

# A COMPARISON OF TIME OJIBWAY ADOLESCENTS SPENT WITH PARENTS/ELDERS IN THE 1930s AND 1980s

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*Abstract: This study compared quantity and quality of family time spent with parents/elders by American Indian Ojibway adolescents (ages 12-18) in the 1980s to Ojibway adults (ages 55-70) who were adolescents in the 1930s. Results indicated that 1980s adolescents spent an average of 12.5 hours per week with parents/elders compared to 62 hours per week indicated by respondents who were adolescents in the 1930s. The 1980s adolescents reported significantly more adult substance use and family abuse within their homes, and indicated significantly less favorable well-being responses than 1930s adolescents.*

## Introduction

Family time has provided fundamental opportunities for the passing of values, skills, and knowledge to the younger generation.

This study was prompted by four main concerns regarding changes in Ojibway families. First, local county and reservation court systems measured a 200% increase in juvenile adjudication in the last 10 years. Court, state, and tribal costs have risen dramatically in an effort to place juveniles within a variety of alternative programs (including foster care, restricted school programs, and institutions). Second, local Indian Health Service studies regarding mental health concerns on reservations listed parent/child conflicts as the number one presenting problem for mental health contacts. Third, incidents of substance abuse appear to be rising at a more rapid pace among American Indian youth than among adolescents from other backgrounds (Finn, 1988). Fourth, there has been much discussion and speculation by reservation elders regarding family disruption resulting in the lack of youth accessibility to adult family members.

Abrams (1970) compared white families of the 1920s to white families in the 1970s. He found that white adolescents spent significantly less time with their parents in the 1970s.

There have been many articles concerning Indian family relationships and adolescent behavior. Robbins (1984) suggested that "the attachment bonds of family conventionality encouraged individuals to remain law-abiding."

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Most of the recent research has summarized opinions and assumptions of sociologists or human service personnel. Few have tested these assumptions with rigorous study because of the absence of solid longitudinal study opportunity.

Much national press has been given to the changing family patterns across America and the influence lack of family time has had on youth problems. This study attempted to provide one basis for measuring current youth involvement with their families, as well as summarizing the recollections of reservation elders regarding involvement with family when they were adolescents.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine an area with significant impact on adolescents: the family. More specifically, we hoped to determine the extent of change in both the quantity (amounts of time adolescents spent with or were exposed to parents and/or adult family models) and the quality (presence or absence of family dysfunctions) over a 50 year span. We realized that the format used was not an adequate replacement for scientific longitudinal study, but believed that in the absence of longitudinal study, current and retrospective assessments could prove informative.

### Method

We were interested in asking respondents to calculate the amount of time spent in family activities with an adult or elder present in five basic category areas. These included: eating together, working together, family recreation, family entertainment, and family spiritual/ceremonial activities. Additional questions centered on the correlation of dysfunctional family behaviors, including: family substance abuse, family abuse, and negative well-being issues.

The study consisted of interviewing two separate groups on a Northern Minnesota Reservation. The first group consisted of respondents ages 55-70 who were asked to reflect back on their family activities in the 1930s. The second group consisted of respondents ages 12-18 who were asked to reflect on current family activities.

Six separate reservation communities were included in the study. Respondents for the 1930s adolescent sample were randomly selected and stratified for age from tribal enrollment and Indian Health Service patient data files. The final sample of 141 represents 43% of the tribal population within the age group 55-70. Respondents for the 1980s adolescent sample were selected from enrollment data from four different schools and were stratified by age, sex, and court adjudication. The final sample of 94 represented 31% of the tribal population within the age group 12-18. All sample respondents (and the adolescents' parents/guardians) completed

permission slips for participation in the study. All responses were held in the strictest confidence.

## Results

### Brief Data Observations

Descriptive characteristics for both groups appeared equivalent and representative of the total reservation community. The 1930s respondents, however, had a shift in sex ratio of 2 to 1 females to males. Religious preference appeared to shift from Catholic and Episcopal in the 1930s group to Lutheran and traditional Indian religions in the 1980s group. Fifty-five percent of the 1930s respondents reported attending boarding school for an average of 4.45 years; only 6.4% of the 1980s respondents attended boarding school, with an average attendance of .5 years. The boarding schools in the 1930s, sponsored by both the Catholic and Episcopal churches, were located within the reservation boundaries and were, with the exception of about 10% of the respondents, day programs only.

