
Pedestrian Fatalities in Native American Populations

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INTRODUCTION

Native Americans have the worst pedestrian safety outcomes of any racial or ethnic group. According to the most recent “Dangerous by Design” report by Transportation for America, native people were 2.2 times as likely to be killed while walking as white people between 2010 and 2019. [1]

While this is an alarming disparity, it represents a major improvement over previous periods. Just two years earlier, the same report found native people were 2.66 times as likely to be killed compared to white people. [2] And as recently as 2016, (this is the data that was cited in my book) during the period between 2005 and 2014, native people faced 4.8 times greater odds of being killed while walking. [3]

In 2020 traffic safety outcomes for native people declined yet again, with the fatality rate increasing 11 percent, according to Federal Highway Administration preliminary data. (The increase, however, was still lower than the increase for Black pedestrians: 23 percent.) [4]

According to a FARS query, 683 native people were killed in pedestrian crashes between 2015 and 2019.

WHY

In 2013, the CDC released a study showing native American men suffered pedestrian deaths at a rate of 7.73 per 100,000 between 2001 and 2010. For native women it was 2.2. The rate for the general population was 1.58, making native men almost five times as likely to be killed while walking as the general population. [5]

According to this study, urban-dwelling native people were about half as likely as rural dwelling to be killed while walking. In large urban areas, native people still had elevated fatality risk, but it was similar to Black and Hispanic people's. (3.58 per 100,000 vs 7.04 in non-metro – rural – areas). In urban areas, native people face similar safety issues as other marginalized racial groups. (Because of the wealth gap they may be less likely to own a car, and more reliant on walking and transit. They may also live in lower-income areas, which are often passed over for safety improvements and have higher pedestrian safety risk.) [5]

The disparity reported by the CDC suggests part of the problem is the conditions on reservations. Between 2011 and 2015, there were 551 Native American pedestrian fatalities,

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of which 197 occurred on reservations. Of those, 136 of the victims were native people. [6]

Perhaps the most detailed look at the problem of pedestrian safety on reservations was published by University of Minnesota researchers Kathryn Quick and Guillermo Narváez in 2018. [7] This federally funded research drew on more than 100 interviews with tribal residents and leadership in Minnesota as well as with state transportation officials.

Quick and Narváez identified pedestrian safety a “critical, under-recognized priority on reservations.”

“Pedestrian safety was the prominent concern in our interviews with key stakeholders and in our brief surveys with residents,” the research team wrote.

“The tribes’ leaders with primary responsibility for roadway safety issues – transportation engineers, law enforcement, and health leaders involved in injury prevention and rehabilitation – repeatedly emphasized this issue, as did the reservation residents with whom we spoke at community fairs.”

Interviewees mentioned that children and adults make frequent trips along state highways to reach school or stores. But often they were lacking lighting or sidewalks, shoulders or had other visibility issues and high speeds.

One county engineer, for example said: “It’s not an urban area, but there are pedestrians like an urban area.”

Some of the overall problems identified by Quick and Narváez included:

- Worse road conditions, lighting, snow removal. (Elsewhere, tribal leaders say they don’t receive enough funding for their often large road networks.)
- Limited tribal capacity for safety studies.
- A “jurisdictional patchwork” between tribal sovereignty and state responsibility over roadways and enforcement.
- Tribes have limited enforcement authority over non-native people even on reservations
- Aging vehicles, passenger crowding.
- Slower emergency response times.

Despite the near consensus about the problem from tribal leaders and elders, there was a disconnect with state transportation officials from the Minnesota DOT.

The research team said interviews showed “that state or county officials are simply not very in touch with residents’ perceptions of conditions on the reservation.”

“We need more research that is driven by the questions, knowledge, and priorities of tribal governments and reservation residents; this is both a matter of respect for sovereignty and self-determination and a matter of designing solutions based on the most informed, knowledgeable perspectives,” said Quick and Narváez.

