





Native Women & Incarceration in Minnesota

Improving Criminal Justice Response to Domestic Violence,
Sexual Assault, and Stalking Victims

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Origins of the Project

Little-to-no services focused on incarcerated women/victims of domestic abuse, sexual violence, or stalking.

Native American women - overrepresented in prisons and overrepresented as victims of abuse and violence

Critically important to breaking cycles of victimization and criminal justice system involvement.

Unique history & needs lead to culturally responsive & victim-centered approach to corrections and re-entry.

Interview Process

Interviewed 62 Native American women

- 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 were led by staff and interns from MIWSAC, Northwest Indian Community Development Center, Sacred Hoop, and VFMN. Interviewers were white, Native, and Latinx.

Interview Process

Women in community were recruited through local community partners. They received a small stipend for their participation in the project.

Women in facility attended an informational session about the project and then could schedule an interview if they chose to. We were not able to provide women in facility with a stipend due to facility policies.

Linda Thompson taught interviewers several techniques for conducting interviews in a culturally-relevant way. Indigenous Focusing-Oriented Therapy (IFOT) provided the basis for these techniques.

Each woman was assigned a pseudonym for confidentiality purposes and potentially identifying details have been withheld.



History & Context

Impact of Colonization

- ❖ When a nation/group of people dominate the resources of a people or nation, in order to enrich the dominating group.
 - ❖ The values of the colonizers are considered superior.
-
- **Destruction of cultural traditions and practices**
 - **Destruction of natural resources,** e.g. land, water, plants, food, etc.
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- **Destruction of social structures**
 - Family
 - Government
 - Economy
 - Work
 - Language
 - Spirituality
 - Values

No cultural adaptation

Total cultural assimilation



No cultural adaptation: maintains traditional patterns that include language, communication, thinking patterns, spiritual beliefs and practices, traditional values and traditional family structures.

Total assimilation: adapted to the thinking patterns, values, family structures, perception of hierarchies, communication patterns, and recreation of the dominant culture.

Continuum of Assimilation

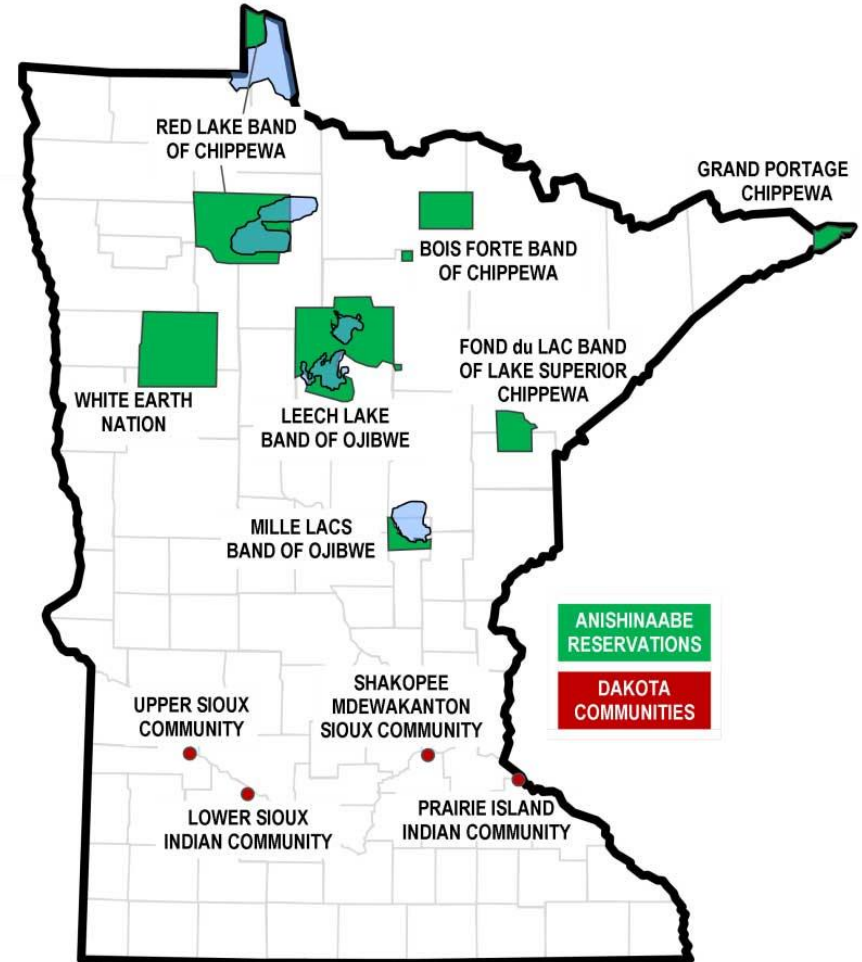
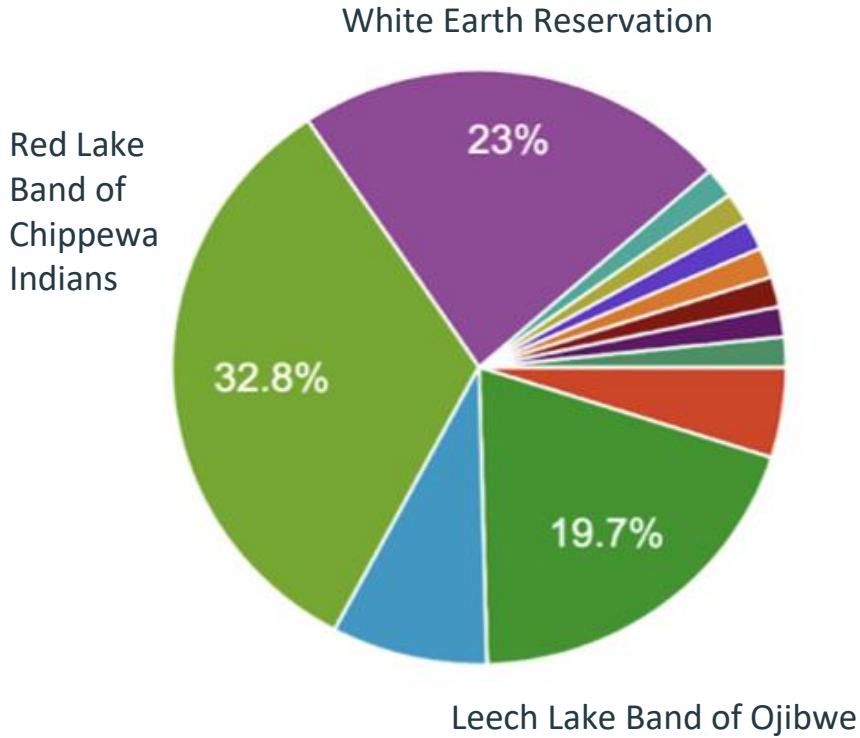
What is the Connection?

