AEE WHITE PAPERS

Adventure Therapy With American Indian Youth

"American Indian youth report lower levels of connectedness to family and poorer educational performance than African American and Caucasian peers and engage in higher rates of risk taking."

Statement of the Problem

The American Indian population is a young one; the median age is 28.0, with 34% under 18 years old. In contrast, the median age for the overall U.S. population is 35.3, with 26% younger than 18 (Hawkins, Cummins, & Marlatt, 2004). It is difficult to avoid resorting to statistical hyperbole when describing the problems facing American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) youth across our nation. Within the AIAN population, youth tend to initiate substance use at a younger age, to continue use after initial experimentation, and to have higher rates of poly-substance use (Beauvais, 1992; U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, 1990).

"Native American youth are worse off than youth of other racial or ethnic groups in several areas. These areas include environmental factors such as widespread poverty, poor health, overcrowded housing, and high rates of alcoholism in Native American communities, as well as characteristics of the youth themselves, such as high teen birth rates, low educational achievement, and high rates of foster care" (Fox, Becker-Green, Gault, and Simmons, 2005).

In a seminal study involving 6,000 participants, Machamer and Gruber (1998) report that, "American Indian youth report lower levels of connectedness to family and poorer educational performance than African American and Caucasian peers and engage in higher rates of risk taking."

AIAN youth comprise 1.1% of the national youth population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006), but they account for 2% of the total juvenile population in custody and 3% of the juvenile status offenders in custody (OJJDP, 2006). Alcohol-related deaths among Native Americans ages 15–24 are 17 times higher than the national average. The suicide rate for Native American youth is three times the national average (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2000).

AIAN youth are also seriously impacted by cultural factors rarely discussed in the literature. Theories regarding historical trauma and grief are gaining support among AIAN researchers, with additional support from the mainstream (as cited in Hawkins, Cummins, & Marlatt, 2004). Hawkins, Cummins, and Marlatt (2004) also note, "Many Indian communities share similar experiences of warfare and colonization, coercive methods of

assimilation, loss of traditional land and customs, boarding school educations and abuses, longstanding struggles to maintain treaty rights, poverty, and high rates of unemployment and disease."

Project Venture

Project Venture(PV), a Native-developed program for adolescents that is guided by advice from Native elders, is gaining popularity among AIAN communities as one approach to addressing these problems (Carter, Straits, & Hall, 2007; Raudenbush & Hall, 2005). Developed by the National Indian Youth Leadership Project, Project Venture is a yearlong program incorporating therapeutic adventure strategies in school, community, and wilderness settings. PV assists youth in identifying positive role models, building confidence through overcoming progressive challenges, fostering knowledge of traditional values and self-knowledge, and developing leadership skills (Hall, 2007).

This, in turn, creates positive experiences and a sense of connection to the natural environment, peers, positive role models, and one's culture and community. PV serves as an alternative to risky and dangerous behaviors and/or thoughts, such as abuse of drugs and alcohol, and suicide, which are too often influenced by experiencing or witnessing the effects of current and historical trauma (violence, depression, alcoholism, illness, poverty, etc.). Some key components of PV include icebreakers, socialization, team building, problem solving, trust building, skill building, intergenerational service projects, education about nutritional principles, journaling, building of spiritual awareness, and reconnection with the natural world—all within a culturally meaningful context. Project Venture has been implemented in communities in more than 20 states, in several First Nations communities in Canada, and with Roma (Gypsy) youth in Hungary.

Project Venture Research Findings and Research Needs

Program evaluation data collected since the early 1990s consistently find positive outcomes related to substance abuse prevention, as well as for violence prevention and the promotion of psychosocial and life skills for PV participants. Project Venture is currently identified as an evidenced-based program in the National Registry of Effective Programs and Practices (SAMHSA, 2009)—the first American Indian substance abuse prevention program to achieve that distinction. Project Venture evaluation studies have primarily focused on the differences between program and comparison youth at baseline and exit. Findings from a large national cross-site study of prevention programs (Springer, Sambrano, Sale, Kasim, & Hermann, 2001) suggest that Project Venture outcomes may be even more robust as youth move into later adolescence. This hypothesis requires further testing. The same study indicated that some of the reasons why PV may be successful are related to the therapeutic adventure strategies employed by the program. Substantial anecdotal evidence also suggests that PV may have a positive impact on other outcomes, such as academic achievement and workforce development skills, though these are yet to be tested.

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