

Statement on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Relatives
September 25, 2024

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The Missing and Murdered Indigenous Relatives (MMIR) crisis, often misconstrued as an “Indigenous issue,” is endemic to North America. Since the onset of colonial settler violence, ongoing colonization efforts, systemic racism, and socioeconomic marginalization, the MMIR crisis has devastated American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities for centuries and remains at the forefront of critical issues impacting Indigenous women, men, boys, girls, and twospirit relatives (Gibbons, 2023). Research documents that AI/AN persons experience higher rates of violence as compared to other races (Rosay, 2021; US Department of the Interior, n.d.; US Department of Justice, 2023) and is also documented in the comprehensive report to the United States Congress and president, A Roadmap for Making Native America Safer (Eid et al., 2013). However, severe discrepancies exist in the accuracy of MMIR data reported (US Department of the Interior, n.d.). Alarming rates reflect there are an estimated 4,200 unsolved cases of AI/AN missing and murdered (U.S. Department of Interior, n.d.) in the United States; violent crimes committed against Indigenous women and girls, sometimes ending in homicide, are consistently higher in the United States (Rosay, 2022); and in Canada, the rate of homicide against Indigenous women and girls is six times more than non-Indigenous women and girls (Burczycka & Cotter, 2023; Police, 2015).

Beyond the statistics, families and communities impacted by MMIR continuously relate the intimate details of the disappearance or murder of their loved one, sometimes recounting their ordeals over decades. In AI/AN communities, these stories often become cautionary tales of a failed justice system in regions with scarce resources. With the utilization of social media and grassroots advocacy, Native victims have come forward to tell their near-death experiences and stories of violence in an attempt to draw attention and raise awareness of MMIR for equitable change. Reports include extreme wait times for law enforcement response from hours to days (Mallonee, 2021) to no response in some cases. In remote and rural tribal lands, sometimes including urban areas with high Native populations, in response to acts of violence, there is often no media coverage, public alert systems, or supportive services available to tribal members. In addition, at times Native testimonies contradict law enforcement investigations resulting in nonapplication of routine investigative and prosecutorial practices. Furthermore, research documented that violence committed against Native women and girls is by non-Native perpetrators (Mallonee, 2021; Rosay, 2016), which complicates jurisdiction and legal proceedings in tribal, state, and federal venues (Ross, et al., 2022).

The MMIR crisis is reflective of the perception that, “Native American people are often overlooked, considered extinct, romanticized, forgotten, ignored and bear the burden of negative stereotypes” (GreyWolf & McCloskey, 2019). These attitudes toward Native Peoples, which may contribute to the lack of awareness surrounding the MMIR crisis outside of AI/AN circles, dovetails with the colonization and annexation of tribal lands at a time when Native persons were dehumanized and treated with contempt. These attitudes have been documented in American history and are evident in the US Declaration of Independence referring to Indigenous ancestors as “merciless Indian Savages”, the Indian Removal Act of 1830 as a solution to the “Indian Problem”, and in the 1800s boarding school slogan, “Kill the Indian in him, save the man.” Into the mid-20th century, the “Indian Problem” remained an issue as attempts to assimilate Native people are still ever present in the US. Unremitting exploitation and sexual violence committed against Native persons is also a factor that contributes to negative attitudes. Historical systemic and institutional policies, including the foster care system, the boarding school era, and ongoing impoverished socioeconomic conditions contribute to the MMIR epidemic. Unlawful removal of Native children and non-adherence to The Indian Child Welfare Act, as well as legislation, are also factors.

This statement is written to urge support for traumatized Native families, tribal communities, and the survivors of the MMIR crisis. The psychological impacts of MMIR not only affect the individual and nuclear family, but also have profound negative consequences for the extended family, the Indigenous community, and Indian Country (Gibbons, 2023). This is partly attributed to the collectivistic orientation of Pueblos, tribes, and nations.

Concerning future directions, Native American professionals are exploring biogenetic avenues for identifying MMIR and unknown decedent remains (Engelhaupt, 2023; Thompson, 2023). Technology, including advanced DNA testing and photo-identification, has been successful in positive identification in some cases. Recommendations include one standardized comprehensive database to assess and address MMIR in the United States and mandatory reporting by all law enforcement entities; an alert system to be developed and instituted in states having high AI/AN populations so that when an Indigenous person goes missing, an immediate response is activated; and in missing person or homicide cases, demographics of the person to be documented accurately, including non-binary gender classifications and the elimination of “other” when ethnicity is demarcated (Ross, et al, 2018). We are calling for equity in the applicability of law enforcement investigations, closure of legal loopholes, and full prosecution of perpetrators of violence regardless of venue, jurisdictional issues, and a victim’s lifestyle (Ross, 2018).

As psychologists, we have a collective responsibility to end violence in all forms. Trauma informed victim/client-centered responses must be culturally strengthened (Tehee, et al., 2021), beginning in academic psychology programs. Providers serving communities affected by MMIR may have to provide services to multiple family and community members who are impacted by the loss of their loved one. Considering an ecosystem of care, beyond land acknowledgements, we must

expand our knowledge of the local history of the people served and the history should be orated from an Indigenous perspective.

It will take all of us to disentangle the harms and find a solution to a several centuries-old clandestine epidemic. Concurrently, life must be respected, including the lives of Indigenous persons. Many people, both Native and non-Native, have been wounded physically, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually by MMIR. “By 2024, coinciding with the centennial of the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924, Native Americans and Alaska Natives should no longer be treated as second-class citizens when it comes to protecting their lives, liberty, and pursuit of happiness” (Eid, et al., p. v, 2013). Those impacted by MMIR deserve the promise of justice for all.

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