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## The Explosion of the 2020 Census “Indian” Population and its Implications for Tribal Policymaking

Chapter manuscript for Hill, N. S., Ratteree, K., Hill, M. M., & Hill, D. (Eds.). (forthcoming). *Beyond Blood Quantum: Refusal to Disappear*. Fulcrum Publishing.

*Preprint Draft of February 25, 2023*

Karl Eschbach and Jonathan Taylor

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## The Explosion of the 2020 Census “Indian” Population and its Implications for Tribal Policymaking

Karl Eschbach and Jonathan Taylor<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

The 2020 US Census reported 9.7 million Indians, an increase of 149% since 2010. While population dynamics and changes in self-identification behavior surely underlie some of that increase, a change in Census methodology contributes an as-yet-unknown portion. The paper summarizes the history of Census Bureau Indian classification, culminating in 2020’s imputation of American Indian or Alaska Native (AI/AN) to respondents who may *not* have self-identified as AI/AN but *did* list Indigenous ancestry in another race’s write-in box. The paper also presents decennial Indian counts for the last seven decades. The geography of the 2020 increase—virtually nonexistent in Indian territories, astronomical (192X since 1950) in states without Indian territories and without large proportions of single-race Indians—and its disconnection from steadier tribal citizenship trends implicate the methodological change for a large portion of the national increase. In effect, the 2020 methodology uncovers latent historic Indigenous descendance going back as far as family folklore, Ancestry.com, DNA testing, and other methods permit. The Census surveying principle that “you are who you say you are” has long contrasted with the core principle of federal Indian policy that Native nations define the boundaries of citizenship, and this paper concludes with four implications for tribal policymakers while we wait for Census Bureau to decompose Census-classified Indians from self-identified Indians.

On June 30, 1920, J.C. Hart, Superintendent of the BIA’s Pawnee Agency, recorded a Census of the Kaw Indians (Figure 1). In the rows, Mr. Hart used the column Indian Name to report the subjects’ Kaw blood quantum. Hart typed for a certain Mr. Charles Curtis: 1/4. His wife, Annie E., is listed as “White.”

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<sup>1</sup> The authors gratefully acknowledge the support and feedback of the editors of Hill, N. S., Hill, M. M., & Hill, D. (Eds.), (forthcoming), *Beyond Blood Quantum: Refusal to Disappear*, Fulcrum Publishing, for which this paper is being considered for inclusion. All remaining defects of the paper are our responsibility. Corresponding author: Jonathan Taylor, jonathan@taylorpolicy.com.

Figure 1

Charles Curtis in the Kaw Census, 1920

5-198

*CENSUS of the* Kaw *Indians of* Pawnee *Agency, Okla*

on June 30, 1920, taken by J. G. Hart, Superintendent  
(Name.) (Official title.)

NUMBER.		INDIAN NAME.	ENGLISH NAME.	RELATIONSHIP.	DATE OF BIRTH.	SEX.
Last.	Present.					
86	94	White 1/4	Curtis, Charles. Curtis, Annie E.,	Head Wife	1861 1861	M F

(Ancestry.com, n.d.)

Ten years later, a Census Bureau enumerator visited a home at 1101 Topeka Boulevard in Topeka Township, Shawnee County, Kansas (Figure 2). The enumerator recorded the presence there of a widower: the same Mr. Charles Curtis. In column 12, *Color or race*, the enumerator wrote “W.” To the enumerator, Charles was white, as were all the other individuals listed on that enumeration sheet. The enumerator also charmingly (and accurately) recorded Curtis’s occupation as “Vice President” and his industry as “United States.”

Figure 2

Charles Curtis of Topeka, Kansas

United States Census 1930

Form 13-A  
DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE—BUREAU OF THE CENSUS  
FIFTEENTH CENSUS OF THE UNITED STATES: 1930  
POPULATION SCHEDULE

State Kansas Incorporated place Topeka, Okla. Enumeration District No. 82-27 Sheet No. 4 B

County Shawnee Ward of city 3 Block No. \_\_\_\_\_ Superintendent's District No. 6

Township or other division of county Topeka Township Unincorporated place \_\_\_\_\_ Institution Engleide Home Care to Health Enumerated by me on Apr. 4 1930 Ma Donna Sella Maxwell Enumerator 7551

NAME of each person whose place of abode on April 1, 1930, was in this family Enter surname first, then the given name and middle initial, if any Include every person living on April 1, 1930. Omit children born since April 1, 1930	PERSONAL DESCRIPTION					OCCUPATION AND INDUSTRY			
	Sex	Color or race	Age at last birthday	Marital condition	Age at first marriage	OCCUPATION Trade, profession, or particular kind of work, as spinner, salesman, ricketer, teacher, etc.	INDUSTRY Industry or business, as cotton mill, dry-goods store, shipyard, public school, etc.	CODE (For office use only. Do not write in this column)	Class of worker
5	11	12	13	14	15	25	26	D	27
<u>Curtis Charles</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>W</u>	<u>71</u>	<u>Wd</u>	<u>25</u>	<u>Vice President</u>	<u>United States</u>	<u>9693</u>	<u>W</u>

(Ancestry.com, n.d.)

This 1930 census counted only 343,352 Indians in the United States, principally on the reservation lands of federally recognized Indian tribes. Notwithstanding his formal enrollment as a Kaw Indian, Herbert Hoover’s Vice President, the former US Senator Charles Curtis, was, to the Census Bureau, simply a white man.

Eighty-eight years later, the *New York Times* asked of another Senator born in the mid-continent, “Elizabeth Warren has a Native American ancestor. Does that make her Native American?” (Zimmer, 2018).

