Quick Facts about Indigenous Americans

Compiled and prepared by Alexis Contreras
(Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde)

2025

Produced and Distributed by the
Indigenous Affairs Committee
Baltimore Yearly Meeting

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Welcome for Quick Facts About Indigenous Americans

Has your best writing ever suffered because of lengthy searches of myriad sources for baseline data to convey, illustrate or dress up your points? Here's some help with that, especially for those trying to share needs and concerns of Native Peoples. It's a gift of time in a Friends-commissioned free report, in digital, searchable format. Less time searching means more time focusing on finding and supporting solutions.

Suzan Shown Harjo (Cheyenne citizen, Cheyenne & Arapaho Tribes, and Hotvlkvlke Mvskokvlke, Nuyakv)

This is a fantastic resource. Anyone who works in Native policy knows that it's often a struggle to find well-researched, empirical data about our communities. Having so much of it in one place makes this report a great resource. Thank you to BYM and Alexis Contreras for their work.

Rachel Overstreet (Choctaw Nation)
Legislative Representative, Native American Advocacy
Friends Committee on National Legislation

Accurate, accessible data educate non-Native populations about the circumstances and conditions of Native communities and peoples. They support informed government policymaking based on the challenges and strengths of Tribal and urban Indian communities. Credible data also serve Native communities themselves by equipping leaders for self-determined policymaking and program development as well as bolstering funding proposals to bring in resources to support services to Native populations.

Sarah Kastelic (Alutiiq)
Executive Director, National Indian Child Welfare Association

Current statistics that capture the complex realities of life for Indigenous Americans are hard to obtain. This compilation of facts and sources will be helpful to newcomers in the field and to experienced researchers as well. Having a place to start is very valuable. I want to thank those who are making this effort.

Stephen L. Pevar, author of *The Rights of Indians and Tribes*

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FOREWORD

In the fall of 2008, the Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) issued *Snapshot of Native Americans at Start of 21st Century*, a compilation of facts about Native Americans based on current sources. Its intent was in part to enable FCNL to better answer frequently asked questions about Native Americans. FCNL also noted that Native Americans generally are less understood than other U.S. groups, and the document sought to expand that knowledge. The Indigenous Affairs Committee (IAC) of the Baltimore Yearly Meeting (BYM) found it was past time to update this valuable document. As an ally group, we need broad, current information, and we believe an overview will be helpful to others seeking an understanding of current conditions and a better grasp of issues.

The Baltimore Yearly Meeting is a regional Quaker organization that encompasses Quaker meetings in Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, the District of Columbia, and West Virginia. Its Indigenous Affairs Committee, formed in 1795, sponsored this national data collection. The committee was fortunate to secure the services of Alexis Contreras, who is a citizen of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde. Ms. Contreras brought experience with the National Indian Child Welfare Association, where she worked with the government and advocacy department as well as the research department on a wide range of topics. She is currently an independent consultant. She spent many months assembling and organizing data in the public domain and added brief reflections about the subjects.

Terminology and limits. While the term "Native American" is often used to refer to all the Indigenous people within the U.S., we recognize that American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians are distinct groups. It is difficult to get details on Native Hawaiians, who are often coupled with Pacific Islanders for U.S. Census and descriptive purposes; consequently, the majority of data in this document is for American Indian and Alaska Native people (AI/AN). We also recognize the significant variations among tribal groups that are hidden when statistics are presented.

The document does not capture the formidable accomplishments of Indigenous peoples, which often do not lend themselves to presentation in the form of statistics. Unfortunately, it is easier to obtain facts about problems, challenges, and needs than about successes. Recent attainments and encouraging trends are seldom quantifiable, even though examples from individuals and hundreds of Native Nations abound.

Also, the focus of this document is on facts related to individuals, families, and everyday life as opposed to lands, arts, and many other topics that could be explored about the larger Native world.

Variations in data. If you sometimes see numbers that are different than those you remembered or expected, this would not be surprising. Data are collected and reported by a variety of organizations and government agencies using different ways of sorting data. For example, it is sometimes unclear whether the numbers cited are for people who report their identity as solely Native or whether they report it as Native mixed with something else. We have attempted to make our citations as specific as possible.

Potential users. Potential users of this demographic profile include non-Native and Native teachers, researchers, policymakers, grant-writers, journalists, and advocates. It can be a source of reliable information and references for generalists and specialists. We hope it will help advocates be more knowledgeable and prepared. It may also be a tool advocates can use to make their case, or a document they can disseminate to their network.

Caution. The information provided is as accurate, reliable, and complete as possible. Nevertheless, as with any report, users should verify particulars and check availability before sharing data with others. For example, the Trump administration is making dramatic changes in what data is available from the government.

We welcome feedback on how this document can be more useful at our committee address: indigenousaffairs@bym-rsf.org

DEMOGRAPHICS

Indigenous People Worldwide

The United Nations estimates that there are 476 million Indigenous people worldwide, with more than 5,000 distinct groups (United Nations, n.d.).

Population Totals, Clusters, and Locations in the United States

Key Definitions

The American Community Survey (ACS) of the U.S. Census Bureau defines the American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) population as follows: (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.): "A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America) and who maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment." Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (NHPI) is defined as: "A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands" (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

To understand Census population estimates, it is also important to distinguish between those who identify solely as members of a particular Indigenous population and those who report mixed heritage. The "race alone" population includes individuals who reported only one response to the question on race, while "race alone or in any combination" includes those who gave multiple responses to this question.

How Many…?

- **3.7 million** people identify themselves as solely American Indian or Alaska Native.
- **9.7 million** people identify as either solely AI/AN or as being of mixed ancestry.
- **615,557** people identify themselves as solely Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander.

Population

The 2020 Census reported these numbers (Jones et al., 2021):

- 3.7 million people identify solely as American Indian and Alaska Native, which is 1.1% of all people living in the U.S.
- 9.7 million people identify as American Indian and Alaska Native alone or in combination with another group such as White or Black. This is 2.9% of all people living in the U.S.
- For example, 4 million of the 9.7 million have an AI/AN and White multi-racial heritage (Sanchez-Rivera et al., 2023).

Reporting for the U.S. Census Bureau about the 2020 census results, Sanchez-Rivera et al. (2023) listed the largest Native Nations with citizens who identify *solely* as American Indian and Alaska Native as follows:

- Navajo Nation (315,086)
- Cherokee Nation (214,940)
- Choctaw Nation (69,454)
- Lumbee Tribe (54,293)
- Muscogee (Creek) Nation (40,677)
- Chippewa Bands and Tribes (39,057)
- Apache Tribes (36,492)
- Blackfeet Nation (34, 810)
- Sioux (30,408)

Using 2020 Census numbers again, the order for the largest Native Nations changes when those Indigenous individuals who identify as having multiple heritages are also included in the total. Then, the Cherokee Nation is by far the largest Nation:

- Cherokee Nation (1,513,326) https://www.cherokee.org/
- Navajo Nation (432,412) https://www.navajo-nsn.gov/
- Choctaw Nation (255,557) https://www.choctawnation.com/
- Chippewa (130,048): 13 bands and Tribes
- Apache (129,589): 9 Tribes
- Sioux (126,571): 6 Tribes
- Muscogee (121,581) https://www.muscogeenation.com/citizenship/
- Lumbee (79,424) https://www.lumbeetribe.com/
- Blackfeet (77,232) https://blackfeetnation.com

Note that the individuals who provide data for the Census on their Indigenous heritage may or may not be members of Tribes. The websites of tribal or Native nations, given above, are the best source for the number of people officially enrolled in the Tribe. Criteria for membership differ among Tribes (Native American Rights Fund, n.d.)

Beyond population numbers, there is the issue of political status: “Unlike other racial groups that are defined in federal data collections, the AI/AN category is both a political and legal classification” (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2024). Authentic Native American identity is rooted in history, legal rights, and citizenship within a tribal/Native nation, not racial classification. Native Nations are government entities, like states, that have a government-to-government relationship with the federal government. Therefore, using Census numbers alone can be insufficient when comparing groups.

