

THE WELL-BEING OF AMERICAN INDIANS IN WISCONSIN:  
RACIAL DISPARITIES AND PUBLIC POLICY

by

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## Introduction

American Indians are an important part of Wisconsin's culture and history. Today 53,358 people identify as American Indian in Wisconsin (Wisconsin Department of Health Services [Wisconsin DHS], 2014). Historically, the American Indian and Alaska Native population in the United States have suffered from "deeply troubling and destructive federal policies and actions that have hurt Native communities, exacerbated severe inequality, and accelerated loss of tribal traditions" (Executive Office of the President, 2014, p. 4). The federal policies and practices developed throughout history by the United States government have created and maintained a system that perpetuates inequity among American Indians and Alaska Natives. Within the American society and its systems, privilege is associated with "whiteness" while disadvantages is associated with "color" thus American Indians and Alaska Native have not been allocated social privilege and instead are characterized by socioeconomic disadvantage. This systemic racism endured by American Indian people has resulted in their exclusion from political, economic, and cultural power (The Aspen Institute, 2004, p. 11). Structural racism highlights the "many mechanisms that perpetuate the link between race and well-being in American," (The Aspen Institute, 2004, p. 35). The structural racism endured by American Indian people throughout history and today, greatly affects individual and family outcomes. In analyzing outcomes for American Indian people living in Wisconsin today, it is clear that they continue to suffer from the historical policies and practices

implemented by the U.S. government. These policies and practices, along with overt racism and other discriminating practices, have created a wide racial disparities gap between the American Indian population and the white population in Wisconsin.

American Indian people fall behind the white population in a large number of well-being indicators including health, justice, education, and economic. Better understanding of American Indian people, accurate data to describe the well-being of American Indians, and public policies that promote equity and reverse structural racism can play a large role in improving the well-being of American Indian people in Wisconsin.

## **Chapter 1**

### **American Indians and Alaska Natives**

American Indians and Alaska Natives are defined as “people having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America), and who maintain tribal affiliation or community attachment,” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2013). According to the United States Census Bureau, 5.3 million people in the United States identify as American Indian and Alaska Native (2012).

American Indians and Alaska Natives make up 1.7 percent of the total population of the United States. The demographic is fast-growing and it’s projected that American Indians and Alaska Natives will make up 2% of the total population in 2050, with nearly 8.6 million American Indian and Alaska Natives residing in the United States by July 1, 2050 (United States Census Bureau, 2011). Since 2000, the U.S. population grew by roughly 9.7% over a 10-year span but the group identifying as American Indian and Alaska Native grew by 27%. In addition to a quickly growing population, the American Indian/Alaska Native population is by in comparison much younger than the overall total population of the United States. The average age of the AI/NA population is 26 compared to 37 of the total U.S. population. 32% of Natives are under the age of 18 (National Congress of American Indians [NCAI], n.d.).

The American Indian population is heterogeneous and their histories and practices vary from tribe to tribe (Wisconsin DHS, 2014). Nationwide there are 565 federally

recognized American Indian tribes and 334 federal and state recognized American Indian reservations (United States Census Bureau, 2011). In the United States, American Indian tribes are only considered tribes when they are federally recognized by the government, meaning they maintain a legal relationship with the U.S. government through treaties, acts, executive orders etc. Currently, there are still hundreds of American Indian and Alaska Native tribes who are not recognized but are going through the government's long and tedious process of federal recognition (Native American Rights Fund, 1991). Tribal nations are located throughout 34 U.S. states and control over 100 million acres of North American land (NCAI, n.d.). While the United States is home to over 500 tribal nations, each tribal nation is considered its own sovereign nation. American Indians and Alaska Natives residing in the U.S. belong to three sovereign nations: the United States, the state they live in, and their tribal nation. Sovereignty, meaning to self-govern, has been the relationship between tribal nations and European settlers since their first contact. This government-to-government relationship continues today and the inherent powers that go along with sovereignty have been repeatedly affirmed by hundreds of treaties signed by the United States government and tribal nations. Between 1778-1871, 370 treaties were signed that guaranteed peace, provided land boundaries, ensured hunting and fishing rights, recognized the United States authority, and provided U.S. protection. Many treaties also included provisions that promised federal assistance for such things as health care, education, economic development, and agricultural assistance. Like treaties with foreign nations, treaties between tribal nations and the U.S. government are considered "the supreme law of the land" (NCAI, n.d.). Despite being the "supreme land of the law"



the United States government has not respected these binding agreements and has mistreated American Indians and Alaska Natives throughout much of U.S. history. American Indian people have long battled for their rights. They were not considered U.S. citizens until 1924 and were not given the rights of U.S. citizenship until this time. (Native American Rights Fund, 1991). At this time, American Indians and Alaska Natives were also granted the right to vote, well after African-Americans and women were able to vote in the United States (National Council of Jewish Women, 2015).

