



MMIWG2S+ Family Experience of Police Intervention: A Literature Review and Environmental Scan

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Community-University Institute for Social Research

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UNIVERSITY OF
SASKATCHEWAN

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Working together, they both inspired this project and guided its development. The almost twenty-year tireless commitment, action, and advocacy of *Iskwewuk E-wichiwitochik* (Women Walking Together) has continued to shine a light on systemic violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2S+ people, to support families of the missing and murdered, to educate and motivate the general public as well as all levels of government, and to promote social justice and community safety.

LIST of ACRONYMS

CPPCG: Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide

IWG: Indigenous Women and Girls

MMIWG: Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls

NI MMIWG: National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls

NWAC: Native Women's Association of Canada

OCPC: Ontario Civilian Police Commission

RPP: Reclaiming Power and Place, the title of the final report of NI MMIWG

TBPS: Thunder Bay Police Service

TBPSB: Thunder Bay Police Services Board

TRC: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada

UNDRIP: United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Settlers rarely recognize the violence of colonial history that “normalizes domination,” while cutting the land off from its histories, and its economic, ecological, political, cultural, social, and spiritual meanings. The systemic and structural forces that continue to marginalize, exclude, and dominate Indigenous peoples, especially women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people, remain so invisible that even inquests and inquiries on deaths in custody fail to see what is before their eyes, including, in one case, a large boot print on an Indigenous man’s chest. The pathway to justice is a shift in awareness and understanding of “modernizing” processes that undermined Indigenous worldviews that had sustained peoples for millennia and rationalized theft of land and displacement and impoverishment of Indigenous peoples in the name of “progress.” These dominant narratives inherited by settler Canadians are buttressed by social constructions of whiteness that settlers take to be natural facts. It is important to highlight how the process of white settler learning, unlearning, and relearning colonial history can be effective only if it takes into account the operations of whiteness, only if it adopts an antiracist approach that challenges the beliefs and norms that produce and reproduce colonial violence.

In responding to this destructive colonial history, the 2019 Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (NI MMIWG) importantly commits to *Reclaiming Power and Place* (the final report title) in its efforts to create a new framework for understanding violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people. It begins by identifying the “undeniable” truth that Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people have been “targets of violence for far too long.” Indigenous people have not been silent, but

Canadians have failed to listen. The testimony of 2,380 people aims to end the persistent ignorance, wilful blindness, and failures to listen. The voices of survivors, their families, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and other experts document acts of “race-based genocide of Indigenous Peoples, including First Nations, Inuit and Métis.”

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is similarly clear that social issues are the result of a colonial legacy of land appropriation, dominant thinking in institutions, intergenerational trauma related to “cultural genocide” manifesting in health and addictions issues, and ongoing structural and systemic discrimination.

The United Nations adopted the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (CPPCG) on December 9, 1948. Canada signed the convention in 1949 and ratified it in 1952.

This colonial background and ongoing context frame this study of the experience of families of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people in interactions with policing in Saskatchewan and beyond. Infamous events, including Starlight tours and deadly wellness checks, as well as formal commissions and inquiries have highlighted an injustice system that has bred fear and suspicion among Indigenous and other marginalized and racialized communities. The marginalized are also often so overpoliced and underprotected that they are reluctant to report when they are themselves victimized. The result is, for example, that sexual assault cases are seriously underreported. According to James Anaya, United Nations Special

Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the rates of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls are “epidemic”.

Report Purpose

This study (literature review, environmental scan, and survey/interview framework) is designed to support an application to fund an in-depth study of the police interactions experienced by families of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls and 2SLGBTQQIA+ community. The literature review first discusses the colonial legacy impacting the victimized and their families before reviewing the literature on police-family interactions, identifying police complicities in ongoing violence as well as failures of accountability, and outlining calls for remedial policing initiatives that might bring justice to victims and their families.

The imposition of colonial systems, such as residential schools, introduced the conflicting realities of a patriarchal, individualistic society focused on material wealth and religious revamping. This imposition, combined with government-sanctioned instruments (such as *The Indian Act*) has encouraged genocidal practices against Indigenous peoples resulting in the total and systemic disadvantaging of a culture. As a result of these policies, survivors of residential schools who returned to their families faced challenges in assimilating back into the Indigenous way of life, many responding to unaddressed pain and trauma by resorting to trauma-informed addictions. Research shows that Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirits who had a parent attend residential school were 2.35 times more likely to be sexually assaulted.

This ongoing violence rooted in the systemic undervaluing and dehumanizing of Indigenous women and girls perpetuates wilful blindness, as Helen Knott's poem "Invisible" so powerfully communicates. The full poem was recited by Connie Greyeyes at a meeting dedicated to the families of victims held by the Canadian House of Commons Special Committee on Violence Against Indigenous Women, December 2013. Knott's words render powerfully what statistics cannot about wilful blindness and indifference born of privilege.

According to the research findings of the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC), as of March 31, 2010, 582 cases of Indigenous women and girls had gone missing or been murdered. The alarming rates of increase resulted in the NI MMIWG to explore the systemic causes of violence against Indigenous women, girls, and Two Spirits and to advance recommendations in its final report for actions to improve the life of Indigenous people.

However, despite the existence of the Inquiry and its numerous calls for justice, the criminal justice system, and the police in particular, continue to approach cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people with insufficient rigour and empathy, often continuing to confer blame on the alleged high-risk lifestyles led by the victims rather than acting on systemic and structural disadvantage. This ongoing issue has resulted in the families of the missing and murdered assigning an average rating as low as 2.8 for Canadian police (on a scale of one to ten where ten is excellent).

The NI MMIWG Final report (*RPP*) validated family fears of poor police attitudes by documenting so thoroughly the common experience of family members and friends of missing

and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and Two Spirit people who recount being dismissed or ignored by the police when reporting incidents encompassing physical violence and sexual victimization.

Emblematic of these interactions is testimony to the House of Commons Special Committee on Violence Against Indigenous Women, on the distorted values that lead to police and media inaction:

We have two missing girls from 2008 and still they're not found. We lost a little baby lion on the reserve two years later. We had a search party. We had the police. We had helicopters. We had game wardens. We had everything. When these two human beings went missing, we had nothing. There were no dogs, no search party, no police, no media. What do we do when this happens? Who do we go to?

This reality continues despite the goal of Call for Justice 5.5, one of 231 calls for remedial actions, which seeks to “fund the provision of policing services within Indigenous communities in northern and remote areas in a manner that ensures that those services meet the safety and justice needs of the community and that the quality of policing services is equitable to that provided to non-Indigenous Canadians.” Instead, families and victims of MMIWG2S+ are perceived through a lens of endemic racist and sexist stereotypes which deflect blame to Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQIA+ people for the violence they encounter.

Furthermore, inconsistencies over the number of hours families and loved ones of MMIWG2S+ had to wait till they reported a disappearance was raised in the National Inquiry whereas the

RCMP Operational Manual, Chapter 37.3 “Missing Persons” amended 2018, June 14 and Chapter 37.3.1 “Missing Person Information Checklist” amended 2014, September 5, is clear: “Under no circumstances will a complainant be advised that he or she must wait a specific period of time before a report of a missing person can be made.”

The *RPP*’s overall goal is to promote a holistic, unbiased approach to policing buttressed by Call for Justice 5.4, recommending improving the life conditions of Indigenous People especially Indigenous girls, women and Two-Spirit people by “transforming Indigenous policing from its current state as a mere delegation to an exercise in self-governance and self-determination over policing” supported by “a new legislative and funding framework” developed “by the federal, provincial, and territorial governments in partnership with Indigenous Peoples.”

It is difficult to reconcile with the ongoing tragic statistics the statement of Saskatchewan Justice Minister and Attorney General Bronwyn Eyre that “Saskatchewan is committed to making our province, and Canada, a safer place for Indigenous women and girls, equal access to justice is a crucial component of that commitment, as is the continued representation of Indigenous perspectives. We will continue to ensure those voices are heard.” Yet more than 76% of homicide victims in 2020 were Indigenous, making Saskatchewan the province with the highest rate of Indigenous deaths in Canada; 55% of female homicide victims are Indigenous, in Saskatchewan, the highest provincial proportion of Indigenous female homicide. It also has among the highest rates of sexual violence in Canada.

The literature review has painted a picture of the families of MMIWG2S+ demanding change in

systems and services, programs and policies, to educate and motivate, to build community capacity, to coordinate all levels of government, and to develop preventive measures. They demand change so that all can be part of “the shared responsibility” to eliminate violence against Indigenous women and girls and 2SLGBTQIA+.

This environmental scan reviews how effectively or not provincial jurisdictions such as Saskatchewan, British Columbia, Manitoba, and Ontario have responded to calls to develop and implement holistic, preventive, collaborative, and culturally appropriate policing. The scan offers both cautionary tales and promising practices from other jurisdictions from which the Saskatoon Police Service can continue to learn and adapt in its own reconciliation journey, in its own efforts to develop decolonizing and antiracist, trauma-informed, and culturally- and age-appropriate policing. Among cautionary tales are examples of gaps between policy and practice, between rhetoric and action. Promising practices include standards that are both binding and subject to evaluation, standards that integrate equity and accountability, and diverse training that is documented to ensure accountability. The conclusion elaborates what findings mean for study design and funding application for an in-depth study of police interactions with families of MMIWG2S+.

INTRODUCTION

Those who have learned their place in the world from what Seawright (2014) calls “the dominant epistemology of settler society” that “provides racialized, anthropocentric, and capitalistic understandings of *places*” (p. 554) rarely recognize the violence of colonial history that “normalizes domination,” while cutting the land off from its histories, and its economic, ecological, political, cultural, social, and spiritual meanings (Seawright, 2014, p. 555). The systemic and structural forces that continue to marginalize, exclude, and dominate Indigenous peoples, especially women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people, remain largely invisible. The violence is so invisible to settler society that even inquests and inquiries on deaths in custody fail to see what is before their eyes. They repeat endlessly stories of Indigenous blame for their deadly fates while overlooking systemic factors and obvious signs of violence done to victims including, in one case, a large boot print on an Indigenous man’s chest (Razack, 2015). The pathway to justice, Seawright (2014) argues, is to challenge these normalizing processes in “a shift in awareness towards our intimate environments” and a new understanding of “how place intersects with race, gender, and colonialism”—and how settler “homemaking” has been achieved “at the expense of previously dominant Indigenous worldviews” (pp. 555, 563) that sustained peoples for millennia.

In his work on the ongoing impacts of settler colonialism, Seawright (2014) adds to the literature on the raced, gendered, and classed views of land, private property, value extraction, and economic “progress” associated with economic modernity that rationalized settlers’ theft of land, displacement of Indigenous peoples, segregation and surveillance, and exploitation of racialized and vulnerable communities (Bonds & Inwood, 2016; DuBois, 1935; Henderson et al., 2022; ge,

2003; Nunn, 2018; Razack, 2015; Seawright, 2014; Tuck & Yang, 2012). As Tuck and Yang (2012) argue, within settler colonialism “land is remade into property” while all things Indigenous are rendered pre-modern and backward. Indeed, the history of colonial violence was sustained by law, policy, and regulation that regulated everything from where people lived, to where they could go, and how they governed themselves, actively impoverishing Indigenous peoples in the process (Findlay & Weir, 2004).

