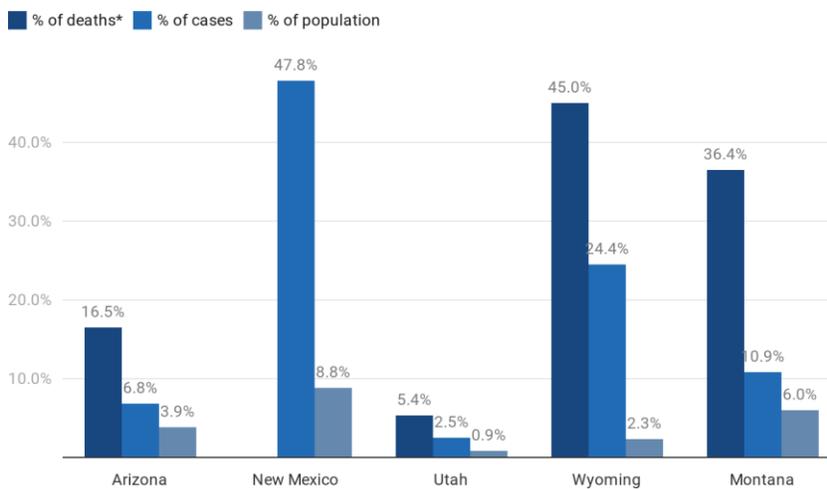


Background: Navajo Nation

COVID and the Crises Facing the Navajo Nation

In the 1918 influenza pandemic, the death rate for Native communities in the U.S. was four times higher than for the nation as a whole.¹ Fast-forward 100 years to May 18, 2020, when the Navajo Nation surpassed New York State with the highest per capita rate of COVID-19 infection in the country. The Navajo Nation achieved this grim statistic despite having one of the earliest and most stringent lockdowns in place by March.² As was the case in the last century, a disproportionately high rate of infection and death from Coronavirus is occurring in Native populations in many states (Figure 1).

Disproportionate Impact of COVID-19 on American Indians & Alaska Natives as a Share of Confirmed Coronavirus Cases, Deaths, and Total Population in Select States



* Data for New Mexico deaths not available
Source: Kaiser Family Foundation (Published July 7, 2020) • Created with Datawrapper

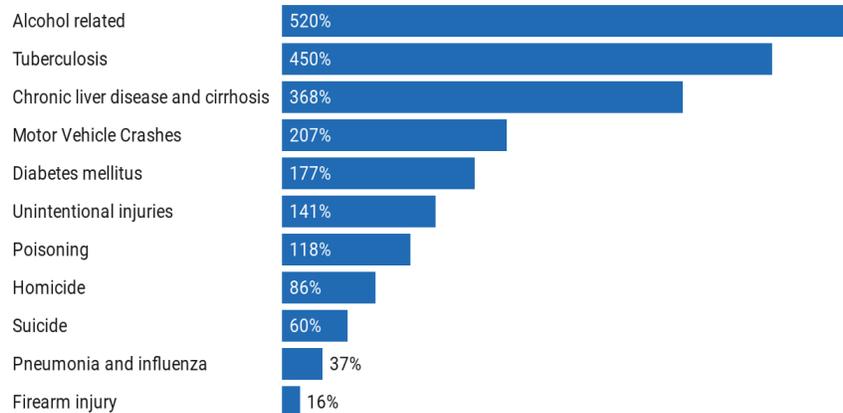
FIGURE 1 - COVID-19 CONFIRMED CASES & DEATHS BY RACE/ETHNICITY AS OF 07/07/20

As the U.S. and the world’s attention is turned towards the Navajo Nation, the pandemic is highlighting disparities and inequities that have existed in the Nation for decades. These include overcrowding, lack of running water and electricity, reduced access to healthcare, and deep infrastructure failings. A concurrent environmental threat comes from the wildfires blazing for weeks in the southern part of the Nation, exacerbating conditions such as asthma that increase the severity of COVID-19 infections.³

Coronavirus is the latest in a long line of diseases that have a greater adverse impact on Native Americans than on other races in the U.S., as shown in Figure 2.⁴

In addition to the health toll, COVID-19 is having a devastating impact on the Nation’s economy, as revenues from casinos and tourism dry up under the lockdown, and expenditures skyrocket.

Percentage Greater Mortality Rates for Native Americans Versus all Races



Source: Indian Health Service • Created with Datawrapper

FIGURE 2 - PERCENTAGE GREATER MORTALITY RATE FOR NATIVE AMERICANS VERSUS ALL RACES

This paper examines the disproportionate effect the COVID-19 crisis is having on the health and economy of the Navajo Nation with some context provided based on historical precursors that contributed to this inexorable tipping point.

Coronavirus

COVID-19 is a highly contagious infectious disease within the coronavirus family that has never been seen before. It is spread through close contact with an infected person. To prevent its spread, people are advised to wear masks, practice frequent, prolonged hand washing, and remain at least 6 feet apart from others. The virus' spread is also slowed by contract tracing—locating and isolating people who may have been infected by a confirmed case. All of the above is easier said than done by particularly vulnerable populations.

