

# Native American gaming and reservation wealth

Prepared by Riley Kouns

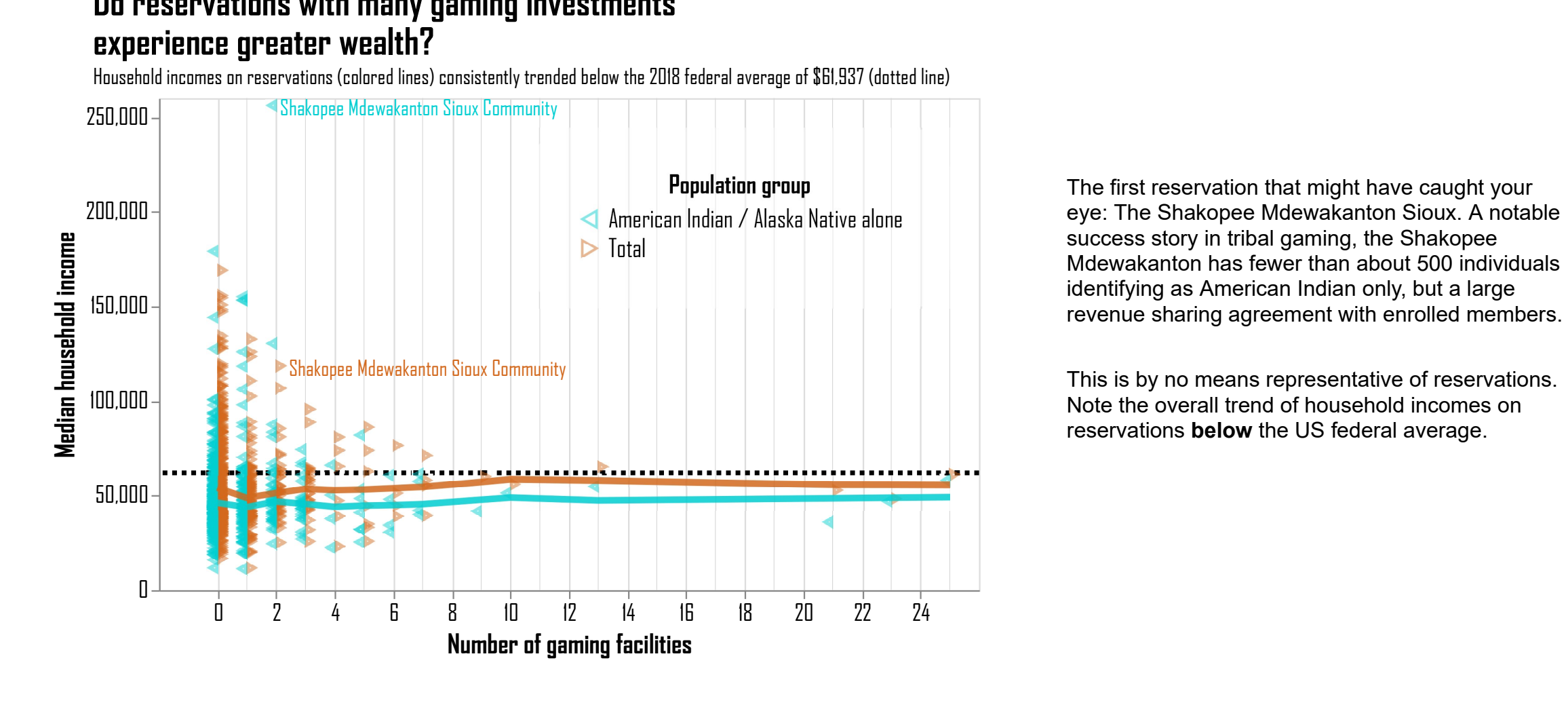
In 1988, the passage of the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA) formally established US federal regulation of tribal gaming on Indian reservations. With this legislation came the opportunity for native nations to build new revenue streams, aiding in economic development of communities that have long been actively disadvantaged and destroyed by the US government. Alongside this opportunity came stereotype, that permitting Indian gaming is so-called "preferential" treatment for native nations. If anything, there is reason to be skeptical that tribally owned gaming operations alone can lift reservations' socioeconomic status alone. Whether to dispel opinions of gaming as a stereotype or as a panacea, the relationship between tribal gaming ownership and reservation economic development is well worth investigation. Tribal gaming may really give no "edge" at all to the wealth and prosperity of native nations.