The dominant narratives inherited by settler Canadians are buttressed by social constructions of whiteness that settlers take to be natural facts. The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (NI MMIWG) (*RPP*, 2019) importantly unpacks how a white settler process of learning, unlearning, and relearning colonial history can be effective only if it takes into account the operations of whiteness. The Final Report (*RPP*) cites a critical example in the recommendations of Justice David H. Wright in concluding the Neil Stonechild Inquiry that Saskatoon Police Service engage in “race relations training,” including “information about Aboriginal culture, history, societal and family structures,” but he does so with no antiracist insistence of the powerful operations of whiteness (pp. 252-253). Such an approach, as Gebhard et al. (2022) insist, “is insufficient for unlearning entrenched colonial scripts of Indigenous inferiority and may even reinforce them. Cultural awareness strategies underestimate the investments of white settler society in the oppression of Indigenous Peoples” (p. 253). Instead, Gebhard et al. (2022) conclude, “Institutions must commit time, resources and funding towards engaging leadership and staff in mandatory and ongoing antiracism education in order to challenge the dehumanizing beliefs and workplace norms that both reproduce and set the stage for colonial violence” (p. 256).

In responding to this destructive colonial history, *RPP* (2019) importantly commits to *Reclaiming Power and Place* (the report title) in its efforts to create a new framework for understanding violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people. It begins by identifying the “undeniable” truth that Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people have been “targets of violence for far too long” (*RPP*, p. 47). Indigenous people have not been silent, but Canadians have failed to listen. The testimony of 2,380 people aims to end the persistent ignorance, wilful blindness, and failures to listen. Before documenting the voices of survivors, their families, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and other experts, and the acts of “race-based genocide of Indigenous Peoples, including First Nations, Inuit and Métis,” the report defines genocide: “in its original construction, . . . defined as coordinated actions aimed at the destruction of a group, committed against individual members belonging to that group” (p. 50). Drawing on Lemkin (1944), the report outlines “two phases that could contribute to establishing the political domination of the oppressor group. The first included the destruction of the “national pattern of the group,” and the second phase included what he called the “imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor,” which could be imposed on the population that remained in the territory” (p. 50). The two phases operated across fields (political, social, cultural, economic, biological, physical, and moral) to undermine, disrupt, and destroy the foundations of the group (*RPP*, 2019, pp. 50-51).

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) (2015) is similarly clear that homelessness and other social issues result from a colonial legacy of land appropriation, dominant thinking in our institutions, intergenerational trauma related to “cultural genocide” manifesting in health and addictions issues, and ongoing structural and systemic discrimination.

This colonial background and ongoing context frame this study of the experience of families of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people in interactions with policing in Saskatchewan (and beyond). Infamous events, including Starlight tours in Saskatoon (Hubbard, 2004) and deadly wellness checks (Tunney, 2020), as well as formal commissions and inquiries have highlighted an injustice system that has bred fear and suspicion among Indigenous and other marginalized and racialized communities (Findlay & Weir, 2004). The marginalized are also often so overpoliced and underprotected (Corcoran, 2012) that they are reluctant to report when they are themselves victimized. The result is, for example, that sexual assault cases are seriously underreported (Tabassum et al., 2023). According to James Anaya, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the rates of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls are “epidemic” (cited in *RPP*, 2019, p. 55).

Report Purpose

This study is designed to achieve the following in support of an application to fund an in-depth study of the police interactions experienced by families of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls and 2SLGBTQQIA+ community:

- Complete a literature review and environmental scan
- Develop a survey/interview framework
- Identify relevant funding opportunities to support study implementation
- Draft a report

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review explores the development of the current relationship between families of MMIWG2S+ and policing in Saskatchewan (and beyond) based on an overview of the academic and gray literature to provide a background and context for the topic under investigation. We first discuss the colonial legacy impacting the victimized and their families before reviewing the literature documenting police-family interactions, identifying police complicities in ongoing violence and failures of accountability, and outlining calls for remedial policing initiatives that might bring justice to victims and their families.

The Colonial Legacy

Historically, Indigenous peoples of Canada were matrilineal societies with flexible, equal gender roles enacted through a collectivistic cultural system based on spiritual connectivity (Kaye, 2016). The ensuing colonialism is one that is well-known: the imposition of colonial systems, such as residential schools, has introduced the conflicting realities of a patriarchal, individualistic society focused on material wealth and religious revamping (Burnette & Renner, 2016; Kaye, 2016). This imposition, combined with government-sanctioned instruments (such as *The Indian Act*) has encouraged genocidal practices against Indigenous peoples resulting in the total and systemic disadvantaging of a culture (Kaye, 2016).

This destructive colonial project was evident in the objective of Duncan Campbell Scott, the Canadian Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs in 1920, whose governmental policy was to “continue until there is not an Indian that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question, and no Indian department” (Facing History and Ourselves Canada, 2020, c.16, p.1). This policy informed the abuse meted out to Indigenous people in residential

schools in an attempt to “civilize” and train them into what the government considered rightful living (Facing History and Ourselves Canada, 2020, c.16, p.1).

As a result of these policies, survivors of residential schools who returned to their families faced challenges in assimilating back into the Indigenous way of life, many responding to unaddressed pain and trauma by resorting to trauma-informed addictions (University of British Columbia, 2015). The Cedar Project in its research established a connection between residential schooling and sexual victimization among Indigenous women, (University of British Columbia, School of Population and Public Health, 2015) where researchers reported that Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit who had a parent attend residential school were 2.35 times more likely to be sexually assaulted (University of British Columbia, School of Population and Public Health, 2015).

The demographic realities paint a picture of the extent of violence Indigenous women, girls, and Two Spirits encounter but does not do justice to the stories of intergenerational internalization of trauma and pain (*RPP*, 2019). In this regard, Indigenous women were and remain doubly disadvantaged within colonial systems of relations dictating their devalued status as the norm. This forced assimilation allowed for the insidious dehumanization of Indigenous girls, women, and Two Spirit people, which in turn has allowed the growth of incidences of victimization and lateral violence (Kaye, 2016; Matamonasa-Bennett, 2015).

This ongoing violence rooted in the systemic undervaluing and dehumanizing of Indigenous women and girls perpetuates wilful blindness, as Helen Knott’s poem “Invisible” so powerfully

communicates. The full poem is cited as Preface in Ambler (2014), pp. 1-2, and recited by Connie Greyeyes at a meeting dedicated to the families of victims held by the Canadian House of Commons Special Committee on Violence Against Indigenous Women, December 2013 (Ambler, 2014, p. 2).

Invisible

Your eyes, they curve around me.

I watch you try so hard to find your way past me.

Your sight is like rushing waters,

Moving beside me, behind me, pushing over me,

Indirectly consuming me.

They say the path of least resistance makes rivers and men crooked.

I am here. I have resisted. I am resisting.

I did not make you crooked.

What is it about you structural giants?

What is it about your pockmarked protection?

What is it about your false perceptions?

What beliefs have you bound to my body?

What pathologies have you painted the pigment of my skin?

What bad medicine did your forefathers use to make me invisible?

You don't want to see me.

What's worse is that you have the choice whether or not you see me.
I become a casualty of your blindness,
Subjected to your one-sided absent-mindedness because you've been given a privilege
called selective vision.
You weed out the colours that don't match your peripheral preference, and,
I am not part of your rainbow, your twisted-light promises for better tomorrows.

My face can be plastered on posters telling you what I was last seen wearing,
With fitted descriptions, a location to give you bearings, and,
You can choose to look past me, and go on, uncaring.

My raven's hair and heritage does not sound alarm bells. It does not stir you to look for
me. Because you have never really seen me. . . .

You see me as dispensable.
This is how you see me. . . .

The poem importantly frames the report of the Canadian House of Commons Special Committee on Violence Against Indigenous Women (Ambler, 2014) explaining in the poetic vision what statistics cannot illuminate. The poem helps prepare for the testimony of families dealing with tragedy, confronting both blindness and deafness to their pain, and trying to keep the memory of their loved ones alive while attempting to find closure (Ambler, 2014). The report speaks to the media and public indifference to the tragic loss of life in killings in Saskatoon:

In 1996 John Martin Crawford was convicted of murder in the killings of three indigenous women, Eva Taysup, Shelley Napope, and Calinda Waterhen, in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Warren Goulding, one of the few journalists to cover the trial, commented. I don't get the sense the general public cares much about missing or murdered aboriginal women. It's all part of this indifference to the lives of aboriginal people. They don't seem to matter as much as white people. (Ambler, p. 3).

Goulding wrote a 2003 book about the case, revealingly titled *Just Another Indian: A Serial Killer and Canada's Indifference*. Family witnesses called for practical action and context-and community-specific recommendations driven by communities themselves that would make a difference in the lives of Indigenous women and girls and their families (Ambler, 2014).

Not until the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) reported that as of March 31, 2010, their researchers had gathered information about 582 cases of Indigenous women and girls missing or murdered in Canada and the TRC's Calls for Action amplified NWAC's voices did the federal government in 2015 announce the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (NI MMIWG). The Inquiry's mandate was to explore the systemic causes of violence against Indigenous women and girls (IWG) and to advance recommendations to make their lives safer (RPP, 2019).

A total of 468 survivors and their families, along with Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and other experts, shared their experiences and recommendations at 15 community hearings (NI MMIWG, 2019). However, despite the existence of the Inquiry and its numerous calls for justice, the

criminal justice system, and the police in particular, continue to approach cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people with insufficient rigour and empathy. They often continue to confer blame on the alleged high-risk lifestyles led by the victims (a tactic exposed by the Inquiry) rather than acting on systemic and structural disadvantage, as recommended by *RPP* (2019). This ongoing issue has resulted in the families of the missing and murdered assigning an average rating as low as 2.8 (on a scale of one to ten where ten is excellent) for Canadian police (CBC, 2015). Marie Lasas was a 19-year-old with roots in Cowessess First Nation but lived in Saskatoon where her body was found behind an abandoned house on the west side, after being declared a missing person for 9 months. Her sister Suzanna Lasas gave the police a rating of three as she believed they gave up on the investigation, leaving the family without justice (Walker et al, 2016c). This statistic is one metric confirming the legacy of distrust in policing systems prevalent in Indigenous communities (Rudin, 2006; Winter, 2018). In its report, *Submission to the Government of Canada on Police Abuse of Indigenous Women in Saskatchewan and Failures to Protect Indigenous Women from Violence*, Human Rights Watch (2017) similarly identified a ruptured relationship between the police and Indigenous people revealing strong mistrust and indignation on the part of Indigenous people fueled by the RCMP's complicity in enforcing residential school policies.

By documenting so thoroughly the common experience of family and friends of MMIWG2S+ being dismissed or ignored when reporting incidents encompassing physical violence and sexual victimization, *RPP* (2019) validated family fears of poor police attitudes. As the final report put it, "Indigenous Peoples have had little reason to be confident that the justice system is working for them. In many testimonies the National Inquiry heard, the same themes demonstrate that,

across the country, Indigenous Women's girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people's right to justice is compromised" (*RPP*, 2019, p. 625).

The local, regional, national, and international impact of *Iskwewuk E-wichiwitochik* (Women Walking Together), a grassroots, non-government funded, network of activists in Saskatchewan since 2005, cannot go unmentioned (Hansen, 2021). In addition to the annual vigil ceremony held on October 4th and other awareness-raising walks and events, *Iskwewuk E-wichiwitochik* members draw attention to "the human rights crisis of missing and murdered indigenous women," while lending critical support to the families and building collaborations to prevent violence (Hansen, 2021). Co-chair Darlene Okemaysin-Sicotte sees hope in the growing public awareness, community and family initiatives, and campus engagement with the REDress Project, but she also feels more could be done in terms of police sharing information across jurisdictions and more missing persons liaisons as well as Tribal Council search units (Hansen, 2021).

