

Article

Community Strengths That Support Rural Alaska Native Youth: “They’re There for One Another”

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Abstract

This paper describes Alaska Native youth-identified community strengths that support young people’s well-being. Youth from three rural Alaska communities were engaged by the research team in digital storytelling and photovoice to explore their perspectives on what their communities were already undertaking to support youth. Each youth participant was then invited to complete an interview, which was then transcribed, coded, and qualitatively analyzed by the research team leads. The community strengths described by young people align with several community-level protective factors identified in a parent study as associated with reduced risk of youth suicide. Findings illustrate that protective communities help young people build and maintain supportive relationships with community members, family, and peers, and promote their connection to their culture, including by providing opportunities to learn their language, history, and culture; to be out on the land hunting and fishing; and to practice traditional ceremonies and spirituality. Communities implementing initiatives that support these factors may protect young people from youth suicide.

Keywords: American Indian/Alaska Native; suicide prevention; community-level protective factors; community resilience; Indigenous; Indigenist; CBPR; mixed methods

1. Introduction

This research focuses on community strengths that promote protection from youth suicide in Indigenous communities, flipping the script on suicide prevention in ways that may be more effective and sustainable. Although there are some key exceptions, most of the research on preventing suicide among Indigenous youth (including in North America, Australia, and New Zealand) has focused on identifying individual-level factors correlated with suicide risk (Wexler et al. 2015; Clifford et al. 2013; Harlow et al. 2014). This line of research has had limited impact on reducing suicide, evidenced by the continued rising disproportionate rates of Indigenous suicide (Nguyen et al. 2023).

Indigenous youth nationwide experience disproportionate rates of suicide, with a rate of 47.6 per 100,000 among AI/AN youth 18–24, as compared to 18 per 100,000 among



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White youth in 2019–2023 ([National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, CDC 2025](#)). Alaska Native youth in particular are burdened by high rates of youth suicide, with a rate of 175.4 per 100,000 among youth aged 18–24 ([National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, CDC 2025](#)). Due to small population sizes, Alaska Native youth rates are calculated from small denominators and multi-year aggregations but consistently demonstrate disproportionate suicide mortality when compared to national averages or statewide rates among other racial/ethnic groups.

Focusing on individual-level risk potentially ignores fundamental drivers of Indigenous youth suicide, including colonization and structural violence (e.g., [Evans-Campbell 2008](#); [Brave Heart and DeBruyn 1998](#)). Programs of research that do not take drivers such as these into account risk reproducing and perpetuating the harms of colonization and structural racism and may further adversely affect the health and well-being of marginalized Indigenous youth ([Bell et al. 2021](#); [Burns et al. 2021](#); [Wexler et al. 2015](#)).

Effective suicide prevention in Indigenous communities must consider that people live within communities that shape individuals' senses of self and cultural continuity. In a widely cited paper, [Chandler and Lalonde \(1998, p. 191\)](#) described “cultural continuity as a hedge against suicide,” emphasizing that culture is a way for young people to find coherence within their identity-making processes. Since time immemorial, Indigenous cultures and communities have protected children from harm, offering shared understandings, purpose, and opportunities to be healthy and thrive ([Ayunerak et al. 2014](#)). These systems continue to contribute to the protection and resilience of young Indigenous people ([Rasmus et al. 2019](#)).

In this context, this study sought to better understand how protective relationships, cultural systems, and everyday processes are already working within communities to support young people's well-being. By focusing on strengths and performing research that perpetuates self-determination, this study is using an Indigenist research approach. Indigenist research is decolonizing, culturally appropriate, prioritizes Indigenous ways of knowing and being, and directly benefits the communities that participate ([Rix et al. 2018](#); [Denzin et al. 2008](#); [Wilson 2001](#); [Smith 2012](#)). This project was led by Indigenous researchers in strong partnership with community members, and we (the project team) employed the Indigenous methodology of developing relationships ([Mbah et al. 2023](#); [Ullrich 2019](#)) and centering youth voices through storytelling ([Cueva et al. 2013](#)). This project began due to requests by Indigenous leadership on the Executive Advisory Committee (EAC) and Research Steering Committee (RSC) to engage directly with young people to hear their perspectives.

