



# AMERICAN INDIANS ARE STILL GETTING A RAW DEAL

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We've all heard about how many bad things the U.S. government did to American Indians in the past. But what about today?

Like most people, the only time I hear about today's American Indians is when people are outraged about sports mascots or team names, like the Washington Redskins. But sports teams' names are the least of Indians' problems.

Did you know that Indians have the highest rate of poverty of any racial group in America? Did you know that alcoholism is more common among Indian youths than among youths in any other ethnic group? Did you know that the rate of child abuse among Indians is twice as high as the national average?

Until I visited Indian reservations for my book, *The New Trail of Tears*, I didn't know any of this. What was at the root of these terrible problems? I wondered. And the deeper I dug, the more I realized that, between the 19th century and today, nothing has changed: it's still the government.

The two main agencies that oversee the activities of Indians who live on reservations are the Bureau of Indian Affairs, or BIA, and the Bureau of Indian Education, or BIE. Education, economic development, tribal courts, road maintenance, agriculture and social services – the federal government basically funds and controls all of it. It's no wonder Indians say BIA stands for "Bossing Indians Around."

Together, these two agencies have combined budgets of \$3 billion per year, and have 9,000 employees. That's one employee for every 111 Indians on a reservation. Of that \$3 billion per year, the BIE uses \$850 million of it to educate 42,000 students. That's more than \$20,000 per student, compared to a national average of \$12,400 per student.

Plenty of other federal agencies also have programs for Indians. For instance, the Indian Health Service had a 2015 budget of over \$4.6 billion. And yet, there are widespread and documented reports of nurses being unable to administer basic drugs, of broken resuscitation equipment, and of unsanitary medical facilities.

Obviously, inadequate funding isn't the problem.

The billions of dollars that the federal government spends on Indians every year hasn't made their lives better. In fact, by most measures of economic and social health, the lives of American Indians are only getting worse.

Aside from issues of culture, the only way out of this morass is economic growth, but the reservation system makes this almost impossible. Following a series of treaties and laws over many decades – some well intentioned, some not – the federal government decided to hold Indian land “in trust” in order to prevent non-Indians from ever buying that land. But other than Indians, the only people who have things held in trust for them are children and the mentally incompetent.

Can anything better illustrate the low regard the government has for American Indians? The awful consequence of this land trust is that Indians can’t sell their land, which means they can’t use it the same way other Americans do – for example, as collateral to get a loan to start a business. What bank would lend to landowners who don’t own their land?

The other effect of this absurdity is that Indians can’t develop this land that they don’t own. Indian reservations contain almost 30 percent of the nation’s coal reserves west of the Mississippi, 50 percent of potential uranium reserves, and 20 percent of known oil and gas reserves. Those resources are estimated to be worth nearly \$1.5 trillion. But the vast majority of Indian lands with natural resources remain undeveloped because of federal regulations. For instance, for Indians to get permission to mine for coal on Indian land requires 49 steps spanning four federal agencies. Each of these 49 steps can take months or years to be approved. There are so many government regulations that just to apply for a permit to dig a hole costs \$6,500.

Is it really any wonder that this community is mired in poverty?

So, what can be done?

For starters, end the trust system. Let Indians do what they want with the land they own. Get the massive federal bureaucracy out of the way. Give American Indians the opportunity to embrace the same thing that has lifted millions of other people out of poverty and into the middle class: free enterprise.

It won’t happen overnight, and it won’t be easy, but it will do a lot more for American Indians than changing the name of the Washington Redskins.

I’m Naomi Schaefer Riley for Prager University.