

Whose Lives Matter: The Media's Failure to Cover Police Use of Lethal Force Against Native Americans

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Abstract

The August 9, 2014, police shooting of Michael Brown reinvigorated the Black Lives Matter movement and triggered widespread media scrutiny of police use of lethal force against African Americans. Yet, there is another group, Native Americans, whose members have experienced very high levels of fatal encounters with the police, but whose deaths arguably have not generated media attention. In this research, we tracked the numbers of African American and Native American deaths associated with police use of lethal force as well as fatalities in police custody following arrest from May 1, 2014, through the end of October 2016. Then, we examined the extent of mainstream media coverage given to these fatalities in the 10 highest circulation newspapers in the United States. Finally, we considered the reasons for the disparities between the two groups.

Keywords

race and policing, community policing, deadly force, tribal law enforcement, race/ethnicity, African/Black Americans, native Americans

He was all beat up, they [Cheyenne River Sioux Tribal Police] picked on him all the time. They beat him up twice before. He had long beautiful hair and he said, "Mom I want to cut my hair so they will stop pulling my hair."

—Paula Mae High Bear¹

I told [the police] that my son was mentally ill, I tell them that every time I call, I just asked for help. Instead they killed my son.

—Lynn Eagle Feather²

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Although the August 2014 police shooting of Michael Brown sparked massive protests, his death was only one of several questionable African American deaths resulting from police actions around the same time period.³ The shooting ignited a national debate about police use of lethal force against African Americans, but they are not the only group whose members have a high probability of dying in encounters with police. According to activists from the Native Lives Matter movement, American Indians also have long suffered from high levels of police brutality, which was one of the major reasons for the creation of the American Indian Movement in the late 1960s (Wilkins & Stark, 2011).⁴ Yet, native activists argue, the media has ignored their deaths while giving prominent coverage of their African Americans counterparts.⁵ While the epigraphs opening this article allude to examples of police interventions that were largely ignored in mainstream media, the general validity of the native lives claim has never been examined.⁶

This study examines the media coverage of African American and Native American fatalities over a 30-month period. We believe this research makes a significant contribution to the understanding of the significance of race in media framing, while extending the current debates over policing in minority communities to raise awareness about interactions with Native Americans.⁷ This focus on Native American deaths, however, is not intended to downplay the importance of scrutinizing the very high number of African American fatalities but to extend that attention to a group whose experience with racism often has been rendered invisible (Robertson, 2015).

We analyzed data on African American and Native American deaths due to police actions from May 1, 2014, through October 2016—not to reach normative judgments about whether police actions are justified but simply to examine the discrepancy in media coverage given to those deaths in the highest circulating U.S. newspapers.⁸ We also searched for stories about Native American fatalities in major English-language newspapers outside the United States. While we expected to find a sharp increase in national media attention given to police use of lethal force against African Americans following the death of Michael Brown, we also expected to find that Black Lives Matter activism kept the issue salient for an extended period before the publicity subsided. In contrast, we posited that the deaths of Native Americans would generate minimal coverage throughout the same time period except within Native American media outlets.

The Role of Media in Framing Issues

The question of whether media attention varies according to the race of the individuals is an important one, given the role of the media in a democratic society. The types of frames used in media reports, or even their lack of reporting of incidents, act as a filtering device that provides cues about issue importance and the ways of thinking about events (Surette, 2007). The degree of media attention given to a policy problem influences the degree of importance that the public assigns to the issue (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; McCombs, 2004; Zaller, 1992). Media

reports also influence legislative priorities of elected officials (Arceneaux, Johnson, Lindstadt, & Vander Wielan, 2016).⁹ Hence, although we are not making an argument about the appropriateness of police use of lethal force, we do believe that its use in a democratic society merits careful scrutiny, and it matters whether the degree of coverage varies across populations.

Our approach to this question draws upon several related bodies of scholarship. Researchers have found that media framing affects public perceptions of different populations (Freng, 2007; Merskin, 1998; Miller & Ross, 2004). Evidence also exists that stereotyped views about groups influence police interactions (M. Smith & Alpert, 2007), but none of these scholarly efforts has examined the Native American populations. There are, however, many studies on the racial stereotyping of American Indians and Alaska Natives. Although some stereotypes are positive, many are negative (e.g., savages, drunks, violent, or criminals; Bataille, 2001; Berkhofer, 1978; Freng, 2007; Lacroix, 2011; S. L. Smith, 2000; Weston, 1996). According to Miller and Ross (2004), negative media depictions of Native Americans have decreased over time, replaced by a pattern of ignoring their existence.¹⁰

It is pertinent to keep in mind that media outlets are primarily driven by profitability concerns. According to Graber (1997), reporters tend to focus on conflict-driven stories as a means of driving up circulation. Other researchers (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Patterson, 1996) have found that negative stories attract readers and boost circulation. While stories about potential police misconduct may garner headlines and reader attention, it can also affect the press's ongoing relationship with law enforcement officials they rely upon for quick and credible information about other crime stories.¹¹

Researchers have found that media framing of stories about possible police misconduct toward racial minorities affects public interpretations of those events. Chermak, McGarrell, and Gruenewald (2006) used public opinion data to examine the impact of media coverage of a high-profile case involving police misconduct against an African American resulted in significant changes in public perceptions. Interestingly, they found no significant effects in general views about the police but did find increase in views about the guilt of the particular officers. A study (Graziano, Schuck, & Martin, 2010) that used a video clip of a purported racial profiling incident did not alter views about the prevalence of racial profiling, but it did shape perceptions about the dangers that police officers encounter during traffic stops.

Method

Data Collection and Generalizability Concerns

There are a number of reasons why it is difficult to compile data on police-related Native American fatalities. Some are endemic to the process of compiling data about lethal police encounters regardless of the victim's race or ethnicity. Others, however, are particular to the collection of Native American data.¹² Most of the existing data on

police use of lethal force are compiled from estimates voluntarily provided by different government entities, but there is no uniform standard for data collection (Nordberg, Crawford, Praetorius, & Hatcher, 2015). The Department of Justice compiles data on “arrest-related deaths” and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has data on fatal injury due to “legal intervention” (Males, 2014). According to the National Institute of Justice, criminal justice data from reservations are among the least reliable because of conflicts between tribal and federal agencies, the geographic isolation of reservations, underreporting of crime, cultural variances, limited technological resources, and poor data compilation methods (Wakeling, Jorgensen, Michaelson, & Begay, 2001).

