

# MISSING AND MURDERED *INDIGENOUS* WOMEN & GIRLS

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*A snapshot of data from 71 urban cities in the United States*

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*\*This report contains strong language about violence against American Indian and Alaska Native women.*

*This report is the second of the Our Bodies, Our Stories series. Go to [UIHI.org](http://UIHI.org) to read the first report regarding sexual violence against Native women in Seattle, Washington.*

*Urban Indian Health Institute is a division of the Seattle Indian Health Board. Donate to future projects that will strengthen the health of Native people by visiting [SIHB.org/donate](http://SIHB.org/donate).*

**DUE TO URBAN INDIAN  
HEALTH INSTITUTE'S LIMITED  
RESOURCES AND THE  
POOR DATA COLLECTION BY  
NUMEROUS CITIES,  
THE 506 CASES IDENTIFIED  
IN THIS REPORT ARE  
LIKELY AN UNDERCOUNT OF  
MISSING AND MURDERED  
INDIGENOUS WOMEN &  
GIRLS IN URBAN AREAS.**

# DATA A NATIONWIDE ^ CRISIS: MISSING AND MURDERED INDIGENOUS WOMEN & GIRLS



*Nationwide, the voices of Indigenous people have united to raise awareness of missing and murdered Indigenous woman and girls (MMIWG). Though awareness of the crisis is growing, data on the realities of this violence is scarce.*

The National Crime Information Center reports that, in 2016, there were 5,712 reports of missing American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls, though the US Department of Justice’s federal missing persons database, NamUs, only logged 116 cases.<sup>iii</sup> The Center for Disease Control and Prevention has reported that murder is the third-leading cause of death among American Indian and Alaska Native women and that rates of violence on reservations can be up to ten times higher than the national average.<sup>iii, iv</sup> However, no research has been done on rates of such violence among American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls aged 10–24 living in urban areas despite the fact that approximately 71% of American Indian and Alaska Natives live in urban areas.<sup>v</sup>

## MURDER #3

The third-leading cause of death among American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls aged 10–24.<sup>iii</sup>

To fill this gap, in 2017, Urban Indian Health Institute (UIHI), a tribal epidemiology center, began a study aimed at assessing the number and dynamics of cases of missing and murdered American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls in cities across the United States. This study sought to assess why obtaining data on this violence is so difficult, how law enforcement agencies are tracking and responding to these cases, and how media is reporting on them. The study’s intention is to provide a comprehensive snapshot of the MMIWG crisis in urban American Indian and Alaska Native communities and the institutional practices that allow them to disappear not once, but three times—in life, in the media, and in the data.

# AN OVERVIEW OF MMIWG IN URBAN AMERICA

*Despite this ongoing crisis, there is a lack of data and an inaccurate understanding of MMIWG, creating a false perception that the issue does not affect off-reservation/village American Indian and Alaska Native communities.*

However, according to an analysis of 2016 Census data, 50.2% of the urban Indian population identified as female.<sup>vi</sup> The data in this report also includes LGBTQ, non-binary, and Two Spirit individuals. The majority of American Indian and Alaska Native people now live in urban communities due to a variety of reasons for migration, from forced relocation due to 1950s federal relocation and termination policies, to current barriers to obtaining quality educational, employment, and housing opportunities on tribal lands. Because of this, urban American Indian and Alaska Native people experience MMIWG-related violence in two ways—through losses experienced by extended family and community ties on reservations, in villages, and in urban communities themselves. Though there are critical issues regarding jurisdiction of MMIWG cases on reservation and village lands, lack of prosecution, lack of proper data collection, prejudice, and institutional racism are factors that also occur in urban areas.

In this study, UIHI sought to demonstrate the ways in which these issues also impact urban MMIWG cases, highlighting the results of a deeply flawed institutional system rooted in colonial relationships that marginalize and disenfranchise people of color and remains complicit in violence targeting American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls.

**71%** of American Indians/ Alaska Natives live in urban areas.<sup>v</sup>

**Urban Indians** are tribal people currently living off federally-defined tribal lands in urban areas.

**Institutional racism** is the process of purposely discriminating against certain groups of people through the use of biased laws or practices. Often, institutional racism is subtle and manifests itself in seemingly innocuous ways, but its effects are anything but subtle.<sup>vii, viii</sup>

# COLLECTING THE DATA

*UIHI utilized a multi-pronged methodology to collect data on cases of MMIWG with the understanding that what is reported and recorded by law enforcement, covered by media, and remembered and honored by community members and family rarely matches.*

As demonstrated by the findings of this study, reasons for the lack of quality data include underreporting, racial misclassification, poor relationships between law enforcement and American Indian and Alaska Native communities, poor record-keeping protocols, institutional racism in the media, and a lack of substantive relationships between journalists and American Indian and Alaska Native communities.

In an effort to collect as much case data as possible and to be able to compare the five data sources used, UIHI collected data from Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to law enforcement agencies, state and national missing persons databases, searches of local and regional news media online archives, public social media posts, and direct contact with family and community members who volunteered information on missing or murdered loved ones.

**Racial misclassification** is the incorrect coding of an individual's race or ethnicity, e.g. an American Indian and Alaska Native individual incorrectly coded as white. Misclassification generally favors the larger race, so while American Indians and Alaska Natives are often misclassified as white, the reverse of that is rare.<sup>ix</sup>

The **Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)** grants any person the right to request access to federal agency records or information.<sup>x</sup>

