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Chair: Terry Sheehan



Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

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• (1635)

[English]

The Chair (Terry Sheehan (Sault Ste. Marie—Algoma, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 14 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs. We recognize that we meet on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Wednesday, September 24, 2025, the committee is continuing its study of indigenous policing and public safety.

Before I welcome our first panel, for those joining us online, if you need to get the chair's attention, please use the "raise hand" function. The clerk and I will then call on you.

By video conference, we have with us today, from Garden River First Nation, Chief Karen Bell.

We may have to suspend and check the audio. The audio has been challenging, to say the least, over the last couple of weeks. We'll make sure it works for the interpreters.

In person, we have Sandra DeLaronde, project lead, Gi-Ganawenima'Anaanig.

Thank you very much for joining us. I know that you tried by video before and it didn't work, so thank you for travelling and appearing here in person.

You have five minutes, Sandra. Please begin.

Sandra DeLaronde (Project Lead, Gi-Ganawenima'Anaanig #231 Implementation Committee (Manitoba)): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, for giving me the opportunity to come and present in person.

Thank you to the committee members as well for creating the space here and for the opportunity to meet with you today.

I am really committed to this issue. In particular, bringing an urban indigenous lens to indigenous policing is critical.

Our name, Gi-Ganawenima'Anaanig, means "we all take care of them". This name was given to us in a ceremony that was conducted by matriarchs.

We are a Manitoba-wide network of first nations, Red River Métis and Inuit families, knowledge keepers, urban indigenous-led organizations, two-spirit-led and first nations, Métis and Inuit rep-

resentative organizations and governments. The City of Winnipeg and the Province of Manitoba also sit at our table.

Our network first came together many years ago to call for the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. In 2024, the federal and provincial governments entrusted Gi-Ganawenima'Anaanig to carry out a province-wide engagement process on the development of a red dress alert system to mobilize police and public response in the critical hours and days after a first nations, Métis or Inuit woman, girl, or gender-diverse relative goes missing. We released our final report yesterday in Winnipeg on a plan to implement the red dress alert in our province.

I would like to share some of the findings of that engagement process, because these findings speak directly to the importance of indigenous policing.

First, we heard countless examples of the wide gulf in trust between non-indigenous police services and the indigenous communities they are meant to serve. In fact, we heard from many community members, who said that even if they feared for the life of a loved one, they would be reluctant to go to the police. We heard examples of family members turning to community organizations, to indigenous leadership and even to fire departments, because they don't trust the police. We also heard accounts of missing persons never even being reported.

The other key theme from our dialogue sessions is closely connected to the issue of mistrust. What we heard many times is that family and community members who do not go to the RCMP and the city police to report a missing loved one are too often not being listened to. They have been treated dismissively or rudely. This adds to the trauma experienced by families and communities, and we feel it undermines the effectiveness of any investigation. In fact, we heard numerous examples of police telling family members that they should go away and only come back once more time has passed.

This is continuing to happen in the province of Manitoba, even after the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. It is happening in the midst of a period of unprecedented public awareness and government acknowledgement of the threats facing indigenous women, girls and gender-diverse persons.

This is why we are recommending the creation of an indigenous-led red dress alert organization to serve as the first point of contact for indigenous families and communities to ensure that their concerns are heard and to help ensure a quick response when a loved one goes missing.

Our findings illustrate the critical importance of the full implementation of the calls for justice 9.1 to 9.11 that emphasize the systemic change needed to ensure the safety and security of indigenous women, girls, gender-diverse people and our families, communities and nations.

In Manitoba, we are fortunate to have a first nations police service.

• (1640)

I have seen for myself the indigenous policing services are better able to serve indigenous communities. They understand the importance of culture and protocol. They are prepared to work with family members in a trauma-informed way. This builds trust and produces better results for community safety and community healing.

Unfortunately, the majority of first nations, Red River Métis and Inuit do not benefit from the indigenous policing model because we live in urban centres under the jurisdiction of city police. That is why there also must be investment in indigenous police services that must go hand in hand with the creation of dedicated units within all police forces, staffed by indigenous officers and resourced to support the needs of indigenous people.

We have already seen that where RCMP and municipal police services employ first nations and Métis officers, the cultural competency that they bring to their roles makes a significant difference in their ability to serve indigenous communities.

We believe that these two approaches can complement and support each other, the parallel development of indigenous police services and dedicated units within non-indigenous police services, with collaboration across these two systems. It will increase the number of culturally competent police officers serving in our communities. It will also build the relationships, trust and understanding that we need to ensure the safety and security of all first nations, Red River Métis and Inuit people in Manitoba, with particular emphasis on the safety of our women, girls and gender-diverse people.

Thank you for listening. I would be prepared to answer any questions.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Our first round will be six minutes.

For the Conservatives we have MP—

Bob Zimmer (Prince George—Peace River—Northern Rockies, CPC): Are we not going to hear from Chief Karen Bell?

The Chair: No. I'm sorry. She's having technical difficulties once again.

If she does come online, we will suspend briefly, do a test and go from there.

• (1645)

Bob Zimmer: Are we going to test her now or are we just going to go into it?

Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes, CPC): Yes, that would be nice for her.

The Chair: She's not even online now. If she appears online, I will suspend—

Jaime Battiste (Cape Breton—Canso—Antigonish, Lib.): Yes, please stop the meeting.

The Chair: —do a test and then you'll have the opportunity to ask questions.

Bob Zimmer: Is that fair? Jaime says he can start?

An hon. member: Ginette wants to start.

The Chair: Do you mind if she starts?

Okay.

Madam Lavack, please, you have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ginette Lavack (St. Boniface—St. Vital, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good evening, everyone.

Ms. DeLaronde, thank you very much for being with us today.

[*English*]

It's a pleasure to see you again following yesterday's announcement on the red dress alert pilot project that was announced by Gi-Ganawenima'Anaanig. It was a really touching and moving event. To see the families and survivors present was really something special. I'm happy I got to take part in all of that.

You've shared with us today some of the plan. As you said, this report does not have recommendations. It is really an action plan to put into practice, to put into place, the red dress alert.

Could you elaborate a little bit specifically on the project? What steps do you want to take? What impacts do you expect it will have on MMIWG2S?

Sandra DeLaronde: First of all, the consultation process went to communities first, to families who were directly impacted and to survivors of violence and human trafficking. They outlined the issues and presented different ways that we can address the situation quickly. Each of those consultations said that we needed this now or we needed it yesterday.

We were really conscious of the ability to create safety quickly for them and for all of us, actually. We took their responses to our essential partners, which were police services, health care, fire departments, the tourism industry, the hotel industry, education services and child and family services. We asked them as essential partners how they can help create safety.

From those two reports, the team was able to build a framework for a pilot project, which really is a system. We acknowledge that technology is foundational to this work, but not everybody has access to it, so we have to do a bit more work on that. Technology also provides people who are victims an opportunity to say that they're in trouble and to ask for help.

The other concern was that, if people just don't want to be found, if they're in situations of intimate partner violence, they could say that they're not missing, that they're hiding and they could ask for help.

Often, when you put out a missing persons report, it's too late. If people have an opportunity to take those steps to protect their safety, and then have the community and the institutions support that, I think that is the measure of success.

Ginette Lavack: In this first phase, the federal government committed \$1.3 million to support the pilot project.

How do you think governments can best support its implementation and ensure its long-term sustainability?

Sandra DeLaronde: We're absolutely grateful to the federal government for providing the financial support to do this part of the work, but we can't always rely on the goodwill of government going forward.

I think of what the late senator Murray Sinclair said. He said that it took us seven generations to get here and it will take us seven generations to create that change.

We have to have a long-term commitment to the safety of indigenous women, girls and gender-diverse people. That will require legislation, provincially and federally, I believe. Due to the urgent nature of this—Parliament declared this a national emergency two years ago—we need to be able to act with precision on implementing an alert system.

• (1650)

Ginette Lavack: In your opinion, what does culturally safe policing look like in practice for indigenous women, girls and gender-diverse people?

