

## **Indian Country on the Move**

Indian Country has been reshaped in dramatic ways over the last three centuries. The conquest of North America beginning with the 1492 “discovery” of the continent has changed the places American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/AN) call home. In the beginning of colonization, the policies of the federal government focused on genocide of AI/AN populations - by the introduction of diseases, mass hangings, scalping for bounty, and the massacre of entire villages – the institutionalized killing of many of our ancestors. This was later followed by forced relocation of many AI/ANs from their ancestral homelands to reservations. As a result of these policies, the life experiences of AI/ANs today are dramatically different than those of our Elders just 250 years ago.

### **The Long Walk**

One historical account is encapsulated in the story of the Mescalero Apache and Navajo who lived in what is now Eastern Arizona and New Mexico (8). Because of the federal government’s interest in developing gold and silver mines on the traditional homelands of American Indians in the region, a policy was adopted to attempt to completely uproot and confine these peoples at Ft. Sumner, New Mexico (8).

In the face of the tribes’ relentless defense of their homelands, the federal government adopted a policy of destroying and seizing the property belonging to the tribes and fighting them in battle (8). After their communities and resources were destroyed, it was no longer viable to continue the resistance (8). The survivors were then forcibly marched in what was known as the “long walk” to Ft. Sumner in perilous conditions, which resulted in untold numbers of deaths (8).

The conditions at Ft. Sumner itself were essentially those of slavery and were employed in the attempt to make a viable agricultural reservation on the high plain of eastern New Mexico (8). Despite the massive effort of those who were interned, the reservation was not viable and many chose to escape rather than face the rampant starvation conditions (8). Eventually, the federal government relented and those interred at Ft. Sumner were released to return to their homelands (8). This brutal “experiment” and attempt at pacifying and removing American Indians from their traditional homes failed because of the resilience of those who survived the horrors of the long walk.

## The Modern Migration

In more recent history, AI/AN populations have again been affected by the policies of the federal government aimed at forced assimilation of AI/ANs into the broader “American culture” and to move them away from their homelands and reservations to major metropolitan areas. While promised greater economic opportunity and a better life, urban migration has proven to be challenging for those who have settled in the cities.



According to a report by the National Urban Indian Family Coalition (NUIFC), more than 3 of every 4 AI/ANs no longer reside on reservation lands (4). It was a quarter century ago, in 1990, that urban AI/ANs began to outnumber AI/ANs residing on reservations. The move toward urban areas and away from reservations has accelerated rapidly over the last 25 years (4). While the move towards the cities may have been prompted by hopes for greater economic prospects, the reality of urban life for many AI/ANs and AI/AN Elders has been one of struggle and adversity.

## The Relocation Policy

Elders who made the move to the cities did not make the choice lightly. Despite numerous attempts on the part of the federal government to “kill the Indian, and save the man,” none of the policies aimed at assimilating AI/ANs into the general population had proven to succeed in that goal despite the brutal methods employed in the boarding schools and foster homes that so many Elders were forced into (3)(6)(7). The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), however, may have had the most “successful” program, and that was the one in which AI/ANs were offered a pittance of roughly \$320 to make the move to urban areas like Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Chicago, and Denver (3)(6)(7).

This program pressured many to leave reservations, and those who did were spurred by the often unfulfilled promises of good jobs, better housing, and financial assistance (6). Many AI/ANs who traveled to cities found little to no

support, in addition to poor or non-existent job opportunities and racism. Nevertheless, during the time of the BIA's relocation program (1948-1980), some 750,000 AI/ANs moved away from small communities into cities (6).

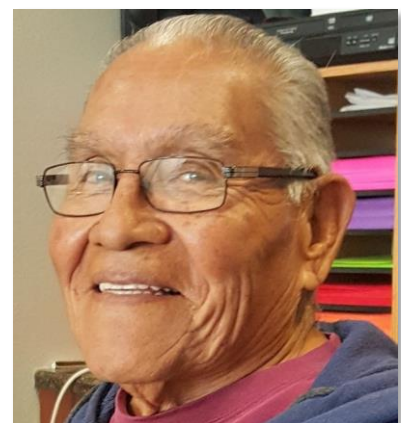
While only 8% of AI/ANs lived in urban areas in 1940, the vast majority of AI/ANs now call urban environments and many of the nation's biggest cities home (7). However, service delivery to those living in bigger cities has been, and continues to be, lacking or non-existent for AI/ANs of all ages (7). The simple fact remains that despite the federal government's agreement to provide health services to AI/ANs, these services are often centered in rural areas (near reservation and Indian lands) and urban AI/ANs may have little or no practical access to Indian Health Services (IHS) (7). The New York Times found that just 1% of IHS funding supports programs in urban areas even though the vast majority of AI/ANs live in such urban areas or metropolitan environments (7).

