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From Isolated Disappearances to Systemic Crisis: An Exploratory Longitudinal Analysis of Canadian News Framing of the Highway of Tears, 1974 - 2022

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how Canadian news framing of the Highway of Tears changed from the 1970s through 2022 and how journalistic practices shaped public recognition of violence against Indigenous women and girls. The study uses a two-stage exploratory design. A source-discovery inventory maps 41 named cases and 442 recorded source mentions across news outlets, official reports, advocacy materials, podcasts, documentaries, databases, and other public sources; because these entries are heterogeneous and sometimes aggregate multiple items, they are not treated as equivalent news articles.

A purposive qualitative analysis then compares professional news coverage of ten focal cases across five decades, using prominence, victim individuation, treatment of Indigenous identity, source authority, continuity, and episodic or systemic explanation as coding dimensions. A separate continuity dataset records 51 dated items about Monica Jack published by CBC, Global News, and the Vancouver Sun between 2009 and 2022. Early reporting generally treated disappearances as isolated police matters and supplied limited biography or structural context. By the 2000s and 2010s, coverage more often connected cases to the Highway of Tears, colonialism, transportation inequity, institutional failure, and the broader crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. Yet follow-up remained highly event-driven: 37 of the 51 Monica Jack items appeared during 2018–2019, around trial, verdict, and sentencing proceedings.

The article argues that Canadian journalism helped transform dispersed cases into a recognizable public crisis while continuing to distribute personalization and sustained attention unevenly.

INTRODUCTION

Today, the Highway of Tears is widely understood as a site of systemic violence against Indigenous women and girls. The term commonly describes the Highway 16 corridor between Prince George and Prince Rupert in northern British Columbia and, in some official investigations, adjacent highways and routes. Project E-PANA identified 18 cases that met its investigative criteria, while families, advocates, and community organizations have often used broader lists (Royal Canadian Mounted Police [RCMP],

2012). These counts are not interchangeable: they reflect different geographic boundaries, evidentiary standards, and understandings of which deaths and disappearances belong to the same public history.

Yet the recognition of the Highway of Tears as a coherent public crisis was not inevitable. The disappearances occurred across different communities, years, and police investigations, often entering the news as apparently unrelated local events. The central puzzle of this study therefore concerns not only what journalists reported, but how a pattern became publicly recognizable as a pattern at all. How did cases once presented as isolated crimes come to be understood as evidence of systemic violence? And once that transformation occurred, did a systemic framing produce more equitable coverage of the individual women at its centre?

The contrast between two cases separated by more than four decades illustrates this transformation. In April 1975, the *Vancouver Sun* published a short notice about Monica Ignas, a teenager from Thornhill, British Columbia, whose remains had been found outside Terrace. The archival item identified in the research inventory is spare: it gives limited biographical information and treats the discovery as a self-contained crime. It offers no indication that Ignas's death might be connected to other disappearances along northern highways. Retrospective official records now place Ignas among the 18 cases examined by Project E-PANA and confirm that she was last seen in December 1974 and found in April 1975 (RCMP, 2012).

Coverage of Jessica Patrick-Balczer's death in September 2018 was markedly different. Patrick, an 18-year-old mother and member of Lake Babine First Nation, was last seen in Smithers and later found near Hudson Bay Mountain Road. APTN News reported a vigil, a procession along Highway 16, red clothing worn in solidarity, and the family's continuing demand for information (Martens, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). The reports did not present Patrick solely as an isolated victim; they situated her within a longer history of violence and collective demands for institutional accountability.

The difference between these two moments is more than a change in journalistic style. It reflects a transformation in the way Canadian news organizations made violence along the corridor intelligible to the public. This article asks two questions: How did Canadian news framing of the Highway of Tears change from the 1970s through 2022? Which inequalities remained after journalists began to recognize the disappearances as a connected and systemic issue? The analysis argues that coverage moved gradually from episodic, police-led, and depersonalized reporting toward thematic accounts that connected cases to colonialism, transportation inequity, institutional failure, and the national crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG). That shift was neither linear nor complete. Non-Indigenous victims were often more readily individualized and nationalized, while later collective framing sometimes rendered Indigenous victims visible principally as members of a category rather than as fully individualized people.

