

“Our Ancestors Have Gone Through This Before”: COVID-19 and It's Disproportionate Consequences in Indigenous Communities



ANNALIESE DIVNEY

WRITER'S COMMENT: For this assignment, I wrote about the impact of COVID-19 among Indigenous communities. The prompt was extremely open-ended, which intimidated me at first. I am extremely passionate about environmental justice, which is intrinsically related to Indigenous rights, Land Back, and decolonization. Related to this topic, of course, is public health among Indigenous communities, as it forms a feedback loop with environmental conditions, each affecting the other through countless interconnected pathways. While writing this article, I had the honor of interviewing many inspiring community leaders. I learned about the consequences of the pandemic that are not at the forefront of the general public's consciousness and are typically not even considered by public health specialists or academics, such as the pandemic's threat to culture and language. Listening to and amplifying the experiences of Indigenous people is crucial to understanding long term socioeconomic and cultural effects of the pandemic, and to documenting and demonstrating the ways in which inequities and systemic discrimination compound and intensify, especially during times of crisis.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Annaliese Divney's extraordinary exploration of the ways in which Covid has impacted Native American communities drew me in as soon as I started reading it. She found powerful data, and, at least as important, powerful stories. Annaliese has what I can

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only call an instinct for story-telling, knowing how to pace her work, how to intrigue her readers, and, perhaps above all, how to tell a hard hitting story in a way that, ultimately, is empowering. I'm delighted that Prized Writing has recognized her work, and I am sure it is only the first of many, many published works that Annaliese shall put out into the world in the years to come. Hers is a powerful voice . . .

—Sasha Abramsky, University Writing Program

Christina Thomas speaks in an earnest and somber tone, reflecting on the knowledge and experiences of the many generations of Northern Paiute, Western Shoshone, and Hopi that shape the branches of her family tree. About the COVID-19 pandemic, she states in simple terms: “Our ancestors have gone through this before.”

Since the arrival of colonizers who carried with them an array of deadly diseases like smallpox, measles, and cholera, public health crises have disproportionately impacted Indigenous communities. The COVID-19 pandemic is no exception to this pattern.

Unequal distribution of public health consequences is caused by a multitude of underlying social and economic factors originating from systematic discrimination. Indigenous peoples fall into some of the most vulnerable categories when it comes to health. Compounding factors that augment Indigenous people’s vulnerability to infectious diseases include access to proper sanitation, clean water, quality healthcare, and healthy food sources. According to a paper published in the *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, these “social and health inequities [stem] from invasion and subsequent colonization,” the legacy of which “includes intergenerational and concentrated poverty, poor physical and mental health, transport and housing issues, increased rates of domestic and family violence, shorter life expectancy, and inadequate access to culturally safe care” (Power et al., 2020). The United Nations (2020) found that American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) populations have higher rates of communicable and noncommunicable diseases, higher mortality rates, and shorter life spans than their non-Indigenous counterparts. Health issues like heart and liver disease, hypertension, cancers, and diabetes are also more common among Indigenous peoples, according to information released by the International Indian Treaty Council (2020). All of these risk factors have come to a head during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent

evidence suggests that average COVID-19 incidence rates are 3.5 times higher for AI/AN persons than non-Hispanic Whites and that death rates are higher for AI/AN persons as well (Yellow Horse & Huyser, 2021). Further, the CDC's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (2020) found that AI/AN persons make up 0.7 percent of the U.S. population, yet are overrepresented in COVID-19 infection rates, as 1.3 percent of all COVID-19 cases reported to the CDC from January 22, 2020, to May 30, 2020, were among AI/AN persons.

Allie Hostler is an editor of the *Two Rivers Tribune*, a community newspaper that serves the Trinity and Klamath River Communities in Northern California. Hostler spoke on how these conditions are all inextricably linked to the centuries of systematic oppression that Indigenous people face: "We struggle with health disparities, unusually high rates of heart disease, diabetes, and substance abuse. That all comes with being oppressed, that comes with poverty." The magnitude of the effects of the pandemic has pushed smaller operations like the *Two Rivers Tribune* to their limits. Hostler works nights for the newspaper, making sure crucial information is readily available to the public, and during the day she spends 40 to 60 hours per week working as the Operations Section Chief for the local COVID-19 Incident Management Team. "We get hit with Covid when we're already struggling to keep up academically, financially, mentally, and emotionally," Hostler explained. "And it's just this big boom." The shock waves of this boom know no boundaries, reverberating through countless spheres of society, leaving nothing untouched.

One specific health disparity that has been exacerbated by the pandemic is substance abuse. Indigenous people suffer from alcohol use disorder at rates 14.9 percent greater than those of other racial demographics and also exhibit increased rates of general drug usage and mental health concerns (Fuller, 2019). "You could ask anyone here if there's been increased drug activity over the course of the pandemic and they're going to say 'yes,'" Hostler stated. "There's also a huge risk of the loss of culture," she continued, "not only from Covid but also from the drug epidemic. People who are keepers of knowledge, if they aren't healthy in a way that allows them to meaningfully participate and share their wisdom, then we risk losing that knowledge."

