From empowering to repowering: A study on missing and murdered indigenous relative's

advocacy groups as a way of retaking power to meet the needs of the MMIR crisis

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Introduction

In 2010 a Canadian artist named Jamie Black created an art installation called the REDress Project. The installation featured hundreds of hanging red dresses—to bring attention to the vast number of Indigenous women who had gone missing or murdered (Indigenous Foundations, 2011). This art installation was part of a growing movement to bring attention to Indigenous people who had gone missing in Canada. Over the next few years, the REDress Project exhibit toured the country, bringing more widespread attention to a problem that had been gaining national interest since the formation of the National Coalition for our Stolen Sisters in 2002 (Harper, 2006)

In 2014 the Canadian government published a report titled *Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women: A National Operational Overview* (Government of Canada, 2014). This report sparked a debate over the validity of the statistics, which reported 1,181 missing or murdered Indigenous Canadian women, of whom 164 were considered active cases, and 225 were designated unsolved (Tasker, 2016). Some argued that the numbers were too high. In contrast, others believed the numbers were too low, citing firsthand experiences of undocumented and misidentified family members and the Walk 4 Justice initiative, which collected 4,232 names of missing or murdered Indigenous women (Tasker, 2016). Disputes about the accuracy of the numbers cited in the National Operational Overview led to a movement to bring attention to the number of cases, lack of statistical consistency, and lack of awareness from non-Indigenous people. As the movement to bring attention to the disproportionate numbers of Indigenous women going missing, being murdered, or otherwise being violently victimized grew, it took on the name "the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women

Movement" (MMIW) due to the "MMIW" hashtag that Grand Chief Sheila North Wilson of the Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak began using in 2012. She created the hashtag to highlight the number of Indigenous women who had experienced violence in Canada (Blaze Baum, 2015). The MMIW movement spread from Canada to the United States (US) to help raise awareness of the similar problem that the United States shared with its neighboring country. Though the MMIW movement in the U.S. can be traced to approximately 2015 (Smith-Morris, 2020), the MMIW crisis was recognized earlier. Yet, to date, little research has been conducted to understand responses to the MMIW crisis and how to best meet survivor needs. This study focuses on strategies that MMIW groups have taken to meet survivor needs in the U.S.

Throughout this paper, the terms Indigenous, Indigenous People, Indigenous Americans, American Indian, Native American, and Natives are used when talking about the original inhabitants of what is now known as the United States and Canada. For the most part, the term used in a particular section of this paper will be the term used in the article, interview, study, or policy referenced in that section. Additionally, using these terms interchangeably is done intentionally to show that while each term has a slightly different meaning and there are individual preferences, all these terms are acceptable and commonly used among Indigenous Americans.

History of Violence against Indigenous People

Though the MMIW movement in North America may be less than a decade old and the awareness of the disproportionate violence against Indigenous people has only recently increased, the mass violence against Indigenous people in North America has much deeper roots.

Brutal, unprovoked violence against Indigenous people in what is now known as North America can be traced directly to the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492. In his journal, Christopher Columbus said, "As soon as I arrived in the Indies, on the first island which I found, I took some of the natives by force, in order that they might learn and might give me information of whatever there is in these parts" (Columbus & Markham, 1971, p. 70). Additionally, men accompanying him on his journey spoke openly of raping Indigenous women (Cohen & Colombo, 2008, p.139). Violence against Native Americans is even built into the founding documents of the United States of America. The Declaration of Independence famously states, "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal," however further down the document, it reads, "merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes, and conditions" (Declaration of Independence, 1776, para. 29). The use of such terms as "savages" in contrast to "man" highlights the belief that "Indians" were subhuman. The tactic of deeming a group subhuman has been well documented to justify violence, slavery, and forcefully taking lands from Indigenous People (Carlson, 2014).

In 2015, Mackay and Feagin (2022) utilized artificial intelligence to examine centuries' worth of written documents, including sermons, government documents, speeches, letters, books, and magazines. They searched the documents looking for the terms "savage," "merciless savage," and "Indian Savage." The study produced 100 pages worth of results in which these words were used from 1800 to 2015. The study pointed out how the use of the terms, partnered with the creation of the concept of race itself, worked to "rationalize massive, and state-sanctioned, anti-Indigenous violence to the present day" (Mackay & Feagin, 2022, p. 520). The study found that in most instances, as with the Declaration of Independence, using the term

"savage" helped point out just how brutal "Indians" were considered. This tactic positions white people as victims, thus justifying violence against Indigenous people (Mackay & Feagin, 2022).

In parallel, two ideas used in the founding and westward expansion of the U.S. were the Doctrines of Discovery and Manifest Destiny. The Doctrine of Discovery states that when a Nation discovers land, they acquire it (Cornell Law School, 2022). "Manifest Destiny" is an idea initially expressed by John O'Sullivan in his newspaper article of the same name and consists of the belief that the westward expansion of the United States was inevitable because it was divine destiny (Heidler & Heidler, 2022). Thus, the combination of the dehumanization of Native Americans, positioning white settlers as victims, and the belief that the seizure of their lands by any means was a divine act led to violence against Indigenous people as rational and even necessary at times.

Most Well-Known MMIW Case

Few Indigenous women are well-known in popular or historical culture. The most well-known telling of a Native American women's story comes from the 1995 Disney Film *Pocahontas*. In the Disney version of the story, a young Indigenous woman named Pocahontas falls in love with an English Captain named John Smith during early colonization at the Jamestown settlement. The story is a classic tale of forbidden love, with Pocahontas's father, the Chief of the Powhatans, preferring that she marry a Native man and John Smith's fellow Englishmen wanting him to steal from the Native tribe (Gabriel & Goldberg, 1995). The main characters in the film are real-life historical figures. However, historical accounts of their lives and interactions vary tremendously from the Disney version of the story.

Firsthand accounts tell of interactions between John Smith, the founder of Jamestown (the first permanent settlement in North America), and the daughter of a Powhatan Chief, whom

he called Pocahontas; that is where the accuracy of the Disney story ends. In his journal, *General Historie of Virginia,* John Smith described the young Indigenous lady as "beautiful." However, there is no evidence that the two were ever romantically involved, which is good considering that she was approximately ten years old when the two interacted (Smith, 1624). The young lady John Smith called Pocahontas, was named Amonute as a child. She was a citizen of the Pamunkey Nation and was born around 1596 in modern-day Virginia, on Pamunkey territory near the Jamestown settlement. As was common in many Native American tribes, Amonute had multiple names in her lifetime and was most likely called Matoaka for most of her life. (Mansky, 2017) It is unclear if Pocahontas was a nickname used by her family and tribe or if that was only a name given to her by English people. John Smith and "Pocahontas" seem to have interacted by teaching each other the other's language (Mansky, 2017).

Other details about "Pocahontas'" life is much more tragic. At approximately 14 years old, she married a young Pamunkey man named Kocoum and became pregnant. When her child was two years old, she was kidnapped by English settlers and forced to leave her husband and baby behind (Schilling, 2017). Her sister and her sister's husband were allowed to visit her. Her sister reported that the once active and adventurous girl had become quiet and withdrawn. Matoaka told her sister that she was repeatedly raped while in captivity. Around this time, she gave birth to a son named Thomas. She married a man named John Rolfe (not Thomas' father) and changed her name to Rebecca Rolf. She was brought to Europe with her husband, sister, and original captor Captain John Argal. She and a few other Native Americans were taken around Europe to show that Indigenous people could be friendly to Europeans and settlers and that mutually beneficial relationships were possible. The circumstances surrounding her death are a mystery, but it is known that she suddenly fell sick in Europe when she was 21 and died shortly

after (Schilling, 2017). The facts of her life, including kidnapping, rape, separation from family, and mystery surrounding her sudden death, are why many MMIW activists and others refer to "Pocahontas" as the first MMIW.

Media Portrayals, Stereotypes, and their link to MMIW

The story of Matoaka's life and death led many MMIW groups and Indigenous leaders to refer to her as the first and most well-known case of a Missing and Murdered Indigenous Woman. Additionally, Disney's portrayal of her as an overly sexualized "idyllic" image of what many men expect a Native American woman to look like plays into the "Indian Princess" and "promiscuous squaw" stereotypes (Croisy, 2017, p.15). As explained in this passage from the Settler Colonial History and Indigenous People in Saskatchewan Gladue Rights Research Database, these stereotypes contribute to the reasons that raping and murdering Indigenous women has historically been minimized and continues to be often minimized today:

> Although the Princess indicates her sexual availability through her apparel and subtle desire for white men, the squaw's lack of subtlety and debauchery transgresses several boundaries of permissible femininity. Because of her refusal to assimilate by way of conforming to the Christian moral order, the squaw's physical death is considered an unavoidable and necessary repercussion of progress (Gladue Rights Research Database, 2018).

> These images perpetuate a stereotype of Native women as inferior and give an "endorsement of Euro-American domination" over Native women (FitzGerald, 2014, p. xii). Since most people in the United States do not know many Native Americans (many people do not know any), these stereotypes are especially harmful. People exposed to

diverse cultures exhibit more empathy for those in that culture. There is no empathy when the only exposure is through the depiction of stereotypes (Stansfield & Bunce, 2014)Additionally, these stereotypes have been shown through empirical observation to contribute to lower self-esteem amongst Indigenous people. (Davis-Delano et al., 2020).

