

## **Module 1 Part 2**

Team 2

## **Indigenous Communities**

### *Missing and Murdered Indigenous Peoples Initiatives*

Crimes committed against tribal citizens, especially women and children, has been a prominent issue nationally, but disproportionately affects indigenous Oklahomans as 39 tribes are located within the state.

#### History of Issue

The sexual exploitation, assault, kidnapping and murder of indigenous peoples has been a long-established, problematic thread in the fabric of American history. This issue holds special relevance in Oklahoma history as Native Americans were forced to relocate under President Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Act of 1830.

Native Americans were forcibly moved to what is now Oklahoma during Jackson's Indian Removal Act of 1830, which outlined Native American tribes as non-sovereign and incapable of self-regulation and democratic autonomy. Consequently, Native Americans were forced to walk thousands of miles to Oklahoma in what is now known as the Trail of Tears. As is common with oppressed groups, especially those of color, women and children are left extremely vulnerable to sexual violence and deviant crimes. The sexual exploitation and murder of Native Americans was a direct consequence of the arrival of Europeans to North America, and has continued to be a prevailing problem in contemporary history.

Native American tribes have labeled these issues under the umbrella term, MMIP (missing and murdered indigenous peoples). In contemporary history, issues concerning MMIP are the direct result of non-indigenous people coming onto reservations and perpetrating these crimes. Because perpetrators are almost always travelers from other parts of the state, or from other states entirely, tribal law enforcement struggles to conduct investigations because of their limited jurisdiction over non-tribal peoples. In addition, the disconnect between tribal law enforcement and state law enforcement results in an overwhelming amount of cold cases and lack of justice for affected families.

#### Key Actors and Parties

First and foremost, Oklahoma's 39 different tribes have become a unified activist public advocating for the protection of their vulnerable citizens. This activist group is because they are directly impacted and they are unified, despite being dispersed geographically. Other activist publics include Human Rights organizations, such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), that often become involved to represent legal issues involving MMIP.

The state government as a whole is a major defining actor in this potential issue. Elections are coming up and MMIP has been a hot topic issue as policies and policy reforms are being presented in committees and in session for voting. As the tribes are uniting and uniformly lobbying the government, there has been a surge of media coverage documenting the process of these policies. Tribal leaders have taken the initiative to optimize broadcast media to air their grievances. As a result, especially leading up to state elections, there will be a lot of media coverage surrounding the issue, which could harm outside perspectives of what Oklahoma values.

The Travel and Tourism Department is the final key party involved in this issue. With Oklahoma having such a strong history of indigenous peoples, any historical tourism is bound to

revolve around, or include, tribal history. Thus, the Travel and Tourism Department is an essential party in maintaining the relationship between MMIP activists and state government.

### Consequences

An influx of tourists to the state would make MMIP activists and tribal communities nervous because of the potential increase of crime. Because the vast majority of predators and perpetrators are non-tribal citizens who encroach on reservations,

Given that this is such a large national problem, but also a huge discussion point right now in state government, negative news coverage concerning lack of action could deter potential tourists, but also further influence the attitudes of latent publics negative perception of Oklahoma as a state that continuously fails to invest back in the people. In addition, state government elections are coming in November 2020, and many representatives and senators in the state are proposing policies that would help navigate MMIP issues. Because this is a hot button issue backed by large activist groups, media coverage is inevitable. If media coverage presents Oklahoma in a negative light, it could further impact perception of potential tourists and future citizens in a negative manner.

### Advised Communication Strategies and Tactics

The best way to maintain relationships is to be proactive, intentional and maintain continuity in communication tactics. The Oklahoma Travel and Tourism department should be actively reaching out to these communities and activists groups to make sure they feel valued, heard and represented in their concerns over potential tourism implications on tribal citizens. A great way to do this is by providing tribal leaders with a meeting or event to go over their concerns and come up with mutually beneficial solutions or guidelines for best practices.

The tourism department should then consistently check back in with tribal communities and urge government agencies within the state to start collecting data and evidence to track the impact of tourism on this issue. In doing so, government agencies, as well as the tourism department, can take preventative actions or precautions to ensure the safety of all Oklahoma citizens.

As a result, tribal leaders and activist groups would feel comfortable coming straight to representatives of state government and members of the Travel and Tourism Department with their concerns. They could be less likely to go to the media and share negative sentiments about what it means to live in Oklahoma and be an Oklahoman, especially an Oklahoman of color. Maintaining and nourishing the relationships built in a proactive manner is essential to problem solving and quelling angry publics. Activist publics may not get the exact solutions they're demanding right away, however they're less likely to share negative feelings via word of mouth in other outlets, for example social media platforms.

