Indian Workers and the Reservation Labor Market: Reality, Research and a Way Forward

Introduction

The challenges facing American Indian workers in reservation areas are clear to even casual observers. For Indian families living on reservations they are part of daily life.

Jobs are frequently few and far between. Severe and persistent unemployment and underemployment are the norm on many reservations. Educational opportunities are limited and may fail to produce a job ready labor force. Poverty is all too often among the results.

Yet a real understanding of these issues based on a theory of reservation labor market dynamics informed by both qualitative and quantitative research is sorely lacking. One result is a serious mismatch between reality at the reservation level and the policy embedded in the federal programs intended to help alleviate the problems.

This paper is an attempt, only a beginning attempt, to outline a number of the major issues involved and suggest a way forward. It looks at what makes labor market conditions facing Indian workers in reservation areas[1] different than those that underlie the theory on how the "mainstream" labor market functions. It discusses what data is available to portray reservation labor market problems and why that data does an inadequate job. And it concludes by suggesting a general principle to guide the way forward -- the encouragement of innovation in analyzing conditions and structuring workforce services for this population.

The Larger Context

Context is crucial in approaching the issues confronting Indian workers in reservation labor markets. To the federal statistical system and many non-Indian workforce professionals, Indian people are just another "minority" group. The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) defines American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/AN) as one of five major groups in its racial classification scheme.[2] Data on the

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[1] This paper focuses exclusively on federal Indian reservation areas. Native American workers in Alaska, including those in Alaska Native villages, those in the former reservation areas in Oklahoma and those in off reservation communities also face serious challenges. However, the economic environments in these areas differ from those in reservation areas and are beyond the scope of this paper.

[2] Revisions to the Standards for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity, US Office of Management and Budget as published by Notice in the Federal Register of October 30, 1997.

Indian population collected by the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics is all a matter of self-identification with this racial category.

However, Indian identity is not simply a matter of who one's ancestors were. More importantly, it is an issue of political status. In federal law an Indian person is a member of an Indian tribe -- a citizen of a sovereign tribal government -- that has a government-to-government relationship with the US government.

This unique status arises from the fact that Indian tribes are self-governing entities that predate the establishment of the US government or the claims of European monarchies to areas now within US borders. The US constitution, numerous treaties between Indian tribes and the federal government, countless federal statutes as well as case law, including decisions of the US Supreme Court going back two-and-a-half centuries, all recognize the special political status of Indian tribes and their members.

The treatment of Indian people by the federal and state governments has had long-lasting effects on both the people and the reservations on which many reside. During the reservation era in the 19th century Indians were encouraged **not** to work. The federal government provided rations -- encouraging dependency -- as a method of controlling behavior. Indians who moved off their assigned reservations were hunted down and severely punished.

Reservations were established on lands considered worthless to others. Even after reservations were created the federal government took away land and resources that were desired by non-Indians for mining, agriculture and transportation corridors.

In the 1950's and 1960's a number of Indian reservations were stripped of their special status -- terminated. Indian workers were strongly encouraged to move away from reservations and into the big cities. The federal government facilitated such relocation.

All these factors have shaped the reservation economic environment to this day, leaving in their wake multiple problems that significantly affect the situation of Indian workers in reservation areas.

Elements of a Labor Market Theory for Reservation Areas

Standard labor market theory ignores all these special factors that are crucial to understanding the situation of Indian workers in reservation areas. Although there are some similarities with the circumstances in other rural communities, reservation labor markets are significantly different.

A number of economic and behavioral characteristics inform the thinking on how the labor market works in much of America.

- Most of the workers and most of the jobs are found in urban settings. The US made the transition from the farm to the city decades ago. Jobs and workers are generally clustered in cities.

- Employment opportunities are to be found primarily in private sector businesses. They are the heart of the economy.

- Career development and career paths to economic mobility are essential to upward mobility. Even though individuals may change jobs and even careers several times during their working lives, pursuing a career path is often essential to achieving a better future.

- Job seeking techniques are changing, but still involve actively reaching out to a wide circle of contacts and persuading prospective employers that the jobseeker is the ideal candidate for the open position.

- Geographic mobility -- the willingness to relocate one's permanent residence -- is important to pursuing opportunities that may be more abundant in distant places.

- Those providing employment and training services to the general population in urban areas do their jobs conscientiously and well, but are usually strangers to those whom they serve.

These factors are fundamental and generally assumed in most standard labor market research. They are embedded in the data systems that inform that research. And they are reflected in the design of federally-funded workforce programs.

None of these factors is necessarily true with respect to the Indian worker and the labor market he or she finds in many reservation areas.

First a critical caveat. No generalization fits all reservation areas. Each is truly unique -- unique in its history, unique in its people and unique in its economic circumstances. While certain factors may be similar among a number of reservations, particularly reservations in the same geographic area, none are universal.

