

# Stories of Change Among Justice-Involved American Indian Youth

From the Cross-Site Evaluation of OJJDP's Tribal Green Reentry Program

Authors: Tasseli McKay, Christine Lindquist, Ada Pecos Melton, Rita Martinez

July 2013



Understanding what helps justice-involved American Indian (AI) youth to make positive changes in their lives and end or reduce their involvement in the tribal juvenile justice system is important for developing effective supports. This report presents perspectives on personal change among justice-involved AI youth who participated in the Tribal Juvenile Detention and Reentry Green Demonstration ("Green Reentry") programs in three tribes funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). We briefly summarize past research on risk and protective factors for ongoing justice-system involvement among AI youth; describe the Green Reentry initiative; and present the perspectives of youth, parents, and program staff and stakeholders on experiences of personal change among participating youth.

## Background

### Risk and Protective Factors Affecting Justice-Involved American Indian Youth

Studies have found a number of risk and protective factors that influence ongoing juvenile justice involvement among various populations of youth, including school engagement, relationships with peers (especially delinquent peer associations), family relationships (especially parental involvement), and substance abuse (Beaver, Wright, DeLisi, & Vaughn, 2008; Gunnison & Mazerolle, 2007; MacArthur Foundation, n.d.; Mulvey, 2011; Mulvey, Schubert, & Chassin, 2010). Certain character traits, such as goal orientation and self-control, have been associated with positive life choices (e.g., ending delinquency) among justice-involved youth (Beaver et al., 2008; MacArthur Foundation, n.d.).

Cross-sectional studies have compared rates of AI youth offending, mental health problems, substance abuse, violence, and suicide with other youth populations, but they have not identified AI-specific risk and protective factors (Costello, Farmer, Angold, Burns, & Erkanli, 1997; Dick, Manson, & Beals, 1993; Stiffman, Alexander-Eitzman, Silmere, Osborne, & Brown, 2007). Longitudinal studies with AI youth have tracked changes in substance abuse, other risk behaviors, and mental health status over time, but they have not looked at justice-system involvement (Stiffman et al., 2007). Thus, it remains unclear whether risk and protective factors for justice-system involvement that have been identified among largely urban, non-AI



This report presents qualitative perspectives on individual change among justice-involved American Indian youth involved in Green Reentry programs. Youth, parents, and program staff identified positive changes in the following aspects of young people's lives as they participated in Green Reentry programming:

- Character
- Emotional health and well-being
- Cultural knowledge and identity
- School engagement
- Community engagement
- Interpersonal relationships

Although conclusions about the effect of Green Reentry programs on these behaviors cannot be drawn from this analysis, the findings suggest that youth, parents, and program staff all attribute positive changes in multiple life domains to participation in the Green Reentry program.



youth—such as substance use, school engagement, community engagement, and relationships with peers and adults—might operate in the lives of AI youth living in mostly rural tribal communities.

Risk factors for violent offending among AI youth include alcohol and other drug use and victimization (Reingle & Maldonado-Molina, 2012). Emotional well-being (e.g., positive affect), peer relationships (especially prosocial peer behavior), and school engagement protect against violent offending (Bearinger et al., 2005). However, it is not known whether these factors affect ongoing justice-system involvement among AI youth processed by tribal courts for status offenses (such as truancy or curfew) and other misdemeanors. Furthermore, much remains to be learned about context-specific protective factors that might affect AI youth living on reservations. Cultural factors, in particular, have been little studied.

### Proposed Culture-Based Protective Factors

AI tribes have unique cultures and cultural practices that may provide key resources to restore harmony in a young person's life and enable healthy life choices that minimize experience with the tribal justice system. Prior research with tribal communities has referred to common cultural resources that could function as protective factors for AI youth involved with the justice system (William, 2005). Positive cultural identity and family and social connections (described below) are thought to increase the likelihood of positive outcomes for AI youth.

