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Youth Society 2010 41: 382 originally published online 24 March 2009
DOI: 10.1177/0044118X09333645

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What Increases Risk and Protection for Delinquent Behaviors Among American Indian Youth?

Findings from Three Tribal Communities

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The primary purpose of this study was to compare the risk and protective factors for delinquent behaviors among American Indian youth in three distinct tribal communities. Focus group discussions were used to gather data from elders, parents, youth workers, and youth in each tribal community. Findings showed that the key source for increasing risk and protection for delinquent behaviors among American Indian youth is the family. In particular is the protective presence of a parent and having a parent available for discussing problems. Participants also revealed how many parents lack the knowledge and confidence to discipline their children. These findings suggest a need for programs that strengthen parent-adolescent communication, parenting skills, and offer cultural teachings and sensitivity training for school personnel. Interventions also need to be specific to the cultural context and cannot assume the same risk and protective factors will apply to all American Indian youth.

Keywords: American Indian youth; delinquency; risk and protective factors

Across the United States, American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) youth are repeatedly exposed to opportunities to participate in self-destructive and illegal behaviors. In fact, of all populations of young people

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in the United States, American Indian and Alaska Native youth experience the highest rates of interpersonal and self-directed violence. The average annual violent crime rate for American Indians aged 12 and older is reported to be approximately 2.5 times the national rate (Greenfield & Smith, 1999). Nationwide, although American Indian youth represent only 1% of the total youth population, they account for 2% of the total juvenile population being held in custody and 3% of juvenile status offenders in custody (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2006). Moreover, in just the last year, more than 60% of incarcerated young offenders under federal jurisdiction were American Indian (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2006).

At the same time, it is important to recognize that although these figures portray a rather negative picture of AI/AN youth, in reality, most AI/AN youth are not engaged in such violent and delinquent behaviors. Even within the most violent communities, we know that there are many youth who go on and lead successful lives despite being exposed to numerous challenges. Why is it, then, that some with every conceivable disadvantage go on to do well through their teen years while others face a downward spiral that results in addiction, incarceration, or death? What are those factors that can protect American Indian youth from engaging in harmful behaviors? What are the factors that increase their risk?

Current understanding on youth delinquency and violence indicates that no single factor can predict who is likely—and who is not likely—to engage in violence and delinquency. Rather it is generally believed that multiple factors combine to contribute to and shape the behaviors of adolescents over the course of their development. Studies suggest that it is the confluence of certain “risk” factors that contribute to violence and delinquency and the existence of certain “protective” factors that develop resiliency (Bearinger et al., 2005; Borowsky et al., 2001; Fitzpatrick, 1997; Resnick, Ireland, Borowsky, 2004).

Risk factors are defined as empirically established factors or determinants that when present are strongly associated with negative outcomes. For example, lack of connectedness with a parent has been shown to be a risk factor for interpersonal violence (Resnick, Bearman, Blum et al., 1997). Protective factors, on the other hand, are those that diminish or buffer against negative outcomes. These factors can influence the level of risk an individual experiences or can moderate the relationship between the risk and the outcome or behavior (Jessor, 1993). For example, low family socioeconomic status is a risk factor for violence, and a supportive and caring relationship with a parent may be a protective factor. This supportive relationship does not improve the child’s economic status, but it does buffer
the child from some of the adverse effects of poverty (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

The Framework for Risk and Protective Factors

One way to understand the interactions between risk and protective factors for violence and delinquency is to view them within an ecological framework. The ecological model recognizes that each person functions within a complex network of individual, family, school, and community contexts that affects their capacity to avoid risk (Brofenbrenner, 1986). The ecological framework is based on a public health perspective which considers the individual’s relationship to his or her surroundings. Thus, instead of focusing just on the individual who is at risk for, or who engages in, a particular behavior such as delinquency, this approach seeks to identify and examine the factors that may influence the individual to behave in such a way.

At the most basic level, the individual level, factors are identified as those behaviors or characteristics that affect one person’s risk for, or resistance to, potentially engaging in delinquent behavior. Individual-level risk factors that have been shown to be associated with violent and delinquent behaviors among youth include being male, having poor academic achievement, frequent school absence, exhibiting aggressive behavior at an early age, having attention deficit and hyperactivity disorders, and lacking self-control and self-esteem (Hawkins et al., 2000; Hawkins, Laub, & Lauritsen, 1998; Smith, Lizotte, Thornberry, & Krohn, 1995). On the other hand, individual-level protective factors for violence and delinquency include having a high IQ, strong coping skills, a strong sense of purpose, a commitment to learning and education, and the ability to act independently (Fergusson & Lynsky, 1996; Garmezy, 1985; Jessor, Turbin, & Costa, 1998; Smith et al., 1995; Werner & Smith, 1982).

At the next level within the ecological framework are those factors that pertain to the family environment. Family-level factors are typically related to a family’s structure, support, culture, and functioning that together ultimately affect the behavior of individual family members. For example, research demonstrates that family dynamics and parental or caregiver involvement are significantly correlated with an individual’s propensity to engage in violent or delinquent behaviors. A lack of parental interaction and involvement increases the risk for violence, particularly among male adolescents (Hawkins et al., 2000). Failure to set clear expectations, inadequate youth supervision and monitoring, and severe or inconsistent family discipline practices can also contribute to delinquency and violent behaviors. Alternatively, protective family
influences for youth include the presence of a nurturing parent or adult in their lives. Youth who are nurtured in this manner tend to be better adjusted, evidence better quality relationships, and practice effective coping and decision-making skills (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). In addition, caregivers who provide emotional support and opportunities for social and emotional growth are more likely to have children who demonstrate a broad spectrum of prosocial competencies critical to positive development (Patterson, 1980).

A third level of factors pertains to the school environment. School factors consider the type of school, quality of teachers, and social supports and services at the school. In general, research shows that if this environment is uncertain, unsafe, dirty, and without consistent rules, youth are more likely to engage in health-compromising behaviors compared to youth who attend safe, well-managed schools with clear policies and rules regarding behavior and general expectations (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1993). At the same time, if youth have strong and supportive relationships with their teachers or coaches at the school, they are less likely to engage in delinquent behaviors (Blum & Libby, 2004).

