HIV Prevention through Land-Based Retreats with Northern and Indigenous Youth in the Northwest Territories

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What we know from other research:

STI rates in NWT are more than seven times higher than the Canadian average and youth aged 15-24 are most affected.[1]

Stigma, discrimination, and mistrust in healthcare are barriers for Indigenous peoples accessing sexual health services.[2]

Health-enabling environments consider the many interconnected factors that can help youth to increase their opportunities for sexual health and HIV prevention.[3]

There is a growing movement toward accepting Indigenous ways of knowing and being, strengths, and resiliencies as pathways to sexual health and wellbeing for Indigenous youth.[4]

Key Terms

Land-based: Programs that emphasize connection to Land

Sexual health: physical, mental, emotional, and social wellbeing as it relates to sexuality

Safer sex efficacy (SSE): feeling confident about making safer sexual choices

STI: sexually transmitted infection

HIV: human immunodeficiency virus

Our research question:

How can land-based Peer Leader Retreats build HIV prevention enabling environments among Northern and Indigenous youth?

How we conducted this research:

- Fostering Open eXpression among Youth (FOXY), a Northern and Indigenous youth organization in the NWT, held Retreats with youth aged 13-17
- Retreats use land-based approaches and intergenerational learning to foster reconnection to community, culture, and self through activities including storytelling, ceremonies, swimming, hiking, and traditional Northern games
- Retreats addressed HIV/STIs, safer sex, and gender equity
- Before and after retreats, 277 participants completed surveys
- After retreats, 252 participants engaged in focus groups

Key Findings:

Retreats significantly improved HIV/STI knowledge.

(Score increases were lower for Indigenous participants)

Retreats significantly improved safer sex efficacy for:

- Cisgender men and women (but not gender diverse individuals)
- Food-secure persons (but not food-insecure persons)
- Sexually diverse and heterosexual persons
- Youth who participated for the first, second, or third time

Focus group participants expressed improvements with:

- Confidence to integrate new knowledge and skills with their own sexual practices
- Awareness of how to recognize, avoid, and leave un/healthy relationships
- Using healthy emotional regulation coping mechanisms
- Comfort to discuss sex with partners, including consent and boundaries

Aspects of the Retreats that were youth-friendly and facilitated sexual health education:

Fun ways of learning | Sex-positive, non-judgemental approach | Learning through role modeling

Discussion

- Land-based Retreats have important potential for promoting sexual wellbeing with Northern and Indigenous youth
- As Indigenous participants had lower score increases in STI/HIV knowledge, there may be a need to explore how to tailor Retreats to better integrate their experiences and worldviews
- Higher scores for those who previously attended a workshop suggests the benefit of continued learning and reinforcement to practice skills

Recommendations

- Incorporate land-based retreat approaches in HIV and STI prevention strategies to enhance sexual wellbeing with Northern and Indigenous youth and their communities
- Address larger social determinants of health, such as poverty

References

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