

## **STATEMENT RE VIOLENCE AND ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN INDIGENOUS PEOPLE AND POLICING AGENCIES**

(Life and Mission Agency – Justice Ministries report, A&P 2021, p. 431–32, 38)

[Statement Regarding Violence and Encounters Between Indigenous People and Policing Agencies |  
The Presbyterian Church in Canada](#)

### **Police Services and Wellness Checks**

One of the issues that has been raised in Canada specifically around policing is the issue of wellness checks. A wellness check is conducted, often at the request of friends or family, when someone is suspected of being in crisis and needing help – not because of any suspected crime. And yet the CBC report also revealed that more than 70% of those who died in encounters with the police suffered from mental health and substance use problems. Violent behaviour is no more common amongst those living with mental illness than it is in the general population, though prejudicial perceptions about mental health, mental illnesses and violence contribute significantly to stigma, discrimination and social exclusion. More can be read on this matter at [ontario.cmha.ca/documents/violence-and-mental-health-unpacking-a-complex-issue/](http://ontario.cmha.ca/documents/violence-and-mental-health-unpacking-a-complex-issue/).

There is a racialized aspect to mental health crisis interventions: Black people who suffer from mental health crises are statistically more likely to have police involvement in their pathway to care. Additionally, the Intergenerational trauma caused by actions to remove Indigenous identity is well documented and families in which multiple generations attended residential schools are at greater risk of distress – experiencing crises and poor mental and physical health, including a greater likelihood of being victims of violence, which are likely to increase interactions with police. And when people who are already in crisis are confronted by an officer – possibly even a well-meaning officer – who is armed, in situations where there is already tension and mistrust between the police and community members, the potential for harm increases exponentially.

In “CAMH Statement on Police Interactions with People in Mental Health Crisis”, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health lays out the issue at its core as one of proper training and care: “Mental Health is Health. This means that people experiencing a mental health crisis need health care. Police should not be the first responders when people are in crisis in the community. Police are not trained in crisis care and should not be expected to lead this important work.” Quoting criminologist Julius Haag, one CBC article by Sanifa Nasser in 2020 entitled “Family of Ejaz Choudry demands firing of officer who fatally shot him during mental health crisis”, points out “[The police’s] primary competency is not to work as counsellors or to work with people in distress”...[and] seeing armed police officers could in fact provoke a ‘heightened response’ with a person in crisis feeling more frightened than comforted.”

Many police agencies do have some kind of mental health crisis intervention training available to their officers. However, the training is not having the effect of lessening police involved deaths during interactions with people who are experiencing mental health crises; while some positive outcomes are reported, studies to date fail to show a reduction in the risk of mortality or death during emergency police interactions, according to a 2019 article entitled “Effectiveness of Police Crisis Intervention Training Programs” by Michael S. Rogers, Dale E. McNeil and Renee L. Binder in *American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law*.

Whether violence involving police interactions with Black or Indigenous people happens in the context of wellness checks or other policing interventions, it is clear that there is a problem. Given the disproportionate numbers of incidents involving racialized communities such as Black and Indigenous communities it is also clear that the problem stems at least in part from racism. This racism is part and parcel of the way we are all raised, no matter our race; it is systemic and it shapes our institutions and practices. The church’s policy, *Growing in Christ: Seeing the Image of God in our Neighbour, the Policy of the Presbyterian Church in Canada for Dealing with Racial Harassment* recognizes that racism exists at multiple levels, including at the level of institutions and systems. The policy states, “Institutional racism or systemic racism occurs where the established rules, policies and regulations or practices of an organization result in the unequal treatment of different groups either within that organization or in the larger society. A result of institutional racism is that the laws, values and practices of society, which may appear to be neutral, in fact tend to benefit one dominant group over others”. Living Faith then calls us to action, reminding us that “God’s justice is seen when we deal fairly with each other and strive to change customs and practices that oppress and enslave others. (8.4.2)

To address the problem, we need to own up to the roots that feed it and transform the mechanisms by which it works. As some steps the church could take to help with that transformation, we propose the following recommendations:

**Recommendation LMA-020** (adopted, p. 38)

That presbyteries, sessions and individuals be encouraged to study The Presbyterian Church in Canada's July 2020 "Statement Regarding Violence and Encounters Between Indigenous People and Policing Agencies".

**Recommendation LMA-021** (adopted, p. 38)

That the Moderator write a letter encouraging the Government of Canada to create a nationally run centralized data collection system that records and analyzes race-based data within policing, including on use of force.

**Recommendation LMA-022** (adopted, p. 38)

That the Moderator write to each province and territory requesting that the responsibility and funding for wellness checks is reallocated from police to community and healthcare-based crisis intervention workers, including pathways for people to access public health-lead interventions through 911 services that do not necessitate the involvement of police as first responders in mental health crises.

**Resource List**

## Books:

- *Racialized Policing: Aboriginal People's Encounters with the Police* by Elizabeth Comack, Fernwood Publishing, 2012. This book gives a detailed account of the racialized nature of policing practice and policy in Canada, including an in-depth review of the shooting death of J.J. Harper and the so called "Starlight Tours".
- *Policing Black Lives: State violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present* by Robyn Maynard, Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2017. This book examines the history of anti-Black racism in Canada, contemporary manifestations of systemic racism including social and economic marginalization, violence and encounters between Black people and the police and Black people and the Justice and Corrections system.
- *The Skin We're In* by Desmond Cole.

## Online resources:

- "Deadly Force" is a CBC archive of deadly police encounters over 20 years. This archive investigates the numbers and some of the circumstance of deadly police encounters.
- "A Disparate Impact: second interim report on the inquiry into racial profiling and racial discrimination of Black persons by the Toronto Police Service." Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2020.
- "The Statement Regarding Violence and Encounters Between Indigenous People and Policing Agencies" can be found at [presbyterian.ca/2020/07/03/Indigenous-people-and-policing](https://presbyterian.ca/2020/07/03/Indigenous-people-and-policing).