Urban American Indian Centers in the late 1960s-1970s: An Examination of their Function and Purpose

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Abstract

The post-World War Two effort by the federal government to alleviate endemic poverty on federal Indian reservations and to encourage Indian assimilation into the “mainstream” society by relocating Native Americans to cities is a familiar topic to scholars of contemporary American Indian history. So too are the many problems facing new relocatees, and the rise of urban Indian institutions to assist them adjust to urban life. Considerably less attention, however, has been paid to the specific forms of assistance provided by urban Indian centers, their important functions as “safe places” and oases of cultural preservation, and the serious problems they faced trying to address the complex needs of a burgeoning urban Indian population. This paper seeks to examine the specific functions and purposes of urban Indian centers via an analysis of a National Council on Indian Opportunity (NCIO) survey conducted in 1972 of seventeen Indian centers located across the country: Such an examination will not only shine light on the important functions of Indian centers, but confirm the magnitude of the problems facing Indian relocatees.

The Historical Context

In June 1892, Captain Richard Henry Pratt addressed the Nineteenth Annual National Conference on Social Welfare and Correction held in Denver. In a paper entitled “The Advantages of Mingling Indians with Whites,” the renowned superintendent of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania discussed the ongoing national dilemma of Indian poverty and despair, problems that he believed, were rectifiable given the proper attention and policy prescription. “We make our greatest mistake in feeding our civilization to the Indians instead of feeding the Indians to our civilization,” he insisted. Native Americans “must get into the swim of American citizenship. They must feel the touch of it day after day, until they become saturated with the spirit of it, and thus become equal to it.” Employing a rather dubious generalization to bolster his point, Pratt declared that “no Indians within the limits of the United States have acquired any sort of capacity to meet and cope with the whites in civilized pursuits who did not gain that ability by going among the whites and out from the reservations ...”

While Captain Pratt’s efforts to “kill the Indian to save the man” succeeded in “saturating” some Indian schoolchildren with the “spirit” of citizenship and civilization, they left others with deep emotional scars, estrangement from their families and cultures, and in the case of nearly two hundred children, a plot in the Carlisle Indian School Cemetery. Following the closure of Carlisle in 1918, official efforts to get Indians “among the whites and out from reservations” dwindled, but the off-reservation exodus continued as Native peoples sought employment opportunities in the agricultural, industrial, and service sectors of burgeoning metropolitan centers such as Chicago, Minneapolis, and Los Angeles. According to historian Nicholas G. Rosenthal, “The history of American Indians in American cities from 1900-1945 is marked by migrations in correlation to urban expansion.” Thus, the term “Indian

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Country” as constructed by lawmakers came to encompass much more than the geographically remote reservations and Indian communities established during the 19th century. By the mid-twentieth century, the de facto Indian Country extended to the towns and cities of contemporary America as well.³

The United States entry into World War II gave impetus to a surge of migrations—both Indian and non-Indian—to urban centers in the West where military installations and defense industries provided employment opportunities. Approximately 25,000 Indians served in the armed forces during WWII and another 40,000 worked in armament plants. Whether laboring in a factory, training for the military, or serving at a military base at home or abroad, practically all Native people involved in the war effort experienced life in an urban area. These wartime experiences altered their visions of the world and were a formative period in their lives.⁴ For some, a return to life on a rural reservation with relatively sparse economic opportunities was a step in the wrong direction. Consequently, the Indian migration to urban centers continued in the post-war era, a phenomenon that to some government officials offered new opportunities for hastening Indian assimilation into the majority society.⁵

In the aftermath of World War Two, the federal government implemented “new” policies that in some ways echoed those advocated by Captain Pratt a half century earlier. Seeking to both combat reservation poverty and encourage Indian assimilation, the Bureau of Indian Affairs in February 1952 instituted the Urban Indian Relocation Program (or Employment Assistance Program) to entice reservation Indians to relocate to one of seven urban areas (Chicago, Dallas, Denver, Los Angeles, Oakland, Cleveland, and San Jose) in which the BIA had established employment assistance centers. Other possible locals included Salt Lake City, San Francisco, Portland, Oklahoma City, Tulsa, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Joliet and Waukegan, Illinois. When the family (or individual) arrived at the center, the BIA provided them with low-cost temporary housing, counseling, and job placement support. Rendering assistance to urban Indian clients was a departure of sorts for the BIA, which had heretofore limited its services to Native Americans living on or near reservations. Helping urban Indian relocatees, consequently, was a challenge logistically and financially for BIA administrators. In August 1956, Congress appropriated $3.5 million to provide vocational training for Indian relocatees between the ages of 18-35 for up to two years. Once the new arrivals had secured employment, the BIA assisted them in moving into permanent housing and provided follow up services for approximately one year. Between 1952 and 1960, the BIA succeeded in relocating over 30,000 Indians away from their reservations to various western and midwestern cities. Writing in February 1960, Commissioner of Indian Affairs Glenn Emmons boasted that 70 percent of the relocatees had “become self-supporting in their new homes” and that the relocation program demonstrated “what Indian people can do in taking their place alongside citizens of other races if they are only given a reasonable opportunity.”⁶

