



An Evaluation of Crime Victim Compensation in Arizona

Part of a National Study of Victim Compensation Programs

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Victims of crime can experience serious harms and face significant costs with long-term implications for their economic security and safety. All US states and territories have crime victim compensation programs that provide financial assistance to cover out-of-pocket expenses associated with the financial, physical, and psychological burdens of victimization. From 2022 to 2024, the Urban Institute and NORC at the University of Chicago conducted a National Study of Victim Compensation Program Trends, Challenges, and Successes, which included evaluations of four state crime victim compensation programs.¹ This brief presents findings from evaluation of Arizona’s crime victim compensation program regarding its utilization by claimants and perspectives of compensation staff and victim service providers on its ability to meet victims’ needs.

In 2003, the Urban Institute published a seminal report, *The National Evaluation of State Victims of Crime Act Assistance and Compensation Programs: Trends and Strategies for the Future* (Newmark et al. 2003). Twenty years later, updated research was needed to provide guidance to victim compensation

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practitioners and policymakers. With funding from the National Institute of Justice, NORC at the University of Chicago partnered with Urban to conduct this current national study.¹ Our study aims to examine the effectiveness, utilization, and comprehensiveness of state crime victim compensation programs, including identifying strengths and challenges of policies and funding models and best practices. Our multimethod design included (1) a national survey of victim compensation program administrators, and (2) deep-dive evaluations in four diverse states: Arizona, Delaware, New York, and West Virginia. The deep-dive evaluations included interviews with victim compensation staff (“compensation staff”) and community- and legal-system-based service providers (“service providers”), analysis of compensation claims data, and a survey² of people who filed for compensation (“claimants”) about their experiences and perspectives (see box 1 for our methods).

BOX 1

Methods for Evaluating Crime Victim Compensation in Arizona

For this evaluation, the Arizona state compensation program leads voluntarily facilitated Urban and NORC’s collection of quantitative and qualitative data, which we then analyzed independently. The two primary data sources were deidentified claims data and stakeholder interviews (although a claimant survey was also conducted, insufficient responses were received in Arizona). This assessment was also informed by data from the Office for Victims of Crime’s Performance Measurement Tool and Arizona program leads’ responses to our National Survey of Victim Compensation Program Administrators.^a

Claims data. Arizona’s compensation program provided data from 2019 to 2021 on claims (filing date, referral source, county, victimization, claimant demographics), decisions (decision request date, decision date, decision outcome, reason for denial), and payments (payment date, amount, expense type). Decisions data from Pima County were not provided to Urban. Urban cleaned, merged, and analyzed the data using the programming language R. We conducted longitudinal comparisons of key frequencies and descriptive statistics, *t*-tests and analyses of variance to compare means, Kruskal-Wallis tests and Dunn’s tests to compare distributions of data between subgroups, chi-square tests to compare cross-tabulations and frequencies, and ordinary least squares and logistic regressions to model claims outcomes, payment amounts, and processing time.

Interviews with professionals. Urban received contact information for and sent up to three email invitations to 16 professionals, requesting their participation in a voluntary 60-minute virtual interview.^b A total of 14 professionals participated (an 88 percent response rate), including 6 staff from the compensation program and 8 service providers from community- and legal-based programs. We used a thematic coding structure to synthesize qualitative information from these interviews.

Claimant survey. Although a claimant survey was attempted in Arizona, insufficient responses were received to analyze the claimant survey data.

^a This evaluation has several limitations, similar to other social research. Although we interviewed 14 professionals, the sample size is relatively small, and Arizona has other victim compensation and assistance professionals whom we did not have capacity to interview. Though we received a large amount of Arizona claims data, analysis of it was limited to the fields collected by the compensation program, and one county (Pima) did not provide information on claims decisions, approvals, or reasons for denials. Lastly, for reasons described in endnote 2, insufficient claimant survey data were available for NORC to analyze in Arizona.

^b The interview protocol is attached to the national evaluation report (Hussemann et al. 2024).

Introduction to Victim Compensation in Arizona

Established in 1982, the Arizona Criminal Justice Commission (ACJC) administers both the state victim assistance program and, since 1986, the victim compensation program. ACJC oversees the program by allocating proportionate state and federal funds to each of Arizona's 15 counties, establishing rules for compensation eligibility and coverage, and providing technical assistance when needed.³

Decentralized Structure

Arizona's program is one of only two decentralized victim compensation structures in the United States.⁴ It is the only compensation program that delegates claims investigations to county-level victim compensation coordinators and decisionmaking power to county-level compensation boards. Each county board consists of approximately three to seven⁵ volunteer members from that community who represent a wide range of backgrounds, including everyday professionals (e.g., dentist, funeral director), medical providers, former victims, victim advocates, law enforcement, and tribal representatives.

When asked about the composition of the compensation boards, an interviewed service provider said there should be a mix of diverse professionals including those with previous victim service experience and those without it who "could bring a more neutral eye." Staff we interviewed indicated such diversity was often present, with boards including a retired medical service provider, victim assistance director, tribal foster care representative, funeral director, county executive, and so forth. Interviewed professionals described challenges finding the right volunteers to serve on the board; one shared, "That's a hard volunteer assignment. You're volunteering a large amount of your time to talk about heavy work."

Within each of Arizona's 15 county attorney's offices, a victim compensation coordinator oversees claims investigations, gathers supporting documentation, and presents each claim before (typically monthly) meetings of that county's compensation board. The coordinator functions as the main point of contact for victims and claimants and is responsible for sharing information about the program with victim assistance providers and community members.⁶ The coordinator also works with board members to convene meetings and identifies new volunteers to join the board when needed (typically for terms of three years that can be renewed).

Each county's board makes the decisions regarding compensation eligibility and the payment amounts for eligible claimants, but those decisions must be in accordance with ACJC rules. As the federal administrative authority for Arizona's Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) funding, ACJC establishes the state's compensation program rules and ensures that each county is in compliance with those rules through annual audits. ACJC is operated by the 19-member Arizona Criminal Justice Commission, which decides annually how state compensation funds will be allocated across counties, using a formula that includes a base amount and a reserve fund, according to interviewed compensation staff.

Every quarter, ACJC receives a report indicating payments made across all 15 counties, and each year, ACJC staff complete either a site visit to or desk audit of each county's compensation program.

Funding

Funding for Arizona's compensation program is supported by fines, surcharges, and penalties paid by people who are convicted of a crime in Arizona. State revenue is supplemented by annual federal grants administered by the Office for Victims of Crime. Federal grants in a given year equate to 75 percent of the program's total state payments to victims in the previous two years. Thus, when state revenues and compensation payments decline, so does the federal supplement provided to Arizona (with a two-year lag).

