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# **Fatphobia and Sexual Assault: How Survivors are Impacted by Internal Biases**

Developed by



**MIWSAC**  
Minnesota Indian Women's  
Sexual Assault Coalition

This material was supported by cooperative agreement #15JOVW-21-GK-02005-INDI awarded by the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Violence Against Women. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication/program/exhibition are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.

# Fatphobia and Sexual Assault: How Survivors are Impacted by Internal Biases

## WHAT IS FATPHOBIA?

Fatphobia is a term that includes fear, prejudice, and discrimination against individuals with larger bodies and it exists in many aspects of society. This societal belief manifests through negative attitudes and harmful stereotypes about larger bodies, often leading to damaging misconceptions.

Many people perceive larger-bodied individuals as lazy, believing they lack the motivation or discipline to maintain a healthier lifestyle. This viewpoint overlooks the complexities of weight, health, and the countless individual circumstances that can influence a person's body size. Furthermore, the belief that weight is a direct indicator of health fails to acknowledge that health is a multifaceted issue that cannot be accurately judged based solely on appearance.

These beliefs can be overtly or externally expressed within institutions such as healthcare settings, workplaces, and educational environments. Systemic biases can result in unequal treatment or discrimination, making it even more challenging for larger-bodied individuals to navigate these spaces. Additionally, fatphobia often manifests in everyday interactions, leading to microaggressions, exclusion, and body shaming.



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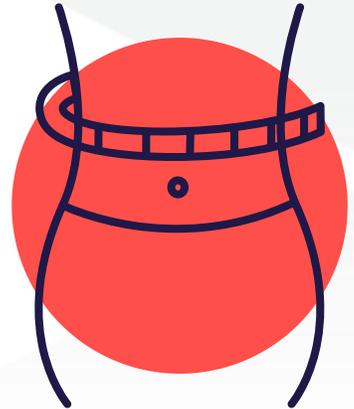
For survivors of sexual assault, the impact of fatphobia can be particularly serious. The bias against larger bodies can affect the care they receive from healthcare providers, who may show fatphobic attitudes that result in inadequate or dismissive treatment. These experiences can discourage survivors from seeking necessary medical attention or emotional/spiritual support, which are crucial for their healing.

In the justice system, fatphobia can similarly setback survivor access to justice. Survivors may face biases from law enforcement, legal professionals, and others, making it difficult for them to seek justice and accountability for their assault. The stigma surrounding fat bodies can also create unwelcoming or hostile environments, impacting a survivor's willingness to engage in support groups, community spaces, or other services designed to aid their healing process. Addressing fatphobia is essential for fostering a more inclusive and compassionate society. By challenging these harmful beliefs, we can create environments that support the dignity, integrity and rights of all individuals, regardless of their body size and appearance.

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## Westernization and Its Impact on Body Sovereignty

The pervasive legacies of westernization have deeply impacted Native communities, disrupting traditional cultural practices and imposing Eurocentric norms. The forced assimilation and loss of lands stripped Native peoples of their autonomy and traditional food systems, resulting in significant disparities in access to nutritious foods and healthcare services. These systemic effects exacerbate issues related to body size and fatphobia. Larger-bodied survivors may experience weight stigma that reflects not only societal fatphobia but also Eurocentric assumptions about health and worth.



## Sexualization of Native Bodies and Eurocentric Beauty Standards

The sexualization of Native bodies complicates the experiences of Native survivors of sexual assault, particularly for larger-bodied individuals. Euro-centric beauty standards often depict thinness and specific body types as the ideal, marginalizing those who do not fit within these specificities. Native bodies are frequently subjected to objectification and fetishization, which distorts the way they are perceived in both social and institutional contexts. Fetishization is the act of making someone an object of sexual desire based on an aspect of their identity. Objectification is the treatment of someone as an object rather than as a human being. Think of this as consuming someone's identity rather than seeing them as a person. This hyper-sexualization can make survivors feel that their bodies are seen as tools for pleasure rather than as deserving of respect and dignity. Survivors may fear that their trauma will be dismissed or trivialized due to society's perceptions of their bodies, further complicating their willingness to disclose their experiences.

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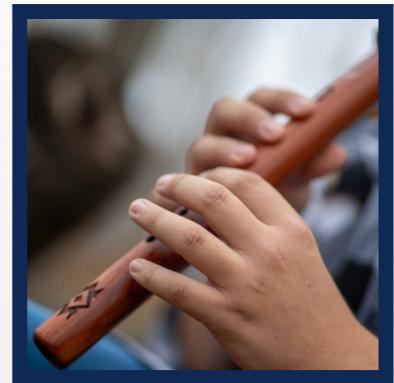
## Systemic Racism and Health Disparities

Disparities within healthcare, education, and other institutions further compounds the barriers faced by Native survivors of sexual assault. For Alaska Native and American Indian survivors, systemic racism and fatphobia intersect, leading to ongoing discrimination and bias in healthcare settings. Larger-bodied Native individuals may encounter underdiagnosis, misdiagnosis, or inadequate treatment due to preconceived notions about their weight, health, or ethnicity. These biases are particularly malicious for survivors of sexual violence, as they can prevent timely, trauma-informed care.