The number of COVID-19 infections on the Navajo Nation peaked in May 2020, with an average of 104 new cases per day. In July, the spread slowed by half, to about 48 new cases reported each day. As of the end of August, 9,820 Navajo had tested positive and more than 500 had died from the virus.^{5,6}

The Navajo Nation

The Navajo Nation is a 27,000 square mile land area straddling northeastern Arizona, southeastern Utah, and northwestern New Mexico. It was established by the 1868 Treaty of Bosque Redondo and is the largest reservation in the U.S., both in terms of land mass (about the size of West Virginia) and population (175,151)*. The landscape varies from arid desert to alpine forest. Window Rock, Arizona is

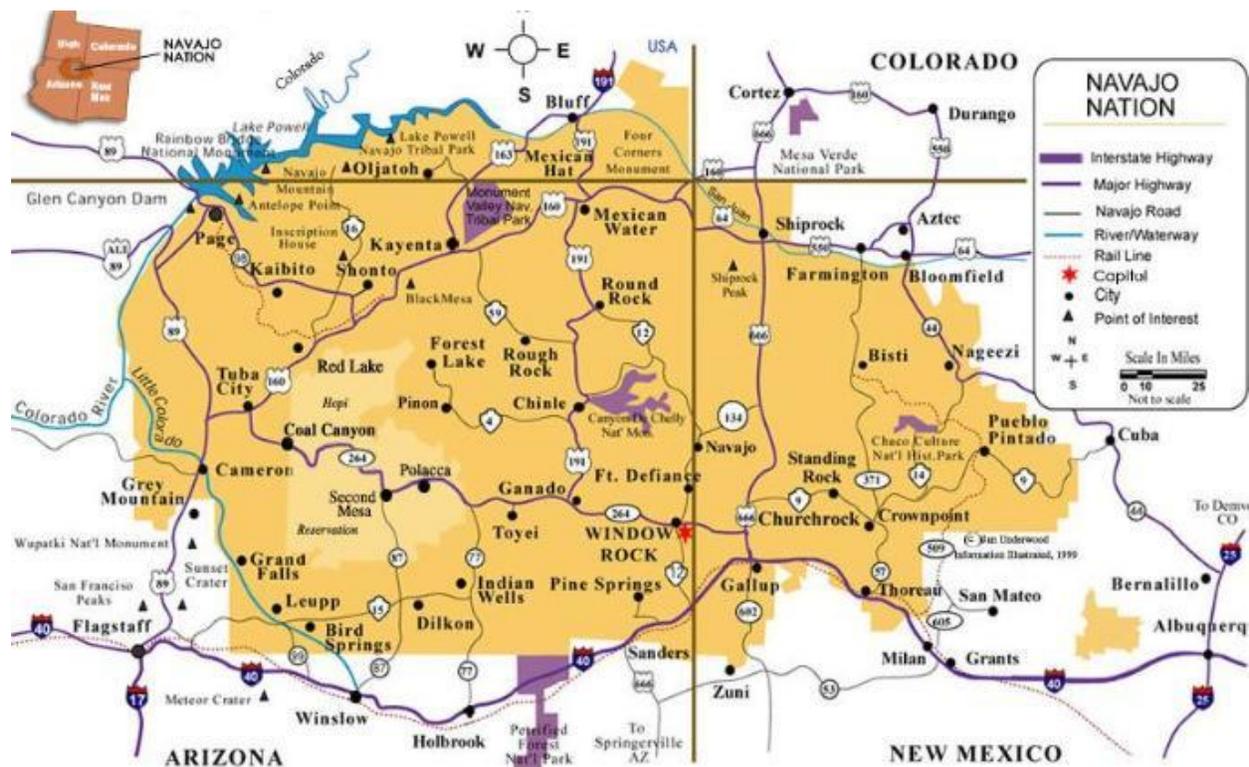


FIGURE 3 - MAP OF THE NAVAJO NATION*

* Unless otherwise stated, all demographic data comes from the US Census, 2018 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. [Navajo Nation data](#), [Data for the whole US](#)

the capital. Since 1989, the Navajo or Diné ("The People" in the Navajo language) have self-governed using a three-branch system: Executive, Legislative, and Judicial. Local governance is through 110 "Chapters," which are geographically subdivided populations of tribal members.

Part of the Nation is in Arizona's Congressional District 1 and is represented by Tom O'Halleran (D), and in Arizona's State Legislative District 7, represented by State Senator Jamescita Peshlakai (D) and State House Representatives Arlando Teller (D) and Myron Tsosie (D). The latter three are members of and live on the Navajo Nation.

Demographics

There are distinct demographic differences between the populations living on the Navajo Nation and the U.S. as a whole.

- The Navajo Nation skews younger, with a median age of 32.7; compared with 38.2 in the U.S.
- The Nation is made up of more diverse households. As befitting their matricentric society, households headed by a single female comprise more than one-quarter (28.5%) of all households on the Nation, twice as many as for the total U.S. (12.6%). Only a third (33.4%) of households are traditional married-couple families, compared to half (47.9%) of households in the U.S. Households are more likely to be multigenerational (20.7% as opposed to 7.5%).
- On the reservation, only 7.7% of adults have a Bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 32.6% for the rest of the U.S.
- The preference to live in a hogan, the traditional octagonal log house dwelling, is reflected in the high number of one-room houses (18.4% as opposed to 2.4% in the US).
- Almost a fifth (19.2%) of the homes on the Nation lack complete plumbing facilities, whereas the U.S. percentage is 0.4%, a forty-fold difference. Similarly, 12.8% of homes on the Navajo Nation are lacking complete kitchen facilities, compared to 0.8% of homes in rest of the US.
- Just over half (50.5%) of the households on the Nation have a computer, compared with 91.8% for the U.S. as a whole. Only 28.1% of households on the Nation have a broadband Internet subscription, compared with 85.1% in the rest of the country.
- The economic data paints a picture of one of the most impoverished populations in the United States. One third (33.4%) of all families on the reservation are below the poverty level, as opposed to 9.3% of families in the U.S. at large. The pre-pandemic unemployment rate for the Navajo Nation is, at 15.8%, three times that of the rest of the U.S. (4.9%). The median household income is \$25,928, a third of the national median amount of \$61,937.