These prominent opposites on the national stage obscure multitudes. Behind Vice-President Curtis are those many Indians in the first half of the twentieth century whose identities were firmly under federal bureaucratic control (often to absurd results) and whose self-conceptions were under concerted social pressure to assimilate (often to tragic ends). Behind Senator Warren are millions of contemporaries deploying everything from family lore and Ancestry.com to DNA analysis and letters in the attic to integrate a self-construction that often encompasses “Indianness.” Vice-President Curtis and Senator Warren also bookend a story of evolving “Indianness” in the quantification of “Indians” in the US Census. The story brackets millions under multiple, often countervailing social, demographic, and policy pressures as the US government counts and sorts them. This paper takes up that story, culminating in a radical and (as yet) poorly understood change in Census categorization in 2020.

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The Indigenous population of the Americas experienced a long decline from the first incursions of Europeans and the forced migration of Africans into the Americas. The causes of this decline include the effect of pathogens, military depredations, the destruction of life and livelihoods, and social disruption. The low point of the American Indian population, as reflected in the United States census, was 240,000 reported in 1900 (Thornton, 1987). From that point, the Indian population began to rebound slowly through the 1950 Census. Counts were erratic at each census as they varied with the emphasis on enumerating the Indian population. In 1950, still fewer than 360,000 Indians were counted.

After 1950, the American Indian population increased with increasing momentum. By 2020, the population of Hispanic and non-Hispanic American Indians or Alaska Natives alone and in combination with other races was counted at 9.7 million.

How does a country get from an Indian population of 360,000 to nearly 10 million in 70 years? Certainly not through any routine demographic process of population growth via the excess of births over deaths. The answer lies in the changes in how people are classified as Indians.

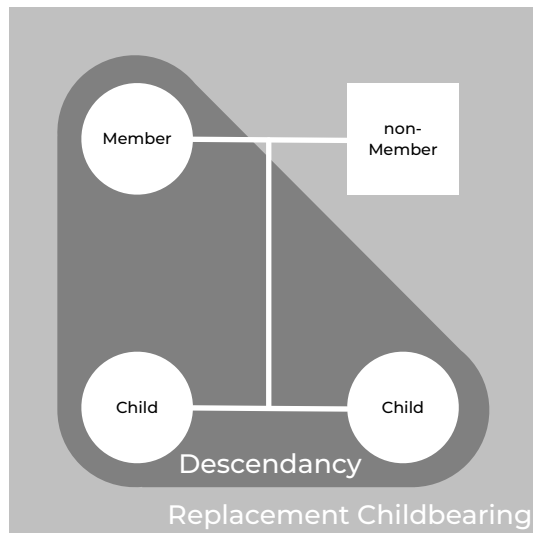
A critical beginning point is that the population of the Americas as it emerged in the wake of the Columbian contact was an amalgam of Indigenous, European, African, and Asian people. Exogamy<sup>2</sup> among groups in bounded populations can have explosive dynamics—doubling the descendency population every generation under what would otherwise be replacement fertility (Figure 3). In other words, if two children per parent pair make for a steady population, the number of members of the descendency population doubles each generation—a point well understood today in the context of Native debates about blood quantum on tribal citizenship and lineal descent policies. Descendency dynamics are also applicable outside that context.

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<sup>2</sup> While common speech uses “intermarriage,” we prefer *exogamy* for denoting childbirth with partners from outside the group (*exo-*), independent of marital status.

Figure 3

### The Core of Descendancy Dynamics under Exogamy



(Eschbach & Taylor, 2022).

## Seven Decades of Census Indians

After centuries of exogamy, when we consider the 360,000 Indians ostensibly counted by the Census in 1950, the truth of the matter is that the Indian descendancy population in the United States numbered in the millions by that time, even setting aside the migrated descendants of Indigenous people from elsewhere in the Americas. Census Bureau classification policies and practices, expressing the presumptions of the Euro-American settler colonial population and its government, substantially restricted the use of the Indian identity category to members of recognized Indian communities living on or near designated reservations and a few similar locally recognized Indian communities. Even when Indians encountered sympathetic enumerators (or later the freedom to self-select race), evidence suggests they felt pressure to pass as white (Sturm, 2011). This reservoir of uncounted millions of Indigenous descendants lies latent through the chronology.

In Charles Curtis's day and up to 1960, racial identification on the Census was assigned by a Census enumerator. The enumerators were temporary workers over whom the Bureau had limited control. Indian identity was rarely assigned outside of states with federally recognized Indian lands, and the overwhelming majority of persons of mixed Indian and white or Black ancestry outside of these areas were not reported as Indians. The mid-century was also a period of growing urbanization of out-migrants from reservation communities. Some first-generation urbanizing Indian populations may have been counted as Indians, but it is unlikely that their mixed-race children and grandchildren would have been so counted.

Subsequent changes in Census Bureau practices combined with changes in the social forces bearing on the formation and expression of Indian identity fed the initially slow, later torrential growth of the census Indian population. Census changes occurred in several steps.

Beginning in 1960, the primary mode of administration of the Census became a mail-out/mail-back form to be filled out by a respondent living in each household. The change of mode essentially remade Census race into an expression of personal identity by the respondent. In other words, a change made initially for operational and fiscal savings yielded self-identification as a fundamental principle: You are who you say you are.

There is one partial qualification to this principle, unique to Indians. Official guidance about racial classification incorporates two distinctive elements for American Indian identity. It defines an American Indian or Alaska Native as “a person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America), *and who maintains tribal affiliation or community recognition.*” (OMB, 1997) or “*attachment*” (US Census Bureau, n.d.) The italicized part of this definition is included for no other group. For example, the definition of being Vietnamese does not stipulate engagement in Vietnamese community affairs. However, the qualification is only partial. It is up to the individual to decide what constitutes an affiliation, recognition, or attachment. For example, would that affiliation be to Pueblo (a category of Indian), Tewa (a linguistic/cultural group), or Ohkay Owingeh (a particular polity north of Española, New Mexico)? Three different citizens (or descendants) of Ohkay Owingeh could reasonably write three different answers. In 1980, changes in census collection and reporting joined “Alaska Native” categories with “American Indian” to yield the racial category American Indian or Alaska Native (AI/AN).

