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Life on the Pine Ridge Native American reservation

Where life expectancy is the second-lowest in the western hemisphere and 80 percent of people are unemployed.



The Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, which encompasses more than 2.8 million acres, was established in 1889.

By [Patrick Strickland](#) [@P_Strickland](#)

FAST FACTS

- More than 5.1 million people in the US identify as fully or partially Native American or Alaska Native
- More than half do not live on reservations
- In 2014, more than 52 percent of the residents of Oglala Lakota lived below the poverty line

Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota, United States - Donald Morrison's one-room home, hidden behind a row of trees, can only be reached via a half-kilometre dirt path.

He lives on his family's ancestral land. His uncle's and brother's trailer homes are nearby. Donald's yard is dotted with rusting automobiles - decaying and half-dismembered, excavated for car parts.

A few metres from the wooden steps leading to his front door sits the decrepit structure - made from a pop-up trailer, scrap wood and tarps - that he lived in for two decades before the local charity [Families Working Together](#) built him a tiny home in 2011.

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Donald, 60, has lived on his family's land his whole life. Time passes slowly in his corner of the Pine Ridge Reservation, and at no point in his six decades have local authorities connected his family's miniature community of shacks and trailers to the reservation's electricity grid or provided them with running water.

They use car batteries and generators for a few hours of electricity a day, and Donald heats up a five-gallon bucket of water on a wood stove to bathe and wash his clothes a few times a week.

The Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, which encompasses more than 2.8 million acres, was established in 1889 as Camp 334 for indigenous prisoners of war as white colonists pressed westward across the North American continent.

It is home to the Oglala Lakota, a tribe that is part of the Sioux people.

Much like Native American reservations across the United States, the 38,000-person indigenous community is disconnected from the state's economic lifelines and untouched by development.

Among the most impoverished of these reservations, Pine Ridge is plagued by an 80 to 90 percent unemployment rate with a median individual income of \$4,000 a year, [according](#) to the Re-Member nonprofit organisation's 2007 statistics.

The US Census Bureau's [2014 study](#) found that more than 52 percent of residents in Oglala Lakota, the largest of Pine Ridge's three counties, lived below the poverty line.

Against this backdrop of poverty and joblessness, public health has suffered, according to Re-Member. More than 80 percent of residents suffer from alcoholism. A quarter of children are born with foetal alcohol syndrome or similar conditions. Life expectancy - 48 years for men, 52 for women - is the second-lowest in the western hemisphere, behind only the Caribbean country Haiti.

OPINION: Native Lives Matter goes beyond police brutality

The tuberculosis and diabetes rates are eight times the national averages, while the cervical cancer rate is five times more than the US average.

On a bright but chilly afternoon in late October, Donald walks through his yard, past the outhouse, around the old rusting sedan his dog is chained to, and arrives at the bundle of firewood he chopped earlier in the week. He moves some inside his home and emerges after a few moments.

A bundle of wires connects the battery of his Ford pickup truck to a rumbling generator on his porch. This source of electricity allows him to watch a few hours of television each night before bed.

Donald and his siblings never attended school. And while he understands a good amount of English, he never learned to fluently speak any language other than his mother tongue, Lakota.

Although Channels Five, Nine and Twelve broadcasted the highly publicised presidential debates between Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton and her Republican counterpart Donald Trump, Donald explains that he was only able to watch the highlights on the news.

"It doesn't really make a difference to us here," he says of the forthcoming elections.

With neither Trump nor Clinton speaking to their specific needs, many Pine Ridge residents say they have been forgotten by mainstream society, abandoned by politicians and neglected by state institutions.

After years of pleading with the local tribal government - which administers the reservation on a semi-autonomous basis - and county authorities for running water and electricity, Donald resigned himself to spending his remaining years without either. "I eventually gave up," he recalls. "They just say they can't help me. It's a waste of time."

Donald and his 67-year-old brother Roland, who lives in a trailer home a five-minute walk over the subtle hills that bisect their family's land, survive the first two weeks of each month on food stamps.

During the second half of each month, they get by on canned meat and ramen noodles donated by charities and locals. When the donations aren't enough and they have enough gas money between them to make the 48-kilometre drive to the nearest town, they get boxes of scrap meat from a meat processing facility.

