

Post-Release Barriers for Incarcerated Native American Women in MN

2017 Office of Violence Against Women Grant, awarded to Minnesota Department of Corrections

- *In partnership with Violence Free Minnesota, the Minnesota Indian Women's Sexual Assault Coalition, Northwest Indian Community Development Center, and Sacred Hoop Coalition*

Motivation for this project: disparity in incarceration rates of Native American women in Minnesota, coupled with extremely high rates of violence experienced by Native American women in the United States.

- American Indian or Alaskan Native women make up approximately **20%** of the population of women housed at MCF-Shakopee on any given day
 - American Indian and Alaskan Native people make up only **1.1%** of Minnesota's total population.
- According to the Indian Law Resource Center, more than **4 in 5** American Indian and Alaska Native women have experienced violence, and more than **1 in 2** have experienced sexual violence.
- Currently, there are **little-to-no programs and services** dedicated to the safety and wellbeing of incarcerated women who are, or have been, the victims of domestic abuse, sexual violence, or stalking.

62 Native American women were interviewed for this grant project before COVID-19 put a stop to the interview process. Interviews were conducted by staff of partner organizations, not DOC staff.

- 29 women were incarcerated in MCF-Shakopee at the time of the interview.
- 33 women were incarcerated at MCF-Shakopee within the past 5 years.
- Interviews took place between August 2019 and February 2020.

Interviews

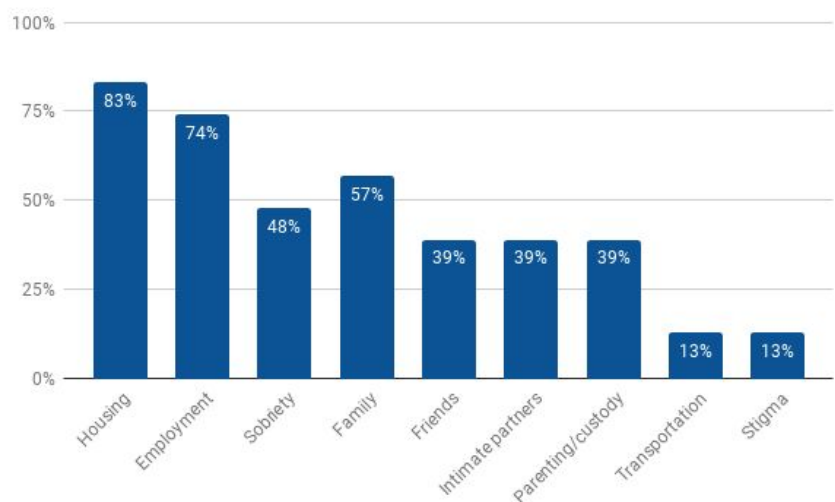
- These interviews explored the women's histories of victimization and criminal justice system involvement, as well as the support needed for healing and safety both while incarcerated and upon reentry.
- Participants also assisted us in identifying the types of services, programming, and policies MN DOC should incorporate in order to address victimization while someone is incarcerated and increase victims' success upon reentry.

Findings

- Almost every single woman - **97%** of participants - experienced abuse or violence prior to their incarceration, often multiple experiences of violence and abuse over their lifetime.
- Many of the women's narratives revealed a direct or indirect connection between their victimization and their justice system involvement.
 - *Quote from participant: "Starting at age 10, I was getting in trouble for truancy. I got molested at that age and never reported it - that's when I started running away."*
- Women faced immense barriers upon release and were unable to overcome these barriers with the resources provided to them.
- These barriers were central to the women's inability to meet the conditions of their probation and parole - sending them back to jail and prison - and/or made them vulnerable to further victimization and criminal justice system involvement in the interests of survival.

Post-Release Barriers for Incarcerated Native American Women in MN

Interview participants identified the following barriers to their success post-release: lack of safe and affordable housing, substance abuse disorder, unemployment/underemployment, unhealthy relationship with friends, unhealthy relationship with family, unhealthy relationship with intimate partner, barriers to parenting or custody, access to reliable and safe transportation, stigma related to their justice-involvement (percentage of participants who identified this barrier represented in graph below).



Quotes from interview participants:

I have 7 felonies and poor credit. My biggest challenge has been trying to find housing. I have been denied so many times, before they even talk to me.

[Huge need for] housing, transportation out of prison - especially in winter. Not everyone has someone to depend on.

I needed more for after I left, I was jumping at any change and trying to get my kids back while

staying on a friend's couch and I know now that wasn't the right thing to do. It wasn't a good situation. I had housing assistance issues, banking issues... A lot of help that sounds so good on the inside doesn't actually happen on the outside.

We need more resources for women in rural and under-resourced areas. We need job programs that are accessible no matter how long you've been incarcerated.

I had lots of housing issues with a felony and no job. I applied to felony-friendly places and those places were a disaster.

We need more information on community resources [for] where we are being released to. An advocate, instead of a probation officer.

There is a need for more resources for Native women being released and in community. I don't know how to find out about these services: bicycle, bus pass, ways to get around, jobs set up before release. I had no ID - only prison ID; I couldn't get it until released.

What interview participants wanted post-release - their hopes and dreams:

- To pursue their education
- To own their own home or rent their own apartment
- To regain custody of children or have accessible visitation
- To repair relationships
- To find a job and make a livable wage
- To stay sober
- To assist others with sobriety
- To move away
- To start over
- To give back to their community

In gratitude to the 62 women who shared their stories with us - Miigwech.