**Cultural identity** is a multidimensional construct reflecting adherence to and acceptance of the cultural values that define an AI perspective or way of life (Choney, Berryhill-Paapke, & Robbins, 1995; Sanders, 1987). Closely related to cultural identity is **spirituality**, which includes ceremony, ritual, and traditional beliefs. Spirituality has been suggested as a potential buffer for preventing engagement in risky behavior, coping with behavioral health issues, addressing wrongful behavior, and dealing with victimization. Studies have found a strong negative relationship between cultural and spiritual practices and suicide attempts, indicating that traditional AI ways appear to be related to resiliency (Garrouette, Goldberg, Beals, Herrell, & Manson, 2003; Lester, 1999). Furthermore, most tribal values are incongruent with alcohol and drug abuse and violent crimes, and some studies have shown that participation in traditional AI culture is associated with lower levels of substance abuse and substance abuse risk (Herman-Stahl, Spencer, & Duncan, 2002; Lysne, 2002; Walls, Johnson, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2006; Winterowd, Montgomery, Stumblingbear, Harless, & Hicks, 2008).

**Family and social connections** may also be particularly salient protective factors for AI youth and may connect AI youth to the tribe's cultural values. Strong families provide a secure and stable environment that enables AI youth to develop strengths and competencies and to incorporate culture-based norms and values (Beauvais & Oetting, 1999). Together, the nuclear family, extended family, and clan can represent a powerful support system that can help mitigate the effect of multiple risk factors (Burgess, 1980; Kawamoto, 2001). Although very little research has explored the role of family or broader social connections among justice-involved AI youth, parental involvement was found to be a protective factor for both victimization and violent offending among AI youth in the AddHealth study (Reingle & Maldonado-Molina, 2012).



## Filling the Gaps in Juvenile Justice Research and Practice With American Indian Youth

Efforts to help young tribal members make positive changes in their lives and avoid future justice-system involvement require a clear understanding of risk and protective factors that affect AI youth. Research and evaluation focused on the experiences of AI youth and innovative programs designed to serve them can help Indian nations to create effective, culturally relevant, and appropriate supports for justice-involved youth. Key research gaps include

- identifying factors that shape the life choices of justice-involved AI youth living on reservations (including the cultural resources mentioned above and other risk and protective factors) and
- understanding how tribes can best support justice-involved youth in making positive changes in their lives.

This brief begins to address those gaps. Using qualitative data from a sample of youth, parents, and staff and stakeholders involved in tribal Green Reentry programs, it explores stories of personal change among justice-involved youth in three reservation communities.

## The Tribal Green Reentry Programs

### Funding Initiative

In 2009, OJJDP awarded Green Reentry grants to three AI tribes: the Hualapai Indian Tribe (AZ), the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians (MS), and the Rosebud Sioux Tribe (SD). The Green Reentry funding was for the provision of services to help detained and reentering youth successfully reintegrate into the community through the incorporation of green technologies and environmentally sustainable activities. Each grantee was required to establish a partnership with a higher learning institution with expertise in green technology. For detailed information about the Green Reentry initiative and detailed information about the funded sites, please see <http://www.rti.org/publications/abstract.cfm?pubid=20742>.

### Overview of Funded Sites

The Green Reentry programs combine conventional youth reentry activities—such as individual assessments, reentry planning, education, and counseling—with green activities such as gardening and skill development in green technologies. In addition, the three programs incorporate traditional tribal culture through cultural education, activities, and ceremonies.

The programs seek to assist youth held in tribal detention facilities to reintegrate into their communities and to prevent future criminal behavior among at-risk youth. Although all three sites originally planned to primarily serve committed youth, security constraints at two sites prohibited participation in activities taking place beyond the secured grounds of the detention center. Therefore, those programs expanded their target populations to include justice-involved youth not committed to the detention center, such as youth on probation.





