

FAMILY AND SURVIVOR INTERVIEWS

Qualitative Analysis



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Findings	4
Support Systems	6
Law Enforcement Involvement	9
Helpful Resources and Practices.....	11
Unhelpful or Harmful Practices	16
Barriers and Obstacles	21
Recommendations.....	28
Conclusion	38
Appendix	39
Methods.....	39

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the family and survivor interviews is to learn about the impact of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and People (MMIWP) crisis and identify areas for improving the identification, response, and resolution of MMIWP. Interviews with people directly impacted by this issue are vital because they provide insight and details that cannot be obtained through other means. The Washington MMIWP Task Force administered by the Attorney General's Office (AGO), understands that it is essential to center the voices of those most impacted by MMIWP as they work to address these issues. Together, Task Force subcommittees, Washington AGO staff, and the Data and Research team developed a plan to engage family members in intentional, trauma-informed, and culturally appropriate ways. Details on the methods and tools used can be found in the [Appendix](#).

Fifty-three people were interviewed for this report. While some family members and survivors had shared their perspectives before, many expressed that this was the first time they had shared their stories and the impact MMIWP has had on them and their families. The findings in this report aim to illustrate both the shared and unique experiences people disclosed. Similar themes across interviews are grouped, and quotes are used to illustrate each point.

Each person who participated in the interviews did so with strength and courage, believing that sharing their experiences would lead to meaningful change. We aim to honor them and their experiences through this report and truly hope their recommendations to address MMIWP are swiftly implemented.



FINDINGS

Family members and survivors shared their experiences with great courage, recounting traumatic and deeply personal details in hopes of making a positive impact to address and end the MMIWP crisis. We sat with them through tears, anguish, anger, and frustration. We hold their stories with the highest level of care and seek to share them in a good way, that is consistent with their wishes.

Interview Question: “What would you like to share with me about your loved one?”

At the beginning of the interview, family members were asked to start by sharing whatever they would like about their loved one who is missing or was murdered. Some of the things they shared are presented below:

“She was a beautiful person, and she loved everybody. She made everybody feel really special.”

“He loved hunting and fishing, and he was a really active father and son, and he helped my mom all the time.”

“She was a cowgirl. My mom rode horses every day. She was a rodeo queen.”

“I spent a lot of time with my aunt. We’d go swimming every day. We’d play basketball every day.”

“She was a coach, grandma, great grandma. Everybody’s aunt, courageous.”

“She loved gymnastics. She was always singing, always happy.”

“My mom was the type of person to give you the shirt off her back.”

“She was my pride and joy; she’s a beautiful, young Native child.”

“One thing that everybody remembers her by was her laugh.”

“She was a grandmother, auntie, cousin, best friend.”

“She was the type of human that wanted to mom.”

“She had tons of friends. She was my best friend.”

“My dad was a fisherman. He was a hunter.”

“She was loving and generous and kind.”

"He was a really good grandfather."

"She absolutely loved her family."

"She was a tiny little woman."

"I raised her since she was a baby."

"He always had the best jokes."

"My mom was my world."

"He is a good little brother."

"This is my son."

"He has four children."

"He was so sweet."

"She's a fancy dancer."

"We loved her dearly."

"She's greatly missed."

"We were inseparable."

"My mom was my world."

"He came home to help me."

"She would always call me her princess."

"He had so much love in his heart."

"He did everything he could for our people."

"He has children and family and a huge support system."

"She just loved people and loved her friends."

"She was just really optimistic and looking forward to being a mother."

"She always kept in touch with her daughter."

"She loved all her babies."

"He's awesome. He's an awesome kid growing up, goofy."

"He's my only son; he's the only child the Creator God gave me to raise."

"He was so happy and so full of life and so full of energy and so full of love."

"He was everything I could ask for in a partner and in a father."

"My brother had deep roots in this community. He loved his people, the kids, and rafting with our church groups that would come into town."

"She is extremely ambitious, heartfelt, and driven to make a positive change."

Support Systems

When a tragedy occurs, the support systems that individuals and families turn to play a critical role in their ability to cope and recover. To better understand the most impactful resources and networks during these difficult times, the research team gathered insights from participants about where they sought support. The responses provided a clearer picture of the sources of strength and assistance sought by those affected and gaps in support.

Interview Question: “When this happened, where did you turn for support?”

PERSONAL NETWORKS

Many people turned to their personal networks for support during these difficult times. Family, friends, and peers who had experienced similar tragedies were often key sources of comfort and understanding. Community members also played an important role in helping individuals cope and heal.

“I can’t thank my family [enough], extended family, and the community that we’re involved with culturally, that have been so supportive.”

“I think the one thing that was helpful for me was just how close our family continued to be.”

“There was lots of community support. I don’t know if we turned to them or they turned to us, but people surrounded us. They surrounded our family.”

“I believe we turn to our community. And our community, really, [is] who held us up, you know, who also, who gave us just all of their love.”

“So, yeah, I guess it was a lot of the peer support and kind of just really like stepping back and realizing, like, not that these people have been through worse, but like, they have also been through what I’ve been through.”

SPIRITUAL, CULTURAL, AND TRADITIONAL HEALING

For some, healing came through spiritual, cultural, and traditional practices. These practices provided a sense of connection, meaning, and resilience.

“Sweat lodge was something that really helped me after my sister passed away.”

“We turn to our Creator, we turn to our people.”

“I started sun dancing and really getting into ceremonies and really connecting.”

“God, day in, day out. I’m a follower of Christ. I’m also Indigenous. Turned to my Indigenous ways too, but turned to my Creator on my knees, praying all the time, day and night.”

Others found strength and purpose by giving back to their community, working to support others as part of their healing journey.

“I’ve learned all kinds of great coping skills because, you know, and then I also believe, whatever you learn, you gotta teach it to help. You know, practice makes pathways in your brain.”

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Some people connected with community resources for support. These included victim assistance programs, crisis lines, shelter services, mental health and recovery support, grassroots organizations, and Tribal programs (see Table 1).

The type and helpfulness of support varied widely between the cases, especially regarding when (recent cases had more community support) and where the incident occurred. More recent cases were more likely to report receiving support from victim services.

“I know that back then, I’m [REDACTED AGE] this year, and back then there wasn’t really no support programs as of today now, back then, it was all this open and closed cases.”

Table 1: Community Resources

Resource/Service	Example
Victim Assistance	<i>"I spoke with [REDACTED] for the most part, for everything, and she helped communicate like what rights I had as a victim, I guess. And she was the one that helped me do a victim impact statement."</i>
Crisis Lines	<i>"We have something called the crisis line for behavioral health."</i>
Shelter Services	<i>"I know that it's in [REDACTED], and I know that it's a place for women who have a tendency to keep ending up in bad relationships, and it's supposed to help them heal with that. I think that's an awesome thing. So [REDACTED] here in [REDACTED] and that place there in [REDACTED], they are amazing."</i>
Mental Health & Recovery Support	<i>"They helped us. The treatment facility helped us realize all of that so that we could finally grow and speak to one another in a healthy way."</i>
Grassroots Organizations	<i>"[REDACTED] came through for me when nobody else would. They helped me search and they helped me financially... They prayed over me. They smudged me off constantly. They constantly called me all the time, doing follow-up care, checking up on me, making sure I was okay. They became my family when I had none."</i>
Tribal Programs	<i>"[REDACTED] tribe helped with the funeral expenses. Casket and food for the services, they actually transferred it over to the [REDACTED] reservation where she was buried in the [REDACTED] longhouse."</i>

BARRIERS TO SUPPORT

Unfortunately, not everyone had access to support. Some individuals reported feeling completely alone with no one to turn to during their time of need. In some cases, the absence of help sometimes led people to use substances to cope with the emotional toll of their loss.

"Nobody. I didn't go anywhere. I didn't talk to nobody. I was like a broken record, like I'm talking now, over and over and over and over. Nobody. Nobody come to see me and said, you know, what can I do for you? Nobody. They should have. Somebody should have came and a priest should have come and talked to me. Nobody came."

"There is nobody to turn to for support."

Law Enforcement Involvement

When an MMIWP event occurs, the role of law enforcement is crucial role in investigating the situation, pursuing justice, and providing support to those affected. To better understand how law enforcement interacts with families and communities impacted by MMIWP, the research team gathered participants' experiences and perspectives. The responses provided valuable insight into the nature of police involvement, the effectiveness of their actions, and the challenges families face in these difficult situations. While a few responses highlighted positive aspects of law enforcement involvement, most participants expressed frustration with the assistance they received. Nearly all interviewees felt law enforcement's support was inadequate, leading to feelings of neglect and disappointment.

