UNDERINVESTMENT IN INDIAN COUNTRY:

HOW FEDERAL AND PHILANTHROPIC FUNDING TO NATIVE AMERICANS FALLS SHORT, AND HOW TO FIX IT

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Key takeaways

- After historic investments into Tribal nations, citizens, and communities following the COVID-19 pandemic, recent federal policy actions have slashed funding for Native Americans. These cuts violate the government's trust and treaty obligations and exacerbate critical investment needs in Indian Country.
- Investment into Indian Country can benefit both Native and non-Native Americans; for example, every dollar invested in Tribal Colleges and Universities returns $1.60 in tax revenue and public sector savings.
- Just 0.88% of foundation and corporate philanthropic investment in the U.S. goes to Native-serving causes or organizations, and only 0.51% goes to exclusively Native-serving causes or organizations.
- Policymakers and philanthropy can bolster Tribal investment by better utilizing mandatory congressional funding, making Native-specific federal investment data more accessible, and reforming philanthropic approaches to investing in Native causes.

Executive summary

American Indian and Alaska Native Tribes and communities have seen significant shifts in federal funding in recent years. Sweeping federal laws passed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and recession brought historic levels of funding to Tribal communities in areas such as infrastructure, health, education, clean energy, and economic development.

However, since the start of 2025, the funding landscape has shifted. Unfortunately, rather than move the U.S. closer to meeting the full funding needs of Tribal communities, recent fiscal policy decisions have moved it further away.

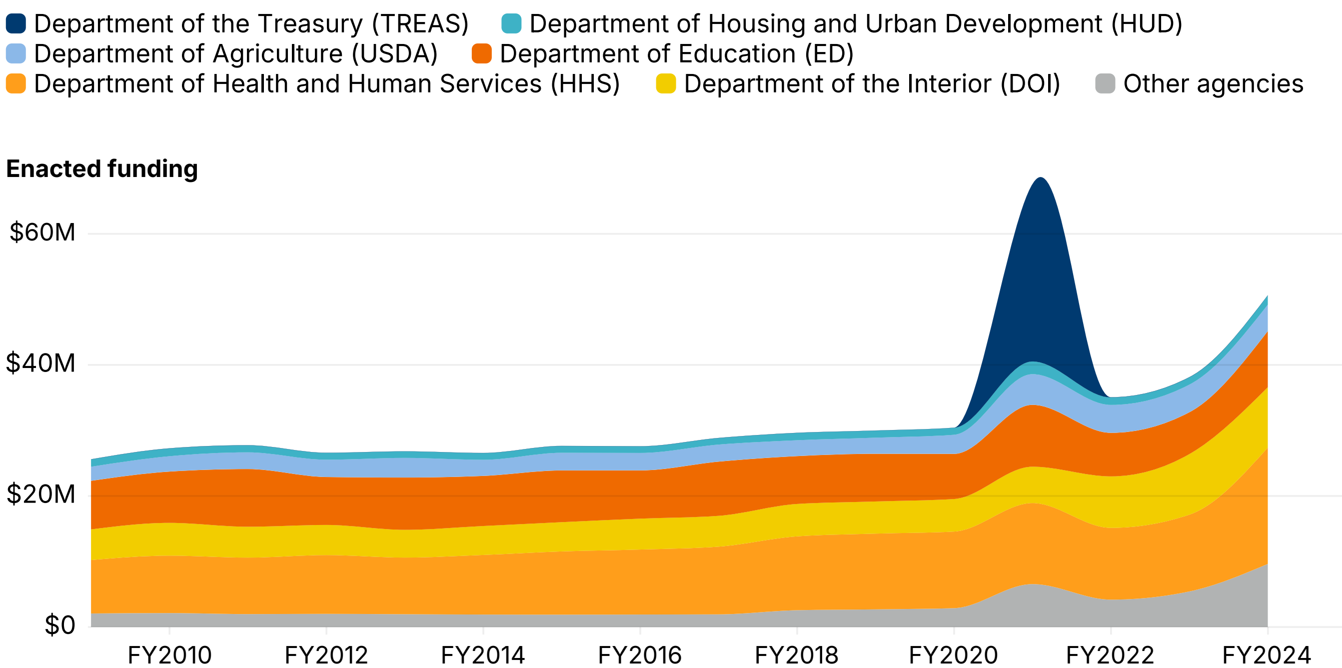
This report provides an overview of recent funding to Indian Country, outlines areas of critical need, and highlights service areas that have recently seen some of the largest funding reductions.

Trends in overall federal funding for Native Americans

Real funding for Tribal nations, citizens, and communities remained flat throughout most of the Obama administration and saw only slight growth during most of the first Trump administration. But with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and recession in 2020, the federal government significantly grew overall spending levels, including to Indian Country, where spending more than doubled between Fiscal Years 2020 and 2021.

FIGURE 1

Federal funding for programs benefitting Native Americans and Tribal nations, by agency



Source: FY2011-FY2024 Native American Funding Crosscut

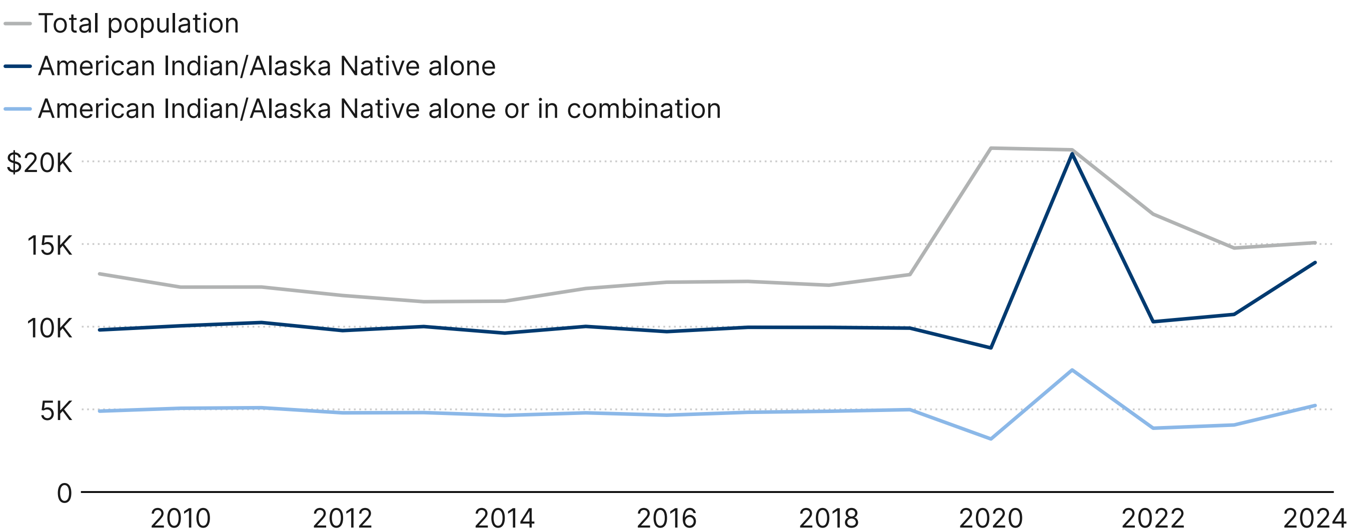
Note: In 2024 inflation-adjusted U.S. dollars, deflated using the GCEGI implicit price deflator (FRED)

As emergency pandemic spending ended, funding for Indian Country reverted to the pre-pandemic inflation-adjusted baseline in FY 2022 and FY 2023. However, between FY 2023 and FY 2024, funding for Indian Country saw another substantial increase, growing by 33% year-over-year. This growth was the result of Congress providing advance appropriations for the Indian Health Service (IHS), as well as new sources of funding for Indian Country from four major federal laws passed during the Biden administration: the American Rescue Plan Act, Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, CHIPS and Science Act, and Inflation Reduction Act.

Spending on Native Americans tracked generally with overall per capita nondefense spending from FY 2009 to FY 2019. However, that trend changed after the COVID-19 pandemic and recession. While all spending grew significantly in the wake of the pandemic, per capita spending on Native Americans reverted to pre-pandemic levels in FY 2022 and FY 2023, while overall nondefense spending remained significantly above FY 2019 levels. This shows that while overall U.S. spending levels have increased in recent years, that increase hasn't always flowed to Indian Country.

FIGURE 2

Per capita nondefense funding for Native Americans compared to total U.S. population



Source: Brookings analysis of U.S. Census Bureau and Office of Management and Budget data

Note: In 2024 inflation-adjusted U.S. dollars, deflated using the GCEGI implicit price deflator (FRED)

Federal investment for Native Americans continues to fall short of Indian Country's needs. There is no single topline estimate of the shortfall of federal investment compared to overall trust and treaty obligations. However, past efforts have attempted to quantify overall investment needs in specific topic areas and assess how federal funding compares.

For example, the federal government invested $41.5 million in Native American language revitalization in 2024—less than 3% of the government's own estimated annual need of $1.5 billion. The National Tribal Budget Formulation Workgroup (NTBFWG) calculates IHS annual funding needs at $73 billion—over 10 times more than the enacted IHS budget of $7.1 billion in FY 2024.

Philanthropic resources have been inadequate to close the funding gap for Native communities and causes

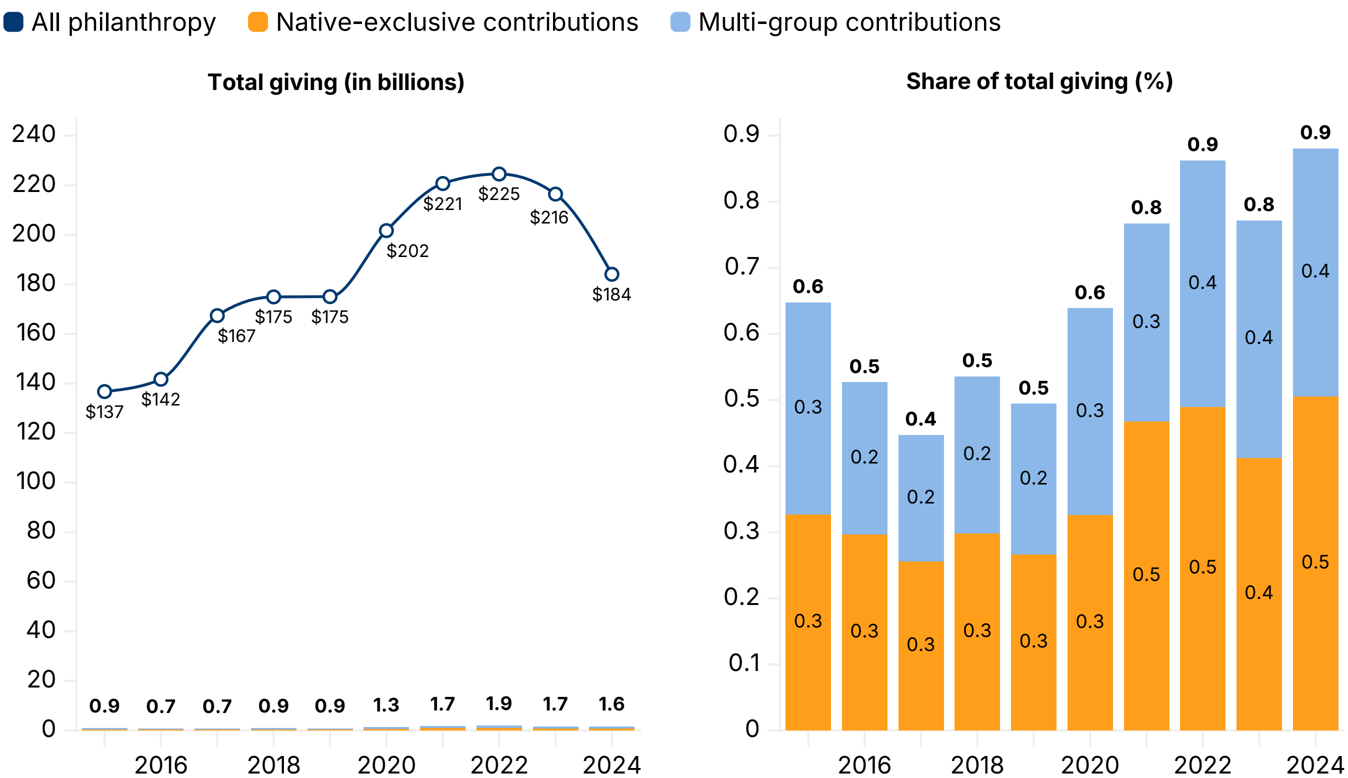
Greater federal investment into Tribal communities is essential; however, it may take years for policy to change sufficiently enough to meet those needs. In the interim, philanthropic funding can help close some of the investment gaps for Tribal nations, citizens, and communities.

Unfortunately, Native-serving grants account for a disproportionately small share of total giving in the United States. This analysis finds that just 0.88% of foundation and corporate philanthropic funding in 2024 was classified as serving Native communities or causes (inclusive of grants that also served other populations). Contributions to Native-exclusive groups and causes account for an even lower share: In 2024, just 0.51% of foundation and corporate philanthropic funding went to grants that Brookings could confirm served exclusively Native communities.

In no year have Native Americans received philanthropic investment at a rate commensurate with their population share, which ranges from 1% to 2.7% in Census Bureau estimates. That shows that the philanthropic sector continues to fail to meet the investment needs of Indian Country.

FIGURE 3

Multi-group vs. native-exclusive philanthropic funding to Indian Country, relative to total U.S. giving



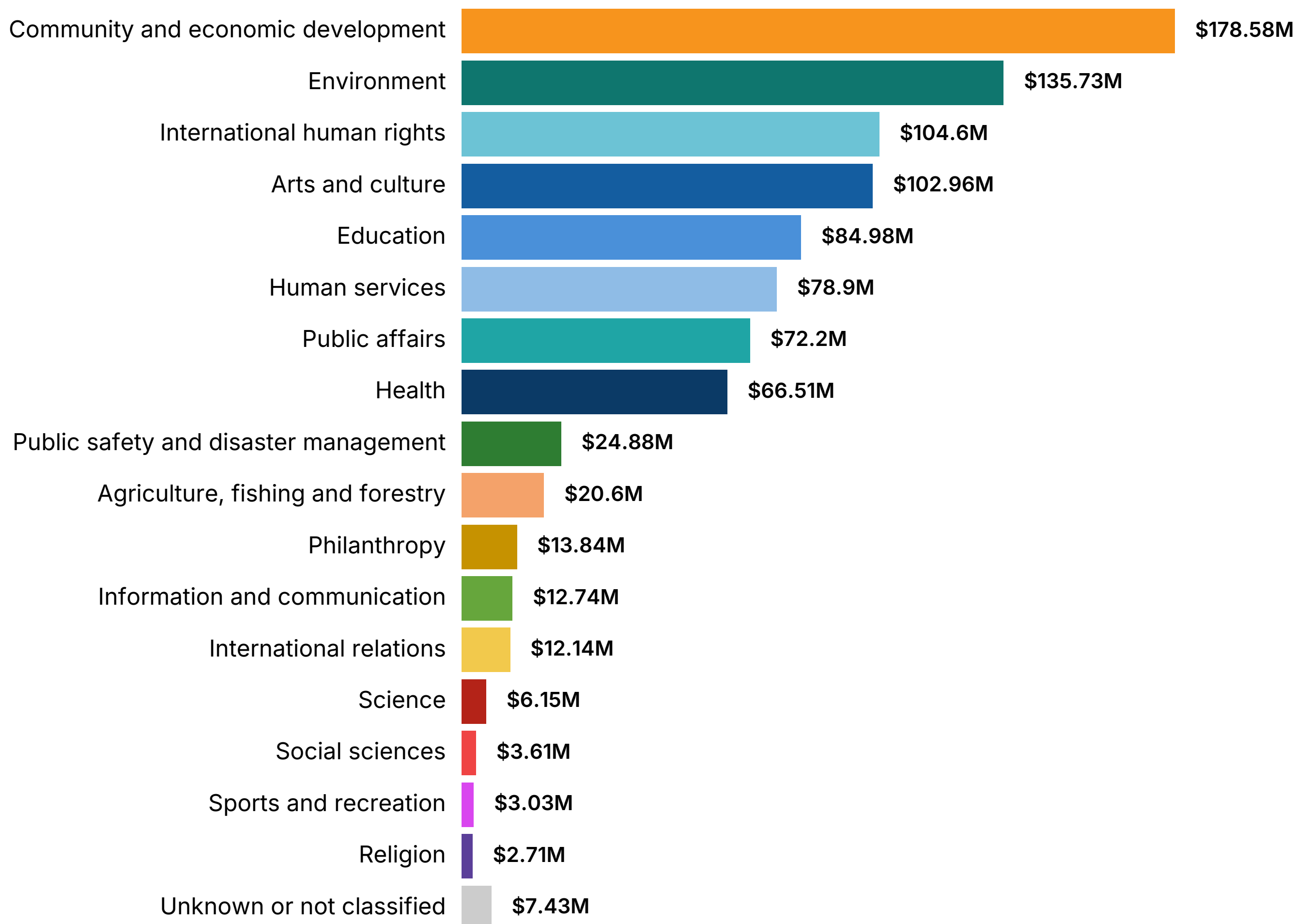
Source: Brookings Metro analysis of Candid data

Note: 2024 dollars, deflated using the GCEGI implicit price deflator (FRED)

Our analysis shows the average grant to Native-exclusive causes in 2024 was $111,200. Notably, the median 2024 grant is significantly below that average: just $20,000. This means that half of all awards made to Native recipients and causes were less than $20,000, indicating a relatively small number of organizations are receiving most of the funding going to Native causes.

FIGURE 4

Foundation and corporate philanthropic funding to Native American causes by subject area, 2024



View the full interactive graphic here

Source: Brookings analysis of Candid data

Note: In 2024 inflation-adjusted U.S. dollars, deflated using the GCEGI implicit price deflator (FRED)

The subject areas for grants to Native communities and causes have changed over the past decade. From 2015 through 2017, health and education services was by far the most significant area for Native-exclusive grants. Since then, investments in community and economic development, environmental causes, education, and human/civil rights advocacy have become significantly more common. This represents a contrast to federal investment, in which health- and education-related spending through the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education continue to represent the largest source of federal investment into Indian Country.

