

Missing and Murdered Native American Women: Costs, Challenges and Prospects

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ABSTRACT

The disappearance and murder of women is a top priority for Native American communities and unquestionably deserves greater attention from both scholars and policymakers. Existing research on this topic underscores the severe lack of reliable data and the profound psychological toll on affected families, while offering limited exploration of the broader social and economic impacts on entire communities. Although recent actions by the U.S. government mark progress, these actions face significant challenges and fall short of addressing the multifaceted nature of this crisis. This paper delves into the epidemic of missing and murdered Native American women, examines its widespread consequences for their communities, and suggests policy recommendations to tackle this urgent issue effectively.

Keywords: Missing and Murdering Native American Women, Human Trafficking, Community Costs, Federal Legislation, Empowerment Programs

INTRODUCTION

According to the First Nations Development Institute Survey, the disappearance and murder of Native American women was the most pressing issue for Native American communities heading into the 2024 presidential elections, surpassing even land rights and economic development on reservations (Sanchez et al., 2024). Acknowledging the longstanding severity of this crisis, in 2021 President Biden proclaimed May 5 as Missing or Murdered Indigenous Persons Awareness Day, honoring these individuals and reaffirming the commitment to work with Tribal Nations to address the violence and systemic inequities fueling this epidemic (OJJDP, 2024). Efforts to quantify the scope of this issue are hindered by limited data, as many cases remain undocumented or unreported. Since its establishment in 2021, the Missing and Murdered Unit (MMU) has investigated 735 missing and murdered persons cases, closed 264 missing persons cases, and solved only 8 murder cases (US Department of the Interior, 2023). This lack of reliable information perpetuates the crisis and obstructs meaningful progress.

Several studies have explored the phenomenon of missing and murdered Native American women (Gilbert et al 2021; Hawes et al 2022; Jiwani et al 2006; Puzyreva et al 2017; Congressional Research Service, 2023) and its profound impact on their families. However, the broader consequences for entire communities and the inadequacies of existing policies remain largely underexamined. This investigation aims to address these gaps and contribute to a deeper understanding of the issue.

The structure of this study is as follows: Section 1 introduces the research topic; Section 2 explores the key findings related to missing and murdered Native American women; Section 3 analyzes the societal and economic impacts of these cases on affected communities; Section 4 analyzes the policies implemented by the U.S. government to address this issue, as well as the challenges they encounter; Section 5 presents comprehensive recommendations for effectively tackling the crisis; and Section 6 summarizes the study's key findings and conclusions.

WHO IS MISSING AND WHY?

An empirical investigation into the issue of missing and murdered Native American women reveals the following key findings:

a. Disproportionate Disappearances

According to the FBI National Crime and Information Center, there were 5,203 missing Indigenous women reported in 2021. This rate is more than two and a half times their estimated share of the U.S. population (Cipriano, 2022). However, only more than 100 of those cases are reported in the US Department of Justice Federal Missing Person database (Gable 2023).

b. Youth Among the Missing

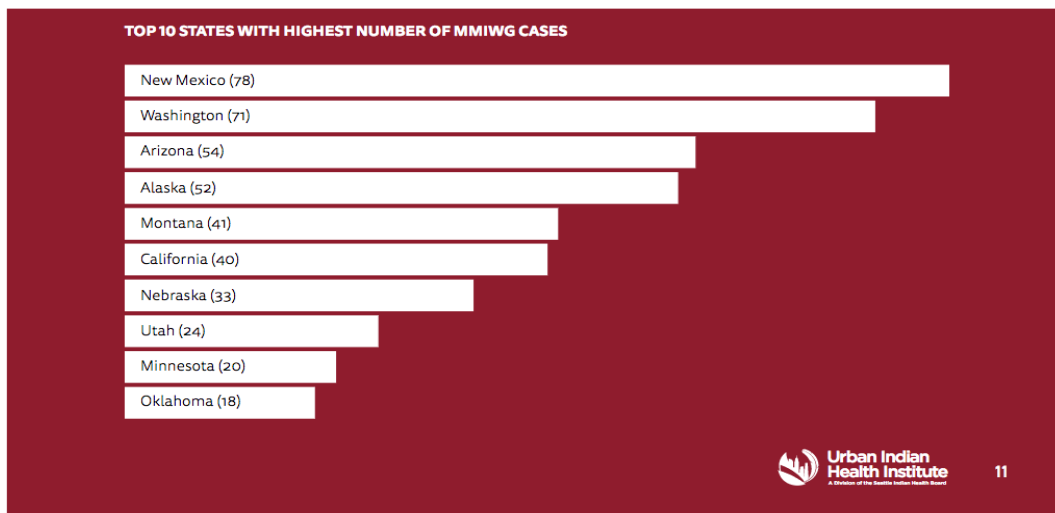
In 2020, the National Crime Information Center recorded 5,293 missing Indigenous women, with 80% being 20 years old or younger. Of these cases, 578 remain open, and 690 are logged in the federal database.