Interview Question: "How were the police involved?"

This section focuses on the direct actions taken by law enforcement, such as investigations, report-taking, and coordination. It is important to recognize that not all families have experienced these services. When assistance was provided, participants described various aspects of law enforcement involvement, which are outlined here. Personal experiences, including the harms and challenges families faced, are explored in the barriers and hurtful practices sections. In contrast, positive experiences with officers are discussed in the section on helpful practices. This approach provides a clear distinction between the services provided by law enforcement and the personal accounts families shared about their interactions and the quality of those services.

INVESTIGATION

"The police actually came and conducted a search and investigation."

"They took DNA samples out of our mouths... they were going to come up with some kind of DNA profile."

"[REDACTED] was involved in doing the missing person report and letting me know that they'll be in contact."

"The [REDACTED] police force came down to help sweep the rivers, comb through the bushes, and search high and low for him."

Some participants shared that police conducted investigations into their loved one's case. This included taking police reports, filing missing person reports, collecting evidence and DNA samples, and organizing and participating in searches. These investigative efforts aimed to gather information, uncover what happened, and help locate missing people. Participants described these steps as important to finding answers and, in some cases, bringing a sense of hope that progress was being made to find loved ones still missing. While not everyone experienced these services, those who did emphasized the importance of these actions in seeking justice for their loved ones.

COMMUNICATION

"They would give us updates on where the investigation was, where evidence was... They would keep in contact with the prosecuting office for us in the very beginning."

"It was just kind of a back and forth and a check in here and there, you know, not consistently, but you know, "Let's talk about it," "Have you heard anything? No? Okay."

When law enforcement communicated with families, it was often through providing updates on the status of the case, sharing information about the handling of evidence, talking with prosecutors, and checking in to see if any new details had come to light. When they occurred, these efforts helped families feel more informed and connected to the investigation process.

COLLABORATION

"They still helped us get in contact with people, and told us who we could talk to over here that would be willing to help."

"And [REDACTED] really has the best equipment for that, whereas we are not prepared for a situation like that, neither was [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]. And so, because of that, we were able to use their advanced equipment to find him."

When law enforcement engaged in collaboration, it was often by providing referrals to family members or seeking assistance from larger or better-equipped agencies. This included involving specialized teams or resources to enhance the investigation or search efforts. When they occurred, these collaborations aimed to bring in additional expertise or tools that could help resolve the case and support the families more effectively.

Helpful Resources and Practices

Understanding how community agencies and law enforcement support families and survivors of MMIWP is important for identifying what works and where improvements are needed. To gain these insights, the research team gathered participants' experiences with community agencies, such as behavioral health services and victims' resource programs, as well as law enforcement. These reflections helped uncover effective strategies that can be expanded and embraced moving forward. It is important to recognize that not all interviewees received the support and help described in this section.

Interview Question: "Were there any shared resources or practices done by community agencies (e.g., behavioral health services, victims resource program) or police that you found helpful during this time?"

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

"Well, [REDACTED] Victim Assistance Services was most helpful, just in every way they could possibly help. They gave us gas cards, food cards, and money for a hotel. They knew we were driving the [REDACTED] Tribe because I worked for them... So that's kind of a long ways to go. So I was really grateful they did that."

"There were quite a few of them that came in to contribute to us, helping us either with a hotel stay or with a travel lodge, or travel."

Family members and survivors shared the immense financial burdens associated with search and recovery efforts, travel for recovery, burial, and court proceedings. Financial support provided by Tribes, community organizations, and victim services was described as invaluable.

"[REDACTED] really came through for me when nobody else would. They helped me search, and they helped me financially. When I had no money, I lost thousands of dollars in that six months being out of work, and I couldn't pay my rent, and I was going to be homeless, and [REDACTED] swooped in and helped me pay two months of my rent; nobody else would do that. So to them, I'm just eternally, eternally grateful, or else I would have been homeless, you know, homeless looking for my son who's missing, that's like... what? Who can endure that, you know? So I'm so grateful that they did that."

"They offered financial assistance for gas, for groceries, stuff like that, just to keep us afloat while we're searching."

"They even helped put some money up, a reward money for if anybody found him, to call."

EMOTIONAL AND PRACTICAL SUPPORT SERVICES

“Well, my housing advocate. She got me into a grieving [class]... There was like a little seminar of some sort... that I went through, which was really good.”

“When you get in there, they have a big room and like a bunch of beds, and you stay in there for 30 days. They observe you, how you treat people, how you act... so they’re trying to get me on social security and everything. Was really a good place for women to go to.”

“I love that now there’s a set crisis team in [REDACTED]. I hadn’t seen that before, and she has an all-around care there, and they’re receptive... that was just like a breath of fresh air to see that actually happening, something we’ve been fighting for 15 years to get this thing to happen for them.”

Some people found services such as grief counseling, mental health and case management, shelter services, and relocation services helpful as they navigated the difficult circumstances related to their case. However, it should be noted that not all people found these types of services sufficient, culturally relevant, or available.

EMPATHY AND COMMUNICATION

“Yeah, trying to keep us in the loop of what was going on. That was one thing [law enforcement] did. So, I thought that was helpful.”

“They [law enforcement] would give us updates on where the investigation was, where evidence was... They would keep in contact with the prosecuting office for us in the very beginning. So those places were helpful.”

“They [law enforcement] did a very thorough investigation in the house. Very thorough investigation, they, I can’t even tell you what they took out of our home, but they took pictures. They took the carpet. They took everything that that man touched out of our house.”

People shared that one of the most helpful aspects during their tragedy was the kindness and empathy shown by those working on the case, such as law enforcement and court personnel. The simple act of staying in touch with the family, providing regular updates, and showing genuine care made a significant difference. These small gestures helped families feel supported and valued, easing some emotional burden during an incredibly difficult time. The compassion shown by these individuals provided comfort and helped families feel that their loved one was cared for by someone besides themselves, which was meaningful during their grief journey.

“There’s people that are really sincere and concerned and love the work that they do... and that’s the kind of people you need in every position that you feel for, you know, for a better community, healthy community, so that I appreciate it folks for listening to my stories.”

“I want families to know that they do care.”

“I felt like they didn’t give up on my sister.”

“They continue to be patient with us.”

“She knew that she was probably going to get reprimanded for not taking orders. So, I appreciated that a lot. I mean, she went out on the limb for us.”

GRASSROOTS AND COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

“Once we hooked up with [REDACTED], there was a lot of resources, and not just financial resources... It was the support of, ‘What do you need? How can we help you? What have you already done?’ So that they knew where to pick up and begin helping us. They taught us how to make flyers. They invited us to different vigils and things like that. Allowed us to speak. It was a lot of platform sharing, a lot of just connections.”

Grassroots and community-based organizations offering comprehensive support services were also mentioned as incredibly helpful. These organizations often assist with search efforts, such as sharing information, printing flyers, and coordinating community outreach. Their efforts provide supportive resources and create a network of support for families and survivors during their most difficult times, helping to raise awareness and increase the chances of finding missing loved ones.

Additionally, these organizations often hold vigils and marches, host educational and awareness-raising events, and create spaces for family members and survivors to share their stories. These actions have been important in helping people on their healing journey, offering a sense of community, solidarity, and emotional support. Sharing their experiences in these safe spaces allows families and survivors to feel heard and validated, which can be a crucial part of the healing process.

“The more that I like... tiptoe into MMIW events and stuff, the more I kind of don’t feel alone, you know, the more I talk to people about stuff that they’ve been through, and like the shared experiences, as messed up as it is, like it’s comforting to know that it’s not just me.”

“We did a couple of the MMIW walks... I think it’s good because it’s an outlet of something positive. I think it’s positive. It still hurts, but sometimes you need to not suppress the hurt all the time.”

LEGISLATIVE AND STRUCTURAL IMPROVEMENTS

People who have experienced an MMIWP case recently mentioned recent improvements in Washington, such as legislative changes, Washington State Patrol Tribal liaisons, and the availability of advocates. They also highlighted the introduction of Missing Indigenous Person Alerts (MIPA) and the development of toolkits and resource lists as valuable resources that have made a difference in their cases. These improvements have provided more support, better coordination, and a greater sense of hope for families and survivors seeking justice.

“I’m grateful that [REDACTED] knew what to do to help. All of our people, she had that leadership, that wisdom, and that knowledge to put it into a bill so we’re not just running around not knowing what to do.”

