



## **Reducing Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG): A Statewide Study in Partnership with Arizona's MMIWG Legislative Study Committee**

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### **Abstract**

The murder and missing of Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG) is an enduring national and international crisis in North America. The goal of this study is to expand knowledge about the prevalence of MMIWG and to identify culturally-specific policy recommendations to reduce MMIWG. In 2019, the State of Arizona enacted legislation (HB 2570) which created a 23-person study committee charged with developing a statewide plan to reduce MMIWG. Our research team worked in close collaboration with the study committee for 18 months in a coordinated effort to understand the scope of MMIWG. Longitudinal homicide data (1978-2018) were examined from the Federal Bureau of Investigations Supplemental Homicide Reports as well as cross-sectional data from the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System. Findings reveal that MMIWG has been occurring, and steadily increasing, over the past four decades in Arizona. While MMIWG impacts Indigenous women and girls of all ages, the average age Indigenous females go missing or are murdered is age 33 and 31, respectively. In response to these findings, our study presents culturally-specific policy recommendations, in consultation with Tribal community partners, to reduce MMIWG.

### **Introduction**

The U.S. is now waking up to the fact that Indigenous peoples have been oppressed by the dominant (non-Indigenous) culture for centuries. This oppression continues today and has led to a national and international crisis involving the missing and murder of Indigenous peoples (MMIP). This report tells a data-driven story about what is known so far about the missing and murder of Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG) in Arizona and offers best-practices to reduce MMIWG. Indigenous peoples in the U.S. have faced the crisis of MMIP/MMIWG for more than 500 years. Strong grassroots movements<sup>1</sup> have propelled public awareness and prevent efforts. While the harms from over 500 years cannot be rectified in a publication, or by a single piece of legislation, Arizona along with several other states and our federal government are now officially recognizing this crisis and are in the beginning phases to work to end it.

The U.S. initiated an unprecedented burst of federal and state legislation in late 2019 concerning violence against Indigenous peoples, with a particular focus on reducing MMIWG. This legislation includes efforts to expand data sharing, a bill to enhance law enforcement protocols, and a presidential executive order to improve protocols and procedures for investigations and prosecutions (U.S. Department of Justice [DOJ], 2019; Savana's Act, 2020;

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<sup>1</sup> The dedicated work of organizations such as the Urban Indian Health Institute, the Global Indigenous Council, the National Congress of American Indians, the National Indigenous Women's Resource Center, Sovereign Bodies Institute, Justice For Native People, and the grassroots efforts led by Indigenous domestic violence and sexual assault coalitions across Indian country, as well as countless others have motivated state-sanctioned research and national policies to be implemented.

Office of Press Secretary, 2019). Legislative efforts at the state level have also occurred with 14 states passing bills to study and reduce MMIWG. These 14 states vary in four distinct ways, including the creation of a task force, community outreach and education, data collection and analysis, and policy recommendations (Fox, 2020).

In the summer of 2019 Arizona enacted HB2570, which established a study committee with the purpose of investigating the nature and extent of MMIWG throughout the state and to develop a statewide plan to reduce MMIWG. The intended outcome of the MMIWG legislation is to improve the safety of Indigenous women, girls, and communities. The study committee is comprised of 23 members which includes Tribal members, legislators, prosecutors, victim advocates, and law enforcement officers located throughout the state of Arizona. The committee includes a wide variety of people with expertise on Tribal governance, political science, law enforcement, and social work. Arizona State Representative Jennifer Jermaine (White Earth Ojibwe, D18) and Arizona State Senator Victoria Steele (Seneca Nation of Indians, D9) introduced the legislation, and Jermaine serves as the Study Committee's Chairperson. We (a diverse and interdisciplinary team of researchers, practitioners, and community partners) collaborated closely with the study committee to complete this research, and we continue to collaborate on MMIWG/MMIP work. The goals of this paper are to (1) conduct a statewide study of the prevalence and contextual characteristics of MMIWG, and (2) promote safer communities by identifying culturally-specific policies and practices to reduce MMIWG.

## **Review of the Literature on Violence Against Indigenous Women and Girls**

### **Defining what MMIWG means**

MMIP is comprised of two different, yet often connected events, including (a) a missing person who either involuntarily or voluntarily vanishes; and (b) the intentional killing of another person (Fox, 2020). While the focus of this paper is on the prevalence of interpersonal and gender-based violence in the form of MMIWG, it is important to address that people of all gender identities are missing and murdered, including men, women, and LGBTQ+/2S<sup>2</sup> people. The purpose of this study is to understand the scope of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG)

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<sup>2</sup> LGBTQ+/2S stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, plus other sexual and gender identities and Two-Spirit. Two Spirit is a term used by some Indigenous Peoples who identify as having both a masculine and feminine spirit.

within the state of Arizona and to identify culturally-specific and appropriate recommendations to reduce MMIWG. Arizona is now the first known state to have established a definition of MMIWG: Indigenous women and girls who identify as female, who are missing, or have lost their lives from violence caused by another person.

MMIWG is connected to other forms of violence and oppression of Indigenous peoples. Violence against Indigenous peoples is recognized internationally as a human rights violation and is disproportionately experienced by some of the most vulnerable within Indigenous communities including elders, youth, women, the LGBTQ+/2S community, and people with disabilities (United Nations, 2008). Violence perpetrated against Indigenous peoples include forced assimilation, marginalization, displacement, removal of sacred land or denial of land, and genocide (Amnesty International, 2020; Gordon & Roberts, 2021; Hinton, Woolford, & Benvenuto, 2014). In addition, Indigenous peoples experience high rates of sexual and domestic violence, sexual violence as a weapon of war, conquest, harassment by non-Indigenous people, labor exploitation, and trafficking (Amnesty International, 2007; Economic and Social Council, 2016; Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2017). Violence against children includes the forcible removal from their family, forced placement in boarding schools, forced adoption into non-Indigenous families, abuse (psychological, sexual, physical, neglect), and recruitment into armed conflicts (Economic and Social Council, 2016). In some cases, the culmination of violence against Indigenous peoples results in MMIP/MMIWG.

