

# American Indian and Alaska Native Populations: Envisioning the Future

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## Executive Summary

American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) people continue to face disproportionate challenges in the US. Health, education, employment, housing, and wealth statistics show the disastrous results of policies and programs. Some policies and programs were meant to improve the lives of AIAN people, but many were aimed directly at dispossession, despite the extreme hardship they caused. Historically-based structural disadvantages impinge on AIAN people's civil rights, and redressing these issues requires plausible information about the future size, age structure, and locational distribution of the population. AIAN people and Tribal Nations are also subject to statistical racism, in which their data (and thus their successes and needs) are ignored because they are relatively small populations.

Work toward equal access to resources for all Americans, including Indigenous people, has made it clear that we need to know how many AIAN people there will be in the future. Tribal Leaders require quality information about their people to effectively exercise tribal sovereignty. Data collection challenges impact AIAN people more than other groups, so traditional demographic methods of estimating a future population fall short with AIANs. To provide a basis for a forward-looking civil rights agenda, especially one focused on minor children and on people living in Tribal Areas such as reservations, this report presents population projections of the racially-identified AIAN population from the present to 2050 using a traditional demographic method that has been modified to account for net response change – one of the most significant data-related challenges.

How many people currently identify as racially AIAN? The answer has a huge range depending on how AIAN is defined, and which data source is used. After centuries of interracial

marriages and assimilation programs, family trees in the AIAN population are deeply multiracial. More than half of census-identified AIAN people report multiple races, and those who identify as single-race AIAN may also have non-AIAN people in their family trees. Despite the resistance of Native people, the painful history of forced assimilation has also produced millions of Americans with Indigenous heritage who do not currently racially identify as AIAN on the census.

People in all race groups can (and many do) change their race responses over time, and this is likely to impact the future size and composition of the AIAN population. Census race response change has led to large net increases in the AIAN population in each decade since the Census Bureau started using self-identification to gather race data. Response change rates vary across time and place; for example, change is less common in Tribal Areas and more common among people reporting multiple races and/or Hispanic origins.

If net response change continues in the next 30 years as it has in the past 50 years, the research presented in this report projects the 2050 AIAN population to be about 23.9 million people, including an estimated 17 million non-Hispanic AIAN people. If the geographic distribution of AIAN people remains consistent to 2050, over one in eight AIAN people will live in a Tribal Area (13.7%, up from 13.4% in 2020); over one-quarter (27.9%) of Tribal Area residents will be minor children.

Of the anticipated 6.6 million Hispanic AIAN people in 2050, few are projected to live in Tribal Areas such as reservations. Hispanic AIAN people are likely to continue to include a large minority of people with Indigenous heritage who were born outside the U.S. New World colonization practices have deeply impacted Indigenous people throughout the Western Hemisphere, and AIAN immigrants are also subject to profound structural disadvantages.

Policy makers, civil rights leaders, and governments often make plans based on the future size and composition of populations. However, AIAN populations have often been left out of

statistical analyses and demographic projections. Tribal leaders also need high quality data about their populations in order to govern. Given the centralized nature of federal funds for data collection, tribes have limited resources for gathering their own data. Unfortunately, the 2020 Census data are of limited utility for a combination of reasons, creating serious problems with data equity for non-White and for rural populations, including many AIAN people living in Tribal Areas.

Four policy recommendations are based on the research presented here:

1. The decennial census aims to reach every person but significantly undercounts AIAN people living in Tribal Areas. In order to increase the quality of data collected about people living in Tribal Areas while supporting tribal sovereignty, we must increase the power of Tribal Leaders in the data collection process. For example, Tribal Leaders could be given a significant budget and effective training programs to collect data about their citizens as part of the next decennial census.
2. To effectively understand topics important for AIAN equity, the Census Bureau could add a national survey similar to Statistics Canada's Indigenous People's Survey (IPS). Topics and questions for the IPS are developed with national Aboriginal organizations and the survey has a very high response rate.
3. Data disclosure and coding policies within the Census Bureau have significantly impacted the quality of available data about the AIAN populations throughout the U.S., including information about size and composition. Post-hoc analyses by the Census Bureau should look at the impact of their policies on AIAN data and release white papers and data crosswalks to support data users.
4. The Census Bureau should expand its partnering with Tribal Leaders to ensure that the released data is as useful as possible. For example, specialists nominated by AIAN organizations and/or Tribal Leaders should be given security clearance, access, and

training so that they can support Tribal staff and data users in effective use of the available data for Tribal governance.

Implementing policy recommendations such as these would significantly improve Indigenous data equity and tribal sovereignty. With clear, relevant information about the AIAN population and subpopulations, policies can be developed to address shortfalls in the civil rights of AIAN people. Tribal leaders, analysts, policy makers, and the public must continue to push for the creation of high-quality data on AIAN people and assure that its use in analyses improves the lives of Indigenous people.