“[REDACTED] was very accommodating in writing letters and pushing for a case to be moved federal. I think also the creation of the MMIP Committee on [REDACTED] was very helpful. I keep wanting to say helpful... They worked hard. They tried really hard.”

“I know we have the MIPA alert that’s been helpful.”

HEALING PRACTICES

Some people found comfort in participating in healing practices like sweat lodges, ceremonial tobacco, burial traditions, prayer, and church services within their communities. These practices provided a sense of connection, support, and spiritual healing, helping individuals cope with their pain and find strength during their difficult journey.

“Our society and our ceremonial young people came up to support us... My mom buried her in a pair of moccasins from my great grandma, we wrapped her in a blanket, but also, I think, in a buffalo robe... We put her to rest. It was beautiful.”

“Being able to consistently pray and exercise our cultural practices to keep ourselves alive and to keep our ancestors alive through us is imperative.”

“I think that’s what helped me too, are those songs, those prayers, because I would go into a deep sleep, and I would hear these prayers, and I would also smell the people... It’s our medicine. That’s what helped me.”

“Culture is healing.”

Others shared that one of the most healing parts of their journey was finding closure, whether by uncovering the truth, bringing their loved ones home, or getting some form of justice. While closure did not erase their pain, it gave them a sense of peace and allowed them to honor their loved ones’ memories. For many, finding closure helped shift their focus from unanswered questions and deep grief to remembering their loved ones and finding a way to move forward.

“The only way I keep going on every day is we got closure.”

Unhelpful or Harmful Practices

To better understand the challenges faced by families and survivors of MMIWP cases, the research team gathered participants' experiences with community agencies and law enforcement during these difficult times. Their responses revealed multiple interrelated themes and harmful practices, highlighting systemic failures, institutional bias, cultural insensitivity, and community-level challenges. These issues contribute to the ongoing mishandling of MMIWP cases and underscore the need for meaningful change in addressing these cases.

Interview Question: “Can you tell me about things done by community agencies or police that were not helpful or that you may consider harmful during this time?”

SYSTEMIC AND INSTITUTIONAL FAILURES

Family members and survivors frequently described significant systemic issues in the handling of MMIWP cases. These failures, which spanned law enforcement, judicial processes, and resource allocation, led to delays, mismanagement, and a lack of accountability and urgency in pursuing justice. As a result, many families feel that justice and accountability remain out of reach, with systemic barriers further complicating their efforts to find closure and support. These ongoing challenges have left families frustrated, disheartened, and increasingly distrustful of the systems meant to protect them.

Breakdowns in Investigative Processes

“From the beginning, they [law enforcement] dropped the ball on so many things.”

“Some of these investigations are botched due to political gain for others.”

Family members described harmful practices, such as incomplete investigations, evidence not being collected, a lack of documentation, and mishandling of evidence, including DNA. These actions compromised the integrity of the investigations and diminished the chances of achieving justice for their loved ones.

“So many other family members got killed, and their deaths never got investigated.”

“Her DNA wasn’t entered right... the correct DNA was not on file for [REDACTED], which supposedly it’s fixed now that it was discovered and brought to light... I have no trust, no nothing in law enforcement.”

In some cases, autopsies were not performed, leaving important questions unanswered about the cause of death. Additionally, coroners sometimes recorded incorrect death classifications, which not only led to inaccurate data but also limited future investigations. These misclassifications can prevent cases from being properly reopened or pursued, further holding back efforts to seek accountability and uncover the truth. These breakdowns in the investigative process contribute to the lack of justice for MMIWP cases.

“We’ve never had closure on what actually happened. She was cremated within 24 hours. So, an autopsy was not done, and there were many inconsistencies with what happened.”

“In their police report, it says that she died in a car accident... and there’s a huge awareness that that’s not what happened. And her body was cremated. And it was their recommendation to do that, and the family was distraught and went along with it.”

“And her death certificate, you know, people started saying she was a suicide. That is not on her death certificate. She’s got a homicide on hers, but it was never investigated.”

Lack of Communication and Follow-up

“I tried to speak to the coroner to ask what happened, what was the cause of death, he wouldn’t tell me.”

“I don’t know what they did. I have no idea. I’ve never seen a report.”

“I don’t know who’s doing my cousin’s case, but it doesn’t seem like they care. They don’t check in, they haven’t followed up, they don’t give an update, or anything like you have to pursue them.”

“And not having answers is harmful to the families, more so than not looking into it.”

“I believe everybody experiences a lack of communication. We always felt like we’re not knowing what’s going on, because we don’t hear anything back.”

Families expressed frustration with the lack of transparency and follow-through from those handling their cases. Many shared experiences of poor communication, explaining that critical updates and information about the case were often withheld or inadequately shared. This failure to maintain consistent communication left families feeling excluded from the investigative process and uncertain about the status or progress of their loved one’s case.

“Eventually [REDACTED] stopped wanting to deal with it, it seems like, and they transferred it back to [REDACTED]. And then that was it. Nothing much has really happened.”

“There were times where we received tips, like through Facebook or wherever it may be, and we would forward them to the detective... they were constantly reassigning people like almost daily it seemed, and they wouldn't seem to be followed through on.”

The lack of communication was often exacerbated when cases were transferred to different jurisdictions or because of staff turnover within agencies handling the case.

Judicial System Shortcomings

“Nothing ever happened, no one was ever charged, no one was ever prosecuted, and nothing was ever done.”

“When he had spoken that way to me, I took it on, and I left that office feeling pretty defeated. He did take [REDACTED] off the case, you know, he said, but I'm now tasked with giving you another lawyer. I'll let you know when I find out who that will be and if I have one.”

“Look, you assured my family this is the best person for our case, and now she [lawyer] is being charged with [REDACTED]. Not only is she being charged with [REDACTED], but she made a racial slur.”

“We fought the entire time to have it moved federal, and he ended up pleading guilty in state court and sentenced to state court. That was a huge obstacle.”

Families shared the harmful legal failures they encountered while seeking justice in MMIWP cases, highlighting systemic issues that added to their struggles. Some families reported that their lawyers were ineffective, often overburdened with excessive caseloads and unable to dedicate the time and resources their cases needed. This lack of attention left families feeling unsupported and disappointed with the legal process. Others expressed frustration with delays, lack of communication, and the absence of culturally sensitive approaches, adding to the challenges of navigating an already overwhelming system.

“I tell Dad I've been told he's on the docket. None of us are prepared... he's making his decision today, you need to get here.”

“I think going to all the trials, going to the parole hearings, in a way, kind of kept me reliving our trauma over and over and over when [REDACTED]'s murderer was released, I almost felt a sense of like I could breathe. I don't have to go to any more trials. I don't have to go to any more parole hearings. I don't need to prepare for any more parole hearings. I don't need to see him again.”

Families also detailed the emotionally and financially draining experiences of long and painful court proceedings. They described being called to hearings on short notice, often requiring them to rearrange their schedules and take on significant travel expenses. Despite their efforts, these proceedings frequently led to less-than-ideal outcomes, leaving families feeling that they did not get justice for their loved ones. The drawn-out nature of the process, combined with the financial and emotional toll, only added to their grief and sense of frustration.

BIAS, DISCRIMINATION, AND DEHUMANIZATION

"You can't file this missing person report because he's not missing. He's an addict, ma'am. And those that's the words from [REDACTED] Police Department. He's not missing. He's just an addict, ma'am."

"It didn't feel like they care, like it was just another Indigenous person."

"Maybe because she's lighter-skinned and looks more White, she's treated better than my brother, being a woman, you know?"

"We are all good people, but we are made to look as if though we are less than and there's a stigma around us that we're just drunk Indians or we're addicts, and it doesn't matter that we're missing and lost."

"The one that comes to mind of being harmful to me is reporting my sister missing and getting told her criminal history."

"When you talk to the police, it's just like, okay, is this just another statistic, just somebody else that don't matter? Well, she matters to me. She matters to my family, and we want to find her."

"And I just feel like they're just forgotten. They're not looked at as human beings."

Families and survivors detailed facing racism and sexism as their cases were handled, furthering their grief and frustration. They also shared that they had to overcome harmful stereotypes and victim-blaming as they sought justice in their cases and fought to search for their loved ones. Many families reported feeling dismissed, dehumanized, and shown a lack of empathy by the people who were supposed to be helping with the case and supporting them. Instead of receiving the help they needed, they reported that they were frequently questioned, accused, and not believed as they shared details and sought information on their cases.