**The Rosebud Sioux Tribe's (RST)** Green Reentry program is administered by the tribal juvenile detention center and is delivered primarily in the context of a day-reporting educational program at the detention center, in which youth report to the facility each weekday to participate in schoolwork and other programming. Committed youth cannot participate in the full program until they are released to day reporting, but they do receive cultural education and have contact with Green Reentry staff. In addition to lessons in gardening, beekeeping, raising chickens, and building greenhouses, the program emphasizes cultural education and complements classroom activities with cultural excursions, activities, and service learning projects that take place in different RST communities.

**The Hualapai Indian Tribe's** Green Reentry program is administered by the Hualapai Juvenile Detention and Rehabilitation Center (HJDRC). The program serves all youth who are adjudicated to the 30-bed HJDRC, which includes Hualapai youth and those placed at the HJDRC by nearby tribal courts. All committed youth participate in gardening, horticultural education, and other program components. Youth who advance to the highest behavioral status level participate in additional activities such as greenhouse construction and maintenance, hydroponic gardening, and special green projects (e.g., solar panel installation) with the Hualapai Planning Department. Gardening plots and greenhouses are located at the HJDRC and the local Boys & Girls Club, allowing youth to participate in the Green Reentry program while at the HJDRC and continue when they return home.

For the **Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians (MBCI)**, the Division of Court Services administers the Green Reentry program. The program is delivered primarily on the MBCI Justice Complex grounds, where a large garden plot is located. (The program plans to expand into hydroponics.) Committed youth cannot participate in the full program until they are released, but they do receive enhanced coordination of mental health services and contact from Green Reentry staff. Youth in the transitional living unit or under community supervision are eligible to participate in the full program. In addition to on-site gardening, Green Reentry youth participate in field trips to cultural activities in the community and in workshops at partner agencies' facilities on topics such as solar panels, permaculture, and native forestry.

### Evaluation Design and Data Sources

The Cross-Site Evaluation of OJJDP's Green Reentry Program is being conducted by RTI International and American Indian Development Associates (AIDA). The purpose of the evaluation is to document program implementation at each Green Reentry site and to determine the impact on the tribal youth and communities served (see sidebar).

Data sources for the current report include individual semistructured interviews conducted during the first two process evaluation site visits (May–June 2012 and November 2012–January 2013) with

- program directors, other Green Reentry staff, and representatives from key partnering agencies ( $n = 59$ );



The **process evaluation** describes each grantee's program implementation experiences over a 3-year funding period. Through four rounds of site visits, the evaluation team collects in-depth information on program operations, implementation challenges and strategies, and interagency partnerships. Each site visit includes semistructured interviews with Green Reentry staff and partner agency representatives, youth participants, and their parents. Site visits also include observation of Green Reentry activities using structured observation forms.

The **outcome evaluation** will determine the effectiveness of the programs by examining recidivism among Green Reentry youth. The primary data sources will be court and detention center records on reoffending, rearrest, and reincarceration.



- youth who participated in Green Reentry programs ( $n = 26$ ); and
- parents of youth participants ( $n = 24$ ).

The findings presented in this report are intended to convey **perceptions** of change among Green Reentry youth as articulated by staff and stakeholders, parents, and youth. Because the data are descriptive and are based on cross-sectional interviews conducted for the process evaluation, no conclusions regarding actual program effectiveness can be drawn.

### Perspectives on Youth Change in the Green Reentry Program

Program staff and community stakeholders, parents, and youth were asked to share their perceptions of youth experiences with the Green Reentry program. According to many of those interviewed, the program facilitated shifts for youth in their character, emotional health and well-being, cultural knowledge, engagement in school and community, and interpersonal relationships.

