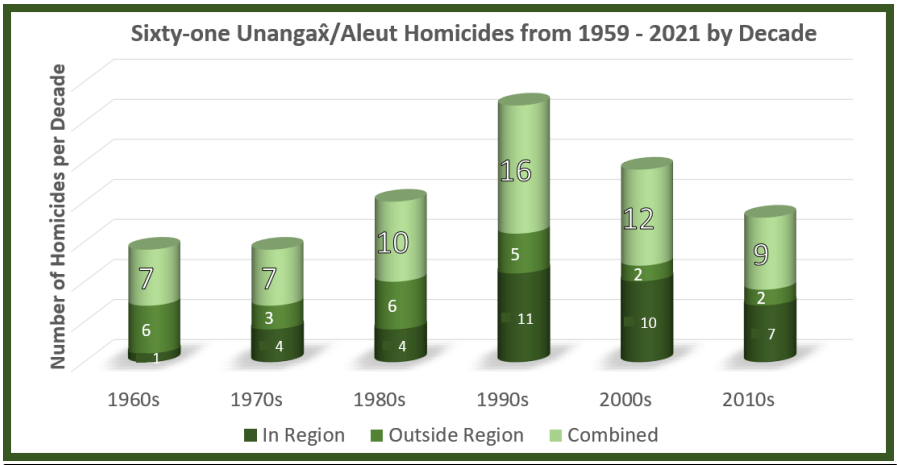
In the Loop

Alaska's Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons Working Group Holds Virtual Meeting for Aleutian – Pribilof Region

Alaska communities have been struggling with an epidemic of missing and murdered indigenous persons for decades. Since 1959, when Alaska became the 49th state, 61 Unangaŷ (Aleut) people have been murdered, according to a preliminary report on Missing & Murdered Unangaŷ/Indigenous Persons from 1959 to 2021, which was compiled by Michael Livingston & Marti Murray, and published by APIA's Cultural Heritage Department.



Unangaŷ/Aleut Homicides inside and outside the Region by Decade per APIA's Preliminary Report. Graph courtesy: Michael Livingston.

"That's almost one Aleut homicide per year, and these numbers are preliminary," Dimitri Philemonof, President/CEO of APIA said in remarks read by Livingston during the May 20th Alaska Missing & Murdered Indigenous Persons (MMIP) Consultation and Listening Session. The virtual event was hosted by APIA. Philemonof was unable to attend the meeting.

According to the preliminary report, Indigenous homicide victims in the Aleutians are 28.6 % female and 71.4 % male. The average age for homicide victims is 27 with a range from 1 to 57. Unangax̂ homicide victims include a boy (age 7) and a girl (age 9). The year 1982 was the deadliest in the region with four homicides. This does not include the 37 Unangax̂ murdered outside of the region. From 1959 to 2021, APIA's Preliminary Report revealed 61 Unangax̂ homicides with 24 in the region (not including four non-Unangax̂ homicides) and 37 outside the region, (20 or 54%) mostly in Anchorage. Per decade, the 1990s was the deadliest inside and outside the region, with 16 Unangax̂ homicides, an average of 1.6 per year or 1.33 a month.

"There may be more victims not identified. Each of these numbers have a name, a name you and I know – names of people we are likely related to," Philemonof added in his remarks. "None of these innocent victims deserve this."

Last year, the U.S. Attorney's Office launched the Alaska MMIP initiative to address the challenges of response in the state to this deadly epidemic. The group is a multi-disciplinary team involving the collaboration and coordination of tribal representatives, federal, state, local and tribal law enforcement. Social and victims service providers are also part of the team. Several partners provided presentations during the virtual discussion. Family members also shared their personal stories of missing and murdered family members.

"The reason I got into this is that I lost my sister to domestic violence," said Jessie Kitamura, who is a healthy relationships advocate with APIA.

Kitamura said her 35-year-old sister, Crystal Rice-McDonald, was murdered in 2014 in Fairbanks by her husband, John McDonald.

Originally, John McDonald reported the murder as a suicide. However, he was charged with 1st and 2nd degree murder after the investigation found that he was responsible for his wife's death.

The 1st and 2nd degree murder charges were dismissed in 2015 after a judge threw out McDonald's statements to police and ruled he was too drunk when officers read him his rights. The judge stated that officers should have read him his

Crystal Rice-McDonald was murdered by her husband in 2014 in Fairbanks. Photo courtesy: Jessie Kitamura.

rights again and obtained information after he sobered up.