Iskwewuk E-wichiwitochik (2019) drafted a Final report to the MMIWG (2019) National Inquiry addressing Reconciliation through "the lenses of wāhkōtowin, pimātisiwin, and gender" and Indigenous knowledges and approaches (p. 1). The result of significant consultations with families of MMIWG2S+ and community leads across the province, the report documents the group's securing standing at the National Inquiry and bearing witness at the hearings in Saskatoon in 2017. In 2018 they attended the Policing Expert Hearings on Human Rights and Racism. The report calls for practical action and community-specific recommendations that would make a difference, especially regarding access to justice for the families of MMIWG2S+. It cites the recommendations of the 2004 Commission on First Nations and Métis Peoples and

Justice Reform on multi-pronged strategies to eliminate racism in policing in Saskatchewan, while adding recommendations on police training, practices, and accountability mechanisms as well as disaggregated data collection. The report concludes with its own powerful calls to action.

Members of *Iskwewuk E-wichiwitochik* (Okemaysin-Sicotte, Gingell, and Bouvier) also importantly contributed to the Anderson et al. (2018) collection on antiviolenace Indigenous work, underlining what all have to gain from ending the destructive legacy of colonial violence. Their chapter documents how *Iskwewuk E-wichiwitochik* came to be after student, wife, and mother Daleen (Muskego) Bosse went missing in May 2004. The family searched extensively in the face of “lax investigation by police” before having to endure both “the horrific details of the case” and an equally brutal, traumatizing ten-year journey through the justice system (p. 243). The family’s experience and the regional and national context of violence against Indigenous women and girls galvanized the “family-centred” approach of *Iskwewuk E-wichiwitochik* who have been individually and collectively recognized for their important work. The book chapter generously shares their own experience of collective action and hard-won successes, of values and commitment, of honouring, remembering, and bringing people into the sacred circle of healing, in hopes that others can learn and adapt the approach to their own specific contexts.

Police Interactions with Missing and Murdered Families/Survivors

Cecile Blackbird, stepdaughter of Margaret Blackbird who went missing from Loon Lake, Saskatchewan, in 1951 speaks powerfully to the under-protecting policing phenomenon when she recounts how the police rarely came around to investigate Margaret’s disappearance, one of the earliest publicly reported cases in Saskatchewan (Walker et al, 2016a). Similarly, Lori Whiteman,

daughter of Delores Whiteman who went missing on Standing Buffalo First Nation in Saskatchewan, narrates how she has moved beyond bitterness towards law enforcement for the refusal to take her mother's disappearance seriously, to a place of acceptance of what her reality is: she would never get the answers she desires (Fiddler, 2015b). Similarly, Dianne BigEagle, mother of Danita Faith BigEagle of Arcola, Saskatchewan, reported Danita missing to Regina police service on February 14, 2007, yet no amber alert was issued. The police in turn suggested that Danita was out partying, and her mother had a greater chance of finding her daughter than they did (NWAC, 2020).

In other cases, the families of victims of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and Two Spirits do not live to see closure; such is the case of John Oaks, now deceased, father of Janine Wesaquate whose body was found inside a burnt house in December 2004. John never received information from the police as to what really happened, or if any witnesses came forward or suspects were apprehended (Polischuk, 2020).

In addition, William Ballantyne, father of Heather Ballantyne, a 40-year-old woman from the Pelican Narrows Cree community of Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation in Saskatchewan, describes his displeasure at the process of investigation of his daughter's death as well as failure to take his statements into consideration as they could have led to further investigation (Walker et al, 2016b).

Jamie Blazek also recounts that, after reporting the murder of his sister, Cindy Blazek of Onion Lake First Nation in Saskatchewan, the police remained unperturbed, and their investigations also

led to several years with no closure (Quenneville, 2017). Gary Favel, brother of missing Patricia Favel of Kawacatoose First Nation of Saskatchewan, likewise recounts how after phoning to report a missing person, the police recommended he report after seventy-two hours which eventually turned to 33 years and yet still, there has been no contact from the police (Bellegarde, 2017).

The unsettling interactions between families of victims of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirits and the police continue to be reported: Darlene Okemaysim-Sicotte details the disappearance of her cousin's daughter, 16-year-old Shelly Napope in 1992 which had to be reported more than 30 times before her body was found. She believes the police have a good public relations front masking the actual work done or not done (Aiello, 2017).

Marilyn Wapass, sister of missing Maxine Wapass, also details her ordeal of trying in distress to file a missing person's report at the police station and being treated horribly with little to no attention paid to her complaints. Finally, after relentless efforts to file a report, the case officer assigned to the case left on vacation without a word during the investigation (NI MMIWG, Truth Gathering Process, 2018).

Pernell Ballantyne, brother of victim Monica Burns, is angered over language used to describe his sister in the media. The media identified Burns repeatedly as a sex-trade worker and Ballantyne told the MMIWG Inquiry that if different language was promoted "maybe our women wouldn't be so targeted" (The Canadian Press, 2017). Ballantyne also stated that he felt that the justice system rushed towards a verdict simply "to get it over and done with" (The Canadian

Press, 2017) regarding how Burns' killers' sentence was reduced from second-degree murder to manslaughter.

In testimony to the Special Committee on Violence Against Indigenous Women (Ambler, 2014), witnesses spoke about the impact of Residential Schools, high rates and levels of poverty and lack of safe, appropriate housing, as well as racism aggravating the vulnerability and victimization of Indigenous women and girls—and the failures of systems and services to protect them. One witness underlined the distorted values that lead to police and media inaction:

We have two missing girls from 2008 and still they're not found. We lost a little baby lion on the reserve two years later. We had a search party. We had the police. We had helicopters. We had game wardens. We had everything. When these two human beings went missing, we had nothing. There were no dogs, no search party, no police, no media. What do we do when this happens? Who do we go to? (Ambler, 2014, p.19)

In confronting a family member's unusual disappearance, Indigenous families are faced with a challenge: "they are forced to reach out to institutions—the police and criminal justice system—. . . that are directly at the heart of significant pain, division, cultural destruction, and trauma experienced in their families and perhaps by the loved one they seek help in finding." The challenge is even worse when, "[i]n some cases they are forced to reach out to the very people who have perpetrated acts of physical and sexual violence against them or their loved ones" (*RPP*, 2019, p. 627). In the case of Bernice C, for instance, although her parents tried to report her disappearance, the RCMP did not take a statement; neither did they interrogate the person last seen with her (*RPP*, 2019).

Human Rights Watch (2013) recounts a woeful encounter of an Indigenous woman who was assaulted by a police officer responding to a distress call: “what would they do to me if I need to call the cops? Police officers—you’re supposed to look up to them. I needed help and they didn’t help me. We’ve been having gang people come to our house. Who do we call? It’s just pretty sad. We’ve got nobody to go to for help” (p. 66).

Dora LaPrise, sister of missing Dene woman Myrna Montgrand from Saskatchewan, recounts that after reporting her 14-year-old sister’s disappearance in 1979, police told her that her sister ‘was out partying with her friends.’ Thus, no action was taken in her case, which remains open to this day (CBC, 2016). In all such encounters with policing, Helen Knott diagnoses wilful blindness resulting from unexamined privilege. In her poem “Invisible,” she powerfully captures the appalling reality of people “choos[ing] to look past me, and go on, uncaring” (cited in Ambler, 2014, p. 1).

This reality continues despite the goal of Call for Justice 5.5, one of 231 calls for remedial actions, which seeks to “fund the provision of policing services within Indigenous communities in northern and remote areas in a manner that ensures that those services meet the safety and justice needs of the community and that the quality of policing services is equitable to that provided to non-Indigenous Canadians” (*RPP*, 2019, p. 183). Instead, families and victims of Missing and Murdered Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirits are perceived through a lens of endemic racist and sexist stereotypes which deflect blame to Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQIA people for the violence they encounter (*RPP*, 2019). Such blame games result when people face injustices that challenge their self-images as just people, causing them to create

“an illusion of justice through assumptions, arguments or stereotypes about the blameworthiness of the victim” (Hanson & Hanson, 2006, p. 417). In so many ways, the “blame frame shields us from ugly truths and, in part for that reason, perpetuates them” (Hanson & Hanson, 2006, p. 425)

For this reason, the National Inquiry heard from many witnesses who voiced their reluctance to reach out to the police for help, leading to underreporting (*RPP*, 2019). The Truth-Gathering Process provided a safe space for families of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA+ to open up about these hesitations especially in cases where severe acts of violence had been experienced (*RPP*, 2019). For survivor Marlene J, after a grueling encounter on a fateful night, she made it clear even after being beaten up, thrown out of a car, and run over by a car, “I didn’t report to the police because I know they’re not going to do nothing and they’re going ask me who is this guy, do you know who he was or where he is... I don’t remember him, I was drunk, too...” (*RPP*, 2019, p. 628).

The cascading flow of indifference, denial, and reluctance by the police is observed in the words by Jamie L. H:

I feel that the women were deemed as disposable. And it was very, very tragic; their lives were tragic. You know, they were human beings; they were sisters, mothers, daughters, loved ones, wives; partners, aunties, grandmas. They were human beings worthy of dignity and respect, and that wasn’t accorded to them in life. (*RPP*, 2019, p. 630)

Jamie’s comments are especially relevant to the circumstances where disappeared or murdered Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA+ were engaged in sex work, where prevailing stereotypes account for the “getting whatever comes to them” police approach (*RPP*, 2019). Cree

scholar and Expert witness Robyn Bourgeois details how this thinking rationalizes inaction on the violence:

If you can prove a link, whether perceived or actual, between an Indigenous woman... or a girl who's experienced a tremendous act of violence and you can link that in any way to prostitution or hypersexuality...I mean, this is what the excuse was with the missing women. Why didn't police investigate? Why did it take, you know, almost 20 years before they took this seriously? It was because of this belief that these women were entrenched in the sex trade and for that reason, you know, they weren't likely victims. And so, it allows for general inaction on violence against Indigenous women and girls. (*RPP*, 2019, pp. 630-631)

The persistent stereotypes come with the presumption of criminality, which Lanna Moon Perrin describes:

I mean, it would be nice to be able to report a bad date to a police officer without getting –being given the attitude, “Well, you know, a girl could run faster with their dress up than a guy can with their pants down,” you know, I have heard from a police officer before, and those services will be understood, right?

At the end of the day, it is evident that not only do these stereotypes and prejudices add to the pain of families of MMIWG2S+, but they also slow down or impede investigations of the successfully reported cases (*RPP*, 2019). Being tagged as “drunks,” “runaways out partying,” “prostitutes unworthy of follow-up” allows and continues to allow for no justice for families of victims (*RPP*, 2019, p. 648).

