Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg
- ✦ Saskatchewan: Mistawasis Nèhiyawak, Wahpeton Dakota Nation

Organizations:

- ✦ Atikokan Native Friendship Centre (Ontario)
- ✦ Cape Breton University (Nova Scotia)
- ✦ Dalhousie University (Nova Scotia)
- ✦ First Nations Health and Social Secretariat of Manitoba
- ✦ Métis Nation of Ontario
- ✦ Ojibwe Cultural Foundation (Ontario)
- ✦ Université Laval (Quebec)
- ✦ University of Manitoba
- ✦ University of Regina (Saskatchewan)
- ✦ University of Winnipeg (Manitoba)
- ✦ Trent University (Ontario)

Based on a thematic analysis of the interview data, the following themes are apparent in interviewee articulations of First Nations poverty: Self-Awareness of First Nations

Poverty; Colonization; Family; Culture; Balanced Economy and Sharing; Racism; Self-Determination; and Measuring First Nations Poverty. These themes are examined in greater detail with exemplar quotes that highlight the thematic analysis.

Self-Awareness of First Nations Poverty

Many First Nations community members have grown up without knowing the total context of First Nations poverty. For some, minimal access to food and resources becomes normalized. Furthermore, a non-material existence may be the norm in First Nations that experience limited exposure or influence of neighbouring settler communities. For instance, gauging poverty or wealth by measures such as the size of one's house, vehicles, clothing, and food may not be familiar or applicable to many people living in First Nations communities. As the interviews reveal, the mainstream Canadian education system has the tendency to exclude First Nations perspectives and indoctrinate students with the concepts of labour and income as measurements of poverty. Influenced by the settler perspective, the acquisition of material wealth becomes the essence of human existence.

Professor David Newhouse situates his awareness of the dominant influence of non-Indigenous conceptions of wealth and poverty that contrast with First Nations articulations.

I guess in one sense I began to see poverty in the same way that the community in our [PARP; explained earlier] study began to see poverty. I grew up in Six Nations and even though many people were poor, and we were part of that group, we never saw ourselves as being poor, and so my father always talked about being poor and the inconvenience more than anything else. It wasn't anything to be ashamed of and so material deprivation was not a large part of the way I began to think about poverty.

Professor David Newhouse, Six Nations of the Grand River and Trent University, Ontario

⁸ Some Nation or community names linked to individuals quoted in the following section may differ, depending on the names used by the participants themselves.

⁹ Akwesasne Territory includes portions that are in Ontario and Quebec within Canada and in New York State of the United States of America. Source: <http://www.akwesasne.ca/overview/>

There is self-awareness of First Nations poverty expressed in Indigenous language and community social and economic relations. Professor Tuma Young, lawyer and fluent speaker of Mi'kmaq, reflects on the meaning of poverty being different in the Mi'kmaq language as compared to understandings based on mainstream income and labour measures. Furthermore, in Malagawatch, there were no social and economic differences between community members. It was thus not possible to understand what poverty means as an all-encompassing term until more interaction with the outside world and self-reflection took place. Professor Young explains:

Well I guess when I was younger I wasn't totally aware that we were poor; being poor basically meant, there's a saying in Mi'kmaq, that you have "mu tal tapsunak" basically means the person has no clothes, it's also a little bit of an insult too, basically the person has no work ... as I grew up I didn't think that my upbringing was any different because everyone in the community was the same so there really wasn't anybody that was any richer than you were...

Professor Tuma Young, Malagawatch First Nation and Cape Breton University, Nova Scotia

Mindy Denny expands on this self-awareness of poverty; growing up, no one was judged, all community members lived the same way of life and there was no social differentiation:

When I lived in the community when I was a really young girl, I didn't know poverty, I didn't know what they call luxuries of modern society because we didn't have them; they just weren't in our frame of reference, you know video games and those kinds of things, they're like outside of what I knew...

Mindy Denny, Eskasoni Mi'Kmaq Nation, Nova Scotia

Reflecting on the past, Peter Jones notes his experience of not considering himself poor growing up, yet recognizing he had been living in poverty according to modern mainstream indicators:

In all my life when I was young, we didn't even know what poverty was because it was general knowledge that we were well off in our own way, you know. My father worked as a cook in the bush camps but his wages weren't very high and so it was necessary that we raised our own animals, you know, like chickens, pigs ... We didn't really know that we were in poverty but we lived in a little wee small shack—there were six of us in the house and all in a little

bedroom; I guess you could consider that being in poverty but when you're young you don't really understand that.

Peter Jones, Garden River First Nation, Ontario

Awareness of poverty in First Nations also incorporates the impact of pollution on the environment as a First Nations indicator of poverty. According to Patrick Lightning Sr.,

I grew up with wild meats, fish—we did all that stuff and now today we don't have any of that kind of food anymore because the animals are contaminated, the lakes are contaminated, there's a change in poverty: it's based on an environment even to the point of having gardens.

Patrick Lightning Sr., Maskwacis, Alberta

A self-awareness of poverty and its determinants, such as limited formal education outcomes, can have the effect of motivating one to change their circumstances:

I was exposed to going to school with the English kids in town. Though Maniwaki is primarily French, the "Indian" children from the reserve attended the English school with the English kids who were mostly from the upper echelon of Maniwaki society. Of course there was a big gap between the reserve kids versus those kids, as most of us were not well dressed, we didn't have good lunches, we didn't have the things that they had, so I felt the effects of poverty at a very young age, maybe from grade three onwards. I felt these effects throughout my early life and I believe that this is what spurred me to continue my education ... I always wanted to improve my life and that of my family and the only way, I realized early on, was through education and that's why I pursued getting educated well into adulthood.

Claudette Dumont-Smith, Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg, Quebec

The awareness of material poverty emerging only in comparison to off-reserve populations was a common experience among participants. This experience was also often accompanied by bullying and racism, with significant impacts on one's emotional well-being:

I think I knew (I lived in poverty) when I was little girl when I went to school because I had to go to city school ... I was not very well-dressed, even with lunch and things, and I saw other students how they dress ... ever since I was a little girl, so I went through it, I experienced it, and it wasn't a good experience and it makes an impact plus you get bullied more and there's a little bit more racist comments.

