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Office of the Federal
Ombudsman for Victims
of Crime

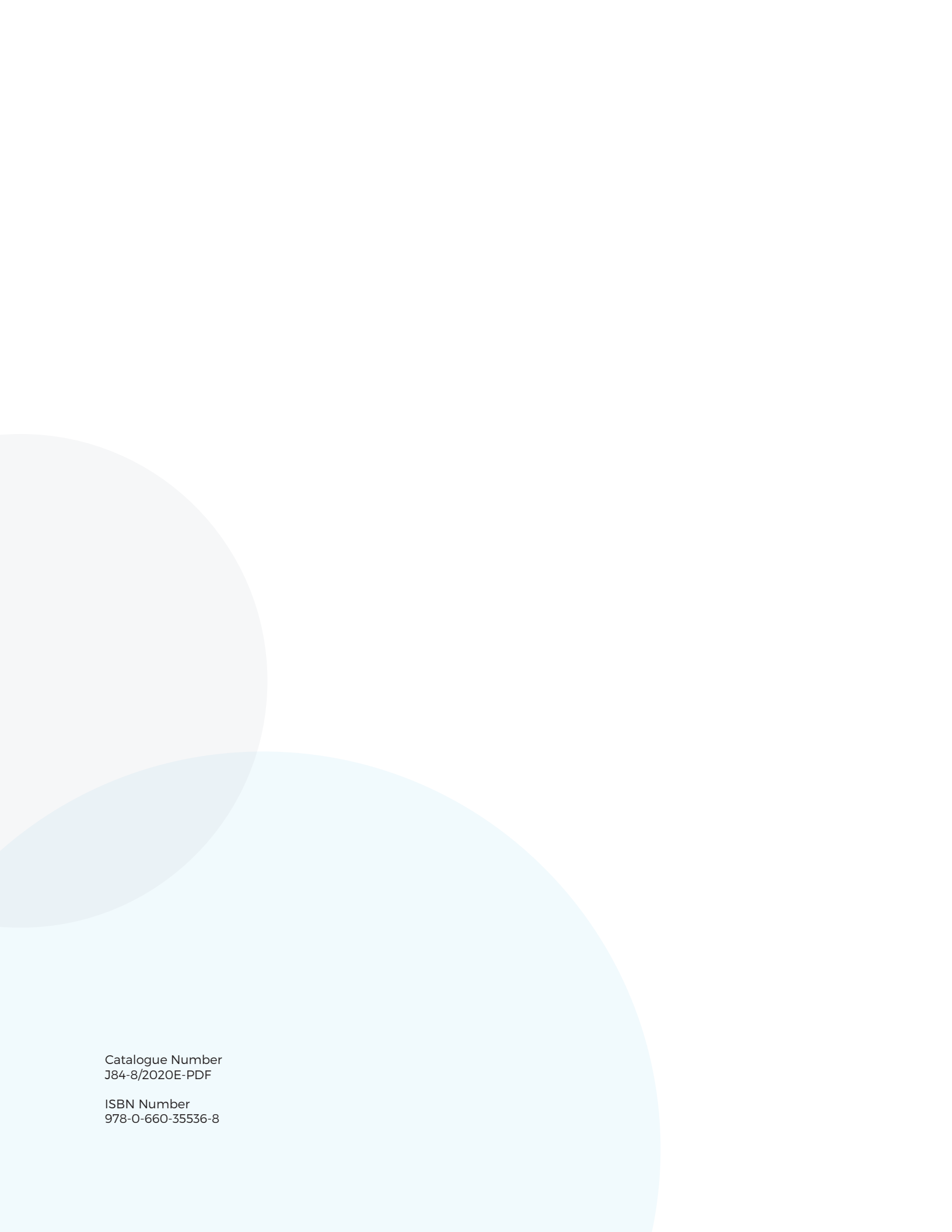
Gouvernement
du Canada
Bureau de l'ombudsman
fédéral des victimes
d'actes criminels

