

Indigenous Practice Paper: Police- involved Indigenous Deaths in Canada

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Nearly three decades after a landmark commission warned of systemic injustices against Indigenous communities, recent police-involved killings and escalating racial disparities make it painfully clear that Canada's promises of reconciliation have yet to be fully realized. For decades, Indigenous peoples in Canada have experienced systemic inequities rooted in a justice system that has failed to address their unique cultural and historical circumstances. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples formally published in 1996 identified the urgent need for meaningful reforms. Yet, contemporary reporting shows rising police-involved deaths, revealing that the same systemic injustices persist today. Within this landscape of ongoing harm, the Canadian Association of Social Workers: Code of Ethics (CASW, 2005) provides a moral compass calling for accountability, respect, and transformative change. Despite longstanding recognition of these problems, these patterns of violence and marginalization continue unimpeded. This essay will examine how these issues manifest on micro, meso, and

macro levels of social work practice. Thus, this essay argues that the persistent violence and inequity faced by Indigenous communities demand immediate transformative reforms, stricter accountability measures, and a renewed ethical commitment that moves Canadian society from acknowledging past injustices to actively dismantling them.

An article from the Yellowhead Institute “Two Weeks, Six Dead: Police Violence, Indigenous Dehumanization & Canadian Indifference” McGuire (2024), details how over a two-week period (August 29 – September 9, 2024) there was a total of six people killed by the RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police). All of whom were Indigenous. McGuire (2024) states that police violence stretches all the way back to early Canada, furthermore, she claims that Canada has been complicit in the deaths of Indigenous people since first contact. The topic of stereotypes, such as the "savage" are explored and how they actively contribute to the justification of violence against Indigenous people. Overall, McGuire's (2024) main message is "There are significant racial disparities in Canada when it comes to police violence, with Indigenous peoples vastly overrepresented in those incidents". Regardless of that in 2024, we speak of this as a time of reconciliation for Indigenous people, "The state continues to apprehend, incarcerate, confine, abuse, and kill Indigenous peoples" (McGuire, 2024) at a

shocking and steadily increasing rate. For more than a century, the rights of Indigenous people have been ignored and eroded.

To put into perspective how long Indigenous people have faced the injustices of the criminal system, we can turn to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP, 1996). The main goal of the RCAP was to investigate the relationship between Indigenous peoples, the Canadian government, and Canadian society. With the intent to propose solutions to challenges affecting these relationships, as well as restore justice to the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people within society. The RCAP states that the justice system of Canada has failed Aboriginal people and that it has been both inaccessible and insensitive (RCAP 1996, p. 27). This report also includes the results of a Saskatchewan study by "indicating that a treaty Indian boy turning 16 in 1976 had a 70 per cent chance of at least one stay in prison by the age of 25 (that age range being the one with the highest risk of imprisonment). The corresponding figure for non-status or Métis was 34 per cent. For a non-Native Saskatchewan boy, the figure was 8 per cent" (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, p. 30).

Over the next 315 pages, the Commission of Inquiry investigated the relationship among Aboriginal people, the government of Canada, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and part of the culture of Canada as a whole. What is crucial to

extract from this report is that even in 1996 when this was published, investigators were able to identify that “understanding the root causes is critical to understanding what it will take by way of a national commitment to bring about real change” (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, p. 33). To return to contemporary issues regarding these same circumstances, it is apparent in McGuire’s (2024) article that, as predicted by the investigators, matters surrounding the justice system have only intensified and worsened for Indigenous people. “It is difficult — especially in moments like these — to ignore claims that genocide in Canada is ongoing, despite our supposed era of reconciliation” (McGuire, 2024).

The harmful inequities faced by Indigenous peoples in Canada's justice system are portrayed in a Global News article titled "Alberta First Nation Condemns Shooting Death of 15-year-old, Calls for RCMP Resignations," written by Karen Bartko (2024). The article highlights the outrage within Indigenous communities over the RCMP's actions and subsequent lack of justice. The communities described it as a failure of law enforcement accountability, calling for resignations within the police force of the officers involved with the incident. The victim, a young boy named Hoss Lightning, had called 911 in fear of his life, stating that he was being followed by people who were trying to kill him (Bartko, 2024).

Within one hour after the 911 call was made, RCMP in Wetaskiwin stated they found an 'individual' and approached. According to police, the individual was in possession of a weapon, which was reportedly confiscated by the two officers on scene. However, RCMP have not provided any further comment or clarification on what the so-called weapon actually was. Following the confiscation, a supposed confrontation occurred, during which both officers discharged their firearms, lightning was struck and later died upon arrival at the hospital (Bartko, 2024). Lightning is one of the six Indigenous people killed by police within a two-week span this year, as mentioned in McGuire's (2024) article.

