

**Escaping the Cycle: A Critical Inquiry into Native American
Poverty and its Causes, with a Comparison into Cultural
and Traditional Values, Followed by an Analysis and
Solutions**

“From poverty of a man, even his friends heed not his words. His power is laughed at; none desire his acquaintance, nor speaks to him with respect. Truly poverty is the sixth great sin.”
– Charudatta, “Mricchakatika” 2nd Century B.C.E. play by Sudrakah

“We fought a war on poverty and poverty won.” – Ronald Reagan, 1987

“Today, a vicious cycle of poverty, criminality, and incarceration traps too many Americans and weakens too many communities...” – Eric Holder, 2013

Poverty among Native Americans has been present for as long as reservations themselves. As part of the decision rendered by the Supreme Court under *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*, John Marshall wrote: “[M]eanwhile, they are in a state of pupilage. Their relations to the United States resemble that of a ward to his guardian.”¹ While this decision came 182 years ago, its derisive attitude towards another race is highlighted in the key words “pupilage” and “ward;” these words imply a sense of subservience and, in my opinion, classify Native peoples as subhuman. The word that best describes this mindset is racist. The Australian Human Rights Commission defines racism as “a set of beliefs, often complex, that asserts the natural superiority of one group over another, and which is often used to justify differential treatment and social positions.”² Racism directed towards Native Americans has persisted to the modern day: Native Americans consistently earn less, have worse health, live on land that goes undeveloped because banks are unwilling to provide loans, have lower levels of educational attainment, and higher incarceration rates. Although these statements appear to be supported by statistics, they are *gross* simplifications of the issue at hand.

This simplification is also present in the issue of poverty. The prevailing stereotype about poor people is that they are lazy, or that they have no “habits for working” for pay “unless

¹ Cherokee Nation v. Georgia, 1831

² Australian Human Rights Commission

it's illegal," a statement made by Republican Presidential candidate Newt Gingrich in December 2011.³ That a person who served as Speaker of the House of Representatives as recently as 1999 not only acknowledges this stereotype (which can be directly linked to any of the stereotypes above), but outright embraces it, demonstrates that there needs to be a culture of change in America and around the world.

Escaping the poverty cycle is, and has been since the rise of civilization, a difficult task indeed. According to a report by the Pew Charitable Trusts released in November 2013, of the approximately 60 million Americans born into the bottom quintile of the "income ladder," 70% do not emerge above the 40th percentile, a staggering statistic that is less pronounced for white Americans than any other race.⁴ This stands in stark contrast to the American Dream: hard work and determination can overcome birthright, especially for those not born as American citizens. Andrew Carnegie and Warren Buffett stand as the prime examples supporters of objectivism⁵, a philosophy brought to the forefront by author Ayn Rand, point to when asked if the American Dream still holds any ballast. Living in poverty is the exact opposite of the American Dream, and is often a crucial reason for immigrate to the United States; how, then, can it be achieved if one still lives in poverty upon becoming an American?

What is omitted from this argument is that the economic ladder is inherently biased. Those with the upper hand at the beginning often maintain this advantage. In a simplification of the issue, those with the best weapons and the best literacy will almost always be at the top, and

³ CBS News, Dec. 1, 2011

⁴ Pew Charitable Trusts, Nov. 2013

⁵ Objectivism, according to Rand's] appendix of *Atlas Shrugged*, is "the concept of man as a heroic being with his own happiness as the moral pursuit of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his absolute."

subjugate those without such advantages.⁶ Of the 30 richest individuals in American history, not a single one is female or a non-Caucasian male.⁷ Among Forbes' 50 Richest Americans today, there is a slightly greater parity, although the WASP still holds sway: there are seven females listed, although each one has inherited a great deal of their wealth. There are two minorities among the top fifty: Patrick Soon Shiong and Pierre Omidyar, each of whom achieved his wealth by his own work.⁸ Economic analysts may still believe that may claim that America is a land of opportunity and equality, but the top of the ladder clearly suggests otherwise.

