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Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Research: Key Learnings Around Integrating Calls for Justice into Delegated Aboriginal Agency Programs and Service

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Abstract:

This report was derived from a national inquiry in regards to systemic forms of violence that Inuit, Métis, and First Nations women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA1 people experience in Canada that recommended 231 calls for justice, including specific actions governments, institutions, service providers and industries needed to take to better ensure the safety of Indigenous Women, Girls and 2SLGBTQIA peoples in all programs and services. The goal of our research was to find out what was happening in the front lines of child welfare in response to these calls for justice, particularly in relation to Delegated Aboriginal Agencies. Our research question was: "How are Delegated Aboriginal Agencies (DAAs) providing culturally safe services; alternatives to removal promoting intact community and cultural connections; supports for youth transitioning to adulthood; and ensuring the safety of Indigenous women, children and LGBTQ2S+ in all programs and services provided?" To answer these questions, we recognize and acknowledge the need for a Post-Colonial Theoretical Orientation, along with a Trauma Informed Practice and an Indigenous framework, during our research. The reason that a Post-Colonial Theoretical approach was recognized as a required key component was that we wanted to ensure we were not re-enacting colonial processes that would harm our research participants and we also wanted to ensure that we were not overpowering Indigenous voices with our own. A focus group consisting of executive directors and program managers from six DAAs in BC. Although we were only able to gather participants from six out of 24 DAAs, data saturation was reached. The focus group were conducted online while we utilized an Indigenous Framework and Indigenous research methods. Our findings showed the needs for more funding for services and staffing, more C6 delegation among DAAs, more support for out of care options and more push for utilization of out of care options; more support for youth transitioning services, and more culturally safe/decolonizing services; a need for more education for staff, caregivers, and community members, particularly in relation to the needs of 2SLGBTQIA children and youth, and adults' needs; and the need for more support for out of care options placements to be able to safely and appropriately care for their family members being placed in their homes. Our recommendations are: 1) Increased funding to support DAAs to obtain increased training to allow C6 delegation for DAA staff, 2) Increased education and support for leadership to encourage the use of out of care options during times of removal. 3) Increasing staffing initiatives to hire more staff of Indigenous decent and more staff who may identify as 2SLGBTQIA peoples. 4) More funding to support youth transitioning services, and more culturally safe/preventative services. 5) More funding and education for staff, caregivers and community members, particularly in relation to the needs of 2SLGBTQIA children and youth, and adult's needs. 6) More funding and education to support staff members in learning about out of care placement needs.

Keywords: Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG), Delegated Aboriginal Agency (DAA), Child Welfare, Calls for Justice



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Introduction

This research project was completed in conjunction with the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) as well as in conjunction with certain Delegated Aboriginal Agencies here in British Columbia. Our research has pertained to the Social Work and Child Welfare related Calls for Justice that resulted from the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) Final Report in 2019. The report derived from a national inquiry in regards to systemic forms of violence that Inuit, Métis, and First Nations women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA1 people experience in Canada and what actions are required to improve safety. The MMIWG Final Report included 231 Calls for Justice aimed at governments, institutions, service providers and industries.

In response to the Final Report, and as a way of taking action toward the Calls for Justice therein, Delegated Aboriginal Agencies (DAAs) in British Columbia developed a Director's Forum, a working group composed of DAA Directors in British Columbia. One of the goals for this working group was to identify what is already occurring within DAAs that align with the Calls for Justice and what challenges DAAs are experiencing in relation to the Calls. This working group has now expanded to include partners such as MCFD and Indigenous Services Canada (ISC), and it has included, for the purpose of this research project, qualitative research students from the University of British Columbia (UBC).

The Calls for Justice that our research team was interested in are those numbered 12.1 to 12.15 which are directed specifically at social service providers. These specifically call for reform to many aspects of current child welfare social service practices. Due to capacity and time constraints, the research question was narrowed to include only part of the child welfare related calls. The research questions were: "How are Delegated Aboriginal Agencies providing culturally safe services; alternatives to removal promoting intact community and cultural connections; supports for youth transitioning to adulthood; and ensuring the safety of Indigenous women, children and LGBTQ2S+ in all programs and services provided." The end goal of this current project is that it will then inform the

Director's Forum in its discussions with government partners and that it will provide an evaluation of what resources are needed to better ensure the safety of Indigenous Women, Girls and 2SLGBTQQIA peoples who are involved in or who are utilizing child welfare services in British Columbia.

Literature Review

During the literature review process, we focused on providing ourselves with a background to the Calls for Justice. We looked at research pertaining to how research is completed with Indigenous peoples as well as the literature that focused specifically on the safety of Indigenous Girls, Women and 2SLGBTQQIA peoples in the child welfare system. We found that when it comes to gendered violence, Indigenous women fare far worse than women as a whole in Canada. For example, 16% of all female homicides between 1980 and 2012 were of Indigenous women while only representing 4% of the population (MMIWG Final Report, 2020). Today, the situation has worsened, with Indigenous women now accounting for 24% of all female homicide victims in Canada and being 16 times more likely to be murdered or missing than Caucasian women (MMIWG Final Report, 2020). Violence against Indigenous women and girls is not restricted to those who are missing and murdered. Physical assault and robbery are examples of violence that Indigenous women experience more, and "in more severe forms" than other populations in Canada (MMIWG Final Report, 2020).

Indigenous women are also sexually assaulted at a rate three times that of non-Indigenous women. Sex trafficking is another form of gendered violence targeting Indigenous women and children, with this group making up the largest share of those trafficked in Canada. As noted in the MMIWG Final Report: "Even when all other differentiating factors are accounted for, Indigenous women are still at a significantly higher risk of violence than non-Indigenous women," and "this validates what many Indigenous women and girls already know: just being Indigenous and female makes you a target" (2020, p. 56). Even in their daily lives, when physical or sexual violence may not be immediately present, Indigenous women and girls experience a constant

threat of violence and the fear that accompanies this (MMIWG Final Report, 2020).

The various forms of violence that Indigenous women and girls have been exposed to have been framed as “deliberate race, identity and gender-based genocide” (MMIWG Final Report, 2020, p. 5). Furthermore, the Report pointed to the historical, multigenerational, and intergenerational trauma; social and economic marginalization; maintaining of the status quo and institutional lack of will; and ignoring the agency and expertise of Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people (MMIWG Final Report, 2020). All of these issues are interrelated and are rooted in colonization, with the more specific issue being colonization as gendered oppression (MMIWG Final Report, 2020). The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls entitled “Reclaiming Power and Place” was released in 2019 along with a detailed list of Calls for Justice urging governments at all levels to take action in “changing the structures and the systems that sustain violence in daily encounters” (Calls for Justice, 2019, p. 5). Four major themes emerged that informed the Calls for Justice: security, health and well-being, justice, and culture (Reclaiming Power and Place, 2019).