Roland left the reservation for the first time in his life in April, when he was airlifted to a hospital in Rapid City for an emergency surgery after he slipped in the snow and shattered his hip while chopping firewood.

Only able to move with the help of a walker, Roland, who wears a dirt-covered jacket and repeatedly pulls up his oversized jeans as they sag from his waist, says he will never be able to pay the \$2,000 in medical bills through the small amounts of cash he gets doing odd jobs for neighbours and ranchers. "I can't work until the spring now," he says.

Roland went to a voter registration booth in town last month to get free coffee, but the brothers say neither of them intend to vote on November 8.

The office of John Yellowbird Steele, the president of the Oglala Sioux Tribe authorities in Pine Ridge, did not return Al Jazeera's numerous calls for a comment on this article.

The tribal government exercises jurisdiction over crimes committed by tribal members and other indigenous people on the reservation. Over the years, however, federal authorities have reduced [tribal sovereignty](#) on Native American reservations through various pieces of legislation.



Time passes slowly in Pine Ridge Reservation and local authorities have not connected with the communities living there [Patrick Strickland/Al Jazeera]

'Intense conditions of colonialism'

More than 5.1 million people in the US identify as fully or partially Native American or Alaska Native, according to the US Census Bureau. Up to 2.5 million identify as fully indigenous Native American or Alaska Native. Of that total, more than half do not live on reservations.

Despite widely varying conditions in indigenous communities, the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs [estimates](#) that "per capita income in Indian areas is about half that of the US average, and the poverty rate is around three times higher".

Reservations, including Pine Ridge, also exercise varying degrees of semi-sovereignty under the US federal government.

Nick Estes, a University of New Mexico PhD candidate whose research focuses on indigenous history and decolonisation, argues that the persistent problems stemming from Pine Ridge's intergenerational poverty are rooted in America's colonial history.

Misunderstanding the ways in which Native bodies are made poor and [are] criminalised makes it impossible to understand the structure of settler colonialism as a precondition for that poverty

Nick Estes, a University of New Mexico PhD

Clinton, Trump and the rest of the American political establishment are incapable of providing lasting solutions for the Lakota of Pine Ridge or the rest of the [566 federally recognised](#) tribal entities in the US, he says.

The present-day poverty gripping many indigenous communities - on and off reservations - is firmly rooted in the historical laundry list of massacres, ethnic cleansing, land theft and broken treaties endured by indigenous people in North America, says Estes. "The fact is that Natives are poor not because they failed at civilisation. Before colonisers came we were not considered poor. We had plenty," he argues.

On December 29, 1890, the US army carried out one of the bloodiest massacres inflicted on indigenous people in North America at Wounded Knee, where soldiers killed between 150 and 300 Lakota led by Chief Spotted Elk (also known as Chief Big Foot) for defying the reservation borders imposed on them by American authorities.

Civilians were subsequently hired to dump the bodies in a mass grave.

More than 100,000 indigenous people were forced to attend Christian boarding schools that started with President Ulysses Grant's 1869 Peace Policy and [continued throughout](#) the late 20th Century.

Separated from their families, children in these schools "experienced a devastating litany of abuses, from forced assimilation and grueling labour to widespread sexual and physical abuse", [recounts](#) a 2007 Amnesty International examination.

In 1973 on Pine Ridge, around 200 members of the American Indian Movement (AIM), a civil rights organisation founded in 1968, and Oglala Lakota activists occupied Wounded Knee to protest against a political crackdown by tribal president Dick Wilson.

Wilson, who had created a private militia to suppress dissidents, was backed by US law enforcement, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The activists demanded that Wilson resign and the US government respect treaties.

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After a 71-day stand-off with law enforcement, the activists ended the occupation without securing Wilson's resignation. Dozens of the tribal government's opponents were killed in the subsequent years and the US government refused to interfere, arguing that it could not force the autocratic leader to step down.

In 1977, AIM activist Leonard Peltier was sentenced to two consecutive life terms in prison for allegedly killing two FBI agents in Oglala, a town on Pine Ridge, two years earlier. Amnesty International and other rights groups [have cited](#) "concerns about the fairness" of his trial and conviction, and many activists consider Peltier a political prisoner.