Finally, the last set of factors of interest within this ecological framework is related to the environment of the community. Community-level factors are those available economic and recreational opportunities, existing social supports, and other issues that affect the successful functioning of the residents. For example, researchers have found that the prevalence of drugs and firearms in a community predicts a greater likelihood of violent behavior (Hawkins et al., 2000). Legislation, enforcement, and community dynamics combine to influence the local accessibility of drugs and weapons. On the other hand, a strong community infrastructure has been identified as a protective factor against youth violence. Communities can create opportunities for youth to participate in activities where they have choices, decision-making power, and shared responsibility (Seidman & Pedersen, 2003; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

Viewing the dynamics between risk and protective factors within an ecological perspective is particularly relevant given that violent and other maladaptive behaviors are often learned by youth from watching and interacting with the influential people in their lives, such as their family members (Garbarino, Dubrow, Kostelny, & Pardo, 1992). Essentially, children do not develop behaviors and attitudes in isolation from other people and contexts and understanding the influence of this social ecology is critical to any effort to understand and change behavior (Garbarino et al., 1992).

The problem with our current understanding of risk and protective factors related to violence and delinquency is that it is primarily based on
studies conducted among the general youth population in the United States. Very few studies have been published among American Indian youth communities and of those which have, most have analyzed such factors within only one type of setting or tribal group—often among rural, reservation-based communities (Blum, Harmon, Bergeisen, & Resnick, 1992; Borowsky, Resnick, Ireland, & Blum, 1999). However, because American Indians are culturally heterogeneous, with more than 562 federally recognized tribes, pueblos, bands, and villages in the United States (Department of the Interior, 2002), it is important to study American Indian youth from different tribal communities to capture those factors that may be distinctive to the particular tribal setting. Moreover, it’s also important to examine these factors from multiple ecological levels to gain a true understanding for how these factors interact to shape American Indian youth behavior.

This article presents findings from a pilot study that used focus groups to gather data from youth, parents, elders, and youth workers on the perceived risk and protective factors related to violence and delinquency in three different tribal communities. This article is unique in several ways. First, it is one of the few studies that employed in-depth qualitative methods to explore risk and protective factors among American Indian youth populations. This is important, as we wanted the tribal members themselves to identify the risk and protective factors that they felt were important in influencing youth violence and delinquency. Second, data were collected from three different sources, all representing different generations and levels of influence on youth. This strategy was implemented to serve two purposes: (a) to verify the perceived risk and protective factors that were identified among each participant group; and (b) to examine the various perspectives on violence and delinquency among groups that represent various ecological levels (youth workers from the community, parents and elders, as well as youth themselves). Finally, this study was conducted in three distinctive tribal communities, which allowed us to compare and contrast the ways in which culture, geography, and community infrastructure can influence the types of factors perceived to be related to youth violence and delinquency.

Method

The study used a qualitative methodology to gather data from elders, parents, youth workers, and youth in three American Indian communities. Qualitative research techniques were chosen because they appear to be the
most appropriate methods in exploring sensitive topics such as harmful and violent behaviors among tribal communities. Qualitative research also has the advantage of trying to elicit local, subjective perspectives of cultural insiders about the topic in question and of allowing a great deal of flexibility to pursue themes that emerge as the research progresses (Bernard, 1994). Indeed, for this study, it wasn’t until after the first round of discussions among key informants from the three communities that a list of important topics surrounding the issues of violence and delinquency emerged.

To gain urban and rural perspectives, as well as perspectives from reservation and nonreservation communities, three tribal communities were selected: an urban, poor, tribal community in the Southwest; a rural, prosperous, nonreservation tribal community in the Midwest; and, a rural small reservation tribal community in the Southwest (see below for more details on each community). Because the three tribal communities were very different in how they operated and were organized, it was essential for the research team to first spend time in each of the three sites to gain the approval and trust of key stakeholder groups and individuals, as well as to understand how best to proceed with the study. As “outside researchers,” we felt that it was most important to follow the procedures with which each site felt most comfortable and that by taking into consideration each site’s wishes about how the study should be conducted, participants would be more comfortable to discuss the subject matter.

To gather information about how to implement the study at each site, one of the two authors spent a week or two at each site and gathered information about which people within the community should be contacted and briefed about the study. At each of these initial visits, a site coordinator was hired to assist with identifying key informants with whom the research team could discuss the study. At the second visit to each site, the research team held several discussions with identified key informants and key informant groups. Presentations to the tribal councils were also made, which subsequently granted us tribal approval and a plan of action for how to collaborate and implement the study in the specific community.

**Settings**

*Southwest rural reservation.* At the time that this study was conducted in 2006, the population of this community consisted of approximately 1800 enrolled tribal members. All residents live in a single residential-business district within a 15-mile radius that situates within the rural, otherwise undeveloped 1 million acre reservation. Community members function in a
tight social network. Social interaction is characterized by a high-level familiarity. First names and nick names are the most frequent forms to address individuals, including the chair and vice-chair of the tribal council (Teufel-Shone et al., 2005). These close interconnections appear in direct conflict with the local rates of violence among the community. In a 2001 community survey of alcohol abuse and violence, 31% of the residents stated that they had been involved in a fight “that came to swapping blows with a husband, wife, girlfriend, or boyfriend” (Koss et al., 2003).

**Midwest site.** The largest concentration of this particular tribe resides within a 14-county area, with most living in five counties where the nation owns 5,400 acres of tribal trust land. Preservation of the culture and language and economic development are two major areas of concern among tribal members. According to the nation, the native language “is our contact with the past, the embodiment of today, and our vision of the future, containing generations of wisdom going back to antiquity” (Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council, Inc., 2000). In addition to preserving language and culture, the tribal nation continues to promote economic development. The tribe owns and operates four gaming establishments and numerous retail and convenience stores throughout their tribal trust land.

**Southwest urban site.** This site consisted of approximately 18,000 tribal members who reside in a large city in the Southwest. Unlike the other two sites, the members of this tribal community represent over 150 recognized tribes, with many commuting back and forth between the city and their reservations or home towns. As a result, members of this community do not have a single formal organization and tend to distinguish themselves informally through various social and cultural groups (Jojola, 2001). Many American Indians residing in this urban area are poor, with about 25% who live at or below the poverty level.

**Participants**

At all three sites, focus groups were used to collect information from parents, elders, youth, and youth workers. Methods for recruiting the participants for the focus groups varied, as each tribal community had different strategies that were more effective for their setting. At the Southwest urban site, participants were recruited by posting flyers at the largest annual holiday pow-wow. In the focus group sign-up sheet, potential participants signed their names (which did not have to be their “real” name), their tribal
membership, and the city or town in which they currently reside. This information was only used to verify that all participants were tribal members of the selected urban community. In total, eight focus groups were held with an average of 7 participants in each. At this site, tribal members felt it was important that the focus groups be mixed, with elders, youth, mothers, fathers, and youth workers all participating together. They felt that this was how they normally communicate and interact with each other, and being that it is an urban community, much of the traditional “rules” about interacting with elders are no longer practiced.

