The Center for Native American Youth (CNAY), created by former US Senator Byron Dorgan, is dedicated to improving the health, safety and overall well-being of Native American youth through communication, policy development and advocacy. The CNAY is a policy program within the Aspen Institute, headquartered in Washington DC and overseen, in part, by a distinct board of advisors.

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As a policy program at the Aspen Institute in Washington, DC, the Center for Native American Youth is uniquely positioned to provide leadership in convening stakeholders, identifying youth priorities, and communicating coordinated strategies at the national level to improve the lives of Native youth across the country. The CNAY’s board and team commend the advocacy work of tribal leaders and national Indian organizations for improving the social and physical well-being of Indian Country. Developing and maintaining meaningful partnerships with tribal leaders and national organizations is critical to CNAY’s success and impact.
PURPOSE OF VOLUME III REPORT

This report is part of a yearly effort to provide current feedback from Native youth regarding challenges and successes in Indian Country. The purpose of the Voices of Native Youth Report series is to summarize and share what CNAY learns on an annual basis from Native American youth, thereby creating a platform to elevate the on-the-ground youth voices across tribal and urban Indian communities. Inviting youth to the table for dialogue guides CNAY’s efforts and ensures that the voices of Native youth are present at the national level in discussions with policy-makers, federal and tribal partners, and new stakeholders.

The Voices of Native Youth Report Volume III highlights:

- Key discussion themes from 25 Native youth roundtables facilitated in six different communities in 2013;
- Native youth perspectives on education, health and wellness, cultural preservation, child welfare, racial equity and extracurricular activities;
- Resources shared by CNAY with Native youth and/or tribal and urban Indian communities that respond to challenges and/or programming ideas expressed by young Native Americans.

SUMMARY: EMERGING THEMES FROM NATIVE YOUTH

Since issuing the Voices of Native Youth Report Volume II, CNAY has held roundtable discussions with youth in South Dakota, Idaho, Washington, Oklahoma, and Maryland – bringing the total number of roundtables facilitated by CNAY over the past three years to over 75 in 17 states with youth representing over 250 tribes.

The following is a list of themes and highlights that emerged from CNAY’s 2013 roundtable discussions with Native American youth:

Education

- Native youth view higher education, post-secondary education as a top priority for themselves and for their communities.
- Young people are eager to learn about scholarships and opportunities for financing college.
- School discipline policies often result in negative learning environments.
Health & Wellness
- Alcohol & Substance Abuse
  - Native youth identified a lack of positive role models, easy access to illegal substances and peer pressure as driving factors of substance abuse among Native youth. Methamphetamine is of particular concern for many Native youth in several communities.
- Suicide Prevention
  - There is a need for training to help peers who are dealing with suicidal thoughts or mental distress.
- Teen Pregnancy
  - Young people noted an increase in teen pregnancy as an issue in their communities.

Cultural Preservation
- Young people are asking for more cultural activities to preserve tribal languages and traditions, and strengthen their connection with elders.

Addressing Racism
- Youth highlight the need to address racism and negative stereotypes against American Indians and Alaskan Natives as key priorities for Native youth. Athletic team names and mascots were especially relevant to youth in 2013.

Bullying
- Bullying, both in school and via social media networks is cited as recurring problem in communities. Youth see this issue increasing with the use of social media.

After-School Programs
- Participants expressed the desire to have more things to do during the summers, on the weekends, and after school.
- Sport continues to be recognized as a positive outlet in engaging youth, staying healthy, and avoiding negative influences like drugs, alcohol and gangs.

BACKGROUND

Today, there are 566 federally recognized Indian tribes that operate as sovereign nations under the United States Constitution. Each tribe is distinct, with its own culture, traditions, language and community. The federal government has legally-binding treaty and trust obligations to provide individuals from federally recognized tribes with health care, education, law enforcement, and other services. However, many of the federal systems in place to fulfill these legal duties are chronically underfunded, leaving much of Indian Country with limited access to
essential services. The needs in these areas extend beyond reservation communities to urban Indian and other tribal communities, where the majority of American Indians and Alaska Natives reside.

Native American youth are the most at-risk population in the United States, facing serious challenges in a number of areas including health, education, and youth development opportunities. These young Americans often live in communities that have long suffered from high rates of poverty and unemployment, health disparities and substance abuse, domestic violence and child abuse, and crime that includes elevated youth gang activity.