"Misunderstanding the ways in which Native bodies are made poor and [are] criminalised makes it impossible to understand the structure of settler colonialism as a precondition for that poverty," Estes says.

Citing "the intense conditions of colonialism", Estes links this history to present-day poverty, as well as increased rates of [police killings](#) and [incarceration](#). "It's not just something [that happened] in the past. You can't heal from something that continually inflicts wounds upon you. The trauma is continually being inflicted."



The increased rates of police killing and incarceration represents a big problem in the community [Patrick Strickland/Al Jazeera]

Children pay poverty's price

Local teacher Cheryl Locke lives in a small wooden home, blue with a white trim, in a cul-de-sac at the top of a hill in the Evergreen neighbourhood north of Porcupine, a town situated 38 kilometres from the Pine Ridge's primary town and namesake. She shares the two-bedroom abode with her four adult children and two small grandchildren.

Cheryl, who has been a fifth-grade teacher for more than 16 years in Pine Ridge, has witnessed generation after generation of children pay the consequences of poverty, alcoholism and rising drug use.

As she speaks, her six-year-old grandson Tyrell sits on the gray linoleum living room floor and practices tying his shoes. Hanging on the wall behind him is a painting of Sitting Bull, an indigenous chief who united the Sioux tribes in the 19th Century.

Born in nearby Wounded Knee, Cheryl moved off the reservation for university and returned to help give back to her community through counselling and teaching. Explaining that many of her students live in crowded homes with multiple families and little parental supervision, she says: "There's overcrowding and no [study] supplies at home, or no beds. Some of them sleep on floors or wherever they can, and then they're expected to perform 100 percent."

During the first few years that she was a teacher, Cheryl would grow frustrated when students came to class tired and unprepared. "After a while, I understood where they're coming from because of what their conditions were at home."

To make matters worse, teachers like Cheryl often struggle with underfunding and a lack of school supplies, turning to nonprofit organisations for help.

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"Some of them - maybe their parents were out and they weren't supervised Some of them get themselves up and get on the bus One of them mentioned [recently] that there wasn't enough room in their house They said 'There are people sleeping on the floor of the kitchen'," she explains.

With many parents on the Pine Ridge Reservation suffering from alcoholism and a growing number of locals grappling with addictions to narcotics like methamphetamines, Cheryl has to play the role of social worker as well as teacher.

The hardest part of the school week, she says, is the first two days, when many students return from restless weekends.

"Thursday and Friday they dread so much - they don't want to go home; because some of them will be going back into homes [with] drinking or they'll be neglected and they'll be caring for themselves," Cheryl says, explaining that many students don't get a proper meal beyond the school cafeteria.

Teachers on the Pine Ridge reservation struggle to find ways of providing hope to younger generations amid the lack of educational and professional opportunities. The suicide rate in the reservation is twice the national average for all ages, and four times the national average for teenagers, according to Re-Member.

Cheryl says she felt an overwhelming sense of helplessness and heartache when a former student of hers committed suicide last year. The student, who had advanced to the eighth grade, was found by her younger brother, who was in Cheryl's class at the time.

"The student, who I'm not going to name, was a very smart girl. She was top of the class," she remembers solemnly. "Her brother found her ... it really affected him and he [later] tried to do the same thing."

Between December 2014 and February 2015, five local youth aged between 12 and 15 committed suicide, local media [reported](#) at the time. The [streak](#) of suicides prompted tribal officials to declare a state of emergency.

Yet the suicides weren't limited to the young.

Down the road from Cheryl's home, her brother Darrell works on his car as a powerful gust of wind blows dust across his barren lawn.

Darrell, who survives on disability cheques from the federal government due to a leg injury that rendered him unable to work more than a decade ago, saunters across the yard and sits on a plastic lawn chair.

He unfolds a newspaper from December 2014, pointing to the front page picture of his 30-year-old son Allen, who was shot and killed by police at his home in Rapid City, where he had moved 10 years earlier to find work.

Standing with his young son Sincere, Allen wears a backwards baseball cap, a striped blue polo shirt, black jeans and beige work boots. There is a smile on Sincere's face and an oversized shirt draped from his shoulders. "Another Native shot dead by Rapid City police," the headline reads.

