

Research on Missing and Murdered Indigenous People in Arizona



The Problem

Indigenous women and girls are missing and murdered at very high rates

10 times the national average in some U.S. counties

(Source: Bachman et al. 2008)

Approach from a Social Work Perspective

The Legislature's study on the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls is lead and directed by Indigenous women and those who are already working with survivors and family members within Indigenous communities.

Arizona's approach is different from other state taskforces because we are looking at the issue from a victim-centered social work approach versus a purely law enforcement problem.

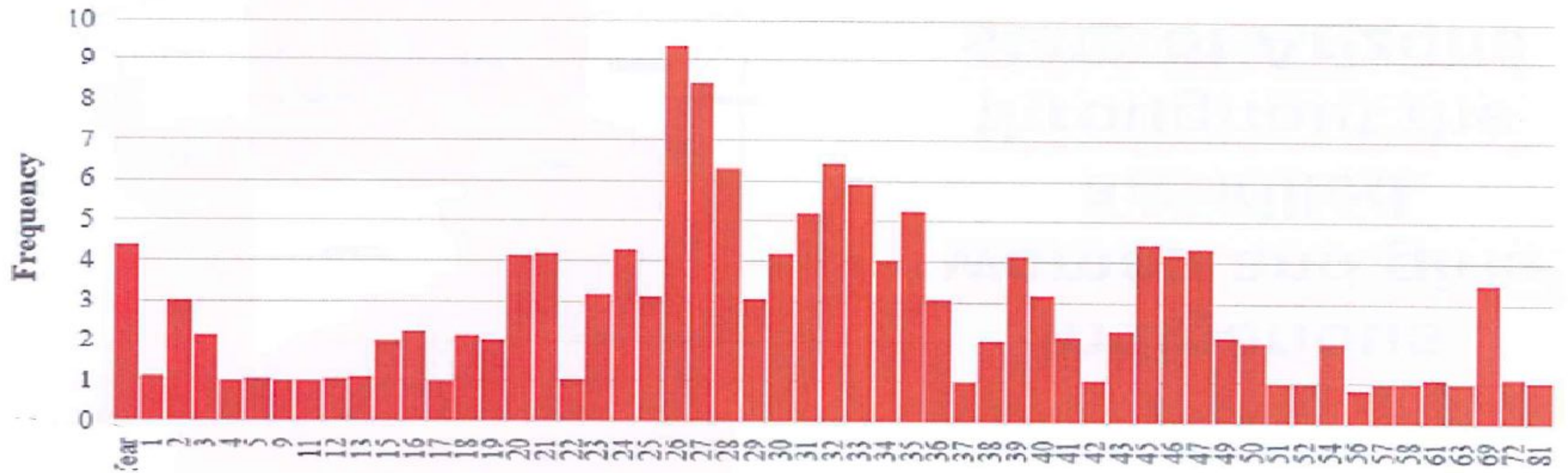
MMIWG Study Committee Goals

1. Partner with Tribal and urban Indigenous communities to ensure that we are approaching this subject in a culturally competent way that will not cause further harm to survivors and family members or infringe on Sovereignty.
2. Work with law enforcement, social work agencies, Tribes, and nonprofits advocacy groups to uncover a more accurate understanding of the problem and begin to quantify the data.
3. Make recommendations to state, county, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies around standardizing data collection and training of victims advocates – this will allow us to see patterns in the crime data.
4. Ensure families have the right to anonymize their data in published reports.
5. Use study data to drive legislation, at all levels, to solve the MMIWG crisis.

