

2010

Research Findings, Policy Challenges, and Lessons Learned: The Native Women's Association of Canada's Sisters In Spirit Initiative

Elizabeth Bastien

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/aprci>



Part of the [Social Policy Commons](#)

Citation of this paper:

Bastien, Elizabeth, "Research Findings, Policy Challenges, and Lessons Learned: The Native Women's Association of Canada's Sisters In Spirit Initiative" (2010). *Aboriginal Policy Research Consortium International (APRCi)*. 41.
<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/aprci/41>

13

Research Findings, Policy Challenges, and Lessons Learned: The Native Women's Association of Canada's Sisters In Spirit Initiative

Elizabeth Bastien

Introduction

The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) was founded on the collective goal to enhance, promote, and foster the social, economic, cultural, and political well-being of Aboriginal women within the Aboriginal community and the wider Canadian society. NWAC is an aggregate of eleven Native women's organizations from across Canada, and was incorporated as a non-profit organization in 1974. NWAC works to empower Aboriginal women through developing and influencing policy and legislation on a wide variety of issues.

The Sisters In Spirit (SIS) initiative is a multi-year research, education, and policy initiative designed to investigate the disproportionately high number of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls in Canada. This initiative was designed to increase public knowledge and understanding about violence leading to the disappearance or death of Aboriginal women and girls, to assist NWAC and other stakeholders to better understand the root causes of violence, and to identify measures that will increase the safety and well-being of Aboriginal women and girls. This paper will present initial SIS research results and identify interim policy recommendations that have been developed as a result of the primary and secondary research undertaken through the initiative. Ideas for emerging policy issues are also introduced. In addition, this paper offers a discussion of policy challenges and lessons learned to date as a result of NWAC's experiences conducting this work.

Research

A mixed-methods participatory action process is employed to conduct SIS research. NWAC emphasizes and privileges the direct participation of Aboriginal women and their family members in the research process through the use of culturally appropriate research protocols and understandings. The primary and secondary data collected inform a research-for-change process that focuses on the root causes, circumstances, and trends underlying the personal experiences

of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls.¹ NWAC has developed a database that contains almost two hundred variables for each individual Aboriginal woman or girl, including demographic data, life experiences information, incident information, and trial and suspect information. This work is supplemented by wide-ranging secondary research, including literary reviews and interviews with stakeholders and key informants.

Research Results

Although quantitative research surrounding missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls is ongoing, NWAC has conducted basic statistical analysis to identify preliminary research results. As these are preliminary findings, all statistics are clearly linked to the date on which the data was analyzed, as future results may return different findings based on subsequent research.

In March 2009, descriptive statistical analyses were conducted. All results presented in this paper reflect work completed at this time. The key variables reviewed include the number of cases in the database and the status of each case.² Demographic variables included in this report are the age of the Aboriginal woman or girl, the size of her family, and whether she is First Nations, Inuit, or Métis. Incident variables included in this report are the province and year in which the incident occurred, as well as the clearance status of each case.

As of March 2009, 520 cases of missing or murdered Aboriginal women and girls had been entered into the NWAC database. Of these 520 women and girls, 126 (24.2%) have been identified as missing and 347 (66.7%) have been identified as murdered.³ There are 43 cases (8%) where the nature of the case remains unconfirmed and 4 cases of “suspicious death.”⁴ This information is updated on a regular basis; when a new case is identified or when new information about the nature of a case becomes available,⁵ the records are amended or recoded as required. To date, NWAC has found that the percentage of missing women in the database has remained consistent despite the regular amendments and recoding to case status, suggesting that the disappearances of Aboriginal women and girls at this time forms an ongoing circumstance or trend, rather than unique or occasional events.