### **American Indians in Wisconsin**

According to the Wisconsin Department of Health Services' Minority Health Report (2008) Wisconsin is home to eleven federally recognized tribes:

Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Ho-Chunk Nation, Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Menominee Tribe of Wisconsin, Oneida Nation, Forest County Potawatomi, Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, St. Croix Chippewa, Sokaogon Chippewa (Mole Lake), and Stockbridge-Munsee. Each tribe maintains a government-to-government relationship with the State of Wisconsin. Also, each tribe has its own unique peoples, languages, and spiritual and health practices, as do the more than 500 federally recognized American Indian tribes (p. 1).

The reservations home to the eleven tribal nations in Wisconsin were established through

a series of 19<sup>th</sup> century treaties. All of the land that is today considered the state of Wisconsin was once Indian Territory. The tribal nations of Wisconsin are the largest concentration of tribes east of the Mississippi river and Wisconsin tribal nations occupy one half million acres of forests, marshes, lakes, and rivers. These natural resources are protected by the same treaties that established the eleven reservations in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Native American Tourism Of Wisconsin [NATOW], 2015). According to the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (2014), before European contact, American Indians in Wisconsin “lived off the land, farming, hunting, and gathering, maintain strong family ties and cultural traditions within their respective tribes. They have a rich cultural heritage that has been passed down from generation to generation by tribal elders. The presence of European settlers drastically altered their way of life,” (p. 1).

Today 53,358 people identify as American Indian in Wisconsin (Wisconsin DHS, 2014). While some American Indians live in urban parts of the state, most live in rural areas of Wisconsin. The Minority Health Report notes that 64% of the American Indian population of Wisconsin resides in the northern and northwestern parts of Wisconsin. Menominee, Sawyer, Ashland, and Bayfield counties all have the largest concentrations of American Indians (Wisconsin DHS, 2008). Like other tribal nations in the United States, the American Indian tribes of Wisconsin endured government mandated policies and actions that removed them from their land, challenged their sovereignty, threatened their natural resources, and assimilated them from their culture. To this day, American Indians in Wisconsin continue to fight for their sovereignty and self-determination in hopes of improving the well-being of tribal people (Wisconsin DHS, 2008, p. 3).

## Chapter 2

### The Genocide of Native People

It is estimated that 10 million Indigenous people occupied the land that would become the United States of America when European colonization began in 1492. By the early 1900's that number dwindled to less than 300,000 Indigenous people (United End to Genocide, 2015). Since the arrival of Europeans, American Indians have endured relentless persecution, which has ultimately led to the destruction of American Indian people and their culture. During colonization, American Indians perished because of disease, malnutrition, ambushes on tribal villages, war, land dispossession, oppression, and blatant racism (United End to Genocide, 2015). This mass genocide had lasting effects and has culminated into the problematic status of American Indians today (Adams and Goldbard, 1986).

Beginning in 1492 when Christopher Columbus mistakenly stumbled on the Americas, American Indians were subject to death by disease and violence. It is believed that 90% of Native American population was wiped out by disease brought by European settlers. Having not been previously exposed to pathogens spread by domesticated animals, a mass number of Native Americans were killed by measles, influenza, whooping cough, bubonic plague, cholera, scarlet fever, among other diseases. (United End to Genocide, 2015). In addition, to Native Americans dying because of contact to foreign diseases, it is also recorded that European settlers intentionally spread diseases

such as small pox to Native people using blankets carrying the disease (Lewy, 2004). In addition to disease, Natives clashed with Europeans and engaged in small battles and larger acts of war, further depleting the population. In parts of the United States, settlers were encouraged to hunt American Indians and the “redskins,” or the scalps of Natives, were celebrated and rewarded with pay (United End to Genocide, 2015). Ultimately, the collapse of the pre-colonial population of Native people in the Americas can be attributed to epidemic disease, warfare, and genocide (Snipp, 1992).

While the colonization of North American land by European settlers meant the destruction of American Indian people and the loss of Indian land, policies adopted after the formation of the United States government added to the destruction. Several key policies adopted by the United States government would come to play a large role in the livelihood of future generations of American Indian people and communities.

## Chapter 3

### Federal Policies and American Indians

As the United States government formed, so did policies that aimed to control American Indian people, which ultimately inflicted more harm upon American Indian people than help. Even after being granted sovereignty by the United States government, the relationship between American Indian tribes and the United States government remained complex and often unbeneficial to American Indians. Closely examining and understanding these federal policies provides the context of how present day structural racism negatively affects the well-being of American Indian people.

