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Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women in Canada and
Governmental Response
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Abstract

The following is a meta-analysis literature review based on organizational reports, government documents, and statistical reports. The literature review has a focus on the governmental response to missing and murdered Indigenous women. The research question at hand was if the current governmental response through direct actions from the federal government and branches related to the federal government were effective in intervening in and preventing murdered and missing Indigenous women. The research briefly goes over findings from both Royal Canadian Mounted Police Commissions, calls to actions from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, and action from the federal governments of past Prime Minister Stephen Harper, and current Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. It was concluded that there was not a significant response to effectively combat murdered and missing Indigenous women.

Keywords: Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women, Indigenous, Colonialism

Introduction

Indigenous can be defined as individuals who identify as First Nations, Metis, Inuit, being registered as or treaty Indigenous as defined by *the Indian Act Canada*, and/or being registered with a First Nation or a band (Statistics Canada, 2011). Within the perimeters of this definition, 600,695 women and girls within Canada identified as Indigenous in 2006; making up 4% of the total Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2011). Despite making up a small portion of the total population, Indigenous women have a rate of violent victimization that is three times higher than that of non-Indigenous women (Brennan, 2011). The high rate of violent victimization of Indigenous women can be theorized to have a relation to the colonial past of

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Canada. In the waves of settlement in Canada, European men were sexually violent towards Indigenous women; creating a transformative property in the lives of Indigenous women in that Indigenous women faced a shift from a reputation under egalitarian values to a reputation under patriarchal values (Murphy, 2005). The societal view of indigenous women then shifted from valuable and equal to disposable and unequal thus generating a pass for violence against women identifying as Indigenous. The patriarchal system brought forth by European settlers to Canada disregarded Indigenous backgrounds, such as matrilineal and matrilineal traditions, and therefore, stripped indigenous women of political power related to their status within such traditions (Murphy, 2005). The loss of political power can build on the stereotype of disposable or invaluable as it shows a lower hierarchical status; leading to increased rates of violence. Further, the loss of political power experienced by Indigenous women can have a correlation to the lack of power to produce an efficient governmental and organizational response within Canada that recognizes the severity and colonial roots of violence against Indigenous women.

Purpose

The literature review at hand will focus on the victimization of Indigenous women of Canada through the phenomenon of murdered and missing Indigenous women. In specific, direct focus will be given to the governmental response, and affiliated organizational response, to the murdered and missing Indigenous women in Canada. The purpose of the stated focus is to examine if there is a substantial and effective response to violence, in terms of homicide and disappearances, against indigenous women in Canada. Additionally, the significance of murdered and missing Indigenous women in a societal context as well as a social work context will be addressed within the conclusion of the review after the examination of the focus. The

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review will be conducted using statistical reports, government documents, and organizational commissions.

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police Commission

The 2014 Royal Canadian Mounted Police National Operational Overview

In 2014, The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) released a report detailing a national operational overview on missing and murdered Indigenous women across Canada. *Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women: A National Operational Overview* was initiated by the RCMP Commissioner in 2013 to examine reports of missing and murdered Indigenous women in jurisdictions across Canada and further steps that need to be undertaken by the RCMP to remedy the situation (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2014). The report stated that, between 1980 and 2012, there was a total of 1,181 police-reported cases in regards to homicides and disappearances of Indigenous women with 1,017 as homicides and 164 as disappearances (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2014). Of the 1,181 cases reported to police, 225, or 19%, were unsolved at the time of the report (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2014).

Missing Indigenous Women

As stated above, 164 Indigenous women are considered missing within Canada as of November 4th of 2013; making up a total of 11.3% of missing women in Canada (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2014). The RCMP divided the 164 Indigenous women into categories related to their disappearance. These categories were as followed: 37% disappeared to unknown causes, 27% disappeared to foul play, 27% disappeared to an accident, 7% got lost, and 1% ran

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away (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2014). Therefore, creating 64% of Indigenous women disappearing under suspicious circumstances (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2014). However, the report noted that the founded numbers could be significantly inaccurate. The number of reported Indigenous women could be gravely lower due to women not being identified as Indigenous during police investigation and disappearances of Indigenous women not being reported (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2014).

