

Since the early years of colonization of the United States, Native American women and girls have experienced an epidemic of sexual violence and have fallen victim to sex trafficking. According to Nikkel (2022), an organization dedicated to bringing awareness to the trafficking of Indigenous communities, 40% of sex trafficking victims are identified as Native American. However, Native Americans represent only 2% of the population. The high rates of sex trafficking amongst Native American communities will continue to grow with the deficiency of awareness, communication, and resources given to these communities. Due to colonization, Indigenous communities were left scattered and fragmented, resulting in the undersupply of resources needed to conduct proper investigations on women who go missing and who are victims of sex trafficking. Indigenous communities need resources and aid to help find and rehabilitate Indigenous women and girls who have fallen victim to sex trafficking. According to Vice News, “Indigenous Women Keep Going Missing in Montana” (2021), the absence of resources and awareness has led the Crow reservation, a reservation the size of Connecticut, to have only five officers. Reservations need more resources, awareness, and better communication between policing agencies to address sex trafficking amongst Indigenous communities. The lack of awareness and cohesiveness between U.S. police agencies and tribal agencies, when conducting investigations of missing and trafficked indigenous women and girls, leads to higher rates of sex trafficking among Native American women and girls.

### **Historical Context of Sexual Violence Towards Native Women and Girls**

Throughout the history of the colonization of the United States, Native American women and girls have been high targets of violence and sexual violence. According to the National Online Resource Center on Violence Against Women (2011), during the expansion towards the west of the United States, military troops would prey on Native American women and girls for “sexual assault, sexual mutilation, and slaughter” (p. 2, paras. 1). It was not just military troops taking advantage and sexually abusing Native women and girls. The National Online Resource Center on Violence Against Women (2011) notes that “early British... settlers viewed Native women’s sexual freedom sexual and reproductive freedom... [gave them...] the right to kidnap, rape, and prostitute Native women and girls without consequence” (p. 1, paras. 1). This sexualizing view of Native American women and girls was used as an excuse to violate them sexually. This historical experience of sexual violence from U.S. military troops has built in generational trauma for Native American women and girls to report sexual violence.

### **Sexual Violence towards Native Women and Girls Now**

The acts of sexual violence towards Native American women and girls since colonization continue today. Native women and girls are still highly likely to experience a type of sexual assault with “those of Indigenous ethnicity are...at least 2 times more likely to experience rape or sexual assault crimes” than any other race within the United States (Joseph, 2021, paras. 3). Even with centuries since colonization, Indigenous women are still more likely to experience extreme sexual violence, such as rape. The high rates of sex crimes committed against Native American women and girls continue at alarming numbers, making Native Americans most likely to be victims of a sex crime, even with Native Americans and Alaskan Natives only representing “approximately 2% of the total U.S. population” (Nikkel, 2022, sect. 2). The violence Native American women experience is completely disproportionate from other races within the United States. Indigenous women, girls, and communities as a whole need and deserve to have their voices heard as they continue to experience significantly high rates of sexual violence.

### **Media Coverage**

When a particular population of people is experiencing a series of sexual violence, especially for generations, we expect the problem to be made known and for awareness to grow; However, this is not the case when violence is made against Indigenous women and girls. According to Lopez et al. (2024), 5,491 missing Native American women and girls reported by the U.S. National Crime Information Center, and “national or international media covered less than 5%” (p. 2, paras. 1). The absence of media coverage on missing indigenous women and girls will continue to contribute to the sex trafficking of indigenous women. If there is no one reporting to the public about the issue of sex trafficking amongst

indigenous women, then the issue within the Indigenous communities will continue to remain invisible. The lack of media coverage on the issue of Native American women and girls going missing is an issue that needs to be addressed urgently. It is not just the media's coverage that needs to be addressed; it is also the communication between the U.S. criminal justice system and the Indigenous criminal justice system.

### **Policing Agencies**

Historically, Native Americans have been oppressed and failed by our "criminal justice" system; That failure and oppression continue to this day. When an Indigenous woman or girl goes missing on a reservation, there are multiple different policing agencies involved: Tribal, State, and Federal. Since early colonization and the creation of Native American reservations, there has been a disconnect in communication between these policing agencies. When it comes to human trafficking cases on reservations, there are certain laws created for the Federal, State, and Tribal governments. According to Gillespie (2020), the laws created confusion among the three policing agencies because they overlap. There is confusion about who gains control over the investigation of each case. Depending on whether a tribe recognizes the victim and if the abuser is a non-native, the case can go to either Tribal courts or U.S. courts. Even with cases being eligible to go to the U.S. courts, "67% of sexual abuse cases filed from 2005–2009 in tribal communities were never prosecuted" (Hill et al., 2022, paras. 6). That is more than half of these cases dismissed by the U.S. courts. There have to be changes within our criminal justice system and in the way we operate towards Indigenous victims of sex trafficking, in order to support the best and aid Indigenous victims of sex trafficking and sexual violence.

### **What Can Be Done**

Indigenous tribes need more resources and media coverage. These communities need practical resources that best suit their conditions and needs. We need to provide more aid to victims and start to recognize the signs of someone being trafficked. Nurses can play a role in recognizing and providing aid to indigenous women and girls who are victims of sex trafficking. Nurses are our first responders and are more likely to encounter victims. According to Peters-Mosquera et al. (2023), nurses need to learn and know the "historical trauma that the AI/AN population has experienced and the association of historical trauma and missingness of Indigenous women and girls" (Peters-Mosquera, et al., 2023, paras. 27). Learning more about the history and generational trauma will help nurses best aid and understand these women and girls. The article also notes that it is important to "embed Indigenous content within a nursing curriculum" (Peters-Mosquera et al., 2023, para. 28). Nurses with knowledge of Native American culture can better assist victims and show respect for their culture. One of the resources mentioned in the Exodus Road was "Reconnection with Native Traditions" (Nikkel, 2022, sect. 6). Having nurses educated about Native culture can help victims reconnect with their cultural traditions as they receive aid. With these changes, we can provide the proper aid and support Indigenous victims and survivors need to be seen and to begin their healing process.

Throughout this paper, there was an examination of the historical and present abuse Native American women and girls experience. For centuries, U.S. male citizens have taken advantage of and sexually abused Native women and girls; That abuse continues today. This situation has been a crisis for centuries, and still, there is barely any media coverage of what these women and girls go through. Many of the reports of missing Native women and girls are not reported correctly into national crime databases. There continues to be confusion between police agencies, both U.S. and tribal, in terms of control in the investigation and prosecution of cases involving reported missing Indigenous women and girls, and the lack of prosecution for their cases. We have also examined beneficial resources that can best aid and serve Indigenous women who are victims of sex trafficking, with nurses. Better education of nurses in the history of sexual violence towards Indigenous women can help them better understand victims. Providing more education on Native American culture can help nurses with victims reconnect with their traditions. Nurses can be the key in helping Indigenous victims and survivors start their healing process. We should focus more on implementing procedures for Nurses, along with an education on Indigenous cultures, to help nurses better address Indigenous victims of sexual assault and trafficking.

Along with implementing regulations for nurses, we also need to address the miscommunication between tribal and U.S. police agencies. We need to clarify each agency's roles and determine which agency should be deemed "in charge" during investigations. With better communication, regulations, and education for tribal agencies, U.S. agencies, and nurses, we can help bring justice and begin healing for Indigenous victims of sexual assault and trafficking.

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