Research in Rural Alaska in a Pandemic: Engaging Indigenous Communities at the Collision of Public Health Crises

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Presentation Overview

- Alaska Rural Context and Indigenous Health Transitions: *Public Health Crises Pre-COVID*
- Ongoing Community-Engaged Research in Rural Alaska to Reduce Suicide and Substance Misuse Disparities: *Suicide Prevention in a Pandemic*
- Impacts of COVID-19 and Rural Yup’ik Community Responses: *A Community Partner Perspective*
Unique Characteristics of an Alaskan Context
229 Federally Recognized Alaska Native Villages; approx 90% off the road system
Rural Characteristics of Communities in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta

- No roads; air transport for freight and patient care beyond routine
- 58 Yup’ik/Cup’ik villages (~25,000 pop) serviced by a single payer hospital in Bethel
- Telehealth & CHAP/BHA service delivery model in village clinics
- Most villages ban importation and sale of alcohol and vote to be ‘dry’ under the AK local option law\(^1\)
- 75-85% of diet comes from subsistence foods (seal, whale, walrus, moose, birds, fish (salmon/halibut, etc)

\(^1\)Berman M. American journal of public health, 2014.
Alcohol abuse mortality is the rate of death due to the direct effects of acute intoxication or withdrawal from alcohol per 100,000 population.

Data Source: Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics

Suicide in Alaska: A Public Health Crisis

- Of those tested, a large proportion of Alaska Native suicide decedents were positive for alcohol (54%).
- Two-thirds of Alaska Native suicide decedents were younger than 29 years old
- The highest suicide rate was found among Alaska Native male decedents aged 20–29 years (155.3 per 100,000 persons).

Ongoing Research to Reduce Alaska Native Youth Suicide/Alcohol Risk

Qungasvik (Tools for Life): Prevention of Alcohol/Suicide Risk in Alaska Native Youth (R21AA016098, R24MD001626, R21AA015541, R01 AA023754, SM063445, SM053557, SM635560)

- Leverage a 20+ year CBPR partnership in the development and testing of a strengths-based, community-level intervention grounded in a multi-level theory of protection¹ and an Indigenous theory of change and implementation.²,³

- Engages ”culture as prevention” in an Indigenous intervention science.

- Provides Indigenous youth with protective childhood experiences as a hedge against risk.

²Rasmus et al. J. Community Psychol., 2014
Scammon Bay’s Qungasvik Project

Geoglanna Ningeulook (top center and right), Abraham Rivers, Wybon Rivers
Intergenerational Resilience Resides in Yup’ik Culture and Communities

*We Survived In the Past as We Do Today by Pulling Together as People*
Impacts of COVID-19 in Rural YK Communities

Health Disparities Research at the Collision of Multiple Public Health Crises

• February 2020 to June 2020 – no cases outside of Bethel hub in YK
• July 2020-Sept 2020 cases remain low and are contained in communities
• Oct 2020—present rates skyrocket – 37 communities, 1,570 cases, 10 deaths. Impacts and spread varies by community.
• Alaska Native people 16% of the state; represent quarter of the deaths
• Containment in rural AN communities presents special challenges (lack of housing, multi-generational and multi-family units, necessity to hunt/fish for livelihood and distribute food across households, untreated addictions and interpersonal violence, increasingly cold/inclement weather, lack of clinical resources and providers, lack of transportation for food delivery, etc.)
• Food security of primary concern as rural airlines go bankrupt, travel bans are enacted and freight is reduced
Rural Yup’ik Community Responses to COVID-19

• Tribes activate self-governance and institute travel bans, social distancing, quarantine and masking policies and lockdown/hunkerdown restrictions.

• State subsistence restrictions are lowered and Tribes use COVID-19 funding to support subsistence activities (hunting, fishing, gathering) and the delivery of subsistence foods and wood for heating to Elders.

• Utilizing community strengths and resilience factors, such as our Yup’ik language, culture and spirituality along with traditional systems of taking care of one another (to increase testing, distribute PPE and a vaccine when ready, etc.) is how we will overcome the pandemic and continue our healing work.
Promoting Alaska Native Legacies of Strength and Resilience

With respect, acknowledgement and gratitude to the Alaska Native Elders, youth and communities and to our partners, supporters and funders, quyana tailuci!

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