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 at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health is focused on working with over 100 tribal communities to improve health leadership, health status and self-sufficiency. 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.
The Native American population is young. Of American Indian/Alaska Native residents, 32 percent are under age 18, compared with 24 percent for the general population.

American Indian/Alaska Native residents are roughly twice as likely to live in urban areas than in rural ones.

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.

There are 567 federally recognized tribes in the United States. In addition, there are hundreds of tribes that have been recognized by individual states, and many others that have received no official recognition at all.

Maryland was once home to a number of prominent tribes, including the Algonquin, Iroquois and Nanticoke. There are now no federally recognized tribes in Maryland, though the state has recognized two branches of the Piscataway tribe, who once lived throughout the Chesapeake region.

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.
HIV
30% more likely to be diagnosed with HIV
10% more likely to die from HIV

DIABETES
2x more likely to be diabetic
60% more likely to have end-stage renal disease
90% more likely to die from diabetes

HEART DISEASE
15% more likely to have heart disease

OBESITY
45% more likely to be obese

TUBERCULOSIS
40% more likely to have tuberculosis

EMPHYSEMA
2x more likely to have emphysema

LIVER DISEASE
2x more likely to have liver disease or cirrhosis

DEPRESSION
60% more likely to experience feelings of sadness or hopelessness

HEALTH DISPARITIES

DEPRESSION
60% more likely to experience feelings of sadness or hopelessness

Heart Disease
15% more likely to have heart disease

STOMACH CANCER
15% more likely to die of stomach cancer

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-people/

Native Circle

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

Upcoming Event

MONDAY, NOV. 20, 3:00–5:30 P.M.
Water Is Life: Native American Leaders at the Forefront of Environmental Health

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Source: Families USA (http://familiesusa.org/product/american-indian-alaska-native-health-disparities-compared-non-hispanic-whites)