## UIHI'S DATA SOURCES



Law Enforcement  
Records



State & National  
Databases



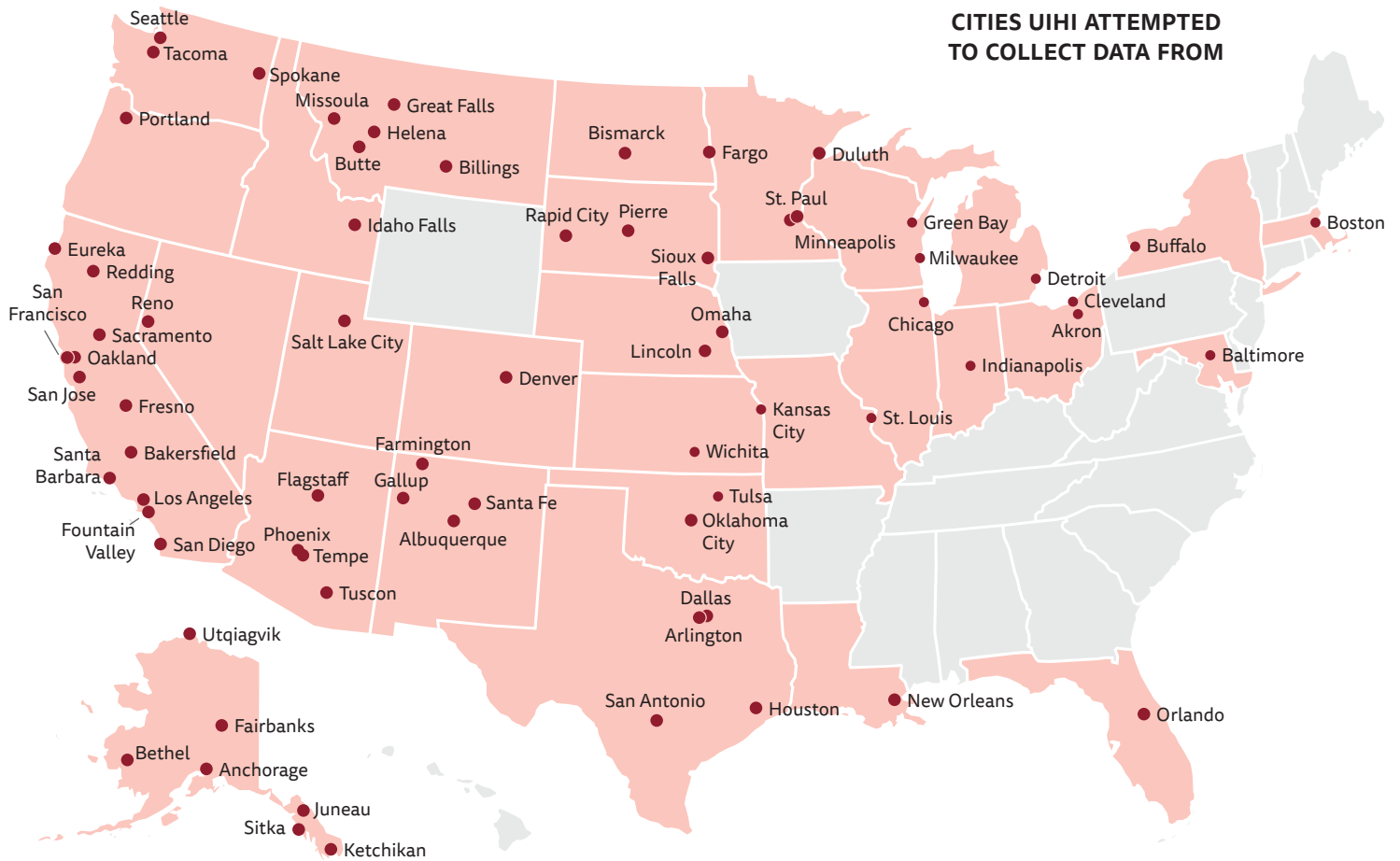
Media  
Coverage



Social Media



Community & Family  
Member Accounts



UIHI attempted to collect data in 71 cities across 29 states.

Due to challenges in collecting data on historical cases, approximately 80% of the cases in this report have occurred since 2000.

In these FOIA requests, UIHI requested all case data from 1900 to the present. No agency was able to provide data dating to 1900 but providing such a large date range was useful in accessing as much data as the agency had readily available, which varied across jurisdictions. The oldest case UIHI identified happened in 1943, but approximately two-thirds of the cases in UIHI’s data are from 2010 to 2018. This suggests the actual number of urban MMIWG cases are much higher than what UIHI was able to identify in this study.

These cities were selected because they either have an urban Indian health center that is affiliated with UIHI, a significant population of urban Indians, or were found to have a large number of MMIWG cases in a preliminary consultation with key community leaders.

# FINDINGS

*UIHI identified 506 unique cases of missing and murdered American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls across the 71 selected cities—128 (25%) were missing persons cases, 280 (56%) were murder cases, and 98 (19%) had an unknown status.*

*Approximately 75% of the cases UIHI identified had no tribal affiliation listed.*

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*Sixty-six out of 506 MMIWG cases that UIHI identified were tied to domestic and sexual violence.*

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*The youngest victim was a baby less than one year old.*

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*The oldest victim was an elder who was 83 years old.*

A case was flagged as “status unknown” in two circumstances: when law enforcement gave a number of total cases in response to a record request but did not clarify how many were missing and how many were murdered (16 cases total), and when a case was listed on a missing persons database but had been removed, UIHI could not verify whether the woman or girl was located safe or deceased.

The identified cases were widely distributed by age and tribal affiliation. The youngest victim was under one year old and the oldest was 83 years old. One hundred and thirty-five cases (27%) were victims aged 18 or under, and mean victim age was approximately 29 years old (out of 387 cases for which victim age was able to be determined).

