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Issue Brief
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Majority Rule and Minority Rights:
American Indian and Alaska Natives and Socioeconomic Status

Key Words: American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN), SES, Health, Poverty, Education.

Abstract: This issue brief defines socioeconomic status, gives a brief statistical look at American Indians in the U.S today, and addresses the specific ways in which low SES affects American Indian communities.

Key Points:

- Minority communities are often affected by low socioeconomic status
- Low SES manifests itself in higher levels of poverty, low health, and a lack of higher education
- American Indian and Alaska Native communities are often affected by low SES
- Programs such as *The Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development* work to improve the low SES in American Indian communities

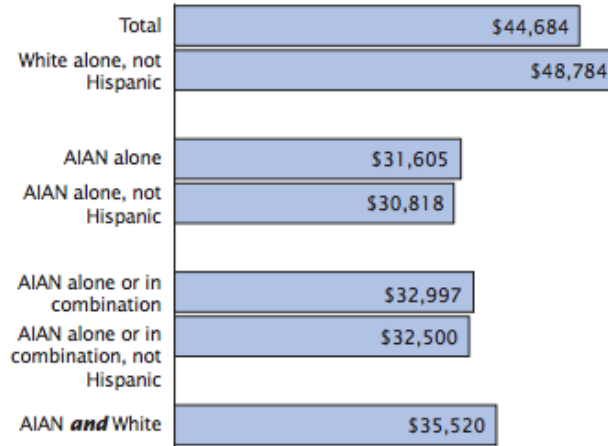
Issue Brief:

The AIAN population in the U.S, when compared to other ethnic groups, suffers disproportionately from low socioeconomic status (SES). The American Psychological Association measures SES using a combination of factors, including education and health. Regularly used to indicate the social standing or class of an individual or group, this conceptualization emphasizes privilege and power dynamics, often highlighting inequalities in resource access and distribution. Race, ethnicity, and SES are unavoidably entangled, as communities are often segregated on these lines. Minority communities often have a low SES, the effects of which are manifested in higher levels of poverty, poor health, and low levels of educational attainment (APA 2013).

American Indians have been plagued by attempted slavery, subjugation, forced migration, and attempted removal and allotment since the colonial period. Beginning in the early seventeenth century and on through the mid-twentieth century, there had prevailed widespread prejudice against American Indians, and constant attempts to remove their rights. These trends slowly began to be ameliorated during the 1960s, when self-government and treaty rights began to be instated (History.com, 1991). Today, tribal sovereignty dictates that tribal governments are autonomous units with control over their population and land. American Indian tribes also participate in the American political system, and are often able to bypass state government in favor of tribal law.

Figure 11.
Median Household Income: 2004

(Household income in the past 12 months in 2004 inflation-adjusted dollars. Housing units are classified by the race and Hispanic origin of the householder. Data based on sample limited to the household population and exclude the population living in institutions, college dormitories, and other group quarters. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see http://factfinder.census.gov/home/en/datanotes/exp_acs2004.html)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2004 American Community Survey, Selected Population Profiles, S0201.

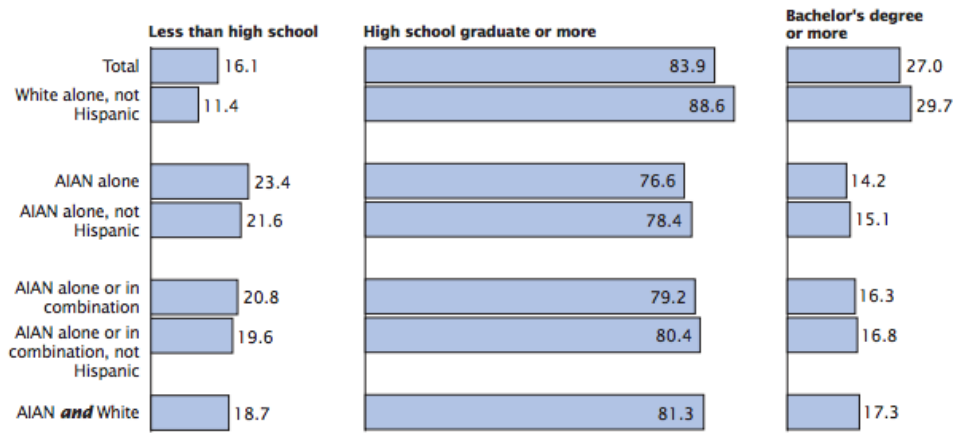
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2004 American Community Survey, Selected population profiles, S0201.