The parent award for this study interviewed adult community members nominated for their knowledge about resources for youth in their community in order to investigate community-level factors associated with protection from youth suicide in 65 rural communities across the three regions that experienced the highest suicide rates in Alaska. These communities were geographically remote, with the majority of Alaska Native peoples. Community populations ranged from 100 to 1800 people, and food systems were heavily integrated with local fish, birds, and land and marine mammals. These communities are separated from Alaska's road system by hundreds of miles and can only access other communities by small plane, boat in the summer, or snowmachine in the winter. Major cultural linguistic groups included Inupiaq, Yup'ik, Cup'ik, and Dene (Athabaskan) peoples. The EAC and RSC requested that the parent study engage directly with youth to hear their perspectives, so this administrative supplement was requested in alignment with their guidance. In this supplemental award, our research team worked with youth in one highly protective community in each of the three participating regions to learn directly from young people how they felt their communities were supporting youth.

2. Results

While young people talked about specific activities and practices that they felt their communities were engaging in that made youth feel protected, youth interviews consistently emphasized the relational processes that resulted from these activities that fostered well-being. For example, activities like talking with Elders and being a part of community-wide celebrations were opportunities for youth to feel belonging, shared responsibility, intergenerational care, and cultural affirmation. Findings are therefore presented to illuminate how community practices work to protect young people, rather than merely what practices exist.

The youth transcripts were coded independently by Co-PIs Cueva and Ullrich, who then came to a consensus on the most prevalent themes. Dedoose allowed researchers to see the number of times a code was applied across all transcripts to help determine basic, organizing, and global themes. Identified themes are organized in Table 1. Basic thematic codes were nested under organizing or global thematic codes. What emerged was an understanding that the basic themes typically demonstrated the activities that communities do to support young people's well-being, and the organizing themes represented the relationships that these activities can help develop. The global themes of Supportive Relationships and Connection to Culture represent the hoped-for or achieved relational outcomes for young people as a result of supportive community activities that included engagement with family, other youth, community, land and animals, spirituality, and language.

Table 1. Application of thematic codes.

Global Themes	Supportive Relationships	Connection to Culture
Organizing Themes	Connection to Community	Connection to Land and Animals
	Connection to Other Youth	Connection to Spirituality
	Connection to Family	Connection to Language
Basic Themes	Engaging Young People in Activities	Teaching Community History and Culture
	School Activities	Continuing Indigenous Ceremonies
	Community Gatherings	Subsistence
	Connecting through Story	Elders Sharing Knowledge
	We Help Each Other	

While both global themes emphasize the importance of relationships/connections, youth talked specifically about relationships with other people that developed and were sustained through school activities, community gatherings, etc., which we have organized into the global theme of "Supportive Relationships." Young people also spoke about their deep cultural connections to ancestral and continuing ways of living and being, including relationships with the land, language, animals, and other traditional ways of life, which we have categorized as "Connection to Culture." There is overlap between the two global themes, with both emphasizing connectedness, but youth distinctions arise between the two as one emphasizes activities that promote person-to-person relationships, while the other speaks to underlying values and ways of being.

Supportive Relationships and *Connection to Culture* emerged as two global themes. The two lead researchers developed a Becoming As Whole As You Are model (see Figure 1), visualizing the findings of how interviewed youth felt that their communities supported

young people, which was shared for comments/revisions at a gathering of community members, youth, and key stakeholders in the project.

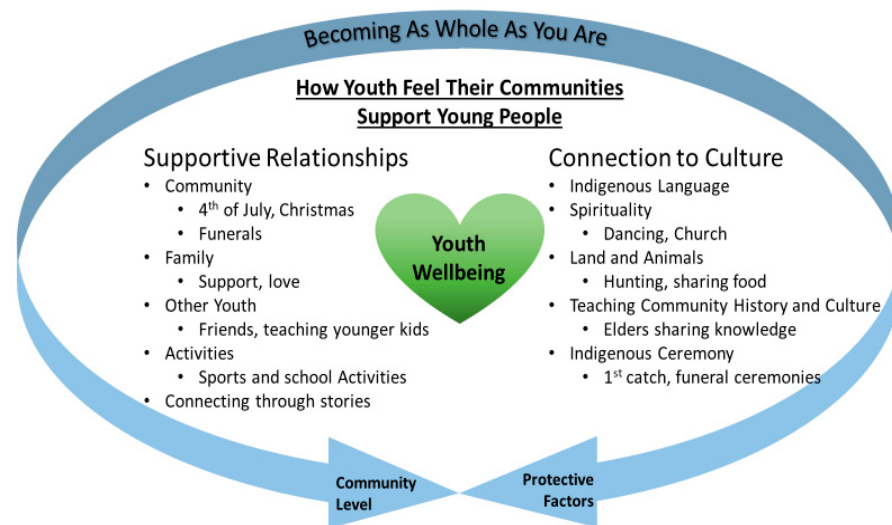


Figure 1. The *Becoming As Whole As You Are* model.

