



# Spiritual Abuse Among American Indian Elderly

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National Indigenous Elder Justice Initiative

## Background

Although elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation occur among the nation's elderly at an estimated 1 in 10 people (Acierno, Hernandez, Amstadter, Resnick, Steve, Muzzy, & Kilpatrick, 2010), little is known about the types of elder abuse among American Indian elderly. American Indian elderly have raised the idea of spiritual abuse following the majority of National Indigenous Elder Justice Initiative (NIEJI) presentations (Gray, 2013). Gray, LaBore, and Carter (2018) define spiritual abuse as "actions that damage one's subjective experience and personal practice of the sacred, creating a severe disconnection with a higher power or other spiritual sources of meaning and resulting in harm to one's spiritual integrity, lack of access to spiritual resources to cope, and/or an inability to pursue spiritual growth." This includes three types of spiritual abuse: "(a) abuse from trusted spiritual leaders or mentors, (b) limitation of access to sacred objects or ceremonial practice, and (c) contamination of sacred objects or practice."

## Methods

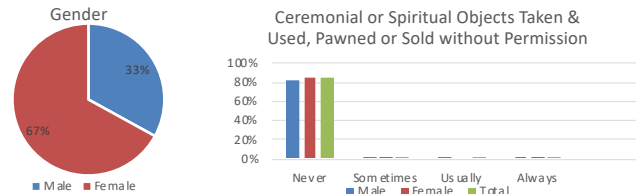
Data was gathered in a Native Elder Maltreatment Survey (NEMS; Jervis, Fickenscher, Beals, & Shielding American Indian Elders Project Team, 2014) offered to tribes by NIEJI. NIEJI received approval from the University IRB under the condition that tribal approval would be received before analyzing any of the data. Tribes that chose to participate secured resolutions or approval from their tribal research process and submitted them to the NIEJI office. Surveys were sent to the tribes and training was given on conducting the interviews, mandatory reporting, and confidentiality. Tribal members conducted interviews and collected the data. Completed surveys were submitted to NIEJI for scoring and analysis. Data was then returned to the tribes for planning and implementation of programs. NIEJI's agreement was that any presentations or publications would include only aggregate data. Four items from the NEMS survey addressed spiritual abuse.

**Participants:** Tribes from across the lower 48 states participated. The 373 completed NEMS surveys included 245 females and 118 males from 27 tribal affiliations. Participants ranged from 50-101 years of age, and 19.1% had less than a high school education, 30.1% had a high school education, and 50% had more than a high school education. Of this sample, 32.9% were married or partnered and 67.1% were single.

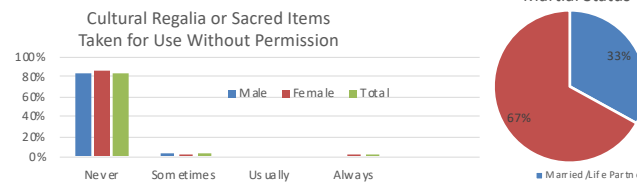
## Results

Although this is a small sample of the 573 federally recognized tribes, this will begin to address the paucity of data on elder abuse and neglect in Indian Country. Only 4 items addressed spiritual abuse.

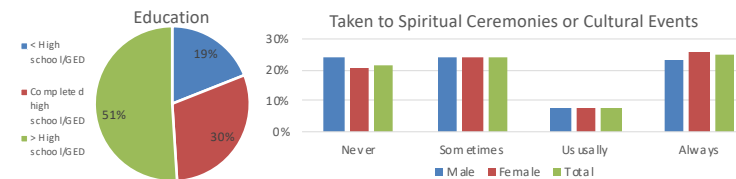
➤ "My ceremonial/spiritual objects have been used, pawned, and sold without my permission." (2.8 %)



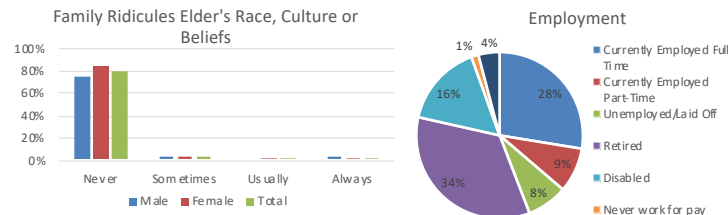
➤ "Someone has taken cultural regalia or sacred items for use without permission." (3.1%)



➤ "My family takes me to spiritual ceremonies and cultural events." (57.2%; 21.8% are never taken to ceremonies)



➤ "My family ridicules my race, culture, or beliefs." (6.5 %)



## Conclusion

Spirituality is a core component of indigenous wellness. Therefore, prevention of spiritual abuse is key to promoting elder health and wellbeing.

- About 3% of elderly American Indians reported ceremonial or spiritual objects have been taken and used, pawned, or sold without permission. This was evenly distributed between women and men.
- About 3% of elderly American Indians reported cultural regalia or sacred items had been taken from them to use without their permission. This was slightly higher for men (3.5%) than women (2.9%).
- About one in five (21.8%) of American Indian elderly were not taken to spiritual ceremonies or cultural events. This was slightly higher for men (24.3%) than for women (20.6%).
- About 6.5% of elderly American Indians reported their family ridicules their race, culture, or beliefs, with men (7.9%) reporting this more than women (5.9%).
- Although questions about sexual exploitation by spiritual leaders was not addressed in the survey, other types of spiritual abuse occurred at levels higher than physical abuse (See Maltreatment of American Indian Elderly, E-1, Wheeler & Gray, 2019; NEMS: Elder American Indian Women's Experiences, G-3, Gray & Wheeler, 2019).

## References

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