

Evidence and investigation: The truth behind missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada

TRAUMATIC CONSEQUENCES

In proportion to their population, Indigenous people are significantly overrepresented in Canada's criminal justice system. Indigenous women are far more likely to be victimized than other women. The causes of both imbalances stem from historic government policies (for example, Indian residential schools, the *Indian Act*), which were aimed at assimilation, cultural destruction, and territorial dispossession. The result has been severe intergenerational trauma. This trauma has contributed to dysfunctional environments and higher crime rates, wherein Indigenous women are stereotyped, marginalized, and victimized in Canadian society and Indigenous communities.

The consequences are catastrophic, as shown by higher rates of Indigenous mortality, suicide, abuse, poverty, homelessness, illness, and addiction. Quality of life, health, housing, education, and employment are all significantly lower for Indigenous people than for those in Canada's general population. Socio-economic marginalization of victims and poverty are roots of victimization. Indigenous women face the double disadvantage of gender stereotypes and racial discrimination (Aboriginal Healing Foundation 2004, 2008; Bombay, Matheson, and Anisman 2009; Erasmus and Sanders 1992; Haskell and Randall 2009; Rice and Snyder 2008; Wesley-Esquimaux 2007).

URGENT NEED FOR STUDIES

The phenomenon of missing and murdered Indigenous women has been dismissed by the current government of Canada as constituting nothing more than a series of criminal events. Rather than heed calls for a national inquiry,

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the government has taken a piecemeal approach that does little to recognize or address the seriousness of the matter. I argue that this approach is consistent with the current government's approach to Indigenous issues across

the country. There is an urgent need for full statistical evidence on missing and murdered Indigenous women to reduce this epidemic. There are no studies that provide *complete* data on missing and murdered Indigenous women. The RCMP released a report in 2014 with data covering 1980 through 2012. These data indicate that 1,181 Indigenous women went missing or were murdered during this time frame: 164 are missing, while 1,017 were victims of homicide. The RCMP report concedes that Indigenous women are overrepresented among all women. Indeed, the report concluded that "the total number of murdered and missing [Indigenous] females exceeds previous [Indigenous] public estimates" (RCMP 2014). Most telling are the data reflected in Table 1, which highlight the degrees of overrepresentation of Indigenous female homicide victims in each province and territory.

The rates of female Indigenous homicides are much higher in the western provinces and northern territories. Indigenous populations are higher in these provinces, as highlighted in recent Canadian census data. The most recent

TABLE 1 Female Homicides, 1980–2012

Province/territory	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	Unknown	Indigenous victim proportion
NL	10	57	1	15%
PE	0	10	0	0%
NS	5	163	4	3%
NB	5	125	0	4%
QC	46	1,445	11	3%
ON	114	1,901	48	6%
MB	196	188	13	49%
SK	153	116	7	55%
AB	206	533	2	28%
BC	205	890	8	19%
YT	10	8	0	56%
NT	47	3	1	92%
NU	20	0	0	100%
Total	1,017	5,439	95	16%

Source: Royal Canadian Mounted Police (2014).

TABLE 2 Indigenous Identity by Province/Territory

Province/ territory	Indigenous identity population	Indigenous proportion of population
NL	35,800	7.1
PE	2,230	1.6
NS	33,845	3.7
NB	22,615	3.1
QC	141,915	1.8
ON	301,425	2.4
MB	195,900	16.7
SK	157,740	15.6
AB	220,695	6.2
BC	232,290	5.4
YT	7,705	23.1
NT	21,160	51.9
NU	27,360	86.3

Source: Statistics Canada (2011).

National Household Survey of 2011 indicates that 4.3 percent of the entire Canadian population self-identifies as Indigenous. The provincial and territorial population breakdown is provided in Table 2. Given that Indigenous women constitute approximately half of those who self-identify as Indigenous, and thus half of the numbers shown in Table 2, most of the Indigenous female homicide rates in Table 1 are significantly higher than the population proportions of Indigenous women in each province or territory.