Similar to the motivations of Indian migrants during the first half of the 20th century, the opportunity to make a fresh start in life, to obtain a good job, and to escape the endemic poverty on reservations held understandably strong appeal and between 1952 and 1968, thousands of Indian men, women, and children participated in the BIA relocation/employment programs.⁷ Determining precisely how long relocatees remained in cities is difficult to determine. According to one Indian Health Service report, 75 percent of relocatees returned to their reservations during the early years of the relocation program but that proportion dropped to about 35 percent as relocation administrators shifted emphasis from job placement to training.⁸ A government report issued in 1972 corroborates the latter statistic in its finding that “only one third [of Indian students] returned to the reservation to offer their acquired skills or more often, to find their skills not in demand.”⁹ The chief reason for the demographic ambiguity is that the BIA eliminated its statistical analyses on the status of relocated Indians in 1959, likely to mute
criticisms of the relocation program’s failures.\textsuperscript{10} The U.S. Census Bureau likewise failed to conduct a proper count of urban Indians, tallying only those who identified themselves as Native American or whom they identified as Indians. As Stan Steiner observed in his 1968 study \textit{The New Indians}, “the city Indian has been an invisible man. He has not even become a statistic.”\textsuperscript{11}

**Problems facing New Relocatees**

For Native American veterans and workers who had resided on military bases and/or in cities in the 1940s and therefore had at least some experience to guide them, the adjustment to urban life was likely less traumatic than for their comrades who were leaving reservations for the first time. For this latter group, the relocation program translated into a host of social, economic, and even psychological problems. Foremost among these was the sense that they were losing their identities and cultural heritages by living in urban centers. One relocation participant described the new “asphalt Indians” as “in between people,” or caught “in the middle of the stream”—entrapped in a racial and cultural rift. This explains their frequent trips home where they could regain their bearings before venturing back to the big city. Urban Indians also complained that BIA officials, in an attempt to encourage reservation Indians to relocate to metropolitan areas, had over-sold the prospects of employment, good pay, and improved living conditions. The reality facing many urban Indians was sporadic employment, low pay, inadequate housing, poor or insufficient health care, crime, alcoholism, and soaring student dropout rates. Richard McKenzie, a young Lakota Sioux living in San Francisco, described many new arrivals as “lost” and in a “hopeless” situation. “The simplest facts of life in the city were new to them,” he recalled, “gearing your entire day by a clock, when to go to work, when to eat lunch. They don’t even understand where you board a bus, how to pay, and how to open and close the doors.” The few boarding houses available to Indian relocatees, McKenzie noted, were “usually ill-run, short on food, and [located] in bad districts—especially for girls.” The employment “opportunities” the Bureau found for them, meanwhile, were hardly more encouraging, often amounting to “fly-by-night outfits” that enjoyed getting as much labor as possible from their workers, while paying them as little as possible.\textsuperscript{12}

Since BIA assistance ended relatively soon after an individual arrived in the city, Indians had to rely on church service organizations and state or local social service agencies to address employment, medical, or housing needs. Unfortunately, many mistrusted what they were unfamiliar with and did not understand the processes to apply for assistance let alone where to go to fill out the paperwork. In her 1965 study of Indian relocatees, anthropologist Joan Ablon stated that their unfamiliarity with written materials such as newspapers, telephone books, legal notices etc. were often causes for failure to take advantage of available opportunities. On occasion, poorly informed social service providers instructed Indian applicants that they needed to get help from the BIA. Bureau officials, in turn, told them to get help from state or local agencies. The growing desperation of new urban Indians did not escape the attention of the Lyndon B. Johnson administration. Vice President Hubert Humphrey, who had earlier praised the relocation program and its promise to move Indians off the “less promising reservations and into industrial centers where work opportunities are more plentiful” later voiced alarm about the program—yet placed the blame for its failures largely on the Indian victims. “Most [Indian relocatees] have never held jobs of any duration and are almost totally unequipped for industrial work. They seek to escape from poverty on the reservation without realizing that they may be making another and worse trap for themselves. Unless we take measures to help this group, we will find new ghettos being established in our cities and towns, new slum children growing up, a new breed of unemployed unemployables, taxing our welfare services.”\textsuperscript{13}
The Growth of Urban Indian Centers

The Indians who chose to remain on the “asphalt prairies” of urban America did not wait for the Great Father to “take measures” on their behalf; many realized, after all, that government “assistance” had led to their predicament in the first place. Instead, urban Indians followed the example of earlier urban immigrants who had formed voluntary associations and/or mutual aid societies to assist newcomers in their adjustment to urban life and to preserve their ethnic/cultural identities. During the first few decades of the twentieth century, for example, Native American activists established self-help organizations in Chicago, Minneapolis, and Los Angeles. Service-oriented religious organizations, meanwhile, established Indian centers in several metropolitan areas to dispense various forms of assistance—job and family counseling, distribution of donated food and clothing, and short term housing. Over time, Native Americans assumed control over these centers and expanded their range of services to include health care, education, youth programs, and a broad array or cultural-oriented activities (e.g. powwows, arts and crafts, native language classes). In this way, Indian Centers became “hubs” through which urban Indians maintained connections with each other, their cultures, and even with friends and family back on the reservation. While the size of their membership, financial strength, and political clout varied considerably, most of these organizations strove to provide their people essential social services, a place for cultural observances, and a location simply to meet, share a meal, and discuss the trials and tribulations of life in the city. As the urban Indian population expanded rapidly in the 1950s and 1960s in response to the BIA’s relocation program, so too did the emergence of new urban American Indian centers.