But an even more challenging problem is identifying who actually is Native American. The National Institute of Justice (2013) noted “many different definitions of AI [American Indian] and AN [Alaska Native] are used in health care, social service, government and academic contexts” (p. 1) before going on to posit that enrollment in a federally recognized tribe may be the “best evidence of Indian status” (p. 1). There is, however, a huge difference between the number of American citizens claiming American Indian and/or Alaska Native heritage and those who are members of the 567 federally recognized tribal nations. Fewer than half of those claiming American Indian/Alaska Native identity on the most recent census are enrolled members of federally recognized tribes (Bureau of Indian Affairs, 2016).

There are two reasons that this definitional issue matters. First, many people with native ancestry may be identified as another race. Consider, for example, a hypothetical homeless Native American man whose death occurs in an urban setting. Depending upon whether the man’s name is John Smith, Juan Mendoza, or John Running Bear, he may be classified as White, Latino, or Native American. A second, measurement issue—how large of a population base to use as a denominator in calculating the rate of deaths resulting from police use of lethal violence—also can lead to an undercounting of Native American deaths. If one uses the Census data for all those self-identifying as at least partially American Indian/Alaska Native, then the rate of deaths, controlling for population size, appears smaller, and if one uses any of the other accepted measures of American Indian/Alaska Native populations, it appears much larger.

Time Frame, Choice of Newspapers, and Research Expectations

The time frame of May 1, 2014, through the end of October 2016 allows us to assess media coverage in both the 3 months prior to Michael Brown’s death and a substantial period afterward. We expected that events in Ferguson, MO (e.g., Brown’s death, the ensuing protests, and social media campaign), together acted as a focusing event that triggered media attention. It fits the media’s criteria of being conflict-driven and focusing on negative events, leading us to hypothesize that the media would increase its coverage of police use of lethal force against African Americans, but that coverage would decline over time as the media turns its attention to new stories. While one could argue that similarly situated deaths of Native Americans also fit these criteria,

Table 1. U.S. Top Circulating Tier 1 and Tier 2 Newspapers.

| Tier 1 Newspapers | Tier 1 Circulation | Tier 2 Newspapers | Tier 2 Circulation |
|----------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|
| <i>Wall Street Journal</i> | 2,378,827 | <i>Los Angeles Times</i> | 610,593 |
| <i>New York Times</i> | 1,865,318 | <i>New York Daily News</i> | 516,165 |
| <i>USA Today</i> | 1,674,306 | <i>New York Post</i> | 500,521 |
| <i>Washington Post</i> | 473,462 | <i>Chicago Sun-Times</i> | 262,461 |
| | | <i>Denver Post</i> | 406,635 |
| | | <i>Chicago Tribune</i> | 414,930 |

Source: Alliance for Audited Media (2015).

racial issues in the United States tend to be framed through a Black-or-White lens that downplay issues affecting other racial minorities (Hattam, 2007). Moreover, the Native American population is small and most reservations are geographically isolated, leading to our expectation of little media attention on Native American deaths at the hands of the police.

We limited our data collection of U.S.-based media coverage to the top 10 circulating newspapers: *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *The Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Daily News*, *New York Post*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Denver Post*, and *Chicago Tribune*. Newspapers were identified as belonging to either Tier 1 or Tier 2 categories, depending upon whether they emphasize stories of national interest or are more concerned with regional issues in their general focus. Even though both Tier 1 and Tier 2 newspapers cover national and regional issues, there is a distinction in the objective, aim, and covered content. Given the historical salience of civil rights struggles affecting African Americans, we expected both Tier 1 and Tier 2 media outlets to cover African American deaths but few of them to report on Native American fatalities, although some might have been covered in regional papers as part of their general coverage of crime.¹³ As Table 1 shows, our list of high-circulation newspapers includes four Tier 1 and six Tier 2 newspapers. Additionally, we examined the coverage of Native American fatalities in the top four international English-language newspapers—*The Guardian*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Mirror*, and *The Independent*—during the same period.

Data Collection Process

To ensure data reliability, we compiled a list of incidents from different sources, including LexisNexis, *The Washington Post* police shootings database, Indianz.com, Indian Country Today Media Network, and fatalencounters.org. Then we used LexisNexis, Google News, the digital archives of the newspapers, and Indianz.com to find articles about the individuals involved. Newspapers vary in their criteria for inclusion in digital archives, therefore we cross-checked the accuracy of the data gathered from the different sources.¹⁴ We compiled the following information about each Native American fatality: (1) date of incident; (2) victim's name; (3) tribal affiliation if available; (4) gender; (5) age; (6) location; (7) articles about the incident; (8) word

count for the articles; (9) law enforcement agency involved; (10) whether the victim was armed, mentally ill, and/or had addiction problems; and (11) if the death occurred on a reservation.

Analytical Approach

Our analysis of the data was divided into five parts. The first part was an overview of the data on the numbers of African American and Native American deaths. This overview included both comparisons of the aggregate numbers of fatalities and the comparisons controlling for population sizes. The second part goes beyond the aggregate numbers to examine more of the context and specific factors that culminated in the Native American deaths. The third part focused on the media stories about African American and Native American deaths. The analysis included coverage in both Tier 1 and Tier 2 newspapers as well as articles in the major non-U.S. English-language newspapers. While the number of stories is important, it does not distinguish between a short crime story and an in-depth article about a contested shooting. This concern was addressed in the fourth part, which compared the word count of stories. Finally, we conclude by identifying any patterns there might be in the media coverage. We explore whether Michael Brown's death served as a focusing event, triggering a spike in media coverage of African American deaths, but that the coverage declined over time as media attention shifted to other topics. With respect to Native Americans, we expected the coverage to be sparse and unaffected by external events.

Overview of the Data on Fatalities

From May 2014 through October 2016, a total of 635 African Americans (606 men and 29 women) died as a result of police use of lethal force or while in police custody. As is evident from Figure 1, a monthly compilation of African American fatalities, the number of fatalities fluctuated between 13 and 31. Despite the fluctuation, the highest number of fatalities was generally in the summer. There also appears to be a decline starting in November 2015.

