

Mental Health & Wellness: Tribally Focused Strategies to Decrease Juvenile Delinquency

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**TRIBAL YOUTH
RESOURCE CENTER**
A PROGRAM OF OJJDP



www.TribalYouth.org



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Opening In A Good Way

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Agenda

1. Opening
2. Background
3. Tribally responsive and community-based approaches to mental health
4. Practical strategies and tools to prevent entry into the juvenile justice system
5. Action Planning & Next Steps
6. Closing

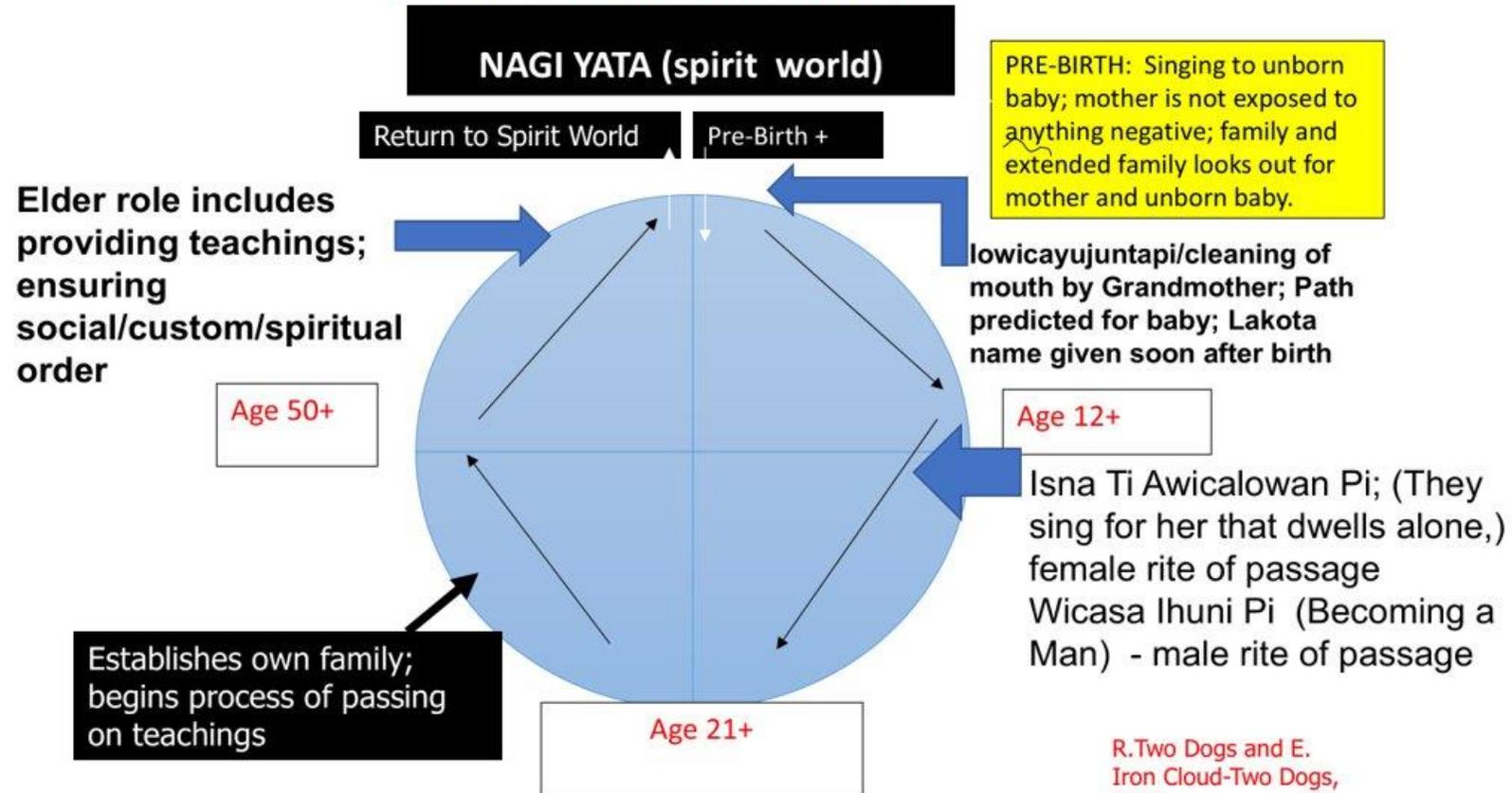


Learning Objectives

- Share research on primary mental health challenges affecting Tribal youth and how these challenges can lead to higher involvement in the juvenile justice system.
- Provide practical strategies, resources, and tools to build capacity within the community to prevent juvenile justice system entry and support diversion efforts.