WHAT WE HEARD

**Community Forums in Yellowknife:
March 11 & 12, 2020**

OFFICE OF THE FEDERAL OMBUDSMAN
FOR VICTIMS OF CRIME





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report documents two Office of the Federal Ombudsman for Victims of Crime (OFOVC) Community Forums held in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories (NWT) on March 11 and 12, 2020. These forums were organized as part of the OFOVC's priority to increase its engagement with victims of crime across Canada. They were held in person and focused on communities the Office has not engaged with before, including Indigenous groups and individuals in the North.

The objective of the OFOVC Community Forums is to further the OFOVC's victim-centred, trauma-informed approach by letting the experiences, concerns and ideas of Canadians who have been affected by crime inform the Office's work. The forums are also opportunities for the OFOVC to build partnerships at the community level.

We chose Yellowknife as the first location for our community forums because of the context faced by victims of crime in that region. The NWT has a small, predominantly Indigenous population that is spread out over a vast area. The remoteness of NWT communities leads to vulnerabilities in regard to victimization and safety. The high rate of Indigenous female victimization in the territory demands particular attention.

The format of the community forums favoured roundtable discussions with the participants. During the March 11 session, we heard from victim services providers, criminal justice personnel and victim advocates who work in or near Yellowknife. The March 12 session was open to the public.

The concerns shared during these forums tended to centre around the criminal justice system, policing, victim services, the Canadian Victims Bill of Rights (CVBR), and context-specific concerns. We heard that many in the North feel abandoned by the criminal justice system, and that services for victims are under-resourced and under-staffed. There is a clear need for more legal, language and financial support for victims in the NWT if we are to make victim support equivalent to the treatment afforded offenders. We heard that residents distrust police, and that criminal justice system personnel hold stereotypes that are harmful to victims. We heard about the secondary victimization, judgment and hopelessness that characterize victims' experiences with the criminal justice system in the NWT. Finally, we heard that loyalties, family ties and relationships make anonymity and safety difficult in the NWT's small communities, disincentivizing victims to come forward and report crime.

The realities faced by victims, service providers and frontline workers make it clear that we must continue our outreach efforts in the North. We intend to host additional community forums in smaller communities in the NWT, likely beginning with Dettah, N'Dilo and Behchoko.

OFOVC COMMUNITY FORUMS IN YELLOWKNIFE: BACKGROUND

The Office of the Federal Ombudsman for Victims of Crime (OFOVC) held two community forums in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories (NWT) on March 11 and 12, 2020 as part of its ongoing efforts to engage and connect with victims of crime across Canada. The OFOVC Community Forums are an opportunity to hear about Canadians' experiences with the criminal justice system as well as their concerns and ideas to improve it, with a focus on federal legislation, programs and policies that affect victims of crime. The Ombudsman emphasized the need to visit communities with whom the OFOVC has not engaged before, with special consideration for Indigenous groups and individuals.

The objective of the forums is to let the experiences, concerns and ideas of Canadians who have been affected by crime—and/or who have engaged with the criminal justice system—inform the OFOVC's work. The Ombudsman wants to take a victim-centred, trauma-informed approach to the Office's work. Knowledge of how victims, service providers and others at the community level are affected by federal policies, programs and services for victims of crime guides the way forward. If the needs of stakeholders are identified and heard, we can communicate them to decision makers at the federal level through policy recommendations. This is also an opportunity for the OFOVC to build partnerships at the community level and across sectors to open the lines of communication, share best practices and work together to promote new initiatives and events.

The OFOVC chose to hold its first community forum in Yellowknife to learn more directly about the unique challenges faced by victims of crime living in the North.