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Other studies have examined the pedestrian safety in native populations. A U.S. DOT-sponsored study from 2004 identified the rurality and high poverty rates among native Americans as important risk factors.

Both those factors are associated with increased pedestrian safety risk across demographic groups. [8]

However, most research on the topic has been focused on issues facing native people who live on reservations. About 1 million native people live on reservations in the U.S, or 22 percent of the nation's 5.2 million native people, according to the nonprofit group Native American Aid.

"The design of safe roadways that recognize pedestrian needs as well as motor vehicle needs continues to be a challenge that is rarely met in rural American Indian communities," wrote authors J. LaValley, C.S. Crandall, D. P. Sklar and L. Banks. "The needs of motor vehicle drivers have usually taken precedence over the needs of pedestrians resulting in roadways that are often fast and dangerous to pedestrians."

They recommended: adding speed humps, pedestrian islands, sidewalks, pedestrian overpasses and lighting.

While we should not minimize the issues on reservations and the lessons here about cross-cultural government responses,

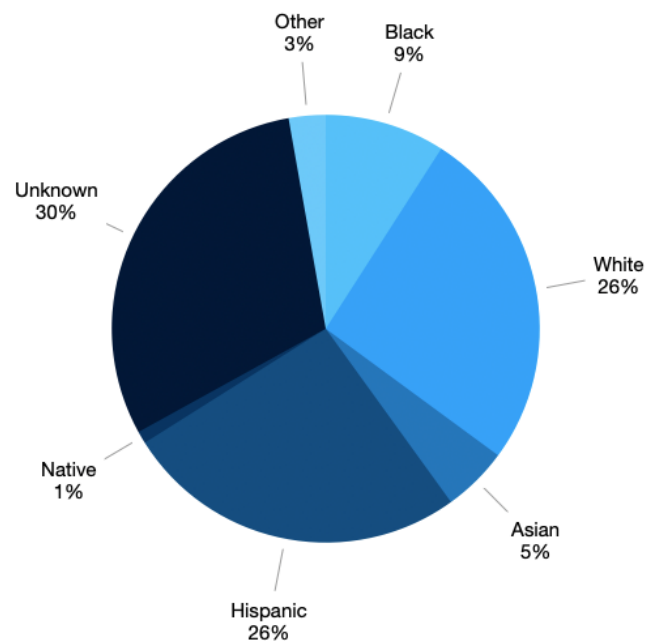
there were still only 56 pedestrian deaths on reservations nationwide in 2018 – and only 33 of those victims were native, according to FARS.

The California Context

According to FARS, there were nine native people killed while walking in the state of California in 2019 and just one occurred on a reservation.

However, all racial and ethnic data for the state of California about pedestrian fatality victims should be view cautiously due to the fact that in a plurality of cases -- 31 percent -- the race and ethnicity of the victims was unknown.

CA 2019 PEDESTRIAN FATALITIES BY RACE



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In California, the native population is largely urban. According to the California Consortium for Urban Indian Health, there are 723,225 urban American Indians or Native Alaskans in California. One in nine “urban Indians” nationwide lives in a California city.

Nationally, about 60 percent of native Americans live in cities, and they say their issues are overlooked.