In recent years, the funding for Arizona's compensation program has fluctuated, and it remains lower than what compensation staff believe is needed. Staff report that recent decreases in fines and fees have affected state revenue, with corresponding decreased federal funding. Arizona has worked to stabilize compensation funds through a general appropriation and American Rescue Plan Act supplements. ACJC also works year-round to help counties contain costs and maintain a reserve fund while trying not to compromise the response to victims' needs. Compensation staff indicated that each county is responsible for managing the funds it receives from ACJC, as well as victim restitution funds collected in that county. If needed, ACJC retains the authority to track and reallocate or reutilize any funds that appear to be going unused in a particular year. Two interviewed service providers indicated they would like to see Arizona pay more attention to court-ordered restitution due to victims, investing more effort in pursuing whatever is possible to collect to offset payments by the compensation program and help meet the financial needs of victims.

We've talked about proposing a rule [on restitution collection], perhaps in the future for financial crimes—it is very frustrating. It is hard for people who are [convicted] and getting out of prison to find meaningful work. In my experience, most victims understand that, but they want to get something and not feel dismissed. —Service provider

Funding for a state's victim compensation program also affects the number of staff available to process claims. In Arizona, staffing of each county's program varies but always includes the coordinator and often one or more support staff who are responsible, as mentioned, for investigating each claim for presentation to the compensation board. Each position may work part-time on compensation while also working other county administrative tasks. Four of the six staff we interviewed felt the number of compensation staff for their program was adequate. The other two staff indicated a need for additional administrative support processing claims. One said that although

their program's staffing was sufficient they could benefit from an additional person and had requested such funding from ACJC, but had not "seen a bump in our administrative allocation in at least the last four or five years." Another interviewed staff member said their program definitely needs more support given the burden of increased claim applications and the need to investigate each claim regardless of staff members' own perceptions of its eligibility.

I think my staff is a bit overwhelmed....Everything we get has to go before the board for a decision....The documentation we have to obtain takes a bit of time to get from providers, and we've seen an increase in applications within the last year and a half, so that's also contributed to the need for staffing. –Compensation staff member

Eligibility

ACJC specifies a number of prerequisites for eligibility to receive a compensation award (see Ariz. Admin. Code § 10-4-101), but the basic criteria are that: a qualifying crime occurred in Arizona and resulted in physical or mental injury or death; the victim did not contribute to the crime (often called contributory conduct); the victim was not an escapee from prison, on active warrant, or delinquent in paying a federal or state fine; the crime was reported to law enforcement within 72 hours; the victim cooperated with law enforcement; the victim incurred economic loss not paid by a collateral source; and the claim was submitted within two years of the crime.⁷

Counties vary in their flexibility with allowing "good cause" exceptions to some of these requirements, such as the requirement that the crime be reported within 72 hours. As vocalized by one service provider, "I've made multiple occasions where people were outside the 72 hours, and sometimes the advocate will tell [compensation] why, and Arizona does a very good job of considering those exceptions and understanding that it's very common that victims delay reporting." A few staff and providers, however, expressed concern over boards' interpretation of contributory conduct. As one provider vocalized: "My biggest complaint in my experience is that I find that the board... can be judgmental about what they think a victim should have done in a certain situation or how a victim should have acted."

ACJC is currently contemplating large-scale rule changes, two of which would affect rules regarding contributory conduct and cooperation with law enforcement. These changes are being considered in response to anticipated VOCA changes,⁸ and also changes requested by Arizona victims and advocacy agencies. ACJC is "in the beginning stages of analyzing each suggested change to determine the impact to victims, program costs in victim compensation, and program costs to administer the requested changes," according to an interviewee.

Perceptions of Arizona's Compensation Structure

Compensation staff and some service providers cite several advantages to Arizona's decentralized compensation program structure. Foremost, it allows for claims decisionmaking by those most familiar with a local region's victimization experiences and culturally relevant resources and needs. One staff member described how compensation board members are "very familiar with the resources in their community, very in tune with the services, and know the people within their communities." Similarly, one service provider indicated that local representation means greater understanding of the challenges and services in a region, particularly compared with anyone operating out of the state capital, as do most centralized state victim compensation programs.

Along this same line, most staff we spoke with believe localized operation empowers the compensation coordinator to directly connect with service providers to improve awareness of the program and engagement with victims and, when necessary, negotiate payment amounts. They felt this personal connection is less possible with state-run compensation systems and even those in Arizona's largest counties. Another interviewed staff member highlighted the importance of building trust through these connections when working with tribal reservations (there are 22 federally recognized tribes in Arizona). They described how relationships with tribal leaders are critical to obtaining information, such as police reports, to support claims investigations. Before they were able to build this trust, it was difficult to approve some tribal compensation claims.

Compensation staff also indicated that Arizona's decentralized structure enables coordinators to interact more frequently with victims themselves. Given Arizona's size, locally based compensation programs make the program more physically accessible to both urban and rural victims. Even though virtual connections can be possible, as one staff member told us, "there's an assumption that all people have access to a smartphone or a computer or Wi-Fi and that's just not the case." Arizona's decentralized structure empowers victims to be able to walk into the local compensation office and to attend open meetings of the local compensation board to see their claim discussed.⁹ Similarly, a service provider we interviewed said Arizona's structure empowers counties by increasing local interest in understanding and responding to victimization in their community.

Arizona is a big state with lots of rural areas and long drives. Because of that, oftentimes I think it makes it a lot easier for victims to come forward if they can actually go someplace.
—Compensation staff member

There are also some challenges with Arizona's decentralized compensation structure, according to some interviewed staff and service providers. The first is the potential for inconsistencies across county boards' interpretation of state rules, particularly those regarding reasons for claims denials.

One staff member acknowledged that inconsistencies statewide “might make it confusing if a victim or claimant happens to have an application in multiple counties for different victimizations.” For example, a staff member in one county said their board decided to deny all claims for any victimization (including homicide) that occurs to someone involved in a drug sale transaction, because the board interpreted those situations as evidence of contributory conduct.¹⁰ This same person said other county boards have not interpreted the contributory conduct rule that way, showing more compassion for when “mom needs to bury her son.”

Similarly, another compensation staff member indicated that the board members can sometimes inject their own perceptions of how a victim should behave into the decisionmaking process: “The boards, because they’re members of the community, [can] have an expectation that the way they would react [is] how people in our community should react or present themselves. They have this vision for our community, and I don’t always think that the victims we’re dealing with have those.” One service provider wondered if a state-led model would be stronger, for reasons of continuity and consistency.