### **MMIWG and Violence Against Indigenous Peoples is Rooted in Arizona's History**

Arizona is home to a relatively higher number of Indigenous peoples and Tribal Nations as compared to other states in the nation. There are 22 federally recognized Tribes in Arizona that comprise 7.4% of Arizona's population and over 27% of the state's land (Arizona Indian Gaming Association, 2019). Tribes in Arizona are the basis for much of Southwestern cultural landscape (Colton, 1938). These Tribes vary in language, culture, ways of life, and lineage (Archaeology Southwest, 2020). While each Tribe is unique, many share a similar history in their relations with explorers, immigrants, and colonizing forces.

The State of Arizona has a violent history of oppressing and killing Indigenous peoples. Early encounters with Indigenous people can be described as military conquest. From the first Spanish explorers who encountered Pueblo Tribes along the Rio Grande in 1540 who demanded

food, shelter, and women to the acquisition of present-day Arizona by the United States from Mexico (Arizona State Library, Archives and Public Records; PBS Interactive, 2001). An influx of foreigners on Native territory resulted in subjugation, loss of life, conflict, forced labor, seizure of ancestral lands and natural resources, and forced removal onto Reservations (Arizona State Library, Archives and Public Records; Gordon & Roberts, 2021). While a full discussion of the interaction and treatment of Indigenous peoples in Arizona is beyond the scope of this publication, it cannot be overstated that each Tribe's experience is also one of survival and resilience.

Forced institutionalization and assimilation further victimized Indigenous peoples. Modern-day interactions with Tribes moved from military conquest to assimilation as Tribes were forced onto Reservations. Assimilation targeted young children in an effort to “kill the Indian and save the man within” by removal of children from their families and culture to be placed in boarding schools where they were not allowed to practice Indigenous ways of life or speak their native language (Cross, 1998). While boarding schools had already been established in Tucson, Sacaton, and Fort Mohave, the Phoenix Indian School, established in 1891, was one of the first boarding schools to run an “outing system” program (Trennert, 1979). This program was primarily aimed at girls to teach them Victorian morality and Christian virtue through domestic labor in the homes of White residents (Trennert, 1988). This program soon shifted focus from student development to providing cheap labor to nearby residents through the exploitation of children making them more vulnerable to abuses at the hands of their employer (Trennert, 1983).

By way of an oversimplified summary of these histories of oppression, Tribal Nations have been – and continue to be – subjected to a multitude of laws and policies that deprived them of land and liberties. The impacts of the colonization of Tribal Nations are manifested in the form of erasure of Native peoples, cultures, and nations. Colonization and the accompanying historical trauma – known as the “unresolved grief response” as a result of cumulative traumas experienced across generations– are contributing factors to MMIP/MMIWG (Horse Brave Heart, 1998).

### **What is Currently Known About MMIWG**

After more than five centuries, non-Indigenous people are finally beginning to learn of and acknowledge the historical violence against Indigenous people and its role in MMIWG (Gordon & Roberts, 2021). One reason for the lack of awareness is the absence of media attention and appropriate documentation of MMIWG. A report from The Urban Indian Health Institute (2018) points out that Indigenous women disappear three times: in life, in the media, and in the data. Indeed, this erasure is evidenced by what scholars are calling the “missing white woman syndrome” whereas BIPOC missing and murdered persons are often ignored by the media or do not receive the same degree of media attention as white persons (Slakoff & Fradella, 2019). This glaring injustice, rooted in racism and oppression, has recently received widespread media attention in light of the murder of Gabby Petito, a white young woman whose murder received widespread national attention (Seattle Times, September 27, 2021).

Very little is currently known about MMIWG. Few empirical studies have investigated the prevalence of Indigenous victimization generally, and MMIWG specifically. Yet the limited existing data clearly show that Indigenous women and girls face an alarmingly high rate of violence. In the U.S., 4 in 5 Indigenous women have experienced violence in their lifetime (Rosay, 2016). Compared to women of other ethnicities, Indigenous women and girls are known to experience more violence, including sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and family violence. (Bachman, 1992; Black et al., 2010).

MMIWG has been linked with other interpersonal forms of victimization. While the specific circumstances surrounding MMIWG are not completely known, a report by the Urban Indian Health Institute (UIHI) in the U.S. was able to identify sixty-six cases with direct links to interpersonal violence (13%; including IPV and domestic violence) and gender-based violence, including rape and sexual assault (Lucchesi & Echo-Hawk, 2018). Of the 506 cases, 8% (n=42) were related to IPV, 6% (n=25) involved sexual assault, and 4% (n=18) were related to sex trafficking. A study funded by the National Institute of Justice found American Indian and Alaska Native women were more likely to be murdered as a result of rape or sexual assault (Bachman et al., 2008). Interpersonal crimes go largely unreported, so the numbers presented above are most likely a severe underrepresentation (Karjane, Fisher, & Cullen, 2002).

Canada has pioneered the research and media attention on MMIWG. Canada recently embarked upon a National Inquiry (2019) and established convincingly that MMIWG is a “deliberate race, identity, and gender-based violence.” Other studies also have found that Aboriginal women experience violence at 3-5 times more than other women (Native Women’s Association of Canada [NWAC], 2015). Aboriginal women are also more likely to experience life-threatening and more severe forms of family violence (NWAC, 2015). Aboriginal women are three times more likely to be murdered by a stranger than non-Aboriginal women and to be murdered in an urban area (Hansen & Dim, 2019). Between 2000 and 2008, Canadian Aboriginal women and girls accounted for 10% of all female murder cases while only making up 3% of the Canadian population (NWAC, 2015).

### **Barriers to Understanding the Scope of MMIWG**

The following section outlines some of the known barriers in determining the true scope of MMIWG.

