



**INTERTRIBAL
AGRICULTURE
COUNCIL**

Intertribal Agriculture Council
PO Box 958, Billings, MT 59103

**Roundtable on Ending Hunger in America: Indigenous Nutrition & Food
Systems**

Before Members of the House Rules and Natural Resources Committees

February 18, 2022

Introduction

Testimony of Lexie Holden, Associate Director of Policy & Government relations of the at the Intertribal Agriculture Council (IAC), presented before members of the House Rules Committee and House Natural Resources Committee.

Chairman McGovern, Chairman Grijalva, and Members of the House Rules and Natural Resources Committees, thank you for inviting me to provide you all with testimony regarding our efforts to end hunger in Tribal communities. My name is Lexie Holden and I serve as the Associate Director of Policy & Government relations at the Intertribal Agriculture Council. I am a member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and an alum of the 27th Class of Bill Emerson National Hunger Fellows. Today my testimony will focus on food insecurity during COVID-19 and the resiliency of Tribal communities.

Intertribal Agriculture Council (IAC)

The Intertribal Agriculture Council (IAC) was founded in 1987 to pursue and promote the conservation, development, and use of our agricultural resources for the betterment of our people. Land-based agricultural resources are vital to the economic and social welfare of many Native American and Alaskan Tribes. Prior to 1987, American Indian agriculture was practically unheard of outside reservation boundaries. Today, federal, state, and organizational partners draw upon IAC's expertise to inform programming and policies that impact Indian Country.

The State of Hunger Across Indian Country Pre-COVID

My colleague, Carly Hotvedt from the Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative, shared an excellent overview of the policies which have shaped Indian Country. I will now discuss the impact of those policies on present-day levels of food insecurity.



Food insecurity is “a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life.”¹ We argue that this food should also be affordable, nutritious, and culturally relevant, as well as located in areas that are accessible to all regardless of one’s ability or zip code.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, rates of food insecurity for American Indian/Alaska Native households were double that of non-AI/AN households. Whereas 1 in 8 Americans faced food insecurity in 2019, 1 in 4 Native Americans were food insecure.²

However, these statistics do not portray the true state of hunger across Indian Country. For some Tribal communities, the rate of food insecurity can be as high as 92%.³ Studies of food insecurity tend to undersample Native populations; they tend to combine Native Americans with other racial/ethnic demographics; and often, they tend to mislabel us as “something else,”⁴ “other,”⁵ or excluded altogether. Data is used to inform federal policies and funding, and we see the effects of our underrepresentation when we look at the overall investment in Tribal citizens by the US government and see that it is only two-thirds of that which is invested in non-Native US citizens.⁶

COVID-19 Pandemic’s Effects on Food Insecurity

¹ “Definitions of Food Security.” *USDA ERS - Definitions of Food Security*, United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, 8 Sept. 2021, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/definitions-of-food-security.aspx>.

² “How Hunger Affects Native American Communities.” *One in 4 Native Americans Is Food Insecure*, Move for Hunger, <https://moveforhunger.org/one-in-4-native-americans-is-food-insecure>.

³ Meredith, Eric. “November Is Native American Heritage Month.” *Hunger and Health*, Feeding America, 10 Nov. 2020, <https://hungerandhealth.feedingamerica.org/2020/11/november-native-american-heritage-month/#:~:text=Native%20American%20Food%20Insecurity%20Statistics&text=A%20study%20published%20in%20the,food%20insecurity%20rate%20of%2025%25>.

⁴ *Indigenous Identity: More Than “Something Else”*, Native Americans in Philanthropy, 24 Nov. 2020, <https://nativephilanthropy.org/2020/11/24/indigenous-identity-more-than-something-else/>.

⁵ Nagle, Rebecca. “Native Americans Being Left out of US Coronavirus Data and Labelled as ‘Other’.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 24 Apr. 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/apr/24/us-native-americans-left-out-coronavirus-data?ref=hp> per.com.

⁶ Henson, Eric, et al. “Policy Brief No. 7: Assessing the U.S. Treasury Department’s Allocations of Funding for Tribal Governments under the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021.” *Harvard.edu*, Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development Native Nations Institute, 3 Nov. 2021, https://ash.harvard.edu/files/ash/files/assessing_the_u.s._treasury_departments_allocations_of_funding_for_tribal_governments.pdf?m=1635972521.



