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## Standing with our American Indian and Alaska Native Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit People: Exploring the Impact of and Resources for Survivors of Human Trafficking

Glenna P. Stumblingbear-Riddle Ph.D.  
*Resilient Tribal Roots*, gpstumblingbear@yahoo.com

Ann K. Burlew Ph.D.  
*University of Cincinnati*, burlewak@ucmail.uc.edu

Daniel Gaztambide Psy.D.  
*New School for Social Research*, g.aztambide@hotmail.com

Michelle R. Madore Ph.D.  
*VA Palo Alto Health Care System*, michelle.madore@va.gov

Helen Neville Ph.D.  
*University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*, helen.neville1@gmail.com

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# Standing with our American Indian and Alaska Native Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit People: Exploring the Impact of and Resources for Survivors of Human Trafficking

## Cover Page Footnote

\* psychologists contributed equally to this submission. We'd like to thank APA's Committee on Ethnic Minority Affairs, Society of Indian Psychologists, and all frontline advocates and survivors

## Authors

Glenna P. Stumblingbear-Riddle Ph.D., Ann K. Burlew Ph.D., Daniel Gaztambide Psy.D., Michelle R. Madore Ph.D., Helen Neville Ph.D., and Gillian Joseph

## **Standing with our American Indian and Alaska Native Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit People: Exploring the Impact of and Resources for Survivors of Human Trafficking**

Violence against Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people in the United States, as well as around the globe, continues to occur at an alarming rate. Specifically, the number of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit Indigenous people has drastically increased to epidemic levels and constitutes a serious human rights issue. Yet, there is little public outcry and even less scholarly research in the field of psychology on the scope and consequences of this crisis on the lived experiences of American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) individuals and communities. The purpose of this manuscript is to specifically focus on violence pertaining to the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people with a concentration on human trafficking which, according to AI/AN community leaders, is one of the major contributors to the high disappearance rates (Department of Justice, 2018).

In our trauma-informed and intersectional approach, we review the available data on gender-based violence and human trafficking specific to Indian country and discuss the negative impact these issues have on the brain, the role of complex trauma, and behavioral outcomes. Throughout the paper, we highlight the influence of gender and race/ethnicity/Indigeneity on trauma and the outcomes of human trafficking while integrating discussions of cultural strengths and resiliency in challenging violence and healing AI/AN communities. We conclude with a discussion of culturally relevant, research-informed recommendations that psychologists can advocate to help raise awareness about and provide services to AI/AN people impacted by human trafficking.

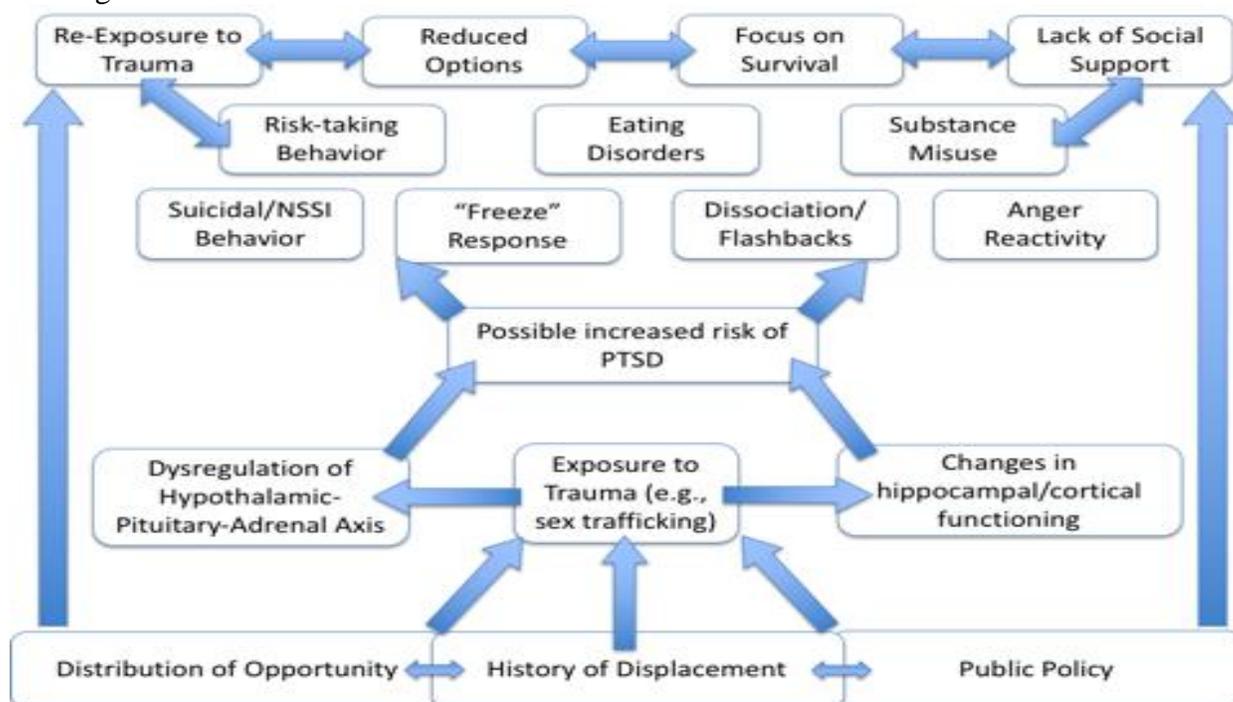
### **Gender-based Violence among AI/AN Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit People**