Based on 2020 Census data, Sanchez-Rivera et al. cite the following numbers of people who identify *solely* with a particular Alaska Native group:

- Yup'ik (133,311)
- Tlingit (9,026)
- Inupiat (7,792)
- Alaskan Athabascan (4,893)
- Aleut (4,878)
- Eskimo (3,337)
- Native Village of Barrow Inupiat Traditional Government (2,565)
- Nome Eskimo Community (1,914)
- Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes (1,424)
- Native Village of Hopper Bayu (1,384)

The largest Alaska Native group of individuals who identified as having mixed heritage is the Tlingit with 22,601 people. The Aleut (12,805) and the Yup'ik (13,706) tie for second (Sanchez-Rivera et al., 2023).

The ACS 5-Year Estimates Selected Population Data Profiles (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021) do not represent a specific point in time but a blending of the data collected across calendar years. The survey for 2017-2021 reported the following data for Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders:

- 615,557 people identify as Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone.
- 1,478,104 million people identify as Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone or in combination with one or more other races.

According to ACS estimates, in 2022 there were approximately 665,807 Native Hawaiians/Pacific Islanders residing within the United States, representing about 0.3% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). The same source found that Native Hawaiians/Pacific Islanders were most represented in the United States by the following sub-categories and their respective estimated populations:

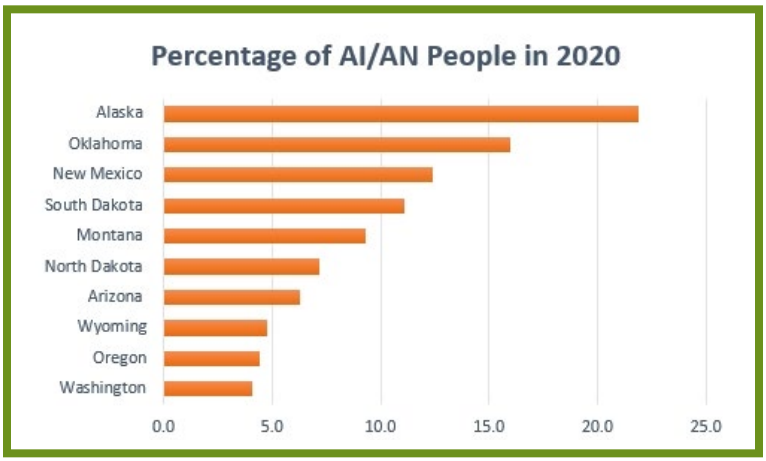
- Polynesian: 375,599
- Micronesian: 205,444
- Native Hawaiian: 185,466
- Samoan: 123,150
- Guamanian or Chamorro: 84,847.

Location of Indigenous Peoples in U.S.

Based on 2020 U.S. Census data, the Indian Health Service (IHS) estimates that approximately 87% of the AI/AN population live in urban areas, while 13% live on reservations or tribal lands (IHS, n.d.). Dewees and Marks (2017) challenge this data, however, noting that the federal government has more than 15 definitions of "rural." Authors argue that "a majority of Native people live in rural and small-town areas, and that in some states, it is the vast majority." They also state that a close analysis reveals that "the majority of people who self-identity as American Indian or Alaska Native live on or near their traditional communities and homelands."

Rezal (2021) found that, according to the 2020 Census, the 10 states with the largest percentage of AI/AN people in 2020 were:

- Alaska (21.9%)
- Oklahoma (16.0%)
- New Mexico (12.4%)
- South Dakota (11.1%)
- Montana (9.3%)
- North Dakota (7.2%)
- Arizona (6.3%)
- Wyoming (4.8%)
- Oregon (4.4%)
- Washington (4.1%).



According to the 2020 Census, the city with the largest number of people identifying solely as AI/AN is New York City, followed by Los Angeles (Wikipedia, n.d.).

The city/municipality with the highest percentage of those identifying solely as AI/AN is Anchorage, followed by Tulsa and Albuquerque (Index Mundi, n.d.).

The metropolitan area with the highest percentage of people who identify as solely AI/AN is Phoenix (Statista, n.d.) For those of mixed heritage, including AI/AN, the highest percentage is found in Los Angeles, followed by New York, Phoenix, and Tulsa (USA Facts, 2019). The Los Angeles Almanac (n.d.) claims that Los Angeles County has the largest concentration of those who identify solely as American Indian or Alaska Native, saying that the Census estimated that, in 2022, this population numbered 111,096 in Los Angeles County and numbered 83,296 in Maricopa County, Arizona, which includes Phoenix.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) reports that there are approximately 326 federally recognized Indian Reservations in the United States (BIA, 2017). It identifies 574 federally recognized Tribes located in 35 states (n.d.).

Data Challenges

In recent years, increased attention has been paid to both the lack of data on Native populations in the U.S. and the complexity of data (Bennett-Begaye, 2025; Dewees & Marks, 2017). Government data about some subjects is incomplete or conflicting. A number of laws and task forces are addressing this problem.

Population Growth

Based on U.S. Census data from 2020, the North American Native population increased in the decade between 2010 and 2020 (Sanchez-Rivera et al., 2023):

- The American Indian alone population grew by 11.6% to 2,169,802, while the "alone or in any combination" population almost doubled to 6,363,796.
- The Alaska Native alone population increased by 10.9% to 133,311, with the "alone or in any combination" population rising 45.6% to 241,797.
- The Canadian Indian alone population grew by 20.0% to 7,723, while the "alone or in any combination" population soared by 390.4% to 72,701.
- The Latin American Indian alone population rose by 344.7% to 766,112, and the "alone or in any combination population" increased by 390.4% to 1,319,523.

Native Populations are Growing!

Between 2010 and 2020, the American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian populations all grew significantly.

The Native Hawaiian alone population was the largest Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (NHPI) alone group. It grew 28.0% between 2010 and 2020.The Native Hawaiian "alone or in any combination" population grew by 29.1% from 527,077 in 2010 to 680,442 in 2020 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023a).

Studies are underway to understand why the jump was so large (Chavez & Kaur, 2021). One explanation is that the Census sought more information and discovered that Latinos, such as Mexican Americans, often identified with American Indians (Indigenous) as well.

Characteristics

Language

The U.S. Census Bureau codes 169 Native North American languages and reports only 372,095 speakers. Nearly half of these (169,471) are Navajo, with other Tribes having less than 20,000 (2011). The same report found that far more people aged 65 and older spoke a Native language than children aged 5-17 (22.3% as opposed to 11%).

The number of people who speak Hawaiian has been growing due to determined efforts to revive this endangered language. The Aloha Project of the government of Hawaii reports 18,610 Hawaiian speakers in Hawaii for the years 2009-2013 (Aloha Challenge, 2020).

A joint report by the U.S. Department of Education, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and the U.S. Department of the Interior found that the vast majority of Native languages were endangered – meaning that it is no longer the norm for children to learn and use the language (2016).

Families

U.S. Census data from the American Community Survey (2023a) finds that:

- 65.4% of AI/ANs live in a family household. Less than a third of those families – 30.1% – are living with children that are their own.
- 40.5% of AI/ANs are a married couple household. 16.9% are a female-headed household with no spouse present.

Approximately 8% of AI/AN children are living with a relative other than a parent, as compared to about 2% of the total population (Generations United and National Indian Child Welfare Association, 2020).

The National Resource Center on Native American Aging (2024) found that 62.7% of Native elders live with family members.

Age

U.S. Census data (2023b) reports:

- 11.1% of AI/AN (alone) are over 65 years old, compared to 17.7% for the U.S.

- Approximately 27% of AI/AN people are under the age of 18, compared to 18.9% of the non-Hispanic White population.
- The median age for AI/ANs is 33.5 compared to 39.2 for the total U.S. population.