Governments have taken some steps to respond to and implement some of the Calls for Justice, particularly as they relate to child welfare. The Federal Government (2020) has responded with a “distinctions-based,” “regionally relevant,” “whole-of-Canada action plan” that will partner federal, provincial, and territorial governments with Indigenous governments and organizations. It promises to be “reflective of the lived experience and expertise of family members of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, Two-Spirit and LGBTQIA people and survivors of gender-based violence as well as including “a focus on the necessary reforms to child and family services” (Government of Canada website, 2020). The Government of British Columbia has also taken steps to address child welfare-related calls including a commitment to “improving child welfare services and supports through the Ministry

of Children and Family Development (MCFD) to keep Indigenous children out of care”; “work[ing] with the Government of Canada (Canada) and the First Nations to build new jurisdictional and funding frameworks in the area of child welfare”; and the signing of a “Tripartite Reconciliation Charter... between the Province, FNLC, and Canada as a shared commitment to improve outcomes for First Nations children and families in B.C” (Government of British Columbia, 2019). In November 2019, the Province formally passed the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act to implement the United Nations Declaration. It is the first Province to enact legislation related to this UN Declaration. Additionally, on September 16, 2019, the Ministry of Children and Family Development announced: “the end of the child welfare practice of non-consensual ‘birth alerts’ which disproportionately impacted marginalized and Indigenous women” (Government of British Columbia, 2019).

In relation to the recent changes within the Ministry of Children and Family Development in BC, we decided to take a further look into what may be happening on the front line of child welfare agencies in British Columbia for both MCFD and for Delegated Aboriginal Agencies (DAAs) when it comes to protecting Indigenous Women, Girls and 2SLGBTQQIA peoples utilizing their child welfare services. We decided to review the literature in regards to two specific calls for justice from the national inquiry: these calls were call 12.11 and 12.14.

First, the Call for Justice 12.11 calls for all levels of government and child welfare services to carry out a reform of laws and obligations with respect to youth aging out of the system, including ensuring a complete network of support from childhood into adulthood, based on capacity and needs, which includes opportunities for education, housing and related supports and provision of free post-secondary education for all children in care in Canada (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019). The literature shows that these calls are already in progress and they actually started before Call 12.11 was requested in 2019. In 2017, the BC government developed the Tuition Waiver Program, which allowed for all children in care in BC to access

free tuition across British Columbia in 25 different universities. In 2018, this program was expanded to include foundation and apprenticeship training programs at ten union-based training providers. (Global News, 2019). There are also other Provincial government programs in place to support youth in transitioning such as the Youth Educational and Assistance Funds (YEOF) and the Agreement with Young Adults (AYA) Programs. The YEOF Program provides grants of up to \$5,500 per program year to former BC youth in care students between 19 and 24 years of age (StudentAidBC, 2020). The AYA Program is a program to support youth transitioning to adulthood and it also is applicable to young adults between the ages of 19 and 24. This program is meant to be used to cover the cost of things like housing, child care, tuition and health care while these young adults go to school or do job training, or attend rehabilitation, mental health, or life skills programs. (Government of British Columbia, 2020). These programs are available to any child or youth that was in care under the Child Community and Family Service Act and therefore is applicable to all children and youth (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) who have been in care under the Ministry of Children and Family Development and under Delegated Aboriginal Agencies. Limitations of these programs, however, are that they transaction-based and the young adults are provided with funds, but nothing else in terms of support. Many young adults are not supported during the process of application for the funds, nor are they supported in learning how to effectively use the funds; they are not held accountable by any social worker during the time they use these funds or engage in these programs and they are not guided or emotionally supported. These programs are also often needs-based and many young adults do not receive the full amounts of funds available to them which can leave them at a disadvantage when trying to get ahead (Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2019).

Literature also shows that child welfare agencies in BC (MCFD and DAAs) have already been attempting to ensure a complete network of support from childhood into adulthood, based on capacity and needs, which

includes opportunities for education, housing, and related supports. Both MCFD and DAAs offer this support network through "Youth Agreements." These agreements are for youth who feel at risk in their primary homes or current care arrangements and where there is no parent or other adult who can take responsibility for them (Government of BC, 2020). The goal of this agreement is to support youth with funds so that they can live independently on their own. Youth are required to be 16 to 18 years old and the goal of this program is to support the youth in finding a place to live, learning life skills, gaining education, and it also offers support to youth who might be coping with alcohol or drug problems or managing mental health issues. However, there are problems with this Youth Agreement program as well, resulting from caseload issues, difficulties engaging the youth on these agreements, difficulties with social workers understanding options available to the youth they are serving (such as the YEOF and AYA Programs), and difficulties in transition planning (Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2019).

On the other hand, transition planning is a whole other area that applies to children and youth on Youth Agreements, as well as to children and youth who are in care (e.g., living in foster homes, group homes, etc.). The goal of transition planning is to support children and youth in care to prepare for adulthood and to connect the children and youth to lifelong connections. Often, this kind of planning also fail for many different reasons. Research shows that early transition planning often does not occur due to other pressing priorities that occur in a young person's life.

Again, there is the lack of connection between the children or youth and the social workers, which hinders the transition planning process. Children and youth are also busy facing other barriers such as mental health and addiction issues, or there is lack of communication between social workers, caregivers, and support workers in regards to what kinds of transition skills need to be worked on before the youth ages out of the system (Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2019).

There are programs being enacted by Indigenous agencies and by MCFD to meet these gaps that cause

the failures in transition planning; however, these services are not always enough. In regards to our research question about how DAAs are working towards addressing call 12.11, the literature does indicate that many DAAs are engaging in innovative practices to address transitioning issues for children and youth. DAAs are actively working on developing resources and activities to connect youth to lifelong connections with others and within their home communities by developing "culture camps." These camps often include activities such as drumming, berry picking, and basket weaving, connecting with Elders and family wellness programs, yearly honouring ceremonies for youth turning 19 and other life events. Delegated Aboriginal Agencies are actively finding ways to continue relationships with youth and young adults after they have aged out of care, even when financial assistance and supports end. They are also hiring youth navigators and developing transitional housing programs that provide young adults who have been in care with affordable and safe housing options. (Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2019).

On the other hand, Call 12.14 calls for all child welfare agencies to establish more rigorous requirements for safety and harm-prevention and needs-based services within group or care homes, as well as within foster situations, to prevent the recruitment of children in care into the sex industry. The Call also insists that the governments provide appropriate care and services, over the long term, for children who have been exploited or trafficked while in care (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019). While this call sounds completely reasonable, the research available discussing these kinds of situations in regards to sexual exploitation and trafficking of Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA is limited and often flawed. Some of the reasons the research is limited and flawed is due to lack of reporting by Indigenous women because of fears of not being taken seriously by police, and also fears of criminalization even though these women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA are often victims. (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019). We also experienced difficulty finding literature in regards to sex trafficking and exploitation

in relation to foster homes, and residential/contracted resources within child welfare. However, throughout the literature that we reviewed, the Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women Final Report had the most information in regards to children and youth being sexually exploited and trafficked from and within foster homes, group homes, and contracted residential resources and it provided some important insight. Other organizations linked sexual exploitation and trafficking of Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA with issues such as the "impacts of colonialism on Aboriginal societies, the legacies of the residential schools and their inter-generational effects, family violence, childhood abuse, poverty, homelessness, lack of basic survival necessities, race and gender-based discrimination, lack of education, migration, and substance addictions" (Native Women's Association of Canada, 2014), while the police associated sexual exploitation and trafficking of children as related to several groups of children found to be at particular risk such as "runaway children; throwaway (unwanted) children; youth living independently when they reach 16 years of age; and children using Internet communications to solicit sex trade clients" (Hidden Abuse-Hidden Crime, 2010). Other resources also related sex trafficking and sexual exploitation of Indigenous women to gendered violence and racism (Amnesty International, 2004). We think it is important to take all of these factors into consideration when developing plans to address reduction of risk for sexual exploitation and sex trafficking for Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA peoples.

