INTOLERANCE AT PLAY IN THE USA

Invisibility is the Modern Form of Racism Against Native Americans

"I've never seen Native people in media at all."

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JUSTIN SULLIVAN/GETTY IMAGES

A study published in July found that two-thirds of Americans don't believe Native people experience significant racial discrimination. Yet rather than living in a country where discrimination has lessened and or access to resources and rights has been improved, Native Americans live in a country that consistently pretends like they do not exist.

Today, Native Americans are more likely to be killed by police than people of any other race. Native women are 2.5 times more likely to be raped or sexually assaulted than any other ethnic group, and 97% have experienced violence perpetrated by at least one non-Native person. Native youth not only have the lowest graduation rates of any racial group, but they are also dying by suicide at the highest rate of any demographic in the United States. These same teens are twice as likely to be disciplined than their white peers in school and are twice as likely to be incarcerated for minor crimes than teens of any other race.

How could a group that faces the highest rates of these indications of systemic racism be perceived by the public as immune from it?

Peyton Boyd is a 15-year-old sophomore at Muskogee High School and a member of the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians and the Kiowa Tribe of Oklahoma. She remembers her teachers showing videos about diversity where

“all the races of the world came together and held hands.” But one race was always missing. “I’ve never seen a Native person in one of those videos. I’ve never seen Native people in media at all,” she tells Teen Vogue.

New research from Reclaiming Native Truth confirms the pervasive invisibility that Native Americans, like Boyd, have been living with for years. In the first comprehensive national public-opinion study about how non-Natives perceive Native Americans, researchers conducted 28 focus groups in 11 states, surveyed 13,306 people online, and analyzed 4.9 million social media posts.

To illustrate this reality, can you name a famous Native American actor? A famous Native politician who is alive today? Can you name five Native Americans, famous for anything, who were born after 1950? Do you know what the Carlisle Indian Industrial School was, or the history of Indian boarding schools in the U.S.? Do you personally know anyone who is Native American?

If you answered no to most of these questions, it's not your fault. Maybe you can’t name a Native actor because of the 2,336 characters on 345 of the most popular television shows that aired between 1987 and 2007, only three were Native American. Most Americans have never heard of Carlisle because even though this country operated over 400 Indian boarding schools, only four states teach this history. Media depiction of contemporary Native Americans is so rare that, according to a 2015 report, 95 of the first 100 Google image search results for “Native American” are historical representations. Sixty-two percent of non-Native Americans report not knowing a single one of the over 5 million Native people in the U.S., 70% of whom live in urban areas.

The prevailing ignorance about Native people does not stem from individual failings but rather from the systemic erasure of Native people from K-12 education, mainstream news, and pop culture. Researchers found that this lack of visibility directly undermines public support for Native rights. Respondents who didn’t know about contemporary oppression were less willing to support a broad range of social justice issues, including treaty rights and eliminating racist sports mascots. As one participant put it, “I feel like Native Americans do not experience a great deal of discrimination mainly because I don't hear about it in the news.”

Invisibility is the modern form of racism against Native people. We are taught that racism occurs when a group of people is seen as different, as other. We are not taught that racism occurs when a group of people is not seen at all. Yet the research shows that the lack of exposure to realistic, contemporary, and humanizing portrayals of Native people creates a deep and stubborn unconscious bias in the non-Native mind. Rooted in this unconscious bias is the idea that Native people are not real or even human.

“They think that we really aren’t people, in a way. I don’t know how to explain it,” Boyd says, struggling to describe interactions with her peers. “It really hurts when I realize everyone assumes that I’m not Native. And when I tell them that I am — I’ll even tell them my tribes — they still try and justify in their minds that I’m not.”

The cruel irony is that Native people survived removal, forced assimilation, and attempted genocide only to be told that they didn’t. Only to live in a country that pretends they no longer exist.

Today in the United States there are 573 federally recognized tribes and over 5 million living, breathing Native people. Despite systemic erasure, “We are still here. We are resilient. We are beautiful. We are modern. We are contributing incredible things,” Crystal Echo Hawk (Pawnee), co-project lead of the group responsible for the report, tells Teen Vogue. Echo Hawk believes non-Native people need to “demand more and learn more” accurate information about contemporary Native people.

You can educate yourself. Here are some inspiring voices from Indian Country with which to pollinate your Twitter and Instagram feeds. So put down your sepia-tinted photos — Native people are alive and relevant, and these folks have a lot to say about it.

Check out blogger Adrienne Keene, reporter Jacqueline Keeler, congressional candidates Deb Haaland and Sharice Davids, fashion designer Bethany Yellowtail, poet Tanaya Winder, indigenerd Johnnie Jae, writer YoNasDa Lonewolf,

scholar Kim TallBear, comedian Tonia Hall, photographer Matika Wilbur, and the mastermind behind this report, Crystal Echo Hawk.