**MMIWG Among Rural Communities.** The lack of reporting of interpersonal crimes (e.g., domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking) can significantly obscure circumstances surrounding crimes related to MMIWG. This is especially true for women living on Reservations. Women on Reservations experience unique barriers to reporting victimization, including geographical and technological barriers (Wakeling et al., 2001). Despite cell phone providers’ claim that signal service coverage is adequate, phone users on Tribal Nations know otherwise. Geographical isolation makes reporting crime and accessing services challenging. Women and girls who live far from a hospital may not be able to access medical treatment or examinations (e.g., sexual assault forensic exams) (Bachman et al., 2008). Many Indigenous victims may be particularly isolated from needed services. At the time of this publication, only half of Arizona’s federally-recognized Tribes have victim services (12 of 22). Even if victim services are available on the victims’ Tribal land, there are many barriers to accessing those services, including the challenges in maintaining confidentiality, shame, mistrust of providers, lack of shelter or safe house alternatives, long distances to travel, and lack of transportation (Bachman et al., 2008; Stewart et al., 2021).

**MMIWG Among Urban Communities.** Those residing in urban areas may not be aware of victim services or may not want to access victim services because of a lack of cultural sensitivity. The Arizona State Victim Compensation Fund provides financial compensation for victims or their families. However, in order to be eligible for compensation, a police report is required to document that a crime has occurred. Yet, police often do not issue police reports for missing adults because “being missing” is not in and of itself a crime. This means that many families of missing adults are not eligible for state victim compensation. Because federal victim compensation funds are administered by the state of Arizona and then distributed through the counties, Tribes are at a significant disadvantage in accessing these funds. Additionally, survivors and families must apply for victim compensation from the county in which the crime occurred – not the county in which the survivor or family resides presenting barriers to access.

**AMBER Alert, Silver Alerts, and Ashlynn Mike AMBER Alerts.** There are challenges that Tribal Nations face that complicate their ability to implement an AMBER Alert, Silver Alert, and Ashlynn Mike AMBER Alert in Indian Country systems. Many Tribes in Arizona (except Navajo Nation) do not have a fully functioning AMBER Alert system (Clark, 2021). Some tribes have recently obtained a resolution in support of participating in an alert system, but no actual system is in place yet. Challenges with infrastructure include: (1) lack of signs/billboards on the roadways in Indian Country, (2) radio and television stations may not broadcast in remote areas, (3) Tribal cell phone carriers may not provide cell phone alerts, (4) language barriers when radio and television are broadcast in English rather than the Native language, and (5) jurisdictional boundaries must often be navigated across Tribal, state, county, and countries (e.g., Canada). Training and education challenges to implementing AMBER and Silver alert systems include: (1) lack of awareness among Tribal Nations about how to contact the State of Arizona for AMBER alert, (2) only 7 of 22 Arizona Tribes have received AMBER alert training, (3) there are no memorandum of understanding or intergovernmental agreements between Tribes and the state to participate in AMBER alert system, although some Tribes are requiring these agreements, (4) Tribes often do not know how to access the state plan, (5) Tribes often do not have training or policies in place to respond to an abduction, (6) the state lacks knowledge on Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) and how it applies off reservation.

**Racial Misclassification.** Data are limited due to the inaccurate recording of Indigenous people's race. Many Indigenous people are often racially misclassified as Hispanic, White, or Asian (Lucchesi & Echo-Hawk, 2018). Racial misclassification occurs when criminal justice personnel attribute an incorrect racial classification to crime victims based on an incorrect best-guess (Lucchesi & Echo-Hawk, 2018). This is a challenging limitation to overcome given the longstanding systemic factors that contribute to this problem. For example, some law enforcement agencies in Arizona and nationwide still do not feature an Indigenous racial category – or Tribal affiliation(s) – on police reports. Racial misclassification plagues all existing data sources. There are also inconsistencies among racial and ethnic codes within law enforcement databases (Lucchesi & Echo-Hawk, 2018). For example, the Sacramento police department used “Indian American” to identify Native Americans, resulting in combined data of those who were Indian American (Asian) with Native American (Lucchesi & Echo-Hawk, 2018). The unavailability of a Native American classification, let alone Tribal affiliation(s), adds to the erasure of Indigenous people in data collection and cannot be overemphasized.

**Distrust of Law Enforcement.** Indigenous communities' distrust of law enforcement may also lead to incomplete reporting of MMIWG. Distrust of law enforcement is deeply engrained within Tribal communities. Distrust stems from centuries of governing bodies attempting to control Indigenous peoples and racial discrimination that persists within law enforcement today (Perry, 2009). A study of 278 Native Americans across 7 states found that Native Americans' lived experience reflected both an over- and under-policing of the Native community (Perry, 2006). Yet, it is important to note that different law enforcement agencies have jurisdictional on Tribal lands (see Leonhard, 2021 for a discussion of criminal jurisdiction on Tribal land). Citizens' trust, or distrust, of law enforcement may vary based on whether the police are from within the Tribal Nation, from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, or city/county. Law enforcement agencies in Arizona Tribal communities are severely underfunded and understaffed. Due to understaffing, one single Tribal law enforcement officer may cover many square miles, and this can create long delays in officer response time. Sometimes officers are unable to respond to calls. The underfunding of Tribal law enforcement means that some police equipment and vehicles are outdated or underserviced, which creates unsafe situations for officers especially when covering large territories and responding to domestic violence situations.

### **The Widespread and Generational Impacts of MMIWG**

Indigenous peoples and nations face many serious—and often long-term—consequences related to MMIWG. Survivors of violence in general often experience physical injuries, permanent disfigurement, posttraumatic stress disorder, and paranoia (Campbell, 2002). Indigenous survivors of violence have unique culturally specific needs, including needing help reconnecting with their Tribal Nation and maintaining access to their traditional ways of healing (Fox, Fisher, & Decker, 2018). For example, many Indigenous peoples participate in sacred traditional ceremonies when grieving the loss of a loved one. The financial resources to prepare and conduct a ceremony on Tribal lands may not be available and finding the most appropriate type of practitioner or another ceremony elsewhere may not be possible or costly. Survivors and families have no place to turn for help as Indigenous communities suffer from chronic underfunding and a lack of resources that can lead to further victimization and trauma.