As expected, the aggregate number of Native American deaths involving police use of lethal force or while in custody is substantially lower: 53 verifiable fatalities (44 men and 9 women).¹⁵ As Figure 2 shows, the number of monthly deaths ranged from zero to six. We found no similarities between these fatalities and the patterns in African American fatalities: The summer months did not see more fatalities nor was there a decline over time. In contrast, the fatalities increased over time, but one must be careful about generalizing, given the small *N* size.

When adjusted for the differences in total population sizes, the disparity in the rate of fatalities largely disappeared. According to Census Bureau data from July 2015, roughly the midpoint in the period of our analysis, the population of African Americans in the country was 11.1 times larger than that of American Indians/Alaska Natives (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). If one multiplies the number of Native American deaths (53) by 11.1, the result is 588.3, which is 92.7% of 635, the number of African

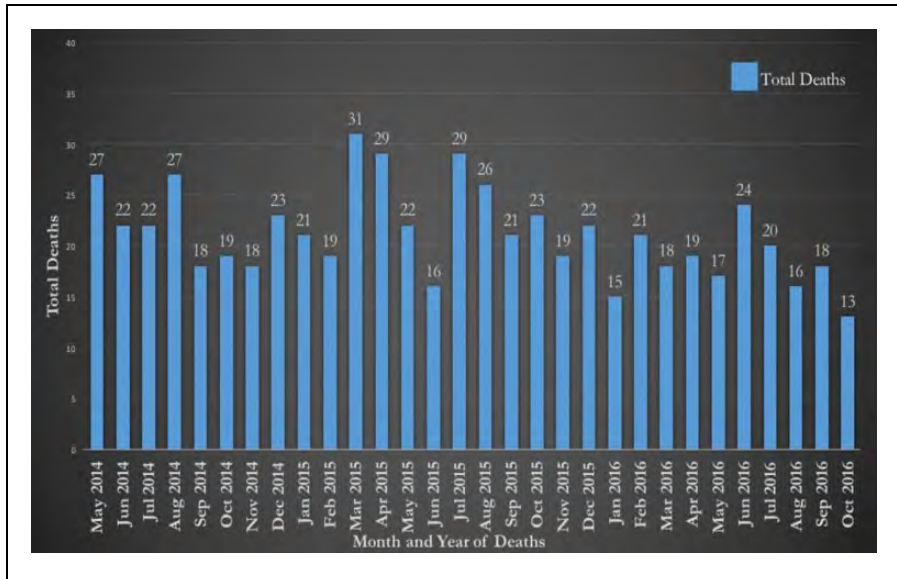


Figure 1. Total deaths of African Americans.

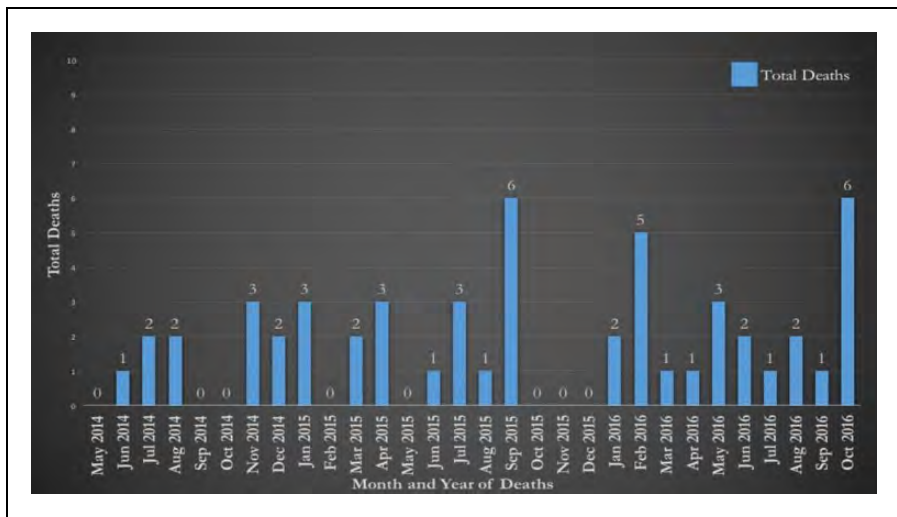


Figure 2. Total deaths of Native Americans.

American fatalities in that period. If, instead, we make the same calculations using the Bureau of Indian Affairs figures for enrolled members of recognized tribal nations, then the Native American death rate is much higher than the African American death rate, because only about 40% of those claiming American Indian/Alaska Native

heritage on census reports are members of federally recognized tribal nations (Bureau of Indian Affairs, 2014). Also, it is worth keeping in mind the aforementioned challenges in compiling data on Native American fatalities, all of which suggest a higher number of deaths than what we have been able to verify. This research, however, does not require absolute certainty about the fatality numbers or the comparisons across populations. Instead, the primary focus was the media coverage of the identified incidents.

Geographic Dispersion of Incidents

There were sharp differences in the geographic distribution of fatalities. Approximately 60% of the lethal encounters involving identifiably Native American victims occurred in Western states. This may appear to make sense intuitively, given the widespread perception that Native Americans live in the West (i.e., the highest deaths would occur where the population is the greatest). However, according to Census Bureau (2012) data, only 41% of the American Indian/Alaska Native population lives in Western states. This fact raises two questions. First, why there are so few identifiably Native American victims in the non-Western states, and second, why there are so many deaths in the West. While answering these questions is beyond the scope of this project, we have some suggestions about what may be occurring.

We suspect that the answer to the first question is that Native American fatalities in non-Western states are not being identified as American Indian/Alaska Native. Over the past half century, large numbers of Native Americans have moved from rural areas in the West to urban centers across the country. From 2000 through 2010, there was a 34% increase in the numbers of Native Americans living in urban areas.¹⁶ Our supposition is that police in Western states are much more likely than their colleagues in other urban areas to be aware of the presence of Native Americans in their cities and therefore more likely to accurately identify Native fatalities.

