

2025

Brief Report on Focus Groups with Tribal Members Regarding Missing Native Persons in New Mexico



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Funding Acknowledgement: Research reported in this report is sponsored by the National Institute of Justice under NIJ Grant Number 15PNIJ-22-GG-01625-REVA. The conclusions expressed in this report are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Institute of Justice.

Background

This brief report stems from a National Institute of Justice funded tribal-researcher partnership between the New Mexico Indian Affairs Department and researchers at the University of Nebraska Omaha and Urban Institute (O-NIJ-2022-171197) regarding the scope and context of missing and/or murdered Indigenous persons (MMIP) in New Mexico and long-term data collection and sustainable data reporting for cases of MMIP. Study data include 12 monthly point-in-time counts of missing persons in New Mexico, focus groups with tribal community members, and interviews with practitioners (e.g., victim advocates, law enforcement). **Here we report on the focus groups with tribal community members** regarding their perceptions of issues that lead to Native people in New Mexico “going missing”; challenges Native people in New Mexico face in reporting their loved ones as missing; challenges Native people in New Mexico face in their journey to have their relatives “found and loved”; and the strengths or supportive services for missing Native people in New Mexico. The Coalition to Stop Violence Against Native Women and Coalition staff provided invaluable partnership and support in the development and implementation of these focus groups (described further below).

Focus Group Procedures

The Coalition to Stop Violence Against Native Women (CSVANW) hosted two in-person focus groups in Albuquerque and Farmington, New Mexico. Albuquerque, the state’s largest city, is characterized as urban with a population exceeding 560,000 people; approximately 7% of the population identify as American Indian/Alaska Native (U.S. Census, 2023a). Farmington, New Mexico spans more than 5,500 square miles, borders the Navajo Nation, and has a population of nearly 46,000 people; more than 28% of the population in Farmington identify as American Indian/Alaska Native (U.S. Census, 2023b). Focus group one was held at the CSVANW and was followed by a healing circle and dinner (see appendix A). Focus group two was held in a private space at the Farmington Public Library and was followed by a grounding exercise and remarks from CSVANW (see appendix B). No focus groups were held on tribal lands. Focus groups were moderated by two staff from the CSVANW; a CSVANW advocate was also in attendance for support as needed. A representative from the New Mexico Indian Affairs Department attended focus group two.

Two doctoral-level graduate students and the principal investigator from the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and the co-principal investigator, a senior research fellow from the Urban Institute, attended the focus groups virtually (via zoom) as note takers. Three note takers were present at each focus group; note takers could hear, but not see participants (i.e., no cameras were used). No identifying information about participants was recorded by the note takers. Note takers did not attend the post-focus groups events facilitated by CSVANW (i.e., healing circle, grounding exercise, closing remarks).

The CSVANW solicited participants through their listservs and networks. Participants were enrolled, affiliated, or descendants of a tribal community member in New Mexico or lived/ worked on Tribal lands; all participants were 18 years old or older. Before beginning the focus groups, one moderator reviewed the study information sheet with participants explaining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the minimal risks of participation, and the \$30 honorarium for participation (see appendix C). The CSVANW facilitated participants' honorariums to preserve their anonymity from the research team members. Focus group one included ten ($n = 10$) participants and focus group two included seven ($n = 7$) participants, for a total of seventeen ($n = 17$) participants. Focus group one was approximately one hour and 30 minutes in length, while focus group two was approximately one hour in length.

Focus groups centered on the following questions developed collaboratively by the research partners and staff at the New Mexico Indian Affairs Department and the Coalition to Stop Violence Against Native Women.

1. What issues do you believe lead to Native people in New Mexico “going missing”?
2. What challenges do you believe Native people in New Mexico face in reporting their loved ones as missing?
3. What challenges do you believe Native people in New Mexico face in their journey to have their relatives “found and loved” when they do go missing?
4. What are strengths or supportive services for Missing Native people in New Mexico?