The hours following the disappearance of a family member or loved one has proved to be the most crucial, as Bernice reports: “time is of the essence when someone goes missing. Time is crucial. There’s no time to say, ‘oh, give her-give her time. She’s on a drunk. She’ll be back’” as was her encounter when she contacted an RCMP officer at the Portage la Prairie detachment after receiving a strange phone call suggesting that her daughter was in distress (*RPP*, 2019, p.649). She recounted the details of the unfortunate event:

That was June 23rd. I went to the police.... That’s where I went. I said, “I want to report my daughter missing.” ... And, he said, “Oh, what’s her name?” I said, “Jennifer. Jennifer [C.]” “Oh, how old is she?” Like that. That’s how he spoke to me. “How – how old is she?” I said, “She just turned 18 Thursday, her birthday.” “Oh, give her a week. She’s on a drunk.” I said, “You don’t even know her to talk ... about her like that. You don’t know her.” He said, “Oh, give her a week. Give her a week. (*RPP*, 2019, p. 649)

Until today, Bernice’s daughter remains missing, but Bernice shares her story with the NI MMIWG: “I want you to understand, and I want the public and Canada and the world to know how we were failed, how Jennifer was failed. The RCMP failed her. How? You say, ‘How?’ They didn’t take my statement. They didn’t take me seriously” (*RPP*, 2019, p. 650).

Like Bernice, Pamela also knew something was wrong somewhere after receiving a strange phone call from her daughter on what would turn out to be the last day she would ever hear her daughter’s voice (*RPP*, 2019). Upon calling the police to lodge a complaint, she was given

several channels to go through for action until one police officer confided in her to go to the media if she wanted her case to be taken seriously. Pamela recalls:

After I called the media, then they started looking. One officer had even told me, Pam – and I got along with this officer really good. I got along with a couple of them really well, but this one told me, she’s like, Pam, that’s the best thing you could’ve done. She said you forced them to look. (*RPP*, 2019, p.651)

Similarly, New York-based Human Rights Watch during their last visit to Saskatchewan, documented statements from victims of police neglect and abuse, which Farida Dief, director of Human Rights Watch Canada, discussed with Canadian Press: “Indigenous women told Human Rights Watch that they would not call the police to report a crime committed against them—or crimes that they witness—out of fear that the police may harass them or be physically violent toward the suspect” (Canadian Press, 2017, p. 2).

Many of the women interviewed by Human Rights Watch (2017) highlight the skewed discretion and perception the police displayed in their interactions: “they look down on a lot of us Natives like we are nothing; like we do not deserve assistance. Like they’re out to get us...” (Ashley D in Human Rights Watch, 2016, p. 4).

Lorna Martin, daughter of Marie Jean Saint Saveur reported missing in Alberta in 1987, shares her racist-reeking encounter:

One of the first questions the RCMP asked my sister was if she [my mother] drank. Arlene couldn't deny it. She didn't lie. She said yes. He said, “They go on a drinking binge for two or three days and then they come back” ...When you're full of anxiety,

you're hurting, it feels like a kick in the stomach or in the head when somebody you're asking for help says something like that. Right away, any chance of trust, any line of communication is.... There's a barrier right there. You might as well put your hand up. There's no help there. They said our mom was a drunken Indian. (Ambler, 2014, p. 20)

Ambler (2014) also details some experiences shared by families of Missing and Murdered Indigenous victims: “The night we reported Denise missing the one officer had the nerve to say to the other officer right in front of Glen and me, “She's probably downtown doing whatever she has to do to get her next fix” (p. 33)

As to whether the police require an extra push to do their jobs, Pamela stated, “They [the police] should’ve reacted when I called the first time. I shouldn’t [have] to try to shame them or something to get them to do what I needed them to do, what they’re supposed to do” (*RRP*, 2019, p. 653). Delores S. shared similar sentiments:

I didn’t even know how to go about—about telling someone that this is just not right. This is not right that my niece fell from a laundry chute, and nobody is taking it seriously, the fact that I’ve had to uncover everything that I’ve uncovered, and that it should not have to come to this. It should not have had to come to [this] for me to continually go to the media to continually expose cracks and flaws within the system and traumatize my family. (*RRP*, 2019, p. 653)

Furthermore, inconsistencies over the number of hours families and loved ones of missing and murdered girls and women had to wait till they reported a disappearance was raised in the National Inquiry (*RPP*, 2019) whereas the RCMP Operational Manual, Chapter 37.3 “Missing

Persons” amended 2018, June 14 and Chapter 37.3.1 “Missing Person Information Checklist” amended 2014, September 5, reported in the Truth Gathering Process-Part II (Larose-Chevalier, 2018) states that:

Under no circumstances will a complainant be advised that he or she must wait a specific period of time before a report of a missing person can be made” (no emphasis added); the manual further reiterates that a missing person investigation must involve “a diligent early response”, “the early and efficient gathering of witness accounts/leads/information/facts”, and “no delays in collecting required information/facts”. Missing children are considered high risk and high-risk missing persons cases should “especially” be given prompt and thorough attention.

Despite the clear RCMP checklist instructions, Paul T, brother of missing 20-year-old Amber, narrates his family’s encounter with the RCMP in Alberta:

Well, when my mom reported her missing there, they said, she had to wait 24 hours. And, you know, and should I wait? We went online and checked it out and we found out that there’s no law saying you got to wait 24 hours. So, I don’t know why the RCMP always tells people that because those 24 hours are critical. It’s always like, oh, yeah, let’s go submit, but we wait 24 hours and on the 24th hour, oh, let’s get up, let’s go, let’s start doing something. But, you know, had something ... been done ... that time when she reported, maybe – maybe we wouldn’t be sitting here. (*RPP*, 2019, p. 651)

Also, the website of Saskatchewan RCMP issues a flagging disclaimer: “Do not wait to report someone missing. If you suspect someone is missing, call your local Saskatchewan RCMP detachment or police service immediately. In an emergency situation, always call 911”

(Saskatchewan RMCP, 2023). It also adds a paragraph of details required in support of a report: “their name and age, their physical description, including hair and eye colour, height, weight, distinguishing marks or features, what they were last seen wearing, when and where they were last seen and a recent photograph” (Saskatchewan RCMP, 2023).

Little to No Consequence for Complicit Police

“You are Aboriginal, what is anyone going to do” (Human Rights Watch, 2013, p. 74). Farida Deif, director of Human Rights Watch Canada, recounts an all-too-common response to accusations of police abuse:

Generally, in our work on policing abuses in many countries, the response by the police is generally one of denial of the policing abuses taking place, claiming that there are just a number of bad apples on the police force, not a systemic issue, not a structural issue. They will often drown us in policing protocols and policies to show how, you know, advanced they are and how much in line they are with international standards. But our response is always that we’re not really concerned about the policies, we’re concerned about the practice and the implementation of those policies. And you know, and what do you do – even if, you know, even if we were to argue that it was a few bad apples, has there been accountability for those bad apples? Has there been any kind of – how have you used that as a teaching moment to change your training of the police services, to change your recruitment practices? What has happened since then? (*RPP*, 2019, p. 654).

Upon questioning by the NI MMIWG (2019), the RCMP exhibited this blaming of bad apples instead of systemic issues. Many of the responses received by families of MMIWG2s+ in the

form of police abuse, apathy towards and in investigation process, failure to protect Indigenous victims were in fact, the RCMP argued, not the norm but a reflection of individual beliefs which when brought to light would be punished (*RPP*, 2019).

However, Human Rights Watch (2013) notes that most police complaints are investigated by the police themselves. Although a civilian complaints commission monitors the processing of public complaints against the RCMP, the practice provides only an independent civilian accountability mechanism for a small portion of the complaints of police misconduct (Human Rights Watch, 2013). Human Rights Watch (2013) express skepticism that investigations by an outside RCMP detachment provide a full assurance of autonomy. This is buttressed by the words of an RCMP officer with experience in investigating complaints against members in other detachments: “the process is hardly impartial” (Human Rights Watch, 2013, p.73). Furthermore, another RCMP investigator calls to mind how he was tasked to look into “taserings that didn’t happen” in a particular northern town (Human Rights Watch, 2013, p.73). Hence, for a thorough, accountable, and transparent policing system which protects and works to achieve justice for families of MMIWG2S+, independent civilian investigations of all allegations of police misconduct must be carried out (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

Calls for Remedial Policing Initiatives and Policies

In the 2021 Census data, 1,807,250 people self-identified as Indigenous which accounted for 5% of the total population of Canada (Saskatchewan Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Saskatchewan’s population of self-identified Indigenous people was 17% with First Nation population

representing 11.0%; Metis population, 5.7%; and Inuit, 0.3% (Saskatchewan Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Within the province, Saskatoon recorded 15.9% of Indigenous people; Regina, 12.4%; and Prince Albert, 8.6% of Indigenous inhabitants (Saskatchewan Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

With these numbers in mind, the NI MMIWG Final Report reinforces how little confidence Indigenous Peoples have in the justice system and especially considering Saskatchewan's history of "starlight tours" involving the police department between the 1990s and 2000s (*RPP*, 2019, p.625). The final report's overall goal is to promote a holistic, unbiased approach to policing buttressed by Call for Justice 5.4 (*RPP*, 2019, p. 17), recommending improving the life conditions of Indigenous People especially Indigenous girls, women, and Two-Spirit people by "transforming Indigenous policing from its current state as a mere delegation to an exercise in self-governance and self-determination over policing" supported by "a new legislative and funding framework, consistent with international and domestic policing best practices and standards, that must be developed by the federal, provincial, and territorial governments in partnership with Indigenous Peoples." Similarly, Call for Justice 5.5 (*RPP*, 2019) calls for government to "fund the provision of policing services within Indigenous communities in northern and remote areas in a manner that ensures that those services meet the safety and justice needs of the community and that the quality of policing services is equitable to that provided to non-Indigenous Canadians" (pp. 17-18).

However, just as addressing the issue of unjust policing practices calls for revisiting the past, justice for families of MMIWG2S+ must be defined in Indigenous terms where its conceptualization is rooted in respect and a collective approach to safety (*RPP*, 2019). Several

testimonies shared with the National Inquiry reveal the gaps in the injustice system not only in the cases of missing and murdered Indigenous woman, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ but also in a broader infringement of rights that perpetuates violence: “the absence of justice, the fight for justice, and the misuse of justice in interactions between the justice system and Indigenous people routinely compromis[e] their rights and [allow] violence to continue unchecked” (*RPP*, 2019, p. 626).

In light of this *RPP* reporting, it is difficult to reconcile the ongoing tragic statistics with the statement of Saskatchewan Justice Minister and Attorney General Bronwyn Eyre that “Saskatchewan is committed to making our province, and Canada, a safer place for Indigenous women and girls, equal access to justice is a crucial component of that commitment, as is the continued representation of Indigenous perspectives. We will continue to ensure those voices are heard” (Government of Saskatchewan, 2022). As a data report issued by Statistics Canada indicates, more than 76% of homicide victims in 2020 were Indigenous, making Saskatchewan the province with the highest rate of Indigenous deaths in Canada (CBC, 2021). In addition, Human Rights Watch (2017) reports that 55% of female homicide victims are Indigenous, also making Saskatchewan the province with the highest proportion of Indigenous female homicide.

Responding to the ongoing data picture of MMIWG2S+, the Honourable Marci Ien, Minister of Women and Gender Equality, commented, “there are so many people in Canada who just never saw the stories, never heard the stories, never heard your stories and time’s up...this isn’t about jurisdictions it’s about humanity, it’s about doing the right thing, it’s about action and it’s about time” (Government of Canada, 2023, p.19). Too many people remain out of touch with the cases

of MMIWG2S+ despite significant attention to, for example, the brutal death of Pamela George of Saulteaux (Ojibway) nation on April 17, 1995, in Regina, Saskatchewan, by 19 year olds Steven Kummerfield and Alex Ternowetsky (Razack, 2000) and the horrific death of Cindy Gladue on June 22, 2011, in Edmonton by Bradley Barton (Russel & Snowdon, 2021). Policemen at the National Inquiry testified that there is little to no training for policemen, both old and new recruits, to guide their actions to ensuring safe and respectful interactions with Indigenous people (*RPP*, 2019).

