

SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

A Community Resource Toolkit — National Native Justice Institute | www.nativejustice.us

■ SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities face some of the highest rates of substance abuse in the nation. Decades of historical trauma, intergenerational poverty, underfunded behavioral health systems, and social isolation have created conditions where substance use disorders devastate families, overwhelm justice systems, and strain community resources.

- ⚠️ Native Americans are 2–3x more likely to die from a substance use disorder than the general U.S. population.
- 🏠 Alcohol and meth are the leading substances driving domestic violence, child removal, and incarceration in Indian Country.
- 👶 Child removal rates tied to parental substance use are disproportionately elevated in tribal communities.
- 🚑 Opioid overdose deaths among Native Americans have surged faster than any other racial group in recent years.

■ COMMON SUBSTANCES & COMMUNITY IMPACT

Methamphetamine

Meth remains the most devastating drug across many tribal communities, driving domestic violence, child neglect, housing instability, and violent crime. Long-term use causes severe mental health deterioration and physical decline.

Alcohol

Alcohol is the most widely abused substance in Indian Country and is linked to the majority of domestic violence incidents, motor vehicle fatalities, and child welfare cases. Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) rates are significantly higher in many tribal communities.

Opioids & Prescription Drugs

The opioid crisis has hit tribal communities hard, with fentanyl-laced supply chains and limited access to naloxone or medication-assisted treatment (MAT). Prescription drug misuse often precedes heroin or fentanyl use.

■ TIPS TO IDENTIFY SUBSTANCE USE IN TRIBAL COMMUNITIES

Early identification protects families and enables timely intervention. The following signs may indicate active substance use:

Physical & Health Signs

- Sudden weight loss or gain, poor hygiene, dental decay, or bloodshot eyes
- Extreme mood swings, paranoia, or hyperactivity inconsistent with normal behavior
- Repeated emergency room visits, unexplained injuries, or suspected overdose incidents
- Tremors, sweating, nausea, or agitation when access to a substance is interrupted

Behavioral & Social Signs

- Withdrawal from cultural activities, ceremonies, family gatherings, or tribal events
- Inability to maintain employment, care for children, or attend school consistently
- Unexplained requests for money, selling personal property, or financial distress
- Secretive behavior, lying about whereabouts, or new associations with known substance users

Environmental Signs

- Needles, pipes, foil, small bags, or chemical containers found in the home or vehicle
- Persistent smell of alcohol, solvent-like or ammonia odors, or burnt chemical smells
- Neglected home conditions, unsupervised children, or unsafe living environments
- Frequent short-duration visitors at odd hours suggesting drug activity

What To Do

If you observe these signs, do not ignore them. Early, compassionate intervention rooted in cultural understanding makes the greatest difference. Contact NNJI for guidance on trauma-informed response, referral pathways, and community training.

RESOURCES, GRANTS & SUPPORT

Funding, Training, and Support Resources — Tribal Substance Abuse Programs | www.nativejustice.us

■ FEDERAL GRANT RESOURCES

Substance Use Treatment & Prevention

- **SAMHSA Tribal Opioid Response (TOR) Grant** – Addresses opioid and stimulant (meth) use disorders in tribal communities. samhsa.gov/tribal-ttac
- **SAMHSA Tribal Behavioral Health Grants** – Mental health and substance use program funding for tribal communities. samhsa.gov
- **CDC Tribal Public Health Capacity Building** – Supports public health infrastructure including substance use response. cdc.gov/tribal
- **NIH Tribal Health Research Programs** – Research funding focused on health disparities including substance use. nihb.org

Public Safety & Justice

- **DOJ Tribal Justice & Safety Initiative – BJA** – Supports tribal law enforcement, prosecution, and community safety. bja.ojp.gov
- **COPS Tribal Resources Grant (TRG)** – Funds hiring, training, and equipment for tribal law enforcement. cops.usdoj.gov
- **STOP Violence Against Indian Women – OVW** – Addresses substance-fueled domestic violence in tribal communities. justice.gov/ovw

■ STATE & ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **State Substance Use Block Grants (SABG)** – Most states administer SAMHSA SABG funds; tribal programs may qualify through state partnerships.
- **State Homeland Security Grants (SHSGP)** – Tribal law enforcement may be eligible for state-administered FEMA homeland security funding.
- **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

Adopt Written Substance Policies Establish lease, employment, and program provisions addressing substance use, response procedures, and referral pathways.	Train Staff & Community Members Ensure all staff know how to recognize signs of substance use and respond with trauma-informed, culturally appropriate approaches.
Document Community Need Maintain incident records, service data, and outcome tracking — strong documentation is essential for successful grant applications.	Build Your Referral Network Know your tribal behavioral health, IHS substance use programs, BIA social services, and victim advocates by name.

■ KEY WEBLINKS

National Native Justice Institute	www.nativejustice.us
SAMHSA Tribal Behavioral Health	samhsa.gov/tribal-ttac
CDC Tribal Health	cdc.gov/tribal
BJA Tribal Justice Programs	bja.ojp.gov/program/tribal-justice
BIA Law Enforcement Services	bia.gov/bia/ojs
Grants.gov (Tribal Search)	grants.gov

■ 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