MEDIA EXPLOITATION, PUBLIC SCRUTINY, AND COMMUNITY SILENCE

A significant theme involved the harmful intersection of media practices, public exploitation, and community dynamics that often retraumatize families and hinder justice in MMIWP cases. Families and survivors faced scrutiny, misrepresentation, and exploitation from external entities and sometimes within their own communities.

Harmful Media Practice

“One person had called us to do this podcast, and I agreed to her because we wanted the word to get out. So, we thought that would be helpful... And one day, I just asked her, can I see what’s in this notebook? Like, let me see it. She wouldn’t share. And then after that, she just disappeared, her and all her information.”

“On the [REDACTED] Facebook page... a lot of the [REDACTED] residents, during these conversations... they would start to attack [REDACTED]’s integrity without even knowing him, just lumping him in with a drunk, I guess, or you know somebody who they think doesn’t deserve help. And that’s not who [REDACTED] was.”

Families shared that their interactions with the media were often exploitative and insensitive, adding another layer of trauma to their experiences. Participants described how media and social media outlets sensationalized their cases, frequently focusing on harmful and negative narratives that perpetuated stereotypes. These outlets often prioritized sensationalism over accuracy, sharing misleading or outright false information that painted victims and their families in dehumanizing and damaging ways. Families expressed frustration and were hurt by seeing their loved ones slandered with little regard for the truth or the dignity they deserved.

Re-Traumatization

“They had gotten my phone number, and they were calling, like, “Oh, hey, can I set up an interview this and that? Like, are you free tomorrow?” And I’m in the middle of, like, planning my mom’s funeral services, so I just remember getting really mad and, like, throwing my phone... It’s just, you know, my mom was just shot and murdered, like, two days ago. I’m not gonna go drop planning her funeral, to do an interview.”

Though sometimes well-intentioned, public attention can retraumatize families and survivors during their most vulnerable moments. Interviews highlighted the emotional toll of constant inquiries and pressure to publicly share details of their stories. While some individuals hoped to raise awareness or seek justice through sharing, they were frequently met with blame, judgment, and skepticism, further adding to their grief. Families described the hardship of reliving their trauma under relentless public scrutiny, often feeling exposed and unsupported. Despite their cases’ attention, tangible assistance or meaningful action was rarely offered, leaving families to navigate their pain and advocacy efforts largely on their own.

Community Silence and Lateral Violence

“But how do we get that out there, if we have our own people that are doing it... They know all these people. Was it this gang that took her, or was it some of our Tribal people, and then they took her? I never in my life imagined I would ever be in anything like this.”

“My mom never called the cops or alerted anybody about what happened. They said that if she even tried, they would come and kill all of her children.”

“People are gone already, and none will talk. A lot of them are quiet... They don’t want to be a narc.”

“A lot of this I didn’t put on social media either because I didn’t want retaliation to happen to me or my family.”

Within their own communities, participants identified harmful practices that further impeded their efforts to receive justice for their loved ones. Many reported experiencing lateral violence—acts of aggression or hostility from peers within their community—adding to their trauma. Witnesses or individuals with critical information about cases often refused to come forward because of fear of retaliation, distrust in law enforcement, or unresolved interpersonal conflicts. This silence created significant barriers to resolving cases, leaving families and survivors feeling abandoned by those closest to them. Combined with external exploitation by media and public entities, this lack of community support deepened their sense of isolation and worsened the challenges of seeking justice for their loved ones.

Barriers and Obstacles

To better understand the obstacles and barriers faced by families and survivors in MMIWP cases, the research team gathered participants’ experiences navigating these difficult circumstances. Their responses shed light on the challenges of systemic failures, trauma, stigma, and logistical hurdles, all of which significantly limit efforts to achieve justice and healing. These insights underscore the complicated nature of the difficulties encountered, emphasizing the need for systemic reforms and increased support for those affected.

Interview Question: “Could you tell me about barriers or obstacles you faced during this time?”

SYSTEMIC AND STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

“Jurisdiction was difficult for it being county, state, and Tribal, and then having the non-communication barrier was difficult for us to even figure out who’s going to take the lead on the case and who was first on scene... So it was, yeah, pretty difficult witnessing the, seeing, like, chaos. It’s frustrating and disheartening.”

“They were like, well, it’s not our jurisdiction anymore. We can’t do anything.”

“When the [REDACTED] Police Department wouldn’t do anything because it wasn’t in their jurisdiction, that’s all we got, was run around, run around.”

Family members and survivors encountered significant obstacles rooted in institutions, policies, and systemic failures. These challenges were often tied to jurisdictional issues that created confusion and uncertainty regarding which agency was responsible for handling the case and how to navigate the complex processes involved. This confusion extended across initial reporting, the investigation, and the pursuit of justice through the court system. The lack of collaboration and communication between the various agencies furthered these difficulties, leaving families feeling unsupported and disempowered. This fragmented approach delayed progress and worsened the emotional toll on those seeking answers and accountability.

"I think it was maybe two years after [REDACTED] passed away that someone informed me that I could have filed for a civil lawsuit because it happened in [REDACTED], and so when I reached out to try to file a civil lawsuit. They're like, Well, it's been more than a year, so there's nothing you can do about it."

"I didn't know anything about the law. I didn't know anything about my rights. I wish I knew back then what the steps were, what the options were, what I could have done legally to help me and my children through our healing journey."

"You don't know who to turn to, because that's a lot of legal hands. It goes from one to the next to the next to the next. And so that was a difficult part. Without any type of legal representative or legal background, you don't know what you're finding yourself in. And it's, it's a scary time."

Inconsistent and inadequate responses to MMIWP cases represent another systemic barrier that families and survivors frequently face. Participants shared that these obstacles stemmed from a lack of accountability across various systems, including law enforcement and coroner practices. The lack of clear and reliable communication was a reoccurring issue, which left families in the dark about important aspects of their cases. Families were often provided with inconsistent or erroneous information, such as incorrect waiting times to report a missing loved one, further delaying the search for answers. These systemic inconsistencies not only hinder progress but also worsen the MMIWP crisis.

"They don't have the actual stipulations or bylaws or anything that says they offer services. So when they don't have it in writing that they don't offer services, then it's up to them to determine if or how they're going to help you, and if you don't align with their politics, they're not going to help you."

"The police here close ranks on what they know. They're not going to tell you what happened, you know, or anything."

"When it comes to investigations, transparency with the families who are impacted, and I just haven't gotten that transparency, and my family hasn't gotten that transparency. I feel that this is for everybody, but in particular, Natives, because there's such a stigma of MMIWP, that a lot of people who are impacted just don't have that support from law enforcement."

“Something’s wrong. I need to find him. I don’t even know where he’s at. And she said, ‘Well, is he missing or is he just lost?’ I’m like, what do you mean? What do you mean by that? And she’s like, ‘well, you know, he’s using.’ I’m like, What’s the difference? He’s both— he’s missing and he’s lost. Does that make a difference? Does that mean you can’t help me come find him?”

“It was about a month that nobody had seen him, and my aunt went to the authorities and she said, I think he’s missing. And the response was, ‘Well, he’s an adult. He can kind of roam wherever he wants, and isn’t that kind of what he does anyway?’ So there shouldn’t be any reason for concern or whatever.”

“Only the family members know how they really are, not a stipulation on the law, not requirements. But you know they have to be missing for 24 hours.”¹

Other structural barriers include the lack of access to important resources, either because such resources did not exist in their location or were inaccessible due to restrictive requirements and policies. Families and survivors reported that even when resources were available, strict eligibility criteria and bureaucratic hurdles often limited their ability to utilize them. These barriers created significant inequities in support, leaving many without assistance.

“I wish there was more programs, more support that could have helped guide us on what our options are, legally, financially, mentally.”

“There was nobody there to offer any assistance... I tried to reach out to them. They said, well, the crime happened in the state, but not on the reservation, so we can’t help you... There’s nobody there to turn to.”

“There’s no roadmap of the resources out there; if you don’t know what resources to look for, then you don’t know who to ask, and if you don’t know who to ask, then there’s nothing.”

JUSTICE BARRIERS

“If someone like him or anybody is in jail on these type of charges, they should not be on the ankle monitor... the most difficult part that I had to go through in the courtroom is knowing that he was getting to go home when I had told the Judge ‘my sister’s in a grave. She’s never coming home.’”

“The murderer was released just four years after the murder.”

“It still hurts today because justice hasn’t been fully served... three years was not justice, and that’s all those boys did; not in prison, in [REDACTED]. That’s where they spent three years. And so that’s what I’m looking for, justice for my sister.”

¹ There is common misconception that there is a waiting period to report a missing person. There is no waiting period in Washington.

