National Native American Heritage Month

History

National Native American Heritage Month, also referred to as National American Indian Heritage Month, began as Native American Awareness Week, authorized by Congress in 1976 after six decades of efforts to achieve official federal recognition of the contributions of Native Americans. Since 1995, the President has made an annual proclamation encouraging Americans to use November to learn more about Native American culture.

What’s in a Name?

While the word “Indian” has a complicated and uncomfortable history, many Native people now embrace the term. Others prefer to describe themselves as “indigenous” or use the term “Native American.” That said, people categorized by the U.S. Census as “American Indian/Alaska Native” make up an incredibly diverse group from hundreds of sovereign nations with varied cultures, traditions and beliefs. As always, it is best to ask the individual’s preference in naming.

Lifting Up Native American Health and Culture

Native American culture is in the midst of an upswing of energy and activism. Increasingly, language revitalization programs are teaching Native American languages to new generations. Groups of indigenous people from several tribal nations have worked to reconstruct traditional dietary practices. And environmental activism across many tribal communities has galvanized indigenous groups around the issue of protecting their lands and the earth.

Johns Hopkins is home to programs that celebrate American Indian/Alaska Native culture and seek to improve tribal health outcomes. The Center for American Indian Health is an independent center within the Department of International Health of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health with over 35 years of collaboration with Native American tribes and their programs now reach more than 120 tribal communities in 17 states. Native Circle, a group of Johns Hopkins Native American graduate students, staff, faculty and community members, works to advance the education, support and well-being of Native American people.
Over a quarter of all American Indians/Alaska Natives live in poverty, double the national average, and the median income for American Indian/Alaska Native households trails that of most other groups by a wide margin.

Of American Indian/Alaska Native families with children, 27 percent live in poverty, while 32 percent of American Indian/Alaska Native families with children under 5 do—and in some tribal communities, that number rises to a staggering 66 percent.

Tribal nations are sovereign in their interactions with the United States, usually managing their own health care systems, law enforcement and basic infrastructure. (A federal agency, the Indian Health Service, does provide health care for many Native Americans.) At the same time, Native Americans living on tribal lands pay federal taxes and vote in national and state elections.
Violence, Suicide, and Alcohol
Violence disproportionately affects American Indians/Alaska Natives, especially Native girls and women, with 84 percent experiencing some degree of violence during their lives. Native youths also have the highest rate of suicide of any ethnic group—suicide is the second leading cause of death for American Indians/Alaska Natives between ages 15 and 24. The alcohol-use disorder rate among American Indians/Alaska Natives is equally stark, more than seven times as high as the national average. Interestingly, research also shows that some tribal communities have higher rates of abstinence from alcohol compared to the U.S. general population.

Resources
Johns Hopkins Center for American Indian Health
http://caih.jhu.edu/about/our-mission/

Native Circle
http://caih.jhu.edu/training/scholars/category/native-circle

Indian Health Service
https://www.ihs.gov/