

Native American Women and the Wage Gap

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Native Americans were the original stewards of the land that now makes up the United States. However hundreds of years of settler colonialism, genocide, and forced migrations, as well as continuing threats to tribal sovereignty, have led to Native communities grappling every day with the tangible consequences of sexism and white supremacy in the United States and how our country systematically devalues women of color and their labor. But Native people are still here, resilient, and creating solutions through community.

Today, Native American women in the United States are typically paid just 55 cents for every dollar paid to white, non-Hispanic men.¹ Even when looking just at people working full time, year-round, Native women are still only paid 59 cents for every dollar paid to white, non-Hispanic men — but that figure does not include the more than 40 percent of Native women who held part-time or short-term jobs in 2022.²

The wages of Native women are driven down by a number of factors that they are likely to encounter in the workplace and labor market, including gender and racial discrimination, workplace harassment, job segregation and a lack of workplace policies that support family caregiving, which is still most often performed by women.³ Overall, women are typically paid 78 cents for every dollar paid to men.⁴

Across Tribes, Wage Gaps Undermine Native Women's Economic Security.

- Native women in every tribe for which data is available experience large wage gaps compared to what white, non-Hispanic men were typically paid in 2022. It is important to note that measuring Native identity is a complex, nuanced effort that should be informed by Native advocates and scholars who are the experts and leaders on these issues.

Improving Data for Native Women

Women members of the 574 federally-recognized tribes and more than 200 unrecognized tribes in the United States have diverse economic experiences and share common challenges in the United States. But lack of data investment means it is difficult to reliably estimate wage gaps for most tribes. Federal agencies should prioritize partnering with tribal governments, Native experts and Native communities to develop better data about Native women's economic experiences in ways that respect tribal sovereignty. Measures of Native people as a racial group, which relies on self-reporting and connection to community, differ from legal definitions of tribal enrollment for a range of reasons including recognition of tribes by the U.S. government, enrollment rules specific to different tribes and more. (See [National Congress of American Indians, "Data Disaggregation."](#))

- Across these tribes, Yup'ik women experience the largest gaps – typically paid more than \$30,000 less per year than white, non-Hispanic men. And even the smallest gap is still sizable at \$16,342, for Alaskan Athabaskan women.

Women's Median Earnings and Wage Gap by Tribe			
Tribe	Median Earnings	Wage Gap	Cents on the Dollar
Alaskan Athabaskan	\$34,527	\$16,342	\$0.68
Aleut	\$27,632	\$23,237	\$0.54
Inupiat	\$33,912	\$16,957	\$0.67
Yup'ik	\$21,195	\$29,674	\$0.42
Tlingit-Haida	\$34,000	\$16,869	\$0.67
Other Alaska Native	\$23,315	\$27,554	\$0.46
Apache	\$25,900	\$24,969	\$0.51
Blackfoot	\$23,800	\$27,069	\$0.47
Cherokee	\$27,554	\$23,315	\$0.54
Cheyenne	\$24,316	\$26,553	\$0.48
Chickasaw	\$31,793	\$19,076	\$0.62
Chippewa	\$25,895	\$24,974	\$0.51
Choctaw	\$28,000	\$22,869	\$0.55
Comanche	\$25,000	\$25,869	\$0.49
Creek	\$29,132	\$21,737	\$0.57
Crow	\$26,526	\$24,343	\$0.52
Iroquois	\$30,505	\$20,364	\$0.60
Lumbee	\$28,614	\$22,255	\$0.56
Navajo (Diné)	\$26,167	\$24,702	\$0.51
Pima	\$27,632	\$23,237	\$0.54
Potawatomie	\$31,290	\$19,579	\$0.62
Pueblo	\$27,214	\$23,655	\$0.53
Pueblo - Hopi	\$29,132	\$21,737	\$0.57
Puget Sound Salish	\$32,045	\$18,824	\$0.63
Sioux	\$23,874	\$26,995	\$0.47
Tohono O'Odham	\$22,043	\$28,826	\$0.43
Yaqui	\$28,000	\$22,869	\$0.55
Mexican American Indian*	\$23,315	\$27,554	\$0.46
South American Indian*	\$26,494	\$24,375	\$0.52

American Indian, tribe not elsewhere classified	\$26,195	\$24,674	\$0.51
American Indian, tribe not specified	\$25,000	\$25,869	\$0.49
All other specified American Indian tribe combinations	\$26,494	\$24,375	\$0.52
American Indian and Alaska Native, tribe not elsewhere classified	\$25,753	\$25,116	\$0.51
American Indian and Alaska Native, not specified	\$24,375	\$26,494	\$0.48

* Disaggregated data for specific Indigenous tribes of Central and South America is not available.

Source: Author's calculations using 2017-2021 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates via IPUMS. Figures are for American Indian and Alaska Native women aged 16 and older with earnings in the prior year, including AI/AN women who reported more than one race and/or Hispanic or Latina ethnicity. These numbers are not comparable to the overall wage gaps of 55 cents for all American Indian and Alaska Native women and 59 cents for American Indian and Alaska Native women working full-time year round, as those calculations look at those who identify as American Indian and Alaska Native alone. Tribal wage gap is calculated based on national median earnings for white, non-Hispanic men, about \$50,869 in this time period.

