

Home  
 About PRRAC  
 Contact Us  
 Support PRRAC

Donate

PRRAC

POVERTY & RACE RESEARCH ACTION COUNCIL

# Race / Racism

Search For

Go

Current Projects  
 Newsletter  
 Publications  
 Policy Briefs  
 Job Bank  
 Calendar  
 PRRAC Grants  
 PRRAC Symposia

Race/Racism  
 Poverty/Welfare  
 Civil Rights History  
 Community Organizing  
 Criminal Justice  
 Economic/Community  
 Development  
 Education  
 Employment/Labor/Jobs Policy  
 Environment  
 Families/Women/Children  
 Food/Nutrition/Hunger  
 Health  
 Homelessness  
 Housing  
 Immigration  
 Rural  
 Miscellaneous  
 Job Opportunities/  
 Fellowships/Grants

**"Urban Indians: The Invisible Minority"** by Gwen Carr

March/April 1996 issue of **Poverty & Race**

Linda is an Urban Indian. She is 22 years old, has two children, is a single head of household, with an income of \$16,500 a year and no health insurance, has no access to child care, lives in a two-room apartment with her mother, grandmother and assorted relatives in a crime-ridden section of the city.

Linda's mother was relocated to the city in the 1950s as a result of the federal governments Relocation Program for Indians that promised a better life, more jobs and opportunities, a chance to succeed and be self sufficient. Her mother was given a one-way bus ticket, money for the first month's rent on an apartment and an alarm clock. Her mother was also given the promise that the government would provide services to assist her in the transition to the city. According to the government, she would not be alone, would not be abandoned in a large urban area after being born and raised on a remote reservation among her family and tribal culture.

She received very little support after her move to the city. Because of the lack of job training and skills, she had difficulty finding a job. Because of racism, she had difficulty finding a decent place to live, and with her limited understanding of English she had difficulty establishing contacts with neighbors. It was difficult acclimating herself to an urban environment. She had no friends. Linda's mother found life off reservation painful, lonely and frightening. She also found out that the government's promise of support and services was not honored. She was alone. Because she was poor and there were no opportunities on the reservation, she also couldn't go back.

Linda was born after her mother had been an active alcoholic and diabetic for many years. She spent a great deal of her childhood following her mother from apartment to apartment, neighborhood to neighborhood and school to school. She knew what it was like to be hungry. She knew what it was like to have to move in the middle of the night and what it was like to live from welfare check to welfare check. She also knew what it was like to live with the unease of poverty. What she did not know was what it meant to be a member of her tribe, to be apart of an ancient culture rich with its own language, traditions and wisdom. Linda has struggled with being discriminated against at school, where she learned that her ancestors were "savages" and massacred countless settlers for apparently no good reason. She has seen people who look like her displayed as stiff, dusty mannequins in museums or as dancing caricatures in sports arenas. Linda has had to struggle with being between two worlds without being a part of either.

The Indian Center in her city struggles to assist Linda and her family. The Center has provided resources such as food, clothing, health care, alcoholism treatment and crisis intervention when she's needed it. The Center has provided social services programs, housing resources, job training programs and, most important of all, a connection to her own people and traditions through pow-wows and cultural events. But, due to federal and local funding cutbacks, the Indian Center is closing. Just as Linda's mother was left alone in the city to fend for herself Linda and her children will be left alone too.

This brief story illuminates some of the issues that impact the over 1.3 million American Indians who live in urban and rural areas. Over 64% of the total American Indian population live off reservation, due to either the promise of the federal government's Relocation Program of the 1950s, designed to assimilate Indians into mainstream culture, thereby lessening the government's treaty responsibilities or the necessity of finding work to support their families on the reservation after World War II.

Urban Indian communities are the invisible minorities in the cities in which they live. We do know that the largest concentrations are in Los Angeles, New York, Phoenix, Chicago, St. Paul/Minneapolis, San Francisco, Houston, Milwaukee, and in North Carolina and Florida cities. The movement to assimilate Indians into mainstream culture has resulted in a significant lack of data available on Urban Indians. Lack of these vital data results in barriers to access to programs and projects that rely on statistics and data to define a population and its needs.

The limited data available through the Census place Urban Indians at the lowest economic stratum in any urban area, at the highest risk for health-related deaths, the highest dropout rate, infant mortality rate and suicide rate of any other group. Although American Indians have a political relationship and status with the federal government as a result of treaties signed with sovereign Indian Nations in the last century, Urban Indians do not benefit from programs designed for Indians who live on reservations.

For example, in Chicago, data from the American Indian Economic Development Association shows that 36% of that city's Native American Indian population over 25 years of age do not have a high school diploma and that 25% live below the poverty level. Thirty-eight percent of all Native American households in Chicago earn less than \$15,000 per year. American Indians in Chicago are also prohibited by city ordinance from participating as presumptive minorities in the Minority Business Enterprise program due to the lack of "appropriate statistics and data to prove historic discrimination," according to the City's Chief Counsel. According to The American Indian Chamber of Commerce in Houston, Urban Indian business owners face exclusion from minority programs as a result of the lack of resources to carry out a disparity study on their business community.

In other regions of the country the limited availability of options and resources is similar. According to the North Carolina Commission on Indian Affairs, Urban Indians have limited choices for homeownership due to the unavailability of housing programs and funding designed to meet the needs

of over 70,000 Indian people who reside in either urban or rural areas.

Overall statistics are equally chilling. According to a report from the National Urban Indian Policy Coalition (NUIPC) to The White House Domestic Policy Council on Native Americans, the number of Urban Indian mental health patients served by Urban Indian clinics has increased by 200% from 1988 to 1990; Urban Indians have three times the national rate for diabetes and heart disease; the Urban Indian suicide rate is four times that of other races,

drop-out rates are over 75%. While Urban Indians comprise the majority of the Indian population in the United States, with a 30% increase over the last three decades, they receive less than 1% of the total Indian Health budget. Just 34 Urban Indian health clinics serve over 1.3 million Indian people across the country, leaving over 75% of Urban Indians without health care.

Urban Indians also have no political representation at local, state and federal levels. The National Urban Indian Policy Coalition was formed to provide representation of Urban Indians and their critical needs at a national level. Comprised of over 240 Urban Indian organizations across the country, NUIPC's mission is to provide access and resources to Urban Indian communities wherever possible. NUIPC's focus is on issues identified by Urban Indian communities as critical: housing, health care, job training, education, economic development, and the development of Urban Indian centers are among the specific areas that NUIPC is working on.

NUIPC's soon-to-be-initiated "Miaheyyun" Urban/Rural Indian Research Project will begin to address the need for comprehensive data to combat the "invisible minority" syndrome by creating a national Urban Indian community relational database and demographic materials for Urban Indian communities over the next three years. "Miaheyyun" means "Wholeness: As we look for our Brothers and Sisters, we find ourselves" in the Cheyenne language. This project is an attempt to bring Urban Indian communities out of isolation and assist Urban Indian communities in educating the mainstream culture and empowering them to effect positive change.

*Gwen Carr is Chairwoman of the National Urban Indian Policy Coalition. Contact her for further information on NUIPC or the Miaheyyun Research Project c/o American Indian Economic Development Association, 4753 N. Broadway, 101126, Chicago, IL 60604; 312/784-0808).*

[3563]

Poverty & Race Research Action Council  
1015 15th Street NW, Suite 400, Washington, DC 20005  
phone: 202/906-8023 \* fax: 202/842-2885 \* email: [info@prrac.org](mailto:info@prrac.org)

©Copyright 1992-2009 Poverty & Race Research Action Council