

**Safety and Justice Challenge Innovation Fund
Missoula County, Montana
Findings from the Native Outreach Project**

In 2017, Missoula County, Montana was one of 20 communities in the United States selected to receive technical assistance and resources through the MacArthur Foundation's Innovation Fund.¹ Missoula County used the Innovation Fund to implement the Native Outreach Project (NOP) from January 2017-March 2018, which sought to address the disproportionate representation of Native Americans in the local jail by instituting culturally relevant prerelease programming for incarcerated people and awareness training for jail staff; the NOP also interviewed incarcerated individuals who identified as Native American to explore concepts of cultural identity and their experiences with programming with the aim of enhancing services. This memo documents the accomplishments of the NOP, focusing primarily on insights gained from the analysis of 22 interviews with incarcerated individuals and the implications for advancing the county's culturally-relevant approach to programming and services. The results of the analysis were presented by the project team to key stakeholders on March 19, 2018 in Missoula, Montana.

Missoula County's Native Outreach Project (NOP)

The NOP originated, in part, from the Jail Diversion Master Plan commissioned by the Missoula County Sheriff's Office in 2015 to address several issues including the disproportionate number of Native Americans incarcerated at MCDF. While Native Americans constitute 3% of the total county population, 14% of individuals incarcerated in MCDF are Native American. The NOP had three components:

- **Semi-structured interviews with Native Americans incarcerated in MCDF.** Between October 2017 and January 2018, project team Kevin Kicking Woman, Kathy Little Leaf, and Danielle Vazquez, interviewed 22 people in the jail who self-identified as Native American. Interviews explored Native American identity through a series of questions focused on family structure, language, beliefs and cultural practices, and ceremony; experiences with services and programming in MCDF; and life plans and future goals post-release. The goals of these interviews were to: 1) explore Native Americans' perceptions of and experiences with culturally-relevant services and programming available in MCDF; 2) learn how Native Americans engage with their cultural identity while incarcerated; and 3) understand how incarceration may affect Native Americans' life plans and future goals.
- **Culturally-centered programming.** Between August 2017 and March 2018, project staff introduced three culturally-relevant programs: *Regaining the Warrior*, *Mending Broken Hearts*, and *Wellbriety* groups. *Regaining the Warrior* is a three-week series designed for men to help reclaim their role and identity in relation to their family, community, and traditional way of life. *Mending Broken Hearts* is a three-week series that addresses grief, loss, and trauma from a cultural perspective, in particular addressing unresolved grief and intergenerational trauma. *Wellbriety groups* encourage sobriety through connection to culture and overall wellbeing. These three programs reached over 400 participants total.
- **Cultural awareness training.** On February 13th and 16th, 2018, project staff delivered a cultural awareness training to more than 110 MCDF staff. The training addressed basic education on Montana tribes, an overview of historical trauma, and how this affects Native American culture and identity today.

¹ In 2016, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur partnered with the Urban Institute to implement the Innovation Fund (IF) initiative designed to foster and support innovative ideas from local jurisdictions that are consistent with the goals of the MacArthur's Safety and Justice Challenge to reduce over-incarceration in America while maintaining or enhancing public safety. The Innovation Fund hosted a competitive application process and selected 20 jurisdictions to receive a package of support including technical assistance and a small grant to "seed" innovative local justice reforms.

NOP Interviews with Incarcerated Individuals: Methodology and Findings

Methodology

Project staff conducted semi-structured interviews with incarcerated individuals (age 18 or older) who self-identified as Native American. All individuals that identified as Native American were invited to participate; there were no restrictions based on pod type, type of offense, and/or whether they were on a federal hold.

The process of recruiting inmates was as follows:

- Jail administration posted fliers with MCDF describing the interviews and inviting individuals who identify as Native American to participate.
- If interested, individuals sent a kite message to indicate their interest.
- Field researchers responded to individuals' kites to confirm a date and time for the interview.

Prior to the interview, field researchers requested and obtained informed consent from each interviewee. The informed consent process described (a) the purpose of the interview and what types of questions would be asked; (b) the potential risks, discomforts, and benefits; (c) the voluntary nature of the interviews²; and (d) they would never be identified in any report and all information obtained in these interviews would be kept confidential and only shared with members of the research team. Interviewees were guaranteed confidentiality, with exception to any threat to hurt themselves or others, plans to commit a crime, or any plans to escape from jail. In addition, interviewees were asked to provide consent to be audio-recorded or not. Importantly, Missoula County engaged the University of Montana Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure all research procedures complied with human subjects protections. In September 2017, the county obtained IRB approval of its research procedures for handling, protecting, and storing data, study design, and interview protocol to carry out data collection. After data collection was completed, all interviews were professionally transcribed. Urban Institute researchers then coded and analyzed the interviews using NVivo, a qualitative analysis software.

