



In 2003 it was described as “A Quiet Crisis.” Now more than 15 years later, officials say not much has changed.

The noted crisis is the failure of the U.S. Congress to live up to its special trust relationship with Native Americans. That basic obligation was set in motion many decades ago in exchange for the surrender and reduction of tribal lands and the removal and resettlement of about one-fifth of Native American tribes from their original lands.

The U.S. government signed 375 treaties in the process. It passed laws and instituted policies that “shape and define the special government-to-government relationship between federal and tribal governments.”

The relationship obligates the federal government to “promote tribal self-government, support the general wellbeing of Native American tribes and villages, and to protect their lands and resources.”

But a new report says those obligations require funding, and the funding has been woefully inadequate.

‘Broken Promises’

The United States Commission on Civil Rights issued the “Quiet Crisis” report in 2003. Then in 2015, 20 members of the U.S. House of Representatives requested an update to that report.

Those members were concerned about a continuing “lack of basic infrastructure” in Indian Country. They noted, in fact, that it had grown over the previous decade.

In their 2015 letter, the Congressional leaders noted “significant budget cuts due to sequestration, increasing threats from natural disasters, and a continued lack of quality housing, educational support, and economic development opportunity” for Native Americans.

The updated report was recently released: Broken Promises: Continuing Federal Funding Shortfall for Native Americans. The title tells much of the story of what has, or hasn’t, happened since the 2003 report.

“Unfortunately, the Commission’s current study reflects that the efforts undertaken by the federal government in the past 15 years have resulted in only minor improvements, at best, for the Native population as a whole,” the report’s executive summary states. “And, in some respects, the U.S. Government has backslid in its treatment of Native Americans ...,” it continues.

Consequences of inequity

The report says the lack of adequate funding has had real-world consequences for Native Americans. For example, Native Americans rank near the bottom of all Americans in metrics involving health, education, and employment outcomes.

To make matters worse, the report says the federal government has also failed to keep accurate records of federal spending on Native American programs, making monitoring of federal spending to meet its trust responsibility difficult.

Other consequences cited include a diminishment of tribal self-determination and negative impacts on criminal justice and housing, among other issues.

Push toward equity

The Commission majority voted for key recommendations, including passing a spending package to fully address unmet needs and targeting those that are most critical for immediate investment.

“This spending package should also address the funding necessary for the buildout of unmet essential utilities and core infrastructure needs in Indian Country such as electricity, water, telecommunications, and roads,” the Commission stated among several other recommendations in the report.

Indian Country reaction

The National Congress of American Indians issued a statement concurring that improvements needed to be made across Indian Country.

“This report confirms what Indian Country knows too well - federal programs designed to support the social and economic wellbeing of American Indians and Alaska Natives remain chronically underfunded, leaving many basic needs unmet,” said NCAI president Jefferson Keel in the statement.



Keel

“ ... Our tribal nations seek only those things promised to us and our citizens by the U.S. Constitution and the solemn treaties and agreements reached between our tribal nations and the United States. When tribal nations agreed to accept smaller land bases, the federal government promised to safeguard our right to govern ourselves, and to enable tribal governments to deliver essential services and provide them adequate resources to do so effectively. We appreciate the Broken Promises report’s recommendation that ‘the United States expects all nations to live up to their treaty obligations; it should live up to its own,’” Keel’s statement continued.

The Seminole Tribe is not directly mentioned in the report. It is cited in one footnote as the owner of the Hard Rock Cafes. The footnote was in reference to a statement that some tribes are able to be successful within the “tribal framework.”

The Broken Promises briefing report is more than 300 pages long. It is available at [usccr.gov](https://www.usccr.gov).

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