This paper will tend to resort to generalizations which apply, to one degree or another, to those reservations facing the most severe labor market problems. Nonetheless, it should be kept in mind that **every reservation is different**. Even the most common problems may be present in different ways or may be completely absent in many reservation communities.

The considerations listed above involving the economic circumstances and behavioral factors common in non-Indian America frequently do not apply in reservation areas, particularly those with the most severe problems.

- Many reservations, especially the largest ones, are in geographically remote, frequently resource poor areas.

- Employment opportunities are often to be found in public sector agencies or enterprises controlled by them. Tribal government is frequently the dominant employer.

- Career development may be a desired goal, but it is often out of reach for many Indian reservation workers. The lack of employment opportunities and the nature of those that are present make "climbing the career ladder" virtually impossible. Workers move from one job to another out of economic necessity and based on what's available at the time.

- The idea of "actively seeking work" has been an essential element in the definition of unemployment in the federal statistical system for the past 75 years. However, it is rather nonsensical from a reservation perspective. Awareness of open positions is spread by word of mouth -- the "moccasin telegraph." It is simply a waste of time to look for jobs that one knows don't exist or when the educational or other requirements preclude a person from getting what positions may be available.

- Migration to distant metropolitan areas in search of work is common for workers in reservation areas. However, the tie to a reservation and desire to return is often strong for those that have been raised there and those who have had to leave most of their extended family behind in such a move.

- Those providing employment and training services to Indian workers in reservation communities are frequently neighbors, sometimes family. The tribal values that animate those services tend to stress assisting all in need, an approach that can conflict with the rules governing eligibility for various publicly-funded services. The performance metrics forced on these programs fail to recognize reservation social and economic conditions.

An Internet search for research articles relating to the Indian reservation labor market turns up little more than a few dozen articles, many dating back to the 1980's and 1990's. Some rely on data which may not fit reservation conditions. A few are more detailed analyses and benefit from on-site work, but deal with only a single reservation.

None appear to rely in any way on the oral testimony of Indian workers about their labor market experiences.

Research sponsored by US Department of Labor agencies with a special responsibility for providing information on the labor market or providing funding for services to address the problems of Indian workers in reservation areas is scarce to non-existent.

The Labor Department's Bureau of Labor Statistics, which is the "keeper" of much of the statistical data on the labor force, published a "research summary" in a 1982 issue of the Monthly Labor Review which looked at three studies of labor force participation of Alaska Natives based on research performed in the late 1970's.

An extensive bibliography[3] of studies supported by the Labor Department's Employment and Training Administration (ETA) lists not a single research study of the reservation labor market. Just three Indian-specific items are cited in the bibliography. One involves economic stimulus (ARRA) funding that went to tribal youth programs, another performance measures for ETA-funded workforce programs and the third, dating to 1999, an evaluation of ETA-funded Indian and Native American JTPA programs.

The tie between culture and work is often ignored in the standard research. Numbers count. Oral testimony seldom does.

The labor market conditions that affect Indian workers in reservation areas may be common knowledge to every Indian there. However, these conditions appear to be virtually invisible to the labor market research community.

Data Sources for Labor Market Information in Reservation Areas

Labor market theory and research is built on data. Three federal agencies issue data on labor market conditions that include Indian workers to one extent or another.

- The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in the US Department of the Interior.
- The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) in the US Department of Labor.
- The Census Bureau (Census) in the US Department of Commerce.

BIA has just one publication dealing with labor market information, the "American Indian Population and Labor Force Report," usually referred to simply as the BIA

[3] Mastri, Annalisa et al, "Employment Research in Brief: An Annotated Bibliography of ETA-Sponsored Studies", Mathematica Policy Research, June 28, 2012.

Labor Force Report. It was issued, generally on a biennial basis, from at least the late 1970's up until the report for 2005. It was based on the concept, well suited to reservation areas, that most people who could work but had no job should be considered as unemployed. "Jobless" may be a better way to describe it. The data covered "BIA service areas" "on or near" reservation or other areas where the Indian or Alaska Native population was eligible for BIA services. The report was based on estimates supplied by tribes or BIA field staff. Neither funding nor technical assistance was provided to tribes for doing this work. No methodology was prescribed for collecting the data.

In 1992 a provision in a law related to Indian employment and training programs mandated the publication of the report on a biennial basis, specifying that the concept of joblessness continue to be used. BIA published the report through the 1990's and into the 2000's. However, a hiatus occurred after the report for 2005 was released in 2007. No report was issued after that.