Framework for estimating investment need in Indian Country

Past research provides guidance for developing a replicable approach for estimating investment need in different topic areas across Indian Country. While different analyses of investment need vary in their specific approach, they share some common characteristics. Based on those past efforts, this analysis finds three major steps that are common across nearly all efforts to estimate investment need in Indian Country, and can form the basis of future investment needs research:

1. Develop an estimate of baseline need based on best-available Native and non-Native comparisons.
2. Track historic federal investment over time to develop an estimate of cumulative unmet need.
3. Complement estimates with qualitative interviews to assess unique Native American needs.

Ideas for strengthening funding for Native Americans

Brookings and others have proposed a variety of ideas to scale up funding for Native Americans to meet the full investment needs of Tribal communities. Policymakers and philanthropic actors can take three broad steps toward bolstering investment into Tribal communities:

- Make greater use of mandatory funding in congressional support for Native Americans.
- Make data about federal investment into Tribal nations, citizens, and communities more accessible.
- Reform philanthropic approaches to investing in Native causes.

Tribal nations, citizens, and communities have had to contend with both sustained underfunding and significant variance in funding levels over time. As this analysis shows, there remains a critical need to increase overall levels of federal and philanthropic support for Tribal nations, citizens, and communities. Policymakers should act quickly to reverse harmful funding cuts affecting Native Americans, and philanthropic leaders should begin scaling up their investments into Native communities and causes.

Introduction

American Indian and Alaska Native Tribes and communities have seen significant shifts in federal funding in recent years. Sweeping federal laws passed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and recession brought historic levels of funding to Tribal communities in areas such as infrastructure, health, education, clean energy, and economic development.

However, since the start of 2025, the funding landscape has shifted. The passage of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) in Congress has significantly reduced clean energy investments in Tribal communities, and may impact resources available for health care and food assistance. The executive branch has canceled grants and contracts to Tribes and Native-serving organizations as part of its efforts to slash federal spending and close federal agencies. Federal agencies have also cut or eliminated funding to Native-serving programs deemed to be in violation of President Donald Trump's executive orders on race-based and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies, such as the Native American-Serving Nontribal Institutions designation for colleges and universities.

Amid these ongoing changes to the federal funding environment, the U.S. continues to fall short of the full investment needs of Tribal communities. Significant unmet funding needs remain in Indian Country across an array of areas, as past analyses by Native organizations and the U.S. government alike have shown. Unfortunately, rather than move the U.S. closer to meeting the full funding needs of Tribal communities, recent fiscal policy decisions have moved it further away.

This analysis, published as a partnership between Brookings and the American Indian College Fund, is the first in a series of reports assessing critical areas of investment need for Tribes and Native American people. This initial report provides an overview of the state of recent funding to Indian Country, outlines areas of critical need, and highlights service areas that have recently seen some of the largest funding reductions.

This and future reports in the series will help inform Tribes and Native-led organizations through improved data about federal and philanthropic investment into their communities. It will also serve as a guide for federal, state, regional, and local policymakers; philanthropy; private sector organizations; and other entities aiming to respond to unmet investment needs in Indian Country.

Overview of key Native-related terminology used in this report

Terminology to describe Native and Indigenous communities is varied and constantly evolving. This report makes use of several specific terms about Native communities and populations. For reference, some of the most significant terms are defined here.

American Indians: Indigenous people (i.e., individuals) and Peoples (i.e., Tribes, Native nations, and communities such as the Wampanoag or Cherokee) whose homelands are in what is today the continental United States.

Alaska Natives: Indigenous people and Peoples whose homelands are in what is today the state of Alaska.

Native Hawaiians: Indigenous people whose homelands are on the Hawaiian Islands (today the state of Hawaii). While Native Hawaiian people do not have federally recognized Tribes (see below for a definition of this term), the U.S. maintains trust obligations and a government-to-government relationship with Native Hawaiians, and many laws provide funding for Native Hawaiians in much the same way they do for American Indians and Alaska Natives.

Native Americans: A collective term generally referring to American Indians and Alaska Natives. Sometimes the acronym AIAN (short for American Indians and Alaska Natives) is used to refer to Native Americans. While Native Hawaiians are not generally considered Native Americans, funding for Native Hawaiian populations is in some cases included in data about federal and philanthropic investment in Native American communities and causes, as outlined later in this report.

Indian Country: A term used as a general descriptor for Native American places and spaces (such as Tribal land) and the communities that occupy them. Indian Country is also used as a legal term for Native American land and communities.

Federally recognized Tribe: A Native American Tribe with whom the United States federal government maintains a government-to-government relationship.

State-recognized Tribe: A Native American Tribe that does not have federal recognition, but maintains a government-to-government relationship with the state in which it is located.

Tribal citizen: An individual enrolled as a citizen of a Tribe. Individuals may be enrolled in federally recognized Tribes, state-recognized Tribes, or unrecognized Tribes (which have neither federal nor state recognition).

Tribal descendant: An individual who has direct lineal ancestry to an enrolled citizen of a Native American Tribe (e.g., a parent, grandparent, etc.), but who does not meet the specific enrollment criteria of that Tribe.

Indigenous: A descriptor for people and Peoples who lived in a place before the arrival of later settlers. In the U.S. context, this includes American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians, as well as other Indigenous groups such as Samoan and Chamorro Peoples residing in U.S. territories, and individuals from Indigenous communities in other countries, such as Latin America or elsewhere, who have immigrated to or historically resided in the United States.

The U.S. government defines the term "American Indian or Alaska Native" as "individuals with origins in any of the original peoples of North, Central, and South America." However, as the above terminology shows, there is significant nuance beyond the federal government's definition about who is counted as American Indian or Alaska Native, and in what context.

Trust and treaty obligations: The legal basis for federal investment into Tribal communities

Federal funding to Tribal Nations, citizens, and communities is not based on race, but rather a political, government-to-government relationship between the U.S. and Native nations. In exchange for the land that now encompasses the United States, the U.S. government ratified 370 treaties and negotiated additional unratified treaties. In these treaties, the federal government obligated itself to provide certain material benefits—including healthcare, education, and the protection of land and natural resources, among other commitments—to Tribes and Native American people. These obligations have no expiration date.

Through subsequent laws and court rulings, these obligations have also been extended to Tribes with whom the U.S. did not sign treaties. Through these treaties, laws, and court rulings, the U.S. has been designated as a trustee for Tribal lands and the well-being of Native American people. Today, these trust and treaty obligations form the bedrock of U.S.-Tribal relations.

While this report is written with a focus on investment needs for American Indians and Alaska Natives, it also includes some discussion of Native Hawaiians (the Indigenous people of what is today the state of Hawaii). This is because many federal and philanthropic programs designed to serve American Indians and Alaska Natives also fund Native Hawaiian communities and causes. Because of this, it's not possible to fully disaggregate funding for American Indians and Alaska Natives from funding for Native Hawaiians.

Similar trust obligations are extended to Native Hawaiians as are extended to American Indians and Alaska Natives. The U.S. government annexed Hawaii by overthrowing the sovereign government of the independent Kingdom of Hawaii in 1898. Because of this, there is no treaty governing U.S.-Hawaiian relations. However, the U.S. still maintains a government-to-government relationship with Hawaiian communities through policies such as consultations and trust obligations to Native Hawaiians, including holding Hawaiian Home Lands in trust, similar to American Indian and Alaska Native reservations. Today, there is not unanimity within Hawaiian communities about what the end state of relations between the U.S. and Hawaii should be. Some individuals advocate for a federal recognition status like American Indian and Alaska Native Tribes, while others want a return to full Hawaiian sovereignty and independence from the U.S.

The United South and Eastern Tribes (USET), an organization representing 33 Tribes in the Southern and Eastern United States, explains the scope and permanent nature of federal trust and treaty obligations as such:

> "The trust obligation, including with regard to federal funding, exists in perpetuity. The purpose of funding delivered to Tribal Nations by the federal government is often misunderstood to be solely for alleviating poverty within Tribal Nations. While some Tribal Nations and Native people do experience extreme lingering poverty as a result of actions taken by the federal government, this is not the reason for the United States' required investment of resources in Tribal Nations. These resources and services are delivered to Tribal Nations as payment on a debt for our massive cession of land and resources to the federal government to create the United States. This permanent obligation does not change with our economic status. It is not a 'needs-based' obligation."
>
> United South and Eastern Tribes, Marshall Plan for Tribal Nations, 2022

Historically the U.S. government took a deliberately narrow view of its obligations to Native Americans, despite the expansive scope of the promises it made to Indian Country. For example, in 1977, the U.S. Senate's American Indian Policy Review Commission Final Report found that:

> "The Department of the Interior adopts a very narrow interpretation of the trustee concept by limiting its application to the lands, natural resources, and management of trust funds of 'federally recognized' tribes. There is little reason to so restrict the trust doctrine other than administrative convenience. There is legal authority that the United States trust duty is much broader. The purpose behind the trust is and always has been to insure the survival and welfare of Indian tribes and people. This includes an obligation to provide those services required to protect and enhance Indian lands, resources, and self-government, and also includes those economic and social programs which are necessary to raise the standard of living and social well-being of the Indian people to a level comparable to the non-Indian society."
>
> United States Senate, American Indian Policy Committee Final Report, 1977

While obligations to Tribal nations, citizens, and communities are not needs-based, the federal government has nonetheless failed to ensure that the overall standard of living for Native Americans meets that of the nation as a whole. In the decades since the Senate's report, federal investments into Indian Country have consistently failed to meet the full needs of Tribal communities. These investment shortcomings have been documented in a series of federal government and Native-led reports. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights has twice documented unmet funding needs in Indian Country, and other federal agencies such as the Government Accountability Office (GAO) have shown how ongoing funding needs affect specific investment areas, as well as how Tribes struggle to access federal funding appropriated to them.

Challenges exist to identifying Native American Tribes, Tribal citizens, and communities

While the U.S. trust and treaty responsibility to American Indian and Alaska Native Tribes and Tribal citizens is clear, what is less clear is who counts as a Tribe or Tribal citizen. Today, there are many varying levels of Native American identity, citizenship, and Tribal recognition, due to the complex history of the U.S. government's attempted extermination and assimilation of Native nations and Native people.

Enrollment (i.e., Tribal citizenship) criteria vary across Tribes. Some Tribes use a version of lineal descent, meaning an individual must prove they have a lineal ancestor who was a Tribal citizen, usually linked to a certain date or Tribal roll (i.e., a registry of Tribal citizens). Other Tribes use blood quantum, which requires an individual to have a certain percentage of their direct ancestors enrolled in the Tribe. Still others use different criteria, such as allowing enrollment only through the paternal or maternal line. As a result, some individuals who are authentically descended from Native American people may not be Tribally enrolled due to specific enrollment criteria.

In addition, some Tribes lack federal recognition, meaning the federal government does not maintain a government-to-government relationship with them. Some of these Tribes have never received federal recognition, while in other cases, former U.S. policies, such as Indian termination, revoked Tribes' federal recognition. Some Tribes are state-recognized, meaning the state in which they reside recognizes them as an authentic Native American Tribe, but the federal government does not. Thus, some individuals may be enrolled Tribal citizens, but the federal government does not recognize their Tribe.

These dynamics complicate who counts as Native American, and leaves definitions of Indian Country murky. These challenges are further underscored by the varied and at times conflicting definitions that the federal government, states, and other entities use in defining Native American identity. For example, Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) receive federal funding based on the number of enrolled citizens of federally recognized Tribes that are attending the school. In contrast, federal funding for Native American-Serving Nontribal Institutions is based on the number of students at the school who self-identify as Native American on demographic forms, as reported by the Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

The federal government does not collect annual Tribal enrollment data, and there is strong resistance within Indian Country to begin doing so. Instead, many federal programs follow the White House Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) definition of American Indians and Alaska Natives, which includes all "individuals with origins in any of the original peoples of North, Central, and South America." This definition is used not only to develop the count of American Indian and Alaska Native people for the decennial census and annual Census Bureau products, such as the American Community Survey and Current Population Survey, but is also used to distribute federal funding for over 350 federal programs. As such, the population of Native American people included in many federal funding streams may not align with Tribes' own population counts.

This report does not take a position on the ideal methodology for counting the Native American population. However, given its focus on federal and philanthropic funding, this report will assess several shortcomings and limitations to different Native American population measurements, and illustrate how those shortcomings cause challenges in tracking levels of funding to Tribal nations, citizens, and communities.

Because of these ongoing funding barriers and shortfalls, ensuring the U.S. sufficiently meets its obligations to Tribal communities has been a long-standing priority for Tribes and Native-serving organizations. In 2023, the Biden White House enacted Executive Order 14112, "Reforming Federal Funding and Support for Tribal Nations To Better Embrace Our Trust Responsibilities and Promote the Next Era of Tribal Self-Determination." This executive order implemented multiple policy changes to bolster funding flows to Native Americans, including directing OMB and the domestic policy advisor to lead an effort to assess unmet federal obligations to Tribal nations. However, the Trump administration repealed this executive order in March 2025.

Rather than moving closer to fully meeting its obligations to Indian Country, since 2025, the federal government has instead reduced funding for Native people and Tribal communities. In this moment of federal disinvestment, there is a greater need for investment in Tribal communities by states, regional organizations, municipalities, and philanthropic organizations. However, because those stakeholders do not maintain the same trust and treaty relationship with Tribes as the federal government, they have historically had less information about the needs of Tribal communities. This report aims to highlight funding trends for Tribal nations, citizens, and communities to help government and other non-Native partners better understand investment needs in Indian Country.

Investment in Native communities supports Native and non-Native people alike

While U.S. trust and treaty obligations to Native nations and citizens are debt-based, investment in Tribal communities has important positive impacts for both Native and non-Native people. Evidence shows that when Native nations succeed, surrounding communities succeed as well. Tribes are economic engines for the regions in which they are located; they create jobs, pay wages to workers, subcontract to both Tribal and non-Tribal businesses, and generate economic activity through government spending, business operations, and capital projects. For example, Randall Akee, Maggie R. Jones, and Emilia Simeonova have found that casinos located on reservation land create substantial positive spillover effects for adjacent non-Tribal communities and their workers.

Investment in Tribal communities also carries important socioeconomic benefits. An analysis by Brookings Senior Fellow Tara Watson found that investments in public sanitation on Native American reservations improved health outcomes for both Native children living on Tribal land as well as non-Native children living in adjacent communities. Native and non-Native businesses alike also benefit from the presence of Native community development financial institutions (Native CDFIs), which improve capital access for businesses and homeowners living on or around reservation land.

Investment in Native educational institutions has similar positive effects for Native and non-Native communities. Research shows that Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) serve as economic anchors for some of the nation's most economically disinvested regions. In addition to their employment, spending, and higher education impacts, TCUs provide community services such as GED programs, cultural events, language revitalization, and health and counseling resources. TCUs also advance regional workforce development, entrepreneurship, and sustainable resource management by aligning curricula with local labor market needs, supporting small businesses, and offering technical support to businesses and Tribal governments. As a result, TCUs have substantial economic spillover effects, including higher earnings for alumni, greater regional tax revenue, stronger regional business growth, and reduced public sector costs.

Finally, funding to Native American communities and institutions has a strong return on investment. For example, literature shows that every dollar invested in TCUs returns $1.60 in tax revenue and public sector savings. Additional research has shown that investments in areas such as early childhood education and small business financing yield positive economic and community benefits.

Conversely, a lack of investment in Indian Country raises costs for Native and non-Native communities. For example, underinvestment in Tribal public safety exacts both a human and economic cost on communities. Tribal land is beset with complex land tenure, jurisdictional rules, and law enforcement policies, made further difficult by ambiguity in who counts as Native American. But despite these additional burdens, reservations have a shortage of Tribal police officers and public safety resources. This leads to higher levels of crime on some reservations, which can spill over into surrounding communities, harming Native and non-Native people alike and depressing economic opportunity.

Trends in overall federal funding for Native Americans

Past and present attempts to quantify federal investment in Indian Country

Over the past several decades, a growing number of studies have documented shortcomings in federal funding for Tribal communities, both in the aggregate and in specific areas. To understand the order of magnitude of funding shortfalls for Native Americans, it's necessary to first understand the size and structure of federal funding to Tribal nations, citizens, and communities.

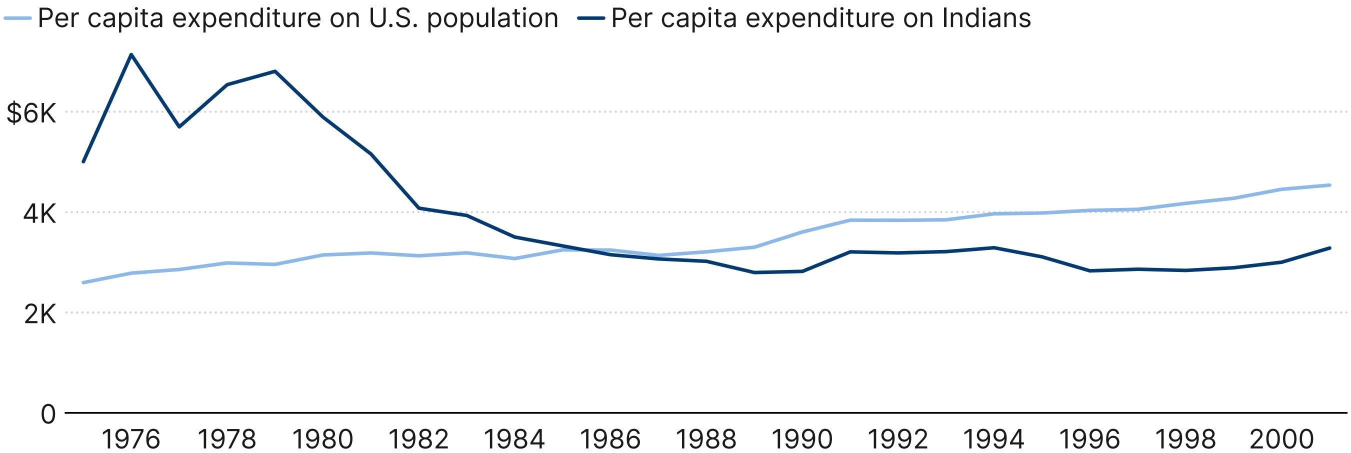
The American Indian and Alaska Native population in the United States—both alone and in combination with other racial and ethnic groups—makes up a single-digit share of the total U.S. population. Evaluating investment per capita can help illustrate whether the federal government is investing in Native Americans at the same proportional level as non-Native populations.

