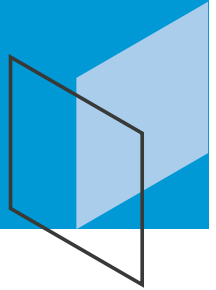


6 Impacts of Homelessness Unique to Indigenous Communities



The reasons for high rates of homelessness among indigenous communities are complex, but like many ethnic injustices in America, they're rooted in the historical traumas uniquely experienced by these populations.

In Seattle, Native people are **7x** more likely than white people to be living in homelessness.

-BLOOMBERG

"Native people were never homeless before 1492."

It's a poignant reminder from the Chief Seattle Club, a Native-led housing and human services agency in the city. In Seattle, Native people are [seven times](#) more likely than white people to be experiencing homelessness. While these rates are higher than most of the country, they represent a crisis that's happening nationwide.

Decades of atrocities against Native people have produced a harsh reality: Today American Indians/Alaska Natives (AIAN) experience the second highest rate of homelessness in the U.S., according to the latest [Annual Homelessness Assessment Report](#) by the National Alliance to End Homelessness. As of 2019, Native Americans account for approximately 1.5% of North America's population, yet they make up more than 10% of the homeless population nationally, according to a 2019 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) [report](#).

The reasons for these disparities are complex, but like many ethnic injustices in America, they're rooted in the historical traumas uniquely experienced by these populations. Policies set up by the U.S. government to assimilate Native people had lasting impacts, and led to deep mistrust of agencies and resources.

It's easy to assume the federal government's partnerships with the Tribes would provide sufficient funding to right these wrongs. But the system is outdated and vastly underfunded. Largely due to this, nearly [80% of Native people](#) no longer live on reservations. These impacts leave many Native people feeling caught between two worlds—with no sense of belonging in either.

1. Historical Traumas

Actions taken by the federal government long ago and the suffering they caused may feel like part of a bygone era. But the traumas experienced by those who endured them [have been passed down](#) through generations of Native people.

[The Indian Removal Act of 1830](#) granted tribes land west of the Mississippi in exchange for ancestral homelands in the east—in many cases forcibly displacing them. When the Cherokees were moved west, approximately 4,000 died on the forced march now known as the “Trail of Tears.” (Library of Congress)

The forced assimilation of tens of thousands of Native children through boarding schools, beginning in the late 1800s rounded off a century of trauma.

“[Between 1869 and the 1960s](#), hundreds of thousands of Native American children were removed from their homes and families and placed in boarding schools operated by the federal government and the churches. Though we don’t know how many children were taken in total, by 1900 there were 20,000 children in Native boarding schools, and by 1925 that number had more than tripled.”

By 1926, nearly [83% of Native school-age children](#) were attending boarding schools. In the schools, Native children were stripped of their connections to their culture, forced to lose their language and traditions. They endured mental, physical and sexual abuses. These [traumas had long-lasting](#), multigenerational impacts, creating personal scenarios in which it’s hard to seek help, trust authorities and systems, and ultimately establish stable housing.

The Chief Seattle Club said it sees first-hand how many Native people who walk through their doors still experience a “[deep longing](#)” for connections to their culture and traditions.



2. Mistrust in government agencies

These historical traumas carried in the bodies and minds of Native people through the generations have created a great mistrust of government agencies. The results are damaging: Even when assistance is available, [few Native people may take advantage](#) of those resources.

According to Point-in-Time data, Native people access housing shelters [at a lower rate](#) than any other demographic. And 2018 HUD data, analyzed by the National Alliance to End Homelessness, shows that [50 percent](#) of Native Americans experiencing homelessness are living unsheltered—the highest percentage of any demographic.

 **50%** of native americans experiencing homelessness are living unsheltered—the highest percentage of any demographic.

-NATIONAL ALLIANCE TO END HOMELESSNESS

When Native people do seek resources such as housing and employment, systemic and cultural barriers—such as implicit bias and lack of respect or understanding of cultural differences by people involved in the process—[present big hurdles](#) to securing that next step toward housing and financial stability.

