



# INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH LEADERS

RESEARCH BRIEF | December 2020

## KEY FINDINGS

- American Indian communities have exhibited remarkable resilience throughout a long history of oppression.
- American Indian resilience is supported and promoted by cultural and community strengths and resources.
- Two hundred ideas expressed by community participants in four Focus Groups were identified and classified across six predetermined content categories: Strengths, Well-Being, Coping with Challenges, Overcoming Adversity, Community Resources, and Cultural Resources.
- Examples of identified strengths and resources at the Fond du Lac Band included: Indigenous cultural teachings, kinship commitments, intergenerational guidance, mutual help, sustaining homelands, and formal reservation services.
- Intentional harnessing of these local strengths and resources may increase community resilience at Fond du Lac.

## Cultural and Community Strengths Foster American Indian Resilience and Wellbeing

### WHY WE DID THIS WORK

The Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa is a sovereign American Indian nation located in northeastern Minnesota. The tribal service population includes over 4,250 individuals who primarily reside within or nearby the reservation boundaries.

Like many rural communities in the United States, the Fond du Lac Band has witnessed escalating rates of death by suicide and drug overdose, in part fueled by the “opioid epidemic.” For the Fond du Lac Band and many other American Indian communities, these devastating losses exist alongside a constellation of mental and physical health inequities largely attributable to social and historical determinants of health. Intergenerational cycles of physical and sexual abuse and other adverse childhood experiences are among the ongoing consequences of historical trauma and contribute to community losses. Consideration of “upstream” factors also warrants

attention, including broader discussion and understanding of why such losses came to be and how community healing from intergenerational and childhood traumas can begin.

In response, our project brought together three American Indian research leaders to engage in a project with the Fond du Lac Band to “flip the script” from a focus on distress and dysfunction to a focus on strengths and resilience. Adopting a participatory approach entailing deep collaboration with community partners, we sought to collectively answer the following three research questions:

1. What are salient community and cultural practices that enable Fond du Lac tribal members to overcome adversity, cope with distress, and promote resilience in their everyday lives?

2. How prevalent is recognition, awareness, and use of these practices by Fond du Lac tribal members in the face of distress and adversity?
3. How might these practices be harnessed for wider recognition, awareness, circulation, and use by Fond du Lac tribal members in their everyday lives?

## HOW WE DID THIS STUDY

Project activities began with establishment of a community advisory board. This board consisted of community members with a range of perspectives and wealth of experience in tribal life, including reservation program management, health administration, and tribal governance. Board members include: Caitlyn Taylor, Samuel Moose, Karen Diver (consultative member), Linda Whitebird, Colleen Bernu, Vicki Oberstar, Marcia Kitto, Pat Dunlap, and Naomi Conley. Community collaborators also included Nashay Howes and Jacob Dunlap. In consultation with the board, we refined project goals, scope, and study methodology. We developed a name and logo for the project that the team felt exemplified “resilience” from an Ojibwe perspective: ***Oodenang, or Gathering of Hearts***. The research team conducted four focus groups with 37

community members to learn about locally salient strengths, sources of healing, and wellbeing in the community. These focus groups were organized in different communities across the reservation for elders, adults, young adults, and service providers. Focus group questions centered on positive experiences and life challenges specific to the tribal community local strategies for surviving and thriving despite adversity, and cultural practices and activities that contribute to wellness. Additionally, we asked for participant definitions of wellbeing and resilience.

Focus groups were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and thematically coded by project team members. Community members themselves were oriented and trained to conduct the focus groups, transcribe the recordings, code the transcripts, and analyze the findings, leading to enhanced cultural and community validity. Findings were circulated to Fond du Lac Band residents through community meetings and local media.

## WHAT WE FOUND

Example outcomes of focus group discussions are provided in Figure 1. Relevant ideas expressed by focus group participants were

Figure 1: Example Focus Group Thematic Findings





Oodenang

(Gathering of Hearts)

Artwork by Sarah Agaton Howes

thematically coded across six predetermined content categories: Strengths, Well-Being, Coping with Challenges, Overcoming Adversity, Community Resources, and Cultural Resources. Two hundred ideas expressed by participants were identified and classified in these categories. Example outcomes of focus group discussions are provided in detail below:

Examples of **Strengths** included respecting others, tight knit families, nurturance during childhood, and formal education. As one participant explained, *“Culture, tradition, your heritage, whatever you want to call it, all that stuff. Man, does it help.”*

Examples of **Well-Being** included love, daily spirituality, and peace without internal struggles. A participant described this as follows: *“Well-being is having balance in my life, and that means those four areas of ourselves, having that spiritual piece, that emotional health, the physical health, and the mental.”*

Examples of **Coping with Challenges** included engaging kids in activities, artistic expression of feelings, and coming to grips with horrific experiences. Another participant observed: *“Gratitude is a really good coping skill that’s helped me. Being grateful. Prayer, meditation, using my culture, smudging, sweats. That’s what helps me.”*

Examples of **Overcoming Adversity** included starting with one family, recovery from addiction, changing for the future, and recognizing that community transformation may take generations. One participant offered concrete guidance: *“Educate everybody on trying to find their identity and their place back with the land. I think that would promote healing of our community.”*

Examples of **Community Resources** included workshops, certified therapists, complimentary feedback, pulling everyone together, a beautiful environment, hunting, and the tribal casino. Bonds of affiliation were important for this: *“It comes down to leading and walking with love and compassion for myself, my children, my community and feeding and growing my connection to the life around me.”*

Examples of **Cultural Resources** included powwows, healing ceremonies, elder roles and responsibilities, and living off the land. With reference to culture, one participant noted: *“It was sleeping, it’s getting woken up right now. And it’s a strong beautiful culture. And the more we have an opportunity to share that with our young ones.”*

## WHAT THESE FINDINGS MEAN

Like other American Indian tribal nations, the Fond du Lac Band has survived centuries of colonial dispossession and subjugation by Europeans and Euro-Americans. This legacy has yielded a raft of social problems that continue to disrupt community life, but a lopsided focus on these problems overlooks or ignores the local strengths and resources that have enabled the people of Fond du Lac to persist and even to thrive despite such longstanding adversity. This alternative ethos of survivance has long been fueled by enduring—and sometimes revitalized—cultural and community practices, strategies, and commitments that this study has sought to identify. Recognition of these important and inspiring resources may lead to future programs and interventions that leverage existing strengths for greater awareness, promotion, and benefit for the people of Fond du Lac.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

This brief was authored by Nikki Crowe (Fond du Lac Ojibwe) of the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Joseph P. Gone (*Aaniiih-Gros Ventre*) of Harvard University, and Melissa Walls (Bois Forte and Couchiching First Nation Ojibwe) of Johns Hopkins University. They are 2017 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Interdisciplinary Research Leaders fellows. For questions, please contact: Nikki Crowe ([nikkicrowe@fdlrez.com](mailto:nikkicrowe@fdlrez.com)).