Responding to criticism from several members of the US Senate, BIA recently revisited its responsibilities. Finally a report covering 2013 appeared in January of 2014. The agency rejected the idea of using data provided by tribes and turned instead to data from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS). However, the ACS data does not fit the specifications for the Report in federal law. BIA responded by attempting to manipulate the ACS data to make it fit.

The Labor Department's BLS is the major federal statistical agency that publishes labor force data. It releases a detailed monthly statement on employment and unemployment at the national level, the statement that contains the official monthly unemployment rate often cited in the press. The data involved is collected for BLS by the Census Bureau through the Current Population Survey (CPS). This data is considered representative for the population at the national level on a monthly basis and for states, 50 large metropolitan areas and 17 cities on an annual basis.

BLS also publishes substate data through its "Local Area Unemployment Statistics" program (more commonly referred to as the "LAUS" program). This combines data from a variety of sources, including Unemployment Insurance (UI) data.

Though the preeminent federal agency for labor market data, BLS publishes almost no data on the Indian population. The monthly employment release has national level data by race or ethnicity (Hispanic origin) for the White, Black or African-American, Asian and Hispanic populations, but contains no data on the American Indian/Alaska Native population. For just the last two years, BLS has included a limited amount of basic information on unemployment and labor force participation for the Indian population at the national level in its annual report on "Labor Force Characteristics by Race and Ethnicity."

The BLS LAUS program publishes monthly data at the county level, but there is no breakout by race. The agency publishes no data in any form for Indian reservations.[4]

The Census Bureau publishes extensive data on the Indian population, including labor force data. Moreover, it is the only federal statistical agency that publishes data at the reservation level.

The Census Bureau has been collecting labor force data, primarily occupational data, dating back a century-and-a-half. Since 1940 it has used the decennial census to sample the population to collect detailed information on its characteristics. In recent decades a special questionnaire, known as the "long form," was distributed to a sample of the population as part of each decennial census in order to collect data on labor force status and many other socio-economic characteristics.

In 2010 the Census Bureau discontinued the use of the "long form" in the decennial census. Instead, data on the detailed socio-economic characteristics of the population is now collected through a separate survey -- the American Community Survey, or ACS for short. Rather than being available only once a decade, as was the case with the "long form" data, ACS data sets are available every year.

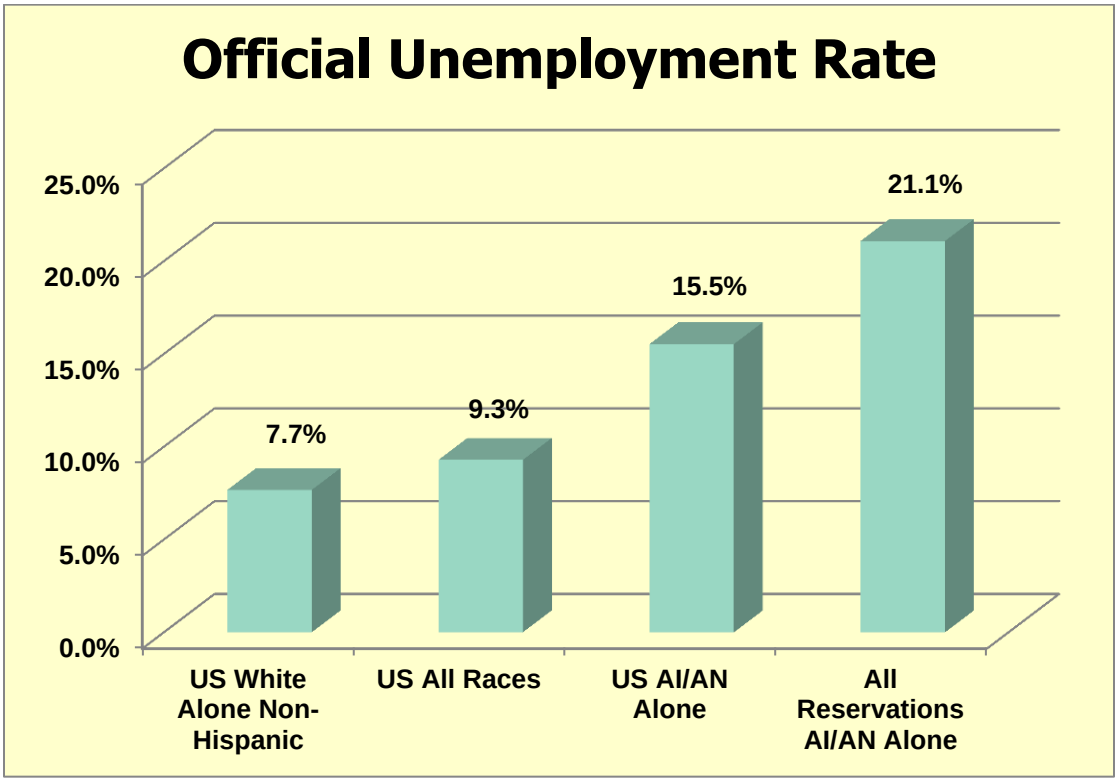
However, because of the reduced size of the sample, ACS data has to be aggregated over a period of years for smaller communities. Reservation level data is released every year, but only the "5-year estimates" series, using information collected and aggregated over the immediately preceding five year period, includes data for all reservations.