Demographic Information

Demographic information is recorded for each woman or girl to the fullest extent possible. In 80% of the cases it is possible to identify the age of the woman or girl. Age ranges were defined by NWAC to correspond with the criteria used by government to establish age of majority or eligibility for programs and services.⁶ The percentage of women and girls found in the database in each age category as of March 2009 showed that:

- 14% are eighteen years of age or younger
- 37% are between nineteen and thirty years of age

- 21% are between thirty-one and forty-five years of age
- 7% are forty-five years of age or older

The percentage of cases that involve youth is striking. Just over one-half (51.5%) of the women and girls whose age is known are thirty years of age or less. This result indicates that the life situations and needs of youth must be taken into account when developing measures to address violence. NWAC's research indicates that young women may have limited resources due to their limited work experience or in-progress education, affecting their ability to find safe and secure housing. They may experience high rates of mobility as they travel or relocate to attend school, to take up part- or full-time employment, or to attend social and cultural events. They may still be developing their social and family networks, and are establishing themselves as adults in their communities and families. These life experiences must be addressed when developing policy measures aimed at increasing the personal safety of young Aboriginal women and girls.

While the information presented in this paper generally refers to "Aboriginal women and girls," it is important to remember that the term "Aboriginal" refers to three distinct Indigenous groups in Canada: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. In recognition of these differences, NWAC identifies and acknowledges, where possible, the specific First Nations, Métis, or Inuit identities of the women and girls who are included in the database. As of March 2009, 21.3% had been identified as First Nations, 2.3% as Métis, and 2.1% as Inuit. The remaining 62.5% of the cases are known to be Aboriginal, but NWAC has been unable to determine whether these women identified specifically as First Nations, Métis, or Inuit.

Family size is known in a limited number of cases, and is often presented in secondary sources as the number of children in a woman's family rather than as information about whether a particular woman did or did not have children. Information about family size is available for just over 30% of the women in the database. In the cases where information on family size is available, NWAC has found that the majority of women are mothers. Of this group, forty-six women had two children, while thirty-eight had one child, and thirty-one had three children. The presence of children is important to consider when formulating policy options and recommendations. Proposed strategies must increase the ability of Aboriginal mothers to provide for their own and their children's personal needs, to access safe and affordable housing, and to encourage good health and healthy development. In addition, victim services must account for the presence of children, and provide direct assistance targeted to the children of victims of violence, including supports for the family or community members who come forward to care for and support these children.

Incident Information

The majority of cases recorded in the database have occurred in the western provinces, with British Columbia being the site of the most incidents (26.3%).

This finding is affected by the availability of information on cases that occurred in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, and those that occurred along the Highway of Tears (Highway 16), centring on Prince George. In the remaining western provinces, eighty-five cases have been identified in Alberta, seventy-one cases in Manitoba, and fifty-nine cases in Saskatchewan. While this result is influenced by the distribution of the Aboriginal population in Canada, it also indicates that regional differences specific to each western province may be relevant. One factor to be considered is the family law regime in each province, including the provisions related to child support, division of matrimonial property following divorce, restraining orders, and custody of dependent children. Other relevant factors appear to include the availability of supports, such as legal aid and legal clinics, the nature and provision of victim services, and whether police services are provided by national or local forces.

In central Canada, fifty-nine cases have been identified in Ontario and seventeen in Quebec. Very few incidents are recorded in the Atlantic provinces or the Northern territories. Of the provinces and territories not named above each has eight or fewer cases identified in the database. A total of fifty-seven cases have occurred in locations that have not been identified.

NWAC records information about when each case occurred. For the cases of missing women and girls, 2.7% date from before 1970, while 7.3% occurred during the 1970s, 15.5% occurred during the 1980s, and 31.8% occurred during the 1990s. A total of 42.7% of the cases of missing women and girls have occurred during or since the year 2000. The statistics show a similar pattern for cases of murdered Aboriginal women and girls. Of the murder cases identified to date, 0.8% occurred prior to 1970, while 4.7% occurred during the 1970s, and 13.8% occurred during the 1980s. Over one-quarter (25.7%) of cases occurred during the 1990s and over one-half (54.9%) occurred between the year 2000 and the present. The high number of cases that have been identified in the years since 2000 is notable, and suggests that the ongoing severity and urgency of the issue must be taken into account when designing measures to address this violence.

The lower number of cases for earlier decades should not be considered as evidence that violence against Aboriginal women and girls was less prevalent in past decades. A number of factors make it difficult to identify older cases or to gather information about the women and girls who disappeared or were murdered. In earlier decades, the pervasive discrimination that existed against Aboriginal peoples and the greater acceptance of domestic and other forms of violence against women may have caused the media to report fewer incidents of violence against Aboriginal women and girls. Media records from those decades are often only available in hard copy, which makes them difficult to access and search for information. In addition, the memories of witnesses and family members who could report on these cases are gradually erased by the passage of time or by the death of these individuals.

