

A Decade with No Improvement: Native Women and the Wage Gap

Native American and Alaska Native Women Are Paid Less than White Men in All States*—with Little Progress Towards Equity Over the Last Decade

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- Native American and Alaska Native women¹ working full-time, year-round are paid just 60.0 cents for every dollar paid to White, non-Hispanic men in 2019—or \$24,000 less per year, on average.²
- During the last decade, the gender earnings gap for Native women and White men has not improved.
- In 19 of the 32 states with sufficient data, Native women are paid at least \$20,000 less per year than White men.



This year, September 8 marks Native Women's Equal Pay Day, or the day Native American women must work, on average, into the new year to earn what their White male counterparts brought home in the previous year. This represents over eight additional months of work to earn the same pay as their male co-workers in one year. This is a harsh reality both for Native women and their families, especially during the COVID-19 crisis, which disproportionately impacts women of color.

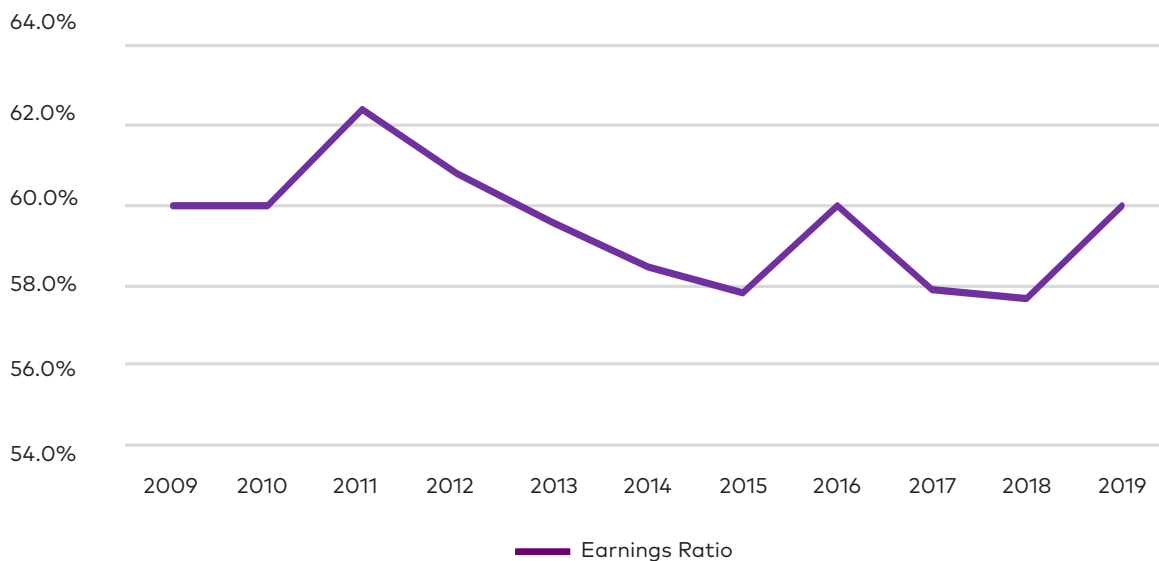
Before the pandemic, Native women working full-time, year-round were paid just 60.0 cents on the dollar paid to White men nationally in 2019. This disparity adds up to a loss of \$24,000 per year, on average, for Native women and their families.³ Even with full-time, full-year work, the median annual earnings of Native women in 2019 was only \$36,000—leaving a family of one adult and two children near-poverty.⁴

*Here, "all states" refers to the 32 states and the District of Columbia with population sample sizes large enough to calculate median annual earnings for Native American women working full-time year-round, the basis for calculating the gender wage gap.

These lower earnings made it particularly difficult for Native women and their families to weather a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic and its related “she-cession.” Well over a third of Native American households with children are headed by single mothers (36.9 percent) and over a quarter of married mothers (27.2 percent) are co-breadwinners who contribute at least 40 percent of household income.⁵ The gender pay gap for Native women takes a devastating toll not only on today’s workers but also on future generations—with few signs of improvement. Over the past decade, the earnings ratio between Native women and White men has stagnated, with no progress toward equal pay (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: The Gender Pay Gap for Native American and Alaska Native Women in 2019 Was the Same as It Was in 2009

Gender Earnings Ratio For Full-Time Year-Round Native American Women Workers, Compared to White, Non-Hispanic Men Workers, 2009 to 2019



Notes: Earnings data for Native American and Alaska Native, non-Hispanic women and White, non-Hispanic men aged 16 and older who work full-time, year-round—50 weeks per year and 35 or more hours per week. All earnings are in 2019 dollars and include self-employment income.

