



**++ A NATIVE YOUTH SURVEY REPORT ++**

Katy Stewart, MPH & Cheyenne Brady-Runsabove, MPH





Center Us: A Native Youth Survey Report  
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## **ABOUT THE DESIGN**

Cover Art & Graphic Design by  
Evynn Richardson (Haliwa-Saponi), Age 21

## **THE CREATIVE NATIVE PROGRAM**

This report features artwork from 2024 Creative Native artists. The initiative is designed to provide space and support to Indigenous artists, ages 5–24, from across Indian Country.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The Center for Native American Youth (CNAY) acknowledges individuals who played key roles in the development of the survey and report.

We extend our gratitude to the Native youth leaders who worked to build and disseminate the survey, and our deepest appreciation to all Native youth who shared their voices in the survey and focus groups.

We recognize the dedicated staff that supported the development of this report. Special recognition to lead report writer, Katy Stewart and secondary writer, Cheyenne Brady–Runsabove (Sac & Fox Nation), both of whom worked on survey development and data analyzation.

Gratitude to CNAY's Youth Advisory Board for their continued guidance, and all youth who continue to inspire and shape our programs.

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# INTRODUCTION

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Native youth perspectives are rarely prioritized in data collection and analysis. This report attempts to do both. Throughout 2023, Center Us: A Native Youth Survey gathered data to better understand the needs and priorities of Native American youth in areas including cultural resources, mental health, civic engagement and more.

Over the course of six months, CNAY hosted eight focus groups with 65 Native youth from different regions of the United States, helping to center their perspectives and voices in this report.

As a society, we have a collective responsibility to future generations. Center Us is an important step in that direction, preparing the next generation to be data sovereign, prioritize Indigenous-led research, and utilize Indigenous research methodologies to assist in the preservation of culture and identity.

The data collected throughout this process helped to shed light on the cultural strengths, resource gaps and priorities of Native youth across the country.



# SUMMARY

Native youth ages 18–24 from across Indian Country weighed in on issues that matter most to them, including elections, education and cultural access.

**Total Respondents 784**      **Tribal Affiliations 239**

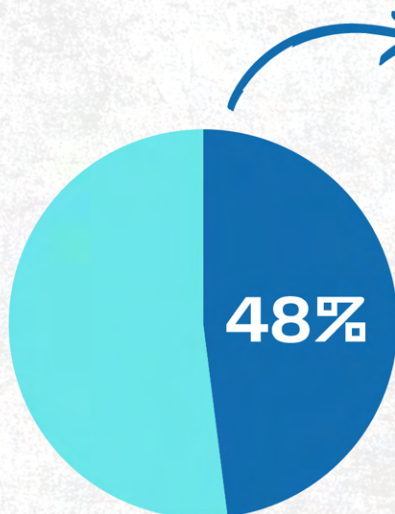
## Top 3 Tribes (Greatest Number of Respondents)

**82**  
Navajo

**39**  
MBCI\*

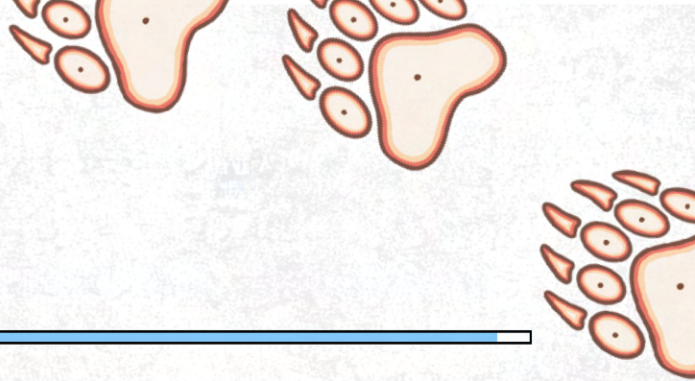
**20**  
Lumbee

Almost half of respondents listed affiliation with **28 tribes**.

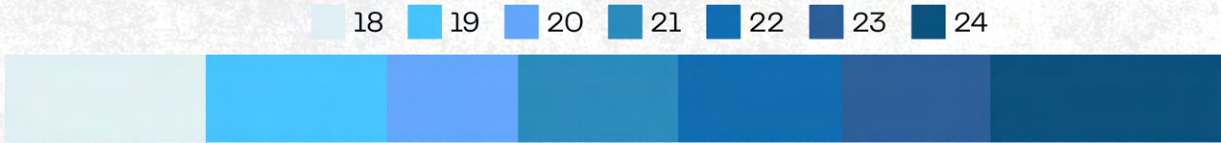


- Diné/Navajo
- Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians (MBCI)\*
- Cherokee Nation
- MHA Nation (Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara)
- Muskogee
- Seminole Nation of Oklahoma
- Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina
- Seneca-Cayuga Nation
- Comanche Nation of Oklahoma
- Crow
- Seminole Tribe of Florida
- Karuk Tribe
- Yup'ik
- Blackfeet
- Haliwa-Saponi
- Miccosukee Tribe of Florida
- Morongo Band of Mission Indians
- Oglala Lakota
- Ojibwe
- Tlingit
- Cheyenne and Arapaho
- Mohegan Tribe
- Oneida Nation
- Yakama Nation
- Choctaw
- Northern Cheyenne
- Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa
- Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska

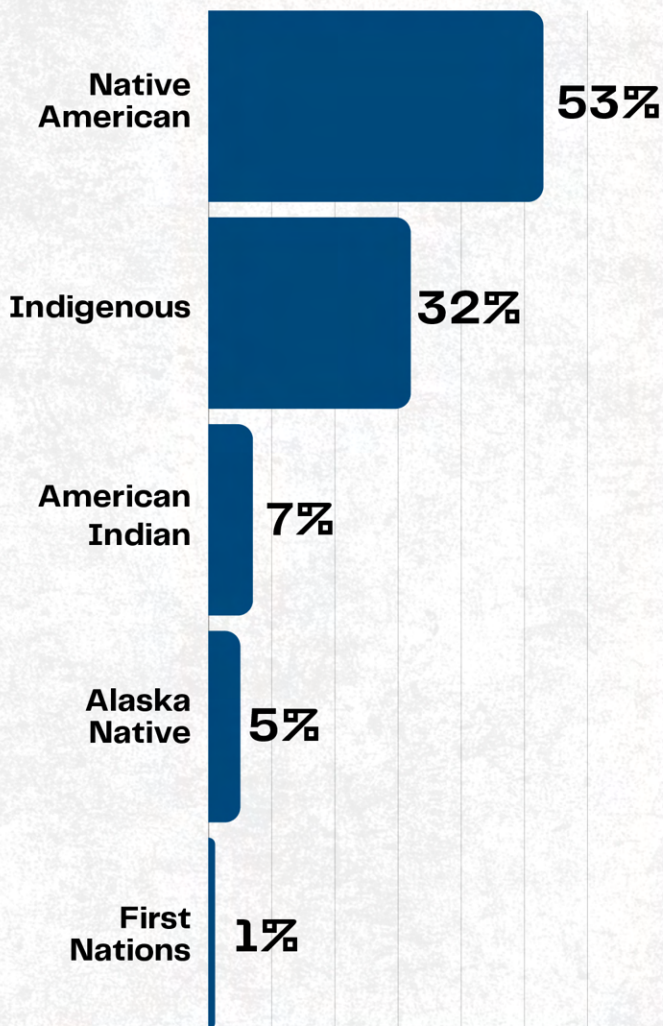
# SUMMARY (CONTINUED)



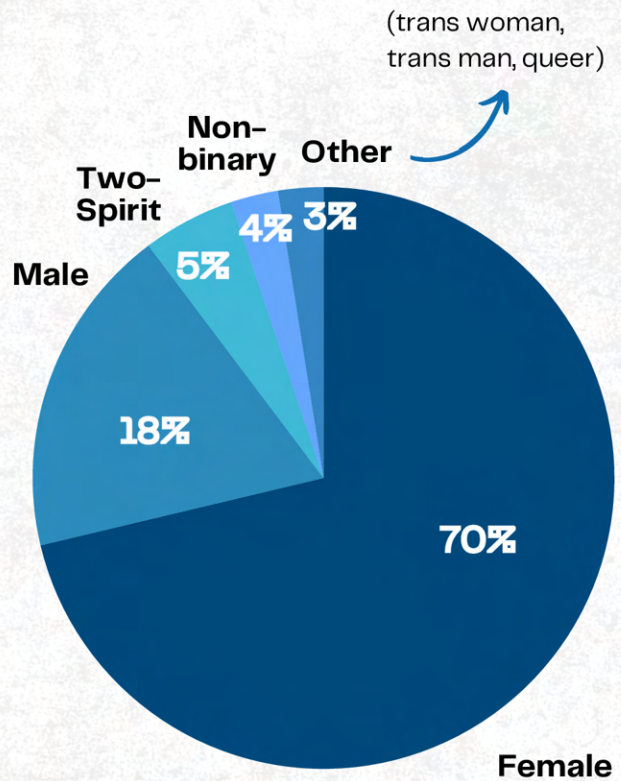
## Age



## Preferred Term\*



## Gender



\*Throughout the report, the term “Native youth” is utilized to reference all Indigenous-identifying youth participants.

\*\*It is important to note that this report does not include a robust perspective of Native Hawaiian youth as we garnered very few responses from this population.



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## Top 3 States (Greatest Number of Respondents)



