

Policy Brief

# *The Status of American Indian Children in Los Angeles*

November 2003

“It is important to recognize and support the variety of health and social issues facing American Indian children and families.”

Los Angeles County Supervisor Yvonne Burke  
December 17, 2002

## Introduction

This policy brief presents findings on the status of American Indian and Alaskan Native (AIAN) children in the Los Angeles metropolitan area, which is coterminous with the County. According to the 2000 Census, there were an estimated 111,000 AIANs in the region who are indigenous to the greater United States.<sup>1</sup> Over a quarter of these AIANs are under the age of 17. These children and their parents face numerous social problems and economic challenges, many of which have been previously documented.<sup>2</sup> This brief uses three decades of census data to provide an updated analysis of the socioeconomic status of AIAN children, focusing on demographic characteristics, poverty, and educational issues.<sup>3</sup>

Major findings on AIAN children include:

- AIANs are a relatively young and rapidly growing population.
- AIAN children are geographically dispersed.
- Nearly one-in-four live below the poverty line.
- Only about a half live in two-parent households.
- A disproportionately high percent face educational barriers.
- AIAN children have less access to childcare.

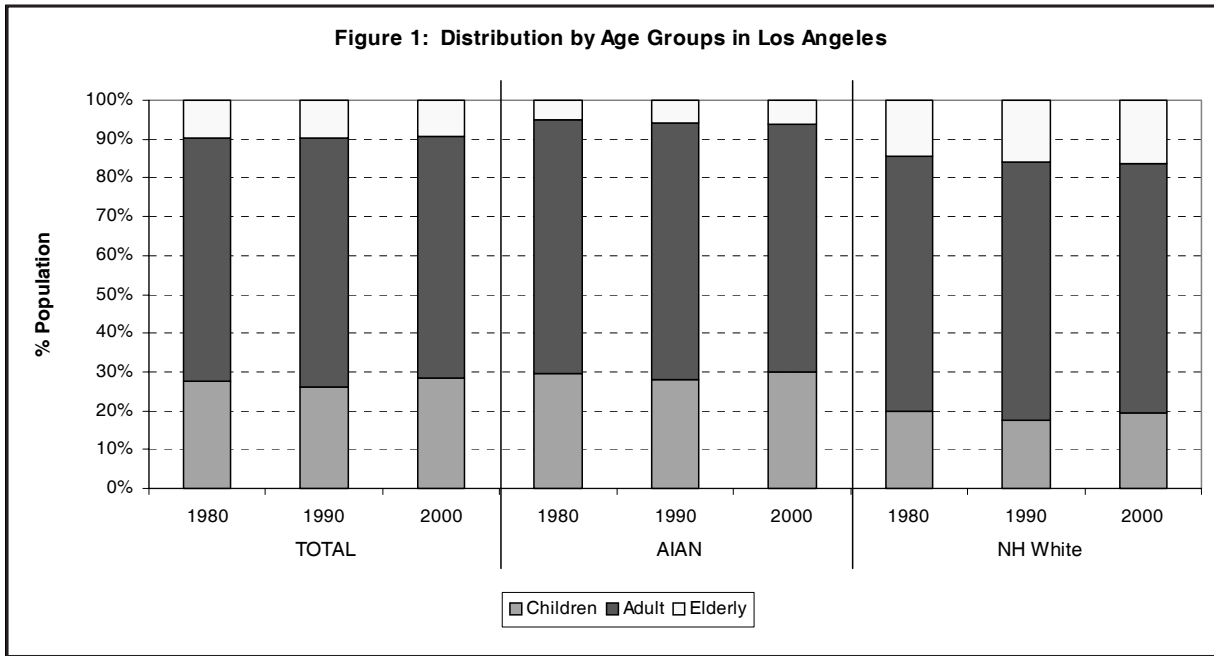
## Overall Population Size and Composition

Not only are American Indian and Alaskan Natives in Los Angeles the largest urbanized AIAN population in the nation, but their numbers are rapidly growing. Table 1 contains official census counts of American Indians and Alaskan Natives in the county for 1980, 1990 and 2000, along with comparable statistics for the total and non-Hispanic (NH) white populations. The 1980 population included over 47,000 American Indians and nearly 800 Aleuts and Eskimos.<sup>4</sup> About 3 in 10 were children. The available data indicate a decline in the number of AIAN children during the 1980s, although the number of AIAN adults remained stable. This downward trend was reversed in the 1990s.

