

# American Indian reservations: The first underclass areas?

by Gary D. Sandefur

---

Gary D. Sandefur is a professor of social work and sociology at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and an affiliate of the Institute for Research on Poverty.<sup>1</sup>

---

To date most of the discussion of the “underclass” has focused on the central cities of the major metropolitan areas in the Northeast and Midwest. There are a number of reasons for this emphasis. First, the largest concentrations of poor are to be found in urban ghettos. Second, it is in these areas that the problems associated with an underclass are most visible. The major news media—themselves located in these cities—see firsthand the poverty, deteriorating housing, and criminal activity. Their reports to the nonpoor urban majority about the problem areas in their midst bring home the plight of the underclass as both a threat and a responsibility. Third, most major research universities are located in or near the same areas, and it is to be expected therefore that these pockets of extreme poverty attract the interest of social scientists.

Yet the fact that the media and scholars have concentrated on the central cities does not mean that the problems of the underclass are unique to these areas. In fact, in a number of rural areas, high rates of poverty, large proportions of out-of-wedlock and teen births, high school dropout, and illegal activities are to be found. In 1980 a quarter of the population of American Indians lived on reservations. Most of these reservation Indians lived in what could, by one definition or another, be described as underclass communities.

One criterion used to define an underclass area is that over 40 percent of the households have incomes below the poverty line. By this criterion alone, 18 of the 36 Indian reservations which had populations of over 2,000 in 1980 were underclass areas. The largest American Indian reservation, the Navajo reservation, had a poverty rate of over 50 percent in 1980. In the Santo Domingo Pueblo, a fairly concentrated group of 2,140 Indians, approximately two-thirds of the households had incomes that placed them below the poverty line.

The prevalence of high poverty rates on reservations suggests that we should look more closely at the extent to which other features of reservation life reflect the problems that are associated with an underclass. If there are parallels between

the reservation and central-city settings, this would suggest that the sources of underclass problems lie not so much in the special features of the central city, but in other factors, such as economic isolation, which may occur in a number of locales.

## A brief history of the reservation system

How American Indians came to be concentrated on reservations is a complicated story that most Americans know only very little about from their courses in American history in high school and college.<sup>2</sup> The isolation and concentration of American Indians began very early, but it received its first legal justification in the Indian Removal Act of 1830. Subsequent to the passage of this legislation, most of the Indians who were located east of the Mississippi were relocated to areas west of the river. This relocation included groups such as the Seneca, who were forced to leave the state of New York and eventually ended up in a small area in what is now northeastern Oklahoma; the Sauk Indians, who were forced to leave the Midwest and now live in a small area in north-central Oklahoma; and the Cherokee, who were forced to leave the Southeast for eastern Oklahoma. Those Indians who did not move west of the Mississippi were compelled to give up large portions of land over which they had previously had control and were concentrated on increasingly small and geographically isolated areas. The Chippewa in Wisconsin, for example, gave up control of the northern third of the state and retained only a very small amount of land for their own use.

As the population of European origin in the United States began to surge west of the Mississippi in the late 1800s, there was increasing pressure on the recently removed groups such as the Cherokee to give up some of their new land, and on the groups indigenous to the West, such as the Sioux, to give up large amounts of land traditionally under their control. Some of this further expulsion was accomplished in a relatively peaceful manner through treaties, and some was accomplished through violent military confrontation. The lands reserved for Indian use were generally regarded as the least desirable by whites and were almost always located far from major population centers, trails, and transportation routes that later became part of the modern system of metropolitan areas, highways, and railroads. In sum, for most of the nineteenth century the policy of the U.S. government was to isolate and concentrate Indians in places with few natural resources, far from contact with the developing U.S. economy and society.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the federal government revised its principal approach to the "Indian problem" to one of forced assimilation rather than forced isolation. This change in policy was in part motivated by awareness that the quality of life on the isolated reservations was very, very low. The concerns about the reservations resembled in many respects the current analyses of problems in the central city. The Eastern media and intellectuals viewed the conditions on the reservations as unacceptable and in need of immediate and drastic action.

