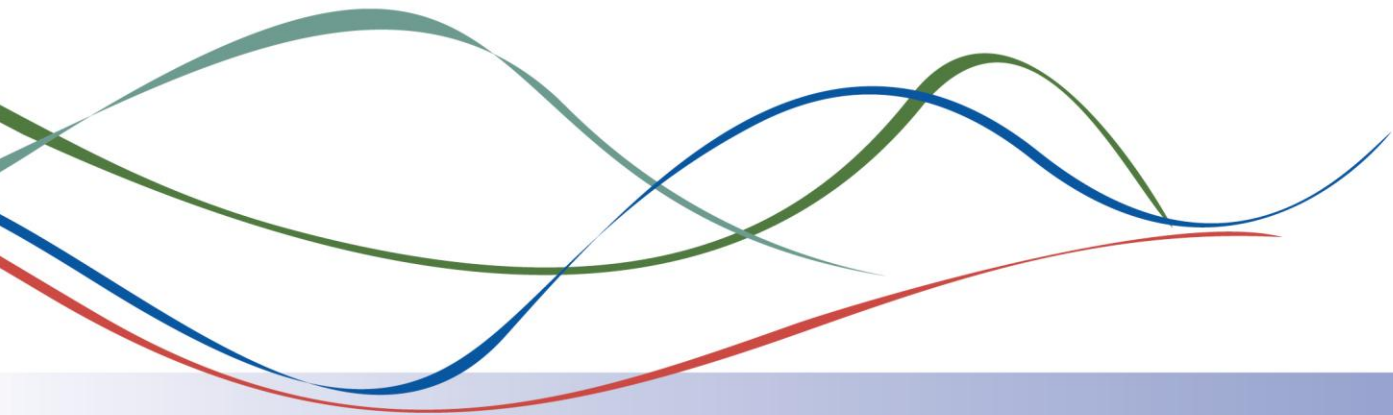




NATIVE WOMEN'S
ASSOCIATION OF CANADA

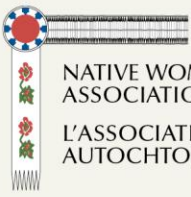
L'ASSOCIATION DES FEMMES
AUTOCHTONES DU CANADA



The national voice of Aboriginal women in Canada since 1974.

What Their Stories Tell Us

Research findings from the Sisters In Spirit initiative



NATIVE WOMEN'S
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AUTOCHTONES DU CANADA

Sisters In Spirit 2010 Research Findings



Aboriginal women and girls are strong and beautiful.
They are our mothers, our daughters, our sisters, aunts, and
grandmothers

Acknowledgments

This research would not have been possible without the stories shared by families and communities of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls. The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) is indebted to the many families, communities, and friends who have lost a loved one. We are continually amazed by your strength, generosity and courage.

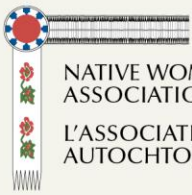
We thank our Elders and acknowledge First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities for their strength and resilience.

We acknowledge the dedication and commitment of community and grassroots researchers, advocates, and activists who have been instrumental in raising awareness about this issue. We also acknowledge the hard work of service providers and all those working towards ending violence against Aboriginal women in Canada.

We appreciate the many community, provincial, national and Aboriginal organizations, and federal departments that supported this work, particularly Status of Women Canada.

Finally, NWAC would like thank all those who worked on the Sisters In Spirit initiative over the past five years. These contributions have been invaluable and have helped shape the nature and findings of this report.

This research report is dedicated to all Aboriginal women and girls who are missing or have been lost to violence.



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Native Women's Association of Canada

Incorporated in 1974, the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) is founded on the collective goal to enhance, promote, and foster the social, economic, cultural and political well-being of Aboriginal women within Aboriginal communities and Canadian society. As one of the five National Aboriginal Organizations, we are a network of Native women's organizations from coast, to coast, to coast. In 2010, we are proud to speak as a collective voice for Aboriginal women for over 35 years.

Mission Statement

NWAC's mission is to help empower women by being involved in developing and changing legislation which affects them, and involving them in the development and delivery of programs promoting equal opportunity for Aboriginal women.

Vision

We have a vision of Aboriginal communities where all individuals have an opportunity to develop their talents in order to achieve their full potential. We see communities where all people can lead healthy lifestyles by maintaining balance in their spiritual, emotional, mental and physical health.

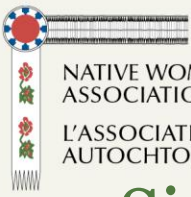
We see Aboriginal communities where our children grow up with pride and a strong identification of who they are. They constantly seek to broaden their knowledge of the things that affect them and their relationship with the environment and the land. We see communities where all our people have an opportunity to learn our history and traditional ways, while attaining a high level of academic education with broader society.

In order to accomplish this, we see strong Aboriginal families where the responsibility of education begins in the home and families nurture their children to be proud of who they are. We see a community where all Aboriginal people accept and exercise their responsibilities to contribute to a strong community.

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NATIVE WOMEN'S
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Sisters In Spirit 2010 Research Findings

Executive Summary

As of March 31, 2010, the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) has gathered information about the disappearance or death of more than 580 Aboriginal women and girls across Canada. This finding is the result of quantitative and qualitative research carried out over a period of five years. In 2005, NWAC secured funding for the Sisters In Spirit initiative – a five-year research, education and policy initiative supported by Status of Women Canada – to address the root causes, circumstances and trends of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls. NWAC has collected the evidence to document, in systematic way, issues of violence that women, families, and communities had been pointing to for the last generation.

What Their Stories Tell Us: Research findings from the Sisters In Spirit initiative brings together five years of research related to missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada. The purpose of this report is to answer three fundamental questions: What are the circumstances, root causes and trends leading to violence against Aboriginal women in Canada? How many Aboriginal women and girls have gone missing or have been found murdered in Canada? And, why this violence has led to such disturbingly high numbers of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada without connection by police or justice authorities?

What Their Stories Tell Us presents demographic and statistical evidence from NWAC's Sisters In Spirit database, while situating the issue within the larger context of root causes and ways forward. It also draws on information gathered through the existing literature and highlights some of the stories and experiences shared by families of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls. NWAC reminds readers that each number presented here represents a woman or girl who is loved and missed by her family.

As of March 31, 2010, 582 cases of missing or murdered Aboriginal women and girls have been entered into NWAC's Sisters In Spirit database. NWAC's research has found that the intergenerational impact and resulting vulnerabilities of colonization and state policies—such as residential schools, the 60s Scoop, and the child welfare system—are underlying factors in the outcomes of violence experienced by Aboriginal women and girls. In summarizing the research and identifying trends related to root causes and circumstances, there are a number of key findings that should inform policy decisions, victim services, and action. These key findings are supported by the common themes that emerge from the life stories previously shared in the first and second editions of *Voices of Our Sisters In Spirit: A report to families and communities*.

Key Findings

There are a **disproportionately high number** of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada. Between 2000 and 2008, 153 cases of murder have been identified in NWAC's Sisters In Spirit database. These women represent approximately ten per cent of the total number of female homicides in Canada despite the fact that Aboriginal women make up only three per cent of the total female population in Canada. The majority of women and girls in NWAC's database were murdered, while **115 women and girls are still missing**.

The majority of disappearances and deaths of Aboriginal women and girls **occurred in the western provinces** of Canada. Over two thirds of the cases were in British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan.

A great majority of the women were young. More than half of the women and girls were **under the age of 31**. Measures designed to increase safety must take into account the needs of young Aboriginal women and girls.

Many of the **women were mothers**. Of the cases where this information is known, 88 per cent of missing and murdered women and girls **left behind children and grandchildren**. These children must have access to culturally appropriate supports to deal with this trauma.

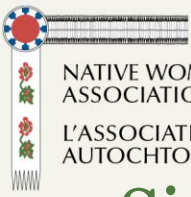
Aboriginal women and girls are as likely to be killed by an acquaintance or stranger as they are by an intimate partner. Almost **17 per cent of those charged were strangers**. Aboriginal women and girls are more likely to be killed by a stranger than non-Aboriginal women.

Nearly **half of murder cases remain unsolved**. Nationally, 53 per cent of murder cases have been cleared by charges of homicide, while no charges have been laid in forty per cent of cases. However, **there are differences in clearance rates by province**. The clearance rate for murdered women and girls ranges from a low 42 per cent in Alberta to 93 per cent in Nunavut.

The majority of **cases occurred in urban areas**. 70 per cent of women and girls disappeared from an urban area, and 60 per cent were murdered in an urban area. But **resources are also needed** to respond to the needs of families in rural and on-reserve communities.

In addition to the above key findings NWAC research has found links between missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls, to FASD (Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder), hitchhiking, gangs, mobility, and jurisdictional issues. All of these emerging issues require further attention and inquiry. NWAC aims to conduct further research in these areas during the second phase of the Sisters In Spirit initiative as we move from knowledge to action.

While NWAC has made great strides in bringing to light issues of violence leading to the disappearance and death of Aboriginal women and girls, Aboriginal women continue to be the most at risk group in Canada for issues related to violence, and continue to experience complex issues linked to intergenerational impacts of colonization, particularly those resulting from residential schools and the child welfare system. Ending violence against Aboriginal women and girls lies with both men and women, with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. It ends with recognition, responsibility and cooperation. Violence against women ends with restoring the sacred position of Aboriginal women as teachers, healers and givers of life.



NATIVE WOMEN'S
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Sisters In Spirit 2010 Research Findings

"What is it about numbers? What do they tell us? Do they help us understand? One woman goes missing, then another, then another. For a long time only those who know and love them pay attention. Until the numbers start to add up..." ~ Finding Dawn

Introduction

The Native Women's Association of Canada launched the Sisters In Spirit campaign in 2004 to address violence against Aboriginal women and girls. The campaign was founded on the belief that "over the past 20 years, approximately 500 Aboriginal women have gone missing in communities across Canada. Yet government, the media, and Canadian society continue to remain silent" (NWAC 2004). In 2005, NWAC secured funding for the Sisters In Spirit initiative – a five-year research, education and policy initiative supported by Status of Women Canada to address the root causes and trends of missing and murdered women and girls. In 2005, NWAC began to collect the evidence, to provide substantiated proof of what women, families, and communities had been talking about for the last generation. In 2010, the Native Women's Association of Canada holds the only research identifying the disappearance and death of 582 Aboriginal women and girls across Canada.

This report is a reflection on the last five years of research related to missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada. The purpose of this report is to answer three fundamental questions: What are the circumstances, root causes and trends leading to violence against Aboriginal women in Canada? How many Aboriginal women and girls have gone missing or have been found murdered in Canada? And, how has this violence led to such disturbingly high numbers of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada without connection by authorities?

To address the issue of violence, one must understand the history and impact of colonization on Aboriginal peoples in Canada. It is the ongoing narration of violence, systemic racism and discrimination, purposeful denial of culture, language and traditions, and legislation designed to destroy identity that has led to the realities facing Aboriginal peoples. This research will begin with an explanation of how colonization is not simply a strategy of the past, but a reality that reinforces the silence surrounding the violence experienced by First Nations, Inuit, and Métis women today. It is this foundation of knowledge that answers the questions of „why?“ and „how?“ so many Aboriginal women and girls have gone missing or been found murdered without recognition of government or society. It is also this understanding of the contemporary realities of colonization that informs the recommendations for change.

The overrepresentation of Aboriginal women in Canada as victims of violence must be understood in the context of a colonial strategy that sought to dehumanize Aboriginal women.

What Their Stories Tell Us

This report shares the numbers, the known cases and the facts related to root causes, trends and circumstances of violence that has led to disappearance and death. Each number represents the story of a woman or girl who is loved and missed by her family. Throughout this report stories are shared of some of the missing and murdered sisters, mothers, daughters, and grandmothers, as told to NWAC by their families. Their stories reflect some of the experiences and impacts faced by these women, girls and their families. But most of all, they are a reminder that Aboriginal women and girls are strong, beautiful, proud and loved.

Through the Sisters In Spirit initiative, NWAC has been honoured to share the life stories of Amber Redman, Beatrice Sinclair, Claudette Osborne, Daleen Kay Bosse (Muskego), Danita BigEagle, Debbie Sloss, Delores Whiteman, Georgina Papin, Gladys Tolley, Lisa Marie Young, Nina Courtepatte, Shelley Joseph, and Terrie Ann Martin (Dauphinais). These are the stories of mothers, daughters, grandmothers, and sisters. Stories of beautiful women and girls with hopes, dreams, and gifts.

Tragically, too many stories illustrate the social and economic marginalization of Aboriginal women in Canada. While some of their stories reveal experiences of poverty, abuse or addictions—issues often associated with increased vulnerability or so-called ‘high-risk’ lifestyles—many of these women and girls were ‘vulnerable’ only insofar as they were Aboriginal women. As argued by Jacobs and Williams (2008, 134), they were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time in a society that poses a risk to their safety. They were targeted because they were Aboriginal, and it was assumed that either they would not fight back or they would not be missed.”

Aboriginal women are the most at risk group in Canada for issues related to violence. The overrepresentation of Aboriginal women in Canada as victims of violence must be understood in the context of a colonial strategy that sought to dehumanize Aboriginal women. While the motivations and intersections may differ, NWAC has found that colonization remains the constant thread connecting the different forms of violence against Aboriginal women in Canada. The value of Aboriginal women is diminished by the persistence of patriarchal values that, consciously or not, continue to influence and regulate social norms and gender relations. As noted by NWAC:

Amber’s story

Amber’s mother strongly believes the greatest gift from the Creator is the gift of a child. As an infant, Amber was breastfed and this mother-daughter bond continued as she grew into a chubby baby. Amber was also “daddy’s girl” and when she was three years old her father designed and beaded her first fancy dance outfit in her favourite colours, purple and pink, and her parents travelled with her on the powwow trail.

