

RECOGNIZING HISTORY

SERVING INDIGENOUS SURVIVORS OF SEX TRAFFICKING IN THE UNITED STATES

The sexual mistreatment and exploitation of Indigenous people in the Americas is not a new problem. While sexual violence is experienced across the globe, some of the first documented occurrences date back to the start of colonization in Central America. Prominent European colonizers often committed acts of sexual violence against Native women without facing consequences, including abducting, raping, and trafficking them to other settlers. Decades later, the violence against and exploitation of Indigenous women and girls only continued as U.S. military troops led settlers further into the American West. To gain control over Native lands, the U.S. government implemented assimilation and relocation practices, leaving countless families homeless and forcing their children into boarding schools or into adoption by settler families. Even as late as the 1970s, American Indian women were forcefully sterilized by U.S. government health workers.

Today, Indigenous women remain the most frequent victims of physical and sexual violence in the United States. 84% of American Indian and Alaska Native women have experienced violence in their lifetime, with one-third having experienced it in the last year. These women are 150% more likely than non-Hispanic white women to be physically injured through violence, 180% more likely to need medical services, and 190% more likely to have missed days of work or school due to their injuries.

Indigenous men are not safe from this problem. 81% of American Indian and Alaska Native men have experienced violence in their lifetime, a rate 1.3 times higher than for non-Hispanic white men. While 56% of Native women report experiencing sexual violence, nearly 28% of Native men report the same. Both of these rates of sexual violence are far above the average for non-Indigenous

people. Furthermore, recent research suggests that perpetrators of these crimes are disproportionately non-Natives, with white males being the most common offenders.

THE PREVALENCE OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE TODAY

The United States' history of mistreatment of Indigenous peoples and the prevalence of violence and discrimination against them today provides a direct link to the disproportionate numbers of Native people who experience sex trafficking. The absence of comprehensive research and the difficult nature of gathering information about trafficking prevents an accurate estimate of how many Native individuals are victimized each year, but it is indisputable that the proportion of Indigenous people far exceeds their representation in the general population. For example, a 2015 study found that an average of 40% of women who have experienced sex trafficking identified as American Indian or Alaska Native in cities where far less than 10% of the general population is made up of Native women. Another study in Minnesota found that 24% of arrests made for charges related to the commercial sex trade were of Native women, more than twelve times their representation in the county's population. In 2010, the Anchorage Police Department and the FBI sent a report to Alaska tribes that sex traffickers were actively targeting young girls from rural areas and forcing them into the commercial sex trade. The APD reported that at least one-third of the women they arrested on prostitution charges were Native.

It is clear that Indigenous people are particularly vulnerable to trafficking, which can be attributed at least in part to the systemic challenges they face socially and economically.

Many communities of Native people, including those living on reservations, experience high rates of common risk factors for trafficking, such as:

- Historical trauma and cultural loss
- Significant poverty and/or economic isolation or dependence
- High rates of Adverse Childhood Experiences in the population
- High numbers of homeless and runaway youth
- High rates of family surveillance and involvement with the child welfare system
- High rates of exposure to violence, particularly in domestic or intimate partner relationships
- High rates of personal or family/caregiver addiction to substances
- Low levels of police or law enforcement presence

These risk factors are exceptionally common in Native communities. On reservations, the poverty rate is three times higher than the national average. Native men, women, and children are far more likely to experience physical, sexual, and domestic violence than their non-Indigenous counterparts. In addition to experiencing more health disparities, American Indian and Alaska Native individuals report Adverse Childhood Experiences at higher rates than other Americans. Out of all of the ethnic demographic groups in the United States, Native minors are the most likely to run away, followed closely by Asian or Pacific Islander minors. These children are also 2.66 times more likely to be placed into state foster care than their representation in the general population. Additionally, the rate of substance dependence or abuse is higher among American Indian people than any other population group in the country, with nearly 1 in 5 Native young adults (aged 18-25) having a substance use disorder.

In particular, Native communities and reservations experience the risk of little law enforcement presence, which is largely due to the complexity of prosecuting non-Native perpetrators. Until 2013, federally recognized tribes had no legal authority to criminally prosecute

non-Indigenous people who commit crimes against Native individuals, even when those crimes were committed on tribal land. Today, non-Indigenous people can only be prosecuted in certain cases that meet the conditions of a special domestic violence criminal jurisdiction. These circumstances provide semi-immunity for non-Native perpetrators which only exacerbates the vulnerability of Native communities.

SERVING INDIGENOUS SURVIVORS

Consequently, American Indian and Alaska Native men, women, and children are more vulnerable to exploitation, more likely to experience violence and sex trafficking, and less likely to find justice through the legal system than any other people group in the United States. As members of the anti-trafficking industry, it is vitally important to understand and anticipate the unique needs of Native survivors. For many, the process of healing from the trauma of trafficking experiences is made more difficult when they are forced to go outside of their culture to access resources. The power of culture, shared history, and community in restorative care for Native survivors cannot be overstated.

The following points summarize the recommendations of Native survivor leaders shared in Safe House Project's webinar, [Serving Indigenous People Affected by Trafficking](#).

