



Cultural Factors that Protect Against Substance Misuse and Promote Mental Health in American Indian and Alaska Native Populations

RESOURCE OVERVIEW

Cultural Factors that Protect Against Substance Misuse and Promote Mental Health in American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) Populations provides a summary of research findings on cultural factors associated with substance misuse. Our search yielded 15 factors associated with substance misuse and indicators of well-being distilled from 11 studies. Key findings include the following:

- Most studies (n = 8) found that cultural factors were protective against substance misuse or promoted well-being.
- Some protective factors included having a strong AI/AN identity, practicing traditional values, and experiencing support and opportunities for connection with family and community.
- Few studies (n=3) found that cultural factors are linked to increased risk for substance misuse.
- Risk factors included experiencing historical trauma (or loss of cultural traditions), participating in generic (vs. tailored) cultural activities, tribal reservation alcohol use norms, as well as being engaged in traditional activities and native traditionalism. While the latter factors are counterintuitive, authors argue that individuals attached to Native American culture may experience cultural dissonance or stress because of the continual exposure to Anglo culture. Also, authors surmise that undocumented contextual factors may have influenced the direct relationship between cultural factors and risk behaviors.

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INTRODUCTION

Understanding factors associated with substance misuse helps us know how to assess, plan for, and select programs, practices, and policies designed to address them. To further that understanding, this document provides a summary of research findings on cultural factors associated with substance misuse among American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) populations. We focus on cultural factors, specifically, because culture is thought to play both a direct and indirect role in shaping individuals' expectations about the positive and negative consequences of drug use (Burnette & Figley, 2016; Heath, 2001). Among AI/AN populations, loss of traditional culture and lack of identification with traditional culture are thought to be associated with many substance misuse problems (Abbot & Chase, 2008). This tool presents empirical evidence on those links between cultural factors and substance misuse among AI/AN populations.

Culture is our way of life. It includes the language, traditions, worldview, beliefs, ceremonies, and practices that reflect our ancestors' hopes and dreams for a journey of balance.

– Gerry Rainingbird, Nehiyaw (Cree)

RELATED TOOLS

This tool is part of a suite of tools developed by SAMHSA's Center for the Application of Prevention Technologies (CAPT) to focus attention on the role that cultural traditions, practices, and values can play in providing protection against substance misuse for American Indian and Alaska Native populations. Other tools in this suite include:

- ***Measuring Cultural Factors Associated with Substance Misuse and Mental Health in American Indian and Alaska Native Populations***. This tool provides information on measures that prevention practitioners and evaluators can use when evaluating programs to reduce substance misuse and promote well-being that include cultural elements.
- ***Culturally-Informed Programs to Reduce Substance Misuse and Promote Mental Health in American Indian and Alaska Native Populations***. This tool is designed to inform strategic prevention planning by helping tribal communities identify and select culturally-informed programs that have been shown or have the potential to reduce substance misuse and promote well-being.

METHODS

To identify cultural factors, we conducted a systematic review of peer-reviewed studies that were written in English, published between 2005 and 2016, and retrieved from multiple, relevant databases (e.g., ERIC, PsycARTICLES, Psychology and Behavioral Science Collection, PsycINFO, Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts, GreenFile, MEDLINE with full text) using EBSCO search engines. The following keywords informed our search:

- *Substance*: Substance use, substance abuse, alcohol, marijuana, cannabis, opioids, tranquilizers, stimulants, cocaine, binge drinking, heavy episodic drinking, substance dependence, drug overdose, drug abuse, heroin, underage drinking, methamphetamine, morphine
- *Culture*: Culture, acculturation, cultural practices, traditional practices, tradition, ritual, rituals
- *Factors*: Predictor, predictors, risk factor, risk factors, protective factor, protective factors, contributing factor, contributing factors
- *Prevention*: Prevent, prevention, harm reduction
- *Population*: American Indian, Alaska Native, Native American, indigenous, tribal, tribe, tribes

A **risk factor** is a characteristic at the cultural level that precedes and is associated with a *higher* likelihood of problem outcomes.

A **protective factor** is a characteristic at the cultural level that precedes and is associated with a *lower* likelihood of problem outcomes.

Studies were selected for inclusion if they:

- Focused on American Indian or Alaska Native populations; and
- Included cultural factors and outcomes of interest; and
- Examined associations between cultural practices or beliefs and substance misuse-related outcomes; and
- Demonstrated a direct association between the cultural practice or belief and substance misuse-related outcomes; and/or
- Found a direct association between cultural practices or beliefs and risk or protective factors for substance misuse.

