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# A qualitative analysis examining the overrepresentation of sexual violence and sexual assaults among women who are American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN)

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A qualitative analysis examining the overrepresentation of sexual violence and sexual assaults  
among women who are American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN)

Brook Pigg

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## **Abstract**

Sexual assault and other forms of sexual violence have effected American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) women throughout time. Recent research has concluded that AIAN individuals are more than two times more likely to be sexually assaulted than any other racial or ethnic group. This may be due to a number of factors such as historical trauma, tribal law discrepancies, and intimate partner violence as previous research has examined but other factors need to be analyzed. In this qualitative study, eight participants were interviewed on their thoughts on the topic of sexual assault and why they believe these rates are significantly higher on AIAN women. This study found that not one factor can be identified as the cause of the rates of sexual assault, but it is many different factors together. These factors range from the prominence of social silence, the lack of proper resources and the normalization of sexual assault in AIAN communities. While there is still much to be done and researched to gain a better understanding of why these rates of sexual assault against AIAN women are significantly higher than other racial and ethnic groups, this study serves to acknowledge the possible factors that may affect these rates.

## **Introduction**

Throughout the course of recorded United States history and across generations, the American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) population has been mistreated and marginalized. This has had major negative effects on the AIAN people and their cultures. Since the arrival of Christopher Columbus and other European explorers, where the AIAN people were victims of a genocide, as more than half of their population was decimated. While this was mainly due to the introduction of disease, which infected and killed numerous AIAN people, the AIAN cultures as a whole has been marginalized by the dominant cultures. As well as being slaughtered in mass quantities by these European settlers, numerous AIAN people perished during this time period. Several hundred years after the earlier circumstances of conflict and death, indigenous people were dispossessed of their land and many died in forced exile. The best known example of this was the so-called “Trail of Tears” in which thousands of AIAN people were forced to migrate thousands of miles into a new territory. Additionally, around this time period and afterwards, AIAN children were being taken away from their families and placed into boarding schools, where these children were forced to assimilate to the dominant cultures. At these boarding schools, these children endured abuse of all types from the people who were employed at the boarding schools and were forced to abandon their cultures. This still occurs today as we see AIAN reservations being poorly funded, poorly staffed and lacking of various types of resources for the people who live there. Lastly, the focus of this paper, AIAN people, especially women, have an incredibly high rate of sexual assault victimization over the course of their lives. While sexual assault rates in the United States effect the majority of the United States population in every demographic, including race, the AIAN population has been vastly effected more so than other racial and ethnic groups.

Among the first documentations of this disproportionately high rate of sexual assault among indigenous women was the Amnesty International report that was published in 2007. This report stated that American Indian and Alaska Native women are 2.5 times more likely to be sexually assaulted than any other race or ethnicity (Amnesty International 2007). While this acknowledged the high rates of sexual assault, this report did not clearly establish the causes of this disproportionality. The goal of this research project is to answer the questions raised by this report and to begin to identify possible factors of these high sexual assault rates.

As stated this is the goal of this study: to uncover specifically which, if any, sociological factors may play a role in this high rate. Previously, there has been much research such as Evans-Campbell, Lindhorst, Huang and Walters in 2006 and Gebhardt and Woody in 2012 about the rates of sexual assault and what specifically may be the cause or causes of the rising number of cases, but it is quite often that AIAN people are either left out of the study completely, or grouped together with other smaller racial populations due to the smaller number of AIAN people in the country compared to other races or ethnicities. Due to this limitation, research on AIAN women had been substantially limited due to the small number of AIAN women in the United States and has mostly been undocumented outside the AIAN populations until Amnesty International's 2007 report was published. When this report was published, it shifted the viewpoint on sexual assaults against AIAN women as it was one of the first pieces of research that showed the higher rates of sexual assault against these people to the general population.

Due to this revelation, more research has emerged that focuses more on smaller populations as well as marginalized groups, however this type research still lumps multiple races and ethnicities together, which will often include AIAN populations due to small sample size (National Research Council, 1996). This is a key contribution that my research project expects to

add to previous research, which is to specifically analyze sexual assault, defined for this research as:

*Any type of sexual contact or sexual behavior that occurs without the explicit consent of the recipient*

This project aims to extend the existing body of research by examining why the rate of sexual assault against AIAN women is so high, relative to members of other racial or ethnic groups. By conducting interviews with professionals in field that work with either AIAN survivors of sexual assault, as that directly relates to this research. Other individuals who were interviewed also work with AIAN people as it allowed for an overall perspective of AIAN people, communities and cultures. Using these interviews I will identify themes to gain a better understanding of why these rates are so high within this community and to specifically identify the causes of these assaults. It is important to note that there can be numerous causes of sexual assault and the narrative provided will most likely differ between every person interviewed, as their do opinions about the causes of this situation. However, my study seeks to find a common thread that interlinks possible factors that may connect and that could account for these high rates of sexual assaults against AIAN women.

While there has been some research analyzing the rates of sexual assaults against AIAN women, the bulk of my literature review will be focusing on the possible factors that may lead to the higher rates of sexual assault. I will first be examining Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) that AIAN women are exposed to, as the reported cases of IPV is also high for AIAN women. Secondly, I will be examining Tribal Law, and how many of the current laws within Tribal Law affects reservations and what federal and local governments can and cannot do on reservation land. For the purpose of this research the majority of mentions involving Tribal Law, both within previous literature as well as throughout the interviews, revolve around the Tribal Jurisdiction

Laws and laws relating specifically to the sovereignty of reservation land, in which crimes are often handled by the reservation police force. Due to these issues with Tribal Law, it often helps potential perpetrators of sexual assault and make it difficult to reprimand the perpetrators in any way due to the grey areas that Tribal Law and jurisdictions can cause. The last main aspect of my literature review will be focusing on how previous traumas that AIAN people have experienced, such as those listed above, have had effects that have been passed down to future generations and how some of those effects may lead to an increase in sexual assault. Lastly, my literature review will cover topics that may play a role in these rates but do not fall under the main three topics, such as the frequent job turnover on reservations and remote villages in jobs that must be filled by professionals, thus making it harder to follow a case through or having to reintroduce and thus re-experience the sexual assault for the new employee.

Moving into my own research on this topic, the methods section of my research covers the introduction of the subjects of my research, who are professionals in the field that either specialize in working with AIAN women who have been survivors of sexual assault, or those who frequently work with AIAN people due to that being the majority population in the city or town they are working in. While these professionals specialize in different fields from social work, to rehabilitation and other services, to solving homelessness around the state of Alaska, they all work frequently with the AIAN populations in their city and state. These subjects not only come from a wide variety of fields but additionally come from different states, Alaska and Minnesota. This is because Alaska has the biggest Alaska Native population in the United States with 14.8 percent of the population identifying as AIAN (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2010). Minnesota currently ranks at the 17<sup>th</sup> most populous state for AIAN people, with 1.3 percent of the population being AIAN (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2010). Due to the fact that these areas

are quite populated with AIAN individuals many of those who were interviewed have a great deal of knowledge about the AIAN populations and issues that their clients may deal with as they frequently interact with AIAN people.

Through my analysis and findings I will be analyzing and discussing which factors may be associated with the high rate of sexual assault and why these assaults are occurring frequently. Then I will examine the findings to see if there are any differences between the different states as well as any differences between those who live on a reservation setting and those who do not. Lastly, I will connect these findings to a sociological theory or concept that can help to not only begin to explain why these rates are occurring at a high prevalence but additionally, what can begin to be done to help stop sexual assaults on AIAN women from occurring. I will also relate these findings to potential policies can put into place to help those who have been survivors of assault as well as creating policies that strive to prevent assaults in the first place. Recognizing that this is an issue that will not be solved quickly, it is still important that we begin to acknowledge whatever may have been created within the AIAN cultures or communities that allows these sexual assaults to occur so frequently. This will require more funding and resources to be put forward towards the AIAN population and by allowing individuals who have been victimized by sexual assaults to reach out to and be able to talk about these attacks and begin the healing process. This important as it will allow the AIAN population, especially females, to thrive once again without concern for their safety and the population as whole can move forward together.

### **Literature Review**

While thoroughly reviewing much of the research on this topic, three themes stood out and seemed more prevalent in the research than others and can possibly play a role in affecting

the rates of sexual assault more than other factors and these topics will be in focus throughout the course of my own research. First is examining Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) which many AIAN women are victims of in their lifetime, thus possibly increasing rates of sexual assault. Secondly, the complexities of Tribal Law often allow attackers not to answer for their crimes depending on where the assault occurred or if the person is a member of the reservation, which could allow attackers to feel more protected, thus committing more sexual assaults. Lastly, looking at how years of trauma to AIAN people as well as their cultures has been passed down from generation to generation has affected the AIAN cultures and in turn taught that violence as well as other issues within AIAN society is acceptable and more often the norm.

As stated previously, the first of these three topics is examining Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). IPV is an issue that many people face no matter one's race or ethnicity, however within AIAN populations, the rates of IPV are also extremely high with about two-thirds of AIAN women report experiencing IPV in their lifetime (Crossland, Palmer and Brooks 2013; Evans-Campbell, Lindhorst, Huang and Walters 2006). It is important to note the difference between IPV and sexual assault as both are being discussed thoroughly in this paper. While IPV is defined as any type of physical, sexual or psychological harm by a current or former partner, sexual assault only involves a sexual act, defined for this research as any type of sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the explicit consent of the recipient. While these two definitions do have some overlap. IPV is a more broad term that also can deal with physical and psychological harm which is also extremely important to analyze. Given this statistic, IPV could account for the higher sexual assault rates against AIAN women as one of the categories of IPV is sexual assault. In addition, it is more difficult for AIAN women to leave their abusive situations given if they live on a reservation or in a remote village due to fact that their partner is

often their provider. As well many of these women live in smaller communities, causing information to be shared more quickly and no space may be safe to protect the survivor from their abusive partner (Crossland, Palmer and Brooks 2013; Oetzel and Duran 2004; Shepard 2001; Wahab and Olson 2004). Furthermore, there is a lack of protection for AIAN women, especially those in rural areas, as services that women can seek out are either poorly funded, lacking proper resources or are non-existent all together (Shepard 2001; Singh 2014; Wahab and Olson 2004). While efforts have been made to provide more resources in rural areas, much of work needs to be done to help protect these women from IPV and other sexual assaults.

In addition to lack of resources to which survivors of sexual assault have access, one must also keep in mind the central role that the family plays in rural societies. Previous research has revealed that when a survivor speaks out against their attacker, the community will often side with the attacker and allows the attacker to go with little to no punishment. The consequence of this reaction is that it is frequently the survivor that is the one that must leave the village or reservation, and is ostracized from their community (Oetzel and Duran 2004; Shepard 2001; Singh 2014; Ullman, Filipas, Townsend and Starzynski 2006; Yuan, Koss, Polacca and Goldman, 2006). Another issue is that the survivor often knows their attacker in some way, which occurs in many sexual assault attacks (Oetzel and Duran 2004; Ullman, Filipas, Townsend and Starzynski 2006). Keeping this in mind when examining the small sizes of villages and reservations, both in terms of overall population size and size of social networks. Due to these small communities everyone in a village or reservation often knows everyone in some form. This small degree of separation between people in a community may make it easier for an attacker to get to know potential survivors. Additionally, there are numerous risk factors that can play a role into increasing chances of being of survivor of a sexual assault which AIAN people may fall

under due to being an AIAN person. These can include having a relatively lower economic status, which can lead to risk factors such as losing or lack of jobs, due to areas with low SES having less jobs, thus more competition overall or being laid off. Not completing education could also be a risk factor due to the fact that the less educated a person is, the more likely they will be vulnerable to negative influences. Lastly, many of these people have access to less housing or good housing options, which could increase overall stressors as lack of basic human needs come before any other issues. These all can possibly link to potential victimization because this can induce stress overall as stated previously and sexual assault may be a means of release for perpetrators or as a perceived consequence for survivors and potentially a means to justify the act in of itself.