**109**  
California



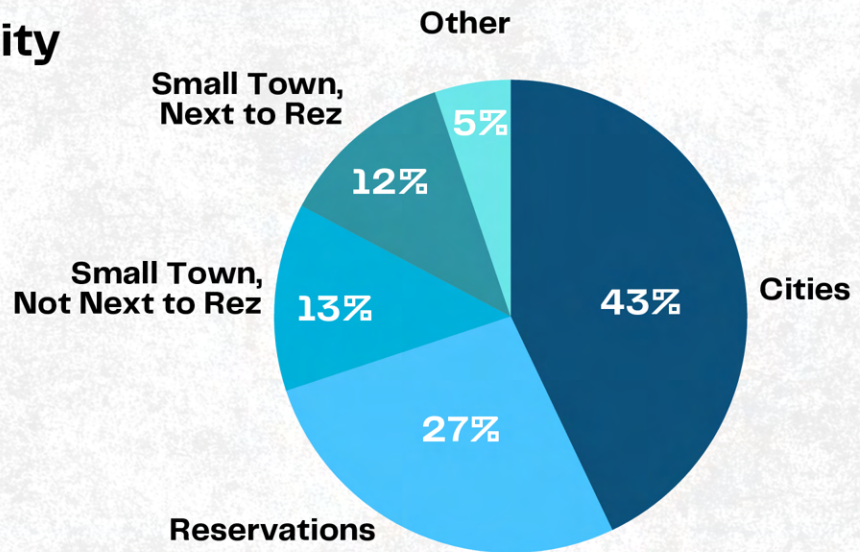
**78**  
Oklahoma



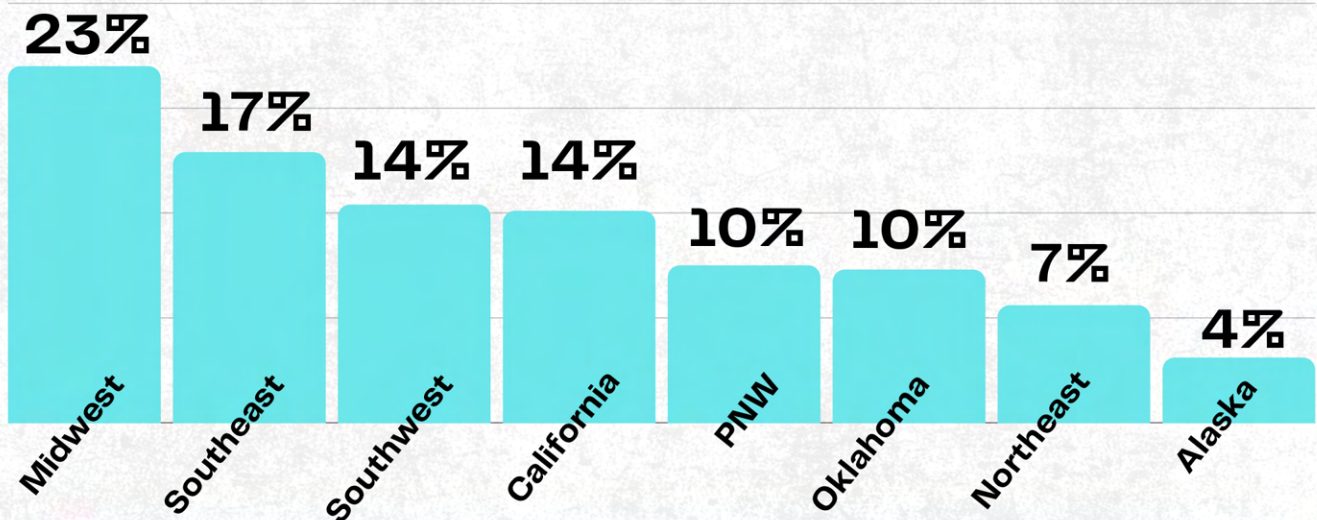
**53**  
Arizona

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## Current Community Type\*



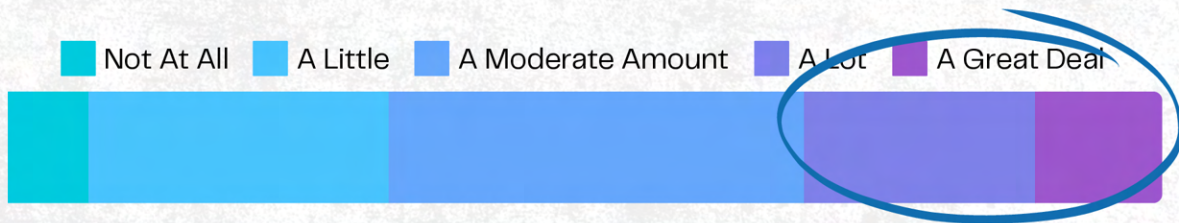
## Region



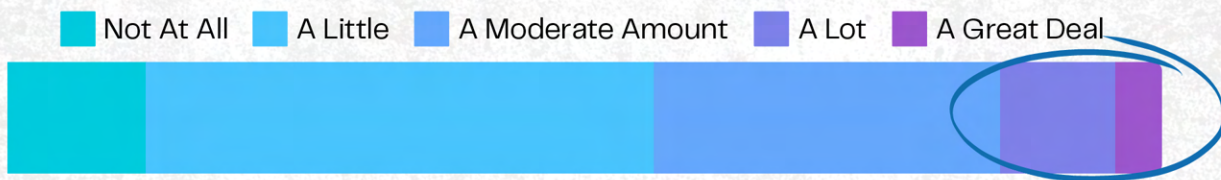
*\*Alaska Native Village was not included in the community types. This was an oversight on survey design that limited the amount of accurate demographic information collected about Alaska Native youth.*

# SUMMARY (CONTINUED)

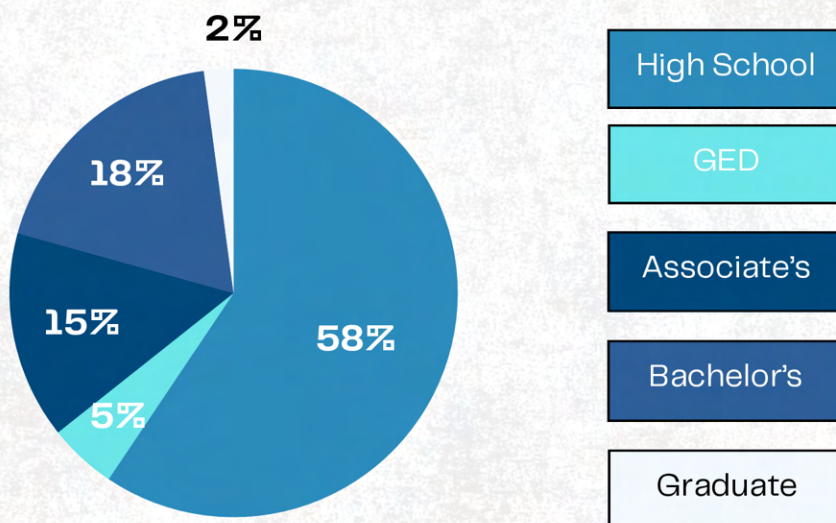
**Cultural Education: 31% of respondents feel like they have a lot or a great deal of cultural education\***



**Tribal Language: 14% feel like they have a lot or a great deal of familiarity with their tribal language**



## Western Education



\*Our 18- to 24-year-old relatives are at a new juncture in their lives, often leaving home for the first time for education, work or other opportunities. This conflict of identity and home came up repeatedly during our focus groups as youth expressed the differences between their home community and current residence, and their struggle to know from which framing to respond.



