

# Solving the puzzle of data gaps in Indian Country

By naming our data priorities, partners across Indian Country can collectively move the needle

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### Article Highlights

- › Enthusiasm to address data gaps doesn't easily translate into clear action
- › Indian Country stakeholders bring diverse data perspectives to the conversation
- › Getting clear about our individual data lenses helps partners identify realistic next steps

My four kids, who range in age from 6 to 12, often ask me about what I do at work. I struggle to describe it to them. How do you simply yet accurately explain what it means to address research and data gaps in Indian Country?

I've come to believe that my difficulty in making my work tangible for my kids has less to do with their ages than with the abstract (and complex) nature of the issues we address. Data gaps have taken center stage at many events in Indian Country over the past few years, including [webinar conversations](#) hosted by the Center for Indian Country Development (CICD). In these conversations, I felt collective energy from tribal leaders and other Indian Country partners to tackle [harmful data gaps](#). At the same time, how to translate that enthusiasm into action felt less concrete, and a bit elusive.

When we get down to it, what does addressing data gaps in Indian Country look like to each of us—in plain language? And what realistic next steps can each of us take?

The past few years, there's been [remarkable progress](#) on collecting accurate, comprehensive data on Indian Country in ways that honor tribal data sovereignty. But much more work remains. Insufficient economic data [continue to impede](#) policymakers' ability to understand Indian Country's economic contributions and seize opportunities to enhance our economic outcomes. As we look to the future of this work, I increasingly believe that the individualized answers to these fundamental questions will—one by one—help us continue moving the needle.

### Getting clear about what we mean

Last year, CICD staff participated in many conversations about Indian Country data gaps at a variety of national and regional events, such as convenings hosted by NAFOA, the National Congress of American Indians, and the National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development. What was clear in these conversations is that tribal leaders and Indian Country stakeholders come to this work from a rich diversity of vantage points. For example, some tribal leaders enter the conversation from the perspective of wanting to build a tribally governed data-collection system—such as a [tribal census](#)—to gather information needed to serve their communities. A [federal policymaker](#) may enter the conversation needing quality data to inform resource allocations. A [banker](#) assessing where to provide capital and financial services requires a solid understanding of community economic assets and opportunities.

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With so many perspectives at the table, the terms we use to talk about data work in Indian Country don't necessarily have one clear, shared meaning. Case in point: CICD's recent data summit included a [lively discussion](#) about panelists' understanding of *tribal data sovereignty*. The same event also featured different examples of what *data infrastructure* can look like to a community, from a tribal census to a [data portal](#) organized around tenets of Native Hawaiian well-being. As another example, a *census* administered by a tribe may seek data points different from the U.S. Census Bureau's decennial census.

The same holds true even for how stakeholders define *data* itself. CICD's 2022 research summit [featured discussions](#) about different types of data needed to allocate resources and make good decisions for our people—from tribal to federal data and population data to labor force statistics. And CICD's event just focused on *economic* data.

This definitional issue was named in a recent convening of tribal leaders hosted by Wells Fargo and the Aspen Institute Financial Security Program. One of the conversation's [key takeaways](#) was that “tribal data can mean different things to different people.” As described in the convening summary and observed by CICD staff who attended to present research, many of the tribal leaders who participated in the conversation conveyed that what *exactly* is meant by “tribal data” can be vague. This can be a problem in that establishing precise protocols to safeguard the sharing of tribal data requires getting clear about the specific data gaps we're trying to close.

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To address this, the convening summary recommends that conversations about tribal data and data sharing start by answering specific questions about what answers the data will provide and the problems they will solve.

## Owning our unique lenses

In addition to the ambiguity inherent in conversations about data gaps, we all come to the work from different entry points. CICD enters the conversation from the vantages of economic data and an independent research institute. Others may enter from the lens of health care or education data, tribally or federally collected data, research or advocacy.

If data gaps are a puzzle and each stakeholder reflects a piece, it's not always clear how our pieces fit together. How do we channel our collective energy to address data gaps into realistic actions that add up to something bigger—to something better for our relatives?

Increasingly, I believe the path forward is getting specific about each of our puzzle pieces—that is, about the data lenses, priorities, and definitions each of us brings. With that specificity, good-faith partners across Indian Country can identify how to work together and where each of us can best contribute to addressing data needs.

## Zooming in on one puzzle piece

Here's an example: At CICD, one clear priority we've identified with our [Leadership Council](#), tribal leaders, and community stakeholders is the need for intertribal data. In plain language, that means collecting data from more than one tribe, analyzing it, and sharing that information in aggregate back with tribes to inform their decision-making. We think this is a service we're well-positioned to provide because the Federal Reserve System has the infrastructure needed to collect and process information securely, and CICD's trusting relationships across Indian Country are strong and ever-growing. CICD also has [Principles for Research and Data Use](#) in place which were informed by tribal leaders and prioritize tribal data sovereignty.

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One of our efforts to advance intertribal data is called the Survey of Native Nations. This pilot project aims to provide Native nations with comparative data on revenues and expenditures similar to what state and local governments have long had access to through the [Census of Governments](#). Through the Survey of Native Nations, CICD partners with Native nations to gather information from

individual tribes in a confidential way that honors data sovereignty, and then summarizes that information at an aggregate level. CICD provides participating tribes with comprehensive analysis they can use to see how their tribal treasuries compare to others and articulate their needs to policymakers. We recently piloted the survey with tribal governments in Montana and look forward to opening it to additional tribes in 2024.

By getting concrete about what CICD is doing in this space, tribal governments who think they could benefit from these data insights can consider participating. Native organizations interested in offering the survey to their tribal government members can also partner with CICD. These organizations may find it valuable to use key findings from their member tribes to communicate policy needs and initiatives to lawmakers and other stakeholders. In this way, naming our puzzle piece helps others consider whether they might benefit from partnering on this historic initiative.

Ultimately, we intend this vital effort to help address Indian Country's often-cited economic [invisibility](#). If the best data on Native nations comes *from* Native nations, as I believe it does, we need to support tribes in the collection and provision of high-quality *tribal* data. And we need to make insights from those data accessible to tribes for their sovereign decision-making.

By naming our individual data lenses and definitions, stakeholders in the data-gap conversation can identify clear actions that, piece by piece, create real change for our Indian Country relatives.

## Asking clear questions

The next time we chat about data work in Indian Country—whether we run into each other on the conference circuit or in your council chambers—forgive me if I ask questions as specific as a puzzle piece. Understanding your data lens and how you define these concepts will help me consider where CICD might best connect with your work and bring the most value to these conversations.

I'm hopeful that as we name and connect our data puzzle pieces throughout Indian Country, my kids and your kids will know a future with holistic data infrastructure that supports their economic and cultural well-being.



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