Since the Bureau of the Census changed the way it collected race information, it is impossible to determine the precise increase in the number of AIAN children from 1990-2000. Our educated guess is that the number roughly doubled over the decade. This growth rate was considerably higher than that for all children and for NH white children.

**Table 1: Population by Age Group**

	1980	1990	2000
<b>Total</b>			
Children	2,061,548	2,326,110	2,655,515
Adult	4,680,169	5,676,467	5,808,683
Elderly	735,786	860,587	879,888
<b>AIAN</b>			
Children	14,988	12,700	33,652
Adult	30,903	30,178	70,838
Elderly	2,229	2,630	7,152
<b>NH White</b>			
Children	778,984	641,892	577,794
Adult	2,603,127	2,409,821	1,924,355
Elderly	571,492	583,373	483,498



The AIAN population tends to be younger than the total and NH white populations. Figure 1 shows the distribution of AIANs and the comparison groups by three ages: children (0-17 years old), adults (18-64), and the elderly (over 65). The elderly consistently comprised a relatively smaller share of the AIAN population than the total population, and children comprised a slightly larger share of AIANs. The differences were even greater when compared to AIANs and NH whites.

Figure 2 provides more details on the AIAN population by plotting the age distribution by five-year age groups. The lines show two distinctive bulges. One is related to the post-World War II aging baby boomers, as indicated by a rightward shift in the bulge from 1980-2000. A second bulge appears as very young children in 1980, and becomes more pronounced over time. This new wave of AIAN children includes those who are a part of the baby boom echo.

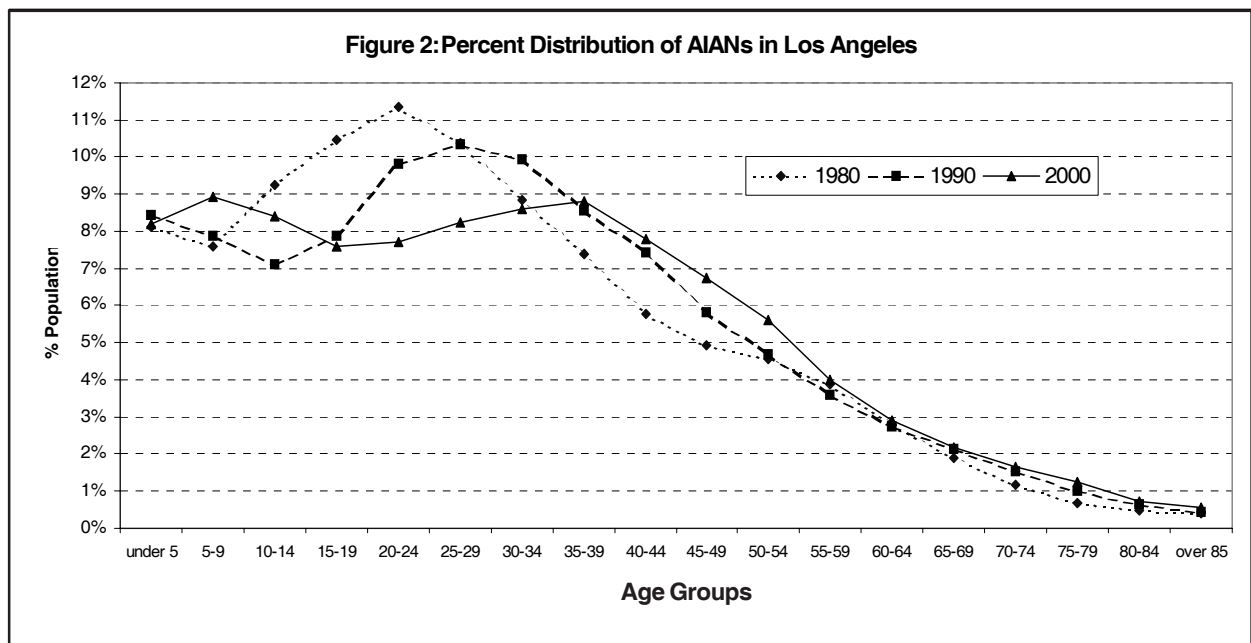
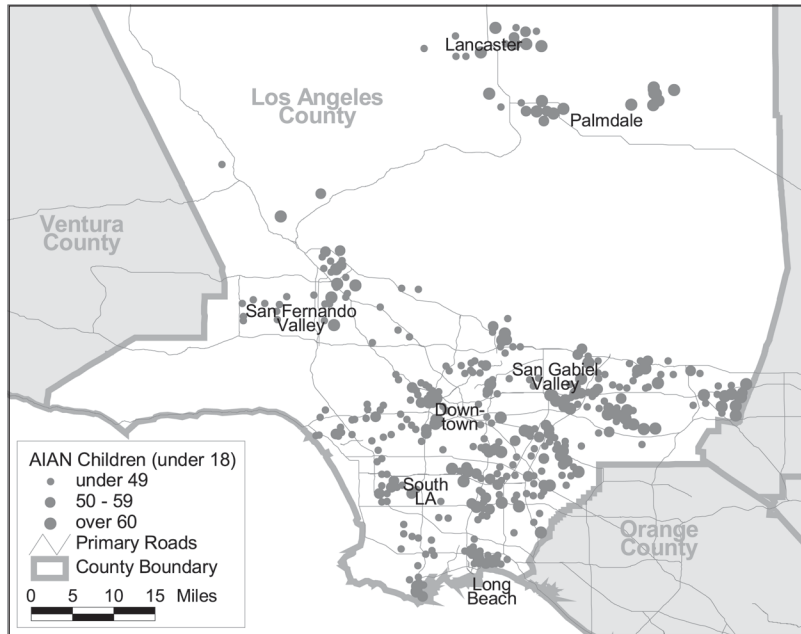