- ❖ Forced removal from homes to boarding schools/disconnect from family, loved ones and Tribal Community has had long term consequences
- ❖ Some have experienced generational disconnection from family & culture which interferes with the natural order of the life
- ❖ Some have genuine generational fear of systems and authority figures
- ❖ High rates of native children in foster care system, juvenile justice system- we know the impact of children in foster care
- ❖ All of these factors (*and more*) create a bridge from colonization to increased incarceration

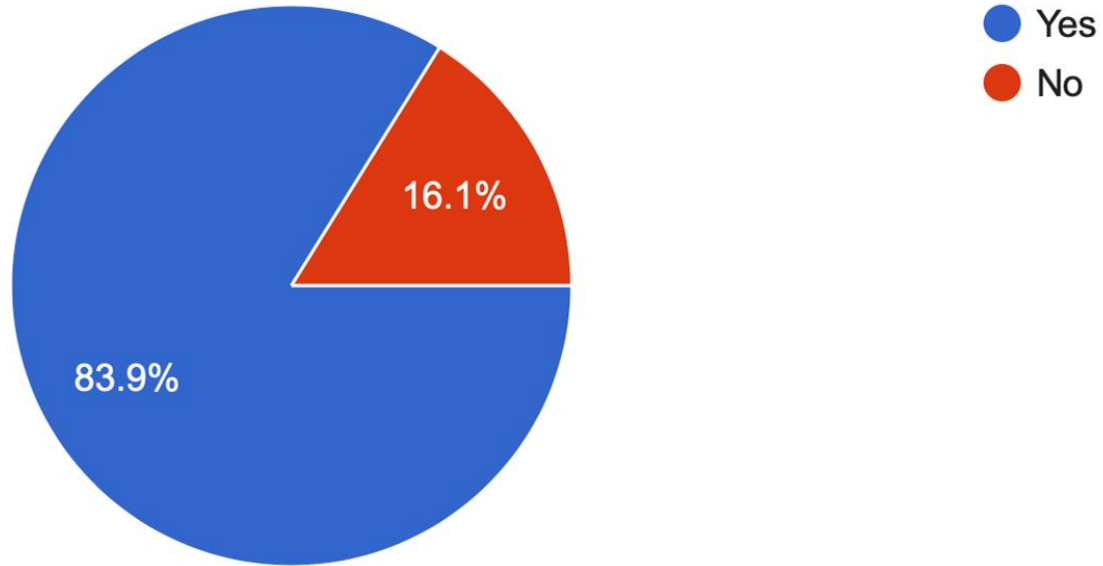


Demographics

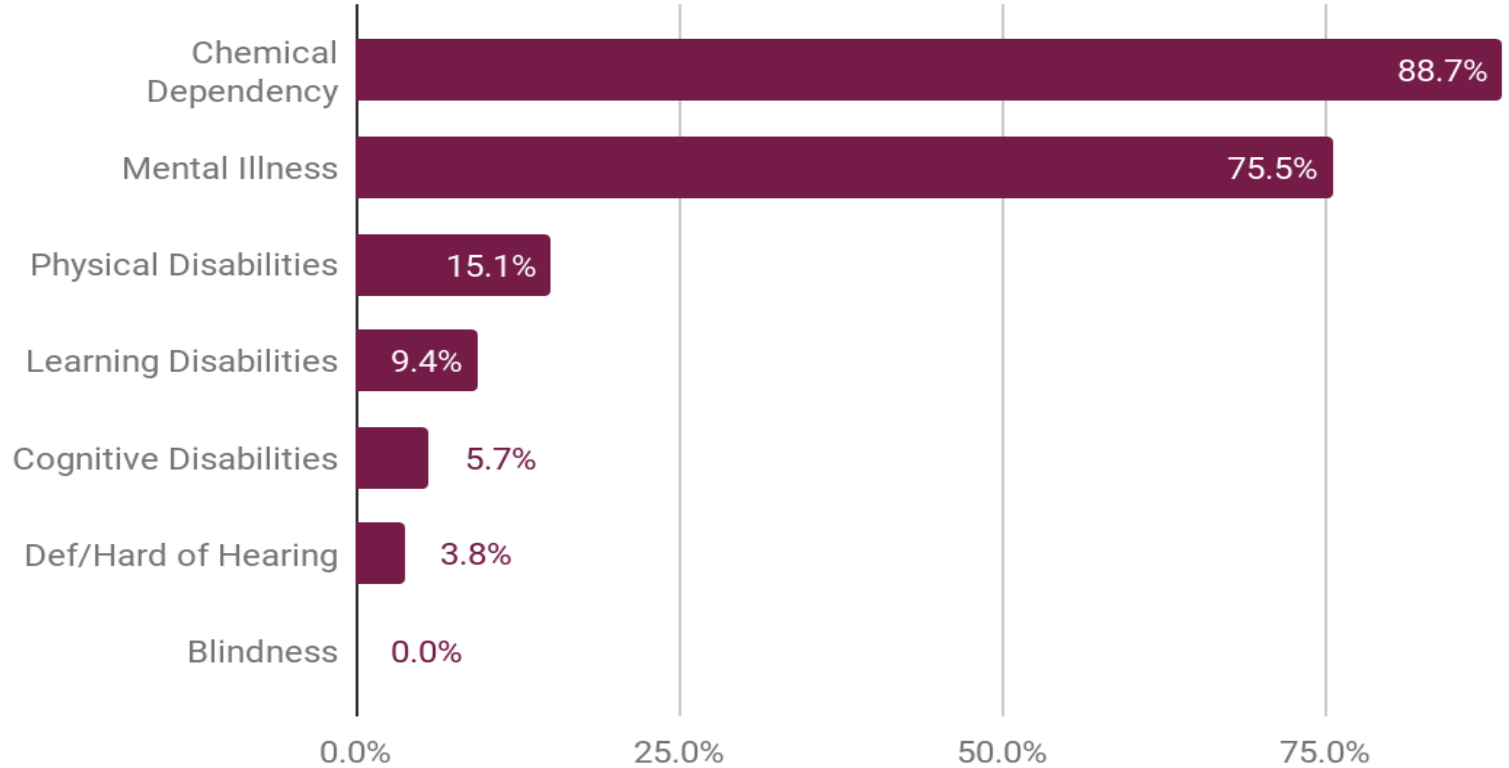
Nation/Tribe of Participants



Self reported a disability





Disabilities Self-Reported







21% of the participants identified as Two Spirit or LGBTQ+

This reflects national data that shows that LGBTQ+ individuals are overrepresented in the criminal justice system.