Efforts to quantify investment into Indian Country date back several decades, and have consistently been hindered by incomplete federal data. In 2000, Congressional Research Service (CRS) specialist Roger Walke attempted this type of per capita comparison, assessing federal investment trends for Native Americans versus the U.S. overall from FY 1974 through FY 2001. This CRS analysis revealed that in the early 1970s, federal investment to Native Americans exceeded that of the overall population on a per person basis. However, investment into Indian Country fell dramatically following budget cuts to critical Native-serving agencies and programs under the Reagan administration and other ongoing measures of fiscal austerity throughout the early 1980s. From 1990 to 2000, federal investment for Native Americans plateaued at a level significantly below that of the U.S. population writ large, even while overall per capita spending continued to rise.

FIGURE 1

Per-capita investment in Indian Country, 1975-2001

in constant 1997 U.S. dollars



Source: Walke, Memorandum on Indian-Related Federal Spending Trends, FY1975–FY2001, Appendix Table 2 (CRS-52, constant 1997 dollars, FY1975–FY2000).

Note: "Indian" population is the 1997 IHS Service Population; Federal federal is the non-defense budget, FY75 & FY77 Indian per-capita expenditures do not include Indian Housing Development.

While Walke's analysis is helpful for showing historical funding into Indian Country, it has several limitations. First, his measure of funding for American Indian people did not cover all federal spending on Tribes and Native American people. Rather, Walke included just seven large programs, which by his estimate accounted for 68% of federal spending on Native Americans. Second, his measure of the American Indian population was the service population of the Indian Health Service (IHS). IHS service population data is published on an annual basis, making the data comparable over time, but significantly underestimates the total number of Native American people living in the United States because not all Native Americans live in IHS service areas. In particular, Native Americans in the Eastern U.S., as well as citizens of smaller Tribes, are less likely to have access to IHS services. Furthermore, even if Native individuals reside in an IHS service area, they may choose to access health services elsewhere due to having public or private health insurance.

Since Walke's analysis, the U.S. government has developed more comprehensive measurements of federal investment into Tribes and Native American people, though few account for population data in the way that Walke's analysis did. As of 2025, the most comprehensive single source of data on federal spending for Tribes and Native American people is the Native American Funding Crosscut (subsequently referred to as "the Crosscut"). Each year after the release of the president's annual budget proposal, OMB requests that all federal agencies provide information on programs supporting Native Americans, discretionary and mandatory funding amounts for those programs, and descriptions of the expenditures. However, as this report will later discuss in more detail, this process has not occurred in FY 2026. The Crosscut also contains some data for programs that benefit Native Hawaiians, though it only contains data on programs that serve Native Hawaiians in addition to American Indians and Alaska Natives.

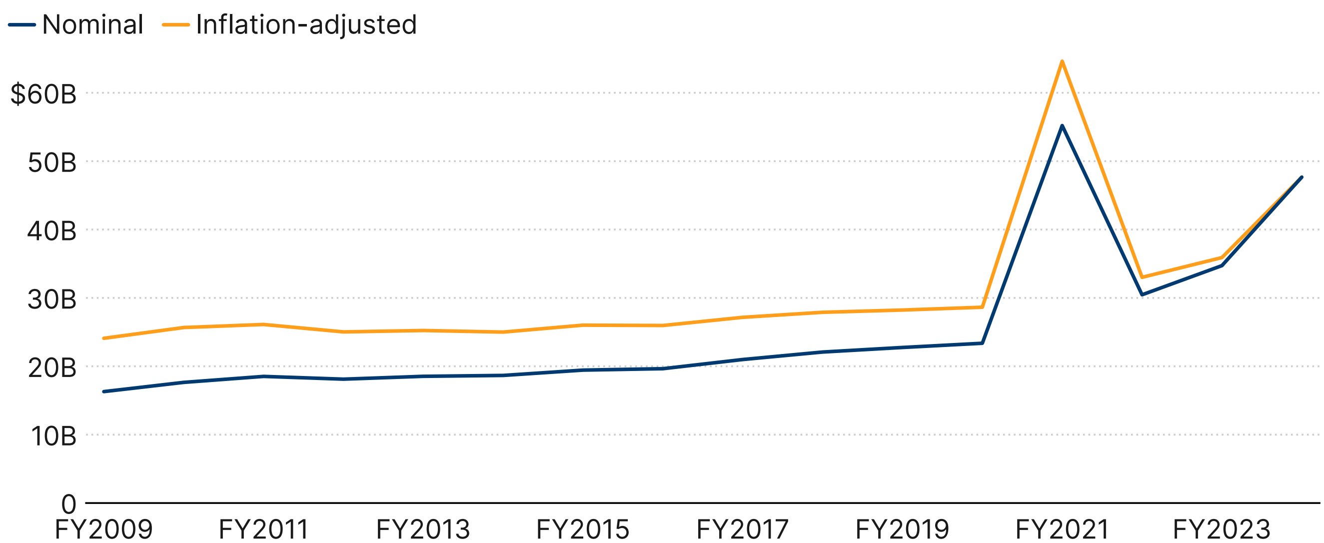
The Crosscut has also grown significantly more detailed since it was first published. Reports from the early 2010s only contain data at the department level, with some select agency and program-level funding. Yet more recent Crosscuts include breakouts of mandatory and discretionary spending, separate totals for emergency funding or standalone appropriation bills, and narrative program descriptions.

According to these Crosscut reports, Tribes, Native communities, and Native American people received $24.1 billion in inflation-adjusted federal funding in FY 2009. The following year, funding to Indian Country grew by approximately 6.5% in real terms, to an inflation-adjusted $25.7 billion. However, real funding for Indian Country remained flat for the remainder of the Obama administration, and saw only slight growth during most of the first Trump administration. Indeed, in FY 2020, inflation-adjusted total funding for Indian Country was just over $28.6 billion, which was 11.6% higher than 2010 levels.

FIGURE 2

Federal funding for programs benefitting Native Americans and Tribal nations

enacted fiscal dollars for FY2009 - FY2024



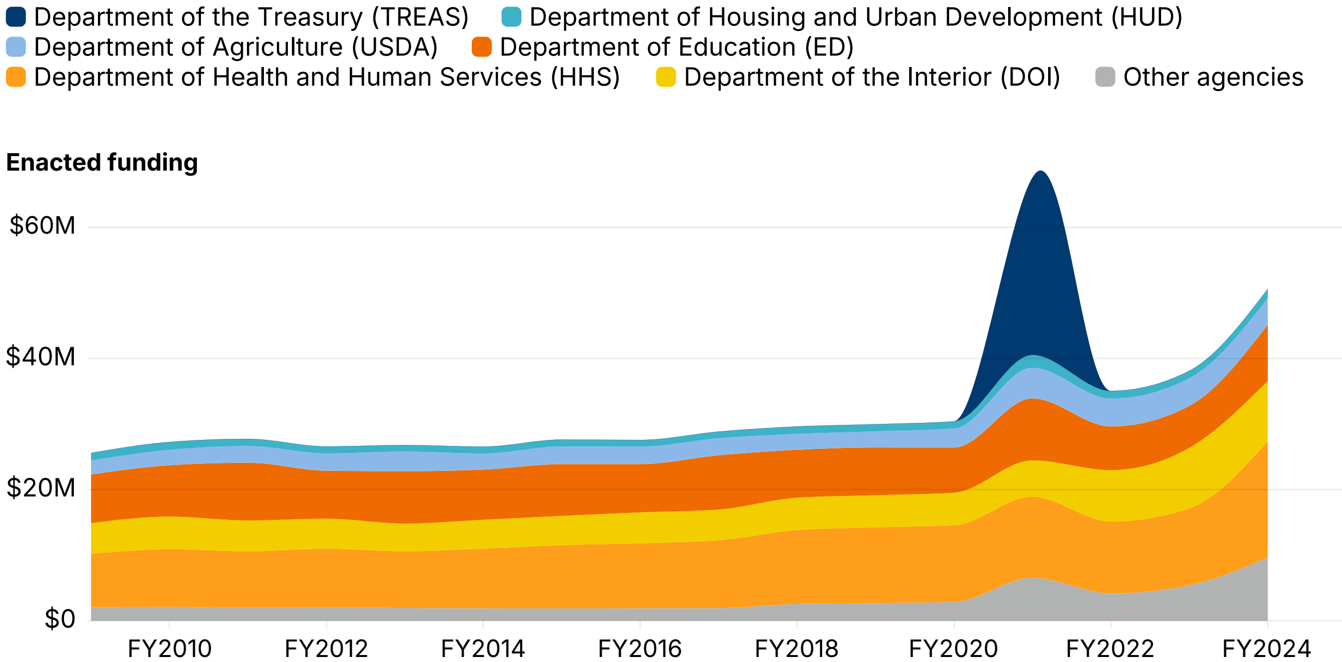
Source: FY2011 - FY2024 Native American Funding Crosscut

Note: 2024 dollars, deflated using the GCEGI implicit price deflator (FRED)

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and recession in 2020, the federal government significantly grew overall spending levels, including to Indian Country. The federal government more than doubled spending on Indian Country between FY 2020 and FY 2021. This additional funding was the result of a significant amount of pandemic-era spending being issued to Tribal communities—most notably, the Treasury Department's Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF) program. As Figure 3 shows, while spending issued to Tribal communities increased across nearly all federal agencies in FY 2021, most of the growth that year came from the emergence of Treasury Department funding for Tribes.

FIGURE 3

Federal funding for programs benefitting Native Americans and Tribal nations, by agency



Source: FY2011-FY2024 Native American Funding Crosscut

Note: In 2024 inflation-adjusted U.S. dollars, deflated using the GCEGI implicit price deflator (FRED)

As emergency pandemic spending ended, funding for Indian Country reverted to the pre-pandemic inflation-adjusted baseline in FY 2022 and FY 2023. However, between FY 2023 and FY 2024, Indian Country spending saw another substantial increase, growing by 33% year-over-year. This significant increase was the result of Congress providing advance appropriations for IHS, meaning that IHS received a portion of its FY 2025 congressional appropriations in the FY 2024 appropriations bill, which insulated the agency from the impacts of the 2025 government shutdown.

During this time, the federal government also provided new sources of funding to Indian Country through four large federal laws passed under the Biden administration: the American Rescue Plan Act, Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, CHIPS and Science Act, and Inflation Reduction Act. These laws provided investments in areas critical to Tribal economies, culture, and well-being, including investments to develop new industries on Tribal land, invest in clean energy, build modern physical and digital infrastructure, and strengthen Native healthcare.

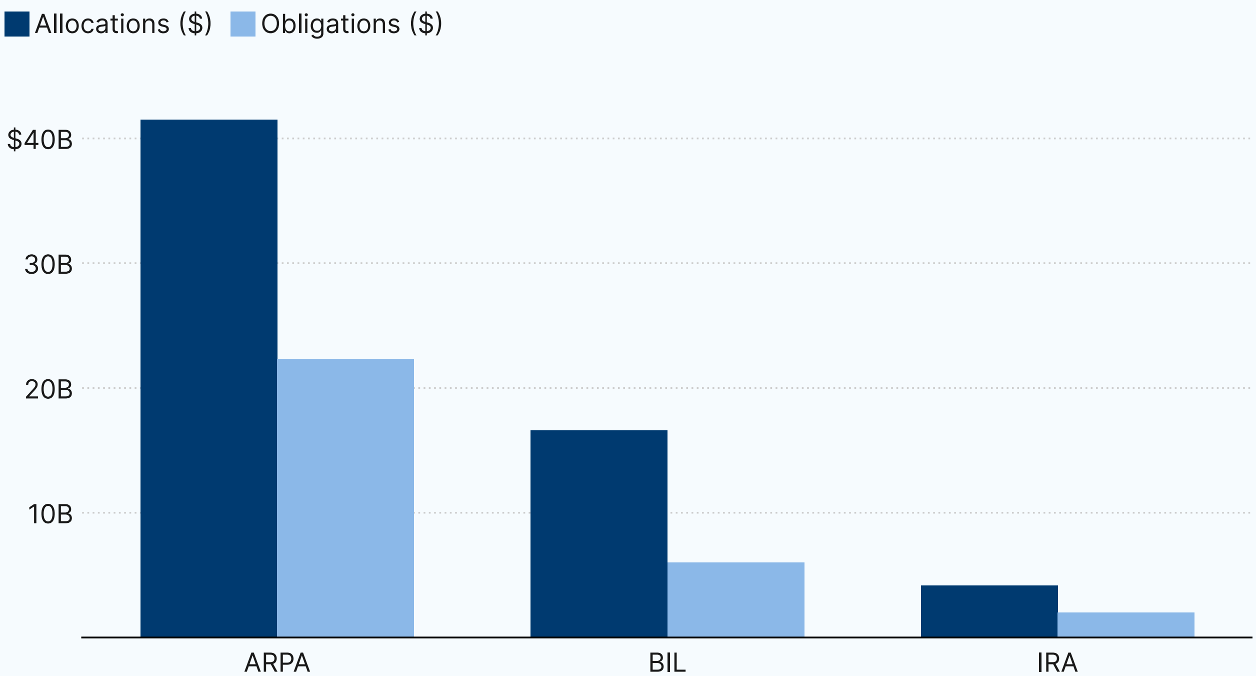
Landmark investments in Indian Country under the Biden administration

Though traditional appropriations to Indian Country have inched upward in recent years, these increases have largely paled in comparison to the influx of funding created through three landmark authorization bills passed under the 117th Congress: the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), and Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). Together, these bills authorized over $3.5 trillion of new investment for the country as a whole in areas such as public health, infrastructure, economic development, and social welfare—amounting to the most significant industrial and community investment exercise the federal government has undertaken in several decades. Since being signed into law by President Joe Biden in 2021 and 2022, these three pieces of legislation accounted for approximately $62.2 billion in investments for Indian Country, of which nearly $30.3 billion has been obligated to date toward grant awards for Tribal governments, Native-owned businesses and organizations, and Tribally controlled colleges and universities. These awards alone exceeded the total amount of discretionary funding Tribes and other Native enterprises typically receive from the federal government across all sources in an average year.

FIGURE 4

Landmark investments in Indian Country under the Biden administration

FY2022 - FY2025, in current U.S. dollars



Source: FY2022-FY2025 Native American Funding Crosscut and USAspending

Note: Allocated totals represent funding authorized by Congress. Obligated totals represent funding committed through grants, contracts, and direct payments.

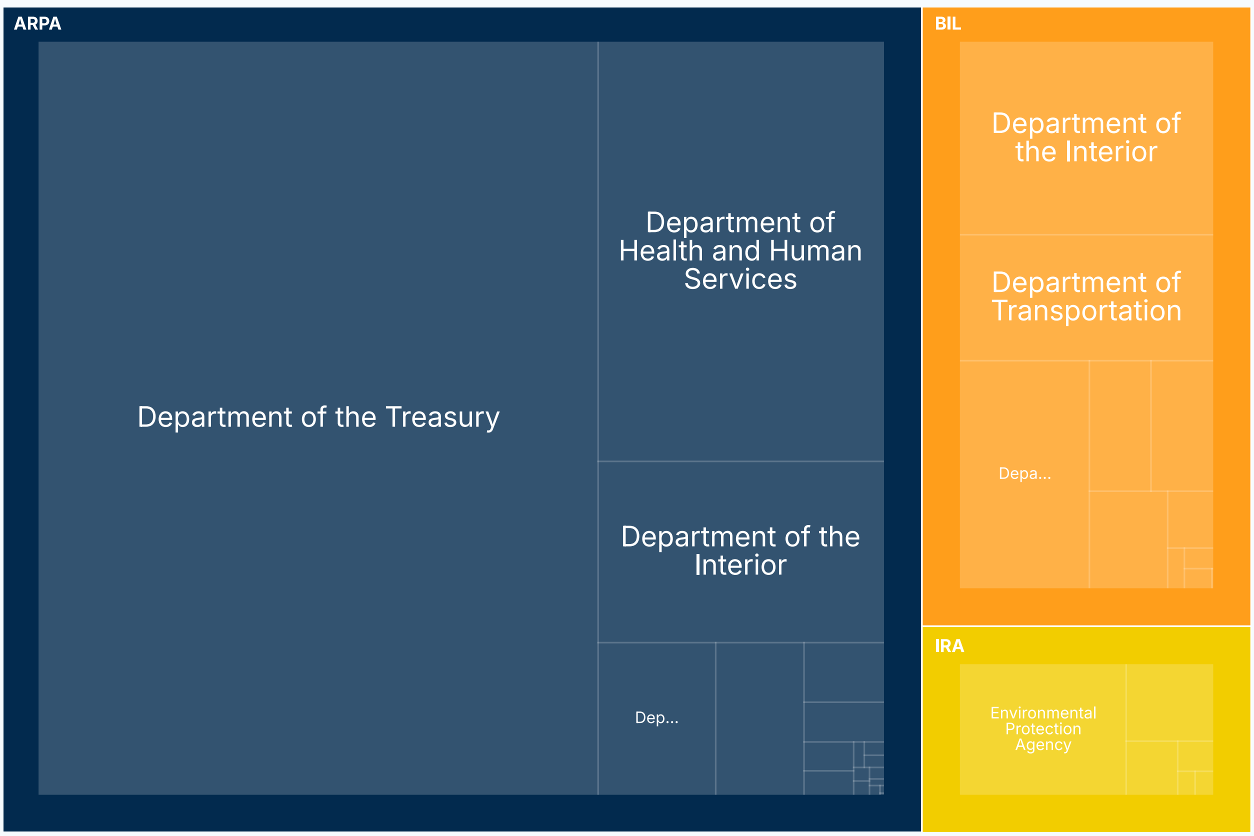
This portfolio of awarded funding spans nearly 300 federal programs across 23 federal agencies, providing critical resources to Tribal communities for housing, healthcare, commerce, economic development, transportation, education, and government support (particularly in the wake of the pandemic). However, the distribution of this funding is heavily skewed between programs: Of the $30 billion in obligated grant funding through the end of FY 2025, 44% was awarded by just a single program: ARPA's Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF) program, overseen by the Treasury Department. The SLFRF program alone obligated $20 billion to Tribal governments, making it the single-largest infusion of federal funding into Indian Country to date.