"Allen was a working man ... he loved his family," Darrell says. "I thought I'd be the first one to go - at least before my kids. I didn't think this would ever happen. Nothing like this. It was a big shock to me."

The police had been called to the house by Allen's wife, who was worried because he was intoxicated, under the influence of drugs and sitting on the kitchen floor with a knife.

A statement later released by the police claimed that Allen was holding a knife and charged the officer. Witnesses admitted that Allen had a knife.

"It's a good day to die," the report claims Allen said. It also described the incident as "suicide by cop" and said a toxicology report found alcohol, marijuana and methamphetamines in Allen's system.



Cheryl Locke is a fifth grade teacher who has witnessed generation after generation deal with the consequences of poverty, alcoholism and drug use [Patrick Strickland/Al Jazeera]

'A liquid genocide'

Along the winding roads on the outskirts of the village of Oglala, there are small neighbourhoods of a dozen or so shacks and ramshackle trailers. Many of them are federally-funded developments.

Cars pause by the side of the road and wait for a row of vehicles led by men on horseback. The men hold flags of the Oglala Lakota Nation, the American Indian Movement and Turtle Island, a name many indigenous people use when speaking of North America.

Alcohol was used as a tool of manipulation to take our lands, take our resources - they needed to keep us drunk and deluded

Olowan Martinez

Olowan Martinez sits on the back porch of her aunt's home in Oglala, as the setting sun gradually disappears behind the hilltops.

Olowan, a 43-year-old mother of three, isn't paying attention to the current presidential elections.

"Politicians give big words and big promises," she says. "When it comes down to it, the people back here on these dirt roads are forgotten."

Olowan says she struggled with alcoholism for years before eventually giving up alcohol 11 years after her mother's death.

Alcohol has inflicted tragedy upon her family time and again. Both of her parents died of alcohol-related cirrhosis of the liver. Her brother was killed by a drunk man. Her 16-year-old daughter's boyfriend was killed by drunk driver in a head-on collision last year.

Describing alcohol as "the white man's piss", she argues that widespread alcohol and drug use were used to prevent indigenous people from organising politically: "Alcohol was used as a tool of manipulation to take our lands, take our resources - they needed to keep us drunk and deluded."

Since the death of her parents, Martinez has become one of the Lakota activists leading the charge against beer stores in Whiteclay, a town on the South Dakota-Nebraska border just three kilometres from the Pine Ridge village.

Whiteclay is a single road bisecting two columns of decrepit stores, most of them shuttered. Among the closed businesses are four small beer stores that sell a combined average of 13,000 cans per day, or upwards of four million a year, according to the Alcohol Justice watchdog group. Most is believed to be smuggled into Pine Ridge, where alcohol has been banned by the tribal government.

With a population of 12, Whiteclay is actually a shell entity registered as a town, with a few small buildings and no neighbourhoods. The closest police station is located more than 30 kilometres away.

In 2013, Martinez was arrested in Whiteclay as protesters blocked off the road into town to prevent delivery trucks from taking beer to the stores. She was dealt a series of charges related to allegations of vandalism, criminal mischief and making threats. The legal proceedings are ongoing.

Citing the high rates of alcoholism and foetal alcohol syndrome, she says Whiteclay's beer stores are creating a "liquid genocide" against the Lakota people in Pine Ridge by selling alcohol to people who suffer from intergenerational alcoholism.

"Whiteclay has been there for more than 100 years with one intention - to sell us alcohol. And that's what it does," she says, laying the blame for increased violence at the feet of the storeowners.

In August, Sherry Wounded Foot, a Lakota woman from Pine Ridge, drove into Whiteclay. The next morning, the 50-year-old was found beaten to the brink of death. Police suspect she was attacked and assaulted, although no officers were in Whiteclay at the time of the incident.

Wounded Foot died 12 days later. Her family worries that the mystery surrounding her death will go unsolved, according to local media.

To make matters worse, the advent of narcotics, namely methamphetamines, in recent years have left Olowan horrified. Over the summer, she says she ran down drug dealers in her neighbourhood and nearby villages to warn them not to speak to her children. "We were going to houses and made sure they knew not to speak to my children," she says.

