



# MISSING & MURDERED INDIGENOUS PEOPLE



STATEWIDE REPORT

---

**W Y O M I N G**

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# SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

## **HOMICIDE**

105 Indigenous people (34 females, 71 males) were victims of homicide between 2000 and 2020. Indigenous homicide victims were 21% of the total homicide victims in Wyoming between 2000 and 2020.

Between 2010 and 2019, the homicide rate per 100,000 for Indigenous people was 26.8, eight times higher than the homicide rate for White people. The homicide rate for Indigenous females was 15.3 per 100,000, 6.4 times higher than the homicide rate for White females.

## **MISSING**

Between 2011 and September 2020, 710 Indigenous persons were reported missing. Some Indigenous people were reported missing more than once during the time period, resulting in a total of 1,254 missing person records for Indigenous people. Eighty-five percent were juvenile, and 57% were female. They were reported missing from 22 counties in Wyoming.

Ten percent of missing Indigenous people are found within the same day they are reported missing, 50% are found within one week. One-fifth of the Indigenous people reported missing were missing for 30 or more days, which is a higher percentage than White people missing for 30 or more days (11%).

Currently, 10 Indigenous people are listed as missing (3 females and 7 males).

## **MEDIA COVERAGE**

Only 30% of Indigenous homicide victims had newspaper media coverage, as compared to 51% of White homicide victims. Indigenous female homicide victims had the least amount of newspaper media coverage (18%).

## **MEDIA PORTRAYAL**

The newspaper articles for Indigenous homicide victims were more likely to contain violent language, portray the victim in a negative light, and provide less information as compared to articles about White homicide victims.

## COMMUNITY BARRIERS

Lack of trust in law enforcement and the judicial system, no single point of contact during an investigation, and lack of information during the investigation and after the final outcome were seen as barriers in the community related to the reporting and response to MMIP.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Develop consistent protocols and data systems for MMIPs to inform both law enforcement and families. Pay particular attention to documenting tribal affiliation in official records, coroner reports, and vital records.

Create an Indigenous advocacy position/response team to help families navigate the reporting and investigation process. The advocate can serve as a communication point-person, helping to reduce the emotional burden for families of repeating incident details to multiple agencies.

Raise community awareness about the prevalence of MMIP, contributing risk and protective factors, and available resources. Distribute a list of community resources and efforts.

*"Growing up I didn't have the opportunity to know who my Grandma was. Her life was taken too soon, and her body was found on the Rez. I know as much of my Grandma as the crime that took her life."*

*-Fawna Friday (Northern Arapaho) Granddaughter of Elsie Louise Hungry Fowler*

# INTRODUCTION

Indigenous people account for less than 3% of the population in Wyoming. They live in all 23 counties, with the largest population living in Fremont County and on the Wind River Indian Reservation (WRIR). The WRIR is currently home to two tribes, the Eastern Shoshone and the Northern Arapaho. In addition to members of these two tribes, Indigenous people enrolled in other tribes or not enrolled members of any tribe also call Wyoming home. Despite their small percentage of the population, Indigenous people experience violence, homicide, sexual assault, and are reported missing at disproportionate rates relative to any other race/ethnicity in Wyoming.

In the United States:

- Four out of five Indigenous<sup>i</sup> people have experienced violence.<sup>1</sup> Indigenous women are more likely to experience violence than any other demographic.
- Of those who have experienced violence, 97% of women and 90% of men had the violence perpetrated by a person who was not Indigenous.<sup>2</sup>
- Homicide is the third leading cause of death for Indigenous people 1-19 years of age (male and female), the fifth leading cause for Indigenous males ages 20-44, and sixth for Indigenous females ages 20-44.<sup>3</sup>
- One in three Indigenous women is

<sup>i</sup>Databases varied in the terms used for Indigenous people. This report does not use the terms "Native American," "American Indian/Alaska Native," and "Indian" but replaces them with the term "Indigenous."

sexually assaulted during her life.<sup>4</sup>

- Of the suspects in Indigenous female homicide cases, 94% were current or former intimate partners of the female victim.<sup>5</sup>
- In 2016, 5,712 Indigenous women and girls were reported missing to the National Crime Information Center (NCIC), an electronic clearinghouse of crime data used by criminal justice agencies nationwide.<sup>6</sup>
- 50% of Indigenous homicides between 1999 and 2017 are missing from the FBI's Supplemental Homicide Reports.<sup>7</sup>

**This is a big issue and not a lot of people are aware of it because, you know, it doesn't affect them, but when it happens, it doesn't affect just the family. It affects the whole community.**

- Key Stakeholder 1, Wind River Indian Reservation

In 2015, a grassroots, Indigenous-led social movement began in the United States and Canada to raise awareness of the high rates at which Indigenous women and girls go missing and are murdered.<sup>8</sup> Family members of lost loved ones demanded the U.S. government acknowledge and begin to address the crisis.<sup>9</sup> In 2016, Malinda Harris Limberhand

(Northern Cheyenne), who had been leading awareness-raising efforts since her daughter Hanna Harris (Northern Cheyenne) was found missing and murdered in 2013, spearheaded the introduction of a congressional resolution to designate a day of awareness for missing and murdered Native women and girls.<sup>10,11,12</sup> In 2017, the United States Congress passed the resolution designating May 5th (Hanna's birthday) as the National Day of Awareness for Missing and Murdered Native Women and Girls.<sup>13</sup> Nearly 200 tribal, national, and state organizations supported the resolution.<sup>14</sup> In 2019, tribal leaders, victim advocates, and community members shared information with Federal agencies to discuss a cooperative approach to public safety in Indian Country.<sup>15</sup> These discussions resulted in an executive order to establish a presidential task force on missing and murdered American Indians and Alaska Natives, known as Operation Lady Justice.<sup>16,17</sup> Operation Lady Justice aims to "enhance the operation of the criminal justice system and address the legitimate concerns of the American Indian and Alaska Native communities regarding missing and murdered people – particularly missing and murdered women and girls."<sup>18</sup>

In 2019, Keepers of the Fire, a student organization committed to keeping the Native American culture alive and strong at the University of Wyoming, sponsored the March for Justice. Family

members who lost loved ones and advocates shared their stories during the event to raise awareness of the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in Wyoming. In direct response to this event, Wyoming governor Mark Gordon convened a task force to determine the scope of the problem and to recommend ways to begin addressing it.<sup>19,20</sup> In 2020, the Wyoming Division of Victim Services (DVS) contracted with the Wyoming Survey & Analysis Center (WYSAC), at the University of Wyoming to research the data on MMIPs in Wyoming and the barriers to reporting and investigation. DVS also tasked WYSAC with making recommendations for improving awareness, reporting, and investigation of the problem.

To complete this assignment, WYSAC examined administrative and archival data, analyzed media coverage on missing persons and homicide victims, and interviewed key stakeholders on the Wind River Indian Reservation (WRIR). This report presents findings from WYSAC's research. This report is comprised of four sections. The first section analyzes the available administrative and archival data. The second section analyzes media coverage of MMIPs. The third section contains information from the interviews with community members. The fourth section offers a conclusion to the study.



# ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

## Indigenous Homicide Victims

WYSAC's first step in assessing MMIP in Wyoming was to determine the number of Indigenous people reported as missing or murdered in Wyoming. Researchers conducted a literature review to guide the identification of data sources to describe MMIP on the local, state, and national levels. Past reports have analyzed administrative data from NCIC, the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs),<sup>21</sup> the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS),<sup>22,23</sup> and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children to describe MMIP at the local, state, and national levels.<sup>24</sup>

These reports have been met with challenges and identified limitations in the data, including inconsistent data collection, misclassification, and under-reporting. The inability to cross-reference databases has also limited access to valuable information. Many Indigenous victims have been incorrectly classified in law enforcement databases as White, Hispanic, or Asian;<sup>25,26</sup> a notable percentage of missing and murdered victims have been simply listed as "Other," or "Unknown."<sup>27</sup> Acknowledging these challenges, researchers developed a list of thirteen potential data sources on Wyoming MMIPs.

## ■ METHODS

WYSAC identified these potential administrative and archival databases and sources from which to collect and analyze data on homicides or missing Indigenous persons:

- National Crime Information Center (NCIC)<sup>ii</sup>
- National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs)<sup>iii</sup>
- National Center for Missing and Exploited Children Database<sup>iv</sup>
- Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit People (MMIWG2) Database<sup>v</sup>
- Centers for Disease Control Wide-ranging Online Data for Epidemiologic Research Database (WONDER)
- Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)
- Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)
- Wyoming Department of Health Vital Statistics Services (WDH VSS)
- Wyoming Division of Criminal Investigation (DCI)
- Wind River Police Department (WRPD)
- Wyoming Highway Patrol
- Lander Police Department
- Fremont County Sheriff's Department

<sup>ii</sup> An electronic clearinghouse of crime data available criminal justice agencies nationwide

<sup>iii</sup> A national information clearinghouse and resource center for missing, unidentified, and unclaimed person cases

<sup>iv</sup> A national clearinghouse and comprehensive reporting center for all issues related to the prevention of and recovery from child victimization

<sup>v</sup> A comprehensive database that spans beyond colonial borders to log missing and murdered indigenous women, girls, and two spirit people, from 1900 to the present

## Challenges to Data Access

Researchers requested data from Fremont County Sheriff's Office and the Lander Police Department but did not receive a response. Researchers contacted the WRPD and BIA for data, and they directed us to other databases (NCIC, DCI, FBI) as all the data of interest would be included in these national databases. Researchers also contacted the Sovereign Bodies Institute who maintains the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two Spirit People (MMIWG2) Database (considered to be the most comprehensive database regarding MMIWG2) and were ultimately unable to receive data.

