

Systemic Failures and the Pursuit of Accountability: An Expert Analysis of Royal Canadian Mounted Police Misconduct

Executive Summary

The history of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) is intrinsically linked to its function as an instrument of Canadian state policy, a role that has frequently superseded its mandate as an impartial law enforcement agency. The analysis within this report demonstrates that the institution's foundational mandate—established with the North-West Mounted Police (NWMP) in 1873—was rooted in the assertion of colonial control over Western Canada. This historical function created a culture of institutional misconduct that manifests today in the form of systemic racism against Indigenous and racialized peoples, a persistent lack of accountability for officer misconduct, and a deeply entrenched environment of gender- and sexuality-based discrimination.

The report details how the RCMP's role as a *de facto* colonial administrator was exemplified by its enforcement of the *Indian Act* and its central involvement in the forced relocation of Inuit communities. These historical injustices have created a multi-generational legacy of profound distrust that directly contributes to the disproportionate overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in serious and fatal police encounters today. This pattern is further evidenced by a critical examination of high-profile cases such as the deaths of Robert Dziekański and Colten Boushie, where independent oversight bodies identified significant investigatory failures and a pervasive lack of accountability.

Internally, the RCMP's culture has historically tolerated and normalized discrimination, as seen in the systematic harassment and dismissal of 2SLGBTQ+ members during the *LGBT Purge* and the decades-long pattern of sexual harassment that led to multi-million dollar class-action settlements. While the RCMP has publicly committed to a comprehensive suite of reforms, including new training programs and modernized disciplinary measures, a critical chasm remains between these announced initiatives and tangible, lasting cultural change. The continued limitations on the authority of external oversight bodies, such as the Civilian Review and Complaints Commission (CRCC), suggest that the institution retains a powerful capacity for internal protection that may undermine the efficacy of its own reform efforts. True and sustainable change, therefore, requires not only internal transformation but also the

empowerment of truly independent external mechanisms of accountability.

1. A Foundation of Enforcement and Control: The Historical Mandate of the RCMP

1.1 The Genesis of the North-West Mounted Police: Law Enforcement or Colonial Agent?

The North-West Mounted Police (NWMP), the precursor to the modern RCMP, was established in 1873 with an initial force of 300 constables to police the vast North-West Territories, a region that now encompasses the provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta.¹ This federal law enforcement agency, created under the direction of Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald, was tasked with a set of duties that extended far beyond standard policing.² Its mandate included curbing the illegal whiskey trade, serving as a border patrol, and overseeing agreements with Indigenous peoples.²

The NWMP's founding purpose was not simply to establish impartial law and order, but to serve a direct political and colonial mandate. The force was explicitly created to "assert Canadian control over the North-West Territories and prevent American encroachment on or annexation of the region".¹ This founding objective reveals that the institution was conceived as an agent of the state's geopolitical agenda. The force's initial success in suppressing the American whiskey trade in 1874 and 1875 did engender a temporary trust with First Nations leaders, such as the Blackfoot chief Isapo-Muxica and the Kainai chief Mékaisto.¹ This trust, however, was a tactical byproduct of a shared interest and served to facilitate the negotiation of Treaties 6 and 7.¹ The relationship between the police and Indigenous peoples deteriorated in the years that followed as the NWMP was increasingly expected to enforce federal policies that had long-term and damaging consequences for Indigenous communities.¹ This transition from a point of shared interest to an instrument of enforced, assimilationist policy established a clear precedent for the force's function as an extension of government will rather than a neutral arbiter of justice.