The U.S. Census data ACS population profile (2023c) finds:

- Approximately 31% of the Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islanders (alone or in combination with one or more other races) are under the age of 18.
- 9.2% of Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders (alone or in combination with one or more other races) are over the age of 65 years old.
- The median age for Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders is 30.2 years old.

A Larger Percent of Natives than Whites are Under 18

A significantly larger percent of AI/ANs and NHPIs are under the age of 18 than the percent of non-Hispanic White people under 18.

Sexual Orientation

Based on several data sources, Wilson et al. estimate that there are approximately 285,000 Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgender (LGBTQ+) or Two-Spirit adults in the American Indian/Alaska Native population (2021).

Reflections

Indigenous Americans are a growing population that skews young and urban. For accuracy and understanding, it is important to determine whether any given total includes those with mixed heritage. More than the increase in numbers, Indigenous people are gratified by the strengthening of their communities and culture. There are, though, many geographic areas without a significant number of Native Americans where non-Natives of all backgrounds lack first-hand experience of Native culture and information about it.

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POVERTY, INCOME, AND EMPLOYMENT

Poverty

In 2021, those who identified as AI/AN alone had a poverty rate of 23.3%, which is almost twice the national rate (12.7%). Those who identified as AI/AN plus another race had a poverty rate of 19.4% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Ramirez reports that 32% of Native households on tribal lands live in poverty (2023).

The poverty rate in rural areas is significantly higher than in urban areas. In 2019, Farrigan reported that rural AI/AN had a poverty rate of 29.6 %, compared with 19.4 % in urban areas. The poverty rate for White residents was about half the rate for either Blacks or American Indians – 13.3 % in rural areas and 9.7 % in urban areas (Farrigan, 2021).

Comparing Poverty Rates

The percent of AI/AN children living in poverty is nearly double the national average.

The typical white family has more than twice the wealth of the typical families who identify as AI/AN, Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander.

In 2021, 17.6% of AI/AN adults aged 65+ who identified as AI/AN alone lived at the poverty level. Among those identifying as AI/AN alone or in combination with one or more other races, the poverty rate was 14.4%. For all older Americans, the rate was 10.3% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

In 2022, 29% of AI/AN children were living in poverty, which is almost twice the national rate of 16%. The child poverty rate for AI/ANs has remained well above the national level for decades (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023). The poverty rate more than doubled in 2022 after government benefits changed (Cid-Martinez et al., 2023).

According to the 2023 1-Year Estimates from the ACS, the combined poverty rate for individuals identifying as Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone or in combination with one or more other races was 11.3% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). When examining single-family homes headed by Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders women, the poverty rate rises to 23.8% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023).

Income and Wealth

In 2021, the median income of AI/AN alone households were $50,183, as compared to $69,021 for the entire nation (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

Based on the 2023 ACS estimates, the median annual income for AI/AN households are $51,238, compared to $83,121 for non-Hispanic White households (U.S. HHS, Office of Minority Health, 2023). Census data reports the per capita income of AI/ANs as $26,928 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023).

And according to 2023 ACS estimates, the median annual income for Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders households is $79,639 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Per capita (by person) income of Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders is reported by Census data as $32,120 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023).

The typical white family has more than twice the wealth of the typical families who identify as AIAN, Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander, or those who have more than one ethnic and racial identification (Joint Economic Committee, 2022).

Employment and Unemployment

AI/ANs and African Americans are the most economically marginalized groups in the U.S. in terms of employment and unemployment rates (Asante-Muhammad et. al., 2022). The unemployment rate measures the percentage of people actively looking for work but unable to find a job. 2022 estimates from the Bureau of Labor Statistics data show the overall unemployment rate for American Indians and Alaska Natives was 6.2% compared to 3.2% for white individuals (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023).

More AI/ANs are Unemployed

AI/ANs and African Americans are the most economically marginalized groups in the U.S. in terms of employment and unemployment rates.

The employment-to-population ratio looks at the total working-age population and measures how many people are employed, regardless of their job-seeking status. In 2022, the employment-to-population ratio for AI/ANs was 57.1%, while White Americans had an employment-to-population ratio of 61%. Wilson and Marvin report that in 2023, workers identifying solely as AI/AN were 1.1% of the U.S. labor force; adding those with multiple heritages brought the total percentage to 2.0% (2024).

Bureau of Labor Statistics data show the overall unemployment rate for Native Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders was 4% in 2022 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023).

Reflections

Native American communities face significant challenges related to poverty, income disparity, and employment opportunities. Historically marginalized, Indigenous peoples experience higher rates of poverty and unemployment than the general population. Despite these economic hardships, Native cultures are resilient, and tribal economies are increasingly diversifying, with many communities investing in education, healthcare, and sustainable economic ventures to uplift their citizens. Cultural traditions play an important role in these efforts, fostering a sense of identity and community that strengthens the shared determination to overcome economic challenges.

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EDUCATION

Education on tribal lands may be operated by the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), tribally controlled and funded through federal grants, or operated and funded by the State as part of the State's public school system. Schools that are directly funded by BIE follow BIE policies and standards. Those that are tribally controlled allow Tribes to exercise self-determination and tailor education to their communities' needs. State-run public schools on tribal lands "operate under state education departments but serve Native students living in or near tribal communities. These schools follow state curriculum standards and regulations rather than BIE policies" (Bonfire Leadership Solutions, 2025).

Schools and Programs Specifically for Native Youth

The BIE funds 183 elementary and secondary schools, located on or near 64 reservations in 23 states, for children affiliated with 226 Tribes. Of these, 55 are operated by BIE and 128 by Tribes. The schools serve approximately 40,000 Indigenous students. BIE reports that high school graduation rates rose from around 51% in 2015 to 75% in 2024 (BIE, 2025).

BIE acknowledges that its programs are underfunded compared to state-funded education. "BIE per-pupil funding is $7,500 on average, significantly lower than the national average state spending, which ranges from approximately $8,700 to $30,300 per student. Most states allocate between $10,000 and $20,000 per student" (BIE, 2025).

Currently, the BIA funds or operates 53 off-reservation boarding schools and dormitories near reservations. It directly runs four (Open USA Project, 2025). Unlike attendance at the 526 boarding schools operated between 1819 and 1969 that were so destructive of Native culture (National Native American Boarding Schools Healing Coalition, n.d.; BIA, 2002), residence is voluntary.

Former Secretary of the Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, a member of the Laguna Pueblo Tribe, has stated that the historical trauma caused by the earlier boarding schools remains, "manifesting itself in Indigenous communities through intergenerational trauma, cycles of violence and abuse, disappearance, premature deaths, and other undocumented bodily and mental impacts" (American Psychiatric Association, 2021).

The role of these and other BIE-funded schools was transformed with the passage of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 (ISDEAA). Testifying before Congress, a representative of the Department of the Interior assured the Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States that "following the passage of ISDEAA, BIE's off-reservation boarding schools were no longer in the business of assimilation; rather, their purpose was transformed to support and respect tribal self-determination and sovereignty" (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2019).

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) reported that there were 530 AI/AN Head Start facilities operating through the U.S. as of 2019 (ACF, 2020). Sarche (2018) observes that of the Tribal Head Start programs, 56% of children were in classrooms that included formal Native language instruction. Sixty-five percent of them used Native language for instruction at least some of the time. He also noted:

- 86% of children were in classrooms with at least one AI/AN cultural item. Common items were cultural displays, Native music/instruments, Native language labels, and cultural books.
- 23% percent of children were in classrooms that used a culturally based curriculum.

In the 2023-24 school year, the Head Start program reported 14,168 AI/AN participants but only 72 NHPI participants. More recent data did not appear to be available (Office of Head Start, 2023).

A multi-agency Memorandum of Agreement states that the BIE provides funding to 17 K-12 schools to support Native language immersion and preservation efforts (U.S. Department of the Interior et. al., 2021).

The Office of Hawaiian Education, located within the Hawai'i State Department of Education, funds K-12 education that includes Hawaiian language immersion. There are 22 Hawai'i State Department of Education sites and seven charter school sites providing Hawaiian language immersion (Hawai'i State Department of Education, n.d.). These programs are available to all students.