I don't know that [Arizona's decentralized structure] would be necessarily a negative, because it's really the inverse of the benefit of knowing your community, of having some inconsistencies statewide. –Compensation staff member

Another concern expressed about Arizona’s program structure has to do with its placement in county attorney’s offices and a reluctance of victims who fear or mistrust police to seek help. One staff member acknowledged that “sometimes there’s a fear of victims approaching county attorney’s offices and I think that may limit [access].” However, they also saw the program’s placement as a positive because for victims who do come forward “there’s a coordination of care for the victim that wouldn’t happen otherwise...you have the victim from beginning to end with that court case and all the appeals and everything else that county attorney’s office is there for.”

Lastly, some staff and service providers shared concerns about claim processing times, given that all decisions are made at the board level. Boards typically meet monthly or less frequently, and the meetings themselves can be very long for larger counties. Although boards discuss all claims presented by the coordinator, more information is sometimes needed before a decision can be made. Consequently, for claims that arrive shortly after a board meeting has occurred, the wait can be longer. Notably, some state-run compensation programs experience similar challenges with processing efficiency when all decisions must be approved at the top.

Victims and Claimants in Arizona

People who directly experience a crime (“victims”) and those who file for compensation (“claimants”) are not always the same individuals. Compensation is limited to certain crimes and out-of-pocket costs, and not all victims who are eligible apply. But understanding victims’ needs and victimization trends across a state helps in evaluating the comprehensiveness, effectiveness, and accessibility of the state’s compensation program.

Victim Needs and Costs

We asked Arizona victim assistance providers about the victimization experiences they see in their communities. Similar to other regions nationally, staff report that all counties saw increases in domestic violence assaults beginning with COVID. They also saw a rise in homicides overall, including those related to domestic violence.¹¹ Staff in one county saw an increase in human trafficking as well. Service providers noted rises in financial crimes including identity theft, given increased reliance on technology, and also an increase in robberies and theft since COVID. One service provider described a rise in campus sexual violence against women in their county’s college town.

As mentioned, Arizona has a large population of people from federally recognized tribes who live on and off tribal reservations. Rural counties with tribal lands experience some of the highest rates of poverty, not only in Arizona but across the nation, according to compensation program staff and the University of Arizona’s Center for Rural Health.¹² This can present challenges physically accessing compensation offices (because of limited public transportation) and given historical experiences of harm by and distrust of US law enforcement and government entities. Service providers describe high rates of homelessness among Native American populations, increasing their exposure to violence on the streets; one provider mentioned the most frequent victimization they saw among people experiencing homelessness was sexual violence and domestic violence among people who knew each other.

In addition to housing needs, particularly those of people experiencing domestic violence, service providers also said victims have increasingly been seeking mental health services, in part because of a rise in its social acceptability. Costs of mental health services and medical expenses, when not covered by insurance, were cited as the most expensive and frequent victim needs.

I think people are more open now to seeking out mental health services. I think more people are open to going to counseling or getting treatment, just that recognizing that “maybe I do need help dealing with all this.” –Service provider

Compensation programs are a valuable resource for crime victims, but they are the payers of last resort, with finite resources and strict limitations on what they cover.¹³ As a result, victims' ability to recover from the costs of crime often depends on their access to insurance and health care, other social programs (such as worker's compensation), community resources, and direct court-ordered payments. As one staff member indicated, "I think that there's a great need for additional financial safety nets for victims. We provide a very small fraction of the assistance that victims need."

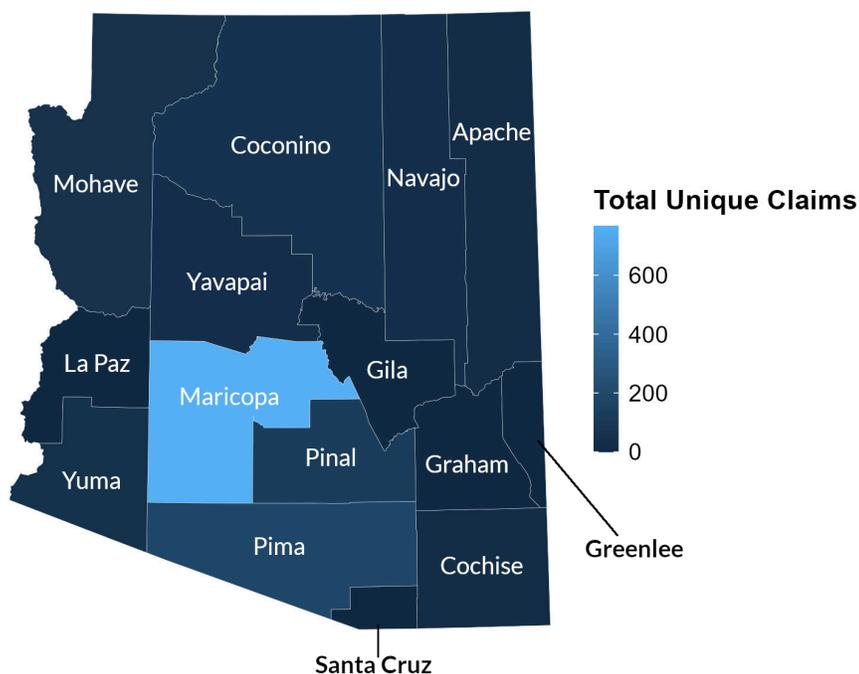
Overall, compensation staff and providers shared mixed perspectives on their program's ability to help victims financially recover. Two providers said the program is strong at covering funeral expenses, which has been particularly important to families who have lost a loved one. As one provider said, "If they didn't have life insurance or anything in place to cover those expenses, then it falls on the family to cover that." In addition, one staff member and one provider said Arizona's compensation program is helpful for medical expenses when the injuries are recoverable (e.g., broken arm). But they felt the program is not sufficient at compensating for longer-term mental health needs and catastrophic injuries. One provider said, "Our hope is always that for catastrophic injuries, victim comp can cover the short term, and we can get them on disability or something to cover the rest."

Compensation Claimants

ACJC provided Urban with three years of compensation data (2019 to 2021), covering costs related to 24 different crimes and 5,354 unique claims from people impacted by crime. Figure 1 shows the total number of unique claims (nonduplicative) for victim compensation received in each of Arizona's 15 counties in 2021. The county with the most claims received, 767 total, was Arizona's most populous, Maricopa (population 4.5 million in 2021). By contrast, the county with the fewest claims, 1 total, was Santa Cruz (population 48 thousand in 2021).