1.2 The Instruments of Assimilation: The RCMP's Role in Residential Schools and the *Indian Act*

The RCMP's role in the Canadian Indian residential school system was a central and legally mandated component of a policy of cultural genocide.³ The *Indian Act* legally appointed RCMP officers as "truant officers" to enforce attendance and

return children to the schools, a function the force performed for decades.⁴ The RCMP assisted Indian Agents in the removal of children from their homes and communities, sometimes forcibly.⁵ This direct participation in the system's core function positioned the force as a key enforcer of a scheme designed to "kill the Indian in the child" by severing children from their families, language, and culture.³

The devastating effects of this role are far-reaching and continue to have a significant impact on Indigenous communities.³ Many former students of residential schools developed a deep-seated fear and distrust of the police, a legacy that persists and complicates contemporary relations.⁵ For generations, this fear has prevented many Indigenous individuals from seeking police assistance, with former students confirming that they and the schools would have never told the RCMP of the widespread abuse that was occurring.⁵ The RCMP has formally apologized for its involvement in this system on several occasions, with Commissioner Giuliano Zaccardelli in 2004 and Commissioner Bob Paulson in 2014 publicly expressing regret for the force's role and the abuse that took place.⁴ These apologies serve as a formal acknowledgment of the institutional wrongdoing and its lasting impact.

1.3 A Tool of Government Policy: The Forced Relocation of Inuit Communities

The forced relocation of Inuit communities serves as another powerful example of the RCMP's historical function as a tool of paternalistic and destructive government policy.⁷ Acting as the de facto government in the isolated Arctic, the RCMP played a central role in orchestrating and enforcing a series of relocations, most notably the move of Inuit from Inukjuak, Quebec, to the High Arctic in the 1950s.⁴ The force used "intimidation, coercion, and control" to enforce these removals, often approaching individuals rather than entire communities, making them feel compelled to move.⁷

The motivations behind these relocations were not to improve the lives of the Inuit, but to serve the interests of the state.⁸ Official reasons included asserting Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic and reducing the administrative costs of government services.⁷ The consequences were disastrous, as relocatees were moved to a much harsher, unfamiliar environment and faced starvation.⁷ The RCMP's power in the North was considered "extraordinary," lacking the external checks and controls that existed in Southern Canada.⁷ This unchecked authority led to abuses, such as the criminalization of Inuit for stealing food to survive, a necessity caused by the very policies the RCMP was enforcing.⁷ This history of an institutional monopoly on power and the enforcement of policies that inflicted harm, rather than protected, reinforces a perception of the RCMP as an occupying or controlling force in many Indigenous communities. This factor directly contributes to the contemporary issues of a lack of trust and cooperation that continue to define the relationship today.

2. Systemic Racism and Disproportionate Impact: Indigenous Peoples and Law Enforcement

2.1 A Legacy of Mistrust: From Historical Roles to Contemporary Relations

The historical foundation of the RCMP's relationship with Indigenous peoples has created a legacy of distrust that directly impacts contemporary law enforcement. Data from British Columbia's Independent Investigations Office (IIO) demonstrates this enduring pattern. According to the head of the IIO, Jessica Berglund, Indigenous people are significantly overrepresented in investigations involving police use of force that results in serious injury or death.⁹ While Indigenous peoples make up approximately 6% of the provincial population, they account for 18% of the IIO's investigations.⁹ This overrepresentation is even more pronounced in firearm-related incidents, where Indigenous individuals represented nearly 29% of affected persons.⁹

These quantitative findings are a direct, measurable consequence of the historical legacy of the RCMP's role as a colonial agent. As documented by the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG), a lack of trust between Indigenous communities and police is a persistent issue, and prejudice and stereotypes about Indigenous peoples negatively influence police investigations.¹⁰ This historical trauma has resulted in many Indigenous people feeling uncomfortable coming forward to police, an issue acknowledged by the IIO.⁹ The causal link is direct: a history of colonial enforcement has fostered an institutional culture that perpetuates negative outcomes for Indigenous peoples, transforming historical distrust into a contemporary pattern of disproportionate harm.