c. Not Limited to Women

The issue of missing persons extends to young men as well. In 2023, the FBI National Crime Information Center reported that 68% of missing American Indian and Alaskan Native (AI/AN) persons were aged 17 or younger encompassing both males and females. However, the number of young girls was almost double that of young males. The percentages were different when the total number of missing persons is considered, but even there, the number of women was higher than that of men-54% female vs 46% male (Congressional Research Service 2023).

d. Regional Concentration

The highest numbers of missing and murdered Indigenous women are reported in New Mexico, followed by Washington and Arizona (see Figure below).



Albuquerque and Gallup, in New Mexico, are amongst the top ten cities in the United States for the highest number of missing and murdered Native American women.

e. Urban Migration and Vulnerability

The majority of Native American women who go missing or murdered reside in urban areas rather than on reservations. According to the 2020 U.S. Census, 9.7 million people are identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native, yet only 13% live on tribal land (Ordway, 2023). This urban migration is often driven by the pursuit of better job opportunities and/or the desire to escape abusive relationships. Additionally, research highlights that factors such as high unemployment rates and substance abuse among Native American men contribute significantly to violence against women (Puzyreva, 2017). Over half of Indigenous women-56.1%- have experienced sexual violence, while 55.5% have suffered physical abuse at the hands of intimate partners (Cipriano, 2022).

f. Overlap Between Missing and Murdered Cases

It is challenging to distinguish between missing and murdered Native American women, as a significant portion of missing cases results in homicide. Approximately 60% of reported Missing Indigenous Women cases involve murder.

g. Disproportionately targeted for Human Trafficking

Native American girls are disproportionately targeted for human trafficking, both within the United States and across international borders, primarily for sexual exploitation. Despite Indigenous people making up only 1.1% of the U.S. population, they account for nearly 25% of human trafficking victims (Stern,2021).

h. Unidentified Bodies of Native American Women

Between 2009 and 2018, the bodies of Native American women were 135% more likely to remain unidentified compared to those of other racial or ethnic groups in the U.S. (Ordway, 2023). Several factors contribute to this disparity, including a lack of regular contact with family members, the absence or passing of relatives, and inadequate efforts by law enforcement agencies to track and identify these cases (Gable, 2023) —often influenced by systemic racism.

WHAT ARE THE COSTS OF MISSING AND MURDERED WOMEN FOR THE COMMUNITIES?

The costs of missing and murdered women are profound, impacting not only the families directly involved but also the broader community.

Families of missing and murdered women experience severe trauma and grief, often leading to anxiety, depression, and long-term psychological distress. In addition, the absence of mothers leaves children without parental support and care.

However, the issue of missing and murdered women has far-reaching consequences, affecting not only the families of the victims but also the broader community. These impacts can be categorized as psychological, social, and economic costs.

At a psychological level, the trauma experienced by missing and murdered women and their families extends to the entire community, instilling a deep sense of fear. This widespread distress contributes to mental health challenges, including depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. Additionally, the failure to adequately address these cases erodes trust in law enforcement and the justice system. The resulting combination of fear and distrust undermines community cohesion, making effective functioning increasingly difficult. (Stumblingbear-Riddle et al., 2019).

At a social level, women play a crucial role in preserving cultural knowledge and traditions, and their absence can lead to the erosion of cultural practices, ultimately weakening the community's identity. Moreover, as primary caregivers, their disappearance disrupts social cohesion and stability. Furthermore, a significant number of missing women can create demographic imbalances, making it difficult to find partners and potentially affecting population growth.

At the societal level, the feminist literature (Gilbert et al., 2021; Weaver, 2009) offers valuable insights into the role of women in contemporary Indigenous societies and the origins of violence against them. This body of work highlights how colonization by the U.S. government has led to a significant loss of sovereignty for tribal nations. Through this process, tribal communities were stripped of their traditional values, beliefs, norms, and practices. Colonization also imposed patriarchal ideologies that disrupted the matriarchal or egalitarian family structures that were common in many native cultures. Historically, native women held prominent roles within their communities—they controlled property, selected tribal council members, guided socialization processes (Deer, 2015), and passed down cultural knowledge to future generations (Weaver, 2009). However, as Indigenous men adopted patriarchal beliefs, they increasingly viewed women as subordinate and used violence as a mechanism to assert control over them (Kuokkanen, 2008).