# KEY TAKEAWAYS

Through focus group conversations, several points emerged about education, culture, civic engagement and community disparity in resource access.

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## EDUCATION

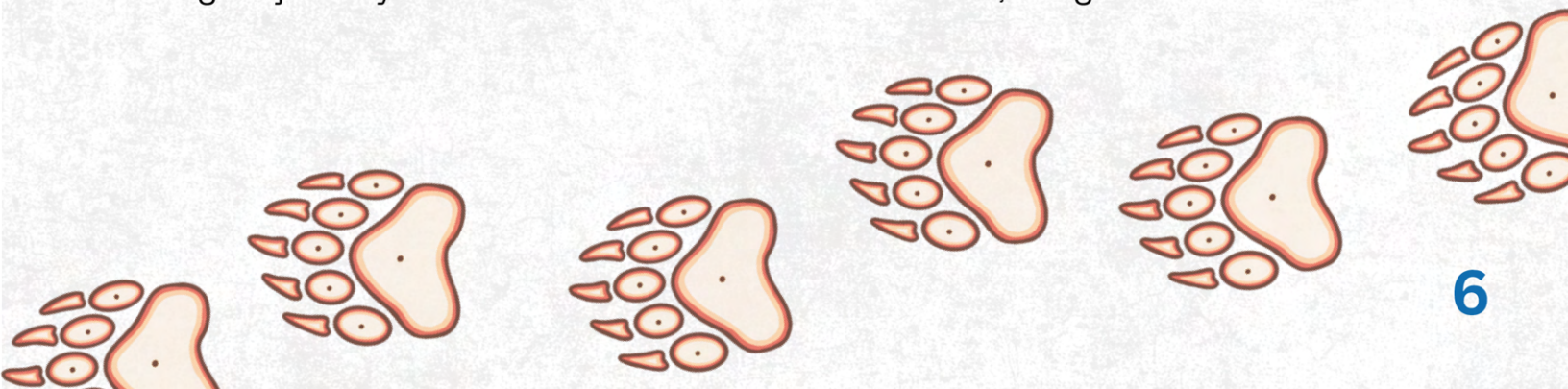
**Native youth in rural communities struggle to receive the funding resources necessary to make higher education seem plausible.** While 65% of Native youth report access to college readiness programs, many shared they don't receive adequate funding opportunities to support their transition to college, making higher education feel inaccessible. And, when funding does exist, barriers to learning about opportunities or understanding how to access them persist.

**Educational institutions can foster community and identity reclamation journeys.** For Native youth who lacked access to culture growing up - due to the historical impact of settler colonialism, including genocide and the boarding school era - college provides a new opportunity to connect with their Indigeneity and to begin a journey of cultural reclamation.

## CULTURE

**Culture builds confidence.** Native youth who feel culturally educated are four times more likely to see themselves as capable of making a difference than those who do not.

**Native youth in the Eastern United States are experiencing a period of cultural resurgence.** Native youth in the Northeast and Southeast reported experiencing less access to cultural and tribal knowledge than those in other parts of the country. This is likely due to Eastern tribes being first contact tribes with white settlers. One youth said that "a lot of our spirituality is lost [as a result of] being colonized so early." Many young people are now working to reclaim their culture, reintroducing social dances, learning about tribal histories and seeking out Indigenous opportunities, through student associations, classes and peer interactions, in higher education.



# KEY TAKEAWAYS (CONTINUED)

## CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

**The majority of Native youth view tribal and U.S. elections as equally important, but barriers exist to participating in tribal voting.** 79% of youth think that tribal elections are as important as U.S. federal/state/local elections, but only 37% of youth participated in their most recent tribal election compared to 58% who participated in U.S. elections. Voting in tribal elections was more comparable to voting in U.S. elections for youth who lived on or in small towns next to reservations, highlighting the barriers that exist to participating in tribal elections for those who don't live in community.

**Lack of trust and a feeling that “nothing ever changes” leads to apathy towards voting in U.S. elections.** Native youth shared that witnessing the re-election of officials who don't prioritize or disparage Native communities reduces interest in voting. Regional differences were also observed when it came to voting.

Native youth participants in the Southeast and Oklahoma shared that there seems to be apathy regarding U.S. elections in their communities, sharing that “a lot of people are discouraged” and “my family doesn't vote at any level because they think it is rigged no matter what.”

**Native youth believe participation in tribal elections will continue to decrease because of blood quantum laws.** 70% of federally-recognized tribes use blood quantum to determine tribal citizenship. Many youth shared that they aren't able to vote in their local tribal elections because of enrollment issues and posited that this issue will only get worse: “we should draw attention to those who aren't voting... the number of people able to vote is dwindling.”

Art by Aspen C.  
(Yerington Paiute, Washoe)





## COMMUNITY-TYPE DIFFERENCES

**Healthcare in tribal communities is preferred to healthcare in non-tribal communities.** Native youth on reservations report greater access to culturally-informed providers (63%) and culturally-appropriate health services (51%), compared to those in cities and small towns. Across all regions of the United States, Native youth expressed hesitation about visiting non-tribal healthcare facilities because of discrimination and the lack of culturally-competent care. In the Northeast, the lack of federally-recognized tribes means there are very few accessible Indian Health Service (IHS) clinics. One youth shared that they “dread going to a health space if it’s not on the reservation” and are most comfortable if they know the provider is culturally-competent or Indigenous.

