



Community-Based Research With Urban American Indians

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Why is it important to learn about urban American Indian communities as well as reservation communities?

Despite the 1976 Indian Health Care Improvement Act, physical and mental health disparities exist in many American Indian (AI) populations. Approximately 70% of AIs live outside reservation lands, typically in urban areas, and yet only about 1% of the Indian Health Service budget serves these urban communities.



Figure 1 An urban American Indian community gathering hosted by American Indian Health and Family Services in Detroit, MI.

Little is known about urban AI community research and action, generally, and the role of urban settings in shaping these collaborative endeavors, specifically. This research brought together four researchers and one urban AI community organization staff member to offer four first-person accounts of collaborative urban AI behavioral health research. Each account offers “lessons learned” to inform future research and action.

Highlights

Collaborative research is an important tool for urban AI community empowerment.

Urban AI collaborations are an overlapping but distinct endeavor from reservation-based projects.

Input from local urban AI community members is crucial.

Dennis Wendt illustrates the importance of recognizing diversity within urban AI communities, describing community members with multiple tribal affiliations, multiracial families, varying residential histories, and fractured relational networks.

Melissa Saftner speaks to community geography, underscoring the value of urban AI communities' proximity to urban research institutes for developing strong relationships, the role of community organizations in overcoming community member dispersion throughout the urban landscape, and the need for creativity in demonstrating commitment to community issues.

ON HOW A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORMED THE PROJECT

Community psychology informed our interest in collaborative research and action as tools for urban AI community empowerment. We also used Community Psychology to inform our decision to represent distinct voices writing from academic and non-academic, as well as Native and non-Native, social positions.

Sandra Momper shares how flexible urban AI community membership can provide a refreshing sense of community to Native researchers, but also can impede community ownership of collaborative projects due to a reduced sense of “sovereign nationhood.”

John Marcus emphasizes an openness among urban AIs to research participation if researchers develop “meaningful relationships” with community members, respect local communicative

norms, demonstrate “cultural competence,” and recognize the sovereignty of AI peoples. Research, he underscored, should “bring our small community together, not apart” (p. 77).

What Does This Mean For?

Research and Evaluation: Understanding community partners and their interests is essential to developing a successful partnership. For research and evaluation efforts, it is also important for accurate measurement and interpretation; for clinical/community practice, it is important for establishing mutual understandings of salient problems and their effective solution; and for social action, it is also important to understand and effectively support local agendas for health, wellness, and empowerment.

People working in settings similar to the one that you studied: Community psychologists have written much about sense of community as an empowerment tool, but how does that work when community members are dispersed through an urban landscape due to federal Indian relocation policies of the 1970s & 80s?

Read the entire article! [Hartmann, W. E., Wendt, D. C., Saftner, M. D., Marcus, J. D., & Momper, S. M. \(2014\). Advancing community-based research with urban American Indian populations: Multidisciplinary perspectives. American Journal of Community Psychology, 54, 72-80.](#)