Information about the police response to murder cases, including whether the case has been “cleared,” is another variable tracked through the database. In the context of the SIS initiative, identifying a case as “cleared” indicates that criminal charges have been laid against an individual or that the case has been otherwise resolved.⁷ A case that is “not cleared” (or “open”) indicates that charges have not been laid to date.⁸ A total of 179 cases have been cleared by charges or by suicide: This accounts for 52% of the cases of murder in the database. Disturbingly, 43% (150) of the murder cases remain open; in other words, no one has been charged in the incident. NWAC is working to confirm the status of the remaining 5% of murder cases in the database for which the clearance status is unknown.

Future Directions

The ambitious size and scope of the database has led to the inclusion of multiple variables that may yield predictive results in the future. NWAC is finding, however, that it is very difficult to compile data for some variables. Currently available data are being used to identify trends, while more predictive statistical analysis may be possible as additional sources of data are found. The research findings to date serve as an important element of the SIS initiative as they have enabled NWAC to demonstrate the reality and urgency of this crisis of violence against Aboriginal women and girls, despite existing issues of undercounting and lack of information on older cases. NWAC is continuing to collect data on the cases of the 520 Aboriginal women and girls whose names are currently in the database. Sadly, we also continue to add cases as new incidents occur. For these reasons, we anticipate that the research findings of the SIS initiative will continue to change as new data is found, amendments to existing cases are made, and new cases are identified.

Policy Analysis and Development

NWAC identified four key policy areas for ongoing activity which have subsequently been modified to better reflect the SIS research findings as they have emerged over the past year. As our understanding of the scope and interconnections between the issues advances, we will continue to revise our policy activities to better focus on the needs of Aboriginal women, girls, and their families. The fluidity of this work allows NWAC to more effectively address the marginalization of Aboriginal women and girls and the multiple barriers to wellness and self-sufficiency that they face. The four key policy areas are reduction of violence, reduction of poverty, reduction of homelessness and improvement in housing, and improved access to justice for women and their families.

Reduction of Violence

Reducing violence that leads to the disappearance, death, or further marginalization of Aboriginal women and girls is the single most important policy issue identified through the SIS initiative. Violence can take many forms. NWAC focuses on violence that occurs in the home, within relationships, between acquaintances,

and between individuals who are unknown to one another. Violence against Aboriginal women is worsened by the lack of understanding and lack of action that they and their families may experience from service providers, justice system professionals, and the wider Canadian society. Addressing the issue of violence is made more difficult by the current societal acceptance of violence against women as demonstrated in various media such as electronic and video games, television shows, movies, and music. The socio-economic inequalities that exist between men and women generally, as well as those that exist between Aboriginal women and Aboriginal men, lessen the options available to women and girls who experience violence. Below are recommendations aimed at reducing the level of violence facing Aboriginal women and girls in the short term:

- All governments (federal, provincial/territorial, municipal, First Nations, Inuit, Métis) must publicly condemn the high rates of violence against Aboriginal women, acknowledge their role in addressing this reality, and make a commitment to bring this issue to their senior officials for follow-up and response, including making public their plans to address this crisis.
- All governments must review and consolidate existing recommendations from Canadian commissions, inquiries, and inquests pertaining to the safety and well-being of Aboriginal women, from 1982 to the present, with NWAC participating as a full member in developing a work plan to identify outstanding recommendations and priorities for action.
- NWAC and governments should jointly establish criteria to evaluate progress, including budget expenditures, staffing and service delivery benchmarks, and milestones for governmental quarterly reporting to NWAC on the specific actions taken by each department, ministry, or agency to address gaps and improve the safety and freedom from violence of Aboriginal women and girls.
- We need to identify resources and champions at senior levels of all governments who are committed to the reduction of violence against Aboriginal women and girls. These individuals must be resourced to provide leadership within their departments, ministries, or organizations on an ongoing basis to produce positive change in legislation, policies, and procedures affecting Aboriginal women and girls.
- Governments and police need to develop policies and procedures that address the issues of prostitution, trafficking, and sexual exploitation of children by focusing on the perpetrators, preventing the abuse, and ensuring that the victims are not penalized, criminalized, or restricted in their personal autonomy.
- Poverty levels must be reduced. Reducing the poverty experienced by Aboriginal women and girls will assist them to personally address other barriers to their well-being. This includes, but is not limited to

the provision of supports for education and training which will enable Aboriginal women to be self-sufficient and to provide for their children. Barriers that must be overcome to achieve this goal include addressing the cultural relevance of training and education programs, assisting women to become “job ready” so that they can access employment training, eliminating restrictive eligibility requirements, and enhancing access to supports for women who experience multiple barriers.

