

## THE IMPORTANCE OF DISAGGREGATED DATA

The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (2003) has repeatedly called for the collection of disaggregated data that describes the distinct experiences of Indigenous peoples. The United Nations International Children's Fund (2003) has affirmed the need for disaggregated data respecting Indigenous children and young people. As Rae and the Sub Group on Indigenous Children and Youth (2006) found that the number of countries collecting disaggregated data on Indigenous children continues to be nominal even amongst the wealthiest nations of the world.

The importance of collecting disaggregated data on the distinct experiences of First Nations, Métis and Inuit children is underscored by the findings of two important studies – the Canadian

Incidence Study on Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS) (Trocme, Knoke, Shangreux, Fallon & MacLaurin 2005) and the study on youth suicide in First Nations communities by Chandler and Lalonde (1998.)

As the CIS collected data by cultural group, the study was able to identify very important differences both between Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> and non-Aboriginal children coming to the attention of child welfare and between cultural groups of Aboriginal children as well. For example, Aboriginal children are more likely to be reported to child welfare authorities for neglect, fueled by poverty, poor housing and substance misuse, than non-Aboriginal children. First Nations children are over represented amongst Aboriginal children reported to child welfare authorities. These differences

have been critical in shaping child welfare policy respecting these distinct cultural groups.

The importance of disaggregated data collection within the major cultural groups is underscored by Chandler and Lalonde (1998). These researchers were interested in understanding the factors contributing to high youth suicide rates amongst the First Nations in British Columbia. Amongst the 197 First Nations in British Columbia, Chandler and Lalonde (1998)

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<sup>1</sup> 'Aboriginal' in this fact sheet refers to First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples. First Nations will sometimes be subdivided by Indian Act status (status/non-status) or by residence on/off reserve. Comparisons in this information sheet are usually between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, but some are between First Nations and non-Aboriginals or among Aboriginal groups.



## What Is Aggregate and Disaggregated Data?

In order to understand the importance of disaggregate data, it is important to first understand exactly what is "aggregate data" versus "disaggregated data." There is no one definitive source that speaks to these distinctions, however, the following definitions, collected from a multitude of sources, provides a simplified overview of aggregate versus disaggregated data.

### Aggregate Data

Aggregate data is data that has been collected from two or more sources. To aggregate data means to gather separate sets of data and present it as a whole. Data aggregation is any process in which information is gathered and expressed in a collective or summary form, for purposes such as statistical analysis. In statistics, aggregate data describes data combined from several measurements. A common aggregation purpose is to get more information about particular groups based on specific variables such as age, profession, or income where the data is aggregated to preserve the confidentiality of individuals (examples of aggregated data collection systems include

the Canadian Census and the Canadian Incidence Study on Reported Child Abuse and Neglect).

### Disaggregated Data

Disaggregated data is data that has been extrapolated (taken) from aggregated data and divided and broken down into smaller information units. Disaggregating data is another critical step to gaining increased knowledge from collective or aggregated information. Disaggregating data involves delving more deeply into a set of results to highlight issues that pertain to individual subsets of results and/or outcomes of aggregated data. Collective or aggregate data can be broken down or disaggregated, for instance, by: gender, urban/ rural location, income, socio-cultural or ethnic background, language, geographical location, political/ administrative units, or age groups. Fully disaggregating data helps to expose hidden trends, it can enable the identification of vulnerable populations for instance, or it can help establish the scope of the problem and can make vulnerable groups more visible to policy makers.

found that the rates of youth suicide varied significantly between communities. In fact, a detailed analysis of the incidence of youth suicide in each community found that over 90% of the suicides were happening in 10% of the First Nations. In exploring what factors differentiated the suicide rates amongst First Nations, the researchers determined that the higher the degree of self determination, the lower the suicide rate.

