

RESEARCH NOTE

RESEARCH NOTE #1 - 2025

BY Olivia Anderson (NIWRC)

COVID-19 Impacts on Indigenous Youth

By Olivia Anderson

Research Assistant at the National Indigenous Women's Resource Center (NIWRC)

oanderson@niwrc.org

The impacts of COVID-19 on Indigenous youth were immense and spanned across all aspects of health and wellbeing. These impacts continue to be felt today by Indigenous communities. Indigenous youth in particular faced major disruptions in areas such as education, social engagement, and social emotional skill development.

This research note will highlight the social impacts of COVID-19 on Indigenous youth and will provide insight into the ways cultural connectedness created a pathway towards resiliency in spite of these challenges.

This Research Note will discuss:

- I. The social impacts of COVID-19 on Indigenous youth
- II. The health and wellbeing of Indigenous youth after these social impacts
- III. The importance of community-driven connections for Indigenous youth resiliency

Social Impacts of COVID-19 on Indigenous Youth

COVID-19 created major disruptions in education, an area that is highly connected to a young person's social wellbeing. Indigenous youth were particularly impacted by educational shifts to online learning. A survey conducted by the National Indian Education Association (NIEA) found that schools serving Native students were more likely to have outdated technology resources¹. Native students also have lower rates of home internet access, which makes remote learning all the more challenging¹. These disruptions in learning and social interaction have major impacts on social/emotional wellbeing. The transition to remote learning can present challenges to student attention and comprehension levels. One study spoke with Indigenous youth from Cheyenne River Sioux, Oglala Sioux, and Rosebud Sioux. Students from these tribal nations reported difficulties maintaining their educational studies due to

remote learning issues and the reduction in peer-to-peer interactions². These challenges have been connected to greater stress in students³.

Beyond educational impacts, high levels of isolation for youth is connected to worsening mental health. Isolation is particularly impactful to youth because social interaction is key to cognitive development. Exposure to isolation and trauma during adolescence can contribute to lifelong mental health challenges like depression and anxiety. The negative effects of social isolation are heightened for Indigenous youth due to pre-existing inequalities and historical impacts^{4,5}. Indigenous youth reported loss of peer friendships and an increase in social anxiety during COVID-19². This loss continues to influence Indigenous youths' social skills and networks.

Indigenous youth experienced disruptions in their larger social networks as well. Social networks of friends, extended families, and tribal communities were disrupted by COVID-19. An Indigenous youth's support system may have weakened during quarantine. Indigenous youth were 2 to 3 times more likely to experience familial and community loss compared to white children³. Such loss is deeply impactful to youth and can create long-lasting changes to family and community support networks. The loss of elders during the COVID-19 pandemic is particularly detrimental to Indigenous youth as well as the larger community because of the potential coinciding losses of cultural, linguistic, and spiritual teachings.

Health and Wellbeing of Indigenous Youth

It is clear that Indigenous youth faced major disruptions in social support systems like school, immediate friends and families, and their broader community. Social disruptions are likely to be followed by similar mental health challenges. Increased feelings of isolation, anxiety, and other mental health struggles were common amongst Indigenous youth^{2,4,5}. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, access to mental health resources declined due to the transition to remote learning and remote care delivery. Gaps in mental healthcare may increase the long-term impacts of mental health challenges^{4,6}.

These negative mental health trends during and after the COVID-19 pandemic are particularly dangerous to the wellbeing of Indigenous youth. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Indigenous youth already faced the highest rates of suicidal ideation and suicide due to intergenerational trauma from colonization^{5,7}. COVID-19 only exacerbated this inequality, as suicide rates for Indigenous youth increased^{5,7}.

The physical health of Indigenous youth was significantly impacted by COVID-19. Indigenous youth face higher rates of diabetes and asthma compared to non-Indigenous youth, and these conditions were exacerbated during the pandemic⁴. Indigenous youth reported less physical activity, in part because of the lowered access to public recreational facilities and physical education classes^{2,4}. Substance use rates amongst Indigenous youth increased during COVID-19, which could lead to negative physical health outcomes⁵.

Cultural Connection Is Key To Indigenous Youth Resiliency

While COVID-19 enhanced persistent inequality for Indigenous youth, it also highlighted the resiliency of Indigenous communities. Cultural connections and family engagement was reported by Indigenous youth as positive experiences during the pandemic². Ongoing family support is key to youth wellbeing and can mitigate the negative effects of social isolation.

