

Over-policed & under-protected

Recommendations to improve the relationship between unhoused Indigenous women and the RCMP in Yellowknife



Yellowknife
Women's Society



Yellowknife **Women's Society**

The Yellowknife Women's Society (YKWS) is a community-based not-for-profit organization that supports people to live in safety with dignity, purpose, and connection by providing shelter, housing, and other practical assistance. Our vision is a caring community where all people can live safely, with purpose and dignity. We operate multiple essential programs including: two daycares; a street outreach van; a women's shelter and transitional housing environment; a Housing First program; and a permanent supported housing program.

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Acknowledgements

Land acknowledgement

The YKWS acknowledges we are located in Chief Drygeese territory. From time immemorial, it has been the traditional land of the Yellowknives Dene First Nation. We respect the histories, languages, and cultures of all Indigenous Peoples including the North Slave Métis, and all First Nations, Métis, and Inuit whose presence continues to enrich our vibrant community. We encourage all readers to learn more about the [City of Yellowknife](#) and the [Northwest Territories](#).

To the women who shared their experiences

Thank you for attending our sharing circles, telling us about your experiences with the RCMP, and making recommendations for ways to improve community safety in Yellowknife. We are grateful for your generosity, kindness, and courage. We hope this report brings real change to your lives and to the Yellowknife community.

To the community members who shared their expertise

Thank you to the many service providers and community leaders in Yellowknife who spoke with our team for this report. Each conversation helped bring fresh perspectives, ideas, and context to this research to make it better.

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- **Renee Sanderson**
Executive Director, Yellowknife Women's Society
- **Zoe Share**
Deputy Director, Yellowknife Women's Society
- **Jennie Smith**
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Elder
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Content warning

As you read this report, please consider how you can care for yourself and for the difficult emotions that reading this report might trigger. This report describes the physical violence, sexual assault, abuse, misogyny, racism, and colonial violence that unhoused Indigenous women in Yellowknife experience in general and at the hands of the RCMP, sometimes in specific detail.

If you find that you need mental health support, you might consider the following resources:

- **The 24-hour Residential School crisis hotline**

1-866-925-4419

- **The National 24/7 MMIWG crisis line**

1-844-413-6649

In the Northwest Territories:

- **The Arctic Indigenous Wellness Foundation support services**

1-867-447-1095

- **The Territorial government mental health crisis line**

811 or 1-844-259-1793

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A letter from our Executive Director

Tansi, my name is Renee Sanderson, I am a Cree descendant, born and raised in the North and belonging to Treaty 8 Territory. With a grateful heart and with pride, I am happy to say I am the Executive Director for the Yellowknife Women's Society, and this written statement is my truth.

My father is a residential school survivor and my mother attended day school. Both sides of my family come from a history of trauma, family violence, and substance use. In my early life, I too was witness to family violence, alcoholism, and other family dysfunction.

I am a survivor of sexual abuse, which started at the young age of 5 and continued to the age of 12. In my older years, there have been many attempts from other men, some who succeeded in taking advantage of me while I was in a vulnerable state.

In my family home, my siblings and I were raised to be seen but not heard. I truly believe this is a teaching passed down to my parents from the institutionalized residential schools, as I see this being a commonality in many Indigenous families. The damage it does to children is huge; we are taught that we are not worthy, nor do we matter. To mask my own trauma, and like many others before me, I turned to alcohol and drugs, which often put me in risky situations. I had bouts of depression, anxiety, and took on an addictive personality.

It took me nearly 19 years to speak about the sexual abuse I went through, and took many, many hours in therapy. Many times, I had to retell my story repeatedly to the new counsellors I was constantly assigned to. It took hard work, sweat, tears and determination to finally be able to find my voice. However, having seen and heard about the horror stories about the RCMP, some even within my own family, I chose not to bring my abusers to court.



Renee Sanderson

Executive Director
*Yellowknife Women's
Society*

Because of this experience, I wanted to change the “system.” I applied and was accepted to be an RCMP auxiliary officer. I was sent to Depot in Regina, Saskatchewan for training, while there I completed the written test and passed. I had full interest in joining the force. I spent four months working in my home community as an officer. The things I saw, the interactions I bore witness to, were heart wrenching. I soon realized that you have two choices; you either become a part of this tight knit group and look the other way when injustices happen or speak out about it and be ostracized. At this point in my life, I hadn't yet come out with my own traumas and felt like I was not prepared to be a part of a dysfunctional organization, nor equipped to make the changes I so desperately wanted to. So instead, I headed off to college to study criminal justice.

It is through building a support system that I was able to move past this and I am so grateful for all those who were a part of my journey along the way. I am thankful that my parents eventually made changes in their lives for the betterment of themselves and their children, I am grateful to have found a lifelong partner who supports me in every way, I am grateful for my ancestors for breaking trail, and lastly, I am so grateful that I never gave up on myself!

Being in this role I am in, I have had to reach out to the RCMP at various times, and it's sad to see not much has changed. The lack of compassion, education, and improper use of words continues to be at the forefront. To be able to attend a focus group for this report, it pulled at my heartstrings to hear the participants' testimonies, and the saddest part of it all, many of them had more than one horrific encounter with the RCMP.

My hope for this research report is that it is used as a stepping stone to generate institutional change. Like a participant said in one of our sharing groups, it will be a darn shame if this report ends up on a shelf collecting dust. For now, I will continue to pray that our Nations find healing in reconnecting with their culture and find their voice to speak against these injustices.

All my relations,

Renee Sanderson

Executive summary

“I’ve been roughed up by three cops [at once]. You know, against me! I’m not that big, you know? That’s ridiculous ... they send five cops to one home, and terrorize all the children and parents. But where it’s a real, real, nasty situation? They send one cop. You know? There’s no balance for that.”

– Yellowknife sharing circle participant

This is a research report about the relationship between unhoused Indigenous women in Yellowknife and the RCMP. Its goal is to offer clear analysis of the situation and meaningful recommendations for policy change.

Indigenous women with experience being unhoused shared their experiences and insights with YKWS’ research team in two sharing circles. Their message was consistent and unequivocal. The women we spoke with fear the RCMP. They do not trust the RCMP. They do not believe the RCMP will keep them safe. Participants told us about being discriminated against by the RCMP and feeling powerless to hold officers accountable.

Despite the challenges they identify in their current experiences with the RCMP, the women we spoke to were hopeful that bringing their experiences to light could lead to positive change for their communities. Participants had specific ideas for what that change could look like that have informed this report. The research team also spoke with service providers, local leaders, and members of the RCMP based in Yellowknife about their perspectives. These conversations, paired with a comprehensive literature review, were critical inputs for the context and recommendations for this report.

The stories that we heard fall within a documented pattern of how unhoused Indigenous women come into contact with the RCMP in Yellowknife, across the Northwest Territories, and throughout Canada:

■ **Unhoused Indigenous women are over-policed by the RCMP**

This over-policing is in part caused by inadequate social services like housing and health, which drive crises and result in more police contact with unhoused Indigenous women. A high ratio of police officer per community member in Yellowknife, the visibility of being unhoused, and systemic discrimination towards Indigenous people also drive more frequent police interactions. The over-policing of Indigenous women increases their risk of experiencing harm at the hands of police and contributes to their higher rates of criminalization and incarceration.

■ **Unhoused Indigenous women are under-protected by the RCMP**

Their stories are less likely to be believed and their concerns are less likely to be taken seriously. Some Indigenous women do not reach out for help from law enforcement when they need it because of prior experiences of being dismissed or failed by police. These patterns make it harder to effectively address the significant rates of victimization and violence against unhoused Indigenous women in the Northwest Territories.

Many of the challenges in RCMP community policing — systemic racism and sexism, capacity shortfalls, poor integration with local communities, lack of institutional accountability — are not unique to Yellowknife. However, these problems are particularly ingrained, damaging, and complex in Yellowknife. Realizing positive change for unhoused Indigenous women in Yellowknife will require RCMP doing less and RCMP doing better:

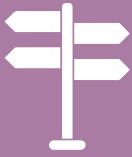
■ **Police need to do less in Yellowknife**

Gaps in much-needed social services like housing, mental health, and gender-based violence response means that the RCMP is tasked with doing work they don't want to do, are not intended to do, and don't do well.

■ **Police need to do better in Yellowknife**

Policing in Yellowknife must be reimagined or significantly reformed to meet community safety needs.

There are policy changes that governments should make to improve the safety of unhoused Indigenous women in Yellowknife. In particular, the Government of Northwest Territories should have an active role in articulating a vision for policing in the NWT that meets the needs of unhoused Indigenous women. This report makes several recommendations aimed to reduce the frequency of contact between unhoused Indigenous women and the RCMP, and when it does happen, recommendations to make those interactions safer and more helpful.



Fix social services to reduce contact between RCMP and unhoused Indigenous women in Yellowknife

These recommendations aim to reduce contact with the police by meeting the basic needs of unhoused Indigenous women and providing alternative community responses to policing:



Increase the supply of shelter spaces and supportive housing to reduce contact with police:

- Increase the number of low-barrier emergency shelter spaces designed for unhoused Indigenous women.
- Improve funding for supportive and transitional housing.



Improve the hours and capacity of a mobile and crisis response team to reduce contact with police:

- Increase resourcing for the Street Outreach Program to provide 24/7 service and a full mobile crisis response unit.



Provide in-territory, Indigenous-led mental health and addictions services and victim services to reduce contact with police:

- Work with Indigenous communities to fund more in-territory, culturally relevant mental health and addictions care.
- Expand resourcing for Victim Services programs.



Define, coordinate, and create accountabilities for an all-government approach to supporting unhoused Indigenous women:

- Develop better data and information sharing practices for all orders of government and community partners working to reduce homelessness in the NWT.
- Ensure services are culturally responsive and Indigenous-led.
- Accelerate integrated services delivery recommendations made in “A Way Home” and report progress and outcomes to the public.
- Create a multi-government task force, with a first focus on ending the use of the RCMP as a ‘backstop’ for other services.
- Expand resources for person-centred care, including expanding Integrated Case Management to communities outside of Yellowknife.



Fix policing to address the under-protection and over-policing of Indigenous women in Yellowknife

These recommendations aim to make changes to policing, urging change to the current status quo in RCMP-led community policing:



Undertake a comprehensive review of policing in the NWT to inform a vision of local policing needs:

- In conducting a review, consult with Indigenous communities, the City of Yellowknife, service providers, non-profit organizations, and members of the public to hear from all voices.
- The policing review should explore establishing a Northwest Territories Police Council with Indigenous co-governance.
- The review should have a mandate to explore options for structuring the police service contract to permit a municipal policing model in Yellowknife.



Create community safety professionals who are resourced to have impact and define their role through collaboration with Indigenous leaders:

- The GNWT should establish an expanded, permanent Community Safety Officer (CSO) program in the territory, including in Yellowknife.
- The GNWT, the RCMP, and other community service providers in Yellowknife should further explore opportunities for Indigenous community safety roles within or alongside the RCMP.



Improve the RCMP's service delivery in Yellowknife through better training, more ambitious community integration, and targeted recruitment to meet community needs:

- Enhance and enforce mandatory training for RCMP officers in Yellowknife, including cultural competency training that is ongoing, in-person, and community-specific.
- Create teams with specialised capacities, training, and mandates to meet the needs of unhoused Indigenous women and vulnerable populations.
- The RCMP should expand efforts to recruit Indigenous people, especially women and 2SLGBTQQIA people to the RCMP.



Improve the RCMP's accountability mechanisms at a national and territorial level:

- Ensure "G" Division's policing priorities are community-informed, measurable, and specific.
- Invest in well-resourced, effective, and independent civilian-led police oversight processes.
- Accelerate the adoption of police-worn cameras in the Northwest Territories and establish clear rules about the oversight of footage.
- Centralize and publish reports already developed by the RCMP in Yellowknife.



Empower Indigenous women in Yellowknife to advocate for themselves:

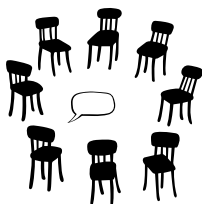
- Develop educational resources for Indigenous women to know and use their legal rights.
- Establish an independent civilian complaint coordinator responsible for helping citizens to navigate the police complaints process.



Methodology & terms

Our methodology

Our research team worked to decolonize its research approaches, centre lived experience, and conduct secondary research. The details of our research methodology are found in [Appendix A](#). This work was informed by two **sharing circles** with Indigenous women in Yellowknife; a **review of academic and grey literature; jurisdictional scans**; and **on-background research interviews** with members of the RCMP, service providers, community-based organizations, and other stakeholders in Yellowknife.



“Nothing for us without us”: Sharing circles are at the heart of this report

In October 2023, we held two sharing circles with Indigenous women in Yellowknife who were, or had previously been, unhoused or precariously housed.

Taking guidance from the Advisory Group and sharing circle partners, the report team tried to make the sharing circles as comfortable and culturally appropriate as possible. The first conversation took place at the Yellowknife Women’s Centre and the second was held at Northern United Place. Over 30 women participated in the sharing circles. All participants were welcomed with coffee and breakfast that included bannock and fresh jam. We opened the circles with a smudging ceremony and an opening prayer. We closed the circles with a prayer. Participants were invited to stay for a traditional lunch with caribou, moose, bannock, and whitefish.

Both conversations were facilitated by Katłjà Lafferty, with Berna Martin in attendance as an Elder, and YKWS staff and the report team observing. Counselling was available on site from the Dene Wellness Warriors. The women who attended were compensated for their time with a taxi voucher and a gift card.

Terms used in this report

Indigenous women, girls, two-spirit, trans, and gender-diverse (WG2STTD+) people

In this report we refer to “unhoused Indigenous women” as the focus of our research. YKWS acknowledges that Indigenous women, girls, two-spirit, trans, and gender-diverse (WG2STTD+) people have distinct experiences with the RCMP both in Yellowknife and nationally. 2STTD+ people are more likely to experience abuse and violence from the police and may be less likely to share their experiences because of fears for their safety.

In background conversations our research team spoke to service providers including organizations that work with WG2STTD+ people. Trans and gender diverse people were invited to participate in sharing circles in Yellowknife. No one disclosed their gender identity and researchers did not prompt self-identification. 2STTD+-specific experiences did not emerge during our sharing circles; however, experiences specific to being an Indigenous woman did.

We do not want to misrepresent the degree to which the distinct experiences of Indigenous 2STTD+ people are reflected in the research or findings for this report. For this reason, the report intentionally uses “unhoused Indigenous women” to describe the focus of our research. This may include 2STTD+ people who are not making that part of their identities known. We hope that future funding and research can elevate the experiences 2STTD+ Indigenous people with the RCMP.

Unhoused

We use the term unhoused throughout the report to refer to people who do not have stable, safe, and/or permanent housing. Unhoused here includes a range of living circumstances, including living without shelter, living in an emergency shelter, living in temporary accommodations, or living in a precarious housing situation.

Community policing

We refer to community policing throughout the report to refer to a style of policing that is focused on the needs of a specific community. Community policing can be distinguished from traditional policing by a focus on partnerships with the community and problem solving in the community.

Introduction

On February 29, 2024, Jane Weyallon Armstrong, the Member for Monfwi, stood before the Legislature of the Northwest Territories and urgently called for action to improve how the RCMP treats Indigenous women. She reported hearing from her constituents that they are “over-policed and under-protected” — that police pull their hair, fracture their wrists, and treat them with disrespect.¹

Member Armstrong’s comments are not the first to name the systemic problems in how the RCMP treats Indigenous women in Yellowknife.

Her comments, and the long-standing advocacy of other Indigenous women, point to a failure by all levels of government to hold the RCMP accountable for the safety of Indigenous women in Yellowknife. Unhoused Indigenous women in particular are over-policed and under-protected in Yellowknife.

The harm caused by this over-policing and under-protection is well-documented and acknowledged even within the institutions of the justice system. In May 2017 an unhoused Indigenous woman was sexually assaulted by a man behind the Capitol movie theatre in downtown Yellowknife. A witness called the RCMP. Both the woman and the male assailant were intoxicated: the survivor was in and out of consciousness. Justice Malakoe who presided over the eventual sexual assault trial later recounted in court:

“The police arrived to find the woman, a street person, lying on the ground. She was intoxicated and uncooperative. The witness who called the police was there to tell them what he saw. He told the police that the woman said she had been raped. The woman was not taken to the hospital for a rape kit or for a physical examination. Instead, she was arrested under the Liquor Act. She was held in cells overnight.”²

He expressed outrage:

*"I am unable to imagine circumstances which would justify this type of treatment of a victim of sexual assault."*³

This was not an isolated occurrence. News stories noted parallels between the Capitol theatre case and another case in 2016: a 13-year-old girl was sexually assaulted in Hay River and arrested by the RCMP. She spent the night in jail for public intoxication and violation of probation.⁴

The survivor in the Capitol movie theatre case was not at the sentencing of the person who assaulted her despite police efforts to contact her. The RCMP launched an internal investigation into how the officers on the case had behaved. Responding to media questioning about the results of that investigation, the RCMP said, "... no disciplinary measures were taken. However, areas for improvement were identified." An RCMP spokesperson said that officers had not been able to take the victim to the hospital without her consent: she was taken to the detachment for her safety. "While it is not the best solution, the cell environment is sometimes the only option available in the circumstances."⁵

Over-policed and under-protected

Those cases demonstrate what has been characterized as the cycle of "over-policing and under-protection" of Indigenous women by the RCMP in Canada.