The combination of stereotypes, limited personal interaction, limited media representation, and the lack of empathy that this creates can lead to perpetrators viewing Indigenous women as easy or deserving targets. Though there is a lack of research, it is no stretch to assume that these factors contribute to police officers, community members, and legislatures treating violence cases and disappearances of Native American victims differently than other victims.

Formation of Grassroots MMIW Groups

To bring attention to specific MMIW cases, community members began organizing marches and holding vigils. Starting around 2015, these marches and vigils began to raise awareness of specific MMIW cases and bring attention to the MMIW crisis (Native Hope, 2022). As these community members began to gather, it further highlighted the link between centuries of ongoing violence against Indigenous people and the modern MMIW problem. Furthermore, these community members, mainly consisting of female family members and friends of victims, began to form across the United States. These community members felt that they needed to advocate for the resolution of current cases and raise awareness about the disproportionate violence experienced by Indigenous people. Ultimately, they were seeking solutions to end the MMIW crisis. (We R Native, 2021)

For many groups, what started as holding vigils, organizing marches, and raising awareness of the MMIW problem has expanded to the grassroots organizations now doing such

things as conducting searches, organizing protests, speaking at events, teaching at symposiums, and running social media campaigns. One MMIW group leader Jodi Voice Yellowfish explains that once a person or group decides to advocate for "the cause," it is natural to become a touch point for family members and friends of victims to reach out to for assistance and resources. She also explains that MMIW groups and members often become advocates between families, law enforcement, and government agencies (Sovereign Bodies Institute, 2020)

As the groups began to grow, it became apparent that the problems of violence against Indigenous people are not only committed against women but also affect young girls, boys, men, 2Spirit, and transgender Indigenous People. Grand Chief Sheila North Wilson, who is often credited with popularizing the MMIW hashtag, has experienced regret for using W (women) rather than P(people) or R(relatives) (Blaze Baum, 2015). While most grassroots groups still use the letters MMIW in their names and media campaigns due to familiarity with the hashtag and name of the movement, most organizations acknowledge that the crisis affects more than women and includes others in their outreach and awareness efforts.

Positionality and Terms Used in This Thesis

I come from The Lakota Nation, a division of the Ocite Sakowin (Sioux Tribe). We are a Native American tribe in the modern-day Black Hills Region of South Dakota, North Dakota, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Southern Canada. One of our culture's most deeply held teachings is that we are all related. This teaching is common among many Indigenous cultures. It is common for Native Americans to address one another as "relative," even though there is not a familial relationship in the European sense of the term. Since this term is inclusive of all genders and age groups in the remainder of this paper and any associated studies, I will use the term Missing and

Murdered Indigenous Relatives (MMIR) unless I am refereeing to a specific organization that uses "MMIW" in its group's name.

Increased awareness but no Decrease in Cases or Violence

There have been great strides in increasing awareness of the MMIR problem since the start of the MMIR movement less than a decade ago (Nutting, 2022). Due to the work of activists and MMIR advocacy groups, there has been an increased awareness of the crisis. As pointed out in an article by the National Indigenous Women's Resource Center (NIWRC), "Congressional hearings, federal reports, statistics, consultations, and testimonials all confirm the MMIW crisis is real" (Agtuca, 2019, para. 2). These actions have led to local, state, and federal governments proposing and, in some cases, implementing a patchwork of laws, statutes, task forces, and propositions. The NIWRC states that across the United States, "legislatures have acted to pass legislation to increase the response to MMIW. State legislation centers on increasing the response to MMIW by monitoring cases by dedicating state personnel and creating local task forces" (Agtuca, 2019).

MMIR advocacy groups face barriers similar to the ones that tribal, local, and state governments face. MMIR groups can be found on reservations, major cities, and in rural communities nationwide. However, there is no clear source or database to find where each group is located, how it functions, or what resources it utilizes to assist missing and/or murdered relatives. A simple search on Facebook or Google can pull up results for chapters throughout the country. Being involved in the movement as a volunteer with an MMIR chapter creates many opportunities to learn about other MMIR groups. However, since the organizations are small, volunteer-led, and not interconnected, most MMIR groups only have the capacity to serve the areas near their members. If one group has a great resource, government partner, or innovative

solution, the information is not easily shared with other MMIR groups. For example, the Great

Lakes MMIR Chapter, known as the *Walking Women's Healing Institute,* helped pass legislation

in Chicago to create a "Missing and Murdered Chicago Women's Task Force" (Illinois HB3988,

2022). Another example is the North Texas chapter, *MMIW Texas Rematriate*, which is building

a relationship with the Dallas Police Department to help establish trust and utilize police

department resources to assist MMIR victims and families. Therefore, it is necessary to explore

how these advocacy groups have navigated meeting the needs of missing and recovered relatives

and their families to find the best ways to support these groups. It is also necessary to uncover

any barriers that can keep these groups from providing the support they would like (Myong,

2022).

The MMIR CrisisThough awareness of the MMIR crisis has emerged recently, few

studies have explored MMIR needs. Indeed, as mentioned in a 2019 study by the Urban Indian

Health Institute (UIHI), there is a lack of cohesive data, research, and understanding of missing

and murdered indigenous women and girls in the United States (Seattle Indian Health Board,

2019). Many advocates attribute the lack of federal and state data to "poor record-keeping, racial

misclassification, and adverse relationships between tribal governments and outside law

enforcement" (Ortiz, 2020, p. 3).

The same reasons that make it difficult to obtain accurate data, combined with a lack of

knowledge about issues that affect the Native American population by non-Natives, lead to a

lack of research on MMIR. While there are only a small number of studies on the MMIR crisis, a

search of Google Scholar and two Social Work databases yielded no results for studies on MMIR

community organizations. As there are few research studies, this literature review focuses on the

evolution of policies and practices to address violence against Indigenous women and how grassroots organizations have formed to help MMIR.

The legacy of genocide and atrocities against Native American populations in the United States still affects Native American's today. In 2008 an in-depth analysis of violent crimes committed against Native Americans (Bachman et al.) was funded by the United States Department of Justice. The report shed light on the differences and similarities between acts of violence committed against Native Americans and other racial groups in the United States. While the researchers go in-depth to explain their difficulty in obtaining accurate information representing the full scope and variety of Native Americans (in cities, reservations, and non-tribal rural parts of the country), their results provide insightful information. For example, the study found that Native Americans were slightly less likely to be murdered in connection with another crime than African American and White women but more likely to be murdered during a rape or sexual assault, with 7% of murders occurring during those acts in comparison to 5% for White and 4% for African American victims. The study also estimated that five out of every 1,000 Native Americans over the age of 12 were the victim of sexual assault each year compared to approximately two out of every 1,000 non-Natives (Bachman et al., 2008).

While the rates of violence against Indigenous people are disproportionately high in comparison to the general population, the rate of individuals convicted of crimes against Indigenous people is low (Rosay, 2016). In addition to the inherent and learned prejudices against Indigenous people that contribute to low conviction rates, there are also practical contributing factors. One contributing factor is that federal, state, local, and tribal governments all share jurisdiction over tribal lands, but the degree of authority and power to arrest, prosecute, and convict perpetrators is rarely straightforward. A 2016 survey of 2,473 women and 1,505 men

who identified as American Indians sought to not only look at rates of violent crimes against Native Americans but to explore who was committing the crimes. The study found that 97 % of female victims and 90 % of male victims experienced violence from non-Natives in their life, while far fewer have experienced violence from other Native Americans (34%) (Rosay2016). The study pointed to the need for tribal governments to have the authority to prosecute non-tribal members. While there has been some improvement in being able to prosecute non-tribal citizens for crimes again tribal citizens since the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) was expanded in 2013 and again in 2022 (VAWA,2013; VAWA,2022), it is still not as easy to prosecute non-tribal citizens on tribal lands as it is to prosecute criminals elsewhere in the US.

Perhaps the most comprehensive study of the crisis is the 2018 report by the Urban Indian Health Institute (UIHI), which analyzed data across 71 US cities. They found 506 MMIR cases. Two hundred eighty were murder cases, 128 were missing person cases, and 98 were still in unknown status. The cases were marked as unknown if a police department shared the number of cases without separating which were missing and which were murders. Unknown was also used if a case was removed from the database without providing a status update, i.e., found safe or murdered (UIHI, 2018). This study points to another factor hindering those who try to address the MMIR crisis: the disparity between reported cases. In the same year, different entities can report vastly different numbers. One example that the BIA pointed out is that in 2016, there were 5,712 reports of missing Indigenous women in the US Department of Justice's missing person database, while another national database for missing people in the US, called the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System reported only 116 missing Indigenous women (BIA, 2018).

One recent scholar explored links between historical and current violence against Indigenous Women, examining potential explanations for ongoing disparities in violence (Croisey, 2017). This study not only made the connection between violence against Native Americans and centuries worth of racist views against them but also connected centuries worth of struggle between federal, state, and tribal governments to the current and historical problem of violence against Indigenous people. Croisy (2017) found that issues of tribal sovereignty and confusion over jurisdictions create conflicts and add to the complexity of solving crimes, convicting perpetrators, and collecting accurate data.

