

HOUSE of WOLF & Associates

Our Position: Reclaiming Safety, Reclaiming Authority

Colonial policing has become a system of **ballooning costs and declining value**. RCMP budgets rise year after year, driving deficits higher, yet Indigenous communities remain the least safe in Canada—over-policed in public, under-protected at home, and too often forced to step in when police fail to respond.

Indigenous Nations are already delivering what colonial systems cannot. Across Yukon and beyond, Nations have built community safety officers, Elder patrols, wellness liaisons, and grassroots patrols. These approaches share a core principle: **safety is reclaimed when it is defined, led, and delivered by the community itself**. They are more effective, more trusted, and far more fiscally responsible than continuing to inflate colonial policing. The question is no longer whether these models work—the evidence is already there.

The legal duty is clear. In 2024, the Supreme Court of Canada affirmed that governments must honourably fund Indigenous safety services as part of inherent self-government rights. UNDRIP and the TRC reinforce this obligation.

Our position is simple:

- **Recognize Indigenous jurisdiction** in safety and justice through legislation and agreements (TRC Call to Action #42, UNDRIP).
- **Ensure Indigenous access to data**. Nations must have direct, timely control over justice, safety, and wellness information.
- **Establish sustainable funding**. Multi-year, statutory, needs-based, and equitable to provincial policing standards.
- **Legislate First Nations policing as an essential service**—with flexibility to include community safety officers, guardians, and prevention services designed by and for communities.
- **Invest in capacity building and training**—support Indigenous-led certifications, peer mentoring, and exchanges across Nations.
- **Integrate community wellness**—link safety initiatives with housing, addictions, youth engagement, and healing supports.
- **Implement Indigenous-led monitoring and evaluation**—using measures that reflect community-defined outcomes, not just colonial crime stats.

Investing in Indigenous safety is not optional. It is a constitutional duty, a fiscally responsible choice, and the only path to safer communities for Indigenous Nations and for Canada as a whole.

Reclaiming Indigenous Authority in Community Safety and Justice

Introduction

Indigenous nations across Canada are asserting their authority in the realm of justice and community safety. Rather than relying solely on colonial policing systems or waiting for institutions like the RCMP to withdraw, First Nations are reclaiming a seat at the justice table by developing their own community-driven safety initiatives. These initiatives seek to complement existing policing – not merely tweak colonial models – through approaches grounded in Indigenous values, cultures, and self-governance. The goal is sustained safety and wellness funding under Indigenous control, allowing nations to build their own systems alongside mainstream ones. This white paper examines the shortcomings of colonial policing in Indigenous communities, the rise of Indigenous-led community safety programs, and the legal and policy imperatives – including a recent Supreme Court decision – that underscore the need for sustained funding and recognition of Indigenous jurisdiction in justice.

Legacy of Colonial Policing and Its Limits

For over a century, public safety in Indigenous communities has been dominated by externally imposed forces (e.g. the RCMP in much of Canada's North and West). This colonial policing model has historically been more focused on controlling Indigenous peoples than on protecting themⁱ. From its origins, policing in Canada was “literally created to ensure Indigenous peoples did not slow down the process of land theft that led to the emergence of so-called Canada”ⁱⁱ. The legacy of this mandate endures today in distrust and stark outcomes: Indigenous people are over-policed yet under-protected in their own homelands. The national inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls found systemic police failures contributed to a pattern of violence against Indigenous womenⁱⁱⁱ. Indigenous communities often face slow or culturally insensitive responses to emergencies, and in some cases must step up themselves during crises when police response falls short. In Winnipeg, after police refused to search for the remains of Indigenous women in a landfill, it was family and community members who organized a camp and search efforts, highlighting that true safety for Indigenous people frequently comes from the community rather than the police^{iv}.

Importantly, expanding colonial policing has not yielded safer Indigenous communities. Higher police budgets and presence do not equate to increased safety for Indigenous peoples^v. In fact, more policing in public spaces can drain resources from social supports that would address root

causes of crime^{vi}. The prevailing sentiment in many Indigenous communities is that “police don’t keep us safe”, especially given ongoing incidents of apathy or violence by police towards Indigenous victims^{vii}. This context has fueled calls for new approaches centered on Indigenous self-determination, where justice and safety are delivered by Indigenous peoples for their communities.