Violence against women, children, and two-spirit people are not traditional AI/AN ways; in AI/AN cultures, women and children were historically honored and considered sacred. It was not uncommon for tribal societies to be matriarchal, and two-spirit people were often revered in AI/AN communities. Brunner (2013) illuminates the colonial context of violence against Indigenous women in her testimony, stating:

Human trafficking of Native women in the United States is not a new era of violence against Native women, but rather the continuation of a lengthy historical one with the colonization of America through wars, and forced removal from their homelands to reservations, boarding schools, and

urban relocation. Domestic human trafficking in the United States has a longstanding history. (para 1)

AI/ANs experience higher rates of gender-based violence than almost any other racial group in the country. Six out of ten (56.1%) AI/AN women have experienced sexual violence; 84% of AI/AN women have experienced physical violence; 66% of AI/AN women have experienced psychological violence (Rosay, 2016). Furthermore, homicide is the third leading cause of death among AI/AN women and girls ages 10 through 24 (Daines, 2017; Ross et al., 2018). Previous legislation has attempted to address this epidemic, but ultimately fallen short. The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), despite added provisions in its 2013 Reauthorization, still left AI/AN tribes unable to fully prosecute sexual assault offenders. Unfortunately, the protective value that VAWA did hold for AI/AN women and girls has been nullified, as the legislation expired during the recent government shutdown.



**Figure 1. Social Determinants of Human Trafficking & Complex Trauma among AI/AN Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit People**

**Human Trafficking among AI/AN Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit People**

AI/AN women and girls also experience disproportionately high rates of enslavement in the commercial sex industry (Brewer, 2017; Kane-Harnett, 2018). Tribal leaders, activists, and advocates such as the National Indigenous Resource Center have worked diligently to shed light on the human trafficking of AI/AN women and girls on reservations and in urban and rural areas. Several years ago, the Bakken oil fields in North Dakota received some coverage when the First Nations Women's Alliance, along with others, brought attention to the sexual exploitation and human trafficking of AI/AN women throughout the area. However, this coverage never reached the national news cycle, leaving people with little information about the current situation since the oil boom's decline in 2015.

Tribal leaders' reports and emerging research are beginning to document the widening scope of human trafficking within AI/AN communities (Brewer, 2017). According to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, there were 116 cases of human trafficking involving AI/ANs, of which 37% were minors, between January 1, 2011 and March 31, 2017 (Ecoffey & Chon, 2018). It is important to note that this data only reflects survivors who called the hotline; it does not account for all cases of human trafficking involving AI/AN individuals. Human trafficking predators target vulnerable individuals, such as those experiencing poverty, homelessness, and mental health and substance misuse; AI/AN women and youth are also disproportionately targeted (Clawson, Dutch, Solomon, & Goldblatt Grace, 2009; Pierce, 2009). Two-spirit youth who have run away from home are often deliberately targeted since they are marginalized on multiple levels because of their race/ethnicity and gender identity (Pierce & Koeplinger, 2011). Given the national and international attention given to modern-day slavery, it is surprising that there are not systematic mechanisms set in place to track data on human trafficking. The few existing databases are incomplete and often do not collect information about race or ethnicity of the victim/survivor.

Similar to other forms of gender-based violence, the sex trafficking of AI/AN women and girls is steeped in colonial history (see Deer, 2010). According to Pierce (2011), British settlers and colonialists justified the rape and kidnap of Indigenous women in what is now the United States by dehumanizing them. The stress and contemporary consequences of this type of historical trauma (i.e., gender-based violence and exploitation) are reflected in the negative experiences throughout present-day Indian Country. The stress and contemporary consequences of historical trauma (e.g. gender-based violence and exploitation) are reflected in the negative experiences throughout present-day Indian Country.