Recommendations aimed at reducing the poverty experienced by Aboriginal women and girls in the short term include the following measures:

- Age restrictions associated with training, education, and skills development programs and funding must be removed.
- Support must be given to NWAC to help them research and evaluate poverty line and market basket measures that underpin income support programs from an Aboriginal women’s perspective, in order to better understand the factors influencing the poverty experienced by Aboriginal women and girls and to evaluate the effectiveness of income support programs.

Housing and Homelessness

The availability, affordability, and appropriateness of housing affects the safety and well-being of Aboriginal women and girls on a daily basis. The current level of housing available to many Aboriginal women does not meet minimum requirements for safety, affordability, security, or appropriateness. Women, especially those who live on-reserve, face limited and inadequate housing choices that constrain their options if they experience violence in their relationship. The current network of shelters, transitions houses, and second-stage housing is insufficient to meet the demand and primarily exists in urban centres. Women who live in smaller communities may face a situation of non-existent services or programs unless they are able to relocate, which, in turn, creates potential negative impacts on their children’s and their own access to family and social networks. Below are recommendations aimed at improving Aboriginal women’s and girls’ access to appropriate housing and reducing homelessness in the short term:

- Adequate funding is necessary for programs and services that meet the needs of Aboriginal girls and youth who are homeless. This must include barrier-free measures and have a geographic distribution that matches the pattern of need.
- Additional funding to link youth with programs and services that meet their personal needs for income, safety, and well-being must be available to assist youth to facilitate their exit from supported housing shelters.
- Governments must establish adequate, sustained, ongoing funding for the provision of sufficient homelessness and housing services for Aboriginal women and girls, ensuring that these are culturally relevant, have a

geographic distribution that matches the pattern of need, and includes emergency shelters, and second- and third-stage transitional housing.

Access to Justice

Improving access to justice for Aboriginal women and girls and their families is critical to lessening the negative impact of violence on their lives.⁹ Aboriginal families face barriers rooted in both cultural and historical experiences when attempting to access police and other justice system services, and these difficulties are exacerbated by discrimination, a lack of knowledge about the justice system, and an inability to utilize legal services due to distance from service providers and the limited and restricted availability of these services. Police personnel often under-respond to reports of missing Aboriginal women and girls, and families report inconsistent application of protocols related to filing reports and following up on concerns.¹⁰ An early lack of attention to a missing person's case can subsequently impede the ability of the police to investigate a murder due to the degradation of physical evidence or the impact of passing time on the memory of witnesses. Canadian values related to personal autonomy and the value of "free choice" may conflict with the need of families to determine the whereabouts of a missing family member. There is also a profound lack of support for families attempting to investigate the disappearance of a family member. Resources for printing notices, the organization of searches, and accommodation and other costs related to travel to follow up on reported sightings or other tips are vitally important to families, especially in instances of an inadequate "official" response by police.

Finally, the ability of families to provide ongoing care for children is often dependent on being able to access the bank accounts and housing of the missing woman, to manage personal assets such as cars, and to receive assistance with responsibilities related to child care and the care of the missing woman's personal belongings and property. Here are our recommendations aimed at improving the access to justice of Aboriginal women and girls and their families in the short term:

- The implementation of mandatory comprehensive training for new recruits and existing personnel in all police forces on issues, concerns, and the history of Aboriginal peoples is needed. This training should focus on real issues and outcomes, must address the gap in understanding that exists between officers and Aboriginal peoples because of cultural differences, and should not be limited by political or operational considerations.
- The development of relationships between NWAC and police forces is crucial to establishing the foundation for the creation of information-sharing protocols in the medium term.
- The implementation of police reporting to NWAC on current missing-person protocols or processes in use in jurisdictions across

Canada is needed.

