“Our people are feeling there’s no hope for the future”: Indigenous teenagers and youth culture as a coping strategy in the archive of the Sioux Lookout Zone Hospital, 1969-1996

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: To analyze the use of youth culture as a coping mechanism by youth in the Sioux Lookout Zone from 1969 to 1996.

Method: This project employs an archival research method to study the records of the Sioux Lookout Zone Hospital, located at the University of Toronto. The hospital was operated by the federal government for Status Indians. From 1969 to 1996, the hospital’s medical service was provided by the University of Toronto.

Discussion: The period of 1969 to 1996 was a challenging time for teenagers in the Sioux Lookout Zone. They had poor job prospects and often struggled with the loneliness of attending high school in southern communities. They turned to youth culture as a coping mechanism, sometimes in healthier ways such as rock music and fashion, but also in less healthy ways such as substance use and gang membership.

Conclusion: This project serves as a case study of the challenges that faced youth in the Sioux Lookout Zone in order to contribute to our understanding of the historical antecedents of the poor health outcomes of youth in the Sioux Lookout Zone.

INTRODUCTION

The period from 1969 to 1996 was a challenging time for the Indigenous youth of the Sioux Lookout Zone. They were marginalized due to poor job prospects and the lonely experience of attending high school in southern communities. Physicians and mental health workers wrote about the terrible social problems that affected teenagers in the records of the Sioux Lookout Zone Hospital. These social problems included substance use, unemployment, and lack of purpose.

The Sioux Lookout Zone Hospital was a federal Indian Hospital operated by the Canadian government for Status Indians in Northwestern Ontario from the 1960s until 1996. The hospital served a population of about 13,000 people, most of whom lived on reserves. Starting in 1969, the University of Toronto provided the medical services for the Zone Hospital, sending University of Toronto doctors in shifts throughout the year to staff the hospital. During these years, the struggle and hopelessness of Indigenous teenagers was captured in the records of the hospital, located at the University of Toronto Archives. Rates of teen suicide increased exponentially in the Sioux Lookout Zone during this time period. In these records, physicians and mental health workers also wrote of resilience on the part of youth, especially in the form of youth culture that built community for otherwise disenfranchised young people. This paper uses these primary sources from the University of Toronto archives to assess youth culture in the Sioux Lookout Zone during this period. It aims to show that youth culture took the form of rebellion against societal expectations and that this rebellion served as a method of coping with social problems.

METHOD

The University of Toronto Archives holds a collection of records from the Sioux Lookout Zone Hospital. These are records from 1969 to 1996 and chronicle diverse topics including research, meetings, and strategic planning from the period during which the University of Toronto coordinated the medical services at the hospital. The records contain rich primary sources including research reports, letters, meeting minutes, and newspaper clippings. This paper uses an archival research method to study teenagers and their uses of youth culture during the era that the University of Toronto partnered with the Zone Hospital.

The history of Indian Hospitals is only beginning to be studied by scholars. This paper will call upon Maureen Lux’s strong 2016 history of Indian Hospitals in Canada, Separate Beds, as important background in this project. Lux’s work describes in detail the ways that universities in Western Canada attempted to bring new health services to Indigenous communities. Lux mentions the Sioux Lookout Zone Hospital briefly, so this project serves as a more in-depth case study of the struggles of Indigenous youth in one region, focusing on the period 1969 to 1996.

DISCUSSION

The youth of the Sioux Lookout Zone had very limited future prospects from 1969-1996. There were very few jobs available in Indigenous communities and the main source of income in the Zone was welfare at this time. With very few possibilities for employment, teenagers lacked “a sense of direction” and experienced a “high level of apathy and boredom.” There were very few recreational activities available in these remote communities.

For high school, teenagers had to leave their communities and...
travel to residential high school programs in larger communities that were further south. Jeanette Callahan, a mental health worker, wrote in 1980 that this experience could be “frustrating and lonely” and that many students dropped out of high school in Grade 9 and 10 and returned home to their reserves. According to Sandy Lake Band Councillor Joe Meekis, those who returned home were often “unemployed and not involved in any meaningful activity.” These young people were vulnerable and sometimes started using drugs and alcohol.

