

Relocation



A History of Removal

Throughout the 1700s and 1800s, Indian policy was designed to strip Tribal land from Native Americans and reduce their holdings to small reservations. Removal, allotment, reorganization were terms used and legally justified by the government to uproot the aboriginal people of this nation for the purpose of gaining land. Those who resisted were offered only two options, be forcibly removed or become the victims of genocide.

Assimilation - Boarding Schools, Termination

By the 20th century a new term, "assimilation" was being used. Assimilating into mainstream American society was supposed to create a better way of life for Native people and "civilize" them. This stated purpose tied neatly into the ultimate goal of acquiring more land and destroying the identity, culture, and the cohesiveness of Tribal society. Termination policies closing tribal rolls and liquidating tribal assets began in 1943 and rapidly accelerated over the next decade. Boarding schools were set up to take American Indian children away from the reservation at an early age and replace Tribal languages and culture with English and Christianity. The boarding school philosophy was "Kill the Indian, Save the Man", epitomizing the thinking behind the method of assimilation.

The Urban Indian Relocation Program

In the 1950s came another attempt to assimilate Indians into white American society - the Urban Indian Relocation program. The scope and magnitude of this experiment is still affecting people's lives today.

The reservation economies during World War II deteriorated as the federal government slashed the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) budget to meet wartime needs.¹ Jobs were scarce and the average annual income for an American Indian male living on the reservation in 1949 was \$623, five times less than that of all males.² Instead of putting resources into Indian Country's economic growth and sustainability, the BIA initiated the Urban Indian Relocation Program. Ten cities were chosen for relocation sites, and Indians were enticed and coerced to move off the reservation to these urbanized areas where there were supposed to be plentiful jobs and a better quality of life.

Original relocation sites³



San Francisco
Oakland
Los Angeles
Denver
Salt Lake City
Chicago
Dallas
St. Louis
Cleveland
Cincinnati

Relocation - Reasons for Leaving

Between 1952 and 1960, an estimated 160,000 American Indians were relocated off of the reservation to live in urban cities. The policies of the federal government and the continuing failure to promote the development of Indian lands caused a great number to leave the reservation and seek the opportunities that were said to be in these cities. Members of terminated Tribes during that era also looked for new opportunity in cities. Many relocatees were part of the more than 30% of able-bodied males who joined the military during WWII.⁴

Whatever the reason for leaving the reservation, it did not mean that they were willing to stop being Indian. Often, individuals would seek opportunities in urban areas with the intention of soon returning home and hopes of making their reservations better places to live. Those who succeeded and returned to their native land found despair at tackling the problems that existed on the reservation.

"Good Jobs"
"Happy Homes"
"Training"



Success Hard to Achieve

The early years of the Relocation era did not provide the support necessary for success. The BIA acted as an employment program, offering no financial support for individuals and families who were basically starting their lives over. Employment was often seasonal, leaving long periods of unemployment. Quality of life was very poor as the jobs were often very low-paying, entry-level positions rather than orientation and training for positions that could lead to upward mobility. Not until 1958 did the Bureau of Indian Affairs begin offering vocational programs for relocatees, although the opportunities from these programs also left the Urban Indian at the bottom of the social ladder.

Vocational Programs Offered for Relocatees in Los Angeles, CA⁵

Aircraft Machine Mechanic
Automobile Engine Mechanic
Barbering
Comptometry

Landscape Horticulture
Nursery Horticulture
Radio Repair and Allied Electronics
Secretarial

Many Hardships

In addition to the lack of quality employment opportunities, Indians living in Urban centers faced many other hardships. They were often placed in overcrowded housing units with unsanitary living conditions in neighborhoods with high rates of crime and poverty. Landlords would take advantage of the tenants' unfamiliarity with city life and overcharge for substandard living. Indians encountered racial and social prejudice, harassment, and even violence. Combine these injustices with a lack of job opportunities and being in a completely foreign land without anyone to turn to for help. A dismal picture is painted of life for many of these American Indians. The Los Angeles Examiner described the plight of one Urban Indian in a 1971 article:⁶

"3 weeks ago, Joe pawned his tribal turquoise belt, buckle, and watch... Absolutely penniless, the young Navajo also suffers from delirium tremors, sleeps on pieces of soggy cardboard,...He talks of committing suicide."

