

## How Many Dead Bodies Equal Justice for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women in Canada?

By Saskia De Vries

On August 17, 2014, Tina Fontaine's lifeless body was pulled from Winnipeg's Red River attached to 11.5kg of rocks. A cursory google search shows a young Indigenous girl with a radiant complexion and sweet smile. She arrived in Winnipeg to reconnect with her birth mother, but never got the chance. Instead, her 15-year-old life was corrupted by the systemic racism and colonial oppression leading to Canada's missing and murdered Indigenous women's crisis. This unspeakable violence requires a concerted commitment and follow-through from police and all levels of Canadian society.

The exact number of Indigenous women and girls who have gone missing or been murdered in Canada since the 1970s is uncertain. Estimates range from approximately 1,000 to 4,000.<sup>1</sup> They make up only 4% of Canada's women, but represent 16% of all female homicides between 1980 and 2012.<sup>2</sup> These are just a few of the appalling statistics that show the severity of the issue. The reason is partially racial. It is well known Indigenous people in Canada are socially, economically, and politically marginalized. But the issue is also gendered. Being a woman makes them more frequent targets for hatred and violence.

In the six weeks leading up to her murder, Fontaine came into contact with various social workers, police officers and health-care workers. Her death despite this made it clear to Indigenous youth across Canada that the system cannot protect them. In fact, it fails them entirely. The case reinvigorated activists who called upon the Canadian government to conduct a national inquiry into the issue. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's call to action 41 seconded this.

The issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women requires sweeping policy changes. To inform these changes, policy-makers first need reliable statistics. Police databases can technically record whether or not missing persons and violent crime victims are Indigenous. In practice, their recording has proved inconsistent. We need standardized protocols with clear expectations of how and when police should record a victim's Indigenous identity. This includes the development of new police training programs and procedures that address racial bias among officers.

What about the long list of cases that already went unsolved? Enough Indigenous women, girls, and their families have been victims of Canada's flawed policing system. They deserve justice and equal attention. We clearly need better coordination of police investigations into long-term missing persons cases and unsolved murders.

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul Tasker, "Confusion Reigns Over Number of Missing, Murdered Indigenous Women" (*CBC News*: Ottawa), February 16, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Northern Affairs Canada, "Background on the Inquiry" (Government of Canada), April 22, 2016. <https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1449240606362/1449240634871>.

Indigenous women and girls would be at less risk of victimhood with the proper services available. These should be culturally appropriate and could include emergency shelters, court workers, and survivor support services. This requires adequate long-term funding and social services coordination efforts.

A national inquiry was established in 2016 under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. But it is plagued with bureaucratic chaos and personal conflict. It is likely that the commissioners won't file their final report until 2020 rather than this year. This long delay is unacceptable considering the seriousness of the issue. Many believe the Federal government is to blame. And they may very well be right.

Missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls are tragic victims of Canada's incompetency. What's been done isn't enough. Too many human rights bodies have weighed in on the crisis to be ignored any longer. The national inquiry needs to reorient itself and speed up the final report delivery. Until this happens, other policy recommendations can't be put in place. Without this issue addressed, the rhetoric of reconciliation means nothing at all.

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