2.2 High-Profile Cases as Flashpoints: An In-Depth Analysis

2.2.1 The Death of Robert Dziekański: The Use of Force and Institutional Lack of Accountability

The death of Polish immigrant Robert Dziekański at Vancouver International Airport in 2007 became a pivotal case that exposed systemic issues within the RCMP.¹¹ Arriving in Canada to join his mother, Dziekański, who did not speak English, became agitated and frustrated after spending nearly ten hours in the airport's secure area due to difficulties with customs and

immigration.¹¹ When RCMP officers were dispatched to the scene, they deployed a conducted energy weapon (Taser) a total of five times within 30 seconds of their arrival.¹¹ Dziekański died shortly after, and the B.C. Coroner's Report concluded that the cause of death was cardiac arrhythmia resulting from the Taser deployment and the physical altercation.¹¹

The investigation and its outcomes highlighted a profound lack of institutional accountability. While the death was classified as a homicide, no criminal charges were approved against the officers involved.¹² The Civilian Review and Complaints Commission (CRCC) for the RCMP, an independent oversight agency, found significant issues with the subsequent RCMP investigation, including ambiguity over whether it was a criminal investigation and improper handling of evidence.¹² The CRCC report recommended that all investigations involving death, serious injury, or sexual assault be referred to an external police force to avoid conflicts of interest, a recommendation that remains unfulfilled.¹²

2.2.2 The Killing of Colten Boushie: Investigatory Failures and Fueling Racial Tensions

The 2016 killing of Colten Boushie, a young Cree man in rural Saskatchewan, revealed a similar pattern of institutional failure.¹³ An investigation by the CRCC found that the RCMP's actions were both discriminatory and insensitive.¹³ The force's death notification to Boushie's family was described as a tactical approach involving seven armed officers, a response the CRCC found would not have been used for a non-Indigenous family.¹⁴ Officers also asked Boushie's mother if she had been drinking and smelled her breath after she reacted to the news of her son's death, an act the CRCC deemed "insensitive and discriminatory".¹³

The CRCC reports also highlighted significant investigatory failures, including leaving the vehicle where Boushie was killed uncovered, which resulted in the destruction of crucial evidence by rain.¹³ Furthermore, the RCMP's initial press release on the incident was widely criticized for fueling racial tensions.¹³ The release disproportionately focused on allegations of theft, which provided "just enough prejudicial information for the average reader to draw their own conclusions that the shooting was somehow justified".¹³ This demonstrates how institutional communication can exacerbate racial divides and undermine the perception of justice. Both the Dziekański and Boushie cases, though distinct, reveal a consistent pattern of institutional failure: a reliance on excessive force, profound investigatory shortcomings, and a tendency to prioritize the protection of officers and the institution over a fair and impartial process. The outcomes of these cases reinforce the perception that the system protects its own, a factor that profoundly erodes public trust.

Case Name	Date	Civilian Oversight Body	Key Finding	Investigatory Failures Noted	Public/Legal Outcome	Institutional Response
Robert Dziekański	October 2007	Civilian Review and	The cause of death was a	Ambiguity in the RCMP's	Death was classified as	No criminal charges for

		Complaints Commission (CRCC)	cardiac arrhythmia resulting from Taser deployments.	criminal investigation; improper handling of evidence.	a homicide, but no criminal charges were approved against the officers involved.	officers; the CRCC's recommendation for external investigations in such cases remains unfulfilled.
Colten Boushie	August 2016	Civilian Review and Complaints Commission (CRCC)	The death notification and treatment of Boushie's family was discriminatory.	Leaving the crime scene vehicle uncovered; allowing witnesses to coordinate their stories; destroying radio transmissions.	The RCMP's press release was criticized for fueling racial tensions. A final legal outcome for the officers was not detailed.	The RCMP accepted the CRCC's finding that the death notification was discriminatory; initial press release fueled racial tensions; the National Police Federation condemned the CRCC's report, claiming it disrespected the RCMP.

