

Oklahoma Native Americans: Federal Policies and Housing Programs

Norma R Nealeigh and Gwendolyn J Brewer

Abstract

The richness of Native American culture is not reflected in the economic or housing status of American Indians. As a group, Native Americans are a poorly housed, disadvantaged minority. An awareness of the heritage of American Indians intertwined with discriminations they have suffered, challenges housing educators and researchers to meet the needs of all our clients better. This challenge is of particular concern if we are to achieve the goal of affordable housing for all families. The purpose of this paper is to review the policies and programs that have had an impact on Native American housing.

Introduction

As a nation, America seems to be growing more aware of ethnocentric biases and willing to acknowledge cultural diversities. Currently, a resurgence of interest focusing on cultural groups in the United States is evident in the media, the entertainment industry and politics, where attention is being given to demographics and government policies. One group receiving much attention is Native Americans.

Though certainly not considered wistful at the time, the American Indian experience was later romanticized in United States history. Native Americans and their way of life were characterized not as principle players, but as the setting in which white, Anglo-Saxon history was recorded. That has changed in the last decade. Cultural pluralism has now been embraced by historians. "In fact, the publication of books on Indian history by historians has become so common that it resembles a cottage industry" (Berkhofer, 1987, p. 35). This acknowledgment of Native American heritage and of the 283 federally recognized tribes who now reside in the United States comes after a very long journey (U.S. Census, 1980).

Native Americans reside in all states and are quite diverse from tribe to tribe. The current study refers to several examples from Oklahoma where there are more tribal communities than in any other state. Over the years, 67 tribes have been located in Oklahoma, and 29 continue to be represented. Oklahoma is surpassed only by Arizona in total number of Native American residents. The Indian population is more widely distributed among Oklahoma counties than in the Dakotas, Arizona, or New Mexico. Just as the nomenclature for numerous states and sites reflects early Indian cultures, Oklahoma's deep Indian heritage is reflected in its name: the Choctaw called the land "Okla-Homma"--home of the Red People (Strickland, 1980, p. 5). Oklahoma Native Americans, like Native Americans throughout the United States, are taking part in more Indian-sponsored activities today than in any period since statehood. Indian tribes are again electing officials, administering programs and functioning as political and economic units (Strickland, 1980). Conversely, Indians, who once had dominion over all the land in Oklahoma, today have one of the lowest income levels of any group in the state (U.S. Census, 1980).

Norma R Nealeigh is Director of Student Services at Oklahoma State University, and Gwendolyn J Brewer is Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Design, Housing and Merchandising at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater.

The fact that Native Americans have been and still remain one of the most economically disadvantaged groups in the United States contributes to a lack of adequate housing in Indian communities throughout the nation. Not only do poor living conditions continue to exist for many Native Americans, but for other low income families as well: "The housing of American Indians stands as a benchmark for judging how well the lowest economic strata of Americans are sheltered" (Snipp and Sorkin, 1986, p. 149). The richness of Native American culture is not reflected in the economic or housing status of American Indians.

Federal Policies

The five major policies of the United States government that have affected American Indians are (a) removal to reservation areas, (b) forced assimilation into white lifestyles, (c) reorganization, (d) termination of federal supervision and (e) self-determination. The current status of Native Americans cannot be fully realized without some knowledge of the social and political consequences that these policies have exacted. This paper reviews the policies and programs that have had an impact on Native American housing.

Indian Policies

Native Americans once inhabited the undivided North American continent but were relocated--by persuasion, force or coercion--onto reservation areas as white settlers pushed westward. This policy, formally called the policy of "removal," marked the beginning of a series of programs designed to cope with the "Indian problem" (Hagan, 1961; Officer, 1971; Utley, 1984).