Beginning in the 2000 census, the race question was modified by introducing an instruction to report all races that applied rather than to choose a single race only (see the left panel of Figure 4, which shows the feature’s continuation in 2010). With the introduction of this rule, the population reporting a single race started to grow more slowly. At the same time, the number of persons reporting the American Indian race in combination with one or more races appeared as a new group of 1.4 million multi-race, non-Hispanic Indians.

In 2020, changes to the race question were more subtle but nonetheless critically consequential (Marks & Rios-Vargas, 2021). The most visible change was the introduction of a write-in space into which Black and white respondents could report a more specific ancestry (right panel in Figure 4). Listed examples on the form include German, Egyptian, Jamaican, and Nigerian. This additional space and the inclusion of examples created more opportunities for persons with mixed Indian ancestry to report an Indian or tribal identity.

A second change entailed the addition of examples to the write-in space for American Indian respondents. One offered example was “Mayan,” which modeled the selection of an “enrolled or principal tribe” neither federally recognized nor in a government-to-government relationship with the United States. This instruction implicitly encourages a broad view of Indigenous identity not

tied to citizenship in or “affiliation, recognition, or attachment” with a federally recognized Native nation.

The third change was not visible to respondents but crucial to reported identity counts—the Census Bureau digitally captured and coded a substantially larger number of characters from the write-in responses in any of the spaces for disclosing specific identities than in previous censuses. For example, a 2020 resident of the Great Smoky Mountains might check the box next to White and write in “Scottish, Irish, and Cherokee.” Even if she did not check the box next to American Indian or Alaska Native, the census coding procedures would record her as “American Indian or Alaska Native in combination with one or more other races.” Respondents were advised, “You are not required to mark a checkbox category in order to enter a response in one of the write-in areas. You may respond by entering your specific identity or identities in any of the write-in response areas on the race question” (US Census Bureau, n.d.). Together these changes encouraged and encoded greater attention to details of mixed ancestry in census race classification.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The Census Bureau tests questions thoroughly before changing the form. Testing showed that the new form used in the 2020 census would likely increase the number of people reporting themselves to be Indian. However, this was not a principal focus of evaluation. Instead, a principal concern was to assess the reliability of responses, that is, the probability that a respondent would answer the same way if asked the exact same question after an interval of time. The Bureau was also concerned to reduce the refusal of subjects to respond to the question, or to reject the race categories listed on the form—long-standing problems, particularly for Middle Eastern and Hispanic respondents. And the interest in these points of evaluation spanned all types of respondents, and not just Indians. The Bureau did note that different question wording and formats did seem to generate different response patterns for Indians but attributed this to small sample sizes of Indians in the different test panels (Compton et al., 2013; Mathews et al., 2017).

Figure 4

## Evolution of the Census Race Question

2010 to 2020

2010

**9. What is Person 1's race? Mark  one or more boxes.**

White

Black, African Am., or Negro

American Indian or Alaska Native — *Print name of enrolled or principal tribe.* ↴

\_\_\_\_\_

Asian Indian     Japanese     Native Hawaiian

Chinese     Korean     Guamanian or Chamorro

Filipino     Vietnamese     Samoan

Other Asian — *Print race, for example, Hmong, Laotian, Thai, Pakistani, Cambodian, and so on.* ↴

Other Pacific Islander — *Print race, for example, Fijian, Tongan, and so on.* ↴

\_\_\_\_\_

Some other race — *Print race.* ↴

\_\_\_\_\_

2020

**7. What is this person's race?**

*Mark  one or more boxes AND print origins.*

White — *Print, for example, German, Irish, English, Italian, Lebanese, Egyptian, etc.* ↴

\_\_\_\_\_

Black or African Am. — *Print, for example, African American, Jamaican, Haitian, Nigerian, Ethiopian, Somali, etc.* ↴

\_\_\_\_\_

American Indian or Alaska Native — *Print name of enrolled or principal tribe(s), for example, Navajo Nation, Blackfeet Tribe, Mayan, Aztec, Native Village of Barrow Inupiat Traditional Government, Nome Eskimo Community, etc.* ↴

\_\_\_\_\_

Chinese     Vietnamese     Native Hawaiian

Filipino     Korean     Samoan

Asian Indian     Japanese     Chamorro

Other Asian — *Print, for example, Pakistani, Cambodian, Hmong, etc.* ↴

Other Pacific Islander — *Print, for example, Tongan, Fijian, Marshallese, etc.* ↴

\_\_\_\_\_

Some other race — *Print race or origin.* ↴

\_\_\_\_\_

(US Census Bureau, 2010b, 2020b)

The large latent population of potential Indians, together with the changes in the wording and coding of the Census race item, fueled subsequent growth in the census American Indian population (Figure 5).<sup>4</sup> The background of these changes included broader social, cultural, and institutional challenges to systems of white dominance in the United States. For American Indians, these changes included the increasing autonomy of recognized Indian nations on the institutional side and the elevation of American Indian identities and culture on the personal side (Nagel, 1997; Sturm, 2011). By 1990, the then self-identified American Indian population had increased to 1.96 million, appearing not just in and near Indian communities (Passel, 1976, 1997). The introduction of reporting multiple races with the 2000 Census led to a scale change. The addition of a mixed-race AI/AN alone and in combination nearly doubled the identified Indian population.