The Navajo Economy

Subsistence Farming and a Society Shattered

When the Navajo left Fort Sumner in 1868 on the "Long Walk Home," they were accompanied by 1,000 sheep, part of the treaty provision that supplied a male and female sheep to every Navajo man, woman, and child.^{7,8} From that initial stock Navajo grew their herds so that by the 1930s, nearly one million sheep or goats ranged across the Nation⁹ and were responsible for roughly half the cash income of the tribe.¹⁰ Livestock are valued beyond their worth as a commodity, as the herd is a symbol of status and prestige, and a central part of Navajo culture.¹¹ In addition to a means of economic self-sufficiency, sheep and goats are a linked to their traditional pastoral lifestyle. Herding is central to Navajo family cooperative values, teaching children responsibility, and respect for nature.¹² Traditionally, the wool from the sheep was woven into blankets and clothes for their own use and trading, and the goats provided the family with milk, cheese, and meat.

A 1930 forestry report to Congress commissioned by the Bureau of Indian Affairs noted increasing soil erosion in parts of the reservation and raised concerns that it would lead to silting of the Colorado River, thus endangering the Hoover Dam project.¹³ The erosion was blamed on overgrazing by the herds on the range, although it was more likely a combination of that and several years of severe winters and droughts. In response, the federal government imposed a range management plan, the Livestock Reduction Program, which culled herds, imposed quotas, and restricted livestock to grazing areas.

This was an economic and cultural disaster for the Navajo. The herds were essential to their survival and way of life. The plan met with resistance, especially culling the herds, and it was enforced with threats and violence. Those who lived through it told stories of sheep being burned alive or driven off cliffs in front of their horrified owners.^{14,15}

Deprived of a means of wealth which could reproduce itself, it was no longer economically viable to continue livestock farming for many Navajo. But there was no plan to replace that lost livelihood and this pushed thousands of Navajo towards wage work in the mines and on the railroads. This work included digging trenches, blasting tunnels, driving trucks— jobs not open to women at the time.¹⁶ Previously, women had owned and cared for the herds, they had their own income, now they were dependent on their husbands, undermining their role and status.¹⁷

In addition to a legacy of a distrust and resentment towards Washington, the Livestock Reduction Program changed the Navajo economy from self-sufficiency in the form of farming and herding, to the economic dependency of wage work and welfare payments, as seen in Table 1.

TABLE 1 - SOURCES OF NAVAJO INCOME¹⁸

| Category | 1936 | 1940 | 1958 |
|--|------|------|------|
| Livestock and agriculture | 54% | 58% | 10% |
| Arts and crafts | 6% | 9% | 1 |
| Wages | 34 | 30 | 68 |
| Miscellaneous | 6 | 3 | 0 |
| Mineral leases | | | 5 |
| Welfare, benefits, railroad retirement | | | 16 |

Mining & Wage Work

Since the discovery of oil and coal reserves, and later uranium, the mining industry has contributed a significant portion of revenue to the Nation by providing employment and royalties from leases. Lacking infrastructure and expertise, the Navajo leased the mineral rights to private companies, in exploitive and often financially disastrous deals for the tribe. The deals were often negotiated by federal agents, who failed to lobby aggressively on the tribe’s behalf, or failed to take inflation or market forces into account.^{19,20,21,22,23} In one particularly egregious example, a 1966 amendment to the Black Mesa mine lease allowed Peabody Energy Company to pump more than 4,000 acre-feet of potable water from beneath the mine. The tribe was paid \$1.37 per acre-foot for the water, when the going rate at that time was \$30 to \$50.²⁴ It was later discovered that the lawyer representing the tribe was working for Peabody.²⁵ As a result of bad deals, poor oversight and portfolio mismanagement, the tribe lost out on hundreds of millions in royalties and lease payments. In 2014, the federal government settled a lawsuit awarding \$554 million to the Navajo Nation in payment for decades of mismanaged royalties, just over half of the \$900 million requested by the tribe.²⁶

Uranium Mining

During the Cold War, mining companies on the Navajo Nation extracted almost 40 million tons of uranium ore which it sold to the federal government to develop the U.S. nuclear weapons stockpile.²⁷ There were over 1,000 mines on the reservation that extracted uranium, and four mills for processing, which included crushing, grinding and feeding the ore to a leaching system to produce a slurry called yellowcake. The toxic byproduct of ore extraction, known as waste rock, contains radium, radon and heavy metals. The process of milling uranium produces a waste product in mill tailings which retains toxic contaminants. Almost 2,500 Navajo worked in the mines or mills during this time.²⁸ These miners were exploited and exposed to hazardous working conditions, paid minimum wage or lower, given the most dangerous jobs, and not warned about the risks of nuclear contamination.^{29,30} And among the most infamous exploitations, without their knowledge or consent, they were also used as subjects in a study to evaluate the health effects of radiation exposure.³¹

When the uranium market dried up in the 1980s, the mining companies abandoned the mines and mills on the reservations. Piles of waste rock were left uncovered with no cleanup, no fences or warnings posted. The abandoned contaminates were left to spread by wind and rain. Mill tailings were mixed with water and left in unlined ponds. The DOE estimates that millions of gallons of contaminated water seeped into the groundwater through the ponds.³²

This uranium mining occurred in six major areas of the Navajo Nation, now designated as AUM (abandoned uranium mine) Regions. According to the EPA, there are 521 abandoned uranium mines requiring remediation cleanup which will cost millions of dollars and take decades to complete.^{33,34} Only 219 of those mines have secured funding and, in most cases, the funding only covers initial studies, not actual cleanup.³⁵ But one-third of the mining companies involved have shut down or become bankrupt.³⁶ For generations the Navajo have been drinking contaminated water, unwittingly letting their children swim in radioactive pools, watering their crops and animals, and breathing air containing hazardous dust. Homes were also constructed using mill tailings and chunks of uranium in the walls and foundations.³⁷