In other words, when Native people take the initiative to push beyond their ingrained mistrust, they're often met with an even higher hurdle—society's historically negative perception of people who have endured unacknowledged hardships and harms.



3. Low counts lead to a lack of federal funding

Native Americans experiencing homelessness [are severely undercounted](#) in U.S. data. Certainly, mistrust in government agencies is one reason—when Native people don't access resources, advocate services can't generate reliable data. Another reason is simply their small population size, which [makes it hard](#) for homeless services and the U.S. Census to identify them. Mistrust in government also hinders accurate Census counts.

“ People who are still alive who know what it is to have a knock on the door and the federal government come in and remove their brothers, their sisters, themselves from their household. So it's completely understandable that people aren't willing to engage. ”

-ELIZABETH DAY, PROGRAM MANAGER,
NATIVE AMERICAN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE

The consequences of low and inaccurate counts can be devastating. Federal and other types of funding are tied to these numbers. Public policies are built around them. When Native people aren't represented in the data—rendering them essentially invisible—public policies simply [can't address their needs](#).

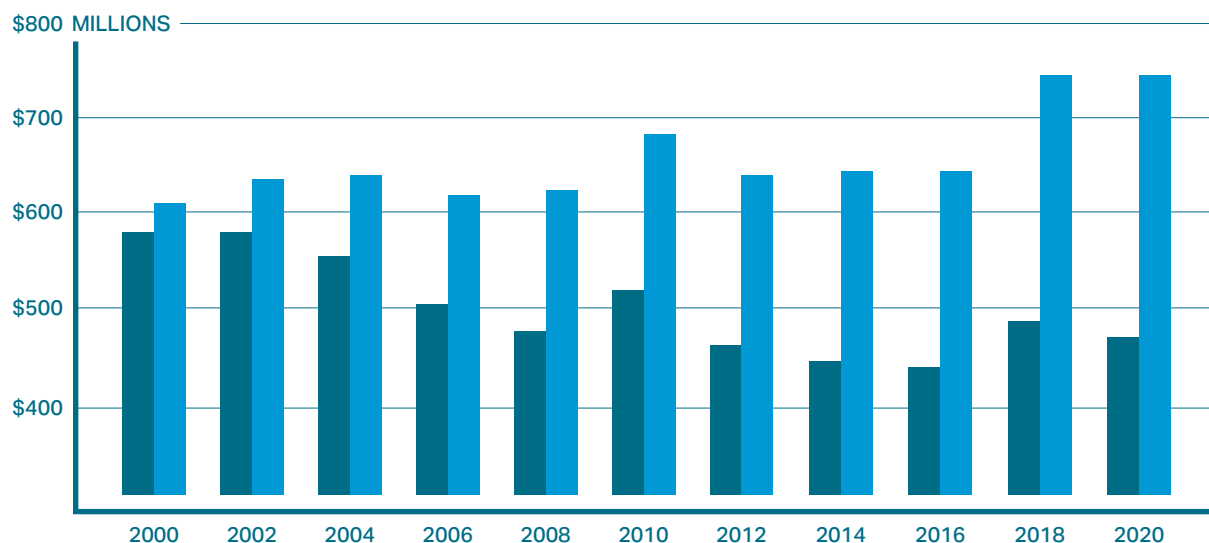
“ That invisibility lends itself almost instantly to marginalization in the economy, to marginalization in public policy When we're not reflected in public policy, those public policies don't address our needs. ”

-JANEEN COMENOTE, FOUNDING EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
NATIONAL URBAN INDIAN FAMILY COALITION

This plays out on tribal lands where, according to an exhaustive 2017 HUD report, 23% of AIAN households [have incomes less than 50 percent](#) of the federal poverty line. “Tribal nations rely on the U.S. Census Bureau to make sure that the count for Indian Country is accurate and complete to ensure proper representation and redistricting, equitable federal funding decisions and formulas, and access to accurate census data for local tribal governance,” [Kevin J. Allis](#) told a Congressional panel in 2020.