Average household size including respondents from the 1930s was 7.42 persons compared to 4.20 persons in the 1980s. This suggests a 41% reduction in average household size within the last 50 years.

When asked which adult family members the respondents spent the most time with during adolescence, there was a significant shift in the selection of "mother" as the first choice from 65% of respondents in the 1930s group to 31% in the 1980s group.

Table 1 summarizes the total family time per week for both groups in each of the five areas. Significantly more time was reported with family and parents/elders by the 1930s groups in all five areas. The 1930s group averaged 61.74 hours per week with family, while the 1980s group averaged 12.47 hours per week. The greatest differences were noted in the areas of eating, working, and religious activities. Respondents were not asked to account for time spent in school. Ten percent of the 1930s respondents did stay overnight at the boarding school or with extended family members in the school community.

Table 1  
Adolescent Time (Hours Per Week) Spent with Family Comparing  
1980s and 1930s

Activity	1980s N = 94 Calculated Time With Family		1930s N = 141 Estimated Time Away	
	1980	1930	1980	1930
Eating	4.15	20.41	4.50	2.02
Working	1.72	24.62	6.09	8.25
Recreation	2.85	8.15	22.75	6.53

Table 1 (Continued)  
Adolescent Time (Hours Per Week) Spent with Family Comparing  
1980s and 1930s

Activity	1980s N = 94 Calculated Time With Family		1930s N = 141 Estimated Time Away	
	1980	1930	1980	1930
Entertainment	3.35	5.40	20.60	2.86
Spirit Activity	.40	3.16	.76	.90
Total hours of 5 Activities	12.47	61.74	54.70	20.56

Tables 2 through 4 summarize responses of both groups to the items assessing adult substance use, family abuse, and well-being during adolescent years. The response choices were: 5) all the time; 4) most of the time; 3) some of the time; 2) seldom; and 1) never.

Table 2 summarizes medians for items measuring family substance use. Modern adolescents indicated a significantly higher frequency with the following experiences: 1) adult alcohol use; 2) adult drug use; 3) adults using money for substances that should have been used for food or clothing; and 4) being left alone (under 10 years) while adults were away using substances.

Table 2  
Reported Family Substance Use

	1980s Adolescents					1930s Adolescents					$\chi^2$ *
	Most 4	Some 3	Seld 2	Nev 1	Med	Most 4	Some 3	Seld 2	Nev 1	Med	
Adult alcohol use	10%	40%	34%	16%	2.45	5%	26%	17%	52%	1.83	69.17
Adult drug use	3%	7%	10%	80%	1.36	0%	0%	2%	98%	1.02	53.76
Used money for alcohol	4%	12%	16%	68%	1.5	20%	4%	3%	93%	1.11	39.99
Left at a young age	5%	6%	15%	74%	1.4	30%	1%	2%	96%	1.05	80.32

\* $p = .01$

Table 3 summarizes medians for items from the family abuse section. The 1980s adolescents reported significantly more experience with the following: 1) adults yelling at adults; 2) adults hitting adults; 3) adults yelling at children; and 4) adults hitting children.

Table 3  
Reported Family/Child Abuse

	1980s Adolescents					1930s Adolescents					$\chi^2*$
	Most 4	Some 3	Seld 2	Nev 1	Med	Most 4	Some 3	Seld 2	Nev 1	Med	
Adults yell at adults	17%	33%	45%	15%	2.48	1%	11%	25%	63%	1.50	84.68
Adults hit adults	3%	9%	31%	57%	1.58	1%	5%	7%	87%	1.17	59.28
Adults yell at children	22%	33%	34%	11%	2.72	1%	17%	18%	64%	1.56	98.34
Adults hit children	6%	15%	33%	46%	1.81	1%	2%	14%	83%	1.19	73.96

\*p = .01

Table 4 summarizes medians for negative well-being items and total well-being indicators for the two groups. The 1980s adolescents reported significantly more negative well-being experiences for: 1) felt adults didn't care about me; 2) felt afraid to go home; 3) felt like running away; and 4) felt like hurting myself.