Another risk factor that various AIAN people are susceptible to and frequently become involved in, is substance and drug abuse issues. Studies have shown that AIAN people have ranged in from 30-84 percent identifying as a “current drinker” where the national average stood around 67 percent (Beauvais 1998). Drug abuses are similar where nearly 50 percent of AIAN individuals have smoked marijuana or tried some other type of drug by age 18 (Beauvais 1998). This is important as it not only leads to other health issues but AIAN people are often exposed to substance abuse at an early age as they may often view their parents abusing these substances (Bachman, Zaykowski, Lanier, Poteyeva, and Kallmyer 2010; Gray and Nye 2001; Sochting, Fairbrother and Koch 2004). While these factors may contribute to the high rates of sexual assaults against AIAN women it may not be the only cause of these statistics and while they may be beneficial to gain an understanding overall of AIAN communities or a baseline factors for the high rate of sexual assault there is much more to be research and discovered.

The second issue that was a major area of focus in the previous research, is that of the accessibility and protection attackers may have against their survivors due to the restrictions and the complexities of Tribal Law (Murphy, Lemire, and Wisman 2009; Robertson 2012; Tharp 2014). For example, if a person who does not live on a reservations comes and sexually assaults a AIAN women on the reservation then leaves, this women is not allowed to press charges both with the reservation police force, as the individual was not a member of the reservation, as well as the city's police force, due to it occurring on the reservation (Tharp 2014; Wood 2008; Murphy, Lemire and Wisman 2009). Due to the fact that this protects attackers if they live off of the reservation, this could add to the high rates of sexual assaults against AIAN women. In addition, due to the complexities of Tribal Law on the reservation, it is hard for the victim to protect themselves if their attacker tries to harm them and the victim ends up harming their attacker, especially in IPV cases, it could actually result in criminal charges for the victim. This is exacerbated by that fact that the majority of lawyers, both on the reservation and off, are not well-versed in Tribal Law and those that specify in Tribal Law still have difficulties with the specific laws and procedures, which make it hard to protect the survivor or prosecute the attacker (Tharp 2014; Wood 2008; Murphy, Lemire and Wisman 2009).

The problem of tribal administration and law is an important factor of my research as it explores another aspect of what survivors of sexual assault may go through, as it takes courage to speak up about their assault in the first place but not gaining the peace of mind that their attacker cannot hurt them or anyone else due to confusing laws could potentially further endangers the victim (Tharp 2014). Furthermore, if they are not protected by these tribal laws they will be less likely to speak out if an assault happens again or at all if they have seen how others have been treated. This is key as a survivor may not only be turned away from their family and community

while coming out against their assault but additionally be further prosecuted due to Tribal Law (Tharp 2014; Wood 2008; Murphy, Lemire and Wisman 2009). This rejection by the family and the legal system can play a role into the high rates of sexual assaults against AIAN women as attackers will not be prosecuted to the full extent as they could be, due to these complicated laws.

The third issue that the majority of past research has focused on, is the topic of historical trauma. Historical trauma is prevalent in AIAN communities as AIAN people have been marginalized and persecuted in various different ways since the beginning of European contact with indigenous people of the Americas. From the days of Columbus to the present day, AIAN people are still treated poorly, whether it be the exposure to various diseases, for example smallpox, measles, scarlet fever and the common cold and others, and killed due to the introduction of these diseases to their less tolerant immune systems, to being corralled, taken away from their families and put into a boarding school where a person is forced to assimilate to a different cultures than their own, to today where AIAN people have been regulated to land with little to no resources or funding to support their communities. This has been empirically established in research on physical and mental health, educational and economic issues, as well as being defined by the stereotypes that encompass different marginalized groups (Bachman, Zaykowski, Lanier, Poteyeva, and Kallmyer 2010; Evans-Campbell 2008). For example while the national percentage of homeless people is two percent, the rate of AIAN individuals who are homeless is around eight percent (Mental Health America 1999). Additionally depression rates of AIAN people range from ten to thirty percent of the AIAN population, and with suicides occurring 1.5 times more than the national average (Mental Health America 1999). Many of these effects can all be traced back to historical trauma, including sexual assault, which can make an person more at risk to be assaulted (Sochting, Fairbrother, and Koch 2004; Yuan, Koss,

Polacca, and Goldman 2006). Certain types of trauma may have been so effective to be passed down to future generations and produce these effects such as, the arrival of Columbus, forced migration, and Boarding Schools overall, as mentioned previously.

This can also be possibly accounted for through social learning theory in different ways, the first and foremost is by seeing not only a person's family but their cultures as a whole being frequently mistreated. Due to the degree that an individual is mistreated, they may start to believe that they are subjected to a lifetime of mistreatment, as they learned it through these observations. Secondly, social learning theory may play a role in observing negative stimuli, such as abuse of any form, and feel like this is normative, thus believing that this is typical for all people to experience. Another factor that may play a role into why these rates of sexual assault have become so high over time against AIAN women and the AIAN community as a whole is through the colonialism that the settlers and explorers brought to the New World as they tried to expand their beliefs into other corners of the world. Due to this colonialism, AIAN people were introduced to a wide variety of diseases and often forced to assimilate to settler and Christian cultures. The most documented example of this was Pocahontas, where she was forced to go to marry a settler and move from her home, across the sea to England where she was christened as Rebecca Rolfe. Given that this frequently occurred, much of the AIAN people were wiped out or forced to hide their cultures and assimilate to the settler and dominate cultures or in many cases be killed trying to keep in touch with the AIAN cultures.

Currently, most of the research has examined what aspects of historical trauma, such as the traumas mentioned above, have affected sexual assault rates as it has eliminated the cultures and what was left were pictures and memories of abuse, thus becoming passed down through generation to generation (Evans-Campbell 2008; Gray and Nye 2001; Robertson 2012). It is

important that researchers, policy makers, as well as the general population, recognize what may have an effect on these high rates of sexual assaults so that future generations can be protected from these assaults in the future and eliminate the effects that historical trauma has caused.

Through historical trauma it is possible to see how negative behaviors may have been passed down to future generations, and may make a person more susceptible to sexual assaults as well as more likely to commit assaults. As mentioned previously, this can be passed down through different ways, whether it is due to learning it from previous generations or observing it happening to others around and manifest as sexual assaults or possibly other violent crimes, although this can occur within individual, every demographic depending on whom they learn from. However, it is important to note that historical trauma only plays a role in the high levels of sexual assault and there are still many factors that may influence these rates of sexual assault. Keeping this in mind it is important to consider the years that AIAN individuals have been victimized as a cultures and marginalized as a whole. Through being forced into boarding schools and being victimized by the people who worked there, both physically as well as mentally, and by being stripped of their cultures, this has affected the AIAN population (Evans-Campbell 2008; Robertson 2012). Furthermore, due to what people experienced at these boarding schools, the behavior shown to them was all many AIAN children knew, which could have been passed down to future generations (Evans-Campbell 2008). It seems like historical trauma does have a major impact on sexual assault rates against AIAN women as well as other issues that the AIAN community faces. Overall these three issues have been those most frequently covered in the previous research and what may be some of the underlying causes of the high rates of sexual assaults against AIAN women, but each of these subjects can be affected by the others as well as various other stimuli.

Additionally there are a few other possibilities that may factor into the high rates of sexual assaults against AIAN women. The first factor that may further the rate of sexual assault is that of job turnover within rural villages and reservations. It is very hard to keep people who are experienced in their field to live in rural areas as the living conditions are often poor and lacking resources overall (Wood 2008). Furthermore if roles are not filled in these villages or reservations, they are filled by individuals who do not have experience in the field and sometimes are even perpetrators of sexual assault who hold these positions, making it harder for survivors to come forward against these people in power (Shephard 2001; Yuan, Koss, Polacca, and Goldman 2006). Another factor that plays a role is the lack of resources for survivors to go to if an assault occurs. This is another difficulty that mostly occurs in rural villages and reservations as there is a lack of funding and people who are willing to work in these remote places, so these resources go unfunded and underemployed (Gebhardt and Woody 2012). This presents a challenge that is currently unsolved but people are slowly coming together through federal programs to try and starts programs that will make survivors of sexual assault safe from their attackers (Gebhardt and Woody 2012; Singh 2014; Tharp 2014). Overall there are many factors that may play a role in these high rates of sexual assaults against AIAN women, however there is work that is starting to be done to combat this issue and is beginning to protect these women who are frequently victimized. However, it is important to reiterate that the previous research suggests that these may influence the rates of sexual assault and it is a theme that this research will expand on these ideas as well as assess whether further factors may influences the high rates of sexual assault on AIAN women.

## Methods

### Participants

This research consists of a qualitative study with the research based on interviews of eight participants who are either AIAN women and/or professionals in the field who focuses on interacting and helping with AIAN survivors after their assaults or works with AIAN populations overall. I chose to do a qualitative study rather than a quantitative study due to the fact that a qualitative study is much more focused on an individual's answers on a given topic and gives the interviewee more time to explain why they answered a question in the way that they did, instead of a simple survey in which questions are unable to go more in-depth and answers cannot be explained to the full extent. These professionals come from both the states of Alaska and Minnesota as these two states have the highest amount of AIAN populations in the country. This provides a unique opportunity to compare and contrast the similarities and differences between states as well as American Indian and Alaska Native cultures which previous research has yet to fully touch upon. A full description of where the participants were from as well as what qualifies them as a professional can be found in **Appendix B** and the end of this paper.

The participants were contacted either through email or over the telephone and were gathered due to previous connections with Hamline University or other colleagues. Additionally, searches were conducted for programs that specifically help AIAN people in any way with a specific focus on those who work with survivors of sexual assault, and employees from these programs were contacted. Originally, twenty individuals were contacted to be interviewed for this research, however only eight interviews were secured due to the limitations of time, access to the interviewees, and number of respondents. Out of the eight participants, four (fifty percent) identified as white and four (fifty percent) were identified as AIAN and were either fully AIAN

or of mixed race with AIAN and all participants identified as female. Furthermore, fifty percent of the interviews were with people from Alaska and fifty percent of the interviews were with people from Minnesota. Lastly, two of the participants currently live in rural areas and six currently live in urbanized areas. However, six participants (seventy-five percent) have lived in rural areas at some point in their lifetime, with many having additionally worked in these rural settings or a mixture of working in both rural Alaskan villages and on Minnesota Reservations as well as working in the more urban areas of these states. Every participant interviewed had at some point in their careers specifically worked with AIAN populations either due to the fact that was their targeted group or due to the fact that it was the population in the city or reservation that they lived in. Acknowledging that those interviewed have an incredible diversification of interviewee's job titles, location of work, and past experiences, this will allow for the research to have more validity than if those interviewed had similar backgrounds.

### Procedures

As stated above, these interviews consisted of four interviews conducted in the state of Alaska as well as four interviews conducted in the state of Minnesota. The interviews took place in the interviewee's place of choosing, specifically one that made the interviewee feel safe and open to talk freely and answers question any way they would like to which, these included either in their homes, at a coffee shop or in a conference room. Three of the interviews took place either over Skype or the telephone given the rural setting in which some participants worked. While it is the assumption that these individuals interviewed over the phone or Skype would give the same answers, this is a limitation as face to face interviews may produce more genuine answers. However, a positive aspect of these interviews is that it can reach a wider range of participants, especially those in rural areas. These interviews were recorded with the participant's

permission, and transcribed after the interview was complete. These transcriptions were then entered into the software NVivo and the data was compiled and coded into themes of patterns that emerged, which will be discussed in the findings section. While transcribing the interviews, pseudonyms were created for the participants names and if specific places were mentioned it is described by the general details of the area. This is to protect the anonymity of the participants and their identity.