The NWT is geographically vast, but home to a relatively small population: 44,904 people as of January 2020.¹ More than half of these residents live in 32 small communities spread across the territories, with the remainder located in Yellowknife.² As we heard from the National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG), the remote nature of these communities and the challenges associated with accessing them can create numerous vulnerabilities with regard to crime and victimization.³

The NWT has a large Indigenous population, comprising Inuit, First Nations and Métis populations with distinct cultures and needs. These factors are important to consider from a cultural perspective when examining the nature of victimization in the region. Statistics Canada recently reported that in 2016, more than half of all victims of crimes reported to police in the NWT were female. Females made up a much larger proportion of victims of sexual offences (94%) in particular, and of other violent offences, such as criminal harassment and indecent and harassing communications.⁴ The data also revealed that among female victims of all sexual offences, 35% were under the age of 12.⁵

The NWT also has the highest percentage of assault victims among Canada's provinces and territories: in 2016, 79% of all crimes reported to police concerned assault.⁶ Overall, the NWT had the second-highest rates of violence in the country. In 2015–16, NWT Victim Services assisted 583 direct victims of crime, 83% of whom were female.⁷

We have heard from the National Inquiry on MMIWG that the issues behind the high rates of violence against Indigenous women and girls are complex. In her testimony to the inquiry, Dr. Pertice Moffitt spoke of a “culture of violence and silence” in the North based on “historical trauma, violence that is normalized, gossip as a tool for silence, community retribution, family and community values and self-preservation.”⁸ The trauma Dr. Moffitt spoke of is partly related to the legacy of colonization and the residential school system, which have caused lasting pain.⁹

Considering the historical context and current statistics, the OFOVC hoped to engage with Indigenous groups and individuals at the forums. We have had very few inquiries from Indigenous groups or people, and would like to understand the possible reasons. It is also critical that we increase awareness of our work as a supportive agency and helper among victims and survivors in the North. We would like to build trust so they will reach out to us.

We want to sincerely thank all of the survivors, advocates, criminal justice professionals and citizens who attended the first-ever OFOVC Community Forum in NWT and shared their lived experiences and concerns. If we believe in putting pain to purpose, then we must honour the voices of survivors and bring effective change to the justice system.

ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

The OFOVC's Ombudsman and Executive Director visited Yellowknife in November 2019 for pre-engagement activities. They met with territorial government officials, federal employees and staff from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who have expertise working with victims of crime in the region. They received advice on how to engage community members in a way that would feel safe, accessible and inclusive.

The OFOVC planned to hold two forums in March 2020. The March 11 session would be open to victim services providers, community-based advocates and criminal justice personnel. The March 12 session would welcome the general public. The OFOVC also planned to organize one-on-one sessions with willing participants over the two days.

Publicity for the forums and one-on-one sessions was organized via email and supported by contacts made during the pre-engagement meetings.



MARCH 11

During the March 11 session, we heard from victim services providers, criminal justice personnel and victim advocates who work in or near Yellowknife. These participants were largely unfamiliar with the OFOVC, excluding those we met during the pre-engagement meetings. They acknowledged the fact that “ombudsman” is a relatively new term in NWT, with the Office of the Northwest Territories Ombud having only opened in November 2019. There were nine participants in total. The event was held at the Tree of Peace Friendship Centre.

Format

Participants were greeted upon arrival and invited to sit at tables arranged in a rectangle. The OFOVC Indigenous Advisor welcomed the group, then made an offering of tobacco to the local Elder, who led an opening prayer. After the prayer, the Indigenous Advisor acknowledged the Chief Drygeese territory and introduced herself in her traditional manner, which included familial ties. She introduced the Ombudsman, who made introductory remarks, spoke about the OFOVC, and reiterated the purpose of the forum. The Ombudsman then informed participants that they did need to share their names if they not wish to, and that names would not be recorded. The Indigenous Advisor then introduced the Communications Advisor, who would be taking notes (without recording names). Participants were invited to engage in a brief roundtable introduction of themselves and their

organizations. Then the floor was opened for discussion about their experiences with and concerns about the criminal justice system, the issues facing victims of crime in the North and the challenges they face in their own roles.