- Jordan's Principle¹¹ should be broadened to include all jurisdictional issues affecting Aboriginal peoples.
- Discussions to identify approaches that focus on the needs of families who have female members who are missing or who have been murdered must be had.
- Governments (federal, provincial/territorial) must conduct an environmental scan of victims services programs to identify what is available, what level of usage exists, gaps, and the overall effectiveness of these services in meeting the needs of individuals, and to report this information to NWAC.
- Governments must conduct an environmental scan of child-welfare systems regarding use of culturally relevant values, beliefs, and practices related to child rearing and Eurocentric values ingrained in current child-welfare policies and practices, including examining current definitions of neglect and related concepts, and to report this information to NWAC.
- Governments should provide resources and funds to eliminate the current inequality in funding between First Nations' and non-First Nations' child-welfare systems.
- Governments need to increase funds for support measures linked to child welfare, in-home child supports, poverty-related neglect, and other issues to assist Aboriginal families to meet their needs in the least disruptive way possible to the family, ensuring equity between First Nations' and non-First Nations' systems.
- Governments must conduct a needs assessment to identify the supports and services needed by Aboriginal children and youth who have experienced harms because they are street involved, have witnessed family violence/abuse, or experienced sexual exploitation or trafficking.
- Governments must identify the number of Aboriginal individuals who have been negatively impacted or traumatized by the child-welfare system, and conduct a needs assessment to identify issues and gaps in meeting these needs.
- Processes and avenues for individuals to connect with court supports, court access, and community justice protocols, including funding for Aboriginal court workers in all jurisdictions and adequate legal aid for Aboriginal individuals requiring this assistance must be established and funded.
- Governments and NWAC need to identify gaps and barriers to the protection and full enjoyment of human rights by Aboriginal women by reviewing outcomes using a report-card model, and evaluate the effectiveness of measures implemented to date to

ameliorate these gaps and barriers.

- Governments must conduct a culturally relevant gender-based analysis of funding formulas and report the results to NWAC.

Emerging Policy Areas

NWAC has identified additional policy areas that require further research. One emerging policy issue is the role of acquaintances in influencing Aboriginal women's and girls' perceptions of safety. A small number of cases have been recorded that involve individuals who were known by the victim either only slightly or by sight alone. In some instances, the presence of these "acquaintances" may have led the woman or girl involved to feel a false sense of security. The criteria that Aboriginal women and girls use to assess their level of safety has been identified as an important area for further work.

A second new policy area concerns the emerging connection between child-welfare issues and the disappearance or murder of Aboriginal women and girls. NWAC is finding that some individuals have witnessed violence as children, while other children have directly experienced violence or abuse. Families may be involved with child-welfare agencies because of these issues, or due to factors associated with poverty and lack of resources. Further research is needed on the number of perpetrators who were involved with the child welfare system as youth, as well as the ability of child-welfare agencies to provide long-term assistance to children of Aboriginal women who have gone missing or were murdered. This includes the provision of supports and services to family or community members who are acting as caregivers to the children of victims of violence.

Policy Constraints and Limitations

NWAC participates in ongoing meetings with government officials and other policy stakeholders. As part of these meetings, open discussions about policy processes, constraints, and limitations occur. NWAC appreciates the candour of technical staff from ministries and departments who provide important insights into the workings of government policy process, as these restraints and constraints affect the ability of non-governmental stakeholders to effectively work within the "black box" of policy development and implementation. Some considerations that affect the workings of the policy process as identified by government technical staff include cost, time frame, scope and redundancy, and incrementality. The discussion below explores the nature and parameters of these issues, without implying any agreement that these constraints are necessary or appropriate to the policy process.

Cost

Government technical staff identify cost as an important factor for consideration when developing policy options or deciding between alternative options. It has

been suggested to NWAC that the probability of a policy option being selected will, all other things being equal, vary inversely with the cost to government associated with implementing that option. The “best” policy recommendations, in this view, are those that contain the smallest financial impacts. An option that contains few or no financial implications can be more likely to move ahead than one that requires government spending, especially if this investment occurs in new program areas. The significant administrative process required to access funds for new initiatives, such as the Memorandum to Cabinet process, is one reason for this preference among government staff. The high level of competing demands for government funds also works to ensure that projects that present small or no financial impacts are easier for government to undertake.

