

Name: _____ Class: _____

Life on Reservations

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The Indian Removal Act of 1830 was the U.S. government federal policy that forcibly removed Native Americans from their land and relocated them to reservations. In this information text, Jessica McBirney discusses the tragic history of relocation and assimilation, as well as the quality of life of Native Americans on reservations today. As you read, identify the reasons why Native Americans began living on reservations. Then, think about how life on Native American reservations has changed over time.

- [1] About 5.2 million Native Americans live in the United States, and 22% of those live on Native American Reservations. Reservations are large areas of land governed only by Native American tribes; the federal government has little control in these areas. Reservations have existed since 1830, although they have changed in size and location since then.



"The Women of Pine Ridge" by Hamner_Fotos is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

Why Reservations?

The U.S. government created reservations to keep more land available for use by U.S. citizens as settlers moved west. Before the arrival of European settlers, Native Americans lived in tribes all over the continent and governed themselves. Each tribe had its own government, culture, traditions, family structures, and ways of life. When settlers began pushing farther and farther west, they fought with Native Americans who already lived there over who should have right to the land.

To “solve” these disputes about the control of land, the U.S. government “reserved” relatively small areas of land for Native Americans, while allowing the larger areas to be used by U.S. citizens. As more settlers traveled West and as natural resources such as gold and silver were found, the areas reserved for Native Americans became smaller and smaller. If Native Americans did not willingly move onto reservations, they were often relocated by force. The “Trail of Tears” was a series of forced relocations of Native Americans in the southeastern United States to areas west of the Mississippi. Over 4,000 Native Americans died from either starvation or disease while they were being relocated. Once tribes arrived on the reservation there were problems as well, because sometimes feuding tribes ended up living on the same reservation.

The U.S. government tried to install its own forms of education, work, and family life onto the reservations to weaken the Native Americans connection to their cultures and tribes. Many younger generations became disconnected from their heritage. This caused many problems for Native Americans in the following decades.

Reservation Life Today

- [5] Many tribes continue to practice key parts of their distinct cultures. Even though many Native American religious and ancestral traditions were centered around land that they are no longer allowed to live on, many tribes maintain a sense of pride in their culture in numerous ways.

One of the most important ways to do this is through the preservation of tribal languages. Since some of the languages have been lost completely, historians have been able to piece them back together using early recordings of folk tales and legends. Some tribes have programs that allow young students to experience daily language immersion with elders who learned the original language growing up.

Important cultural events still exist on most reservations. For example, on Cherokee reservations in Georgia and Missouri, communities come together to perform traditional stomp dances and play an ancient game called stickball.

Perhaps the most common cultural event on reservations across the country is the pow-wow. A pow-wow is a community event where there is singing, dancing, and ceremonies to celebrate Native American culture. No one is sure which tribe actually started the practice so many hundreds of years ago, but over time each tribe evolved its own spin on the tradition. Today, pow-wows happen all over the country, and many tribes come together to form bigger pow-wows to celebrate both their similarities and differences with each other.

Life on reservations also has its share of problems. Because of the unique history of reservations, many of them face serious economic and social struggles.

Economic Challenges

- [10] Some of the poorest places in America are reservations. The Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, located in South Dakota, is the poorest of the reservations; with a reported average annual income of less than \$4,000 per family. Eight in ten adults don't have a job. Not all reservations are as economically disadvantaged as Pine Ridge, but many have unemployment rates in the double digits, and many households rely only on government benefits for income.

Because there are so few job opportunities within the bounds of the reservations, it is not uncommon for parents to live elsewhere for at least part of the year in order to earn money. Meanwhile, they have to leave their children with other relatives or friends. All the economic hardship strains family relationships.

Native Americans also face difficult living conditions. Most reservations have severe housing shortages – a wait list for a house could be up to three years long. Because of this, whole extended families crowd into existing houses, sleeping on couches and floors. Many live without the many utilities most of America takes for granted. For example, over 50% of houses on reservations are not even connected to public sewers, and some have no running water.

