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# Addressing Inequities in Education: Considerations for American Indian and Alaska Native Children and Youth in the Era of COVID-19

Edited by Tiffany Yip, Ph.D., *Fordham University*. For more information, contact Kelly R. Fisher, Ph.D., Director for Policy, or Nighisti Dawit, M.Sc., Senior Policy Associate, *Society for Research in Child Development*, at policy@srcd.org.

MATERIALS

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Statement of the Evidence

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**STATEMENTS OF THE EVIDENCE**

**Authors**

- **Monica Tsethlikai, Ph.D.** (Zuni), Arizona State University
- **Michelle Sarche, Ph.D.** (Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe), University of Colorado, Anschutz Medical Campus
- **Jessica V. Barnes, Ph.D.**, Michigan State University
- **Hiram Fitzgerald, Ph.D.**, Michigan State University

COVID-19 exacerbates the effects of historical trauma on American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) communities. High death rates among Elders, parents, and extended family, who are central figures in preserving cultural traditions, threaten children's ability to overcome adversity. Already at risk for low levels of school achievement, AIAN children are further threatened by school closures due to limited access to broadband services and technology, inadequate access to nutritious food and dedicated space to study at home. Systemic inequalities not only limit access to needed services but also result in the provision of lowquality education and health care, which worsens the negative impact of COVID-19. Policies that direct funds to provide children with culturally informed educational experiences and mental health services, ensure access to broadband and information technology, and honor AIAN families and communities will help mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on AIAN children.

"Despite the fact that the U.S. government has a trust responsibility to provide for the education, health and safety of Native children, resources and support for Native children are currently inappropriate, insufficient, or limited by bureaucracy so that they are ineffective, even in the absence of the current crisis."

The Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children, 2020

There are 574 federally-recognized tribes in the United States. American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) represent 1.7% of the United States population with the population highly concentrated in Alaska, California, Oklahoma, the Southwest and the upper Midwest.[1,2] The population is young; with recent US Census estimates showing that nearly one-third of AIANs are age 18 or younger.[3] Tribes have a special trust that obligates the federal government to ensure the health and well-being of AIAN people.[1] Failure to uphold this obligation has led to inequalities in access to basic human needs such as clean water, plumbing, electricity, internet, cellular service, housing, hospitals, and schools.[1] Generations of attempted genocide, systemic

racism and oppression, including cessions of land and resources, verbal and physical violence, and police brutality[4-6] in AIAN communities have led to disproportionate rates of disease and addiction[7-10] which increase the risk of infection and death from COVID-19.[11] It is impossible to know the true impact of COVID-19 as data on AIAN people are frequently incomplete, inaccurate or not tracked at all.[1] As of July 30, 2020, up to 40% of all COVID-19 cases in New Mexico were American Indian (AIs) despite the fact that AIs are only 9% of the population.[12] The Navajo Nation, which spans Arizona, New Mexico and Utah, has had the highest infection rate in the United States.[13,14] Even with the national discourse focused on systemic racism and inequality, AIAN communities remain largely unrepresented in mainstream and academic reporting. These inequitable conditions may be experienced as *interlocking systems of oppression*[15] increasing vulnerability for poor educational outcomes. That said, evidence supports what AIAN people have always known; connections to AIAN culture protect and buffer children from the trauma of inequality.[16,17]

**Inequalities in Education Must be Addressed to Mitigate Vulnerability to COVID-19**

It is important to understand the negative sociohistorical context of schooling in AIAN communities.[18-22] In the early 20th century, almost 83% of AIAN children were forcibly removed from their parents and sent to boarding schools where they were not allowed to speak their tribal languages and were often physically and sexually abused.[19,21] Today, 93% of AIAN students attend state-funded public schools and 7% attend Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools.[23] AIAN high school graduation rates are the lowest in the nation.[1,23]

The roots of disparity start early and are amplified over time.[24] In Arizona and New Mexico, where tribes have had high rates of COVID-19, AI children are 3.5 times more likely to live in poverty, twice as likely to read below grade level in 4th grade, and 1.5 times more likely to be below grade-level proficiency in math in 8th grade compared to non-Hispanic White children.[25] Additionally, AI children experience significantly higher median rates of per-student discipline including school suspension and expulsion.[26,27]

School closures due to COVID-19 threaten to exacerbate existing challenges given that over one-third of AIAN children live in households without broadband internet access (the highest of all groups) and 15% live in homes without a computer – both access issues are further compounded with rural residence.[28] Many children live in multigenerational homes and may not have dedicated space available for formal learning.[1,29-31] In addition, many families rely on school lunches and do not have transportation to obtain food provided by school lunch programs during the pandemic.[11,29,32] The need to attend classes at home or with social distancing, and other safety measures (e.g., face coverings, Plexiglas partitions) will likely harm AIAN children's learning, as studies have shown they learn best through active participation, observing others,

and nonverbal forms of instruction.[26,33-35] In addition, more AIAN teachers, tutors and support staff are needed to support AIAN students' learning.[1,36]

"What we see repeatedly across national crises and disasters is that the most disenfranchised among the U.S. population are disproportionately harmed physically, emotionally, economically, and educationally."

Fortuna et al., 2020

**Resources are Needed to Buffer Children from COVID-19 Related Trauma**

Prior to COVID-19, studies showed that AIAN youth experience more adverse childhood experiences than their non-AIAN peers, including physical abuse and witnessing domestic violence.[37,38] Increased financial stress and overcrowding of homes due to COVID-19 are likely to result in even higher rates of domestic violence and abuse.[39] Increased exposure to adverse childhood experiences heightens the risk for negative outcomes including suicide attempts, poly-drug use, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.[37]

Studies have found that creating and maintaining connections to language and culture within AIAN communities buffer children from trauma.[16,40,41] This includes participating in ceremonies, dancing at Pow Wows, and maintaining strong connections to extended families. Unfortunately, each of these connections will likely be limited due to social distancing and the loss of parents, grandparents, extended family, and elders to COVID-19.

**Policy and Practice Implications**

To ameliorate the impact of COVID-19 on AIAN children, policymakers and school administrators should:

- Increase funding for Native language instruction and online family culture nights.
- Increase the number of AIAN teachers, tutors, support staff, and mental health professionals available to students.
- Increase broadband infrastructure to ensure access to technology (e.g., computers, tablets) and wireless connectivity.
- Provide additional funding for early education and K-12 programs to incorporate AIAN language and culture in curricula, teaching practices, and family outreach.
- Increase support for AIAN students in both BIE/tribal and public schools through federal programs such as Johnson O'Malley and Title VII Indian Education programs, which provide funding for AIAN

students to participate in cultural, language, academic, and dropout prevention programs that they might not otherwise be able to afford.

This brief is part of a larger volume that addresses the impact of systemic racism and the potential exacerbating effects of COVID-19 on racial-ethnic minority children, youth, and families, and LGBTQ+ youth. The full volume includes the following briefs:

- Considerations for American Indian and Alaska Native Children and Youth in the Era of COVID-19
- Considerations for Asian American Children and Youth in the Era of COVID-19
- Considerations for Black Children and Youth in the Era of COVID-19
- Considerations for Latinx Children and Youth in the Era of COVID-19
- Considerations for LGBTQ+ Children and Youth in the Era of COVID-19

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