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MANITOBA OFFICE

**December 2024**



# **Mapping Colonial Harms:**

## **Social Emergencies in Northern Manitoba First Nations**

**By Jonathan Meikle  
and Elizabeth Comack**



## ISBN 978-1-77125-697-1

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## Acknowledgements

This report was supported by the Manitoba Research Alliance as part of its larger project, "Community-Driven Solutions to Poverty; Challenges and Possibilities," which is funded by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). The authors thank Elder Darlene Osborne from Norway House Cree Nation, Ashley Moore and Greg Fontaine from Manitoba Keewatinow Okimakanak (MKO), and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and feedback on earlier drafts of the report.

## About the Authors

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The CCPA Manitoba publishes research on the original lands of the Anishinaabe, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene peoples and the homeland of the Métis Nation on Treaty 1 Territory. Beyond recognizing the importance of place, we acknowledge our responsibility to contribute to solutions to the problems caused by past and present colonial policies in Canada. We are committed to contributing research that builds on the strengths of Indigenous communities, respects the spirit and intent of Treaties, and that is done in partnership with First Nation, Métis, and Inuit people and organizations.

Cover art by Jackie Traverse



Social Sciences and Humanities  
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en  
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# Introduction

ACCORDING TO THE Canadian Red Cross, a social emergency is “an event or situation, excluding natural disasters that require community evacuations, which exceeds the resources and capacities of a community and requires the immediate response and support of external agencies and service providers.” Flooding and wildfires that require the evacuation of a community are therefore excluded from the definition. The Red Cross cites “multiple suicides in the same community or a fire at a school or other community building” as examples.<sup>1</sup>

Social emergencies relating to deaths caused by suicide, violence, drug misuse/poisoning, community fires, and/or health-care services have been declared in northern First Nations in Manitoba and, in some communities, multiple times. While the definition of an emergency is “an unforeseen combination of circumstances or the resulting state that calls for immediate action,”<sup>2</sup> the social emergencies called in these First Nations are not “unforeseen.” Rather, as our research has found, they are predictable. They are rooted in colonial conditions that have left many First Nations in dire straits. Social emergencies are a clear sign that the myriad harms generated by colonialism — impoverished living conditions, disconnection from Indigenous cultural traditions and ways of being, the impacts of forced relocations, and historical and intergenerational trauma — have reached a breaking point.

Our purpose here is to map out social emergencies that have been called in northern First Nations in Manitoba, including the social problem or issue that led to calling a social emergency, how that problem was framed or

understood by the leadership in those communities, and the response by provincial and federal governments to the social emergency.<sup>3</sup> This mapping reveals that a full understanding of these social emergencies requires locating them in their colonial context. Without that understanding, responses on the part of governments will fall short and social emergencies — and the tragedies that prompt them — will only continue to occur.

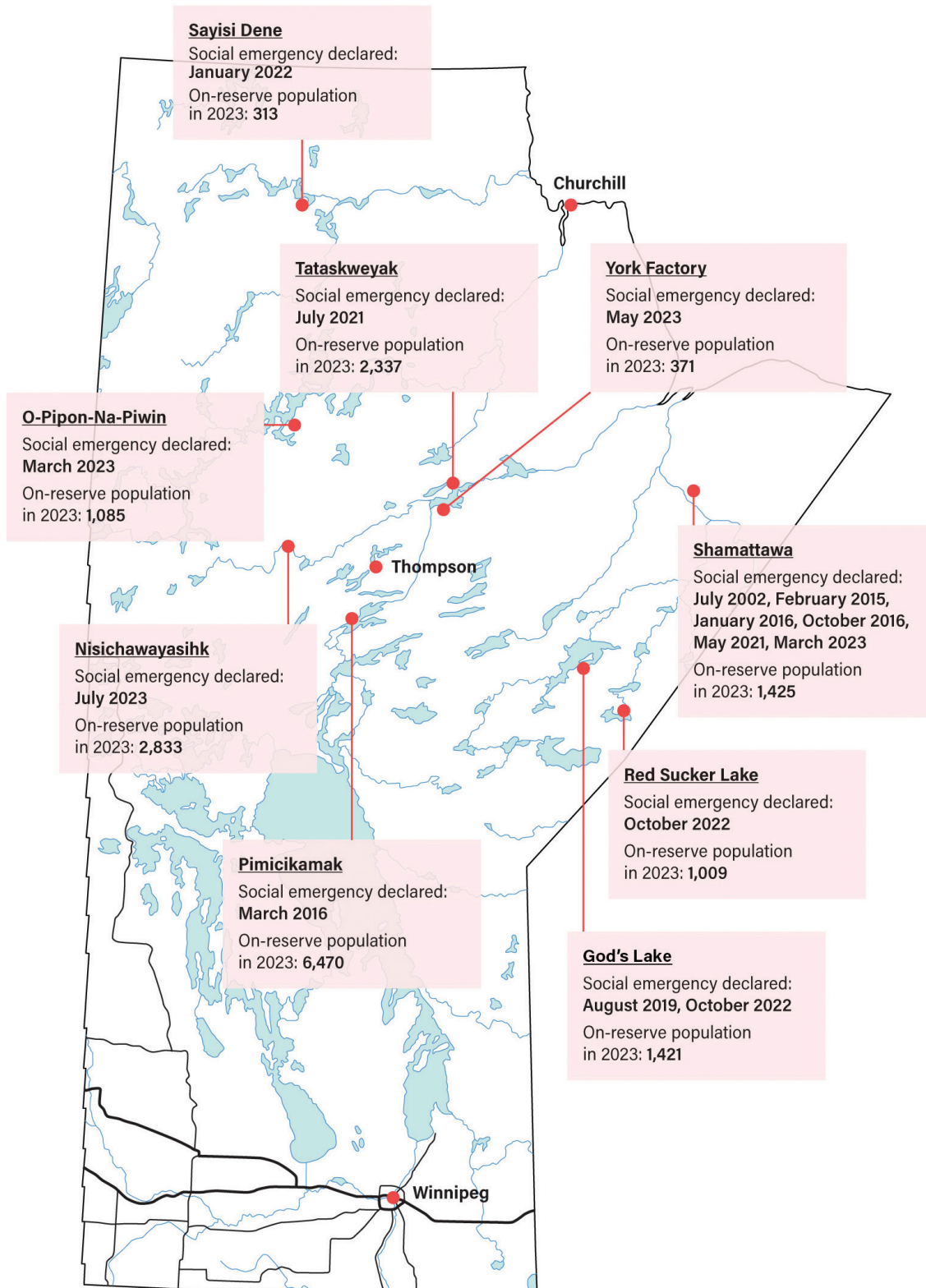
While it is important to provide a timely response when social emergencies occur in First Nations, preventing the social issues that lead to declarations of a social emergency will require addressing the colonial conditions that generate them. Northern First Nations have been actively involved in that work, taking steps to assert their rights and build the social, economic, and political power to foster collective healing and wellbeing in their communities. To that end, provincial and federal governments — and all settlers — have a responsibility to ensure the success of this decolonizing process.

