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# A New Epidemic: Missing Black and Indigenous People and Their Portrayal in Media

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## Abstract

*As of January 2023, the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) reported 97,127 total active missing person cases in the United States (“2022 NCIC Missing Person and Unidentified Person Statistics”). Amongst these cases, Black people account for 31.2%, but comprise 13.6% of the population. Similarly, American Indian, and Alaskan Native people make up 2.4% of cases yet encompass an estimated 1.3% of the national population, not counting those who identify as being of two or more races, or Native Hawaiian and/or Pacific Islander (“QuickFacts: United States”). This disparity in the number of missing person cases arises from prevalent stereotypical portrayals of these communities, coupled with the inadequate reporting of their disappearances. This combination contributes to damaging media portrayals, elevating the vulnerability of Black and Indigenous individuals. Consequently, perpetrators may then find opportunities to exploit these circumstances, resulting in an unfortunate increase in missing person incidents. As a result, the families of these missing individuals face challenges in obtaining media attention that goes beyond mere public awareness, encompassing genuine empathy. In my paper, I present four case studies to highlight the primary factors exacerbating the underreporting of Black and Indigenous missing people and explore how issues with classification, policymaking, and reporting may have led to this disparity in an effort to provide concrete solutions that can protect marginalized communi-*

*ties and solve their missing person cases.*

## 1. Introduction

We are facing the “Nation’s Mass Disaster” of active and cold cases of missing people (Ritter). The latest data provided by the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) reports a staggering 97,127 active missing person records in the United States as of 2022 (“2022 NCIC Missing Person and Unidentified Person Statistics”). These distressing figures indicate the immense challenge faced by law enforcement in solving cases involving unidentified human remains (Ritter). In this context, the aforementioned report’s documentation of 29,357 missing Black individuals and 1,554 missing American Indian/Alaskan Native individuals takes on an even greater significance (“2022 NCIC Missing Person and Unidentified Person Statistics”). Amongst these cases, Black people account for 31.2%, but comprise 13.6% of the population. Similarly, American Indian and Alaskan Native people make up 2.4% of missing person cases yet encompass an estimated 1.3% of the national population, not counting those who identify as being of two or more races, or Native Hawaiian and/or Pacific Islander (“QuickFacts: United States”). These numbers serve as a poignant reminder of the urgent need for comprehensive efforts to address this deeply concerning issue and ensure the safety and well-being of these marginalized communities.

## 2. A Note on Terminology

- American Indian/Alaskan Native - The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) defines American Indian/Alaskan Native as “someone who has blood degree from and is recognized as such by a federally recognized tribe or village (as an enrolled tribal member) and/or the United States” – This is not the only means by which an individual is recognized as an American Indian or Alaska Native. It encompasses various elements that carry significance in an individual’s perception of their tribe’s culture, history, language, religion, familial ties, and the degree to which they personally associate themselves with being American Indian or Alaska Native (“Frequently Asked Questions”).
- Federally Recognized – Is defined as “an American Indian/Alaska Native tribal entity recognized as having a government-to-government relationship with the United States, with the responsibilities, powers, limitations, and obligations...and is eligible for funding and services from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (“Frequently Asked Questions”).
- Indigenous – The University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) defines Indigenous peoples as “those...with pre-existing sovereignty who were living together as a community [in the land the United States currently occupies] prior to contact with settler populations, most often – though not exclusively – Europeans” and, for the purposes of my research, encompasses those who self-identify as Indigenous but may not be federally recognized by the United States due to racial misclassification, blood quantum, and their tribe and/or nation’s lack of federal recognition (“Native American and Indigenous Peoples FAQs”).
- Latine – Coined by Spanish-speaking femi-

nist and LGBTQ+ communities, as a variation of Latino/a/x, Latine acknowledges the gender expansive populations of Latin America while preserving original Spanish pronunciation (Gamio Cuervo). I will use “Latine” to encompass the diasporic Latin-American community living in the United States of America.

## 3. Underreporting

Historically, a lack of attention and resources dedicated to investigating and publicizing these cases has led to a disproportionately low level of awareness and public discourse surrounding Black and Indigenous people, revealing systemic challenges that hinder the accurate representation and identification of individuals from these marginalized communities. These problems, most notably underreporting and racial misclassification, shed light on these issues.