After removal came acculturation. This policy was characterized by attempts to "civilize" the American Indian. This meant Christianizing, educating, and introducing them to private property (Brophy and Aberle, 1966; Hagan, 1961; Jorgensen, 1971). There seemed to be no room for cultural differences in early America. All Americans were to worship the same; read, write and talk the same; have the same values; and earn a living in the same way. "The bureau [of Indian Affairs] . . . sometimes refused to give out names and addresses of Native Americans in the same vicinity to one another since association would encourage Indian cultural contacts and identification rather than the desired assimilation" (Burt, 1986, p. 91). Native Americans were even encouraged or forced to cut their long hair in order to appear more acculturated. "The dominant American society a century ago thought they could 'help' Indians assimilate by requiring them to adopt the tenuous fashions and language of the new settlers . . ." (Levitan and Hetrick, 1971, p. 15). Of course, these methods did not work and only further alienated Native Americans from the lifestyle that they had always known, a lifestyle that had functioned well before the white man came.

The policy of forced assimilation culminated with the Dawes Act of 1887. This legislation divided tribal land into tracts of 160 acres to be owned individually by tribe members and used for agriculture. The rationale was that possessing land would automatically make the Indian want to farm and become "civilized" (Otis, 1973). The concept of individual ownership was foreign to Native Americans. Land was viewed as "conditionally entrusted" to them by a deity as long as they tended it. Land was not something to be used or owned but to be lived with in harmony. Native Americans did not consider land an economic commodity; rather, to them it was inherently sacred (Loftin, 1989). "Undesirous of private ownership, unfamiliar with farming as a way of life, and lacking the provisions for agricultural training and the credit with which to purchase livestock and farming implements, Indians lost their land" (Levitan and Hetrick, 1971, p. 16).

"After more than a generation of destruction of the Indian spirit by forced acculturation and exploitation of the Indian property by throwing it also into the melting pot, it began to dawn on some of the good people who had urged the allotment policy that perhaps the Indians were not exactly prospering under it" (Debo, 1970, p. 284). The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 was an attempt to repair damages of the Dawes Act. It per-

mitted tribes to reorganize their own institutions and manage their own affairs. The intent of the act was good; however, Bureau of Indian Affairs officials continued business as usual and did little to help tribes in initiating self-sustaining communities (Brophy and Aberle, 1966).

The 1950s saw heated controversy over the policy of termination--the policy that dictated termination of federal supervision from reservations. This continues to be a hot issue. Without built-in provisions to ensure a livelihood and source of income for those affected, the policy of termination set in motion the collapse of the entire reservation infrastructure (Officer, 1971; Olson and Wilson, 1984). "Relocation," a program initiated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs during this time, was intended to help Indians find jobs in the cities. It did succeed in relocating Native Americans, but they were often left on their own, without emotional or financial support, and in unfamiliar surroundings (Burt, 1986; Snyder, 1971).

The current policy of self-determination had its beginnings in the Nixon administration.

President Nixon strongly supported Indian self-determination as a major thrust of his "new federalism" in a message on Indian Affairs delivered in July 1970. He addressed himself to a new national policy of strengthening "the Indian's sense of autonomy without threatening his sense of community" and rejected the extreme measures of both forced termination and federal paternalism (Levitan and Hetrick, 1971, p. 212).

Although few could argue with the premise of the policy, some contend that the same "failure-oriented" programs previously administered by the Bureau of Indian Affairs are being continued but with local administration (Olson and Wilson, 1984; R. Swimmer, former Chief of the Cherokee Nation, personal communication, March 21, 1989). Barsh (1991) goes a step farther in suggesting that the continuing policy of the federal government is assimilation. He contends that shifting responsibility from federal to state and tribal authorities is a very effective way to integrate tribes into the overall political framework--not with the intent of encouraging sovereignty, but for the purpose of assimilation into white culture. Post-1980 Indian policy has seen substantial cut-backs in Indian education and human services programs due to budget cuts and denial of access to federal programs. This may explain, in part, the six percent decline in Native American enrollment in higher education between 1982 and 1984; white-student enrollment increased by eight percent during these same two years (Morris, 1988). There are many dimensions and ramifications to American Indian governmental policy. Whether the issues are human capital or land, they impact availability, affordability and adequacy of housing.