Figure 3: Geographic Distribution of AIAN Children in Los Angeles County, 2000



### Geographic Distribution

Some parts of Los Angeles County have a disproportionate share of AIAN (Figure 3). These areas include the downtown areas of the cities of Los Angeles and Long Beach. There are also pockets in the southern parts of the San Gabriel Valley and the Tri-city area. Despite this pattern, AIAN children and their parents are highly dispersed among other racial groups within the county. The typical AIAN child lives in a census tract where AIANs comprise only 1.5 percent of the population. In fact, no tract has more than 5 percent AIANs. A small majority of American Indians reside in neighborhoods with a Latino majority, and a fifth reside in neighborhoods with a non-Latino majority.

Table 2 lists the top five county subdivisions with the largest AIAN populations in absolute counts and as a percentage of the AIAN population in the subdivision. The subdivision that includes the City of Los Angeles has the largest AIAN population, but the percent of the city's overall population that is AIAN is lower than the county's overall percent of AIANs. The subdivision of the county with the highest percent of AIANs is the North Antelope Valley.

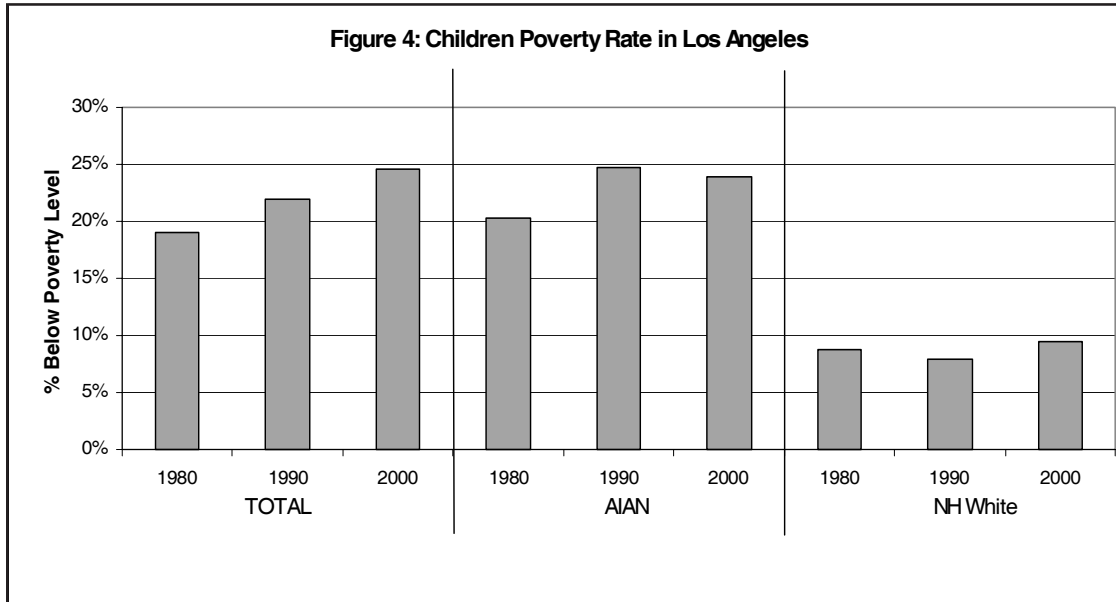
While AIANs are the least segregated racial group in Los Angeles, they are disproportionately concentrated in low-income communities. AIANs and their children are eight times more likely to live in the poorest neighborhoods than non-Hispanic whites and are only

