

## **Voices of Native Youth Report**

*Volume 1*

Center for Native American Youth  
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### CENTER FOR NATIVE AMERICAN YOUTH

The Center for Native American Youth, founded 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 heart of the Center's work focuses on the tragic rates of suicide among young Native Americans. The Center is a policy program within the Aspen Institute, headquartered in Washington DC and overseen by a board of advisors.

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The Center commends the advocacy work of tribal leaders and national Indian organizations for improving the social and physical well-being of Indian Country. The Center aspires to develop and maintain meaningful partnerships with tribal leaders and national organizations. Through these partnerships, the Center seeks to strengthen and create new connections as well as share resources and best practices for addressing the challenges facing Native youth across the Nation.

### INTRODUCTION

Today, there are approximately **5.2 million Native Americans living in the United States** (Infoplease, 2011), of which **2.1 million are under the age of twenty-four** (American Fact Finder, 2010). For those who belong to one of the 565 federally-recognized Indian tribes, the federal government has definite legal, treaty and trust obligations to provide these individuals health care, education, public safety and other services. However, the systems serving Indian Country have suffered from **historical underfunding and tribes continue to experience limited access** to adequate health, education, housing and law enforcement services.

Lack of access to these fundamental services has contributed to the tragic disparities that Native American youth face. These young Americans often live in communities that have long suffered from high rates of poverty and unemployment, health disparities, substance abuse, domestic violence and child abuse, and increased youth gang activity.

The impact of these combined burdens is reflected in the shockingly high rate of suicide among youth in Indian Country. **Native American youth suffer the highest rate of suicide** of any group in the United States – at least 3.5 times the national average (Hummingbird, 2011).

The Center for Native American Youth seeks to reverse the impact of historic neglect by raising awareness of these issues, bringing them into the national dialogue and collaborating with tribes, organizations, foundations, and others engaged in the lives of Native youth to foster solutions.



### PURPOSE OF REPORT

The Center for Native American Youth has held roundtable conversations with over 150 Native American youth (grades 6 through 12) in Alaska, Arizona, Denver, Minnesota, Oregon, Washington, DC and Wisconsin. During these roundtables, the Center's staff moderates one-hour conversations with small groups of youth to ask questions about the challenges and successes facing young people and their tribal communities. In addition to these roundtables, the Center partnered with the National Congress of American Indians to hold a youth summit in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in June 2011 and with the National Indian Health Board and Healthy Native Communities Partnership to hold a Native Youth Track focused on health and wellness in Anchorage, Alaska in September 2011.

The purpose of the Voices of Native Youth Report is to summarize and share what the Center has learned during these roundtables. Each tribe, community, and village is unique; however, the Center was able to conclude similar themes and ideas generated from conversations with young people. The Center is dedicated to inviting youth to the table for discussions, and make sure that their voices are present as the Center continues to raise awareness and bring resources to challenges and successes they face in their homes, schools and communities.

This report highlights:

- Key themes heard from youth during roundtables;
- Native youth perspective on education, suicide prevention, community living, and extracurricular activities; and
- Recommendations developed by Native youth for decision-makers like tribal leaders, federal agencies, policy-makers, tribal organizations and the Center for Native American Youth.



### SUMMARY: EMERGING THEMES FROM NATIVE YOUTH

The following is an overview of the key themes that emerged from the Center's roundtable discussions with Native youth:

#### Education

- Students want more support from their communities, schools and families to help them succeed in school.
- Youth find it difficult to stay in school when their friends and peers are dropping out, and students expressed experiencing limited positive reinforcement for those who stay in school.
- When applying for or enrolled in secondary education, Native American students want access to tribal support services and groups.
- College-bound students say they need help finding financial support for secondary education.

#### Suicide Prevention

- Native youth do not always feel comfortable reaching out to adults when they or someone they know is thinking about suicide. Youth are more likely to talk to their peers about these issues.
- Native youth know suicide is an issue in their communities, but lack the resources to safely identify and help peers who are thinking about suicide.
- Despite community leader and school administration efforts to promote, support and raise awareness to suicide prevention, many students are still unaware of health promotional programs or suicide prevention initiatives in their communities

#### Community

- Many young people from Native communities say they see alcohol and drug use among their family and friends everyday.
- It is difficult to refrain from substance abuse with constant peer pressure and easy access to drugs and alcohol.
- There is a sincere interest in Native culture. Youth want more opportunities to participate in their Native traditions and activities.

#### Extracurricular Activities

- Youth want more after-school activities to keep them out of trouble, and they want community event planners to engage the whole family.
- Students have expressed that they need a safe place to spend time after school and during weekends.

