

California Indigenous Students Count

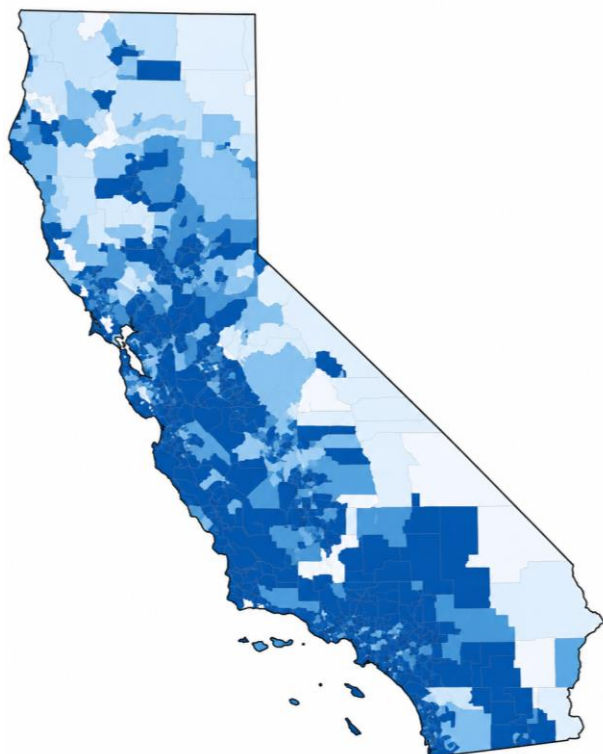
June 2026 | Nara Nayar, American Institutes for Research

Background

California's Native student undercount is more than 93%. This means that nine out of every 10 American Indian or Alaska Native students are not represented as part of that demographic in data disaggregation and reporting on education outcomes.

California Indigenous Student Counts Interactive Map

This brief is intended to accompany the interactive map available at air-esri.maps.arcgis.com.



The interactive map represents California's American Indian and Alaska Native pre-K–12 public school population for the 2024–25 school year. Data were drawn from the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS), the state's longitudinal education database; and from federal program data for those districts with Title VI Indian Education Formula Grants.¹

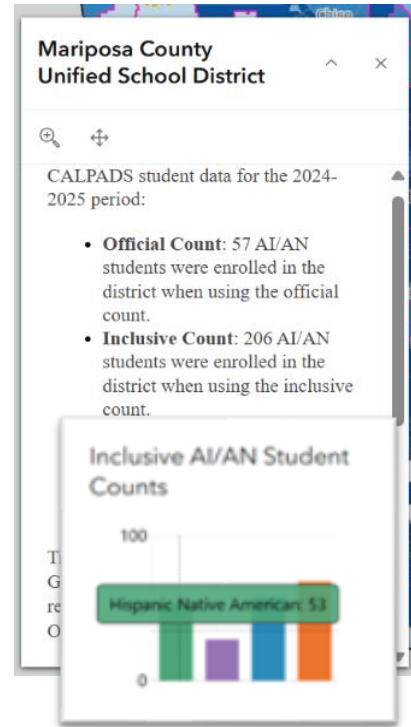
Much of the background on each of these counts and what they mean is covered in the [Indigenous Students Count](#) report produced by this project in 2023. It is not our intent to duplicate that report here, but rather to provide state-specific context that may illuminate California's unique Indigenous demographics.

¹ The four Title VI Indian Education Formula Grants in California that are administered by tribes or Indian Community Based Organizations "in lieu of" a district or districts are not represented on this map. California also contains several groups of districts that applied for funding as consortia; those districts are represented on this map by only the lead district in the consortium. Efforts are underway to secure data that would allow those districts to be more accurately represented; in the meantime, you can download the full list of grantees and their counts for 2024–2025 on the [Title VI Indian Education Formula Grant awards](#) website.

Using the map

When users click on a district, they can see the “official” and “inclusive” counts of students in that district as reported to the California Department of Education, as well as the undercount percentage. The inclusive count is broken down into a chart that shows the various combinations of ethnicity and racial identification that make up the total.² Where available, the count of students served by federal Title VI Indian Education Formula Grant programs is also provided.³

An area’s “undercount” of students is the difference between the *inclusive* count of students identifying as American Indian or Alaska Native (356,453 statewide) in the CALPADS data system and the *officially reported* count of those identifying as American Indian or Alaska Native alone, with no other ethnic or racial identifications (24,822 statewide).