What We Heard

Criminal Justice System

“The justice system is a maze—even people within it do not know whom to refer to whom.”

The participants agreed that residents of the North feel abandoned by the criminal justice system. They are generally unaware of the services that exist to help them, and many would lack access to them anyway due to the remote nature of their communities: most services are concentrated in Yellowknife, and some communities are as far as 800 kilometres away.

There was agreement that there is a general lack of support for victims in the region. We heard that victims have difficulty finding the help they need to navigate legal procedures, such as writing victim impact statements or affidavits in family violence cases. When faced with such requests, service providers often do not know to whom they could refer the victim, as there is no specific person or office to turn to for help in the North. Participants stressed the need for more victim support from lawyers who understand the legal processes, acknowledging that many of these procedures are confusing and difficult.

Participants also agreed that there is a need for more Indigenous-specific support. For example, lawyers who may have the legal skills to help do not necessarily know how to support an Indigenous woman fleeing intimate partner violence, which requires knowledge of cultural context and trauma sensitivities. Some participants mentioned that creating an opportunity for a dedicated outreach lawyer to help victims of crime in the North could go a long way to help clarify processes and procedures. Preparing victims for court was another area where participants felt an outreach lawyer could help.

There was also agreement that it is important to educate judges and lawyers about these specific needs. As well, there was mention of the need to create opportunities for peer support among Indigenous women—a resource that is yet untapped. Some participants also suggested that a child advocate is needed in the North, as children have specific, unique needs that existing resources are not always adequate to support.

Participating service providers acknowledged that police, victim services personnel and criminal justice personnel work in silos. Because of this lack of partnership, the information and advice they provide to victims can be incohesive or even inaccurate. Participants recognized that there is room for better collaboration between the sectors. Victim services providers also noted that police referrals to their organizations are very low. They suggested police could be more proactive about telling victims what resources exist. The police in attendance agreed.

Victim blaming by judges was cited as an issue that contributes to the re-traumatization of victims. Participants emphasized that, based on their experiences, sexual assault training for judges is critical. We heard that trauma-informed training for police would also go a long way toward better supporting victims of crime.

Victim Services

There was consensus that there is a general lack of victim services in the North, and that existing organizations are under-staffed and under-resourced to support the significant need. One participant mentioned that outsourcing victim services—which would involve victims connecting with service providers and counsellors from other regions—is not a viable solution: first, it cannot be safely assumed that remote communities have the capacity to connect with others online; and second, counsellors who are not knowledgeable about specific cultural and environmental contexts may not be able to support victims in the North adequately.

Accessibility issues are a problem that service providers have difficulty overcoming in the North. We heard that existing victim services workers must take it upon themselves—at their own cost—to travel to communities to connect with victims who cannot make the journey to Yellowknife. In the summer, without ice roads, some remote communities are hard to reach. Some victims receive phone support from neighbouring community counsellors, but only if and when available, and the waitlists are incredibly long. Small communities truly need their own workers.

One participant saw a benefit in creating a sexual assault centre, and felt such a centre would be well positioned at the hospital. Since the hospital is generally the first place police would bring a sexual assault victim, perhaps this presents an opportunity for victims to get the professional health care and trauma-informed care they need in one location.

In a one-on-one session with a victim services provider, we were told there is also not enough support available for victim services workers themselves. For the few who operate in the North, the mental health toll of supporting victims through trauma while contending with an unresponsive justice system is extremely high. We heard that victim services workers in Yellowknife are overwhelmed: not only do they struggle to serve more than 20,000 residents in Yellowknife and remote communities in the territories, they struggle to take care of themselves. We heard that as a result, staff turnover is high. It was shared that many workers have personal backgrounds as survivors of violence; thus, they have knowledge for which they should be paid accordingly. This is especially so considering that contextual, cultural and community-based knowledge makes training quite complex for such positions. It was suggested that having peer support for victim services workers would go a long way toward easing their stress, helping them to process the trauma they hear about and improving their mental well-being.