Karen Parenteau, Wahpeton Dakota Nation, Saskatchewan

Despite self-awareness of material poverty, some interviewees noted that in retrospect there is a critical reflection of the contrast to a richness associated with community and land-based living.

I never felt poor. I never ever, ever, felt poor—by Western standards we were probably very poor, we never had running water, we did not live near a lake, we had to depend on people who had vehicles, and they would go cut ice and bring it back, or the air was pure, we'd melt snow in the winter time to wash dishes and all of that. In our material poverty I never felt poor, we always had enough food and shelter, our basic Maslow's hierarchy of needs were all taken care of in our community...

Leslie Spillet, Mosakahiken Cree Nation and
University of Manitoba, Manitoba

Family and community connections are expressed as a being foundational to First Nations wealth and a key part of mitigating awareness and consequences of material deprivation:

When I look back, I believe that I grew up in the best possible era of our people because we were surrounded by our grandparents, either maternal or paternal, and including uncles, like were raised in a community. Back then we had a lot less than what is available today; even though we didn't know we were poor, we were supposedly poor. ...We were raised with parents, we were raised with other extended families and the community was united, and that was before the alcohol was open to the communities. You know, there was a lot of culture, there was a lot of community, the community cared for each other. For example, if someone killed a moose, you shared it with everybody—at least my dad did—even though you had 10 kids, you still had people to give to, the elderly people; that has changed very much from over the years...

Doris Martell, Dene Tha' First Nation, Alberta

Colonization

The legacy of colonization figured prominently in all interviews. The impact of colonization is spoken about in the context of Residential Schools, the structural context of the First Nation reserve system that limits economic opportunity, and the unequal relationship with government and society that marginalizes Indigenous peoples. Additionally, the assimilative nature of the Indian Act of Canada and associated policies have compromised Indigenous peoples' communities.

It is intriguing that an awareness of poverty lies in social relationships that are by-products of Canadian policies of

assimilating Indigenous peoples, such as the influence of Christianity and the trauma associated with Residential Schools. In the following narrative account, Leona Nahwegahbow remarks on their association with her conception of poverty and their impacts on her mother's emotional and spiritual being:

Poverty is when colonization set in, our language was taken away from us, our ceremonies were taken; I think those were the saddest [times]. ...I saw my mother suffering because she couldn't openly go see her healer because of the priest. Also what hurt her the most was when Residential School scoops were happening, her children were put on a bus to be sent to Residential School in Spanish [a town in Ontario]; she had no vehicle and she lost so many children ...she cried every night.

...And she said even our own relatives were turned against us because of how they were instructed by the priest, they had to follow the direction from the church and our relatives were told to keep away from the ceremonies. ...When finally the powwows were happening those were happy events, and by that time my mother was afraid to go to those; she said it's not right to go past the priest's residence where they see you walking down to go to the powwow. ...You weren't free to live in your community to enjoy social events.

Leona Nahwegahbow, Whitefish River First
Nation and Ojibwe Cultural Foundation, Ontario

For Mark Atleo, poverty is a consequence of colonialism, a process that displaced the Nuu-cha-nulth from living on the land and detached them from it on reserves. A major consequence, he argues, is substance abuse to deal with the effects of colonization:

Poverty is having no money, not being able to afford the necessities of white society in our own way. Where I'm from, we lived off the land and on the water, and we survived off it without money, so in that way we weren't poor. ...Our people are, in my opinion, in poverty because of the effects of Residential School... Poverty creates mental health issues; I believe a good percentage of our people are in that [situation] right across Canada. ...It destroys our families and it drives one to alcoholism or drugs; to me that's poverty.

Mark Atleo, Ahousaht First Nation,
British Columbia

For Gina Laing, the effects of Residential School had a particular impact on her lack of life skills, leading to ill health:

I realized I was in poverty myself as a result of Residential School. ...When I left the school, I was completely absolutely on my own and I had no skills to survive in society—you know, skills to even care for family properly. It was a challenge to fit into society and it affected my health.

Gina Laing, Uchucklesaht tribe,
British Columbia

Poverty is rooted in treaty relationships and Canada's failure to uphold their promises. Treaties promised access to education, health care resources and a continuance of Indigenous economies, yet access to these is presently inequitable in comparison to mainstream Canadians, and the result is poverty.

Poverty is primarily rooted in the failure to uphold Indigenous rights and Indigenous human rights in Saskatchewan, failure to recognize the treaty rights that Nations have in Saskatchewan that were negotiated through the Western number treaties. ...Restricted access to health, education, income [is] deeply rooted in historic issues that contribute to Indigenous poverty today.

Dr. Allyson Stevenson, Métis and University of
Regina, Saskatchewan

Interviewees emphasized the connection between education outcomes and the legacy of colonization. This legacy is one of power and control over First Nations and limiting self-determination through education. In the process, Indigenous self-determination is diminished through bias in schools that nurtures a societal belief—even among some Indigenous people themselves—that Indigenous peoples are inherently incapable of success and the result is inequitable education and employment outcomes.

To me poverty is what I reference as genocide; that's another way of destroying our nations and there's so much happening now when I talk about poverty. ...And we're trying to convince our youngsters to get a job and right now in our communities they don't have enough education for their high school diplomas, and when they apply for a job they can't get it because they don't have the high school diploma. ...What causes this genocide is the schools that the kids go to: [in] schools, they're labelled as underachievers, they're not capable of comprehending matriculation courses.

Keith Chiefmoon, Blood (Kainai) First Nation,
Alberta

The location of the First Nation communities can impact poverty levels; for example, the remote and isolated geography for fly-in communities can limit or inhibit access

to healthcare, education, affordable food, and resources such as adequate infrastructure and clean drinking water.

I hear from the Elders, especially when we talk in the context of Western poverty, what poverty means to communities is not being treated equally when it comes to people who live in an urban setting. For example, if you go to a community in the far North, someone who requires immediate medical attention needs to fly [to get it], and so there are cases where someone doesn't make it to Winnipeg to get treated, so that's poverty. ...Here the poverty is not lack of money, but lack of adequate resources when it comes to healthcare and education, safe drinking water; it is not because of lack of money.