FIGURE 1

Total Unique Claims for Victim Compensation Received in Arizona in 2021, by County

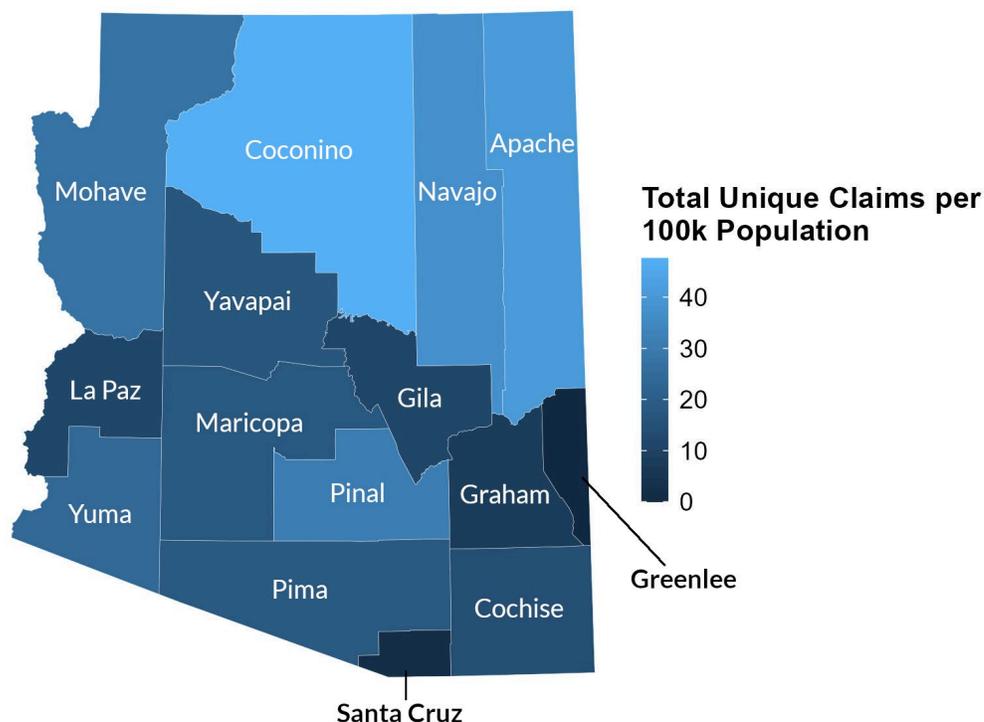


Source: Urban Institute analysis of ACJC victim compensation data and US Census Bureau American Community Survey data.

To understand the proportionate number of claims by county, figure 2 presents the total unique claims received in 2021 per 100,000 people. With this population adjustment, an alternative perspective emerges. Counties with the highest percentages of people identifying as Native American—specifically Apache (74 percent), Navajo (44 percent), and Coconino (26 percent) Counties¹⁴—submitted proportionately more claims in 2021 than other counties in Arizona. Rates of violent victimization among Native Americans are one of the highest of all race and ethnicities.¹⁵ Although unrecognized for hundreds of years, untold numbers of Indigenous women and girls have been murdered or gone missing, including many in Arizona.¹⁶ Furthermore, in recent years a behavioral health fraud scheme has specifically targeted vulnerable Native Americans in Arizona (and New Mexico and South Dakota), recruiting those seeking a sober living or group home under false pretenses—amounting to human trafficking—to illegally collect state Medicaid funds while leaving victims untreated and unprotected.¹⁷ These experiences may help explain the disproportionate claim submissions from tribal counties.

FIGURE 2

Total Unique Claims Received in Arizona in 2021 per 100,000 People, by County



Source: Urban Institute analysis of ACJC victim compensation data and US Census Bureau American Community Survey data.

Overall, the demographics of Arizona claimants also help illustrate the program’s usage and can be affected by the types of crimes covered, help-seeking behaviors, and access to information. As shown in table 1, female claimants were somewhat overrepresented compared with their share of the state population (59 percent compared with 50 percent), whereas male claimants were underrepresented (41 percent compared with 50 percent). With regard to race and ethnicity as recorded in Arizona claims and population data, the claimant data showed disproportionately higher percentages of people of color, including American Indian/Alaskan Native (7 percent compared with 4 percent), Black/African American (10 percent compared with 5 percent), and Hispanic or Latino (38 percent compared with 31 percent). By contrast, White Non-Latino/Caucasian claimants were underrepresented compared with their share of the state population (38 percent compared with 53 percent). Furthermore, claimant data captured that 6 percent of victims had a disability and 40 percent did not, while 54 percent did not report such information. Age information for claimants was unfortunately not available in the claims data provided by Arizona.

TABLE 1

Demographics of Claimants Who Used Arizona's Victim Compensation Program

	Percentage of claimants (2021)	Percentage of Arizona population (2021)
Sex/gender		
Female	59%	50%
Male	41%	50%
Unknown	0.6%	N/A
Race/ethnicity		
American Indian/Alaskan Native	7%	4%
Asian	1%	4%
Black/African American	10%	5%
Hispanic or Latino	38%	31%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	0.2%	0.2%
White Non-Latino/Caucasian	38%	53%
Some Other Race	1%	13%
Multiple Races	4%	14%
Age		
Under 20	N/A	25%
20 to 34	N/A	20%
35 to 54	N/A	24%
55 and older	N/A	30%

Source: Urban Institute analysis of ACJC victim compensation data and US Census Bureau American Community Survey data.

Notes: N/A = not available. $n=1,398$ for 2021 claims.

Across all counties in Arizona, the most commonly reported victimization types in claimant data from 2019 to 2021 were assault, homicide, child sexual abuse, sexual assault, robbery, and vehicular crimes. In the most recent year, 2021, the percentage of claims submitted for these crimes were as follows ($n=1,398$): 35 percent assault, 20 percent homicide, 15 percent child sexual abuse, 7 percent sexual assault, 5 percent vehicular crimes, and 3 percent robbery. Arizona's claim submission form asks applicants to separately flag whether the victimization was related to domestic violence or family violence, which 23 percent of claimants did in 2021 (down slightly from 2020 when 27 percent indicated domestic violence). However, these percentages likely underestimate the amount of domestic/family violence claims, as interviewed compensation staff said that box is not always checked even when applicable. One staff member reflected, "The only way to identify a true domestic violence crime in the system is through the DV indicator that we receive from them. So if they forget to indicate that, we're not going to be able to capture it. But then we talk with them, they talk about the number of those assault situations coming up again and again."

