

POLICY BRIEF

Indigenous Data Sovereignty in the United States

STEPHANIE CARROLL RAINIE
DESI RODRIGUEZ-LONEBEAR
ANDREW MARTINEZ

We live in the information age. Governments, industries, and organizations of all kinds are claiming a right to gather information on everything from our spending habits to our health records. Data has become a global currency, a valuable asset, and a source of power. Native nations are part of this data revolution, but encounter distinctive obstacles to fully realizing the power of data.



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
**NATIVE NATIONS
INSTITUTE**
Founded by the Udall Foundation
& the University of Arizona

Strengthening Indigenous Governance

A Call to Action for Native Nations, Tribal Citizens, Governments, Organizations, Scholars, and Funders

We live in the information age. Governments, industries, and organizations of all kinds are claiming a right to gather information on everything from our spending habits to our health records.¹ Data has become a global currency, a valuable asset, and a source of power. Native nations are part of this data revolution, but encounter distinctive obstacles to fully realizing the power of data.^{1, 2}

Purpose

This policy brief is a call to action on *Indigenous data sovereignty*. It defines the terms “data” and “data sovereignty,” explains the data-sovereignty rights of Native nations, describes the data history of Native nations, and offers recommendations for decolonizing data and asserting Indigenous data sovereignty.

Indigenous Data

Indigenous peoples have always been data creators, data users, and data stewards. They have used this information to interact with each other and with the natural world since time immemorial. Data were and are embedded in Indigenous instructional practices and cultural principles, and transmitted orally as well as recorded through winter counts, calendar sticks, totem poles, and other physical objects.¹ Today, Indigenous data are information that impact Indigenous lives at the collective and individual levels. Indigenous data include, “any facts, knowledge, or information about a Native nation and its tribal citizens, lands, resources, programs, and communities. Information ranging from demographic profiles to educational attainment rates, maps of sacred lands, songs, and social media activities are all data.”³

Indigenous Data Sovereignty

In mainstream usage, “data sovereignty is the concept that information which has been converted and stored in binary digital form is subject to the laws of the country in which it is located.”⁴ This definition focuses on geographic jurisdiction over digitized data. A nation’s laws control the digital data that is housed within its geographic boundaries.

Indigenous data sovereignty extends beyond this mainstream definition. It is not limited by geographic jurisdiction or digital form. **“Indigenous data sovereignty is the right of Native nations to govern the collection, ownership, and application of its own data.”**⁵ It derives from the inherent right of Native nations to govern their peoples, lands, and resources, a right acknowledged in treaties and other legal mechanisms negotiated on a nation-to-nation basis with settler-colonial governments. The concept of Indigenous data sovereignty as a collective right also may be positioned within an international Indigenous rights framework.⁶ The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) underscores Native nations’ right to self-determination, including their right to have a say over the information needed to achieve their self-determined objectives.⁷ Indigenous data sovereignty repositions the control of data back to Native nations.

Data Dependency and Data Inadequacy

In the United States, the processes of colonization have led to a state of data dependency in Indian Country. Federal policies of assimilation, forced removal, relocation, residential schooling and other

cultural ruptures led many tribes to rely on external sources of information about their communities' economic, environmental, and health status. This data dependency produces a paradox of scarcity and abundance: extensive data are collected about tribes, but rarely by tribes or for tribal uses. As a result:

- existing Indigenous data are inconsistent, inaccurate, or irrelevant to tribal goals;
- the collection, ownership, and application of Indigenous data are controlled by external entities;
- an extensive history of exploitative research and policies has left a legacy of mistrust of data; and
- a lack of data infrastructure and capability cripples tribal efforts to overcome these obstacles.^{1,2}

Toward Indigenous Data Sovereignty

Indigenous data sovereignty is an aspiration. Native nations strive to achieve Indigenous data sovereignty through decolonizing data and indigenizing data governance. Decolonizing data occurs as Native nations replace external, nontribal norms and priorities with tribal systems that define data, control how it is collected, and influence how it is used. It results in findings—derived both from external data collected on Indigenous peoples and from internal data produced by Native nations—that reflect the understandings of those peoples. Indigenizing data governance is a means of implementing greater Indigenous data sovereignty. It is the act of harnessing tribal values, principles, and mechanisms—Indigenous ways of knowing and doing—and applying them to the management and control of a Native nation's data ecosystem.^{1,2} How might tribes and others facilitate this process?

Implications for Native Nations, Tribal Citizens, Governments, Organizations, Scholars, and Funders

The following list provides preliminary recommendations for decolonizing data and indigenizing data governance. The full realization of Indigenous data sovereignty requires these actions plus many more not listed here:

- Acknowledge Indigenous data sovereignty as an objective and incorporate it into tribal, federal, and other entities' data policies;
- Generate resources and build support for Indigenous data governance, including the governance of Indigenous data by others;
- Grow tribal data capacities, including establishing data governance policies and procedures and recruiting and developing data warriors¹ (Indigenous professionals and community members who are skilled at creating, collecting, and managing data);
- Establish strong relationships between tribal leaders and data warriors;
- Create intertribal institutions dedicated to data leadership and building data infrastructure and support for tribes; and
- Build connections among Native nations domestically and internationally for the sharing of strategies, resources, and ideas.

This brief was produced by the Native Nations Institute and has been made available to the US Indigenous Data Sovereignty Network.

For more information, contact the Native Nations Institute at nni@email.arizona.edu.

Join the Network!

For more information on the US Indigenous Data Sovereignty Network and to join its community of practice that supports Indigenous data sovereignty through data governance-focused research, policy advocacy, and education, visit usindigenousdata.arizona.edu.

Suggested Citation

Rainie, Stephanie Carroll, Desi Rodriguez-Lonebear, and Andrew Martinez. 2017. *Policy Brief: Indigenous Data Sovereignty in the United States*. Tucson: Native Nations Institute, University of Arizona.

1 | Rodriguez-Lonebear D. (2016). Building a Data Revolution in Indian Country. In T Kukutai & J Taylor (Eds), *Indigenous Data Sovereignty*. Canberra: Australian National University Press.

2 | Rainie SC, Schultz JL, Briggs E, Riggs P, & Palmanteer-Holder NL. (2017). Data as strategic resource: Self-determination and the data challenge for United States Native Nation and tribes. *International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 8(2). Retrieved 5 December 2017 from <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/iipj/vol8/iss2/1>. DOI: 10.18584/iipj.2017.8.2.1. DOI: 10.18584/iipj.2017.8.2.1.

3 | Rainie SC, Rodriguez-Lonebear D, & Martinez A. (2017). Policy Brief: Data Governance for Native Nation Rebuilding. (Version 2). Tucson: Native Nations Institute, The University of Arizona. Retrieved 5 2017 December from http://nni.arizona.edu/application/files/8415/0007/5708/Policy_Brief_Data_Governance_for_Native_Nation_Rebuilding_Version_2.pdf

4 | Rouse M. (2013). Data Sovereignty. Retrieved 8 April 2017 from <http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/data-sovereignty>.

5 | Rodriguez-Lonebear D & Rainie SC. (2016). US Indigenous Data Sovereignty Network: About Us. Retrieved 5 December 2017 from <http://usindigenousdata.arizona.edu/about-us>

6 | Kukutai T & Taylor J. (2016). Data Sovereignty for Indigenous Peoples: Current Practice and Future Needs. In T Kukutai & J Taylor, cited above.

7 | Davis M. (2016). Data and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. In T Kukutai & J Taylor, cited above.