The figure lists the two global themes, as well as the organizing themes or basic themes that emerged from the transcript coding process. Each organizing theme is included below, as well as representative quotes to allow the young people's voices to speak for themselves.

2.1. Supportive Relationships

The global theme of *Supportive Relationships* (see Table 2) included organizing themes of community, family, other youth, activities, and connecting through stories. The theme of community included community-wide activities, ceremonies, and gatherings as important to the youth's sense of well-being and belonging, as well as describing that a sense of community unity, cooperation, and inclusion was beneficial. Youth emphasized that community gatherings functioned as predictable, shared moments of collective presence, reinforcing a sense of belonging, regardless of cultural origin or adaptation of the specific event. Youth discussed the impact of family support on young people, including family being present at activities important to youth. Young people talked about peer support systems as important ways to maintain connection and well-being. Youth talked about the role of activities as important to keeping busy and having something to do, as well as a venue where community members showed their support. Young people shared how hearing stories from Elders and other adults helped them to feel connected both to their culture and the generations that came before them.

Table 2. Representative quotes illustrating the global theme "Supportive Relationships".

Organizing Theme	Representative Quotes
Community	"Have gatherings, it's better to go through it together than alone. Like after funerals we'll have popups, so we'll go to eat with the family and talk with the family so they're not by themselves. To me, I feel that it's the burial that helps with coping. We're all there helping with the burial, laying him or her to rest. Getting that weight off your shoulders, and we're all doing it together."
	"It helps me feel well because the community is one—so there's not really that group over there and this group over here, these groups arguing with one another. They're there for one another. Give you that feeling about being one and being a part of the community too."

Table 2. Cont.

Organizing Theme	Representative Quotes
Family	<i>"I've observed the parents and I've observed the children and how they react and I think overall they're doing a good job. Like going to school events, like the kids have school events and awards and their posters and they're really happy when their parents attend. I think that really helps the children."</i>
Other Youth	<i>"Maybe just staying connected. Just like with friends, they can help each other. Just being there."</i>
Activities	<i>"People in our community really support the kids that do sports. I feel like parents and community members like to come to all the events and encourage them to do the best in all the sports"</i>
Connecting Through Stories	<i>"In bicultural they taught us that whenever you catch a seal and take some of the water from the ocean and pour it down the mouth. You give it not really an offering but it helps them not get mad. Before our old librarian retired, she told us stories and whatnot about Alaska like [name] she told us there's a giant and I forgot what happened but he fell and his arm stayed up like that. If you go around to any of the Elders and ask them to tell you the stories I'm sure they'll tell you."</i> <i>"It gives me opportunities to have that conversation with lots of people. They usually tell stories, hunting stories, Elders who passed or people who passed, those kind of stories."</i>

2.2. Connection to Culture

The second global theme identified was *Connection to Culture*. While this theme intersected with *Supportive Relationships*, young people discussed several specific aspects of culture that were included in the organizing themes of indigenous language, spirituality, land and animals, teaching community history and culture, and indigenous ceremony. Each organizing theme is listed below in Table 3 along with representative quotes. We specifically asked young people about language, and many shared that while there were some opportunities to learn, they largely did not speak or understand their traditional languages. Young people discussed both a close relationship to their community's religion as well as feeling a spiritual sense of calm and belonging when being out on the land. Young people also discussed their connection to the land and animals as both places for recreation and calming, as well as a source of subsistence foods and traditional practices, in addition to feeling a responsibility for the land. In their interviews, youth shared that they learned from their Elders, with several noting the integration of teachings from Elders in a school setting, as well as their respect for Elders and their role in providing youth instruction on ways of life.

Table 3. Representative quotes illustrating the global theme "Connection to Culture".

Organizing Theme	Representative Quotes
Indigenous Language	<i>"My gram tries to talk to people in our language but she stopped because people don't understand her anymore, but in bilingual we learn some, but I don't really understand it."</i> <i>"We have teachers, like our bilingual teacher and our Elders and our grandparents, they teach us the language and what it means, like our [cultural] songs."</i>

Table 3. Cont.