Sandra DeLaronde: A culturally safe practice looks like an individual being approached in a manner that's safe, with the appropriate language. It means moving beyond that initial interaction and providing that long-term support, including for the families and communities.

We had a situation in Winnipeg this summer where a young woman had remained unidentified for a year. We partnered with the police service and led the outreach to community publicly. Within 24 hours, the young woman was identified, and her family returned to Winnipeg. That was done, but without that community intervention, she would still be unidentified.

Ginette Lavack: Thank you very much.

The Chair: I do believe we have Chief Bell online. We would like to run a test, please, for the interpreters.

I'll suspend just for a moment, please.

• (1650)

(Pause)

• (1650)

The Chair: Chief Bell, it's good to see you. You have perfect timing. We just finished with our first presenter. Now, we would like you to speak for five minutes, please.

Chief Karen Bell (Garden River First Nation): Good evening, everyone. My name is Chief Karen Bell of the Garden River First Nation in Ontario.

I was a police officer for 35 years in my home community of Garden River First Nation, employed with the Anishinabek Police Service. I have since resigned, in March this year, and I am now the chief of the nation. I'm open, actually, to a lot of conversation.

I started my employment with the Anishinabek...well, actually, with my first nation in March 1990. By the time that I started there, I had spent three years with the Toronto Police Service. I went back to my home territory and was taken aback by the underfunding, the way in which policing was being conducted in that community. I was the first female officer to work in the community. I was a lone officer working by myself in a very remote community with no backup other than an OPP member who may have been 40 to 100 miles away from me.

A lot of my interactions with the community were very sporadic and fractured because I did not have the support that mainstream police officers had. I had come from a mainstream policing service, and I was not set up to work as a lone police officer within a nation. Yes, I carried a gun and I had a baton, but that did not adequately support my having to do calls for service in a first nation that had very traumatic incidents, which I attended. My personal safety was often at risk. I came from a service where anywhere from 10 to 15 officers would respond within a two-minute window. A lot of times I had to sit on the side of the highway and wait for half an hour or more for backup to arrive. I was leaving many members and victims vulnerable because I was not responding in a timely fashion.

There is a provincial highway that goes through the community of Garden River First Nation. Actually, currently there are two provincial highways that go through there, but at the time there was one. It was the only highway, the Queen's highway. It intersects the eastern side of the country to the western side. Anybody and everybody who travels from one side of the country to the other had to pass through my first nation. I was making traffic stops on a highway by myself in the dark, and the only support that I had was the dispatcher. Often, because I didn't feel safe, I would not make those stops or respond to calls until I had backup. Like I said, as a result, I was putting many people at risk of vulnerability and further harm because I couldn't get to them at a time that was normally sufficient when you have a number of officers to support you and provide you with that backup.

I didn't have officers to bounce things off of—not just for backup purposes but on how to approach and deal with situations—especially in situations of crisis, so decisions were made on the fly, right at the time that you're there. Even though I'm from that community and I know the people there, there are still times when you don't know the people, or you don't know them when they're in a crisis and they're capable of doing anything and everything. I have been chest bumped, pushed from behind, had objects thrown at me in the dark and I have been unable to identify who did it. I've entered homes or spaces when I was the only officer working who had the ability to go there, and the dispatcher was telling me my backup was an hour away.

• (1655)

I couldn't sit there and wait and listen to predominantly a female being assaulted. As a police officer, it was my role and responsibility to serve and protect the public and their property. It was not to do nothing about it. There were times when I put myself in a situation I probably shouldn't have. Nonetheless, that was the career I had, and that was how I had to deal with situations that were presented to me.

I realized that, at the end of the day, I had to go home. As an officer, there are times when you get those feelings, that things are not comfortable, or things are not safe for you, so you don't go there.

I would like to let this committee know about the disparity in the backup system we had at the time, and still do, and about the lack of funding for additional vehicles or additional apparatus to augment your safety as an officer or to provide that additional complement that will put two people in a cruiser rather than one. To have to spend a 12-hour shift by yourself is not healthy for your own well-being.

I can tell you that back in the early 1990s, there were only two of us working. One of us would work all the day shifts, 12 hours a day, and the other officer would work every single night shift in the month. Then we would flip over and do the same the next month. I would do 30 12-hour day shifts in a row, and the other officer would do 30 12-hour night shifts in a row. Then we would switch. We never had any time off. There was nobody else to serve and protect the community. It was not the responsibility of the OPP to police that community. I had no choice but to work those kinds of hours and those kinds of days as an officer early on in my career in the 1990s. On top of that, oftentimes when you worked a night

shift, you had to go to court the next morning. You were in court all day. Then you would come home and get maybe two or three hours of sleep before you got up to go back to work again.

It does drain a lot of people. It does wear and tear on the human body. Every working day you're in a uniform. Every working hour it seems like you're in a uniform and you've dedicated your entire life and your entire career to working in that community. If I did not have a vested interest in my home community and the public safety, I would probably not have lasted 35 years, for sure. I would probably have gone back to another police service where I knew, coming from the Toronto Police Service, that I didn't have to work the hours I was working and where I knew that I would have support from many other officers as well from as the technological items I could use.

We had no other officer. I was the only officer. I was the chief cook and bottle washer. I was the officer who did all the calls for service and everything.

• (1700)

The Chair: Chief Bell, I'm sorry for interrupting.

Thank you very much for your opening statement.

We'll get some questions from the members going and there will be some more time for you to answer them.

Chief Karen Bell: Good enough.

The Chair: We will resume the order with MP Schmale, followed by MP Lemire.

Jamie Schmale: Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you to both witnesses for your testimony today.

Chief Bell, I'll start with you. Thank you for your service to all the police services you served. Just based on your short testimony here, I can imagine you have a large number of stories left untold.

Having said that, based on your testimony alone, it sounds like you were just racing from call to call. It sounds as though, because of the constraints put on the service and because of the program funding, etc., the time you spent with somebody, whether in crisis or otherwise, was almost like a band-aid situation. You really didn't have the time to complete many investigations. I'm sure you did, but it seems like there were some where you probably wished you'd had more time with an individual to help them through their crisis.

Chief Karen Bell: Yes, you're correct in your understanding of that.

I worked for a very large police service, the Toronto Police Service, and then I went to my home community. The calls for service are not as voluminous as those I come from, but nonetheless, there are calls, and the people who live in those communities expect the cops to arrive when they call for service.

If the police are not showing up, the people in those communities are certainly letting their chiefs and councils know that. First of all, it's where are our police? If we're getting support and policing through funding and through the support of the Ontario Provincial Police, then why are our members not here?

You're absolutely right. I did not have time to think long and hard about what I was doing. You're going from crisis to crisis. I learned very early on that this is the way policing is expected in these small communities, and I just lived with it. I had no choice.

• (1705)

Jamie Schmale: I can imagine. Even hearing your testimony, where you were saying that you were on the side of the road waiting for backup to show up because the situation seemed potentially dangerous, it's something that I don't blame you for not jumping in until there's backup. That was handled properly.

This program was created in the 1990s and there have been a couple of reviews of the program along the way, but nothing substantial to the point where there were really major changes to the program. Of course, the prime minister at the time, Trudeau, promised that indigenous policing was going to be an essential service. I think it was 2019 or 2020 when that happened. We haven't seen any progress on that front, to the point where nothing was introduced in the budget just a few weeks ago to show an intention to enhance this program.

Chief Karen Bell: Yes, you're correct there.

Again, this program started before I became a police officer in 1990. There were two other officers there when I arrived. I realized why the program started and what it was designed for.

First of all, it was the RCMP that policed first nations across the country. Eventually, the OPP took over the policing of the first nations under that program. They quickly realized that they were having difficulty attending calls and doing calls for service because of the historical wrongdoings or the misconceptions that indigenous people had of police.

They then instituted the Indian policing program and hired indigenous police officers, predominantly from their home communities, to police their people. It got to a space where we weren't sufficient for the number of calls we were getting. If you're sitting in court all day long, you would expect to go home, have a rest for six to eight hours and then go back to work. That did not happen for us.

Jamie Schmale: Thank you, Chief Bell.