### **Native Youth Leadership**

- Youth want more responsibility by being included in decision-making and developing partnerships with their tribal leaders.
- Native culture is important to youth and they want to share their culture with non-Native members of their community.

### LISTENING TO NATIVE AMERICAN YOUTH

Listening to Native youth, collecting their ideas and concerns is vital to the Center for Native American Youth's mission and work. The Center's staff moderates conversations with youth to ask questions about the challenges and successes facing young people and to identify role models, after school activities, and successful resources or areas youth feel are in need of improvement.

Below is a series of topics youth discussed in the Center's roundtables, paired with direct quotes from students and statistics that illustrate issues affecting Indian country.

#### EDUCATION

Educational success is important to Native American youth, their families and communities. The report will explore feedback from students to better understand how Native youth can overcome the numerous barriers that prevent academic achievements.

Native students preparing for college discussed the need for more information about college support services to help young adults transition into a new environment. In addition to support services, youth also shared that they would like to experience more family involvement in college activities to foster healthy transitions for new students. They expressed that Native students want to involve their families in their educational journey, and would like schools to support family engagement to help strengthen the support system for students away from home.

*Just 13.3 percent of Native Americans have undergraduate degrees, versus 24.4 percent of the general population (National Indian Education Association, 2008).*

Another concern for achieving higher education is the actual planning process. Multiple students reported that they felt it was hard to plan for college when there is limited assistance and support within their high schools for scholarship applications, financial aid, major declaration, housing, and other first-year student responsibilities. Students also found that college communities offer few Native cultural activities, and lack transportation support for students and families with limited means to travel home for weekends and holidays.

During a roundtable in Minneapolis, Minnesota, a group of youth from around the country expressed that they felt a lack of support and encouragement from their families and teachers. They would like their parents to be more involved in their education and future ambitions. Most

significantly, Native youth want to hear positive reinforcement from their teachers, parents, relatives, tribal leaders and others involved in their lives. Students expressed that they feel there is a greater focus on mistakes made rather than praise for a well-done project or homework assignment. A positive reinforcement report from *B.F. Skinner* suggests, “by rewarding someone for good behavior you increase brain stimulus and increase the chances that the person will repeat the behavior (Boeree, 2006).”

In addition to improved reinforcement needs, youth are concerned about the large amount of peers dropping out of school. Students felt that the motivation to stay focused on academic achievement was hard to maintain when many of their peers and friends make the decision to withdraw from school. To overcome peer pressures, youth have expressed that they need strong encouragement from their support network. The *Journal of American Indian Education* reported that high school dropout rates for American Indian/Alaska Native youth are double the national average, over 50 percent in states with the highest American Indian/Alaska Native populations and the Pacific Northwest (The Civil Rights Project, 2010).

*“Among those American Indians living in Census designated American Indian Area (AIAs), in 2000, a third of the population 25 years and older had not graduated from high school, and only 35 percent had attended college” (Graduate Management Admission Council, 2008).*

Academic performance is influenced by many environmental factors including access to resources and positive encouragement from support networks. Without these two factors, youth can be at a higher risk of poor development at the social, emotional, and academic levels. Next, the report will explore the youth perspective on an issue that involves the topic that lies at the core of the Center’s mission and goal – addressing the high rates of youth suicide.

### SUICIDE PREVENTION

Native American youth are the most at-risk of suicide of any population in the United States and many conversations with youth involved an individual who knew someone in their family or community who had taken their own life. These personal stories and discussions with youth help decision-makers and advocates understand what resources are needed to combat the epidemic proportions of youth suicide in Indian Country.

*“I lost my cousin to suicide a month ago and I want to know how I can help prevent that in the future. I need to know how to help a person who is thinking about ending their life.” – Student from Alaska roundtable*



Youth's biggest concern is that they do not know where and how to get help if they themselves or a friend/peer is thinking about ending their life. Promising practices exist throughout Indian Country for suicide prevention trainings; however, students seem to be especially interested in knowing how they can help their friends and safely refer peers to mental health services.

Over the last decade, suicide rates have reached epidemic proportions in some tribal communities, and it is important to raise awareness to these statistics, as well as provide students with suicide prevention resources – including information about trainings, national prevention help hotlines and local initiatives. Students want to be involved in conversations surrounding suicide prevention and they are interested in peer-to-peer trainings and other resources. Students know their peers are in trouble and they want to help.

*“Teens often are aware of such threats among their peers before others and can serve to support peers and provide resources.”*  
*(Brotherson & Anderson, 2006)*

Despite promotional and outreach efforts made by community health leaders and school administrators, some Native students conveyed that they are unaware of health promotional programs and suicide prevention initiatives in their own communities. For example, at one roundtable as students were talking about a lack of suicide prevention resources in their community, youth were surprised when a teacher chimed in and talked about a tribal program located less than a mile away from their school. Prior to this discussion, these high school students had not been aware of the program. Youth have recommended that tribal communities, federal agencies and others involve young people more in the marketing to make sure the word is getting out.