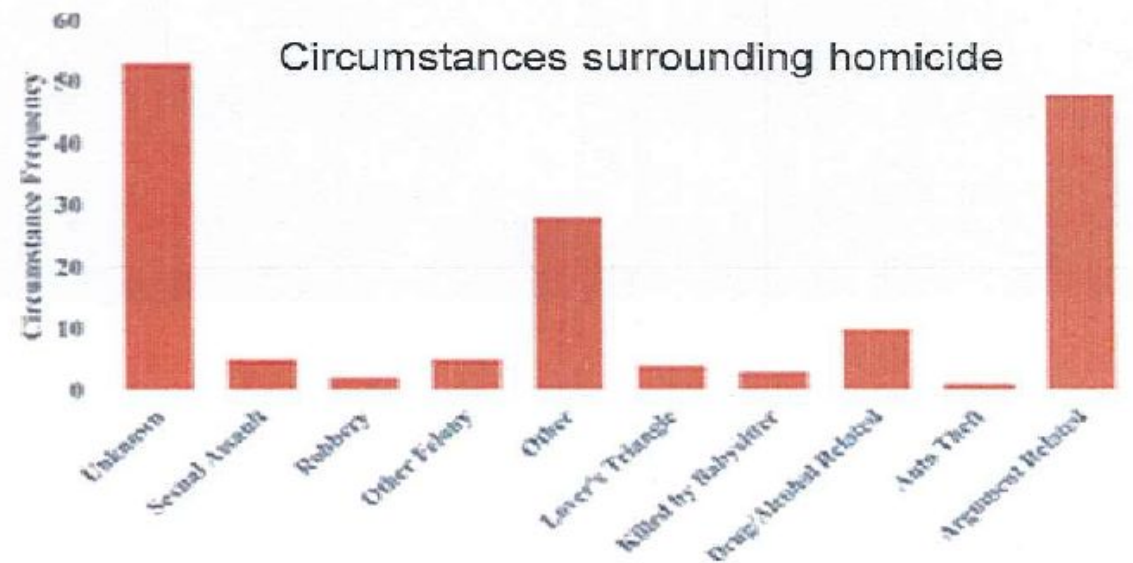
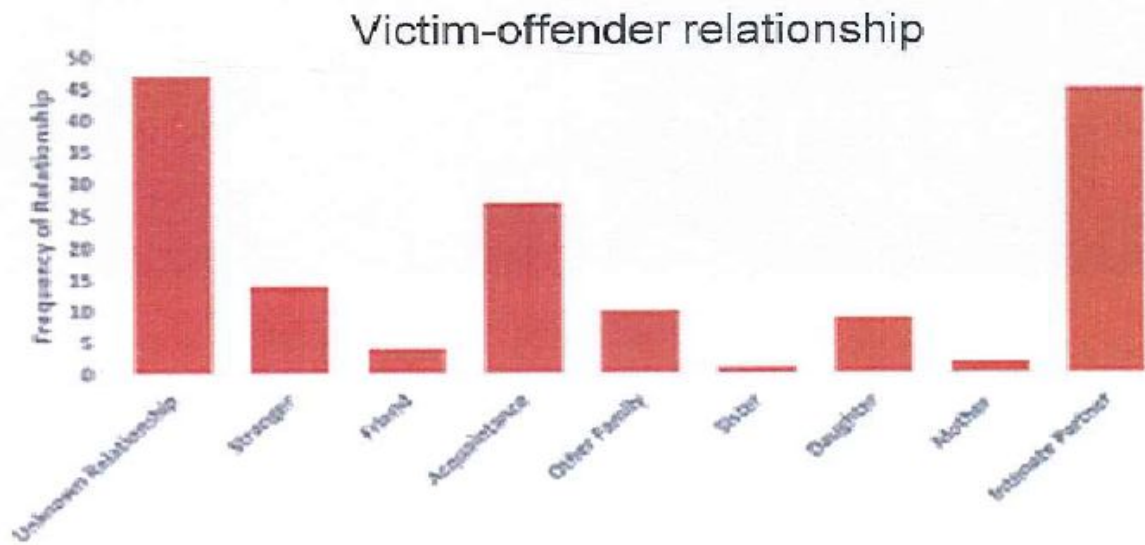
Systemic Barriers to Tracking Violence against Indigenous People

1. Unique barriers in urban, rural, and remote areas
2. Infrastructure challenges prevent implementing AMBER and Silver Alerts in Indian Country – lack of cell and broadband service
3. Racial misclassification in law enforcement databases
4. Distrust of law enforcement (compounded by severe underfunding and understaffing)
5. Complex jurisdictional issues

Indigenous females are killed ranging in age from infant to elder, with an average age of 31



Much remains unknown about murders of Indigenous women and girls, including victim-offender relationship and circumstances surrounding the homicide.



Field Study Procedures

It was the upmost importance to us to conduct the field study in an ethical way that protected the confidentiality of the victims and respected the sovereignty of the Tribal Nations. This included:

1. Formal MOUs with Tribal Nations prior to interviewing their citizens
2. Study questions approved by an Independent Review Board
3. Interviewers certified in Human Subject Interviews and have additional training in cultural issues and trauma counseling

Many interviewees indicated the intersection of violence and substance abuse were factors that lead to their loved one going missing and/or murdered.