Restorative Justice

“Restorative justice is delivered in a colonialist manner.”

Participants agreed that there were cultural concerns concerning how restorative justice is delivered for northerners. They stated that for restorative justice to be a viable option for victims in the North, its processes must be re-evaluated and made more culturally relevant. At present, referrals to domestic violence courts count as restorative justice. But for many cases, this is simply not an appropriate forum. There have been no evaluations to determine if this is what is wanted or if it is effective. Restorative justice varies greatly by agency. Victims need to be fully informed about what to expect.

Participants suggested that instead of sending offenders back into communities where victims live—with no rehabilitative action having taken place during their sentences—facilities should offer proper counselling and education for restorative purposes during incarceration periods. This should be mandatory for offenders, especially when they will be coming back to live among their victims.



Language & Accessibility

“In the Northwest Territories, the courts read out the language rights to the perpetrator. How come we scramble to find translators for victims?”

Much of the discussion centred on language, which deserves particular consideration in NWT given that it recognizes 11 official languages. Because English is actually the second language in many communities in the North, it can be very difficult for victims to understand the information being given to them, especially legal terminology. Currently, it is a struggle to find interpreters for victims at all stages of the criminal justice system, police and victim services included. Participants stated that translation services should be available for victims throughout the criminal justice system, just as they are for offenders. The challenges of finding translators for victims was cited as another example of the imbalance between victims and the accused, with the justice system’s resources skewed in favour of the latter.

One participant mentioned that those who have disabilities also have little to no recourse for support. For example, a person who is hard of hearing cannot fully participate in court proceedings without aids, yet in the North, such aids are rarely, if ever, available.

Travel was also raised as an accessibility issue for victims in the northern context, presenting a significant barrier to services and access to justice. As mentioned by victim services providers, it can be extremely expensive to travel from a remote community to a service centre; making the trip regularly is not feasible. Many communities have difficulty covering travel costs for family or criminal court appearances, and there is no funding available through the courts to cover these. For example, we heard that many mothers simply give up on the family court process because they struggle to overcome these challenges and barriers to justice.

Canadian Victims Bill of Rights

“Enforceability of the CVBR is an issue, so people think it’s a joke.”

Many of the participants in attendance were unaware of the Canadian Victims Bill of Rights (CVBR) when prompted to discuss it. Those who had heard of the bill were aware of some details. It was clear that there is a general lack of awareness in the region about the bill. Most participants did realize that frontline personnel have obligations under the bill and must be informed so that they can, in turn, inform those they serve.

We heard that enforcing the CVBR is problematic. Specifically, advocates highlighted the bill's vagueness and the fact that roles are not specifically assigned to any actors, meaning no one is held accountable when rights are not respected. One participant mentioned that this gap makes it hard for victims to take the bill seriously when looking for a tool to uphold and defend their rights. Tracking complaints related to the CVBR is also an issue for police in the region, likely due to limited bureaucratic resources.

There was a general sense among participants that the people who are prosecuted have more rights than victims, even with the CVBR in play. A common theme throughout the discussion was that victims' rights are treated as secondary.

Community Concerns

“There is a higher price to pay for speaking up in the North”

Participants shared the sentiment that witnesses fear speaking up about crime because they are at high risk of suffering consequences in small, remote communities. Because “everyone knows everyone else,” there are many loyalties, family ties and relationships at play. Anonymity is difficult in small communities. For many, coming forward is simply “not worth the price.” Participants agreed that there is also a culture of victim blaming, and that the lack of accessible support for victims in the North compounds these issues.

Participants recounted stories of harassment and assault (by the friends or relatives of perpetrators) against those who came forward. It was obvious that there are insufficient resources to protect those who do speak up, despite the CVBR providing victims a right to protection in statute.