FIGURE 5

Landmark investments in Indian Country under the Biden administration

FY2022 - FY2025, in current U.S. dollars

Obligations ($)



Outlays ($)

View the full interactive graphic here

Source: FY2022-FY2025 Native American Funding Crosscut and USAspending

Note: Allocated totals represent funding authorized by Congress. Obligated totals represent funding committed through grants, contracts, and direct payments.

The SLFRF program was not only transformative in scale, but also in programmatic design. In an effort to be responsive to the economic and public health needs of communities during the pandemic, Treasury obligated funding in a tranche structure, with cities, counties, and most states receiving their funds via two equal payments: the first in spring/summer of 2021, and the second 12 months later. Upon consultation with Tribal leaders, however, Treasury recognized the need to deliver funding more quickly to Tribal recipients. Rather than receiving two equal tranches 12 months apart, Tribal governments instead received an equal share of a $1 billion initial payment in May 2021 to cover emergency expenses, and received their employment-weighted share of the remaining $19 billion allocation the following month. These changes—alongside increased flexibility and lower reporting burdens relative to other federal grants—made SLFRF the closest of any federal program to meeting the recommended policy design specifications that Native advocates have been pushing for years.

While these bills all passed between 2021 and 2022, in some cases, money did not reach Tribal communities until 2023 or 2024. This is because most of the funding through these bills came in the form of grants, loans, and cooperative agreements, which typically require significant front-end administrative work such as issuing a request for proposals and considering applications before issuing funding. In addition, some of these funding streams to Indian Country rely on a reimbursement-based funding model, which means that Tribes and Native entities did not receive money when they were chosen as awardees, but rather only after they spent money that the federal government could reimburse.

Funding and capacity challenges for Native grant recipients

One of the most significant challenges in mitigating the federal government's chronic underinvestment in Indian Country is the systemic, entrenched, and codified grant management practices that prevent Native American recipients from benefitting from funding even when made available through appropriations. In a 2024 report, GAO identified four key barriers to federal assistance for Tribes:

Administrative capacity. Like many rural communities, Tribes and Native-serving organizations lack the personnel and operational resources to identify, pursue, and compete for federal challenge grants. Because federal grant compliance is notoriously complex and resource-intensive, these capacity challenges often persist even after a Tribe is awarded funding.

Financial constraints. Despite the integral role of Tribes in community and regional economic development, Tribal governments face financial challenges distinct from other federal grant recipients, including the inability to levy property taxes on trust land, lack of access to credit, and state overreach in sales tax collections. As a result, Tribes face significantly more challenges in meeting federal cost-share requirements, and are disproportionately impacted by pre-reimbursement cost burdens and federal processing delays.

Poor agency communication. Federal agencies often engage in limited or ineffective communications with Tribes and Native enterprises during the grantmaking process, creating barriers for potential recipients to receive reliable information about funding opportunities, solicit feedback on applications, or ask questions about compliance. Federal employees responsible for administering these grants often lack experience with direct government-to-government coordination, or the historical and cultural context necessary to effectively communicate about grantmaking with Tribes.

Geography and infrastructure. Tribes and Native-serving enterprises that compete for federal grants are often rural and disconnected from broadband infrastructure, exacerbating other challenges Tribes face when competing for or administering federal grants.

Because of these barriers, reversing historical disinvestment in Tribal communities and enterprises must go beyond simply increasing the amount of funding available for Tribes. The federal government must also enact new practices to reduce administrative burdens on Tribes during both the application period and grant administration, and complement programmatic funding with resources for technical assistance, grant writing, and other capacity-building investments. Efforts to increase investment opportunities without mitigating these structural barriers may continue to drive funding toward other eligible grant recipients, and away from the Tribal communities that would benefit from them most, thus increasing existing inequality between Tribes. Other funders, including state governments and philanthropy, can adopt similar strategies to reduce administrative burdens on their Tribal grant recipients as well.

There has been some federal momentum in recent years toward addressing these challenges. In one prominent example, the Economic Development Administration (EDA) and the Mountain | Plains Regional Native CDFI Coalition—one of 21 awardees in ARPA's Build Back Better Regional Challenge—coordinated to adjust the agency's grant administration procedures to make them more accessible to coalition members. Based on this coordination, EDA reduced the coalition's match requirement to 7% (down from 20%), freeing up capital to invest in more resource-intensive projects and build administrative capacity. The Biden administration recommended similar reforms in its Executive Order 14112, but the Trump administration has since rescinded that order.

Measurement limitations

Though the overall level of inflation-adjusted funding for Native Americans has seen modest growth over the past 15 years, the population of Native American people has grown. Indeed, the substantial growth of the Native American population, as reflected in the 2020 census, was a significant story after decennial census data was released. It's important, then, to look at how federal funding has fared given the documented growth in the Native American population—and to assess how past attempts at quantifying Indian Country investment and population have fallen short.

While the Crosscut is the most detailed source of data on federal spending for Tribes and Native American people, it has several notable shortcomings. A GAO report on the Crosscut found that federal agencies interpret OMB's guidance differently regarding which programs to identify and funding information to provide for the Crosscut. GAO also found that agencies report data to GAO differently, and that the Crosscut lacks detailed information about what individual agency-reported data represent. Finally, GAO noted that Tribal stakeholders say the overall lack of detail in the Crosscut decreases its utility in decisionmaking. In addition to these problems GAO pointed out, the Crosscut does not include a consistent set of programs in its overall analysis. For example, while the amount of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) funding going to Native Americans is included in the Crosscut, the amount of Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid spending on Native Americans is not. Readers should note these limitations to federal data on spending on Indian Country.

In addition to problems with measuring funding for Indian Country, there is no single best-in-class measure of the Native American population. The federal government does not regularly conduct a comprehensive count of enrolled Tribal citizens—reflecting, in part, Tribes' resistance to submitting enrollment data to the federal government, which some Tribes see as conflicting with the tenets of Indigenous data sovereignty. As of 2026, there are multiple ways to calculate the American Indian and Alaska Native population in the United States, all of which offer significantly different estimates. The most common approaches include:

- **Treasury COVID-19 allocation estimates.** In 2021, as part of the agency's distribution of COVID-19 relief funding, more than 570 Tribes submitted enrollment data to the Treasury Department. While the federal government did not release total population counts based on that data, a joint analysis by the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development and the University of Arizona Native Nations Institute estimated the total enrolled population count as 2.6 million people. While this data point is useful for calculating a baseline estimate of the Native American population, it has several shortcomings. First, many Native American people are not enrolled in a Tribe for various reasons discussed above, including a lack of federal recognition, voluntary non-enrollment, and/or eligibility requirements (e.g., blood quantum, specific rules or thresholds for citizenship inheritance along the patrilineal or matrilineal line, etc.). Second, and most importantly, since there is only one year of population data available based on the Treasury data, it cannot be used to estimate changes over time in per capita funding for Native Americans.
- **Decennial census.** This is the count of individuals who self-identify as American Indian or Alaska Native on the decennial U.S. census, as well as those the U.S. Census Bureau classifies as American Indian or Alaska Native because of their responses on the decennial census (for example, if someone did not check the American Indian or Alaska Native box on their census form, but wrote "Cherokee" into a detail box in their race or ethnicity response, the Census Bureau would count them as American Indian or Alaska Native). The 2020 census calculated that there were 3.7 million individuals classified as American Indian or Alaska Native alone, and 9.7 million individuals classified as American Indian or Alaska Native alone or in combination with another group. Brookings and many others have written extensively about the problems with federal statistical agencies' approach to calculating the American Indian and Alaska Native population. In addition to self-identification being an unreliable indicator of citizenship in or descent from a Tribal nation, the federal government's definition of American Indian and Alaska Native includes all individual indigenous to North, Central, and South America. This means the decennial census count of Native Americans is inclusive of American Indian and Alaska Native Tribes; First Nation, Metis, and Inuit peoples in Canada; as well as Indigenous Peoples from Mexico, Central America, and South America. In this regard, the census count of the American Indian and Alaska Native population is much larger than just the Tribal nations, citizens, and communities that the U.S. maintains trust and treaty relationships with.
- **U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS) population estimates.** The ACS is one of the most widely used methods of estimating the American Indian and Alaska Native population. The ACS is published every year, making the data helpful for estimating per capita funding over time. ACS data are published with both one-year estimates (generally only available for larger groups and geographies), as well as five-year estimates, which average five years' worth of data and are available for both larger and smaller groups and

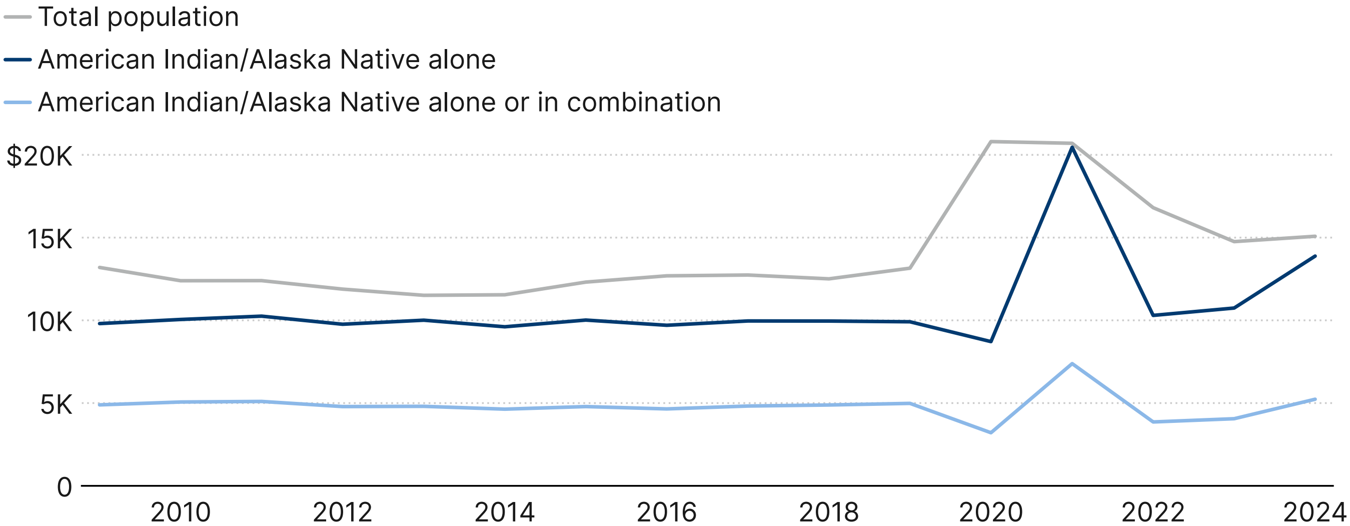
geographies. The 2024 ACS one-year data—the most recent year available—estimates that there are 3.4 million individuals classified as American Indian or Alaska Native alone, and 9.1 million individuals who are classified as American Indian or Alaska Native in combination with another race. However, like other Census Bureau population products, the ACS only measures whether an individual self-identifies as American Indian or Alaska Native (alone or in combination) using the federal government's broad definition of American Indian or Alaska Native, and so does not provide any detail on Tribal citizenship or descent.

- **U.S. Census Bureau Population Estimates Program (PEP).** Despite being used less frequently than the ACS to measure American Indian and Alaska Native populations in the United States, PEP is considered the Census Bureau's most authoritative breakdown of racial and ethnic population totals across the nation, states, and counties during intercensal years. Other Census Bureau products, including the ACS, rely on PEP estimates for population controls. However, like the ACS, PEP does not collect any data about Tribal citizenship. PEP also faces challenges with multiracial classifications and with linking birth/death administrative records used to develop these estimates. As a result, estimates for the single-race American Indian and Alaska Native population are frequently higher in PEP than in other Census Bureau surveys. PEP data from 2024 estimate that there are 4.7 million individuals classified as American Indian or Alaska Native alone, and 7.7 million classified as American Indian or Alaska Native alone or in combination with another group.
- **IHS service populations.** Used by CRS analyst Roger Walke in his analysis of federal spending on Native Americans (see above), IHS service population data measure the number of American Indian and Alaska Native people, as defined by the ACS, that live in geographic areas IHS serves. While this number can be useful for calculating the needs of communities IHS serves, it is limited in its usefulness for calculating the overall population of Native Americans because it contains all the shortcomings of ACS data discussed above as well as the shortcomings of IHS data—most notably, that not all Native Americans use IHS services.

With these various shortcomings in mind, this analysis calculates federal per capita spending using two measures: ACS one-year estimates of the American Indian or Alaska Native alone population, and ACS one-year estimates of the American Indian or Alaska Native alone or in combination with another racial group population. These numbers offer the broadest range of population outcomes while still being available every year. The American Indian or Alaska Native alone ACS population estimate should be seen as the low-end estimate of the overall Native American population, while the American Indian or Alaska Native in combination ACS population estimate can be seen as the high-end estimate.

FIGURE 6

Per capita nondefense funding for Native Americans compared to total U.S. population



Source: Brookings analysis of U.S. Census Bureau and Office of Management and Budget data

Note: 2024 dollars, deflated using the GCEGI implicit price deflator (FRED)

Following Walke's methodology, this analysis compares per capita spending on Native Americans and Tribal nations to overall per capita total U.S. population nondefense spending. As illustrated in Figure 6, spending on Native Americans tracked generally with overall per capita nondefense spending from FY 2009 through FY 2019. However, that trend changed after the COVID-19 pandemic and recession. While all spending grew significantly in the wake of the pandemic, per capita spending on Native Americans reverted to pre-pandemic levels in FY 2022 and FY 2023, while overall nondefense spending remained significantly above FY 2019 levels. This shows that while overall U.S. spending levels have increased in recent years, that growth in spending hasn't always flowed to Indian Country.

At time of publication, OMB had not published an FY 2026 Crosscut, limiting available data about the fiscal impacts of the second Trump administration on Native Americans. However, the administration has brought significant changes to U.S. fiscal policy. In the early months of the administration, the White House's Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) oversaw a significant government-wide effort to cancel federal grants and contracts and lay off federal employees. These efforts had a substantial impact on funding and program delivery for Indian Country. For example, one analysis of federal grants canceled during the first four months of the Trump administration showed that nearly a third of all canceled grants included the word "Tribal," making it the most commonly flagged keyword among canceled grants. A forthcoming Brookings report finds that grant and contract cancellations by DOGE resulted in at least $378 million in lost federal funding for Native American Tribes and organizations. Moreover, significant federal layoffs have hindered Tribes' ability to access funding and services.

Later in 2025, Congress passed the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA), the centerpiece of the Trump administration's fiscal policy. This law will substantially reshape the level of investment the federal government makes into Tribal communities and Native American people in the coming years. One of the biggest impacts of OBBBA is the rescission (or cancellation) of climate-focused grants and tax credits enacted under the Biden administration's Inflation Reduction Act. While the full fiscal impacts of OBBBA on Indian Country have yet to be seen, Brookings analysis has found that Tribal communities may have lost an estimated $1.5 billion in future grant funding due to program recissions. In addition, OBBBA created new work requirements and other program restrictions for both Medicaid and SNAP (also known as food stamps). As the analysis noted, while Native American people are exempted on paper from these work requirements, the administrative burden of proving Native American identity may nonetheless cause some Native individuals to be disqualified.

Federal investment for Native Americans continues to fall short of US trust and treaty obligations

There is no single topline estimate of the shortfall in federal investment compared to overall trust and treaty obligations. However, past efforts have attempted to quantify overall investment needs in specific topic areas and assess how federal funding compares.

Two of the most prominent efforts to measure continued funding shortfalls for Indian Country were published by the United States Commission on Civil Rights (USCCR). In 2003, USCCR published "A Quiet Crisis: Federal Funding and Unmet Needs in Indian Country," which provided a comprehensive look at federal funding for Native Americans across the six federal government departments that provided the largest amounts of funding to Indian Country. Using assessments of federal funding over time, extensive literature review, as well as qualitative interviews, the report found that federal funding for Tribal communities consistently failed to meet Tribal needs, and that sustained funding shortfalls have compounded investment needs over time.

Perhaps the most significant finding of "A Quiet Crisis" was that this continued funding shortfall violated the civil rights of Native Americans. Having a federal government agency assert that the federal government itself was violating the civil rights of Native Americans through continued disinvestment was a watershed moment in modern fiscal policymaking toward Native Americans.

"A Quiet Crisis" also demonstrated that the current system of discretionary funding for Tribes frequently resulted in real funding cuts when spending was adjusted for inflation. In response, USCCR laid out a robust policy agenda. This included recommending a shift away from discretionary funding for Indian Country and toward a system resembling mandatory funding, as well as the development of more robust and standardized data on federal funding for Indian Country.

In 2018, USCCR published a follow-up report titled "Broken Promises: Continuing Federal Funding Shortfall for Native Americans." Despite the significance of "A Quiet Crisis," this new report showed that after 15 years, little had changed in terms of overall policy regarding federal funding for Indian Country—and in some areas, the U.S. had regressed in its investments in Tribal communities. As with "A Quiet Crisis," USCCR again found that the continued use of discretionary appropriations for Indian Country led to sustained underinvestment across an array of areas for Native American communities, violating Native Americans' civil rights. Among the subject areas assessed in this report were criminal justice, healthcare, education, housing, and economic development.

Though “A Quiet Crisis” and “Broken Promises” were landmark efforts to demonstrate the continued challenges of federal underinvestment in Native communities, they both stopped short of attempting to quantify a dollar amount to meet the full needs of Native Americans—either in total or in specific areas. Rather, the reports assessed investment need using an array of publicly available materials, including agency budget requests and budget assessments put together by relevant nongovernmental associations and advocacy groups, as well as testimony from leaders and policy experts in Indian Country.

