



National Institute of Justice Framing Paper on Improving the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) for American Indian and Alaska Native Individuals

BACKGROUND

The National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs) Program is a national center for information about missing and unidentified people in the United States. Operated by the U.S. Department of Justice's National Institute of Justice (NIJ), NamUs collects information about long-term missing people as well as people or bodies who have been unidentified to help resolve these cases and bring resolution to families. We also provide a place where police agencies, medical examiner offices, and families can share information about long-term missing or unidentified people with the hope that an organization with access to NamUs might have additional information to help expedite case associations and resolutions.

The most recent data from the FBI's National Crime Information Center Missing Person File showed that there were 10,650 entries into the database in 2023 of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) people. (see [2023 Missing American Indian and Alaska Native Persons Data — FBI](#)). It also indicates that, as of April 10, 2024, of the more than 10,000 entries in 2023 into the database, 325 remained active. At the end of 2023, the database indicated that there were 1,631 active records of missing AI/AN missing persons (which reflects all active records regardless of the year they were entered into the database).

Based on a subset of this data, the FBI, along with the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, also known as OJJDP, and the United States Marshals Service, issued a separate report that demonstrated approximately 72% of the entries in 2023 of missing American Indian and Alaska Native persons were 21 years old or younger. The report also demonstrated that a significant portion of those missing person entries were under age 18 (see [2023 Missing American Indian and Alaska Native Persons: Age 21 and Under](#)). While many of these individuals are found alive and well, some become long-term missing people.

At the same time, federal, state, and local investigators (such as medical examiners) are constantly working to identify thousands of deceased people nationwide. Over 11,000 sets of unidentified human remains were held in medical examiner and coroner offices in the United States, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (see [Medical Examiner and Coroner Offices, 2018 BJS Bulletin](#)). Information about such remains is maintained in



NamUs. The data in our databases and the Program's associated services have led to tens of thousands of case resolutions.

QUESTIONS ADDED TO NAMUS DATABASE

- Was a missing person last seen on tribal land?
- Was the missing person's primary residence on tribal land?
- Was the missing person enrolled in or affiliated with one or more tribes?
- Was an unidentified person found deceased on tribal land?
- Is the tribal law enforcement agency participating in TAP (Tribal Access Program)?

One of the NamUs Program's main goals is to enable families and loved ones to remain involved in cases and allow the public to give information to the proper agency. In 2017, NamUs increased efforts to consult with Tribal leaders and other interested parties about reporting on missing Indigenous people, including discussions with the Bureau of Indian Affairs' Office of Justice Services . The Program used the information collected to add several

questions to the NamUs database that Tribal communities said were the most relevant to them (see sidebar).

In addition, several statutes and federal initiatives have also focused on the NamUs Program's outreach, training, technical assistance efforts, and reporting requirements. As a result, NamUs developed a new publication series. For example, each month, we publish reports and statistics for all our unresolved missing, unidentified, and unclaimed person cases (see <https://namus.nij.ojp.gov/library/reports-and-statistics>).

NIJ is committed to improving NamUs data and ensuring they are useful to public and professional users. By working with investigating agencies and families, the NamUs staff want every case in the databases to have the most detailed and accurate information possible.



NamUs users should be mindful that the use of the Program's databases is not required by law. Therefore, the NamUs database only contains information on individuals who have been voluntarily reported. The NamUs system does not include information on all missing, unidentified, and/or unclaimed people nationwide. Information about race, ethnicity, age, sex assigned at birth, and other demographic markers reflect the data entered into the NamUs system by the reporting party. Once a NamUs case is resolved, it is archived and restricted from public view.

We want Tribal Sovereigns' advice about how we can improve efforts to provide information about NamUs to Tribal Leaders and police to help them understand our mission and how NamUs can help resolve cases. We want to improve NamUs's ability to collect and share information on these cases, which can support investigations and help families who seek answers. At the same time, we are also committed to privacy and confidentiality protections. We demonstrate this commitment by hosting the NamUs system in OJP's SecureCloud to maintain the highest level of security of sensitive case data and personally

identifiable information, by limiting advanced access to only vetted professional users, and by developing [Frequently Asked Questions](#) that help communities understand how forensic evidence is collected, stored, and used.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What information from the missing, unidentified, and unclaimed persons (a person who has been identified but the legal next of kin has not been found or officially notified) databases is most important to Tribal Nations?
2. What other NamUs data would Tribal Nations like collected about American Indian and Alaska Native missing, unidentified, and unclaimed person cases? How would the additional data help Tribal Nations?
3. What information from the missing, unidentified, and unclaimed persons databases is most important to Tribal police? For example, a list of known Tribal members' names and/or a list of the cases' primary LE POC, if available?
4. What other NamUs data would Tribal police like collected about American Indian and Alaska Native missing, unidentified, and unclaimed person cases? How would the additional data help Tribal police?
5. If a Tribal citizen is identified in the NamUs databases, would Tribes like to be notified? If so, who should be the contact representative(s)?
6. NamUs offers different [services](#). Which ones are most important in resolving American Indian and Alaska Native missing, unidentified, and unclaimed person cases? Services include investigative support, such as cold case advisors who provide case consultation and collect critical information, and forensic services, such as DNA analysis, anthropology services, fingerprint analysis, and dental record collection.



7. Some individuals may have cultural and spiritual sensitivities or a historical mistrust of DNA collection and analysis. How can we better inform Tribal communities about our services, their benefits, and how DNA samples taken from family members will be protected and kept private?
8. Which ways should the NamUs Program spread the word and provide training for Tribal communities and with Tribal police about the services we offer? What is the best way to communicate with Tribal leaders and citizens? For example, in-person, virtual, or a combination of the two?

The NamUs Program is designed and maintained to help users manage and resolve cases. It is not a historical database. There are restrictions on the use of the information. (To learn more about capabilities and restrictions, see the NamUs [FAQs](#).)

NIJ MISSION

The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) supports and shares evidence-based knowledge and tools from objective and rigorous scientific research to promote safety and advance justice. For over 50 years, NIJ has had a significant federal role in assisting local, Tribal, and state governments. NIJ uses different ways to exchange information among these communities to build connections and solutions and help bridge the gap among different worlds. NIJ's six objectives are (1) research, (2) development, (3) evaluation, (4) testing, (5) assistance, and (6) sharing information. NIJ achieves its mission through the "Listen, Learn, Inform" model — we listen to communities' needs, learn how to meet them by funding research and development projects, and then inform communities about what we learned.

NOTE: This paper is not a statement of official Department policy. It is intended to provide information and suggest questions to be considered by Tribal leaders and representatives as they prepare to participate in the 19th Annual Government-to-Government Violence Against Women Tribal Consultation. The Department welcomes all input from the Tribes on this and other matters of concern to Tribal communities.