Participants noted that the bill does not specify how a victim will be provided the listed guarantees, allowing officials to overlook their rights. Participants agreed that if witnesses are encouraged to come forward, more would need to be done to protect them from retaliation before and after their testimony.

We heard that violence against Indigenous men is not being addressed in the North, especially gang violence or sexual assault.

The lack of federal prisons in the North was also raised as a concern. To serve a federal sentence, offenders are currently forced to leave the North (and their home communities) to serve their time if the sentence is longer than two years. To avoid this and keep offenders closer to home, judges often give lighter sentences—less than two years. While this recognizes the offender's needs, it does not necessarily provide justice for their victims. We also heard that some domestic violence offenders manipulate the system and use emergency protection orders and temporary custody against women, leaving them homeless in some cases.

Participants framed access to guns within the cultural context of the North: sometimes when offenders are released, there are weapons prohibitions placed on them for years or a lifetime, which can be problematic in the North because the offenders cannot return to houses where family members or roommates may be storing weapons for hunting. This can lead to homelessness, which may encourage further criminal behaviour. Participants felt that weapons restrictions should be reserved for offenders who use weapons in committing the crime. Participants told us laws should be more flexible in order to take these unique contexts and considerations into account.

MARCH 12

Format

As with the previous community forum, participants were greeted upon arrival at the Tree of Peace Friendship Centre and invited to sit at tables arranged in a rectangle. However, the first survivor to arrive felt the tables represented a barrier and the room felt too large and intimidating. She suggested that seating participants in a smaller circle without tables would remove any perceived barriers and allow everyone to feel equal. The tables were removed to accommodate this excellent suggestion and create a more welcoming and inclusive sharing circle. We are pleased to report that all seven community participants felt safe enough to share openly in the circle about their experiences. The event ran almost an hour and a half over the allotted time, which indicated to us that participants felt safe, recognized and validated.

The Indigenous Advisor welcomed the group, and then the local Elder led an opening prayer. Afterwards, she acknowledged the Chief Drygeese territory and introduced herself, the Ombudsman

and the Communications Advisor. The Ombudsman acknowledged the territory, spoke about the OFOVC, and reiterated the purpose of the community forum. The Ombudsman then informed participants that they did not need to disclose their names and that if they did, the names would not be recorded. The floor was then opened for discussion about participants' experiences and concerns regarding the criminal justice system, issues facing victims of crime in the North, and the challenges they faced in their own roles.

While the discussion was emotional at times, participants were empathetic and supportive of each other. (Note: The OFOVC had engaged the services of a counsellor who was unable to attend at the last minute.)

Policing

“Police have a jaded view of women—particularly Indigenous women.”

Participants told us that victim blaming was a major obstacle to seeking justice in the North. In their experiences, police were more likely to believe offenders' stories, not survivors'. This could be due to stereotypes about victims—particularly about



Indigenous women—that present obstacles to fair treatment. One participant shared that she felt the officers to whom she had reported her crime had viewed her as “just another drunk Indian woman.”

One survivor of sexual assault said the response she had encountered from the criminal justice system in the North was not trauma-informed. She disclosed that police had forced her to go to the hospital after her assault, after which she was held on a suicide watch because of the severity of her reaction to her traumatic experience of sexual violence. When she told a police officer that she hoped he would suffer one day, he was offered protection from her.

Victims also told us that police do not inform victims about their rights under the CVBR (a fact that police had acknowledged as an issue during the March 11 session). One participant felt that immediate support from police could “make or break” a victim. Participants were adamant that police should be the initial point of contact to inform victims of their rights and that police should be able to provide immediate

referrals to social workers and victim services. We heard that victims wished police would follow up with them in the days after an incident, because in the immediate aftermath of trauma, many victims do not retain the information given to them.