- ⊕ **Educate tribal citizens and community leaders across the United States about identifying, reporting, and providing appropriate resources to survivors of sex trafficking.** Because it is so challenging to estimate the extent of exploitation among Indigenous peoples, the numbers of trafficking victims reported are very likely to severely underrepresent the actual population that is impacted. Fostering a culture of prevention in Native communities is the first step to shrinking the numbers of people who are being trafficked in these groups. Training should be implemented for key groups such as cultural authorities, community groups, teachers, caregivers, and child welfare representatives to begin

the process of preventing further trafficking cases. Training materials should include the signs and symptoms of trafficking, risk factors, methods of reporting, and culturally appropriate resources for survivors. Many Native survivor leaders also offer their services as lived experience experts to help train communities about the unique cultural needs of specific Indigenous populations as well.

- ⊕ **Equip and empower children to practice appropriate physical boundaries and youth to understand sexual exploitation to prevent peer recruitment.** Victims of sex trafficking are most commonly targeted between the ages of 11 and 14. Tragically, even very young children are not safe from vulnerabilities to trafficking. In the United States, hundreds of thousands of children are estimated to be trafficked every year, with at least 40% being exploited by a family member and another 27% being trafficked by a friend or significant other. Since traffickers and abusers are so often someone a child knows and is comfortable with, it is vitally important that children are taught how to identify inappropriate physical contact and establish boundaries. For teenagers, who are more likely to spend unsupervised time with others, it is particularly crucial to teach them the difference between appropriate relationships and potentially exploitative sexual situations. Teens are especially vulnerable to peer-to-peer recruitment, in which an individual of a similar age is involved in recruiting or trafficking them. This type of recruitment may take place in schools, among friends, in dating relationships, or in other social situations. Because abuse and trafficking often happen behind closed doors, educating children and youth with age-appropriate lessons is one of the best ways to equip them to protect themselves against exploitation.
- ⊕ **Build an infrastructure of adequate and safe housing options for homeless, runaway, and pregnant or parenting Native youth.** In the United States, nearly 4.2 million youth and young adults experience homelessness every year with fewer than 3,500 dedicated emergency shelter beds available to them.

This lack of resources is only exacerbated for American Indian and Alaska Native individuals, who often have severely limited funding for support in their communities. Homeless children and teens are exceptionally vulnerable to traffickers; in fact, between 20% and 40% of minors who experience homelessness also experience sex trafficking. About half of all trafficked women and children report being runaways and engaging in survival sex for a safe place to sleep. Homelessness, runaway minors, and unplanned pregnancies are among the most common vulnerabilities traffickers use to manipulate individuals into the commercial sex trade. The first step to lessening this vulnerability is to build an adequate infrastructure of resources for homeless, runaway, and pregnant or parenting Native youth, which enables them to meet their basic needs in emergencies without engaging in survival sex.

- ⊕ **Develop cross-community, regional, and state networks to share information and resources for serving survivors of trafficking.** For Native survivors, the process of healing from trafficking can be hindered if they need to move away from their community and culture to access restorative care resources. Currently, there are very few safe house programs that are equipped to serve Native residents with the full cultural appreciation that they need. In areas where the population of Native people is significant, it is vitally important for restorative care programs to highlight the voices and experiences of survivor leaders who are part of the community. Partnerships and collaborations with Native organizations in the area can supplement the available resources of these programs and enable Native survivors to heal in a space that holds connections to their culture. These connections between local organizations can grow to include regional and state networks as well, which will multiply the available resources for Native survivors.
- ⊕ **Elevate the voices of Indigenous survivor leaders in the development of restorative care programs to build culturally appropriate services.** There are currently 574



federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native tribes, each with a unique culture and history. To sufficiently include the culture of individual tribes in restorative care, it is necessary to include the input of survivors from those same tribes in restorative care programming. Doing this will require safe house programs to cultivate cultural humility among their staff and volunteers, which is a mindset that moves beyond stereotypes to humanize and dignify the experiences, backgrounds, and family histories of other people in relation to their culture. Pride about being American exists very strongly in mainstream U.S. culture, which often results in the minimization and diminishing of the vitality and history of other cultures, especially those native to the Americas. Adopting cultural humility will take proactive attention from members of the anti-trafficking movement, but it is a necessary and right addition to responding to survivors from minority cultures. This process should begin and continue to include elevating Native survivor leaders as experts in this area.

CONCLUSION

As the anti-trafficking movement seeks to serve and protect survivors, it is critical to understand the experiences and individual needs of those survivors. The industry must recognize their unique vulnerabilities to exploitation and incorporate their experiences and culture into restorative care, fostering an environment of cultural humility and celebration in which all individuals are welcome to heal and find freedom.

- ⊕ **Encourage greater coordination and collaboration between tribal, state, local, and federal law enforcement agencies to more efficiently respond to missing American Indian and Alaska Native individuals.** Currently, it is impossible to estimate how many Native individuals go missing or remain missing each year. Due to misclassification in other racial categories, a distinct lack of reporting, and severely limited research, the number of Native people who are reporting missing is likely to be markedly underreported. The resources and collaborative partnerships needed to fill this gap simply do not exist, but the need for them is clear. To adequately address the problem of violence against and exploitation of American Indian and Alaskan Native people in the United States, there needs to be far greater coordination and collaboration between law enforcement agencies, along with expanded investigative resources.