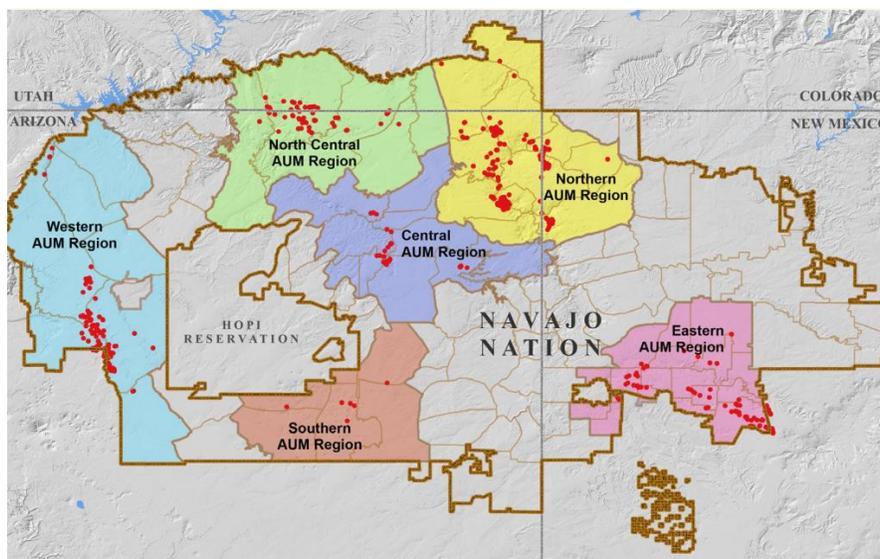


FIGURE 4 ABANDONED URANIUM MINE SITES MAPPED BY THE EPA³⁸

Almost 40 years after uranium mining and milling operations ceased, the Nation is still suffering the toxic effects on human health and on the environment. A 2018 study found a third of men and a quarter of women sampled on the reservation had levels of uranium that exceeded amounts in the highest 5% of the U.S. population.³⁹ The same study found babies born with similar amounts at extreme levels, and those levels persisted during the first year of life.⁴⁰

Summing up the irreparably cavalier treatment at the time, author Richard White writes:

“Navajo society after the 1930s conservation program is not a revitalized traditional society, but an exploited, dependent one. [...] an economy where strip mines and uranium mines scar the land and destroy the people’s health to an extent sheep never did, and where profits enrich multinational corporations, not Navajos”.⁴¹

A Crisis in the Coal Industry

Given the separation from their agrarian roots, for decades the Navajo have relied on coal companies for millions in revenues and the creation of hundreds of high-paying jobs (in fiscal year 2018, coal revenues totaled \$56,319,000).⁴² But now, as a result of cheap natural gas due to the fracking boom and the development of renewables such as wind or solar, the demand for Navajo coal is very much on the wane, as it is in the rest of the country. In the nineties, coal-fired power plants generated more than 60% of electricity in the U.S. As recently as 2010 it was at 40%.⁴³ By 2019 it had fallen to 23.9%,⁴⁴ and studies project that it will go as low as 8% by 2030.⁴⁵ As a result, in the last 10 years, U.S. power companies retired more than 546 coal-fired power plants.⁴⁶

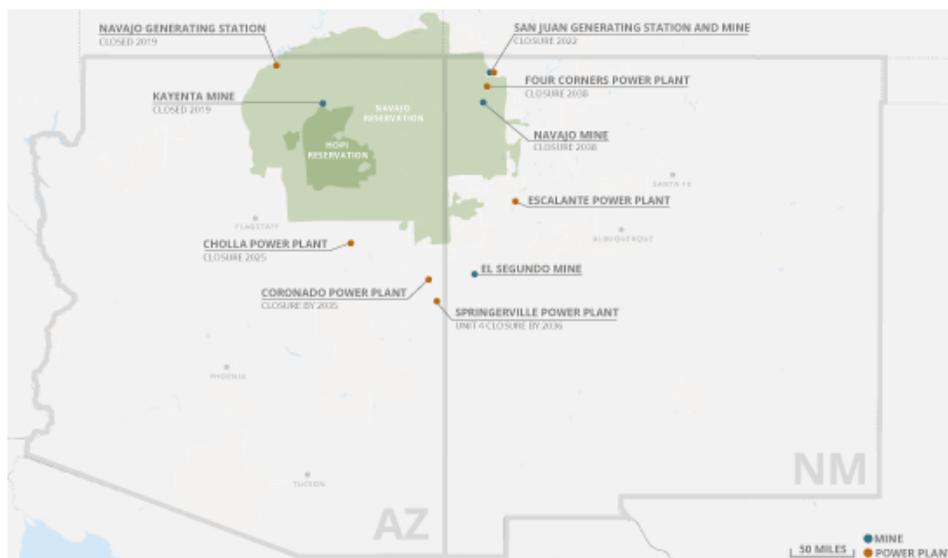


FIGURE 5 COAL MINES AND COAL POWER PLANTS ON THE NAVAJO NATION CLAUDINE HELLMUTH/E&E NEWS (GRAPHIC); SNAZZY MAPS/© 2019 GOOGLE (BASE MAP)⁴⁷

The Navajo Generating Station, a behemoth of Western coal, and the Kayenta mine which supplied it were closed in November 2019, despite strong lobbying efforts by the tribe to keep them open. The closure represents an income loss of \$40 million in royalties, about a quarter of the tribal revenue.⁴⁸ The station and the mine employed 800, mostly Navajo and Hopi workers, with average salary and benefits of \$117,000, compared to \$26,000 elsewhere on the reservation.⁴⁹

