

## FACTS AND FIGURES

- The poverty rate among Native Americans is the highest in the country, and twice the rate for the total U.S. population.
- 11.7% of Native American and Alaska Native households lack complete plumbing (compared to 1.2% of the entire U.S. population).
- One in 10 Native Americans will be a victim of violent crime this year.
- While Native Americans make up less than one percent of the U.S. population, Native land contains an estimated 10 percent of all energy resources in the United States. The U.S. government keeps many of the revenues from these resources in trust, and Native Americans often do not have access to their wealth.
- From 1990 to 2000, income levels on Indian reservations increased by 33 percent and poverty decreased by 7 percent.
- Over 100,000 culturally unidentified Native American remains that need to be repatriated to Native American tribes are in government depositories, museums and universities across the country.

*Facts taken from information compiled by the National Congress of American Indians, based on census data and federal reports, and from the Return to the Earth Project.*



## More on the Internet

- MCC Washington Office:  
[www.mcc.org/us/washington](http://www.mcc.org/us/washington)
- Return to the Earth Project:  
[www.rfpusa.org/returntotheearth](http://www.rfpusa.org/returntotheearth)
- Friends Committee on National Legislation Native American Issues Website:  
[www.fcnl.org/nativeam](http://www.fcnl.org/nativeam)
- National Congress of American Indians:  
[www.ncai.org](http://www.ncai.org)
- Indian Law Resource Center:  
[www.indianlaw.org](http://www.indianlaw.org)
- Native American Rights Fund:  
[www.narf.org](http://www.narf.org)
- United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues:  
[www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii)
- First Nations Development Institute:  
[www.firstnations.org](http://www.firstnations.org)



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**MCC U.S.  
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Guide to**

# Native American Issues



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The Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office is a Mennonite and Brethren in Christ presence on Capitol Hill, providing and encouraging prophetic witness to the way of Christ on matters of U.S. public policy.

## Native American issues

In debates over public policy, the original inhabitants of this land are all too often ignored. Non-Natives are frequently unaware of the injustices done to Native Peoples, or quick to say that those injustices are historic, not contemporary.

Historical wrongs done to Native Americans—genocide, the destruction of Native cultures and the theft of land and resources—are modern wrongs if not corrected. Additionally, current public policy creates new injustices.

*Assaults on Tribal Sovereignty.* The United States government has long recognized the sovereignty—or right of self-governance—of Native Tribes. The government nevertheless continues to intervene in internal Native affairs. For example, the Supreme Court ruled in 1978 that Tribal courts have little or no jurisdiction over non-Natives, even on Tribal lands. This has led to an increase in violent offenses such as rape against Native Americans by non-Natives that Tribal courts are powerless to stop.

*A Broken Trust System.* Much Native wealth—and Tribal land—is held in trust by the U.S. government. The Bureau of Indian Affairs has mismanaged this money, however, and cannot account for approximately \$15 billion of Native wealth. This has led to increased poverty levels among Native Americans, many of whom own land with oil wells and other resources but cannot access the revenue from them.

*Unmet Government Promises.* In return for Native land, the U.S. government made treaties with Native American Tribes, promising to provide health care, education and public safety in perpetuity, and claiming to forever honor remaining Native land. U.S. policymakers have broken these treaties—and U.S. law—time and time again by ignoring their promises to Native Americans.



## Faith reflection

*The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.*  
—Psalm 24:1

Native Americans have traditionally believed that the earth belongs to the Creator and that they have been placed by the Creator on the land. This differs from the Western notion of private land ownership, but it does not contrast with Biblical notions of land ownership. Christians have often acknowledged that everything they have belongs to God, even if they haven't always acted upon this sentiment.

While Mennonites were not on the front lines during battles for land between U.S. militias and Native Americans, they often were quick to benefit by buying stolen land at outrageously inexpensive prices.

Today, non-Native Mennonites, whether they reside in urban, suburban or rural areas, live on land that was unfairly taken from the indigenous peoples who once lived there. While it is too late to change a long history of oppression, it is critical that U.S. residents stop contributing to current injustices and begin to work towards reconciliation with their Native brothers and sisters. Reconciliation is impossible without justice, however, and we must find ways to actively and positively promote justice for Native Peoples.

## How can Christians respond?

1. *Learn* about the Native Peoples who once lived on the land where you now reside.
2. *Acknowledge* the sins against Native Americans that were inflicted by U.S. policymakers, militias and settlers.
3. *Pray* for justice for our Native sisters and brothers, that their lands and rights be respected and promises made to them kept.
4. *Advocate* for Native Americans by learning and sharing the history of Native people with national and state legislators and local officials and asking for concrete action to deal with injustice.

## How should public policy respond?

1. National and state governments should officially acknowledge the crimes done to Native Americans and apologize for them.
2. The government should honor the sovereignty of Native Tribes and follow the treaties it made with them, respecting Native land claims and providing (and fully funding) the services and programs promised to Native Americans.