

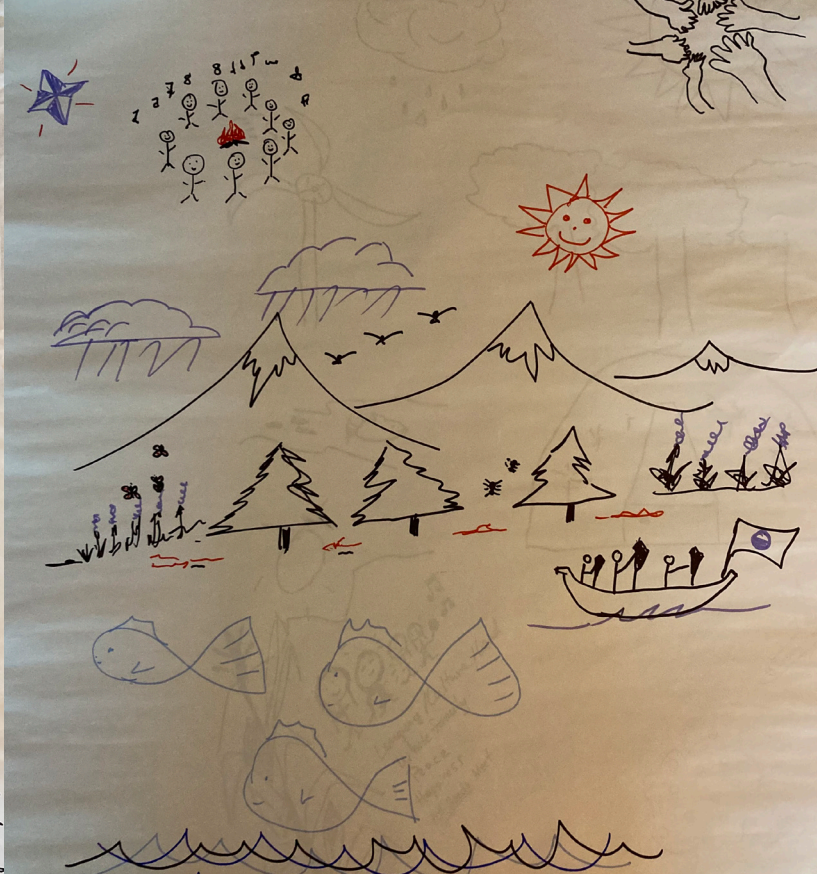
CONCEPTUALIZING AND DEFINING FAMILY ECONOMIC WELLBEING IN NATIVE COMMUNITIES AND CONTEXTS

TRC Brief | May 2026 Update



Summary

This brief summarizes key findings from a scoping review of peer-reviewed and grey literature related to family economic wellbeing (FEW) among Native communities and populations, specifically highlighting the culturally and contextually diverse economies of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian communities. It also shares the process of defining FEW from Native perspectives in collaboration with a Community of Learning. Given the scarcity of research on this topic, this brief aims to summarize economic contexts within Native communities in the U.S., describe how FEW is conceptualized through major themes that emerged from the scoping review, and share a working definition of FEW that reflects cultural and community values. Findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of FEW in Native communities and families and inform future research, policy, and practice in this area.



Illustrations of FEW created by TRC Steering Committee members

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Family economic wellbeing (FEW) is a central factor in promoting healthy child development and overall family wellbeing.¹⁻⁸ The benefits of FEW on child development are lifelong^{4,9,10} and far greater when children are exposed to economic security during early childhood.^{4,11} Despite the importance of economic security in promoting positive child development, most research on family-related economic issues has come from a deficit perspective, focusing on the impact of poverty and economic strain during childhood.^{3,5,12,13}

American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian (hereafter referred to as “Native”) communities have among the most culturally and contextually diverse economies in the U.S.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ On one hand, many Native communities share an abundance of community and cultural wealth through subsistence practices, culturally congruent economies and employment, and stewardship of land, water, and natural resources,^{1,11,14-19} and some experience substantial financial wealth through successful gaming and related business enterprises made possible through exercising Tribal sovereignty.^{1,11,14,18} On the other hand, despite these diverse forms of wealth, Native

families and children overall experience significant inequities in mental and physical health, socioeconomic status (SES), and educational attainment when compared to other racial and ethnic groups in the U.S.^{13,20-23} The diversity of these cultural, social, and economic contexts warrants a deeper understanding of how they affect families with children, as well as strategies for programs and policies that support economic wellbeing in Native communities.^{16,19}

