



# Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma

## Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma: Economic and Demographic Data

(Note: The information that follows was provided to Oklahoma Department of Transportation by leaders and staff of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. Contact information is included at the end of this document in the event that additional clarification is required. Oklahoma Department of Transportation contacts are provided as well.)

The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma (CNO) is a “non-reservation” based American Indian Tribe federally recognized by the United States Secretary of the Interior<sup>1</sup>. The CNO is defined as an extremely rural 10.5-county (roughly) territory spanning 10,613 square miles<sup>2</sup> in southern Oklahoma, which encompasses about 15 percent of the state’s total area (larger than the entire state of Maryland at 9,707 mi<sup>2</sup>). The Choctaw Nation’s service area includes Atoka, Bryan, Choctaw, Coal, Haskell, Hughes, Latimer, Leflore, McCurtain, Pittsburg and Pushmataha counties. This is the second largest tribal service area in the lower 48 states.<sup>3</sup> To put the vastness of the CNO into perspective, it takes about three hours (160 miles) to travel from the southwest to the northeast corner of the service area. Not only is the territory vast, but Southeast Oklahoma is an extremely rural region that is more mountainous and forested than any other part of the state.

The Choctaw service area is home to 52,351 Native Americans, accounting for as much as 50 percent of the population in some communities, 41,616 of which are reported as Choctaw by the Choctaw Tribal Membership Office. The remaining Native American population is made up of as many as 29 different tribes, making this a diverse region with many languages, dialects and cultures.

In 2014, the CNO received designation as the first Tribal *Promise Zone*. As is implied with the designation, this rural region struggles with extreme poverty, unemployment, and low educational attainment. In fact, Southeastern Oklahoma has some of the poorest counties in the state, and indeed, the entire U.S. with all 10.5 counties of the CNO, having been recently

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<sup>1</sup> 2013 Federal Register. Federally-recognized Tribes

<sup>2</sup> 2010 Summary Population and Housing Characteristics. U.S. Census Bureau.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. 2000 Census of Population and Housing, Summary Population and Housing Characteristics, PHC-1-38, Oklahoma. Washington, D.C. 2002.

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designated as USDA *StrikeForce* areas<sup>4</sup>, which consists of, “the country’s most economically challenged areas”<sup>5</sup>.

As reported by the Oklahoma Employment Security Commission, three Choctaw Nation counties were ranked first, second and third (LeFlore, Latimer and McCurtain County) for the highest rates for unemployment in the state, and three more counties ranked among the highest. However, looking at the unemployment rate alone is not indicative of the extreme poverty felt in the region. Workers in southeast Oklahoma are some of the lowest paid employees in the state with average annual salaries far below the state average, and even further below the national average<sup>6</sup>. Adults fortunate enough to work typically have minimum wage jobs with 23.2 percent of people within the region living in poverty (7.3 percent higher than the national rate) and an average weekly wage 32 percent lower than the national average<sup>7</sup>.

The Choctaw Nation is the largest employer in the southeastern Oklahoma region with 8,204 employees in the 10-county Choctaw National Tribal Boundary. The largest single business operation in the Choctaw Nation’s business portfolio is the Choctaw Resort and Entertainment Center in Durant, Oklahoma near the terminus of the proposed improvements to US 69/75. This facility employs 2,483 people and hosts over 3.4 million visitors per year. Based on research conducted by the Choctaw Nation, fifty percent of the visitor trips originate from a 50-mile radius around the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex.<sup>8</sup> The annual revenues generated from this operation are estimated to be 42 percent of the total revenues for the Choctaw Nation.

The Choctaw Nation is building a new 500,000 square foot Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma campus on 80- acres adjacent to the section of US 69/75 proposed for improvement in this FAST LANE grant application. The complex will include Tribal Member Services, the Choctaw Nation Government Headquarters, and a Health Clinic. This campus will provide a one-stop resource for tribal members for medical services, prescriptions, apply for employment, access more than 75 tribal business units and programs, update tribal membership information, and apply for scholarship and training programs. Currently these programs and offices are scattered throughout Durant at more than 30 locations and offices. The new headquarters will have approximately 900 employees, the new health clinic will have 300 employees, and the other offices will have 106 employees. Future planned additions to this campus will ultimately

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<sup>4</sup> USDA, 2015. USDA Expands StrikeForce Initiative for Rural Growth and Opportunity to Build Rural Economies. Retrieved from [www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?contentid=2015/03/0070.xml](http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?contentid=2015/03/0070.xml)

<sup>5</sup> USDA StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity. Retrieved from [http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?navid=STRIKE\\_FORCE](http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome?navid=STRIKE_FORCE)

<sup>6</sup> The Southeast WIA Economic Report, March 2013. Division of Economic Research and Analysis, Oklahoma Employment Security Commission. [http://www.ok.gov/oesc\\_web/documents/lmiwiaer10SE.pdf](http://www.ok.gov/oesc_web/documents/lmiwiaer10SE.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Table 1: Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2011. (2012). U.S. Census Bureau.

<sup>8</sup> Choctaw Nation research including license plate surveys, sign in sheets, regular and periodic visitor interviews, and surveys conducted to determine visitor origination for Choctaw Resort and Entertainment Center

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provide space for 1,600 employees. Patient population visits to the new Choctaw Nation Durant Clinic are expected to exceed 5,766 in year one and over 7,000 patients in 2025.<sup>9</sup>

Other businesses in the Choctaw Nation's portfolio include several travel plazas, Texoma Printing Co., the Choctaw Food Distribution Market, Choctaw Transportation, the Choctaw Day Care and Headstart Center, Smokeshop, and several senior living developments. Business revenues from these businesses in the US 69/75 corridor are invested in tribal government services. According to the Choctaw Nation, the UD 69/75 corridor from Texas to Durant "is the gateway and transit source for the largest economic driver in the Choctaw Nation. The business revenue generated in this local (the US 69/75 corridor in Calera and Durant) is reinvested by the Choctaw Nation throughout the 11-county tribal service area to improve the quality of life and battle immense socioeconomic challenges throughout the federally designated Promise Zone. Programs funded by this revenue include high education scholarships, college and career training, certification and preparatory services, student services, victims of crime advocacy and services, vocational rehabilitation, youth empowerment and intervention programs, children and family services, maternal and infant home visits, Head Start and Early Head Start, and many more life-changing services."<sup>10</sup>

Over the next three to five years, the Choctaw Nation plans to invest over \$300 million in the Durant area. These significant investments will support new housing, amenities in the area such as parks and trails, and upgrades to existing facilities. The improvements to US 69/75 will improve the access and safe mobility to these facilities for visitors, residents, and freight moving into and through the region. Additional resort development expansion are also being discussed that will increase the number of visitors and the demand for goods transport.

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<sup>9</sup> Data from Joe Bray, Choctaw Nation HAS April 6, 2016

<sup>10</sup> Interview Dara McCoy, Grants Director, Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma