



Mapping to Protect Children & Preserve Communities

The relationship between Native people and our homelands provides a powerful connection to our origin stories, our histories, our communities, and our future. References to place are spiritual: our stories of Creation and Emergence give us a deep spiritual connection to a geographic place and tribal identity. Geography is an innate part of our being, which often leads us to ask questions about where people are, where we live, and where we are from. This geographic knowledge is often depicted on maps and through storytelling, which provides a connection to home.

Sense of Place, Knowledge of Home

Much like our ancestral systems for survival, gathering and using information and data is critical for collective decision-making about business, resource, and cultural management, which are in turn critical to empowerment and self-determination. Data visualized on a map becomes personal because we can relate it to where we are.

From a social services perspective, geographic data can help us understand spatial patterns that create a picture of what is happening within our community. This could include location of tribal members, tribal offices, services, public safety, natural resources, or cultural or sacred places. Each type of data can be layered with other data to provide an enhanced picture of the community, what resources are available, and where resources are needed. In this way, maps can help our social services agencies better understand the connection of relational and spatial data through geography, such as where the greatest needs are or how to connect families with the closest resources.

Where are our children?

Our philosophies about our children are based on Indigenous language and culture. Language and culture are tied to the land and history of a tribal community. When children are removed from their homeland, their identity and cultural connections are at risk because they are also separated from their cultural connections to family and language.

The urgency to know where our children are located can feel daunting without the right tools to visualize location data. Especially when tribal children are moved to foster homes outside of tribal boundaries, knowing where children are located can help empower tribes to keep cultural ties intact. Child welfare agencies can map location data, such as addresses, to assist in meaningful visualization and interpretation.

Mapping and GIS: A Vision for Child Welfare

A Geographic Information System (GIS) is a mapping program for capturing, managing, analyzing, and displaying all forms of geographical reference information (e.g., addresses, tribal boundaries, social demographics), including sensitive or secure data. Tribes have traditionally used GIS for mapping jurisdictional boundaries, environmental resources (e.g., forestry, range, and fisheries programs), and cultural locations (e.g., sacred or historical sites). Only in recent years have tribes also started using GIS for mapping health and human services data.

GIS and child welfare are a natural fit. GIS allows us to see where our children and resources are located, whether they are on reservation or several towns—or even states—away. The geographic needs of a tribe vary.



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Tribes that are urban, rural, or isolated have different geographic challenges in identifying the location of children in foster care. The use of GIS can assist social workers and child welfare advocates to make better, more informed placement and service decisions that are in the child's best interest, based on his or her location and spatially based patterns observed over time.

Visualization and Descriptive Mapping

Descriptive mapping provides thematic or meaningful information to a location. This type of mapping brings to life critical information about tribal members and resources in a visual display and can ensure the alignment of tribal program decision making and planning based on data. If we can map it, we can chart it, enrich it, and report it.

We can start using GIS with the basic information documented about a case, such as the address of the child's living location, the location of family members, sources of parenting support in the community, characteristics of the child, the location of the child's school, and the locations of services the

child receives. This type of data, typically presented in tabular form in an Excel spreadsheet or database, can now be geocoded, which allows the data to be spatially referenced and visually interpreted on a map. Visualizing this information through mapping can help us find the best ways of meeting the needs of the child and family.

Connecting to Future Generations

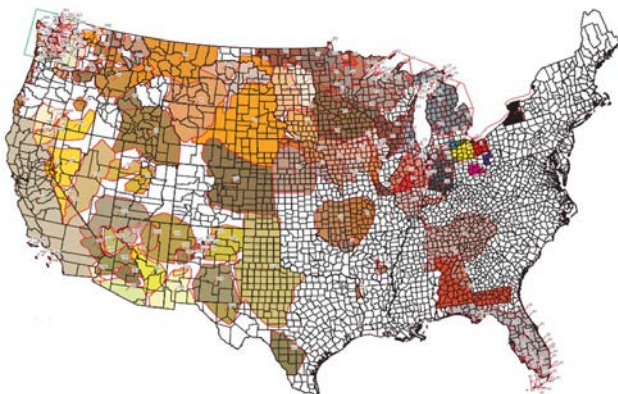
Visual representation of data through maps can help ensure the continuation of culture and help tribes connect to our greatest resource: our children. GIS is a technology that is already being used in many tribes to map environmental resources or tribal boundaries. Bridging GIS technology into child welfare will empower tribes to see where future generations are living and how to keep them connected to their land, language, and culture.

References:

- Tribal GIS: Supporting Native American Decision Making. 2012. ESRI Press.
- Tribal GIS: Supporting Native American Policies with GIS. 2013. ESRI Press.
- [Tribal GIS Conference 2015/2016](#)
- [Bureau of Indian Affairs](#)
- Header image courtesy of Jhon Goes in Center.
- Map courtesy of [National Park Service](#)

The next Tools for Growth universal product will look at capacity building around data infrastructure and GIS applications.

Indian Land Areas Judicially Established 1978



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