The answer to the second question is likely more complicated. To some extent, the high number of deaths in the West is simply a reflection of the fact that people living in those states are more likely to have fatal encounters with the police. Data from the CDC show that “deaths by arrest,” controlling for population size, are almost twice as high in the West as in other parts of the country (Thompson, 2014), but that does not sufficiently explain the disproportionately high rates of Native American fatalities. Consider South Dakota, which has been labeled the “Mississippi of the North” for its treatment of Native Americans (Warm Water, 2005), has slightly less than 2% of the country’s American Indian/Alaska Native population but was responsible for 13% of the deaths in our study. In Table 2, we present figures on Native American deaths due to “legal intervention” per 10,000 American Indian/Alaska Natives in each state’s population based on Census data. As is evident from Table 2, South Dakota and Mississippi are extreme outliers, controlling for population size.

In contrast, African American deaths occurred across states that have large African American populations, with the highest number of fatalities in California, Florida, Texas, Ohio, and Illinois. The states that experienced no African American deaths are

Table 2. State-Level Data on Native American Deaths (May 2014 to October 2016).

| State | Native American Population | Deaths in State | Deaths per 10,000 Population |
|----------------|----------------------------|-----------------|------------------------------|
| Mississippi | 16,837 | 2 | 1.19 |
| South Dakota | 72,782 | 7 | 0.96 |
| Alaska | 106,268 | 7 | 0.66 |
| Washington | 122,649 | 6 | 0.49 |
| Nebraska | 23,418 | 1 | 0.43 |
| Idaho | 25,782 | 1 | 0.39 |
| Arizona | 335,278 | 9 | 0.27 |
| North Dakota | 36,948 | 1 | 0.27 |
| Pennsylvania | 39,735 | 1 | 0.25 |
| Nevada | 42,965 | 1 | 0.23 |
| New Mexico | 208,890 | 4 | 0.19 |
| Minnesota | 67,325 | 1 | 0.15 |
| Oklahoma | 335,664 | 5 | 0.15 |
| Colorado | 78,144 | 1 | 0.13 |
| North Carolina | 147,566 | 1 | 0.07 |
| California | 622,107 | 3 | 0.05 |
| Texas | 251,209 | 1 | 0.04 |
| Vermont | 2,308 | 1 | Not Applicable ^a |

^aVermont's Native American population is 2,308, and a comparison cannot be made with the rest of the data set because this research examined deaths per 10,000 population.

Table 3. States With Highest Number of African American Deaths (May 2014 to October 2016).

| State | African American Population | Deaths in State | Deaths per 10,000 Population |
|------------|-----------------------------|-----------------|------------------------------|
| California | 2,486,549 | 69 | .28 |
| Florida | 3,078,067 | 66 | .21 |
| Texas | 3,070,440 | 52 | .17 |
| Ohio | 1,426,861 | 35 | .25 |
| Illinois | 1,903,458 | 30 | .16 |

those where their populations are exceedingly small: Alaska, Connecticut, Idaho, Maine, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming. For comparison purposes, we examined the aforementioned five states with the highest number of African American deaths due to "legal intervention" and then calculated the rate per 10,000 African Americans in the populations based on census data. These results are presented in Table 3.

While one must be careful not to overgeneralize, given the much lower number of Native American fatalities, the data clearly suggest that Native Americans have a very high rate of deaths at the hands of law enforcement. The comparison of data on the two populations showed that the Native American death rate was at least comparable, controlling for population size, to that of African Americans. Also, in quite a few

states, those rates are significantly higher than African American fatalities. Furthermore, our data likely understated the actual number of Native American fatalities, given the likelihood of racial misidentification in urban areas outside of the West.¹⁷ But again, the purpose of the study was the level of media scrutiny of these lethal encounters, not which population is most likely to die as a result of interactions with law enforcement personnel.

Characteristics of Incidents Involving Native Americans

As noted earlier, we compiled basic demographic data about the individuals as well as information about the nature of the incidents that resulted in their deaths. The victims belonged to a broad cross section of native nations including Navajo, Sioux, Choctaw, Comanche, Kiowa, Mojave, Hoopa, Suquamish, Tulalip, Cherokee, and Puyallup. In about half of the cases, there was no mention of the native nation, and this was particularly true of the deaths that occurred in Alaska. Even though most of the deaths occurred in states with reservations, only 17% of the lethal encounters occurred on reservations. The prototypical Native American victim was a young male; 83% of the victims were male, and approximately 43% were 30 years of age or younger, although the ages ranged from 17 to 61 years. Roughly two thirds of the male victims were armed during their encounters with police, with guns being the most common weapon.

The female victims differed from their male counterparts in that they generally were older. Half were armed when they died, with guns again being the most common weapon. Another difference between the male and female victims was the type of incidents that culminated in their deaths. Nearly two thirds of the men were suspected of committing crimes, with domestic disturbance/violence accounting for about a quarter of the initial police activity. Some of the men were suspected of very serious offenses, including murder and armed robbery, but only one woman fit that profile. Instead, most of their encounters were caused by incidents related to the women's mental illness and/or addiction issues. These issues were also prevalent in the male victims, more than a third of whom had verifiable histories of mental illness and/or addiction issues.

Comparisons of Media Assessments of Salience

Our analysis of media coverage focused on accounts provided by the top 10 circulating newspapers within the United States. They were divided into Tier 1 newspapers, which are considered to be national media outlets, and Tier 2 newspapers, which are high circulation but have a more regional focus in their coverage of events. The comparative analysis of their coverage of Native American and African American deaths was divided into three sections. The first section had two parts: an aggregate comparison of the number of media stories and a summary of the incidents that triggered coverage. In the second section, we used the word count of the stories to gauge the depth of coverage. The word count of Tier 1 coverage of African American fatalities was limited to the top two general circulation newspapers, the *New York*

Table 4. Number of Tier 1 and Tier 2 News Articles About African American Deaths (May 2014 to October 2016).

| Tier 1 Newspapers | Number of Tier 1 Articles | Tier 2 Newspapers | Number of Tier 2 Articles |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| <i>Wall Street Journal</i> | 188 | <i>Los Angeles Times</i> | 373 |
| <i>New York Times</i> | 311 | <i>New York Daily News</i> | 494 |
| <i>USA Today</i> | 327 | <i>New York Post</i> | 705 |
| <i>Washington Post</i> | 339 | <i>Chicago Sun-Times</i> | 671 |
| | | <i>Denver Post</i> | 126 |
| | | <i>Chicago Tribune</i> | 458 |
| Total | 1,165 | | 2,827 |

Times and *USA Today*; the former is characterized as a more liberal media outlet, while the latter is considered more conservative in its orientation. We also obtained the word count for the coverage in the *Denver Post*, the Tier 2 newspaper in our study with the fewest number of articles about African American fatalities. In the third section, we analyzed any patterns that might exist in the degree of media coverage of these events; to what extent the coverage conformed to our expectation that Michael Brown's death served as a focusing event, causing a spike in media coverage of African American fatalities; and whether over time the salience of these events declined as the media's attention shifted to other topics. We expected that the loss of Native Americans' lives would not generate significant media attention at any point, a clear indication of the lack of salience accorded to Native American issues.