The shockingly high rate of suicide among Native American youth reflects the impact of these combined burdens. Native American youth have the highest rate of suicide of any group in the United States – reaching 3.5 times the national average in recent years. The CNAY seeks to reverse the impact of historic neglect by raising awareness of these issues, fostering solutions, and highlighting success stories in Indian Country.

Native Youth Roundtables: Listening to Native youth, collecting their ideas and concerns, and elevating their voices are critical to the Center for Native American Youth’s mission.

The CNAY staff moderate one-to-two hour roundtable conversations with small groups of youth to identify priorities, understand the diversity and complexity of challenges and successes affecting young people, and discuss positive influences such as: role models, after school activities, and other resources that are working and making a difference for young people. These conversations are essential to CNAY’s advocacy, identification of “highlight programs” and “inspirational stories” (or youth-defined best practices), and building actionable connections with and across sovereign nations and diverse communities.

As a part of the roundtable conversations, CNAY’s team also provides a “resource packet” to share with youth, school administrators, and the tribal community. These resource packets include a tailored list of local tribal organizations, internships, scholarships, technical assistance support, and information about national Indian organizations and federal agencies. After each event, CNAY follows up with a written report to tribal leaders, school and the community to summarize conversations with youth and include a tailored list of available resources that address the specific needs highlighted by youth roundtable participants. These meetings are a critical first-step in developing the meaningful relationships with tribes programs and other local contacts that inform CNAY’s greater efforts and allow the organization’s team to serve as a resource to tribal communities and most importantly, the young people in those communities.
LISTENTING TO NATIVE AMERICAN YOUTH

The CNAY remains committed to learning from and listening to Native youth and tribal community perspectives. The valuable insight provided by Native youth directs the focus of CNAY’s work and is central to dialogues and advocacy with policy-makers, federal agencies, tribal organizations, and new stakeholders.

During 2013, CNAY facilitated 25 Native youth roundtable conversations – including one high school assembly – in a total of six tribal communities in order to gather young people’s priorities and perspectives on important issues. These outreach visits to Indian Country connected CNAY with approximately 350 Native American youth, bringing our total connections with youth to over 3,000. Following each of these roundtable discussions, CNAY shared a brief summary report to the community that included key priorities mentioned by young people, as well as a tailored list of resources that address those priorities or other areas of expressed interest. Further, CNAY staff organizes follow-up discussions with each community six weeks after the roundtable visit for a formal discussion of the report. CNAY then works diligently to continue open lines of communication well into the future. Ultimately, these communities and youth become plugged into a greater network of Native youth advocates and resources.

“Having informed decision-makers who have the best interest of tribes and Native youth in mind is a key component of positively altering the current state of Indian health.” – Joaquin Gallegos, 2013 Champion for Change

The sections below highlight specific topics that youth feel should be top priorities. Youth have a holistic view of their success which includes the importance of healthy lives, access to equal educational opportunities, and safe communities. For example, when roundtable participants were asked what success looks like to young people, they said success included graduating from high school, making sure that you try your best at everything, and making a conscious effort to stay active. These topics and other major themes shared by Native youth in 2013 are described in more detail in the section below.

EDUCATION

Education continues to be a priority expressed by the majority of Native youth roundtable participants. Roundtable discussions are often dominated by young people sharing educational
Voices of Native Youth Report III

Aspirations and goals and coupled with a perceived set of barriers and challenges to achieving those goals. In 2013, youth quickly pointed out the importance of having Native teachers in the classroom, availability of traditional language and cultural teachings in school, and importance of proactive encouragement of students by peers and teachers. Further, post-secondary opportunities continue to be the focus and critical gateway to “success” as defined by youth.

Share More Success Stories

Many youth believe that education is very important to them and their communities, and that higher education is connected to the future success of Indian Country. As such, roundtable participants were eager to obtain higher education and expressed a willingness to work hard to achieve their goals. Young people often motivate themselves by participating in extracurricular activities such as youth councils, choir, and cultural programs to supplement their academic efforts. Although many were optimistic about achieving their educational goals, obstacles cited by young people included a shortage of success stories and positive role models, as well as limited knowledge about scholarship opportunities. Youth say positive role models, such as family or community members, who have earned college degrees, are scarce, leaving these young people without someone to inspire them and show them a path to education. Youth say the lack of success stories often discourages them and affects their peers’ motivation to go forward with academic aspirations.