Coding

The focus group notes were independently coded by two research team members using an inductive coding strategy. Each coder read their focus group notes and identified and recorded each unique theme in a Word document; the coders then met and reviewed the themes for disagreements. Disagreements were resolved through discussion and input from the third note taker. A draft document was then reviewed by the moderators and the representative from the New Mexico Indian Affairs Department for a final reliability check. Themes were organized under the four focal points of the focus groups (i.e., issues that lead to missingness, challenges in reporting missing loved ones, challenges in finding missing loved ones, and strengths or supportive services for missing Native people).

Results

Below, we provide a detailed discussion of the primary themes identified for each of the four focus group questions. In addition, Tables 1-4 provide a list of themes that emerged across the focus groups and whether each theme was identified during focus group one, focus group two, or both focus groups.

Issues related to Missingness

Focus group participants were first asked about their insights into why Native people go missing in New Mexico. There was considerable overlap in participants' reports across focus groups; however, some unique themes were also uncovered by each group. Prominent themes – themes identified by multiple participants in one or both focus groups – are listed and explained below while a comprehensive list of themes is presented in Table 1.

1. Systemic issues from few resources (e.g., poverty, lack of employment/ educational opportunities, poor/no housing).
2. Untreated alcohol use, drug use, and mental health challenges.
3. Victimization experiences, such as domestic violence and child abuse/neglect.
4. Family members' and elders' lack of awareness and/or discomfort talking about difficult issues (e.g., alcohol/drug use, domestic violence).

- **Systemic issues stemming from few resources** in Native communities (e.g., poverty, lack of employment/educational opportunities, poor/no housing housing). Participants described a **lack of jobs and proper housing for Native people** and how housing instability and poverty are contributing factors that lead people to go missing. For example, participants explained that community members may be living in homeless encampments or “fall to the streets” (i.e., be living on the streets because they do not have housing) which makes them vulnerable to violence/victimization and going missing.
- **Untreated alcohol abuse, drug abuse, and mental health challenges.** Participants discussed how alcohol and drug abuse and other mental health challenges are prevalent in their communities and that there are few treatment options. Alcohol abuse was a reoccurring topic with participants noting that alcohol was “how people handle their pain”. Participants noted that alcohol leads to “fights, arguments, going to the streets” and “People getting their anger out on people” (i.e., alcohol may lead to violent victimization and/or perpetration of violence). Participants discussed the impact of colonization on Native people, including how it has contributed to issues like alcohol and drug dependency and homelessness. One participant described that community members may hide their alcohol/drug abuse from family and then may turn to the streets to wean themselves off alcohol/drugs because they have nowhere else to turn to for help.
- **Experiencing victimization, such as domestic violence or child abuse.** Participants noted that current or prior trauma can lead to leaving home and going missing. Participants emphasized that Native people's trauma is generational. They noted that Tribal community members are taught by elders to not speak up about trauma, such as sexual abuse, and therefore there is a lack of knowledge of violence happening in the communities. One participant explained, “It won't stop because we aren't willing to

speak up for ourselves and talk about it with future generations”. Several participants in both focus groups noted that they are trying to use their voice/stories to teach the younger generation and stop the cycle of violence.

- **Family members’ and elders’ lack of awareness and/or discomfort talking about difficult issues (e.g., alcohol/drug use, domestic violence).** Participants also noted a lack of knowledge/awareness by family and elders regarding violence and life challenges that can increase one’s vulnerability to going missing. One participant explained that there is a “lack of knowledge about these issues among the families too – maybe they don’t know the problems their loved one is facing” while another noted “Elders don’t know when their children are on drugs or in a violent situation, because they don’t want to talk about it or acknowledge it because they are embarrassed by it”.