Rhonda Bigovich, a member of the Hoopa Valley Tribe and lead reporter for the *Two Rivers Tribune*, is closely involved with community

support groups for people recovering from addiction. There have been several youth overdoses during the past year in her community, she said as she explained the impact that the pandemic has had on substance usage. The cancellation of support group meetings per COVID-19 restrictions has left people without their core means of support for over a year. “Typically, we’d have these resources to go to for support, but it’s all fallen apart completely,” Bigovich commented. Her biggest concern lies with the community’s Narcotics Anonymous (NA) group. Because members of their NA group do not keep in contact with each other outside of their in-person meetings, Bigovich explained that the impact of having these services completely shut down for such a long period of time could lead to people not returning to meetings, even once they are back up and running.

Jeanine Gaines, a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, also remarked on how these behavioral health problems have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Gaines is the Communications Manager for the Sacramento Native American Health Center (SNAHC), overseeing its internal and external communications, outreach, marketing, advertising, and social media—to name only a few of her responsibilities. Gaines’ packed schedule was projected onto the background of her Zoom window, with boxes and books stacked high behind her desk and a ceiling-to-floor whiteboard so full of writing it barely had any blank space to spare. And if that isn’t enough evidence of her crammed workdays, since the start of the pandemic, the Behavioral Health Department at SNAHC has seen a 106 percent increase in the number of appointments and outreach initiatives, Gaines said as she leafed through the various stacks of numbers and charts that would soon be transformed into SNAHC’s 2019–2020 Report. She said it’s a good thing that people are able to get support through SNAHC, “but we also know there’s still a huge population of people struggling out there who we just aren’t able to reach.”

Another factor of the pandemic that affects Indigenous communities in a crucially significant way is the threat that COVID-19 poses to older demographics. Christina Thomas shared that “the threat that Covid poses to our elders, our knowledge-keepers and culture-protectors, is a really scary thing.” In some Indigenous communities, elders are among the last remaining fluent speakers of the language, and COVID-19 threatens to sever that flow of knowledge before it has the chance to be passed on to the next generation.

Gaines remarked on how it was interesting to see the public's reaction when the pandemic first started, as many dismissed it as only a danger for old people. "Our elders are sacred," Gaines said passionately. "Dismissing Covid because it poses the greatest threat to elders is just not our way." She continued, "Unfortunately a lot of our elders have been lost through the pandemic, and it was very hard not being able to hold ceremonies while they were still here." Dozens of Native elders from the SNAHC community alone have passed. "It's been difficult. A lot of the ceremonies, songs, and dances are not supposed to be filmed, so then we're faced with the question of whether or not to break tradition and film the ceremonies so that the elders can see it and participate from their homes," said Gaines. Not only does COVID-19 threaten to take the lives of loved ones, but it also endangers culture and language, a burden that is largely specific to Indigenous communities.

The pandemic likewise brought about an unprecedented disruption of traditions and ceremonies. Hostler spoke about how their major community gatherings have not taken place in over a year, which has significant impacts on mental health in the community. "Public ceremonies are some of the most important events for people who have it rough, who may not have much hope, or who, for instance, struggle with substance abuse," Hostler elaborated. They rely on those public ceremonies for mental and emotional fortitude.

Indigenous children also rely on social groups that have been affected by the pandemic. Councilmember Joe Davis is a thirty-six-year-old representative for the Soctish-Chenone District of the Hoopa Valley Tribe and is the head organizer for the local youth football and cheerleading programs as well. He explained that athletics are a huge deal on the reservation: "There's not a lot else going on to keep the kids excited." With the cancelation of the athletic season and the closure of schools, the kids on the reservation have had an extremely rough time regarding lack of social interaction and physical exercise, combined with the ever-present stress of living through a pandemic.

As COVID-19 left no sector unscathed, it is not surprising that weaknesses in local infrastructure were brought to light over the past year as well. AI/AN people suffer from higher rates of food insecurity due to centuries of institutionalized inequities. Research conducted by Blue Bird Jernigan et al. (2017) found that one in four Indigenous people experiences consistent food insecurity, compared to one in nine Americans

nationally. “We don’t have five grocery stores to choose from; we have one,” Hostler stated. “So if there’s an outbreak at the store and it closes down, our entire community doesn’t have access to food. The pandemic really exposed the weaknesses in our food systems.” Councilmember Davis further elaborated on how COVID-19 has affected the food supply by causing issues in the community’s supply lines, leaving shelves at the local grocery store barren. “I think we can’t be so dependent on outside sources,” Councilmember Davis said, as he explained that this was a wake-up call to start increasing production of food locally and further build self-sufficiency wherever possible. For him, this incident exposed how a seemingly unrelated catastrophe, like the spread of a virus, affects things as crucial as the supply of food when infrastructure and resources are already stretched so thin. Gaines likewise explained how it has been a challenge to keep vital services like grocery stores and gas stations operational, and how necessities as basic as water access have been threatened by the pandemic. “Our water treatment plant has two guys that know how to treat the water. If one of them got Covid and the other one was exposed and had to be quarantined, then all of a sudden our entire community’s source of clean water is threatened.”

