

THE INCARCERATED SOUL IMPRISONMENT AND NATIVE AMERICAN SPIRITUALITY

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OBJECTIVE

The objective of this research project is to gain a deeper understanding of the various consequences of the incarceration of AI/AN peoples. Not only that, but the necessity and urgency of future studies and justice for the AI/AN community is called upon.

This study seeks to inform policy recommendations and culturally-based interventions that encourage successful rehabilitation and assimilation post-release.

Research Question: To what extent does incarceration influence the loss of identity and spirituality in American Indians/Alaska Natives?



REFERENCES



AI/AN identity faces difficulties regarding certain requirements and political statuses, leaving the AI/AN community even more susceptible to loss of identity.⁵



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INTRODUCTION

American Indians/Alaska Natives (AI/AN), in particular, have faced extensive disparities within the criminal justice system, developing a disproportionate incarceration rate compared to other ethnic groups.¹ The impact of imprisonment goes beyond physical confinement, also influencing an individual's well-being, including their sense of identity and spirituality.²

A strong sense of culture and spirituality are integral parts to AI/AN identity and also serve as sources of strength, health, and community.² However, within the prison environment, desired cultural practices are often absent, resulting in a significant loss of identity and purpose for AI/AN inmates.²

The absence of cultural engagement and spiritual nourishment can have adverse effects on mental, emotional, spiritual, and potentially even physical well-being over time.³ This study highlights the importance of preserving AI/AN culture and promoting culturally sensitive policies and interventions within the prison system to support the overall well-being and successful rehabilitation of AI/AN inmates.

RESULTS/FINDINGS

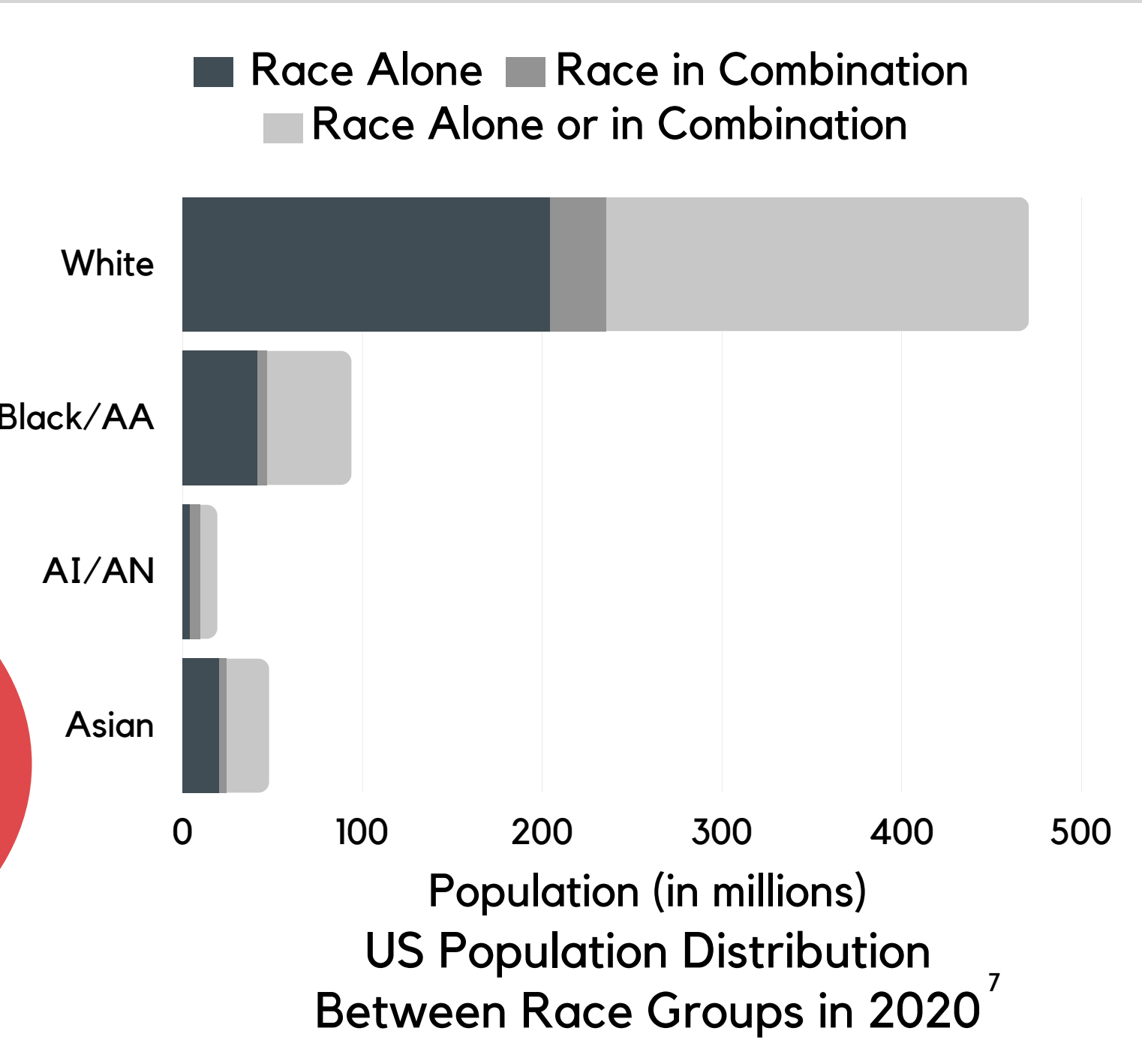
Overall, 28 different sources were found through the methods previously listed, as well as through references. However, the sources were reduced to nine total references through consideration of its relevance and contribution to further research on the topic.