What Judge Malakoe called "egregious" RCMP conduct in 2017 shows a police response that is inadequate and extreme. The women in both cases above needed help. They were sexually assaulted, in daylight, in a public place, while near-unconscious. Instead of receiving help, they were arrested. RCMP considered that detainment a form of help — remarkably the "only option available".⁶

Kent Roach, a professor of law at the University of Toronto and expert on criminal law and the Canadian Charter of Rights and freedoms, describes the problem of over-policing and under-protection by saying: "**Over-policing and under-protection are intertwined.** They are both forms of systemic discrimination." In the case of Indigenous people, "... both over-policing and under-protection are united by stereotypes depicting Indigenous people as less worthy and often involved with crime or 'high risk lifestyles'. The mistrust and poor relationships between Indigenous people and police make it more difficult for the police to prevent or investigate crimes against Indigenous people effectively."⁷

There are serious consequences of over-policing and under-protection for unhoused Indigenous women. Over-policing leads to greater use of force by police officers, being charged for petty crimes at disproportionate rates, and over-incarceration. Under-protection leads to increased vulnerability to crimes like sexual assault, violence, and “...being seen as less worthy victims by the police, having their credibility questioned, and their requests for assistance ignored or not adequately supported.”⁸

This is a well-known problem

These issues have been raised before: for years, the treatment of Indigenous women and the culture of the RCMP have been the subject of Indigenous advocacy and major reports directed at and commissioned by the Government of Canada and the RCMP. Recommendations and commitments have been made at the federal, provincial, and territorial level to improve the way Indigenous women are treated by and interact with the RCMP and the broader justice system in Canada.

Two major reports — the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s 94 calls to action, and the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) — have prompted commitments to change from the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT).^{9,10} While a positive step, in many cases, the GNWT’s responses are modest or point to programs that existed before.

The Indigenous women in our sharing circles were clear: despite the hundreds if not thousands of recommendations from all orders of government across the country, the relationship between unhoused Indigenous women in Yellowknife and the RCMP is not working.

Decision makers agree that change needs to be made but fall short when it comes to implementation and action. The City of Yellowknife, the Government of the Northwest Territories, and the Government of Canada have shared goals around community safety and Reconciliation but struggle to find alignment on who should be responsible for change or who should pay for it.

“And I think that has to be included in the report. If you’re gonna just read the report, put it on a shelf, no — you respond to the report and say, yeah, this is a good idea, we’ll start implementing this or that is our response. Doesn’t go on the shelf.”

– *Yellowknife sharing circle participant*



Both unhoused Indigenous women and the Yellowknife RCMP used the phrase “last resort” in conversations with YKWS for this paper.

Towards real change

There has been some progress since these cases, but not at the scale required. In 2017, Yellowknife opened its first sobering centre — a place where highly intoxicated people can safely rest, with supervision. A mobile Street Outreach Van began also operating in 2017. In their response to the Capital theatre incident, the RCMP wrote: “The social support initiatives now available fill a gap which existed for some time, providing officers more choices for some of the more vulnerable persons.”¹¹ In years since, the RCMP in NWT “G” Division have been increasingly vocal about their commitment to preventing the criminalization of homelessness in the territory and the unnecessary detainment of people in crisis.

We spoke on a background basis to community organizations, and representatives of the RCMP, government, and NGOs; everyone agrees that there is a problem.

Both unhoused Indigenous women and the Yellowknife RCMP used the phrase “last resort” in conversations with YKWS for this paper. For RCMP, this was used to describe how they felt used as a catch-all solution — “the last resort agency” for the hardest-to-address issues for health, housing, and social work. For Indigenous women in our sharing circles, calling the police was described as “a last resort”: women would endure problems or exhaust all other possibilities before taking on the perceived risks and potential harm that comes with RCMP involvement.

As we conducted research for this project, it became clear that the City of Yellowknife, local community-based organizations, the GNWT, the federal government, and the RCMP “G” Division all recognize the harm that comes from the over-policing and under-protection of unhoused Indigenous women. For things to change:

- **Police need to do less in Yellowknife**

Improving the lives of unhoused Indigenous women in Yellowknife means reducing the frequency with which they interact with the RCMP. The gaps in social service currently filled by the RCMP is work they are not trained for, intended to do, or interested in doing. Underfunding services and allowing the RCMP to be a “last resort agency” creates contact between unhoused Indigenous women and the RCMP that does not need to happen.¹ Increased police contact creates and feeds a cycle of victimization and criminalization for unhoused Indigenous women and perpetuates the colonial legacy of using the RCMP to supervise and regulate Indigenous communities.

- **Police need to do better in Yellowknife**

Unhoused Indigenous women are entitled to rely on the police for safety and assistance when they need it. Right now, they tell us they cannot trust the RCMP with that responsibility. Building the relationship between Indigenous women and the RCMP starts with, and relies upon, building trust. It will require translating commitments into action and making meaningful changes to policing in Yellowknife.



What we heard: experiences of Indigenous women in Yellowknife with the RCMP

In October 2023, Indigenous women in Yellowknife who had experience being unhoused told us about their experiences with the RCMP and their recommendations for policing reform and community safety. The overwhelming majority of the experiences shared were negative, characterized by physical violence, fear, a lack of trust, and dehumanization. Many of these women described a high frequency of interactions with the RCMP throughout their lives.



During our sharing circles, we asked women two main questions:

How would you describe **your experiences with the RCMP?**

What does **community safety and good policing** look like to you?



Key themes emerged in these conversations — participants in the sharing circles reported being:

- Fearful of the RCMP
- Under-protected by the RCMP
- Discriminated against by the RCMP
- Distrustful of the RCMP and government institutions
- Powerless to ensure RCMP accountability or fairness
- Supportive of Indigenous and community-led police alternatives

Participants fear the RCMP

“Because the thing that really struck me being [back home] in Nunavut....These little kids — the cops are driving by in their vehicle. These little five-year-old preschoolers, [started shouting] “Cops! Run! Hide!” None of those kids in [that community] want to be cops. Why? Because their parents are scared of cops.”

– Yellowknife sharing circle participant

Women in the sharing circles told us that in their experience, calling the police can do more harm than good. Many of the participants do not consider the RCMP a safe place to call or trust that the RCMP will keep them safe. In our sharing circles, every woman knew an Indigenous person who had experienced some form of abuse from an RCMP officer, and many reported being abused by RCMP themselves. These experiences included slurs, unnecessary force, and outright violence from RCMP officers. Women also emphasized the tendency for RCMP officers to escalate situations rather than de-escalate, in what they perceived as an effort to make Indigenous people “make the first move” — thereby justifying the officers in using force.

“Just seeing how rough the police are with people downtown... you know, it’s just unnecessary for them to do that, [to be] that harsh.”

– Yellowknife sharing circle participant

“But that’s the thing — that police always assault people, no matter what. Like you phone them for, say somebody’s trying to break into your house, and they’ll turn around and come and turn it on you.”

– Yellowknife sharing circle participant

Participants are under-protected by the RCMP

“You know, they’re there when you don’t need them. And when you need them, they’re nowhere around.”

– Yellowknife sharing circle participant

Several women told us that the RCMP responds differently, and with more urgency, when a non-Indigenous person calls for help. Participants spoke about calling the police for help in dangerous situations and waiting hours for them to respond: by the time RCMP arrived, preventable damage had been done. In some cases, we heard that RCMP decided not to respond to their call at all. In others, their call was not taken seriously by the officer, and their report was lost or dropped. Women also told us about calling for help and having the RCMP focus on “the wrong thing” — asking women aggressive questions, spending time on administrative checkboxes despite urgency, or even arresting women who had sought their assistance.

Participants told us that when RCMP officers discover they are Indigenous, they treat their case differently: that their problems are seen as less serious and that less care is taken in documentation or follow-up. Participants told us they felt especially disregarded when reporting violence or sexual assault. Many women had experiences, or knew someone who had experience, reporting violence and sexual assault to the RCMP and having those reports lost or not taken seriously.

“Whatever violence we go through with our spouse, common law — the RCMP don’t take it seriously.”

– Yellowknife sharing circle participant

Participants are discriminated against by the RCMP

“You get into a fight with somebody that abuses you downtown? It doesn’t matter. Because you’re an alcoholic. Indigenous [...]Because we’re homeless. We’re “street people”. We’re garbage. [...]. And that’s how they think. So you know, being around downtown, being around things that happen. It doesn’t really matter.”

– Yellowknife sharing circle participant

Participants told us about being treated by police in a way that diminishes their sense of self-worth. One of the most prevalent and consistent themes from the conversations was being dehumanized: being met with apathy and indifference from police because of being Indigenous and unhoused. Participants felt that they are seen as “less than” non-Indigenous Yellowknife residents. This bias translates into their problems being taken less seriously, their experiences being treated as less credible, and their bodies being treated with less care. Some participants who had taken on a non-Indigenous last name told us this meant they were treated better as a result. Others shared that they believed the RCMP would automatically believe a version of events told by a white person over that of an Indigenous person.

Participants said that when coming into Northern communities like Yellowknife, many RCMP officers demonstrate a lack of understanding of Indigenous peoples, their culture, or their history with the RCMP.

But you see that a lot in Yellowknife with the Aboriginal people. If the other person that’s not Aboriginal, well, you won’t see that happening. [If] we’re missing,[if] somebody’s missing — Aboriginal, they’ll never look for you, they’ll never look for them. If it’s not Aboriginal, somebody else, they’ll be right on it: billboards up [and] everything, running around looking for that person.

– Yellowknife sharing circle participant

Participants lack trust in the RCMP and government institutions

“The parents don’t trust the cops and the kids don’t trust the cops. I think it’s a matter of — do the cops want to be trusted? Do they? I think that’s the question we need to propose to them, who actually want to do something about it.”

– Yellowknife sharing circle participant

A few participants told us about good interactions with the RCMP, and that individual officers can have a positive impact on the people in the community. However, they also said that the actions of individual officers or one-off events are not enough to improve institutional trust with the RCMP without more change.

We heard that high officer turnover means that even warm officer-civilian relationships are time-limited. Participants noted the benefits of RCMP outreach, education, and cultural activities: initiatives like BBQs, blanket exercises, and spending time with youth that all RCMP detachments in the NWT now report doing in some form. However, we also heard that the deficit of trust is so large that transformational change is required. We heard that how RCMP do their core policing work also shapes the effectiveness of their community-building efforts. To paraphrase one participant, — “that’s great if a kid comes to trust an RCMP officer as a hockey coach, but does that last if they see that officer roughing up their dad a few days later?”

“When I was 14 I ran next door to call the RCMP. I called the RCMP and they took his side over my side. For 14 years, I was crying. I just... I’d had it...he was beating me constantly and beating my mom. And the cops weren’t doing anything about it. So that’s the first time that I’ve tried to trust an RCMP officer. I was 14 years old. And they let me down.”

– Yellowknife sharing circle participant

We heard that participants’ distrust of the RCMP was bound up in a broader distrust of government and social services to offer real help when they needed it. Reaching out for help means relinquishing control to institutional responses that might result in unwanted outcomes: a family member being caught on a parole violation, children being removed from their home, a contravention of their lease agreement and loss of housing.

“Up north, you know, there’s a knock on the door: it’s the cops or social services. It’s not nothing nice. Never nothing nice.”

– Yellowknife sharing circle participant

“I moved to Yellowknife — Overwhelmed with a little bit of negativity but not sharing it, because I have trust issues. And I was overwhelmed — I’m the only single parent, trying to raise boys by myself. I couldn’t do it — I reached out to a social worker — but she backstabbed me. The cops got involved, and my babies were taken away from me. And by then — I wasn’t drinking then, but after I lost them, I started drinking.”

– Yellowknife sharing circle participant

Participants are powerless to ensure accountability or fairness

“How do you complain, right? Like how did we go up against — it’s uneven. They’re the big guys. And we’re the little guys and how do we make those complaints that need to be made?”

– Yellowknife sharing circle participant

Most participants who had been mistreated by the RCMP did not feel it would be worthwhile to report what happened to them. Some women felt afraid to do anything. They described an uneven power dynamic between themselves, the Indigenous community broadly, and the RCMP. Many women had distressing experiences with the RCMP, but few had reported those experiences back to the RCMP. Some participants shared a sense of helplessness and felt that little would be done for them if they ever tried to report misconduct by a police officer. More than once, women in our circles shared stories of being roughed up by the police and being explicitly told some version of **“I can do what I want to you — no one will believe you”**.

Some participants shared times they held the RCMP to account by asking questions or asserting their rights: we heard that when these women were subjected to unnecessary force by an officer or watched it happen to a friend, they knew to ask the RCMP officer to identify themselves. When they did, they said that the officer’s

behaviour changed and became less aggressive. However, they also shared that not all women knew what they are entitled to ask for. Women in the sharing circles told us that some RCMP officers take advantage of women who are vulnerable and do not know their rights or are afraid to express them.

Participants support Indigenous and community-led police alternatives

Throughout the sharing circles, several women expressed the need for some sort of Indigenous liaison role to both hold the RCMP accountable and to improve mutual understanding between unhoused Indigenous women and the RCMP. **This was the most consistently expressed recommendation for change.** They shared that having an Indigenous officer or liaison present could help make sure unhoused Indigenous women are not mistreated. They shared that someone from the Indigenous community should be around to check in on people to see how they're doing.

“There needs to be a watch, like our own people. That will not only help others, but make sure there's follow up too — “how did this person do after?” Little things like that can have major impacts, good impacts. And people are not just left hanging, wondering.”

– Yellowknife sharing circle participant

The participants raised and endorsed the idea of an Indigenous liaison officer riding alongside police to provide cultural awareness and to help RCMP understand some of the trauma the Indigenous community bears. While women shared the need for community-led alternatives to the RCMP to connect policing to the community, women also supported the need for some form of policing in the community.

“The RCMP saw us as people to be fearful of, to be scared of, because of what their dad saw. So there needs to be a good cultural awareness and a person riding with the RCMP that knows mental health and the effects of the residential schools. Not only those, but people that are familiar with the traumas. Lots of different traumas our people go through. Because we're under-housed, underrepresented — not understood or misunderstood — stereotyped. [sighs] Anyway, something needs to change.”

– Yellowknife sharing circle participant

Women also expressed the need for a safe place to go for help and a place to speak up and share their experiences.

“We need someone that we should be able to go to instead of going to the RCMP [about RCMP complaints] and there should be somebody else that we should be able to go to. Because you go to the RCMP and you want to come make a complaint against an officer, but they’re gonna do — they’re just gonna beat you around the bush and say, oh, yeah, we’ll look into this. We’ll look into that. They don’t look into nothing. We need someone there for support.”

– Yellowknife sharing circle participant



Yellowknife experiences are part of a pattern across Canada



What we heard during the sharing circles reflects the broader experiences of unhoused Indigenous women across Canada. Research and testimony shared through forums like the MMIWG Commission and advocacy from Indigenous women across Canada create a clear picture of the relationship between unhoused Indigenous women and police. It is a relationship defined by violence, mistrust, a lack of accountability and cultural understanding, and over-criminalization.

