

# Poverty on native american reservations in the united states

[Sociology](#), [Poverty](#)



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The Washington Post cites “ a toxic collection of pathologies—poverty, unemployment, domestic violence, sexual assault, alcoholism, and drug addiction” as some of the many issues that afflict high percentages of the Native American community (Horwitz 2014). Statistically, minority groups in America have higher rates of poverty; this rings especially true for Native Americans. Of those who identified as American Indian or Alaska Native in 2012, 29. 1% were living below the poverty line (Krogstad 2014). As a small minority comprising only about 2% of the US population in 2013, American Indians and Alaskan Natives are often overlooked by the general population (Peralta 2014). A large chunk, about one third, of the Native American population resides on Indian reservations, and many others migrate back and forth, or live in adjacent communities. These reservations, over 500 in total, exercise different levels of political control, but most tend to be poorly run and economically underdeveloped (Cornell and Kalt 2006).

The unique intersection of political, economic, and cultural challenges faced by Native Americans, residing on or near tribal reservations, calls for a comprehensive and carefully tailored approach to tackle poverty in this community. Poverty: Causes and Correlates Poverty can be a condition experienced from birth, the result of bad luck. It may come from a poor decision or a series of poor decisions. In general, there is not one “ cause” of poverty, but rather a wide range of factors that may precede or perpetuate economic instability. The Brookings Institute developed a Social Genome Model in 2012 that defines indicators that lead to a successful life, including “ being born to parents who are ready to raise a child; being school-ready by age 5; acquiring core competencies in academic and social skills by age 11;

<https://assignbuster.com/poverty-on-native-american-reservations-in-the-united-states/>

being college- or career-ready by age 19; living independently and either receiving a college degree or having an equivalent income by age 29; and finally being middle class by middle age” (Sawhill, Winship, and Grannis 2012). The model’s indicators for success are protective factors, which conversely identifies a failure to meet these goals as risk factors. There are many factors that can throw an individual “ off-track,” and unfortunate a child’s level of advantage at birth is a strong indicator of their future success (Sawhill, Winship, and Grannis 2012). Obviously, individuals do not succeed purely by personal will or as a result of birth circumstance: their interactions within a number of systems may act as protective or risk factors to their achievement. These interactions can be broken down to three general levels: micro (inter- and intra-personal), mezzo (community and/or family based) and macro (systemic or institutional). In most—if not all—instances, it is a combination of factors that leads an individual or family to poverty. Some examples may include, but are not limited to: a disability or mental health disorder (micro), lack of access to transportation or educational/occupational opportunities (mezzo), lack of public benefits, or having a criminal record (macro).

When we discuss poverty indicators for Native Americans, the same factors apply. Differences, however, particularly stress factors, may lie in the micro, mezzo, or macro environment. On an institutional level, Native Americans face many challenges that stem from centuries of oppression. Reservations, in many cases, receive developmental advice and conditional funding from non-Indian governments that can lead to economic failures (Cornell and Kalt

2006). Horrific assimilation practices, “ boarding schools” for Native American children, remained in practice as late as the 1970s (Horwitz 2014). Historical trauma and loss are significant; in one study, about half of participants indicated that thinking about these losses caused them distress, and the study revealed that these kinds of thoughts were causal to anxiety/affective disorders and substance dependence, both risk factors for poverty (Ehlers et al. 2013). Traditional governmental or private benefits (potential protective factors) may not be well suited to the Native American way of life. For example, many American Indians living on communally owned reservations have limited access to credit, as they may not own the land on which they live and therefore have nothing to use as collateral. Banks must coordinate with tribal governments in order to tailor banking practices to suit the needs of the particular community—not an easy task (OCC 2010). Native American indicators for poverty look similar to those for the rest of the American population, but may be heightened by micro and mezzo stresses and by macro institutional deficits. In general, the effects of poverty on the individual, family, and broader community are innumerable.

Low-income households are more likely to have family members with higher instances of alcoholism and other substance use disorders, and are more likely to experience a whole host of health complications due to high stress levels, poor diet, and environmental risk factors. Communities with low economic advantage tend to be more dangerous, exposing children and adults to trauma (Evans 2004). The risk for child maltreatment is higher in low-income households for a variety of reasons, such as: lack of food or

