

MISSING AND MURDERED INDIGENOUS WOMEN: AN EPIDEMIC

By Dean Mahlum, RMIN Law Enforcement Information Coordinator, Montana

*"It's not safe to be an Indian woman in Montana. That is why the Indian Caucus is leading the charge in the 2019 Montana Legislative session on passing laws to protect and prioritize missing and murdered Indigenous women. It is a hidden epidemic that has permeated all aspects of our lives. The data and the research on missing and murdered Indigenous women in Montana have been nearly non-existent. When Native women go missing, the cases are regularly under-reported. The lack of reliable data, and the lack of formal studies on violence against women in Indian country, has made it difficult to address this widespread epidemic."*¹

Evidence of the truth in that newspaper opinion piece is the heartbreaking case of Henny Scott, a 14-year-old high school freshman from the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in Montana. Henny was found dead on December 28, 2018, three weeks after last speaking with her mother. Her family reported her missing to law enforcement but nearly two weeks passed before Henny's missing person report was broadcast to the public.

In Indian Country, the investigation and prosecution of felonies in which an Indian is either the victim or suspect falls under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Department of Justice. In cases of misdemeanors and missing persons, law enforcement from either tribal police or the Bureau of Indian Affairs have jurisdiction.

BIA law enforcement and tribal law enforcement agencies are typically understaffed. Access to resources such as the national missing person database or even NCIC is often minimal. Lack of funding, training and technology also create stumbling blocks.

Tribal governments are sovereign in their ability to retain jurisdiction over their affairs and relationships between tribal law enforcement

and state agencies, sheriffs' offices and local police departments are often strained.

How serious is the problem?

A recent study² on cases of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls, released by the Urban Indian Health Institute (UIHI), described the lack of data regarding missing and murdered indigenous women as a "nationwide data crisis." According to the study, while the National Crime Information Center noted 5,717 reports of missing Native American women and children, NamUs—the U.S. Department of Justice's information clearinghouse and resource center for missing, unidentified and unclaimed person cases—reported only 116.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention reported that murder is the third-leading cause of death among American Indian and Alaska Native women and that the rates of violence on reservations can be up to 10 times higher than the national average.³

In its "snapshot of data from 71 urban cities in the United States," UIHI identified 506 unique cases of missing and murdered Native American/Alaskan women across 71 selected cities: 128 (25%) were missing person cases; 208 (56%) were murder cases; 98 (19%) were of unknown status. Of the 506 cases, 157 originated in the Southwest, 84 in the Pacific Northwest, 52 in Alaska, and 40 in California. Cities with the highest numbers of reported cases included Seattle with 45; Albuquerque, 37; Anchorage, 31; Tucson, 31; and Billings, Montana, 29.

States with the highest number of cases were: New Mexico with 78; Washington, 71; Arizona, 54; Alaska, 52; Montana, 41; California, 40; Nebraska, 33; Utah, 24; Minnesota, 20; and Oklahoma, 18.

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Based on those numbers, states in the RMIN region account for nearly 40% of the cases studied. (It should be noted that the study included cases from as far back as 1943; however, two-thirds of the cases were from 2010 to 2018.)

“Until there is cooperation and better tracking systems at all government levels, the data on missing and murdered indigenous women will never be 100 percent accurate, which is what is needed to strive for in order to protect our mothers, daughters, sisters and aunties,” said Abigail Echo-Hawk, director of the UIHI.²

In August of 2017, the horrific homicide of a Native American woman gained national attention. Savanna LaFontaine-Greywind, who was 8 months pregnant, was reported missing to a local police department in North Dakota. After an intense search, Greywind’s body was found floating in a nearby river. Greywind’s baby had been cut from her womb and was missing. The investigation led detectives to a female neighbor of Greywind’s; the infant was located with the woman and she and her boyfriend were charged with Greywind’s murder.

As a result of this case, then U.S. Senator Heidi Heitkamp of North Dakota introduced a bill entitled “Savanna’s Act” to improve access to information databases and standardize protocols for law enforcement agencies responding to cases of missing and murdered indigenous women.

Heitkamp’s bill was defeated in committee but was reintroduced this session by U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and supported by U.S. Senators John Tester and Steve Daines, both of Montana.

Additional legislation has been proposed in Montana through House Bill 21, “Hanna’s Act.” Hanna’s Act would require the Montana Department of Justice to employ a missing persons specialist to assist with all county, state, municipal and tribal law enforcement agencies in pursuing missing person cases without delay. This legislation is named in remembrance of Hanna Harris, a Lame Deer woman who was murdered in 2013 on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation.

On a personal note...

As a former Montana sheriff, most of my career was spent working in Indian Country. My county was one of only seven in the U.S. where homesteading had been opened on the reservation. As a result, we were involved with cases that involved Native Americans as either victims or suspects. We worked hand-in-hand with tribal police, Bureau of Indian Affairs police and criminal investigators and the FBI. Nationwide, we can no longer ignore this issue. The victims, their families and our communities all cry out for justice for these missing and murdered indigenous women and girls.

About the author...

Dean Mahlum began his law enforcement career in Montana in 1971. He has served with the Wolf Point Police Department, Roosevelt County Sheriff’s Office as a deputy, undersheriff and sheriff and with Yellowstone County Sheriff’s Office. He also served for 31 years as a special deputy, United States Marshals Service, District of Montana. Mahlum has been with RMIN since 1998.

¹*Flathead Beacon*, opinion piece, February 6, 2019

²Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls: A snapshot of data from 71 urban cities in the United States, Urban Indian Health Institute, 2017

³Racial and Ethnic Differences in Homicides of Adult Women and the Role of Intimate Partner Violence, United States, 2003–2014. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6628a1>.