The interviews will consist of a list of ten to twenty questions that range from asking them about previous experiences within the job field to what they believe is causing these high rates of sexual assault. Additionally, some questions were only asked to certain participants as a follow-up, given what they may have said during the pre-determined questions during the interview that prompted further questioning. A full list of the questions posed to every participant can be found in **Appendix C** and a list of question posed to specific interviewees will be found in **Appendix D**. These interviews lasted from thirty minutes to an hour, given how much the participant would like to share about their past personal experiences or how extensive they answered the question. As stated previously, the questions the professionals were asked will relate to why they believe these rates are so high and what factors may be behind this statistic, as well as questions relating to what they have seen within their work in the field, why they see this rate not being recognized or challenged by people within the AIAN community as well as the country, and what must be done to be able to stop the high amount of sexual assaults from occurring. Another aspect that came up through the interview process was the impact that AIAN stereotypes have played in both AIAN cultures but additionally to the rates of sexual assaults so that questions was added after the third interview given that the first two interviews also touched

upon this topic. Once the interviews had concluded they were transcribed into a document for future analysis within the NVivo software program.

### Data Analysis

The data analysis of this data consisted of recording all of the interviews, transcribing the interviews, coding the interviews into different themes and finally analyzing the data found within these themes. Once the interviews were transcribed into documents, the interviews were put into the software NVivo, which is a qualitative coding software. This program allowed to track and code patterns that appeared in each interview and categorize them based on themes that may have appeared throughout the interview as well as those that were mentioned within the Literature Review as previously focuses from research. While going through every interview I highlighted sections that seemed to relate to themes or possible themes and categorized themes based on the topic that was mentioned within highlighted section. Using this software I was also able to examine emerging patterns and categorizing various references into different themes after the interviews were conducted. These themes then became the basis of my findings which I will be focusing on later in the findings section.

### **Research Question**

For this research, the overall research question for the paper is “What are the sociological factors associated with the disproportionately high sexual assault rates among AIAN women?”. This is an important question to answer because if researchers as well as the general public can begin to understand why these rates are so prevalent within this relatively small population, than it could lead to more research on a quantitative scale about this topic and possibly understand why these rates occur frequently. If future research yields similar results to other studies, than the issues that are linked to high sexual assault rates can be combatted through funding programs

that not only support survivors and those that rehabilitate them but programs that prevent the assaults from occurring in the first place. When risk factors, which could make a person more vulnerable to sexual assault, decrease as these programs wish to achieve, the better chance they will have to not be affected by sexual assault.

In addition to the benefits of focusing on the research question is the fact that this negatively affects the majority, if not all, of the AIAN population. If two-thirds of AIAN women have reported being sexually assaulted then the degrees of separation between an individual and someone they know being sexually assaulted is small. Additionally, this is only the reported number of assaults, and it is important to keep in mind that the vast majority of sexual assaults are not reported, so this number may in fact be much higher. This is an issue that can affect everyone a person knows and loves from their mother and sisters to aunts and cousins. Sexual assault has impacted the AIAN people to the degree that everyone knows someone who has been assaulted at least once in their lifetime. Not only that but sexual assaults have become so intertwined within the AIAN community that if a person has a child who is a girl they expect her to be assaulted at some period in her lifetime which was brought up during many of the interviews but as expressed by Anne:

*“It’s not if you get raped, it’s when you get raped”.*

This thought raises concern, as a race of people, no matter how small, cannot have this as an expectation for their children and without creating any type of program or doing anything else to intervene and stop the problem before it becomes further integrated within the AIAN communities and goes on to affect future generations.

### **Anticipated Factors**

Based on previous research, I expect to find three main factors that may explain why sexual assault rates against AIAN women are so high relative to other groups. These three causes covered by previous research which focused on, historical trauma, IPV, and issues with Tribal Law. In addition to these, I also think a fourth factor might help to explain the high rates of sexual assault, which is that the negative Indian stereotypes have affected the AIAN community so much so that they have taken on some stereotypes and become a self-fulfilling prophecy, as well as tried to cover-up other stereotypes, such as a savage, which may have an effect in covering up sexual assaults within these communities. This thought about becoming the stereotype relates much to Cooley's Looking Glass Self and how a person may behave in a manner consistent with the way that the general population sees them (Conley 2013). This idea is similar to a self-fulfilling prophecy, in which AIAN people have begun to take on these stereotypes that persist throughout the general population. While this is an understandable reaction as one do not want to admit their faults, it has affected the AIAN community at such a prevalent rate, these rates can no longer be ignored.

Additionally, the stereotype of AIAN women being exotic may affect the rates of sexual assault due to white males feeling like the need to "have" one of these women due to the exotic nature of being native. Some stereotypes that surround AIAN women deal with the oversexualization of AIAN women as various images depicting AIAN women often have them scantily clad in a cloth. This not only is an inaccurate depiction of AIAN women but additionally mocks traditional AIAN clothing. This also relates to IPV as many AIAN women are in interracial relationships, which is at a more prevalent rate than other races or ethnicities. It is important to recognize that due to these stereotypes about exoticness non-AIAN men may be

more likely to exploit this stereotype and possibly become violent if the stereotype has not be fulfilled. These stereotypes have not only affected AIAN cultures but the more dominant cultures around them which has helped cultivate these stereotypes and help them grow and thrive due to misconceptions. This is what I believe this research will discover, as well as more potential causes behind why the sexual assault rate is 2.5 times more frequent than any other race or ethnicity.

If each factor is examined and analyzed further, this is what I expect to find about how each individual factor may relate to the high rates of sexual assault on AIAN women. In the case of historical trauma, the research expects to link past traumas, such as the arrival of Columbus and Boarding Schools, from past generations to the current high rates of not only sexual assaults but other issues such as worse physical and mental health due to the effect of these past traumas. For IPV, this research seeks to find a correlation between IPV and sexual assaults, specifically within smaller communities that may make it more difficult to move away thus staying with the abusive partner. Additionally, being in a smaller community there is an increasing chance of knowing the attacker due to the size of the community, as various studies have found that an individual is more likely to be sexual assaulted by someone they know (Oetzel and Duran 2004; Ullman, Filipas, Townsend, and Starzynski 2006).

With respect to Tribal Law, one aspiration of this research is to show the difficulties that arise while trying to navigating Tribal Law as well as the cushion some individuals may have to commit an assault due to where the assault occurs and how that can be monitored better or changed to incorporate these types of loop-holes. Lastly, I expect that stereotypes are revealed to be a primary factor behind why these assault rates are significantly high, given that the AIAN community would like to protect its image as a cultures and as a people more so than has already

been torn down due to previous stereotypes. Then once these issues are discussed within the community, it will open the door to combating sexual assaults and thoughts and action towards preventing sexual assaults will begin to shift to a communal effort in protecting one another and coming together as a community to lower the rates of sexual assaults against AIAN women.

## **Findings**

### Intimate Partner Violence

As noted above in the Literature Review, Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) affects many AIAN people as well as their friends and family members that are surrounding them. Furthermore, looking at the rates of IPV between other racial and ethnic groups compared to AIAN people, due to the fact that the AIAN demographic is often discarded due to the small sample size. However, if considering that previous research on IPV within AIAN relationships found that two-thirds of AIAN women are victims of IPV, when this is compared to other racial and ethnic groups it is substantially higher. I saw the effects IPV had on sexual assault throughout my interviews and it was a discussed often. However, these themes also overlapped frequently with some of the other themes that I will be discussing later. This is seen while discussing IPV, as IPV was mentioned in different contexts and differ because of the interviewee and the context of the question.

Perhaps the most important theme that was mentioned for IPV occurring was due to the fact that IPV and sexual assaults have become the norm for many AIAN women. As Anne put it:

*“Domestic violence isn’t necessarily seen as this horrible no-no thing, it’s not if your dad hits you, it’s when your dad hits you. It’s not if you get raped, it’s when you get raped.”*

It is important to consider that many AIAN individuals do expect this to occur to themselves at some point in their lifetime, especially if there are female. This relates to how sexual assaults

have become normalized not only by the women but by the community as a whole to the point that often little to no punishments exist for the perpetrators, but that will be discussed in detail later on.

Recognizing that IPV has become normalized for many women, those who may be in abusive relationship may not recognize that their relationship is not healthy or possibly detrimental to their mental, physical and psychological health. This negative effect on victims of IPV was shown throughout almost every interview but documented best by Elaine when she told this story:

*“I had a young child once that was being sexual assaulted by her family, it was a problem that ran throughout the family, the grandpa was molesting them and eventually served time for it, which when we knew, she was in my office and she was like a six year old kid, her older sister, I asked her older sister to come in and we said, ‘I know this is rampant in the family and it happened to you. If you testify we can put this man away and protect your sister’ and her answer was ‘I lived through it so will she. If I say anything my family will turn against me.’”*

While this does not specifically relate to IPV, it shows what the general reactions of violence against an individual will do to a person, and to get them to the point of accepting that what is being done to them is actually wrong.

Identifying what in a relationship is wrong, however is difficult. Since many of these young girls have seen IPV and other forms of violence for most of their life, it can lead to some confusion about what IPV is and what it entails. This was laid out most thoroughly by Anne and the experiences she has had working with younger AIAN girls and educating them on what is a healthy relationship and what these qualities that may look like when she said:

*“Domestic violence to our girls tends to look like the super aggressive, like “I didn’t do anything and my partner just hit me for no reason” kind of stuff. Whereas violence is manipulation, control, social media control, who you can see and who you can and can’t hang out with, aggressive grabbing. And you see the wheels turning in their head when we start to talk about this and then there’s the realization that ‘oh this happened to me, I’ve seen this happen’”*

This is important when recognizing that some AIAN girls do not understand that being violated and controlled by a significant other is unhealthy and that there is more to expect out of a relationship than just abuse, as they have not been taught otherwise.

However, it is not uncommon for the persons who are victims of IPV are unable to escape these relationships due to either economic issues, lack of transport, or lack of support by the surrounding community. Especially on reservations and in rural Alaskan villages, it is extremely difficult to be able to leave for the reasons listed above and by the time they may become available the violent act has passed and the partner has apologized and promised not to do it again. Elaine discussed this to an extent in her interview by stating similarly:

*“If you are in a smaller village and you need to get to one of these hub villages to get help which can be extremely difficult and sometimes impossible if there is not a plane coming in for three days. By the time the three days are up, he’s sober, apologized and you are cooking his dinner.”*

Additionally, recognizing that in many of these villages a person's partner, or heads of the family, are often the one supplying the resources, food and money so it is difficult to leave when they are providing for a family on a daily basis, even if they are the ones doing the abuse as Elaine also discussed in her interview saying that:

*“If you are in an isolated community and you are being beaten by your husband or your boyfriend or your father or you brother, then they are also the one’s that go out the next day hunting and getting the food that gets you through winter so it’s really hard to be able to stay mad at them or leave them.”*

This is crucial to understanding why victims may stay with their attackers as they often do not have anywhere else to go or cannot leave due to other circumstances, a fact which is not often understood. This factor is increased in rural villages and on reservations because there is less resources overall, making it more difficult to leave their homes. Furthermore, leaving their

homes may be viewed as turning their back on their community and this may lead to people being ostracized from their communities and support systems.

Overall it is important to recognize that IPV occurs in some AIAN relationships as it is normalized by the community that surrounds these individuals. Additionally, there are numerous other factors that influence why a person may stay in the abusive relationship from not knowing that the relationship is toxic, to not having the proper resources to do so in the first place, which will also be discussed in another finding.

While the previous research has vastly examined the lack of resources and normalization of IPV, I discovered that it is also a lack of knowledge and understanding of what a healthy relationship consists of and that has important policy implications as schools and shelters can begin to teach what are the differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships are. This has already begun to be implemented within public schools around Alaska due to a recent law, aptly named “Bree’s Law” after a White young girl was murdered by an abusive boyfriend, which teaches middle and high schoolers about dating violence and how to recognize the signs of violence within relationships. However, due to a shutdown of the Alaska legislature, this has been unable to gain the traction, and proper support. While this law strives to change and expand on health curriculum across the state, to be implemented around the states and nation as a whole, requires many resources that may not be currently available in rural villages and on reservations which will be discussed further in this manuscript. It is also important to note the fact that this female who was murdered was White and it raises questions on whether if this occurred to a person of another race or ethnicity, specifically AIAN, if the reaction to this murder and abuse would have been the same.