How much time do I have, Chair?

The Chair: You have a minute and a bit.

Jamie Schmale: Okay.

Ms. DeLaronde, you mentioned in your words here about making sure.... By the way, on this side of the House, we support the red dress alert system. I think all parties do. I'm pretty sure that received unanimous support. Thank you for everything you've done on that and for the work of you and your colleagues.

You talked about ensuring that women and girls are safe. First of all, are you noticing an increase in violent crime across the country in many communities? Also, it seems we're not talking about an 18-year-old who made a mistake and got arrested. We're talking about those who offend and get arrested, get out on bail and reoffend. It's this revolving-door justice system that we've been encountering lately. Is that posing a problem in the conversations you're having on the ground?

Chief Karen Bell: Yes. I've given you my first nation policing perspective as a police officer. I'm also now the chief of a nation, so I'm giving you two perspectives.

I can tell you that the women are victims on all fronts. There is a definite increase in violent crime. There's a definite increase in human trafficking. There's a definite increase in drugs in the communities, and in all the communities, not just mine.

That means that even though all of these things have come in, when people, mostly men, offend and get released, they don't go anywhere else other than back to their homes. Now we're back to square one, and there's recidivism. It just keeps repeating.

• (1710)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Mr. Lemire, you have the floor for six minutes.

Sébastien Lemire (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd also like to thank the two witnesses for being with us. Their extensive experience and dedication to the most vulnerable people, especially women, is truly remarkable.

Chief Bell, I also want to congratulate you on becoming the first female police chief and chief of Garden River first nation.

Given your extensive experience in Anishinabek policing and your current role as chief, can you tell the committee about key changes you've seen over the years around public safety in your community?

In your opinion, what priorities must the future federal first nations policing act address to ensure the safety and well-being of your people?

[English]

Chief Karen Bell: For the first comment, I feel that for first nations it should be designated as an essential service. Without that designation, we're not going to get additional financial support for all of the other outlying services that other police services have. Other than that we'll stay in the same boat as the last 35 years. There will be one, two or three officers trying to do everything.

[Translation]

Sébastien Lemire: The committee has been hearing more and more reports that organized crime groups are targeting first nations territories because they know that many on-reserve police services have serious staffing, funding and equipment shortages.

In the case of Garden River and the territory served by the Anishinabek Police Services, have you noticed any criminal groups trying to exploit these vulnerabilities?

What are some specific ways these external pressures affect your police service's ability to effectively protect your community and its members?

[English]

Chief Karen Bell: I can say that we are not untouchable. We are another nation that sits here like a sitting duck, waiting for these persons of criminality to come. They are an enterprise that sees money. The easy way to get into this money is by targeting vulnerable persons in Ontario. The vulnerable persons are these communities that are left without proper policing and other effective services that other police services have, like a drug unit, a dog handler, detectives and analysis on crime. We just don't have those kinds of things.

You're looking at a very vulnerable population of men and women who are sitting there and allowing these things.... They're not allowing it, but it comes in and it is affecting everybody.

As the chief of the nation, I can say that when the Robinson Huron Treaty settlement agreement of \$10 billion came into the 21 nations within the treaty area, we definitely identified, as chiefs, that there was a high influx of undesirable people to our communities. As a result, now we're left with how we're going to try to get rid of this kind of behaviour. We're stuck trying to create bylaws that don't have any teeth to them.

[Translation]

Sébastien Lemire: Your police service serves 16 communities. My region has a similar undertaking that aims to serve a number of indigenous communities.

What are the benefits of amalgamating like that?

Can you also expand on your previous answer by telling us about coordination challenges related to the territory you have to cover and the distinct characteristics of the communities therein?

Does collaborating result in more services and resources?

What can you tell us about that?

[English]

Chief Karen Bell: Yes, I did come from the Anishinabek Police Service, where there are 17 detachments. When there was a special event or a crisis happening in one of the communities, as a supervisor, I would reach out to the other supervisors in the community and say that I needed supports. That means those officers would leave their home communities and come to help another community. However, in the meantime, we've left another community vulnerable because the officers have gone. They've now travelled, say, from southern Ontario to northern Ontario to assist another first nation in its policing situation.

This is not helping. We talk about band-aids and this is what we are doing. We're just rotating people and officers around to different first nations to provide additional support, but we've now left those communities. Their chiefs and councils get very frustrated because we've just asked to borrow three of their officers for a week, two

weeks, a month, or who knows how long. We don't have those additional supports like other services do.

• (1715)

[Translation]

Sébastien Lemire: Your community is in a region where a number of police services work alongside each other.

How does your service coordinate responses with municipal and provincial police chiefs, including investigations, emergency responses and cross-border cases?

[English]

Chief Karen Bell: I can tell you that when I started my policing career in 1990, there was an invisible line between police services. I was stuck in the bush on a first nation working as a police officer and I had no access to municipal police. I didn't even know who they were. Once in a while, I would hear from an OPP member if he decided to drive through on the highway to get to his other area of responsibility. There was little to no cohesiveness, and it took me almost my entire career to create that bond and relationship with other services.

Now it is definitely much better than when I first started. We can rely on members of either the Sault Ste. Marie city police or the Ontario Provincial Police to provide all those supports. Also, we have a memorandum of understanding with the Ontario Provincial Police that if we cannot provide support such as a drug unit, dog handlers or major crime investigators, they will provide that support for us.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

Now we'll have the second round of questions for the two presenters.

First off, we have MP Stevenson for the Conservatives.

Oh, you're going to go first, Mr. Zimmer. Okay. You have five minutes, please.

Bob Zimmer: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses as well.

My question is for Karen.

First of all, thank you for your service, as my colleague mentioned previously. You continue your service after serving many years in the police force by being a community leader and chief. It just continues, and I appreciate your care for your community.

You said that you served in the Toronto police force for three years, but how many years did you serve in the community?

Chief Karen Bell: I actually started as a correctional officer in Ottawa. From there, I went to the Toronto police for three years. From there, I went to my home community, where I spent 35 years policing.

Bob Zimmer: That's amazing.

I'll reiterate what you said. You said that at times your personal safety was at risk. You had to wait for half an hour, at times, for backup on the side of the road, which impeded your helping people whom you wanted to help. You also said that there was a lack of funding.

In the Parliamentary Budget Officer's report on first nations and Inuit police funding, on page 1, it says, "Most stakeholders believe self-administered First Nations and Inuit police services are underfunded". Would you agree with that?

Chief Karen Bell: Yes.

Bob Zimmer: Here's my second question, and maybe I'll ask you this first because I almost assume that you do.

Do you hunt?

Chief Karen Bell: Yes.

Bob Zimmer: You do.

I'm assuming that you own hunting rifles.

Chief Karen Bell: Yes.

Bob Zimmer: You might know already, then, about the government's gun confiscation plan. It's at about \$800 million now, and estimates are in the billions of dollars. I've seen an expert estimate as high as \$6 billion.

Would you rather spend that kind of money on hiring more officers and having better resources for a police community or would you rather spend that money attacking law-abiding firearms owners?

Chief Karen Bell: I would definitely take the money.

Bob Zimmer: Where would you focus that money? Would you put it into officers and equipment? If you could plan it and had access to the resources, where would you spend it?

Chief Karen Bell: If I could have a wish list and had that kind of money, the first thing I would do is increase the complement. I worked for far too long in that first nation without support, and I know what it does to a person's mental health. You lose a lot of things because of that.

I would definitely take the money and say, first of all, to increase the complement. Of course, from increasing the complement come the resources and the technical support that come with having additional police officers working in a nation.

• (1720)

Bob Zimmer: It looks like you still lack sufficient officers. You've been at it for 35 years, and you said it was a problem 35 years ago. You just mentioned that example where you're sort of robbing Peter to pay Paul with officers, and you're sharing them around. Meanwhile, those communities aren't adequately policed. We've heard that from many witnesses, too, from chiefs of police of Inuit and first nations police forces across Canada. We've heard that same issue.