Underreporting can stem from societal indifference, communities’ mistrust in law enforcement, and barriers within the justice system. Within the initial 24-48 hours of a person’s disappearance, the impact of underreporting and delayed investigations is notably amplified, with an even greater risk faced by Black and Indigenous individuals due to the presence of systemic biases and historical injustices that hinder the swift allocation of attention and resources. Furthermore, while federal law mandates reporting on missing children in the United States, there is presently no equivalent legislation that compels the reporting of individuals once they reach the age of 21 (Chakraborty). While this legislation affects all people once again there are potential risks for 21+ year olds from marginalized communities.

In addition, racial misclassification poses another major hurdle in accurately documenting missing people from these communities. In some instances, individuals classified as the wrong racial or ethnic groups can create significant delays and inaccuracies when identifying found individuals deceased or living, and subsequently noti-

ifying their families. This misclassification can be a result of implicit biases, limited cultural competency, or inadequate data collection practices. Misclassification based on race also leads to poor record keeping in law enforcement agencies. The limitation of both content analysis and reporting procedures becomes evident in the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) database which classifies missing persons into five categories: Asian, Black, Indian (Native), White, and Unknown, thereby classifying a significant demographic of the Latin population as 'white' or excluding them in an 'unknown' category ("2022 NCIC Missing Person and Unidentified Person Statistics"). The Urban Indian Health Institute has highlighted the distressing reality of racial misclassification when reporting missing persons in Indigenous communities in America. In their report, UIHI reveals that Indigenous people (including those identified as Native, First Peoples, American Indian, Native American, or Alaskan Native) are often incorrectly classified as white, underscoring the prevalence of this issue (Angerman). The absence of specific distinctions between tribal nations proves to be detrimental in cases involving missing people on their own tribal land, leading to unreported disappearances. A striking example of this issue is highlighted by a representative from the Fargo, North Dakota Police Department, who acknowledged that "Sometimes the information (on a victim's race) would not be asked, and our record system defaults to white."

The misclassification of Indigenous people as white has far-reaching consequences, significantly impeding the effectiveness of investigations and compromising search results, while also obstructing the compilation of comprehensive records by other departments involved in handling missing persons cases. Regrettably, racial misclassification remains a pervasive problem even in these limited categorizations. Furthermore, the UIHI report reveals that police departments continue to use outdated systems dating as far back as the 1960s. For instance, the Seattle, Washington po-

lice database employed the designation "N" between the 1960s and 1980s to represent "Negro" instead of "Native," encompassing both Indigenous and Black people, without providing any further clarification from the department (Angerman). This long-standing casework error has created obstacles for researchers in tracing information from older reports and accurately documenting the number of Black and Indigenous disappearances. The consequences are grave, as it perpetuates the marginalization and invisibility of missing Black and Indigenous people, and further impedes investigations into their disappearances.

#### 4. Newsworthy Victims

News media play a vital role in helping the public understand the world we live in, especially when it comes to depicting individuals from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds, gender identities, beliefs, sexual orientations, and economic backgrounds. However, news coverage often focuses on cases involving cis-gendered white individuals who are young and come from middle-class to upper-class backgrounds, portraying them as innocent victims in a perilous society. Thus, for missing person cases, social media is a critical tool when the virality of one's story can aid in their search.

When discussing viewers' media consumption, social media immediately comes to mind. A story going "viral" or becoming "trending" indicates that the posted text, photo, or video has garnered a large audience. Many individuals on social media aspire for fame, hoping to appear on the trending pages of platforms like Twitter, Instagram, or TikTok. In cases of disappearances, social media is an opportunity for family members to gain widespread attention for their missing loved ones. If traditional news outlets offer limited coverage of a case, social media has the potential to generate greater substantial support from audiences.