The information we found most pertinent to child welfare came from the Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women Final Report. In this report, there were many stories told by Indigenous women about how Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people were directly recruited into sex trafficking and sexual exploitation, while many of the stories were directly connected to child welfare. There were stories about sexual exploitation and trafficking occurring out of foster homes and group homes, and trafficking occurring from bus stations

after girls had been dropped off by their social workers to go live independently in the city (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019). They also discussed how many traffickers station themselves outside key target zones (e.g., group homes, medical travel homes, bus stations, and airports and schools), how these traffickers often use tactics such as the boyfriend method (i.e., where a trafficker approaches a woman as a suitor, rather than as a trafficker), use other girls or women to befriend the victims and recruit, how traffickers target girls who are hitchhiking, and how they will use virtually any place that is away from home where victims can be isolated (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019).

We were not able to find any literature about steps MCFD or DAAs are taking to reduce sex trafficking occurring within and outside of residential resources such as foster homes, group homes and other contracted agencies. However, we did find an audit that was performed in 2019 in regards to oversight of these resources. In this audit report, it was found that resources belonging to MCFD (which are often shared with DAAs) are not being properly overseen and, therefore, the safety of children and youth cannot actually be guaranteed in these homes (Office of the Auditor General of British Columbia, 2019). It was revealed in this audit that MCFD did not have a good sense of what services they were providing in these resources, nor did they have much knowledge about the skill sets of their staff in these resources (Office of the Auditor General of British Columbia, 2019). It was also found that the Ministry was not properly collaborating with DAAs in regards to their resources for Indigenous children and youth, and many of the contracted residential services did not ensure that Indigenous children and youth placed in these services were receiving culturally appropriate care (Office of the Auditor General of British Columbia, 2019).

Theoretical Orientation: Post-Colonial Theory, Decolonizing Practices, & Trauma Informed Practice

The Post-colonial theory aligns with the findings, the recommendations, and the values that have come out of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered

Indigenous Women and Girls and allows us, as social workers and researchers, to develop a practice framework based on these principles. The “profession of Social Work can join with Indigenous peoples to resolve the problems caused by colonization, industrialization, and Western encroachment, cloaked in the concept of civilization” (Montgomery, in press). To do this, we as researchers must adopt a post-colonial lens and work to understand the root causes of violence against Indigenous women and girls, “violence that stems from the same structures of colonization” (Rose, 2020). Post-colonial theory informs social work practice and, more specifically, social justice work with Indigenous groups, by emphasizing (1) the need for respect for and encouragement of Indigenous-centred epistemology, (2) an understanding of the historical background and current issues, (3) support for self-determination, and (4) self-government (Rose, 2020).

It is also imperative that for the Calls specifically relating to Social Workers and Those Implicated in Child Welfare, that “all policies, procedures, and practices of solutions” are implemented using a “Trauma-Informed Approach” (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019, p. 3). As social workers, we embarked on this research journey with MCFD and DAA’s, acknowledging our role in colonization so we do not reinforce “the very conditions and structures that may support violence” (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019, p. 1). The subject matter and topics at hand required intentionality on the part of the moderators in order to respect Indigenous worldviews and research methodologies as well as to approach the group from a trauma informed lens, creating a safe space for discussion and hopefully mitigating the risks of re-traumatization.

Methods

Western and Indigenous Methodologies

It became clear early on how important utilizing an Indigenous Framework and methodology was to our entire research process. Decolonizing practice “demands that social work practitioners incorporate Aboriginals’ unique worldviews into their

interventions, recognize how colonization has affected Aboriginal peoples, and understand the need for Aboriginal peoples to know and accept their cultural identity. This promotes healing, empowerment, and positive self-esteem” (McKenzie & Morrisette, 2002). In many ways, the current suggested strategies for decolonizing social work practice mirror the findings and recommendations set out in the MMIWG Final Report and Calls for Justice; the importance of trustworthy and genuine research relationships including adherence to tribal protocols, a focus on community strengths, resiliency, and creating positive change, respectful reciprocity, transparency, integrity, accountability, and critical reflection and cultural humility (Rose, 2020). Rose (2020) stresses that any research process must be Indigenous-led and Indigenous centred. Key considerations for social workers are attention to diversity, history, and culture, time, incorporating local knowledge, values, and worldviews, and ongoing monitoring and sustainability. Throughout the research process, adhering to an Indigenous Framework called for extra time to be taken for prayer, relationship building, and storytelling.

In our attempt to conduct the current research project using an Indigenous methodology wherever possible, we collaborated with the working group coming out of the DAA Director’s Forum in every stage of the research process. Using an Indigenous methodology “allows the researcher to enter the world alongside Indigenous experience rather than framing the Indigenous world-view from a distance” (Rose, 2020, p. 13). It puts a focus on Indigenous communities, people, agencies as participants rather than subjects and allows “First Nations Communities to retain control over research and means they are recognized as knowledge holders within a research process.” When reviewing the Calls for Justice document, we came upon some suggested “Principles of Change.” One is “a Decolonizing Approach,” a strengths-based approach that “challenges colonial influence,” acknowledges Indigenous perspectives and governance, and “honours and respects Indigenous values, philosophies, and knowledge systems” (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered

Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019, p. 2).

In keeping with the suggested Principles of Change, we chose a combination of Western and Indigenous research methods. A standard Western focus group was adapted to fit within an Indigenous perspective. The indigenized method we opted for was a “talking circle” or campfire format which utilized storytelling. We placed an emphasis on incorporating indigenous knowledge, community and cultural values (Drawson et al., 2017), in an attempt to complete research *with* participants and the Indigenous community rather than *on* them (Drawson et al., 2017). A talking circle or “campfire” format is an Indigenous approach to focus groups. It is a “method of group information sharing and discussion, with a focus on cooperation within the group. It is “similar to a focus group method in that participants are gathered together to discuss the research topic for the purpose of data collection” (Drawson et al., p. 10). A benefit of the circle format is that it “rebalances the power dynamic in the researcher-participant relationship,” in that the “participants grant the researcher permission to use the dialogue generated in the Circle for research purposes.” Verbal consent for our research was obtained, but traditionally would have been implied through the circle process because the talking circle emphasizes the importance of “sharing all aspects of the individual-heart, mind, body, and spirit” (Drawson et al., p. 10).

The Principle of “Cultural Safety” speaks to the empowerment of Indigenous Peoples and requires the “inclusion of Indigenous languages, laws, and protocols.” It was therefore important to the research process to have an elder, a spiritual leader to participate and bless the group with a prayer prior to the talking circle. Another participant offered an opening and closing prayer in their own Indigenous language at our follow-up talking circle, part of our member checking process. Participants used their Indigenous names, if applicable, and gave thanks in their own languages throughout the focus groups. Storytelling was another important and relational aspect of our talking circle style focus groups. Storytelling is an Indigenous qualitative research method where participants describe their answers

orally rather than on questionnaires. The relationship between the researcher and participant or group of participants is also considered. Storytelling is also helpful in decolonizing the research process (Drawson et al., 2017). Drawson et al. (2017) highlights that “relationality is inherent in storytelling and this component can help to ensure that the participants are respected as equal partners in the uncovering of knowledge” (p. 14).