#### Character

Across sites, all three groups of interviewees (staff and stakeholders, youth, and parents) observed a transformation in character among youth who participated in the Green Reentry program. Parents and staff and stakeholders all focused on the effect that Green Reentry programs had on participants' **sense of responsibility**. Parents found their children to be more focused, self-disciplined, and invested in new activities. Staff and stakeholders emphasized that the gardens allowed youth to produce something of immediate value to their families and communities through their own labor. Youth noted that they enjoyed the responsibility of caring for plants and animals. One youth said that her favorite part of the program was "the bees and the chickens, because it taught me responsibility, how to take care of animals." They also took pride in having new skills that could help them provide for themselves and others; for example, one youth explained, "I learned a lot about self-sufficiency, how to produce things."

Perhaps as a result, a new sense of **personal pride and self-worth** was observed among Green Reentry youth. One staff/stakeholder interviewee stated, "The Green Reentry program encourages ownership, pride, a sense of worth." Youth described improved confidence and self-esteem: "I feel confident every day and I can take over anything." Another youth reported with pride, "I have an awesome green thumb."

Parents and staff and stakeholders also sensed a new **focus on long-term life goals** among Green Reentry participants. Youth themselves articulated a range of aspirations, including leading traditional singing, attending community college, attending nursing school, and becoming a welder. Youth also described an increased ability to choose and follow through on a course of action to meet a goal. Some parents noticed these changes in their children's thinking and decision-making as well.



He's learning new skills, he's got direction, and it's leading him away from the trouble that he was getting into. They helped him learn new skills, because he never knew anything about gardening or building anything. He has something to look forward to when he comes here every day.

—Parent Interview

Fixing the greenhouse, I learned how to use tools, and I learned that I'm pretty good with my hands and that I like to make arts and crafts.... Someone would teach me one time and I'd just learn it fast and they're like, "You're pretty good with your hands!"

—Youth Interview

I see change in them: getting their focus back on track, beginning to focus back on what their dream was, what their goal was.

—Staff/Stakeholder Interview

I'm a lot more motivated. The people I used to know are out there drinking and burning through their time. I'm focusing on the future and what I want to do.

—Youth Interview



## Emotional Health and Well-Being

Youth who participated in Green Reentry programs seemed to experience improvements in their emotional health and well-being. Staff and stakeholders believed that the experience of being known and supported by caring adults outside of the family was transformative for youth who had limited access to other adult support, helping them to practice **emotional openness and trust**. One suggested that youth were “learning that there are other types of people who care for them—industrious, spiritual people that are there to help them and are not part of the violence and neglect that happens for some youth at home.” Parents also commented that their children began opening up more about their feelings.

Parents also perceived that their children had become **better at dealing with anger** and **experienced more positive emotions** as a result of Green Reentry participation: they were calmer, more at peace, and better able to work with others and to control their tempers. Some parents reported that their children had learned specific anger management skills (e.g., using exercise to cool down), whereas others felt that simply engaging in outdoor activities helped youth release anger.

Youth echoed this observation. One shared, “I don’t get mad like I used to; I’m not depressed like I used to be; I just feel calm.” According to another, “I’m happier and I just feel like me.” Youth stated that having access to counselors or other supportive adults had helped them to learn how to express anger productively. They emphasized the value of feeling listened to and supported, as well as of the opportunity to learn from elders about how to manage interpersonal challenges and difficult emotions. Youth and staff also specifically identified cultural activities such as healing ceremonies, and green activities involving animals or gardening, as being crucial in releasing stress and negative emotions. One youth explained, “When I’m around animals, I get calmer, and I feel like it’s not their fault that I’m feeling this way, so I have to calm myself down.” Staff believed that many youth found gardening and being outside to be helpful for relieving stress. One explained, “Some will start taking off their socks and shoes and just sit at the garden. Gardens help you to relax.”

Youth also indicated that they were better able to resist the urge to express their feelings in destructive ways. Several youth attributed **decreased substance use** to their participation in treatment (provided by Green Reentry counselors and referrals to residential treatment when needed), traditional cultural activities, the presence of supportive adults, and a focus on new life goals.