one fifth as likely to live in the most affluent neighborhoods.

The dispersion of AIAN children presents a challenge to the delivery of social services. There are communities within Los Angeles where Latinos, Asian Americans or African Americans comprise a majority, but there are no areas where AIANs comprise a majority. The lack of geographic concentration is a barrier to providing services to this population. It is impossible to serve a large proportion of AIAN children with a few centralized facilities, and the small numbers in any particular location make it difficult and costly to design culturally appropriate programs to address their needs.

Table 2. AIANs in the Top 5 County Subdivisions

Sub-Division by Population	AIAN Population	Percentage
<i>Los Angeles County</i>	115,311	1.21%
Los Angeles City	43,772	1.07%
East San Gabriel Valley	12,762	0.74%
Long Beach-Lakewood	8,421	1.11%
Southeast	5,709	1.31%
Downey-Norwalk	5,347	1.37%
Sub-Division by Percentage	AIAN Population	Percentage
<i>Los Angeles County</i>	115,311	1.21%
North Antelope Valley	3,368	2.23%
Torrance	1,449	1.82%
Calabasas	612	1.63%
Upper San Gabriel Valley	4,140	1.49%
Downey-Norwalk	5,347	1.37%



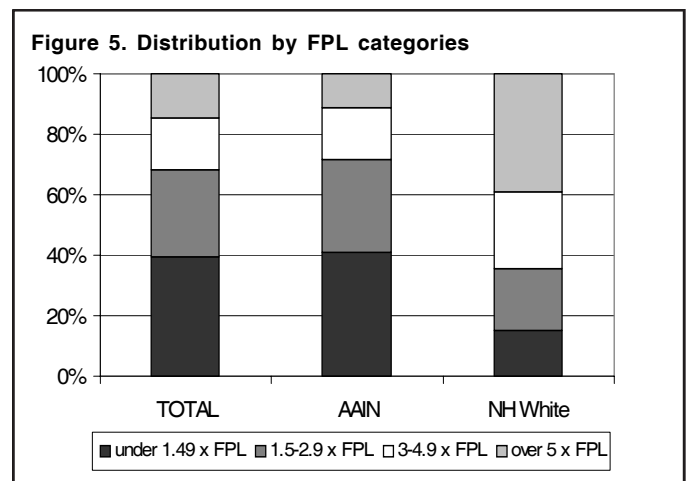
### Poverty

An unacceptably high proportion of AIAN children live in families with very limited income. Income statistics in this policy brief are based on income reported for the year prior to the census (1979, 1989 and 1999). The Census classifies a household as being in poverty if its reported income was below the federal poverty line (FPL). The FPL was established in the 1960s at an income level approximately three times the cost of a basic food basket for a family. The poverty line is adjusted for inflation but not for regional variations in the cost of living. For 1999, the federal poverty line for a family of four was \$16,700. The poverty rate is the proportion of the population in families with income below the FPL. For relatively expensive areas such as Los Angeles, the official rate underestimates the number of poor people. Despite this limitation, the statistics provide insights into the trends in poverty and the relative well-being of different groups.

Figure 4 provides the poverty rate for those under the age of 18. The statistics reveal a consistently troubling picture for AIAN children. About one in four is living in poverty. In 1980 and 1990, poverty rates for this group were higher than for all children. While the 1999 rate in Los Angeles for AIAN children was slightly lower than for all children, both rates were about one and a half times as high as the national rate for all children. The disproportionate burden of poverty on AIAN children is also apparent when compared to NH

white children. In this region, AIAN children are twice as likely to fall below the FPL than NH white children.