# Mapping States of Emergency

AS OF MARCH 2021, there were 164,289 registered First Nation peoples in Manitoba; 93,840 (57 percent of the total population) live on reserve.<sup>4</sup> There are 63 First Nations in Manitoba; 17 are inaccessible by an all-weather road, which “accounts for approximately half [about 47,000 people] of all First Nations people who live on reserve in Manitoba.”<sup>5</sup>

There are three key organizations representing and advocating for northern Manitoba First Nations. Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak (MKO) represents 26 northern First Nations that are signatories to Treaties 4, 5, 6, and 10. Incorporated in 1981, the mandate of MKO is “to maintain, strengthen, enhance, lobby for and defend the interests and rights of First Nation people within its jurisdiction and to promote, develop and secure a standard quality of life deemed desirable and acceptable by its First Nations without limiting the generality of the foregoing and the objectives of MKO.”<sup>6</sup> Keewatinohk Innininiw Minoyawin (KIM), meaning “northern peoples’ wellness” in Cree, is a First Nations health organization with a mandate to ensure northern First Nations people in Manitoba have access to health-related services that are reflective of their needs and priorities. The organization emerged from a 2018 Memorandum of Understanding on health transformation between MKO and the federal government designed to transfer control over some of the federal government healthcare functions to northern First Nations.<sup>7</sup> Keewatin Tribal Council represents 11 First Nation band governments in the

**FIGURE 1** Social Emergencies in Northern Manitoba First Nations



north of the province. The mandate of the council is “to ensure and achieve self-sufficiency, self determination and empowerment of the member First Nation communities it serves.”<sup>8</sup>

In recent years, nine northern Manitoba First Nations (see “Social Emergencies in Northern Manitoba First Nations” map), in company with MKO, KIM, and Keewatin Tribal Council, have declared states of emergency as a means of raising awareness and prompting a response on the part of the provincial and federal governments to the pressing social issues confronting their communities. Drawing on media reports of those declarations, we identify the social problem that led to calling a state of emergency, statements made by First Nation leadership that reflect how they framed or understood that problem, and, if reported, the response by provincial and federal governments to the social emergency. At its core, this mapping provides a revealing picture of the troubling social conditions that underly these states of emergency — conditions that are rooted in colonialism.

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## **Pimicikamak Cree Nation**

In March 2016, the leadership of Pimicikimak Cree Nation (formerly Cross Lake First Nation) declared a state of emergency in response to a suicide crisis on the reserve. Six people, most of whom were in their teens, had taken their lives in the previous four months. More than 140 others had attempted suicide or expressed suicidal thoughts in the previous two weeks. Two of the cases involved teens in the care of Child and Family Services (CFS); another was a mother whose children had CFS involvement. One of the youths had just returned after being discharged from the Health Sciences Centre’s child and adolescent psychiatry unit in Winnipeg. Some 100 students were on a suicide watch list.<sup>9</sup> The community had experienced similar suicide crises in 1987 and 1999.<sup>10</sup>

Located along the shore of the Nelson River, 500 kilometres north of Winnipeg, Pimicikimak has a registered population of 9,424, with 6,470 members living on-reserve as of 2023.<sup>11</sup> The First Nation is located near a hydro generating station. Frustrated residents had occupied the station in 2013, saying “their traditional lands are regularly transformed into a floodway and none of the promised economic development and employment programs has materialized.”<sup>12</sup> Premier Greg Selinger issued an apology in 2015 for the damage caused by the hydro development to traditional land, way of life,

and cultural identity, saying the community had not been properly consulted on the river diversion project.<sup>13</sup>

There are few social resources in the community, such as a community centre. The nursing station is staffed by two nurses overnight and only one trained mental-health therapist visits the community on a part-time basis. “Support services are stretched to the breaking point,” according to Acting Chief Shirley Robinson.<sup>14</sup> Robinson said there was no one cause for the despair in the community, but “a combination of several factors”: poverty, unemployment, residual trauma among residential school survivors, and disconnection from traditional culture.<sup>15</sup>

The band council was asking for at least six mental health workers, a child psychologist, and family therapist, as well as after-hours counsellors and physicians. More long-term requirements included a hospital and recreational facilities for youth in the community.<sup>16</sup> Member of Parliament Niki Ashton called for “a crisis centre, a place young people can go to seek help right now but also in the longer term, to address the lack of recreational opportunity; the lack of youth drop-in centre; the lack of places where young people can go and come together in a healthy and positive way.”<sup>17</sup> Eric Robinson, Manitoba’s Aboriginal Affairs minister, noted that the root causes of suicide — poverty, overcrowded housing, and past abuse — needed to be addressed.<sup>18</sup>

In terms of government response, a meeting with the provincial health minister a month previously only resulted in one mental-health worker being sent to the community for an eight-hour shift.<sup>19</sup> With the social emergency declaration, however, the provincial government sent in a mobile crisis unit from Thompson.<sup>20</sup> As well, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada said the department was working with the band council and other front-line workers to “identify need and take immediate action in response” and Health Canada reached out to the First Nation chief to offer assistance to address mental health needs.<sup>21</sup> Federal Health Minister Jane Philpott indicated that the number of travelling therapists and other mental health service providers had been increased and that “The government will remain involved in the long term.”<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, in the aftermath of the suicides, youth in the community gathered together to begin their own fundraising effort to pay for 30 youth to attend a suicide prevention conference in Thompson in the spring of 2016. Participants at the conference received training and certification in suicide prevention. A support group called Y.O.U.T.H., short for “youth only understand the pain,” was also formed.<sup>23</sup>



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## God's Lake First Nation

God's Lake First Nation is a Cree community with a registered population of 2,872 and an on-reserve population of 1,421 (as of 2023).<sup>24</sup> It is located on God's Lake Narrows, 250 kilometres southeast of Thompson and 550 kilometres northeast of Winnipeg.

In August 2019 a state of emergency was called after a rash of suicide attempts left four young people dead; 22 others attempted suicide over that summer. In a news release, MKO said the community had been in the grips of a methamphetamine crisis, along with addictions to alcohol and other drugs. MKO called on the federal government to send in qualified therapists and indicated it would be sending its Mobile Crisis Response Team to the community.<sup>25</sup> Indigenous Services Canada agreed to dispatch a youth counsellor from the Manitoba Adolescent Treatment Centre to God's Lake.<sup>26</sup>

Three years later, in October 2022, the First Nation declared another state of emergency because of a sharp rise in illegal drug use and accompanying escalation of violence over the previous six months. A number of factors were cited as contributing to the drug crisis, including inadequate housing and a lack of mental health and drug rehabilitation services.<sup>27</sup>

Band council member Phillip Kanabee called for "some kind of a detox centre here in the community, where people can go ... without going out of the community, because we don't know what will happen if they are sent out in the city."<sup>28</sup> He also cited the lack of protective services in the community. While there is an RCMP detachment, officers' "hands are tied" when it comes to removing drug dealers from the community. The only option was for the band council to pass a resolution to ban the dealers from the community. As well, the community has only one First Nations safety officer, which is insufficient for a community of some 1,500 people.<sup>29</sup>

God's Lake is a remote community, accessible only by air. Counsellor Mary Spence indicated that drugs were easily coming into the community through the airport, and so better detection methods were required. "We need ... those X-ray machines to search the persons that are coming in. They have that security system at the airport in Winnipeg."<sup>30</sup>

In November 2022, the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs (AMC) held a news conference and issued a statement calling on the government to send support and resources to respond to the drug crisis in God's Lake First Nation. The AMC statement said, "God's Lake First Nation declared a state of emergency on October 4th, and now, forty-two days later, there has been no response from the government. This is unacceptable."<sup>31</sup>

God's Lake Chief Hubert Watt told the news conference that as many as 30 percent of those living in the community were addicted to drugs, especially methamphetamines, which has led to a "crisis of epidemic proportions."<sup>32</sup> Watt saw the problem as the result of traumas that the community is still healing from. Chief Watt accused both levels of government of ignoring the crisis, saying "We have called upon the federal governments for help over and over. They continue to ignore the lives being lost and the trauma being inflicted."<sup>33</sup> According to the chief, the community required an emergency detox centre with more than 100 beds, long-term mental health treatment programs, more mental health therapists, and a safe house for children whose parents are using drugs.<sup>34</sup> Chief Watt was also intent on the First Nation implementing their own programming, including land-based healing for people struggling with addiction issues.