The purpose of this brief is to summarize findings from a scoping review of peer-reviewed and grey literature about how FEW is conceptualized within Native communities and contexts. Major themes related to FEW in Native communities and families will be shared, as well as an example of how the [Tribal Early Childhood Research Center](#) is using a Community of Learning approach to build on these themes by developing a culturally grounded definition and measure of FEW that can be applied in Tribal early childhood programs, settings, and research. Findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of FEW from Native perspectives and inform future research, policy, and practice in this area, including the administration and evaluation of programs related to [Tribal TANF \(Temporary Assistance for Needy Families\)](#).

APPROACH AND METHODS

Identifying Literature

We followed a rigorous scoping review methodology to identify and summarize key literature on FEW-related constructs within Native communities in the U.S.²⁴ A comprehensive literature search was conducted during Fall 2022, including peer-reviewed articles (e.g., empirical research, literature reviews, conceptual or theoretical articles, book chapters) and grey literature (e.g., news articles, evaluation reports, dissertations/theses, briefs). Another search was conducted in Fall 2025 and is under review by the research team.

Search Terms and Inclusion Criteria

Pre-defined search terms related to FEW and Native communities and populations were developed with a medical librarian, the study team, and feedback from the Tribal Early Childhood Research Center's Leadership Team. A two-step approach was used to select literature. First, the initial review identified literature related to FEW and Native communities that focused on family and community economic wellbeing, subsistence practices, and child and family outcomes. Second, during the full-text review, we narrowed the scope to focus on articles related to FEW (at the family level), including articles highlighting subsistence practices, resource sharing, and cultural knowledge about how FEW is conceptualized.

Identification, Screening, and Selection

Articles were identified by searching six library databases and using Covidence²⁵ (a web-based platform) for title and abstract screening, full-text review, and data extraction by two independent reviewers. A total of 1,368 articles were identified and screened for inclusion, of which 529 were selected for full-text review. Three additional articles were identified through a supplementary grey literature search of Tribal TANF program evaluation reports in the Administration for Children and Families Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation online Resource Library and included in the full-text review.

Identifying Themes

A thematic analysis was used to identify, analyze, and interpret themes across the final set of articles.²⁶ We used codes to identify subthemes and then grouped those subthemes into major themes that represent ways to describe and conceptualize FEW in Native communities.

RESULTS

A total of 58 articles met the final inclusion criteria. Most of the articles (85%) were from peer-reviewed sources, with the remaining articles being reports, dissertations, news articles, and a book chapter. Although none of the articles provide a definition of FEW, more than half (n=33) provide some characteristics or terms used for conceptualizing FEW in Native contexts. Most articles (59%) described using quantitative methods, followed by qualitative methods (26%), mixed methods (3%), and other or no methods (12%). Similarly, the most reported study design across the articles was correlational (50%), followed by descriptive studies (12%), quasi-experimental studies (9%), and experimental or randomized controlled trial studies (3%). About one-quarter (24%) reported using other methods or no study design. The final articles were based on culturally and geographically diverse populations, with one-third representing Native communities across the U.S. and the other two-thirds representing specific regions, including Alaska, California, Great Lakes, Hawaii, Northern Plains, Pacific Northwest, Southeast, Southern Plains, and Southwest. Although none of the articles used the term "FEW" explicitly, 80 unique terms were used to describe FEW, including wealth and asset accumulation, subsistence living, reciprocity, intergenerational mobility, generosity, family and community wealth, economic empowerment and stability, and cultural capital. Many of these terms inspired subthemes in the thematic analysis.



Figure 1. Major themes related to family economic wellbeing across culturally and economically diverse Native communities and populations

We identified seven major themes used to describe FEW in Native communities: collective responsibility, cultural capital, financial health, mental health, physical health, subsistence living, and Tribal sovereignty (see Figure 1).

Thirty-two subthemes were also identified, which reflect connections within and across major themes. Table 1 provides an overview of how each major theme connects with subthemes, as well as a summary of the articles that reflect the themes.

