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“They Failed to Protect Me:” New Report on COVID-19 Impact on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls Released

“They did nothing to help, it went nowhere. They told me I should not have made the abuser angry.” This is just one of the voices of Indigenous survivors of violence featured in the newly released report “They Failed to Protect Me: Enhancing Response to and Surveillance of IPV DV and MMIWG2 in California During the COVID-19 Pandemic.”

The report, published by Sovereign Bodies Institute in partnership with the California Rural Indian Health Board, details the current extent of the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and two spirit people (MMIWG2) in California, and how the pandemic has led to increases in the already exponentially higher rates of violence Indigenous peoples of California experience. According to the report, SBI has documented 174 MMIWG2 across the state, over half of which are murders.

The report features the case of Laverna Killson Top Wallowing, a Northern Cheyenne woman killed in Southern California in late 2019. Like 18 other Indigenous women throughout the state, Laverna was killed due to intimate partner violence, and she is one of 44 MMIWG2 that was a mother. Laverna’s is one of 130 unprosecuted cases statewide, despite a history of violence documented by law enforcement, witness statements attesting to abuse, and medical records confirming abuse-related injuries.

The report places stories like Laverna’s in a broader context of high rates of violence against Indigenous people. For example, over 70% of Indigenous Californians surveyed said they had experienced at least one form of violence or abuse, and nearly half of those surveyed said they had experienced sexual violence--a rate 1.7 times higher than the national rate of AI/AN sexual assaults and five times higher than the national rate of victimization regardless of gender. 79% of victims stated they had been harmed by a non-Indigenous person.



Shockingly, 93% of LGBTQ2 respondents shared that they had experienced sexual assault, 20% of LGBTQ2 respondents experienced trafficking, 3 out of 5 trafficking victims identified as LGBTQ2. 87% of Indigenous LGBTQ2 respondents experienced two or more forms of violence. Not only were rates of violence against Indigenous LGBTQ2 Californians, they also reported experiencing additional barriers to help from law enforcement and healthcare providers due to their gender or sexual identities.

Says SBI Executive Director Annita Lucchesi, “This report is the first attempt to document the widespread increase in violence against Indigenous people due to the pandemic, and is a milestone in giving voice to Indigenous survivors and those impacted by violence throughout the state.” According to the report, during the pandemic, 81% of Indigenous Californians surveyed felt that MMIWG2 increased, 62.5% felt that domestic violence increased, half felt that intimate partner violence increased and child abuse increased, and approximately one-third felt that elder abuse, sexual assault, and survival sex work increased.

The report also assesses current gaps and failures to document and address this violence, stating that there is no systematic data collection. Of the 59 FOIA requests sent to the California County Clerks and California Department of Public Health, nine have not been acknowledged, 14 have been denied or claimed to have no responsive documents, 11 require payment (\$21.00 per copy), and 26 required that SBI provide them with specific names of victims. 18 of the county clerks and 17 of the county sheriff’s offices did not respond to SBI’s FOIA requests within the timeframe required by law. 39 of our requests to county sheriffs were rejected or claimed to have no responsive documents, and four are still awaiting acknowledgement since November 1, 2020.

Lastly, the report details pervasive system failure and bias among law enforcement. About half of Indigenous Californians surveyed who reported their experience of violence to law enforcement rated their experience as below average or poor, said their abuser was never arrested, and said they felt uncomfortable or unsafe calling 911 for help. 1 in 5 said that they were arrested or threatened with arrest when reporting the



abuse, and said it was pointless to ask for help because service providers would not meaningfully respond.

Altogether, the report is a powerful reminder of the work to be done to better protect Indigenous women, girls, and two spirit people in California. To read the report in full, visit sovereign-bodies.org/reports.

If you are a survivor or MMIP family member in California, you may reach SBI on our 24/7 Crisis Line via text or phone at (707) 298-3015. Press inquiries should be directed to SBI's Executive Director Annita Lucchesi at annita@sovereign-bodies.org.