Since massive administrative and policy changes are underway at the time of publication, readers should check which programs previously managed by the Department of Education still exist and where they are located (National Congress of American Indians, 2025). Check with the American Indian Higher Education Consortium if the Bureau of Indian Education data on tribal colleges is unavailable.

K-12

The National Indian Education Association (n.d.) reports the following data for 2021:

- Approximately 459,000 AI/AN students are enrolled in the K-12 public school system, which is 93% of all Native students.
- 24% of all AI/AN students attend rural schools, a rate more than 2.5 times that of any other racial or ethnic group.

- Nationwide, Native students make up 1% of the public school population, with Alaska (22.0%), Oklahoma (12.0%), Montana (11.0%), South Dakota (10.7%), and New Mexico (10.3%) having the highest proportions of AI/AN public school students.

About 14% of AI/AN children received services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act compared to 9% of the general student population (Generations United and National Indian Child Welfare Association, 2020).

The Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) provides funding to 17 BIE-funded K-12 schools to support Native language immersion and preservation efforts (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2021).

The Hawaiian language immersion program offers K-12 public education, with 22 Hawai'i State Department of Education sites and seven charter school sites providing Hawaiian language immersion (Hawai'i State Department of Education, n.d.).

Since massive administrative and policy changes are underway at the time of publication (2025), readers should check which programs previously managed by the Department of Education still exist and where they are located (National Congress of American Indians, 2025). Check with the American Indian Higher Education Consortium if the Bureau of Indian Education data on tribal colleges is unavailable.

High School Graduation Rates

Nationally, 11% of the adult public has less than a high school education. 12% of Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders and 15% of American Indian/Alaska Natives have less (AAPI, 2025).

The National Center for Education Statistics (2024) reports the following comparative data about high school graduation rates for the 2021-2022 school year:

- The national average for those attaining a public high school diploma within four years of starting in 9th grade was 74% for AI/AN students and 87% for all students. The AI/AN graduation rate for AI/AN students is the lowest among all racial groups.
- The percentage of AI/AN students who graduated high school ranged from 91% in Mississippi to 46% in South Dakota. AI/AN rates were higher than the U.S. average in Indiana, Alabama, Kansas, Texas, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Mississippi.
- Compared to the national 87% average high school graduation rates, data for other groups is as follows: Asian/Pacific Islander (94%), White (90%), Hispanic (83%), Black (81%), economically disadvantaged (81%), English learner (72%), and homeless students (68%). Note: Native Hawaiian is not listed separately.

Encouragingly, the same source observes that the dropout rate for 16- to 24-year-olds Native students decreased from 12.8% in 2012 to 9.9% in 2022. This finding reflects the percentage of 16-24-year-olds who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school diploma or an equivalency certificate.

> While 26% of AI/AN students did not complete high school in the conventional 4-year pattern in 2020-21, by age 25 or older, 92% of them had completed high school or above.

Bear in mind that some people do graduate later; for example, they may achieve Graduate Equivalency Degrees (GED). In 2021-22, 26% of AI/AN students did not complete high school in the conventional four-year pattern compared to 13% for all students. However, by age 25 or older, AI/AN adults had completed at least high school at a rate of 92% compared to a rate of 97% for White adults (NCES, 2023).

Post-Secondary Education

According to the American Indian College Fund (2025):

- AI/AN students age 18-24 have the lowest college-going rate (25%) of any racial or ethnic group in the U.S.
- Alarmingly, the enrollment rate dropped by 40% between 2010 and 2021.

At two-year institutions, AI/AN students tend to graduate within three years. This rate is similar to that of other racial/ethnic groups --31% for AI/AN students as compared to 35% overall (PNPI, 2023).

At two-year institutions, among first-time, full-time students beginning in 2019, 27.8% of Pacific Islander students graduated within three years, compared to 34.1% of all students (PNPI, April 2025)

Forty-four percent of first-time, full-time Native American students attending four-year institutions beginning in 2016 graduated within six years, compared to 64.6% for all students. Beginning in 2015, 51.6% of Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students graduated within six years, compared to 64.5% of all students (PNPI, September of 2025).

In 2024, 17.5% of AI/AN individuals aged 25 or over had earned a bachelor's degree or higher. This rate is up from 13.9% in 2014, but falls short of the 2024 national rate of 36.8% (PNPI, September of 2025).

In 2023, among NHPI individuals aged 25 or over, 19.1% had earned a bachelor's degree or higher. By comparison, in 2013 only 16% had earned a bachelor's degree or higher (PNPI, April of 2025).

The exact make-up of the Native population being discussed is often unclear in education statistics. A 2023 Census summary sheet does state that it refers both to those who identify solely as AI/AN and those of mixed heritage. Of individuals 25 years and over, Census data gives a lower percentage of bachelor's achievement than PNPI:

- Approximately 16% of them had less than a high school diploma
- 28% were high school graduates (includes equivalency but no higher education)
- 33% had some college or an associate's degree
- 15% had a bachelor's degree, and
- 8% had a graduate or professional degree (U.S. Census, 2023).

In addition to the aftermath of the colonial past, the American Indian College Fund (2025) points out that Native students are affected by the impact of "economics, geography, and race, such as affirmative action, financial aid, recruitment and access, and higher education policy."

Tribal colleges were created to overcome some of these barriers. The American Indian Higher Education Consortium asserts that "tribal identity is the core of every TCU, and they all share the mission of tribal self-determination and service to their respective nations" (AIHEC, n.d.)

- There are 37 tribal colleges on or near 64 reservations in 23 states (Bureau of Indian Education, n.d.) Most but not all are two-year programs.
- Salish Kootenai College in Montana has the highest graduation rate at 52%. Haskell University in Kansas has the second highest at 46%. Chief Dull Knife College, also in Montana, has the third highest at 44% (College Values Online, 2025)
- 18,672 students were in enrolled in tribal colleges in 2023 (Data USA, n.d.).

Reflections

Native communities continue to face systemic barriers and challenges when it comes to education; however, Tribes and urban Indian organizations are increasingly reclaiming and redefining education to better serve the cultural needs of Native people. Indigenous communities place a strong emphasis on education as a means to preserve their cultures, languages, and traditions while also gaining the skills necessary to navigate modern society. Many Native communities have established their own schools, blending traditional knowledge with contemporary curricula to provide culturally relevant education.

Native youth are negatively affected by stereotypes and jokes generated at their expense; other children and teenagers do not have to deal with sports names, chants, and mascots. The National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) has long opposed the use of use Native-themed

mascots in schools. NCAI created a national tracking database of K-12 schools to identify, track, engage, and educate schools about mascots and the documented harm that they cause for Native people. NCAI reports that in 2023, 1,901 K-12 schools across 966 school districts have Native "themed" mascots (NCAI, n.d.).

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HEALTH

Life Expectancy

A detailed *Lancet* report (Dwyer-Lindgren, 2024) found that between 2000 and 2010, life expectancy increased for every American sector except for AI/AN individuals in the West; between 2010 and 2019, it declined again. (The West was defined as counties in Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming). Note that AI/AN individuals living elsewhere are not included.

Dwyer-Lindgren observes, "Low rates of health insurance and chronic underfunding of the Indian Health Service are barriers to this AI/AN population accessing health care. Higher rates of unemployment, lower rates of educational attainment, and historical legacy of systemic discrimination against AI/AN people and cultures have contributed to higher rates of excessive alcohol consumption, tobacco use, injuries, and dietary risk factors" (2024).

An analysis of 2022 data provided by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) found that life expectancy of American Indian/Alaska Natives declined 1.9 years between 2020 and 2021, more than any other race (Arias et al., 2023). The same report stated that the largest contributing factors to the decline for AI/ANs were COVID-19 (21.4%), unintentional injuries (21.3%), and chronic liver disease and cirrhosis (18.6%).

