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7 Years Into Self-Rule, Inuit Are Struggling

By [CLIFFORD KRAUSS](#)

IQALUIT, Nunavut — The Inuit of the Canadian Arctic have forsaken their sod houses and dog sleds for satellite television and snowmobiles in less than two generations. Assembling a smoothly functioning government and a solid educational system has been another matter entirely.

The initiative to grant Nunavut, a land of frozen fjords, desolate tundra and roaming herds of caribou, self-rule seven years ago was heralded worldwide as an enlightened attempt to right past wrongs against a suffering aboriginal people.

But two recent federal government reports tell a disheartening story of frustrated hopes and local failures that do not bode well for Nunavut's exceptionally young population (38 percent of its people are under 14), one still plagued by widespread drug abuse, alcoholism, suicide and family abuse.

One report found that only 25 percent of Inuit students graduate from high school. The lack of basic skills means that the territorial government has filled only 45 percent of its 3,200 public positions with Inuit, once known as Eskimos, although Inuit are 85 percent of the population. Meanwhile, unemployment for the territory is at 30 percent, with some communities suffering 70 percent unemployment.

"Nunavut faces a moment of change, a moment of crisis," wrote Thomas R. Berger, a former British Columbia Supreme Court judge, in his report to the federal minister of Indian affairs and northern development. Noting that 75 percent of Nunavut's 30,000 people speak Inuktitut as their first language while the principal language of the government remains English, Judge Berger added, "the people of the new territory speak a language which is an impediment to obtaining employment in their own public service."

A second report, by Sheila Fraser, the auditor general of [Canada](#), disclosed widespread public financial mismanagement that was responsible for errors, bad decisions, waste and fraud in the spending of nearly \$1 billion in annual federal and other financing.

She noted that the territorial government's efforts to decentralize operations to spread public jobs beyond the capital, Iqaluit, had spread accounting talent too thinly. She recommended "recentralizing"

government accounting operations so senior staff members could more closely supervise less experienced public workers.

"Probably we need more time," said Levi Barnabas, a member of the Nunavut Legislative Assembly, acknowledging in an interview the central conclusions of the two reports. "Education in southern Canada is 200 years old, and our education system is only 60 years old."

Few sociologists are surprised by the lack of significant improvement since the establishment of the territory despite the highest per capita federal aid budget for any jurisdiction in the country.

The Inuit are a traditionally nomadic people who migrated about 1,000 years ago from western Alaska toward what is today Arctic Canada. Until very recently, they had no formal political organization. Nuclear families lived together and occasionally joined other families to compose small, fluid bands to share their hunt.

Since World War II, the Inuit have been forced by the federal government to abandon their nomadic lives for remote settlements approachable only by airplane. The federal police killed their sled dogs, saying they were sickly. Young Inuit were required to leave their parents and sent to residential schools, where they were routinely abused physically and sexually.

Modern life has its benefits, but the Inuit diet of hunted game has largely been replaced by sugary and fatty packaged foods. Welfare has become a way of life, and 30-year-old grandparents are not uncommon. Housing is scarce, so crowding only exacerbates social ills.

The new Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper has earmarked nearly \$200 million for new housing in the territory in its budget, but that fell short of what the previous Liberal government had promised.

Judge Berger recommended in his report that a good way to start fixing Nunavut would be to restructure its bilingual educational system in which children are taught in Inuktitut through fourth or fifth grade and then introduced to English as the sole language of instruction.

"This reintroduces the colonial message of inferiority," he wrote. "The Inuit student mentally withdraws." He recommended that both languages be used through elementary and secondary schools.

Territorial and federal officials say they are studying the recommendation.

Daniel Iqaluk, 22, whose main employment is washing dishes in the hamlet of Resolute, said he quit school after 11th grade because his classes were boring and confusing. He said his problems started early: while his parents spoke to him at home in English, his classes in early elementary school were in Inuktitut.

"I couldn't understand what they were talking about so all I did was watch and I never learned," he added while taking a break from cleaning an oil slick from a leaky snowmobile.

He said he did not think the establishment of self-government for the territory made a difference, "but I don't know why."

Many others here say they do like self-rule, and think it will bear fruit with time.

"Job-wise we're not better off," said Mayor Susan Salluvinik of Resolute, who was unraveling a ball of yarn for a worker who knits on the floor of an office equipped with high-speed Internet, maps and a fax machine. "But it's slowly coming along."

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