In looking at the time frame of Indian policies--removal, 1816-1850; acculturation, 1850-1934; reorganization, 1934-1950; termination, 1950-1970; and self-determination, 1970-present--some wonder what new policies may lie just over the horizon. Native Americans have been "removed," "assimilated" and "reorganized." They have been stripped of the outward manifestations of their culture and then left to survive in an alien environment. They have been relocated to areas far removed from family, friends and familiar customs in order to "make a better life." But through it all, the roots of their culture have been nourished, though dormant, waiting for a season of celebration.

Housing Traditions

The traditional housing of Native Americans was as diverse as the North American landscape. They had adapted their housing and lifestyles to their physical environment. In the Southwest, pueblos were constructed from adobe and small stones. In the Northwest where there is abundant wood, houses were made of split planks. Houses in the Northeast were constructed around a framework of bent boughs that were covered with bark sheathing or mats. Eskimos used snow blocks for igloos. Some of the Great Plains

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tribes dug "pit houses" or covered cave houses in hillsides. The Navajo are famous for the eight-sided hogan. The tipi is perhaps the most universally recognized house form associated with Indian life; it was used extensively in Oklahoma by itinerant plains tribes (Cole, 1973).

Except for Navajo hogans and tipis built mainly for ceremonial purposes, most of the traditional forms of Indian housing have been replaced by European housing design. Indian acceptance of these square designs was sometimes gradual and voluntary. In other instances, houses were abruptly forced on tribes after settling on a reservation. One such confrontation was between federal authorities and the Sioux in the late 1800s. "At first the reservation Indians lived in their traditional dwellings but later, responding to official pressures to adopt white ways, moved into dark, unhealthful cabins" (Utley, 1984, p. 230). Hehaka Sapa, also known as Black Elk, the Sioux Holy Man, reflected the despair of the Indian when he said, "The Wasichus have put us in these square boxes. Our power is gone and we are dying. For the power is not in us anymore" (Stea, 1982, p. 1). Native Americans abandoned their traditional building technology as they tried to assimilate into the culture of their conquerors. Forced into unfamiliar surroundings with little or no knowledge of upkeep or repair, unable to compete, they were compelled to rely on the government. This relationship became known as a "trust responsibility" (Stea, 1982).

Technological developments in the more recent past (electricity, indoor plumbing, waste disposal systems and heating and cooling systems) have greatly improved the housing of most Americans. At the same time it has widened the gap between those who can afford to keep pace and those who struggle for economic survival. As Snipp and Sorkin (1986) note, ". . . for Indians outside of the urban American mainstream and too poor for luxuries such as pressurized water systems, housing conditions improved very little during the first half of this century" (p. 149). A medical team visiting Cherokee homes in eastern Oklahoma in 1959 observed:

The houses were made of unpainted, irregular slabs, sometimes partially covered with tar paper. Almost all homes had kitchens and sinks, although some depended on hand pumps for water. Where there was no well, water was often brought in buckets from a nearby brook or spring and stored by the kitchen sink (Brophy and Aberle, 1966, p. 166). Dismal housing conditions are often linked to the health status of American Indians. Indians are more often victims of infectious disease than other poverty stricken groups in the United States. They have a higher infant mortality rate and a shorter life span than other poor, rural groups (Levitan and Hetrick, 1971).

Due to the diverse nature of the Native American community, it is impossible to paint just one picture which accurately reflects the housing situation of so many. Nationwide, there are some 312 tribal communities and 300 Indian languages still in use (Levitan and Hetrick, 1971, p. 15). As many as 100 different Indian languages are spoken in Oklahoma alone. Many authors have discussed the vast diversity of the people known as "Indian." Among them are Levitan and Hetrick (1971, p. 213) who note, "Appropriate Indian programs must also recognize that there is great diversity among Indian tribes and that projects that are helpful on one reservation may not be appropriate for all Indian tribes." Hagan (1961) concurs, "No general policy, regardless of how carefully conceived or well intended, could be applied fairly to the several hundred Indian societies (p. 151).