Violence among Indigenous women and girls has ripple-effects that reach far beyond the individual-level and across the life span. Indigenous victims' children, families, and entire communities are impacted by violence against women in profound ways. The impact of losing a mother, a sister, an aunt, or a grandmother, especially within a matrilineal Tribe, impacts the entire community. Many Native American communities are matrilineal and when a matriarch is missing or murdered, this results in a complete unraveling of a Tribe's structure that has devastating consequences impacting generations. When a matriarch is missing or murdered, this can result in a complete unraveling of community and family structure that may have devastating consequences impacting future generations. This is especially significant given that up to 85% of missing and murdered women are mothers (Center for Homeland Defense and Security, 2019). When children lose their mother, grandmother, sister, cousins, and aunts to trafficking, disappearance, and death, this causes extreme trauma and cumulative impacts, such as chronic acute physical and/or mental health issues that increase the probability of the child being vulnerable to poverty, domestic violence, neglect, runaway, incarceration, substance abuse, suicide, and other types of violence (Apok et al., 2019).

### **Current Study**

The overarching goals of this study are to (1) conduct a statewide study of the prevalence and contextual characteristics of MMIWG, and (2) create safer communities by identifying culturally-specific policies and practices to reduce MMIWG. The current study is the first known study to reveal the documented prevalence and contextual characteristics of MMIWG in the state of Arizona. It is important to acknowledge that this prevalence will likely be a substantial underrepresentation of MMIWG, consistent with all other empirical studies, given the measurement issues mentioned earlier. Although a complete portrayal of MMIWG is impossible at this time, it is vital to examine the available data as a first step in understanding the extent of this problem. Indeed, the lack of quality data has been one reason for the lack of research attention to this phenomenon. This study is an important first step in understanding the prevalence of MMIWG for developing and implementing policy recommendations aimed at reducing its prevalence.

### **Method**

#### **Data**

To identify the scope of MMIWG in Arizona, the following presents data from two existing secondary data sources, including: (1) Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Supplemental Homicide Reports (SHR) (1976-2018), which includes homicide data, and (2) National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs), which features missing person data. The data sources are publicly available and university institutional review board approval was obtained to examine the data sources.

The SHR data contains incident-level data for homicides in the U.S. as reported by state and local law enforcement agencies. This data contains information about each homicide and all victims and known offenders involved in the incident. In other words, police agencies track this data and report it to the FBI for inclusion in their national database of homicides (the UCR's SHR). These data reflect what police agencies know at the time a homicide is reported to police. Examining reported homicides offers a more expansive insight into the prevalence of homicide as opposed to examining prosecution or conviction rates at later points in the criminal justice system.

The National Missing and Unidentified Persons System, called NamUs (2020), is a national resource center for missing, unidentified, and unclaimed person cases throughout the U.S. This national database was established in 2007 and contains cross-sectional data about cases reported to the police and those entered by the general public. Due to the dynamic nature of missing person cases (i.e., the ability for the person to be found and the case resolved at any point), this data is by no means a comprehensive list of every Native American missing person in Arizona, but simply a snapshot of the missing persons at the time of collection (July 25, 2020). The data used in this study is the publicly available Indigenous missing persons data in Arizona that was available at the time of collection.

Following the collection and analysis of the secondary data sources, we presented our findings to Arizona's 23-person MMIWG study committee. On multiple occasions, the study committee reviewed our findings and provided in-depth recommendations in a number of policy areas including Tribal sovereignty, victim services, resource allocation, training and education, law enforcement, collaborative partnerships, data improvement, and legislation. Each time feedback was received from the study committee, we compiled and condensed for clarity and understanding. Given the magnitude of the MMIWG crisis, the actions and policies needed to stop it expand far beyond what any single paper or report can reasonably present. All recommendations from our statewide study, including recommendations from the study committee, are contained in the report we presented to the State of Arizona (Fox et al., 2020). Given space limitations in this paper, the recommendations presented herein represent some of those that our team and the study committee determined to be most viable and vital for ending MMIWG.

## **Measures**

There were a number of variables that we examined within each of the two data sources. NamUs data source included variables for each recorded missing person including their age, race, Tribal affiliation/enrollment, the Arizona county and city they went missing from, if they went missing from tribal land, and the number of years they had been missing. SHR data included a number of variables ranging from incident characteristics, jurisdiction, offender characteristics, and victim characteristics. In addition, SHR data included a number of incident characteristics including the year the homicide occurred, victim-offender relationship, and the circumstances surrounding the homicide. It is important to note that one case was not included within the victim-

offender relationship variable, which represented other known relationship. Additionally, wife, common-law-wife, and girlfriend categories were all combined to create the “intimate partner” category. Finally, daughter and stepdaughter were combined into one “daughter” category. The final variable examined the Arizona county in which the homicide took place.

## **Results**

### **Missing Indigenous Women and Girls in Arizona**

First, we present rates of missing Indigenous women and girls in the state of Arizona. On July 25, 2020, a total of 12 Indigenous females had active open missing person cases in Arizona. Due to the low prevalence, we do not present tables or figures on missing Indigenous women and girls. The average age of Indigenous females at the time they went missing was 33 for females. The age of missing Indigenous women as of July 25, 2020, ranged from 20 to 54 years old. NamUs data allows for the calculation of years for each missing person based on the date that the missing person was last seen and the current date. Indigenous females were missing for between 1 to 64 years. Indigenous women were missing for an average of more than two decades (e.g., 21 years missing).