Shravan Ramayanam, First Nations Health and
Social Secretariat of Manitoba

Family

From a First Nations perspective, the state of poverty is a deficit in holistic being. Family is core to one's sense of being and connection. Extended family supports the nurturing and growth of children and youth, and Elders provide guidance. For many, it may have been the case that grandparents were primary or secondary parents, and aunts and uncles were close and took an active part in raising individuals.

In this narrative account, Leona Nahwegahbow remarks on the close family connections in economic capacities, such as food gathering and harvesting for crafts to working on the farm:

[T]he best time for the families was when we were able to travel by boat to the pristine islands where there were no cabins back then. We were collectively gathering for medicines, for resources for my mother ...my uncle who lived in Rabbit Island [satellite community of Wikwemikong] had such a big farm, and they were the last house on that road in Rabbit Island and everybody would go there and help when it was planting season, [when] it was time for putting the hay away there were so many people that came to help.

...When [my mother] got married, everybody came together with logs to build a house that we lived in at that time, so there was a lot of helping hands that came from relatives, family who lived in the same area, so it was a happy time when I was growing up and it was easy to follow the culture of our people because we lived that life and so those are the happiest times. And the poverty times were when the children were forced away from their families and the loss of the spirituality, the ceremonial restrictions, the

language that was taken. ...I think that our people are still suffering.

Leona Nahwegahbow, Whitefish River First Nation and Ojibwe Cultural Foundation, Ontario

The family environment can furthermore nurture spaces that are devoid of poverty. Mindy Denny reflects on the characteristics of a family that was not in a state of poverty:

...their parents were loving, they were sober people, they didn't fight a lot, they respected one another, they stayed in ceremony. What makes a Mi'kmaq person wealthy ...is just the ability to nurse your family's needs, whatever they are.

Mindy Denny, Eskasoni Mi'Kmaq Nation, Nova Scotia

Family is an indicator of First Nations poverty: without family, one is not well.

...[W]e should be able to develop our own determinants of poverty. ...I believe that family has a major role to our people; we've recovered from Residential Schools but we haven't recovered from the Sixties Scoop, and people say 'no we're okay' and when you get triggered you are no longer employable so I think those things need to be considered as well.

Gordon Peters, Eelūnaapèewii Lahkèewiit, Ontario

In Blackfoot tradition, providing for the family is the essence of livelihood and a strong family is protective against poverty:

They [the Blackfoot] still take the traditional definition of what poverty looks like, like being able to provide for your family and your extended family and in some instances, the community. Traditionally, the way we were historically, when we had food and whatever essentials to eliminate poverty, we would share those: housing, food, the caring of children, family, etcetera... I don't really know how to say it in English but we have a number of ways of saying it in our language "go sa man da pit duh"—it encompasses a number of different words that kind of define poverty, but [also] other areas of who we are and where we come from which basically means getting what you need, one of the definitions, getting what you need to provide for your family and extended family.

Jack Royal, Siksika Nation, Alberta

Indigenous culture emphasizes family responsibilities, and family is a conduit to cultural awareness and continuity, as well as addressing poverty:

One needs to incorporate kinship obligations into measuring poverty, to care for Elders, to care for family members, the obligation for reciprocity in Indigenous communities. ...It's to have your children close to you, it's to be able to pass on your languages and teachings and your culture to your children, to be able to go out onto the land. ...To have enough food to make lunches for kids, have enough food to share with Elders or visitors that come by, to have enough to keep a roof over people's heads, to have clean water, to be able to ensure that you can meet your obligations.

Dr. Allyson Stevenson, Métis and University of Regina, Saskatchewan

A large family equals richness:

You're rich in my terms if you have a huge family, you know you're rich, [if] you have many grandchildren you're rich. ...If you have any grandchildren, many relatives in terms of wealth and social standing, that sort of thing—some people have been living the right way all their lives, you know.

Charlie Chisaakay, Dene Tha' First Nation, Alberta

Culture

The primary immaterial sources of wealth are language, ceremony, and Indigenous knowledge, and a deficit in these results in poverty. This point was reiterated many times in responses to the question of what "richness" is in First Nations communities. While some remarked on material wealth leading to a form of richness, cultural practices such as being fluent in one's First Nations language, knowledge of ceremonies, and valuing community are viewed as more of an ideal than material wealth. In fact, those who may be materially wealthy can be poor in cultural wealth.

Leona Nahwegahbow remarks on the importance of language and spirituality:

You see people now that have good jobs but what they're lacking is that spirituality, the ability to speak the language. ...I think that some of our ceremonies will help you when you have your spirituality; that's going to carry you a long way. ...Everybody should be able to feel it, how good it is to be fluent in the language, that's why when the Elders

come together there's a lot of laughter. If everyone had that enjoyment of being fluent, we'd have a much better First Nation environment.

Leona Nahwegahbow, Whitefish River First Nation and Ojibwe Cultural Foundation, Ontario

From an academic research perspective, Professor David Newhouse came to the realization that First Nations poverty is more than economic development. Reflecting on his work with the national Poverty Action Research Project (PARP), he noted the following insights:

It became quite clear that economic development became only a small part of what needed to be done. ... They want to start up cultural reclamation, cultural revitalization, language revitalization, and some of them wanted to talk about access to land which is another way they began to think about poverty. They have a loss of access to land, they have a loss of access to spirituality and ceremony, and a loss of access to food. ... Some of them particularly in the North use what they call country food as a large part of the diet, so our ideas about poverty were challenged. I began to think about poverty in a much broader sense.

Professor David Newhouse, Six Nations of the Grand River and Trent University, Ontario

Investing in cultural outcomes will require accommodations for a compromise between the realities of a contemporary society and some possible incompatibilities of past ways. For Professor Tuma Young, some adaptation is necessary:

In our communities, we need to bring back culture, we need to bring back traditions, we need to bring back the way it was. ... We also have to change it to fit some of these old rituals, these old traditions, old customs, old approaches, ways of doing things, which may not work in a contemporary setting. They need to be adapted and changed and reformulated and reshaped, you know, to fit into a contemporary society. ... And some things that worked in the past may not work today, so that's one way we need to think about poverty, and how to eradicate it; just giving everybody a gun and telling them to go hunt may not work.