The community only has two nurses at its nursing station.<sup>35</sup> MKO Grand Chief Garrison Settee told the press conference: "Due to inadequate public health, we will continue to see the detrimental effects of prolonged drug use, including late-stage diagnoses of life-threatening diseases. God's Lake First Nation deserves better. Our First Nations people deserve better. It is imperative that God's Lake First Nation received the support they have repeatedly asked for. MKO remains committed in declaring that a whole of government response is required in order to address the ongoing state of emergency that was declared by the God's Lake First Nation."<sup>36</sup>

The late AMC Grand Chief Cathy Merrick said that AMC reached out to Indigenous Services Canada requesting emergency access to highly-trained professionals and supports. Both requests for resources and a meeting to discuss the issues were denied, as were requests to the Canadian Red Cross. The only recommendation from a government official was to send God's Lake First Nation a team of Assembly of First Nations (AFN) ambassadors. But they don't have the ability to provide the services that are required.<sup>37</sup>

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## **Tataskweyak Cree Nation**

Tataskweyak Cree Nation is located at Split Lake on the Nelson River system, which is 143 kilometres west of Thompson, Manitoba and accessible by road. Tataskweyak's registered population was 4,143, with 2,337 members living on-reserve in 2023.<sup>38</sup> The community has been under a drinking water advisory since 2017.<sup>39</sup>

In July 2021, the First Nation declared a state of emergency when nine young people committed suicide in the previous 14 months. Other young people and adults had attempted suicide or were self-harming. According to one of the band's councilors, the suicide crisis had been prompted by "drug dealers and bootleggers" bringing drugs and alcohol into the community. "That's the biggest problem we are dealing with, it's the amount of alcohol and drugs being brought into the community, and pushed onto young people," he said.<sup>40</sup>

Tataskweyak Chief Doreen Spence said that other factors were behind the community's crisis aside from drugs and alcohol. The disruptions and social isolation prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as recent discoveries of unmarked burial sites at former residential schools across Canada had a major impact on the mental health of community members.<sup>41</sup> "People are depressed right now, and they feel like they have nowhere to turn to for supports out there. In all of our First Nations, we don't have adequate care — health-care supports — and we need that here."<sup>42</sup>

The First Nation also lacked basic infrastructure supports. According to Chief Spence, there is "a lack of recreational activities for our children, because we're lacking building infrastructure, right. Our band hall, during this whole school year, we had to utilize it as a classroom space for early grades, because our school was shut down because of the roof collapsing."<sup>43</sup>

Indigenous Services Canada said it was supporting the First Nation with additional mental health therapists, including youth workers. The Canadian Red Cross was offering training for youth empowerment and "Psychological First Aid."<sup>44</sup> While MKO Grand Chief Garrison Settee indicated the MKO Crisis Response Team had been sent to the community, he added that the First Nation needs "long-term mental wellness supports, including mental health counselling available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week; a crisis drop-in centre; and a commitment to work to protect young and vulnerable people from illicit drugs and bootlegging."<sup>45</sup>

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## Shamattawa First Nation

Shamattawa First Nation, with a registered population of 1,648 and an on-reserve population of 1,425, is located 744 kilometres north of Winnipeg and is accessible only by air and winter ice road.<sup>46</sup> A drinking water advisory has been in place since 2018.<sup>47</sup>



The First Nation's problems with drug use have been ongoing for a long time. Over three decades ago, journalist Geoffrey York, in his book, *The Dispossessed: Life and Death in Native Canada*, devoted a chapter to the struggles the community was having with an epidemic of children sniffing gasoline. York showcased the social conditions that had led to the problem, which was also affecting Indigenous communities in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand:

In almost every case there is a unifying factor: the young addicts are poverty-stricken members of a community that has been overwhelmed by a more powerful outside culture. They are victims of cultural invasion or dislocation. The economic influence of the outsiders has forced an ethnic group to move to a foreign place, or it has surrounded and besieged the indigenous culture, destroying the traditional economy and social harmony. In each case, members of the minority group are stripped of their identity and their traditional way of life. Inhalants are simply the cheapest and most accessible of the weapons of self-destruction.<sup>48</sup>

In the case of Shamattawa, York noted that this process of colonial dislocation began in the 1940s when the First Nation was moved onto the site of their future reserve and “suffered the trauma of sudden dislocation. Their traditional culture was virtually destroyed and replaced by a new culture of dependency, and they lost the ability to control their fate. Foreign institutions took control of their education, their justice system, their economy, and their way of life.”<sup>49</sup> The impacts of that dislocation on the wellbeing of Shamattawa residents continued in the years to follow.

In July 2002, the First Nation experienced three suicides within nine days: an 18-year-old man, a 22-year-old man, and a 26-year-old mother of six. A CBC reporter visiting the community found that alcohol and solvent abuse were prevalent. While mental health specialists were sent to the community, MKO Grand Chief Francis Flett said that more needed to be done. “There has to be something continuously done instead of going for one day and meeting with the chief and council. That doesn’t do anybody any good especially a community like this.” The band required resources for police, addiction treatment, mental health services, and job creation. “What the people of Shamattawa want is for Canadians to care and for the government to help them help themselves,” said the grand chief.<sup>50</sup>

In February 2015, two young men (aged 21 and 23) died by suicide, followed by two 19-year-old women a month later; four other young people had attempted suicide. A youth worker in the community said that suicide

attempts increase during the winter months, as drugs, alcohol, and solvents are brought in via the ice roads. Crisis intervention counsellors had arrived in the community. Ten counsellors from AWASIS (a First Nation child caring agency) and the Keewatin Tribal Council attended the school and held workshops in the evening for community members. Health Canada was involved in providing the supports and said they had invested \$1.3 million in Shamattawa that year alone for support care and mental health.<sup>51</sup>

In January 2016, ten members of the community tried to take their lives.<sup>52</sup> MKO Grand Chief Sheila North Wilson noted, “A lot of it has to do with despair and poverty and lack of opportunities that we see in our north. Now it’s showing up in the lives of our young people.” She added that mental health services were not the only resources required. “We need to provide opportunities and give them the same fighting chance to succeed in life as we do in urban areas for our youth there.”<sup>53</sup>

The First Nation declared another state of emergency in October 2016 after the band office and the only store were burned down. The community’s 911 service and radio station were also affected by the blaze. Families were left to live off of emergency food and supplies flown in by the Red Cross and the Northern Store. “The post office is gone along with the only bank machine. Bills are piling up and stress is mounting as no one can cash cheques.”<sup>54</sup> Indigenous Services Canada had funded a new fire truck for Shamattawa in 2015, but it was not able to respond to the blaze. The truck needed extensive repairs and had to be transported to Winnipeg to be fixed, which meant waiting for the winter road to be constructed.<sup>55</sup>

Shamattawa First Nation is not alone in experiencing inadequate fire protection. A 2011 federal government report indicated that almost half (44 percent) of First Nations in Canada have “little to no fire protection”; the remainder have more adequate protection because they are able to depend on a neighbouring municipality. The report also noted that fire incidence rates for First Nations are 2.4 times higher than the rest of Canada, and First Nations residents are 10 times more likely to die in a house fire.<sup>56</sup> MKO Grand Chief Sheila North Wilson noted, “First Nations have very little discretionary spending and fire protection has to go up against housing, education, water and sewer systems.” She added, “Deliberately under-funding basic priorities like fire protection is racist.”<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, determining where to target funds for firefighting and prevention in First Nations became more difficult after 2010, when the federal government stopped keeping track of how many fires occur on First Nation reserves.<sup>58</sup>

Six children were involved in the January 2016 fire. A 12-year-old boy was arrested for the arson; the others were too young. However, AMC Grand Chief Derek Nepinak told a news conference that criminalizing youth was not the answer. Instead, other “confounding factors” should be the focus, including “a lack of infrastructure for youth, a lack of opportunity, a lack of alternatives to make sure that our young people can flourish.”<sup>59</sup> Lawrence Einarsson, the school principal, agreed that charging youth and sending them to the youth detention centre in Winnipeg is a “Band-Aid solution. They’ll come back. They’ll reoffend again.” While the children required mental health supports, the community has a psychologist that “comes once or twice a year and they’re gone ... we don’t have the resources here.”<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Shamattawa Chief Jeff Napaokesik said that in addition to needing a new grocery store, band office, and more housing, his top concern was a lack of place for youth to gather. “I see nothing for them. You know, if we don’t have anything in there, they’ll just go into mischief, vandalism.”<sup>61</sup>