## Historical Trauma

Due to the wide variety of trauma AIAN people have been exposed to throughout history, historical trauma was discussed in detail in each of the interviews conducted. Considering that various racial and ethnic groups have been subject to some form of trauma that may be passed down to future generations it is important to note that these traumas occurred more frequently and throughout history towards the AIAN people which may have had more of an impact. This finding is also consistent with the previous research, as much of the research discussed how historical trauma has affected future generations, specifically long-lasting traumas, such as those the AIAN people went through. However, there were minor variations between how the trauma was passed down and what trauma was mentioned however. The most prominent trauma that AIAN people were exposed to was that of the Boarding Schools, in which AIAN children were forced to be sent to and while there, they endured assimilation processes as well as other physical and psychological abuses. Additionally, other traumas, such as colonialism which allowed for the elimination of AIAN people through murder and illnesses, combined with the assimilation to the dominant European cultures, was also frequently acknowledged. It is important to recognize how historical trauma has affected both future generations in terms of psychological and physical risk factors but additionally, how the removal of people and cultures have additionally affected the current generations.

One of the main causes behind the removal of AIAN people from their communities belonged to the boarding schools. While at these boarding schools the AIAN children were forced to speak English and not their native tongue and forget about their previous cultures. These schools also cultivated abuse from those who were employed at these schools and subjected the children to various types of physical, psychological and emotional abuse. These

abuses were discussed frequently in interviews and how they affected not only the students but additionally, the cultures when these students came back as Elizabeth described:

*“I mean the boarding schools...and then of course just the annihilation of the cultures, the language, the separation from the family, the colonizing of the children. Then they come back for their summer break for school and they’ve been altered. So that connection, that belief of people are separate but equal is skewed. And then in an environment that is violent and sexually abusive, you know, you’re going to act out somewhere. And so you bring that back.”*

Due to this abusive environment that these children were exposed to, they learned this behavior as it was normalized and expected to occur. When they grew up these children believed that abuse was normal due to the fact they were introduced to it at a young age and saw it all around them and continued to abuse those around them as Anne stated:

*“So, like, with my father, my grandpa went to a boarding school and my grandpa never had any parental guidance or parental figures in his life, so the way that he learned how to keep kids in line was abuse, really severe abuse, and that’s what my dad learned, that’s what my grandmother learned.”*

This was not an uncommon narrative that was expressed throughout the interview process and many participants saw this occur in some way. Another factor boarding schools played a role in creating was making their students become silent. While I will discuss this in much greater detail later on in the paper it is important to take note of here as this was one of the areas that this social silence started to emerge and become more prominent in the communities. At these boarding schools students had to stay silent or be punished and in turn created a mental block on the terrible things that occurred at these schools and it is only now that people are understanding the horrors that AIAN children endured at these schools as shown by Brenda:

*“I think it does, because this historical trauma...women who were sexually assaulted back then didn’t really talk about it. They wouldn’t talk about it, it’s in the past, but obviously we call it historical trauma for a reason. Whole generations, new generations, were traumatized by these events and kind of leading into even my grandparent’s generation, a lot of stuff happened to them. Did they ever talk about it? No. I feel like it’s just now we’re at the generation where we can start*

*talking about it. So I think that's why it's always been generation after generation, its happening but no one ever talks about it, and how can you stop something that no one ever addresses or talks about?"*

The fact that of the individuals who endured abuse at the schools are only now opening up discussions, it is an important factor to consider when examining historical trauma as they were taught by learning and observing and when all an individual views is abuse, this is going to have consequences.

Another aspect of historical trauma that is important to recognize is the effect that colonialism had on AIAN people and their cultures as a whole. When Columbus and other explorers arrived to the Americas they decimated the majority of the AIAN population through disease and murder. These effects were felt through the entire AIAN cultures and has had implications on current issues as well as stated by Lindsey:

*"Everything from the legacy from colonialism that really disrupted and by design broke apart family ties and probably the natural healthy connections that adults have with their children and communities had with children."*

Lindsey then goes on to describe the effects that the decimated population had on AIAN people and their cultures:

*"And part of that, to understand that, is to imagine if you had a ball of yarn and got at least five people in a circle, maybe six or seven. And they would throw the yarn back and throw. You throw the yarn back and forth until you get 40 passes and so you have a nice web being held and the idea is that the youth would be kind of be a balloon on that web. So if the web is nice and tight like that, the balloon doesn't fall through the floor to hit the ground, which would be what we think of as risk factors, and it can kind of launched and discover itself. So the reason is we call that tightly webbed. If you don't have as many strings you have 10 strings, there are a lot more holes for that balloon to fall through. So the way this relates, and the way I'm going to answer your question is that AIAN youth in the United States don't have the strings they need, what we call protective factors...Just take that visual image and you if pull out instead five people you only have one, or you cut the strings holding them. Those people we think of as connections and anchors in a person's life. That's where we learn things, we get tangible things like home, food or clothing, or the things we need. And that's where we learn intangible things. Like what does honesty look like, what does perseverance look like, what does any*

*of those other things have. And so if those people aren't there, or the connection to them is cut, then the integrated human and youth development theory we are working with suggests that it is harder to get what you need and get launched into the world. Because no one person, even our biological parents can't provide everything for us. So the way I think historical trauma affects things, besides a direct somebody was sexually assaulted 20 years ago and that gets passed along. If you cut things, take some language away that helped people express themselves, when we have the ability to name things. If you literally introduce dangerous dependencies, trading alcohol for other things. If you introduce disease, you affect people's whole interconnections, and their webs and their communities and how to build resiliency right and how it would be a transition of acculturation anyway in introduction of this and bring European content in."*

As Lindsey stated, cutting these ties to others through either boarding schools, separation, or by other means, it has major effects on both the individual and as a cultures. Colonialism provided an opportunity for Europeans to expand their cultures and their world, but in the process destroyed another. The AIAN community was decimated and half the AIAN population died during this time period which has various implications such as the ones that Lindsey mentioned above (Evans-Campbell 2008). Keeping this in mind, it is important to think about the people that were killed or died during this time period. Was it probably the ones that stood up and fought back for their cultures and their people, those who took care of the sick and dying, or those who stood back and hid? While this is not known or recorded in any manner this idea was discussed by Elaine as she mentioned it during our interview when she stated that:

*"I mean how do you transmit a cultures when its being so disrupted and then you think of the people that died and I had this said to me once and I don't know if it's true or not, but they said "Think about it, there's a flu epidemic, who are the people that are going to die? The people who contract it, and maybe the people who go to help the sick people, the good people get it and die and the survivors are the ones that stayed in the house with the doors shut so you didn't necessarily have survival of the best." And again I have no idea if there is any historical truth to that but it certainly seems to have some sense behind it. I think what happened to these cultures they talk about how whole villages are basically in a constant state of PTSD and I really believe that, that it was so traumatic that it takes more than a generation or two to get over having most of your family and your cultures wiped out."*

The concept of “Survival of the Best” is an interesting aspect to apply to this paper as if it is assumed that those who are “best” or more caring, or were the ones that went to stand up against those who were threatening their cultures or looking after those who were exposed to disease. If this is the case, then it is possible that the others who stood back and did not help those who became ill or fought for their community, were the ones that may have committed unfavorable acts such as committing sexual assaults. If it was these individuals that survived it is possible that these behaviors remained, which may have led these beliefs or thoughts to be passed down and normalized to future generations. However, these beliefs or thought processes are not genetic in any way and while they may affect the rates of sexual assault, it cannot be assumed to have much impact on AIAN cultures as a whole or what gets passed onto future generations beyond what may have become normalized, which will be discussed later on..

While it is difficult to conclude what part of historical trauma has played a role in the frequency of sexual assaults in the AIAN community, it has had an impact. Any time that a person loses part of their family the norms and cultures changes, even slightly, but it still impacts many. When a person lose a majority of their cultures or forced to assimilate to another, this has bigger impacts than just small changes. When the ties are cut across the entire community the people must pick up the pieces and try to put them back together, however this is not always possible. The pieces may either be put back in an incorrect order or not remembered all together which makes it difficult to reestablish a community. Historical trauma has done this to AIAN communities. Years of being marginalized by the general public and being pushed to the sidelines has had major implications and hurt the AIAN community to the point when violence, such as sexual assaults, can thrive without little punishment or remorse.

## Tribal Law

A main focus in the previous literature examines Tribal Law and the difficulties that comes with the jurisdiction and who is allowed to prosecute where, specifically relating to crimes committed on reservations. This relates specifically to AIAN people versus other racial and ethnic groups due to the fact that Tribal Law only effects reservation land and thus these jurisdiction issues occur. Further noting that jurisdiction for these crimes often falls under where the crime occurred versus who committed the crime, which allows for these issues of jurisdiction. This can allow for sexual assaults to occur on reservation land as a non-reservation member can come in and assault an individual and then leave and the reservation police cannot prosecute as they are not a member of the reservation and city and state police forces cannot prosecute because it occurred on the reservation. This creates a grey area on reservation land that can allow for unsavory acts, beyond sexual assault, to occur as Anne detailed:

*“Tribal law is so flawed. The federal government loves to screw us over with that. So if it is a non-Native person that assaults someone that is Native on tribal land, they cannot be prosecuted. Unless it’s some horrific thing that the FBI takes over, it cannot be prosecuted in any court because non-Natives can’t be prosecuted in tribal court, but if something like that happens on tribal land the state can’t touch it...But yeah there’s this kind of wall of silence between tribal government, county government, state government.”*

Lindsey also described these grey areas and the frequency behind how often these assaults involved an attacker who was non-AIAN or who did not live on the reservation and how this was extremely difficult to navigate for the various police forces and how Tribal Law is difficult for all, even lawyers to understand:

*“We don’t know a lot about the perpetrators but yet we know that some of the data is about how non-native perpetrators are at a higher rate and so some people have a legal analysis about that, about the, I think it’s the olafont position. Some of the decisions not to allow tribes to have jurisdiction over crimes and non-natives and prosecute them for crimes. So there would be undoubtedly be a piece of that and what we’ve been doing with our SVJI work nationally, have defiantly been read and*

*talked with people. We've been training in [West Coast state] with the [West Coast tribe and reservation] and some other places about corridors for gangs or for people running drugs or anything else kind of viewed the reservation as kind of free territory for them to pass through or live among and not be as highly on anybody else's radar and these crimes not having any jurisdiction."*

This shows how difficult it can be to file a charge against a person, due to the fact that there are frequent jurisdictions issues, as well as a lack of talking about the crimes that allows for all types of crimes to become easier to commit as mentioned above and how Natalie discussed:

*"I'll say I remember when I was eighteen, and up there and driving around and they said that [my reservation] is one of the top places to get away with murder because it's so...it's all flat, it's so spacey, it's a small community."*

However, there has been some development recently as both Anne and Natalie discussed during their interviews about enacting Safe Harbor laws that help protect survivors of sexual assault so that the grey area can be limited on reservations, so jurisdiction can depend on whoever was involved in the assault and so that the attacker cannot get away with their attack. Although these laws strive to accomplish great things, it is up to each individual state and reservation to create and enforce these laws which has shown to be difficult in some areas as Anne described:

*"Safe Harbors is a state law, it's not federal, it should be federal but its state law. Tribes, because it's a state law, tribes can opt in or opt out to have it, and so right now all of the reservations except for [Minnesota Reservation] have adopted safe harbors. [Minnesota Reservation] it's not even being talked about. Like I did a law enforcement training up there and the cops had never even heard that Safe Harbors was a thing. I'm like, oh why is that not happening because this is like such an obvious 'duh' kind of thing that yeah you should be taking this in. So now there's more of a push but safe harbors has been in the works for five years, on the books for about two years now, why has this not happened up there?"*

This shows that while important work is being done to reduce these grey areas, Tribal Law and the requirement of enforcing various policies is difficult due to the relationship between reservations and the states that they are in. Additionally, when other issues such as substance-

abuse issues are decided to be more important to be focused on, sexual assaults get pushed out of sight as do the programs as Natalie detailed:

*“They’re not even thinking about – they know like that the sexual assault and all that is happening but that’s not even relevant...I’ve looked for programs up there, I’ve tried to see like where the closest resource center is for things like that. There is none. There’s nothing. I mean they have county workers but they don’t want to out anybody. It’s just even having somebody to talk to, I mean you can talk to someone in the school if you’re a youth but as an adult there’s nothing.”*

If the resources are not available for people to go to, even with Safe Harbor laws, the average individual will not be well-versed in these laws or Tribal Law in general, so there is a need for these resources. If a person is sexually assaulted, they may not know how to file charges on someone, especially by using Safe Harbor laws, and probably would not even want to think about the attack in detail again, this is where these resources could come in. These resources could provide an outlet for these people to go to and have the paperwork be taken care of, so the person can begin to cope and rebuild their life after the attack. However, if the community is more worried about other issues, these resources will never be provided as Anne and Natalie described previously.

