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## The true tragedy of Attawapiskat

Award-winning author Joseph Boyden reflects on his love for places like Attawapiskat, and the desperate need for investment and education  
by Joseph Boyden Apr 13, 2016



A man walks down the street in Attawapiskat, Ont., Tuesday November 29, 2011. (Adrian Wylid/CP)

Attawapiskat is a microcosm of intergenerational trauma.

If you don't know what Attawapiskat is or if you're not quite sure what intergenerational trauma means—or how they are married to please allow me to explain.

Attawapiskat is an isolated northern Ontario Cree reserve on the west coast of James Bay. According to the last census taken in 2011, t population is just over 1,500 souls. According to that census, more than a third of those souls are under age 19, and three-quarters are 35. That's a very young population. It's representative of a national trend: Canada's fastest-growing population by far is its First Nation

Attawapiskat has made a disproportionate amount of national news in the last decade, most often because of the deplorable living co as the suicide epidemics that sweep through and devastate the community. Perhaps Attawapiskat's most famous daughter is Shannen youth from the community turned national activist for Indigenous children's rights to education in her fight to have an elementary sc her reserve. Shannen tragically died in a car accident in 2010 while forced to attend high school off-reserve because hers doesn't have well-known daughter of Attawapiskat is former Chief Theresa Spence, who helped propel the Idle No More movement when she emb hunger strike to bring attention to First Nations' grievances, and especially to deplorable living conditions in her community.

This week, Attawapiskat is back in the news after its chief and council were forced to declare a state of emergency. Eleven people in th reportedly attempted suicide in a single night; 28 are reported to have tried in the month of March, and 100 attempts have been made seven months.

I first flew into Attawapiskat 21 years ago, in the winter of 1995, as a professor of Aboriginal programmes with Northern College. I still vividly an older woman named Agnes who served as an officer in the tiny airport sheepishly rummaging through my luggage to make smuggling any alcohol into the community. It's a dry reserve, where alcohol is banned. I'll be honest: I'd considered sneaking a bottle keep me warm at night during my first week-long stint there. But I was glad I hadn't tried, as there's no doubt this woman would have

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Since that first visit, I've returned both professionally and personally many times. I love the people of Attawapiskat and the relatively isolated reserves of Fort Albany and Kashechewan, and the less isolated Moose Factory. I don't use that word lightly. I love them enough that a number of years ago I begged my dear friends in the Tragically Hip to play a free concert in Fort Albany in support of the Cree of James Bay during another crisis in Attawapiskat. I've helped build a camp, with the Cree couple William and Pamela Tozer, called Onakawana; it gets James Bay people back on the land in order to connect them with their birthright. I financially support the camp, as well as a number of young people from various communities when they need help.

*From the archives: Read Boyden's chronicle of that Tragically Hip show*

I don't do any of this because I am a saint. I do this because the Cree people of the west coast of James Bay, including the community of Kashechewan, have served as my muses for most of my writing life and are the ones most responsible for giving me my career. Now some of the people who once respected me are in crisis again.



Author Joseph Boyden is shown in a handout photo. (THE CANADIAN PRESS/HO-Penguin Canada)

I first tried to take my own life on my 16th birthday. It was a serious attempt. I lay down in front of a car speeding toward me. I believe what it is like for an Indigenous youth, albeit a mixed-blood one in an urban setting, to feel despair so crushing you don't want to live. The difference is, I was immediately swarmed with the best medical attention. When I was able to walk again, I was made to see a psychiatrist for a number of years. I was given medications and all form of support and counselling and help. Why are the people I love up north not getting help in times of deep crisis?

Yes, these are rural places and the costs of physical and mental health care rise in these areas. But remote areas like the Cree homeland of Mushkegowuk lie atop some of the richest diamond and chromite deposits in the world, and companies like diamond giant DeBeers have extraction operations like Victor Mine, not far from Attawapiskat. I have no doubt that the Victor Mine site has top-notch physical and mental health care facilities. The mine couldn't operate without them. DeBeers has the obligation to keep its employees, who toil 90 km from Attawapiskat, in good physical and mental health. They would be shut down if they didn't. DeBeers certainly wouldn't let that happen. Yet the people who have the right to profit from what is being taken out of their homeland live in Third World conditions amidst another wave of attempted suicides. I've seen accredited mental health workers living in the community. This past Monday, after the state of emergency was declared, 13 youth were taken to hospital who'd made a pact to kill themselves. Something is deeply broken, not only in the community, but in how we allow business to operate.

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It's certainly not so simple as to suggest we relocate our northern populations to the south. First off, the vast majority don't want that consider the idea a nightmare. Think of Tina Fontaine. Tina was the 15-year-old Cree girl found murdered and wrapped in plastic at the Red River, and whose death forced the issue of our MMIW into the national headlines. Just ask her family if they thought her relocation to the city of Winnipeg down south was the proper solution. Just as important, you don't sever a people with thousands of years of connection to their land from that very land. In another article I wrote for this magazine a number of years ago called "The hurting," during a visit to James Bay, I argued that not only is suicide the direct fallout of the devastatingly destructive residential school system but that it is connecting with it that offers some of the most potent medicine to combat these recurring crises.