Source: IWPR analysis of annual American Community Survey data taken from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMs) at the University of Minnesota.

NATIVE WOMEN’S EARNINGS ARE LOWER IN ALL STATES

Native American women’s median annual earnings are lower than White men’s in all states with sufficient data (32 states out of 50 and the District of Columbia, Table 1).

- **Alabama** and **Arkansas** are the states where Native women have the highest earnings compared with White men, and the only two states where the earnings ratio is at or near 80 percent (80.0 and 79.2 percent respectively; Table 1).
- **New Mexico**—a state with a large Native American population⁶—has the worst earnings ratio for Native women compared with White men. Native women were paid just 51.6 percent of White men’s earnings (Table 1).

- **California**—the state with the highest number of Native women—has the worst absolute gap in earnings, with Native women’s median annual earnings being \$37,220 less per year than White men’s for an earnings ratio of just 52.4 percent (Table 1).
- Native women in **Mississippi** have the lowest annual median earnings for full-time, full-year work of any state at \$26,471, followed by **Nebraska** (\$28,472) and **South Dakota** (\$29,830).

LOW EARNINGS REFLECT A NUMBER OF FACTORS

Many factors contribute to Native American women’s lower earnings. These include:

- **Concentration in low-wage jobs:** Across the ten most common occupations for Native women, only two—elementary and middle school teachers and registered nurses—have earnings above 200 percent of the poverty threshold. Many of the most common jobs for Native women—cashiers; maids and housekeeping cleaners; nursing, psychiatric, and home health aides; waitresses; and cooks—are low-wage.⁷
- **Unemployment and lack of access to full-time work:** Compared to other workers, Native American workers faced substantially higher rates of unemployment and drops in labor force participation during the COVID-19 crisis.⁸ Native American part-time workers are also more likely to be involuntarily working part time than an average worker.⁹ Economic opportunities and access to good jobs are particularly limited for the more than one-in-five Native women who live on reservations.¹⁰
- **Gap in education:** In 2019, 39.9 percent of White, non-Hispanic men held a Bachelor’s degree or higher, compared with 20.2 percent of Native women.¹¹ While these disparities in educational attainment may account for some of the earnings disparity, a wage gap between Native women and White, non-Hispanic men persists at all levels of education.¹²
- **Lower union coverage:** Native women are less likely to be covered by a union contract than women as a whole, with 11.5 percent of all women covered by a union but only 5.8 percent of Native women.¹³ A lack of union representation can mean lower wages, larger wage gaps, and reduced access to benefits such as paid leave and quality health care.¹⁴
- **Heightened presence of violence:** Violence has a destabilizing effect on women’s lives, making it difficult to continue working or search for a job.¹⁵ During their lifetime, more than four in five Native women experience intimate partner violence, stalking, or sexual violence.¹⁶ Intimate partner violence has likely worsened during the pandemic.¹⁷
- **Limited access to health care and safety services:** Native American women are more than three times as likely to lack health insurance than their White male counterparts, with 8.4 percent of White men uninsured compared with 26.7 percent of Native women uninsured.¹⁸ A lack of healthcare can lead to sickness and death, and diminishes an individual’s ability to work and earn wages.¹⁹ Living on a reservation where housing is often crowded and health care services are not always adequate can further exacerbate health disparities.²⁰

EQUITY-FOCUSED POLICIES ARE NEEDED TO ACHIEVE EQUAL PAY

Tackling the gender wage gap will require comprehensive policies that ensure essential service and care work are properly valued, discrimination is addressed and prevented, and all workers have access to living wages, paid leave, health care, and quality, affordable child and elder care, including during training and education. This will benefit Native American and Alaskan Native women and their families, strengthen communities, and change lives.