*“Larger-bodied Native individuals may encounter underdiagnosis, misdiagnosis, or inadequate treatment...”*

Weight stigma, intertwined with systemic racism, also has significant implications for the mental health of Native survivors. Navigating the compounded effects of racism, sexism, and fatphobia can lead to increased risks of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicidal tendencies. Survivors may feel shame about their bodies, leading to a reluctance to engage with healthcare providers.



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## Impact on Survivors and Barriers to Support

### RELUCTANCE TO DISCLOSE AND REPORT SEXUAL ASSAULT

Survivors of sexual assault who are larger-bodied often face significant challenges in disclosing their trauma. The fear of being judged based on body size, combined with fatphobia, creates a strong reluctance to report incidents of sexual violence. Survivors may internalize shame, believing they are at fault because of their body size and have feelings of being unworthy of support or validation. This can lead to a long-lasting fear of not being believed, especially when society suggests that larger individuals should be more capable of defending themselves. Victim-blaming mindsets not only reinforce these feelings but also shift responsibility away from the perpetrator, isolating survivors and making them feel that their experiences are less valid or serious.

### SOCIETAL PRESSURES AND VICTIM-BLAMING

The pressure to conform to beauty standards can have devastating effects on larger-bodied individuals, especially when they experience sexual assault. Cultural norms often portray larger bodies as less desirable, which can increase feelings of shame and inadequacy. Survivors may worry that their size will lead to judgment from others, influencing their decision to remain silent about their experiences. This fear is compounded by the misconception that larger individuals are less credible or that their claims are less serious. The tendency to blame victims further discourages disclosure, as survivors may fear being met with skepticism or dismissive attitudes.

### POSITIONS OF POWER AND BIAS

The prevalence of non-Native individuals in positions of power, especially in sectors related to law enforcement, healthcare, and social services, can exacerbate the challenges faced by Native survivors. These professionals may hold biases shaped by Euro-centric values regarding body image and worth, leading to harmful assumptions about larger-bodied individuals. When survivors seek help, they may encounter microaggressions or overt discrimination that reinforces feelings of inadequacy and shame. Anti-Native biases can lead to a lack of understanding and sensitivity, making it more challenging for survivors to trust that their experiences will be taken seriously. The absence of representation and understanding in these essential support systems can create a sense of alienation, discouraging survivors from reporting assaults or seeking help.



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### INFLUENCE OF EUROCENTRIC AND MALE-DOMINATED BACKGROUNDS IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

Institutions that uphold law and order across the United States, specifically criminal justice systems, have been shaped by a history of inequality. These systems are not just a reflection of social norms but also barriers to justice for Native survivors and communities. In 2022, statistics revealed that 70.9% of police officers in the United States were white. Of the white police officers, 88.3% were men. This majority reflects a strong influence of Western, Eurocentric values in law enforcement. These imbalances in representation contribute to a cycle of mistrust between criminal justice system institutions and the communities they serve. When those in positions of power are not representative of the diversity of the population, policies and legal decisions can reflect the experiences and biases of the majority demographic represented rather than the needs of all survivors.

To address these disparities it is essential to prioritize diversity and inclusion within both law enforcement and various sectors of the criminal justice system. In policing, this may include intentional training programs, increasing access to education advancement, and recruitment efforts to employ officers from the communities they serve. This can lead to improved community engagement, prevention efforts, education, and reduction of bias.



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## Institutionalized Racism and Marginalization in the Justice System

Institutionalized racism within the criminal justice system further marginalizes Native survivors of sexual assault, complicating their access to support, protection, and justice. Historical patterns of bias and violence against Native peoples deepen the distrust of law enforcement and legal systems, which often fail to protect survivors or hold perpetrators accountable. Fatphobia contributes to these challenges, influencing perceptions of credibility and deservingness. Larger-bodied survivors may face additional scrutiny, with law enforcement questioning whether their size contributed to the assault, perpetuating harmful myths about sexual violence, responsibility, and their size related to culpability.

This manifests in various ways with law enforcement officials and legal professionals as they may harbor implicit biases that devalue the testimonies of larger-bodied, Native survivors. Fatphobia and racist stereotypes can lead to unjust assumptions that survivors are exaggerating their experiences or that their bodies made them more resistant to assault. Such biases delegitimize the survivor's trauma and reduce the likelihood of thorough investigations or prosecution.