Aggregate Comparisons of Media Stories

As expected, there were many stories about African Americans who experienced "arrest-related deaths" or died while in police custody. That these events were covered in both Tier 1 and Tier 2 outlets was strong evidence that encounters that resulted in African American deaths were considered to be of national importance. There were 3,992 stories in the high-circulation U.S. newspapers, representing an average of 6.29 stories for every fatality, but, as we know, not all deaths prompted coverage. The Tier 1 newspapers published articles for about 190, or roughly 30%, of the 635 African American fatalities, while the Tier 2 newspapers ran articles for about 228, or 36%, of the victims. The four Tier 1 newspapers ran 1,165 stories about African American fatalities, while the six Tier 2 newspapers had 2,827 articles. Table 4 is a listing of the number of articles in each of the Tier 1 and Tier 2 newspapers.

The disparity between the number of stories devoted to Native American deaths as opposed to African American deaths is staggering. There were a total of 42 articles about Native American fatalities in the Tier 1 and Tier 2 media sources, representing an average of 0.79 articles per fatality or roughly one eighth of the average per fatality coverage of African Americans.¹⁸ Also, only six (11.3%) of the deaths triggered any coverage in the Tier 1 and Tier 2 newspapers in our analysis—nearly 90% of the

Table 5. Number of Tier 1 and Tier 2 News Articles About Native American Deaths (May 2014 to October 2016).

| Tier 1 Newspapers | Number of Tier 1 Articles | Tier 2 Newspapers | Number of Tier 2 Articles |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| <i>Wall Street Journal</i> | 2 | <i>Los Angeles Times</i> | 5 |
| <i>New York Times</i> | 1 | <i>New York Daily News</i> | 8 |
| <i>USA Today</i> | 3 | <i>New York Post</i> | 1 |
| <i>Washington Post</i> | 5 | <i>Chicago Sun-Times</i> | 0 |
| | | <i>Denver Post</i> | 12 |
| | | <i>Chicago Tribune</i> | 5 |
| Total | 11 | | 31 |

Native American deaths did not receive any coverage, whereas 30% of the African American deaths garnered media coverage in Tier 1 outlets and 36% were covered in the Tier 2 outlets. Moreover, some of the incidents not identified as newsworthy involved deaths under questionable circumstances.¹⁹ See Table 5 for a summary of the Tier 1 and Tier 2 articles.

Nearly half (20) of the Native American articles were major crime stories about Michael Vance, who was sought on two counts of first-degree murder, felony sexual assault on a minor, and two counts of assaults on police officers.²⁰ Most of the stories about the crimes, the week-long manhunt, and Vance's death in a shoot-out with police did not identify him as Native American, but the police wanted flyer and local media outlets described him as Native American.²¹ The remaining 22 articles (six Tier 1 stories and 16 Tier 2 stories) concerned the deaths of five individuals (three men and two women): Daniel Covarrubias, Loreal Tsingile, Renee Davis, Paul Castaway, and Dominic Rollice. Aside from Rollice, all had histories of mental illness and each died in circumstances similar to the well-publicized cases involving African American fatalities.

Tier 1 Stories

Aside from articles about Vance, the Tier 1 news outlets covered three police shootings. Daniel Covarrubias's death in a small community south of Tacoma, WA, was mentioned in two Tier 1 general articles about police shootings—one in the *New York Times* and the other in the *Washington Post*. The articles mentioned that police mistook the mentally ill man's reaching for a cell phone as an attempt to pull a gun on them. The *New York Times* (Pérez-Peña, 2015) identified Covarrubias as Latino, while the *Washington Post* (Lowery et al., 2015) described him as Latino and Native American. Neither article identified Covarrubias as an enrolled member of the Suquamish Nation. As such, it is hard to characterize these two articles as likely to raise awareness of the disproportionately high number of Native American deaths in encounters with police.

The Washington Post (Staff, 2016) published a short article about Loreal Tsingile, a 27-year-old Navajo woman, who was shot by a Winslow, AZ, police officer on Easter

Sunday. Tsingile was suspected of stealing beer from a convenience store. The video footage from a police body camera shows Tsingile being shoved to the ground by two police officers and then getting up. The 5-foot-tall woman walks slowly toward one officer, while the other is standing behind her. Tsingile's arms are at her side, but she is holding a small pair of scissors. The officer in front fires 5 times, and Tsingile dies within a few minutes. The Maricopa County Attorney's Office ruled that the shooting was justified, but the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department stated that they would open an investigation. However, the family had heard nothing by the 1-year anniversary of the shooting (Jeong, 2017; Lartey, 2016). *USA Today* also ran two stories about Tsingile's death and the police officer's subsequent resignation from the police department.

The Washington Post also published a story about Renee Davis's death on the Muckleshoot Reservation in Washington. The King County Sheriff's Office had been called to her home, because the pregnant 23-year-old woman was threatening suicide. The deputy sheriffs entered the home after seeing two young children through a window. *The Washington Post* article goes on to state, "What happened next is unclear, but at some point two deputies opened fire on Davis" (Hawkins, 2016). Subsequent reports revealed much more information, including the fact that the depressed woman was hiding under a blanket and holding an unloaded handgun in one hand and an ammunition magazine in the other hand when she was shot (Barajas, 2016; Radil, 2017).

Tier 2 Stories

The Tier 2 coverage of Native American deaths was consistent with what one would expect from regional newspapers—an emphasis on major crimes stories (e.g., Vance) and those of particular relevance in their regions, albeit with a few sensationalized national stories. Besides a story about Vance, the *Denver Post* published 11 articles about an incident involving the city's police officers shooting a mentally ill Rosebud Sioux man. In this incident, Paul Castaway was holding a knife to his throat and threatening to kill himself when police opened fire (Ahtone, 2015).

