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Race and Ethnicity in American Politics

Issue Brief: Native Americans and European Americans in the US

Key Words

Urban Indians, termination and relocation, cultural appropriation

Description

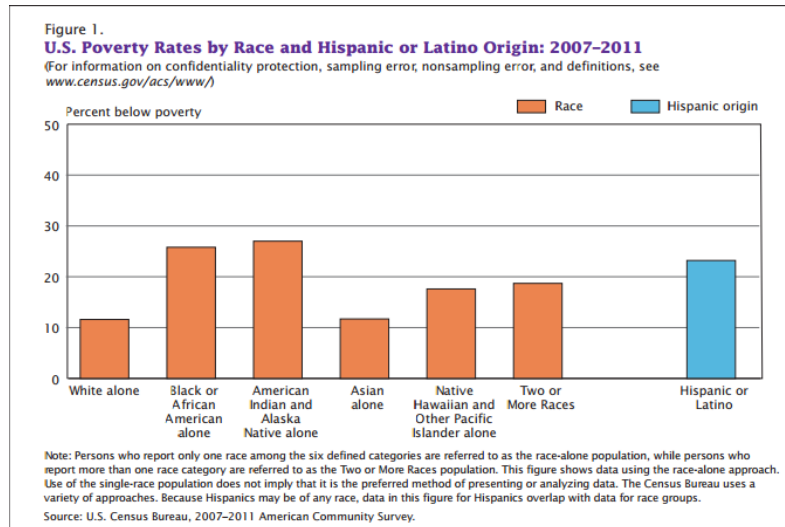
This issue brief examines the unique relationship between the United States government and Native Americans. As it does so, it explores the unique positions Native Americans occupy in the public consciousness, and the responses that arise to address these issues both within the Native American community and without.

Key Points

- Native American tribal governments are sovereign and deal with the United States federal governments directly, with exchanges of land and health and educational benefits passing between them.
- Major Native American communities exist in metropolitan areas with struggles of their own and communities emerging to counter them.
- There are significant racial conflicts and strain between whites and Native Americans, typically emerging as disputes over taxes, cultural affronts, and violence.

Brief

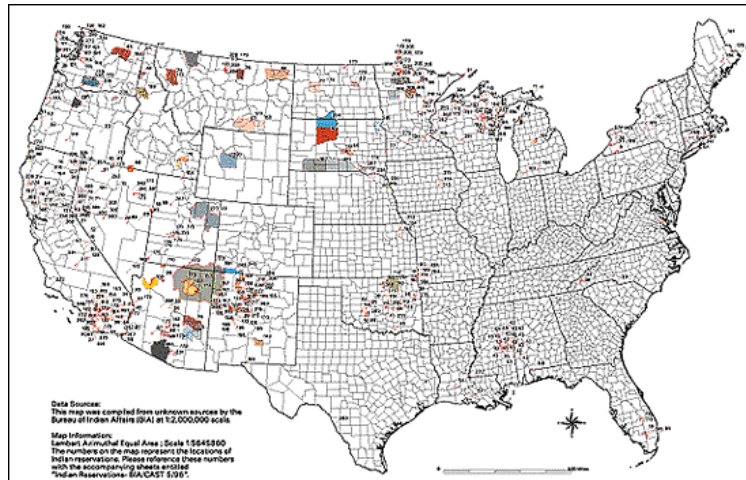
Native Americans have a unique position compared to other minority groups in the United States. Whereas most minorities are immigrants, whether forced or otherwise, Native Americans were forced to not only accommodate an influx of newcomers, but endure centuries of violence, enslavement, and theft. Native Americans now are still dealing with many of these same issues, in addition to the fallout of the United States' past and continuing actions. To this day, roughly 27% of all Native Americans live below the poverty line.



A graph comparing poverty rates between the major racial and ethnic groups in the United States. Native Americans, closely followed by blacks, have the highest poverty rate in the US. Image retrieved from a US Census Bureau 2013 report on poverty rates.

Currently, there are over 5.2 million self-identified Native Americans living in the United States, which is 1.7% of the total US population, according to the 2010 US Census. Additionally, about 43.8% of Native Americans identify as multiracial. There are over 1.4 million people who identify as both white and Native American, and 285,464 people who identify as white, Native American, and some other race (e.g. Asian or Black).

In addition, there are 566 federally recognized tribes. There are about 326 reservations, with about 56.2 million total acres of land, for Native American use. The largest of which is the Navajo Nation Reservation in the Southwest, with about 16 million acres. Some of the reservations are fragments of the tribe's original lands, while others were created by the government to resettle Native Americans removed from their homes. However, not all tribes have reservations. About 22% of Native Americans live on reservations.



A map of Native American reservations shows the distribution of remaining Native American tribes with federally-recognized land. Most reservations are concentrated in the Midwest and West because of the systematic relocation and removal of Native Americans from their original lands by the US. Image retrieved from the US Department of the Interior Indian Affairs' website.

Most others live in metropolitan areas and are sometimes called “Urban Indians.” Los Angeles, Phoenix, and Chicago are the top major centers of Urban Indians. The large Native American presence within cities can be partially attributed to termination and relocation policies started in the 1950s that ended some Native American tribes and incentivized Native Americans to relocate from their reservations. This relocation, however, has created many new problems: broken cultural identity, isolation within these new cities, and low socioeconomic status. Regardless, this mass migration is a continuing trend among Native Americans.

In order to enroll in a Native American tribe, one must prove their ancestry through birth or familial lineage records. Blood tests, however, are often not sufficient to prove ancestry because it cannot trace specific tribes and families. However, because most Native Americans live in cities, there are significant rising communities available even for those who are not associated with a tribe. The National Urban Indian Family Coalition is one such organization designed to help Urban Indians.

Native Americans have all of the rights of citizens of the United States, although tribal governments receive certain extra benefits, such as education and health services. The United States typically operates on a government-to-government basis when dealing with Native American tribes because of their sovereignty.

Because of this peculiar relationship between Native Americans and the US government, the interactions between whites and Native Americans can be strained. There are many myths of Native Americans that persist in public discourse. For example, many people believe that Native Americans receive a lot of special free benefits from the US government and they do not pay taxes. While in certain cases, this may be true, it worth noting that many of the benefits tribes receive from the government were exchanged for land and were codified in treaties. Native Americans living on reservations do pay federal taxes, but since the reservation is not part of the surrounding state, they are exempt from state-levied taxes. Another source of strife between Native Americans and white-dominated culture at large is frequent cultural appropriation and the use of Indian caricatures as official logos and mascots, e.g. Pocahontas Halloween costumes and Chief Wahoo of the Cleveland Indians.



Chief Wahoo, mascot of the Cleveland Indians, has been subject to controversy because of possible racist implications. Image retrieved from the Chief Wahoo entry on Wikipedia.

In addition, in 2012 the FBI reports that Native Americans are overrepresented as victims of hate crimes, constituting about 3.3% of all victims of racially-motivated hate crimes with about 43% of their attackers being identifiably white. Whites are 22% of all racial hate crime victims, and 2.8% of their attackers are Native Americans.

This rocky relationship between Native Americans and whites sometimes be challenging for people of with both Native American and European-American ancestry, particularly when it comes to proving their status as a Native American. However, because of prolonged contact between whites and Native Americans, this group has become a nontrivial entity, with over a million US citizens identifying as both white and Native American.

General References:

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<http://www.census.gov>
- The US Department of the Interior Indian Affairs
<http://www.bia.gov>
- National Urban Indian Family Coalition
<http://nuifc.org/>

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