

# THE INDIGENOUS LIFECOURSE: Strengthening the health and well-being of Native youth



NATIVE AMERICANS  
IN PHILANTHROPY



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### **Native Americans in Philanthropy**

#### **Contributors**

Dr. Rosalee Gonzalez, Arizona State University

Dr. Michael Yellow Bird, Professor of Sociology and Director of Tribal and Indigenous Peoples' Studies, North Dakota State University

Dr. Karina Walters, Associate Dean for Research, University of Washington

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Today, we see countless examples of Native American youth at the forefront of movement building in Native communities, demonstrating their leadership, resiliency and relentless commitment for a better world. Native Americans in Philanthropy believes that it is vital for funders to understand and value Native youth, and their indigenous peoples traditional knowledge that makes them champions and leaders. We also believe that funders must invest in long-term systemic change, led by Native leaders, with an emphasis on justice, healing, and reconciliation.

Over the past decade, philanthropy has become increasingly responsive to the needs of young boys and men of color and in more recent years, the needs of girls and young women of color. While some advances have been made for some young men and women of color, the distinctive needs of Native Americans are still overlooked by most of philanthropy. Foundation funding for Native issues and communities remains disproportionately low. Despite Native Americans accounting for nearly 2% (5.4 million) of the U.S. population, funding for the population remains less than 0.5 percent of annual foundation grant dollars. Like other youth of color, Native American and Alaska Natives in cities and communities across the United States face structural challenges and a colonial legacy of systematic discrimination. However, Native youth have the distinctive challenge of interfacing with a settler-colonial legacy that prevails over their homelands, Native institutions and their lives. This legacy includes an exhaustive list of policies that sought to destroy Native American culture, identity and communities. Indian Boarding Schools are only one example.

While many Native youth have persevered against all odds, Native American nations and families are confronting historical, cultural and social challenges threatening the wellness and survival of Native youth and future generations. While social programs and services targeting the needs of Native Americans are necessary and useful, those programs do nothing to alter the structural conditions that result in the need for those programs. Consequently, structural changes are necessary to make a positive and sustainable impact on the optimal development of Native youth.

Native Americans in Philanthropy has initiated implementing a two phase research agenda to develop a framework that focuses on understanding and influencing the optimal development of Native youth. In Phase One, a core group of researchers discussed and developed a working document that will be further developed in Phase Two. In Phase Two, we propose to coordinate a broad consultation process. We will be broadening our indigenous scholar circle, gather additional academic and community insight, and produce a clear and concise framework reflective of the diversity of Native youth, families and communities. We have concluded Phase One and share a preliminary draft framework. We offer partner opportunities to support Phase Two of this critical initiative. Philanthropy in partnership with Native American leaders must bring new light and bear the weight of action to achieve the optimal development of Native youth and future generations. We look forward to partnering on this important work together.

Wopila ("With deep gratitude" in Lakota)

**Sarah Eagle Heart, CEO of Native Americans in Philanthropy**



## INTRODUCTION

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Traditionally, Native American societies were structured to ensure the optimal development of youth. Government and science are now catching up to acknowledge and find value in the traditional knowledge and systems that Native Americans have known since time immemorial; yet, were disrupted. This report expresses the urgency to return to Original Instructions, by protecting and promoting a holistic worldview, traditional knowledge and other significant protective factors that influence Native youth.

Native American nations and families are confronting historical, cultural and social challenges threatening the wellness and survival of Native youth and future generations. There is a colonial legacy that prevails in the structures that Native Youth interface with every day. In the current social service era, programs and services targeting the needs of Native Americans are necessary and useful; however, social services are limiting and do not alter the structural barriers that must change to make *a positive and sustainable impact on the optimal development of Native youth*. Consequently, a distinctive framework and approach to understand the current state of Native American youth is necessary—one that considers the historical, cultural and social determinants and can guide the *investment in actions* that strengthen the protective factors that influence Native youth wellness.

