

research snapshot

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Colonialism Continues to Impact the Health and Diet of Native Peoples

What is this research about?

For Native peoples, food carries with it an important meaning. It is connected to one's community, history, and traditional knowledge. Storytelling is one way these histories and knowledge are shared and taught. Colonialism has threatened the survival of traditional knowledge through policies of assimilation, land displacement, and Western education for Native peoples. In Canada, this has affected their access to resources, space and traditional knowledge and many continue to feel these consequences on their health and diet. Native peoples seek traditional knowledge to support and heal these existing traumas.

What did the researcher do?

The researchers looked at key experiences of Native peoples with colonialism in Canada (both past and ongoing). They connected health and dietary concerns today with:

1. Legal treaties and reserves that separated Native peoples from their ancestral hunting and fishing grounds.
2. Ongoing resource extraction and industrial development on and around the reserves.
3. The history of the Indian Act's and making ceremonial life a criminal offense. This included the practice of food sharing in communities.

What you need to know:

The impact of colonialism on First Nations is rarely looked at through the result of food abuse and health. Institutions like residential schools attempted to disrupt the relationship between Native peoples with food. Food is a central area for community and spiritual life. However, traditional knowledge continues to thrive in new forms of media, including Indigenous food ways and ceremony.

4. In particular, the history of residential schools and Native peoples.

After looking in depth at residential schools, the researchers looked at ways Native peoples attempt to heal and revive Indigenous food ways. This included the use of cookbooks and programs for the community. One example came from the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto. The "Keep the Campfires burning" program allowed residential school survivors to reflect on their experiences.

What did the researcher find?

For Native peoples, colonialism has been a major influence for having: diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity and stress. Residential schools added to the unhealthy attitudes towards food that developed. Survivors there experienced multiple abuses and

racism. This included changing diet and lifestyle patterns because of poor food, or dealing with hunger. Programs like “Keep the Campfires burning” allowed participants to talk about the connection between these experiences and their current eating patterns, physical activity, and health status. Many found that drawing on traditional knowledge offered healing opportunities. This included activities like hunting, fishing, gathering and ceremonial practice. It also helped many to cope with the abuse they experienced. They learned to transform their memories from those of trauma and suffering to survival and strength.

Finally, newer forms of popular media are being used to revive Indigenous foodways, including the use of cookbooks. The researchers found that cookbooks allowed the tradition of storytelling to continue through the recording and sharing of food knowledge.

How can you use this research?

This research offers insight on the importance of food, not only to physical health, but also to spiritual, emotional and mental wellbeing. The research also shares how important food is for community building. Finally, it may be used to review the consequences of colonialism on people’s lives. It may inform public policy on community programs and development by First Nations in Canada.

About the Researchers

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