### **Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls in Arizona**

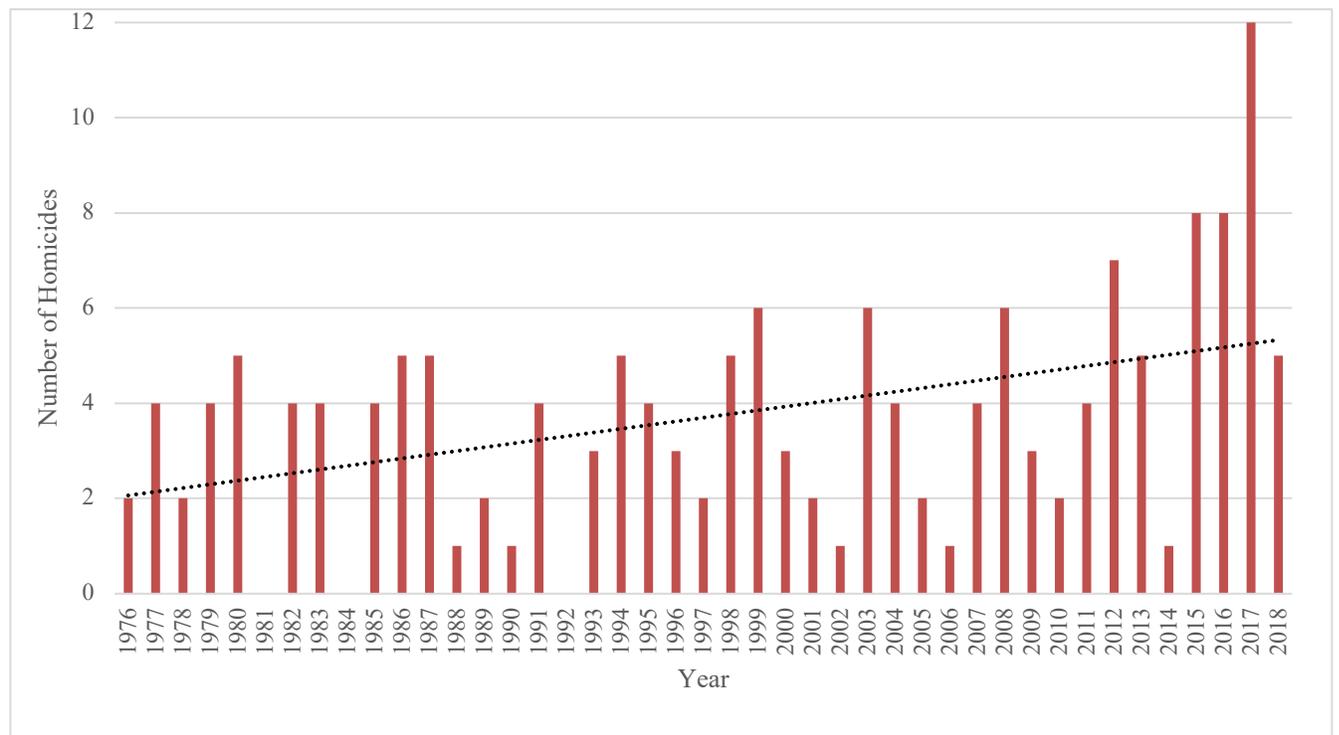
#### ***Homicides of Indigenous Women and Girls are Increasing***

Turning to the data on homicides, we present rates of homicide for Indigenous women and girls, then focus on specific characteristics of these cases including age of victims, the relationship to their offender, and the circumstances surrounding their murders. Over the span of 40 years (1976-2018), the FBI SHR data documents 160 Indigenous female homicide victims. Murders of Indigenous women and girls have been steadily increasing over the past 40 years (see Figure 1). This alarming trend may reflect increased community acknowledgement and reporting of MMIWG, better law enforcement tracking systems, or the reality that MMIWG is happening more often now than ever before. It is important to remember that these numbers are most likely an underrepresentation of the actual number of homicides committed against Indigenous peoples. One notable difference in the homicide rate of Indigenous women and girls occurred recently in 2017 when there was a noticeable increase in MMIWG. The reason for this increase in 2017 is unknown. It will be critical to continue to closely document whether the homicide of Indigenous

females continues to rise or begins to fall, especially after the media attention and MMIWG federal and state legislation that was implemented in late 2019.