Amber’s purpose here on Earth was to bring this issue of missing and murdered Aboriginal women to the forefront because society did not see this as a priority. Our communities need to take responsibility for the safety of our women and girls.

Addressing the issue of violence against women in Canada is made more difficult due to the underlying acceptance of a level of interpersonal violence between men and women throughout Canadian history. This makes it difficult to work towards the elimination of violence in society as an ideal. In addition, the general cultural acceptance of violence and violence against women as demonstrated in various media, including video games, television shows, movies and music establishes a climate in which it is difficult to eliminate violence. (2008, 5)

This is compounded by a colonial process that involved a deliberate strategy to undermine the influence and respect held by Aboriginal women and replaces the existing social, economic and political systems of Aboriginal peoples with ones rooted in patriarchy and European understandings of femininity and masculinity. The outcomes and ongoing impacts of this history are pervasive and include poor health and mental health outcomes, intergenerational trauma, overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in the child welfare system, lack of access to justice, and economic insecurity leading to restricted options and inadequate choices. The impacts of colonization, however, are perhaps most evident in the rates of violence against Aboriginal women.

Violence against Aboriginal Women and Girls

Prior to the Sisters In Spirit initiative, academic literature on violence and violence experienced by Aboriginal women focused on domestic or family violence rather than violence rooted in the systemic, gendered racism facing Aboriginal women. While academic literature on violence still largely focuses on family violence, NWAC has tried to expand the scope of literature on violence. The initial research question of the initiative boldly challenged the context in which violence impacts Aboriginal women in that it asked specifically: —What are the circumstances, root causes and trends leading to *racialized, sexualized* violence against Aboriginal women in Canada?” This question challenged the assumptions of violence against Aboriginal women and girls. While NWAC has shifted away from this language, the initial question broadened the context of violence to ask if Aboriginal women and girls are victimized because of their race and gender, and if the experiences of violence go unnoticed by police, the justice system, government, and society because of their race and gender.

According to the 2004 General Social Survey (GSS), Aboriginal women 15 and older are three and a half times more likely to experience violence (defined as physical and sexual assault and robbery) than non-Aboriginal women (Statistics Canada 2006b, 5). Statistics concerning family violence (which represent most of the available data) are particularly alarming.¹ Statistics Canada reports that rates of spousal assault (physical or sexual assault and threats of violence) against Aboriginal women are more than three times higher than non-Aboriginal women (Statistics Canada 2006a, 64). And, nearly one quarter of Aboriginal women experienced some form of spousal violence in the five years preceding the 2004 GSS (Statistics Canada 2006b, 6).

Aboriginal women also report experiencing more severe and potentially life-threatening forms of family violence, such as being beaten or choked, having had a gun or knife used against them, or being sexually assaulted (54% of Aboriginal women versus 37% of non-Aboriginal women) (Statistics Canada 2006a, 65). 44% reported “fearing for their lives,” compared with 33% of non-Aboriginal women and 27% of Aboriginal women reported experiencing 10 or more assaults by the same offender (as opposed to 18% of non-Aboriginal women) (ibid., 66). As a result of this severe violence, it is reported that Aboriginal women are significantly more likely than non-Aboriginal women to suffer physical injury, receive medical attention or take time off daily activities as a consequence of these assaults (ibid, 65). And while non-Aboriginal women reported a decline in most severe forms of violence (from 43% in 1999 to 37% in 2004) the number of similar attacks against Aboriginal women remained unchanged since 1999, at 54% (ibid.).

The GSS indicates that Aboriginal peoples have higher rates of non-spousal violence and are threatened with violence in and around their homes to a greater extent than non-Aboriginal

Beatrice's story

Beatrice is remembered as a beloved grandmother and a strong Cree woman. Beatrice taught her grandchildren to respect the people who come through your door; they are there to visit you, so you must give them that time. Beatrice was not given the same respect in death as she offered those around her in life.

Beatrice was the primary caregiver to her granddaughter Sharon. Alcoholism was present in the family, a fact that could be related to many family members' attendance at residential school. With Beatrice no longer alive to shelter her from this trauma, Sharon's life started to spiral downwards. Nevertheless, the values Beatrice had instilled in Sharon gave her the ability to take care of her siblings.

¹ In this report NWAC has chosen to use the language of “family violence” rather than partner or domestic violence. As Kelly (2002) explains, the language of family violence provides a greater contextual understanding of the intergenerational impacts of violence and its effects on families. As such, the language of “family violence” helps situate violence against Aboriginal women within the context of colonization, which is key to explaining the prevalence of this issue.

people (ibid, 68). Beyond this general observation, however, little information is available concerning other forms of violence against Aboriginal women. Statistics Canada reports, for example, that GSS sample counts are too low to produce statistically reliable estimates of sexual assault against Aboriginal women (ibid.). Certainly, family violence remains an urgent issue impacting Aboriginal communities, but the lack of data concerning other forms of violence indicates the need for further attention and research in this area, particularly as it relates to Aboriginal women and girls.

Statistics Canada also reports that Aboriginal peoples are severely overrepresented as victims of homicide. While Aboriginal peoples made up about 3% of the population between 1997 and 2004, they represented 17% of homicide victims where the Aboriginal identity of the victim was known (Statistics Canada 2006b, 7). Between 1997 and 2000, homicide rates of Aboriginal females were almost seven times higher than non-Aboriginal females.²

According to a 1996 report by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), Aboriginal women between the ages of 25 and 44 with Indian status are five times more likely than other women of the same age to die as the result of violence (Amnesty International Canada 2004, 23). Often overlooked or ignored is the extreme vulnerability of women in the sex trade. According to police reports submitted to Statistics Canada, 171 female prostitutes³ were killed in Canada between 1991 and 2004; 45% of these homicides remain unsolved (Statistics Canada 2006a, 37).

As reviewed by Brownridge (2003, 66), community based studies have found rates of violence against Aboriginal women to be much higher than indicated by government surveys: from 48% of women in a reserve-based sample in rural southern Ontario, to 80% of 104 women in northwestern Ontario, to 70 to 100% of Mi'kmaq women living on-reserve in Nova Scotia. While published rates of violence against Aboriginal women vary depending on the methodology of the study, common to all these reports are the shocking levels of violence experienced by Aboriginal women. The results presented later in this report add further evidence, dimension and urgency to an issue already demanding immediate action.

Claudette's story

When Claudette laughed, she laughed from the belly. She had a big smile and contagious laughter. She could get anyone laughing. She had a good sense of humour and lit up a room when she came in. She was also a very strong girl and she stood up for herself.

When Claudette's disappearance was reported, sometimes they didn't even say her name in the headlines. Instead, her family read words like "sex trade," "drug addicted" and "Aboriginal." That was tough for the family to deal with. It made it difficult to get society to see Claudette for who she really is. She's a mother. She's a daughter. She's a sister.

² Age range not specified.

³ Age range not specified.

Research has also identified certain socio-demographic characteristics that are associated with higher rates of violence against women. Such characteristics cannot be considered causes of violence, but rather, “factors that help identify the context in which violence occurs” (Statistics Canada 2006a, 36). Factors consistently identified in the literature are:

- Age (rates of violence are highest among young women);
- Emotional and psychological abuse is determined to be one of the most important predictors of physical and sexual violence in spousal relationships—Statistics Canada (ibid., 40) reports that spousal assault rates are up to 20 times higher for women whose male partners demonstrate these behaviours;
- Socio-economic factors (such as low income, being unemployed or having low educational attainment); and,
- Alcohol abuse and relationship type (rates of spousal violence are higher in common-law unions than marriages).

Additional factors mentioned in the literature include being a member of a lone parent family, living in crowded conditions, large family size (number of children), having a previous marriage or common-law union (an indicator of family stability), high residential mobility, experiences of sexual abuse, especially as a child, homelessness, institutionalization, and drug addiction (Brownridge 2003; NWAC 2008; Statistics Canada 2006a; Statistics Canada 2006b). However, in 2006, Statistics Canada reported that Aboriginal peoples are three times more likely to experience violence than non-Aboriginal peoples even when the effects of all other factors are controlled (Statistics Canada 2006b, 5).

Daleen’s Story

Daleen’s family wanted answers; they wanted to know what happened to the beautiful, compassionate and outgoing woman who wanted to be a teacher, who loved to make people laugh, who had a passion for drama and fine arts. They wanted to know what happened to their beloved daughter, sister, mother, wife, and friend.

Daleen’s family says the initial police response was like being “shrugged off and brushed to the side”. But they also want people to know that the Saskatoon Police Service and RCMP eventually launched an intensive investigation into Daleen’s disappearance. “If it wasn’t for their hard work, my daughter would never have been found,” says Daleen’s mother.

Impacts of Government Policies and Colonization

The experiences of violence and victimization of Aboriginal women do not occur in a vacuum. Violence is perpetuated through apathy and indifference towards Aboriginal women, and stems from the ongoing impacts of colonialism in Canada. While this process is rooted in history, the impacts of colonization continue to affect Aboriginal peoples, and perhaps more profoundly Aboriginal women, today. One example with regard to First Nations women is the administration of the *Indian Act* which has created ongoing barriers to citizenship for Aboriginal women and their children and the intergenerational impacts and trauma resulting from the residential school and child welfare systems. These are well known and documented patterns of historic, as well as contemporary colonization. Systemic racism and patriarchy has marginalized Aboriginal women and led to intersecting issues at the root of the multiple forms of violence. The result of the system of colonization is a climate where Aboriginal women are particularly vulnerable to violence, victimization, and indifference by the state and society to their experiences of violence.

Government attacks on the social and cultural systems of Aboriginal nations through government legislation continued with the establishment of church-run residential and day schools. Operating from the 1800s to 1996, the residential school system saw Aboriginal children (not just First Nations, but also Métis and Inuit) forcibly removed from their homes for the purposes of assimilation. Children frequently suffered physical, mental, sexual and spiritual abuse and many are known to have died from disease or malnutrition (National Council of Welfare 2007, 83). These schools had a profound impact on the traditional family, community and education systems of Aboriginal nations. As it has been said, “the removal of children from their families altered relationships between everyone and everything. Family bonds normally created as result of nurturing and loving relationships were not part of the residential school experience” (Jacobs and Williams 2008, 126). As a result of the residential and day school systems, children suffered loss of language (and with it the ability to communicate with parents or grandparents), were denied cultural and spiritual learning and traditional teachings around

Danita’s story

Danita had her first child, a daughter named Cassidy, at 18. Once born, Cassidy became Danita’s passion. Although she was still battling addictions to medications prescribed to her, Danita was determined to go back to school and find a place where she could build a home for herself and Cassidy. Danita would tell her little girl, “it won’t always be like this.” In an attempt to keep her promise, Danita went to treatment centres, trying to get better.

After two weeks went by with no sign of her daughter, Dianne, fed up with police inaction, marched down to the station and demanded that something be done to locate Danita. Dianne had to convince police officers that Danita really was missing, that she wasn’t “out partying” as they insisted. The police responded, “Give us some time or give us a place to look.” Dianne replied, “I think I’m doing your job.”

roles and responsibilities, as well as the experiential education traditionally provided by parents and Elders. Not surprisingly, the residential school system has been characterized as cultural genocide (ibid) and has had a direct impact on the next generations of Aboriginal children, resulting in what is often referred to as the intergenerational effects or intergenerational trauma of residential schools.

In 1951 the *Indian Act* was revised and provincial child-welfare agencies were granted legal authority on-reserve. In the years following this amendment, First Nations children were taken into care at an unbelievable rate. This period is commonly referred to as the ‘Sixties Scoop,’ a term used to describe the time between 1960 and the mid-1980s when the greatest number of Aboriginal children were adopted (National Council of Welfare 2007, 84). More than 11, 000 status First Nation children, along with many other Aboriginal children, were adopted at this time. In some instances, children were “literally scooped from their homes without knowledge or consent from families or communities” (ibid, 84). These children were adopted mainly by white families, resulting in cultural dislocation and “confused identities” (ibid.). Many are believed to have suffered sexual and other abuse and continue to deal with the trauma associated with this violence.

Reflecting on the current state of child welfare policy and practice in Canada, Blackstock argues that while practitioners often reflect on residential schools and the Sixties Scoop, when you ask them what they really learned or how this history impacts their current practice, very few people have real answers (National Council of Welfare 2007, 88). This is significant, as there are now more Aboriginal children in child welfare care than at any point in history (ibid., 85). The First Nations Child and Family Caring Society (FNCFCFS) estimated that 30-40% of children in care are Aboriginal (Blackstock et al. 2004, 156). Further research by the FNCFCFS in three sample provinces in 2005 found that while non-Aboriginal children had a 0.67% chance of being taken into care, the likelihood rose to 3.31% for Métis children and 10.23% for status First Nations children. Recent research by the National Council of Welfare (2007, 86) indicates that in some provinces, Aboriginal children comprise 70 or 85% of children in care, and that the percentage of Aboriginal children in care continues to increase. Nationally, the number of status First Nations

Debbie's story

Debbie was just Debbie. She was stubborn and wouldn't walk in the line that they tell you to walk in. At the same time, Debbie loved helping with the community events such as potluck dinners, bingo, dances at the community hall, and bonfires at the beach.

