



Where Research Begins with American Indians/Alaska Natives

Fact sheet purpose and audience

The primary audience for this document is researchers who wish to work with tribes or urban American Indians/Alaska Natives (AI/ANs). These fast facts are intended to introduce investigators to indigenous ways of thinking and ensure that the research has value to the participants and their communities. Rather than a checklist, this document is intended as an overview.

Indigenous Perspective

Tribal leaders increasingly acknowledge that research is a key tool of tribal sovereignty, to provide information to guide community planning and policies and address issues of environmental and health disparities.

Tribal and urban AI/AN communities are intent on protecting knowledge, culture and beliefs from unethical research practices.

There have been historic and present-day ethical violations in the use of data and knowledge collected from AI/AN peoples. Communities have experienced research where data has been collected and findings published, but no information or resources provided to the community to help solve local problems.

What is tribal sovereignty?

Federally recognized tribal governments are sovereign nations with legal authority to regulate activities conducted on their lands and with their citizens. Tribal nations are diverse. Place matters: It is important to learn about local histories and experiences with research. The sovereign authority of tribal governments needs to be acknowledged and reflected in all aspects of the research process including decision-making about research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, publication and dissemination.

Proposed research should benefit tribal citizens or urban Indian communities and should answer a question of priority to the members of those communities.

Tribal governments formulate and enforce their own laws or policies for research on their lands or with their people. Tribal views on research and structures for research regulations are also diverse. Many communities have Institutional Review Boards, Ethics Committees, cultural committees, or health boards that may require review and approval of research protocols.

Others work with the Indian Health Service or a tribal college. Working towards consensus may be a key objective to foster effective relationships. It is important for researchers to study tribal governance and oversight models, research policies, ethical guidelines and indigenous research protocols, both overarching and those unique to a community.

Working with AI/ANs outside tribal lands

Over 60% of AI/ANs live in cities and rural areas outside of reservations. Urban AI/ANs are heterogeneous in their tribal membership status, often identifying with more than one tribal group or with non-federally recognized tribes. Like reservation communities, urban Indians experience disparities and are affected by issues associated with low socioeconomic status. Urban Indians are connected with broader tribal networks, but lack sovereignty status and tribal governance structures. Nonetheless, urban Indian-serving organizations and communities should be treated with similar respect for the knowledge they can contribute throughout the research process. Researchers can promote trustworthy partnerships by forming oversight committees and collaborating with existing agencies familiar with urban Indian populations, community cultural norms and local research priorities.

Consider ways to involve AI/AN communities in the research process from conceptualizing the issues or identifying community assets and strengths, to developing appropriate study design, and collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data.

Will the community benefit from the research?

A core value of working in AI/AN communities is that the research must benefit the community. Even in a basic science investigation in which participants may not expect benefit for themselves, consider ways the work can benefit AI/AN communities. For example, a research partnership can provide science education, employment, or resources to build capacity and infrastructure. However, be transparent about direct or long-term positive outcomes. Don't overstate possible benefits. Researchers must work to prevent misinterpretation by communities that leads to disappointment.

What will you do with the information?

Even with the best of intentions, researchers have collected data from tribal members and published

journal articles, yet failed to bring what they have learned back to the community. Developing a dissemination plan with an advisory board or local individuals with outreach experience will ensure findings are shared through modes that are accessible and potentially useful to community members and decision-makers. Tribal boards often want to review and approve manuscripts and presentations. Be prepared to allow time for local review processes prior to publication of materials.

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Tips for developing research relationships

(Adapted from NCAI-CNHP, 2012)

Learn to listen; be authentic; act with humility: Both parties contribute ideas; no one should dominate the conversation. Project deadlines and career obligations should not limit researchers from hearing AI/AN partners and respecting their cultural and local knowledge. The perspective of others is central for work to benefit community.

Leave pre-conceived assumptions behind: Indigenous people have sound community-driven research ideas and methodologies that reflect their values. Create shared goals and be transparent about academic motivations. Be considerate and flexible about study methods and designs.

Learn about the people you are working with: AI/AN communities have different research processes and needs based on a unique set of historical, cultural, social and environmental conditions. Spend time with leaders and key community stakeholders at all phases of the research. Building these relationships requires patience, humility and sincerity.

Plan for sustainability and positive impact: Research projects do not have to continue indefinitely, but should provide lasting impact. Sustainability could mean training community members to develop the project after funding ends, transferring data to tribal or urban Indian organizational ownership, or forming a non-profit to continue the work.

Create a dissemination plan: Use accessible and easy-to-understand language when discussing the research protocol, progress, or findings. Work with an advisory group representing a diversity of community stakeholders to ensure that local operational systems and cultural considerations are well represented. Work with professionals with community outreach experience to prepare for and conduct conversations in the community at each juncture of the research.



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