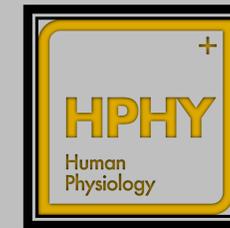




The Alaska Mental Health Enabling Act: The Treatment of Alaskan Natives in Mental Health Policy

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Introduction

The Alaska Mental Health Enabling Act (AMHEA) of 1956 serves as a case study for addressing access to health care services, especially for Native Alaskans. Prior to the passage of the AMHEA, Morningside Psychiatric Hospital in Portland, Oregon, offered inpatient mental health services for Alaskan Natives and other residents of the Pacific Northwest. In the first half of the 20th century, few psychiatric services were available in the then-territory of Alaska. In my thesis research, I analyze the AMHEA as a historical case study for mental health care for Native Alaskans, and for other racial/ethnic groups in the U.S.

Research Question

The overarching goal of looking at the Alaska Mental Health Enabling Act is to analyze how mental health policy has impacted native communities historically. Through this we can look at how the policy changes health care and other aspects of people's lives. The aim of this research is to analyze the quality and accessibility of care for the Native Alaskans as Alaska Mental Health Enabling Act intended.

Methods

- Morningside hospital data was gathered in the University of Oregon Special Collections DeWitt Burkes papers
- An interview was conducted (February 2021) with a prominent lawyer regarding the AMHEA.
- Research online further brought light onto the stories of the Alaskan native people regarding Morningside and their mental health care.
- Ethnographic books
- Lastly, the court hearings and legal proceedings that followed the passing of the AMHEA found on law data bases.



University of Oregon Libraries. (n.d.). <https://library.uoregon.edu/special-collections>.

Result 1

- Native persons also have a life expectancy of five years less than other Americans.
- On top of the other systemic disparities they face, native Indians and Alaskans die at higher rates than other Americans from diseases such as, chronic liver disease, diabetes, assault, and chronic lower respiratory disease.
- Suicide rates among native persons are two times as high as any other race in the United States.

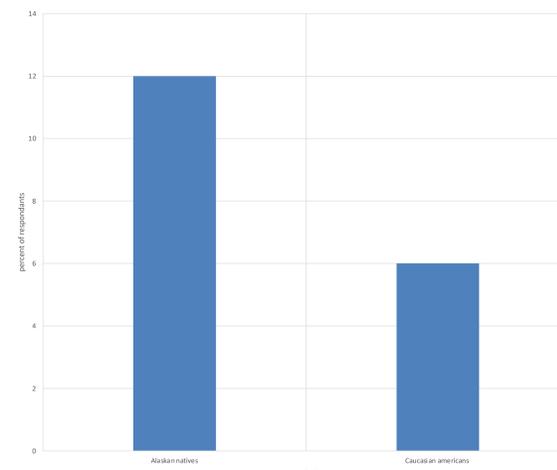


Figure 1: In a survey done by the CDC Alaskan Natives and Caucasian Americans responded to the question is “everything is an effort.”

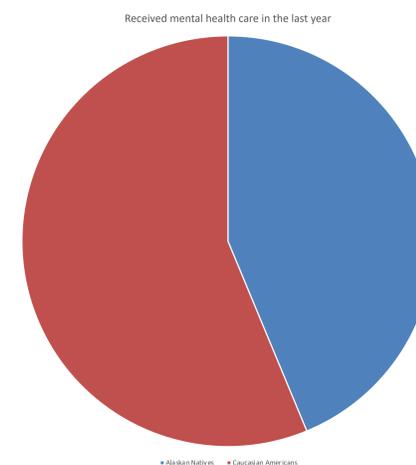


Figure 2: Percent of Alaskan Natives versus Caucasian Americans that received mental health care in the last year.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019, March 5). *Suicides Among American Indian/Alaska Natives - National Violent Death Reporting System, 18 States, 2003–2014*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/67/wr/mm6708a1.htm>.

Result 2

- Before the AMHEA patients were sent to Morningside hospital in Oregon. Most of these patients never returned home to Alaska. The creation of the Alaska Psychiatric Institute from the funds of the AMHEA allowed Alaskan natives to stay in state to receive mental health care, improving outcomes of treatment.
- API and the AMHEA have not solved all the problems. Colonization of this land brought many land disputes and even diseases. Colonization breeds the lack of respect for native Alaskans and has carried over into today where natives fall victim to mental health disparities.
- Very little attention has been paid to cultural competency in American policy. With such a high population of native Alaskans being admitted to the psychiatric facilities, these facilities should provide simple courtesies such as the customs surrounding mealtime and food in order to make the patients feel comfortable while they are trying to heal.
- The process by which the AMHEA selects their land is problematic. The AMHEA did not allow native tribes to select land the act had previously attained because of the method of patenting. This caused an uproar and was followed by lawsuits which eventually allowed the tribes to regain this land.

Conclusions

- The AMHEA is a stand alone policy that had many positives and negatives.
- Having instate mental health care assessable to native persons is dire to the outcomes of their treatment.
- Mental health Policy in the United States needs to outline cultural competencies and incorporate the needs of native cultures into the language.
- Policy and law in the United States creates an environment within health care and as a result it is important for policy itself to create equality from the ground up.
- Colonization is the root of the mistrust in westernized health care which effects Native Alaskans to this day.
- Federal and state policies often take advantage of native persons not only in health care setting but also by claiming native land, causing more distrust in the policies put in place to benefit them.



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