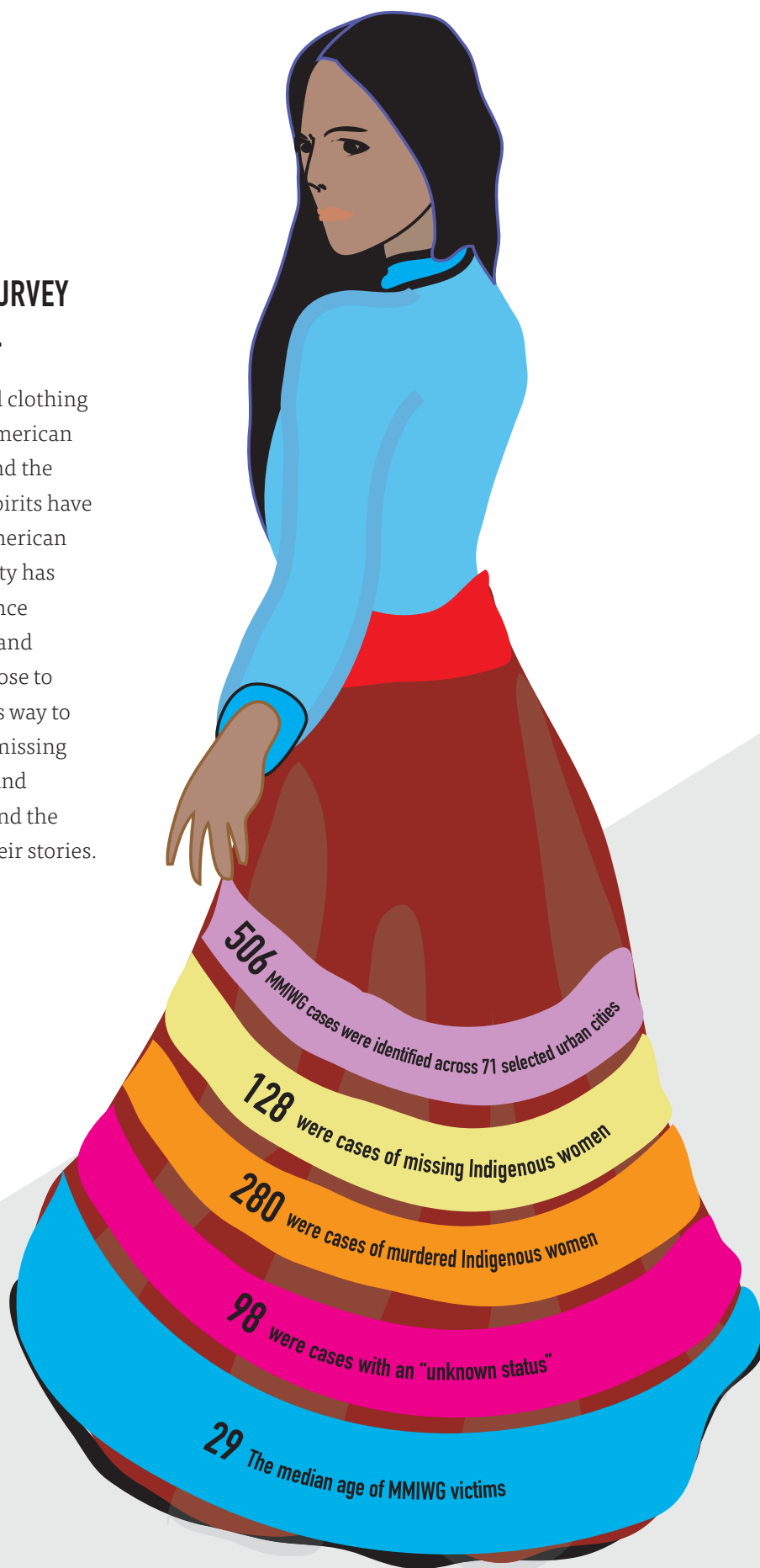
UIHI identified 96 cases that were tied to broader issues such as domestic violence, sexual assault, police brutality, and lack of safety for sex workers. In this report, domestic violence includes intimate partner violence and family violence. Forty-two (8% of all cases) cases were domestic violence related, and 14% of domestic violence fatalities were victims aged 18 and under. Three victims were pregnant at their time of death. At least 25 victims (6% of all cases) experienced sexual assault at the time of disappearance or death, 18 victims (4% of all cases) were identified as sex workers or victims of trafficking, and 39% of victims in the sex trade were sexually assaulted at the time of death. For this report, sexual assault is defined as penetrative and non-penetrative sexual violence and includes victims who were found murdered and left nude. Eight victims were identified as homeless, six were trans-women, and seven were victims of police brutality or death in custody.

UIHI was able to identify the victim’s relationship to the perpetrator in 24 cases; of these, 13 victims were killed by a partner or the partner of an immediate family member, three were killed by an immediate family member, six were killed by a serial killer, and two were killed by a drug dealer. Of the perpetrators UIHI was able to identify, 83% were male and approximately half were non-Native. Thirty-eight of the perpetrators were convicted, while nine were never charged, four were acquitted, one had a mistrial, and one committed suicide. Altogether, 28% of these perpetrators were never found guilty or held accountable. An additional 30 alleged perpetrators have pending charges.



## MMIWG STATISTICS FROM A SURVEY OF 71 CITIES ACROSS THE U.S.

The ribbon skirt is a form of cultural clothing that represents the sacredness of American Indian and Alaska Native women and the deep connection their bodies and spirits have to the land. Just like a skirt, each American Indian and Alaska Native community has its own beauty and stories of resilience despite multiple ribbons of trauma and violence stacked upon them. We chose to represent the study's findings in this way to honor the sacredness of our urban missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, the prayers we hold them in, and the responsibility we have to care for their stories.







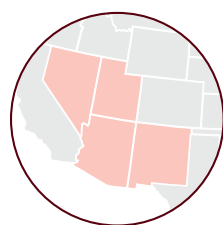
**THE INVISIBLE 153**

Number of cases identified by UIHI that currently **do not exist** in law enforcement records.

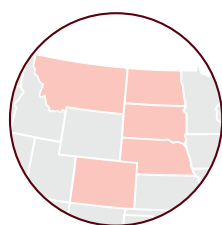
# GEOGRAPHY

The 506 cases UIHI identified were dispersed over a wide geographic area. Regionally, the Southwest (157), Northern Plains (101), Pacific Northwest (84), Alaska (52), and California (40) were the areas with the highest number of cases. The cities that figure most prominently in the data are Seattle (45), Albuquerque (37), Anchorage (31), Tucson (31), and Billings (29).

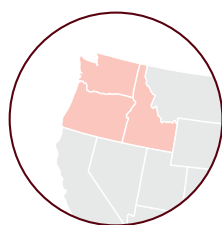
## AREAS WITH THE HIGHEST NUMBER OF CASES (BY REGION)



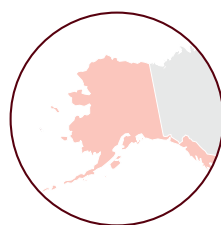
Southwest



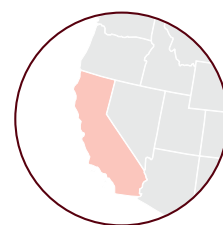
Northern Plains



Pacific Northwest



Alaska



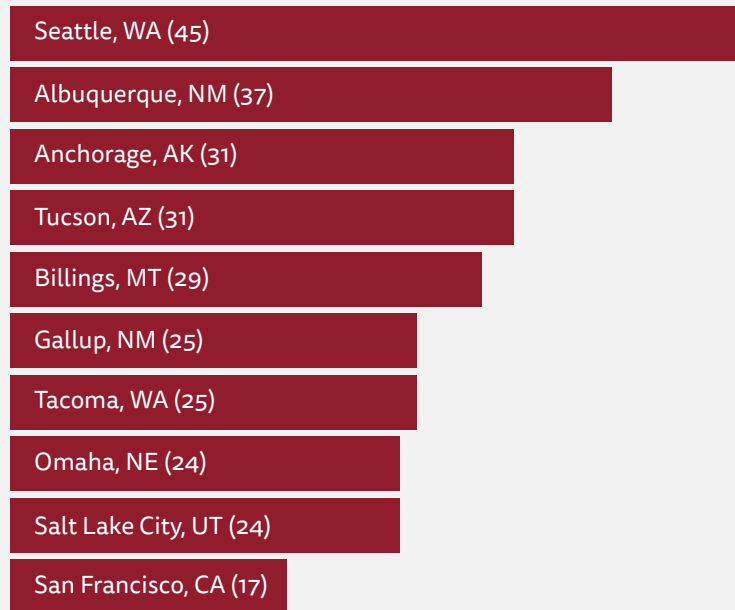
California

The states with the highest number of cases are as follows: New Mexico (78), Washington (71), Arizona (54), Alaska (52), Montana (41), California (40), Nebraska (33), Utah (24), Minnesota (20), and Oklahoma (18).