The NCIO Survey

The ability of these centers to address the needs of urban Indians received a boost during the waning days of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society. On March 6, 1968, Johnson issued a special message to Congress on the problems facing American Indians. Subtitled the “Forgotten American,” the message detailed the myriad difficulties facing Native Americans in the post-World War II era. In addition to recommending an appropriation of $500 million for Indian-related programs for fiscal year 1969 (a ten percent increase over the previous year), the president called for a new federal Indian policy based on “self-help, self-development, and self-determination.” The growing urban Indian population, he acknowledged, had “urgent needs” for education, health, welfare, and rehabilitation services that were far greater than that of the general population. Consequently, he called on the newly established National Council on Indian Opportunity (NCIO) to study the problem and to recommend actions to meet the needs of Indians residing in towns and cities.

Established by executive order on the same day that Johnson issued his “Forgotten American” message, the NCIO was both a symbolic and potentially dynamic effort to include Native Americans in the decision-making processes that affected them. Comprised of six Cabinet members with Indian-related responsibilities and six Indian leaders appointed by the President, the council gave Native peoples unprecedented access to some of the highest-ranking decision makers in the federal government including the Vice President, who served as the council’s chair. The NCIO’s primary responsibilities included coordinating the federal government’s services to Native Americans, promoting interagency cooperation to maximize the delivery of those services, and encouraging Indian communities to take full advantage of the programs available. Johnson’s special Indian message added an additional responsibility—to study the problems facing urban Indians and recommend solutions.
Later that year (mid-December 1968 thru mid-April 1969), NCIO Indian member LaDonna Harris (Comanche) organized a series of urban Indian field hearings in Los Angeles, Dallas, Minneapolis-St. Paul, San Francisco, and Phoenix. Resident Indians and representatives of government or social agencies that had responsibilities to serve the needs of Native Americans received invitations to attend and discuss problems in the areas of education, housing, employment, recreation, social services and justice. More than a simple fact-gathering exercise, the hearings sought to enlighten attendees about the problems facing urban Indians and to stimulate remedial federal government and local community action. Throughout the hearings, the urban Indians expressed considerable interest in the development of Indian centers. Although existing centers were often marginally funded operations with minimal staff, they fulfilled important functions. These functions included housing assistance, recreation and sports for children, legal aid, employment assistance, provision of a social gathering place, a mailing address for those without a permanent residence, and a “safe place” for the observance and preservation of Indian values. Attendees argued that Indian centers were in desperate need of adequate funding and that financial assistance should come from federal agencies.21

Building on many of the concepts introduced in Johnson’s Forgotten American message, on July 8, 1970, President Richard Nixon issued his own “Special Message to the Congress on Indian Affairs.” Explicitly repudiating the failed termination-oriented and paternalistic Indian policies of the past, Nixon proclaimed, “Self-determination among the Indian people can and must be encouraged without the threat of eventual termination.” It was the federal government’s responsibility, furthermore, to clarify that Indians could “become independent of Federal control without being cut off from Federal concern and Federal support.” Like his predecessor, Nixon acknowledged the special problems facing urban Indians. “Lost in the anonymity of the city, often cut off from family and friends, many urban Indians are slow to establish new community ties. Many drift from neighborhood to neighborhood; many shuttle back and forth between reservations and urban areas. Language and cultural differences compound these problems.” As a result, federal, state and local programs designed to help urban Indians often overlooked what Nixon described as the “most deprived and least understood segment of the urban poverty population.”22

Based in part on the information gathered during the NCIO’s urban Indian field hearings as well as his administration’s support for decentralization (or the New Federalism), Nixon announced an experimental program to extend federal support to seven “model” urban Indian centers in cities (Los Angeles, Fairbanks, Omaha, Phoenix, Denver, Gallup, and Minneapolis) that would thereafter serve as links between existing federal, state and local service programs and urban Indians. The Office of Economic Opportunity and the Department of Health, Education and Welfare—organizations that already provided services for the urban poor—would oversee the new initiative. The BIA, meanwhile, pledged to cooperate with the experimental centers and to contract with them to assist reservation Indians in their transition to urban employment. The Los Angeles Indian Center was the first institution to apply for and receive federal funding for social services under Nixon’s model Indian center initiative. Over the course of the next five years, fifty-eight urban Indian centers received federal funding to assist an estimated 140,921 Native Americans.23

In an effort to evaluate the efficacy of using urban Indian centers as the intermediary and/or disburser of government assistance, Representative Julia Butler Hansen (D-WA), the chairperson of the House Subcommittee on Appropriations for the Interior Department, requested information from the NCIO about the various activities of urban Indian centers. The task of gathering the data fell to Bob Robertson
who managed the council staff. On March 2, 1972, Robertson sent out a questionnaire to the directors of over seventy urban Indian centers seeking responses to the following six questions:

1) How many individual Indians has your center been able to serve during the past calendar year?
2) How many unemployed Indian people are there in your area?
3) What specific services do you provide?
4) Who are the persons serving on your Board of Directors?
5) How many people do you have on your staff?
6) What are the top priority need areas which have been established by your Board of Directors?