Researchers attempted to obtain homicide data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Wide-ranging Online Data for Epidemiologic Research database (CDC WONDER) but, ultimately, could not use any results because of the relatively low numbers of victims and lack of annual estimates made it impossible to gather reliable data. Further, population estimates for Wyoming provided by the CDC database were not consistent with actual population rates based on the U.S. Census.

Researchers analyzed data from the FBI Supplemental Homicide Reports on homicides in Wyoming between 2000 and 2019. Supplemental Homicide Reports do not, however, include

information about the victim's race/ethnicity, so these data were not used in the analyses. Similarly, researchers obtained homicide data from Wyoming DCI Uniform Crime Reports, but racial information was not available after 2011, so it was not used in the analyses.

The National Indigenous Women's Resource Center (NIWRC) uses data sets from the National Vital Statistic System and the National Violent Death Reporting System to assess violence against Indigenous people. The WDH provides state-level data to inform these systems. Given the challenges accessing the other sources of homicide data, the researchers decided to use data from the WDH VSS to assess homicide cases.

Of the thirteen potential data sources identified, researchers were able to use three to inform this report: one source for homicide data (WDH VSS) and two sources for data on missing persons (NCIC [provided through DCI], and NamUs).

*"It's traumatic to bury your children before their time. Their lives have been taken by others and it's not okay."*

-Nicole Wagon (Northern Arapaho)  
Mother of Jocelyn Watt and Jade Wagon

Table 1 presents additional information on the data requested, its availability, and use.

### **Table 1: Data Sources and Outcome**

Three of the thirteen data sources provided data for this report.

Source	Variables Requested	Availability	Status
National Crime Information Center (NCIC)	Missing Persons in Wyoming 2000-2020	Available through DCI	Used
National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs)	Missing persons 2000-2020	Yes	Used
National Center for Missing and Exploited Children	Missing Children in Wyoming 2000-2020	Yes	There were no Indigenous children in the database
Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two Spirit People (MMIWG2) Database	Homicide and Missing Indigenous persons 2000-2020	No	Non-Native research entities cannot access data
Centers for Disease Control (CDC)	Homicide cause of death in Wyoming	No (not from WONDER database)	Annual estimates too small, low numbers suppressed, population incorrect
Federal Bureau of Investigation	Homicide victims 2000-2020	Yes	Racial data was not available after 2011
Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)	Homicide and Missing persons 2000-2020	No, all records reported into NCIC, Vital Statistics, DCI	They directed us to other sources
Wyoming Department of Health (WDH), Vital Statistics Service	Homicide victims 2000-2019	Yes	Used
Wyoming Division of Criminal Investigation (DCI)	Homicide and Missing persons 2000-2020	Yes	Used Missing Persons Data, Racial information not available for homicide
Wind River Police Department (WRPD)	Homicide and Missing persons 2000-2020	No, all records reported into NCIC, Vital Statistics, DCI	They directed us to other sources
Wyoming Highway Patrol	Amber Alert Activations 2000-2020	Yes	Only 2019 included racial data.
Lander Police Department	Homicide and Missing persons 2000-2020	No	No response to requests
Fremont County Sheriff's Department	Homicide and Missing persons 2000-2020	No	No response to requests

## ■ RESULTS

### Indigenous Homicide Victims in Wyoming

Researchers received Excel files from the WDH VSS that contained data on 498 homicides that occurred between 2000 and 2019. All deaths in the state are reported to WDH VSS, including those occurring on WRIR. The data provided by WDH VSS included death date, race, ethnicity, sex, age at death (in years), county of residence, county of death, and location type (hospital, decedent's home, etc.). Some records included information about tribal affiliation; however, this information was not required to be reported prior to 2004. Tribal affiliation listed on the death certificate does not mean necessarily that the decedent was a legally enrolled tribal member. Of the 498 homicides, WDH VSS identified 105 as Indigenous people.



Of the 105 Indigenous homicide victims identified in Wyoming between 2000 and 2019, 68% ( $n = 71$ ) were male and 32% ( $n = 34$ ) were female. Homicide victims ranged in age from 0 to 81, with the median age being 29. One-fifth ( $n = 21$ ) were juveniles (age 0 to 17), 71% ( $n = 74$ ) were adults (age 18 to 54), and 10% ( $n = 10$ ) were elders (age 55+).

#### Ages of Indigenous Homicide Victims

	Juvenile	Adult	Elder
Female	35%	50	15
Male	13%	50	7

For the 10-year period, 2010-2019, the homicide rate for Indigenous persons in Wyoming was 26.8 per 100,000. In the same time period, the homicide rate for Indigenous males was 38.0 per 100,000 and 15.3 per 100,000 for Indigenous females.

*"She will not be deemed as a statistic and her life, with her beautiful voice, still counts and matters."*

-Nicole Wagon (Northern Arapaho)  
Mother of Jocelyn Watt and Jade Wagon

Despite representing less than 3% of the state's total population, Indigenous people represent 21% of Wyoming's homicide victims. Additional information about Indigenous homicide victims is in Appendix A.<sup>28</sup> Nationally, the homicide rate for Indigenous persons is 12.1 per 100,000.<sup>29</sup> This rate, the most recent, was calculated using data from 1999 to 2009. The national rate may be higher now.

**Indigenous People Make Up****BUT ARE ONLY****Fremont County**

Researchers compared the current homicide rate in Fremont County, WY (which has the largest Indigenous population in the state) to the Fremont County homicide rate reported in a study about violence against Indigenous people prepared for the U.S. Department of Justice (USDOJ) in 2008.<sup>30</sup> Though old, this report is the most recent account of homicide data available on the county level. Similar in methodology to our report, the 2008 study assessed vital statistics records for Indigenous homicide victims. The study concluded the homicide rate for Indigenous people in Fremont County between 1994 and 1998 was 11.5 per 100,000. Our analysis used the most current figures (2010-2019) and determined a rate (55.2 homicides per 100,000) almost five times higher than the 1994-1998 rate.

**Indigenous Missing Persons****METHODS**

WYSAC received two Excel files from DCI with missing person's records. As Wyoming's Missing Persons Clearinghouse, DCI holds data about missing persons in the state. When law enforcement agencies enter information about missing persons into NCIC, DCI receives the NCIC message and manually transfers the record into an in-house database. Combined, the two files contained 8,622 missing person records. The records include demographics (race, date of birth, and sex), the law enforcement agency that entered the report, date of last contact (ranging from 1974 to 2020), date of emancipation (the date a juvenile turns 18), date the record is cleared (the date the person is determined to be no longer missing and the law enforcement agency who entered the record removes the record from NCIC), and the NIC number (unique record identifier).<sup>vi,vii</sup>

Researchers used the NIC number to identify 85 duplicate records, leaving 8,537 unique records. From these, WYSAC removed records with missing or inconsistent dates (records missing date of birth, records where the date of the last contact preceded the date of birth, or the date of last contact was a future date). When finished, WYSAC had 8,431 records to analyze with the date of last contact occurring between

<sup>vi</sup> 1. Disabled (A person of any age who is missing and under proven physical/mental disability or is senile, thereby subjecting himself/herself or others to personal and immediate danger); 2. Endangered (A person of any age who is missing under circumstances indicating that his/her physical safety may be in danger); 3. Involuntary (A person of any age who is missing under circumstances indicating the disappearance may not have been voluntary (as in an abduction or kidnapping.)); 4. Juvenile (A person under the age of 21 who is missing and does not meet any of the entry criteria set forth in 1, 2, 3, or 5.); 5. Catastrophe Victim (A person of any age who is missing after a catastrophe.); 6. Other (A person age 21 and older not meeting the criteria for entry in any other category who is missing and for whom there is a reasonable concern for his/her safety.)

<sup>vii</sup> 2018 National Crime Information Center (NCIC) Missing Person and Unidentified Person Statistics Pursuant to the Requirements of the Crime Control Act of 1990, Pub. L. No. 101-647, 104 Stat. 4789

2011 and 2020. We calculated the number of days missing by counting the number of days between the date of last contact and the date the record was cleared from NCIC. When the date of last contact and the date cleared were the same, the number of days missing equaled zero because the person was missing for less than a full day. Researchers matched records on sex, race, and date of birth to identify individuals with multiple records. We identified 4,884 unique individuals.