Calls for Self-Determination in Justice

Recognizing the failures of the status quo, national inquiries and Indigenous leaders have long advocated for Indigenous self-determination in justice. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Call to Action #42 urges federal, provincial, and territorial governments to recognize and implement Indigenous justice systems in accordance with Indigenous rights, the Constitution, and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)^{viii}. In essence, reconciliation in the justice realm means honoring Indigenous laws, courts, and community-based resolutions rather than forcing sole reliance on colonial institutions. UNDRIP – now affirmed by Canadian law – reinforces that Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their own legal institutions and customs (UNDRIP, Article 34)^{ix}. These principles acknowledge that Indigenous nations are best positioned to address safety challenges in ways that reflect their cultural values and community needs.

In practice, some Indigenous communities have begun exercising inherent jurisdiction over justice. For example, the Teslin Tlingit Council (Yukon) negotiated an *Administration of Justice Agreement* in 2011 that empowers it to operate a Peacemaker Court for adjudicating disputes under Tlingit laws^x. This historic agreement – the first of its kind in Canada – allows Teslin Tlingit to resolve matters using restorative Tlingit principles, demonstrating a tangible assertion of Indigenous judicial authority. Many other self-governing First Nations in Yukon and elsewhere have frameworks in their modern treaties to similarly take on justice responsibilities when ready^{xi}. These developments illustrate a broader trend: Indigenous nations are reclaiming power in areas of policing, courts, and corrections, moving from being subjects of the justice system to partners in its design and delivery.

The Canadian legal landscape is beginning to acknowledge Indigenous jurisdiction in community safety. In a landmark 2024 decision (*Quebec [Attorney General] v. Pekuakamiulnuatsh Takuhikan*)^{xii}, the Supreme Court of Canada held that the honour of the Crown applies to agreements between governments and First Nations to establish Indigenous police services^{xiii}. The case involved a Quebec First Nation that had entered a tripartite agreement for a tribal police force, only to face chronic underfunding. The Court affirmed that such agreements engage a First Nation’s credible claim to a self-government right in public safety, meaning the Crown must “negotiate, interpret and apply [the agreement] with honour and integrity”, avoiding any sharp dealing or indifference to the

¹ “Indigenous peoples have the right to promote, develop and maintain their institutional structures and their distinctive customs, spirituality, traditions, procedures, practices and, in the cases where they exist, juridical systems or customs, in accordance with international human rights standards.”
(United Nations, 2007, p. 23)

First Nation's needs. Quebec's failure to adequately fund the Mashteuiatsh police and refusal to renegotiate funding was found to breach both the honour of the Crown and the duty of good faith, undermining the very purpose of the agreement. The Court ordered damages to cover the funding shortfall. **This decision is monumental:** it confirms that governments have a legally enforceable obligation to uphold promises made to First Nations in the sphere of community safety. As the Assembly of First Nations noted, the ruling highlights the need for all governments to respect First Nations' rights to self-governance over community safety and to fund these services on an equitable basis^{xiv}. In brief, Canadian law now recognizes that Indigenous policing and safety initiatives are not discretionary programs but rooted in rights and relationships that demand honourable treatment.

Indigenous Community Safety Initiatives on the Rise

Against this backdrop, Indigenous communities are innovating new safety and justice models that depart from the colonial police-only paradigm. These range from formal First Nations police services under the federal First Nations Policing Program to grassroots community patrols. Notably, many nations are creating Community Safety Officer (CSO) or Community Safety Guardian (CSG) programs – unarmed, community-based safety personnel who emphasize prevention, trust-building, and cultural knowledge. These initiatives do not replace the police outright; rather, they fill gaps and work in parallel with conventional policing, often acting as a bridge between the community and law enforcement.

