

Survey: Indigenous populations face unique COVID-19 risks

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COVID-19 has unique impacts on Indigenous populations. Now a leading network of Indigenous leaders, scientists, and other experts has identified research topics that are important for better understanding the pandemic's impacts on Native Peoples.

The Rising Voices Center for Indigenous and Earth Sciences, which is administered in part by the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR), organized a survey and webinar discussion to create a space in which to better understand and center Indigenous perspectives on the [coronavirus](#) pandemic and identify key concerns, vulnerabilities, and emerging questions. It also examined how traditional cultural practices can strengthen the resilience of Indigenous societies.

"Indigenous communities where resources like water, food, shelter, and healthcare may be particularly limited, or where access to traditional sources for these has been disrupted by settler colonial processes, are being affected by COVID-19 more deeply than other places," said

NCAR scientist Heather Lazrus, co-director of the Rising Voices Center. "In many cases, the pandemic is exacerbating existing pressures that are caused by changing climates. At the same time, Indigenous knowledges and practices around subsistence foods, [community support](#), and healing are providing opportunities for resilience."

The Rising Voices Center survey and webinar revealed a number of challenges among Indigenous communities. For example, the pandemic has further restricted the access Indigenous peoples have to their traditional lands where they find foods. These foods help sustain their well-being spiritually and mentally as well as physically. Quarantine orders have also limited access to grocery stores, which are often located many miles away from rural tribal communities and have inconsistent supplies. In some cases, families have turned to eating foods that are out of season, such as shellfish that can contain biotoxins if consumed at the wrong times of the year.

COVID-19 is also exacerbating the existing disparities faced by many Indigenous peoples, including high rates of poverty and limited resources for housing, education, and health care. Survey responses highlighted concerns about continued racialized biases and a resulting distrust of officials, which reduced confidence in state-at-home directives. Communities that lack computers and Internet access need more reliable and accessible information.

The survey also found that Indigenous communities have substantial resilience.

While Indigenous communities are particularly vulnerable to the novel coronavirus because many residents live in small multifamily/multigenerational homes of more than 10 people, which makes social distancing difficult, the survey also revealed a resilience that draws on the strategies of ancestors during challenging events. More people reported

returning to traditional practices in medicine and food sources, with gardening and farming emerging as the most common solutions to [food](#) insecurity. Community networks are also working with families to provide meals to children, the elderly, and others who do not know where their next meal will come from.

Emerging questions

The survey responses highlighted a number of research questions for potential intercultural collaboration between the Indigenous and Earth sciences communities. These include:

- What role do temperature and humidity play in increasing or decreasing the spread of the novel coronavirus?
- What role does air pollution play in the spread of the virus?
- As the climate and temperature changes, how does this affect exposure to new viruses?
- How can traditional practices, such as not eating predator animals or not disturbing soil in certain places, prevent virus transmission to humans?

"The significance of the answers to this survey highlights the necessity of including Indigenous knowledge within the discussion of solutions for this global pandemic," said Lesley Laukea, a Ph.D. candidate focusing on Indigenous Studies at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. "We found that these solutions are focused on reasserting and reclaiming traditional practices through active agency in modern-day issues. The collaboration between different worldviews could also possibly help us find solutions for greater issues of sustainability and climate change disasters."

Provided by NCAR & UCAR

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