The Humanities in Our Lives

AMERICA’S NATIVE LANGUAGES

The United States has always been a land of many languages. Before Europeans arrived, more than 300 indigenous languages were spoken in North America. As a result of forced cultural assimilation, Native American, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian communities suffered massive losses of language and culture. Since the civil rights era, many of these communities have begun to reclaim and preserve their languages and encourage their revitalization.

Data corroborate that instruction in indigenous languages offers substantial benefits for Native American society that extend beyond mere bilingualism. With the Native American Languages Act of 1990, these languages were recognized with a distinctive political status and cultural importance.

KEY FACTS

- The U.S. Census reports that 150+ Native American languages are still in use today in the U.S. Some estimates project that, without sustained intervention, only around 20 will remain by 2050.

- These languages are collectively spoken by over 450,000 people, with the top 10 spoken by nearly half this number.

The Ten Largest Native North American Languages by Number of Speakers over the Age of 5

- Navajo
- Yupik
- Dakota
- Apache
- Keres
- Cherokee
- Ojibwa
- Choctaw
- Zuni
- Pima

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