Yukon as a Trailblazer

In Yukon Territory, where the RCMP is the territorial police, several First Nations have led the way with CSO programs. The Kwanlin Dün First Nation (KDFN) in Whitehorse launched a Community Safety Officer program in 2017 as a response to rising violence in its community^{xv}. KDFN's CSOs are local First Nation staff who do not carry firearms and focus on community patrols, wellness checks, relationships, and early intervention rather than simply enforcement. They patrol in partnership with RCMP and territorial officers when needed, but their primary role is to “support the day-to-day safety of citizens” and build positive relationships with residents. The impact was significant: within a couple of years, Kwanlin Dün reported fewer emergency calls to the RCMP as the CSOs dealt with minor incidents and diffused situations before they escalated^{xvi}. Trust between the community and authorities improved because CSOs, being from the community, could approach situations with cultural sensitivity and familiarity that outsiders lack. Chief Doris Bill called the initiative “the way forward,” central to restoring safety in the community^{2xvii}. The success of this model garnered national attention and even an award – the program, as proof of concept for

²“The security and safety of our community is a priority for our citizens and Kwanlin Dün leadership. We know the implementation of the Kwanlin Dün Community Safety Initiative is the way forward and the Community Safety Officers program is central to moving forward...” – Chief Doris Bill

House of Wolf, won the \$500,000 Arctic Inspiration Prize in 2022 to expand training and share best practices^{xviii}.

Other Yukon First Nations quickly followed suit. Selkirk First Nation (Pelly Crossing, Yukon) set up its own Community Safety Officer patrol in response to violent incidents in the community^{xix}. Selkirk's safety officers coordinate with local RCMP to keep the streets safe, a proactive step after a tragedy underscored that relying solely on distant police was inadequate.

The Teslin Tlingit Council (TTC) started a community safety officer program in late 2021, staffed initially by two Elder Tlingit women affectionately nicknamed the "deadly aunties"^{xx}. In the small village of Teslin (pop. ~450), these aunties patrol the community, give rides home to intoxicated relatives, make sure children get home safe from school, and check on Elders – tasks that traditional police often neglect but which greatly enhance local safety. They do not carry guns, cannot arrest, and avoid intervening in violent disputes, yet community members credit them with preventing harms (for instance, ensuring no one freezes outside in winter) and making people feel protected. The Teslin CSOs serve as the "eyes and ears" of the community and an *early warning system* for trouble, which frees the RCMP's limited detachment (three officers) to focus on serious crimes. Importantly, some Teslin citizens who are uncomfortable dealing with RCMP are willing to confide in the CSOs, meaning issues get addressed that previously went unreported. The program's manager – a retired Indigenous RCMP officer – noted the approach is more holistic and rooted in trust, contributing to a safer, healthier community climate. TTC's program has been so well-received that they plan to hire additional officers and hope to add nighttime patrols if federal funding can be secured.

Around the same time that Teslin's "Deadly Aunties" were beginning their patrols, the Carcross/Tagish First Nation (C/TFN) launched its own Safety and Wellness Liaison program in 2022^{xxi}. C/TFN deliberately framed its initiative around *wellness* rather than enforcement, even choosing to drop the word "officer" from the title. Initially, the liaison wore a standard uniform, but after community feedback, this was replaced with a casual shirt bearing a local logo to better reflect approachability and cultural fit. The program is designed to act as a connector between citizens, services, and the RCMP, focusing on wellness checks, early interventions, and de-escalation rather than punitive responses. As the first liaison described, sometimes safety means something as simple as "sitting in the sun and having a smoke" with someone in conflict to calm them down. This approach signals a distinct model of Indigenous community safety—rooted in healing, cultural responsiveness, and trust—launched in parallel with Teslin's elder-led program, and demonstrating that multiple Yukon Nations were simultaneously reclaiming safety on their own terms.

Each community tailors the concept – for example, Carcross/Tagish integrated a wellness focus – but all share the principle that community members are taking responsibility for community safety, in partnership with their First Nation governments. The trend continues to spread: First Nations such as Na-Cho Nyäk Dun (Mayo, Yukon), Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in (Dawson City area, Yukon), and even Indigenous communities in northern British Columbia (e.g. the Daylu Dena Council of Lower Post

and the Taku River Tlingit First Nation in Atlin) have been developing similar community safety or guardian programs in recent years.

