

MISSING AND MURDERED INDIGENOUS WOMEN
Old Lesbians Organization for Change End White Dominance August 26, 2022

Native American women are murdered and sexually assaulted at rates as high as ten times the average in certain counties in the United States. These are crimes that are overwhelmingly committed by individuals outside the Native American community and their crimes fall between jurisdictional cracks, leaving victims and their families without recourse. There are numerous reasons, but at the forefront lie issues that stem from the Indian Relocation Act of 1830 and many federal policies. Many Native Americans do not live on tribal lands or reservations where when someone goes missing, the Tribal community, and tribal law enforcement band together in search efforts. For those residing in an urban area, cities offer few ties to Native cultures, communities, and tribal law enforcement. Many urban Indians fall into the “pipeline of vulnerability” which is people of color, people coming out of the foster care system, people of poverty.

From many studies, by average, more than 4 in 5 American Indian and Alaska Native women or 84 percent have experienced violence in their lifetime. The data shows:

56 percent have experienced sexual violence.

56 percent have experienced physical violence by an intimate partner.

49 percent have experienced stalking, and

66 percent have experienced psychological aggression by an intimate partner.

It is noted that the most common type of *service* needed by American Indian and Alaska Native women, victims of a lifetime physical violence, stalking, and sexual violence is much needed medical care. Among victims who needed those services, only 38 percent of those women were able to get the services they needed.

There are common patterns across the board regarding Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls:

- Tribal sovereignty being undermined, and jurisdictional borders being crossed.
- Police dismissing concerned mothers and fathers and aunties and grandparents with the excuse that runaways always come back.
- Coroners dodging paperwork and scrawling “other” next to the line titled “Race” and putting accidental death next to “Cause of Death”.
- Government officials, top to bottom, ignoring practical, sovereignty first reforms and instead hoarding the kind of power that keeps the crisis alive.

Reports of sexual violence and other crimes against Native women are particularly likely to occur in remote settings where for example, transient workers such as oil and gas workers, live in temporary housing units called man camps on and near Tribal lands. On reservations such as in Montana and also across the country, reports of sexual violence are almost never prosecuted as a result of racial and gender-based discrimination and legal loopholes that leave Native women unprotected against sexual violence.

Law enforcement must be held accountable when officers abuse their authority to sexually assault the very people they are sworn to protect. When a Northern Cheyenne woman called the Bureau of

Indian Affairs law enforcement officer to her house for help, she was hoping to receive support. Instead, she was sexually assaulted by the law enforcement officer who was sworn to protect her. Native communities continually express frustration about the difficulty of being heard by federal authorities. Fear and mistrust of the government is the result of generations of broken promises and is an ongoing barrier to reporting any crimes. Because reservations can be policed by as few as half a dozen Bureau of Indian Affairs officers, survivors of sexual misconduct by these officers rightly are concerned that they will have to interact with their abusers again in the future, discouraging them from coming forward. And when survivors do come forward, they face legal barriers to receiving justice. This shows that Federal law enforcement has historically failed to protect against, and has often perpetuated, racialized and gender-based violence against Indigenous women and girls. Law enforcement is typically unresponsive to tribal needs, open cases languish unresolved, and wrongdoers exploit these gaps to prey on Indigenous women and girls. This is critical for tribal citizens where sexual assault, human trafficking, and other forms of violence have reached crisis levels.

In 2020, bipartisan members of the United States 116th Congress took an important step forward through the passage of two pieces of legislation — *Savanna’s Act* and the *Not Invisible Act*.

Savanna’s Act or the Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women Act was passed in October 2020 and nicknamed after Fargo, North Dakota resident Savanna LaFontaine-Greywind who was brutally murdered in August 2017, as an example of the horrific statistics regarding abuse and homicide of Native American women. This Act reforms law enforcement and justice protocols appropriately to address missing and murdered Native women. This Act directs the US Department of Justice to review, revise, and develop law enforcement and justice protocols to address missing or murdered Native Americans.

- To provide training to law enforcement agencies on how to record tribal enrollment for victims in federal databases;
- Develop and implement a strategy to educate the public on the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System;
- Conduct specific outreach to tribes, tribal organizations, and urban Indian organizations regarding the ability to publicly enter information through the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System or other non-law enforcement sensitive portal;
- Develop regionally appropriate guidelines for response to cases of missing or murdered Native Americans;
- Provide training and technical assistance to tribes and law enforcement agencies for implementation of the developed guidelines; and
- Report statistics on missing or murdered Native Americans.

Congress unanimously passed the *Not Invisible Act* also in October 2020 to increase intergovernmental coordination to identify and combat violent crime against Indians and on Indian lands. This was the first bill in United States history to be introduced and passed by four Congressional members enrolled in their respective federally recognized tribes which included bipartisan backers, Representatives Deb Haaland (Democrat New Mexico), Tom Cole (Republican Oklahoma), Sharice Davids (Democrat Kansas), and Markwayne Mullin (Republican Oklahoma) which was led by Deb Haaland who is now a US cabinet member, the Secretary of the Interior.