## Cultural Knowledge and Identity

Across all sites and all types of interviews, interviewees emphasized the powerful changes that Green Reentry youth experienced in cultural knowledge and identity. Staff and stakeholders as well as parents reported with evident joy and pride that youth had devoted themselves enthusiastically to **understanding traditional teachings and practices** such as healing ceremonies, drumming, beading, basket making, gourd singing and dancing, and gardening. Parents suggested that participation in traditional cultural activities had allowed youth to become more comfortable with who they were, talk about things that they normally would not talk about, and pray.



I make a comparison with the old ways, where the whole camp was your aunts and uncles, and were concerned for the young people. We all know these kids—what their good behaviors are and bad behaviors. Once they start to acknowledge that, they have some kind of support. They start trusting us. Then there are better outcomes. They find safety here.

—Staff/Stakeholder Interview

Without consciously knowing about how people are processing their emotions, a lot of people do it through activities, and it burns something out of them. Just by being involved in different activities, you’re bringing something to life and you’re letting go of a lot of things too. [Child] released a lot of anger through the program without even knowing.

—Parent Interview

It gave me more coping skills to where I could deal with problems that I don’t like and forgive people that hate me for what I’ve done, and forgive myself for my problems. The Green Reentry plan got me back on my feet and I got myself together to where I could overcome things I couldn’t before.

—Youth Interview

When I’ve been having urges to do drugs, I call [staff members] and they always stop by. And if nobody is around, I usually just sing. I keep going because I want to be able to be a song leader.

—Youth Interview





Exposure to traditional cultural knowledge and the opportunity to practice traditional ways also helped youth to develop a **stronger cultural identity**. Staff and stakeholders, parents, and many youth noted that Green Reentry participants experienced a new sense of pride in their identities as tribal members and in the arts and survival skills of their people. One stakeholder shared, “It brings out the old ways in a new fashion [and] provides pride and joy in their community.” Youth believed they had become more culturally connected and informed. They reported increased knowledge of cultural teachings, an ability to participate more confidently in cultural practices, and stronger interest in learning about their cultural ways. They also reported feeling a part of something larger than themselves: identifying not only with tribal traditions, but also with the shared responsibility to strengthen those traditions in the wake of colonization and culture loss.

Finally, youth who became engaged in traditional activities as a part of the Green Reentry program also seemed to experience **improved connections with elders**, including parents, grandparents, and other community members, through those activities. One youth explained, “My grandma makes dresses and sometimes I’ll watch and sew little pieces. My other grandma does beadwork and sometimes I watch her or do beadwork.” Other youth mentioned helping an uncle hold a sun dance, helping a neighbor prepare a sweat, and feeling more connected to a parent through practicing traditional singing. Another youth expressed a new desire to connect with elders: “They let us learn our own ways. They let us sing. I would like to learn from an elder like him because they have a lot of knowledge, more than us.”

### School Engagement

According to staff and stakeholders, parents, and youth, Green Reentry participants generally became more engaged with school as a result of their participation. Across sites, it was reported that most Green Reentry youth **demonstrated more frequent school attendance, less tardiness, and progress toward a diploma or GED**. Many youth who had fallen one or more grade levels behind had been able to begin catching up on coursework during their time in the program.

Staff and stakeholders credited individualized educational support provided by Green Reentry staff with enabling these improvements. Parents and youth emphasized the fact that youth in the Green Reentry program had access to **alternative educational environments** where they were free from bullying and gang activity. This included enrolling in online school, moving to dormitory housing adjacent to the tribal school, gaining admission to a boarding school, or attending day school at the tribal detention center. Youth said they **felt safer and better able to focus** in the alternate academic environments provided by the Green Reentry program and detention centers. One young woman explained, “I liked [the program] because I thought I’d rather be out here than in a public school, because you don’t have to worry about bullying.”



I just feel great because we’re, like, keeping the tradition going instead of letting it die out. Because our language is going out, everyone is starting to speak English, so we’re trying to save that.