- Some prison officials view AI/AN religious practice as a means of getting special treatment²
 - For other religions, many practices are openly accepted, yet AI/AN spiritual needs are dismissed²
 - Elder therapy has been valuable to inmates who would like to reconnect with their Native identity and heritage, even those who are unfamiliar²
- AI/AN inmates are not universally guaranteed religious freedom¹
- Interventions should be culturally appropriate and unique depending on its target stakeholder³
- There is a correlation between incarceration and US individuals identifying themselves and others as either Black or White⁴
 - People that identify as AI/AN are more likely to be fluid with their identity, shifting their race and ethnicity identities⁵
 - People who left the AI/AN subgroup when identifying themselves tended to have migrated out of an American Indian area, while those who joined the subgroup tended to have moved to one⁵
- Culturally meaningful physical places has been shown to have a strong effect on self-identification of being AI/AN⁵



AI/ANs are incarcerated at a rate approximately 3.3 times more frequent than that of Caucasians.^{7,8}

AI/AN are sentenced more harshly than White, African American, and Hispanic offenders, leading to longer sentences for the same offenses⁹



ANALYSIS

Difficult relationship between AI/AN population and federal government continues to result in complicated decision making

- Identifying as Indigenous heritage has been criticized for seeming like a way to benefit from minority status⁵
 - Multi-race non-Hispanic AI/AN people living near reservation or trust land had a 56.4% lifetime risk of imprisonment.⁴
- Mass incarceration may shape social perception of AI/AN community⁴
- AI/AN inmates that stay in facilities that lack culturally supplementing services and resources may eventually lose contact with their own identity
 - Major shifts in identity from incarceration can worsen data collection on AI/AN population.
 - Spirals into difficulties to accurately and effectively respond to AI/AN issues that require attention
 - AI/AN individuals of mixed race may be misinterpreted by others and lead to higher rates of misinformation

Some complications with data collection involve the misclassification and underreporting of AI/AN individuals. For example, recidivism rates in the U.S. are collected by states, thus the regulation and standards for these data sets may differ. Additionally, the security of data on the AI/AN population worsens when considering the instability of self-identification.

METHODOLOGY

- Scholarly journals, articles, reports, publications
 - Google Scholar, PubMed
 - Key words: incarceration, imprisonment, prison, policy, religious freedom, spirituality, identity, mental health, loss, Native American, Indigenous, American Indian/Alaska Native
- Governmental Data Sources
 - U.S. Census Bureau, Federal Bureau of Prisons

After the initial screening for potential relevant sources, publications that appeared to align with the research focus were selected for further evaluation.

CONCLUSION

To understand the mass incarceration of AI/AN people, it's necessary to consider the historical trauma between AI/ANs and the US government. The generational struggle of surviving against federal efforts to diminish AI/AN culture continues to contribute to disparities the community faces today.

The following is a series of recommendations for future studies:

1. Implement culturally-based interventions
2. Evaluate effectiveness of interventions for AI/AN during incarceration
3. Assess rehabilitation effects of AI/AN post-incarceration

Further studies should involve the effects of the interventions post-incarceration, as well as evidence-based methods of influencing mainstream culture into recognizing the legitimacy of AI/AN spirituality. Factors such as reduced re-offending rates, improved mental health outcomes, increased cultural connectedness, enhanced community support, and consistent identification responses need to be explored to determine the true benefits of these interventions in supporting AI/AN individuals beyond their time in prison.

Addressing these knowledge gaps is essential for developing evidence-based strategies and interventions that can better support the rehabilitation process and successful reintegration of AI/AN into the general population.