



# Walking a Mile: A First Step Toward Mutual Understanding

**A Qualitative Study Exploring How Indians  
and Non-Indians Think About Each Other**

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A Report from  PUBLIC AGENDA  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This study explores the attitudes of American Indians<sup>1</sup> and non-Indians about Indians' heritage, historical roles, relationships and contributions to society, as well as their views about each other. While considerable research has been done on American Indians, very little thinking has been done about how Indians and non-Indians think about each other. Given the limited documented opinion research on the topic, this study 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 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. Race and ethnicity have always been emotionally charged and confusing topics in American history, but American Indians, in many ways, represent a special case—a population thought of more in historical terms than in racial or ethnic terms by non-Indians and Indians alike. This study uncovers fascinating insights and raises

compelling questions for discussion and additional research.

The findings are based on the views of people in 12 focus groups conducted in 2006 and 2007 throughout the United States: 7 with Indians, including 2 conducted in the Crow language, and 5 with non-Indians. Covering an array of topics, these in-depth, nuanced discussions lasted an average of about two hours.

Although the responses captured in the Public Agenda focus groups are intriguing, we should underscore the limitations of this research. The value of focus groups for generating insights for further investigation notwithstanding, observing how people talk about issues cannot predict how many people hold a particular view. Nevertheless, a number of clear, characteristic patterns of thinking emerged in these discussions, illustrating the need for further research.

### Principal Observations

#### The Past

- *The Connection Between the Past and the Present:* 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

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that even though some of the Indians prefer to use the term *Native American*, the Bureau of Indian Affairs reports that the tribes it represents generally prefer the term *American Indian*. Consequently, the latter is used exclusively in this report.

directly affects Indians' lives today. Non-Indians generally felt regret about what happened to Indians prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> 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.

## The Present

- *Images:* Many Indians believed that non-Indians' perceptions of them are based on crude stereotypes, and indeed, non-Indians often had a foggy, distorted set of perceptions about Indians, usually based on little direct contact and on what some admitted were little more than Hollywood stereotypes or generalizations. Most conjured up images drawn from a largely mythic past or a static, isolated present, all but unaware that American Indians continue to be possessed of an active, vibrant culture down to the present day.
- *Daily Life:* Both Indians and non-Indians said that Indians living on reservations face chronically high unemployment, poor social services and a litany of 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.
- Many Indians were troubled that non-Indians know so little about their current lives. Even though non-Indians generally expressed goodwill toward Indians and sympathy about the past, most admitted that they rarely think about Indian-related issues and rarely (if ever) encounter Indians in their daily lives. The results suggest that, compared with other minorities, Indians living away from reservations are largely invisible to most non-Indians.
- *Prejudice and Discrimination:* Many Indians said their people continue to be mistreated in the United States, a view far less likely to be expressed by non-Indians. As noted, most non-Indians expressed sympathy toward Indians, but an unsettling number of those living near dense Indian populations strongly resented what they saw as the “preferential treatment” Indians receive.
- *Redress:* Many Indians said nothing could ever compensate for centuries of Euro-American genocide, oppression and discrimination. While non-Indians expressed sympathy toward Indians' problems, a large number adamantly opposed any kind of reparations. (Americans' views on this issue are not limited to Indians, as surveys also

show overwhelming opposition to reparations for African-Americans.)

- *Legal Status:* The Indians we spoke with, while aware of their standing as a sovereign people, were concerned that non-Indians do not understand their treaty rights. Few non-Indians understood that Indians have a distinctive legal status, based on a long history of treaties. Most had no idea why Indians are able to run casinos or sell tax-free cigarettes, and several described such policies as a kind of affirmative action.
- *Between Two Worlds:* The Indians with whom we spoke were at once proud of their tribal heritage and of Indians' contributions to society, painfully cognizant of social and economic problems facing many Indians and fearful that they may be losing their distinctive cultures. Many felt torn between two worlds—their traditional cultures and modern-day America. Most non-Indians, however, were oblivious to the conflicting pressures Indians bear today.

## The Future

- *The Need for Education:* Deeply unhappy that non-Indians know so little, many Indians crave greater understanding by the non-Indian majority. Importantly, many non-Indians expressed a genuine interest in learning more about Indian culture, history and contemporary life. Given that the two

groups saw each other through lenses colored by generalizations, lack of awareness and, on the part of non-Indians, at least, minimal personal contact, the results suggest a wide gap in perception of Indians' history and daily life. But the results also suggest that, given the opportunity to communicate and learn, many non-Indians are ready to face up to their lack of knowledge, which in turn suggests that many of the gaps can be bridged.

## Questions for Further Exploration

This study represents only a beginning. As a research technique, focus groups can by their very nature provide only a limited amount of insight. There is much we do not know.

First, and most important, we are unsure just how many Indians and non-Indians hold the views we heard. Qualitative research enables people to talk at length in their own words, but it does not, by definition, permit researchers to ascertain exactly what percentage of the population agrees with any given sentiment. Moreover, we do not know how different subsets of each population feel about various issues.

Regarding non-Indians, we barely scratched the surface in understanding the gap in attitudes between those living close to Indian lands and population and those living far away. Moreover, the non-Indians we interviewed who lived away from Indian lands came from only a small

number of locations. We would also like to explore why people acknowledge that Indians have been badly mistreated in the past but at the same time resent what they see as “preferential treatment” by the government.

While the Indians we interviewed described their sadness about the past and widespread prejudice and discrimination against Indians today, they also talked about their hopes and feelings of success—their pride in the great strides Indians have made economically and their sense that their lives are improving. An estimated two-thirds of the current Indian population in the United States lives in urban areas. However, lacking an adequate quantitative understanding of the differences between the views of Indians on and those living away from Indian lands, we are left with a number of questions: Do Indians living on reservations feel differently from those living far away from Indian lands? Or do Indians living on or near reservations and other Indian lands feel that reservation life is also improving? If so, why? Because of efforts by Indians themselves or because of what the government is doing?

Finally, we did not fully explore the common ground we identified. We heard that Indians are displeased about how they are misunderstood and that non-Indians desire to learn more. This point alone has enormous implications for bridging the historic gap that has separated American Indians from the non-Indian majority. Since Jamestown and especially since the

closing of the frontier in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, non-Indians have not understood—or been much interested in understanding—the native people in America. Yet these results suggest that this historic view has changed, which would be an enormously hopeful sign.

