

Chapter 21

Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls in Canada: Does Methodology Matter?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how one particular group of people within Canada, indigenous women, experiences both a higher rate of victimization and a lower rate of case clearance. Indigenous women in Canada are three times more likely to be killed by a stranger than non-Aboriginal women, and as of 2010, clearance rates for cases involving missing and murdered Indigenous women are consistently lower across Canada. Despite these statistics, other measures show that Indigenous women show similar satisfaction with their personal safety from crime as non-Aboriginal women as well as other measures indicating a similar confidence in the criminal justice system as non-Indigenous women. In this chapter, it is argued that the dissonance between certain measures is indicative of the settler-colonial heritage that informs both the perception of violence against indigenous women in Canada, as well as the phenomenon of violence against indigenous women themselves.

INTRODUCTION

Whilst it has gone out of vogue to call the developed world the 'First World', this terminology does, however, have a continuing purchase and relevance to discussions about development. The 'First World' as it used to be called is indeed first in many things. First world countries have higher net annual income, higher gross annual income, higher social benefits to households and health spending (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015). First world countries also enjoy the lowest rates on indicators relevant to violence against women (OECD, 2019). Whilst this is most certainly an achievement, these rosy figures do obscure and camouflage the systemic victimization of vulnerable and marginalized

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populations. In Canada, indigenous women and girls are one such marginalized population. Whilst a comprehensive overview of the research and analysis of the issue of missing and murdered women and girls in Canada is beyond the scope of this chapter, a review of some of the key reports and the methodological debates that inform them is instructive. The aim is not, therefore, to provide a comprehensive review of the issue, or the methodological approaches to be discussed, but to make the argument that researchers, academics and policymakers need to consider the impact of their research methodologies when approaching vulnerable and marginalized populations.

In relation to missing and murdered indigenous women and girls in Canada, while reports which focus on hard data do disclose the extent of the violence against indigenous women in Canada, there is a distinctly different tone and focus than the research emerging from an Indigenous perspective and methodology. The exploration intends to discuss some of the key research emerging from these different approaches, and examine whether there is a meaningful difference between these methodologies in terms of approaching the issue for significant solutions. In other words, does methodology matter? As such this chapter aims to review existing research on missing and murdered indigenous women and girls to determine (i) whether existing data disclose that there are greater incidents of violence perpetrated against aboriginal women and girls, and (ii) whether these findings disclose a methodological bias in approaching the issue that perpetuates the settler-colonial discourse which also contributes to the continuance of such violence. It will ultimately be argued that the dissonance between certain measures is indicative of the settler-colonial heritage that informs both the perception of violence against indigenous women in Canada, as well as the phenomenon of violence against indigenous women itself.

BACKGROUND

While Canada in comparison to other countries has a reasonably low homicide rate (1.8 per 100,000 people) (Statistics Canada, 2017), Canada has a fairly high rate of sexual assaults (65.5 per 100,000), though these recent statistics are attributed to higher reporting levels (Rotenberg & Cotter, 2018). Comparing statistics to other countries, however, is not the focus of this examination. This analysis is instead concerned with the incidence of violence against Indigenous women and girls in Canada, in comparison to non-Indigenous women. Statistics Canada, do specifically target Indigenous people with several measures. For example, in 2018 “more than one in five victims of homicide were Indigenous people” (Statistics Canada, 2019), with the homicide rate for indigenous people at 7.31 per 100,000 people versus the overall rate of 1.44 for non-Indigenous people (Statistics Canada, 2019). Of these victims 69% were male and 31% were female. Specifically in relation to Indigenous women and girls, in a report released in 2011, while it was found that Indigenous women were more than 3 times more likely to report being victims of crime than non-Indigenous women (Brennan, 2011), the report however cited that collecting the statistics on Indigenous victimization was difficult as the “Aboriginal identity of many homicide victims [was] unknown” (Brennan, 2011, p. 9). In addition, this report identified that 76% of Indigenous women did not report incidents of non-spousal violence to the police.

The issues of victimisation faced by Indigenous women and girls have come slowly to the forefront over the last 30 years. In the Report of the Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples released in 1996, while focusing on the status of women concerning the overall legislative framework for Indigenous people in Canada also highlighted the issue of violence against Indigenous women. This report, primarily concerned with family violence and violence within Indigenous communities, did however also

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