**Figure 2. Trauma in Indian Country (Bigfoot, 2018)**

Despite these negative outcomes, AI/ANs remain resilient. Stumblingbear-Riddle and Joseph (2018) stated,

Native people and communities are exceptionally strong and resilient; the fact that we are still here demonstrates this. While some of the issues plaguing our communities are similar to those that other marginalized and oppressed communities face, the field of psychology and psychological science are still catching up to what Indigenous people have known for centuries. This is evidenced by the growing number of psychologists and other mental health professionals integrating traditional Indigenous healing practices and values into therapeutic interventions, which provides a trauma-informed method to reduce health disparities and promote overall wellness. (para. 4)

### **Human Trafficking and the Brain**

Exposure to human trafficking is not without significant consequences to neural functioning. Chronic exposure to stressful events, such as human trafficking, is associated with dysregulation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (HPA-axis), and the dysregulation of these neural areas perpetuates the brain's exposure to cortisol (Sapolsky, 1984). Chronic exposure to cortisol is associated with

changes in hippocampal functioning and changes in the prefrontal cortex. More specifically, the cognitive changes associated with trauma have been linked to increased arousal related to decreased functioning in the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, orbitofrontal cortex, and the anterior cingulate cortex (Daniels et al., 2010; Vasterling, Brailey, Constans, & Sutker, 1998). This is particularly salient given that early life trauma may negatively impact resilience factors in an individual (De Bellis, Hooper, & Sapia, 2005). Although less is known regarding the exact neural changes associated with evidenced-based treatments for psychiatric conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder, treatment has shown to be effective for individuals irrespective of cognitive functioning (Duax et al., 2013).

### **Behavioral Outcomes due to Human Trafficking as a Result of Complex Trauma**

The neuroaffective and cognitive-dysregulation that AI/AN women who are victims of human trafficking experience often results in symptoms consistent with complex trauma (Farley et al., 2016). These behavioral outcomes span a broad range of trauma-related and comorbid disorders, including posttraumatic stress disorder, borderline traits, anxiety disorders, substance use disorders, and psychotic spectrum disorders, among others (See Table 1; Briere & Lanktree, 2013; Herman, 1992; Van der Kolk et al, 2005).

Cumulative trauma exposure over the lifespan is also associated with worse behavioral, medical, and health outcomes, which has been evidenced by what came to be known as the ACEs study (Felitti et al., 1998). More recently, Farley et al. (2016) found that in their sample of 105 AI/AN women involved in human trafficking, 52% had been arrested during childhood due to physical violence, theft, and truancy, with 88% arrested as adults for prostitution, theft, assault and battery. Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and high levels of dissociation were common (71%), with more severe levels of dissociation associated with worse medical outcomes, including muscle aches or pains, somatization, memory or concentration difficulties, and chronic headaches.

**Table 1. Behavioral Outcomes associated with Complex Trauma**

<b>Externalizing Symptoms</b>	<b>Internalizing Symptoms</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Suicidal and non-suicidal self-injurious behavior.</li> <li>● Excessive risk-taking.</li> <li>● At-risk sexual behavior.</li> <li>● Eating disorders (e.g. bingeing and purging, food restriction).</li> <li>● Compulsive stealing, physical or verbal assault.</li> <li>● Difficulty controlling anger.</li> <li>● “Freeze” response.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Dissociation, “numbing,” de-realization, and de-personalization.</li> <li>● Re-experiencing symptoms (e.g. flashbacks).</li> <li>● Excessive anxiety or worry.</li> <li>● Emotional dysregulation.</li> <li>● Identity diffusion.</li> <li>● Stress-induced paranoid ideation.</li> <li>● Auditory/visual hallucinations.</li> <li>● Distorted views of self and other.</li> <li>● Concentration and attention deficits.</li> </ul>

Recurring exposure to trauma in the context of sexual and gender violence for AI/AN women, girls and two-spirit people can lead to the brain becoming solely focused on survival. The individual’s attempt to survive chronically unpredictable and unstable environments may inadvertently impair their ability to cope and have accessible social supports -- other coping mechanisms, such as substance misuse, may take their place among other negative outcomes.

Early initiation to substance misuse may serve as a means of coping with the sadness and feelings of self-loathing associated with surviving trauma, or as a means of escaping painful family issues or problems (Reid & Piquero, 2014). In some cases, parents of human trafficking survivors may have their own history of substance misuse, and may traffic their children under coercion of the predators to obtain substances (Walls & Bell, 2011). In a retrospective study, Varma (2015) found that 69% of child human trafficking survivors between the ages of 12 and 18 had a history of drug use. Eventually, this early experimentation—whether learned in the home or acquired later—may become more serious. Predators may use substances to target young women, girls, and two-spirit people into human trafficking. Moreover, O’Brien et al. (2017) reported that 56% of a sample of youth victims of human trafficking in the child welfare system were in the clinical range for a substance misuse.

