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# Residential school survivors, descendants, show poorer health outcomes: survey

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By Mia Rabson

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OTTAWA- The impacts of residential schools on the health and well-being of First Nations people are similar, whether they attended the schools themselves or are descended from someone who did, a new survey suggests.

The finding comes from the third regional health survey by the First Nations Information Governance Centre, a non-profit organization with a mandate from the Assembly of First Nations. The centre has conducted the only comprehensive survey done in Canada of the health and socio-economic conditions on reserves.

The first volume being made public today looks at physical and mental health, employment and income, housing and residential school experiences.

On the latter it found the number of former residential school students still living is dwindling, but the impacts of the schools continue for the students' children and grandchildren.

Jonathan Dewar, executive director of the centre that produced the survey, said this is in keeping with similar research over the last 15 years.

"Our studies indicate the impact of intergenerational survivors of residential schools were similar, sometimes identical to residential school survivors," he said.

About 15 per cent of adults who live on a reserve in Canada said they had attended a residential school. That number was 20 per cent in the first two surveys released in 2003 and 2010. Nearly two in three of those who attended said the schools had negatively impacted their health and well being.

More than four in 10 adults who attended a residential school say they were sexually abused and seven in 10 say they were physically and verbally abused.

About one-tenth reported the schools had a positive impact while about one-quarter said it had no impact, good or bad.

The survey found former students or children of former students were less likely to say they were in good or excellent health compared with those who were not touched by the schools.

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Residential school survivors and those whose parents or grandparents attended were more likely to have considered suicide at some time in their life and had higher rates of binge drinking and drug use, including marijuana and opioids. For example, one in four teenagers on reserve who had a parent who attended a residential school had considered suicide, compared with one in 10 teenagers who didn't have a parent or grandparent attend.

Dewar says the survey does show some bright spots of improvement for the health and social well-being of people living on reserves though he cautions there needs to be more research done to explain why that may be.

"It's definitely showing signs of progress," he said. "It still says there is more work that needs to be done. We need to dig deeper to know what interventions have worked."

In many cases where indicators have improved, First Nations still show significant differences from the general population in areas such as income and education, he noted.

The number of adults who haven't finished high school fell to 35 per cent from 40 per cent between 2010 and 2017. Youth smoking rates were cut in half, with one in 10 teenagers smoking regularly in the most recent survey compared to one in five seven years earlier. The prevalence of fetal alcohol syndrome was reduced among children living on reserves and the number of mothers who reported smoking during pregnancy fell to about one-third from nearly half.

Almost 75 per cent of youth said they abstained from alcohol, up from 61 per cent seven years ago.

On the flip side, some indicators got worse, particularly overcrowded housing. About 24 per cent of adults were living in a house considered to be overcrowded, up from 17 per cent in 2002. A house is deemed overcrowded if there is more than one person per room in the home.

More than two-thirds of First Nations people living on reserve are in the labour force, either working or looking for work, which is slightly higher than the Canadian population as a whole. However almost one-third of First Nations adults on reserve are unemployed, compared with less than one-tenth of the general population.

Fifteen per cent of the people who are not participating in the labour force said there was simply no work to be found in their community or that they had given up looking. Another 18 per cent said they could not work because of a health issue or disability.

The survey is based on responses from more than 24,000 people living on reserve in 253 First Nations across Canada and was conducted between 2015 and 2017. The next volume of the report will focus on language and culture and will be released in July.

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