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American Indians, widely considered a vanishing race in the early years of the present century, are now increasing at a faster rate than the whole United States population, the Bureau of Indian Affairs of the Department of the Interior reported today.

The annual growth rate for the Nation's Indian population during the decade of the 1950's was about 2.5 percent as compared with 1.7 percent for the entire country.

Despite recent advances, however, the Indians between the Canadian and Mexican borders have quite a way to go before they reach the numerical level of their ancestors at the time of Columbus, the Bureau emphasizes. The best available estimate of the indigenous population of what is now the United States, excluding Alaska, around the year 1500 is roughly 846,000. The 1960 Census showed 509,147 Indians living in the same area.

The explanation of this seeming paradox lies in the fact that the indigenous population between the Canadian and Mexican borders went into a long decline following the original intrusions from western Europe--a decline that lasted nearly 400 years. Wars and campaigns of extermination were major factors. But the most important cause seems to have been the introduction of “new" diseases from across the Atlantic. Some of these, like smallpox and tuberculosis, had a literally devastating effect on tribal populations never previously exposed to them. The peoples of western Europe, by contrast, had built up some degree of immunity against their ravages over the course of centuries.

In the latter years of the 19th Century the number of Indians reached a low point of less than a quarter million. Then, for reasons not yet fully understood (possibly involving the gradual acquisition of disease immunities), it turned a corner and has been moving upward ever since.

Today's Indian population, however, differs from that of the Columbian period in that it contains a very large admixture of non-Indian blood, While full-blood Indians predominate on reservations in states like Arizona and New Mexico, they constitute a small minority even among the people counted as Indians on the Turtle Mountain Reservation of North Dakota, for example, and in areas that formerly comprised reservations in Oklahoma.

Congress has provided the Bureau of Indian Affairs with no "all-purpose" definition of an Indian and the blood quantum requirements vary for different purposes. In North Carolina's Eastern Band of Cherokee only a thirty-second degree of Cherokee ancestry is required for membership.

The number of Indians now residing on reservations under Federal jurisdiction is approximately 285,000, according to the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

The native population of Alaska includes about 14,000 Indians and roughly 29,000 Eskimos and Aleuts.