Several other fires occurred in the community, which were seen as adding tension for residents in dealing with a long-standing housing shortage. Band councilor Liberty Redhead noted that there were only 161 housing units for the 1,425 members of the First Nation, which contributes to “crisis after crisis.”<sup>62</sup> Meanwhile, more security and community safety officers were working with the RCMP to patrol the streets.<sup>63</sup>

In May 2021, Shamattawa Chief Eric Redhead called a state of emergency, saying the community was facing a suicide crisis. There had been a number of suicide attempts in early 2021, but two recent incidents — the suicide death of a mother of four and a serious attempt by a seven-year-old child — prompted the call. Chief Redhead was concerned about the potential for more suicides, citing the “copycat or domino effect,” and was requesting additional supports because the local health team was “fatigued.”<sup>64</sup> “We’ve had multiple natural deaths in the community that affected the health staff, and really the entire community. That overlapping grief for our service providers at the local level is overwhelming.”<sup>65</sup>

MKO and the Keewatin Tribal Council sent crisis response teams. While mental wellness supports were needed in the short term, Chief Redhead also said, “I think in the long term what we need is more resources from the feds, a more robust mental health program. I feel as though the programs that are in place right now have been in place for a very, very long time and obviously they’re not working.”<sup>66</sup> He maintained, “If we really want to get a grip on these things we need to get control.”<sup>67</sup>



MKO Grand Chief Garrison Settee believed the COVID-19 pandemic had exposed gaps in supports to First Nations, saying “Mental and emotional health is an area that we really need to address because the youths in our communities are suffering. And they have no one to reach out to.”<sup>68</sup> Indigenous Services Minister Marc Miller noted, “the relationship between the federal government and First Nations needs to be strengthened and gaps in housing, substance abuse, education and health care that have left Shamattawa vulnerable need to be addressed.” He added, “I’m not going to sit here today and tell you I have the answers to it, because I really don’t think we’re doing enough.”<sup>69</sup>

In March 2023, another state of emergency was declared in Shamattawa after an electrical fire in an Elders’ complex destroyed the nine-unit building. The community’s only fire truck was in Winnipeg for repairs at the time. According to Chief Jordan Hill, “We don’t have a firehall. We don’t have fire equipment for a fire truck (or) safety gear. Oxygen tanks need to be flown out to be filled. It’s costing us. These services are things that other communities are provided with and we seem to have to fight for them.”<sup>70</sup> Chief Hill was asking the provincial and federal governments to adequately fund fire prevention measures, long-term mental health resources, and emergency housing for those displaced.<sup>71</sup>

At the same time, the community was dealing with a mental health crisis after a young girl died by suicide the previous month, after which her mother also died by suicide. The mother had called Chief Hill asking for help for her daughter, but there is little in the way of supports in the community. MKO sent the Mobile Crisis Response Unit to provide short-term help. However, Chief Hill said there needs to be more recreational opportunities for young people, who make up 70 percent of the community’s population.<sup>72</sup> MKO Grand Chief Garrison Settee called on governments to respond immediately, saying, “If it’s not suicide after suicide, it’s the burning of buildings without adequate resources to fight these fires, also overcrowded housing that is causing all kinds of mental and emotional issues.”<sup>73</sup>

Indigenous Services Canada said they were in the process of identifying needed supports, such as housing and other buildings. The spokesperson noted that the department provides mental health therapy services on-site seven days a week in the community and also supports five treatment centres in Manitoba, and that additional mental health therapist services have been offered. Indigenous Services Canada was also supplying \$150,000 for the purchase of a new fire truck and provides \$70,000 annually to support the operation and maintenance of their fire assets.<sup>74</sup>

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## Red Sucker Lake First Nation

Red Sucker Lake First Nation is a remote fly-in community located 709 kilometres northeast of Winnipeg with a registered population of 1,170 and an on-reserve population of 1,009 residents in 2023.<sup>75</sup> It is part of Island Lake Anishininew Okimawin (along with Garden Hill, St. Theresa Point, and Wasagamak First Nations).

In October 2022, the First Nation declared a state of emergency after a 16-year-old boy died by suicide on the school playground. A man in his early thirties had died by suicide a month earlier, and at least 17 other people had attempted to take their lives. Chief Samuel Knott was petitioning for a crisis team and mental health counsellors to be immediately deployed, and also noted that there are few resources for youth in the community (such as sports or education training). The First Nation has an arena available only in winter. As well, there's alcohol and drug abuse in the community, "but the only resources available to help manage that are through a community safety officer program that includes one full-time and one half-time officer for the community of more than 1,000 people," according to the chief.<sup>76</sup>

In a news release in support of the First Nation, AMC Deputy Grand Chief Cornell McLean stated, "Our people have lost so much cultural and community connection for generations, and we still see that disconnect today. Our youth are crying for help, and there are ways the government can step up and help them." The deputy grand chief was calling on provincial and federal governments to not only fund mental health supports but also community initiatives that would enable youth to "develop a sense of pride, and individuality, and discover their talents." He also cautioned, "It should not take these tragic and irreversible measures to get support. We must stop these reactionary band-aid solutions and commit to preventative measures so that our relatives do not seek drastic solutions to feeling unseen."<sup>77</sup>

MP Niki Ashton also spoke to the need for resources at Red Sucker Lake during Question Period in the House of Commons: "It is time to fix their half-finished arena, deliver the new school they have been promised, build the recreational treatment centre they need, and ensure people in poverty can afford basic necessities in the face of sky-high prices. It's time to end the third-world living conditions."<sup>78</sup>

As well, leaders from Island Lake Anishininew Okimawin, AMC, and AFN held a news conference urging the provincial and federal governments to do more to ensure equal access to healthcare and social services to deal with the rising mental health and addictions issues. They called for more

crisis and long-term care options, including a hospital and an addictions treatment centre to serve the 18,000 people in the four communities.<sup>79</sup> Island Lake Anishininew Okimawin Grand Chief Scott Harper told the gathering: “An urgent strategy is needed to address colonization’s intergenerational traumatic effects, combined with decades of insufficient resources and funding, which has created a pandemic of suffering.” Chief Knott added: “Most people don’t even have clean, potable water and sewage disposal in their homes.” As a result, “Chaos, mental health problems, food [in]security, inadequate housing have families in our First Nation in Third World conditions and do not make the word ‘hope’ something Red Sucker Lake First Nation would even say.”<sup>80</sup>

In terms of government response, then Manitoba Mental Health Minister Sara Guillemard said the province was sending an outreach team from the Manitoba Adolescent Treatment Centre. Indigenous Services Canada planned to increase its counselling services in the community by sending a therapist for 10 days (as opposed to eight days) a month.<sup>81</sup> Chief Knott said that consistent funding for land-based programs to improve wellness and harm reduction would go a long way. As it stands, youth who want treatment have to wait, “sometimes for months” and are usually flown south to Winnipeg.<sup>82</sup>

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## Sayisi Dene First Nation

Sayisi Dene First Nation, with registered population of 904 and an on-reserve population of 313 residents, is located near Tadoule Lake,<sup>83</sup> about 985 kilometres north of Winnipeg and accessible only by air and winter road travel.