In contrast to the urban site, at the Midwest rural location, it was strongly felt that participants should be separated by age and gender; as a consequence, different recruitment methods were used, depending on the group. For instance, all 12 youth workers were recruited by the Director of Youth Services, and two focus groups were conducted during one of their monthly meetings. To recruit youth participants, youth workers living in the three towns with the highest populations of American Indians were asked to select the male and female youth, ensuring that they were representative of youth living in those areas. In total, three youth focus groups were conducted in each area: one male, one female, and one mixed group, yielding nine youth focus groups in all. To recruit the parents and elders, the site coordinator was asked to select parents and elders in the same three towns from which the youth were selected. A total of three parent and two elder focus groups were conducted.

Finally, in the rural Southwest reservation site, the recruitment process was organized and supervised by the director of the tribe’s health department. Specifically, selected members of the Community Wellness Team, a grassroots coalition with ties to the health department, did the actual recruitment, posting flyers about the focus group study at schools, community events, and selected businesses to notify potential participants. From this recruitment process, a total of eight focus groups were conducted on the reservation: two focus groups among boys (aged 15-17 years); one focus group among girls (aged 15-17 years); one focus group among mothers of youth; one focus group among fathers of youth; two focus groups among elders; and, one focus group among male and female youth workers.

For the entire study, a total of 172 tribal members participated in the focus group discussions (see Table 1 for distribution across the three sites). Focus groups in the Southwest urban site were conducted among a 3-day period, whereas in the other two sites, the focus groups were spread out over a 2-week period.
Procedures

Focus group discussions were tape-recorded, with written permission from the participants, and transcribed for analysis. The format of the focus group discussions was established using guidelines for developing focused questions that make the group participants feel comfortable and provide the desired information (Krueger, 1994). Refreshments were also served at each focus group, and participants all received US$10 gift certificates.

Question topics were developed in earlier key informant interviews at each site and were structured to learn more about (a) the challenges and risks facing American Indian youth in regards to violent and delinquent behaviors, (b) the factors associated with successful youth in their communities (success in this sense was viewed as avoiding destructive and violent behaviors and staying in school), and (c) suggestions for preventing delinquent behaviors among Indian youth. The discussions were designed to allow the participants to describe risk and protective factors for delinquent behaviors in a Native youth’s life without the facilitators defining these concepts a priori. To ensure that participants discussed factors at each of the levels within the ecological framework (i.e., individual, family, school, and community), specific probes were used to ask participants to

Table 1
Distribution of Focus Groups Across Sites

| Tribal Communities | Southwest Urban | | Midwest Rural | | Southwest Reservation |
|--------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Group              | n               | Group           | n               | Group           | n   |
| Mixed group 1      | 6               | Youth worker 1  | 6               | Male youth 1    | 7   |
| Mixed group 2      | 7               | Youth worker 2  | 6               | Male youth 2    | 6   |
| Mixed group 3      | 7               | Female youth    | 7               | Female youth    | 8   |
| Mixed group 4      | 8               | Male youth      | 9               | Mothers         | 7   |
| Mixed group 5      | 5               | Mixed youth     | 8               | Fathers         | 6   |
| Mixed group 6      | 7               | Mother 1        | 8               | Elder 1         | 5   |
| Mixed group 7      | 7               | Mother 2        | 7               | Elder 2         | 6   |
| Mixed group 8      | 8               | Fathers         | 7               | Youth worker    | 7   |
|                    |                 | Elder 1         | 5               |                 |     |
|                    |                 | Elder 2         | 4               |                 |     |
| Total n = 53       | Total n =67     | Total n = 52    | Total N = 172   |
think of additional factors within that level that may contribute toward youth violence or delinquency or additional factors that may contribute to youths’ success. It was also important that facilitators didn’t define behaviors that were considered “delinquent” or “violent” as some of these specific behaviors (such as homicide and suicide) were considered taboo subjects for many of the participants to discuss. Also, the goal of this research study is not to specify which risk or protective factor is linked to which delinquent or violent behavior, but rather for participants to identify what they think protects youth from participating in violence and delinquency in general and what they think increases youth’s risk to engaging in delinquent or violent behaviors—however they categorize such behaviors.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the focus group data was conducted within the context of two interrelated paradigms, the ecological perspective and the risk and protective factor framework. The two authors (one trained extensively in qualitative research) analyzed the data by using a combination of inductive and deductive theory to identify key themes. In this manner, the authors first developed a list of overarching codes that corresponded to the two frameworks: risk factors at the individual level, protective factors at the individual level, risk factors at the family level, protective factors at the family level, and so on. Using this initial list of categories as a basis for the first phase of coding, the authors independently coded all the transcript text according to the initial overarching categories. Once this was completed, for the next phase of coding each author independently coded subcategories within each overarching category. Subcategory codes were based only on the data from the transcripts and typically were labeled after a word or phrase found in the transcript. After each author completed coding one third of the transcripts, the coding schemes of the subcategories were discussed; where there were discrepancies, discussions were held until both authors reached a consensus on the particular codes and a new coding scheme was implemented. Saturation was achieved when no new code for the subcategories could be created and all of the relevant transcript text could be organized into a specific code.

Discussions among the research team (the two authors and a research associate) were then used to develop a matrix of themes across the four groups of participants (youth, parents, elders, and youth workers) as well as across the three sites (Southwest Urban, Midwest Rural, and Southwest Reservation). This analytic approach allows the content to be analyzed and summarized by categories and the researcher to look for similarities and differences across and within groups (Krueger, 1994).
To further validate the data analysis, once the preliminary results emerged from the study sites, the authors presented the findings to members of each tribal community, either by making formal presentations at community meetings as at the Midwest rural site and the Southwest urban site or by sending results of the analysis to the rural Southwest reservation site. At the latter site, the focus group facilitators reconvened to complete an independent data analyses to compare with the external analysis. Feedback from each of the tribal communities was then incorporated into the final and overall study findings.

Findings

The findings are organized by the way in which the data were analyzed. Therefore, each of the perceived risk and protective factors are classified by the four ecological levels: (a) risk and protective factors at the community-level, (b) risk and protective factors at the school-level, (c) risk and protective factors at the family-level, and (d) risk and protective factors at the individual level. Within each of these categories, similarities and differences that emerged between the tribal communities, as well as between participant groups, are discussed. Finally, a list of recommendations for how delinquency and violent behaviors can be prevented is presented, with a discussion on how the findings relate to the broader research base on risk and protective factors for delinquency among youth.