**Reservations provide significantly greater access to cultural resources than other communities.** 51% of Native youth on reservations feel their culture is respected outside of their family, compared to 28% in small towns and 33% in cities. 51% of Native youth on reservations also report having access to Indigenous curriculums in schools, compared to 30% in small towns and 42% in cities.

62% of Native youth on reservations were familiar with at least some of their tribal language, compared to 35% in small towns and cities.

**High-speed Internet access varies dramatically by community type, but not region.** Native youth access to high-speed Internet is dependent on community type. Those in cities have far greater access to high-speed Internet (80%) than those living on reservations (56%) or in small towns (68%). Insufficient Internet access impacts participation in educational opportunities; resulting in difficulty participating in online courses or uploading class assignments on time, for instance.

**Native youth are impacted by over-policing of their communities on reservations.** Native youth reported 10-15% greater presence of law enforcement on reservations than in cities and small towns. Youth shared that it is often ‘hard to feel safe’ when Native communities are over-policed and that they often have to contend with tribal, state, local and federal police forces. One participant shared that the “presence of law enforcement says nothing about public safety.”

# RESOURCE ACCESS

The Center Us survey looked at access to **42 unique resources** across **nine different categories**: sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), workforce, food security, child welfare, education, climate & environment, health, public safety and juvenile justice.

Native youth reported having (on average) the most access to public safety resources and the least access to SRHR resources. **The green arrows throughout this section indicate the most accessible resource in the named category and red arrows indicate the least accessible resource.**



**Blue squares indicate a deeper look into a resource across various community types.** Center Us categorized communities as cities, reservations, small towns next to reservations or small towns not next to reservations.