Colonial government practices have had a disastrous impact on what was once a thriving community that relied on a hunting and trapping economy. In 1956, the federal government made the decision to forcibly relocate the Sayisi Dene from their traditional caribou hunting grounds near Little Duck Lake. This decision was based on the false assumption that “there was a caribou shortage and the Sayisi Dene were to blame.”<sup>84</sup> Approximately 250 members were flown to Churchill, Manitoba, “but the essentials to the livelihood of a trapper — boats, traps, sleds and dogs — were left behind.”<sup>85</sup>

First Nation members were first housed in tents and shacks, and later moved to government-built houses in an area called “Camp 10” located on a barren tundra adjacent to a cemetery (which was contrary to Sayisi cultural beliefs). But the houses were poorly constructed, providing little protection against the cold weather, and the tundra offered little in the way of susten-



ance. In 1966, the government announced another move to a housing project called “Dene Village” located six kilometres south of the Churchill townsite. The situation there was no better, as residents encountered “violence, discrimination, poverty, and despair,” which the government of Canada admitted in a 2016 apology.<sup>86</sup> In the early 1970s, several First Nation members returned to their traditional land, eventually settling at Tadoule Lake, about 250 kilometres west of Churchill. Of the more than 250 members who were originally moved, 117 had died.<sup>87</sup> In her book, *Night Spirits: The Story of the Relocation of the Sayisi Dene*, Ila Bussidor maintains, “for my people, the impact of the relocation had the same effect as genocide.”<sup>88</sup>

In 2010, the provincial government issued a formal apology for its role in the original relocation.<sup>89</sup> In 2016, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Minister Carolyn Bennett offered a statement of apology, saying that the federal government’s decision to relocate the First Nation was “catastrophic” and stemmed from “the pervasive legacy of colonialism — a legacy of disrespect, lack of understanding and unwillingness to listen.” She also acknowledged the “racism and disrespect” that First Nation members endured during those years and the collective trauma they suffered. The band was to receive more than \$33 million in compensation, most of which was to be put in trust for community development. Roughly \$5 million was designated for individual survivors.<sup>90</sup> In 2017, the provincial government entered into a bilateral Relocation Claim Lands Agreement to provide over 13,000 acres of Crown land in traditional Sayisi territory to compensate for the effects of relocation.<sup>91</sup> Despite these efforts at reconciliation, the Sayisi Dene First Nation continues to grapple with the trauma of the relocation.

In January 2022, Chief Evan Yassie put out a call for mental health resources after the death of a 21-year-old man. The man was accused of assaulting multiple people. When the police attempted to arrest him, he turned a gun on himself. The chief believed that drugs were involved in the circumstances surrounding the man’s death, which were entering the community through the mail. According to Chief Yassie, “Our community is impacted by intergenerational trauma that contributes to young people having challenges with addictions and mental wellness. Due to the forced relocation of our citizens in 1956, community members are sadly disconnected from cultural teachings and traditions. These are land-based practices that kept our community members healthy from time immemorial.”<sup>92</sup>

Chief Yassie asked for assistance from provincial and federal governments “to address the need for more resources, address the addictions, and to put supports in place for the benefit of our youth.”<sup>93</sup> He also noted that the

remoteness of the First Nation makes it difficult for people to communicate with each other because of the poor internet connectivity and cell service, and that more could be done to ensure that illegal drugs could not get into the community.<sup>94</sup> While a mental health therapist had been in the community, they only visit once every two weeks to provide services. Keewatinok Inniniw Minoayawin (KIM - the northern First Nations health organization) and MKO had sent crisis response teams and Elders to the community. Two months later, eight modular trailers were delivered to the First Nation by winter road to house the crisis response teams.<sup>95</sup>

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## Health Services State of Emergency

In May 2022, the Keewatinohk Inniniw Okimowin Council, which represents 23 northern First Nations, declared a state of emergency on health services, citing critical nursing shortages that were impacting Manitoba's 21 federal nursing stations and placing First Nations peoples in danger because of increasingly longer wait times and minimum standards of care.<sup>96</sup> The federal government had put in place an "open to emergencies only" policy on May 16, 2022 because the number of nurses able to support a community was so low that nursing stations could only support emergencies.

Dr. Barry Lavallee, CEO of KIM, supported the declaration, saying: "Nursing shortages and shortages in physician-led care, limited access to diagnostic care, lack of appropriate health infrastructure in communities, and the lack of a coordinated systems-based response for urgent and emergent issues like the nursing shortage — all of this is racism, full stop, and has been worsening instead of improving over time."<sup>97</sup> The state of emergency was intended to signal to provincial and federal governments that northern First Nations would be seeking more control over the health systems meant to serve them.<sup>98</sup>

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## O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation

O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation is located at South Indian Lake, 130 kilometres northwest of Thompson. It has a registered population of 1,773 and 1,085 on-reserve residents.<sup>99</sup>

In March 2023, the First Nation declared a state of emergency after three deaths occurred in the community in the previous two weeks, one of which was the homicide of a 47-year-old woman.<sup>100</sup> Chief Shirley Ducharme at-

tributed a rise in violence in the community to “centuries of colonial impacts resulting in addictions, reactions to trauma and mental health issues.”<sup>101</sup> According to the chief, the First Nation lacks the resources to deal with these issues. There is no treatment or wellness centre and residents have to wait six months to a year before they can access outside resources. “When they return to the community they fall back into the cycle again as there is nothing here for them as supports to continue with the ongoing healing that they need,” said the chief.<sup>102</sup>

As part of the emergency announcement, Chief Ducharme was calling on the provincial and federal governments to address the issue in the form of crisis supports for people dealing with trauma, addiction, and mental health issues.<sup>103</sup> MKO offered to send in its Mobile Crisis Response Team.<sup>104</sup> The Chief had also reached out to AMC for assistance in designing, developing, and implementing a community action plan to address the immediate and long-term needs of the First Nation, including the need for a wellness centre and adequate housing.

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## York Factory First Nation

Located 850 kilometres north of Winnipeg and 116 kilometres from Thompson, York Factory First Nation had a registered population of 1,571 and an on-reserve population of 371 residents in 2023.<sup>105</sup>

In 1957, after the Hudson Bay Company made the decision to close its trading post at York Factory, the federal government relocated the First Nation inland from their traditional territory on the Hudson Bay lowlands to the southeast corner of Split Lake, which became the community of York Landing. The First Nation members “found themselves in a new environment with different plants and wildlife, limited access to resources, hydro-electric development projects, and increased pressure to send their children to residential schools.” The move separated the First Nation “from the land that held our history, homes, relations, and even the graves of our loved ones.” The collective trauma generated by the forced relocation “was amplified by the effects of residential schools and the loss of available harvesting and trapping areas.” Despite those challenges, York Factory First Nation has been working to rebuild their community through economic development, self-governance, and the strengthening of language, culture, and connection to their ancestral lands along the Hudson Bay coast.<sup>106</sup>

However, in May 2023 York Factory First Nation Chief Darryl Wastesicoot raised an alarm about the effects the community's isolation and lack of infrastructure and resources were having on the mental health of residents, saying "Our youth are very much in trouble right now."<sup>107</sup> According to the chief, substance abuse issues had led to a series of other problems, including suicides. Five teenage girls were receiving counselling outside the community following suicide attempts. Two 14-year-old girls had died by suicide a few months earlier. "There's nowhere that they can go [for help], so some of them just decide that they wanna leave this world," said the chief.<sup>108</sup> In the previous two years, York Factory had declared states of emergency over these same concerns. MKO, the Keewatin Tribal Council, and the Canadian Red Cross were providing crisis support to the community.<sup>109</sup>

The isolated First Nation is accessible only by aircraft or ferry after the winter ice roads are closed. But flights are too infrequent with limited seats to meet the demand for medical travel and access to crisis support workers. Climate change has reduced winter road travel from five months to three months and a ferry that is supposed to run from June to October needed replacing. As a result, residents are isolated. They are also living in overcrowded housing with poor plumbing and sewage.<sup>110</sup>

Previous attempts to ask for help from provincial and federal governments had gone unanswered. Chief Wastesicoot wanted to see a permanent 26-kilometre road built to connect York Factory to the railway line. "We'd like Canada, the province of Manitoba, and Manitoba Hydro to come to our aid to get these issues addressed."<sup>111</sup>

