



# A Spotlight on Two Spirit Elders and Elder Justice Facts

*Based on findings from the Two Spirit Elders Resource and Information Guide*

## Defining Two-Spirit

The term “Two-Spirit” was articulated at the Third Annual Intertribal Native American/First Nations Gay and Lesbian Conference in Winnipeg in 1990.<sup>1</sup> The term is an attempt to embrace the ways in which distinct American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities had and continue to practice sexual and gender expressions that exist outside of the European binary labels imposed on tribal communities through the process of colonization. For many tribes, Two-Spirit people are not thought of in terms of “man” or “woman” and embody a distinct, alternative identity marker reflected by their Indigenous language.<sup>2</sup> It is important to not assume that a person identifies as Two-Spirit, LGBTQ, or a particular gender identity, and to always reflect language used by the person.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

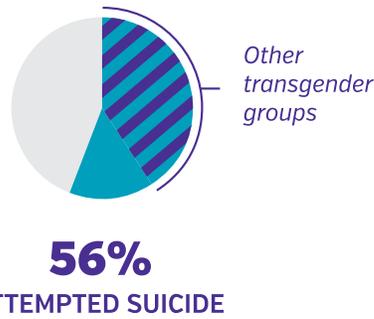
- ▶ Two-Spirit is a contemporary *distinctly cultural* term than many American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN), First Nations, and other Indigenous people identify with to bring together their sexual orientation and gender identity with their spirituality, traditions, and culture.<sup>3</sup>
- ▶ Two-Spirit elders experience significant disparities across multiple areas when compared with the general U.S. population, and are at higher risk for adverse health outcomes than other AI/ANs.<sup>4</sup>
- ▶ Colonization introduced structural homophobia, transphobia, and sexism, disrupting AI/AN traditional gender norms and sexual expressions. Because of this, many Two-Spirit and queer-identified elders have increased health risks including HIV diagnoses, higher suicide rates, chronic stress, and susceptibility to abuse, to name a few.<sup>5</sup>
- ▶ Further research that is culturally responsive and includes Two-Spirit identifying people is needed to increase health outcomes and combat elder abuse.<sup>6</sup>

Historical trauma profoundly affects health outcomes for all AI/ANs, but even more so among Two-Spirit elders. Many Two-Spirit elders have survived state-sanctioned violence and federal policies such as the establishment of Christian residential schools, which sought to impose rigid gender norms and familial structures that they were not accustomed to. It is vital for practitioners to understand the lasting effects of colonization, which in turn, have encouraged a climate of patriarchal and homophobic sentiments among many AI/AN communities and tribal decision makers.

## Two Spirit and AI/AN LGBT Elders Face Multiple Challenges



Two-Spirit identifying men accounted for 71% of **new HIV diagnoses** within the AI/AN population.<sup>7</sup>



56% of AI/AN transgender and gender-nonconforming respondents in a national survey **attempted suicide**, compared with 41% of all other transgender groups.



Two-Spirit elders who have experienced discrimination report **poorer health and increased physical pain and impairment**.<sup>8</sup>



Two-Spirit identifying women **face multifaceted challenges** including stigma regarding their sexual orientation, exclusion from mainstream Two-Spirit discourse, and sexism from both AI/AN and LGBTQ communities.<sup>9</sup>



A 2008 report found that 23% of LGBTQ and Two-Spirit people reported **living in extreme poverty** and 32% **live alone**.<sup>10</sup>



In a 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 community.<sup>11</sup>

## Cultural Resilience and Protective Factors

Although Two-Spirit elders experience increased risk factors, they also exemplify considerable resilience. In spite of structural and institutional constraints, Two-Spirit elders are culturally perseverant, finding pathways toward healing and wellness.<sup>12</sup> Though disrupted as a result of colonization, Two-Spirit elders continue to embrace their tribes gender norms and cultural responsibilities.<sup>13</sup> Culturally-responsive intervention approaches should be strengths-based, while supporting the existing knowledge systems and ceremonies of Two-Spirit elders. Such support can increase determinants of resilience such as community acceptance, a sense of belonging, sharing of ancestral histories, and mindfulness, to name a few.

## Call to Action!

It is important to increase cultural awareness when supporting Two-Spirit and AI/AN LGBTQ communities, especially for Elder Justice Professionals and others working on behalf of Elder Justice and Equity. The following resources are available to you:

- ▶ **Indian Health Service (IHS)** has a page devoted to Two-Spirit resources including presentation, webinars, and other relevant media resources: [www.ihs.gov/lgbt/health/twospirit](http://www.ihs.gov/lgbt/health/twospirit)
- ▶ **Diverse Elders Coalition** has a variety of blogs related to Two-Spirit elders such as a history of the movement and Two-Spirit elder voices:  
[www.diverseelders.org/2016/03/04/two-spirit-the-story-of-a-movement-unfolds](http://www.diverseelders.org/2016/03/04/two-spirit-the-story-of-a-movement-unfolds)
- ▶ **Two Spirit Elders Resource and Information Guide:**  
[ncea.acl.gov/NCEA/media/Publication/Two-Spirit.pdf](http://ncea.acl.gov/NCEA/media/Publication/Two-Spirit.pdf)

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Thomas, W. (1997). Navajo Cultural Constructions of Gender and Sexuality. In *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality*. University of Illinois Press.

<sup>2</sup>Indian Health Service. Two-Spirit. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, (LGBTQ) and Two-Spirit Health.

<sup>3</sup>Gilley BJ. *Becoming two-spirit: gay identity and social acceptance in Indian country*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press; 2006

<sup>4</sup>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.

<sup>5</sup>Chae DH, Walters KL. Racial discrimination on 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

<sup>6</sup>Faiman-Silva, Sandra (2011). Anthropologists and Two Spirit People: Building Bridges and Sharing Knowledge. In *Anthropology Faculty Publications*. Paper 23.

<sup>8</sup>Chae DH, Walters KL. Racial discrimination on 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

<sup>9</sup>Hayes, Lenny. (2009). *Walking in Two Worlds: Understanding the Two-Spirit & LGBTQ Community*. Minnesota Indian Women's Sexual Assault Coalition. grant No. 2009-EC-S6-0003.

<sup>10</sup>PRC N. Spot Light On Two Spirit (Native LGBT) Communities. Available 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)

<sup>11</sup>PRC N. Spot Light on Two Spirit (Native LGBT) Communities. Available 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.

<sup>12</sup>Elm, J. H., Lewis, J. P., Walters, K. L., & Self, J. M. (2016). "I'm in this world for a reason": Resilience and recovery among American Indian and Alaska Native two-spirit women. *Journal of lesbian studies*, 20(3-4), 352-371. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2016.1152813>

<sup>13</sup>National Aboriginal Health Organization. Suicide prevention and Two-Spirited people [Internet]. Available from: [https://ruor.uottawa.ca/bitstream/10393/30544/1/Suicide\\_Prevention\\_2Spirited\\_People\\_Guide\\_2012.pdf](https://ruor.uottawa.ca/bitstream/10393/30544/1/Suicide_Prevention_2Spirited_People_Guide_2012.pdf)

