The Missoula County Native Outreach Project: Summary Findings from Semi-Structured Interviews with Native Americans Incarcerated at Missoula County Detention Facility

Project Team: Kevin Kicking Woman; Kathy Little Leaf; Danielle Vazquez; Erin Kautz; Evelyn McCoy*; Carla Vasquez-Noriega*

In 2016, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation partnered with the Urban Institute to implement the Innovation Fund (IF) initiative. 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 designed to safely reduce the jail population while maintaining or enhancing public safety. Missoula County was one of these selected sites to receive Innovation Fund resources and support over a 15-month implementation period spanning January 2017 to March 2018.

Under the Innovation Fund, Missoula County implemented the Native Outreach Project, designed to address the disproportionate number of Native Americans incarcerated at the Missoula County Detention Facility (MCDF). This three-pronged approach consisted of:

1. semi-structured interviews with Native individuals housed in MCDF to (1) explore Natives' perceptions of and experiences with culturally-relevant services and programming available in MCDF; (2) learn how Natives engage with their cultural identity while incarcerated; and (3) understand how incarceration may affect Natives' life plans and future goals.
2. implementing culturally-centered programming for Native Americans in MCDF;
3. presenting a cultural awareness training to MCDF staff.

The Native Outreach Project culminated with a presentation by the project team to key criminal justice, social and legal services, and tribal leadership on March 19, 2018 in Missoula, MT.

Methodology

Researchers in Missoula conducted 22 semi-structured interviews with incarcerated individuals (age 18 or older) who self-identified as Native American. These interviews focused on exploring a variety of issues relevant to cultural identity and engagement with culturally-relevant services and programming available in MCDF. The information gathered from these interviews is intended to inform culturally-relevant programming in the jail.

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.

Jail administration made all incarcerated individuals aware of the research opportunity by posting fliers within MCDF describing the research project. Those who were interested could indicate their willingness to participate through a kite message to jail staff. The research team would then respond to the interested individual to set up a time to explain the purpose of the interview in depth, attain informed consent, and conduct the interview if the individual was willing. Interviews were recorded and then professionally transcribed. The research team coded and analyzed the interviews using NVivo, a qualitative analysis software.

*denotes research staff from the Urban Institute, located in Washington, DC.

Table 1 displays the sociodemographic characteristics of the Native Americans incarcerated that were interviewed for this research study.

TABLE 1

Native Outreach Project Interviewee Characteristics (n=22)

	n	%
Age		
18-24	2	9%
25-34	13	59%
35-44	6	27%
45-54	1	5%
Gender		
Male	10	45%
Female	12	55%
Marital Status		
Single	16	73%
Married (or with someone)	6	27%
Children		
Yes	19	86%
No	3	14%
Highest Level of Education Attained		
Grade School	9	41%
High School/GED	11	50%
Associate/Technical Degree	2	9%
Tribal Affiliation		
Blackfeet	9	41%
Confederated Salish and Kootenai	3	14%
Chippewa-Cree	2	9%
Other	8	36%
Setting Raised In		
Reservation	8	36%
Urban	1	5%
Both	13	59%
Years Lived in Missoula		
0	2	10%
<1 year	4	18%
1-5 years	4	18%
6-10 years	6	27%
10+ years	6	27%

	n	%
Crime Classification		
Felony	16	73%
Felony and Misdemeanor	3	13.5%
Misdemeanor	3	13.5%
Charged Offense		
Aggravated assault	5	23%
Robbery	4	18%
Domestic Violence	3	14%
Drug abuse	4	18%
Driving under the influence	3	14%
Theft	1	5%
Burglary	1	5%
Fraud	1	5%
Detention Status		
Convicted	8	36%
Pre-trial	13	59%
Sentenced	1	5%
Previous Incarceration (# of times)		
<5 times	3	14%
5-10 times	10	45%
>10 times	7	32%
Don't know	2	9%
Most Recent Incarceration		
2017	12	57%
2016	5	24%
Prior to 2016	4	20%
Don't know	1	5%
Previous Convictions (# of times)		
0 times	1	5%
<5 times	8	36%
5-10 times	8	36%
>10 times	5	23%