IGNORED REPORTS

Why is this so? The dearth of previous studies on missing and murdered Indigenous women reflects broader systemic stereotypes in Canadian society. The Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC) conducted extensive research and consultation as part of its Sisters in Spirit initiative, culminating in a final report submitted to the Department of Justice in 2011 (NWAC 2011a). As part of her doctoral dissertation, Maryanne Pearce presented an extensive study with new data on victims in 2013. One month after the release of the RCMP report in March 2014, the House of Commons Special Committee on Violence Against Indigenous Women released a report. The government ignored this latter report’s recommendation for a public inquiry (Bar-

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ton 2014). Each study presented some data, but none provided figures as extensive as those in the RCMP report. The fact that such data were not readily available until 2014 gives one pause.

However, these data are still inadequate. The original information collected by the RCMP has not been made public, and there exist significant inconsistencies across the data presented in different studies. Most striking are the data related to solve rates of missing and murdered victims. The RCMP report indicates that solve rates for murdered Indigenous women are approximately the same as for non-Indigenous women, at close to 90 percent. NWAC’s research shows a drastically lower solve rate of only 53 percent for Indigenous female homicides (NWAC 2011b). Further, according to NWAC, Indigenous women are “almost three times more likely to be killed by a stranger” than are non-Indigenous women; most perpetrators are men who are both Indigenous and non-Indigenous (NWAC 2011a). These data are in stark contrast to the most recent RCMP assertion that 70 percent of perpetrators of violence against Indigenous women are *Indigenous* men (Galloway 2015).

Systemic stereotyping and discrimination also undermine efforts to collect complete and accurate data. There has been a demonstrated lack of consistent and accurate interjurisdictional sharing of information. There has also been insufficient accountability of law enforcement to victims and victims’ families, inasmuch as police officials may not communicate proactively or respond sufficiently to concerns about victims. Indigenous organizations, commun-

ities, and the public need to collaborate to maintain complete and accurate data on violence against Indigenous women, including data on missing and murdered victims. There have been some efforts to create databases on missing and unidentified persons, but significant gaps remain. The Government of Canada recently announced the creation of a DNA-Based Missing Persons Index by 2017 for missing and unidentified individuals, but it will not pay for DNA testing in missing-persons or unidentified-remains cases. The result will be insufficient funding to test and create enough DNA profiles to link cases or compile adequate data for the 697 or more cases of unidentified human remains in the country (Carlson and D’Aliesio 2015).

THE NEED FOR A PUBLIC INQUIRY

The common key, in nearly all studies and reports, has been the emphasis on the need for a public inquiry to remove the stigmatization that leads to incomplete and inaccessible data. Stereotypes need to be unlearned and criminal justice reforms are necessary. For these reasons, a public inquiry is most appropriate, despite claims of the Government of Canada to the contrary.

Public inquiries can be more costly and time-consuming than other approaches, but they serve a number of vital purposes that cannot be readily achieved through other means. *First*, public inquiries hold significance for good governance. *Second*, they raise public awareness of vital issues of national importance. *Third*, they contribute to effective justice administration, includ-

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ing criminal justice. *Fourth*, they provide a level of independent and objective review and analysis at a much more extensive level than other reports or studies may achieve because they are granted broad powers under their enabling legislation. *Fifth*, they provide informed public policy recommendations and suggestions for progressive reform. *Sixth*, public inquiries have the power to reveal causes and consequences of significant public problems (Ipperwash Inquiry 2007, vol. 3, 2). *Finally*, when a government turns a matter over for public consideration and review, it is indicating the sheer significance of an issue or problem and its own dedication to achieve meaningful change. The fact that the current federal government continues to fight against a public inquiry undermines broader objectives to address the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women. It also speaks volumes about the government's approach to Indigenous peoples and their quality of life across the country. This must stop, and it must stop now. 🍁

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