Criminal Justice System Involvement

Incarceration rates of Native people are difficult to measure accurately due to multiple failures in the way government agencies collect data on Native people.

American Indian or Alaskan Native women make up **20%** of the population of women housed at MCF-Shakopee

Native Americans make up only **1.1%** of Minnesota's total population.

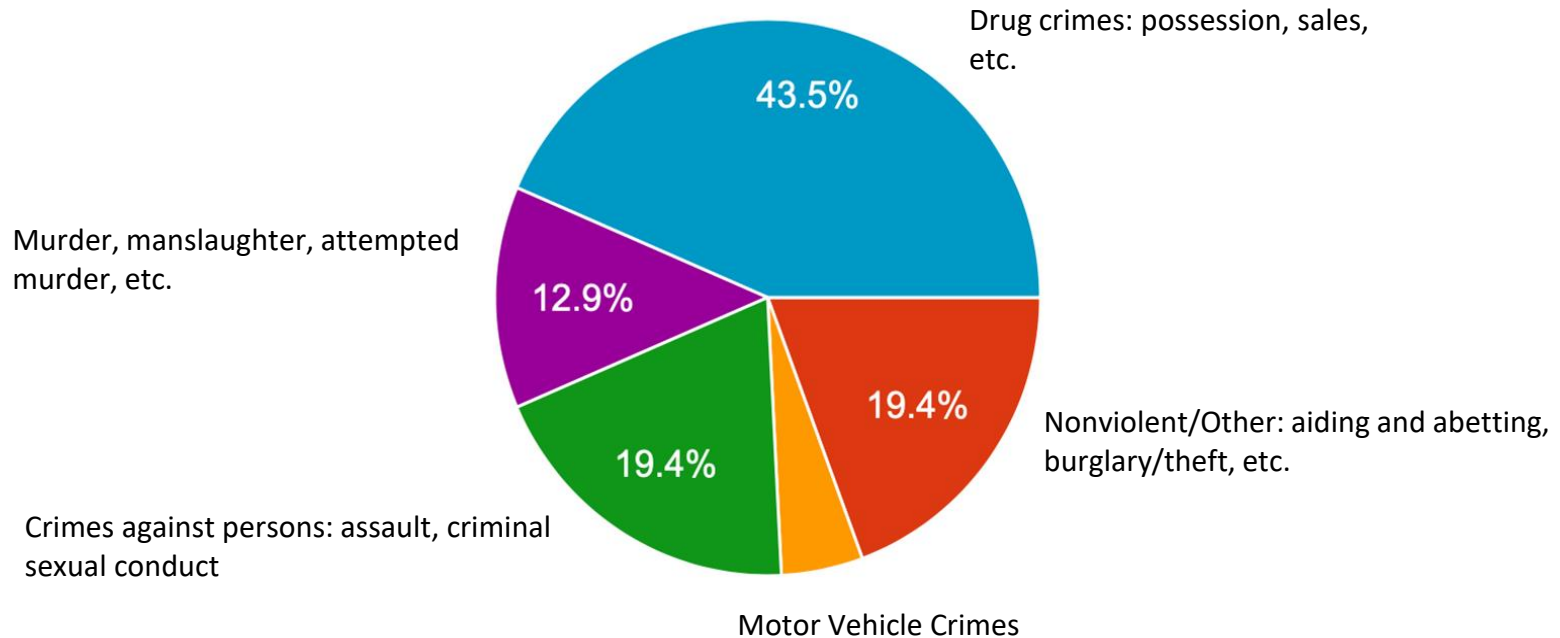
- *MN Department of Health*

MCF-Shakopee has the **largest disparity of Native women incarcerated anywhere in the United states.**

Most are Anishinaabekwewug.

According to the MN Department of Corrections approximately **70-80%** of those women are transferred from **Beltrami county.**



Crime resulting in participant prison time



In Minnesota, the most recent 5-year estimate indicates that just under **one in three** American Indian and Alaskan Natives live in poverty (29%).


This is the highest percentage of any race/ethnicity in the state.

- *MN Department of Health*



Native youth involvement in the
criminal justice system is a growing
concern...

Native youth are approximately **three times** more
likely to be confined than white youth.