House of Wolf & Associates was founded to walk alongside Nations as they reclaim their authority in justice and safety. Our work does not impose a template, nor does it attempt to “fix” colonial policing models. Instead, we start with community-based participatory research (CBPR), listening first to citizens and leadership to identify priorities, risks, and strengths. From there, we co-develop safety frameworks that reflect each Nation’s governance, culture, and realities on the ground. In practice, this has meant supporting Kwanlin Dūn, Teslin, Selkirk, Carcross/Tagish, and now Na-Cho Nyäk Dun, Taku River Tlingit, and Daylu Dena as they design and implement their own safety programs. Each Nation has built something different—Elders on patrol, wellness liaisons, community guardians—but all share the principle of Nations taking back their seat at the justice table. House of Wolf’s role is to facilitate, connect, and sustain these processes so that Nations themselves lead safety in their homelands.

Urban Community Patrols:

In urban centers, Indigenous people have similarly taken safety into their own hands. A prominent example is the Bear Clan Patrol in Winnipeg’s North End – a volunteer street patrol initiated by the Indigenous community to prevent crime and support vulnerable residents. The Bear Clan’s approach, “by the community, for the community,” has yielded impressive outcomes. Members of the patrol provide a non-threatening presence, conduct wellness checks, and help find missing community members. As of 2021, the Bear Clan noted a 75% success rate in locating missing people during their patrols^{xxii}, vastly improving outcomes in situations where conventional police searches had often failed marginalized Indigenous victims. The success of the Bear Clan Patrol has inspired chapters in other cities and First Nations, showing how grassroots Indigenous initiatives can create safer environments through vigilance, culturally informed mediation, and sheer community solidarity. These patrols do not carry weapons or exercise statutory powers – instead, their moral authority and cultural grounding earn them trust on the streets. Such trust is something many marginalized Indigenous community members are unwilling to extend to police, but will readily give to their own community protectors.

First Nations Policing Services

In some regions, First Nations have pursued a different route by establishing their own official police services under agreements with Canada and provincial governments. More than 35 self-administered First Nations police forces exist (mostly in Ontario and Quebec), such as the Nishnawbe Aski Police Service and the St’át’imc (St’at’imx) Nation Tribal Police in BC. These forces operate with fully empowered, sworn officers and are recognized as police services under provincial police legislation. They have been successful in increasing cultural competency in policing and local control. For instance, officers often speak the local language and understand community protocols, which can improve response and reduce excessive use of force.

While Indigenous-administered police services were an important step toward local control, they remain constrained within a **colonial legal and funding framework**. They operate under provincial

Police Acts, enforce Canadian criminal law, and depend on contribution agreements that treat them as discretionary programs rather than essential services. Chronic underfunding, inadequate facilities, and recruitment shortages continue to undermine their effectiveness. Between 2013 and 2017, for example, the Mashteuiatsh police in Quebec accumulated over \$1.5 million in deficits simply to maintain baseline operations after federal funding froze—a situation the Supreme Court of Canada has since ruled inconsistent with the **honour of the Crown**.

Indigenous leaders increasingly argue that genuine self-determination in justice demands a **different architecture altogether**—one where Nations define and deliver safety according to their own laws, cultures, and community priorities. This means shifting from a policing-only paradigm to a **community-safety continuum** that includes Community Safety Officers, Guardians, wellness responders, and healing-centred interventions operating alongside, not beneath, mainstream enforcement. These models reflect a return to Indigenous jurisdiction and accountability rather than a variation of colonial policing.

Toward Sustainable Funding and Partnerships

One of the greatest barriers facing Indigenous-led justice initiatives has been the lack of sustained, flexible funding. Until recently, the only pathway to stable funding for community safety was to fit into the existing First Nations Policing Program (FNPP) model – essentially, to create a police service that meets provincial policing standards. This model, while important, did not accommodate the innovative approaches like unarmed safety patrols, elders as safety officers, or traditional peacemaking processes. Those had to scrape together short-term pilot funds or depend on contributions from the First Nation's own limited revenues. The result was that many promising programs remained pilot projects – vulnerable to cancellation when funding expired.

