

The report on murdered and missing Indigenous women, children fails to hold anyone to account—it's not enough

August 18 2024, by Chay Brown, Connie Shaw, Kayla Glynn-Braun and Shirleen Campbell



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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised this article contains mentions of someone who has died.

After two years and 16 hearings, the Senate Inquiry into Missing and Murdered First Nations women handed down [its report](#) yesterday. While important, it was not the moment of reckoning many of us had hoped for.

The Senate inquiry was introduced and spearheaded by Dorinda Cox, the West Australian Greens Senator, who [today called](#) the [report's](#) recommendations "weak" and "toothless."

The inquiry came after other nations, such as [Canada](#) and [the United States](#), held their own inquiries into missing and murdered Indigenous women. Australia's own report about the appalling rates of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women was comparatively benign.

No one's counting

The inquiry's [terms of reference](#) focused on missing and murdered First Nations women and [children](#). It sought to examine the extent of the problem, comparing investigation practices between First Nations and non-First Nations cases, examining systemic causes, the effectiveness of existing policies, and exploring actions to reduce violence and improve safety.

Additionally, they consider how to honor and commemorate the victims and survivors. By their own reports, the committee was deeply affected and disturbed by the stories they heard.

What the inquiry found is precisely what First Nations women have been saying for decades: that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and

children are disproportionately impacted by men's use of violence.

That their stories and lives are ignored by mainstream media.

That police often fail to adequately investigate, search for, or respond to calls for help from First Nations women and children.

And that the data is shockingly incomplete and inadequate. No one is accurately keeping count.

As Janet Hunt from the Center for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research submitted to the inquiry, there is a gender bias in public policy:

"Despite the fact that a comparable number of First Nations women have died as a result of violence against them, as First Nations men have died in custody, it is the latter issue that attracted far more public policy attention, including through an early Royal Commission [...] There is now data on deaths in custody. There is still no data on national deaths of First Nations women by violence."

Extreme rates of violence

Despite the flawed data, those that were captured show the extreme and disproportionate rate of violence against First Nations women.

National Homicide Monitoring Program [data](#) on murdered First Nations women and children from 1989–1990 to 2022–2023 show 476 women were recorded as victims of homicide (murder and manslaughter), and 158 children were recorded as victims of homicide (murder, manslaughter and infanticide).

First Nations women represented 16% of all Australian women homicide victims, despite comprising between 2%–3% of the adult female

population.

First Nations children represented 13% of all child homicide victims.

Counting missing First Nations women and children was equally problematic, somewhat owing to some jurisdictions not recording Indigenous status in their figures.

Despite the flawed data, the Senate inquiry heard 20% of missing women in Australia are Aboriginal women. The report found First Nations children and youth are over-represented in the out-of-home care system (approximately one in 18) and are "[markedly overrepresented](#) in reports of missing children. These children make up 53% of missing children reports."

Not only are First Nations women and children more likely to go missing, they are less likely to be found.

The inquiry also heard the problematic nature of the language of "missing" as being passive, and somehow suggestive that people go deliberately missing. We agree with Amy McQuire's argument that these First Nations women and children are not missing—but disappeared.

Consistent legal failings

The Senate committee also heard these missing and disappeared First Nations women and children, and their families and communities, were regularly and routinely failed by policing and legal systems.

These systems were often regarded as another harm or threat by First Nations women and children, who were at times over-policed, and at other times, under-policed.

First Nations women are also disproportionately [misidentified](#) as the perpetrator, instead of the victim, criminalizing First Nations women and creating yet another barrier to getting help.

These issues are intertwined with the dehumanization of First Nations women and children that manifests in them not being searched for adequately or mourned in the media. There is insufficient accountability for their murders.

What is truly missing in this report is exactly that: accountability. Missing from the narrative is the focus on the users of violence and the state systems that have caused harm and repeatedly failed to support First Nations women and children.

It is this lack of accountability that has prompted Cox to say the report is simply "not enough."

Falling well short

The report makes ten recommendations. One is co-designing a culturally appropriate way to recognize murdered or disappeared First Nations women and children.

Another is the appointment of a First Nations person with the specific responsibility for advocating for, and addressing [violence](#) against, these women and children. This role would be within the Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Commission.

It also recommends policing practices be harmonized across the country to help close data gaps and create guidelines for the review of past cases. These would then be monitored for progress.

A sustainable funding mechanism for work in this area was also

recommended, alongside a request for the media to reflect on the findings of the report, namely the portrayal of these cases in the news.

[Guidelines](#) for [reporting](#) already exist.

The Senate inquiry was an important step. And these recommendations are welcome. But they do not go far enough.

Some of the authors of this piece gave evidence to this inquiry. And all of us have lost loved ones. Each one of us know First Nations women and children who have been murdered and disappeared. We think about them every single day.

We remember R. Rubuntja, our sister and friend, whose life was stolen and who we spoke about in loving memory to this Senate [inquiry](#).

It is not enough.

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