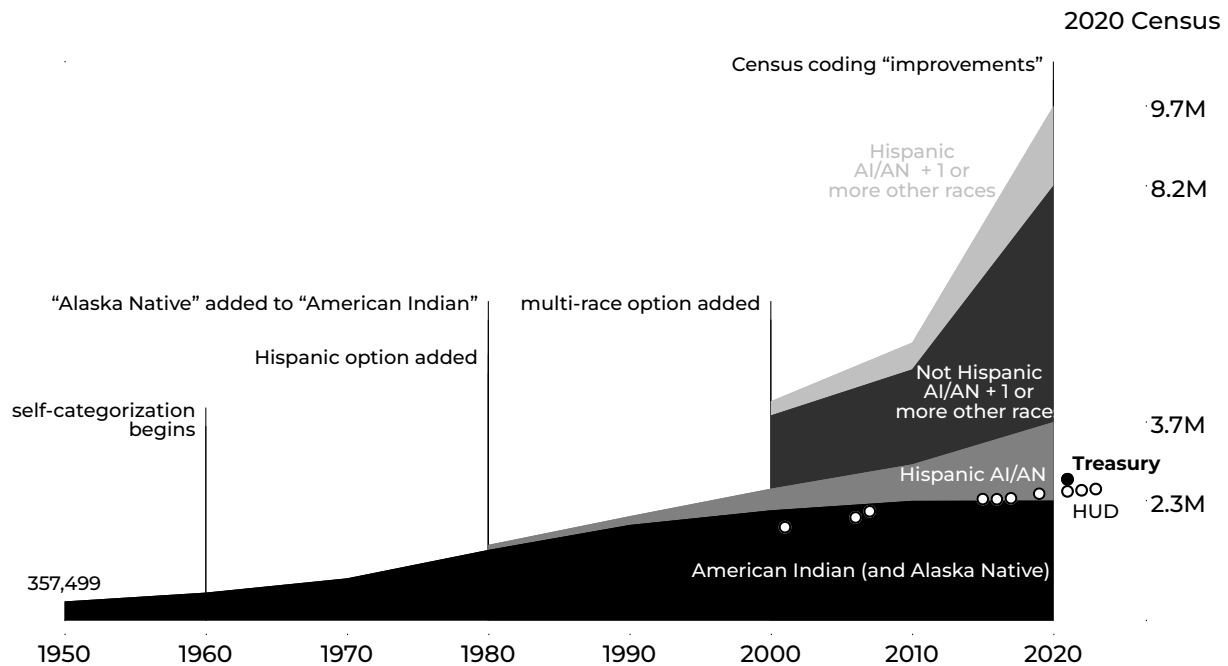
<sup>4</sup> For simplicity and consistency, the rest of this report will use the following abbreviations and terms for the following non-overlapping categories:

acronym	lay terms	designation herein
AI/AN	American Indian or Alaska Native	non-Hispanic, single-race AI/AN
H, AI/AN	Hispanic Indian	Hispanic, single-race AI/AN
AI/AN+C	multi-race Indian	non-Hispanic, multi-race AI/AN
H, AI/AN+C	Hispanic multi-race Indian	Hispanic, multi-race AI/AN



Figure 5

Census Indian Populations 1950–2020 and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Tribal Citizenship citizenship as reported to HUD and Treasury



(Henson et al., 2021; HUD, various years; Manson, Steven et al., 2022; Thornton, 1987)

The emergence of a population that was both Hispanic and Indian was sudden and extremely rapid. In 1980 for the first time, a separate Hispanic identity item was added to the complete count form of the Census. The population cross-classified as Indian and Hispanic in 1980 was 95,000, 7% of the total Indian population and just 0.6% of the Hispanic population. The count rose to 165,000 in 1990, 8 percent of the census Indian population. After 1990, the Hispanic Indian population grew much more rapidly than the non-Hispanic Indian population, growing to 675,000 (16% of all census Indians) in 2000 and nearly 3 million (30% of census Indians) in 2020.

The increase in the Hispanic American Indian population reflects in part the rapid growth of the Hispanic population through immigration and a high birth rate. However, another part of this growth reflects an apparent evolution in how Hispanics report race, given the available options. Through the 2020 census, the Hispanic population has been counted on a “Hispanic origin” question, separate from the race question. Hispanics have been asked to classify themselves on the race item, using available options. These options do *not* include Hispanic categories. The most common choice by Hispanic respondents has been “White,” but a significant minority either leave the question blank or report that they are another race. That “other race” reported is typically a Hispanic identity category.

At each successive census, however, a small but growing minority of Hispanic respondents have chosen to identify as American Indians, reflecting the Indigenous component of their heritage. Given available options, this is a logical choice because the amalgamation of Indigenous and other racial populations was typical throughout the Americas. As in the United States, Indigenous identities elsewhere in the Americas have been persistent across time and have been expressed with increasing assertiveness in recent decades.

It remains a small share of all Hispanics who also self-report as Indian alone or in combination with another race. Less than 5 percent made this choice in 2020. Nevertheless, the large and growing Hispanic population makes Hispanic Indians the fastest-growing census Indian sub-population.

The rapid growth of the population reporting American Indian race in combination with some other race between the censuses of 2010 and 2020 caught many observers off guard. Changes in counts between 2000 and 2010 for non-Hispanic Indians were modest. We know from work by Liebler and co-investigators (2016, 2017) that the relative stability of the count totals between 2000 and 2010 masks a high level of churn in who was counted in the different groups (Indian alone, Indian in combination, not Indian). However, the total counts may have stabilized by 2010.

This was not the case in the next decade. The non-Hispanic population reporting American Indian race combined with at least one other race grew by more than 2.6 million people, doubling this population. Nearly a million additional Hispanic Indians reported multiple races, nearly tripling the count in a decade. Why were these changes so significant? The Census Bureau has not released data that fully account for the shifts. It does appear that the changes to the race item that were designed to encourage greater reliability of results and discourage non-response to the race question and reporting of “some other race” played a role.