The areas with the largest number of urban cases with an unknown status were Albuquerque (18), San Francisco (16), Omaha (10), and Billings (8). Notably, both Albuquerque and Billings police departments acknowledged FOIA requests but did not provide any records or information or respond to any follow-up,

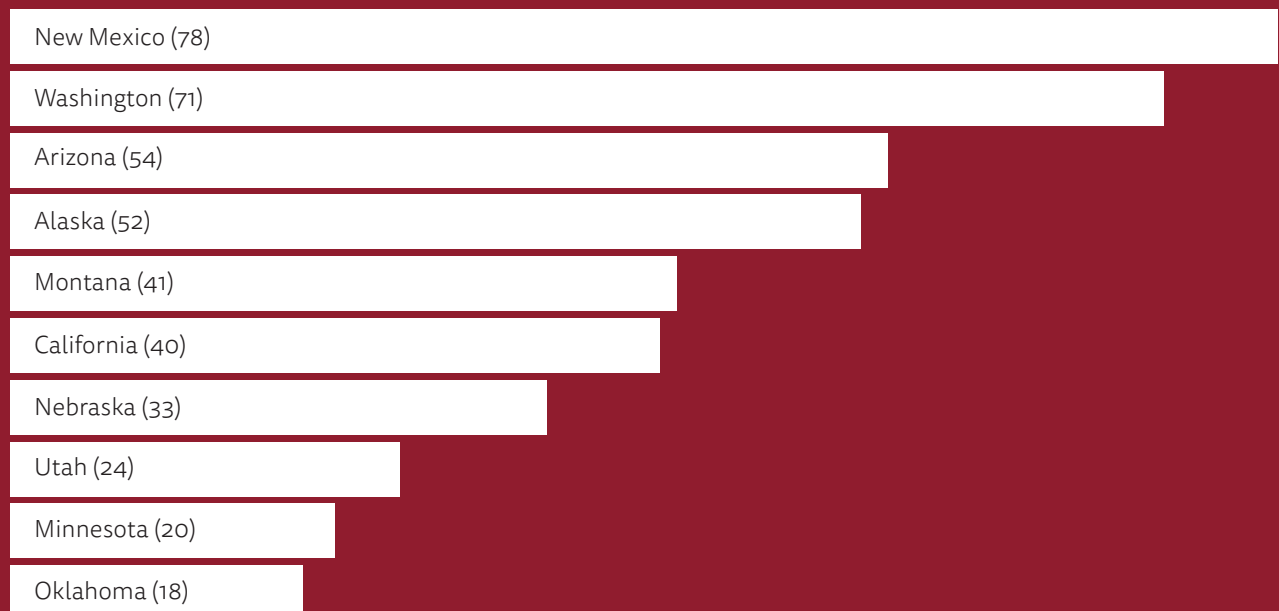
while the records provided by San Francisco police did not specify the name or status of any victim. Omaha figured prominently in this list because, like many jurisdictions across the country, when a person listed on the Nebraska missing persons database is located, the notice is removed with no public information as to whether they were found safe or deceased. Together, these cities highlight the need for changes to public information systems on missing persons and improvement in cooperation from law enforcement agencies.

### TOP 10 CITIES WITH HIGHEST NUMBER OF MMIWG CASES



See Appendix for data from all 71 cities surveyed.

### TOP 10 STATES WITH HIGHEST NUMBER OF MMIWG CASES



# CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES IN OBTAINING MMIWG DATA

“Until there is cooperation and better tracking systems at all government levels, the data on missing and murdered Indigenous women will never be 100 percent accurate, which is what we need to strive for in order to protect our mothers, daughters, sisters, and aunties.”

- Abigail Echo-Hawk (Pawnee), Director, Urban Indian Health Institute

## ACCESSING LAW ENFORCEMENT DATA

UIHI filed FOIA requests with municipal police departments in all 71 cities included in the survey. In the case of Alaska, UIHI also filed a request with the Alaska Department of Public Safety (DPS) because a case that occurred in a major city was not considered city jurisdiction. To ensure other such cases would be included in the data, a request to DPS was necessary.

Initially, these requests were filed via the agency’s online request system, when one existed, and, in cases where there was no such system, via email. Where no online system or email was available, no contact was made. After a significant portion of these initial requests never received a response, UIHI utilized MuckRock, a paid service that assists in FOIA requests, to re-file prior requests and file new requests with agencies that had no online system or email available.

In these requests, UIHI asked for all data on cases of missing persons (unsolved only), homicides, suspicious deaths, and deaths in custody (solved and unsolved) involving an American Indian or Alaska Native victim that was female or identified as a trans-woman/girl.

## FOIA RESULTS

Seventy-one city police agencies and one state police agency were surveyed. Forty agencies (56%) provided some level of data. Thirty-three of the 40 (and 46% of all surveyed) actually searched their records, though not all provided comprehensive data. Ten out of the 40 agencies provided data but with a “caveat”, meaning they only confirmed cases UIHI had already logged, provided what they could recall from memory, or gave partial data. Fourteen of the 72 agencies surveyed (20%) did not provide data, and 18 (25%) are still pending. Those combined with the 10 “caveat” cases comprised 59% of all the agencies surveyed. In sum, nearly two-thirds of all agencies surveyed either did not provide data or provided partial data with significant compromises.

Thirteen of the 72 agencies surveyed (18%) did not respond to our FOIA request within the time limit set by local statute, and an additional 12 agencies (17% of all agencies) failed to respond within their local time limit by ignoring the first attempt, but did respond in time when a second request was filed nine months later using MuckRock. Combined, these 25 agencies

“It is unacceptable that law enforcement feel recalling data from memory is an adequate response to a records request. In the one instance where this occurred and the officer searched their records after, several additional cases the officer could not recall were found. This highlights the need for improved records provision standards and shows that the institutional memory of law enforcement is not a reliable or accurate data source.”