Key Findings

Based on an analysis of the 22 interviews, we identified several key findings:

1. **Interviewees demonstrate different levels of engagement with their Native identity.** More than half of interviewees (59%) do not speak their native language. In addition, 36% of interviewees expressed that they had some sort of belief/practice around the cosmos, however, very few interviewees were familiar with their tribe's creation story. Lastly, more than half of interviewees (57%) had an Indian/tribal name.
2. **Interviewees come 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.
3. **Interviewees religious and cultural practices are limited in MCDF**. Interviewees (91%) overwhelmingly expressed that there is no support for Natives in MCDF. Natives are unable to practice their religious and cultural practices in MCDF. The inability to participate in ceremony and cultural practices (i.e. smudging, pow-wow, song) as a result of incarceration was mentioned as difficult and a catalyst for generating a disconnect between one and one's culture because of the great significance that practice might carry.
4. **MCDF offers programming and services that are overall beneficial to incarcerated individuals, but culturally-specific programming is the most meaningful.** Overall benefits of programming included that they provide emotional support, strengthen resiliency, and build 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.
5. **There are five major challenges in accessing programming and services at MCDF.**
    a. **Classification level by pods and tiers 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.**
    b. **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.**
    c. **Jail administration can be unresponsive to repeated requests or leave issues unresolved despite multiple communications from individuals incarcerated.**
    d. **Navigating the system, and learning how to navigate it, can be a roadblock for individuals that want to participate in programs and services.**
    e. **Programs and services within the jail are limited.**
6. **Eighty-six percent of interviewees felt that MCDF has not prepared them for release or to pursue their post-incarceration goals.** This included lack of support upon immediate release to the community. More than half of interviewees (59%) planned on stay in Missoula after release. Interviewees were split approximately in half in terms of whether they were aware of general resources available to them post-release. Sixty-eight percent were aware of culturally-specific resources in the community with all of those who answered mentioning the Missoula Urban Indian Health Center. The availability of culturally-specific resources was meaningful and important to Native Americans.

Recommendations

Interviewees made a number of recommendations that could be implemented to improve their experience within MCDF and also their reentry into the community. **What should be emphasized in these recommendations is that initiatives for this population must be Native-led and Native-informed.** They include the following:

Reentry

- Expand programs and services specific to Natives, including employment placement services and housing specifically.
- Conduct direct outreach for Natives because many have a hard time asking for help when they most need it. This would include outreach into the jail while people are still incarcerated that way they are aware of programs and services once they are released.
- Establish a tribal reentry program facilitated between MCDF and the Indian Health Center to connect people with Natives on the outside upon release.
- Establish wellbriety groups within the community that way people can continue to attend once released.

Recommendations for MCDF:

- Provide books on wellbriety and recovery that are specific to Natives in the facility's library.
- Provide a computer for individuals to learn those skills and then find employment prior to release.
- Allow Native individuals to participate in ceremonial practices, such as smudging, prayer, organized song, carry medicine pouches while incarcerated.
- Provide additional programming to wellbriety and talking circles that are specific to Natives.
- Conduct additional research and inquiry into what incarcerated Natives need.
- Provide Native language classes or cultural classes.
- Establish a peer mentorship program with people who are Native and have been previously incarcerated.
- Establish an NA 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, MT, stakeholders brainstormed a number of recommendations, which include:

- Establish a tribal reentry center run by the Indian Health Center with support and guidance from the Flathead Reservation reentry program
- Create a document that provides information on what other counties and states are implementing for Native-focused efforts.
- Conduct a literature review to learn about the models that exist on Native-focused efforts in the jail and the community.
- Conduct a system-mapping exercise to map all of the Native-focused efforts in Missoula County, MT.
- Implement trauma-informed practices for Natives and non-Natives both in the jail, across decision points in the criminal justice system, and in community services.
- Implement a peer mentorship program for Natives 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 Natives within the government and community services.
- Provide wellbriety and creation story books in MCDF's library.
- Implement a service where Natives enter the jail to provide sweet grass or smudging for Natives, in a similar way that Bibles are donated.