The U.S Commission on Civil Rights cites that in the 1823 Supreme Court case *Johnson v. McIntosh*, the court ruled that the United States was a successor nation and it inherited the control that Europeans had established over America (2003, p. 2). Therefore, the conquest of the Indigenous people of America was justified as a right of discovery and the Indigenous lost complete sovereignty. They were, however, allowed to occupy and use land, but the United States government retained title to the land (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2003, p. 2). Several years later in 1831, the Supreme Court made another ruling that determined that American Indian tribes were not considered foreign nations but instead “domestic dependent nations. This case, *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*, established that the United States possessed a “trust relationship” with American Indians (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2003, p. 2). This designated

relationship would add to the complexity of the relationship that exists between tribes and the government today. The “trust relationship” established by this court decision meant that the U.S. was obligated to do two things for American Indian people. First, they were required to prepare the nations for independence by assimilating American Indians into the United States’ predominantly white, mainstream culture. Second, they were required to protect and provide special care for American Indian nations. According to Andrew Boxer, this led to the on-going creation of federal policy related to American Indians that “has lurched back and forth, sometime aiming for assimilation and, at other times, recognizing its responsibility for assisting Indian development” (2009, para 2). However, a later Supreme Court case, *Worcester v. Georgia* would affirm tribal sovereignty by ruling that tribes did have ability to self-govern and that they were considered distinct political entities (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2003, p. 2).

While these Supreme Court rulings aimed to define the relationship between the United States government and tribal nations, they did little to prevent the onslaught of policies adopted by the federal government that would remove American Indians from their land, act violently toward tribal nations, and use policy to assimilate American Indian culture. The Supreme Court cases did little to protect American Indian people from continued genocide, abuse, and oppression.

## **Federal Policies**

### **Indian Removal Act**

While the ruling by the Supreme Court in case of the *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* established a “trust relationship” between tribal nations and the U.S. government, this relationship would be abused in the government’s push of American Indians westward (Library of Congress, n.d.). Under the direction of Andrew Jackson and the Indian Removal Act, the government began “assisting” Cherokee Nations in Georgia in moving westward. In 1838, “thousands of federal soldiers and Georgia volunteers entered the territory and forcibly relocated the Cherokees. Americans hunted, imprisoned, raped, and murdered Native Americans. Cherokees surviving the onslaught were forced on a 1,000-mile march to the established Indian Territory with few provisions. Approximately 4,000 Cherokees died on this Trail of Tears,” (Library of Congress, n.d.).

Other parts of the country also witnessed the U.S. government abusing power and harming the livelihood of American Indian tribes. The California gold rush devastated many American Indians communities in the west. Not only did tribes suffer from toxic chemicals and ruined natural resources, but also the state of California actively punished American Indians for cultural practices and legalized the slave trade of American Indian children (United to End Genocide, 2015). In the late 1800’s, after much turmoil over land in the Great Plains region of the United States, the United States U.S. 7th Cavalry Regiment opened fire on hundreds of Lakota men, women, and children, killing over 150 people at the Battle of Wounded Knee (Denver Post, 2014). During this period of

removal, the United States continued to obtain land from American Indians through coerced treaties and by promising tribes money, food, education, and medicine in exchange. The U.S. advised American Indian tribes that they would be safer away from white settlers so they parceled out land called “reservations.” At this time, the United States did not allow American Indian people to own private land (Ziibiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture & Lifeway, 2011).

### **The Dawes Act**

In 1887, the United States Congress passed the General Allotment Act, also known as the Dawes Act (Indian Land Tenure Foundation, 2015). The act would call for private land ownership by American Indians and allowed for reservation land to be opened to settlement by non-Natives. In addition, the act would address the country’s “Indian problem” which was that American Indians were not becoming the Christian farmers the government hoped they would assimilate to be. But by surrounding American Indians by white settlers through the Dawes Act, white settlers would be able to help American Indians become more white. Ultimately what the act did do to American Indian tribes was devastating. Tribal communities were broken, millions of acres of land were lost, and tribal sovereignty was threatened. The act, which parceled reservation land into 40 to 160 acres of land and assigned those allotments to individuals and heads of households, resulted in the loss of 90 million acres of American Indian land by 1934. The effects of the Dawes Act linger today, as the land became so fractioned up it is nearly impossible for heirs to use or develop the land. While the Dawes Act clearly succeeded in



taking land from American Indian tribes, it's debatable whether the act fulfilled the goal of Henry Dawes, the namesake of the bill who once proclaimed that in order for American Indians to be civilized they must "wear civilized clothes, cultivate the ground, live in houses, ride in Studebaker wagons, send children to school, drink whiskey (and) own property." (Landry, 2014). Clearly from the early start of our nation, it was established that in order to be considered civilized, accepted, or successful, it must be by the standards of white America.

