

COVID-19: The Impact on the Navajo Nation

Humanities Lab (Fall 2020): Why is the Amazon Burning?

Dr. Glen Goodman

Dr. Mary Jane Parmetier

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Sarah Froxyliia

Gabriel Garcia

John Kole

Samantha Maas

Porshe Miller

The Issue

In the midst of the COVID-19 surge in the U.S., the state of New York was a hotspot with infection rates averaging 1.9% (Mozes, 2020). There were more infected patients than there were hospital beds and that's without mentioning the shortage of ventilators. What used to be packed streets in New York City, turned to an empty ghost town during quarantine. While this surely affected the everyday livelihoods of New York, the impact was an understatement when compared to the Navajo Nation. The Nation was home to the highest infections in the U.S. with rates averaging more than 3.4% (Mozes, 2020). However, for all Indigenous communities, not just the Navajo Nation, there are pre-existing issues that make them more susceptible to this new disease. Native American adults are more likely to have diabetes, obesity, and heart diseases than other ethnicities, putting them at higher risk of infection. As determined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "people with heart disease, diabetes and lung disease are 6 times more likely to be hospitalized and 12 times more likely to die due to COVID-19" (L., 2020). Such inequality is a factor among COVID-19 exposure. The disproportionate impact of structural racism and socioeconomic factors has created and continues to create limited access to healthcare for underserved communities like the Navajo Nation.

Why Are They More Vulnerable?

For tribes across the United States, many are fortunate to have land they can govern themselves. However, many of those who have land are also located in desolate areas. While this enables greater connection with cultural beliefs and practices, one must also consider the demands of the modern world. It is important to have access to resources in order for a community to have a sustainable economy. However, for tribes, this is not an easy task. For the

Navajo Nation, one big issue is a lack of infrastructure. About one-third of the population doesn't have access to electricity nor running water. Both of these sources have become essential to everyday lives. We rely on electricity for warmth and cleanliness, needs that can be fulfilled through manual labor. Although for some people, manual labor and lack of electricity may not be an issue, in these unprecedented times of COVID-19, these tasks conflict with stay-at-home orders. Thus, preventing the spread of the virus proves impossible for members of the Navajo Nation.

Additionally, lack of electricity also disables food preservation, resulting in the need to travel to the nearest grocery stores, which is also challenging given the Navajo Nation only contains 13 grocery stores in a 27,000 square mile reservation. Given the lack of jobs and the ruralness of the communities, 44% of the residents are living below the poverty line. Thus, all of Navajo Nation is classified as a "food desert" by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

What is most impactful, not just for the Navajo Nation, but for all Indigenous tribes, however, are the normalities of culture. Indigenous people believe that "it takes a village to raise a child", meaning families are always largely grouped together and rarely distanced from one another. Houses typically do not consist solely of just a father, mother, and their children. Rather, households can have grandparents, parents, siblings, and cousins all living under one roof. This is not because of affordability issues; this is because of cultural factors. Therefore, being at least "6 feet apart" has proven challenging, resulting in the Navajo Nation being more vulnerable to COVID-19's spread. Social distancing is an especially tough concept in this context.

Why Are Resources Scarce?

One of the main reasons that Native Americans have suffered disproportionately during this pandemic is due to the lack of financial resources for Native American lands. The issue of low financial resources for Native Americans can be traced back all the way to the first encounters between Europeans and Native Americans. From that point on, there has always been a sense of superiority and a practice of mistreatment from the U.S. government towards the many Indigenous nations throughout the United States. This mistreatment and racism has allowed the COVID-19 pandemic to affect many native nations, especially the Navajo Nation that sits in Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico. With over 175,000 people, the Navajo Nation must be able to adequately protect those that live in its borders. Unfortunately, this is a difficult task when over “30 percent of homes on the Navajo Nation are also without running water. This presents challenges to meet CDC guidelines, including the thorough washing of hands” for at least 20 seconds (Newton). Those without running water are required to travel every so often to refill their containers, creating a challenge towards stay-at-home orders. The lack of access to water has plagued the Navajo Nation for years, and the U.S. government has not taken action. “The US government has continually failed to uphold agreements with the Navajo Nation...citing a lack of funding for healthcare and infrastructure that has contributed to the challenges faced by the Navajo Nation” (Newton). Without adequate access to one of the most important resources to combat the pandemic, the Navajo Nation is in a dangerous situation. There have been many plans set forth to either drill more wells and extended pipelines, though no work has been done. “Leaders of the Navajo Nation say COVID-19 has brought urgency to their plans for water solutions. But the scale of needed infrastructure projects, with costs estimated in the billions, makes their task a monumental challenge” (James). Now with around 15,000 positive cases, the Navajo Nation is in need of financial assistance, an action that the U.S. government should have

given so long ago. In order for the U.S. to truly beat COVID-19, the Navajo Nation must gain access to its resources.

