



# Missing the Point

The Real Impact of Native Mascots and Team Names on American Indian and Alaska Native Youth

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# Introduction and summary

The debate over the racist name and mascot of the professional football team based in the nation’s capital, the “Redskins,” has reached a fever pitch in recent months.<sup>1</sup> Fifty U.S. senators signed a letter urging the National Football League, or NFL, to take action and change the name.<sup>2</sup> The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office recently canceled several of the team’s trademarks because they were disparaging to American Indian and Alaska Native, or AI/AN, people and communities.<sup>3</sup> And several media outlets across the country have stopped printing and using the name, including the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Slate*, and *The Seattle Times*.<sup>4</sup>

Much of the recent debate has centered on issues such as economics. Many fans and media commentators have debated the cost of changing the name for the team and the league. Others have focused on the “legacy” and memories that fans will lose with a new name. And perhaps the most referenced issue is the team’s supposed lack of racist or derogatory intent. But too much of the debate misses the point. It is not just about a name, a logo, a business, or a matter of intent. Racist and derogatory team names have real and harmful effects on AI/AN people every day, particularly young people.

AI/AN students across the country attend K-12 and postsecondary schools that still maintain racist and derogatory mascots. Research shows that these team names and mascots can establish an unwelcome and hostile learning environment for AI/AN students.<sup>5</sup> It also reveals that the presence of AI/AN mascots directly results in lower self-esteem and mental health for AI/AN adolescents and young adults.<sup>6</sup> And just as importantly, studies show that these mascots undermine the educational experience of all students, particularly those with little or no contact with indigenous and AI/AN people.<sup>7</sup> In other words, these stereotypical representations are too often understood as factual representations and thus “contribute to the development of cultural biases and prejudices.”<sup>8</sup>

These are some of the many compelling reasons why major professional organizations have already weighed in. For example, the American Psychological Association called for the “immediate retirement of all American Indian mascots, symbols, images, and personalities by schools, colleges, universities, athletic teams, and organizations” nearly a decade ago.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the American Counseling Association passed a resolution in 2011 calling on their members to advocate for the elimination of these stereotypes where they are employed,<sup>10</sup> and the American Sociological Association called for the elimination of AI/AN names, mascots, and logos in 2007.<sup>11</sup>

The need to eliminate these derogatory representations and stereotypes is urgent and long past due. Racist team names and mascots provide a misrepresentation of AI/AN people that masks the very real and continuing hardships that these communities endure today. For example, AI/AN communities struggle with poverty at nearly double the national rate,<sup>12</sup> have some of the lowest high school graduation rates in the country,<sup>13</sup> and suffer from extreme health disparities.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps most disturbing, suicide is the second leading cause of death for AI/AN youth ages 15 to 24—a rate that is 2.5 times higher than the national average.<sup>15</sup>

The effects of these representations on AI/AN youth have spurred a growing nationwide movement to eliminate racist names and mascots. Although many inside the Beltway and in the national media portray the debate over the Washington football team name as something new, it is a decades-old movement that is finally getting the attention it deserves.

This report examines the current research about the impact of these mascots and team names on the mental health and self-esteem of AI/AN students, while sharing the real stories of AI/AN students in their own words.<sup>16</sup> It also provides an overview of the ongoing movement across the country to retire them from K-12 and postsecondary schools.

Finally, the report proposes recommendations to local, state, and federal agencies that will help school administrators, educators, and community members transform learning environments that are hostile and unwelcoming to AI/AN students and their families into ones that are supportive. These recommendations include:

- The U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights should use its full authority to enforce civil rights protections for AI/AN students and promote a safe and welcoming learning environment.

- State-level boards of education and education agencies should identify schools in their state with AI/AN representations, examine their impact, and develop recommendations to remove harmful representations.
- Nonprofit legal assistance organizations and law school clinics should develop programs to support AI/AN students who want to file complaints.
- The federal government and foundation community should identify and fund new research on the impact of derogatory AI/AN representations in schools.

Although the debate over the Washington football team may rage on until either the NFL or the team's owner, Dan Snyder, finally does the right thing and changes the name, there are many things that can be done right now to support AI/AN students in schools that perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Instead of debating merchandise economics and fan sentimentality, it is time to get to the point in this debate and to stop the harm that racist mascots and team names do to AI/AN youth.

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