Table 4  
Reported Negative Well-Being Data

	1980s Adolescents					1930s Adolescents					$\chi^2*$
	Most 4	Some 3	Seld 2	Nev 1	Med	Most 4	Some 3	Seld 2	Nev 1	Med	
Felt adults didn't care about me	11%	19%	33%	37%	2.05	0%	4%	3%	93%	1.11	124.32
Felt afraid to go home	2%	18%	26%	54%	1.72	1%	2%	6%	89%	1.14	69.48

Table 4 (Continued)  
Reported Negative Well-Being Data

	1980s Adolescents					1930s Adolescents					$\chi^2$ *
	Most 4	Some 3	Seld 2	Nev 1	Med	Most 4	Some 3	Seld 2	Nev 1	Med	
Felt like running away	22%	27%	27%	2%	2.61	1%	2%	7%	90%	1.13	139.45
Felt like hurting myself	17%	17%	21%	55%	1.78	0%	1%	1%	98%	1.03	102.48

\* $p = .01$

Table 5 summarizes the self-report of both groups regarding personal inappropriate adolescent (delinquent) behaviors. Percentiles were calculated indicating "yes" or "no" participation in each of the items. The 1980s group indicated significantly more participation in all items.

Table 5  
Summary of Inappropriate Adolescent Behaviors

	1980s Adolescents Participated		1930s Adolescents Participated		$\chi^2$
	Yes	No	Yes	No	
Smoke Cigar.	79%	21%	52%	48%	25.37*
Traffic viol.	8%	92%	2%	98%	32.01**
Skipped school	64%	36%	33%	67%	27.91*
Ran away	32%	68%	8%	92%	29.07*
Used alcohol	85%	15%	30%	70%	72.47*
Smoked marij.	53%	47%	2%	98%	84.36*
Stole something	70%	30%	18%	82%	70.47*
Damaged property	45%	55%	9%	91%	45.61*
Was arrested	29%	71%	9%	91%	33.19*
Total incident	Mean = 4.53		Mean = 1.14		180.38*
Court adjudic.	34%	66%	1%	99%	58.18*

\* $p = .01$

\*\* $p = .05$

The mean response for participation in all inappropriate behaviors for the 1980s group was 4.53. The mean response for the 1930s group was 1.14. The 1980s group's participation in inappropriate behaviors was significantly more than the 1930s group using  $\chi^2$ .

The most frequently reported inappropriate adolescent behaviors for the 1980s group were: 85% used alcohol; 79% smoked cigarettes; and 70% stole something. For the 1930s group; 52% smoked cigarettes; 33% skipped school; and 30% used alcohol. The greatest differences in participation in behaviors between the groups were noted in: marijuana use; stealing something, and skipping school.

Finally, 34% of the 1980s adolescents experienced court adjudication, while only 1% of the 1930s adolescents reported such adjudication.

### Conclusions

Adolescents spent significantly less time with parents/elders in all the major areas of Ojibway family time when 1930 to 1980 families were compared. Working together fell the most, from an average of 24.62 hours per week in the 1930s to 1.72 hours per week in the 1980s. Eating together dropped from 20.41 to 4.15 hours per week. Recreation together fell from 8.15 to 2.85 hours; entertainment dropped from 5.40 to 3.35 hours; and spiritual activities were reduced from 3.16 to .40 hours per week. Summation of the above five areas indicated a total weekly average reduction from 61.74 hours per week (1930s) to 12.47 hours per week (1980s). Modern adolescents appear to be spending significantly much more time away from parents/elders.

Participation in the traditional activities or historical activities (ricing, maple sugaring, berry picking, etc.) still occurred for a small percentage of the 1980s adolescents, but less frequently than for the 1930s group. The modern Ojibway family does not appear to be as dependent on these activities for survival or pleasure.