Considering this, it is important to analyze

what makes a story newsworthy in traditional news outlets (ex. CNN, NYT, Washington Post) in comparison to social media platforms when discussing missing Black and Indigenous people. The Columbia Journalism Review conducted a sample analysis of 3,630 articles about missing persons in 2021 using “Areyoupressworthy.com” - a tool that determines the perceived “worth” of coverage based on national and international press attention in cases of disappearances. For example, a young adult Black woman reported missing in New York would be deemed worthy of only eight news stories, while a young adult Indigenous man missing in New York would merit just six stories. These approximations stand in stark contrast to the over 120 news stories a missing white woman would garner. Based on these figures, only an estimated 10%-17% of Americans would hear about the case of a missing Black or Indigenous person, in comparison to 92.4% for a 22-year-old white woman residing in Nevada – percentage calculated from a “representative sample of 3,630 news stories about missing persons out of 19,561 collected by Meltwater Jan-Nov 2021. Of this sample, 2,383 stories concerned one or more specific missing individuals, covering 735 unique missing persons who were identified and categorized by age, gender, race / ethnicity, and geography” (“How Much Press Are You Worth?”). This demonstrates how missing Black and Indigenous people are overshadowed by the attention given to white women in the media. As the media tend to prioritize white women as the most captivating victims, the public’s attention is disproportionately drawn to them, perpetuating the perception that they are more newsworthy.

#### 4.1. White Women Syndrome

The phenomenon known as “White Woman Syndrome” captivates viewers with its relentless 24/7 news coverage. Coined by American journalist Gwendolyn L. Ifill during the Unity Journalists of Color conference, “White Woman Syndrome”

is the tendency to prioritize coverage of missing white women because, as Ifill states, “...if there is a missing white woman, you’re going to cover that every day,” (Ifill). While it is crucial to bring attention to any new missing person cases, it cannot be ignored that conversely, Black and Indigenous people are not offered the same empathy, uproar, and privilege given to a white woman when she goes missing.

As a matter of fact, Black and Indigenous people can more likely become victims because their perpetrators, especially within the same demographic, may take advantage of a potentially victims lack of case attention and law enforcement resources. This is exemplified in Samuel Little’s case – a black man and prolific serial killer/ rapist that terrorized the United States between the confirmed years of 1970 – 2005. Due to being undetected for so long he stayed within his victim pool, increasing his confidence and total number of victims (“FBI Seeking Assistance Connecting Victims to Samuel Little’s Confessions”). Little targeted primarily cisgendered and transgendered Black women of whom were unhoused, involved in sex work, and/or struggling with drug addiction (Knowles). He was found responsible for 60 confirmed homicides out of the possible 93 through the Violent Criminal Apprehension Program (ViCAP) - a testament to his chilling and ruthless reign of terror (“FBI Seeking Assistance Connecting Victims to Samuel Little’s Confessions”). Little proudly confessed to investigators that he avoided white individuals because they would quickly be noticed as missing victims: “Sometimes, I’d return to the very same city and effortlessly select another target, just like picking ripe grapes from a vine. How many grapes are left for me to pluck here? I have no intention of venturing into the predominantly white neighborhood to target an innocent teenage girl” (Knowles).

Samuel Little exploited “White Women Syndrome” and high-risk lifestyles to use for his benefit, as evident in his statement where he expressed his preference for targeting victims in vulnerable

demographics based on their race and lifestyle, all of which contributed to his concept of the “perfect” victim. (“FBI Seeking Assistance Connecting Victims to Samuel Little’s Confessions”). The “Missing White Women Syndrome” not only poses a threat to Black, Indigenous, and people of color, but to society as a whole (. When it comes to locating missing individuals alive or uncovering their remains, media outlets should provide equal news coverage for all. Through its selective coverage, the media implicitly communicates a hierarchy of importance, subtly signaling that certain lives hold greater value in society’s eyes. This not only perpetuates biases and reinforces existing power dynamics but also impacts how resources and empathy are allocated (Moss). The media’s portrayal of events and individuals plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and perpetuating societal norms – in essence, the media’s choices in what to cover and how to cover it contribute to a broader narrative could have the potential to challenge existing inequalities and hierarchies.

Without featuring cases involving Black and Indigenous people, this escalating crisis remains invisible to the public. However, for marginalized communities, these cases are far from invisible. They must bear witness to these injustices that permeate their lives and the lives of others within their areas. These cases rarely make headlines or receive minimal coverage, often limited to a single article without adequate follow-up. Desperate for a glimmer of hope, families are left pleading not only with the media but also with investigators themselves to take these cases seriously.