## Methodology

Between September 2006 and March 2007, 12 focus groups were conducted as follows:

- Seven with American Indians, including two with Crow Indians on reservations in Montana (conducted in their native language); two with Yakama Indians on reservations in Washington State; one with Navajo and other southwestern Indians living in the Albuquerque, New Mexico, area; one with Cherokee and other Indians living in the Tulsa area; and one with Indians living in New York City.
- Five with non-Indians, including three with those living far from reservations or Indian lands in New York City, Philadelphia and Minneapolis; and one in Tulsa, Oklahoma, near Indian land and one in Aurora, Colorado, near a sizable Indian population.

The focus groups were conducted by senior Public Agenda researchers Ana Maria Arumi and John Immerwhar. Two focus groups were conducted in the Crow language by Ms. Arumi, who worked with a translator. The focus groups were preceded by nine in-depth interviews with

Indian opinion leaders and experts in the field to inform the research and sharpen meaningful lines of inquiry.

The report was coauthored by John Doble, senior vice president and director of research

and Andrew Yarrow, vice president and director of Public Agenda's Washington, D.C. office.

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American Indians, who account today for about 1.0 to 1.5 percent of the U.S. population, are an indigenous people who have inhabited what is now the United States for perhaps 20,000 years. Over the millennia, they have divided into many different cultural and linguistic—or tribal—groups, and their population and settlement patterns have changed significantly. The federal government recognizes more than 550 tribes, although many Indians and others believe that the number of tribes is larger.<sup>2</sup>

Many estimate that there are fewer Indians today than at the time of the European settlement in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Thereafter, their population was decimated in large part by disease. Historian Alan Taylor, in his book *American Colonies*, estimates that the American Indian population fell by 90 percent between 1492 and 1800, to about 600,000, owing to diseases (such as smallpox) introduced by European settlers.<sup>3</sup> It is only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the American Indian population of the United States began to grow again. The latest Bureau of the Census counts about 4.5 million people as American Indian, although this includes about

1.5 million who claim partial native heritage.<sup>4</sup> The Indian population is heavily concentrated in a few western states. In 2004, about 700,000 lived in California, 400,000 in Oklahoma and 325,000 in Arizona. Nearly 1 in 5 Alaskans are of native descent, and 1 in 10 residents of Oklahoma and New Mexico are American Indians. Perhaps surprisingly, more than 100,000 Indians live in Los Angeles County, and nearly 100,000 Indians live in New York City. By contrast, in many eastern states Indian populations are virtually nonexistent; the census estimates that barely 1 in 500 residents of states such as Pennsylvania and Ohio are of native ancestry.<sup>5</sup>

America's six largest tribes are the Cherokee, Navajo, Latin American Indian, Choctaw, Sioux and Chippewa. The statistics are complicated by the fact that both American Indian "alone" and "in any combination" with other ethnicities are reported. For example, there were 281,000 Cherokees "alone" tallied in the 2000 census, but 730,000 reported some Cherokee ancestry.<sup>6</sup>

Socioeconomically, about one-quarter of Indians live below the poverty line, which is double the

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, "Indian Entities Recognized and Eligible to Receive Services from the Bureau of Indian Affairs," *Federal Register* 67, no. 134 (July 12, 2002): 46327–46333.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America* (New York: Viking, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, "State and County Quick Facts" (Washington, D.C.: Census, 2005); and "Census: 4.1 Million Claim 'American Indian' Heritage," *USA Today*, February 13, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, "State and County Quick Facts" (Washington, D.C.: Census, 2005); and U.S. Bureau of the Census, "American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month: November 2005" (Washington, D.C.: Census, October 25, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, "The American Indian and Alaska Native Population: 2000" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Bureau of the Census, February 2002).

national average. However, Indians' incomes, unlike those of other minorities that are also disproportionately poor, are attenuated to some extent by government benefits. The American Indian median income is just two-thirds the national average. Nearly one-third lack health insurance. Just 71 percent have graduated from high school, and only 12 percent have bachelor's degrees. Unemployment and occasional employment are often staggeringly high on reservations and in rural communities. American Indians are twice as likely as other Americans to be victims of crime and are 2.5 times more likely to be involved with the criminal justice system. In

addition, American Indian men in South Dakota have a life expectancy of barely 55, nearly a quarter century less than the national average and 14 years below that of even African-American men.<sup>7</sup>

The United States began forcibly settling Iroquois on reservations just two years after George Washington became president, and it became official policy in 1851. Today, slightly more than half a million American Indians live on the 56.2 million acres of land held in trust for reservations, whereas 66 percent live in metropolitan areas and others live in rural areas apart from reservations.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, "American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month: November 2005"; the Heard Museum, "Native American Statistics" (Phoenix: Heard Museum, 2001); Terri L. Rutter, "Study Finds Life Gap in U.S.," *Harvard Public Health Review* (Fall 1998) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard School of Public Health); Commission on Professionals in Science and Engineering, "The Status of Native Americans in Science and Engineering" (2005); and U.S. Department of Justice, "American Indians and Crime" (Washington, D.C., February 14, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan B. Taylor and Joseph Kalt, *American Indians on Reservations: A Databook of Socioeconomic Change Between the 1990 and 2000 Censuses* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, 2005); and U.S. Bureau of the Census, "American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month: November 2003" (Washington, D.C.: Census, 2003).

## THE PAST

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**Indians interviewed said their ancestors were victims of injustices akin to the Holocaust, adding that non-Indians do not understand the dimensions of what happened to them. Although regretting the treatment of Indians in the past, the non-Indians interviewed knew very little about history after the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially of the ongoing legacy of the forcible cultural assimilation of Indians.**

Many of the American Indians we interviewed described, with sorrow, the mistreatment of their people, with some seeing it as analogous to the Holocaust. “Our stories are not unlike the Jewish people,” a Yakama woman said. “[Jews] can show where the bodies are littering the ground. That happened to us, but we just don’t have the pictures to be able to prove it.” Another pointed to Indians’ loss in numbers. “We used to be 100 percent [of the North American population] before Columbus showed up.... Now we’re down to less than 1 percent,” a Yakama student said.

Some of the Indians we interviewed suggested that the “war” against Indians did not end in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. An elderly Crow Indian remembered restaurant signs that read “No Dogs or Indians Allowed.” Some of the Yakama, Crow and others we interviewed described government efforts to force Indians to abandon their traditions for Christianity, to withhold citizenship rights until

1924 and to drive them to abandon their language in enforced boarding schools and other government-sponsored public education projects. “When I was young, about 6 years of age, the Indian agent forced us to go to...boarding school,” an elderly Crow man recalled. “We had to stay there.... It was as if we were slaves.... We were not allowed to speak Crow. They, at times, hit us and washed our mouths with soap.” In the group with Yakamas, some complained that Yakama children are learning Spanish in school, even though in the not-so-distant history Indians weren’t allowed to learn their native language.