64% of our participants
were first arrested before
the age of 18

Almost half - **47%** - of our currently
incarcerated participants were
arrested
10+ times before the age of 18

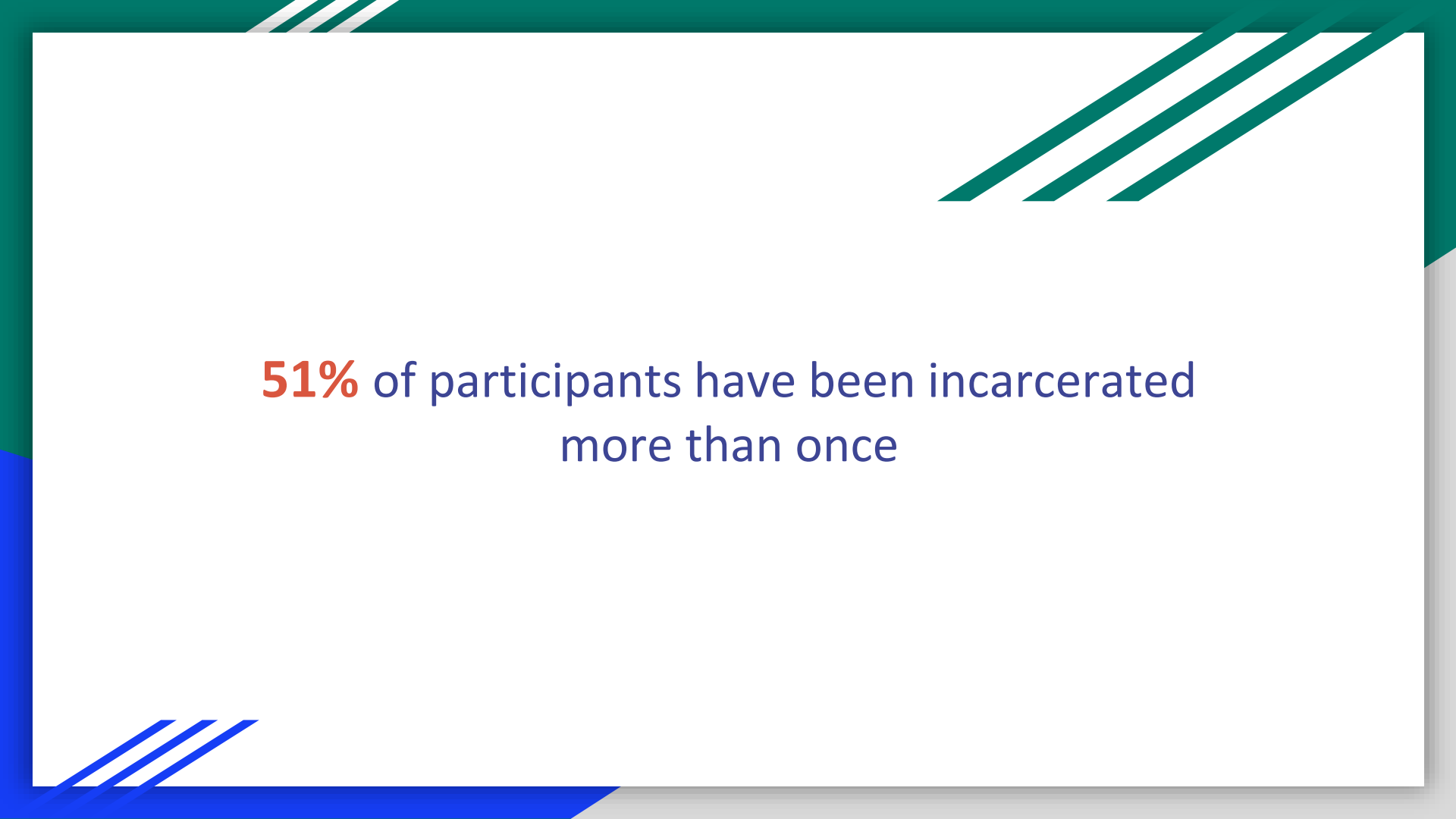
First encounter with the criminal justice system

For the women who first encountered the criminal justice system as juveniles, they overwhelmingly recalled early charges related to juvenile delinquency and minor consumption, and - to a lesser degree - assault and theft-related charges.

For the women who first encountered the criminal justice system as adults, drug charges predominated.

Narratives: First Encounters with the Criminal Justice System

- *I was 12 and I got caught for stealing a jacket because I was cold.*
- *Starting at age 10 I was getting in trouble for truancy. I got molested at that age and never reported it, and that's when I started running away.*
- *I was arrested over 50 times before the age of 18. Thefts, assaults, warrants, runaway... I think it was a chain reaction to my parents being in boarding school.*



51% of participants have been incarcerated more than once

Returning to prison

Multiple incarcerations tended to result from technical violations of probation and parole.