Table 1: A Comparative Analysis of High-Profile Cases

2.3 Seeking Justice and Accountability: The RCMP Racism Class Action Lawsuit

The RCMP's internal culture is now a subject of a significant legal challenge in the form of a class action lawsuit filed in 2020.¹⁵ Initiated by former Aboriginal constable Marjorie Hudson,

the lawsuit alleges "widespread systemic racism" and a "paramilitary culture" that enables abuse of authority and a lack of accountability.¹⁵ The lawsuit claims that racialized employees have been subjected to both overt and systemic racism, including explicit comments and discriminatory workplace practices.¹⁵

The legal action alleges that non-racialized members of equivalent rank and experience were assigned to more complex files, received better training, had more positive performance reviews, and were more likely to be promoted.¹⁵ The lawsuit points to the RCMP's paramilitary culture as a key factor in fostering an environment where accountability is lacking.¹⁵ This lawsuit is a critical legal challenge that directly links the historical colonial mandate to contemporary workplace discrimination. The fact that the RCMP's motions to stay the lawsuit have been denied by federal courts and appeals courts indicates a legal recognition of the seriousness of the allegations and the potential for large-scale institutional failure.¹⁵

3. The Institutionalization of Discrimination: The RCMP and LGBTQ+ Communities

3.1 The LGBT Purge: A Systematic Campaign of Harassment and Dismissal

Between the 1950s and the mid-1990s, the RCMP was an active participant in the "LGBT Purge," a systematic campaign of employment discrimination against 2SLGBTQ+ employees of the Canadian government.¹⁶ This campaign, which was a matter of "policy and sanctioned practice," resulted in thousands of people being investigated, harassed, and fired from their jobs.¹⁷ The RCMP's role went beyond mere compliance; a controversial "fruit machine" project, encouraged by the then-Commissioner, was initiated to identify and screen out homosexuals from government service.¹⁸

This systematic campaign of institutional discrimination demonstrates the RCMP's historical role in enforcing federal policies of social and moral control. This role positioned the force not as a protector of all citizens but as an enforcer of state-sanctioned prejudice. The long-term consequences of the Purge were profound, with a generation of people experiencing psychological trauma, ruined careers, and a loss of self-esteem.¹⁷ The RCMP has since apologized for its role in enforcing these "historically unjust laws and policies," acknowledging the pain and trauma caused to its own members and their families.¹⁶

3.2 Legal and Financial Redress: Examining the Class Action Settlements

The RCMP's history of discrimination has been the subject of several landmark legal settlements. The force was a defendant in the historic LGBT Purge class action lawsuit, which resulted in a \$145 million settlement in 2018 to compensate victims.¹⁷ In addition to this, the Merlo-Davidson Class Action Settlement, approved in 2017, provided \$125.4 million in compensation to over 2,300 women for gender- and sexual-orientation-based harassment and discrimination within the force from 1974 to 2017.¹⁶ A subsequent settlement, the Tiller settlement, was reached in 2019 to compensate women in non-policing roles who also experienced harassment, with another \$20.1 million paid out to over 400 claimants.¹⁶ The sheer scale and financial scope of these class action settlements represent a definitive legal verdict on the pervasiveness of the RCMP's internal culture of misconduct. The fact that multiple lawsuits were certified as class actions, rather than individual cases, indicates that the courts recognized the discrimination and harassment as a shared, systemic experience.¹⁹ The combined financial liability of over \$165 million is a clear acknowledgment of the deep-seated institutional failures and the immense harm caused by a culture that tolerated and normalized abuse for decades.

3.3 Path to Reconciliation: Apologies and Modern Institutional Policy

In recent years, the RCMP has undertaken significant steps toward reconciliation and inclusion. Following the Prime Minister's formal apology for the LGBT Purge in 2017, the RCMP has also issued its own apology for its role in enforcing these unjust laws.¹⁶ On an institutional level, the RCMP has launched a new Pride Employee Network to support 2SLGBTQ+ employees and has introduced a session on transgender experiences at its Depot training academy.²¹ The force has also added gender-affirming care as a benefit for officers, a move that aligns with its commitment to creating a more modern and inclusive workforce.²¹ These modern reforms represent a tangible shift from an institution that actively discriminated to one that is, at least on paper, working toward inclusion. These new policies stand in stark contrast to the force's historical role. However, it is essential to acknowledge that these are recent developments, and their long-term impact on the institutional culture remains to be seen. A truly inclusive culture requires not only new policies but a fundamental shift in the attitudes and behaviours of all members, which can only be measured over time.