Data for this project come from Minnesota Fed's [Native Economic Trends \(NET\)](#) and the National Indian Gaming Commissions' (NIGC) [registry of gaming facilities](#). Tribal gaming operations are recorded by the NIGC, but gaming facility revenues are only available as a national total or more granularly through paywalled estimation services. For this study, we can only determine the number of gaming facilities owned by each tribe or nation. Because the NET data only break down to the reservation level, we count the number of facilities in each reservation owned by nations based in that reservation. Gaming facility counts as of 2025 are at least a crude proxy for the revenue flowing into reservations that may then be used for economic development and tribal revenue sharing.

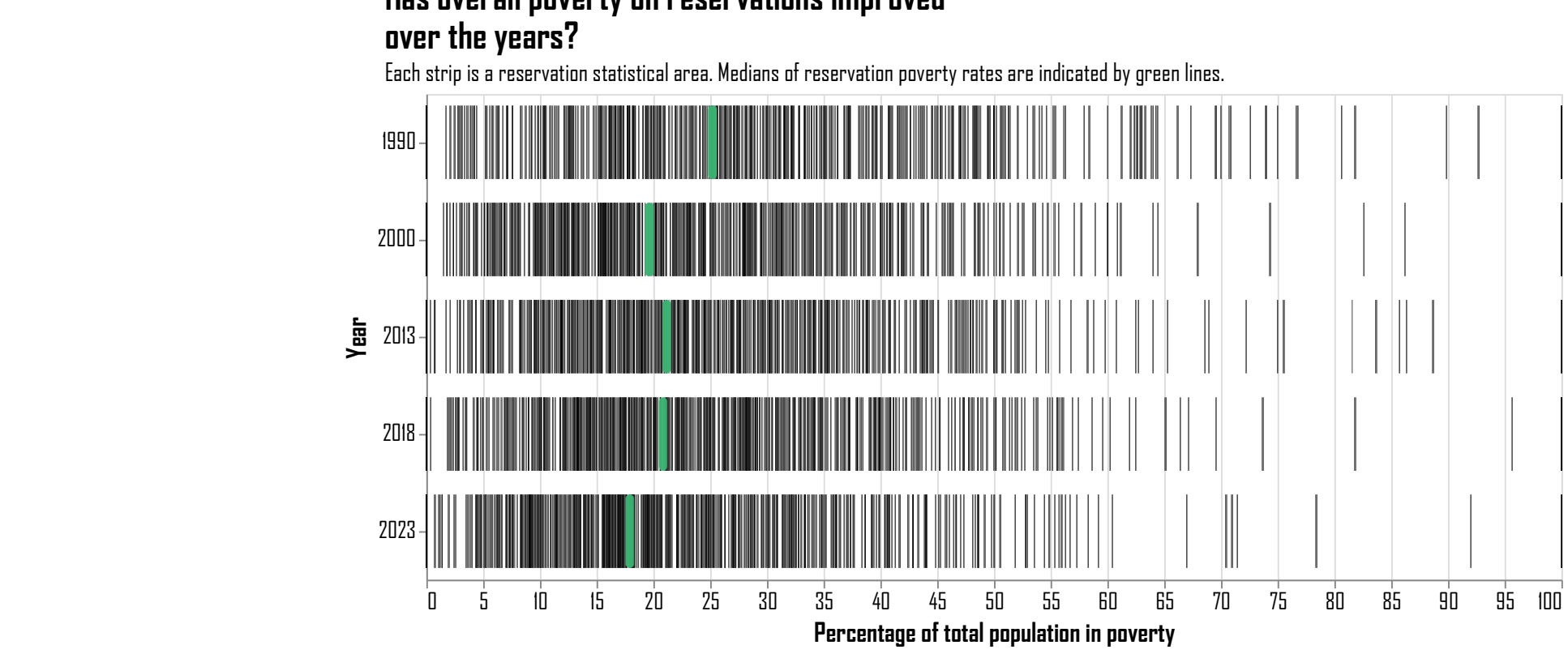
Many native communities are both small and undersampled, and there are many time gaps in their data. Sparse data, however, is no reason not to try anyway.