The power of Indigenous resiliency cannot be overstated. Participation in cultural activities led to positive health outcomes for Indigenous youth during the pandemic⁵. Decreased stress and increased social connectedness have been seen from practicing cultural activities⁵. Increased self-confidence, which can mitigate mental health challenges, has also resulted from cultural participation⁷. Culturally-relevant health programs have begun to be developed. Early research suggests these resources are more meaningful and impactful to Indigenous youth⁸.

Conclusion

This research note discussed the profound impacts of COVID-19 on Indigenous youth, focusing on social disruptions, health challenges, and the role of cultural connectedness in fostering resilience. Social disruptions in education, peer engagement, and community connections led to mental and physical health challenges. Isolation worsened Indigenous youth mental health. Physical health of Indigenous youth was also impacted through the exaggeration of pre-existing conditions, decreased physical activity, and increased substance use.

Despite these challenges, cultural connections emerged as a source of resilience. Engagement in cultural activities and ongoing family support helped mitigate the negative effects of isolation, reduce stress, and boost self-confidence. These protective factors highlight the importance of cultural and familial ties in promoting the mental and physical wellbeing of Indigenous youth, underscoring the need for culturally relevant health programs to support them moving forward.

Feedback

We would love to hear from you!

Want to provide us with anonymous feedback for this resource? Let us know how we did, how, and if this Research Note was useful to you, others, and/or Indigenous Communities!

Please visit this [Research Note Feedback Form](#) to provide your feedback! NIWRC does not collect any personal identifying information. The feedback is completely anonymous without the collection of IP addresses or any other personally identifiable information.

References

1. National Indian Education Association. (2020). NIEA survey on impact of COVID-19 in Native schools. <https://www.niea.org/s/Survey-Results.pdf>
2. Johnson G, Purvis S, Le Beaux K, Tobey M, Isaacson MJ. American Indian Adolescent Perspectives on COVID-19 Impacts Within Great Plains Area Reservations. *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*. 2025;0(0). doi:[10.1177/10436596251316235](https://doi.org/10.1177/10436596251316235)
3. Tamirisa, K., & Maringanti, H. B. (2024). A Narrative Review of the Factors Affecting the Mental Health of Adolescents and Young People During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Cureus*, 16(8), e66781. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.66781>
4. Oberg, C., Hodges, H. R., Gander, S., Nathawad, R., & Cutts, D. (2022). The impact of COVID-19 on children's lives in the United States: Amplified inequities and a just path to recovery. *Current problems in pediatric and adolescent health care*, 52(7), 101181. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cppeds.2022.101181>
5. Mollons, M. O., Penner, K. E., Elsom, A. L., Cameron, E. E., Hunter, S., Woods, L., Tomfohr-Madsen, L. M., Nijdam-Jones, A., & Roos, L. E. (2023). COVID-19 and indigenous youth wellbeing: A review. *Current opinion in psychology*, 53, 101659. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2023.101659>
6. Sacca L, Markham C, Hernandez B, Shegog R, Peskin M, Craig Rushing S, Warren H, Tsosie M. The Impact of COVID-19 on the Delivery of Educational Programs in Native American Communities: Qualitative Study JMIR Form Res 2022;6(4):e32325 doi: 10.2196/32325
7. Villodas M. L. (2024). Suicidality and Non-Suicidal Self-Injury: A Narrative Review of Measurement, Risk, and inequality among Minoritized and System-Involved Youth in the USA. *Children (Basel, Switzerland)*, 11(4), 466. <https://doi.org/10.3390/children11040466>
8. Reed, N., Peterson, R., Ghost Dog, T., Kaufman, C., Kelley, A., Craig Rushing, S. (2022). Centering Native Youth's Needs and Priorities: Findings From the 2020 Native Youth Health Tech Survey. *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research (Online)*, 29(2), 1-13.

Acknowledgments

This Research Note presentation is made possible by Cooperative Agreement, Award Number 990EV0540, from the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Suggested citation: Anderson, Olivia. (2025). *Research Note - name*. Lame Deer, MT: National Indigenous Women's Resource Center.

Please visit the National Indigenous Women's Resource Center (NIWRC) at niwrc.org for more resources. For immediate questions, concerns, or comments regarding this Research Note, please contact NIWRC Research & Evaluation at oanderson@niwrc.org.