Awareness of the Compensation Program

The claims data provided by ACJC showed victim assistance programs as the most common referral source for claims received by the compensation program, helping with the submission of 57 percent of claims in 2019, 61 percent of claims in 2020, and 56 percent of claims in 2021. The next-most-

common referral source was law enforcement agencies, accounting for 13, 12, and 17 percent of claims submitted in 2019, 2020, and 2021, respectively. Other referral sources ranged widely from prosecutors to medical service providers to social service agencies, each accounting for 5 percent or fewer of the submitted claims, and a catchall category of “other” for which more detailed information was not available.

Virtually all compensation staff and service providers we interviewed said that victims often do not become aware of the compensation program until after they have experienced a crime and typically when they are working with a community- or legal-system-based victim advocate. This was true across the country, based on the National Survey of Victim Compensation Administrators that NORC administered as part of this larger study. When asked why some crime victims do not apply for compensation, over three-quarters of state administrators indicated that victims are not aware of the compensation program (Hussemann et al. 2024).

As one Arizona staff member shared with us, “I often hear, ‘I never knew this program existed,’ so I don’t think awareness is out there.” Another staff member reflected that the program only has limited “resources to promote while still keeping a robust fund for what it’s needed for, and some people don’t want to know because they think it doesn’t affect them.” A few staff and providers mentioned that law enforcement and crisis responders hand out victims’ rights pamphlets that contain information about the compensation program, and the online portal for submitting applications has been helpful in making the program more accessible to some victims.

Compensation staff provide training to victim assistance providers and prosecutor offices regarding the compensation program and have been increasing outreach to tribal reservations, according to interviewed staff. Staff indicated they conduct compensation training at police academies, to new victim advocates, and to shelters, funeral homes, and community-based organizations. In addition, the victim assistance agency within ACJC requires that all VOCA-funded programs in Arizona identify and train someone in their organization on victim compensation. All service providers we interviewed said they routinely provide information about victim compensation to victims they encounter and, if needed, answer questions or provide a referral to the county victim compensation coordinator.

Probably the best example of coordination is that for any victim assistance agency, they must identify a victim comp coordinator who takes the training provided through the compensation program. [They must be] able to guide staff on how to fill out applications and the coordinator can answer any questions the applicant may have. —Service provider

Claims Processing in Arizona

As mentioned, the victim compensation coordinator in each of Arizona's 15 county attorney's offices oversees the investigation and processing of claims, which involves reviewing applications, communicating with victims and service providers to obtain any necessary additional materials, and requesting police reports if not included. Some coordinators have support staff who assist with claims processing. All claims are presented to county compensation boards for determination as to eligibility and any payment to be made. Claimants have the right to be present when the board is making these assessments, and they have a right to appeal any decision to ACJC.

Claimants have always been able to submit claims by mailing in a paper application and, as of two years ago, they can also use an online portal to submit claims electronically. One compensation staff member said the online portal “was in the works during the pandemic [and] went live shortly after.” Interviewed professionals appreciate the online portal. One staff member reported having seen “good success rates in the online portal and...[we] now receive more applications through the online portal than paper applications.” Service providers also embrace the opportunity to submit online applications when assisting claimants, so long as the victim has the technology to be able to electronically sign an application.

Key Numbers: Compensation Claims Made in Arizona, 2019-2021	
Average annual number of claims	1,785
Average approval rate	87%
Average total payment (mean)	\$3,026

Claims Outcomes

Across three years of claims data we analyzed, an average of 87 percent of submitted claims were approved, with no differences by race or ethnicity and a statistically significant but small difference by gender.¹⁸ For the 13 percent of claims that were denied, we found some differences by gender and race regarding reasons for those denials. Compared with female claimants whose claims were denied, male claimants who were denied were significantly more likely to have contributory conduct cited as a reason, even after adjusting for crime type.¹⁹ With regard to race, contributory conduct was more likely to be cited as a reason for denying Black claimants than white claimants.²⁰

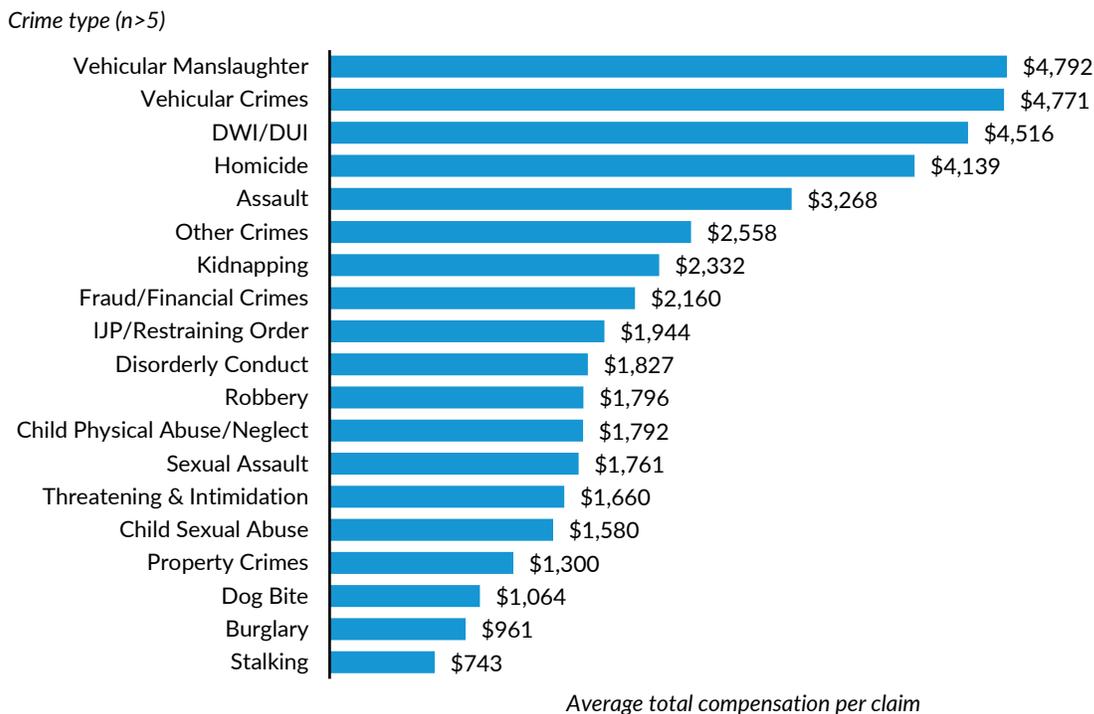
With regard to processing times for claims, from 2019 to 2021, the average time from receiving a claim to having it ready for board review was 13 days. This turnaround is a credit to comprehensive submitted claims and investigatory speed of compensation staff. But the average time from receiving a claim to having a decision made by the compensation board was 45 days, with the additional time driven by the typically monthly frequency of board meetings. Once decided, however, claims took over three additional months, 107 days on average, to result in payment. Altogether, successful claimants in Arizona waited over 150 days (five months) after submitting a claim until the day they received payment. This timeline explains some of the frustrations with inefficiency that interviewed

professionals vocalized. Of note, we examined whether these time frames differed by claimants' gender, race/ethnicity, or gender interacting with race/ethnicity and found no sizable differences.²¹