Physical and Mental Health

There are also many health issues among people living on reservations. Tuberculosis and diabetes rates are very high. On top of this, government-funded health care only meets about 60% of people's needs. Life expectancies are about four years lower than in the rest of the nation. The life expectancy on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation is 48 years for men and 52 for women, which are the second-lowest averages in the entire western hemisphere.

One of the most damaging diseases on reservations is alcoholism. The exact numbers are disputed, but alcohol addiction is notoriously¹ high on many of the reservations, despite laws against the sale and purchase of liquor. Addiction to alcohol not only hurts (and sometimes kills) the addicts themselves, it is also stressful for their families, and it can even lead to domestic violence.

Stress and School

- [15] All of these issues contribute to perhaps the greatest problem facing most reservations: poor education systems. The schools themselves are under-maintenanced and underfunded, and students score substantially lower on math and reading tests than students in the rest of the country. Most of the schools do not have enough computers or internet bandwidth² to meet national standards.

Interestingly, Native American students who participate in the immersion programs mentioned at the beginning of this article often have higher academic performance and test scores later in life than students who did not receive dual-language education. Some school reformers³ believe this indicates that if schools continue to integrate more of the unique Native American culture into their own classrooms, more students will improve.

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1. **Notorious** (*adjective*): famous or well known, typically for some bad quality or deed
2. how much data can be sent over a specific connection in a given amount of time
3. a person who makes changes to something in order to improve it

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following identifies the central idea of the text?
 - A. Life on reservations has vastly improved due to the involvement of the United States government.
 - B. Native Americans continue to face significant challenges on reservations that negatively impact their quality of life.
 - C. Most Native Americans eventually leave reservations due to the lack of opportunity and unsafe environments.
 - D. While reservation schools have less funding, they are more successful due to their integration of Native American cultures in the classroom.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "The U.S. government tried to install its own forms of education, work, and family life onto the reservations to weaken the Native Americans connection to their cultures and tribes." (Paragraph 4)
 - B. "Not all reservations are as economically disadvantaged as Pine Ridge, but many have unemployment rates in the double digits, and many households rely only on government benefits for income." (Paragraph 10)
 - C. "Many live without the many utilities most of America takes for granted. For example, over 50% of houses on reservations are not even connected to public sewers, and some have no running water." (Paragraph 12)
 - D. "Native American students who participate in the immersion programs mentioned at the beginning of this article often have higher academic performance and test scores later in life than students who did not receive dual-language education." (Paragraph 16)

3. PART A: How does the section "Economic Challenges" contribute to the development of ideas in the text (Paragraphs 10-12)?
 - A. It shows how the economic issues that Native Americans face on reservations result in several other related problems.
 - B. It emphasizes the need for additional jobs to be available on reservations so families are not separated.
 - C. It proves that the reservations need additional funding from the U.S. government to fulfill their basic needs.
 - D. It shows that not all reservations across the country are struggling, and that quality of life can vary dramatically.

4. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "Not all reservations are as economically disadvantaged as Pine Ridge, but many have unemployment rates in the double digits" (Paragraph 10)
 - B. "Meanwhile, they have to leave their children with other relatives or friends. All the economic hardship strains family relationships." (Paragraph 11)
 - C. "Most reservations have severe housing shortages – a wait list for a house could be up to three years long." (Paragraph 12)
 - D. "[O]ver 50% of houses on reservations are not even connected to public sewers, and some have no running water." (Paragraph 12)

5. How does Native Americans' access to their cultures on reservations today compare to the past?

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. In your opinion, why don't more schools have immersion programs available to Native American students, despite their obvious success?

2. In the context of the text, how has America changed over time? How has the U.S. government's treatment of Native Americans and the reservations they live on changed over time? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

3. In the context of the text, what are the effects of prejudice? How are the issues that Native Americans face on reservations today a result of past prejudices? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.