TABLE 1: Native American Women Earn Less Than White Men in All States*

Median Annual Earnings and Ratio of Native American Women's to White Men's Earnings, Full-Time Year-Round Workers, Aged 16 and Older				
State	Native American Women	White Men	Annual Earnings Gap	Earnings Ratio
Alabama	\$42,615	\$53,268	\$10,653	80.0%
Alaska	\$42,615	\$64,746	\$22,131	65.8%
Arizona	\$33,026	\$59,351	\$26,325	55.6%
Arkansas	\$37,769	\$47,662	\$9,893	79.2%
California	\$41,000	\$78,220	\$37,220	52.4%
Colorado	\$36,503	\$63,123	\$26,620	57.8%
Florida	\$36,652	\$52,942	\$16,290	69.2%
Georgia	\$34,092	\$56,464	\$22,372	60.4%
Idaho	\$31,288	\$50,906	\$19,618	61.5%
Kansas	\$37,769	\$53,955	\$16,186	70.0%
Louisiana	\$31,288	\$59,351	\$28,063	52.7%
Michigan	\$33,292	\$55,000	\$21,708	60.5%
Minnesota	\$34,531	\$60,726	\$26,195	56.9%
Mississippi	\$26,471	\$50,072	\$23,601	52.9%
Missouri	\$36,711	\$50,906	\$14,195	72.1%
Montana	\$30,544	\$50,000	\$19,456	61.1%
Nebraska	\$28,472	\$52,876	\$24,404	53.8%
Nevada	\$36,258	\$59,000	\$22,742	61.5%
New Mexico	\$30,000	\$58,153	\$28,153	51.6%
New York	\$42,000	\$67,984	\$25,984	61.8%
North Carolina	\$32,580	\$52,876	\$20,296	61.6%
North Dakota	\$35,634	\$57,000	\$21,366	62.5%
Oklahoma	\$32,580	\$52,147	\$19,567	62.5%
Oregon	\$38,000	\$57,015	\$19,015	66.6%
South Carolina	\$35,000	\$52,876	\$17,876	66.2%
South Dakota	\$29,830	\$49,000	\$19,170	60.9%
Texas	\$40,000	\$65,000	\$25,000	61.5%
Utah	\$33,300	\$60,069	\$26,769	55.4%

Median Annual Earnings and Ratio of Native American Women's to White Men's Earnings, Full-Time Year-Round Workers, Aged 16 and Older

State	Native American Women	White Men	Annual Earnings Gap	Earnings Ratio
Virginia	\$43,164	\$64,746	\$21,582	66.7%
Washington	\$41,717	\$66,748	\$25,031	62.5%
Wisconsin	\$35,000	\$54,233	\$19,233	64.5%
Wyoming	\$37,059	\$57,015	\$19,956	65.0%

Notes: White men are non-Hispanic; Native American women refer to those who self-identify as "American Indian or Alaska Native" on the U.S. Census, and are non-Hispanic.

*Sample sizes were inadequate to calculate earnings for Native American or Alaska Native women in Connecticut, Delaware, District of Columbia, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Vermont, and West Virginia.

Source: IWPR analysis of the 2015–2019 American Community Survey (ACS) microdata (Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Version 9.0).

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Photo credit: eyecrave/istockphoto.

ENDNOTES

¹ This brief uses "Native," "Native American," "Native American and Alaska Native" interchangeably to refer to those who self-identified as American Indian or Alaska Native (AI/AN) in the American Community Survey. The authors acknowledge that no term is perfect or entirely inclusive and none adequately capture the full range of identities and cultures within Indigenous communities in North America.

² IWPR analysis of the American Community Survey from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Sophia Foster, Ronald Goeken, Jose Pacas, Megan Schouweiler, and Mathew Sobek, "IPUMS USA: Version 11.0 [dataset]" (Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2021) <<http://doi.org/10.18128/Do10.V11.0>>.

³ These are the latest available earnings data; 2020 data will be released in the fall.

⁴ In 2019, the federal poverty threshold for a household of one adult and two children was \$20,598. At 200 percent of poverty, or near-poor, this was \$41,196 annually; see U.S. Census Bureau, "Poverty Thresholds by Size of Family and Number of Related Children Under 18 Years" (Washington, DC: United States Census Bureau, 2021) <<https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-poverty-thresholds.html>> (accessed June 2021).

⁵ See Elyse Shaw and C. Nicole Mason, *Holding Up Half the Sky: Mothers as Workers, Primary Caregivers, and Breadwinners During COVID-19* (Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2020) <<https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Holding-Up-Half-the-Sky-Mothers-as-Breadwinners.pdf>> (accessed June 2021).

⁶ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Minority Health, "Profile: American Indian/Alaska Native" (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021) <<https://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/omh/browse.aspx?lvl=3&lvlid=62>> (accessed August 2021).

⁷ Jasmine Tucker, *Equal Pay for Native Women* (Washington DC: National Women's Law Center, 2017) <<https://nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Native-Women-Equal-Pay-2019.pdf>>.

