

COVID-19 devastates Native American reservations in California and across the US

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had a harmful impact on Native American reservations across much of the United States. As many tribes rely on revenue from casinos and other gambling operations, the pandemic has led to job losses and depleted funding for social services.

The residents of reservations—among the poorest and most isolated places in the country, where homes often lack electricity or running water—have suffered higher than average rates of infection and death from coronavirus.

While the pandemic has continued to rage across the US, the wealthy owners of lucrative casinos have insisted on re-opening without any significant restrictions regardless of the health consequences. Casino workers and tribal residents, among the most exploited layers of the population, have been made to suffer as a result.

Early last month, a Harrah's Resort Southern California executive resigned in May after raising concerns about reopening the casino in the middle of a global pandemic. The resort is owned by the Rincon Band of the Luiseno Indians.

Darrel Pilant, a general manager and senior vice president and employee of 23 years, filed a lawsuit against the casino's operator, Caesars Entertainment Inc., after claiming he was forced to resign after Harrah's made moves to reopen its casino resort back in May of this year, in defiance of a mandated stay at home order issued by Governor Gavin Newsom.

Pilant stated that the decision to reopen the casino caused "serious adverse health and safety consequences involving employees and customers contracting COVID-19."

Through September of this year, 217 residents of San Diego County who contracted the novel virus reported

being at a casino within two weeks of becoming ill. The numbers reported included 12 hospitalizations and the death of one casino patron.

All the confirmed cases were connected to San Diego County's nine casinos and include 76 employees and 141 patrons.

Casino spokespersons were quick to deny responsibility by stating that casino patrons who tested positive cannot confirm that they contracted the virus from a casino itself, and furthermore, San Diego County officials have refused to name the specific tribal casinos where each of the outbreaks have occurred.

From the standpoint of private profit, the identification of any specific casino as a coronavirus hotspot would mean dramatic loss of revenue as patrons would avoid the location in an effort to protect themselves.

Pilant also stated in the lawsuit that Democratic Governor Newsom and San Diego County administrative officials were fully on board with the decision to reopen the casino, despite the illegality and overt recklessness of reopening a gambling center in the middle of a pandemic.

Casino workers in San Diego have previously voiced health and sanitization concerns. Photos have surfaced with casino patrons not wearing masks or respecting social distancing measures and workers have related that patrons are frequently removing their mask to speak.

A worker at the Sycuan Casino Resort, owned and operated by the Sycuan Band of the Kumeyaay Nation east of El Cajon, stated that he has verbal exchanges with non-masked patrons at least 20 times per day.

At the Thunder Valley Casino Resort, owned by the United Auburn Indian Community just north of Sacramento, employees have complained that the

casino has been operating with less than minimal safety measures.

With casino gaming revenue being the lifeline for tribal communities, the push to reopen effectively dangled the continued operation of social infrastructure, education, and medical services over the heads of tribal residents, highlighting the heightened disparities of wealth between working class tribal members and casino owners and operators.

The reliance on income from gambling for maintaining already limited social services is an indictment of corrupt tribal leaders, who are most often tied closely to the Democratic Party and oversee conditions of deep poverty on the reservations.

The industry in San Diego County is part of a larger boom seeing annual increases in total revenue collected. California alone dominated the Indian gaming market in 2016 and amassed a total of \$8.4 billion dollars in gaming revenue that year. Nationwide, California dominates a little over a quarter of the national revenue collected on just gaming alone. California tribal casinos collected nearly a billion dollars in non-gaming revenue in the same year.

With the number of positive cases in San Diego County approaching the 50 thousand mark in the next few days, and 803 confirmed deaths, the dangerous character of tribal casinos staying open with limited restrictions like temperature checks and requiring face masks puts residents across the county and more broadly in jeopardy.

Despite the much-hyped economic benefits promised by gambling on tribal reservations, the reality is that the vast majority in these communities have not seen any tangible improvement in their lives.

The latest available statistics are telling. While casinos reap billions of dollars every year for the owners and operators, Native Americans continue to have the highest poverty rate among any ethnic or racial group in the US. American Indians are much more likely to be victims of police violence and suffer a host of health problems such as diabetes and liver disease a rate higher than the population as a whole.

They also suffered the lowest educational achievement rates in comparison to other demographics. According to the US Census Bureau, from 2013-2017 just 14.3 percent of Native Americans have a bachelor's degree or higher. By comparison,

20.6 percent of African Americans and 34.5 percent of whites have a bachelor's degree or higher.

These processes have only accelerated under the COVID-19 pandemic. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released data that showed a disproportionate impact of the virus on American Indian/Alaska Native populations. According to the CDC, Native populations were 3.5 times more likely to be infected than non-Hispanic whites.

The Navajo Nation, the largest reservation in the US, has recorded at least 560 deaths, a larger total than 13 states and a higher death rate than any state. In Arizona, Native Americans account for 11 percent of COVID-19 fatalities, despite making up only 5 percent of the population. In

Wyoming, 30 percent of the coronavirus deaths are Native American.



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