The dynamics linking substance misuse to human trafficking among adult women is different. Drug use is sometimes conceptualized as a risk factor for survival sex, in which case human trafficking becomes a “bargaining chip” to procure access to substances (Le, 2018). However, it is not uncommon for women involved in trafficking to turn to drugs to cope with the pain associated with

trafficking (Gerassi, 2018). Moreover, unless trauma-informed and co-occurring treatment is included in the services, drug use may serve as a barrier to taking advantage of available services for escaping from human trafficking.

Although AI/AN sexual minority and two-spirit people are vulnerable to substance misuse due to complex trauma and oppression, they also exhibit resilience and posttraumatic growth in the face of adversity. These women draw on familial, communal, spiritual and cultural resources for strength to interrupt substance use and recover from trauma (Elm, Lewis, Walters, & Self, 2016). Greater involvement of Indigenous women and two-spirit people in leadership positions within AI/AN communities would likely provide further empowerment of their voice and agency (Burnette, 2015). Research on AI/AN communities suggest that resilience is an ongoing, dynamic process taking place across the lifespan, and as such, requires a life-course perspective (Ore, Nicolette, Teufel-Shone, & Chico-Jarillo, 2016). Additionally, securing substance use disorder treatment, peer support, developing personal safety plans, and enhancing boundaries to reduce the risk of violence are other resources which foster resilience (Heileman & Santhiveeran, 2011).

We note the dire need for research on resiliency across the lifespan of Indigenous women and two-spirit people who are survivors of complex trauma, gender violence, and human trafficking. Such research would help complement our attention to cumulative trauma across the lifespan with a view of how resilience and posttraumatic growth can occur across the life course as well.

### **Conclusion and Ideas for Advocacy**

Human trafficking and other forms of gender-based violence among AI/AN women, girls, and two-spirit people have a devastating impact on the survivors as well as on their families and communities. The legacy of colonialism is evident in the high rates of racialized poverty, economic exploitation, hunger, and violence within AI/AN communities and the exploitation they experience at the hands of non-AI/AN people. AI/AN activists are on the frontlines of naming the concerns, addressing systems contributing to the continued oppression of AI/ANs, and cultivating cultural practices to promote healing and wellness. Building on these efforts and the extant literature, we offer some advocacy recommendations to end human trafficking and assist survivors in the healing process.

- Encourage legislators to pass S. 1870 SURVIVE ACT (Securing Urgent Resources Vital to Indian Victim Empowerment). This bill was introduced in 2017 as an amendment to the 1984 Victims of Crime Act and would offer tribes grants to support programs providing services for survivors.

- Systematically collect data on human trafficking and to gather information about race and ethnicity as well as not limiting gender to binary categories for survivors (Ross et al., 2018). Without data, such crimes remain invisible; data help to humanize survivors and identify those who are most vulnerable. Additionally, this recommendation calls for the development of a culturally appropriate and trauma-informed training protocol for law enforcement and a national alert system.
- Create a national education campaign to bring to light the vulnerabilities and exploitation of AI/AN women, girls, and two-spirit people, as well as the strengths and resiliency of survivors of gender-based violence.
- Increase the number of and ease of accessibility to culturally-informed local services that are readily available to women, girls, and two-spirit people in the communities in which they live.
- Develop training for direct service providers to identify human trafficking risk factors and the implementation of prevention services. Similar to training protocols for non-mental health individuals for suicide prevention, a similar training model can be used in communities to help reduce human trafficking and link community members to additional services and resources.
- Identify and train peer mentors to provide services to AI/AN girls, women, and two-spirit survivors of human trafficking and support to those most vulnerable for human trafficking (Contreras & Kallivayalil, 2019).
- Enhance partnerships between community resources to facilitate a safe exit from prostitution (Farley et al., 2016; Pierce, 2012).

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## Addendum

Federal Legislation has been enacted to curb human trafficking along with acts of violence against women. Over 25 years ago, the US House of Representatives passed the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) to implement state and local programs to prevent domestic violence, sexual assault and dating violence. Title IX of the Act speaks directly to ensuring safety for Indian Women by ‘ .....clarifying the responsibilities of Federal, State, tribal, and local governments with respect to responding to cases of domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, trafficking, sexual violence, crimes against children, and assault against tribal law enforcement officers and murdered Indians.....while empower(ing) tribal governments to respond to the same offenses....’ (H.R.1585 - Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2019 116th Congress (2019-2020)).

We’d like to acknowledge, thank, and honor the contributions of Congresswoman Deb Haaland and Representative Sharice Davids for their tireless and endless efforts towards moving critical issues forward that impact Indian Country and beyond.

We’d also like to express our deepest gratitude and acknowledge our dear friend Dr. Alberto Figueroa-García for his encouragement and support in writing this article. He was an advocate for Indian Country and all persons of color. Ah-ho (thank you). May he rest in power.