Indian reservations tend to be in very rural parts of the country.⁷ Prior to the pandemic, this already left many Tribal communities at the end of the food supply chain, resulting

in higher prices, lower food quality, and limited choices at the grocery store.⁸ Beyond food access, Tribal communities also tend to have elevated rates of unemployment and poverty. Access to healthcare is also limited for Tribal communities, despite higher rates of obesity, diabetes, and smoking.⁹ When we examine the relationship between health, poverty, and food insecurity during COVID-19, it is not surprising that Native Americans were 3.5 times more likely to catch COVID than white individuals, and 2.8 times more likely to die from it.¹⁰ These numbers are in spite of the fact that Native Americans have the highest vaccination rates of any demographic.¹¹

Thanks to the Native American Agriculture Fund (NAAF), the Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative (IFAI), and the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), we now have a study detailing the impacts of COVID-19 on the rate of food insecurity in Native American communities. From over 500 survey responses, we learned that the overall food insecurity rate for Native American households without children was around 42% and for families with children, that number leaped to around 51%.¹²

Resiliency of Native American Producers & Tribal Communities

Despite all of this, Tribal communities have always been, and continue to be, resilient in the face of adversity. I would like to highlight some of the 2021 success stories from the Intertribal Agriculture Council's Technical Assistance (TA) Network. Our TA Specialists were instrumental in helping Native American agriculture producers remain in operation during the pandemic so that they could continue to feed their communities. In 2021, the IAC's Technical Assistance network served over 13,000 individual Tribal

7

<https://www.usetinc.org/wp-content/uploads/bvenuti/WWS/2017/May%202017/May%208/ Twice%20Invisible%20-%20Research%20Note.pdf>

⁸ <https://moveforhunger.org/one-in-4-native-americans-is-food-insecure>

9

[https://www.cdc.gov/tribal/data-resources/information/chronic-diseases.html#:~:text=American%20Indian%20Alaska%20Native%20\(AI,more%20likely%20to%20be%20smokers.](https://www.cdc.gov/tribal/data-resources/information/chronic-diseases.html#:~:text=American%20Indian%20Alaska%20Native%20(AI,more%20likely%20to%20be%20smokers.)

10

<https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2021.03.13.21253515v1#:~:text=CONCLUSIONS%20Most%20risk%20factors%20for,risk%20of%20COVID%2D19%20mortality.>

11

<https://www.nicoa.org/american-indians-have-highest-covid-vaccine-rate/#:~:text=The%20tracker%2C%20E2%80%9CPercent%20of%20People,and%2039.1%20percent%20fully%20vaccinated.>

¹² <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/Reimagining-Hunger-Responses-in-Times-of-Crisis.pdf>



producers, Tribal government contacts, and partners.¹³ A few of the projects our Technical Assistance Specialists led include:¹⁴

- The Tribal Elder Food Box Distribution program, which sourced products from local Tribal producers and fed Tribal elders (*Daniel Cornelius, Great Lakes Region*)
- The Food 4 Families Processing Coupon initiative, which let Tribal youth involved in 4-H process their show animals, feeding their families and communities (*Katherine Minthorn, Northwest- Oregon/Idaho*)
- Disaster assistance program outreach, which kept producers' operations afloat during unprecedented drought conditions resulting in decreased livestock feed availability (*Mike Shellenberger, Northwest- Washington*)
- Soil health workshops to support regenerative agricultural practices among producers, reducing and reversing the effects of climate change in production (*Desbah Padilla, Southwest Region*)

A Path Forward

After speaking with our producers, Tribal leaders, TA Specialists, and other stakeholders, we have collected several suggestions for how to eliminate hunger across Indian Country, during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. They include:

- Expanding 638 Tribal Self Governance Authority to allow more Tribes to source products for the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) from local and regional Tribal producers
- Enabling Tribal governments to administer all federal nutrition programs
- Creating set-aside programs at USDA to increase Tribal producers' access to credit, land, equipment, crop insurance, and other resources relevant to agriculture production

¹³ "Success Stories Volume III." *IndianAg*, Intertribal Agriculture Council, 2021, https://www.indianag.org/_files/ugd/53da25_a9317b3a679a41ada11cb77aea6e722d.pdf. (2021 Success Stories)

¹⁴ *Ibid.*



**INTERTRIBAL
AGRICULTURE
COUNCIL**

Intertribal Agriculture Council
PO Box 958, Billings, MT 59103

-
- Removing the restrictions on concurrent usage of the FDPIR and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
 - Working with Native American data scientists to better count American Indians/Alaska Natives in all federal studies related to nutrition and agriculture
 - Continuing to make investments in Tribal food economies; a \$528 million investment in infrastructure for regional food hubs across Indian Country could create a potential return of over \$9.4 billion¹⁵

Thank you for taking the time to listen to my testimony. I believe that ending hunger in Indian Country is possible, so long as those in power continue to listen to us and make investments in our communities. I look forward to answering your questions.

If you wish to reach me after the conclusion of this roundtable, please feel free to email me at lexie@indianag.org.

¹⁵ Simms Hipp, Janie, and Maria Givens. "Native American Agriculture Fund: Reimagining Native Food Economies." *Issuu*, Native American Agriculture Fund, 27 Oct. 2020, https://issuu.com/nativeagfund/docs/naaf_nativefoodecon_spread.