### AIAN Cultures

Cultures is a major aspect of AIAN identity and cherished by members of the AIAN community. The majority of the previous research talked about this strength of cultures but did not go into detail about how these cultures may impact these rates of sexual assault except for Gray and Nye who examined how AIAN cultures connected to substance abuse by AIAN people (2001). While this does relate to this research, more cultural factors may influence these rates. Recognizing however that many racial and ethnic people have strong connections to their cultures, it is different for AIAN people. This may be due to the fact that AIAN people can trace where they came from in the land back numerous generations as described by Anne:

*“My blood is in this land. I am from here. I can go and visit the site of my creation story.”*

Given this fact, it is not a surprise that cultures was frequently mentioned throughout the various interviews. The overall theme of cultures was mentioned the third most frequently compared to other themes, which shows how important it is to AIAN identity and communities. However, much of the mentions of cultures were either talking about how AIAN cultures has become broken in some way or how the current resources that are provided do not account for AIAN cultures and should use strategies that can incorporate AIAN cultures. This aspect of keeping programs related to AIAN cultures is key as it builds support for one another in a way that other programs may not be effective. If a person gives people the chance to connect with others who are struggling through the same issues, then a person can build a support system and ties back to their community by using their cultures.

However, before we build relationships between people and strengthen programs we must first be able to solve the breakdown of AIAN cultures, specifically the relationship between AIAN individuals in urban and rural areas. Natalie mentioned this idea during her interview, especially the animosity between the two groups when she said:

*“I’m even just starting to see it all. Just even going back home and stuff and hearing what people have to say like ‘oh you’re a city Indian’ and a ‘burban Indian, you don’t know really what its like. It’s...I don’t know. It’s heartbreaking to hear that from people who are your cultures, your everything. We’re all turning against each other and that’s causing more issues with the youth as well because more rivalry, starting gangs, colors.”*

The divide in these two groups is important to take note of as they are very different. One of my interview questions was about the differences between being a AIAN people in rural versus urban area, and the main occurrence is the fact that many reservations or rural villages do not have proper resources compared to those living in urban areas. While the lack of resources will be discussed later in this paper it is important to note at this point as it serves as a major division

between AIAN people living in a remote village or on a reservation compared to those in urban areas, as the ways of life are vastly different in various aspects. Additionally, many individuals who “get out” for various reasons such as to get an education or a job, frequently feel required to come back once they have become more educated overall. Another aspect of cultures that has become broken, is due to the assimilation policies that the United States forced upon AIAN people, specifically through the boarding schools. As discussed previously, this removed an entire generation and tried to eliminate AIAN cultures through these programs as Nadine mentioned in her interview:

*“Firstly, there was an entire generation of people, due to the United States assimilation policies, this generation that wasn’t parented and that those parents had such a traumatic life themselves which plays a huge role but their overall cultural beliefs respect women but the cultures sometimes is not always intact which adds a lot to the rates of sexual assaults.”*

Due to this removal of a generation and the strained foundation of AIAN cultures left over from colonialism, this allowed for cracks to form in the cultures and negative acts, such as abuse and sexual assault, seep into the voids.

This integration of sexual assaults to AIAN cultures was discussed often throughout almost every interview as Natalie described:

*“You feel like you’re not being respected and the violence starts, the ganging, the rivalry, the assaults. It’s just like...how do we go back through all of that to the core and make things better in a society like this.”*

Elizabeth also described similar ideas in terms of how she has also seen the cracks in AIAN cultures affect the rates of sexual assaults on AIAN women and how a drive for power and to have power affects this relationship and possibly can contribute towards sexual predation towards these women:

*“So I think that, yeah, the loss of who am I and where did I come from. And we’re creatures of aggression, we want alphas, there’s going to be alphas and there’s*

*going to be betas and omegas and so on, and so you know, if the way that I learned power was through the sexual assault of me then I'm going to turn around and sexually assault the people around me."*

As described in the above quotes and stories, sexual assault has been able to fill the voids left by decades of forced assimilation and decimation into AIAN cultures, and these new beliefs have affected every person and communities and how one may see or react to both the assault and the aftermath as Elizabeth stated and which we will discuss later on in this paper:

*"So it doesn't just happen to me, it happens to my family and my community. So that ripple effect is very powerful. So it's not just me making a decision to report, it's also how does that impact my family, and my community."*

Although, some of the AIAN cultures has been diluted and somewhat dampened by sexual assaults, the cultures as a whole is still bright and strong. Many of those who I interviewed talked for the need of cultural programs to help individuals cope with issues they may be facing. This is vital to AIAN cultures as it is built on community and interactions with others, so programs must be able to recognize the importance is using the strength that this cultures has. As Natalie discussed:

*"That's where, I think, a lot of the Native American communities struggle is they're not getting their cultural things in there and I think it's a tool to finding healing and peace."*

Due to this lack of cultures in both programs and other institutions, some AIAN people lack the integration into their cultures as a whole. Additionally, when using these cultures-integrated programs many of those I interviewed found them to be more beneficial for AIAN individuals, compared to those that were built around other, more dominant cultures, as they were able to better relate to the programs and those involved with the programs. Natalie discussed the need for these programs as otherwise they are not as effective as these programs assume that a person has the same thoughts and belief systems the creators of the program did:

*“I think all should have their own culturally-specific treatment programs and plans instead of ‘kay you’re in jail here’s a Bible, read something, learn something, you’re going to go to heaven.’ Like no, this is not...you need to respect everybody’s tradition and cultures and I think, you know, that’s what it just comes down to.”*

Elizabeth also described the benefit of culturally-specific resources but elaborated more on resources overall and how they could focus on cultures and involve the community within these resources as well:

*“Resources available for traditional healing, and I think again, if somebody is not behaving in the right way that they get sent somewhere, not jail, but somewhere where they can get their thinking hopefully back in order, and that again, I feel like elders, traditional healers, lots of cultural activities, so that the healing can happen and the thinking can get straightened out.”*

It is clear that there is a need for these programs and how they can benefit the AIAN people, whom may struggle with various issues. If these programs were available to the communities, then positive ties can begin to form and rebuild the damage done to AIAN cultures through the years of marginalization, so that then individuals can connect again to their cultures and one another as Sheila puts it:

*“Things like having more opportunities to talk about you know what happened there, is important for people to talk about and start piecing things together. I think people need to be reconnected to their cultures and who they are.”*

This is an important aspect to any person, but it also allows a dialogue to be created between people and possibly to begin to recognize issues within their own communities and band together to strengthen the AIAN cultures overall.

### AIAN Identity and Stereotypes

When considering how important AIAN cultures is to an individual, it is also recognize how important being identified as an AIAN person is as well. Identifying as an AIAN person is extremely powerful for many, as was stated during interviews. However, AIAN people and AIAN cultures as a whole have become extremely stereotyped as well as fetishized which may

play a role the rates of sexual assaults against AIAN women. This was discussed to a degree in the previous research although it served as more of an after-thought or future direction rather than a factor behind sexual assault (Yuan, Koss, Polacca, and Goldman 2006). While the majority of other racial and ethnic groups face stereotypes, especially women being fetishized, it may affect AIAN people differently as it may serve as a type of “breaking-point” and defeat an individual. It could also affect other factors, such as the prominence of social silence, and give AIAN people another reason to stay silent about a sexual assault. When considering that AIAN women often are the most likely race or ethnicity to be assaulted by a person of another race or ethnicity as reported by Amnesty International (2007). Considering that AIAN women have been fetishized over time, this may factor into these high rates of sexual assault. Additionally, how do other stereotypes affect AIAN individuals and AIAN cultures and does it possibly serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy after being introduced to these stereotypes.

Beginning with stereotype that AIAN are drunks or frequently abusing substances was acknowledged in many of the interviews. While the majority of the participants agreed that while it is a stereotype and while some AIAN people do abuse substances, not every AIAN person takes part. However, this stereotype has become so intertwined with AIAN people as a whole, that some professionals in fields may assume that every AIAN individual has a substance-abuse problem as Natalie described in one of her personal experiences:

*“Yeah I met with a doctor and he had asked me, you know, he asked me how much I drink and I think I said like once a week and he said well this could be an issue, knowing of your past and family and cultures and I’m like excuse you? Like...so yeah, it was like even generalized, and that’s just at a little doctor’s clinic.”*

While this is unacceptable from any professional, it should show how misinformed many people are about AIAN people and the cultures. This is also seen in smaller villages and is stereotyped to certain communities versus others as Elizabeth outlines:

*“They’re drunks. I mean just recently we were dealing with a Medicaid person who is really just supposed to fill out a form and turn it in, and she stated that she wasn’t going to allow that form to go through because “those people just like to come to [remote Alaskan village] to drink”. And this is like...within the month. So yeah. That’s a huge stereotype. It’s sort of like ‘well they’re a bunch of drunks so they get what they deserve.’”*

This thought that certain areas are more susceptible for substance abuse or that a certain group of people are more likely to abuse a substance than others should be acknowledged, and due to the risk factors described previously, these stereotypes may show non-AIAN people a means of taking an advantage of a situation and possibly a person.

While this may have an effect on the rates of sexual assaults on AIAN women, what may factor into these rates of sexual assault is the fact that AIAN women have been fetishized in consumer cultures. Many individuals throughout the interview process brought this up and mentioned how commercial cultures has affected this, the most as acknowledged by Anne:

*“This fetishizing, this romanticizing, this ideal of like a native woman wearing buckskin in a waterfall with the mist blowing at her with animals crawling up her arms, I’m like... I hate camping. I would do it, but I hate camping.”*

This fetishizing and romanticizing also occurs at a more basic level, in terms of trying to justify a relationship even though the actual occurrence was more much brutal. Disney in particular was brought up in a discussion with Anne and Natalie as expressed below:

*“Natalie: That is I mean...even just like the image of Pocahontas and John Smith.*

*Like, of course.*

*Anne: That’s the only Disney princess I ever got. And that was rape.”*

The importance of this idea cannot be overstated. The fact that children are viewing films and television that portrays AIAN people, and women in particular as exotic and different is not only damaging to AIAN people and their cultures overall but also puts them in danger. When an individual in fetishized in such a way it primes an person to think that they “must have her” and

believe that they can just take her and do whatever they want. Lindsey describes this best when she states:

*“Our belief about sexual assault in part, is if when you start turning a person into a thing. You can dehumanize them and do violence to them, whether it's sexual assault or domestic violence or other. And so the stereotypes that would dehumanize or suggest...I think around from what I've heard and understood from native women is the stereotype that all women of color get about their sexuality and promiscuity...That has certainly been true throughout history...To try anything that devalues and shifts that sense of dignity or purpose.”*

These assumptions are detrimental to AIAN people, especially women, because it puts them into a position that is dangerous and may allow them to be sought out more often than members of other racial or ethnic groups. These dangers will not go away and will continue to feed into the grey areas that exist due to Tribal Law and the lack of protection AIAN women have.