Indigenous women experience disproportionate violence at the hands of the RCMP in Canada.¹² Violence can occur during “routine” policing operations: participants in our sharing circles described being roughed up in the course of being apprehended, or being handcuffed in a way they believed was intentionally uncomfortable. There are many recorded cases of Indigenous women dying and being harmed in police custody.¹³ Reports by Human Rights Watch on police conduct in British Columbia (2013) and Saskatchewan (2017) showed widespread mistreatment of Indigenous women in custody by police, including the use of excessive force and unnecessary strip searches.¹⁴

Indigenous women need to be able to rely on police to report instances of violence and sexual abuse. However, mistrust and fear prevent many Indigenous women from reporting cases of violence and sexual assault at all. An estimated 63% of Indigenous women in Canada have been victims of physical or sexual assault at some point during their lifetime.¹⁵ At the same time, Indigenous women in Canada fear further pain and suffering caused by the police, their accounts not

being taken seriously, subjecting others to violence or criminalization, being charged with crimes themselves, or having their children taken from them.¹⁶ In Canada, Indigenous women are twice as likely to report having little to no confidence in the police compared to non-Indigenous women.¹⁷ In their submission to the MMIWG commission, The Native Women's Association of the Northwest Territories described how institutional distrust impacts Indigenous women in the territory: that "... the effect of historic trauma and its impact on trust for government institutions" contributes to "women's observed hesitancy in accessing services even when they are in dire need."¹⁸

Limited cultural understanding from the RCMP perpetuates racism and contributes to entrenched patterns of discrimination for Indigenous women in Canada. Indifference and racism directed towards Indigenous women allows their problems to be more readily dismissed: dehumanization drives victimization.¹⁹ Systemic and institutional racism and misogyny within law enforcement are core drivers of the crisis of violence against Indigenous women and girls.²⁰

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Unhoused Indigenous women in Yellowknife

Many Indigenous women in Yellowknife who are currently housed have experiences with homelessness and housing precarity. This includes former NWT Premier Caroline Cochrane, a Métis woman who has described being homeless as a teenager.²¹ A risk of writing a report like this one is flattening the experiences and varied perspectives of our YKWS community and unhoused Indigenous women in the pursuit of clarity. The life stories of unhoused and precariously housed Indigenous women living in Yellowknife are stories of so much more than trauma or criminalization. They have diverse interests and different relationships to their Indigenous identities and culture; they put forward varied ideas about what good community safety could look like.

Every unhoused Indigenous woman in Yellowknife is different. But factors like gender, Indigeneity, colonialism, and remoteness often combine in similar ways to create commonalities in their circumstances, experiences, and relationships with the RCMP. It is not our intent to capture how these factors overlap and reinforce one another in this report. Rather, our intention is to show how these common factors, identity considerations, and shared life experiences shape patterns in how unhoused Indigenous women interact with RCMP in Yellowknife. Our goal is to do this while holding up the individuality and strength of the women who are impacted — but not defined — by those experiences. **Naming shared identity markers, challenges, and circumstances is critical to understanding both the gendered nature of colonialism and the fractured relationship between unhoused Indigenous women and the RCMP in Yellowknife.**

Gendered colonialism and system failures for Indigenous women in the NWT



Indigenous people account for 90% of the homeless population in Yellowknife, despite being only half of the population in the NWT and about a quarter of the population of Yellowknife.²²

A 2021 point in time count of unhoused people in Yellowknife showed that:

- **Over 60% of unhoused respondents had one or more parents who attended residential schools.**
- 1 in 5 women had attended residential schools themselves. However, **80% of people who were experiencing chronic homelessness attended residential schools.**²³



In the same count, **over a third of unhoused people in Yellowknife reported living in foster care or group homes** in their youth.²⁴

A snapshot count of those incarcerated in the NWT revealed that **100% of women** inmates were Indigenous (compared to 83% of male inmates).²⁵



Across Canada's three territories, over **half of Indigenous women report having experienced intimate partner violence since the age of 15.** 1 in 6 Indigenous women reported they experienced intimate partner violence in the prior 12 months.²⁶

Indigenous Healing Lodges are a type of correctional institution designed for Indigenous inmates. **Of the 10 Indigenous facilities in operation, there are zero Indigenous Healing Lodges in Canada's territories.**



When compared with non-Indigenous women, Indigenous women in the NWT are **less likely to be employed** (51% vs 76%) and **less likely to be a high school graduate** (55% vs. 91%)²⁷

The impact of gendered colonialism

Gendered colonialism — the different ways Indigenous women are treated by the processes of colonialism — has clear and harmful outcomes in Yellowknife.²⁸ Almost all unhoused women in Yellowknife are Indigenous: most unhoused Indigenous women in Yellowknife identify as First Nations, while others identify as Inuit and Métis.²⁹ Most unhoused Indigenous women living in Yellowknife are not originally from Yellowknife, and many moved from other, smaller Indigenous-majority communities to access services or look for work. Many of them had a parent who attended residential school or attended residential school themselves.³⁰ Indigenous women are more likely to have substance use disorders than other women in the NWT.³¹ Compared to non-Indigenous women in the territories, Indigenous women are more likely to be victims of a crime.³² They are also more likely to go to jail.³³

These intersecting experiences make Indigenous women in Yellowknife more likely to be homeless and more likely to have contact with police. As the GWNT says in their 2023 homelessness strategy, “In the NWT significant root causes of homelessness include the impacts of colonialism, trauma, the lack of affordable housing, addictions and substance use, poverty, inequality, unemployment, and lack of access to education and healthcare.”³⁴

The colonial legacies of substance use, family separation, poverty, and trauma as a precondition to Indigenous criminalization is evidenced by the shocking over-representation of Indigenous women in correctional facilities. Indigenous women make up more than half of federal female prisoners across Canada and effectively 100% of female inmates in the NWT.³⁵ While data about the lives of incarcerated Indigenous women in the territory is limited, we know 91% of Indigenous women incarcerated in federal prisons across Canada have histories of physical or sexual abuse, and 90% reported using substances on the day they offended.³⁶ Nearly half reported being removed from their family home as children.³⁷

Patterns of oppression and dysfunction in the relationship between Indigenous women and the RCMP are not just causal — they are cyclical. Trauma and difficult life circumstances drive interactions with police: being criminalized or experiencing harmful or inadequate response from police creates more trauma: “... socio-economic and historical factors result in increased Indigenous contact (and re-contact) with Canada’s criminal justice system, a proverbial revolving door that keeps Indigenous peoples criminalized, marginalized and over-incarcerated.”³⁸

The RCMP in Yellowknife

The history of the RCMP in the NWT shapes relationships today

The RCMP were some of the earliest non-Indigenous arrivals to the North: the RCMP has operated in the Northwest Territories longer than Yellowknife has existed as a city. The predecessor of the RCMP, the North West Mounted Police (NWMP), was created in 1873 with a central purpose to impose “law and order” and express sovereignty over areas of Canada that were primarily populated by Indigenous people. Colonial control and expansion was so central to the existence of the NWMP that in the 1890s some federal politicians encouraged disbanding the force because the “frontier had been tamed.”³⁹ Instead of being dismantled, the NWMP was given a renewed mandate to “tame” new frontiers through the expansion of state presence, including deeper expansion into today’s Yukon and Northwest Territories. This was the re-named RCMP’s mission and purpose through the early 20th century: including during the founding of Yellowknife in 1938.⁴⁰

Government services were under-resourced from the earliest days of colonial settlement in the Northwest Territories. As a result, the RCMP occupied outsized roles in their communities that went “far beyond normal police work.”⁴¹ The RCMP was the operating arm for a wide range of government activities: a report made by the “G” Division Commissioner in 1946 describes the “extra” responsibilities of officers to act as game wardens, tax collectors, issuers of liquor permits, etc. The Commissioner wrote, “... almost every year some new duty is assigned to our members in the Northwest Territories.”⁴²

In their role as “front-line” enactors of colonial policy, the RCMP became closely associated with traumatic colonial abuses in the North. Most unhoused Indigenous women living in Yellowknife come from other remote communities in the NWT, Western Nunavut, or Alberta.⁴³ These are places where the RCMP participated in dog culling and taking children to residential schools only a generation or two ago.⁴⁴

Indigenous women in Yellowknife both know and *feel* the history of the RCMP, and this contributes to broken trust. Women in our sharing circles clearly underscored the connection they feel between colonial abuse in the very recent past and the RCMP as executors of that colonialism. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission noted, “for many [Indigenous] children, their first encounter with the justice system came when an RCMP officer appeared in their community to take them to residential school.”⁴⁵

“Well, anybody who’s ‘North of 60’ and who is 50 and older has been to residential school or knows somebody who has. And who takes all the children away is the cops. And so right from day one, there was no trust between cops and our parents. [...]”

– *Yellowknife sharing circle participant*

The RCMP has institutionally acknowledged the impacts of systemic racism and formally apologized for their role in enabling Canada’s residential school system.⁴⁶ But some Indigenous women experience today’s RCMP actions as being a continuation of colonial practices. Child services is a prime example of how traumatic patterns of Indigenous-RCMP relationships continue into the present. In the NWT, police still sometimes accompany social workers when they apprehend children under child welfare law. The Auditor General of Canada has found that the NWT child welfare system has “serious deficiencies,” including that in nine of every ten cases the department did not maintain minimum contact with children in their care.⁴⁷ Around 95% of children and youth in the NWT child protection system are Indigenous.⁴⁸

The RCMP in Yellowknife today

Yellowknife's "G" division offers a case study for many of the broader RCMP's most pressing issues including police accountability, community integration, police-Indigenous relationships, financial sustainability, the criminalization of homelessness and substance use. As the RCMP's Chief Human Resources officer told the CBC, "I think that policing writ large is going through a reckoning. The RCMP is no different."⁴⁹ Canadian policing experts outline four "wicked problems" in Canadian police reform: mental health, substance misuse, homelessness, and missing persons.⁵⁰ These are problems centred in discussions about policing. The most extreme outcomes of these issues necessitate police involvement, but the most impactful interventions for these issues focus on addressing their root causes outside of the criminal justice system. The Northwest Territories has some of the highest rates of substance use, suicide, homelessness, and missing persons in the country.

Yellowknife is one of over 150 municipalities across Canada where the RCMP acts as the local police force. The RCMP is a police force with a broad mandate, covering federal policing duties — like anti-terrorism, national security, and cybercrime — as well as community policing. The RCMP provides this community policing through contract policing agreements, which collectively cover more than three quarters of Canada's geography. Under those agreements, the RCMP are the only police force in all three territories.⁵¹ In recent years the RCMP's role in community policing has faced growing criticism with several reports and expert commissions calling on the government to re-examine the force's mandate and possibly restructure the RCMP to move away from contract policing and re-focus on federal policing.⁵²





Snapshot: RCMP in Yellowknife and the NWT

- **The NWT's "G" Division provides community policing across 33 communities through 22 detachments in the NWT**, including Yellowknife.⁵³ Yellowknife is also home to "G" Division's territorial headquarters.
- The **Northwest Territories** was the Canadian jurisdiction with the **highest rate of police-reported crime in 2022**.⁵⁴
- **The NWT is the "most policed" jurisdiction in Canada with a ratio of 428 officers per 100,000 people**, compared to a national ratio of 181 police officers per 100,000 people.⁵⁴
- The Northwest Territories has the **second highest cost per officer** in Canada.⁵⁵
- The NWT **RCMP has the third highest vacancy rate** in Canada at 15%.⁵⁶

Funding and governance of the RCMP in the NWT

The Government of the Northwest Territories contracts the RCMP to provide policing services through *The Territorial Police Service Agreement (TPSA)*.⁵⁷ The RCMP is overseen by the federal government, is legislated by the federal *Royal Canadian Mounted Police Act*, and is accountable to Parliament through the federal Public Safety Minister.⁵⁸ The current contract is a 20-year agreement between the federal government and the NWT government set to be renegotiated in 2032. Under these agreements with the provinces and territories, the federal government covers 30% of the costs of RCMP policing, with the remaining 70% paid by the province or territory. Between 2012 and 2022, the cost of the GNWT RCMP policing contracts have increased at a rate of around \$1.4 million dollars a year⁵⁹ and is expected to cost over \$57 million in 2024.⁶⁰

There are costs and benefits to using the RCMP as a local police force. Administering policing contracts requires a massive, centralized bureaucracy, ill-equipped to respond to local circumstances or policing needs. Following the RCMP command chain up from Yellowknife will eventually lead to National Headquarters in Ottawa, over 4,000 kilometres away. However, jurisdictions that contract policing through the RCMP gain lower policing costs overall and less local administrative burden than they would have with a local police force. Especially for small, Northern, and remote communities in Canada, the cost and effort of creating and overseeing an independent police force is considered by many to be impractical.⁶¹



Local governments in Yellowknife and the GNWT are currently limited in how they can shape or influence local policing. In general, there is strong operational independence for police forces in Canada: the rationale is to prevent political interference or corruption.⁶² Even in this context, however, the City of Yellowknife and the GNWT are particularly distanced from policing decisions and input when comparing elsewhere in Canada. Municipalities in the NWT have no option to create their own police services under the TPSA.⁶³ This is different from other jurisdictions who use federal police — for example, the prairie provinces have legislation and RCMP contracting agreements that allow for separate municipal police forces.

The only official channel for the GNWT to influence the RCMP is through the GNWT Minister of Justice. The territorial Minister has no control over professional police standards or procedures in the territory. They have some indirect influence over the complement and allocation of police resources through how much budget they allocate for RCMP operations. However, in practice the RCMP Divisional Commanding Officer makes many important decisions about how to best spend that money. The Minister can set yearly priorities for “G” Division. Past Ministerial priorities have been broad and touched on high-level themes that often overlap from year to year. Most recently these included “building trust” in communities and addressing the impact of drugs and alcohol in the territory. The RCMP have said that these priorities are shared with all “G” Division officers.⁶⁴

A theme that emerged across several of our conversations with decision-makers was that **the GNWT's legislators clearly do not feel that they have meaningful control or influence over the RCMP.** This is also evidenced by these exchanges in the call out below:

Exchanges between Members of the Northwest Territories Legislature (MLAs) and then-Minister of Justice and current Premier of the NWT, R.J Simpson in 2022

Q: Does the Minister have the authority and the will to review the terms and conditions of the existing Territorial Police Service Agreement. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

HON. R.J. SIMPSON:

*Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Territorial Police Services Agreement is a 20-year agreement, and it goes until the year 2032. It is collectively managed by all provinces and territories. **So there wouldn't be much utility in myself sitting down and reviewing this 80 page document.** Thank you.⁶⁵*

Q: I want to ask the Minister, can the Minister share some of the specific actions the RCMP will take to address the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls calls for police services as part of that renewal? Thank you.

HON. R.J. SIMPSON:

*Thank you, Mr. Speaker. So as everyone knows, **the RCMP is a contractor. They are separate.** I'm not privy to all of the operational details, and I don't have them on hand. So because of that, I will have to get back to the Member with a written response. Thank you.⁶⁶*

At a community level, "G" Division seeks direction and input from local leaders where they serve to set policing priorities: however, the process appears to be variable across communities and dependent on relationships. According to the RCMP and Department of Justice, all "G" detachments are tasked with creating a Community Action Plan with local community leaders and officials, setting out objectives to meet agreed-on priorities. However, members of the public can not easily access their local Community Action Plan, much less participate in its development.



Problems with management culture at the RCMP contribute to reform challenges.

Repeated advice to improve accountability and oversight in the RCMP has yielded few changes.

– MMIWG commission

RCMP accountability and oversight

The RCMP has well-documented problems with accountability and oversight mechanisms. As the MMIWG inquiry final report stated, “the RCMP have not proven to Canada that they are capable of holding themselves to account”.⁶⁷ Part of the issue is structural: the size, complexity, and opacity of the RCMP’s bureaucracy makes it hard to determine who has authority over what. Even the Mass Casualty Commission —the joint public inquiry that evaluated the April 2020 mass casualty in Nova Scotia — equipped with a sweeping mandate, resources, and unusual access to RCMP leadership “... found it difficult at times to build a clear picture of the [RCMP]’s decision-making, roles, and responsibilities.”⁶⁸

Problems with management culture at the RCMP contribute to reform challenges. Repeated advice to improve accountability and oversight in the RCMP has yielded few changes. In a 2007 report, the management culture at the RCMP was described as “horribly broken” and recommended civilian oversight.⁶⁹ After more than a decade of similar recommendations, the federal government created a civilian-led Management Advisory Board to “strengthen oversight” of the RCMP in 2019. The Management Advisory Board does not have the power to make any binding decisions. In late 2023, the Chair of the Management Advisory Board Kent Roach resigned, citing frustrations with transparency and a lack of operational independence from the RCMP.⁷⁰

RCMP have established accountability processes to ensure quality and prevent wrongdoing, but these processes often fall short.

There are two types of accountability processes for police wrongdoing: one process is for police professional misconduct, and the other is to investigate “major incidents” for potential criminal offenses. The NWT RCMP relies on the Civilian Review and Complaints Commission (CRCC) for the former, and other jurisdictions’ police departments for the latter.