## ■ RESULTS

Of the 8,431 records, 15% (1,254) were Indigenous persons. These records represent 4,884 unique individuals, 710 of whom were Indigenous. Law enforcement agencies in Wyoming enter nearly 900 missing person records into NCIC annually. Each year, approximately 13% ( $n = 120$ ) are records of Indigenous people.



## Indigenous Persons NCIC Records

At the time of this research, almost all of the records were cleared from NCIC (99%). Of the 52 records still active in NCIC, nine are Indigenous persons. Of these nine, three (33%) are female and six (67%) are male. Ages ranged from 13 to 74. Of the 1,254 cleared records for Indigenous missing persons, law enforcement agencies cleared 11% on the same day they were entered, and an additional 50% were closed within seven days (Table 3, Appendix A). In comparison, for missing White people, law enforcement agencies cleared 21% on the same day and an additional 60% within seven days. More than one-fifth (21%) of Indigenous people were missing for 30 or more days compared to 8% of White missing persons.

Most missing persons' records (84%) were categorized as juvenile. Of the 1,254 Indigenous person records entered into NCIC between 2011 and 2020, 85% were for juveniles. More than half (57%) were female. The ages ranged from 0 to 95, with the median age at last contact being 15.

Missing Indigenous persons' records were generated by law enforcement agencies across Wyoming. The only county that did not have a law enforcement agency enter a missing Indigenous person into NCIC was Niobrara County (the state's least populated county). More than

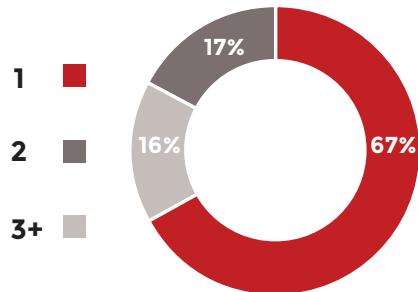
**Between 2011 and September 2020  
Indigenous people were  
listed as missing in**



one-quarter of records were from Natrona County (28%), followed by Fremont County (which includes data from WRPD; 18%), and Laramie County (17%). Natrona and Laramie counties are the states' two most populated counties. Eighty-two percent of records for Indigenous missing persons were generated by law enforcement agencies outside of Fremont County (where the majority of WRIR is located).

#### **Number of Records per Person**

Most Indigenous people had only one record in NCIC



#### **Demographics of Indigenous Missing Persons**

Of the 710 individuals with records in NCIC, 477 (67%) had only one record. Of those with multiple records, 110 (16%) had two records, and 123 (17%) had three or more. The percentage of multiple records for Black, Indigenous, and White missing people were nearly identical (Table 3, Appendix A).

#### **Indigenous Persons NamUs Records**

The USDOJ operates the National Institute of Justice's National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs). NamUs is a free, centralized, secure clearinghouse for records pertaining to missing persons, unidentified decedents, and unclaimed decedents. Law enforcement, medical examiners, coroners, and families can upload and access information to aid in the resolution of missing, unidentified, and unclaimed persons' cases. The NamUs database has had a total of 5 missing Indigenous people from Wyoming recorded in its database, one is currently listed as missing and four have been cleared. They were reported missing from five counties in Wyoming.

**5**

**Only five of the  
710 Indigenous  
people reported  
missing in  
Wyoming  
were recorded  
in the NamUs  
database**

## Currently, 9 Indigenous people are listed as missing in NCIC



### 1 Indigenous person is listed as missing in NamUs, and misclassified in NCIC

Four of the five people are male, and one is female. The age range is 17 to 69 years old. All of the records in NamUs were also recorded in NCIC, but the person currently still missing (in both NamUs and NCIC) is classified as White in NCIC and American Indian/Alaska Native and Hispanic/Latino in NamUs. Because of this discrepancy in racial classification, he was not identified as Indigenous and was not part of the previous analysis. Researchers could not determine how many other missing people may be misclassified in NCIC.

## Other Data Sources

WYSAC queried the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children Database, but their database did not include any Indigenous children from Wyoming, so we did not use their data. Reports on amber alert activations were received from Wyoming Highway Patrol. In 2019, there were 5 amber alert activations for Indigenous children in Wyoming. Information on race/ethnicity was not available on data prior to 2019, so the amber alert activations could not be used in the analysis.

## ■ DISCUSSION

Based on death certificate data listing homicide as the cause of death, Indigenous people have a homicide rate higher than any other race/ethnicity in Wyoming. The current Indigenous homicide rate in Wyoming is higher than the national Indigenous homicide rate. One possible explanation for the higher homicide rate found in this study is that we used data from the Vital Statistics System, where past reports relied solely on law enforcement data, such as the FBI Supplemental Homicide Reports (SHR). Nationally, nearly half of Indigenous homicides have not been recorded in the FBI SHRs. Between 1999 and 2017, 63% of Indigenous homicides from Wyoming were missing from SHRs.<sup>31</sup> This missing homicide data likely resulted in an artificially low homicide rate for Wyoming.

In addition to being reported missing at a disproportionately higher rate, a higher percentage of Indigenous people were missing for more than 30 days, as compared to Whites. Law enforcement records indicate that Indigenous persons were reported missing in every Wyoming county except for Niobrara. Our findings are similar to a recent report released by NamUs,<sup>32</sup> which indicates that their database included unresolved missing Indigenous persons cases that were missing from both tribal (46%) and non-tribal lands (46%). These data indicate that missing Indigenous people is a widespread phenomenon and not limited to tribal lands.<sup>viii</sup>

<sup>viii</sup> An additional 8% were missing from an unknown location

## Data Limitations

Although our findings indicate the disproportionate and elevated rate of homicide and missing person reports for Indigenous persons in Wyoming, the true rate may be even higher. A limitation of vital statistics data is that it relies on the certifiers (coroners, medical examiners) to determine the cause of death as a homicide. Literature indicates that homicides could be misclassified as accidental, self-harm, or cause unknown.<sup>33,34</sup> This crucial decision impacts the reliability and validity of the data as does the misidentification of race on vital statistics records. The misidentification of race on death certificates could be as high as 30%.<sup>35</sup> Because of inconsistency in the data or the lack of standardized protocols for research, we cannot make a direct comparison between past and current homicide rates for Indigenous people.

Accessing and analyzing data pertinent to Wyoming was challenged by duplicate records, the removal of records with missing or inconsistent dates, misclassification of race, and individuals with multiple records. These issues are not unique to this study. Research from the Urban Indian Health Institute (UIHI) indicates that obtaining an accurate number of missing and murdered Indigenous persons is an ongoing challenge. Racial misclassification, as well as misclassification of the causes of

mortality, has hampered efforts to search for Indigenous victims.

## Misclassification

Racial misclassification happens when an individual is classified as a different race from the race by which they identify themselves.<sup>36</sup> Misclassification of race typically happens when the data collector assumes the individual's race based solely on physical characteristics, location, or name.

A study of racial misclassification on U.S. death certificates compared self-identified race from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) to the race recorded on death certificates for a sample of decedents in the National Longitudinal Mortality Study (NLMS) database. This study found markedly higher misclassification of AI/AN persons (30%) compared with persons of other races.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, a project matching Indian Health Service (IHS) patient registration records with National Death Index (NDI) records showed the same percentage of inconsistent classifications of AI/AN race.<sup>38</sup> Racial misclassification resulted in significant underestimations of death rates among AI/AN populations for all causes.<sup>39</sup>

Despite limited ability to assess racial misclassification, our study identified at least two cases of racial misclassification, one for homicide, and one for missing persons. We suspect the true number is much higher.

## **Disaggregation**

Disaggregation of data on race for those who report multiple races occurs when categories of race are combined or too few categories are given as options. Indigenous people are often grouped into “other” categories and lumped in with other races making it impossible to draw conclusions about Indigenous people. On election night 2020, CNN grouped Indigenous people into an egregious racial category called “Something Else” on prime-time television.<sup>40</sup> The NCIC data used in this study to assess missing persons included 100 people defined as ‘unknown race.’ Some of these could be misidentified Indigenous people.

The use of a multi-race category is also problematic. In 2013, nine million Americans classified themselves as multiracial (U.S. Census, 2013). Pew Research conducted a study using self-reported race and the race of the individual’s parents and grandparents to examine the demographic characteristics of multiracial Americans. They concluded that 7% of American adults are multiracial. In further analysis of the multiracial group, 68% were identified as American Indian and another race.<sup>41</sup> This “multi-racial” category obscures the fact that two-thirds of this group was American Indian.