How Does the Wage Gap Harm Native Women?

Overall, median wages for Native women in the United States are \$30,584 per year, compared to median wages of \$55,859 annually for white, non-Hispanic men. This amounts to a difference of \$25,275 each year.⁵ These lost wages mean Native women have less money to support themselves and their families, save and invest for the future, and spend on goods and services. Families, businesses and the economy suffer as a result.

If the wage gap were eliminated for just one year, on average, a Native woman would have enough money for approximately:

- More than 28 more months of child care;⁶
- Five semesters (nearly three years) of tuition and fees for a four-year public university, or the full cost of tuition and fees for a two-year college;⁷
- More than 15 additional months of premiums for employer-based health insurance;⁸
- More than 32 months (140 weeks) of food for her family;⁹
- Fourteen months of mortgage and utilities payments;¹⁰
- More than 19 months of rent;¹¹ or
- Enough money to pay off the average student loan debt in about one and a half years.¹²

Native Women and Their Families Cannot Afford Discrimination and Lower Wages

Eliminating the wage gap would provide much-needed income to Native women whose wages sustain their households.

- Approximately 64 percent of Native mothers are key breadwinners for their families, which means their households rely heavily on their wages to make ends meet and get ahead.¹³
- More than one in four Native family households – more than 500,000 households – are headed by women, and thirty percent of those households live below the poverty level.¹⁴ Closing the wage gap would help Native women breadwinners provide for their families and be more economically secure.

The Public Overwhelmingly Supports Fair Pay Policies

Polling ahead of the 2022 midterm elections found that economic concerns topped the list of issues Native women voters are worried about, including the cost of living (87 percent) and family income and expenses (69 percent). Large shares of Native women are also concerned about other issues that affect economic security, health and safety, including gun violence (62 percent), abortion and reproductive health services (55 percent) and affordable mental health services (54) percent).

Native women voters overwhelmingly rate policies to address economic, health and safety needs as important for Congress to act on, including:

- Comprehensive health coverage (85 percent);
- Domestic violence prevention and services (84 percent);
- Paid family and medical leave (83 percent);
- Ending workplace discrimination and harassment (83 percent);
- Preventing gun violence and mass shootings (82 percent);
- Protecting access to contraception (81 percent); and
- Strengthening equal pay laws (79 percent).¹⁵

What We Can Do to Fight for Pay Equity for Native Women

Native women and their families urgently need the following to close the wage gap and to ensure their economic security and opportunity:

- Lawmakers should pass the **FAMILY Act and Healthy Families Act** to ensure all workers, regardless of job type and title, are able to take paid family and medical leave and paid sick days to care for their health and loved ones without losing

income or a job. Employers can expand paid leave policies to be more equitable by ensuring all employees are eligible – including those working part-time – and that policies are gender-neutral and use an inclusive definition of family.

Tribal Nations Can Act On Pay Equity

Because tribal nations are sovereign governments, they can increase the minimum wage, implement paid leave, and enact other policies that improve pay equity in areas that would not otherwise have them (See [“CN investing \\$10.6M to increase salaries for more than 80% of government, healthcare employees.”](#))

- To ensure fair pay, lawmakers must enact the **Paycheck Fairness Act** which would make it harder for employers to engage in sex-based wage discrimination and would institute data collection that will help inform future enforcement efforts. Employers should use wage transparency instead of salary history and conduct compensation reviews to evaluate noticeable disparities amongst employees in the same, or similar jobs.

- Lawmakers should pass the **Raise the Wage Act** to eliminate the discriminatory pay practices that plague employed women. Employers should use a reputable online tool to ensure employees are paid at least a wage that meets basic needs.¹⁶ Increasing access to overtime pay through updated U.S. Department of Labor regulations will also make salaries fairer.
- Lawmakers should enact the **BE HEARD Act** to expand protections against harassment and discrimination in the workplace. Employers should prohibit retaliation and discrimination for employees who choose to report workplace harassment.
- Like in California, federal lawmakers should enact a **Feather Alert system**, an emergency notification system to notify the public when Indigenous people go missing under suspicious circumstances in real time.¹⁷ Native women experience disproportionately higher rates of abduction and violent crimes.¹⁸

¹ U.S. Census Bureau. (2023). *American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates 2022 (Tables B20017C and B20017H: Median Earnings in the Past 12 Months (in 2022 Inflation-Adjusted dollars) by Sex by Work Experience in the Past 12 Months for the Population 16 Years and Over with Earnings in the Past 12 Month)*. Retrieved 3 November 2023, from data.census.gov. (Unpublished calculation based on the median annual pay for American Indian and Alaska Native women and white, non-Hispanic men). All analyses in the fact sheet used racial self-identification due to data limitations. The term used here, American Indian and Alaskan Native, is the one used in the American Community Survey, though individuals may prefer a different term when speaking about themselves, or to be identified specifically by their tribe(s). National Partnership for Women & Families respects individuals' preferences for self-identification.

