



Reasons Why People Do Not Claim To Be American Indian¹ **Social Work Practice Tips for Inquiry and Noticing**

There are many reasons why individuals do not claim their American Indian heritage. This has implications for ICWA compliance especially in the area of inquiry and noticing. If an Indian child is not known to be American Indian/Alaska Native how can social workers and service providers ensure culturally effective services and case plans?

Below is a brief list of reasons why some individuals may not claim their American Indian heritage, followed by practice recommendations to address this issue.

- “I know we’re part Indian but not enough.”
- “I, my mom, or my dad was adopted.”
- “No one knows the real history anymore, that person passed a long time ago.”
- “No one talks about it.’ We don’t talk about it with anyone.”
- “I heard our family was disenrolled.”
- “It was painful so we don’t talk about it.”
- “We heard different stories and not sure if it’s true or not.”
- “Grandpa only talked about it late at night.”
- “It’s in the past now, you can’t go back.”
- “Someone lost the papers.”
- “I can’t prove it.”
- “I didn’t know until recently, so I don’t think we qualify.”
- “When dad came here to work we lost our history.”
- “I don’t our history, but I heard something. We were told we didn’t need to know.”
- “No one speaks the language anymore, so we don’t talk about it.”

Practice Tips To Ensure Effective Inquiry:

1. Encouraged social workers/intake workers to state (rather than ask), ‘if you are AI/AN or believe you may be affiliated with a tribe, there are additional services (ICWA) that are available to you.’
2. Talking to that family historian, may yield you a lot of information, when you are asking about specifics with NA tribes. Ask them who the keepers of the family history is, usually there is one family member, or a few, who are gifted in this area. Consider asking families about specific areas relatives may have originated from.
3. Consider asking if they also have ever utilized Native America services, or if anyone has in the family?

¹ This document was developed by the American Indian Enhancement Team (2) with support from the Bay Area Collaborative of American Indian Resources (BACAIR), the Human Services Agency of San Francisco Family and Children Services, the Alameda County Social Services, in collaboration with the American Indian Caucus of the California ICWA Workgroup, and Tribal STAR.



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4. Be sure to ask if the child is Indian even if the child and family may not “look” as though they have American Indian/Alaska Native ancestry.

Background

It is a significant challenge for American Indians to claim tribal ties to a Native community who are not enrolled in their own tribe. This can be due to the complex process of identifying ancestors and being able to establish family blood lines. How an individual comes to know their heritage, and how much they know varies from region, to tribe, to family. With over 500 recognized tribes, over 100 terminated tribes, and countless unrecognized tribes across the United States each family has a unique history. As a result of federal and state policies (1830’s Removal Era through 1950’s Termination Era), many individuals and their families lost connection to their relations, customs, and traditions. The effects of boarding schools, and religious proselytizing, left many with the perception that it was better to pass as non-Indian than to claim their tribal status. In 1952 the federal government initiated the Urban Indian Relocation Act designed to increase the American Indian workforce in seven cities (San Francisco, San Jose, Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, St. Louis, Cincinnati, and Dallas).

Historical and federal efforts to quantify and track the American Indian/Alaska Native populations through census, and establishment of “Indian Rolls” resulted in efforts to document “proof” of Indian heritage through enrollment numbers verified by blood quantum (amount/percentage of documented American Indian/Alaska Native blood). Tribal nations are not uniform in determining who is a tribal member through this manner. Some tribes acknowledge descent and ancestry verified by proof of family lineage rather than ‘how much Indian’. Conversely, in some cases, tribal enrollment policies exclude many individuals from enrollment for political, historical, and reasons known only to their tribal membership. Enrollment to a tribe may only be open at certain times, which can also affect an individual’s eligibility for enrollment.

Many descendants have only bits and pieces of information, sometimes passed along with quiet dignity, often with a longing to know more, and why or how the information was lost. What information was passed along may have been shrouded in shame or secrecy for unknown reasons resulting in reluctance to share the information. The number of families that are disconnected from their ancestral homeland grows exponentially each generation and many individuals find connection to Native communities through intertribal, regional, and local cultural events. These communities enable a sense of belonging and kinship, and provide support for resilience through programs as Title VII Indian Education, and Tribal TANF, that do not require proof of enrollment.

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