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American Indian, Alaska Native, and Tribal Population Data

Overview

Federal agencies collect population data, including on American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities and federally recognized tribes (hereinafter *tribes*), to allocate funding and provide services. There is no uniform definition of AI/AN populations or tribal enrollment, and federal agencies rely on different sources for these data. This In Focus describes selected AI/AN and tribal population data sources, differences among these sources, past collection and reporting practices, current efforts to improve collection and reporting practices, and possible congressional policy considerations.

Population Data Sources

Tribal Enrollment Data

Tribal enrollment, or membership, is one source of information on tribal populations. Every tribe generally determines its own criteria for who is eligible to become a tribal member, which may include factors such as degree of tribal ancestry. Because tribes are sovereign nations, tribal membership is a political designation rather than a racial or ethnic classification.

Many tribes provide enrollment data on their official websites. Others view enrollment data as proprietary information. Although tribes historically have submitted enrollment data to the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), currently, the agency does not publicly report those figures.

BIA's Tribal Service Population Data

BIA calculates the *tribal service population* to determine eligibility for its services. The Snyder Act of 1921 (25 U.S.C. §13) authorizes BIA to operate programs and spend federal funds for the benefit and assistance of tribes and individual tribal members throughout the United States. BIA determines a tribe's service population based on the tribe's estimate of all tribal individuals who live on or near its reservation (25 C.F.R. §20.100). There are about 326 tribal reservations with a total national service population of nearly 2 million. Currently, tribal service population data are not publicly available below the national level.

U.S. Census Bureau's AI/AN Data

The U.S. Census Bureau conducts the decennial enumeration of the population required by the Constitution (Article I, Section 2, Clause 3) and operates other programs to measure the nation's people and economy.

The Census Bureau relies on individual self-identification as AI/AN using the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB's) standardized definitions for racial and ethnic categories. OMB currently defines *American Indian or Alaska Native* as a "person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America), and who maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment."

In 2020, the Census Bureau counted 9,666,058 people who identified as AI/AN. This figure includes members of more than one racial group. The Census Bureau also allows people to list detailed ancestry, origin, and/or tribal affiliation; selected groups appear in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Self-Reported Affiliation, 2020
(self-identification by American Indians and Alaska Natives)

Group	Population
Cherokee	1,513,326
Aztec	583,981
Navajo Nation	423,412
Maya	300,519
Blackfeet Tribe of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation of Montana	297,899
Choctaw	255,557
Alaska Native	241,797
Chippewa	130,048
Apache	129,589
Sioux	126,571

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2020 Census, Detailed Demographic and Housing Characteristics File A, Table T01001.

Notes: This list contains 10 of the largest groupings out of more than 1,000 groups such as tribes and villages. Individuals may choose to identify as being part of more than one group and when that occurs will be counted more than once.

Annual estimates for the overall AI/AN population are available from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), a large-scale survey of U.S. households. Those estimates are available at the national level as well as for states, congressional districts, and other geographic areas. The decennial census, which provides an actual count of the AI/AN population and a more granular breakdown by self-identified tribal affiliation, is next scheduled for 2030.

Differences Among Data Sources

The data sources described above provide varying population estimates due to a number of factors, including the absence of a statutory definition of AI/AN or tribal populations.

For example, the Census Bureau's figures rely on a relatively broad definition of AI/AN, while criteria for tribal service area and tribal enrollment may be less inclusive. As a result, Census Bureau statistics may report larger populations than tribal enrollment or service population data. For example, in 2023 the Cherokee Nation reported about 450,000 enrolled tribal members, but more than 1.5 million people reported being at least part Cherokee in the 2020 census.

The Census Bureau allows people to self-report in multiple racial and ethnic categories. In 2020, 61% of people who identified as AI/AN were also members of at least one other race (Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, White, or Some Other Race). Among the 3.7 million AI/AN people who listed no other race in the 2020 census, 40% also identified as Hispanic (which OMB currently considers an ethnicity, not a race).

A tribe's service population may be larger than its enrolled population, because its service population may include AI/ANs who are not members of that tribe. For example, AI/ANs or members of one tribe may live close to another tribe's reservation and may be counted in that other tribe's service population. This definition of a service population enables services to reach AI/ANs from tribes that are landless or live off (but close to) a reservation.

However, the service population metric may not fit the circumstances of some tribes, leading to inconsistent data. For example, only tribes with reservations can report their service populations, and many tribes and Alaska Natives do not have reservations. Therefore, this dataset likely inadequately accounts for those groups. In addition, some Oklahoma-based tribes' service areas are based on the tribes' historic reservations, which are larger than most current reservations.

Past Approaches to Collection and Reporting

From 1982 to 2013, BIA released a generally biennial *American Indian Population and Labor Force Report* that collected and reported AI/AN and certain tribal population data based on a range of data sources, including BIA field offices, tribes, and the Census Bureau. According to BIA, collecting reliable data for the biennial report was challenging. Some tribes reported confusion over whom to include in their service populations, and concerns were raised about the accuracy and consistency of the data.

Many tribes and other stakeholders also raised concerns about BIA's publications. For example, some assert that using Census Bureau estimates is inappropriate because they come with margins of error that can be sizable when working with relatively small populations. Alternatively, some recommend using administrative data already collected by federal agencies, such as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Other tribes and tribal groups recommend using data provided by tribes.

Considering these challenges, some tribes have asked federal agencies to use tribal enrollment data. However, use of tribal enrollment data raises a number of considerations.

For example, not all tribes may have the resources and trained personnel to collect consistent tribal population data with methodologies that meet federal requirements. Some tribes also have expressed privacy concerns. Although some tribes choose to make enrollment figures publicly available, others have raised concerns that public release against their wishes would harm tribal sovereignty. Some tribes have also noted that once BIA collects this data, statistics might be obtained through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA, 5 U.S.C. §552) requests.

Current Approaches to Improving Collection and Reporting

In P.L. 115-93, Congress transferred the responsibility for developing and publishing biennial tribal population reports from BIA to the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL). As of early 2024, DOL is conducting research and outreach and has not published a report.

Some federal agencies are working with tribes to improve tribal data collection. In 2023, the Department of the Interior led an interagency tribal consultation session on federal and tribal data priorities. They discussed collecting tribal enrollment data annually, developing a tribal service population dataset, and exploring opportunities to check the Census Bureau's data for tribal affiliation self-identification against BIA tribal enrollment data to validate Census data. The Census Bureau also has committed to working with AI/AN stakeholders to develop new statistical products.

Options for Congress

As part of its oversight and legislative role, Congress may consider assessing the accuracy and suitability of federal agency methodologies for measuring and serving tribal and/or AI/AN populations.

For example, Congress may be interested in ensuring consistent AI/AN and tribal data collection and use across federal agencies. If this is a priority, Congress may consider defining AI/AN or tribal membership for the purpose of population data collection. This definition could be based on geography, race, tribal enrollment, or some combination.

Alternatively, Congress may be interested in using different datasets depending on its priorities. For example, if Congress is interested in benefiting certain AI/AN populations or tribes, it could consider specifying the use of certain AI/AN and tribal datasets. For example, BIA traditionally has collected and used service population data to allocate funding, and some tribes believe this should continue because it is a relatively inclusive method. On the other hand, some tribes have suggested that BIA use a methodology that incorporates not only enrollment but also the relative costs of addressing tribal needs, which could ensure that small tribes receive greater funding to achieve community objectives.

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