It is a false economy, however, to suggest that short-term savings to the government purse should drive policy choices. Cost-benefit analyses can demonstrate how the investment of funds to address root causes now will result in equal or greater savings realized through the elimination of the need to treat the symptoms or outcomes of these issues in the future. Framing policies aimed at increasing the well-being, safety, and human rights of Aboriginal women and girls within economic arguments that demonstrate the financial benefit of investing funds now to prevent the need for expenditures in the future will help to counter arguments that successful policy approaches must carry few or no financial implications. This framing is especially relevant to medium- and long-term recommendations being developed through SIS that address the reduction of poverty and the elimination of homelessness, as these commonly carry greater resource implications than short-term measures.

Time Frame

The time frame that is associated with a specific policy option is also a consideration for government partners. According to government staff, the optimum policy option is one that can be implemented within a minimum of two years and a maximum of five. Again, this constraint relates to the operational processes of government and the political landscape within which government policy stakeholders are working. The process associated with researching, costing, writing, presenting, and gaining approval for a Memorandum to Cabinet for a new policy initiative, for example, is counted in months, if not in years. Anything less than that time period will present complications and difficulties in fitting the required steps into a shorter time frame. This is especially true for policy options that involve financial implications, or that venture into new areas of activity.

The maximum window for policy implementation was suggested to be five years—which corresponds to the maximum length of a government’s term in office. The sitting government will wish to ensure that any positive effects or credit for implementing a policy will accrue to the government before its term in office is over. This has the effect, of course, of slowly closing the policy window as the government’s mandate wears on and the length of time remaining for implemen-

tation of new policies lessens correspondingly. It is difficult to counter the cyclical and short-term nature of government priorities and departmental mandates. The use of an incremental approach, discussed in more detail below, may be one approach. Organizations may also need to recast their policy issues and activities to match the vision, goals, objectives, priorities, or pillars of the government of the day, which leads to the discussion of scope and redundancy below.

Scope and Redundancy

The scope of the proposed policy or options is also a consideration for government technical staff. If the government is already working on the issue or if it is a “good match” with the current mandate or priorities of the government, then it is more likely to receive a positive hearing and further action. If the policy option is seen to be outside of the current priorities of the government or unrelated to activities already underway, then government technical staff face greater constraints that make this activity less likely to be adopted or moved forward. While it is certainly possible for non-governmental stakeholders to reframe policy issues to match the current governmental agenda, this imposes an additional burden on the often already strained resources of non-profit agencies. In addition, if an agency reworks its language or approach to be more congruent with the government’s current priorities, it may be perceived as behaving inconsistently with its own vision or organizational goals. This concern is especially relevant to NWAC as we ground our vision, understanding of issues, and development of solutions in our ongoing dialogue and interaction with Aboriginal women and Aboriginal communities.

Redundancy is closely related to the concept of scope. Technical staff may advise non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that the government is already investing time and resources in the identified policy issue, and, in fact, has been doing so for quite some time. Leaving aside any possible evaluation of the efforts undertaken to date to resolve overwhelming issues such as homelessness, poverty, and violence against women—although one’s mind does inescapably wander in that direction—the expression of this concern creates a Catch-22 when considered in conjunction with the issue of scope. If the proposed policy is too far removed from the current scope of governmental activities, it will be less likely to be seen as a “fit” that can be moved forward. On the other hand, a proposed policy that does fit within current government activities may be seen as redundant.

Incrementality

Another suggestion raised by government technical staff is to use incremental steps in defining and moving ahead policy agendas, rather than working towards a broad vision or goal. Small steps, clearly outlined and sequenced, are more likely to gain support than the presentation of broad approaches or long-term goals. The implication of this approach for non-governmental policy stakeholders and their relationships with their constituents or boards of directors may be considerable.

There can be a wide gulf between articulating a vision and identifying specific, concrete, incremental steps that result in movement towards this goal. Of particular concern is the willingness of an organization's constituents to accept the use of incremental steps to achieve a broad vision or long-term policy goal. Constituents and other community members may feel frustration at seeing limited or short-term actions being taken to address issues of well-being and safety that they perceive to be at a crisis point, such as the issue of violence against Aboriginal women and girls. This disconnect between the reality and extent of the need and the perceived inadequacy of the response could result in negative repercussions for both the NGO and the government. A second danger, of course, is that small incremental steps will not result in cohesive policy change, or that the rate of change will be so glacial as to effectively be no change at all.

