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The Strategic Power of Data: A Key Aspect of Sovereignty

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Abstract

The lack of good data about U.S. American Indian and Alaska Native populations hinders tribes' development activities, but it also highlights a space for sovereign action. In coming years, tribes will no doubt continue to advocate for better national data and at the same time increasingly implement their own "data agendas" by gathering high quality, culturally relevant information about their communities. With more meaningful data, tribal policymakers can make informed decisions about which policies and programs are right for the task at hand. Strategic data planning empowers tribes to tell their communities' stories through their own data, and not that of others.

Keywords

American Indian, Alaska Native, data, sovereignty, self-determination

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The lack of good data about U.S. American Indian and Alaska Native populations hinders tribes' development activities, but it also highlights a space for sovereign action. In coming years, tribes will no doubt continue to advocate for better national data and at the same time increasingly implement their own "data agendas" by gathering high quality, culturally relevant information about their communities. With more meaningful data, tribal policymakers can make informed decisions about which policies and programs are right for the task at hand. Strategic data planning empowers tribes to tell their communities' stories through their own data, and not that of others.

It's no coincidence that the root word of "statistics" is "state." Data is intimately linked to the sovereignty and self-determination of all nations. Tribes successfully collect quantitative information—or data—on land, the environment, and physical structures. Unfortunately, tribes have been less likely to tell a numeric story about their citizens' and community members' health, education, and welfare.

Data about citizens and community members is a strategic resource. Reliable data, carefully gathered and analyzed, can strengthen the ability of tribes to pursue their own goals. Armed with dependable and relevant information, tribes can be *strategic*, envisioning a role for data as part and parcel of sovereignty and governance. They can be *responsive*, initiating projects to address emerging needs. They can be *culturally authoritative*, asserting control over which topics are measured, and how. As tribes meaningfully engage with data, quantitative information about Native populations will enhance—rather than detract from—the vibrancy and resiliency of tribal communities.

It's no secret that the current data environment for tribes needs improvement. Because of the small size of Native populations, statistics rarely are reported in the findings of national surveys. When Native peoples and populations are reported, the data are not dependable, even on a matter as fundamental as who should be counted as a Native person. Must a respondent be a tribal citizen? Live on reservation lands? Have a particular blood quantum? Be closely connected to Native culture? Adding to the confusion, the answer to this question can change from survey to survey and year to year.

Nearly every tribal program and enrollment office holds a substantial amount of undigested data. Most of this information has been collected to comply with funders' reporting requirements. Afterward, it is stashed away in separate offices, stored in increasingly outdated formats. Some tribal councils and program managers may not have a comprehensive view of available data that could help them make decisions. The challenge for tribes is to convert program data into a strategic resource. This means making better use of what they already have and shifting to more proactive and strategic collection of new data.

Tribes are more than capable of developing the technical expertise necessary to improve their data management capacities. But collecting and analyzing data about tribal citizens makes many tribal leaders nervous. And with good reason! Such information brings with it serious responsibility. Data about Native peoples is sensitive and tribal governments must be sure that they can protect citizen information. But the reality is that if tribes don't actively tell their citizens' numeric stories, someone else—usually the federal government—will.

A number of positive developments are underway. Organizations like the National Congress of American Indians Policy Research Center and the National Indian Child Welfare Association have developed recommendations for improvements to nationally collected data about Native peoples and populations.

Equally important, some tribes have begun to invest in the development of demographic data, in the process creating greater capacity to respond to community needs. For example, in the wake of devastating tornadoes, the Citizen Potawatomi Nation had concerns about its ability to contact citizens for well-being checks and assistance. The Nation has since begun a census of tribal members, collecting basic household data and contact details in order to improve future emergency response efforts.

In another tribe, widespread public opinion attested to a large and growing juvenile crime problem. Even law enforcement, justice system, and social services personnel subscribed to this view. While the police department had incident reports going back several years that could shed light on the problem—stored in boxes in the basement of police headquarters—the data had never been compiled. When an outside justice systems evaluator (who was collaborating with the tribe on several other programs) offered to collate and analyze the data, tribal officials seized the opportunity. Results showed that in the nation's recent history, juveniles had committed relatively few serious crimes, low-level juvenile crime was the norm, and a dozen or so individuals were responsible for most of it. Uncontrolled repeat offenders were the real problem, not pervasive, serious juvenile crime. Faced with this finding, law enforcement, juvenile justice, detention, and human services staff developed programming aimed at these young offenders' treatment and rehabilitation. But it was only with the data—and the ability to analyze it—that tribal policymakers could really know what kind of crime problem the tribe had and how to best address it.

The insights generated by these investments in data collection and analysis will inform tribal policy for years to come. Such information is also a powerful tool for communicating tribes' concerns and triumphs outside the community, in ways that non-Native people and institutions can understand.

Strategic data collection can be accomplished at a reasonable cost and without major changes in staff duties. One way to begin is with a small project that has widespread support. Another is to use an existing process (a revenue distribution mailing, voter registration, etc.) to collect additional data. Another is to commit to a data project that will directly inform a current community concern (for example, consolidation of children-in-need-of-care data and juvenile justice data). Another is to work with other agencies and organizations to pool resources for data collection, storage, analysis, and use while maintaining authority and control over the data. There is no wrong place to begin to collect and use data.

Tribes, Native advocacy groups, federal staff, researchers, and others must continue to work together to improve the state of national data. Meanwhile, at the local level, tribes are increasingly investing in the development of their own data collection and analysis capacities: identifying needed information, strategically developing data infrastructure, setting down policies for internal/external data-sharing, and encouraging partnerships with other entities. As tribes work to regain sovereignty over their statistics, there is no telling the scope of the long-term effects that will be realized.

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