Table I. Overview of major themes and sub-themes related to FEW in Native communities and contexts from the scoping review

Major Themes	Sub-themes	Description
Collective Responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural and social identity • Subsistence practices • Culturally and socially congruent economies • Tribal casino (family income supplement) 	Six articles describe collective responsibility as a form of youth and family resilience. Engaging in subsistence practices and sharing economic resources are ways of fostering collective responsibility, as well as strengthening cultural and social identity. Moreover, the authors highlight the important role of reinvesting Tribal gaming revenue in Tribal infrastructure, suggesting it is a form of “collective efficacy” that should be included in future research.
Cultural Capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural and social identity • Culturally and socially congruent economies • Economic resources • Economic empowerment and stability • Grandparent caregivers 	Five articles describe cultural capital as central to FEW and community economic resilience in Native communities. Cultural capital strengthens cultural and social identity, is an important currency in culturally relevant economies, contributes to economic empowerment, generates economic resources, and often involves intergenerational support.
Financial Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asset and wealth building • Economic empowerment and stability • Economic mobility • Economic resources • Educational attainment • Household income • Poverty reduction • Unique social gradients 	Fifteen articles attributed FEW to financial health at the family and community levels. From asset and wealth building to intergenerational economic mobility, financial health is central to FEW and aligned with more common measures of income and financial wellbeing. Several articles show unique social gradients of wealth or income among Native populations compared to other racial and ethnic groups, suggesting other contextual and cultural factors may contribute to differences in SES and other outcomes.
Mental Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grandparent caregivers • Household income • Presence of tribal casino • Tribal casino (family income supplement) • Unique social gradient 	Ten articles identified relationships between FEW and positive caregiving, as well as more positive mental health among children and youth. Findings suggest FEW reduces parental and caregiver stress, as well as the risk for adverse mental health issues and substance misuse and abuse across the lifespan.
Physical Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic resources • Household income 	Five articles describe how FEW influences nutrition and physical activity-related practices and outcomes among children and youth, including how economic resources and higher household income reduce the risk for obesity and overweight among children.
Subsistence Living	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural and social identity • Culturally and socially congruent economies • Generosity and reciprocity • Stewardship of land and natural resources 	Six articles highlight the many contributions of subsistence living in strengthening Native economies. Among those contributions are taking care of land and natural resources, sharing resources within extended families and communities, and supporting cultural and social identity through culturally congruent employment.
Tribal Sovereignty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic resources • Presence of tribal casino • Asset and wealth building • Tribal casino (family income supplement) 	Eleven articles explore how exercising Tribal sovereignty contributes to FEW. Results show the presence of Tribal casinos not only benefit families through reinvesting in Tribal infrastructure and/or per capita payments, but also through economic development in rural and low-resource areas.



Table 2. Definition of family economic wellbeing from Native perspectives

Family economic wellbeing from Native perspectives is grounded in:	
Prosperity & Access	Opportunities for intergenerational mobility and intergenerational access to economic and other types of resources that result in security and stability for you and your family, relatives, and community. These opportunities will continue and persist now and for future generations.
Expansiveness & Generosity	Recognizing the expansiveness of Native economic systems historically and into the future, which means sharing with human and non-human relatives and collectively working toward a future where there is an abundance of resources for all, including in economic, financial, relational, social, and environmental realms.
Reciprocity	Caring for others and receiving health through a strong family and community safety net and maintaining balance by being mindful of using only what you need and giving back what you can.
Collective Responsibility	Building and sustaining place-based economies that honor Native Peoples' sovereignty, strengthen human and social capital, and center wellbeing of the Earth and all relations now and in the future.

COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

Given the importance and lifelong benefits of exposure to FEW during early childhood,^{4,11} the [Tribal Early Childhood Research Center](#) (TRC) launched an area of research to deepen understanding of FEW within Native communities and Tribal early childhood settings. To begin formative research on this topic, a TRC research team initiated the scoping review described above. They also simultaneously began exploring the nationally representative [Region XI American Indian and Alaska Native Family and Child Experiences Survey](#) (AIAN FACES) data through a latent class analysis, which is a method to identify patterns among individuals and families who share similar experiences.