Arias et al. also reported that in 2022, the life expectancy for AI/AN males was 64.6 years and female life expectancy was 71.3 years. Life expectancy for AI/AN population remains much lower than the average for all races, which was 74.8 for males and 80.2 for females.

Why is Native Life Expectancy Declining?

"Low rates of health insurance and chronic underfunding of the Indian Health Service are barriers to this AI/AN population accessing health care."

Reviewing the same CDC data for *Native News Online*, Kunze (2022) observes that COVID-19 affected Native communities more than others – even though more Native people were vaccinated than Black or Hispanic people. She attributes this to barriers to healthcare services.

Infant Mortality

In 2022, the CDC reported that the infant mortality rate was 9.1 for AI/ANs and 4.5 for non-Hispanic White babies (HHS, 2025). Similarly, the infant mortality rate among NHPIs was 9.4. In the same year, AI/AN mothers were nearly three times as likely to receive little or no prenatal care as non-Hispanic White mothers (HHS, 2025). Hill et al. (2024) report that 12.6% of AI/AN mothers received late or no prenatal care.

In 2022, the infant death rate among Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders was 8.5 per 1,000 births (Ely & Driscoll, 2024).

Assessing the reasons for these discrepancies based on various sources, the National Council of Urban Indian Health (n.d.) cites cost, lack of culturally appropriate services, and discrimination as significant barriers to receiving recommended prenatal care.

Payment Source for Care

Based on U.S. Census data for 2021, Branch and Conway (2022) report:

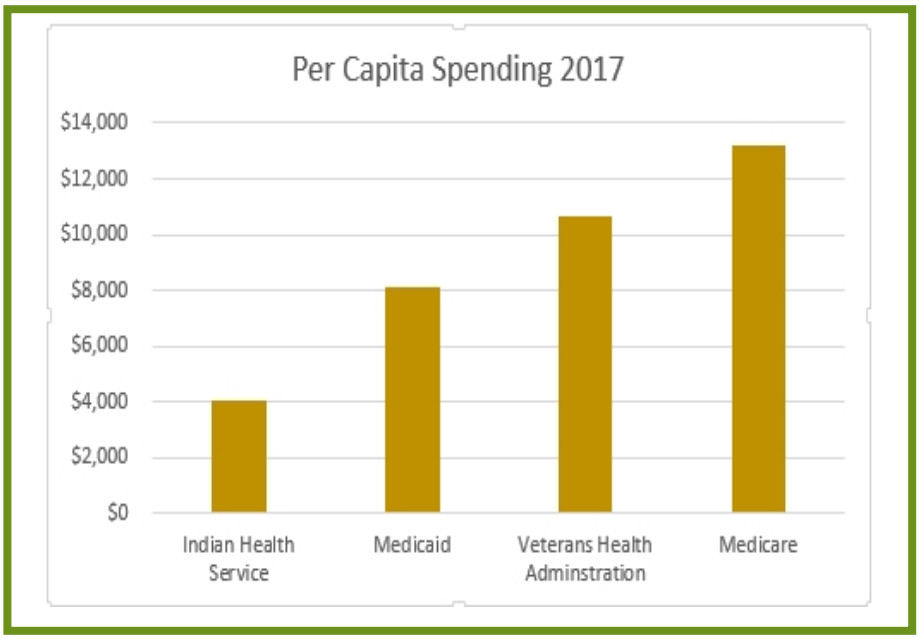
- 18.8% of people identifying as American Indian or Alaska Native are uninsured.
- 10.1% of people identifying as Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander alone are uninsured.
- 43.1% of AI/AN people were covered by private insurance compared to 74.2% for White, non-Hispanic people.
- 62.3% of NHPI people were covered by private insurance.

Delivery and Quality of Services

There are 1,003 Indian Health Service (IHS) tribal health care facilities within 37 states (Indian Health Service, 2023). Of these, 41 are in urban areas in 22 states.

According to the National Center for Health Statistics (n.d.), in 2023, 19.6% of individuals who identify solely as American Indian or Alaska Native reported fair or poor health. This rate was 22.5% among individuals identifying as both American Indian/Alaska Native and White. In comparison, 14.5% of those identifying solely as White reported their health as fair or poor. The same report estimates that 21.8% of Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders Only aged 18 and over reported fair or poor health (National Center for Health Statistics, n.d.).

On October 16, 2024, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services approved 1,115 waivers for Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Oregon, allowing Medicaid to cover traditional health care practices for American Indian and Alaska Native communities (Smithey, 2024). Smithey observed that culturally centered traditional health care practices have been shown to improve health and well-being. Some traditional practices that are commonly seen in Native American communities include talking circles, sweat lodges, and smudging. Healing practices may be unique to Native nations and locations, so there is no specific list of covered traditional healing services.



Adequacy of Funding and Services

The IHS provides health care to 1.6. million American Indian and Alaska Native people (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018). Taylor et al. (2024) observed that IHS facilities are chronically underfunded and can experience challenges such as staff shortages and lack of culturally effective care, difficulty maintaining continuity and quality care, and limited access to behavioral health and other specialty care, among others.

Significantly, according to the Government Accountability Office (2018), IHS per capita spending in 2017 was $4,078, as compared to $8,109 for Medicaid, $10,692 for the Veterans Health Administration, and $13,185 for Medicare. In other words, IHS spends less than half as much on a per-person basis compared to other federal health programs**.**

Ndugga et al. (2024) report that nonelderly AIAN (19%) and Hispanic (18%) people were more than twice as likely as their White counterparts (7%) to be uninsured as of 2022.

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services provide a directory of tribally run nursing homes and assisted living facilities (2024b). They list 38 such facilities, which serve tribal members and occasionally their descendants and other family members as well.

Native Americans as Physicians

In 2018, Native Americans represented just 0.4% of the total physician workforce (Council on Medical Education, 2018). Robeznieks (2019) stresses the importance of having AI/AN doctors

who are more likely to understand and respect Native cultural practices and health beliefs, which can lead to more effective and culturally sensitive care. Yet, Robeznieks quotes the Chair of the Minority Affairs Section of the American Medical Association (AMA) as stating that only 9% of medical schools have more than four AI/AN students, while 43% have none.

Disabilities

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found in 2020 that 30%, or one in three, American Indian or Alaska Native adults have a disability and that Native people overall are 50.3%more likely to have a disability when compared to the national average. The same report states that 16% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders adults have a disability (National Indian Council on Aging, 2023).

Health Status and Specific Diseases

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the leading causes of death for AI/AN between 2018-2022 were heart disease, unintentional injuries, malignant neoplasms, and Covid-19 (2024). Between 2018-2023 the leading causes of death for Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders (NHPI) were heart disease, malignant neoplasms, and unintentional injuries (CDC, 2024).

The diabetes rate among both AI/AN and NHPI populations is higher than for other populations. Sixteen percent of AI/ANs were diagnosed with diabetes between 2019-2021, the highest proportion among all populations. For NHPIs, the diabetes rate was 11.7%, the third highest among all populations. The rate for non-Hispanic Whites is 8.5% (CDC, 2024a).

AI/ANs adults also face significantly higher health risks related to diabetes compared to non-Hispanic whites. In 2023, AI/ANs were 1.6 times more likely to die from diabetes than non-Hispanic white people and twice as likely to be diagnosed with end-stage renal disease due to diabetes (HHS, 2024a).

Suicide

The suicide rate among the AI/AN population in 2020 was 24 per 100,000 people compared to 14 per 100,000 people overall (Suicide Prevention Resource Center, n.d.). In 2022, suicide was the second leading cause of death for AI/ANs ages 10–34. The overall death rate for suicide among adolescent AI/ANs was about 50% higher than for non-Hispanic whites and in 2021 the rate for AI/AN females ages 15–19 was more than five times higher than for non-Hispanic white females in the same age group (HHS, 2024b).