Murdered Indigenous Women

The commission from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police brought forth two important components of Indigenous women homicide victims: overrepresentation and trends in the proportion of victims. In all homicides across Canada, women victims made up 32% out of 20,313 victims between the years of 1980 and 2012 (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2014). Of this 32%, Indigenous women homicide victims made up 16% (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2014) which is greater than their representation of 4% of the total Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2011). Furthermore, the report found that unlike their non-Indigenous women counterparts, the rate of Indigenous women as homicide victims remained constant (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2014). The rate of homicide per 100,000 of the population decreased from 7.60 to 4.45 between 1996 and 2011 for Indigenous women (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2014), showing a constant state. In 1984, Indigenous women accounted for 8% of women homicide victims compared to 2012 where they accounted for 23% of women homicide victims (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2014); thus, quantifying the significant decrease of non-Indigenous women homicide victims while representing the constant, or increase, in Indigenous women homicide victims.

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Risk Factors

The report examined three notable risk factors for indigenous women in terms of disappearances and homicides: employment status, use of intoxicants, and involvement in the sex trade. In regards to employment, 16% of Indigenous women victims were employed compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts with 40% (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2014). 18% of Indigenous women victims were employed through illegal means compared to 8% of their non-Indigenous counterparts (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2014). 23% of Indigenous women victims were on social assistance or disability compared to 9% of their non-Indigenous counterparts (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2014). With the use of toxicology reports, it was shown that 63% of Indigenous women victims were intoxicated in some capacity at the time of the violence in comparison to 20% of their non-indigenous counterparts (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2014). Lastly, in terms of involvement in the sex trade, it was found that 12% of Indigenous women victims at the time of the violence were involved in the sex trade compared to 5% of their non-Indigenous counterparts (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2014). The RCMP respectively concluded that the aforementioned factors contributed significantly to murdered and missing Indigenous women in Canada.

Next Steps

In the final portion of *Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women: A National Operational Overview*, four steps were outlined in regards to RCMP involvement in murdered and missing Indigenous women. First, enhancing efforts on unresolved cases was outlined. This

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included ensuring necessary level of supervision on missing persons cases, guaranteeing victim support services are available to the families of victims, providing timely and ongoing reporting to the families of victims, conducting interviews with located individuals to analyze risk factors with prevention and intervention efforts, updating the RCMP National Missing Persons policy to include best practices, introducing the use of a mandatory intake form for missing persons, and executing a mandatory national risk assessment tool for investigations (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2014). Second, focusing on prevention efforts was outlined. The prevention efforts outline were working in conjunction with government departments and agencies to identify communities with high risk factors to maximize support and community appropriate referrals for at-risk individuals, introduce crime prevention programs, and track the progress of these two interventions (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2014). Third, increasing public awareness was outlined. This outline included working in conjunction with community organizations to release data on cases of murdered and missing Indigenous women, providing statistics to Statistics Canada, and funding public intervention and prevention projects (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2014). Fourth, strengthening data was outlined. Strengthening the data included changing how data is collected and ensuring Statistics Canada is provided with the most recently collected RCMP data (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2014).

National Overview Update

In 2015, an update report was released by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police from the *Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women: A National Operational Overview*. The 2015 update revealed that since the release of the 2014 report, there was a 9.3% reduction in the number of

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unsolved homicides and suspicious disappearances of Indigenous women (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2015). As well, the 2015 update report, stated that cases involving Indigenous women have an 81% solve rate in comparison with their non-indigenous counterparts of a solve rate of 83% (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2015). Lastly, as of April 2015, there was a total of 174 missing Indigenous women in Canada; this represents 10% of the 1,750 missing women in Canada that were reported to the police (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2015).