Organizing Theme	Representative Quotes
Spirituality	<i>“Going to church. I’m not talking about the physical church. Like when you’re with a group of people you’re just bonding. You’re just talking about anything. What I really enjoy is when people talk about the Lord. It really makes me feel like I’m being more of myself. It brings out me . . . where I can truly be myself. We’re part of the same religion. Where I feel most connected is in a group like that, mainly that’s in the church building, singing gospel and hearing them preach the word, just where I feel at my best.”</i> <i>“When I go out on the water in the ocean. Might have to go out there and feel for yourself. Very peaceful.”</i>
Land and Animals	<i>“When a lot of people catch a lot of moose or a lot of geese and share it. We also got oogruk and that was very delicious. My family got a bunch of moose this year and we were sharing it downtown and uptown.”</i> <i>“Our school will have us go pick berries, sled, pick up trash, and spend time in the country. Like on earth day we go pick up trash. Taking care of the land that takes care of us.”</i>
Teaching Community History and Culture	<i>“Sometimes at our school they’d ask an Elder to come up and talk about anything. They’d bring Elders and there’d be a bunch of us. Or like the whole high school would be in one room while the Elder speaks and talks. Like when they were younger, how they respect, what they would do, like make stuff, or go hunting. They do it like once a month. Different Elders.”</i> Youth also talked about their respect for Elders and their role in providing instruction on ways of life: <i>“I feel like the older people that have been there—they do teach us. They give us examples of how to treat someone or what not to do. Not to throw any hate on the community and the Elders they really do support us.”</i>
Indigenous Ceremony	<i>“There’s a dance group that connects young people to ceremonies.”</i> <i>“They kind of do it within themselves or their families. If some 15-year-old goes out and catches their first caribou, as soon as they bring it home, they give it to an elder, the whole thing. They talk about it a lot, Facebook is like big around here. Everyone will know within a week. They’ll say thank you for providing, thank you for giving this Elder some meat. They really appreciate what everyone does.”</i>

3. Discussion

This study represents a novel strengths-based approach to exploring youth-identified community-level protective factors. These findings both augment and can be compared with the results from the larger ANCRS, where adults were interviewed about community-level protective factors for youth. The most frequently discussed themes for young people in our interviews were subsistence, teaching community history and culture, engaging young people in opportunities, and connection to spirituality. While many young people did not respond directly to our prompts on spirituality, several discussed Indigenous ceremonies and the central role of church gatherings and services in their own and their community’s lives. Young people did not specifically discuss governing responsibly or governing responsively as a community strength in their interviews. This could be because the young people may not have participated in Tribal governance activities. However, some youth mentioned school government, and the school environment emerged as a central hub of young people’s connection with community strengths and activities, including traditional cultural practices such as opportunities for language learning. Young people frequently brought up the importance of community support, family, and peer connections, which was an unexpected finding in relation to the ANCRS study. When communities host gatherings, it helps young people feel a sense of closeness within multiple relationships

that exist in the community. Communities foster the feeling that people are there to help each other and that the community is stronger and better together as a whole. Youth need the availability of community activities and gatherings to nurture their supportive relationships and connection to culture. When these protective factors and activities exist, this helps young people *become as whole as they are*, which may provide key direction for suicide prevention efforts in the future.

The interviewed youth represent a handful of young people from one community with unique cultural, historical, and social contexts in each of the three participating regions, and the findings may not be generalizable to all youth in the regions. The interview prompts were informed by the categories of protective factors identified in the parent study, which may have shaped the types of responses elicited from interviewed youth. However, youth responses nonetheless emphasized specific local processes that young people felt contributed to their well-being. The findings and the Becoming As Whole As You Are model (Figure 1) created out of these findings were member checked with a group of youth, community members, and key stakeholders but may not necessarily be representative of all community members' understandings of the findings. This study was conducted with three highly protective communities with primarily Inupiat and Yupiit individuals; however, there is great diversity within the participating regions and cultures, and these findings may consequently not be generalizable or representative.

