Wyoming Missing & Murdered Indigenous People Task Force

2023 UPDATE

Acknowledgments

We thank the family members who have shared the stories of their lost loved ones, giving a voice to the numbers that are reflected in this report. We thank the Wyoming Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons (MMIP) Task Force for support and guidance throughout this project. We thank Wyoming Vital Statistics Services, Wyoming Division of Criminal Investigation, and Wyoming Association of Sheriffs and Chiefs of Police for their data support. We thank the Wyoming Legislative Select Committee on Tribal Relations for their feedback. We thank the community stakeholders from the Wind River Indian Reservation for their contributions. This work was funded by the Wyoming Division of Victim Services.

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INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Wyoming is home to 13,000 Indigenous people – slightly more than two percent of the State's total population. In Wyoming, more than 61% of Indigenous people live in Fremont County, either on or near the Wind River Indian Reservation (WRIR). Despite representing a small portion of Wyoming's population, Indigenous people experience violence more often than other racial groups.

The Missing and Murdered Indigenous People (MMIP) movement is a grassroots social movement started by Indigenous communities and their allies in 2015. The movement demands the United States government acknowledge the alarmingly high rates at which Indigenous people go missing and are murdered and take steps to address the faults in the system that contribute to this crisis.

In 2019, the Indigenous-led *Keepers of the Fire* organization at the University of Wyoming (UW) sponsored a March for Justice. The march was an opportunity for those whose lives had been touched by the MMIP epidemic to share stories about their lost loved ones and raise awareness of the movement. Community members requested that the State address the issue. Governor Mark Gordon established the MMIP task force to determine the scope of the crisis and create a plan to address it. The Wyoming Division of Victim Services (DVS) contracted with the Wyoming Survey



Governor Gordon signed SF0008, "Missing and murdered indigenous persons-agency cooperation." The law, which became effective July 1, 2020, was one of the first steps in creating a pathway for the MMIP Task Force to gather data and begin work on MMIP in Wyoming.

Databases vary in the terms used for Indigenous people. This report uses the term "Indigenous," rather than "Native American," American Indian or Alaska Native," or "Indian", as recommended by Indigenous members of the Task Force.

& Analysis Center (WYSAC) at UW to investigate the State's MMIP crisis and offer recommendations for increasing awareness, improving data collection and reporting, supporting victims and their families, and addressing jurisdictional issues and other barriers to effective missing person and homicide investigations. The task force published the initial statewide report in January 2021.

The initial statewide report provided information about Indigenous people who were victims of homicide from 2000 to 2020 and Indigenous people who were reported missing between 2011 and 2020. Between 2000 and 2020, Indigenous people were 21% of all victims of homicide in Wyoming and had a higher homicide rate than White people. Only 30% of Indigenous victims of homicide received newspaper coverage compared to 51% of White victims of homicide. The limited media coverage was more likely to contain violent language, portray the victim negatively, and provide less information than articles about White homicide victims. Seven hundred and ten Indigenous people were reported missing between 2011 and September 2020, 57% were female, and 85% were under 18. Indigenous people were reported missing from 22 of Wyoming's 23 counties.

The report included the community perspectives obtained during listening and truth-gathering interviews. The interviews highlight the problems with past interactions, including investigations and responses that built distrust between some Indigenous people, law enforcement, and the judicial system. Community members also identified the lack of information sharing by law enforcement during investigations and the lack of a single point of contact between families and law enforcement as barriers to addressing the MMIP epidemic.

Finally, the report made three recommendations: developing consistent protocols and data systems, creating an Indigenous advocacy position and response team, and increasing community awareness about MMIP.

Since the first report's release in 2021, the task force has continued to work on addressing the MMIP crisis in the State. This second statewide report details the task force's accomplishments and progress made towards implementing the recommendations from the first report; shares input collected from community stakeholders; provides updated data about Wyoming's Indigenous victims of homicide and missing people; provides an overview of the most recent literature, including findings from other states' examinations of the crisis; and outlines next steps for the task force.

Between 2000, and 2020, Indigenous people were

21%

VICTIMS OF HOMICIDE IN WYOMING

and had a homicide rate 8 times higher than White people.

TASK FORCE ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND PROGRESS TOWARD IMPLEMENTING RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2021 Wyoming Statewide Report listed three recommendations to address MMIP across the State. They were:

> Develop consistent protocols and data systems on MMIPs to inform law enforcement and families, paying particular attention to documenting tribal affiliation in official records, coroner reports, and vital records.
>
> Create an Indigenous advocacy position or response team to help families navigate the reporting and investigation process from initial inquiry to the final outcome.
>
> Raise community awareness by educating the public 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 U.S., and by a sovereign nation.

Improvements to Protocols and Data Systems

Publicly Accessible Missing Person Web Page

The Wyoming Division of Criminal Investigation (DCI) changed its website to make finding information about missing people easier. The website now has a page that lists missing people. The page shows the person's picture, last known location, physical description, and contact information for the local police. Someone must report a person as missing to the police for DCI to put the missing person on the website. The website allows people to submit tips anonymously via a virtual "tip line" if they have information about a missing person. DCI encourages people to use the tip line and says anonymous tips have already helped them locate missing people. People can visit Wyoming's missing person website here https://wyomingdci.wyo.gov/dci-homepage/missing-persons.

Law Enforcement Protocol Survey

In 2022, WYSAC surveyed law enforcement agencies (LEAs) across Wyoming to better understand agencies' policies, practices, and procedures regarding missing person reports and investigations. WYSAC developed a 29-question survey in collaboration with DVS, DCI, and the Wyoming Associated of Sheriffs and Chiefs of Police (WASCOP) based on established best practices and existing protocols. The survey aimed to identify areas for training and technical assistance.

WYSAC asked 90 LEAs to complete the web-based survey and sent up to three reminder emails to



Governor Gordon signed HB 0018, "Missing Person Alert Systems" The law, which became effective February 21, 2023, is a tool to help find missing adults and address MMIP in Wyoming.

non-responsive agencies. WYSAC shared the survey results with the task force, DVS, DCI, and WASCOP; however, because only 26% of the States' LEAs responded, the task force cannot rely on using the results to make statewide policy recommendations or determine technical assistance needs.