To facilitate collaborative research around MMIWG, Rose (2020) suggests strategies for social workers to achieve these partnership principles by developing critical reflection skills and cultural humility, highlighting the “importance of genuine and ongoing self-reflection for those from dominant groups, benefactors of colonization, and/or non-Indigenous People when working in cross-cultural partnerships with Indigenous People” (Rose, 2020). In our meetings leading up to the focus group, locating oneself became an important practice. We were able to locate ourselves as white researchers with European ethnic backgrounds. We also acknowledged our status as “researchers” and as graduate students in the School of Social Work at UBC. Similarly, our team members and participants were able to locate themselves. An “awareness can lead to challenging and confronting the status quo rather than perpetuating it” (Rose, 2020). It is therefore integral that social workers are “examining how their positionality informs what they perceive as the social problem to be studied” and that they “ask questions that challenge Western worldviews” (Rose, 2020). Thus, this self-locating was important to the research process and to our attempt to decolonize it.

An Indigenous land acknowledgement is “a formal statement that recognizes and respects Indigenous Peoples as traditional stewards of this land and the enduring relationship that exists between Indigenous Peoples and their traditional territories” (Native American and Indigenous Peoples Steering Group, n.d.). It is important to understand “the longstanding history that has brought you to reside on the land, and to seek to understand your place within that history. Land acknowledgements do not exist in a past tense, or historical context: colonialism is a current ongoing

process, and we need to build our mindfulness of our present participation.” “When we talk about land, land is part of who we are. It’s a mixture of our blood, our past, our current, and our future. We carry our ancestors in us, and they’re around us. As you all do.” (Native American and Indigenous Peoples Steering Group, n.d.). We practiced acknowledging the land on which we were working in each meeting and in the focus group itself. We also acknowledged that we are representing the School of Social Work at UBC which is placed upon the unceded territory of the Coast Salish Peoples, including the territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations.

The Calls for Justice also speak to the “inclusion of family and survivors, the importance of involving Indigenous women and girls in the implementation process” (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019). It is also important to note that “Family” is defined differently and outside the confines of a Western conceptualization. “Family,” throughout the MMIW literature, “must be understood to include all forms of familial kinship, including but not limited to biological families, chosen families, and families of the heart” (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019, p. 3). The circle format we chose allowed for a space in the circle representative of all missing and murdered Métis, First Nations, and Inuit women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people including the spirits of the missing or murdered.

Research Approach

Our research project has been both exploratory and evaluative. Our research is exploratory as little has been known or documented (Davis, 2020) in regards to how Delegated Aboriginal Agencies in BC have been working towards ensuring safety of women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA peoples within their programs. This research is evaluative and needs assessment based as it is a “systematic collection and analysis of information about social service interventions” (Davis, 2020) targeted towards Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA children, youth, and adults. This research has been initiated with the goal to improve practice, planning, and accountability to ensure the safety of

Indigenous Women, Girls and 2SLGBTQQIA peoples in child welfare services. This research also aims to support knowledge building in regards to what agencies are already doing to keep Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people safe within their services. This research is evaluative as it assesses needs and evaluates the challenges and barriers that may be preventing Delegated Agencies to incorporate elements that can help ensure the safety of Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA into their programs and services.

Sampling Methods

The sampling procedure was purposive in that the population we interviewed were all people who identified as Indigenous and who would have knowledge about the Calls for Justice and the issue of Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA peoples. These purposive elements also served as the inclusion criteria when we selected our participants. People who did not have knowledge about the Calls for Justice and Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA peoples were excluded.

Recruitment Strategy

The first step to recruitment involved our sponsors sending out a survey, which was meant to inform who we would pick as respondents. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and Christmas break, there was a low response rate. Our sponsors then decided to use a decolonizing and relational approach by calling the Executive Directors of the DAA offices and asking them personally to select respondents who they felt had the knowledge of DAA programs and knowledge in regards to the connection between Murdered Missing Indigenous Women and Girls and Child Welfare Services.

Once participants were identified by the Executive Directors, emails were sent and phone calls were made to each of the participant to, again, encourage a decolonizing and relational approach. The reason this act of phoning is seen as a decolonizing and relational approach is because it utilizes Indigenous traditional ways of communication (i.e., oral and relational), rather than through the western colonial approach of written, indirect and impersonal communication. Our

sponsors then further decolonized our research by receiving permission from the MCFD Ethics Committee to eliminate the need for written consent and instead to obtain oral consent from all participants in the recorded Zoom focus group.

Analytic Strategy

For this research project, we utilized an inductive approach as we did not have a hypothesis in mind and we wanted to allow our themes and concepts to emerge from the data we gathered from the focus group. We used thematic analysis with initial and intermediate coding to analyze our data. When we did our initial coding, we broke apart data from our transcriptions to determine ideas and patterns that stood out to us. From the initial coding, we then moved to Intermediate Coding where we created categories which evolved into our themes.

Another part of our analytic strategy included the utilization of member-checking. Member checking is a research method in which researchers return to their participants for clarification on findings to ensure that the member's voices have been accurately reflected in the research. There is a risk of perpetuating colonization through the data analysis phase. We were able to mediate this factor through member checking as our analysis was through a Western lens, not through an Indigenous worldview, as neither of the researchers are of Indigenous backgrounds. We were able to do this member checking on March 24, 2021 in a follow-up circle and we then incorporated the input from that meeting into this final report.

Results

We found that much of the information gathered in our literature review supported our research findings. There were many similarities in that we found DAAs and MCFD are indeed struggling with supporting youth transitioning, while they are also struggling with ensuring children and youth's safety within child welfare services and programs. The literature review also talked about issues mentioned in the focus group such as housing barriers as well as determining when youth are actually ready to transition versus when the Ministry deadline determines they need to transition. Although we did not directly address safety of Indigenous children and youth within resources

through our research question, our focus group participants did emphasize that a lack of safety for Indigenous 2SLGBTQQIA children and youth exists within MCFD and DAA staff and caregivers.

In focusing the review of relevant literature directly on child welfare and how the system contributes to Missing Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA peoples, we found that much of the information directly correlate with information we gathered from participants in our focus group. For example, we found that many youth transition programs used to support youth transitioning to adulthood are hindered as a result of social workers having high caseloads and insufficient staffing. We also learned that social workers often struggle when working on youth transitioning because there are challenges engaging youth in services and programs and even getting the youth to come and meet with the workers. Many of these challenges are often attributed to the youth experiencing mental health and substance use issues and experiencing lack of access to mental health and addiction services in their communities. We also heard about the common incompatibility of the caregiver's and social worker's ideas for transitioning, and also about the challenges in regards to transition programs only providing youth with funds, but not providing room for social workers to provide true guidance and emotional support to these growing adolescents. We also noticed an emphasis by focus group participants on difficulties in planning for transitioning because of incompatibilities in regards to caregiver's ideas for transitioning and social worker's ideas for transitioning. This incompatibility was also mentioned in the Literature Review.

Advancing Supports for Youth Transitioning to Adulthood

The Delegated Aboriginal Agency representatives shared ways in which their agencies are supporting youth as they transition into adulthood. When participants spoke about what is working well and what they saw as successes in supporting this transition, several themes emerged. One of these themes was life skills in connection with tradition. DAA participants spoke about the importance of life

skills in connection with tradition and incorporating culture into life skills programming:

They started a program where they bring the youth in as a group and teach them how to cook, budget, and shop and take them out and get the youth shopping. They went out and they harvested an elk and they're working with it. They know how they take care of the animal. The youth in that program, some are youth in care and others aren't. So that's an excellent, excellent thing to see (Participant).