The Highway of Tears therefore provides a case study not only of media representation, but of the production of public knowledge about systemic violence. News organizations do not simply determine

how much attention an issue receives; through prominence, repetition, sourcing, language, and connections between cases, they also influence whether dispersed events appear to be unrelated incidents or evidence of a broader social problem. Tracing that transformation helps explain how a crisis can exist for decades before becoming publicly recognizable as one.

COLONIAL VIOLENCE, NEWSWORTHINESS, AND INDIGENOUS REPRESENTATION

Scholarship on the Highway of Tears has primarily emphasized the colonial and structural conditions that expose Indigenous women and girls to disproportionate violence. Goodell Ugalde (2023) connects the crisis to settler-colonial disruptions of matrilineal systems and the imposition of patriarchal social relations. Labrecque (2014) similarly situates violence along Highway 16 within a longer history of colonial devaluation, institutional neglect, and impunity. These arguments align with the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (2019), which describes contemporary violence as inseparable from historical and ongoing structures that include dispossession, child removal, poverty, racism, and failures in public services.

The history of northern British Columbia also complicates narratives that treat hitchhiking as an individual lifestyle choice. Communities along Highway 16 are separated by long distances, and many residents have historically faced limited access to affordable transportation, education, health care, and employment. Public discussion of a bus route along the corridor repeatedly emphasized that hitchhiking could be a response to unmet transportation needs rather than simply reckless behaviour (Kassam, 2016). When reports foreground hitchhiking without explaining those conditions, they can shift causal responsibility from institutions to victims.

A second body of scholarship examines how media institutions assign newsworthiness. Jiwani (2009) argues that representations of missing and murdered Indigenous women frequently draw on racialized and gendered narratives that portray victims through poverty, addiction, sexualization, or personal dysfunction. Such frames can make violence appear to result from individual behaviour rather than unequal social and institutional conditions. Gilchrist's (2010) comparison of Canadian local press coverage found substantial differences between the treatment of missing or murdered Indigenous women and white women, including differences in volume, photographs, front-page placement, and narrative detail.

These studies establish that media visibility is neither neutral nor evenly distributed. They also suggest that quantity and quality must be examined together. An increase in article volume does not necessarily produce equitable representation if Indigenous women are discussed as statistics, if police remain the only authoritative sources, or if personal histories are replaced by generalized descriptions of risk. Conversely, a highly personalized story may generate sympathy without connecting the case to structural conditions or other victims.

This article adds a longitudinal and methodological distinction. It separates broad source discoverability from a bounded set of dated news items and asks how framing changes over time rather than assuming that Canadian media discourse remained fixed.

METHOD

Evidence Mapping and Sample Construction

The project began with a source-discovery spreadsheet compiled through iterative searches of newspaper archives, broadcast sites, official records, advocacy materials, and other public sources. The inventory records 41 named cases and 442 source mentions. A source mention is a recorded appearance or outlet entry associated with a case. The total does not represent 442 verified unique news articles: some cells aggregate several items from the same outlet, and the inventory includes podcasts, films, official pages, advocacy sources, databases, blogs, and true-crime materials alongside professional journalism. The discovery inventory was therefore used to identify cases, outlets, and potential archival items, not as a direct quantitative measure of news coverage.

The longitudinal framing analysis uses a purposive focal-case design. Ten cases were selected to represent different periods and framing problems: Monica Ignas and Monica Jack for the 1970s; Alberta Williams for the 1980s; Delphine Nikal, Ramona Wilson, Roxanne Thiara, Alishia Germaine, and Lana Derrick for the 1990s; Nicole Hoar for the 2000s; and Jessica Patrick-Balczer for the 2010s. Available professional news items were examined when sufficient full text or page context was available (refer to Table 1). The qualitative analysis is therefore exploratory and case-based rather than a census of every article published about all 41 people (refer to Table 2).