Families whose MMIWP cases progressed through the court system reported significant barriers to receiving justice. One of the most distressing challenges was using plea bargains, which often resulted in reduced punishment for perpetrators. Additionally, many perpetrators received minimal sentences or probation, allowing them to return to the community, which compounded the trauma for families seeking accountability. In some instances, multiple individuals were implicated in the crime, but only one person was held accountable and served time, leaving others unpunished and free in the community. These judicial outcomes left families feeling that justice was incomplete or denied, worsening their pain, and putting them in fear for their safety.

PERSONAL AND FAMILY-LEVEL BARRIERS

"I think it impacted the whole family in a way that's indescribable."

"Something really tricky in traumatic grief. Grief is hard anyway, and you add a layer of trauma to it, and it feels so out of body."

"Not knowing how or what or when or where, that's puts a little bit of anger into me, a lot of anger."

"Just a scary thought, a nightmare for something like that to happen to a family member."

Months of not knowing. Wondering if she's okay. Is she being sex trafficked? Is she being beaten up? Is she hungry? Is she cold? Is she eating? You know, that's the kind of things we think about our loved one, if they're okay."

"And I feel ashamed I let my mom down, you know, I let my family down. I let myself, my spirit down because I let my guard down. I should have been fighting."

Families and survivors disclosed numerous personal and family-level barriers they encountered while navigating their MMIWP cases. They shared the emotional toll these experiences took on them and their loved ones as they struggled with overwhelming feelings of grief, anger, frustration, confusion, and hopelessness. Many also described intense fear, shame, and self-blame, deepened by the trauma of losing a loved one under unresolved or violent circumstances. These emotional burdens often led to deteriorating mental health, creating additional challenges for families already struggling to seek justice and healing.

"I really thought, you know, that it destroyed me spiritually. I couldn't go into a ceremony. I would plan these ceremonies. I would put them on. I would walk in and I would walk out, and I could not be in there."

"I gave up all my sun dance stuff, all the stuff we'd collected. Our rattles, feathers, everything, all our stuff. I got rid of it all. I couldn't have it around me anymore."

Some individuals shared that their grief led them to lose faith and disengage from cultural practices and ceremonies. The profound pain and sense of loss they experienced created a disconnect from spiritual and cultural traditions that might otherwise have offered comfort. This shift highlights the personal and diverse ways people process grief, as well as the additional emotional and spiritual challenges that many face when navigating the aftermath of an MMIWP tragedy.

“He only got one year and got let go. And I run into him quite often. Sometimes I get triggered, sometimes I don’t, but it’s always a gamble on what kind of if I expect it or not or and it’s not that I’m scared. It’s just it just like stuff comes back.”

Some individuals live in communities where they regularly encounter the perpetrator involved in their or their loved one’s case. These ongoing interactions serve as a constant reminder of the trauma, increasing the emotional toll and creating significant obstacles to healing. The presence of perpetrators in the community not only reinforces feelings of fear and frustration but also highlights the lack of accountability and justice, making it even more challenging for families and survivors to move forward in their journey toward healing.

“We weren’t really open with each other at that time, because I think we were trying to protect each other and everybody, because it just felt so scary and raw.”

“I never, maybe hardly heard how my mother was murdered, or nothing about that. My grandparents never talked about it to us.”

“They don’t know I’ve been through that... They don’t know because I’m just scared to tell them. Never told my kids either.”

While many individuals described their families as a source of support, this was not the case for everyone. Some people feared disclosing their case details to family members, worried about potential judgment or conflict. Others experienced family members avoiding discussions about the loved one who had passed, either out of discomfort or an inability to process the loss. This lack of openness created feelings of isolation for those seeking connection and understanding. These experiences underscore the complicated dynamics within families during times of grief and stress.

“And my little niece is only [REDACTED], and she lost her dad. And how do I— how do we as a family help her understand?”

“It was hard for me because it’s like, you know, you want to support, like, how do I support that? And you don’t want to contribute to anything that’s more damaging. You want to contribute to the healing. So, what does that look like?”

Similarly, some individuals shared that they often struggled to find ways to comfort hurting loved ones. The grief and emotional pain experienced by family members created an environment where it was difficult to know what to say or do to provide support. This uncertainty sometimes led to feelings of helplessness and frustration, further complicating their ability to connect and heal together.

"I think that's when my marriage started breaking up. It was when that happened with her, because I really blamed my ex-husband. Why did you stop me? I wanted to go look for her. It's your fault. If I had found her, she would still be alive."

"And so while all this is going on with [REDACTED], we still have [REDACTED] trying to deal with his mom, trying to figure out what happened... we've got three little grandkids here that lost their mom abruptly, and then we've got this one that we've been dealing with, you know, how do you raise kids like that? Nobody prepares you for what happens with these kids."

The trauma stemming from MMIWP cases profoundly impacted entire families, often causing ripple effects that extended beyond individual grief. People shared experiences of heightened conflict within their families, leading to strained relationships, divorce, and, in some cases, the displacement of children. These secondary effects of trauma disrupted family stability and support systems, worsening the challenges families faced as they navigated their loss.

"So, I did the same with my son's pictures, and I had a lot of thinking to do about that, because in our tradition, we're not supposed to share pictures of our loved ones until a year after... I shared his pictures to let him know you know what we know you did... I had a lot of people that were really angry at me because I was breaking tradition of sharing my son's pictures... But I want answers."

People also described the barriers and obstacles they encountered within their communities. For some, cultural practices define specific ways of honoring a loved one after they pass, including guidelines on when and how to talk about them and how to handle their belongings and photographs. While these practices are meaningful to many, others shared that they faced judgment from their communities when they chose not to follow them. This judgment added to their emotional burden, leaving them feeling alienated or unsupported during an already difficult time.

"I was scared to speak up on things. I was scared to, because I lived in [REDACTED], where she disappeared... My kids, her kids, went to school in the [REDACTED] School District at that time, so it was kind of a scary thing, you know, where you wouldn't speak up."

"I also say, like, inside our communities, I feel like there's a lot of judgment of each other."

Additionally, individuals reported experiencing judgment, stigma, and even threats from members of their community related to their MMIWP case. These negative responses created a hostile environment that contributed to emotional distress and feelings of isolation. The fear of retaliation or alienation further limited their ability to seek justice or openly grieve their loved ones.

PRACTICAL AND LOGISTICAL BARRIERS

Families and survivors shared numerous practical and logistical barriers they faced throughout their MMIWP cases, many of which were tied to significant financial burdens. Families often bear substantial expenses related to their cases, such as travel costs to attend court proceedings or access services. These travels spanned throughout Washington, across state lines, and even into Canada, often with little or no financial assistance. For many, the inability to afford travel prevented them from participating fully in court proceedings or receiving critical support services.

“The murderer was released just four years after the murder. I went to all the parole hearings after he was sentenced, and that last one was during the pandemic. The murder happened in Canada. So, at the time, nobody was crossing the border, and I couldn’t attend, I feel like if I could have gone, maybe he’d still be serving his time.”

“She did try to look into private investigators, but it was way too much money.”

“I went to our Tribal programs up here to seek help, and it was hard for them. ‘Sorry, we can’t do anything because there’s nothing there in our budget at the moment for us to even help you out with any type of funds traveling.’”

“I don’t have money, so I can’t find an attorney.”

“Flyers aren’t cheap. I mean, I just got printed out like, I think it was 15. It was in their weatherproof at Office Depot, and it was close to, like \$90 and you know, for a poster.”

“People don’t have money for fuel... that becomes an obstacle as well, not having adequate transportation, not having somebody there to be with you.”

In addition to these challenges, families bore the financial strain of searching for their missing loved ones. This included costs for printing flyers, food, fuel, lodging, and in some cases, hiring private investigators—expenses that were simply not feasible for many families. These logistical and financial barriers not only added to the emotional toll but also highlighted systemic inequities that disproportionately affect families seeking justice and closure.

“Not having access to a phone or technology was really hard.”

Some individuals reported that a lack of access to technology posed a significant obstacle during their MMIWP cases. Without reliable access to phones, computers, or the internet, they faced difficulties communicating with key contacts, organizing efforts, and staying updated on developments in their case.

“And I’m like, well, we can’t just go on people’s property, and we have to have permission from [REDACTED]. We can’t just go on land that, you know, we can’t just invade that land like that and look around, we have to have them escort us, which I knew, and it costs money to have them go back out there.”