In addition, neither report contained a robust assessment of investment needs in either higher education or language revitalization. “A Quiet Crisis” has a short section discussing higher education, contrasting the funding that TCUs receive with non-Native community colleges, and noting funding levels for TCUs fall well short of the recommended funding needs determined by the National Indian Education Association (NIEA). The report also noted that reservation land being held in trust by the federal government constrains Tribes from levying property taxes, which are an important source of revenue for funding non-Native community colleges. “Broken Promises” does not have a section focusing on higher education, and the main references to higher education are around that the lack of resources for K-12 education for Native American youth, which contribute to them attending higher education at lower rates than other populations.

“A Quiet Crisis” does not address Native language reclamation efforts. “Broken Promises” has a short section on teaching Native languages and cultures, but the only funding discussed in this section is related to funding for English language learning for Native students whose first language isn’t English.

Federal investment in Native American language revitalization

Data about Native language revitalization and reclamation are scarce even beyond the “Quiet Crisis” and “Broken Promises” reports. While education is one of the largest domains of federal investment for Native Americans (receiving significant attention in the annual OMB Crosscut, GAO studies, and CRS briefs), language is often mentioned only in passing, rather than as a standalone topic area. Five weeks before leaving office, the Biden administration acknowledged this information gap and the need to increase federal investment through the publication of a 10-year national plan on Native language revitalization, which estimated that the federal government spent just $42 million on aligned Native language education, reclamation, and revitalization programs in FY 2024. In total, OMB estimates that the federal government has spent just 1 cent on language reclamation since 2006 for every dollar it spent on assimilatory policies in the 19th and 20th centuries, including the federal Indian boarding schools. While underinvestment in Indian Country is widespread and pervasive, this gap is notably large given that Native language loss has been exponentially increasing: Of the 197 Native languages currently active in the United States, only four are considered not in danger of extinction.

FIGURE 7

Existing federal programs and funding for Native language revitalization

Agency	Program	FY2024 Enacted
Department of Education	Preservation and Maintenance	$11.9M
Department of the Interior	Native Language Instruction	$7.5M
Department of the Interior	Living Languages Grant Program	$6.5M
Department of Health and Human Services	Esther Martinez Immersion	$5.4M
Department of Education	Native American and Alaska Native Children in Schools (NAM)	$5M
Department of Education	Native American Language Resource Center (NALRC)	$3M
Department of Education	Native American Language Grant (NAL@ED)	$2.9M
Department of Education	Durbin Feeling Native Language Act of 2022	$0

Source: FY2022-FY2025 Native American Funding Crosscut and USAspending

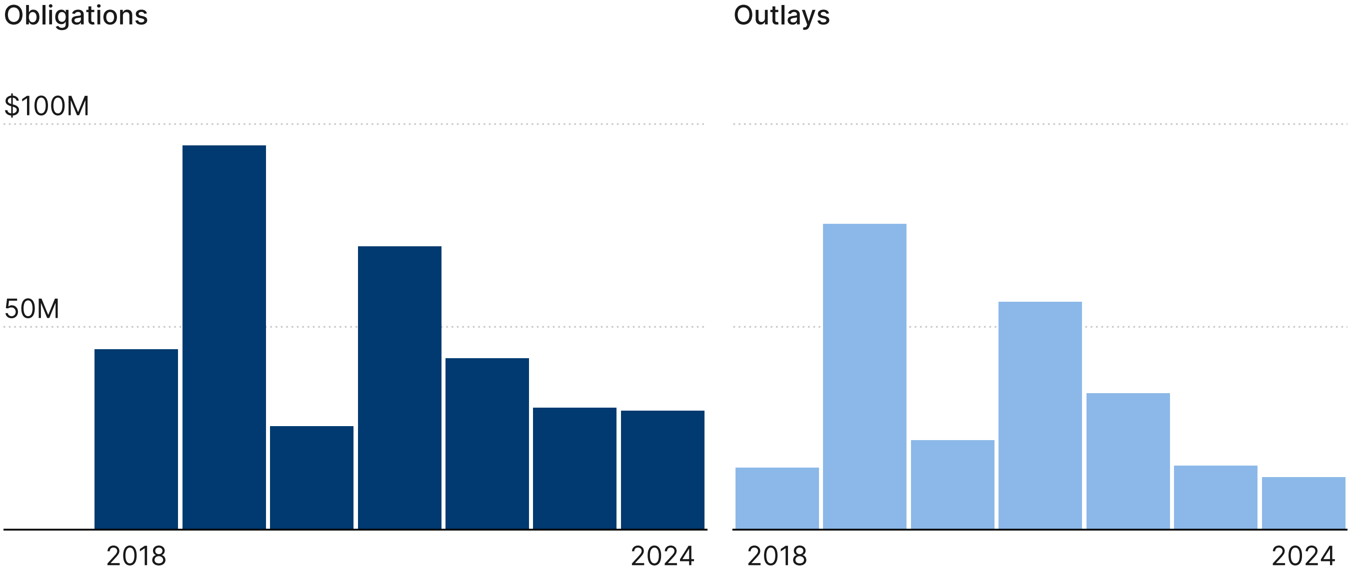
Note: Allocated totals represent funding authorized by Congress. Obligated totals represent funding committed through grants, contracts, and direct payments.

As part of this plan, OMB also put forth an estimate of the level of investment needed for Native language reclamation: $16.7 billion between 2025 and 2035. If enacted, this policy agenda would create new programs for student immersion, community revitalization, curriculum innovation, teacher hiring and retention, and technical assistance. To achieve this goal, the federal government calculated an investment need of $1.5 billion per year into Native language programs and their administration, starting with the funding and staffing of a new Office of Native Language Revitalization. As of the end of FY 2025, there has been no congressional action to provide new appropriations toward these investment goals. Additionally, while no new executive orders or OMB policy shifts have explicitly targeted the above Native language reclamation programs, no new obligations have been made since the end of 2024, and annual obligations made under these programs through 2024 have been steadily declining.

FIGURE 8

Federal investment in select Native language revitalization and reclamation programs

FY2018-FY2024, in inflation-adjusted U.S. dollars



Source: Brookings analysis of U.S. Census Bureau and Office of Management and Budget data

Note: 2024 dollars, deflated using the GCEGI implicit price deflator (FRED)

Several reports have attempted to calculate the amount of money needed to meet the full investment needs of Native Americans and the full trust and treaty obligations the federal government owes in specific subject areas.

Since 2003, Tribal leaders have provided input on IHS budgets and policy through the National Tribal Budget Formulation Workgroup (NTBFWG), which serves all 575 federally recognized Tribes throughout the 12 IHS service areas. Each year, NTBFWG publishes a budget request for IHS to meet the full healthcare needs of the entire service population. This budget request differs from both the president's official budget request as well as the amounts Congress enacts. For context, the NTBFWG's most recent budget request estimated total IHS funding needs at $73 billion—over 10 times more than the FY 2024 enacted IHS budget of $7.1 billion.

To arrive at this number, NTBFWG starts with the most recent fiscal year's enacted dollar amount. It adjusts that number to incorporate anticipated changes to federal and Tribal pay, inflation, and population growth. It then calculates the amount of money needed to fully meet what it calls "Binding Obligations" to Native Americans, which consist of funding to staff newly completed facilities, for healthcare facility construction, and to fully fund contract support costs and payments for Tribal leases. Finally, each of the 12 IHS service area offices calculates the amount of funding that would be needed to expand their offerings to serve every Native American person in their respective service area. NTBFWG's annual budget book contains an appendix further detailing each individual IHS service area's funding requests.

NTBFWG's methodology provides one approach for aggregating total investment needs across other topic areas. For example, the approach of having individual service areas submit budget recommendations could be applicable in the higher education context, in which individual institutions such as TCUs can coordinate with each other and with associations such as the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) to develop detailed budget requests that are then aggregated together into a topline request.

However, such an approach is time- and effort-intensive. Without well-established infrastructure or a central coordinating entity available to provide guidance and assistance to constituent organizations, aggregate data, and write and publish reports, such a detailed and comprehensive analysis may be prohibitively difficult on a regular basis absent dedicated resources.

Another recent effort to measure subject-area-specific investment needs for Native Americans is the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Office of Justice Services' "Report to the Congress on Spending, Staffing, and Estimated Funding Costs for Public Safety and Justice Programs in Indian Country, 2021." This report estimates the full cost of public safety and justice programs for Tribal communities by combining actual spending data with modeled projections of what a fully funded public safety and justice system would require. The report then compares these modeled costs with actual FY 2021 federal appropriations to calculate unmet need.

To calculate the costs to fully fund public safety and justice in Indian Country, BIA begins by collecting FY 2021 expenditures, staffing levels, and service population figures for Tribal law enforcement, detention and corrections, and Tribal courts. Using Tribal-certified enrollment data and national staffing benchmarks (such as officers per 1,000 residents), the report calculates how many full-time staff and operational dollars would be necessary to meet standard public safety service levels across Indian Country. Costs per employee and per facility type are applied to these staffing estimates to establish the total cost of a fully functional system.

By comparing these numbers to actual appropriations, BIA found a funding gap of just over $3 billion in FY 2021. This number reflects the difference between FY 2021 appropriations and the projected cost of meeting public safety responsibilities in Indian Country that year, highlighting how existing funding covers only a small share of documented need.

BIA's approach is distinct from the NTBFWG's work to calculate IHS funding needs, and may potentially be more replicable. In particular, by basing staffing need calculations on national benchmarks for Indian Country and applying standard per-employee and per-facility costs to estimate the funding needed, BIA doesn't need to rely on bespoke—and possibly nonreplicable—funding estimates from individual offices. However, BIA's approach also leaves shortcomings. In particular, basing calculations on national benchmarks and standardized costs, even those based on Tribal numbers, means these numbers likely understate the true unmet need by failing to account for the unique public safety challenges some Tribal nations face. For example, police on rural reservations may need to navigate geographically isolated communities with substandard physical and digital infrastructure. In other cases, complex land tenure and reservation checkerboarding mean that Tribal police may need to patrol with GPS to determine whether an area is under Tribal authority or not. Nor do these models account for centuries of jurisdictional limitations and chronic under-resourcing. Addressing safety in Indian Country also often requires more intensive and community-anchored resources, as underscored by the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) crisis.

In the higher education space, AIHEC publishes annual funding requests for congressional appropriations, with recommendations for how much funding to provide programs across government that serve TCUs. However, these funding requests aren't full assessments of needs. While they are calibrated to more fully address ongoing investment needs for Native American higher education, they are also designed to be realistic targets for Congress to meet based on the realities of the current discretionary appropriations process.

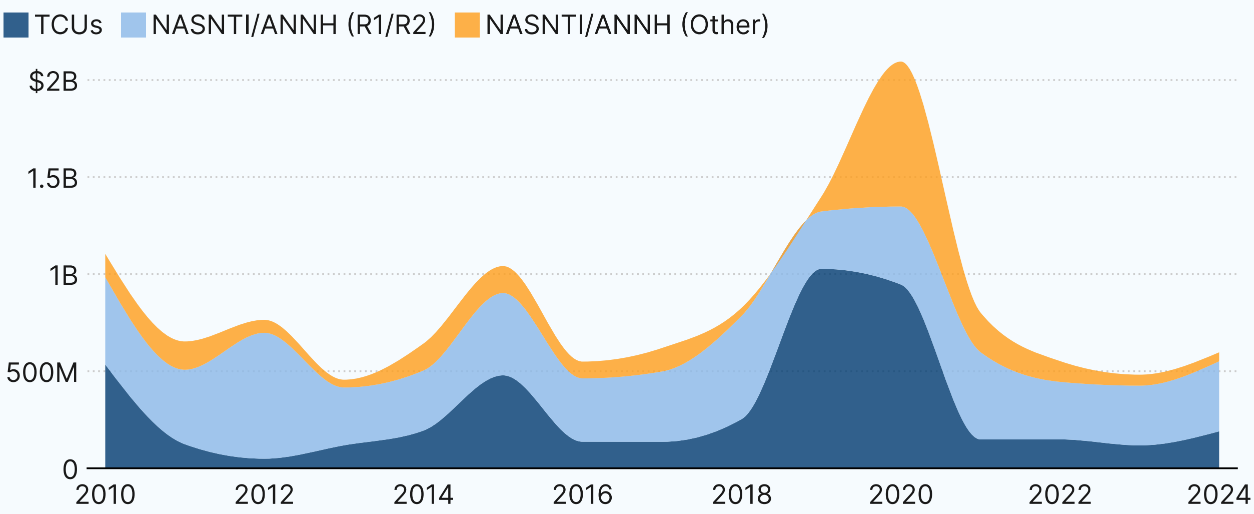
Federal investment in Native American postsecondary education

Discretionary appropriations for Native Americans fall short across all investment domains, and higher education is no exception. Despite significant evidence that TCUs and other Native-serving colleges and universities provide significant returns on investment for the federal government, spending on Native postsecondary education has been backsliding. The federal government obligated roughly $597 million in grant funding to TCUs, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian-Serving Institutions (ANNHs), and Native American-Serving Nontribal Institutions (NASNTIs) in 2024, representing a 7.1% drop from a decade prior. While these institutions received a surge of federal funding during the pandemic, it was followed by a steady decline in spending over the following years. This retrenchment has been more concentrated in TCUs than in other Native-serving institutions, with a decline of nearly 7% in obligated funding between 2014 and 2024.

FIGURE 9

Federal obligations to Native-serving postsecondary institutions, 2010-2024

in inflation-adjusted U.S. dollars



Source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and USASpending.

Note: Two Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian-Serving institutions are classified as research universities by the Carnegie Classification framework. Because these universities comprise the majority of funding for native-serving nontribal colleges and universities in most years, they are presented separately above.

2024 dollars, deflated using the GCEGI implicit price deflator (FRED).

This funding retrenchment is a consequence of appropriations legislation that has never funded Tribal postsecondary education at statutorily mandated levels. While programmatic funding requirements differ for ANNHs and NASNTIs, TCUs are entitled to over $12,000 per Native student under current federal law, but Congress most recently appropriated less than $8,000. This funding deficit is compounded by a funding model that disadvantages TCUs far more than other public-serving colleges and universities:

Federal funding for TCUs is contingent solely on Native student enrollment (despite high enrollment rates for non-Native students at some TCUs), and state and local governments are not required to fund TCUs as they are most other minority-serving land grant institutions.

Regardless of approach, the message is clear: Federal investment for Native Americans is failing to meet both the overall investment needs of Indian Country as well as the trust and treaty obligations that the U.S. owes to Tribal nations, citizens, and communities.

Philanthropic resources have been inadequate to close the funding gap for Native communities and causes

Greater federal investment into Tribal communities is essential; however, it may take years for policy to change sufficiently to meet those needs. In the interim, philanthropic funding can help close some of the investment gaps for Tribal nations, citizens, and communities. Philanthropy can also help partially meet the additional funding needs created when the federal government prioritizes funding cuts and austerity over meeting Native Americans' full investment needs. Doing so aligns with many philanthropic organizations' missions to improve the well-being of American citizens, including historically underserved populations.

However, recent studies have shown that Native communities and the organizations that serve them—as well as other communities of color—rely disproportionately more on government funding. Analysis from Indiana University's Lilly Family School of Philanthropy shows that about two-thirds of contributions to organizations serving communities of color come from government grants, compared to just a third of contributions going to other organizations. This dynamic becomes particularly problematic when federal agencies are disinvesting in Native communities and the organizations that serve them.

Philanthropic investment in Native causes goes beyond just meeting the needs of Indigenous communities. New investment has the opportunity for significant impact. As previous analyses have shown, less than 1% of philanthropic funding currently goes to Native causes. Greater investment in Indigenous communities would bring significant opportunity for partnership, nation-building, and the creation of broader prosperity for Native and non-Native communities alike—what the nonprofit Native Americans in Philanthropy (NAP) calls "shared abundance." To that end, philanthropic investment, like federal investment, can yield a strong return on investment for all parties.

In addition to the shared benefits that come from investment in Indigenous communities, philanthropy has a strong moral obligation to invest in Native communities and causes. Many of today's largest philanthropic organizations draw on endowments that have historical origins in extractive industries such as mining, oil, and railroad construction—all of which involved significant expropriation of Native lands and resources and adversely impacted Native Americans' livelihoods. Because philanthropic organizations don't have the same legal trust and treaty obligations as the federal government, investing in shared abundance is a way to respond to the historical harms that have been levied on Indigenous communities.

About the data: Calculating philanthropic investment into Native communities and causes

All data used to calculate philanthropic investments in Indigenous communities contained in this report are provided by Candid, a private data provider that tracks and consolidates reporting data from grantmaking organizations, foundations, and other nonprofit organizations across the United States. The dataset Candid provided covers giving by foundations and corporations to American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, and other Indigenous causes, which mirrors the methodology used in a 2019 report from NAP and Candid titled "Investing in Native Communities: Philanthropic Funding for Native American Communities and Causes." This analysis does not include giving from individuals, which, while not included in the 2019 report, is included in NAP and Candid's Investing in Native Communities data map. Additionally, while the populations included in the Candid data do not fully align with the federal government's tracking of investment in Native American communities, this analysis strives to be consistent with previous literature tracking philanthropic investment in Native causes.

While most of the data are sourced from publicly available IRS Form 990 submissions, Candid extends the data by combining them with other publicly available resources as well as voluntarily provided operational data from individual nonprofits. All data compiled by Candid are harmonized using its Philanthropy Classification System (PCS), providing the most comprehensive view into nonprofit organizational structures, service populations, and grant subjects available on the market. A full list of Candid's data sources and partnerships is available here.

Despite its comprehensiveness, the Candid data contends with many of the same measurement limitations described earlier in this report. There are several components of the PCS that may classify a grant or organization as Native-serving, but there is limited ability to identify whether these grants are specifically targeted toward Native populations or whether Native persons are included as a byproduct of the grant's broader geographic or subject area targeting. For instance, a grant to a food bank may be classified as Native-serving if that grant is described as serving any combination of racial or ethnic groups that includes Indigenous Peoples, even if only a fraction of the people the food bank serves are Native. Likewise, a museum may be classified as Native-serving if it hosts an exhibit focused on Native people. As a result, counting all grants Candid flags as Native-related constitutes an overcount of the actual level of philanthropic spending serving Native communities and causes.