The legacy of ill-treatment leaves contemporary Indians with conflicting feelings toward non-Indians. A Crow man said, “Because of this bad treatment, today we are leery of non-Indians, and we have a negative attitude toward the white people.” Conversely, some are forgiving. An Oklahoma woman said, “The people that did it are dead.”

The Indians we interviewed believed that non-Indians have only the most superficial knowledge of their history prior to European settlement, the extent of white brutality and oppression toward Indians and the very existence of an Indian history since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some also described their resentment of non-Indian

accounts of history that emphasize Indian primitiveness and savagery. An Oklahoma Indian said that U.S. history should devote more space to what he called “the five ‘civilized’ tribes...[the] Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek [and Seminole]” who were hunters and farmers living much like the early European settlers. Others pointed to many Indian people’s achievements and peaceful proclivities.

Summarizing the views of many Indians, a Yakama leader said, “We as Indian people have had to give up a lot—our language, somewhat of our culture, somewhat of our lands, our belief system—and [then] be tied into the assimilation process, [yet we] still try to hang on to who we are.” Many believed that their people’s strength through centuries of adversity should be emphasized much more.

At the same time, some recognized that historical depictions and school curricula about American Indians have changed in the last 30 to 40 years, providing a more balanced picture of U.S. history. However, a few felt that even these depictions are too often superficial, relegated to elementary school or laden with political correctness.

Most of the non-Indians in our focus groups recognized the tragic history of Euro-American oppression of American Indians. White people killed countless Indians virally and militarily, they said, stole the lands on which they had lived for millennia and disenfranchised Indians through

broken treaties and prejudicial public policy. Many felt sad—and some even seemed to feel a sense of guilt—about how Indians have been treated since Columbus.

Perhaps because Euro-American abuses and brutality toward Indians have been emphasized more recently in popular culture and history classes, many non-Indians agreed with the Philadelphian who linked 1492 not only with America’s “discovery,” but with the time “when we started to kill them.” People in that group, as in others, cited “broken treaties” and the diseases “we gave them” as that which “killed off whole tribes.” A Minneapolis man simply said the way Indians have been treated throughout history is “heartbreaking.” A woman in Tulsa said, “They lost a lot of people dying on the Trail of Tears” when the 1830 Indian Removal Act forced the Cherokees to move west from North Carolina to Oklahoma.

At the same time, the non-Indians we interviewed had little sense of Indians’ history after the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. To many, Indians were no longer historical actors on the stage of the United States. There was virtually no talk about “acculturation”—the government’s effort to remove Indian youth from their tribes, forcibly put them into boarding schools and assimilate them into the larger society by stripping away their language, religion and traditions. Many non-Indians we spoke to, particularly those living far from concentrated Indian populations, had a vague, simplified

knowledge of Indian history, almost as if their thinking ended with the battle of Little Big Horn. A great many non-Indian respondents recognized the names of Pocahontas and Crazy Horse but seldom recognized that American Indians have continued to play a role in U.S. history during the last 120 years.

Some of those we interviewed mentioned that museums, history books and movies largely depict Indian life from antiquity to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Images of Indians living in pueblos and planting maize, or as headdress-wearing warriors, were frequently cited. To most non-Indians we interviewed, American Indians' history has decisively ended, much as the Roman Empire ended. These narratives dominated the thinking of many, but multiculturalism, "political correctness," a greater awareness of U.S. history and post-1960s appreciation of minority rights and majority injustices make this story only halfway believable among some non-Indians. We found a fair number who would admit that they know very little, including a New Yorker who said, as several others nodded, "None of us knows anything about Indians."

***Connection Between the Past and the Present: The American Indians we interviewed talked about how past injustices affect Indians' daily lives, saying poverty,***

**unemployment, discrimination and reckoning with the tensions between maintaining their identity and the pull of modern society are directly related to this country's history. But non-Indians focused almost exclusively on the past.**

Non-Indians tended to talk about broken treaties and mistreatment of Indians by whites in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Yet few thought hard about the consequences of past actions toward Indians on their current condition.

The lens through which most white non-Indians viewed Indian-related issues would seem to contrast dramatically with the one they use for other minorities. That is, when asked to consider issues relating to African-Americans such as the widespread poverty and unemployment among black Americans, most whites think mainly in terms of the present, without taking the past into consideration. But when thinking about Indians, their reflections are mainly in terms of the past and only the past. For a great many non-Indians, there are few, if any, present-day issues related to American Indians.

## THE PRESENT

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**Images: Many Indians said non-Indians' perceptions of them are based on crude stereotypes. Non-Indians had extremely vague perceptions about Indians, often because they lacked direct experience and had only been taught what some admitted were little more than Hollywood or schoolbook generalizations.**

Indians we spoke with talked about widespread stereotypes and their assumption that non-Indians look down upon them and hold largely negative images about them as being lazy, alcoholics, dirty and living on the “federal dole” on reservations in the rural American West. A Yakama student said that the perception among non-Indians is that “we’re alcoholics or we’re uneducated, or...shaman...and they’re worried about us doing taboo stuff on them,” adding that non-Indians “don’t even realize that we do have a lot of highly educated people.” A young Crow woman echoed this thought, saying that non-Indians should know that “we have Crow-speaking adults who are lawyers, pharmacists [and] professional people in natural resources.”

Some seemed offended by an array of different stereotypes. In Tulsa, one Indian remembered tourists who “want[ed] to know where the Indians are that’s got the war bonnets and all that stuff.” Others brought up the offensiveness of using

Indians as sports mascots or models for Halloween costumes. An Indian in New York reported being asked, “[Do] you still live in tepees?”

Some of the Indians we interviewed blamed academics for developing and perpetuating stereotypical thinking. “We [were] not just hunter-gatherers,” one said. “[But] that’s what we’re told by archaeologists and anthropologists and historians: ‘Oh, you were just hunter-gatherers.’ We were more complex than that.”

Others pointed to what they saw as historical misrepresentations. An Oklahoma Indian said, “The Union army wins a war against an Indian, and it was a ‘victory,’ [whereas] an Indian tribe beats the Union army in a war, and you’ve got a ‘massacre.’” Others said Hollywood and the popular culture were responsible for the animosity toward Indians, among them an Albuquerque Indian who, speaking in shorthand for the influence of decades of western movies, said, “It’s all John Wayne’s fault.” An Oklahoma woman added, “The way that [Indians] are perceived is like fairy tales [and] Walt Disney’s movies.” An Indian from Albuquerque said, “When you go back [east]...they’re thinking everybody’s...running around with feathers on their heads. What they’re thinking is what they see on TV.”