## **Gaming**

### *Revenue and Bad Faith*

Gov. Kevin Stitt is currently in a lawsuit against indigenous tribes within the state with the goal to increase the revenue rate at which the tribes are taxed in regard to the gaming industry. This lawsuit not only negatively impacts relations with tribal governments, but also with industry officials who fear the rate increase will harm gaming tourism.

### History of Issue

In 2004, the gaming industry was very new to the state of Oklahoma. At this time, the indigenous tribes signed a 15-year contract in which they agreed to pay between 4 percent and 6 percent of their revenue in order to operate within the state. With the revenue that the indigenous tribes make, they are able to build hospitals and provide free healthcare in a state that has one of the largest rates of uninsured people. With this money they also provide firefighters, police officers, paramedics and make many donations for rural Oklahoma communities not even within their jurisdiction. These rural communities would otherwise not be able to afford these things as the state does not provide adequate funding.

### Key Actors and Parties

Key parties associated with this issue are: Gov. Kevin Stitt, indigenous tribes, Oklahoma lawmakers, citizens of the state and gaming tourism. While the governor as well as the tribes are obvious key parties, the impact will be felt among many other groups of people. Lawmakers across the state are facing much division, forced to choose between their party and what they feel is the right thing to do. Many Republicans in the Oklahoma government are currently choosing the tribes' side over the governor's, even going as far as appearing in anti-Stitt ads paid for by the indigenous tribes. Many citizens of Oklahoma are upset, especially those in rural communities, as indigenous tribes provide many services and donations to these communities with the revenue that they obtain. If this revenue were to decrease, these services would likely no longer be provided. The tourism industry within Oklahoma will be impacted due to the likely decline that will be seen in the casinos. With a decrease in revenue, the tribes will no longer have the funding necessary to make the casinos top tier. With a decrease in the appearance and amenities within the casinos, tourists will likely look elsewhere when they are desiring the gaming experience.

### Consequences

The impact of this revenue rate increase could negatively impact many communities and industries. With an increased rate, the indigenous tribes will no longer be able to provide the services to their own communities, as well as those outside, at the magnitude which they currently do. Due to declined revenue, the tribes will not be able to put adequate money into the casinos in order to make them comparable to those in other states, resulting in the gaming industry potentially struggling to attract tourists. If the revenue that tribes obtain were to decrease, the tribes will begin to have to make decisions on what programs and communities in which they will be forced to cut funding. Indigenous tribes are very big on taking care of their own, so likely the areas that will be impacted the most will be the casinos themselves as well as the outside rural communities which the tribes provide so many resources for. The rural communities themselves may not attract many tourists, but if they begin to detrimentally decline

and garner any sort of news coverage, this will even further increase the stigma surrounding Oklahoma in which people believe the state is underfunded and potentially dangerous.

#### Advised Communication Strategies and Tactics

Recently, a judge in Oklahoma City has ordered Gov. Stitt and the tribes participating in the lawsuit to enter mediation. I believe mediation is an excellent first step to attempt to avoid a trial. If the lawsuit were to lead to a trial, it is likely the media attention would lead to national coverage. Approaching the situation with caution is crucial for Gov. Stitt, as too much aggression will likely lead to a large-scale, well-covered conflict. The media coverage has the potential to result in a national outcry over indigenous peoples' right to sovereignty, which could result in an even larger division within the state government as well as contribute to the national negative perceptions already harming Oklahoma tourism.

Resolving this issue to where both parties are pleased is key. Indigenous tribes are a large part of Oklahoma culture and history, therefore they hold quite a bit of influence. It would be in the best interests of Gov. Stitt as well as the tribes to come to a quick and quiet resolution, as a public and lengthy dispute could only further divisiveness in the state.

## **Negative Perceptions**

We found that people often associate Oklahoma with cowboys and the middle of nowhere. Many people communicated some negative perceptions of the state and others say it is easier to think of negative things than positive sentiments about living or visiting. One of the main things Oklahoma is known for is the lack of a fruitful education system, limited ability or access to commercial restaurants and stores and political bias, causing many people to have a divided view on social issues.

