

Issue Brief: Mass Incarceration of Native Americans and Latino Americans

Key Words

Native Americans (Amerindians), Latinos, Mass incarceration, Ethnic Self-Designation, Cultural Competency

Description

This issue brief focuses on exploring the relationship between Native Americans and Latinos in the United States. Additionally, this brief will shed some light on the overrepresentation of Native American and Latino populations in the criminal justice system.

Key Points

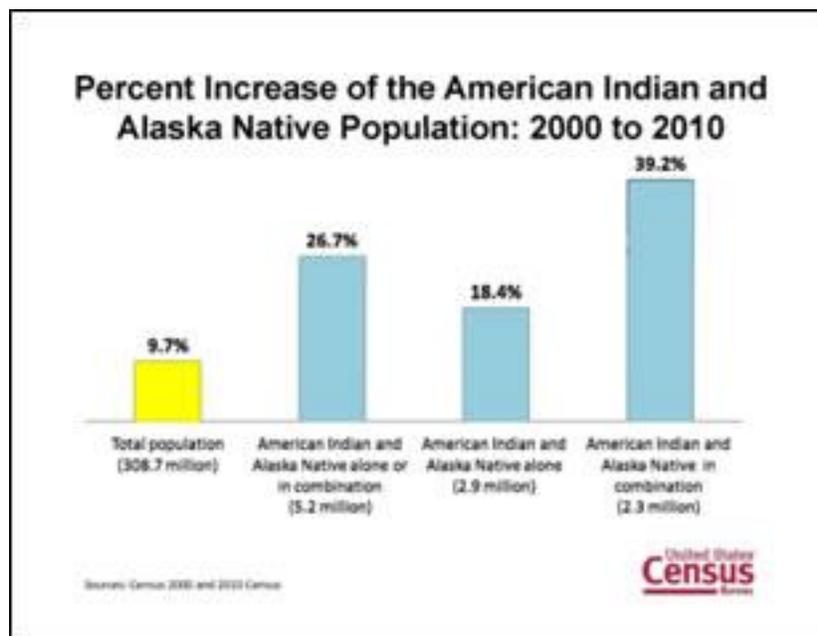
- There is some evidence that Latinos and Native Americans have a shared heritage in the United States, especially in places like New Mexico, Texas and California.
- More and more Latinos are using the term “American Indian” to define themselves. The number of Amerindians, a term for aboriginal peoples of the Americas, (North and South), who also identify themselves as Hispanic has tripled since 2000, from 400,000 to 1.2 million.
- Latinos and Native Americans have very distinct cultures. However, there is heavy influence of Amerindian customs and traditions in Hispanic culture.
- Unfortunately, both Latinos and Native Americans are minority populations in the United States (and its important to note that Latinos are the fastest growing minority population); they are disproportionately represented in the correctional system.
- This disproportionate representation in the correctional system leads to a large population of disenfranchised men and women that cannot participate in the political system.



At a festival June 26 in East Elmhurst, Queens, people from the Tlaxcala tribe of Mexico wore masks parodying the Spanish conquistadors. (Decker)

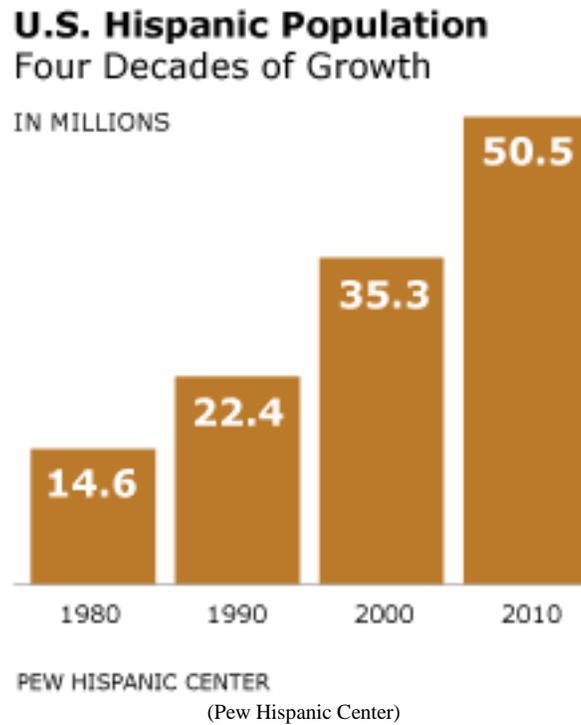
Since 2000, the number of Hispanics who identified themselves as Native American grew from 407,073 to 685,150, according to the 2010 census. There is significance in the labeling of a people who encompass a large range of Spanish speakers, nationalities and races. Many see the naming as Amerindian or Native as a way to combat the cultural assimilation and degradation by the Spanish. “The trend is part of a demographic growth taking place nationwide of Hispanics using “American Indian” to identify their race. The number of Amerindians — a blanket term for indigenous people of the Americas, North and South — who also identify themselves as Hispanic has tripled since 2000, to 1.2 million from 400,000” (Decker). Marzio Graza, creator of the Indigenous Cultures Institute in 2005, a nonprofit that researches and preserves indigenous cultures, says: "The Spaniards tried to destroy our civilization and history, outlawed our ceremonies, yet we are still here," Garza said. "With a bigger group of Native Americans, we

have a better chance of getting federal recognition and grants." Fairly recent studies from researchers at NYU Langone Medical Center have even found that the imprint of Native Americans, as well as West Africans brought to the U.S. and Latin America by the trans-Atlantic slave trade, have influenced the genes of the current Hispanic/Latino populations. It is clear that to some extent, there is a shared heritage between Latinos and Native Americans; one that is only now being actively explored.



(Census 2010)

The U.S. category American Indian and Alaskan native refers to people whose origins are in North, Central, and South America, and maintain some time of contact, affiliation and community. Between 2000 and 2010, this population grew by over 39%.



Similarly, Hispanic Americans are the fastest growing minority population in the United States. According to the 2010 Census, However, as Latino Americans and Native Americans grow in numbers in the United States, the maintenance of the sanctity of their culture has become even more difficult as disproportionate numbers of Native and Latino Americans are incarcerated in comparison to their White counterparts.



Inmates at Chino State Prison in California exercise in the yard. (Photo by Kevork Djansezian/Getty Images – Thompson)

Both Hispanics and Native Americans are more likely than their White counterparts to have a relationship with the judicial system. As of 2008, Amerindians only made up 3.6% of the nation's population. However, they are five times more likely than their White counterparts to be incarcerated or have some relationship with the criminal justice system (Tonry). The term cultural competency refers to the ability to be able to meet both Latino and Native Americans with strategies that match them both ethnically and culturally. For example, providing schools and educational systems with Latino and Native American teachers, that students will identify with, but also that are more familiar with many of the issues of their students. There needs to a shift in policy to remove barriers with criminal records and increase access to employment, housing and civil engagement (through voting). For Native Americans and Latino Americans to most effectively participate in the American political system, it is important that culturally competent policies attempt to keep them out of the judicial system, and prevent recidivism when they are released. In addition to high incarceration rates, both Hispanic Americans and Native Americans share a significant amount of adversity: low education attainment levels, substance abuse issues, unemployment, lack of affordable housing and societal marginalization. Due to high incarceration rates, and policies that "directly prohibit ex-felons from voting, disparities across communities will be produced" which will only prevent Hispanic Americans and Native Americans from voting for policies that will contribute to their social improvement (like substance assistance programs, more affordable housing and employment opportunities (Bowers & Preuhs).

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