

The socioeconomic status of Native Americans: A special policy problem

The study of poverty among American Indians poses a number of problems because of the unique history and circumstances of this group of Americans. Unlike other minority groups, Indians have a special legal status. A federal agency, the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, oversees their well-being, the Indian Health Service provides free health care to them, and other programs, such as the Wisconsin Relief to Needy Indian Persons program, are designed specifically to aid them. On the reservations Indians are frequently governed by tribal leaders rather than by county or state officials, and these tribal governments administer welfare, job training, and other social services.

In addition to the special programs designed for them, Indians are entitled to participate in the various programs for all of the needy: Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), General Assistance, Food Stamps, and school lunches. Yet for all this attention directed toward a group that consists of a mere 0.7 percent of the population, there is much hardship. According to the 1980 Census, 27 percent of American Indian households were below the poverty line, and among them were the poorest of the poor. Indian couples have been found to be poorer, less educated, and more geographically isolated than any other couples.¹

Gary D. Sandefur of the Institute for Research on Poverty has been studying the American Indian population for a number of years. His work, which includes an examination of the 1980 Census data, has revealed much that runs counter to common preconceptions about Native Americans. The most recent figures show, for example, that only 25 percent of the Indian population live on reservations, while 54 percent live in urban areas. This is in contrast to the beginning of the century, when virtually all Indians lived on reservations.

Intermarriage between Indians and whites is widespread. According to Sandefur, married Indian men and women are as likely to be married to whites as to one another. In this they differ greatly from blacks. Whereas only 0.8 percent of black women were married to white men in 1980, 48.4 percent of Indian women were.² Furthermore the number of people classified as Indians in the population grew between 1960 and 1970 by 51 percent, and between 1970 and 1980 by 79 percent. This growth was in part because Americans who formerly had reported themselves as "white" in Census counts changed their self-reported classification to "Native American." Some people may be claiming their Indian identity in order to benefit from special programs. On the other hand, these changes in self-identification from white to Indian may be part of the general resurgence of ethnic identity in the United States.

The socioeconomic situation of the American Indian appears to be improving, though this may be due in part to

changed classifications among these new Indians. In 1960 the median income of the American Indian man was 43 percent of the white man's median income. By 1980 it was 62 percent. In this same period, the median income of blacks advanced from 50 percent to 60 percent of white median income.³ Both median and mean per capita household incomes of Indians were slightly higher than those of blacks in 1980, with the exception of households with children headed by couples and "other" family households (see Table 1).

Indians in the labor force

In a pair of studies, Sandefur and Wilbur J. Scott of the University of Oklahoma⁴ found that although the average wages of Indian men are significantly lower than average white men's wages, most of the difference can be explained by factors such as location and human capital characteristics of the Indians. They conclude that there are few differences in the way wages of whites and Indians are determined in the American labor market, once we account for the lower levels of human capital, geographical isolation, and overrepresentation of American Indians in less favorable occupations and industries.⁵ They suggest that there is a great need for programs to improve educational levels and health conditions among Indians and that affirmative action may be less important for Indians than for blacks as a mechanism for increasing earnings:

Table 1
Mean/Median Per Capita Household Total Income for Each Household Type, by Race (figures rounded to the nearest dollar)

Household Type	Indian Households	Black Households	White Households
Families			
Married couple, no children	\$8155/6755	\$7069/5607	\$10,566/9010
Married couple, with children	4723/4028	4763/4167	6440/5702
Mother-child	2595/1823	2536/1751	3624/3019
Father-child	4890/3937	4046/3370	6728/5915
Other family	4627/3515	4733/3604	7811/6498
Nonfamilies			
Men living alone	9808/7610	9375/7505	13,584/10810
Women living alone	6593/4520	6190/3980	8671/6250
Multiperson	9989/7950	8470/6615	11,335/9130

Source: U.S. Census, 1980, Public Use Microdata Sample A, 5 percent sample.

Note: Indian household: Household head and/or spouse is Indian. Black household: Household head is black. White household: Household head is white and spouse is not Indian.