adequate shelter, parental neglect due to poor mental health, inadequate childcare, heightened levels of violence and discord, et cetera (Cancian, Slack, and Yang 2010). Native Americans experience these trends at even more heightened levels. American Indian and Alaska Native children are exposed to more violence than any other race in the United States; they experience PTSD at rates comparable to veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. This exposure to violence and lack of access to resources in turn leads to “ altered neurological development, poor physical and mental health, poor school performance, substance abuse, and overrepresentation in the juvenile justice system” (Dorgan et al. 2014). American Indian and Alaska Native children were found to experience higher levels of child abuse and neglect: 21.7 out of 1,000 children were identified as victims, a rate higher than African American (20.2) or white (10.7) children (Sarche and Spicer, 2008). Though the national unemployment rate has begun to decline, the unemployment rate for Native Americans was nearly double that of the rest of the nation in 2014 (Peralta 2014). College readiness for American Indians has been declining over the last five years: 52% of students met none of the ACT’s college readiness benchmarks (Bidwell 2014). One study suggests that the historically, school has been a vehicle through which Native Americans were separated from their families, and forced to assimilate to more European/American cultural values. As a result, parental involvement is low and school performance suffers; the study calls for schools to meet the specific cultural and social needs of the American Indian and Alaska Native populations (Sarche and Spicer 2008). Considering the

history of education in this community and the low income of many students, it's no wonder Native Americans are struggling.

### **Prevention: Program Implementation and Evaluation**

To tackle the issue of poverty is to tackle not only the issue of limited economic resources, but also to minimize the incidence of its negative correlates. We can identify, then, different ways to minimize poverty, by: a) eradicating poverty before it sets in (primary); b) pulling poor individuals out of poverty (secondary); and c) reducing secondary risks associated with living in poverty, perhaps focusing on setting children on track to economic independence (tertiary). (Tracking children to achieve middle class status may also be considered as a form of primary intervention. ) We must consider that interventions should look different for Native Americans, respecting and (where possible) utilizing the unique traditions of each tribe so that cultural assimilation is not a by-product of our interventions. Due to the complex nature of the reservation's special status, and considering the failures and successes of some reservations compared to others, a broader discussion of economic stimulation must be discussed in tandem with efforts that target the individuals living in these Native nations. To effectively reduce poverty, individuals must be provided culturally competent assistance and the tribal reservations themselves need to move toward self-sufficiency. The Great Smoky Mountain Study explored psychological outcomes on American Indian children of different age groups whose families were given an income supplement totaling about \$9, 000 per year. The study found that when cash assistance was provided throughout adolescence,

particularly beginning at a young age, those American Indians had fewer incidences of adult psychiatric disorders including substance use disorders (Costello et al. 2010). Other cash assistance programs have been implemented (both with and without conditions, to varying populations) with much success, though as The Great Smoky Mountain Study reveals, these programs provide the most effective long-term outcomes when they begin during youth or early adolescence (Costello et al. 2010; World Bank 2010). A targeted cash assistance program for poor children funded by the government or nonprofit sector could be a micro solution to improve mental health conditions in the Native American community and over time, save money on associated rehabilitation and health costs. Many other micro- and mezzo-level models of intervention have been successful in the Native American community.

The “ Aunties and Uncles” program, created in Sonoma, CA, was successful in screening for youth mental health issues and depression, incorporating a mentor model that connected children with “ aunts” or “ uncles. ” These mentors took on a much more thorough, invested role than a traditional mentor would, reflecting the role of an uncle or aunt in traditional Native American culture. The mentors were able to emphasize strong community values and safe mental health practices to both children and their parents (Schweigman 2011). The National Indian Child Welfare Association developed a curriculum that has been widely adopted across the United States: Positive Indian Parenting (PIP), which integrates traditional Native American practices into parenting today (Schweigman 2011). Two Native

American values that can act as protective factors for poverty have been identified in one study as extended-family networks and an autonomous child-rearing style (Sarche and Spicer 2008). Programs like PIP and “Aunties and Uncles” encourage the use of traditional parenting and community relations with children. The enlargement of a family’s social network would remove one correlate of poverty and have a domino-like effect (i. e. access to social support, low-cost childcare alternatives, positive adult relationships). Evidence has shown that “the extent to which parents adhere to traditional tribal values is related to positive aspects of children’s early development,” and moreover, a child’s allegiance with traditional culture has shown to be protective against mental health problems during adulthood (Sarche and Spicer 2008). Programs like these that combine best practice intervention models with unique cultural strengths of Native American communities should be made available on reservations or in areas with high concentrations of American Indians. Some issues of poverty and its correlates (violence exposure, trauma, and related symptoms) can be tackled on the mezzo level by equipping tribes themselves to deal with these problems. Senator Dorgan’s report cites tribal sovereignty as “vital” to the protection of Native American children at risk. His proposal suggests that the federal government should consider three core values: “Empowering Tribes, Removing Barriers, and Providing Resources” (Dorgan et al. 2014). To reduce child maltreatment and trauma exposure that is so often correlated with poverty, tribes must be able to prosecute perpetrators of violence and child abuse. The proposal recommends the establishment of a Native American Affairs Office in the White House, and also cites numerous laws that should