# NATIVE AMERICANS AS DISTINCTIVE PEOPLES

**Original Instructions** refer to the many diverse teaching, lessons, and ethics expressed in the origin stories and oral traditions.<sup>1</sup> Native American cultures think primarily in terms of **space** and Western Europeans think in terms of **time**.

Native Americans understand the world and the meaning of life in terms of nature, and nature and space are indissociably linked to thought and experience. This world view orients Natives spatial concepts of “natural cycles”—seasons, harvesting cycles, moon patterns, etc. Native Americans, therefore, see their responsibility as living in harmonious and balanced relation with all creation, including other tribes and racial/ethnic communities. In contrast, Western Europeans understand the world and the meaning of life in terms of history and tend to orient their life towards the future, towards goals, destiny, and final purpose. This worldview reflects temporal concepts of progress, development, and colonization.

The design of effective and culturally relevant interventions targeting Native youth must consider this distinction. It must inform the outcomes of optimal development for Native youth. The outcomes should not focus solely on the success of Native youth as individuals, but rather towards restoring a sense of collectivism, responsibility, and purpose.

Melissa Nelson explains Original Instructions as refer to the many diverse teaching, lessons, and ethics expressed in the origin stories and oral traditions. They are passed from generation to generation, for how to be a good human being living in a reciprocal relationship with all our relatives. The original instructions celebrate our interdependence and inter-connection with the diversity of life and one another (Nelson, 2008).

Some Native American youth continue to receive these **Original Instructions**, while many have lost their relationship with their homeland, elders, kinship, traditional knowledge or language. The Native American concept of spatiality informs Natives of their obligation to future and past generation, which is a distinct way of thinking and approaching how philanthropy can support Native youth so that “relational ways” of being must be restored.

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1. Nelson, Melissa K. (2008). *Original Instructions: Indigenous Teachings for a Sustainable Future*. Rochester, VT: Bear & Co.

# FLIPPING THE SCRIPT: RESTORING A DISRUPTED LEGACY

Native Americans descend from *diverse and distinctive cultures*. Before European expansion, Natives created and upheld continental trade routes, evidence of sustainable economies. Ancient structures—high mounds and sophisticated aqueduct systems—prove that they were wisely designed and constructed by intersecting science, engineering, and art. Given the great diversity among Native Americans, sharing knowledge(s) was common practice and reflected, for example, in farming techniques, medicinal knowledge, songs, and dances. Ancestral judicial systems once drew on traditional Native American philosophies of fairness and justice. Native youth must push through structural barriers—education, health, legal and economic systems—that persistently disadvantage them.

Despite the United States' historical and sacred trust responsibility to Indian tribes, there is a history of deeply troubling and destructive federal policies and actions that have hurt Native American communities, exacerbated severe inequality, and accelerated the loss of tribal cultural traditions. The effects of colonial laws, policies and institutions continue to prevail. Native youth are gravely affected by historical, cultural and social determinants that correlate with the outcomes for alarming statistics—high rates of incarceration, obesity, suicide, unemployment, violence and low rates of educational attainment, health care and access to quality food.

There are 566 federally-recognized Native American tribes in the United States (US Census, 2011). The U.S. Constitution recognizes tribes as sovereign nations with the power of self-government. The federal government, however, has an obligation to provide a variety of benefits and services to American Indians and Alaska Natives, such as education, health, law enforcement, among other services.

**Structural barriers** impede with the implementation of these legal, treaty and trust obligations. Mainly, the federal systems in place to meet these responsibilities they are underfunded. Also, urban Native populations and unrecognized historical tribes are most vulnerable due to an increasing lack of federal representation. The federally unrecognized Native Americans require further needs assessments, research, disaggregate data and resources. These structures must be altered and the legacy of thriving indigenous peoples must be restored.

# AT A GLANCE: NATIVE AMERICAN YOUTH CHALLENGES

## DEMOGRAPHICS

According to the US Census (2010), there are approximately **5.2 million** self-identified American/Alaska Natives living in the US.

