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The return of the Native: The supply elasticity of the American Indian population 1960–1980*

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While ethnic identity is in large part biologically determined, a public choice perspective suggests that subject to practical constraints, individuals should *choose* their ethnic self-identification in part as a rational response to social incentives.

The latter part of the 1960s and the 1970s marked a resurgence in public affirmation of ethnic identity in the United States. This resurgence is particularly marked for American Indians. We look at one direct measure of the resurgence of ethnicity for American Indians, by examining the growth in the numbers of those who identified themselves as such on the U.S. Census.¹ By tracking the American Indian population over time, using cohort analysis, we are able to plot birth rates by age cohort. Thus, in particular, we can show how much of the growth of Indian population between 1960 and 1980 is due to change in self-identification as compared to birth.

We show in Table 1 the American Indian population, using U.S. Census figures, in 1960, 1970 and 1980, broken down by five-year age groupings. This permits us to track age cohorts, since someone who was 20–24 in 1960 must (if still alive) be 30–34 in 1970 and 40–44 in 1980.

The data in Table 1 show that the Indian population jumped by 817,805 persons from 1960–1980, with roughly $\frac{3}{4}$ ths of that jump coming in the 1970s (603,461 persons).² Of that population growth, at most 477,001 could be accounted for by birth (192,895 in the 1960s and 284, 106 in the 1970s). Also, dur-

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Table 1. Growth in the American Indian population 1960–1980 by age cohort

1960 ^a Age Groups	Number	Comparable		Comparable	
		1970 ^b Age Groups	Number	1980 ^c Age Groups	Number
				Under 5	143,282
				5–9	140,824
		Under 5	91,441	10–14	149,713
		5–9	101,454	15–19	162,956
Under 5	91,287	10–14	98,075	20–24	142,241
5–9	75,947	15–19	82,940	25–29	119,618
10–14	63,499	20–24	65,342	30–34	103,198
15–19	49,897	25–29	51,789	35–39	81,141
20–24	39,667	30–34	46,357	40–44	66,889
25–29	33,026	35–39	39,047	45–49	55,791
30–34	30,122	40–44	36,033	50–54	49,729
35–39	28,389	45–49	31,570	55–59	43,384
40–44	22,929	50–54	27,958	60–64	32,811
45–49	21,711	55–59	24,757	65–69	27,299
50–54	20,767	60–64	20,174	70–74	19,248
55–59	31,560	65–69	17,342	75 ⁺	25,909
60–64	11,830	70–74	11,063		
65–69	9,975	75 ⁺	15,230		
70–74	6,857				
75 ⁺	8,765				
Total	546,228	Total	760,572	Total	1,364,033

^a From 1960 Census Final Report PC(2)–1C.

^b From 1970 Census Report Characteristics of the Population. Vol. 1, Part 1, U.S. Summary Section

^c From 1980 Census Report PC80–1–B1.

ing 1960–1980, at least 44,597 aged Indians died (those aged 60⁺ in 1960, or 70⁺ in 1970), but in *every* other age category the American Indian population grew – implying the birth of ‘new’ Indians, *of all ages*. Indeed, from 1960–70 at least 42,074 new non-infant American Indians (aged 5–49 in 1960) had been ‘born’; while for the 1970s, the period where we would expect American Indian growth to be most dramatic, we find that to be indeed the case, with at least 338,007 new non-infant Indians (aged 5–59 in 1970) having been born. The most dramatic increase came among those who were in their 20s in the 1970s, the number of American Indians in that cohort went from 117,131 to 184,339 in 1980, an increase of 57 percent.³ The addition of 338,007 non-infant Indians from 1970–1980 is especially remarkable since the total American Indian population on Indian reservations in 1980 was only 339,186.⁴ This phenomenon of recent growth in the American Indian population has been privately

remarked upon by geographers and demographers (see, however, Quinn, n.d.), but has not yet, we believe, been discussed in the published literature nor has a cohort analysis been done.