## Health Resources

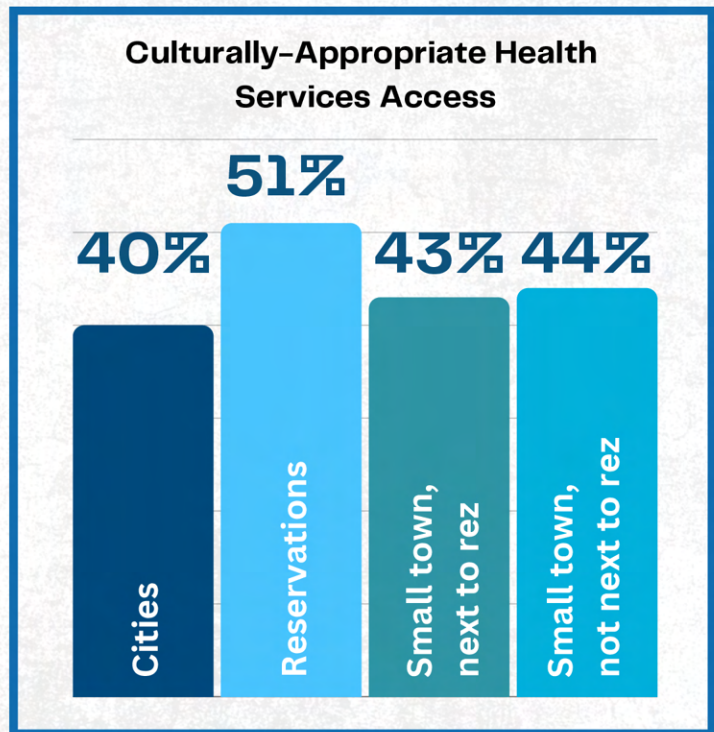
**54%** reported access



73% access to sports programming



42% access to culturally-appropriate health services





## Public Safety Resources

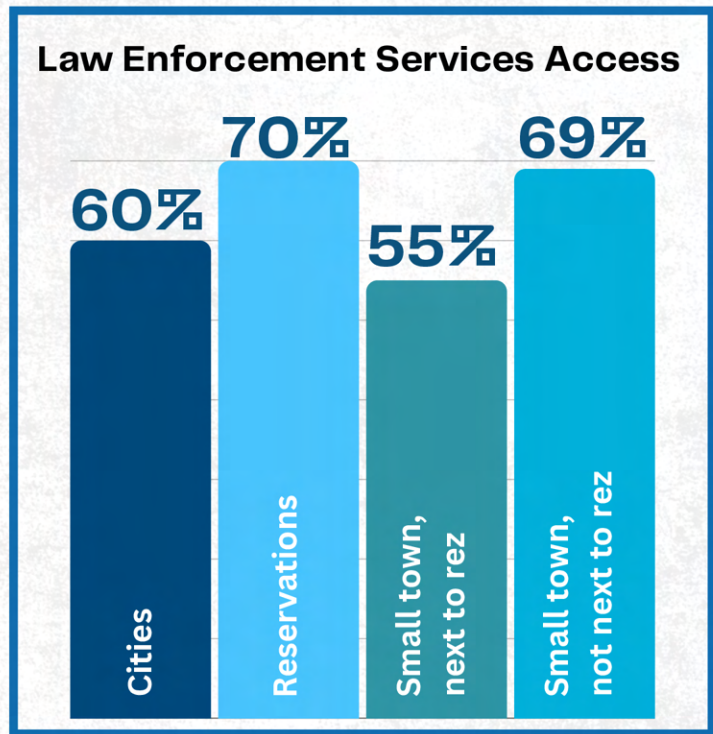
**55%** reported access



**68%** access to safe public spaces



**48%** access to alcohol & drug bans in public spaces and investment in community infrastructure



## Education Resources

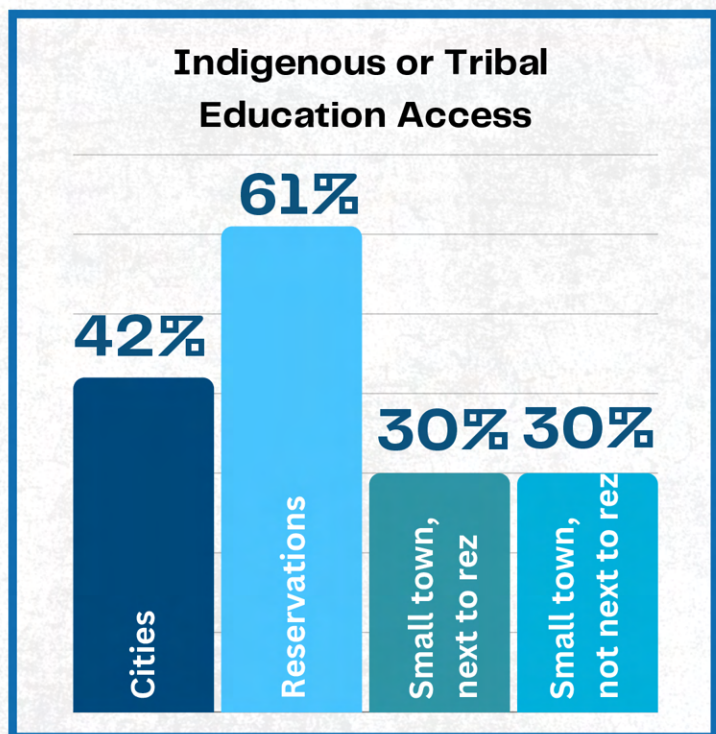
**55%** reported access



**78%** access to school supplies & equipment



**33%** access to affordable tuition







# RESOURCE ACCESS (CONTINUED)

## Food Security Resources


**51%** reported access


 **90%** access to food

 **29%** access to gardening spaces

## Child Welfare Resources


**49%** reported access


 **60%** access to programs to keep families together

 **30%** access to opportunities to connect with other Indigenous youth in foster care

## Sexual & Reproductive Health Resources


**32%** reported access


 **54%** access to programs with domestic violence resources

 **8%** access to opportunities and services for young parents

## Juvenile Justice Resources

**40%** reported access

 **53%** access to prevention programs to keep children in school

 **27%** access to culturally-immersive conflict mediation



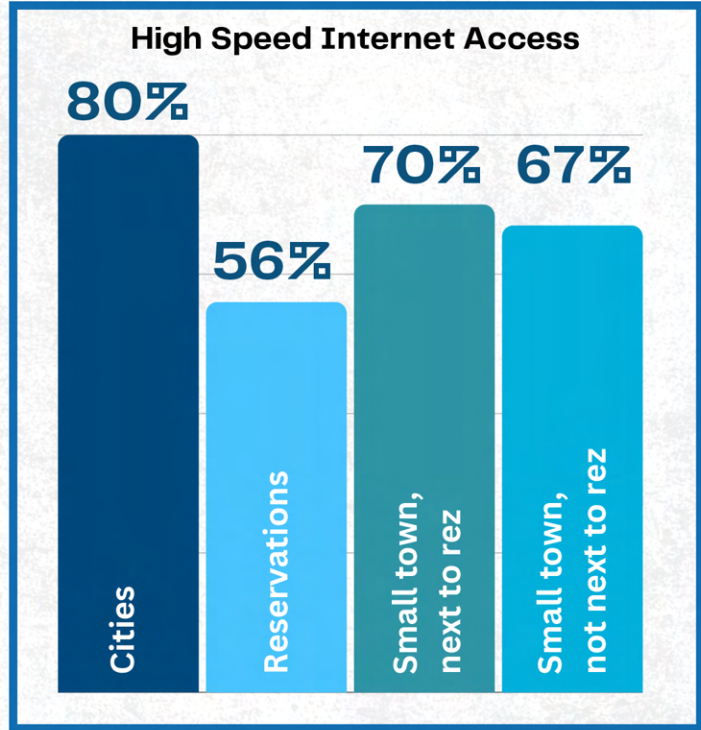


## Workforce Resources

**53%** reported access

**70%** access high-speed internet

**31%** access to financial literacy programs

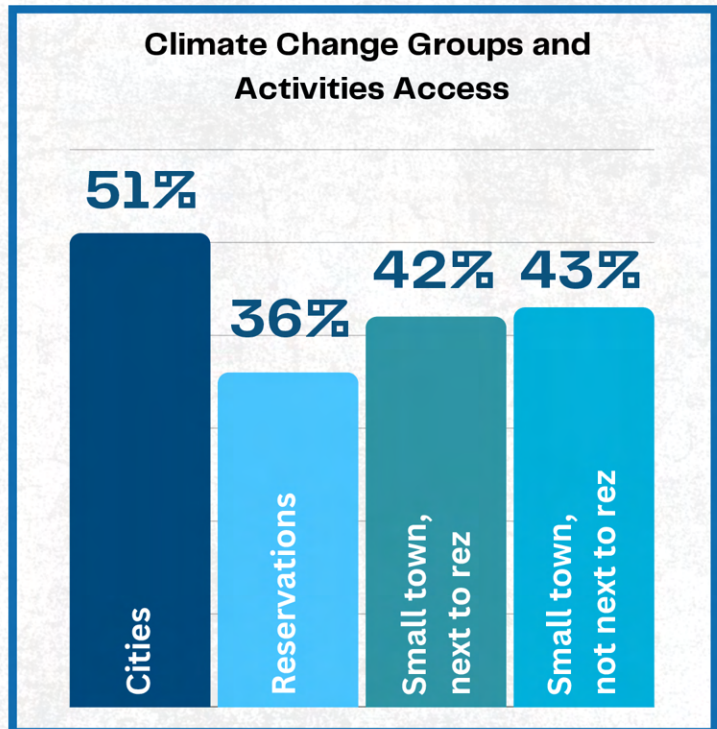


## Climate & Environment Resources

**48%** reported access

**57%** access to recycling programs

**42%** access to environmental employment opportunities



# FAST STATS: REGIONS

Data from the survey highlighted regional differences in resource and culture access. Focus group conversations emphasized that access to certain resources varies by geographic region.

