

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# UNDERSTANDING INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' ENGAGEMENT WITH LAW ENFORCEMENT: A STUDY OF CONTACT AND CONFIDENCE

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## Abstract

The relationship between Indigenous peoples and law enforcement agencies has been a subject of considerable attention, particularly due to historical and ongoing issues surrounding systemic discrimination, cultural misunderstandings, and a lack of trust. This study explores the dynamics of Indigenous peoples' engagement with law enforcement, focusing on the extent and nature of contact, as well as the levels of confidence and trust in police services. Through surveys and interviews with Indigenous individuals and communities, the research examines how factors such as personal experience with law enforcement, perceived biases, and cultural differences shape their interactions with police officers. The findings highlight significant disparities in the ways Indigenous peoples view law enforcement, with many expressing a lack of confidence in the police, particularly in relation to issues of accountability and fairness. The study also explores potential pathways for improving police-Indigenous relations, including cultural sensitivity training for law enforcement, community policing models, and greater involvement of Indigenous voices in shaping law enforcement policies. Understanding these relationships is critical to fostering safer and more equitable interactions between Indigenous communities and law enforcement agencies.

**Keywords** Indigenous Peoples, Law Enforcement, Police Relations, Contact, Confidence, Trust, Systemic Discrimination, Cultural Sensitivity, Community Policing, Accountability, Bias.

## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Indigenous peoples and law enforcement agencies has long been shaped by a complex history of systemic inequality, cultural misunderstandings, and marginalization. In many regions, Indigenous communities have historically faced disproportionate levels of policing, criminalization, and violence, creating a deep-seated mistrust of law enforcement. This mistrust is rooted in the legacy of colonization, where police forces were often used as instruments of control, forcibly displacing Indigenous populations, suppressing cultural practices, and undermining Indigenous sovereignty. As a result, the perception of police as adversaries, rather than protectors, persists in many Indigenous communities.

In contemporary society, despite efforts to improve police-community relations, Indigenous peoples continue to experience significant disparities in their interactions with law enforcement. Issues such as racial profiling, the overrepresentation of Indigenous individuals in the criminal justice system, and a lack of culturally competent policing have all contributed to a strained relationship between Indigenous communities and police forces. The consequences of these strained relations are far-reaching, affecting not only public safety but also the broader social and economic well-being of Indigenous peoples.

Understanding the nature and extent of Indigenous peoples' engagement with law enforcement is

critical for identifying ways to bridge the divide between these communities and police services. This study aims to explore the level of contact Indigenous peoples have with law enforcement and to assess their confidence in the police. By examining factors such as personal experiences, perceptions of bias and discrimination, and the cultural competence of police officers, the research seeks to uncover the underlying causes of mistrust and identify potential solutions for improving police-Indigenous relations.

Ultimately, this research will contribute to the ongoing dialogue about how law enforcement agencies can better serve Indigenous communities, promoting fairness, accountability, and mutual respect. Addressing the concerns of Indigenous peoples and fostering more positive, productive interactions with law enforcement is essential for building safer, more inclusive societies.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to explore Indigenous peoples' engagement with law enforcement, specifically focusing on their contact with police and the levels of confidence and trust they have in law enforcement agencies. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods allows for a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing Indigenous peoples' interactions with police, including their personal experiences, perceptions of bias or discrimination, and attitudes toward police services.

**Study Population and Sampling:** The target population for this study consists of Indigenous peoples residing in urban and rural areas, with a focus on communities that have experienced varying levels of engagement with law enforcement. To ensure diverse representation, a purposive sampling method was used, selecting participants from different age groups, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The study includes individuals from multiple Indigenous groups to reflect the diversity of experiences within these communities. Additionally, the study seeks to capture both those who have had direct contact with law enforcement and those who may not have, to compare and contrast their

perceptions of police services.

**Data Collection:** The data collection process involved two primary methods: structured surveys and semi-structured interviews.

**Surveys:** A standardized questionnaire was developed to assess participants' contact with law enforcement, levels of trust, and perceptions of police conduct. The survey included both closed-ended questions (e.g., Likert scale items assessing confidence in police, frequency of police encounters, and perceived fairness of law enforcement practices) and open-ended questions to capture additional insights into their experiences. The surveys were distributed both in-person and online, depending on the accessibility and preferences of the participants.

**Interviews:** In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of participants to further explore personal experiences with law enforcement. The interviews provided an opportunity for respondents to share their narratives in a more detailed and open-ended manner, allowing for a deeper understanding of the nuances behind their interactions with police. Topics covered in the interviews included personal stories of encounters with law enforcement, perceived racial or cultural bias, and suggestions for improving police-Indigenous relations.

**Data Analysis:** Data analysis was carried out in two phases: quantitative and qualitative.

**Quantitative Analysis:** Survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores. This provided an overall picture of the level of contact Indigenous peoples have with law enforcement and the general confidence they have in police services. Comparative analysis was conducted to assess how confidence levels varied by factors such as age, gender, geographical location, and past experiences with law enforcement.

**Qualitative Analysis:** Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes and patterns in the participants' responses. Thematic coding allowed for the identification of recurring issues related to police contact, trust, and perceptions of bias or discrimination. This

qualitative approach provided rich, contextual insights into the reasons behind the survey results and highlighted the personal and collective experiences that shape Indigenous peoples' views on law enforcement.

**Ethical Considerations:** Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to the commencement of the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring that they were aware of their right to participate voluntarily, withdraw at any time, and remain anonymous. To ensure confidentiality, all personal information was kept secure, and identifying details were excluded from the final analysis. Special care was taken to create a culturally safe and respectful environment for participants, especially when discussing sensitive topics related to their experiences with law enforcement.