Finding and Applying for Scholarships

Many young people need help finding educational and scholarship opportunities along with support in completing applications once those opportunities have been identified. Because many high school students do not have mentors or positive role models to help them in this process, they are left to navigate the college and scholarship application processes on their own and sometimes become discouraged by the complexity of scholarships and their requirements.

Despite the difficulties that young people face while seeking higher education, many schools are working to reverse this challenge with innovative classroom training, mentorship programs, and proactive outreach by staff. One school in South Dakota serves as a great example of working diligently to expand opportunities for students by requiring school staff to coach students through the college application process. The school encourages all students to apply for the Gates Millennium Scholarship and supports them throughout the entire application process.

“I think we are the future of our tribal nations and the need for education and a college degree is more important than ever.”
– Dakota Brown, 2013 Champion for Change
Recognizing Native students’ desire to connect with more scholarship programs, CNAY has shared numerous resources for tuition funding, grants, and internships with thousands of teachers, youth programs, and young people. The CNAY supports roundtable participants in staying up-to-date on these opportunities by directing them to the “For Youth” resource section on CNAY’s online one-stop resource page. In addition, all youth are encouraged to subscribe to CNAY’s Native Opportunities Weekly (NOW) emails, which highlight a different program, grant, scholarship or other Native youth opportunity each week.

**School Discipline**

In conversations with Native youth, many participants criticized school discipline policies that harshly punish minor offenses and remove students too quickly from learning environments. Participants cited outdated and authoritarian policies that are enforced arbitrarily and contribute to a negative learning environment. Native Youth worry that removal from the educational setting makes peers more likely to fall behind on class assignments, become discouraged and drop out of school, thereby rendering them more likely to get in trouble while away from the classroom. As a solution, some participants proposed that youth be given more input in the development of school discipline policies, and that youth be encouraged to constructively resolve issues among themselves. Youth provided examples of student-led councils as a way to play a more active and productive role in the school discipline system.

**2013 Champion for Change Spotlight:** Dahkota Brown, a 2013 CNAY Champion for Change, is a 15 year old high school student from the Wilton Miwok tribe in California. Like other Native youth, Dahkota identified education as a priority for his community and created his own peer-to-peer study group called NERDS (Native Students Raising Dedicated Students). Dahkota’s goal is to help local high schools and middle schools to help Native students better connect with and relate to lessons. Learn more about Dahkota at: [http://cnay.org/Dahkota_Brown.html](http://cnay.org/Dahkota_Brown.html)
HEALTH & WELLNESS

In every roundtable discussion, health and wellness issues, including healthy lifestyle promotion and challenges like alcohol and substance abuse, suicide, and teen pregnancy were discussed in-depth. Native youth are dealing with or being exposed to many health issues on a daily basis and it is clear that they are concerned about themselves, their peers, and their communities.

Substance Abuse

Drug and alcohol abuse was a common theme heard in roundtable conversations with youth of all ages. Participants said that it is very easy for young people to find and buy illegal drugs and alcohol in their communities. Specifically, CNAY’s staff heard about high levels of prescription drug abuse and methamphetamine use amongst their peers. Youth participants were concerned about the ease of access to prescription drugs from local clinics as well as the increasing use of substances such as synthetic marijuana.

Youth attribute the high rates of substance abuse to the lack of positive role models within their communities and the all too visible presence of adults abusing alcohol and drugs in their homes and communities. In addition, participants said that drug and alcohol abuse occurs because of a lack of positive things for youth to do outside of school. Peer pressure to use drugs and alcohol also plays a significant role, according to roundtable participants.

During a roundtable in Oklahoma, youth cited the use of synthetic drugs as a major concern and problem. Many participants said that it is simple for young people to find and buy synthetic drugs since they are available in convenience stores. Synthetic drugs like K2 marijuana have been connected to serious health problems – including seizures – and are a cause for significant concern in one of the communities visited. Youth participants know this is a new issue for the community and discussed the challenges of synthetic drugs being of “ambiguous status under the law,” which makes them even more difficult to regulate and control.
When CNAY asked participants about what helps youth and their peers avoid substance abuse, youth say that their future goals are the biggest motivation to abstain. Sports and clubs were mentioned as positive outlets that also help youth stay away from drugs and alcohol. Research on protective factors for Native youth suggests that students view culturally centered activities such as powwows and sweat ceremonies as effective ways to avoid substance abuse.