Despite the low response rate, the survey provided valuable information about how Wyoming LEAs respond to missing person cases. Most responding LEAs reported following formal processes and procedures for taking initial missing person reports. However, most do not have formal processes to guide investigations, classify cases (e.g., determine if a case is a high or low risk), or manage cases when people are missing for more than 30 days.

More than half of LEAs responded that they always gather essential information about the missing person, for example, when and where the person was last seen; any known physical or emotional challenges (e.g., recent trauma, substance abuse); and the missing person's plans, habits, routines, and personal interests.

Missing Person Alert System

During the 2023 legislative session, the State Legislature considered HB 0018, "Missing Person Alert Systems." The bill was inspired by the national Ashanti Alert, named for Ashanti Billie, a young woman from Virginia who was kidnapped and murdered in 2017. The alert is designed to give police another tool to find missing adults, including Indigenous people. The alert system will help law enforcement inform the public about adults who may have been taken against their will or are in danger. Governor Gordon spoke about the importance of the new system in his 2023 State of the State Address. The bill received unanimous support from the committee and passed in the House and the Senate. Governor Gordon signed the bill into law on February 21st, 2023.

The alert system will help law enforcement inform the public about adults who may have been taken against their will or are in danger.

MMIP Advocate

Indigenous families voiced the need for an advocate. An advocate could help families navigate complex jurisdictional issues, follow up on cases during the investigation, and limit the number of times a family needs to retell painful stories. In 2021, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) opened a Victim Assistance Program Coordinator position on the WRIR and filled the position in late 2022.

Community Awareness

MMIP Task Force

The governor's task force held its first meeting in Cheyenne on July 24th, 2019, and the second on August 7th, 2019, in Fort Washakie. In 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic swept Wyoming and disproportionately affected Indigenous people and the WRIR. In response, tribal leadership restricted public gatherings. As a result, the task force held only one in-person meeting in 2020 on January 22nd but continued to meet virtually. The task force met virtually on February 17th and November 17th in, 2021, and on July 20th and November 16th, 2022. The task force will resume quarterly meetings in 2023. Task force meetings are open to the public, and everyone is encouraged to participate. People can contact DVS or visit https://dvs.wyo.gov/missing-and-murdered-tf to learn the next meeting time.

Who She Is Documentary

DVS contracted with Caldera Productions and Jordan Dresser (Northern Arapaho, then Chairman of the Northern Arapaho Business Council) to create a documentary film, *Who She Is*, to highlight the issues of gender-based violence experienced by Indigenous communities throughout North America, including the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho communities of Wyoming. The documentary artfully captures the humanity of the people behind the statistics. *Who She Is* uses first-person storytelling and animation to give voice to those who have gone missing and were murdered. *Who She Is* began its community screening tour in September 2022 and early 2023. The producers and key partners conducted post-screening question-and-answer sessions at community screenings and engaged the audience in essential conversations about MMIP to educate, raise awareness, and hear ideas for addressing the issue. Over the next year, the film will be shown through film festivals, additional screenings, and national broadcast venues to bring the issue to wider audiences.

To go hand in hand with the film, the film team is developing a *Who She Is* Action & Resource Guide to provide audiences with a deeper background on missing and murdered Indigenous women (MMIW). The guide will also include ideas for action at the local, state, and federal levels. The film



Film poster for "Who She Is" designed by Joseph Lynch. Film by Jordan Dresser and Sophie Barksdale with animation by Jonathan Thunder

team is also developing an accompanying 20-minute film, Understanding MMIW, featuring Wyoming Indigenous leaders. Understanding MMIW will serve as an educational primer for classrooms and other audiences who seek to understand the issue of MMIW on a deeper level. Both value-added pieces (the Action & Resource Guide and the accompanying film) were designed as important scaffolding for *Who She Is*. They are to be used in classrooms and communities that cannot feature Indigenous voices, ensuring that Indigenous-led solutions to this epidemic remain at the forefront of all education, action, and impact discussions.

People can visit https://calderaproductions.com/whosheis/ to learn more about the film, screening schedules, and download resources.

Coverage of the Statewide Report

Local, state, national, and international news media sources covered Wyoming's 2021 statewide report. News articles included quotes and data from the report. References to the report appeared in national publications, including Insider, NBC News, Reuters, the Associated Press, the New York Times, and the Washington Post. The report also received coverage from state and regional media, including the Seattle Times, the Independent, Wyoming News Exchange, Wyoming Public Media, Wyoming Truth, Oil City News, and the Ranger. People across the globe viewed the report online, from China, Singapore, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. Additionally, the Public Broadcasting Service used information from the report in several podcasts that addressed the MMIP crisis. The public discussed the report and shared it frequently on social media sites like Facebook and TikTok.

National resource websites, including the National Indigenous Women's Resource Center; the U.S. Department of Justice's Operation Lady Justice website; and Not Our Native Daughters, prominently feature Wyoming's report. Further, education platforms outside of Wyoming, including the University of New Mexico's libraries and Studypool, reference the report. In addition, peer-reviewed journal articles and Idaho's statewide MMIP report cite Wyoming's initial report. Data from the report appear in a new textbook for gender and communication studies. Wyoming's initial report has gone beyond raising awareness and contributed to the foundational literature base on this critical issue. People can read the first statewide report here https://wysac.uwyo.edu/wysac/projects/mmip-report/.

National Day of Awareness for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls

May 5th has been recognized as the National Day of Awareness for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls since 2017. Governor Gordon signed a proclamation in 2021 declaring May 5th Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Awareness Day Wyoming, and has done so each year since. The day serves as an opportunity to raise awareness about this issue and to honor the lives of those who have been lost.