The tribe has been concerned with divesting and building other energy industries to replace coal income.^{50,51} In 2013, the Navajo Transitional Energy Company (NTEC) was formed as an autonomous business entity to diversify the Nation's energy resources. In August 2019, in a deal that shocked tribal leaders, the NTEC bought three huge mines in the Powder River Basin area of Wyoming and Montana. The mines, located almost 900 miles from the reservation, were purchased for \$100 million from the bankrupt Cloud Peak Energy, and NTEC assumed all future cleanup costs. The deal is fraught with financial risks, with estimates for reclamation liabilities associated with the mines ranging from \$400 million to \$1 billion.^{52,53} The acquisition increased NTEC's total coal output tenfold to make the Navajo Nation now America's third-largest coal producer.⁵⁴ In response to what was deemed the underhandedness and "disrespectful" nature of the deal, the Navajo government refused to provide surety bonds to the NTEC, forcing the company to find hundreds of thousands of dollars to pay for mine decommissioning insurance.^{55,56} This insurance expenditure not only complicates the deal but opens NTEC to added costs, which could be the difference between profitability and bankruptcy. Across the U.S., demand for coal-powered energy is at a 42-year low,⁵⁷ but NTEC is hoping to attract overseas customers.⁵⁸

Whatever the fate of the new mines, two of the three remaining coalmines on the reservation are scheduled to close in 2025, and the third will likely follow in 2031.⁵⁹ The tribe is now looking to renewables as an opportunity to bring jobs, income, and infrastructure. The potential for renewable energy development on the Navajo Nation is considerable. A 2018 DOE report found the Navajo tribe had the most favorable conditions for wind and solar development among all the tribes.⁶⁰

Tourism & Gaming

Recent economic growth has come from the Nation expanding their tourism and casino businesses. Navajo land is home to a number of natural wonders including Canyon de Chelly, Shiprock peak, Monument Valley, and Window Rock. The spectacular scenery became world-famous through John Ford movies such as *My Darling Clementine* and *The Searchers* and drew tourists to the area to "say hello to John Wayne."⁶¹ Monument Valley saw the creation of the first Navajo tribal park in 1960. Today there are more than a dozen tribal parks and three national monuments on the reservation. In addition, the tribe has built tourist attractions including six museums and a zoo.

A 2011 report estimated that tourism brings in \$113 million in revenue to the Navajo nation and directly supports almost two thousand full-time jobs.⁶² It also stimulates other industries such as silversmithing and weaving. As in many other areas of industry on the Navajo Nation, the poor quality of the roads hinders the expansion of tourism. Of the 11,600 miles of roads, it is estimated that 9,000 miles are unpaved. It costs \$2 million to \$3 million to pave one mile of road on the Navajo Nation.^{63,64} Cheaper alternatives to paving are still astronomical; putting gravel on all roads in the Navajo Nation, for example, at a cost of \$250 per mile, would be more than \$2 billion.⁶⁵

The four casinos on the reservation have also been a draw for tourists. Indian gaming has been called "the new buffalo," a reference to the prophecy that envisioned the buffalo returning as a means to economic independence.⁶⁶ The Navajo were comparatively late to begin developing their casino industry. The members of the tribe twice rejected gaming through referenda, before it passed in 2004 on the third try. By the time they opened the first casino in 2008 there were already many in areas adjacent to the Nation operated by other tribes: the Apache in Arizona, Pueblos in New Mexico, and Ute in Colorado—competitors for both tourists and Navajo gamblers.⁶⁷ The Navajo Nation financed the project and set up a management company, the Navajo Nation Gaming Enterprise, to manage their casinos. Between 2008 and 2013 the Navajo Nation Land Acquisition Fund invested nearly \$300 million to open the four casinos, an amount that worries some tribal members.⁶⁸

Many consider the presence of casinos on the reservation a double-edged sword.⁶⁹ On the positive side, gaming has created over a thousand much-needed full-time jobs and an annual payroll in excess of \$60 million. More money has a chance to circulate on the reservation and stimulate economic growth. The infrastructure improvements needed for operating the casinos have also benefited the surrounding communities. On the negative side, however, many see an erosion of the tribe's sovereignty by having to contract with the states. They see a further erosion of their values in the fact that, in 2013, the Navajo Nation Council voted to allow alcohol to be served in their Arizona casinos, in direct violation of traditional Navajo law.⁷⁰ Of greater concern to some members is that, while the four casinos have brought visitors to the reservation, the majority of patrons are Navajo. According to former Farmington, New Mexico mayor Bill Standley, "When the casinos opened up, the pawn businesses skyrocketed. People were pawning trucks, horse-trailers, all kind of personal objects to pay for gambling".⁷¹

As of September 1, 2020, there has been no date set for re-opening the four casinos on the Nation which have been closed since mid-March due to COVID, with employees on administrative pay. The casinos received \$11.1 million from the federal Paycheck Protection Program, which provided payroll for about nine weeks of payroll costs. After that ran out, the NNGE had to temporarily layoff 90% of their staff—900 people on July 28, and 140 in August. CARES funding of \$24.4 million is earmarked for the gaming industry, which will be used for payroll, building upgrades, and sanitizing protocols.⁷²

Economic Leakage

Leakage refers to the amount of money that leaves or "leaks off" as tribal consumers buy goods and services that are not produced on the reservation. According to the Navajo Nation Department of Economic Development, 53 cents of every dollar earned on the reservation is spent in the border towns.⁷³ The world's largest Wal-Mart is in Gallup, New Mexico, on the edge of the Navajo Nation.⁷⁴ The second largest is in Billings, Montana, nicknamed "Crow-Mart," outside the Crow reservation.⁷⁵ The Nation will never have a vibrant economy unless it can curb the problem of leakage by providing more local shopping options for Navajo customers.

Public Financial Support

In response to the current COVID emergency on the Navajo Nation, a [GoFundMe](#) appeal was created to finance a grassroots project to get supplies of food, water, personal hygiene items, and firewood to people living remotely on the reservation. It has received almost \$6 million in donations from members of the public and from non-profit grants.^{76,77}

The Navajo Nation government set up an official, competing, GoFundMe appeal. The amount of money donated to this fund has not been disclosed.