Over the course of the next few weeks, completed questionnaires filtered in to the NCIO’s Washington, D.C. office. The responses provide important data and insight into the functions of urban Indian centers, their various problems and shortcomings, and into the difficulties facing their urban Indian clientele.24

The seventeen centers that responded to the survey (see Table 1) indicated that they had provided services for nearly 70,000 Indian clients in 1971, but there were wide disparities in the number of individuals served and in the size of the centers’ staffs. The American Indian Study Center (Baltimore American Indian Center), for example, opened its doors in 1968 to address the needs of primarily Lumbee men and women from North Carolina who had ventured to Baltimore in hopes of landing employment in the city’s then booming industrial sector. In 1971, it reported serving the needs of 500 Native Americans with a staff of four people. The Fairbanks Native Community Center (one of the Model American Indian Centers designated by the Nixon administration), meanwhile, served 5,000 Native Alaskan clients with a staff of twenty-five people. The Norman, Oklahoma-based Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity (OIO) (est. 1965), reported that its staff of three people assisted approximately 18,000 Indians during the same period.25

Several push-pull factors help explain such disparities in the “performance” of urban Indian centers. First, urban Indian centers varied in their ability to attract (or pull in) potential clients. Centers with adequate funding to provide a wide array of useful services and with an energetic and competent staff had obvious advantages over cash-strapped centers with inadequate or ill-trained staff. The amenities (food, television, recreation, etc.) and location of the center, along with the availability of public transportation to get there would also have affected caseload. Various push factors over which Indian center staffers had no control included current employment trends, the availability of affordable housing, and the accessibility (or lack thereof) of church and other community service oriented institutions in the area. Finally, the degree of urban Indian knowledge of—and familiarity with—the center, their willingness to take the initiative to visit one, and their level of confidence in its ability to deliver assistance influenced the degree of Indian center use. The most obvious factor was the number of Indians in the surrounding area that needed help. According to the 1970 census, Maryland possessed 4,239 Native Americans, Alaska possessed 50,802 Native Alaskans, and Oklahoma reported 98,468 Indian residents. Assuming that each Indian center counted each person served only once (rather than several times for repeaters), the percentage of each state’s Native American population that received Indian center assistance is more balanced—11 percent for Baltimore’s American Indian Study Center, 10 percent for the Fairbanks Native Community Center, and 18 percent for the OIO.26
Just as urban Indian centers differed in staffing levels and in their ability and/or opportunity to serve a diverse and rapidly growing Native American population, so too did they differ in the services they offered (see Table 2). Some centers offered a multiplicity of programs and services while others concentrated their efforts on specific issues. The following list details some of the services offered by the seventeen centers under consideration starting with the most common.

1. Employment counseling and placement

The number one priority of new arrivals—and of urban Indian centers—was to help relocatees find jobs. Unfortunately, a host of interconnected problems made job-hunting a major challenge and the urban Indian unemployment rate during the early 1970s stood at 9.4 percent—nearly three times the national average. A study conducted by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) in 1974 traced the low level of urban Indian employment to the poor quality education and inadequate vocational training available on reservations. When combined with language and cultural barriers, lack of transportation, improper clothing, and Indian inexperience with locating job openings, filling out application forms, and sitting through interviews, the prospects for employment were slim at best. Not surprisingly, the jobs most often available to new relocatees tended to be low paying, seasonal, and unskilled.27

Indian center personnel aided relocatees by helping them complete job applications, familiarizing them with the interview process, providing a physical address and phone number in case employers needed to contact them, and with transportation, clothing, and shower/bathing facilities. Center employees also kept an eye out for employment opportunities and assisted placing college and high school aged Native Americans in job programs. The St. Paul Indian Center, for example, referred youth ages 12-17 to the Recreation, Employment, and Anti-Pollution (R.E.A.P.) program to earn money during the summer while the Catholic Indian Center in Gallup assisted college students gain admittance to the Commerce Department’s Student Temporary Employment Program (S.T.E.P.). The Inter-Tribal Indian Council of Yankton, South Dakota sought to put its clients to work by purchasing a jewelry manufacturer and relocating it to the Indian center.28

2. Housing

Second to securing employment, locating affordable housing was a crucial task facing newly relocated urban Indians. Many had little or no experience negotiating rental or lease agreements and most arrived with inadequate money to make down payments or their first month’s rent. Exacerbating problems further, Indian families came without furniture and lacked the financial means of paying deposits on utilities. As a result, families anxious to cut expenses moved in together (usually with relatives) creating unsanitary and overcrowded living conditions, often in poor neighborhoods with high crime rates and failing schools. In all, 19 percent of urban Indian families lived in moderately or severely overcrowded housing compared to 7 percent of the total US urban population. Not surprisingly, some families began questioning if they were better off back on the reservation.29

Indian center workers assisted urban relocatees by providing temporary housing and emergency loans and/or grants so that families could make their initial rent and utility payments. They also explained and aided in the completion of lease and rental agreements. Indian centers were a critical intermediary to local government and civic organizations to explain the various housing-related problems facing Native peoples and to advocate for safe and affordable housing. Some centers offered relocatees specialized
assistance. The Fairbanks Native Community Center, for example, helped its clients fill out home loan applications. Gallup’s Catholic Indian Center sought to improve family life through home improvement training.