Representativeness

When the study was designed, MCDF's booking records indicated 24 Native Americans were currently incarcerated. For this reason, we believe this study's sample to be representative of Native Americans incarcerated at MCDF. However, it should be noted that individuals were invited to participate and opt in to the study.

Interviewee Characteristics

Interviewees were predominantly female and represented a mix of Native American tribes; most were single and between the ages of 25 and 34. Interviewees were raised both in urban and reservation settings, and most lived in Missoula for over 6 years. Lastly, most interviewees were incarcerated for felonies and were detained pre-trial. Every interviewee had been previously incarcerated, most five or more times. Table 1 displays additional background information on the sample.

² An individual's decision to participate (or not) would not affect their current legal standing or access to benefits or services with the Missoula County Sheriff's Office, MCDF, or the State of Montana and that they can stop the interview at any time or refuse to answer any question(s) at any time.

TABLE 1

Native American Interviewee Characteristics (n=22)

	n	%		n	%
Age			Crime Classification		
18-24	2	9%	Felony	16	73%
25-34	13	59%	Felony and Misdemeanor	3	13.5%
35-44	6	27%	Misdemeanor	3	13.5%
45-54	1	5%	Charged Offense		
Gender			Aggravated assault	5	23%
Male	10	45%	Robbery	4	18%
Female	12	55%	Domestic Violence	3	14%
Marital Status			Drug abuse	4	18%
Single	16	73%	Driving under the influence	3	14%
Married (or with someone)	6	27%	Theft	1	5%
Children			Burglary	1	5%
Yes	19	86%	Fraud	1	5%
No	3	14%	Detention Status		
Highest Level of Education Attained			Convicted	8	36%
Grade School	9	41%	Pre-trial	13	59%
High School/GED	11	50%	Sentenced	1	5%
Associate/Technical Degree	2	9%	Previous Incarceration (# of times)		
Tribal Affiliation			<5 times	3	14%
Blackfeet	9	41%	5-10 times	10	45%
Confederated Salish and Kootenai	3	14%	>10 times	7	32%
Chippewa-Cree	2	9%	Don't know	2	9%
Other	8	36%	Most Recent Incarceration		
Setting Raised In			2017	12	57%
Reservation	8	36%	2016	5	24%
Urban	1	5%	Prior to 2016	4	20%
Both	13	59%	Don't know	1	5%
Years Lived in Missoula			Previous Convictions (# of times)		
0	2	10%	0 times	1	5%
<1 year	4	18%	<5 times	8	36%
1-5 years	4	18%	5-10 times	8	36%
6-10 years	6	27%	>10 times	5	23%
10+ years	6	27%			

Native American Identity

Interviews explored Native American identity, which was operationalized into the following indicators: use and knowledge of Native language, family structure and decision-making, beliefs and cultural practices considered sacred, beliefs around the cosmos, identification of Native/tribal name, knowledge of Creation story, and use and knowledge of Native/tribal song. Questions focused on these indicators to understand the cultural identity of Native Americans incarcerated at MCDF. With a better understanding of their cultural identity, Missoula County can design and institute appropriate culturally-relevant programming that responds to Native American's expressed identity and needs.

This section found that interviewees demonstrate different levels of engagement with their Native American identity.

More than half of interviewees (59%) do not speak their native language. Of those who said “yes”, very few expressed that they were able to speak the language fluently. Only 3 interviewees (14%) confidently responded “yes” to this question. Out of the interviewees who do not speak their Native language, 33% indicated that they would like to learn it. One interviewee reflects,

“I see our language as a dying—us as a dying breed. It's slowly falling off, and there's only so many people in our tribe that could speak Kootenai fluently, and then there's only a few that do speak Salish, and so I figured I want to try getting the—at least the heritage of the Salish down.”

Despite the fact that only 14% of interviewees confidently answered “yes” that they speak their Native language, all interviewees (100%) reported that MCDF does not address language barriers for those who speak it.