Some were also unhappy with what they saw as idealized or romanticized presentations. One mentioned the movie *Dances with Wolves*, saying Kevin Costner found Indians to be “good.” Others felt that in today’s more “politically correct” world, Indians cannot escape the stereotype of being deeply spiritual and respectful of nature in a way that modern non-Indians largely are not. Although the stereotype contains flattering grains of truth, as two New York Indians noted disparagingly, many non-Indians relate to them—thanks to recent movies—as deeply “spiritual” or even “tree huggers.” One added that some non-Indians try to adopt what he called “pseudospirituality” and become “like virtual reality Indian wannabes.”

The great majority of non-Indians interviewed did not know any Indians personally, and even those who did were only passingly familiar with Indians, perhaps because they saw Indians in the community or worked with them occasionally but were not close friends. So when asked what comes to mind when they think about Indians, most non-Indians interviewed offered generalizations that were sometimes positive, sometimes negative, but were usually based on vague impressions rather than firsthand, in-depth knowledge.

Most of the non-Indians living away from reservations or sizable Indian communities voiced a mishmash of views. Philadelphia participants, for example, ticked off such images as “tribal dances,” “tepees” and “wampum” and

characterized Indians as “stoic,” “brave,” “fierce” and “savages, hunters and gatherers” who sport ponytails and wear exotic dress and jewelry. People in Minneapolis had a similar list, adding such disparate qualities as being “quiet,” being “warriors,” and “[moving nomadically] from place to place.”

A fair number of non-Indians—perhaps basing their views on popular cultural and more contemporary media depictions—expressed negative views, seeing Indians as alcoholics and drug abusers, likely to turn to either criminality or dependence on federal benefits and inclined to social dysfunction, bitterness and depression. A Philadelphia participant said that the Indians’ life is “sad” because of their “high incidence of drug abuse [and] alcoholism.” A Minneapolis woman said, “I hear a lot of stereotypes about, ‘Oh, the Indians just live on the casino land, get money off the casino and drink all day.’” Although they were not sure such perceptions were true, several members of the Minneapolis group said that it was widely believed that Indians are “lazy,” “don’t want to work,” “don’t like to clean the house” and are “dirty drunks.”

Despite this array of negative characterizations, a sizable number of non-Indians viewed American Indians in a more positive light, calling them spiritual, less materialistic, artistic and a people who live in harmony with nature. The view of the eco-friendly Indian was captured by a Tulsa man who praised American Indians’ focus on “the earth, the recycling, the trying to care

[for] the creation.” A woman there admired Indians’ use of natural “medical home remedies,” while a man added, “I respect their commitment to one another and that they value where they come from.” Minneapolis participants agreed that American Indians are “nonmaterialistic,” in contrast with the widespread materialism of mainstream American culture. In that vein, a Minneapolis woman described Indians as “not a very aggressive people.”

The dichotomy between the primitive Indian and the famous nature-loving “crying Indian” of television fame was captured by a Minneapolis man. “There [are] kind of those two different ends of it,” he said. “There [are] a few stereotypical kinds of things—like the savages, fighting...and scalping. On the other side, you have that they’re strong traditionalists, protecting the environment and all that kind of thing.”

**Daily Life: Many Indians we interviewed talked about the hardships Indians face and were deeply concerned that non-Indians know so little about their current lives. While offering distinct impressions about reservation life, non-Indians said that they rarely (if ever) encounter Indians in their daily lives.**

Proud of their heritage, their survival through centuries of adversity and their culture’s recent successes, many American Indians talked at length about the differences between life on and

off reservations and the advantages and difficulties that arise from each site.

On reservations, Indians talked about a host of socioeconomic problems. Some said that reservations and other Indian lands are still poor, filled with “shanties,” “no grass, [just] dirt” and “cars that don’t run,” as Cherokees on Oklahoma Indian lands described them. An Indian woman in Oklahoma said, “There are still a lot of poverty-level Indian families, and I mean they do well to have running water.” Yakama students and leaders spoke of 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. An Indian woman in Albuquerque added, “There was a song...[that] said: ‘The only safe place to live is on an Indian reservation.’... [But] nowadays, even on the reservation, they have to board their windows.” A Yakama man said, “Anger is like a cancer on this reservation.”

The Indians we interviewed felt strongly that non-Indians ignore and are unaware of them, and a number of them wished for better knowledge among the general population. Some felt that non-Indians know almost nothing about Indian life today. “The general public out there is really naive [about] American Indians,” a Yakama Indian leader said. A New Mexico Indian man added, “Through my travels, it’s just amazing

how little the total United States knows about Indians.”

Non-Indians offered a number of impressions about life on reservations. Most saw them as grim, situated on the “worst land” and beset by an array of social problems associated with high poverty, dilapidated housing, widespread unemployment, rampant crime, endemic drug and alcohol use and lackluster schools and health and other public services. Quite a few were sympathetic, including a Philadelphia woman who asked, “What do they have on reservations? Is there any industry? Is there any business?”

When the non-Indians thought of Indians, they seemed to think almost exclusively of western reservations, even though reservations exist east of the Mississippi River. Additionally, reservations evoked many more images of contemporary Indians, but most American Indians do not live on reservations,<sup>9</sup> and cities such as New York have relatively sizable Indian populations. New York focus group members were essentially unaware of Indians living in their midst and concurred that Indians today live in Oklahoma, Nebraska, the Dakotas and the Southwest, “where they got pushed.”

On the whole, non-Indians in our focus groups said almost nothing about Indians living away from reservations and other Indian lands. Our

results suggest that, compared with other minorities and ethnic groups, Indians are largely invisible to most non-Indians. A Philadelphia man said, “You read about how they were screwed when we first came over here and how they were killed and this and that, [but] you don’t hear anything [about them] now.” The moderator in Minneapolis summarized the thoughts of the group in this way: “A lot of people don’t think of American Indians as still being around. They were something in the past, and they’re not now.”