MMIR Activism

When looking at the amount of attention that MMIR and violence against Indigenous people have been receiving recently, progress has been made, and efforts to bring attention to the crisis are gaining momentum. While it may appear that positive momentum is happening quickly, it is slow, considering that this crisis and violence against Indigenous people have been happening continuously since the arrival of Europeans in the 1400s. The progress that has occurred in recent years has not happened by chance. Many of the laws, decrees, and task forces addressing the MMIR crisis were initiated by the advocacy MMIR groups and activists (Isaacs & Young, 2019). These activists are community members who have often been directly affected by the MMIR crises, and most of this movement is led by women. Before colonization, many Indigenous nations, such as the Dine and Lakota, were matriarchal or saw men and women as equals. After colonization, Indigenous women became more economically and politically dependent on men (Kearl, 2006). The MMIR movement has enabled Indigenous women to regain their voices, power, and leadership roles.

According to a timeline made by a Canadian organization, "KAIROS," the effort to bring attention to MMIR can be traced back to approximately 2002 when a group of faith-based and

non-profit organizations formed a group known as the National Coalition for our Stolen Sisters. Over the next few years, other collations, such as the Native Women's Association (NWAC), formed and partnered with Amnesty International to research the MMIR crisis. The result of the partnership was the "Stolen Sisters Report," which laid out recommendations for how the Canadian government could address the problem of Indigenous Canadian Women going missing (Amnesty International, 2004). According to this timeline, between 2004 and 2014, many organizations were formed and dissolved. These organizations were often initiatives launched by already existing faith-based organizations; therefore, they were slightly more professional and less organic than future MMIR groups. According to this timeline, the shift to a more primarily community-led movement began after the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) identified 1,181 MMIR in their "Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women: A National Operational Review" (KAIROS, 2021).

On July 4, 2013, a young Indigenous woman named Hanna Harris went missing from the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation in Montana (MT). Her family reported her missing, but local law enforcement did not start a search. However, community members worked with the family to launch their own search. The community searchers found her body decomposed four days later, and it was determined that she had been raped and beaten to death. Family and community members demanded that lawmakers act so law enforcement could no longer downplay MMIR cases. The activist group's efforts were not in vain. In 2017 MT Senators Steve Daines and Jon Tester introduced a resolution recognizing Hanna's birthday (May 5) as a National Day of Awareness for Missing and Murdered Native Women and Girls. In 2021 and 2022, President Joe Biden signed a National Proclamation recognizing the day. On this day, thousands of people across the nation wear red shirts and host events to increase awareness of the

MMIR crisis (Rickert, 2022). Taking this effort from a small Native American reservation to the

White House is evidence that these grassroots organizations' work leads to action.

Similar efforts to those taken by the Canadian MMIR movement, Hanna Harris' family,

and Northern Cheyenne community members have created many policies and practices,

including those referenced in the previous section of this paper. Community-led searches, press

conferences, and marches continue to draw attention and urgency to the MMIR crisis. According

to the NIWRC, "These efforts are as varied as the Indian Nations, where they are being

organized;" however, they share the commonality that "silence is being replaced with the

understanding of the urgency to act" and that family members, activists, and organizations are

demanding that these cases and the overall MMIR crisis be handled in "crisis mode" (Agtuca,

2019).

There is no standard rule to the size or the structure of an MMIR grassroots organization.

Small MMIR groups such as Restoring Ancestral Winds, Inc. (RAW), a three-person MMIR

organization in Utah, have led efforts in statewide legislation being passed (Sovereign Bodies

Institute, 2020, p.15). RAW did, however, partner with tribal leaders, law enforcement, and non-

MMIR organizations. They built relationships with stakeholders to raise awareness of the MMIR

problem in Utah and convince politicians that legislative action needed to be taken. RAW shared

its story, strategies, and resources with Sovereign Bodies Institute. This knowledge sharing could

benefit MMIR activists and organizations across the country. My research aims to speak to other

groups and allow them to share their stories, strategies, and resources similarly.

Methods

This study used a community-based, qualitative approach (Hills et al., 2007) to explore the experiences of MMIR groups in meeting the needs of missing and recovered Indigenous relatives . Through CBPAR, community members are engaged as active participants in the research process and the co-construction of knowledge about the topic (Cooke et al., 2011). To answer the research question of this study, I actively engaged MMIR group leaders as experts in their own experiences serving MMIR. The CBPAR approach aligns with the MMIR movement, as one purpose of the movement is to undo the history of forced reliance on government agencies and others imposing themselves as the experts and authorities over what is best for Native American communities. This approach ensured that I partnered with MMIR groups to gather information and share ideas rather than giving the impression that I am the expert.

CBPAR Framework

Traditionally in qualitative research, there is an inherent power dynamic in which the researcher is perceived to be "superior," "more knowledgeable," or "more experienced" than the research subjects (Råheim et al., 2016). CBPAR challenges these traditional power dynamics in relationships between researchers and research subjects, instead recognizing the need to share power, co-construct knowledge, and focus on social change (Tremblay et al., 2018). Prior research has found CBPAR to be a particularly useful framework for Indigenous communities to actively partner and engage communities as experts and collaborators (Chilisa, 2012; Swanson et al., 2016).

Critical components of CBPAR include highly collaborative relationships with insiders, participation, empowerment, and dissemination as a team (McKay, 2011). These principles guide the current project as, the author of this study is a citizen of the Sicangu Lakota Nation (Rosebud

Sioux Tribe) and a member of the North Texas MMIR chapter MMIW *Texas Rematriate.* As a member of MMIW TX Rematriate, the author has witnessed firsthand the organizing power and innovative solutions that an MMIR group can have. The author has seen how a small group with limited resources can positively affect those affected by the MMIR crisis. They have also experienced the difficulty of sharing innovative solutions amongst MMIR groups. Furthermore, the goal of this research project is, together with MMIR leaders, to identify and disseminate strategies that other groups can leverage to meet the needs of missing and murdered Indigenous relatives and identify common barriers to seek solutions to overcome those barriers.

Recruitment and Data Collection

The target population for this study was MMIR group leaders (e.g., Chairperson, Executive Officer, Chapter President) or their designated representative(s) in the US who are 18 years or older. We targeted MMIR groups across the US., which included a variety of Native communities in areas including reservations, urban, and rural areas. These groups are volunteer-led, non-professional, and are not entities of Tribal governments or any other government agencies.

I used public information online to recruit participants. The leader or designated group member overseeing communication is usually identified on the group's website or social media pages. I also used contacts they made as a community leader in the Dallas - Fort Worth American Indian community and as a member of an MMIR group. As part of each interview, snowball sampling was implemented by asking each person if they could provide contact information or introduce the PI to other MMIR groups interested in participating in this study.

. There were 33 MMIR groups on social media. Of these, 15 were contacted to participate in the study. These 15 were selected based on groups and leaders the author was familiar with

and then via Of the 15 groups contacted, there were a total of nine interviews, with eleven participants due to two interviews having two MMIR group members in the same interview. Saturation occurred after the eighth interview. There was an informed consent process prior to beginning the interview and all study procedures were approved by the author's university institutional review board prior to any data collection. A semi-structured interview guide was used during the interview. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The author reviewed all transcriptions for accuracy.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed CBPAR principles, including ensuring faithfulness to the data collected (e.g., using direct quotes and words from the participants) (Fletcher et al., 2015). This study used a thematic analysis approach to analyze data by reading the interview transcripts and looking for common patterns or differences amongst MMIR groups. There were two main stages of coding: in the first stage, each transcript was read, and the PI conducted line-by-line coding to find the main idea(s) the participant conveyed. In this stage, to ensure faithfulness to the participants' own words, the codes included words and terms that the participants stated. During the first coding stage, a constant comparison was conducted within and across interviews to identify similarities and differences among codes. In the second stage, codes were grouped by underlying themes. The faculty advisor served as a second coder on all transcripts to enhance rigor. During the data analysis phase, the PI met weekly with the faculty advisor to review codes emerging themes, and to ensure inter-rater reliability.

Since I am a member of the affected community and an MMIR group, I acknowledge that I naturally have inherent biases about the research topic and the people I am interviewing. To help ensure that my biases do not affect the integrity of the study, after each interview, I took

part in a debriefing session with one of the committee members to identify my reactions, emotions, and thoughts throughout the interview. In addition, extensive memos and notes were taken after each interview to capture body language, hesitations, pauses, and other non-verbal communication that participants may have engaged in during the interview. A detailed audit trail was kept throughout the analysis, and a codebook was created to document decisions about codes and emerging themes.

Chapter 4: Results

The qualitative thematic analysis revealed five themes regarding how MMIR groups navigated meeting survivors' needs. These themes are presented in Figure 1 and include: raising awareness, navigating systemic struggles, navigating organizational struggles, building relationships, and taking action.

Figure 1
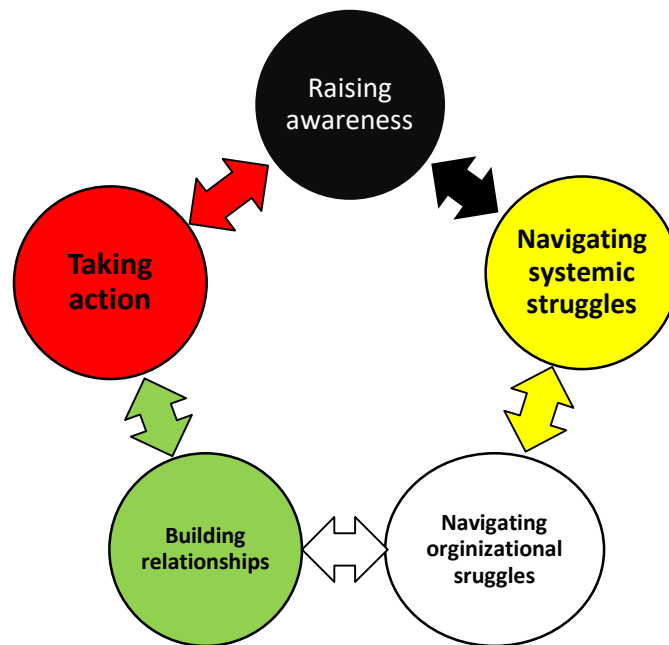
Raising Awareness

The first theme that emerged was raising awareness, which encompassed ways in which grassroots groups brought more attention to specific MMIR cases and the MMIR crisis in general. The three subthemes that surfaced under raising awareness were: *information deficit, awareness-raising activities,* and *grassroots groups as subject matter experts*.