**2 million** American Indian/Alaska Natives qualify for federal services.

There are **2.1 million** American Indian/Alaska Natives under the age of 24 living the United States.

In 2011, **22%** of American Indian/Alaska Native lived on reservations.<sup>2</sup>

In 2011, **60%** of American Indian/Alaska Native lived in urban areas.<sup>3</sup>

## VIOLENCE

Violence, including intentional injuries, homicide, and suicide account for **75%** of deaths for American Indian/Alaskan Native youth age 12-20.

In 2004, a study reported gang activity in over **23%** of American Indian/Native Alaskan communities, compared to **20%** of communities with similar demographics.

**15%** of American Indian/Native Alaskan youth are involved in gang activity, compared to **8%** of Chicano/Latino youth and **6%** of African American youth.

## EDUCATION

The national graduation rate for American Indian high school students was 49.3 percent for the 2003-4 school year, compared with **76.2%** for white students.

Just **13.3%** of Native Americans have undergraduate degrees, versus 24.4 percent of the general population.<sup>7</sup>

Native students are the only student population that did not improve their reading and math testing scores in grades 4 and 8 from 2005-2011.<sup>8</sup>

In 2011, only 18 percent of Native fourth-graders were proficient or advanced in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), as compared with 42 percent of white fourth-graders.<sup>9</sup>

## SUBSTANCE AND ALCOHOL USE

In 2010, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Summary of National Findings<sup>5</sup> reported:

**22.9%** of American Indian/Alaskan Native youth aged 12 and older report alcohol use, **18.4%** report binge drinking

**16.0%** report substance dependence or abuse

In the same group, **35.8%** report tobacco use and **12.5%** report illicit drug use

## MORTALITY DATA

Suicide was the **eighth leading cause** of death for American Indians/Alaska Natives of all ages.

Suicide was the **second leading cause** of death among youth ages 10–24.

Suicide rates vary widely among the White Mountain Apache Youth age 15-24 (128.5 per 100,000) was much higher than the rate for all American Indian/Alaskan Native youth of the same ages and same period (24.62 per 100,000).

In 2011, American Indian/Alaskan Native high school students reported higher rates of suicidal behaviors than the general population of high school students.<sup>4</sup>

**22%** of females and **12%** of males reported having attempted suicide, while **5%** had serious thoughts of suicide in the past year.

## POVERTY

In 2009, 32.4% of the under-18 American Indian/Alaskan Native population lived in poverty (NCAI Policy Research Center).

Native Americans have the lowest employment rate of any racial or ethnic group in the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012).

2-3. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Minority Health (OMH). 2011 Summary Report 2011. Retrieved <http://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/Default.aspx>

4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2011). High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey data: 2010. Retrieved from <http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/youthonline>.

5. Results from the 2010 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Summary of National Findings. (2010). Retrieved July 3, 2012, from <http://www.samhsa.gov/data/NSDUH/2k10Results/Web/HTML/2k10Results.htm>

6-7. National Indian Education Report. (2011). National Indian Education Report. Retrieved from <http://www.uteed.net/files/nieareport.pdf>

8. Ed Trust. "State of Education for Native Students, 2011". 2011. Retrieved [http://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/NativeStudentBrief\\_0.pdf](http://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/NativeStudentBrief_0.pdf)

9. Ed Trust. "State of Education for Native Students, 2011". 2011. Ibid.

# SHIFTING PARADIGMS TO MEET NATIVE YOUTH NEEDS

Dramatic structural inequalities in the United States exist by race, ethnicity, gender, age, disability status, geography sexual and gender identity, and socioeconomic status. Despite increased attention to such inequalities, our federal system has made insufficient progress in reducing these disparities and creating greater equity. Too little attention has focused on the social determinants of education, health, and justice—environment, structural, communal, familial, individual factors—whereby structural disparities take root, inequalities grow, and inequities reproduce.

Native Youth experience significant institutional and intergenerational challenges in reaching their potential. Native children are far more likely than their non-Native peers to grow up in poverty, to suffer from severe health problems, and to face obstacles to educational opportunity. These conditions are systemic and they must be altered.