Professor Tuma Young, Malagawatch First Nation and Cape Breton University, Nova Scotia

Once again, interviewees emphasized the inextricable connections between family, culture, and natural environment. As Mark Atleo stated,

I strongly believe in our culture, and that's what makes you rich. ... In the way I was taught when I was young, by my grandfather, he always said life is like a circle, we depend on each and every plant, animal that's in that circle; treat them with respect. When you go out there and take something from that circle, we ask for permission from the Creator.

Mark Atleo, Ahousaht First Nation, British Columbia

Speaking one's Indigenous language is a form of richness, and itself may be an indicator contributing to a multidimensional measure of poverty or wealth:

In my community, the loss of the Algonquin language is there, so those that have their language and can speak to each other in Algonquin is one way of measuring a community's and even personal richness.

Claudette Dumont-Smith, Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg, Quebec

Carol Hopkins' discussion of poverty in relation to wellness links and expands upon the above ideas. Poverty, she argues, is analogous to a lack of wellness. Connection of individuals to family, community, spirituality, and land are fundamental requisites for wellness and richness in a First Nations context:

Many people suffer greatly because of their disconnection from their culture, their identity, disconnection from the land, disconnection from language and community. I would say those are all impoverished states of being because they don't have those resources to be drawn to live life. You know, when you're thinking about measuring, understanding poverty, it's the absence of wellness, it requires not only financial needs, it requires our connection to language, culture, and community, and land, and our identity.

... When I hear Elders talk about being rich, they're talking about their richness in language or their richness in family or community. ... The Elders will talk about their biological family and their extended family and within that extended family they not only talk to me about blood relations, they're talking about their spiritual adopted children and clan family or the nation that they come from and knowing the history and the importance of their nation, their community, their language...

Carol Hopkins, Lenape Nation; Delaware Nation at Moraviantown, Ontario

Balanced Economy and Sharing

First Nations do not reject the importance and reality of the contemporary economic system in Canadian society. What is rejected, however, is inequality that is created as a consequence of the capitalistic economy. The ideal for a community is to have a balanced economy incorporating economic development initiatives where community members are equal participants and resources are shared. This aligns with traditional First Nations economies of the past when, for example, a harvested moose was shared in the community. In the same way, economic fortune should be shared, and a lack of such sharing in a community is a sign of poverty.

To share is to be rich according to Professor Tuma Young:

...[S]o the definition of being rich is your ability to share your resources with other members of the community who don't have as much, that's when you're seen as being wealthy or rich. ...When we look at poverty, we must not forget that poverty is not in our culture—that's the big thing.

Professor Tuma Young, Malagawatch First Nation and Cape Breton University, Nova Scotia

Balance refers not only to equitable sharing in the capitalistic economy; it also refers to living sustainably, to engage in equitable sharing of the environment and its resources with one another and with future generations:

Generally, I think understanding poverty is not just about money... Sustainability is not money, sustainability is about the permeance of humanity and our environment and harmony moving forward, it's not money. Sustainability is more about how are we going to continue for the next seven generations? We are borrowing the environment from the next generation.

Mindy Denny, Eskasoni Mi'Kmaq Nation, Nova Scotia

A requirement among Indigenous communities and, in particular, community leadership in the past involved sharing:

I heard this growing up, quote-unquote, "The poorest people are Chiefs because they're givers and they spend on the community and they don't focus their attention on accumulating wealth or objects." Historically, they were the poorest among us.

David Fadden, Akwesasne, Ontario/Quebec

For many First Nations individuals, to be balanced is to come to terms with past trauma. When reflecting on who is considered rich among the Atikamekw in Quebec, Dr. Gerard Duhaime commented,

People carry wounds, and a rich person would be somebody who is able to heal to make peace with these wounds, and these ones are always, but not exclusively, are very often connected with the roots [original Indigenous ways of living]. ... I met a number of people who I would say they are very spiritually rich—materially not necessarily—but they are in peace and then they can give, they can transmit this peaceful mind to the others for the betterment of the community. What I see what would be the opposite of a poor person ...I can tell you that they are very respected: we're talking about the Elders, and we're talking about a wise person, this is my perception.

Dr. Gerard Duhaime, Université Laval, Quebec

A major problem with colonization for First Nations is the changing worldview and psychological transformation towards a value system that focuses on individualism rather than family and community:

The value side of it, colonization, ...shifted to more individualization and so many of our communities are involved in an economic development strategy that's about individual wellness. And we haven't seemed to have found a way forward where there's a balance between individual wellness and communal wellness.

Carol Hopkins, Lenape Nation; Delaware Nation at Moraviantown, Ontario

Interviewees stressed that a value system that prioritizes community is a necessary quality of being rich and a key component of addressing poverty in First Nations:

To me being rich is being able to help our people—it's got nothing to do with money...

Harvey Dreaver, Mistawasis Nêhiyawak, Saskatchewan

To be rich means... having food in your house and you can open up your doors and feed the people. It's not about the house, or the furnishings, or the vehicle; it's about opening up your house to feed the people.

Holly Obee, ʔaq'am First Nation, British Columbia

Racism

For First Nations people, racism is a constant that is experienced throughout life. This has inhibited students' progress in school due to prejudicial assumptions of First Nations academic inferiority and led to barriers in finding employment. Racism is embedded in many of the interview responses and these snippets illustrate the deep scarring it has had on First Nations people in Canada.

Racism has been a consistent experience for Dr. Andrew Bear Robe:

Growing up as a boy on reserve, I grew up with racial discrimination. We have surrounding white communities, [and] overall, I would say that European settlers that live in these towns do not treat my people well. I also experienced racial discrimination in the city of Calgary and Edmonton, so I grew up with the notion of racial discrimination against my people. I went to college outside of my reserve and experienced racial discrimination there as well.

Dr. Andrew Bear Robe, Siksika Nation, Alberta

As a barrier to employment for many First Nations people, racism directly contributes to poverty. According to Gordon Peters,

[W]hen we were young, we were faced with the heavy-duty racism that we got in the surrounding communities. Nobody wants to hire an Indian—the rumour was, the story was, Indians weren't reliable, or drunk Indians were violent, you know, and all the same stuff. And as a result, it's taking us a long time to get past that barrier.