“So they couldn’t use the confession, and they didn’t do their due diligence to collect the evidence,” Kitamura said.

McDonald later plead to a lesser crime, criminally negligent homicide.

“Unfortunately, my pregnant sister, who was murdered, did not get justice,” Kitamura said. “She is why my heart is so dedicated to this issue.”

Chy Maitland, a healthy relationships advocate with APIA, also experienced family tragedy.

“I’m also a family member of two missing – murdered indigenous people,” she said. “My stepsister was murdered last week. My uncle, who I didn’t get the chance to know, was missing and presumed dead after a boating accident before I was born.”

Candace Nielsen of Cold Bay understands what it’s like to lose family members suddenly and senselessly.

“I have two cousins on our murdered persons list,” she said.

One was killed in 2007 and the other in 2015, both in alcohol-related car crashes in Nelson Lagoon.

“Both were really tragic and traumatic times for my family,” she added.

For generations, Alaska Natives and American Indians have experienced disproportionately high rates of violent crimes. However, until now, there have been no official statistics specifically tracking missing and murdered indigenous people in Alaska communities.

In February, the Alaska MMIP launched a pilot program, which includes three model sites: the Curyung Tribal Council of Dillingham, the Native Village of Unalakleet, and the Koyukuk Native Village.

“We really had to be a bit creative about how we looked at this,” said Ingrid Cumberlidge, U.S. Attorney’s Alaska Office MMIP Coordinator. “We wanted to include the tribes, stakeholders, providers, and law enforcement, and we wanted it to be multi-disciplinary.”

These sites are establishing plans for tribal communities to collectively use their resources and effectively support a multi-disciplinary approach. The Tribal Community Response Plans (TCRP) guidelines are being shared across the state. The guidelines address the response to new missing and murdered persons cases by outlining how tribal governments, law enforcement and other partners can best work together to approach such cases. The TCRP guidelines include those with unique challenges.

"One was for those communities without any law enforcement presence," said Cumberlidge. "The second one was for communities with limited law enforcement (VPSOs or VPOs) or maybe a one-person municipal police department. Then there are the hub communities with municipal or state law enforcement."

For those with missing family members, it's crucial to notify law enforcement immediately. The way cases are reported in the media is also important. When the Curyung Tribal Council of Dillingham met with journalists during the formation of its tribal community response plan, they asked the media to honor and respect all the tribal members as people first.

"So for instance, if you were to have a teacher outside of the community go missing, that would be the headline," said Cumberlidge. "The feeling in Dillingham was that was not the way stories were approached if it was a Native person, so they asked the media to change that. Dillingham was successful. The media are not leading with a story that it's an Alaska Native missing person or that they're involved in substance abuse. Now they're leading with the fact that somebody is missing, and we need to find them right away."

Ingrid Cumberlidge, the U.S. Attorney's Alaska Office MMIP Coordinator, during a virtual consultation and listening session hosted by APIA.

One of the goals of the Alaska MMIP pilot project is to identify root causes for missing and murdered indigenous people. Those causes include domestic violence and substance abuse. Other causes include the dangers of social media to children, which can lead to human trafficking. Chy Maitland said she nearly became a victim of human trafficking when she was about 13 years old.

"I was talking to someone online who I thought was my age," she said. "Eventually, they tracked my IP address and broke into my house while my family and I were having dinner. The police showed up, but the guy ran into the woods," Maitland said. "He was never caught. This kind of stuff happens all the time, and it could happen to anyone you know."

