



# TWO SPIRIT

## Elders

- Two Spirit is a contemporary term that many American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN), and First Nations people identify with to bring together their sexual orientation, and gender identity with their spirituality, traditions, and culture.<sup>1</sup>
- This term was adopted at the 1990 Native American and First Nations Gay and Lesbian conference in Winnipeg. It comes from the Ojibwa words niizh manitoag (Two Spirit).<sup>2</sup>
- Not all AI/ANs consider themselves Two Spirit and identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or third, fourth, or fifth gender.
- Many AI/AN tribes had more flexibility in sexuality and greater gender diversity with four or five gender roles or identifications that were honored and respected.<sup>1</sup>
- 574 federally recognized tribes speak over 200 languages, with most having terms/names for gender identity, social, and spiritual roles.<sup>3, 4</sup>
- The term Two Spirit is not accepted by all AI/AN Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ). For some tribes, when Two Spirit is translated into traditional language, it can mean something inappropriate or dangerous.
  - In the Navajo and Apache languages, the term Two Spirit, means that a person possesses both a living and dead spirit, and this is in direct conflict with traditional ways of life.<sup>5</sup>

## COLONIZATION

- Colonization negatively impacted tribal traditions, language, culture, and the social and spiritual roles of individuals in tribal communities. As a result, some tribes took this knowledge underground to prevent further desecration of their way of life.
- By the mid-1800s, tens of thousands of AI/ANs were forcefully removed from their traditional homelands, and systematic assimilation policies were put in place.
- Between 1880 and 1930, a significant number of AI/AN children were placed in off-reservation boarding schools.
- By 1930, nearly half of all AI/AN children attending boarding schools that were often hundreds of miles away from their homes. The students were forbidden to engage in cultural practices or speak their languages, suffering harsh punishment if they disobeyed.
- Christian standards of conduct were strictly enforced with the prohibition of cultural practices and conformity to rigid gender roles. The historical trauma increased contemporary Two Spirits' to struggle with identity and mental health.
- Historical trauma is defined as an unresolved trauma resulting in grief that continues to impact the lives of survivors and subsequent generations, often referred to as intergenerational trauma.<sup>6</sup>
- Historical trauma profoundly affects health disparities and health outcomes of all AI/ANs, but even more so among Two Spirit people.



*\*\*There is very little research or data on LBGQTQ Two Spirit Elders.  
The information presented may refer to AI/ANs in general.\*\**



## ELDER STATUS

Becoming an Elder in many AI/AN communities is not typically at a set age, but is a distinct cultural status earned from wisdom, knowledge, and responsibility to others, to name a few traits and qualities. Being an Elder is different than being elderly. Elderly is associated with age and ability for care for oneself. Elder and elderly status varies from tribe to tribe.<sup>10</sup> Out of respect, the term Elder will be used.

## HOUSING & SAFETY

- Urban AI/ANs tend to have less social support and a long history of circular migration and residential mobility (i.e., regular travel between urban settings and reservations).
- Many LGBTQ and Two Spirit AI/ANs struggle to find safety. In one state survey, nearly 1 in 3 LGBTQ and Two-Spirit AI/ANs (29.4%) reported experiencing hate violence—a higher rate than any other LGBTQ group.<sup>11</sup>
- AI/AN lesbian, bisexual, and Two Spirit women revealed a high prevalence of both sexual (85%) and physical (78%) assault.<sup>7</sup>
- 47% of AI/AN transgender experience housing discrimination and have been denied a home or apartment.<sup>11</sup>



## DISCRIMINATION & VIOLENCE

- Two Spirit people have significant disparities across multiple areas when compared with the general U.S. population.
- More than 35% of Two Spirit and transgender individuals report having lost a job because of their gender identity.
- 37% of Two Spirit and AI/AN LGBTQ people report not having full-time employment.
- 78% of AI/AN women who identify as bisexual, lesbian, or Two Spirit, have experienced physical assault, and 85% have experienced sexual violence.<sup>11</sup>