### **Indian Boarding Schools**

The United States' attempt to "civilize" American Indians didn't stop with the Dawes Act. The government strongly felt that the only worthwhile American Indian was one who abandoned their ways of life and assimilated to a white, Christian way of life. The government organized efforts to assimilate the American Indian population by creating boarding schools for American Indian children to attend. "Indian schools were designed to destroy American Indian cultures, languages, and spirituality. Students had to accept white culture, the English language, and Christianity," (Ziibiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture & Lifeway, 2011, p. 5). American Indian boarding schools were modeled after a social experiment in which Apache prisoners of war were taken from their homes, put in uniforms, had their hair cut, placed in uniforms and were subject to strict military protocols. Some of the men were so traumatized by the experiment they took their own lives. However, those who survived learned English and white customs. The boarding schools created were federally funded under a bill passed by Congress called the American Indian Appropriation Act. By the early 1900's almost all American

Indian children were taken from their families and placed into boarding schools. Congress permitted the Bureau of Indian Affairs to withhold food and supplies to American Indian families who did not comply with sending their children to boarding schools (Ziibiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture & Lifeway, 2011). In 1902, the boarding school number peaked at 25 federally funded board school. The schools went to great measures to assimilate the children and as a result physically and mentally traumatized students.

Children as young as 5 years of age arrive by car, train or wagon, and immediately were told they were “dirty’ Indians.” They were stilled and disinfected by having alcohol, kerosene, or DDT, one of the most well-known synthetic pesticides, poured on them. Long hair, valued for its cultural and spiritual significance, was cut. Any personal belongings such as medicine pouches, beadwork, family photographs, etc. were taken from them and never returned. Students were given uniforms made of low quality, uncomfortable materials to help teach them “sameness, regularity, or order.” School administrators renamed the students, giving them common English first and last names. It was a humiliating and traumatic experience for students (Ziibiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture & Lifeway, 2011, p. 10).

In addition to these experiences, many children in boarding schools suffered from physical and sexual abuse by school staff (Smith, 2007). The children enrolled in boarding schools went years without seeing family and soon acted, spoke, and thought like white Americans. Despite vast efforts made to assimilate American Indians through

these schools, white society still did not accept them. Many of the thousands who attended boarding schools became lost, as they were unable to identify as either American Indian or white (Ziibiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture & Lifeway, 2011).

### **Termination**

Upon learning of the grave living conditions on reservations during the mid 1900's, the United States government enacted what they called the "Termination Policy." Believed that these conditions were due to mismanagement by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the government sought to create a policy that would eradicate federal obligations to tribes and push American Indians into mainstream white, American society (American Indian Relief Council, n.d. a). Formalized by House Concurrent Resolution 8, the Termination Policy had four goals:

1. Repealing laws that discriminated against Indians and gave them a different status from other Americans
2. Disbanding the Bureau of Indian Affairs and transferring its duties to other federal and state agencies or to tribes themselves;
3. Ending federal supervision of individual Indians;
4. Ending federal supervision and trust responsibility (Milwaukee Public Museum, n.d. b).

The policy resulted in 109 tribes being terminated. Federal responsibility and jurisdiction of the tribe was passed on to state government. In addition, roughly

2,500,000 acres of American Indian land was removed from protected status and was sold to non-Indian people. Some of the first tribes to lose recognition and land were coincidentally tribes who were located near highly desirable land, such as the Klamaths who owned timber property in Oregon and the Agua Caliente whose land surrounded Palm Springs. The policy also resulted in 12,000 American Indians losing their tribal affiliations (American Indian Relief Council, n.d. a).

In addition to the Termination Policy, the United States government created programs at this time to entice American Indians off of reservations and into urbanized areas. The goal of the Urban Indian Relocation Act was to get American Indians to cities where jobs were supposedly plentiful. With help of federal aid for housing, counseling, job training, and social services it is believed that 750,000 American Indians migrated to cities between 1950-80 (Indian Country Diaries, 2006). With hopes of better opportunity for themselves and their families, these people abandoned their families, communities, and culture. And while aid was promised to help in relocating, often the only aid American Indians received was a bus ticket away from the reservations (Wisconsin Historical Society, n.d.). This policy is another example of how public policy forced American Indians to either abandon their identity, or balance living in a predominantly white world and trying to maintain an unaccepted culture.

### **Sterilization**

In 1976 the United States government admitted to the forced sterilization of American Indian women. Between 1973 and 1976, a U.S. General Accounting Office

study found that 3,406 American Indian women had been sterilized while receiving care from Indian Health Services. And despite a court-ordered moratorium on sterilization of women younger than 21, the study found that 36 women age 21 and younger had been forcibly sterilized. A later independent study found that Indian Health Services had singled out full-blooded American Indian women for sterilization (National Library of Medicine, n.d.).

