



**"Police (In)Justice: Responding Together to Change the Story"
Collaborative Statement and Resources
Native Youth Sexual Health Network & Families of Sisters in Spirit**

We have come together in solidarity as the Native Youth Sexual Health Network (NYSHN) and Families of Sisters in Spirit (FSIS) to demand accountability with the recent release of the Human Rights Watch report; [“*Those Who Take Us Away: Abusive Policing and Failures in Protection of Indigenous Women and Girls in Northern British Columbia*”](#). We also want to recognize the police injustice recently faced by a young [Indigenous woman in Edmonton](#), and that we hear and believe you. We respectfully acknowledge your strength for sharing about the abusive policing and failures in protection you have faced.

We would first like to acknowledge all of the Indigenous communities who came forward to share these stories. We respect and affirm our rights to speak out anonymously and to have control over the way our stories are being told. We recognize a long-standing history of Indigenous families and communities calling out these injustices and human rights violations. This is a time when we respond together about how we see larger policing (in)justices our communities face now and what we can collectively do to change the story together.

The stories shared throughout come from Indigenous FSIS grandmothers who've lost loved ones to forced disappearance, murder, and violent death - including at the hands of police.

“It feels like the Canadian public doesn't understand our realities, especially when it comes to police violence and abuse. They've been taught that police are there to 'serve and protect us' and keep the peace. But what folks don't know is that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police was originally created to control and manage the 'Indian Problem', which included using force, violence and coercion against our peoples. This is the RCMP's living legacy.”

We validate the many stories we've heard from families about a lack of police responsiveness and/or dehumanizing treatment directed at the missing woman themselves, their family or friends. Families have expressed frustration and anguish of being ignored when they presented evidence countering police theories. For instance, pointing out that their loved ones disappeared without taking their wallet, clothes, or cell phone, told no one of their plans, left without saying goodbye, and have not heard from for months, years, and decades in some cases. When the police don't view our loved ones' disappearances as a cause for alarm that leaves it up to families and allies to take on the role of investigating despite the shock we are experiencing.

It is unacceptable and trauma-inducing when families are put in a position of having to circulate their own posters/information, raise money for rewards or to hire private investigators and lawyers, coordinate their own searches, set up tip-lines, follow-up on leads, or speak to the media, or mobilize community without supports in place. It is likewise problematic and harmful that families who do not have the capacity to undertake this overwhelming and expensive process are unable to advocate on behalf of their loved ones.

These accounts illuminate a deeply complicated relationship with police that's been shaped by colonial stereotypes that dehumanize Indigenous women and label Indigenous peoples as needing to be controlled, managed, and assimilated. Some families are reluctant to speak out when problems with police arise, out of fear of having it reflect back on the investigation and how it proceeds (or doesn't).

Different forms of “police”

We see that ‘policing’ comes in many different forms. **‘Policing’ appears as a larger systemic system of control and violence against the self determination** we seek over our bodies as Indigenous peoples and the many different spaces they are in. As the HRW report and stories from FSIS tell us, policing has historically allowed for violence to happen against Indigenous bodies. Indigenous women and girls don't just go missing or are murdered.

“Families and friends of missing women tell of dispassionate police officers and front-line workers from Missing Persons departments not taking their loved one's disappearance seriously from the beginning. Being told to wait 24, 48 or 72 hours before a report could be filed when no such time limits exist in Canada. When reports are filed family members have felt that police jumped to the conclusion that women and girls had runaway or are ‘out partying’ and will come back on their own eventually, maybe “at Christmas or for her birthday”.

This happens because the current policing system over polices and under protects us. The behavior of policing extends beyond law enforcement, into social services, child welfare, the mental health system, as well as the increased collaboration between these agencies resulting often in increased criminalization and incarceration but not actually producing more safety.