In recognition of this, previous Native-led analyses of philanthropic investment for Native American causes have taken steps to identify truly Native-serving grants within the Candid data. First Nations Development Institute (FNDI) first attempted this in their 2014 report, "Growing Inequity: Large Foundation Giving to Native American Organizations and Causes, 2006-2014."

In that report, FNDI performed extensive manual analysis to determine whether recipient organizations were Native-led based on their mission statements and board membership. In doing so, they identified that just half of all grant dollars designated as serving Native causes went to Native-led organizations. In their 2019 report and data map, NAP and Candid provided discrete filtering options to omit data for grants coded as serving other racial and ethnic groups in addition to Indigenous Peoples. Using this approach, NAP and Candid found that only about one-third of philanthropic funding Candid coded as Native-serving between 2002 and 2016 served exclusively Native people or causes.

Following their 2014 report, in 2024 FNDI published "On the Matter of Foundation Giving: Examining the Inequity of Private Philanthropy's Investment in Native Communities." By assessing the mission statements and board membership of all recipients of grants of $20,000 or more in the NAP and Candid data map mentioned above, FNDI found that 70% of grant dollars designated as Native-serving in 2022 flowed to Native-led organizations—a 20-percentage-point improvement over their 2014 analysis. Still, FNDI found that all grants Candid tagged as Native-serving accounted for just 0.78% of total philanthropic spending, meaning that just 0.55% (i.e., 70% of 0.78%) of total giving in the United States in 2022 was awarded to Native-led organizations.

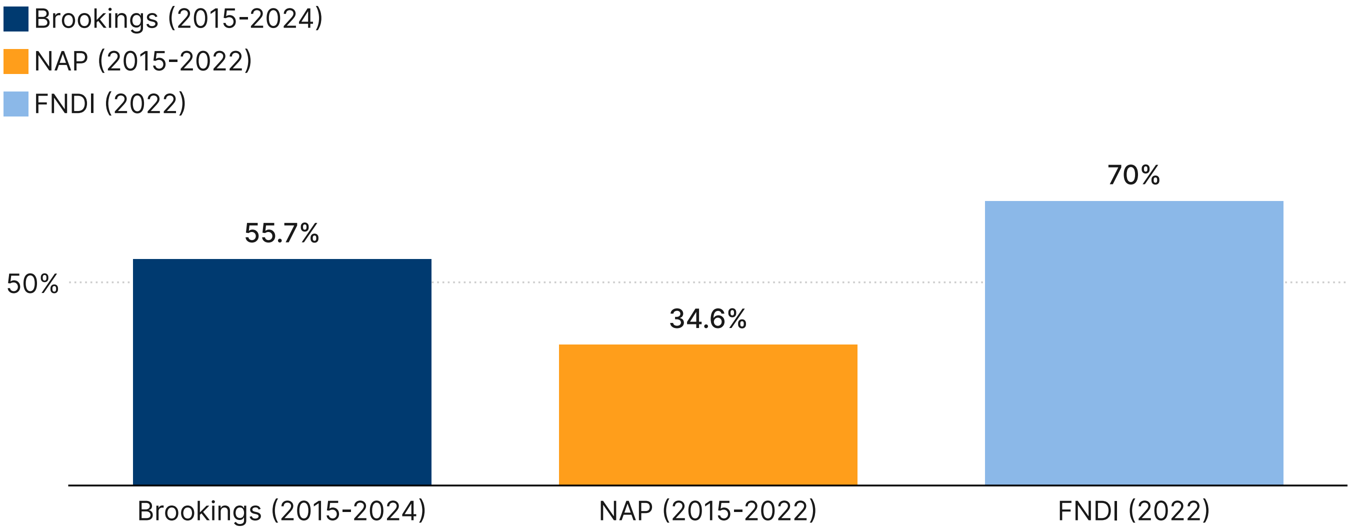
This report contributes to the literature by creating a complementary approach to tracking grants benefiting Native-serving organizations and causes. Our approach draws on supplementary data from the IRS and databases of Tribes and Tribal organizations maintained by the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), and the Census Bureau. We classify these types of grants as Native-exclusive if they meet any of the following conditions:

- The recipient is included on a consolidated, standardized list of Tribes, Tribal organizations, or Tribe-affiliated schools derived from NCAI, BIA, and Census Bureau databases.
- The IRS categorizes the recipient as a Tribe.
- The recipient's name or official mission statement matches a set of common keywords (e.g., "American Indian," "Alaska Native," "First People").
- The recipient is not a federal agency subsidiary (e.g., IHS).
- The recipient is not classified as a religious organization or mission, unless their service population includes Native groups and no other racial or ethnic groups, their name or official mission statement matches the set of common keywords defined above, and they actively provide social services to the Native groups in their service populations (e.g., food pantries and health clinics).

This approach finds that between 2015 and 2024, about 56% of Native-serving funding in the Candid database exclusively served Native Americans. This number is in between the share of funding going to "Native Americans only" that NAP found in their 2019 analysis (about one-third of funding), and the share of funding that FNDI found was going to Native-led organizations in their 2024 analysis (about 70% of funding).

FIGURE 10

Share of Native-serving philanthropic grants awarded to Native-exclusive groups and causes



Source: Brookings analysis of Candid, NAP, and FNDI data

Note: Brookings share based on 2024 inflation-adjusted dollars, deflated using the GCEGI implicit price deflator (FRED).

While these methodological distinctions are important for understanding how this report relates to the existing literature, they do not suggest fundamentally different trends in Native-serving philanthropic funding, nor indicate different degrees of accuracy. NAP's work, including their data map published with Candid, remains a crucial resource for understanding the flows of philanthropic funding to Native causes based on recipient- and grant-level service populations. Meanwhile, FNDI's reports continue to be the most comprehensive assessment available of philanthropic investment flows to Native-led organizations. The analyses contained in this report should be interpreted as a supplement to these resources.

Yet despite these different approaches for analyzing philanthropic investment for Native causes, all three analyses find that Native-serving grants account for a disproportionately small share of total giving in the United States: less than 1%. This analysis finds that just 0.88% of foundation and corporate philanthropic funding in the Candid database was classified as serving Native communities or causes (inclusive of grants that also served other populations).

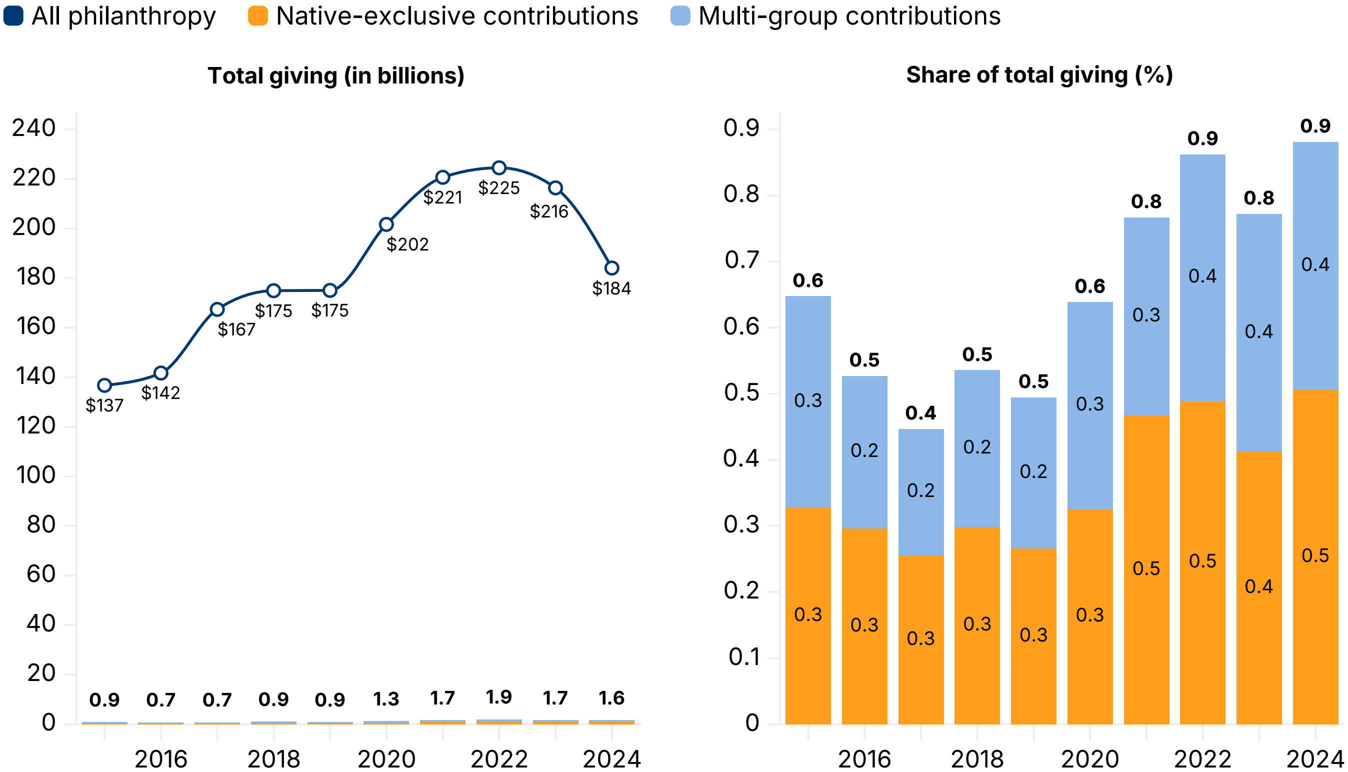
Contributions to Native-exclusive groups and causes account for an even lower share, generally accounting for less than half of 1% of total philanthropic investment nationwide between 2015 and 2024. In 2024, just 0.51% of foundation and corporate funding in the Candid dataset went to grants that Brookings analysis could confirm exclusively served Native communities.

In no year have Native Americans received philanthropic investment at a rate commensurate with their share of the population, which ranges from 1% to 2.7% in Census Bureau estimates. That shows that the philanthropic sector continues to fail to meet the investment needs of Indian Country.

Figure 11 displays the extent of this disinvestment, with total investment levels shown on the left and the percentage of total philanthropic investment reaching Indian Country shown on the right.

FIGURE 11

Multi-group vs. native-exclusive philanthropic funding to Indian Country, relative to total U.S. giving



Source: Brookings Metro analysis of Candid data

Note: 2024 dollars, deflated using the GCEGI implicit price deflator (FRED).

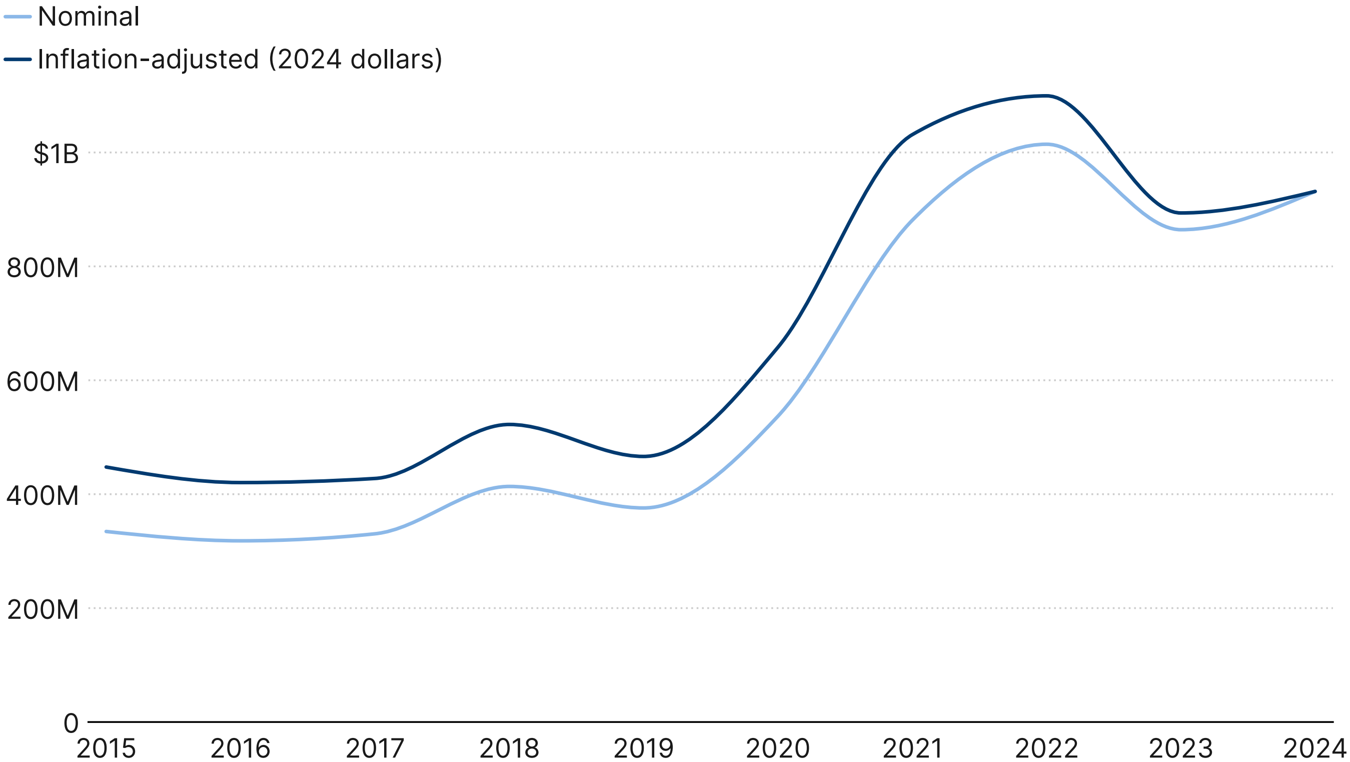
Because this report seeks to quantify investment flowing directly to Native American organizations and causes rather than all investment that tangentially and/or indirectly impacts Native communities, all data contained in the section below reflect insights from this Native-exclusive segment of the Candid database.

Trends in foundation and corporate philanthropic investment into Native American causes

The good news is that small increases in the share of total giving going to Native Americans have come at a time when overall philanthropic investment is rising, leading to Native-exclusive giving more than doubling since 2019. As Figure 12 shows, inflation-adjusted philanthropic funding for Native-exclusive causes rose from $466.3 million in 2019 to $931.6 million in 2024.

FIGURE 12

Foundation and corporate philanthropic funding to Native causes



Source: Brookings analysis of Candid data

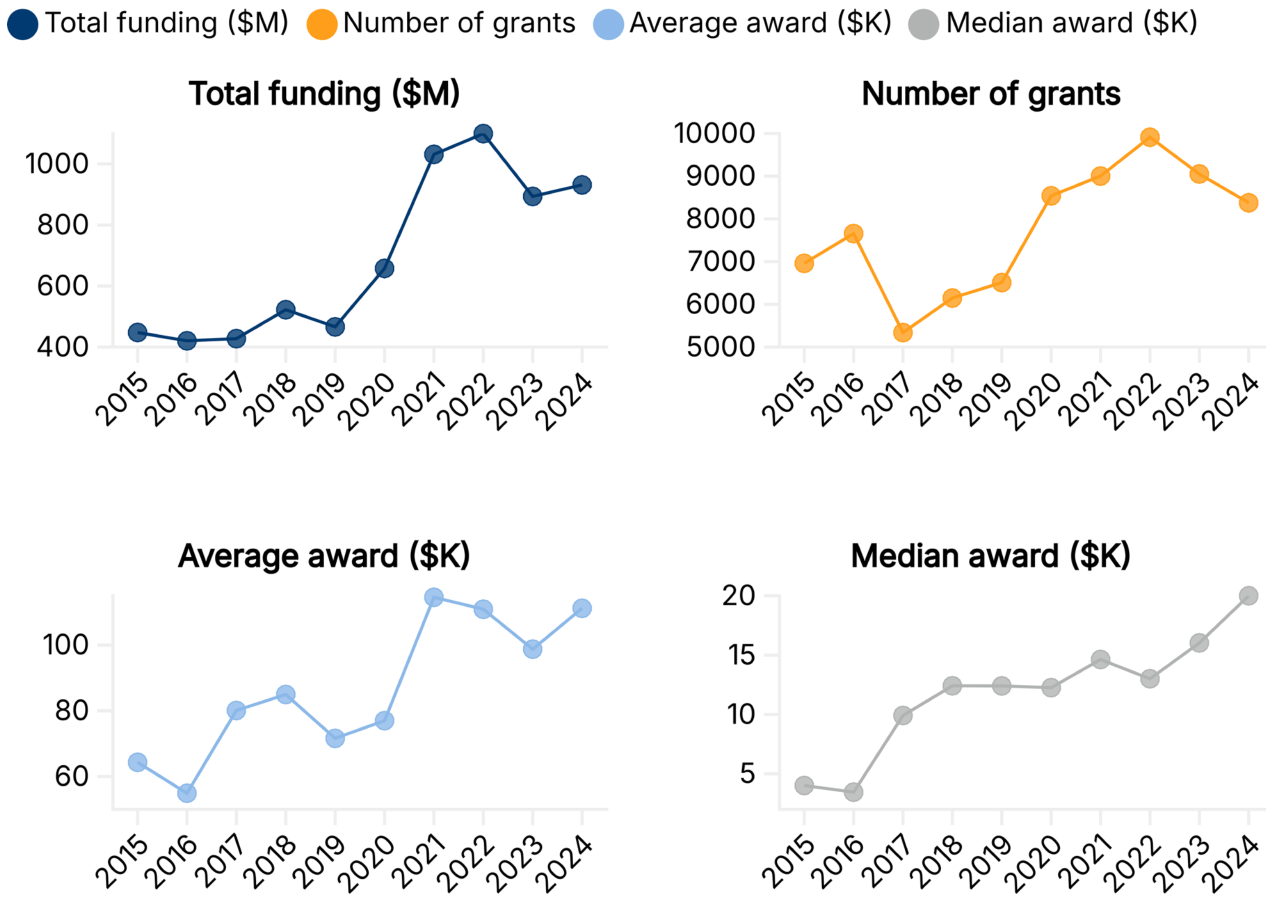
Note: Inflation-adjusted totals shown in 2024 dollars, deflated using the GCEGI implicit price deflator (FRED).