The average payment across the three years was \$3,026 but with a sizable range from a minimum of \$3 to a maximum of \$28,049. There were some differences in total payment amounts by race and gender, with Black claimants receiving higher total payments on average than white claimants (\$4,369 compared with \$2,962) and male claimants receiving higher payments on average compared with female claimants (\$3,811 compared with \$2,486). Controlling for the type of crime experienced, however, accounted for the race difference and reduced the size of the gender difference, as Black and male claimants were more likely to experience homicide.

As shown in figure 3, total compensation paid by crime type also varied widely. On average, victims of vehicular manslaughter, vehicular crimes, and DWI/DUI received the most compensation between 2019 and 2021. Homicide covictims (e.g., family members) and assault victims received the next-highest payments. By contrast, victims of stalking, burglary, dog bites, and property crimes received the least compensation payment amounts, on average.

FIGURE 3
Average Total Compensation per Claim Issued by Arizona's Victim Compensation Program, by Crime Type, 2019–2021



Source: Urban Institute.

Notes: Crime types with 5 or more unique paid claims are included. Excludes human trafficking claims (n=3) in 2019; arson claims (n=2) in 2019; child pornography claims (n=4) in 2019, 2020, and 2021; and road rage claims (n=3) in 2020 and 2021.

Perceptions of Claims Processing

Providers also shared their perceptions of claim processing times and claims outcomes. Two service providers reported conflicting perspectives: one felt it did not take too long, because as an advocate they felt victims would have complained if it did, whereas another said “I think the decisions themselves are reasonable, but the amount of time is really hard. The board only meets once per month so if you miss that month you have to wait a month. It may take months on top of that to be reimbursed, there’s folks who got sent to collections because they weren’t able to pay their bill.”

When considering reasons for claim denials, two providers and one staff member indicated that board members’ perceptions of contributory conduct had presented problems, but all felt that with increasing education and trauma-informed understanding such denials were no longer a serious issue. As one provider said, “Years ago, there was a lot of contributory conduct, where people were being denied because, ‘Oh you were incapacitated, but you had cocaine in your system,’ but that was years ago, and I don’t hear that many of those types of stories.” Similarly, an interviewed staff member shared that “in the past couple of years, we’ve had a better understanding of how, as advocates we get it, but as board members who don’t routinely work with people who have trauma, we are much more open to hearing what victims say their reasoning was and try to put ourselves in victims’ shoes.”

Two providers working with tribal populations, however, indicated they had experienced several denials of applications that had somewhat discouraged them from pointing victims to compensation as an option. As one provider described, “I filled out several applications, which largely were unsuccessful for various reasons.... One was: there was no funding. One was: they didn’t report the crime within three days. Another was for mental health expenses, and they said no, because the prosecutor declined to take the case further, so in the eyes of the state of Arizona they were no longer a victim.”

Interviewed professionals also mentioned that very few of their clients go through the appeals process but that a change—approximately five years ago—in the appeals decisionmaker had helped. Appeals had originally returned to the very compensation board that denied a claim, while the change placed appeals decisionmaking in the hands of ACJC instead.

Effectiveness of Arizona’s Victim Compensation Program

To examine the effectiveness of Arizona’s compensation program we analyzed responses from interviewed professionals working in the program and those in victim service agencies across the state, as well as the ACJC claims data. We first sought to understand how Arizona professionals define a successful victim compensation program. Collectively, the professionals we interviewed viewed an effective program as having the following components:²²

- **Accessibility and equity:** The program is known and accessible to all victims of crime, operating equitably with cultural sensitivity and an understanding of diverse victims’ needs.
- **Comprehensiveness:** The program fully meets the needs of all victims and victims’ families and is transparent in the process, using all available financial allocations for victims.

- **Efficiency:** The program responds to all victims' claims in a timely manner, with prompt updates on the status of claims and more immediate approval and payments to eligible victims.

Perceptions of Accessibility and Equity

The accessibility and equity of a crime victim compensation program depends on the program's eligibility and coverage requirements, awareness of the program in diverse communities, outreach efforts by the program, the type and ease of the application process, and resources available to assist victims in making claims. Five professionals we interviewed cited accessibility and equity as key to a successful compensation program. As one staff member said, "Anyone who has been a victim of crime who is eligible [should] know about the program," while one provider elevated equity, saying the program should be "culturally sensitive, understanding the needs of victims."

In my experience, I haven't seen...particular inequities here in Arizona, but that's not saying it doesn't happen. And I'm kind of alarmed by the numbers I'm seeing around the country, with denials being proportionally higher among Brown and Black communities.
—Service provider

Conducting outreach to diverse populations and incorporating appropriate accommodations are critical to meeting these accessibility and equity goals in Arizona. Professionals said this includes tailoring compensation services to people who speak different languages, "whether it's somebody on staff that signs or speaks Spanish." Given the large number of federally recognized tribes in Arizona, it is also important for programs to engage more frequently and intentionally with tribal advocates to reach potentially eligible tribal victims. Other interviewed service providers mentioned that an accessible and equitable program would recognize challenges some victims face with regard to reporting their experiences to law enforcement, given experiences of trauma and historical distrust of police. One provider said, "I also think incarcerated people and people who owe fines should not be excluded" from compensation. As mentioned above, some staff and providers expressed concerns over how contributory conduct had been interpreted by some compensation boards, leading to inconsistencies between different counties and the potential for victim blaming.

With regard to the success of Arizona's compensation program at achieving accessibility and equity, the professionals we interviewed gave mixed assessments, presenting both strengths of the program and recommendations for improvement. Several professionals, as mentioned above, appreciate that the decentralized structure of Arizona's program increases makes it more physically and culturally accessible to victims. The decentralized structure allows for claims decisionmaking by people most familiar with locally and culturally relevant needs, and empowers the compensation

coordinator to connect with tribal advocates and build the relationships necessary to facilitate trust, which can in turn help reach more tribal victims and substantiate claims submitted by tribal victims.

