

**The State of the Tohono O'odham Nation:
A Review of Socioeconomic Conditions and Change**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Tohono O'odham Nation seeks to have the United States take title to lands on its behalf for economic development purposes—for a resort casino. Such a land status change would support O'odham self-government and socioeconomic recovery into the future. As this report shows, not only do law and long-standing policy justify Indian self-government, self-government is essential to the social, political and economic development of the Tohono O'odham. The land into trust application would properly remedy a loss of land as required by Congress, but it would also help the Nation meet an acute need for continuing development.

The Tohono O'odham Reservation is superlative in many regards, and several of its geographic characteristics compel the expenditure of more than the usual fiscal resources for effective self-government. Its 2.8 million acres make it the second largest reservation in the United States, a territory almost as large as Connecticut. Because the roughly 14,000 O'odham residing on the reservation are widely dispersed, occupying more than sixty towns and hamlets, it is more costly for the government to provide myriad services ranging from timely 9-1-1 responses and clean drinking water to comprehensive school busing and reliable utility service.

Uniquely in Indian Country, the Tohono O'odham Reservation boundary aligns with the US-Mexico border for seventy-five miles. The border cleaves more than 1,500 O'odham residing in Mexico from the rest of the membership, complicating family relationships, service delivery, and workforce participation. Illegal immigration across the border imposes uncommonly high public safety risks on reservation residents who must contend with violent gangs trafficking drugs and migrants. The Nation spends upwards of three million dollars annually on essential services related to migrant issues (but neither addressed nor reimbursed by the federal government), including autopsies, vehicle removals, waste removal, criminal investigations and more.

Social and economic conditions further burden the Tohono O'odham government. Across a range of important metrics of quality of life, the O'odham still lag far behind US and Arizona averages, and even behind the averages for American Indians living on other reservations in Arizona. Moreover, the Nation lacks the strong, diversified economy and unobstructed taxing powers sufficient to reap the tax revenue streams necessary to meet the Nation's needs.

In particular this report shows:

¹ *The Tohono O'odham Nation retained the services of Jonathan Taylor, a leading consulting economist working in Indian Country, to evaluate the socioeconomic status of the Nation and its ongoing needs. Mr. Taylor has published and consulted widely on matters relating to American Indian economic development and socioeconomic change, gaming impact, and taxation. Additional biographical material can be found at www.taylorpolicy.com.*

- American Indian self-government is the essential and uniquely successful policy for advancing Tohono O'odham socioeconomic well-being, yet the federal government, despite numerous federal obligations to the contrary, consistently underfunds it. The Tohono O'odham Nation must pursue more economic development to meet its pronounced social, economic, and health needs.
- It is difficult to overstate Tohono O'odham poverty. The average income of Indians on the Tohono O'odham Reservation in 2000 (\$8,137) lagged the average for all Arizona reservations (\$8,386), all US reservations (\$9,932), and for all Arizonans (\$25,303) and Americans (\$26,940).ⁱ The rank of O'odham income among tribes in Arizona rose from last to fifteenth of twenty-one between 1990 and 2000, but even at 1990s rates of change it would take three-and-a-half decades to reach parity with the US average.
- Low incomes correlate with poor health outcomes. Indian life expectancy in the IHS region that encompasses Tohono O'odham (69.2 yrs.) lags Indian life expectancy in the other two Arizona IHS regions (71.9 and 73.8), and lags the all-races US average (76.9).
- Federal and state efforts to address educational deficits fail to bring O'odham students even close to educational parity with Arizona and the United States. Only about a third of Tohono O'odham students in schools on the reservation are proficient in math and reading whereas off the reservation nearly three-quarters are.
- On the Tohono O'odham Reservation housing reflects years of accumulated poverty and insufficient federal policy responses. Nearly a third of all homes on the reservation are overcrowded—five times the US proportion—and one in five Indian households on the reservation lacks hot and cold piped water, a flush toilet, or a bathtub/shower (compared with one in a hundred nationally).
- Low levels of income, health, education, and housing conspire against family integrity. More than half of Indian families with children on the reservation are headed by a single female whereas a bit more than a third are on other Arizona reservations and only a fifth are in the United States, generally.
- To meet these needs the Tohono O'odham Nation has invested with increasing sophistication in resort casinos and turned the proceeds into innovative and award-winning health, education, police, and other programs that address social and health conditions directly, while bolstering the on-reservation economy with greater employment opportunity.

Approval of the Nation's land-into-trust application would add to these recent successes and ensure that the Nation's efforts to close socioeconomic gaps with Arizona and the United States continue unabated.