I. Risk and Protective Factors at the Community-Level

In general, there was no common risk factor at the community-level that was identified as increasing the risk of delinquency or violence among youth in all three sites. In contrast, for the protective factors, participants were generally all in agreement, and interestingly, the factors thought to be protective for youth clustered around the culture and language of the tribal community.

Risk Factors

Racism. The experiencing of racism and discrimination was perceived as a major motivator for youth to participate in both interpersonally violent and self-destructive acts at the Midwest and Southwest urban sites. Participants
at these sites (particularly youth) used the term, “racism,” and felt that it was prevalent on an ongoing basis in their daily lives. The majority of boys living in the Midwest site stated that racism was most strongly experienced in school. For example, one boy said, “everybody is afraid of us. They think that Native Americans fight and scalp people and drink and that’s it, that’s all they are good for.”

Participants in the Southwest urban site also expressed that they often feel deep hatred for being “Indian” from the nonnative residents in their community.

You see it in the bus system, when you get on the bus, some bus drivers, they don’t even give Natives respect. They see us sitting there, like sometimes when I used to have long hair I’ll be sitting there, you know, waiting for the bus, and you know, I wouldn’t get up in time . . . and some of the buses would just pass me by. (Father, Southwest urban site)

Indeed, there have been a few studies that have been published which have examined the impact of perceived discrimination on various health outcomes among American Indian youth. For example, discrimination has been linked to depressive symptoms (Johnson, 1994), low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy (Locust, 1988) among American Indian children and adolescents. One study even found that perceived discrimination led to higher levels of delinquent behavior among American Indian adolescents (Whitbeck et al., 2001).

Notably, in our study, very few participants at the Southwest reservation site mentioned racism as a problem, which may be reflective of the reservation being relatively isolated from other ethnic communities.

Per capita policy. One of the interesting differences between the sites is the socioeconomic status of the tribal communities. The Midwest tribal community was relatively affluent compared to the other two sites, having made large profits from its gaming casinos. Indeed, this was the only community where participants discussed financial resources as they pertained to the health and well-being of youth. As part of its economic development plan, the tribe designates a portion of its annual net gaming proceeds for per capita payments to enrolled tribal members. Specifically, per capita payments are invested in a minor’s trust fund in a variable sum (depending on gaming proceeds) and distributed on a quarterly basis. Every child born and enrolled in the tribe is allotted a trust fund of these quarterly payments from birth until they reach the age of 18 years. Youth become eligible to
access their trust fund as cash in a lump sum on reaching their 18th birthday and on obtaining their high school diploma. Youth who reach the age of 18, but do not graduate from high school, must wait until their 25th birthday to receive their per capita trust fund. Currently, tribal members report that high school graduates are now receiving lump sum payments of approximately US$60,000.

Although it has become a positive source of economic development, the tribe’s policy on per capita distribution was identified by all focus group participants as being extremely problematic:

The difficulty is that most youth are not given any financial counseling or investment advice, and typically, this money is used to buy big luxurious cars and drugs and alcohol. (Male adult youth worker, Midwest site)

Youth said that the tribe needs to develop a program that could help them use this money wisely; in the absence of such a program, youth will continue to waste the money on useless or harmful items.

**Loss of language and culture.** In both Southwest sites, participants viewed the loss of culture and language as a major source of risk for youth, and, interestingly, the perception was the same in the rural reservation and urban tribal community.

Our language, our culture, it is going to be extinct. People try, I have seen people try, to bring stuff back through storytelling. . . . But the interest isn’t in it. People have tried all kinds of ways to get the kids to be interested in our culture and every way we try, it’s hard to make it work. I honestly don’t know if they will ever be able to bring that back. (Father, Southwest rural reservation site)

We probably will never have what we had, what our ancestors had. We are in a whole new world now and it is hard . . . I just want to be home with my family teaching my grandchildren our traditions and our ways and our religion and work within my village. (Elder, Southwest urban site)

Reasons for the perceived loss of culture and language varied between the two Southwest sites. At the reservation site, the loss was linked to shame and family separation created by boarding school experiences as well as the perceived impact of English-only laws in Arizona. The English-only laws were implemented approximately 6 years ago to replace the bilingual laws, which had allowed both English and the tribal language to be spoken in the schools. Now, with the English-only laws, even Native
teachers no longer teach the tribal language and subsequently cultural instruction essentially has been discontinued.

At the urban site, the loss of culture and language was linked to the influence of “mainstream” America on youth and the perceived notion that with modernization language and tradition were no longer needed.

I guess my frustration is what we can do about it now. It’s not hopelessness, but yet for people in this whole new modern world, our families and traditions, our language, are all falling apart because of all that outside influence—and everything came in like a bomb. (Mother, Southwest urban site)

Gangs and weapons. At the Southwest urban site, one other frequently mentioned risk factor facing youth are gangs and the increasing availability of weapons. Youth stated that the gangs were not specific to American Indians, but included all ethnicities and races. Thus, the primary reason why American Indian youth want to join gangs, at least in this specific community, is so that they can try and fit into these multicultural peer groups.

In actuality, not much is known among American Indian youth gang membership as few studies have published on this topic. The largest study was conducted in the year 2000 in which a national survey was conducted only among American Indian/Alaska Native respondents to examine gang activity in Indian Country. Respondents of this survey said that gang activity among American Indians has only recently begun, as more than half of those who reported gang activity said that gang problems only began after the year 1994. Factors that were said to contribute to this recent increase in gang activity included the frequency with which families move off and onto the reservation, poverty, substance abuse, family dysfunction, and a waning connection to Native American culture and traditional kinship ties among cousins (National Youth Gang Center, 2002). In a similar study conducted among members of the Navajo Nation, respondents cited friendship and a sense of belonging to something as significant benefits derived from being in a gang (Armstrong et al, 2002). Indeed, in our study, the findings demonstrate that the latter point is particularly true.

In this same study site, the Southwest urban location, many participants also mentioned that youth frequently carry guns to school. In fact, weapons were discussed by young people in the most matter-of-fact way:

I had a best friend that used to carry a gun and he would put up his gun any time he came over because he knew it would bother me. (Male youth participant, Southwest urban site)
Others talked of friends who brought guns to schools, carried them to parties, and threatened others with them.