“My mom hid domestic violence well, but we would hear it. She would get mad at us if we got into her business. I knew she was getting beat but she never did or said anything... I didn’t live too far from her. Her boyfriend was nice on the outside, but he was mean to my mom; I didn’t understand this. He had a nice family. My mom’s boyfriend used meth and alcohol. My mom used alcohol.”

- Family Member

Six survivors that we interviewed were kidnapped, drugged and sex-trafficked or groomed for sex-trafficking

“What I want to share is that anyone can be kidnapped. I don’t think I am pretty or have the body to be sold or men wanting me. I am a regular Native girl. But on the internet when they sold me... I was worth \$500 as a Native young woman not having been through a women’s ceremony. Now, I am so scared to go anywhere. I feel very violated and all the woman in me was taken.”

- Survivor

Experience with Law Enforcement

Families and Survivors Perspective



“[FBI Law Enforcement] gave us the best investigation team and prosecution team... This was the best of the whole court experience.

FBI gave it their all, they did not give up.”

- Family Member

“I reported this to [City] Police Department, but they didn’t take a report because they told me she was an adult and wouldn’t take a report. I shared my frustration with a co-worker; she referred me to a [victim] advocate. I called her and she made arrangements to meet me in person and do a search. We tried to report again to the police department, and finally they took me serious.”

- Family Member

Law Enforcement Study

Law enforcement from around the state were interviewed about their policies and procedures for missing persons and homicide cases

Included were state, county, municipal, university, and Tribal law enforcement agencies

Most interviews focused on police chief, sergeants, detectives, and patrol officers

We asked law enforcement what would be helpful in these cases

“[Having] a policy and guide that provides clear instructions for all police departments especially those that don’t have a high percentage of these types of cases. Also, a large poster board with a bracket that clearly describes step-by-step the directions of conducting a missing person’s investigation that begins with the initial phone call from the complainant... and so on.”

- Field Officer Survey Respondent

Challenges with State Victim Compensation Fund

Only applications that indicate a crime against a victim are considered

It is not a crime for an adult to go missing in Arizona

Law enforcement often will not take a report within the VCF allotted timeframe for reporting and therefore, victims often are not eligible

Recommendations on Policy/Protocols/Systems

1. Establish and enforce clear database protocols (NamUs, NCIC, NCMEC, etc.)
2. Create a standardized protocol for investigative response for missing persons cases across all law enforcement agencies at all levels
3. Implement state, regional, and/or local Tribal Liaison/Tribal Liaison Office(s)
4. Increase priority on cases of missing adults
5. Create a coordinated approach to address sex trafficking
6. Enhance and expand training in victim advocacy
7. Recruit and train more Native American victim advocates for all levels of law enforcement

2021 Legislative Session:

Bills still moving through the process

as of 4/30/21

HB 2098 – Jermaine missing children; mandatory reporting

In our MMIWG study committee, we discovered that not every law enforcement agency in the state was reporting missing children to the federal missing persons databases.

The problems with only reporting them to the Arizona Department of Public Safety database is that Tribes cannot access that databases and law enforcement agencies across state lines cannot access that database. Many of our Tribes cross state borders.

Passed 3rd Read in both Chambers. Waiting on final vote in the House.

HB 2099 – Jermaine Missing and Murdered Indigenous People

Extends the Study Committee (taskforce) for two years and expands the scope to include all Indigenous people.

Passed the House Chamber. Waiting on 3rd Read vote in the Senate.

HB 2494 – Jermaine / SB 1301 – Shope Arizona Health Education Centers; increase

Will add an additional Arizona Health Education Center that focuses on workforce development for the IHS/Native Health system and serves our 22 Tribal Nations.

Program run through the University of Arizona College of Medicine

SB1301 was signed into law by Governor Ducey on 3/26/21

Work to be done

The committee came up with 78 legislative and administrative recommendations to help solve the MMIP crisis in Arizona.

This year, we introduced eight of them and three are still moving through the process. It will be a multi-year process to reform systems and policies to better address the root causes of this crisis.

“A story matrix connects all of us. There are rules, processes, and circles of responsibility in this world. And the story begins exactly where it is supposed to begin. We cannot skip any part.”

Joy Harjo

Native American Poet and Poet Laureate