

Montana Urban Indians

The following section addresses the subject of Montana Urban Indians. It must be understood that this is as complex as any area dealing with Montana Native people. The information stated is not all-inclusive, for the individual history and circumstances of Montana Urban Indian people are as diverse as the people themselves (Essential Understanding #2). However, some commonalities do emerge, which include and transcend individual tribal affiliation.

Definition

“... ‘Urban’ is not a kind of Indian. It is an experience, one that most Indian people today have had.”
(National Urban Indian Family Coalition)

The term Urban Indian is sometimes confusing and complex, even among Indian people themselves. Because of the divisions and disenfranchisement, Indian people in Montana have been split into many communities, social structures, cultural groups, and economic strata. This has resulted in reservation and off-reservation Indians, enrolled and non-enrolled Indians, treaty and non-treaty Indians, Indian reservations and Indian country, trust and non-trust lands, etc. This condition has sometimes caused strained relationships between the various groups and has led to confusion for young people.

There is no one definition of an “urban Indian.” The National Urban Indian Family Coalition, an organization based out of Seattle, WA, uses the following definition, “individuals of American Indian and Alaska Native ancestry who may or may not have direct and/or active ties with a particular tribe, but who identify with and are at least somewhat active in the Native community in their urban area.”

A 2006 publication by the Montana Indian Education Association called, *Fast Facts about Montana Tribal Governments* includes the following information that pertains to Urban Indians.

Are there any Indian people in Montana who live off the reservations? Yes. According to the 2000 Census, there are 56,068 American Indians living in Montana. Of this number, about 35% live off of a reservation. This percentage has held fairly steady for the last 20 years. This percentage includes the members of the Little Shell Tribe because the Tribe does not have a reservation. It also includes American Indians who are enrolled members of tribes outside of Montana. Tribal enrollment offices for Montana tribes estimated that in 2006 anywhere from 30% to 50% of their enrolled tribal members lived off of their home reservation.

Do Indian people who live off of their home reservations in Montana lose their tribal membership and benefits? No. Tribal members who live off of their home reservations do not lose tribal membership and benefits. However, to access those benefits (e.g. health care) or to exercise their membership rights (e.g. voting in tribal elections), they may have to return to their home reservations. There may be some benefits, such as higher education scholarships, that they are eligible for without returning to the reservation. Tribal services and benefits for off-reservation members will vary from tribe to tribe.

Historical Background

It should be noted that many American Indians have lived in urban areas for thousands of years. A few notable examples include the MesoAmerica city of Tenochtitlan (an estimated population of 200,000) and Cahokia (an estimated population of 40,000) which was located near present day St. Louis.

Most of the contemporary urban Indian populations were created after World War II, when the federal government embarked on a policy to terminate federal recognition and services to reservations. This resulted in terrible economic conditions and high unemployment in these rural areas. Many Indian people were forced to leave the reservation because of the tremendously high level of unemployment and little chance to provide for their families. During World War II 44,000 Indians served in the military, and another 40,000 left reservations to work on farms and in factories.

Native American's service during World War II prompted the Bureau of Indian Affairs to decide that Indians were ready for assimilation. Later, during the late 1940s and 1950s, the government followed their termination policy with the disastrous Relocation Program. This policy moved several hundred thousand Indian people from the reservations to the cities, hoping to provide them with training that would ensure they would seek a better life, and therefore abrogating the government's responsibility to uphold promises made in treaties. However, the policy did not work for all participants, and many returned to the reservations with little or no skills for off-reservation employment and more disillusioned about government programs. However, large populations of Indian people left the reservations to find employment in large cities such as Portland, Seattle, Los Angeles, Denver, and Minneapolis.

Many Indian people who remained in the cities did not fare any better than those remaining on the reservations. They ended up with poor health and inadequate housing and were unemployed and surrounded by prejudice or discrimination. Most of the support promised by the government failed to materialize, and, in many cases, Indian people were left to survive on their own. Contrary to government intentions, many urban Indians maintained their cultural identity and beliefs but lacked strong community or tribal support. However, much of their ties to tribal identity and cultural practices were either isolated or fragmented. Many of the people who migrated to the cities became assimilated into the mainstream culture. It is unsure just how many, or to what degree, the assimilation process affected the urban Native population.

A 1996 publication, *Native America in the Twentieth Century: An Encyclopedia*, noted that Urban Indians fall into three broad categories:

- (1) those who live in urban areas, but remain oriented to their reservation, and who may move back and forth between the reservation and the city;
- (2) skilled laborers who move to the city, but live generally on the "fringes" of the city and city life;
- and (3) "middle class" American Indians who typically live in predominately white neighborhoods, but may also participate in American Indian cultural and political activities.

In more recent times, Indian people continue to leave the reservations for many reasons; employment and educational opportunities, professional access, inter-marriage, etc. They may leave for a period of time and return to the reservation or decide not to return.

Montana Context

Even though Indian people are concentrated on the seven reservations and in the larger cities of Billings, Butte, Great Falls, Helena, and Missoula, they are also scattered over the state of Montana, probably in every county, city, and town. Smaller, off-reservation towns with significant Indian populations include Augusta, Chinook, Choteau, Cut Bank, Hardin, Havre, and Lewistown.

A large percentage of Indian people living in the larger Montana communities have ties to the Little Shell or Metis. However, off-reservation Indians represent a considerable mixture of tribes from throughout the United States. The Population Division of the U.S. Census Bureau reported in 1990 that there were over 275 Indian tribes represented in the state of Montana.