**Figure 1**

*Indigenous female homicide victims in Arizona (1976-2018)*

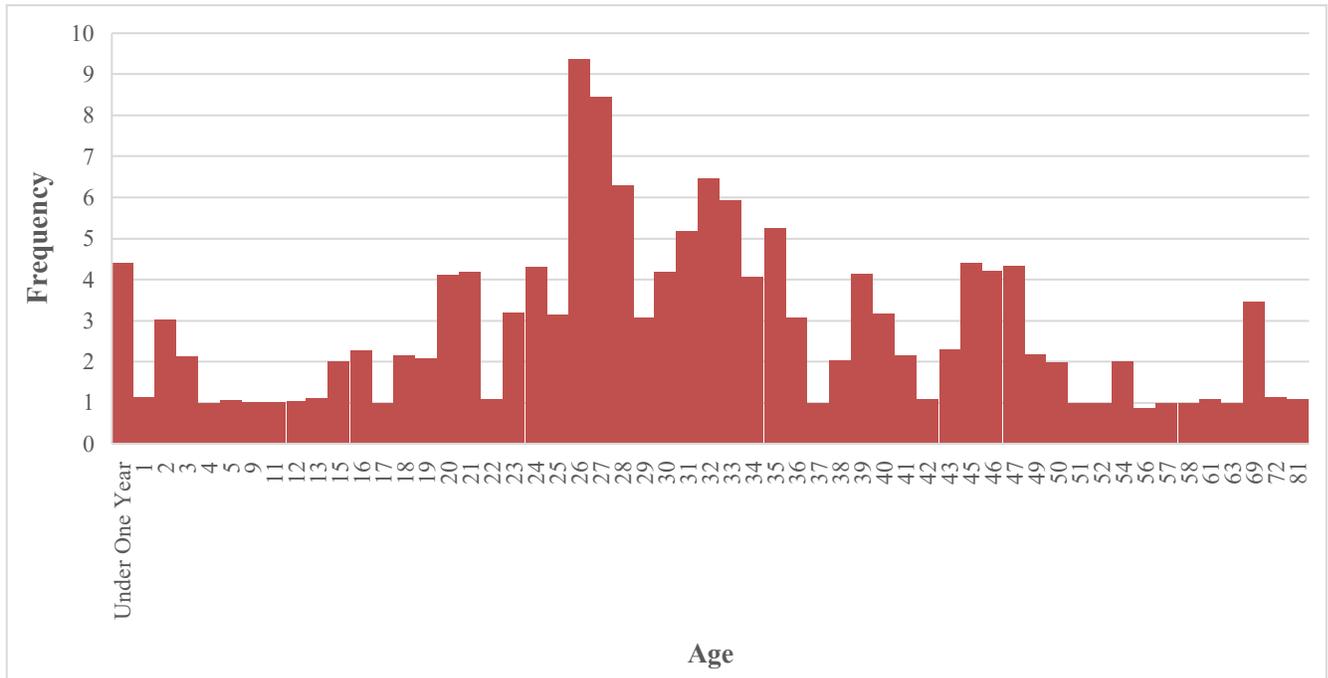


### *Characteristics of Female Homicides*

**Age.** MMIWG impacts Indigenous females of all ages. The youngest Indigenous females killed in Arizona were infants less than 1 year old and the oldest was 81 years old (see Figure 2). Indigenous women in their 20s to 40s have the highest likelihood of being killed. The average age of Indigenous murdered females is 31 years old. Although women have a higher prevalence of being killed compared to girls, the number of Indigenous girls who are murdered cannot be overlooked. During the past 40 years in Arizona, 14% of homicides committed against Indigenous peoples were documented to be girls aged 17 and younger (n=22).

**Figure 2**

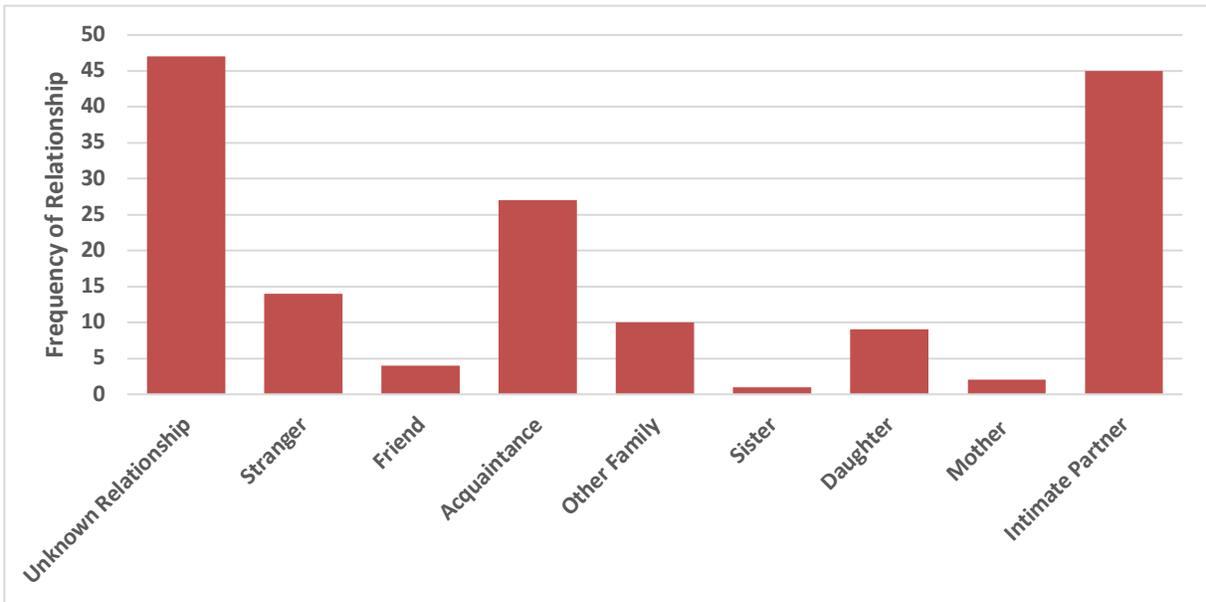
*Age distribution of Indigenous female victims of homicide in Arizona (1976-2018).*



**Victim-Offender Relationship.** It is important to understand the relationship between victims and offenders in order to identify the source of the violence (see Figure 3). Given the gaps in data, much remains unknown about the relationship between Indigenous females and those who murder them. The relationship is unknown among 30% (n=47) of murdered Indigenous females and their murderers. Over a quarter of Indigenous females were killed by an intimate partner (n=45; 28%). Murders of Indigenous females by intimate partners comprise the largest known class of victim-offender relationships. Indigenous females are also killed by family members other than intimate partners. In some cases in Arizona, Indigenous females were killed by their parents (n=9; 6%), children (n=2; 1%), siblings (n=1; 1%), or other family members (n=10; 6%). The victim-offender relationship among homicides of Indigenous females also includes murders by acquaintances (n=27; 17%), strangers (n=14; 9%), and – to a much smaller degree – friends (n=4; 3%).