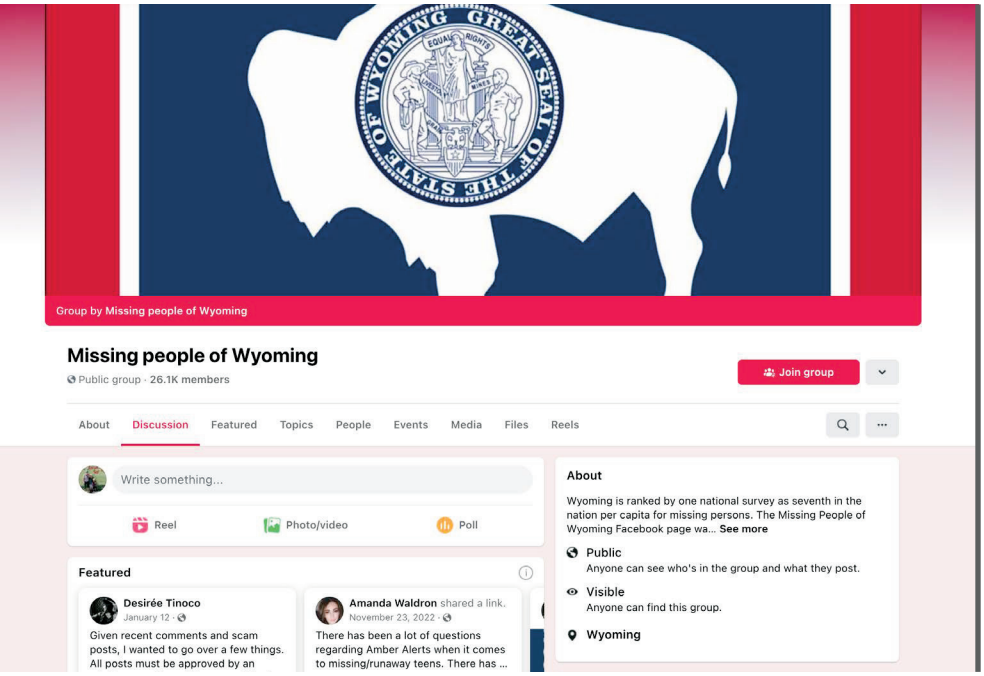
Grassroots advocacy plays a vital role in raising awareness. Community members in Fremont County held annual marches to commemorate the National Day of Awareness for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Marches bring awareness to the MMIP epidemic, support families and loved ones, share community resources, and provide a space for survivors to share their stories. In addition, these annual marches allow the families and friends affected by the MMIP crisis

Grassroots advocacy plays a vital role in raising awareness...Marches bring awareness to the MMIP epidemic, support families and loved ones, share community resources, and provide a space for survivors to share their stories.

a time to come together and honor and remember their lost loved ones. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, UW sponsored a virtual Zoom event, "Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women/People: Awareness and Advocacy" to raise awareness on May 5th, 2021. Andi LeBeau (Northern Arapaho, then Wyoming Representative for House District 33) moderated the panel of Indigenous female experts who discussed potential solutions. On May 5th, 2022, the Northern Arapaho Tribe hosted a march in Ethete, WY, with a group of local students. MMIP family members and local service providers in Fremont County organized a march on May 7th, 2022. In addition, community members rode on floats, in decorated cars, and on horses during the Lander Pioneer Day Parade on the 4th of July in 2021 and 2022 to raise awareness of the MMIP crisis.

Missing People of Wyoming Facebook Group

Casper resident Desiree Tinoco (Blackfeet descendant) created Missing People of Wyoming, a public Facebook group and non-profit organization, to bring attention to missing person cases in Wyoming. Ms. Tinoco is especially interested in highlighting missing person cases that do not receive attention from the media. The Facebook group has approximately 26,000 members. Ms. Tinoco verifies every publicly submitted missing person report with DCI or local law enforcement agencies before sharing information with the group. The group gives the public another avenue to engage with missing person cases. Missing people have been recovered based on tips shared through the group. People can join the Missing People of Wyoming Facebook Group here https://www.facebook.com/groups/408454390014762/.



Screenshot of the Missing People of Wyoming Facebook Group that highlights missing person cases that may not receive attention from the media.

Missing Person Community Resource List

In 2022, WYSAC created a community resource list to help families know what to do when their loved one is missing. The list has five sections, state resources, national resources, child-specific resources, native-specific resources, and human trafficking resources, and includes links to 34 different resources. WYSAC also created a nine-step checklist to guide families when reporting a loved one missing. The checklist helps families organize the process, from making the initial police report to keeping track of the investigation. In addition, WYSAC created two social media cards containing information on filing a report and a brief checklist. DVS posted the resources on the MMIP task force web page. Ms. Tinoco posts the social media cards on the Missing People of Wyoming Facebook group. People can find the list of community resources here https://dvs.wyo.gov/missing-and-murdered-tf#h.eepsawlw6yq9

COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES

As in the first statewide report, WYSAC gathered community perspectives from community stakeholders through stakeholder interviews. Community stakeholders are people that have an interest in the community. Community stakeholders include parents, community workers, service providers, and business owners. Researchers often interview community stakeholders to provide additional context on an issue. WYSAC used a similar method to obtain community input for the 2021 statewide report. The goals for the interviews were to determine the following:

> The resources available to assist with MMIP and how they have changed in the last two years.
>
> The barriers and challenges that contribute to MMIP in Wyoming.
>
> Recommendations for improving Wyoming's response to MMIP.

Methods

WYSAC asked community stakeholders similar questions to those asked during interviews for the first report. The interviews aimed to learn about what has changed and what has stayed the same during the last two years. WYSAC shared the interview questions with the task force and requested feedback. WYSAC asked task force members if they were interested in being interviewed and to recommend community stakeholders who should also be interviewed. WYSAC conducted sixteen interviews over the phone between December 2022 and February 2023. Three people gave their responses in writing. After the interview, stakeholders were asked to share if they were tribally affiliated via email. For this report, tribal affiliation is defined as 'a person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America), and who maintains a tribal affiliation or community attachment.' WYSAC sent an email to each stakeholder that included the definition of tribal affiliation and gave response options of 1) Yes, I have tribal affiliation, 2) No, I do not have tribal affiliation, and 3) Prefer not to respond. WYSAC received 17 responses back from the 19 stakeholders. Stakeholders reported 71% had tribal affiliation, 24% indicated no tribal affiliation, and 5% preferred not to respond. Additional demographic information was not collected to maintain the confidentiality of the stakeholders. WYSAC used qualitative data analysis software, QDA Miner, to analyze responses using an open-coding process. The open-coding process lets the analysis begin organically, without a preset structure, to find the main ideas.

Results

Resources

Community stakeholders reported that awareness of MMIP has increased in Wyoming. They noticed that more people share information about missing people on social media and saw a slight increase in local news outlets reporting on Indigenous stories.