Participant narratives highlighted the following factors in their inability to meet the conditions of probation or supervision:

- *Lack of housing, transportation, and suitable employment*
- *Unaddressed or unresolved chemical dependency issues*
- *Risk factors related to life on a reservation and/or in a small, rural community*

Alternatives to incarceration

Over half of the participants talked about needing treatment options, not incarceration.



Needed to get away from my ex and everything that was connected to him. [I needed] help with the domestic abuse.

Available treatment, an understanding probation officer. I had no job, no car... I needed help, I needed a bridge.

“When it would have helped me the most - age 6, 7, 8 - that’s when I needed help, that’s when I needed to know it was okay to be Native. I needed to be safe at that time.”

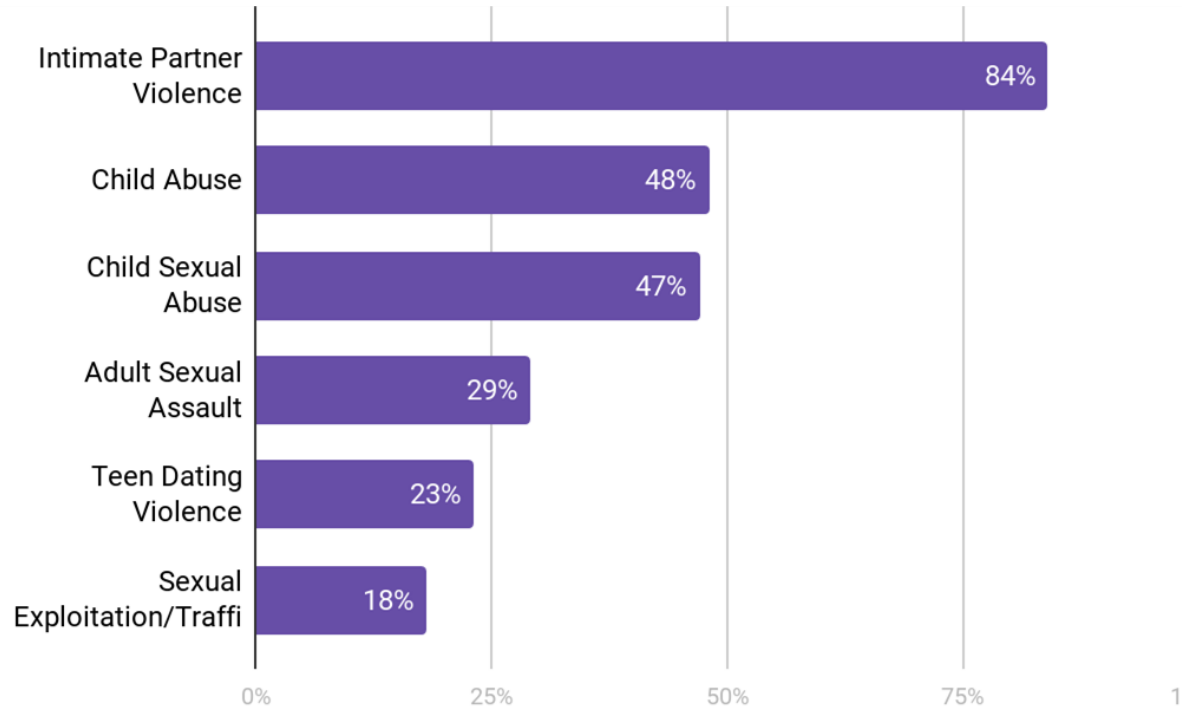


Experiences of Violence & Abuse



97% of participants experienced violence or abuse - often multiple instances of violence and abuse - prior to incarceration

Types of abuse/violence



84% of participants had experienced intimate partner violence

The last 3 guys I have been with hit me. My husband (separated) was really abusive. It was an everyday thing. I got an OFP, but then it was lifted/expired and he came back.

47% of participants reported histories of child sexual abuse

My uncle touched me when I was little. I told my mom and my cousin, and she told everyone in the family. My mom was really mad at me. I was really ashamed. This is the first time I've ever talked about it.

