

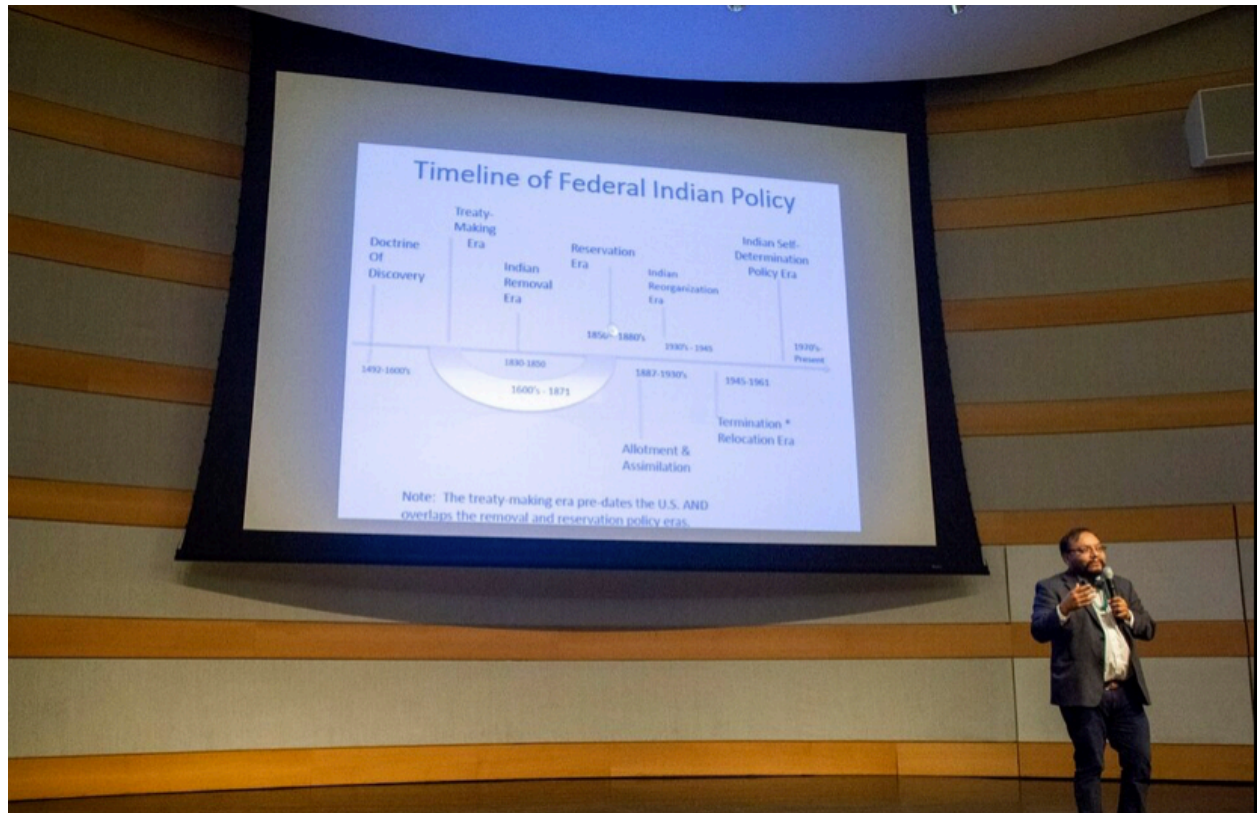
# Activists highlight missing and slain indigenous people in Utah, propose a task force

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Violence against Native people is overrepresented, underreported and it persists when they leave reservations to live in urban settings and that includes in Utah, according to Native rights advocates.

In recent years, the phenomenon of missing and slain indigenous women, girls and LGBTQ individuals has emerged as a particular concern for Native rights advocates across Canada and the United States.