“I know other correctional facilities that I've been in, they don't. Like, you have to speak English. They get mad when you speak other languages, especially the prison I was in. There was no speakin'—you'd get in trouble”.

In addition to speaking their Native language, another indicator of Native American identity is belief in and practices around the cosmos; thirty-six percent of interviewees expressed some sort of belief in and practices around the cosmos, and this usually depended whether it was a family practice. One interviewee reflected on their relationship with the cosmos,

“When I go to Caras Park and I look at the river, I always told myself, and I always tell everybody else, is like, ‘Look at the w—look at the water. It only runs one direction.’ I look at my life like that. I've made mistakes. I'm not perfect. I can't go back and fix those mistakes. What I've done, I've done, but life is gonna keep going, and I'm gonna make sure that it keeps going, and water runs in one direction. It never runs backwards, so just keep lookin' forward. Pick yourself back up when you fall, and just keep movin' forward. That's all”.

In addition to the cosmos, other beliefs and cultural practices that are considered sacred to interviewees include: belief in the Creator and Mother Earth, smudging, medicine bundles, sweet grass, sweats, beading, rituals, pow-wows, medicine dance, jump dance, burial practices, and native language.

While tribal creation stories are a key part of Native American identity, very few interviewees were familiar with their tribe's creation story. Most attributed this lack of familiarity to fragile or nonexistent family connections. However, they did recognize Native/tribal song as a source of pride and connection to their culture, part of their religious practice, and also provide relaxation, energy, and joy. One interviewee said the role of Native song/connection to their culture in their life was stronger when they were not using drugs: “But when I'm using, it's like I kinda get distant away from my culture and everything”. Some said they are only exposed to Native song at events like pow-wows.

Lastly, more than half of the interviewees (57%) had a Native/tribal name, which is considered sacred, important, and representative of one's personality. However, only a few could remember their name. Some of those who did not have a Native/tribal name were interested in receiving one because they wanted to be more connected to their culture. One interviewee said they felt “lost without one.” Another interviewee reflects,

“Just because it, you know, it helps me define the man I am, become to be to this day. And you know, uh, as when I got that name, as a kid growing up, it's White Horse, you know, and like now, to this day, it defines the man who I am. You know, like I really do see and, uh, why they—why I was named that”.

Another key finding regarding Native American identity was that interviewees came from different household and family situations. Most interviewees were married and had children. When asked about their

family structure, 41% said their mother was the key decision-maker in their family. Other designated decision-makers included parents, grandparents, siblings, and other non-immediate family members. Additionally, 18% reported that they had a family member who is incarcerated or had been previously incarcerated.

Programming and Services in MCDF

Interviews also explored Native American's perceptions of and experiences with culturally-relevant services and overall programming available in MCDF. Interviewees were asked to describe the programs and services available to them, including culturally-specific ones, identify the benefits of programs, and challenges in accessing programs and services.

This section found that MCDF offers programming and services that are overall beneficial to incarcerated individuals, but culturally-specific programming is the most meaningful. Identified benefits of programming included the provision of emotional support, strengthened resiliency, and increased feelings of hope. Forty percent of interviewees said they were aware of culturally-specific programs and services. Of those interviewees, 78% mentioned Wellbriety and Regaining the Warrior.

"Um, the Wellbriety group, for me, is the best program there is, um, I think because it-it has the, you know, principles of AA, but it's—you can put anything there. And it's about wellness and sobriety, which is super important to me, because you can be sober without being well. And that's a big part of relapse, I think, and—for me, especially. And I know that's why I've ended up back here multiple times— is because I'll be sober, but I'm not happy, and I'm not well. And so that ends up with me relapsing—"

Despite an indication of culturally-specific programs and services at MCDF, interviewees overwhelmingly agreed (91%) that there is no support for Natives in MCDF. Native Americans are currently unable to perform songs, ceremonies, or certain religious actions because of safety concerns. One interviewee reflected on support from MCDF:

"They're not. They, um—they're again—they're against a lot of different things. The only thing I noticed that they'll let us do is pray. And this is the first time I've ever did a talking circle that—with her, last night. We never had one of those before."

The inability to participate in ceremony and cultural practices (i.e., smudging, pow-wow, song) during incarceration was described as difficult and as a catalyst for generating a disconnect between one and one's culture because of the great significance that practice might carry. One interviewee described the significance of their cultural practices:

"It-it cleanses me. Like, when you smudge and you pray and everything, it just—it releases so much. It just makes you feel so much better. It gives you that—I always feel that—uh, kinda, like, that connection".

