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Barriers to Participation in Physical Activity for Shibogama First Nations

Project Summary

This research examined the barriers to participation in sport and physical activity for Shibogama First Nations communities in northwestern Ontario. Aboriginal peoples face significant barriers to participation in physical activity in comparison to Euro-Canadians or other minority populations. This collaborative research project qualitatively investigated how sport and physical activity are connected to both broader cultural practices and Aboriginal holistic perspectives of health in two remote First Nations (Wawakapewin and Kasabonika Lake). This research focused on land-based physical practices associated with food harvesting (hunting, fishing and gathering).

Key questions included: What barriers to being physically active exist; and What are the the exercise, dietary and cultural implications of participating in land-based practices for these First Nations?

Research Methods

Several forms of qualitative methods contributed to this study. Participant observation was required to understand the experiences based around participation. This included actively participating in physical cultural practices related to food harvesting. I directly engaged with community members to help understand the role these physical practices play in their quotidian lives. While hunting and fishing remain male-oriented activities in these communities, this study also aimed to appreciate female perspectives and roles in these processes by investigating food gathering and distribution procedures. To understand the complexities of northern First Nations' physical practices, it was necessary to gain intimate knowledge of the cultural contexts of participation. I researched these activities by participating in these physical cultural practices. The intention was to comprehend the complete process of what is involved in food harvesting activities. The fieldwork was coordinated around hunting, fishing and gathering seasons.

Conducting semi-structured and unstructured interviews was a critical component of this study. With the assistance of community officials, community leaders, coordinators, elders, and local participants were interviewed. Semi-structured and unstructured interviews with thirty community members form the basis of primary information collected. In two months of fieldwork in these communities, I also contributed to several programs designed to enhance food security and improve access to physical activity. Due to the nature of this research, it was imperative to foster a research process that was collaborative in orientation and held First Nations' perspectives at its core throughout the entirety of the project.

Research Results

Findings suggest that despite the significant barriers that these communities encounter to participate in physical practices associated with food harvesting, land-based practices can support community-driven

initiatives to increase physical activity as a strategy to prevent chronic disease and foster cultural continuities. This research unravels some of the complexities surrounding participation in physical activity and explores how it is linked to broader conceptions of health for rural First Nations.

Policy Implications

This study reveals that researchers and policy makers alike should consider land-based physical practices as a key aspect of Northern Aboriginal peoples' physical activity.

Support of land-based initiatives has great potential for fostering cultural continuities, encouraging physically active lifestyles and lowering levels of chronic disease. As a result, instead of or in conjunction with investing in Euro-Canadian sporting practices in Northern communities, support for land-based initiatives offer significant cultural, economic and health advantages to the communities and broader Canadian society.

Next Steps

While it is critical to have an extensive knowledge base about how barriers to participation in physical activity impact Aboriginal peoples, future research should also consider the ways in which sport and physical activity specifically enable Aboriginal communities and participants. This includes the potential benefits that participation may have for Aboriginal individuals and communities across the country. A key question could be: How does participation in physical actually impact the health of Aboriginal youth who engage in these programs and what are the long-term cultural consequences of their participation. Another key area of research could be comparing the impacts of different oriented activity programs in Aboriginal communities, specifically Euro-Canadian sport and Aboriginal physical and cultural practices associated with food harvesting/procurement. A key question could be: What are the cultural benefits and risks of engaging in physical practices related to food harvesting for remote First Nations in comparison to common Euro-Canadian sport initiatives in place in Northern communities? Issues concerning the health of Aboriginal peoples have been identified as a critical national concern, as Aboriginal health standards fall abysmally below national averages. For millennia, cultural practices that constitute forms of physical activity have been grounded in the daily lives of Aboriginal communities.

Along with identifying the limiting and enabling aspects of participation in sport and physical activity, this research could help local First Nations and rural Aboriginal Canadians across the country find significant ways to engage in physical activity and process the cultural and physical benefits involved with their own experiences of participation.

Key Stake Holders

Health Canada, Sport Canada, PHAC, CDPAC, CIHR, government and university researchers, Aboriginal leaders and communities.