



Diversity Gazette

December 2019

Shining a Light on American Indian Children and Tribes

by Sara DePasquale

Did you know that there are 573 federally recognized American Indian tribes and Alaska Native villages in the United States? Did you also know that American Indian and Alaska Native children have been and continue to be disproportionately represented in the child welfare system, more so than any other group of children?

The United States has a history of systemically removing American Indian children from their families and tribes, as a way of assimilating those children into “American” culture. Starting in the late 1800s, American Indian children were removed from their families and placed in residential boarding schools. In these boarding schools, the children were given new “white” names, were not permitted to speak their native language, had their hair cut short, and were required to wear uniforms. A well-known motto, “kill the Indian, save the man,” represents the mindset of how American Indian children were treated and viewed.

After the boarding school movement, American Indian children were removed by social workers who determined the children were neglected and

placed them in non-Indian foster care and adoptive homes. It is estimated that on a national basis, 25-33% of American Indian and Alaska Native children in the 1960s and 70’s were removed from their families and communities – one out of every three or four. Some communities had no children because they were all removed. Compared to non-Indian children, the adoption rate for American Indian children was 8 times higher and foster care rates were 2 to 22 times more likely. Nearly all the placements were made in non-Indian homes.

In response to the disproportionately large numbers of American Indian and Alaska Native children who were removed from their families and communities by public and private child welfare and adoption agencies, Congress passed the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978. One of the congressional findings in ICWA is that “there is no resource that is more vital to the continued existence and integrity of Indian tribes than their children.” 25 U.S.C. 1901(3). The purpose of ICWA is “to protect the best interests of Indian children and to promote the stability and security of Indian tribes and families by

the establishment of minimum Federal standards for the removal of Indian children from their families and the placement of such children in foster or adoptive homes which will reflect the unique values of Indian culture.” 25 U.S.C. 1902.

ICWA has a dual purpose – to provide special protections to the tribes as well as the children and their families – when it comes to child abuse, neglect, or dependency and adoptions. It is designed to correct past wrongs moving forward. Yet, despite ICWA, in 2014, American Indian children were still removed at a disproportionately higher rate than any other demographic, almost 3 times the rate of the general population.

The overall numbers of American Indian children in the U.S. is small. It is my hope that this article brings some visibility to this issue and the vulnerability of both American Indian tribes and their children and families. You can learn a lot about ICWA from any google search (<https://www.nicwa.org/about-icwa/>). I’m also happy to talk about it with you if you are interested.