Housing Programs

Given the plight of a people who had essentially no voice in the policies which shaped their destiny, one must begin to look at what programs are in place to assist In-

dian citizens with their basic housing needs. How well is the government fulfilling its "trust responsibility" role? The United States Housing Act of 1937 established the Low Rent Public Housing Program which authorized the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to make loans to local housing authorities. The purpose was to help remedy the unsafe and unsanitary housing conditions that characterized low-income households (Snipp and Sorkin, 1986; Ulmer, 1988). It was not until 1962 that HUD determined that Indian tribes had the authority to establish Indian Housing Authorities (IHAs) for the purpose of developing and operating low-rent housing projects. There are two primary housing programs currently financed by HUD and administered by local IHAs--the conventional low-rent program and Mutual Help.

In conventional low-rent housing, the local housing authority contracts with private developers and administers the program while HUD provides financial assistance. Rents are based on family income with HUD subsidizing the difference between rent payments and operating costs. Dissatisfaction with this program centers on two aspects. One, some Native Americans prefer to live in units they themselves own (even though they may be of a lesser quality) rather than move into rental units. The second dissatisfaction has to do with quality. Some rental units deteriorate rapidly because of the mediocre quality of construction or construction materials, or because of lack of maintenance by inhabitants (P. Coser, Native American Counselor for Minority Programs and Services at Oklahoma State University, personal communication, March 14, 1989; Snipp and Sorkin, 1986). This lack of maintenance points out the need for "housing counseling" as a part of the conventional program. Native Americans are often put in the situation of not having grown up with similar housing, and they are not knowledgeable about maintenance needs or how to care for their units (A. Chapman, Native American Mutual Help Housing Program participant, personal communication, March 15, 1989).

For those who qualify, the Mutual Help program assists in purchasing a home. The participating family must make a "down payment" on the home in the form of land, labor, cash or equipment. Because the contribution is often in labor, it has come to be known as "sweat equity." The family occupies the home under a lease-purchase agreement. They must maintain the unit and pay the utility bills and the monthly mortgage payment. When these conditions are met, the family will acquire ownership (usually in about 25 years). "The Mutual Help program presently constitutes about 60 percent of housing assistance on the Indian reservations" (Snipp and Sorkin, 1986, p. 168).

An alternative program, the Housing Improvement Program (HIP), funded by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, is aimed at providing housing assistance to the most needy Native Americans. About two-thirds of HIP funding goes for repair of existing housing; the remaining one-third is used for down payments or closing costs in the purchase of new homes (Snipp and Sorkin, 1986). "Housing has always been an important symbol to Native Americans. In the past, it was symbolic of the federal government's fulfillment of--or, more often, failure to fulfill--its trust responsibility to Native Americans. In the future, it may be symbolic of cultural restoration" (Stea, 1982, p. 12).

Conclusion

Early government policies sought to eliminate differences between Native Americans and whites by forcing Native Americans into mainstream white society. In dress, in occupation, in religion and in housing, differences were not accepted, but differences have survived. Today, there is growing recognition of cultural diversity.

Historically, attempts to respond to the needs of Native Americans have been approached from the perspective of the predominant white culture. Decisions have been made for, rather than with, Native Americans. This has resulted in housing policies which make little or no attempt to tie the culture of a people to their housing. As we become more cognizant of the diversity of cultures, we also need to become more knowledgeable about the cultural dimensions of housing. Future studies might consider the impact of current housing programs on the quality of life of Native Americans. There

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is a need to know the benefits and barriers of policies which affect the lives of families. Studies which investigate cultural values could help policy makers to address more effectively the needs of individuals.

As housing researchers and educators, it is our goal to assist families--all families--in securing affordable quality housing which contributes to quality of life. It is a challenge and an opportunity not only to be aware of Native American and other cultural heritages, but to build upon those cultural strengths in our philosophies and in our communities.

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