## **90% of Alaska Native youth have access to activities focused on climate change, 40% above the national average.**

*65% of Alaska Native communities practice some form of subsistence activities. Given the greater reliance on the land than communities in the lower 48, Alaska Native youth are more aware of the impact of climate change, leading to greater accessibility of climate-focused groups or activities.*

## **70% of Oklahoma Native youth have access to culturally-informed providers, 14% above the national average.**

*“You have to not look to not notice Native people in Oklahoma,” was one response to why access to culturally-informed providers was higher in Oklahoma than elsewhere. Given the high density of Oklahoman tribes, there is a large number of available IHS clinics. Native youth also shared that there is more cultural awareness among non-Native clinical providers.*

## **60% of Midwest Native youth have access to culturally-appropriate health services, 15% above the national average.**

*When possible, Native youth go to IHS clinics for more culturally-competent care. The Midwest has the highest number of IHS services and facilities anywhere in the country, according to our regional classifications.*



Art by Nasbah C.  
(Navajo)



**40% of Southwest Native youth have access to alcohol and drug bans in community spaces, 10% below the national average.**

*Native youth in Southwestern cities reflected that there are not enough rehab centers to service Native Americans struggling with substance abuse.*

**34% of Pacific Northwest Native youth have access to domestic violence resources, 20% below the national average.**

*56% of Native youth respondents from the PNW live in cities, higher than the national average. The Urban Indian Health Institute reports that 94% of Native women in Seattle, WA have been sexually assaulted.\* One youth shared that “in the city or outside communities, I feel like I’m the last person to get seen [in health clinics].” The perspectives of Native youth from the PNW reflected data that they feel less seen and supported in non-tribal communities.*

**30% of Northeast Native youth have access to culturally-informed providers, 25% below the national average.**

*There are only five IHS clinics across 13 Northeastern states and only 4% of federally-recognized tribes in the region. Native youth reflect that a lack of federal or state recognition means less access to and funding for culturally-competent health services. One youth shared, “my school provides free therapy, I would never try and access it. Almost all [providers are] white - I would never.”*

**28% of California Native youth have access to transportation to after school programs, 11% below the national average.**

*California is the most populous state, home to a diverse array of tribal communities. The state has dense urban centers and remote, rural towns. Youth noted that after school programs are inaccessible for many, either due to the lack of transport or due to poor quality of the transit provided.*

\*Urban Indian Health Institute. (2018). *Our Stories, Our Bodies*. <https://www.uihi.org/resources/our-bodies-our-stories/>

# CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

**71%** of respondents believe **civic engagement** is embedded in **Indigenous history**.

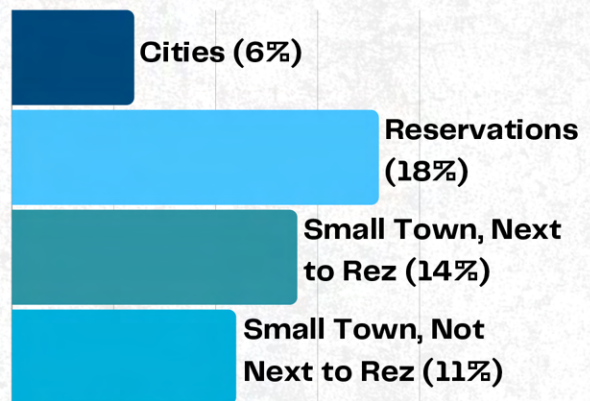


Roughly **7 out of 10** Native youth believe Native people face **greater barriers to voting** than others.

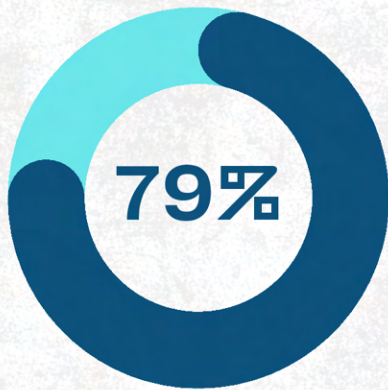
Only **11%** feel **represented** by state & national **decision makers**.



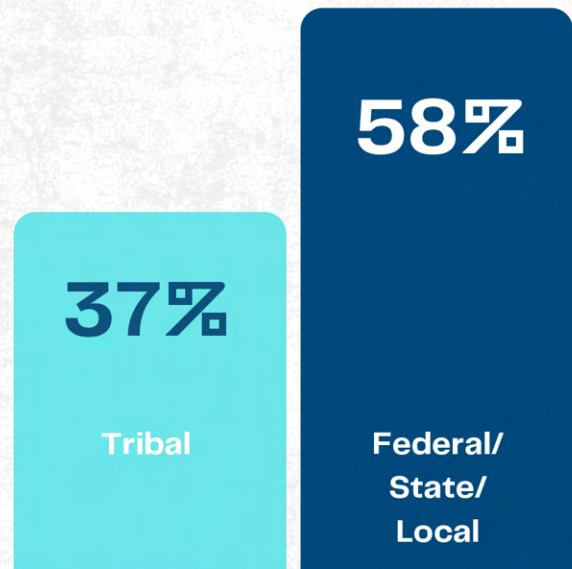
*Belief about representation varies by community.*



The majority of Native youth think **tribal elections are equally important to U.S. elections.**



Though, **fewer vote in tribal elections** than in U.S. elections.