**Figure 3**

*Female Indigenous homicide victim's relationship with their offender (1976-2018).*

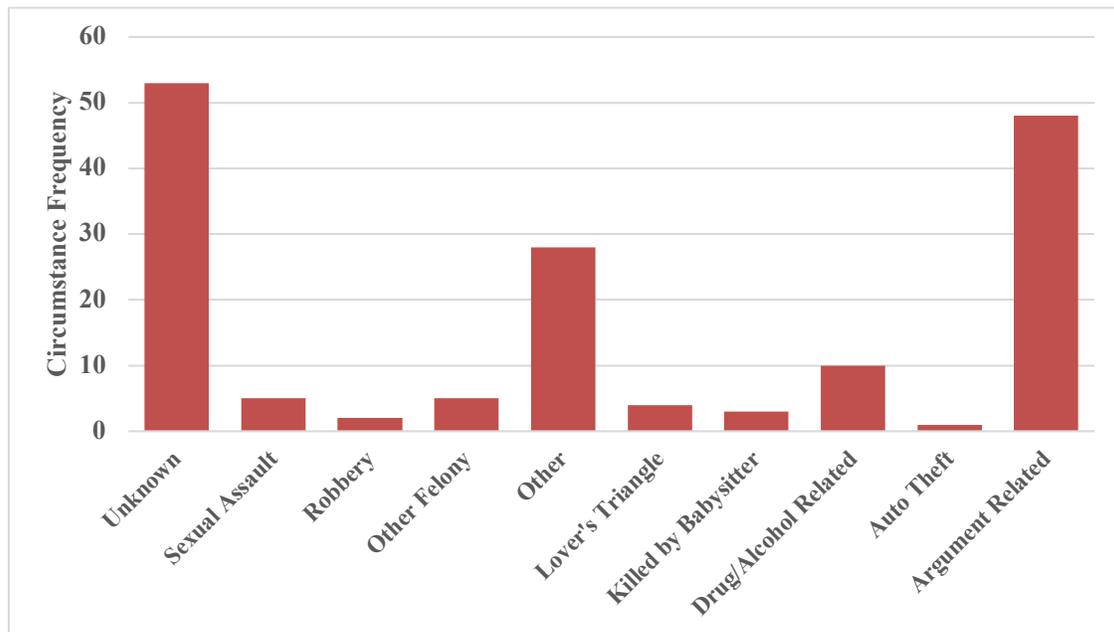


*Note.* One case was not included in the above table representing other known relationship. Wife, common-law-wife, and girlfriend categories were all combined to create the “intimate partner” category. Daughter and stepdaughter were combined into one “daughter” category.

**Circumstances Surrounding MMIWG.** The SHR data provides information regarding the circumstances of each homicide allowing us to better understand what may contribute to the murder of Indigenous women in Arizona (see Figure 4). While many circumstances of homicides against Indigenous females are unknown ( $n=53$ ; 33%), the largest known precipitating factor involved an argument ( $n=48$ ; 30%). The next largest category was other ( $n=28$ ; 18%) which included circumstances such as gang-related homicides or a suspected felony. This category also included cases of justifiable homicide, where a felon was killed by a citizen, or where a felon was killed by police. Drugs or alcohol were known to have been related to 6% ( $n=10$ ) of homicides of Indigenous females. Other circumstances surrounding the murder of Indigenous females included sexual assault ( $n=5$ ; 3%), “lover’s triangle” ( $n=4$ ; 3%), murder by a babysitter ( $n=3$ ; 2%), robbery ( $n=2$ ; 1%), and auto theft ( $n=1$ ; 1%).

**Figure 4**

*Circumstances surrounding MMIWG (1976-2018).*



*Note.* “Rape” was combined with other sex offenses to create the sexual assault category. The brawl under the influence of alcohol and brawl under the influence of drugs categories were combined to create drug/alcohol related. Arguments over money and other arguments were combined to create argument related category. “A lovers’ triangle” (term used by the FBI SHR) involves infidelity in a romantic relationship. Gang-related and suspected felony categories were combined into other.

### Discussion

Based our findings regarding MMIWG in Arizona, and in partnership with the study committee, we present the following policy recommendations with the goal of reducing violence against Indigenous peoples, including MMIWG. These recommendations provide a brief overview of possible policies and research avenues that could address issues that were identified by our analysis such as addressing gaps in victim services, resource allocation, and databases; providing education and training to law enforcement, advocates, and community members; and creating collaborative partnerships and new legislation.

While respecting the sovereignty and political integrity of Tribal governments, and the values and culture represented by each Tribal Nation, Arizona’s response should reflect a full and cooperative relationship in regard to mutual information sharing, which will enhance the development of Tribal laws and court orders on Reservations by Tribal governments. To be clear,

it is critically important to engage in consultation and partnership with Arizona Tribes to work together to determine the best permanent approach and structure to collectively take action to reduce MMIWG.

For instance, one possibility may be a permanent state office, run by Indigenous peoples, that partners with all 22 Arizona Tribes to ensure the coordination of training, services, resource allocation, relationship building, collaboration, and data fidelity. Or, perhaps cross-disciplinary and cross-departmental collaboration is possible among Tribal Liaisons and the State of Arizona entities (e.g., Department of Economic Security, Department of Child Safety, Department of Public Safety, Office of Faith, Youth and Family, etc.).

Either the creation of a state office, or the collaboration among Tribal Liaisons among state departments would be poised to ensure that appropriate considerations are made regarding (1) Tribal sovereignty and the federal trust responsibility (a relationship that supersedes the state for funding and services), and (2) complexities surrounding any recommendations regarding the safety of Indigenous peoples, including how these recommendations would be carried out, who would be responsible for ensuring their completion, securing source of permanent funding, and how these recommendations will impact current programs that are providing direct services to avoid unintentional harms.

The State of Arizona should work with Arizona's Tribal communities and leaders, and MMIWG experts on the following select recommendations:

### **Victim Service Recommendations**

- Provide funding opportunities (and increase current funding) for Tribes and non-profit agencies that serve Indigenous victims within rural, urban, and Tribal communities (see Stewart et al., 2021 for review of suggested Native American victim service programs).
- Provide a centralized reporting site for MMIWG to report missing and murdered persons that honors the unique nature of all of the 22 Tribes and provides an accurate account of MMIWG in Arizona.
- Establish a 24-hour crisis hotline for MMIWG and related needs (e.g., domestic violence shelters and safe homes, legal assistance, medical care, financial assistance, and housing advocacy referrals).