-Annita Lucchesi (Southern Cheyenne), PhD-c

# 71 CITY POLICE DEPARTMENTS AND 1 STATE AGENCY WERE SURVEYED.

OUT OF THOSE:

40 AGENCIES  
PROVIDED SOME  
LEVEL OF DATA



14 AGENCIES  
DID NOT  
PROVIDE DATA



18 AGENCIES  
STILL HAVE  
PENDING FOIA  
REQUESTS



as of our cutoff date,  
October 15, 2018

Departments like Anchorage and Lincoln demonstrate that it is possible for urban police departments to respond to FOIA requests for such data and that the barriers other agencies have identified are not inherent to law enforcement as a whole.

“Your assertion that we have ignored a similar request from eight months ago is false. Unless you sent your request elsewhere, this is the first time we have seen it.”

-Chief of Police in Billings, Montana, after receiving a second FOIA request. After receiving screen shots of first request, no further response was given.

represent over one-third (35%) of all agencies surveyed. Six agencies never responded to any FOIA requests: Albuquerque, Baltimore, Butte, Reno, San Jose, and Tempe. Sixty agencies (83%) required more than one communication regarding UIHI's request. Of those 60, 29 (40% of all agencies) needed more than two, and 16 (22% of all agencies) needed more than five.

The findings highlight that the FOIA process is, at best, laborious, requiring intensive follow up and resources from the requesting agency. For example, a representative from Juneau Police in Alaska explained that they received UIHI's initial request at the same time as an unaffiliated project at another institution filed a request for data on sexual assault on Alaska Native women. The agency assumed any request on violence against Alaska Native women must have come from the same source, so, when they filled the other institution's request, they closed out UIHI's. Similarly, in an October 2018 phone call, a representative from the Los Angeles Police claimed UIHI's two prior FOIA requests to their agency had been closed out by being lost in the system due to understaffing. They had a backlog of thousands of requests that three staff members were responsible for filling, and many were not answered (as UIHI's first request was) or were rerouted to the wrong agency (as UIHI's second request was). An entire year later, the agency expected UIHI to file a third request and “get back in line.”

In another case, the Chief of Police in Billings, Montana, after having received a second FOIA request from UIHI, wrote, “Your assertion that we have ignored a similar request from eight months ago is false. Unless you sent your request elsewhere, this is the first time we have seen it.” UIHI responded with screenshots of the initial request and of the automatic email received stating that the request was received and was processing, but UIHI never received any response to the email or to the record request to date.

However, some agencies were helpful and provided case data in a timely manner. For example, a representative from the Anchorage police department was one of the very first to provide comprehensive data on MMIWG cases in their jurisdiction. Not only did they search their records for



cases, they also searched the name of each case UIHI had logged to determine why they may not appear on the department's search results. Similarly, a representative from the Lincoln police department called for clarification of the request to ensure that they were pulling all of the pertinent records. They were very supportive of the project and dedicated hours of research at no cost to provide case data dating back to 1962.

## FEES FOR ACCESSING DATA

Thirteen percent of all agencies surveyed charged a fee for accessing data: Fairbanks, Flagstaff, Juneau, Sitka, Kansas City, Ketchikan, Portland, Salt Lake City, Tucson, and Utqiagvik. If UIHI had paid every invoice received, it would have cost \$4,464.48 (not including the cost of the paid service for the FOIA requests). Alaska agencies comprised 93% of the total costs of invoices. The invoices UIHI paid totaled \$68, and, in turn, UIHI received data from three cities, resulting in an additional 51 cases logged. Portland police never provided any data despite their invoice being paid. As a small American Indian and Alaska Native organization with limited resources, UIHI was unable to pay a majority of the fees and thus was unable to access the data.

Of the agencies that did provide some kind of data, nine (23%) located data prior to 1990, 18 (45%) located data prior to 2000, and 29 (73%) located data prior to 2010. Accessing historical data was extremely difficult.

**\$4,464**

Total Required Fees  
(from 13% of the cities)

**\$68**

UIHI's Budget  
for FOIA Fees

## FOIA REQUEST TO ALASKA

After UIHI's FOIA request was rejected by the Alaska State Troopers for being too burdensome, an appeal was denied by the Department of Public Safety because they estimated there were between 800 and 1,200 homicides of Alaska Native women since 1940 and it would require too many work hours to complete the request. Using one of the author's connections in Alaska, UIHI received assistance

from a prominent Alaska Native tribal leader, after which the agency offered to provide data only from 2013 to 2018 because those records had been digitized and were searchable. However, UIHI has still not received the data to date.

“[Many] Native Americans adopted Hispanic names back during colonial times...Our crime systems are not flexible enough to pick out Native Americans from others in the system...it would be impossible to compile any statistically relevant information for you.”

-Representative from Santa Fe Police Department

“[Regarding the difference] the Homicide unit found that ‘N’ was being used in the 60s up through the late 70s and early 80s – meant Negro not Native American.”

-Representative from Seattle Police Department

“Sometimes the information [on a victim’s race] would not be asked and our record system defaults to white.”

-Representative from Fargo Police Department

## LACKING RECORDS AND RACIAL MISCLASSIFICATION

Nine cities (13% of total) reported the inability to search for American Indian, Native American, or Alaska Native in their data reporting systems despite the common and expected practice of classifying victims by race in data systems. A representative from Santa Fe police wrote, “[Many] Native Americans adopted Hispanic names back during colonial times...Our crime systems are not flexible enough to pick out Native Americans from others in the system...it would be impossible to compile any statistically relevant information for you.”

In Seattle, UIHI was initially provided one list then subsequently provided another. Considering they had significant overlap, UIHI asked for an explanation of the difference between the two and were told: “[Regarding the difference] the Homicide unit found that ‘N’ was being used in the 60s up through the late 70s and early 80s – meant Negro not Native American.” However, all of the names that were on the original list—which presumably had both American Indian and Alaska Native and African American names on it—were also on the second list and did not provide any clarification.

Additionally, several police departments provided UIHI with data that included both American Indians and Indian-Americans with visibly Indian-American surnames (e.g. Singh). When asked about this misclassification, a representative from Sacramento police claimed the Indian-American names must be victims who were biracial.

