

Measuring Indigenous Well-Being: What is Indigenous Services Missing

By Ethan Guthro

THE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX (HDI) was introduced by the United Nations Development Program in 1990 “as a measure of achievement in the basic dimensions of human development across countries.”¹ This index has been touted as a potential solution to issues existing in current Canada-wide data collection methodologies. For example, common indices like the Gross National Product (GNP) and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) fail to account for non-financial aspects of development.²

The HDI system itself is not without fault, though. Critics of the system assert that it lacks the capacity and nuance to account for other, non-financial factors like social programs and environmental conditions.³ To account for these discrepancies, some analysts suggest that changes be made to scores related to well-being that go beyond financial considerations.⁴ While HDI scores can provide a snapshot in time of the country as a whole, some critics assert that they fail to adequately illustrate disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

To address such issues, the Registered Indian Human Development Index (RI-HDI) was introduced by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) in 1996. The RI-HDI measures HDI scores — both on and off-reserve — of individuals possessing Indian Status and effectively created two categories of Canadians: registered Indians and everyone else.⁵ Applied to data sourced from the 2016 census, the RI-HDI would have ranked the Registered Indian population 52nd globally, whereas the entirety of Canada was ranked 12th.⁶

Despite this telling number, the flaws of the HDI system are even more apparent in the context of three other factors: cross-cultural understandings of well-being, significant variance in the socio-economic status of First Nations and Inuit individuals and communities, and the notion of Indigeneity extending beyond the statutory bounds of Indian Status.

This brief will examine existing problems with the Community Well-Being (CWB) index categories and census divisions and the resulting need for reform of these systems. It will then shine a spotlight on a new set of social well-being indicators and methodologies that could better guide policy and assessments of life for Indigenous peoples in Canada. Finally, it will put forward proposals for a holistic approach to the measurement of Indigenous well-being.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE COMMUNITY WELL-BEING INDEX?

So, there are still major gaps in the data.

Today, maintenance of the CWB index falls within the purview of both Crown-Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (CIRNAC) and Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) and is used primarily as a tool in community-level data collection and academic research.⁷

Data underlying the CWB index is sourced from and organized around the Census of Canada's Census Subdivision (CSD) geographic unit. CSDs vary in size, though generally correspond to municipal borders, and consist of four distinct indicators of well-being: education, labour force activity, housing, and income.⁸

WELL-BEING INDICATOR	MEASUREMENT
Education	→ comparing the proportion of the community's population who have completed high school and the proportion who have obtained a university degree
Labour Force Activity	→ comparing the proportion of labour force participation and the employed proportion of the total labour force
Housing	→ comparing the proportion of the population living in dwellings with no more than one person per room and the proportion of the population reporting that their dwellings did not need major repairs
Income	→ per capita ⁹

Each indicator of well-being is assigned a numeric value between 0-100, then weighted equally against the other indicators.¹⁰ ISC reports that between 1981 and 2016, the CWB scores of First Nations communities averaged increases of 13.4 points, whereas non-Indigenous communities averaged increases of 13 points. Though such increases may not seem substantial, First Nations communities still averaged a significant deficit when compared to non-Indigenous communities. And this is exactly what this data allows us to do: it enables us to compare deficits. Indigenous communities are receiving well-being scores equivalent to those that non-Indigenous communities received in 1981.¹¹ For example, in 1981, First Nations communities had an average CWB score of 45 points out of the possible 100, while non-Indigenous communities had an average of 64.5 points. In 2016, First Nations communities scored approximately 19.1 points lower than non-Indigenous communities.

In other words, the deficits are getting worse despite government promises to improve First Nations well being.

NEED FOR REFORM

The CWB index was introduced to report more fully the idea of well-being in Indigenous communities. However, issues with the comparability of census data have resulted in new problems. For example, because provincial governments can alter the boundaries of a CSD, an Indigenous community may fall within a CSD one year and a different CSD the next.¹² If something like this happens, academics, statisticians, and governmental funding agencies will be unable to compare changes to the CWB accurately.

To further complicate things, data inconsistencies can result in the inability to correctly account for many Inuit and Métis communities. Métis-designated settlement areas in

Canada (eight, all located in Alberta) do not receive a CWB score because the area of a CSD is larger than that of any Métis settlement.¹³ Therefore, the entirety of these settlement areas are instead included within the CWB scores of nearby communities. Similarly, Inuit communities' relatively low population — Inuit only made up approximately 5 percent of all Indigenous people in Canada in the 2001 census — and their higher frequency of remoteness from major metropolitan centres also pose similar challenges to the longitudinal comparison of data, as many diverse communities may be included within the same CSD.¹⁴

Certain geographical areas are also at a disadvantage when attempting to collect comparable data. For example, Nunavut, the largest provincial or territorial body in Canada, has 31 CSDs, whereas Prince Edward Island, the smallest provincial or territorial body in Canada, has 113. Due to the methodology of CSD determination, CWB scores may also include non-Indigenous residents of a CSD, which can potentially further skew the data.

Additionally, ISC has recognized that “[t]he components included in the CWB index are not intended to represent a complete list of dimensions of well-being.”¹⁵ As such, and combined with the distinct lack of available data for certain communities, it is clear that the existing systems of well-being determination are in need of reform.