The proposed **recommendations** for Native Youth address five broad themes:

FIVE BROAD AREAS FOR CHANGE	
<b>RELEVANT FRAMEWORK AND APPROACH</b>	Research and practice efforts that incorporate a historical, cultural and social determinants approach relevant to Native Youth
<b>SETTINGS-FOCUSED AGENDA</b>	Settings-focused agenda that includes community voice and vision
<b>CULTURALLY GROUNDED</b>	Culturally grounded prevention and social innovation
<b>EVIDENCE-BASE CULTURALLY CONGRUENT MODELS</b>	An evidence base that provides program planners, practitioners, community leaders, and providers with effective, culturally congruent models
<b>CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION</b>	Cross-sector collaboration in the conduct of research and prevention efforts targeting Native youth

The vulnerabilities of Native American's must be interpreted within the *context of their historical and contemporary oppression*. An indigenous perspective *capitalizes on Native youth strengths* that will assist researchers, practitioners, and philanthropy in promoting the optimal development of Native Youth. Emphasis in services and philanthropy continue to focus on reducing risk factors. We must shift the emphasis on ***reducing risk factors*** to focus on ***strengthening the Protective Factor of Native youth, families and communities***.

# FROM A DETERMINANTS TO PROTECTIVE FACTOR APPROACH

An innovative and culturally relevant framework for Native Youth must consider the function of Native American protective factors, which often serve as **sites of resistance and or cultural buffers that mitigate the outcome in their optimal development**. Rather than placing an emphasis on reducing risk factors, this approach focuses on strengthening the Protective Factor of Native Youth, families and communities.

Drawing on the study of Walters and Simone (2002), they present “The Indigenist model of trauma, coping and health outcomes for American Indian women<sup>10</sup>, and in Figure 1. this model illustrates a culturally relevant framework that considers the function of Native American protective factors that often serve as sites of resistance and or cultural buffers that mitigate the outcome in health.

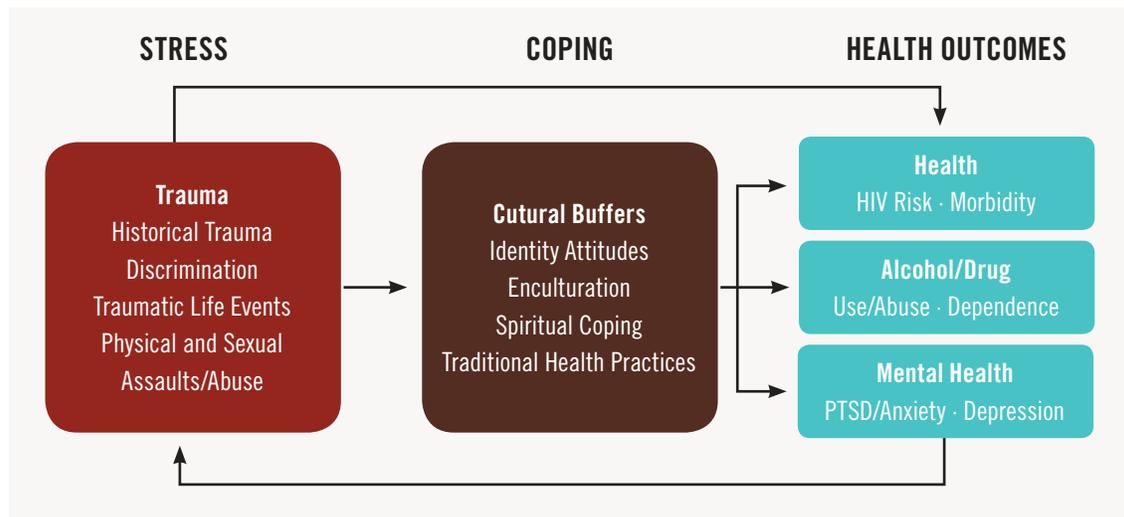


Figure 1 – Indigenous model of Trauma, coping and health outcomes for American Indian women.