Truth and Reconciliation Commission

The Truth and Reconciliation Committee was established in 2008 to promote healing from colonialism between Indigenous peoples and the government (Truth and Reconciliation Commission). The committee ceased on December 15th of 2015 with 94 calls to action for reconciliation (Truth and Reconciliation Commission). In the 94 calls to action laid out by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, six resonated in regards to murdered and missing Indigenous women.

Call to Action: #27

“We call upon the Federation of Law Societies of Canada to ensure that lawyers receive appropriate cultural competency training, which includes the history and legacy of residential schools, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law, and Aboriginal–Crown relations” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

Action 27 would assist indigenous women in that it creates the chance for lawyers to provide correct advocacy for Indigenous women in violent situations, Indigenous women victims

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of violence, as well as their families. Furthermore, Action 27 is significant as it prepares for lawyers to remain culturally competent in the courtroom of cases of murdered and missing Indigenous women.

Call to Action: #28

“We call upon law schools in Canada to require all law students to take a course in Aboriginal people and the law, which includes the history and legacy of residential schools, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law, and Aboriginal–Crown relations” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

Similar to Action 27, Action 28 would help Indigenous women in that law students when graduated can accurate advocacy for indigenous women in violent situations, Indigenous women victims of violence, and their families. As well, Indigenous education would generate more culturally competent prosecution and defense arguments in the courtroom for murdered and missing Indigenous women.

Call to Action: #39

“We call upon the federal government to develop a national plan to collect and publish data on the criminal victimization of Aboriginal people, including data related to homicide and family violence victimization” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

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Action 39 helps Indigenous women in that it analyzes why indigenous peoples, including Indigenous women, are at a higher risk of violence and how to prevent this violence.

Furthermore, in alignment with the 2015 Royal Canadian Mounted Police update, Indigenous women are at a high rate of being exposed to family violence (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2015), and therefore, data related to family violence victimization would ensure a decline in Indigenous women as victims to family violence and an increase in prevention programs for Indigenous women.

Call to Action: #40

“We call on all levels of government, in collaboration with Aboriginal people, to create adequately funded and accessible Aboriginal-specific victim programs and services with appropriate evaluation mechanisms” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

Action 40 would assist indigenous women who have faced violent assaults gain access to culturally competent services, such as counselling and advocacy, to promote healing and justice. As well, Action 49 would help create culturally competent services for families and communities of murdered and missing Indigenous women to deal with grief and other emotions related to the trauma.

Call to Action: #41

“We call upon the federal government, in consultation with Aboriginal organizations, to appoint a public inquiry into the causes of, and remedies for, the disproportionate victimization of Aboriginal women and girls. The inquiry's mandate would include an investigation into missing

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and murdered Aboriginal women and girls and links to the intergenerational legacy of residential schools” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

Action 41 would aid indigenous women in that indigenous women who have been victims in the murdered and missing phenomenon would receive justice. Furthermore, it would prevent more Indigenous women in falling victim to the murdered and missing phenomenon. Additionally, it would ensure the importance of the role colonialism plays in murdered and missing Indigenous women.

Call to Action: #57

“We call upon federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal governments to provide education to public servants on the history of Aboriginal peoples, including the history and legacy of residential schools, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law, and Aboriginal–Crown relations. This will require skills-based training in intercultural competency, conflict resolution, human rights, and anti-racism” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

Action 57 benefit indigenous women as it would bridge the gap of distrust and incompetency between important key responder public servants and Indigenous women. The bridging of this gap could aid the prevention of violent attacks, murders, and disappearances against Indigenous women across Canada.

The Federal Governmental Response

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Stephen Harper

Past Prime Minister Stephen Harper was the initial Prime Minister when the phenomenon of murdered and missing Indigenous women first came to light. Harper viewed murdered and missing Indigenous women differently than Indigenous advocates, stating “We should not view this as a sociological phenomenon. We should view it as crime” (CBC News, 2014).