Staff also said the decentralized model seems a little more accessible and personal for victims and makes it easier for rural victims to get to a compensation office in such a large state. And as mentioned, the claimant data showed percentages of claims submitted by people of color that were higher than their share of Arizona's population, which indicates a fair number of diverse claimants are accessing the program.

The county has a direct source of representation with the victims they're serving. I think that's a success...I don't think that program could be represented better anywhere else than where it is. I would think that's a success for [victims] as well. –Service provider

The potential for inconsistencies in boards' interpretation of eligibility across counties, however, creates space for inequities. One provider shared that certain counties are affected by political perspectives that affect the policies in place: "Some counties, it's like going back 20 years. Police rule a lot of things, and I don't think their victim compensation does a very good job compared to other places." By contrast, one staff member described how "good cause" exceptions are used flexibly to accommodate needs in special claims cases: "If the victim explains why they didn't apply within two years, it is extremely rare for the board to deny."

As mentioned, there have been challenges helping tribal victims submit successful claims. More specific engagement and training with tribal advocates would be beneficial, and ACJC has recently been increasing attempts to accomplish this. One staff member credited their numerous years in the county at helping develop strong interpersonal relationships with tribal advocates, improving outreach to tribal victims and processing of claims from tribal claimants. They are attempting to build a plan of succession so that when they leave their position, future staff can benefit from these strong connections. Some but not all relevant counties have representation from tribal leaders on the compensation board, which one staff member highlighted as important "because we have to prove traditional healing as a counseling expense and that is very complex and unique to each specific tribe."

ACJC has been around for years and it's just now reaching tribal advocates.... Being more visible within tribal communities.... There needs to be more understanding and awareness, especially to tribal advocates, because they are the ones who know the victims who need compensation. –Service provider

Comprehensiveness

Five of the 14 professionals we interviewed described the comprehensiveness of the victim compensation program as a core goal. Staff defined a successful victim compensation program as one that “fully funds the victims’ needs from beginning to end as long as they need them,” while another said a program should “assist as many victims of crime and their families as it can.” Staff and providers also felt it was important for a strong program to “fully exhaust” the available allocations. One staff member said “there shouldn’t be counties with unspent funds,” while a provider said, “If we had compensation money left over, that would feel like a disservice to crime victims in some way.”

Overall, interviewed professionals shared mixed perspectives on their county program’s comprehensiveness at helping victims financially recover. Compensation staff, who arguably understand the funding limitations most intimately, expressed more positive perceptions about their ability to meet victims’ needs given available resources. Some professionals clarified that the program is strongest when reimbursing victims for funeral expenses and at meeting short-term mental health needs and costs for “recoverable” injuries. The program was challenged, by contrast, to meet the financial needs of victims who experience more catastrophic injuries and have longer-term mental health needs.

We are a good, solid B- if we were to grade ourselves. We do good work with what we have, there are pieces we are missing... With the money we have, we’re doing good things. I just wish it could be more... An A+ would require the state as a whole to add in additional resources and manpower to make that happen. –Compensation staff member

As mentioned, the need to invest in restitution collection came up in some interviews with staff and providers. One provider suggested there be a restitution advocate in every compensation program to help increase efforts to pay back costs reimbursed to victims by the program. By contrast, one staff member reported that their county had success in collecting restitution, increasing their reserve funds.

Efficiency

Interviewed staff and providers both cited the efficiency of the compensation program as an ideal goal, with efficiency in the turnaround time for victims to receive notice of the status of their claim and a “system where folks can get approved and funded within a week or two.” Challenges with efficiency (discussed above) include the fact that compensation coordinators must process all the claims they receive and all eligibility decisions must be made by the compensation board, even when the coordinator knows a claim is ineligible. One staff member said they were “spending a whole lot of

time on claims that aren't eligible." That person indicated it would be more efficient for them to at least be permitted to determine emergency awards. Service providers agreed with the push to process claims more efficiently; as one provider shared,

I know that victims feel like having the applications reviewed once a month...that's a long, long process. And I have seen where we've submitted the application...and we got it right before the review board, so it seems like it was a fast process. And then I've had where we just missed that review board meeting, so they had to wait a month just to get it reviewed and have them request information. I've seen both sides of it.

Providers suggested that the efficiency of Arizona's program could be increased if the board meetings could occur more frequently than monthly, perhaps even twice a month, based on need. One provider said, "I think it's a great program, it is something that families benefit from. I would just say, you know, I guess maybe the response time could be quicker." Some interviewed staff also wanted clearer communication to victims about eligibility criteria to help limit claims for things the program could not cover. One staff member described the importance of conveying to victims that they must have experienced a compensable injury to receive payment.

I guess maybe the response time could be quicker. Families that are reaching out for this, and I would say especially for families that are victims of homicides, that is something that's a little more immediate, because they do have...from the medical examiner's office, you have to pick a funeral home right now, you have three days...so they have all this pressure...without the financial means to do it. –Service provider

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this evaluation of Arizona's state victim compensation program, we synthesized findings from the perspectives of 14 interviewed staff and victim assistance providers as well as three years of deidentified claims data shared by ACJC. We conclude that the Arizona compensation program serves an important role helping victims address the financial burden of crime, and that it has several strengths and has made recent improvements, such as opening an online portal. The program's uniquely decentralized structure allows for local-level familiarity with victims' needs and available resources. But the program also experiences some challenges with efficiency in processing claims and inconsistencies across counties in interpretations of ACJC requirements. ACJC is currently undergoing a thorough review in response to input from victim advocates, compensation staff, and anticipated federal rule changes. This effort may result in clearer written guidelines leading to greater consistency across counties. Our evaluation would support these efforts, as would the perspectives shared by

professionals we interviewed across the state. With expanded eligibility and more consistent approvals across Arizona will come a need for increased funding at both the state and federal levels. Thus, based on the information and data examined in this study, we offer the following recommendations:

- **Provide more federal and state funding to the Arizona compensation program** to increase the administrative support needed for staff to process claims and engage in increased program outreach to diverse victims, including tribal populations. Additional VOCA and state resources are needed to meet the increasing coverage and costs of victims' out-of-pocket expenses.
- **Establish clearer written guidelines that minimize inconsistencies across counties**, particularly in interpreting conduct and behaviors by claimant victims, such as contributory conduct and law enforcement cooperation. We acknowledge that ACJC is already assessing changes such as these and many others, in anticipation of federal rule changes.
- **Empower all compensation coordinators with emergency eligibility determinations**, to minimize the burden on victims who need immediate financial coverage (e.g., funeral expenses) and to reduce demands on the time of the voluntary board members.
- **Continue and intensify outreach and engagement to historically underserved populations**, working closely with tribal advocates and other community-based organizations. ACJC could hire a statewide outreach coordinator or establish a mobile unit to reach the most rural and unhoused victim populations. Outreach should include training and technical support.
- **Continue exploring innovative and efficient mechanisms for improving the program** similar to the recent launch of the online portal.