## Visualizing reservations across the country

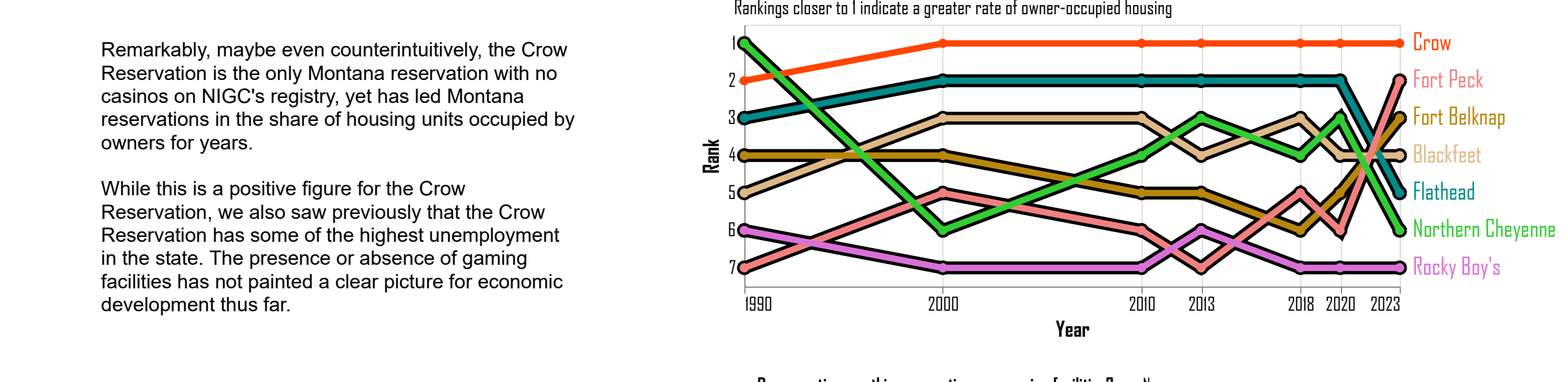
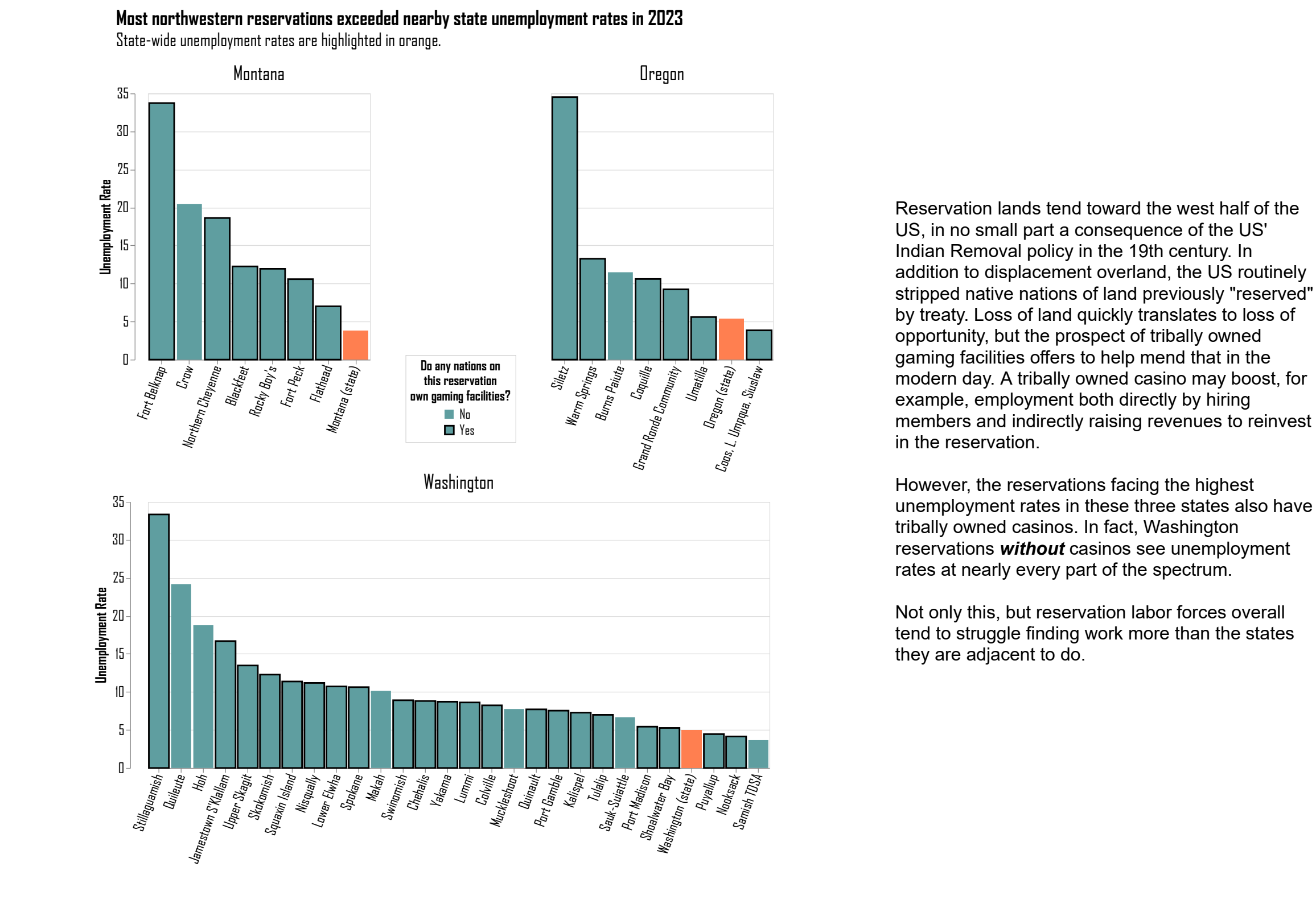
To give a fair overview of wealth in reservations across the country, we start with pre-pandemic measures. Many non-native individuals in fact live on Native American reservations, making it critical important to distinguish between population subgroups.



