US Census Data about Native Nations in Washington State

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The relationships between the US Census and Native nations is full of conflict. Historically, the US census has been used as the spearhead of US government efforts to track and assimilate Native peoples and, despite numerous improvements in its survey practices on race, basic trust between the census and most Native peoples has yet to be repaired. Nevertheless, billions of dollars in federal funding for federally recognized Native Nations is contingent on census results. Consequently, this poster explores recent census data available for Native nations in Washington state.

Data

Data for this poster was gathered from the US census portal "My Tribal Area" (available at https://www.census.gov/tribal/?st=53) which is based on 2015-2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Data were downloaded separately for each "Tribal area" listed in Washington state and then compiled to created one merged dataset.

Of note, this dataset reflects census data gathered on census-designated reservations, off-reservation trust land, and Tribal Designated Statistical Areas (TDSA). It does not reflect data gathered solely on enrolled or self-identified Native people.

WA State Reservations

The below map depicts US census boundaries for 29 federally recognized Native nations located within the boundaries of Washington State. While these boundaries are hotly contested, they nonetheless correspond with the data gathered by the US census. Of note, some federally recognized Native nations do not have reservations (e.g. Samish Indian Nation), and consequently the US census gathers data from a Tribal Designated Statistical Area (TDSA). Furthermore, the map below does not reflect Native nations who are not federally recognized (e.g. Duwamish), and many reservations correspond to more than one Native nations who were forcibly relocated to the same place. Lastly, the term "reservation" does not accurately describe many Native nations who have never been dislocated and still live in the same place in which they have historically resided, despite encroaching settlers.

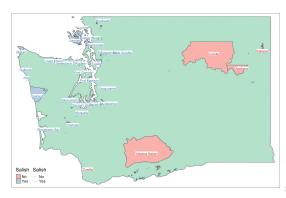


Figure 1. US census designated reservations in WA State, divided between Salish nations and others

Analysis

Despite the problematic relationship between the US census and Native nations, some useful data trends are visible given a careful interpretation. Population measures give some indication of the relative size of "Tribal Areas," though these sizes should not be mistaken for population density (some reservations are quite large, e.g. Yakama Nation) or for Native population (numerous reservations are predominately non-Native populations). For smaller "Tribal Lands", margins of error make comparisons difficult though margins of error are relatively small for "Tribal lands" with larger populations. Additionally, carefully, used, this data can be used to demonstrate heterogeneity across and within "Tribal Lands." For example, racial and income distributions across "Tribal lands" indicate that large ranges that counter stereotypes of reservations being both predominately Native and poverty stricken.

Population Distribution

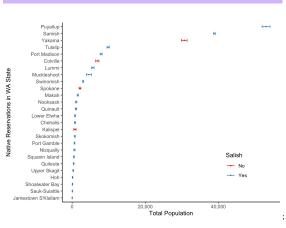


Figure 2. Population distribution among "Tribal Lands" in WA state, along with margins of error.

Racial Distribution

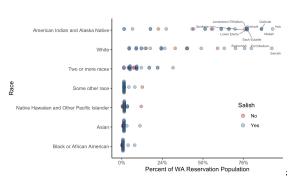


Figure 3. Racial composition of people who reside on "Tribal Lands"

Income Distribution

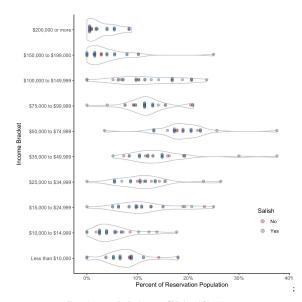


Figure 4. Income distribution across "Tribal Lands" in WA state

Results

Carefully used, this data can be used to counter some negative stereotypes, such as Native peoples being both homogenous and poverty stricken. For example, "Tribal Lands" indicate a variety of income distributions which indicate a wide range of incomes on reservations despite frequent assumptions of poverty. Consequently, the data is useful for providing some level of heterogeneity across "Tribal Lands" despite the problematic categories employed by the US census.

Additionally, one area of exploration in this poster is the differences between Salish and non-Salish nations. On initial examination, no significant differences seem to be apparent in socio-economic variables.

References

[1] Jacobs B. Connolly, M. Counting indigenous american indians and alaska natives in the us census. Statistical Journal of the IAOS, 36(1):201–210, 2020.

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