The multiple factors contributing to suicide among Native Americans have been studied for decades (Weinstock, 2024). Weinstock observes that “the national strategy for suicide

prevention isn't culturally relevant or sensitive to Native American communities' unique values." In addition, "Systemic issues and structural inequities, including underfunded and under-resourced services from the federal Indian Health Service, also hamper suicide prevention in Indigenous communities." Some assert that the historical trauma stemming from forced attendance at boarding schools further contributes to vulnerability (American Psychiatric Association, 2021).

In 2019, suicide was the leading cause of death for Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders ages 15-24 (HHS, 2024). Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders, however, were 70% less likely to receive mental health services or treatment as compared to non-Hispanic whites (HHS, 2024).

Dental Care

Approximately 40% of AI/AN children experience tooth decay by the age of 2, and this number increases to 80% by the age of 5 (Phipps et al., 2023).

Alcohol and Drug Use

Alcohol continues to be a concern among many tribal communities. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Agency (SAMHSA) conducted a household interview survey in 2023 and found that the largest percentage of AI/ANs aged 12 or older who used substances in the past month used alcohol (30%), followed by tobacco products, marijuana, and nicotine vaping. Nearly 2 in 3 of those who used alcohol were binge drinkers. Still, binge alcohol use in the past months was about the same for AI/ANs as for other racial and ethnic users (SAMHSA, 2023).

The same SAMHSA survey found that, based on substance use in the past year, one-quarter of AI/ANs were considered to have a substance use disorder. This was the highest rate among racial and ethnic groups studied, but about the same as that of multiracial individuals. However, another source says that only 10% have a substance abuse disorder (American Addiction Centers, 2025).

AI/ANs are 3.6 times more likely to die from alcohol-related causes compared to non-Hispanic Whites. For individuals aged 15-24, this risk increases to 12.2 times as likely (Karaye, Maleki, and Yunusa, 2023). While Native students report a particularly high use of alcohol, a study of data collected between 2005 and 2016 found that they also had a high prevalence of feeling the need to reduce or stop use (Terry-McElrath and Patrick, 2018).

Methamphetamine and fentanyl have been identified as major threats to tribal communities, with Tribes reporting 1,590 fatal and 899 non-fatal overdoses in 2023 (Melville, 2023).

Based on several studies, Subica et.al (2022) report that Native Hawaiian youth display the highest rates of alcohol use, chronic drinking and binge drinking of all Hawai'i youth. Nationally, NHPI youth reported among the highest prevalence of heavy episodic drinking and early alcohol use of any U.S. racial/ethnic group between 1991 and 2015. Among adults, Hawai'i data indicated that NHPIs reported higher age-adjusted rates of heavy episodic drinking than Whites. Community-partnered studies revealed that NHPI adults experienced alcohol use disorders at rates four times greater than the 5% U.S. population rate in 2019.

Reflections

Native communities face significant health disparities, including higher rates of chronic diseases and limited access to healthcare services. Many efforts to improve Native health are focused on combining culturally relevant care, promoting preventive health measures, and addressing the whole-person well-being. By advocating for better healthcare access and culturally competent care, Native communities continue to work towards health equity and preserving traditional practices.

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HOUSING AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Home Ownership and Housing

Housing Conditions

Congressional testimony in 2023 by Chelsea Fish, Executive Director of the National American Indian Housing Council, cites the 2018 *Broken Promises* report by the United States Commission on Civil Rights. It found that housing conditions for AI/AN had deteriorated since 2003, with the number of overcrowded households or households with inadequate plumbing growing by 21% and the number of families facing severe housing costs growing by 55% (Fish, 2023). Ramirez (2023) reports the following:

- Nearly 16% of households on tribal lands are overcrowded, compared to 2.2% nationally.
- 40% of on-reservation housing is considered inadequate, compared to 6% nationwide.

Hager (2021) reports that:

- 5.6% of houses on AI/AN land lacked complete plumbing (compared to 1.3 % of national average).
- 6.6% lacked complete kitchens (compared to 1.7% nationally).
- 12% lacked sufficient heating (compared to 2% for the U.S.).
- 49% of tribal homes lack access to reliable water sources.

Citing a 2022 report from the Department of Energy, *Tribal Business News* reported that over 16,000 tribal homes are without electricity, primarily in the Southwest and Alaska (Tribal Business News, 2024).

Fish argued that “Indian Country needs to build more housing units to meet its persistent and growing need which is largely due to the lack of funding and insufficient resources” but Federal programs required to fulfill the government’s trust obligations have been underfunded and have not kept up with inflation (2023). In 2017, the U.S. Department of Urban Development estimated that 68,000 additional housing units would be needed to replace inadequate units and eliminate overcrowding in tribal areas.

Hermann (2023) reports 56.7% of Native households own their homes. Fish (2023) notes that there are many unique barriers to homeownership in Indian Country, including the fact that federal trust land cannot be used to secure a home loan. Generally, Fish explains, “banks see doing business with Tribes and/or tribal citizens as a risk because if the borrower defaults on the loan, the lender cannot seize the land from a Tribe to recoup monies.”

A *USA Facts* article (2023) citing Census data stated that in 2022:

- 14.9% of AI/ANs lived in multigenerational households.
- 19.9% of NHPIs also lived in multigenerational households.
- The percentage of the total U.S. population living in multigenerational households was 6.8%.

Half of all purchase loans on tribal lands are used to purchase manufactured mobile homes, which is four times the rate elsewhere (Castillo et al., 2023). Also, 17% of AI/AN households are low-income renters, compared to 6% of White renters (National Low Income Housing Center, 2025).

Reviewing a more recent 2023 report by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Grabiner (2024) notes an increase in AI/AN who are unhoused. Grabiner summarizes key findings of the annual report:

- Among all people experiencing homelessness, 4% identified as AI/AN or Indigenous. This population was twice as likely to be experiencing unsheltered homelessness rather than sheltered homelessness.
- The largest percentage increase of people who were unhoused between 2022 and 2023 was among people who identified as AI/AN or Indigenous, which increased by 18% (1,631 more people).

Native Homelessness is Increasing

The largest percentage increase of people experiencing homelessness between 2022 and 2023 was among people who identified as AI/AN or Indigenous.

Telecommunications

In 2020, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) estimated that 18% of households on tribal lands lacked broadband compared to about 4% in non-tribal areas (GAO, 2022). However, some estimates suggest that over 30% of population on tribal lands lack access to broadband that provides minimally adequate speeds (White House, 2022).

Out of 574 federally recognized Tribes, it is estimated that 80 tribal networks are either selling or operating active institutional networks (Community Networks, n.d.).

There are 55 tribally owned radio stations in 18 states (Moylan, 2024).

Roads and Transportation

The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) is responsible for maintaining many of the public roads on tribal lands. BIA states that these are "often major corridors that provide access for tribal communities through which medical, educational, commercial and recreational services and opportunities are delivered or made available to tribal members and the general public." BIA reports:

> *Many of these BIA roads are in failing to fair condition and are not built to any adequate design standard and have safety deficiencies. In FY2012, approximately 5,150 miles, or 17%, were considered to be in acceptable condition based on the BIA Service Level Index condition assessment criteria. The remaining roads, 23,850 miles, or 83%, were in unacceptable condition. Many of these roads are used today for vehicular traffic even though the roads were never planned or designed for that use* (U.S. Department of the Interior, n.d.).

The U.S. Department of Transportation (2025) observes that "tribal communities are made vulnerable by unsafe and often inaccessible roads, bridges and ferries. There are aging and unsafe bridges that are used for economic development for tribal nations and to transport children to school that are in need of improvement." Its TPP Bridge Program is designed to provide financial support to Tribes to address these issues.

Traffic accidents are a leading cause of death for AI/ANs. The Centers for Disease Control (2025) reports that:

- Among Native youth ages 0-19 years old, motor vehicle traffic crash deaths were 8 times as high as other racial and ethnic groups.
- Among Native adults 20 years old or older motor vehicle traffic crash deaths were 7 times as high as other racial and ethnic groups.