#### Prominence of Social Silence

Throughout the interview portion of my research I noticed a trend that the previous research failed to mention. This theme revolved around the social silence of the AIAN people around sexual assault and what happens when survivors choose to speak out. It is also important to recognize that within previous research, little to none have been looking at this prominence of social silence, with the only source I could find was an account of one survivor's assault in which her attacker was the only one who told her to be quiet repeatedly (Raine 1998). It is concerning that social silence was discussed in length in each of the interviews, however little research has looked at this topic further. While many racial and ethnic groups tend to stay silent about a sexual assault, it is much more on the individual level compared to the social silence that AIAN people take. This may be due to a combination of numerous reasons, such as mistrust of police, adhering to stereotypes such as the “stoic Indian” this community use of social silence seems specific to AIAN communities as expressed by those interviewed. Throughout my

interviews, people discussed how impactful not speaking about sexual assault affected not only individuals but the community as a whole. Not speaking about sexual assault allowed for the issue to be put out of sight while not solving the problem in the first place. It is this finding that I believe is one of the main reasons that this issues continues. Elaine expressed when she stated:

*“What it has to do with women being quiet about it, their quietness is more of despair and seeing no alternative and oftentimes it's a familiar thing, watching their mom being beat up they were raised in a family in which they were being abused or taught to take it because it's family and you are raised growing up to think that this is normal.”*

This is often the reaction to what happens when a sexual assault occurs throughout the community. People may recognize that it occurred, but it does not go beyond that. Moreover, there is little to no consequences for committing a sexual assault because no one will say differently, and many times it is often the survivor that must leave the community as described by Anne:

*“There’s this huge stigma around any sort of abuse that it’s really put on the victim or survivor of it, and not enough on who’s actually doing the abuse in the first place, or a lot of times”*

Elaine echoed this same sentiment from the perspective of a rural person as it is quite different than in an urban area:

*“If you are in an isolated community and you are being beaten by your husband or your boyfriend or your father or you brother, then they are also the one’s that go out the next day hunting and getting the food that gets you through winter so it’s really hard to be able to stay mad at them or leave them. It’s very hard to go to a shelter as most villages do not have shelters, it's not like you can get on a bus, its isolation and helplessness and if you do get to the city”*

Elizabeth also added onto this by relating it to victim blaming and how it was often believed to be the woman's fault that the assaulted occurred:

*“We have big problems down here with legitimizing sexual assault. ‘Oh she was drinking’ that attitude. That’s gotta go. It’s come a long way from say like 1980. The women would come into the shelter and be totally embarrassed and ashamed*

*that they walked away from their family, walked away from their community, and that they were at fault. That they were somehow weak. And I see that lens shifting. One thing I've disagreed with for a long, long time is why are the victims, the women and children, primarily, why are victims forced to leave? Why is not the perpetrator told to go somewhere and get better?"*

If we see these survivors who are speaking out being treated poorly and unfairly it is easy to see why individuals may not speak out against their attacker, due to there being little consequences for the attacker. Additionally, the community and even other family members do nothing about it and at most, acknowledges it at a passing glance as stated by Elaine:

*"The guy beats your sister up, he's married to your sister, he beats her up that night and the next morning you are on a Ski-Doo and go out hunting with him and everything is perfectly fine. There is no social stigma to it for men, at best everyone looks away with kind of a sheepish grin."*

This adds to the social silence of the community as the victims are forced to keep silent or risk being alienated from their family and community or be denied resources altogether.

Furthermore, another factor that plays a major role in survivors staying silent is due to the fact their attacker may be in a position of power or in their own family. To further draw attention to Elaine's quote about how families, especially those in rural villages, have to stay together and if a person reports their attacker that may take a food or income source away:

*"If you are in an isolated community and you are being beaten by your husband or your boyfriend or your father or you brother, then they are also the one's that go out the next day hunting and getting the food that gets you through winter so it's really hard to be able to stay mad at them or leave them."*

Rural villages in particular often have a lack of resources overall, and if an individual takes away a resource suppliers in a father, husband or brother, due to a sexual assault charge, then they are worried about how themselves, their family and possibly their children will be fed and cared for. This makes it difficult for women to justify leaving or makes them question if they could survive on their own.

Family ties are not the only form of power an attacker may hold, however. Many participants throughout my interviews discussed how people who have had previous sexual assault charges and served time are able to come right back and continue in a position of power as described by Elaine:

*“I mean I was on the North Slope [borough] when a village just elected a convicted rapist who had just gotten out of jail and gotten his civil rights back twice to the assembly.”*

More so, the community attempts to try and justify the reason behind why these attackers are committing sexual assaults as detailed by Anne:

*“There’s this elder from [Minnesota Reservation] who has been confirmed as a sexual predator, a pedophile. And some of his victim/survivors have come forward and his lawyer justified it by saying well he is a victim of abuse himself, so it’s okay.”*

While this may be some members of the communities’ explanations behind the acceptance of committing sexual assaults, it still needs to be addressed. An individual who has been convicted of a sexual assault should not be able to hold a position of power, at least until they have received rehabilitation resources and the help they deserve and show that they have changed as Elaine proposed:

*“I would love to see every native corporation in the state stand up and say ‘if you have domestic violence assaults on your record mister and you were put in jail or you were found guilty and you don’t stay clean for at least 10 years after that record, you don’t get on our board, you don’t get a position, you don’t get hired and I don’t take you on my whaling crew or hunting crew.’ That’s what going to make a difference, the men have to stand up and say this isn’t acceptable.”*

If perpetrators continue to have access to positions of power, this will further silence survivors as they will be going against a powerful figure in their community and possibly sending them away which could ostracize them from the community.

The last factor that adds to the social silence of AIAN people, and women in particular as they are most affected by sexual assaults, is the mistrust between AIAN people and police forces. In many of the interviews conducted, police mistrust was acknowledged ranging from the fact that the police commit crimes or protect those who do, or encourage victims to stay silent about their attack due to the difficulties that come with a sexual assault case. This is a major issue as if AIAN women feel uncomfortable with reporting their attack because they will be discouraged or not listened to, they will continue to be silent. This was described by Anne in detail when discussing her experiences with her clients:

*“And it’s normalized and there’s also a big mistrust of police in our community for very, very valid reasons and so you don’t want to report it, or if you do report it most of the time when you go to the cops and say ‘this has been my experience I am a survivor of sexual assault’ they discourage you from filing a report because they say it just wouldn’t go anywhere.”*

Elizabeth also describes this feeling of mistrust towards the police somewhat:

*“Law enforcement does respond differently. If a Native woman is sexually assaulted, she does get different treatment than a non-native woman. I’ve watched it time and time again up here.”*

This is a major difference between reservations and villages compared to urban areas, as very often in these smaller communities a person knows the police and they know everyone, so word can spread quickly. Anne describes this relationship and how in more urban areas, and while there is still issues with police, it is in a different way:

*“As a member of a small community, you know everything probably before social services does, or before the police do, or it might be related to police officers, so there’s less incentive to handle it as much of a heinous crime as it really is down here. Like yeah there’s different issues with police officers, but there’s less of a chance that you’re going to be related to them, or that the abuser is going to be related to them.”*

When considering how often everyone knows everyone, this does play a role in these individuals keeping silent. If a person speaks up against their attacker there is a chance the community could lose a

person, either the attacker or the survivor and in some cases both. This shrinks the community overall and the AIAN population that is active within the community and that can put a community more at risk.

There are numerous factors that go into AIAN people being silent about sexual assaults. Many refuse to acknowledge the existence of these attacks and go on as usual, to being afraid to report a person's own attacker due to their position of power or role in their family and how that will affect their family and community by taking these pieces away. The rationale behind this social silence however, is not nearly as important as the effects that the social silence has on the community and that is what must be focused on. While the factors behind the social silence can be addressed through programs or support, the social silence as a whole must be broken. AIAN individuals must start to do this and to talk about what is happening to their friends, families and themselves. However as Elaine stated there is some movement regarding speaking out but it needs to continue and involve the entire AIAN community:

*"I think that Native women are becoming more organized and attuned to becoming more supportive to one another and I think that the existence of these shelters is proof of that. When we started in the North Slope [borough] we had safe homes and a lot of people thought that was wrong and now thoughts have shifted to becoming more organized and supportive. They don't buy anymore that you have to go home with your abuser."*

To continue these support systems and conversations will benefit the entire AIAN population and is needed as shown by Brenda:

*"So I think that's part of the reason that we're getting more vocal and we're opening up about it and realizing that it's a huge issue in the Native American population."*

While these changes and shifts in talking about sexual assault openly are starting to happen, it is crucial for the conversations to continue as it will strengthen relationships and bonds and begin to support survivors in a way that has yet to be done.

## Community

As mentioned throughout this paper, community is important for AIAN people. Given the strengths of the cultures, it brings people together and allows for people to know each other. Recognizing that community is an important factor in many types of racial and ethnic groups, since the AIAN population is smaller than most these communities are vital for the AIAN people as discussed by our participants. The importance of community was mainly due to the fact that everyone knows everyone, there are not many secrets between people and if something is said, almost everyone will know about it. This particularly applies to reservations and villages where the population size is smaller and confined to, mostly, a set area. This small population size was described in some of the previous research to factor in how a survivor reacts after an assault and how this reaction is often based on the community (Shepherd 2001), however I wanted to see community interactions looked at in more detail through this research. The tight-knit identity of AIAN communities could possibly allow for sexual assaults to occur more frequently when combined with the social silence aspect of AIAN people, which may arise due to the victimization and marginalization of people and AIAN cultures over time. It was this idea that many people brought up, in addition to how the community reacts when a survivor does speak out against her attacker. Elaine spoke to this in detail when she acknowledged how villages have access to various things now but isolation still plays a role:

*“On the other hand you go to villages now, and between the internet and TV they aren’t as isolated. They are as isolated in terms of a woman trying to make it on her own but they are not isolated from the world. They see, why they refuse to acknowledge sexual assaults is beyond me.”*

Furthermore, a major aspect of community is how important it is to an individual. This is especially the case in rural villages where many of the people in the village are either family or have been friends for lifetimes. Thus if a person is assaulted by someone close to them, they

may not speak out against them due to their respect for their family or the fact that it would disrupt the community too much, these individuals just accept the abuse as shown by Elaine in this story:

*“I had a young child once that was being sexual assaulted by her family, it was a problem that ran throughout the family, the grandpa was molesting them and eventually served time for it, which when we knew, she was in my office and she was like a six year old kid, her older sister, I asked her older sister to come in and we said, ‘I know this is rampant in the family and it happened to you. If you testify we can put this man away and protect your sister’ and her answer was ‘I lived through it so will she. If I say anything my family will turn against me.’ and in Native cultures, at least here is Alaska, having your family turn against you, you might as well be dead, you feel so alone and isolated. Family is such an important construct for them and this girl would not, not even to save her six year old sister would turn against her assaulted and instead took on the attitude of if I lived through it so will she and when you are dealing with that, you’re not going anywhere.”*

Elaine makes note of the fact that if an individual turn against their family, they turn against their entire community. This was discussed in many interviews as the importance of family is strong and if a person speaks out they are often ostracized by the entire community as it puts the community in danger as detailed by Elizabeth:

*“I think the community pressure is significant. So the perpetrator has family too and they come down on the victim who might report. Many people are related, and so you’re not just turning in your co-worker, you’re turning in your cousin.”*

Elizabeth further goes on to describe how these assaults effect not only the person but the community as a whole:

*“So it doesn’t just happen to me, it happens to my family and my community. So that ripple effect is very powerful. So it’s not just me making a decision to report, it’s also how does that impact my family, and my community.”*

Additionally, often the women who choose to speak out and state they were sexually assaulted are questioned about their assault and sometimes are not believed in the community as detailed by Lindsey:

*“The other big thing, is if women aren’t believed. If survivors aren’t believed they are told to get over it, if you’re a community that doesn’t trust your own or even believe in legal systems because you have been hurt by them because of a history of racism and you have been torn apart because of that, then that avenue is not as open to you.”*

Often, women are not believed by their community but the legal system as well, which could further contribute towards not speaking out about a sexual assault. The fear of stigma associating AIAN people and cultures with rape and victimization may also result in the lack of reporting and overall social silence of survivors of sexual assaults as expressed by Lindsey:

*“So people who are marginalized, or non-mainstream community are even more challenging time and that choice between justices for myself and if I [as an AIAN person] reports that this was my brother, or my sister’s non-native husband or whatever. If there is any of that tie to the community, then are we going to be, there is a need to protect the community image as well.”*

In a sense, AIAN people often face more scrutiny for being of that race, due to the numerous stereotypes and misconceptions that are associated with them and their cultures. These communities must combat this in any way possible and show that they are strong, however that may further hide the rate of sexual assaults.

