

BUILDING BELONGING IN MONTANA: Why Social Inclusion Matters for Health

Feeling connected to community plays a powerful role in health. When people feel welcomed, valued, and able to participate in community life, they are more likely to thrive.

But belonging is not experienced equally across Montana. Discrimination, rural isolation, and barriers to participation mean some people are less likely to feel included or heard.

When people are excluded, the effects ripple outward —shaping health, opportunity, and trust across communities.



The Ripple Effects of Social Exclusion

Social exclusion affects health, safety, education, and long-term opportunity. In Montana:

25% of students report being treated badly at school because of their race or ethnicity.

17% of high schoolers have been teased or called names because someone thought they were gay, lesbian, or bisexual.¹

Native Americans make up about **25%** of Montana's incarcerated population, while representing about **6%** of the overall population.

39% of LGBTQ+ young people seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year.

10% of Native American students drop out of high school, compared with **3.8%** statewide.

These patterns reflect systemic barriers — not individual failures — and shape who feels safe, supported, and able to thrive.

Social Inclusion Challenges

Discrimination, stigma, and isolation affect entire communities. In Montana, this shows up in several ways:

- **Discrimination sends a message about who matters.** When people feel unwelcome or unsafe, they are less likely to participate in community spaces or see themselves as leaders.
- **Young people often lack clear, welcoming pathways into civic life,** making it harder to participate or know where their voice fits.
- **LGBTQ+ families often navigate identity and safety questions** without affirming guidance, supportive schools, or strong community networks.
- **Tribal communities are often left out** of statewide decision-making, weakening trust and relationships.
- **Rural residents face infrastructure gaps,** from broadband to safe gathering spaces, that deepen isolation.

When trust and connection grow, communities are better able to care for one another and influence policies that improve their lives.

Strengths to Build On

- **Community Connection Matters:** Local hubs and gathering spaces help neighbors connect and build relationships.
- **Local leadership drives change:** Leadership programs are helping Montanans build skills and shape decisions that affect their lives.
- **Belonging strengthens communities:** When people feel connected, they stay engaged and support one another.

Why Social Inclusion Matters for Health

Feeling connected supports mental and physical health, builds trust, and helps communities stay resilient across the lifespan.⁵



Belonging grows when people have the **resources, trust, and voice** to shape their own lives.



Actions Leaders Can Take

Nonprofit Leaders

- Create welcoming spaces where people from different backgrounds can connect and feel they belong.
- Involve youth, Tribal members, LGBTQ+ families, and other underrepresented groups in shaping programs and decisions.

Philanthropy Leaders

- Fund organizations that are led by and accountable to the communities most impacted by health challenges.
- Provide flexible, multi-year support so local leaders can build trust, relationships, and community networks over time.

State Leaders

- Invest in community spaces, programs, and services that bring people together and reduce isolation.
- Ensure decision-making processes include voices from communities that have historically been left out.

Endnotes

- 1 Montana Office of Public Instruction. (2023). *Montana Youth Risk Behavior Survey: 2023 statewide report*. https://opi.mt.gov/Portals/182/Page%20Files/YRBS/23/2023_MT_YRBS_Statewide_Report.pdf
- 2 Vera Institute of Justice. (2024, October 16). *Montana: Justice system trends*. <https://trends.vera.org/state/MT>
- 3 The Trevor Project. (2024). *National survey on the mental health of LGBTQ young people*. <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2024/>
- 4 Montana Office of Public Instruction. (2025.). *Montana education facts*. <https://gems.opi.mt.gov/>
- 5 Liamputtong, P., & Rice, Z. S. (2025). Social inclusion, social exclusion and health promotion. In *Handbook of concepts in health, health behavior and environmental health* (pp. 1-17). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.

Turning Investment into Action

Headwaters Foundation supports organizations that build leadership and a sense of belonging with families, elevate their voices to policymakers, and create the conditions for meaningful change to happen.

Learn more about our work and grantees at www.headwatersmt.org