Some national institutions, such as the U.S. Department of Education, collect data on Indigenous persons, but if the

person indicates they are Indigenous and also of Hispanic/Latino ethnicity, they are reported as Hispanic/Latino and not American Indian/Alaska Native. Likewise, if the person indicates they are of two races, for example, White and American Indian/Alaska Native, they are only reported as multiracial. To be reported as American Indian/ Alaska Native, individuals must state they are solely American Indian/Alaska Native and claim no other races or ethnicities (USDOE, 2007). Categories that aggregate multiple races must be able to be disaggregated to reflect the true number of Indigenous people.

## **Data Suppression and Small Sample Size**

Small sample sizes cause problems related to the validity and statistical significance of the data. These challenges often result in the suppression of data, as with the CDC WONDER data we tried to access for this project. Data suppression is not just an issue with homicide and missing persons’ data, it is an issue for all types of data based on small sample size, such as data on Indigenous people (health, economic, education, crime).<sup>42</sup> Researchers should strive to employ methodologies that enhance the validity of small sample sizes.

## **Data Gaps**

Data gaps are another major data quality issue. Data gaps refer to the non-existence of data or the inconsistency of data reporting over time. For example,

the American Indians and Crime Series published by the Bureau of Justice Statistics at the USDOJ provided essential data between 1999 and 2004 but has published nothing since.

### **Accessibility**

Database sources such as NCIC can only be accessed by law enforcement. While the NamUs database is free and open to the public for review and recording of data,<sup>43</sup> the system is not comprehensive because it relies on individuals and local jurisdictions to enter their own information. Only nine states are mandated by law to enter law enforcement data concerning missing and unidentified cases into the NamUs system.<sup>44</sup> NamUs is therefore

underutilized as no direct links between NCIC and NamUs currently exist to share information.<sup>45</sup> This makes access to complete missing persons data difficult for both law enforcement and the public.

There is a critical need for accurate, meaningful, and timely data collection for Indigenous people. National datasets are used to allocate federal and state funding and to develop policy. When data is lacking on Indigenous people, their communities do not receive the funding they need, policies and goals are not created, nor can they be measured for effectiveness.

*"I have said this in the past; law and justice should have no color. I am the voice of my two oldest kids Dawn Day & Jeff Day. I will not give up the fight."*

*- Greg Day (Northern Arapaho, Eastern Shoshone)  
Father of Dawn Day and Jeff Day*

# MEDIA COVERAGE

Examining media coverage of MMIP is crucial to understanding how media portrayals can perpetuate stereotypes that support systemic oppression of Indigenous people. Systemic oppression happens when members of a certain group are mistreated simply because of their membership in the group, and the mistreatment is reinforced by systems throughout the larger community.<sup>46</sup> Systemic oppression often shows up as implicit bias in both law enforcement personnel and the public.<sup>47,48</sup> Implicit bias is the subconscious beliefs people hold about members of a certain group. Being subconscious, people are often unaware they hold these biases.<sup>49</sup>

Studies have found that MMIPs are less likely to receive media coverage than their White counterparts.<sup>50,51</sup> Research has also shown the media portrayal of Indigenous people often differs from that of Whites in ways that support the dominant racial and paternal hierarchy.<sup>52</sup> Indigenous people – especially Indigenous women – are often negatively portrayed as sex workers, drug addicts, and criminals, while their non-Indigenous counterparts are depicted as respected family and community members.<sup>53</sup> Portrayals of Indigenous people found in other media research were used as a preliminary framework to guide our inquiry into the representations of MMIP in Wyoming newspaper articles.

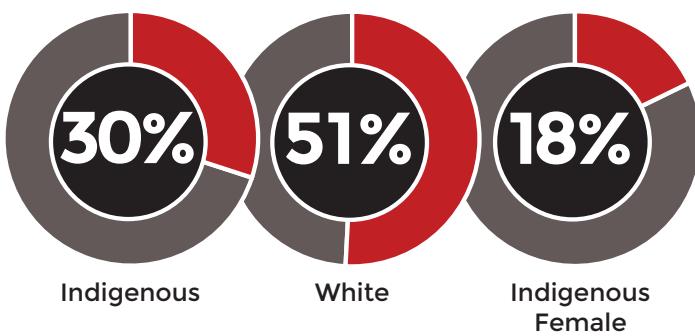
<sup>ix</sup> WYSAC analyzed online versions of The Casper Star Tribune, Cody Enterprise, County 10, Gillette News-Record, Jackson Hole Daily, Laramie Boomerang, Laramie Live, Northern Wyoming Daily News, Rawlins Daily Times, Riverton Ranger, Rock Springs Daily Rocket-Miner, Sheridan Press, The Lovell Chronicle, The Lusk Herald, The Pinedale Roundup, The Platte Co. Record-Times, The Sublette Examiner, The Torrington Telegram, The Uinta County Herald, and The Wyoming Tribune Eagle.

## Presence of News Articles for Indigenous Homicide Victims

### ■ METHODS

WYSAC collected online newspaper articles published in Wyoming by 20 state and local news sources to analyze media coverage of murdered persons. All articles were available online.<sup>ix</sup> Researchers located 2,786 articles by searching for the keywords “murder,” and “dead.” We examined all articles (2000 – present) for content related to homicide victims and used Evernote Web Clipper (an application designed to organize and archive web content) to organize the articles. Researchers assigned “clipped” articles one or more “tags” for the victim’s name, age, race, sex, and county in which the crime occurred. Of the articles found, 315 articles were about people who died while in police custody or during an interaction with law enforcement. To limit the focus to non-law enforcement-related deaths, these articles were excluded from the sample, resulting in 2,471 articles about homicides in Wyoming. WYSAC provided the WDH VSS with identifying information found in the newspaper articles (demographic data [age, sex, race], the date and location of the homicide or where the

Only **30%** of Indigenous homicide victims had newspaper media coverage, as compared to **51%** of White homicide victims.



Indigenous Female victims had the least, with only **18%** coverage

person went missing, the reason for inclusion [missing, murdered, killed by police, unnatural death in custody]). In return, WDH VSS provided WYSAC with mortality data. Researchers used these data to confirm demographic information for homicide victims described in the newspaper articles. Of the 2,471 articles collected, 12% ( $n = 287$ ) reported on Indigenous victims.

## ■ RESULTS

Of the 498 homicides that occurred in Wyoming between 2000 and 2019, 236 (48%) were associated with at least one news article. Researchers found that news articles were present for 30% ( $n = 31$ ) of the 105 Indigenous homicide victims, compared to 51% ( $n = 169$ ) of the 332 White homicide victims. Indigenous female homicide victims were the least likely to have newspaper coverage. Of the 34 female homicide cases, only 18% ( $n = 6$ ) were associated with a news article.

## Portrayal of Indigenous Homicide Victims

### ■ METHODS

Researchers matched 27 Indigenous homicide victims who had news articles to 27 White homicide victims who had news articles based on sex, age, and geographic location of the incident.<sup>x</sup> Combined, the 54 victims had 1 to 49 articles written about them. In choosing articles for analysis, WYSAC excluded articles if they were identical to another article in the sample, if they only contained information about the perpetrator or the related legal proceedings, or if the media coverage was limited to a brief (one or two sentences) update on police activity. To arrive at the same total number of articles for both Indigenous and White homicide victims, in the instances when a victim had multiple associated articles, articles that included the most information about the victim were retained. For example, if a victim had 10

<sup>x</sup> Four indigenous victims with associated articles were not assigned a White counterpart for comparison during the analysis. Three victims were newborn or infant Indigenous females, and they could not be assigned to a matched victim pair because there were no similar White victims. One other victim, an Indigenous male in his 30s, was excluded from the matched pairs because his name was only briefly mentioned in one article, and no identifying information about him or his murder was ever discussed.

associated articles and five mentioned the victim only by age and name, and the other five articles provided additional details beyond age and name, the five with the most information about the victim were retained for the analysis. The final matched sample consisted of 154 articles (77 articles for the 27 Indigenous victims and 77 articles for the 27 White victims). The number of articles for each homicide victim in the sample ranged from one to eight.

Researchers analyzed the words in the articles to describe the articles' portrayal of homicide victims. To conduct the analysis, WYSAC used NVivo 12 Plus (a qualitative data analysis software). Researchers analyzed the words to determine if the media portrayal of Indigenous homicide victims were different from the media portrayal of White homicide victims. Researchers used a summative content analysis approach (exploring the frequency of themes in the articles and the context in which they were used) to identify and count common themes in the articles. To guide analysis, researchers identified seven codes (themes) based on previous research that had examined the media portrayal of Indigenous persons.<sup>54-65</sup> Two researchers independently applied these codes to the content of each article. Before beginning the coding, WYSAC determined interrater reliability using the Kappa statistic (a numerical rating of the degree to which raters agree on the codes used to describe the text) based on a subset of the articles. The inter-rater

reliability was 0.79 ( $p<0.01$ ), indicating substantial agreement between the coding of the two researchers.