Counting California: Considerations

The history and politics of tribal nations and Indigenous people are complicated throughout the United States, but possibly nowhere more than in California. Some key context is included below.

- The state is home to **more Indigenous students (by inclusive count) than any other state.**⁴
- California has **109 federally recognized tribes** (the second largest number after Alaska).
- Upon first contact with Europeans, **the people in the region now known as California spoke as many as 64 distinct languages** (California State Parks, 2026).
- **Each of the rancherias (reservations) in California may be home to multiple Tribes** due to broken treaties and haphazard relocation. For example, the Susanville Indian Rancheria is composed of the

² For example, in the Mariposa Unified School District (MUSD) pop-up, users can roll over each bar of the graph to see which identities are represented and their total counts. In MUSD, 53 students identified as Hispanic and Native American only; 28 as Hispanic, AI/AN, and one or more other races; 57 as non-Hispanic and AI/AN only, which is what is reported in the “official” count; and 68 as non-Hispanic, AI/AN, and one or more other races. The total of these categories, 206 students, makes up the “inclusive” count.

³ A number of districts are served through tribal Title VI programs in which the tribe applies for funding “in lieu of” the local educational agency. The Indigenous Student Identification (ISI) project is currently working on a method for identifying and representing these tribal Title VI student counts on the district maps.

⁴ For reference, the 2024 inclusive count of students identifying as American Indian or Alaska Native in California, despite being only 0.4% of the student population, is greater than the total population of K–12 students enrolled in 14 U.S. states. It is also 10 times greater than the total number of students enrolled in Bureau of Indian Education schools nationally (National Center for Education Statistics, 2026). For more information on “inclusive” versus “official” counts, see Indigenous Education State Leaders Network and American Institutes for Research (2023).

Mountain Maidu, Northern Paiute, Pit River, and Washoe tribes, but the Rancheria is the officially federally recognized tribal nation.

- Despite a large number of tribes and a large number of students, **California’s American Indian or Alaska Native population density is low.** With so much land and so many people, American Indians and Alaska Natives still compose only 0.4% of California’s student population by official count (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).
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- **The state of California had a specific role in the breaking of promises to tribes.** In the 1850s, California representatives pressured Congress not to ratify treaties the United States had signed with California tribes, whose people were then left homeless for half a century and decimated by starvation and settler violence. It was only when the unratified treaties were made public in 1905 that public outcry caused Congress to establish 61 small rancherias, totaling less than one hundredth of one percent (<0.001%) of the land the treaties had promised.
- Experts estimate that **more of the state’s Indigenous students are affiliated with tribes outside the state than tribes within** due to migration and forced or coercive relocation policies (California Department of Education, 2023). As of 2019, three of the top 10 U.S. metropolitan areas by Indian population were located in California (Pew Research, 2021).
- More than 55 tribes in California remain unrecognized by the federal government. In addition, 12 tribes were terminated during the 1950s and 1960s and have not been restored. This is **the largest group of unrecognized tribal groups and individuals of any state** in the United States (University of California Los Angeles, n.d.).
- **California has a high population of Central and South American Indigenous people.** The U.S. federal racial category “American Indian/Alaska Native” is defined as all Indigenous people of the Americas, including Canadian First Nations and Central and Southern American Indigenous peoples (Office of Management and Budget, 2024). Using only federal racial and ethnic categories to identify Indigenous students is insufficient to determine eligibility for many Native-serving programs.

Tribal Affiliation in California

It is these last several points that make much of the California data so difficult to use at the state and local levels. The U.S. federal government has a trust and treaty obligation to tribes under which the United States “has charged itself with moral obligations of the highest responsibility and trust”

(*Seminole Nation v. United States*, 1942). This obligation includes education and is one of the most important principles in federal Indian law. That obligation—and the funding and requirements that accompany it—are specific to tribes that are recognized by and native to the territory now known as the United States of America. The racial category, however, makes no such distinction.

To more accurately identify students whose education falls under the United States’ trust responsibility, it would be necessary to collect tribal affiliation data. Tribal citizenship is a political category, and tribal affiliation is a self-report proxy which better approximates alignment with political and/or cultural belonging.

