

As COVID-19 continues to ravage the Navajo Nation

Gallup, New Mexico locked down to control spread of coronavirus

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5 May 2020

The coronavirus crisis continues to spiral out of control on the Navajo Nation as the city of Gallup in northwest New Mexico was placed on lockdown on Friday under the state's Riot Control Act. The restrictions began on Friday at 12:00 p.m. and have been extended to Thursday at 12:00 p.m., with no one being allowed to travel into or out of the city of 22,000.

The crisis in Gallup is a preview of the situation that small towns across America will face as states continue to ease social distancing restrictions and open their economies. All roads into Gallup are closed and nonessential traffic is being routed around the city by the New Mexico National Guard and state police. Traffic routed around Gallup, including tourists, are being directed to travel through the Navajo Nation, which is on lockdown until May 17.

Gallup is a small, rural city at the edge of the Navajo Nation in northwest New Mexico, the largest population center on the route between Flagstaff, Arizona and Albuquerque, New Mexico. The city is predominantly Native American and borders the nearby Navajo, Zuni, and Hopi reservations. Its metropolitan area has the third-highest rate of COVID-19 infection of any metropolitan area in the United States.

McKinley County, which includes Gallup, has a total of 1,144 COVID-19 cases, over 30 percent of New Mexico's total. According to McKinley County Commissioner Bill Lee, one in 70 people has this virus. The number of confirmed cases likely undercounts the total.

The extraordinary number of cases in Gallup is a reflection of the poverty and economic devastation facing rural towns in the Southwest US, particularly on Native American reservations.

As of Sunday, there were 2,373 cases of COVID-19 on the Navajo Nation, an increase of over 200 in 48 hours. The critically underfunded US Indian Health Services (IHS) has administered roughly 2,800 tests per 100,000 people as of April 20, the third-highest testing rate in the US. Though the IHS has expanded rapid testing, the crisis in Gallup shows that testing continues to lag far behind the need.

The lockdown will sharpen the hunger crisis on the Navajo Nation, already a food desert, where food access has been curtailed by curfews, closures and shelter-in-place orders. According to the *Navajo Times*, border cities like Gallup are a vital resource for the reservation's residents, who must often travel hours to shop for groceries, do laundry, haul water, and buy hay and feed for livestock. As many Navajo people rely on federal aid to survive, the first of the month is a particularly vital day for travel into Gallup.

The political boundaries of the Navajo Nation make it difficult to attain a true count of the cases among Native Americans who live in the areas surrounding Southwestern reservations and trust lands as well as within them. However, the case of Gallup paints a stark picture for rural towns that are seeing an increase in tourism as Southwest states allow businesses to reopen, compelling workers to return back to work.

On April 30, the same day New Mexico Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham requested a lockdown of Gallup, the state eased restrictions on travel and nonessential businesses while reopening state parks in all counties except for McKinley, San Juan, and Cibola, the counties that border the Navajo Nation. Despite prematurely lifting restrictions, Governor Grisham placed the blame for the "unchecked" spread of the

coronavirus in these areas on workers, “Physical distancing has not occurred and is not occurring. The virus is running amok there.”

Rural hospitals in the Navajo Nation are at capacity, and cases are spilling into high school gymnasiums and local community centers. This weekend, as state parks in southern Utah saw crowds of tourists, the Chinle Community Center, which is on Navajo land near major tourist destinations along the Utah/Arizona border, was authorized for use as an “alternate care site” for isolating COVID-19 patients.

This is in addition to the FEMA field hospital set up in Chinle, one of two FEMA hospitals set up on the reservation. According to local news, the FEMA facilities cost a total of \$4 million, for which the Navajo Nation will be expected to pay \$1 million. This comes as none of the \$8 billion awarded to federally recognized tribes via the CARES Act has been disbursed.

The US government’s inability to stem the pandemic on native land is the latest in a long history of crises in Native American communities across the country, all of which have roots in the origins of American imperialism.

That thousands of people whose ancestors were relocated and imprisoned in the US government’s genocidal drive to subjugate Native Americans are now ill with a virus abetted by the ruling class’s malign neglect of the entire working class is no accident of history—it is the logic of capitalism, which the international working class must replace with socialism in order to reorganize society to meet the needs of all.



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