

Manitoba's NDP presides over child care crisis

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A 15-year-old Manitoba girl who was under the care of Manitoba Child and Family Services (CFS) was severely beaten in April, in yet another incident that showcases the contempt with which the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) government treats the province's First Nations and working class population.

The teenage victim was set upon by a boy of the same age who was himself a CFS ward. At the time of the attack, both were being housed in a CFS-contracted motel. Last year, 15 year-old Tina Fontaine, a First Nations girl also under CFS care, was housed in the same motel just days before being abducted and murdered.

The CFS has for years been housing children in “welfare motels”—low-rent flop-houses notorious for violent crime, drug trafficking and prostitution. The children are largely unsupervised as a result of cuts to social service jobs and privatization. Currently, substantial numbers of CFS child-care workers are private sector contractors who are paid the minimum wage and have little to no training or experience working with children in difficult situations.

The scandal surrounding the housing of vulnerable children in these low-rent motels is only the latest example of the province's burgeoning social crisis. Along with British Columbia, Manitoba has the country's highest poverty rate. Almost 12 percent of Manitoba's population lives in dire straits in a province that has been governed by the so-called “worker friendly” NDP for the past 16 years.

For aboriginal children poverty rates are far higher. Across Canada, over 50 percent of First Nations children live in poverty, but this number jumps to 62 percent in Manitoba. These children are also more likely to drop out of school, live off social assistance in

dilapidated housing, and suffer family violence. Based on the United Nations Human Development Index, the quality of life for First Nations in Manitoba ranks the lowest in Canada, with a life expectancy eight years shorter than other Manitobans.

Winnipeg, the capital city, has perennially had the highest rates of violent crime in Canada. In a given year, Winnipeg's police receive about 6,500 missing person reports. National police statistics show that girls are six times more likely to be reported missing in Manitoba than in the rest of Canada, and most of them are the vulnerable youths left in the care of CFS.

In the wake of the April beating incident, NDP Minister of Family Services Kerri Irvin-Ross, who oversees the CFS, pledged that the use of motels would be halted by June 1. Similar promises, without result, have been made by NDP ministers in the past.

Due to the cuts to social services, jailed foster children have for years been kept incarcerated even after serving their full sentences—a clear violation of the Charter of Children's Rights—in order to alleviate the bottle-necks in the decaying CFS system.

According to dubious, just-released government figures there are now no CFS youth housed in motels—at least in Winnipeg. However, Irvin-Ross could not give assurances for the north of the province.

A steady stream of reports going back years demonstrates that, contrary to its stated mission of shielding vulnerable children from neglect and abuse, the CFS has largely left them at the mercy of their circumstances.

In most CFS cases, children are taken from their parents not because of outright abuse, but because of “neglect”—a condition more accurately described as poverty—which often included a lack of permanent housing or having to leave a child alone to go to work.

Poor parents who reach out to child services for social assistance, often instead see their children simply taken from them.

As poor people know all too well, these conditions are a fact of life—the result of decades of de-industrialization and austerity administered by federal Liberal and Conservative and provincial NDP and Tory governments. For native families, the situation is further aggravated by the horrendous legacy of the residential school system, which forcibly tore children from their familial homes and inflicted terrible physical and emotional abuse on generation after generation.

The overall condition of children in CFS care has progressively gotten worse. There are currently about 10,000 children under CFS care, a jump of more than 400 from last year. Relative to the rest of the country, Manitoba has the most children in foster care.

Between 2010 and 2014, the number of missing children in Manitoba grew by 22 percent, while across Canada this number has gone down by an average of 20 percent. The majority of these children are under CFS care.

Government social spending cuts are compounding the social crisis. Manitoba's child benefit, an income supplement program for working poor families, is worth less in purchasing power today than when it was first introduced by a Progressive Conservative government in 1980. The maximum benefit for this program has only been raised once in the last 35 years.

The social housing allowance in Manitoba has been frozen at \$285 per month for 23 years. In 2012, Manitoba had the lowest welfare payments in Canada. Single parents who rely on welfare in Manitoba are receiving \$1,500 less than what the provincial government provided in 1986.

These cuts have deepened the crisis for children living in poverty in Manitoba, leaving more of them in the care of CFS. This ongoing crisis means that the CFS budget has ballooned to \$400 million a year, which translates to \$40,000 per child in care. Meanwhile, Manitoba's NDP government has cuts corporate taxes by \$1 billion per year.



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