
Canadian Family Justice Report

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Native Women's
Association of Canada



L'Association des femmes
autochtones du Canada

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Through funding from the Canadian Family Justice Fund, the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) is supporting the well-being of Indigenous women in all their diversities accessing the family justice system. In this project, NWAC has sought to better understand how Indigenous women and their families interact with the family justice system and identify what supports are needed to ensure safe access to services, navigate legal processes, and remain connected to their families and communities.

As part of this work, NWAC brought together service providers and community organizations from across Canada to share their experiences supporting Indigenous women, children, and families navigating the family justice system. This consisted of two engagement sessions and a national survey, which brought together service providers and community organizations from across Canada. These engagements provided an opportunity for participants to share their perspectives, personal experiences, and changes needed to improve justice system responses for Indigenous women and their families.

Across both the national engagement sessions and the survey responses, similar themes consistently emerged, highlighting the resilience of community-led supports and the ongoing systemic challenges that continue to affect Indigenous women and families navigating the justice system.

Purpose of Sessions and Engagement

The purpose of these engagements was to gather insights from individuals and organizations working directly with Indigenous women, children, and families to better understand how the family justice system is experienced on the ground.

To support this work, two national engagement sessions were held, each bringing together approximately 25 participants from across Canada, alongside the broader service provider poll.



Participants represented a range of regions, including the West Coast, Prairies, Ontario, Quebec, and Northern territories, reflecting diverse community realities and experiences.

Many who participated included frontline workers, community advocates, program coordinators, outreach workers, and individuals working in areas such as family support, justice services, health, and community-based programming. A lot of the participants shared their lived and professional experiences supporting Indigenous women and families navigating complex and often overlapping systems.

The engagements aimed to identify:

- Strengths and successes within community-based programs
- Barriers organizations face in delivering services
- Priority needs within individuals and communities
- Opportunities for improving justice responses for Indigenous women and families

Through engagements, NWAC also explored the experiences of frontline service providers to help inform broader policy discussions related to justice reform and family wellbeing.

Indigenous Community-Based Supports

Across the engagements, a key finding is the strength and impact of Indigenous community-based initiatives rooted in Indigenous knowledge, relationships, and cultural practices. Many highlighted their ability to create safe and supportive environments for Indigenous women and families through culturally informed programming, advocacy services, and community engagement. These initiatives often include healing circles, cultural gatherings, parenting support, and youth programming that strengthen identity, connection and overall wellbeing.

Participants also spoke about the importance of trust within communities, noting that it is built through sustained relationships over time. In many cases, Indigenous organizations are able to support families in ways that formal justice systems cannot because their work is grounded in cultural knowledge, kinship relationships, and community care.

Some participants shared examples of successful family reunification efforts supported through culturally grounded case planning and wraparound services rooted in Indigenous kinship practices. These approaches emphasize family connection and community accountability rather than surveillance-based systems. Moreover, participants highlighted the importance of partnerships with other community organizations, Elders, health providers, and social service agencies in providing holistic support to families.



Barriers to Service Delivery

A key finding from the engagements is that, despite the important work carried out by Indigenous organizations and service providers, significant barriers continue to limit their ability to deliver services effectively. The most frequently identified challenges included:

- **Funding limitations** - Many organizations operate with short-term or project-based funding, making it difficult to sustain programming or respond to growing community needs.
- **Staff and organizational capacity** - Limited staffing and reliance on volunteers often create challenges in meeting increasing demand for services.
- **Lack of culturally grounded resources** - Participants noted that many justice-related programs and services do not adequately reflect Indigenous culture practices or community realities.
- **Systemic barriers within justice systems** - Many respondents described ongoing challenges navigating legal systems that are complex and often disconnected from the realities of Indigenous families.
- **Community awareness and engagement challenges** - Some reported difficulties reaching families who may not trust formal systems or may not be aware of available services.

These barriers highlight the ongoing gap between community needs and the systems intended to support them.

Priority Needs Identified by Participants and Organizations

Participants across both survey responses and engagement sessions consistently identified several urgent priorities affecting Indigenous women and families. These include:

- **Housing and basic needs** - Housing insecurity was one of the most frequently raised concerns. Many participants emphasized that safe and stable housing is foundational to family well-being and stability.
- **Mental health and addictions support** - Many identified the need for culturally grounded mental health and addiction services.
- **Legal advocacy and justice navigation** - Participants highlighted the importance of court workers, legal advocates, and community-based legal clinics to support families navigating complex justice systems.
- **Prevention and early support** - Early intervention programs were identified as critical in supporting families before challenges escalated into justice system involvement.



- **Recognition of Indigenous governance and law** - Participants emphasized the need for justice systems to recognize Indigenous laws, leadership, and community-based approaches to family well-being.

Together, these priorities reflect the need for a holistic, community-led approach that addresses both justice system barriers and the broader conditions impacting Indigenous women and families.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were informed by themes raised through both engagement sessions and the national survey. They reflect priorities identified by participants to strengthen supports for Indigenous women and families navigating the family justice system.

- **Strengthen Indigenous-led family justice supports** – Governments and justice system partners should increase sustained and flexible funding for Indigenous community organizations delivering culturally grounded services that support Indigenous women and families. Moreover, long-term funding commitments would allow organizations to maintain existing programming, respond to emerging community needs, and continue providing culturally informed services.
- **Expand access to culturally safe legal advocacy** – Investments should be made to expand access to culturally safe legal advocacy supports for Indigenous women and families navigating the family justice system. This includes increasing the availability of Indigenous court workers and community-based legal clinics that provide guidance and culturally informed support throughout the legal process.
- **Prioritize prevention and family stabilization programs** – Governments should prioritize investments in prevention and early intervention initiatives that support family stability and well-being. This includes programs addressing housing insecurity, mental health, addictions, and other social determinants that can contribute to justice system involvement.
- **Increase Indigenous representation within justice systems** – Efforts should be made to increase the representation of Indigenous professionals within legal and justice institutions, including courts, legal services, and policy-making bodies.
- **Recognize Indigenous governance and community leadership** – Just systems should recognize and support indigenous governance, leadership, and community-led approaches to family well-being. This includes creating spaces for justice approaches that incorporate Indigenous laws, cultural knowledge, and community-based decision-making processes.



Conclusion

The engagement responses collected from both the service provider survey and the national sessions reaffirm the strength and commitment of Indigenous organizations supporting women and families across the country.

These organizations continue to provide culturally grounded supports rooted in relationships, community care, and Indigenous knowledge, often stepping in where systems continue to fall short. The findings highlight the persistent barriers which Indigenous women and families continue to face when navigating the family justice system. Many participants consistently described systems that are difficult to access, complex to navigate, and often disconnected from the lived realities of Indigenous families.

Ongoing challenges such as housing insecurity, poverty, trauma, and limited access to culturally safe legal support continue to shape the experiences of many families seeking justice and stability. Nonetheless, the engagement made clear that community-led support is already demonstrating effective approaches grounded in prevention, healing, and family connection. These approaches reflect Indigenous ways of caring for families and communities, yet they often operate with limited and unstable funding.

The voices shared throughout both engagements reinforce the urgent need for sustained investment in Indigenous-led programs, stronger prevention supports, and justice systems that recognize Indigenous leadership, knowledge, and community-based solutions. Moving forward, meaningful change will require governments and institutions to listen to the experiences of those working directly with families and to support approaches that strengthen families rather than further fragment them.

Importantly, the findings and voices reinforced the broader calls for systemic change raised through the National Inquiry in Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, which emphasize the need for culturally grounded justice systems that prioritize Indigenous leadership, prevention, and community-based-supports.





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