The second major issue which I feel I must address is the issue of sovereignty rights. This idea is that Native Americans, by virtue of their heritage, are due lands belonging to their ancestors and that they should not be subject to the laws of the United States. This is where reservations become a favorable outcome. Inhabitants are subject to the laws of the reservation. Where this becomes an issue is when, excluding Puerto Rico, nine of the eleven poorest counties by median income, none of which exceed \$9,251 per capita, have a majority Native American population.⁹ A large proportion of the reservation population receives welfare from the U.S. government, although it is treated as aid to a foreign nation. When Native Americans try to move off the reservation and compete for jobs, many find that they are at a disadvantage because of their background. A solution has yet to be found which strikes a balance between legal independence from the United State and support from the U.S. government to enable American Indians to be more competitive in the market. By the end of this essay, I hope to establish a set of logical solutions that accomplishes this goal.

⁶ Note: I do realize the irony in using a simplification of the issue, but the idea of literacy and warfare as the driving factors behind the rise to power of the white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant, straight, Upper Class male could easily fill an entire paper by itself and that is not the topic on which I am focusing.

⁷ NYTimes.com, July 2007

⁸ Forbes 400, as of Sept. 2013

⁹ U.S. Census Bureau

Part I: Reservations

Among the issues at the core of the problem is that of health and healthcare. Several reservations boast the highest rates of diabetes and heart disease, among many others, as well as a life expectancy equivalent to that of Guinea-Bissau, or the sixth lowest expectancy in the world.¹⁰ The United States has an average life expectancy of 79 years, or *29 years more* than a reservation technically within its borders.¹¹ The Pine Ridge Reservation of the Oglala Sioux tribe in Shannon County, South Dakota exemplifies this disparity. In 2004, the most recent date for which accurate data is available, 71.9% of Native Americans were overweight or obese (compare to 66.3% for all Americans).¹²¹³ Heart disease and diabetes occur at 3 times the national rate. Infant mortality is 2.34 times the national level. Deaths relating to alcohol were nearly 14 times, diabetes six times, heart disease 1.7 times, and suicide 3.1 times the national average.¹⁴ For fiscal year 2009, only \$1,132 was spent on health care per capita on the reservation, compared to \$3,261 for the national average.¹⁵

Another indication of reservation poverty is the crisis in education. In 2000, only 27.2% of the population of Pine Ridge earned a high school degree. Only 8% proceeded to earn an Associate degree and 5.7% a Bachelor's degree. One in 33 inhabitants earned a Master's or Professional degree.¹⁶ The national averages for these numbers were: 28.6% earned a high school degree, 6.3% an Associate degree, 15.5% a Bachelor's degree and 8.9% a Master's or

¹⁰ WHO, 2011

¹¹ Ibid

¹² "Oglala Lakota College Case Statement," 2012

¹³ CDC, 2009

¹⁴ "Oglala Lakota College Case Statement," 2012

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ "Pine Ridge Indian Reservation Population and Housing," 2009

Professional degree.¹⁷ Like with any other group, a college degree means a considerable amount of more money. For Native Americans, each of the median incomes for four major educational attainment levels (No high school diploma, High school diploma without college, Some college but no degree, and a Bachelor’s degree or higher) was lower than the median income for the United States as a whole. The table below is from the Journal of Multicultural, Gender, and Minority Studies, adjusted to 2013 levels:¹⁸¹⁹

	U.S. Population	American Indians	Percent Difference
All educational levels	\$40,868.06	\$26,546.18	-54.0%
Less than a high school diploma	\$17,003.68	\$12,234.75	-38.98%
High school graduates, no college	\$28,816.42	\$24,066.48	-19.7%
Some college, no degree	\$36,848.27	\$30,158.30	-22.2%
Bachelor’s degree or higher	\$66,586.12	\$52,513.95	-26.8%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2006. Figures include individuals with no earnings. IHEP, 2007, p. 26

These data show that, even with an equivalent education, Native Americans are earning less money than their counterparts. In 1999, admittedly a date earlier than I would like, the poorest reservation had a median income of \$4,043 (equivalent of \$5,682.26 in 2013) and the highest had a median income of \$17,436 (equal to \$24,505.53 in 2013).²⁰ The poverty line in America in 2013 is \$23,492 for a family of four.²¹

One school of thought, primarily composed of financial experts, believes that the issue is not in health issues or lower levels of higher education. A 2011 Forbes article discusses the issue of property rights. John Koppisch writes that as “[t]he vast majority of land on reservations is

¹⁷ 2000 U.S. Census

¹⁸ Harrington and Hunt, 2008

¹⁹ These numbers are for all Native Americans, not just those living in reservation or urban settings.