The CDC cites low seat belt use, low car seat and booster seat use, and impaired driving as risk factors for the high death rate. For example, the seat belt usage rate in Indian Country is 78%, which is lower than the national average of 92% across the United States (CDC, 2023). The CDC states that improvements in highway infrastructure, laws, and enforcement can address and overcome these risk factors (2025).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control and the Indian Health Service's Prevention Program partnered with several Tribes to implement programming to increase safe driving (CDC, 2023). They report:

- The Hopi Tribe improved collaboration with law enforcement to strengthen the existing seat belt law resulting in seat belt use increase of 33% among drivers and 50% increase among passengers between 2011–2014.

- The Yurok Tribe implemented the Buckle Up Yurok Program and increased car seat use by 34% between 2011–2014.
- The San Carlos Apache Tribe focused on reducing alcohol-impaired driving and saw an increase in driving under the influence arrests and a decrease in the number of vehicle crashes.

Lack of transportation was listed as the number one barrier to accessing medical care (11.2%) in the 2017-2020 needs assessment survey cycle by the National Resource Center for Native American Aging (2021).

Reflections

The U.S. is currently experiencing a housing crisis, and Tribes are significantly impacted. Tribes are addressing housing shortages through various initiatives such as developing affordable housing projects, leveraging federal grants like the Indian Housing Block Grant, and creating homeownership programs. They are also focusing on urban housing needs, promoting sustainable building practices, and incorporating renewable energy solutions. These efforts aim to improve living conditions, preserve cultural heritage, and foster economic self-sufficiency within Native communities.

It is a cultural tradition among American Indian/Alaska Natives to place value on extended families. Each family member plays a role in a multigenerational household. This could be one reason that the number of multigenerational homes is higher among AI/ANs.

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RELIGION

Religious Identification

The Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) reports the following (2021):

- 60% of AI/AN identify as Christian. Religious affiliation among Native Americans has had no substantial shift since 2013. Of those who identify as Christian:
  - 47% are Protestant, and
  - 11% are Catholic.
- 28% of AI/AN report no religious affiliation.
- A mixture of religions makes up the last 12%. The PRRI report does not mention the Native American church.
- The Native American Church is the largest Indigenous religion in the U.S., with approximately 300,000 members (Thompson, 2023).

Another PRRI study (2022) broke the U.S. into sectors, including one called Native Lands. This sector included "places with large Native American populations." Of all the sectors, Native Lands had the largest share of religiously unaffiliated people (32%).

Several religions reported the number of their churches that were predominately Native American as of 2020. These included more than 340 Catholic parishes in the U.S. (USCCB, n.d.) and 422 Southern Baptist churches (ERLC, 2023).

Data on religious breakdown specific to Native Hawaiians is not available; however, many accounts, documented by the Center for Oral History, describe a blending of Christian and traditional spiritual beliefs (Center for Oral History, n.d.). One of these sources observes, "Native Hawaiians continue to engage in traditional religious and spiritual practices today, often adhering to Christian and traditional beliefs at the same time."

The American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978

The Act protects the rights of Native peoples to freely exercise their traditional religions, including ceremonies, rites, and spiritual and cultural practices.

The American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 was enacted to protect the rights of Native Hawaiians, American Indians, Eskimos, and Aleuts to freely practice their traditional religions, including access to sacred sites, use of sacred objects, and participation in ceremonies (Pogue, 2004).

Honoring Native American Ancestors

A 2020 report estimated that over 116,000 Native American human remains are still held in museums and other collections (GAO, 2022).

In 2023, revised regulations for the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act were published. Key changes include prioritizing Indigenous knowledge in the repatriation process, requiring consent from descendants or Tribes for activities involving human remains, and setting a five-year deadline for museums and federal agencies to update their inventories (U.S. Department of the Interior, 2023).

Two organizations have created guidance for those who discover Native burials concerning their legal obligations, appropriate action, and respect (Land Justice Futures & NARF, 2025). They stress that meaningful consultation with tribal Nations is necessary to ensure that human remains and cultural items are appropriately cared for or returned.

> The modern American concept of religion has never been up to the task of describing how Native peoples traditionally integrate the sacred with enviro-socio-economic-political facets of life and dominant society priorities. It follows that Native efforts to protect sacred places have failed in courts, even in the land of religious freedom.
>
> Native American Rights Fund (n.d.).

Sacred Places

Suzan Shown Harjo explains why sites may be considered sacred: “These lands may be sacred, for example, because of religious events which occurred there, because they contain specific natural products, because they are the dwelling place or embodiment of spiritual beings, because they surround or contain burial grounds or because they are sites conducive to communicating with spiritual beings. There are specific religious beliefs regarding each sacred site which form the basis for religious laws governing the site” (Harjo, 2024).

There are thousands of sacred sites. Some places are well-known to the public, such as “Devils Tower” in Wyoming. Its original and preferred Indigenous name was Bears Lodge. Others are well known to Indigenous people, such as Medicine Lake in California. Some sites are kept secret to help preserve them and keep them pure (Museum of the American Indian, 2025).

A Report to Congress by the Congressional Research Service states: “Indigenous peoples developed deep cultural, spiritual, and religious ties to sacred sites located on their ancestral homelands. However, due to forced removal, treaty negotiations, and other historical events, many no longer live on or near these ancestral lands; instead, the federal government now

often owns and manages land where sacred sites exist" (2025). The land-back movement has regained some such places for Tribes.

Reflections

Religion and spirituality in Native American communities are diverse, from Indigenous traditions to Christian denominations and many other beliefs. Despite historical efforts to suppress Native traditions, Indigenous peoples continue to practice and revitalize their spiritual customs, integrating them with contemporary life while preserving their rich cultural heritage.

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CRIME, PUBLIC SAFETY, LAW ENFORCEMENT

Victims of Crimes

Violence against AI/ANs is a major concern.

- Rosay (2016) reports that throughout their lives, 84% of AI/AN women and 82% of AI/AN men have reported being victims of violence.
- In 2021, 1.6% of all violent crime victims were identified as AI/AN. Specifically, they were victims of homicide (1.3%), rape (2.0%), robbery (1.1%), and aggravated assault (1.7%) (CRS, 2023).
- Throughout their lifetimes, 58% of AI/AN women and 51% of AI/AN men have experienced intimate partner violence (CDC, 2023). Rosay reports a lower figure of 43.2 for men (Rosay, 2016).

Native women are frequent victims of violence. Rosay (2016) reports:

- 56.1% of AI/AN women have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime compared to 49.7% of non-Hispanic White women.
- 97% of AI/AN females experience sexual violence or stalking at the hands of at least one non-AI/AN individual during their lifetimes, while 35% experience violence by AI/AN perpetrators.
- AI/AN women victims are 1.5 times as likely as non-Hispanic White women victims to be physically injured.

The National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA) reports that 16% of AI/AN children were victims of violence or witnessed violence in their neighborhoods (2022).

In 2019, homicide ranked as the third leading cause of death for AI/AN girls aged 15-19 and the fourth leading cause of death for AI/AN women aged 25-34 (Heron, 2021).

In 2024, Mike Simpson (R-ID), Chairman of the Interior and Environment Subcommittee, stated that: “Homicide is the number three leading cause of death for American Indian and Alaska Native females between the ages of 10 and 24 and the number five leading cause of death for 25 to 34-year-olds. Additionally, 40 percent of all victims of sex trafficking are identified as American Indian and Alaska Native women. In 2023 alone, over 5,800 American Indian and Alaska Native females were missing—and 74 percent were children.”

A multi-year analysis by the Not Invisible Act Commission (2023) pointed to numerous issues that must be addressed to bring justice for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and proposed solutions. One aspect of the problem was highlighted by the Urban Health Institute, which noted that out of 5,712 reported cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in 2016, only 116 were logged in the Department of Justice database (2018).

Indian Country faces persistent levels of crime and victimization. At the beginning of Fiscal Year 2025, the FBI's Indian Country program had approximately 4,300 open investigations, including over 900 death investigations, 1,000 child abuse investigations, and more than 500 domestic violence and adult sexual abuse investigations (U.S. Department of Justice, 2025).