#### **4.2. High Risk Lifestyle Associations**

Black and Indigenous people are overreported, and often mislabeled, as runaways, sex workers, substance abusers, and criminals in media. These labels are often associated with those with a high-risk lifestyle. Therefore, rather than being met with empathy, individuals with these lifestyles are pushed to the margins of society, thus, making

their demise expected due to their assumed environment. As speculation, one could delve deeper into the potential implications and consequences of the dehumanization and desensitization of victims, where crime and impoverished conditions are portrayed as routine in their lives - this narrative has the capacity to contribute to a cycle of perpetuating social injustices and systemic inequalities while undermining the urgency and significance of locating missing Black and Indigenous individuals (“Missing Persons Statistics 2022 (Infographic): Black and Missing”).

The use of racially biased and violent language in news reports can harm victims and their families. In their analysis, the UIHI defined violent language as language that promotes racism, misogyny, or racial stereotypes encompassing various elements such as mentioning drugs, alcohol, sex work, gang violence, victim-blaming, excusing the perpetrator, misgendering transgender victims, racial misclassification, disseminating false information about cases, withholding the victim’s name, and sharing images or videos of the victim’s death (Angerman). It is also important to note that movements such as #SayHerName and hashtags with names trending in social media is to bring awareness of victims and the crimes committed against them regardless of age (“Say Her Name”). Out of the 934 articles examined in the report, 46 media outlets incorporated violent language in their coverage, constituting approximately one-third of all the surveyed outlets. Additionally, 36 (25%) consistently employed violent language in 50% or more of the cases they reported on, and 22 outlets (15%) consistently used violent language in 100% of the cases they covered. (Angerman). Through critical language in the media, it perpetuates their victimization which may lead to neglect from both investigators and the public concerning missing person cases. The media’s consistent failure to inform us about missing Black and Indigenous people is a much greater problem than simply missing out on an opportunity to provide assistance. Due to the lack of qual-

ity data and the consequent lack of understanding as their cases go unnoticed by the public, the connection between Black and Indigenous people and generational trauma is a distressing reality. Racial trauma from historical and ongoing acts of violence, discrimination, and systemic oppression have inflicted profound harm upon these communities, leaving lasting emotional, psychological, and social wounds that span across generations – to break the cycle of racial trauma and prevent further revictimization would mean for increases in socioeconomic and health equity (Comas-Díaz).

The rates of incarceration for Black and Indigenous individuals reflect the systemic racial disparities that influence public perceptions and contribute to the negative portrayal of these communities. For Black and Indigenous people, incarceration is frequently categorized as part of a high-risk lifestyle (“Missing Persons Statistics 2022 (Infographic): Black and Missing”). Additionally, disproportionate representation in the criminal justice system, systemic biases, and socioeconomic inequalities contribute to a heightened risk of imprisonment for individuals from these communities. In a report from October 2021, the Sentencing Project, concluded that the rate of incarceration for Black Americans is 1,240 per 100,000, which is nearly five times the rate of White Americans. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistic Report, 2.1% of Indigenous people make up the federal incarceration population, a statistic that is disproportionate to the 1.1% that made up the national population in 2019 (Nellis). Consequently, the treatment of a missing Black or Indigenous person in the media reinforces patterns of discrimination prevalent in society and vice-versa.

While the media also mentions white people with high-risk lifestyles, they tend to receive the benefit of the doubt. In the analysis of 219 mass shooter attacks, it has been observed that the media’s portrayal of white people, particularly white school shooters, tends to involve an imbalanced amount of positive and empathetic cover-

age. This coverage tends to highlight their mental health struggles or as a “victim of society...going through a lot, experiencing high levels of stress, or having endured childhood abuse,” (Grabmeier). Coinciding with these portrayals, the media depicts missing white victims with similar highlights and including people of interest surveillance, family member interviews, TV shows specials, and countless evidence updates that draw viewers’ attention to these cases.

The stark contrast in the portrayal of individuals from marginalized communities becomes evident when considering the negative stereotypes, violent language, and harsh judgment they are frequently subjected to in media coverage (Moss). This type of representation intersects with institutionalized racism, compounding the already pervasive negative portrayal that Black and Indigenous people experience both in society and the media (“Missing Persons Statistics 2022 (Infographic): Black and Missing”). The continued and consistent coverage of missing white person cases by the media leads the public to perceive it as a societal concern. Regrettably, one might speculate that this perception unintentionally diminishes the importance, the potential for resolution, and the relatability of missing cases concerning Black and Indigenous individuals, thus in theory perpetuating an ongoing cycle of inequality that hampers effective resolution and justice (Moss).