be passed, granting tribes the authority to assert criminal jurisdiction and allocating the funds they would require to do so. This could also allow tribes to deal with juvenile delinquency in their own manner, which may cut the high numbers of adolescents in the juvenile justice system and reduce risks associated with early criminal activity (Dorgan et al. 2014). All the aforementioned programs—cash assistance, culturally competent training and mentoring programs, tribal punitive empowerment—are direct programs that, while potentially beneficial, do not necessarily guarantee that those living in poverty will achieve economic independence. To alleviate those currently living poverty and lead the Native American community to a more fruitful future, reservations require major, macro-level economic stimulation and employment opportunities. Research studying Indian reservations identifies three attributes of a successful Native nation:

They control their own affairs,

They establish strong self-governing institutions, and

They base their institutions on their own indigenous values (Taylor 2008).

The Harvard Project for Indian Economic Development came up with a similar list (Cornell and Kalt 2006). Supporting self-sufficiency of the community may seem like a cop-out, but the reality is that reservations reserve the right to act as U. S. states, actively exercising their sovereignty and developing economic opportunity. Indian reservations can appoint Native American leaders who have their best interest at heart. The Harvard Project for Indian Economic Development has done extensive research on

<https://assignbuster.com/poverty-on-native-american-reservations-in-the-united-states/>

this topic. One report goes into detail about the “ standard approach” versus the “ nation-building approach,” the latter of which has proven to lead to sustained economic development. The bottom line is that a “ standard approach,” involving short-term developmental planning by non-Indigenous communities, tends to lead to economic failure. When an Indian nation itself takes control over its own development and management of affairs and resources (which is possible given the Indian Self-Determination and Education Act of 1975) they tend to succeed economically and make better long-term decisions for the reservation as a whole. The evidence speaks for itself: over the past fifteen years, the researchers “ cannot find a single case of sustained economic development in which an entity other than the Indian nation is making the major decisions about development strategy, resource use, or internal organization” (Cornell and Kalt 2006). The role of non-Indian governments is to be a resource, not a source for decision-making.

Block grants should be given that allow Native Americans to make their own decisions about developmental priorities. The federal government can act as a partner rather than a consultant, and should recognize the legitimacy and necessity of Indian governments. Relinquishing federal control is imperative if Indian nations are to ever flourish economically (Cornell and Kalt 2006).

With appropriate policy and non-conditional assistance from the federal government, Native reservations can strengthen economically and add value to the nation as a whole. An ideal situation is one in which the Native nation operates with efficiency and affluence comparable to non-Indigenous communities, but with a uniquely Indigenous benefit to its habitants and

neighbors. The success of the Tulalip Tribes in Washington is one example of this. The tribe's formation of Quil Ceda Village, a 2,000-acre development including land for parks and environmental preservation, a business park, a casino, and space for future developments provided economic stimulation and jobs, significantly reducing unemployment (over 35% in ten years) and welfare dependency. The development has also promoted indigenous entrepreneurship, which provides individuals not only with economic opportunity, but also with the opportunity to innovate and be self-sufficient.

The Village gained municipality status—a smart move that allows them a unique infrastructure that attracts businesses. Their macro-level approach proved highly effective and provides the tribe with the funds to implement their own social programs that can in turn provide more micro and mezzo interventions (CITE). Many studies recognize that a key component to the well being of Native Americans is linked to the maintenance of their own culture (Ethers et al. 2013; Sarche and Spicer 2008; Zaferatos 2013). Not only will we see economic benefit and poverty reduction if Indian nations are pushed to practical sovereignty, but the general well being of Native American individuals will improve. Conclusion Native Americans experience poverty and associated correlates at rates higher than many other subgroups. Indian reservations tend not to flourish economically and as a result, rampant poverty and correlates—to name a few, childhood violence exposure, unemployment, even suicide—ensue. To combat poverty among this community, cash assistance models can be utilized, but a larger, systemic intervention needs to take place. We must be careful to intervene

in a way that does not re-traumatize Native Americans by merely forcing them to assimilate to the rest of the nation; we can attempt to recreate a sense of tribal pride and autonomy through sovereignty and economic stimulation. With the assistance, not demands, of the United States government there to guide each tribe to their own self-sufficiency, reservations can begin to flourish, in turn alleviating poverty and its correlates. An economically flourishing reservation is not only favorable to its inhabitants, it is favorable to surrounding cities and the United States as a nation. We cannot undo the historical oppression of the Native Americans, but we can work structurally to provide intervention methods that honor the cultural differences and benefits that each tribe has to offer.