Top 3 Major Problems of Relocation

American Indians affected by relocation were given an opportunity to address some of the issues when the National Council on Indian Opportunity held hearings in five major cities in 1968 and 1969. The hearings described some of the major problems with the relocation process, falling into three main categories.⁷

1. Lack of orientation in relocating from reservations to cities
2. Low quality of opportunities for work
3. Confusion of where to turn for necessary services, as the difficulties like language and cultural barriers were ignored.

Health concerns were also a factor and a significant barrier to relocatees' success in cities. A 1974 case study showed that more than 50% of the unemployed urban American Indians felt that health problems strongly limited the type of work that they could do.⁸

*"When I first came to Colorado, I was so backward I didn't even know how to get off the bus...When you come from a place which has few paved roads, let alone buses, a pull cord may not be very obvious - it may be frightening."*⁹

Cultural Shock

It is important to note that the urbanization of American Indian people was not a single, unitary experience, and many fared better than Joe in Los Angeles. But one difficult aspect of relocation similar for everyone was the shocking difference between life on the reservation and urban-living. The bustling industry and complexities of urban living were overwhelming to many relocatees.

The cultural differences from the reservation to urban city life were so vast that it took a great deal of strength and determination for American Indians to survive in the Relocation Era. Compared to the traditional social structures of the reservation, the city's alien environment was unlike anything they had ever experienced. In addition, the values of urban life violated many of the basic premises of Indian living. Caught between two societies and struggling to survive, many became part of America's inner-city underclass.

American Indian Values

Cooperation/Group Harmony

Modesty/Humility

Silence and the Ability to Listen

Generosity and Sharing

Relationship With Nature, "We Belong to the Land"

vs.

Euro-American Values

Competition/Individual Achievement

Identification of Accomplishments

Verbally Aggressive, Expression of Opinion

Individual Ownership of Property

Mastery of Nature, "We Own the Land"¹⁰

Forced to Assimilate

In addition, there was constant pressure to assimilate into white mainstream society. The BIA had adopted a quota system in recruitment and the central office sought to recruit a certain number of applicants from each area, and that those relocatees stayed in the cities and did not return to the reservation. One officer in the Community Adjustment Section at the Denver BIA Relocation office wrote:

"When a person moves to a new area, he should make friends in his new home. He should not go back to his reservation and to the people he has known, for all recreation".¹¹

Urban Indian Centers - A Source of Help and Hope

However, American Indian people demonstrated that they were not content to be absorbed into mainstream society and would not let go of their Tribal and cultural roots. They maintained their cultural identity in the nation's largest metropolitan cities and formed groups of other relocatees. They spontaneously formed community centers and sought to help newcomers manage their new lives. They worked to identify the severe problems with health, employment, education, housing, etc. of their communities, -problems that the federal government had largely created and then simply forgotten. Today, 33 Urban Indian Health Programs exist with numerous other Indian non-profit organizations in cities across the country to aid and prevent the health and social issues of American Indians living in cities, and to provide a hub that continues the traditions and values of Indian people.

⁶Blackhawk, "I Can Carry On", p. 19

⁷American Indian Policy Commission, "Final Report", Government Printing Office, Submitted to Congress, May 17, 1977, Vol. 1, p. 432

⁸Victor J. Hanby, "Indians in American Cities," Case studies on human rights and fundamental freedoms: a world survey, Vol. 2, 1974, p. 348

⁹Ono, "The Relocation and Employment Assistance Program," p. 44

¹⁰The American Indian: Yesterday Today and Tomorrow, A Handbook for Educators. California Department of Education, Bill Honig, State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Sacramento, 1991.

¹¹Ono, "The Relocation and Employment Assistance Program," p. 39

¹Azusa Ono, "The Relocation and Employment Assistance Program, 1948-1970: Federal Indian Policy and the Development of the Denver Indian Community," Indigenous Nations Studies Journal, Vol. 5, No. 1, (Spring, 2004), p. 29.

²Ibid.

³PBS: Indian Country Diaries, August 1, 2011, <<http://www.pbs.org/indiancountry/history>>

⁴Ono, "The Relocation and Employment Assistance Program", p. 28.

⁵Ned Blackhawk, "I Can Carry On From Here: The Relocation of American Indians to Los Angeles," Wicazo Sa Review, Vol. 11, No. 2, (Autumn, 1995), p. 22