Misclassification can also occur due to lack of recognition of tribal nations. UIHI found that if a woman or girl was killed during the time their tribe was terminated, her citizenship may have never been restored when her nation was re-recognized, and she may have been falsely classified as white—or not racially classified at all—in documentation regarding her case. These cases would not be included in search results constrained to searching for records of Native American females. This is an issue that still impacts contemporary cases involving victims from tribes that are not federally recognized, and lack of recognition is an issue that disproportionately affects urban

Indian communities. For example, Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles each are located on homelands belonging to tribes that are not federally recognized (the Duwamish, Ohlone, and Tongva peoples, respectively). In this way, it is possible that American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls indigenous to the land the city is located on may not even be included in the city's data on American Indian and Alaska Native people, and their deaths and disappearances go uncounted on their own homeland.

UIHI found that it was not just racial categories that held misclassifications. Records obtained from Anchorage police showed that two-thirds of the cases UIHI identified that were not in the data the agency provided were, indeed, in their system, but three cases were misclassified as white, one was classified as a suicide (despite the case having been reopened as a homicide), one was classified

as an overdose when her body had been moved and disposed of suspiciously, and one was not considered as having happened within the city because she had been kidnapped from a bar within the city but killed just outside of it.

Through research methods outside of FOIA requests (government missing persons databases, news reports, social media and advocacy sites, direct contact with families and community members who volunteered info), UIHI found 153 cases that were not in law enforcement records. Of all of the data gathered in the 40 cities where FOIA requests produced results, 42% of the cases were found by UIHI's diligent research and not present in law enforcement data. This 42% was made up of cases from 26 of the 40 cities (65%). The cities where UIHI located the highest number of cases not found in law enforcement records are listed in the table below.

### TOP 10 CITIES WITH HIGHEST NUMBER OF MMIWG CASES THAT ARE NOT IN LAW ENFORCEMENT RECORDS

CITY	NUMBER OF CASES
Gallup, NM	20
Billings, MT	17
Omaha, NE	16
Seattle, WA	11
Anchorage, AK	9

CITY	NUMBER OF CASES
Farmington, NM	9
Denver, CO	7
Oklahoma City, OK	7
Rapid City, SD	6
Great Falls, MT	5

# URBAN MMIWG IN THE MEDIA

## METHODS

UIHI conducted a content analysis of media coverage on MMIWG in the areas covered by the study. The vast majority of coverage on MMIWG, both on individual cases and on the issue overall, was centered on reservation-based violence. Though coverage of reservation-based violence is critical, this bias does work to collectively minimize this issue in urban spaces. It also bolsters stereotypes of American Indian and Alaska Native people as solely living on reservations or in rural areas, perpetuates perceptions of tribal lands as violence-ridden environments, and, ultimately, is representative of an institutional bias of media coverage on this issue. Additionally, media sources have used language that could be perceived as violent and victim-blaming in their coverage of MMIWG cases. This type of coverage can also perpetuate negative stereotypes of American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls, so UIHI also conducted a qualitative analysis to identify this type of language.

UIHI conducted a comprehensive online search for media coverage on all 506 cases represented in the data. Each publicly-available article UIHI found was logged, assessed and coded for the type of language it used, and attributed to the outlet that originally published it.

**MORE THAN 95%**

of the cases in this study were never covered by national or international media.



## FINDINGS

### *Media Coverage*

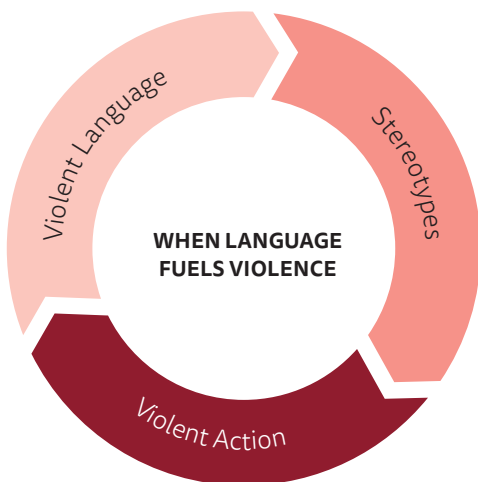
UIHI examined 934 articles, which collectively covered 129 cases out of the 506 represented in the study. One-quarter of the total number of cases were covered by local, regional, or national media. Less than one-fifth of the total number of cases were covered more than once (14%), less than one-tenth were covered more than three times (7%), and less than 5% of cases were covered more than five times. The top ten cases that received the most coverage comprised 62% of all coverage, and 47% of coverage was regarding just one case. Nearly all of the articles UIHI surveyed (91%) regarded a murder case, and 83% of the cases covered by media were murder cases. There were 27 articles printed in national or international media, covering 21 cases.

## Violent Language

For the purposes of this analysis, UIHI defined violent language as language that engages in racism or misogyny or racial stereotyping, including references to drugs, alcohol, sex work, gang violence, victim criminal history, victim-blaming, making excuses for the perpetrator, misgendering transgender victims, racial misclassification, false information on cases, not naming the victim, and publishing images/video of the victim's death.

Of the articles analyzed, 46 media outlets had violent language in their coverage, representing nearly a third of all outlets surveyed (31%). Thirty-six media outlets (25%) used violent language in 50% or more of the cases they covered, and 22 (15%) used violent language in 100% of the cases they covered. UIHI identified prevalence of specific types of violent language in the table on the right.

If the case is covered in the media, the language that is used to describe the crime and the victim often causes additional harm. In addition, these findings demonstrate that media outlets are willing to publish a single story on this issue but not commit to sustained coverage on the cases that happen within the geographic areas they cover.



## TYPES OF VIOLENT LANGUAGE USED IN ARTICLES

References to drugs or alcohol 38%

Coverage of trans-women victims that misgendered the victim 33%

References to victim's criminal history 31%

References to sex work 11%

Gave false information on the case or did not name the victim 8%

Made excuses for the perpetrator or used victim-blaming language 4%

Showed images or video of victim death 3%

# DISCUSSION

This study illustrates the maze of injustice that impacts MMIWG cases and demonstrates how they are made to disappear in life, the media, and in data. UIHI discovered a striking level of inconsistency between community, law enforcement, and media understandings of the magnitude of this violence. If this report demonstrates one powerful conclusion, it is that if we rely solely on law enforcement or media for an awareness or understanding of the issue, we will have a deeply inaccurate picture of the realities, minimizing the extent to which our urban American Indian and Alaska Native sisters experience this violence. This inaccurate picture limits our ability to address this issue at policy, programing, and advocacy levels.