It is not for nothing that the policy process has been described as a "black box." NWAC initially found it difficult to hear these self-imposed constraints that affect our government partners, and we imagine that it is not easy for those working within government to face these restrictions or to share this type of information with their partners. It is to their credit that they have done so, as this knowledge will assist us in deciding when we must modify our recommendations and plans to accommodate the government policy framework, and when we will challenge these unnecessary limitations.

Conclusion

The work completed to date under the SIS initiative has clearly demonstrated the real and present existence of violence leading to the death or disappearance of Aboriginal women and girls. All levels of government, organizations, and ordinary Canadians need to act in concert with Aboriginal people, communities, and organizations to reduce this violence, and to lessen its impacts on victims and their families. All those working on this issue must also remember that remedial actions cannot be restricted to the issue of violence alone. Rather, the interconnected reality of Aboriginal women's and girls' socio-economic, political, and legal status with their experiences of safety and violence necessitates solutions that are grounded in multi-dimensional approaches to resolve issues and concerns across a multitude of dimensions of well-being.

Acknowledgements

NWAC acknowledges and thanks those individuals who have assisted us with this difficult work. The participating families who have lost loved ones to violence have demonstrated courage and generosity in sharing stories of their daughters, mothers, and grandmothers. Elders and spiritual leaders have assisted the families who have experienced losses as well as NWAC staff to achieve healing and to retain hope for a better future. The contributions of communities and community organizations have provided ongoing assistance to Aboriginal women, girls, and their families, as have the many partnering organizations, ministries, and departments which have provided important supports to individuals, families, communities, and organizations.

Endnotes

- 1 A full description of the SIS research methodology may be found in Chapter 12: “Sisters in Spirit Research Framework: Reflecting on Methodology and Process,” in *Aboriginal Policy Research Volume X*.
- 2 The case status variable has three values: missing Aboriginal woman, murdered Aboriginal woman, or suspicious death of an Aboriginal woman.
- 3 In the context of this research initiative, the definition of “murder” is not restricted to that found in the Canadian Criminal Code, but is instead used to refer to deaths resulting from homicide and negligence, including deliberate omission or commission of acts.
- 4 For example, the police may have ruled that a death was due to exposure, while the family believes that an individual was responsible for the death.
- 5 The record for a missing woman who is safely located is removed from the database, while the record for a missing woman who is subsequently found to have been murdered is recoded from a “missing” to a “murdered” case.
- 6 The age of majority is nineteen years in seven Canadian territories and provinces. Federal and provincial/territorial governments use the age of thirty years or less to define eligibility for “youth” programs, and the age of forty-five years or more to identify “older workers.”
- 7 For example, the suicide of an individual against whom charges were pending might result in the case being closed.
- 8 As with the variable for case status, the clearance status of a case is updated in the database as new information becomes available.
- 9 In its broadest sense, access to justice encompasses the ability of Aboriginal women and girls to enjoy basic, fundamental standards of human rights.
- 10 For examples of the experiences of specific families with these issues, see *Voices of Our Sisters in Spirit: A Research and Policy Report to Families and Communities*, released by NWAC in 2008.
- 11 Jordan was a young First Nations child who was born with complex medical needs. As his family did not have access to the support needed to care for him at their home on-reserve they made the difficult decision to place Jordan in child-welfare care shortly after birth. Jordan remained in hospital for the first two years of his life as his medical condition stabilized. During this time, the First Nations child and family service agency, First Nations community, and family worked together to locate a medically trained foster home and to raise money to refit a van for Jordan’s safe transportation. Shortly after Jordan’s second birthday, doctors said he could go to a family home. This decision should have been a time of celebration, but for federal and provincial governments it was a time to begin arguing over which department would pay for Jordan’s at-home care. Shortly after Jordan’s fourth birthday in hospital, the jurisdictional dispute was settled, but not in time for Jordan who sadly passed away at the age of five (see <http://www.fncfcs.com/jordans-principle/index.php>).