Starting in 2000 the Census Bureau, consistent with an OMB Directive, allowed respondents to Census questionnaires to identify with more than one race. Persons who identified with only one race are referred to as race "**alone**." For instance, American Indians and Alaska Natives who checked only the box for this racial category are referred to as "AI/AN alone" persons. Any who identified with more than one race are referred to as persons "**in combination** with one or more races." This results in two different counts for each racial group in Census and other federal publications -- one for race "alone" and one for race "alone or in combination."

[4] In 1977 the American Indian Policy Review Commission recommended that BLS collect "accurate, uniform and consistent statistics on an annual basis" for the labor force on every reservation.

This analysis looks at the most recent set of 5-year estimates, covering the years from 2008 through 2012 and released in December of 2013. It is the most recent ACS data set currently available.

The graphs that follow present 5-year ACS data for 2008-2012 that illustrates the status of the Indian labor force in reservation areas for all 325 federal reservations. The graphs compare these rates with those for the White "alone" non-Hispanic population nationally, the total population of all races nationally, and the AI/AN "alone" population nationally.

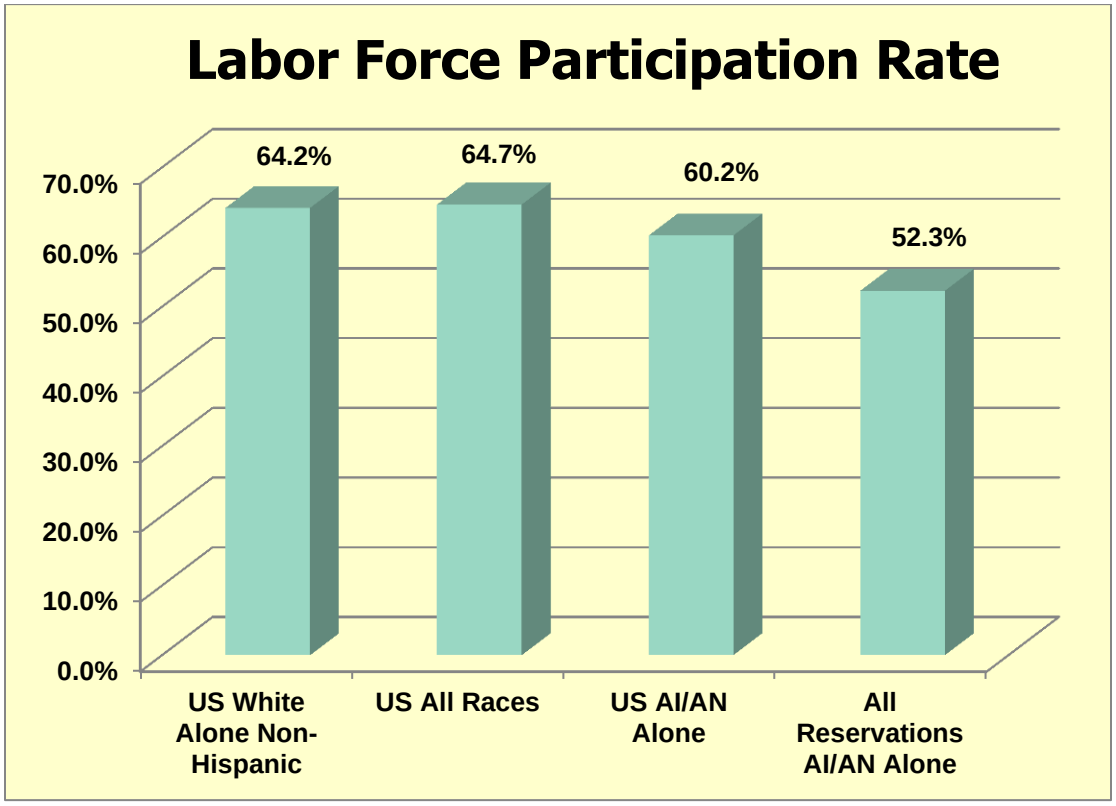


The graph clearly shows the importance of looking at data at the reservation level. Labor market factors there are different than they are for the total Indian population.