Turning to the economic level, the impact of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Crisis is significant, encompassing both direct costs and lost economic opportunities. These impacts can be summarized as follows:

- **Rising Healthcare and Social Service Costs:** Families of victims, along with affected community members, often require medical and psychological support, placing additional strain on healthcare and social service systems.
- **Increased Law Enforcement and Legal Expenses:** Investigations into missing and murdered women require substantial resources, escalating costs for law enforcement, judicial proceedings, and victim support services.
- **Loss of Productivity:** The absence of women in the community results in reduced economic participation and diminished overall productivity.
- **Deterrence of Business Investment:** A heightened perception of insecurity may discourage external and local investment, stifling economic growth and business development.
- **Potential decline in Tourism Revenue:** Concerns over safety may deter tourists, leading to decreased visitor numbers and financial losses for local businesses reliant on tourism.

Thus, the crisis extends beyond a criminal justice issue; it profoundly impacts the emotional well-being, social cohesion, cultural preservation, and economic sustainability of Indigenous communities. Addressing it is not only a matter of justice but also of long-term economic stability and growth.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES?

The crisis of missing and murdered Native American women is a deeply rooted and complex issue that demands comprehensive policies and actionable solutions.

Over the last decade, several significant pieces of legislation have been enacted to address the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women. Among the most notable are *Savanna's Act of 2020*, *the Not Invisible Act of 2019* (signed into law in 2020) and *the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) Reauthorization Act of 2022*. In addition, in 2019, the president signed an executive order establishing a task force aimed at addressing the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls entitled *Operation Lady Justice* (OLJ).

Operation Lady Justice aims to enhance law enforcement coordination, strengthen investigative resources, and provide greater support for victims and their families.

The Savanna's Act—named in honor of Savanna LaFontaine-Greywind, a 22-year-old pregnant woman from North Dakota who was tragically murdered in 2017—represents a bipartisan effort aims to improve data collection of missing or murdered Native Americans, and clarify the responsibilities of Tribal, federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies responding to cases of missing or murdered Native Americans. Moreover, the Act enables indigenous organizations to access the data collection system “and collaborate in reporting surveillance from other portals not regulated by law enforcement.” (Richardson et al., 2024)

The Not Invisible Act establishes a multi-agency advisory committee tasked with identifying and combating the root causes of violence, human trafficking, and the disappearance of Indigenous people.

The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) Reauthorization Act strengthens and expands protections and programs to improve access to safety and support for survivors, enhance prevention efforts, and continue to advance social change in how communities address and respond to these crimes.

These laws represent a significant step forward in addressing the systemic issues contributing to the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women. They aim to improve data collection, enhance coordination between tribal, federal, and state agencies, and provide specialized training for law enforcement. However, their true effectiveness ultimately depends on proper implementation and oversight—areas where most challenges arise.

The most significant challenges can be summarized as follows:

- A 2021 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO, 2021) found that the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Department of the Interior (DOI) had not fully implemented the mandates outlined in *Savanna's Act* and the *Not Invisible Act*.
- While the DOJ took initial steps to analyze data in federal databases on missing or murdered Native American women, these efforts remained in the early stages and lacked a long-term strategy beyond November 2021.
- Law enforcement agencies responsible for investigating these cases have yet to implement key measures intended to improve intergovernmental coordination and data collection.
- The *Not Invisible Act* requires the Secretary of the Interior, in collaboration with the Attorney General, to appoint members to the *Joint Commission on Reducing Violence Against Indians* by February 7, 2021. The members of the Commission were finally appointed on May 5, 2022, and the Commission transmitted its recommendations to the Department of Justice (DOJ), the Department of Interior (DOI) and U.S. Congress on November 1, 2023. One of the overarching concerns expressed in the Commission's report was the need for additional resources to respond to the Missing or Murdered Indigenous Persons (MMIP) and Human Trafficking (HT) crisis across Indian Country; a concern whose validity was acknowledged in the Departments' response to the Commission's report (DOJ and DOI, 2024).
- The 1978 Supreme Court ruling in *Oliphant v. Suquamish Indian Tribe* prevents tribal courts from prosecuting non-American Indian perpetrators who commit crimes on tribal lands, creating a significant legal barrier to justice.
- Many law enforcement agencies remain underfunded and understaffed, limiting their ability to investigate cases effectively.
- There is a pressing need for more emphasis on preventive measures. A Congressional Research Service Report on VAWA Reauthorization noted that since the original adoption of VAWA in

1994, “the majority of grants funded under VAWA have tended to address violence that has already occurred rather than working to change public attitudes or prevent violence in the first place.” (Congressional Research Service, 2023)

- Federal programs supporting missing and murdered Indigenous women rely heavily on grant-based funding, such as those provided under the *Violence Against Women Act* and the *Tribal Law and Order Act*.

