

How to Approach and Prevent The Increased Substance Abuse Among Native American and American Indian Youth

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ABSTRACT

Substance abuse among Native American youth is significantly higher compared to other ethnic groups. Contributing factors include a history of trauma, violence, poverty, discrimination, sparse healthcare access, and lower levels of education. This article discusses the preventative approaches schools can use to help decrease substance abuse among Native American teenagers and overall youth.

Keywords: Native American; American Indian; Substance abuse

INTRODUCTION

Substance abuse among Native American youth is disproportionately high compared to other ethnic groups. Studies have shown that the rate of substance abuse disorder is as high as 10 percent, and illicit drug use is as high as 4 percent as compared to other ethnicities.^[1] Studies have also shown that alcohol use can be as high as 7 percent compared to other ethnic groups.^[2] Alarmingly, these adolescents also demonstrate higher rates of tobacco and psychoactive drug use.^[3]

Understanding the etiology of these statistical differences is crucial to developing effective prevention strategies.

The increased incidence of alcohol and drug abuse among Native Americans is a multi-faceted problem. One of the main issues affecting this ethnicity is the level of poverty, possibly secondary to increased unemployment, discrimination, and at times, racism. The need to provide for family leads to an increased number of Indigenous American students dropping out of school to seek employment, trying to help their family survive day-to-day. These socioeconomic conditions are highlighted by historical, social, and cultural factors that have concerning health disparities, including mental health disorders, diabetes, and substance abuse.^[4] Another major risk factor is historical trauma passed along generations, known as generational

trauma. Studies have shown that descendants of oppressed groups can show signs of psychological and physical health issues. Anxiety, depression and anger and grief can be manifested in future generations secondary to historical trauma. Harsh colonization practices, systemic racism, genocide, broken treaties, and land dispossession are key historical factors contributing to this psychological burden.^[5]

Other contributing factors have been shown to be the students' home situation. Native American children are disproportionately exposed to domestic violence, sexual abuse, and post-traumatic stress disorders.^[6] This, in turn, influences individuals to not attend school or lead to academic underperformance. These events predispose these children to more substance abuse as an alternative to deal with a poor home environment, further complicating the problem.

Stressors such as discrimination among some ethnicities are also contributing to increased incidence of drug and alcohol abuse.^[7,8] Experiencing social isolation, anger, and resentment due to mistreatment creates additional stressors that can lead to substance use. Understanding these stressors can help counselors plan each approach differently to deal and improve the social issues with these children.

Prevention Strategies for Youth:

Due to the fact the issue at hand is multifaceted, the approach to prevention must be as well.^[9] Each state provides grants for opioid response teams to help combat substance abuse, including support for mental health services and state-level prevention initiatives^[10] These resources must also be used by mental health services and state substance abuse prevention teams. However, providing resources at the school level and training school auxiliary staff and counselors to act as front line for substance abuse is essential. It is also important to seek help from students to act as peers in prevention and help for other students which may be more responsive to peers. It is also essential to use funds to provide media campaigns on Television, radio, billboards, and social media to target audiences to try to improve access to resources and pass the message of prevention. These campaigns have been shown to reduce use of smoking tobacco in the past and the same effort can help reduce teenage abuse of these substances.^[11] Ensuring that these campaigns target specific audiences and improve access to resources is essential.

In 2024, the National Institutes of Health allocated funding to Native American and American Indian tribes to conduct research on substance abuse in their communities. This initiative aims to develop strategies to reduce substance use among tribe members, including adolescents, by 2027.^[12] Other organizations, such as National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, are also funding research to improve and understand underlying causes of this problem and help improve and reduce substance abuse.

CONCLUSION

Preventing substance abuse among Native American youth requires a comprehensive, multifaceted approach. We can take action with all preventative measures at federal, state, and local level and resources to help contain the substance abuse problem. Research, community engagement, and culturally sensitive interventions are also

essential to addressing this pressing issue and improving outcomes for Native American children and adolescents.

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