Increases in total funding have been attributable to both a larger number of grants awarded to Native recipients and causes as well as larger award totals within those grants. The average Native-exclusive award in 2024 was more than 1.5 times larger than the average Native-exclusive award in 2019.

The average grant to Native-exclusive causes in 2024 was $111,200. Notably, the median grant flowing to Native-exclusive causes in 2024 was significantly below that average: just $20,000. This means that half of all awards made to Native recipients and causes were less than $20,000, indicating a relatively small number of organizations are receiving most of the funding. And while median award size largely followed the same trend as total funding and award averages prior to the pandemic, the total number of grants to Native-exclusive causes has been in decline since 2022, indicating that a smaller number of larger gifts may have been awarded to Native causes during this period compared to previous years. Absent a significant structural adjustment, these levels of philanthropic funding are insufficient to meet the significant investment needs in Tribal communities.

FIGURE 13

Distribution of philanthropic and corporate philanthropic funding going to Native organizations and causes



Source: Brookings Metro analysis of Candid data

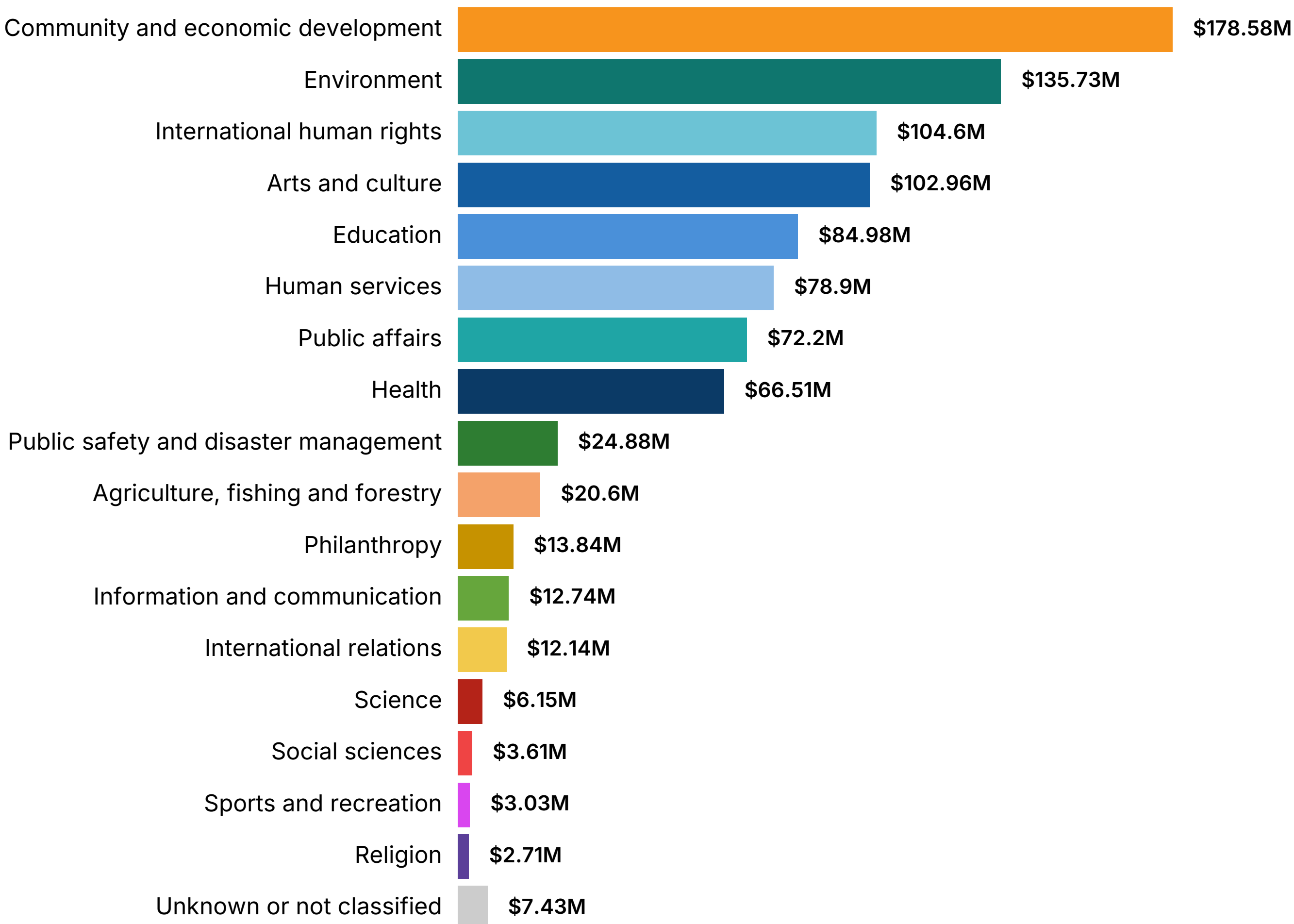
Note: 2024 dollars, deflated using the GCEGI implicit price deflator (FRED).

Subject area overview of philanthropic giving to Native American causes

Figure 14 provides an overview of the subject areas with the largest amount of Native-serving philanthropic investment in 2024. Candid classifies each grant in the dataset into one or more subject areas. To provide a sense of relative investment scale across categories and ensure that each category and subcategory are summative, Figure 14 allocates funding for each grant proportionally based on its number of assigned subject codes. For example, if Candid coded a grant's subject areas as "environment," "arts and culture," and "education," this analysis allocates one-third of the grant's funding to the environment subject area, one-third to the arts and culture subject area, and one-third to the education subject area. As a result, these numbers should be interpreted as a lower-bound estimate of total foundation and corporate philanthropic investment in each subject area. This data should therefore be interpreted as directional, and not a complete representation of all possible investments in a given subject area.

FIGURE 14

Foundation and corporate philanthropic funding to Native American causes by subject area, 2024



View the full interactive graphic here

Source: Brookings analysis of Candid data

Note: In 2024 inflation-adjusted U.S. dollars, deflated using the GCEGI implicit price deflator (FRED)

Figure 14 shows significant change in how grants for Native communities and causes have been used over the past decade. From 2015 to 2017, health and education services was by far the most significant topic for Native-exclusive grants. Since then, investments in community and economic development, environmental causes, education, and human/civil rights advocacy have become significantly more common. This represents a contrast to federal investment, in which health- and education-related spending through the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education continue to comprise the largest source of federal investment into Indian Country. We don't know whether this is philanthropy's response to emerging needs, giving assessments, or perceived gaps in federal support. Further work is merited to understand whether philanthropy has a leading or lagging response to societal changes.

Philanthropic investment in Native higher education and language reclamation

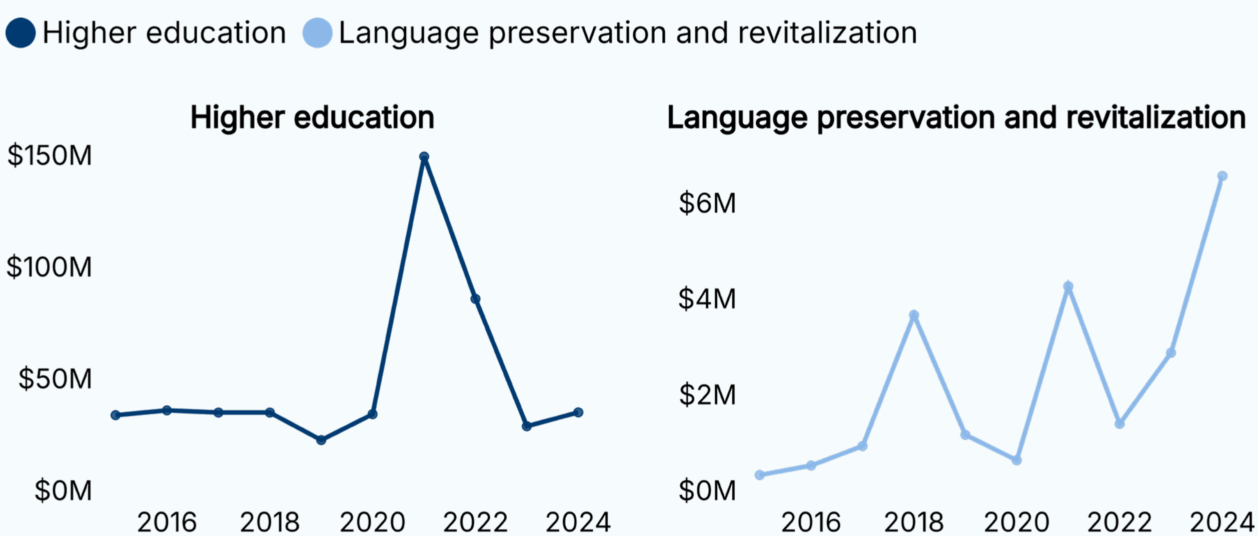
The decline in the share of education-focused philanthropic investment has led grantmaking to Native higher education to stagnate. In each year of the Candid dataset, grants to higher education make up a significantly larger share of funding than any other type of educational institution; however, as of 2024, $35.2 million in grant funding was awarded to Native higher education, which was just $1.3 million more than in 2015 after adjusting for inflation. The only significant increases in philanthropic investments toward Native higher education came in 2021 and 2022, mostly thanks to a small number of large grants awarded to the American Indian College Fund and Native Forward Scholars Fund. However, these types of large, one-off gifts are not predictable philanthropy, and don't reflect an overall trend of investment growth.

Unlike higher education, grants toward Native language revitalization have been growing, but have also been extremely volatile since 2015. Native-exclusive grants for language revitalization grew from just over $344,000 in 2015 to nearly $6.6 million in 2024. But while Native organizations and causes received nearly 20 times the amount of funding for Native language revitalization in 2024 than they did in 2015, these grants accounted for less than 1% of total Native-exclusive philanthropic funding.

FIGURE 15

Trends in Native-exclusive philanthropic investment for higher education and language reclamation

in inflation-adjusted U.S. dollars



Source: Brookings analysis of Candid data

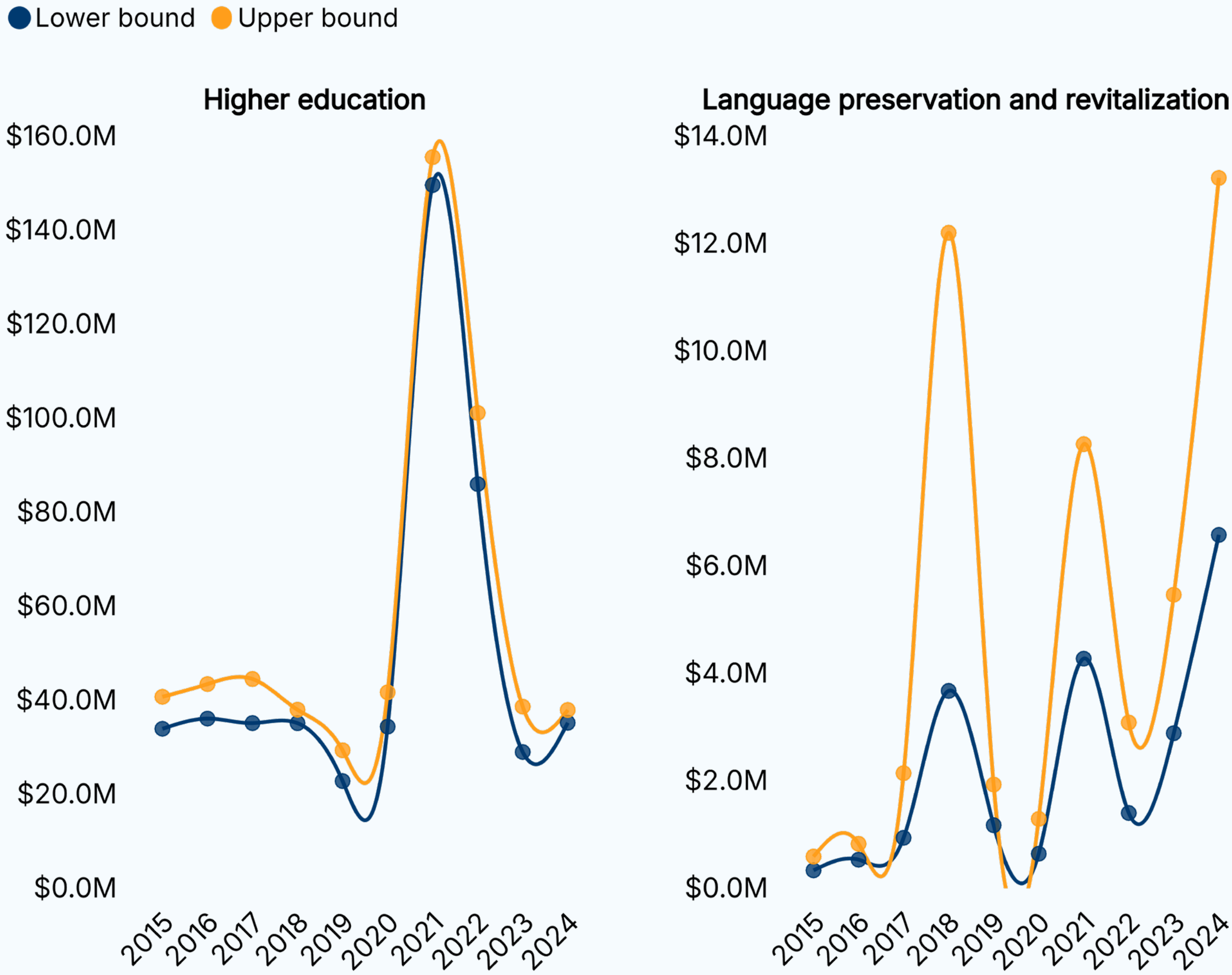
Note: 2024 dollars, deflated using the GCEGI implicit price deflator (FRED).

One caveat is that language revitalization grants are significantly more likely to be multi-classified with other subjects in the Candid dataset, increasing the difference between the lower-bound estimates in Figure 16 and the upper-bound potential philanthropic flows targeting language revitalization. In 2024, the upper-bound estimate for Native-exclusive investment in language revitalization was roughly $13.2 million—twice as high as the lower-bound estimate. This means that a majority of language revitalization grants serving Native communities are multi-purpose, providing other educational, environmental, and cultural services as well.

FIGURE 16

Upper-bound vs. lower-bound Native-exclusive philanthropic investment for higher education and language reclamation

in inflation-adjusted U.S. dollars



Source: Brookings analysis of Candid data

Note: 2024 dollars, deflated using the GCEGI implicit price deflator (FRED).

Across this upper-bound/lower-bound range, results indicate that language revitalization efforts are not receiving adequate support from private philanthropy. Assuming that all multi-categorical grant funding could be counted as language revitalization alone (i.e., the upper-bound estimate in Figure 16), these grants still summed to a total of just $49 million in funding between 2015 and 2024—only slightly more than the federal government invested into language revitalization in 2024 alone. And, like the federal government, this grant volume is barely a drop in the bucket compared to the $16.7 billion in investment needed for Native language revitalization over the next 10 years.

To put it another way, using the most generous estimates, the $49 million in philanthropic funding into Native language revitalization from 2015 to 2024 totaled less than a third of the $1.67 billion the federal government estimates is needed for just one year of adequate Native language revitalization funding.

While philanthropic giving to Native causes has benefitted from the overall growth in giving more broadly, it remains a small share of overall philanthropic funding. There is ample opportunity for the philanthropic sector to step up and better meet the investment needs of Native communities.

Framework for estimating investment need in Indian Country

Past research provides guidance for developing a replicable approach for estimating investment need in different topic areas across Indian Country. While different analyses of investment need vary in their specific approach, they share some common characteristics. Based on those past efforts, this analysis finds three major steps that are common across nearly all efforts to estimate investment need in Indian Country, and can form the basis of future investment needs research:

- Develop an estimate of baseline need based on best available Native and non-Native comparisons.
- Track historic federal investment over time to develop an estimate of cumulative unmet need.
- Complement estimates with qualitative interviews to assess unique Native American needs.

This section provides further detail on each of these steps, as well as examples of how these approaches have been leveraged in past analyses.

Develop an estimate of baseline need based on best available Native and non-Native comparisons

As a first step, analyses of investment needs in Indian Country frequently develop estimates of baseline need by drawing on comparison institutions from Native and non-Native contexts.

Mixed-methods approaches are essential to having a clear understanding of needs. Existing literature, testimony, and perspectives from Native and non-Native subject matter experts can provide critical inputs for developing funding baselines.

As an example, BIA's 10-Year National Plan on Native Language Revitalization leveraged testimony and community outreach sessions with Native language experts to find that between 2,000 and 3,000 hours are needed to become a proficient Native language speaker. From there, BIA developed a set of resources, programs, and investments needed to help individuals reach that benchmark and quantified the amount of funding needed for each. The plan lays out the assumptions that go into individual funding lines, which then aggregate up into a total 10-year investment of $16.7 billion.

Modeling different funding scenarios is also helpful. For example, BIA analysis of funding for public safety and justice first develops a "basic program" of staffing needs in Tribal law enforcements and courts based on a Tribe with a service population between 1,601 and 6,500 people. From there, BIA develops a series of tiered "law enforcement need" categories based on Tribal population sizes that are larger or smaller than the "basic program."

Track historic federal investment over time to develop an estimate of cumulative unmet need

Federal underinvestment has been a perennial challenge for Indian Country. As such, looking at a single year of unmet need is not sufficient to determine the true scope of the challenge. Rather, any analyses of investment needs for Native Americans must take a multi-year look, calculating aggregate underinvestment over years, decades, or even centuries.

While many past reports have stopped short of calculating a cumulative, multi-year estimate of unmet need, they have pointed to calculations of unmet need over time for specific topic areas. For example, the "Broken Promises" report noted that the Department of the Interior estimates its Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) accumulated a maintenance backlog of $634 million in 2018—a number that had grown to $1 billion based on department estimates at the time of this report's publication. The report also noted that others estimated the BIE construction backlog to be as high as $1.3 billion in 2018—over twice as large as the official department estimate from the time.