## **Census Indians and Tribal Citizens**

Overlaid on the Census racial categories in Figure 5 are plotted two separate data series on tribal citizenship published by other federal government departments. The white dots are the tribal enrollment totals from certain years of HUD’s IHBG Final Allocation spreadsheets (HUD, various years), which are collected in service of implementing the Indian Housing Block Grant Program formula under NAHASDA (“Native American Housing Assistance and Self-Determination Act; Revisions to the Indian Housing Block Grant Program Formula Final Rule,” 2016). The black dot is the sum of enrolled citizens of tribes that certified to the US Treasury their numbers of citizens and employees in applying for ARPA funds during the pandemic (Henson et al., 2021). Whatever their omissions, limitations, and errors,<sup>5</sup> together these two data series show that the 2020 magnitude of

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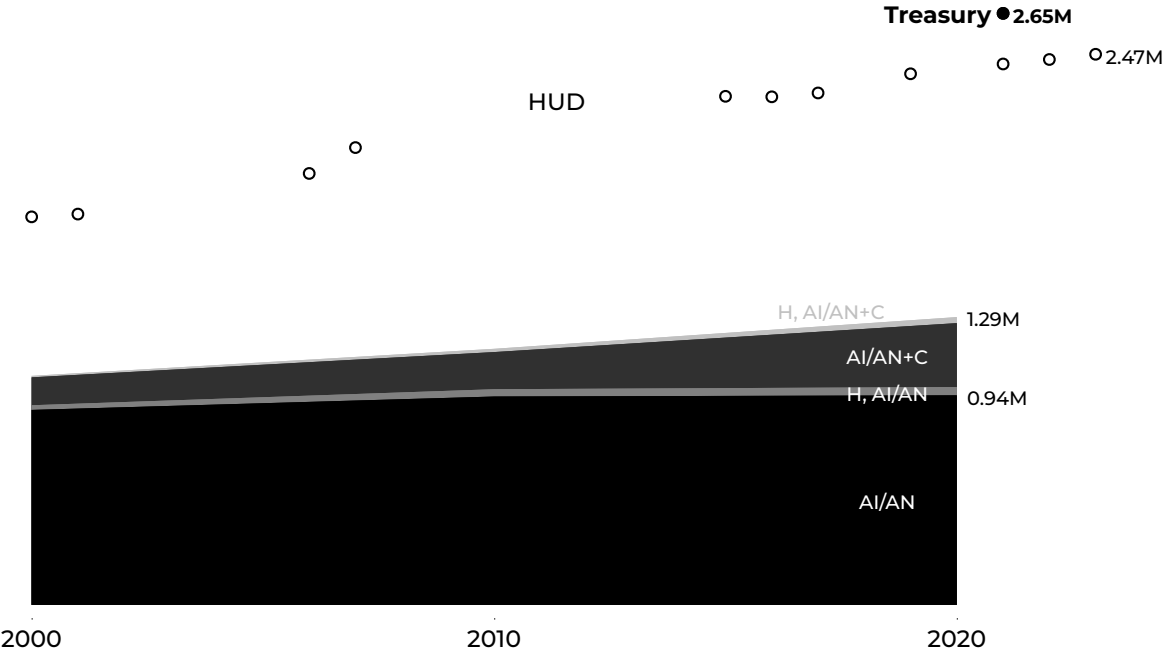
<sup>5</sup> For example, the errors highlighted in HUD’s case by a 2018 Inspector General Report entitled, “HUD Did Not Have Adequate Controls to Ensure That Grantees Submitted Accurate Tribal Enrollment Numbers for Program Funding”

the single-race Indian population (AI/AN) is on par with the tribal citizen population.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the HUD data decisively do *not* show an increase from 2010 to 2020 on par with the multi-race Indian increase of 149 percent in the Census data.

### Variability in growth in different areas

Insights into the explosion of the multi-race Indian population in 2020 can be gleaned from disaggregating the national picture. First, Indian Country does not drive the phenomenon. Figure 6 extracts from Figure 5 the data for all American Indian Areas, Alaska Native Areas, and Hawaiian Home Lands in the three censuses with multiple race identification: 2000, 2010, and 2020. No 2020 spike appears. Instead, the single-race Indian population gives ground to the multi-race category, and Hispanic Indians are a consistently small fraction. Over time, the Census-recorded in-area Indian population is about half the tribal citizen population reported to HUD and the US Treasury. It is reasonable to surmise that adding the tracts near Indian areas to this analysis would close the gap between the in-area and citizen populations.

Figure 6  
 Census Indian Populations in Indian Areas\* 2000–2020 and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Tribal Citizenship citizenship as reported to HUD and Treasury