On gun confiscation, I'm sure you've seen both sides of this issue, or I guess three sides of it, being a community leader, a police officer and a hunter. If you're asked to use the resources of your police service to confiscate firearms from first nations hunters, what's your plan to do what the government wants you to do?

Chief Karen Bell: I can tell you that as a chief of a nation currently that is not my priority. I don't see that. I've spent 35 years policing that community, knowing lots about lots about lots, knowing people who are in the community and the calls that I've dealt with in 35 years, and I can tell you that guns are not the priority. What's the priority is our vulnerable people, our vulnerable women and children, our people who are being human trafficked and all kinds of assaults that go with that. That's what's important. That's what we have to tackle, not guns.

Bob Zimmer: Right.

I have one last question.

How much time do I have, Chair?

The Chair: I'm sorry, but you're out of time.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next on the list is Parliamentary Secretary Jaime.

Bob Zimmer: Thank you, Karen, for your testimony.

Jaime Battiste: I'm going to start off with you, Sandra.

Thank you for your testimony.

We've heard a lot of discussion around the lack of indigenous police, the lack of first nations police, but we really haven't heard a lot of discussion about how we can encourage and increase indigenous women's participation as a part of the police force.

I wonder if you have any perspectives that you could share on how we can ensure that we have more indigenous women as part of the police services, both in the RCMP or in the areas that are policed by Winnipeg Police.

I don't know what the policing is in your neck of the woods, but if you could talk a little bit about that, that would be great.

Sandra DeLaronde: I have some experience being on the commanding officer's advisory committee for the RCMP in Manitoba for several years. Recruiting is critical. Who is recruiting is critical. I also think there needs to be cultural support within all the police forces, but particularly when it comes to women. We know that there have been some cases before the courts or the tribunals on the treatment of indigenous women and indigenous officers within police forces.

When we talk about cultural competency, we have to address that internalized racism and discrimination within the police forces.

Jaime Battiste: You said something there that I think is key. You said that who is recruiting is critical, and we've heard testimony that many people are applying to the RCMP or indigenous police programs, but they're weeded out somehow from within.

Do you think it's important for indigenous women to be doing the recruiting and doing the questioning? You have a unique experience in Canada that's absolutely clear from the murdered and missing indigenous women's inquiry. Is this something that we really need to focus on as a recommendation?

Sandra DeLaronde: I think that's critical. In my experience and from the stories we've heard over the years, when you have an indigenous woman in leadership, whether that's police leadership or community leadership, things change for the benefit of the community or those who we serve.

Yesterday, one of our Inuit relatives, Nikki Komaksiutiksak, talked about how historically women had to listen to what was happening on the land and apply that in order to preserve and enhance their family life. I think that having women in policing brings that inherent knowledge to listen and to apply that in terms of providing safety measures for community. When people who come before the law see indigenous women in these positions, there's an automatic feeling of safety and an automatic feeling that they're going to be okay.

● (1725)

Jaime Battiste: Chief Bell, I have the same question for you. Do we need more indigenous women doing the recruiting and the interviewing? How do we promote indigenous women in the police force?

Chief Karen Bell: It's a very difficult position to have in a first nation or in an area where a large number of indigenous people reside. Women are not typically looked at as enforcers, the ones who lay down the law or the arresting persons. I can tell you that in the years I've been a police officer, I've never had another female officer hired in my community. It's slowly changing, yes, but we're still very outnumbered.

The only way I see that changing is by, like you say, having that female recruiter and having that voice that's going to be in front of individuals and attending those public schools, high schools and post-secondary schools and encouraging women and telling them this is a good career to have. You're still doing a lot for your community, and yes, you have to sacrifice things because you have to work shift work, but nonetheless, I still think there is a greater role as we pass along in our years here. Women are now at a point where they should be sitting in spaces, places and roles that were not typically identified as locations that females would work in.

Jaime Battiste: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

MP Lemire, you have two and a half minutes, *s'il vous plaît*.

[Translation]

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. DeLaronde, you lead a network called "We all take care of them", if I may use the translation here. Manitoba took the lead in developing the red dress alert system, which is spreading across the country.

From your experience in developing this initiative, what key elements make an alert system effective for missing and murdered indigenous women, girls and two-spirit people?

In your opinion, what conditions must be in place for such a system to work everywhere in Canada, whether in Quebec or in northern or remote rural regions?

[English]

Sandra DeLaronde: I'm not sure if I got the interpretation right, but we don't have an alert system yet. We've issued our report to put in place a red dress alert system, and based on our community interventions, we need an alert system now.

[Translation]

Sébastien Lemire: What gaps do you think the federal government could fill if you had more resources, particularly financial and technical resources?

[English]

Sandra DeLaronde: The federal government can play a role by enacting legislation to implement a nationwide red dress alert system. We do have a national crisis of missing and murdered indigenous women, girls and gender-diverse people. That would be the first thing, the legislation, along with the development of partnerships to ensure there is collaboration to create a safer environment for all of our relatives.

● (1730)

[Translation]

Sébastien Lemire: The lack of data on missing indigenous women and girls remains a major barrier. The first few hours are especially critical, but we also need to find these women.

In your opinion, how can police forces be more open in terms of sharing more data and acting more quickly?

[English]

Sandra DeLaronde: In Manitoba, our organization, Gi-Ganawenima'Anaanig, has developed a database called reddressstoriesmb.ca where we have been able to rely on different databases, media reports and family notifications about our missing and murdered loved ones.

From 2010 to 2020, in 10 years, we had 105 women, girls and gender-diverse people go missing in Manitoba, but from 2020 to August of this year, 105 people have been murdered in our little province.

[Translation]

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

MP Stevenson, go ahead please.

William Stevenson (Yellowhead, CPC): Thank you.

Chief Bell, again, thank you for your service.

You've given some testimony that has already answered some of my questions.

Can you tell me the population of your community?

Chief Karen Bell: My community has a population close to 4,000, but actually only about 1,200 are living on the nation.

William Stevenson: What kind of territory is it? How big of an area would you say it is?

Chief Karen Bell: We're on the U.S. border, between the Great Lakes. We have an area just east of the city of Sault Ste. Marie. If you were looking at its size, the area would be 10-by-10-by-10.

William Stevenson: You said that you've had improvements. I'm wondering how many officers you actually have now in your community.

Chief Karen Bell: When I started in 1990, we had three. In 1995, we ended up with two more. From 1995 to 2025, we still have the same number, five.

William Stevenson: I would imagine your population has increased over that time.

Chief Karen Bell: Yes.

William Stevenson: If you had a magic wand.... I'm assuming you've actually had conversations with people in neighbouring areas. Do you have an idea of an ideal number of officers per area?

In my riding of Yellowhead, all of the areas are policed by the RCMP. There are often 400 to 800 square kilometres per officer where they have to work, which is way too much for an individual officer. I'm wondering if you have worked out a formula for the optimum number of police officers you should really have.

Chief Karen Bell: I would say it would have to be double, right off the top. If you have officers working night shifts, then who's going to work days? If you have officers on training or on sick leave, who's going to work their shifts? We must have that number to support and augment 365 days of policing.

William Stevenson: Thank you.

I don't have too much time, but I'll go to Ms. DeLaronde.

I'm from Alberta, and my riding doesn't have the issues that some others have in remote areas, even though it's a huge riding. I have heard of some ridings in Saskatchewan, and possibly in Manitoba, where rural areas are getting fly-in officers.

Do you know if they have looked at that to get some coverage and to get some of their policing dealt with in that way?

• (1735)

Sandra DeLaronde: In Manitoba, the RCMP still has fly-in communities. Many of our communities are fly-in.

William Stevenson: I meant the actual coverage for the officers, where they have officers who might live in Winnipeg, for example, but then they fly to areas where they might be policing for a week or two.

Sandra DeLaronde: Yes, that's one of the strategies in place in Manitoba.

William Stevenson: Do you know the percentage? Do you know what kind of coverage? Is that a minority, or is it becoming more of an issue that they're dealing with?

A lot of those guys are not necessarily connected to the communities. You discussed having that community-based person who understands everything there.

