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Truth, Healing, and Health: Protecting Tribal Communities

*California is home to a rich diversity of Native American Tribes whose cultures, traditions, and leadership continue to strengthen the state. **Leading with truth means acknowledging the disproportionate impact of the commercial tobacco and nicotine industry on American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities while honoring the sacred role of traditional tobacco.** By supporting Tribal leadership and culturally grounded prevention efforts, California can confront the nicotine crisis and advance healthier futures for Tribal communities.*

- AI/AN youth also report higher rates of e-cigarette use (about 15.5%) compared with approximately 7.8% among all high school students nationally.⁽¹⁾
- In California, AI/AN adults continue to experience disproportionately high rates of commercial tobacco use despite statewide declines in smoking, contributing to persistent health disparities.⁽²⁾
- Substance use disorder (SUD) treatment options that lack alignment with Indigenous worldviews are a significant barrier to participation among American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities. Research shows that AI/AN peoples not only seek greater access to care, but also strongly prefer services that incorporate culturally grounded practices, such as sweat lodges, drumming, and other traditional healing approaches. At the same time, while effective SUD treatments are essential to reducing health disparities and advancing health equity in Native communities, AI/AN populations have been historically underrepresented in treatment research. This underrepresentation is due in part to a legacy of research ethics violations and misrepresentation, which has contributed to a deep and ongoing distrust of researchers.⁽³⁾





- In 2024, 16.3% of American Indian middle and high school students reported using tobacco products, double the national average of 8.1% among middle and high school students.⁽⁴⁾
- In order to develop effective policy responses to reduce marked health inequities among the AIAN population and other racial/ethnic groups, a comprehensive examination of health and socioeconomic challenges faced by the Native American population, including tribal communities, is urgently needed.⁽⁵⁾
- Tobacco-related diseases like cardiovascular disease and lung cancer are the leading causes of death among American Indians/Alaska Natives.⁽⁶⁾
- Commercial tobacco use has eroded sacred practices and community cohesion by replacing traditional tobacco in ceremonial use and uses appropriating symbols and Tribal imagery (e.g. Natural American Spirits brand depicts an Indian smoking a pipe).^(7, 8)

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