***Discrimination: Many Indians felt that the “war” against Indians did not end in the 19th century, saying instead that discrimination and neglect continues today. Non-Indians, however, were far less likely to talk about current mistreatment and were virtually oblivious to Indians’ views about it.***

Indians’ tales of present-day mistreatment and prejudice abound. To many of them, the war against Indians—albeit without bullets, disease and conquest—rages on. A number of them claimed that the size of the Indian population is badly undercounted. Several wanted the U.S. government to officially recognize what a New Mexico Indian estimated was 1,000 Indian tribes rather than the 550 or so that currently are recognized and eligible for benefits. Others talked about how the government discriminates and mistreats Indians in deals over fishing rights, the policies of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the perceived underfunding of social services.

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<sup>9</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, “American Indian and Alaska Native Heritage Month: November 2003”; and Answers.com, “Indian Reservation,” <http://www.answers.com/topic/indian-reservation-2>.

“We’ve been the only people that have had war declared upon us continually,” a Yakama man said. “Even in modern-day society, we’re still faced with annihilation.” An Albuquerque Indian said, “I’m still living in the Holocaust. As a native people, [we] are still having one.”

Some felt that Indians are victimized by the American legal system because of laws that bar them from various practices. In sharp contrast with the belief that Indians have “preferential” hunting and fishing rights, a Yakama leader pointed out that “probably the most unfair laws...in this country apply to my people.” Another said that Indians “are the most regulated and restricted class of people, at least in this country,” adding that the government is “always taking.” To general agreement, a New Mexico Indian saw the Bureau of Indian Affairs as little more than an “enemy.”

Others focused more on “unofficial” discrimination. A Tulsa woman reported that one of her husband’s co-workers would not work beside him because he was an Indian. A Crow man mentioned that department store clerks follow him around “as if I’m going to steal something.” An Indian from New Mexico said the media give more play to car crashes involving Indians than non-Indians. A Crow man added, “If we tried to get a sizable loan, the banks or lending institutions would deny us.”

Indians said the ongoing devastation of their culture is symbolized by such diverse

phenomena as the use of Indian land in Washington State for the Hanford nuclear waste reservation and portrayals of Thanksgiving and Columbus Day as holidays implicitly celebrating the subjugation of Indians. “The Hanford nuclear reservation...is [on] our ceded area,” a Yakama man said. “It has been desecrated to where anything living today cannot safely walk across that area without being radioactively contaminated.” A New York Indian remarked on “the indignity of listening to and seeing the Columbus Day parade, the Thanksgiving dinner and the entire mythology that is wrapped up with that.”

A few were upset about Indians serving as sports mascots or team names, but Indians more often felt that other issues—poverty, legal and political rights, federal funding, educational and economic opportunity, substance abuse and political clout—were far more important. A New York Indian said, “Protesting mascots and baseball teams, junk like that, has nothing to do with [the real issues facing us].”

Though uninformed, most non-Indians voiced rather positive views about Indians. But some non-Indians, especially in the two groups close to dense Indian populations, expressed notable resentment toward Indians, with a few suggesting that Indians want to use taxpayer dollars to do little more than buy alcohol and hang out on crime-filled reservations. An Aurora man blamed reservations for what he saw as Indians’ “lack of ambition.” This sentiment was

echoed by another man who said that because of reservations and government benefits, Indians do not have “to scratch and fight [to earn a living] like every other person in the United States.” An Oklahoma woman voiced a different complaint, saying Indians want to turn “Oklahoma [into] an Indian state.”

Yet not everyone in these two groups felt that way. Like the non-Indians in areas distant from dense Indian populations, some in these sessions talked about the historical injustices Indians have suffered and the poor condition of life on Indian lands. “We gave them land in the middle of nowhere,” an Aurora man said. “It’s hard to make a living where we put them.” A Tulsa woman added that Indians on Navajo reservations “were very oppressed, very poor, [with] a lot of alcohol problems, a lot of health problems.”

Still others in these sessions work and live alongside Indians and see urban Indians as not terribly different from the general population. “They just live in our community,” an Aurora woman said. “They’re just people.” Likewise, a Tulsa woman said that Indians in her city “dress just like we do [and] live just like we do,” adding that Indians are “normal, everyday people.”

Importantly, the non-Indians in all our groups did not seem at all aware that many Indians feel routinely discriminated against and mistreated. The non-Indians simply were not mindful of how Indians see their treatment either by the

government, by society at large or by average Americans.

In this regard, consider how perplexed many whites were to the reactions of so many African-Americans to the Rodney King trial. Many whites, who saw the trial in an ahistorical context, could not understand the depth of skepticism African-Americans feel toward the police and the criminal justice system. Blacks’ reactions to the trial jarred many whites to rethink their views, almost as if a door opened on another people’s souls and whites could see for the first time just how intensely black people felt.

One might imagine a similar incident involving Indians in which non-Indians would be shocked to learn the depth of Indians’ anguish about the past and its impact on the present.

**Redress: The Indians and non-Indians we spoke with agreed that Indians had been terribly mistreated in the past, but non-Indians strongly opposed reparations.**

Many Indians we spoke with felt that Indians are entitled to whatever they receive from the government—and more—because the United States is their land. Since Indians were here first, they suggested, this land has always belonged to them and they have the right to use it as they see fit. Many added that the United States could never do enough to make up for its long history of human and cultural destruction.

When it comes to government benefits, Indians recognize that they obtain certain health, educational and tax benefits from the government, including the ability to operate casinos. An Oklahoma Indian felt that “for the most part, Indians are getting what’s just.” A number of Indians suggested that the government is far from generous when it comes to benefits for American Indians, with some adding that recent immigrants receive far better treatment.

A number of Indians said non-Indians deeply resent the legal rights and benefits accorded to Indians. “A lot of people think that the majority are dependent on government,” an American Indian in Tulsa said. A Yakama student added, “People despise that we are federally recognized as tribal nations and get special benefits as a result.” Others felt that non-Indians grossly overestimate how many Indians are benefiting from casinos.

Some non-Indians did see a direct connection between past injustice and present conditions. A New Yorker said, “I would definitely find a cause-and-effect link between violations of the past and poverty today.... You can’t push a people around and uproot them and do all those things and expect them to be at the same level.” A member of the Philadelphia focus group added, “We took them off their land, [and] we corralled them.”

But many others did not make a connection between a story that, to them, ended around

1890 and the present—they did not link the effect of centuries of oppression on present-day Indians. Therefore, many non-Indians, especially those living close to areas with dense Indian populations, resented what they felt amounted to “special treatment” for Indians. “They expect something because of who they are,” an Aurora man said. “They still have this bitterness and chip on their shoulder like we owe them something.” In Oklahoma, non-Indians said that Indians get “their own welfare” from government, tax breaks for casinos and schools and generally live off the largesse of the U.S. government. An Aurora woman said, “A majority of them are very comfortable where they’re living because they’re provided stuff.” Several focus group participants in Tulsa said disparagingly that Indians used “loopholes” to establish profitable casinos, get “discounted” car license plates and free college tuition and sell tax-free cigarettes, undercutting non-Indian merchants. A man there added, “[If] you’re a Cherokee Indian in Tahlequah, you get a full ride [to college].”