A separate continuity dataset provides a bounded article-level measure. It contains 51 dated items concerning Monica Jack published by the Vancouver Sun (18), CBC (18), and Global News (15) between December 2009 and September 2022. Publication dates were standardized and grouped by year and legal phase. This dataset permits a descriptive assessment of when follow-up occurred, without implying that the three outlets represent all Canadian coverage.

Component	Scope	Unit	Analytical use
Source-discovery inventory	41 cases; 442 recorded source mentions	Case-source entry	Case and outlet discovery; not an article-volume measure
Focal-case qualitative sample	10 cases across the 1970s–2010s	Case-level framing across available professional news items	Longitudinal comparison of narrative practices
Monica Jack continuity dataset	51 dated items, 2009–2022	Individual news item	Descriptive analysis of follow-up frequency and event clustering

Table 1: Comprehensive Outline of Data Collection Method

Coding and Analysis

News coverage was examined across six dimensions: prominence and length; victim individuation; treatment of Indigenous identity; source authority; continuity; and explanatory frame. Prominence included placement, headline naming, photographs, and article length when complete page scans were available. Victim individuation captured biographical details, family relationships, aspirations, and descriptions that presented a person as more than a case file. Source authority recorded whether reports relied primarily on police and government officials or also included family members, Indigenous leaders, advocates, and community organizations.

Continuity distinguished initial reports from later searches, anniversaries, investigative updates, memorial coverage, trials, appeals, and policy follow-up. Explanatory framing was classified as predominantly episodic when a report presented a disappearance as an isolated event, connective when it linked multiple cases without explaining underlying conditions, or systemic when it addressed institutional, colonial, economic, geographic, or policy causes.

The continuity dataset was summarized with simple counts by outlet and year. No inferential statistical tests were used. Archive formats varied considerably, and source-discovery counts were not standardized for publication age, archive accessibility, duplication, or media type.

Dimension	Indicators	Analytic question
Prominence	Placement, headline naming, photograph, article length	How visible was the case within the publication?
Victim individuation	Biography, family relationships, interests, aspirations	Was the person represented as a full social subject?
Indigenous identity	Omitted, descriptive, stereotyped, or structurally contextualized	How did identity shape the explanation offered?
Source authority	Police, government, family, Indigenous leaders, advocates	Whose interpretation was treated as authoritative?
Continuity	Initial notice, search update, anniversary, investigation, memorial, legal or policy follow-up	Did attention continue after the first event?
Explanatory frame	Episodic, connective, or systemic	Was the case isolated, linked, or structurally explained?

Table 2: Qualitative Coding Framework

Limitations and Ethical Approach

The evidence base is not a census of every report about every person associated with the Highway of Tears. Searchable archives are uneven, names and spellings vary, local print coverage is less consistently digitized than national reporting, and the original discovery inventory does not retain complete bibliographic metadata for every source mention. Coding was conducted by a single researcher and does not include intercoder reliability. The analysis identifies patterns in published discourse but cannot establish the intentions of individual journalists or prove that coverage alone caused institutional change.

Because the research concerns women and families who have experienced violence and prolonged uncertainty, the article avoids unnecessary graphic description and does not treat official lists as the only legitimate record of loss. It distinguishes the narrower E-PANA criteria from broader community understandings and uses contemporary terminology such as Indigenous and MMIWG except when reproducing historical titles or language.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The 1970s: Visibility Without Connection

The 1970s material is dominated by episodic reporting. Short items identify a disappearance, the discovery of remains, or a police request for information, but they rarely connect one case to another. The result is a sequence of events that now appears geographically and socially clustered but was not presented to readers as a pattern at the time.