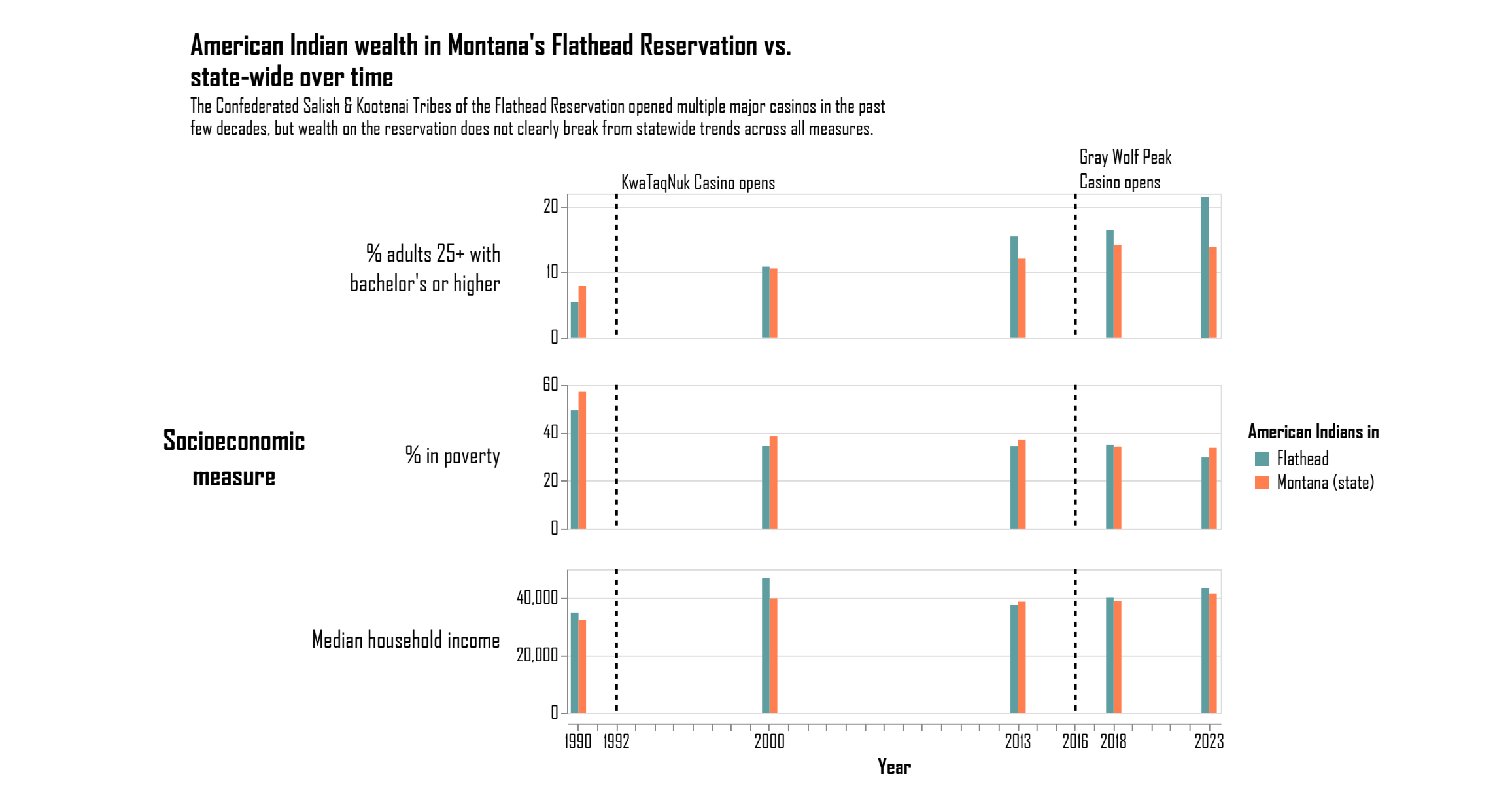
Even irrespective of casino ownership, reservations as a whole have vaguely trended away from poverty since the IGRA.