Sandra DeLaronde: Limited posting was an issue raised in the national inquiry. Having non-community members or not having indigenous officers policing those communities continues to create barriers. If you were to have indigenous officers or indigenous persons policing those communities, there would be, I think, less animosity.

William Stevenson: They're a bit more connected to the community so there are better effects.

Sandra DeLaronde: Yes.

William Stevenson: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Before we conclude, I'm going to exercise the chair's prerogative to ask a question in the last Liberal spot.

My question is around human trafficking. I'm going to pose the question to Chief Bell, because obviously I'm very familiar with the area.

Where Garden River is situated it's at one of the narrowest spots on the river. You already mentioned that you are a border nation to the United States. There is some money in the budget, and they're talking about doing more enforcement along the border. How important is that as it relates to Garden River nation and its safety?

I've been down the river. I've been with the APS. I've been with the CBSA. They always talk about that spot in Garden River that is very narrow. They point to the bridge that connects to Sault Ste. Marie, and they'll say that only the dumb criminals take that one.

There's a lot of pressure on your community not only being on the highway, but also being so close to the United States.

Please provide some comments on that, Chief Bell.

Chief Karen Bell: I'll put it into some context. I was a member of the Anishinabek Police Service. From 2001 to 2004, I had the fortunate ability to join what was called the international integrated border enforcement team. It was an initiative, I believe, by the RCMP. That consisted of several police services from both the U.S. and Canada. We did a lot of border protection, because Canada is so vulnerable. They realized very quickly that lots of the first nations in Canada are bordering the U.S., and those are the vulnerable locations.

I had four years of experience working with the RCMP on this integrated border enforcement team. Most if not all of the interdictions we had were with vulnerable persons and people who were attempting to enter into the U.S. or vice versa. All that took place at that little location that you alluded to, where if you throw a baseball and you're pitching it into the U.S.

There were people using every means of effort to get over there illegally, whether it be by boat or pontoon, a flotation device or swimming. That is the prime location where all of the trafficking of persons back and forth took place. You leave that alone, put it aside and think about who's going to police that when this integrated border enforcement team disintegrates, which it did in 2004.

That spot is still there, and it is still vulnerable and not being adequately policed.

The Chair: You would recommend something similar to what was done in the past, with some improvements, then. This is just for the analysts to take note.

Chief Karen Bell: Yes, absolutely.

At the time that I was on that integrated border enforcement team, we had weekly conversations with a lot of the law enforcement on the Canadian side and the U.S. side. We did joint projects together. I spent a lot of time in the U.S. That faces Canada. It was predominantly my nation. I knew the people in my nation, and they knew that was a vulnerable location where people were being trafficked back and forth.

The public gets to know that, too. We were interdicting people from all over Canada who knew that was a vulnerable location.

To increase that relationship and keep it going is very important, especially in this time of what's going on in the country.

• (1740)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Chief Bell. Thank you for your testimony and your answers.

Thank you very much, Sandra DeLaronde, for your work as well.

Chi-meegwetch, everyone.

We are going to suspend and get ready for our next panel.

• (1740)

(Pause)

• (1740)

The Chair: We're back.

On the second panel, from the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, we have Jason Jacques, interim Parliamentary Budget Officer; and Govindadeva Bernier, director, budgetary analysis.

Welcome. You will have five minutes. Please, gentlemen, begin.

[Translation]

Jason Jacques (Interim Parliamentary Budget Officer, Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer): Mr. Chair and members of the committee, thank you for inviting us to appear before you today.

We are pleased to present the findings of the report entitled "Overview of First Nations and Inuit Police Funding and Spending", which we were honoured to prepare at the request of this committee.

As you know, indigenous policing is a complex and sensitive topic. An adequate comparative analysis of the costs of providing policing needs to consider multiple factors. Given the significant amount of time it took to determine the availability of data and obtain it from Public Safety Canada, we were unable to provide a comparative analysis of indigenous and non-indigenous police services.

Instead, this report examines funding and expenditures trends for the first nations and Inuit policing program, and the first nations and Inuit policing facilities program, as well as four self-administered first nations and Inuit police services.

• (1745)

[English]

Between 2015 and 2025, planned and actual federal funding for first nations and Inuit policing through the first nations and Inuit policing program and the first nations and Inuit policing facilities program tripled.

Notwithstanding this funding increase and based on our analysis, we bring to the committee two conclusions. The uncertainty with program funding leads to short-term contribution agreements. This disrupts long-term planning for the communities that actually need to deliver policing services. Second, the funding gap for first nations and Inuit policing must be estimated. Should the committee wish, we would be very eager to undertake this analysis.

[Translation]

We would be pleased to respond to any questions you may have regarding this report.

The Chair: Thank you.

[English]

We're going to the first round.

For the Conservatives, we have MP Zimmer, please.

Bob Zimmer: Thank you, Chair.

Thanks again, Jason, for coming before committee. I appreciate your work.

I'll turn to page 1 of your report on the overview of first nations and Inuit police funding and spending. It states:

Most stakeholders believe self-administered First Nations and Inuit police services are underfunded, and there is a need for federal legislation that recognizes First Nations policing as an essential service. While the federal government previously committed to table such legislation, the Minister of Public Safety wants to secure funding prior to its introduction. The cost of funding resulting from such federal legislation is currently not known.

That's from your report. It essentially says that the government's not spending enough on community policing. I know there are issues with even getting some of the money to community. Even for some of the money that's on the table, it's difficult to get it spent.

The puzzling part for me is that the government seems to have the money to confiscate the firearms of law-abiding first nations and Inuit firearms owners. As your office stated before, and I'll quote an article from 2024:

The Parliamentary Budget Officer estimates range between 150,000 to more than 500,000, with an estimated total value between \$47 million and \$756 million. These costs only include the value of the confiscated firearms and exclude the administrative costs to collect them and the costs of destroying the collected firearms.

This is the doozy:

The total cost of this ban to taxpayers will be more than \$4 billion and possibly more than \$6 billion.

That's not from you. This is from this other source that extrapolates the numbers.

Seeing that most stakeholders of the quote I just read believe first nations and Inuit policing is underfunded and under-resourced, do you think it's a good use of taxpayer dollars to spend potentially billions of dollars to go after highly vetted, law-abiding citizens and their hunting rifles, or would it be better if the government spent that money to go after criminals?

• (1750)

Jason Jacques: It's not the mandate of the parliamentary budget office to opine upon government policy.

What I would say is, similar to the Government of Canada's gun buyback program, where we received a request from a committee to put a number, a cost estimate, on something where the government did not have a cost estimate, this seems to be a similar situation where there seems to be a broad qualitative consensus that there is underfunding for these services and there seems to be no official number available to anyone. As a starting point to come up with an estimate of how much additional money may be required... I think it behooves somebody—potentially, it's certainly within our mandate or other people could do it—but simply putting a number around it is a good starting point to support parliamentarians in having a very healthy policy debate.

Bob Zimmer: Yes, that's a great answer.

I'll move on to my second question, Jason.

On page 3 of your report “Budget 2025, Issues for Parliamentarians”, it talks about budgetary balance. On the bottom line on page 3, if you add \$78.3 billion this year, \$65.4 billion next year, \$63.5 billion in 2027-28, \$57.9 billion in 2028-29 and \$56.6 billion more in 2029-30, the total debt added to our national debt will be \$321.7 billion. That's over the next five years. That's more than twice the \$154 billion of the previous prime minister, Justin Trudeau.

This Prime Minister promised he would spend less and invest more, but it looks like he's spending a whole lot more by my estimations and by your document. Does this massive increase in government spending and debt concern you?

Jason Jacques: Mr. Chair, I'll just circle back through you with respect to whether the committee would like me to answer the question. While I'm very happy to answer questions about our analysis, and I definitely have an answer, it does seem slightly outside the purview of the reason why we were asked to come and testify before the committee today.

The Chair: You are correct, so—

Jason Jacques: Yes, feel free to.

The Chair: No, I mean stick to what we're supposed to be doing here. I think I heard some over here [*Inaudible—Editor*].