Current Population Statistics

According to the 2010 Census, 5.2 million people in the United States identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, either alone or in combination with one or more other races. Out of this total, 2.9 million people identified as American Indian or Alaska Native alone, and 2.3 million people reported being American Indian or Alaska Native in combination with one or more other races.

Among places of 100,000 or more population in 2010, Anchorage, Alaska, had the greatest proportion (12 percent) of American Indians or Alaska Natives alone or in combination with one or more races. Other places with large proportions of American Indians or Alaska Natives alone or in combination were Tulsa, Oklahoma (9 percent); Norman, Oklahoma (8 percent); Oklahoma City, Oklahoma (6 percent); and Billings, Montana (6 percent). Nationwide, Billings has the fifth highest percentage of Indian population in an urban area.

Census data consistently shows the majority of the American Indian or Alaska Native population live outside of American Indian or Alaska Native areas. In 2010, 78 percent of the American Indian or Alaska Native alone-or-in-combination population lived outside of American Indian or Alaska Native areas. This compares with 67 percent of the American Indian or Alaska Native alone population.

Current statistics for Montana indicate that 47 percent of American Indians live off the reservation. For the 2010 Census, the total reported population of Montana was 989,415. Of this population, 78,601 residents identified as American Indian/Alaskan Native alone or in combination with other races. Of these, 62,555 residents identified as only American Indian/Alaskan Native. Of the 78,601 state resident population in 2010 who identified as American Indian/Alaska Native alone or in combination, 41,140 individuals lived within a reservation or trust land on April 1, 2010; leaving a total of 37,461 who resided off-reservation.

Organizational Structure

American Indians may lose access to many of the federal services and tribal privileges (i.e. health care and voting in tribal elections) when they leave the reservation, and there is no official government or organizational structure on a statewide basis for Urban Indians. There are local committees and organizations whose functions are to provide a forum for economic, social, medical, and cultural concerns. Many off-reservation and urban schools have Title VII Indian Education Programs, which may be the center of cultural activities, projects, and programs for the Native populations. They may be the lone central organization available to promote and carry on Indian culture in the schools, as well as the community.

Medical Facilities

Although about half of Montana Indians live off the reservation, a very small amount of the IHS budget goes to urban clinics. Some urban communities have Indian Health Service facilities that provide for minor medical care and referrals to regular hospitals and clinics. The Billings Area Indian Health Service contracts five non-profit corporations to provide a variety of levels of health care services to Indians living in the Billings, Butte, Great Falls, Helena, and Missoula urban areas. Among the services provided by the urban programs are limited primary medical care, in addition to outreach referral, health education, limited health care, and substance abuse counseling. The transportation component also transports patients from urban areas that are within a day's travel to reservation-based health programs.

Current contact information for the urban centers and urban health clinics along with descriptions of their services is provided below.

BILLINGS

Indian Health Board of Billings
Substance Abuse Program
1127 Alderson Avenue
Billings MT 59102
Phone: (406) 245-7318

The mission of the Indian Health Board of Billings is to empower the urban Indian/Alaska Native community by providing comprehensive, low or no cost medical services; substance abuse counseling, referrals, and treatment; preventative services; youth programs; and community based recreational and cultural programs.

BUTTE

North American Indian Alliance (Butte)
55 East Galena
Butte, MT 59701
Phone: (406) 782-0461
Email: meaglefeathers@naia-butte.org

The North American Indian Alliance (NAIA) is committed to protect and perpetuate the health and welfare of all eligible Native Americans residing in an urban setting.

GREAT FALLS

Indian Family Health Clinic
1220 Central Avenue, Suite 2B
Great Falls, MT 59401
Phone: (406) 268-1510

The Indian Family Health Clinic provides high-quality and comprehensive health care services to support and strengthen individual, family, and community health.

HELENA

Helena Indian Alliance
301 Euclid Avenue
Helena, MT 59601
Phone: (406) 442-9244

The Helena Indian Alliance develops, implements, and maintains cultural, social, and economic programs for families, seniors, and youth. The HIA contracts with the Indian Health Service to operate the Leo Pocha Memorial Clinic, to give service for the physical, diabetic, and behavioral health of the Helena-area Indian population.

MISSOULA

Missoula Indian Center
Building 33, Fort Missoula Road
Missoula, MT 59804
Phone: (406) 829-9515

The Missoula Indian Center promotes and fosters the health, education, and general welfare of urban Native Americans in and around Missoula.

OTHER ORGANIZATIONS:

National Council on Urban Indian Health

The National Council on Urban Indian Health, a non-profit, 501(c)(3) organization based in Seattle, Washington, supports and develops quality accessible healthcare programs for all American Indians and Alaska Natives living in urban communities through advocacy, training, education, and leadership development.

References

The American Indian and Alaska Native Population: 2010 U.S. Census Bureau

Facts for Features: American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month: November 2014. U.S. Census Bureau

FAST FACTS ABOUT MONTANA TRIBAL GOVERNMENTS, December 2006. Montana Indian Education Association

Native America In The Twentieth Century, 1996. Garland Publishing, Inc. New York and London.

Urban Indian America: The Status of American Indian & Alaska Native Children and Families Today, January 2008. National Urban Indian Family Coalition. Seattle, WA.