**Resource Allocation Recommendations**

- Create and disseminate information kits for survivors and families with resources, service directories, and orientation to the legal system.
- The State of Arizona should support and call for appropriations by the federal government to directly fund the design, development, and construction of Arizona Tribal courts, multi-purpose justice centers, Tribal correctional facilities, Tribal facilities for law enforcement, drug and alcohol treatment and programming space, public defender offices, and the expansion or renovation of Tribal courts and justice facilities that support alternatives to incarceration. Funding should also be set aside for federal and Tribal systems to support operations and programming.

**Training and Education Recommendations**

- Design, develop, and implement prevention and intervention strategies for youth, men, and boys (e.g., Indivisible Tohono and A Call to Men).
- Create a State MMIWG website with resources, links, data dashboards, information, resources, and reporting links. Create a social media awareness campaign and implement a public-relations initiative to establish community confidence in and support for the justice system.
- Designate annual training for all professionals, especially police officers to include intermittent annual training that prioritizes training to all professionals for cultural responsiveness.
- Work with Tribes to facilitate training on MMIWG reporting systems in their communities and encourage Tribal and non-Tribal law enforcement and family members to utilize (e.g., NamUs and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children).
- Develop a “best practices guide” for inter-jurisdictional matters (e.g., contact information, how to report a missing person or report a crime in each jurisdiction, court information, how to obtain and enforce orders of protection, basic jurisdictional information, how to identify and report suspected human trafficking, and a list of Arizona and Tribal resources).

**Law Enforcement Recommendations**

- Increase the recruitment of Indigenous peoples in all levels of law enforcement (Tribal, federal, state, county, municipal) agencies and allow Indigenous recruits to request being assigned to their home area, if jurisdiction allows.
- Establish a law enforcement task force for missing persons and include Tribal law enforcement agencies on the task force.
- Train law enforcement officers to ask victims if they are Native American. Just because a victim looks a certain way, does not mean they are a particular race. Ethnicity is not measured by looks. There is no standard Indigenous “look.”
- Increase training and community orientations for law enforcement officers, including cultural awareness/competency, sensitivity, and safety to victims and their families, and communication with families and survivors.

**Collaborative Recommendations**

- Develop multijurisdictional Endangered Missing Advisory (EMA) Systems/Plans, which enables collaboration among agencies to broadcast and search for missing persons who are in danger but do not fit AMBER Alert criteria.
- Create an inter-agency case review team – and encourage each tribe to hold regular meetings with the team. The inter-agency case review team may include Tribal, local, county, state, and federal agencies that handle MMIWG cases, including law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, Tribal and non-Tribal courts, child protective services, direct service providers, medical examiners, Tribal coalitions, tasks forces, and families affected by MMIWG. This will reduce duplicative efforts, streamline service delivery, and minimize the need for survivors and families to recount their trauma repeatedly due to agencies being barred from communicating.
- Promote meaningful collaborations between academics, front-line practitioners, families of MMIWG, survivors of violence, and grassroots organizations to inform policy and service delivery.

**Data Improvement Recommendations**

- Allow Tribes to have full access and input to information available in currently restricted databases, such as NamUs, Tribal Access Program (TAP), National Crime Information Center (NCIC), and Criminal Justice Information Services (CJIS). Provide Tribes access

to edit or add to the data on their citizens, as well as be notified when a Tribal member has been added to a database.

- Establish methods and protocols for tracking, gathering, and collecting data on violence against Indigenous peoples, including data on MMIWG, by Tribal affiliation, and enhance statewide efforts to prevent and end domestic violence and sexual violence.

### **Legislative Recommendations**

- Mandate NamUs entry among law enforcement agencies within a designated time period to report missing and unidentified persons. Currently, several states mandate the use of NamUs (e.g., Oklahoma, New Mexico, Tennessee, New York, Michigan, and Illinois).
- Expand the language of legislation pertaining to the safety and protection of all people to be inclusive of people of color, the LGBTQ+/2S community, and Indigenous peoples.
- Enact (or reauthorize) funded MMIWG and MMIP legislation.

For all of the recommendations presented herein, it is essential to consult with Tribal Nations to review, modify, approve, implement, and periodically re-assess the effectiveness of policies that impact Indigenous peoples. As the State of Arizona works to address crime and violence associated with MMIWG, it should do so through a civil rights approach. The State should develop training requirements, transparent protocols, and develop models for solutions to address domestic violence, victim and family safety, victim notification, data collection, and testing and evaluating evidence, by using a trauma informed, human rights framework that respects Tribal sovereignty and the rights of victims and families. The State should do so by consultation, informed consent, and by communicating any new process or reform to and through Tribal communities and leaders.

The crisis of MMIWG has been felt for centuries in Indigenous communities and has been perpetuated by colonialism and oppressive systems maintained by those in power. One key component that allows MMIWG to continue is the suppression of cultural and Indigenous perspectives from legislation and policy creation. Social and cultural integration have been shown to serve as protective factors against possible victimization (Gordon & Roberts, 2021). Allowing for increases in cultural practices and cultural orientation within Indigenous communities has long been found to be vital for preventing victimization (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008). Increasing connectedness within Indigenous communities not only helps protect against victimization, but

also can reduce the MMIWG/MMIP crisis. Increasing awareness of the experiences of Indigenous individuals in addition to creating opportunities for Indigenous peoples to reconnect or strengthen their ties to their culture can begin to address historical trauma while bringing together communities (Gordon & Roberts, 2021). In terms of policy, Tribal consultation and involvement serve as vital protective factors for Indigenous people while increasing Tribes' self-determination. This study is a step toward elevating Indigenous voices at the forefront of policy recommendations with the goal of ending the MMIWG/MMIP crisis.

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