

Native Hawaiian Land Rights, DHHL Policy, and Community Safety: The Intersection ISPI Researches

Author: Warren Pulley, Founder & Executive Director, Island Security Policy Institute

Date: May 2026 · **Document:** ISPI-HI-07 · **Domain:** At-Risk Youth, Community Safety & Governance Policy

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Department of Hawaiian Home Lands waitlist represents one of the most consequential unresolved justice obligations in American policy — tens of thousands of Native Hawaiian families waiting decades for the homestead land Congress promised in 1921. ISPI's research intersects with Native Hawaiian land and community rights at three specific points: housing instability as a driver of Native Hawaiian youth overrepresentation in Hawaii's juvenile justice system; community displacement as a driver of the social structure erosion that ISPI's research identifies as an island community safety risk factor; and the ESG accountability of corporations operating on or adjacent to Native Hawaiian cultural lands. This brief examines ISPI's research findings most relevant to Native Hawaiian land and community rights policy.

KEY FINDINGS

- The DHHL waitlist contains tens of thousands of Native Hawaiian families — many waiting multiple decades for homestead land that the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act of 1921 promised.
- The \$600 million set aside under Act 279 for DHHL waitlist housing represents the largest single state investment in Native Hawaiian homestead housing — with active 2026 legislative oversight focused on ensuring funds reach as many families as possible.
- ISPI's research identifies housing instability as the primary upstream driver of Native Hawaiian youth overrepresentation in Hawaii's Family Court — connecting DHHL policy failure to juvenile justice outcomes.
- Corporate ESG accountability for operations on or adjacent to Native Hawaiian cultural lands requires frameworks that generic ESG standards do not provide — creating both a policy gap and a commission research opportunity for ISPI.

- Ohana-based intervention programs — engaging the extended family network in juvenile justice response — consistently outperform nuclear-family and individual-focused programs for Native Hawaiian youth, supporting policy investment in culturally grounded community infrastructure.

Housing Instability and Native Hawaiian Youth

ISPI's at-risk youth research identifies a documented causal pathway from housing instability to juvenile justice involvement that is particularly pronounced in Native Hawaiian communities. Housing instability disrupts the school attendance, family stability, and community connection that ISPI's research identifies as the primary protective factors against juvenile justice involvement.

The DHHL waitlist — representing families unable to access the homestead land that would provide stable housing — is not merely a land justice issue. It is a community safety issue. Reducing the waitlist is a juvenile justice intervention.

The Ohana Intervention Framework

ISPI's juvenile justice research for Native Hawaiian communities identifies ohana — the extended family network including grandparents, aunts, uncles, and community elders — as the most powerful accountability and support structure available for intervention. Programs that engage only the nuclear family miss the majority of available leverage.

Policy investment in ohana engagement infrastructure — formal protocols for extended family involvement in juvenile justice decision-making, community elder advisory roles in diversion programs, culturally grounded residential programming that maintains family connection rather than severing it — represents the highest-evidence investment available for reducing Native Hawaiian youth justice system involvement.

Corporate ESG Accountability on Native Hawaiian Lands

Corporations operating on or adjacent to Native Hawaiian cultural lands — in tourism, energy, agriculture, and development — face ESG accountability requirements that generic ESG frameworks do not address. The relationship between commercial operations and Native Hawaiian land rights involves specific obligations around cultural access, environmental stewardship, and community benefit that require Hawaii-specific ESG policy frameworks.

ISPI's corporate security and ESG research provides the island-specific accountability framework that corporations operating in these contexts need — and that foundation and government funders are increasingly requiring as a condition of investment and partnership.

1. Accelerate DHHL waitlist processing through the Act 279 funding framework with independent oversight ensuring maximum family reach — recognizing housing provision as a juvenile justice and community safety intervention.
2. Establish formal ohana engagement protocols in Hawaii's juvenile justice diversion programs — requiring extended family network involvement as a standard component of intervention planning for Native Hawaiian youth.
3. Develop a Hawaii Native Hawaiian Land ESG Accountability Framework establishing the specific obligations of corporations operating on or adjacent to Native Hawaiian cultural lands.
4. Commission independent research examining the causal pathway from DHHL waitlist status to juvenile justice involvement — establishing the evidentiary basis for housing investment as a community safety investment.
5. Support OHA's disaster grant programs for Native Hawaiian communities as a community resilience investment that simultaneously addresses housing stability, cultural preservation, and emergency preparedness.