The April 1975 notice on Monica Ignas is representative. It supplies basic facts but little biography, family testimony, or follow-up. Its brevity directs attention to the immediate crime rather than the conditions surrounding travel along northern highways. Coverage of Monica Jack later in the decade shows a partial change: an archival item includes a photograph, a more precise timeline, physical details, and comments about her personality. These choices create a more recognizable individual, yet personalization does not produce systemic analysis. Jack is presented as a singular child in danger rather than as one person within a growing history of disappearances.

Indigenous identity in the early material is often omitted or introduced only as a descriptor. It is not used to examine racism, jurisdictional fragmentation, transportation inequality, or colonial policy. This absence does not make the reporting race-neutral. By stripping identity of social and historical meaning while emphasizing individual movement, the reports normalize the cases as unrelated misfortunes.

The 1980s: Continuity of the Episodic Frame

The 1980s coverage largely continues the police-centred structure of the previous decade. Reports focus on last known movements, searches, discoveries, and requests for tips. They may provide information useful to an investigation, but they rarely return to earlier cases or ask why similar disappearances recur along isolated highways.

Retrospective official accounts now place Alberta Williams's 1989 homicide within Project E-PANA's broader investigative history (RCMP, 2012). Contemporaneous reporting, however, did not consistently offer readers that connective framework. The pattern existed in the accumulation of cases before it existed in mainstream news language.

The absence of connection shapes responsibility. When each report begins and ends with an individual event, risk appears to reside primarily in the victim's movement through a dangerous place. Broader questions, why safe transportation was unavailable, why families perceived investigations as inadequate, and why the same communities experienced repeated loss, remain outside the frame.

The 1990s: Community Recognition and Partial Visibility

During the 1990s, the accumulation of cases made geographic and narrative connections increasingly visible. The disappearances of Delphine Nikal and Ramona Wilson, the deaths of Roxanne Thiara and Alishia Germaine, and the disappearance of Lana Derrick intensified public concern in northern British Columbia. Reports began to mention earlier cases more frequently, although those connections were often tentative and did not yet amount to a developed structural explanation.

The most important change was the growing public role of families and Indigenous communities. Searches, vigils, posters, and advocacy created a counter-narrative to institutional hesitation. Community members did not experience the cases as isolated; they recognized repeated vulnerabilities, investigative delays, and the consequences of limited transportation. News organizations increasingly encountered a language of collective loss produced outside the newsroom.

Nevertheless, Indigenous identity often remained descriptive rather than analytical. Reports might identify a victim's Nation or community without explaining how colonial policy, poverty, child welfare systems, policing, or geographic isolation could shape vulnerability. The decade therefore produced partial visibility: cases were increasingly connected, but the conditions linking them remained underdeveloped.

The 2000s: Consolidating the Highway of Tears Narrative

The disappearance of Nicole Hoar in June 2002 coincided with a substantial expansion in the reach and intensity of coverage. Hoar was a non-Indigenous tree planter from Alberta who disappeared while travelling toward Smithers. Her case was reported beyond northern British Columbia and prompted renewed attention to earlier disappearances. Labrecque (2014) identifies the disappearance of a young non-Indigenous woman as a critical moment in wider media recognition of the Highway of Tears.

This change illustrates the racialized operation of newsworthiness identified by Gilchrist (2010). Hoar's case did not create the pattern, but it was more readily narrated through familiar conventions of innocence, mobility, family concern, and national relatability. Once journalists treated her disappearance as a major story, earlier Indigenous cases became newly relevant as background. The broader crisis gained visibility through a comparison that also exposed unequal conditions of public recognition.

By the middle of the decade, the phrase Highway of Tears had become a recurring organizing label. Reports increasingly linked cases across time and location, cited totals, revisited unsolved investigations, and covered calls for transportation and coordinated action. Project E-PANA, established in 2005, gave journalists an official framework through which previously separate files could be discussed together (RCMP, 2012). Yet recognition introduced another representational problem: Indigenous women became

more visible as members of a collective category, but were not always individualized with comparable biographical depth.