Leaving aside their three stories about Michael Vance, the *New York Daily News* ran a total of five stories: three about Loreal Tsingile and one each about Renee Davis and Dominic Rollice. The latter's death started with a domestic disturbance call to the police. Three officers came to the home and confronted Rollice, who picked up a hammer. On a video from the police body camera, Rollice is heard asking the police to leave just before he died. One officer used a Taser, but the other officers fired their weapons (Bult, 2016).

The highest circulation English-language newspapers outside of the United States also ran 18 stories about controversial police shootings of Native Americans. Interestingly, the coverage was spread across all of the different media outlets, and it did not appear to be affected by the ideological orientation of the newspapers. The liberal *Guardian* had three articles, while the conservative leaning *Daily Mail* had 11 articles. *The Independent* and *The Daily Mail* each published two articles.²² All of the

newspapers covered the manhunt for Michael Vance, but the other stories dealt with more controversial shootings, primarily those involving mentally ill individuals.

Word Count Comparisons

While the number of stories devoted to a topic gives a general sense of whether the media thinks an issue merits some attention, the amount of space—including word count—devoted to the topic is a good measure of the media's assessment of the topic's likely salience among the public and possibly among political leaders. The stories about African American deaths appeared in both Tier 1 and Tier 2 newspapers, an indication that the issue was viewed as being of such national interest that both the national and regional press covered it.

We compiled the word counts of stories on African American fatalities in the two largest general news-oriented national newspapers, the *New York Times* and *USA Today*. These two newspapers accounted for 55% of Tier 1 articles about African American fatalities. The *New York Times* is generally viewed as having a liberal perspective, while *USA Today* is generally considered conservative.²³ We also included a Tier 2 newspaper, the *Denver Post*, in order to provide a comprehensive analysis for the word count comparison and to examine if the word count is similar to Tier 1 newspapers. We chose the *Denver Post* for comparison because it was the Tier 2 newspaper in our data set that ran the fewest articles about police shootings of African Americans.

USA Today published more articles about police use of lethal force that resulted in African American deaths than did the *New York Times*: 327 versus 311. On the other hand, the *New York Times* articles were longer (i.e., giving more in-depth coverage to the topic). During the time period covered, the *New York Times* devoted a total of 263,602 words to stories about African American deaths due to police action. Their average per-story word count was 848. *USA Today*'s total word count was lower (231,343), with an average of 707 words per article. These two newspapers devoted 16 articles, with a total of 25,730 words, to Michael Brown's death. Clearly, the national newspapers considered the media salience of African American deaths to be very high and allocated a large amount of coverage accordingly. The *Denver Post* also dedicated 126 articles to African American deaths, with a total word count of 85,787 or an average of 681 words per article.

The 42 articles covering Native American deaths due to lethal encounters with police generated a total of only 14,717 words, which translated into an average of 350 words per story or roughly half of the average per-article word count for African American fatalities in the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Denver Post*. As noted previously, there were only 11 articles about Native American fatalities in the Tier 1 newspapers. The total word count for all the Tier 1 articles is 2,848 words, with an average of 259 words per article.

If one considers only the *New York Times* and *USA Today*, the most direct comparisons to the coverage accorded African American fatalities, it is apparent that these newspapers consider controversial deaths of Native Americans to be much less

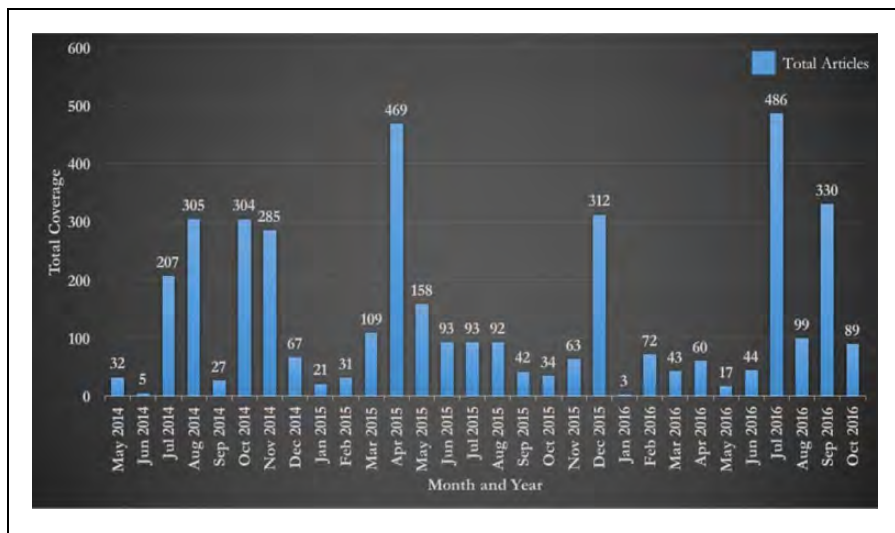


Figure 3. Total monthly numbers of articles about African Americans.

newsworthy than those involving African Americans. There was only a total of 1,748 words devoted to covering these stories (and 350 of the words were about Michael Vance). This is 6.8% of the number of words that the two newspapers devoted to the coverage of Michael Brown. There was substantially more coverage in the Tier 2 outlets, which generated a total of 11,869 words about Native American deaths, with an average word count of 383 words per story. But it is worth noting that 58% of those words in Tier 2 newspapers appeared in crime stories about Michael Vance.

Changes in Coverage Across Time

While there was the expected uptick in media coverage due to Brown's death, we found no evidence of a decline in media attention over time. There was robust media coverage throughout the entire period, nearly all of which corresponded to controversial police shootings of African American males (e.g., Michael Brown, Vonderritt Myers Jr., Laquan McDonald, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, Philando Castile, Terence Crutcher, and Keith Lamont Scott). This suggests that both national and regional press continue to consider deaths of African Americans due to lethal encounters with the police to be a high salience issue. This fits with the previously cited research about negative stories and controversial issues being positively related to press coverage—and likely factors that increase circulation and revenue. The monthly numbers of articles are presented in Figure 3.