Given the history of job displacement, a growing dependence upon external sources of income—many of them low-paying jobs in vanishing industries, and lack of infrastructure support across its vast territory, it may come as no surprise that the Navajo Nation is among those hardest hit by a pandemic reliant upon all of the above to weather the stresses COVID is causing across the nation.

Factors Contributing to the Spread and Severity of Coronavirus on the Navajo Nation

Lack of Infrastructure

The spread of COVID-19 on the Navajo Nation has largely been attributed to the lack of infrastructure, particularly the lack of running water in houses on the reservation.⁷⁸ More than a third of Navajo households do not have direct public water access (compared to 0.6% of households nationally).⁷⁹ Without piped water, families must haul the water to provide for their everyday needs: drinking, bathing, cooking, laundry, watering their gardens and animals.

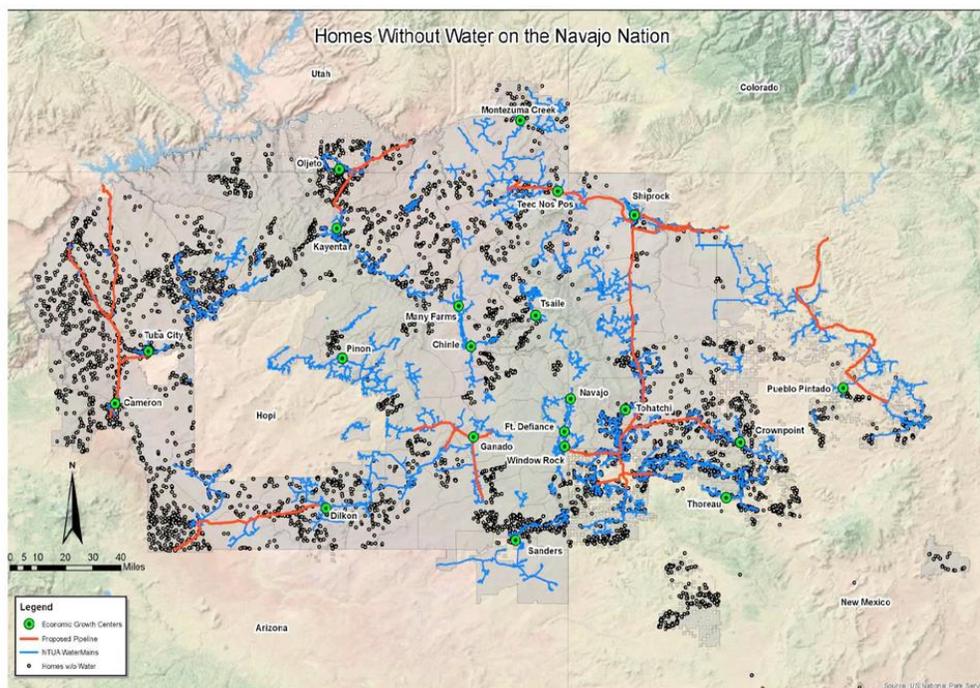


FIGURE 6 HOMES WITHOUT WATER ON THE NAVAJO NATION. SOURCE: THE NAVAJO TRIBAL AUTHORITY⁸⁰

For many people on the Nation, the nearest water is located in one of the thousands of unregulated and untreated sources, such as livestock wells or springs. The water from these sources is known to contain chemical and bacterial contaminants, such as arsenic or fecal coliforms.⁸¹

The cost of hauling water on the Nation is estimated at \$133 per 1,000 gallons, compared with Phoenix, where the cost is about \$2 for the same amount of tap water.⁸² Given the cost and trouble (one study estimated the average household's one-way trip was 14 miles and could be up to forty miles), water is a precious commodity on the reservation and is conserved accordingly by rationing and re-use. Average water usage on the Navajo Nation for people living without running water is 10 to 20 gallons per day.^{83,84} By comparison, the average per capita use for 80 neighboring communities surveyed was 190 gallons per day.⁸⁵ The Indian Health Service estimates it would cost over \$700 million to provide potable water and basic sanitation to all homes on the Nation.⁸⁶

Without access to clean water, it is impossible to comply with the CDC guidelines around frequent, prolonged handwashing. In addition, by having to make daily or weekly long-distance trips to haul water, people on the Nation are exposing themselves and others to the virus.

There has been a drought in the Southwest for the last twenty years and it is expected to go on for many more years.⁸⁷ Water is both a precious—and contested—commodity. The Navajo have water rights to the San Juan River, the Colorado River Lower Basin and the Little Colorado River.⁸⁸ A recent U.S. Senate bill that passed unanimously recognizes for the first time the tribe’s senior water rights to 81,500 acre-feet of water each year from the Colorado River Upper Basin, and allocates \$210 million for water improvements in the southeast Utah area of the Nation.⁸⁹ A version of the bill with bipartisan sponsorship is now before the U.S. House of Representatives.⁹⁰

About 90% of the water used on the Navajo Nation is groundwater, supplied by 20 aquifers on the reservation. As mentioned, mining operations siphoned away vast quantities of aquifer water. A recent Bloomberg Law article reports the allegation that, before they closed the Kayenta mine in August 2019, Peabody Energy Corporation pumped so much water from the Navajo Aquifer that hundreds of community wells and springs (the main source of potable water for residents) have gone dry, compounding the COVID-19 crisis.⁹¹

Underfunded & Under-resourced Health Services

As 16-year-old Larry Jackson pointed out in his viral video, the Navajo Nation is comparable in size to West Virginia, but access to resources is markedly different. “West Virginia is living on 163 grocery stores; we’re living on 13. They are living on 63 hospitals; we are living on six.”⁹²

Unlike any other racial group in the United States, Native Americans have legal rights to health care services, long-established through treaties and court decisions. The Indian Health Service (IHS), a federal agency within the Department of Health and Human Services, provides healthcare to people on the reservation. The funding of the IHS by the federal government, however, is considered a joke, with communities served by the agency advising each other, “Don’t get sick after June.”⁹³ The funding disparities between the IHS and other federal healthcare programs are shown in Figure 7 below.

