

# Native American mothers separated from their children experience a raw, ongoing grief that has no end, says researcher

December 4 2023, by Ashley L. Landers

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Credit: Andreas - from Pexels

Native American mothers whose children were separated from them—either through child removal for [assimilation into residential](#)

[boarding schools](#) or through [coerced adoption](#)—experience the kind of grief no parent should ever feel. Yet theirs is a loss that is ongoing, with no sense of meaning or closure.

While some families have eventually been reunited, far too many languish in the [child welfare system](#), where [Native American children are overrepresented](#) as a result of discrimination and racial bias, structural racism and [increased exposure to poverty](#).

A panel I attended years ago in California was composed of three birth mothers representing three generations of Native American women who had lost a child to [foster care](#) or [adoption](#). While each story was unique, they had one thing in common: a never-ending grief that had stayed with them long after they were separated from their children.

I still vividly recall that, with a lump in her throat, one of these mothers said, "I can still hear my baby crying." Those mothers and their stories left a lasting impression on me and my colleagues, which was the catalyst for a new line of research for us. After listening to the panel, my collaborator Sandy White Hawk, a Sicangu Lakota elder of the [Rosebud Tribe in South Dakota](#), responded, "We have to do something for our birth mothers. We cannot let them pass to the other side carrying this grief."

I am an assistant professor of human sciences and I [conduct research](#) in partnership with the [First Nations Repatriation Institute](#). This work focuses on the health and well-being of Native American families that have experienced family separation by way of the foster care system and adoption.

For the past 10 years, we have [explored the outcomes of fostered and adopted children and what happens when families are reunified](#).

## Foster care and adoption

The adoption era refers to a period of time beginning in the 1950s with the [Indian Adoption Project](#), a [collaborative effort](#) between the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Child Welfare League of America. It aimed to [promote the adoption of Native American children into non-Native homes](#) and has been criticized as another attempt at forced assimilation into non-Native American culture and the [destruction of Native American families](#).

The [adoption era](#) continued until the enactment of the [Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978](#), which aimed to protect the best interests of Native American children by [establishing federal standards for their removal and placement](#). An estimated 25% to 35% of Native American children were removed from their families prior to the [Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978](#).

The Indian Child Welfare Act protects Indian children by [prioritizing placement](#) with extended families, within the tribe or with an Indian family.

The child welfare system tracks when children leave the system [through reunification](#) with family of origin. Reunification can occur after aging out of foster care at age 18 or [being adopted](#).

To date, there is no way to consistently track how many fostered and adopted Native American children have [reunited with their family of origin](#). However, our team's studies suggest that more than 80% of Native American people who were fostered or adopted [eventually reunify](#).

## Separated families

The loss of a child to foster care, adoption or both is not uncommon in the United States. In 2021, approximately 606,031 children were involved in the foster care system. According to the latest data provided by the [Children's Bureau](#), an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in September 2021 more than 391,000 children were residing in foster care and over 113,000 were waiting to be adopted. In addition, [more than 54,240 children](#) were adopted through public child welfare agencies in 2021.

Legislation known as the [Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997](#) requires only that states report adoptions that occur in public child welfare agencies. Therefore, the statistics above do not account for the thousands of children who are adopted, often as infants, through private agencies outside of the child welfare system. Unfortunately, there is no way to determine [the total number of children adopted](#) each year in the U.S.

This is especially true for Native American children. [Alarming numbers of Native American children](#) remain [involved in the child welfare system](#). Allegations of abuse and neglect of Native children at the hands of their parents and other caregivers are twice as likely to be investigated, and Native American children are four times [more likely to be placed out of the home](#) than [white children](#).

In my view, the rights of Native American caregivers to raise their children have been violated by systematic practices of child removal that [targeted Native American families](#). Until recently, Native American mothers have been omitted from research on the [grief and loss of birth parents](#).

## **Ambiguous loss**

As a [family](#) therapist, I have sat with hundreds of families that were

grieving the loss of a loved one, particularly a child lost to miscarriage, stillbirth and even death. Still, I was struck by the grief of Native American birth mothers. This grief was different. While it sounded like the grief that follows the death of a child, these children had not died. They were taken. They were alive but still lost.

While my colleagues and I have spoken with dozens of Native American birth mothers over the years, we interviewed eight of them who lost a child to adoption for what is called a phenomenological study. Phenomenology is used to explore the lived experiences of a group of people who experienced a similar event or phenomenon.

We wanted to understand the lived experiences of these mothers. We asked them how they became a birth mother, how their child came to be adopted and how this experience affected their health and well-being.

Our study found that these Native American birth mothers [experienced ambiguous loss](#), which is a [loss that remains unverified](#) and [without resolution](#).

In Native American culture, mothers are revered as "life givers." The loss of a child to adoption stripped Native American birth mothers of this respected role and of their dignity.

Loss is often linked to death, but there are other types of losses. In ambiguous loss, there is [no closure or resolution](#). Ambiguous loss is different from other kinds of loss. It is unfathomable, confusing and immobilizing.

There are two primary types of [ambiguous loss](#). One is a psychological absence with [physical presence](#), such as when a loved one has dementia. Another is physical absence with psychological presence, such as the [loss of a child to the foster care or adoption system](#).

## The downstream effects

Our research suggests that many Native American birth mothers [felt forced to surrender their children](#) to adoption because they were young and lacked resources. In many cases, they were unable to say goodbye or hold the baby. They felt ashamed and unworthy.

In addition to the unresolved grief, these mothers became vulnerable to mental health and [substance abuse problems](#).

From my perspective, there are glaring and unanswered questions on the ethics and well-being of foster and adoption practices for children separated from Native American families. Native American adults who were [fostered, adopted or both have also reported experiencing profound grief](#) that parallels the ambiguous loss felt by Native American birth mothers.

The healing of Native American birth mothers will be an ongoing and collective effort. One by one, [Native American birth mothers are telling their stories](#). These stories are gaining momentum. What happened to one woman happened to many others.

Credit to Sicangu Lakota elder Sandy White Hawk, founder and director of First Nations Repatriation Institute, whose vision guides this work. White Hawk is a senior author on studies that emerge from this work.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Native American mothers separated from their children experience a raw, ongoing grief

that has no end, says researcher (2023, December 4) retrieved 29 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-12-native-american-mothers-children-raw.html>

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