



Understanding Native Americans

Native Americans, Indians, Americans, American Indians, what's the correct or legal name for the original people in North America that Europeans encountered when they reached these shores? Did they really recognize royalty within their culture? Do all Native Americans live on a reservation? What about all the stereotypes associated with Native Americans – was Hollywood right in all those Western movies?

The North American Indian Women's Association recommends using the term "American Indian" as "Native American" can refer to anyone born in America. The Cherokee (at least) never had princesses and this concept has no reality in Cherokee history and culture. In 2001 there were more than half a million American Indians living on reservations, whereas 66 percent live in metropolitan areas and others live in rural areas apart from reservations. An estimated two-thirds of the current Indian population in the United States lives in urban areas.

North Carolina has a strong American Indian presence and a rich history of the native people that lived here long before white settlers arrived. In proclaiming November, 2009 as American Indian Heritage Month Governor Beverly Perdue cited no less than 8 Indian tribes containing 103,480 persons giving our state the largest American Indian population east of the Mississippi River and

the 8th largest population in the country. Coharie, Eastern Band of Cherokee, Haliwa-Saponi, Lumbee, Meherrin, Occaneechi Band of Saponi, Sappony and the Waccamaw-Siouan are all mentioned in the proclamation.

Even with 4 centuries of association with all peoples that arrived in America since before our country began American Indians remain one of the most misunderstood groups in our society. John Doble and Andrew Yarrow published a report in 2007 for Public Agenda that explores many of the issues, historical events, contemporary factors and other factors that affect how Indians and Non-Indians think of each other. The complete report is available for free download at www.publicagenda.org. "Walking a Mile: A First Step Toward Mutual Understanding" is quite interesting and very worthwhile for those interested in a qualitative look at the issues involved in how Indians and Non-Indians relate to each other.

Doble and Yarrow assembled focus groups of both American Indians and non-Indians, on and off reservations, nearby and far away from reservations. "Given the limited documented opinion research on the topic, this may be one of the most in-depth examinations of the thinking of these two groups about each other yet undertaken. It was conducted to learn more about how Indians see their role in today's America, how they define themselves in terms of their



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heritage and how they perceive non-Indians' feelings about Indian-related issues. It also explores how non-Indians view American Indians, what they know (or think they know), the generalizations they make and stereotypes they hold, how their perceptions were formed and their interest in learning more.”

“Many Indians we interviewed felt that their ancestors were victims of a historical injustice akin to the Holocaust, and they talked at length about how the past directly affects Indians' lives today. Non-Indians generally felt regret about what happened to Indians prior to the 20th century, but most had little understanding of Indian history, including efforts to forcibly assimilate Indians. Indeed, most seemed to relate to and understand Indians as if they belong to the past, almost as if Indian history ends with Custer and Wounded Knee.”

Indian focus groups identified concerns about non-Indians' perceptions of them appear to be based on crude stereotypes shaped by characters portrayed in movies and Hollywood productions. Both groups identified the same challenges that face Indians living on reservations – high unemployment, poor social services and many other poverty-related problems.

“However, Indians saw these problems as both urgent and connected directly to past injustices, whereas non-Indians often saw the hardships facing Indians as contemporary problems comparable to those facing other minority groups – that is, as something

Indians can overcome if they struggle on. The results suggest that, compared with other minorities, Indians living away from reservations are largely invisible to most non-Indians.” Would you believe that more than 100,000 Indians live in Los Angeles County and nearly that many live in New York City? Many eastern states Indian populations are almost nonexistent. Think for a moment where you may have traveled over the recent Holidays and wonder how many of the people you came in contact with or passed might be American Indians and you never even noticed. Did you notice other minorities during that time? Do you feel a discrepancy in your view of the world now?

Indians were much more likely to say their people are continually mistreated in the United States. Non-Indians expressed sympathy toward Indians but those living near dense Indian populations were more likely to express resentment at what they felt was “preferential treatment” towards Indians. On the subject of redress Indians indicated that nothing could ever compensate for what their people had suffered since the arrival of Europeans to this country. Non-Indian groups were adamantly opposed to any kind of reparations, a view not limited to Indians alone.

The report states that socioeconomically, about ¼ of Indians live below the poverty line, which is double the national average. Interestingly, Indian incomes unlike those of other minorities that are also poor are attenuated to some extent by government



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benefits. Unemployment and occasional employment are amazingly high on reservations and in rural communities. Many of these statistics might begin to conjure up your image of American Indians that were shaped by movie characters. The focus groups involved in the study repeatedly mentioned negative images like “lazy, alcoholics, dirty, living on the federal dole,” One Albuquerque Indian who was part of a focus group stated “It’s all John Wayne’s fault.” Fortunately many participants in the non-Indian focus groups brought forth an equal number of positive characteristics of American Indians like “spiritual, less materialistic, artistic and a people who live in harmony with nature.” Yakama students and leaders mentioned poverty, substance abuse, crime, homelessness, suicide, low literacy levels, high unemployment, anger, depression, the loss of cultural traditions, a growing generation gap, a sense of victimization and obesity, diabetes and other health problems. Sounds a lot like what we hear in reference to many other groups of Americans!

Both groups talked about the need for increased education for better mutual understanding of each other. Most Americans get a taste of Indian culture from a historical perspective in school but unfortunately some of what is taught may not be completely accurate. What are we missing from a contemporary standpoint? Are we really doing all we can to include all minorities in our diversity efforts?

“When asked what non-Indians should learn about Indians, on Indian, in a particularly poignant moment, said to the moderator, Maybe you should just tell them that we still exist.”

Public Agenda was founded in 1975 by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former U. S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance. Public Agenda works to help the nation’s leaders better understand the public’s point of view and to help average citizens better understand critical policy issues.