

Legacy of Forced Homelessness Among Native American Peoples

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Though many Americans would like to forget the unimaginable horrors committed against Native American peoples, the survivors that keep the cultures and traditions of these peoples alive still struggle with the legacy of violence and oppression. They face a major issue

that has manifested itself from the long and complex history of conflict between Native and American—homelessness. Because of financial issues, culture shock, and attempts by the American government to assimilate children from tribes to mainstream US culture, Native Americans are more susceptible to homelessness and require unique solutions for recovery compared to other US citizens experiencing homelessness.

According to Jennifer Biess, one of every 1000 people in the US identify as Native American, but one of every 200 US citizens experiencing homelessness identify as Native American. Therefore, if someone in the USA were to walk around town and meet five hundred people, they may never meet a Native American. However, if they were to visit homeless shelters and meet five hundred people, they would likely meet two Native Americans. The obvious disproportionality of homelessness among the Native American population is alarming enough by itself. The government responded to this crisis in 1996 by instating the Indian Housing Block Grant (IHBG). According to the information provided by hud.gov, the IHBG allows Native Americans to access affordable housing on reservations by giving them access to various house building services as well as living assistance—like crime prevention and modeling. Though the government claims that the IHBG is a helpful program for Native Americans, and it may be, it is not the first “solution” the American government has rolled out for Native Americans.

The US government veiled attempts to eliminate tribes of Native American peoples through assimilation. In truth, assimilation meant a total annihilation of Native cultures and, with them, the need to reserve lands and money for Native American peoples. One still-too-recent attempt was the boarding schools. Tony Enos, in their discussion of Two Spirit People, revealed that boarding schools meant to teach Native American children how to become members of

mainstream American society actually worked to destroy each child's Native identity. Two Spirit People refers to any Native American that embodies both male and female. Enos explains in their discussion how integral they were to various Native peoples and the various leadership roles they adopted. Boarding schools forced a single gender on them as part of their re-education, effectively demolishing their own identify and understanding of themselves. A child with only one gender was much easier to push into the binaries of American society. However, boarding schools cost money; the US government needed a cheaper means of assimilation. The federal government's Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) claimed to be helping Native Americans when they started the Indian Adoption Project in 1958. MPR News revealed that the government's attempt to assimilate Native American children into white American homes did far more damage than good. The project did not just encourage white families to adopt unfortunate orphans that happened to be Native Americans. MPR reports that the BIA "enlisted social workers to visit reservations and convince parents to sign away their parental rights." Although the article is unclear as to how the "convincing" worked, it may be safe for one to assume false promises and maybe even coercion were involved (given the US government's historical use of false promises and coercion when making deals with Native American peoples). MPR argues that adoptions and foster homes alienated Native American children further from their cultures and identities than boarding schools did. When placed in a boarding school, a Native American child was still surrounded by other Native American children. In a foster or adoptive home, they were fully submerged into white American society with no contact to their original family or any other people like them. Because so many have been ripped away from their homes and forced into a society that is neither their own nor accepting of their kind, Native Americans have a legacy of homelessness that runs deeper than financial insecurity.

Although it helps, money alone will not solve the homelessness crisis among Native Americans. Solutions need to be specific not just to Native Americans as a whole, but to individual tribes and peoples. Hallie Golden reports one such solution—one featuring both financial commitment and cultural sensitivity—in Seattle. There, an apartment building reserved for Native Americans experiencing homelessness will open in October. It features eighty studio apartments, a health clinic, a traditional Native café, art by the Coast Salish people native to the Seattle area, and a name in their language: ʔálʔal. Home. With its emphasis on culture and outreach to local Native Americans experiencing homelessness, it will live up to the name better than any boarding school or adoptive family could for these peoples.

Works Cited

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