## Accessibility Issues and Marginalization

Accessibility issues significantly exacerbate the challenges faced by survivors of sexual assault, particularly for larger-bodied individuals. Barriers such as transportation difficulties, financial constraints, lack of culturally competent care, and limited resources can prevent survivors from seeking help. Additionally, inadequate physical accessibility in healthcare and legal settings creates further obstacles. For instance, seating accommodations in public spaces like hospitals, courthouses, and advocacy centers can often be a challenge, making it physically uncomfortable or even impossible for larger-bodied individuals to fully participate. The lack of appropriate seating on planes or buses also poses significant challenges for those needing to travel for support such as medical forensic exams, making ADA (The Americans with Disability Act) accessibility crucial.

Survivors may feel marginalized within systems that do not accommodate their needs, reinforcing feelings of shame. When undergoing medical forensic exams, they may encounter environments that are unwelcoming, leading to additional trauma during an already vulnerable time. The fear of being judged or mistreated in these settings contributes to the reluctance to report incidents or seek medical assistance. Meeting with advocates can also present challenges if those spaces do not prioritize accessibility, further alienating survivors in places designed to support them.

To improve accessibility, it is essential to provide medical diagnostic equipment, such as weight scales and height-adjustable exam tables, that accommodates larger-bodied individuals. Healthcare providers should also receive training to better assist patients with larger-bodies to foster an environment where all survivors feel safe and supported.

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## Psychological Impacts of Fatphobia and Racism

The psychological toll can be devastating for survivors of sexual assault. These overlapping oppressions contribute to:

- **Increased Mental Health Risks:** Survivors who experience fatphobia and racism are more likely to struggle with mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The intersection of sexual violence, body size discrimination, and racial bias leaves survivors feeling powerless, ashamed, and fearful of being further marginalized by those who are supposed to help them.
- **Substance Abuse and Suicidal Tendencies:** Larger-bodied Native survivors may turn to substance abuse as a coping mechanism for the compounded trauma of sexual assault, fatphobia, and racism. The lack of accessible, culturally competent support services, combined with the persistent societal devaluation of their bodies and experiences, can lead survivors to feelings of despair, isolation, and suicidal ideation.

## Health Consequences of Weight Bias

Fatphobia and weight bias have serious health consequences for Native survivors of sexual assault. Larger-bodied individuals often encounter weight-based discrimination within healthcare systems, discouraging them from seeking necessary medical and mental health services. Providers may focus on weight loss rather than addressing the specific trauma-related needs of survivors, leading to:

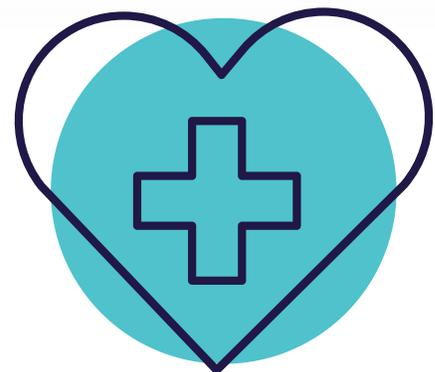
- **Reduced Trust in Healthcare Providers:** Fatphobia in healthcare settings erodes the trust survivors have in medical professionals. Survivors may already mistrust institutions due to past experiences of discrimination and may withdraw further from healthcare due to weight bias. This lack of trust prevents survivors from receiving necessary healthcare.
- **Poor Adherence to Treatment:** When healthcare providers prioritize weight loss over the survivor's trauma and overall well-being, survivors may disengage from treatment plans altogether. The emphasis on weight reinforces societal fatphobia and diminishes the survivor's sense of agency, making it harder for them to access the care they deserve.

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## The Need for Trauma-Informed and Culturally Competent Care

To address the negative and historical impacts on Native survivors of sexual assault, it is critical that healthcare providers, advocates, and criminal justice system professionals adopt a trauma-informed, culturally competent approach. This means acknowledging the historical trauma that Native survivors carry, recognizing the intersecting oppressions of racism and fatphobia, and actively working to dismantle these biases within institutions.

These negative and historical impacts intersect in complex ways that marginalize larger-bodied Native survivors of sexual assault. These intersecting oppressions create barriers to care and support, often leaving survivors feeling unseen and ashamed. By addressing these challenges and prioritizing trauma-informed, culturally competent care, we can help dismantle the stigma surrounding fat bodies, support survivors in their healing journeys, and ensure that their voices are heard and validated.



## Resources

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Call the Professional Resource Helpline for technical assistance related to  
medical forensic care at 800-999-5444

This project was supported by Grant No. 15JOVW-21-GK-02005-INDI and 15JOVW-23-GK-03969-INDI awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed on this site or in any materials on this site are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.