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Native American, Rural Women Hit Hardest by Opioid Crisis, Experts Say

By **Megan Hadley** | January 26, 2018



Photo by David Comdico via Flickr

Native American females and women in rural communities suffer the highest risk of deaths from opioids and other drugs, advocates and caregivers involved in mental health and trauma said Thursday.

The risk is heightened for Native American women, who face a long history of oppression and abuse, turning to opioids as a form of pain management, and for women in rural areas, who have limited access to drug treatment programs, the experts said at a webinar organized by the National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma & Mental Health (<http://www.nationalcenterdvtraumamh.org/>).

Researchers found that more than 84 percent of Alaska Native and American Indian women had experienced some form of violence in their lifetimes: 56 percent experienced sexual violence and 55 percent experienced intimate partner violence,

according to a [study \(https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/249736.pdf\)](https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/249736.pdf) released by the National Institute of Justice in 2016.

In some villages, 100 percent of women experienced sexual assault or domestic violence, the webinar told.

Indigenous women also face a long history of genocide, removal from their land, removal of their children into state custody, and loss of culture and language- all factors that play into the high rates of opioid deaths, said Gwendolyn Packard, a specialist at The [National Indigenous Women's Resource Center \(NIWRC\)](http://www.niwrc.org/).
(<http://www.niwrc.org/>)

"We experienced a period of forced removal of our children. [Society] placed them in institutions in an effort to civilize the savage born. Even today we experience the highest rate of children in state custody" she continued.

"This left many families psychologically battered."

Opioids can also lead Native American women into the grasp of sex traffickers, who prey on their drug dependency to maintain control.

Sarah Deer, attorney and author of "The Beginning and End of Rape: Confronting Sexual Violence in Native America" refers to this vulnerable community as 'the perfect population.'

"If you're a trafficker looking for the perfect population of people to violate, Native American women would be a prime target. You have poverty. You have people who have been traumatized. And you have a legal system that doesn't step in to stop it."

In an attempt to fight back, the Cherokee Nation [has filed a lawsuit](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/17/health/choke-opioid-addiction-pharmacies.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/17/health/choke-opioid-addiction-pharmacies.html>) against pharmaceuticals companies for negligent conduct. Tribes are seeking monetary damages to pay for treatment programs, which are scarce.

Still, generations of trauma and abuse has left a scar on Native American populations, who are searching for the best way to tackle the epidemic within the tribes.

"There is common agreement that the country is rooted in historical and generational trauma" said a tribe member at an opioid hearing, reported on by the webinar.

"There is also agreement that as a tribe we are strong and resilient and can create and support in order to heal the next generation."

While women in rural areas suffer from domestic abuse as well, they face unique difficulties accessing treatment due to their geography.

For instance, in some parts of West Virginia, the state with the highest rate of fatal drug overdoses in the nation, there is no cell phone or internet connection. West Virginia is the only state that lies completely within the Appalachian mountain region, which greatly affects telecommunication.

But the biggest issue is the the lack of local treatment or effective treatment close by. It may take opioid users 2 to 3 hours to arrive at a local clinic- that is, if they have access to a car.

There is also no public transportation, leaving some addicts stranded in the countryside.

Often times, for women, the vehicle owner is the batterer who controls where and when his victim takes the car, added Laurie Thompsen, a Mental Health and Behavioral Health Coordinator in West Virginia.

In attempt to maintain power and control, abusers may restrict their partners from getting treatment, and instead fuel their drug addiction by leaving paraphernalia around the house and forcing them to use drugs.

The National Domestic Violence Hotline reported that 60 percent of women said their partner or ex-partner tried to prevent or discourage them from getting help, while 27 percent said they were pressured or forced to use alcohol or other drugs more than they wanted.

If admitted to a treatment center, there is also the possibility the batterer and the victim will be in the same drug program.

“Safety is a big issue” said Thompsen, who recalled a story about a husband who checked himself into a mental health hospital to stalk and follow his wife.

“These situations occur because we don’t have many services.”

Editor’s Note: The Webinar proceedings will be available online. Please check here for update.

Megan Hadley is a staff writer at The Crime Report. Readers’ comments are welcome.
