



Guidelines and Best Practices for Journalists, Family Members, and Tribal Officials to Improve Media Coverage of MMIP Cases

*“We will never get the media coverage
we need until people view us as human.”*

– Tiffany Webb,

Tribal Wellness Services Coordinator and Tribal Chief

INTRODUCTION

American Indian and Alaska Native people are at a disproportionate risk of experiencing violence, murder, or going missing and make up a significant portion of the missing and murdered cases.

On October 10, 2020, the [*Not Invisible Act of 2019*](#) was signed into law. The Department of the Interior and Department of Justice worked to implement the *Not Invisible Act*, including by establishing the Not Invisible Act Commission, a cross jurisdictional advisory committee composed of law enforcement, Tribal leaders, federal partners, service providers, family members of missing and murdered individuals, and survivors.

During seven public hearings across the country as well as a two-day virtual national hearing that informed the Commission’s recommendations, survivors and families impacted by the crises of missing and murdered Indigenous peoples (MMIP) and human trafficking (HT) shared concerns about lack of media coverage (or compassionate media coverage) and whether that may contribute to cases being ignored or going unsolved.

The Commission developed [recommendations](#) through the work of six subcommittees focused on improving intergovernmental coordination and establishing best practices for state, Tribal and federal law enforcement to bolster resources for survivors and victim’s families, and combatting the epidemic of missing persons, murder and trafficking of American Indian and Alaska Native peoples, as specified under the law.

One of the commission’s recommendations was to convene a roundtable to discuss the issue of media coverage of missing persons cases:

Chapter 4, Recommendation E1: DOJ and DOI must convene a roundtable to discuss the issue of media coverage of missing persons cases that should result in a set of guidelines and best practices for family members, Tribal governments, victim advocates, and journalists. The guidelines and best practices must be widely disseminated to advocates, Tribal nations, and media associations and organizations.

The following new guidelines and best practices to improve media coverage on the crisis of missing or murdered Indigenous peoples (MMIP) and human trafficking (HT) are part of the Department of the Interior and the Department of Justice’s commitment to respond to the Commission’s recommendations. They were developed based on feedback during the Commission hearings, in discussions with Tribal leaders and advocates, and through a [roundtable discussion](#), hosted by the Departments and attended by more than 200 participants, including journalists, survivors, community advocates, and Tribal and federal officials.

MEDIA

“If I were to make any recommendation to the journalists that are here today, it’s talk about the victim, tell their story, talk about who they are and keep them alive in that aspect. They’re only gone when we stop talking about them” - Paul Etnire (Hopi), Captain, Arizona Department of Public Safety

Journalists and news organizations have the power to bring needed attention to MMIP and HT cases. Your power is to be respected, but also earned. Remember that you may be interviewing someone terrified for their loved one, or themselves. The below best practices are intended to help journalists ensure that media coverage of these cases equitable, respectful and effective.

Humanize victims

“So many times, this issue, journalists have a deadline within a few days to get a story out and do this, and it is very clear that it takes more than a week, it takes more than a few hours to be able to truly cover this issue”

- Tara Gatewood, Director of the International Women's Media Foundation's Fund for Indigenous Journalists and citizen of the Pueblo of Isleta/Diné

Victims come from many different backgrounds. By choosing which details of a person’s background to highlight, media influences the public’s sentiment towards them. Media are encouraged to present a balanced view of a missing or murdered person, highlighting their humanity rather than any potential criminal background. Everyone deserves to be and feel safe in their community, regardless of past behavior.

Provide context of disproportionate impact on Native communities

“I want people to be well versed in all of the harm that I’ve experienced, and all of the harm that my relatives have experienced, and that is not my entire identity—and it’s not even the most interesting thing about us!”

– Christina Love, former NIAC commissioner

When reporting on MMIP and HT cases, proper contextual framing is critical. Indigenous communities face socio-economic disparities, such as disproportionate risk of experiencing violence, murder or going missing, that are rooted in generations of trauma from policies of the past that were intended to harm Native communities such as the federal Indian boarding school era.

While recognizing this context, journalists should avoid coverage that can be viewed as exploitative or insensitive to Native communities. While this can be a tricky balance, resources are available to help, such as the [Indigenous Journalists Association’s reporting guides](#).

Establish relationships and trust with Native communities

“How do we expect the media – the mainstream media, specifically – to tell our stories, when none of them are from our communities, sound like us or look like us?”