Another theme was a focus on the importance of ceremony in the process of youth transitioning into adulthood. One participant spoke about the historical significance of traditional ceremonies based around milestones and developmental goals and the importance of ceremony in the transition to adulthood. They spoke about how, traditionally, the transition to adulthood was not based on something arbitrary like an age, as it is within the current child welfare system. Moreover, the youth was deemed ready when the community agreed that the youth was ready. It can thus be seen how it is more difficult within the current system to adequately assess, in a culturally appropriate way, a child's readiness for transition into adulthood:

When a baby was born there was a certain protocol that happened with the family. And then, as they move on in terms of puberty there was another ceremony. And when they entered into adulthood, there were certain tests and things that they had to do, to say, for other family to say that person was ready for adulthood. And then transitioning into the adulthood or elder role (Participant).

Ceremony also plays an important cultural role in Indigenous youth reaching cultural and developmental milestones and is seen as strengthening continued connection to their community. Participants reported that their agencies are incorporating ceremony into their programming with youth, especially at this critical juncture. Through ceremony, an important part of the process of transitioning into adulthood, Elders are able to share knowledge, wisdom and guidance. Youth are often also surrounded with their family and support network. Participants also spoke about the

connection between culture and life skills in a youth's degree of preparedness for adulthood. Agencies have also been incorporating traditional cultural teachings into like skills programming for youth. A participant noted, "we do a nest wing ceremony... and we do a specific ceremony where we stand them up, we blanket them... We've also done previous work on sharing knowledge and coming of age ceremonies." Another stated:

We did start having our transition ceremony for acknowledging youth that are moving on to that part in their life and same standing them up in the long houses blanketing them having their support networks around them, and then having elders speak and fill them with words to help them, guide them onto the next journey (Participant).

But ceremonies can be very involved and complex cultural events. Participants spoke of blanketing ceremonies, inviting the youth's support systems including staff, caregiver, family members, friends, elders all to take part. COVID-19 has presented challenges in providing the opportunity for youth to participate in ceremonies, especially those that would require large in-person gatherings:

We do stuff like we have different ceremonies and stuff that do deal with youth going into things but with the way things are different now, things are falling through the gap. So, I definitely think we need to revisit that and see how we can share some of the lessons we normally do through ceremony. Some of our lessons can be really simple, cuz our hereditary structure's complex and interconnected. So, how do you take one thing without teaching about this and about this (Participant)?

Participants also spoke about the importance of having staff positions specific to youth transitioning, including life skills programs. Many agencies have positions or programming specific to supporting youth transitioning into adulthood:

We do have an Intensive Youth Support Worker. So, her job is essentially supporting youth in day-to-day things, referring them to services and support and helping them get to appointments or signing them up for training and her job. She's just one person who is just to support our youth throughout and kind of do minor counselling and just touch base

with them (Participant).

My position is really interesting. At times, I've supported youth that were aging out of care and moving, so I had the privilege of driving the youth to their community at Alert Bay. They moved back home so I was able to help them pack up and blow it up and make sure that they got there safely. So that's part of my role which has been really wonderful and is unique (Participant).

A major challenge identified by participants in advancing the supports for youth transitioning to adulthood is the difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff and caregivers, as well as lack of funding for culturally safe programs and related services. While recruitment and retention were issues for almost all DAA participant's agencies, they reported that it was especially difficult to find suitable Indigenous staff and caregivers. They noted that having Indigenous staff and caregivers is especially important when trying to honour youth's cultural background and support them in these transition ceremonies.

We don't have more than one counselor... We only have funding for one permanent counseling position, which is a barrier... There are very limited indigenous counseling services, like everywhere else we do have counselors and therapists in the area that are funded through First Nations Health Authority. But, you know I always think of this really great program... and it just was such a culturally safe environment, Indigenous counselors. There was culture that could integrate my healing and things like that. We don't have anything like that. And I think that would make a world of difference, especially for young people to be able to have access to service that's culturally safe that's relatable and decolonial (Participant).

Another challenge that a participant identified are the differing ideas about youth's readiness for transition. Especially when boundaries around caregiver and guardianship responsibilities are not clear, there can be incompatibility between opinions, principles, or interests of DAA (guardian) and the caregiver; vastly different opinions about how to approach certain issues with youth:

I think some of the challenges that we sometimes face...[are] when you're the guardian, you are the

parents so sometimes you have to say no and sometimes you have to give direction. And sometimes I think caregivers get a little bit possessive with their children that they have in their care. But the bottom line is that we are the guardians and therefore we have to sometimes make adult choices on behalf of kids (Participant).

Lack of housing, substance use and mental health services and the difficulty in accessing appropriate services were also identified as barriers for youth. This was emphasized through the member checking process in the follow-up talking circle that was held. Youth-specific services and low-barrier services were noted to be important in supporting youth in transition. The housing crisis communities across British Columbia are experiencing is also making it difficult for youth who are ready to live independently to obtain safe, affordable accommodations. Participants expressed that: "barriers around housing and, you know, we're, you know we're far from the city but the rents here are you know \$1200 to \$1400 dollars a month as well."

A lot of our kids do a job and end up on the streets, end up homeless, end up having addictions. So I think that I would identify that as a huge gap. There is a huge [gap] in youth-based services for drug and alcohol misuse. There's very limited [programs] that will accept you, and then of course navigating that is you have to be clean for this amount of time, you have to be detox for some amount of time and that doesn't really work for many people in addiction (Participant).

Expensive rates rents for housing and very limited housing. So our youth that do want to go into independence, are paying 1200 a month for a studio suite...We don't have housing...where they do hold apartments, specifically for youth in care...and can move into their own apartments and they hold those apartments just for those youth. We don't have anything like that unfortunately. We do have very limited, low income or affordable housing. So that's been a huge barrier (Participant).

Key learnings and recommendations around advancing supports for youth transitioning into adulthood include: increased education for staff and caregivers; ensuring cultural safety in all environments; continuing to integrate culture and tradition into programs and

services; and more opportunities for knowledge sharing between agencies and ensuring wrap-around supports.

Promoting Intact Community and Cultural Connections and Providing Alternatives to Removal

Main themes discussed among participants were successes in Promoting Intact Community and Cultural Connections and Providing Alternatives to Removal, which include having educative and preventative programs: representative staff (Indigenous and 2SLGBTQQIA peoples), additional funding, and the ability to be inclusive and anti-discriminatory in all programs. Many participants discussed how they were finding educational preventative programs such as "Fatherhood" or "Sacred Motherhood" as helpful in preventing removal and promoting intact community, along with other programs that addressed child welfare issues such as domestic violence, family violence, and abuse.

A participant said, "so, we've developed different booklets and we started out with a booklet on residential schools." Another stated, "we have a parade every year. So, and the biggest event that they did was, honoring inviting all of our indigenous women, children LGBTQ2S into to a ceremony. And they blanketed them."

They also discussed how having relatable staff was helpful as having staff that identify as Indigenous or as 2SLGBTQQIA1 allows clients and community members to feel more comfortable and trusting of the service providers because they feel the staff understand their perspectives and experiences. Research participants also discussed additional funding as being helpful as they have been able to hire more staff, and fund more programs. They also discussed how inclusivity and anti-discrimination in their services and programs played a large role in the success.