—Youth Interview

I feel a lot closer to [the traditional culture], because now I can go to powwows and sun dances and sweat lodges and know what they’re doing and why they’re doing it.

—Youth Interview



I’m getting more done now academically than I did in regular school, and it’s all good grades. It’s bigger steps for me on a daily basis. I can achieve more out here and still get green activities done, too, so it’s a double win. I’m more motivated and productive.

—Youth Interview

It even helps them out in the science classes. Those that were really struggling in science, they’re not so much now, because now they’re beginning to listen in the classroom, and do homework, and now they go on the Internet and do research. It was a surprise to me, especially those that didn’t really get into science. Now they are. It’s helping them.

—Staff/Stakeholder Interview



Finally, staff and youth interviewees alike suggested that learning about green skills and technology in the program had inspired a stronger interest in learning in general. Youth spoke enthusiastically about the **hands-on experience** they had gained through Green Reentry lectures, field trips, and hands-on activities. A typical respondent liked “working with the bees and the chickens, because I can learn a lot from them. I learned that the queen bee in one day can lay 200 eggs!” Another young person appreciated “that I was learning something that I get to use in the long run.” This **appreciation for practical skills** was a strong theme among youth. For a few, the skills they gained in the Green Reentry program even led to a career path.

### Community Engagement

Many interviewees who had worked directly with Green Reentry youth or heard about their efforts shared tremendous appreciation for their engagement in community service work. Staff and stakeholders as well as parents observed that youth showed great **enthusiasm for giving back to their communities**, whether through mandated community service hours or voluntary activities. One staff member explained, “They are so eager to get into community service. They are hard-working kids and they are just looking for a chance.”

This was borne out in interview after interview with youth, who made statements like these:

- “I liked all of the parts where we were all involved together to help the community or help the kids.”
- “[I liked] helping out, picking up trash.” [What did you like about it?] “Just helping out.”
- “When someone needs help around here, I volunteer to help them out.”
- “It was fun. We all got to help.”

Reflecting on the topic of helping others, one youth mused, “I never thought I’d be doing anything for anybody.”

Since enrolling in the program, youth said they had gotten involved in a variety of **positive activities on the reservation**, such as public runs, spiritual ceremonies, and sporting events. Staff and stakeholders suggested that participation in community activities allowed youth to feel a **sense of belonging** in their communities that they had not felt before. One said, “It’s giving them a sense of overall community, not just ‘me and my mom at home.’”

Youth exhibited a strong **feeling of accomplishment** from participating in Green Reentry activities that allowed them to make a contribution and serve others, including sharing items they produced with elders (such as vegetables, firewood, and Christmas cards); collecting materials for community spiritual events; and cleaning up graffiti on local buildings. One young woman seemed to speak for many of her peers when she explained that the positive changes she made in her own life while participating in the Green Reentry program put her in a better position to act on a long-standing desire to make positive changes in her community.



I’m done with school! I’ll be going to tech school... soon, to do hands-on training for jobs. I’m going for carpentry and building houses, which is something I like.

—Youth Interview



Being able to do community events helps them build pride in the community. They are not alienated from the community.... They are at public sweats and public runs.

—Staff/Stakeholder Interview

I always thought about... how it would be helpful to change things [in the community and with other kids], but I couldn’t tell anybody how to change because I wasn’t changing myself.

—Youth Interview

I see everybody’s got more trust in me and is liking what I’m doing now. They say I came out of the detention center a little different.

—Youth Interview





Finally, increased involvement in service activities and public events left many youth **feeling more seen and respected by adults** in their communities. Youth had opportunities for positive reinforcement through these activities, and they felt that the contributions they made to the community were recognized. One youth explained, “I was trying to do productive activities with the Green Reentry program and it was making me feel like I was more appreciated.”