Students are aware of the presence of suicide in their communities and they are interested in working together with their people to help address the issue together.

### COMMUNITY

When visiting students the Center asked about the reality of what their communities look like. Youth described communities comprised of families, tribal leaders, programs and schools, all of which play a part in a support system that helps nurture youth development. Native youth are proud of their tribal ancestry and want to be involved in the strong traditions and culture; however, youth also see serious struggles in their tribal communities, struggles that they believe affect their families' ability to be successful.

During a small group discussion in Minneapolis, youth shared that although their community nurtures spirituality through churches and cultural traditions; they far too often see depression, unemployment and attest that drugs and alcohol are still prevalent in their hometowns.

Students described their communities by adding that many of their facility structures are older buildings and that there is a lack of transportation for community members to travel to and from other towns. As far as existing opportunities available to youth, many young participants talked about having recreational centers for traditional dances, a Boys and Girls Club and church-led activities.

*“Youth in my community are challenged by high rates of teen pregnancy, sexual abuse, substance abuse, and lack of law enforcement.” – Student from Alaska roundtable*

In an event with over 100 junior and high school students, multiple small groups talked about wanting a safe place to be with their friends during the evenings and weekends. Some individuals came from communities with strong after school programs where community leaders are committed to youth development. Other students talked about how much of an impact a “safe house” could have on individuals who come from unstable families or home environments.

During many roundtables, youth have shared that if they are not spending time with family or “sitting at home” they are with friends who are partying, fighting and drinking on the weekends. They said that the biggest challenge they face is the temptation to get involved with drugs and alcohol. Youth know that these substances are harmful and can hinder achievements but peer pressure and easy access make abstinence difficult.



*“If we’re not in school and we don’t play sports, we don’t have anything to do. Friends are getting into fights and abusing alcohol or drugs. We need a safe place to go.” – Student from Minneapolis roundtable*

Another obstacle addressed by youth is the lack of cultural awareness among non-Native peers. Some youth shared feelings of hesitation about sharing their experiences or participating in their school’s Native American programs because they fear that classmates might ridicule them. The students are proud to be Native American and they want support from the school to share their

work with the non-Native students. Hesitation from Native students to share their culture may stem from experiences with accounts of bullying and racism within their school and communities. A Denver middle school student shared that another student made fun of him by using a racial slur while walking down the hallway to class.



Students feel bullying and racism should not be tolerated, and school administrators and teachers play a critical role in raising awareness to multicultural representation within a school community. It is critically important that students feel safe and supported during the tough developmental years of middle and high school.

In an urban setting, youth talked about concerns that there are high rates of homelessness amongst their Native American neighbors. Young urban Natives feel upset seeing Native Americans homeless, holding a sign asking for money at intersections, sitting on the side of the streets, and hitchhiking from one location to another. These Native youth are interested in getting involved with volunteerism to help individuals who have found themselves on the streets and in unfortunate circumstances.

*“It makes me really sad to see someone on the street that is homeless and looks like me.” – Student from Denver roundtable*

To make their communities safer and healthier, Native youth believe they need:

- Stronger law enforcement,
- Community Centers,
- Better education,
- Strengthened tribal governments,
- More opportunities to share and learn more about their culture, and
- More training opportunities and additional information about vocational schools.

Obtaining a Native youth perspective on community, allows the Center to identify areas of need, and develop a tailored exchange of resources that are available to address those needs.

Furthermore, the Center believes it is important for organizations and agencies working in Indian Country to consider the youth's perspective on their communities when developing programs and activities for young people. Native youth communicated the importance of a "safe house" for youth to visit after school and on weekends, the report will further examine Native youth concerns and ideas surrounding extracurricular activities.

### EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

In the numerous roundtable discussions, the majority of Native students, both from a rural and urban setting, were interested in their traditional culture, but some expressed that they felt detached from their tribal values. Students who left their communities to live in an urban setting have shared with the Center that they want to find a way to reconnect with their tribal identity and culture.

*"I feel lost. I wish I knew my Native culture and language." – Student from Alaska roundtable*

Aside from the need to connect with traditions and culture, students also expressed that music played a big role in their lives and social culture. Facebook and text messaging are the preferred, and at times the only way youth, communicate and stay informed about events and issues happening in their communities. Other activities of interest for urban junior high students included spending time shopping with friends, or taking walks to local playgrounds.