Other themes that were discussed included Native folks being targeted for violence due to racism and/or human trafficking. One participant specifically noted that adolescents are targeted by online predators who look for teens living in vulnerable home environments. They explained that predators offer to buy kids things and then they’re groomed and then taken. Other participants noted the sheer size of reservations and rural communities and that community members can go missing without their loved ones knowing for days or weeks. Finally, some participants discussed the loss of traditions in terms of respect for others and sanctioning community members and a lack of support from medicine people.

Table 1. What issues do you believe lead to Native people in New Mexico “going missing”?

	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2
Systemic issues stemming from few resources in Native communities (e.g., poverty, lack of employment/educational opportunities, poor/no housing housing).	X	X
Untreated alcohol abuse, drug abuse, mental health problems.	X	X
Victimization experiences such as domestic violence and child abuse.	X	X
Family members and elders lack awareness and/or are uncomfortable talking about difficult issues (e.g., alcohol/drug use, domestic violence).	X	X
Being targeted for human/sex trafficking.		X
Living in border towns that support racism/racist attitudes towards Native people.		X
Large land area of reservations (e.g., not realizing someone is even missing for days).	X	
Loss of tradition and spiritual ways to take care of each other; lack of support from medicine people.	X	

Challenges in Reporting Missing Loved Ones

Next, focus group participants were asked about their perceptions of challenges faced by Native people in New Mexico when reporting their loved ones as missing. Both overlapping and unique themes were identified at each focus group. A comprehensive list of themes is presented in Table 2 and prominent themes are described below.

Several prominent themes were identified by comparing the themes identified for each focus group. In general, Native community members voiced concerns over the following issues:

1. Questions about how and when to report, to whom, and what information to provide.
2. Challenges getting a loved one classified as a “missing person”.
3. Poor interactions/communication with law enforcement when reporting a loved one as missing.
4. Jurisdictional issues regarding which agency is responsible for taking a report/investigating.

- **Questions about how and when to report, to whom, and what information to provide.** Participants noted confusion about how/where to report, when to report, and what information they needed to provide. For example, one participant noted that different agencies tell you different time frames for when to report, 24, 28, 48, 72 hours. Other agencies tell you to report right away, so if you file at 48 hours, then “you feel judged for filing late”. Several participants noted that they know now that they can report right away.
- **Challenges getting a loved one classified as a “missing person”.** Participants explained that they are not taken seriously by law enforcement or that they are perceived as over exaggerating when they try to report a loved one as missing. Participants noted that among Native people, adults who go missing are labeled an “addict” (i.e., having an alcohol or drug problem) or the law enforcement officer says, “they are an adult, and going missing is not a crime”; missing minors are often labeled as runaways. Participants explained that loved ones must convince law enforcement to take the missing persons report, and that it often results in delays in the missing person’s information being entered into the National Crime Information Center database. One participant shared that her sister was labeled as a runaway and they [law enforcement] made her mom wait three days to file the police report and now 20 years later she is still missing. Another participant noted that in their experience, law enforcement officers will not take missing persons reports for community members who identify as two-spirit, and if they do, the flyers will not mention that the person identifies as two-spirit, misgenders them, and may include pictures of them misgendered and use their dead names (i.e., name they no longer use).

- **Poor interactions/communication with law enforcement when reporting a loved one as missing.** Law enforcement officers were described as poorly trained and not trauma-informed; not caring or sympathetic; and impatient when collecting information on a missing person. Participants shared that loved ones with alcohol or drug abuse challenges and those experiencing homelessness were particularly dehumanized. While another participant explained that it may be difficult to recall what a loved one looks like (e.g., what clothes they were wearing when they last saw them) when filling out a missing person's report if they are being rushed by an officer. Participants also noted frustration that they rarely receive updates from law enforcement officers regarding ongoing missing person cases. One participant noted, "One officer takes the report and then they switch it up and no one tells you. There is no communication."
- **Jurisdictional issues regarding which agency is responsible for taking a report/investigating.** Jurisdictional challenges were a major concern for focus group participants. They noted confusion regarding who is responsible for protecting Native people and who can get involved in helping them: tribal, local, state, and/or federal agencies. Participants emphasized that county/local agencies in the jurisdictions bordering the reservations do not think they can get involved. There were also questions about whether every Tribe will take missing persons reports seriously (e.g., will they help, can they help). Overall, participants expressed frustration that no one [no specific officer or agency] takes Indigenous missing persons cases seriously or takes responsibility. One participant whose brother had gone missing and who had helped other impacted families explained that "Investigators are failing aspects of each case – there is a lot of back and forth and nobody takes responsibility."