In attempting to measure the well-being of Indigenous communities by imposing Eurocentric, settler colonialist measurement standards, this index disregards the potential for vast differences in social norms and values between each community and the rest of Canada. The collection of census data is premised upon the notion of the nuclear family, or a “census family,” defined as either a couple, married or common-law, living with at least one child or a single parent living with at least one child.¹⁶ What the definition of a census family does not account for are individuals living in “vertically or laterally extended families” — a phenomenon more commonly found in Indigenous residences.¹⁷ Further, some individuals living on-reserve may place greater value on acquiring traditional knowledge than institutional education, yet the CWB only places value in standardized systems of education.

How can the CWB index purport to measure a community's well-being while imposing a one-size-fits-all conceptualization of what well-being is?

PROPOSALS FOR HOLISTIC RESEARCH

Instead of simply categorizing communities for improved comparability, current CWB indicators could be revised to reflect the demographic differences unique to Indigenous communities. As one of the four current CWB indicators is the average income of employed individuals aged 20 or older, the lower average age of Indigenous communities results in a greater number of individuals excluded from the calculation, and in turn, an overestimation of the average income. As such, the CWB could be adjusted to reflect the average income of the entire population, not just those currently employed and/or over the age of 15, thus providing a more accurate depiction of average income in the community. By making this change, thus accounting for the notion that the less money one makes, the more valuable it is to them, a well-being indicator could more accurately show the true value of income statistics in Indigenous communities.

By applying these proposed changes to existing data, it is possible to see that INAC's claims are wholly untrue. The disparities between Registered Indians and Canadians have not decreased.

While the well-being of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals has improved over the past 20 years, the gap between the two has grown larger; the overall well-being of Indigenous communities has increased, yet relative well-being has worsened. These disparities highlight the need to reform how Indigenous well-being is calculated, reported, and potentially incorporated into future funding decisions.

CONCLUSION

Indigenous communities in Canada have faced, and continue to face, significant socioeconomic barriers stemming from centuries of colonialism and systemic underfunding. Though the Community Well-Being index was introduced to allow for a more comprehensive measurement of community well-being, it faces the same challenges that similar indexes have encountered in the past. By adjusting the indicators used to calculate well-being scores and incorporating Indigenous notions of well-being, the CWB could better depict Indigenous well-being across Canada. Similarly, reassessing the way in which communities are defined can attain greater levels of precision. One great place to start is to read the [BC Assembly of First Nations](#)'s report on the well-being index that provides critical ways forward for revaluing what we measure. If the CWB is to succeed in providing accurate reflections of current policy impacts, more work must be done to ensure that the data utilized is both accurate and meaningful.

CITATION

Guthro, Ethan “Measuring Indigenous Well-Being: What is Indigenous Services Missing?” *Yellowhead Institute*. 29 June 2021. <https://yellowheadinstitute.org/2021/06/29/measuring-indige...services-missing/>

ENDNOTES

¹“About Human Development,” *United Nations Development Program*, online: hdr.undp.org/en/humandev/.

²Martin Cooke, Daniel Beavon & Mindy McHardy, “Measuring the Well-Being of Aboriginal People: An Application of the United Nations Human Development Index to Registered Indians in Canada, 1998-2001” (2004) *Aboriginal Policy Research Consortium International (APRCi)* 158. (ir.lib.uwo.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1286&context=aprci)

³*Ibid.*

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵Marin Cooke, “The Registered Indian Human Development Indices: Conceptual and Methodological Indices” (2008) *Aboriginal Policy Research Consortium International (APRCi)* 8. (<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/61687878.pdf>)

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷Indigenous Services Canada, *National Overview of the Community Well-Being Index, 1981-2016*, online (pdf): www.sac-isc.gc.ca/DAM/DAM-ISC-SAC/DAM-STSCRD/STAGING/texte-text/nat-overview-community-well-being-index-1981-2016_1578933849349_eng.pdf [Indigenous Services Canada 1]; Nicholas Spence et al, “The COVID-19 Pandemic: Informing Policy Decision-Making for a Vulnerable Population” 2020 *Int'l Indigenous Pol'y J* 11:3 1. (www.erudit.org/en/journals/iipj/1900-v1-n1-iipj05493/1072617ar.pdf).

⁸Indigenous Services Canada 1, *supra* note 7.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Indigenous Services Canada, *Report on trends in First Nations communities, 1981 to 2016*, online (pdf): www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1345816651029/1557323327644 [Indigenous Services Canada 2].

¹³Indigenous Services Canada 1, *supra* note 7.

¹⁴Senecal et al., “Applying the Community Well-being Index and the Human Development Index to Inuit in Canada” (2008) *Aboriginal Policy Research Consortium International (APRCi)* 4. (ir.lib.uwo.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1440&context=aprci)

¹⁵Indigenous Services Canada 2, *supra* note 12.

¹⁶Simona Bignami-Van Assche and Charles-Olivier Simard, “Indigenous Families and Households in Canada: A Tale of Statistical Disadvantage” (2020) *Canadian Studies in Population* 47:1-2 119 at 124. (link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s42650-020-00028-6.pdf)

¹⁷*Ibid.*