In July 2023, the TRC engaged a Community of Learning on FEW, comprised of health economists and early childhood researchers, Tribal TANF program directors, and federal program partners, to help interpret findings from the scoping review and results from the AIAN FACES analysis. Together, they used major themes derived from the scoping review (Figure 1) to develop a culturally grounded definition of FEW (Table 2), which will guide future development of a conceptual model and one or more culturally responsive measures of

FEW that can support emerging practice, policy, and research in this area. Although there are many measures for economic strain and poverty, measures of FEW and Native wealth applied in early childhood settings and contexts are scarce. Thus, this Community of Learning aims to generate new conceptual and measurement tools to support practice and research, as well as foster culturally grounded ways of understanding and promoting economic wellbeing within Native communities and families.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE, AND RESEARCH

The complexity of FEW in Native communities and populations warrants a multilevel response across policy, practice, and research. Findings in this scoping review provide direction and ideas for promoting economic wellbeing in Native communities with diverse cultural and economic contexts.

Policy

Policymakers and Tribal leaders might consider assessing the alignment of FEW-related policies with the major themes from this scoping review (Figure 1). If gaps emerge, they can explore ways to incorporate those areas into

the administration and funding of social and economic programs, including provisions for self-determination and Tribal administration of programs and funding.

Practice

Programs and practitioners can provide flexibility for culturally and socially relevant employment and focus on strengthening opportunities for intergenerational and community economic mobility. Moreover, practitioners can use the framework of major themes of FEW to identify community priorities for new program development and evaluation.

Research

Researchers can use these findings to conceptualize FEW in Native communities and populations and begin using a strengths perspective to explore economic wellbeing and its relationship to outcomes of interest. The development of a culturally relevant measure of FEW is needed to generate valid and reliable results for research and evaluation in these populations. Such a measure may serve as a tool for monitoring levels of FEW and using results to identify areas for interventions and policies.

SUMMARY

FEW is foundational to positive child development and family wellbeing. As an emerging area of research and practice, it is important to understand how FEW is conceptualized, especially in Native communities with diverse cultural and economic contexts that require flexibility in implementing programs and policies. Through this scoping review, we identified more than 50 articles that provide a variety of Native perspectives on FEW and related constructs. We also share a framework for conceptualizing and defining FEW in Native communities that includes major themes of collective responsibility, cultural capital, health (financial, mental, and physical), subsistence living, and Tribal sovereignty. Although preliminary, these themes provide the seeds of a culturally relevant framework that may deepen understanding of how economic wellbeing is experienced and perceived within Native families and communities, as well as underlying values of wealth and generosity

in these contexts. It also has implications for policy, practice, and research by helping to identify priority areas for promoting economic wellbeing that align with specific community contexts, values, and resources.

REFERENCES

1. Akee R, Copeland W, Costello EJ, Simeonova E. How does household income affect child personality traits and behaviors? *American Economic Review*. 2018;108(3):775-827.
2. Akee RK, Copeland WE, Keeler G, Angold A, Costello EJ. Parents' incomes and children's outcomes: a quasi-experiment using transfer payments from casino profits. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*. 2010;2(1):86-115.
3. Brooks-Gunn J, Duncan GJ. The effects of poverty on children. *The Future of Children*. 1997;55-71.
4. Diemer MA, Marchand AD, Mistry RS. Charting how wealth shapes educational pathways from childhood to early adulthood: a developmental process model. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. 2020;49:1073-1091.
5. Duncan GJ, Magnuson K, Kalil A, Ziol-Guest K. The importance of early childhood poverty. *Social Indicators Research*. 2012;108:87-98.
6. Duncan GJ, Morris PA, Rodrigues C. Does money really matter? Estimating impacts of family income on young children's achievement with data from random-assignment experiments. *Developmental Psychology*. 2011;47(5):1263.
7. Lugo-Gil J, Tamis-LeMonda CS. Family resources and parenting quality: Links to children's cognitive development across the first 3 years. *Child Development*. 2008;79(4):1065-1085.
8. Pascoe JM, Wood DL, Duffee JH, et al. Mediators and adverse effects of child poverty in the United States. *Pediatrics*. 2016;137(4).
9. Copeland WE, Tong G, Gaydos L, et al. Long-term outcomes of childhood family income supplements on adult functioning. *JAMA Pediatrics*. 2022;176(10):1020-1026.
10. Costello EJ, Erkanli A, Copeland W, Angold A. Association of family income supplements in adolescence with development of