Civilian Review and Complaints Commission

The main accountability mechanism for the RCMP is the Civilian Review and Complaints Commission (CRCC), an independent federal agency tasked with RCMP oversight. The CRCC deals with public complaints about the RCMP made by individuals and undertakes one or two larger “public interest investigations” a year based on key cases or issues.⁷¹

However, current practices and a lack of CRCC resourcing means that functionally, the RCMP mostly is left to police itself. Nearly all individual cases of officer misconduct are referred back to the RCMP to investigate in-house.⁷² The RCMP will then report its own findings to the complainant, who then must re-submit their complaint for CRCC review if they are unsatisfied.⁷³ A complaint is “finalized” when the RCMP is finished reviewing a complaint or a complaint is withdrawn.⁷⁴ In 2021, the NWT RCMP representatives told the NWT legislature that the NWT RCMP takes around three months on average to respond to public complaints.⁷⁵

The data indicates that people who use the CRCC system in the Northwest Territories can rarely, if ever, expect their RCMP complaint to be substantiated. In the Northwest Territories the RCMP finalized 90 complaints in the years between 2018 and 2023. These complaints contained 231 unique allegations of wrongdoing. Of 231 allegations, only 10 were deemed substantiated by the NWT RCMP: the rest were deemed unsubstantiated, dropped by the complainant, or “informally resolved”. Half of these substantiated admissions of wrongdoing were for “improper attitude”. **There were 63 allegations of use of force during that period: none of them were eventually deemed substantiated by the RCMP.**⁷⁶

All eventual recommendations made to the RCMP by CRCC are non-binding.⁷⁷ In the event that CRCC undertakes a review of an RCMP complaint response with which the CRCC disagrees, the CRCC only has power to issue a recommended response (i.e., the member should apologize, the member should undergo additional training). The CRCC cannot mandate or even recommend disciplinary action.⁷⁸

For its more ambitious public interest investigations the CRCC must rely on RCMP cooperation and participation, which often results in long delays in information-gathering and reporting. Several of these larger investigations have been centred on relationships between the RCMP and Indigenous communities, including investigations into the 2016 Colten Boushie case (published in 2021) and a 2020 Nunavut case where an Inuit man was struck by an RCMP vehicle (published in 2023).⁷⁹ However, there is no statutory requirement for the RCMP to report back how it is enacting CRCC recommendations. The CRCC does not have the resources to independently verify progress or change, something a CRCC spokesperson has acknowledged is “a major gap.”⁸⁰

The current system of ‘police investigating police’ for misconduct yields few concrete results, erodes public trust, and drains policing resources needed in the community.

The current system of ‘police investigating police’ for misconduct yields few concrete results, erodes public trust, and drains policing resources needed in the community. As the head of Canada’s national police federation has said, “This is particularly harmful in smaller detachment areas where all resources are vital to daily operations.”⁸¹

Outside investigations into major incidents

The Northwest Territories does not have its own civilian body to investigate “major incidents”, nor does it refer major incidents to a similar body elsewhere in Canada. “Major incidents” of police wrongdoing to a criminal standard go through a different process than misconduct complaints, although both can happen simultaneously. Seven jurisdictions in Canada have civilian-led police investigation organizations who deal with major incidents. An important goal of civilian-led investigations is to remove the perception of bias when police investigate themselves.⁸²

It is rare for investigations to occur, and rarer still for RCMP officers to be charged and/or convicted through investigations. Where the actions of an RCMP employee have resulted in “a major police incident” or allegations of criminal activity,

“G” Division contacts other police services, usually in Alberta, to conduct what they call an “external” investigation. The RCMP describes these investigations as “fair, effective, thorough, impartial and culturally sensitive, and [...] conducted in a manner that promotes public confidence.”⁸³

Some examples of these investigations into major incidents involving “G” division officers include:

- In 2012 Medicine Hat police investigated the fatal shooting of an Indigenous woman by the RCMP in Yellowknife. The woman was experiencing a mental health crisis: she was suicidal and had barricaded herself in her house. She was shot and killed by police after she emerged from the house and pointed an unloaded gun at officers at the scene. **The officers involved were cleared of any wrongdoing.**⁸⁴
- In 2017 the Edmonton Police Services investigated a case in the NWT where an RCMP officer was alleged to have kneed an Indigenous handcuffed prisoner in the back. **The investigation cleared the officer of any wrongdoing.**⁸⁵
- In 2019 the Medicine Hat Police investigated a case from two years prior where a man had been hit by an RCMP vehicle in Yellowknife. **The investigation cleared the involved officers of wrongdoing.**⁸⁶
- The Alberta RCMP investigated a 2020 case in Inuvik where a woman’s clothes were forcibly removed by two male officers and she alleged she was denied medical attention. **The officers were cleared of wrongdoing.**⁸⁷
- The Alberta RCMP investigated allegations of fraud by an RCMP officer in Fort Liard in 2020. They recommended charges be brought against the officer in question. **The charges against the officer were eventually dropped by the Crown.** An internal code of conduct hearing was scheduled, but the accused officer resigned before the hearing.⁸⁸
- The Alberta RCMP investigated a 2020 incident where Yellowknife RCMP officers used force with an Indigenous woman in custody, including punching her. **The incident was initially reported by another officer in the Yellowknife detachment.** The investigation was brought to the NWT Crown, who pursued criminal charges of assault and use of excessive force. The officers were brought to a criminal trial. **All charges against the accused officers were stayed after two days in court.** The prosecutor decided that there was “no reasonable chance of conviction” for the officers.⁸⁹

RCMP structure, culture, and training

Flaws in the structure, culture, and training of the RCMP have been well studied and documented in the last twenty years. Reports highlighting these flaws have been published in [2007](#), [2009](#), [2010](#), [2012](#), [2013](#), [2020](#), [2021](#), [2023](#), and [2023](#). These represent just some of “... decades of study and thousands of pages of reform proposals issued by a wide range of experts, almost none of which have led to substantive change.”⁹⁰

RCMP structure

Two consistent criticisms of the RCMP include the force’s adherence to a paramilitary structure and its dual roles in federal and community policing. Both are issues that shape policing in Yellowknife. The House of Commons Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security (SECU) completed a report on systemic racism in policing in Canada and recommended that the RCMP “be transitioned away from a para-military force into a police service model”.⁹¹ The RCMP’s traditions and structure have endured since the 19th century, including rigid command hierarchies and the practice of cadet training: that “every Mountie must go through Depot and be an armed generalist.”⁹²

RCMP training and recruitment

All RCMP officers are required to go through six months of training at the RCMP Depot in Regina before completing an additional six months of training in the field.⁹³ The site of today’s training Depot was chosen in 1885 and remains closely connected to the force’s colonial origins: fifteen days after the establishment of the Depot, Métis leader Louis Riel was hanged for treason on its grounds.⁹⁴ Witnesses for the SECU parliamentary hearings on racism in Canadian policing described how the RCMP Depot’s intensive, residential training model does not necessarily result in better policing: “...claimants also suggested the training provided at Depot Division was comparably worse than other police training academies in Canada”.⁹⁵ A main finding of the 2023 Mass Casualty Commission was that “...the Depot model of police training is inadequate to prepare RCMP members for the complex demands of contemporary policing”.⁹⁶

When we asked the RCMP what ongoing training “G” division officers receive that is relevant to their interactions with unhoused Indigenous women, they responded that “*G’ Division remains committed to training our employees in, but not limited to, de-escalation techniques, recognition of emotionally disturbed persons, crisis intervention, bias awareness, cultural awareness and humility.*”



Even for skilled, well-intentioned officers, a ‘revolving door’ of members through the North has impacts on institutional memory and police effectiveness.

RCMP deployment model

Even for skilled, well-intentioned officers, a ‘revolving door’ of members through the North has impacts on institutional memory and police effectiveness. After Depot training, officers can be deployed anywhere the RCMP works in Canada.⁹⁷ This model drives a high turnover rate and is poorly suited for effective community policing in Indigenous and Northern areas for many reasons, including limiting the ability of officers to build relationships, local knowledge, cultural competence, and trust.⁹⁸ The newest officers are typically sent to “remote” locations for their postings, meaning that the RCMP’s most inexperienced members are doing some of the most difficult community police work.

The MMIWG commission noted the impact of this revolving door on police work: *“In one example [of a case], a young Indigenous teenage girl went missing in the Northwest Territories. Since 1990, more than a dozen lead investigators and upwards of 250 investigators in total have been involved with investigating her disappearance. The file remains unsolved.”*⁹⁹ In the Northwest Territories’ own MMIWG *What We Heard* report, officer turnover was also cited as a reason cases “fall through the cracks.”¹⁰⁰

RCMP culture

Documented features of RCMP culture include institutional discrimination, sexism, and racism, particularly against Indigenous people.¹⁰¹ A 2017 CRCC report into workplace harassment and discrimination within the RCMP showed “significant and pervasive problems.”¹⁰²

They said despite a “dizzying array” of recommendations made over prior decades, “...RCMP has failed to take the necessary steps to effect real and systemic change.”¹⁰³ The Commission was sharply critical of ad-hoc responses and standalone “Action Plans” to address these challenges: “...the effect of one short-term program after another has been to erode the confidence of RCMP members and employees that real change will ever be realized.”¹⁰⁴ A later 2020 report by Supreme Court Justice Bastarache called the culture of the RCMP “toxic,” and tolerant of misogynistic and homophobic attitudes.¹⁰⁵

Reconciliation and the RCMP

The RCMP’s fraught relationship with Indigenous communities has been much-examined in Canada, driven by Indigenous activism, public conversations around racism in policing, and findings from the Truth and Reconciliation and MMWIG commissions. Building better relationships with Indigenous communities is one of the RCMP’s organizational priorities.¹⁰⁶ A 2022 evaluation of the RCMP’s Reconciliation Actions found that at a federal level, the RCMP had been “increasingly advancing reconciliation actions,” but overall effectiveness was “...impacted by operational capacity challenges, such as a lack of long-term sustainable leadership to support national coordination and strategic planning, and a decline in Indigenous employee representation and engagement.”¹⁰⁷

Indigenous representation in the RCMP

Indigenous people used to have important, defined roles within the RCMP in the North, albeit with less pay and non-officer responsibilities. When the RCMP came to the Northwest Territories, they hired Indigenous people from the community as special constables to teach them to survive in the North. They worked alongside RCMP officers, helping them understand Indigenous people and their cultures. From the 1970s to 1980s, roles for special constables were abolished.¹⁰⁸ Instead, special constables were encouraged to transition to become regular members of the RCMP. While some constables were able to transition, most faced barriers that prevented them from becoming a regular member of the RCMP.¹⁰⁹

The RCMP has said it wants to increase Indigenous representation within the organization; however, the RCMP has not meaningfully increased its cohort of Indigenous police officers.¹¹⁰ In fact, the national share of police officers who are Indigenous has *decreased* in recent decades. Right now, 4% of police officers in Canada are Indigenous: this is slightly higher at 7% of the RCMP.¹¹¹ This is roughly aligned with the demography of the overall Canadian population but is in no way

representative of the people who interact with the criminal justice system in the rural, Northern, and remote communities where RCMP work. Nearly 30% of people in federal prisons are Indigenous.¹¹²

The current “G” Division commanding officer said in 2023 that there is only a “handful” of Indigenous RCMP officers in the territory and identified the recruitment of Indigenous officers as a top priority for the NWT RCMP.

In keeping with this pattern, the number of Indigenous officers in the RCMP’s Yellowknife detachment is not representative of the city’s population. Representatives of the RCMP Yellowknife detachment shared that there are four members who work out of the Yellowknife office who identify as Indigenous.¹¹³ The current “G” Division commanding officer said in 2023 that there is only a “handful” of Indigenous RCMP officers in the territory and identified the recruitment of Indigenous officers as a top priority for the NWT RCMP.¹¹⁴ At his first media address at the helm of “G” Division, Chief Supt. Syd Lecky told reporters, “[Indigenous recruitment] would be my No.1. If I could make one thing happen today, that would be it.”¹¹⁵ The RCMP has an Indigenous Pre-Cadet Training Program, and there is a national RCMP First Nations, Inuit and Métis Recruitment Strategy that is currently under development. RCMP representatives told our researchers that “G” Division is given only one seat on this program each year.¹¹⁶

Relationship with Indigenous communities

“G” Division RCMP and the Yellowknife detachment have made many public commitments to improving Indigenous community relationships. The Division’s 2022-2023 annual report says “The RCMP is unwavering in its commitment to reconciliation and forging strong partnerships between the police and [I]ndigenous communities in the Northwest Territories.”¹¹⁷ “G” Division has a dedicated Community and Indigenous Policing Unit that consists of one Corporal Non-Commissioned Officer in charge and one Constable Métis Coordinator. When YKWS asked the RCMP Yellowknife detachment about Indigenous engagement with communities, a spokesperson said:

“There are a number of activities and initiatives designed to increase member education and understanding of [I]ndigenous culture and historical impacts on [I]ndigenous communities. This includes, but is not limited to: Detachment orientation guides with emphasis on Indigenous cultural awareness, blanket Exercises, Cultural Awareness and Humility, “Uniting Against Racism”, Northern History (G Division Initiative)... There are also times when local training is being conducted for the officers and [I]ndigenous Elders will come to discuss [I]ndigenous history and culture specific to the area.”²



First Nations and Inuit Policing Programs (FNIPP) in the Northwest Territories

Since 1991 the FNIPP has provided dedicated funding to enhance policing in First Nation and Inuit communities throughout Canada. The cost of these policing agreements are shared by the federal (52%) and provincial or territorial governments (48%). There are two main policing models, neither of which are used in Yellowknife.

Self-Administered Police Service Agreements (SAs) are between the federal government, a provincial or territorial government, and an Indigenous community or several communities. Under SAs, Indigenous communities are responsible for administering their own police service. **There are no Self-Administered Police Service Agreements in Canada’s three territories.**

Community Tripartite Agreements (CTAs) are between the federal government and the provincial or territorial government and an Indigenous community or communities. Under a CTA, Indigenous communities receive “additional” policing services intended to supplement those already in place: **in the NWT, this means more RCMP officers in Indigenous-majority communities outside of Yellowknife.**

There is a limited presence of FNIPP-funded officers in the NWT: in 2023, Hon. R.J. Simpson estimated that the complement was around nine officers, all of whom are in Indigenous-majority communities outside of Yellowknife.¹¹⁸ While these RCMP officers are funded through a Community Tripartite Agreement (CTA), it is not clear that that indicates CTA-funded RCMP officers are doing anything other than standard police work in the NWT. Further, in 2024, the Office of the Auditor General of Canada released a report on the FNIPP stating: “No community tripartite agreements have yet been signed in these 2 territories.”¹¹⁹ The report indicated no presence of CTAs or SAs in the NWT.¹²⁰ Finally, there are no Self-Administered Police Service Agreements (SAs) in any of Canada’s territories: territories do not have legislative frameworks in place to support SAs.¹²¹

The FNIPP is the federal government's response to a need for culturally responsive policing in Indigenous communities. As we conducted our research, we hoped that leveraging the FNIPP to create an SA might offer some solutions for Yellowknife. However, FNIPP agreements typically involve one primary Indigenous community and associated leadership structure, whereas Yellowknife has a diverse makeup of Indigenous communities in one place. It wouldn't make sense for one Indigenous community to lead an Indigenous police force in an urban Indigenous community. Yellowknife is also home to as many non-Indigenous people as Indigenous people — the scope and jurisdiction of an Indigenous police force in the city would be uncertain. As a result, **implementing an SA in the City of Yellowknife would be a challenge.**

Beyond the poor fit of the FNIPP to the Yellowknife context, the FNIPP has other flaws: the program is currently under review and a consultation was held in 2022 to co-develop a legislative framework that recognizes First Nations policing as an essential service.¹²² Stakeholders that participated in the consultation agreed that funding and resources for these services needs to be sufficient and predictable.¹²³ They also agreed that clarity around roles and relationships within each agreement is needed.¹²⁴

Recruitment and the future of the RCMP

Canadian police in general, and the RCMP in particular, are grappling with profound questions about their purpose, mandate, and public value. Surveys done in Canada have shown declining public confidence in the RCMP in recent years.¹²⁵ A 2023 survey shows that less than half of Canadians agree that the RCMP is an open and transparent organization (25%), that they treat Indigenous peoples (30%) or visible minorities (35%) fairly, or that RCMP personnel treat people with respect (47%).¹²⁶ Shifting perceptions of law enforcement may be one reason that the RCMP has been struggling to recruit enough suitable candidates to fill positions.¹²⁷

Another possible reason for RCMP challenges in recruitment and retention is the stress of the job.¹²⁸ We heard from our research interviews that Yellowknife's RCMP officers are over-extended and under-resourced. Many community service providers we spoke to were critical of the RCMP, but also recognized the significant challenges that officers face on the job. Yellowknife's RCMP officers deal with more crime than elsewhere in Canada: importantly, they also are called on to deal with more things that *aren't* crime. Acting as the 'backstop' for social services means officers are responding to difficult, recurring, multifactorial issues, often without the tools to help people. As a result, RCMP officers are at risk of burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma.¹²⁹ The RCMP's high vacancy rates can further increase the workload for frontline officers.¹³⁰

The social service landscape & unhoused Indigenous women

Systemic and cultural problems within the RCMP are a core reason why unhoused Indigenous women in Yellowknife are over-policed; but over-policing is also caused by Yellowknife's inadequate social service system. Our research team heard that when Indigenous women are not supported with the fundamental services they need to live well, they are often pushed into crisis. Crises, and especially the crises experienced while unhoused, invariably push unhoused Indigenous women into contact with the police. In turn, police contact is a multiplier on challenging life circumstances that impact women's wellbeing: interaction with the criminal justice system makes it even harder for women to get and keep housing, remain with their children, or seek employment.