The legacy of the BIA's efforts to move our Elders off of the reservations is one of having separated them from their communities, families, and the services they need. Because of the small budget allocation, the IHS provides for Urban Indian Health Organizations (UIHO), services are less available to AI/ANs living in urban environments (5). In the entirety of the United States, there are only 34 UIHOs serving the nearly 80% of AI/AN which live outside of reservations or Indian lands (5).

The legacy of the relocation efforts is also one in which AI/ANs continue to face high rates of unemployment and poverty (5)(7). According to the New York Times, the rates of poverty experienced in the cities among AI/ANs were not unlike those of the reservations they left (5)(7). In the face of this reality, it is clear that increased support for the needs of AI/ANs in urban areas is desperately needed.

### **Redefined Identities**

The tide of the migration of AI/AN families and youth leaves many questions, both for those who go, and for those who do not. With so many AI/ANs now living in cities, what will it mean to be an American Indian or Alaska Native? What happens to those who leave their families communities to start a new life in the city? And what happens to the communities that see the next generations leave with no intent to return?



The unique cultures of each tribe, nation, pueblo, and band matter, especially for those who leave kinship ties behind. Though AI/ANs have much shared heritage in a broad sense, the distinct traditions, beliefs, and practices define the cultures and contribute to the identity of each individual. For those who have embraced life in the city, some find that the knowledge of these specific tribal differences are less understood (5). For many, being AI/AN in a cosmopolitan context may mean adopting what is described as a “pan-Indian identity.” (5) Researchers have described this as an identity which incorporates the broader elements of many different AI/AN cultures into one (5).

This “detrribalization” is also the result of the attempts that AI/ANs from diverse backgrounds have made to join together as a cohesive unit in their new homes. The earliest and most resilient example of this is the American Indian Center in Chicago, Illinois. Tracing its roots back to the 1950’s relocation programs, the American Indian Center is more than 60 years old and has members from more than 50 different tribes (1). The Center has successfully incubated programs for American Indians who, in Chicago, were far removed from any reservation and have created a community from a diverse group of AI/ANs in the Chicago metro area (1). Organizations like the American Indian Center serve as models for how AI/ANs can advocate for their interests and create a community rich in cultural heritage in places where one does not exist (1).

The needs of AI/ANs in urban areas cannot always be met by these types of organizations. Those who depart for the cities do often return to their home communities, even if only for a short time (5). Research shows that one third of AI/ANs 18 and older stay on a reservation for up to one total month per year, and nearly 15% return to a reservation for more than a month in total every year (5). Those who returned did so because of healthcare and a stronger identification with their community’s culture (5). This provides an invaluable opportunity for those with the means to return to their communities to stay connected with the people they care about and their culture; an opportunity to retribalize (5).



### **What it Means for Elders**

AI/AN Elders want to – and need to – grow old in their homes and in their communities. Those living in truly small rural communities may not have access to

the same resources that are found in bigger communities (2). The fact that so many Elders, in both rural and major metropolitan areas, are underserved might make it difficult for them to stay in their own homes no matter where they live. (2).

The Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC) found that a combination of factors such as lack of Medicaid reimbursement, funding for those not Medicaid-eligible, and low wages for healthcare workers have all contributed to the insufficient services found in rural areas and on Indian lands (2). The reality of moves to the city for many Elders is less of a story about seeking opportunity, and instead represents a necessity (2). Some Elders are simply forced to move to areas where more care options are available, and this is doing them a disservice because it takes them away from the security of being a part of a community that is familiar, a place they have always known as home (2).

### **What Can Be Done**

Because of the dramatic shift from rural areas to urban ones, the needs of AI/ANs and especially AI/AN Elders are in a state of rapid change (2). This change is not well understood, as there are many different reasons why AI/ANs are leaving their home communities (2). Further study of this change and what it means for AI/AN Elders is desperately needed (2). Only through a more complete understanding of the drivers of this recent migration to the cities on a regional basis can the long term needs of Elders be satisfied (2).

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