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There is no single solution for what has become one of the most pressing tragedies this nation of Canada faces. Attawapiskat is not alone suffering. Last month, the people of Pimicikamac (Cross Lake) also had to declare a state of emergency with their own string of suicides.

So why the insanely high suicide rates among our Indigenous youth, especially in northern communities? Why are our Indigenous women more likely than any other female population in this country to be murdered? Why such high addiction and physical and mental health issues in many of our communities? Is it because our Indigenous peoples are somehow lesser? Somehow not well enough equipped for contemporary life? Do we really need to move some of our Indigenous people somehow less smart, less motivated, less well-equipped genetically or socially? Do we really need to move some of our remote communities? Of course not.

Intergenerational trauma is real and alive in communities deeply affected by residential schools. You can't attempt cultural genocide for seven generations—the last of these schools closing their doors in 1996—and not expect some very real fallout from that. Attawapiskat is a prime example.



Stella Wheesk and her husband Harold Wesley hold one month old Rain Wesley in their one room home in a dorm styled temporary housing trailer in Attawapiskat, Ont., Tuesday November 29, 2017. (The Canadian Press/Adrian Wyld)

For 140 years in this country, residential schools operated with the intention of "getting rid of the Indian problem," a phrase uttered by Duncan Campbell Scott, one of residential schools' central architects. Over 150,000 children were forcefully removed from their parents, many from Attawapiskat who were shipped down to St. Anne's in Fort Albany, one of the country's most infamous institutions and the site of horrific abuse, as outlined in Ed Metatawabin's brilliant memoir, *Up Ghost River*. These residential schools were the only schools in Canada that literally have cemeteries built beside them. Officials understood that the death rates for Native children due to rampant spread of disease and other factors, including death from abuse in its many forms—were many times higher than for any other children in the nation. Thousands of children died while attending these institutions and many hundreds if not more remain buried in unmarked graves.

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At the beginning of the 20th century, a committee from South Africa visited Canada to study our reserve and residential school system returned home to create apartheid. The phrase, the final solution, was proudly and publicly uttered by Duncan Campbell Scott decades when Scott referred to these schools. One of the worst memories that my dear friend Patrick, who attended Saint Anne's, still can't forget of the teacher's footsteps in the middle of the night approaching Patrick's bed in order to drag him to the teacher's room where Patrick repeatedly raped. When I asked another dear friend who attended residential school what was most tough about it, she thought about it and then replied, "I grew up never being given proper physical contact, never getting to be kissed goodnight by my parents. I grew up not getting a hug." These are just a couple of stories.

There has never been a level playing field for our First Nations, Inuit and Metis peoples. For years, the brilliant Cindy Blackstock argued that schools on reserve in this country are severely underfunded compared to the rest of the country. This past January, in a groundbreaking decision, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal unequivocally agreed. As well, schools on reserves are grotesquely underfunded compared to their counterparts. But the answers to the continuing tragedies in communities like Attawapiskat lie in exactly these two things: our children's education.

What will allow places like Attawapiskat to get better? The equal ability to receive a proper education in your own community in all its languages. Curricula that teach children about their culture and their language and their land. When children learn the importance of where they are and who they are, and that others in the world care for them, they begin to internalize that vital ingredient of self-esteem: a sense of belonging in community.



The remains of a Canadian flag can be seen flying over a building in Attawapiskat, Ont. on November 29, 2011. (Adrian Wylde/CP)

Education outside the classroom is just as important. That camp I helped build, Onakawana, teaches young Cree of Mushkegowuk to connect with the land again, whether that is how to build a fire or a winter shelter, how to make a hand drum and sing a song in your own language or fish and paddle a canoe or sew moccasins or simply play volleyball together and laugh with one another. William and Pamela Tozer, who run the camp, see the difference the camp can and does make. I do, too. We see how youth come hesitantly but almost always can't wait to return home to their communities with a growing awareness of who they are and where they come from. William and Pamela run the camp with children with a deep knowledge of their land, and their children are all such solid and grounded people, from the oldest, an OPP officer from his home community of Moosonee, to the middle boys who have their own outfitting companies, to the youngest, happy and excited high school senior who was just gifted her first powwow regalia.

Of course education costs money. It is also the greatest single investment we can make in this country, especially in regard to our fast-growing population. Let's first agree to begin with actually investing just as much in our First Nations, Inuit and Metis youth as we do in every other youth across this country. It is simple logic. If there's one thing I know as deeply in me as I know anything, I too would have been one of the suicide statistics we hear about far too often, if it hadn't been for the resources available to me to continue my own education in its

This is a right for all youth in our country, not just those who happen to live in more urban places.

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Attawapiskat is a lightning rod for the debate in regard to the plight of Canada and its original peoples. Attawapiskat is a microcosm of intergenerational trauma. And Attawapiskat, the home of those people I love, is the spear's tip in the battle over how we will move forward for our nation.

As my dear friend Gord Downie said when he and the rest of the Tragically Hip came to James Bay to perform their first high school gig years ago, our nation is only as good as how we treat our most vulnerable, as how we respond to those most in pain.



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