- psychiatric and substance use disorders in adulthood among an American Indian population. *JAMA*. 2010;303(19):1954-1960.
11. Anderson RJ. Tribal Casino Impacts on American Indians Well-Being: Evidence from Reservation-Level Census Data. *Contemporary Economic Policy*. 2013;31(2):291-300.
 12. Mani A, Mullainathan S, Shafer E, Zhao J. Poverty impedes cognitive function. *Science*. 2013;341(6149):976-980.
 13. Sarche M, Spicer P. Poverty and health disparities for American Indian and Alaska Native children: current knowledge and future prospects. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*. 2008;1136(1):126-136.
 14. Cattellino JR. The double bind of American Indian need-based sovereignty. *Cultural Anthropology*. 2010;25(2):235-262.
 15. Mushinski DW, Pickering K. Inequality in income distributions: Does culture matter? An analysis of western Native American tribes. *Journal of Economic Issues*. 2000;34(2):403-412.
 16. McGregor DP, Morelli PT, Matsuoka JK, Rodenhurst R, Kong N, Spencer MS. An ecological model of Native Hawaiian well-being. *Pacific Health Dialog*. 2003;10(2):106-128.
 17. Hibbard M. Development planning with cultural integrity: Self-determination, multifunctionality, and the hybrid economy in Indian country. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*. 2016;36(2):158-166.
 18. Oddo VM, Walkinshaw LP, Jones-Smith JC. Peer Reviewed: Casino Ownership and Health-Related Community Resources Among Native American Tribes in California. *Preventing Chronic Disease*. 2019;16.
 19. Pickering K. Alternative Economic Strategies in Low-Income Rural Communities: TANF, Labor Migration, and the Case of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. *Rural Sociology*. 2000;65(1):148-167.
 20. Campbell CD, Evans-Campbell T. Historical trauma and Native American child development and mental health: An overview. *American Indian and Alaska Native children and mental health: Development, context, prevention, and treatment*. 2011:1-26.
 21. Empey A, Garcia A, Bell S. American Indian/Alaska Native child health and poverty. *Academic Pediatrics*. 2021;21(8):S134-S139.
 22. Kenney MK, Singh GK. Adverse childhood experiences among American Indian/Alaska native children: the 2011-2012 national survey of children's health. *Scientific Data*. 2016;2016.
 23. Sun J, Goforth AN, Nichols LM, et al. Building a space to dream: Supporting Indigenous children's survivance through community engaged social and emotional learning. *Child Development*. 2022;93(3):699-716.
 24. Pham MT, Rajić A, Greig JD, Sargeant JM, Papadopoulos A, McEwen SA. A scoping review of scoping reviews: advancing the approach and enhancing the consistency. *Research Synthesis Methods*. 2014;5(4):371-385.
 25. Babineau J. Product review: Covidence (systematic review software). *Journal of the Canadian Health Libraries Association*. 2014;35(2):68-71.
 26. Attride-Stirling J. Thematic networks: an analytic tool for qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*. 2001;1(3):385-405.

Acknowledgements

The Tribal Early Childhood Research Center (TRC) is supported by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) under cooperative agreements 90PH0030 (2020-2025) and 90PH0027 (2016-2022). The information, content, and products of the TRC are those of the authors and should not be construed as the official position or policy of, nor should any endorsements be inferred by, OPRE, ACF, HHS, or the U.S. Government.

Recommended citation

Wesner, C., Raj, P., Around Him, D., Asdigian, N., Desanto, K., Whitesell, N., Barnes-Najor, J., Sarche, M. & Tribal Early Childhood Research Center Community of Learning on Family Economic Wellbeing. (2023). Conceptualizing and defining family economic wellbeing in Native communities and contexts. Tribal Early Childhood Research Center (TRC) Brief, May 2026.

Special thanks to our Community of Learning members (2023-2025) who contributed to the development of a definition of FEW and co-designed a group concept mapping study that will inform a culturally grounded measure of FEW. Members include: Tess Abrahamson-Richards, Randall Akee, Gloria Cobb, Megan Cruz, Rosie Gomez, Carrie Green, Ryan Howard, Maggie Kane, Elizabeth Karberg, Farha Marfani, Michelle Sauve, and Emilia Simeonova.

