

Addressing Poverty on Native American Reservations

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## Addressing Poverty on Native American Reservations

Increased poverty leads to lower life expectancy on Native American reservations and we need to address it. According to the most recent statistic, the U.S. Census Bureau shows that 25.4 percent of American Indian and Alaska Natives are in poverty; that is one in four Natives living in poverty, more than every other race individually in America ([ncrc.org](http://ncrc.org)). As a Native American this does not surprise me and likely would not surprise any other natives in America. With genocide and dislocation of Native Americans it has still today affected, reservations. It is very clear just by looking at most Native American reservations that they are very poor. According to [kunk.org](http://kunk.org), “49% of tribal homes do not have access to reliable water sources, clean drinking water or basic sanitation.”

It is apparent that Natives need help in decreasing poverty rate. But how? Economically, there are many reasons that could lead to poverty for Native Americans, such as location. Many tribes are located in remote areas making it difficult for residents to have job opportunities. There is a lack of infrastructure for many reservations which leads to a lack of economic opportunities, such as, support for businesses, reliable transportation and access to capital.

It is also important to understand the history of colonialism and forced assimilation. Natives were forcibly located by white settlers from their original land to more remote areas. An excerpt from History.com reads, “At the beginning of the 1830s, nearly 125,000 Native Americans lived on millions of acres of land in Georgia, Tennessee, Alabama, North Carolina and Florida—land their ancestors had occupied and cultivated for generations. But by the end of the decade, very few natives remained anywhere in the southeastern United States.” This forced

relocation was called the Trail of Tears which not only forcibly migrated and assimilated Native Americans but also killed thousands fighting for their land, which had been theirs for thousands of years. Ultimately, this forced migrant led to poverty and a lower life expectancy on Native American reservations in the Eastern United States tribes being; Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, and Seminole.

It is apparent the location of Native Americans reservations are remote and lack variables to help increase economic growth, so what can be done to help fix this? One way to help promote economic growth could involve providing financial incentives for businesses to invest in these communities, as well as supporting local entrepreneurs and small business owners. By creating more job opportunities and supporting local businesses, we can help stimulate economic growth and reduce poverty on reservations. However, most Natives do not own their land or home on reservations because they are owned and managed by the federal government. This makes mortgaging their assets for loans unfeasible, making it difficult to start a business on reservations. According to [minorityhealth.hhs.gov](https://minorityhealth.hhs.gov), “As of 2022, there are 324 federally recognized American Indian reservations in the U.S. The 2020 Census reveals that 87 percent of those who identify as AI/AN alone or in combination population live outside of tribal statistical areas; 13 percent live on reservations or other trust lands” (Note: AI/AN was abbreviated for American Indian/Alaskan Native). Most tribal members do not live on reservations because of the poor economic opportunities. In my opinion it would be a privilege to move outside the reservation; I always relate this to one living in the “hood” and wanting to get out to search for better opportunities. Why would someone want to live in such a remote, economically

disadvantaged area with less opportunities? Tribal members may want to relocate to urban areas with greater employment prospects and access to services.

Improving job quality is also a key factor in reducing poverty among Native Americans. But, what are some ways job quality can contribute to poverty reduction amongst Native reservations? First, we must have livable wages and policies that address wage disparities. In addition, there should be support for economic sectors that offer higher-paying jobs, such as healthcare, technology, and renewable energy. Such actions can create opportunities for Native Americans to secure better paying positions. According to [jec.senate.gov](http://jec.senate.gov), “Approximately 54% of Native Americans were employed according to the March 2022 three-month rolling average, relative to 60% of all individuals... The three-month rolling average unemployment rate for Native Americans in March 2022 was 7.8%, greater than the one-month unemployment rate for all other minority groups.” Furthermore, it has been proven Natives are working more than other minority groups. Despite this, it is also proven that AI/AN Median Household income is lower than the rest of groups in America. Some other facts include, “In 2020, the median income of AI/AN (alone) households was \$45,877 compared to \$64,994 for the entire nation.” ([ncoa.org](http://ncoa.org)). As for wealth (note: wealth is the value of assets you own such as money and property. Income is the amount you make in a time period such as your salary) [nrcr.org](http://nrcr.org) states, “an estimate of a median \$5,700 for Native American wealth compared to a median \$65,000 of wealth for the American population as a whole. This data has Native American wealth at about 9% of the national average.”

Native Americans are also faced with higher unemployment rates compared to the national average. According to Bureau of Labor Statistics the unemployment rate averaged

11.1% for AI/AN during the start of 2022 in January, which was the highest among every race in America, with the overall population average being 4 percent in the United States. If there were more job opportunities and better job quality on Native American reservations that number would be lowered.