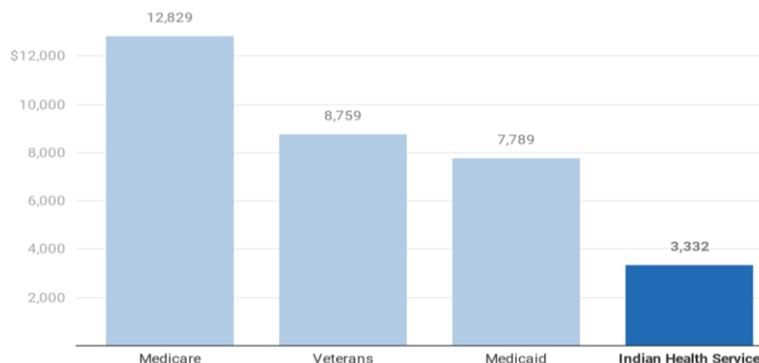


FIGURE 7 – DISPARATE PER CAPITA EXPENDITURE FOR FEDERAL HEALTH AGENCY PATIENTS

The comparatively low salaries for positions and the remote locations of facilities have resulted in significant staff shortages, particularly for specialists.⁹⁴ The Tuba City facility reports a pre-pandemic 30% vacancy rate for nursing staff alone. In addition, the facilities are obsolete (the average building is 49 years old) and undersized for the population, leading to overcrowding for the staff and patients.⁹⁵

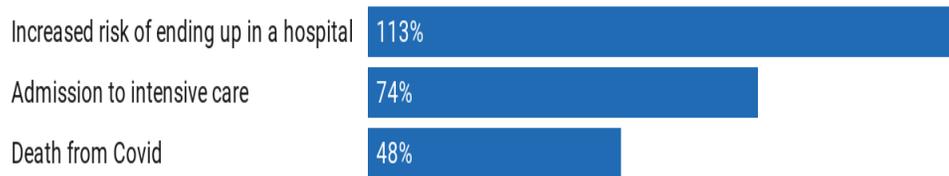
There are only 40 ICU beds between all Navajo Nation health facilities. In the early stages of COVID-19 the health centers were able to transfer more critical patients to larger hospitals off the reservation.⁹⁶ Now, as cases have surged in number and severity in the rest of Arizona, this option is no longer available.⁹⁷

The majority of people on the Navajo Nation, 53.5% of whom speak a language other than English, face cultural and language barriers to health care. While about 2% of the U.S. population identify as American Indian or Alaska Native, only about 0.56% of practicing doctors do so.⁹⁸

High Rates of Diabetes and Obesity in the Community

People with diabetes who are infected with the coronavirus are more likely to develop severe disease complications.⁹⁹ Likewise, obesity puts people at much greater risk of complications and death from COVID-19, as seen in Figure 8.

People with obesity are at greater risk of hospitalization, intensive care, and death from COVID-19



Source: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill • Created with Datawrapper

FIGURE 8 : COVID-19 RISK OUTCOMES IN PEOPLE WITH OBESITY

Historically, virtually no Navajo suffered from diabetes or obesity,¹⁰⁰ but today, American Indians and Alaska Natives have the highest rates of diabetes in the nation.¹⁰¹ Their current rate of obesity is 48.1% compared with 30% for non-Hispanic whites.¹⁰² On the Navajo Nation, 1 in 5 people have diabetes, compared with 1 in 11 for the U.S.¹⁰³ It is similar with obesity, a disease also suffered at high rates on the reservation, with as many as 4 out of 5 residents being overweight or obese.¹⁰⁴ Multiple underlying medical conditions significantly increase the risk of severe illness from COVID-19.¹⁰⁵



FIGURE 9 – FOOD DESERTS IN THE USA¹⁰⁶

Although many factors such as genetics, sedentary lifestyle, even trauma, can contribute to obesity, food is at the root of the high rates of obesity and diabetes.¹⁰⁷ People on the reservation do not have access to healthy, local food. According to the USDA, the vast majority of the Navajo Nation is a “food desert,” defined as limited access to fresh, nutritious food (see Figure 8 above).¹⁰⁸ As mentioned, the Navajo Nation has only 13 grocery stores, and people on the reservation have to rely on whatever food is available at gas stations or trading posts. These stores stock processed or frozen foods. Sources of low-fat protein, such as fish, are not readily available, and when they are, they tend to be expensive.¹⁰⁹ The average resident has to drive three hours to a grocery store for food, again increasing their risk of infection or contamination.¹¹⁰

Dense Multi-generational Living Arrangements

The housing shortage on the Navajo Nation has been a crisis for decades. A 1991 study estimated a housing shortage of 21,000 units, which, in subsequent decades, has increased to 34,000 units.¹¹¹

The reasons for the housing shortage are multiple and compounding. Firstly, land ownership on the Nation is complex and governed by bureaucracy. Less than 1% of the reservation is designated “fee-simple property,” i.e., land that can be freely bought and sold by individuals, while over 90% of the Nation is held in federal trust by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Development is stymied by the bureaucratic requirements for construction, such as environmental and archaeological permits.¹¹²

The extra costs associated with building on the Nation’s remote and rugged land, with little infrastructure, are enormous. There are no major contractors on the reservation, and laborers have to be brought in and provided with accommodations. Construction materials have to be delivered over bad roads. Banks and investors are nervous about lending without conventional collateral and native sovereignty means that disputes are settled in tribal court.

