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Issue Brief: European Americans and Native Americans

**KEY WORDS:**

European Americans, Native Americans, American Indians, Dependent nations, Limited sovereignty, Federal government

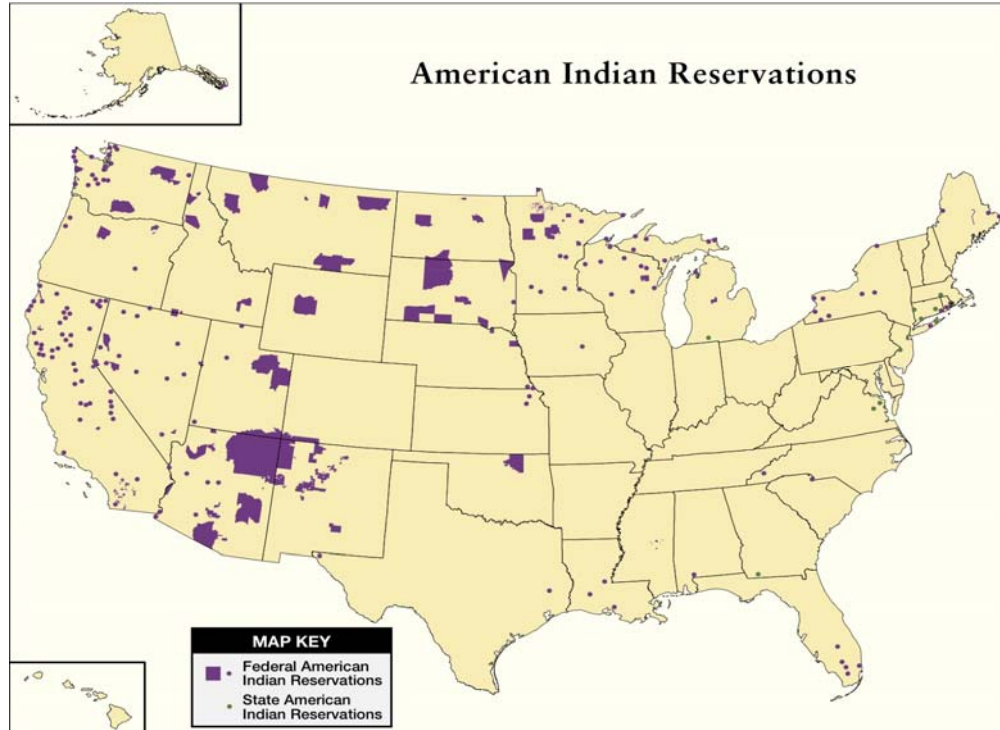
**DESCRIPTION:**

This issue brief examines the relationship between European/White Americans and Native Americans. Complicated even to the present day, the relationship between these two groups has historically been one of oppressor versus oppressed, a dichotomy that has since evolved but which serves to shed light on the intricacies of the contemporary Native American experience in comparison to that of white America.

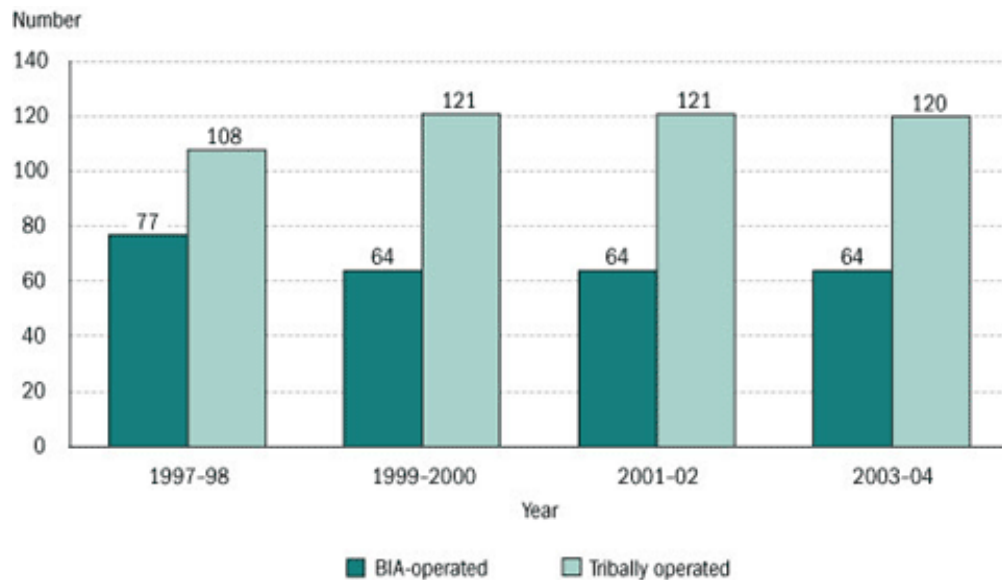
**KEY POINTS:**

- Native Americans or American Indians became targets of oppression soon after European colonists reached American soil.
- Native American tribes are considered “domestic dependent nations”, which in practical terms means that American Indians on reservations often have a deep-rooted dependency on federal funding.
- Compared to European Americans, and indeed to the rest of the country, American Indians suffer low levels of education and high levels of unemployment, suicide, and alcoholism.
- The special limited sovereignty status of Native American tribes serves, to some extent, to insulate American Indians from socioeconomic interactions with European Americans beyond the federal level.
- A “self-governance” movement among American Indians in recent years has pushed toward increased control over services like health and law enforcement.

