

## Binge Drinking in the Northern Plains Tribes

*NIJ Research in Progress Seminar, "Pilot Study Regarding the Interrelationship of Alcohol and Drugs and Crime Among Adult American Indians—A Prevalence and Methodological Study," Philip A. May, grant number 99-MU-MU-0023, available on videotape from NCJRS (NCJ 194096).*

In most tribes, fewer Indian adults drink than do adults in the general U.S. population; however, the pattern of heavy drinking among those who do drink is associated with a great deal of social and medical

pathology. Indeed, severe binge drinking—defined as five or more drinks per day, occasion, or sitting for men and three or more drinks for women—is a major problem among adult American Indians who are arrested in North and South Dakota, where a small number of repeat offenders (17 percent) account for half of all arrests in two tribal police jurisdictions that were studied.

A team of researchers from the University of New Mexico is exploring the interrelationships of alcohol, drugs, and crime among

adult American Indians. Preliminary data were presented June 5, 2002, as part of NIJ's Research in Progress seminar series.

The research suggests that poor performance in school, inadequate education, and low intelligence are common among arrestees; that alcohol-related behavior and crime are highly influenced by one's family; and that arrestees generally do not recognize their own alcohol and drug problems. May believes these findings can be generalized to tribes throughout the Northern Plains.

From August 2000 through February 2002, pilot data were collected in partnership with two tribal police departments in the Dakotas. Data were collected on more than 2,000 arrests, and detailed interviews were completed with 165 adults. Participants were asked about their criminal history, the events preceding arrest (including where alcohol was obtained on the day of the arrest), time spent drinking before the arrest, place of arrest, blood alcohol concentration levels at the time of arrest, and their personal assessment of the degree of their problems with alcohol or drugs. Urine toxicology screens and neuropsychological interviews were also performed.

Eighty-four percent of the arrestees had participated in binge drinking within 30 days of the arrest or offense, with a mean of 5.4 binge drinking occasions during that span. May noted that most studies do not measure the burden repeat offenders place on law enforcement. In this study, these "revolving door" offenders (N=399 or 17 percent) accounted for 47 percent of the arrests.

Researchers also looked at the causes and effects of consumption. Alcohol consumption was highly correlated to family and social environment. Fifty-three percent of arrestees reported alcohol problems within their immediate family; more than one-fourth believed their spouse or partner had an alcohol problem. Arrestees also had low education levels and poor scores on intelligence tests. More than one-third had not complet-

*Researchers also measured the arrestees' perceptions of their drinking problems using the SOCRATES scale, an instrument designed to assess how ready alcohol abusers are to change their behavior. The scale indicated that the arrestees did not recognize the seriousness of their alcohol problems, were not prone to accept labels such as "problem drinker" or "alcoholic," and did not express a desire for change.*

ed the requirements for a high school diploma or a GED. In a subset of 14 subjects who were administered a battery of measures of intellectual functioning, all performed in the low average to average range.

Occasional or frequent violence is often a result of drinking. Three-fourths of the arrestees had been involved in a fight; one-third had physically attacked someone; and 73 percent had experienced a heated argument while drinking. Additional effects reached beyond the time of consumption, with as many as half of the arrestees reporting losing or nearly losing a job due to drinking.

Researchers also measured the arrestees' perceptions of their drinking problems using the SOCRATES scale, an instrument designed to assess how ready alcohol abusers are to change their behavior. The scale indicated that the arrestees did not recognize the seriousness of their alcohol problems, were not prone to accept labels such as "problem drinker" or "alcoholic," and did not express a desire for change.

---

#### **For more information**

- Contact Philip A. May, Ph.D., University of New Mexico, 505-925-2308, pmay@unm.edu.