



## Circles for Reconciliation Gathering Theme

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### Dispelling Misconceptions About Indigenous People (National Version)

What follows are 10 common misconceptions that simply are not true. These misconceptions which are based on stereotypes and lack of information are often at the root of the serious mistreatment Indigenous peoples continue to experience today.

(When presenting this theme at a circle, it is often effective to have participants read one of the misconceptions. Be sure participants feel free to pass and not read a misconception if they don't feel comfortable.)

**MISCONCEPTION #1: All Indigenous peoples are the same.**

***The Facts: The Indigenous population is very diverse.***

- Canada recognizes three groups of Indigenous Peoples: First Nations, Inuit and Métis. Each of these three groups has many diverse beliefs, languages and cultural practices.
- There are more than 50 First Nations languages and cultures divided into 634 communities living in Canada.
- Some Indigenous languages are as different as Spanish is from Japanese.
- In British Columbia alone, there are 34 distinct languages involving 61 dialects, representing 60% of the Indigenous languages in Canada (Murray, 2019).
- Most Inuit belong to one of four groups that live in 53 communities in the North on settled land claims that cover one third of Canada (The National Indigenous Economic Development Board, 2019, p. 10).
- The Métis are descended from both First Nation and European identity, have historically been and currently are members of a Métis community. They total about one third of all the Indigenous peoples in Canada (The National Indigenous Economic Development Board, 2019, p. 11). There are 8 Métis settlements, all in Alberta (The National Indigenous Economic Development Board, 2019, p. 80), so governance structures have had to evolve without a land base in other parts of Canada (The National Indigenous Economic Development Board, 2019, p. 69).

**MISCONCEPTION #2: Indigenous peoples have always had the same rights as other Canadians.**

***The Facts: Only recently have Indigenous peoples begun to obtain the same rights as other Canadians.***

- Registered First Nations peoples obtained the right to vote in 1960. Before this, although Indigenous peoples were not strictly denied the right to vote, the list of qualifications required, made it almost impossible for them to vote (Leslie, 2016).
- The Indian Act (which did not apply to Inuit or Métis people) was created in 1876 by the government of Canada to eliminate First Nations culture in an effort to westernize them. Residential schools were formed to take Indigenous children away from their homes and communities so they would eventually lose their traditional, social, spiritual, economic, and political powers.
- In 1884, the Indian Act introduced prison sentences for anyone participating in traditional Indigenous ceremonies such as potlatch, denying these peoples their religious rights.
- In 1927 it became illegal for First Nations communities to hire lawyers or make new land claims without the government's approval.
- It wasn't until 2008 that First Nations individuals could start making complaints about Indian Act related discrimination (Henderson, 2020).
- Today, entire generations have grown up without access to safe drinking water. The Neskantaga First Nation in Ontario has had a water advisory warning in effect since 1996. Currently, there are more than 100 water advisories in Indigenous communities at any point in time (The National Indigenous Economic Development Board, 2019, p. 86).

### **MISCONCEPTION #3: Indigenous peoples are responsible for their current situation.**

***The Facts: Many factors have contributed to the situation of Indigenous peoples in Canada***

- Prior to European contact, Indigenous communities were strong and self-sufficient. In addition to the Indian Act, the Pass system was introduced which has had a lasting impact to today:
- The Pass system, in effect for 60 years and not removed until 1941, required written permission from the Indian agent for a person to leave a reserve to fish, hunt, sell their crops, get married, etc. The pass indicated why they were allowed to be absent, for how long and whether or not they could carry a gun. This fostered mistrust toward the government and police and their non-Indigenous neighbours.
- The travel restrictions imposed by the Pass system damaged natural family and cultural connections as well (Nestor, 2018).

### **MISCONCEPTION #4: Indigenous peoples have a lot of money.**

***The Facts: Indigenous individuals have lower incomes than others in Canada.***

- In 2015, First Nations men living on reserve made about \$14,000 per year compared to \$41,000 for the non-Indigenous man. Inuit people averaged \$24,500

per year. The income gap between the Métis and non-Indigenous people has almost closed (The National Indigenous Economic Development Board, 2019, p. 23-24).

- The average income for all the Indigenous people combined was \$25,526 and for the non-Indigenous person it was \$34,604 in 2015 (The National Indigenous Economic Development Board, 2019, p. 33).
- A 2014 pay gap study in Canada, revealed that in private businesses, university educated Indigenous employees bring home 44% less than their non-Indigenous co-workers. In the public work force they may not earn more, but the gap between the two groups is much smaller at 14% (McInturff & Tulloch, 2014).