The unemployment rate alone is inadequate to describe the severity of the labor market problems that the on reservation Indian worker faces. The official definition of unemployment used by the federal statistical agencies counts as unemployed only those who have "actively" sought work during the previous four weeks. Indian people on reservations (as workers elsewhere) who do not "actively" seek work they know is not available or for which they will not qualify are invisible in the unemployment numbers. They are simply "not in the labor force."

Those "not in the labor force" are reflected in the labor force participation rate -- the sum of the employed and the officially unemployed (and, in Census data, those in the armed forces) divided by the population age 16 and over.

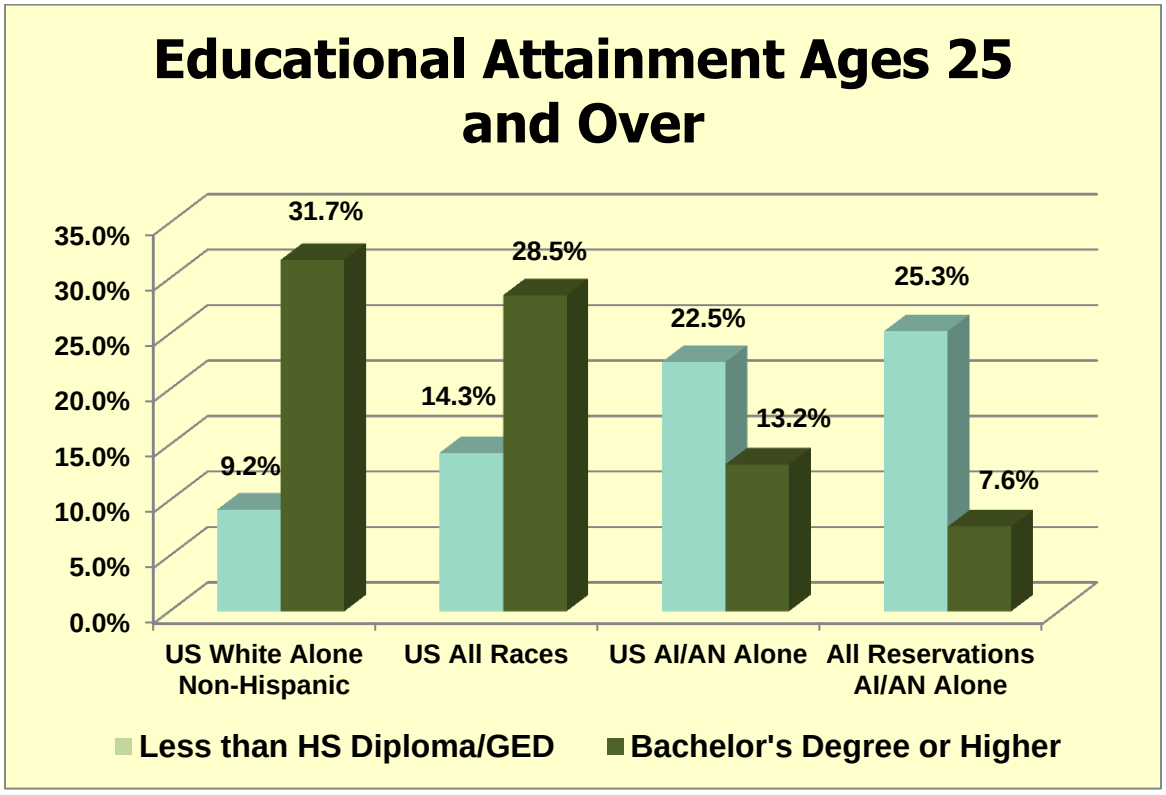
The graph shows that the labor force participation rate for Indian workers in reservation areas is about twelve percentage points below that for the general population.



Shifts in labor market patterns since the official end of the "Great Recession" have focused more attention on the labor force participation rate for the general population. It's not just Indian workers who don't "actively" seek work when they know there are no jobs are available for them in the area. Dropouts from the labor force among non-Indian workers are affecting the labor force data for the entire population.

A more realistic measure of the severity of labor market problems for reservation areas would be one that incorporated the concepts built into the "U-6" alternative measure of labor underutilization used by BLS. This metric, published monthly in the BLS employment situation report, takes into account all who are officially considered as unemployed, plus those working part time for economic reasons and all persons "marginally attached" to the labor force (who have searched for work in the prior 12 months). In the reservation context, a similar metric would also include those with little or no work history who could work if work were available.

Success in the labor market is, in part, a product of a person's education. Those with less than a high school diploma or GED fare poorly. College graduates have much better employment prospects. The educational attainment rates for the population age 25 and over are shown on the following graph for the same four population groups.



The contrast is striking. Indian people, particularly in reservation areas, are seriously disadvantaged because of their lack of formal schooling, including the lack of a four year college degree.