- In 2024, the U.S. Department of the Interior allocated \$16.5 million to address this crisis which is just 0.35% of its \$4.7 billion budget (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2023). An additional \$33.5 million was designated to expand law enforcement in Indian Country through increased staffing of officers and investigators, while \$2 million was allocated to enhance recruitment, retention, and training within the Office of Justice Services. Combined, these two last allocations total \$35.5 million, a mere 0.755% of the overall budget. These minimal spending highlight a glaring disparity between government spending priorities and the urgent need for action in Native American communities.

The underfunding of the U.S. government toward the Indian community is unsurprising. Reports from Congress in both 2003 and 2022 have reached the same conclusion: despite some progress, the federal government consistently fails to adequately support the social and economic well-being of Native Americans. As a result, over the past two centuries, Native Americans have consistently ranked among the lowest of all Americans in health, education, and employment outcomes (Andreopoulos et al 2022).

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

Undoubtedly, the issue of missing and murdered Native American women demands greater attention and accountability from the U.S. government. Beyond improving data collection, fostering effective communication among tribal, federal, and state agencies, and providing specialized training for law enforcement, Congress should consider implementing the following policies:

1. **Enhanced Legal Protections for Women**

Strengthen legal frameworks to ensure stricter safeguards against violence, discrimination, and exploitation.

2. **Empowerment Programs for Women**

- Develop leadership and self-advocacy training to build confidence and resilience.
- Establish mentorship and networking initiatives to expand career opportunities.
- Expand microcredit programs to foster entrepreneurship and financial independence.

3. **Promote Community Awareness Campaigns**

- Organize workshops and events for community members of all genders to raise awareness about gender-based violence.
- Educate the community on the risks and warning signs of human trafficking.
- Promote a culture of respect, equality, and understanding toward women.

4. **Increased Indigenous Representation, Especially Women, in Legislation and Law Enforcement**

Native American communities play a vital role in shaping legislation to address violence against Indigenous women by testifying before Congress and collaborating with lawmakers. Organizations such as the National Indigenous Women's Resource Center and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women USA are instrumental in advocating for

stronger legal protections and more effective law enforcement responses. Despite these efforts, significant challenges remain. It is crucial to ensure that Native American voices, particularly those of Indigenous women, are meaningfully included in the legislative process, law enforcement, and oversight to drive systemic change and improve protections for their communities.

These policy recommendations clearly require greater resources, stronger collaboration, and a shared responsibility among all stakeholders at every stage of the process. Without these essential elements, addressing the systemic challenges facing Indigenous women and their communities remains unattainable.

CONCLUSIONS

The scope of this paper is to investigate the epidemic of missing and murdered Native American women, evaluate its consequences for their communities, and offer comprehensive policies to confront this pressing issue.

Our investigation highlights a severe crisis with disproportionately high rates of disappearance and victimization of Native American Women. Most cases involve young women, under 20 years old, many occurring in urban areas rather than reservations. The missing women are usually victims of human trafficking, many cases overlap with homicides and their bodies are more likely to remain unidentified.

In addition to the trauma experienced by the families of missing and murdered women, there is a heavy cost for the community which manifested in a loss of trust and social cohesion. In addition, women's absence disrupts caregiving roles, erodes cultural traditions, and creates demographic imbalances. Economically, the community costs arise from healthcare, law enforcement, and lost productivity, while perceptions of insecurity deter business and tourism reducing potential growth.

Addressing this issue requires coordinated efforts from multiple stakeholders. Despite recent policy advancements, a significant gap persists between the needs of Native American communities and the effectiveness of the federal response. While these legislative measures represent important steps forward, they remain insufficient due to incomplete implementation, inadequate funding, and the absence of comprehensive, long-term strategies.

To effectively tackle this crisis, a comprehensive and sustainable approach is essential. Prioritizing robust data collection and improving interagency communication are key steps, alongside decisive Congressional action to allocate substantial, dedicated funding. A strong preventive strategy should also be implemented—one that bolsters legal protections for women, empowers them through targeted training and mentorship programs, and expands access to microcredit initiatives to promote financial independence. Additionally, community awareness campaigns and increased Indigenous representation in both legislative and law enforcement roles are vital to advancing gender equality and reinforcing systemic protections. The incorporation of these measures will lead to a more effective and enduring response to this urgent issue.

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