2013 Champion for Change Spotlight: Joaquin Gallegos is another 2013 CNAY Champion for Change who advocates for improved oral health and access to health care in Indian Country. As a 23 year old member of the Jicarilla Apache Nation and Pueblo of Santa Ana, Joaquin continues to speak out on health and wellness needs for tribal and urban Indian communities. More about Joaquin’s work can be found at: http://cnay.org/Joaquin_Gallegos.html

Suicide Prevention

Suicide is almost always a primary concern for Native youth. During a roundtable in Arizona, CNAY failed to list suicide on a slide outlining themes from the Voices of Native Youth Report Volume II, and participating youth asked CNAY to ensure that this topic is always discussed, since it is such a substantial concern to their youth council. In one community, every single student reported that they knew someone who was dealing with suicidal thoughts. Though some communities offer some form of suicide prevention training, youth strongly felt that more young people should be exposed to training on how to address and support friends considering suicide or suffering from mental distress. Youth who had participated in suicide prevention training agreed that it was both helpful and necessary.

In some cases, youth see a connection between bullying and suicide. Youth report bullying as a significant obstacle facing peers today. Young people shared that cyber-bullying in particular has had a detrimental impact on the mental health of youth and believe it has been the driving force of some of the suicides experienced in tribal communities. Participants said that cyber-bullying occurs on Facebook and that it mostly takes place after school hours since students do not have access to Facebook on school grounds.

2013 Champion for Change Spotlights: Cierra Fields, a 14 year old from the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, is a 2013 CNAY Champion for Change who is recognized for her efforts to address suicide prevention, promote healthy lifestyles in her tribe, and reduce the risk of cancer. Learn more about Cierra at: http://cnay.org/Cierra_Fields.html
Teen Pregnancy

Youth highlight teen pregnancy as an issue in their schools and communities. During one roundtable, many participants expressed that pregnancy in schools is very common and that young women in their communities are becoming pregnant at younger and younger ages. Some youth said that even their parents consider it acceptable for middle school and high school students to become pregnant at younger ages. One participant said that their youth council tried to address teen pregnancy in the past by creating public service announcements to be aired in schools, but unfortunately the project was not completed due to a lack of funding.

CULTURAL PRESERVATION

Native American youth from all communities visited by CNAY in 2013 spoke passionately about their desire to learn about and engage in their culture. Youth were very interested in learning more about their culture from elders, and many say they would like to see more young tribal members learning their language and traditional customs. In some communities, cultural education and language classes are offered through their schools, yet funding for these programs is often limited. In one community, middle school students expressed their hopes that Native language and cultural activities would be incorporated into their high school curriculum. Youth have also cited cultural programming as a deciding factor in school selection.

In addition to cultural education in schools, participants want diverse programming on the evenings and during school breaks to keep them engaged and connected to their culture and traditions. Many 2013 youth participants told CNAY that they participate in and attend powwows, and “really enjoy being connected with extended family members and nearby tribes” during these gatherings. Participants explained that more opportunities to get involved in traditional events, dances and other similar opportunities would benefit young people and the community as a whole.

2013 Champion for Change Spotlight: Vance Home Gun is a 20 year old member of the Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes in Montana, and is a great example of a young person taking the lead to preserve his culture. Vance has been working with tribal departments, local organizations, and youth groups over the past six years to help preserve the Salish language. Vance teaches language classes at high schools and utilizes peer-to-peer methods to teach language and culture. Read more about Vance at: [http://cnay.org/Vance_Home_Gun.html](http://cnay.org/Vance_Home_Gun.html)
RACISM

During the majority of CNAY’s roundtables, racism between Native and non-Native peoples is cited as an issue and barrier in tribal and urban Indian communities. Participants said they are often the target of negative stereotypes and racial slurs. Although they rarely describe the hurtful words used against them explicitly, youth say words and interactions like these have a negative impact on their mental and emotional wellbeing. Youth believe that these racist attitudes are especially present in larger urban areas. Youth participants expressed frustration about all forms of racism within the tribal community, and worried that it negatively impacts the attitudes and success of tribal youth.