Another challenge facing teenagers in the records of the Sioux Lookout Zone Hospital was a lack of understanding between adults and youth and a loss of the status and role of elders in youth’s lives. Callahan wrote that in the years leading up to 1980, “elders [had] slowly lost their status and respect” in the Sioux Lookout Zone. This would have been a huge change from previous generations, for whom the authority and guidance of elders were important in the lives of youth. She wrote that part of the generation gap was due to a difference “related to the child’s versus the parent’s expectations” where the parents expected the children to follow their wishes and the children expected to make their own decisions in matters such as choice of romantic partner. After returning from high school, students’ expectations differed from the older generation in practical matters as well. They expected facilities that they had seen at high school and wanted “to play hard ball (by their own rules), have tennis courts, a gymnasium, organize youth groups, and run dances.” This generation gap was exacerbated by students’ loss of their traditional language while in high school. Whether this was due to decreased use of their language or to shame instilled by their high schools, this language loss exacerbated the challenge of intergenerational communication. The disconnection between youth and older generations led to social isolation and marginalization of youth in their communities. The youth of the Sioux Lookout Zone used youth culture in order to cope with their disenfranchisement, both by adopting elements of the broader North American youth culture as well as by creating their own. Visitors to Sandy Lake in 1969 describe youth wearing “hippy type dress. Walking about you can hear rock music either being played by one of the five rock bands in the community hall or from battery operated record players in houses or tents. You will see long hair styles, bell bottom pants, coloured shirts and jackets decorated with the occasional peace sign, flowers or an inscription.”

This adoption of rock music and hippy fashion shows that youth in the Zone were incorporating elements of hippy culture into their own youth cultures. In 1973, a 15-year-old boy from Poplar Hill described to a visiting physician “his obsession with Karate,” a popular element of youth culture in the 1970s. Similarly, in 1980, “rock music and movies” were becoming important sources of recreation for teenagers in the Zone. Adopting forms of recreation from popular culture provided healthy pastimes for youth, especially compared to other coping mechanisms such as drugs and alcohol.

Another method that adolescents used to cope with the challenges that they faced was substance use. In the 1970s and 1980s, gas sniffing and alcohol use became common among teenagers in the Zone. In interviews in 1979, one of the Indigenous mental health workers in the Sioux Lookout Zone asked teenagers why they drank alcohol. The reasons that they mentioned were “attention, to make them happy, menas [sic] of escape, boredom and to show off for the people to feel sorry for them.” In the same report, the Indigenous Mental Health worker mentioned the increasing rates of gas sniffing among teenagers in the Zone. A 1992 report about rising rates of teen suicide mentions an even wider range of substances used by youth including “alcohol, hairspray, perfume, over-the-counter and prescription drugs, street drugs, and inhalants.” Substance use was devastating for communities in the Zone, especially in the way that it affected the health of youth.

Drug use led to involvement with the police and incarceration for some teenagers and also to other criminal behaviour. Vandalism was common in many communities in the Zone during this era and led to teenagers’ further involvement with the criminal justice system. In 1969, a youth gang called Satan’s Souls briefly became popular in Sandy Lake. The gang called for the community to bring in new jobs but then committed several major acts of vandalism before the band council shut it down. Much as in Canadian cities, membership in gangs in the Zone represented youth trying to form a community where they had power in response to the powerlessness of their poor social and economic prospects.

“Satan’s Souls” was one of several references to Satan in the records of the Sioux Lookout Zone Hospital. Donna Roundhead, an Indigenous Mental Health Counsellor, wrote in 1990 that Satanicism had become a growing concern in several communities in the Zone and in 1992, five young people who committed suicide “were alleged to have participated in Satanic Worship.” The 1992 report about teen suicide argued that

“The recurrence of signs of Satanic practice may be symptomatic of a rebellion on the part of young people against what they perceive to be the unreasonably restrictive expectations of a minority of adults in the community.”

The communities of the Zone were very religious, with several denominations of Christianity being quite popular. The authority figures in many communities of the Zone were thoroughly connected with the church. Therefore, the choice of Satanism could possibly be interpreted as a very carefully aimed rebellion against the religiosity of older generations.

A major theme of the writing about teenagers in the records of the Zone Hospital was a feeling of hopelessness. Donna Roundhead, the Indigenous Mental Health Counsellor, wrote in 1990 that “some of the reasons that we’ve heard about why suicides happen are that a lot of our people are feeling there’s no hope for the future.” Despite efforts to form community and embrace youth culture as a coping mechanism, suicide rates became very high in the Sioux Lookout Zone and continue to be high today, especially among teenage girls.

CONCLUSION
Youth culture in the Sioux Lookout Zone from 1969 had aspects of rebellion against older generation and aspects of community building among disenfranchised teenagers. Youth culture was used as a way of coping with limited social and economic prospects and hopelessness about the future. Unfortunately, some of the ways of coping, like substance use and vandalism, led to poor health outcomes and involvement in the criminal justice system. Studying the plight of teenagers in the Sioux Lookout historically is important to understand the historical antecedents of the poor health outcomes among youth in the Sioux Lookout Zone today. This project is a case study of the history of the youth served by one Indian Hospital and hopes to add to the body of scholarship about Indian Hospitals.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
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