## ■ RESULTS

Researchers found the media portrayal of homicide victims different for Indigenous homicide victims and White homicide victims. Researchers identified differences in six themes: violent language (providing graphic details of the homicide, the victim's injuries, or the crime scene), essentialism (reducing the individual to nothing more than a body), positive character framing (emphasizing positive aspects of the victim's life, family, and community that are unrelated to the crime itself), negative character framing (emphasizing negative aspects of the victim's life, family, and community that are unrelated to the crime itself), location or site of the incident, and victim-focused articles.

### THEMES IN MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF HOMICIDE VICTIMS

#### **Indigenous victims were more likely to have . . .**

- Negative character framing
- Violent language
- General location of incident
- Essentialism

#### **White victims were more likely to have . . .**

- Positive character framing
- Articles focused on them
- Exact location of incident



### **Violent Language**

**“...blood coming from his nose and mouth; he had a stab wound in his lower right abdominal area, with fatty tissue protruding from the wound.”**

Violent language was used more often (77%, n = 44) to describe Indigenous victims than to describe White victims (27%, n = 21).

### **Essentialism**

**“[They] left the body in a ditch.”**

These articles lack personal information. Essentialism was only found (14%, n = 11) in articles about Indigenous victims. No articles used essentialism to describe White victims (0%, n = 0).

### **Positive Character Framing**

**“He had the heart of a cowboy, a wild streak, an ever-ready joke to brighten someone’s spirits.”**

Positive character framing was found more often (33%, n = 25) in articles about White victims than in articles about Indigenous victims (16%, n = 12).

### **Negative Character Framing**

**“The presence of toxins in [the] body at the time of his death was alcohol and chemical heavy. Peripheral blood sources showed a blood-alcohol concentration of .229 percent, an amphetamine level of 56 ng/mL, and a methamphetamine level of 180 ng/mL.”**

Negative character framing was found more often in articles about Indigenous victims (42%, n = 32) than in articles about White victims (24%, n = 19). 



## **Location**

Articles about Indigenous homicide victims were more likely to report the incident took place in a general location, (for example, on the reservation; 30%, n = 23) compared to articles about White victims (4%, n = 3). Articles about White homicide victims were more likely to report that the incident took place at a specific location, (at a specific address or at two named cross streets; 52%, n = 40) as compared to Indigenous victims (33%, n = 26).

## **Victim Focus**

The vast majority of articles obtained were of legal focus, detailing the legal proceedings related to the homicide (74%, n = 114). An additional 15% were initial reports filed by police responding to a call (n = 24). Only 6% (n = 9) of the articles in the sample were victim-focused, comprising 10% (n = 8) of the articles about White victims and 1% (n = 1) of the articles about Indigenous victims.

## **Blame**

Researchers separated blame into three themes: Solely Offender Blame, Solely Victim Blame, and Shared Blame. Blame, as a theme, did not show much difference between Whites and Indigenous people. Solely Victim Blame was present in 14% (n = 11) of the articles about White victims as compared to 9% (n = 7) of the articles about Indigenous victims. Solely Offender blame was present in 10% (n = 8) of the articles about White

victims as compared to 8% (n = 6) of the articles about Indigenous victims. The theme of Shared Blame was present in 31% (n = 24) of articles about White victims as compared to 30% (n = 23) of the articles about Indigenous victims. Further statistical analysis of the themes are displayed in Appendix B, Table 6.

## **News Articles for Indigenous Missing People**

### **■ METHODS**

WYSAC collected 684 online newspaper articles published in Wyoming by 20 state and local news sources to analyze media coverage of missing persons. All articles were available online.<sup>ix</sup> Researchers located articles by searching for the keywords "missing," "kidnapped," and "runaway." We examined all articles (2000 – present) for content related to missing persons. We used Evernote Web Clipper (an application designed to organize and archive web content) to organize the articles. Researchers assigned "clipped" articles one or more "tags" for the missing person's name, age, race, sex, and county from which the individual went missing. Of the 684 articles collected, 6% (n = 42) reported on Indigenous victims.

## ■ RESULTS

Of the 4,884 unique missing persons reported in Wyoming between 2011 and 2019, 178 (4%) were identified in at least one news article. News articles were present for 2% ( $n = 12$ ) of the 710 Indigenous missing persons reported by DCI, compared to 1% ( $n = 35$ ) of the 3,837 White missing persons reported by DCI. Among the 178 missing persons identified by local newspapers after 2011, 7% ( $n = 12$ ) were Indigenous, 1% ( $n = 1$ ) were Asian, 2% ( $n = 3$ ) were Black, 20% ( $n = 35$ ) were White, 3% ( $n = 6$ ) were Hispanic, and 68% ( $n = 121$ ) did not have their race specified. Between the years 2000 and 2010, an additional 50 missing persons were identified by Wyoming newspapers, but each of the articles were excluded from analysis because the missing person's data from DCI did not extend further back than 2011. Of these 50 people, 2% ( $n = 1$ ) were Indigenous, 6% ( $n = 3$ ) were White, and 92% ( $n = 46$ ) did not have their race specified.

## Media Portrayal of Indigenous Missing People

### ■ METHODS

Researchers matched the 13 Indigenous missing persons whose race was identified by the newspapers to the 13 White missing persons based on similar sex, age, and geographic location of

the incident. Combined, the 26 missing people had 1 to 24 articles written about them. In choosing articles for analysis, researchers excluded articles if they duplicated another article in the sample or if they contained information only about legal proceedings after the person was found. The final matched sample consisted of 63 articles (42 articles for the 13 Indigenous victims and 21 articles for the 13 White victims). One of these matches contained an Indigenous female victim who went missing prior to 2011. Researchers determined that given the small number of Indigenous female victims ( $n = 3$ ) portrayed by the newspapers, the study would include all available data, regardless of the date the victim went missing.

Researchers analyzed the content of the articles to describe the media portrayal of missing persons. To conduct the analysis, researchers used NVivo 12 Plus (a qualitative data analysis software). Researchers analyzed the article content to determine if the media portrayal of Indigenous homicide victims was different from the media portrayal of White homicide victims. The number of articles for each homicide victim in the sample ranged from one to six. Researchers used a summative content analysis approach (exploring the frequency of content in the articles and the context in which they are used) to identify and count the content in the articles. The Fisher's exact test was used to test significance of the difference between the two groups.

## ■ RESULTS

Researchers found the media portrayal of missing persons differed between Indigenous people and White people. White people were more likely to have an article written while they were still missing (76% of articles on White missing people, compared to 42% of articles on Indigenous missing people). Indigenous people were more likely to have an article written about them being missing only after they were found dead (57% of articles about Indigenous missing people, compared to 0% of articles about White missing people). Twenty-three percent of the articles about missing White people said they were found alive and well, while zero articles discussed missing Indigenous people who were found alive and well.

Researchers analyzed articles to determine if differences existed between Whites and Indigenous people in the inclusion of a photograph of the missing person, as well as negative and positive character framing of the missing person. Twelve percent of the articles about Indigenous missing persons contained a photo of the missing person, whereas 33% of the articles about White missing persons contained their photo. Negative character framing was in 16% of the articles about Indigenous people. None of the articles about missing White people included negative character framing. Positive character framing was in 43% of the articles about White people, compared to 38% of the articles about Indigenous people. Further

statistical analysis of the article content is displayed in Appendix B, Table 7.

### THEMES IN MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF MISSING PERSONS

#### **Indigenous missing persons were more likely to have . . .**

- Negative character framing
- Article only after found dead
- No article while missing

#### **White missing persons were more likely to have . . .**

- Articles while still missing
- Articles stating they were found safe

## ■ DISCUSSION

Indigenous homicide victims were less likely than White homicide victims to have media coverage. This difference was even more pronounced for Indigenous female victims—only 6 of the 34 victims had media coverage. Race was a salient difference in the media portrayals of victims, with more violent language, more essentialism, and more negative character framing used to describe Indigenous victims. Media descriptions of incident location also differed, with more Indigenous homicide locations described in general terms and more specific locations described for White victims.

The media portrayal of missing Wyomingites also differed between Indigenous people and Whites. The media was less likely to cover missing Indigenous people while still missing, with Indigenous missing women having the least amount of coverage

of all groups measured. Indigenous people were also less likely to have their photograph published in an article or to receive a positive character portrayal than Whites. Indigenous missing persons were more likely to have an article stating they had been found dead and more likely to have their character portrayed negatively.

The content analysis of the media coverage of murdered and missing people revealed strong racial and gender bias. This bias in media coverage contributes to systemic oppression and implicit bias in Wyoming. The violent descriptive language used, the focus on negative character framing, and the dearth of reports on Indigenous missing and murdered – especially on women and girls – substantiate the findings of others showing the disparity in news media coverage of Indigenous people.<sup>66</sup> Our findings also echo the underlying themes of continued stereotyping, devaluation, and ‘othering’ of Indigenous people in the media found in numerous other studies.<sup>67</sup> These themes demonstrate the power of the media to perpetuate problematic narratives that support beliefs held by the dominant culture that limit, and in some cases, erase the lives and voices of Indigenous people.<sup>68,69</sup>

This portion of the study had several limitations. First, the majority of articles on homicide victims focused on legal proceedings rather than on the victims, making it challenging to find suitable

articles for content analysis. Second, DCI’s lack of missing person data before 2011 resulted in only a small number of articles on Indigenous females ( $n = 3$ ) available for the matched sample. Finally, most of the articles collected from local newspapers (68%;  $n = 121$ ) did not specify the race of the missing person-reducing the number of articles analyzed.