This assimilation was to be accomplished through allotment policy, and the first allotment legislation (the Dawes Act) was passed in 1887. The basic idea was to divide into smaller parcels (often 160 acres) the small areas of land that were at that time controlled by the various groups of Indians, and to allot one of these parcels to each Indian in the particular tribe. The goal of this policy was to enable Indians to become farmers or ranchers, the major occupations in the areas where Indians were located, and full members of American society. A side benefit was that "surplus" land was purchased from Indian groups at low prices and opened up for white settlement.

Allotment did not have the desired healthy consequences for American Indians. The conclusion of most observers was that the Indian groups who experienced allotment were no better off, and in some cases worse off, than before. The enthusiasm for allotment as a solution to the Indian problem gradually subsided, and many reservations remained intact.

The next major attack on the reservation system occurred in the early 1950s. Public opinion and political leaders were distressed by the miserable living conditions on Indian reservations, on the one hand, and the special legal relationship between American Indian groups and the federal government, on the other hand. In 1953, termination legislation was passed and signed into law. The intent of this legislation was to end the special relationship between Indian tribes and the federal government. Reservations would cease to exist as independent political entities. To accompany this program, the federal government also instituted an employment and relocation program which provided financial assistance and social services to Indians who wanted to leave reservations and isolated rural areas for urban areas with supposedly better employment prospects. Only a few tribes were terminated before this approach was abandoned, but a very limited relocation and employment assistance program is still in place.

Since the 1950s the proportion of the American Indian population living on reservations has declined from over 50 percent to approximately 25 percent in 1980. This decline has been due to the migration of American Indians away from these impoverished, isolated areas. In 1980, 336,384 American Indians lived on reservations. Although some of these

reservations are quite small, 250,379 Indians lived on 36 reservations with populations of 2,000 or more. Three-quarters of these Indians lived on the 18 reservations that had poverty rates of 40 percent or higher. In other words, approximately 14 percent of all American Indians in 1980 lived on large reservations with poverty rates of 40 percent or higher.<sup>3</sup>

### **Are some reservations underclass areas?**

Various definitions of the underclass have been reviewed and analyzed in detail by a number of observers. The definitions vary in the degree to which they can be quantified. Some analysts attempt to identify underclass individuals, whereas others identify underclass areas. Published census data describing the populations of Indian reservations do not allow one to characterize individuals as "street hustlers," or long-term welfare recipients, or persons who lack an attachment to the labor force over the long term. Consequently, for the purposes of this essay, I focus on those definitions that identify underclass areas. One, as previously mentioned, is a high concentration of poverty (over 40 percent). Although most reservations are considerably larger than the usual census tract in urban areas to which the 40 percent measure is applied, it is not stretching the definition too much to apply it to "large" reservations, i.e., those with populations of 2,000 or more.

Another major definition of underclass areas is that of Ricketts and Sawhill.<sup>4</sup> To be an underclass area by this definition, census tracts must be at least one standard deviation above the national average on the following characteristics: (1) the percentage of individuals aged 16–19 who were not enrolled in school and not high school graduates (national average=13 percent); (2) the percentage of males aged 16–64 who were without a full-time or part-time job for more than 26 weeks during 1979 (national average=14 percent); (3) the percentage of households receiving public assistance (national average=3 percent); and (4) the percentage of households with children that were headed by women (national average=17 percent).

The Ricketts and Sawhill definition does not use the poverty rate, and the choice of one standard deviation as the cut-off point is an arbitrary decision. The working definition of underclass areas in this essay uses the 40 percent poverty rate as the principal criterion, but I also present data on the four characteristics of underclass areas specified by Ricketts and Sawhill.

Published statistics on American Indian reservations allow use of the Ricketts and Sawhill definition for criteria (1) and (3); for criterion (2), I use the percentage of men aged 16 and over (including those 65 and over) without a full-time or part-time job for more than 26 weeks during 1979; and for criterion (4) I use the percentage of all Indian households headed by women.