> "We are finally being seen."
> – *Community Stakeholder*

Community stakeholders said they feel like the MMIP issue has brought the community together and that some people feel more comfortable reaching out when they need help. In terms of resources, the primary resource available to assist with MMIP is local law enforcement. A few people said they felt more resources were available to assist with MMIP now; examples include the new BIA advocate and expanded allowable services from funding streams supporting victims and families. However, not everyone felt the availability of resources increased. Some people thought they did not change, while others said they decreased because of changes during the COVID-19 pandemic and several programs that closed.

> "I know there has been the report – but what does that really mean? We don't see any changes."
> – *Community Stakeholder*

Barriers and Challenges

Distrust in Law Enforcement

The most common barrier voiced by community stakeholders was distrust in law enforcement. Due to past interactions (i.e., police misconduct, abuse, indifference, implicit bias), many people believe that police will not take cases seriously and will not respond quickly or thoroughly to MMIP cases. Contributing factors included the lack of personnel and other resources that limit the ability of law enforcement to respond effectively, lack of accountability, and societal issues like individual and systemic racism and colonialism.

> "Not taken seriously enough from law enforcement if the victim has a past history with WRPD [Wind River Police Department]."
> – *Community Stakeholder*

> "I believe that some people that have had an unfriendly encounter with the police (and there are many) have little faith that anything will be done."
> – *Community Stakeholder*

Jurisdictional Barriers

Community stakeholders talked about jurisdictional barriers. Jurisdictional barriers included difficulty coordinating between different agencies, families not knowing whom to call for information, and law enforcement agency staff lacking knowledge about the roles of each agency. People spoke about the impact of their past interactions with law enforcement. These interactions have made some people feel hopeless and fearful. People said they are afraid they would not be protected from retaliation by the perpetrator or the perpetrator's family if they involve law enforcement. There is also fear that instead of putting the missing person first, police will arrest a family member for something unrelated to the missing person, like an outstanding warrant. Lack

of trust and jurisdictional issues were also primary barriers in the 2021 statewide report.

> "Justice should have no color – be justice for all." – *Community Stakeholder*

Lack of Resources for Indigenous People

Community stakeholders shared that the lack of resources for Indigenous people increases their vulnerability to victimization. Community stakeholders reported that the available resources are insufficient to prevent Indigenous people from being victimized. There are not enough resources to help people heal from things that go hand-in-hand with victimization, like child abuse, substance abuse, and domestic violence. Community stakeholders pointed out poverty, lack of employment, transportation, limited Wi-Fi or cell phone minutes, and unmet basic needs as challenges the community faces.

> "...being a victim as a child; later on, becoming a victim as an adult, I think that would be one of the root causes of how individuals go missing." – *Community Stakeholder*

Recommendations

Relationships

Overwhelmingly, stakeholders recommend increasing community engagement in the task force. There is a great need to build trusting relationships with the Indigenous communities, tribal leaders, and community members.

> "For this kind of thing, you have to be more involved."
> – *Community Stakeholder*

Stakeholders believe in-person meetings, where community members know they are welcomed, safe, and heard, and where Indigenous people can lead are essential. Community stakeholders said the task force must be intentional and mindful when inviting community members to participate. Remote meetings benefit some people but exclude people who do not have access to reliable internet and cellphone service and elders who do not use technology. Stakeholders suggested that the task force can achieve balance by having in-person meetings in different communities around Wind River and holding some meetings remotely. Writing out the task force's goals and listing action items step-by-step could help engage people and focus the work.

> "If you don't make space, there will be no space." – *Community Stakeholder*

Resources

Increasing resources to address MMIP is paramount. Community stakeholders called on the State to provide additional funding and resources for community programs and prevention efforts. Collaboration between existing programs and enhancing services provided through the telehealth network would help close the gap in unmet needs. The State could also help by providing more resources to local law enforcement agencies so they can conduct thorough and timely investigations.

> "Wyoming needs to decide they care more about it, not just lip service."
> – *Community Stakeholder*

Law Enforcement

Community stakeholders want a law enforcement subcommittee on the task force. The subcommittee could focus on cases that need more attention and could work on developing better protocols to respond to MMIP. Increased accountability for law enforcement was a top recommendation shared during the interviews. Making efforts towards improvements is a way for law enforcement to build community trust.

> "Have open communication with law enforcement – work with them, not against them."
> – *Community Stakeholder*

Safety

Wyoming must ensure the safety of people who report crimes and reach out for help. Community stakeholders suggested creating Safe Harbor locations or accessible places where people could request services without fear of retaliation. Partnering with the telehealth network was also seen as a solution to increasing safety.

> "We have got to develop a better system." – *Community Stakeholder*

Education

Community stakeholders saw many opportunities to educate community members, for example, by educating people about available resources and how to use them. Stakeholders also thought more community members should know how to report someone missing and why it is important to include a picture. More than one person interviewed said it is important to let the public know when a case has been resolved.

> "I don't know that there is a way to educate people on how to care about other people." – *Community Stakeholder*

Stakeholders also saw opportunities to educate professionals and service providers who work in the community. Suggestions included holding a victims advocate academy and promoting mentorship opportunities for those interested in working on MMIP. Stakeholders said law enforcement, advocates, and court systems should receive training on cultural competency. People who collaborate with tribal communities must understand and respect the Eastern Shoshone and the Northern Arapaho tribes' policies and procedures and always uphold tribal sovereignty.

> "Indigenous people need Indigenous solutions." – *Community Stakeholder*

INDIGENOUS HOMICIDE AND MISSING PERSON DATA

Indigenous Victims of Homicide

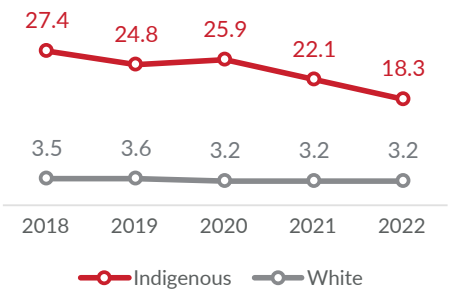
In 2022, White people made up 76% of Wyoming's homicide victims. While correct, this basic calculation conceals a significant and ongoing disparity. For example, although less than 3% of Wyoming's population is Indigenous, Indigenous people accounted for 12% of all homicides in 2022.