**IMAGES:**



**Figure One:** This map of American Indian Reservations clearly shows the lasting effects of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which pushed many Native Americans from the east to the west of the United States. SOURCE: US Census Bureau <<http://www.census.gov/dmd/www/pdf/512indre.pdf>>



**Figure Two:** The chart above shows the number of Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)-funded school programs, by operational structure. As can be seen, there has been an increase in tribally operated schools within the last years. SOURCE: U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Office of Indian Education Programs (OIEP) <[http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/nativetrends/ind\\_2\\_2.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/nativetrends/ind_2_2.asp)>

**BRIEF:**

Among ethnoracial groups in the United States, it can be said that European Americans and Native Americans have the oldest ties. Historically, Native Americans predate European Americans on the continent, but this does not necessitate that Native Americans have enjoyed a sense of belonging and stability because of this. To be sure, it was only after centuries of subjugation that Native Americans were recognized as part of independent tribal nations as well as American citizens in 1924. Today, the relationship between European or white Americans and Native Americans continues to be characterized by its complexity.

Native Americans - or American Indians as they are often referred to – became targets of oppression soon after European colonists reached American soil. Threatened both socially and politically, Native Americans confronted Old World diseases to which they had no immunity in addition to territorial hostilities and wars. In 1830, the Indian Removal Act was signed into United States law thereby forcing the migration of hundreds of thousands of American Indians off the lands they had inhabited for centuries and further out west of the Mississippi River. A conservative estimate of the Native American population in 1492 placed their number at around 1.5 million people, but by 1920 this number had dwindled to a mere 350,000.

Today, the number of American Indians hovers at around 4.5 million, which is equal to about 1.5% of the U.S. population, and “more than two centuries of court decisions, treaties, and laws have created a complicated system of coexistence between tribes and the rest of the country” (Katel). Native American tribes are considered “domestic dependent nations”, which in practical terms means that American Indians on

reservations often have a deep-rooted dependency on federal funding for services such as health care and education.

Federal spending on Indian programs nation wide currently amounts to around \$11 billion, but leading experts have suggested that this is not nearly enough when factoring in inflation and many Indians point to the bleak living conditions on federal reservations. This is especially important to note when one considers that 34% of Native Americans were living on reservations in the year 2000. For one, Indian unemployment on reservations nationwide is ten times the national average, with the on-reservation family poverty rate at four times the national figure in 2000. Suicide and alcoholism rates for American Indians are 650% higher and triple that of average Americans, respectively. American Indians on reservations also suffered from low education rates: college graduations rates were half the national average for Indians at about 16%.

The special limited sovereignty status of tribes also serves to insulate Native Americans socioeconomic interactions with European Americans to the extent that though Indian tribes receive some funding from the federal government, tribal governments don't have a tax base whose revenues they share with state governments. Moreover, tribal governments are free to make decisions at more local levels and in recent years, there has been a move towards "self-governance". Allegations of systematic mismanagement of Indian-owned assets by the Interior Department have further complicated the relationship between the U.S. government and American Indians. Such allegations have prompted Native Americans to seize more control of services including education and law enforcement – traditionally overseen by the federal government – in an attempt to deliver higher quality services with increased efficiency.

To this end, it becomes clear that the relationship between European Americans and Native Americans in the United States is extremely intricate. Historically, European Americans served as the oppressors of Native Americans and this is something that still strains their relationship to this day. Speaking in more modern terms, European Americans can be taken to mean the federal U.S. government by extension. Pictures from the research into the relationship between these two groups will undoubtedly continue to change as Native American tribal affiliations grow and the “self-governance” movement further complicates the interactions between European Americans and Native Americans.

#### **GENERAL REFERENCES:**

Katel, Peter, "American Indians." *Issues in Race and Ethnicity*. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2009.

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"Society > Native Americans." *About the USA*. July 2009. Web. 10 Oct. 2010. <<http://usa.usembassy.de/society-natives.htm>>.

#### **RELEVANT WEBSITES:**

U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)  
<http://www.bia.gov/WhatWeDo/index.htm>

National Congress of American Indians (NCAI)  
<http://www.ncai.org/Our-History.14.0.html>

U.S. Census Bureau Race Data for American Indian and Alaska Native Populations  
<http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/race/indian.html>