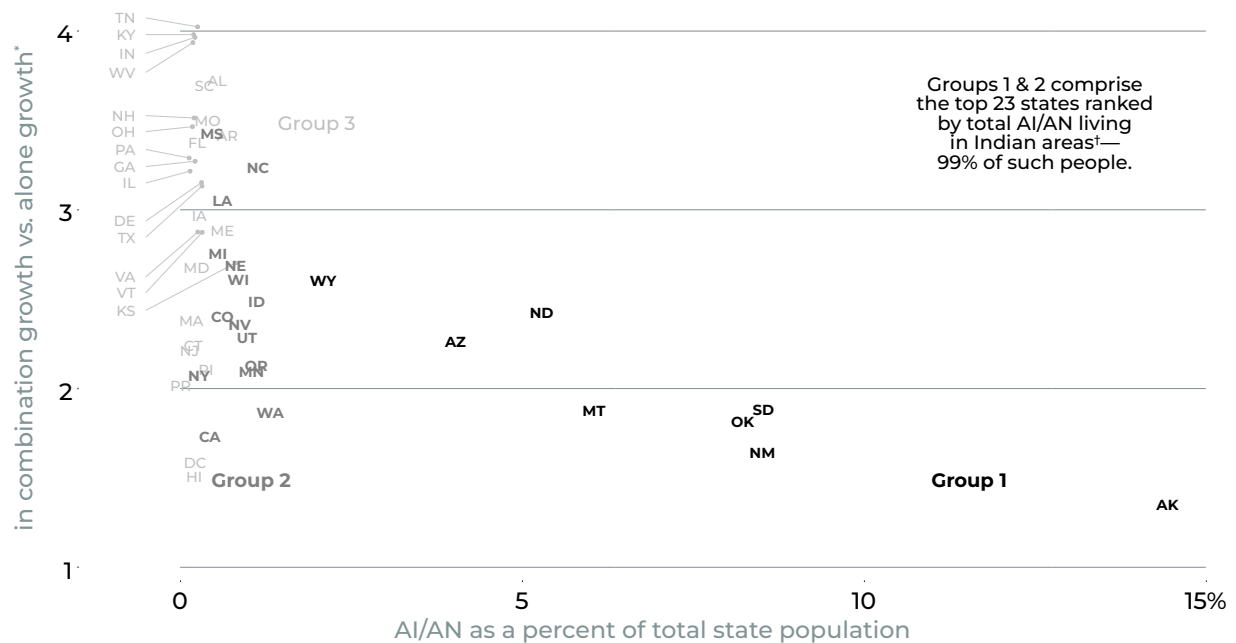
\*Reservations, pueblos, rancherias, and Native/tribal statistical areas.  
 (Henson et al., 2021; HUD, various years; US Census Bureau, 2000, 2010a, 2020a)

(Shultze, 2018). For an additional review of the issues in and implications of the HUD data, see, Malinovskaya and Moreno (forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup> This is decidedly *not* to conclude any other equivalence between the two populations beyond magnitude.

Figure 7 decomposes the 2010 and 2020 data in Figure 5, plotting the states by the percentage of 2020 single-race Indians on the horizontal axis and by the relative growth of the multi-race Indian category on the vertical axis. Thus Tennessee (TN) experienced four times as much multi-race Indian growth as single-race Indian growth from 2010 to 2020. The states are further divided into three groups for convenience. Group 1 states include a higher Native proportion, spanning Wyoming (2.1%) to Alaska (14.4%). Group 2 states are those states that, together with Group 1, comprise 99% of the 2020 single-race Indians living in Indian areas. Group 3 is all other states. Above 2% (i.e., to the right of Wyoming), the relative change of the multi-race category declines with an increase in the Native percentage.

Figure 7  
Relative Growth of AI/AN in Combination by State  
2010–2020



\*Ratio = (AI/AN+C 2020 / AI/AN+C 2010) / (AI/AN 2020 / AI/AN 2010).

†Reservations, pueblos, rancherias, and Native/tribal statistical areas.

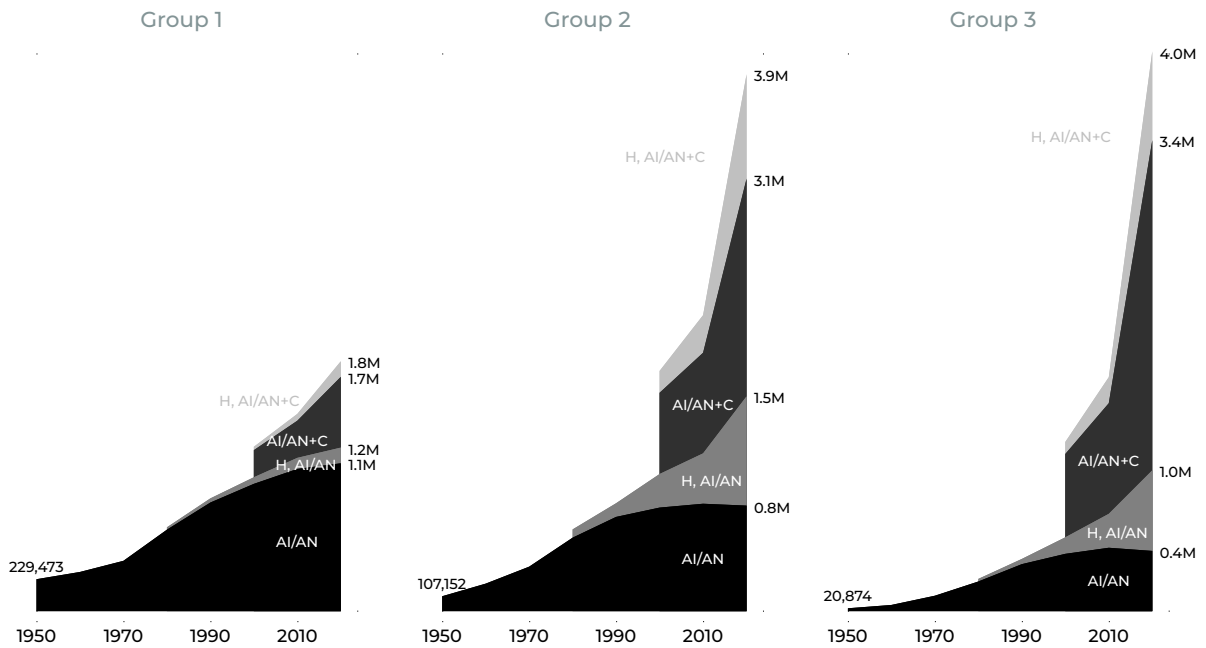
(Manson, Steven et al., 2022)

Figure 8 breaks apart Figure 5 into the three groups identified in Figure 7. It shows the geographic concentration of multi-race Indian growth in the states with few single-race Indians and few on-reservation, single-race Indians, i.e., Group 3. Group 1 displays some descendency dynamics (faster growth in the multi-race population) and Hispanic growth. Group 2, which contains California, shows substantial growth in the Hispanic Indian group and more multi-race Indian growth than Group 1. Group 3 overwhelms them both. Consider the growth from 1950 to 2020. In Group 1, it was 8X. In Group 2, 36X. And in Group 3, 192X, more than half of which occurred in the seventh decade. Texas contributes substantially to the growth of Hispanic Indians, and the southern states at the top of Figure 7 contribute massively to multi-race Indian growth. In Group 3 states, the Census

Bureau identifies more than six times more people as mixed-race Indians than as single-race Indians.

