

Navajo Demographics

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In what follows I draw heavily on a 2000 Census Bureau report called, "We the People: American Indians and Alaska Natives in the United States."¹ Occasionally it would help make a point if I were to compare numbers from Alaska, but that will have to be for another paper. Here the context has to do with what concerns the Navajo People of the American Southwest.

To establish a context, a fifth of one percent of all the people in the United States are either Cherokee or Navajo. The Cherokee population in 2000 was 303,000, the Navajo population 277,000. If we round to the nearest 10,000, that's 300,000 and 280,000 respectively. Navajos form a large nation.

Navajo has linguistic relatives in Alaska, Canada, and California, as well as Oklahoma, but by far the greatest number of speakers of any Athabaskan language are Navajos. There is another category we have not mentioned. These are the various Apachean groups scattered across Arizona and New Mexico. There are roughly 60,000 Apaches in the United States (57,199 in the 2000 census). The name does not tell us this, but Navajo is an Apachean language. It is only an accident of history that Navajos are not called Apaches. The languages differ, but are closely related.

The Zuni word for one Navajo is (or was) *Pachu*; with corresponding plural *Aapachu*. (I'm rounding out the spellings.) In 1620 a Spanish writer referred to the Navajo as "Apachu de Nabajo." Later on they used the expression "Apaches de Navajo," and from there the term was shortened to just "Navajo." Some Anthropologists challenge the idea of deriving the term "Apache" from Zuni, but there is no challenging the close connection between Apaches and Navajos. Navajos call themselves *Diné*. The corresponding Western Apache term, for example, is *dinnee*. This is pronounced *dinnee* (din-NAY) by some and *dindee* (din-DAY) by others.

This much is history. Our current realities, however, are that the Navajo have one of the youngest tribal populations in Native North America, with 38.6% under the age of 18. (The Sioux are next with 38.9%.) In terms of how many households are headed by married couples. Creek Indians have the highest number (53.7%), the Sioux have the lowest (35.7%), and with 45.4% Navajos fall midway between.

We not turn to the matter of Native language retention. One third of all Navajos speak only English at home (31.9%). From this we might draw that Navajo is losing ground to English, and on one level this is true, but not in comparison with other Native groups. Navajo has by far the highest language retention figures in Native North America. While it is true that 31.9% (1:3) speak only English at home, it is also true that 24.5% (1:4) speak Navajo at home and speak English less than "very well." Pueblo Indians come next with 39.7% (2:5) speaking only English and 17.5% (1:6) speaking primarily their Native language. Apaches are third with figures of 60.3% (3:5) and 12.4% (1:8) respectively.²

¹ <http://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/censr-28.pdf>.

² In Alaska only the Eskimo exhibit higher language retention than Apaches (52.9% [1:2] and 15.7% [1:6] respectively). But these numbers are less those for Pueblos and for Navajos.

What this means in practical terms is that waiting idly for the Navajo language to go away so we can outreach in English is a waste of time. Jesus did not wait for those around Him to learn the language of heaven before He would speak to them. The fact is that we have a major linguistic challenge before us. The Navajo are the second largest tribe in North America and they are retaining their language more vigorously than any other tribe, with the various Pueblo groups as their only close competitor.

Navajo is one of the few Native languages in North America which still have monolingual speakers, i.e., people who might know a few words of English but for all practical purposes speak only the Native language. These numbers are no longer as current as our other census data, but illustrate a useful point. It does not seem possible that this could be, but it is.

Table 1
Monolingual Speakers of Native Languages

Language	Monolinguals	Speakers	Population
Navajo	7616	148530	219198
Tohono O'odham (Papago)	181	11819	20000
Cherokee	130	22500	308000
Muskogee	43	4300	52000
Hopi	40	5264	6500
Dakota	31	15355	20355
Blackfoot	1	5100	15000

In educational attainment the Navajo score dead last among North American tribes. 37.3% of all Navajos have less than a high school diploma (the Lumbee are next with 35.3%); 27.7% are high school graduates (the Lumbee are next with 29.0%); 28.1% have some college or an associate's degree (here only the Lumbee are lower with 23.2%); and 6.9% have a bachelor's degree or more (the next group here are the Apache, with 8.5%).