Oinajin Topa/Four Stages of Life

LAKOTA WORLDVIEW



R. Two Dogs and E. Iron Cloud-Two Dogs, 2010

WOTAKUYE (Kinship) – FOUNDATION OF LAKOTA SOCIETY

High Rates of Mental Health Disorders among Indigenous Youth

- Suicide among Native youth 15-19 are 2.74x the national average (DHHS, 2026)
- 9.7% of Native youth have a co-occurring substance abuse disorder and mental health condition (MHA, 2026)
- Native Youth are 2-3 times more likely to experience Adverse Childhood Experiences (Kenney & Singh, 2016)
- Need for culturally grounded healing (Massoti et al., 2023)

Intergenerational Trauma and Mental Health

- Trauma rooted in historical injustice
- Loss of cultural knowledge and traditions
- Requires community supported healing



Systemic Neglect & Overrepresentation

Indigenous youth are 3.8x more likely to be placed in juvenile detention than white youth (Rovner, 2025)

70% of justice-involved Indigenous youth have a diagnosable mental health disorder (SAMHSA, 2022)

Justice system lacks holistic support for mental health and relies more on confinement (OJJDP, 2016)

Protective cultural factors



- Strong cultural identity = protective factor
- Kinship & extended family networks buffer against stress
- Language, ceremony, spirituality build resilience
- Community-defined evidence shows culture itself is prevention



Tribal Youth Mental Wellness

Challenges

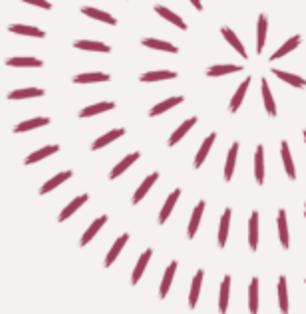
- Historical trauma
- Cultural disconnection
- Inadequate system support

Strengths

- Kinship and community
- Resilience
- Connection to culture and the land



Tribally Responsive and Community-Based Approaches to Mental Health



Building Indigenous Led Solutions for Change

Pathways to building adequate support

- 
- Early intervention support
 - Collaborative community care
 - Healing through culture with youth programming and elder support



Minimizing Risk of System Involvement

- Healing Ceremonies
- Family-based therapy
- Wraparound Model
- Culture Camps



Building Youth Resilience with Tribal Youth Programs

- [American Indian Life Skills](#) (LaFromboise & Howard, 1997): School-based, strengthens protective factors, reduces suicide risk
- [Project Venture](#): Experiential program, lowers risky behaviors including substance use and violence

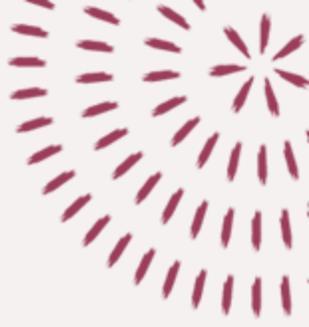


Strategies and Tools for Prevention

Leverage Existing Community Strengths

- Build on traditional practices, ceremonies, and cultural teachings as prevention tools
- Engage elders, cultural mentors, and language programs to guide youth identity development.
- Use community gatherings (powwows, feasts, school events) as opportunities for mental health outreach

Strengthen Natural Support Systems



Train trusted adults (coaches, bus drivers, aunties, teachers, peers)

- Sample trainings - [Youth Mental Health First Aid \(YMHFA\)](#)
- Support peer mentoring and youth advisory councils
- Create “safe spaces” for expression through cultural activities, arts, storytelling, or sports





Create resource maps of local and virtual supports (988, native and strong, telehealth, traditional healers)



Use **screening and brief intervention (SBIRT)** in schools and youth programs.



Utilize **telebehavioral health and mobile crisis teams** to bridge service gaps.

Use Low-Cost, High-Impact Tools

Community Engagement Shared Decision-Making

- Involve community members, youth, elders, and cultural leaders in advisory or decision-making roles.
- Establish **Community Advisory Boards** or **Youth Councils** to guide program design and evaluation.
- Ensure that policies and practices reflect local knowledge, traditions, and values
- Use engagement as a **two-way process** – not just input, but shared ownership and accountability.

Partnerships

- Partner with schools, law enforcement, and tribal courts for early identification and alternatives
- Use **restorative justice circles** and **traditional peacemaking** as diversion pathways.
- Formalize cross-sector collaboration through **MOUs** and relationship-building meetings.





Use **community-defined indicators** (e.g., belonging, participation, hope)



Combine **stories + numbers** to demonstrate impact and secure funding



Document cultural practices as legitimate interventions and outcomes

Data and Storytelling as Tools

Action Planning & Reflection

- Identify: What is **one** practical strategy you can implement in your community within 90 days?
- Consider: Which partnerships or advisory roles could amplify your efforts?
- Reflect: How can traditional knowledge inform justice prevention for youth?

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Resources

- **Screening and Brief Intervention** <https://www.miccsi.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/02-MHTTC-SBIRTShort-Screens-Brief-Assessments.pdf>
- **Project Venture** <https://projectventure.org/>
- **American Indian Life Skills** <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED402129>
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Closing in a Good Way

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