



Going Off to Grow Strong: Resilience in an Aboriginal Community

What is this research about?

Aullak, sangilivallianguinnatuk: Going off, growing strong is an action-oriented, solutions-driven research program that represents an enhancement of community freezer initiatives in Nunatsiavut (northern Labrador) for improved youth mental health, nutrition and intergenerational skills transmission. Local communities manage and evaluate the program with research support from Memorial and Trent universities.

The program operates in Nain and Hopedale where at-risk youth participants (ages 14-21) are selected based on needs and anticipated benefits from building relationships with positive adult role models in the community (e.g., harvesters, elders). Experienced and trusted harvesters take the youth out on the land, in pairs and as a group, to teach them how to hunt, fish, collect firewood, navigate on the land, and prepare wild foods. There is also a community-centred dimension to the program in which participants, for instance, prepare wild foods for the community freezer and distribute it to elders.

What did the researchers do?

With respect to the youth program evaluation specifically, researchers developed a youth-orientated participatory approach, because they are primarily interested in evaluating whether time spent on the land and building relationships with harvesters and others in the community is enhancing the resiliency of community youth to better cope with local social, ecological, and cultural changes. Change in resiliency is being

What you need to know:

Similar to other Inuit regions across the Canadian Arctic, Nunatsiavut has a vibrant population of young adults and youth. Over the past 10-15 years, however, an increasing number of young people in Nunatsiavut have begun to struggle with mental health and wellbeing. One of the results of this is that Nain has the highest suicide rate among all Nunatsiavut communities and one of the highest rates across the Canadian North. Mental health and addictions counsellors in Nunatsiavut reported that for most young people who are struggling with mental health and addictions in the community, *going off* (i.e. trips on the land and sea ice) is one of the healthiest behaviour modifications that they would like to increase, if given the opportunity.

Over the last decade there has been a growing body of work focused on the impacts of climate change on human communities across the Arctic. These climate and environmental changes impact directly on human health by making safe navigation over ice and snow increasingly difficult, thereby decreasing available opportunities for subsistence activities and eroding food security. Country foods are an important source of caloric intake and consequently, community freezers as a means to maintain a regular supply of country food have been identified as a possible coping mechanism for this food insecurity.

measured using indicators of mental health, coping skills, and social connections. Researchers are also interested in learning and attitudinal outcomes,

such as self-reported improvement in harvesting and navigational skills on the land as well as any changes in preferences by program youth for country foods.

What did the researchers find?

There are early indications that the program is improving the resilience (i.e., mental health, coping, and social/environmental connectivity) of youth participants. There are observed improvements in mood affect, self-confidence, and inter-personal skills. Youth are reporting enhanced appreciation for traditional foods and the land skills necessary to obtain them. Most importantly, in contrast to the year prior to the program start when there were 7 school-age male suicides in Nain, since the program implementation there have been no school-age male suicides. Full program evaluation took place in 2013 and results will be available later this year.

How can you use this research?

Our research publication describes the operational framework of the *Going off, growing strong* program and offers a critical perspective on community-based health interventions. Communities can use this information to explore how similar programs might be adapted to their specific needs. Policy experts can see the initial and immediate positive impacts of this innovative program and should consider how such a program might be mainstreamed into existing community services and upscaled to address similar mental health issues in Aboriginal communities across Canada.

About the Researchers

Dr. Rachel Hirsch spent her year-long post-doctoral fellowship in Nain, working alongside the *Going off, growing strong* team to document program operation and development and design evaluation and reflection tools.

Dorothy Angnatok is the program coordinator for

Going off, growing strong and is the main contact for youth in the program.

Carla Pamak is Research Advisor for the Nunatsiavut Government in Nain.

Tom Sheldon is the Director of the Environment Division in the Nunatsiavut Government, through which *Going off, growing strong* is managed.

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