“A barrier that we had is because, because it’s a no-fly zone, we had to apply for permits to use our drones to go out there and search the banks up the river. And so the primary means of search was on boat. Additionally, it was lack of access to the beaches during a low tide, you really have to navigate it. So not all people have access to a boat for a means of searching.”

“A barrier we had was just fences, and being able to walk along the shores of beaches that were accessible, because it’s private property, and a lot of it is just getting access to places that you can search.”

Another logistical barrier families faced was the inability to access the areas they needed to search. This included challenges such as restricted access to private property, difficulties obtaining necessary permits, and safety concerns in hazardous or remote locations. Additionally, some searches required specialized equipment, such as tools for searching in water, which many families could not access or afford. These obstacles delayed search efforts and added to the frustration and emotional burden experienced by MMIWP families.

Recommendations

To learn more about family member and survivor recommendations for addressing the challenges related to MMIWP cases, the research team gathered participants’ ideas for improving the system and supporting those affected. In response, they shared a wide range of recommendations to create meaningful change and better meet the needs of families and communities.

Interview Question: “What recommendations do you have to begin to address some of these issues you faced?”

These recommendations were categorized into six areas based on the population they were intended to support:

1. General Recommendations (Table 2)
2. Recommendations for People Experiencing an MMIWP Case (Table 3)
3. Recommendations for the State (Table 4)
4. Recommendations for Tribes (Table 5)
5. Recommendations for Law Enforcement (Table 6)
6. Recommendations for Community Agencies (Table 7)

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Interviewees offered diverse recommendations for addressing MMIWP issues. They emphasized the importance of establishing a comprehensive DNA database to aid in identifying victims and reconnecting families. Federal oversight was suggested to revisit unresolved cases, while collaboration among stakeholders and taking actionable steps with tangible results were identified as priorities.

Raising awareness through accurate media portrayals and consistent local news reporting was also suggested. Family members and survivors called for research and data collection improvements to provide updated statistics. Finally, they urged those involved in this work to approach families with kindness, take the time to meet and listen, and continue spreading awareness about MMIWP to drive change.

Table 2: General Recommendations

Recommendation “Example”
1. Establish and encourage contributions to a comprehensive DNA database to assist with MMIWP. <i>“I think if there was some sort of DNA register, you would be able to find their families faster.”</i>
2. If you are involved in this work, be kind. <i>“Just remember to be kind, to be kind, especially when we’re working, you know, you have to remember, if it wasn’t for our people, we wouldn’t have our positions.”</i>
3. Take action that has tangible results. <i>“You know, we don’t want sympathy. We want action, and that’s what seems to be lacking.”</i>
4. Federal oversight on MMIWP cases. <i>“Some sort of federal oversight to revisit these cases.”</i>
5. Improve collaboration. <i>“We got to collaborate, continue to work as a team.”</i>
6. Improve accurate media portrayals. <i>“For the media aspect, I think we need to see more Indigenous people. I think just being able to show the media that, you know, like, break the stigma and stereotypes.”</i>
7. Report MMIWP cases in local news. <i>“I wish that they would put in the news at least every night.”</i>
8. Take the time to meet with people and listen. <i>“Meet with the families. Meet with the people. Sit and listen to us. Don’t dismiss us.”</i>

² These recommendations were provided directly by family members during interviews. They have not been further analyzed or contextualized through external research.

9. Improve research and data collection on MMIWP.

“We need more research. Sovereign Bodies Institute, Annita Lucchesi originally came out with original numbers of how many were missing in each city. That was the first time anybody’s seen any numbers. Those numbers are old, like by five years now, you know we need, we need more numbers.”

10. Continue raising awareness.

“Continue to put the word out for our missing sisters and brothers out there, and maybe one day all this won’t be happening so much or at all.”

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PEOPLE EXPERIENCING AN MMIWP CASE

Families and survivors shared advice for others navigating the challenges of MMIWP cases, emphasizing perseverance, self-care, and connection. They encouraged others to not lose hope and to practice patience, love, and self-care. Engaging with cultural traditions, language, and prayer was highlighted as important for healing. Advocating for oneself and others, seeking guidance from elders, and offering support to those in need were also recommended. Additionally, participants stressed the importance of utilizing MMIWP-specific resources, which provide practical support, counseling, and organized search efforts.

Table 3: Recommendations for People Experiencing an MMIWP Case

Recommendation “Example”
1. Don’t lose hope. <i>“All I could recommend is keep going, don’t give up. You are going to run into a lot of people that will surprise you, that are willing to help.”</i>
2. Practice self-care. <i>“When you feel like you are needing some sanity, take a deep breath... Sometimes you just have to take a breath and sleep.”</i>
3. Be there for your family. <i>“Just continue to have patience and love, you know, for your family. Don’t just numb out and just be there for them as you can be. But don’t numb yourself.”</i>
4. Practice culture and language. <i>“Culture and language—I will live by that. That is really the only thing that I think has helped contribute to our healing.”</i>
5. Pray. <i>“We just need to pray, because at the end of all of it, the only one who really knows everything that’s going on is Creator himself.”</i>

<p>6. Advocate for yourself and others.</p> <p><i>“Speak out, use your voice, let your voice be heard because it can potentially help.”</i></p>
<p>7. Connect with elders.</p> <p><i>“They just have so much knowledge to pass on.”</i></p>
<p>8. Offer help to others.</p> <p><i>“We need to go to the individual themselves and see for ourselves and try to get them the help that they need, even when they don’t want that help, we have to try to offer it to them.”</i></p>
<p>9. Seek out MMIWP resources.</p> <p><i>“Our council has MMIW chairperson, Councilman that sits on the MMIW Washington. So I feel like it’s starting to get better for us in our community, but I would just seek out those services like MMIW, Washington is a really good support, and they’re really on it. As soon as you did your intake, like, they assigned somebody for you, and they gave you the support that you need counseling or someone to talk to. Like, if that person is missing, they have, like, somebody assigned search party and get going that going for you. So I feel like the MMIW Washington is a really good resource, and I recommend that to anybody that’s lost somebody or has a family that they’re missing.”</i></p>

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE STATE

Participants also offered recommendations to address systemic issues they experienced in MMIWP cases. They stressed the need for adequate resources and funding for searches, investigations, and family support, while advocating for Tribes to have direct control over MMIWP funding. Structural changes, such as addressing systemic racism and fulfilling treaty obligations, were highlighted as important. Participants called for specialized MMIWP advocates in each region and the establishment of a complaint system within the AGO for mishandled cases.

Table 4: Recommendations for the State

<p>Recommendation</p> <p><i>“Example”</i></p>
<p>1. Provide resources and funding, specifically for search, investigation, and support.</p> <p><i>“You know, everybody’s aware that we’re in the MMIWP epidemic. We need that money to go towards services.”</i></p>
<p>2. Have Tribes control how MMIWP funding is used.</p> <p><i>“We do not need to be going through the state to get the funding for MMIP. Funds [should] be taken away and given to Tribes, federal organizations that are trustworthy, and to nonprofit organizations directly.”</i></p>

<p>3. Do not remove children from the family.</p> <p><i>“When you’re dealing with somebody and a parent is missing, you need to leave that child wherever the mother left the child until that person surfaces.”</i></p>
<p>4. Address structural racism.</p> <p><i>“There has to be a whole structural change in the way that we believe Native people, the way that we love and care for Native people or people of color.”</i></p>
<p>5. Establish regional MMIW specialists.</p> <p><i>“Why can’t they have a specialist for MMIW in these regions that to just reach out to families, just like those victim specialists do you know, after a crime is committed, they’re the ones that go in there and really work with the family to help them, get into counseling, get into resources.”</i></p>
<p>6. Establish a complaint system in the Attorney General’s Office for MMIWP cases.</p> <p><i>“There should be somebody that’s easily reachable that you can put complaints into or requests for investigations into these specific cases where they’re not being handled correctly, so that you can have attorney and you know, tell, the police officers that they need to be doing things differently because they’re not going to listen to the families.”</i></p>
<p>7. Share information on MMIWP cases publicly and have a tip line.</p> <p><i>“I would like to see something like Crime Stoppers, and they would send out a pamphlet of like, who was being looked for, what their charges were, but with the missing people and to have an anonymous tip line.”</i></p>
<p>8. Fulfill treaties.</p> <p><i>“I feel like it really just kind of falls on the hands of the people who’ve done this to us, where, how, and when are they going to fulfill those treaties, right?”</i></p>
<p>9. Create a legal pathway for accessing surveillance footage.</p> <p><i>“They need to make a law or something that people can access surveillance footage. It really feels like there should be a legal pathway for investigators or people who are looking for a missing person to have the utmost authority to get access to surveillance footage, and I think that really would have helped in finding my father.”</i></p>
<p>10. Respect Tribal sovereignty.</p> <p><i>“Washington state laws need to not be trying to take over the Tribe’s sovereignty.”</i></p>

Interviewees also stressed practical measures, like publicizing MMIWP cases with tip lines, creating legal pathways to access surveillance footage, and ensuring children are not removed from families during crises.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TRIBES

The interviews resulted in several recommendations for Tribes to enhance their response to the MMIWP crisis. These include enacting policy changes to hold individuals accountable for activities contributing to MMIWP cases, such as drug-related offenses, and increasing justice-focused training within Tribal communities. Expanding the number of Indigenous police officers was emphasized as a critical step toward improving safety and accountability.