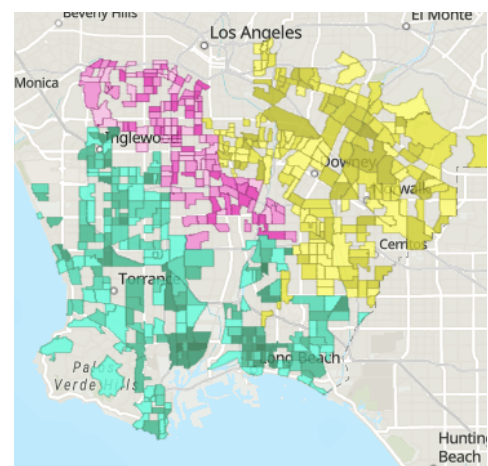
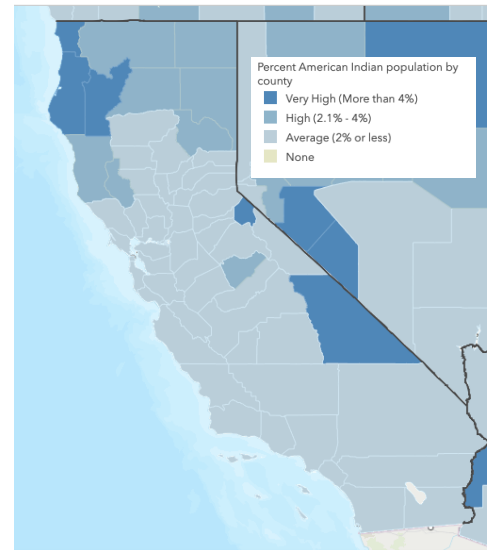
There are people representing 109 Indian tribes in California, and 90 percent live in urban areas. Many urban Indians were relocated by federal policy to cities in the 1950s, which was intended to promote assimilation and weaken tribal ties.

Los Angeles County has the largest urban Indian population in the country, with 73,000 who identify as fully native and 162,000 as either fully or partly native. [9]

Native people in California are widely dispersed. There are concentrations in some rural counties in the western and northern parts of the state. Inyo county, for example, was 10.2 percent native American or Native Alaskan according to the 2010 Census. Alpine County was 17.9 percent. Del Norte County was 6.8 percent.

Within urban areas we see concentrations of native people in neighborhoods in Oakland, Newark,, North Long Beach and West Carson, but as shown (bottom right), compared to other racial groups, native Californians do not typically

live in neighborhoods with clear borders or definitions, which makes isolating geographic safety factors more difficult.



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Success stories

Red Lake Nation

At the Red Lake Nation Band of Chippewa reservation in Minnesota, tribal staff developed a comprehensive transportation plan. During the study, Minnesota Highway 1, a high-speed rural road that runs through the reservation, was identified as a safety problem. The tribe was able to use the data to apply for funding from the State of Minnesota to install lighting and a trail along the road.

Navajo Nation (1992-1993)

A partnership between tribal officials, the New Mexico Department of Transportation, law enforcement and substance abuse nonprofits identified a stretch of Highway 666 that was the site of a high number of pedestrian fatalities. In response, \$30,000 was invested in lighting, particularly in two locations around bars. In addition, law enforcement were encouraged to remove intoxicated pedestrians from the roadway when possible. As a result, U.S. DOT reported, the number of fatalities dropped from 7-8 per year to just 1-2 following its completion.

Urban Indians and Pedestrian Safety

There appears to be a dearth of information focused on improving pedestrian safety for urban Indians.

This might be an opportunity for CalTrans to either:

- Study pedestrian safety issues specifically within urban Indian context
- Institute a program or policy aimed at helping this population.

Additional Resources

- The national online Tribal Transportation Safety Data Survey
<https://www.tribalsafety.org>
- Minnesota DOT short course on tribal-state relationships
<https://www.dot.state.mn.us/tribaltraining/TSRTCcoursework.html>
- The California Consortium for Urban Indian Health
<https://ccuih.org>
- UC Berkeley SafeTREC Tribal Road Safety Program + Crash Tool & Street Story Tool
<https://safetrec.berkeley.edu/programs/tribal-road-safety-program/tribal-crash-data-tool>

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Maps

- #1. AtlasPublisher, "USA Census American Indian Population," Map Service [MAP], Created: Jul 12, 2012 Updated: May 2, 2018.
- #2. Kywilliams0, "Map of all LA County residents with native american ancestry (both those reporting partial ancestry and those reporting exclusively as AIAN)," Feature Service [Map], Created: May 1, 2019 Updated: Jun 9, 2020.