Table 1 contains data on two sets of reservations that have poverty rates of 40 percent or higher. The reservations in Panel A also have female headship rates that are at least 30 percent. There are ten reservations in this category, located in four states: Arizona, Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Most of these reservations have values on the Ricketts and Sawhill criteria far above the U.S. average. For example, the percentage of households receiving at least one form of public assistance ranged from 12 percent at Salt River to 33 percent on the Red Lake reservation.

The reservations in Panel B have household poverty rates of 40 percent or higher, but less than 30 percent of the households on these reservations are headed by women. Their underclass characteristics are apparent from the statistics presented in the table. In addition to these problems, many reservations are also afflicted by other forms of social disorganization. Accidents, some of which are related to alcohol abuse, are the first or second leading causes of death on most reservations. The prevalence of alcohol-related dis-

eases is much higher on Indian reservations than among other populations in the country. The rate of suicide is very high on many reservations.

### Reservation life: A mixed blessing

As I mentioned earlier, the problems on American Indian reservations have drawn the attention of concerned citizens many times in the past. Critics of conditions in the United States often point to American Indian reservations as examples of the hypocrisy of a system that purports to provide liberty and justice for all. Many Americans would prefer that reservations did not exist, and many American Indians leave the reservations to seek a higher quality of life elsewhere. Consequently, people are often surprised that everyone does not leave the reservation, and that most Indians strongly oppose any attempt to dismantle the reservation system. In focusing on the negative aspects of reservation life, these people ignore the positive features, of which there are many.

Table 1

American Indian Reservations with Populations of 2,000 or More That Are Underclass Areas

	American Indian Population	% of Households in Poverty	% Dropouts	% Working Little	% with Public Assistance	% of Households with Female Heads
A. 40% poverty rates and female headship rates of 30% or higher						
Fort Totten, N. Dak.	2,217	54%	26%	55%	26%	37%
Gila River, Ariz.	6,906	53	40	47	17a	33
Leech Lake, Minn.	2,734	43	33	57	29	30
Papago, Ariz.	6,772	58	24	50	19a	32
Pine Ridge, S. Dak.	11,868	56	30	52	23	32
Red Lake, Minn.	2,826	43	45	48	33	35
Rosebud, S. Dak.	5,643	49	33	45	23	34
Salt River, Ariz.	2,604	44	44	41	12a	34
Sisseton, N. Dak., S. Dak.	2,589	54	39	56	26a	36
Standing Rock, N. Dak., S. Dak.	4,587	51	29	53	24a	34
B. 40% poverty rates but female headship rates of less than 30%						
Fort Apache, Ariz.	6,870	50	29	41	10	24
Hopi, Ariz.	6,592	54	15	61	14a	22
Navajo, Ariz., N. Mex., Utah	104,517	53	24	56	15a	24
N. Cheyenne, Mont.	3,069	43	24	53	16	27
San Carlos, Ariz.	5,795	56	31	51	10	28
Santo Domingo Pueblo, N. Mex.	2,140	66	24	42	18b	26
Turtle Mountain, N. Dak.	4,011	44	36	59	24	29
Zuni Pueblo, N. Mex.	5,973	46	30	42	11b	27

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *American Indians, Eskimos, and Aleuts on Identified Reservations and in the Historic Areas of Oklahoma* (Excluding Urbanized Areas), PC80-2-ID (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986).

Notes: The population figures do not include non-Indians living on the reservations. The numbers in the "percentage dropouts" column refers to the percentages of persons 16-19 who are not enrolled in school and are not high school graduates. "Percentage working little" refers to the fraction of men aged 16 and over who worked fewer than 27 weeks in 1979. "Percentage with public assistance" refers to the fraction receiving AFDC, unless followed by an a or b. An a indicates the figure is the fraction receiving general assistance; b refers to the fraction receiving SSI. For each of the reservations, the largest of these three fractions is recorded.