This model highlights protective or buffering factors, in contrast to risk factors that characterize much of the research on Native peoples. Interpreting the vulnerabilities of Native American’s within the context of their historical and contemporary oppression while capitalizing on their strengths represents an indigenous perspective that will assist researchers, practitioners, and philanthropy in promoting the optimal development of Native youth and, ultimately, the health and well-being of indigenous communities and nations. (Walters, K. and Simone, J., 2002)

10. Walters, K.L. and Simoni, Reconceptualizing Native Women’s Health: An “Indigenist” Stress-Coping Model. Am J Public Health. 2002 April. 92 (4): 520 – 524.

# STRENGTHENING THE MOST SIGNIFICANT PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Studies found that for Native youth strengthening protective factors may be more important than reducing risk factors.<sup>11</sup> The following is a list of most significant protective factors in American Indian/Alaska Native populations:<sup>12</sup>

**Cultural Identification (Truth Telling):** Native youth success depends on knowing who they are. Youth must engage in effective Decolonizing practices, which serve to undo any ambivalence of how or why they came to this moment in time and engage in Indigenizing practices that promote developmental growth rooted in Traditional Knowledge(s) and philosophy.

**Community Control:** Without land and control over natural resources, Native Americans and their youth cannot have sustainable economies. Promote and support Native youth leadership to restore a relationship with land, community and the environment. Support leadership models rooted in the Original Instructions and sustainable social change.

**Native Youth Leadership:** Increase the visibility of Native American leaders and issues. Develop the capacities of youth leadership to promote and protect human and indigenous peoples rights—restore Indigenous Peoples rights to land, sacred places, traditional knowledge and language, education and judicial systems, which were altered or vanished.

**Extend Kin Bonds/Networks:** to decolonize (neuro decolonize) oneself or community, you must understand what has invaded your well-being, mental or physical health. According to neuro-decolonization, we have been “made into individuals”—transformed to individualists oppose to collectivist communities. We must create connections again from the neurological to the community level. Promote the restoration of kin relationships that are healthy for kids and parent/adult mentor roles.

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11. (Mackin, J., Perkins, T., & Furrer, C. , 2012). The power of protection: A population-based comparison of Native and non-Native youth suicide attempters. *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research*, 19 (2), 20–54.

12. Borowsky, I. W., Resnick, M. D., Ireland, M., & Blum, R. W. (1999). Suicide attempts among American Indian and Alaska Native youth: Risk and protective factors. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, 153(6), 573–580.

A new framework considers the historical, cultural and social determinants and protective factors (PFs) that influence Native youth wellness:

- Emphasis is placed on **strengthening** the PFs that serve as cultural buffers and mediate key determinants.
- Effort is placed in **altering the structures** that intervene and impede in Native Youth's optimal development.
- Native American youth are **distinct from any other racial or ethnic group**—they are members of Indigenous Peoples that poses the **inherent right to sovereignty and self-determination**.
- Effective and culturally **relevant interventions and outcomes** must consider this distinction.
- Outcomes should not focus solely on the success of Native youth as individuals, but rather towards **restoring a sense of collectivism, responsibility, and purpose**.

### **WHY SHIFT THE FOCUS FROM TO A PROTECTIVE FACTORS APPROACH?**

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Studies found that for Native youth strengthening protective factors may be more important than reducing risk factors.<sup>13</sup> We **MUST** identify protective factors within the context of the lives of the *specific population* targeted for interventions. PFs serve as sites of *resistance and or cultural buffers* that mitigate the outcome in their optimal development. Increasing the number of protective factors is as *effective as or more effective* in promoting healthy behaviors than decreasing risk factors. The positive health effects affect *all members of a community*.

The chart on the following page is a list of most significant protective factors in Native American populations.

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13. (Mackin, J., Perkins, T., & Furrer, C. , 2012). The power of protection: A population-based comparison of Native and non-Native youth suicide attempters. *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research*, 19 (2), 20–54.