## 5. Analysis and Methods

The focus of my analysis will delve into the media disparities observed in cases of missing Black and Indigenous people, shedding light on the systematic neglect these communities have faced. To illustrate these disparities, I will present four case studies that vividly exemplify the lack of attention and support received by vulnerable demographics within these communities. The case studies of Daniel Robinson, Henny Scott, and Aubrey Dameron will be examined alongside the high-profile disappearance and murder of

Gabby Petito, allowing for a comprehensive comparison of media presence and public response. These case studies aim to highlight the concept of “White Woman Syndrome”, raising questions about how societal biases are constructed and reinforced through media narratives. Through this analysis, I seek to explore the challenges encountered by Black and Indigenous family members as they navigate the complexities of seeking assistance from law enforcement and media platforms to raise awareness about their missing loved ones. By shedding light on these difficulties and examining the disparities in media coverage, the objective is to foster a deeper understanding of the systemic issues that perpetuate the invisibility and marginalization of missing Black and Indigenous people.

### 5.1. Daniel Robinson

Daniel Robinson (24), a Black man, who disappeared on June 23, 2021, after seen leaving his worksite in Buckeye, Arizona. His father, David Robinson, has expressed his difficulties with news outlets about the handling of Daniel’s case by law enforcement. David was told by investigators during the initial request for a missing person’s report to wait an additional 12 hours. He was subsequently informed that his grown adult son had the autonomy to disappear or depart without any obligation to inform his family. Unfortunately, when the authorities eventually accepted the report, they cited the darkness outside as a hindrance to conducting a thorough search of the area, and their requests for helicopter assistance were denied for multiple days (Turney, “Daniel Robinson”). Moreover, law enforcement further exacerbated the situation by waiting an additional 16 days before inspecting Daniel’s apartment, leaving David with no choice but to find his son independently with the help of others and a private investigator. This sequence of events seemed to confirm that the burden of locating his son rested solely on David’s shoulders (Robinson II).

In a press conference, as relayed by David, investigators reportedly mentioned, “...he [Daniel] wrecked his Jeep, undressed at the crash site, joined a monastery to become a monk, and it’s the theory they stand on no matter what” (Adams). David maintains that the department prematurely dismissed the possibility of foul play and has been unwilling to explore alternative avenues, resulting in a lack of proactive measures on their part. Encouraging accountability, he calls upon the public to ensure that the department remains committed to an ongoing investigation which led to a dearth of meaningful media coverage during the initial months after he went missing (Turney, “Daniel Robinson”). Unfortunately, Daniel Robinson remains missing to this day, with his family persistently searching for him utilizing their own resources.

### 5.2. Henny Scott

Henny Scott (14), an Indigenous girl, went missing on December 7, 2018. After her last contact with her mother, Paula Stops, where she mentioned heading home after spending time with friends, Henny’s absence became apparent to Paula the next morning. Concerned, Paula reached out to Henny’s friends to gather any possible information, but upon learning that her friends had not heard from Henny either, Paula approached law enforcement to officially report her daughter as missing. While the officers’ inquiries about a possible boyfriend or Henny being out with friends may have seemed reasonable, Paula asserts that their demeanor came across as “condescending” (Chang). At a rally in Montana, Paula said, “... [the law enforcement officers] said Henny was just one of those crazy little girls...So what?” (“Indigenous Women Keep Going Missing in Montana”). After Paula successfully convinced law enforcement agents to file a missing person report, she was instructed to wait for a follow-up call. However, when Paula didn’t receive any communication, she decided to approach law enforcement



once more, only to be informed that the individual responsible for handling incoming missing person reports was currently on vacation. As a minor in Montana, especially during the winter season, Henny's case should have been treated as a high priority. Unfortunately, investigators failed to recognize the urgency. It wasn't until two days before Henny's remains were discovered on December 27, 2018, that an alert was finally issued. Despite her family's repeated pleas for a more thorough investigation, Montana's Department of Justice concluded that no crime had occurred, based on the medical examiner's determination of accidental death (Chang). In light of the circumstances surrounding her untimely demise, Henny's family persists in their appeal to reopen and thoroughly investigate her case.