Gordon Peters, Eelūnaapèewii Lahkèewiit, Ontario

In addition to its direct effect on First Nations employability and educational attainment, racism experienced over time can diminish confidence to pursue higher education and career goals. As Keith Chiefmoon explains, determination and perseverance are necessary strategies to overcome these barriers to escaping poverty:

When I finished high school, at that time I was told when you get your high school diploma you could get a job. I went and tried for a job in every business at the town and not one of them offered me a job; they said no—they were very subtle—they basically said we don't hire Indians. The only one who would hire me was a farmer. ...All day during harvest, I said to myself there's got to be a better way to make a living. So, then I pushed myself to apply at a local university and I was labelled that I cannot make it: they

asked me, "Why do you want to go to university?" It was very confrontational, so I went through a kind of a means test [for university study]. I was able to answer all the questions and they said I could actually go to university, so I lived through all of this.

Keith Chiefmoon, Blood (Kainai) First Nation, Alberta

Racism perpetrated by individuals may be manifested as blatant discrimination, unconscious biases or a mixture both:

I don't see any First Nations, Métis or Inuit goal posts, they're not the same. ...I see it in the classroom when an Elder or Métis Senator comes in: the teacher has a hard time deferring to them and they're not seen as a teacher, as an equal.

First Nations had a really hard time, serious racism plain and simple. ...In my house we were always speaking without speaking when my grandmother was around. This was the time of the Residential Schools and she was absolutely sure there would be a knock at the door. She would never admit there was native background in her family. ...Teachers didn't care, it's just an Indian—if it was a doctor's kid, they would go the extra mile if the kid was failing. It still goes on...

Brian Gouliquer, Métis Nation of Ontario and Atikokan Native Friendship Centre, Ontario

Self-Determination

Control is a significant determinant of poverty in First Nations communities. Lack of control over opportunities and decisions manifests itself as chronic unemployment or underemployment and loss of cultural knowledge such as ceremonies and language. Mechanisms of control such as the Indian Act; the First Nation reserve administrative structure (e.g., Band Office); and historical assimilative tactics already mentioned, including the Residential Schools, Sixties Scoop, and the overwhelming control exerted by churches and missionaries greatly eroded Indigenous self-determination.

Leona Nahwegahbow succinctly summarized the problem of self-determination in First Nations today:

I think that is poverty when people cannot help themselves: like keeping the traditions, to being able to hunt and fish.

Leona Nahwegahbow, Whitefish River First Nation and Ojibwe Cultural Foundation, Ontario

Self-determination is furthermore identified as a key aspect of a holistic and healthy way of living. In addition to actions at the individual level, Dr. Fred Wien noted in relation to his PARP findings, self-determination is a key component to achieving well-being in First Nations:

What also came through strongly to me is people also wanting to take action to strengthen the collectivity ... in terms of things like having the autonomy to make decisions as a community, rebuilding their economic base, revitalizing their culture, protecting their Aboriginal and Treaty rights, and so forth.

Dr. Fred Wien, Professor Emeritus, Dalhousie University, Nova Scotia

For Professor Tuma Young, the lack of self-determination is often masked in resignation to the new norms of chronic unemployment and the subsequent reliance on social assistance. Young emphasizes that these are not the ways of First Nations but emerged as consequences of the disempowering effects of colonization. The solution to this circumstance is a return to nurturing a skillset that puts one back in being in control of their own livelihood. Young relayed a conversation he had with an Elder about traditional skills and livelihoods:

One Elder reminded me that we must never mistake poverty for culture; it's not part of our culture to be poor. Prior to colonization we were not poor, we were self-sustaining and everything... ...for me the one way you are really poor is when the level of hopelessness is you can't even help yourself...

...[T]he Elder said, "Nobody has sewing skills—I didn't consider myself poor because I was able to make clothes, I was a seamstress. My parents didn't really consider themselves poor because they could hunt, they can fish, they can trap, they did crafts, they did all this stuff. They were able to respond and provide a living. It might have been that there wasn't a whole lot of money, but they provide. ...You will do fine if the whole world around you collapses if you know how to hunt, fish, and trap; not that you want to, but you could feed yourself and you can clothe yourself. The young ones today don't have those skills and that is when they consider people to be poor."

Professor Tuma Young, Malagawatch First Nation and Cape Breton University, Nova Scotia

Similarly, Dr. Andrew Bear Robe succinctly identified the problem of involuntary dependency as fundamental to his understanding of poverty in First Nations:

From self-sufficient people we became totally dependent on Canadians to maintain us, so that's how I view poverty.

Dr. Andrew Bear Robe, Siksika Nation, Alberta

A lesson from the past is to reintroduce caring for self and community.

We need to take care of ourselves, and we did that in the old days—we took care of ourselves, we did not build a dependence.

Keith Chiefmoon, Blood (Kainai) First Nation, Alberta

Measuring First Nations Poverty

The question on how to measure First Nations poverty was the most challenging question posed, and it required pause and reflection. Some interviewees felt it was not possible to provide a fruitful answer, since such an endeavor is rather challenging. A consistent argument, however, is that a meaningful and appropriate First Nations poverty measurement is something that is different than mainstream Canadian measures.

Holistic measures that incorporate elements discussed in the above sections, including family, community, and culture, were recommended:

It's getting beyond all of that [money] you know, recognizing that people have other things that they bring to the conversation that are very rich that typically do not happen with white people—you know, the extended family, the connections to community. Especially the students who have reclaimed their cultures, they're very engaged in all sorts of activities. Even if they are economically poor, they may not experience poverty in the same negative way as someone else.

Dr. Shauna MacKinnon, University of Winnipeg, Manitoba

From the perspective of Mindy Denny, wellness is a more appropriate conceptualization of the measurement of First Nations poverty:

When I'm looking at poverty, I'm thinking about wellness. I'm thinking the indicators that they're using to measure wellness are Western ideas of wellness; they're not inclusive of values and perspectives that are Indigenous. ...We're not well because we're not interacting with our environment. We're not well because we are not living the way we were intended to live. ...What they are measuring is how well we are assimilating...

Mindy Denny, Eskasoni Mi'Kmaq Nation, Nova Scotia

Some participants argued, however, that employment and income remain important components of First Nations poverty outcomes:

I would include income and I would include livelihood: whether or not they're working or training and their participation [in] the labour force, based on unemployment or employment I want to say housing, if they have a place to stay that would be a part of it as well because there's programs that are trying to change it, housing first.