Sometimes, when young people were asked about specific ways that their community provided support, they talked about the ways those supports were not provided. For example, in a question about what some of their hopes and dreams were for their community, some of the young people mentioned how they would like to see less bullying or violence and more sobriety among community members. We heard from young people who lost friends or family members to suicide and how they wanted this to be talked about so support could be provided to help process the grief they were experiencing. While these challenges were not the focus of this study, we feel it is important for the broader community to be aware of the struggles that young people are experiencing so that awareness can lead to action. Some of the actions that communities might consider could be linked to the ideas and solutions that young people expressed as helpful ways of coping. Young people talked about ways of coping through their connections to Elders, talking with other youth, having adults reach out to ask if they needed help or connection, and providing encouragement, sharing food as comfort, keeping busy, and having opportunities to talk with safe adults. As one young person said,

"I feel like the older people that have been there- they do teach us. They give us examples of how to treat someone or what not to do. Not to throw any hate on the community and the Elders really do support us."

4. Materials and Methods

This research project was part of a larger community-based participatory research study called the Alaska Native Community Resilience Study (ANCRS), focused on community-level protective factors that prevent youth suicide. ANCRS was led by an Executive Advisory Committee (EAC) of Alaska Native leaders from around the state, a Research Steering Committee (RSC) of scholars and community members from the Northwest Arctic, Bering Strait, and Yukon-Kuskokwim regions, and an internal leadership team composed of Indigenous and non-Indigenous university researchers. The EAC and RSC requested that the larger parent study directly engage with youth, and the administrative supplement that funded this project was written in alignment with their guidance. This project was reviewed and received approval from the Washington State University IRB (#20037-001, approval date 23 March 2023), and the University of Alaska Fairbanks IRB

(#1009525, approval date 25 February 2022), the Alaska Area IRB (#1301054, approval date 25 February 2022), as well as Maniilaq Association, the Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corporation, and the Norton Sound Health Corporation. Youth ages 15–24 were recruited to participate. All youth who participated in research signed a consent form if they were over 18, or a youth assent and a parental consent if they were under the age of 18.

Youth from one highly protective community (as identified in the parent study) in each of the three participating regions were invited to participate in a digital storytelling workshop focused on what communities were already doing to support young people and their well-being. Specific community selection among the several highly protective communities relied on community connections and willingness to participate. The digital storytelling workshops involved trusted community members and Indigenous leaders who guided youth through storytelling, activities, and ceremonies to invite youth to consider what their communities were doing to support young people, as well as through the technical processes of creating digital stories. Digital stories are 2–3 min video narratives using photos and voice recordings. The digital storytelling process involved story development, discussion, revision, and production. Youth selected topics for their digital stories, wrote and recorded audio for their stories, selected photos to use, aligned the photos with audio using WeVideo or Apple iMovie, and engaged in final edits like transitions and adding a title screen and closing credit screen.

One workshop took place in Anchorage in April 2022, and 13 young people flew in from two communities. This workshop coincided with a regional hub meeting of the parent project. At the hub meeting, young people were invited to actively participate in activities and conversations and to share their finished stories with the attending RSC and EAC members. In the third participating community, researchers flew to the community for five days and worked in a community partner's English classes at the PreK–12 school, which included all enrolled middle and high school students. All students who attended during the week participated during their respective classes, and 10 students created digital stories. Several students also created photovoice stories consisting of an image they chose that represented a way their community supported youth, accompanied by about a paragraph of text describing what the image was about and how they felt like it showed a way their community supported young people. Several other students began with their digital story script and a selected photo, which became their Photovoice project, while other students jumped straight into their digital story. A total of 17 Photovoice projects were completed, which were displayed on the school wall on the way to the cafeteria for all students in the PreK–12 school and community to view.

All young people who created a digital story in each of the three communities were asked if they would be willing to share their digital stories at a showing in their community. Youth in the two communities who had traveled to Anchorage shared stories back with their communities about 6–9 months later, when the research leads came into the community to conduct interviews and convene community gatherings to share updates on the project. At the community gatherings, researchers described the larger research project and the general findings from the interview-based surveys in 65 communities that showed an inverse relationship between these types of community protective factors and youth suicide death and suicidal behavior (Allen et al. 2025). With youth consent, the youth-produced digital stories were then shared on a big screen for their communities. After these activities, community surveys were distributed to learn how the young people's stories may have helped community members better understand community strengths and identify specific supports for youth well-being. These surveys and each response were compiled into an Excel spreadsheet for further analysis using descriptive statistics. While youth were present at the community gatherings where digital stories were presented, their responses and

reactions to their peers' stories were not explicitly sought on community feedback forms or in interviews.

