

**DOES THE US GOVERNMENT CARE? ADDRESSING THE NATIVE AMERICAN PLIGHT**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Native Americans are the most impoverished ethnic group in the United States: in some of the reservations the poverty rate is more than three times the national average. In addition, reservations show rates of unemployment, education level, health, standard of housing, infrastructure, and safety much lower than the ones in the rest of the country. These phenomena have been extensively discussed in the media as well as in the scholarly literature, and particular attention has been placed on the US government, often considered the entity most responsible for their predicament. The US government, however, has been mainly discussed in terms of its role as the holder of the legal title to and manager of Native Americans' land, with little attention to the financial support that it provides to these communities. The scope of this paper is to put forward a more comprehensive understanding of the role played by the US government to address the challenges of the Native American communities and suggest policies to improve its actions.*

**Keywords:** Native Americans, Poverty, US Government

**1. INTRODUCTION**

The American Indians and Alaska Natives (AIAN) suffer financially and physically more than any other group of people in the US with most of the population living well below the poverty line. Currently, according to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), the AIAN are dying of Covid 19 more times than any other group and their mortality rate is almost 2.5 times that of the Whites and of the Asian Americans. The disturbing fact is that people dying of covid 19 in AIAN communities are on average much younger compared to the white population. Some Native communities, such as those in Arizona, New Mexico, Oregon, Mississippi, and Washington, have been hit extremely hard. At the same time, as the result of the economic crisis which has accompanied the pandemic, many businesses have closed permanently. Scholars estimate that there will be a \$50 billion loss in economic activity in Native communities (First Nation Development Institute, 2021)

Most of the literature on the extreme poverty of the AIAN communities concludes that institutions, and in particular the US government, has been playing a crucial role in their lack of development. This interpretation, however, is usually based on the role that the Federal Government plays as the owner and manager of their land without considering the specific allocation of resources that - via the Bureau of Indian Affairs- it provides for them. To be sure, the land tenure system developed by successive administrations and the resulting patchwork land tenure pattern, including some land "with only non-transferable property rights" (allotted trust) and "some with full fee-simple rights," has contributed to this problem (Dippel, Frye and Leonard, 2020). While the land tenure system constitutes an important constraining factor, this paper aims to go beyond this issue and offer a more comprehensive interpretation of the role that the US government has played in the development on the AIAN communities and suggest recommendations for improvements.

The structure of the paper is as follows: Section 1 discusses the empirical evidence on poverty amongst the AIAN. Section 2 looks at the role played by the Federal Government in the promotion of the well-being