Michael Auger, Bigstone Cree Nation, Alberta

Yet, as a measurement of First Nations poverty or wealth, culture is equal in importance to economic, housing, and social issues:

One measure that I would like to see used is the level of employment. I would say the second indicator of poverty is ...families that are in distress: they are in distress because of the lack of employment, lack of adequate housing and child welfare—the [child] apprehensions have to come down.

...To be able to maintain your cultural ways, our cultural knowledge or cultural practices is also a measure of wealth, because if you know your language, if you know your cultural practices, your customs, your customary ways of living, you're considered a rich traditional Indian. You get respect by the people, by your own people for being that way, so there's cultural respect and there's economic respect, and we are both of those kinds of people.

Dr. Andrew Bear Robe, Siksika Nation, Alberta

For Gordon Peters as well, family, culture, and language are indicators of First Nations poverty:

I don't equate wealth to money, and richness to money. ...[T]o be well-off, I think it's human characteristics: Do you have your language? Do you follow your culture? Do you do your ceremonies? Those things are incredible indicators for us. The only thing that we're given to measure everything else on wealth, is measured ...from the outside, so those are my measurement tools.

Gordon Peters, Eelūnaapèewii Lahkèewiit, Ontario

In addition to family cohesion and culture, indicators of First Nations poverty must include employment, health, and addictions. According to Patrick Lightning Sr.:

It would be measured by employment. ...Another measuring stick is the addictions in the community. ...If

you look at the addictions, what does that look like from an overall point of view?...How many children are in child welfare? ...My kids are always at home; that's the definition of rich, and at the same time our culture has always been real strong within our family.

Patrick Lightning Sr., Maskwacis, Alberta

Echoing the idea of a holistic approach, an apt measure of First Nations poverty is reflected in the symbolism of the medicine wheel. However, adapting it as a form of measurement is the challenge:

The four dimensions of the medicine wheel [physical, emotional, mental and spiritual wellness] are at play when it's time to combat poverty; I think it's a starting point. I would consider those factors in all these four dimensions. Now, the point would be talked about how to operationalize that—this is where things may be complicated, but complicated doesn't mean impossible.

Dr. Gerard Duhaime, Université Laval, Quebec

It was noted that even economic measurement of First Nations poverty should not simply be based on income, but a standard of living that is moderate within the context of the First Nation:

There was an Elder that described being well-off as having healthy children and that being well-off was not to be measured by income. Not being poor can be measured by the number of children in the family, having a comfortable home and having basic needs met. I don't think it means having a fat bank account or a big fat wage, it's just having enough to live comfortably. There are people back home who are making \$20,000 a year and have everything and are doing well and who do not consider themselves poor. If you go to a non-Indigenous community, \$20,000 a year will never be enough and they would consider themselves poor, because they want to have that bank account, they want to have that pension plan, which is very different from how our people, my people in my community, view things from a poverty perspective.

Claudette Dumont-Smith, Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg, Quebec

Measuring poverty must take into consideration the impact of the traumatic effects of colonization:

It's complex: It's not just about having not enough money, it's more the trauma that comes. Poverty is part of it, but it's more the trauma that comes from the colonial context that we live in: the impact of Residential Schools, the Sixties Scoop, all of that. Poverty is interconnected, it is

far deeper and the ongoing systemic racism that people experience. ...It's not just about economic poverty, it's the exclusion, it's the racism, it's the continued feeling that this prosperity that we always talk about, people don't see it for themselves.

...I just feel it's far more complex than measuring it by an economic measure and that's not to say we shouldn't take that serious—we should be—but it really is more broadly around access....I don't practice Indigenous spirituality, but I've seen the difference it makes ...reclaiming of culture and Indigenous spirituality, whatever that means for the person, their Nation or their community. I think we need to start measuring those sorts of things in terms of how people feel about themselves. We can't ignore the economic piece but it's also about how people are dealing with the trauma and the factors that interconnect with poverty issues such as addictions. There's a deeper reason for problems like addiction and how that connects with poverty and how we deal with those sorts of things.

Dr. Shauna MacKinnon, University of
Winnipeg, Manitoba

Carol Hopkins suggested basing measurement more specifically on the effects of government policies, as well as community policies. Once again, this perspective then has the implication that measuring or assessing community-level factors, as root causes or determinants of poverty, is a necessary complement to measuring poverty at the individual level:

What if we measured all of the policies, so we turn the picture around, and we examine the policies that impact on our poverty. So, when we think about what is the

opposite of poverty, what creates health in a community, and then we examine what those things are; you know, what is the policy that helps to support that? Then we measure the influence of that policy in our community so that we have a direct connection between the state of wealth or poverty and government policy, whether it's our own policy or government policy.

Carol Hopkins, Lenape Nation; Delaware
Nation at Moraviantown, Ontario

In any case, measuring First Nations poverty and wealth must be multidimensional; it must include multiple indicators at multiple levels:

If you look at reports—employment level; education level; What's the total household income?; Is the pure drinking water safe in the community?; How often do you participate in cultural activities?; How often do you go to traditional healers?; Do you have any difficulties accessing traditional medicine?; Do you have difficulties accessing services through NIHB services?—to a point, we are measuring social determinants of health which help an individual to stay healthy. ...Money is definitely a factor—I'm not saying [money is] totally not important to be happy—it is important, but it is not everything for First Nations.

...[A] rich community is happy and educated and getting access to all the services, having proper basic necessities like proper housing, clean drinking water. ...Money is not the only thing that First Nations need.

Shravan Ramayanam, First Nations Health and
Social Secretariat of Manitoba, Manitoba



Survey Results

By the time the short survey was administered at the National Gathering of Elders (NGE), more than 20 interviews had been completed and a general sense of First Nations perspectives on poverty had started to take shape. The NGE provided an opportunity to supplement the interview data by reaching out to a national representation of Elders and those with an interest in learning from Elders.

The benefit of this survey is that it presented an opportunity to verify themes in interviews and allow for additional perspectives in open-ended questions. Though the survey data generally aligns with and validates the interview findings, limitations of the small, convenience sample of respondents and the brevity of the survey necessitate caution in interpreting its findings.