Another recent Indigenous victim of police brutality mentioned by McGuire is Steven 'Iggy' Dedam. In the CBC News article, "Family Challenges RCMP Statement After Mi'kmaw Man Shot and Killed During Wellness Check," written by Sis'moqon (September 12, 2024); the problematic and disputable death of a thirty-four-year-old father was reported. According to the article "the RCMP statement said officers from the Elsipogtog detachment responded to a call around 11:19 p.m. about a man in mental distress with a weapon at a residence in the community. RCMP said the man refused to drop his weapon and a member shot their gun at the man. RCMP said first aid was immediately administered and the man was taken to the hospital

where he later died" (Sis'moqon, 2024). Dedam's family disputes the RCMP statement and claims it is falsified, stating that the RCMP statement did not include that they were called to Dedam's home for a wellness check. The family believes that further details regarding the incident should be shared with the public community and denies the claim that RCMP administered first-aid immediately to Dedam after he had been shot. In conclusion to the article the family claims that they were not able to say goodbye to Dedam at the hospital prior to his death and that he died surrounded by police rather than family and loved ones (Sis'moqon, 2024).

The systemic injustices outlined by the RCAP (1996) and echoed by current accounts of police violence against Indigenous communities (Bartko, 2024; McGuire, 2024; Sis'moqon, 2024) are further underscored by the data from Tracking (In)justice (2023), which reveals a troubling rise in police-involved deaths and persistent racial disparities in Canada. The number of individuals who have died at the hands of police has steadily increased over the last century, most significantly within the last two years. In 2021 Indigenous people accounted for 5.1% of the entire Canadian population. However, they accounted for 16.2% of the overall number of representations for police use of force-involved deaths. In 2000 there were reported to have been 19 victims nationwide, fast-

forward to 2022 – 69 deaths – and this year (2024) we are at an alarming 117 deaths by police. The source stated, "Within the overall increase in deaths there are persistent and deeply disturbing racial disparities. Black and Indigenous peoples are over-represented in police use of force-involved deaths in Canada" (Tracking (in)justice, 2023). Although there are fluctuations on a year-to-year basis, the racial disparities have remained consistent over the past two decades, bringing to light that Indigenous people die at almost eight times the rate compared to white people (Tracking (in)justice, 2023).

As future social workers, it is important to consider the role the profession must play in advancing reconciliation in response to the ongoing injustices inflicted upon Indigenous people by the criminal and justice systems. To begin, we must promote and engage in a renewed ethical commitment to addressing and investigating the increase of missing and/or murdered Indigenous people. Social workers are required to guide their actions and choices using the Code of Ethics (CASW, 2005) to help them. Value 2: Pursuit of Social Justice – Social workers are committed to promoting equal treatment and legal protection to all individuals, particularly those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged. This value highlights the responsibility of social workers to challenge oppressive systems

and address ethical issues with the best interest of clients, families, communities, and the entire world at large.

On a micro-level, social workers must prioritize enhancing their individual education on Indigenous culture and community to better equip them to support the marginalized communities and clients they work for. A macro-level response should be that social workers promote and offer first aid mental health services and support to people in crisis, subsequently referring them to the appropriate services, rather than having police respond with hostility and misconceptions. This could include social workers collaborating and planning the implementation of widespread Mobile Crisis Response Teams (MCTs) to respond to mental health related 911 calls. On a mezzo-level, social workers can work towards providing targeted community support services and groups for both trauma and grief, for the victim's families and loved ones to find support through.

The urgent warnings issued almost three decades ago by the RCAP (1996) have proven tragically prophetic. Contemporary accounts from Bartko (2024), Sis'moqon (2024), and McGuire (2024), alongside sobering data from Tracking (in)justice (2023), confirm that Indigenous communities continue to withstand the worst of systemic violence, neglect, and injustice at the hands of those sworn to protect them. Even

with ethical frameworks such as the CASW (2005) calling for accountability and respect, meaningful reform has stalled. The reality is stark: in the 28 years since the commission's dire forecasts, conditions have significantly worsened, and without immediate and transformative change, Canada risks watching these disparities deepen further and continue to repeat themselves.

If the nation fails to act now, how many more Indigenous lives will be needlessly lost in the coming years. These are not theoretical questions – they demand urgent attention, committed advocacy, and genuine structural reforms that honour the rights and dignity of Indigenous people. The choice to either confront these systemic injustices and honour the dignity of Indigenous people or allow these harms to intensify over the coming years rests squarely in our hands, and the choice to break this cycle lies in today's actions.

This disproportionate impact of criminal accusations and police brutality on Indigenous peoples is considerably well-documented yet remains largely unacknowledged by broader society. Despite clear data pointing to a troubling rise in police-involved deaths – particularly in recent years- the depth of the crisis is often minimized or overlooked. A closer examination reveals that awareness alone is not enough; lasting change requires direct intervention, systemic reform, and a collective

commitment to justice. In the field of social work, it is critical to amplify these truths, maintain ongoing dialogue, and work alongside Indigenous communities. The goal is to serve as an active ally in reconciliation by fostering trust, supporting intergenerational healing, and addressing both historical and present-day injustices through sustained and purposeful action.

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