Another major factor contributing to the lack of new housing development on the Nation is attributed to the corruption and mismanagement at the Navajo Housing Authority (NHA). For many years, management at the NHA employed questionable, if not criminal, business practices, which allowed misappropriation, price-gouging, and construction delays.^{113,114} Reporting on a 2007 inspector general’s audit, the Arizona Republic writes:

“Auditors for the Office of Inspector General found that \$53 million went to 14 housing projects that were either unfinished or never started. Contractors were hired without competitive bids. Procurement codes were ignored. Building inspections were not done. Homes were built without access to roads. Workmanship was so flawed, and building materials so shoddy, some homes were ruled unsafe to inhabit.”

In spite of reforms, the agency was unable to make progress towards ending the housing shortage, building fewer than 300 new homes between 2013 and 2016, less than 1% of the needed 34,000.¹¹⁵ A 2017 investigation by the Office of Senator John McCain condemned the “wasteful, fraudulent and abusive use of housing funds” by the NHA, pointing out that the agency received \$803 million for housing— far more than any other tribe— but built only 1,100 new homes.¹¹⁶

The persistent housing shortage means high rates of intergenerational housing and crowded living situations on the Nation. This makes it is very hard—if not impossible—to quarantine and has proven deadly in many cases as Coronavirus infections quickly spread through the entire household.

Difficulty Contact Tracing

The vast geography and lack of telecommunication infrastructure on the Nation make contact tracing especially challenging. In those cases where a person doesn't have a phone, driving to reach them can take hours. Huge areas on the reservation do not have cell service, a fact reflected in the Navajo words for mobile phone—one phrase translates to “the thing you use while spinning around” and the second is “something you use while running up a hill.”¹¹⁷ According to the National Broadband Map, less than 54% of the population living in Navajo Nation territory have access to even the most basic wireline broadband speeds of 3 megabits per second downstream.¹¹⁸ As a response to the pandemic, the FCC has provided free access to an unused spectrum delivering wireless broadband service to the reservation. The tribe also has been provided an opportunity, for the first time, to apply for a license for a slice of the spectrum, so they can establish their own community broadband networks. The Nation is seeking subsidies and public-private partnerships to extend broadband infrastructure to the majority of its territory. It has received some limited short-term help with this from the cell-carriers currently providing emergency Wi Fi access in the region.¹¹⁹

CARES Act

Native American tribes were awarded \$8 billion in the CARES stimulus bill which was signed into law on March 27, 2020. The Navajo Nation was apportioned \$600 million but did not receive it until May 7, 2020. This was six weeks after the congressional deadline for distribution and only after the Nation sued the Treasury Department for untimely delivery after it was delayed for over a month.¹²⁰ The Nation received an additional \$114 million from the federal government after filing another lawsuit to prevent the Treasury from allocating CARE funds to for-profit Native corporations.

The federal funds come with the stipulations that the money must be used to cover only those costs that are necessary expenditures incurred between March 1 and December 30 and that are a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The deadline for spending all the money is December 30, 2020, which is problematic, considering the intricate process the tribe has in place for awarding contracts.¹²¹ The tribe is lobbying through Congressman Tom O'Halleran to have the deadline extended until December 2022.¹²²

The Navajo Nation Council apportioned the money in August 2020 as shown in Figure 10.

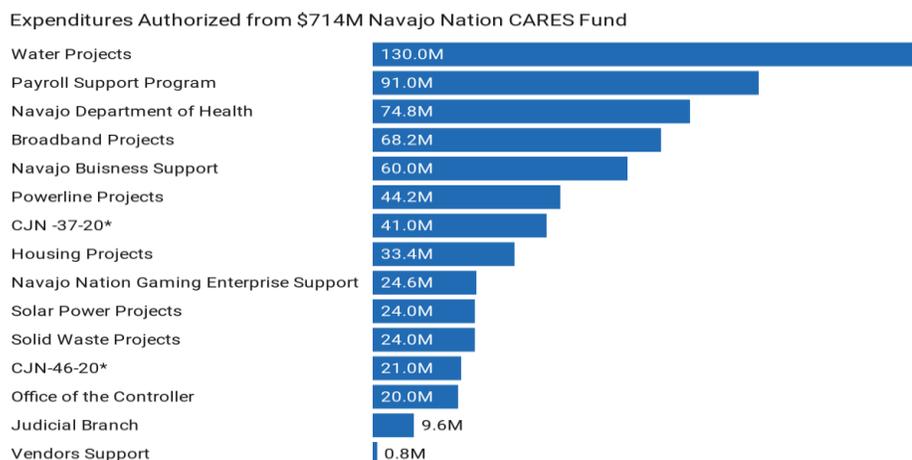


Chart: * Previously allocated funds for PPE, hazzard pay, care packages etc. - Source: Navajo Times 8/6/2020 - Created with Datawrapper

FIGURE 10 – EXPENDITURES FROM THE CARES FUND

Conclusion

The Navajo Nation recognizes that its future prosperity, health, and quality of life are dependent on the provision of basic services including water, electricity, and broadband internet access. All three are crucial in the fight against COVID-19, from access to running water for home hygiene and provision of telemedicine, to the dissemination of accurate public health information. In the Bosque Redondo Treaty dating back over 150 years, the U.S. Government agreed to provide healthcare, dwellings, and education to the tribe; the emergence of COVID-19 has made it more urgent than ever that the federal government make good on its promise.

As an elected official—or an aspiring one—it might be easy to think that these issues were “before my time”, or “don’t affect the people in my district,” when, in fact, neither of these statements are true. Legislation affecting current water rights, rural healthcare, broadband expansion, environmental protections, and a plethora of other issues—from voting rights to affordable healthcare to public health funding—are *all* under the auspices of state government officials who are tasked with representing Arizona’s entire population. Historic injustices may never be fully resolved, but measures to mitigate contemporary barriers to improving the lot of the Navajo Nation *and* protecting the entire state’s population from scourges like COVID-19 are certainly in the hands of voters and elected representatives.

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