4. An Internal Crucible: Culture, Harassment, and the Struggle for Accountability

4.1 Pervasive Misconduct: Sexual Harassment and Gender-Based

Discrimination

Despite public apologies and legal settlements, the RCMP continues to struggle with allegations of sexual misconduct and a lack of accountability.²² Multiple women officers, including Janet Merlo, Sherry Lee Benson-Podolchuk, and Catherine Galliford, have filed claims detailing persistent sexual harassment over the course of their careers.¹⁹ A review of discipline decisions revealed that most Mounties cited for sexual misconduct were allowed to keep their jobs, with punishments ranging from pay cuts to transfers.²²

One particularly telling case involved an officer who was demoted and transferred after he rubbed the inside of a co-worker's legs and touched her vagina. The conduct board ruled that this was a case of an "honest, but mistaken, belief in consent" and cited his prior "strong performance throughout his career".²² This approach, which prioritizes the offender's career over the victim's well-being, signals a tolerance for misconduct within the institution's culture. The force's guiding principle in discipline is to ensure an incident does not happen again, with an emphasis on "remedial, educated measures versus being solely punitive in nature".²² This approach, however, has been criticized as inadequate, with a former Supreme Court justice, Michel Bastarache, noting that alleged victims of sexual misconduct felt the RCMP let perpetrators "slide with next to no 'consequences'".²³ The lack of consistent and proportionate punishment for serious misconduct creates a permissive environment where harassment is not only unpunished but is sometimes even excused.

Lawsuit Name	Date Initiated	Class of Claimants	Allegations	Settlement Amount	Current Status/Key Outcome
Merlo-Davidson	2012	Female RCMP employees	Gender and sexual orientation-based harassment and discrimination.	\$125.4 million	Settlement approved in 2017, resulting in compensation for 2,304 claimants.
Tiller	2017	Women in non-policing roles at the RCMP	Gender and sexual orientation-based harassment and discrimination.	\$20.1 million	Settlement reached in 2019, covering a period from 1974 to 2019, providing compensation to 417 claimants.
LGBT Purge	2016	2SLGBTQ+ federal	Systematic employment	Up to \$110 million for	Historic settlement

		employees, including RCMP members	discrimination, harassment, and dismissal.	victims	reached in 2018; includes financial compensation, a federal apology, and funding for reconciliation measures.
RCMP Racism Class Action	July 2020	Racialized individuals who worked for or with the RCMP	Widespread systemic racism and a paramilitary culture.	Seeks compensation and accountability	The RCMP's motion to stay the lawsuit was denied in 2023, and a subsequent appeal was dismissed in 2024. The lawsuit is currently proceeding toward a certification hearing.

Table 2: Key Class Action Settlements Against the RCMP

5. A Critical Analysis of Contemporary Reforms and Modernization Efforts

5.1 Strategic Shifts: The RCMP's Vision for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

In response to sustained public pressure and legal action, the RCMP has embarked on a comprehensive modernization plan, which includes a formal Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy.²⁴ The strategy is designed to create an inclusive organization by reducing workplace and service delivery barriers for underrepresented communities, including Black,

Indigenous, and racialized individuals, as well as women, persons with disabilities, and 2SLGBTQ+ communities.²⁵ The force has established a new Anti-Racism Unit and has committed to developing its first Anti-Racism Strategy with a focus on creating a representative workforce and ensuring psychological safety for employees.²⁴ The RCMP is also developing a performance measurement framework to track its progress and is releasing annual progress reports to ensure accountability.²⁴

