

The Poverty Cycle

Contrary to what many people believe, most tribes are not wealthy from gaming. Two of the five poorest of the United States' 3,142 counties are located on Indian Reservations. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).



Many American Indian communities are impoverished, with some tribes reporting unemployment as high as 85%. Existing jobs are found mainly within the tribal government, Bureau of Indian Affairs, state social services, the school systems, and the Indian Health Service (IHS) Hospital. Additionally, years of failed government policies have left reservation economies with limited economic opportunity. The government placed reservations in areas away from fertile land, population centers, water supplies and other vital resources, compounding economic challenges with geographic isolation. While it is important to know these economic challenges, it is also important to know that tribes are dynamic, open to new ideas, and committed to improving their communities and their children's future.

Poverty-related statistics:

Employment:

- Native Americans have the lowest employment rate of any racial or ethnic group in the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012).
- In the poorest Native counties, only about 1/3 of men in Native American communities have full-time, year-round employment (Beal, 2004).

Education:

- Native students are the only student population that did not improve their reading and math testing scores in grades 4 and 8 from 2005-2011 (The Education Trust, 2013).
- High school graduation rates are also among the lowest of any population. In the states with the most American Indian and Alaska Native students, less than 50% of Native students graduate, on average. (The Civil Rights Project, 2010)

Housing & Infrastructure:

- The percentage of homes that are overcrowded on reservations is 3-6 times higher than the percentage of overcrowded homes in the U.S. as a whole (Housing Assistance Council, 2013; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2003; U.S. Census, 2000).
- As of 2011, there were over 120,000 tribal homes lacking access to basic water sanitation services (EPA, 2012).
- It is estimated that almost 1 in 10 Native American homes are without safe and reliable water (Indian Health Service, 2011).
- More than 60% of the roads within the Indian Reservation Roads system are earth or gravel (NCAI, 2012).
- Nearly a quarter of IRR bridges are classified as deficient (NCAI, 2012).

The Digital Divide:

- Internet penetration is estimated to be less than 10% in Indian Country (NCAI, 2012), a figure that is higher on the poorer reservations.
- When it is available on reservations, internet is more expensive than it is in the U.S. as a whole (Native Public Media, 2009).
- In 2015, President Obama [announced a new initiative called ConnectHome](#) to help narrow the digital divide in urban communities around the country, as well as the Choctaw Nation

Despite these struggles, Native American communities are working to improve their lives and the lives of future generations. Tribal policy makers work hard to ensure that new government policies and consultations respect tribal sovereignty, tribal nations' unique government-to-government status. The emergence of tribal colleges and universities located on reservation lands has improved educational prospects, and the number of tribal owned and operated businesses has increased in recent decades. Congressional passage of the 2013 Violence Against Women Act authorized tribal judicial systems to prosecute Native and non-Native perpetrators in their communities, strengthening public safety and infrastructure. Native American-led charities like Running Strong also have an impact on reservation life working in the communities themselves, meeting basic needs, building homes, and planting gardens, as well as supporting youth programs to encourage increased leadership skills and education for the next generation.

It is important to know that while Native American children face some of the worst poverty in the nation, they are not defined by it. These are amazing kids, culturally and spiritually rich, and filled with their own hopes and dreams. Each has the potential to be the next Billy Mills and follow the passion of their choice. At Running Strong, we work every day with committed community members and caring Americans nationwide to give these children a chance. Together, we give them hope.