In addition, interviewees expressed five major challenges in engaging with programs and services within the facility:

1. Classification level by pod and tier drives participation in programs and services, meaning there are restrictions for certain individuals. Interviewees mentioned that their entire pod was excluded from programming, which can carry unintended consequences on certain ethnic and racial populations – like Native Americans – that may be grouped together in pods across the jail. Interviewees also mentioned preferential treatment towards certain pods and individuals in terms of providing access to services.

"And sometimes, like we feel like we have to bite our tongue and hold—you know, hold what we say because some of these—some of these girls in here, you know, they're—they're these cops"

favorites and stuff, and they get their way no matter what. But that's when—that's when—like I'm—I'm the type of person that I don't—I don't put up with that, you know."

2. Hesitation of individuals to ask for help because of past trauma or past negative experiences in the facility affects ability to access programs and services.

"Well, for me, I guess there's probably cer—um, programs and stuff, but I have a hard time asking, so—I—just because of in the past—my past things. I've—and when I have asked, I've never gotten answers, so I think they should, you know, before we leave or whatever, like mental health or something, they can offer places that help when we get out."

3. Jail administration can be unresponsive to repeated requests or leave issues unresolved despite multiple communications from individuals incarcerated.
4. Navigating the system, and learning how to navigate it, can be a roadblock for individuals who want to participate in programs and services.

"But nobody tells you these kinda things to begin with. Nobody sit there says, oh okay, well, in this jail you gotta do it this way. Or in this jail we gotta do this and this and this in order to get things done right. Um, mental health, mental health is backed up for whatever reasons, you know, maybe too many people to whatever".

5. Programs and services within the jail are limited. For instance, interviewees expressed the need for Narcotics Anonymous instead of just Alcoholics Anonymous, however, this is unavailable in the facility. Interviewees also mentioned that there is a lack of consistency in programs occurring because volunteers do not show up or programs are cancelled.

Reentry

Lastly, interviews explored Native Americans' knowledge of programming and resources in the community. Interviews also asked what types of personal and social supports Native Americans have upon release, whether they feel prepared, what future goals they might have, and what they need from MCDF to achieve post-incarceration goals. These findings are important to understand to inform the design and implementation of services in the community, especially considering that 59% of interviewees indicated they will stay in Missoula post-release.

The main finding of this section is that 86% of interviewees felt that MCDF has not prepared them for release or to pursue their post-incarceration goals. This was primarily due to a lack of support from the facility immediately upon release and a lack of knowledge about post-release options and how to get connected to programs and services. One interviewee reflected:

"I think it's you don't come to jail to learn how to get better ever. You can—you can be a better criminal. You can be a—you know, better at hustlin' dice or hustlin' cards or, you know, hustlin' your food to make—to make commissary. I mean, and there's even guys that hustle themselves to get by. That's—you don't—you don't learn anything here that's gonna help you live a better life."

Out of the interviewees that did express they felt prepared, this was not due to programming or services in the jail. One interviewee reflected:

"Um, yes, but that's not due to Missoula County Detention Facility. It's due to, um, my own doings. Even through Lake County, it ain't like that either, but I had to go out and branch out and then make phone calls myself. Yes, I do feel that I have, but it's not due to Missoula County Detention Facility."

Despite not feeling prepared for release, interviewees were split in knowing about general resources, however, the majority (68%) had identified culturally-specific resources in the county that were available to them upon release. Every interviewee (100%) that mentioned knowledge of culturally-specific resources mentioned the Missoula Urban Indian Health Center as a place to receive services. Interviewees agreed on the critical importance of having these services available. One interviewee mentioned:

“Because like—like, you know, like Turning Point, they don’t—or the other places, they don’t always, you know—like you have to approach us a certain way, uh, with things, and they—they don’t always do that, you know. And sometimes they don’t—they don’t even think like that. They sometimes, you know—their comments and the things that they say, you know, is really offensive.”

Interviewees who had previously accessed these culturally-specific services mentioned the great benefit it brought to them post-release, in terms of establishing inner spirituality and remaining calm through difficult times.

