Homicides Involving American Indian and Alaska Native Individuals

American Indian and Alaska Native populations experience homicide at a higher rate than some other racial and ethnic groups in the US. A 2021 report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) summarized data from the National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS) from 2003 to 2018 on homicides among American Indian and Alaska Native individuals. The study, which was the first to examine NVDRS homicide data for all American Indian and Alaska Native persons for such an extended period, included data on 2226 homicides of American Indian and Alaska Native individuals in 34 states and the District of Columbia during 2003 to 2018. The reported age-adjusted homicide rate among American Indian and Alaska Native individuals was 8.0 per 100,000 population, and there was a significantly higher rate of homicide among American Indian and Alaska Native men (12.0 per 100,000 population) than women (3.9 per 100,000 population). By comparison, the age-adjusted homicide rates among the US population during the same time period were 2.87 per 100,000 population among males and 2.06 per 100,000 population among females.

Homicide rates for American Indian and Alaska Native individuals are disproportionately high compared with other racial and ethnic groups, except for non-Hispanic Black individuals.

Precipitating and contributing factors to homicides involving American Indian and Alaska Native populations are in many ways similar to those found in other populations. For instance, the CDC report indicated that a firearm was used in nearly half (48.4%) of homicides involving American Indian and Alaska Native individuals and in a higher percentage of homicides of American Indian and Alaska Native men than women (51.5% vs 39.1%). These data have broad policy implications for prevention efforts and improvement of law enforcement responses in cases of homicides involving American Indian and Alaska Native individuals, i.e., that existing strategies could be utilized to improve efforts to reduce homicides among the American Indian and Alaska Native population.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a known contributing factor to homicides regardless of the race or ethnicity of the victim. Based on homicide data from 18 states from 2003 to 2014 for which the circumstances of death were known, 55.3% of the 8028 total homicides against adult women involved IPV and 55.4% of the homicides involving American Indian and Alaska Native adult women involved IPV. According to the CDC report, 1 of the 545 homicides involving American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls, 45% were IPV-related (this reported proportion was lower than for homicides in 2003-2014, possibly because the earlier study cohort was limited to adult women instead of females of all ages). Because homicides involving American Indian and Alaska Native females were associated with IPV at a similar rate as homicides involving females from other racial and ethnic groups, policy makers can leverage existing research, practices, and initiatives to help address the IPV-related homicide risk among the American Indian and Alaska Native population and in American Indian and Alaska Native communities.

The US Preventive Services Task Force has recommended that clinicians screen for IPV in women of childbearing age and refer women whose screening results are positive for IPV to intervention services. IPV prevention and intervention initiatives could be focused on efforts tailored to American Indian and Alaska Native communities in areas such as healthy relationship skills, promoting tribal values, or bystander programs. In addition, tribal law enforcement and social service agencies could be trained in utilizing IPV lethality risk assessments to better assess risk of re-assault and homicide in cases of IPV.

Another known risk factor for homicide, regardless of the race or ethnicity of the affected person, is being
pregnant or less than 6 weeks postpartum. From 2013 to 2014, among all 1957 homicides involving adult women of reproductive age (ie, 18-44 y) with known pregnancy status, 15.2% were pregnant or less than 6 weeks post partum and among homicides involving American Indian and Alaska Native women in this age group, 13.2% were pregnant or less than 6 weeks post partum. As with IPV, existing strategies and approaches to prevention can be leveraged to reduce homicides among women and girls who are or recently were pregnant. Screening for IPV, particularly during pregnancy and after, may be an important step in preventing homicide among American Indian and Alaska Native women.

Alcohol and drug use are also known risk factors for violence perpetration and, for women, experiencing IPV. One area in which the response to violence involving American Indian and Alaska Native individuals and their families could improve is in correcting and overcoming false stereotypes about the Native American population and alcohol or drug consumption. In the 2021 CDC report, 27.8% of all American Indian and Alaska Native homicide victims were reported to have had a problem with alcohol or substance use, and drug involvement was reportedly a precipitating factor in approximately 10% of homicides of American Indian and Alaska Native individuals. However, the cultural misperception of elevated levels of alcohol consumption among American Indian and Alaska Native persons persists, even though a 2016 study that used the National Survey on Drug Use and Health as the primary data source (involving 4201 American Indian and Alaska Native participants and 171 858 White participants) showed that rates of alcohol consumption were lower among American Indian and Alaska Native individuals compared with White persons. For example, 59.9% of American Indian and Alaska Native participants had abstained from alcohol in the past month, whereas only 42.6% of White participants had done so.

Misinformed negative beliefs about substance use and alcohol consumption in American Indian and Alaska Native communities may compromise interactions of American Indian and Alaska Native individuals with law enforcement and the criminal justice system. For example, law enforcement may presume that a known drug user who has been reported missing is “on a run” (ie, binging on their drug of choice over a course of days or weeks) and not commit appropriate resources to solving the case in a timely manner. Continuing to screen for and understand the use of alcohol and other drugs and their influence, particularly in relation to violence, remains a key opportunity for violence prevention messaging and intervention.

The Special Domestic Violence Criminal Jurisdiction created by the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and its reauthorizations for implementation in tribal courts is a meaningful avenue for tribes to hold non-American Indian and Alaska Native domestic violence offenders accountable by allowing tribes to prosecute non-American Indian and Alaska Native offenders in addition to their existing authority to prosecute American Indian and Alaska Native offenders. The recently passed VAWA reauthorization bill expands the crimes subject to such special criminal jurisdiction to also include offenses such as stalking and sexual violence. According to the CDC report, 26% of the 109 homicides involving American Indian and Alaska Native women that occurred as the result of another serious crime involved rape or sexual assault. By expanding the capacity for tribal courts to prosecute all cases of domestic violence, stalking, and sexual violence, it is likely that offender accountability will increase and thus assist in ongoing prevention efforts.

The findings in the 2021 CDC article are extremely helpful and can immediately assist clinicians in their daily practice. However, because participation in NVDRS is voluntary, the data are incomplete and there are data gaps in states with a heavy concentration of American Indian and Alaska Native individuals. Because of this, any NVDRS data cannot be fairly extrapolated to the entire country. Nevertheless, as participation in NVDRS increases (currently all 50 states have signed on as participants in the program) more robust data will become available for analysis and a more representative description of the national homicide statistics for American Indian and Alaska Native individuals will be possible to determine.

Violence is preventable, and by utilizing the existing strategies tailored to the needs of American Indian and Alaska Native communities and individuals, the high rates of American Indian and Alaska Native homicide can be reduced.

ARTICLE INFORMATION
Conflict of Interest Disclosures: Mx McPherson serves as a member of the Steering Committee to Address the Crisis of Missing or Murdered Indigenous Persons within the US Department of Justice and reported assisting in drafting an internal report to the White House that summarized some of the same data and information cited in the current article.

Disclaimer: Opinions expressed herein are solely that of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the US Marshals Service, US Department of Justice, or the US government.

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REFERENCES