Change is on the horizon. Following years of advocacy, the federal government has committed to legislate First Nations policing as an essential service^{xxiii}. This would entrench the funding of First Nations police services as a statutory obligation, ending the ad-hoc contributions that left services under-resourced.

The Assembly of First Nations, in multiple resolutions, has urged that any such legislation also recognize First Nations jurisdiction over community safety more broadly and support *alternatives* to the standard policing model³. In the wake of the 2024 Supreme Court decision, these calls have gained momentum. The Court's affirmation that governments must uphold the honour of the Crown in funding agreements with First Nations signals that inadequate or inequitable funding will not be tolerated^{xxiv}. As AFN National Chief Cindy Woodhouse stated, *"The decision confirms that we too often face inequitable challenges when negotiating essential services funding with the Crown"*, and it highlights the need for meaningful change to address discriminatory gaps in how public safety is resourced. In practical terms, this

means Canada and provinces/territories are now under pressure – legally and morally – to provide long-term, needs-based funding for Indigenous community safety initiatives, whether they are police services or community safety officer programs.

Going forward, a nation-to-nation approach is needed to finance and govern these initiatives. Stable agreements, co-developed with each First Nation, should enable communities to hire and train safety officers, establish local safety offices or hubs, and integrate cultural practices (e.g. land-based healing camps, circle sentencing, and clan-based conflict resolution) as legitimate parts of the justice system. Multi-year funding commitments (as opposed to annual grants) are crucial so that First Nations can build capacity and plan strategically for community safety. Transparency and accountability can be maintained through First Nations-led governance boards or intergovernmental committees, rather than unilateral control by federal/provincial agencies. In addition, legislative amendments may be required to empower Indigenous safety officers with certain authorities (for example, enforce First Nation bylaws or act as peace officers in defined circumstances) while keeping their role distinct from armed police. Some self-governing nations, like those in Yukon, are working to pass community safety legislation under their self-government powers to solidify the mandate of their CSOs. Such laws would formalize the coexistence of an Indigenous safety system alongside the mainstream system.

Another key element is capacity building and knowledge sharing. The success of Yukon's programs has been aided by training tailored to Indigenous community safety. House of Wolf worked to co-create an accredited six-week training curriculum for community safety officers, delivered in the North through partnership with Yukon University^{xxv}. Workshops and conferences (such as a Yukon community safety summit held in 2022) allow Indigenous communities to share best practices, cultural approaches, and lessons learned in implementing safety initiatives. Governments and institutions can support this by funding training programs and recognizing credentials for Indigenous safety personnel. Over time, we envision a network of Indigenous Community Safety programs across provinces and territories, each unique to its community but linked through common standards of service and mutual support – effectively creating a new pillar of Canada's public safety landscape, alongside police, courts, and social services.

Calls to Action

Indigenous peoples are reclaiming authority in justice not by waiting for colonial structures to change, but by building the change from within their communities. The proliferation of First Nations community safety officer programs, guardian initiatives, and Indigenous-led patrols demonstrates a powerful assertion of self-governance in action. These initiatives are reducing crime and harm, increasing trust, and healing communities in ways that conventional policing alone has not achieved. They embody a shift from policing to peacemaking and prevention, aligning with traditional principles. They operate in complement to existing systems: RCMP and other police services remain present, but Indigenous nations are no longer relegated to the sidelines – they are active partners and leaders in keeping their people safe.

To support and sustain this movement, the following steps are recommended for policymakers and stakeholders:

Recognize Indigenous Jurisdiction:

Formally acknowledge through legislation and agreements that Indigenous governments have jurisdiction in matters of community safety and justice. This means implementing TRC Call to Action 42 by recognizing Indigenous justice systems and respecting Indigenous laws and practices in the administration of justice. It also involves including First Nations at decision-making tables for policing and justice policy at local, regional, and national levels.