# LISTENING AND TRUTH GATHERING INTERVIEWS

Community perspectives were obtained through listening and truth gathering interviews. Researchers often use listening sessions to provide additional depth and context on an issue. This type of data collection and analysis has been used in numerous MMIP studies including those sponsored by UIHI,<sup>70</sup> NIWRC,<sup>71</sup> and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) Texas<sup>72</sup> to gain a better understanding of a variety of stakeholders' perspectives. Research has shown this method of data collection can strengthen an investigation by increasing participant involvement.<sup>73</sup> The goals for the listening and truth gathering were to determine: 1) the barriers/challenges families face when reporting a missing or murdered person, 2) the resources available to assist when a person is missing or murdered, and 3) recommendations for improving the reporting and investigation process.

## ■ METHODS

During the January 2020 meeting of the Governor's MMIP Task Force, WYSAC researchers were introduced to a community volunteer who could facilitate communication with the WRIR community. WYSAC and the community volunteer worked in

partnership throughout the project. All work was conducted remotely because of COVID-19. Members of the Indigenous community who were involved with the task force guided WYSAC in developing the methodology and language for the listening and truth gathering sessions. Once developed, the community volunteer shared the methodology with members of the Indigenous community to get their feedback to further improve the cultural appropriateness of the protocols and language. Researchers also consulted with UIHI for guidance on listening session methodology.

Because of COVID-19, researchers conducted semi-structured telephone interviews with key stakeholders. Researchers identified stakeholders using a snowball approach. In a snowball approach, researchers ask an initial group of key stakeholders and interviewees for the names of other people whose opinions they think should be collected. For this study, the initial interview was held with a key member of the community identified by the Wyoming MMIP Task Force. Upon completion of the interview, the researcher asked if the interviewee had recommendations for other key stakeholders whom they



believed should participate or might be interested in participating. Researchers then contacted those referred and repeated the process. Interviews took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, which disproportionately impacted the Indigenous community and hampered recruitment efforts. Seven key stakeholders participated in the interviews.

The interviews were approximately 30 to 60 minutes in length. Prior to beginning an interview, the researcher obtained the stakeholder's informed consent to be interviewed and for the interview to be audio-recorded. The researcher read aloud the content of the informed consent and asked the stakeholder for verbal consent. All identified interviewees consented to the audio recording of their interviews.

Researchers analyzed transcripts of the audio recordings using thematic analysis (data analysis that identifies common themes across all interviews). Researchers used an open-coding process (which allows the analysis to begin organically, without a preconceived structure) to identify themes within the data, using NVivo 12 Plus.

## ■ RESULTS

The listening and truth gathering interviews yielded insight into the experiences of the community related to the reporting of and response to

MMIPs. Common barriers to reporting included challenges related to living on the reservation (geographic distance and not having a physical address), uncertainty of the reporting process (which jurisdiction to call, how long a person needs to be missing before filing a report), and technological barriers (lack of cell and/or internet service, and uncertainty related to online reporting). While there are no community resources specifically for MMIP, stakeholders listed many resources that could help or guide impacted families to other resources. Responses to the listening and truth gathering interview questions are listed in Appendix C.

The benefit of semi-structured interviews is the conversation is loosely guided by initial structured questions. The flow of the conversation is flexible, though, allowing participants to share additional information they find relevant to the topic. Going beyond the initial question about barriers to reporting, the flow of conversation allowed the interviewees to share a broader view of the barriers and challenges in the community related to MMIP.

## Barriers Within the Community

### Lack of Trust

Although stakeholders considered local law enforcement a strong community resource for MMIP, they also acknowledged some community members do not trust law enforcement or the judicial process. Stakeholders believe this lack of trust leads to the community's belief that a rigorous investigation of MMIPs is unlikely. Generational trauma and a history of bad experiences with law enforcement contribute to this lack of trust.

**"People would be like, 'Oh no, no— we don't call the police, we don't do that because you know they won't do anything anyway'."**

- Key Stakeholder 4

**"We're second class. So you know, we might find out. We might get this by ourselves, you know, someday – whenever. People out here don't expect that something's gonna be solved quickly 'cause it isn't."**

- Key Stakeholder 2

### No Single Point of Contact

Though jurisdictions have a good working relationship with each other, navigating multiple jurisdictions and communicating among numerous agencies can be difficult and time consuming for families.

**"They say 'well, we've got to report it back to reservation' [and] the reservation gets it in their hands. It's a federal case, so the feds have to take over, which is FBI. Then, if there's drugs involved, DCI gets involved and pretty soon you've got a handful of departments that have their hand on one case."**

- Key Stakeholder 4

### Lack of Information

People in the community become frustrated when they think information from an investigation is being withheld or when the results of an investigation or judicial proceeding are not made public.

**"They'll just say we'll keep looking. We'll keep working on it. Well, sometimes that 'we'll keep working' goes into ten years. Twelve years. Fifteen years. Sometimes for individuals, a lifetime."**

- Key Stakeholder 3

Key stakeholders acknowledged some people in the community misunderstand how the investigation process works and what information can be released.

## Recommendations

### Protocols and Data Systems

Develop consistent protocols and data systems on MMIPs to inform both law enforcement and families. Pay particular attention to documenting tribal affiliation in official records, coroner reports, and vital records.

This recommendation is supported by the passage of Savanna's Act (Public Law No. 116-165) by the 116th U.S. Congress on October 10, 2020. This legislation requires the federal government to update information relevant to Indigenous people and improve tribal access to local, regional, state, and federal crime databases. It also mandates the creation in collaboration with tribes of standard protocols for responding to MMIP cases.

*"I believe that law enforcement agencies could start by receiving a cultural sensitivity training in order to work with my native tribal members."*

-Nicole Wagon (Northern Arapaho)  
Mother of Jocelyn Watt and Jade Wagon

**I want people in this state to remember that the citizens of the Wind River Reservation are citizens of Wyoming as well and deserve a voice in our government, and they deserve a voice to be treated like citizens.**

- Key Stakeholder 6, Wind River Indian Reservation

### Community Awareness

Raise community awareness by educating the public (preferably by Indigenous educators) about the prevalence of MMIP, contributing risk and protective factors, and available resources. Distribute a list of community resources and efforts, broken down locally, across the United States, and by sovereign nations.

*"If there was more education in the community about the problem, I think more people would be willing to report."*

- Key Stakeholder 2

### MMIP Advocate

Create an Indigenous advocacy position or response team that can help families navigate the reporting and investigation process from initial inquiry to final outcome. The advocate can serve as a communication point person, helping to reduce the emotional burden for families of repeating details of the incident to multiple agencies.

## ■ DISCUSSION

Stakeholders identified three key barriers within the WRIR community: 1) lack of trust in law enforcement and/or the judicial process, 2) the absence of a single point of contact among law enforcement, agencies, and communities to help families navigate the system, and 3) the perceived lack of information concerning the timely progress of an investigation or judicial proceeding. These findings corroborate other studies on MMIP – most notably UIHI's corrected study of MMIWG in Washington State,<sup>74</sup> the *Oregon State Police Report on Missing and Murdered Native American Women*,<sup>75</sup> and the Sovereign Bodies Institute *To' Kee Skuy' Soo Ney-Wo-Chek' Project Report* centered on Northern California.<sup>76</sup>

Recommendations from the community mirror those of other studies. For example, UIHI<sup>7</sup> has called for tribal nations to collaborate in developing reliable methods of collecting, managing, and analyzing data on Indigenous people to prevent undercounting through racial misclassification. The *Nebraska State Patrol's LB154 Report* recommended NamUs training be offered in tribal communities on the reporting and collection of data.<sup>77</sup> *Oregon's State Police Report* suggests cultural awareness education for law enforcement officers.<sup>75</sup>

Challenges and limitations to gathering data for this portion of the study were two-fold. First, the COVID-19 pandemic caused WYSAC to alter its method for gathering stakeholder data. Rather than having a dynamic dialogue among different stakeholders in a group setting, WYSAC researchers were limited to individual interviews over the phone. This limitation hampered WYSAC's ability to gather information from discussion among those with different viewpoints and ideas. The interviews, however, allowed for more in-depth explorations of specific topics important to individual stakeholders. Second, despite the efforts of the researchers and the community volunteer to obtain tribal approval to collect data from families and the community, time constraints tied primarily to COVID-19, WYSAC did not receive tribal approval for data collection. Researchers had to rely on individual stakeholders to provide information on how Indigenous families were affected by issues surrounding MMIP.



