

TRIBAL POLICING & HISTORICAL TRAUMA

A Trauma-Informed Law Enforcement Toolkit — National Native Justice Institute | www.nativejustice.us

■ UNDERSTANDING HISTORICAL TRAUMA IN TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

Historical trauma is the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations resulting from massive group trauma. For Native American and Alaska Native communities, this includes forced removal, boarding school policies, cultural suppression, and systematic destruction of families and governance structures. Tribal officers serve communities where this trauma lives in daily interactions, family systems, and community relationships.

 Elevated PTSD, depression, and intergenerational grief are direct outcomes of historical trauma that tribal officers encounter every shift.

 Deep-rooted mistrust of law enforcement — a legacy of over-policing and forced removal — shapes nearly every community encounter.

 Family disruption, high domestic violence rates, and cultural disconnection are all tied to historical and ongoing trauma.

 Jurisdictional gaps and underfunded services mean tribal officers often serve as the sole response to complex behavioral health crises.

■ KEY IMPACTS ON TRIBAL POLICING

Community Trust & Relationships

Historical trauma creates a legacy of fear and mistrust toward law enforcement. Building authentic relationships requires consistent presence, cultural respect, and trauma-informed engagement — not just crisis response.

Behavioral Health Crises

A significant share of calls for service in Indian Country involve mental health crises, substance use, and domestic violence rooted in trauma. Officers who understand these connections respond more effectively and de-escalate more safely.

Officer Wellness

Tribal officers absorb community trauma daily. Secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout are serious risks. Departments must invest in peer support, counseling access, and officer wellness programs.

■ 10 TIPS FOR BECOMING A TRAUMA-INFORMED TRIBAL OFFICER

Trauma-informed policing is not about excusing behavior — it is about understanding it well enough to transform outcomes.

- **Lead with Empathy** – Approach every call understanding that behavior may be rooted in survival responses, not defiance. Regulate your own nervous system first.
- **Know Your Community's History** – Learn the specific historical events that impacted your tribe. This context builds authentic community trust.
- **Practice Active Listening** – Slow down, make eye contact, and listen without interrupting. Community members who feel heard are more cooperative.
- **De-escalation First** – Use voice, posture, and space intentionally. Trauma-activated individuals respond to calm, predictable, respectful communication.
- **Recognize Trauma Responses** – Fight, flight, freeze, and fawn responses can look like aggression, evasion, or silence. Reframe behavior as communication, not defiance.
- **Build Relational Trust Year-Round** – Community policing is a daily practice. Attend events, support cultural activities, and be visible outside of crisis response.
- **Respect Cultural Protocols** – Understand sacred practices, talking circles, and traditional healing. Defer to elders and cultural leaders when appropriate.
- **Manage Your Own Secondary Trauma** – Officers absorb community trauma. Seek peer support, counseling, and wellness practices. You cannot pour from an empty vessel.
- **Collaborate with Support Services** – Partner with tribal behavioral health and victim services. Many calls are better resolved with a co-responder than enforcement alone.
- **Pursue Ongoing Training** – Trauma-informed policing is a skill set. Commit to regular training through NNJI and tribal-focused organizations to stay current.

RESOURCES, GRANTS & SUPPORT

Funding, Training, and Support Resources — Tribal Law Enforcement Programs | www.nativejustice.us

■ FEDERAL GRANT RESOURCES

Law Enforcement & Public Safety

- **COPS Tribal Resources Grant (TRG)** – Funds hiring, training, and equipment for tribal law enforcement. cops.usdoj.gov/tribalresources
- **BJA Tribal Justice Programs** – Supports courts, corrections, law enforcement, and victim services. bja.ojp.gov/program/tribal-justice
- **CTAS – Coordinated Tribal Assistance Solicitation** – Consolidated DOJ tribal funding covering multiple public safety programs. justice.gov/tribal
- **BIA Law Enforcement Services** – Federal support and funding for tribal police departments. bia.gov/bia/ojs

Behavioral Health & Trauma Services

- **SAMHSA Tribal Behavioral Health Grants** – Mental health and substance use program funding for tribal communities. samhsa.gov/tribal-ttac
- **IHS Behavioral Health Programs** – Supports trauma-informed care and co-responder models. ihs.gov/behavioralhealth
- **OVW Tribal Governments Program** – Funds domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking response. justice.gov/ovw/tribal-governments

■ STATE & ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **Tribal Law & Order Act (TLOA) Resources** – Expanded tribal criminal authority and DOJ technical assistance for implementation.
- **Grants.gov Tribal Search Tool** – Search all federal grants available to tribal entities. grants.gov (filter: Tribal Government eligibility)

■ HELPFUL TIPS FOR TRIBAL PROGRAMS & LEADERS

Seek Specialized Tribal Training Look for training specifically designed for tribal contexts — cultural relevance is essential and cannot be replaced by mainstream curriculum.	Document & Track Community Needs Maintain call records and outcome data. Grant applications require documented community need — your data is your strongest resource.
Engage Tribal Leadership Tribal councils are critical partners in sustainable public safety. Include them in planning, not just reporting.	Build Your Referral Network Know your tribal behavioral health, BIA social services, IHS programs, and victim advocates by name.

■ KEY WEBLINKS

National Native Justice Institute	www.nativejustice.us
Tribal Crime Research Network	ojp.gov/tribal-crime-research
BJA Tribal Justice Programs	bja.ojp.gov/program/tribal-justice
SAMHSA Tribal Behavioral Health	samhsa.gov/tribal-ttac
COPS Tribal Resources	cops.usdoj.gov/tribalresources
BIA Law Enforcement Services	bia.gov/bia/ojs

■ PARTNER WITH NNJI — WE ARE READY TO SUPPORT YOUR COMMUNITY

TAKE ACTION TODAY — Contact NNJI at www.nativejustice.us to schedule training, consultation, or access resources.

Strengthening Tribal Justice — One Community at a Time