Information Deficit

Based on the interviews, the need to raise awareness came from the sense that across all populations (Indigenous, non-Indigenous, urban, rural, and reservation), there was, and in some cases still is, an information deficit about the scope and nature of the MMIR crisis. Amber, the leader of an MMIR group that operated on tribal lands, said that even in her group's area, there was a lack of knowledge pertaining to the MMIR crisis:

> There are still people in our tribe, in our own tribes that don't know they have a chapter. You know, we'll see this on Facebook. You know that somebody's missing, and they wanna know who they can get to help and because they don't know that we even exist.

Even when there was knowledge of the crisis in general, some participants, like Valerie, expressed community members being in denial about the chances of the crisis affecting them. Therefore, she felt that communities need a more focused education on the type of crimes and contributing factors specific to their area.

> Even when the crisis hits their family, they are in denial to a certain point of thinking that the person will just come back [...] denial is also intertwined with hope. You can't fault anybody for it, but you do have to be a little more realistic and realize what the crime rate is in your town, in the area that you're in, and what is the basis of that crime. What are the base causes of violence that are happening in your community?

In other words, participants felt there was not just a lack of awareness about the MMIR crisis but there was a lack of awareness on what the crisis entailed, who all was affected, and how it could affect community members.

Awareness Raising Activities

Raising awareness encompassed any activities or initiatives MMIR groups implemented to make their communities or the public more aware of ongoing cases and issues around the MMIR crisis. To raise awareness, groups did activities such as "holding vigils," "attending community events," "organizing rallies," and "hosting educational discussions in Native American and non-Native American spaces." Amber said, "We've done everything from doing vigils, going on searches, interviews, powwows. Whatever we could do to bring awareness. That's what we did. We broke barriers."

Pam and Sam's group was created just two months before their interview. When asked about the activities that they had done, they said:

> [MMIR victim] was […] the most recent worst ones that we could use to bring awareness along with the chapter. And so that's kind of what we've done. We've done T-shirts and stuff, and we've done another food sale, and then we were gonna have a birthday celebration, and we hope that the other crimes that might have happened around here, that would fit into that, we could include that too. […] But right now, it's just kind of been stuff for [MMIR victim] […] We had a walk too.

Participants in this study implemented a variety of strategies to draw attention to cases in which a person had gone missing. Additionally, they deployed many tactics to educate others about the facts surrounding the MMIR crisis.

Grassroots Groups as Subject Matter Experts

According to the participants in this study, as members of the MMIR groups began engaging with the community and public through awareness-raising campaigns, they began to be viewed as experts on the MMIR crisis and specific MMIR cases. Since the MMIR groups were

seen publicly campaigning for MMIR awareness, they became the face of the movement in their communities. Additionally, they become subject matter experts, which led to community members being more aware of what to do when their loved one went missing. Missy expressed that grassroots groups are viewed as experts in the eyes of community members because of MMIR group member's level of cultural understanding:

> There's not a disconnect between your knowledge and your life. With somebody that's law enforcement or detective, there is. But it's our life because it's our community. It's our relatives. It's our tribal members. It's community. It's people that we know because we powwow together, or they go Sundance, or they go Stomp Dance together. Like that's who we're finding. We have a different knowledge than a detective would.

Missy went on to explain that some MMIR groups deployed a strategy to connect with MMIR victims, families, and the community: "survivor leadership.":

> I had never heard of *survivor leadership*. That's a concept I learned from Sovereign Bodies Institute, and I was like, "this makes perfect sense." Just like we don't want a non-Native person educating on Native topics, why do I want somebody that doesn't understand that trauma? Why do I want somebody that doesn't understand that trauma that we're trying to help in some kind of way? I can't be the expert on that. I've never been trafficked. I've never been kidnapped. We need somebody that can tell us what do you think works. What needs to be said? What needs to be understood? […] And now that's why we have *survivor leadership* because somebody saw it work.

Since group members were visible in their communities doing awareness-raising campaigns, they, in turn, were viewed as subject matter experts on the MMIR crisis. As leaders and

survivors, they often formed therapeutic bonds with MMIR victims and families as they sought to raise awareness of the overall crisis or specific cases. Kourtney shared this example and said, "We're still doing awareness. He's still missing. This will be four years now. We do support for the mom. I'm always talking to her, making sure she's OK, and trying to comfort her the best we can." Thus, raising awareness also entailed going above and beyond to build relationships, become subject matter experts, and go all the way to support families and increase the issue's visibility.

Navigating Systemic Struggles

MMIR groups worked to bring awareness to the MMIR crisis and offer comfort and resources to victims and community members. Through their work, the second theme that emerged was *navigating systemic struggles.* Many participants discussed systemic problems that played a role in creating the MMIR crisis, led to the information deficit, and created barriers in the battle to curtail violence against Indigenous people. Interviewees also discussed how they were working to overcome these systemic hurdles. Subthemes surrounding how groups navigated systemic struggles arose. The subthemes were: *contributing factors, jurisdiction issues, working with agencies and governments, and empowering/ repowering Indigenous people.*

Contributing Factors

Numerous study participants spoke about factors contributing to the MMIR crisis. They discussed issues like substance use disorders, racism, suicide, and lateral violence. Some participants, like Missy, spoke about generations worth of trauma that could be brought to the surface when Indigenous people faced a new traumatic experience. When discussing why an Indigenous victim who had recently been assaulted and was at a hospital did not want to speak to

a police officer, Missy said, "A [city] police officer isn't gonna understand the generations of

trauma that went into that conversation. Knowing that boarding schools shape that grandma. And

there's a fear of losing your kid...losing an entire generation of people is present in that ER exam

room."

When asked what problems must be addressed to help end the MMIR crisis, Valerie said:

A lot of the communities that I have been, in its drugs. I don't need to say much more on

that subject. I'm not a substance abuse counselor or anything like that, but that happens to

be one of the big base causes of violence against our people in our communities. And

that's going from ages young to old.

When asked about things that communities needed to help combat the crisis, Pauline

responded, "I do know that we need a lot more substance abuse services and intervention when it

comes to alcohol because alcohol is probably one of the main contributing factors to not only

domestic violence but violence overall."

Overall, systemic issues that led to Indigenous victims going missing or being murdered

at significant rates included micro and macro-level issues such as substance use and historical

trauma. Participants also discussed how MMIR groups are either addressing or hoping to address

these issues.

Jurisdiction Issues

Another factor that many participants mentioned contributed to the MMIR crisis was

confusion and disputes over who had authority over MMIR cases. When asked why tribal police,

city police, and MMIR groups do not work together, Pauline gave a personal example and said:

Personal issues […] [Specific MMIR case] was because [MMIR victim] lived in town.

So [name] had reported it in town that [MMIR victim] was missing, but [name] also

reported out here to the tribal police. But it was like they weren't corresponding with each other—the counties and the tribal the police don't [correspond]. If there's no MOU (memorandum of understanding) agreement cause of the sovereignty stuff that we have with our reservation, the city police or county police don't really like to work with the tribal police, so we have that jurisdictional issue going on.

When asked about the issues that make cases involving tribal citizens or occurring on tribal land so complicated, Pauline responded, "There is a multitude of gaps. So, communications, primarily. And that is both on and off-reservation. And then, between reservations, border towns, and urban settings such as [city name], there are communication gaps between social services and law enforcement." She went on to give a recent example that their MMIR group experienced and said:

> For instance, today, we found that there were two runaway youth cases where the certain agencies weren't informed of this youth being missing, so there was that. Because there was a communication issue between these various governmental departments.

Tribal jurisdiction issues were a unique aspect of MMIR cases that similar types of human rights crises did not have to consider. Jurisdiction issues affected every participating group, not just those on or near reservations. Groups, law enforcement, and agencies must consider the location of the crime, the victim's tribal status, the perpetrator's tribal status, and laws and agreements between agencies that are supposed to work the case. Participants across the board reported that jurisdiction issues made it more challenging to help MMIR victims.

Working With Agencies and Governments

Another systemic issue that many of the MMIR group leaders spoke about was the difficulties that MMIR victims and groups had when working with agencies and governments. Amber spoke about the desire to help educate law enforcement and their tribal government about the MMIR crisis:

 I did have a couple of contacts within my tribe, within our police force because I invited them so many times. I invited them to the table to sit down with us and to learn because they didn't even know how many missing or murdered women or relatives we had.

Amber also reported the benefits of working with legislators, stating:

I've worked with somebody from the BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs). There's been somebody from there. Mostly we worked a lot with one of our State Representatives, Mickey Dolans. He helped get the Ida's law passed. I don't know if he got all the credit, but I know it was him behind it.