### **MISCONCEPTION #5: Indigenous peoples have everything paid for.**

***The Facts: Certain services are paid for, but what these are and who they are for is defined by laws or treaty agreements.***

- Registered First Nations peoples, who remain part of the community, have certain services paid for which are part of the federal government's responsibilities outlined in the Indian Act. Other than those services decided upon by the government, Indigenous peoples pay their own expenses.
- Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada provides certain services to the Inuit through its Indian and Inuit programs. Non-Indigenous Canadians also receive services from their provincial or municipal governments like education, social services, water, sewer and roads.
- On-reserve schools receive less tax money than schools for non-Indigenous children. In 2017, it was estimated the federal government would need to add \$654 million in funding per year to match on-reserve school funding to non-reserve school funding.

### **MISCONCEPTION #6: Indigenous peoples do not pay taxes.**

***The Facts: Personal tax exemption occurs only in a few types of cases. Indigenous peoples pay significant amounts of tax every year.***

- Registered First Nations peoples with status are sometimes exempt from paying personal taxes as part of the government's obligation outlined in the Indian Act.
- Registered First Nations peoples working off-reserve pay income tax, regardless if they live on or off reserve.
- Inuit and Métis people always pay taxes.
- There are many taxes beyond personal income taxes which are being paid by First Nations peoples.
- Most First Nations peoples choose to pay sales tax on purchases under \$500 because of the costs of making a claim.

**MISCONCEPTION #7: Indigenous peoples cannot adapt to life in the mainstream.**

***The Facts: Indigenous peoples have extensive and effective relationships with the rest of Canadian society.***

- Indigenous peoples attend and graduate from a wide range of colleges and universities. The University of Victoria offers the world's first Indigenous Law Program which is training a growing number of students in both Indigenous and mainstream law—making sure graduates can work easily across cultures.
- In 2017, there were nearly 17,000 businesses in First Nations communities and 2,000 in Inuit communities. Combined, these businesses made just over \$10 billion in total revenue and \$0.4 billion in profits.
- Of the \$32 billion Indigenous people contributed to Canada's economy in 2016, more than \$12 billion was from Indigenous businesses.

**MISCONCEPTION #8: Indigenous peoples do not have a good work ethic and are lazy.**

***The Facts: Indigenous peoples are skilled, productive and reliable employees who are valued by their employers.***

- Indigenous tourism alone employs more than 33,000 people and produces \$1.4 billion of goods produced and services provided in Canada. In British Columbia, the Toquaht First Nation is building a new marina with “plans to expand and share our beautiful country with recreational tourists” (Bailey, 2018).
- Manitobah Mukluks has facilities in Winnipeg, Vietnam, Edmonton and Ottawa. They have more than 300 employees (Merasty, 2018).
- In Quebec the three Mi'gmaq communities of Gaspésie joined together to build a wind park which is projected to make \$200 million over 20 years. The Mi'gmaq who will make most of the profits from the sale of this electricity are known to shop locally and are supportive of the communities around them (Listuguj Mi'gmaq Government, 2013).
- The Nunavik Inuit wrote, “our ways and the earth must be protected. As such we are prepared to share our knowledge even as we hold on to our values.” Their Avataq Cultural Institute created Northern Delights Herbal Teas which employs Inuit to harvest and make the teas which are sold in Europe and Canada (Northern Delights, n.d.).
- In Newfoundland and Labrador, Indigenous people are developing tourism that combines culture and outdoor adventure (Gaudi, 2018).
- In Nova Scotia, the Membertou Sports and Wellness Centre opened in 2016 providing the first facility of its kind in the area which serves the surrounding municipalities (The National Indigenous Economic Development Board, 2019, p. 14).

**MISCONCEPTION #9: There are no qualified Indigenous workers to hire.**

***The Facts: Indigenous peoples have the education, skills and expertise required for jobs in all economic sectors.***

- In 2016, the Indigenous population had a college/trades completion rate of 35.7% compared to non-Indigenous populations of 33.1% (The National Indigenous Economic Development Board, 2019, p.121).
- Indigenous young people (15-24 years) represent the fastest-growing source of new workers, entrepreneurs and professionals (The National Indigenous Economic Development Board, 2019, p.131).
- Many services are available to help employers find qualified Indigenous employees.

**MISCONCEPTION #10: Métis people have the same rights as First Nations people.**

***The Facts: This is not currently true.***

- Indigenous people with Registered Indian status have special rights attached to treaties. These rights are not available to non-status Indians or Métis people.
- In 2016, the Supreme Court declared that Métis and non-status Indians must be considered “Indians” in the Constitution and therefore fall under federal authority. However, there was no new money given.

**Note:** The majority of this document comes from a publication “Indigenous Workforce Participation Initiative” by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (1998) with updates from Statistics Canada, and from “Indigenous contributions to the Manitoba Economy” (2019) by Indigenous Strong, Manitoba Strong <https://indigenouststrong.ca>

This publication is very consistent with other similar documents, such as the 2012 publication by TD Bank called “Debunking Myths Surrounding Canada’s Aboriginal Population.” [https://www.td.com/document/PDF/economics/special/sg0612\\_aboriginal\\_myth.pdf](https://www.td.com/document/PDF/economics/special/sg0612_aboriginal_myth.pdf)

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