Many respondents favored applying at least a partial compensatory remedy for historical injustice. Some in Philadelphia talked of such measures as an understandable course to give deserved concessions from “guilt.” New Yorkers called casinos justifiable “payback” for historical mistreatment of Indians. Others said that more than casinos were in order because only a small number of Indians actually benefit from casino income. A handful agreed with a woman from

Oklahoma who said, “The government will never in their lifetime ever repay [them] for the things that happened over the years.”

But while many non-Indians supported the rights that Indians currently receive, the great majority adamantly opposed what they felt resembled large-scale reparations. A non-Indian from New York said, “I don’t owe anyone anything.” Another said that although Indians have been victimized in the past, everyone must ultimately make it on their own, despite what they have been through:

There are so many different cultures that have been through hell and back—the Holocaust, the Asians and whatever. They’ve come through and live their life how they wanted. In America, you can do what you want. Do what kind of work you want. Live where you want, that kind of stuff. I don’t really agree with [reparations].

Importantly, although non-Indian participants opposed reparations for Indians, there is every reason to believe that such sentiments apply across the board and are not limited to any particular group. In a recent survey, for example, Americans overwhelmingly opposed reparations to descendants of slaves, with only 11 percent in favor and 81 percent opposed.<sup>10</sup>

### **Legal Status: The Indians we spoke with believed that non-Indians know almost**

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<sup>10</sup> Survey by Fox News. Methodology: Conducted by Opinion Dynamics, March 28–March 29, 2001, and based on telephone interviews with a national registered voters sample of 905. [USODFOX.033001.R32]

### **nothing about Indians’ legal status, and indeed, non-Indians were poorly informed about Indians’ rights related to treaties, sovereignty and legal status.**

Some of the Indians with whom we spoke strongly defended Indians’ rights to establish and enforce their own laws. Some even talked about their right to establish governing bodies that are different from, or even independent of, the governmental institutions of the United States. “We’re like a sovereign nation within a nation,” a Yakama man said, adding, “We can not only govern ourselves, but we can also print money if we wanted to.” Others felt that the very idea of “tribes” disparages Indians’ legal independence and rights as members of Indian nations.

The Indians were displeased at non-Indians’ lack of knowledge about their legal status, treaty rights and status as a “sovereign nation.” One Indian said:

When we ignore state regulations on fish and game, people get upset. They say, ‘You should [have] to buy a license like we do.’ Well, the treaty of the United States exempts us from that. They have a hard time believing that. So it’s an educational process of the non-Indian.

The Indians’ perceptions were borne out by our interviews in which the great majority of non-Indians we spoke with had only the vaguest sense of Indians’ legal status both as members of a “sovereign nation” and as American citizens. While most knew that government treaties have often not been honored, the non-Indians we

interviewed had only a dim sense about what Indian treaty rights are. Some saw such rights as gifts from the government, saying Indians have “special rights and privileges” over and above those granted to other citizens. A Minneapolis man said, “They have the rights to basically live off the land and farm their rice, fish and whatever. The average citizen would have to be licensed, fish in seasons, fish within limits and stuff like that.”

A small number, however, did suggest that treaties give American Indians a unique, independent status within the United States. Saying Indian land is legally distinct, some added that they live under laws that differ from those of the national or state constitution. A few felt that reservations or Indian trust lands are a sort of “country in a country,” as an Aurora resident put it, or, in the words of a New Yorker, “like Luxembourg.” Describing what he called “treaty land,” that man added, “It’s not like going to Canada, but it’s not like going to New Jersey, either.”

Some were unclear about when Indians are bound by American law. Because of their sovereignty, an Aurora man said, “They can do what they [want]. They’re not bound by our laws.” A Philadelphia woman seconded this perception that Indians are “not under United States law” because of treaties providing for sovereignty. A New Yorker was uncertain whether Indians are U.S. citizens. There was

also confusion about whether or not Indians pay taxes.

We should note, however, that given the myriad variables at work here, including laws that are continually changing, state-to-state legal differences and distinctions between federal and state laws, it should not be surprising that so many were confused about this issue. It is also worth noting that most Americans are not well-informed about the intricacies of complex issues, especially legal ones. Indeed, even some Indians expressed differing views about what “sovereignty” involves, with a Yakama woman defining it as “the right to education, health and welfare.”

***Between Two Worlds: Many Indians we spoke with felt torn between their traditional cultures and modern-day America. But non-Indians seemed oblivious to the conflicting pressures Indians feel.***

Indians pointed with satisfaction to the strides they are making in contemporary America. Many we spoke with saw younger generations becoming successful in mainstream, metropolitan America. A Yakama leader said proudly, “We are going out and developing businesses and enterprises” to spur economic development. “Today, opportunities are good for the Indian youth,” a Crow woman said.

The combination of Indian ambition, increased education and revenue from casinos is helping to

improve life on Indian lands, some said. “[We] are improving the reservations that [haven’t] been the best in the past,” an Oklahoma Indian man said. Yakama leaders expressed optimism about the increased emphasis on education for Indians on reservations, with some students talking proudly about reservation-based universities such as Heritage. An Oklahoma Indian woman said, “The Cherokee nation...[is] putting their own money into roads, in schools and health centers, and not just for Indians.... It’s not like we’re getting handouts from the government.”

But the pride Indians felt about progress coexisted with their sense that Indian culture is being threatened. Some agonized over the abandoned traditions and languages in younger and nonreservation Indians. A Yakama woman worried about the younger generation’s desire to “leave their culture behind.” A Yakama man bemoaned that the nation’s children are “forgetting their culture, their language.” A Crow man said, “If there was no language, the ways of the Crow would be lost.”

Indians feel torn between their historic cultures and modernity, others said, and between an identity as both American Indian and American. Cultural identity was a highly charged topic. Who are they? Bombarded by stereotypes, burdened by a tragic history, yet clinging to pride, many Indians are torn, trying to figure out how to see themselves as Indians and as Americans, an issue central to their soul-searching. “The

biggest fight that we have is identity,” a New York Indian said.

Over and over, Indians talked about uneasily inhabiting “two worlds”—one Indian and traditional and one American and modern. “It’s a hard walk...the dual citizenship.... Which laws do we follow?” a Yakama student asked rhetorically. An Albuquerque Indian added, “It’s really hard to balance the...two roles you were given.”