Respondent Demographics

In order to situate the survey findings, key demographic information on participants was collected. Table 1 below provides a summary.

Table 1: Demographic Attributes of Survey Participants

Attribute	Summary	
Gender	13 Female; 8 Male; 1 No response	
Age Category	11 Elders; 8 Adults; 3 No response	
Indigenous Identity	19 First Nations; 1 Métis; 2 Non-Indigenous	
City or First Nations community	Alberta	Alexis Nakota Sioux Nation, Bigstone Cree Nation
	British Columbia	Prince Rupert, Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc
	Manitoba	Brokenhead Ojibway Nation, Fisher River Cree Nation, Moose Lake, Peguis First Nation, Sandy Bay First Nation, Winnipeg
	Northwest Territories	Behchokò
	Ontario	Big Island First Nation, Lac Seul First Nation, Six Nations of the Grand River
	Saskatchewan	Kahkewistahaw First Nation
	Yukon	Kwanlin Dün First Nation

Money, Income, Poverty and Richness

An overwhelming majority of survey respondents understood poverty and richness as being beyond money or income. They were asked to indicate “Yes,” “No” or “Not sure” regarding their perspective on the statement, “Poverty is only about income/money.” Nearly 4 in 5 respondents (78%) said “No,” 9% said “Yes,” and 13% said they were “Not sure.”¹⁰

Similarly, when asked to indicate “Yes,” “No” or “Not sure” regarding their perspective on the statement, “Being rich is only about having lots of money,” 82% said “No,” 5% said “Yes,” and 14% said they were “Not sure.”¹¹ Respondents who indicated “No” to either statement were asked to explain their response. These open-ended responses were not always written in full sentences, and in some instances a few words or semi-completed sentences were filled in. The text was analyzed for word frequencies in a word cloud format (see *Figures 1 and 2*).

¹⁰ For all survey questions, those who did not respond were excluded from analysis.

¹¹ Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

socioeconomic indicators, such as housing, food, and education. Otherwise, additional common terms for both open-ended responses reflected the more holistic and multi-dimensional indicators discussed in the interviews, such as “family,” “community,” and “culture.”

[illegible]

Survey respondents were asked to indicate “Yes,” “No” or “Not sure” regarding their perspective on a third statement: “Poverty in First Nations can only be measured by money/income.” Four out of five (80%) said “No,” 15% said “Yes” and 5% said they were “Not sure.”

Figure 3: Word cloud of ideas for measurement of poverty in First Nations



and systemic levels—and colonial policies were significant contributing factors to poverty and that First Nations poverty indicators are multidimensional and should be developed by First Nations themselves.

Discussion and Conclusions



It is clear in the interviews, surveys, and literature that a First Nations perspective on poverty is holistic and goes beyond income considerations. This echoes the COO (2016) and PARP (2019) findings. In the PARP (2018) research, First Nations preferred “wellness” rather than “poverty” in the conceptualization of a poverty. Furthermore, cultural richness in the form of connection to land, speaking Indigenous language, and community values figures prominently in PARP research findings. There is also a continuity with the ethnographic literature: the ethnographic record shows that First Nations perspectives of poverty are not income-specific, but rather associated with community equality and livelihood.

In interviews, there is a consistency in the self-awareness of First Nations poverty: interviewees did not originally consider their situation to be one of poverty, and there came a moment in time when community values clashed with those of the dominant Canadian society.

This clash is the material and non-material visions of the world. A First Nations worldview focuses on a non-material vision of the world, emphasizing connections to family, language, identity, the environment, and a general sense of belonging. This was realized prior to colonialism through balanced economies that ensured equality and sharing in community. Many stories were told of shared wild game and other foods. A balanced economy is one that is moderate—as opposed to extravagance and excess—and does not contribute to community disequilibrium by ensuring equal access to resources and sharing. These values were challenged upon interacting with mainstream Canadian society’s dominant materialistic worldview, with its focus on individuals rather than on community.

It is emphasized in this research that money is not excluded in an understanding of First Nations poverty. It is, however, not the sole focus of the experience. It is acknowledged that contemporary society requires money to purchase goods and services and maintain a basic standard of living; however, money alone cannot address First Nations poverty.

First Nations poverty must be understood within the context of colonization. The process of colonization restricted access to land through Treaty land cessions.

Residential Schools and child welfare apprehensions disrupted First Nations’ Indigenous language acquisition, cultural knowledge transmission, and family and community connection. Chronic racism toward First Nations exacerbates the situation by ongoing reinforcement of false beliefs of social and cultural inferiority among First Nations people. This translates directly into limiting employment opportunities for First Nations citizens, which directly produces poverty itself (for a succinct review of these colonial processes and poverty outcomes see Palmater, 2011). These insights are consistent with what Kanien’kehá:ka scholar Gerald Alfred (2009) calls “colonialism and state dependency,” a term linking unresolved historical trauma and cultural dislocation to the resulting First Nations dependency on the Canadian state.

Solutions to First Nations poverty involve a return to traditional First Nations values and livelihoods. These values emphasize sharing, retaining, and returning to cultural practices and language. This is accomplished through self-determining measures; specifically, undoing the legacy of colonization. It means recognizing the detrimental and ongoing effects of these historical injustices and investing in a return to cultural practices that are compatible with contemporary society.

In comparing the results of this study to the literature outside of poverty studies, there are striking similarities with Health Canada & the Assembly of First Nations’ (2015) First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum (FNMWC). The FNMWC focuses on a First Nations perspective of mental wellness and includes holistic components in its wellness continuum model inclusive of culture (language, practices, ceremonies, knowledge, land, and values); community; infrastructure; family; First Nations relations with government and industry; health care resources; employment; social services; and many other components (see Health Canada & AFN, 2015, pg. 12 for a visual of this model).

The results of this research reveal the challenge inherent in devising a measurement tool for First Nations poverty. Indeed, the question of measurement was a challenge for participants, since the First Nations experience differs from that of mainstream Canadians, yet the common measure

of poverty is based on the mainstream Canadian poverty experience. The notion of a determinants of First Nations poverty framework comes from the interview with Gord Peters, who raised the question, “We have First Nations’ determinants of health, why can’t we have determinants of First Nations poverty?”

