



# NATIVE STRONG

THE SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH OF TYPE 2 DIABETES AND OBESITY

A RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Native American communities have and continue to build strong and thriving communities and governments, however many continue to struggle with challenges like high unemployment rates, low graduation rates, lack of access to healthy food and little access to quality health care, to name a few. Unfortunately, Native American people are all too aware of these systemic challenges in their community, but often have little voice or input within the research and public health community when it comes to the discussion of the social determinants of health in addressing childhood obesity within Native American communities.

Multiple years of research have made clear that Native American children are among the most likely to be obese and overweight and are at high risk for developing type 2 diabetes. What is less clear are the complex causes behind this growing epidemic and the culturally appropriate and effective ways to address the causes and improve the health for Native American children. In other words, beyond eating more vegetables or getting in more exercise, what are the deeper causes making our children and communities obese and sick?

This research project aims to better understand these issues by examining the social determinants of health of childhood obesity and type 2 diabetes among Native American people from a Native/Indigenous perspective. Using this perspective, this paper considers the unique indigenous factors (i.e. historical trauma, self determination, cultural activities, etc.) in better understanding the role and impact of the social determinants of health among Native people. The goal of this research project is to: 1) provide a research framework to guide the NB3 Foundation's approach to addressing childhood obesity in Native communities, 2) begin to analyze the current infrastructure for collecting available public data and 3) investigate the gaps and issues with data collection, access and dissemination.

***Social determinants of health are the circumstances in which people are born, grow up, live, work and age, and the systems put in place to deal with illness. These circumstances are in turn shaped by a wider set of forces, economics, social policies, and politics. – World Health Organization, 2014.***

# REALITIES OF TYPE 2 DIABETES AND OBESITY AMONG NATIVE CHILDREN AND YOUTH

- American Indians and Alaskan Natives ages 10-20 had the highest risk of developing type 2 diabetes when compared with other racial/ethnic groups (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014).
- A 2002 study using Indian Health Service data demonstrated that the number of Native American youth diagnosed with diabetes increased by 71% and prevalence increased by 46% between 1990 and 1998; prevalence in the general population increased by only 14% (Acton, Rios Burrows, Moore, Querec, Geiss, & Engelgau, 2002).
- The Urban Indian Health Commission found in 2007 that urban American Indian youth were two to three times as likely as their peers in the general population to either be obese or at risk of becoming obese (Urban Indian Health Commission, 2007).

## SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

- Social determinants of health (SDOH) are “the circumstances in which people are born, grow up, live, work and age, and the systems put in place to deal with illness. These circumstances are in turn shaped by a wider set of forces: economics, social policies, and politics” (World Health Organization, 2014)
- Determinants related to type 2 diabetes and obesity include:
  - *Poverty and family socioeconomic status*
  - *Educational attainment and access to education*
  - *Childhood obesity*
  - *A family history of type 2 diabetes*
  - *Lack of access to medical care*
  - *Lack of exercise and safe spaces to exercise*
  - *The ability to purchase high quality and poor diet*
  - *Increased stress and unstable living conditions*
  - *Participation in cultural activities and heritage*
  - *Historical trauma*
  - *Racism and Social Exclusion*
  - *Self-Determination/Autonomy*

## HEALTH FROM AN INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVE

- Health from an indigenous perspective incorporates ideas of life balance, living in harmony with others and the land, as well as one’s connection to food in creating or providing it (King, Smith, & Gracey, 2009). It also considers one’s relationship within a community as well as an individual’s physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health (King, Smith, & Gracey, 2009). This perspective connects well with the social determinants of health model.
- Indigenous determinants to be considered for this research project include:
  - *Self-determination/autonomy*
  - *Access and utilization of traditional lands*
  - *The impact of historical trauma*
  - *Experience of race-based social exclusion*

## **THE CHALLENGE OF DATA FOR NATIVE AMERICANS**

- The lack of available data specifically on Native American populations--due to the relatively small size of the American Indian and Alaska Native populations in the US, these groups are rarely included in a large enough proportion within a sample to produce valid and useful statistics for their population. This limits the number of studies Native Americans are included in and creates a significant challenge for finding data on this population.
- The universal applicability of qualitative research-- Many of the studies reviewed and cited in this framework use qualitative research methods. While qualitative research provides a greater understanding of the unique social and cultural dynamics of a particular community and adds additional evidence to the body of research, the methodological limitations associated with qualitative research make any findings not universally applicable.

This paper is providing the NB3 Foundation an approach and research framework to better understand the impact and role of the SDOH in addressing childhood obesity among Native American children. The full report is outlined into three key sections. The first section provides background information on the SDOH model and indigenous determinants of health and a rationale for utilizing this model to analyze the root causes of type 2 diabetes and obesity among Native American children and youth. The second section provides a detailed description of the study design, including research questions, the process for selecting specific social determinant indicators and associated data. The last section provides the expected limitations and planned outcomes of this research.

This document provides a baseline of information on the SDOH and serves as a model for the NB3 Foundation's research moving forward. Using this paper as a framework, NB3 Foundation intends to compile the data on selected SDOH indicators and publish several briefing and issue papers. These papers will be available on the NB3 Foundation website and in other forms with the goal of educating the community, foundations, Tribal Leaders, advocates and policy makers. These papers will include:

- Five (5) state (NM, AZ, OK, MN, WI) fact sheets, 1-1.5 pages, on the tribes within each state, state level data and appropriate social

determinant indicators.

- Six (6) fact sheets, 1-2 pages, on specific SDOH indicators and how they apply in Indian Country, including examples of statewide, tribal and national data.
- Summary report of our findings

As far as we know this is one of few research projects being conducted with a Native/ Indigenous lens. As a result, it is our hope that this research will provide an initial framework and highlight data indicators for communities to consider in addressing childhood obesity and improving the health of their children. Underlying root causes can help communities develop a clearer picture of the driving causes behind childhood obesity and type 2 diabetes and help communities be strategic in addressing them. In addition, this research has the opportunity to highlight the challenges in collecting Native American-specific data and to advocate for improved sources of data to better understand the realities of health and life for Native Americans.

# ABOUT THE NOTAH BEGAY III FOUNDATION

Notah Begay III (NB3) Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, is the only national Native American nonprofit organization solely dedicated to reversing Native American childhood obesity and type-2 diabetes. NB3 Foundation is setting a national standard for investing in evidence-based, community-driven and culturally relevant programs that prevent childhood obesity and type 2 diabetes, ensuring healthy futures for Native American children and their communities.

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