# CONCLUSION

Our research underscores the depth and breadth of the MMIP crisis and its effects on Wyoming's Indigenous people. Indigenous people in Wyoming are reported missing and victims of homicide at disproportionately high rates relative to any other race/ethnicity in Wyoming. The true number of MMIP in Wyoming is likely *higher* than what this report conveys. The analysis of Wyoming data combined with the past research efforts of others illustrates how concerns such as racial misclassification and the disaggregation of data have helped amplify the MMIP crisis. Striking inconsistencies in MMIP data have aided the creation of a faulty narrative that results in the underreporting of the scope of the MMIP epidemic. Accurate and timely collection, reporting, and analysis of data can be a powerful tool in the pursuit of justice, accountability, and safety. Incomplete and inaccurate data not only prevent a precise count of MMIP, they also render some missing and murdered Indigenous people invisible; creating enduring distress for families unable to obtain justice for their loved ones.

Additionally, WYSAC's research reveals an overall dearth of media coverage pertaining to Wyoming MMIP. When

covered by the media, findings show a significant trend toward the negative portrayal of Indigenous people. Negative coverage and the absence of coverage creates stigma by normalizing stereotypes of Wyoming's Indigenous people. Media narratives that create social exclusion or "othering" warp the public's understanding of MMIP, decrease empathy toward Indigenous people, and limit the capacity of tribal communities to form useful alliances and develop solution-based approaches for addressing MMIP.

Interviews conducted by WYSAC researchers with key stakeholders described the barriers and challenges of Indigenous people related to Wyoming's MMIP. These include a lack of trust, no single point of contact, and the need for more timely information. These barriers and challenges have created a pervasive sense of frustration directed at law enforcement and the judicial process throughout much of the Indigenous community. This frustration and lack of trust curtail open and authentic communication between law enforcement and tribal communities--thereby impeding a collective, productive, and meaningful response to address the problem of MMIP.

Altogether, the findings in this report convey a need for increased recognition and understanding of the MMIP epidemic by law enforcement, the government, the media, and the public. Inconsistencies in the data point to a need for a concerted collaborative effort by federal, state, and tribal agencies to develop a set of comprehensive protocols to collect, classify, and analyze MMIP data. Media coverage and portrayals of MMIP suggest that journalists would benefit from cultural competency training to better understand the lives and perspectives of Indigenous people, and, thus, craft more accurate articles. Stakeholder interviews reveal that an ongoing and respectful dialog between tribal communities, and federal, state, and tribal law enforcement systems, can help voices to be heard, collaboration to occur, and common goals to be achieved. These

initial steps can begin dismantling the systemic oppression of Indigenous people in Wyoming

Sadly, these findings are not unique to Wyoming. As seen in other states, missing and murdered Indigenous people are not geographically bound to tribal lands. They are present in urban centers, rural areas, and all places in between. The pervasiveness of the problem suggests that the MMIP crisis is systemic and can best be addressed using all the federal, state, and local, resources available in coordination with tribal communities. An important first step in this process was the passage of Savanna's Act by the 116th U.S. Congress in 2020. This Act directs USDOJ to establish best practices in searching for and administering resources to missing persons on and off tribal lands.

*"I hope they (young girls from the WRIR) know we're advocating for them, to protect them, and work to change the data and culture, so we would not be the most stalked, raped, murdered, and sexually assaulted people - compared to other races in our nation."*

-Lynnette Grey Bull (Northern Arapaho, Hunkpapa Lakota)  
Director of Not Our Native Daughters

## Endnotes

- 1 André B. Rosay, "Violence against American Indian and Alaska Native Women and Men: 2010 Findings from the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey," U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, Published May 1, 2016, <https://scholarworks.alaska.edu/handle/11122/7025>.
- 2 Ibid.
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# Appendix A

## Homicide Data

**Table 2: Characteristics of Indigenous Homicide Victims**

*Two-thirds of Indigenous homicide victims are males*

Female		Male		Total		
n	%	n	%	n	%	
Juvenile (0 to 17)	12	57.1	9	42.9	21	20.0
Adult (18 to 54)	17	23.0	57	77.0	74	70.5
Elder (55+)	5	50.0	5	50.0	10	9.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>32.4</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>67.6</b>	<b>105</b>	

Source: Wyoming Department of Health, Vital Statistics Services 2000-2019

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## Missing Persons' Data

**Table 3: Number of Days Missing for Cleared NCIC records**

*Four-fifths of NCIC records were closed within 7 days*

Asian		Black		Indigenous		Unknown		White		Total		
n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Cleared Same Day	8	26.7	74	18.2	131	10.5	21	21.2	1379	20.9	1613	19.3
1 - 7 Days	14	46.7	235	57.9	623	50.0	64	64.6	3941	59.7	4877	58.2
8 - 14 Days	2	6.7	28	6.9	124	10.0	4	4.0	429	6.5	587	7.0
15 - 21 Days	2	6.7	18	4.4	56	4.5	3	3.0	186	2.8	265	3.2
22 - 29 Days	1	3.3	7	1.7	44	3.5	1	1.0	121	1.8	174	2.1
30+ Days	3	10.0	44	10.8	267	21.4	6	6.1	543	8.2	863	10.3
	30		406		1245		99		6599		8379	

Source: Wyoming Division of Criminal Investigation 2011-2020

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**Table 4: Missing Person Record Category, by Race***Across all races, the majority of NCIC records were for juveniles*

Asian		Black		Indigenous		Unknown		White		Total		
n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Disabled	1	3.2	5	1.2	22	1.8	1	1.0	87	1.3	116	1.4
Endangered	0	0.0	15	3.7	31	2.5	4	4.0	276	4.2	326	3.9
Involuntary	0	0.0	2	0.5	6	0.5	0	0.0	39	0.6	47	0.6
Juvenile	28	90.3	339	82.9	1,066	85.0	86	86.0	5,595	84.3	7,114	84.4
Other	2	6.5	48	11.7	129	10.3	9	9.0	639	9.6	827	9.8
	31		409		1,254		100		6,636		8,430	

Note: Missing = 1

Source: Wyoming Division of Criminal Investigation 2011-2020

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**Table 5: Number of Records per Person, by Race***Two-thirds of Indigenous people had only one record in NCIC*

Asian		Black		Indigenous		Unknown		White		Total		
n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
1 Record	24	88.9	145	66.5	477	67.2	87	94.6	2,551	66.5	3,284	67.2
2 Records	2	7.4	32	14.7	110	15.5	2	2.2	655	17.1	801	16.4
3+ Records	1	3.7	41	18.8	123	17.3	3	3.3	631	16.4	799	16.4
	27		218		710		92		3,837		4,884	

Source: Wyoming Division of Criminal Investigation 2011-2020

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# Appendix B

## Thematic Analysis of Articles on Homicide Victims

The 154 articles from the matched pair cases were separated into two groups by race, Indigenous (n = 77) and White (n = 77). The articles were coded ‘present’ or ‘absent’ on each of the seven themes. The nominal variables are race (Indigenous or White) and theme (absent or present). The difference between the values estimates the effect of race on themes present in media portrayals of homicide victims. Applying Fisher’s exact test, the proportion of themes present significantly varied by race for all tests indicating the null hypothesis can be rejected: there is a significant difference in themes present between racial categories. Results are displayed in Table 6 below.

**Table 6: Comparison of Themes in Articles about Homicide Victims**

*Statistical significance was found in 7 of the 10 themes assessed between groups.*

Theme	Present/Absent	Indigenous	White	p Value
Violent Language*	Present	44	21	<.001
	Absent	33	56	
Essentialism*	Present	11	0	0.001
	Absent	66	77	
General Location*	Present	23	3	0.001
	Absent	54	74	
Positive Character Framing*	Present	12	25	0.023
	Absent	65	52	
Victim Focus*	Present	1	8	0.034
	Absent	76	69	
Exact Location*	Present	26	40	0.034
	Absent	51	37	
Negative Character Framing*	Present	32	19	0.039
	Absent	45	58	
Victim Blame	Present	7	11	0.453
	Absent	70	66	
Offender Blame	Present	6	8	0.780
	Absent	71	69	
Shared Blame	Present	23	24	1.000
	Absent	54	53	

Note: \*Result is statistically significant

Source: WYSAC analysis of themes found in online newspaper articles published in Wyoming between 2000 and 2020

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## Content Analysis of Articles on Missing Persons

The 63 articles from the matched pair cases were separated into two groups by race, Indigenous (n = 42) and White (n = 21). The articles were classified as either having each of the 5 content elements and 2 themes present or absent. The nominal variables are race (Indigenous or White) and content element/theme (absent or present). The difference between the values estimates the effect of race on themes present in media portrayals of homicide victims. Applying Fisher's exact test, the proportion of content present significant variety by race for four tests (Found Dead, Found Safe, Only After Found, While Missing) indicating the null hypothesis can be rejected: there is a significant difference in themes between racial categories. Results were not significant for two of the tests (Picture of Missing Person and Positive Character Framing) indicating the null hypothesis is retained; there is not a significant difference in the content between racial categories. One test (Negative Character Framing) could not be completed because no negative character framing was present in articles on White missing persons, thus violating the assumptions of the test. Results are displayed in Table 7.