*\*\*There is very little research or data on LGBTQ Two Spirit Elders.*

*The information presented may refer to AI/ANs in general.\*\**

## CAREGIVING AND LONG-TERM CARE

- Tribes pay for long-term care with funding from various federal agencies, such as the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services and the Administration for Community Living, along with their own resources.
- AI/ANs prefer to age in their own homes. Many communities are rural, and sometimes lack electricity, running water, and may only be accessible by dirt roads making it difficult to age in place.<sup>8</sup>
- Long-term care facilities continue to employ staff who lack an understanding of sexuality and sexual diversity in the elderly.
- Concerns and fears of LGBTQ Elders being admitted to a long-term care facility include:
  - Potential rejection or neglect by healthcare providers
  - Lack of acceptance and respect by fellow residents
  - Feeling that it is necessary to hide their sexual orientation<sup>9</sup>

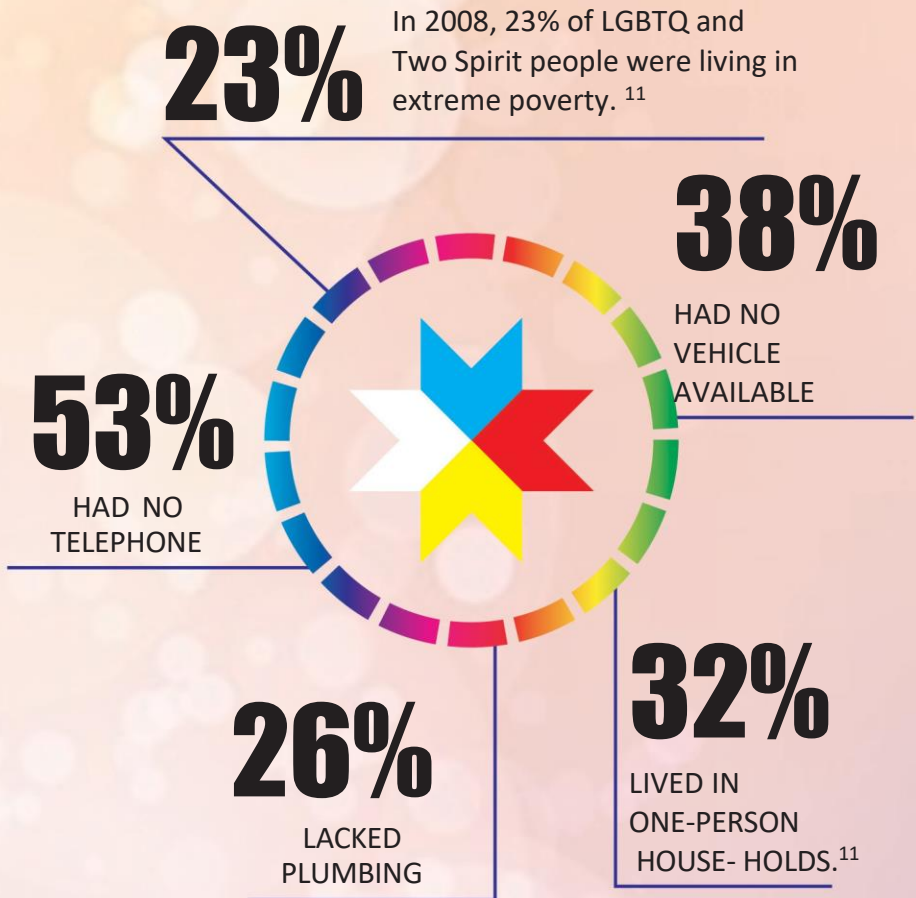
## HEALTH STATUS

- Two Spirit people are considered to be at higher risk for adverse health outcomes than other AI/ANs.<sup>7</sup>
- Between 2000 and 2010, the number of AI/AN, age 65 or older, increased by 40.5%, growing at double the rate of the overall older population.<sup>8</sup>
- Elderly AI/ANs are the most underserved individuals in the US.
- In 2013, Two Spirit men accounted for 71% of new HIV diagnoses within the AI/AN population.<sup>11</sup>
- 56% of AI/AN transgender and gender-nonconforming respondents in a national survey attempted suicide, compared with 41% of all other transgender groups.
- Urban LGBTQ and Two Spirit AI/AN experiences of discrimination decreased their self-rated health and increased self-reported physical pain and impairment.<sup>12</sup>
- Urban AI/ANs experience higher social, health, and economic problems with less to AI/AN-specific resources than those who reside within tribal lands.
- Urban AI/ANs typically do not have Indian Health Service available compared to AI/ANs who reside within tribal lands.<sup>13</sup>