3. Education

Federal policymakers have long assumed that education was the solution to the nation’s historic “Indian problem.” In 1928, Lewis Meriam’s *The Problem of Indian Administration* (or simply the Meriam Report) concluded “the whole Indian problem is essentially an educational one” and advised that the application of “principles that have been found to be successful in educational administration on a large scale should be applied to it.”

Although there were differences of opinion as to the type of schools needed (e.g. liberal or vocational, on-reservation or off-reservation), there was widespread agreement that education promoted assimilation and economic self-sufficiency. That said, the government’s record in administering Indian schools had been, in the words of a much-publicized 1969 Senate report, a “national tragedy” and a “national challenge.” Inadequate funding, poor facilities, culturally insensitive teachers, and sparse parental control over—or involvement in—school administration were contributing factors but so too was pessimism among students that education would translate into meaningful employment on impoverished reservations. The relocation program of the 1950s and 1960s did little to alter this dynamic. According to the 1970 U.S. Census, less than half of urban Indian men between the ages of 16-24 had earned a high school diploma (compared to 66 percent nationwide). Urban Indian males between the ages of 25-44 fared little better—approximately 51 percent had graduated high school (compared to 67 percent nationwide). Impoverished urban Indian parents, meanwhile, failed to take advantage of education-oriented anti-poverty programs such as Head Start. The 1974 HEW report, for example, indicated that only 11 percent of urban Indian children between the ages of 3-4 were enrolled in the program.

Urban Indian centers sought to address education deficiencies among relocatees by offering adult education, driver’s education, and GED classes at night. Some employed tutors to assist Indian schoolchildren with their homework. To combat culturally insensitive school curriculums, the Cleveland center launched “Project American Indian” to develop programs, speakers, and visual aids for use in area schools and established a community school for Indian children in the public library. The Fairbanks Native Community Center worked with local radio stations to broadcast programming to remote rural villages; the American Indian Community House in New York City served as the liaison with area TV stations to assist with the development of Indian-themed programs. Other centers offered Native language and culture classes.

4. Healthcare

Urban Indian health care concerns echoed those of their reservation relatives. Inadequate and/or inaccessible healthcare facilities, doctors, medicine, and a lack of general medical information were all too familiar problems. Urban Indians, however, faced additional pressures. Some hospitals refused to treat Native Americans because administrators feared they would not be able to pay their bills. New arrivals also were unfamiliar with medical facilities and unsure if they were eligible for treatment. Language barriers contributed to Indian discomfort as did their inexperience filling out hospital admission forms and insurance claims. As a result, some urban Indians procrastinated in seeking medical care, or awaited a return to the reservation where they could seek attention through the Indian
Health Service. Delaying treatment at times caused illnesses (e.g. heart disease, diabetes, depression) to grow more serious.

Although some urban Indian centers (e.g. the Sacramento Indian Center) offered emergency medical care, most centers did not possess adequate facilities and did not meet the federal government’s various requirements to dispense primary care. Instead, they served as referral agencies and directed the sick or injured to hospitals and clinics. Seven of the seventeen Indian centers under review provided treatment and counseling for alcoholism and/or drug addiction. The Farmington Indian Center in New Mexico provided a meeting place for Alcoholics Anonymous.32

5. Recreation, Youth Activities, Miscellaneous

Urban Indian centers provided a host of additional services that defy easy categorization. First, they became vital focal points in the urban Indian community, providing a physical presence or space for Native peoples to congregate and discuss their problems and formulate solutions. Just as important, they were “social beehives” to simply relax, play games, and organize sports teams. They also became cultural oases where Indians could converse in their native languages, pursue traditional arts and crafts, and observe important ceremonies and rituals. In some cases, Indian centers became staging areas for political action and reform movements. Baltimore’s American Indian Study Center hosted a Boy Scout troop and conducted voter registration drives; the Dallas Indian Center organized an Indian Women’s Club and an Indian Youth Council; the Great Falls Indian Center conducted an Indian population census and survey; the Upper Midwest Indian Center raised funds to send seventy-five youth to Camp Amnicon in Wisconsin; the Cleveland Indian Center sought to enlighten newcomers about the need for greater Indian self-determination.33

