Tribes and the Census

Latest Census Data Shows the Extent of Severe Economic Disadvantage for the AI/AN Population

The US Census Bureau released its most detailed data set on the characteristics of the American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) population late last week. It paints an all too familiar picture of the economic disadvantage that persists among Native people in all areas of the US, particularly reservation areas. It is grim news for what should otherwise be a joyous time of year.

The scourge of unemployment among the AI/AN population far exceeds that for the US population as a whole, poverty remains at astronomical levels, particularly for reservation youth, and educational attainment lags the levels for the general population.

The data comes from the "5-year estimates" derived from the Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS). The numbers were collected through the ongoing ACS survey conducted over the five calendar years from 2012 to 2016.

Although most public attention is currently focused on the upcoming 2020 decennial census, the figures that are crucial for many purposes are those for the socio-economic characteristics of the population, like employment, poverty and educational levels. This data is now found only in the ACS. The ACS is the one federal survey that has this kind of data for all the smaller communities in the country, including all reservation areas, former reservation areas in Oklahoma and Alaska Native villages and regions.

ACS Data Used in the Allocation of Federal Funds

ACS 5-year data has become widely used in the allocation of federal program funds. The Labor Department began using this data for the allocation of WIA and now WIOA funds to the states and the substate workforce areas several years ago. With respect to federal Indian programs, the Department of Housing and Urban Development decided last year to use the ACS 5-year estimates for various housing need variables in the funding formula for the Indian Housing Block Grant (IHBG) program. In doing so, HUD overruled the opinion of many Native housing authority officials that favored the use of a jointly designed federal-Native tribal survey instead.

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1 All the data in this newsletter is for the AI/AN "only" population. Those responding to the race question on a Census form by identifying AI/AN as their only race are referred to here as "AI/AN only" persons. The Census Bureau calls them "AI/AN alone" persons. Those identifying as AI/AN and also as members of a different race are referred to by the Bureau as the AI/AN "in combination" population; that is, AI/AN and also members of another racial group.
Updates to the data used for fund allocation for the Section 166 WIOA programs are long overdue. The shift from the currently used 2000 Census "long form" data to a more recent data source has been delayed for years over the issue of whether to take the money to pay for the necessary special tabulation of Census data from Section 166 funds, or from non-program funds as has always been the case in the past.

**A Look at the Numbers**

On every one of the three characteristics covered in this analysis -- labor force status, income and educational attainment -- the AI/AN population is more severely disadvantaged than the general population.

The latest ACS data set indicates that the unemployment rate is almost twice as high in percentage terms for the AI/AN population as the rate for the total population of all races -- 13.5% versus 7.4%. In federal reservation areas the AI/AN unemployment rate is nearly triple the total population rate -- 20.9% versus 7.4%. The graph below shows the levels.

![Unemployment Rates by Area](image-url)
The graph also shows the rates for the former reservation areas in Oklahoma, called Oklahoma Tribal Statistical Areas (OTSAs), and for the Alaska Native Village Statistical Areas (ANVSAs), along with the rates for the AI/AN population in other areas of the US. However, the rates for the OTSAs and ANVSAs are not really comparable with those for reservation areas as the economic circumstances in the OTSA and ANVSA communities are usually quite different from those in the reservation areas.

The AI/AN unemployment rates for individual reservations vary considerably. For the largest individual reservations, those with AI/AN populations counted in the 2010 Census as 1,000 or more, the rates run from a high of 43.6% to a low of 7.4%.

Even though the official unemployment rates for the AI/AN population are much higher than those for the general population, this is just part of the story. With jobs scarce and many too discouraged to look for work or facing barriers that keep them out of the workforce, a significant portion of Native people are not counted in the official unemployment rate at all. They become invisible in the unemployment numbers, showing up in the data as simply "not in the labor force."

This is reflected in what is known as the labor force participation rate. That rate calculates the percentage of people who are considered as either employed, including those in the armed forces, or unemployed but "actively looking" for work as a percentage of all persons age 16 and over. The lower the labor force participation rate, the more disadvantaged a population tends to be.

While the labor force participation rate for the total population of all races nationally was 63.5% in the ACS 5-year estimates for 2012 to 2016, the rate for the AI/AN population was a full 5 percentage points less, 58.5%. For AI/AN workers in reservation areas, the rate was just 50.9%, another indicator of the severe labor market conditions that reservation workers face.

A lack of jobs and barriers to employment that keep people out of the workforce goes hand in hand with low incomes. The new ACS data dramatically demonstrates how true this is for AI/AN people.

While the poverty rate for persons of all ages in the general population is shown as 15.1% nationally, the rate for the AI/AN population is 27.6%, nearly twice as high. The rate for the AI/AN reservation population is nearly three times as high, at 38.3%.

For AI/AN youth, the picture is even bleaker. Nationally over one third of Native youth are in poverty. In reservation areas it is closer to one half, an incredible 46.3%.

The graph on the following page displays the data.
Per capita income, the income available divided by the number of people that rely on that income, is another useful measure of relative income levels among different groups in the population.

The per capita income for the AI/AN population nationally is only 60% of what the per capita income is for the total population of all races -- $17,917 compared to $29,829. For the AI/AN population in reservation areas it is less than half that for the total population, just $14,590. For 14 of the largest reservations it is below $10,000.

A well-known barrier to successful participation in the workforce is the lack of a solid education, particularly one that involves a degree at the post-secondary level. The newly released ACS data set illustrates the position of the AI/AN population on this metric as well.

In the Census numbers, educational levels are measured in terms of the highest grade level or degree that a person has attained. The data is available for the population age 25 and over.
For the AI/AN population nationally, 20.7% have less than a high school diploma or GED. In reservation areas, the comparable figure is 22.5%. For the total population of all races, the figure is just 13.0%. At the post-secondary level the picture is somewhat better. A third of the AI/AN population nationally and in reservation areas has some college or an associate's degree.

However, at the bachelor's degree or higher level there is a big gap between the percentage of the AI/AN population with this increasingly important credential and the total population. Just 14.0% of the AI/AN population nationally have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 30.3% of the total population. For the reservation AI/AN population, the figure is just 8.3%.

The ACS data that just became available involves information collected over the most recent five calendar years, from 2012 to 2016. To compare these numbers with those of the preceding five-year period it is necessary to look to the ACS figures for the 2007 to 2011 time frame. The comparison shows some, but rather minimal progress over time.

For example, the unemployment rate for the AI/AN population in the earlier five-year period was 14.8%. This covered the officially measured period of what is called the "great recession." The rate for the last five years declined to just 13.5%, even though this was during what economists consider as a period when conditions had recovered from that recession. For the AI/AN population in reservation areas the unemployment rate was actually a fraction of a percentage point higher in the latest five year period than it was during the recession. Progress on the poverty measure was also rather minimal. The data for educational attainment was better during the last five years, but only slightly.

A future issue of this newsletter will look at the new ACS data for the large metropolitan areas where many Native people live.

Readers can check with me at the e-mail address below if they want the latest ACS data for their reservation, former reservation area in Oklahoma or Alaska Native area.

**LUCA Registration Deadline Just Two Days Away**

The Census Bureau's deadline for tribes to register to participate in the Local Update of Census Addresses (LUCA) program is this Friday, December 15th. It is the one opportunity to insure that the Census Bureau has a complete and accurate list of all the housing addresses for the reservation population. See the November 9th issue of this newsletter for details.

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