Inadequate access to the internet has posed another problem throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, especially regarding distance learning for students. Large portions of the Trinity and Klamath River communities do not have internet access, which is part of why print media like the *Two Rivers Tribune* is such a vital source of information. “To have missed a whole year of school and also not have internet access for much of that time,” Hostler said, “it’s been a rough year for our students.” As cited in Feir et al. (2019), the U.S. Census Bureau released estimates that demonstrate significant disparities in internet access, with some AI/AN reservations having fewer than 55 percent of households with broadband access, compared to the national average of almost 80 percent. Having no internet access tends to throw a wrench into the process of taking classes online, not to mention being able to access crucial public health information, guidelines, and news.

During public health crises, visibility can be a matter of life and death, affecting everything from federal funding to epidemiology and data collection. “Ours is a part of the world that gets very little press coverage,” Hostler remarked. When asked about the role of visibility in SNAHC’s work, Gaines spoke about how accurate data collection surrounding

COVID-19 cases and mortality among Indigenous populations is crucial. “Our Native people are being hidden,” she explained. COVID-19 death rates, especially in urban areas, are inaccurately recorded because of restrictive options for Indigenous people when it comes to denoting their race and ethnicity. For instance, racial misclassification is a common occurrence, which leads to underestimates when it comes to COVID-19 data in specific demographics. According to the CDC (Arias et al. 2016), Indigenous people were racially misclassified on their official death certificates up to 40 percent of the time. “So there’s been this huge push to get accurate numbers,” Gaines explained. “We see these Covid death rates, but we know that they’re probably even higher for Indigenous people, it’s just that the data is not reflective of our community.” A friend of Gaines’s, a young woman, lost both her grandmother and her aunt to COVID-19 and, “instead of grieving, she was trying to fight to make sure they were visible She said the last thing she could do for them was to try to make sure they were accurately represented.”

And yet in the midst of this crisis we see rays of hope, shining outpourings of solidarity and support, and an astounding willingness to adapt to changing circumstances. “At SNAHC, we’ve had to pivot a lot to support our patients,” explained Gaines. Fifty percent of patients served by SNAHC have multiple chronic health issues, putting them at an increased risk for severe disease and death from COVID-19. One major change that happened at SNAHC was a shift to telehealth. At the beginning of the pandemic, SNAHC’s Behavioral Health Department transferred completely to online visits, and medical health departments went 80 percent online. And this transition all happened in the blink of an eye; the change was drastic, to say the least. SNAHC employees found themselves rearranging in-clinic activities to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, organizing virtual telehealth appointment systems, and setting up and implementing huge testing and then vaccination campaigns, on top of all of the other basic services provided by the center. And still, every week the medical team improved their processes to be faster, safer, and more efficient. “Their willingness to change processes at a moment’s notice—it’s like a well-oiled machine,” Gaines explained with passionate admiration.

Hostler reported a similarly bright outlook regarding vaccinations among the Hoopa Valley Tribe, where over 45 percent (around 1,450 people) of the eligible population had been vaccinated by mid-April

2021. Tribal leaders even made the effort to call every tribal elder to offer vaccines, schedule appointments, answer questions, and make home visits when requested. For a small community with a significant proportion of the population being under sixteen years of age, having vaccines in at least 1,450 arms is an incredible feat.

However, testing and vaccinations are not the only ways in which communities have worked to battle this pandemic. A care package program started by Christina Thomas helped connect and comfort many families. Initially, Thomas established the program as a way to get personal protective equipment (PPE) and traditional medicines into the hands of community members. However, as support increased and donations grew, the lucky recipients opened their doors to packages filled with much more than just PPE. Alongside masks and hand sanitizer sat bread, potatoes, fruit, veggies, canned goods, puzzles, books, and more. But Thomas didn't stop there—she wanted to do a little something extra for the kids. By the time August 2020 rolled around and (virtual) school was back in session, Thomas and her partners were able to donate over three hundred backpacks, each stuffed with school supplies, PPE, and some extra goodies too.

In quiet reflection, Allie Hostler spoke of the things that fortify her: a recent decline of COVID-19 cases among the Hoopa Valley Tribe, the strength of her community, the gradual re-opening of schools, the beautiful weather. And as she spoke, birds chirped in the background, affirming the arrival of spring—nature's song of solidarity. Hostler elaborated, “There's a sense of hope here. We've been very resilient so far, and my hope is that we continue that resiliency, that we appreciate our community events even more, and that we cherish every chance we get to be together.”

Author's Note: I would like to express my sincerest thanks and deepest appreciation to Jeanine Gaines (Citizen Potawatomi Nation), Allie Hostler (Hoopa Valley Tribe), Christina Thomas (Northern Paiute, Western Shoshone, and Hopi), Rhonda Bigovich (Hoopa Valley Tribe), and Councilmember Joe Davis (Hoopa Valley Tribe) for sharing with me their invaluable knowledge, insight, and experiences.

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