RESULTS

The search yielded 31 studies. Of these, 11 met our inclusion criteria and highlighted 5 risk and 10 protective cultural factors associated with substance use and indicators of well-being. Results are presented in the tables below. Cultural factors included: American Indian identity, involvement in American Indian practices, placing great importance to traditional Indian values, having cultural pride,

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and living traditionally. Most studies (n = 8) found that cultural factors were protective against substance misuse or promoted well-being. However, a few studies found that cultural factors are linked to increased risk for substance misuse. For example, native traditionalism, defined as degree of Native culture orientation (that is, communicating in a native language, having a Native American name, participating in Native American organizations, and learning Native American studies), was associated with increased risk for tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, and serious drug use among Native American adolescents and young adults attending public high schools in Oklahoma (Morris et al., 2006). Although this finding may seem counterintuitive, the authors argue that individuals who are attached to Native American culture may experience cultural dissonance or stress because of the continual exposure to White society especially in studies, such as this one, where Native youth were sampled from White-dominated public schools (Morris et al., 2006). This dissonance may, in turn, increase vulnerability to substance misuse.

AI/AN cultural factors may be defined and measured in different ways. Yet, no matter how they are assessed, cultural factors, for the most part, seem to be protective against substance misuse among AI/AN populations. In those few studies where cultural factors are associated with increased risk, authors argue that other, undocumented contextual factors may influence the direct relationship between cultural factors and risk behaviors.

Caveats: The findings are limited to the time frame, libraries, and search parameters described. The methodological rigor of the studies reviewed varied widely. For example, some quantitative studies used longitudinal designs that established cultural factors as preceding substance misuse outcomes, whereas others used cross-sectional designs that cannot determine whether the factor followed or preceded the outcome of interest.

READING THE TABLES

So, how do you interpret results in the tables below? Simply read across as follows: a risk/protective factor is associated with an outcome among a specific population as documented by the study cited. For example: *American Indian identity* is associated with *protective family and peer influence and social support* among *American Indians* as documented by *Baldwin, Brown, Wayment, Nezm & Brelsford, 2011*.

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TABLE 1. CULTURE AS PROTECTIVE

Protective Factor	Outcome	Population	Citation
American Indian identity	Protective family and peer influence Social support	American Indian	Baldwin, Brown, Wayment, Nezm & Brelsford, 2011
Ethnic identity	Lower odds of having smoked in the past month Lower odds of engaging in experimental smoking	California American Indian youth	Soto, Baezconde-Garbanati, Schwartz, & Unger, 2015
Involvement in American Indian cultural practices	Low substance use following treatment	American Indian adolescents who had been referred to the Western Regional American Indian Treatment (WAIT) Center	Boyd-Ball, Dishion, Myers, & Light, 2011
Greater importance ascribed to traditional Indian values	Positive family functioning Less lifetime meth use Low or no substance use during pregnancy	Pregnant American Indian teens from rural reservation communities in the Southwest US	Barlow et al., 2010
Cultural pride/spirituality	Fewer or no alcohol abuse/dependence symptoms	American Indian youth	Yu & Stiffman, 2007

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Protective Factor	Outcome	Population	Citation
Living by traditional way	Positive family functioning Less lifetime meth use	Pregnant American Indian teens from rural reservation communities in the Southwest US	Barlow et al., 2010
Raised in rural reservation area	Less likely to have used illicit substances	American Indians seen at Indian Health Services facility in Arizona and New Mexico	Kunitz, 2008
Individual characteristics (sense of efficacy)	Lifetime alcohol abstinence	Rural Alaska Native Yup'ik youth	Allen et al., 2006
	Reflective processes (thinking over the potential negative consequences of alcohol use and abuse) Reasons for life (cultural beliefs and experiences that make life enjoyable, worthwhile, and provide meaning in life)	Rural Alaska Native Yup'ik youth	Allen, Mohatt, Fok, Henry, & Burkett, 2014
Family influences (close relationship with parents)	Lifetime alcohol abstinence	Rural Alaska Native Yup'ik youth	Allen et al., 2006
Community influences (support and opportunity)	Lifetime alcohol abstinence	Rural Alaska Native Yup'ik youth	Allen et al., 2006

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Protective Factor	Outcome	Population	Citation
Community influences (support and opportunity) (cont.)	<p>Reflective processes (thinking over the potential negative consequences of alcohol use and abuse)</p> <p>Reasons for life (cultural beliefs and experiences that make life enjoyable, worthwhile, and provide meaning in life)</p>	Rural Alaska Native Yup'ik youth	Allen, Mohatt, Fok, Henry, & Burkett, 2014

TABLE 2. CULTURE (OR LOSS OF CULTURE) AS A RISK FACTOR

Risk Factor	Outcome	Population	Citation
Being more engaged in traditional activities ¹	Suicidal ideation	American Indian middle school students living on a Northern Plains reservation	LaFromboise, Medoff, Lee, & Harris, 2007

¹ The authors hypothesize that their findings could point towards the importance of tribal specific research. There is a wide range of cultural factors that may play a role. The presence of any cultural elements may not buffer against the complex trauma that has occurred in tribal communities.

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Risk Factor	Outcome	Population	Citation
Native traditionalism ²	Tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, and serious drug use	Native American adolescents and young adults ages 15 to 21 attending public high schools in Oklahoma	Morris, Wood, & Dunaway, 2006
Historical trauma (or loss of cultural traditions)	Past month smoking Experimental smoking	California American Indian youth	Soto, Baezconde-Garbanati, Schwartz, & Unger, 2015
Participation in generic (vs. tailored) cultural activities	Alcohol abuse/dependence symptoms	American Indian youth	Yu & Stiffman, 2007
Established norms of alcohol use on reservation	Alcohol problems in adulthood	American Indians living on or near tribal lands	Yuan, Eaves, Koss, Polacca, Bletzer, & Goldman, 2010

² According to Morris, Wood & Dunaway, native traditionalism refers to “the degree of enculturation or orientation toward one’s culture.” The authors argue that “cultural differences between native traditions and norms of White society generate strain, conflict and cultural dissonance, therefore placing Native Americans at a cultural disadvantage.”

HOW TO USE THIS INFORMATION

The cultural factors presented in the tables above have been identified in the research literature as associated with substance misuse or well-being in specific AI/AN populations. It is important to note, however, that individual factors may not be present, or salient, in all AI/AN populations. Thus, before selecting or developing prevention programming to address a particular factor, it is important to determine which of these are present in *your* community.

Since very few existing data sets or surveys collect information on cultural factors, finding this information is likely to involve collecting your own data, using measures of culture that are of greatest interest to you. The data you collect should be specific to your community and to the measures that are most relevant to your prevention efforts. For example, you may want to find out what members of your community think about and are doing related to tribal cultural traditions, their substance use patterns, and their well-being. You can gather this information first-hand, using methods ranging from questionnaires to interviews, focus groups, observations, diaries, and case studies. Qualitative methods such as focus groups and key stakeholder interviews, in particular, can provide important context for understanding your findings. You can find qualitative and quantitative measures of cultural factors in the accompany tool, [*Measuring Cultural Factors Associated with Substance Misuse and Mental Health in American Indian and Alaska Native Populations*](#); consider incorporating these into your data collection instruments.

As you begin to identify factors that may be influencing substance misuse in your community, you will need to determine which to address, given available resources and time. To help you prioritize, consider the following questions:

- *How important is the factor?* That is, how much does it contribute to your problem of interest? How strongly is it associated with mitigating this problem? Quantitatively, this can be determined by examining measures of association or correlation strength between risk factors and outcomes. When collecting qualitative information or reviewing qualitative results, you might note, for example, how many people and how many times individuals mentioned a cultural factor as being linked to substance misuse or well-being.
- *Does the factor influence other behavioral issues besides substance misuse?* You will want to focus on those factors that influence multiple outcomes. For example, you may prioritize those factors associated with multiple positive outcomes over those that are associated with only a single positive outcome or with both positive and negative outcomes.
- *Is the factor modifiable?* That is, does your community have the capacity—readiness and resources—to address it?

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- *Is there a suitable evidence-based or practice-based program that can be implemented to promote or deter this factor? Also, is it possible to change this factor in a reasonable time frame (which may be defined by you or your funder)?*

Once you have prioritized specific cultural factors, consider which strategies or programs are most likely to affect that factor. Let's say that you want to implement a program that incorporates cultural elements of your tribe because evidence has shown that participation in cultural activities is protective. You've learned that such participation promotes attachment to community and family which, in turn, can promote community or family engagement as well as strong senses of security, identity, belonging, and trust—all factors that may protect against stressors linked to substance misuse. To inform program development, you might peruse the protective factors described above and review data you have collected showing which of these factors are associated with substance misuse in your community. Then, you might review programs described in [*Culturally-informed Programs to Reduce Substance Misuse and Promote Mental Health in American Indian and Alaska Native Populations*](#) tool to determine whether there are programs designed to promote the cultural factors that mitigate stressors in your community.

Your next questions: Have these programs been developed, implemented, and evaluated with a tribal community similar to yours? Can they be adapted to address your needs? Finally, if no such program or strategy exists, consider how you will design a program so that it promotes those cultural factors you have identified as important to preventing substance misuse and/or promoting well-being. In designing your own program, you may still want to review [*Culturally-informed Programs to Reduce Substance Misuse and Promote Mental Health in American Indian and Alaska Native Populations*](#) to see how other communities have aimed to promote cultural factors similar to those you have identified as important.

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