

# At the Nexus of Knowledge and Wisdom: The Roles of Native American Youth in Building Community Resilience

Lauren Dent, Cary Webb & Nicole Dash



## ABSTRACT

Since 1993, FEMA's Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training programs have been implemented throughout the United States as a way of engaging community members in volunteer service toward emergency management activities. While a few of these programs are focused on youth, fewer still are designed to engage Native American youth exclusively. This research uses a qualitative approach to explore one such program, and seeks to contribute to two areas that are often neglected in emergency management and disaster science studies: Native American populations and adolescent groups. Specifically, this research aims to elucidate the dynamics of a rationally structured approach to emergency management being implemented in a Native American tribal setting. Using qualitative interviews with tribal emergency managers, federal emergency management officials, and youth involved in the program, as well as observation analysis of the CERT training among a number of tribal youth, we apply a Habermasian theoretical framework, to better understand the dynamics of the roles that tribal Emergency Managers' and Native American youth play in bridging the gaps between technocratic knowledge and the wisdom of indigenous experience.

## CONTEXT & GOALS

FEMA supports the development of "cultural brokers," who promote disaster preparedness by bridging cultural gaps between stakeholders. We posit that tribal emergency managers (EMs) are actively taking on this role, as they draw on their own cultural knowledge and their emergency management training to implement emergency management tools in tribal settings.

The primary goals of this research are to describe and explore:

- the dynamics of the cultural broker role
- the challenges to disaster preparedness that individuals in these roles face
- the solutions these individuals develop to build resilience.



2019 Tribal Princess (and certified Teen CERT instructor) smiles as she and her peers present on their recent experience putting on a tribal Teen CERT camp. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rpFWDh1ueQ>

We are particularly interested in recent efforts to include tribal youth in emergency management efforts. Thus, we also seek to understand the extent to which these efforts may be a response to the challenges of bridging cultural gaps between technocratic practices and traditional indigenous cultures.

## MAJOR FINDINGS

**As Cultural Brokers:** Tribal Emergency managers act out the 'cultural broker' role as they build relationships with state and federal entities. Many have strong symbiotic relationships with neighboring jurisdictions, and their federal tribal liaison. Several of these tribal EMs have worked with federal entities to develop and execute training that is tailored to Native American communities.

### Challenges to Preparedness

"In Indian Country, we don't talk about disasters. Its like...the land is sacred. And saying that it would harm us, well... we just don't do that."

- The legacy of generational trauma may widen the gap between native and non-native stakeholders
- Indigenous cultural experiences, beliefs, and wisdom may be in conflict with technocratic knowledge about disaster preparedness procedures and systems

### Solutions for Resilience

Emergency managers get community buy-in and implement practical measures for preparedness.

- They get buy-in by building on the resilience that is already embedded in cultural practices.
- They implement practical tools by empowering young people to reach their communities.

"We start with our children, and do monthly drills and evacuations. So now, they hear that sound and they go... and if you're standing there, they're gonna tell you to get out. It's awesome, because they do they same thing when they go home. They're teaching their parents."

Tribal Teen CERT camps have emerged as important tools to maximize community resilience. They have been embraced by youth, and there is evidence that young people help bridge the gap between technocratic knowledge and tribal wisdom, by taking preparedness tools into their own homes.

## CONCLUSION

"youth are revered, so getting youth involved means that we can ingrain emergency management into the cultural mores of the tribe... then, resilience will become part of our culture."

Acting as cultural brokers, tribal EMs empower young people to overcome the challenges of distrust and cultural clashes in their communities. In this way, youth are positioned as the bridge between the instrumental rationality of the system of emergency management and the value rationality of the tribal lifeworld.

## ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

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Lauren Dent is a doctoral candidate in Sociology at the University of North Texas, studying disasters and development. More information can be found at [www.laurendent.com](http://www.laurendent.com)