Question 2. What challenges do you believe Native people in New Mexico face in reporting their loved ones as missing?

	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2
Challenges with getting a loved one classified as a missing person (e.g., a minor will be labeled as a runaway, adult will be labeled as an addict, going missing as an adult is not a crime).	X	X
Being told to wait to file a missing person's report; being judged/questioned when they wait.	X	X
Not knowing where to go or what information to provide.		X
Reservations are often large land areas/in rural areas, and it may take days to notice when someone goes missing.	X	
Jurisdictional issues (e.g., which agency is responsible for taking report/investigating missing person cases, protecting Native people).	X	X
Law enforcement takes a long time to respond to missing person's cases.	X	X
Law enforcement officers are poorly trained and not trauma informed.	X	
Law enforcement officers are impatient/rush those filing a report.	X	
Law enforcement officers have stereotypes about Native people (e.g., drug addict, homeless) or exhibit racism that impacts response.	X	X
Poor communication between law enforcement and other agencies and law enforcement and community members.	X	
The missing person is a "frequent flier" (aka known to law enforcement) so their missingness is not taken seriously.		X

Challenges in having Missing Native Relatives “Found and Loved”

Focus group participants were also asked about their perceptions of challenges faced by Native people in New Mexico on their journey to have missing relatives found and loved. These discussions on the journey – searching and investigations - often overlapped with the discussions on reporting, but some unique themes were also identified. A comprehensive list of themes is presented in Table 3 and prominent themes are described below.

1. Need for more people in law enforcement and social services; more resources.
2. Need for law enforcement to take Native missing persons cases seriously.
3. Need for substance abuse and mental health treatment.

- **Need for more people in law enforcement and social services.** Participants cited a **shortage of law enforcement officers to investigate cases and victim advocates and social workers** to support them while their loved ones were missing. Further, participants noted the size of reservations as a barrier to supportive services: “the ‘rez’ [reservation] is just too big to provide coverage everywhere”. Participants shared that the loved ones of missing person often take on multiple roles, such as being the caseworker, therapist, detective, healer, and mental health provider for their families. These roles are responsibilities that act as a full-time job. Another participant noted, “The police don’t have the resources, they tell us they can’t help us. They tell us to hire a private investigator.”
- **Need for law enforcement to take Native missing persons cases seriously.** Participants noted that law enforcement officers (often) do not take Native missing persons cases seriously from taking the report to investigations. Participants noted that law enforcement officers do not think the loved one is really missing, that they “will just come back” so they do not put effort into finding them. Again, as noted in discussions on reporting, participants noted that law enforcement officers were not trauma informed and did not seem to care about finding their missing loved one. Participants repeated their frustrations regarding failure to take responsibility and communicate with families on the progress of missing persons cases.
- **Need for substance abuse and mental health treatment.** Participants also recognized the need for affordable, high-quality substance abuse and mental health treatment in their communities. They noted that some missing loved ones needed treatment to stay found and loved and that neither medicine people nor Western medicine were options. For example, one participant noted the cost of Medicine people (i.e., “they cost an arm and leg nowadays”) as well as fear about Western medicine (i.e., “mental health facilities just put people on medication and put them in a padded room do not help”).

Other themes included not knowing who they could trust as well as the fact that sometimes a missing person did not want to be found.