Secretary Deb Haaland has stated: “A lack of urgency, transparency, and coordination has hampered our country’s efforts to combat violence against American Indian and Alaska Native people. In

partnership with the Justice Department and with extensive engagement with Tribes and other stakeholders, the US Interior Department is marshalling our resources to finally address the crisis of violence against Indigenous peoples.” Secretary Haaland, in coordination with the United States Attorney General, established the “**Not Invisible Act Commission**” an advisory committee composed of law enforcement, tribal leaders, federal partners, service providers, and most importantly **survivors**. The Commission’s purpose is to make recommendations to the Department of the Interior and Department of Justice to improve intergovernmental coordination and establish best practices for state, tribal, and federal law enforcement to combat the epidemic of missing, murder, and the trafficking of Native Americans and Alaska Natives.

And, on November 15, 2021, President Biden signed an Executive Order for Improving Public Safety and Criminal Justice for Native Americans and Addressing the Crisis of Missing or Murdered Indigenous People

In Section 1 regarding Policy, it states - The safety and well-being of all Native Americans is a top priority for my Administration. My Administration will work hand in hand with Tribal Nations and Tribal partners to build safe and healthy Tribal communities and to support comprehensive law enforcement, prevention, intervention, and support services.

Generations of Native Americans have experienced violence or mourned a missing or murdered family member or loved one, and the lasting impacts of such tragedies are felt throughout the country. Native American women in particular are disproportionately the victims of sexual and gender-based violence, including intimate partner homicide. Research shows that approximately half of Native American women have experienced sexual violence and that approximately half have experienced physical violence by an intimate partner. The vast majority of Native American survivors report being victimized by a non-Native American individual.

For far too long, justice has been elusive for many Native American victims, survivors, and families. Criminal jurisdiction complexities and resource constraints have left many injustices unaddressed. Some progress has been made, particularly on Tribal lands, but given that approximately 70 percent of American Indian and Alaska Natives live in urban areas, we must continue that work on Tribal lands but also build on existing strategies to identify solutions directed toward the particular needs of urban Native Americans. *The Executive Order also includes:*

- Coordination of a Federal Law Enforcement Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Violence Against Native Americans.
- Supporting Tribal and Other Non-Federal Law Enforcement Efforts to Prevent and Respond to Violence Against Native Americans.
- Improving Data Collection, Analysis, and Information Sharing.

Available Resources

- There are two important days on the United States calendar for the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women cause: February 14 and May 5.
February 14th is Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women National Day of Action and Awareness. On this day, activist groups organize Women’s Memorial Marches around the country to protest class disparity, racism, inequality, and violence against Native Americans.
May 5th is the official Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Day and is the most widely celebrated across the United States and Canada. Every year, there are marches, protests, bike

rides, fundraisers, and more to raise awareness for the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women cause and fight against the injustice that is happening to Native women and their families every day.

- **The national organization, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women USA**

<https://mmiwusa.org/> which I have put the link in the chat box.

This organization's number one mission is to bring their missing home and help the families of the murdered cope, and to support them through the process of grief. They give hands-on support and guidance and if they do not have the answers, they get the answers so that these families do not feel abandoned and alone in this struggle like so many have before them. The broader goal is to eradicate this problem so that the future generations thrive through education of the threats that they face and self-defense. This organization last November, when so many families are celebrating Thanksgiving dinners, held a fundraiser through a Facebook/GoFundMe campaign for the families of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. Allies at the dinners passed a red purse and told stories of how generational trauma, disregard by the government and law enforcement, and the disenfranchisement of Native people is causing this tragedy right in front of our eyes.

- Informational booklet called, "*Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women: Understanding the Crisis*" by Samantha Johnston and MacKenzie Neal which you can find on the Internet by the title of the booklet which I have put in the chat box. <https://understandingthemmiwcrisis.wordpress.com/>

Some of the booklet contents includes:

- ✓ Historic Sources of Intergenerational Trauma
- ✓ Violence against Native Women Statistics
- ✓ Federal, Tribal, and State Jurisdictional Issues
- ✓ Native Women in Pop Culture and Media
- ✓ Economic Influences
- ✓ Violence on the Land: Extraction Industries
- ✓ Take Action
- ✓ Reminder for Allies

- **Center to Stop Violence Against Native Women** <https://www.csvanw.org/mmiw/>

Their mission is to stop violence against Native women and children by advocating for social change in their communities.

- **To get involved, you can find the Tribal government** near you and see if they have a program where you can talk with staff, be an ally, have a red purse fundraiser, etc.