 At the federal level and in many states more funding has been dedicated to the MMIR crisis over the past five years. Notably Minnesota, Arizona, Wyoming, Montana, New Mexico Wisconsin, Utah, South Dakota, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Washington State have created task MMIR task force or designated funding towards addressing the MMIR crisis (Haynie, 2021). However, some study participants feel that increased funding alone was seen as insufficient to meet survivor needs. In response to a question about this, Missy responded:

Throwing money at it by having a counselor doesn't mean a family's gonna go to you. But they'll go to the person they've known their whole life and is an auntie and a grandma to different people and in your home in different ways.

While many participants spoke about a perceived lack of understanding and care from law enforcement, others, like Pauline, expressed a different view. In fact, Pauline stated, "we need better-trained law enforcement... more law enforcement […] In [specific reservation], we only have two BIA cops for the entire reservation. So, we do need more law enforcement in Indian country."

While the work with agencies and governments looked different for each participant, all participants acknowledged the need to work together and partner with other agencies.

Empowering/ Repowering Indigenous People

Beyond considering MMIR as victims of a system, participants also mentioned how MMIR groups helped to empower individuals, families, and communities to advocate for themselves or other Indigenous people. One concept that stood out was the idea of empowering or *repowering* Indigenous people. Phyllis introduced the concept of the MMIR repowering Indigenous individuals and communities:

> First of all, it's repowering. I like to think of it as repowering because I think that us as Indigenous people, we are already born with the power, but, through colonization, experiences, and history things have been done to us that have stripped away that power. It's still in us. We just need to grow it. We need to repower ourselves a lot. I get compliments, you know, telling me that my program is empowering, and I'm like, "no, it's repowering.

Repowering is about giving power back to communities and community members. Pauline expressed how the MMIR movement is undoing historical trauma and creating new leaders:

> I'm the proudest of the communal effort that tribes are putting together in Montana because I feel like prior to the movement, we still contended with that historical

animosity when it comes to the battle of little Big Horn or the Battle of Rosebud or whichever battle. I feel like this has been kind of a uniting force, and we've been able to inter-tribally connect and heal together as a people, as opposed to comparing and contrasting tragedies to one another. I feel like that is a plus. I've met a lot of brilliant, phenomenal Indigenous leaders that are so hopeful and proactive in addressing the crisis.

Thus, through the grassroots organization, MMIR groups provided budding leaders opportunities to empower and repower themselves, their families, and their communities.

Navigating Organizational Struggles

In addition to navigating systemic issues, participants also discussed the organizational struggles that MMIR groups faced. Subthemes from this topic were the three primary things that MMIR organizations needed to help navigate organizational struggles: *self-care, professional development,* and *funding.*

Self-Care

Many participants interviewed spoke about themselves and other group members struggling with feelings of stress, depression, and burnout that came with being an MMIR organization member. Amber discussed the feelings that come from being so close to this crisis, movement, and particular cases:

> You go on a search[...], you end up where you got so close to this case, you feel like you know the person. And when you can't find them or your hands are tied, there's nothing you can do. You get frustrated. We've been like that many times, and sometimes depression sneaks in. So, you gotta take care of yourself. Whatever it takes to heal yourself so you can go to the next case, and if this is what you wanna do this, you know this is your calling and you know if it's, you're calling or not.

Due to the heavy nature of MMIR work, many participants spoke about the importance of rest. For example, Kourtney spoke about the importance of practicing self-care by doing things like taking breaks:

> Sometimes, I have to take a self-care break because it really hurts. I know how these mothers feel. I lost two sons, but it wasn't through missing or murder. But I know it hurts. I know how they feel. So, I bond with them so that they know that I'm there and that I care for them. And what matters is that you have the heart to do it. You know it, and to be able to take on something that's really emotional. It is wear and tear on us, but we do take care of ourselves spiritually, in our traditional ways.

Many participants mentioned being affected by the MMIR crisis in their personal life before they formed or joined a group. Participants expressed how this level of personalization made them more dedicated to the work and more likely to burn out without engaging in self-care.

Professional Development

The MMIR groups participating in this study varied in size, location, age, and scope of their work. However, they were all volunteer organizations with little professional structure or training. Some participants discussed the benefits of MMIR groups becoming more professionally structured. For example, Darla discussed meeting other MMIR group members at a conference and the insight that this gave her, "I don't know how many people I met at the conference who have multiple things going on in their lives, but they're still trying to make that time as MMIP, MMIR, and MMIW workers." She went on to discuss the work that groups do and her belief that groups could benefit from professional training:

There is a whole entire system that comes together to help find these people that have

gone missing, help find people that they know for sure are probably no longer alive but

still need their bodies to be recovered. There is an immense amount of work in training

that goes into their field that our organizations could benefit from.

A few participants discussed the desire to design and implement more professional

training and protocols into their MMIR work. When asked about innovative strategies that their

group was implementing, Valerie said, "[group name] also partnered with a team that does search

and rescue, and they are the first that I know of that is tribal based but is setting standards as far

as training and education for search and rescue."

In addition to the need for training or professionalization of volunteers, another

component that emerged from the interviews was the importance of physical space dedicated to

the group. None of the participants in the study have a dedicated physical location for the group

to operate. Instead, all MMIR groups in this study operated from home or shared community

spaces. Some participants, like Missy, spoke about the benefits of having a physical operating

space.

We've been asked to contact people, families have contacted us, and they already know

their child or relative has been murdered. They know who did it. You know when I'm

saying, 'What do you need? What do you want me to do? How can I help you?' We need

spaces where those type of situation they can just come and be with someone that

understands. Sometimes they need to be on the peripheral of the work. Just their presence

isn't only contributing, but it's healing for them. We don't have that anyway.

Phyllis spoke in detail about what having office space could mean for an MMIR group and victims:

> We would be able to sit down with their families, provide that comfort that's needed, and resources. We can have different departments come there and drop off resources. [..] We can also sit there and go over some of the details and what to expect, and we can lead them to who could help with that type of situation so. If the case turns from a missing case to a murder case, we can help them with getting him in contact with those different departments. A lot of the time, our people on the reservation don't have access to Wi-Fi. They don't have access to a lot of the things that are available out there. So, with them being able to come to the office, they would be able to access any of that information, get printing if they have a flyer, they want to print, they can come to our office and get that printed. So, I say that it would be very beneficial so that we were able to just sit there and listen to some of the things that they need and help them in the direction that they need to go in.

Across the board, participants felt that having physical space would benefit MMIR groups, victims, and families. Participants envisioned having a physical office space dedicated to doing the MMIR casework that could help limit burnout and streamline the ability to work on cases. Additionally, it would give victims a physical space to come for resources, comfort, or safety. Moreover, participants discussed the communal benefits of having MMIR groups having an office space.

Funding

Another significant barrier that participants reported was funding. When asked, "If you could get more support for your organization or the MMIW crisis, what type of help would be most beneficial?" and "What is the biggest obstacle to this organization's ability to help individuals or the MMIR crisis?" most participants replied, "funding." Amber summed up her answer by saying, "We need funding. All the chapters [MMIR groups] need funding," and Pauline said, "It would be funding support. For the past five years […], 95% of my work has been out of pocket. It would be really nice to be able to find funding avenues to support what I'm doing."

Participants took a variety of actions to raise funds, from "selling shirts" like Pam and Sam to obtaining "grants" like Kourtney or "getting creative" like Zoe. When asked what innovative strategies her group had implemented, Zoe responded, "maybe a few of our fundraising techniques." which included partnering with businesses, "like our Marcos Pizza fundraiser [...] we did the Ted, the Qdoba […] and there was a Panda Express too." She then talked about how this type of fundraising could serve a dual purpose and said, "That also creates another bridge with the community, and with them seeing us out there, they know that we're actually working and not just […] sitting around."

A few participating groups, like Phyllis' group, had 501c3 nonprofit status, which helped with receiving donations and grants. Several other participants were in the process of filing for non-profit status. However, not every participant felt that being a non-profit organization would be beneficial. Valerie said, "That's not something I'm looking to work towards because there's limitations as far as the 501C3 status in that you can't lobby at the state level or federal level."

Missy discussed her views that funding would need to be coupled with knowledge about combating the crisis:

Things are made difficult by this whole funding issue. They'll say, 'well, tribal

governments get this.' They don't work with groups. It doesn't matter if your tribe has

$1,000,000. If they're not bringing that MMIP group to the table to plan how that funding

is used, that MMIW crisis in your area isn't being combated in any way.

Participants often worked MMIR cases, went on searches, and hosted educational events

all out of their own pockets or through small fundraising engagements like food or shirt sales. In

summary, fundraising, and particularly how MMIR groups could benefit from more funding,

strategies to obtain funding, how to spend funds, and barriers to obtaining funds all emerged as

salient factors that impacted groups' abilities to meet survivor needs.

Building Relationships

The fourth theme that emerged was broken relationships between the Native American

community and agencies of authority, such as law enforcement, politicians, and various levels of

government. Many participants discussed the need for MMIR groups and these agencies to work

together. Furthermore, participants spoke about the relationships between MMIR groups,

community members, other movements, and advocacy organizations. These ideas formed the

subthemes of *relationships with "authority"* and *allyship.*

Relationships with "Authority"

A recurring theme in the interviews was that police departments did not want to work

with MMIR groups. Phyllis spoke about her group's relationship with the local police

department:

We don't get a lot of support from our Police Department, and I don't know why. Our

local Police Department, I don't know why they don't work hand in hand with us. It's like

they don't acknowledge us, but our tribal council does. They acknowledge us, who we

are, and what we're doing out in the community. But it's weird that our own Police

Department… it's like they don't work hand in hand with us. You know, be of help

somewhere. Maybe we can be of help to them, but they don't work like that here.