Difficulty in the labor market frequently leads to poverty. Here again the rates for the on reservation Indian population substantially exceed those for the White alone non-Hispanic population.

The poverty rate for the White alone, non-Hispanic population at the national level in the ACS 5-year estimates for 2008 to 2012 is 10.3%. For the on reservation Indian population it is 37.6%, nearly four times as high.

This discussion has highlighted conditions for all 325 federal reservations in the US. The ACS 5-year estimates have data for each reservation. As noted earlier, each reservation is unique. The ACS data illustrating labor market difficulty for the on reservation Indian population varies considerably from reservation to reservation.

Individual reservation rates were analyzed for the 86 federal reservations with an AI/AN alone population in the 2010 decennial census of 1,000 or more. The data for these reservations is less susceptible to sampling error than that for the smaller Indian populations on the remaining reservations.

The official unemployment rate for these 86 large reservations varied from just over 40% for one reservation to 7% on the low side[5]. The poverty rates ranged from 53% to 13%. Conditions differ significantly from reservation to reservation, although, in general, the metrics of labor market disadvantage show Indian workers on individual reservations much more disadvantaged than the general population nationally.

ACS is the only source of labor market information at the reservation level, but its accuracy is subject to question in a number of respects.

- There is a serious undercount in the ACS figures for the AI/AN alone population at the national level and for a number of reservations as well as some metro counties outside of reservation areas. The 2010 decennial census counted roughly 2.9 million AI/AN alone persons. The ACS 1-year estimate for 2010 and the ACS 5-year estimate for 2008-2012 (with 2010 as the mid-point) are both about 2.5 million. Many of the AI/AN alone persons missing in the ACS counts lived in reservation areas.

- The ACS differs from the former "long form" data on socio-economic characteristics of the population in that it is calculated from a smaller sample, and less likely to be representative of the total population. The Census numbers for the unweighted count of questionnaires show that the 2000 "long form" data sampled about 15% of Indian people in the 86 largest reservation areas. In contrast, the unweighted count of questionnaires in the ACS 2008-2012 data shows a sampling of about 8% of the Indians on those same reservations.

- One serious issue arising from using a smaller sample is the degree of sampling error. The Census Bureau is very transparent regarding sampling error, publishing a Margin of Error number for every estimated value. An analysis of data on Indian unemployment on the 86 largest reservations shows the potential unreliability of the data due to sampling error.

[5] Data for one reservation showed an official unemployment rate of below 2%, but other information for that area indicates this to be obviously erroneous.

The data on sampling error for the number of AI/AN alone unemployed between the ages of 16 and 64 for roughly one quarter of the 86 large reservations had Coefficient of Variation (CV) -- a relative measure of sampling error -- in a range that could be considered as reliable (0% to 15%). The data for 60% percent of the reservations had a CV in a range that might be considered as maybe reliable/maybe unreliable (15% to 30%). The data for 17% of these large reservations had data in a CV range (over 30%) indicating that the data can be considered as unreliable from a sampling error perspective.

The ACS data is also subject to nonsampling error. Although harder to prove, nonsampling error appears to be an issue in some of the numbers. Reservation-based observers may well question the accuracy of the data for their individual areas.

Although an analysis of the ACS data on labor force status and poverty shows that it may be unreliable in several respects for at least some reservations, it is what it is and remains the **only** source of publicly available labor force data for individual reservations throughout the entire US. Additional oversampling might help to improve its reliability.

The potential unreliability of data from the ACS for reservation areas is not the only problem with the data. In many ways the questions asked and the data published is based on definitions that don't fit reservation labor market conditions. The questions asked are developed for the general population, not the on reservation Indian population. Questions that would fit reservation labor market conditions and provide a much more useful profile of these conditions aren't asked. For example:

- The standard definition of unemployment includes only those who have "actively" sought work in the preceding four weeks. It makes many jobless workers in reservation areas invisible in the ACS and other federal data sets on employment status.

- The question on "class of worker" on the ACS questionnaire doesn't fit. It is intended to determine whether one works in the public or the private sector. Employees of tribal governments are lumped in the category of federal government employees, along with employees of foreign governments and the UN. The question on the ACS form does not distinguish employees of tribal enterprises -- a major source of employment on a number of reservations -- as being either public or private sector employees.

- The ACS question on migration -- residence one year ago -- does not capture the common experience of Indian people who move from reservation to urban area and back to reservation in an all-too-often futile search for work.

Detailed questions on job training, receipt of unemployment insurance, availability of a car in reliable running condition and similar subjects are not asked in the ACS, although they are key to assessing the problems that Indian workers in reservation areas face. Questions that don't fit, don't resonate with a person's own experience or aren't asked produce data (or an absence of data) that is not useful in analyzing the issues that affect the on reservation Indian labor force or in developing policies that might lead to effective solutions to the problems.

