

# Indigenous Communities

Narrator: With 9.7 million people identifying fully or in part as American Indian and Alaska Native, Indigenous people make up to 2.9% of the U.S. population and represent 574 federally recognized tribes and over 100 state-recognized tribes. These tribal nations are spread throughout the U.S. on reservations, non-reservation land, and in urban areas. They are closely connected through rich historical, racial, and ethnic ties.

In fact, Indigenous communities have overcome many attempts at cultural disruption and erasure, demonstrating incredible strength and resiliency to maintain their traditions, ceremonies, and spiritual practices. Traditional concepts of health for Indigenous communities involve the intersection of physical, behavioral, social, mental, emotional, and spiritual health, intertwined with a deep connection to the Earth.

Indigenous communities believe that they are only one part of creation, dependent on nature and meant to live in harmony with all things – people, animals, plants, and the elements. Traditional tribal social organizations, language, and culture have been impacted by geographic displacement, socioeconomic disparities, lack of access to health care, and implementation of historical and structural racist U.S. policies.

Indigenous communities are still impacted by the trauma and abuses endured by white immigrants' colonization of their land throughout the centuries. Cultural, historical, and intergenerational traumas have been well documented.

Cultural trauma, defined as ongoing physical or psychological harm on a group of people with a shared identity, began centuries ago. One example of cultural trauma in Indigenous communities is when early European settlers forcefully, physically relocated tribes from their homes on what became known as the Trail of Tears.

Another example is taking Indigenous children from their families and relocating them to boarding schools, aiming to convert them to the White ways of living. The schools caused harm when they renamed children, cut their hair, prevented the use of their tribal languages and practices, forced them to do manual labor, and engaged in physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. This continued until the early 1980s.

Today, Indigenous communities not only face modern cultural traumas, but they are also impacted by the cultural trauma of their ancestors. The concept of passing down cultural trauma from one generation to the next is called intergenerational trauma. Together, past and present traumas affecting new generations has created a unique, shared experience for Indigenous people in the United States. This is referred to as historical trauma.

Trauma of any kind is associated with increased substance use. While every Indigenous person experiences their culture in a unique way, and there are many individual tribal differences,

native held ideas and traditions are deeply held and inform how challenges are addressed, including health-related issues like addiction.

Addressing substance use disorders is challenged by the stigma associated with the disease, distrust in the government and health care systems, and inadequate cultural understanding by treatment providers. This substance use impacts parenting and negatively affects trust, intimacy, and the ability to form a healthy bond between parents and their children.

Children can witness and internalize their parents reactions in times of stress and turn to substance use themselves to cope. This is particularly difficult as many Indigenous tribes believe that children are gifts from the creator and parenting is guided by rich, culturally driven traditions.

Indigenous communities, languages, traditions, philosophies, and cultures continue to endure due to their strength and resiliency. Change begins with understanding the cultural traditions and beliefs that serve as guides to Indigenous communities. Going beyond Western treatment options, Indigenous communities support their tribal members on the addiction and recovery path in unique ways.

Culturally respectful treatment should implement practices and treatment approaches that embrace traditions, ceremony, and spiritual practices. Head Start staff can help address the cycle of trauma and its impact on substance use by respecting and supporting the traditions and practices of the Indigenous communities they serve. These practices provide protection that can prevent against substance use.

In 2021, Head Start served nearly 28,000 Indigenous families and conducted 90,000 home visits. Head Start staff continually build trusting relationships with the families they work with. As a result, the staff can provide resources and culturally sensitive education about addiction that can make a real difference for families affected by substance use.