Participants also suggested using revenue from sports betting and online gaming to fund services addressing MMIWP and establishing a Tribal resource hub for pooling resources and supporting investigations. Finally, fostering open-mindedness and supporting efforts to reconnect relatives with their culture were highlighted as important steps for building more united communities.

Table 5: Recommendations for Tribes

Recommendation "Example"
<p>1. Change policies.</p> <p><i>"I would have a list of policy changes that the Tribal councils can enact on their Tribal land. For example, banning drug dealers, taking per capita away from people that are fentanyl users, not disenrolling, but holding accountable individuals on the Tribal level for participating in any kind of murders or missing people."</i></p>
<p>2. Increase justice training in Tribal communities.</p> <p><i>"We should be able to take the training to our people and have our own sheriffs or law authorities."</i></p>
<p>3. Increase the number of Native police officers.</p> <p><i>"I'd like to see an increase in Native police."</i></p>
<p>4. Ensure law enforcement coverage in unincorporated areas.</p> <p><i>"It's unincorporated, which means that we don't have funding for law enforcement."</i></p>
<p>5. Use revenue from sports betting and online gaming to address MMIWP.</p> <p><i>"They already are aware that we're in an MMIW fentanyl epidemic, and they're proposing this new online gaming, and nothing has anything to do with it for services. They just recently, in the past two years, passed the sports betting here in Washington and California, and none of that is going towards any epidemic."</i></p>
<p>6. Establish a Tribal resource hub focusing on sharing resources for search and investigation.</p> <p><i>"There should be a central place for all the Tribes in Washington State to pool resources and help each other."</i></p>
<p>7. Support reconnecting relatives.</p> <p><i>"If there's a young person, an older person who's trying to get connected with their roots and stuff, and they're trying to find people to learn more about their culture; I think being like open minded about it, not being so quick to judge, would be beneficial so, open mindedness on both sides."</i></p>

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT

Most of the recommendations shared by family members and survivors were for improving law enforcement's approach to MMIWP cases. Prioritizing increased communication with families was a recurring theme, with suggestions to establish consistent follow-up protocols and eliminate waiting periods for reporting missing people. Many emphasized the importance of deploying search parties immediately and ensuring cases are taken seriously, especially when families express urgency.

Additional recommendations included expanding investigative resources, improving jurisdictional collaboration, and providing officers with training in trauma, historical context, and empathetic communication. Participants further stressed the need for transparency, eliminating racism within agencies, and ensuring officers show respect for victims and their families.

Table 6: Recommendations for Law Enforcement

Recommendation "Example"
1. Increase communication with families. <i>"Law enforcement can work on contacting families."</i>
2. Send out search parties. <i>"I recommend that search parties be utilized. That was something they refused to do. I feel like if that were would have been deployed within the first day or two, then we probably would have had a lot more luck."</i>
3. Increase investigative resources. <i>"But then again, for whoever's on the case, you're hoping that they have endless amounts of resource[s] to seek out answers, follow leads, investigate."</i>
4. Improve jurisdictional collaborative efforts. <i>"Make cross jurisdictions and collaboration efforts way more easy than what it seems to be right now."</i>
5. Officers show families that they care about their case. <i>"If I knew that they were that they cared, that would be huge. It's like the simple things...you can show that you care and that you take your job seriously. That's simple."</i>
6. Don't dismiss any missing person report. <i>"It needs to be taken seriously. Especially if the family is saying that it needs to be taken seriously."</i>
7. Eliminate racism in the agency. <i>"I just want our people to be seen as people, as human beings."</i>
8. Additional training for law enforcement officers. <i>(i.e. trauma, historical context, how to communicate with families, empathy, MMIWP and its risk factors, mental health).</i>

9. Increase transparency.

“Be more transparent where you can be let people know, what are you doing, or can we get a summary of what our problems are out here?”

10. Establish a follow-up protocol.

“We might have a law, but how good is it if we’re not following up with it?”

11. Eliminate waiting periods to report a missing person.³

“They should be able to take the report and not make the family go home and wonder and then wait that two days, because that two days feels like a very long time, especially when you’re worried.”

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNITY AGENCIES

Finally, family members and survivors offered recommendations to address issues surrounding MMIWP cases, highlighting the need for support across diverse areas and populations. Suggestions included increasing services for urban Indigenous individuals, providing mental health resources and peer support, and improving resources for vulnerable populations such as homeless individuals or victims of domestic violence. The importance of in-person engagement and culturally relevant practices was emphasized, alongside calls for early intervention, more shelters, and programs specifically for children impacted by MMIWP. Participants also stressed the need for grief and support groups, community readiness assessments, and education on safety for youth and families. Other recommendations included reducing barriers to service participation, increasing access to crisis intervention, and creating resources for individuals who voluntarily go missing to safely return home. The need for advocates to guide families through these challenges was also strongly expressed. These insights reflect a holistic approach to addressing the needs of families and communities affected by MMIWP.

Table 7: Recommendations for Community Agencies

Recommendation “Example”
<p>1. Provide support to urban Natives.</p> <p><i>“I’m an urban Indian. I can’t go up there and access counseling up there, because I’m not part of that Tribe. So when you have people like me that are urban Indians from somewhere else, you end up depending on a place like this. And if you don’t find it here, you’re just left with whoever your circle of people is to help you get through these things.”</i></p>
<p>2. Increase mental health resources and peer support.</p> <p><i>“Therapy, counseling, like, I don’t know, kind of like a program to where, where you can heal and be yourself with people who are equipped to help and other people who are experiencing it so they can help each other.”</i></p>

³ There is common misconception that there is a waiting period to report a missing person. There is no waiting period in Washington.

3. Improve resources for women who are leaving domestic violence.
<i>"They say this is the scariest time for women in domestic violence is when she tries to leave... I think that's also important."</i>
4. Early intervention for victims.
<i>"People who are victims can become perpetrators or predators. So without taking care of the people who are victims early enough, if they don't have the conscience to steer themselves into the right path to go get the healing that they needed. It's not good."</i>
5. Reduce requirements that pose barriers to participation in services.
<i>"I think it's really important not to try to scare people away with too many requirements. I think that requirements should be based off of psychological or case management evaluation and each individual should kind of have their own path."</i>
6. Incorporate cultural practices into care.
<i>"So I would like to see that culturally done with children. Teach them how to make earrings, teach them how to, I don't know, weave, teach them something."</i>
7. Establish more support groups.
<i>"I'm always looking for grief and loss groups, and they're just nonexistent."</i>
8. Create programs for children impacted by MMIWP.
<i>"You know, the high-risk kids that have families that have been impacted by this, and then they don't know what to do, where to reach out."</i>
9. Have more advocates to guide families.
<i>"I think having someone to walk with us would have greatly benefited us."</i>
10. Conduct community readiness assessments.
<i>"Doing what we call this community readiness process. Is your community ready to address a subject?"</i>
11. Provide education on safety.
<i>"Maybe schools, maybe programs and reservations...send people out to talk to young people, and remind people, anywhere they gather, to be safe, keep their kids safe."</i>
12. Provide crisis intervention early.
<i>"I think the problem is, is that they (mental health services) don't actually help until the crisis is at its worst point."</i>
13. Provide resources for people who went missing voluntarily to come home.
<i>"If there was a way to get her home, if all she had to do was ask, that would be great. Because maybe that might save her life."</i>

LIMITATIONS

The research team held interviews over 15 days in six locations across Washington. During that time, 53 people were able to participate in the interviews. Due to time and travel limitations, not everyone who wanted to participate in the interviews could do so. If the data and research team had been able to conduct interviews in more locations or on more days, more people would have had the opportunity to share their experiences. It is important to note that the experiences reflected in this report are not the experiences of every person who has experienced MMIWP in Washington.