Jaime Battiste: I have a point of order.

Bob Zimmer: I asked the question. I'd appreciate it. It is your report—

Jaime Battiste: I have a point of order.

The Chair: On the point of order—

Bob Zimmer: Yes, I would appreciate an answer to the question.

Jaime Battiste: I have a point of order.

The Chair: You have to stick to the context, and even the witnesses have identified that they feel this is out of order, so I would appreciate—

Jamie Schmale: It's Bob's time.

The Chair: I can—

Jaime Battiste: I'll give him his time back but on a point of order, we brought him here to talk about indigenous policing.

He did a great CTV interview you can watch, which I think answers the question you're posing. I think it addresses that.

The Chair: We'll give you your time, but please ask another question because even the witness identified that he didn't feel that it was appropriate.

Jamie Schmale: I'm interested.

Bob Zimmer: Yes, even talking about indigenous policing and Inuit policing, considering that the budget has massively grown and there are other requirements and other requests for those funds to be spent on policing, do you think the money spent on things other than policing is overly excessive, the \$321 billion is overly excessive?

Jason Jacques: I think going back to the comments put out with the text and the observations we made on our budget 2025 issues note, it is a very challenging economic and fiscal situation. Certainly when you have a situation like this where there seems to be a qualitative consensus that there is underfunding for these essential services across the country, and a very important essential service, having clarity around what the appropriate funding level is and actually putting a number around it could certainly help parliamentarians navigate what are very challenging trade-offs right now in the fiscal environment.

Bob Zimmer: Thank you.

The Chair: Now we go to PS Hanley for six minutes.

Brendan Hanley (Yukon, Lib.): Thank you very much for being here today and for your rapid analysis. I really appreciate it.

I have a few questions to get a better sense of the work you've done and some of the conclusions you've drawn.

You obviously point out a discrepancy between funding and spending, essentially. Then you point out one of the reasons, which is asynchrony between budgetary fiscal schedules and cycles among the provinces, the territories and federally.

I wonder whether you could elaborate a bit on that and other reasons behind that discrepancy between planned and actual spending. What lies behind that? In particular, it's not to get federal spending off the hook, but to understand more of the impact of the provincial and territorial funding being out of sync or insufficient.

• (1755)

Govindadeva Bernier (Director, Budgetary Analysis, Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer): As you probably know, the first nations and Inuit policing program, the FNIPP—and it's the same for the facilities program as well—is a cost-shared program. The federal government spends 52% and the provincial government spends 48%. One condition for the federal government to actually put the money on the table is that the province or territory is going to also provide the 48% remaining.

One thing we heard from Public Safety officials, and it's also in their departmental results report, is that, for example, when increased funding was announced in budget 2021, it took the provinces a bit by surprise. The federal government has this new money that's available and wants to provide it to the first nations police services but the provinces might have already tabled their own budget or might be in the middle of their planning cycle, so they might need to wait until the next year until they can actually match that funding. That was one of the reasons, as I was explaining, that there were often discrepancies.

A more recent example—we don't mention it in the report—is that budget 2024 also announced additional funding for the FNIPP and the FNIPFP. When the the Public Safety departmental plan was tabled, in June 2025, that additional funding was still not in the three-year plan. It's only in the supplementary estimates (B), which were tabled two weeks ago and are going to be voted on before December 10, that there was actual additional money that was appropriated, or right now is being asked to be appropriated. There seems to be also a lag in terms of planning.

Brendan Hanley: Maybe you answered it in general, but I noticed, more specifically, in figure 1 that the gap is substantially higher, I think, in 2023-24 compared to 2024-25. It's almost like there's a recovery, in a way, of that discrepancy. Is there a particular reason for that year being...?

Govindadeva Bernier: I can't tell you whether there's a particular reason for that. Potentially, provinces and territories caught up at some point and were able to secure their own share of the funding, but I really have no idea, specifically.

Brendan Hanley: If you were to undertake further, deeper analysis, I suppose those kinds of questions could be answered.

Govindadeva Bernier: We could answer that, although that would not necessarily be the same thing as estimating the funding gap that is necessary right now to address the service levels that would probably be needed in those first nation police services.

Brendan Hanley: I understand, and—

Govindadeva Bernier: However, yes, it's definitely the type of analysis we could do, if requested to do so.

Brendan Hanley: Mr. Jacques, do you want to add something?

Jason Jacques: I was only going to add that this is the eighth report our office has done over the past 17 years with respect to funding gaps in essential services, whether it's on the education or health care side, capital operating or first nations water and waste water, and our office has certainly seen charts like this in the past. What jumps out in this chart—Govindadeva is correct that we don't have a definitive answer—but having seen it eight times in the past, what typically is happening is that the capacity of the 634 first nations across the country to absorb a significant jump in funding immediately is relatively limited. It's not that the money cannot or should not be used. It's simply that, when governments come to the table and say, "Congratulations, we're substantially increasing the funding next year," everyone is happy and then the real work has to start, which is the work of actually taking the money and putting it into practice.

• (1800)

Brendan Hanley: I guess that solidifies one of your two conclusions about how the effects of longer-term stable funding would obviously mitigate against that phenomenon of undercapacity with short-term funding.

Jason Jacques: Yes, very much so.

It has been a recurring.... Typically, when we've looked at federal funding for various first nations programs in the past, there end up being two parts or two issues that we focus on or that become evident. The first is the funding issue. The second is the governance issue.

The governance issue really comes back to the side of the federal and provincial governments wanting to do something, wanting to put in additional funding, and not being able to necessarily provide the guidance or the guarantee that first nations would expect in the same way that for the City of Québec they can provide guidance to its police force from one year to the next, in multiple years going out, on how much money is going to be there and what type of support will be available, whereas in the case of Garden River First Nation, you have the provincial government, the federal government and the realities on the ground that you're dealing with.

Potentially, you're dealing with multiple different departments. You're dealing with multiple agreements, and it gets really complex very quickly, especially with differing schedules for election campaigns.

Again, that's a common theme that comes up over and over again.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Lemire, you have the floor for six minutes.

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Jacques, Mr. Bernier, thank you for the work you do and the impact it enables us to have in ours.

In your presentation, you touched on the importance of analyzing the costs involved in making first nations and Inuit police services essential. You expressed an interest in that, so I would conclude that the committee should also take an interest in it and make a recommendation in its report.

In your opinion, what are the guidelines that could be used to provide a better framework and that we could recommend in this study?

Jason Jacques: If your committee mentioned this in its report, it would be a priority for us.

The Government of Canada and Statistics Canada already have the data. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police and some provincial police services have models that enable them to determine the quality of services and the types of investment that would be required.

To be honest, the methodology for this type of analysis is simple. The complex part is having to convince people to share their data and the methodology used. The Excel files are there. It's just a matter of finding them and buying some pizzas and Coca-Cola for Mr. Bernier.

What I mean by that is that all you have to do is give them eight weeks—two months—to do that analysis, and you'll get results.

Sébastien Lemire: I would like to ask you a question that seems rather complex to me.

Your report mentions that federal and provincial funding cycles are often misaligned, which complicates cost-sharing agreements for first nations policing.

Do you think that misalignment causes the chronic underfunding we're seeing in the program, or is it a sign of deeper jurisdictional ambiguity between the levels of government?

What structural reform would reduce that friction?

I'm talking about cost-sharing at 52% for the federal government and 48% for the provincial or territorial government, which often results in a race to the bottom instead of to the top when it comes to investment.

Govindadeva Bernier: I don't think we necessarily have any recommendations to make in that regard.

However, there is one interesting thing to note. Every funding agreement includes a list of criteria that determine what will be considered to establish the level of funding needed. All kinds of statistics are taken into consideration, including geographic location, type of community, whether it's an isolated community or not, population and rates of serious crime. At the end of the day, two final points must be taken into consideration: the availability of federal funds and provincial funds.

I get the impression that there is a desire to provide the money needed to deliver the services required. However, if the federal government doesn't have enough funding, or if the province or territory doesn't have enough funding to align with the federal government, the result is always a dead end and a lack of funding.