Looking at homicide rates is a better way to understand the victimization of Indigenous people. First, the number of homicides is divided by the total population, then multiplied by 100,000 to get the homicide rate. In 2022, the Indigenous homicide rate was 18.3 per 100,000. The homicide rate for White people was 3.2 per 100,000, and the statewide rate was 3.8 per 100,000. The Indigenous homicide rate was more than five and a half times higher than the White homicide rate.

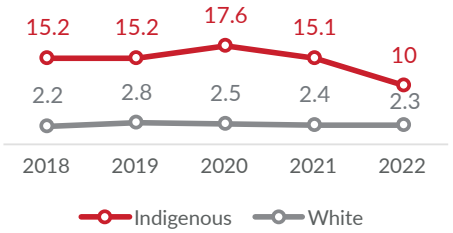
Changes from one year to the next can seem enormous when an event is relatively rare and affects small populations. For example, in Wyoming, there were 25 homicides in 2022, 23 in 2021, and 12 in 2020. To smooth out year-to-year fluctuations, we calculated five-year moving averages. These averages help us understand how the disparity continues. To calculate the homicide rate for 2018, we add the homicide rate for 2018 and the four prior years (2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017) and divide the total by five. The five-year average homicide rate for Indigenous people (12.3 + 37.7 + 24.9 + 24.8 + 37.3) ÷ 5.0 = 27.4. We follow the same process to calculate the five-year average for 2019, but this time we add the homicide rate for 2019 and the four prior years (2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018).

FIGURE 2: HOMICIDE RATES PER 100,000

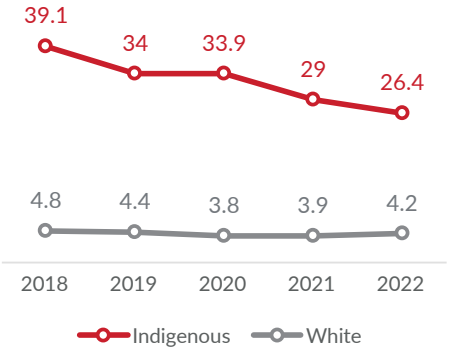
All Sexes



Female



Male



> "I am concerned for our Native women and children."
>
> *– Community Stakeholder*

The average homicide rate for Indigenous people is consistently and dramatically higher than the homicide rate for White people. The 2022 five-year average homicide rate for Indigenous people was 18.3 per 100,000, nearly six times higher than the homicide rate for White people.

This is true for Indigenous males and females alike. The 2022 homicide rate for Indigenous females was 10.0 per 100,000 compared to 2.3 per 100,000 for White females.

In 2022, the homicide rate for Indigenous males was 26.4 per 100,000 compared to 4.2 per 100,000 White males.

The Indigenous homicide rate has gradually declined over the past five years; however, Indigenous people continue to be victims of homicide at a disproportionate rate.

Missing Indigenous People

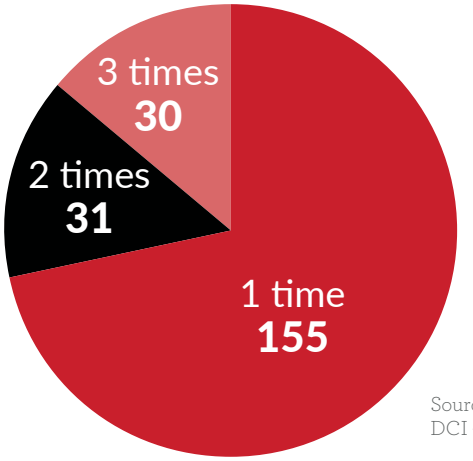
The National Crime Information Center (NCIC) is a criminal records database that includes valuable information for law enforcement, including information about missing people. When law enforcement receives a report about a missing person, they create a record in the NCIC database. When the person is found, the agency that created the record clears it from the database. A new record is created every time a person is reported missing. Indigenous people are reported missing at higher rates and stay missing for longer than White people in Wyoming.

In the two years since the last statewide report, law enforcement created 360 missing person records for 216 unique Indigenous people. There were more NCIC records than individual people because one person can be reported missing more than once. Most people, regardless of race, were reported missing one time. Indigenous people were reported missing from nine counties across the state, most from Fremont County. While this may seem dramatically different than the data presented in the first statewide report, it is important to remember that the first report presented data about Indigenous people reported missing over a nine-year period.

In 2021 and 2022, the majority of missing Indigenous people were female. Most were between the ages of 5 and 17 when they were reported missing.

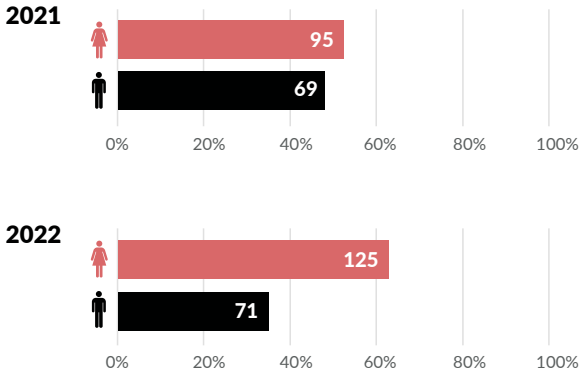
The number of days between when a person is reported missing and when they are found varies. Almost one-third of missing Indigenous people are found on the same day they are reported missing. About 50% are found between one and seven days after they are reported missing.

FIGURE 3: OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE REPORTED MISSING FROM 2021 TO 2022, MOST WERE REPORTED MISSING ONCE



Source: Wyoming DCI - 2021-2022

FIGURE 4: INDIGENOUS PEOPLE REPORTED MISSING



Source: Wyoming Division of Criminal Investigation (DCI)
WYOMING SURVEY & ANALYSIS CENTER

There is a difference in the average number of days an Indigenous person stays missing and the average number of days a White person stays missing. In 2022, Indigenous people stayed missing for an average of eight days, while White people were missing for an average of five days.