Utah is home to about 60,000 American Indians and Alaska Natives, according to the Utah Department of Health. Data on crime involving these Utahns is much harder to nail down. One study in 2018 put Salt Lake City in the top 10 in the nation in cases involving missing and slain indigenous women, but Salt Lake City police have disputed that.

Moroni Benally, coordinator for public policy and advocacy at Restoring Ancestral Winds, said some of the most telling data is actually what's missing.

He shared information from the nonprofit Murder Accountability Project which found that between 1999 and 2017, about half of killings of Native people that were reported by medical officials to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention were reported by police to the FBI, compared with about 90% of killings of white people. In Utah, only 32 of 52 Native killings reported to the CDC were reported to the FBI.

The lack of information is a nationwide problem, but the Justice Department estimates that on some reservations, indigenous women are killed at rates over 10 times the national average. Violence against Native people is so pervasive it might seem impossible to end, said Yolanda Francisco-Nez, executive director of Restoring Ancestral Winds, a nonprofit advocacy group for indigenous people in Utah. But she is hopeful that this state can lead, as long as Utahns become informed about the problem.

“I know that Utah is going to do better,” she said, speaking at an information session Monday. “Why is Utah going to do better? Because now you as Utahns, you have this knowledge that you maybe didn’t know before.”

Politicians, law enforcement officers and residents gathered at the Salt Lake City Public Library for the session, which was led by representatives from Restoring Ancestral Winds and cosponsored by groups including the Utah Domestic Violence Coalition, ACLU Utah and the Rape Recovery Center. Utah Commissioner of Public Safety Jess Anderson and state Rep. Angela Romero, D-Salt Lake City, supported the event. Romero recently sponsored a resolution designating May 5 as Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and LGBT+ Awareness Day.

Benally said it is impossible to combat modern violence against indigenous people without understanding the trauma Native people faced under colonialism. U.S. policies spanning hundreds of years have stolen land, culture and lives from Native people, he said.

The abuses that Native populations have faced are not far in the past. Benally’s own mother was one of many Native children taken from her family in the 1940s and forced to attend a boarding school where she was punished for speaking Navajo in an attempt by the government to erase indigenous cultures.

Historical trauma has manifested high poverty rates in Native communities today, which makes them more vulnerable to exploitation, said Benally, who is running for Salt Lake City Council in District 2. He explained that Native Americans have the highest suicide rates, the lowest levels of educational attainment and the lowest life expectancies of any group in the United States. “This is a basic textbook recipe for high-risk populations,” he said.

Addressing inequality and trauma is critical for getting at the root of violence against Native populations, Benally said.

There are a number of pathways that might lead Native women and LGBTQ people into danger, he said. Coming from a traumatic home might cause a person to run away and fall prey to human traffickers. A history of trauma might make an individual more vulnerable to being in an abusive relationship. Moving to an urban center without family connections might create isolation that leads to victimization.

Francisco-Nez said she has witnessed non-Native predators attend Native ceremonies and powwows where they target young women and attempt to lure them into cities with offers of relationships or material gain in order to push them into prostitution.

A history of trust issues between Native communities and law enforcement makes it less likely that people report violence, Francisco-Nez said. She pointed to the state of Washington, which recently created police liaisons for Native populations, as one state making strides to combat violence against Native people.

Francisco-Nez proposed that a task force ought to be created in Utah to focus on this issue. Speaking to reporters after the information session, Salt Lake City Police Chief Mike Brown said he supports the creation of such a task force. The police department has been meeting with Restoring Ancestral Winds for the past year, said Brown, who added that he hopes to continue the conversation about violence against Native people.

Francisco-Nez called on Utahns to support the creation of such a task force and to continue to educate themselves about the issue. She said she believes there is a strong will in Utah to improve conditions for indigenous people.

“In Salt Lake City, where I have lived for over 30 years, I know there are good people in this community and awesome law enforcement officers,” she said. “People come along every day asking how can I help.”

Restoring Ancestral Winds will address this issue at its annual conference on Sept. 14 at the University of Utah.