²⁰ Anderson, 2011

²¹ CNN Money, Sept. 2013

held communally...Native Americans...can't use the money as collateral" in order "to establish credit and borrow money..."²² This would suggest that interactions with non-tribal lending agencies are almost counterproductive, as many banks are unwilling to loan money when they have no collateral. Land surrounding the reservations is of the same or lower potential, but because of development by private landowners (usually Caucasian), this land is of much higher value. Without investment, it is difficult for Native Americans to achieve equality financially, which in turn makes it difficult to achieve equality in other sectors. This stands in contrast to the long-held belief that when Indians were relocated to reservations, they were moved to lands that were barren. Although development of land arose long after relocation began, development for Native Americans has yet to occur, aside from casinos and the like, which have not demonstrated to effectively benefit Native Americans, according to a report by Dwanna Robertson of Indian Country Today Media Network.²³

As with most other issues, or "symptoms" (a term to which Koppisch relegates all non-purely fiscal matters), the Pine Ridge Reservation presents a stark example of this scenario. Supported by a research grant from the Graduate School of Colorado State University, Dr. Kathleen Pickering and Dr. David Mushinski conducted research at Pine Ridge concluding in 1999. In their report, Drs. Pickering and Mushinski found conditions similar to what Koppisch described twelve years later: "Currently there are no banks within the boundaries of the Reservation, which is equivalent in size to the state of Connecticut and has a population of 11,000 to 35,000 residents."²⁴ In the United States, there is one bank for every 54,254 persons and one bank per 40.8 sq. miles.²⁵ By comparison, Sierra Leone, where 76.08% lives below the world poverty line

²² "Why are Indian reservations so poor? A look at the bottom 1%" *Forbes*, 12/13/2011.

²³ "The Myth of Indian Casino Riches" *Indian Country Today Media Network*, 6/23/2012

²⁴ Pickering and Mushinski, pg. 2

²⁵ Calculated using statistics from Google and Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis

of \$2 PPP, has one bank for every 33,000 persons and one bank per 153.88 sq. miles.²⁶ While comparing an area of the United States to a sub-Saharan country may seem dramatic or sensational, it is a comparison that must be made. How can we, a nation that prides itself on helping smaller nations in need, feel content or ignore a situation where, in 1998, *66% of reservation inhabitants lived below the poverty line*? Although this rate has fallen to 53.5% by 2011, that number is still 3.56 times the national average.²⁷²⁸ These data are a signifier that, while maintaining tradition may be a morally and emotionally action, it is not an economically viable one, especially in a world where income disparity is at its greatest in decades, an issue that prompted Zhu Min, special adviser to the International Monetary Fund, to say that “the increase in inequality is the most serious challenge for the world.”²⁹

Part II: Urban Areas

While the situation is more pronounced on reservations, the crisis of American Indian poverty in urban areas is nearly as significant. Cities, and especially cities in America, are supposed to be a great opportunity for social mobility. Chinese immigrants arriving in San Francisco in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries called it *gum saan*, or Gold Mountain.³⁰ For many Native Americans, cities like Los Angeles, Phoenix, Minneapolis, New York, Albuquerque, and, incidentally, San Francisco, cities remain their *gum saan*. They could escape the cycle of poverty that ensnared their family and reservation for decades and rise in the ranks. Diane Humetewa, a nominee for the federal judgeship in Arizona by President Obama and a Hopi Indian, was born in Phoenix and is the first Native American woman, and third Native American ever, to be nominated

²⁶ World Bank, 2011

²⁷ Pickering and Mushinski, pg. 7

²⁸ U.S. Census Bureau

²⁹ The Telegraph, Jan. 2011

³⁰ *The Chinese Exclusion Era: Conflict and Compromise on Gold Mountain*

for a federal judgeship, should act as a role model in coming years.³¹ Over seventy percent of Native Americans live in urban areas (far lower than any other major racial group), but few have reaped the benefits of increased median income: for 2000, the median per-capita income for all urban Americans was \$22,736, or \$30,835.67 in 2013. For urban Native Americans, the respective numbers are \$15,312 in 2000, or \$20,766.88, still below the poverty rate.³²³³ In Chicago, Houston, New York City, Oklahoma City, Denver, Tucson, and Phoenix, the poverty rate for Native Americans is over 25 percent, a number that increases in the under-18 group.³⁴ For urban areas as a whole, this total is 26 percent; on reservations, it increases to 39% of the population.³⁵

The issues present on reservations, notably those of health and education, are present in urban areas. These are joined by the presence of Native American gangs and a homelessness rate that is far beyond the average for all other races. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, 8% of all homeless people are Native American “compared to 1% of the general population.”³⁶ Forty-one percent of the homeless population is white (76% of general population), forty percent African-American (11% general population), and eleven percent for Hispanic (9% of the general population).³⁷

While gangs are a presence on many reservations, ranging from Oklahoma to Wisconsin to the Dakotas, the situation is worsened in cities where contact with other gangs, especially of other races, leads to increased conflict. This increased conflict leads to a need for more protection, which inevitably leads to greater gang participation. Coupled with unemployment, this leads to high levels

³¹ CBS News, Sept. 20, 2013

³² Harvard, *The State of the Native Nations*, 2007

³³ BLS CPI Inflation Calculator

³⁴ New York Times, Apr. 14, 2013

³⁵ Harvard

³⁶ National Coalition for the Homeless, July 2009

³⁷ Ibid

of alcoholism and drug use. Educational attainment levels are similar to those on reservations. Thus, the potential that the cities represented is lost on many Native Americans.

Part III: Analysis

Social mobility in the United States has become a thing of the past. While role models may very well be positive indicators of things to come, oftentimes they are, to their contemporaries at the very least, exceptions to the rule, rather than the norm. According to U.S. Census Bureau data, approximately 545 million people have lived in the United States since 1790.³⁸ Of those 545,000,000, only 43 have been elected President of the United States. That equates to a 0.0000000789% chance that any American will be elected President. However, these statistics do not tell the whole story. There has been one Catholic president, zero non-Christian presidents, one non-white President, and zero female presidents. This shows that people we lionize are atypical of what not only Americans, but people around the world, can accomplish in their lifetimes.

While this train of thought may seem tangential, it is pertinent to my main argument. With little to no voice in national politics, Native Americans see fewer opportunities for progress than any other minority. Not since the early 1970s have Native American rights grabbed the attention of the American populace. Each President since, oddly enough, Richard Nixon³⁹ has publicly supported Native American rights but, aside from a few pieces of legislation regarding repatriation (return of ancestral artifacts) rights, little progress has been made inside the Beltway.

This lack of progress can be partially attributed to the conditions faced by Native Americans in urban areas. Because of their status as sovereign states, tribes living on reservations *technically* have no voice in American politics, even if tribal members were born off the reservation. Thus, it is

³⁸ “How Many Americans Have There Been?”

³⁹ Although not particularly if you examine his personal history more closely. For more information, please watch <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iCKf-VonsY4>

up to urban American Indians to “pick up the slack,” to use the vernacular. In response to the Civil Rights Movement, but not affiliated with it, the Native American sovereignty movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s had the potential to achieve the success experienced by black Americans. It had all the makings of a social movement: dynamic young leaders from urban areas (including Dennis Banks, Clyde Bellecourt, and Russell Means, among many others), support in the White House (Leonard Garment, Barbara Kilberg, and Brad Patterson, as well as Pres. Nixon to a lesser extent, if only because of the Vietnam War), support from the media, and support from celebrities (Marlon Brando’s refusal to accept his award for *The Godfather* because of the poor treatment of Native Americans). However, as the 1970s shifted the focus from achieving social equity to achieving economic equity, Native Americans have yet to catch up.

Another element is the resounding racism. Like any minority, Native Americans face racism in the social, economic, and political sectors. Among all Native Americans in 2000, 52.3 of 1,000 experienced some form of violence in the past year, 53.4% higher than that of any other race.⁴⁰ In a 2001 report, the Department of Justice said that “one in 10 racially motivated bias incidents targeted Native Americans.”⁴¹ A famous incident occurred in 1975, when Leonard Peltier, an Anishinabe-Lakota member of the American Indian Movement, a radical group similar to the Black Panthers, allegedly shot and killed two white FBI agents on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Peltier was convicted of their murder and sentenced to two consecutive life sentences. However, an examination of evidence and testimony following the trial suggested that the case against Peltier was racially motivated and Peltier was a believable scapegoat, due to his history of issues with crime. Peltier has remained in federal prison since his conviction and each appeal has failed.

⁴⁰ Indianz.com, Apr. 2002

⁴¹ Indianz.com, Oct. 2001

Part IV: Conclusion

As I am not a Native American, these solutions may seem inappropriate to someone who has experienced the problems detailed above. However, based on my research, what follows are solutions that I believe may be viable, while maintaining elements of tradition and sovereignty.

Health: I believe that, in addition to the Indian Health Service, the United States government should provide low-cost healthcare to Native Americans that matches or exceeds the best healthcare available to most Americans. A prime example for this would be that of Canada and the First Nations. Because of treaties signed with tribal leaders that enabled them to use their land and resources, Canada has allowed tribal members to use healthcare resources for free, as if they were Canadian citizens. This might not be a terribly logical solution at the moment, with the Affordable Healthcare Act freezing up progress in Washington, but I believe that if it works in Canada, then there is no reason why it should not work in the United States. I believe that this solution would lower the rates of alcoholism, teenage pregnancy, diabetes, obesity, drug use, and suicide among Native Americans. I am not suggesting a reliance on U.S. hospitals and healthcare, but merely have it remain a viable and affordable option.

Education: A previous “solution” to the “problem” of Native education were off-reservation boarding schools, popularized by Richard Pratt, who was proud to say that his boarding school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania “Killed the Indian in him, and Saved the White man in him.” Obviously, assimilation is not a viable solution as I seek to preserve and expand sovereignty in each of these solutions. Thus, I think that Native Americans should receive heavily subsidized educations that are free from federal student loans. I do not think that a low-cost education would cause them to “be lazy” later in life; rather, much like launch aid for a company, it would give them a leg up in life that they would not normally have on reservations or in cities. However, it should not be mandatory and should be open

to those American Indians who believe it to be a better option than remaining in the conditions under which they were born.

Land Development: I believe that Native American tribes should be given the same treatment as corporations when it comes to loans for land development from banks. These loans should be treated as tax-free until the land has been developed to a level equivalent to that of the land surrounding the reservation. This would hopefully encourage reservations to become more active in the marketplace and would improve property values, and thus living conditions, on reservations.

Sovereignty: I firmly believe that all Native Americans should be given dual citizenship, but to an extent that is not shared with any other nations. They should be treated as a sovereign people and should not be subject to any U.S. laws, with the exception of those established under treaties with their respective tribe(s). However, they should be given all the same rights as natural-born American citizens. I believe that this would encourage greater cooperation between tribes and state and federal governments. I also think that each Indian tribe should be given an embassy in Washington D.C. that can have a so-called Ambassador to the United States. These Ambassadors could then meet with Congress several times a year to discuss sovereignty relations and policy reform.

The current state of Native American affairs is one that has changed little since the Assimilation era of the 19th and early 20th Centuries. That no other racial group experiences the same level of discrimination from that time is astonishing and demands change. The issues I listed above more or less encompass the problems present on reservations and in cities. However, they are hardly a thorough representation of any issue. I believe that the solutions I listed above may be viable and logical ones, based on the research I have conducted both for this and previous projects. However, I am not guaranteeing their success. I can only hope that more people will learn more about this topic and contribute to the discussion of possible solutions. Native Americans must be included as equals

in the conversation in order for solutions to hold any water. Only then can we reverse 530 years of racial tension and see each other as social, economic, and intellectual equals.

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