Figure 8

Relative Growth of Census Indian Populations 1950–2020 by State Grouping  
groups as identified in



Group 1: AK, AZ, MT, ND, NM, OK, SD, WY.

Group 2: CA, CO, ID, LA, MI, MN, MS, NC, NE, NV, NY, OR, UT, WA, WI.

Group 3: AL, AR, CT, DC, DE, FL, GA, HI, IA, IL, IN, KS, KY, MA, MD, ME, MO, NH, NJ, OH, PA, PR, RI, SC, TN, TX, VA, VT, WV.

(Manson, Steven et al., 2022)

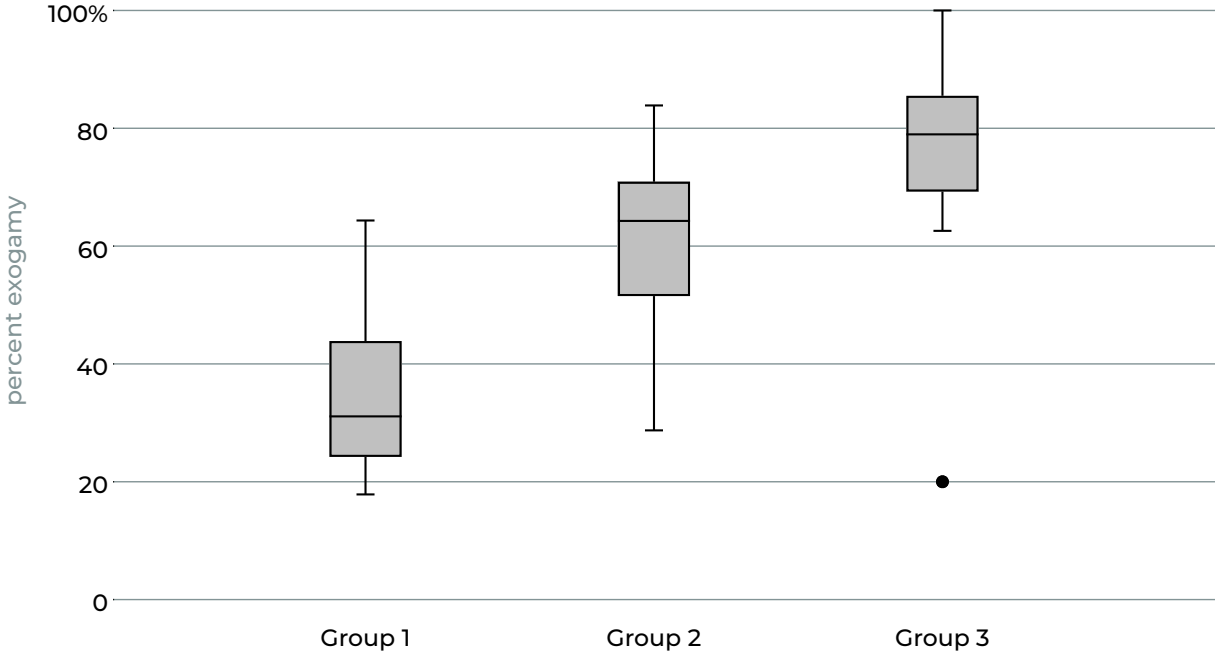
## Some Evidence of Contemporary Indian Exogamy

The start of this discussion highlighted the critical role of descendency dynamics under exogamy in fueling the rapid Indigenous descendency population growth. The Census Bureau’s 2020 change in racial classification methodology brings the latent Native descendency population into view, fueling the rapid “growth” of the census American Indian population in 2020. Nevertheless, the rapid growth of the Indian descendency population through exogamy continues today.

This process is well known to many Indian nations that use tribal blood quantum to limit citizenship. For many, a growing number of children born to citizens do not qualify for citizenship. Tribes are thus caught between two conflicting but interrelated futures: exponential population growth with some tribal ancestry; rapid decline in the number of children who qualify for citizenship under blood quantum rules (Eschbach & Taylor, 2022).

As Indians and Native nations move forward from the present, the logic of descendency dynamics will continue to progress at an exponentially increasing rate. Figure 9 shows a conservative view of Indian exogamy in 2021 using Census data for the non-Hispanic AI/AN alone population from the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey. The box-and-whisker plots indicate the ranges of state average exogamy for Groups 1, 2, and 3. Nationwide, more than half of married persons reporting AI/AN alone were married to non-Indians. Even in the first group of states, which are home to large populations living in areas of tribal sovereignty, reported median exogamy rates above one marriage in three. Where the Indian population is dispersed, intermarriage rates range around eight marriages in ten to non-Indian spouses.

Figure 9  
The Distribution of Exogamy of Single-Race Indians by State Grouping, 2021



Group 1: AK, AZ, MT, ND, NM, OK, SD, WY.  
 Group 2: CA, CO, ID, LA, MI, MN, MS, NC, NE, NV, NY, OR, UT, WA, WI.  
 Group 3: AL, AR, CT, DC, DE, FL, GA, HI, IA, IL, IN, KS, KY, MA, MD, ME, MO, NH, NJ, OH, PA, PR, RI, SC, TN, TX, VA, VT, WV.  
 (Ruggles et al., 2022)

### Implications for Native Nations

The extreme number of multi-race Indians recorded in 2020 begs the question of whether they should be compared to earlier data at all. Confounding as they may be for analysis, the 2020 “improvements” in collecting racial data (Marks & Rios-Vargas, 2021) and the resulting explosion in multi-race Indian numbers point to four important contemporary features of defining an “Indian.”