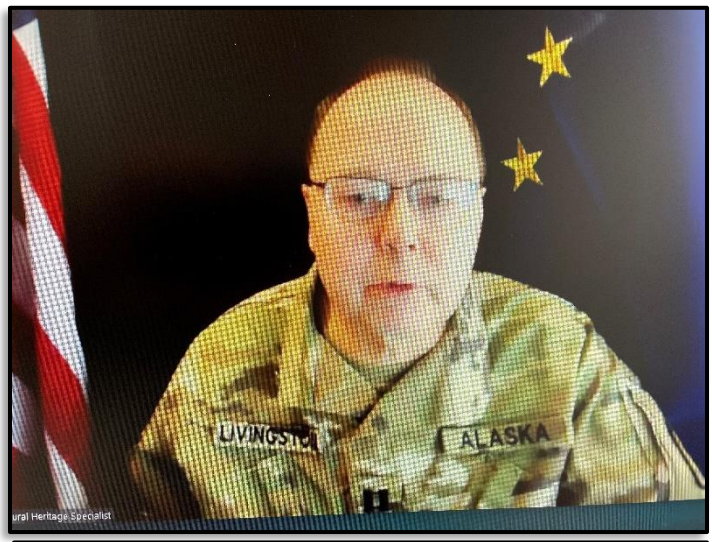
Historical trauma is another root cause of missing and murdered indigenous people. For the Unangax̂ people, this trauma spans generations. During the 1700s, thousands of the Unangax̂ were murdered during European colonization.

"Over the past 300 years, the Unangax̂ people may have endured more homicides than others," APIA's President/CEO Dimitri Philemonof said during remarks read by Livingston. "Yet this fact

is not well-known because these memories have been stuffed down, forced to be forgotten, so they do not become part of our institutional knowledge."

High rates of homicides also occurred during World War II, when the Unangaŷ were taken prisoner of war to Japan where 24 of the 42 Indigenous people died from starvation. Other Unangaŷ people were interned by force to southeast Alaska by the U.S. government where there were high rates of death later determined by a U.S. Commission to be wrongful deaths.

Today, the mission of APIA includes advocating for the safety of the Unangaŷ in their communities. Recently, APIA began dedicating more resources toward collecting basic data so it can be analyzed to find patterns.



Mike Livingston, APIA's Cultural Heritage Specialist, during Alaska's MMIP virtual consultation and listening session.

Livingston said he started learning about MMIP at the age of 16, before the acronym existed, when a young Aleut person was murdered in a nearby village. Five years later, he began investigating his first homicides as a police officer for Unalaska, where he served in that post for 3 ½ years. He later served as a police officer for Anchorage for 20 years, including working as a homicide detective with the major crimes unit before retiring from law enforcement. However, as APIA's cultural heritage specialist, he continues to research Aleut homicides. Livingston also serves as a captain with the Alaska State Defense Force, a division of the State of Alaska, whose mission is to prepare Alaska to respond to a wide range of emergencies to minimize injury and loss.

"I think it's an area that has been under-researched in the past," he said. "I work with amazing researchers like Marti Murray."

He said when he and Murray first began work on compiling a report, they knew the number of murdered Unangaŷ people would be high.

"We didn't realize how many there were," he said. "One is too many, but one a year during a 62-year period is way too many."

Getting closure for loved ones who have been murdered or missing is an important part of the process. That can be challenging for families, especially when an individual has been missing for years.

In the Aleutian – Pribilof region, nine indigenous persons are considered missing since 1959.

"My cousin went missing a few years ago," said Nikita Bereskin, tribal administrator for the Akutan Traditional Council. "At this point, he's still considered missing."

Bereskin asked how families can get legal closure after someone has been missing for a long period of time.

"There's emotional closure and legal closure," said Livingston. "When a person is missing, a person can eventually be presumed deceased," he said.

A person who has a relationship with the person presumed to be deceased, (for example, a relative, spouse, or significant other) can file a Presumptive Death Petition (form CIV-710) with the Alaska Court System, specifying that the disappearance occurred in Alaska, outlining what efforts were made to search for the missing person, and spelling out what circumstances have led the petitioner to believe that the missing person is deceased. The form must be notarized and submitted to a judicial officer of the Alaska Court System. A jury will then listen to the facts.

"Emotional closure can quite often take more time," he said.

Livingston said he would look into what was done during ancient times in our region to assist with closure.

"I do know that grieving was certainly an important part of the process," he said.

Traditional Alaska Native ceremonies have assisted with closure for centuries. For example, after Alaska State Trooper Commissioner Glenn Godfrey was murdered in Anchorage in 2002, a Sugpiaq mask burning ceremony was performed in Kodiak in 2009 and posted on YouTube. In Notes of the Islands of the Unalashka District, Russian Orthodox Father Ivan Veniaminov documented traditional Unangaχ grieving and burial ceremonies.

During his remarks, Philemonof stated that during ancient times, the names of Unangaχ victims were not forgotten.

"We need to remember these names, honor these victims, and decrease the number of future tragedies," he said.

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