The flip side of the disproportionate high concentration at the bottom rungs of the economic ladder is a relative absence at the other end. Figure 5 depicts the distribution of children by multiples of the FPL. Those below 1.5 of the FPL are considered to be poor, and those at or above 5 times the FPL are at least upper middle class. For a family of four, 1.5 times the FPL is equal to \$25,050 and 5 times the FPL is equal to \$83,500. While the percent of AIAN children in the poorest category is only marginally higher than for all children, the percent of AIAN children at the other end is noticeably smaller than for all children. The disparity is even greater relative to NH white children.



### Household and Family Characteristics

Table 3 reports the percent of American Indian and Alaskan Native children residing in two-parent households. The available data show that AIAN children are consistently less likely to live with two parents than all children. The disparity is particularly noticeable when comparing AIANs and NH whites. The AIAN percentage dropped during the 1980s, but then increased slightly in the 1990s. Despite this improvement, nearly half of all AIAN children lived with only one parent. One implication is that AIAN children tend to have fewer parental resources and guidance than other children.

Despite the lower percent in two-parent households, AIAN children tend to live in families with an average size that is equal to or greater than the average family size for the total and NH white populations.

Census data indicate that AIAN children are more likely to live in poor quality housing. Table 3 reports the distribution of children by housing tenure, that is, by whether the household resides in a home they own or in a rental unit. Over half of AIAN children lived in rental units. Relative to NH whites, AIAN children are also more likely to live in crowded housing with fewer basic amenities. These results are not surprising given their overall lower economic status.

### School Issues

This section examines three indicators related to schooling. In today's economy, having a good education is critical to economic success in the future. Higher education is certainly a desirable goal, and the education that AIANs receive as children can provide the foundation. The first indicator of how well AIANs will perform is enrollment in preschool. One of the keys to success in K-12 schooling is participation in early childhood programs. The second indicator is the presence of a disability, which can hinder learning if not addressed. The final indicator is the dropout rate as measured by non-completion by older teenagers.

Table 4 provides information on the percent of 3 and 4-year old AIANs enrolled in school. This serves as a proxy of the proportion attending preschool. The data indicate a decline during the 1980s followed by an increase during the 1990s, but we do not know the causes. During the first two decades, AIANs fared worse than the total and NH white populations. By the

**Table 3. Children by Household & Family Characteristics**

	1980	1990	2000
<b>% Children in Two-Parent Household</b>			
Total	70%	70%	62%
AIANs	62%	51%	55%
NH White	79%	77%	74%
<b>Average Family Size</b>			
Total	3.1	3.5	3.6
AIANs	3.4	3.4	3.7
NH White	3.0	2.9	2.9
<b>Housing Tenure</b>			
<b>% Rental</b>			
Total	45%	53%	53%
AIANs	56%	62%	55%
NH White	30%	33%	32%

end of the century, AIANs had a rate comparable to the total population but still lagged far behind NH whites.

The 2000 census collected and reported information on children with disabilities, but provides no comparable data for the previous two decades. The available data show that the percent of AIANs with at least one disability is about twice as high as the rate for the total and NH white populations, an astonishing disparity.

Table 4 also provides statistics on the percent of AIAN youth ages 16 to 19 not enrolled in school and not a high-school graduate, which is a measure of the dropout rate. The 1980 and 1990 rates for AIAN youth are considerably higher than for all and NH white youths. The rates declined dramatically in the 1990s, but AIANs still fared worse than NH whites in 2000.

**Table 4. Children by School Indicators**

	1980	1990	2000
<b>Preschool Enrollment Rate</b>			
Total	40%	30%	46%
AIANs	35%	30%	50%
NH White	53%	43%	62%
<b>Disability Status</b>			
Total	n.a.	n.a.	6%
AIANs	n.a.	n.a.	11%
NH White	n.a.	n.a.	5%
<b>High School Dropout Rate of Youth</b>			
Total	17%	17%	12%
AIANs	22%	21%	13%
NH White	11%	8%	4%

**Access to Childcare**

Although the Census provides some insight into preschool enrollment as described in the previous section, it does not provide information on the use of out-of-home childcare services. This section draws supplemental data on the distribution of licensed childcare slots to profile the accessibility of AIANs to childcare.