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## Keewatin Tribal Council

In March 2023, the Keewatin Tribal Council, which represents the band governments of 11 northern First Nations, including Tataskweyak Cree Nation, Shamattawa First Nation, God's Lake First Nation, Sayisi Dene First Nation, and York Factory First Nation, declared a regional state of emergency to draw attention to what Keewatin Tribal Council Grand Chief Walter Wastesicoot called "dire" situations in the northern Manitoba communities.<sup>112</sup>

While several of the First Nations had already declared states of emergency in the previous six months due to suicides, drug misuse/poisonings, and/or violence, a regional state of emergency was prompted by system-wide deficiencies involving "housing, cost of living and employment, as well as a lack of year-round roads and air service that affects access to health care and

justice.”<sup>113</sup> A letter sent to Prime Minister Trudeau, Manitoba Premier Heather Stefanson, and other government officials said the Keewatin Tribal Council needed the governments to step in and offer immediate assistance to deal with the wide-scale suffering. “Our communities are remote northern communities in crisis, plagued by an opioid epidemic, chronic under-funding of health care services, and inadequate infrastructure,” said the grand chief.<sup>114</sup> Previous calls for assistance have been met with a slow response by governments.

Grand Chief Wastesicoot said that he used the term “state of emergency” intentionally to underscore how serious the problem is. “This is a term that we are using to draw attention to the systemic racism that we face every day.”<sup>115</sup> Nevertheless, four months later, in August 2023, the grand chief indicated that the \$300,000 in additional funding provided by Indigenous Services Canada to support “short, medium, and long-term strategies” to address the crises in the communities amounted to “very little” help.<sup>116</sup>

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## Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation

Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation (NCN), formerly Nelson House First Nation, has a registered population of 5,566 and an on-reserve population of 2,833 members.<sup>117</sup> The main community is located on the north shore of Footprint Lake, where the Burntwood, Footprint, and Rat Rivers converge, roughly 800 kilometres north of Winnipeg and 80 kilometres west of Thompson. The community is accessible by year-round road.

In March 2023, the First Nation implemented a two-week ban on all alcohol and drugs in response to concerns about bootleggers bringing alcohol into the community as well as substance misuse. RCMP data indicated that compared to two weeks prior to the ban, calls for service had dropped by about 23 percent and calls involving “violent persons” dropped by 45 percent. However, the ban had also created negative impacts, as people were turning to dangerous substances (hand sanitizer and Lysol) or making risky snowmobile trips in an effort to bring alcohol and drugs into the community. NCN therefore ended the prohibition, reverting back to its previous policy of allowing a 26-ounce bottle of alcohol, a case of beer, or a box of wine upon entry to the community. NCN Chief Angela Levasseur asked that the provincial and federal governments provide more financial support for culturally-relevant substance misuse and addictions services.<sup>118</sup>

However, bootlegging, illegal drug activity, and alcohol and drug misuse were continuing to pose problems for the community, especially in relation



to an increase in violent incidents. In response, NCN declared a state of emergency in July 2023.<sup>119</sup> Rather than turning to the provincial and federal governments for support, NCN took a different approach. The NCN chief and council passed an Order in Council intended to minimize the risk of violence, health, and safety of community members, which included:

- Anyone who is bootlegging, transporting or selling illegal drugs will be evicted or banished from NCN lands;
- Anyone who tried to bring in alcohol or cannabis over the amounts outlined in the Community Protection Law regulations will be fined and all the drugs will be seized;
- Bear mace, machetes, knives, or guns cannot be brought into NCN unless approved by chief and council or their authorized designate;
- Anyone who tries to hurt someone using bear mace, machetes, knives, guns or other weapons may be evicted or banished from NCN lands;
- Children under the age of 18 must follow a curfew from 10:00 pm to 7:00 am and parents or guardians whose children are in breach of the curfew will lose eligibility for social assistance benefits and CFS will be notified;
- All access roads, trails, rivers, and waterways that lead to NCN lands will be patrolled and vehicles and other personal property will be searched;
- Anyone released from jail will require a special pass to be allowed entry onto NCN lands;
- Anyone who violates the Order in Council will be offered the opportunity to enter into an agreement to achieve *Mithopenatisiwin* (a good life). If they refuse they will be evicted or banished from the community;
- Failure to comply with the Order in Council will result in fines or other penalties as well as disciplinary action for employees.<sup>120</sup>

The bulletin outlining these measures noted that further steps would be taken by the band council if the violence in the community persisted. It also noted that all NCN residents and visitors need to work together to stop the violence, including the lateral violence that occurs on social media. “We all have a collective responsibility to make our community a safe place to live, work and raise our children.”<sup>121</sup>

# States of Emergency and the Harms of Colonialism

SUICIDES, DRUG MISUSE/POISONINGS, interpersonal violence, community fires, and inadequate healthcare services have prompted declarations of states of emergency in several northern Manitoba First Nations. In calling attention to these social problems, First Nations leadership has been clear in highlighting the lack of resources (mental wellness supports, drug rehabilitation services, recreational activities for youth) to respond to these emergencies. They have also been clear in naming the socio-economic factors and conditions that underly those emergencies, including poverty, food insecurity, unemployment, overcrowded housing, lack of potable water and sewage disposal services, and lack of year-round access to roads and air service.

Government of Canada data confirm the disparities in socio-economic factors and conditions that exist in these First Nations compared to the province as a whole. These are communities characterized by below-average household incomes, low levels of labour-force participation and high unemployment, and low levels of educational attainment. They are also communities that are far more likely to experience inadequate housing. While nine percent of dwellings in Manitoba are categorized as in need of major repairs, *over half* (52 percent to 68 percent) of the dwellings in the nine First Nations that have declared social emergencies fall into that category (see *Table 1*).

**TABLE 1** Socio-economic Factors and Conditions in Selected Northern First Nations (2016 Census)

First Nation	Labour-Force Participation	Unemployment	Average Total Income	Median Household Income	Pop. over 15 Years without a Degree, Certificate, or Diploma	Dwellings in Need of Major Repair
Pimicikamak	45%	33%	\$20,556	\$45,952.	57% (1605/2810)	60% (505/845)
God's Lake	43%	26%	\$16,928	\$29,760	69% (455/660)	54% (135/250)
Tataskweyak	50%	41%	\$22,065	\$61,600	64% (775/1220)	68% (210/360)
Shamattawa	43%	29%	\$18,749	\$47,936	84% (505/600)	61% (110/180)
Red Sucker Lake	46%	23%	\$15,268	\$35,968	75% (325/435)	57% (80/140)
Sayisi Dene	54%	24%	\$17,110	\$26,464	48% (110/230)	57% (65/115)
O-Pipon-Na-Piwin	48%	25%	\$20,793	\$51,712	66% (420/640)	63% (125/200)
York Factory	70%	15%	\$24,483	\$41,216	47% (135/285)	48% (55/115)
Nisichawayasihk	45%	27%	\$20,975	\$52,160	62% (1025/1660)	52% (255/490)
<b>Manitoba</b>	<b>66%</b>	<b>6.7%</b>	<b>\$43,767</b>	<b>\$68,070</b>	<b>22%</b> <b>(220,390/ 1,001,315)</b>	<b>9%</b> <b>(44,060/489,050)</b>

Source: Government of Canada, *First Nation Profiles*, <https://fnppn.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/fnp/Main/Index.aspx?lang=eng>.

Significantly, First Nations leadership has also been clear in locating these socio-economic factors and conditions in the context of colonialism, citing the impacts of forced relocations and hydro-electric development, residual trauma among residential school survivors, and disconnection from traditional culture as important contributing factors to the problems that prompt a state of emergency. In this context, these emergencies are not “unforeseen,” but rooted in the colonial conditions that generate them.