Noting that the police report describes Debbie as a “Native Indian” and “known alcoholic and drug addict”, the family believes that police officers made judgments about Debbie based on preconceived notions and stereotypes and that these assumptions hindered the investigation into her death. Her daughter, Laura, believes they just passed her off as another dead Indian. But Debbie was a woman, a mother, a sister who was loved.

children entering the child welfare system rose a staggering 71.5% between 1995 and 2001 (ibid., 85).

These devastating figures indicate just how much attention needs to be paid to child welfare policy and practice. In particular, there is a need for greater recognition and attention around the reasons why Aboriginal children are taken into care. By and large, Aboriginal children come into care for reasons different than non-Aboriginal children. Compared to other children in Canada, Aboriginal children are less likely to come to the attention of child welfare authorities for physical or sexual abuse, but are twice as likely to experience neglect (Loxley et al. 2005, 7). Data from the Canadian Incidence Study on Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS) indicates that —substance misuse, poverty and inadequate housing appear as undercurrents to the over representation of Aboriginal children in care” (Blackstock and Trocmé 2005, 23).

In order to address the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in care it is necessary to address the socio-economic status of Aboriginal peoples. It is critical that Canada acknowledges that the current system works in ways that perpetuate racism towards and inequality for Aboriginal families and communities. As Blackstock points out, —even if a non-Aboriginal family has these same factors [poverty, poor housing, care giver substance abuse], the Aboriginal child is still more likely to go into child welfare care. So, race has continued to play a role in child removal” (National Council of Welfare 2007, 87). Current practice also fails to recognize that, for Aboriginal peoples, the ‘best interest of the child’ (the overarching principle that guides child welfare work) is inextricably tied to community and culture. Indeed, it has been argued that, —i]nvariably, many Aboriginal to non-Aboriginal adoptions break down during adolescence when identity formation is crucial” (ibid, 85). Yet despite interest from Aboriginal families, many children continue to be placed in non-Aboriginal adoptive homes (ibid.).

A focus on apprehension as the main form of intervention is incredibly short-sighted, in that it fails to recognize the potential long-term impacts of being taken into child welfare care. Research indicates that children in child welfare care are more likely to experience health

Delores’ story

Family and friends recall that Delores was always smiling, had a great sense of humour and was the life of the party. As a youth, Delores attended Lebret Indian Residential School. It was not a place where Delores found the nurturing and guidance she needed to fulfill her dreams of becoming a nurse or working with children.

Delores’ daughter, Laura, was placed in foster care during the “60s Scoop,” when it was not uncommon for “Indian” children to be removed in order to be placed with white families. In 1987, Laura returned to Standing Buffalo Dakota First Nation after discovering this was her home community. After speaking to relatives and community members, Laura began to realize that her mother had not been seen or heard from in a very long time.

problems later in life and are less likely to have success in education programs, a fact that has implications in terms of economic security (ibid, 88). It is known that low educational attainment and unemployment have been identified as risk factors associated with violence. Also of particular concern in the context of missing and murdered women is Australian research (Cripps et al. 2009) that found that Indigenous women with children who had been removed from their natural family during childhood were at higher odds of experiencing violence as adults than those who did not.

A review of the literature also indicates a link between child welfare involvement, sexual exploitation and the sex trade. Sikka's interviews with key informants in Winnipeg and Edmonton support previous research that point to child welfare involvement as "perhaps the most common feature among girls who entered into prostitution" (2009, 14). Surveys in Winnipeg have found that around two thirds of women involved in street prostitution had been taken into care as children (ibid., 11). Participants in Sikka's study also drew attention to the link between child welfare involvement and sexual exploitation, noting that girls who run away from their foster homes or care facilities are "particularly vulnerable to being preyed upon by older males seeking to exploit them" (ibid.).

Research also indicates a link between child welfare involvement and conflict with law. As explained by Sikka:

Many girls' first point of entry into the criminal justice system is a charge for an offence committed within a care facility. Girls may be charged with assault on a staff member or other 'violent' offences and are then remanded to detention centres, where they come into contact with sexually exploited youth and recruiters. (ibid., 9)

Considering that Aboriginal women now represent a startling 33% of women in federal penitentiaries (Mann 2009, 6), the link between child welfare involvement and conflict with the law requires further attention. Real action, however, requires a holistic approach encompassing the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual health of Aboriginal women, families and communities. As explained by Hill, the history of colonization has burdened Aboriginal nations

Georgina's story

Georgina carried the trauma of being removed from her home as an infant, or growing up in foster care, group homes and the streets, of missing her family and community. She carried the pain of addiction, prostitution, and violence. But it was losing her children to the child welfare system that hurt Georgina the most. When she lost her children, she lost a piece of herself.

A proud Cree woman, Georgina was the mother of seven children, as well as a cherished sister and friend. Her favourite colour was red and she loved to make bannock. She was a ball of fire with a heart of gold. She made people feel safe. These are the things people remember most about Georgina.

with a continual — passing down of various loads or degrees of post traumatic stress. Generation after generation so that we wind up with this entire burden on our people as they exist today” (National Council of Welfare 2007, 84). This burden is evidenced by the current socio-economic condition experienced by Aboriginal peoples in Canada, particularly, Aboriginal women.

The social and economic marginalization that impacts so many Aboriginal women and their families is troubling. Research shows that Aboriginal women are affected by higher levels of poverty, lower educational attainment, higher unemployment, poorer physical and mental health and lack of housing (CCPA 2010, 37). Indeed, recent statistics reveal that over 40% of Aboriginal women live in poverty (NWAC 2009a, 1). In 2006, 13.5% of Aboriginal women were unemployed compared to 6.4% of non-Aboriginal women; data from 2001 indicates that the highest rates of unemployment (22%) are experienced by Aboriginal women living on-reserve; and, 60% of Aboriginal women with jobs work part-time and/or part-year and most are concentrated in low paying occupations, such as sales, service, business finance, or administration jobs (ibid.).

While Aboriginal peoples are making significant gains in terms of educational attainment, they are still far less likely to complete high school or obtain a university degree than non-Aboriginal people. In 2006, only 12% of non-Aboriginal women had not completed high school, compared to 27% of Aboriginal women (Wilson and MacDonald 2010, 14). Less than 15% of Aboriginal women have a university degree or higher versus to 28% of non-Aboriginal women; it should be noted however, that more Aboriginal women had attained trade certificates or college diplomas than non-Aboriginal woman (ibid, 13, 14). Sadly, the situation is less optimistic for Aboriginal men. 8% of Aboriginal men have a university degree or higher, compared to 25% of non-Aboriginal men (ibid. 13).

Impacts of economic insecurity are seen in the poor housing conditions experienced by many Aboriginal peoples.⁴ Aboriginal peoples are almost four times as likely as non-Aboriginal people

Gladys' story

Gladys lived in Kitigan Zibi all her life and enjoyed the simple pleasures of her home land, especially going to the bush. That was her time. She really liked going hunting and fishing. Gladys loved everybody and took care of her kids and her family. She welcomed everybody and anybody into her home, no matter who they were.

Gladys' s family is now on a journey to find answers to the questions they have about the death of their beautiful mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. They want her story to be told and hope that shedding light on injustices will help to build a better future for her great-grandchildren and generations to come.

⁴ It is important to acknowledge that housing conditions vary greatly amongst Aboriginal communities. The experience of Inuit people living in the North is very different, for example, from First Nations people living on and off- reserve and for Métis people living in urban areas versus rural areas.

to live in a crowded dwelling and are three times as likely to live in a home in need of major repairs (Statistics Canada 2008a, 16). While the number of Aboriginal people living in crowded homes has declined in the last decade (from 17% in 1996 to 11% in 2006) the number of Aboriginal peoples living in homes requiring major repairs remains unchanged (ibid.). The housing situation is particularly precarious for Aboriginal single mothers. In 2001, more than half of all Aboriginal single parent households headed by women were in core housing need (NWAC 2009a, 1). Aboriginal women are far more likely to be single parents than Aboriginal men. In 2006, 29% of Aboriginal children 14 and under lived with a single mother, compared to just 6% living with a single father (Statistics Canada 2008a, 15). Research from 2001 found that over 70% of Aboriginal single parents lived off-reserve and over 80% of those households were headed by single mothers. (NWAC 2009a, 1).

The above statistics are noteworthy in that they identify the current context impacting many Aboriginal women and their families and indicate what needs to be done to improve this situation. Many factors of health and wellbeing are inextricably linked to low income and measures of socio-economic stress and that the mental and emotional impacts of poverty, the lack of perceived options, can be overwhelming. As recounted by Jacobs and Williams:

[w]ords such as low-self esteem, depression, anger, self-doubt, intimidation, frustration, shame and hopelessness were used to describe some of the crushing feelings of Aboriginal children and parents living in poverty. Families are feeling despair as they cannot see any way to rise above their situations. (OFIFC 2000, 7)

Poor housing options mean limited choices for Aboriginal women in terms of leaving violent relationships or escaping unsafe situations. In such a context, women living on-reserve may be forced to choose between remaining in a violent home or leaving their community. Aboriginal women residing in towns or urban centers often live in marginalized areas of these communities where housing fails to meet the criteria of being safe, secure, affordable or appropriate (NWAC 2008, 10). Aboriginal women and girls are also at increased risk for homelessness (ibid.). The housing experiences of Aboriginal women and girls in urban areas are troubling, as research

Lisa's story

Lisa Marie Young is remembered as a beautiful and vibrant woman. Her parents always felt like she was going in the right direction. "My daughter wanted to shine," says Lisa's mother. "No matter what she wanted to do, she would have been awesome." More than anything, the family wants to keep Lisa in people's minds. They do not want people to forget about Lisa Marie.

Lisa always felt strong about her independence. She felt safe in her community, as though she knew everyone. She never thought anyone would harm her. Still, Lisa was practical and if she went out at night she was always with a friend. But the night she went missing, Lisa was with friends.

indicates that a high number of Aboriginal peoples are now living in urban areas. The 2006 Census found that 54% of Aboriginal peoples lived in an urban centre (Statistics Canada 2008a, 12).

In the context of restricted options and inadequate choices, too many Aboriginal women and girls are forced into situations or coping strategies that increase their vulnerability to violence, such as hitch-hiking, addictions, homelessness, prostitution and other sex work, gang involvement or abusive relationships. While there are no nationally collected statistics regarding Aboriginal women in the sex trade, research reviewed by Sikka (2009) indicates that the number of Aboriginal women involved in prostitution is disproportionately high, especially in the Prairie provinces. According to Sikka:

[S]tudies have indicated that between 70% of sexually exploited youth and 50% of adult sex workers in Winnipeg are of Aboriginal descent. These estimates are staggering, given that Aboriginal peoples only make up approximately 10 percent of the Winnipeg population. (ibid., 10)

The link between prostitution and experiences of violence requires greater attention. Women who work as prostitutes or in other areas of the sex industry frequently report to researchers that they experience violence perpetrated by strangers, clients, acquaintances, partners and the police (NWAC 2008, 5).

Despite the many layers of trauma experienced by Aboriginal peoples throughout history and into today, Aboriginal women, men, their families and communities, continue to live and love, work, teach, protect, provide, hope, create and dream. It is a legacy of strength and resilience, one more powerful than colonialism.

Limitations of Research

Most of the national data concerning victimization in Canada stems from surveys developed, administered and analyzed by Statistics Canada. These surveys include the General Social Survey (GSS) and five justice surveys that collect data related to the Aboriginal peoples as

Nina's story

Nina's mother says that Victims' Services workers do not know how to deal with families that have lost someone to murder. She is frustrated by the feeling that there are more resources available to offenders than to families. Family members also need access to supports like healing circles and counseling – but these services can be expensive and not everyone can afford to pay.

Nina was a beautiful girl with a passion for movies, music, and dancing. She had a gift for drawing, writing and loved drama. Nina wanted to be famous and dreamed about becoming a model and actress. She loved TV shows like American Idol, Canadian Idol, and America's Next Top Model.

victims and (accused) offenders: three corrections-level surveys and two police-level surveys. In terms of violence against Aboriginal women, however, these data sources are characterized by certain methodological challenges and published findings are sometimes limited by a lack of gender-specific data. In addition, most of this research deals with violence against Aboriginal women generally, offering little to no discussion around the unique experiences of or between First Nations, Métis or Inuit women. Given this limitation it is difficult to formulate a response that speaks to the circumstances and needs of these distinct groups.⁵

The GSS is cited frequently as an important source of data regarding the experiences of Aboriginal peoples as victims of crime, their fear of crime, and perceptions of the criminal justice system (Statistics Canada 2006b, 4). A general population survey conducted every five years, the GSS has been characterized as the only study of violence that records Aboriginal identity and is representative of the Canadian population (Brownridge 2003, 66). It is important to emphasize, however, that the GSS is characterized by certain limitations, especially with respect to ‘measuring’ violence against Aboriginal women. As explained by Statistics Canada:

Statistical methods developed by Statistics Canada for measuring violence against women were not designed specifically to take account of cultural differences among [various] groups, including Aboriginal women. For example, the General Social Survey (GSS) was conducted by telephone and only in English and French; Aboriginal women who live in remote communities without telephones or who do not speak English or French fluently will not be able to participate. Aboriginal women may also face additional barriers to disclosing violence to an interviewer that relate to cultural differences. The GSS is therefore likely to underestimate the true incidence of violence against Aboriginal women (Statistics Canada 2006a, 64).