Conceptual Framework

Beedie et al. (2019) specify an Indigenous framework for the determinants of health as being inclusive of land, resources, language, culture, and ceremony. Wien (2017) examines First Nations poverty as a social determinant of health, and proposes the solution to addressing First Nations poverty must include addressing social issues (e.g., social services and housing in First Nations); seeking strategies for providing a minimum income in First Nations communities; and addressing education and training needs in order to strengthen the economies of First Nations.

Geddes (2015) proposes the concept of community wellness in a First Nations context, based on a social determinants of health framework. According to this framework, community wellness determinants include income and social status, employment, education, gender, biology and genetic endowment, social support networks, social environments, personal health practices and coping skills, health services, culture, physical environments, and healthy child development (p. 9).

Analyzed in combination, the data gathered from interviews, surveys, and reviews of the literature for this research allows for the development of a conceptual framework for the determinants of First Nations poverty. This framework can provide a foundation for further work towards developing a precise method to assess and measure First Nations poverty.

This framework is expressed through key components that are consistent in responses in the data. In consideration of the points above and in the interview data, self-determination of communities is necessarily implicated in governance of many of the components. These are presented below with a description.

Culture: the ability to speak a First Nations language and have connections to the land.

Family: to have a large extended family for love and support.

Housing: to have safe shelter and a place to call home.

Employment: to have a form of self-determined economic

livelihood that is not reliant on social assistance; this may include participation in the wage economy or a land-based economy (consisting of hunting, fishing, and harvesting), or a combination of both land-based and wage economies.

Health: to be mentally, physically, spiritually, and culturally healthy.

Addictions: addictions are a sign of poverty since it reveals one is not well.

Food: to have enough food to nurture one’s physical survival.

Moderate standard of living: First Nations value community, and having a moderate standard of living enables a degree of equality; since having enough to get by is the ideal, this may allow excess resources to be shared.

Education: a balance of formal Western education and Indigenous knowledge provides the ideal skillset to overcome or prevent poverty.

Within the context of First Nations community wellness, Geddes (2015) presents a sample methodology in how to measure wellness. Geddes (2015) emphasizes that each First Nations community will have its own measure of wellness; correspondingly, each First Nation in Canada may have its own measure of poverty. Given the insights achieved in this research project, First Nations poverty measurement at the community level may include the following measures: percentage of language speakers; employment rate; personal incomes in relation to average community income levels; percentage of community members with addictions; education levels; traditional knowledge levels; percentage of home ownership; water quality; numbers of identified family members providing social support; reported level of holistic health; and access to quality food (Western and/or traditional). These measures may also be adapted to develop a multidimensional poverty index for individuals.

Limitations and Recommendations

This research initiative is limited by the numbers and representativeness of individuals consulted and the limitations of the ethnographic record in documenting a full picture of poverty perspectives across all First Nations in Canada. The duration of this research project was relatively limited—less than one year in duration and minimal resources for community engagement. This is the reason for the limited numbers of interviews. Most interviews took place over the phone and it is a challenge to connect

meaningfully with First Nations individuals across Canada using this method. Future research can benefit from additional engagement with First Nations communities from all geographic regions and subregions in Canada. There are thus limitations in the validity of generalizations made from a small national sample.

Future research is required in narrowing the focus of a First Nations poverty measurement tool. The approach taken in this research is, in essence, exploratory and it relied upon initial reactions from participants on the question of measurement. It was common to have periods of silence after asking this question and there was difficulty at times in articulating responses, since the question raises an important issue that needs time and reflection.

Future research needs to factor in an efficient and effective methodology that can lead to development of a poverty measurement tool in First Nations that reaches across Canada in a comprehensive way. This may involve the recruitment and formation of an interdisciplinary expert panel from across Canada that can operationalize common First Nations poverty measures. This expert panel should include quantitative researchers, Elders, traditional Knowledge Holders (who may be Elders, but not necessarily), and policy experts. This panel may advise on a measurement tool based on the collective knowledge of First Nations community members and in consideration of the existing research that has been done, inclusive of this report.



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Appendices



Appendix A: Survey Questionnaire



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A First Nations Perspective on Poverty Survey 2019

Instructions: For each question, please check the box that best applies and/or fill in the blanks.

Date: ☐ Mon. Sept 9, 2019 ☐ Tues. Sept 10, 2019 ☐ Wed. Sept 11, 2019

About Me:

7. Gender: _____ ☐ Prefer not to say
8. I am: ☐ First Nations ☐ Métis ☐ Inuit ☐ Other ☐ Prefer not to say
9. I am a(n): ☐ Youth ☐ Adult ☐ Elder ☐ Prefer not to say
10. I am from/my home is: _____ (First Nation, City, Town)
11. I have read about the purpose of this study and I agree to participate in this study:
☐ Yes ☐ No

My Perspective of Poverty and Being Rich:

- 12.a) Poverty is only about income/money: ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not sure
- b) If you answered "no" in question 6a) explain:

*****TURN THE PAGE FOR MORE QUESTIONS*****

13.a) Being rich is only about having lots of money: ☐Yes ☐No ☐Not sure

b) If you answered “no” in question 7a), explain:

Ways to Measure Poverty

14.a) Poverty in First Nations can only be measured by money/income:

☐Yes ☐No ☐Not sure

b) If you answered “no” in question 8a), what else needs to be measured? Explain or list other measurement needs/ideas:

c) I have more information to share:

Thank you for participating!!!!

Appendix B: About the Researcher

Darrel Manitowabi is an associate professor in the School of Northern and Community Studies at Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario. He holds a cross-appointment in the Northern Ontario School of Medicine, Human Sciences Division and the School of Indigenous Relations, Laurentian University.

He has a PhD in sociocultural anthropology from the University of Toronto and has published articles on Indigenous health, tourism and gaming, Ojibwa/Anishinaabe ethnohistory, and urban Indigenous issues. He has completed research projects on Indigenous casinos, diabetes, traditional medicine, socioeconomic interventions, cultural approaches to opioid recovery, occupational health and education and training.

His interest is on understanding the intersection of Indigenous social, economic, and cultural well-being in relation to colonization and decolonization of Indigenous Peoples in Canada and in comparative global perspectives.

He is a citizen of the Wiikwemkoong Unceded Territory and he currently resides in the Whitefish River First Nation.





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