

New research reveals harrowing stories of murdered Indigenous women and the failure of police to act

June 2 2023, by Kyllie Cripps



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(Editor's note: This article mentions acts of intimate partner violence against First Nations people.)

Indigenous [women](#) are [eight times](#) more likely than non-Indigenous women to be murdered, according to [national statistics](#). [Figures compiled](#) by the Australian Institute of Criminology show a significant proportion of these are attributable to intimate [partner violence](#).

I conducted a [study](#), published this week, that examined the deaths of 151 Indigenous women and girls from across Australia over a 20-year period beginning in 2000. Almost all of these women and girls were subjected to [intimate partner violence](#), whether at the hands of their husband or de facto spouse (72.2%), boyfriend (15.9%) or ex-partner (5.9%). The offenders were both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

While these statistics paint a grim picture, they provide little insight into the full extent of the violence experienced, and its impact on women, children and families. Their stories, unfortunately, become muted in the numbers.

My research also revealed that in almost all of these instances, Indigenous women experiencing intimate partner violence had engaged with [police](#) to help them in their situations. However, a lot of women did not receive the support that potentially could have saved their lives.

The women being lost behind the numbers

The people subjected to violence in the cases we investigated had died, so we relied heavily on coronial records. These records provided insight into their experiences of violence in the period leading up to and including their deaths.

We found the average age of Indigenous women who died from intimate partner violence was 35. The youngest was in her teens and the oldest was in her 60s.

These records also provide graphic details of the nature of these deaths, leaving little doubt as to the suffering the women endured.

Of those women whose stories we studied, 61.6% died from blunt force trauma assaults that went on for hours. The offenders used not only their bodies to inflict injury, but also whatever was at their disposal, such as rocks, pieces of concrete, fence palings and pieces of furniture.

The significance of this finding is that it speaks to the possibility of witnesses (other [household members](#), neighbors, passersby) having the opportunity to intervene by calling 000 on behalf of the victim. Certainly there was evidence of this in the cases we examined.

At the time of writing, 106 offenders among the 151 cases have been held accountable through the justice system for the deaths of these women. However, it should be noted not all were convicted of murder or manslaughter.

We know from the case files that 41.7% of the cases we investigated are mothers. Seven of the women were also pregnant at the time of their deaths.

The records also show 25% of these women's children witnessed violence in the home, potentially including the murder itself. This finding is important, as it reinforces the need for trauma-informed care for children in these situations.

Police involvement—or lack thereof

It takes immense courage for our women to reach out for support, with many having to weigh up the risks and benefits of reporting the violence to police.

For example, a [domestic violence](#) report to police now means mandatory reporting to child protection services for those who have children. This fear is due to First Nations people being disproportionately affected by child protection services, with [42.2% of children](#) in out-of-home care being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

Indigenous women have also [been arrested](#) when they have called for help, either through being misidentified as the perpetrator, or due to other matters such as overdue fines.

In one instance, Yamatji woman Tamika Mullally was beaten almost to death by her partner, but police arrested her and her father, who had come to help her. Her baby Charlie was [later killed](#) by her partner while she and her father were in police custody.

Many will remember the case of Roberta, featured in the ABC 4 Corners program [How Many More?](#) in 2022. This showed video footage of police not taking Roberta's injuries seriously, and also [telling her](#) in no uncertain terms not to call again.

Our study found there was a consistent practice of non-compliance with police general orders relating to domestic violence. For example, officers were not doing background checks on whether restraining orders were in place to determine the level of risk a victim may be in.

We also found police often did not follow through on victims' requests for domestic violence orders to protect them. Some officers asked the victim whether they really wanted their partner to go to court, forcing victims to second-guess their own decisions about their safety.

A similar reluctance by police to act on breaches of domestic violence orders was also found in the case files. This pattern of actions and inaction means crucial opportunities to prevent tragic outcomes can be

lost.

A coroner (name withheld) who conducted 17.9% of the inquests and investigations into the cases in this study reported that in his experience if it was not institutional racism that was confounding the actions of police, "it was lazy policing".

"Just trying to find the easiest way to wind up an investigation. Or perhaps, it is cultural ignorance."

This is significant in light of [recent statements](#) by the Victorian police commissioner to the Yoorrook Justice Commission. The commissioner admitted "our policing of Aboriginal persons is influenced by systemic or structural racism", which has "gone undetected, unchecked, unpunished or without appropriate sanctions" and "caused significant harm across generations of Aboriginal families".

Other police jurisdictions have [stated](#) they "don't believe that we have systemic racism" but equally recognized that members of their force were "exchanging racist and sexist, misogynist views".

The [inquiry](#) into the Queensland Police Service's responses to domestic and family violence found there is a lack of understanding of the dynamics of, and power imbalances within, domestic violence relationships.

The report stated there is a significant under-resourcing in this area, which leads to reactive and sometimes short-lived reform. And on the frontline, it can lead to confusion as to expectations in police practice.

Police need to do better

Coroners will [continue](#) to investigate and report on our women's deaths.

So, too, will domestic and family violence [death reviews](#) that are now being instituted in most jurisdictions across the country.

Indigenous experts need to be included in the teams reviewing this data to further investigate the racism, sexism and misogyny our women experience.

Police need to build in more effective accountability processes and measures so there is an appreciation that their actions and inaction impact lives. Indigenous women and girls who have experienced [violence](#) deserve to be treated with humility, respect and dignity. Working with and for them to achieve safety must always be at the center of the work we do. This article and research reminds us we can and must do better.

These women's lives mattered. They were loved and valued by our families and communities. We need to honor them by ensuring future victim-survivors are not let down as they were.

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