⁵ The term —Aboriginal” is used to conflate First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples into a single category. While NWAC recognizes the importance of discussion, policy and programming that speaks to the distinct experiences of these communities, the secondary sources that inform quantitative research often fail to acknowledge the particular nation of the woman or girl involved. Given this limitation, this report speaks to the issue of missing and murdered Aboriginal women generally, and not First Nations, Métis or Inuit women specifically. This said, NWAC recognizes that —Aboriginal women” does not represent a uniform category. In addition to the cultural distinctions between and within First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples, the category of —Aboriginal women” is further differentiated by class, geographic location, disability issues, etc.

Shelley’s story

Shelley was the daughter of Aileen and Jim Joseph. She was the mother of Ivan, Sheena, Amanda, and Shane. Shelley was a Mohawk woman, Wolf Clan from Six Nations of the Grand River Territory. She was a woman with beautiful long brown hair and many gifts. This is her story.

A year and a half after she was murdered, Shelley’s oldest son committed suicide. Ivan was an iron worker and very handsome. He had a long ponytail and loved his red Oakley sunglasses. Family members say he never recovered from the loss of his mother.

Of the five justice-related surveys, corrections level data is generally considered most reliable with high levels of response and coverage and most national level indicators on Aboriginal peoples in the justice system have been based on this information (Statistics Canada 2006b, 4). Indeed, police surveys are complicated by a number of challenges and limitations. For example, data is based only on reported incidents. Considering that about six out of 10 incidents of violent crime against Aboriginal people go unreported (a figure comparable to the non-Aboriginal population) (ibid, 6), it is clear that ‘official’ police counts must under-represent the current situation.

Though Statistics Canada has tried to improve the limited data they receive by asking police to note cases where the question of Aboriginal identity is not asked, some police services still systematically classify the Aboriginal background of victims and accused persons as ‘unknown’ (Statistics Canada 2006b, 4). Considering that the RCMP covers 75% of Canada’s geography and serves more than 630 Aboriginal communities (Royal Canadian Mounted Police), the lack of available data contributes to a major gap in data concerning the victimization of Aboriginal peoples. Statistics Canada reports that “[b]etween 1997 and 2000, an average of 18% of victims had an unknown Aboriginal status. Between 2001 and 2004, the proportion of victims with an unknown Aboriginal status increased to an average of 44%, resulting in substantial undercoverage of the Aboriginal status variable” (Statistics Canada 2006b, 21). Clearly, such gaps raise serious questions about the representiveness of current homicide data as it relates to Aboriginal peoples.

Even when police do report this information, there are no established guidelines for identifying how data on Aboriginal identity should be collected. Without guidance or clear protocols, Statistics Canada notes that data pertaining to Aboriginal identity is often collected through “police observation.” This approach is problematic. As explored by Lawrence (2004), there remains in Canada a prevailing attitude that ‘being Aboriginal’ is about how you look, and that ‘look’ is dark skin, black hair and brown eyes. However, Aboriginal identity is about much more than appearance. The experience of Aboriginal peoples in Canada is accompanied by the unique historical context of colonization, the impacts (and resulting vulnerabilities) of which cannot be measured by a quick assessment of skin, hair, and eye colour.

Recognizing the need for more reliable, comprehensive data around the number of homicides involving Aboriginal peoples, Statistic Canada’s yearly Homicide Survey asks police to record

Terrie’s story

As a youth, Terrie excelled in school. She was active in drama and choir and won first place in a school science fair. She was an artist and a writer and could speak French. Her teachers used to say. “I wish all my students were like her.”

Almost eight years have passed and Terrie’s murder remains unsolved. Her parents try to stay positive but the process is frustrating. They are sure that someone knows what happened to their daughter and are pleading for anyone with information to come forward. The silence needs to be broken.

the number of victims and persons charged that were Aboriginal. Some police agencies, however, have refused to collect or report the data, arguing that collection of such information contravenes internal policy, that the information is not needed for the agency's own purposes, or that police officers find it impractical, uncomfortable or insensitive to ask individuals about their cultural background.

Statistics Canada also frequently receives requests for data regarding missing persons in Canada; however, there are no national data sources concerning the number of missing persons reports filed each year, the number of cases resolved or the percentage that remain outstanding. It is argued by some law enforcement personnel and researchers that since it is not a criminal violation to be missing it is inappropriate to track missing persons reports as part of national data collection on the incidence of crime. That said, in 2006 the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police (CACCP) sought to improve data collection on the number of Aboriginal peoples reported missing by modifying the CPIC database to allow officers to note First Nations, Métis or Inuit ancestry. Unfortunately, to date the trends observed through this 'improved' data collection have not been made available to the public.

In Canada, there is one known jurisdiction that has worked to improve reporting of Aboriginal identity. The Saskatchewan Association of Chiefs of Police (SACP) is the only policing body to present detailed statistics on missing persons in their jurisdiction. The SACP website offers an analysis of missing persons from 1940 to 2009 by race, gender, and geographic location. The website reveals that almost 59% of missing women and girls in Saskatchewan are of Aboriginal ancestry (17 of 29 cases). The number of outstanding cases of Aboriginal men and boys is also significant, but represents a smaller percentage of cases (44% of 69 cases). Considering that Aboriginal people represent only 15% of the population in Saskatchewan (Statistics Canada 2008a, 11), these figures are significant, and speak to the urgency surrounding this issue of missing Aboriginal peoples and need for more publicly available data.

Despite the clear need and desire for data on missing persons in Canada, and missing Aboriginal peoples in particular, there has been little tangible movement in this direction. Recently, initial consultations were held in Saskatchewan to discuss a pilot project that would have instructed police officers to record the Aboriginal identity of victims and offenders. According to Statistics Canada, the RCMP "categorically refused," citing privacy concerns and other practical issues. As the pilot required the full support of all police forces and Aboriginal leadership in Saskatchewan, the so-called "Saskatchewan pilot" is not expected to proceed.

Sisters In Spirit Research

Methodology

Through the Sisters In Spirit initiative NWAC has systematically documented all known cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada. Such research allows NWAC to speak with confidence about the root causes, circumstances and trends associated with these cases. However, given the nature of this subject matter, the methodological, ethical and practical considerations around this research are numerous and complex.

Above all, this research is designed to honour the woman and girls lost to violence, their families and communities. To this end, NWAC has developed a community-based research plan to guide the research in a culturally appropriate and respectful way. The approach to community based research is rooted in the principles of relationship, reciprocity, collaboration, and equal partnership between researchers and participating family members. This methodology privileges the experiences of Aboriginal women, girls, and their families as well as incorporates key principles of participatory action research. In doing this work, NWAC is guided by the ethics of sharing, caring, trust, and strength and the analysis of the data reflects a grounded theory perspective. As an inductive approach, grounded theory holds that “conclusions must be grounded in the data collected, that researchers should build theories that reflect the evidence rather than attempting to make the data ‘fit’ into preconceived hypotheses” (King, forthcoming).

The quantitative research began with creating a database to record information about missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls. In doing so, the objective was to create a ‘census’ of these cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls (that is, to document every case). Over the course of the initiative NWAC reviewed more than 740 cases of missing and murdered women, 582 of which were found to meet the criteria for inclusion in the database:

- The woman or girl involved is Aboriginal (status or non-status First Nations, Métis, or Inuit);
- The case involves a female or living as a woman (includes transgender or transsexual Aboriginal women);
- The woman or girl is missing, or died a result of homicide, negligence, or in circumstances family or community members consider suspicious; and,
- The woman or girl was born or connected to a community in Canada.

While the database is designed as a census of such cases, NWAC does not claim to have documented every case of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada. In fact, it is believed the scope of this violence is far greater than what has been documented. As will be discussed below, the findings reflect only those cases that have identified and reviewed to date. As such, when reporting on the findings, NWAC refers to the ‘known cases’ of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls.

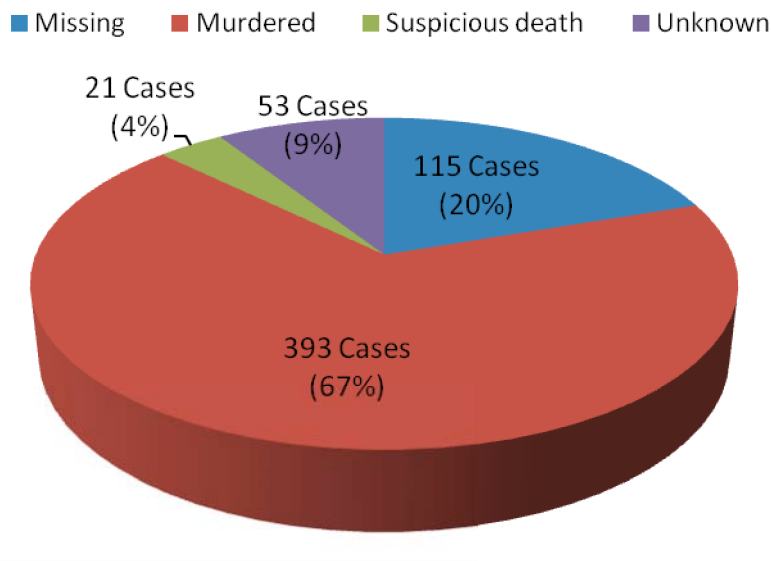
The database consists of more than 250 variables organized according to four themes: demographic information, life experiences (of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls), incident information and trial information, including some information about the accused. The database is populated mainly through secondary research, and in some cases supplemented by information shared through storytelling by family members, reports from community members and other key informants (such as police officers). Main data sources are media articles, police websites, and reported court decisions. The design of the database was informed by the work of other research bodies, particularly Statistics Canada. This approach allows for comparability between the quantitative findings by NWAC and general population trends related to violence against women and homicide in Canada.

The research carried out through the Sisters In Spirit initiative is valuable in that it represents new information—primary data collected by NWAC that exists nowhere else. However, it should be emphasized that Aboriginal communities have been pointing to this issue for some time. As an organization representing the interests of Aboriginal women in Canada, NWAC has sought to gather this information and analyze it in a thoughtful and respectful way.

Sisters In Spirit Research Findings

In 2009, NWAC reported 520 known cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls. As of March 31, 2010, NWAC has recorded information for 582 cases. Of the 582 cases, 115 (20%) involve missing women and girls, 393 (67%) involve women or girls who died as the result of homicide or negligence, and 21 cases (4%) fall under the category of suspicious death (incidents that police have declared natural or accidental but that family or community members regard as suspicious). There are 53 cases (9%) where the nature of the case remains unknown, meaning it is unclear whether the woman was murdered, is missing or died in suspicious circumstances. Most of these unknown cases come from lists of missing and murdered Aboriginal women compiled by community members and posted on the Internet or published in newspapers. NWAC values and respects community knowledge and feel it is important to include these cases in this research. While lists acknowledge women and girls who have been lost, the information related to circumstances of the case is often limited. To date NWAC has not been able to locate further details about the unknown cases through secondary sources. Figure 1 presents a summary of the 582 cases.

Figure 1: Summary of Cases in SIS Database, 2010



Source: Calculations by NWAC using data from the Sisters In Spirit (SIS) database, 2010.

Over the past five years, information has been collected on an ongoing basis with regular updates to the database. When a change in a case occurs (for example, if a missing girl is found safe), the database is updated to reflect the new information. Comparing the 2010 findings to those from the 2009, *Voices of Our Sisters In Spirit (Second Edition)*, there are a few changes to take notice of. First, there is a sizeable increase in the number of known cases. In 2009, NWAC reported 520 cases and as of March 31, 2010, there are now 582 cases of disappearance and death. While there are an additional 62 cases in the database, these reflect both ‘new’ cases from the past 12 months, as well as historic cases identified through archival research. The number of new cases recorded in 2009-2010 is 20⁶, which includes missing, murdered, suspicious death, and unknown status cases.

Upon review of the cases, a second finding of interest is related to the overall number or proportion of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls. While murder cases continue to represent 67% of cases in the database (similar to our 2009 findings), the number of missing cases has decreased both in terms of the actual number of cases, as well as the percentage of overall cases. In 2009, there were 126 missing cases in the database (24%). This has since dropped to 115 cases (20% of total cases). Based on the dynamic nature of this research, this change reflects that some women and girls have been found alive. Sadly, others have since been found murdered or died as the result of suspicious circumstances.

⁶ Since January 2009, there have been 27 cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women entered into the SIS database. However, since the last release of data in the 2nd edition of *Voices of Our Sisters In Spirit*, there have been 20 new cases of disappearance or death.

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Women and Girls All Impacted

The information identified in these findings has grouped cases under a broad category of Aboriginal women and girls. In recognition of the differences between and within First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples, NWAC also acknowledges the specific community of each woman or girl where possible. However, this information is not well reported in secondary sources, making it difficult to gather enough data to formulate a discussion that speaks to the unique experiences of (and within) each group. For this reason, the overall analysis of frequency and trends related to missing and murdered women and girls is presented as an aggregate of the three identity groups. This said, it is important for NWAC to report on the cases where the identity is known.