No Research + Poor Data = Bad Policy

The lack of an appropriate theory of the labor market dynamics affecting Indian workers in reservation areas, along with the absence of relevant data to inform useful research, has consequences.

Experience in Indian Country over many years shows that the theory, the research and the data needs to come from the reservation level, not the national level.

A prime example involves the decades-long struggle over "performance standards" between the Labor Department's Employment and Training Administration (ETA) and tribes and other Native American organizations that receive special funding to provide workforce services to Native people throughout the US.

Although the legislation authorizing this funding has always explicitly recognized the unique character of the programs and the communities served, ETA (with OMB's help) has succeeded in imposing the same set of performance metrics on the smallest, most geographically remote tribal grantee that are imposed on the largest and most urbanized state grantees. For example, the Hualapai Tribe in rural northern Arizona received less than $27,000 in Indian WIA money in the 2013 funding cycle to serve its reservation workforce. In that same cycle, the state of California received well over $113 million for its adult WIA services, yet the same performance metrics are used for both programs.

The so-called "common measures" used provide no recognition of institutional reforms that can make a long term difference in the workforce outcomes for on reservation Indian workers, no recognition of support for tribal economic development initiatives, and no recognition of innovation in the nature or delivery of services that are uniquely suited to individual reservation conditions.

Straight-jacketed in this way, the reservation workforce programs align their services to meet the same kinds of performance tests that apply to the largest state-administered workforce programs in heavily urbanized states. This effectively kills innovation and

tribal-specific approaches that may be much more meaningful for the reservation economy and its Indian workforce in the long run.

Another example, this one in the data area, also illustrates the problem. Each federal program supporting education, job training or other services promoting workforce preparation imposes its own reporting requirements.[6] All are focused on data items which each federal funding agency considers necessary for its own purposes. Although individual agency reporting requirements generate volumes of data, there is no coordination among agencies on reporting requirements, even when the programs involved have the same general goals and serve some of the same people.

The result is that this abundance of administrative data is useless to tribal planners, program managers or economic development staffs trying to develop a healthier labor market on both the supply and demand sides.

This situation also deprives the federal agencies with a special responsibility for supporting labor market-relevant services in reservation areas of any data that could better inform policy on how these programs might be redesigned to be more effective.

Innovation as the Way Forward

The significant advances in Indian Country over the last decades in the educational, economic and workforce development arenas have come from the tribal level, not the federal level. Three obvious examples:

- Educational achievement, particularly at the post-secondary level, is key to improving the situation of Indian workers in reservation areas. The most significant development in this area has come from tribal initiatives that created and expanded the tribal college system. Despite woefully inadequate funding from both federal and state governments, the three dozen-plus tribal colleges and universities and specialized post-secondary vocational institutions around the country provide services vital to developing strong reservation workforces.

- In the economic development area, tribes in Florida, California, Arizona and elsewhere fought hard in the face of fierce opposition from federal and state authorities to establish tribal gaming. Tribal gaming, which has now led to the development of a full blown on reservation hospitality industry, has been the largest single source of new jobs in many reservation areas.

[6] The unique case of the PL 102-477 service integration initiative is discussed further below.

- In the workforce services area the major innovation over the last two decades has been the Public Law 102-477 service integration initiative. The law was passed in 1992 at the initiative of tribes, with the federal agencies standing on the sidelines. It authorizes individual tribal governments, at their option, to integrate workforce, welfare and educational services funded by a number of different federal agencies through a number of different authorization statutes under a single plan, a single budget and a single reporting system. Although the initiative has provided a significant way for tribes to adapt program resources to tribal goals, federal agencies have waged a determined campaign for over a decade to destroy the essential features of this initiative.

Innovation is required in order to make significant gains in the economic progress of the Indian workforce in reservation areas in the years to come.

There are a variety of approaches to innovation that are worth pursuing. Three are sketched briefly below involving action at the tribal level. These are followed by three suggestions for spurring innovation through programs at the federal level.

Developing a theory of the labor market dynamics involving the on reservation Indian workforce is key to better policy.

Approaches to solving problems will continue to be piecemeal and uncoordinated in the absence of a well-articulated theory of how the labor market operates in reservation communities. Tribal colleges and universities have a role to play in stimulating this research. Labor research centers elsewhere in academia may be able to offer useful perspectives. The availability of funding, particularly private funding unconstrained by what federal officials "want to hear," would be an important stimulus to such research.

Fostering data collection and analysis at the tribal level is essential to appropriate tribal planning.

As noted earlier, the federal statistical system simply doesn't produce the information necessary to realistically describe reservation labor markets. Struggling with very limited resources, several tribes have nonetheless undertaken efforts to more adequately measure conditions on their own reservations.