– Jordan Dresser, journalist and former NIAC commission member

Journalists will benefit from building relationships of trust and respect in Tribal communities, giving them a better understanding of Tribal issues and helping to develop sources who will be more open with sharing information. Reach out

before a crisis hits to get to know media contacts in Tribal governments, get to know the community. This will help inform accuracy and credibility of reporting.

Be aware of cultural differences – you don’t know what you don’t know

“One of the areas that we’re having trouble with ... people in the outside world, when these things occur ... a lot of them believe that it’s an Indian problem, and it’s not something that the outside world understands”

– Jordan Dresser, journalist and former NIAC commission member

Journalists should keep an open mind. Something that may seem unusual at first may have cultural importance. Ask questions before assuming what the goal may be for a ceremony or traditional practice.

Language matters

“The words that we use really, really matters.”

– Christina Love, former NIAC commissioner

Journalists are encouraged to be mindful of the language used to describe events and communities. For example, referring to the MMIP “epidemic” implies disease, the MMIP “crisis” is preferred. Similarly, “vulnerable” populations implies weakness and could be replaced with “at-risk” populations.

More Resources for journalists:

- IJA – [Indigenous Expert Source Guide](#)
- IJA – [Tribal Nations Media Guide](#)

FAMILY & COMMUNITY MEMBERS, ADVOCATES

“I always encourage the families I work with that are the families of murdered or missing people to talk to media because it’s a way for law enforcement to silence us and keep us quiet and keep the stories out of the public eye.”

– Antonia Commack, MMIP advocate

Family members and the community can help journalists raise awareness of MMIP and HT cases by providing relevant, timely information. Journalists have a constant flow of stories to work on, so making their job easier can help get needed coverage. Have an open mind, one mistake should not define any one reporter. The below best practices are intended to help loved ones support equitable, respectful and effective media coverage.

Use established channels for submitting information

“Why can’t we provide resources to educate, give our communities, our small rural communities the resources in learning how to be a voice for their people?”

- Deilah Johnson, tribal resources director for the village of Solomon, Alaska

During the roundtable, journalists reported that the best way to get coverage of a missing person case is to submit information to local and regional newspapers, TV and radio stations through their “breaking news” or “news tips” channels. This may be an online form, a phone number, or an email address. Check the web sites for local news outlets for details on how to submit.

Provide media with photography or creative assets

“It is very important for council leadership, whoever they are, to be able to get up and give those media statements ... and give [news outlets] the information they need.”

– Grace Johnson (Oglala Sioux Tribe), MMIP Tribal Liaison for Nebraska’s Attorney General

Providing media with a recent photograph of a missing person can help to get media coverage, while also helping to humanize the individual. Think about what image of themselves they might want shared. Don’t leave media to search the internet for whatever might be available/

Leverage social media

“That’s where our kids are – they’re on social media. They’re not watching CNN, the kids are not watching NBC. They’re following stuff on whatever social media is out there.”

– Grace Johnson (Oglala Sioux Tribe), MMIP Tribal Liaison for Nebraska’s Attorney General

Families and Tribal authorities can work with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Missing and Murdered Unit to have cases highlighted at <https://www.bia.gov/service/mmu/missing-murdered-cases>. Case profiles on this page can easily be shared on social media platforms.

FEDERAL & TRIBAL LAW ENFORCEMENT

“Law enforcement does need that training ... in regards to communicating to the families in regards to what is going on with that particular case – and understand that that is not just a victim, but that is a person...”

- Paul Etnire (Hopi), Captain, Arizona Department of Public Safety

Law enforcement is the key to solving MMIP and HT cases. While collaboration among law enforcement officials is common across jurisdiction, advocates can be an important ally. You can help give information to the media to further a case that can be live saving. The below best practices are intended to help law enforcement think about what role they can plan in participating in media coverage.

The Justice Department’s Tribal Justice and Safety resource page includes a [guide for families](#) that includes tips on media outreach, and other [MMIP resources](#).

Consistently and promptly release information to the media on MMIP cases by designating a Public Information Officer

Coordinating media engagement through a designated, trained public information officer will ensure consistent and reliable information is shared with the media and the public. Training Public Information Officers and investigators on how to engage with the media will allow them to efficiently and effectively share actionable information and better leverage opportunities for media coverage.

Be proactive in actively engaging the public in an effort investigate, search and locate.

Reach out to media outlets through established relationships with journalists or through “breaking news” or “news tips” submissions to encourage media coverage of active cases.

Leverage social media

BIA has developed <https://www.bia.gov/service/mmu/missing-murdered-cases>, where cases can be highlighted. This platform is designed with social media “cards” that make sharing of cases easy across social media platforms.