We were told that relationships between residents and police in the North can be complicated. One participant shared that, when she was growing up, most members of her community feared interacting with the RCMP. While it was noted that the RCMP now make greater efforts to be more involved in communities, this relationship remains overshadowed by mistrust, especially among older people who grew up with more fear.



The Criminal Justice System

“We throw victims into court and make them defend themselves and their rights when they didn’t ask to be victimized.”

“Victims are people and need to be treated as such. We need humanity, compassion and respect.”

Participants agreed that feelings of alienation permeate their interactions with the justice system. They felt that victims are met with a cold, unhelpful bureaucracy and minimal legal aids. Family and criminal courts sometimes issue contradictory orders, and it is difficult for victims to navigate these confusing processes without guidance. We also heard that victims could use support in court. Currently, nobody in the criminal justice system plays a role in supporting them or explaining processes to them. Going to court alone can also be mentally and emotionally distressing for victims. Requests for more in-person legal support came up several times during the forum, as it did in the service provider session. Participants mentioned that secondary victimization by the criminal justice system is a common experience. Many agreed that trauma-informed training could help those who work in the system to better serve victims of crime without causing additional harm.

One survivor of sexual assault told us that in court, she had been blamed for drinking with the perpetrator, and her case dismissed because he was well known to her: she had posted pictures of herself with him on social

media on the night of the assault. The court also asked how he could possibly have victimized her when he was physically smaller. They did not recognize that he had used alcohol as a tactic to violate her. Ultimately, he was acquitted while her life was a shambles. She felt completely revictimized by her experience.

We also heard sentiments about the criminal justice system being ill-equipped to deal with certain types of violence. This is especially so for intimate partner violence, where as one participant explained, “the criminal code does not recognize the dynamics.” Currently, intimate partner violence is considered physical assault only. However, as one participant pointed out: “Assault is what happens when you get into a brawl at a bar. Intimate partner violence is about psychological or financial abuse. These need to be recognized as forms of violence.” There was general agreement among participants that the criminal justice system has not evolved to adapt to the lived experience of intimate partner violence, which often includes coercive control.

Similar to the March 11 session, language came up as a concern. One participant said, “Being able to speak in your own language, and present a victim impact statement in one’s own language, is powerful.”

It was also clear among participants that there is a general lack of awareness about the CVBR. Many victims do not know or understand their rights, and yet the onus is on the victim to defend their rights in court.

Victim Services

“Are there any resources that are actually working?”

“Frontline services should be put back on the frontlines.”

Participants discussed the general lack of accessibility to victim services in the region, and the importance of having access to medium- and long-term supports. This point was emphasized given that the effects of victimization often materialize as far as 6-12 months after the initial trauma has occurred.

Participants agreed that even if referrals to services for victims were to increase, the long waitlists are a barrier to receiving support: some waitlists are two years long and no one follows up or checks in with those who are waiting. One participant mentioned that an accessible 24/7 hotline for victims could be beneficial in northern contexts, given that travelling makes face-to-face services difficult.

Accessing victim services in general is difficult for many in the North. The Native Women’s Association of the Northwest Territories is in Yellowknife, a great distance from many remote communities. Participants even criticized its location within Yellowknife as being hidden and difficult to find (it is located on a second floor above the post office).

Other common services were viewed as “Band-Aids” to systemic problems. Shelters are one example; one participant described them as “reactive.” We heard that what victims need more than reactionary measures are strategies that can prevent victimization from happening in the first place and that are better at promoting healing when they

do happen. It was clear that the participants did not think the criminal justice system is a constructive instrument for dealing with the nuances of crime, nor for addressing restorative practices.

Safety & Community Concerns

Participants voiced concerns about offenders who are released back into communities where their victims live and try to go about their lives. This was particularly concerning in the context of safe houses, which do not truly exist in the North, yet are needed due to the lack of available beds in women’s domestic violence shelters. “Communities are too small, and everyone knows everyone,” one participant said. Another participant shared that a victim she knew of was alone with her kids in a “safe house”—with no one monitoring who went in or out. Virtually anyone could access the building.