The 2010s: Systemic Language and Indigenous Voices

By the 2010s, the Highway of Tears was firmly connected to national debates about MMIWG. Coverage increasingly used terms such as systemic violence, colonialism, institutional failure, and transportation inequity. This language reflected a broader public reckoning shaped by Indigenous activism, inquiries, scholarship, and the work of families who had demanded recognition for decades. The National Inquiry's final report situated violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA+ people within persistent structures of colonialism and state failure (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019).

The range of quoted voices also expanded. Family members, Indigenous leaders, advocates, and community organizations appeared more frequently alongside police and government officials. Coverage of Jessica Patrick-Balczer illustrates this change. APTN News described the vigil in Smithers, the red clothing worn in solidarity, the procession along Highway 16, and relatives' continuing demand for information (Martens, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). The story's authority did not come solely from investigators; it also came from the family and community interpreting the meaning of her death.

Commemorative reporting changed what counted as news. Vigils, marches, red dresses, memorial installations, and anniversary gatherings became events through which journalists could report not only death but also resistance, memory, and political claims. However, systemic language can become routine without producing sustained investigative attention or measurable policy change, and collective symbolism can flatten distinct lives into a familiar national narrative.

Continuity and Event-Driven Follow-Up: Monica Jack, 2009–2022

The bounded Monica Jack dataset clarifies the difference between continuity and steady attention. It records 51 dated items: 18 from the Vancouver Sun, 18 from CBC, and 15 from Global News (refer to Table 3). Coverage was highly clustered by legal development. The dataset contains two items in 2009, six in 2014, two in 2015, one in 2016, nine in 2018, 28 in 2019, and three in 2022.

The 2014 increase coincided with the arrest and charging of Garry Handlen (Talmazan, 2014). The largest concentration occurred during the trial, verdict, and sentencing: 37 of 51 items, or 72.5%, appeared in 2018–2019. Global News, for example, published repeated trial updates before reporting the guilty verdict on January 17, 2019, and the sentence later that month (Azpiri, 2019; The Canadian Press, 2019). The three items in 2022 corresponded with the appeal process and the Court of Appeal's dismissal of Handlen's appeal in R. v. Handlen (2022).

This pattern shows that later journalism did return to an Indigenous victim's case, but continuity was primarily milestone-driven. The dataset does not demonstrate a smooth increase in routine follow-up over time. Instead, attention surged when police, courts, or formal proceedings generated new events. Legal institutions supplied the news pegs that made sustained reporting possible, while long periods without an official development remained comparatively quiet.

Outlet	***Items***	***2009–2016***	***2018–2019***	***2022***
Vancouver Sun	*18*	*3*	*13*	*2*
Global News	*15*	*3*	*12*	*0*
CBC	*18*	*5*	*12*	*1*
Total	*51*	*11*	*37*	*3*

Table 3: Monica Jack Follow-Up Items by Outlet and Year

Period	**Dominant form of coverage**	**Principal limitation or change**
1970s	Brief, episodic police notices	Cases treated as isolated; Indigenous identity omitted or merely descriptive
1980s	Continued event-driven reporting	Accumulation grows, but connections and structural causes remain weak
1990s	Tentative linking and community advocacy	Pattern increasingly visible through families and local organizing
2000s	National attention and consolidation of the label	Nicole Hoar's case broadens attention; Indigenous victims often aggregated

2010s	Systemic, commemorative, and community-voiced reporting	Colonial and institutional context becomes explicit, but unequal follow-up persists
2018–2022 continuity	Intensive reporting around formal legal milestones	Follow-up expands but remains strongly event-driven

Table 4: Summary of Longitudinal Framing Changes
Note. The table summarizes qualitative patterns in the focal cases and the bounded Monica Jack continuity dataset; it does not represent statistical estimates for all Canadian news coverage.