In place of family time spent with parents or elders, the 1980s adolescents offered open-ended responses including: school activities, television (satellite dish), three wheelers, riding in a car, listening to the radio, television games, partying, and "just hanging out."

Highly significant differences were noted in all areas of family dysfunction measured between respondent groups. Drug use, parents using money for substances, or leaving children at a young age were almost non-existent for parents of the 1930s group. These same behaviors appeared to increase in occurrence, along with significant increases in parent alcohol use, for the 1980s adolescents.

All areas of family abuse (including adults yelling at adults, adults hitting adults, adults yelling at children, and adults hitting children) increased significantly for the 1980s adolescents.

Negative well-being factors provided the most notable differences between the 1930s and 1980s groups. The 1930s respondents appeared

to seldom or never experience the negative well-being items (feeling like adults didn't care, feeling afraid to go home, feeling like running away, and feeling like hurting myself). The 1980s adolescents experienced all negative well-being items to a significantly greater degree.

Several built-in biases have not been effectively controlled. The 1930s adolescents were asked to "reflect back" to a time in their lives that is perhaps the most tumultuous time for any person: adolescence. The 1980s respondents were assessed in the midst of their adolescence, and therefore may have been more in touch with their negative feelings. There may have been a tendency for all ethnic groups in the 1930s to be more cautious and closed about sharing negative information about themselves or their families.

A final bias is noted for the 1930s group. According to Erickson (1968), persons aged 55 to 70 are approaching their final stage of development and are in the process of reviewing their lives and attempting to resolve the conflict of looking back with either despair or acceptance. They may bias responses in favor of "acceptance" in an attempt to avoid despair, or they may even romanticize a simpler and perhaps less stressful existence.

Attempts to control for the biasing influence of survivorship in later years have met with a variety of strong comments and suggestions. Some would speculate that the "survivors" represent the better adjusted representatives of their group and by virtue of their survival, skew data to reflect more positive family models. Therefore, a more accurate study would suggest comparing the "best" of 1980s to the "best" of the 1930s. Others argue that there is no research to support the concept that strong or weak family ties have any relationship to longevity, and believe that subdividing groups would introduce yet another bias into the research. Finally, others argue that persons in the sample in the 55 to 70 age group may represent the "poorest" survivors by virtue of their remaining existence in and dependency on the reservation, and their inability to function independently outside the reservation community.

In evaluating delinquency behaviors and the experiences of court adjudication for both groups, notable and significant differences were measured. Significantly greater delinquency experiences were noted for the 1980s group. The 1980s respondents reported significantly greater participation in court adjudication.

The adolescents of the 1930s appeared to generally receive influence, discipline, and behavioral control from within the family or extended structure. Discipline appears to be affected by multiple resources outside the family structure for the adolescent of the 1980s.

Speculations are unlimited regarding the shift of the modern Ojibway adolescent away from family time with their parents or elders. One argument suggests that some Ojibway parents lack Coopersmith's (1967) definition of self-esteem ("a personal judgement of worthiness"), and as a result withdraw from their children. Some arguments focus on the pervasiveness of chemical dependency problems that plague reservation



communities and suggest that alcohol or drug use by parents disenfranchises children from meaningful contact. Economics and the need for parents--often both parents--to be away working or at school summarizes yet another dilemma.

Other opinions suggest that the changes in Ojibway family life reflect the changes in American society as a whole. As Bronfenbrenner (1970) put it, "Americans are inconsiderate of others and predisposed to alienation and violence because children in our society are reared not by their parents, but by television and their peers." The mere quantity of choices of "alternatives" for today's youth causes further speculation that parents are unable to compete for their children's attention.

Finally, the combined backdrop of unemployment, poverty, chemical dependency, social isolation, and prejudice found on the reservation provides support for the speculations of Jencks (1972) that both parents and their children lack. . ."destiny control, the feeling of individuals that they no longer have the opportunity and capability of shaping their own future."

Parents lacking destiny control may withdraw from their parenting opportunities. Sensing the lack of control, children may withdraw from their parents. Clearly, Ojibway parents (similar to parents in American society as a whole) face a continued challenge as they seek to teach and impact their children in a time when the families themselves struggle for survival.

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