There is no identifiable pattern in the media coverage of Native American fatalities. As noted earlier, there were a total of 42 articles that mentioned lethal encounters that resulted in Native American deaths. The most noticeable element in the coverage is an apparent spike in October 2016, when 22 articles were published about Native

American fatalities, but 20 of those were about Michael Vance. While newsworthy, these stories do not contribute to a broader discussion of law enforcement's use of lethal force against Native Americans.

Discussion

Our findings clearly demonstrated the media's failure to bring Native American deaths to the attention of the public. Although the differences in both the size of the two populations and the aggregate numbers of fatalities are reasons for the media to provide substantially greater coverage of stories about African American fatalities, the disparity in coverage is far larger than might be expected. There are 12 times as many African American deaths (635) as those of Native American deaths (53), but the number of articles about lethal police encounters involving African Americans is 95 times greater (3,992 vs. 42 stories). Moreover, as we have shown, the average number of words in the stories is also much greater for deaths involving African Americans than Native Americans.

While it is tempting to conclude that the media does not consider Native American fatalities due to "legal intervention" to be newsworthy and politically salient, we investigated whether Tier 1 and Tier 2 newspapers encountered barriers that made it difficult to access information about the Native American deaths. We began by examining NewsBank, a website that for 40 years has archived stories from local newspapers, the Associated Press, and other sources. We found that three quarters of the Native American deaths were reported in local newspapers and/or Associated Press stories that went out on the wire, but these generally were not picked up by the high-circulation regional and national newspapers. As we noted previously, two easily accessible national news websites—Indianz.com and Indian Country Today Media Network—focus solely on stories about Native Americans and gave extensive coverage of many of the deaths. Indianz.com provides access to 32 in-depth stories that clearly identified the individuals as members of specific native nations, while Indian Country Today Media Network had 37 additional in-depth stories.

Pulitzer Prize-winning *Washington Post* reporter Sari Horowitz recently explained the lack of media interest in Native issues thusly: "It's hard to get interest in a newsroom for stories that most people don't feel affect them. Native Americans and Native American issues are invisible in this country" (Marcus, 2016, p. 6). Getting into the reasons for the invisibility is beyond the scope of this research, but it is not enough to simply argue that it is justified on the basis of their small numbers, without considering that questionable actions directed at other groups of equal or smaller size (e.g., Jews and Muslims) garner much greater media attention.²⁴

Future Directions for Research and Concluding Thoughts

In a racially diverse society, the question of "whose lives matter" cannot be separated from history. Given the legacy of the Middle Passage and chattel slavery, it is not surprising that the media considers stories about possibly brutal police actions directed

at African Americans to be politically salient and newsworthy. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that people of African descent are not the only group displaced by Euro Americans' conquest of the New World. This Black-or-White framing of race issues in the United States has the unintended consequence of diminishing the salience of other racial disparities. We argue that the group most likely to be discounted is Native Americans, because of their small numbers and geographic distance of reservations from the centers of power in the country—their “invisibility,” according to Horowitz.²⁵

As we noted at the outset, the existing data sources about fatal encounters with police undercount the number of Native American deaths. To overcome this problem, we drew upon different sources and then cross-checked every person identified as being American Indian/Alaska Native. Although we might have missed some individuals, we are confident that each of the cases we identified fits the criteria of being an American Indian/Alaska Native. Once we controlled for population sizes in different states, we found a very high rate of Native American deaths, in many cases, higher than for African Americans.

In a democratic society, the media acts as a filtering device that provides cues to the public and government officials about the political salience of issues. The media deserves credit for raising concerns about the high numbers of African American “arrest-related deaths,” but it has not given a similar level of attention to Native American fatalities or possibly those involving other minority groups. To reiterate, our purpose in this study was not to judge the actions of law enforcement officers in any particular incident, but rather to highlight the importance of media scrutiny—not only of police use of lethal force in situations involving minority populations but also to facilitate a broader discussion of alternatives to lethal force.

In particular, this discussion needs to consider options for dealing with individuals whose mental illness and/or addiction had led to their encounters with police officers. Police officers are often the first responders for many crises, and this has led to multiple circumstances for which officers may need specialized training. The amount of mental health training at police academies ranges from 0 to 40 hrs, with most providing less than 8 hrs (Pauly, 2013). The Los Angeles Police Protective League, along with several other police unions, is requesting federal assistance and funding for specialized training that will impart valuable knowledge to officers on methods for effectively building rapport, while deescalating volatile encounters involving individuals with mental health issues (Mather, 2017). We encourage future research to examine the role of mental illnesses and addictions in fatal police shootings and how mandatory crisis intervention team training for all police officers may reduce these fatal occurrences.

Our research compared media coverage of Native Americans and African Americans who died during police legal interventions. While we concentrated on one gap in the literature, future research can investigate whether similar results emerge when examining Whites, Hispanics, Latinos, Asians, and Pacific Islanders who died during legal intervention. This extensive analysis will assist in determining whether the race or ethnicity of an individual plays a pivotal role in media framing and police

interactions in heterogeneous communities. Finally, we also encourage future researchers to explore the reasons that Native American issues are generally not considered newsworthy. How much of this is due to the large number of native nations—567 federally recognized tribes and many unrecognized tribes—which may make it difficult to communicate a consistent message to the media outlets? Is the problem simply rooted in a lack of awareness about Native Americans, their histories, and issues? Researchers may want to consider basic survey research among reporters to ascertain the level of their knowledge about American Indians and Alaska Natives.

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Notes

1. Paula Mae High Bear is the mother of Phillip High Bear, who was beaten by police and died in custody in September 2015 (Chasing Hawk, 2015).
2. Lynn Eagle Feather is the mother of Paul Castaway, who was mentally ill and shot by police (Ahtone, 2015).
3. A few weeks prior to Brown's death, Eric Garner, a middle-aged African American man, died after the police subdued him with a choke hold (Goldstein & Schweber, 2014). Four days prior to Brown's death, another African American man, John Crawford, was shot under questionable circumstances by police (Gokavi, 2014). Two days after Brown's death, a mentally ill African American man, Ezell Ford, was killed by Los Angeles police officers (Dewan & Oppel, 2015).
4. Tim Giago, the founder of the Native American Journalists Association, suggests that some police may still have a "frontier mentality," so that the murders of Native Americans "go unpunished because after all, they were only killing Indians" (Giago, 2017).
5. The media has largely ignored the Native Lives Matter movement (see Danks, 2015; Jae, 2014; Lakota People's Law Project, 2015; Loevy, 2015).
6. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice show that Native Americans from 1999 to 2011 were more likely than any other group to experience police lethal interventions (CDC, 2011; Males, 2014), but no one has systematically studied the degree of media coverage given to these incidents.
7. There is a substantial body of research examining relations between law enforcement agencies and minority communities, but most of the studies have focused on African American and Latino populations (Arthur & Case, 1994; Barrick, 2014; Brown & Benedict, 2005; Brunson & Miller, 2006; Brunson & Witzer, 2009; Callahan & Rosenberger, 2011; Lai & Zhao, 2010; Ong & Jenks, 2004; Schuck, 2013; Thomas & Burns, 2005; Webb & Marshall, 1995; Weitzer, 2002), as well as some that combine minority groups, thereby masking intergroup differences (Benson, 1981; Chandek, 1999; Chermak, McGarrell, &

