



National  
Congress of  
American  
Indians

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# SECURING OUR FUTURES

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**"This is the task at hand, to move together toward a more perfect union...  
And when we do, we'll always be able to say, the the State of Indian Nations is  
strong, and the future prosperity of America is secure."**

- Jefferson Keel, NCAI President, State of Indian Nations Address 2013

NCAI is releasing a *Securing Our Futures* report in conjunction with the 2013 State of Indian Nations. This report shows areas where tribes are exercising their sovereignty right now, diversifying their revenue base, and bringing economic success to their nations and surrounding communities. The path to securing our future – from education to food security, climate change to workforce development – is illuminated by the proven success of tribal nations. While the circumstances of each tribal nation are unique, the promising practices contained in the report offer a way forward to secure tribal economies and sustain prosperity for future generations.

Throughout the report, you will note quotes and themes from the 2013 and past State of Indian Nations speeches.

In the new era of nation-to-nation engagement between tribes and the federal government, tribal nations are increasingly pursuing strategies that enhance economic security and build prosperity for their communities. The economic impact of tribes is increasingly measured in the millions (even billions) and many communities rely on tribes as major employers for Native and non-Native citizens. What distinguishes these successes from previous economic development strategies is that these strategies are pursued without dependence on the federal government.

This document outlines an array of promising practices where tribes are taking control of their own future. From education to food security, renewable energy to workforce development, tribes are determining their own futures and building sustainable prosperity. As President Keel says, tribes that were once managing poverty are now managing resources.

These exciting developments should not obscure the work that remains undone. Unemployment and poverty in Indian Country are still unacceptably high. Improving basic infrastructure is a prerequisite to lasting economic success. Native people need equal (and universal) access to reliable, affordable broadband.

However, it is important to balance the stark inequities faced by Native people with the promising future that is indicated by other data. Education outcomes are improving for the growing number of Native young people (42 percent of Native people are under the age of 25). Native-owned businesses (both those owned by tribes and Native citizens) are growing and generating more revenue, creating jobs at home, throughout the nation, and around the world.

Policy developments of the past few years have created a federal policy environment that is more conducive to tribal economic success. Landmark legislation to improve health outcomes and advance public safety was passed. Historic settlements were reached. Tribes were included in national policy to support economic recovery and financial security. New policy and legislation was implemented to streamline leasing and business development.

On the threshold of sustained prosperity, tribes also face significant risks as the nation continues to consider the appropriate role and size of the federal government. While tribes must continue to urge the federal government to meet the obligations of the trust responsibility, relying on the federal government to build a strong economic future for tribal nations is a strategy that carries immense risk.

The path forward is illuminated by the proven success of tribal nations. While the circumstances of every tribal nation are unique, the promising practices contained in this document offer a path forward to secure tribal economies and sustain prosperity for future generations.

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“This is the task at hand, to move together toward a more perfect union. To strengthen our trust relationship with the United States....Tribal nations have worked with the United States to uphold this promise. That trust, ultimately, is the principle that must guide us—all of us—as we go forward and do right by all of our children and grandchildren. And when we do, we’ll always be able to say, the the State of Indian Nations is strong, and the future prosperity of America is secure.”

- Jefferson Keel, State of Indian Nations 2013

# Challenges and Opportunities for Securing Our Futures

*“Today, more tribes are managing resources instead of managing poverty programs.”*

## ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IMPROVE IN INDIAN COUNTRY

Over the last 30 years, Indian Country has experienced significant economic growth as measured by average individual and tribal incomes. The growth is substantial. Although poverty for tribal citizens on reservation and trust land is more than two-and-a-half times higher than for the total population, poverty declined from 2000 to the 2006-2010 period by almost three percentage points on reservations, while increasing for the entire nation. Similarly, unemployment, as measured by the Census, decreased on reservations over the same time period; but, with 18.8 percent of the Native civilian labor force still unemployed on reservations, the rate remains more than two times as high as the unemployment rate for the total population.

Meanwhile, tribal citizens have witnessed progress in addressing some of the most basic infrastructure disparities since 2000. In Alaska, 38 percent of tribal households in Native Village Statistical Areas lacked complete plumbing, 33 percent had an incomplete kitchen, and 34 percent were overcrowded in 2000. By the 2006-2010 period estimate, incomplete plumbing dropped by a third to 25 percent, complete kitchens increased by 13 percentage points, and the number of homes lacking a telephone was cut nearly in half. Similar advances in infrastructure occurred on reservation lands, but in every Census housing indicator, considerable gaps persist. For example, the percentage of reservation homes lacking complete plumbing is 17 times the national percentage.

Many factors give cause for hope in Indian Country for creating economic security and prosperity. The number of American Indian- and Alaska Native-owned businesses increased 17.9 percent from 2002 to 2007; total receipts of these businesses were \$34.5 billion, up 28.3 percent from 2002. Tribal enterprises and Native individual-owned businesses were included in the 2002 data but tribal enterprises were not included in the most recent study in 2007. This raises the question of significantly undercounting the growth of American Indian and Alaska Native businesses.

Tribal economies still have a long way to go. But the overall trend is positive and substantial.

## FEDERAL GOVERNMENT FISCAL CHALLENGES IMPACT TRIBAL NATIONS

Federal spending on Indian programs – far and away the dominant source of outside support for reservations – has been flat or falling since the late 1970s (Walke 2000). And given the current fiscal challenges confronting the United States with federal budget deficits projected to grow, federal spending on tribal programs, as investments in the domestic discretionary portion of the budget, is slated for deep cuts.

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