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GUEST COMMENTARY

The invisible crisis killing Native American youth

By Troy A. Eid

Guest Commentary

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Troy A. Eid is chairman of the Indian Law and Order Commission. He is scheduled to testify before the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs on Feb. 12. (Hyoung Chang, Denver Post file)

Nearly two dozen military veterans kill themselves every day in the United States, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs. Post-traumatic stress disorder is often to blame.

President Obama has rightly demanded better care for returning vets who suffer from PTSD. He recently invited Wayne Telford — father of U.S. Air Force Sgt. Brooke Caffrey of Grand Junction, who committed suicide in 2012 after her fourth tour of duty — to attend the State of the Union address.

Yet there's another massive PTSD tragedy in Colorado and across our country. It generates virtually zero public attention because it concerns what may be the most vulnerable group of our citizens: Native Americans and Alaska Natives. Because they're exposed so frequently to violent crime, an astonishing one in four Native American juveniles currently suffers from PTSD.

That's the same PTSD rate as returning veterans from Afghanistan and Iraq.

We're losing an entire generation of Native American and Alaska Natives, the fastest-growing group of young people in the United States. According to the recently released

findings of a presidential commission, Native juveniles experience violent crime rates up to 10 times the national average. One in three Native American girls will be raped in their lifetimes.

In Alaska, where services to Natives are limited or non-existent, sexual assault rates are much higher. The National Indian Law and Order Commission visited Alaska communities where every single woman reported she'd been raped. When a 12-year old girl was raped and murdered in one village last year, it took Alaska troopers four days to respond.

The commission has concluded that the federal government is overwhelmingly to blame for this tragedy. We recently reported to the president and Congress on the unacceptable violent crime rates afflicting the 566 federally recognized Native American tribes.

The commission spent the past three years in the field as part of a congressionally ordered inquiry — nine volunteers appointed by Republican and Democratic leaders alike. We unanimously concluded it's time for Washington, D.C., to repeal outmoded laws and policies that keep tribes from protecting their citizens, especially their youth, and to let tribes make and enforce their own laws to protect all U.S. citizens on Indian lands.

Since the 1800s, federal officials have usurped tribes' rights to make and enforce criminal laws, or have enlisted some state governments to do so as an unfunded mandate. The result of this federal takeover of local governments: Average life expectancies on many Indian reservations, fueled by violence and suicide, are the lowest in the Western Hemisphere.

Is it any wonder that Native youth are killing themselves in numbers that exceed all other ethnic and racial groups?

Fortunately, there's reason for hope. In places where the federal government provides great freedom so tribal police and courts can govern themselves, violent crime rates are being cut, youth and women are finally getting more support, and the civil rights of all U.S. citizens — Native and non-Native — are receiving greater respect.

Congress is now preparing for hearings on the commission's report, " A Roadmap for Making Native America Safer." The tragedy in Indian country will remain invisible only if the rest of us refuse to see it.

Troy A. Eid is a former U.S. attorney for Colorado.