### **Indian Self-Determination Act and Education Assistance**

Soon after efforts to terminate American Indian tribes, the United States government established a new perspective on relations with tribal nations, one that believed that the role of the federal government was to recognize and help build the capacities of tribal nations. In 1975, Congress passed the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, which would allow the federal government to contract with tribes for federal services. It would also allow for tribe's to operate schools (American Indian Relief Council, n.d. b). While the Indian Self-Determination and Educational Assistance Act was a step in the right direction for relations with American Indian nations, the unjust acts of the past couldn't be undone. It's been over 30 years since the Self-Indian Determination Act and many American Indians and tribal communities struggle to thrive today.

## **Federal Policies and Wisconsin**

Without a doubt the federal policies and actions of the United States government have had a great impact on the eleven tribes of Wisconsin. Throughout the 1800's the U.S. took control of Indian land in Wisconsin through deceit, retaliation, and sale. The United States also used the large number of tribes residing in Wisconsin to their advantage, often cutting deals with individual tribes and pitting tribes against one another. By 1871 the United States ceased making treaties with American Indian tribes, but by then most of American Indian land had already been obtained by the U.S. and American Indians were now living on reservations. The Dawes Act would go on to reduce reservation land in Wisconsin by half and nearly wipe out all reservation land for some tribes (Sharko, 2000).

As the federal government made efforts to civilize American Indians through boarding schools, those in Wisconsin were also mandated to attend such schools. The federal government operated the Tomah Indian Industrial School and boarding schools on the Oneida, Lac du Flambeau, and Bad River reservations. Like boarding schools elsewhere in the country, children were strictly denied access to their cultural and spiritual practices (Milwaukee Public Museum, n.d. a).

The Termination and Relocation policies adopted by the United States government also had profound effects on American Indians in Wisconsin. In 1954 the government decided that in 1958, the Menominee tribe would be terminated. The tribe was forced to find ways to protect land and assets before termination. Termination proved to

be devastating for the Menominee people. They lacked the tax base to provide public services such as police, health care centers and schools closed, and the Menominee people found themselves plagued with high poverty (Milwaukee Public Museum, n.d. a). To current day, Menominee County, which consists mostly of the Menominee Indian Reservation, is the poorest county in Wisconsin and one of the poorest counties in the United States (Bureau of Indian Affairs, n.d.). In addition to termination, relocation also worked to dismantle tribes in Wisconsin. Many American Indians in Wisconsin were encouraged to relocate to urban areas, but the only assistance most received was a one-way bus ticket to Chicago, Milwaukee, or St. Paul (Wisconsin Historical Society, n.d.).

Land obtainment and allotment, boarding schools, termination, and relocation affected every tribe in Wisconsin in unique and different ways. While the Self-Determination Act was supposed to empower American Indians tribes to govern, serve, and juristic themselves, the theft of American Indian land and the many attempts at assimilating American Indians to be more white has made self-determination a challenge (Milwaukee Public Museum, n.d. c). In addition, the expectations that tribes were capable of creating and implementing a system of government acceptable to the standards to white America is far-fetched, as American Indians hold different beliefs in relation to land, power, education, money, etc.

While American Indians have worked hard to govern themselves for the past 30 years, their sovereignty continues to be misunderstood and challenged. This has resulted in the inherit rights of American Indians being infringed upon. Infringing on these rights

further threatens the livelihood and the well-being of American Indian people and their communities. Throughout the past several decades we have witnessed attempts in Wisconsin to limit the hunting, fishing and gathering rights promised to American Indian tribes by federal treaty. Most notably, the right to spearfish by American Indians came under attack in the late 1980's and early 1990's when the State of Wisconsin attempted to illegally prohibit the right. While a federal court had reaffirmed these rights in 1983, American Indians became the scapegoat for the economic recession and were the targets of racial acts including violence. Little was done by the state to persecute or condemn the racism directed at American Indians during this time (Ways, n.d.). Today, the Ojibwe tribes of Wisconsin continue to exercise these rights but the State of Wisconsin still uses scare tactics to scare and control tribes. Furthermore, these scare tactics promote a culture of hate toward American Indians (VanEgeren, 2013).

Additional natural resources found sacred and protected by treaties have come under attack by state government in Wisconsin. In 2013, the Wisconsin legislature passed laws exempting the iron industry from environmental protections making it easier to mine the Penokee Hills in northern Wisconsin. This land is considered sacred land to the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa and mining the area could damage wild rice crops, a natural resources protected by treaties in Wisconsin. In addition, the land and water could be polluted by the dangerous open-pit mining process and threaten communities, including the Bad River Band (Midwest Environment Advocates, 2015). Little efforts were made by the Wisconsin State Legislature to respect the treaty rights of the Bad River Band in this matter and the law ultimately passed.



