

Violence on Violence: The Racism-Policing Loop in Prince George, B.C.



by Michaela McGuire

PRINCE GEORGE, British Columbia (B.C.) has been deemed one of the most **dangerous cities** in Canada. Statistics Canada (2023) continually finds that Indigenous peoples are more likely to be targeted for violence and homicide. In response to increased violent crime, Prince George City Council has allocated funding for **additional law enforcement**.

This decision to hire more officers occurred despite the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP)'s well-documented ongoing abuse of power and accusations of harm against Indigenous peoples, with women as specific targets.

Prince George is the largest city in Northern B.C. and occupies the homelands of the Lheidli T'enneh, a **Dakelh people**. The Lheidli T'enneh were forcibly relocated, and their village **burned to the ground**, to make way for the development of Prince George. Racism was **embedded into the city** throughout its development. Home to a predominantly white population, Prince George's racism persists in continued violence against Indigenous peoples. Located along Highway 16, labelled the Highway of Tears because of the number of Indigenous women who have gone missing or been murdered along this route, the city is often dangerous.

Is an increased RCMP presence really an adequate solution to addressing violent crime and protecting Indigenous peoples in this Northern city?

The RCMP & the Failure to Protect

There has been a long history of law enforcement harming and failing Indigenous peoples. **The National Inquiry (2019a)** reports that “the government of Canada used the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and its predecessor, the Northwest Mounted Police, to implement and enforce laws and policies designed to control, assimilate, or eliminate Indigenous Peoples” (p. 717). For example, the police enforced compulsory residential school attendance and regulated movement on and off reserve. Law enforcement continues to fail to protect and sometimes is the source of harm, particularly against Indigenous peoples.

Multiple reports, inquiries, and investigations have examined racism and abuse against Indigenous peoples and missing Indigenous women along the Highway of Tears, including in Prince George. These reports provide examples of gross abuse of power by officers — including physical and sexual abuse, racism and discrimination, and failures to investigate (Human Rights Watch, 2013; National Inquiry, 2019a).

Racism against and the dehumanization of Indigenous peoples has been an ongoing issue for decades. Prince George was home to the notorious David Ramsay, a

provincial court judge who pled guilty to, among other charges, “ten violations that comprised sexual assault, breach of trust and obtaining the sexual services of a person who was under the age of 18 years,” his victims were Indigenous girls (R v. Ramsay, 2004, para. 1). Multiple officers either were alleged to be involved in or knew about Ramsay’s actions. Considering the weight of these allegations, the failure to investigate is particularly concerning.

These allegations against RCMP officers have received renewed attention because of retired RCMP officer Garry Kerr’s fight to have them investigated. Kerr’s complaint to the Civilian Review and Complaints Commission for the RCMP (CRCC) and the resulting CRCC report brought to light these **decades-long injustices**. His story has been bolstered by comments from retired constable Lisa Mackenzie, who had previously reported tapes of officers harassing Indigenous girls. An external agency — the **Alberta Serious Incident Response Team** — is now set to review these allegations.

The pleas of the survivors and their families to have these cases investigated, the battle of human rights groups, and previous media reporting did not lead to action. However, the government, media, and law enforcement have known about these injustices for decades.

All of this is happening against the backdrop of five Prince George officers recently involved in the death of Dale Culver of the Wet’suwet’en and Gitksan Nations, who was in police custody at the time. Two of the officers have been charged with manslaughter and three others with obstruction of justice.

These cases are two of many reported violations of Indigenous people’s human rights by law enforcement in Prince George.

Policing and the National MMIWG Inquiry

When Indigenous peoples seek law enforcement help to report a crime or a missing person, they must often combat stereotypes and discrimination. Their concerns are often

ignored, and Indigenous peoples reporting violence are often treated as **if they are the perpetrators**. It is no surprise, then, that distrust, fear of the police, and subsequent silence undermine Indigenous peoples right to safety. Fear and silence are reasonable responses when the institutions of criminal justice are complicit or directly involved in harming Indigenous peoples.

How can anyone expect that further empowering the RCMP, which has made so few changes or progress in response to allegations of abuse, racism, and failures to protect, is a sufficient solution to high crime rates?

The Prince George City Council’s decision to fund additional officers in response to violent crime disregards the harm that law enforcement causes to Indigenous peoples and the need for social support and structural change rather than an expanded police force. As the National Inquiry highlighted, implementing previous recommendations from decades of reports, investigations, and inquiries to address harm against Indigenous women and girls is a more reasonable approach.

Addressing high crime rates and violence requires solutions that target social issues. For example, since Indigenous peoples make up a large percentage of unhoused peoples in Prince George, addressing **housing security** is necessary. In light of the overdose crisis impacting the North, with Prince George recording some of the **highest overdose deaths per capita**, there is also a need for safe gathering spaces and services for people who use drugs, including harm reduction and safe supply.

Along with increased social services, anti-Indigenous racism interventions are required within the RCMP and broader society. As a starting point, working towards achieving the National Inquiries **Calls to Justice**, including creating a special investigation unit to look into officer misconduct and discrimination against Indigenous peoples, may result in adequate oversight and policing of Indigenous communities. These are further structural solutions that require dedicated support and commitment.

In Prince George, officers have a decades-long history of covering up physical and sexual abuse of Indigenous

women and girls and racism and disregard for the lives of Indigenous peoples. Adding additional officers without changing the underlying structure will only cause more harm. Law enforcement and governments continue to choose the easiest path forward, but addressing racism against Indigenous peoples, which includes making substantive changes to structurally racist institutions such as the RCMP, is the only real solution.

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