Lastly, interviewees mentioned family as their main source of support upon release, while a smaller group of interviewees mentioned substance use and/or mental health counselors that would be available to them. The majority of interviewees had plans to focus on securing a job and receiving an education (GED or high school diploma).

Recommendations

Interviewees made recommendations for MCDF and the community. To be successful and meaningful, these initiatives must be Native American-led and Native American-informed. They include the following:

Reentry

- Expand programs and services specific to Native Americans, with an emphasis on employment placement services and housing.
- Conduct direct outreach for Native Americans because many have a hard time asking for help when they most need it. This includes outreach in the jail while people are still incarcerated to make Native Americans aware of programs and services available to them post-release.
- Establish a tribal reentry program facilitated between MCDF and the Missoula Urban Indian Health Center to connect Native Americans with people on the outside upon release.
- Establish Wellbriety groups within the community so people can continue to attend once released.

Recommendations for MCDF:

- Provide books on Wellbriety and recovery that are specific to Native Americans in the facility’s library.
- Provide a computer for individuals to attain skills and find employment prior to release.
- Allow Native Americans to participate in ceremonial practices, such as smudging, prayer, organized song, and carrying medicine pouches while incarcerated.
- Provide additional programming such as Wellbriety and talking circles that are specific to Native Americans.
- Conduct additional research and inquiry into what incarcerated Native Americans need.
- Provide Native language classes or cultural classes.
- Establish a peer mentorship program with people who are Native American and have been previously incarcerated.
- Establish a Narcotics Anonymous group.
- Adjust classification to allow individuals in different pods to attend programming and services.

In addition to this, at the presentation of these findings on March 19, 2018 in Missoula, Montana, stakeholders brainstormed several recommendations, which include:

- Establish a tribal reentry center run by the Missoula Urban Indian Health Center with support and guidance from the Flathead Reservation reentry program.
- Create a document that provides information on other counties' and states' Native American-focused efforts.
- Conduct a literature review to learn about the models that exist on Native American-focused efforts in jail and the community.
- Conduct a system-mapping exercise to document all of the Native American-focused efforts in Missoula County, MT.
- Implement trauma-informed practices for Native Americans and non-Native Americans both in the jail, across decision points in the criminal justice system, and in community services.
- Implement a peer mentorship program for Native Americans that are incarcerated upon reentering the community. Peer mentorship can now be certified in Montana with 40 hours of training, meaning that peer mentors can be reimbursed for their work.
- Hire more Native Americans within the government and community services.
- Provide Wellbriety and creation story books in MCDF's library.
- Implement a service where Native Americans can enter the jail to provide sweet grass or smudging to those who are incarcerated, in a similar way that Bibles are donated.

Lastly, it was recommended that Missoula County establish a Native American-led committee that can focus on maintaining the momentum needed to carry out these action items and identify a specific entity within the county that will advance these recommendations.

Conclusion

Missoula County stands out amongst other Innovation Fund grantees for fielding a survey of Native Americans who are incarcerated in the local jail. The insights gained from these interviews give voice to a discrete population whose needs are rarely documented and whose relative overrepresentation in the jail system warrants acknowledgement. The findings from the Native Outreach Project (NOP) provide baseline information on Native Americans incarcerated at the Missoula County Detention Facility (MCDF), which can be utilized to inform decisions to improve the experience of Native Americans during their time in MCDF and after it. The experiences they shared with the research team were distilled into recommendations for change. In broad terms, this means that MCDF will need to expand culturally-specific programming, resources, and services; increase access to and enhance availability of preexisting jail programming; lift prohibitions on cultural and religious practices such as smudging and ceremony; and work with community-based service organizations, such as the Missoula Urban Indian Health Center, to improve Native American reentry experiences.

Results from the Native Outreach Project might only be applicable in the context of this county, but they provide critical insight into the needs of Missoula's Native American incarcerated residents. Support from the county jail and government throughout the grant period highlights the promise of partnerships between local researchers in turning research into action. Through this partnership, the Native American-led research team presented its findings to key county stakeholders, facilitated a discussion amongst them, and garnered interest in implementing some of the interviewees' recommendations. Focused research of this kind legitimizes the issues and complaints of incarcerated individuals that may have long been overlooked. Maintaining this research partnership will be critical to mount a county-wide approach to change Native American experiences within MCDF and outside it. Whatever action comes from these recommendations might, in the future, serve as a useful guide to other jurisdictions that are searching for ways to create a fairer and more just jail experience for Native Americans.