Four might be mentioned. There are undoubtedly others as well. Over the last fifteen years the **Eastern Shoshone Tribe** and the **Northern Arapaho Tribe**, working with the **University of Wyoming**, have conducted three major surveys of the Indian population on the Wind River reservation. These have provided data to guide the planning of tribal services. For the last several years the **Nez Perce Tribe** has worked with faculty and students at **Washington State University** to conduct a labor force survey on the

tribe's reservation in Idaho. One of the earliest groundbreaking surveys was carried out by the **Standing Rock Sioux Tribe** with the support of the **Job Service agencies in the states of North and South Dakota**. That study documented not only the circumstances of the Indian workforce, but enabled comparisons with non-Indians living on the reservation as well. The **California Indian Manpower Consortium,** working with **Tribal Data Services**, a private firm, developed an important tool for surveying the labor market condition of Indian workers.

Tribe-to-tribe openly-structured meetings to exchange experiences in assessing and dealing with reservation labor market issues can be very helpful.

The really exciting work in solving reservation problems is most visible at the tribal level. Efforts by the Policy Research Center of the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) have helped to bring tribal leaders and scholars together to share experiences. Conferences conducted by various Indian and Alaska Native organizations also help, although the agendas are heavily structured around the administrative requirements imposed by the federal funding sources. Peer-to-peer sharing certainly occurs, but often in a more informal way.

The private philanthropic sector can play a key, though presently untapped, role in supporting tribal efforts such as those noted above, efforts that are difficult to launch with the strings commonly attached to federal resources.

That said, the federal government does have an obligation to meet its responsibilities to Indian tribes and people in the labor market arena.

The Congress must provide greater support for essential services.

Tribes have been especially hurt by funding cuts over the past several years.[7] Funding levels have to be increased for workforce services, for educational services such as those involving tribal colleges, and for economic development, along with basic services in the health, housing and public safety fields, among others.

In a period of very strained budgets, flexibility in adapting federal program requirements to reservation-specific needs is essential.

"Doing more with less" -- the mantra for too many years -- can accomplish only so much. If the money's not there, there have to be other ways to deal with critical problems. Reducing administrative requirements, including but not limited to

[7] The level of cuts in Indian workforce programs administered by the Department of Labor is well documented in the "Statement of Urgency" developed by the Native American Employment and Training Council, an advisory body to the Secretary of Labor. The statement can be found at: https://ina.workforce3one.org/view/2001405961497995484/info.

reporting requirements, could enable tribes to stretch the scant federal resources available to them. A noteworthy illustration of how this can be done is found in the Public Law 102-477 service integration initiative. When program and financial reporting requirements are simplified, tribal staff spends more time helping people. The money appropriated for the programs is intended to solve problems, not produce data that simply goes into a "black hole" in some agency's computer system.

A new institution to support tribally-driven innovation in labor market services for Indian workers in reservation areas would serve as a stimulus to developing new approaches that further reservation economic development.

In the early days of Labor Department's support for job training, creative staff in the Department's "Manpower Administration" (the predecessor agency to ETA) took advantage of a small pool of unused money to invent an "experimental and demonstration" program. Relatively small grants from that program fostered community-based organizations as service providers and demonstrated the usefulness of employing paraprofessionals, workers without professional credentials often from within the populations being served.

In the early 1970's federal legislation created the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education in the Department of Education. Innovation was its sole mission. Housed in the higher echelons of the Department, separate from the line agencies, with a small staff, a strong and very involved advisory board of experienced and respected outsiders, and making small grants, FIPSE opened up new approaches to community-based education and development.

There are undoubtedly other examples as well. What it takes to develop this kind of stimulus to innovation is known and has been documented.[8]

The development of a theory of labor market dynamics involving Indian workers in reservation areas, the creation of a relevant research base informed by appropriate data and fostering innovation in labor market services for Indian workers are all essential to the future development of reservation communities.

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[8] See the report entitled "Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education; The Early Years" by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education dated June 2002 and available at: http://www.highereducation.org/reports/fipse/fipse.shtml.

A Note on the Author

Norm DeWeaver has worked with Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian workforce programs throughout the country since the inception of these programs in the 1970's. From 1978 to 2004 he served as the National Representative for the Indian and Native American Employment and Training Coalition, an informal information network linking the tribes and other Native-controlled organizations providing workforce services in all parts of the US. Over the last decade he has continued to work on data issues involving the Indian and Alaska Native workforce.

As noted, the literature on this subject is largely non-existent. The observations in this paper are based largely on the author's engagement with tribal and urban Indian workforce program leaders and staff over the past 35 years, leaders and staff to whom he expresses his deep gratitude. All conclusions and any errors are entirely the responsibility of the author.