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Lifelong Disparities among Older American Indians and Alaska Natives

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By 2050, the number of American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs) ages 65 and older will more than triple, and the number of those 85 and older will increase sevenfold—from 42,000 in 2012 to 300,000 in 2050.¹ This In Brief outlines characteristics of AI/ANs ages 50 years and older and offers recommendations for better serving their needs.

An American Indian is generally understood as a person eligible for membership in one of the 566 federally recognized tribes or Alaska Native entities or one of the 67 state-recognized tribes.²

More than 5.2 million US citizens identify as AI/AN, either alone or combined with other races. From 2000 to 2010, the AI/AN population grew by 27 percent, increasing nearly three times faster than the total population.³

The federal government has a *trust responsibility* to AI/ANs that includes a legal obligation to protect treaty rights, lands, assets, and resources, plus a

duty to carry out the mandates of federal law to AI/AN people.⁴

This In Brief uses American Community Survey data from the US Census to provide a national overview of the sociodemographic characteristics of AI/ANs ages 50 years or older compared with the same age group (including AI/ANs) in the general US population (“same-age US population”).

Key Findings

Age Distribution

The AI/AN 50-plus cohort is younger than the same-age US population. Sixty-eight percent of AI/ANs in this cohort are between 50 and 64 years, compared with 59 percent of the same-age US population, which has a larger share of people in older age groups.



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Racial Breakdown

Fifty percent of AI/ANs ages 50 and over identify as AI/AN alone, 42 percent report as AI/AN and white, and 10 percent as AI/AN and African American.

Marital Status

Fifty percent of AI/ANs ages 50 and over are married, compared with 61 percent of the same-age US population. Twenty-six percent of people in this AI/AN cohort are divorced, compared with 17 percent of the same-age US population.

Multigenerational Households

Almost 10 percent of AI/ANs ages 50 and over reside in households with three or more generations, compared with 6.5 percent of the same-age US population. Nearly twice as many AI/ANs report living with grandchildren.

Educational Attainment

Nearly 22 percent of AI/ANs ages 50 and older did not graduate from high school, compared with 16 percent of the same-age US population. Only a quarter of 50-plus AI/ANs graduated from college, compared with 33 percent of the same-age US population.

Mean Annual Income

The mean annual personal income for AI/ANs ages 50 and over (\$29,391) is \$10,000 less than the same-age US population (\$39,584). AI/ANs ages 50 and over receive higher levels of Supplemental Security Income and food stamps, and their personal income is more likely to fall below the poverty level (17.5 percent versus 9.5 percent).

Employment

More AI/ANs ages 50 and over are unemployed or are not in the labor force compared with the same-age US population. The differences are most significant in the 50–64 age group: 53.8 percent of AI/ANs are employed, compared with 65.5 percent of the same-age US population, and 40.2 percent of

Box 1. AI/AN Health Care

Under the federal trust responsibility, the IHS provides primary and public health care for Indian tribes. IHS appropriations for FY2015 were \$4.64 billion,^a an amount estimated to meet 50 percent of needs.^b IHS estimates it received only 22 percent of funding needed for Urban Indian Health Programs.^c Medicare, Medicaid, and private insurance companies are billed before the IHS pays medical costs.

- a. IHS, "Fiscal Year 2016: Justification of Estimates for Appropriations Committees," <http://www.ihs.gov/budgetformulation/includes/themes/newihsthemedocuments/FY2016CongressionalJustification.pdf>.
- b. Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board, "The FY2010 Indian Health Services Budget: Analysis and Recommendations," Portland, OR, 2009.
- c. IHS, "Office of Urban Indian Health Programs: Program Information," 2014, http://www.ihs.gov/urban/index.cfm?module=dsp_urban_programs.

AI/ANs are not in the labor force, compared with 29.7 percent of the same-age US population.

Health Coverage

Almost twice as many older AI/ANs are uninsured than are people in the same-age US population (16 percent versus 8.5 percent). A larger percentage of AI/ANs ages 50-plus receive Medicaid or use Veterans Affairs coverage, and 22 percent receive care provided by the Indian Health Service (IHS; box 1).

Geographic Distribution

The number and proportion of AI/ANs (of all ages) who reside in urban areas have increased 34 percent from 2000 to 2010.⁵

Forty-four percent of AI/ANs ages 50 and over reside on tribal lands. Alaska has the highest proportion of AI/ANs ages 50 and over (14 percent), followed by Oklahoma, New Mexico, South Dakota, and Montana. California has the most AI/ANs ages 50 and over (nearly 172,000), followed by Oklahoma, Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico.

- 1 Jennifer M. Ortman, Victoria A. Velkoff, and Howard Hogan, "An Aging Nation: The Older Population in the United States," Document P25-1140, US Census Bureau, Washington, DC, May 2014.
- 2 Bureau of Indian Affairs, "Frequently Asked Questions: Who Is an American Indian or Alaska Native," <http://www.bia.gov/FAQs>.
- 3 Tina Norris, Paula L. Vines, and Elizabeth M. Hoeffel, "The American Indian and Alaska Native Population: 2010," 2010 Census Briefs (C2010BR-10), US Census Bureau, Washington, DC, January 2012.
- 4 *American Indian Policy Review Commission: Final Report*, submitted to Congress May 7, 1977, Vol. 1. Chapter Four, "Trust Responsibility," 121-38. Retrieved from <https://archive.org/details/finalreport01unit>;
- 5 Norris, Vines, and Hoeffel, "The American Indian and Alaska Native Population," from <https://archive.org/details/finalreport01unit>; Brett Lee Shelton, "Legal and Historical Roots of Health Care for American Indians and Alaska Natives in the United States," Issue Brief 7021, Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, Menlo Park, CA, 2004.

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