Additionally, the 53 interviews resulted in 483 pages of transcriptions, all of which is rich and important information. The data and research team used qualitative methods to summarize information in this report and selected illustrative quotes, but that process is inherently reductive in nature. It is important to note that this report summarizes the experiences shared. The research team shared this report with everyone who participated in the interviews, requesting feedback to ensure it aligned with its intended purpose.



CONCLUSION

This interview report offers insight into the lived experiences of the families and survivors of MMIWP. It offers a window to understand the devastating impact that violence, systemic failures, and cultural erasure continue to have on Indigenous communities. It also highlights Indigenous families' never-ending strength and love as they strive for justice.

Family members and survivors shared their deeply personal accounts of how the systems that are supposed to protect and serve instead created barriers, delays, and additional trauma as they sought justice. Families spoke of investigations that stalled or never started, mishandled cases, and inconsistent or nonexistent communication. They described feeling dismissed, dehumanized, and sometimes entirely alone in their efforts to seek justice. At the same time, they also shared moments of support—sometimes through cultural and spiritual practices, grassroots organizing, trusted advocates, or family and community members coming together. Family members and survivors shared numerous recommendations to be implemented at the family, state, Tribe, law enforcement, and community agency levels.

This report is a single step forward in addressing MMIWP. It is critical to understand that this work is not finished. We must all take action to address systemic deficiencies. Policy makers, law enforcement, service providers, and all who are involved in responding to MMIWP cases should implement the recommendations in this report. There is not one single way to address MMIWP. Many changes are needed and require ongoing commitment from people at all levels. We hope this report contributes to that momentum and that families and survivors guide the path forward.

To everyone who participated: thank you for taking the time to share your experiences and trusting us to reflect what you shared in this Task Force report. We are honored to have spent time with each of you. We carry your stories with the utmost commitment and care.

APPENDIX

Methods

Source Selection

The Data and Research Team worked with the Data & Research Subcommittee and Families Subcommittee of the Washington MMIWP Task Force, and the Washington Attorney General's Office (AGO) Tribal Liaison and AGO Policy Analyst, with Tribal consultation, to develop the plan to engage family members and survivors impacted by MMIWP. The team worked with six Indigenous-serving organizations across Washington. These six organizations served as host locations, assisted with recruiting participants, and offered culturally supportive services for the participants before, during, or after the interview.

The Data and Research Team and the AGO developed informational materials, handouts, and email language describing the purpose of the interviews, and the host locations shared the information with the people they serve. Interviews were open to any adult who self-identified as a survivor or family member impacted by the MMIWP crisis. A total of 53 people participated in the family and survivor interviews.

Tools

Researchers worked with the Data & Research Subcommittee, Families Subcommittee, AGO Tribal Liaison, and AGO Policy Analyst to develop seven open-ended interview questions (provided throughout the report) to gain knowledge on six learning objectives. The AGO and Task Force designed the learning objectives in response to recommendations voiced by the community from the previous [Washington MMIWP Task Force report](#) (2022).

The Data and Research Team designed the interview protocol and questions to reflect culturally appropriate, responsive, and trauma-informed best practices. They developed an informed consent document written in plain language to ensure clarity and accessibility, explaining the purpose of the research and what participation entailed. They also developed an interview protocol document outlining how interviews would be conducted and concluded. The Data & Research Subcommittee, the Families Subcommittee, the AGO Tribal Liaison, and the AGO Policy Analyst reviewed the developed materials to suggest appropriate changes. Proceeding with the feedback, the research team finalized the informed consent document and interview tool after final approval from the AGO.

Collection Procedure

The Data and Research Team and the AGO worked closely with Data & Research and Families Subcommittees to identify potential interview host locations. It was important to the subcommittees that urban and rural interview sites were selected. If a host location was a program under a Tribal government, AGO reached out to Tribal leadership to request permission for interviews to be conducted within their Tribal facilities. The Families Subcommittee emphasized the importance of having additional support for

participants during the interview. Support staff from the host locations were on-site to assist the participants at their request. Support included prayer, smudge, companionship, and sharing of resources.

The Data and Research Team, AGO, and host locations worked together to recruit and schedule those who indicated they would like to participate in the interviews. AGO staff and researchers traveled to the host locations throughout the state, spending two or three days in each location interviewing family members and survivors.

Upon arrival at the host location, AGO staff or researchers greeted the participants and reviewed the informed consent document before the interview. During this time, the participant was asked to consider having their interview video recorded, audio recorded, or not recorded. With the recording, the participants also had the choice to receive an edited and an unedited version of their interview for personal use. Professional photos were also offered for personal use. Lastly, participants were given the option to share their interview with the MMIWP Task Force.

The MMIWP Families Subcommittee recommended providing video and audio recording options, along with professional photos. It was important to the Families Subcommittee that these options were available to participants to decrease the burden of retelling their story multiple times and to affirm their agency and ownership of what they shared and experienced.

If the participant did not want a visual recording, they were asked to consent to audio recording the interview for note-taking purposes. If the participant declined audio recording, AGO staff were present to take notes on paper. Before beginning the interview, the interviewer reaffirmed that the prepared questions were to guide the conversation, but the participant was in control of their story. Participants could skip questions, return to questions later, take breaks when needed, and end the interview whenever they liked. If participants consented to recording, the videographer also took time to explain the recording process and how the equipment worked, answering any questions.

The interviews lasted approximately one hour on average but ranged from 15 minutes to three and a half hours. After the interview, the research team thanked each person and told them when to expect a final report. Participants were compensated \$200 for their time. Small gifts provided by the host locations, the Task Force, and items provided by the AGO were made available as a “thank you” to the participants. The items included blankets, beadwork, candles, traditional medicines, food, beverages, and other available items in each location.

After the interviews were complete, the videographer edited and distributed recordings to participants as they had indicated on their consent forms. The videographer transferred audio files to the Data and Research Team for transcription. Transcripts were redacted of all personally identifying information to protect the participant’s anonymity. Researchers compiled all notes taken during the interviews and stored them on a secure server, accessible only to staff associated with this project.

Analysis

The Data and Research Team analyzed the family and survivor interview data using thematic analysis (data analysis that identifies common themes across all interviews). QDA Miner software was used to organize, code, and analyze the data. An open-coding reflexive process allowed the themes to emerge organically from the data. Once the open coding process was finished, the team performed second-level axial coding to provide a more focused and systematic examination of the data. Axial coding aims to identify the relationships between the categories and subcategories identified during the open coding process.

Family and Survivor Interview

Consent Form

Why We're Doing This:

The Washington Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and People (MMIW/P) task force wants to talk with people from Washington State and the Pacific Northwest to understand why violence against American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN) people happens. We also want to figure out how different rules and systems make collecting information about this violence hard. We hope to find ways to improve things for AIAN people who experience violence, whether they live on reservations or in cities.

What You'll Do:

If you agree to help, we'll ask you to share your experiences and thoughts about the MMIW/P problem. We will talk with you in person. We have prepared ten questions to guide the conversation and will share those with you beforehand so you can prepare. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to.

You will have the option to choose between an audio recording or a video recording of your story. Additionally, you can decide whether to share your recorded story with the MMIW/P task force or to keep it private. If you consent to share the recording with the task force, they may use clips, images, and audio as part of their efforts to address MMIW/P. If you choose to keep your recording private, only you will have a copy of the recording. We will destroy the original recording after we take notes.

Possible Risks:

Talking about your experiences might bring up painful memories. If it does and you want to stop, just let us know. We can help you find support services for free.

Possible Benefits:

Sharing your story will help us better understand the MMIW/P issue, which could lead to recommendations for improving safety and communication.

Compensation:

You'll be compensated \$200 for your time, even if you decide to stop during the interview. You will also receive an electronic copy of your interview.

Keeping Your Information Safe:

Your name, your loved one's name, and personal details will not be shared in any reports or publications. You can even use a different name if you want. Only the researchers will have access to what you tell us. We'll keep records of your interview for three years, but we won't link them to your name. The information we gather might be used in future studies, but it will always be anonymous.

Your Choice:

You don't have to participate if you don't want to. You can stop at any time without any negative consequences.

Questions and Help:

If you have any questions, you can contact Emily Grant's office at emily.grant@uwyo.edu.

Recording Consent

- I consent to video recording my interview.
- I consent to audio recording my interview only.
- I DO NOT consent to be recorded during my interview

Sharing Consent

- I consent to the WA MMIP Task Force using my interview recording.
- I want to keep my interview recording private.

Name

Date

Signature

Mailing Address

City, State

Zip code

Email Address

Phone Number