Quotes from participants include: "One thing I will say is having staff that are open and proud of their gender and sexual identity has been very positive." "Our agency acknowledges all sexual orientation, gender identities. We do have several few staff here employed that do identify as being part of the LGBTQ2S+ community. We ensure that our documentation center agency reflects those pronouns and chosen names."

Our sexual abuse intervention program. And again, it's the state program which I'm sure everyone is familiar with, and we did add a counselor to that program with the understanding that educating our youth around sexual safety is an important part of the work that we do so as happy to hear that we've added a worker to that program. And then we've also added a couple of trauma counselors, again, which I think is helpful in those areas (Participant).

The additional funding and the ability to have inclusivity and anti-discrimination as core values in their programs have been helpful because there have been more opportunities for effective programming and to create safe and welcoming spaces for all community members. Participants expressed that through these programs and opportunities, clients and community members have felt more encouraged to participate in services and programs, which in turn contributed to preventing removals and encouraging community and cultural connections for all.

A participant noted, "we're constantly, ensuring that we're having difficult conversations with our youth in a safe space. In terms of the safety of our, you know, indigenous women and the epidemic, our children and our Two Spirit folks"

Challenges, barriers, and gaps to promoting intact community and cultural connections and providing alternatives to removal, identified by participants, include their agency's limited capacity and lack of funding and delegation, engagement challenges, and the risks of re-traumatizing clients and community members through services and programs.

Some statements include, "we are very small and busting at the seams here so we're very limited even in pre-covid capacity to offer a lot of workshops and things in house. Again, it's just funding and delegation" and "Not everybody is open to changing their thought process or even learning. You know, someone earlier mentioned their reluctance to connect with counselors."

Many participants also discussed experiencing difficulties with lack of delegation to perform full child welfare duties, lack of funding to fill certain needed positions or to develop certain needed programs. A participant noted, "we don't have a C6 delegation so from that of course this limits our services, but all of

our programming is of course open to everyone. Ongoing challenges is funding."

Participants also discussed difficulties with getting people to the programs or getting clients and community to want to engage in their programs, as well as the risks of re-traumatizing clients and community members through the intensity of some of their programs as they acknowledge that many clients and community members already have trauma from direct experience with social issues such as family violence, domestic violence, abuse, etc. A participant highlighted, "talking about challenges. It would definitely be the engagement piece. Many, you know, many of our kids to kiddos avoid counseling." Another questioned:

So what are some of the challenges. I think just bringing the awareness, you know, the violence, you know, and because, you know, for years people have experienced so much violence that you know bringing that forward is challenging for some people (Participant).

Some of the key learning and recommendations participants offered to continue promoting intact community and cultural connections and providing alternatives to removal are: continued use and increasing use of family preservation teams; continued empowerment approaches; acknowledging that removal of children and youth has contributed to the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and 2SLGBTQQIA1 peoples; and the continuance of encouraging supportive programs for service users and community members.

Participants expressed that they felt Family Preservation Teams were key as these teams have the ability to actively work with families while searching for solutions to prevent removal. The participants discussed how important it was that Family Preservation Teams encouraged finding family solutions that keep the families together instead of tearing families apart. They also talked about the importance of empowerment approaches where the agencies and child welfare workers support families to come up with their own solutions, and support families to keep or regain custody of their children:

I think [the family preservation team is] hugely important in child welfare, because they're based

on, you know, supporting families and preventing the removal of children but also supporting relatives or parents to work towards taking steps to regain custody of their children (Participant).

The participants also discussed the importance of acknowledging that removal of Indigenous children and youth contributed to the Missing Murdered Indigenous Women epidemic, and the importance of utilizing this knowledge to make the needed changes in services and of programming to better protect children, youth, women, and 2SLGBTQIA1 peoples. They highlighted the importance of encouraging more supportive and preventative services and programs to encourage safe spaces, healthy choices, and healing for service users and community members:

One of the things I think would be a good thing to do and perhaps some of this has already been done I'm not too sure, but is for us to have a look at how the removal of indigenous children is contributing to the issue of the murdered and missing indigenous women and children (Participant). I'm just going to use the word sexual empowerment for now, but I know we do like because of, especially because of residential school we do, we have sex, sexual abuse education, counseling intervention and so on and so forth. I think another piece of that, though, is for us to look at how do we get back to empowering our sexuality, how do we get back to developing a healthy connected relationship with that part of self. So those, those would be the two recommendations (Participant).

Advancing Culturally Safe Services

Focus group participants spoke to the example of leadership supporting culture in practice as a key to the successful provision and advancement of culturally safe services. They discussed the importance of agency policy being rooted in Indigenous values and worldview. Part of this strong leadership was seen as placing importance on the role of Elders, especially in teaching, educating, and supporting staff as is the case in at least one agency that has an elder's council. For one participant, it was meaningful, especially in the context of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, that their Board of Directors was primarily Indigenous women.

We have mostly Indigenous staff from all over Canada. And I would say that our executive director is also really about, you know, supporting culture in our practice (Participant).

The agency is making good use of that elders council both to help with some work that's being done, but also to help the staff. So the staff have a safe place to go. Elders will, I don't need to tell, I think everyone here is aware of how elders teach and correct and they just do it in such a kind way that makes people want to do better (Participant). Our culture is the voice of our grandmothers, making sure that there's space and place for our grandmothers, to have voice, and for us to be able to incorporate their voice into the work that we do...The majority of our board has been grandmothers, that sit on that board...Learning and working with them to make change and to be effective and what we're trying to do. It's very empowering for me (Participant).

We're super fortunate to work in, you know, agency that is absolutely rooted indigenous values and worldview (Participant).

Through this leadership, DAAs have created unique staff roles that support Indigenous culture. For example, a Cultural Continuity Worker who supports youth to visit their ancestral territory and family, and a Lifelong Connections Worker who assists in creating family trees and genealogies alongside youth. Some agencies reported having cultural workshops and teachings, that are open to the broader community:

As a Cultural Continuity Worker, I support our children, youth in visiting their territory and family visits and summer camps and things like that. It's so that's amazing. [I] support them as they're visiting family and community and keeping them safe. I work with two sisters that are teenagers, and they recently lost their brother, and I traveled with them to their community and Saskatchewan, to take them to his funeral services. And I think you know I am very privileged and grateful that I'm able to support them in that work (Participant).

My greatest feedback is these positions are so cool, so important. Their focus is culture (Participant).

A challenge in providing culturally safe services among DAAs is recruitment and retention of staff,

especially Indigenous staff. Further, recruitment of caregivers, most importantly Indigenous ones, is also a challenge. Some agencies report having up to 75% non-Indigenous staff and that non-Indigenous caregivers are not necessarily grounded in cultural traditions and Indigenous worldviews. Staff turnover was also presented as a barrier. Participants shared that, "I think the biggest challenge that I've seen with our agency is turnover," "right now three quarters [are] new staff, so onboarding our allies and presenting to them our world view," and:

About a quarter of our staff are of First Nation ancestry. So about three quarters are not. And I think that that's one of the challenges and the barriers that we have is a lack of understanding of, you know of an indigenous ways of, you know who we are (Participant).

The geography and the physical distances between communities and community members were also reported as barriers to advancing culturally safe services. One participant emphasized that for youth, physical distance from one's community, whether by geography or the child welfare system contributes to a disconnection from their culture:

The barriers are just, you know, coming together as a team and, you know, because we are scattered throughout our territory here.