We focus on three service areas that push unhoused Indigenous women into interactions with the RCMP:

- Housing and shelter services
- Mental health and addictions services
- Sexual violence and intimate partner violence services

Too often, the RCMP fill gaps as the agency of last resort, a place to 'help' (or contain) people who would be obvious candidates for targeted services, if only those services were available to them. We heard from women in sharing circles that police officers do a bad job when acting in the role of social workers, victim support workers, or housing outreach workers. We heard from the RCMP that this is not work they feel equipped to do, or want to be doing.



Homelessness services, especially those that support individuals with complex needs to remain housed, reduce interactions with the RCMP. The policing problem in Yellowknife is also a housing problem.

Housing, shelter, and mobile outreach services in Yellowknife

Homelessness services, especially those that support individuals with complex needs to remain housed, reduce interactions with the RCMP.³ The policing problem in Yellowknife is also a housing problem.

The Yellowknife RCMP told YKWS researchers, and have stated elsewhere on record, that they don't want to engage with unhoused women in Yellowknife who aren't committing crimes or haven't requested police help. Answering a media question upon starting the role, the latest "G" Division RCMP Commander said: "Homelessness is not a policing matter... Homelessness is not a crime, and nor should it be".¹³¹ In reaction to incidents where intoxicated Indigenous women have died in cells, the RCMP have made a shift in their approach, refusing to take people into custody to "sleep it off" who have not committed a crime. The 2021-2022 "G" Division report makes special note of a decrease in people "housed" in Yellowknife RCMP cells overnight "... despite an increase in calls for service. This decrease is indicative of the detachment operations working collaboratively with the partner agencies to address the needs of the clients from the vulnerable population rather than criminalizing social issues such as addictions and homelessness."¹³²

Housing

The criminalization of homelessness is a form of discrimination against Indigenous women, and one that feeds the cycle of under-protection and over-policing. As Canadian policing expert Kent Roach writes, “The unhoused are both overpoliced and frequent victims of crime.”¹³³ Without shelter or private spaces, unhoused people experience heightened scrutiny by both police and the public. Yellowknifers with their own homes can do any number of things — play music, get drunk, have an argument, take a nap — that people living on the street can’t do without fear of a call to police.

The criminalization of homelessness is a form of discrimination against Indigenous women, and one that feeds the cycle of under-protection and over-policing.

Housing in the NWT is at a crisis point. Market housing is scarce and expensive. Public housing has long wait lists, tight restrictions, and is often in poor repair.¹³⁴ Homelessness is on the rise: there was a 124% increase in Yellowknifers experiencing homelessness between point-in-time counts in 2015 and 2021.¹³⁵ An overall shortage in housing means that even if funding were available to subsidize rent or housing costs, there is a lack of physical units to live in.¹³⁶ Accessing public housing is administratively burdensome: the hundreds of people on housing waiting lists are required to “check in” every six months to reaffirm they would like to stay on the list for public housing.¹³⁷ There is a specific, persistent gap in housing for people with complex needs — for example overlapping addiction, mental and physical health, and behavioural issues — who are most likely to interact with police.

Transitional and supportive housing is a model that pairs housing with services that include social workers, culturally-relevant mental health and addictions support and employment support. Supportive programming can be transformational in helping individuals with complex needs get and stay housed. In fact, moving people with complex needs into housing that offers no support can be more damaging in the long-term: people who struggle to pay rent or prevent unhoused friends, partners, or family from moving in or causing disturbances can end up evicted. Beyond eviction, people can be liable for arrears to Northwest Territories Housing

Corporation for unpaid rent and damages to units that make it near-impossible to get public housing again.

The RCMP told us they see the impact of supportive housing units on reducing calls for service. Spruce Bough is a new program operated as a partnership between YKWS and the GNWT. It provides supportive housing to individuals with complex needs and has been highly successful in keeping people housed, improving their health and well-being, and reducing interactions with the criminal justice system. Supportive housing frees up capacity in emergency and shelter spaces, helping women break out of the cycle of precarity and crisis that often leads to police interaction. Supportive housing has higher upfront costs than housing programs without additional services, but saves money in the long term, especially to health care systems.¹³⁸

Shelter and Mobile Outreach Services

Shelter and mobile outreach services reduce calls to the RCMP and emergency services. For example, Yellowknife's day shelter and sobering centre, which opened in 2017 and gave intoxicated people somewhere safe and warm to go, measurably reduced calls to the RCMP and visits to the Stanton Hospital Emergency Room.¹³⁹ Rates of women visiting the Emergency Room for alcohol abuse decreased by nearly a third.¹⁴⁰ Also in 2017, the Yellowknife Women's Society in partnership with the City of Yellowknife began operating a Street Outreach Van. The van offers safe rides, snacks, and informal wellness checks to unhoused people in Yellowknife. Staff carry a naloxone kit and a first aid kit. Most people we talked to pointed to the Street Outreach Van as the service they thought had the greatest impact on diverting calls that would have previously gone to the RCMP.

However, even with these services, the Yellowknife RCMP still gets many non-policing calls related to homelessness. In minus 30-degree weather, someone sleeping outside is a matter of life and death. When the Street Outreach Van isn't running, residents call police: usually to help unhoused people, not to criminalize them. If the RCMP can't find somewhere warm for that person to be — a shelter space, the sobering centre, a relative's couch — officers struggle to find somewhere else to put that person, especially if they are intoxicated, in an overburdened shelter system. We heard from the RCMP that the official policy of EMS paramedics is to "hand off custody" for people who do not require urgent medical care, but who still need assistance, to the RCMP to avoid liability issues.



The day shelter and sobering centre are insufficient to meet the demand for shelter and housing services in Yellowknife; in particular for people with severe addictions and complex needs. Shelters continue to call the RCMP in cases that exceed their capacity. In the months leading up to the 2020 pandemic, there were more than 40 calls a day to the RCMP from the day shelter and sobering centre.¹⁴¹ Clients at the sobering centre or day shelter who are deemed violent or disruptive can still be kicked out and “banned” for multi-day stretches.¹⁴² A 2019 evaluation found that around 15% of those trying to access the sobering centre were “turned away,” with one of the most common reasons cited being that they were sober.”¹⁴³

Mental health and addictions services in Yellowknife

CBC researchers found that over two-thirds of people killed in police encounters in Canada between 2000 and 2020 were suffering from a mental health or substance use disorder.¹⁴⁴ We heard from the Yellowknife RCMP that mental health calls and wellness checks were a large part of their work.

Indigenous peoples living in the Northwest Territories have higher rates of both mental health and substance use disorders. The suicide rate in the NWT is twice the Canadian average. Rates of hospitalization for harm caused by substance use is over three times the national average.¹⁴⁵ The experiences of colonialism, racism, poverty, and loss of culture are all social determinants of health and risk factors for addiction and mental illness.¹⁴⁶

For many unhoused Indigenous women, substance use is a way to self-medicate to deal with both past traumas and endure present-day hardships. Both police and service providers told YKWS that alcohol was a contributing factor in the majority of interactions between unhoused Indigenous people and the RCMP.¹⁴⁷ The NWT's most recent alcohol strategy acknowledges how alcohol use intersects with systemic racism and criminalization: "Indigenous peoples may be less able to hide heavy alcohol use due to their living situation (rental units, overcrowded housing, or homelessness), [may be] more likely to be arrested for public intoxication or other altercations while intoxicated and may be more likely to be convicted of these crimes and be sentenced to jail time."¹⁴⁸

Mental health and addictions services in the Northwest Territories are inadequate to meet the needs of residents, particularly those of Indigenous people. Despite having one of the highest rates of substance use and addictions in Canada, **there are no residential mental wellness and addictions treatment facilities in the Northwest Territories.**¹⁴⁹ Indigenous women who want to access residential programs are required to leave the territory and go to facilities thousands of kilometers away in places like Alberta and Ontario; for many, the experience of going to "treatment" is the first time they have been on a plane or left the Territory. Those who do the hard work to complete the program return to the NWT with few if any aftercare supports for their transition. A 2022 report by the Auditor General of Canada on mental health and addictions services in the NWT found that **"despite many commitments" the GNWT "did not do enough to provide residents with accessible, coordinated, and culturally safe addictions services."**¹⁵⁰ The GNWT has not provided evidence that its current policy of spending millions of dollars on out-of-territory treatment facilities is cost-effective, particularly if compared to the culturally-appropriate, Indigenous led, in-Territory treatment facilities for which Indigenous organizations have long advocated.

Gender-based violence, family violence, and intimate partner violence (IPV) services in Yellowknife

The intergenerational impact of residential schools and colonialism has fueled cycles of violence, abuse, and trauma experienced by Indigenous women. **The Northwest Territories has one of the highest rates of intimate partner violence in Canada.** The intimate partner victimization rate in the NWT was 3,890 per 100,000 residents in 2019, more than ten times the national average.¹⁵¹ The same year there were 2605 police-reported incidents of violence against women and girls in the NWT.¹⁵² The actual rates of violence are almost certainly higher: we know that women, especially

Indigenous women, avoid reporting incidents to the police or social services. A 2017 Aurora Research Institute report on intimate partner violence support in the NWT found a “a [continued] normalization of violence and a doggedness of individual and community attitudes of blame and shame towards victims.” It also reported that “there are not enough emergency shelters in the NWT to effectively manage the number of women experiencing IPV.”¹⁵³

The intergenerational impact of residential schools and colonialism has fueled cycles of violence, abuse, and trauma experienced by Indigenous women.

RCMP are an important and necessary resource for incidents of intimate partner violence, but they have a finite array of tools with which to respond to violence: they can remove or detain someone, they can lay charges, they can support the creation of an Emergency Protective Order. For victims who don't want to pursue criminal charges, there are few things the RCMP can do to help. Frontline workers also described services as “crisis oriented” and “working in silos.”¹⁵⁴

In Yellowknife and elsewhere in the Northwest Territories, Victim Services is an important resource that can help women navigate supports and deal with the police. The GNWT provides funding to community organizations to provide victim services, with the RCMP formally referring people to the program. In Yellowknife, Victim Services are administered by the Native Women's Association: the majority of clients are Indigenous women. However, Victim Services is constrained by under-funding, severely limiting hours and availability. We heard that Victim Services is overtaxed with limited staff, a large mandate, and a reliance on volunteers.⁴ Victim Services can't be everywhere they are requested to be.



Recommendations



Fix social services to reduce contact between RCMP and unhoused Indigenous women in Yellowknife

These recommendations aim to reduce contact with the police by meeting the basic needs of unhoused Indigenous women and providing alternative community responses to policing:

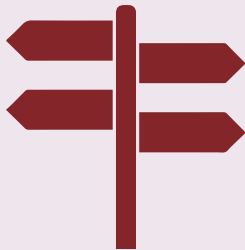
- Increase the supply of shelter spaces and supportive housing to reduce contact with police
- Improve the hours and capacity of a mobile and crisis response team to reduce contact with police
- Provide in-territory, Indigenous-led mental health and addictions services and victim services to reduce contact with police
- Define, coordinate, and create accountabilities for an all-government approach to supporting unhoused Indigenous women



Fix policing to address the under-protection and over-policing of Indigenous women in Yellowknife

These recommendations aim to make changes to policing, urging change to the current status quo in RCMP-led community policing:

- Undertake a comprehensive review of policing in the NWT to inform a vision of local policing needs
- Create community safety professionals who are resourced to have impact and define their role through collaboration with Indigenous leaders
- Improve the RCMP's service delivery in Yellowknife through better training, more ambitious community integration, and targeted recruitment to meet community needs
- Improve the RCMP's accountability mechanisms at a national and territorial level
- Empower Indigenous women in Yellowknife to advocate for themselves



Fix social services to reduce contact between RCMP and unhoused Indigenous women in Yellowknife

This report makes recommendations to **meaningfully improve the social services whose inadequacy pushes people toward RCMP contact.** The recommendations sometimes refer to individual services but are most concerned with the way services fail to work together in an overall service system.

Social services in the NWT and Yellowknife are largely arranged by type of need (housing, health, income, etc.) and are intended to ‘catch’ people with different services based on their level of need — at least in theory. This approach is more or less standard across Canada, and it can ‘meet people where they are’.

In Yellowknife, every step along this continuum of care is inadequate — inadequately funded, with inadequate capacity to serve all the people who need support. Efforts to improve the situation for unhoused Indigenous people have mostly focused on increasing the adequacy of particular services areas; for example, trying to provide more shelter spaces. This is necessary — in fact, one of our four categories of recommendation targets adequacy of funding and capacity for homelessness services — but not sufficient to address the ways in which services fail to help unhoused Indigenous women and drive crisis situations with RCMP.

The women, service providers, and officials we spoke with painted a clear picture: **the lack of coordination and service silos are some of the greatest barriers** to addressing the root causes of Indigenous homelessness and criminalization in Yellowknife.



Increase the supply of shelter spaces and supportive housing to reduce contact with police

- Increase the number of low-barrier emergency shelter spaces designed for unhoused Indigenous women (GNWT)
- Improve funding for supportive and transitional housing (all orders of government)

Increasing funding for housing across the whole spectrum of services — emergency shelters; supported housing; permanent housing; and affordable housing — is essential to improving the well-being of Indigenous women in Yellowknife and reducing interactions with the RCMP.

Housing and homelessness supports in the GNWT are provided through a patchwork of funding streams and are delivered by a mix of governments, non-profits, and Indigenous organizations.¹⁵⁵ Services include day programs, emergency shelters, family violence shelters, supported living programs, and transitional housing. Across these supports, there is a global lack of capacity to meet the needs of the unhoused population generally and Indigenous women specifically.¹⁵⁶

There is a precedent for fast, coordinated action on housing in the Northwest Territories. During the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, all orders of government demonstrated the ability to act quickly and with a higher degree of coordination in the name of crisis response in Yellowknife — re-imagining use of space for unhoused people, bringing in the territory's first managed alcohol program paired with housing, and mobilizing and flowing through funding quickly.¹⁵⁷

Leadership at the GNWT and the City of Yellowknife should work closely with the federal government to not only increase the supply of housing but also to provide the social services — through supportive housing — that lead to long-term success and stability for unhoused Indigenous women.

Increase the number of low-barrier emergency shelter spaces designed for unhoused Indigenous women (GNWT)

You go downtown. You're everywhere. You have nowhere to go. No bathrooms — can't go to the mall, you're kicked out. You go to the stores, you're kicked out. You go to Walmart, you're kicked out. You have nowhere to go, practically. So you got to stand outside.

– Yellowknife sharing circle participant

The availability and quality of emergency shelter spaces in Yellowknife impacts how often, and in what ways, unhoused Indigenous women interact with RCMP. As described above, the 2017 opening of Yellowknife's day shelter (a staffed facility where unhoused people can go during the day to be safe and access basic resources) and overnight sobering centre (a low-barrier shelter space for intoxicated people) has been credited with reducing calls to the RCMP and preventing the unnecessary criminalization of unhoused people.

However, Yellowknife still does not have enough emergency shelter space. The overnight sobering centre, as well as other emergency overnight shelters in Yellowknife, are almost always at full capacity.¹⁵⁸ A lack of low-barrier shelter spaces puts unhoused Indigenous women at risk and increases contact with the RCMP.

Current plans to improve low-barrier emergency shelter spaces are insufficient to meet the level of demand in Yellowknife.

The NWT is building a new Wellness and Recovery Centre that is designed to replace Yellowknife's existing sobering centre and day shelter. It is currently slated to be open in the summer of 2026.¹⁵⁹ But it is uncertain if the new Centre will create much-needed capacity in the overall emergency shelter system. The new building is expected to have 30 dedicated beds in the recovery centre and 59 "seats" at the new day shelter.¹⁶⁰ The current overnight sobering centre has an average of 33 users per night.¹⁶¹ The 30-bed "recovery centre" would be an improvement in quality but not capacity.

Governments must fund the creation of low-barrier emergency shelter spaces beyond the planned capacity of the Wellness and Recovery Centre, and these must be tailored to meet the specific needs of unhoused Indigenous women in Yellowknife.