Weiss, 2001; Dowler & Zawilski, 2007; Engel, 2005; Gau, 2010; Graziano, Schuck, & Martin, 2010; Hurst & Frank, 2000; Jesilow, Meyer, & Namazzi, 1995; Reisig & Parks, 2000; Wu, 2014). Following a meta-analysis of the field, Peck (2015) strongly urged scholars to extend their research to include police interactions with Asian, Pacific Islander, and Native American communities. There is only limited research on Native American perceptions of police, most of which are based on very small samples (Cockerham & Forslund, 1975; Giblin & Dillion, 2009; Myrstell, 2005; Perkins & Starosta, 2011), the only exception being research by Perry (2002, 2006, 2009). According to Perry and Robyn (2005), there is a pattern of normalizing acts of violence against Native Americans, such that those actions are rendered invisible.

8. We examined newspapers rather than online and television reporting because newspapers typically have better archives than other media formats.
9. See also the extensive public policy literature on focusing events, leading to substantial policy change (Birkland, 1997, 1998; Cobb & Elder, 1972; Kingdon, 1995; Stone, 1989).
10. There, however, has been a development and growth of Native American media outlets, such as Indianz.com and Indian Country Today Media Network (Daniels, 2006; Wilkins & Stark, 2011).
11. Journalists' reliance upon information provided by police can lead to increased usage of police-generated frames and promote responses favored by the police (Ericson, 1989; Fishman, 1981).
12. All government data sources combine American Indians and Alaska Natives into a single category, so we followed that practice, although it is problematic.
13. Media outlets have to produce "normal, routine crime stories" that fill up space in news programs or newspapers (Chermak, McGarrell, & Gruenwald, 2006, p. 274). We expected some of the coverage about lethal encounters with police to fall into this category as opposed to "celebrated cases" such as the coverage elicited by Brown's death.
14. We want to acknowledge the generous assistance provided by Stephanie Woodward, who helped us gain access to materials in the Native American press outlets and Elizabeth Rowen for providing research assistance.
15. The following is the listing of Native American fatalities: Ray Dakota Scholfield, Jeanetta Marie Riley, Ira James Arquette, Jordan Keith Willis, John J. Rogers, Joy Ann Sherman, Christina Tahhahwah, Myles Roughsurface, Richard Frederick Tis'mil Estrada, Allen Locke, Kenneth Arnold Buck, Nicholas Leland Tewa, Larry Kobuk, Justin Fowler, Tyrel Wes Vick, William J. Dick, III, Daniel I. Covarrubias, Joshua Deysie, Joe Charboneau, Sarah Lee Circle Bear, Paul Castaway, Rexdale Henry, Anthony Lorenzo Vallejo, Vincent Perdue, Tristan Vent, Phillip M. High Bear, Sr., Cecil D. Lacy Jr., Philip Quinn, Patrick Stephen Lundstrom, Herman Bean, Jr., Jacqueline D. Salyers, Joseph Molinaro, Raymond Gassman, Vincent Nageak, III, Sherissa Homer, Patricia Kruger, Loreal Tsingile, Lance McIntire, Francis Clark, Mark Nelson, Verl Bedonie, Hubert Thomas Burns, Jr., Jamie Lee Brave Heart, Alvin Sylversmythe, Dominic Fontana Rollice, James Robert Richards, Jesse Beshaw, Kheyanev Madison Littledog, Dylan Rogers, Dennis Hunt, Rex Vance Wilson, Renee Davis, and Michael Dale Vance, Jr.
16. According to the Urban Indian Health Institute (2013), 71% of Native Americans currently live in cities, and more than 20% have incomes lower than the federally defined poverty level.

17. Several urban centers located outside of the West—New York City, Chicago, and Philadelphia—have very large American Indian/Native Alaska populations (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012), but none of those cities have records of Native American fatalities during the 30 months we studied.
18. If one moves from Tier 1 and Tier 2 newspapers to local coverage, either in the Associated Press wire coverage or local newspapers, there is more coverage, but mostly it is still sparse.
19. Two of the noncovered fatalities involved individuals who died while jailed on minor offenses. Christina Tahhahwah's grandparents called for help in taking the young woman to the hospital. Instead, the police in Lawton, OK, arrested the young woman, who suffered from bipolar disorder. Witnesses stated that officers used a Taser on Tahhahwah when she was singing Comanche hymns (Rains, 2014). In the other case, the Cheyenne River Sioux Police arrested Phillip High Bear, Sr., for public intoxication. Witnesses said that police used mace and beat High Bear during the arrest and that the abuse continued after he was thrown in the drunk tank (Chasing Hawk, 2015).
20. The *Los Angeles Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* ran four identical stories, but we counted each of these stories because the newspapers served different regions of the nation.
21. The horrendous nature of Vance's crimes has made people in Oklahoma reluctant to answer questions about whether he was Native American, but we were eventually told that he was Cherokee.
22. Al Jazeera America also published three articles during the period we covered: one on Allen Locke, one on Paul Castaway, and another on Loreal Tsingile.
23. We considered the *Wall Street Journal*, but it tends to focus its coverage on the business community and economic issues.
24. The small population size is largely due to the effects of Euro American conquest of the continent (Barnes, 2015; Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014).
25. For more on the history of indigenous peoples in the United States, see Dunbar-Ortiz's (2014) prize-winning book, *An Indigenous People's History of the United States*.

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