Distrust in the System

63% indicated they did not report their experiences of violence or abuse to law enforcement

- *In my experience with my [supervising] agents I have never been very honest... Just from the trauma I have experienced in my past I have a mindset of “they aren’t going to help me.” It’s really hard for me to trust white people. It’s really hard for me to talk to them and think that they have my best interest at hand.*

Although **84%** of participants reported experiencing **domestic violence** and **29%** reported experiencing sexual assault...

... only **32%** ever worked with a domestic violence or sexual assault advocacy agency.



Family & Children

Generational Incarceration

Prison Experience – Prison Programming

Substance Abuse





According to the Minnesota Department of Health,
approximately **3,500** offenders need substance use
disorder treatment annually.

The MN Department of Corrections is funded to treat
1,400 offenders annually.




“For a lot of us, being sober in prison is a big deal, it’s the first time we have experienced those feelings. A lot of us don’t know how to feel our feelings because we never have before.

Just in general there is so much trauma...”

Sense of Safety


79% of participants reported that they feel/felt safe in prison

- *[I feel] a lot safer here than out there. That's why people come back. Once you get warmed up in here it can be a family that a lot of us have never had. **I was living on the streets** and lost - here, I can focus on my purpose.*
- *I feel safe being around all women.*
- *I know I can't run off and hurt myself.*



Women spoke of feeling **safer** in prison than back in their communities; however, that should not be interpreted as feeling **safe** in prison.

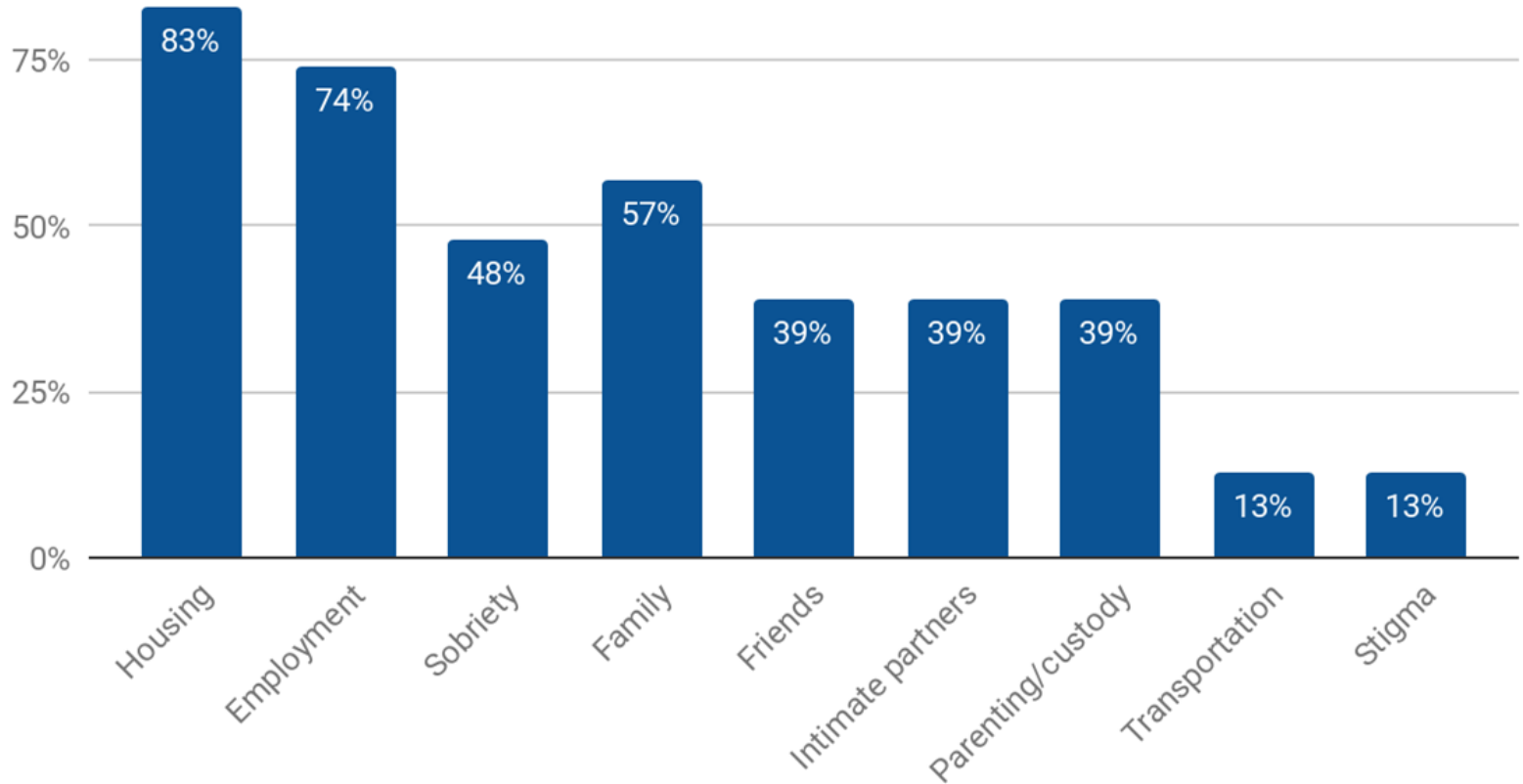
Women spoke of the lack of privacy, disparities in treatment by correctional officers, and fears of retaliation as making them feel profoundly unsafe in prison, even while they may have felt prison was **safer than home**.