### **History of issue:**

**Shopping/Commercial stores:** Within the state of Oklahoma, there are two major cities that serve as the hub for a majority of touristic activities. These include Oklahoma City and Tulsa. To put the size of the cities into perspective, Oklahoma City has a population of around 649,000 people while Tulsa has a population of around 400,000 people. In comparison to Oklahoma's neighbor state, Dallas has a population of around 1.3 million people, which is still larger than Oklahoma's two largest cities combined. One of the largest misconceptions about Oklahoma is that the shopping/commercial retail and restaurant options are incredibly selective. Another common misconception revolves around stereotypical aspects of southern lifestyles such as hunting, fishing and other outdoor activities. Despite this common misconception, Tulsa and Oklahoma City contain an abundance of vibrant restaurants, quaint cafes and thriving clubs.

**Education:** Oklahoma is ranked 39th in the country in education, and the average teacher makes \$36,000. Those that want to become teachers will seek employment elsewhere, due to low salary and out of pocket expenses like buying supplies for basic necessities in a classroom. It also does not help that Oklahoma has the highest student-to-administrator ratio, teachers are getting paid much less for far more work. The college graduation rate is only 34% in the state, which many people will blame the lack of funds towards public education. Others believe that due to the fact that Oklahomans don't have an education from a university a lot of people are not aware of social issues or how they arise, allowing many others to be close-minded.

**Political spectrum:** Oklahoma is a red state (Republican), many of the officials that represent us in the federal and state government are republican which means that they lean towards conservative, traditional values and could cause bias and division in the government. Current polarization in American political parties has caused conservatism to potentially be seen as a lack progressive solutions to social issues, especially among those that are considered open minded. Oklahoma is a strong supporter of the second amendment and subscribes to political policy that is reflective of Christian values. Republicans also have strong beliefs in secured borders and stronger immigration laws. As aforementioned, these beliefs and ideas can make people believe they are close minded, and therefore could cause people to not feel welcomed by those that do not share the same beliefs. Not feeling welcomed can create a hostile environment, making it difficult for people to want to visit or move here for lack of inclusivity. People from more progressive states might perceive Oklahomans to be uneducated due to lack of funding in public services and lack of progressive policy.

### **Key Actors and Parties**

**Out-of-State Residents:** For those who do not live in Oklahoma, there are a few common perceptions surrounding the state. Since the positive publicity points that Oklahoma has to offer

are scarce, often the main opinions about the state which outsiders hold are largely negative. Oklahoma is well known for the presence of Native American tribes, which spurs outsiders to associate the state with casinos, gambling problems and the Trail of Tears. People are also quick to assume that the majority of Oklahoma is composed of smaller, rural towns, with residents that are most likely conservative, bible belt and redneck. Those who live in outside states are also likely to associate the OKC bombing with Oklahoma, as well as terrorism in general. Another perception outsiders hold is that since Oklahoma is such a farm state with so much cattle, most of the residents must be rednecks or hillbillies.

In-State Residents: Many former residents who felt Oklahoma lacked opportunity have shared some of their own negative experiences. Former residents, especially those who subscribe to more progressive beliefs, complain that Oklahoma's political and social values have caused Oklahoma to fall behind the quality of life found in other states. Current citizens have complained about the poorly funded public education system, and concerns about the spread of the opioid epidemic in rural areas.

### Consequences

Consequently, Oklahoma's reputation has taken a serious hit. Oklahoma is ranked one of the worst states to live in, and misconceptions play a significant role as to why so many people think Oklahoma is not an ideal state to travel to or live in. Because of this, often people will hear these complaints about Oklahoma and accept them as the truth. Additionally, Oklahoma's travel and tourism websites have giant holes where information could be supplied which could help deconstruct negative stigmas. People are often hesitant to move to Oklahoma because of its reputation, and many of those who live in the state now are eager to relocate.

### Advised Communication Strategies and Tactics

The best way to communicate and promote positive information that is reflective of everything Oklahoma has to offer, as well as the diversity of people and opportunities to be found. OK Travel and Tourism should focus on rebranding initiatives that promote everything Oklahoma offers versus opportunities only select groups would seek out. The focus of rebranding should surround the idea that Oklahoma is capable of providing the best of both worlds. Oklahoma offers small-town, homey communities as well as metropolitan lifestyles that promote business growth. The tourism department should be launching a campaign that highlights the lack of information highlighted above. By promoting these opportunities and activities that weren't given proper attention on the website, the tourism department increases awareness and will be able to actively begin to deconstruct perceptions rooted in stereotypes.