Some expressed ambivalence about their Americanness. “I consider myself a Yakama Indian...first, before I’m a U.S. citizen,” one student proclaimed proudly. Others felt differently, including an Oklahoma Indian woman who said, “As far as identifying [myself], I’m an American.” An Albuquerque Indian who was raised a Catholic voiced a third view, describing the tug he feels between his American Christianity and the “traditional,” which “has mostly to do with spirituality...living in a Native American way.”

Identity in 21<sup>st</sup>-century America is also complicated by other issues, the Indians suggested. Whereas non-Indians tended to think of Indians as a monolithic, undifferentiated population, Indians defined their identities through their cultural heritage as members of one great Indian nation and in terms of specific details about the hundreds of Indian tribes, including differences among Indian “nations”—such as the agricultural “five ‘civilized’ tribes” of

the East as opposed to more nomadic, and warlike, western tribes.

Indians said that other complicating factors involved the growing numbers of Mexican and other immigrants moving onto reservations and younger Indians being culturally overwhelmed in cities. These issues, together with increased intermarriage with non-Indians, are “killing our native bloodline,” said a Yakama student. Others added that the question of “who is an Indian” also poses problems of cultural and personal identity, as many of those marking “American Indian” on U.S. Census forms have only partial or extremely limited Indian heredity. But others did not worry, including a New York Indian man who said, “Indians always married...people in other races, but we always had a right to define who our people were.”

American Indian activism since the 1970s, along with the rise of multiculturalism and increasingly “politically correct” textbook and media depictions of Indians, has created conundrums for many American Indians. Characterizations of the past—whether Indians were “native” Americans or the first immigrants, who crossed the Bering Strait—were dicey issues for many. Historical or anthropological accounts of crossing a “land bridge” from Asia made some feel as though Indians are being relegated to the status of American immigrants, thus diminishing or delegitimizing their status as the continent’s original inhabitants. A New York Indian spoke sarcastically of mainstream historical tales of

crossing the Bering Strait as a “‘walking across the ice’ kind of thing.” A Yakama student felt that Indians could not be compared with other immigrant groups. “We were here first,” he said. “It wasn’t even America—it was here.”

American Indians living far from their cultural “homes,” in cities and elsewhere, have an acute sense that they are not on most people’s mental map. Many felt—quite accurately, the research suggests—that non-Indians are unaware that many Indians live in urban areas. A Yakama student noted that reservations do not even exist in the heavily populated Indian state of Alaska. Many pointed out that Indians also live in rural areas in other states, and not just in rural states.

Many Indians leave reservations and rural, southwestern poverty to find greater economic opportunities, we were told. An Oklahoma Indian woman said, “There’s a lot more opportunities...if you get into a bigger city and you’re able to find jobs, support your families and live a normal life.”

Many urban Indians we spoke with saw themselves as being much like other city dwellers. “We live in average communities around blacks, whites, Hispanics or whatever, and you would never even know it,” an Indian in Tulsa said. The only difference between urban Indian families and their neighbors, he said, are the Indian artwork and other mementos that adorn their homes. Urban Indians “commit crimes, they work for nonprofit organizations,

they do everything,” a New York man said. In New York, he added, “You’ve got a lot of actors...a lot of gay people.... Native Americans are just regular people.” Another Indian woman who said she lives in a prosperous urban area suggested that the American normalcy of her life was not something that many non-Indians would recognize.

Conversely, some Indians who live in cities felt that they are often alienated in a non-Indian world. Torn between their traditional culture and

modern, urban America, some reported finding it difficult to fit in. A Brooklyn woman emphasized that urban Indians are “living in two worlds.” In New York, where Indians are all but imperceptible to the larger population, some reported a profound sense of isolation. “You can walk around New York for days and never see another Native American,” one said. Another added that one can feel like an outsider not just in the city, but even when visiting family and friends on reservations.

## THE FUTURE: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

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### **The Need for Education: Both Indians and non-Indians would like to see American Indians' history and contemporary life be better understood by non-Indians.**

Indians and non-Indians alike talked about the need for increased education. Indians in Albuquerque, for example, favored teaching non-Indians about Indians' culture and history, noting that New Mexico had recently started teaching more local history in the public schools, which they felt would have a positive impact.

While some Indians felt that public ignorance about American Indians was due to a lack of interest in learning more, non-Indians often admitted that they know very little and lamented that they did not learn more in school about American Indians. The consensus was that more needed to be taught both about history and about American Indian culture. A Minneapolis man said, "It'd be refreshing to have a more frank and honest depiction and for our children to learn [more] through school. It doesn't have to be too comprehensive, but, basically, honest."

Many Indians we interviewed believed that non-Indians do not want to preserve Indian culture, but this assumption was not borne out by our research. While admitting they know very little, non-Indians talked about the importance of preserving what they saw as the artifacts of

Indians in American history. When asked what they would like to see in a museum about Indians, some non-Indians talked about what one might expect. A New York woman said that Indian museums naturally should display "tepees, cloths they slept on, the toys kids played with, pottery, headdresses and weapons." Others praised Indians for their artistic abilities—their "beautiful jewelry," as an Aurora woman said, and their crafts, saying those too should be on display. Similarly, a New York woman expressed fascination with exhibitions that show Indian "pottery from ancient history, but also a lot of current paintings."

A great many non-Indians, however, also talked about the need to learn more about how Indians live today. A woman who wanted to learn about more than just casinos and the Indian Wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century spoke of wanting to take her children to a museum where they could experience the current life of an American Indian child. "I'd really like to know more about where they are today," she said. "What is the percentage that we still have left of Native Americans and various tribes? Where are they mostly?" Others wanted museums to focus both on Indian history and on contemporary Indian culture, art and day-to-day life. There was much agreement with a Minneapolis woman who said, "I would love to see what Indians are doing

now.... I think people need to see that.” To broad agreement, a woman in the New York group expressed the same view, saying that she wanted “to know...all the things we don’t seem to know.... Along with the headdresses, are there any [Indian] computer programmers along with the [Indian] people that used to build our city?” A New Yorker talked about the need for a knowledgeable museum that could answer his questions about daily life, Indians’ legal status and political rights, as well as questions about history. Summing up what he saw as the mission of an Indian museum, one man said, “Tell the story of American Indians truthfully and honestly,

and tell that story in both the historical and contemporary concepts.... They survived everything that happened to them—they survived.”