The Message: Why You Should Care:

We take many of our everyday privileges for granted including our quick access to water, electricity, and food. We should care about these rural communities as we are seeing the devastating impact COVID-19 has had on them. In the Navajo Nation, there is little advocating for minority, poor, and elderly groups. Within these communities, things that non-Indigenous people take for granted are evident, many of which people on the reservation do not have. Even when the COVID numbers reached their peak, despite being in lockdown, we could still take our families with us to the nearest store. On the reservation, people have not been able to leave their property unless they are in immediate need of food.

The health of Indigenous people is prone to diabetes, obesity, and heart diseases. Any exposure or close contact to Native Americans like the Navajo populations make them more susceptible to COVID. As a result, attractions in the Navajo Nation like the east Grand Canyon have been closed to outside visitors to avoid uprising cases. The infrastructure in the communities is exposing how little access the people have to basic healthcare and essentials, leading to the highest death per capita in the U.S.

Ways to Help

In the time of the COVID-19, the pandemic has opened the eyes of many as lives continue to be negatively affected on a daily basis. There are many actions that public health professionals and Congress can take to improve the health of Native Americans. Actions include

sustainable funding, access to technology and healthcare services, and gaining better understandings of the Indigenous communities.

For starters, Congress can provide sustainable funding to the Indian Health Service (IHS) to reduce administrative, cultural, and linguistic barriers as well as to bring the IHS workforce and training to the required levels. This would allow critical information and resources to be translated in Indigenous languages, ensure cultural competence of healthcare providers, and implement organizational accommodations and policies that cater to Indigenous people. It is also important to ensure that a fair proportion of stimulus money is being sent to help Indigenous communities.

Technology has made it easier and convenient to access health resources and services. This is especially important in light of COVID-19. Thus, passing the COVID-19 DISASTER in Indian Country Act (H.R.6819) would provide emergency special temporary authority to use electromagnetic spectrum for the provision of wireless broadband service on Tribal lands and Hawaiian Home Lands.

It is best to ensure tribal governments can access resources from the strategic national stockpile and qualified pandemic or epidemic products from the Department of Health and Human Services. This can occur if Congress passes the Tribal Medical Supplies Stockpile Access Act of 2020 (S.3514). Likewise, this could have already been accomplished if the IHS Director was on the White House's COVID-19 Task Force. This ought to be a standard as it would ensure the IHS Director is a member of future pandemic work groups. This would then certify that Native Americans and the IHS, Tribal, and Urban health systems are involved in discussions about addressing pandemics.

For the Public Health Officials, it would be best that they review data and other resources to better understand the burden of disease in Indigenous communities. Such burdens include the lack of access to personal protective equipment (PPE), medicines, and other necessary items. To ensure proper distribution of resources, it would be best if the public health officials work with advocacy, community, labor, and faith-based organizations to better understand the community's knowledge, needs, barriers, and challenges around COVID-19 prevention. It is best to include trusted community leaders who serve racial and ethnic minority populations and people with disabilities. For participants not from the community, it is important to learn about special challenges or misconceptions that they may encounter in their interactions with community members, including social and cultural aspects. Part of this requires fostering a sense of trust and credibility. To do so, it is best to share messages and materials that are sensitive to unique health issues, access to care, and lifestyle challenges. Thus, develop messages that fit with the culture while also ensuring the messages are easy to understand. Storytelling is a great way to convey such complex information.

Without these Indigenous people, beneficial knowledge for the communities would be at a loss. Traditional and cultural practices protect environmental resources that are crucial to the American economy like oil and uranium. Caring for everyone promotes public works projects and improves the health of the economy. If we seek to continue thriving as a country, we need to ensure all people are cared for and protected, including members of the Navajo Nation.

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Why are resources scarce?

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