The reality is that despite helpful increases in the last few years, Indian Housing Block Grant (IHBG) funding, which provides affordable housing activities on reservations and Indian lands, has remained [relatively stagnant since 1998](#).

Though the dollar amount of IHBG funding has increased slightly over time, [inflation has taken a toll](#) in the 25 years since it began, eating away at the value of the contribution. It now represents only a fraction of the 1998 value—a serious impact considering that even at full 1998 value, these dollars did not meet the demand for affordable housing.



AMOUNT OF INDIAN HOUSING BLOCK GRANT FUNDS APPROPRIATED
CENTER ON BUDGET AND POLICY PRIORITIES, CBPP.ORG

NOMINAL DOLLARS
INFLATION ADJUSTED

Meanwhile, reservation populations have increased since 1998, significantly lowering the per capita allocation of IHBG funding. In the period from 1999 to 2014, the per capita amount decreased over 33%—with [real consequences](#).

Because this funding has not kept pace, services like housing assistance have suffered significantly. Unfortunately, the negative consequences of these impacts can be highly masked on tribal lands. That's because of a practice called "doubling up."

4. Doubling up contributes to inaccurately low homelessness counts

According to the 2017 HUD [report](#), an estimated 42,000 to 85,000 AIAN people on tribal lands experience homelessness. The true number is difficult to pin down because of a practice called [doubling up](#): family members providing shelter to friends and extended family lacking access to housing. Individuals move from one overcrowded home to the next, a direct result of lack of affordable housing, which in turn is a consequence of inadequate funding.

“People go from one family member’s home to another. [Everyone’s homeless](#) around here, but they just stay with family members and extended families until they get kicked out. It’s not good—they are not living in the street, but it’s still not good.” – Anonymous interviewee

In the HUD survey, [99.8 percent](#) of tribal housing officials said that doubling up was a problem on tribal lands. The report also found that among AIAN households in tribal areas, 16% were overcrowded, compared to 2% nationally.

Literal homelessness—according to the HUD definition, sleeping outside, in an emergency shelter or some place not meant for human habitation—is [far less common](#) but often the only figure represented in official counts tied to resource allocation.

On top of overcrowding, barriers to new development including limited private investment, low-functioning housing markets, and poverty mean that Native communities face some of the worst housing and living conditions in the United States. According to the 2017 HUD report, homes in tribal areas had deficiencies that far exceeded the national rates of 1-2%. And

In nearly every social, health, and economic indicator, AIAN people rank at or near the bottom. According to the latest counts, 1 in 4 AIAN people were living [below the poverty line](#), almost twice the national rate, yet only 12% of households said they were in assisted housing.

An estimated [68,000 new homes are needed](#) to eliminate overcrowding and replace inadequate housing on reservations – and an increase in population since that data was collected has likely worsened the shortage.

These circumstances have pushed many to seek opportunities off the reservations. But this comes with its own harsh realities.

5. Caught between two worlds

Having a credit history or understanding how to get an ID card are elements of everyday life in the US. But for Native people migrating away from the reservation, these fundamentals can present major [barriers to the first steps](#) in applying for a job and establishing an economic foothold. Additionally, mistrust and social discrimination [continue to factor](#) into their personal journeys.

Roughly 8 out of 10 American Indians do not live on reservations. Experts trace an [urban migration](#) to the Indian Relocation Act of 1956, "when the federal government, attempting to assimilate Native people, offered them incentives to leave their reservations. But assurances of opportunity gave way to discrimination, isolation, dead-end jobs and poor living conditions that continue today."

8 out of 10 Americans indians do not live on reservations. Yet very little funding is directed specifically toward them.

-THE NEW YORK TIMES

Today there is still very little federal funding directed specifically toward them. Tribal governments usually allocate funds [for life on the reservation](#), rarely with any to spare for services in urban areas where Native Americans often lack basic housing.

This leaves many Native people feeling caught between urban life and reservation life—or abandoned by both.



6. Loss of spiritual connection

The major impacts of homelessness are felt across populations, from hazardous environmental exposure to safety risks, such as theft and murder. But unhoused Native people also face racial discrimination and a loss of connection to their culture and spiritual traditions. Often, shelters and advocates [aren't knowledgeable](#) about Native cultural issues. Nationwide, there's a shortage of culturally competent outreach, which is key to engendering trust with unhoused Native people.

“ There are [basic cultural issues](#) that the agencies who help the homeless are not knowledgeable of when dealing with native people. This is what is at the heart of the problem of homelessness for our community. ”

-PATRICIA LOPEZ, COMMISSIONER,
LOS ANGELES NATIVE AMERICAN INDIAN COMMISSION

However, resources that are designed specifically for Native people are [finding success](#). “We know that when our community gets culturally competent services, by Native people for Native people, the services are going to stick,” Janeen Comenote, Founding Executive Director, National Urban Indian Family Coalition, told Bloomberg.

If more resources address the challenges unhoused Native people face, the effects would literally be life-saving. According to [New Mexico In Depth](#), statewide data from a three-year study shows that the average age of death for unhoused white people was 45.6 years old. For unhoused Native people, 37.5. And for Native women, only 35.3. The study also showed that from 2014 to 2018, 22% of deaths of unhoused people were Native people, the highest rate among any racial group. In 2020, it increased to 26%.

Those are staggering numbers that hit us at the core here at Pallet. They're proof that creative solutions are desperately needed.



Tribal housing assistance is in desperate need of an overhaul and an infusion of dollars.

Even if funding levels rise sufficiently to meet the affordable housing crisis head on, how much time will pass before conditions measurably improve on tribal lands? Construction is a slow process and, when tied to grant funding, often hindered by red tape that can add years to a project. The tribes need solutions now, not five years from now.

There are signs of progress. With All In: The Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness announced in December 2022, the government acknowledges the work to be done both nationally and specifically to improve conditions on tribal lands. The intent is to “ensure state and local communities have sufficient resources and guidance to build the effective, lasting systems required to end homelessness.” One of its four main strategies: Increase access to federal housing and homelessness funding for AIAN communities living on and off tribal lands.



Pallet can help

At the end of 2022, we built a shelter village on the Tulalip Tribal Reservation in Washington state. The Tulalip Tribe will operate it with the ability to provide culturally appropriate resources. It's an example of a solution personalized to its community. We know there's no one-size-fits all approach to solving the homelessness crisis. But when advocates can create an ecosystem of support for reintegration—such as the Tulalip Tribe with these shelters—there's potential for great progress to happen.

Since our start in 2016, Pallet has built thousands of safe, secure, and dignified transitional shelter units for people experiencing homelessness across the US. Affordable housing alone will not bring an end to this crisis. While long-term housing solutions are put in place, Pallet plays a critical role in bridging the gap with immediate transitional shelter and connection to wrap-around social services – a proven model for success.

Pallet shelters are a safe and affordable way to quickly house historically marginalized groups at particular risk. Our team has extensive end-to-end expertise in the multistakeholder process required to create healing transitional shelter villages at speed and scale. We are also a resource for assistance securing funding, identifying appropriate sites and housing types, working with community stakeholders, partnering with service providers, and building the shelters.

Our goal is to empower you to end homelessness in your community.



We believe housing is a basic human right that all people are entitled to. As some politicians look to innovative plans to solve the current housing crisis, we need to work together to find comprehensive solutions to end unsheltered homelessness.



-AMY KING, PALLET FOUNDER AND CEO

[Learn more about tribal communities finding a solution through Pallet.](#)