The final question on the NCIO’s urban Indian center questionnaire asked directors to prioritize their needs and those of their Indian clients (see Table 3). In most respects, their lists mirrored the services they provided. Employment and job training, housing, healthcare, and education ranked as top priorities. Some directors listed new or improved center facilities as a priority. The American Indian Study Center shared space in the South Broadway Baptist Church; the Cleveland Indian Center was located in the basement of St. John’s Episcopal Church; the Inter-Tribal Indian Council met in an old dairy barn. The Winslow Indian Center appeared especially hard pressed. Members of its board of directors were unreliable, the two-person staff was unpaid, and the 400 Indian clients it served each month received no counselling or financial assistance. According to board member Jo Cain, “Our major need is simply a place for the Indians to come off the reservation when in town; to relax, use restroom showers, prepare meals if wanted... We do attempt to provide some recreation facilities [such as] books, games, TV”

Other common priorities included providing family counselling, immediate necessities (food, clothing, money), and increased attention on Indian youth via recreational programs, summer camps, and childcare.34

Although only the Kinatechtapi Indian Council in Seattle listed securing funding as a priority, virtually all Indian centers faced some degree of financial pressure. To keep their centers’ doors open, staffs and boards of directors had to host fund raisers (powwows, craft fairs, raffles etc.), apply for grants, obtain donations from churches, civic organizations and private foundations, and secure assistance from federal departments such as the Office of Economic Opportunity, the Department of Labor, the
Department of Commerce, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Since the government predicated many types of assistance on population determinations, urban Indians were often shortchanged. The precise number of urban Indians in a given locale was difficult to determine due to the migratory patterns of relocatees who moved back and forth between reservation and city and due to inaccurate and incomplete census counts. As noted earlier, the Bureau of Indian Affairs certainly played a pivotal role in the relocation program and contracted with Indian Centers to provide newly arrived urban Indians with various forms of assistance but the BIA did not fund the creation of Indian centers nor work closely with them.35

While the federal government’s efforts to “feed Indians to our civilization” via the relocation program subsided in the 1970s, jobs and social opportunities continued to attract young Indians to urban America. By 1980, 50 percent of the American Indian population resided in cities.36 The significant work of urban Indian centers continued as well. By collecting, analyzing, and reporting information about the problems facing urban Indians, urban Indian centers enlightened policymakers about the need for change and how that change could benefit an urban Indian population that was all but invisible to the surrounding community. In response to the information provided by Indian Center administrators during the 1969-70 Urban Indian conferences, the NCIO recommended that the federal government reconsider the relocation program and instead promote economic development near existing Indian communities. The NCIO also recommended that the government make better use of urban Indian Centers, which could be used both as community and cultural centers and as programmatic referral agencies or clearinghouses. The Nixon administration’s model urban Indian centers initiative was the result.37

By providing an exclusively Indian forum where urban Indians could meet, form inter-tribal relationships, define Indian values, formulate solutions to common problems, and allow Indian leadership to grow and develop, urban Indian centers nurtured the growth of Pan Indianism and provided vital psychological and material assistance to thousands of Native Americans seeking economic mobility and security for their families. For some urban Indians, however, close interaction with Indian centers was as threatening to their tribal identity as relocation to a large city. According to Robert K. Thomas, tribes from the Southwest and eastern Oklahoma avoided Indian centers dominated by Plains tribal members because their activities (powwows, art festivals, communal meals, etc.) reflected Plains cultures and not their own. For them, “Pan-Indianism” was a concept to be feared for its “entity-dissolving implications.” Indian relocatees who were more open or pragmatic about such issues held a different perspective. Indian centers, in their view, provided a safe and supportive setting to observe their tribal traditions, they helped reinforce Native American identification with their heritages, and educated non-Indian observers about the vital significance of such activities to both Indian peoples and to the nation’s pluralistic culture. Indian center sponsored activities such as powwows, for example, provided many non-Indians with their first interaction with Native peoples and helped dispel popular stereotypes and misinformation about the First Americans.38

While the Nixon administration had broached the idea of expanding federal funding for seven “model” urban Indian centers in the president’s July 8, 1970 message to Congress, the American Indian Policy Review Commission (AIPRC) dedicated an entire section of its final report to the problems facing urban and rural-non reservation Indians. The two-year (1975-1977) $2.6 million study provided nearly one hundred separate recommendations for change in U.S. Indian policy. Several had a direct bearing on American Indian centers:
• Urban Indian centers were “the only real source of help for city Indians” but policymakers had “failed to recognize the significance and utility of these centers for administering, or assisting in, the implementation of Federal programs for urban Indians.”
• Since the federal government had an obligation to all Native Americans—both on and off the reservation, Congress should recommend that the executive branch deliver appropriate services when feasible through urban Indian centers.
• The executive branch should provide financial support for Indian centers in urban areas.
• The executive branch should mandate that urban Indian centers receive funding for education programs
• The executive branch should mandate that urban Indian centers receive funding to provide relocates with real estate information, consumer education programs, and grants for initial moving costs, rent supplements, and housing improvements
• The executive branch should mandate that urban Indian centers be provided with health care facilities and with funding to administer health care programs and health educational programs

The AIPRC’s recommendations for reforming and revamping federal Indian policy and, in the process, strengthen the purpose and functions of urban Indian centers were quickly dismissed as unworkable and/or impractical. Nicholas C. Peroff argues that racism likely played a part in Congress’s unwillingness to act. “When Indians do research in Indian policy, many non-Indians automatically assume that their work and any policy recommendations they might make are self-serving and, therefore, not to be taken seriously.” Other factors also contributed to the legislative impasse. Inadequate information, population statistics, and data on the effectiveness of Indian-oriented government assistance efforts discouraged meaningful reform, as did the opposition of bureaucrats in the Bureau of Indian Affairs (and their Congressional allies) who opposed any diminution of BIA power or influence. The late 1970s-early 1980s, meanwhile, was a challenging time economically for the nation with rising unemployment and double-digit inflation. New domestic spending programs on the part of the federal government would have been politically risky for incumbents seeking above all else to retain their influential positions.