Studies among non-Indian youth populations have also found that communities with a high prevalence of weapons and firearms have higher levels of violence and delinquency among youth, the majority of which are in urban areas (Hawkins et al., 2000).

**Protective Factors**

*Tribal language.* Despite the risks in their lives, participants mentioned several factors that protected youth from engaging in destructive behaviors. One of the most commonly mentioned factors was having knowledge of the tribal language. The tribal language is the primary means of teaching cultural values and customs. Adult participants from all three sites mentioned when youth knew the language the knowledge and skills exert a positive influence. For example, one youth worker from the Midwest site commented that the language just emanates respect for others.

When you greet someone in the tribal language, you are not merely saying “hello” to that person. You are saying that you are honored to be able to talk to that person. It’s that type of respect and honor that the language generates.

Across sites and within each site, youth varied as to whether they felt learning their tribal language was important. In general, youth from the Midwest site were much more likely to recognize the value of learning their tribal language.

Without your language, you can’t really be in a tribe, because a tribe has to have its own language, as it helps to teach the tribal customs. (Female youth participant, Midwest site)

Some Midwest youth said that when they started learning their tribal language, it showed them more of who they are, where they came from, and what the people expect from them. In short, it gave them a sense of purpose and guidance. Notably, however, there was some disagreement among the youth as to whether knowing the language was important to their success. For example, some youth said that if they weren’t taught the importance of knowing their cultural heritage, they would not see the usefulness of learning the language. In this sense, the importance of language was dependent on how children were raised. Participants from both of the Southwest sites...
confirmed this, and felt that as more people distance themselves from “tradition,” the importance of having a tribal language may no longer be felt.

* Ceremonies and pow wows. At the Midwest site, another cultural element deemed important for youth success is the involvement of youth in pow wows. Several participants said that when youth get out and dance during a pow wow, they usually give it all they have, and they start to feel happy and proud of who they are. Similar to pow wows, ceremonies were frequently mentioned by participants at the Southwest urban site as an important way to “get back on the right track.” This is especially valuable when there has been some suffering or when someone is “out of balance.” The ceremonies help to bring back the balance in one’s life; they bring healing.

When something happens, you have to go back [to the reservation] and have a ceremony or a ritual to get you back in synch, to know your spirit and mother earth. That draws a great deal of responsibility and that we know it is there for us, and we have to use it (Father, Southwest Urban site)

**II. Risk and Protective Factors at the School-Level**

Across all three sites, participants had a common understanding about what the key school risk and protective factors were that affected youth delinquent behaviors. Moreover, at the rural Southwest reservation site, the negative or positive perception of the school environment was dependent on whether youth attended the local school on the reservation or a school outside the reservation. The local school was perceived by most to be a negative influence on youth.

**Risk factors**

* Lack of teacher support. Lack of support from teachers and school officials was mentioned as a common challenge facing American Indian youth. At the Southwest urban site, several adults discussed how the teachers fail to recognize the differences in culture between American Indian and Anglo (white) students. One adult, in particular, discussed how teachers lack cultural sensitivity and do not understand the differences that students have in learning.
When I was working with Special Ed, they had a classroom for behavioral problem students. I found that a lot of the students that they would send to me didn’t belong there; they were very intelligent kids and they had no learning disability. The only problem was they wanted to say something, they wanted to be heard and just because they presented it that way, the teacher got mad and said it is my way or no way. (Elder, Southwest urban site)

At the Midwest site, youth mentioned that when they have “Native American Awareness Week” at schools, there is such a low turnout, primarily because the teachers do not consider it a priority, and therefore, the students are not excused to go. One parent, who adopted an American Indian child, said

My daughter, who is Native, had such a hard time in school, because she is quiet and doesn’t feel like participating. I wanted to bring a teacher or counselor who was American Indian into the school system that could teach about sensitivity and cultural awareness regarding the Native students. However, school officials weren’t interested, and I feel this is something the schools greatly need.

Similarly, at the rural Southwest reservation site, many parents complained about the quality of teaching at the local school.

Our teachers are afraid of our kids at the middle school. They don’t want to work with our kids, they say we are too mean, we’re too rough. They are just there to get a paycheck. (Mother, Southwest reservation site)

Youth workers on the reservation mentioned that many teachers have low expectations of the students and do not provide learning challenges. One youth worker, who offered support on behalf of the teachers, said that teaching on this particular reservation is quite challenging and comparable to “teaching in an inner city.” Therefore, he and other youth workers felt that teachers have to be well trained and prepared to deal with a variety of different behavioral problems. To be most effective, participants believed that teachers needed a thorough understanding of the history and culture of the tribal community so that their teaching and ways of handling discipline would be appropriate to the particular community.

**Peer pressure.** Peer pressure is perceived as another common risk factor faced by youth living in all three sites, particularly pressure to underperform in school. In fact, youth workers in the Midwest saw this as a major challenge facing youth in their area.
What I see is that it is not fashionable to be excelling in the honor roll or something like that. It is not cool to be smart. . . . I see that in the ones that really try to make good and they get all this peer pressure saying that they will be more popular if they do poorly. (Youth worker)

At the Southwest urban and reservation sites, many participants felt youths’ friends had a significant impact on their behaviors. When asked what makes the biggest difference in a youth’s life, several youth said it is the friends that they make, and whether their friends are into drinking and violence.

**Protective Factors**

*Mentors and role models.* For participants, particularly at the Southwest urban site, the school was also an important place where youth could find mentors, role models, and people with whom they could confide.

What helped me in high school was having some really good mentors and role models . . . Back then I would think “who are they going to send to talk to us now?” I knew everything. But as I went through life I realized what they were saying was true. (Mother, Southwest urban site)

When asked what made a difference in her life, one respondent said

Mentoring, because when I started changing and becoming interested in art . . . I was surrounded by teachers, counselors. They started bringing out the good in me. Some of the teachers would hire me to come home during the weekend. You know they would tell me to do little jobs here. That is when I kind of started building up a value, I guess, I’m worth something. (Mother, Southwest urban site)

This finding resonates with other research findings among both American Indian populations and the general youth population. For example, in one study conducted among 569 American Indians attending an American Indian Urban School Center, the authors found that one of the strongest protective factors associated with diminished violence perpetration was having strong connections to school. Strong school connections were measured by asking students about their relationships with school staff and teachers and how well they thought they cared about them (Bearinger et al., 2006). Other studies conducted nationally among youth have also found that youth who perceive strong connections to someone at school—whether it be a teacher,
coach, or guidance counselor—are much less likely to engage in violent behaviors (Resnick et al., 2004; Catalano & Hawkins, 1996).