Emergency shelter spaces must be low-barrier, open to intoxicated clients, offer gender-safe spaces and be culturally appropriate.¹⁶² Encouragingly, the new Wellness Centre is slated to have programmable space and be built with "cultural safety" in mind.¹⁶³ Additionally, the GNWT has committed to developing "2SLGBTQIPA+ guidelines for emergency shelters, transitional housing and NGOs": these guidelines should be used in developing the Wellness Centre.¹⁶⁴

Improve funding for supportive and transitional housing (all orders of government)

Transitional and supportive housing is a model that pairs housing with additional wrap-around services for things like mental health, addictions, employment services etc. Service providers told us that **supportive housing can be transformational for Indigenous women with complex and overlapping needs.** In fact, we heard that

moving Indigenous women into public housing without ensuring other, necessary services were in place could actually be damaging to their long-term well-being.⁵

Creating transitional housing also frees up capacity in emergency and shelter spaces, helping unhoused Indigenous women break out of cycles of precarity and crisis that often lead to RCMP interactions.

The GNWT, the City of Yellowknife, and the federal government have all recognized the value of transitional housing projects: however, this needs to be matched with more ambitious and sustained resourcing. All dedicated transitional housing units in Yellowknife are administered by non-profit organizations. The YWCA in Yellowknife opened 21 new transitional housing units for women in late 2023. These are apartments paired with wrap-around supports whose construction was partially funded with money from CMHC and the City of Yellowknife. However, the building was constructed to replace another YWCA housing complex with 33 family units that burned down in 2018.¹⁶⁵ This investment is important, but is functionally a restoration, rather than an expansion, of transitional housing availability in Yellowknife: more units were needed in 2018, and more are needed now.

As a snapshot of the need for supportive and transitional housing, there are over 150 families on the waitlist for these 21 transitional housing units at the new YWCA facility.¹⁶⁶ YKWS's two supported housing programs, Housing First and Spruce Bough, also have extensive wait lists.

Current funding models are insufficient to meet this demand and often come with administrative burdens that are unsustainable for program operators.¹⁶⁷ Service providers often must rely on varied funding streams, each with their own timelines, program parameters, and reporting requirements. The experience of YKWS with the Spruce Bough is just one example: it is funded through three different arrangements, including territorial funding that includes a convoluted mix of a direct contribution agreement and "rent" garnished by the GNWT through clients' income assistance (IA) and Canada Pension Plan (CPP) benefits.

The GNWT has publicly committed to increasing transitional and supportive housing placement options as an important goal, including in their 2023 homelessness strategy. Providing wrap-around services alongside housing will require the GNWT's departments to work together across service areas and spheres of responsibility.



Improve the hours and capacity of a mobile and crisis response team to reduce contact with police

- Increase resourcing for the Street Outreach program to provide 24/7 service and a full mobile crisis response unit (City of Yellowknife, Government of Northwest Territories)

Increase resourcing for the Street Outreach program to provide 24/7 service and a full mobile crisis response unit (City of Yellowknife, Government of Northwest Territories)

“I recently saw a guy that couldn’t even stand up and a younger guy trying to help him: people were just passing him by. I asked them, “Do you want me to call outreach?” The younger guy let out a little laugh — “It’s past 9:30!”. I said, “What?” [and he replied] “They only run till 9:30 now” That’s so crazy! ... I think it needs to be extended, not just a band aid solution that looks good on a piece of paper.”

– Yellowknife sharing circle participant

The Street Outreach Van Is—a program that provides rides and basic resources to unhoused and vulnerable people in Yellowknife, currently operated by YKWS. In 2023, the then-Minister of Health and Social Services told the legislature that “the Street Outreach Program has been a huge success.”¹⁶⁸ The RCMP has called the Street Outreach Van “essential” to their work.¹⁶⁹ We heard over and over from unhoused women, service providers, and the RCMP themselves about how impactful the Van is as an alternative to calling emergency services. Other community members who would have formerly called the RCMP about someone who was intoxicated or sleeping outside can now call the Street Outreach Van to help get someone to the sobering centre or another safe place. In its first year of operation, the Van was giving around 30 rides a day to vulnerable people in Yellowknife.¹⁷⁰

Right now, the Street Outreach program is only funded to operate 12 hours a day. Any call that would go to the Van outside those hours is presumed to go to the police or Emergency Medical Services instead, at greater cost to taxpayers, greater frustration for emergency responders, and greater institutional trauma for clients. Expanding the operating hours of the Street Outreach Van could maximize the proven positive benefits of the program.

The Street Outreach Van is not currently equipped to provide the full range of services that would benefit unhoused people. The Van can provide basic support and rides but its staff do not have specialized knowledge to provide health care or referrals.

YKWS made a Budget 2024 request to the City of Yellowknife for funding to support the Outreach Van to an “advanced paramedic model” that would include the services of a paramedic and more first aid tools. The City Council rejected the proposal: the main reason cited by councillors was that funding these services should be the responsibility of the GNWT. The City of Yellowknife did, however, allocate \$100,000 dollars of federal funding to hire a consultant to review the program and explore next steps.

As they consider the future of the Street Outreach Program, City of Yellowknife and the GNWT should look to expand the program to become a more robust, professionalized, civilian-led mobile response team. There are many expanded models to explore across Canadian cities: some communities embed Registered Nurses, housing workers, or social workers into their street outreach teams to meet unhoused people “where they are” and prevent service gaps.¹⁷¹ There are precedents for civilian-led mobile crisis response units that respond to 911 calls in Ontario, B.C., and Saskatchewan: these intervention services are separate from local police, although often collaborate with police on triage and decision-making.¹⁷² Bringing in professionalized services into a mobile response team could help meet a need that participants identified in sharing circles.



Provide in-territory, Indigenous-led mental health and addictions services and victim services support to reduce contact with police

- Work with Indigenous communities to fund more in-territory, culturally relevant mental health and addictions care (all orders of government)
- Expand resourcing for Victim Services programs (GNWT, federal government)
- Work with Indigenous communities to fund more in-territory, culturally relevant mental health and addictions care (all orders of government)

Work with Indigenous communities to fund more in-territory, culturally relevant mental health and addictions care (all orders of government)

Mental health crises and substance use are a primary driver of interactions between the RCMP and unhoused Indigenous women. Yellowknife and the Northwest Territories needs more and better mental health and addictions care. Future investments in mental health and addictions services will have better outcomes if they are designed “from the start” with Indigenous partners to be culturally relevant. Research shows that Indigenous people are more likely to feel unsafe, triggered, or uncomfortable in Westernized programs, making them less likely to be successful.¹⁷³

Work with Indigenous communities to fund more in-territory, culturally relevant mental health and addictions care (all orders of government)

Governments should collaborate to fund more mental health and addictions programs that are led by and for Indigenous communities. Indigenous organizations in the NWT have consistently called for more funding for land-based, Indigenous-led mental health and addictions treatment. Programs like the healing camp operated by the Arctic Indigenous Wellness Foundation illustrate what that treatment can look like and how effective Indigenous-led programming for unhoused populations can be.¹⁷⁴ At the camp, people are able to access Indigenous based healing practices, speak with traditional counsellors, and have traditional meals. Indigenous-led wellness services promote self-determination and lead to better outcomes.

Expand resourcing for Victim Services programs (GNWT, federal government)

The Northwest Territories has the second highest rate of sexual violence and family violence in the country, which disproportionately impacts Indigenous women. In the sharing circles for this report, Indigenous women told us that services did not meet their needs when trying to report experiences with family violence to police or getting help to protect themselves.

Victim Services is funded through the GNWT and delivered through community organizations in the territory: data shows most users are Indigenous and 84% of users are women.¹⁷⁵ In Yellowknife, Victim Services is operated by the Native Women’s Association. RCMP “G” Division has a Memorandum of Understanding that the police will refer all victims of crime to Victim Services.¹⁷⁶ Service providers and the RCMP told us that Victim Services workers play an important role in connecting

Indigenous women to needed care and liaising with police.¹⁷⁷ In Yellowknife, Victim Services relies on volunteers in order to be operational “off-hours”. We heard through community interviews that Victim Services staff and volunteers are often over-burdened and under-resourced, even as they play a critical role in supporting Yellowknife’s vulnerable populations. Additional resourcing for the NWT’s Victim Services — both in Yellowknife and elsewhere — should be a priority for the GNWT.



Define, coordinate, and create accountabilities for an all-government approach to supporting unhoused Indigenous women

- Develop better data and information sharing practices for all orders of government and community partners working to reduce homelessness in the NWT (all orders of government)
- Ensure services are culturally responsive and Indigenous-led (all orders of government which provide services to Indigenous communities)
- Accelerate integrated services delivery recommendations made in “A Way Home” and report progress and outcomes to the public (GNWT)
- Create a multi-government task force, with a first focus on ending the use of the RCMP as a ‘backstop’ for other services (GNWT as convener)
- Expand resources for person-centred care, including expanding Integrated Case Management to communities outside of Yellowknife (GNWT)

Develop better data and information sharing practices for all orders of government and community partners working to reduce homelessness in the NWT

Better data on homelessness in Yellowknife can inform evidence-based policymaking, including around policing and RCMP officer interaction, as well as immediately improve the reach of services for unhoused Indigenous women. The issue of reach was made clear to service providers, including YKWS, during the 2023 wildfires in Yellowknife. During the crisis, community organizations were not able to access or systemically share information about the location and well-being of people who were homeless with government or with each other. This inability to access information put Yellowknife’s most vulnerable residents in danger and strained the already-scarce resources of service providers.¹⁷⁸

The City of Yellowknife and the GNWT should explore mechanisms to improve timely, specific data collection and sharing on homelessness. One data tool that many Canadian municipalities are adopting as a best practice are “by-name lists”. A by-name list is a real-time, person-specific list of people experiencing homelessness in a community that can be fed into a centralized function like a Coordinated Access System.¹⁷⁹ This kind of list helps to both coordinate client services and track outcomes for people experiencing homelessness.¹⁸⁰ This data can generate insights that support service coordination and system-wide improvements, including facilitating a better understanding of the impacts of criminalization. The small population size of Yellowknife, paired with the co-location of municipal, territorial, and core services, should make it particularly well positioned to be successful at sharing information.

We heard from community organizations and public service providers that better information sharing would be helpful for service coordination.¹⁸¹ But the possible expansion of data collection must be understood within the broader context and approached with care. Indigenous people have good reason to be uncomfortable with and suspicious of efforts to catalogue and count them, given the ways in which administrative tracking has been used to perpetuate colonial violence. The development, use and maintenance of a by-name list or other privacy-sensitive information on unhoused Indigenous people should only be done with the direction and collaboration of Indigenous communities.

Ensure services for unhoused Indigenous women are culturally responsive and Indigenous-led

We heard that Indigenous knowledge is essential to the design and delivery of culturally appropriate services. Governments who provide programming to majority-Indigenous service communities should take leadership from Indigenous experts in culturally appropriate service delivery. **Centering and funding culturally responsive, Indigenous-led services is not only a critical requirement of reconciliation: it is also a way to maximize the impact and efficacy of public investments.**

The majority of people who access crisis services in Yellowknife are Indigenous. It is a recognized principle in public service design that services should be based on user needs.¹⁸² But many existing public services are based on non-Indigenous cultural practices and structures: they are not designed for the needs of their *actual* users. Research shows that Indigenous people are, justifiably, likely to feel unsafe, triggered, or uncomfortable in institutional-feeling, Westernized programs: this makes these programs, even if well-intentioned and generously resourced, less likely to be successful.¹⁸³

Recent initiatives by the GNWT and the City of Yellowknife to ensure better training and awareness of cultural responsiveness for service providers is a positive step.¹⁸⁴ Meeting the basic principles of public service design, however, would mean building cultural responsiveness into service design itself, rather than ensuring the people delivering existing services are equipped to do so more sensitively.

Accelerate integrated services delivery recommendations made in “A Way Home” (GNWT) and report progress and outcomes to the public

Better service integration and accountability mechanisms are desperately needed to address both homelessness and the root causes of homelessness.¹⁸⁵ Coordinating services for unhoused people leads to better outcomes for clients, cost savings for governments, and less contact with the RCMP. Community service providers, the RCMP, and unhoused women described a culture of bureaucracy, silos, and stonewalling across departments in the GNWT and at the City of Yellowknife.¹⁸⁶

Better accountability mechanisms and transparency are required for the GNWT to meet its own goals. In May of 2023, the GNWT released “a whole of government” strategy to address homelessness called *A Way Home: A Comprehensive Strategy to Address Homelessness in the Northwest Territories*.¹⁸⁷ The plan is ambitious in its objectives and, if resourced and implemented effectively by the GNWT, could be transformational. An Integrated Services delivery team is tasked with coordinating policy development and delivery of the strategy, not only across government departments but with community partners.

However, this new mandate to coordinate is not accompanied by new powers to oblige government departments or community partners to act with urgency. The success of the strategy will rely in large part on the political capital of the Homelessness and Integrated Services delivery team and the level of cooperation they get from partners, particularly within the GNWT. Regular, public reporting on progress — on an annual basis — could help drive outcomes and create buy-in.

Create a multi-government task force, with a first focus on ending the use of the RCMP as a ‘backstop’ for other services

One of the recurring themes we encountered through our research was the many ways in which the structural relationships between the different orders of governments — city, territory, federal, and Indigenous — frustrated progress in supporting unhoused Indigenous women. There is a growing body of literature recognizing the extent to which conflicts over service responsibilities have resulted

in the harm and death of Indigenous people in Canada.¹⁸⁸ These jurisdictional questions are real, but they are hardly insurmountable, and cannot be accepted as the reason why unhoused Indigenous women are pushed towards contact with the RCMP.

Coordination across governments may be made easier by focusing on specific, discrete problems. A task-force based approach, with the right political will and operational flexibility can be a way through intractable questions of jurisdiction. In the case of problems that affect unhoused Indigenous women, this could be a multi-government task force that includes the City of Yellowknife, the GNWT's departments like Health and Social Services and Justice, community service providers, and Indigenous governments and organizations.

One candidate for a discrete problem to be addressed by this task force is the recurring role of the RCMP as a backstop, or substitute, for services. This could include wellness checks, emergency shelter availability, mechanisms for third-party sexual violence reporting, etc. Our research makes it clear that many police interactions are avoidable: the police are engaged because the appropriate services are closed, at capacity, or don't yet exist. A police-first or "police-only" response fuels cycles of over-criminalization in the community, puts strain on RCMP resources needed elsewhere, and is often higher-cost for the public.¹⁸⁹

A task force could be struck to focus first on identifying the points in the Yellowknife service system where police are unwanted back-stops, and then on ways to avoid using backstops at all for non-criminal incidents. This should include interventions that are already working, like the day shelter and sobering centre, and include close consultation with the RCMP themselves. Setting this modest ambition may allow faster progress than is possible on broader goals like ending homelessness. Working across governments and service providers on this first problem can establish the 'muscle memory' and institutional skill and commitment to working together.

Increase resources for person-centred care models, including expanding Integrated Case Management to communities outside of Yellowknife

Even when social services are available, unhoused Indigenous women describe being exhausted and demoralized by trying to find and access them.⁶ Community service providers and the RCMP both described witnessing unhoused Indigenous women get overwhelmed by the administrative barriers that are in place to

do things like access Income Assistance or get on housing lists. The Integrated Case Management (ICM) program was created by the GNWT to help people with complex needs to navigate the bureaucracy and complexity of government services in Yellowknife. A 2020 evaluation of ICM indicated that 86% of ICM users are Indigenous, and 54% are women.¹⁹⁰

The RCMP has said that the Integrated Case Management program helps reduce the number of calls for police. It is also cost effective; a 2020 report on ICM found that for every \$1 spent on ICM, the program generated \$4.50 worth of public value, with nearly a third of this value returning directly to the GNWT.¹⁹¹

The GNWT should prioritize person-centred support models like ICM, including expanding the ICM program to other communities in the NWT. If ICM teams are expanded to other communities, this would potentially decrease “push” factors, like a lack of services, that result in people moving to Yellowknife — a city with such low vacancy rates and high housing costs that people easily become unhoused.¹⁹²



Fix policing to address the under-protection and over-policing of Indigenous women in Yellowknife

The policing services that exist today are not meeting the needs of the Yellowknife community. The RCMP in Yellowknife are doing too much and yet not enough. They are under-resourced, over-extended, and struggling to meet needs they're not intended to meet. They have too much power, too much responsibility, and not enough accountability.