Question 3. What challenges do you believe Native people in New Mexico face in their journey to have their relatives “found and loved” when they do go missing?	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2
Lack of staffing in victim services, law enforcement, and the criminal justice system	X	X
Lack of resources	X	X
Reservations are too large to provide resources	X	
Law enforcement is not trauma informed	X	X
Law enforcement falsely believes the missing person does not want to be found	X	
Law enforcement does not take responsibility		X
Lack of communication from law enforcement		X
Law enforcement misgenders a missing person		X
Financial cost of medicine people for mental health and substance use	X	
Lack of proper care from Western medicine for mental health and substance use	X	
The missing person does not want to be found	X	
Not knowing who to trust	X	X

Strengths and Supportive Services for Missing Native People in New Mexico

1. Tribal Coalitions, Tribal health care services, and Tribal agencies.
2. New Mexico state agencies and non-profits.
3. Social media.
4. Other impacted families.
5. Using their [the loved ones of missing persons] voices.

- **Tribal Coalitions, Tribal health care services, and Tribal agencies.** Participants identified the Coalition to Stop Violence Against Native Women (aka the Coalition) as one of the strongest support providers/supportive services regarding missing Native persons in New Mexico. Participants noted that the staff is devoted to supporting the loved ones of missing people. One participant noted, “they [Coalition staff] let loved ones know that things are okay, it gets better, and there is always hope”. The Coalition has supported loved ones’ lodging/travel and expenses for rallies and events, and it assists with mental health services. Participants also noted First Nations Health Authority traditional wellness and healing program which uses traditional ways (i.e., no Western medication) and Utah Navajo Health Systems which has comprehensive supportive services for families of missing persons and victims of violence in the four corners region. Participants also named Four Corners Search and Rescue – a Native search and rescue firm – as a primary source of investigative support.
- **New Mexico state agencies and non-profits.** Participants also noted state victim compensation programs and advocates at police departments and peer support programs at a local jail have been useful support providers. In addition, participants identified non-tribal non-profits such as housing assistance programs and mental health services.
- **Social media.** Participants explained that social media was helpful in two ways (1) it is a huge help in finding people who are going through the same thing as you are (e.g., other impacted families) and (2) it is helpful for getting the word out about a missing loved one. One participant noted that “Facebook is the place that is the most updated. If they [the loved one of a missing person] has one or two people that they can count on [on Facebook, they can use their network to help find people real quick”.
- **Other impacted families.** Participants also noted the importance of finding and building relationships with other impacted families. One participant noted “Find a family who knows how you feel, it gives you a sense of security” while another explained, “Getting involved with the families, they let us know what else we can

access for services or advocates”. One impacted family member in the focus group mentioned another impacted family member who was a supportive voice in their journey to search for their missing loved one. Both participants are MMIP activists now and have become close friends. Finally, focus group participants indicated that the families of missing people are the best resource for police departments to fill advocate positions. One participant explained ‘They [loved ones of missing people] have “crossed that line” and they know what to do, how to start. They want to stand together. WE need to fix this.”

- **Using their voices.** Throughout the focus groups, participants noted the power of using their voices, for strength, support, healing, awareness raising, and more. Participants discussed the importance of talking circles and writing circles: one participant noted that “[we] need more of it” while another explained, “the more we continue to do these talking circles, the more we can help each other”. Other participants talked about the growth of podcasts to raise awareness about MMIP (i.e., missing and/or murdered Indigenous people) and allow families to share their stories.

Question 4. What are strengths or supportive services for Missing Native people in New Mexico?

	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2
The Coalition to Stop Violence Against Native Women	X	X
Utah Navajo Health Systems		X
Life Link		X
Peer support group through local jail		X
Victim advocate at local police department		X
First Nations Health Authority		X
Social media	X	X
New Mexico victim compensation program	X	
Other impacted families	X	X
Personal contacts or tribal community members		X
Four Corners Search and Rescue		X

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