Publications on Native Americans

- Gary D. Sandefur and Wilbur Scott, "A Sociological Analysis of White, Black, and American Indian Male Labor Force Activities." IRP Discussion Paper no. 765-84. Forthcoming in *Research in Race and Ethnic Relations*, vol. 5, Cora B. Marrett and Cheryl Leggon, eds. (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press).
- Gary D. Sandefur and Trudy McKinnell, "Intermarriage between American Indians and White Americans: Patterns and Implications." Center for Demography and Ecology Working Paper no. 85-26, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1985.
- Gary D. Sandefur, "The Relationship between Migration and Labor Force Participation for American Indian and White Couples." IRP Discussion Paper no. 795-85. Forthcoming in *International Migration Review*.
- Gary D. Sandefur and Arthur Sakamoto, "Income Sources and Program Participation of American Indians." IRP Discussion Paper, in preparation.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that blacks experience a great deal of *current* discrimination in the wage-setting process that is not experienced by American Indians. The *past* discrimination experienced by American Indians has placed them in isolated regions of the country, with few opportunities to work in core industries or nonmanual occupations, has promoted poor health, and has led to inadequate educational opportunities.⁶

When it comes to hours worked, the difference between blacks and whites disappears when adjustments are made for human capital measures, location, and other variables that affect labor market participation, but the difference between Indians and whites persists. Whether this difference is cultural or the result of some variable not taken into account is not known. Anthropologists have shown that Indians do place more emphasis on nonwork roles than do white Americans. Or it may be that the rural location of Indians, relative to whites and blacks, results in fewer opportunities to work.⁷

Migration

If much of the disadvantaged position of the Indian has to do with location, is migration the solution? From the 1950s through 1984, the Bureau of Indian Affairs had a program to assist Indians who wished to relocate from rural and/or reservation areas to such metropolitan sites as Chicago, Cleveland, Dallas, Denver, Los Angeles, and Oakland, where jobs were presumably available. The program, which was no doubt designed to redress in part the injustices of an

earlier time—when all Indians were forcibly removed to reservations and prevented thereby from participating in the economic growth of the nation—has had mixed results. Sandefur and C. Matthew Snipp of the University of Maryland made use of the 1980 Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) file drawn from the U.S. Census and found that although urban Indians are more likely (slightly over 6 percent) to be in the labor force than rural Indians, there is no difference in median weeks worked. Nor are there higher median earnings. It appears that at least in the short run (the first five years) migration to the city does not yield economic benefits. Migration to urban areas per se, the authors conclude, is an insufficient condition for improving the economic status of the American Indian. The mere fact of migration will not make a disadvantaged person more employable. It is likely as well to have some negative impact on the culture and cohesion of the Indian population.

The Wisconsin study

How then do we go about helping disadvantaged Indians? It would seem to require detailed examination of those Indians who are in need of assistance and the tailoring of programs specifically for them. Sandefur is now engaged in such a project in Wisconsin.

The 30,000 Wisconsin Indians (0.6 percent of the population) are among the neediest inhabitants of the state. Under a two-year contract with the Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services, Sandefur has undertaken to examine their economic well-being, compare the conditions of female-headed households with those headed by men, and compare Indian households with those in other states and with other ethnic groups. Making use of the national 5 percent Public Use Microdata Sample of the Census for 1980, he is examining such specific factors as whether residential location has an impact on the participation of Indian women in AFDC and whether participation rates, levels of support, and particular determinants of poverty (e.g., educational level, health status, migration status) differ among Indians, Hispanic, black, and white women.

This study should be useful in both assessing and addressing the causes of poverty among Indian women. ■

¹ Gary D. Sandefur and Trudy McKinnell, "Intermarriage between American Indians and White Americans: Patterns and Implications," Center for Demography and Ecology Working Paper no. 85-26, University of Wisconsin-Madison, p. 32.

² *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³ Sandefur and Arthur Sakamoto, "Income Sources and Program Participation of American Indians." In preparation.

⁴ "Minority Group Status and the Wages of Indian and Black Males," *Social Science Research*, 12 (1983), 44-68, and "A Sociological Analysis of White, Black, and American Indian Male Labor Force Activities," IRP Discussion Paper no. 765-84, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

⁵ "A Sociological Analysis," p. 32.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-39, *passim*.