Many of these findings and recommendations align with those emerging nationally in conversations about how to improve victim compensation programs (Alliance for Safety and Justice 2022; Hussemann et al. 2024; Maki and Warnken 2023). We are grateful that programs such as Arizona's remain open to evaluation and eager to understand how to continue expanding and improving their accessibility, responsiveness, and coverage to provide meaningful benefits to victims.

Notes

¹ Visit www.urban.org and www.norc.org for additional products resulting from this national study.

² In Arizona, a claimant survey was attempted but insufficient responses were received to analyze the claimant survey data. NORC developed a letter requesting Arizona claimants' voluntary and confidential participation in an online survey about their claims' experiences with the compensation program. Arizona declined to share claimant contact information with NORC to facilitate its direct outreach to potential respondents. Instead, Arizona compensation staff mailed NORC's claimant survey "invitation letters" to claimants along with the decision letters about their claims for victim compensation. Because victim compensation is administered at the county-level in Arizona, each county managed its own mailing of invitation letters and the frequency at which survey invitation letters were shared with claimants varied across the state. Due to the method by which the survey was administered in Arizona, participation rates were particularly low, and we lacked information about when and if survey letters were shared with claimants. To increase response rates the incentive was increased from \$30 to \$40 and a QR code was added to the invitation letter; however, these adjustments had no impact

on responses. In sum, between July 2022 and February 2023, a total of 1,053 claimants in Arizona were mailed invitation letters and only 32 (3.0 percent) completed the survey. Consequently, insufficient data were available to analyze the claimant survey data in Arizona.

- ³ “Victim Services: Compensation Program,” Arizona Criminal Justice Commission, accessed July 1, 2024, <https://www.azcjc.gov/Programs/Victim-Services/Compensation-Program>.
- ⁴ Colorado has the other decentralized victim compensation structure, operating its programs out of the state’s 22 judicial districts. “OVP: Crime Victim Compensation,” Colorado Division of Criminal Justice, accessed July 1, 2024, <https://dcj.colorado.gov/dcj-offices/victims-programs/crime-victim-compensation>.
- ⁵ The largest counties have over 10 board members, but only require a majority quorum to convene.
- ⁶ “Victim Services: Compensation Program,” Arizona Criminal Justice Commission.
- ⁷ Ariz. Admin. Code § 10-4-101, https://apps.azsos.gov/public_services/Title_10/10-04.pdf.
- ⁸ For compensation programs across the country, two eligibility requirements—that of no contributory conduct and that of cooperation with law enforcement—have been linked to reports by victims, advocacy organizations, and investigatory news as leading to racial disparities in victim compensation (for instance, see Lauer and Catalini 2024 and Maki and Warnken 2023). In 2024 the Office for Victims of Crime proposed the first revisions to the VOCA Compensation Guidelines in over 20 years with intentional focus on improving diverse victims’ access to compensation and equity of the program’s administration (Rose 2024). Accordingly, OVC’s new rule will restrict the use of contributory conduct and cooperation with law enforcement as reasons for compensation claim denial (Ruebman et al. 2024).
- ⁹ Claims are discussed with identifying information redacted to protect victims’ identities and not influence board decisions.
- ¹⁰ ACJC is currently contemplating several large-scale rule changes in response to anticipated federal rule changes and requests from victims and advocacy agencies. Two of the requested changes would affect rules regarding contributory conduct and cooperation with law enforcement.
- ¹¹ Given that Arizona’s maximum award for homicide claims is \$25,000, one staff member indicated that even a single homicide in a smaller rural county could dramatically reduce funds available for other compensation claims. Arizona underwent a needs assessment a few years ago to compare reported crime and associated expenses with county-level statistics, which identified a \$12 million shortfall, according to an interviewed program staff member.
- ¹² “Poverty in Rural Arizona,” University of Arizona Center for Rural Health, accessed July 1, 202, <https://crh.arizona.edu/resources/interactive-data-visualizations/poverty-rural-arizona>.
- ¹³ Being a “payer of last resort” means the compensation only reimburses victims for costs that are not covered or paid by health insurance, restitution, workers compensation, or any other source.
- ¹⁴ National Institute of Minority Health and Health Disparities, https://hdpulse.nimhd.nih.gov/data-portal/social/table?socialtopic=070&socialtopic_options=social_6&demo=00023&demo_options=pop_12&race=00&race_options=raceall_1&sex=0&sex_options=sexboth_1&age=001&age_options=ageall_1&statefips=04&statefips_options=area_states.
- ¹⁵ Association on American Indian Affairs, <https://www.indian-affairs.org/violenceagainstnatives.html>.
- ¹⁶ Reducing Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, https://ccj.asu.edu/sites/default/files/rovv-lab/files/ASU_MMIWG_report_November_2020.pdf
- ¹⁷ National Council of Urban Indian Health, <https://ncuih.org/2024/01/03/hhs-provides-update-on-suspected-behavioral-health-treatment-center-fraud-targeting-native-americans-in-arizona/>
- ¹⁸ Women had a slightly higher approval rate than men: 88 percent compared with 85 percent.
- ¹⁹ This disparity was true in 2019, 2020, and 2021 and for both the largest county (Maricopa) as well as other counties.

- ²⁰ This disparity was only true in 2019 and across all three years combined (2019 to 2021) and all Arizona counties combined, but did not reach statistical significance ($p < .05$) in other individual years or any single county.
- ²¹ Two statistically significant differences emerged showing approximately 20 days longer between the time a claim was received and the first payment made for Hispanic/Latinx claimants (175 days) compared to white claimants (154 days) and for female claimants (169 days) compared to male claimants (151 days). These differences reduced when controlling for crime type but remained statistically significant for Hispanic/Latinx compared to white claimants among both male and female claimants. No other significant race or gender differences emerged.
- ²² One provider also defined a successful program as one that is trauma-informed, where program coordinators and board members understand how victims react to trauma, avoid victim blaming, and respect the vulnerabilities of trauma survivors.

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