There are approximately 1.9 million American Indians and Alaska Natives in the U.S. They make up the 566 tribes federally recognized by the Indian Affairs Bureau of the United States Department of the Interior. American Indians make up 0.9% of the U.S population, 1/3 of who live on reservations (Norris 2012). Within these numbers, the Center for Disease Control found that American Indian adults were more likely to have “poorer health, unmet medical needs due to cost, diabetes, trouble hearing, activity limitation, and to have experienced of physiological distress in the past 30 days.” They were also more likely to be current smokers and drinkers compared with other adults (CFDC 2010). The center found that the community faced these health challenges due to higher rates of risky health behaviors, poorer health status, and health conditions, and lower utilization of health services.

Educational statistics among American Indian communities are similarly troubling. According to a 2008 study by the Alliance for Excellent Education, the national graduation rate for American Indian high school students was 50.6% (compared to the 77.6% for white students) in 2004-5. Only 45.8% males, and 52.5% of American Indian females graduated with a high school diploma that same year. NAEP reports that 74% of American Indian and Alaskan Native twelfth graders read below grade level, a percentage much higher than the national average for white twelfth graders (AEE 2008).

Figure 9.
Educational Attainment: 2004

(Percent of population 25 and older. Data based on sample limited to the household population and exclude the population living in institutions, college dormitories, and other group quarters. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see http://factfinder.census.gov/home/en/datanotes/exp_acs2004.html)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2004 American Community Survey, Selected Population Profiles, S0201.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2004 American Community Survey, Selected Population profiles, S020.

About 90% of all American Indian and Alaska Native students attend regular public schools (with 7% attending schools administered by the BIA). Civil rights and cultural identities of American Indian students are not often supported in the classroom, which is telling when considering the discrepancy between white and American Indian drop out rates. AEE also notes that “American Indian and Alaska Native teenagers suffer from poverty, suicide, teen birth, and substance abuse at rated higher than the national average,” all factors that affect the level of education some American Indians might receive (AEE 2008).

Figure 12.
Poverty Rate by Age Group: 2004

(Percent of specific group in poverty in the past 12 months. Data based on sample limited to the household population and exclude the population living in institutions, college dormitories, and other group quarters. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see http://factfinder.census.gov/home/en/datanotes/exp_acs2004.html)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2004 American Community Survey, Selected Population Profiles, S0201.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2004 American Community Survey, Selected Population profiles, S020.

Programs such as the *Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development* study the correlation between American Indian communities and low SES. They aim to “understand and foster the conditions under which sustained, self-determined social and economic development is achieved among American Indian nations” (Hpaied 2010). They look to do so through systematic and comparative studies of social and economic development on American Indian reservations. Among the key research findings, they list sovereignty, institution building, leadership, and governance in keeping with unique contemporary cultures as integral to improving SES (Hpaied 2010).

In 1995, the U.S Department of Justice released the following statement of purpose regarding the American government’s relationship with American Indian Tribes:

“[We seek] To reaffirm the Department's recognition of the sovereign status of federally recognized Indian tribes as domestic dependent nations and to reaffirm adherence to the principles of government-to-government relations; to inform Department personnel, other federal agencies, federally recognized Indian tribes, and the public of the Department's working relationships with federally recognized Indian tribes; and to guide the Department in its work in the field of Indian affairs.” (Justice.gov)

In 2000, Bill Clinton released a statement saying that his administration hoped to further establish the sovereignty of American Indian tribes, and to reduce the “impositions of unfunded mandates” against them (Justice.gov). While the Harvard project points to sovereignty as integral to alleviating low SES in American Indian communities, they also mark institution building and encouraging leadership as key to reversing the current trends. There is a balance that has yet to be struck between maintaining American Indian sovereignty, and encouraging policies within said communities that will assuage low SES. After such intrusive and damaging impositions by the U.S government throughout history on American Indian communities, it makes sense that maintaining sovereignty would be the government’s priority. However, the current political system is not responding adequately to the needs of American Indian communities in a way that will sufficiently change their markedly low Socioeconomic Status.

Relevant Websites:

US Department of the Interior, Indian Affairs:

<http://www.bia.gov/WhatWeDo/ServiceOverview/TribalGov/index.htm>

United States Census, American Community Survey: <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/>

The Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development: <http://hpaied.org/>

CDC Minority Health: <http://www.cdc.gov/Features/MinorityHealth/>

The United States Department of Justice, Native American Policies:

<http://www.justice.gov/otj/napolicies.htm>

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