Accessibility is measured in this analysis based on an area's ratio of childcare slots to the number of younger children under age 4. This ratio is calculated for all cities and unincorporated places designated by the Bureau of the Census. Because the City of Los Angeles is so large, the statistics are based on smaller communities. Groups that are concentrated in areas with a high ratio would have greater spatial access to licensed childcare than other groups. Based on this measure, there is considerable geographic variation in access to childcare.

The analysis indicates that AIAN children tend to reside in areas with relatively fewer childcare slots. The average for all young children is 0.35 slots per child. The average for NH whites is 0.37. This does not necessarily mean that NH whites use licensed childcare at that rate because the ratio is based on slots to all children. Nonetheless, the higher ratio indicates that NH whites have better geographic access to licensed childcare services. On the other hand, the ratio for AIANs is considerably lower, with 0.32, indicating that this group has worse geographic access to licensed childcare.

For center slots, the ratio for AIANs is only about two-thirds of the ratio for NH whites. This disparity is partially offset by a higher ratio of home-based slots,

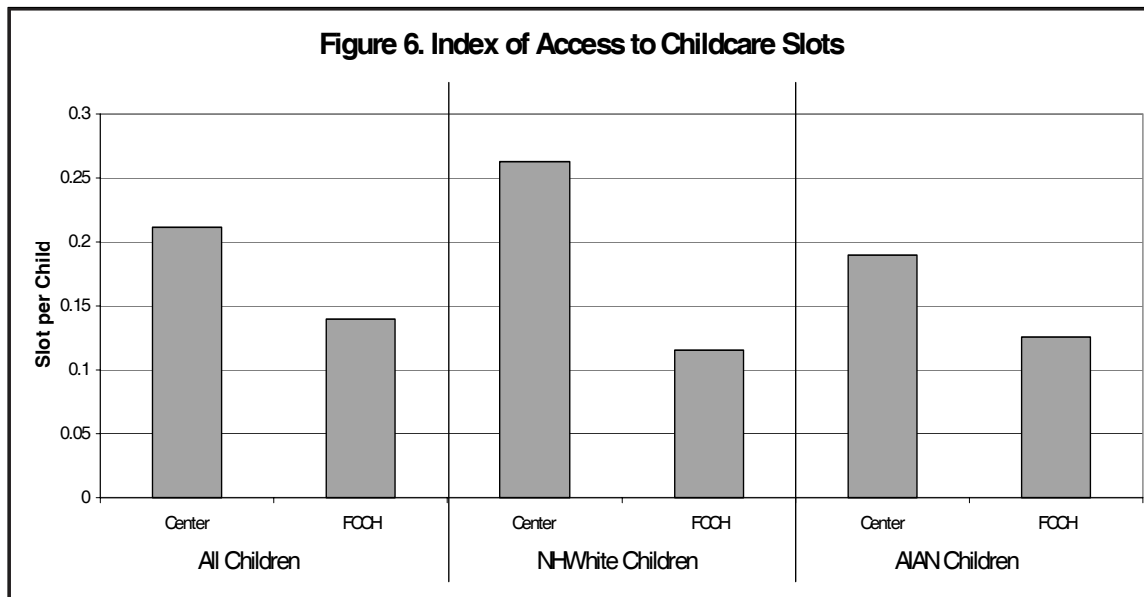
but these facilities often do not have the educational programs offered by childcare centers.

**Concluding Remarks**

Although American Indian and Alaskan Natives were the first Americans, they are often among the most forgotten in the region's social priorities. AIAN children face persistent economic and educational hardships. Serving this community presents unique challenges, in part because the geographic dispersion of AIANs makes it difficult to serve this community using centralized facilities. The relatively small overall size of the AIAN population hinders the reach of their political voice. Despite these barriers, as a society we have an obligation to work with AIANs to formulate better and more appropriate public policies. Understanding and respecting the diverse cultures and experiences of AIANs must be an integral part of programs to address and alleviate the challenges facing indigenous populations in the Los Angeles region.

**Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> Including Latin American Indians, there were about 138,000 AIANs in the region in 2000, making Los Angeles the home of the largest urbanized AIAN population in the country. Note that statistics in this policy brief exclude persons classified by the Bureau of the Census as Latin American Indians.
- <sup>2</sup> See references listed at the end of the brief.
- <sup>3</sup> See Appendix for discussion of the data and data issues.
- <sup>4</sup> The number of AIAN children and elderly is estimated because the Census does not provide age breakdowns for Eskimos in Los Angeles. Estimates are based on applying the age distribution for Aleuts to the Eskimo population.



## **Appendix: Data Sources and Data Issues**

This policy brief draws from several data sources. Aggregated data come from Summary Tapes files for the 1990 Census, Summary Files for the 2000 Census, and published reports for 1980 and 1990. Because AIANs constitute a relatively small population, our approach is to rely on statistics based on the largest underlying sample. Whenever possible, tabulations are based on the 100% population counts. Detailed demographic and socioeconomic data are obtained from the "long form" survey based on a 1-in-6 sample of the population. Unfortunately, aggregated data are limited by the way the Census reported the information, which is not always sufficient for the analysis. The final data alternative from the Census used in this policy brief is individual-level and household-level data from the Public Use Micro Samples (PUMS), which contain a 5% sample of the population. For American Indians and Alaskan Natives, this small sample rate limits the level of detail of the analysis.

There are problems when census data are used to examine changes over time. The single most significant difference is the collection of self-reported race. For 1980 and 1990, individuals were instructed to select only a single answer from a list of racial categories. The 2000 Census allowed people to check as many categories as appropriate. Given this change, caution should be taken when comparing statistics across decades. The 2000 statistics are for the combined single- and multi-race AIANs. Generally, the socioeconomic status of single-race AIANs is lower than the socioeconomic status of multi-race AIANs.

This policy brief uses 2000 data specific for AIANs indigenous to the U.S. The AIAN category includes Indians from other parts of the Americas. The 2000 AIAN statistics are adjusted by excluding Latin American Indians, most of whom are not indigenous to the U.S.

This policy brief utilizes two comparison groups, the total population and the non-Hispanic white population. Decade-to-decade changes in the statistics for the total population are influenced by an increasingly large number of Latinos, who tend to have a disproportionately large number of working poor immigrants. Statistics for NH whites provide a more comparable benchmark to evaluate the socioeconomic status of AIANs.

Data on childcare slots is derived from the Community Care Licensing Division of the California Department of Social Services and includes both childcare centers and family facilities as of August, 2003. For the analysis, zip-code level data are proportionately allocated to cities and Census designated places. Within the City of Los Angeles, slots are allocated to neighborhoods defined

by United Way. The analysis of access to childcare compares childcare slots to the young population. For this analysis, tract-level population counts are aggregated to estimate the number of young AIANs (0-4 years) in each neighborhood. Since the Census does not provide the required counts for many tracts because of privacy and confidentiality concerns, the number of young AIANs is estimated in these tracts using the AIAN population counts for ages 0-17.

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## **Disclaimer**

The authors are solely responsible for all interpretations and errors.

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## **American Indian Children's Council**

American Indian tribes, as autonomous sovereign nations, have a unique legal standing in this country. With that status in mind, members of various tribes have come together to work with representatives of public and private agencies to represent the interests of American Indian children and youth in this region. The Los Angeles American Indian Children's Council was created in February 1998 by the Children's Planning Council of Los Angeles, and works with the Council, the County Board of Supervisors and County Departments to produce positive results for children, youth and their families. The AICC, by planning and coordinating programs and resources designed to enhance their quality of life, supported by strong cultural and spiritual traditions and tribal relationships, works to ensure a better life for future generations.

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## **Ralph and Goldy Lewis Center**

The Center was founded in 1988 with a \$5 million endowment from Ralph and Goldy Lewis with the mission of promoting the study of regional policy issues, with special reference to Southern California. The Center seeks to enhance the understanding of the problems of the environment, urban design, housing, community and neighborhood dynamics, transportation and economic development. It supports interdisciplinary activities, involving faculty members and graduate students from many schools and departments at UCLA. The Center fosters linkages with researchers at other California universities and research institutes, and with civic, community and governmental organizations. The Center is supported by its endowment, other private donors and foundations, and research grants from a variety of agencies.

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