From an Indigenous perspective, colonialism “is the evolving process where we, as peoples of this land, face imposition — from genocide, to assimilation, to marginalization — of views, ideas, beliefs, values, practices, lands and/or resources. It is when we as peoples of this land are stopped, hindered, cajoled, and/or manipulated from making and enacting decisions about our lives, as individuals and as a group, because of being a person of the peoples of this land.”<sup>122</sup> As Michael Hart and Barry Lavallee note, colonialism “affects all aspects of Indigenous peoples’ lives, including the economic, social, cultural, and political aspects of the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized, as well as our spiritual practices, emotional wellbeing, knowledges and health.”<sup>123</sup> Social emergencies — and the social problems that prompt them — are a manifestation of these colonial harms.

Indeed, First Nations in northern Manitoba are not alone in declaring social emergencies. States of emergency have been declared in First Nations across Canada, including:

- In April 2013, Neskantaga First Nation in northern Ontario declared a state of emergency after two suicides occurred in less than a week. The community of 400 had also experienced five other deaths due to suicide and 20 suicide attempts in the past year.<sup>124</sup>
- In April 2016, Attawapiskat First Nation in Ontario declared a state of emergency in response to escalating suicide attempts. In total, 101 people in the community of 2,000 residents had attempted suicide in the previous seven months.<sup>125</sup>
- In June 2017, Wapekeka First Nation in Ontario declared a state of emergency after the suicide death of a 12-year-old girl. This was the third suicide of a child in the community that year. Forty other youth were considered to be at risk of suicide.<sup>126</sup>
- In 2019, Makwa Sahgaiehcan First Nation in Saskatchewan declared a state of emergency after three people, a 10-year-old, a 14-year-old, and a father, died by suicide in one month.<sup>127</sup>
- In February 2023, the chief and council of Ehattesaht First Nation on Vancouver Island declared a state of emergency due to the “unrelenting impact” of drugs and alcohol on their people, especially youth. Six young people had died due to drug poisonings in the previous few months.<sup>128</sup>
- In August 2023, Sitansisk (St. Mary’s First Nation) in New Brunswick declared a state of emergency over concerns about illicit drugs being brought into the community.<sup>129</sup>
- In September 2023, the Athabaska Tribal Council in Alberta declared a regional state of emergency after 30 members across the five First Nations it represents died due to drug poisoning, suicide, or the results of self-harm. Each of the five First Nations had also called independent states of emergency.<sup>130</sup>
- In October 2023, Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation in Northeast Saskatchewan declared a state of emergency after a teenaged boy had been killed, saying the boy’s death “underscores an escalating cycle of violence” in its communities. This was the second time in 10 months

that a state of emergency had been called. The first one occurred after the death of a 34-year-old man in the Pelican Narrows community.<sup>131</sup>

Many of these social emergencies have been prompted by a suicide crisis. A Statistics Canada study examining suicide data from 2011 to 2016 found the suicide rate among First Nations people to be *three times* higher than the rate among non-Indigenous people (24.3 deaths per 100,000 person-years at risk versus 8.0 deaths per 100,000 person-years at risk, a ratio of 3:1).<sup>132</sup> The rate ratios were notably higher in the Prairie provinces: 4.6 in Manitoba, 4.5 in Saskatchewan, and 3.5 in Alberta. In other provinces, the rate ratio ranged from 1.9 to 2.6.<sup>133</sup>

The suicide rate among First Nations peoples living on-reserve was nearly twice as high as that among those living off-reserve (34.1 versus 19.5, respectively).<sup>134</sup> Youth living on-reserve were especially at risk, with males aged 15 to 24 having a suicide rate of 78.8 (compared to 11.9 for non-Indigenous males aged 15 to 24 in Canada) and females aged 15 to 24 having a suicide rate of 52.9 (compared to 3.3 for non-Indigenous females aged 15 to 24 in Canada).<sup>135</sup>

Importantly, the Statistics Canada study found that suicide rates varied among First Nations: over 60 percent of First Nations experienced *no* suicides between 2011 and 2016; 78 percent of First Nations in BC had a zero suicide rate.<sup>136</sup> Socio-economic factors — household income, labour-force status, level of education, marital status, and geographic location (on- or off-reserve) — accounted for 78 percent of the disparity in risk of death by suicide among First Nations peoples.<sup>137</sup> The researchers noted that other factors, such as “historical and intergenerational trauma, community distress, cultural continuity, family strength and mental wellness” have also been found to account for differences in suicide rates among First Nations.<sup>138</sup>

The findings of the Statistics Canada study mirror what Michael Chandler and Christopher Lalonde found in their landmark study of suicide rates in First Nations in BC over a 14-year period (1987 to 2000).<sup>139</sup> More than half of the province’s bands experienced no suicides and others experienced suicide rates equal to or lower than those found in the general population. While suicide rates were largely unrelated to measures of poverty and geographical location (urban, rural, or remote), they were strongly related to measures of what Chandler and Lalonde called “cultural continuity,” that is, the degree to which Indigenous communities “find themselves bereft of meaningful connections to their traditional past, and otherwise cut off from local control of their own future prospects.”<sup>140</sup> In other words, Chandler and



Lalonde pointed to measures of cultural resurgence and self-determination to account for differences in suicide rates between First Nations.

Charlotte Lappie and Fred Wien explain cultural resurgence as the “reclamation and regeneration of Indigenous languages, traditions, and relationships with ancestral lands and waters.” It is “part of a larger movement to reclaim Indigenous knowledge systems, laws, and identities, as well as to develop decolonized infrastructures, communications, and technologies, which are powerful tools of self-government.”<sup>141</sup> In addition to establishing facilities to preserve and promote traditional cultural practices, Chandler and Lalonde note that self-determination is reflected in efforts by First Nations to regain legal title to traditional lands, to re-establish forms of self-government (particularly the involvement of women), and to reassert some degree of control over educational services, police and fire services, health-delivery services, and the provision of child and family services.<sup>142</sup> Chandler and Lalonde therefore conclude: “First Nations communities that succeed in taking steps to preserve their heritage culture and work to control their own destinies are dramatically more successful in insulating their youth against the risks of suicide.”<sup>143</sup>

# Building Social, Economic, and Political Power

THERE ARE CLEAR signs that First Nations in northern Manitoba have been taking steps to enable cultural continuity, in other words, to assert their rights and build the social, economic, and political power to foster collective healing and wellbeing in their communities. Those steps involve attending to the more immediate need to respond when social emergencies occur, as well as addressing longer-term goals involving decolonization and reclaiming control over their own destinies.

One sign is the establishment of Indigenous-led mobile crisis response and mental wellness teams. In June 2016, the federal government announced new funding to support crisis response and mental wellness in First Nations. Northern Manitoba, identified as an area of greatest need, was provided with \$10 million over a three-year period (2016 to 2019) for one crisis response team and three wellness teams.<sup>144</sup> Subsequently, engagement sessions were held with frontline workers and with leadership and youth representatives in Thompson and Winnipeg in 2017 to fashion a co-ordinated, Indigenous-led response to crises as well as mental health and wellness supports to northern First Nations. A continuum-of-care framework was adopted to guide the work of the crisis response and wellness teams. The framework involves:

- committing to community-based decision making and an engagement process that builds on levels of community capacity and competency;
- delivering culturally-relevant programs and services that are founded in the language, spirituality, and customs of each First Nation community;
- strengthening and building service networks;
- providing training opportunities for local service providers as ways to develop and implement community-based response plans; and
- harmonizing services and advocacy work to address legislative, policy, and fiscal challenges, and limitations to ensure the co-ordination of responsibility and actions at all levels.<sup>145</sup>