Red Dress Day instituted in 2010 by Métis artist Jaime Black's REDress Project is celebrated on May 5 as a national day of remembrance and action honouring the lives of MMIWG2S+. With red dresses hanging from window and trees, the day galvanizes those attending rallies and ceremonies and demanding change and justice (Amnesty International Canada, 2025).

In addressing the high rates of sexual violence in Saskatchewan, among the highest in Canada, Umereweneza et al. (2020) point to the Treaties as “the foundational framework for just relations” in Saskatchewan and acknowledge “the harms and mistakes of our colonial past and present” which have perpetuated and tolerated violence in gender socialization. They commit to “respectful partnerships” with Indigenous peoples “in a learning spirit of reconciliation and collaboration” (p. viii). The study designed to support the first provincial sexual violence action plan reported that only 23.7% of sexual assault victims formally reported out of “fear of not being believed, fear of being blamed for the assault. . . . fear of retaliation from perpetrator or perpetrator's network, . . . lack of understanding that the violations were crimes, lack of trust of law enforcement's ability to handle sexual assault cases, and fear of the criminal court process”

(p. xiv). Survivors rating service providers reported least satisfaction with policing at 38.5% (p. xiv) because of a “lack of trauma and violence-informed service delivery” (p. xix). The study recommends mandatory trauma-informed care training as well as specialized sexual assault training for law enforcement, coordinated services in one location, and broader public education in the face of overreporting of “false reporting” by law enforcement (p. 110) and myths contributing to reports being dismissed as “unfounded”—with little rigorous investigation—a practice well documented in a *Globe and Mail* series (Doolittle, 2017). Tabassum et al. (2023) recommend adding incentive for education to address intersectional forms of violence, a legacy of state violence founded on gender-based violence targeting Indigenous and other marginalized peoples. To shockproof communities against structural violence, Tabassum et al. argue for decolonization, an intersectional lens, repaired relations, and mutual flourishing supported by development of community-engaged workshops.

ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

The literature review has painted a picture of the families of MMIWG2S+ demanding change in systems and services, programs and policies, to educate and motivate, to build community capacity, to coordinate all levels of government, and to develop preventive measures. Their hope is that all can then be part of “the shared responsibility” to eliminate violence against Indigenous women and girls (Ambler, 2014, p. 27). This environmental scan reviews how effectively or not provincial jurisdictions such as British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, and Saskatchewan have responded to calls to develop and implement holistic, preventive, collaborative, and culturally appropriate policing. It highlights lessons learned in the different jurisdictions that could be applied in Saskatchewan.

Public safety is widely understood as about protecting the public from crimes, disaster, and other dangers so inimical to economic prosperity in a responsibility typically assigned to governments (Public Safety Canada, 2023). The primary goal of achieving public safety is, then, widely understood as preventing danger and protecting the property and wellbeing of individuals, businesses, organizations, and communities, a view represented in Saskatoon Board of Police Commissioners (2021) community conversations on the biggest challenges facing public safety. The Commissioners reported increasing social issues impacting community safety, difficulties accessing supports without 24/7/365 coordinated outreach services, and policing that was not equipped to address the social issues. While the Commissioners’ report documented calls for more visible police presence, better training to deal with diverse groups, and trust building, compassion, respect, and professionalism, there was also recognition of the responsibilities of “a more caring community” and a request for “respect for basic human rights and respect for the

Canadian Charter” (p. 9).

A human rights perspective is not just about prevention to address public safety but “depends on . . . food, clean water and air, housing, a basic income and the means to obtain it—an education and a job” along with “health care, health insurance, and the freedom from discrimination” (Friedman, 2021b, p. 1). This understanding of public safety underlines broader governmental responsibilities as well as harms caused by their neglect (Friedman, 2021a; 2021b).

Discrimination in the areas of employment, housing, and social policies, affect individuals’ wellbeing (Baskin, 2007). They push more people to the streets—and prompt in many jurisdictions “the exclusionary policing” of marginalized groups in public spaces (Baillergeau, 2014, p. 354).

Reorienting Policing

Grassroots movements from civil rights to Idle No More, Black Lives Matter, and Every Child Matters have raised their voices about an injustice system that has bred fear and suspicion among marginalized and racialized communities so disproportionately overrepresented in Canada’s prison system, so overpoliced and underprotected that they are reluctant to report when they have themselves been victimized with the result that acts of violence are seriously underreported (Tabassum et al., 2023; Umereweneza et al., 2020). Their advocacy has added to incentives to change policing culture and understand and implement policing that promotes a broad understanding of public safety in which Indigenous policing has an important role. Still, it is important to bear in mind Auditor-General Karen Hogan’s 2024 report warning that despite a half-billion-dollar investment, there is little to show for the investment in cost-shared federal-

provincial First Nations and Inuit Policing with no self-administered police service added in the five-year audit to August 2023 despite high crime-severity rates and low police presence (Freeze, 2024). Further, the James Smith Cree Nation mass killings underlined “a picture of systemic failure,” according to then Treaty Commissioner Mary Musqua-Culbertson (Peterson, 2024).

On a positive note, a 2021 major report *Missing and Missed: The Report of the Independent Civilian Review into Missing Person Investigations* by Independent reviewer, The Honourable Gloria J. Epstein, made 151 comprehensive recommendations to address deficiencies based on “systemic differential treatment” (Epstein, 2021, Vol. 4, p. 720). The Toronto Police Service is working on implementing these recommendations to achieve deserved priorities, develop a model of responsibilities, design “effective, timely, and discrimination-free” investigative procedures, redefine “the relationship between the Service and the LGBTQ2S+ and marginalized and vulnerable communities” and ensure “effective civilian oversight, accountability, and transparency”—from all of which other police services can learn as they have often failed to do in the cases of Robert Pickton and the Oppal report, for example (Epstein, 2021, p. 720).

Learning from British Columbia

Following the failure of Project Evenhanded, a task force formed in 2001 to investigate the disappearances and deaths of several Indigenous women in Downtown Eastside, Vancouver, by serial killer Robert Pickton, after Vancouver police wrote off the alarming situation as the “inexplicable comings and goings of druggies and hookers” (Macdonald & Macqueen, 2014, p. 5), it was obvious that investigative strategies were erroneous or misguided. Some of these

strategies were marred by failure to employ an Aboriginal-specific investigative strategy, restricted involvement of family members and community in the investigations, lack of follow up on tips, and mismanagement of informants and information sources as well as delays in pursuing a suspect-based strategy and failure to confirm or rule out suspects (Pearce, 2013, p. 491).

In response to this failure, former judge and adjudicator and commissioner under the *Police Act* of British Columbia Wally Oppal championed changes, significant reforms and initiatives in dealing with violence against Indigenous girls and women, becoming named in 2010 Commissioner of the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry. (Public Safety, 2019).

Section 5 of the Provincial Policing Standards in British Columbia (which are binding and subject to evaluation by the government) outlines Specialized Investigations which subsume Missing Persons Investigations put into effect on September 1, 2016 (Government of British Columbia, 2024). The purpose of the British Columbia Provincial Policing Standards promoted by Wally Oppal following the NI MMIGW was to ensure a consistent, prioritized approach in investigating missing people and to maintain and act on “important lessons of the Pickton cases and other missing and murdered women investigations.” These underlying principles would guide the approach:

There should be no barriers to reporting a missing person and investigations should begin without delay,

Investigations into persons reported missing should initially be approached as high risk until a risk assessment is completed,

Aboriginal women and girls are at an increased risk of harm,

If foul play is suspected, the case must be assigned to a serious or major crime section,

The safety and wellbeing of the missing person should be the primary concern driving investigative tasks and decisions,

Police officers need discretion to address the unique needs of each case, with accountability for decisions through supervisory review,

Cooperation between police forces is crucial to missing person investigations.

Families and reportees must be kept appropriately informed of the progress of an investigation and treated with compassion and respect.

A proactive approach should be taken towards missing person investigations.

Going missing is not in and of itself a crime. (Government of British Columbia, 2024).

Subsection 5.1.7 Prevention and Intervention (revised effective September 15, 2018) mandates standards in the following categories:

- Extra standard of care required for missing persons under the age of 19 (1)
- Child protection authorities
- Aboriginal liaison
- Protocols with other agencies
- Frequent reports involving the same individual.
- Suspicious links between cases

- Public awareness of the missing person reporting and investigation process
- Policies and procedures

In addition, subsections 5.2 Major Case Management, 5.3 Inter-Agency Cooperation and Coordination, 5.4 Sexual Assault Investigations, and section 6 Promotion of Unbiased Policing add to efforts to integrate equity and accountability.

Towards the same goal of improving police and Indigenous relations, further revisions have been incorporated into the British Columbia provincial policing standards (Government of British Columbia, 2024). Under subsection 3.2.5 Provincially Approved Training Courses, “Training to Promote Equitable and Unbiased Policing” has been introduced and would be kickstarted on July 30, 2024 (Government of British Columbia, 2024). This subsection mandates the following:

The Chief Constable, Chief Officer or Commissioner must ensure that:

- (1) All front-line police officers and front-line supervisor have completed BC Fair and Impartial Policing Training or a provincially-approved equivalent training course. Training records
- (2) Written records are maintained of the training required by this standard that has been completed by each police officer in the police force.

In addition, Subsection 3.2.6 “Training to Enhance Service Delivery to Vulnerable Communities” was revised on January 26, 2024, with standards grouped under **Indigenous**

cultural safety which mandates, for example, that all police officers and Independent Investigations Office investigators take approved training “on the history and current status of Indigenous peoples, including the history and legacies of police relations with Indigenous peoples in British Columbia” (and are encouraged “to attend learning events that are, where possible, experiential and specific to the local First Nation(s) or Indigenous peoples in the areas”); **trauma-informed practice** scheduled to be effective July 30, 2024, including a requirement to “update their skills and knowledge about trauma-informed practice every 3 years, at a minimum”; and **relationship violence** which have been in operation since December 31, 2022, including completion of Evidence-based, Risk-focused Intimate Partner Violence Investigation with refreshers every five years; and **training records** requiring documentation of training completion (Government of British Columbia, 2024).

Similarly, the *Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act* passed into law in November 2019, established the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) as British Columbia’s framework for reconciliation consistent with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action. The aim was to create channels which duly recognize and respect Indigenous human rights while at the same time introducing improved transparency in the collaboration of actors (Government of British Columbia, 2019). Four critical aspects of the legislation are to mandate that provincial laws align with UNDRIP; that the province develop an action plan in consultation with Indigenous peoples; that the province table annual reports on progress by June 30 each year; and that the province have flexibility to establish agreements with Indigenous governments “to exercise statutory decision-making authority together.”

Furthermore, the First Nations Policing Program, announced in June 1991 by the federal government, paved the way for Indigenous participation with provincial and federal governments in developing dedicated policing services within the community (Government of British Columbia, 2021). Formulated to give Indigenous populations “greater control over delivery and management of police services” and improve policing services offered by municipal departments and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 124 police are designated to 141 Indigenous communities in British Columbia to ensure policing services rendered are “culturally sensitive and responsive to their particular needs” (Government of British Columbia, 2021).

