

of the residential school Survivors and sometimes to their grandchildren. Residential schools also posed a threat to the mental health of students through the pervasive assumptions and assertions they made about the inferiority of Aboriginal peoples, cultures, and languages. This disregard for Aboriginal health and well-being was consistent with the long-established patterns of colonialism: the introduction of new diseases, the disruption of traditional food sources, and the concentration of people on unproductive land and the housing of them in cramped, unsanitary dwellings.

The schools undermined Aboriginal health by failing to feed and clothe the children properly and housing them in poorly constructed and dangerous buildings. The schools did not properly screen out sick and infectious children, and often lacked adequate treatment facilities. As Ruby Firth, a former student at Stringer Hall in the Northwest Territories, told the Commission, those conditions had a lasting effect.

I've got chronic bronchitis today. Every winter I get pneumonia like two or three times and I'm on two puffers 'cause when I was in Stringer Hall residential school they used to put us in these little skinny red coats that weren't even warm enough for winter. And we used to have to walk across the street to go to school.... Both my lungs are 50% scarred from having pneumonia seven times in [residential school]. That's always going to be there, it's never going to go away.<sup>98</sup>

There were also lasting psychological and emotional impacts. Sonia Wuttunee-Byrd described the damage that residential school caused her.

I lost my braids, my beautiful hair was cut, and I felt like my identity was so confused, I didn't know who I was. What is even worse is that they started to sexually take advantage of me and abuse me, not one, not two, but many, many people for a very long time, until I was sixteen. I started to really deteriorate. I became very sick and anorexic, and really started to go downhill. At one point I only weighed sixty-six pounds, and that was it, I had no desire to live. The doctor said, "You have a month to live, go home." He said to my family, "Take her home, she is going to die..." I would say to Mom and Dad, and they never understood why I was crying. The school always said, "Sonia is a fantastic student, she is doing so well," but inside it was torment. I held everything in and didn't tell anybody for twenty years.<sup>99</sup>

Katherine Copenace, a former student at the St. Mary's residential school in Ontario, told the Commission about her struggles.

The residential school students suffered physical, sexual, spiritual, and most of all emotional abuse and my dad used to say to me, "Emotional abuse is more damaging than physical abuse. Your physical hurts heal." That's what he used to say. When I got older, I had thoughts of suicide, inflicting pain on myself which I did. I used to slash my arms, pierce my arms, my body and I destroyed myself with alcohol which the government introduced of course.<sup>100</sup>