The above are just some examples of how policy, or lack of policy, has left American Indians in Wisconsin at great disadvantage. Not only are the guaranteed rights of American Indian people often infringed upon, but also policy formulated to enhance and protect citizens is not always inclusive of American Indian people, and in some case policy can negatively affect American Indians. In the State of Wisconsin there is a gap between the well-being of the white population and American Indians. American Indians in Wisconsin are failing to thrive.

## Chapter 4

### Racial Disparities

Policy adopted by federal and state governments have created systems of inequity, which have excluded American Indians from political, economic, and cultural power. Continuously ignoring the unique needs of the American Indian community throughout history have put the well-being of American Indians in grave danger. Furthermore, the policies created throughout history that have oppressed American Indians and other communities of color have led to structuralized racism where privilege is associated with “whiteness” and disadvantage is associated with “color” (Aspen Institute, 2004, p. 11). This structural racism does provide privilege to American Indians and instead makes it much harder for American Indians to successfully navigate through systems governed by policy such as the education, justice, and child welfare systems. Furthermore, disparities in these systems along with other disparities related to the well-being of American Indians in areas such as income, poverty, jobs, and health have made life much more difficult for American Indian people. American Indians face much more barriers when trying to succeed in life than the white population.

According to *Race to Equity: A Baseline Report on the State of Racial Disparities in Dane County* (Race to Equity Project, 2013) disparity “refers to the likelihood of someone in a group experiencing a positive or negative outcome compared to someone else in a group” (p. 3). A racial disparity is when that comparison is between a racial or

ethnic minority and a non-minority (Race to Equity Project, 2013). The National Healthcare Disparities Report defines disparities as “any differences among populations that are statistically significant and differ from the reference group by at least 10%” (Hebert, Sisk, & Howell, 2008. p, 375). Disparities between minorities and the White population in America means that minorities fare less well in life. Compromising the life chances of a large portion of the nation’s population will have a negative impact on society and tolerating a close link between color and disadvantage will only adversely affect the prosperity and livelihood of the United States. The correlation between color and disadvantage will only continue to nurture stereotypes, foster racial profiling, and produce differential expectations for achievement, while at the same time undermine motivation, aspiration, self-esteem, confidence and hope among minority children. Failure to change the current imbalances in opportunity, well-being, and outcomes will ultimately corrode commitments to social justice, economic competitiveness and success, and the overall quality of life in a world that values diversity and inclusion (Race to Equity Project, 2013).

Closer examining outcomes related to the health, economic well-being, and education of American Indians shows alarming racial disparity rates. The below tables highlight disparities between American Indian and the white population in Wisconsin.

Table 1 : Economic Well-Being

<b>Economic Well-Being</b>			
Indicator	American Indian Estimate	White Estimate	Disparity
In labor force	63.90%	68.20%	American Indians are <b>1.07</b> times less likely to be in the labor force
Unemployed	11.00%	4.90%	American Indians are <b>2.2</b> times more likely to be unemployed
Unemployed Females	8.80%	3.90%	American Indians women in Wisconsin are <b>2.3</b> times more likely to be unemployed
Median household income (dollars)	\$35,358	\$53,539	Whites have a median income <b>1.51</b> times higher than that of American Indians

(United States Census Bureau: American Community Survey 2010-12, Wisconsin Department of Health Services: Wisconsin Interactive Health Statistics)

Table 2: Poverty

<b>Poverty</b>			
Indicator	American Indian Estimate	White Estimate	Disparity
Poverty rates for all families	26.40%	6.70%	American Indian families are <b>3.9</b> times more likely to live in poverty
Poverty rates for female householder, no husband present, family	44.20%	25.60%	American Indian families with a female head of household are <b>1.73</b> times more likely to live in poverty

Children under 18 years	39.10%	13.60%	American Indian children are <b>2.9</b> times more likely to live in poverty
Households with Food Stamp/SNAP benefits	26.20%	9.90%	American Indian households are <b>2.7</b> times more likely to utilize food stamps/SNAP benefits
Vehicles Available: None	10.30%	5.90%	American Indians are <b>1.8</b> times less likely to own a car
No telephone service available	4.50%	2.10%	American Indians are <b>2.1</b> times less likely to have a telephone service

(United States Census Bureau: American Community Survey 2010-12, Wisconsin Department of Health Services: Wisconsin Interactive Health Statistics)

Table 3: Health

Health			
Indicator	American Indian Estimate	White Estimate	Disparity
With no coverage	23.00%	8.00%	American Indians are <b>2.9</b> times less likely to have health insurance coverage
Teen Births	16.50%	5.30%	Teenage birth rates are <b>3.1</b> times higher than Whites

(United States Census Bureau: American Community Survey 2010-12, Wisconsin Department of Health Services: Wisconsin Interactive Health Statistics)

The above data shows that there is significant difference in education attainment between American Indians and Whites in Wisconsin, with a lower percentage of American Indian adults having a high school diploma and a smaller number of American Indians possessing a Bachelor's Degree.