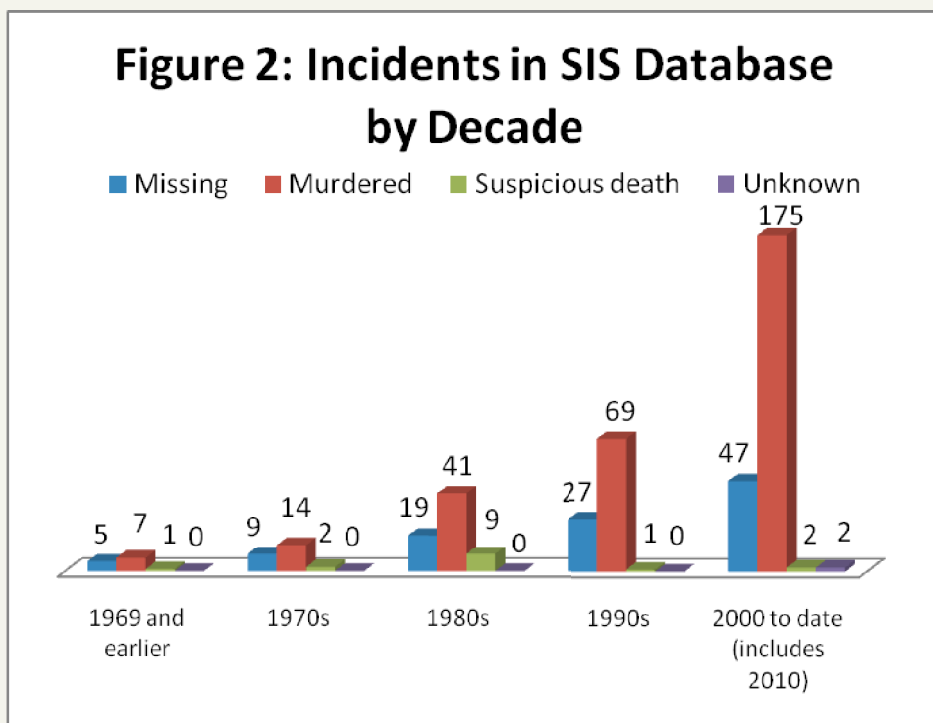
Of the 582 cases in this report, 153 of the women and girls are First Nations, 14 are Métis and 27 are Inuit. In 332 cases, the woman or girl is known to be Aboriginal, but there is no additional information to indicate whether she identified as First Nations, Inuit or Métis. There are also 56 cases where the identity of the woman or girl involved is unknown. These cases are included in the database because there is a strong reason to believe that the woman or girl is Aboriginal; however NWAC has not been able to confirm this through secondary sources. To collect further information regarding these cases, NWAC requested assistance from the RCMP to confirm the identity of the women and girls involved. RCMP records indicate that 23 of the 56 cases involve non-Aboriginal women; however, due to the Privacy Act the RCMP could not report back to NWAC *which* of the 56 women were non-Aboriginal. Without further details, the decision was made to keep all unknown cases in the database for analysis. The concern was that randomly removing 23 of the 56 cases might inadvertently exclude cases where the woman or girl is in fact Aboriginal. To support this decision a statistical significance test was conducted first with the inclusion of all cases, and then with 23 cases randomly selected for exclusion. The results found no significant difference in the outcomes, suggesting that there are no outliers in these 23 cases that would change the overall analysis or outcomes of the research.

The decision to include the 23 cases also reflects the concern around how police collect and record information on Aboriginal identity. As discussed earlier in this report, NWAC has learned there is no requirement or consistent protocol regarding how police gather information on Aboriginal identity. In carrying out this research, NWAC honours community reporting as the most reliable means of knowing whether a particular woman or girl is Aboriginal. Police recording, meanwhile, is often based on the visual assessment of the woman by the officer involved. Knowing the problems and inaccuracies of police collected data on Aboriginal identity NWAC was reluctant to randomly remove 23 cases from the database without further information.

Most Known Cases from the Last 10 Years

NWAC records information about when the known cases occurred. Of the cases identified to date 226 (or 39%) occurred in the past 10 years, and 97 (17%) occurred in the 1990s. This distribution is quite different from the findings released in 2009, which found that over one half

(55%) of cases occurred since 2000, and over one quarter (26%) of cases occurred in the 1990s, again reflecting the dynamic nature of the research. Compared to the 2009 findings, the 2010 data also indicate a different proportion of missing versus murder or suspicious death cases. The 2009 data found the majority of older cases involved missing women; however, as Figure 2 identifies, the findings now indicate more cases of homicide or suspicious death in all decades. This change in the data reflects what was previously suspected—that ongoing research will uncover additional older cases of both missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls which were previously undocumented.



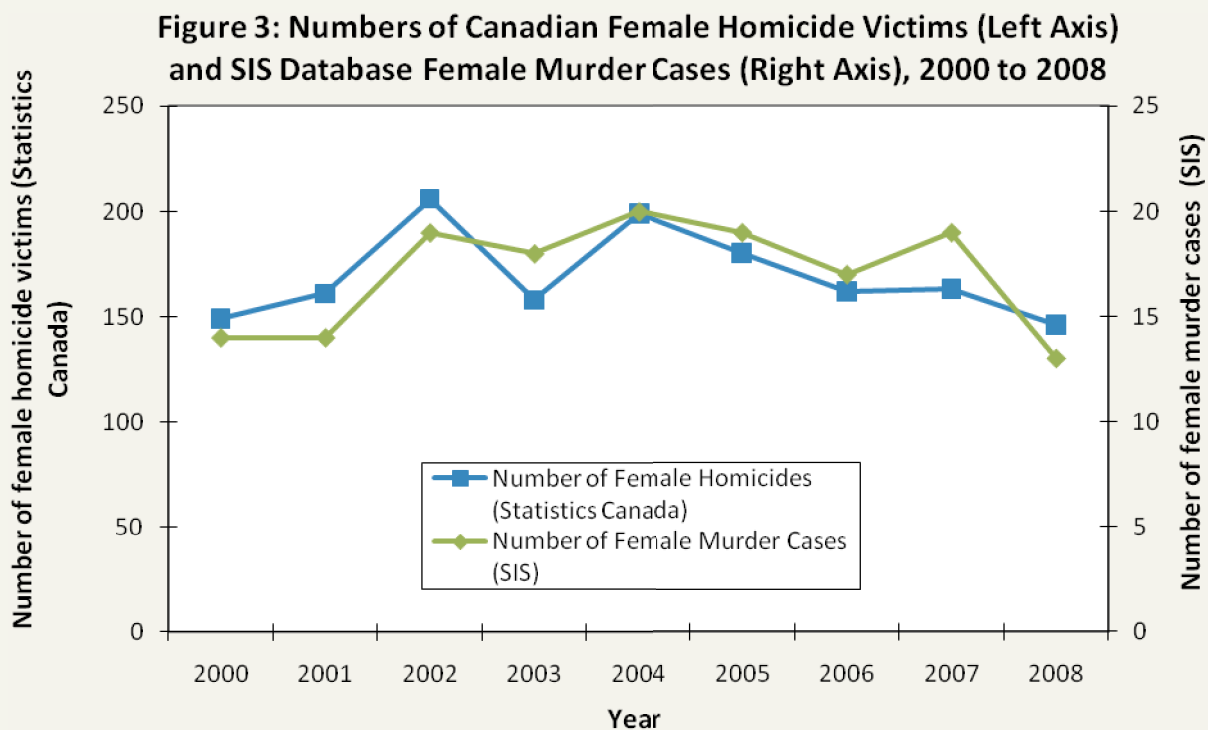
Source: Calculations by NWAC using data from the Sisters In Spirit (SIS) database, 2010.

There Are Likely More Older Cases

The number of female homicide victims in Canada has fluctuated in recent years. The most recent statistics show that from 2000 to 2008 the number of female homicide victims was as high as 206 in 2002 and as low as 146 in 2008 (Statistics Canada 2009a). As a trend, the number of female homicide victims increased from 2000 to 2002, declined slightly in 2003, increased again 2004, before starting a general downward trend until 2008 (Figure 3).

In Canada, there is no known homicide rate for Aboriginal women, but comparing the overall homicide rate for women in Canada, with the findings from the Sisters In Spirit database, there is an interesting pattern to consider. While the numbers differ considerably, a comparison of the trends suggests that the Canadian female homicide rates coincides quite closely with murder

cases collected in the Sisters In Spirit database over the same time period (Figure 3).⁷ While the two trends are not identical, it does suggest that over this period there was a relatively close relationship between trends of female homicide victims in Canada and cases of murdered Aboriginal women. The patterns observed in Figure 3 might be simply coincidental; however, the similarity makes sense given that cases of Aboriginal women and girls in the database are likely represented in the Statistics Canada figures.



Source: Beattie, Sara "Homicide in Canada, 2008" Juristat, October 2009. Vol. 29, No. 4, Statistics Canada, and SIS Database, 2010, and SIS Database - Female Murder Victims

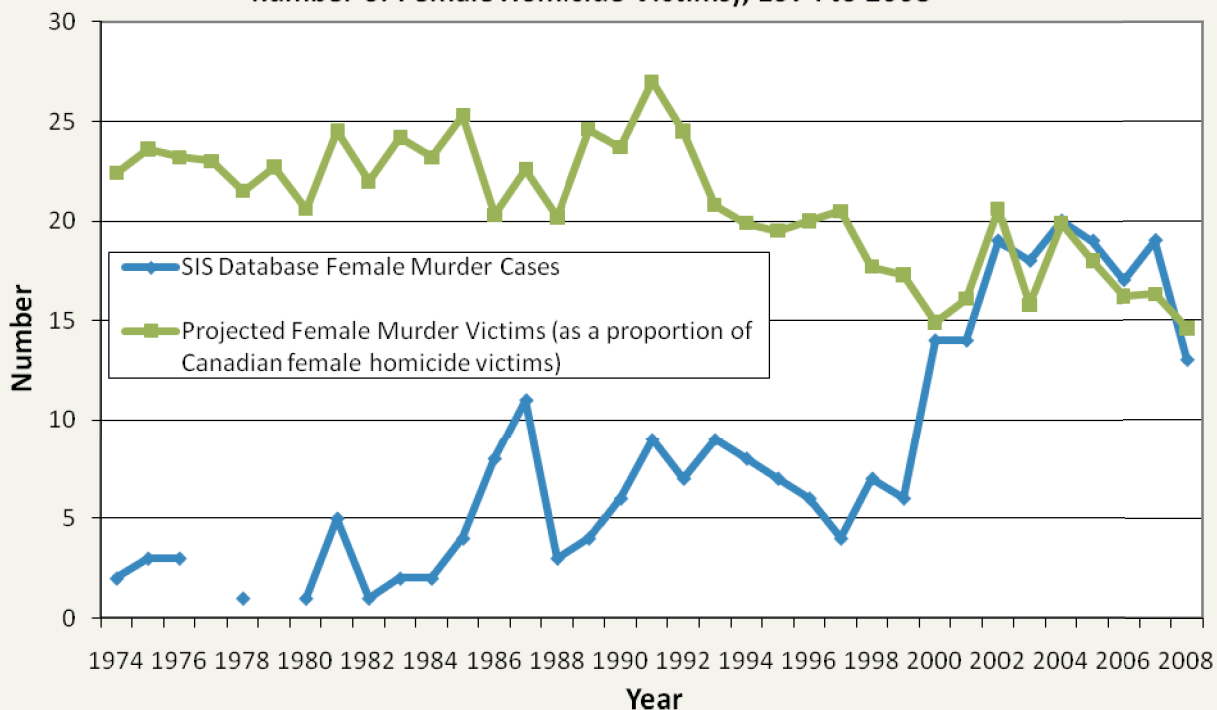
The close relationship between these two trends in recent years suggests there may have been a similar relationship in the past. However, a comparison of murder cases in the Sisters In Spirit database with the historical Statistics Canada figures shows that this is not the case. The current NWAC findings suggest there was a sudden increase in the number of murder cases at the turn of the century from 1999 to 2000, yet the overall number of female homicide victims in Canada at that point was declining. As there is little evidence or research to suggest that the number of homicides involving Aboriginal women suddenly jumped at this point in time, it seems far more likely that, despite ongoing research, the NWAC database continues to undercount the older cases, or true number of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada.

The question, therefore, is by how much might this research undercount the number of Aboriginal women and girls that have been murdered in Canada? The recent close relationship

⁷ The two data series are being compared for similarity of trends, but differ quite considerably in terms of actual numbers.

between female homicide rates in Canada and the Sisters In Spirit database indicates that, between 2000 and 2008, cases identified by NWAC represent about 10% of the total number of female homicides in Canada. Applying this percentage to the number of female homicide victims back to 1974 allows us to estimate or project the number of Aboriginal women and girls that were murdered over this period. It must be emphasized that the projected line in Figure 4 is speculative and its shape is related to the overall Canadian trend. The actual trend in the number of murdered Aboriginal women might have been much higher or possibly lower than the projected line. Nevertheless, the projected line in Figure 4 suggests that the Sisters In Spirit database accounts for only a fraction of the older cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada. For example, the projected line suggests that the number of cases

Figure 4: Number of SIS Database Female Murder Cases and Projected Number of Female Murder Victims (as a proportion of the Canadian number of Female Homicide Victims), 1974 to 2008

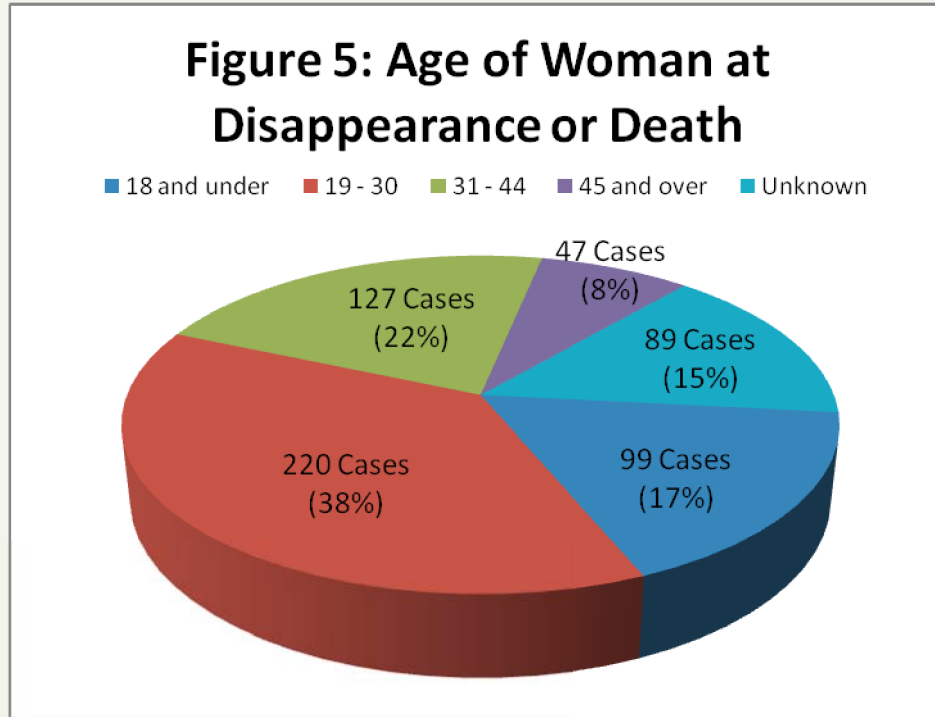


involving Aboriginal women and girls could have been as high as 20 to 25 in the mid-1970s. In contrast, the number of cases recorded in the Sisters In Spirit database is less than five for each year during the same period.