Learning from Manitoba

Taking “concrete steps,” as heralded by then-Manitoba Premier Brian Pallister in a press conference (Aiello, 2021, p.4), in response to the NI MMIWG Calls for Justice, the national action plan co-developed by the federal government with the National Families and Survivors Circle, Indigenous communities, and other levels of government, aims to “achieve the vision of a Canada where Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people, wherever they are, live free from violence, and are celebrated, honoured, respected , valued, safe and secure” (Aiello, 2021, p. 4). Louisa Housty-Jones, Assembly of First Nations Women’s Council member, stressed the need for “inclusion, transparency, representation, and political will” to implement the plan. In light of the federal government’s release of a 30-page “federal pathway” report to outline MMIWG commitments, including cultural changes, health and wellness changes, safety and human security changes, and justice changes supported by \$2.2 billion in the 2021 budget, many, including the Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC) denounced it as “fundamentally

flawed,” criticizing both process and outcome (Aiello, 2021, p. 4).

The Manitoba government released its own full report on an independent review of the provincial legislation outlining the responsibilities of various law enforcement entities in Manitoba (Frew, 2020; Government of Manitoba, 2020). Justice Minister Cliff Cullen promoted the report as bringing “changes that will . . . support greater responsiveness and accountability in policing, and help to ensure Manitobans have the utmost confidence in the law enforcement agencies who serve our communities so well.” He promised that legislation would be introduced to “strengthen the Manitoba Independent Investigation Unit (IIU) and address gaps in the current legislation.”

The full final report on the *Police Services Act*, which builds on the 1991 Aboriginal Justice Inquiry, was commissioned by the Manitoba government in 1988 to investigate the depths of racism in Manitoba’s justice system following the 1971 homicide of Helen Betty Osborne and the 1988 police shooting of J.J. Harper (Carreiro, 2021). The Aboriginal Justice Inquiry had issued a report with 296 recommendations to improve the justice system, including for Indigenous girls, women, and 2SLGBTQQIA+:

Better co-ordination between police, social workers, and abuse teams to deal with women involved in domestic violence.

Community based policing in Indigenous populations and abuse teams to deal with women involved in domestic violence.

Cross-cultural training among police officers and justice officials.

Indigenous-led safe houses and support for vulnerable women (Carreiro, 2021, pp. 2-3).

On the 29th of May 2020, the government of Canada acted on report recommendations by allocating \$44.8 million to build 12 new shelters in the bid to “support and protect Indigenous women and girls experiencing and fleeing violence” (Carreiro, 2021, p. 3; Government of Canada, 2020). However, as a result of “pushback from institutions within the society,” according to Commissioner Murray Sinclair, the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry has “actually just collected dust, sitting on the shelf,” says Indigenous rights advocate Percy Ballantyne (Carreiro, 2021, p.4). And the targeting of Indigenous women and girls continued.

The minister highlighted the independent review’s 70 recommendations spanning revisions to new sets of legislation, comprehensive regulatory standards and oversight regimes coupled with a Manitoban implementation team furthering research in collaboration with police agencies, Indigenous and non-governmental organizations, police governing bodies and the Association of Manitoba Municipalities (Government of Manitoba, 2020). The Royal Mounted Canadian Police were not left out as the Calls for Justice needed action leading to working to form a Joint Action Circle, “Indigenous-led and Survivor-centric,” to address violence against Indigenous girls, women, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ peoples (Manitoba RMCP, 2023).

Guided by the tenet, “nothing about us without us,” Manitoba RCMP is working in tandem with Indigenous Elders, Knowledge keepers, Survivors, and family members, a path barely traversed in the past. Together they are working to create a meaningful action plan centred on “ten core

components” derived from the 231 Calls for Justice where the Manitoba RCMP could effect change: Investigations, prevention, education, Indigenous units and policing, victim servicing, recruiting and retention, advisory committee and oversight, research and reporting, communication, reconciliation, and partnerships (Manitoba RCMP, 2023).

Further, Winnipeg police have included the MMIWG calls for justice in its Indigenous Accord (unanimously adopted by City Council on March 22, 2017) and its commitment and reporting process to relay its strides in reconciliation and progress in the NI MMIWG Calls to Justice (City of Winnipeg, 2024). In addition, health, and wellness, employment and volunteering opportunities, housing, among many other resources are outlined on the website of the city of Winnipeg to provide for and cater to Indigenous people (City of Winnipeg, 2024).

Learning from Ontario

Thunder Bay Police Service (TBPS) in particular has been the subject of a number of investigations in light of ongoing injustice, very poor relations with Indigenous communities, and concerns about poor police oversight. The 2018 *Thunder Bay Police Services Board [TBPSB] Investigation Final Report* led by Senator Murray Sinclair (retained by the Ontario Civilian Police Commission [OCPC]) documented "an extreme level of racism, and differential treatment by police towards Indigenous peoples in missing person and death investigations and violence against Indigenous peoples generally in Thunder Bay." Policing, the report argued, was embedded in historical relations with Indigenous communities “depriving First Nations of both land and livelihoods, and leading to their increasing marginalization in the social, political and economic life of the growing urban centre” (pp, iv-v). The *TBPSB Final Report* found that “the

high-profile cases of murder and violence are only the tip of the iceberg” in the context of daily, well-documented cases resulting from “the general climate of racism” that goes well beyond a few “bad apples,” causing the Indigenous community to lose all faith in the system and a pattern of underreporting (p. vi). The *TBPSB Final Report* found the following related to systemic discrimination and a failure of Board leadership:

- There are no formal channels for input by Indigenous people or their organizations into the planning and policy development functions that shape policing;
- Indigenous people are under-represented on the TBPS, both in direct enforcement and in administrative and management positions, and there is no formal plan or policy in place to address that imbalance;
- There are no mandatory training or orientation programs in place that speak to the obvious and critical need for cultural awareness training to familiarize police with the history, culture, and issues of the Indigenous community and
- Programs intended to foster rapport with communities and organizations are funded year to year, without long term commitment of resources. (p. vii)

The *TBPSB Final Report* therefore recommended that OCPC appoint an administrator to exercise Board responsibilities until a new Board is appropriately trained to implement the Final Report’s 12 recommendations regarding governance policy; Board planning; recruitment, retention and promotion; oversight of chief and deputy chief; communication and transparency; relationships with Indigenous groups; Board and police training; support to Police Boards from the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services (MCSCS). The report also recommended that MCSCS “designate the following as crimes for which the TBPS Chief of Police

must develop and maintain procedures and processes for criminal and general investigations” (TBPSB, 2018, p. xi):

1. Criminal Organization;
2. Human Trafficking;
3. Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls; and
4. Hate Crimes and Violence against Indigenous Peoples.

Despite investigations and reports, issues persisted with allegations of misconduct, internal feuding among officers and board, and formal complaints leading to the board being placed under the outside administrator’s control (Fiddler, 2024). The OCPC “announced charges of deceit and discreditable conduct against [retired TBPS police chief] Ms. [Sylvie] Hauth”; in April 2024 Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) arrested and charged Hauth with obstruction of justice, obstructing a public or peace officer, and breach of trust by a public officer (Fiddler, 2024). This was the third TBPS member to be charged in an investigation ongoing since late 2021 (Fiddler, 2024). The current Chief Darcy Fleury welcomed the investigation as “another step toward resolution” and hoped that “community members will not allow the results of this investigation to overshadow the ongoing dedication and quality service provided by our TBPS” (Fiddler, 2024).

On November 24th, 2019, the Thunder Bay Police Service erected the First Annual Tree of Hope to pay respects to the thousands of MMIWG; there were 1200 red lights strung around the tree to

represent the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls across Canada (Diaczuk, 2019). Constable Sharlene Bourdeau of the Thunder Bay Police Service spearheaded the Tree of Hope project stating that the number of bulbs on the tree holds dual significance. It represents the 1200 cases of MMIWG as stated by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police as well as the fact that the Thunder Bay Police Service's address is at 1200 Balmoral Street (Diaczuk, 2019).

In an OPP information session in February of 2024 Thunder Bay Constable Sharlene Bourdeau pointed out that in the first year (2019) of the Tree of Hope campaign to honour “all the victims, families, and relatives of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls and Two-Spirited,” only the Thunder Bay Police Service participated. The OPP began participating in 2022 and now there are 26 police services across in the province putting up red lit trees in honour of MMIWG (Garrick, 2024). Fort William Councillor Desiree Morriseau-Shields opened by “honour[ing] and respect[ing] the work you are doing here to bring justice, to bring some respect for us to continue cherishing our Anishinaabekwe across the region of Ontario — it's important.” She added that she herself has three daughters and worries: “I want all Anishinaabekwe to be cherished just as I cherish my girls, they deserve respect, they deserve justice when respect is not given, and that's everyone's job here, everyone who is standing in this room, across Thunder Bay, across Ontario, all of our communities” (Garrick, 2024). OPP Constable Tanya Kutschke, an Algonquin member of the OPP Indigenous Policing Bureau's MMIWG Team, stressed their role to implement NI MMIWG calls for justice related to policing. They work closely with the Family Information Liaison Unit mandated by the MMIWG Inquiry. A detective constable is tasked with establishing what information can be share and they host a “healing circle and the families are very appreciative of this information,” according to Constable Kutschke (Garrick,

2024). It is an important start but there is still much work that needs to be done to breach the distance between the police services and Indigenous and racialized communities.

The TBPS installed a Breaking Barriers initiative to dismantle the barriers between Indigenous people and other racialized groups and the police service. The page starts by defining systemic racism, citing the provincial government definition: “Organizational culture, policies, directives, practices or procedures that exclude, displace or marginalize some racialized groups or create unfair barriers for them to access valuable benefits and opportunities. This is often the result of institutional biases in organizational culture, policies, directives, practices and procedures that may appear neutral but have the effect of privileging some groups and disadvantaging others.” The page also offers five clickable links to: *Broken Trust: OIPRD systemic review of Thunder Bay Police Service*, *TBPS Board Investigation: Senator Murray Sinclair’s final report on the TBPS Board*, *Inquests: Updates on 7 Youth Inquests Recommendations & other inquests*, *Anti Racism & Inclusion: The City of Thunder Bay’s Anti Racism and Inclusion coalition*, and *Sudden Death Reinvestigations*. However, it is also important to note that of the links available only one was working, TBPS Board Investigations. They have also recently revamped their Aboriginal Liaison Unit to become their Community Inclusion Team. The team consists of two school resource officers, two liaison officers, and one civilian coordinator who have been working towards establishing a framework to guide the unit. Their goal is to build more positive relationships with Indigenous and other racialized communities (TBPS, 2024).

The Thunder Bay example is a cautionary tale from which lessons need to be learned. Talaga (2024) describes Thunder Bay as “ground zero for human rights violations against Indigenous

peoples in Canada” (p. A 11). She reminds of the countless inquests, including one of the largest in Ontario history for seven First Nations students who died between 2000 and 2013; most of its recommendations remain to be implemented. “First Nations people continue to die, their families left with nothing” p. A 11). Such is the loss of faith in TBPS, where 25 unsolved cases of MMIWG remain without a recommended external review, that there are calls for “the disbandment of the TBPS.” Talaga asks, “if this much apparent rot doesn’t justify extreme measures, what does?” (2024, A11)

Learning from Saskatchewan

The province of Saskatchewan responded to the final report of the NI MMIWG by renewing its own efforts to foster inclusive spaces around Indigenous culture such as a redevelopment of the Prince Albert Victoria Hospital and increasing available funding for the First Nations and Métis Community Partnership Program (Government of Saskatchewan, 2021). In 2023 the Government of Saskatchewan invested \$27.5M in community-based and Indigenous-led programs and services in keeping with the commitment to the 2019 federal Calls for Justice (Government of Saskatchewan, 2023). The Government of Saskatchewan also allocated \$800,000 for the MMIWG+ Community Response Fund, which in the 2023-2024 fiscal year funded 23 projects geared towards the safety of Indigenous women and the 2SLGBTQIA community. This fund addresses the Call for Justice 15.6 and Pillar 2 and Pillar 4 of the National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence (Government of Saskatchewan, 2024).