First, the reservation is a cultural base. Indians in the United States do not share a native language as do the different Hispanic groups. There are hundreds of different Indian languages and traditional cultures. And very few groups have settled in large enough numbers in particular urban areas to maintain their tribal language and culture off the reservation. For most Indians, then, the reservation is the only place where one can speak to others in one's own native language and share in a traditional way of life.

Second, life on the reservation is characterized by a strong sense of family and community. The kinship structures on many reservations are elaborate and complex. They add to daily existence a meaning and context that are missing when one leaves the reservation.

Third, social services and assistance programs on reservations are usually administered through the tribal government and special federal agencies such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Indian Health Service. Indians who "grow up" in this political and social service setting find it quite difficult to understand and negotiate the political and social service systems off the reservation. Furthermore, those who leave the reservation often lose access to services that were free while they lived on the reservation but for which they are ineligible unless they return. The Indian Health Service, or tribally run health clinics, for example, provide free health care to Indians living on reservations. Once a reservation resident moves to an urban area, he or she usually has to arrange to obtain health care from providers that serve non-Indians as well.

In spite of these positive features of life on the reservation that to some extent counterbalance the "underclass" nature of life there, neither Indians nor non-Indians familiar with reservations are satisfied with reservation conditions. This dissatisfaction and desire to improve life for the reservation Indian population have led to two major types of efforts to assist reservation residents. One type of program, alluded to above, has provided the opportunity for individuals, especially young people, to leave the reservations to seek better opportunities elsewhere. In addition to employment assistance programs, special vocational and higher educational assistance programs have been established for American Indians. The second, and currently major, effort involves the development of the economies of American Indian reservations. Economic development has proved difficult because of the success of the policy which created American Indian reservations to begin with: the removal and isolation of the Indian population away from the major growth and development in American society.

The most successful economic efforts to date have taken advantage of natural resources. Some tribes have benefited from the discovery of oil and the harvesting of timber on reservation lands. Others have taken advantage of their location near tourist attractions such as ski areas. Most reservations, however, have no marketable natural resources to make use of.

Many tribes have attempted to develop their own businesses or attract private business to the reservation. Tribal businesses have sometimes failed because of a lack of business experience or because of the difficulties in marketing goods produced on the reservation. Efforts to attract private business are hampered by the isolation of most reservations and by the special legal status of American Indian tribal governments. These governments are akin in many respects to state governments. Many private businesses which try to locate on reservations find that they are not protected by state laws. This increases the risks that must be taken to do business on reservations.

The special legal status of American Indian governments has also provided the opportunity for tribes to engage in business activities that are illegal in other parts of the states where the tribes are located. Many tribes use bingo and other gambling activities as a source of revenue. Tribally owned and operated bingo halls have become increasingly common throughout Indian country.

Although economic development has met with only limited success, the federal and tribal governments have been more successful in improving other aspects of life on reservations. The Indian Health Service, for example, has dramatically improved access to medical care for the reservation population during the past thirty years. The quality of housing, the water, and the sanitation facilities on reservations have also improved. But economic development and, with it, job creation continue to be lacking.

## Policy suggestions

Valuable and important in and of themselves, Indian reservations should be accepted as permanent features of American life. The reservation system preserves traditional ways of life and languages that might otherwise disappear. Those who choose to live on reservations, even though from an economic point of view it would be more sensible to leave, enable this historic culture to persist.

Having made that choice, however, reservation residents should not be precluded from the opportunities available to other Americans. Individuals who are born and/or attain adulthood on reservations currently must (1) leave for other areas with better economic opportunities; (2) remain on the reservation, which often involves some level of dependence on public assistance; or (3) move back and forth between reservation and nonreservation areas. One way to increase the options available to reservation residents would be to invest more in the employment assistance program. Employment assistance involves more than simply providing financial assistance for moves from reservations to other areas. The program must also include—as it did in the past—extensive employment and social services, so that Indians from reservations can learn to adapt to life on the outside.