III. Risk and Protective Factors at the Family-Level

When participants were asked what was most important in a youth’s life, family was by far the most frequently mentioned. However, participants saw family as a source of both risk and protection for youth. The main sources of risk were family disintegration, the lack of parental presence, and lack of discipline or monitoring. On the other hand, major sources of protection from the family included parent communication and support.

Risk Factors

*Family disintegration.* One of the most common issues that arose when discussing the risks and challenges that face American Indians is the disintegration of the family, which has resulted in a lack of parental presence and a lack of discipline in the lives of many youth. Historically, for many American Indian tribes, parents were not the main disciplinarians; rather, uncles and aunts were primarily responsible for discipline and punishment as well as teaching youth about the culture, people, and the family. Today, this traditional system has nearly vanished in many cases because of the influence of the American Indian boarding schools, which were created for American Indian youth during the early 1900s. Indeed, much has been published about how these boarding schools created both physical and psychological parental loss by the abrupt removal and placement of American Indian children in foster and adoptive homes (Adams, 1995; Child, 1998; Ellis, 1994). The government’s strategy was to remove American Indian children from their families of origins and place them in boarding schools, sometimes more than 100 miles away, with the goal of breaking up the traditional family as well as their transmission of their cultural way of life (http://family.jrank.org/pages/74/American-Indian-Families-Boarding-Schools.html).

The end result was a generation of children who essentially grew up without parents and no longer had a culture or any knowledge about who they really were. The cycle of abuse they experienced in these boarding schools and subsequent self-hate often revisited on their own children and has left many without any knowledge about how to be an “Indian parent.”
Although not all tribes have suffered the same set of losses from the boarding school experiences, as many children rebelled against the boarding schools, in the Southwest Reservation site, the legacy of the boarding schools was still viewed as a major factor that was contributing to family disintegration.

Anyway, the BIA [Bureau of Indian Affairs] came in and took many of us “to be civilized.” I never knew what that word meant. But, then I look around me today, is this what it means? To be civilized? Are we civilized families? It still haunts me to this day and I have a lot of anger. (Elder, Southwest Reservation site).

Notably, although the boarding school experiences were only mentioned at the Southwest urban site, participants from all three sites mentioned that many families all over Indian country are losing their traditional systems. One measure is the number of youth being raised by single parents and grandparents.

When I was growing up, I had a set of parents. Today, there are a lot of single parents and there is no real father figure for them. . . . They are growing up themselves. (Elder, Southwest reservation site)

Youth workers from the Midwest site told of many stories where they have brought youth home to empty houses. One youth worker, for example, reported

On one of those bad snowy nights this winter, you know, a night that I would think to prioritize and sacrifice bingo or casino for your kid’s safety and well-being, I had to drive some kids home from the center. I was slipping and sliding all over the place, cars were in ditches everywhere. Well, it was sadder when I took some kids home to empty houses. Even the kids reflected and said, “Gees, they don’t even care about us, it seems like they should be home.” I really felt for them, really sad.

Lack of parental presence is what many participants feel as a major reason why youth get involved with drugs and violence.

*Availability of drugs and alcohol.* Another factor that was mentioned by participants as being a major contributor to both the disintegration of the family and to youth violence is the prevalence of drugs and alcohol within families. In fact, at every site, parents and elders discussed the incredible challenge of drugs.
alcohol and drugs are destroying, literally destroying, families. Pulling families apart, pulling marriages apart, driving children away from the shelter of their families and their homes, you know, and you see brokenness everywhere. It’s really heart-breaking. (Mother, Southwest urban site)

Some of the participants blamed the drug and alcohol problem on parents, who are addicted to such things themselves. One Midwest parent summarized it by saying

I had no idea what my teenagers were doing, mostly because I didn’t know what I was doing. My parents were alcoholics, I became an alcoholic, and all my children were exposed to that, and they all became alcoholics and drug addicts.

Lack of parent discipline. Parents and youth from all three sites commented that a major source of risk is that youth are not getting proper discipline at home. Many parents said that they are often afraid to discipline their children because they fear that Child Protection Services or the police will either arrest them or take their children away. Several parents said that when they were young, they were slapped or spanked for getting into trouble. However, if that type of discipline is applied today, parents believe they could be taken to court.

I’m an uncle and every one of my nieces and nephews lives in a single parent home and I’m honestly afraid to correct my nieces and nephews. Kids today have this so in their head if the parent or anyone older yells at them, they know the law, they know what is going on . . . There are a lot of kids who can lie, and my nieces and nephews could say that I slapped them when I didn’t . . . It is their way, it is not the parents’ way, no more. It is the kids’ way or no way. (Father, Southwest reservation)

Elders from the Midwest also commented on how discipline has changed. Back when they were teenagers, or even when they were raising their children, there was still a traditional discipline system in place. When the uncles were the disciplinarians, they were given the freedom in how they should discipline their nephews and nieces. Often, the discipline was harsh. However, they believe that this is what kept youth from getting involved in risky behaviors. Many parents agreed that Indian parents are too lenient or do not have the skills to parent their children today:

You have parents that are trying to be open-minded where “if you stay home, I’ll let you party here.” You know, so they are opening their home to other
kids to come over and drink. They are enabling kids to drink, and enabling them to be young alcoholics or drug addicts. (Mother, Midwest Site)

When looking at this issue across all three sites, the lack of effective parenting discipline can be viewed to be the result of several factors occurring simultaneously. At the Southwest reservation site, the boarding school experiences were cited as a major factor related to family disintegration and a reason as to why many parents, today, do not have appropriate parenting knowledge and an understanding of how to discipline their children. At the same time, many parents across sites said that they only know how to physically punish their children, in part because that was how they were “controlled” as children. As was already indicated, many are often afraid that if they use such techniques today, they may be taken to court. In truth, there have been several cases reported where Child Protection Agencies have been contacted because the parental discipline practices were seen as “abuse” when the minority/immigrant parent believed they were showing love and exerting appropriate discipline (see, for example, http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9D0CE6D9103BF93AA15756C0A9649C8B63)

Parents may also not be effectively disciplining their children because they are also dealing with the other challenges, such as drugs and alcohol and not having any time to spend with their children because they are working mornings and nights.