In our research for this report, **we found a dissonance between what the RCMP claims as priorities and key actions in the North, and what we heard from Indigenous women in the Yellowknife community.** Many of the recommendations that follow are designed to fill the space between what is being said and what is being done by the RCMP in Yellowknife. They suggest options for reforming the RCMP, improving mechanisms for holding the RCMP accountable, and shaping RCMP services to the needs of Yellowknife.

As described above, this is not the first report calling for the RCMP to change. Many reports have detailed important changes the RCMP needs to make as an institution at the federal level to address reconciliation, cultural competency, community integration, and discrimination.

The failure of the Government of Canada and the national RCMP leadership to enact these recommendations are a driver of the broken relationship between the RCMP and unhoused Indigenous women.

However, **we have chosen to direct many of our policing recommendations at the "G" Division of the RCMP.** Our intent has been to ground our recommendations in the needs of our community. We echo existing calls for true reconciliation at the federal level and fundamental shifts in the RCMP's culture. In this report, we build on those calls with a focus on the Yellowknife community, where our diverse backgrounds and unique needs warrant an approach that is shaped to the community.

We have also directed recommendations to the GNWT and the City of Yellowknife, with unique roles to play at the territorial and local level. When thinking about policing challenges in Yellowknife, it is easy to forget that **this is a police force contracted by the GNWT to meet the needs of the community.** The GNWT has a responsibility to lead conversations and shape policing in the NWT to meet the needs of the community.



Undertake a comprehensive review of policing in the NWT to inform a vision of local policing needs

- In conducting a review, consult with Indigenous communities, the City of Yellowknife, service providers, non-profit organizations, and members of the public to hear from all voices (GNWT)
- The policing review should explore establishing a Northwest Territories Police Council with Indigenous co-governance (GNWT)
- The review should have a mandate to explore options for structuring the police service contract to permit a municipal policing model in Yellowknife (GNWT)

There is a clear need for the GNWT to rethink community policing in the NWT, especially in Yellowknife. The GNWT has a responsibility to lead conversations and advocate for policing in the NWT that meet the NWT's distinct needs, including those of unhoused Indigenous women. Our first recommendation to improve policing in Yellowknife is for the GNWT to conduct a review of policing in the NWT that includes consultation and collaboration with key members of the Yellowknife community.

Yukon Territory has a helpful blueprint for a similar review. In the Yukon, where they share similar policing challenges and contract the RCMP to police the territory, the Minister of Justice initiated “Review of Yukon’s Police Force” in 2010.¹⁹³ The purpose of the review was to restore, or build from scratch, trust in the RCMP “M” Division. Following the review, the final report outlined a range of recommendations to improve the quality of police services for all citizens in the Yukon. The Government of Yukon also reported on the implementation of the recommendations that came out of the review.¹⁹⁴

The Yukon’s review can serve as an example while the GNWT designs its own. The purpose of this review should be to **shape policing to the needs of the community and build trust in the police.** While our recommendation is focused on the Yellowknife community, this review of policing in the NWT could include a review of all of the NWT communities’ needs; the decision to review and include various communities in the NWT should be made at the local level.

A review of policing needs in the NWT is timely. As described above, policing services in the NWT are provided through a service contract — a TPSA — between the RCMP, the GNWT, and the federal government. This contract is up for renegotiation in 2032: an opportunity for the GNWT to articulate the needs of communities in the NWT and a vision for policing in the NWT. One key outcome of this proposed review should be a clear vision for the future of policing in Yellowknife that can inform negotiations with the RCMP and federal government in 2032.

In conducting a review, consult with Indigenous communities, the City of Yellowknife, service providers, non-profit organizations, and members of the public to hear from all voices (GNWT)

Any police review should be informed by voices within the community, especially those most frequently and deeply impacted by interactions with the police. The GNWT should design a review that leaves ample time (e.g., at least 2 years) to consult meaningfully and frequently with members of the community that have experiences to share with the RCMP, and experiences working with the RCMP.

Once the review has been completed, the GNWT should try to maintain relationships built between stakeholders during the review. These groups should continue to be engaged on what is and is not working. This oversight could be maintained by a formal committee with set meetings throughout the year, or informal conversations when needed.

The policing review should explore establishing a Northwest Territories Police Council with Indigenous co-governance (GNWT)

The review should consider the establishment of an NWT Police Council and include a mandate to design the Council and create accountabilities for it to exist within a specific timeframe. A Yukon Police Council was a key recommendation coming out of the Yukon review, and the recommendation included the structure and roles of the Council. Since the review, a Council has been established with a mandate to maintain an ongoing dialogue between the communities, the police force, and the Government of Yukon.¹⁹⁵ The Council is chaired by the Deputy Minister of Justice and is further composed of six members appointed by the Minister, of which three are nominated by First Nations.¹⁹⁶ The Council meets quarterly and makes written recommendations to the Minister and the Commanding Officer of the RCMP “M” Division on policing objectives and ongoing challenges in the community.¹⁹⁷

The NWT Police Council can mirror a similar structure to the Council in the Yukon.¹⁹⁸ An NWT Police Council should be an appointed civilian body reporting to the Minister of Justice and serving as a conduit for issues and ideas to be raised to the Minister of Justice and the RCMP “G” Division. The Council should include members from across the NWT and have Indigenous co-governance alongside the GNWT. At least half of the Council should be nominated by Indigenous partners. The Council should inform the GNWT’s policing priorities each year, ensuring the priorities are directly sourced from the community. The Council could meet regularly with service providers, Indigenous communities, and municipal governments to gather input

and make recommendations to the Minister on the delivery of policing services. The Council should also maintain an open door for the citizens of Yellowknife to share their concerns and experiences with the Council. Overall, the Council should help to ensure that policing values reflect the culture and history of the NWT, and each region within it.

The review should have a mandate to explore options for structuring the police service contract to permit a municipal policing model in Yellowknife (GNWT)

The existing TPSA does not permit a municipal policing model in any municipality throughout the NWT. Following a review to better understand the needs of the community in Yellowknife, the GNWT could assess whether a municipal policing model would be feasible and beneficial for the citizens of Yellowknife. The mandate to explore options for municipal policing in Yellowknife should include a feasibility study to understand the risks and benefits to a municipal police force, and the cost.

Even without such a review, creating a municipal police force would be costly and would not solve all policing problems in Yellowknife. It could, however, yield a police force which is more aligned with the community's distinct needs. There are precedents for this approach: cities with comparable population sizes like Lacombe, Alberta have chosen this option.¹⁹⁹ An appropriately scoped police review could give the issue rigorous consideration.



Create community safety professionals who are resourced to have impact and define their role through collaboration with Indigenous leaders

- The GNWT should establish an expanded, permanent Community Safety Officer (CSO) program in the territory, including in Yellowknife (GNWT)
- The GNWT, the RCMP, and other community service providers in Yellowknife should further explore opportunities for Indigenous community safety roles within or alongside the RCMP (RCMP and GNWT)

The single most consistent recommendation from Indigenous women in our sharing circles was the need for Indigenous or culturally competent professionals working within or alongside the RCMP. They shared that this would be helpful to build trust, hold officers accountable, and foster greater cultural understanding. One model to get there in the near term is expanding the Community Safety Officer (CSO) program in the NWT, but other options for Indigenous participation in community safety could be explored.

The GNWT should establish an expanded, permanent Community Safety Officer (CSO) program in the territory, including in Yellowknife (GNWT)

The use of CSOs can complement the work of RCMP officers and in some cases replace work the RCMP has taken on that is outside the scope of needs they are meant to fulfill. This can reduce the use of costly, over-stretched police resources and help to improve community relationships by diverting non-criminal, non-emergency calls to more appropriate resources.

This is a model with a record of community impact. In other northern communities in Canada, like the Kwanlin Dün and Selkirk First Nations in Yukon, CSOs have helped to improve outcomes for Indigenous people in the community.²⁰⁰ In these programs CSOs do not carry weapons or have enforcement powers like making arrests, but they do patrols, conduct wellness checks, and respond to incident calls. As members of the community, CSOs are often familiar with the people they interact with so they can approach the situation differently than police would.²⁰¹ By using de-escalation techniques, connecting people with their family or friends, and working with local service partners, CSOs can divert calls that would otherwise involve police or Emergency Medical Services. In cases where RCMP officers are summoned, CSOs can stay on site and provide reassurance or support to the people interacting with police.²⁰² Yukon's CSO programs have received national attention and have resulted in positive feedback in the places where they operate.²⁰³

The GNWT should move quickly to expand its modest CSO pilot program in the territory, including in Yellowknife. The GNWT began a three-year pilot program in Fort Liard in 2022, funding three CSOs to respond to non-criminal safety concerns. The program in Fort Liard has taken lessons from CSO programs in the Yukon.²⁰⁴ ²⁰⁵The pilot program has been frequently cited as an example of how the GNWT is working to address the relationship between the RCMP and Indigenous communities. However, the initial pilot is only a few officers, in a community of 500 people, and is resourced with only \$300,000 per year, contrasted with an annual RCMP budget of about \$50 million in the NWT. If the GNWT is serious about the potential of CSO programs, they could act quickly to start further pilot initiatives or even establish permanent streams of funding.²⁰⁶

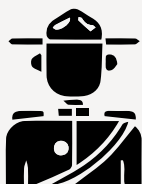
The GNWT could explore opportunities to leverage First Nations and Inuit Policing Program (FNIPP) funding — the federal program that provides dedicated funding to enhance policing in First Nation and Inuit communities throughout Canada — for CSO positions in Yellowknife. As mentioned above, establishing a Self-Administered Service Agreement through the FNIPP would be challenging to implement in

Yellowknife.²⁰⁷ However, the GNWT should work with the federal government to determine if a funding arrangement through the FNIPP for CSOs could be possible — CSOs help to achieve the FNIPP’s goal of delivering culturally relevant policing to Indigenous communities.

The GNWT, the RCMP, and other community service providers in Yellowknife should further explore opportunities for Indigenous community safety roles within or alongside the RCMP (GNWT, RCMP)

The use of CSOs is just one model of how Indigenous people can work within and alongside the RCMP. **The GNWT and the RCMP could design other distinct roles for Indigenous frontline workers in the RCMP force.** These roles could include distinct RCMP officer roles that work alongside regular members to facilitate safer interactions between Indigenous people, in particular unhoused Indigenous women, and the RCMP. These roles would help to hold officers accountable for interactions with Indigenous people and build trust between the RCMP and Indigenous people.

These roles could also build on existing roles for liaison officers in the RCMP. Liaison officers exist in Canada and in other jurisdictions like Australia to facilitate stronger relationships between two groups.²⁰⁸ In Australia, these officers teach non-Indigenous officers and the broader community about Indigenous history and culture.²⁰⁹ Similarly, in Canada, a small number of Indigenous liaison officers work in divisions across the country to help to “build a bridge” between Indigenous communities and the RCMP.²¹⁰



Improve the RCMP’s service delivery in Yellowknife through better training, more ambitious community integration, and targeted recruitment to meet community needs

- Enhance and enforce mandatory training for RCMP officers in Yellowknife, including cultural competency training that is ongoing, in-person, and community-specific (RCMP)
- Create teams with specialised capacities, training, and mandates to meet the needs of unhoused Indigenous women and vulnerable populations (RCMP)
- The RCMP should expand efforts to recruit Indigenous people, especially women and 2SLGBTQIA people to the RCMP (RCMP)

When examining the ways the RCMP itself could do a better job for unhoused Indigenous women in Yellowknife, two themes emerged. **The first theme was a lack of transparency and an institutional focus on checking boxes.** On paper, RCMP officers working in Yellowknife have dedicated and occasionally specialized training, go through community orientation, report participation in community activities. As a result, recommendations around these activities could be dismissed or considered “already complete”, even amid ongoing problems and a lack of public information available about their quality, duration, delivery, or impact.

The second theme was the failure to prepare RCMP officers for common challenges they will encounter in Yellowknife due to the perception that officers *should* not have to deal with certain issues. This is a complex issue in policing: it is not distinct to the NWT. However, we heard over and over that for community RCMP police officers in Yellowknife, addressing homelessness, intoxication, mental health crises, intimate partner violence, and safety checks constitute a large share of their day-to-day duties. According to the GNWT, about forty per cent of calls to police in the NWT are “social disturbance calls” — someone who is creating a nuisance or requires assistance, but who has likely not committed a crime.²¹¹

Yellowknife police are not ready or trained to provide culturally competent, trauma-informed services to the populations they interact with the most. When under-prepared officers are called to address non-criminal calls (for example, to execute a wellness check) or criminal calls that require a sophisticated response (for example, supporting a victim of sexual assault), they’re at risk of mishandling the situation. This mismatch in mandate and capacity has real consequences: escalation rather than de-escalation, over-criminalization rather than adequate support, and continued failure to protect unhoused Indigenous women from harm.

Enhance and enforce mandatory training for RCMP officers in Yellowknife, including cultural competency training that is ongoing, in-person, and community-specific (RCMP)

We heard from women in the sharing circles that the RCMP lacks cultural understanding; officers come to the Yellowknife community without an understanding of Indigenous people and their history. Former RCMP officers have suggested that RCMP officers are often disconnected from the Indigenous communities they serve.²¹²

RCMP officers should take **cultural competency training on Indigenous history and culture that is ongoing, in-person, and community-specific.** The RCMP should work with Indigenous communities in Yellowknife to develop the training,

and the training itself should be Indigenous-led. The leadership at “G” Division should ensure that training is ongoing and tailored to the needs of the community. This is especially important for officers frequently interacting with unhoused Indigenous people.

There are precedents for this approach. A similar mandatory training requirement for the RCMP has been recommended by Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada for Inuit communities in Canada.²¹³ In the Yukon, a committee of representatives developed a training and development framework for the RCMP to ensure that the needs and views of the Yukon community, like Yukon history and First Nations culture, are incorporated into the RCMP’s strategic training plans on an ongoing basis.²¹⁴ The GNWT could learn from its neighbours and consider developing a transparent training and development framework, similar to the framework developed for the Yukon, to guide the RCMP’s training plans and develop ongoing training that will fulfill community needs.

RCMP officers in Yellowknife and elsewhere need to be held accountable for completing and applying existing training requirements. The RCMP at a national level has recently introduced new training requirements for officers: training to improve their responses to reports of sexual assault, training on how to apply a trauma-informed policing approach; and anti-racism training.²¹⁵ Additional training is a step in the right direction, but it is not clear if enhanced training is being taken seriously or applied in officers’ day-to-day work.

There is evidence that officers regularly do not complete mandatory training. For example, a Toronto Star investigation in early 2023 into anti-racism training in the RCMP found that only 51% of officers had completed the “mandatory” online training — at the time of the inquiry, NWT was one of the jurisdictions where less than half of officers had completed training by the organization’s own deadline. A follow-up later that same year by the Star saw compliance shoot up to over 85% of officers nation-wide. Overall, the RCMP’s “United Against Racism” training was slower than promised, insubstantial (a 3-hour online course) and there remains little clarity on how officers apply the training in their duties.²¹⁶

At minimum, officers should face repercussions if they fail to complete required training. Beyond the minimum, the RCMP should evaluate officers to ensure they are able to retain knowledge and apply their training in real circumstances. Through monitoring and follow-up, the RCMP can determine if training is working and consider tactics to improve the application of training. This training should not be viewed as a box to check but rather a core step to shifting the culture of the RCMP.

Create teams with specialised capacities, training, and mandates to meet the needs of unhoused Indigenous women and vulnerable populations (RCMP)

The RCMP should create a dedicated Specialized Response Unit (SRU) for intimate partner violence and sexual violence in Yellowknife, similar to the unit in force in the Yukon.²¹⁷ Currently, “G” Division has no such team. An SRU could focus on improved responses to domestic violence and sexual assault in the community. Officers in the unit should have specialized training that they use to lead investigations and provide guidance to other officers as they navigate intimate partner violence and sexual assault investigations. Eventually, all frontline RCMP officers should have more robust training for responding to domestic violence and sexual assault in a trauma-informed way.

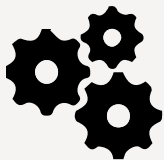
Integrated mobile response teams that pair RCMP responders with healthcare providers should be piloted in Yellowknife. Once again, there are examples of this model at work elsewhere in Canada. In Saint John, N.B., the Department of Social Development launched a pilot project to create “integrated mobile crisis response teams” including people with specialized training to assess mental health conditions alongside police officers during mental health calls. The pilot has resulted in fewer people being taken to the hospital involuntarily or held in custody, and better use of community resources.²¹⁸ Learning from the pilot project in Saint John, mental health and social workers could apply their specialized training to support de-escalation during crisis calls and reduce the likelihood of Indigenous people being held in police custody or taken to the hospital against their will.²¹⁹ This model is different than something like the Street Outreach Van, where response workers may collaborate with police but are not formally integrated.