Lastly, communication plays a major role within AIAN communities and it is through these channels that sexual assaults will begin to be acknowledged in a way that opens up the conversation and takes the blame off the survivors. Many of those interviewed believed that this movement and change within communities must be led by the younger generation and have them teaching the older generation as described by Anne:

*“So no, they might not come to our doors, but we have an open communication line and I think people are talking about it more. Talking about sexual assault, about domestic violence, about sex trafficking, that’s been a much larger conversation now than it ever has been with sex trafficking. And the youth are leading it. The youth are raising their parents at this point, but I think that’s what needs to happen.”*

If these conversations can begin to occur, then the lines of communication can open up across the communities and AIAN communities, as well as society as a whole can begin to reverse the victim-blaming that occurs and be able to ostracize the perpetrator versus the survivor so that these survivors can speak about their assault without any fear.

### Resources

Resources were frequently mentioned through each one of the interviews conducted as well as the previous research. While the topics varied from the lack of resources in more remote villages and reservations as well as how the current resources need to be taken advantage of by AIAN individuals. These thoughts were mirrored in the previous research although most of the previous research looked at resources more as a policy implication compared to a factor that may add or assist the rates of sexual assault (Crossland, Palmer and Brooks 2013; Gebhardt and Woody 2012; Oetzel and Duran 2004; Robertson 2012; Shepherd 2001). This lack of resources in remote areas and on reservations is specific to AIAN people as these areas are frequently more homogenous in race or ethnicities than other areas. Although homogenous racial and ethnic groups do exist in various areas, it may not be on the same scale as the AIAN communities. When recognizing the issues that surround the lack of acknowledgement of sexual assaults, it is important to discussing that there is not many resources available for those who need it and especially in smaller villages, as it is difficult to hide that a person is using a resources as they may need to be flown out or a professional be flown in as described by Lindsey:

*“So a lot of tribal villages, um if somebody reports, or there is somebody flying in, so how do you keep that particularly private? You’re being flown out for a medical exam or the distances, the times, or the response may be fairly discouraging. I think some people still do it but there is some ways as to how that response would look.”*

This also refers to the previous aspect of the role that the community plays in if a person chooses to report a sexual assault, but especially in rural villages as it is difficult to have access to the proper resources that a survivor may need.

The majority of the interviews discussed the lack of resources that are provided for AIAN people either due to the smallness of the community, or the overall lack of trained individuals who work in these places as described by Anne:

*“As long as that continues, our services that we can provide for I guess sexual assault, are very limited if this violence is going to keep happening. So the best we can do is to get the word out, be supportive, do things like this, speak to you, you know, because you’re hearing our story, and having you tell people what you’ve heard and what’s happening. It’s kind of just a rolling ball on that, and almost motivating people to want to do this work because not many people want to but it needs to be done, it needs to be here.”*

While services can be provided, it is hard to extend them for a variety of reasons, the most prominent being budget cuts and lack of funding overall from the federal and state levels, as well as tribal governments, as while resources may be in place they are not well-funded or shut down due to the lack of funding. A major issue surrounding resources however, is the lack of any resources for AIAN people. Many of those interviewed mentioned how some AIAN people are more worried about housing and basic needs before they can even begin to cope with the fact they were sexually assaulted as explained by Anne:

*“I think part of it too though, is going to be stabilizing all other basic needs for one to have a successful life. Like, secure housing, having an affordable living wage as a minimum wage, I would love to see that \$15 an hour pass because I know when you’re feeling like you’re in survival mode for every other part of your life, even trying to process or to acknowledge to yourself that something horrible has happened to you is like the last thing on your mind...when our girls come in to us, or come into our program, we can assume they’ve dealt with abuse or trauma of some kind. That’s going to be the last thing they talk about though because they’re more worried about school and housing to begin with.”*

Natalie also added onto this idea by describing the thought process of many of her clients:

*“They are, yeah, they’re seeking stability first hand, and then all the other stuff comes out later, because you can breathe again, and then you process.”*

Anne describes the process of the lack of housing and other basic needs even in her own life as it is difficult to obtain housing even for person who works at a full-time job:

*“We need more housing, we need more affordable rent-controlled, section 8 approved housing where you don’t have to jump through 20 fucking hoops to get to something. Like you can’t keep having this. Like I have a full time, stable job, and I still worry about making rent.”*

This was a common theme throughout the interviews as many do not worry about their own assaults, as AIAN people and especially women have more to worry about than coping with their assault, they need to care for their families first and make sure they are cared for before they can process their own assault.

Another issue that was frequently discussed was resources for all people, beyond that which children in school may receive. Natalie explained this in detail talking about how there are resources but they are not sought out by all:

*“They’re not even thinking about – they know like that the sexual assault and all that is happening but that’s not even...I’ve looked for programs up there, I’ve tried to see like where the closest, you know, resource center is for things like that. There is none. There’s nothing. I mean they have county workers, but like you said, they don’t want to out anybody. It’s just even having somebody to talk to...I mean you can talk to someone in the school if you’re a youth but as an adult there’s nothing.”*

This speaks to the lack of resources as after a certain amount of time, resources may go away as an individual enters adulthood. The lack of resources also applies to other groups of people, such as felons, which make it difficult for a person to get proper resources as Anne described:

*“Really on the reservations, there needs to be also less state grants because there’s a lot more limitations to what you can do with that kind of money, or there’s a lot...like if you have a felony, you pretty much can’t use any state services. The prison system in America is the largest reservation. There’s more Natives with felonies than without felonies. That right there just screws over like 60-70% of our population, so that needs to stop too, in general.”*

This can be detrimental to those who may need the most access to rehabilitation resources as they are often not allowed to receive proper resources due to restrictions on how the money is spent.

The main component of how resources are not as effective as they should be revolves around the fact that there is not enough professionals who are educated to work with people about the issues of sexual assault as described by Anne:

*“Minnesota is very, very well structured. Stretched thin, but well structured. So Minnesota is broken up into a handful of different regions and there’s different navigators which are like the people that I report to, so different navigators assigned to these regions. Now they might just be a connection to other services, they may be providing the services themselves, it depends on what agency is hosting the worker, or how it’s set up or what the need is. For tribes in Minnesota, it looks a little different though. So up until actually currently, it’s me and one other worker for all other Native people in the state.”*

While Minnesota does not have as many professionals as it should have, it is better off than some other states. This shows how important having educated individuals in these roles are, as if not, the AIAN person who need these resources in a short period, for example after an assault, can rarely access it right away.

Brenda also expands on this idea more so on the reservations and how many of those employed at sites are often not properly educated to work there:

*“Well really, I don’t think there’s enough education as far as prevention. Especially on reservations. And another thing too that I’ve noticed is that a lot of IHS clinics on reservations, a lot of their staff are not trained to do an [sexual assault] exam, or tribal laws are different than state and federal law and what happens is when people go and get examined after a sexual assault, it is not done properly and so when it comes to bringing that to court or to trial, it just never gets brought up...no one ever gets convicted.”*

We even see this inexperience in the positions those interviewed, as some had to take on jobs they were not qualified for and to handle cases such as sexual assault but did due to the fact that

they were educated in a semi-related field and the position was need in the area that they lived in as Elaine described:

*“I started out as a nurse, then I went up to [rural and remote Alaskan Village] and became a health director, then I became a social worker, then a city recreation director then a guardian ad litem with the court system and now I am a court visitor. In between I developed a writing career so I am a published author and columnist for the local newspaper. Has nothing to do with the college degree that I got [laughs].”*

Elaine also went on to describe how in rural villages how little resources are available and the only way to can get access to these resources is by leaving:

*“It’s very hard to go to a shelter as most villages do not have shelters, it’s not like you can get on a bus, its isolation and helplessness and if you do get to the city”*

Nadine also elaborated on how hard it is for rural communities to access the proper resources and how that can possibly make those who live there more vulnerable than those in urban cities:

*“They are in more vulnerable in these places and I would even include that they are vulnerable in their communities, you know if you look at some of our sexual assault rates in some of our villages, like [small and remote Alaskan Village], there was one period of time that 90% of the children had been sexual abused and so when you have that situation people don’t have the skills they need, they are just so much more vulnerable.”*

However, if these basic resources and shelters do get built and funded more so than they are now, those who I interviewed were positive on the effects that these resources could possibly have on these AIAN communities and while they did not believe it would fully solve the problem it could begin to start the conversations necessary for addressing the problem as Anne described:

*“So it’s removing the unnecessary stress that shouldn’t be part of human rights, as basic human rights, so if we can deal with those, I think we can really start addressing these really nuanced things.”*

While there is some beliefs that resources can be provided, many also expressed the need for more AIAN people in these roles as expressed by Lindsey:

*“We need more advocates for this who are Alaskan Native or American Indian would be fantastic. Because I think people who can think about and analyze and identify the solutions or what’s needed is, and how I’ve always tried to approach the work is how to unleash that and how do we find it and unleash it, rather than just give people answers. [With] that said, the other pieces would be then is the work to be done around responders.”*

If these things can be accomplished, resources may be able to be more accessible or more individuals may begin to seek these resources out as they will be able to connect with those with similar experiences.

### Becoming the Norm

The last theme that stood out throughout this research revolved around the idea that sexual assault within AIAN communities has become so normalized, when an assault occurs it is thought of as not a big deal to many. Noting that the United States as a whole is surrounded by “Rape Culture” and does affect all racial and ethnic groups, this normalization may occur more so within AIAN communities due to the previous factors listed as well as other possible influences. This was seen in previous research as the majority of the research was focused only on the dominant culture and specifically, individuals on college campuses seeing sexual assault as more normal. However, this research only looked at how frequent sexual assaults occurred versus perception of sexual assault being the norm. The overall normalization of sexual assault by AIAN people was discussed in detail by almost all of our participants as Elaine described this through a conversation she had with various children in rural Alaskan villages:

*“I can't tell you how many kids I talked to who were raised like this who I would have to tell it's not normal for your mother to be walking around with a black eye and they kinda look at you like “Well she always had one” then that's normal”*

Anne also elaborated on this issue and how she has seen people accept that sexual assault is normal within these communities:

*“And so domestic violence isn’t necessarily seen as this horrible no-no thing, it’s not if your dad hits you, it’s when your dad hits you. It’s not if you get raped, it’s when you get raped. It’s just something that you just have to figure out how to deal with and there’s been generations of people that don’t know that they can say no, that this isn’t okay, that this isn’t normal.”*

This was not uncommon to see throughout the interviews and how normal sexual assaults have become within the community and how it's not viewed as harmful or deviant in any way as described by Natalie:

*“Because those emotions are so broken, and you’re right, they don’t know what love is. They don’t know what that connection is supposed to be, they don’t know that they have rights for themselves because so long ago they were taken away and that’s being passed down. We’re being hated on pretty much, you know, that’s kind of the feeling.”*

This normalization has also affected how AIAN individuals see relationships, especially those in the younger generation as they believe that they must stay with their partner and support him in everything as Anne described:

*“The young women are involved with that too, ‘well I’m going to take care of my man’ because this is what has been told of me, because this is how I’m told to take care of my man. But that’s generations of brainwashing and abuse. So there’s a lot you’re fighting up against. And even too, you know, when a female is going in there saying ‘I have your back, I’m here for you’ you know, there’s going to be a man who says ‘well are you going to be here for my friend too?’ So that also. The sexual assault piece and not knowing that this is wrong, trying to stand by your man. That can have influence too on things like sexual assault happening.”*

This acceptance and normalization of sexual assault and violence is need to be recognized as many of those interviewed noted how when they describe what is unhealthy they see that their clients recognize that it has happened to them and this is what begins to reverse the concept that this is normalized overall described by Anne and her experiences working with clients:

*“Whereas violence is manipulation, control, social media control, who you can see and who you can and can’t hang out with, aggressive grabbing. And you see the wheels turning in their head when we start to talk about this and then there’s the realization that ‘oh this happened to me, I’ve seen this happening.’”*

However, it is important to state and recognize that AIAN people may have a misconception of what an assault consists of as described above, as well as how Natalie describes how many AIAN girls can confuse what a sexual assault or violence in general can be defined as:

*“It’s hard to say that yes this has happened to me when you have a very different view of what that looks like in your head. So domestic violence to our girls tends to look like the super aggressive, like “I didn’t do anything and my partner just hit me for no reason” kind of stuff.”*

Overall it is important to recognize how normalized sexual assault and violence as a whole has become in AIAN cultures and throughout communities has become after being marginalized throughout history as Lindsey describes:

*“I have heard second hand of kind of a sense in some communities that maybe this is just what happens here and the important thing is to get over it and move on.”*

If this normalizations continues, so will sexual assault as it will not be seen as wrong and it occurs as just another factor of life. It must be recognized and challenged by the community so that AIAN individuals view sexual assault as deviant and not normal within AIAN cultures. That conversation is beginning to be had by some members of the AIAN community as they speak out against sexual assaults and providing resources for victims, but a great deal must occur before this normalization can begin to reverse as shown throughout this paper.