## FINANCIAL RESOURCES

- Many AI/AN Elders lead a life that is characterized by poverty, deprivation, poor health, poor housing, and significantly limited social opportunities.<sup>14</sup>

## BY THE NUMBERS



"This document was completed for the National Indigenous Elder Justice Initiative and National Center for Elder Abuse and are supported in part by a grant (No. 90IERC0002 & 90ABRC0001-03-02) from the Administration on Aging, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). Grantees carrying out projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their findings and conclusions. Therefore, points of view or opinions do not necessarily represent official Administration on Aging or DHHS policy."



1. Gilley BJ. Becoming two-spirit: gay identity and social acceptance in Indian country. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press; 2006.
2. Centre RR. Two-Spirit People of the First Nations. Winnipeg; 2014.
3. DOI U. History of the BIA. Available at: <https://www.bia.gov/bia>, 2020.
4. Indian Health Service. Two Spirit, 2020.
5. Brown LB. Two spirit people : American Indian, lesbian women and gay men. New York: New York : Harrington Park Press; 1997.
6. Evans-Campbell T, Walters KL, Pearson CR, Campbell CD. Indi an Boarding School Experience, Substance Use, and Mental Health among Urban Two-Spirit American Indian/Alaska Natives. The American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse. 2012;09/01 2012;38(5):421-427.
7. Lehavot K, Walters KL, Simoni JM. Abuse, mastery, and health among lesbian, bisexual, and two-spirit American Indian and Alaska Native women. Cultural diversity & ethnic minority psychology. 2009;15(3):275-284.
8. Bylander J. Meeting the Need of Aging Native Americans. Health Affairs. Maryland; 2018.
9. Schwinn SV, Dinkel SA. Changing the Culture of Long-Term Care: Combating Heterosexism. Online J Issues Nurs. Mar 31 2015;20(2):7.
10. Jervis LL, Jackson MY, Manson SM. Need for, availability of, and barriers to the provision of long-term care services for older American Indians. J Cross Cult Gerontol. Dec 2002;17(4):295-311.
11. PRC N. Spot Light on Two Spirit (Native LGBT) Communities. Avail able at: [http://www.ncai.org/policy-research-center/research-data/prc-publications/A\\_Spotlight\\_on\\_Native\\_LGBT.pdf](http://www.ncai.org/policy-research-center/research-data/prc-publications/A_Spotlight_on_Native_LGBT.pdf). Accessed May 15, 2020.
12. Chae DH, Walters KL. Racial discrimination and racial identity attitudes in relation to self-rated health and physical pain and impairment among two-spirit American Indians/Alaska Natives. American journal of public health. 2009;99 Suppl 1 (Suppl 1):S144-S151.
13. Weaver H. Urban and Indigenous: The Challenges of being a Native American in the City. Journal of Community Practice. 10/01 2012;20:470-488.
14. Saravanabhavan RC, Marshall CA. The Older Native American Indian With Disabilities: Implications for Providers of Health Care and Human Services. Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development. 1994/07/01 1994;22(3):182-194.

The NIEJI project has been retired, but they have granted NIJI permission to share materials.  
 For the most current information, please contact Wendelin Hume, PhD at  
 221 Centennial Drive, Stop 8050 • Grand Forks, ND 58202-8050  
 • Phone: (701) 777-4001 • Email: [admin@nijii.org](mailto:admin@nijii.org) • Web: [nijii.org](http://nijii.org)