Majority of Cases involve Young Women and Girls

In conducting this research NWAC has gathered as much information as possible in order to understand the lives of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada. In 2010, NWAC has collected information about the age of the women or girl in 85% of known cases. Just over half of the cases (55%) involved women and girls under the age of 31, with 17% of women girls 18 years of age and under (Figure 5). This finding is up slightly from 2009, when

approximately 52% of cases involved women under the age of 31, with 14% of women and girls 18 years of age and under (NWAC, 2009). While Statistics Canada data indicates that just over 24% of female homicide victims between 2004 and 2008 in Canada are 50 and older (Statistics Canada 2009b), only 8% of murder cases in NWAC's database involve women over 45.

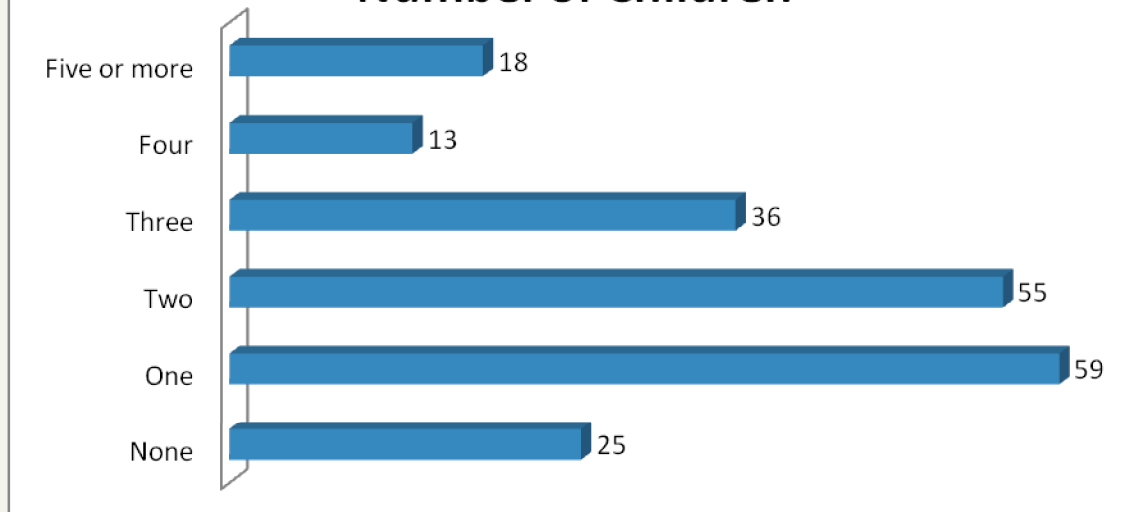


Source: Calculations by NWAC using data from the Sisters In Spirit (SIS) database, 2010.

Intergenerational Impact of Missing and Murdered Women: Many are Mothers

In 2009, NWAC reported that many of the missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada were mothers. Knowing the number of women who were mothers speaks to the intergenerational impact of women who have gone missing or been found murdered, and the need to provide supports and services to the children left behind. Unfortunately, this information is not always reported in secondary sources. Of the 582 missing and murdered Aboriginal women, information regarding the family size, or number of children, is known in just over one third (206) of the cases. In these cases, the overwhelming majority of women were mothers (88% of cases). Moreover, there are more than 440 children who have been impacted by the loss of their mother. See Figure 6.

**Figure 6: Intergenerational Impact,
Number of Children**



Note: n = 206 cases in SIS database for which this information is known. Moreover, there are more than 440 children who have been impacted by the loss of their mother.

Source: Calculations by NWAC using data from the Sisters In Spirit (SIS) database, 2010.

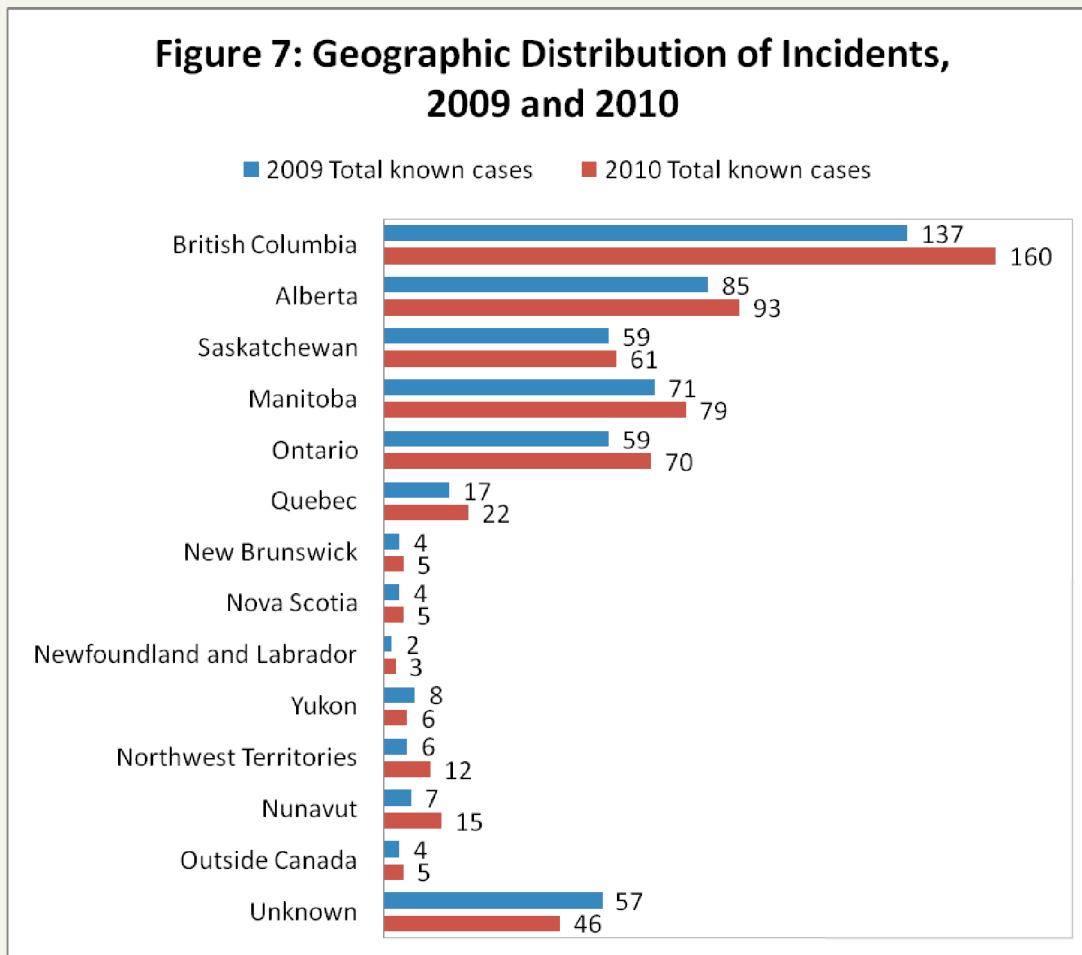
Majority of Known Cases Occur in the Western Provinces

The majority of known cases identified in this research occurred in the western provinces, with more than a quarter (28%) of all cases taking place in British Columbia. The high number of cases in British Columbia may reflect the availability of information on cases in high profile areas, such as the Downtown East Side of Vancouver, and those occurring along Highway 16 (also known as the “Highway of Tears”) in northern British Columbia. In contrast, there are a limited number of known cases in the Atlantic provinces and northern territories. For the Atlantic region, this may reflect the smaller population or lower proportion of Aboriginal peoples in these provinces, or be the result of underreporting/limited access to secondary source information concerning cases in these areas. In the northern territories, it may reflect the small population, as well as the fact that it is rare for a person to be missing in the north.

The distribution of cases across the country suggests no region is immune to violence leading to the disappearance or death of Aboriginal women and girls. To date there is only one province in the database without any cases—Prince Edward Island. However, community members have shared information about Aboriginal women and girls who disappeared or were murdered in Prince Edward Island but at the time of this report NWAC was still working to gather further information about these cases.

Since the release of the 2009 *Voices* report, NWAC has been able to gather information about 11 cases where the province of incident was previously unknown, reducing the number of these cases from 57 to 46. The research has also identified additional cases in all provinces and two of

the three territories, which can be seen in the overall increase in cases (from 520 to 582) since the last report. Only the Yukon territory saw a decrease in missing and murdered Aboriginal women or girls (from eight to six cases). This change reflects the ongoing nature of the research, indicating new information in these cases or that a missing woman has been found safe.



Source: Calculations by NWAC using data from the Sisters In Spirit (SIS) database, 2010.

Most Cases Occur in Urban Areas

The evidence collected indicates that the majority of cases occur in urban areas.⁸ Of the cases where this information is known, almost 60% of women and girls were murdered in an urban area; 28% of cases occurred in rural areas; and, 13% of women and girls were murdered on-reserve. This distribution is even more striking in terms of missing cases. Taking a broad look at the different locations where women and girls have disappeared,⁹ it was found that over 70% of women and girls went missing from an urban area, 22% were last seen in a rural area and 7%

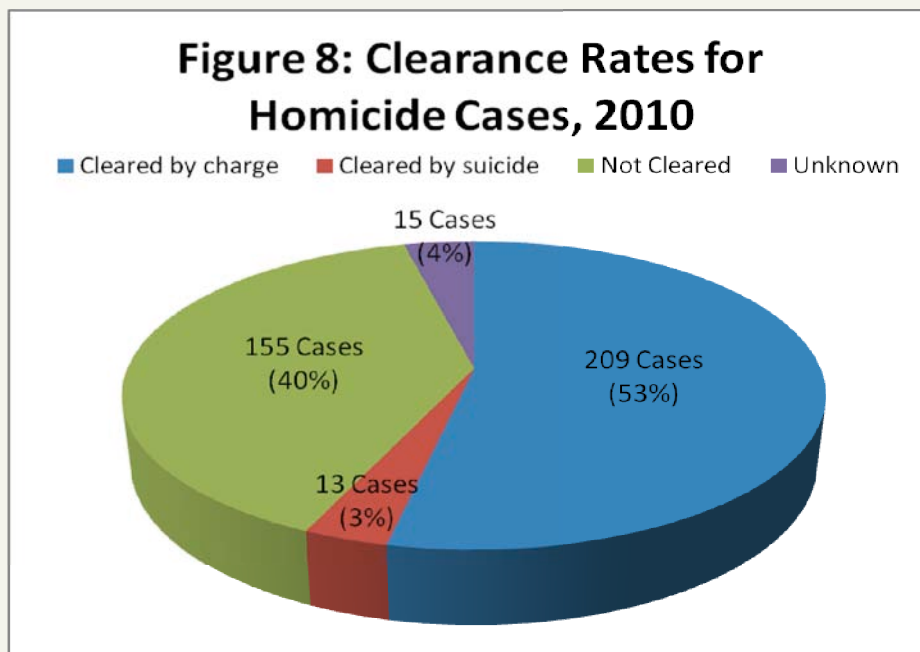
⁸ In this report, “urban” is defined under the Statistics Canada’s definition or category of a Census Metropolitan Area, whereas “rural” refers to a non-Census Metropolitan Area.

⁹ This includes cases where women and girls are still missing, as well as cases where women were missing and have since been found murdered.

disappeared from a reserve. While it is clear that the issue of missing women and girls is overwhelmingly an urban issue, the high rates of mobility of Aboriginal peoples, and particularly Aboriginal women and families, creates a different dynamic for cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls than would be experienced in the non-Aboriginal urban population. What this means is that even when cases may be linked to an urban area, there are often other circumstances impacting women and families, such as temporary or semi-permanent residence in a city and having close ties to a home community that is also impacted by the disappearance or death of a woman or girl. For cases on reserve and in rural areas, however, must also receive equal attention to identify appropriate recommendations for justice intervention. This issue is reiterated by family members who have expressed frustration over the fact that rural cases do not seem to get as much attention as those in urban areas, a situation one family member described as “racism-plus.”

