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Great Plains Indians

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PLAIN
Indians

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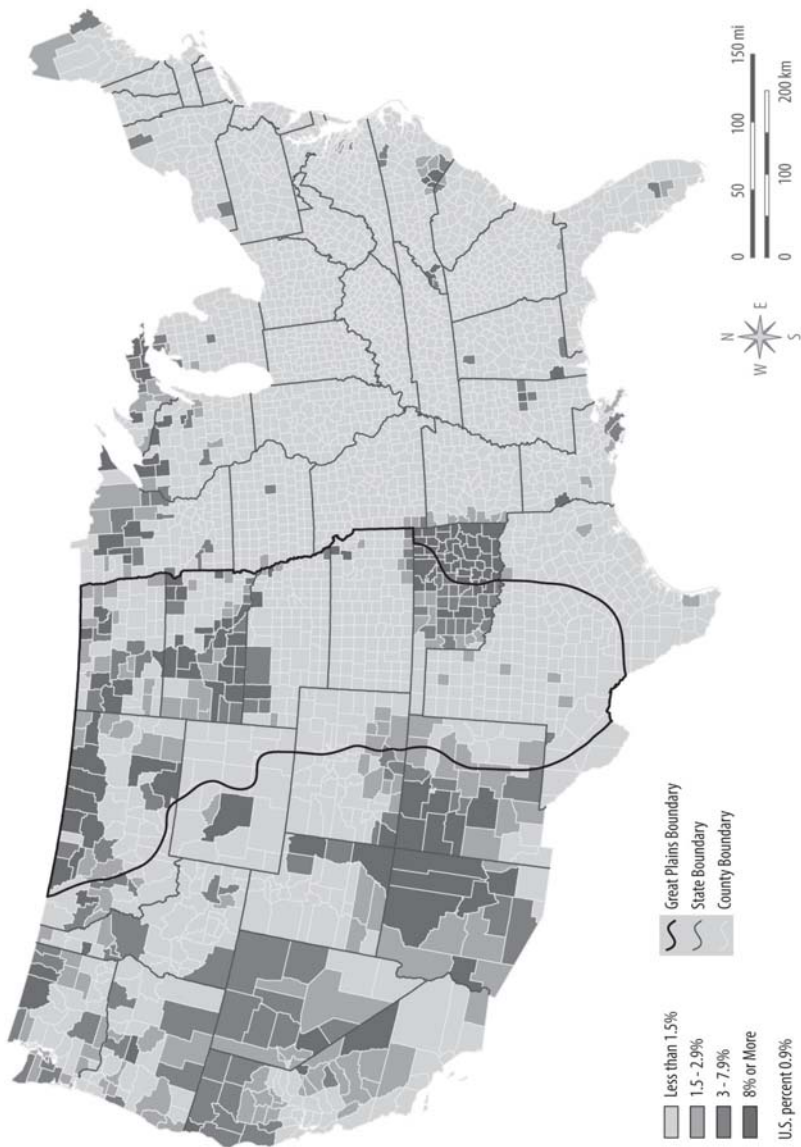
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introduction

Plains Indians in the 2010 Census

On the census map showing the distribution of American Indians and Alaska Natives in the United States in 2010, the Great Plains stands out (fig. 1). The map locates those Americans who identified as being American Indian or Alaska Native *alone* in the 2010 census. If those who reported being American Indian and Alaska Native in combination with other races—an option in the census since 2000—are counted, then the total numbers would just about double, though the geographic concentrations would remain much the same. In the continental United States, only the Southwest matches the Great Plains as an Indian region, however measured.

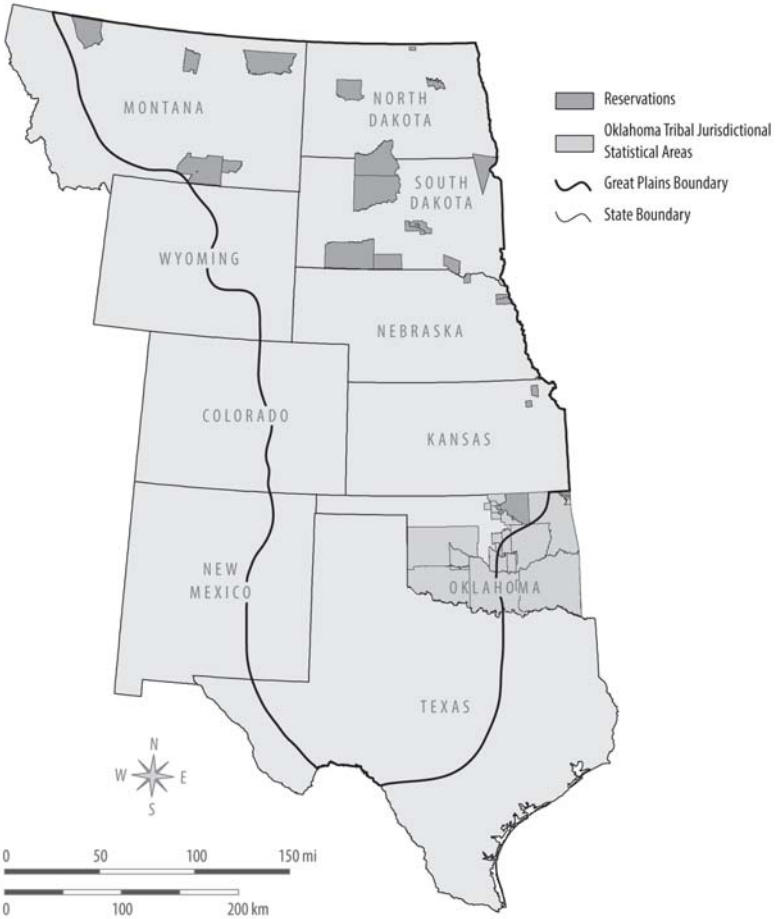
The census map shows two distinct belts of Indians in the American Great Plains. On the northern Great Plains, the populations of many counties within, or around, reservations are more than 8 percent Indian. Many other counties nearby are 3 to 7.9 percent Indian. (By comparison, 0.9 percent of the population of the United States as a whole is Indian alone.)