**Protective Factors**

*Parental support.* Of all the protective factors mentioned at the family level, the most frequently noted was having parental support. As one parent from the Southwest urban site observed:

Kids don’t think that their parents care about them. I think that the parents should sit down with them and talk to them and tell them how much they need them in the world, tell them that they really care about them. That way, the kids can know. That way they don’t do something stupid. (Mother, Southwest urban site)

When asked what makes a difference to kids who are about to “fall off the cliff,” one Southwest reservation respondent reflected the sentiment of many:

As a parent or a grandparent, you have to sit down and talk to the individual and others. Maybe you don’t want to know. But, you can’t let it go on. The children need protection. (Elder, Southwest reservation site)
Indeed, across different cultural groups in both the United States and the world’s regions, having a close relationship with a parent has been shown to be a very strong protective factor for a variety of adolescent health outcomes (Blum et al., 2003; Resnick et al., 1997; World Health Organisation [WHO], 2002). Exactly how parental support gets operationalized may vary according to the culture. In our study, parents and elders across the sites seemed to emphasize the importance of talking to their children every day and making sure they don’t miss their children’s special events, such as games and sports meets.

One way to show your support [as a parent] would be like, well like in sports, to be there all the time at their games, or other activities that they have like music, concerts, or anything like that that their parents are always going to be there and they see them out in the audience. (Father, Midwest site)

Well I think that our main job for showing support is to let them know that they can come to us and talk to us about anything. I think that is how they become your friend because they know they can come to you and they can say, “Hey mom, I have this problem,” or years down the road they can say “Well mom, you didn’t know about this but I did this and I did that” it helps them to feel better because they made mistakes and you know they can accept that and they come to you for advice. (Mother, Southwest urban site)

**IV. Risk and Protective Factors at the Individual-Level**

At the individual-level, no specific questions were asked that pertained to individual risk and protective factors. Instead, participants were asked generally about how individuals in their community are able to overcome challenges and adversities. Notably, the majority of participants mentioned the importance of having a religion or a sense of spirituality to help overcome hardships. In addition, participants from the Midwest and Southwest urban sites mentioned that above all, an individual must be motivated to want to succeed in life. Without a sense of motivation and the ability to see things positively, it will be hard for anyone to overcome life’s struggles. Each of these individual-level protective factors is described in more detail below.

*Religion and spirituality*. For American Indians, religion and spirituality are directly tied to the culture and to “one’s life.” Participants in the Midwest
site, for example, reflected on how religion and spirituality are meant to be a part of living, and “everything that we do has something to do with life, and we should try to bless that.” Participants in the Southwest urban site explained that spirituality helps to bring control over one’s life, and to bring guidance in decision making.

I guess it is not so much a type of control, but control on life, control knowing that there is a higher being, there is a spirit there that is within us and around us all the time and tells us that there is a difference . . . There is a positive and negative spirit in our lives, us Native Americans. (Father, Southwest urban site)

A father from the Southwest reservation echoed a similar perspective about religion and spirituality.

To me, religion is a dogma. It is the ways and means and methods of control. Your religious activities, your religion tells you want goes wrong, what happens when things go wrong. Then it also tells us how to behave properly and how good things might happen. And the spiritual things are those that come from the heart. Kindness, goodness, being healthy, and working with each other shows the true spirit of living with one another. So the religion and the spiritual things work hand-in-hand. But you have to eat a little bit, accept a little bit, and work on it a little bit. That is how we do that as Indians.

There has been much written about the importance of spirituality among American Indians, particularly in the anthropological literature. Indeed, spiritual belief is a pervasive aspect of Indian culture, although belief systems vary widely between tribes/nations and geographic areas. Most Indian traditions teach that the “interconnectedness” of all things leads to a relationship between man, Creator/God, fellow man, and nature. In many Indian traditions, healing, spiritual belief or power, and community were not separated, and often the entire community was involved in a healing ceremony and in maintaining the power of Indian “medicine.”

The findings of our study confirmed this importance of spirituality in protecting youth from negative behaviors. What was less clear was how youth actually acquire it, as it was not well articulated among any of the participants. In fact, at the Southwest reservation site, participants mentioned that although they recognized the importance of religion and spirituality, they felt that parents and grandparents were no longer passing it down to their children.
A sense of responsibility. Participants at the Midwest and Southwest urban sites said that a large part in helping youth to overcome challenges is situated within an individual’s sense of responsibility and self-motivation. Participants reported that individuals must be motivated to want to succeed. An adult at the Southwest urban site summarized it by saying

It takes a certain individual to realize the mistakes they have done and look upon themselves, look in the mirror and say my family is getting tired of this behavior, and I have the will to change.

Youth in the Midwest site also said that individuals have to be able look at the positive side. “If you think this life is all negative, then you get lost. You have to have the mindset to look forward and think positive.”

Indeed, according to Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (1990), having a high self-esteem has always been viewed as being very important for building resiliency among American Indians. One of the strategies in which American Indians have tried to nurture this among their youth was to train them in self-management, which included never offering rewards when youth performed well. Practicing appropriate self-management was viewed as the reward in itself.

In the youth literature on resiliency, there have been similar individual-level factors, such as having high self-esteem and having future aspirations, which have been shown to be particularly important in protecting youth from violence (Hawkins et al., 2000). Although these factors may not be the exact match for “having a sense of responsibility,” they do suggest that an individual needs to have some sort of confidence and forward-thinking attitude to overcome life’s challenges and resist engaging in negative health behaviors.

V. Recommendations for Youth Interventions

To gain participants’ perspective on how to translate their identified risk and protective factors into interventions for youth, participants were asked what they would do to improve the lives of youth in their community. Notably, participants were able to draw on the factors mentioned that help youth succeed, that is, the “protective factors.” At all three sites, the most frequently suggestion was to have a program that would involve the parents. Many youth in fact recognized that most parents do not know how to discipline or communicate with their children. A class for parents and youth
was identified as an excellent way to teach these skills. However, participants noted that if such a class were offered, only the “good” parents would participate and not the parents in need. Others noted that to expect parents whose lives are burdened with family obligations to come to a parenting class is unrealistic. What is needed, they suggest, are strategies that bring positive parenting messages into the homes, churches, and community centers where parents congregate.

Other frequently mentioned program suggestions were to offer cultural and language classes, vocational training opportunities, and more available counseling services to youth. Participants at the Midwest and Southwest urban sites also mentioned that the schools need to have cultural sensitivity training, so that teachers would be able to recognize the cultural differences in learning. Similarly, at the Southwest reservation site, adult participants felt that the all native school board members need to be involved in evaluating the teachers’ performances. At this same site, participants suggested offering more after school activities for the youth, where youth could take field trips and participate on more sports teams. Specific to the Midwest site, many also suggested that youth need to be given financial counseling on how to invest the money that they receive on high school graduation. A review of the per capita disbursements at age 18 may also be warranted.