There were 97 actively missing people at the time of this report. Of these, 11 were Indigenous people. Of the 11 Indigenous people with open records in NCIC, as of December 31, 2022, the shortest amount of time an actively missing person was missing was 13 days. The person missing the longest was reported missing in July 2019, and has been missing for 1,271 days. Please note 2011 is the first year available in the NCIC data used for this report only go back to 2011. The United States Department of Justice (DOJ) operates the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs). NamUs is a free, centralized, secure clearinghouse for records pertaining to missing persons, unidentified decedents, and unclaimed remains. Law enforcement, medical examiners, coroners, and families can upload and access information to aid in the resolution of missing, unidentified, and unclaimed persons' cases. As of February 10, 2023, NamUs has two Indigenous people (both adult males) missing from Wyoming recorded in its database.

The data limitations identified in the initial report persist.

Data Limitations

The data limitations identified in the initial report persist. Accurate data about Indigenous homicides relies on coroners and medical examiners to determine the cause of death, which can be misclassified. The homicide data in this report do not include cases where the cause of death was inaccurately determined to be accidental, suicide, natural cause, undetermined, or pending are not included in this report. Family members and community members have shared misclassification cases and suspicious classifications in Wyoming.

Additionally, racial misclassification on death certificates and police records results in underestimating death rates and missing rates for Indigenous populations. Data gaps and the aggregation of Indigenous people into "other" or "multiple races" categories make it difficult to draw accurate conclusions. Limitations to the data were described in detail in the 2021 report. At the time of this writing, WYSAC is unaware of any changes in data practices that have been made to correct or reduce these limitations.

FIGURE 5: INDIGENOUS ACTIVE MISSING PERSONS



Source: Wyoming Division of Criminal Investigation (DCI)
WYOMING SURVEY & ANALYSIS CENTER

MEDIA

Missing White Woman Syndrome

Research has shown that the coverage of missing White women tends to be more extensive and sensationalized than that of missing women of color. This leads to a distorted public perception of crime and a lack of attention and resources for finding missing people from marginalized communities.

> "We kind of really have no voice."
> – *Community Stakeholder*

When the media gives more coverage to missing person cases involving attractive, young, White women than missing people of other demographics, it is called Missing White Woman Syndrome. Sociologist Richard Prince first coined the phrase in his 2004 article "Missing White Woman Syndrome." Disparities in media coverage perpetuate racial and class biases in both the media and the criminal justice system.

Looking back over the past 20 years, several examples of young White women and girls who went missing and whose cases received extensive media coverage and, therefore, widespread public interest, stand out. These cases include Elizabeth Smart (2002), Natalee Holloway (2005), and Gabby Petito (2021). The media coverage of these cases sparked criticism over the lack of coverage of similar disappearances of young women in the same areas, especially young women of color.

The media's focus on missing White women

reinforces stereotypes of White women as innocent and needing protection, while women of color are often portrayed as promiscuous or criminal.

The media's focus on missing White women reinforces stereotypes of White women as innocent and needing protection, while women of color are often portrayed as promiscuous or criminal. Harmful stereotypes can influence how law enforcement investigates and prioritizes cases, leading to a lack of attention and resources devoted to finding missing people from marginalized communities. To bring awareness to the disparities in American media coverage of missing person cases, the Columbia Journalism Review created an online tool to test how newsworthy one is likely to be based on their demographic profile. The tool is available at www.areyoupressworthy.com.

> "... the national headlines about these five students in Idaho, there's a lot of coverage that's going on about them and what's happened. They were murdered. Okay, that's the sad case for their families and for them, but nothing is ever talked about the Native people...And it seems like it's always been that way. If there was five Native people that were murdered like that, I can guarantee there would be very little coverage of that."
>
> *– Community Stakeholder*

It is critical to recognize that every missing person case is equally important, regardless of the race, gender, or socioeconomic status of the individual. The media plays a vital role in shaping public perception and must be held accountable for equitable reporting. This is essential, especially for missing persons, because public attention could aid in finding the person.

Missing White Woman Syndrome became a topic in popular media during the search for Gabby Petito, a missing young woman and later found deceased by domestic violence homicide. The media attention and public response were unprecedented, and Gabby Petito was ultimately recovered from the Bridger-Teton National Forest of Wyoming. Through their sadness, Ms. Petito's family has urged the media to give more attention to other missing person cases so their families can also receive closure. At this same time, prominent media outlets began coverage of the first Wyoming Statewide report on MMIP, released earlier the same year (2021).



HOME / OPINION / STAFF COLUMNISTS

The double standard of 'missing white woman syndrome'

If they'd been women of color, we probably wouldn't know their names.

Karris Golden

Nov. 21, 2021 6:00 am

One of many articles in the popular press that recognize the ongoing issue of missing White woman syndrome in media coverage.

It is critical to recognize that every missing person case is equally important, regardless of the race, gender, or socioeconomic status of the individual.

MMIP RESEARCH AROUND THE UNITED STATES

The U.S. Government Accountability Office published a study in October 2021 that reviewed the Federal response to MMIP. The study added support to existing literature showing that across the country, Indigenous people are missing and murdered at disproportionately high rates, and the full scope of the MMIP crisis remains unknown (United States Government Accountability Office, 2021).

A report released in 2021 highlighted recent statewide efforts that had brought substantial awareness to the MMIP epidemic, but federal efforts to remedy the issue still need to be made. The study used data from NCIC, NamUs, and the Urban Indian Health Institute (UIHI) to identify twenty-three "hot spots" for MMIP cases in the U.S. Up to 16 of the hot spots were current locations of hydraulic fracking, adding support to the idea that "man camps" are the modern-day colonization of the U.S. (Skyler, 2021). The study added additional support to the idea that NamUs is vastly underutilized by law enforcement. On December 18th, 2018, NCIC had 85,459 active missing persons cases; in contrast, NamUs had only 16,592 (Skyler, 2021).

Statewide Reports

In 2018, UIHI published a landmark study analyzing MMIP data from 71 urban cities in the U.S. This study sparked a nationwide effort to raise awareness and begin addressing the crisis, one state at a time.

The first statewide report published came from Washington in 2019. Unfortunately, the report was not well-received. UIHI conducted a follow-up study to re-examine and analyze the data from the first report. UIHI discovered numerous omissions in terms of sources and approaches, a substantial deficiency of contextual information, and inaccurate or misleading statistics (i.e., the use of raw numbers instead of rates that take into account the impact of population changes; as noted by Echo-Hawk et al., 2019). As a result, Washington is producing a new statewide report to understand the scope of MMIP in the state and working towards addressing the crisis.

