

# American Indian/Alaska Native Populations

## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS



This list defines key terms and provides a cultural context for American Indian/Alaska Native populations. These key terms are utilized throughout the toolkit. Reference these definitions for information about how to use these terms in communication products and in media.

### Boarding School Era

Between 1869 and the 1960s, the U.S. Federal Government partnered with religious institutions to forcibly remove hundreds of thousands of American Indian and Alaska Native children from their villages and communities. Children were sent to government- or church-operated boarding schools where they were forbidden to speak their Native languages or practice their culture. Some schools assigned children numbers instead of names. Many children were sexually and physically abused and died. Indian Boarding School Policy expressly intended to implement cultural genocide through the removal and reprogramming of American Indian and Alaska Native children.<sup>1</sup>

In 1978, the Indian Child Welfare Act passed, giving Native American parents the legal right to refuse their child's placement in a school.<sup>2</sup> This law became a key component to protect the rights and culture of American Indian and Alaska Native families.

### Colonization

Colonization is the process of settling among and establishing control of Indigenous people of an area.<sup>3</sup> Colonization began during early contact with Europeans, and it is still prevalent today.

### Cultural Affiliation

Cultural affiliation is a shared connection or identity that may be traced historically between an existing tribe and an earlier culture or group.<sup>4</sup> Cultural affiliation is integral to the identity of Alaska Natives and American Indians and is typically shared upon first introduction with a new person, especially if introduced to another Indigenous individual.

### Elder

An Elder is a community member who has a great deal of wisdom, maturity, and cultural knowledge. Elders are typically older adults with a variety of life experiences, but they can also be younger people bearing the gift of wisdom. Elder is a designation typically given to someone by those in his or her community.<sup>5</sup>

### Epigenetics

**Epigenetics** is the study of how your behaviors and environment can cause changes that affect the way your genes work. Epigenetic markers have been shown to be affected by natural, built, and social environmental exposures such as nutrition, stress, and air pollution. Epigenetic markers can change over time and can also be inherited.<sup>6</sup>

## Historical Trauma

Historical trauma is the result of hundreds of years of oppression, colonization, and systemic racism that continues to impact American Indian and Alaska Native lives today. It is the total emotional and psychological wounds over the lifespan and across generations that comes from large-scale group trauma. Unresolved grief is part of historical trauma and is defined by the length of the grieving and its interference with a person's grief symptoms in their everyday life. Symptoms of unresolved grief can range in intensity and can contribute to high rates of suicide, homicide, domestic violence, sexual abuse, child abuse, substance abuse and addiction, as well as other social problems among American Indians and Alaska Natives.<sup>7</sup>

## Indian Country

Indian Country refers to all land within an Indian reservation or held in trust by the U.S. Federal Government. Additionally, any dependent Native community within the borders of the United States may be considered Indian Country. Indian Country now spans thousands of rural areas, towns, and cities where Native Americans live.<sup>8</sup>

## Intergenerational Grief

Intergenerational grief is grief or trauma that is felt from one generation to the next and sometimes through many generations.<sup>9</sup> The impact of this grief can be both mental and physical.

## Native

Native or Indigenous people are the original inhabitants of an area. "Native" should always be capitalized when used alone or in a sentence. When referring to a Native or Indigenous person in Alaska, this person is an "Alaska Native." This is not interchangeable with "Native Alaskan," which refers to any individual born in the state of Alaska regardless of race or ethnicity. People who are Indigenous to the contiguous United States may be appropriately referred to as either "Native American" or "American Indian."<sup>10</sup>

## Resilience

Resilience represents both personal strength and the collective strength of all Native people past, present, and future. It is built and strengthened through culture, spirituality, shared values, and a strong sense of identity.<sup>11</sup> Their resilience speaks to the spirit and desire to overcome racial, economic, social, health, and environmental disparities experienced by Native people and to heal.

## Self-determination

Through the Self-determination and Education Assistance Act, tribes have the right to assume responsibility for the programs and services administered to them on behalf of the U.S. Federal Government.<sup>12</sup> Self-determination also has a broader meaning when referring to membership in a Native person's tribal government or identity as a tribal citizen. These are the freedoms promised through treaties and legislation throughout the history of the United States.<sup>5</sup>

## Sovereignty

Sovereignty, specifically tribal sovereignty, refers to the right of American Indians and Alaska Natives to govern themselves. The U.S. Constitution recognizes Indian tribes as distinct governments with most of the same powers as federal and state governments to regulate their internal affairs.<sup>11</sup>

## Tribal Government

Each federally recognized tribe has its own government called a tribal government. Tribal governments interact with the federal government as sovereign nations and have legal jurisdiction over their own land. Tribal sovereignty was formed as a result of hundreds of treaties and federal actions between the U.S. government and Native American and Alaska Native tribes.<sup>12</sup>

### Tribal Health Organization

Tribal health organizations are recognized direct service providers that deliver healthcare and manage healthcare facilities for American Indian and Alaska Native communities and tribes.<sup>13</sup> There are also tribal health organizations that serve non-Native people, if they carry the status of a federally qualified health center.

### Tribal Member

Tribal membership is a political status given to an Alaska Native or American Indian who is an enrolled member of one of the 574 federally recognized tribes in the United States.<sup>14</sup> There are many Native people who do not have tribal membership status but are still considered Alaska Native or American Indian based on their heritage or genetic background.

### Tribe

The U.S. government defines a federally recognized tribe as an American Indian or Alaska Native tribe that has a government-to-government relationship with the United States with responsibilities, powers, limitations, and obligations that come with it.<sup>15</sup> There are tribes that are not federally recognized for a variety of reasons. For the purposes of developing media, these tribes should be approached similarly to their federally recognized counterparts. Federally recognized tribes have natural rights to self-government (tribal sovereignty) and are entitled to receive some federal benefits, services, and protections because of their special relationships with the U.S. government.<sup>15</sup> There are currently 574 federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native tribes and villages.<sup>15</sup>

### Trope

A trope is any word used in a figure of speech or a recurring theme in literature.<sup>16</sup> Media often feature many kinds of Alaska Native and Native American tropes, which are damaging and false representations. Examples include the “Mystical Native American” who is always in tune with nature, the “Indian Princess” or chief’s daughter, the “Stoic Indian” who never speaks, or the “Savage Indian” who is typically portrayed as an uncivilized villain. It is important to note that when featuring Native people in media, a story is being told on their behalf. Public perception is highly influenced through media, so proper and realistic representation is crucial for the protection of American Indian Peoples’ rights, both those that are inherent and those affirmed by treaties, litigation, and legislation.

### Unresolved Grief

Unresolved grief is part of historical trauma and is defined by the duration of the grieving and its interference with a person’s grief symptoms in their everyday life. Symptoms of unresolved grief can range in intensity and can contribute to high rates of suicide, homicide, domestic violence, sexual abuse, child abuse, substance use and substance use disorder, as well as other social problems among American Indians and Alaska Natives.



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Centers for Disease  
Control and Prevention  
National Center for Injury  
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Learn more about the signs of addiction, as well as recovery and treatment options at <https://www.cdc.gov/rxawareness/treatment>.

## References

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