### Interpersonal Relationships

One of the changes that youth most often described as a result of their Green Reentry program participation was an improvement in their interpersonal relationships. Youth and parents focused particularly on the changes that occurred in their relationships with one another, including more **open communication** with family members and more time spent at home. One youth explained, “Ever since I stopped running away, it’s been better. Me and my mom used to argue, but after the Green Reentry program, we never did.” Several parents observed that since enrolling in the program, their children had become more helpful at home and had begun to consult with them about their activities and plans outside the home, rather than simply taking off.

Youth, parents, and staff and stakeholders noticed that participation in the Green Reentry program helped youth to **express themselves openly** and with more confidence. Parents noticed that their children seemed more open and talkative. They experienced youth sharing more about their feelings, as well as sharing about the green projects they were working on, such as gardening, raising chickens, and keeping bees. A staff member recounted: “I’m thinking of three youth who were withdrawn, quiet, not participating. Now, today, they are willing to speak in front of people.” Another suggested, “They’re able to participate and verbalize their thoughts.... We see the intelligence that is there.”

According to youth, parents, and staff and stakeholders, youth had also developed a new ability to **show respect** in their interactions with others, which resulted in more harmonious relationships: “We’re starting to see little by little the respect come back. They are showing it to the elders and the community members.” Parents noted that their children had become more helpful at home and more likely to ask them for permission and communicate about their whereabouts. Youth reported feeling better able to communicate effectively and politely with adults. One youth explained that he learned “how to be yourself and be respectful, how Natives are.” Some youth mentioned that they felt **more approval from parents, grandparents, and siblings** than before. One youth shared, “Every day my mom tells me she’s proud of me for putting down the old things I did. My little sister says nice things to me every day, too.”

Finally, youth felt they had become better at creating and maintaining **healthy boundaries** with others. They reported that they had let go of worrying about what their peers or family members might do, had an easier time setting themselves apart from negative influences, and could assert themselves with peers who challenged them or did not understand them. Youth who became sober kept their distance from friends who were still using alcohol or drugs.



I’m working on how to be around my family. I woke up and I want to be around my family more. It’s really great now. I used to have problems with my mom because I used to have a lot of friends coming over and I’d sneak people into the house. Now, I just ask my mom and she lets me.

—Youth Interview

He talks a lot about the stuff he does with Green Reentry.... I see the emotions and his face changes and brightens up for a minute or two. I can see the effect it has on him.

—Parent Interview

The people I used to hang out with before Green Reentry, I don’t hang out with them anymore. They always want to go out drinking on the weekend, but I’m always writing and reading and getting ready for things.

—Youth Interview



## Conclusion: Supporting Positive Change Among American Indian Youth

The transformations recounted by Green Reentry staff and stakeholders, parents, and youth expand what is known about supporting justice-involved AI youth on tribal reservations. They suggest that positive change is possible in many areas of young people's lives, including character, emotional health and well-being, cultural knowledge and identity, school engagement, community engagement, and interpersonal relationships.

**Character.** Prior research has suggested that aspects of character such as goal orientation and self-control exert an important influence on ongoing justice-system involvement among youth (Beaver et al., 2008; MacArthur Foundation, n.d.). The Green Reentry program appears to have offered youth an opportunity to cultivate positive character traits. Staff and stakeholders, parents, and youth recounted changes in respectfulness, responsibility, focus, helpfulness, and confidence that they saw resulting from program participation.

**Emotional health and well-being.** Positive emotional health has been proposed as a protective factor for juvenile justice system involvement (Bearinger et al., 2005). Green Reentry youth as well as staff and stakeholders reported that youth experienced positive emotions more often and were better able to cope with stress and difficult emotions as a result of program participation. Parents noticed that their children seemed better able to manage anger. Many youth credited the program with helping them to eliminate substance abuse, an important known risk factor for ongoing justice-system involvement (Reingle & Maldonado-Molina, 2012).

