

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	%		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%			

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 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.
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 staying 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.