



Building Life Skills, Connectedness, and Resilience in Youth

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NACA

Native Americans for Community Action, Inc.

The Challenge

Many youth in the [juvenile justice system](#) [1] face very difficult life circumstances, such as poverty, unstable households, mental health issues, disabilities, and low educational achievement.¹ Just as disheartening, these incarcerated youth also have higher rates of suicidal thoughts and behaviors than their peers.²

Several years ago, [Native Americans for Community Action, Inc. \(NACA\)](#) [2] in northern Arizona noticed that more than half of the youth at the local detention center were Native American. NACA was determined to change this trajectory for other Native youth and keep them out of the juvenile justice system by building their [life skills and resilience](#) [3] to adversity.

The Strategy



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After careful consideration, NACA chose an evidence-based program called Coping and Support Training ([CAST \[4\]](#)), which had been used successfully with Native youth. This program aligned well with their goals: to help youth manage their emotions, make better decisions, reduce their substance use, and improve their grades in school.

To implement the program, NACA needed a partner with direct access to the youth they wanted to reach. NACA knew from local data that many of the Native American youth in the county juvenile detention center came from specific towns on the reservation. So they reached out to the schools in those towns to see if they would participate.

The Implementation

While partner buy-in can be a major hurdle, NACA was fortunate to already have a working relationship with the school system. Still, it's a big commitment for schools to integrate CAST into their curriculum, identify teachers to facilitate the 12-session program each semester, and select students to participate. So NACA provided ongoing support. They used grant funding to pay for CAST facilitator training, program materials, and monthly support calls with facilitators.

To overcome common challenges like retaining teachers and students in the program, they provided stipends to CAST facilitators and incentives, like movie tickets, to students. To help encourage and celebrate youth who completed the program, they also held "graduation ceremonies."

To date, six schools have partnered with NACA to implement the CAST program among students ages 13 to 17. Approximately 40 students at each school participate in the program every year.

The Results

At the beginning and end of the CAST program, participants complete self-assessments that evaluate their personal growth. Posttest results have shown substantial improvements in the areas of self-worth, coping, and [connectedness \[5\]](#). After the program, there was a 51% increase in the number of students who agreed with the statement "I am proud of myself" and a 66% increase in the number of students who agreed with the statement "I know where I can get help when I have a problem."

Through NACA's partnership with schools, youth who participate in the program feel a sense of accomplishment, develop valuable skills, and form a network with each other and the facilitator. In sharing common challenges, they discover that they can cope with their problems and they are not alone.

“CAST helped students form stronger bonds with peers and adults at their school, and also improved relationships with their parents/guardians.”

– Valorie Barriga, former NACA mental health specialist and CAST coordinator

[Native Americans for Community Action, Inc. \(NACA\) \[2\]](#) is a nonprofit urban Indian center founded in 1971. They



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Additional Resources

- Watch a [webinar on preventing suicide through social connectedness](#) [6] and check out the related research and measurement tools.
- Learn more about preventing suicide in [American Indian and Alaska Native settings](#) [7].
- Find out more about [preparing mentors to work with Native youth](#) [8].
- Learn how [enhancing life skills and resilience](#) [3] and [promoting social connectedness and support](#) [9] are critical parts of a [comprehensive approach to suicide prevention](#) [10].

References

1. Thompson, K. C., & Morris, R. J. (2016). *Juvenile delinquency and disability*. Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.
2. Casiano, H., Katz, L. Y., Globerman, D., & Sareen, J. (2013). Suicide and deliberate self-injurious behavior in juvenile correctional facilities: A review. *Journal of the Canadian Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 22(2), 118–124.

Populations: Youth, Racial and Ethnic Groups, American Indians and Alaska Natives
Settings: American Indian/Alaska Native Settings, Schools
About Suicide: Behavioral Health Disorders, Substance Abuse, Suicidal Thoughts and Behavior
Planning and Implementing: Culturally Based Practices, Cultural Competence, Education and Training, Promoting Mental Health
Strategies: Life Skills and Resilience, Connectedness

Links within this resource

- [1] <http://www.sprc.org/settings/juvenile-justice-system>
[2] <http://www.nacainc.org/>
[3] <http://www.sprc.org/comprehensive-approach/life-skills>
[4] <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/pdf/10.2105/AJPH.91.5.742>
[5] <https://www.sprc.org/comprehensive-approach/social-connectedness>
[6] <http://suicideprevention-icrc-s.org/event/preventing-suicide-through-social-connectedness-overview-what-we-know-about-promoting>
[7] <http://www.sprc.org/taxonomy/term/8/>
[8] <https://nationalmentoringresourcecenter.org/index.php/nmrc-blog/161-preparing-mentors-to-work-with-native-youth.html>
[9] <http://www.sprc.org/comprehensive-approach/social-connectedness>
[10] <http://www.sprc.org/effective-prevention/comprehensive-approach>

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