One issue that some participants expressed was that they felt law enforcement often

viewed victims as undeserving of their help. When talking about an interaction working on an

MMIR case early in her group's existence, Missy said:

It showed that a lot of law enforcement have biases that you're a runaway, you're bad no

matter what. You like to party. You're into drugs or alcohol. You're not running away to

keep safe; you're running to go to parties or be with your friends. They don't ask. That's

why I tell everybody, 'Make sure that our group understands that we don't ask that.' First,

we ask what they ran from. Why are they running?

Missy then suggested that law enforcement and government entities talk to the grassroots

organizations working on MMIR cases in the community and listen to them regarding this crisis.

On a broader level than just the MMIP work, a need is for any government level. I don't

care if that city or state or federal, but it's also tribal… need to acknowledge and just

accept the fact that we know what we're doing. You will never know what we do unless

you hear us, and we can talk to you.

Valerie spoke about her perception of politicians and their relationship with MMIR groups and

families:

Promises get made and then not fulfilled. And that goes with promises to families and

promises of attention to things. It's easy to have things go to the wayside or, just not

made a priority like families would and those of us who do the work would like.

Amber expressed similar feelings regarding political figures and the MMIR crisis: "It really

makes me mad when someone is campaigning, and they're using MMIW as their platform. I

don't like that. It's disturbing because […] once they get in, they don't...they forget about us."

Many participants in this study conveyed frustration with the lack of support that they

had in working with law enforcement and government agencies. Despite this frustration, most

participants expressed the desire or need to work with these entities to serve MMIR victims best.

Allyship

Several participants reported expanding networks, collaborating, and partnering with key

members from other systems to meet survivors' needs better. Missy spoke about how her MMIR

group used allyship differently than groups in smaller towns or reservations might be able to.

Because of our location and what allyship looks like in a city as opposed to a smaller

community. Our allyship looks different in that I don't wanna say there's more trust, but

there's more time to work together in a situation to say I will work with them.

When asked about other groups or organizations that their group has partnered with, Jennifer

said, "… the Black and Latino communities because the more BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and

People of Color) people you work with, the more they realize what's really going on and they'll

share it like we share theirs."

Many participants also mentioned the benefits of working with the unhoused communities when searching for missing relatives. Phyllis spoke about how these individuals help and expressed how essential unhoused communities can be in working these cases:

That's what I figured out right there is that if you need information on somebody that's missing 9 out of 10 times, you're gonna get it from people or unsheltered relatives that live out on the streets. And boy if you helped them out here and there, they're gonna help you out. Because now when I get over there and I'm like going down there and they see me and they're, 'hey, Sister, what's going on?' And I got food for them. I got snacks and hygiene products to give them. And they're like, 'who are you looking for, sister? Who's missing?' you have any more extra flyers, sister? We'll go hang them up for you. We'll go pass it out.' And boy, they knew how to get around. So, you know what? I love our unsheltered relatives. I have a lot of respect for them because they help me…They're our eyes right there. That's what I call them. Eagle eyes. […] They're the ones that really help, and it's like, you would think it'd be law enforcement and I'll tell you right now, it's not. It's our unsheltered relatives. Our 'Eagle Eyes.'

Besides other BIPOC organizations and unsheltered individuals, participants spoke of partnerships with universities, businesses, police departments, and community members who were not full-fledged group members but still supported the organization. Some of these alliances emerged in other subthemes of this study.

Taking Action

Another key topic that arose in this study was the types of "boots on the ground" actions that MMIR groups were taking. Nearly every group interviewed echoed Zoe's sentiment: "I feel like I've done that, and now this is the next level. You know that awareness is out there. Now it's

time for action." None of the MMIR groups in this study only focused on raising awareness about the MMIR problem; instead, they all mentioned the importance of going beyond raising awareness to take action.

Within the theme of taking action, two sub-themes emerged. First, there were several types of *MMIR casework* that nearly all participating MMIR groups did beyond outreach. An additional subtheme included *innovative strategies* that only some participating groups utilized to assist MMIR, families, and the community.

MMIR Case Work

Each participant discussed the intensive casework they were doing, such as "going on searches," "meeting with legislatures," "organizing fundraisers," and "comforting families." When asked why she felt her area needed an MMIR group, Zoe replied, "We have had a lot of runways. And our runaways, law enforcement, does not take that very serious. […] And our searches are pretty much our chapters and the community." Amber spoke about her group's work and said, "We went to the government. We went to the State Capital, and we sat in on hearings and stuff, and we tried to push policies put policies in place." One example of what fundraising funds were used for was given by Pauline, who said, "I've done fundraising too, for search and rescue to try… like gas fundraising for volunteer search and rescue. Kourtney talked about comforting an MMIR family:

Not only do the awareness, like for [MMIR family] after they found the people that killed him and found his body, I sat in court with her through the whole trial. And just to be there with her, be that advocate, be that person to sit with her because she was going through a lot at the time.

Each participant discussed numerous ways in which their group or they themselves actively worked to look for MMIR victims. They also assisted survivors and families of those who were still missing or who did not survive. Many interviewees did not speak of working MMIR cases as volunteers but as someone who was "called to do this work" or served their "purpose."

Innovative Action

Activities such as "leading awareness-raising campaigns," "disseminating flyers," "forming partnerships," and "providing comfort" were common activities among study participants. Additionally, many groups were "conducting searches" and "doing investigations" on active MMIR cases. However, a few participants revealed *innovative actions* that they or their groups were doing to meet survivor that no other group mentioned.

Valerie gave an example of one such strategy. Her group provided proactive training in which she went to communities and taught self-defense integrated with cultural teachings. She discussed the work that she does:

> The work that I do is proactive for violence against our person. Against women, men, and children. But it's also reactive as well. I get into our native communities, and I teach about self-reliance. So, I teach about self-reliance in the way of self-defense, self-awareness, and adopting a mindset to navigate the two different worlds because there is a decision-making process that happens.

She expanded on this strategy and why she felt it was effective:

> We can do awareness campaigns all day, but I like the fact that I'm getting into homes of people and reiterating what parents are telling their children about how to be responsible

for themselves. And then I'm repeating that, so the kids hear it from a different source, and it has an impact rather than just a parent scolding or a parent lecture. So being able to model that and being able to show them how to make safer choices and go through situational type exercises. So that they and make it relatable to them, I'm hoping. The work that starts from within working outwards.

When asked about unique strategies her group implemented, Amber spoke about a database of MMIR victims that she created, and her group maintained:

I started putting one together, and I still have it. As a matter of fact, I'm still carrying it, so I want it to pass it on to the state chapter. I do the women and the men. And there isn't six hundred people that I know of. I know it's close. I know it's for sure over 400, close to 500 in Oklahoma.

Phyllis spoke about a unique tool that her group created that she suggests all MMIR groups implement:

One of the things we got a toolkit going […] We were able to make it downloadable and in sections. So just in case if it's for a child or if it's if it's for an elderly, we have all different kinds of sections. We have call logs and stuff like that, down to where you can put in officers' name their badge number. 'Don't forget to ask about this, this, this, and this. Keep this information with you at all times.' It's everything you need to know. And it's pretty much a step-by-step process, and it's helped a lot of families.

She also spoke about creating an alert system for MMIR in her area and said, "What I did was, I created… I mimicked the alert system for a state. So, like an Amber Alert for us, I called it the

"Turquoise Alert." Other unique strategies included an MMIR cross-country motorcycle ride to raise awareness of the crisis and the use of drones.

Groups that participated varied in size from two to sixteen members. They varied in group age, from two months to eight years. They also varied in location, connections, and community support. However, they all spoke about actions that they were taking to help MMIR victims and affected families. Additionally, they all expressed the desire or need to do more than they are currently doing.

Synthesis of Results

In many Indigenous cultures, stories are not told linearly, nor are ideas expressed linearly (Boje, 2016). The PI of this study, who is a citizen of the Lakota Nation also known as the Rosebud Sioux tribe, did not set out to synthesize the results in a non-linear fashion. However, after analyzing the data, he felt the best way to communicate and understand the results was from a circular perspective. When looking at Figure 1, a viewer could start with any theme and flow in any direction, and the study results would be the same. More specifically, the results are best expressed in a fashion that shows there is no beginning or end to the MMIR crisis or the roles of MMIR groups in assisting and advocating for MMIR, their families, and their communities. MMIR groups also operate between this study's central themes at any time. For example, an MMIR case could start with the need for awareness about the missing person to be spread, the next step could be for an MMIR group to take action by conducting a search, or it may be for the group to begin navigating systemic struggles like working with tribal and state police. The same case could be viewed through a different lens in which the case started with systemic struggles that led an individual to go missing.

Discussion

This study explored how grassroots community organizations work in their communities to help lessen the burden of the MMIR crisis. The findings addressed the paper's primary question of strategies MMIR groups utilized to help MMIR, families, and the community. The interviews also highlighted the various issues that have contributed to the MMIR crisis and the problems that groups face while trying to deploy these strategies. This study reveals how MMIR groups are working to empower their communities and the obstacles they face in their attempt to do so.

