Census Data Again Portrays Severity of Disadvantage of the Native Population

Last week the Census Bureau issued its latest set of data on the characteristics of the US population. It again portrayed the extent of economic disadvantage under which the Native population has suffered for too long.

Rates of unemployment and poverty were estimated to be two to three times as high for the Native population as for the total US population. Educational disadvantage was most pronounced at the 4-year college level, a level that is now the gateway to many of the better-paying jobs.

This is a quick glance at the overall numbers:

**Census Bureau Latest Estimates: 2013 to 2017**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Labor Force</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Educational Attainment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unemployment Rate</td>
<td>Poverty Rate All Ages</td>
<td>Poverty Rate Youth Ages 0-17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total US Population</strong></td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>US AI/AN Only Population</strong></td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
<td>34.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>On-Reservation AI/AN Only Population</strong></td>
<td>19.6%</td>
<td>37.9%</td>
<td>46.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey Data, 2013-2017*

The ACS provides data every year on the American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) population that identifies AI/AN as its only race. The tables in this newsletter refer to that population as AI/AN "only." The Census Bureau labels it as the AI/AN "alone" population.
The data are from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), an ongoing survey of a sample of the entire US population designed to produce a wide variety of data on the socio-economic characteristics of that population. For many of the major characteristics, data are provided by major racial group. The ACS replaced the "long form" sample that was used as part of the decennial census through 2000.

The ACS publishes data annually in two series, a 1-year series covering the nation, states and the larger communities, generally those with a total population of 65,000 and over. The other series publishes data for every community in the US, including every reservation, every former reservation in Oklahoma and the several types of Alaska Native areas. However, to publish that data the Census Bureau needs to aggregate the responses it receives to the ACS questionnaire over 5-year periods. The data published last week covers the responses to the questionnaires collected from 2013 to 2017.

**Has the Situation of the Native Population Improved Over the Last 5 Years?**

Since the 5-year data series is a rolling one, with each year's published data dropping the oldest numbers from the previous 5-year set and adding the most recent year, the Bureau advises users to compare data from one 5-year set only with the data from 5 years earlier.

Looking back to the data on the Native population from the period 2008 to 2012 shows some improvements over time, but little change in the gap between the situation of the Native population and that of the total US population.

In terms of labor force status, the unemployment rate for the total US population dropped from 9.3% to 6.6% according to the ACS results for the 5-year period from 2008 to 2012 when compared to the results for the five years from 2013 to 2017. The drop represented the movement of the US economy from the depths of the "Great Recession" of late 2007 to mid-2009 to a period of general economic recovery.

The drop in the unemployment rate for the overall US AI/AN only population was nearly, but not quite as much, going from 15.5% in the 2008 to 2012 time frame to 12.3% in the 2013 to 2017 period. The drop in the rate for the AI/AN only on-reservation population was even less, from 21.1% to 19.6%. The gaps between the AI/AN only population, nationally and on reservation, compared to the total population widened slightly over the five years.

The poverty rates for persons of all ages were nearly the same for both periods for the total population and the AI/AN only population, both nationally and on-reservation. However, the rates for AI/AN only youth ages 0 to 17 dropped several percentage points over the five years according to the Census Bureau's ACS data.
Overall, both the total and the AI/AN only populations improved in terms of the highest level of educational attainment attained for the population age 25 and over. The improvement is evident in the percentage of persons that attained a bachelor's degree or higher. Nonetheless, the gap in percentage points between the total and the AI/only populations widened, an ominous signal for what lies ahead for the future status of the AI/AN only work force.

The numbers look like this:

### Educational Attainment Status
ACS 2008-12 v ACS 2013-17

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Percent with Bachelor’s Degree or Higher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2008 to 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US Total Population</td>
<td>28.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US AI/AN Only</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Reservations AI/AN</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-year Estimates

The ACS has the advantage of being the only source of general demographic data on the Native population for every reservation, former reservation area in Oklahoma, Alaska Native Regional Corporation area and Alaska Native village area. It is currently the only source of labor force information for the AI/AN workforce in reservation areas.

**Drawbacks of ACS Data**

At the same time, the ACS has its faults, particularly with respect to the data for many smaller reservation areas and Alaska Native villages.

ACS is a survey, and like all surveys is subject to sampling error. Since surveys cover a portion of an entire population, a relatively small portion in the case of the ACS, the
A data point called the coefficient of variation (CV) is the standard indicator of the reliability of an estimate derived from a sample. One yardstick for the reliability of an estimate considers a CV of 15% or less to indicate that the estimate is reliable from a sampling error perspective. If the CV is between 15% and 30%, the estimate is considered possibly reliable, possibly unreliable. If the CV is over 30%, the estimate is considered as unreliable.

Using this yardstick, the estimates of the number of AI/AN only persons in poverty living in reservation areas can be considered as unreliable for nearly 45% of the 276 reservation areas where there was at least 1 person counted as in poverty. The poverty numbers on another 36% of these 276 reservations can be considered as maybe reliable, maybe not. Only about 20% of the reservations, generally the largest ones, had data that, from a sampling error perspective, might be considered as reliable.

In addition to sampling error, survey data is subject to nonsampling error. For instance, nonsampling error can result from nonresponse to a question on the survey form.

The ACS questions are designed for the general population. Some of the questions don't fit the circumstances of Native people, particularly in predominantly Native areas.

This is evident in the case of questions on labor force status. Indian workers in many reservation areas, particularly those that are large and very rural, do not "actively" seek work when they know that work is not available for them or they have barriers to looking for or accepting a job, such as child care requirements or lack of transportation to look for or get to work. The standard labor force data considers such people as simply "not in the labor force," totally missing in action when it comes to the ACS numbers.

These drawbacks should be kept in mind in judging and using ACS data on the Native population.

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