All youth who participated in the digital storytelling workshops were invited to take part in an interview about their experience and how they felt their community supported them. To triangulate results, interview questions also included factors identified in the larger study as protective against youth suicide, such as youth activities, spirituality, knowledge of history and culture, community leadership and decision-making, and engagement in ceremonies. Interviews were conducted in the young person's home communities about 2–13 months after the digital storytelling workshops were completed. Questions asked included, "What do you like about your community?," and "What is happening in your community when you feel like everybody is doing well?" Additional questions focused on the ways communities helped young people connect with the land and promote Indigenous language use. We also requested feedback from young people about their experience of creating a digital story and what we could improve on for future workshops. During the interviews, one researcher asked the interview questions, while the other took verbatim notes on their laptop. These interview transcripts were uploaded into Dedoose, an encrypted online qualitative software program, and were coded independently by both researchers. Interviews lasted about 20–45 min.

The qualitative data analysis involved a hybrid deductive and inductive coding process. An initial codebook of deductive hypothesis codes was created based on the community-level protective factors identified in the parent study, including governing responsibly, governing responsively, providing opportunities, teaching history and culture, continuing Indigenous ceremonies, and spirituality (Allen et al. 2025). Additional inductive codes were added based on what was learned from participants, such as the importance of connection to land and animals and connection to language as protective factors.

Inductive codes were guided by a constructivist grounded theory (CGT) approach, which aligns with Indigenous research methodologies that emphasize relationality, co-creation, and reflexivity (Charmaz 2017; Wilson et al. 2022; Sebeelo 2024). As codes were applied to the transcripts, additional inductive codes were created and applied to youth-identified processes, like connection to family, connection to other youth, ways of coping, and challenges experienced. Rather than calculating a formal interrater reliability statistic, the two lead analysts independently coded transcripts and then met iteratively to resolve discrepancies and reach agreement. This approach is consistent with CGT and Indigenous qualitative methodologies.

Thematic network analysis involves the identification of basic themes, organizing themes, and global themes (Attride-Stirling 2001). The use of thematic network analysis allowed researchers to step back from the coding process and think about the bigger picture view of what we were learning from the young people about protective factors. The analytic separation of global themes reflects the structure of thematic network analysis rather than an assumption of separateness within Indigenous ontologies; themes were organized to support analytic clarity while preserving relational overlap. Collaborative discussions about the basic, organizing, and global themes from the youth interviews led to the creation of a draft visual that summarizes key elements of community support for youth well-being. The youth perspectives as shared in their interviews guided the development of this draft visual, which was then shared with key stakeholders, community members, and research project leaders as a process of member checking. Their feedback guided the development of the resulting model.

This project included two lead researchers within a web of key individuals. The lead researchers were Drs. Cueva and Ullrich. Dr. Cueva is a descendant of the first peoples of Mexico, focuses professionally on community-based participatory action research with

Alaska Native communities, and previously worked as a high school teacher with Alaska Native youth. Dr. Ullrich is Inupiaq, with origins in one of the participating regions, previously worked in child welfare, and is passionate about promoting Indigenous child, family, community, and intergenerational well-being. Both researchers were born and primarily raised in Alaska.

The research was undertaken within the auspices of the parent research project, ANCHRR, which was guided by Alaska Native leaders and community members (Peter et al. 2025). Individual portions of this sub-study were also facilitated by Indigenous knowledge holders who conducted cultural ceremonies, activities, and storytelling with young people, built connections, and grounded the work in a larger cultural context. Young people were also supported during the research project by known and trusted individuals from their communities who coordinated with the research team to facilitate the study.

5. Conclusions

This study highlights Alaska Native youth perceptions of what rural Alaska communities are already doing to support young people. Community-level factors that served to connect youth to their cultural traditions and encircle them in positive relationships were identified as supportive of youth wellness. Specific ways that communities were actualizing the factors the youth identified included community gatherings around holidays and funerals, being out on the land hunting and fishing, sharing food, and having opportunities for young people to learn their traditions, language, and ways of being from Elders. Young people have things to say about how they are supported to be well, if we listen. While youth identified specific activities and connections that were key to their well-being, our analysis also highlighted that youth wellness was not about young people's responsibility to be resilient in the face of historic and ongoing colonialism, racism, trauma, and other challenges. Instead, youth emphasized ways they were supported along their own personal wellness journeys by community-level opportunities, wellness ways, and strengths that deepened Indigenous cultural and social connections.

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