### **Conclusions**

This research strove to add to the previous research done by conducting a qualitative study on why the rates of sexual assaults on AIAN women are significantly higher than the rest of the population and any other race or ethnicity. I conducted this research by interviewing eight professionals throughout Alaska and Minnesota about their thoughts of why these rates may be higher than other races or ethnicities. Throughout these interviews I was able to listen to the

stories these professionals had to shared, as well as their thoughts and opinions on what needs to change to protect AIAN women from sexual assault.

What I found was that similar to much of the previous research, Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), Tribal Law and historical trauma all have an effect on the levels of sexual assault on AIAN women due to violent relationships, grey areas within tribal law and the trauma from years of being marginalized by the dominant cultures respectively. These factors allowed for AIAN people to become more vulnerable and thus more susceptible to assaults and other types of crimes and abuses. Another theme that previous research touched upon but did not go into detail about was how stereotypes affected AIAN people. What I found was that while stereotypes did affect AIAN people in terms of how they may respond or react to a situation, it cannot be directly related to the high rates of sexual assault as much as I thought it would.

However, throughout my research more themes that were not discussed in the previous research, or not as a main focus, started to emerge. These themes examined how the AIAN cultures and community affected how people interact and respond to a situation. These responses often led people to stay socially silent about their assault as it may damage the community and if a survivor speaks out, they are often out-casted by their family and community as a whole. The social silence of AIAN people was a major point that was not previously covered within the literature and should be analyzed in further detail. Lastly, a major finding that was lacking in the previous research was the normalization of sexual assault and violence overall in AIAN communities. This normalness is featured throughout every theme that was examined and discussed as if sexual assault is not recognized as a problem by the majority of the AIAN population, than the rates will not decrease and actions will not be taken.

While this research did seem to examine factors that were unidentified within the previous research, why are these factors important? Recognizing that there are numerous factors that build upon one another or created by other factors, it is clear that there is no simple solution to solving this issue. However, it is important for the general public, especially those in governmental positions, to recognize that this is effecting a majority of the AIAN population. When looking at how policies could be implemented to counter these sexual assault rates it would be beneficial to incorporate various policies that are not only focused on strengthening AIAN culture. This would allow for more culturally-sensitive programs as well as connecting individuals together through culture and rebuilding bonds within the community. It is also important to recognize that these policies must also break down misconceptions about sexual assault and the reaction to survivors or assault and shifting the perspective and protection from the perpetrators to survivors. This would allow for survivors to be protected within their own communities and not feel like they must leave their community and family if they report a sexual assault. While these policies would benefit many survivors, it would be difficult to implement without the support of the government providing these resources or proper funding to implement these resources. Lastly, the United States cannot continue to allow these crimes to occur to this population. The lack of support survivors receive from their communities as well as police forces must be acknowledged and reevaluated as sexual assault should no longer be seen, and to a degree supported, as normal to the AIAN people.

### **Discussion**

These findings do have numerous implications across policy as well beyond what was stated above. It is important to recognize how much of an effect these themes and issues have influenced not only AIAN people, but how they approach and handle sexual assaults overall.

While these rates do seem to effect AIAN people more, we see similar factors across racial and ethnic groups. However, due to the conglomeration of these factors and how they interact with each other, this may be the reasoning behind why these rates of sexual assault are so high in comparison to other racial and ethnic groups. While, it is difficult to conclude the specific reasoning's that may affect rates of sexual assaults on AIAN people compared to other racial and ethnic groups, there does seem to be differences in these factors as shown by the different rates of sexual assault on various racial and ethnic groups. Additionally, given that the AIAN population has been marginalized for hundreds of years, the general populations and researchers must recognize how vulnerable they are as a population as well as how cautious they may be to accepting help or a changing of their views. This however is important to do so as the research presented throughout this paper suggests that the normalization of sexual assaults is a prominent feature in many AIAN cultures and communities, and it is through resources and support that this mindset must change for the rates of sexual assault to decrease at all. While it is important that the AIAN population be aware of the normalization of sexual assault and how other factors affect this rate, this will only be done through providing proper resources throughout AIAN reservations as well as villages that have predominantly AIAN people. It is for this reason that policy makers and state at federal governments need to take note of this issue and provide funding for these resources as well as training for those providing services to AIAN communities, so that they can help those who are seeking these resources fully.

While this research expands on previous research by affirming the impact IPV, historical trauma and the difficulties with Tribal Law has on the rates of sexual assault against AIAN women, it also seeks to find other factors that may impact the sexual assault rate as well. What this research does add that was not covered in the previous research is on the normalization of

sexual assaults, the impact that AIAN communities have on an individual, and the social silence of AIAN people as well as the negative ramifications that often come with speaking up about their assault. These factors were not discussed within the previous research and this research found that many of those interviewed cited this as a key theme, and while it may not directly cause the rates of the high sexual assault it helps continue the rates at the current degree and possible cultivate and allow for the continuation of sexual assault at such a high rate.

### **Limitations**

While there are numerous strengths to this project that adds to the previous literature, there are some limitations that must be noted. The first major limitation is that this research interviews individuals who work with AIAN people and survivors of sexual assault compared to interviewing AIAN people who have been survivors of sexual assault. Having the opportunity to interview people who are survivors themselves would allow for a more direct and personal perspective on the question of why more sexual assault occurs and about their own experiences as an AIAN woman. This has been countered somewhat given the number of professionals who work with AIAN people, who identified as AIAN themselves, that took part of the study as they were able to have a more personal experience. Another possible limitation with this research is the small sample size. Unfortunately only eight people responded to be interviewed which does not give a great variability to the study and makes thoughts and opinions on the questions and overarching topic less representative. While it is frequently the case that qualitative studies have smaller sample sizes overall, it is a limitation of this type of research. Lastly, many of those interviewed had little to no experience working with Tribal Law, which was a main discussion in the previous literature for explaining why these assaults occur at a high rate, especially on reservations. I expected this to be the case as Tribal Law causes grey areas relating to

jurisdiction, thus possibly allowing from crimes to happen without the fear of punishment. Due to this fact, Tribal Law could not be analyzed as thoroughly beyond what was discussed in interviews and previous literature, thus conclusions on this topic may be more difficult to make and will not have extensive evidence supporting those findings.

### **Future Directions**

There are various different ways this research can be taken into the future and how it can be used. One direction that this research can go towards is doing further studies on the effects of the normalization of sexual assaults, the impact that AIAN communities have on an individual, and the social silence of AIAN people as well as the negative ramifications that often comes with speaking up about a person's assault. It is important to do this especially given that these topics have not been researched as much and it is important to replicate these findings to insure that the conclusions drawn here are not biased by the small non-random sample of interviewees. This could be done either as a qualitative or quantitative study, with the participants being AIAN and survivors of sexual assault compared to professionals that work with AIAN people as this research did, as this could more closely examine possible factors. Additionally, it is important that future research include both genders as this study only interviewed women, as the inclusion of more gender diversity might yield different results. Lastly, it is important to include in future research, LGBTQIA+ individuals and how identifying within this group may affect viewpoints as that was not a main identifying factor in this study but could factor into possible rationale.

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## **Appendix A - Interview Schedule**

**Anne**, personal interview, December 11, 2015, Hamline University Anderson Center, St. Paul, MN.

**Brenda**, personal interview, January 21, 2016, mobile phone, St. Paul, MN.

**Elaine**, personal interview, December 17, 2015, Elaine's home, Anchorage, AK.

**Elizabeth**, personal phone interview, January 8, 2016, mobile phone, Anchorage, AK.

**Lindsey**, personal phone interview, December 14, 2015, mobile phone, St. Paul, MN.

**Nadine**, personal interview, January 11, 2016, Steamdot Coffee Shop, Anchorage, AK.

**Natalie**, personal interview, December 11, 2016, Hamline University Anderson Center, St. Paul, MN.

**Sheila**, personal phone interview, December 21, 2015, mobile phone, Anchorage, AK.

## **Appendix B - Description of Interviewees**

**Anne** - Minnesota, Currently employed at a resource center for AIAN women in an urban area

**Brenda** - Minnesota, Currently a development coordinator at an AIAN resource facility in an urban area

**Elaine** - Alaska, Worked in both rural and urban Alaska as a social worker, currently a court visitor in an urban area

**Elizabeth** - Alaska, Currently working in a rural area as a health provider for AIAN women

**Lindsey** - Minnesota, Currently working as an independent consultant in an urban area but has worked previously with sexual assault resource programs

**Nadine** - Alaska, Currently working in an urban area working with homeless populations in the urban area

**Natalie** - Minnesota, Currently employed at a resource center for AIAN women in an urban area

**Sheila** - Alaska, Currently working as a youth coordinator in a rural area for AIAN women

## **Appendix C - Interview Questions Posed to All Interviewees**

Give a brief outline of your career and what jobs you have held?

Why did you choose to work with AIAN individuals?

Statistics show that Alaskan Native/American Indian individuals are more than twice as likely to be sexually assaulted compared to other races. Additionally, two-thirds of AIAN women are victims of intimate partner violence. What do you think is the cause behind these high numbers of assaults?

Do you think any social constructs or community beliefs may add to this rate of sexual assaults or pretend that they it doesn't occur? If you do not believe this why?

Have you interacted within individuals who have had traumatic experiences aside from assault in their life or seen their family members, tribal members or community members experience any traumas over the past generations?

Do you think there is a connection between past traumas and the high rate of sexual violence experienced by Native women?

How is the support system for survivors of sexual assault? In terms of family, community, resources, etc.

What are the difference for women who are victims of sexual assault on a reservation our in a rural village compared to urban areas?

How have these conversations and interactions with survivors affected you?

What do you think needs to be done to protect Native women? What would you like to be seen done?

What is the most toxic AIAN stereotypes?

## Appendix D - Interview Question Posed to Selected Individuals

These questions were asked as either a follow-up question or to have interviewees expand on an idea.

Anne:

Beyond boarding schools, and passing down trauma, and the normalizing of assault, do you think there's any other historical traumas that have played into the role of high sexual assault rates?

- This was in relation to the fact that only boarding schools were referenced, but Anne made mention of other factors.

Elaine:

Do you think that there is any programs or infrastructure that could begin to reverse this thought process on men?

- This was asked due to the fact that Elaine specifically mentioned men frequently throughout her interview.

Why do you think these statistics are still relatively unheard of in the general public even though AIAN women are starting to speak out on the subject?

- This was asked as a follow-up to Elaine mentioning that much of the general public is unaware of the frequent rate of sexual assault.

Does difficulties with Tribal Law occur in villages as it is not specifically a reservation but it is often only native individuals living in these communities?

- This question was asked to look at the main differences between living in a village versus a reservation.

Do you think tribal land would help or hurt the situation more?

- This was a follow-up question to a mention of how villages have started to implement programs similar to those on reservations.

Natalie:

Beyond boarding schools, and passing down trauma, and the normalizing of assault, do you think there's any other historical traumas that have played into the role of high sexual assault rates?

- This was asked as a follow-up as while boarding schools were mentioned the most frequently, the interviewee briefly mentioned other factors.