“I know what it's like to distrust and even fear the police. When I needed protection and assistance for myself and my children to flee family violence, I was treated like a criminal. Rather than believe the abuse, they threatened to arrest me on a 4 year old arrest warrant they forgot to vacate out of their system. One of the police officers actually shouted at my 15 month old son to ‘Shut the fuck up’ because he was crying. I was told my children were going to be taken away. I ended up going back to that abusive relationship and never called the cops again.”

Examples of where we see the extension of police violence:

- Removal of Indigenous children and youth from their homes/communities
- Arrest and detention of land defenders and those protecting the environment
- Racial profiling and the intersection of policing genders and sexualities. This includes specific violence against Two Spirit, LGBTQ and gender nonconforming

peoples.

-Decreased and/or restricted access to justice and support systems in cases of sexual assault, rape, or sexual abuse.

-Criminalization of accessing harm reduction equipment to stay safe such as clean needles or syringes

-Increasing legislation around mandatory minimum sentences and the construction of more prisons. Youth in custody and jail are also tied into these larger forms of (in)justice.

Supporting Indigenous systems of accountability and justice

Many Indigenous nations have their own systems of accountability and ways of keeping people safe, although many have been affected by colonialism. We support Indigenous communities restoring traditional forms of self-governance and justice systems that can help to deal with issues of violence. If this is an option where you are, Elders/Grandparents and community leaders you trust may be able to help resolve conflict, or this may be something to ask for and seek out. Build up and support local organizing that Indigenous communities may already be taking leadership around for using alternative responses to violence.

We also recognize that sometimes the only option is to approach police or law enforcement, while doing what you can to reduce the harm. **Here are some things to keep in mind whenever possible**, in addition to the resources we have listed at the end of this statement:

- 1.) **Bring an advocate.** An advocate can be someone who can help listen to what police officers may say, take down badge numbers, pictures and be a witness to conversations, actions and your case. The person can also help to provide additional emotional, spiritual and cultural support and comfort.
- 2.) **Documentation.** Keep documentation at the individual and community level of police violence or lack of protection. Talk about trends within your local, provincial or territorial police and what you would like to see change. These can also be community led research through surveys, art projects, group or individual interviews or oral histories of the police.
- 3.) **Know your rights.** Learn about your rights when it comes to dealing with police and law enforcement. There are info cards in different regions such as the one detailed here on Rabble.ca's "Interacting with Police" <http://rabble.ca/toolkit/guide/your-rights-and-police>. Even if it isn't something you can pull out in the moment, it can be helpful information to know before or after and share with others.

The injustice of police violence is about more than a select few people or incidents.

We need to respond together to change the story...

Families of Sisters in Spirit (FSIS) is a grassroots volunteer organization led by families of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, with support from Indigenous and settler friends, allies, and community organizations.

www.familiesofsistersinspirit.com

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Native Youth Sexual Health Network (NYSHN) works with Indigenous youth and communities across the United States and Canada to advocate for and build strong, comprehensive, and culturally safe sexuality and reproductive health, rights, and justice initiatives in their own communities. www.nativeyouthsexualhealth.com

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RESOURCES

INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence

Stop Law Enforcement Violence Toolkit

<http://www.incite-national.org/index.php?s=103>

Police Violence Against Native Women and Native Trans & Two Spirit People

http://www.incite-national.org/media/docs/5676_toolkitrev-native.pdf

What Their Stories Tell Us: Research Findings from the Sisters in Spirit Initiative

http://www.nwac.ca/sites/default/files/imce/2010_NWAC_SIS_Report_EN_Lite_0.pdf

No More Stolen Sisters

<http://www.amnesty.ca/research/reports/no-more-stolen-sisters-the-need-for-a-comprehensive-response-to-discrimination-and->

Streetwise and Safe

Criminal In/Justice Map - working through the criminal in/justice system:

<http://justicemap.streetwiseandsafe.org/index.html>

Young Women's Empowerment Project

"Street Youth Bill of Rights" on:

<http://ywepchicago.wordpress.com/our-work/our-campaign/>