

Poverty on Aboriginal Reserves in Canada

The United Nations General Assembly declared 1995 to 2004 the International decade of the World's Indigenous People. The aim was to address the problem of widespread poverty among many of these people around the world, including Canada.

On many First Nations reserves in Canada, people must deal with problems that would challenge the resources of much more prosperous communities. High rates of infant mortality, substandard housing, few social services, and low life expectancy create conditions closer to those found in countries associated with the bottom half of the Human Development Index.

On October 14, 1988, the *Winnipeg Free Press* reported on conditions at a reserve in northern Manitoba that are typical of many reserves:

Poverty beyond imagination – like a shanty town in Mexico or Sao Paulo, with sometimes ten to fifteen people living in one shack. The people are conditioned to live on welfare; more than 70 percent don't work. There is no work, apart from a little trapping and fishing along the Churchill River. Life has improved in recent years thanks to band initiative and good leadership, but there is still no work.... People have nothing to do here. Especially the young people. Children start drinking as early as six.

Conditions like this led to the 1996 report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. The Report found that: "The current state of Aboriginal housing and community services poses acute threats to health." Poor sanitation and water quality, substandard housing and health care are linked to high levels



Residents of the reserve in Davis Inlet, Labrador, have high unemployment and a low standard of living.

of infant mortality, infectious diseases, and safety concerns.

The Report warns of a rapidly growing population straining the resources of Aboriginal communities. It points out that reserves are too small even to support existing numbers. Most Aboriginal peoples in Canada have neither effective control over their existing lands nor sufficient access to lands and resources outside their reserves and communities.

These are the issues that Matthew Coon Come (former Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations) pledged to address. He thought that Aboriginal Canadians deserve a greater share in the benefits of Canada's natural resources. He saw this as a way to remove dependence and achieve Aboriginal rights. He stated that "If the government of Canada wishes to continue to stand tall as a member of the international community, [it] will have to recognize our right to share in the wealth of the land.