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Domestic Violence in Indian Country

By Sarah Deer

On Dec. 28, 2006, the U.S. Department of Justice released its latest statistics on the rates of intimate partner violence. The headline of the press release declared: "Intimate partner violence declined between 1993 and 2004." However, several paragraphs into the press release was the following sobering statement:

"The average annual rate of non-fatal intimate partner violence from 1993 to 2004 was highest for American Indian and Alaskan [sic] Native females at 18.2 victimizations per 1,000 females aged 12 and older."

Compared to the overall statistic, 2.6 victimizations per 1,000 individuals in 2004, Native women are seven times more likely to be victims of domestic violence than all other women.

For those who follow these kinds of statistics, these numbers should not be too surprising. Every national study in the past 15 years that has looked at levels of victimization throughout society has put Native women at the top of the list. Other studies have shown that more than 60 percent of Native women will be the victims of violent assault during their lifetimes and more than one-third of Native women will be the victims of rape. Can this be true? Where do these numbers come from and what can be done?

In order to appreciate these statistics, it is important to understand where the government comes up with these numbers. For this recent report on domestic violence, the numbers come from a national survey called the National Crime Victimization Survey.

Many years ago, the United States calculated the crime statistics by counting the number of police reports filed. In recent decades, however, experts have shown that many victims of crime do not file reports with the authorities for a variety of reasons. Therefore, simply counting the number of police reports does not give the true picture of crime. Surveys like the NCVS were designed to provide a more accurate picture of crime in the United States.

To compile data for the NCVS, U.S. Census Bureau staff contact a random sample of people in the United States. Those contacted are asked about their experience with violent crime during the past six months. They are assured that their identities will not be revealed. At least in theory, the survey results in more accurate calculation of crimes – including those never reported to the police.

While the victimization survey is a dramatic improvement over the older methodology of counting police reports, there are still obvious shortcomings. NCVS does not cover homeless individuals or people living in shelters (including battered women's shelters). Moreover, it cannot guarantee that every victim of crime is willing to disclose his or her experience, even anonymously, to a stranger. Particularly in cases of domestic violence, a victim may be reluctant to discuss her experience if her batterer is listening to her conversation. Therefore, the actual numbers of Native women who are victims of domestic violence is likely higher than the NCVS statistics indicate.

While law and policy makers often want precise numbers, the ultimate issue is that there is an epidemic of victimization in Indian country. Even one victim of domestic violence in Indian country is cause for action. The question becomes – How do we best prevent and respond to this crime?

Most experts agree that domestic violence is a recent phenomenon among Native people. Advocates for Native victims believe that the historical impact of colonization led to the devaluation of women and girls in Native cultures. The loss of the sacredness of women has resulted in extremely high rates of violence in our communities.

It is important to look beyond the numbers when discussing domestic violence. Every victim is a daughter, a sister, a cousin, an auntie, a friend, a wife, a mother - not merely a statistic. Violence ripples through a community. Unresolved violence can often be at the source of alcohol addiction and drug abuse, particularly when victims seek to find relief from the pain they feel.

Grass-roots advocacy programs for Native women have become critical avenues of intervention for victims. The federal Violence Against Women Act, originally passed in 1994, has recently improved dramatically in terms of addressing the unique needs of Native women by providing additional resources to grass-roots organizations.

The Dec. 28, 2006, announcement from the Justice Department is yet another reminder that the issue of violence against women has reached crisis proportions in Indian country. It is time to reach beyond the numbers and reclaim the nonviolent legacy of our ancestors.

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