RELATED: The Fight for Native Families

On October 16, Olowan's nephew, Vinnie Brewer, was [shot dead](#) in what was believed to be a dispute over a methamphetamine deal. Several men walked up to him in the parking lot of a youth centre and opened fire, killing him on the spot.

In response to Brewer's death, tribal police put curfews in place for those under 18 - 9.00 pm on school nights and 10pm at the weekends. There are just 24 police officers on the reservation, but an additional [20](#)

[officers](#) have been requested from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, an agency within the US federal government.

Speaking at a [press conference](#) following the killing, tribal president John Yellowbird Steele said: "If a person sits down here, he can connect the dots. It's several incidents of our tribal members being murdered. And it's all related to drugs."

Back in her home the day after her nephew's killing, Olowan smokes a cigarette as she speaks about his death. "I'm scared for my people. I hope we come together and start policing our own neighbourhoods," she says.

"With the Whiteclay issue already being [present], I'm hoping there is enough awareness about saving the minds of the young people [in regards to methamphetamines]."



Olowan says she struggled with alcoholism for years before eventually giving it up 11 years after her mother's death [Patrick Strickland/Al Jazeera]

'What can I do to make it better?'

Jerome High Horse, a 66-year-old from Pine Ridge's Wanblee village, helps his elderly neighbours by standing guard outside their homes when there seems to be a peak in robberies by drug dealers and criminals.

He is a tall man with a single braid that protudes from beneath his cowboy hat. On his left forearm, he has a homemade tattoo, faded from black to grey over the past four decades: "Jethro N' Theresa", it reads.

Jerome sits on his porch smoking a cigar. Behind him, a horse head is painted on the sidewall of his house.

The father of seven believes that standing guard is part of his duty to create a safer environment for people already struggling with poverty and other problems.

His adult life has been split between working as an engineer off the reservation and returning home for lengthy periods to carry out charity projects.

Along with his parents and nine brothers and sisters, he grew up in a two-room shack with a dirt floor. Although he was able to pull himself out, he says the level of poverty and institutional neglect gripping the reservation makes it impossible for most people to be as lucky as he's been.

When Jerome was a teenager, he was sent to a Christian boarding school. On the first day, he says the teachers and nuns forced the students to dip their heads in vats of chemicals.

"They took all the boys behind one of the buildings by the garage [at the school]. They dipped our head in [the tubs]. They thought, as Indians, we are lousy and have bugs," he recalls, shaking his head.

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The next morning, they shaved the students' heads. Whenever he spoke in Lakota, the nuns would slap the tops of his hands with a ruler.

"When I was 14 years old, I decided there's got to be a better way to live; because I've seen the struggles, the disrepair. The thing that kept us together was [doing things like] cutting wood for the community."

After graduating from high school and moving off the reservation, Jerome served two years, from 1970 to 1971, in the US army during the Vietnam war.

In 2010, Jerome and his wife Theresa retired and moved back to Pine Ridge. Within two years, they founded Families Working Together, a local charity to help impoverished residents of the reservation. "I asked, 'What can I do to make it better?'" he says.

Families Working Together collects donations from around the nation, including money, food, building supplies, medicine and other necessities. They are currently building a home for a homeless father and son in Wanblee on a lot of land acquired from the tribal government.

"We are always bringing back truckloads of food and anything and everything you can think of. And we have a lot of people who don't have electricity and water," Jerome says. His organisation also builds tiny homes and does home repairs for people living in crumbling shanties.

"That's how we operate. We all take care of each other. I grew up with that concept. I was always led to believe that, as Indian people, we're going to be treated different because of who we are. If there's one value we have, it's to look out for each other. That way of life is a good way of life."

Back in her home, Olowan Martinez says the Pine Ridge reservation shouldn't be the subject of pity. "People look at our communities here on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation ... and all you see is the poverty, the violence and the bad. But there's so much good that came from here - not only for our homeland but for all indigenous nations," she says.

"They tried to wipe us out, they stuck us on this reservation, this POW camp, and thought we're going to die off. But this is our land. We were made from this land. So, we survive and here we are today. We're still here."



Jerome, a father of seven adult children, worked as an engineer off the reservation, returning home for lengthy periods to carry out charity project [Patrick Strickland/Al Jazeera]

Find Patrick Strickland on Twitter: [@P_Strickland](#)

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