**Table 7. Comparison of Content in Articles about Missing People**

*Statistical Significance was found in 4 of the 6 themes assessed between groups.*

Content Element/Theme	Present/Absent	Indigenous	White	p Value
Found Dead*	Present	24	0	<.001
	Absent	18	21	
Found Safe*	Present	0	5	0.003
	Absent	42	16	
Only After Found Only*	Present	17	1	0.003
	Absent	23	20	
While Missing*	Present	18	16	0.016
	Absent	24	5	
Photo of Missing Person	Present	5	7	0.085
	Absent	37	14	
Positive Character Framing	Present	16	9	0.788
	Absent	26	12	

Note: \*Result is statistically significant

Source: WYSAC analysis of themes found in online newspaper articles published in Wyoming between 2000 and 2020

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# Appendix C

## Information From Key Stakeholder Interviews

*What are some of the barriers or obstacles a person faces when they or someone else tries to report their loved one as missing to law enforcement?*

- Too few officers for a large geographical space
- Long response time from WRPD
- Lack of transportation
- Not having a physical address
- Lack of culturally appropriate response (off the reservation)
- Lack of understanding about the process of law and investigation
- Uncertainty of which jurisdiction to call
- Feeling like it won't be taken seriously because of previous substance abuse by the MMIP or the family
- Not wanting to get someone else in the family in trouble who may be criminally involved
- Family wanting privacy/not wanting to talk about it
- Fear of retaliation by the police
- Uncertainty regarding the time frame of when to make a report
- Sometimes law enforcement won't take the report
- There are not any barriers

*Are there any technology type barriers or obstacles that prevent a tribal member from reporting to law enforcement when a loved one goes missing?*

- Poor Cell Phone Service
- Lack of Internet Service
- No Computer
- No Cell Phone/ Cell phone out of minutes
- They might have to drive 30+ miles to make a report
- Problems filling out online forms
- Not knowing where to report something online
- No access to social media to know about events or communicate with the community
- We don't have a proper database or access to statistics to know the problem or start working on the problem.
- There are not any barriers

*What are the different types of Community Partnerships or tribal services that Tribal Members can access to help when someone goes missing or is murdered?*

- Substance abuse treatment providers
- People who are connected in the community, that are familiar with resources
- Domestic violence shelters
- Hotlines (suicide, prevention, clinic)
- Victim Services
- Police Department
- Social services
- The courts
- The prosecutor's office
- Indian Health Services
- Not our native daughters
- MMIP task force

*Are there any tribal services available to assist a person in reporting a missing tribal member?*

- WRPD
- BIA
- The Police Chief
- Tribal Council
- Other tribal members who are vocal about MMIP
- County sheriff
- Victim Services (Eastern Shoshone Victim Service Program, Red Paint Alliance, Wind River Cares).

*What works well in this community to enable a positive resolution when a loved one goes missing or has been murdered?*

- Community Support (emotional, financial, food, donations, saving space for the family, etc.)
- Showing solidarity with marches
- Word of Mouth, people will know if there was a suspicious car or something
- Victim witness programs
- Persistence and communication between law enforcement agencies
- Tribal law enforcement has a good relationship with state law enforcement in this area and does a good job of complimenting each other's agencies.
- Social media, posting pictures of missing people and who to call

*Do you have any recommendations that would increase tribal members' ability to report a missing family member?*

- A database for uploading pictures and details of the missing so other people can be on the lookout
- A resource guide for different kinds of efforts and resources nationally and locally
- Media on what is being done so people know that it is not being forgotten
- Build up connections between tribes
- More law enforcement presence on the reservation
- Getting the word out in the community about a person missing
- Community education on the problem
- Work with victim services and advocates

*How can Government in Wyoming help Tribal Members and Tribal Communities solve, find, identify, or bring closure to families of missing and murdered loved ones?*

- Continue listening to the tribe, leaders, and members, people who have lost someone.
- Seeing the Governor listen to the story of a tribal member losing a family member and deciding to take action was good.
- Approachable representatives that you can talk to and they will listen.
- The bills that have passed were great.
- Showing support, that they hear and understand the issue and are willing to take action.
- Be more involved.
- More communication on the status of cases.
- Compile and gather information on unsolved cases.
- Collaboration between the DCI cold case team and the BIA cold case team.
- Get support from outside of the tribal community in Wyoming.
- Create standards in data collection.
- Train the coroners on racial classification.
- Collaboration with other state and tribe efforts.
- Understand that each tribe is different and each family is different in how they feel about things and how they would like them to be done.
- Funding for better internet coverage on the reservation.
- Funding for more substance abuse treatment.
- Developing standard policy and procedures for investigation.
- Cultural sensitivity training.

# Appendix D

## Statements from Wind River Families

### Nicole Wagon

Greetings,

My name is Nicole Wagon, I am the mother of Jocelyn Watt and Jade Wagon. Both of my beautiful daughters were both murdered and missing. They are why I am involved in the Murdered and Missing Indigenous People Task Force and Movement.

My beautiful daughter Jocelyn Watt was murdered and found on January 5th, 2019 in Riverton, Wyoming of Fremont County along with her companion, Rudy Perez. This remains an open case and am hoping we will find justice for them both in the future. I work alongside diligently with the detectives assigned to the case in hopes it will be solved by working and collaborating together with justice to be served.

My other beautiful daughter, Jade Wagon, was reported missing on January 2nd, 2020 to the BIA Authorities. BIA found her on January 21st, 2020. They stated that due to hypothermia and drugs in her system was the cause of my daughter's death. I believe otherwise that she was murdered. I have personally with my family have taken it upon ourselves with the assistance of community information had to push this case with BIA to state otherwise. They (BIA Police Department) as of this moment realized that there is more to my daughter's story. I made them fully aware that I will not allow them to brush off her death to hypothermia and drug use. She will not be deemed as a statistic and her life with her beautiful voice still counts and matters. The BIA Department have realized that I was right and at this time my daughter's case remains opened and not closed.

As a parent and mother of two beautiful daughters I have realized that the systems of the Riverton RPD Department and the BIA Law Enforcement are very different of how they handle cases. It's unfortunate of other families that this has happened to not have the support, encouragement, or tools of where to start or what to do, nor the services that are provided for themselves and their families. It's traumatic to bury your children before their time whereas their lives have been taken by others and it's not okay. The trauma of how your children's lives are taken as well. It's easy to fall into depression and give up. I am not made up that way and I personally push for justice for my daughters but I hope to make a positive difference to others as well.

I believe that the RPD and Sheriff's Department could start by receiving a cultural sensitivity component course in order to work with my native tribal members. Let's meet at the table halfway and to discuss how we can make it better in all our surrounding communities to work with each other and not against.

As for the BIA Law Enforcement Officials they need a different plan of action and to get the word out of how to report a missing child and my hope is they give that particular family the benefit of the doubt that their loved one is missing.

I could give a list of all the pros and cons of each department because there are so many perspectives and views alone with my personal experiences. It can be better for all and hope others open up their minds for positive change with handling these situations of the "Murdered and Missing Indigenous People".

I do not know why these incidences happened to my family but somehow and somehow it (murdered and missing) chose me. If it was my choice I would simply rather have my two beautiful daughters, Jocelyn Watt and Jade Wagon with me and my family again. What drives me? My beautiful daughters would have NEVER given up on me nor will I give up on them. What gives me the energy to stay motivated and positive for myself and my other three beautiful daughters and my family? God my creator. He is the foundation that my parents raised me with so I keep my faith and keep going with a positive mindset.

Respectfully,  
Nicole Wagon

### **Greg Day**

"I have said in the past!! That law and justice should have no color!! Too many of these cold cases have been covered up!! By one law enforcement entity in Fremont county Wyoming!! I am The voice of my two oldest kids Dawn Day & Jeff Day I will not give up this fight until those that murdered my two kids are brought to Justice!!/Fremont county sheriff's department needs to be held accountable!!" - Greg Day, Northern Arapaho & Eastern Shoshone of the Wind River Indian Reservation

### **Fauna Friday**

My Mother is Betty Friday, and her mom is Elsie Louise Hungry Fowler. Growing up I didn't have the opportunity to know who my Grandma was. Her life was taken too soon, and her body was found on the Rez. I know as much of my Grandma as the crime that took her life. All I know is, no justice has ever manifested from her death... just another murdered Indian girl from Wind River and nobody did a thing. - Fawna Friday, Northern Arapaho