**Cultural knowledge and identity.** Cultural identity appears to protect AI youth against various risk behaviors (Garrouette et al., 2003; Herman-Stahl et al., 2002; Lester, 1999; Lysne, 2002; Walls et al., 2006; Winterowd et al., 2008). Youth who participated in Green Reentry activities reported increased cultural knowledge and seemed to form or reinvigorate their cultural identities. The Green Reentry program appears to have played an important role in enculturation, or the process through which an individual learns about and identifies with his or her own cultural roots (Little Soldier, 1985; Whitbeck, Adams, Hoyt, & Chen, 2004; Zimmerman, Ramirez-Valles, Washienko, & Walter, 1996). Youth, staff and stakeholders, and parents observed that youth had strengthened their cultural identities, showed increased enthusiasm for traditional cultural and spiritual activities, and participated in (or even led) more cultural activities in the community than before participating in the Green Reentry program.

**School engagement.** Prior research suggests that school engagement is associated with ending or reducing justice-system involvement among youth (Bearinger et al., 2005). Green Reentry youth and parents each emphasized that the program had helped youth to improve their school attendance, get back on track for a high school diploma, or attain a general equivalency diploma (GED). Many indicated that access to a different learning environment, such as day school at the detention center, a boarding school, or online school, was key to these positive developments. Opportunities to explore and excel at hands-on activities, including



green activities and traditional cultural arts, seemed to stimulate an interest in learning, particularly among youth whose academic achievement had been limited.

**Community engagement.** The role of community service and civic engagement in the lives of AI youth is not yet well explored in the research literature. Green Reentry youth and staff and stakeholders perceived a marked increase in the extent to which youth made positive contributions to their communities and felt a sense of accomplishment. Parents indicated that their children showed a new pride in helping others. The community engagement activities offered to youth as part of these programs seemed to yield enormous benefits in terms of increased self-worth, responsibility, and confidence among youth. Furthermore, the highly visible positive activities that youth took part in during their Green Reentry participation were seen to rebuild feelings of trust and belonging in their communities.



**Interpersonal relationships.** Various studies have suggested the importance of peer and parenting relationships in preventing continued justice-system involvement (Bearinger et al., 2005; Beauvais & Oetting, 1999; Burgess, 1980; Kawamoto, 2001; Reingle & Maldonado-Molina, 2012). Among AI youth, access to the wisdom of elders is also proposed as an important influence. The Green Reentry program seems to have facilitated positive changes in the youths' relationships with parents, peers, and community elders. Parents and staff and stakeholders all described improvements in peer relationships and a general increase in positive relationships with adults. In their peer relationships, many youth reported better boundaries, including keeping their distance from substance-involved friends and being willing to be different. Youth and parents reported that youth were spending more time at home, engaged in more open communication with their parents, and received more approval from family members.





### Next Steps

The perspectives shared by Green Reentry staff and stakeholders, parents, and youth regarding youth experiences in this program begin to shed light on how justice-involved AI youth can make positive changes in their lives. Continued efforts to identify effective, culturally robust services and interventions for these youth are crucial. The Green Reentry program expanded services to youth at various levels of justice-system involvement, including diversion, community supervision, incarceration, and reentry. All three local programs incorporated green technologies, cultural components, and other holistic services to help youth reintegrate into their communities, support the development of green skills, and build individual and community cultural resources.

Building on the qualitative perspectives on youth change presented here, the Cross-Site Evaluation of OJJDP's Green Reentry Program will make a quantitative assessment of the effect of program participation on youth outcomes, particularly recidivism. In this outcome study component, the evaluation team will draw on existing court and detention center data on rearrest and reincarceration to explore recidivism outcomes. In addition, the evaluation will continue to document program implementation through ongoing in-person and telephone interviews with Green Reentry staff and stakeholders, youth, and parents from the Hualapai and Rosebud Sioux tribes and the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians.

Lessons gleaned from the outcome and implementation studies will help to inform ongoing work to improve juvenile justice system responses for AI youth and support them in building positive futures.



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