### 5.3. Aubrey Dameron

Aubrey Dameron (25), an Indigenous transwoman, disappeared on March 9, 2019. After leaving home at 3 a.m. to meet a friend, Aubrey was never seen again. This triggered growing concern among her family, especially considering her health condition characterized by seizures and medication dependence, with her medication left behind at home (Shrestha). This circumstance intensified their worry, suggesting that Aubrey's disappearance may not have been voluntary. Like the previous case, her mother approached investigators upon realizing Aubrey was missing but encountered the same resistance. Despite her family's apprehension that she could have been the target of a hate crime, law enforcement officers did not treat her disappearance with the seriousness it deserved (Cavallier). Jennifer Byrd, Aubrey's mother, passionately appealed to the officers, but they instructed her to wait for six days since Aubrey was not initially considered a missing person and passed off as a runaway (Shrestha). Unfortunately, those days turned into weeks as her family rallied together to raise awareness about their missing loved one. Sadly,

during a press conference, law enforcement officers repeatedly misgendered Aubrey, adding to the distress and complications. Tragically, her case was ultimately dismissed, as it was attributed to her perceived "high-risk lifestyle," leading to inadequate attention and investigation. In July 2019, Delaware County's undersheriff, Gayle Wells, claimed that despite Aubrey's extended absence, there was insufficient evidence of foul play. In a distressing display of victim blaming, additional law enforcement officials told Aubrey's uncle that she would return on her own, stating, "she knew exactly what she was doing". This perspective unjustly attributes her "transgender lifestyle" and past struggles with addiction as reasons for her disappearance (Turney, "Aubrey Dameron and Anthonette Cayedito"). Aubrey Dameron is still missing, and her family continues their fight to have her case properly investigated.

### 5.4. Gabby Petito

In the case of Gabby Petito (22), a white woman who went missing in 2021, her story is also tragic and differs from the previous cases mentioned. Her road trip began in July and she was reported missing in late August of the same year. #AmericasDaughter was trending on social media for weeks in an effort to raise awareness for her disappearance. On the social media app, TikTok, the hashtag, #GabbyPetito had millions of views reaching the trending page. Strangers related to her story, feeling that she could be anyone in someone's family who went missing. Endless news coverage was shown from all possible connections to her disappearance with updates on any confirmed tips.

Her fiancé, Brian raised suspicions when he drove her van from Wyoming to Florida. He refused to speak on her whereabouts and was flagged as a person of interest (Maxouris). Brian soon disappeared in September and Gabby's remains were found on September 19th, 2021. Resources were used for manhunts in search for

Brian while Gabby's remains were confirmed by the medical examiner's office (Simonpillai). Her death was ruled as a homicide. It was announced later that Brian had committed suicide and the case was closed with the examination of his journal found near his remains. The Denver FBI stated that Brian's journal indicated that he murdered Gabby Petito (Maxouris).

At the closing of Gabby Petito's case, her parents held a press conference and thanked all involved for bringing her back home. Their press conference concluded with a statement from Joseph Petito: "This same type of heightened awareness should be continued for everyone... it's on all of you, everyone that's in this room, to do that. If you don't do that for other people that are missing, that's a shame, because it's not just Gabby that deserves that" (Simonpillai). His words rang out to the public and it was indicative that there were indeed cases neglected by media, law enforcement, and the public.

## 6. Discussion

The case of Gabby Petito garnered substantial public attention, media coverage, and investigative efforts, leading to discussions on the phenomenon known as missing white woman syndrome. The intense media scrutiny, constant updates, and public outcry demonstrated the disparity in how missing person cases are prioritized and portrayed based on race and lifestyle. The cases of Daniel Robinson, Henny Scott, and Aubrey Dameron provide significant insights when compared to the highly publicized case of Gabby Petito; they demonstrate how missing Black and Indigenous individuals often face significant hurdles in garnering law enforcement assistance and media attention, amplifying the distress and frustration experienced by their families. By analyzing these cases in conjunction with the media coverage surrounding Gabby Petito, we can gain a deeper understanding of the disparities and biases that exist in reporting and investigating missing

person cases.

The media coverage surrounding Daniel Robinson's disappearance was notably limited. His case was overshadowed by the media attention surrounding Gabby Petito, particularly after news of her disappearance emerged in late August. As Arizona was one of her road trip destinations, significant news coverage and search efforts were dedicated to her, diverting attention and resources away from other missing person cases, including Daniel Robinson's (Turney, "Daniel Robinson"). Interestingly, as the search for Gabby Petito unfolded, one news article from the Daily Mail, titled "At least NINE bodies have been discovered since September during the massive searches for Gabby Petito and Brian Laundrie," caught attention. While the article suggested a connection between Gabby Petito's case and the subsequent discoveries, such a perspective overlooks the real issue at hand (Diaz).

