

The Historical Implications of Indigenous People and Substance Abuse in the United States

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Context

Substance abuse is the harmful pattern of using addictive substances in excessive amounts. According to the National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics (NCDAS), 165 million, or 60.2% of Americans age 12 and older, currently misuse drugs or alcohol (NCDAS, 2022). Research by the American Addiction Centers, a nationwide, leading provider for substance abuse treatment, confirms that substance abuse is one of the most serious health problems in the United States, contributing to the deaths of millions of Americans every year (American Addiction Centers, 2022). Moreover, certain racial groups are disproportionately affected by substance abuse. In data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, Indigenous Americans, also referred to as Native Americans, have higher rates of substance abuse than any other race, despite representing 2% of the U.S. population (NSDUH, 2013).

For generations, substance use disorders have been an ongoing problem among Indigenous people. Findings from the 2018 NSDUH suggest that 10% of Native Americans have a substance use disorder, 4% have a drug use disorder, and 7.1% have an alcohol use disorder (Kaliszewski, 2022). Kristin Fuller, an expert in addiction medicine, emphasizes that historical trauma and European-influenced culture are major variables contributing to increased rates of substance abuse among Native Americans (Fuller, n.d.). With that, rehabilitation services are critical in reducing substance abuse rates among Indigenous communities, but the treatment methods used are debated. According to a medically reviewed journal article by Amanda Lautieri, while there are substance abuse rehabilitation programs available for Native Americans, these programs are highly underutilized due to the providers' insufficient knowledge of their needs and culture (Lautieri, 2022). Therefore, this leads to the research question of to what extent should substance abuse rehabilitation services for Indigenous people consider alternative approaches to increase effectiveness in the United States?

Historical Trauma

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), historical trauma is the collective experience of emotional damage and unresolved grief within and across generations (SAMHSA, 2014). Historically, Native Americans have been subjected to the traumas of colonization and cultural assimilation policies, resulting in a loss of culture (SAMHSA, 2014). According to Kathleen Brown-Rice in the division of counseling and psychology, additional losses include people, land, and family (Brown-Rice, 2014). Furthermore, in an academic journal by experts in human services, Marilyn Doucet and Martin Rovers, historical trauma in Native Americans resulted in changes in family structure and relationships, leading to feelings of helplessness (Doucet & Rovers, 2010). Responses to such shifts include using drugs or alcohol (Doucet & Rovers, 2010). Likewise, Dr. Maria Heart, director of Native American disparities research, affirms that responses to historical trauma "... may include substance abuse, often an attempt to avoid painful feelings through self-medication" (Heart, 2011).

Native American children and women are further affected by historical trauma. According to Dr. Maria Heart and her colleagues, since 1879, policies were made to remove children from tribal influence and locate boarding schools far from reservations (Heart et al., 2016). The separation of children from their families is a major contributor to indigenous communities' current problems, such as substance abuse (Brown-Rice, 2014). Furthermore, these boarding schools promoted Native American acculturation as well as child and female oppression (Heart et al., 2016). Dominating European influence has also led to a legacy of legalized domestic abuse against indigenous women (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1982). According to Karen Saylor and Nalini Daliparthi of the Native American Health Center, "Significant relationships were found among childhood abuse, trauma, substance abuse, and high-risk sexual behavior among urban Native women" (Saylor & Daliparthi, 2006). Furthermore, studies show that children who were physically and sexually abused were more likely to misuse substances (Brown-Rice, 2014). Together, historical data conveys that Indigenous women and children are more vulnerable to the effects of historical trauma. Therefore, rehabilitation services must "recognize the impact of historical trauma on patient's substance use", especially in regard to these populations (Lautieri, 2022).

Removal and Relocation

Thereafter, between 1492 and Columbus' arrival in America, the Native American population "decreased by 95%", which "can be explained by two main factors: the intentional killing of Native Americans and the exposure of Native Americans to European diseases" (Brown-Rice, 2014). This tremendous loss was further disrupted by an 1883 federal law preventing Indigenous people from practicing traditional ceremonies, including mourning practices (Heart et al., 2016). As a result, "... subsequent generations have been left with feelings of shame, powerlessness and subordination" (Brown-Rice, 2014). These feelings are associated with the abuse of alcohol and drugs, which are used to manage the loss of family and tribal connections (Brown-Rice, 2014). Moreover, according to Scott Plous, a social psychologist who specializes in discrimination, the Indian Removal Act of 1830 established the use of treaties in return for Native American land east of the Mississippi River and forced the relocation of 100,000 Native Americans (Plous, 2003). "By 1876, the U.S. government had obtained the majority of Native American land and the Native American people were forced to either live on reservations or relocate to urban areas" (Brown-Rice, 2014). Furthermore, according to Dr. Maria Heart and behavioral scientist Lemyra DeBruyn, thousands of Native Americans died because of relocations and families were disrupted (Heart & DeBruyn, 1998). These significant losses of "lives, land, and culture from European contact and colonization" have contributed to high substance abuse rates (Heart & DeBruyn, 1998). Ultimately, when rehabilitation providers deliver their treatment, they should be mindful of the root cause of many Indigenous peoples' substance misuse problems: a history of discrimination and trauma.

European Influence

Substance abuse problems plaguing Indigenous communities are partially the result of European influence on Indigenous culture. In 1871, the U.S. government started to civilize Native Americans and assimilate them to European culture (Brown-Rice, 2014). According to The Red Road, a Native American awareness organization, and Landmark Recovery, a national health company focused on substance misuse, prior to European colonization, tribes used fermented beverages with small alcohol content as well as psychoactive substances for



ceremonial and healing purposes (The Red Road, n.d.; Landmark Recovery, 2019). However, “As European colonists settled, they rapidly introduced Natives to regular, social alcohol consumption with distilled beverages of significantly higher alcohol content. Native attitudes toward alcohol began to shift, becoming less about spirituality and more about social bonding experiences” (The Red Road, n.d.). Furthermore, historians believe this shift toward European-influenced alcohol content and attitudes contributed to the emergence of drinking issues among Indigenous populations (Landmark Recovery, 2019). According to population health scientists John Frank, Roland Moore, and Genevieve Ames, binge drinking among Native Americans became normalized due to European influence, and this method of drinking became increasingly associated with individual and social harm rather than traditional culture (Frank et al., 2000). Essentially, European colonization increased alcohol concentrations and altered drinking behaviors among Indigenous communities. Therefore, to counteract the impacts of European culture, rehabilitation programs may need to incorporate cultural and traditional practices into the treatment process.

Conclusion

Ultimately, there are several historical factors that rehabilitation services need to consider when using alternative approaches to increase the effectiveness of their programs. Native Americans face large amounts of historical trauma, which disproportionately affects substance abuse among youth and women. Additionally, the removal and relocation of Indigenous people led to increased substance usage, which managed feelings of helplessness due to a loss of culture. Furthermore, European influence adapted the way Native Americans view alcohol, creating social drinking behaviors rather than its purpose before colonization, traditional practices. It is clear that Native Americans find great value and fulfillment in their culture, which was lost throughout history. Therefore, rehabilitation services need to consider these historical detriments in their treatment, and alter their methods to meet the cultural and emotional needs of Indigenous people. Limitations to this conclusion include the stigma related to substance use and cultural differences between Native Americans and rehabilitation providers. Increased knowledge of Native American history, however, may lead to a more thoughtful examination of cultural approaches.

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