² U.S. Census Bureau. (2023). *American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates 2022 (Table B20005C: Sex by Work Experience in the Past 12 Months by Earnings in the Past 12 Months (in 2022 Inflation-Adjusted Dollars) for the Population 16 Years and Over (American Indian and Alaska Native Alone)*). Retrieved 3 November 2023, from data.census.gov. (Unpublished calculation based on the number of Native American women with earnings in 2022 who worked full time, year-round and those with earnings who did not work full time, year-round.)

³ Mason, J. & Gallagher Robbins, K. (2023, March). *Women's Work Is Undervalued, and It's Costing Us Billions*. Retrieved 8 November 2023, from <https://nationalpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/womens-work-is-undervalued.pdf>

⁴ See note 1.

⁵ See note 1.

⁶ Child Care Aware of America. (2022). *Demanding Change: Repairing Our Child Care System*. Retrieved 14 September 2023, from <https://www.childcareaware.org/demanding-change-repairing-our-child-care-system>. The authors note that the landscape of child care varies significantly from state to state and computing a single national average is complex. This analysis uses the average of program-weighted averages for center-based care for a four-year-old, \$9,715 with a 10.84% inflation adjustment to account for the rise in child care costs since 2020 (Inflation adjustment uses the Consumer Price Index data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics for Day care and preschool) for a total annual cost of \$10,768.

⁷ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2023, July). *Digest of Education Statistics: 2022* (Table 330.10, Average undergraduate tuition and fees and room and board rates charged for full-time students in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by level and control of institution: 1963-64 through 2021-22), Chapter 3. Retrieved 6 September 2023, from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_330.10.asp (The average total annual cost of undergraduate tuition and required fees is \$9,596 for a four-year public college or university or \$3,564 for a two-year college.)

⁸ Kaiser Family Foundation. (n.d.) *Average Annual Single Premium per Enrolled Employee For Employer-Based Health Insurance, 2022*. Retrieved 5 September 2023, from <https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/single-coverage/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colld%22:%22Employee%20Contribution%22,%22sort%22:%22desc%22%7D>

⁹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2023, September). *Consumer Expenditures – 2022*. Retrieved 6 September 2023, from <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/cesan.pdf> (Calculation uses overall average “food” cost.)

¹⁰ U.S. Census Bureau. (2023). *American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates 2022, Table DP04: Selected Housing Characteristics*. Retrieved 14 September 2023, from <https://data.census.gov/> (Calculation uses median monthly owner costs, housing units with a mortgage)

¹¹ Ibid. (Calculation uses median gross rent, occupied units paying rent)

¹² U.S. Department of Education, Office of Federal Student Aid. (n.d.) *Federal Student Loan Portfolio: Federal Student Aid Portfolio Summary*. National Student Loan Data System Publication. Retrieved 11 September 2023, from <https://studentaid.gov/data-center/student/portfolio>. (Average dollars outstanding for recipients of direct loans as of Q3 2023, \$37,673.)

¹³ Shaw, E., Mason, C., Lacarte, V., & Jauregui, E. (2020, May). *Holding Up Half the Sky: Mothers as Workers, Primary Caregivers, & Breadwinners During COVID-19 (Figure 2)*. Retrieved 6 November 2023, from the Institute for Women’s Policy Research: <https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Holding-Up-Half-the-Sky-Mothers-as-Breadwinners.pdf> (Breadwinner mothers are defined as single mothers who head a household or married mothers who generate at least 40 percent of a household’s joint income.)

¹⁴ U.S. Census Bureau. (2023). *American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates 2022, Table S0201: Selected Population Profile in the United States (American Indian and Alaska Native alone or in combination with one or more other races)*. Retrieved 6 November 2023, from <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSSPP1Y2022.S0201?q=s0201&t=009&g=010XX00US>

¹⁵ YWCA USA and Finn Partners. (2022). *YWomensVote 2022 – Midterm Election Study*. Retrieved 6 November 2023, from <https://ywomensvote.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/20220826-YWomensVote-Memo-MidtermElectionStudy.pdf>

¹⁶ See for example MIT’s Living Wage Calculator, <https://livingwage.mit.edu/>

¹⁷ Nelson, J. (2023, March 24). Feather Alert notification system for missing Native Americans touted. *San Bernadino Sun*. Retrieved 13 November 2023, from <https://www.sbsun.com/2023/03/24/feather-alert-notification-system-for-missing-native-americans-touted/>

¹⁸ Urban Indian Health Institute. (2018). *Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women & Girls: A snapshot of data from 71 urban cities in the United States*. Retrieved 13 November 2023, from <https://www.uihi.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Missing-and-Murdered-Indigenous-Women-and-Girls-Report.pdf>

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The National Partnership for Women & Families is a nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy group dedicated to promoting fairness in the workplace, reproductive health and rights, access to quality, affordable health care and policies that help all people meet the dual demands of work and family. More information is available at NationalPartnership.org.

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