MKO's Mobile Crisis Response Team has responded to social emergency declarations in northern First Nations, sending an Indigenous team of frontline helpers to assist in stabilizing the crisis situation and ensuring appropriate referrals are made and aftercare is in place.<sup>146</sup> In addition, the mental wellness teams provide ongoing healing supports and care once the crisis is stabilized. In 2022, for instance, the Keewatin Tribal Council Mental Wellness Team provided trauma-informed care, land-based healing, counselling, early intervention, and aftercare to eight northern First Nations, serving an on-reserve population of 6,585.<sup>147</sup>

In line with enabling cultural continuity, a key component of this strategy is community capacity building. Both the MKO Crisis Response Team and the mental wellness teams engage in local, community-based training initiatives that are inclusive and culturally relevant with the aim of strengthening a community's capacity to respond when social emergencies occur.<sup>148</sup> In the process, practicing ceremonies and reconnecting with the land, components of cultural resurgence, are emphasized as integral supports for self-care, aftercare, and prevention.<sup>149</sup>

As well, MKO has been taking steps to form an Indigenous-led Emergency Management Response System (EMRS) that would co-ordinate and oversee responses to states of emergency adversely affecting northern First Nations. In addition to building resiliency through disaster preparedness in response to emergencies prompted by flooding, forest fires, and in-community fires, the EMRS will address social emergencies such as the "crises of addictions" and ensure that "all levels of government respect and reflect First Nation authorities in policies, standards, regulations, and legislation."<sup>150</sup>

Another sign of enabling cultural continuity, specifically with regard to self-determination, is the moves being made by Indigenous organizations to take greater control over the provision and delivery of health services in northern Manitoba. Recall that the Keewatinohk Inniniw Okimowin Council had declared a health services state of emergency in May 2022 as a way to signal to provincial and federal governments that northern First Nations were seeking more control over the health systems meant to serve them. In November 2022, the Minister of Indigenous Services, MKO Grand Chief Garrison Settee, and KIM CEO Dr. Barry Lavallee announced federal funding to support First Nations health and community safety initiatives in northern Manitoba, including \$23 million over two years for MKO and KIM to support progress toward transforming the design and delivery of health services.<sup>151</sup>

First Nations are also taking control over their economic destinies. Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation (NCN), for example, has “embarked on a comprehensive program of economic development that addresses employment, training, healing from trauma, infrastructure development, and energy-self-reliance.” A key focus of their initiative is “nurturing young people.”<sup>152</sup> Taking a convergence or self-reliance approach to community economic development, NCN has undertaken an ambitious infrastructure project through its Atowkiwin Training and Employment Center (ATEC). Their training program targets young, unemployed people, offering not only employment skills but social supports to ensure their success. As researcher Lawrence Deane explains, ATEC started up in 2012 after the Wuskwatim generating station began operation, leaving a 27,000-square-foot training facility empty but with no resources to run a program. Initially focused on providing high school completion programs, ATEC shifted its focus in 2017 to offering a Construction Trades Apprenticeship Program. In the first year of the program, apprentices developed a bid for the construction of two houses on the reserve. On winning the contract, they built the houses, completing the two units in just 84 working days. As Deane notes, the economic effects of the contract completion were significant. “The trainee’s incomes rose from \$311 per month in social assistance payments they were receiving as students, to \$3,338 per month (\$19.26 per hour) as first-year apprentices” — earnings that were spent in the community.<sup>153</sup>

Subsequently, a for-profit construction company, Pewapun (New Day) Construction Ltd, was formed that could hire ATEC apprentices and bid on construction opportunities. “By 2018, Pewapun had logged 67,200-person hours of employment for 35 NCN citizens,” which amounted to \$1.29 million in earnings that were retained and recirculated in the community. Pewapun

went on to other building projects, including: a four-plex facility to house NCN seniors; an extension to the ATEC training centre; and an energy-efficient eight-apartment complex for staff of the community's Medicine Lodge treatment centre. By 2019, the company had 55 apprentices in its workforce.<sup>154</sup> The ATEC facility was also expanded to accommodate the manufacture of structural insulated panels and ready-to-move housing. And Pewapun began focusing on converting community buildings to solar power, which will produce energy savings for the First Nation.

As Deane notes, although the ATEC/Pewapun initiative is in its early stages, “the impact in the community and on the lives of young people is observable. Inspired young people now want to contribute to community improvement. Resources flowing into the community are being retained and circulating for the benefit of community members. Local residents are finding skills and employment. The community is becoming self-reliant in energy.”<sup>155</sup>

Signs of enabling cultural continuity are evident in other realms. In particular, the passage of federal legislation, *An Act Respecting First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Children, Youth, and Families*, in 2019 marks an important development in the area of child welfare. The Act affirms Indigenous peoples' jurisdiction over child and family services, opening the way for First Nations in northern Manitoba to advance their efforts to keep Indigenous children connected to their families, communities, and cultures.<sup>156</sup>

The damage inflicted by the colonial state onto Indigenous children has a long lineage, dating back to the residential school era, the Sixties Scoop, and more recently to apprehensions of Indigenous children by the child welfare system. Manitoba has the highest percentage of children taken into care in Canada (2 percent, which is four times the national average). Manitoba also has the highest proportion of Indigenous children in child-care custody of all the provinces. In 2022, of the 9,166 children in the custody of the child welfare system in Manitoba, 91 percent were Indigenous.<sup>157</sup> This dramatic over-representation of Indigenous children in the child welfare system was acknowledged in 2017 by Minister for Indigenous Services Canada Jane Philpott to be a “humanitarian crisis.”<sup>158</sup>

Indigenous organizations have been working for decades to reclaim control over processes that would ensure and safeguard the welfare of Indigenous children. In 2000, MKO established a Child Welfare Office (now the Family First Nation Secretariat) and undertook to develop *Minisiwin Winiswaywin*, a legislative framework created to promote family unity and wellness and to serve as a basis for MKO First Nations to develop their own laws for child welfare.<sup>159</sup> In 2024, the Supreme Court of Canada affirmed the constitutional-



ity of the federal law respecting Indigenous child and family services and deemed Indigenous laws to be paramount to those of provincial and territorial governments. As MKO Grand Chief Garrison Settee commented, “The Court’s decision reaffirms the inherent right of First Nations to self-determination and to exercise jurisdiction over child welfare.”<sup>160</sup>

Such initiatives can go a long way toward building the social, economic, and political power in northern First Nations, enabling them to control their own destinies.

# “All Settlers Have a Constant Part to Play”

DECLARATIONS OF A state of emergency are one strategy that First Nations leadership has adopted to assert their rights, calling attention to the ongoing impacts of colonialism on their communities and the need for both immediate and long-term solutions. As Keewatin Tribal Council Grand Chief Wastesicoot noted in declaring a regional state of emergency: “This is a term that we are using to draw attention to the systemic racism that we face every day.”<sup>161</sup> In these terms, social emergencies are a signal that the structurally rooted harms of colonialism have reached a breaking point.

The *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* affirms that in addition to the inherent rights of Indigenous peoples, including the right to self-determination (article 3), states are obligated, in consultation and co-operation with Indigenous peoples, to take appropriate measures, including legislative measures, to ensure those rights are upheld (article 38) and to provide access to financial and technical assistance for the enjoyment of those rights (article 39).<sup>162</sup> In that regard, provincial and federal governments have an obligation to not only cede control and authority over the lives of Indigenous peoples, but to provide the financial resources necessary to accommodate their right to self-determination and governance of their own affairs.

Moreover, not just governments but all settlers have a role to play in supporting the moves by First Nations to repair the harms that colonial-

ism generates in their communities and build a more secure future. As an editorial in *The McGill Daily* noted in relation to a suicide crisis in Cross Lake First Nation:

The government has a responsibility to address these structural causes. Instead of only reacting and apologizing when things reach a point of crisis, the government needs to provide substantive resources to fulfill Indigenous communities' expressed needs, such as economic security, sustainable mental health facilities, and employment programs. As well, all settlers have a constant part to play in pushing the government to act—it should not take a state of emergency to get Canada to notice.<sup>163</sup>

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