

# American Indian spiritual beliefs influential in spurring youth to avoid drugs and alcohol

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New research indicates that urban American Indian youth who follow American Indian traditional spiritual beliefs are less likely to use drugs and alcohol. Arizona State University social scientists will present their findings at the 107th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association.

The study, "Spirituality and Religion: Intertwined Protective Factors for Substance Use Among Urban American Indian Youth," was recently published in *The American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse*. The authors are: Stephen Kulis, the study's principal investigator and ASU School of Social and Family Dynamics professor; David R. Hodge, ASU School of Social Work associate professor; Stephanie L. Ayers, ASU Southwest Interdisciplinary Research Center associate director of research; Eddie F. Brown, ASU American Indian Studies professor and American Indian Policy Institute executive director; and Flavio F. Marsiglia, ASU School of Social Work professor.

"Most American Indians now live in cities rather than tribal communities. Our study is one of the few to address the role of spirituality and religion among urban Native youth, recognizing the unique histories of cultural integration that characterize today's urban American Indian communities and the complex belief systems and practices that sustain them in the [urban landscape](#)," Kulis said.

Among the general American Indian youth population, higher rates of substance (both drug and alcohol) abuse are reported than among their

non-American Indian counterparts. They also are more likely to use heavier amounts, initiate substance use earlier, and have more severe consequences from substance use, according to past research.

[American Indians](#) typically do not separate spirituality from other areas of their lives, making it a complex, cultural and intertwined aspect of their daily existence.

Researchers found that adherence to American Indian beliefs was the strongest predictor of anti-drug attitudes, norms, and expectations. Concerning substance use, aspects of spirituality and religion associated with lower levels of use were affiliation with the Native American Church and following Christian beliefs.

Data for the study were collected from American Indian students enrolled in five urban middle schools within a large southwestern city in 2009. The average age of the 123 respondents was 12.6 years old.

Most of the study respondents expressed strong anti-drug and alcohol beliefs, with the majority stating that they "definitely would not" use alcohol, cigarettes, or marijuana if given an opportunity (55 percent) and that it was "definitely not okay" for students their age to use those substances.

Respondents also felt that their parents (78 percent) and grandparents (69 percent) would be "very angry" if they used drugs or [alcohol](#) and 51 percent stated they were "very sure" that they would reject any substance offers.

Also notable was that about half (53 percent) had resisted offers of drugs in the past 30 days.

Spirituality was reflected as an important aspect in students' lives. More

than 80 percent of respondents said that spirituality held some importance to them and was part of their lives. Seventy-nine percent of the students felt it was "somewhat" or "very important" to follow traditional American Indian beliefs and about half felt it was important to follow Christian beliefs.

However, a general sense of spirituality that did not refer specifically to American Indian traditions, beliefs, or culture was not found to be a deterrent against substance use.

"Rituals and ceremonies have helped American Indian communities adapt to change, integrate elements of different tribes, infuse aspects of Western organized religions, and make them their own," according to the paper.

In addition, the paper states that possessing a feeling of belonging to traditions from both American Indian and Christian cultures may foster integration of the two worlds in which urban American Indian youth live.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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