Currently, there is no national child welfare data collection system in Canada. Data respecting Aboriginal children is only available through the provinces, which do not collect data according to a uniform process, making cross regional comparisons difficult. The types of data collected for the federal government (Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Development), for child and family purposes, include: (1) monthly financial reports (to request reimbursement for services provided), and; (2) non-financial reports (these include (a) monthly reports on information about children placed under protection in alternative care facilities; (b) monthly requests for special needs funding for children in care, and (c) reports on operational expenditures regarding the agency's prevention and protection services provided twice yearly) (Auditor General of Canada, 2002; Loo, 2005).

The data that First Nations Child and Family Services Agencies (FNCFSAs) are required to forward to the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Development as required by their respective funding agreements are collected without any analysis by the federal government as to what this data may reveal locally, regionally and/or nationally about current trends in First Nations child welfare.

In many cases, the data that is being collected is flawed or not being processed or analyzed in ways that can inform decision making (Bennett & Shangreux, 2005). What the collected data doesn't say





is how FNCFSAs differ from one another or about their specific achievements, challenges, needs and/or service trends. In other cases, the complete or the right data is simply not being collected (Loo, 2005).

Furthermore, the technological needs of FNCFSAs to collect, record and produce agency information reports for provincial, territorial and federal governments, particularly for remote and geographically disbursed agencies, is great as many FNCFSAs lack access to sophisticated computer equipment, updated software and hardware, and collaborative computerized database systems, including IT expertise and/or researchers and appropriate infrastructures, along with adequate funds to support updated computerized information systems (Bennett & Shangreux, 2005; Loo, 2005). Child Welfare administrators and researchers are increasingly recognizing the need and value of disaggregating data respecting Aboriginal children and youth. Disaggregating data is an important analytical process. Disaggregating data is about measuring unique bits of data separately from collective data.

Disaggregated data can play a critical role in helping FNCFSAs understand how effective they are in meeting the needs of the children, families and communities that received their services. Collecting more and richer information on the challenges as well as the achievements of FNCFSAs would help policy makers understand the scope of the response that is needed to create effective policies and programs from a culturally congruent point of view. When researchers analyze and disaggregate child welfare outcome data, for instance, they can pinpoint the effectiveness of services and modify services based on the trends reported from disaggregated data.

Disaggregating collective data on Aboriginal children is necessary so that it will be useful and illuminating, but



it must also be useful to those who are responsible for determining the role of the data, reporting of the results, as well as the interpretation and use of such information according to OCAP (Ownership, Control, Access and Production) principles over research by Aboriginal peoples (Schnarch, 2004).

Improving data collection and analysis benefits governments in many additional ways too. For example, with better information, governments can focus their response on the best way to fund and assist FNCFSAs and help reduce the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in the child welfare system. New policies or programs can be piloted; policy makers can build support and capacity in FNCFSAs. Governments can show bilateral and multilateral partners the issues that they are concerned about and ask for help based on better information. The act of improving data collection and analysis helps to fulfill the goals and targets that governments have agreed to, as well as enable governments to demonstrate they have met their obligations (ILO, 2004). Furthermore, disaggregated data is essential for responding to issues of transparency, accessibility, fairness and equity in the child welfare system, and

are particularly relevant for Aboriginal peoples given their high level of overrepresentation in the child welfare systems of Canada (Kong & Beattie, 2005).

The traditional approaches to studying FNCFSAs (and Aboriginal peoples generally) as a single entity tend to hide important intra- and -inter agency differences among FNCFSAs and Aboriginal populations across Canada. Aboriginal peoples and FNCFSAs as a whole are not all the same, and there is a need to look at the outcomes for the children and families serviced by these agencies separately as well as comparatively.

Until the federal, provincial/territorial governments and FNCFSAs are able to collaboratively collect, disaggregate and analyze the aggregated data that exists, child welfare reform initiatives by FNCFSAs, including non-Aboriginal agencies, will not be as effective as they can and should be. Aboriginal children in care, their families and communities will continue to suffer and grow apart from each other because of the lack of appropriate disaggregated data collection on the distinct experiences of First Nations, Métis and Inuit children with the child welfare systems in Canada.

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