1. American Indians in the contiguous United States as a percentage of county population, 2010. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012. Created by Ezra J. Zeitler.

The reservations of the northern Plains are what remain of the Indians' land base following the wholesale dispossession of the nineteenth century. Some of the largest reservations in the country, by both area and population, are here (fig. 2). Pine Ridge, home of the Oglala Sioux (or Lakota), has the second highest Indian alone population (16,906) of any reservation in the country, and adjacent Rosebud Reservation (Brule Sioux), with 9,809 Indians, ranks third. All together, the Sioux nation, both on and off reservations, is the third largest tribal grouping in the United States, with an Indian alone population of 112,176. The Blackfeet Reservation of northern Montana, with an Indian alone population of 9,149 in 2010, also makes the top ten list of most populous reservations. Much of the northern Great Plains is still Indian.

The same can be said about Oklahoma, the second concentration of Indians in the Great Plains, although there the Indian population is more integrated, culturally and geographically, than those on the northern reservations. Almost all the counties in the eastern third of Oklahoma are more than 8 percent Indian; in fact, of the 187 counties in the United States (including Alaska) that fall into this category, 55 are in Oklahoma. Only the Oklahoma Panhandle has a negligible Indian presence.

The reason there are so many Indians in Oklahoma (321,687 in 2010, second only to California) is that this was Indian Territory in the nineteenth century, the last place to put Indians from elsewhere in the Great Plains and the nation when their lands were taken by Americans. Reservations in the former Indian Territory, with the exception of the Osage Reservation, which still exists today, were extinguished in the build-up to statehood in 1907. Oklahoma Indians are now enumerated by the census bureau and administered by tribal governments in Tribal Jurisdictional Statistical Areas,



2. American Indian reservations on the Great Plains, 2010. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010. Created by Ezra J. Zeitler.

whose boundaries approximate those of the former reservations (fig. 2).

The census map shows relatively few Indians in the central Great Plains and Texas. The former had too much rich farmland to remain in Indian hands for long; the latter, in its early days as the Texas Republic, was too intolerant to let Indians stay. But because the map measures Indians as a percent of total county populations, it hides significant numbers of Indians who live in urban areas. Denver, for example, was home to 13,184 Indians in 2013, almost as many as the Indian population of the Pine Ridge Reservation. But because this is a densely populated urban area, Indians are only 0.5 percent of the total, and they do not, therefore, register on the map.

Throughout the Great Plains, Indian populations are increasing rapidly. South Dakota added almost ten thousand Indians from 2000 to 2010, an increase of 15 percent, and Oklahoma's Indian population grew by almost fifty thousand, an increase of 18 percent, over the same decade. Moreover, Plains Indians are young populations, with typically 40 or 50 percent of the total being nineteen or younger. So there is a built-in demographic growth, as numerous young people advance to childbearing years.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the census data. First, there are probably more Indians on the Great Plains now than at any time in the past. Second, Indians will only become a larger and larger proportion of Great Plains populations in the future. Such a scenario would have seemed inconceivable in 1900, when most Plains Indian populations bottomed out.

A third conclusion revealed in the census data is that the majority of Plains Indians are poor. Certainly, there are Plains Indians who have succeeded in all walks of American life, and are prosperous, but they are exceptions to the pervasive poverty. Six of the eleven poorest counties in the United States, as

measured by per capita income, lie within or overlap reservations on the northern Great Plains. In fact, these six places of abject poverty are Sioux reservations in North Dakota and South Dakota, with the Crow Creek Reservation in central South Dakota being the poorest of the poor. Many other northern Plains reservations are on the unenviable list of the nation's hundred poorest counties, including Big Horn County in Montana, which overlaps the Crow reservation; Rolette County in North Dakota, where the Chippewa's Turtle Mountain Reservation is located; and Thurston County, Nebraska, which includes the Winnebago and Omaha Reservations.

Behind these cold, hard statistics are the harsh realities of the conditions of poverty: high unemployment rates (often 70 percent or more); epidemics of alcoholism, violence, suicides, obesity, and diabetes; inadequate housing in a region of climatic extremes; and lack of access to health services, or even to fresh fruits and vegetables. Such dire living conditions result in low life expectancies. On the Pine Ridge Reservation, life expectancy at birth for a male is estimated to be forty-eight years and for a female fifty-two years; by comparison, Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, has life expectancies of sixty and sixty-four for males and females respectively.

This short book travels a long road in an attempt to explain how Plains Indians have come to this point in time. The account begins more than thirteen thousand years ago with the initial settlement of the Great Plains from Asia and relates how these first Americans lived for millennia as hunters and gatherers in physical environments that were always changing. The pace of change accelerated with the incursion of Europeans after AD 1500, bringing guns, horses, and epidemic diseases that changed Indian lives forever. The story then halts, and, in a transection through time, presents a historical geography of Indian life on the Great Plains on the eve of the American takeover in 1803.

It moves ahead again and explains how the Plains Indians lost most of their lands and much of their traditional cultures in a tumultuous century of dispossession. The final chapter shows that dispossession continued after 1900, but it also reveals that Indian populations rebounded and rights were asserted, changing the tenor of the story from a tragedy of loss into a triumph of survival, with, perhaps, the prospect of a better future ahead.