When asked about strategies for dealing with racism, youth responded with encouraging efforts and ideas for cultivating a more positive environment. Youth have managed to garner strength and motivation in spite of negative perceptions, using negative stereotypes as fuel “to prove them wrong” and create a positive path for younger students to follow. For example, youth report using encounters with racism as opportunities to educate others and correct misconceptions about Native Americans and Native culture. A few participants felt that much of the ignorance and stereotypes stem from a lack of accurate and comprehensive American Indian history taught in schools. Those participants suggested that improvements in education would help combat racism, discrimination and negative stereotypes against Native Americans.

COMMUNITY SAFETY & POSITIVE PROGRAMS

Community Safety and Gangs

A clear priority heard from young people was the need for more safe places to go outside of school, on the weekends, and during summers. A number of participants mentioned that gangs were becoming increasingly prevalent and disruptive in their communities as a result of this lack of available extracurricular activities. Youth say that young people become involved in gangs while in urban areas and subsequently, bring gang activity home to the reservation. Without positive activities and safe environments, like after-school programs offered in evenings and on weekends, there are concerns that those struggling at school or experiencing family issues are more likely to turn to gangs as an outlet for their frustrations and source for a sense of belonging.
**Successful Programs**

When asked about strategies to keep youth away from negative influences, participants highlighted a desire to be more involved in music, choir, bands, and youth councils. Youth also spoke of the importance of sport. Young people see sport as an outlet for engaging youth, staying healthy, and avoiding negative influences like drugs, alcohol, and gangs. Although some communities have physical fitness or community centers where youth can spend time after school, some young people said that programming seemed to be targeted toward younger children and did not feel like a place for older youth. The challenge of attracting teens to youth centers or identifying funding for after-school activities is a recurring issue that CNAY hears across Indian Country. Youth have ideas for ways to address this challenge and are hoping that adults, including tribal leaders, will solicit and consider their suggestions for solutions. For example, one youth participant suggested a community library for tribal members of all ages to read, study, and have access to books, DVDs and other resources for their academic development or leisure.

**2013 Champion for Change Spotlight:** Sarah Schilling is a 19 year old member of the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians in Michigan. Sarah helped organize her tribe’s first Native youth council because she recognized that her community was full of Native youth who wanted to be active and involved with their tribal council. Read more about Sarah’s leadership at: [http://cnay.org/Sarah_Schilling.html](http://cnay.org/Sarah_Schilling.html)

“I feel the youth in my community oftentimes lack a voice. When we as youth are not represented in the community, our people are living out of balance.”

– Sarah Schilling, 2013 Champion for Change

**SHARED RESOURCES**

During CNAY’s travels and outreach to tribal or urban Indian communities, CNAY staff and board members invite youth, tribal leaders, programs to use [www.CNAY.org](http://www.CNAY.org) as a resource for identifying opportunities that have the potential to positively impact young people in Indian Country. Following roundtable conversations, CNAY provides a short report to the community, respectfully summarizing the conversations with youth and providing a set of recommended resources to help address the specific challenges and amplify successes Native youth described in their respective communities.
An example of a CNAY Resource Packet shared with participants during outreach trips can be found at this link in a PDF document:


Please keep in mind the resources are typically tailored for the region of the country.

CONCLUSION

The Voices of Native Youth Report Volume III summarizes youth concerns, ideas, and priorities generated from ongoing roundtable conversations with the Center for Native American Youth and young Native Americans across the nation. As previously stated, the purpose of this report series is to share what CNAY learns and inform Indian Country advocates and other key stakeholders about the diverse needs and visions outlined directly by young people in tribal and urban Indian communities.

The Center for Native American Youth values and prioritizes listening to communities and engaging in consistent diplomatic efforts. The CNAY is committed to maintaining meaningful partnerships with direct service programs, tribes, and tribal youth as an on-going effort to bring awareness to important matters affecting the lives of Native youth. Each roundtable and community site visit contributes to CNAY’s national work and mission to improve the health, safety, and overall well-being of Native American youth.

If you have a comment, question, or want to learn more about CNAY’s roundtable visits and upcoming initiatives, please contact us using the information below.

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