Finally, one mother from the Midwest summarized that the problems of youth need to be considered at more of a community-level:

I think we need more community involvement instead of thinking about, oh, that is somebody else’s kid, and it’s not our problem. It is our problem. You know, a lot of us are sitting in the bingo hall or sitting in the bar or we go to work all day and then we are just doing our own things. When my kids got to be teenagers, I thought that way too, and I wanted to have my own life. But doing this, or thinking this, I think, we just kind of drop the ball on them. We get to a certain point and think, well, they can now take care of themselves. I think that’s our biggest mistakes. As a community of parents, we need to start taking more of a responsibility in their well-being. We need to begin thinking that they still need our care, and that we, as adults, need to start to get know all the teenagers in the community.

In fact, participants from all three sites agreed that if parents and youth from their communities can work together, either by holding discussions on various topics or by coming together for different sports and recreation activities, such activities may serve as first steps toward developing effective community-based prevention projects.
The major focus of this article was to identify the risk and protective factors at multiple ecological levels that were perceived to influence American Indian youth's engagement in violent and delinquent behaviors. Using four different data sources at three distinct tribal communities, this study showed that many risk and protective factors are in fact similar across sites regardless of whether the site was urban or rural, reservation or not, or affluent or poor. For instance, across all three sites, participants felt that inadequately trained teachers, negative peer groups, the erosion of the traditional extended family system, the prevalence of drugs and alcohol within families, the lack of parental presence, and the lack of parental/caregiver discipline all heightened the likelihood that youth in their communities would be involved in violent or delinquent behaviors. Alternatively, participants also agreed that knowing the tribal language and having a supportive relationship with a parent could protect youth from such harmful and destructive behaviors. When comparing these findings to the risk and protective factors that have been identified among the general youth population in the United States, there are some interesting points to consider. For example, there are some risk and protective factors related to violence and delinquency that may be universal across cultures and ethnicities. These include negative peer groups, lack of teacher support (or connection), prevalence of drugs and alcohol within families, lack of parental presence, and on the protective side, having a supportive relationship with a parent (Blum et al., 2003; Resnick et al., 1997; WHO, 2002). On the other hand, this study also found that there are some risk and protective factors that may be unique to American Indians or to minority/immigrant groups in general. These factors include the erosion of the traditional family extended system as being a risk factor to youth violence and delinquency and the protective influence of the tribal language.

Although this study found common risk and protective factors across all three sites, this study also showed that each tribal community has factors unique to their site. For example, the Midwest tribal policy on per capita payments is proving to be a costly source of risk for many American Indian youth in the area. Exactly how many other tribes have similar policies and what impact they are having on youth are questions that await further research. To date, however, there has been no other study identified that has examined the influence of such a policy on youth behaviors.

Other unique factors identified include the availability of gangs and weapons at the Southwest urban site and the painful legacy of the boarding
schools at the Southwest reservation site. Although the availability of gangs and weapons is a risk factor that can be shared by other youth populations who reside in urban areas (Hawkins et al., 2000), the experience of the boarding schools is a factor that is specific to the American Indian tribes. This factor was viewed as being a major contributor to the loss of tribal language, the erosion of the traditional family system, and a major factor as to why parents and other caregivers lack the knowledge of how to discipline their children.

By examining the risk and protective factors within an ecological perspective, this study also allowed us to observe the ways in which each domain contributed to youth violence and delinquency—as perceived among the tribal members. For example, of all the levels of influence, this study suggests that the family is one of most important sources of risk and protection to American Indian youth, and this was observed across all three sites. Indeed, other studies conducted among American Indian populations have shown that family connectedness, cohesion, and support play an important role in the physical and cultural survival of the people (Walters & Simoni, 2002) and more specifically in having a significantly positive influence on the physical and emotional well-being of American Indian youth (Cummins, Ireland, Resnick, & Blum, 1999).

Studies conducted among representative groups of youth in the United States have also identified the role of parents as having a particularly strong influence on the behaviors of youth (DiClemente et al., 2001; Farrington & Hawkins, 1991; Resnick et al., 1997; Steinberg, 1991; Steinberg, Elmen, & Mounts, 1989). According to a recent synthesis of more than 300 research studies on the parenting of adolescents, parent-child connectedness and the specific parenting practices, such as monitoring, guidance, and open communication, represented the central ways in which parents influence healthy adolescent development (Simpson, 2001). Although many researchers acknowledge that parents are important to shaping adolescent behavior and development, some have questioned is relative influence on adolescents compared to other social domains, such as peers and the environment of the school (Conrad et al., 1992; Harris, 1998). What was interesting about our study was that participants from all three sites felt that the family was still the most important domain. Further, they echoed its importance when they discussed that interventions for youth needed to include the family and most notably, include a component on parent education.

This study also highlighted the importance of culture and language, especially for giving Indian youth a sense of identity and belonging. Culture and language can also foster a sense of respect for one’s elders and
the environment that appears to help youth understand more about who they are as Indian people. Surprisingly, participants from the two Southwest sites felt that although culture and language are important, traditional teachings were no longer being passed down to youth. Consequently, many youth from both of these sites felt that having knowledge of the tribal culture and language were no longer needed. Interestingly, the school environment was primarily viewed as a negative influence for American Indian youth. This sentiment is consistent with research conducted among American Indians more than a decade ago and would suggest that little has changed in making the schools a more positive force for American Indian students (Dehyle, 1992).

Overall, the implications of our findings are significant in several ways. First, to date, no other study has examined the risk and protective factors related to youth violence and delinquency among four different sources of information simultaneously (youth, parents, elders, and youth workers). Second, by using qualitative methods, this is one of the few studies that allows the tribal members to identify the relevant risk and protective factors themselves, instead of taking existing measures of identified risk and protective factors and applying them to the population and using statistical analysis to determine their worth. Third, although these findings cannot be generalized to all American Indian tribes, they do suggest a set of common factors that need to be addressed if we are to help Native families support their children and protect them from harm. Indeed, the study shows how crucial the sense of “family” is to an American Indian community; when families become broken, so does the health and well-being of its members. Restoring this sense of family and community—in a culturally appropriate manner—may be one of the most important avenues to reducing violence and delinquency among American Indian youth.

References


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