**Limitations:** While the study aims to gather a broad range of perspectives, limitations include potential biases in the sample selection, as not all Indigenous individuals may have been reached. Additionally, the study's reliance on self-reported data may be influenced by social desirability bias, particularly in relation to sensitive topics such as trust in law enforcement. Efforts were made to minimize these biases through anonymous surveys and by ensuring participants felt comfortable and safe in sharing their experiences during interviews.

This methodology combines both structured and open-ended data collection techniques, providing a comprehensive understanding of the intersection between Indigenous peoples and law enforcement. The mixed-methods approach allows for an in-depth exploration of not only the frequency and nature of police contact but also the underlying factors that shape Indigenous peoples' confidence in law enforcement and their experiences with policing practices.

## **RESULTS**

The study involved 250 Indigenous participants from urban and rural areas, providing valuable insights into their engagement with law enforcement, their levels of confidence in police, and the factors influencing these dynamics. The

results showed clear patterns regarding police contact, trust, and perceptions of bias or discrimination:

### **Contact with Law Enforcement:**

**Frequency of Contact:** Approximately 45% of respondents reported having regular or occasional contact with law enforcement, often due to routine checks, legal matters, or involvement in community-related incidents. The remaining 55% reported limited or no direct contact with police, particularly among those living in more isolated rural areas.

**Reasons for Contact:** Those who had frequent interactions with law enforcement cited issues such as public order violations, traffic-related matters, or disputes with neighbors. A small but significant percentage of respondents (12%) also described encounters linked to their Indigenous identity, leading to feelings of being targeted or stereotyped.

### **Confidence in Law Enforcement:**

**Trust Levels:** Confidence in law enforcement varied significantly among participants. Only 35% of respondents expressed confidence in police to handle issues fairly and without bias. Among this group, those who had positive experiences with officers, particularly those who received culturally sensitive interactions, reported higher levels of trust.

**Distrust and Perceived Bias:** Around 50% of participants reported a general lack of confidence in law enforcement, attributing this distrust to historical experiences of discrimination and criminalization, as well as ongoing perceptions of racial profiling. Many respondents noted the perception that Indigenous peoples were treated unfairly by police, with some recounting instances where they felt mistreated or misunderstood due to their cultural background.

### **Perceptions of Police Conduct:**

**Cultural Insensitivity:** Approximately 60% of respondents felt that police officers lacked cultural awareness or sensitivity when engaging with Indigenous individuals or communities. A significant number of participants (40%)

expressed the view that police officers were not trained to understand the unique challenges faced by Indigenous peoples, particularly in relation to language barriers, cultural practices, and historical trauma.

**Suggestions for Improvement:** Many respondents suggested the need for greater police training on Indigenous cultures, as well as more community-based policing initiatives that involve Indigenous leaders in decision-making processes. About 70% of participants supported the idea of incorporating more Indigenous voices into police policies and practices, particularly when addressing community safety and law enforcement strategies.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal significant gaps in the relationship between Indigenous peoples and law enforcement, particularly concerning the level of trust and perceptions of fairness. The low levels of confidence in police and widespread perceptions of bias are consistent with broader trends observed in other regions with high Indigenous populations. The study highlights that Indigenous peoples often view law enforcement not as protectors of public safety but as institutions that perpetuate historical injustices and ongoing systemic discrimination.

The results indicate that cultural insensitivity is a major factor contributing to strained police-Indigenous relations. Many Indigenous individuals feel that their cultural identity is not respected or understood by law enforcement officers, which exacerbates feelings of distrust. This aligns with research showing that cultural competence in policing can significantly improve relationships with marginalized communities. The lack of proper cultural training among police officers is a critical issue that needs to be addressed if police are to build better relationships with Indigenous peoples.

The study also revealed that while some Indigenous individuals have positive interactions with law enforcement, these instances are the exception rather than the rule. This suggests that improving police-community relations requires a systemic change that goes beyond individual officer behavior. The introduction of community-

based policing models, where police work more closely with Indigenous communities and leaders, could be a productive avenue for improving relations. This approach could foster trust and ensure that police practices are more aligned with the needs and perspectives of Indigenous peoples.

Furthermore, the study's findings suggest that the experiences of Indigenous peoples with law enforcement are deeply influenced by broader historical and societal contexts, including the legacies of colonization, forced assimilation, and marginalization. These historical factors continue to shape how Indigenous peoples view law enforcement institutions, making it essential to address not just current practices but also the underlying historical dynamics that contribute to distrust.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the study underscores the deep-seated mistrust between Indigenous peoples and law enforcement, driven by historical injustices, perceptions of bias, and ongoing cultural insensitivity within police forces. While there are instances of positive interactions, the overall relationship remains strained, with many Indigenous individuals feeling that law enforcement does not adequately serve or protect their communities. To improve these relationships, it is crucial for law enforcement agencies to implement culturally sensitive training, engage in community-based policing, and prioritize the involvement of Indigenous voices in shaping policing policies and practices.

Addressing the concerns of Indigenous communities requires a multi-faceted approach that not only seeks to improve the conduct of individual officers but also works to reform institutional practices and policies that perpetuate inequality. Long-term change will depend on building trust through open dialogue, meaningful engagement, and systemic reforms that acknowledge and address the historical and cultural complexities at play.

Ultimately, fostering a relationship based on mutual respect, understanding, and collaboration between Indigenous peoples and law enforcement

is key to ensuring safer and more inclusive communities for all.

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