In labor force participation 56.7% of Navajo men are employed outside the home and 49.8% of Navajo women. These are the lowest figures in Native North America. Next in line are Pueblo men (61.5%) and Apache women (54.6%) respectively.

In regard to the types of jobs people hold, when they have jobs, the Lumbee are lowest in management, professional, and related areas (21.5%) and Navajos are next with 22.2%. In service jobs the Lumbee are lowest (15.2%) and the Navajo are mid-range at 20.1%. In sales and office work the Lumbee are lowest again with 16.6%. In construction, extraction, and maintenance jobs the Lumbee are highest with 20.0%, and the Navajo are next with 16.9%. In production, transportation, and material moving jobs the Navajo are highest with 25.6%, and the Lumbee are next at 18.9%. Remember the Lumbee. We return to them below.

In terms of median earning power Pueblo men are lowest at \$24,688 and Navajo men are next at \$25,992. Among women, Navajo women are lowest at \$21,077 and Pueblo women are next at \$21,128. At the other end of the spectrum are Iroquois men (72.3%) and Chippewa women (64.0%) respectively.

As regards poverty, at 38.9% the Sioux are highest. Navajos are next with 37.0%. In home ownership Navajos are about mid-range (64.4%). This is the fourth highest number, behind the Choctaw (54.2%), Pueblo (67.8%), and Lumbee (74.3%).

Across Native North America approximately about 1:3 (33.5%) live in American Indian areas, i.e., on reservations. Among the Navajo that number is half as large, with perhaps only 1:6 living off reservation. This approximation is rough, but not without foundation.³ Navajos are deeply attached to their land, known affectionately as *Dinétaah*.

Returning to the matter of language, one could reason that speaking a Native language in the home makes people learn less, earn less, and generally have more problems. This does not follow. The Lumbee – a mixed but primarily Algonquian group based in North Carolina – has the lowest language retention numbers in the census bureau special report cited above. With language retention figures so low (only 0.8% of all Lumbee speak English less than "very well"), and English usage so high (97.0% speak only English in the home), it would seem the Lumbee are headed for success in the broader society. But the reader will recall that in a number of areas mentioned above the Lumbee were either lowest, or second lowest only to Navajos. Their language retention is the logical opposite of Navajo, but the economic profiles of the two tribes are often similar. There is no direct link between language and economics.

These facts will have to be explained by anyone wishing to say that learning and/or knowing a Native language is some sort of social impediment. Were the Navajo Code Talkers at a disadvantage in the World War II because they knew Navajo? On the contrary, their knowledge of Navajo put the Japanese at a disadvantage. One might say they lost the war in the Pacific because they didn't know some Navajo – and the code hidden within it. In our own church, was Tom Holiday's knowledge of Navajo an impediment to him as radio speaker for the Navajo Voice of Prophecy? I hope no one will ever say so. We need more leaders like him.

In summary, the Navajo do not follow national trends among Native American peoples with any consistency. They are the second most numerous of all the tribes, they retain their language with more tenacity than others, they are more deeply attached to their land, and their population is younger. They are low in some areas – frequently areas that go with moving away, with abandoning one's roots. They are a people with many needs and many potentials. God expects us to treat them as He has treated us, not least by coming to us where we are.

The above report shows where the Navajo are on various scales. We can't meet these people where they aren't; we must meet them where they are – including where they are in terms of language use. If we minister to a disembodied nonexistent ideal, we won't get much done. We must minister to real people under their present circumstances.

³ The Navajo reservation extends across parts of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. Arizona has 125,881 Navajos, New Mexico 102,286, Utah 14,634, for a total of 242,801. Not all of these will be found living on the reservation, but these are the only states where Navajos would be able to live on reservation lands. The total tribal population is 276,775. The difference is 33,974. So we can know with certainty that at least 33,974 Navajos live off reservation. This is not to say that all of the remaining 242,801 do not, but taking this as a starting point, 34,000 is about 1:8 of 277,000. If we back this off a bit, saying that 1:6 live off reservation is a reasonable starting point for informed conjecture. This is half the national average for off-reservation dispersal.