Nearly Half of Murder Cases Remain Unsolved

NWAC also tracks information to measure outcomes in homicides involving Aboriginal women and girls. Referred to as the ‘clearance rate’, the data reveals a strikingly low percentage of cases where someone has been charged criminally in cases involving Aboriginal women and girls. In 2010, the evidence indicates charges have been laid in only 209 of 393 cases (approximately 53%). This clearance rate for murder cases is dramatically different from the average clearance rate for homicides in Canada, which was reported by Statistics Canada at 84% in 2005 (Statistics Canada 2005, 10). While a small number of cases have been cleared by suicide of the offender, there remain 155 cases (40%) where no charge has been laid, and an additional 15, or 4% , where the status of the case is unknown by NWAC.



Note: n = 393 cases in SIS database for which this information is known.

Source: Calculations by NWAC using data from the Sisters In Spirit (SIS) database, 2010.

There are Differences in Clearance Rate by Province

In looking at the outcomes in cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls, NWAC also wanted to identify if there was a difference in clearance rates by province or territory. Table 1 identifies the clearance rate by provinces in cases of homicide.

Table 1: Clearance Rates by Province, 2010					
Province or Territory	Cleared by charge	Cleared by suicide	Cleared otherwise*	Not cleared	Unknown
British Columbia	47.0%			49.0%	4.0%
Alberta	42.3%	9.0%		42.3%	6.4%
Saskatchewan	78.4%			21.6%	
Manitoba	51.6%	1.6%		45.3%	1.6%
Ontario	51.8%	3.6%		41.1%	3.6%
Quebec	56.3%	6.3%	6.3%	31.3%	
New Brunswick	50.0%			50.0%	
Nova Scotia	40.0%			60.0%	
Newfoundland and Labrador	66.7%	33.3%			
Yukon	75.0%			25.0%	
Northwest Territories	62.5%	12.5%		25.0%	
Nunavut	93.3%			6.7%	
Outside Canada	66.7%				33.3%
Total	53.2%	3.3%	0.3%	39.4%	3.8%
Source: Calculations by NWAC using data from the Sisters In Spirit (SIS) database, 2010.					
*refers to cases where a charge was laid, but not for homicide (e.g. a charge of assault)					

While the overall clearance rate is low, there are some provinces or territories that stand out as having higher clearance rates than the national average. Notably, all known cases in Newfoundland and Labrador have been cleared, either by charge or suicide of the offender. The Territories have a higher than average clearance rate, with 93% of cases in Nunavut and 75% of cases in the Yukon cleared by charge. In the Northwest Territories, 62% of cases are cleared by a charge and an additional 13% are cleared by suicide, resulting in an overall clearance rate of 75%. Based on reports of higher levels of family violence in the northern territories, it seems likely that the higher clearance rates in these regions may reflect that it is generally easier to lay charges when the offender is someone close to the victim (e.g. a partner or family member) versus an acquaintance or stranger. What is of interest, however, is the clearance rate in Saskatchewan which boasts a high (by comparison) rate of 78% of cases cleared by a charge.

More than Half of Women and Girls Died in a Residential Dwelling

The data collected has also been analyzed to track the specific location where women were found murdered/in suspicious circumstances in order to examine the idea of ‘safe space’ (for example, in one’s home versus a busy city street). Of the cases where this information is known (234 of the 393 cases of murder or suspicious death), it was found that 59% of Aboriginal women and girls died in a residential dwelling. In 15% of cases, the violence happened in an open area, such as a field, and in 14% of cases the incident took place on a street, road, or highway. The large number of cases occurring in residential dwellings may reflect the rates of family violence experienced by Aboriginal women.

Table 2: Locations of Murders and Suspicious Deaths in SIS Database, 2010

Where victims were found	Murders		Suspicious Deaths		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Residence	130	33.1	9	42.9	139	59.4
Public place	14	3.6	2	9.5	16	6.8
Vehicle, including public transportation	1	0.3			1	0.4
Street, road, or highway	31	7.9	1	4.8	32	13.7
Open area	34	8.7			34	14.5
Other	12	3.1			12	5.1
Total known locations	222	56.5	12	57.1	234	59.5

Source: Calculations by NWAC using data from the Sisters In Spirit (SIS) database, 2010.

Aboriginal Women and Girls More likely to be Killed by a Stranger than Non-Aboriginal Women

Of the known cases where charges were laid (261), it was found that 23% of the women were killed by current or ex-partners; 17% of accused offenders were acquaintances of the woman or girl, meaning a friend, neighbour, or someone known to her and a further 16.5% of suspects were strangers with no prior connection to the woman or girl. While anti-violence advocates in Canada have worked toward debunking the myth of ‘stranger violence’—only 6% of non-Aboriginal women are killed by strangers (Statistics Canada 2006, 68)—NWAC’s research indicates that Aboriginal women are almost three times more likely to be killed by a stranger than non-Aboriginal women.

Table 3: Relationship of Suspects to Homicide Victims in SIS Database, 2010

Relationship	No.	%
Partner	45	17.2%
Ex-partner	14	5.4%
Family, including all types of family relationships	15	5.7%
'John' or criminal relationship	4	1.5%
Acquaintance	45	17.2%
Stranger	43	16.5%
Unknown relationship	95	36.4%
Total	261	100.0%

Note: Total represents the number of cases in the database in which charges were laid.
Source: Calculations by NWAC using data from the SIS database, 2010.

Aboriginal Women Experience Violence by Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Offenders

Examining the demographics of the accused offenders, NWAC found the vast majority (80%) are men. Where the age of the accused offender is known (51% of cases), over one quarter were youth under the age of 30 (73 of the 261 accused, or 28%), a further 14% of accused offenders were between the ages of 30 and 39, and 7% were between 40 and 49 years of age. It is also clear that Aboriginal women experience violence by both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal offenders. In 36% of cases, the person charged is Aboriginal, while 23% of accused offenders are non-Aboriginal. In the case of non-Aboriginal offenders, there are some known cases of multiple offenders (e.g. Robert Pickton and John Michael Crawford), which results in offenders being counted more than once based on the number of homicide charges that have been laid. The background of the remaining 41% of accused offenders is unknown.

Upon examination of the offenders or perpetrators of these crimes, it is perhaps important to explore the connection between offending and prior personal experiences of violence, neglect or abuse—particularly for offenders who may disproportionately experience intergenerational violence and abuse. While information about personal history is only known in 24 of 261 cases, the research uncovered a history of abuse or suspected abuse in 21 cases. In only three cases there was no prior personal experience of violence or abuse. While the tragic outcome of violence by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders is the same, the social contexts from which they emerge and the measures that must be taken to address them are distinct, as will be considered in the following section.

Involvement in Prostitution is not a ‘Cause’ of Disappearance or Murder

Recognizing the extreme vulnerability and high levels of violence against women in prostitution, NWAC has worked to better understand how this experience relates to cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women. Of the 582 known cases, information is known about this experience in 149, or slightly over one-quarter (26%) of the cases. In about half of those cases¹⁰ (74 of 149) the women were not involved in the sex trade; in 51 cases,¹¹ the women were known to be involved in prostitution at the time of disappearance or death. NWAC also found an additional 24 cases where the women *may* have been involved in prostitution.¹² It is important to remember that these figures represent only a subset of cases and findings around the proportion of women involved (or suspected to be involved) in prostitution may change with more information. Moreover, it must be emphasized that involvement in the sex trade is not a cause of disappearances or murders; rather, many women arrive at that point in the context of limited options and after experiencing multiple forms of trauma or victimization.

Sisters In Spirit: A Research for Change Initiative

One of the most powerful components of NWAC’s research into the issue of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls is the subsequent ability to act and implement positive solutions in light of what is known. NWAC has identified a fundamental need to create preventative measures and effective solutions, as well as tailor action to the needs of Aboriginal women, particularly young women and mothers. Aboriginal organizations, federal, provincial, municipal and Band governments, Aboriginal communities, police, service providers, courts, educators, media, Canadians and the international community all have a stake in this issue. In order to address violence, policy, programs, and services must incorporate and reflect the evidence.

Need for a Two-Stream Approach

A two-stream approach is needed to address violence against Aboriginal women: the preventative (proactive) stream and the reactive stream. On one hand, changes are needed to increase safety and lessen vulnerability of Aboriginal women and girls. At the same time, the system must also address the needs of families and communities after a woman disappears or is found murdered. Success in preventing violence will, of course, decrease need for reactive measures, but preventative measures can only be obtained over a longer period of time so both must be addressed simultaneously. Immediate improvements to responses to families of missing

¹⁰ Five cases involved missing women, 67 were murdered, and two involved suspicious deaths.

¹¹ Eight cases involved missing women and 43 were murdered.

¹² Three cases involved missing women and 21 were murdered.

and murdered Aboriginal women and girls are crucial; however, such improvements do not necessarily address root causes of violence.

Prevention

Prevailing violence prevention strategies have been criticized for placing the onus on the victim to ensure her safety and effectively alleviating responsibility from perpetrators of violence and the society that allows violence to exist. Too often, prevention strategies assume that if programs and services are available, women will be able to improve *‘their’* situation. This is problematic on two levels. First, violence prevention needs to be about more than individual choice. Second, many of the programs intended to *‘help’* fail to reflect the real needs of Aboriginal women and are therefore inaccessible and ineffective.

Equality is essential for the health and well-being of Aboriginal communities. At the same time, it is hard to focus on culture and healing when families and communities lack clean water, access to childcare or the economic security to have safe, affordable housing. In this way, physical, spiritual, mental and emotional needs must be seen as interconnected and mutually re-enforcing. To truly address violence against Aboriginal women, it is necessary to support the revitalization of *‘our ways of being’*. It is necessary to reclaim the balance inherent in traditional gender roles and to take responsibility for the transmission of pride, cultural awareness and traditional knowledge to future generations. Since so many missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls are young, there is also a need for integrated educational strategies that engage youth in frank discussions about healthy relationships, self-esteem and personal safety, while raising awareness about the supports and services available in communities (something that obviously becomes more difficult in the context of rural and some First Nations communities, where supports may be limited by resource and capacity issues). The roles and guidance of Elders and culturally-relevant teachings around traditional roles and responsibilities must be understood as integral to this process.

There is a need for integrated educational strategies that engage youth in frank discussion about healthy relationships, self esteem and personal safety, while raising awareness about the supports and services available in communities.

Response

It is an unfortunate reality that this issue will not abate until major changes are made to improve the overall socioeconomic outcomes of Aboriginal peoples. These circumstances, however, cannot be addressed in isolation. Efforts to ensure effective responses from the police, the courts, victim services, the media and other service providers when Aboriginal women and girls go missing or are found murdered are required.

NWAC’s research with families found that they encountered barriers when working with police and victim services after their loved one disappeared or was murdered. For example, in research related to police responsiveness it was found that police often stereotype missing Aboriginal girls

and act based on those stereotypes as opposed to acting in the girl's best interest. This is a clear indication that measures must be taken to increase police and, arguably, Canadians' sensitivity and understanding of things like the history of colonization in Canada (Whiteduck, forthcoming). Families also indicated that they need victim services to help them navigate the police system, yet many families either were unaware that they could access victim services or there was a gap in the availability of services, particularly for families of missing women (Rexe, forthcoming). The obstacles that preclude families from a complete and equal response must be immediately removed. As articulated by Jacobs and Williams –it is obviously difficult to deal with the loss of a loved one, but the grief is even more difficult to cope with when the institutions designed to serve you let you down" (2008, 133)

While history is not an excuse for violent behaviour, violence perpetrated by Aboriginal men in the context of colonization, devaluation, and feelings of powerlessness, should be considered.

Experiences of Aboriginal Offenders

In understanding the vulnerability of Aboriginal women to violence, it is also important to recognize the trauma and violence experienced by Aboriginal men. Many Aboriginal men are struggling with the trauma of colonization and the intergenerational impacts that accompanies this history. For example, when Canada forcibly removed or apprehended children during the residential school era, they impressed upon children that their mothers were 'bad' mothers, that their families and communities were inferior and that their very identity was something to be ashamed of. Among the many negative impacts, boys were denied traditional teachings, rites of passage and understandings of their responsibilities toward women and how their role contributes to a sacred balance. As a result, many boys were never taught how to parent or interact with women in positive ways that are reflective of their cultures and traditions. As a result, some Aboriginal men internalized patriarchal understandings of masculinity that are not reflective of traditional teachings; values like the importance of power, domination, and control.

While history is not an excuse for violent behaviour, the context of colonization, devaluation, and feelings of powerlessness should be considered. Violence perpetrated by Aboriginal men is explained by Brownridge:

It is possible that those partners of Aboriginal women who themselves are Aboriginal have not only internalized [the] devaluation of women but that this operates in a context where they themselves feel devalued by society. To feel some value in the society in which they find themselves, they may have adopted White devaluation of women and seek to attain a sense of self-worth through having power over their partner. (2003, 78)

The experience of violence in childhood is a known risk factor or indicator for perpetrators of violence later in life (Cripps et al. 2009, 484) and since the residential schools era, as many as four generations of Aboriginal children have been raised in an environment of violence and abuse (Bopp, Bopp, and Lane 2003, 49). In this research, at least 21 Aboriginal offenders have been identified as experiencing violence, neglect, or abuse. NWAC's finding is supported by research concerning family violence and sexual assault in the territories, which found that

approximately three quarters (77%) of those accused of family violence and just over two thirds of those accused of sexual assault had suffered at least one form of abuse (Paletta 2008, vi).