The RCMP should expand efforts to recruit Indigenous people, especially women and 2SLGBTQIA people to the RCMP (RCMP)

Representation of women and gender-diverse people, Indigenous people, and especially Indigenous women and gender-diverse people in the NWT RCMP is low. In Yellowknife, less than a fifth of RCMP officers are women. Improved representation could encourage greater trust in the force. One recent study showed that when the public is alerted to the lack of diversity in the police force, they have less trust in the force.²²⁰ When people see themselves represented in a police force, they may be more likely to have a positive attitude towards the police force. This was the premise behind the transformation of the Royal Ulster Constabulary into the Police Service of Northern Ireland²²¹ which was designed to garner broad support by increasing Catholic representation in the force. These efforts were a step towards Catholic people in Northern Ireland receiving more equal treatment under the law.²²²

The RCMP should expand efforts to recruit Indigenous people, especially women and gender-diverse people, to the RCMP. “G” Division should set public targets for a minimum percentage of Indigenous people, and specifically women and 2SLGBTQQIA people, within their workforce. Federally, the RCMP needs to better understand and address barriers to recruitment, such as the requirement to train outside of the community at the RCMP Academy (Depot) in Regina, Saskatchewan.

Additionally, Depot selection processes need to be thoroughly and externally evaluated. Data from 2020-2021 shows that while 337 Indigenous applicants attempted to join the RCMP that year, only 17 entered training. That year, 4.3% of visible minorities and 5% of Indigenous people who applied for cadet training were accepted: meanwhile, almost a fifth of applicants who did not self-identify as a visible minority or Indigenous were accepted into training.²²³



Improve the RCMP’s accountability mechanisms at a national and territorial level

- Ensure “G” Division’s policing priorities are community-informed, measurable, and specific (GNWT, RCMP)
- Invest in well-resourced, effective, and independent civilian-led police oversight processes (federal government)
- Accelerate the adoption of police-worn cameras in the Northwest Territories and establish clear rules about the oversight of footage (RCMP)
- Centralize and publish reports already developed by the RCMP in Yellowknife (RCMP)

We heard from participants in our sharing circles that the RCMP needs to be held accountable for their actions. This is true at the local level in Yellowknife, and it is also true at the national level — the RCMP needs to meet their various commitments to change with actions and strong accountability mechanisms.

Accountability mechanisms are only worthwhile if they genuinely work. If the RCMP wants to build trust with unhoused Indigenous women in Yellowknife it will have to buy into accountability mechanisms within and outside of the RCMP that result in real consequences for officers when they engage in misconduct.

Ensure “G” Division’s policing priorities are community-informed, measurable, and specific (RCMP, GNWT)

The GNWT’s Minister of Justice sets the NWT’s policing priorities each year for the RCMP under the Territorial Police Services Agreement.²²⁴ However, the priorities set by the NWT do not include measurable performance indicators for the RCMP to report on their progress. Further, according to the Services Agreement, there are no accountability mechanisms to ensure that the RCMP is making tangible progress on the priorities set each year by the GNWT.²²⁵

The GNWT should publicly set priorities for the RCMP with clear and measurable metrics for each year. The GNWT and the RCMP should agree to a reporting process to monitor the RCMP’s progress on priorities. Ideally, the RCMP’s progress on priorities should be publicly available to improve accountability and transparency.

Invest in well-resourced, effective, and independent civilian-led police oversight processes (federal government)

As outlined above, civilian-led oversight of the RCMP is inadequate, resulting in many cases of ‘police policing police’.

“Major police incidents” — cases where “G” Division officers may have caused serious harm and/or there is the potential for criminal charges — should be sent to an outside civilian-led investigation agency for review, rather than an outside police force. This does not mean the GNWT must create a new institution for the territory: they could contract with the investigations bodies from another jurisdiction such as the Independent Investigations Office of BC or the Alberta Serious Incidents Response Team (ASIRT). For instance, the Yukon Department of Justice has signed an agreement with ASIRT to conduct external investigations when requested.²²⁶

The federal government should improve resourcing of the CRCC to give it the capacity to evaluate complaints thoroughly and broaden its mandate to follow up on implementation of recommendations. The time is ripe for this change. The CRCC is currently under a mandate review and its purview may expand to include public complaints about the Canadian Border Services Agency. Improved resourcing will allow the CRCC to respond to all public complaints it deems merit further inquiry, rather than only those that are “most pressing”. This change would help ensure the RCMP is held accountable for the mistreatment of all civilians, and especially Indigenous people.

Accelerate the adoption of police-worn cameras in the Northwest Territories and establish clear rules about the oversight of footage (RCMP)

The idea of having police wear body cameras to capture direct evidence of misconduct gained traction across North America as a useful police reform policy. If officers' actions are captured on camera, their misconduct is harder to dispute, but only if that footage is released.²²⁷ In Canada, RCMP officers will soon be required to wear body cameras, but their efficacy will be determined by the release of footage and accountability schemes for misconduct. The RCMP will manage the release of camera footage.²²⁸

Body-worn cameras are not a “silver bullet” fix for accountability and transparency in police conduct. In the U.S., the impact of body worn cameras has had mixed success in large part due to the restricted or delayed release of footage by police departments.²²⁹ Chicago has taken a different approach than other U.S. cities, allowing the Chicago Civilian Office of Police Accountability to control the release of video footage instead of the Chicago Police Department. This approach has made Chicago a leader in transparency and police oversight.²³⁰

The federal government should require the RCMP to accelerate implementation timelines for police worn cameras. In particular, the roll-out of the program should be prioritized in communities with high frequency of interactions between the police and Indigenous people. The RCMP should be held accountable for adopting the use of cameras over a specific timeframe. Taking lessons from jurisdictions like Chicago, where their civilian-led independent investigation body can access video when they want and decide when it is appropriate to release footage, **the federal government should work together with the RCMP to enable civilian-led oversight bodies like the CRCC to have access to video footage and the decision-making authority to release footage to the public.**²³¹

Centralize and publish reports already developed by the RCMP in Yellowknife (RCMP)

The RCMP tracks progress on priorities and compiles data and statistics as a matter of course in a series of reports. They do so at various levels: at the community level the Yellowknife detachment produces monthly policing reports for the City of Yellowknife; at the territorial level the “G” Division produces a yearly report on the implementation of the NWT's policing priorities for the GNWT; and at the national level the RCMP produces an annual policing report to highlight their main accomplishments of the year.

Some of these reports are published online. Many are not, and where they are published, they are spread across different websites and organizations. Our researchers were able to locate only a fraction of these reports online. One of the challenges of filling the space between what is said by the RCMP and what is done is a lack of progress reporting, transparency, and accountability to the public. The RCMP “G” Division referenced a commitment to improving transparency in the 2022-2023 report on the implementation of the GNWT’s policing priorities, saying:

“The “G” Division RCMP firmly upholds the value of preserving public trust and support, actively striving for maximum transparency and openness. Recognizing the significance of disclosure, the RCMP acknowledges the necessity of proactively sharing information pertaining to various aspects, including police interventions (including use of force), calls for service (including those related to mental health and wellness checks), and statistics on the RCMP’s employee diversity.”

“G” Division now shares statistical territory-wide summaries monthly on social media, which is a step in the direction of greater transparency.²³² However, even this initiative is several months out of date at the time of writing. Making the RCMP’s already-existing progress reports more accessible to the public is a low-cost way to improve transparency and engagement, and might help to drive the RCMP’s performance.



Empower Indigenous women in Yellowknife to advocate for themselves

- Develop educational resources for Indigenous women to know and use their legal rights (GNWT, City of Yellowknife)
- Establish an independent civilian complaint coordinator responsible for helping citizens navigate the police complaints process (GNWT)
- Develop educational resources for Indigenous women to know and use their legal rights (GNWT, City of Yellowknife)

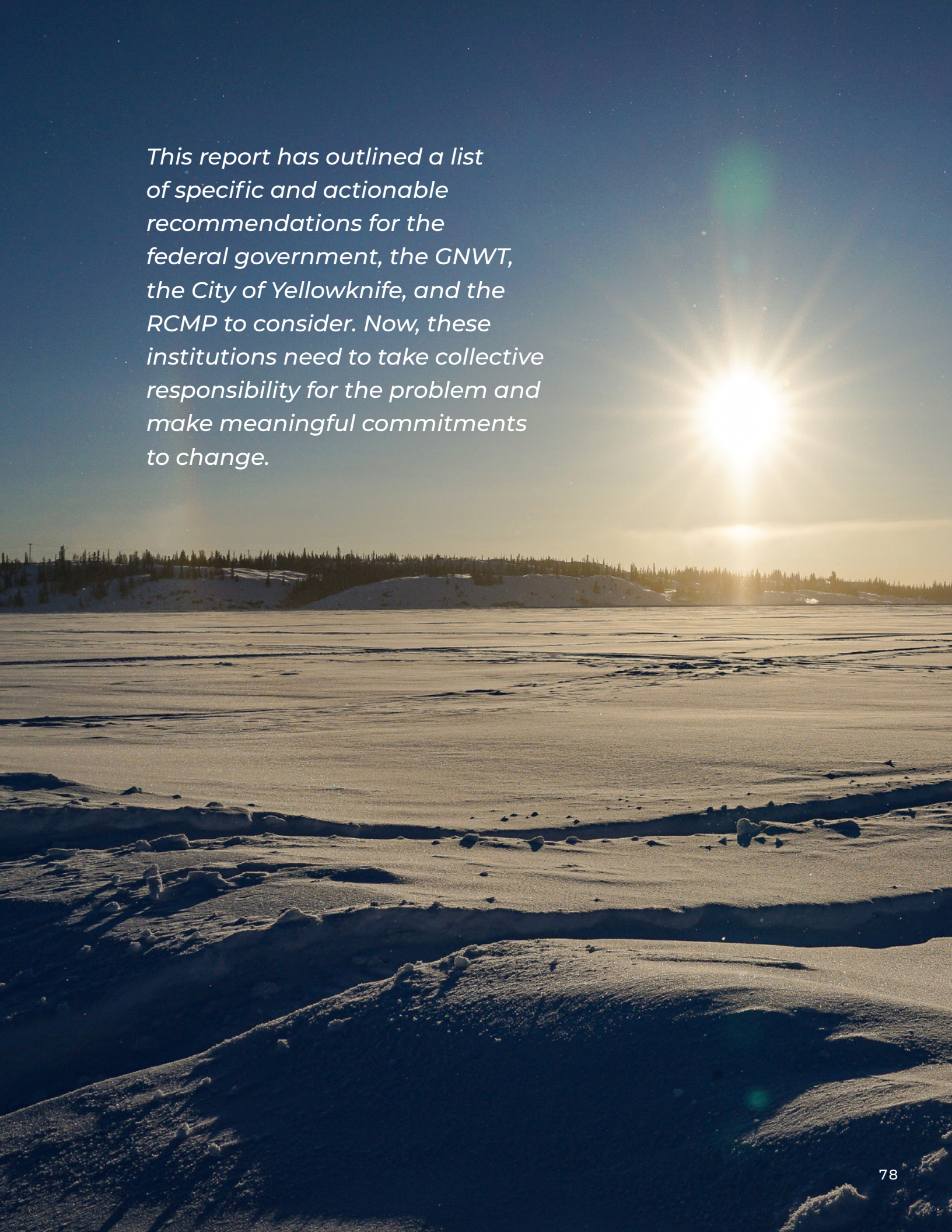
The women we spoke to in the sharing circles had varying levels of knowledge and awareness about their legal rights and how those legal rights could be used. Some women shared information with others about their rights while interacting with a police officer. While information about legal rights will not change the system that works against unhoused Indigenous women, it can help to empower them to name the wrongs they experience in a way that will be recognized by that system.

The GNWT or City of Yellowknife should collaborate with community organizations to develop educational resources on legal rights for unhoused Indigenous women. This education could include information about what to do when stopped or questioned by the police, when the police use excessive force or harsh language, or when taken into police custody. This information could also offer guidance on reporting officer misconduct to encourage women to speak up and offer a list of what women are entitled to if they are taken into police custody. There are existing precedents for information tools designed to empower Indigenous women. For example, the Native Women’s Association has a “Know Your Rights” toolkit for Indigenous women about sexual and reproductive health.²³³

Establish an independent civilian complaint coordinator responsible for helping citizens navigate the police complaints process (GNWT)

When developing the NWT Police Council, the GNWT should work with community stakeholders to appoint a civilian complaint coordinator. While the NWT Police Council recommended above would be responsible for reporting feedback from the community to the Minister, a complaint coordinator’s role would be to answer questions from citizens about policing in the NWT, their rights, and the complaints process. The coordinator would also be a sounding board for ideas to improve community policing in the territory and would report ideas back to the Council.

This report has outlined a list of specific and actionable recommendations for the federal government, the GNWT, the City of Yellowknife, and the RCMP to consider. Now, these institutions need to take collective responsibility for the problem and make meaningful commitments to change.



Conclusion

Unhoused Indigenous women are over-policed and under-protected by the RCMP in Yellowknife. This dynamic has harmful consequences: unhoused Indigenous women experience over-incarceration, greater use of force by the police, and increased vulnerability to being victims of crime. These women are continuously failed by gaps in social supports and at all levels of the justice system, especially law enforcement.

The women who we spoke to for this report told us that they fear the RCMP, the RCMP fails to keep them safe, they are discriminated against by the RCMP, they do not trust the RCMP, and they feel powerless to hold the RCMP accountable for wrongdoing.

We spoke to community organizations, service providers, government representatives, and the RCMP. In every conversation we heard that unhoused Indigenous women deserve better, and that the status quo is not working. We heard loud and clear from the women we spoke to that they do not want this to be another report that sits on a shelf.

RCMP officers need to do *less* in Yellowknife and they need to do *better* in Yellowknife. This report has outlined a list of specific and actionable recommendations for the federal government, the GNWT, the City of Yellowknife, and the RCMP to consider. Now, these institutions need to take collective responsibility for the problem and make meaningful commitments to change. Most importantly, those commitments must make their way off the desks of decision makers and into actions that make a meaningful difference in the lives of unhoused Indigenous women in Yellowknife.

Appendix

Research methodology

Decolonizing our methodology

Northern Indigenous communities have historically been the subjects of extractive research practices. These practices are typified by researchers who arrive in the community, take the information they need and do not consider how or whether their work benefits the community. These extractive methodologies cause harm by making Indigenous peoples the object rather than the subject of research. They also perpetuate colonial power structures by excluding Indigenous peoples from the process of advocating for their own communities and by removing knowledge generated by the community from the community.

As a community-based organization, the Yellowknife Women's Society wanted this research methodology to be different. Specifically, we wanted this paper to be guided by and benefit Indigenous women with lived experience of homelessness in Yellowknife. We adhere to the edict of "nothing about us, without us."

Our commitment to conducting this work with and for the community follows the most recent guidance on best practices when conducting research in Indigenous communities. Specifically, we took the following steps:

Constituting an Advisory Group that consists of a majority of Indigenous women and two-spirit people. The Advisory Group consists of people with experience in areas that include: research and project design, including the philosophy of "doing things in a good way"; consultation and reconciliation; law; and, housing. The Advisory Group guided major decisions throughout the research and writing process, including during the research ethics application process, design of the sharing circles in Yellowknife, and crafting this final report.

Securing research approval from the Aurora College Research Ethics Committee; and Consulting and following *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* and *Chapter 9 of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*, and the First Nations principles of ownership, control, access, and possession.

Nothing for us without us: lived experience

In October 2023, we held two **sharing circles** with Indigenous women in Yellowknife who were, or had previously been, unhoused or precariously housed. The first conversation took place at the Yellowknife Women's Centre, and the second discussion took place at Northern United Place. Between the two conversations, over 30 women participated in the sharing circles. All participants were welcomed with a traditional breakfast and the conversation began following a smudging ceremony and an opening prayer. Both conversations were facilitated by Katłjà Lafferty, with Berna Martin in attendance as an Elder, YKWS and Springboard Policy staff present, and counselling available on site from the Dene Wellness Warriors. The conversation was closed with a prayer and women stayed to share a traditional lunch. All women were compensated for their time with a taxi voucher and gift card.

Secondary research

Research for this project also included a **literature review**, including a jurisdictional scan, to frame the context, core issues, and promising ideas to shape police services to the unique needs of the (urban) Indigenous community in Yellowknife.

This report was also supported by **background conversations with members of the RCMP, service providers, community-based organizations, and other stakeholders in Yellowknife**. These conversations helped to set the context for the report; share challenges between unhoused Indigenous women, the RCMP, and other stakeholders in Yellowknife; and shape recommendations to improve the relationship between unhoused Indigenous women and the RCMP.



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