The Impact of COVID-19 on the Behavioral Health Of Massachusetts Tribal Communities

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Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of COVID-19 on the behavioral health of the MA AI/AN population.

Background

- Drug overdose death rates in the US for American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) adults have increased nearly 4-fold between 1999 to 2017 from 5.7 to 19.7/100,000 among men, and from 4.6 to 12.7/100,000 women (National Center for Health Statistics [NCHS], 2019).
- As of 2017, AI/AN had the highest prevalence of illicit drug use of any race group in the US, with 17.6% of the population aged 12 and older reporting using illicit drugs (NCHS, 2019).
- Intergenerational trauma, systematic discrimination, and displacement are downstream effects of colonization, and experiences of racism often define the life experiences of AI/ANs who use substances (Shahram, Bottorff, Olalla, Kertz, Thomas, & Spittal, 2017).
- Before the pandemic, AI/AN populations experienced serious psychological distress at 1.5 times and posttraumatic stress disorder 2 times the rate of the general population (McKinley & Figley, 2019).
- The Institute of New England Native American Studies (INENAS) research team’s Community Advisory Board (CAB) has been an existing group working together for 4 years with a high degree of trust.

Funding culturally specific mental health interventions are critically needed.

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Methods

1) Cross-sectional on-line survey in MA from Sept-Nov 2020 (n=452)
   - 452 AI/AN residing in MA participated
2) Focus group was conducted in October 2021 with the Community Advisory Board (n=8)
   - Thematic analysis using a deductive approach
   - Member checked by the focus group facilitator & all focus group participants
   - Four in-person and four virtual focus groups conducted

Results

1. Survey Results
   - 47% reported 15+ days of poor mental health in past month with largest number among the younger age group
   - 85% reported between 1-14 days of poor mental health in past month with rates highest among women.
   - 43% of respondents reported 3+ PTSD symptoms in past month.

Compared to Pre-Pandemic Use all AI/AN respondents*
   - 46% reported increased alcohol use in past 30 days.
   - 16% reported increased tobacco use in past 30 days.
   - 20% reported increased marijuana use in past 30 days.

2. Focus Group Results
   Major Theme: Isolation
   - “I’m thinking of my two cousins who died of overdoses this year. I can’t help but think that outside of a pandemic, they would have had a better chance of surviving...[if] supported by family and other community members. But we lost them.”
   - “And this lack of access, like with the cancellation of the Pow Wows. I mean...because that's part of preserving our mental health, in access to sacred spaces, I mean, I can’t tell you how good it was to go to the recovery retreat outdoors...after the vaccination it started, just to be in that space where the circle was...it was a sacred space.”
   - “…just to get an appointment if it was not COVID related...... I need medication, I can’t get hold of my doctor. In the beginning was bad...”

Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Weighted %</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex Group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>76.2</td>
<td>70.9 - 80.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>16.0 - 25.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>79.2</td>
<td>72.3 - 85.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rurality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>18.4 - 29.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>76.1</td>
<td>70.9 - 80.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education Level</td>
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<tr>
<td>&lt; High School</td>
<td>66.9</td>
<td>64.5 - 70.0</td>
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<td>26.7 - 38.6</td>
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<td>12.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>76.2</td>
<td>70.9 - 80.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Funding

- Massachusetts Department of Public Health
- Community Health Initiative's Statewide Initiative Fund
- Massachusetts Department of Public Health RFR# 192224 PI Cedric Woods