When the Baltimore American Indian Center nearly shut down in 2002, Lumbee businessman Stanton Lewis got personally involved. As a middle school student in the 1960s, Lewis had tutored other Native American children at the center; as a teenager, one of his first jobs was painting a mural on the building; as an adult struggling with drug and alcohol addiction, he sought counselling there. Being at the center “was the only time I really felt safe and knew who I was,” Lewis recalled. “If I had to go outside my comfort zone, I probably wouldn’t have gotten the help that I needed.” A century earlier, Captain Richard Pratt had declared that “no Indians within the limits of the United States have acquired any sort of capacity to meet and cope with the whites in civilized pursuits who did not gain that ability by going among the whites and out from the reservations...” For urban Indians like Stanton Lewis, Pratt’s assimilationist prescription that Indians simply “go out among the whites and out from the reservations” proved woefully inadequate. During the 1960s-70s, Native American “capacity to meet and cope” did not come merely from the act of relocating to urban centers but from urban Indian communities that organized Indian centers to provide newcomers with critically needed social services and a place to go where—like Stanton Lewis—they could feel safe, understood, and respected.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>State</th>
<th># of Indians served in past year</th>
<th># unemployed Indians in area</th>
<th>How many people on staff</th>
<th>Board of Directors (members)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Indian Community House</td>
<td>NYC</td>
<td>NY</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>15 volunteers</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian Study Center</td>
<td>Baltimore</td>
<td>MD</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Catholic Indian Center</td>
<td>Gallup</td>
<td>NM</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>2890</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>Cleveland American Indian Center</td>
<td>Cleveland</td>
<td>OH</td>
<td>2248</td>
<td>3248</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>American Indian Center of Dallas</td>
<td>Dallas</td>
<td>TX</td>
<td>776</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fairbanks Native Community Center</td>
<td>Fairbanks</td>
<td>AK</td>
<td>5000</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmington Indian Community Center</td>
<td>Farmington</td>
<td>NM</td>
<td>5700</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Mayor &amp; City Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gallup Indian Community Center</td>
<td>Gallup</td>
<td>NM</td>
<td>1028*</td>
<td>14,280</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Great Falls Indian Center</td>
<td>Great Falls</td>
<td>MT</td>
<td>2000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inter-Tribal Indian Council, Inc.</td>
<td>Yankton</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>800</td>
<td>50-60 family heads</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kinatechitapi Indian Council</td>
<td>Seattle</td>
<td>WA</td>
<td>3000</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lincoln Indian Center</td>
<td>Lincoln</td>
<td>NE</td>
<td>1300</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity</td>
<td>Norman</td>
<td>OK</td>
<td>18000</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacramento Indian Center</td>
<td>Sacramento</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>9000</td>
<td>4000</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Augustine's Center</td>
<td>Chicago</td>
<td>IL</td>
<td>8000</td>
<td>&gt;14%</td>
<td>20 (12 full time)</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>St. Paul American Indian Center</td>
<td>St. Paul</td>
<td>MN</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Midwest American Indian Center</td>
<td>Minneapolis</td>
<td>MN</td>
<td>&gt;2000</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winslow American Indian Center</td>
<td>Winslow</td>
<td>AZ</td>
<td>4800</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* 257 family heads

**Table 1**

Britten: Urban American Indian Centers in the late 1960s-1970s
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Services Provided</th>
<th>AICH</th>
<th>AISC</th>
<th>Catholic IC</th>
<th>Cleveland</th>
<th>Dallas</th>
<th>Faribault</th>
<th>Farmington</th>
<th>Gallup</th>
<th>Great Falls</th>
<th>Inter-Tribal</th>
<th>Kinatechtapi</th>
<th>Lincoln</th>
<th>OLO</th>
<th>Sacramento</th>
<th>St. Augustine</th>
<th>St. Paul</th>
<th>Upper MW</th>
<th>Window</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education (adult ed; GED)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education (tutoring; at risk intervention)</td>
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<td>Employment (counseling)</td>
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<td>Financial (emergency loans)</td>
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<tr>
<td>General Assistance (food, clothing, showers)</td>
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<td>General Assistance (transportation)</td>
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<td>Health (alcoholism; drug addiction)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Health (referrals)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Housing assistance</td>
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<td>Indian cultural awareness/preservation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Legal and Technical Assistance¹</td>
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<td>Recreation (general)</td>
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<td>Recreation (youth oriented)</td>
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<td>Referral service (information)</td>
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<td>Referral service (welfare agencies)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Promoting broader awareness²</td>
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<td>Other³</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