Thus, the context of colonization and its intergenerational effects must be taken into consideration when working with Aboriginal offenders, particularly as the intersections between incarceration, recidivism, healing, and Aboriginal justice and legal traditions are emerging as important issues in the corrections system. However, when searching for solutions to rehabilitate Aboriginal offenders and overcome their own trauma related to the effects of colonization, it is vital to remember the needs of the victims' families. Returning to traditional forms of justice is an important step toward decolonization; however, Aboriginal women and their families have rights and society must be protected from violent offenders. Adjin-Tettey warns of the potential consequences of victim's rights being neglected during sentencing:

Focusing on decolonization or reversing the legacies of colonization could thus render women's victimization (both from colonization itself and the resulting social disintegration) invisible. Although it is important during sentencing to recognize the disadvantaged background of Aboriginal offenders that may have contributed to their commission of the offence in question, the harmful effects of the victimization of Aboriginal women (who are also obviously disadvantaged as victims of colonization) must not be trivialized. (2007, 200)

The needs of Aboriginal offenders may be similar to those identified for Aboriginal peoples in terms of reconciliation from colonization and its effects; for example, a part of the healing process for Aboriginal peoples may involve reclaiming traditional gender roles and responsibilities to regain or maintain traditional ways of being. There is a need to establish culturally-appropriate healing resources for men who have committed violence, such as men's support groups, counselling and sitting with Elders.

Mothers, Families, and Children

NWAC has found that many women impacted by violence, as well as disappearance or death are mothers and caregivers of their children. The research findings presented in this report identify at least 183 missing and murdered Aboriginal women are or were mothers; this means more than 440 children have been left without their mothers. When examining the circumstances of violence, we must not overlook those who may be affected by multiple layers of violence or trauma: the children. For this reason, measures created to improve the situation of Aboriginal women will have a similar and positive impact on their children and families. There are very real implications for the children left behind after their mothers disappear or are lost to murder. It goes without saying that children will experience trauma after such incidents regardless of their age. However, what supports are available to children of missing and murdered women? If these wounds are not healed and children carry this pain with them into adulthood, a cycle of intergenerational trauma may well result. Other family members and the community require support to cope with this trauma as well.

The overrepresentation of Aboriginal children involved in the child welfare system also has serious implications. After five years of research on this issue, NWAC has found that Aboriginal women losing their children to the child welfare system often leads to depression, increased use of alcohol or drugs to cope and, ultimately, increased vulnerability to violence. For example, through this research families have shared that a woman losing her children may *push her over the edge.*‘ This link to trauma caused by involvement with the child welfare system must be acknowledged as a root cause; apprehending children, breaking that special bond between mother and child, must be the last possible resort. Alternatively, we should focus our efforts on working with Aboriginal mothers and families, particularly those who suffer from family violence, addictions, poverty or other factors associated with increased vulnerability, to foster healthy families. As articulated in a report by the National Council on Welfare, *“we still need to shift our paradigm of working from one where we tell other people what to do to one where we bring families together and listen to them and ask them, ‘What kind of support do you need?’ ‘How can we help you to take care of your children and keep them safe?’”* (2007, 90)

The number of Aboriginal children left behind after their mothers go missing or are murdered is high. Thus, there is a dire need to support family members who take custody of these children. In order to avoid perpetuating the cycle of cultural disconnection, Aboriginal families and their communities must have the necessary supports in order to keep their children home. There must also be support for those who express interest in caring for Aboriginal children in the child welfare system, and consideration that they may also be living in poverty. There should be support for these families and communities to care for these children and prevent an ongoing cycle of apprehension into the child welfare system.

Emerging Issues

A number of issues have emerged over the course of NWAC’s research relating to missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls that require further inquiry, but fall outside the scope of the current framework: deaths that occur as a result of drugs, alcohol, exposure or suicide; deaths in-custody of police or corrections; and deaths in residential school or child welfare care. NWAC has also considered links between missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls and foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), hitchhiking, gangs, mobility, jurisdictional issues and human trafficking, which are not necessarily reflected in the data, but are important to the overall discussion of missing and murdered women and girls.

Deaths as a Result of Drugs, Alcohol, Exposure or Suicide

While homicide is a very specific form of violence, numerous cases have identified Aboriginal women and girls‘ who died not as the result of violence, but in tragic circumstances that might be considered *violent*—through drugs or alcohol, exposure or suicide). Although the immediate circumstances surrounding these deaths may not have been caused by a particular person, the root causes are often similar to cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls, such as increased vulnerability due poor housing, poverty and other socio-economic inequalities.

These cases are not included in the Sisters In Spirit database, but are relevant to research that broadens its scope to include deaths that result from the intersections of racism, sexism and indifference. The close links to the underlying causes and circumstances identified in the Sisters In Spirit research framework, as well as the tacit knowledge gathered by NWAC suggests that such deaths are far too common for Aboriginal women and girls.

Deaths In-Custody of Police, Corrections, Residential School or Child Welfare 'Care'

Also not included in the database are women who died in-custody of police or corrections and children who died in state care.⁶ Decisions have been made not to include these cases because of the belief that these cases must be reviewed under a different lens of responsibility. Based on a growing understanding of the experiences of children in the Residential School system, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is beginning to investigate the history of children who died or went missing in residential schools (CBC News 2010). It is the assertion of NWAC that these deaths warrant close examination since the systems in which they occurred could, or perhaps should, be held responsible. When in police custody, prison, residential school or foster care, the responsibility of care for Aboriginal women and girls, as well as men and boys, falls to the state. As such, all levels of government in Canada have a responsibility to keep these women and children safe. Deaths and murders in these systems must be examined individually, even though root causes and the issues may intersect.

Deaths and murders in the corrections and child welfare systems must be examined independently, even though root causes and the issues may intersect.

Research by Sikka points to a disturbing gap in terms of both police and child welfare response to teenagers in care or with high needs.⁷ She writes,

[p]articipants raised concerns that police missing persons units and social welfare agencies pay less attention to the whereabouts of runaway girls once they reach the age of fourteen. Many noted that chronic runaways over this age are not deemed missing or high risk, particularly where they stay with friends or are thought to be just hanging out. (2009, 14)

Sikka's work directly relates to the research presented in this NWAC report, which found almost one quarter of Aboriginal girls who go missing are under the age of 18 years old. What can be gleaned from Sikka's findings is that these so called chronic-runaways are actually the highest risk of being exploited, as friends are often the ones luring these young girls into situations of sexual exploitation or prostitution. Women and girls in prostitution are extremely vulnerable to violence, which may lead to disappearance or death. For this reason, the non-responsiveness of the police and child welfare systems in working with cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls should not be overlooked.

Heightened Vulnerabilities: FASD¹³, Hitchhiking, Gangs, Mobility

Recent research for NWAC has also indicated that links exist between the issue of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls, and FASD, hitchhiking, gangs, and mobility. While it has been difficult to draw out the extent and influence of these particular issues through secondary research, experiential knowledge of researchers and NWAC staff based on relationships with families and communities and the examination of large numbers of cases has revealed linkages. A small number of cases in the database have indicated that the woman or offender was affected by FASD. The literature on FASD and the corrections system in Canada indicates a connection between the disorder and offending: “[t]he cognitive, social, and behavioural problems faced by individuals with FAS/FAE are believed to lead these individuals into trouble with the law, and then create further problems for them during incarceration” (Boland et al. 1998, 54). Participants in Sikka’s research also stressed the inability of care facilities to effectively support youth with FASD, the result being that many young people run away from these centres, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation and violence.

When the important role Aboriginal mothers fulfil is lost to violence, the trauma of such an experience can breed more violence in the next generations. Research shows that 22% of gang members in Canada are Aboriginal (Totten 2009, 2) and information collected by Totten suggests a number of Aboriginal women and girls who have been murdered were involved in gangs at the time of their death. Also, Aboriginal mothers being lost to violence affects the children they leave behind, as Totten writes, “[m]any of these young men bitterly report that their mothers were absent throughout their childhood – some having been murdered or missing for extended periods of time” (ibid., 12).

It has been found that mobility amongst Aboriginal women, particularly as they move from small communities to large urban centres, makes them vulnerable to violence. Many young people from rural communities relocate to urban centres to attend school. Family and community members, as well as other key informants have shared stories that women and girls raised in rural or isolated communities are often unprepared for the transition to an urban environment. It is also of concern that many community members have long pointed to a high number of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls who were hitchhiking at the time of the incident. The issue of hitchhiking is of concern to NWAC as it directly relates to poverty, lack of access to transportation, and barriers to Aboriginal women securing safe transportation. However, it also speaks to issues impacting youth. Considering the research findings which indicate 17% of all missing and murdered Aboriginal women are youth 19 years and under, and more than 55% are youth under the age of 30, educating young Aboriginal peoples about safe transportation, safety in the urban context, and knowing risks posed by strangers and acquaintances, are all extremely important issues that are often overlooked.

¹³ Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) describes a continuum of permanent birth defects caused by maternal consumption of alcohol during pregnancy, which includes, but is not limited to fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS).

Sikka's study also makes the link between mobility, increased vulnerability and sexual exploitation. It was noted that Aboriginal women and girls living in rural areas sometimes have to travel to urban centres to access health or employment services, and that young girls often come to larger centres for powwows, dances, or other gatherings. Participants in Sikka's research relayed stories in which "people preyed on the mobility and transience of Aboriginal women in order to facilitate their entry into the sex trade" (2009, 15). While the link between mobility and sexual exploitation/disappearance/murder is sometimes obscured through secondary sources, qualitative research, including interviews with families of missing and murdered women and girls and knowledge shared by community members and other key informants, indicates strong connections in this area. Considering that Statistics Canada has found that Aboriginal peoples are moving away from rural and non-reserve areas to large urban centres and back to reserves (Statistics Canada 2006b, 4), there is a clear need for greater supports for Aboriginal women and girls in cities as they transition to and from their home communities.

Overlapping and Unclear Jurisdiction Areas

Finally, NWAC has found that overlapping and unclear jurisdictional areas of RCMP, First Nations, municipal and provincial police forces has impeded effective resolution of some cases. Family members have shared stories about jurisdictional conflicts when attempting to file a missing persons report outside their community of residence. For example, while one police service says the report needs to be filed in the city where their loved one went missing, the other maintains the report should be filed with police in her home community. Jurisdictional issues such as this act as a tremendous barrier to families and loved ones who try to make a missing persons report, but also to the investigation into a case. Jurisdictional conflicts also impact families' access to victim services. Over the course of the Sisters In Spirit initiative, NWAC has learned that different police forces provide different types of services, so families in the same city might receive different supports depending on whether their loved one's case falls under RCMP, provincial, or municipal jurisdiction. Jurisdictional issues must be resolved quickly and effectively so that officers and service providers can work in the best interests of victims and their families.

The high number of missing Aboriginal women in Canada is a serious issue that needs further research to identify links to human trafficking and what supports are needed to support women and girls who have been trafficked.

Jurisdictional issues must be resolved quickly and effectively so that officers can work in the best interests of victims and their families.

Missing Aboriginal Women and Girls and 'Human Trafficking'

NWAC has been asked about potential links between missing Aboriginal women and girls and human trafficking. Based on what is known from cases of women who were missing and later found murdered, human trafficking has not emerged as a significant factor in the disappearance of Aboriginal women. This is not to say that Aboriginal girls or women are not being trafficked or that trafficking might play a role in the disappearance of the 115 women still missing.

However, NWAC's research to date does not indicate strong links to the stereotypical or most recognizable forms of human trafficking, where cross-border activity and the sale of women's bodies are common elements.

Yet, the legal definition of human trafficking is much broader than what is commonly understood. As Sikka writes, "a person in Canada can traffic someone simply by exerting control over the movements of a person" (ibid., 5). Sikka's research shows that Aboriginal women and girls' experiences fall under this definition and "the types of trafficking to which Aboriginal women and girls are subject because they are Aboriginal are the types associated with discrimination, racism, poverty and breakdown of community" (ibid., 22). By this definition, certainly intersections could exist, but limitations of our quantitative research circumvent ascertaining this level of information. However, Sikka warns of problems with conflating the two issues and points out that the high number of missing Aboriginal women in Canada is a serious issue that should not need the label of 'trafficking' to be taken as such. By trying to 'fit' cases of missing and murdered Aboriginal women into the trafficking box, we serve only to diminish or hide what we know to be true about their experiences.

Although the limitations of secondary research made it difficult to explore the depth of these issues, the purpose of drawing attention to them here is to share what we have learned and point out areas that require further attention so that meaningful solutions can be implemented. While NWAC has uncovered unique and vital information pertaining to missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada for the first time, one of our major findings is that there is still much work that needs to be done. As evidenced through these areas we have identified for further research, the issue of violence against Aboriginal women is broad in scope and as we move forward we must take into account the many interconnected issues that make up the roots of the problem.

Conclusion

As of March 31, 2010, NWAC has found 582 cases of Aboriginal women and girls who have gone missing or been murdered. Tragically, too many of their stories illustrate the social and economic inequalities experienced by Aboriginal women and girls, which are directly linked to the impact of colonial policies that dislocated Aboriginal women, families and communities, and result in trauma, violence, as well as circumstances of vulnerability. However, the stories shared by families, communities, and friends also tell us that many missing and murdered women and girls were 'vulnerable' only insofar as they were Aboriginal and they were women.

While NWAC has made great strides in bringing to light issues of violence that have led to disappearance and death of Aboriginal women and girls, Aboriginal women continue to be the most at risk group in Canada for issues related to violence, and continue to experience complex issues linked to intergenerational impacts of colonization and residential schools. Ending violence against Aboriginal women and girls lies with both men and women, with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, as well as all levels of government. It ends with

recognition, responsibility and cooperation. Violence against women ends with restoring the sacred position of Aboriginal women as teachers, healers and givers of life.

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*Aboriginal women and girls are strong
and beautiful.*

*They are our mothers, our daughters,
our sisters, aunties, and grandmothers.*