In 2020, statewide MMIP reports were published by Nebraska, Northern California, Montana, Oregon, Minnesota, and New Mexico. Research from these states confirmed what was already known; Indigenous women and girls are going missing and being murdered at a disproportionate rate compared to their White counterparts (Abinanti et al., 2020; Linse & Greenwood, 2020; MartinRogers & Pendleton, 2020; New Mexico Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Relatives Task Force [NM MMIWR], 2020; & Oregon State Police, 2020; Sutter et al., 2020).

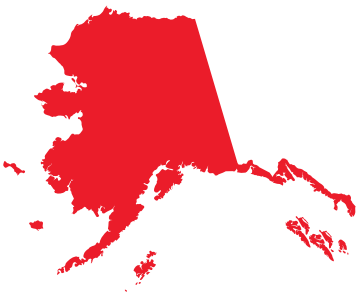
In 2021, Wyoming released its statewide report on MMIP. Wyoming had similar findings to other statewide efforts throughout the country. Indigenous Wyomingites are disproportionately the victims of violent crime and go missing at rates beyond their representation in the State's population (Grant et al., 2021). Further, the initial Wyoming report analyzed media coverage and found that MMIPs receive less coverage than

Whites and are often described using violent language, negative character framing, and with very little detail compared to White victims (Grant et al., 2021).

Following Wyoming's 2021 Report

In 2021, following the release of Wyoming's MMIP report, Alaska and Idaho published their statewide findings. Arizona and Hawai'i published reports in 2022.

Alaska



In Alaska, Apok et al. conducted research to describe data sources, present current MMIP figures in the State, and offer recommendations for addressing the epidemic. The report echoed findings from UIHI's landmark study in 2018, reiterating that Alaska has the fourth-highest rate of MMIP in the country (Apok et al., 2021 & Lucchesi & Echo-Hawk, 2018). Apok et al. documented 229 cases of MMIP, 149 missing persons, and 80 victims of homicide. Unfortunately, researchers were confident that this was a severe undercounting of the MMIP victimizations in their state due to data limitations; "The scope of the problem is invisibility" (Apok et al., 2021, p. 6).

The research found reoccurring issues with the collection, consistency, reporting, and accessibility of MMIP data (Apok et al., 2021). The report noted that missing person reports exclude culturally sacred names and only record legal names. Traditional names, however, could be beneficial in getting more information about a case (Apok et al., 2021). Further, Alaska identified a significant lack of consistency in law enforcement policy and protocol for MMIP cases. For example, missing person protocols, such as how long a person must be missing before a report can be filed, vary widely among Alaskan law enforcement agencies (Apok et al., 2021). Additionally, the report highlighted jurisdictional complexities and confusion, mistrust between Indigenous people and police, lack of technological capacity for law enforcement agencies, and inaccurate determinations of death as central barriers to MMIP cases (Apok et al., 2021); themes commonly found in the statewide reports.

The report ended with a call to standardize missing person protocols, require LEAs to report on the race, ethnicity, and tribal affiliation of MMIPs, mandate the use of the NamUs, including incident location rather than only filing location, update sex and gender fields to be more inclusive, establish tribal review boards, and mandate cultural training for law enforcement officers (Apok et al., 2021).

Idaho



On September 30th, 2021, Idaho released its' statewide MMIP report. Like research in Wyoming and around the U.S., Fillmore et al. found a disproportionate rate of missing Idahoans are Indigenous people (Fillmore et al., 2021). The research found that the missing person rate was about 19 per 100,000 for Indigenous people, compared to 11 per 100,000 for their non-Indigenous counterparts (Fillmore et al., 2021). Additionally, almost two-thirds of Idaho's Indigenous missing persons had been missing for more than a year at the time of the report. Finally, the research found that many individuals go missing more than once (Fillmore et al., 2021).

Idaho's research found that most of the missing people in the State were adults (a finding unique to Idaho). However, juveniles did make up a disproportionate number of missing person cases compared to their presence in the population. Further, Idaho reported that a greater proportion of Indigenous juveniles were missing than their non-Indigenous counterparts (Fillmore et al., 2021). And finally, the Idaho report found that Indigenous

victims comprised a disproportionate number of violent deaths (more than three times their proportion in the population) and that Indigenous homicide victims were harmed both on and off tribal lands (Fillmore et al., 2021).

Fillmore et al. also found significant inconsistencies in policy and procedure among law enforcement agencies throughout the State. They listed inconsistency, decentralization, and limited access to administrative data as significant barriers to describing MMIP data quantitatively (Fillmore et al., 2021). The report called for standardized policies and procedures in handling MMIP cases; better data collection, sharing, and accuracy; improved victim services for Indigenous victims and their families; expanded community education and resource awareness; and conducting further research (Fillmore et al., 2021). Finally, the report identified a need for interagency agreements to overcome jurisdictional confusion and frustrations.

Arizona



In 2022, Arizona released a peer-reviewed journal article describing the scope of MMIP within the State. The research found that 12 people identified as Indigenous females were missing as of July 25th, 2020. Additionally, they found that between 1976 and 2018, 160 Indigenous females were the victims of homicide; 14% of those were juveniles (Fox et al., 2022). Additionally, the report showed that the relationship between victim and offender was unknown in about 30% of cases, and in 28% of cases, Indigenous females were killed by their intimate partners (Fox et al., 2022).

In addition to these statistics, the Arizona report also found that Indigenous women living in rural areas, including reservations, often face unique barriers to reporting missing Indigenous people (e.g., lack of cell phone service and long travel distances; Fox et al., 2022). The report also reiterated common themes of racial misclassification and lack of trust between law enforcement and Indigenous people as significant barriers (Fox et al., 2022).

The Arizona report also found that cases of MMIP have been increasing for the past 40 years in the State (Fox et al., 2022). Grassroots efforts are primarily to credit for the current awareness brought to the issue in Arizona. Colonization and historical trauma were identified as the root causes of the epidemic in the State (Fox et al., 2022). The lack of awareness of the MMIP epidemic in Arizona, as in the rest of the country, is primarily due to a lack of accurate data reporting and media attention (Fox et al., 2022). Arizona's call to action was for better training for law enforcement, better collaboration among agencies, better and more consistent data collection, and new legislation to mandate the use of NamUs and expand the language to protect all people of color and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and Two-Spirit people (Fox et al., 2022).