In looking at the economic well-being and poverty of American Indians, a number of statistics stand out in the data above. First, American Indians households make almost \$20,000 less than White households in Wisconsin, this could be related to the population's high unemployment rate of 11% which is more than two times the rate of the White population. Not only is high unemployment contributing to low household median income, lack of job and lack of steady income may also be contributing to the high poverty rate among American Indians. Twenty-six point four percent of American Indians live in poverty. Close to 50% of households headed by a female, with no husband present live in poverty, which is concerning because other statistics suggest almost a quarter of American Indians households is headed by a female with no husband present. However, the most alarming of the data is that 39.1% of American Indian children live in poverty, which is almost two times the rate at which White children in Wisconsin live in poverty. This should be a big concern because of the known detriments poverty can have on the development of children and it often predicts one's success in life. Other data such as the high number of American Indian households utilizing SNAP programs, households without a vehicle, and households without telephone service suggest that many American Indians live in poverty-like conditions. This data is also concerning being that a large portion of American Indians in Wisconsin live in rural areas so they may have even less access to food, transportation, and technology, all of which is important in trying to live a quality life.

The health statistics on American Indians in Wisconsin provided in this paper, while limited, but they provide a small glimpse at the health conditions of the population.

Twenty-three percent of American Indians are without health insurance, which is almost three times the rate of Whites in Wisconsin. The lack of health insurance by a high percentage of the population, most likely due to high unemployment rates and access to only unaffordable insurance, suggests that a high number of American Indians go without preventative care, regular medical appointments, and quality care putting their health at risk and possibly contributing to high mortality rates.

These shocking percentages and disparities suggest that American Indians are not faring well and that racial disparities do exist between American Indians and Whites in Wisconsin.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Policy Recommendations**

We cannot not undo the years of mistreatment of American Indian people, nor can we easily fix the systemic and institutionalized racism that is now ingrained in society. But we must begin taking steps to address these issues, not only because it is owed to the original occupants of this land, but because having all people fare well in society will have heaping benefits as a nation. Dismantling institutionalized racism and adopting policies that promote a stronger well-being for American Indians will improve individual, family, and community outcomes. Two ways the public sector can play a role in improving the well-being of American Indians is by training all employees to be culturally competent and working to create policies that directly address the needs of American Indian communities, particularly by implementing policies that use a two-generational approach.

#### **Cultural Competence**

Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs define cultural competence as “a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enable that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations,” (1989, p. 13). With a lack of minority



representation working in the public sector, it is critical that public sector workers are trained in cultural competence so they can work across cultures and best address the needs of those they serve. This is especially critical for public sector workers who provide direct services such as teachers, social workers, public defenders, probation officers, etc. Historically, government has aided American Indians by assimilating, not by addressing differences and accommodating individuals in a culturally competent matter. “A culturally competent system of care acknowledges and incorporates—at all levels—the importance of culture, the assessment of cross-cultural relations, vigilance towards the dynamics that results from cultural differences, the expansion of cultural knowledge, and the adaption of services to meet culturally-unique needs,” (Cross et al, 1989, p. 28). Failure to address cultural differences can lead to mistrust and conflict which can ultimately result in a lower quality of services and poorer outcomes (Calzada and Suarez-Balcazar, 2014). Cultural competence is key in working to overcome racial disparities, especially in government systems where high disparities exist such as the education, justice, and child welfare systems.

Cultural competence is critical when working with American Indians. First, the general population often knows little to nothing about American Indians. American society has homogenized American Indian people although American Indians represent 565 distinct tribal nations (United States Census Bureau, 2011). The depictions of American Indians people are most familiar with are culturally incorrect and glamorized images of the past. Knowing very little about American Indians or only knowing stereotypes poses a great problem when interacting and serving this population. Second,

American Indian cultural has been misunderstood and threatened through much of history and American Indian practices do not often adhere to the norms of white American society. For example, death rituals in many American Indian cultures call for individuals to take part in ceremonial practices for several days. This causes problems for American Indian students in regards to school attendance. Other cultural practices require American Indians be near rural-ceremonial grounds for multiple, sometime extensive days, this makes it difficult for students and employees to balance work or school and their religion. There are many, many more examples of specific practices, beliefs, and norms that are unique to American Indian people. American Indian people live, learn, work, cope, heal, and relate to one another differently than the mainstream white population. American Indians struggle to navigate systems that don't work or accommodate their needs, resulting in poorer outcomes.