For those who wish to remain on the reservations, we need to increase the options for making a living. Although the lack of attachment to the labor force appears to be a feature of life on many reservations, it is not equivalent to not working. Many reservation residents raise livestock and plant and harvest produce—activities often not reported as labor force participation. Taking these activities into account, however, one would still conclude that the lack of job opportunities is a critical problem on reservations. The hope of many observers is that economic development will someday provide jobs for reservation residents who need them, but we cannot afford to wait on the promise of economic development. What is needed is a large-scale public jobs program. This program could be modeled after existing workfare programs in that individuals who receive public assistance would be expected to participate. To provide a sufficient number of jobs, new public service jobs would have to be created.

The most important lesson to be learned from the reservations may be that it is economic, social, and physical isolation from the majority society that produces what we have come to call underclass behavior. This isolation has produced extreme poverty, high unemployment, unstable families, low rates of high school graduation, and high rates of alcoholism and/or drug abuse and crime on reservations and in central cities. These effects occur even, as is the situation on the reservations, where other aspects of social organization, such as kinship and community systems, seem strong. So the key to improving life for members of the underclass may lie in reducing their physical, social, and economic isolation. ■

---

<sup>1</sup>The author wishes to thank Becky Sandefur for her research assistance.

<sup>2</sup>There are a number of analyses of the history of American Indian–U.S. relations and federal policy toward American Indians. A recent book by Stephen Cornell, *The Return of the Native: American Indian Political Resurgence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), examines in a clear and interesting fashion the attempts of American Indian groups to protect and maintain their way of life after being confronted with the overwhelming forces of European migration and military might. Francis Paul Prucha, in *The Great White Father: The U.S. Government and American Indians* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), discusses the changes in federal policy toward American Indians over the entire course of American history.

<sup>3</sup>This and other information on the American Indian population in 1980 are based on computations with published data from the 1980 Census. These published data appear in the volumes titled *General Social and Economic Characteristics and Detailed Characteristics and American Indians, Eskimos, and Aleuts on Identified Reservations and in the Historic Areas of Oklahoma*.

<sup>4</sup>Erol R. Ricketts and Isabel Sawhill, "Defining and Measuring the Underclass," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 7 (Winter 1988), 316–325.

## Funding opportunities for poverty research

### Small Grants Program: Institute for Research on Poverty

The Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services will sponsor the ninth competition under the Small Grants program for research on poverty-related topics during the period July 1990 through June 1991. Two programs are offered: (1) several grants of up to \$12,500 each are available for work during the summer of 1990 and do not require residence in Madison; (2) a smaller number of grants of up to \$25,000 each are available for visitors in residence for a period of up to 4.5 months at either Madison or the Department of Health and Human Services during the 1990–91 academic year. Researchers must hold the Ph.D. If more information is desired, write for guidelines after October 1, 1989, addressing the request to Small Grants Program, Institute for Research on Poverty, 1180 Observatory Drive, Madison, WI 53706. Application deadline is mid-February 1990.

### Poverty, the Underclass, and Public Policy: University of Michigan

A research and training program on poverty, the underclass, and public policy is open to American minority scholars who will have completed their doctorates by August 15, 1990. The program is under the supervision of Sheldon H. Danziger, Professor of Social Work and Public Policy at the University of Michigan. It is funded by the Rockefeller Foundation.

Applications are being accepted for a one-year period, beginning as early as July 1, 1990, but no later than September 1, 1990, and lasting a calendar year. Application deadline is January 10, 1990.

Postdoctoral fellows will conduct their own research, participate in a research seminar led by Danziger and Mary Corcoran, Professor of Political Science and Public Policy, and may collaborate with other University of Michigan faculty members while in residence in Ann Arbor. The type of research that will be funded is described in the Social Science Research Council announcement of research on the urban underclass (see following page).

For further information, contact Program on Poverty, the Underclass, and Public Policy, School of Social Work, 2060F Frieze Building, 105 S. State Street, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109–1285.

*continued on p. 42*