

Doctrine of Discovery: Modern Legacy

This long and painful history of the Doctrine of Discovery and its legacy of trauma has had a tremendous impact on the health and wellbeing of Minnesota's Native peoples. Data clearly shows that Minnesota's Native communities are under great stress.

A Community in Distress

If the community at large had the same struggles as Native American communities, it would be viewed as a national crisis. While Native American communities have many assets and strengths to build on, a look at the data is alarming.

- **Income:** In 2012, median income for Minnesota Native Americans was \$32,153 compared to \$61,667 for white Minnesotans.ⁱ
- **Poverty:** In 2012, 32 percent of Minnesota's Native Americans—one out of three—lived in poverty compared to eight percent for white Minnesotans.ⁱⁱ
- **Education:** The on-time graduation rate for Native American students in 2013 was 49 percent compared to 85 percent for white Minnesotans.ⁱⁱⁱ
- **Infant Mortality:** Native American babies die at twice the rate of white babies in Minnesota.^{iv}
- **Teen Suicide:** American Indian teens in the Upper Midwest are 10 times more likely than other teenagers to commit suicide.^v

The list goes on. Data shows that Native Americans are more likely to be unemployed or incarcerated and less likely to own their own homes. Minnesota's Native American children are much more likely to end up in out-of-home placements.^{vi} How we understanding these striking disparities will affect our response to them.

Historic Trauma

Some people understand Native communities' poor health and well being in terms of "historic trauma." This refers to the cumulative effect of traumatic emotional and psychological wounding that spans generations. The trauma become a vicious cycle. For Native American communities, that wounding has included the consistent assault on the basic foundations of community and identity: land, language, culture and religion. Some have been resilient and found ways to overcome this history. For many, the result has been hopelessness and despair. Historic trauma can lead to depression, anxiety, and self-destructive behavior, including drug and alcohol abuse and suicide.^{vii}



Current research gives some insight into how trauma can be intergenerational in any community, including Native American communities.^{viii} Researchers have looked at “Adverse Childhood Experiences” and their impact on future well being. They start by asking people how many of nine negative experiences they had as children, such as physical abuse, emotional abuse, divorce/separation, domestic abuse towards a parent, an incarcerated parent or problem drinking or drug use in the home. Then they ask about people’s current lives and health problems. What they found is that adverse experiences for children increases the likelihood they will have health problems as adults, such as anxiety, depression, smoking, and alcohol or substance abuse.

This is one explanation for how trauma becomes self perpetuating: Kids who grow up in trauma are more likely to repeat that trauma in the families they create as adults. And for Native Americans, this trauma is not limited to individual families, but is community wide. The Minnesota Department of Health explains how adverse experiences affect child brain development:

[A]cute or prolonged stress can become toxic to the developing brain and body. ... In childhood, persistent and intense stress stemming from [Adverse Childhood Experiences] actually influences how the brain develops. Toxic stress strengthens connections in the parts of the brain that are associated with fear, arousal, and emotional regulation. Additionally, toxic stress negatively impacts parts of the brain associated with learning and memory.

Questions

- What is your initial reaction to the data on Native American community well being?
- What is your initial reaction to the idea of historic trauma? Can you think of examples among family or friends where you can see how trauma has passed from one generation to the next?
- If the current conditions in Native American communities are the result of past efforts by religious and civic leaders to break Indian identity, culture, and spirit, what is the proper response by people of faith and civic leaders moving forward?

ⁱ Minnesota Budget Project, Minnesota Still a Land of Inequality, [Minnesota Budget Bites, Sept. 19, 2013](#)

ⁱⁱ [Minnesota COMPASS](#) accessed June 19, 2014

ⁱⁱⁱ Wilder Foundation, [COMPASS website](#), accessed June 19, 2014

^{iv} Minnesota Dept. of Health, [Advancing Health Equity in Minnesota: Report to the Legislature](#), 2014

^v Minnesota Public Radio, [Indian teen suicide: 'A tragedy of enormous proportions'](#) May 3, 2005,

^{vi} Minnesota Department of Children and Family Services, [Minnesota Child Welfare Disparities Report](#), February 2010.

^{vii} http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical_trauma

^{viii} Minnesota Department of Health [Adverse Childhood Experiences webpage](#).