Ensure Indigenous Access to Data:

Guarantee that Nations have direct, timely access to safety and justice data relevant to their communities, including RCMP incident statistics, victimization data, child welfare and social assistance numbers, and other indicators of community well-being. Too often, this data is siloed within colonial systems, released slowly, or filtered through government interpretation. Without it, Nations are forced to make decisions in the dark or rely on external institutions to tell them what is happening in their own homelands. Data sovereignty is therefore fundamental to self-governance in justice: Nations must be able to collect, analyze, and apply information to design safety systems that respond to their realities.

Establish Sustainable Funding Mechanisms:

Treat Indigenous community safety initiatives as essential services. Implement multi-year, statutory funding (similar to health or education funding) for First Nation safety programs – whether they are police services or culturally-based safety officer programs. Funding models should be needs-based and equitable to provincial policing standards, eliminating the gap that has historically left First Nations policing under-resourced.

The recent Supreme Court decision must be used as a framework: governments should proactively renegotiate and adjust funding in good faith when communities identify shortfalls, to uphold the honour of the Crown.

Legislate First Nations Policing as Essential, with Flexibility:

Expedite the co-developed federal legislation to make First Nations policing an essential service, but ensure it has the flexibility to encompass community safety models outside of the conventional police force structure afn.ca. The law should recognize that a First Nation's "policing" might include peacekeeper programs, community safety officers, and prevention services tailored to the community. First Nations' sovereignty over policing and safety should be explicitly affirmed, as called for by multiple AFN resolutions.

Capacity Building and Training:

Invest in Indigenous-led training programs for community safety personnel. Support certifications or diplomas in Indigenous community safety that cover skills like conflict de-escalation, trauma-informed response, cultural protocols, and coordination with police. Expand peer mentoring and exchange among established First Nation safety programs and those emerging in other communities (for example, Yukon's trained CSOs could help mentor new teams in NWT or BC). Building a professional cadre of Indigenous safety practitioners will ensure these programs endure and evolve.

Community Wellness Integration:

Encourage integration of these safety initiatives with broader community wellness strategies. Sustained safety is intertwined with social determinants – mental health, housing, youth engagement, and so on. Governments and First Nations should cooperate through memorandums of understanding for complementary services (youth centers, healing lodges, addictions support) alongside the safety programs. This holistic approach resonates with the Indigenous worldview that healthy, safe communities are achieved by caring for people's needs and restoring balance, rather than reacting only after crimes occur. Indigenous safety officers and programs should be empowered to connect community members with services (e.g. helping someone into a detox program, or arranging an Elder counsellor), thus preventing incidents and reducing reliance on police/crisis responses.

Monitoring and Evaluation:

Develop metrics for success that reflect the true goals of these initiatives – metrics may include reduced victimization rates, community perceptions of safety, number of conflicts resolved peacefully, increased use of restorative justice, etc., rather than just arrest or crime statistics. Joint evaluations by First Nations and funding partners can help demonstrate the efficacy of Indigenous-led approaches and inform continual improvement. Early indications (like Kwanlin Dün's reduced RCMP call volumes or Bear Clan Patrol's missing person finds) are promising and should be systematically tracked.

By implementing these steps, Canada can move away from a colonial public safety model toward one of true partnership and respect, where Indigenous nations have equal standing in safeguarding their communities. The evidence is clear that when Indigenous peoples reclaim authority over justice – supported by fair funding and recognition – the outcomes benefit not only Indigenous communities but the overall fabric of Canadian society. Safer Indigenous communities mean a safer Canada, and realizing that vision requires embracing and investing in the self-determined solutions that Indigenous nations are pioneering today.

The path forward is not to remove the RCMP or police of jurisdiction, but to re-balance the system by empowering Indigenous nations to develop and lead solutions on their own terms. This means moving beyond tinkering with colonial systems, and instead nurturing the “two systems, one goal” approach – where Indigenous justice systems operate in concert with the existing system, each lending its strengths. The honour of the Crown and the imperative of reconciliation demand nothing less. As the Supreme Court of Canada affirmed, First Nations have the right to self-governance in community safety, and governments must act honourably to support that right. afn.ca. It is time for sustained actions and investments that live up to those words – ensuring Indigenous nations can fully reclaim their authority at the justice table, for the betterment of present and future generations.

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