

# Intelligence MEMOS



From: John Richards

To: Marc Miller, Minister of Indigenous Services, and Provincial Ministers of Education

Date: July 8, 2020

Re: **EDUCATION THE CRITICAL PIECE FOR AN INDIGENOUS URBAN AGENDA**

Since 1981, Ottawa has published the Community Well-Being Index (CWB), an exercise in rating social conditions in individual First Nation and Inuit communities. Using census data, the CWB is constructed from four equally weighted sub-indices: per capita community income index, an education index, a labour force participation index, and a housing index.

In order to compare with mainstream Canadian communities, it includes equivalent results for “other” communities across Canada.

This special three-part Intelligence Memo series is based on my C.D. Howe Institute [paper](#) that uses 2016 census numbers to examine sub-indices in the CWB and make the case that low employment among many First Nation communities deserves far more policy attention than it receives.

Today, the background.

At least since the 1996 report of the [Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples](#), the dominant agenda among Indigenous and non-Indigenous political leaders, among academics, and among policy analysts has been rehabilitation of First Nation cultures via expansion of treaty rights.

To quote the report: “Canadians need to understand that *Aboriginal peoples are nations* [emphasis in original] ... To this day, Aboriginal people’s sense of confidence and well-being remains tied to the strength of their nations. Only as members of restored nations can they reach their potential in the 21st century.”

This is a valuable agenda. However, if it implies that those identifying as First Nations cannot reach their potential while living in cities, and that closing socio-economic gaps between First Nations and other communities can be subsumed under strategies designed to affirm treaty rights, it is a limiting agenda. Average CWB scores for First Nations have modestly increased since 1981, but many sub-indices are stagnant.

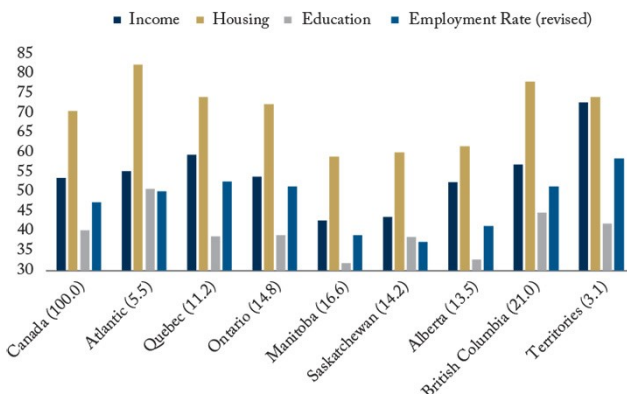
Statistics Canada provides the census data from which Indigenous Services Canada has constructed 2016 CWB scores for 623 First Nation communities, 50 Inuit communities, and 3,781 “others” (ranging from Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver to small towns).

There are several summary points to make:

- From the first CWB index in 1981 to 2016, the average First Nation score has risen from 45.0 to 58.4, the Inuit score from 46.1 to 61.3, and the non-Indigenous score from 64.5 to 77.5. (Scores range from 0–100.) All three scores have risen, but the gaps between non-Indigenous on the one hand, and either First Nation or Inuit have remained nearly constant.
- The First Nation labour force score incorporated in the CWB distributions combines labour force participation rate and employment rate. The latter is defined in a manner significantly different from that used by Statistics Canada. In Figure 1, showing the regional values of the four sub-indices that make up the CWB, the labour force score has been replaced with regional employment rates, defined in a manner similar to that in the Census.
- There exists overlap among the three distributions—but not much. Coincidentally, 71 is the top decile CWB score for the First Nation and Inuit communities, and the bottom decile for the “other” communities. In other words, nine of 10 First Nation and Inuit communities score below 71; nine of 10 of the “other” communities score above 71.
- At a regional level, the most severe social outcomes, as measured by the CWB sub-indices, are in the three Prairie provinces, which collectively account for 45 percent of the population living in a First Nation community.
- In Manitoba and Saskatchewan, average community income scores are 10 points lower than the Canadian average—and roughly 15 points lower than in Quebec and British Columbia.

Tomorrow, we examine the role of employment in measures of success.

CWB Sub-Index Scores and Revised Employment Rate, First Nation Communities, Canada and Regions, 2016



*John Richards teaches in the Simon Fraser University public policy school and is a fellow-in-residence at the C.D. Howe Institute.*

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*Source: Statistics Canada and the Community Well-Being Index.*