**Community Location Note:** For Native youth living on the reservations of the tribe they are enrolled in, or in small towns nearby, voting in tribal elections more closely mirrors voting in U.S. elections.



Art by Xeneca L.  
(Otoe-Missouria)





# CULTURE

Culture represents the traditional beliefs, practices and customs of a population. For many Native youth, **their culture is at the core of their identity**, often holding significant life teachings. Through Center Us, culture was found to greatly influence Native youth’s perception of self. This reinforces the importance of access to cultural resources for Native youth across the nation.

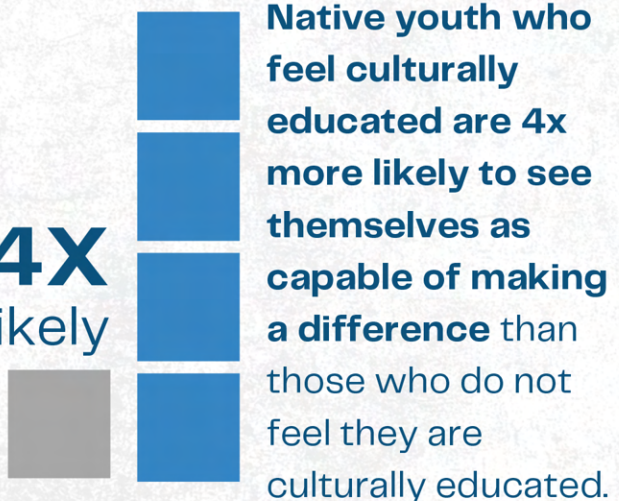
“  
Culture is who you are around. It is what you  
are doing and how you grew up...  
Culture makes me, me. – Virginia  
”

It is of extreme importance to note that Native youth recognize cultural education can be subjective. For example, youth in some communities are taught to practice humility about their knowledge, making it difficult to answer questions on their self-perceived cultural education. Some also note that cultural education is relative to the place one lives and, at this stage of life, Native youth are often a part of a transient population.

Art by Camela M.  
(Navajo)



**4X**  
more likely





# CULTURAL TRANSMISSION

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It is important to recognize that in each Native community, **the transmission of culture is a multifaceted process** influenced by respective tribal histories, traumas, resiliency, cultural preservation and revitalization efforts. Many Native youth noted that the legacy of boarding schools, where Indigenous languages and cultural practices were suppressed, created a gap in cultural transmission.

Native youth recognize that their **elders play a crucial role in preserving and passing down cultural knowledge**. Respect for elders is held in high regard by Native youth. It seems to be ingrained, known without mention and almost woven within their identities.

“  
The elders and mentors in our community hold invaluable knowledge about our dances and cultural practices. – Taylor  
”

Native youth also share that **interactions with other Native communities, outside of their own, bring an awareness to different cultural practices** and make way for deeper connection. Youth recognize that when tribes work together, particularly those in close proximity to each other, it can benefit all.

*Art by Jacquelyn Y.  
(Diné & Walatowa)*





# CULTURAL PRESERVATION

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Native youth share that, **in some cases, they have had to fight to learn their culture**, often through self-teaching methods. In an effort to reclaim and preserve tradition, youth attend community cultural and language classes, establish Native student programs on college campuses, document history, attend ceremonies and practice traditional social dances.

“

We have classes for Native youth and are revitalizing our language. – Jadyn

”

Together, Native youth are reclaiming, revitalizing and preserving their respective cultures. Their culture is their identity, and they are working to ensure it lives on for generations to come.

**CULTURE = IDENTITY**

Art by Rachel S.  
(San Pasqual)







# CONCLUSION

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Center Us has provided conclusive data and stories that tell us what Native youth across the country think, how they feel and what they need. Policymakers and stakeholders nationwide have an opportunity – and a responsibility – to provide increased access to the resources outlined within this report.

It is important to note that, across all categories, average resource access hovers around 50%. This highlights significant gaps in resource availability and underscores the urgent need to improve infrastructure and provide support to ensure equitable access for all.

At the Center for Native American Youth, our hope is that you will join us in using this data to advocate for the future our Native youth deserve. One with unwavering access to culturally-competent healthcare (42%), reliable public safety (55%) and affordable education (33%). One where Native youth feel represented by their elected officials (11%).

We envision a world in which all Native youth feel connected to their cultures and confident in their unique identities. Where Native traditions are valued, preserved and passed along for generations to come.

While Center Us is an immensely important step forward, we recognize our work is not done. We will continue to prioritize research that uplifts Indigenous knowledge and the voices of Native youth.





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## **CENTER for NATIVE AMERICAN YOUTH**

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Founded in 2011, the Center for Native American Youth (CNAY) at the Aspen Institute is a national education and advocacy organization that works alongside Native youth — ages 24 and under — on reservations, in rural villages and spaces across the country to improve their health, safety and overall well-being.

All Native youth deserve to lead full and healthy lives, have equal access to opportunity, draw strength from their culture and inspire one another. At CNAY, we uplift youth through cross-sector, culturally-immersive programming that incorporates Indigenous knowledge systems, leadership training, and youth-led policy agenda and narratives.

[www.cnay.org](http://www.cnay.org)



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2024 Creative Native Grand Prize Winner: Aiyana Beaulieu (Red Lake Band of Chippewa)