According to the experts with whom the senior author spoke, no complete explanation has ever been offered for the recent dramatic increase in American Indian population. We can, however, largely reject the claim that much of this growth can be accounted for by immigration of Indian population from Mexico and other parts of Central and South America. In 1980 only about 6 percent of those who identify themselves as Indians also identified themselves as of Hispanic origin on the separate Census question on that topic.⁵ There were other changes in Census procedures between 1970 and 1980 besides the shift to self-identification,¹ but we can also reject the possibility that these changes in census procedure caused the reported increase. In 1970 only 115 reservations were identified while 278 reservations were identified in 1980 and various boundary line disputes had been resolved; also by 1980 indigenous population provided the census enumerators used on American Indian reservations (Gloria Potter, U.S. Census, personal communication, 17 June 1985). However, neither of these changes is of a magnitude to generate the kinds of changes between 1970 and 1980 reported in Table 1.

One potential explanation is, of course, in terms of changing incentives. For those who might wish to claim membership in certain groups (e.g., blacks, Hispanics) this period also introduced new incentives to identify oneself as a minority member so as to qualify for enrollment in various affirmative action programs. American Indians enrolled in federally recognized tribes are eligible for special benefits, and a number of new programs were added in the past two decades (see Jones, 1985). For some programs, Federal aid to a tribe depends on the size of the tribe, thus creating some incentives for tribes to maintain or expand the number of those who are enrolled in it.⁶ Unfortunately, evaluating the relative importance of sociological and psychological as opposed to pecuniary incentives for resurgence of Indian self-identification is a matter beyond the scope of this brief note. Nonetheless, Table 1 demonstrates clearly that the self-definition of those in whole or in part of a native American Indian stock has changed dramatically in the past several decades in ways compatible with a public choice model.

Notes

1. 'The concept of race as used by the Bureau of the Census does not denote any scientific definition of biological stock. Rather it reflects self-identification of respondents. Since the 1970 census obtained information on race primarily through self-enumeration, the data represent essentially self-classification by people according to the race with which they identify themselves. For persons of mixed parentage who were in doubt as to their classification, the race of the person's father was to be used' (U.S. Census, Introduction, 1970). We recognize that in focusing on cen-

sons self-definition as Indian we are begging the complex questions of the nature of Indian identities, e.g., subtribal, tribal, or pantribal (see Cornell (forthcoming): esp. Ch. VI). However, for our purposes it is self-identification which is the most direct indicator of a resurgence of 'ethnic' identity.

We note that had the enumeration methods for Indians used in the census count of the American Indian population in 1960 continued in use, the growth in self-identified Indian population recorded after 1960 would not have been seen to occur, because of the restrictive notion of Indian identity used in 1960 and prior. Between 1960 and 1970 there was a change from census-enumerator based identification of Indians (used in 1960 and earlier) to self-identification (used in 1970 and 1980). In 1960, 'In addition to full-blooded American Indians, persons of mixed white and Indian blood are included in this category if they are enrolled on an Indian tribal or agency roll or if they are regarded as Indians in the community. A common requirement for such enrollment at present is that the proportion of Indian blood should be at least one-fourth' (U.S. Census Summary, 1960). By 1970, the concept of race (including American Indian) was largely one of self-definition.

2. Numbers provided by Gloria Porter, American Indian Desk, U.S. Bureau of the Census (personal communication, 17 June 1985). Native Indian population has been estimated in the several millions in 1492 and is thought to have hit its nadir in the 1890s at around 250,000 persons. (See Cornell, forthcoming.)
3. The next largest jump from 1970 to 1980 came among the age groups just above and just below this one.
4. There are 786,019 Indians identified by the Bureau of Indian Affairs as Indians living on and adjacent to reservations. ('Local Estimates of Resident Indian Population and Labor Force Status,' Division of Financial Management, Department of the Interior, January 1985.) Although there are some members of federally recognized tribes not included in the 786,019 figures, we can safely say over 40% of those who identify themselves on the Census as Indians are not enrolled members of any federally recognized tribe. See, however, Quinn (n.d.).
5. Personal communication, February 1986, from Matthew Snipp, a demographer studying reservation populations.
6. A large number (over 100) of 'new' tribes (i.e., groups having no previous formal relations with the federal government) are currently petitioning for recognition by the Bureau of Indian Affairs – an administrative process which can take decades. See 'Information about Acknowledgment' (Bureau of Indian Affairs, n.d.) and 'Priority Register of (Acknowledgment) Petitioners' (Bureau of Indian Affairs, December 1985).

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