Our communities are about 1.5 hours apart so, the South community would be about three hours from the North community so we don't get a lot of interaction that way other than through Zoom.

When I connect this back up to the murdered missing Indigenous women and youth... some of our young people are becoming disconnected because they've been away from their community. One of the biggest challenges that we've noticed so far, and the feedback from our family, children and youth is that they've been in care for so long that they cannot identify what culture is, so under that oppressive system of the CFCSA, they don't identify with their communities.

Supporting Indigenous staff, and incorporating culture and ceremony in the workplace was seen as a practice that strengthened capacity. Some agencies do this by practicing ceremonies such as brushing and cleansing. Training for non-Indigenous staff and

caregivers was reported as being equally important and an area for growth in most agencies. Participants spoke of the importance of building and sharing cultural knowledge to empower Indigenous non-Indigenous caregivers alike. This is so important in helping children and youth remain connected or reconnect to their culture:

You know, we do a lot of ceremony. And it's really good for some traditional wellness... We do brushing and cleansing ceremonies with our staff. We offer weekly sessions where we sing a song. And so we've done cleansing of our office. And so our practice is a little bit different than I would say from mainstream (Participant).

Number one [will] be educating our non-Indigenous caregivers, our resource team does an amazing job at looking for trainings for non-native non indigenous caregivers to ensure that they carry that knowledge to be able to support the indigenous kids in their care (Participant).

Key learnings and recommendations around advancing culturally safe services within child welfare agencies include: (1) cultural competency training/education for non-Indigenous staff and caregivers, (2) succession planning, and (3) strengthening leadership capacity inclusive of cultural practice.

With our strategic planning. We're working more towards decolonizing our agency and doing a lot of cultural awareness training. again, you know, really stressing the importance of working in a culturally sensitive way. And how do we pass all that information along, and you know ways of working with non-indigenous staff, you know, so that they, they really understand (Participant).

Ensuring Safety of Indigenous Women, Children and 2SLGBTQQIA in Programs and Services

Some success discussed throughout the talking circle for ensuring the safety of Indigenous women, children, and 2SLGBTQQIA in programs and services included: promoting cultural and community connections, engaging in preventative work, building relationships, flexibility and creativity, and caregiver recruitment.

Participants discussed how promoting cultural connections for youth and providing cultural programming provided children and youth with safety

as they are being granted the opportunities to connect with their extended families and communities, on top of being taught traditional knowledge that enables them to stay connected to their communities and to their roots. Participants also discussed the importance of having the ability to take children and youth back to their home communities no matter how far, because children are no longer being lost and disconnected from their home connections:

The promoting of our cultural connections for kids and our cultural programming and what we, you know, provide for kids, and our caregivers to ensure that they carry the cultural knowledge for our kids. Yeah, and then I get [Name] taking our kiddos to back to their community when they want to it's a referral so it's really about, you know, engaging with our youth and continuing this conversation so that they want to make those connections when they're ready (Participant).

Participants also noted that having the ability to be able to do preventative work, and having the ability to truly get to know families they are working with has also been helpful. It is through this ability to do preventive work and through this ability to build relationships that many DAAs are able to prevent problems from escalating within families:

But I mentioned earlier prevention has been a big part of our focus and I think why we've actually lowered our numbers of children and care significantly. So what we've done and what I continue to see is that we have a very like strong and capable family service team and they are like the hustlers of the agency (Participant). They know the families, they know where the challenges are happening, they're already anticipating what's going to come up as a protection issue and how do we prevent that from happening (Participant).

Also discussed by participants was the importance of being able to utilize flexibility and creativity as leading to success for promoting safety as they are able to be flexible and creative in finding out of care placements, creating low barrier programs and they have the ability to meet with families creatively during during the pandemic through Zoom meetings, or backyard picnic table meetings, etc:

One of the things that we utilize is our circles program. And that program can be self-referral, it can be from a social worker, it can be for families, caregivers, it's very, very low barrier. And we have a circle facilitator... and he brings the family and he organizes it well. When we can gather, he brings them all in. Now we do it either outside if we need to all be in person or we on zoom (Participant).

What we are referring to is like a change in paradigm and how we're approaching this where, you know, instead of removal being the first option, it's the absolute last option (Participant).

I'm having a look at the other parent and not just not just assuming that the other parent is not capable. And then another one which I thought was... a success story in terms of keeping a child out of care was looking at family across the border...to keep the child out of care (Participant).

Participants also discussed progress in caregiver recruitment as a success because they are currently finding that through reducing barriers, by updating their brochures and holding meetings where apprehensions can be addressed. They are able to recruit more Indigenous caregivers, which in turn provides more safety to Indigenous children and youth who may be removed from their families and who cannot find out of care options:

We recently formed a Caregiver Recruitment Committee, which includes people from all staff within our agency so myself. There's resource social workers, social workers, and we are meeting bi-weekly now to discuss how can we recruit more caregivers, but more importantly more Indigenous caregivers and how can we inform the community about becoming a relative caregiver (Participant). Taking down those thoughts and maybe addressing those apprehensions because understandably many of our people are hesitant to have any involvement with social workers, that's 100% valid, And also looking at addressing our process and how we interact with caregivers how we do fill applications with potential caregivers. So we're even looking at redeveloping those materials (Participant).

Challenges, barriers, and gaps that the participants identified in regards to ensuring safety of Indigenous

women, children, and 2SLGBTQQIA peoples in programs and services are: limited capacity within the agencies, engagement challenges, relationships and networking challenges; challenges with increasing the use of out of care options; lack of delegation. In the member checking process, participants discussed the challenges of staff and caregivers' inability to meet 2SLGBTQQIA people's needs including youth.

For example, participants discussed difficulties with engagement as a result of service users and community members not having access to transportation to get them to the programs and services, or DAAs experiencing service users and community members being afraid and uncomfortable with engaging in programs and services. Quotes from participants include: "It's getting from here to here, which is some of the barriers. So what reserve gets it what's closer. If you go here then transportations a barrier," and "I think the biggest barriers for that is that there's just still community fear around, engaging with us."

Participants also talked about challenges in building relationships with families, community and with MCFD, and they discussed challenges in utilizing out of care options despite the use of them being a success. They also discussed how their programs, services, and caregivers often lack the ability to effectively meet the needs of 2SLGBTQQIA children, youth, and adults, and more education and awareness is needed on the unique needs of this group of peoples:

We have a really good relationship with them (MCFD). That's something that has been fostered. I know not all DAAs have the best relationship with their local MCFD. That can sometimes be challenging (Participant).

And so as a result of I just saw the stats within the last year... was over a 40% increase in out of care options. So it's definitely happening. It's on the go, but of course there's still a lot of, a lot more work to do in that area (Participant).

Participants also talked about the importance of addressing fears that service users, community members and possible caregivers may have so that they can get further engagement, and recruit more Indigenous caregivers.

The key learning and recommendations around ensuring safety of Indigenous women, children, and 2SLGBTQQIA peoples in programs and services were: agencies and service providers remembering the importance of relationships; the importance of preventative work; the importance of cultural safety; the importance of utilization of out of care options; the importance of increasing support for all service users and community members; the importance of increasing education in regards to 2SLGBTQQIA needs; as well as the importance of increasing supports for mothers whose children are in care.