The identified individuals included Emily Ferlazzo, Lauren Cho, Sara Bayard, Josue Calderon, Miya Marcano, Robert Lowery, Kylen Schulte, Crystal Turner, and an unnamed homeless man. Family members of Miya Marcano, a Black woman who went missing from her Florida apartment complex, publicly criticized authorities for allocating more resources and attention to Petito's case than to Marcano's, even though Marcano disappeared two weeks after Petito (Diaz). It is also important to recognize that Gabby Petito's remains were discovered in Wyoming, a state where 710 Indigenous people were reported missing between 2011 and 2021, with many of their cases remaining unsolved (Grewal).

This further emphasizes the issue of cases slipping through the cracks and not receiving equitable attention. These incidents shed light on the disparities in media coverage and investigative efforts, and the need to address the systemic biases that contribute to the underrepresentation of marginalized communities in missing person cases. It is crucial to advocate for equal attention and resources for all missing individuals, irrespec-

tive of their race or background in order to rectify these injustices and ensure justice for all.

The cases of Henny Scott and Aubrey Dameron bring attention to the disturbing challenges experienced by indigenous women and children, including the troubling delays in investigations and jurisdictional complexities when addressing crimes. Additionally, the determinations made by medical examiners ruling out foul play in these cases further highlight the obstacles faced in seeking justice for these individuals. If a crime involves multiple Indigenous individuals, the jurisdiction lies with the reservation's Tribal Law Enforcement ("Tribal Law Enforcement"). However, if the crime involves an Indigenous person and a non-Indigenous person, jurisdiction shifts to the local or state police (Chakraborty). In such cases, it is the responsibility of law enforcement officers and chiefs to request additional support from Tribal Law Enforcement or the FBI. Unfortunately, in the cases of Henny Scott and Aubrey Dameron, the state police rejected assistance from both the Tribal Law Enforcement and the Federal Investigation Bureau ("Indigenous Women Keep Going Missing in Montana").

The analysis of thirty-two deaths and two disappearances of Indigenous girls and women in Canada, where authorities concluded no foul play, uncovers significant insights. First, it highlights that ten of those cases involved unexplained injuries, even though officials insisted that these injuries did not play a role in the individuals' deaths. This discrepancy raises questions about the potential impact of these injuries and the need for further investigation. Second, in five other cases, conflicts arise between the findings of coroners/inquests and the determinations made by the police. Such discrepancies underscore the necessity for thorough examination and clarification to ensure accurate conclusions are reached. Third, in twenty-five out of the thirty-four cases, families expressed experiencing racism and enduring prejudiced assumptions about the women and their lifestyles. These biases, unfortunately, impeded

the progress of investigations and hinder the pursuit of justice. These findings highlight the importance of establishing a comprehensive and unbiased approach to investigating the cases of missing and deceased Indigenous girls and women in Canada (Pedersen). This analysis conducted in Canada can serve as a valuable reference for similar cases across the United States. The striking parallels observed in the cases of Henny Scott and Aubrey Dameron, such as unexplained injuries or rulings of no foul play and the presence of racial biases, exemplify the relevance and applicability of this research beyond Canada's borders. By recognizing and learning from these shared experiences, it becomes possible to advance the pursuit of justice and address devastating systemic issues.

## 7. Conclusion

Efforts must be made to dismantle the hierarchy of victims in cases of disappearance. The media has a responsibility to give equal attention to missing Black and Indigenous individuals, alongside acknowledging and addressing the racist foundations of the criminal justice system. Reforms should be implemented at both the state and federal levels to address the underreporting of these cases. This includes establishing a new reporting system in law enforcement agencies and enacting federal laws mandating the reporting of missing persons. Also, advocacy groups and organizations should lobby for state and federal programs that allocate resources to underrepresented populations. We must challenge the institutionalized racism that perpetuates these issues and fuels the increasing number of cases – starting with media. The media, including social media platforms and traditional news outlets, plays a significant role in shaping societal understanding when it prioritizes narrow archetypes of the vulnerable white victim and the expected, high-risk non-white victim. The dismissal of cases that do not fit into this narrative affects people of all races, ethnicities, ages, genders, sexual orientations, and so-

cioeconomic backgrounds. Neglecting the cases of Black and Indigenous individuals reinforces the notion that their lives and the circumstances leading to their disappearances do not matter. To effectively seek justice for those overlooked, it is necessary to address the needs and demands of Black and Indigenous communities at the local and national level. For this action to have a meaningful impact, trust must be instilled in them, but it should weigh heavily on each of us to fight for change.