We referenced an indigenous police service in Ontario, the Nishnawbe Aski Police Service, which voluntarily agreed to the provincial legislation. The Province of Ontario seems to have some sort of analytical framework for determining what essential services need to be provided once they're covered by the legislation.

As a result, it was determined that the number of police officers had to be doubled. In our conversations with Public Safety Canada, we were told that the province had gone to the federal government to request more funding, a 52% contribution, since there wasn't enough funding in its budget.

That's just one of many police services, but it's the largest in Canada. I don't think all police services would need to double the number of police officers, but it does illustrate, to some extent, the limitations of the current system.

• (1805)

Sébastien Lemire: Let's say Ontario, for example, paid \$98 and the federal government paid just \$52, would Ontario not be allowed to contribute \$98?

How does that work, exactly?

Govindadeva Bernier: The \$98 would certainly not be provided through the first nations and Inuit policing program, because the 52% to 48% ratio is really strict.

However, there are a number of other provincial and federal initiatives. For example, there is a fund to combat serious crime, which provides funding to a number of police services, not just first nations police services.

They also sometimes receive funding through other initiatives. The provinces probably have other funding structures as well, if they want to provide funding directly.

That said, everything that goes through this specific program really has to comply with the 52% to 48% ratio.

Sébastien Lemire: In your report, you say, “When asked for electronic copies of this data in a workbook format, Public Safety Canada officials told us they did not have the information in this format.”

When Public Safety Canada Deputy Minister Shawn Tupper testified in 2024, he said:

We have simply not been able to sustain an IT system that allows us to do the kind of data analytics that we need to do. This is something that I am looking at now and trying to figure out ways so that I can find the cash to make that kind of investment. That's a department-wide challenge that I have.

What are we to make of the fact that, in 2025, Public Safety Canada is unable to be transparent about funding for first nations and Inuit police services in Canada?

Govindadeva Bernier: I don't know if we can make anything of it. It's not in our mandate.

However, I can give you a bit of context.

We did get all the data, but it was basically the same as paper documents. There were columns of numbers on tonnes of pages.

To analyze that data, it had to be entered manually into a computer, into an Excel spreadsheet. That was the problem. I'm not trying to make excuses for the department, but a year may not have been enough time for it to upgrade its data system.

Nonetheless, it is not our role to state an opinion on that.

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you. I'm satisfied with your answer.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Lemire.

[English]

Next is MP Stevenson for five minutes, please.

William Stevenson: Thank you.

I think MP Lemire was looking over my notes and took some of my questions. I had a bunch of them, and they're exactly the same I'll ask a couple of them in different ways.

I don't think you were here when Chief Bell was here, but I asked her specifically if she could say what the optimum number of officers would be per area, per population and that sort of thing.

Going with some of this data you have, the closest town to where I live is at that population where they need their own police station now. All of my area is covered by the RCMP. They know they have the numbers. If you have so much for a town, there's a number they say should be the RCMP number, and each RCMP costs x dollars.

When I'm looking at some of these, they're pretty general in saying they're underfunded. You said you would be willing to take on a study. I'm wondering whether you would have to study the information or whether you think you have the information to be able to quantify these. Being a CPA, I'd like to have the numbers and the cost to figure this out.

When we're looking at this, do you think the numbers are available to figure out what that actual number is instead of just saying it's underfunded and actually say how many officers they need? We can figure out the dollar value if we can figure out the optimum number of officers per area. I think it's going to be different for certain rural areas versus some of the band areas and some of the reserves. They would have a different number from the numbers for the cities.

Would you be able to say you would have those numbers available if you did the study?

• (1810)

Jason Jacques: The data certainly exist.

I was speaking to one of the other members of the committee immediately before the proceedings started, and I mentioned I had the privilege of being on interchange two years ago and working with Kevin Page at the University of Ottawa. I worked on several first nations contracts where we specifically undertook support to identify these types of funding gaps, so I have quite a bit of confidence that the data exist.

Being a CPA as well, I have quite a bit of confidence there are methodologies that exist for the RCMP, the OPP, the Sûreté du Québec and other police forces that offer these services across the country.

It can certainly be done, and we can certainly offer you scenarios. Again, being a CPA myself, it's great that everyone qualitatively says it's underfunded. Why don't we just put a number on the table—

William Stevenson: That's exactly—

Jason Jacques: —and then people can have a qualitative debate? This is a knowable fact at this point.

William Stevenson: For the most part, I think that covers what I was going to ask.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next we have Jaime for five minutes.

Jaime Battiste: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

You talked about the funding formula around policing in indigenous communities and that it has to be 52% federal and 48% provincial. Does that mean if a provincial government refuses to fund that 48%, our federal government is unable to spend that money in that province?

Govindadeva Bernier: That's correct through the FNIPP.

As I mentioned earlier in response to another member, there exist some other funding streams that are not necessarily tailored specifically to first nations and Inuit communities but can still provide funding for specific activities, such as communities where there are drug problems or severe criminality.

Through the FNIPP, indeed, if the province cannot come up with the 48%, then the federal government is either not going to spend the 52% or they're going to spend a lower amount that corresponds to 52% relative to what the province puts on the table.

Jaime Battiste: While that's a challenge—and as a federal MP, I'd love to be able to say that it's the provincial government that's not funding its portion of it; therefore, we can't help the people who need it the most—there are several different scenarios. Jordan's principle is an example of that, where people have said never mind the jurisdiction, let's make sure that the service is provided and then figure out later how the funding can flow and who's responsible.

Is there a situation when the federal government can say that it is going to pay for this, but it is going to come to the provinces after with a bill for the 48% of the funds that are required for this community to have the policing that they require?

• (1815)

Jason Jacques: To your point, it sounds a lot like the Jordan's principle program that's currently offered by the federal government under ISC, that the federal government was directed to undertake as a result of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruling. Yes, there are other examples of that being done.

Jaime Battiste: I think your job is a fascinating one because you're getting to the heart of the numbers on this. What we really need to do is figure out.... Like you said, we've tripled the funding from 2015 to 2025, but no community has come here and said that everything is going swimmingly. In fact, they will say that despite the fact we've tripled the funding, they've had fewer indigenous police officers and fewer indigenous people getting recruited to go into policing.

What are the lessons we've learned from the eight previous PBO reports that help us find solutions to this specific problem around indigenous policing based on things that we've seen as best practices in other studies?

Jason Jacques: I would go back to advice that I received after we did the third study at the behest of a former member of Parliament, Charlie Angus, who laid out the framework for me. He asked me if it was a funding problem, a governance problem or if it was both. I think that in the vast majority of situations, it ends up being both.

Quantitatively, we don't know. Notwithstanding the consensus that there is underfunding at this point, I think we should actually put a number around the extent to which there is underfunding on a global basis. Obviously, in communities across the country, the level of underfunding is going to vary. In the case of Garden River, the situation might be different in comparison to Akwesasne.

From a governance perspective, that's something that is very much under the control of the federal government in terms of how it reaches decisions and how it collaborates with not only first nations but also provincial governments.

That's looking at other situations where the federal government offers substantial amounts of funding and the way in which it's being provided doesn't provide a clear guarantee to the 634 first nations that actually have to deliver on the programs. There's the certainty around the funding over a longer-term period of time, flexibility around management of the funding depending on the capacity of the first nations, which of course varies across the country in terms of the capacity on the ground for those first nations. It's recognizing the unique challenges that first nations are going to face and looking at the classification of the remoteness framework—one through four, with four being those fly-in communities across the country—and taking that into account as well.

The easy part we can solve, which is that we can give you a number. If you give us two or three months and a motion from the committee, we can undertake the work and we can come back with a number.

The hard part is left to the committee, which is sitting down and writing out the spaghetti process map that Garden River needs to go through every year from the federal government to the provincial government to other federal funding sources and provincial funding sources to figure out what the chief of Garden River actually has to navigate on an annual basis and how that can be simplified. Thankfully, that's not something that we have to get up to—

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Jaime Battiste: Mr. Chair, could you give me 30 seconds to ask just one follow-up to that?