Another issue common in most Native American tribes, that is one of the most important issues among Natives to bring up is substance abuse. Personally, this is a problem my own tribe and family has dealt with and has ultimately led to multiple deaths. It is an essential and important issue to point out that does not have enough awareness. According to [americanaddictioncenters.org](http://americanaddictioncenters.org), “Native Americans have the highest rates of alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, inhalant, and hallucinogen use disorders compared to other ethnic groups.” Other facts important to note regarding substance abuse among natives are: “Native Americans have the highest methamphetamine abuse rates, including past month use at more than 3 times the rate of than any other group. They are also more likely to report drug abuse in the past month (17.4%) or year (28.5%) than any other ethnic group” Substance abuse is also too common for young adult Native Americans, “Substance abuse and addiction are major concerns among young Native Americans. Results from the 2018 NSDUH show that nearly 1 in 5 Native American young adults (aged 18-25 years) has a substance use disorder, including 11% with illicit drugs and 10% with alcohol. The survey also indicates that approximately 4 in 10 Native American adolescents (aged 12-17 years) have a lifetime prevalence of illicit drug use.” ([americanaddictioncenters.org](http://americanaddictioncenters.org)) (note: NSDUH is an acronym for National Survey on Drug Use and Health). Unfortunately, as a Native American these statistics are not surprising in the slightest.

Now that the issue is raised, what are some ways we can fix this? One way these statistics could possibly be reduced is to develop prevention programs that are specifically designed for Native American communities. These programs should promote community involvement and empower individuals to make healthier choices. “The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration reports that 13% of Native Americans need substance use treatment, but only 3.5% actually receive any treatment.” Native Americans also have less access to substance abuse centers making it more difficult to rehab from addiction, “Unfortunately, many Native Americans have limited access to substance abuse services due to transportation issues, lack of health insurance, poverty, and a shortage of appropriate treatment options in their communities.” ([americanaddictioncenters.org](http://americanaddictioncenters.org)). Improving access to mental health services, including counseling, therapy and support groups could substantially reduce substance abuse in Native American tribes such as my own. Furthermore, there should be an enhanced access to treatment programs along with offering early intervention services that identify individuals at risk and provide support before substance abuse problems escalate. It is important to also incorporate ongoing support and aftercare services to individuals in recovery to help them maintain sobriety. This may include relapse prevention programs, sober housing options, vocational training and ongoing counseling. Most importantly there needs to be increased education and awareness about the risks and consequences of substance abuse within Native American communities, such as providing information about the impact of substance abuse on physical and mental health and relationships. This could be taught in schools at an early age. Lastly, making education a priority is essential to keeping young adults focused on school rather than participating in substance abuse or other mischievous things.

Regarding Native American kids going to school, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) stated that, “the dropout rate among Native American students is between 29 percent and 36 percent, and usually during some time between 7th and 12th grade” ([meaww.com](http://meaww.com)). It is also evident that Native American students are more likely to be suspended than most other racial groups, “In general, 90 percent of Native American students study in public schools across the US and are reportedly more likely to be suspended than any other racial group (except African-Americans). A majority of the remaining 10 percent attend schools administered by the BIA, where the nationwide graduate numbers and test scores are among the lowest.” ([meaww.com](http://meaww.com)). This is an issue that should be looked into further. In addition, there has been data that shows “American Indian children are less likely to reside with two parents than are children in the total U.S. population. Also, American Indian women are less likely to ever marry and more likely to be divorced than women in general.” ([ncbi.nlm.nih.org](http://ncbi.nlm.nih.org)). Relevant to these statistics it can be concluded that Native Americans students who are suspended and/or dropped out of school are likely due to parental absence in the child’s life. To help minimize school drop out percentages there should be services provided for Native American families, such as parenting programs and counseling to promote school attendance. Moreover, engaging with tribal leaders, parents and community members can be done to develop educational policies, programs, and initiatives for Native American children. Lastly, investments in early childhood education programs for learning can also be an opportunity to help young Native American kids succeed in school.

In summary, the issue of increased poverty on Native American reservations has a direct impact on the lower life expectancy of Native Americans. However, by implementing strategies to decrease poverty such as, creating economic opportunities, improving job quality, and

addressing substance abuse, we can begin to mitigate the challenges faced on Native American reservations. Although, Natives Americans are the second smallest census population in the United States, Natives still deserve the help they need and we must not let that forbid them getting any. It is important to recognize the historical and economic factors that have contributed to the current situation but also come together and work together to empower Native communities to promote equity, improve poverty rates and life expectancy of Native Americans.



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