That non-Indians want to both preserve Indian culture and learn more about Indians’ history and contemporary life would probably come as a pleasant surprise to a great many American Indians, whose feeling of invisibility in mainstream America haunts them wherever they live. When asked what non-Indians should learn about Indians, one Indian, in a particularly poignant moment, said to the moderator, “Maybe you should just tell them that we still exist.”

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Issue	American Indians	Non-Indians
Indian issues generally	<p>See Indians as victims of a historical injustice comparable to the Holocaust</p> <p>Often feel that discrimination and mistreatment continue and that the government/BIA treats Indians shabbily</p> <p>Often bitter non-Indians know so little</p> <p>Believe non-Indians are unsympathetic, indifferent or hostile toward Indians</p> <p>Directly connect the past and present; think about Indian-related issues in terms of the present</p> <p>Believe non-Indians see them through crude stereotypes</p>	<p>See Indians as victims of great injustice, but little sense of history after late 19<sup>th</sup> century</p> <p>Largely unaware of current mistreatment</p> <p>Oblivious to Indians' feelings</p> <p>Goodwill toward Indians among much of the general population</p> <p>While expressing goodwill, think about Indians mostly in terms of the past</p> <p>Generalizations and stereotypes colored by schoolbooks and Hollywood</p>
Views of daily Indian life	<p>Often see reservations as plagued with social problems; say many Indians live at or below the poverty line</p> <p>Painfully aware of problems facing Indians and see them as urgent</p> <p>Believe non-Indians are unaware of, or indifferent toward, Indians' poverty and social problems</p> <p>Identify themselves in complex ways—through cultural heritage</p> <p>Believe non-Indians think Indians are getting rich from casinos</p> <p>Strongly believe Indians deserve whatever they get from government as members of a sovereign nation with treaty rights</p>	<p>Often see reservations as plagued with problems; believe many Indians live at or below the poverty line</p> <p>Rarely think about Indian-related issues</p> <p>Aware of Indians' problems, but don't think about them often</p> <p>See Indians as one group instead of many different tribes</p> <p>Often realize that casino revenue is unevenly shared</p> <p>Poorly informed about treaty rights and legal status; mixed feelings about Indians getting "special treatment"; many strongly against reparations</p>
Indian culture and identity	<p>Believe non-Indians view them as a historic relic rather than an active, vibrant culture</p> <p>Strong desire to defend Indian culture against pressures to reduce its influence</p> <p>Believe non-Indians have no interest in preserving Indian culture</p>	<p>Often unaware that Indian culture is active and vibrant; to many, Indians are "invisible" people</p> <p>Favor preserving Indian culture, but oblivious to tensions Indians feel</p> <p>Disregard Indian culture; unaware that their lack of understanding may lead Indians to feel bitter</p>
The future: bridging the gap	<p>Believe non-Indians do not know much</p> <p>Believe non-Indians do not care or want to learn more about Indian history, art, culture and contemporary life</p> <p>Greatly desire far more public education about Indian-related issues</p>	<p>Realize they know very little.</p> <p>Want to learn more about Indian history, art, culture, political rights and contemporary life</p> <p>Want schools and museums to provide more instruction about Indian issues</p>

## AFTERWORD

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This study paints a mixed picture. On the one hand, the results suggest widespread resentment among American Indians of the broader U.S. population's views about them, which are often based on misunderstanding or lack of knowledge. On the other hand, non-Indians' views, though often uninformed or even saturated with stereotypes, also reflect considerable sympathy with American Indians, sadness about what happened to them and a strong desire to learn more about the past and present.

Non-Indians are aware that their knowledge of Indian history, culture and contemporary life is extremely limited, and most are eager to learn more. Although they expect to see museum dioramas about American Indian history, non-Indians often do not seem to know that Indians had a history prior to European settlement and have a rich, diverse and changing culture in 21<sup>st</sup>-century America. The fact that there are three to four and a half million Indians from perhaps 1,000 tribal backgrounds living in the United States today, and not primarily on scattered western reservations, would surprise many non-Indians.

This study suggests that many American Indians, especially those on reservations, would be surprised at how much sympathy non-Indians feel. And in a few respects, many Indians might be surprised by how much non-Indians do understand. While non-Indians are oblivious to Indians' painful sense of their own invisibility, they often realize that Indians face acute social problems, that they deeply desire to preserve Indian culture and that certain images, like the idea that all Indians are getting rich off casinos, are simply false. Insofar as Indians think that non-Indians have any interest in them, they believe that it is confined to a past demarcated by the advent of European settlement and the late-19<sup>th</sup>-century conquest of the West. But the results suggest that this is not the case.

Given non-Indians' sincere desire to learn more, the content of education in museums, schools and the media should not only include more in-depth, less stereotyped information about Indians' history, but also be expanded to include information on Indians' contemporary life, culture and political rights. Concerted efforts should be made by educators, museum curators and the media to flesh out the full story of America's original inhabitants in all its nuanced richness. This should involve not only written, audiovisual and Internet-based materials, but also exhibitions in museums and other public history displays and educational curricula. While non-Indians are right in recognizing their own lack of

knowledge, they need to realize just how much there is to learn about American Indians throughout the millennia, during the last century and down to the present day.

Non-Indians also need to recognize and to respond to the feelings, perceptions and issues uppermost in the minds of American Indians—at the levels of policy and public education, including museums. It is not enough to know, and feel guilty, about Indians' mistreatment in the past or even their poverty and isolation today. In addition, this study makes it clear that American Indians have deep-seated worries that go beyond these issues. Indians feel typecast by most Americans and seethe at the belief that they are perceived through myriad stereotyped lenses. In short, they want to be understood and known for who they have been and who they truly are. Moreover, many Indians profoundly fear that they are losing their culture in the wake of the loss of their bloodlines through intermarriage and the movement of many young Indians to big cities, far from Indians' cultural "home" on reservations, as a result of the powerful tides of assimilation into modern America. They also crave economic, educational, political and legal advancement and equality.

Given these concerns, American Indians worry deeply about their future. Will their cultures die out as they become part of a generic American culture? Will reservations wither and become depopulated when their problems become overwhelming? Will non-Indians actually gain a better understanding of who Indians are, what issues concern them and what their history really was? And will Indians escape the double traps of poverty and discrimination and finally be able to participate in a land of abundance, opportunity, equal justice and tolerance? Indians need to know that many non-Indians are ready to face up to their lack of knowledge about Indian affairs and that the attitudinal and knowledge gaps that exist between both groups can indeed be bridged with goodwill among all.

Ruth A. Wooden, President

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