Participants discussed the importance of knowing the families, knowing who they are and what their family dynamics are like, acting before problems get worse, getting into supportive services earlier rather than later, providing culturally safe spaces and culturally relevant services, utilizing out of care options whenever possible, increasing support for Out of care Options families, increasing support for children in out of care option placements, and increasing support for children in care. Participant quotes include: "so the prevention work and engaging the family in that process and giving them the tools to problem solve, is very powerful rather than saying 'here's your solution, go do it'" as well as "working together and making it just one whole movement."

The participants also discussed the importance of increasing education in regards to 2SLGBTQQIA children and youth's needs for staff and caregivers as these children often fall through the cracks and do not engage with services due to lack of relatability. Participants also suggested increased support for mothers with children in care, since when a mother's children are removed, they too, like 2SLGBTQQIA children and youth, fall through the cracks. Mothers who are not supported after their children have been removed often disengage and become demoralized and participants emphasize the importance of engaging these mothers and lifting them up and encouraging them so they can get their children back into their care:

I think it's about the creativity that agencies use, it also speaks to the vulnerability of the mothers.

What happens to the moms when their children are

removed and how vulnerable they become and targeted as a population. Because of that vulnerability right so when kids and families are supported to stay intact our mothers don't go those other directions such as addictions and sex work and some of those things that some of our mothers have experienced (Participant).

Limitations

The present research findings are limited in that the research question could not address all of the Calls to Justice related to child welfare services. Another limitation is the representation of DAAs in this focus group. There are 24 DAAs in BC, but this focus group had representation from only six DAA offices. The focus group is, however, part of a larger body of research being conducted over the next year, with MCFD and Delegated Aboriginal Agencies, which will also include key informant interviews and the potential for another focus group. The research will be used to inform the development of a concrete, DAA-authored action plan in response to the Calls for Justice. This will then inform the Director's Forum in its discussions with government partners and provide an evaluation of what resources are needed to better ensure the safety of Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA peoples who are involved in or who are utilizing child welfare services in British Columbia.

In this focus group, there were limitations due to time constraints and the sensitivity of the topic. Due to the three and a half hour length of the focus group, there was limited time for follow up questions from the participants and limited time for debriefing. There were also limitations in regards to opportunities for the researchers to probe deeper into participant's responses, and there was a risk of this due to the sensitive nature of the topic we were focusing on and the fact that as researchers do not identify with the culture of the participants.

By speaking to our sponsors, we also learned that the COVID-19 pandemic, the opioid overdose crisis within British Columbia, and the use of Zoom got in the way of preferred methods such as recruiting more participants, connecting in person, and having more opportunity to build relationships. The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, presented limitations as we

could not meet in person with our sponsors or with our research participants. Also, many pieces of the Indigenous Framework that are often utilized in Indigenous research became hindered and limited due to the pandemic. We were not able to utilize certain aspects of the Indigenous Framework, such as the use of ceremony, gift giving, and passing around a talking feather or stone through the talking circle. The circle process was also not as intimate and there was no way to connect with the land while discussing this very sensitive topic.

Implications for Policy and Practice

As a result of our research findings, we think that there is a large need for more funding for more services and for more staffing. Many of the participants expressed that when they had extra funding, they were able to hire more staff and they were able to develop more preventative programs which in turn, they felt helped to prevent Indigenous children from coming into care, and also in turn better protected Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA peoples. We also learned that there is a need for more C6 delegation among Delegated Aboriginal Agencies as this delegation would provide DAAs with more authority over when Indigenous children can be removed from their family homes or not be removed, and it would provide them more opportunity to safely plan with extended family when removals are necessary.

We learned that DAAs are needing more support for Out of Care Options and more push for utilization of Out of Care Options. They need more support for their youth transitioning services such as housing, mental health and addictions services, and more culturally safe/decolonizing services to safely and positively engage service users and community members. There is also a need for increased education for staff, caregivers, and community members, particularly in relation to the needs of 2SLGBTQQIA children, youth, and adults. Lastly, Out of Care Options Placements need more support to be able to safely and appropriately care for their family members being placed in their homes.

We also think that the present research findings show just how important it is to understand and to

recognize the impacts that child welfare has in regards to its connection to Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA peoples. It is our hope and has been our goal since the start of this research project, that this research will influence an MCFD and DAA authored action plan so that conscious efforts can continue to be made to provide ongoing safety for Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA peoples within their programs and services. We also hope that this project will encourage more research in regards to how social service agencies can better protect and promote Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA peoples' safety. Throughout our research, we have also come to learn how important it is for Indigenous peoples to have cultural safety and cultural preservation integrated into every service and program and we hope that all other social service agencies can recognize and integrate this need as well. We also would like to advocate for more support for women who have had children removed as they too, can be missed and forgotten about during child welfare service implementation. Lastly, we also hope that this research will continue to open doors for more creative innovations and more solutions to protect Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA peoples.

Recommendations

- Education and training for staff and caregivers to ensure cultural safety in all environments;
- Ensuring wrap around supports for youth;
- Empowerment approaches;
- More opportunities for knowledge sharing between agencies;
- Increased support for women who have had children removed;
- Acknowledging the role of the child welfare system in MMIWG;
- Programs and Services that promote cultural preservation;
- More support for unique and creative staff roles specific to culture;
- Increased education and training for staff and caregivers in regards to 2SLGBTQQIA needs;
- Utilizing out-of-care options wherever possible, and the importance of Family Preservation Teams;

- Strengthening leadership capacity, succession planning;
- Embedding culture in policy.

Conclusion

This research illustrates the importance of the Calls for Justice and how important it is that we consider how we are implementing these within DAAs and MCFD and how we are approaching our work in the larger context of social work. While there is a need for capacity building, such as more funding, more access to preventative programs, and more resources and support for recruitment and retention of Indigenous staff and caregivers, it should be noted that DAAs are actively implementing the Calls for Justice. DAAs are actively working towards protecting the safety of Indigenous Children within their child welfare programs, although improvements could be made according to the above list of recommendations. Improvements may include changes for more cultural safety and more cultural preservation. This research has also led to further research questions such as what kinds of services are needed for Indigenous women whose children are in care. The hopes are that this research will continue to open doors for more creative innovations and more solutions to protect Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA peoples. This research, however, points to a need for systemic change and the need for commitment and action by government and other institutions toward the implementation of all of the Calls to Justice. Social workers must “understand new possibilities for informed action that can overturn the structures and systems that silence Indigenous voices and lead to social and economic marginalization” (Rose, 2020, p. 50). We all need to work together to implement all of the calls, not just those associated with child welfare. This change is required to stop the perpetuation of our Indigenous women, our daughters, sisters, aunts and mothers going missing or being murdered.

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Appendix A

Focus Group Question List

- How is your agency advancing culturally safe services?
- What is working well? What have some of the successes been?
- What are the challenges, barriers, and gaps in providing these services?
- What are some key learnings or recommendations?
- How is your agency providing alternatives to removal promoting intact community and cultural connections?
- What is working well? What have some of the successes been?
- What are the challenges, barriers, and gaps in providing these services?
- What are some key learnings or recommendations?
- How is your agency advancing supports for youth transitioning to adulthood?
- What is working well? What have some of the successes been?
- What are the challenges, barriers, and gaps in providing these services?
- What are some key learnings or recommendations?
- How is your agency ensuring the safety of Indigenous women, children and LGBTQ2S+ in all programs and services provided?
- What is working well? What have some of the successes been?
- What are the challenges, barriers, and gaps in providing these services?
- What are some key learnings or recommendations?