



# CONCEPTUALIZING FAMILY ECONOMIC WELLBEING IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES AND CONTEXTS

KEY FINDINGS FROM A SCOPING REVIEW

TRC Brief | November 2023



## Summary

This brief summarizes key findings from a scoping review of peer-reviewed and grey literature related to family economic wellbeing (FEW) among Indigenous communities and populations, specifically highlighting the culturally and contextually diverse economies of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian communities. Given the scarcity of research on FEW from an Indigenous perspective, this brief aims to summarize economic contexts within Indigenous communities in the U.S. and describe how FEW is conceptualized through major themes that emerged from the scoping review. Findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of FEW in Indigenous communities and families and inform future research, policy, and practice in this area.



## BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Family economic wellbeing (FEW) is a central factor in promoting healthy child development and overall family wellbeing.<sup>1-8</sup> The benefits of FEW on child development are lifelong<sup>4,9,10</sup> and far greater when children are exposed to economic security during early childhood.<sup>4,11</sup> 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.<sup>3,5,12,13</sup>

American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian (hereafter referred to as “Indigenous”) communities have among the most culturally and contextually diverse economies in the U.S.<sup>14-16</sup> On one hand, many Indigenous 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,<sup>1,11,14-19</sup> and some experience substantial financial wealth through successful gaming and related business enterprises made possible through exercising Tribal sovereignty.<sup>1,11,14,18</sup> On the other hand, despite these diverse forms of wealth, Indigenous 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.<sup>13,20-23</sup> 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 Indigenous communities.<sup>16,19</sup>

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 Indigenous communities and contexts. Major themes related to FEW in Indigenous 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 framework 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 an Indigenous perspective 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 Indigenous communities in the U.S.<sup>24</sup> 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).

### ***Search Terms and Inclusion Criteria***

Pre-defined search terms related to FEW and Indigenous 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 Indigenous 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 Covidence<sup>25</sup> (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.<sup>26</sup> We used codes to identify subthemes and then grouped those subthemes into major themes that represent ways to describe and conceptualize FEW in Indigenous 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 Indigenous 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 Indigenous 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, intergenerational mobility, reciprocity, 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 Indigenous communities and populations

We identified seven major themes used to describe FEW in Indigenous 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 1. Overview of major themes and sub-themes related to FEW in Indigenous communities and contexts from the scoping review

<b>Major Themes</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Collective Responsibility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural and social identity</li> <li>• Subsistence practices</li> <li>• Culturally and socially congruent economies</li> <li>• Tribal casino (family income supplement)</li> </ul>	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.
<b>Cultural Capital</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural and social identity</li> <li>• Culturally and socially congruent economies</li> <li>• Economic resources</li> <li>• Economic empowerment and stability</li> <li>• Grandparent caregivers</li> </ul>	Five articles describe forms of cultural capital as central to FEW and community economic resilience in Indigenous 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.
<b>Financial Health</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asset and wealth building</li> <li>• Economic empowerment and stability</li> <li>• Economic mobility</li> <li>• Economic resources</li> <li>• Educational attainment</li> <li>• Household income</li> <li>• Poverty reduction</li> <li>• Unique social gradients</li> </ul>	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 Indigenous populations compared to other racial and ethnic groups, suggesting other contextual and cultural factors may contribute to differences in SES and other outcomes.
<b>Mental Health</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grandparent caregivers</li> <li>• Household income</li> <li>• Presence of tribal casino</li> <li>• Tribal casino (family income supplement)</li> <li>• Unique social gradient</li> </ul>	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.
<b>Physical Health</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic resources</li> <li>• Household income</li> </ul>	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.
<b>Subsistence Living</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural and social identity</li> <li>• Culturally and socially congruent economies</li> <li>• Generosity and reciprocity</li> <li>• Stewardship of land and natural resources</li> </ul>	Six articles highlight the many contributions of subsistence living in strengthening Indigenous 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.
<b>Tribal Sovereignty</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic resources</li> <li>• Presence of tribal casino</li> <li>• Asset and wealth building</li> <li>• Tribal casino (family income supplement)</li> </ul>	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.





## COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

Given the importance and lifelong benefits of exposure to FEW during early childhood,<sup>4,11</sup> the [Tribal Early Childhood Research Center](#) (TRC) has launched a new area of research to deepen understanding of FEW within Indigenous communities and Tribal early childhood settings. To begin formative research in this new area, a TRC research team conducted this scoping review and is simultaneously exploring the nationally representative [Region XI American Indian and Alaska Native Family and Child Experiences Survey](#) (AIAN FACES) data through a latent class analysis of family economic characteristics related to FEW, 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 described in this brief and results from the AIAN FACES analysis. Together, they are using major themes derived

from the scoping review (Figure 1) to develop a culturally grounded conceptual model of FEW and will use it to guide the development of 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 Indigenous 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 Indigenous communities and families.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE, AND RESEARCH

The complexity of FEW in Indigenous communities and populations warrants a multilevel response across policy, practice, and research. Findings in this scoping review provide guidance and ideas to promote economic wellbeing in Indigenous 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 Indigenous 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, 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 Indigenous 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 Indigenous perspectives on FEW and related constructs. We also share a framework for conceptualizing FEW in Indigenous 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 Indigenous 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.

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