One participant added that education could be important and life-saving for many who are unassuming victims of coercive control. That is, many may not recognize what is happening to them at home, or in their relationships, as abuse. We heard that many instances of violence are between people who know each other. The abuser as the main provider for the family is another nuance: sending the abuser to jail means sending the provider away. This knowledge creates a dilemma for victims: suffer in silence, or report the abuser and affect everyone who depends on them.

LESSONS LEARNED

Engagement Process

Going forward, we believe it would be helpful for the OFOVC to cast a wider net during the pre-engagement stage to promote the community forums. We reached out to NGOs during the planning stage to see if they might post about the forums on their social media pages, but we only received one reply. This is likely because we did not engage sufficiently with NGOs during the pre-engagement stage. If they were unfamiliar with the OFOVC and the purpose of the forums, they may have been reluctant to promote them. Government officials did not publicize the forums.

Format

The OFOVC reflected on the format of the forums after discussing the feedback from the participant at the March 12 session regarding the layout of the room. The room was much larger than necessary, which resulted in a lot of empty space. The participant perceived the space as intimidating and cold, which was the opposite of the environment we had hoped to create. Going forward, we will explore options for smaller rooms. Removing the tables and opening the circle led to more comfortable interaction with participants, and we will consider using this format going forward.

Recognizing that the low turnout for the March 12 session could have been due to its public nature, and to the fact that many victims and survivors may not have been comfortable speaking publicly, we will seek to organize more one-on-one sessions with victims and survivors going forward.



NEXT STEPS

Overall, several important themes emerged from the OFOVC Community Forums. We will use this knowledge to inform our next steps and future forums.

First, Indigenous victims and survivors of the colonial justice system generally do not trust the criminal justice system. Given their experiences of systemic racism, it is not surprising that most victims do not report violence. The formal criminal justice system maintains systemic attitudes that blame victims for the violence perpetrated against them and minimizes that violence. It lacks a victim-centred and trauma-informed approach. The difficulty of protecting victims' privacy and confidentiality in the North can also make them reluctant to report violence.

Second, victims face a number of barriers in accessing support services, including a lack of well-resourced, community-based, culturally appropriate services, isolated geography and ongoing intimidation and pressure to stand down when they do come forward. These factors contribute to their sense of having been abandoned by the criminal justice system. It is clear that system navigators or advocates—particularly Indigenous women with lived experience of violence—could be hired to support victims and survivors as they move through the civil and criminal courts. We know that Crown Witness Coordinators operate in the North, and play a role in supporting victims of crime through court processes. Given that participants did not seem to be aware of this resource, it may present an opportunity for Crown Witness Coordinators to increase outreach and raise awareness about their services. The transition to online services

may be on the horizon and could improve access to victim services for some; however, we recognize that not all residents of the North have the resources to connect with others online.

Third, new federal legislation may be needed to address the pervasive issue of coercive control in intimate partner violence, which police—who require evidence of physical assault in order to charge perpetrators—cannot adequately address.

Fourth, accountability is important and significant for victims, and came up in discussions around the CVBR, which suffers from gaps in accountability that can make it easy for the criminal justice system to overlook its obligations to victims. For meaningful change to occur, legislation that seeks to protect victims' rights must be binding.

It is clear that we must continue our outreach efforts in the North. We must listen to the voices of survivors and incorporate them in our work. We will be returning to Yellowknife when pandemic travel restrictions are lifted to continue building relationships and trust.

We also intend to host forums in other NWT communities, likely beginning with Dhetta, N'Dilo and Behchoko. Over the next year and a half, we will also visit Yukon and Nunavut to raise awareness of the Office and connect with survivors and advocates on the ground in multiple cities and communities.

ENDNOTES

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