First, the federal census-surveying principle that “you are who you say you are” stands in contrast to a core principle of federal Indian policy: In the relationship between Native nations and the United States, Native nations determine the boundaries of their citizenship. These opposing principles will always complicate the application of federally gathered information to citizenship questions and demographic analyses of and by Native nations.

Second, internal Census Bureau dynamics that amplify counts of the population of American Indians or Alaska Natives in combination with other races will persist independent of the needs of Native and other governments for demographically well-behaved numbers. The designers of Census survey questions and response coding protocols face professional incentives to improve engagement and consistency, both of which will tend to “pull” more ethnic information from Americans. The professionals in the Census Bureau probably do not care if there are two million Indians or four. On the other hand, they might be professionally offended (if not called to testify to Congress) if the churn of American Indians or Alaska Natives entering and departing the census count (Liebler et al., 2016, 2017) were to continue to appear in the Indian data.

Third, *whenever* distinctions between Indian and non-Indian were drawn, and there was exogamy across that boundary, the Census Bureau’s encouragement to be detailed, thorough, and consistent about the race question will tend to recover—to bring forward in time—the effects of historic descendancy dynamics created by exogamy. Genealogy does get lost to history, but the recollection of great-grandma’s Indian heritage behaves like a lineal descent population to everyone who does remember it. We should not be surprised to see ballooning multi-race Indian numbers in the age of Ancestry.com and concerted Census excavation of remembered lineage.

Fourth, while the descendancy dynamic may have been remote from Indian Country in time and space, it is moving closer, if not already arriving. Yes, the multi-race Indian populations of reservations (Figure 6) and Group 1 states (left panel of Figure 8) appear to display demographically plausible population dynamics. Nevertheless, because exogamy rates are high (Figure 9) and generally rising, the population of Indian descendants will continue to accelerate even in those areas.

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Were he still alive for the 2020 census, Charles Curtis might have been enumerated as a person of mixed white and Indian race. Kaw planners would undoubtedly want his census record in their statistical portrait of the Kaw Nation. Elizabeth Warren’s census record might be of less practical interest as she is not a citizen of a tribe.

Regardless, everyone’s freedom to self-identify would drive the data. Unfortunately, tribal prerogatives of self-government weigh little in most census respondents’ race choices. Furthermore, in 2020, the number of non-Hispanic people reporting American Indian or Alaska Native alone or in combination with one or more races (6.69 million) outnumbered the enrolled

citizens of recognized tribes reported to the US Treasury (2.65 million) five to two. Most Census respondents may not be aware of the sensitivity of Indian citizen populations to others' claims of Indian identity. Of the few who do, many may not care.

The Census Bureau probably cannot be counted on to stem the tide. If anything, the Bureau will improve its capacity to reveal latent historic descendency populations. Tribal governments will have to take matters into hand. Here are four implications for doing so:

1. **Non-Hispanic AI/AN alone may be a temporary, imperfect safe harbor of plausible Census information about tribal citizens.** The AI/AN alone data in Indian areas has imperfections; most importantly, it is not a closed population (i.e., it does not stay the same from survey to survey because it is affected by identity and geographic migration). It is also subject to undercount and now differential privacy fuzzing. That said, it is the available census population with the most substantial overlap with tribal citizens, especially on and near Indian lands. For the time being, it gives a plausible picture of the socioeconomic status of tribal populations.
2. **The premium on Tribes' knowing off-territory citizens and descendants is rising.** It has always been essential to tribal politics and policymaking to know who the self in self-government is and where the relevant people reside. Moreover, it has always been a challenge to know the socioeconomic status of, for example, *Oglala* Lakotas in Rapid City, *Fond du Lac* Chippewas in Milwaukee, or *White Mountain* Apaches in Phoenix, relying only on census Indian data. Tribal governments can expect to receive even less precise Census information about the socioeconomic status of Indians living off-territory, especially in further-flung cities and as multiracial self-identification increases.
3. **Tribal governments can amplify their information-gathering.** The US Census is arguably the country's most expensive, studied, and calibrated data-gathering effort. The learning, policy, and infrastructure needed to replicate even a small segment of it could be prohibitively expensive for most tribes. Nonetheless, for specific high-value statistics, Native governments may find that they can leverage their existing enrollment, public outreach, and administrative data and staff to systematically develop more statistics about their citizenry. In 2013, the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe completed an oversampled, 1-in-4 household survey comprising 157 questions, some as detailed as "How often do you forage or hunt for food?" Deepening intertribal communities of practice in survey design, anonymity protection, response rate development, demography, and related expertise is likely a worthwhile investment.
4. **Tribal governments should advocate for more detailed Census Bureau reporting of the effects of its imputation "improvements."** National and tribal policymaking directed toward "Indians" would often be distinct between, for example, a) census respondents who *do not* self-identify as American Indian or Alaska Native but *are* identified by the Bureau's



Indian imputation from their self-identification as, say, Scottish-Irish-Cherokee, on the one hand, and b) census respondents who *do* self-identify as American Indian or Alaska Native, on the other. As of this writing (February 2024), the Census Bureau has not released data or analysis of the many permutations of race identification across the self-reported vs. imputed distinction. Doing so should be an urgent priority. At the moment, apples-to-apples comparisons to prior censuses of un-imputed, self-identified, multi-race American Indian or Alaska Native populations are impossible.

The Census Bureau's 2020 methodology takes the unprecedented step of classifying people as American Indian or Alaska Native *who themselves did not self-identify as AI/AN using the available checkbox*. Until the Census Bureau decomposes the Census-classified and self-identified multi-race Indians in 2020, policymakers and social scientists will be flying blind about the intercensal demographic dynamics in that population.

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