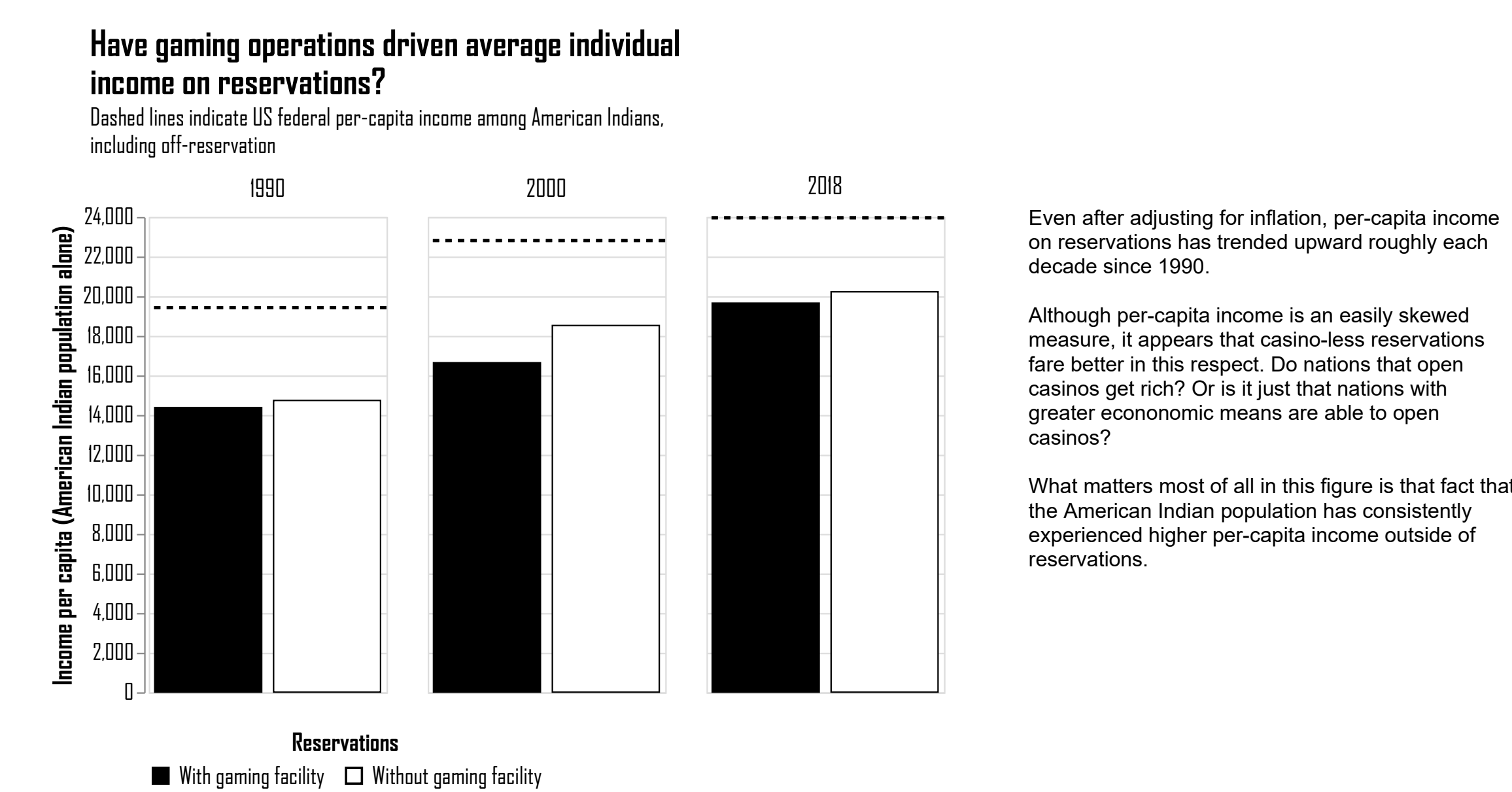
## Regional focus: Northwest US



Every reservation is home to its own nations, which we have grouped out of necessity due to the way public data are collected. However, aggregating distinct communities inevitably obscures their individual experiences. To the best of our ability given these constraints, we can zoom in further on one reservation. The Flathead Reservation stood out as having the lowest reservation unemployment rate in Montana and for many years had a relatively high rate of owner-occupied housing.



## Another broad overview of reservation wealth



## Big picture

American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) identification. It was not until 2000 that the Census allowed self-identification with more than one race, so to make any attempt at a comparison with pre-IGCA data from 1990 requires that we focus on populations who identify as AIAN *alone*. Additionally, facility-level revenue data belongs to casino owners themselves, so without industry knowledge, the exact effect of revenue distribution is tough to discern.

We could ask "Do reservations with casinos really do better than those without?", but given the data limitations, this burning question is perhaps not a totally helpful one.

The fact of the matter is that many Native American reservations in the US face greater economic adversity than off-reservation counterparts. Casinos may be a tool for economic development, but they don't look like a silver bullet.

## Data Sources

"Native Economic Trends: Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis." Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis: Pursuing an Economy that works for all of us.

Accessed October 15, 2025. <https://www.minneapolisfed.org/indiancountry/resources/native-economic-trends>.

"Map of Indian Gaming Locations: Gaming Tribes by State (Pdf)." National Indian Gaming Commission, June 17, 2025. <https://www.nigc.gov/map/>.