Coronavirus Could Be Devastating for the Navajo Nation

The Navajo Nation, the largest Native American reservation in the U.S., saw its first case of COVID-19 on March 27th, and since then has seen over 1,300 positive tests for the virus. Most people in the Navajo Nation live in rural areas, which should limit the spread of the virus, but the tribe is facing several challenges in dealing with the Coronavirus.

Many natives have high rates of illnesses that make the community vulnerable to COVID-19 like asthma, diabetes, and heart disease. A history of mining, especially uranium mining, on the reservation has resulted in higher rates of reproductive cancers. In addition, one in 2,000 Navajos are born with severe combined immunodeficiency (SCID), a genetic disorder where a child is basically born without an immune system, although mandatory screening of Navajo children at birth enables the tribe to treat the condition.

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In addition to these health challenges, the Navajo Nation is extremely poor. The United States has an official poverty rate of 12.6 percent. The rate of poverty in the Navajo Nation for families is 46.5 percent, with 14.9 percent of people living in extreme poverty.

Amenities that Americans take for granted, like plumbing, electricity, and paved roads, are not a guarantee on the reservation. One in ten Navajos doesn’t have electricity. In Apache county Arizona where the capital of the Navajo Nation,

Window Rock, is located, Native American households are 13 times more likely to lack complete plumbing. Forty percent of the Native nation does not have indoor plumbing. The CDC handwashing guidelines are incompatible with life under these conditions.

A Poor People Pandemic

The Navajo Nation government has taken steps to stop the spread of COVID-19, with President Jonathan Nez declaring a weekend curfew on April 12th, and the Navajo Department of Health mandating the use of masks outside the home on April 19th. Even with these measures, the Navajo Nation will see higher COVID-19 infection rates and deaths, much like other poor and systematically disadvantaged communities across the country.

Sources

- *The Navajo Nation outbreak reveals an ugly truth behind America's coronavirus experience* – The Week
- *As Coronavirus Cases Rise, Navajo Nation Tries To Get Ahead Of Pandemic* – NPR
- *Navajo, Hopi Nations Have High Rates Of "Plumbing Poverty"* – KNAU
- *A forgotten health crisis in Navajo lands* – Center for Health Journalism