DISCUSSION

Across the five decades, the clearest transformation is a movement from episodic to thematic framing. Early reports answer immediate questions of crime reporting: who disappeared, where a body was found, and what police knew. Later reports are more likely to ask why similar cases recurred, how transportation and geography shaped vulnerability, and how colonial institutions affected the treatment of Indigenous women. This changes the moral and political scale of the story. An episodic frame locates danger in an individual event; a systemic frame makes governments, police, transportation systems, and media institutions part of the explanation.

The transition was not simply the result of journalists discovering new facts. Families and Indigenous communities had long recognized connections that mainstream institutions hesitated to name. Advocacy supplied journalists with case lists, public rituals, expert language, and alternative sources of authority. Later media recognition should therefore be understood partly as the incorporation of knowledge produced by affected communities.

The evidence also demonstrates that visibility, individuation, and continuity are distinct. The Highway of Tears became highly visible as a public symbol, yet individual Indigenous women could still disappear within collective statistics. A report can acknowledge systemic violence while offering little sense of a person's relationships, ambitions, humour, work, or role in her community. Equitable coverage requires both contextualization and personalization: structural explanation should not replace biography, and biography should not isolate a case from the conditions that shaped it.

The Monica Jack continuity data adds a further distinction. Follow-up can be extensive but still depend on official events. Courts and police create recognizable news moments—charges, testimony, verdicts, sentencing, and appeals—that sustain coverage. Families without comparable legal developments may

receive less follow-up even when uncertainty and public significance persist. A newsroom committed to equity must therefore distinguish between following institutions and following cases.

Source selection is equally important. Police are necessary sources in crime reporting, but exclusive dependence on official statements narrows what can be known. It privileges investigative categories, evidentiary thresholds, and institutional timelines while marginalizing family knowledge and community experience. Later coverage becomes more complex when it includes Indigenous families, advocates, and leaders as interpreters rather than only as grieving witnesses.

The findings support the argument that media institutions participate in constructing public issues. Repetition, naming, and cross-case linkage helped transform the Highway of Tears from a collection of local crimes into a nationally recognized crisis. This does not mean media coverage alone caused government action, nor does the study establish discriminatory intent by individual journalists. It shows how routine news practices can distribute attention unevenly and how those practices can change under pressure from advocacy, institutional inquiry, and shifting public norms.

For contemporary journalists, the implications are practical. Reports on missing Indigenous people should avoid presenting travel, poverty, housing instability, or contact with child welfare systems as self-explanatory risk factors. They should explain the policies and service gaps that shape those conditions; seek family and community sources early; provide comparable biographical detail across victims; and return to cases even when no new police or court event has occurred. Newsrooms can also audit disparities in photographs, article placement, follow-up frequency, and headline naming.

CONCLUSION

Canadian news framing of the Highway of Tears changed profoundly between 1974 and 2022. Reports that once presented disappearances as brief and unrelated police matters gradually began to connect cases across decades, identify transportation and institutional conditions, quote Indigenous families and advocates, and situate the corridor within the national MMIWG crisis. The emergence of the Highway of Tears as a public narrative was not automatic. It depended on the accumulation of cases, the persistence of families and communities, the creation of official investigative and inquiry frameworks, and journalists' growing willingness to adopt a systemic lens.

Progress in framing did not erase inequality. Non-Indigenous victims were more readily individualized and nationalized at key moments, while Indigenous women were often made visible through lists and collective labels. The continuity analysis also shows that later follow-up was concentrated around formal legal milestones rather than evenly sustained. The amount of coverage matters, but the organization and timing of coverage matter just as much.

The Highway of Tears demonstrates journalism's power both to obscure and to reveal. When cases are isolated, patterns of racialized violence can remain publicly unintelligible even when communities have recognized them for years. When reporting combines individual dignity, historical context, community knowledge, institutional scrutiny, and follow-up beyond official events, it can help make those patterns visible without reducing the women at their centre to symbols.

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