¹ grant writing, legal advice, scholarship applications  
² Work with local tv and radio stations on Indian programming; Indian curriculum for schools  
³ AISC hosted a Boy Scouts troop and conducted voter registration drives  
Catholic Indian Center provided home improvement training and trained clients to become preschool aides  
Cleveland Indian Center conducted research on manpower development and how it relates to American Indians  
Dallas Indian Center hosted an Indian Women’s Club and an Indian Youth Council  
Gallup Indian Center sought to encourage community development and new business growth  
Great Falls Indian Center conducted an Indian population survey  
The Inter-Tribal Indian Council sought to establish a small jewelry-making industry  
Sacramento Indian Center provided emergency care  
St. Paul Indian Center participated in the REAP (Recreation, Education, and Anti-Pollution) program  
Upper Midwest Indian Center sent 75 Indian children to Camp Amnicon in Wisconsin
### Table 3: Indian Center Priorities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priorities</th>
<th>AICH</th>
<th>AISC</th>
<th>Cleveland</th>
<th>Dallas</th>
<th>Fairbanks</th>
<th>Farmington</th>
<th>Gallup</th>
<th>Great Falls</th>
<th>Inter-Tribal</th>
<th>Kinatechtapi</th>
<th>Lincoln</th>
<th>OIO</th>
<th>Sacramento</th>
<th>St. Augustine</th>
<th>St. Paul</th>
<th>Upper MW</th>
<th>Winslow</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improving center facilities</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★</td>
<td></td>
<td>★</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employment and job training</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★</td>
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<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>★</td>
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<tr>
<td>Healthcare</td>
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<tr>
<td>Treatment/counselling for alcoholism and/or drug addiction</td>
<td>★</td>
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<td>Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provision of immediate necessities</td>
<td>★</td>
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<tr>
<td>Childcare</td>
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<tr>
<td>Youth programs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family counseling</td>
<td>★</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<sup>1</sup>AICH listed creating a newsletter and conducting an Indian census as priorities

AISC listed voter registration and fostering community cohesiveness as priorities

Dallas Indian Center cited community organization and establishing a preschool as priorities

Fairbanks listed native industries development as a priority

Kinatechtapi listed funding for the center as a priority

Lincoln listed helping Indians adapt to urban life and providing on-the-job training as priorities

Upper MW Indian Center listed provision of legal services as a priority
Notes


3 Nicholas G. Rosenthal, *Reimagining Indian Country: Native American Migration and Identity in Twentieth Century Los Angeles* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 12. The Intercourse Act of 1834 defined all lands west of the Mississippi River—with the exceptions of Missouri, Arkansas, and part of Louisiana—as Indian Country. 18 USC § 1151 defined Indian Country as (a) all land within the limits of any Indian reservation under the jurisdiction of the United States Government, notwithstanding the issuance of any patent, and, including rights-of-way running through the reservation, (b) all dependent Indian communities within the borders of the United States whether within the original or subsequently acquired territory thereof, and whether within or without the limits of a state, and (c) all Indian allotments, the Indian titles to which have not been extinguished, including rights-of-way running through the same.


5 Ibid., 24-30.


9 Between Two Milestones: The First Report to the President of the United States by the Special Education Subcommittee of the National Council on Indian Opportunity (November 30, 1972), ERIC ED 091104, 84.

10 Sociologists James H. Gundlach and Alden Roberts estimate that nearly 70,000 Native Americans were supplied transportation to relocation centers by the end of fiscal year 1968 but that nearly fifty percent had returned home by the end of 1970. See James H. Gundlach and Alden E. Roberts, “Native American Indian Migration and Relocation: Success or Failure,” The Pacific Sociological Review 21 (January 1978): 118-119; Sorkin, “Some Aspects of American Indian Migration,” 244-245.


12 An Examination of the 1968-1969 Urban Indian Hearings Held by the National Council on Indian Opportunity (Training Center for Community Programs, University of Minnesota); David Hawkins, “To Them Dallas is an Interlude,” Dallas Morning News (April 17, 1971); Steiner, The New Indians, 179-181; Despite the shortcomings of the BIA relocation program, there is some evidence that Indian relocatees that participated in the program were still better off than Indian relocatees that attempted to do so on their own. See James H. Gundlach, P. Nelson Reid and Alden E. Roberts, “Migration, Labor Mobility, and Relocation Assistance: The Case of the American Indian,” Social Service Review 51 (September 1977): 472.


14 In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, Italians, Jews, Poles, and other immigrants from eastern and southern Europe organized mutual aid societies and clubs to combat the impact of industrialization and urbanization on traditional communal attachments. See Gerald Gramm and Robert D. Putnam, “The Growth of Voluntary Associations in America, 1840-1940,” The Journal of Interdisciplinary History 29 (Spring 1999): 522, 525-531.

16 John A. Price, “U.S. and Canadian Indian Urban Ethnic Institutions,” *Urban Anthropology* 4 (1975): 40-41. Price points out that one of the first urban Indian institutions was the bar (saloon).


25 NCIO Survey.


27 AIPRC Task Force 8 Report, 57-61.

28 NCIO Survey


34 NCIO Survey.


37 Britten, The National Council on Indian Opportunity, 186-188.