There are no known studies explicitly focused specifically on MMIR groups. However, there are studies on community-led advocacy groups. A study commissioned by the World Health Organization found that when marginalized communities organize to fight social injustices, they often build homegrown leaders, which can be empowering and give community members a greater sense of power over their lives (Gama e Colombo, 2010). Our study shows that MMIR groups are doing just that. Most participants stated that they started or joined a group to raise awareness for the MMIR crisis or help with a particular case. However, through the process of working cases, participants have become experts and community leaders who create and implement ideas that reach beyond the initial goal of raising awareness.

Indeed, it is crucial to consider the historical and political contexts that have contributed to the MMIR crisis and how these may fuel distrust and an overall lack of partnership from law enforcement and other authorities. Participants reported bureaucratic difficulties like jurisdiction issues and disenfranchisement with authorities that can be linked to acts and policies that were created in the 1800s. Some even expressed difficulties in working with their tribal governments. Pre-colonization and into the late 19th century, Indigenous populations acted as sovereign nations, with their chosen leaders acting in the interest that they felt was best for their people. In

the late 1800s, these sovereign nations became legally regarded as "domestic dependent nations" (Cherokee v. Georgia 1831), which led to policies such as the Dawes Act, in which the US government divided communal land into small familial allotments to assimilate American Indians into the US way of life (Dawes Act, 1887). This strategy helped ensure Indigenous Americans would become reliant on the federal government or its arms like the BIA.

 Previous studies have shown that centuries of racism and erasure combined with confusion over jurisdiction create a system that contributes to high rates of violence and unsolved cases involving Indigenous people (Croisy, 2017). Our study reveals how MMIR groups continue to navigate within the restrictions of these systems while trying to get enough support to change how the systems function. Navigating these systems is complex, and MMIR group members must address funding, professionalism, and self-care issues within their organization. Many participants discussed the struggle between needing more financing and being more professional to serve their communities better. However, others coupled this with the need to stay grassroots and community-based. Edwards and Hulme (1996) found that greater reliance on outside support often compromises an organization's performance toward its original goal; some of this tension was also observed in the diverse perspectives in our study on partnering with external agencies, obtaining 501c non-profit status, and other actions that could decentralize actions away from the MMIR groups themselves. This finding aligns with prior studies that have explored the dichotomy between volunteer groups staying fully independent and unaffiliated with outside organizations and the need to grow, which is often made more attainable by outside partnerships (Edwards & Hulme, 1996).

The most well-known modern American Indian civil rights movement is known as the American Indian Movement (AIM). AIM was formed in 1968 and was most active in the 1970s

(Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023). The participating MMIR group leaders did not speak of themselves as civil rights leaders in the same vein as AIM, but this study shows that MMIR groups are taking action that affects not only missing or murdered people but all Native Americans. Another grassroots Native American-led movement was the NoDAPL movement that began in 2015 (Estes & Dhillon, 2019). NoDAPL saw many Indigenous Women, such as Madonna Thunder Hawk, Phyllis Young, and Red Fawn Fallis, take on roles as leaders and become the face of the movement (Estes & Dhillon, 2019). Every MMIR group leader interviewed for this study identified as female.

Furthermore, the concept of empowering or *repowering* Indigenous communities aligns with the AIM and other Indigenous civil rights movements. Notably, every MMIR group leader the PI could find was an Indigenous Woman. Pre-colonization, most Indigenous societies were either matriarchal or viewed women as equal to men (Kearl, 2006). This study reveals that through addressing the MMIR crisis, Indigenous women are regaining their power, leadership roles, and respected place in society.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

A strength of this study is that the PI is both Native American and a member of an MMIR organization, which made recruitment simpler than it may have been if someone from outside of these communities had conducted it. Additionally, this created a sense of comfort and trust among participants. Another strength of this study is that it is one of the first to explore MMIR groups' work. One of the limitations of this study was the time limit on when the interviews could be conducted and when data could be analyzed. Since this study was part of an undergraduate thesis, the time frame for completion was limited to the weeks of the semester. Time limitations led to limited sample size. In order to allow adequate time for data analysis, the

window for interviews was eight weeks, and four willing participants could not schedule times during the allotted interview timeframe. However, despite this limitation, the PI reached saturation after the eighth interview. Another limitation of this study was that eight of the eleven participants operate their MMIR groups in the Southern Plain region of the US. Specifically, two-thirds of the groups interviewed were from Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas. Therefore, findings are not necessarily transferable to MMIR groups in other regions of the U.S. In addition, initially, the PI planned to conduct a follow-up focus group as a means of member checking. Given time constraints, the focus group is scheduled for late April 2023. Therefore, the findings from member checking are not included as part of this written thesis but will be integrated into any follow-up dissemination materials and research, including the thesis defense.

Implications

As pointed out in the previous section, this study was limited to nine MMIR groups, and most were in the same geographic region. That limitation leaves an opportunity to expand this study to other regions and interview more groups. This study highlights that many MMIR groups in the US are only a few years old, and there has been increased attention on the crisis in recent years, which likely indicates that the needs of MMIR victims and the strategies that groups deploy will continue to evolve. Since the needs and strategies are likely to shift quickly, a longitudinal study consisting of multiple interviews with group members over time would likely be valuable. Additionally, the US Indigenous population would like to benefit from a study like ours incorporating the voices of MMIR victims and/or family members who have interacted with MMIR groups.

In addition to the implications for research noted above, this study provides tangible information for MMIR groups to share with other MMIR groups. For example, every group

would likely benefit from developing a toolkit of strategies and practices to identify what has worked and what has not. Another example of tangible benefits amongst groups would be the ability for groups to have easier access to one another to share information and resources. With the recognition of the uniqueness of each MMIR group and the communities that serve, the data from this study should result in MMIR groups having more accessibility to the strategies other groups implement, allowing them to decide if the strategy is something they can implement or build upon for the community they serve. There are opportunities for groups to disseminate the information discussed in this study with other groups through focus groups, conferences, and community events. The PI has already been invited to share the study's results at an MMIR event which points to the level of intrigue and excitement the Native American community has for this area of research. Thus, it is important for MMIR groups and leaders to find spaces to connect with one another and exchange information.

One idea from this study that merits further conceptualizing is "*repowering*." As presented by a study participant (Interviewee # 6) , repowering has implications for academia, research, and beyond in areas of social justice and advocacy. There are implications for *repowering* marginalized communities to expand the CBPAR framework of how to conduct research. CBPAR is based on researchers and participants sharing power and co-constructing knowledge (Tremblay et al., 2018). However, *repowering* could see the research team simply facilitating or helping to provide the resources for marginalized community members to rediscover their pre-colonization power. This concept and the idea of *survivor leadership* build on the ideas of decolonizing research and data sovereignty as well as the ideas of decolonizing and sovereignty spaces beyond academia.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, MMIR groups engage in various strategies to meet survivor needs. Notably, through specific actions like fundraising, hosting educational events, and pushing for legislation, MMIR group leaders have become the face of the MMIR crisis and community-based subject matter experts. MMIR groups have found ways to *repower* or give power back to their local communities and those directly impacted by the MMIR crisis. Through their work, in addition to building relationships and therapeutic bonds with families impacted by MMIR, they also are leading the way in retaking the power to engage communities, connect within and beyond the community, and address the MMIR crisis.

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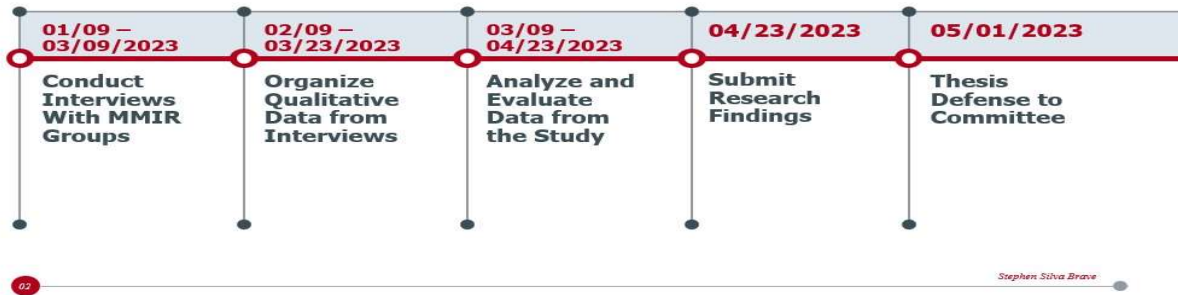
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Timeline

MMIW Thesis
Fall 2022

08/25/2022	09/08/2022	08/08 – 11/01/2022	10/21/2022	11/16/2022
Initial Meeting With Thesis Committee	Submit Research Application to IRB	Prepare Thesis Proposal	Minimal Risk Research Approved by IRB	Present Thesis Proposal to Committee

01   Stephen Silva Brave

MMIW Thesis
Spring 2023

01/09 – 03/09/2023	02/09 – 03/23/2023	03/09 – 04/23/2023	04/23/2023	05/01/2023
Conduct Interviews With MMIR Groups	Organize Qualitative Data from Interviews	Analyze and Evaluate Data from the Study	Submit Research Findings	Thesis Defense to Committee

Stephen Silva Brave

Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Appendix B: Informed Consent

Appendix C: Interview Guide

Appendix D: Participant Mental Health Resources

Appendix A: Email Recruitment

Dear MMIW Group Leader, 3x

My name is Stephen Silva Brave. I am an enrolled citizen of the Sicangu Lakota Nation. I am a member of the North Texas MMIW chapter *MMIW TX- Rematriate* and a student researcher at the University of Texas at Arlington. I am conducting a study looking into grassroots MMIW organizations and how they help missing and murdered relatives, their families, and communities. As part of this study, I am reaching out to MMIW group leaders or a chosen group representative to take part in one virtual interview (approximately 60 minutes in length) with an option of participating in a follow-up virtual interview (approximately 30 minutes in length) after initial themes are identified. I also want to discuss any barriers that may keep MMIW groups from better-assisting relatives.