## SEVEN MOST SIGNIFICANT PROTECTIVE FACTORS FOR NATIVE AMERICAN YOUTH, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

<b>CULTURAL CONNECTION AND CONNECTEDNESS</b>	Native youth success depends on knowing who they are. Promote and Protect access to traditional knowledge.
<b>FAMILY CONNECTEDNESS</b>	Parental connectedness has proven a significant predictor of Native Youth mental and health wellness. Promote and protect the positive influence and monitoring of Native parents upon youth.
<b>COMMUNITY CONTROL</b>	Community control over land, natural resources and Indigenous Institutions (governance and ancestral courts), Native Americans and their youth will achieve sustainable economies, self-governance, relationship with land and their original instructions.
<b>SPIRITUALITY AND CEREMONIES</b>	Healing at a multi-level is necessary—from the child (micro level) to his/her environment (macro level). Promote and restore Native American Original Instructions (OI).
<b>EXTENDED KIN BONDS AND NETWORKS</b>	Networking is an ancestral practice that must be protected and restored. Protect and promote the restoration—from the neurological to the community level—kin relationships that are healthy for kids, parents and adult mentor roles.
<b>HEALTHY TRADITIONAL FOOD</b>	Promote and protect access to Native Ancestral diets and food habits. Strengthen Native American microbiome and traditional medicinal knowledge and its use to protect necessary traditional knowledge and philosophy that restores and supports holistic wellbeing—physical (biological), mental and spiritual health.
<b>YOUTH SELF-EFFICACY</b>	Develop capacities that promote confidence and competence. Promote and protect Native Youth sense of purpose rooted in Original Instructions and Traditional Knowledge.

# FUNDAMENTAL RELATIONS AND OBLIGATIONS TO PAST AND FUTURE GENERATIONS

The Innu, an Indigenous Peoples of Northern Canada, serve as a model for action among Native American leaders and Philanthropy. We draw on their traditional stories to exemplify the kinship and cross-sectional collaboration that they exemplify in this story.

## *Mashkushuts-Innu legend*

*Two bear cubs woke in the Spring time after hibernation. They discovered berries as their mother slept and they followed her footsteps to a berry bush. They returned to hear their mother screaming; she was being killed by a greedy monster. The two cubs ran down a trail and ran into grandmother Porcupine. They explained why they were running away and she agreed to intervene and stall this monster. Grandmother Porcupine refused to let the monster pass. He implored that he needed to find their grandchildren. She agreed to let him pass only if he did what they did, and he accepted. He was to build a fire and rub his face on her tail. He did, and quills were lodged all over his eyes and month. She allowed him to pass and the monster took his time to pull out the porcupine quills. The cubs were still on the trail and ran into Grandma Seagull. They told her why they were running. She said, "Don't be afraid, I have killed this kind of monster before" and she took them to a safe place across a body of water on her boat. Grandma Seagull rubbed dirty, smelly fish around her boat. The monster approached Grandma Seagull and asked for her help to cross the body of water on her boat, and she agreed. The monster asked, "Did you see our grandchildren? I have been running after them. I was thinking of eating them." The monster once on the boat could not bear the smell. The Grandma Seagull told him if he couldn't stand the smell to hang his head over the boat, which he did. The seagull took a huge knife from hiding and killed the monster. She returned the cubs and told them she had killed the monster and they could stay there, with her and she would make toys for them to play with. So, they did. (source)*

In this oral story, the cubs have lost their mother, their greatest source of protection, and when at risk by the same factor(s) that killed their mother, they are protected by two grandmothers—a porcupine and seagull. They act like kin and take action to procure the necessary measures to protect these cubs from harm. Similar to the Grandmothers in this story, philanthropy in partnership with Native American leaders must assert themselves, bring new light and bear the weight of action to achieve the optimal development of Native youth and future generations.

Native Americans in Philanthropy  
2801 21st Avenue South, Suite 132D  
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55407