## 8. Call to Action

For far too long, the issue of missing Black and Indigenous people has been overlooked and disregarded. As of now, the federal government has taken minimal steps to address the epidemic of missing Black and Indigenous people in the United States, despite a national movement to raise awareness. However, progress can be seen in certain states, such as Washington, where the first statewide alert system for missing Indigenous people was implemented, or the Missing Persons Project in Illinois, a taskforce focused on solving cold cases involving women and girls in the Chicago area (“Missing or Murdered Indigenous Persons (MMIP): State Resources”). Establishing a nationwide system for reporting and classifying cases would be a significant step towards addressing the needs of Black and Indigenous communities. It is critical that we collectively fight for change, no matter how challenging, in order to bring justice and resolution to these communities.

Despite the efforts of protests like the Black Lives Matter, Say Her Name and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls movements, the pleas for attention and justice have gone unheard by policymakers. Although there have been moments when these cases gained some media coverage, they quickly faded into obscurity once the media’s attention shifted elsewhere. The reality is that we are still grappling with a crisis of missing persons in the United States. Families are

left searching for their loved ones while facing a lack of local and national attention to their cases. We must continue these conversations and keep the names of missing Black and Indigenous people at the forefront to push for action. Tackling the multitude of issues at hand necessitates employing comprehensive and multifaceted approaches.

First, implementing inclusive policies within law enforcement can help overcome the barriers that perpetuate underreporting. Moreover, enhancing data collection practices is essential for accurate representation and identification. This includes collecting and analyzing demographic data with a nuanced understanding of race, ethnicity, and cultural identities. It is crucial to adopt standardized protocols that ensure consistent and accurate reporting, as well as disaggregate data to capture the unique experiences and challenges faced by different racial and ethnic groups (Moss).

Second, raising public awareness about the underreporting and misclassification of missing Black and Indigenous individuals is vital (Angerman). Education campaigns, media engagement, and advocacy efforts can contribute to amplifying these voices and shedding light on the systemic issues that perpetuate these injustices. Through these efforts, we can address these disparities and ensure the safety and well-being of all individuals, regardless of their racial or ethnic background.

Third, by promoting diversity within news outlets and social media platforms, we can establish meaningful relationships with communities and bridge the gap, thereby guaranteeing more comprehensive coverage (“Missing Persons Statistics 2022 (Infographic): Black and Missing”). This, in turn, can influence resource allocation in law enforcement agencies at various levels. It is a call to action for racial equality in the face of media disparities and underreported cases. Immediate attention is needed to put an end to the spread of injustices surrounding missing Black and Indigenous peoples. It is our hope that media outlets, law enforcement agencies, investigators, and lawmakers take significant steps in handling these

cases to bring about a more balanced representation and address the needs of various communities.

The long-standing issue of missing Black and Indigenous people cannot be ignored any longer. Despite the efforts of movements and protests, the lack of sustained attention and justice has persisted. We must continue to advocate, raise awareness, and keep the names of missing individuals at the forefront of public discourse to drive meaningful action. Addressing this multifaceted problem requires comprehensive approaches, including community outreach, improved data collection, public education, and media diversity. By dismantling the barriers and biases that perpetuate underreporting, misclassification, and media disparities, we can strive for a more inclusive and equitable system that values the lives and well-being of all individuals, regardless of their racial or ethnic background. It is time to put an end to the injustices surrounding missing Black and Indigenous peoples and work towards a safer and more just society for everyone.

To stress the profound impact of these cases on families, we can draw inspiration from David Robinson's words regarding his son Daniel Robinson's disappearance. He expressed his unwavering commitment, stating, "When the lights and camera turn off, I will be here. When the interest and conversations fade, I will be here. When there's no one around, a father will do anything it takes to be there for his son, to protect his family" (Robinson II). These powerful sentiments remind us of the unyielding dedication and resilience exhibited by families in their pursuit of justice.

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