AI/AN people are seldom perpetrators of hate crimes: of 6,406 hate crimes reported in 2019, 52.5%of the offenders were White and only 1.1%were AI/AN (FBI, 2019a). The same report also finds fewer Native victims: 2.4% AI/AN versus 48.5% Black/African American victims (FBI, 2019b). However, some sources believe that AI/AN are victims of hate crimes more frequently than the limited reported data available would suggest (Bennett, 2022; Hilleary, 2017).

Indian Country faces high levels of crime and victimization.

At the beginning of Fiscal Year 2025, FBI's Indian Country program had approximately 4,300 open investigations

Incarcerated for Crimes

The United States Sentencing Commission (2024) reports that of 61,678 cases reported in FY24, 1,727 involved Native American individuals. Of these, the most common offense types were:

- Drug trafficking (291)
- Aggravated assault (285)
- Firearms (225)
- Sexual assault (145).

Domestic violence was the most common violent offense for which inmates were held in Indian Country jails from 2013-2023 (Perry, 2025).

The Prison Policy Initiative (2023a) reports:

- AI/ANs are incarcerated in state and federal prisons at a rate of 763 per 100,000 people, which is double the national average and four times the incarceration rate for White people.
- Native youth, aged 17 or younger, are incarcerated in the juvenile justice system at a rate of 85 per 100,000, compared to 27 per 100,000 for White youth. For the lowest-level offenses, Native youth are confined in the juvenile justice system at three times the rate of White youth.
- In the state of Hawaii, NHPIs are 10% of the residents but 44% of the prison population of Hawaii (PPI, 2023b).

A nine-year study in a Southwest county (Camplain et al., 2020) found that AI/AN people were overrepresented in the justice system for alcohol-related offenses, yet they had higher alcohol abstention rates than the general population.

The disproportionate percentage of AI/ANs in prison differs. For example, South Dakota has a larger disproportionality rate than North Dakota (South Dakota Legislature, 2025).

Law Enforcement Facilities, Authority, and Resources

There are over 90 detention centers throughout Indian Country. A quarter of these are operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the remainder is operated by Tribes (U.S. Department of the Interior a, n.d.).

Tribal law enforcement consists of 258 agencies, each with at least one full-time sworn officer authorized to make arrests or issue citations in Indian Country (Bureau of Justice Statistics, n.d.). Tribal law enforcement consists of 234 tribally operated agencies, 23 BIA operated agencies, and the Village Public Safety Officer program in Alaska.

Tribal law enforcement officers cannot enforce federal and state laws on reservations without specific authority, limiting their ability to investigate and arrest non-Indians who commit crimes on tribal lands. Some states (e.g., Arizona, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Washington) allow tribal law enforcement officers to enforce state laws if they meet certain standards. These laws typically limit enforcement to crimes on tribal lands. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that 70% of tribal law enforcement agencies are authorized by states to enforce state laws (Congressional Research Service, 2024).

There are about 400 tribal justice systems, which function as a sovereign legal framework that governs laws and courts within tribal communities, throughout the nation (U.S. Department of the Interior b, n.d.).

There are approximately 99 Tribal Healing to Wellness Courts across Indian Country (Tribal Law and Policy Institute, n.d.). Similar to the drug court system, Tribal Healing to Wellness Courts integrate traditional healing practices within the legal process.

Reflections

Native communities often face challenges such as higher rates of violent crime, high rates of substance abuse, and limited access to law enforcement resources. Tribes and Native organizations are working to make Native American communities safer by using practices that respect their cultures and by building strong relationships between tribal, federal, and state law enforcement. These initiatives aim to respect tribal sovereignty, enhance community trust, and provide culturally competent services that address the specific needs of Native people.

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ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND CAREERS

Business Activity

Loans to AI/AN entrepreneurs backed by the Small Business Administration nearly doubled from $139 million in fiscal year 2020 to $278 million in fiscal year 2023 (GAO, 2022).

The U.S. Small Business Administration reports the following (2024):

- In 2021 there were 402,582 Native American-owned firms in the U.S. employing 307,933 people.
- AI/AN-owned firms generated $66.9 billion in total sales in 2021.
- Native American business owners represented 0.6% of all owners in 2022 compared to 0.9% of the overall labor force. The total number of Native American owners increased almost 16% from the prior year.
- In 2021, Native American-owned firms represented 1.2% of firms in the United States.
- The highest share of Native American-owned firms was in the Mining and Gas sector, while the largest number of Native American-owned businesses was in the Construction sector.

Referencing the Federal Reserve Bank's 2022 Small Business Credit Survey and the U.S. Census Bureau's 2020 Annual Business Survey, Goff (2023) observes:

- 40% of Indigenous-owned businesses have been established in the last two years.
- While 51% of Indigenous-owned businesses received all or most of the financing they sought, 44% did not receive any funding.
- 37% of Indigenous-owned businesses were operating at a loss by the end of 2021.

In 2022, the percentage of 18-24 year olds who were neither enrolled in school nor working was higher for those who were American Indian/Alaska Native (27%), Pacific Islander (24%), or Black (20%) than for the average of all groups (13%) (NCES, 2024).

Types of Employment

Ramirez (2019) reports:

AI/AN individuals serve in the armed forces at five times the national average, with Native people having the highest per-capita involvement of any population in the U.S. military.

- Native women serve in the military at higher rates than women of other racial and ethnic groups. Nearly 20% of AI/AN service members were women, compared to 15.6% of female service members from all other racial and ethnic groups.
- Reasons for serving are diverse (Simkins & Barett, 2019).

A Record of Service

AI/AN individuals serve in the armed forces at five times the national average.

Akee (2021) reports:

- In 2017, there were 158,217 AI/AN veterans, and 65,749 of them used at least one VA benefit or service.
- The top three types of jobs available on or near reservations are in the food and lodging, public administration, and arts and recreation sectors.

As of 2024, the Indian/tribal gaming business generated $43.9 billion in FY 2022 Gross Gaming Revenues. Out of 574 federally recognized Tribes, 243 have gaming businesses. These operations are located in 29 states. Starting from recreational origins and bingo, this federally regulated industry now accounts for the most economic development (National Indian Gaming Commission, 2025a).

As of 2025, Indian gaming supported 1.2 million jobs, directly and indirectly (Indian Gaming Association, 2025b).

Reflections

Traditionally, Indigenous economies were diverse and adapted to their environments, but colonization and systemic barriers have disrupted traditional livelihoods and continue to have long-lasting effects. Today, tribal communities emphasize self-governance and self-determination in tribal communities as they work toward economic equity. Many Tribes are developing economic policies, managing lands, and creating enterprises that reflect their cultural values.

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The Indigenous Affairs Committee (IAC) of the Baltimore Yearly Meeting (a regional Quaker organization) provides resources to encourage non-Natives to engage in advocacy for and with Indigenous people and engages in advocacy to support Native people in the U.S.

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Quick Facts About Indigenous Americans

This collection of data on Native Americans, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians was compiled and prepared by Alexis Contreras (Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde).

Alexis Contreras is a citizen of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and holds a Bachelor of Science in Sociology from Portland State University. She brings over 15 years of experience working in tribal communities, supporting a wide range of programs that strengthen the well-being of Native children, families, and communities.

Alexis spent nearly 12 years with the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA), contributing to research and community development efforts to improve child welfare systems across Indian Country. Her work includes leading the creation of culturally based resources for Tribes and Native communities, collaborating closely with tribal partners on systems change initiatives, and conducting community-based research in partnership with Tribes and tribal organizations.

Alexis currently continues her work in Indian Country as an independent contractor. A skilled trainer and facilitator, Alexis continues to serve Native communities by training new facilitators in *Positive Indian Parenting* and providing training across a range of topics, including Indigenous health and reproductive justice, early childhood education, and building anti-racist learning environments.