The Chair: Is everybody okay with that?

[*Translation*]

Sébastien Lemire: Yes.

[*English*]

Jaime Battiste: Considering that we're doing this at the end of December and we're going to have a long break between now and potentially late January when we come back, would you be able to provide some information like that to help us make the best recommendations possible for this study?

Jason Jacques: Yes. It is contingent upon being able to obtain.... I think it's less an issue of the data and it's more a question of the allocation framework. That's why, if we have a motion from the committee, once we reach out to the chief financial officer of the RCMP, I think they will respond to us very quickly with respect to their allocation framework or their calculation framework.

If you give us three months, you will have a beautiful report in both of Canada's official languages. If you need something sooner, we're happy to brief the committee on some preliminary findings.

Jaime Battiste: Yes. I'd like to move that we do that so that we get the best information to ensure that our recommendations are following what you've been able to uncover on this.

I'm hoping that the clerk can be a little bit patient before we go into our drafting instructions on that.

• (1820)

The Chair: I understand what you're getting at. We will probably need some wording.

We'll go to questions, but if you want to put down some wording that they can—

Jamie Schmale: Does he have an idea of what he wants the motion to look like?

The Chair: Mr. Jacques, can you repeat what you had said about the motion that would be necessary or that PS Jaime wants to move? It would be to give you the time.

Jason Jacques: Simpler is better for everybody.

The Chair: Yes.

Jason Jacques: The simple motion would be that the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer prepare an estimate of the funding gap between first nations communities supported by federal and provincial programming versus non-first nations communities.

The Chair: That's perfect.

Did everyone get that?

Jamie Schmale: I have a quick question.

In that motion, Mr. Jacques, do we need a budget for pizza and pop as well?

Voices: Oh, oh!

Jamie Schmale: Should we include that? I'm just thinking ahead here.

The Chair: Very good. We'll provide pizza and pop for sure.

I will deem that in order and so moved by Jaime.

As I look around the room, I see all thumbs up.

(Motion agreed to [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: We're getting towards the end, but we have a few more people asking questions.

Monsieur Lemire, you have two and a half minutes, *s'il vous plaît*.

[*Translation*]

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Jacques and Mr. Bernier, you mentioned in your report that the Parliamentary Budget Officer was unable to conduct a comprehensive comparative analysis of spending on indigenous versus non-indigenous policing services. You also said that the available data nevertheless show significant variations in per capita funding and expenditures for police services, depending on whether they are on or off reserve.

For example, police operating expenditures in Canada, according to Statistics Canada, were \$335 per capita in 2022-23. The Sûreté du Québec has a budget of about \$289 per capita. For indigenous services, it's \$2,400 per capita.

First of all, how did you come up with that number?

With respect to policing, is that disparity indicative of underfunding, structural inefficiency or incomplete program design?

Govindadeva Bernier: Regarding the first question about how we arrived at that number, we simply took the amount of funding that had been provided through the first nations and Inuit policing program. That amount includes both the federal and provincial portions. That's the total amount a given police service received divided by the number of people who lived in the territory or territories it served, since the services can serve several communities.

Yes, it's a much higher amount, but it's important to note, as others have no doubt done before this committee, that we can't make comparisons based simply on dollars spent per capita, because these are remote communities. Some are fly-in only and have specific needs.

Even if a community is very small, you can't simply assign a portion of a police officer. As a witness in the previous panel mentioned, you need someone there at night, someone there during the day and someone to replace them when they take vacation or sick leave. Even a small community needs a minimum level of resources. That's what makes the per capita cost relatively high.

The second part of your question escapes me.

Sébastien Lemire: It sounds like we're not necessarily talking about underfunding, even though there has been an average annual growth rate of about 12% since 2018-19.

Is that correct?

Govindadeva Bernier: That's right. The point is equitable funding, not equal funding.

If we just look at per capita spending, it might look like there isn't a problem with underfunding.

Sébastien Lemire: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*English*]

Next we have MP Schmale for five minutes, please.

Jamie Schmale: Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses again.

I want to pick up on something you finished off with when talking to Mr. Battiste a few moments ago. You were talking about the application process that some of these chiefs would have to go through to figure this all out. It's the yearly process that goes on and on and on.

How do we get to the point...? I would like one standardized reporting form for all departments—just in a perfect world, right? If I were king, that's what I would like to see. Having said that, is there a point that we can get to that allows the paperwork itself—the forms that need to be filled out—to be more efficient? Whether there is an easy way to get there, I guess, is the first part of the question, but also is there a will to get there on the part of the government side as well, the bureaucracy side?

• (1825)

Jason Jacques: I think that's a question that's better put to the government.

Jamie Schmale: What is your experience in dealing with them? You said that they gave you a whole slew of forms when you asked for them.

Jason Jacques: That specific example aside, I would say that, looking at the projects that we've examined in the past, there is flexibility. There has been, in the past, flexibility on the part of the government, especially the public service, to change or lighten the reporting requirements and to potentially standardize the reporting requirements. Again, you have to recognize that in the 634 first nations, plus other indigenous communities across the country, there are differing levels of need and differing levels of capacity that you're dealing with, so having one single form for everybody potentially doesn't necessarily make sense.

Jamie Schmale: It doesn't make sense. If you're increasing your capacity to deal with the different forms from different departments at different times—

Jason Jacques: I actually think it's the inverse. Not singling out any particular indigenous community or first nation, if there's greater capacity—and I'm channelling my inner CPA and my outer CPA. The audit approach, when you're going through a company that has well-established control frameworks, a company that you know can keep track of the money fairly well and that has a good policy suite, you're doing less as part of the overall audit test. You have a lot more confidence in terms of what you're looking at. This is as opposed to a situation where you start to look at a company, and when you ask it for its policy around petty cash, it doesn't have it. When you ask it where the petty cash is, it doesn't know. At that point, it starts to give you pause, and you think that you actually need to look at this in greater detail.

Again, it's the challenge, and the government has indicated this itself in terms of its engagement with indigenous communities and first nations—that you can't.... For the first nations that have much greater capacity, it's potentially more efficient and more reasonable for everybody to actually treat them with a lighter touch, in a more professional way, recognizing that they know what they're doing.

Jamie Schmale: Yes, absolutely. It's just that the smaller communities are the ones that are building capacity and are going to have a problem with that.

I want to go back to a few reports ago. I can't remember how long ago it was; I'm sorry. When you're looking at the ISC department.... I know, obviously, that this is public safety that we're dealing with, but I think, with the reporting standards, it does have some merit.

There is the fact that ISC is a bureaucracy which, in its own mandate, has said that it wants to put itself out of a job, but it has doubled in size since its creation. Previous reports of your office have said that funding has increased substantially in that department, yet the outcomes are not equal to, or even close to, the funding levels.

When we look at this program again, the problems that we continue to see, are we able to get to a place here in the indigenous policing program without a major overhaul of the program?

Jason Jacques: I think that's a question that's better put to the Auditor General or to the two deputy ministers of CIRNAC and ISC.

Jamie Schmale: That's true. It was the Auditor General, but your—

Jason Jacques: From our side, going back and looking at the other funding gap reports that we prepared in the past, there are certainly opportunities on the governance side to improve things.

I recall that we prepared a 2013 report for the federal government with respect to capital funding for first nations schools in British Columbia. We administered a survey with first nations communities in British Columbia to collect the data. We thought it was primarily a data and an accounting story. It was very interesting because what came out immediately as part of the results was that we found that the schools that were being built were very, very large in first nations communities. There was a lot of additional capacity. When we started to poke and prod and ask questions around it, the response was that, well, you receive a phone call from Ottawa once every 30 to 40 years, and they say, "Congratulations. You're at the top of the list. We're going to build you a new school." You know that you're not going to receive that phone call again for a very long time, so you build the school that you think you might need over the next 20 to 30 years. Certainly, on the governance side.... That was in 2013. I'm optimistic that things have improved since then. At the same time—certainly on this—potentially there will end up being governance improvements.

• (1830)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We look forward to receiving more information.

That concludes today's meeting.

The meeting is adjourned.

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