

Blueprint for Safety Equity Assessments

Duluth, Minnesota

The question

What is the experience of Native women in Duluth who encounter the criminal legal system because of domestic violence?

Why this question?

Native people comprise one of the larger non-white or ethnic communities in Duluth, and historically this community has experienced problems with police response. Earlier institutional analyses of Native women's experiences of the response to domestic violence and sexual assault revealed long-standing and persistent problematic responses from law enforcement. The Blueprint Coordinators have worked to strengthen relationships with Native advocates in the community and, together, they decided to take a snapshot of current practice.

Who was involved in answering this question?

The Blueprint Coordinator led the process, which included Native advocates from the local program serving Native women, a locally-based technical assistance provider to Native programs and tribes, and Praxis International.

What strategies were used to answer this question?

The team reviewed data of domestic violence-related criminal justice response involving Native women from 2012 to 2016, from initial police response to case disposition. The team also conducted focus groups of Native survivors and advocates, analyzed police reports, and listened to corresponding 911 calls.

DATA GATHERED

Tools	Detail
Data-Gathering: Numbers	Secured data for 2012-16 by race and gender on police response, prosecution, conviction and sentencing.
Learn from Victims	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 4 focus groups with Native women (16 women)• 1 interview with a Native woman

Tools	Detail
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 focus groups, ethnicity unknown (15 women) • 1 interview with a woman arrested, ethnicity unknown • 1 focus group Native advocates (4 women)
Learn from Experts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 interview with Native advocate • 1 focus group of shelter advocates, not necessarily Native (6 advocates) • 1 interview of shelter advocate, non-Native
Case Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 41 police reports from 2016 involving Native women arrested • 8 selected for additional analysis, including the corresponding 911 call. • 41 police reports involving white victims were reviewed by the coordinator for comparison
Interviews & Observations	3 police ride-alongs by Native women advocates

Analysis/Discovery

Early data suggested that Native women are arrested or charged at a much higher rate than other women. However, the numbers are quite small, so a small numerical change can create a significant change in percentage, making it difficult to draw strong conclusions.

Gaps/themes from focus groups included:

- Inaction by police (“I call them, but they don’t do anything”), especially in cases where suspects flee the scene
- Poor treatment by police and 911
- Detailed questioning from 911 that doesn’t seem relevant to the caller
- Fear that police involvement will lead to arrest of victim or CPS involvement
- Being questioned about alcohol use without a clear purpose or explanation of why law enforcement was asking
- Perception that when the caller gives her name or address that 911 or law enforcement identified her as Native and the response changes

- If other crimes are committed, the violence is not investigated
- Advice-giving by law enforcement: leave him, don't make him mad, etc.

The coordinator created a template for analysis of the police reports based on focus group data. This analysis of police reports reflected much of what focus group participants disclosed. In approximately one-third of the cases, law enforcement took no action, despite evidence of assault. This was most prevalent when both survivor and abuser were alleged to have used violence. For example, in one case, the officer wrote that since both people had injuries, it was not possible to determine predominant aggressor, indicating a confusion about the process and function of predominant aggressor determinations. Additionally, the officer did not appear to have assessed for self-defense. The team saw numerous examples of Native women not taken seriously when reporting abuse, especially if the officer believed – correctly or not – that the woman had been drinking, if she might have a mental illness, or had a criminal record.

Next Steps & Reflections

What steps did Duluth take in response to what was learned?

The Duluth Police Department (DPD) agreed to department-wide training on self-defense and predominant aggressor analysis to strengthen adherence to Blueprint policy and protocol. DPD also agreed to training on cultural competency when responding to calls involving Native people. This training would be led by the local Native advocacy program and Native technical assistance provider.

What successes were realized?

DPD has a long-standing relationship with the Domestic Abuse Intervention Program (the organization coordinating the Blueprint for Safety), but both agencies have had weaker relationships with the programs serving the Native community and the community at large. The local Native advocacy program now participates in weekly meetings at DPD to review cases for risk and danger. Police referrals to the Native shelter have also increased since the equity assessment.

What limitations or challenges were encountered?

The group experienced delays and challenges with staff turnover and scheduling with the police department. Law enforcement was not involved with the case

review, which might have contributed to a lack of urgency by DPD to complete the cultural competence training as recommended by the Blueprint team.