These aggregated estimates of need are important because underinvestment accumulates and worsens over time. Underinvestment in a certain area can accelerate deterioration in another; for example, as "Broken Promises" explained, when a school has inadequate resources to fund maintenance and needed repairs to its physical structures or systems, the lack of maintenance leads to quicker deterioration of systems such as heating, cooling, and lighting. This not only costs the school more in long-term maintenance, but also has negative effects on student learning outcomes, further exacerbating long-term social costs for students, families, and communities.

While the full array of indirect effects is likely impossible to calculate, having an overall estimate of cumulative underinvestment over time is critical for understanding full investment need.

Complement estimates with qualitative interviews to determine unique Native American needs

Native American communities have unique needs above and beyond other populations. As such, while funding needs for non-Native institutions can be helpful to develop initial funding baselines, they are not sufficient to develop accurate estimates of true investment need in Indian Country.

In addition, Native American Tribes and communities vary widely in size, rurality, land holdings, wealth, economic development, demographic compositions, and other factors. The needs of a small Eastern Tribe in a suburban area will differ from a large, rural, land-holding Tribe in the Mountain Plains, which will in turn differ from the needs of a small, rural Alaska Native village.

To that end, qualitative research and input about the unique conditions that Tribes in different regions face is essential to ensuring a complete understanding of investment need.

Nearly all past needs analyses have incorporated qualitative elements into their assessments to reflect the unique circumstances across and within Indian Country. For example, NTBFWG's work developing an IHS budget to meet the full needs of Indian Country highlights the unique healthcare needs of Tribal communities, including the effects of historical trauma, socioeconomic disparities, and high disease burden, as well as the benefits that come from culturally appropriate care models. To develop their full needs assessment, NTBFWG solicits detailed input about program needs and aspirations from each of the 12 IHS service areas across the country. In doing so, NTBFWG ensures that funding requests incorporate the specific nuances of Tribes in different regions.

Another example of blending qualitative conversations with quantitative analysis comes from BIA's development of a 10-Year Plan on Native Language Revitalization. In the plan, BIA acknowledges there are many barriers for Native language learning that don't exist for other languages, such as unique Tribal contexts, a lack of qualified language teachers, and shrinking communities of proficient speakers. Given these distinctions, BIA leveraged a series of Tribal consultations to learn firsthand from language experts about the specific needs of Tribes and Native language learners. BIA then used that feedback to refine budget recommendations in the plan, making them deliberately robust to ensure funding for Tribes and language learners is sufficient.

Ideas for strengthening funding for Native Americans

Brookings and others have proposed a variety of ideas to scale up funding for Native Americans to meet the full investment needs of Tribal communities. Policymakers and philanthropic actors can take three broad steps toward bolstering investment into Tribal communities:

- Make greater use of mandatory funding in congressional support for Native Americans.
- Make data about federal investment into Tribal nations, citizens, and communities more accessible.
- Reform philanthropic approaches to investing in Native causes.

Make greater use of mandatory funding in congressional support for Native Americans

One of the most significant policy changes would be to shift a greater share of federal funding for Native Americans from discretionary funding to mandatory funding. Most funding for Tribal nations, citizens, and communities is based in discretionary funding, which Congress must proactively approve each year. In contrast, mandatory funding provides benefits to all eligible entities, regardless of overall program cost.

As previous Brookings work noted, shifting more funding for Native Americans to mandatory funding would have three significant impacts. First, it would allow federal funding to fully meet Native American investment needs by allowing Tribal nations, citizens, and communities to access the full dollar amount of funding that they're eligible for. Second, mandatory funding would insulate funding for Tribal communities from the whims of the congressional appropriations process, helping to mitigate the stagnation and erosion of funding for Native Americans that have resulted from the congressional funding process over the past 15 years. Third, it would allow for more robust indexing to measures such as inflation adjustments, ensuring real funding for Native Americans continues to meet the needs of Indian Country in the long run.

Make data about federal investment into Tribal nations, citizens, and communities more accessible

Policymakers should work to strengthen data about federal spending for Native Americans. This has been a frequent recommendation from past analyses assessing funding for Tribal communities. As far back as 2003, the USCCR's "A Quiet Crisis" report noted:

> "Individual agencies are expected to report to the Office of Management and Budget the amount spent on Native American programs annually. Yet, there are no apparent guidelines for how that information should be reported, or for what must be included. Some agencies report direct and indirect funding; others estimate how many Native Americans benefit from programs that serve the general public, not just those directed specifically to tribes, villages, and Native American individuals. Any exercise involving the collection of budget data for federal Native American programs is thus difficult and likely compromised by the lack of uniformity in reporting."

Despite this callout on the need for improved data, the situation remained largely unchanged 15 years later. In its 2018 "Broken Promises" report, USCCR wrote:

> "The federal government continues to fail to keep accurate, consistent, and comprehensive records of federal spending on Native American programs, either for a given fiscal year or for longer time periods, making monitoring of federal spending to meet its trust responsibility difficult."

Other government and nongovernment reports have continually validated these findings. For example, in 2022, GAO published "Tribal Funding: Actions Needed to Improve Information on Federal Funds That Benefit Native Americans," writing that:

> "[Federal agencies] interpret OMB's guidance differently when identifying programs and information on federal funding to include in the crosscut. They also take different approaches to reporting data to OMB for a variety of reasons. The crosscut lacks detailed information about what the agency-reported data represent. Tribal stakeholders stated that this lack of detail makes it challenging for them to leverage the data for decision-making. By improving guidance to collect more detailed information from agencies in its request for crosscut data, OMB could help to provide crosscut users with greater clarity about the data being reported and better meet their needs."

As these reports show, while resources on federal spending data for Indian Country such as the Native American Funding Crosscut have improved over time, they still have significant limitations. In particular, the wide latitude for agencies to submit spending data to the Crosscut based on their own individual interpretation of OMB guidance makes data comparison difficult across agencies and over time. In addition, the Crosscut is only available publicly as a PDF, limiting its usefulness to Native organizations, Tribes, and other entities that have an interest in understanding federal spending for Native Americans.

The Trump administration had not published an FY 2026 Crosscut at the time of this report's publication. While OMB had previously publicly published the Crosscut every year since 2009, doing so is not required by law. Congress should require OMB to publish a Crosscut every fiscal year to aid the federal government in meeting its trust and treaty obligations to Tribes. Congress should include specific provisions around the level of detail that each agency is required to report, including spending on the individual program level. Congress should also require that the data be downloadable in a format that Tribes and the public can easily use for data analysis, such as in an Excel or CSV document. Finally, Congress should direct agencies to take steps to make federal spending data available to Tribal governments on the Tribal level where available, as well as at the state and other relevant geographic levels. Doing so would make the data more useful for Tribes themselves.

Reform philanthropic approaches to investing in Native causes

Major philanthropic organizations continue to underinvest in Native Americans, with just 0.88% of foundation and corporate philanthropic giving going to Native American-related causes, and just 0.51% going to Native-exclusive causes, according to Candid data. As previous research has found, many philanthropic organizations that give to Native causes make just one or two grants to Native American recipients per year, indicating such giving is incidental and not part of a focused strategy for Tribal communities. In other cases, giving to Native causes is limited to just a single project or program, and isn't integrated into an organization's larger giving approach.

Research from FNDI found that an overall lack of knowledge about Native Americans fuels misconceptions about Tribes and Native people and impacts funding. For example, FNDI found a "perception within philanthropy that Native communities have access to federal funds and 'casino money,' and therefore do not need philanthropic dollars." FNDI also found that barriers to investment—such as rural and remote reservations, the time required to build relationships with Native communities, and deficit-based views around the inability of Native organizations to handle large investments—made philanthropy less likely to fund Native causes.

There is an extensive body of literature dating back more than two decades recommending steps philanthropic organizations can take to grow their investments into Tribal communities (as well as other historically underinvested communities). This analysis draws on recommendations from seven major reports looking at philanthropic underinvestment for Native Americans: one jointly published by Washington University in St. Louis' Kathryn M. Buder Center for American Indian Studies and the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development in 2005; two by NAP, in partnership with the Foundation Center in 2011 and Candid in 2019; one by FNDI in 2018; two by the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity (PRE) in 2021 and 2025; and one jointly published by the Bridgespan Group and NAP in 2025. While these seven reports are just a portion of the extensive literature in this space, they are among the most widely cited. Brookings' assessment of these reports finds 10 recommendations that are regularly emphasized (and reemphasized) for philanthropic audiences to bolster their investments in Native causes.

The first major recommendation for philanthropy, which can be found in nearly all reports in this space, is to **leverage long-term patient capital** rather than short-term grants for Native awardees. Given the significant investment needs in Native communities and the length of time that Native Americans have needed to navigate underinvestment from both the federal government and philanthropy, it's unrealistic to expect many of the challenges they face to be resolved in a single grant cycle. Complementing this recommendation, scholars Sarah (Hicks) Kastelic and Miriam Jorgensen called for funders to provide endowment funding for Native grantees, which can serve as a form of long-term funding and free recipients from potentially paternalistic funder-recipient relationships.

To complement this patient capital, funders can **provide capacity-building assistance** to help Tribes and Native-led organizations access funding. This might include pre-award funding to help Native applicants hire or contract with a grant writer, or even providing direct grant-writing assistance to Native organizations. Foundations may also want to **develop alternative application processes** for Native applicants that emphasize cultural characteristics and recognize potential application barriers. Examples of such approaches could include creating flexible or rolling timelines for applications and forgoing traditional application portals in favor of interactions where Native organizations may have more available expertise.

To complement these efforts, funders can **deepen relationships with Native-led intermediary organizations**. These institutions frequently have long-standing, authentic relationships in Native communities, and providing them with flexible funding can be another way to fund issues that Indian Country sees as top priority. More broadly, philanthropic organizations should work to learn more about Native American Tribes, citizens, and communities in both their service areas and nationally. In addition to working with Native regranting organizations, philanthropy should **provide greater support to Native-led organizations**. These are organizations that are founded by Native people, have Native people in key leadership and executive positions, and have Native representation on their boards. Supporting them does not preclude philanthropy from supporting non-Native organizations working on projects in support of Native Americans. However, philanthropy should explore prioritizing funding for non-Native organizations that have clear support from Native communities, which may be evidenced by letters of support from Tribes, partnerships with Native-led organizations, or other forms of collaboration with Native Americans. Philanthropic organizations can also **incorporate Native community perspective into grantmaking**. PRE lays out a variety of options for doing so, including by engaging Native organizations and individuals to provide input into funding strategies in a collaborative way, establishing efforts such as movement accountability boards to inform grantmaking, and recruiting Native individuals to serve on boards of directors or trustees.

Internally, philanthropic organizations should aim to **hire more Native staff**, which can build internal knowledge and capacity to work with Native communities and organizations in an informed, productive, and respectful manner. FNDI put together a set of helpful practices to support philanthropy in doing so in their report "Searching for Inclusion in Philanthropy: A Guide to Equitable Practices in Foundation Hiring." Philanthropic organizations should also work to **improve and protect data about Native-focused grantmaking**. As mentioned above, Tribes, Native communities, and Native organizations must frequently operate with inadequate data, and Native philanthropy is no exception to this reality. Good data about philanthropic investment into Tribal nations, citizens, and communities is essential to ensuring foundations and other donors remain accountable to goals they have set for improving support for Native Americans. At the same time, increased scrutiny of race-conscious decisionmaking in the current political moment—which has affected the public, private, philanthropic, and nonprofit spheres—has at times incorrectly targeted investments into Native causes. To that end, PRE has outlined steps that philanthropy can take to ensure grantees' data are protected, including by engaging grantees in determining appropriate data collection and safety measures as well as investing in data-secure systems.

Organizations across the Native philanthropy space are divided about whether it's more appropriate to integrate Native investments into existing lines of giving or develop dedicated programs aimed at Native organizations and communities. For example, NAP writes that funding Native communities doesn't require the creation of a new program, and instead recommends donating to Native communities in areas of existing philanthropic work by grounding investment into Native causes within organizations' existing missions. FNDI, on the other hand, writes that philanthropic organizations "may have to consider creating designated funds and programs that target Native communities and causes," at least in the short term, because while Native communities may fit within organizations' existing funding priorities, "all too often, Native communities are still not represented in these funding portfolios."

Regardless of approach, the literature is unanimous that the most important step philanthropy can take is to actually **commit to funding** Native causes. In their 2025 report, the Bridgespan Group and NAP provide a series of pathways for philanthropic organizations to "just do it." These include tactical steps such as partnering with effective intermediaries as well as ideas for areas of investment need, including cultural cultivation, economic prosperity, urban Native communities, and Native rights. They also share a variety of approaches that philanthropic organizations with a sustained history of giving to Indigenous communities can take to deepen that involvement, including working toward narrative change, partnering with Tribal nations to support nation-building, unlocking private and public funding, supporting land return initiatives, supporting Indigenous education systems and languages, and bolstering data infrastructure, among others.

Finally, organizations with a dedicated history of giving to Native causes should work to **become advocates** for greater investment into Native communities. NAP notes that funding Native causes is ultimately one of the best ways to learn more about Indian Country and inform future support for Tribal nations, citizens, and communities. And FNDI highlights the importance of peer networks in philanthropy, writing that foundation peers are among the most trusted sources of information in the philanthropic space. Given that, a commitment to funding Native causes and a willingness to advocate to other philanthropic organizations to do the same can be one of the best mechanisms for growing overall philanthropic investment to Native American communities and causes.

Policymakers could take steps to encourage philanthropic organizations to invest further into Native communities. Given that philanthropic organizations are tax-exempt, policymakers have a compelling interest to ensure the benefits of philanthropic investment reach historically underinvested communities such as Native Americans. There have been past policy efforts to move philanthropy in this direction. For example, California's 2008 Assembly Bill 624 would have required the largest philanthropic organizations in the state to release public data on their giving to minority and low-income communities, as well as information about these groups' presence on those foundation staffs and boards. While a growing number of philanthropic organizations are reporting data on their grantees, staff, and board membership, this type of reporting is still inconsistent across the sector, and policy action could increase visibility. Given federal courts' increased scrutiny on race-conscious policy in recent years, policymakers could take steps to ensure any reporting requirements are not just focused on race, but on historically underinvested groups more broadly, including rural and persistent poverty communities.

At the same time, policymakers can take steps to explicitly protect philanthropic investment aimed at historically underrepresented communities, including Native ones. The 2023 Fearless Fund case, as well as recent Trump administration actions targeting nonprofits, have had a chilling effect on philanthropic investments into historically under-resourced communities. State and federal policymakers can respond by stating explicitly that it is legal for philanthropy to invest in historically underinvested groups, signaling to philanthropic leaders that it is safe to proceed. In Massachusetts, for example, policymakers introduced a bill that would affirm it is explicitly legal for professional investors to designate certain funds for historically disadvantaged members of protected classes. Policymakers could extend these protections to philanthropy to give philanthropic leaders the confidence to increase investment in historically underrepresented groups.

Some philanthropic organizations are putting a greater focus on Native issues

While the overall levels of philanthropic investment in Native causes remain very low, some organizations have taken deliberate steps to grow their investment into Native communities and causes by making Native Americans a central part of their giving strategy.

In recent years, several large national philanthropies have developed deliberate funding portfolios focused on Native American causes. After a two-year process of building relationships with Native American organizations and Tribal leaders, the MacArthur Foundation launched its Native Self-Determination Program in June 2025. In launching the program, the foundation also highlighted a series of shifts in its giving process to reflect what it learned from Native stakeholders and best practices in the field. These shifts include moving from just financial support to sustained engagement and partnership with Native communities over time. They also involve supporting Native communities not just through the Native Self-Determination Program, but by infusing giving to Native causes throughout all the foundation's programs. (Note: The MacArthur Foundation, through the American Indian College Fund, supported this report.)

Other large foundations have maintained long-standing relationships with Tribal communities and have made giving to Native causes a core part of their identity. The Northwest Area Foundation, which was created by the founder of the Great Northern

Railway, has an explicit mission to give to the eight Northwestern states and 76 Tribal nations that were impacted by the creation of the railway. The foundation has done extensive work to understand the origins of its wealth and the disruptive effects the railway had on Tribal lands, sovereignty, and resources. In recognition of that, since 2012, the foundation has committed to investing 40% of its giving into Native-led organizations.

Similarly, the Bush Foundation, which was created by the founders of the Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company, today known as 3M, has for nearly 20 years elevated the importance of supporting Native people and nations. There are 23 federally recognized Native nations in the three states that the foundation serves (Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota). In 2008, the foundation committed to serving those Native nations as a core part of its work. Since then, the foundation has placed a significant emphasis on Tribal governance issues and now supports Tribal nations through all its giving programs.

Even smaller family foundations can have a significant presence in Tribal communities with a sustained commitment. The O.P. and W.E. Edwards Foundation is a small, family-run foundation based in Red Lodge, Mont. While the foundation typically funds organizations with which its trustees are acquainted, it places a special emphasis on supporting Native American children, youth, and their families. In particular, the foundation focuses on funding grassroots and Native-led organizations. In many cases, it provides flexible general operating funds for Native causes and places an emphasis on long-term engagements with the organizations it supports. The foundation emphasizes mutual learning, ensuring it learns from grantees while also working to build capacity at the organizations it funds.

Despite the low levels of overall philanthropic support for Native Americans, there are both emerging and long-standing efforts to grow the level of philanthropic resources going to Native communities and causes. The good news, then, is that philanthropies of all sizes can find a peer organization to learn from if they want to scale up their investment in Indian Country

Conclusion

Tribal nations, citizens, and communities have had to contend with both sustained underfunding and significant variance in funding levels over time. As this analysis has shown, there remains a critical need to increase overall levels of federal and philanthropic support for Tribal nations, citizens, and communities. Policymakers should act quickly to reverse harmful funding cuts affecting Native Americans, and philanthropic leaders should work quickly and deliberately to begin scaling up their investments into Native communities and causes. This report aims to inform those efforts, and future reports in this series will provide more detailed insights into some of the most critical areas of investment need across Indian Country.

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