

The stories of American Indians and Alaska Natives are as varied and nuanced as the people themselves. But the latest study from the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) finds one troubling through-line that links these stories: the experience of high rates of violence.

Like songs and oral histories, science can raise awareness by quantifying the severity of violence. It's time to hear what the numbers are saying.

The vast majority of American Indian and Alaska Native women and men have experienced violence in their lifetime, and one in three have experienced recent violence in the past year.

Those levels are higher than the general population, but that's not where the inequalities end. The study also measures a range of impacts as well as services needed because of violence.

What's behind those numbers? Let's start with the finding that for American Indians and Alaska Natives, violence doesn't discriminate by gender. Women and men share similar rates of victimization. That means that almost three million of American Indian and Alaska Native women and men have been victims of violence.

To put that number in perspective, imagine if everyone in the state of Iowa stood up. Or, every resident of Orlando, Dallas, Detroit, Anchorage, and Atlanta combined. That's the scale of the violence, but what about the scope?

The NIJ study breaks types of violence into four categories, and violence against American Indians and Alaska Natives is high across all of them. Take stalking for example. It can be a gateway to more aggressive violence, and repeated, unwanted, fear-inducing experiences come in many forms. Lifetime estimates of stalking for women in the study are almost double those of non-Hispanic whites. Add male and female victims together, and that's more than 1.2 million people. That would fill 20 sports stadiums if every single ticket holder had been stalked.

Being forced or coerced to engage in unwanted sexual activity is another form of violence, a form all too familiar to American Indians and Alaska Natives. For example, these mothers, daughters, and sisters face almost two times the risk of sexual violence with penetration as non-Hispanic white women. Overall rates of physical violence by intimate partners in the past or present are even higher, from being shoved to having a gun or knife used on them. More than one in every two women and more than one in every three men have experienced physical violence by intimate partners in their lifetimes, comparatively much higher than the physical victimization rates over the lifetimes of non-Hispanic whites.

Of course, not all violence is sexual or physical, so the NIJ study also examined psychological aggression, for example, expressions of anger that seemed dangerous or humiliating, or controlling access to birth control. Overall, psychological aggression affects more than one in every two women and men. Psychological aggression may not be as obvious as broken bones or bruises, but it is real. Among victims, 63% of women report partners tracking them, and 55% of women report being kept from family or friends.

These are just a few findings, but remember they are numbers that correspond to real victims who would fill the entire state of Iowa. Now picture of 97% of women and 90% of men in Iowa were victimized by people of other races and ethnicities; interracial perpetrators that violated

the safety of their schools, workplaces, parks, homes and bedrooms. Numbers alone don't tell the whole story, but they do point to a dangerous gap: most federally recognized tribes don't have the legal authority to criminally prosecute non-Indians, even for crimes committed on tribal lands.

So what does it all mean? The impacts of high rates of violence against American Indians and Alaska Natives range from missed days of work or school to physical injuries. It's not surprising that services are needed, like medical care to treat injuries, but here's where the NIJ results uncover another glaring disparity: almost 40% of female victims who need services can't get them, compared with only 15% of non-Hispanic white female victims who fall through the cracks.

American Indians and Alaska Natives deserve better, and now there is science to prove it. These numbers are not abstract. They bear witness to real people: mothers, girlfriends, brothers, and grandfathers. Our hope is that this study will lead to a story of a new beginning, one where all of us listen to what the science is saying, what the victims are saying, and unite to prevent violence wherever it happens.