Participation in this study is voluntary. There is no compensation for participating, and you will not receive any direct benefit from participating in the interview. However, this research could supply information that may be valuable to MMIW organizations in the future or may lead to more MMIW research. You are eligible to participate if you are a leader or designated representative of an MMIW group in the United States, and if you have at least 1 hour, you can designate to talk about the work your group does.

We do not anticipate any risks from participating in this study; however, we understand that discussing MMIW work can naturally lead to discussing specific cases or events that some participants may find uncomfortable. Any interview data that mentions a specific name, case, location, or date will be de-identified and remain confidential. As a participant, you will have the option to identify the group and any specific strategies you have implemented to meet the needs of missing and recovered Indigenous relatives; you will be asked if there is any information you would like attributed to your group in the preliminary interview and will be allowed to read initial findings/themes and asked to verbally consent before any group-level identifiable information is presented. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and any interview data collected will be deleted. Data collected will be stored under data security procedures for three years.

To take part in the study, please reply to this email so we can schedule a time to conduct the virtual interview.

The University of Texas at Arlington Institutional Review Board has reviewed and approved this study. If you have any questions, please contact Stephen Silva Brave (sjs9624@mavs.uta.edu) or Dr. Catherine LaBrenz (Catherine.labrenz@uta.edu).

Appendix B: Informed Consent for Interview Participants

RESEARCH TEAM

PII- Stephen Silva, Bachelor of School of Social Work Student, sjs9624@mavs.uta.edu, 214-677-2272

Thesis Chair—Dr. Catherine LaBrenz, School of Social Work, catherine.labrenz@uta.edu, 512-915-1637

IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT THIS RESEARCH PROJECT

The research team above is conducting a research study about uncovering strategies that successfully meet the needs of missing and recovered relatives; based on MMIR (Missing and Murdered Indigenous Relative) leadership perceptions. Additionally, the study seeks to uncover barriers that advocacy groups face in helping victims, their families, and the community. You can participate in this research study if you are an MMIIR advocacy group leader (i.e., chairperson, executive officer, President, leader) or a designated representative. Furthermore, you must be at least 18 years old to participate.

This study has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB). An IRB is an ethics committee that reviews research to protect the rights and welfare of human research subjects. Your most important right as a human subject is informed consent. You should take your time to consider the information provided by this form and the research team and ask questions about anything you do not fully understand before making your decision about participating.

TIME COMMITMENT

You will be asked to complete an individual interview once between December 2022 and March 2023. Interviews should take approximately 60 minutes; if necessary, a follow-up interview should last approximately 30 minutes.

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

If you decide to take part in this research study, we will interview you about your MMIR group and how the organization helps missing and murdered relatives, their families, and communities. We will also discuss any barriers that may keep your group from better-assisting relatives. All interviews will be audio recorded using the record feature on Microsoft Teams. If the participant prefers a phone interview, the participant will be asked to call a Teams number, and the same platform will be used to record and transcribe the interview. The audio file will be transcribed by Teams, which means it will be written exactly as it was recorded, word by word. This is an automatic feature on Teams, and the final transcript will be checked by the PI (Primary Investigator), Stephen Silva Brave. The PI will delete the audio file after checking the transcription for quality. Transcriptions will be de-identified of individual information (e.g., your name), meaning that any information that could link your responses to you as an individual will be deleted or modified. After the data has been analyzed, all participants will be sent a copy of the results and themes from the interviews (April 2023). All participants will have an opportunity to opt-in to a 30-minute follow-up Teams interview to provide feedback and go

over themes. As with the first interview, the follow-up interview will be recorded and transcribed. All participants will be asked to give verbal consent to having any group-level information presented (e.g., the Dallas Fort Worth MMIR group that partnered with law enforcement as a strategy). All participants will also be given an opportunity to withdraw from the study and have all quotes and transcripts deleted if they no longer feel comfortable with having their data used in the thesis; in the event they do not feel comfortable, they will be asked to give their official withdraw verbally to the PI of the study.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS

While there are no direct benefits, your participation might help us better understand how MMIR (Missing and Murdered Indigenous Relative) groups help individuals, families, and communities. This information may be valuable to other MMIR organizations in the future and could lead to more MMIR research.

POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

The risks associated with the study do not exceed those experienced in everyday life. Any new information developed during the study that may affect your willingness to continue participation will be communicated to you. Furthermore, please inform the research team if any discomfort is experienced due to topics discussed in this interview. A list of resources is available and sent along with the informed consent. We will also have a copy available for participants if they feel distressed during the interview. There are also potential risks to privacy and confidentiality. Although we will not ask for any individually identifiable information in this study, it is possible that through your role as a leader or designated representative of an MMIR group, that confidentiality could be breached. To mitigate the potential risks, we will only report group-level information after receiving consent after the initial results and write-up is complete. As a participant, you can withdraw from the study at any time. You will be given the option to withdraw any group-level information you feel could breach privacy or confidentiality after the initial results are complete.

COMPENSATION

There is no compensation for your participation in this study.

ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

There are no alternative options to participating in the study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The research team is committed to protecting your rights and privacy as a research subject. All paper and electronic data collected from this study will be stored in a secure location on the UTA campus and/or on a secure UTA server for three years after the end of this research. All audio recordings will be destroyed once the de-identified transcript is available. Transcripts will be housed on a private UTA OneDrive only accessible via password by the research team.

The results of this study may be published and/or presented without naming you as an individual participant. As noted in the informed consent, participants will be given the option to

have their organization identified along with any key strategies or initiatives they have developed at the organizational level. If a participant wants this information named, the PI will conduct a follow-up interview after initial analyses to ensure that they are comfortable with presenting the results and findings. The participant can approve the reporting or may ask to withdraw the group identification. The data collected about you for this study may be used for future research studies that are not described in this consent form. If that occurs, an IRB will first evaluate the use of any information that is identifiable to you, and confidentiality protection will be maintained.

While absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, the research team will make every effort to protect the confidentiality of your records as described here and to the extent permitted by law. While we make every effort to maintain confidentiality, all research team members are mandated reporters of child abuse, elderly abuse, communicable diseases, or criminal activities. Although the research team does not consider this to be likely, given our target population of groups who work with cases that would almost always be reported to law enforcement. Before starting the interviews, we will inform all participants of our mandated reporting duties. If any situations of ongoing, current child abuse, elderly abuse, communicable diseases, or criminal activities come up during the interview, the PI and research team are all mandated reporters and will follow state and federal protocols. Therefore, if any current or ongoing child abuse situations are uncovered during the interview, the research team will be required to contact the necessary authorities and file a report.

CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS
Questions about this research study or reports regarding an injury or other problem may be directed to Stephen Silva Brave, sjs9624@mavs.uta.edu, 214-677-2272. Any questions you may have about your rights as a research subject or complaints about the research may be directed to the Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services at 817-272-3723 or regulatoryservices@uta.edu.

CONSENT
By verbally expressing your consent to participate, you confirm that you understand the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and your rights as a research subject. You are not waiving any of your legal rights by agreeing to participate. You can refuse to participate or discontinue participation at any time, with no penalty or loss of benefits you would ordinarily have.

Appendix C: Interview Guide

Semi-Structured Interview Guide for MMIR Group Representative

1. Please tell me the name and location of your organization
2. When and how was your group formed?
3. Why did you feel there was a need for this MMIR group?
4. What type of work does the group do in the community?
5. In what ways is the group able to help MMIR? Families? The Community?
6. Is the group an official 501 (3)(C) non-profit organization? Have there been any hurdles to obtaining non-profit status?
7. Does your organization have contacts with other organizations (e.g., tribal, non-profit, local, state, or federal) that help your organization or the local MMIR crisis in general?
8. What are you most proud of about this organization?
9. Is there anything you believe this group is doing that may differ from other MMIW organizations?
10. Are there any strategies your group has taken that you would like to have identified for the larger MMIR community? If so, may we associate your group name with the strategy?
11. If you could get more support for your organization or the MMIW crisis, what type of help would be most beneficial?
12. What is the biggest obstacle to this organization's ability to help individuals or the MMIR crisis in general?
13. Do you have any ideas/solutions for addressing these obstacles? If so, can you share?

Appendix D: Participant Mental Health Resources

Mental Health Resources

Coping with Stress

1. [Centers for Disease Control – Stress & Coping](#)
2. [National Alliance on Mental Illness- Managing-Stress](#)

Native American Mental Health Resources

1. [Indian Health Services Mental Health Resources](#)
2. [Strong Hearts Free 24/7 Native Helpline](#)

Texas Resources & Services

1. [Texas 2-1-1 (Resource directory by county/zip code)](#)
2. [Find Help in Texas (hotlines and organizations)](#)