

Combating Food Insecurity on Native American Reservations

Healthy living begins with healthy eating. A well-balanced diet coupled with fresh fruits and vegetables can positively impact a person's health and well-being. However, the choice to eat nutritious foods is not necessarily accessible to everyone. One in four Native Americans, for example, are faced with food insecurity – uncertain access to enough sufficient, affordable food to get the actual nourishment they need.

At least 60 reservations in the United States grapple with food insecurity. The condition is common in what are referred to as “food deserts” – rural or urban areas that are void of fresh fruits and vegetables and other healthy whole foods. These food deserts offer more convenience stores and fast-food restaurants than supermarkets and grocery stores – thus contributing to communities of people with poor diets and higher levels of obesity and diet-related diseases such as diabetes and heart disease.

Food deserts are prevalent on many American Indian reservations. This is coupled with the reality of Native Americans enduring one of the highest rates of poverty in the U.S., with 35 percent of Native American children living in poverty. Households of Native American families are 400 percent more likely than other U.S. households to report not having enough to eat, largely as a result of living in remote, isolated locations where food supplies and jobs are scarce.

U.S.D.A. food commodities help feed families. Yet, they are often limited to foods that are low in nutritional value, and high in fats and carbohydrates, which help contribute to the poor health in Indian country.



An 800-square foot garden can feed a family of four

In This Issue

- What is food insecurity?
- What is a food desert?
- How do these affect Native Americans?
- What can we (and you) do about it?



Pine Ridge family participating in Project Grow

Meet John Yellow Hawk

When we first met John Yellow Hawk, he was volunteering at a youth garden we supported on the Pine Ridge Reservation. After losing his wife, he needed a project that would draw on his natural talents and help others.

Already well familiar with gardening, John helped teach gardening classes and ultimately began an expanded operation growing vegetables he could sell at farmer's markets. PWNA and NPRA helped with garden tilling, seeds, tools and a chicken coop, honored to share in John's journey to help grow a strong community.

The Realities of Food Insecurity

The U.S. government provides food [commodities](#) to low-income tribal members, as they do to other low-income Americans. These commodities help feed families but are often limited to foods that are low in nutritional value and high in fats and carbohydrates, in part contributing to the poor health in Indian country.

Native Americans face multiple health issues, including the highest rate of type 2 diabetes in the country and being nearly twice as likely as other Americans to die from diabetes. An estimated 42 percent of Native Americans also struggle with obesity.

What's working

[Partnership With Native Americans](#) (PWNA) combats food insecurity through immediate relief and long-term solutions that support healthier communities. This Native-serving nonprofit is committed to addressing food insecurity in the more than 300 reservation communities it serves across 12 states.

Support from individual donors, and organizations such as the Walmart Foundation and Newman's Own Foundation, enables PWNA to directly support more community partners through the provision of healthy food, as well as gardening support and nutrition training.



John Yellow Hawk, gardener-grower

Fast Facts (Native American vs. U.S. norms)

Food insecurity is uncertain access to healthy, affordable food for true nourishment.

- Food insecurity affects at least 60 reservations.
- Native families are 400% more likely to report not having enough to eat.

Reservation food deserts are devoid of fresh fruits and vegetables and healthy foods.

- Food deserts are prevalent on many reservations.

Native Americans have the highest need in the U.S.

- 35% of Native children are affected by impoverishment.

Food-related illness is high for Native Americans, including:

- The highest rate of type 2 diabetes
- The highest risk of diabetes-related death
- 42% obesity



Northern Plains youth excited about their growing garden

Gardening as a Solution

The [Project Grow](#) service of PWNA and its Northern Plains Reservation Aid (NPRA) program supports individuals and reservation programs taking the lead on healthy diets and nutrition education in their tribal communities.

A gardening movement in Indian country has inspired citizens to take on gardening as a solution to the lack of locally-available fresh produce, all the while gaining in self-reliance. In the past five years, Project Grow has supported gardening through tilling of more than 500 individual gardens on three reservations.

In keeping with its vision of self-sufficient Native communities, PWNA also assists with grants, seeds and tools to help tribal community partners 'plant the seed' for new garden projects. Through this support, community partners are able to integrate tradition and culture into their garden projects, increasing community interest and engagement among the people, while encouraging healthier lifestyles.

An 800-square foot garden can feed a family of four, creating a direct access to healthier, whole foods. PWNA tills and supports 10 or more community gardens on five reservations, per year. This trickles down and benefits many families, ultimately helping to achieve each communities' goal of increasing access to healthy food and addressing food insecurity.

Other Nutritional Gains in Tribal Communities

Project Grow gardens and collaborative projects often “grow” into a life of their own, creating other nutritional gains in tribal communities, such as requests for healthy cooking classes, training on canning and preservation, and a return to [traditional diets](#) free of processed foods, all of which PWNA and its NPRA program gladly support.

PWNA also operates two [mobile units for training and nutrition](#) (MUTNs) that enable Native American chefs and local cooks to collaborate on introducing fresh produce and healthier recipes in remote reservation communities. PWNA staff travel to individual reservations with the MUTNs to provide educational demonstrations and showcase how to use locally available foods to create healthier meals.

All of these various garden and nutrition activities help address food insecurity and celebrate a return to a healthier, more traditional diet that is free of processed foods.

You are invited

PWNA invites you to join in its commitment to decrease food insecurity and health concerns of Native Americans. Even the smallest monetary gift from you – or a bulk, in-kind donation of fresh fruits and vegetables – can help fuel the nutrition of remote and geographically-isolated tribal communities. All of our Northern Plains programs, including NPRA (Northern Plains Reservation Aid), NAA (Native American Aid) and SNRF (Sioux Nation Relief Fund) address food insecurity in various ways.

Contact us to learn more:

(800) 816-4102
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Visit us online:

www.npraprogram.org/ProjectGrow

www.naaprograms.org/NutritionCare

www.snrprograms.org/food

Download the story:

www.nativepartnership.org/Food-Insecurity

Serving immediate needs, supporting long-term solutions for strong, self-sufficient Native American communities



High-tunnel garden project in Fort Belknap, Montana, supported by Project Grow

With Project Grow support, Red Paint Creek Community Council and Hannah Has Eagle built this high-tunnel garden on the Fort Belknap Reservation, contributing to the community's food sovereignty and a healthier lifestyle.