



## Justice Systems Research & Evaluation

The *National Institute of Justice* (NIJ) is the research, evaluation, and development arm of the U.S. Department of Justice (USDOJ). NIJ actively supports research and evaluation (R&E) with American Indian and Alaska Native communities on issues of crime and justice, including the development, implementation, and dissemination of best practices to enhance the safety and wellbeing of tribal citizens and communities.

### Current Paradigms in R&E “Evidence”

Best practices generally are determined by the extent to which they can demonstrate their effectiveness in producing a given outcome. When shown effective, programs and practices are often then designated as “evidence-based.” The evidence itself, including the types of information that can serve to show program effects and the methods that are used to gather and analyze this information, are generally dictated by Western approaches to scientific knowledge production.

These Western approaches, however, are often not appropriate when it comes to understanding the effects of cultural practices and customs in tribal communities. While a randomized controlled trial might be appropriate to test the effects of a medication, it is not ethical to withhold a person’s culture to see what happens. Likewise, the collection and/or release of data required for Western evaluation could be a violation of the cultural practice itself. Thus, the power of cultural practices and programs on various outcomes, including criminal justice outcomes, remains relatively understudied.

### Bridging Paradigms in Tribal R&E

NIJ’s ultimate goal is to enhance the ability of tribal communities to demonstrate that their cultural practices and programs effect and/or sustain positive change. This goal will be achieved through the investigation of 1) the various types of information that can be used as “evidence” to understand that practice or program effect, and 2) the methods that can be used appropriately and ethically to collect and analyze this information.

### Building the Bridge

NIJ is considering the development of a system or set of criteria through which the effects of the culture-based practices and programs on various outcomes can be determined. Although various frameworks and approaches that incorporate culture in the R&E process exist (e.g., culturally-responsive evaluation and assessment, indigenous evaluation framework), this initiative would place culture itself as the focus of R&E efforts.

### Who will benefit?

NIJ believes that this initiative has the potential to benefit multiple partners, including:

- **Tribes** by equipping them to understand the effects of their cultural customs and traditions on the health and wellbeing of their citizens, and to assess these effects in ways that are appropriate and acceptable within tribal cultures themselves. Further, the data generated through this process will enable tribes to be more competitive in applying for funding that requires such information.
- **NIJ** by providing an enhanced understanding of the multiplicity of types of “evidence” and methods that exist that can provide meaningful conclusions about the effects of a program or practice.



### **How can you help us achieve our goal?**

Share your thoughts. Cultural traditions, customs, and practices vary greatly from one tribal community to another. To ensure that any system or criteria developed as part of this initiative is inclusive, comprehensive, and broadly useful, it is imperative that NIJ receives input from a variety of stakeholders. All input will be considered thoroughly and will be greatly appreciated as we continue through this information gathering process.

### **What type of feedback would we like?**

We welcome all opinions and ideas. Some framing questions that we are interested in getting your feedback on are:

- To what extent does the current “evidence-based” paradigm influence your program and practice choices?
- How does the need for existing data or a program evaluation plan influence your decision to pursue funding opportunities?
- Which alternative approaches might NIJ consider when it comes to researching and evaluating programs and practices?
- What types of information would be okay to gather in order to better understand the effects of traditional cultural programs and practices on outcomes related to crime and justice?
- How should this information be collected? Who should collect this information? How should this information be used?

Any and all feedback will be greatly appreciated and thoroughly considered as we move forward with this process. If you have any suggestions, feedback, or questions, please contact us at [TribalResearch@usdoj.gov](mailto:TribalResearch@usdoj.gov).

NIJ will be holding a listening session on this new proposed system at the 15<sup>th</sup> National Indian Nations Conference being held at the Renaissance Palm Springs Hotel, Thursday, December 8, 2016 from 3:30 to 5:00 PM PST in the Smoke Tree D/E conference room. We encourage you to join us at this session to discuss this program with other tribal stakeholders. For more information on the conference and to access the agenda, please go to <http://www.ovcinc.org/home>.