

## Navajo Nation disproportionately impacted by coronavirus

There are no road names in Navajo territory— landmarks and mile markers are used by travelers as a vague hint to your location, and they stick out of the arid desert like gravestones. Many roads are unpaved, and are dotted with the dangers of the desert. The reservation can be difficult to navigate, so many stick to two rules: do not stay out past dark, and make sure your gas tank is filled enough to get back.

Unfortunately for Arlene Mori, a Navajo woman who now lives in Colorado, in the busyness of her day she forgot to refill her tank before leaving the reservation the weekend of Sept. 27. She had just buried her 19-year-old son Jagr, who died of coronavirus, on the reservation-- and gas was the last thing on her mind. She tried to stop at four gas stations on her way home, but all the pumps were closed due to the lockdown. She could not have read in the news that the pumps were closed— because like many on the reservation, she had no cell phone service and there was no electricity on her family’s land.

“We were freaking out. We couldn’t believe it. ... When you have to stop and think about something so basic as gas, and wonder-- am I going to make it?” Mori said. “These are things the average person doesn’t have to think about. But there is such a different way of living on the reservation.”

Coronavirus and the lockdowns have made life, already difficult on the Navajo reservation, much more challenging to its inhabitants. The Navajo Nation is the [largest native reservation](#) in America, yet the coronavirus hit them disproportionately hard as a result of years of inadequate funding creating weak infrastructure and systemic health problems. According to the [Navajo Department of Health](#), as of Dec. 1 there were more than 16,000 reported cases and more than 650 deaths. 75 communities were identified as having an [uncontrollable spread](#) of the virus. In May, they surpassed New York State for the [highest infection rate](#) in America. Yet the media seem only concerned for the Native population on a shallow level, considering it satisfactory to report the statistics instead of investigating the causes.

“When the first coronavirus cases were being shared on the news, the Navajo Nation wasn’t a part of that. And it wasn’t until May that you were seeing live coverage, and that’s only when it got really bad,” Mori said. “More people need to be aware of how they’re being treated by the government on their own territory. It’s jaw-dropping.”

In the 1800s, the Navajo Nation [signed treaties](#) with the federal government giving up their land in exchange for funding for housing, infrastructure, and healthcare. Yet within the reservation, 30 percent do not have [running water](#), and 1 in 3 homes have no toilet or sink. 27 percent do not have access to [electricity](#). 43 percent live below the [poverty](#) line. And the government spends

three times as much on funding for healthcare on non-Native medical care than on Native [health care](#).

And so, when the federal government approved the \$2.2 trillion [stimulus package](#) for coronavirus, it came as little surprise that the Navajo Nation received only \$714 million. That's \$4,552 per resident on the reservation, compared to \$6,703 per capita nationwide. Yet the media paid little to no attention to the lack of infrastructure, housing, or medical aid the government spent on the Navajo Nation-- in fact, most articles say no more than the daily case rates on the reservation. This absence of coverage on the lack of promised government aid, while simultaneously reporting high Navajo case rates, excludes the government from the narrative and propagates a misleading storyline that the Navajo are responsible for their disproportionate case rates.

If you were to google search "Navajo Nation coronavirus" on Dec. 2, and filter the results by date, nine of the ten articles listed are from local news organizations. If you add up the words from all the articles, there is a 491.1 word average per article (for comparison, if you do the same thing but google search "New York coronavirus" your word average per article is 2,077.75-- the coverage on New York coronavirus cases goes significantly more in-depth). Seven articles address updated case numbers, two list information about President-Elect Joe Biden's coronavirus task board, and one talks about a local nonprofit. Only two articles even mention any of the systemic or structural issues that may cause the high numbers, and only briefly.

But if you sort your search by relevance, including major news organizations, the information is not better-- of the fifteen listed results, seven are local news stations with updated case numbers or news about Biden's board; and of the articles by CNN, NPR, The Hill, Fox News, and BuzzFeed, only two mention any systemic or structural issues in the community. And all the articles by major news corporations are weeks old. It seems the media coverage of the Navajo Nation is either shallow, dated, or missing-- just like the government funding.

"It's been amazing to see the interest the national and mainstream media has in our suffering, but sad to say that it took a pandemic for everyone to say 'hey, let's see what's up with the Navajo Nation, even they don't have running water or electricity and all these preexisting health conditions,'" said Krystal Curley, the Executive Director of [Indigenous Lifeways](#), a 501(c)3 organization that supplies resources to Native Americans.

But there's only so much these nonprofits can do to bridge the gap between the poorer Navajo and the luckier. For example, Laticia Tyler Joe and Veryl Joe live in the town Shiprock on the reservation, and consider themselves blessed to have access to things like food or electricity to keep up with coronavirus news. But they know many who are not as fortunate as them.

“I think that the information we get about the pandemic is accurate, and it’s easy for us to get all the information we need. At least, we do,” says Laticia, before Veryl adds, “but others aren’t so lucky. If you have no electricity, you may have a radio, and you may be able to tune in their radio to the local radio station and get news about the pandemic. But I don’t think they have access other than that, besides what people tell them. It’s not just about what type of news you get-- but if you have access to news at all.”

Cases like this on the reservation are not uncommon, yet you will not read about them in most CNN, New York Times, or Washington Post articles. And if the local news is aware of the lack of infrastructure, which is easy to witness, it is not in their reporting-- perhaps because they experience it every day. This type of numbers-only reportage is creating a picture of the pandemic that is inaccurate and dangerous. How can you have access to information if you are quarantined without electricity? How can you give information?

“It’s a cultural crisis,” says Laticia.

Though it is clear that articles exist about coronavirus and the Navajo, to confine the stories to numbers instead of inquiring into the causes (for either the benefit of the residents or to satisfy the curiosity of the masses), suggests that we see the Navajo as statistics. We care about them when their numbers are high, like the rest of America. We talk about them when their struggles are similar to ours. But it is unfair of the media to only count the Navajo as newsworthy in times of crisis. We rarely see an acknowledgement of how badly and *why* they are struggling-- because to do so would be to point a finger at ourselves.

Within the coverage of the Navajo, I could only find one story that adequately addressed the numbers as well as the causes. It was featured on the Indigenous Lifeways’ website, as a long-form [story by USA Today](#) for their series of “Deadly Discrimination” articles. The byline for the article reads “The federal government underfunded health care for Indigenous people for centuries. Now they’re dying of Covid-19.” When I spoke on the phone with Krystal Curley, she said that she thought it was the most accurate story she read about the Navajo and coronavirus thus far.

The title? ““Still killing us.””