5.2 New Paradigms in Recruitment and Training

The RCMP has implemented new initiatives aimed at modernizing its recruitment and training to address historical biases. The Diverse and Inclusive Pre-Cadet Experience (DICE) is a new program that focuses on removing systemic barriers for racialized and underrepresented individuals who want to join the force.²⁵ The RCMP has also introduced new mandatory training courses, including "Uniting Against Racism" and "Cultural Awareness and Humility," to educate employees on the history of racism in Canada and Indigenous experiences.²⁵ To inform future policies, the RCMP is piloting a race-based data collection initiative at four pilot sites to "better understand the experiences of Indigenous, Black and other racialized individuals and communities in their interactions with RCMP frontline officers".²⁴ The RCMP has stated that preliminary results from a pilot project on implicit bias testing suggest that applicants show low levels of bias.²⁶ However, many of these efforts are self-directed and focus on internal mechanisms. Without a significant shift toward genuine, external accountability, a deeply ingrained institutional culture may remain resistant to change. The pre-existing "paramilitary culture" could present a risk that new recruits will be socialized into the very environment the reforms are designed to change. This raises the question of whether these reforms are addressing the symptoms of a broken culture rather than its root cause.

5.3 Enhancing Oversight and Accountability

The RCMP has made changes to its disciplinary process, with the modernized *RCMP Act* and a new Conduct Measures Guide that includes "presumptive dismissal for serious sexual misconduct".²⁸ The force states that this new process is intended to be more "responsive, timely and effective" and focuses on "remedial, corrective and educative solutions".²⁸ However, the persistent limitations of external oversight bodies demonstrate a crucial gap in accountability. The Civilian Review and Complaints Commission (CRCC) for the RCMP, an independent agency created to investigate public complaints, has a limited scope of authority.³⁰ The CRCC's reports on high-profile cases have not led to criminal charges for officers, and the RCMP Commissioner must approve the distribution of certain reports, a critical conflict of interest.³¹ The CRCC's past recommendation for an external police force to investigate all RCMP incidents involving death, serious injury, or sexual assault remains a vital

unfulfilled reform.¹² Without this level of external control, the RCMP's internal culture of protection will likely persist, undermining the efficacy of all other reforms and reinforcing public and legal perceptions of a lack of genuine accountability.

Conclusion: A Path Forward

The analysis presented in this report confirms that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police's foundational history as an agent of state-sanctioned colonial and social control is the primary cause of its current systemic issues with racism and misconduct. This is not a matter of a few bad actors but rather an issue of institutional identity, where a paramilitary culture of enforcement and internal protection has consistently overshadowed a public-facing mandate of service and justice.

The report also highlights a significant paradox: while the RCMP is actively implementing new programs and policies designed to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion, the ongoing findings of independent oversight bodies and the progression of class-action lawsuits suggest that these changes have not yet translated into a fundamental cultural shift. The continued overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in serious police incidents and the historical pattern of lenient discipline for misconduct underscore the profound distance between the institution's public promises and its on-the-ground reality.

To achieve sustainable and meaningful change, the RCMP must move beyond self-directed reforms and embrace a path of genuine, externally mandated accountability. This path forward requires:

1. **Empowering External Oversight:** Granting external oversight bodies like the Civilian Review and Complaints Commission full investigative and disciplinary authority, free from any RCMP influence. This includes the ability to conduct and lead investigations into all incidents of serious injury, death, and sexual assault involving RCMP members.
2. **Adopting a New Policing Paradigm:** Transitioning away from the traditional, militarized, and reactive model of policing toward a community-based approach that prioritizes de-escalation, cultural sensitivity, and partnerships with social support networks.
3. **Maintaining Legal and Public Pressure:** Continuing to hold the institution accountable through legal actions and public scrutiny to ensure that the RCMP's promises of reform are not empty gestures. This sustained pressure is critical to ensuring that the institution's response is not a temporary reaction to crises but a permanent commitment to transformation.

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