The public sector can play a role in improving outcomes by implementing cultural competence training across agencies. Further educating public sector workers on the American Indian culture will be beneficial in providing better service and in narrowing racial disparity gaps. Training all public sector workers on American Indian culture is a daunting and costly task, so that's why it is imperative that this education begins earlier. All Wisconsin public schools must teach culturally and historically correct information on American Indians. Furthermore, secondary education programs should train students in cultural competence, especially programs for direct service careers such as nursing, social work, police, etc. In addition, it would be very valuable for public administration and public policy programs to mandate some form of cultural competence training. The

public sector's biggest goal to effectively serve all people can best be achieved by incorporating cultural competence, as Carrizales further explains (2010). "With the increasingly changing demographics of the U.S. population, increased opportunities for an effective public sector arise. The opportunities can be found in new and innovative approaches to government-citizen relationships, which take into account the cultural diversity of their populations. Cultural competency initiatives within the public sector allow for increased effectiveness and the public it serves" (Carrizales et al., 2010, p. 593). Cultural competence will not only increase the effectiveness of the public sector, but it can narrow racial disparity gaps among American Indians and other communities of color.

### **Two-Generation Approach**

In addition to the public sector committing itself to being culturally competent, the public sector must also begin adopting policies that address the racial disparities that exist between American Indian people and the white population in Wisconsin. It is the responsibility of federal and state governments to aid tribal communities, not only because it was guaranteed by treaty, but because past policies disguised as aiding American Indians have oppressed, assimilated, and destroyed American Indian communities. Ensuring that American Indians are thriving, and all other communities in the United States, will result in generations of productive citizens. Productive citizens equal a prospering nation. It's in everyone's best interest that all individuals are thriving.

To improve the well-being of the American Indian population in Wisconsin, tribal, state, and federal government should adopt policies that promote a two-generation approach. A two-generation approach would ensure that adults have the resources needed to be productive workers and it would create opportunity for American Indian families. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the approach would remove the barriers that many low-income parents run into while trying to work and it would provide them with a pathway to a family-supporting job (2014). This could be accomplished by implementing programs that train and educate parents, offer financial coaching, and care for the mental health of working adults. In addition to supporting parents, a two-generation approach would also focus on ensuring that young children are getting the care and education needed to create a foundation of educational and economical success. Preparing a child in his or her early years, will hopefully ensure success throughout the education system and lead to an increased number of American Indians continuing on to higher education and obtaining advanced degrees. This approach also prepares parents to better support their children socially and emotionally and to advocate for their child's best interest (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014). Investing in these programs and policies will create long-term economic stability for American Indians families and tribes.

Two-generation approach programs have already been proven to be successful in tribes throughout Indian Country. The Face and Child Education Program, an initiative of the Backwater Community School in Coolidge, Arizona, is a two-generation program that provides parenting education services and adult education to the parents of children who are enrolled in the program. The program has served over 41,000 children and

reports a higher percentage of parents who read to their children and that families enrolled in the program have more books in their homes compared to the majority of Native American homes. In addition, a substantial number of parents who have participated in the program went on to complete their GED diploma and have received scholarships to attend college (United States. Cong. House. Committee on Indian Affairs, 2014).

The public sector can best address the needs of American Indians and reverse racial disparities by creating “policies that equip parents and children with the income, tools, and skills they need to succeed – as a family and individually,” (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014, p. 12). Not only should the public sector look to invest in two-generation programs specifically aimed to educate and provide resources to American Indian families such as Headstart and home visiting programs, they should also make policy changes in other areas that will help families succeed. Some examples of this include increasing the Child Tax Credit for low-income workers and expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit, strengthening job training programs, flexible workforce policies such as sick leave and paid time off, increasing the minimum wage and promoting job growth near reservations (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014). Investing in these programs and policies will help lift American Indian families and communities out of poverty and help overcome racial disparities. These policy changes will achieve greater return on public-sector investments.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, public policies enacted by the United States government throughout history have created and promoted structural racism that has had deep ramifications on American Indian people. In Wisconsin, these ramifications are seen in the wide racial disparities that exist between the American Indian population and the white population. The disparities signal that the well-being of American Indians is in danger and the population is struggling to thrive. Adopting public policies that promote equity can narrow these disparities. It is the role of the public sector to rid itself of the structural racism once created by United States policy. Training all public sector workers in cultural competence is one step in overcoming structural racism and narrowing racial disparities. In addition to training workers to better understand and work with people of all cultures including the American Indian population, it is the government's responsibilities to adopt policies that directly address the needs of American Indian people because of past actions that have oppressed American Indians. Creating programs and policies that use a two-generation approach will work best in improving the conditions of American Indian communities in Wisconsin.

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