The 2021 Saskatchewan Police Commission Policy Manual (developed with the Saskatchewan

Association of Chiefs of Police and the Saskatchewan Missing Person Partnership [SMPP]) contains an Incident Response for Missing Persons, importantly providing minimum provincial standards shaping individual agency responses and promoting accountability in a system of audits along with reviews and revisions. The Policy Manual spells out its commitment to community policing principles; its statement of principles clarifies the understanding of changes in policing:

Policing has evolved to the extent that demands on police services sometimes exceed the resources of any particular police service. The Saskatchewan Police Commission supports and encourages cooperation and collaboration between police services, the sharing of resources between police services, and the establishment of necessary mutual assistance protocols.

Change in the handling of cases is something that now retired Sgt. Ken Palen, head of the Historical Case Unit for the RCMP in Saskatoon, witnessed even before the policy manual development. His unit, of which he was part from 2007, handles all of the cases in the northern half of the province. He saw how DNA has changed things since the 1960s and 1970s when a missing person's case would be added to the Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC) for about six months before being removed if it was not solved (Fiddler, 2015a). He also witnessed the impact of such new tools as criminal profiling, geographic profiling, forensic pathology, statement analysis, and the Violent Criminal Linkage System (ViCLAS) in addition to Saskatchewan's Missing Persons Task Force (from 2007) and the Saskatchewan Association Chiefs of Police website regular updates with all missing persons (Fiddler, 2015a). The result of these initiatives and his unit reviews, according to Sgt. Palen, is that "we have not had any long-

term missing persons added to our provincial website from the RCMP side of things" (Fiddler, 2015a).

Recognizing the larger systemic and structural factors that impact their roles and responsibilities, Saskatoon Police Service (SPS) is collaborating in “holistic” approaches. On May 5th, 2017, the SPS unveiled a monument *Wicanhpi Duta Win* (the Dakota name of Missing and Murdered Amber Redman) honouring MMIWG positioned outside the building on 25th St. This beautiful monument is crafted by Cree artist Lionel Peyachew and inspired by Amber Redman, who was murdered in 2005. Amber’s mother, Gwenda Yuzicappi, described her traditional fancy shawl dancing as watching an eagle in flight (CBC, 2017; SPS, 2024b). The monument depicts a traditional fancy shawl dancer on a cloud. The artist describes his work as “‘an angel, in flight, on a cloud; white wings to represent purity.’ Icons on the shawl include a tree of life ‘to represent the longing for life,’ [and] butterflies to represent freedom; and flowers to represent beauty and femininity” (CBC, 2017). According to the Saskatoon *StarPhoenix* approximately 300 people gathered for the unveiling on May 5th 2017, braving the blazing sun to hear speeches by Police Chief Clive Weighill, Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations (FSIN) Chief Bobby Cameron, and Saskatoon Tribal Council (STC) Chief Felix Thomas. Former Police Chief Clive Weighill’s speech underlines the meaning of the monument for a new way forward:

The Saskatoon Police Service is honoured to be the home for the monument to missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.... It is our hope that the monument represents not only a place of reflection and peace, but also represents the strong partnerships our Service has with the Saskatoon Tribal Council, the families of victims of violence, the

province of Saskatchewan and the City of Saskatoon (Saskatoon Police Service, 2017).

The project was funded by the STC, the Government of Saskatchewan, and the SPS. The Saskatoon Police Service's Indigenous Relations page (SPS, 2024b) records its commitment in working with the Office of the Treaty Commissioner to create an action plan towards "Truth, Reconciliation and Treaty implementation" complete with actions, timelines, and measures of success. The Chief's Advisory Committee made up of local Elders, cultural advisors, kokums, and mushoms advises SPS on current Indigenous matters.

Missing Persons Task Force

In an update for this report on SPS initiatives in the areas of staffing, organizational structure, policies, investigative techniques, training, education, and community collaboration, Detective Sergeant Aaron Moser, SPS Missing Person Unit (with input from Constables Keri Heikman, Stephanie Kepler, and Shaina Lynden of the Equity and Cultural Engagement Unit), reported that Saskatoon Police Service (SPS) first received provincial funding in 2007 for a Missing Person Task Force Sergeant responsible for the continued investigation of current and long-term missing person investigations. SPS strengthened the Task Force in 2015 with the addition of the Missing Person Unit including two detective constables assigned to assist the Missing Person Task Force Sergeant. In 2017 SPS began deploying a dedicated Patrol Missing Person Constable to each shift. All four Patrol Platoons now have a primary and alternate Missing Person Constable to ensure a consistent 24/7 response to missing person complaints. In addition, assigned officers have the opportunity to develop the necessary skills and abilities needed to conduct missing person investigations.

In 2020 the Missing Person Unit (MPU) / Missing Person Task Force was restructured and moved into the Major Crime Section, augmenting resources and knowledge of the Missing Person Unit and allowing for a more proactive response to a suspicious missing person report with the assignment of a Team Commander and the use of Major Case Management—a model that remains in place in April 2025.

Missing Person Task Force Training

In terms of training, the MPU has since 2019 delivered annual training to the Patrol Missing Person Constables, including best practices, case studies, and the tools to conduct proper Missing Person investigations. In 2025 training added presentations from the family of Megan Gallagher who was reported missing to SPS in September 2020. Tragically the investigation ended in the recovery of her body and numerous persons being charged with her homicide. The Gallagher family discussed their experiences (both positive and negative) with SPS. In addition to discussing Megan's case, they also covered MMIWG, trauma, police involvement/relationships with the community, and the importance of communication with families of missing persons. The SPS believes that family involvement in this type of training will help frame a professional and trauma-informed approach to missing person investigations.

Officers also receive training from investigators in the Major Crime Unit and Public Safety (Search and Rescue) Unit on how to navigate different steps that can be taken to locate missing persons and understand relevant legislation, media releases, and partner agency roles.

Missing Persons Family Liaison

The Missing Persons Family Liaison established in 2012 is a civilian-led position within the SPS Victim Services program with these goals and responsibilities:

- Providing direct services and support to families of missing persons, including emotional support, information and referrals to other agencies and community resources
- Assisting police investigators in a coordinated response for families of missing persons
- Identifying service gaps and emerging issues related to supporting the families of missing persons
- Working closely with the Indigenous Resource Officer(s) in order to provide culturally appropriate services and support to Indigenous families
- Delivering and facilitating workshops on the topics of missing persons, promising practices, and available services
- Identifying and developing partnerships with key service delivery agencies that provide outreach services to the families of missing persons
- Assisting other police services in developing consistent and appropriate practices, procedures and training materials regarding the services and support provided to families of missing persons in Saskatchewan
- Providing training, advice, and guidance to other victim service programs in Saskatchewan regarding best practices for supporting families of missing persons
- Working with community agencies involved with missing Indigenous women cases to provide outreach services to affected families.

Policy and Reporting Procedures

Policy and Procedures relevant to Missing Person investigations has undergone numerous reviews and revisions in recent years, including after the National Inquiry's final report. The Saskatchewan Police Commission Policy Manual provides a framework for many of the protocols contained in the current SPS Policy. The Missing Person Task Force Sergeant reviews, assesses, and monitors all missing person complaints. Some examples of changes made to address shortcomings since 2004 when Daleen Bosse was reported missing include the following:

- “There is no waiting time before a Missing Persons report will be accepted. Members will not advise the complainant to return or call back at a later time/date to file the report.”
- Communications staff are subject to the same conditions outlined above
- CPIC (Canadian Police Information Centre) entry is required as soon as possible
- The Communications Supervisor and Operational Staff Sergeant are both notified of all missing person complaints received through Communications
- Detailed policy that outlines both the procedures and various persons responsible for ensuring all reports are assigned for investigation. This policy also contains criteria for initial evaluation, reporting requirements, mobilizing immediate patrol resources, assignment of detectives, coordinating with outside agencies, deployment of search and rescue, media releases, long term file management, DNA collection, liaising with family, and transfer to Major Crimes (homicide) among other topics.

Operation Runaway

Developed in 2017, Operation Runaway (OR) is a voluntary, youth-centred and collaborative program designed to identify the root causes for youth that habitually run away (EGADZ, 2025a). The program relies on partnership and inter-agency cooperation and has resulted in strong relationships between EGADZ, the Ministry of Social Services, Mental Health and Addictions Services, and the SPS. Youth engaged in the program are directly involved in the development of their own case-planning and are able to quickly access wrap-around services and support as they need them. Strengths of the program include the identification of risk reduction strategies for youth while at home or in the community, reducing the instances of runaway youths and missing youth reports, and increasing self-determination through encouragement, accountability, and support.

Missing Youth Saskatchewan Application (Missing Youth Sask App)

The Missing Youth Sask App was a partnership between EGADZ, SPS, and the Government of Saskatchewan (EGADZ, 2025b). The initiative was developed using the input and experiences of youth on the EGADZ Youth Committee to address and reduce unnecessary missing youth reports through the identification and prioritization of safety and risk. The application itself consists of a risk assessment tool that helps youth workers engage with and assess the level of risk for each youth if they do not return to their group home as scheduled. Upon completion of the risk assessment, the application guides the worker on whether or not they should report the youth as missing to police. While adhering to strict privacy guidelines, the application also serves as a database with comprehensive history for each youth, so that in the event of a youth transferring to a new home that is also using the application, staff are able to

easily access information and provide timely and effective support.

Officially launched in 2023, the application is currently being used in all EGADZ-operated youth homes. In 2024, the Ministry of Social Services of Saskatchewan approved its use in government-operated homes, the implementation of which is ongoing in May 2025. The application has been effective in ensuring proper risk assessments are completed, reducing reporting, and enhancing the quality of reporting.

Community Engagement

The SPS Community Engagement Division is directly accountable to the community and is also the direct line of contact for City Councillors, Community Associations, Indigenous governance leaders, Elders and Community Committees (SPS, 2025a). Officers working in this area are involved in a range of initiatives and programs designed to enhance relationships between police and these groups. Some examples include the following:

1. Indigenous Studies – Recruit Training

Cst. Shaina Lynden has a master's in Organizational Leadership and is currently working in the Equity and Cultural Engagement Unit. Cst. Lynden's Applied Project involved assessing gaps in SPS officer knowledge of Indigenous history based on which she developed a week-long Indigenous Studies in-service implemented in January 2025 for all SPS recruits graduating from the Saskatchewan Police College. The training covers a variety of topics including bias, stereotyping, treaty development, residential schools, the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in the justice and child welfare systems, TRC Calls to Action, MMIWG2S Calls

for Justice, and other pertinent historical experiences. She is currently working on an EdD in Educational Leadership and continuing to pursue research surrounding improving the police-Indigenous relationship and the training and education of officers in Canada.