While eight states now collect some form of tribal affiliation data, California is not yet among them (Maday-Karageorge & Nayar, 2024). Instead, for some indication of the tribal groupings, we can refer to the 2020 Census Demographic and Housing Characteristics—File A (Detailed DHC-A) table (U.S. Census Bureau, 2025), which breaks down the major subcategories within ethnic and racial groups from the 2020 census.⁵

Of the approximately 320,000 American Indian and Alaska Native individuals under 18 identified by the census in California in 2020, 34% indicated no tribal affiliation, while American Indian and Mexican American Indian tribal groupings were the largest of those who did indicate affiliation. (See Table 1.)

Table 1. 2020 Census California Tribal Affiliation Groupings

Tribal grouping	% of under-18 AI/AN population
Not specified	34%
American Indian ⁶	40%
Mexican American Indian	12%
Central American Indian	5%
Canadian and French American Indian	2%
Alaska Native	1%
South American Indian	1%

⁵ The DHC-A is “best available” data, which is to say that it should be used with caution due to many complications, including the historic underrepresentation of American Indian and Alaska Native people in the census count, the duplicative nature of subcategorizing within “alone or in any combination,” the need to introduce “noise” to mask data in groups under certain sizes, and the inexact match between school-age students and the census categories for individuals under 18 (or for ages 5–19, in the case of those who did not specify an affiliation).

⁶ The top 10 specific tribal groupings emerging from the California 2020 Census DHC-A data were Cherokee, Apache, Choctaw, Blackfeet, Navajo, Yaqui (Mexican Indian), Sioux, Pomo, Chumash, and Chippewa (Ojibwe). Of these, only the Pomo and Chumash are tribes whose original lands encompassed parts of the territory now known as the state of California.

Tribal grouping	% of under-18 AI/AN population
Spanish American Indian	1%

More than a third of those who were identified as American Indian or Alaska Native (alone or in combination) did not specify a tribal affiliation. Of those who did, 41% specified one or more affiliations with tribes whose traditional lands are within the wider borders of the United States of America—tribal groupings covered by the federal trust and treaty responsibility.

This does not mean, of course, that in any given district one can assume that 41% of the American Indian or Alaska Native students are those to whom the federal government owes its obligation. Self-identification is not proof of citizenship or descent, and geographic variation means that California’s districts vary from on-reservation nearly mono-tribal populations to multitribal, multinational meccas like San Jose Unified School District or Los Angeles Unified School District.

Findings

None of these data are conclusive, but we can say several things for certain:

1. California’s American Indian and Alaska Native students are underrepresented in its educational data and reporting, whether by their political *or* racial identities.
2. Tribal affiliation is of great importance as a proxy for understanding students’ political status, which is distinct from their racial categorization.
3. Tribal affiliation and political status are key factors in determining program eligibility, culturally appropriate instruction, and tribal consultation needs.

Implications

The consequences of Indigenous students being severely undercounted in California and the nation include, but are not limited to the following:

- **Tribal Consultation.** The percentage of AI/AN students in a district is one of the key factors that determines whether a district is categorized as “affected” and, therefore, required to consult with tribal governments under the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act regarding educational decisions that impact its students.
- **Program Eligibility.** District Indigenous student counts shape decision makers’ understanding around eligibility and the prioritization of programs such as Title VI and Johnson O’Malley.
- **Resource Allocation.** Inaccurate counts of AI/AN students impact resource allocation, including staffing and funding at the state, district, and school levels. Using the “official” count can

contribute to significant underfunding for programs aimed at supporting Indigenous students and communities.

- **Instruction and Student Belonging.** The undercount of Indigenous students can lead schools to underestimate the need for culturally relevant instruction, resulting in fewer opportunities for students to learn about Indigenous history, culture, and tribal sovereignty.

Exploring the data: Considerations

As you explore the data in the accompanying map, it may be helpful to ask yourself the following questions:

- What do you notice about the data for your community? What story does it tell you?
- What questions arise about American Indian student identification, data collection, and reporting as you examine the data?

The overview pop-up of the accompanying map contains further considerations for families, district administrators, tribal leaders, and policymakers to think about as they explore the data.

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