Moreover, many of the reasons commonly attributed to root causes of MMIWG in the media and popular narrative—sex work and domestic violence, for example—are forms of violence that were not prominent in the cases UIHI found, and the geography of this data does not match an assumed perception on where MMIWG cases are more likely to occur. These narratives stress areas like Montana and North Dakota, while minimizing the issue in places like California and Alaska. This study shows these neglected areas need to be at the forefront of the dialogue rather than almost entirely absent from it. Overall, there is a need for more sustained and in-depth research on how and why urban American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls go missing and are killed and enforceable data collection practices for local, state, and federal agencies.

## LAW ENFORCEMENT

The challenges and barriers in accessing data on this issue from law enforcement severely impede the ability of communities, tribal nations, and policy makers to make informed decisions on how best to address this violence. This is especially problematic in the case of grassroots organizers, who often serve as informal first responders and service providers for American Indian and Alaska Native women and their families. The average community member does not have thousands of dollars and unlimited time to continue to follow up for this data, and yet they are the entities staffing women's shelters, volunteering in searches, organizing memorials, advocating for policy changes, caring for families, holding ceremonies, fundraising for funerals, and organizing awareness campaigns. This indicates that measures need to be put in place for community access to information on this issue as the FOIA process is far from its democratic intentions.

Additionally, it is alarming that UIHI located records of 153 cases that are not in law enforcement records and that some cities still do not have systems that are searchable by race or include American Indian, Native American, or Alaska Native as categories. Record-keeping protocols must be updated and implemented immediately—no agency can adequately respond to violence it does not track.

More largely, continued research on racial and gender bias in police forces regarding how MMIWG cases are handled needs to occur. It is unacceptable that nearly a third of perpetrators were never held accountable, and the resistance to tracking this data

that UIHI experienced from agency leadership is indicative of larger institutional structural inequity. Ultimately, American Indian and Alaska Native women will continue to go missing and be killed as long as law enforcement does not account for this violence in accurate, meaningful ways and does not bring these cases to justice more consistently.

## **MEDIA**

Based on UIHI's findings, it is clear that media coverage of this issue is extremely uneven, and the vast majority of cases occurring in urban areas are never covered by media at all. Combined with the inaccessibility of law enforcement data, this lack of reporting leads the general public to have an inaccurate understanding of the issue, and over two-thirds of the cases that happen in urban areas are rendered invisible. This not only prevents critical awareness of the issue and is hurtful to victims' families and communities, it limits efforts to engage in cross-cultural community dialogue on how to enhance safety, not just for urban American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls, but for all who live in the cities in which they go missing and are killed.

Similarly, existing media coverage remains deeply biased, and standards and protocols need to be put in place for covering these cases to decrease the amount of violent language used. It is imperative that stories on the violence our urban American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls experience are treated with care and respect. The Native American Journalist Association has created resources to assist reporters in evaluating their stories to determine if they rely on stereotypes; use of resources such as this will assist in decreasing, and ultimately ending, the use of racist, victim-blaming, and criminalizing language.<sup>xi</sup>

Both the lack of reporting and the bias in existing coverage could be addressed through the presence of more Indigenous staff at media outlets, and efforts to build more substantive relationships with the communities they are reporting (or not reporting) on. In an urban context, these relationship-building opportunities are readily available through urban American Indian and Alaska Native community events, community organizations and programming, and outreach to American Indian and Alaska Native college students pursuing a career in journalism.

**THE CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS IN ACCESSING DATA ON THIS ISSUE FROM LAW ENFORCEMENT SEVERELY IMPEDE THE ABILITY OF COMMUNITIES, TRIBAL NATIONS, AND POLICY MAKERS TO MAKE INFORMED DECISIONS ON HOW BEST TO ADDRESS THIS VIOLENCE.**

# RECOMMENDATIONS

The MMIWG epidemic deeply impacts urban American Indian and Alaska Native communities, and the dialogue must shift to include them. Any policy addressing MMIWG that does not account for the violence urban Native communities experience will not adequately address the issue. This includes the currently proposed Savanna's Act, a federal bill aimed at collecting data on new MMIWG cases. Though it is named after Savanna LaFontaine-Greywind, who was murdered in Fargo, North Dakota (one of the cities included in this survey), presently, it solely asks federal law enforcement to track and report data. Because cases occurring in urban areas are not federal jurisdiction, this means missing and murdered urban Native women and girls, including Savanna herself, would not be included in the data the bill aims to collect. Gaps such as these allow the violence urban Native women and girls experience to continue.

Tribal nations must have the ability to advocate for their citizens living in urban areas when they go missing or are killed. This is a courtesy extended to all other sovereign nations—when a citizen is killed while living or traveling outside the nation of which they are a citizen, the nation is notified of their death and able to advocate for their citizen's case and family. This basic respect must be afforded to tribal nations as well, so they are able to fully practice their inherent sovereignty by advocating for the health and safety of all their citizens, regardless of where they reside. Currently, this courtesy is not extended, and rarely is a tribal nation notified or given access to the data regarding their tribal citizens. The concept of Indigenous Data Sovereignty, which has been

adopted by the National Congress of American Indians in 2018, is defined as the right of a nation to govern the collection, ownership, and application of its own data, including any data collected on its tribal citizens.<sup>xiii</sup> The findings in this report show that racial misclassification and a lack of consistent data collection made for a significant undercount of urban MMIWG cases. Tribal nations should be part of meaningful consultations to ensure proper data collection and sustained access to the data.

Lastly, funding for research that will support effective policy on violence against American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls in urban areas is desperately needed—by mid-October 2018, 76 urban MMIWG cases had already occurred in the year. Despite calls to action from tribal leadership, federal agencies have not been able to conduct a comprehensive study on MMIWG, and a focused study on this violence as it occurs in urban areas has been deemed too difficult to include in a bill like Savanna's Act. However, UIHI completed this study in approximately one year. This demonstrates the deep commitment Indigenous research and epidemiology institutions have in honoring and better understanding the violence our sisters experience. This study shows the importance of creating funding opportunities to support a continuation of this work by the Indigenous institutions who are equipped to take it on in a good way.

\*The data collected does not reflect any FOIA responses received after October 15, 2018 nor any community reported instances after that date. UIHI acknowledges that Chicago recently responded to the FOIA with 7 reported homicides, and 4 urban Indigenous women and girls have been murdered and are missing since this date.