Regardless of a rural or urban setting, many of the Native students expressed a concern for the lack of activities provided after-school. When students responded to questions about what they do when they are not in school, many of them reported that they are home with their families or just hanging out. Students from rural communities disclosed that many peers and friends take part in substance abuse, and that fighting and partying gets young people in trouble in their communities.

*"In my community, youth get alcohol through their older relatives. When parents buy for their kids it's not a good example. We need good role models." – Student from Alaska roundtable*

Youth want to collaborate with their communities and tribes to bring more after-school opportunities into the area as well as weekend activities that involve the whole family. As

mentioned above, students are looking for a safe place where events and programs can take place, and where youth of all ages are welcome to engage in Native cultural activities such as singing, dancing and learning traditional values through storytelling and ceremonies.

Ultimately, Native youth are interested in receiving support and opportunities from their communities to reclaim their culture and practice their traditions. Furthermore, when these types of initiatives are underway, Native youth want to be included in the conversation.

### NATIVE YOUTH LEADERSHIP

Youth want to be involved. Students have shared with the Center that they are eager to have the opportunity to be heard and included in decision-making that affects their lives and communities. Roundtable participants talked about forming youth groups or councils to focus on their issues and raise awareness to their concerns. Youth want opportunities to shine and be successful; they would like their tribes and community leaders to give them more responsibility.

Students are interested in opportunities to document their Native American heritage. Many youth like to use digital storytelling for projects related to their culture and values. One student shared a digital story with the Center – a touching interview with her grandmother about growing up in an Indian boarding school. Students have also expressed that they want the opportunity to share their work with adults by developing their own mediums such as video, music, art, and other creative methods.

In addition to sharing projects with adults, young people have also mentioned that they want to be involved in their tribal government systems. Youth view their tribal leaders as role models and decision-makers; and although students are interested in collaborating with their tribal leaders, they are not sure how to connect.

*“We want to get involved and support the work of tribal leaders, but we don’t feel like they want to talk to us and include us in their conversations.” – Student from New Mexico roundtable*

Young people have shared that they would like more responsibility in their communities and in some discussions, students have expressed that they want to gain the right to vote during tribal elections, or create a youth council that is invited to tribal leader meetings to offer a youth perspective. Youth are ready and willing to get involved in their communities. The barrier for youth is actually feeling connected to adult leaders in their communities and there being a youth entity present to hear the young voices and perspective.

## HEALTH AND WELLNESS RECOMMENDATIONS

As mentioned above, the Center for Native American Youth partnered with the National Indian Health Board (NIHB) and Healthy Native Communities Partnership (HNCP) in the fall of 2011 to create a Native Youth Track at NIHB’s Annual Consumer Conference in Anchorage, Alaska. The goal of this initiative was to bring Native American students together and invite them to join the national discussion on promoting health and wellness in Indian Country.



During the Native Youth Track, participants drafted recommendations to health advocates, tribal leaders, NIHB, the Center and any entity that aims to improve the lives of Native youth. Students shared these recommendations with attendees at NIHB’s conference.

### American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) Youth Recommendation Statements:

#### “AI/AN YOUTH WANT YOU TO FOCUS ON...”

Spending less time and money on travel, conferences, and meetings. We need you here in the community instead of going away and talking about it. Come home and do it.
Supporting young adults after high school.
Organizing groups that help people become good role models for younger kids. We all need to help raise and prepare future generations.
Tribal leaders being better role models because that’s who we look up to.
Schools need to be equal. Some schools don’t have a cafeteria. Updating school curriculum to include native language and practices. We need computers.
Letting us form better habits of healthy eating by letting us have better lunches at school.
More youth conferences, cultural gatherings, and events. More Native language classes in high school. More Native art classes. Recruit more teachers and decrease teacher turnover rates. More tribal representation in schools, in corporations, and other regions.

### CONCLUSION

The Voices of Native Youth Report summarized the key themes, concerns, and ideas generated from youth roundtable conversations organized by the Center and Native American Youth. The Center created this report to help inform advocates for Native youth and other entities about the concerns and ideas raised by young people in Indian Country.

Each roundtable and community site visit contributes to the Center's mission – to improve the health, safety, and overall well-being of Native American youth. Obtaining youth input is extremely valuable to the Center's work and maintaining a partnership with tribes and their children will continue to be an on-going effort.

The Native Youth Voices Report is an ever-evolving report. The Center will generate additional reports to continue to share youth opinions and ideas that ensure we hear the voices of Native youth at a national level.

If you have a comment, question, or want to learn more about the Center's travels and upcoming initiatives, please visit our website at [www.cnay.org](http://www.cnay.org) or contact the Center's office at (202) 736-2905 or [cnayinfo@aspeninstitute.org](mailto:cnayinfo@aspeninstitute.org).

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