Hawai'i



In December 2022, Hawai'i released a task force report on missing and murdered Native Hawaiian women and girls (MMNHWG). Like other statewide reports, the Hawaiian report found that a disproportionate number of Native women and girls experience violence in the State and a severe lack of data to describe the scope of the epidemic accurately (Cristobal, 2022). The MMNHWG crisis often does not receive attention because many do not recognize Native Hawaiians as Indigenous peoples, the lack of commitment by the government to understand and prevent it, and the complexity of MMNHWG cases (Cristobal, 2022). Like other Indigenous peoples, Native Hawaiians have faced a long history of colonialism and associated trauma, racism, and gender-based violence, manifested in generations of trauma response (e.g., substance abuse and poverty; Cristobal, 2022).

Overall, the report found that 182 Native Hawaiian women and girls went missing between 2018-2021, and more than 25% of the missing girls in Hawai'i are Indigenous. Additionally, 38% of perpetrators arrested for soliciting sex from a minor were active-duty military personnel (Cristobal, 2022). Hawai'i, much like Wyoming, identified racial misclassification, lack of disaggregated data, and victim-blaming as root causes of MMNHWG underreporting.

Legislative Action Since the Last Report

Violence Against Women Act, 2022

The Supreme Court's 1978 decision in Oliphant v. Suquamish Indian Tribe prevented tribes from prosecuting non-Indigenous offenders, even when crimes were committed against Indigenous people on tribal lands. This ruling created a legal loophole; non-Indigenous people could commit crimes on tribal lands and essentially be above the law in certain circumstances.

The Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013 (VAWA 2013) included a historic provision recognizing the inherent authority of "participating tribes" to exercise special domestic violence criminal jurisdiction (SDVCJ). This provision granted [some] tribal entities the authority to prosecute domestic violence crimes of non-Indigenous offenders who victimized Indigenous persons on reservations. Unfortunately, most tribes are unable to benefit from this act due to a lack of resources. Only 31 of the 574 federally recognized tribes in the U.S. have been able to participate; Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho have not. The VAWA SDVCJ provision is simply too burdensome for most tribes to participate in. For a tribe to participate in SDVCJ, there are many requirements they must be able to meet. For example, training for law enforcement and court personnel, publishing laws and regulations, affording due process to defendants, and detaining or incarcerating offenders all cost a substantial amount of money and are only the tip of the iceberg (National Congress of America Indians [NCAI], n.d.). Funding is sometimes available to help tribes with the implementation of the provision. However, beyond the implementation phase, tribes need to compete against each other for funding or raise the money on their own. Even if a tribe were able to afford the training of criminal justice personnel, provide due process to defendants, pay for changes in policies, procedures, laws, and fund [or contract] detention centers, they would then face the burden of even more additional costs, such as providing healthcare costs to non-Indigenous offenders (NCAI, n.d.). Tribes must also be able to establish their jurisdiction in each case, meaning they must confirm the tribal status of the victim and the existence of a relationship between victim and offender; absent this, they cannot prosecute (NCAI, n.d.).

The narrowness of the 2013 provision failed to provide protection against other serious offenses, such as crimes against children, sex trafficking, sexual assault, drug and alcohol crimes, or crimes that occur within the criminal justice process (e.g., assault on a tribal law enforcement officer; NCAI, n.d.). In 2022, the U.S. Congress amended the VAWA 2013 to expand tribal jurisdiction further to allow participating tribes (those who meet the requirements and voluntarily choose to participate) to prosecute additional crimes beyond domestic violence, such as assault of tribal justice personnel, child violence, obstruction of justice, sexual violence, sex trafficking, and stalking (Office of Tribal Justice, 2022).

Though few tribes have been able to implement and use the VAWA SDVCJ provision, those that have experienced success. The provision has helped the participating tribes with the prosecution of non-Indigenous offenders who violate protection orders or commit crimes of domestic or dating violence. Overall, as stated by Sharon Jones Hayden, Tulalip Prosecutor and Special Assistant U.S. Attorney, "it's really just a little tiny down payment on a much bigger issue that needs to be addressed" (NCAI, n.d.).

CONCLUSION

This second statewide report details the serious and ongoing problem of MMIP in Wyoming. The task force has made progress in implementing each recommendation from the initial statewide report. However, there is still more work to be done in Wyoming to address MMIP. Effective solutions require commitment from and partnership with agencies throughout the State. With the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic waning, the task force is positioned to make continued progress on the recommendations. The future goals of the task force are described below as potential goals because they should be defined in collaboration with the task force members and the Indigenous community.

While there are annual fluctuations, Indigenous people in Wyoming are more likely to go missing or be murdered than people of any other race or ethnicity in the State. Still, the true number of MMIP cases is probably higher than reported. There are problems with data collection, including the ways it is recorded, and analyzed. These problems make it difficult to get a complete picture of the MMIP crisis. This can lead to underreporting of the extent of the problem and cause pain and frustration for families who cannot get justice for their loved ones. Identifying specific deficiencies within Wyoming data collection and storage and implementing a plan to address them could be future task force goals.

Community stakeholders stressed the importance of re-engaging the Indigenous community in the task force.

This report's findings indicate that relationships must be built between law enforcement, government agencies, media, and community members to address the MMIP crisis.

This report's findings indicate that relationships must be built between law enforcement, government agencies, media, and community members to address the MMIP crisis. It is important to have an open, respectful, and culturally competent dialogue between Indigenous communities and law enforcement. Training stakeholders on relationship building and cultural competency for agencies in Wyoming could be future task force goals.

> " ... ask the tribal members. 'How can we help you in bringing closure to your loved one's case?'" – *Community Stakeholder*

As states collaborate with tribes to address the MMIP crisis in America, keeping current statistics, learning about new efforts across the country, and building relationships with others working on the same goal is important. Wyoming has been a forerunner in detailing the statistics on MMIP and contributing to the knowledge base of the movement. Documenting the statistics and raising awareness are the first steps. ***Wyoming is now challenged with moving towards creating real and meaningful change to end the MMIP crisis.***

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