*The lack of good data and the resulting lack of understanding about the violence perpetrated against urban American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls is appalling and adds to the historical and ongoing trauma American Indian and Alaska Native people have experienced for generations. But the resilience of American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls has sustained our communities for generation after generation. As the life bearers of our communities, they have been integral to holding strong our culture and traditional practices. Bringing to light the stories of these women through data is an integral part of moving toward meaningful change that ends this epidemic of violence. UIHI is taking huge steps to decolonize data by reclaiming the Indigenous values of data collection, analysis, and research, for Indigenous people, by Indigenous people. Our lives depend on it.*

## END NOTES

<sup>i</sup> National Crime Information Center (2018). Federal Bureau of Investigation.

<sup>ii</sup> Department of Justice (2018). NamUs. Retrieved from <https://www.namus.gov/MissingPersons/Search>

<sup>iii</sup> Urban Indian Health Institute, Seattle Indian Health Board (2016). Community Health Profile: National Aggregate of Urban Indian Health Program Service Areas.

<sup>iv</sup> Bachman, R., Zaykowski, H., Kallmyer, R., Poteyeva, M & Lanier, C. (2008) Violence Against American Indian and Alaska Native Women and the Criminal Justice Response: What is Known. Retrieved from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/223691.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> Norris, T., Vines, P.L. & Hoeffel, E (2012). The American Indian and Alaska Native Population: 2010. U.S. Census Bureau. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-10.pdf>

<sup>vi</sup> U.S. Census Bridged Race Categories (2016). National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

<sup>vii</sup> Omi, M. & Winant, H. (2015) Racial Formation in the U.S. Third Edition. New York: Routledge.

<sup>viii</sup> Robertson, D.L. (2015) "Invisibility in the color-blind era: Examining legitimized racism against indigenous peoples." The American Indian Quarterly 39.2: 113-153.

<sup>ix</sup> Jim, M.A., Arias, E., Seneca D.S., Seneca, D.S., Hoopes, M.J., Jim, C.C., Johnson, N.J. & Wiggins, C.L. (2014). Racial Misclassification of American Indians and Alaska Natives by Indian Health Service Contract Health Service Delivery Area. American Journal of Public Health. 104 (Supplement 3): S295-S302.

<sup>x</sup> Office of Information Policy, Department of Justice (2017). About FOIA. Retrieved from <https://www.justice.gov/oip/about-foia>.

<sup>xi</sup> Native American Journalists Association (2018). NAJA AP Style Guide. Retrieved from <https://www.naja.com/resources/naja-ap-style-guide/>

<sup>xii</sup> National Congress of American Indians (2018). Support of US Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Inclusion of Tribes in Development of Tribal Data Governance Principles (Resolution #KAN-18-011). Retrieved from [http://www.ncai.org/attachments/Resolution\\_gbuJbEHWpkOgcwCICRtgMJHMsUNofqYvuMSnzLFzOdxBIMIRjij\\_KAN-18-011%20Final.pdf](http://www.ncai.org/attachments/Resolution_gbuJbEHWpkOgcwCICRtgMJHMsUNofqYvuMSnzLFzOdxBIMIRjij_KAN-18-011%20Final.pdf)

# APPENDIX

CITY	MISSING	MURDERED	UNKNOWN	TOTAL
Akron, OH	0	0	0	0
Albuquerque, NM	3	16	18	37
Anchorage, AK	3	27	1	31
Arlington, TX	1	0	0	1
Bakersfield, CA	1	3	0	4
Baltimore, MD	0	1	0	1
Bethel, AK	1	3	4	8
Billings, MT	5	16	8	29
Bismarck, ND	0	0	0	0
Boston, MA	0	0	0	0
Buffalo, NY	1	0	1	2
Butte, MT	0	0	0	0
Chicago, IL	0	0	1	1
Cleveland, OH	1	1	0	2
Dallas, TX	1	1	0	2
Denver, CO	1	8	3	12
Detroit, MI	1	0	0	1
Duluth, MN	1	3	0	4
Eureka, CA	3	2	0	5
Fairbanks, AK	3	3	0	6
Fargo, ND	0	2	0	2
Farmington, NM	3	3	4	10
Flagstaff, AZ	0	7	0	7
Fountain Valley, CA	0	0	0	0
Fresno, CA	0	0	0	0
Gallup, NM	12	9	4	25
Great Falls, MT	2	0	3	5
Green Bay, WI	0	3	0	3
Helena, MT	0	0	3	3
Houston, TX	6	1	0	7
Idaho Falls, ID	2	2	3	7
Indianapolis, IN	0	0	0	0
Juneau, AK	2	1	0	3
Kansas City, MO	0	1	0	1
Ketchikan, AK	0	3	0	3
Lincoln, NE	2	5	2	9

CITY	MISSING	MURDERED	UNKNOWN	TOTAL
Los Angeles, CA	0	0	0	0
Milwaukee, WI	1	2	0	3
Minneapolis, MN	2	7	0	9
Missoula, MT	1	1	2	4
New Orleans, LA	1	0	0	1
Oakland, CA	0	0	0	0
Oklahoma City, OK	2	7	1	10
Omaha, NE	11	3	10	24
Orlando, FL	0	2	0	2
Phoenix, AZ	8	6	0	14
Pierre, SD	1	0	0	1
Portland, OR	4	0	2	6
Rapid City, SD	3	5	0	8
Redding, CA	2	1	0	3
Reno, NV	0	0	1	1
Sacramento, CA	3	10	0	13
Salt Lake City, UT	1	22	1	24
San Antonio, TX	1	0	0	1
San Diego, CA	0	1	0	1
San Francisco, CA	1	0	16	17
San Jose, CA	0	0	0	0
Santa Barbara, CA	0	0	0	0
Santa Fe, NM	2	1	3	6
Seattle, WA	7	38	0	45
Sioux Falls, SD	0	4	0	4
Sitka, AK	0	0	0	0
Spokane, WA	0	0	1	1
St. Louis, MO	0	0	0	0
St. Paul, MN	4	3	0	7
Tacoma, WA	13	10	2	25
Tempe, AZ	0	2	1	3
Tucson, AZ	1	30	0	31
Tulsa, OK	4	1	3	8
Utqiagvik, AK	0	1	0	1
Wichita, KS	0	2	0	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>506</b>





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Partial funding for this report was provided by the Indian Health Service Division of Epidemiology and Disease Prevention, grant #HHS-2016-IHS-EPI-0001. The report contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Indian Health Service.

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