Additionally, Harper did not see an inquiry or action into murdered and missing Indigenous women as a priority in an interview with Peter Mansbridge, stating “It isn't really high on our radar, to be honest, Peter” (Maloney, 2015). Furthermore, Harper stated that it was not the responsibility of the federal government but that of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, “The RCMP has said itself in its study, the vast majority of these cases are addressed, and they're solved through police investigations, we'll leave it in their hands” (CBC News, 2014). Therefore, justice for murdered and missing Indigenous women did not receive a federal inquest, or action, during the terms of Stephen Harper.

Justin Trudeau

Current Prime Minister Justin Trudeau stated in his post-election mandate letter to Carolyn Bennett, the Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs, that action was to be taken in regards to murdered and missing Indigenous women; “Develop, in collaboration with the Minister of Justice, and supported by the Minister of Status of Women, an approach to, and a mandate for, an inquiry into murdered and missing indigenous women and girls in Canada”

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(Trudeau, 2015). The above vision generated by Trudeau for Bennett sparked the creation of a national inquiry. The national inquiry into murdered and missing Indigenous women has a completion date of December 31st of 2018 with a total budget of \$53.86 million dollars (Government of Canada, 2016). The inquiry has a four-step approach: mandate, build on existing knowledges, recommend and approach. The mandate step includes examining systematic causes, explaining patterns and risk factors, examining historical, social, economic, institutional and cultural factors that are contributing factors, examining the effect of policies, institutions, and practices, and assessing prevention and intervention efforts that have been used thus far (Government of Canada, 2016). The build step includes reviewing pre-inquiry submissions and data as well as to review and consider preexisting reports on the subject (Government of Canada, 2016). The recommend step includes bringing forth recommendations to the Canadian federal government to remove systematic causes of violence and increase the safety of Indigenous women and girls as well as recommending ways to honor missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls; these recommendations are to be given through an interim report on November 1st 2017 and a final report on November 1st 2018 (Government of Canada, 2016). The last step, approach, includes taking a trauma informed approach that is culturally competent of Indigenous peoples while also promoting and advancing reconciliation, contributing to public awareness around the causes and solutions of violence, and providing Indigenous peoples with a chance to share their experiences, and views on the recommendations from the inquiry (Government of Canada, 2016).

Conclusion

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After reviewing current government documents, organizational reports, and statistical reports, it can be reasonably stated that missing and murdered Indigenous women is a serious problem facing the Canadian population. However, when considering the little action done by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the nonexistent work of adopting the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, and years of government denial, it is clear that the governmental response is low, despite an inquiry now in process. A low governmental response can be attributed to the racism and sexism still present in the societal structure of Canada. Indigenous women, who are faced by both racism and sexism, become the other. The other is acted as disposable, invaluable as they do not conform to the privileged norm of society. The othering of Indigenous women creates a culture of acceptance where violence against Indigenous women is an accepted act of society. The significance of this literature, and the findings, then is to acknowledge the sociological phenomenon of murdered and missing Indigenous women and the ties it must racism and sexism in the Canadian context. Further, the literature and the findings have the significance of that action must be undertaken. This leads to the role of social workers in the development of this change. Social workers must undertake cultural competency, whether that be in training or academia, to firstly understand the underpinnings of violence against Indigenous communities as well as the traditions of Indigenous communities. To undertake this knowledge, will assist social workers in advocating for Indigenous women victims, their families and their communities to ensure equitability, justice, and effective prevention and intervention. Finally, social workers play a key role in bridging the gap of untrust and oppression between Indigenous communities and governments, organizations, and the rest of Canadian society. Further research in the field should focus on the effectiveness of the current inquiry as well as the underpinnings of racism and sexism and its effect on Indigenous women.

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