Reentering Community

Barriers upon release



Narratives: Reentry

- *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.*
- *I had lots of housing issues with a felony and no job. I applied to felony-friendly places and those places were a disaster.*
- *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. No ID - only prison ID - I couldn't get it until released.*

Racism & Anti-Native Sentiment

Some of the women we spoke with explicitly named racism and anti-Native sentiment as a barrier to their ability to be successful in their communities.

They described racial profiling by local law enforcement, disparate treatment by the courts, and being singled out for being Native in correctional settings.

Addressing racial/ethnic bias across systems and state agencies is necessary for the equity of Native peoples - and all people of color - in Minnesota.

Beltrami County is a very prejudiced place...I see that things are easier for people with light skin. A couple of cops beat up my sister. She never filed a report. Color of your skin matters to the cops around here.

In gratitude

Rose Twistedstalk

Crested Arrowhead

Garden Phlox

Wild Calla

Plains Wild Indigo

Tarragon

Wild Petunia

Pitseed Goosefoot

Striped Coralroot

Red Goosefoot

Wood Lily

Yellow Starthistle

Devil's Beggarticks

Woodland Sunflower

Cardinal Flower

Showy Milkweed

Crimson Clover

Golden Clover

Wild Comfrey

Summer Cypress

Smooth Oxeye

Purple Avens

Purple Pitcher Plant

Wild Lupine

Seaside Arrowgrass

Orange Hawkweed

Gypsy Flower

Orange Marigold

Great Plains Goldenrod

Blue Lobelia

Indian Paintbrush

Spotted Touch Me Not

Golden Alexander

Pink Maiden

Kittentails

Prickly Lettuce

Dayflower

Path Rush

Absinthium

Prairie Sagewort

Seablite

Red Columbine

Cornflower

Indian Tobacco

Scarlet Gaura

Leedy's Roseroot

Indian Rice Grass

American Ginseng

Prairie Violet

Green Sorre

Buffalo Grass

Black Huckleberry

Yellow Pimpernel

Butterfly Weed

Prairie Parsley

Hallequin Blueflag

Day Lily

Sawtooth Sunflower

Gumweed

Small flowered Bittercress

Angelica Flower

Northern Bluebells



Recommendations

Solutions & Recommendations – Linked to Culture

“My cultural identity has absolutely helped me. My culture is where I gain strength. I held my rock on my way over here and sang. I feel stronger because of my culture, and it has made my family stronger as well. I spend a lot of time with my elders and children now. It has kept me from being around the using population. I have had a lot of “Ah ha” moments. I realized on my way over here that I don’t remember my OID number, and that was huge. Now I am mom, auntie, grandma. I am no longer that number that defined me for so long.”



Healing House Model

Healing House Model

Safe and supportive housing was named by interviewees as the leading barrier to success.

Support innovative housing resource developed through community-based organizations for re-entering women.

What is the Model?

- A space to heal from trauma and specifically from trauma of violence.
- Designed by justice involved Native women
 - Physical space
 - Whole family space
 - Programming
 - Rules & How Governed
 - Spiritual practices & Cultural Learning
- Owned by the Community

What is happening around the Model?

- Conducting Architectural Study – Trauma Informed Design
- Fund project manager
- Secure funding to build and run and sustain and evaluate Healing House
- Master lease of house in Bemidji starting February 2022 to test out some of the Healing House principles

Challenges

- Community based, constituent driven projects need some level of guarantee for longer-term support
- Being able to show up authentically in established housing funding & support services spaces
- Housing that addresses multiple, complex needs
- Support for open-ended design space
- Multi-agency participation & support

Questions