2. Chief's Advisory Committee + Indigenous Women and Two Spirit Advisory Circle

The Chief's Advisory Committee made up of local First Nation and Métis Elders, the Chief of Police, as well as SPS officers from different levels of the service, meets four times annually, coinciding with the beginning of every new season, to connect and advise the police service on current issues relating to Indigenous and police relations (SPS, 2025b). Planned and facilitated by the Indigenous Relations Consultant and the Equity and Cultural Engagement Unit, the meetings are typically opened with a pipe ceremony, include a meal, and a discussion/sharing circle.

The Indigenous Women and Two Spirit Advisory Circle also meets quarterly and includes Indigenous female officers, the Chief of Police, and Indigenous women from different organizations and institutions within the community, including those with lived experience. Traditionally within Indigenous (First Nations, Métis and Inuit) communities, women were the decision makers. This circle was created in 2019 to ensure the service is meeting the needs of Indigenous women & 2SLGBTQIA+ within the community, to build relationships, and to create dialogue on topics of mutual concern. It was created from a vision of restoring women to the role of decision makers within the working framework of the SPS.

3. Ongoing Community Engagement

Among ongoing events and initiatives that SPS participates in to improve relationships with the Indigenous community are the following:

- Victim Services, the City of Saskatoon, and the SPS Equity and Cultural Engagement host an annual *Calling Home Ceremony* on May 5th which includes a pipe ceremony and a community walk as well as a gathering of MMIWG2S families.
- SPS is currently on year 3 of a 4-year commitment to hosting a yearly feast and round dance in commemoration of MMIWG2S.
- An Indigenous recruiting event is being hosted on June 20, 2025, which will celebrate Indigenous voices in policing and highlight Indigenous members while bringing together Indigenous people interested in a career in policing. The event will include hands-on opportunities, connections with current Indigenous officers, and insightful information about the hiring process to help remove barriers to applying;
- The Equity and Cultural Engagement Unit also hosts various events and initiatives such as Orange shirt fundraisers, Tipi teachings, Indigenous Storytelling, medicine picking, the moose hide campaign and others.

VICE and Human Trafficking Unit

The SPS Vice and Human Trafficking Unit's primary responsibility is the disruption of sexual exploitation in the sex trade and investigations including but not limited to Human Trafficking, Procurement, Advertising and other associated offences. In 2023 SPS enhanced the

capacity of the unit from two to four detective constables, also adding an analyst to assist officers, in response to evidence that the incidence of sexual exploitation in the community was both increasing in frequency and evolving to include organized crime and interprovincial movement of victims.

The Vice and Human Trafficking Unit works closely with Victim Services and other community organizations to ensure that victims are connected with appropriate supports. In October 2023 SPS Victim Services secured 2.5 years of federal (Justice Canada) funding for Victim Services to create a Human Trafficking Response Team. Their work began in 2024 and included two full-time positions in Victim Services. National data from CCJS shows that young persons are the most commonly trafficked victims in police reported cases of Trafficking in Persons.

The SPS Vice and Human Trafficking Unit also participates in Operation No Go which is a collaborative multi-agency approach to assisting persons who are involved or at risk of being involved in sexual exploitation or human trafficking.

In 2020 SPS also developed internal guidelines for the enforcement of prostitution-related offences to treat prostitution as a form of sexual exploitation and to ensure members promote the safety, dignity, and well-being of victims as well as those who sell their own sexual services. A number of operational changes accompanied these guidelines including a prohibition on the ticketing of sex workers under Saskatoon's Adult Services Bylaw.

Mandatory Training for Sworn Members

In 2018, all sworn members were afforded the opportunity to experience and engage in the KAIROS Blanket Exercise. Founded on Indigenous methodologies, the Blanket Exercise was a participatory and engaging learning session that used history and emotional experience to teach individuals about pre-contact, treaty-making, colonization, and resistance. (KAIROS, 2025). The exercise was also implemented as part of SPS's yearly block training program.

In 2020, SPS implemented mandatory training on trauma-informed approaches for all sworn members. The online course, run through the Canadian Police Knowledge Network (CPKN), "introduced the concept of trauma, the different range of reactions to trauma, and conducting investigations using a trauma-informed approach" (CPKN, 2025a). The learning objectives of the course included:

- Recognizing the biological impacts of trauma on the brain
- Identifying the different types of trauma
- Recognizing the range of reactions that can result from a traumatic event
- Recognizing the importance of your role and the potential impact you can have when interacting with a victim of trauma
- Recognizing the individual impacts trauma can have on diverse populations.

In 2023, SPS implemented training specific to unconscious biases. The goal of the online course, which was also run through the CPKN, was for candidates to "learn about types

of unconscious bias, how unconscious bias can impact others, and strategies and techniques that could be used to recognize and prevent unconscious bias” (CPKN, 2025b).

The learning objectives of the course included:

- Explaining and identifying types of unconscious bias
- Describing how unconscious bias negatively influences decision-making and perceptions of others
- Applying strategies to manage and interrupt bias.

In numerous ways, then, SPS is part of collaborative efforts to keep people safe in the city, emphasizing “holistic” approaches deploying Alternative Response Officers (AROs) made permanent in 2022—in addition to the Community Support Officers (CSOs) now transferred to Saskatoon Fire—augmented by the Community Mobilization Unit introduced in 2020 to patrol and build relationships with community organizations in a move away from an “enforcement” model (James, 2021, 2022a, 2022b; Levy, 2024). The Police and Crisis Team (PACT) program created in partnership with Saskatoon Crisis Intervention Service and the Saskatoon Health Region’s Mental Health and Addiction Services and funded by SPS in collaboration with Saskatchewan Health Authority, and the provincial Ministry of Health, pairs an officer with a mental health social worker to attend calls related to mental health or addictions (Levy, 2024; SPS, 2024a). The program has added a fourth unit in October 2023 in response to rising calls: from 949 in 2019 to 2,632 in 2023 (Levy, 2024). Program benefits include reduced arrests for disturbances, decreased volume and length of avoidable mental health emergency-room visits, stabilization in the community, successful crisis resolution, and follow-ups on client situation (Levy, 2024; SPS, 2024a)—diverting 452 people from emergency rooms and 42 from detention

with estimated savings in 2023 of \$437,597.05 (Levy, 2024).

Five pillars anchor the SPS (2021) Strategic Plan 2020-2024: “Crime & Safety, Our People, Partnerships, Communication, and Innovation” (p. 5). While respectful of community concerns around “road safety, addictions and mental health issues” in a changing landscape, it is innovative in its “methods to address both crime and community safety. Community partnerships and solutions outside of traditional policing are key to addressing the root causes of crime and achieving community safety” (p. 6). SPS has shown its commitment to responding to "the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Calls to Action and to responding to the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Calls for Justice” (p. 8).

Umereweneza et al. (2020) were heartened to find law enforcement “making strides” in Saskatchewan (p. 112). They found effective partnering with local agencies and leaders, trauma-informed training, and “pro-active steps” in building trust in community. SPS, for instance had reduced “unfounded” cases [see also Doolittle, 2017] from 135 to 25 by 2018 (p. 112), while Regina Police Service had partnered with Regina Sexual Assault Center and Regina Hospitals to develop two new reporting options (p. 151).

CONCLUSION

Drawing on a literature review and environmental scan of select jurisdictions in Canada, this report has aimed to shed light on interactions with policing experienced by families of MMIWG2S+ in support of a funding application to conduct an in-depth study. The report highlights the systemic and structural forces that continue to marginalize, exclude, and dominate Indigenous peoples, especially women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people, in order to shift awareness and understanding of how and why the violence continues—and continues to be so invisible to settler Canadians and to the systems and agencies that are mandated to protect public safety. Instead of repeating blame games that deflect attention from “ugly truths” (Hanson & Hanson, 2006) about where culpability lies, we need to understand how colonial history so deeply embedded in mainstream institutions and their cultures, is not part of Canada’s past but profoundly implicated in our ongoing realities. In *Reclaiming Power and Place*, the 2019 Final Report of the NI MMIWG importantly offers a new framework for understanding violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people and a pathway to justice. It is not interested in blame games but in truths about how colonial history has undermined Indigenous worldviews that had sustained peoples for millennia and rationalized theft of land in the name of “progress.” It is equally clear that Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people have been “targets of violence for far too long” and that it is time that settler Canadians listen and learn from the testimony of 2,380 people. In an effort to end the persistent ignorance, wilful blindness, and failures to listen, the voices of survivors, their families, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and other experts document acts of “race-based genocide of Indigenous Peoples, including First Nations, Inuit and Métis.” The TRC is equally clear that social issues are the result of a colonial legacy of land appropriation, dominant thinking in institutions, and

intergenerational trauma related to “cultural genocide” and ongoing structural and systemic discrimination.

This colonial legacy shapes the experience of families of MMIWG2S+ in interactions with policing in Saskatchewan and beyond. Their experience of the system has bred such fear and suspicion that Indigenous and other marginalized and racialized communities are reluctant to report when they are themselves victimized. Thus, the cycle of violence continues, while the families of MMIWG2S+ call for change in systems and services, programs, and policies, to mobilize community, to coordinate all levels of government, and to develop preventive and holistic measures in “the shared responsibility” to eliminate violence against Indigenous women and girls (Ambler, 2014, p. 27).

The environmental scan reviews how effectively or not British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, and Saskatchewan have responded to calls to develop and implement holistic, preventive, collaborative, and culturally appropriate policing. While some jurisdictions have made strides in this regard, Thunder Bay in particular has been identified as “ground zero for human rights violations against Indigenous people in Canada” (Talaga 2024, p. A11) and as having a “general culture of racism” (TBPSB, 2018, p. vi). Much remains to be done and to be better understood and acted on—which can be explored in an in-depth study designed to centre and learn from the voices in surveys and interviews of those most affected: the families of MMIWG2S+. We conclude with recommendations related to Survey/Interview Framework and Funding.

Recommendations

Survey/Interview Framework

The survey/interview framework can usefully focus on issues and themes identified in the literature review and environmental scan related to police-family interventions. The framework should be Indigenous-led, decolonizing and antiracist, critically aware of whiteness as a social construct, trauma-informed, culturally and age-appropriate, and inclusive of all family generations (from youth to seniors and Elders) and locations (urban, rural, and remote). Major themes include:

- Blame games and accountability frameworks
- Gaps in policing policy and programming
- Gaps between policy and practice
- Timeliness and transparency of communications
- Police training and experience
- Disclosure and reporting
- Referrals to services and supports
- Access to supports and services (formal and informal)
- Barriers to support and services access
- Treatment by service providers
- Satisfaction with supports and services
- Trust in policing and service providers
- Overall impact on families and communities (safety, security, self-confidence, empowerment)

Funding Opportunities

While there are TriCouncil funding opportunities (both Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council [SSHRC] and Canadian Institutes of Health Research [CIHR]), there are also funding options that are tailored to MMIWG2S+ applications:

- **Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls + (MMIWG+) Community Response Fund** has been augmented by federal funding to Saskatchewan to address gender-based violence. Up to \$40,000 for “dedicated projects that enhance awareness, safety and empowerment within Indigenous communities.” Applications for first intake are due May 31, 2025, and for the second intake, November 10, 2025.
- **Women and Gender Equity Canada** adds to provincial funding in support of Indigenous-led approaches. Open to grassroots and non-profit Indigenous organizations; non-profits and municipalities “seeking authentic partnerships” with Indigenous communities; and non-Indigenous non-profits with “Indigenous involvement and whose primary programs/services benefit First Nations or Métis clientele.” Applications for projects that “advance violence prevention efforts and foster safety for Indigenous women, girls, Two-spirit people, their families and communities” are due May 31.

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