⁸ See Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, "Native American Labor Market Dashboard" (Minneapolis, MN: Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, 2021) <https://www.minneapolisfed.org/article/2021/-/link.aspx?_id=631EAE8053F14E4C90A40DE46DDF95C3&_z=z> (accessed August 2021); data are not published by gender. See also Donna Feir and Charles Golding, "Native Employment During COVID-19: Hit Hard in April but Starting to Rebound?" (Minneapolis, MN: Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, 2020) <<https://www.minneapolisfed.org/article/2020/native-employment-during-covid-19-hit-hard-in-april-but-starting-to-rebound>>.

⁹ Mary Dorinda Allard and Vernon Brundage, Jr., "American Indians and Alaska Natives in the U.S. Labor Force" (Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Monthly Labor Review*, 2019) <<https://doi.org/10.21916/mlr.2019.24>>.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Minority Health, "Profile: American Indian/Alaska Native" (Washington, DC: United States Department of Health and Human Services 2021) <<https://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/omh/browse.aspx?lvl=3&lvlid=62>> (accessed August 2021).

¹¹ National Center for Education Statistics, "Table 104.10. Rates of high school completion and bachelor's degree attainment among persons age 25 and over, by race/ethnicity and sex: Selected years, 1910 through 2020" (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2021) <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_104.10.asp> (accessed August 2021).

¹² Jasmine Tucker and Kayla Patrick, *Equal Pay for Native Women* (Washington, DC: National Women's Law Center, 2017) <<https://nwlc-ciw49tixgw5lbab.stackpathdns.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Equal-Pay-for-Native-Women-2017.pdf>> (accessed June 2021).

¹³ Asha DuMonthier, Chandra Childers, and Jessica Milli, *The Status of Black Women in the United States* (Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2017) <<https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/The-Status-of-Black-Women-6.26.17.pdf>>.

¹⁴ Celine McNicholas, Lynn Rhinehart, Margaret Poydock, Heidi Shierholz, and Daniel Perez, *Why Unions are Good for Workers—Especially in a Crisis like COVID-19* (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2020) <<https://www.epi.org/publication/why-unions-are-good-for-workers-especially-in-a-crisis-like-covid-19-12-policies-that-would-boost-worker-rights-safety-and-wages/>>.

¹⁵ See Cynthia Hess and Alona Del Rosario, *Dreams Deferred: A Survey on the Impact of Intimate Partner Violence on Survivors' Education, Careers, and Economic Security* (Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2018) <https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/C475_IWPR-Report-Dreams-Deferred.pdf>.

¹⁶ Andre Rosay, *Violence Against American Indian and Alaska Native Women and Men: 2010 Findings from the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey* (Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice, 2010) <<https://scholarworks.alaska.edu/bitstream/handle/11122/7025/1607.01.violence-vs-aian.nij-report.rosay.pdf?sequence=1>>.

¹⁷ See Megan L. Evans, Margo Lindauer, and Maureen E. Farrell, "A Pandemic within a Pandemic—Intimate Partner Violence During Covid-19," *New England Journal of Medicine* 383, no. 24 (2020) <<https://www.nejm.org/doi/pdf/10.1056/NEJMp2024046?articleTools=true>> (accessed June 2021).

¹⁸ Asha DuMonthier, Chandra Childers, and Jessica Milli, *The Status of Black Women in the United States* (Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2017) <<https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/The-Status-of-Black-Women-6.26.17.pdf>> (accessed June 2021).

¹⁹ Jack Hadley, *Consequences of the Lack of Health Insurance on Health and Earnings* (St. Louis, Missouri and Washington, DC: Missouri Foundation for Health and the Urban Institute, 2006) <<https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/50321/1001001-Consequences-of-the-Lack-of-Health-Insurance-on-Health-and-Earnings.PDF>> (accessed June 2021).

²⁰ Kate Conger, Robert Gebeloff, and Richard A. Opperl Jr., "Native Americans Feel Devastated by the Virus Yet Overlooked in the Data," *New York Times*, July 30, 2020, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/30/us/native-americans-coronavirus-data.html>> (accessed June 2021). Heidi Schultz, "Native American Communities and COVID-19: How Foundations Can Help," *Health Affairs* (blog), March 31, 2020, <<https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hblog20200331.659944/full/>> (accessed June 2021).

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We win economic equity for all women and eliminate barriers to their full participation in society. As a leading national think tank, we build evidence to shape policies that grow women's power and influence, close inequality gaps, and improve the economic well-being of families.

