

A Neglected Nation:

THE INFLUENCE OF WATER POVERTY ON NAVAJO HEALTH



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In an area roughly the size of West Virginia, Navajo Nation is facing a crisis that many Americans cannot conceptualize: water poverty. According to Science Directly, water poverty is defined as a “situation where a nation or region cannot afford the cost of sustainable clean water to all people at all times.”

Insecure access to water poses a significant problem. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), this can have many impacts on a community, including disrupting agriculture and increasing risk of diseases. It also can make seemingly small, daily tasks like brushing your teeth, cooking, washing your hands and cleaning your clothes impossible.

It is reported by CBS News that 40% of the 173,000 Navajo Nation residents lack access to clean, safe drinking water. Additionally, one in three Navajos do not have a sink or toilet in their home. In the U.S. according to the WHO, 99% of the population has access to clean water. How is it that the disparity is so large between communities in the United States? The history of the Navajo and the U.S. government is key to understanding this.

The U.S. government has signed 370 treaties with numerous Indigenous nations, the Navajo included, from 1778 to 1871 alone. As history repeats itself, countless more have been signed since then. According to the National Public Radio, “More than 150 years ago, the Navajo and many other tribes signed treaties with the federal government giving up their land in exchange for funding of things like housing, infrastructure and health care. But for decades that hasn’t happened.” As a result, Navajo Nation faces food deserts, an unemployment rate around 70%, substance abuse and poor infrastructure.

Another major result of these treaties that led

to the water poverty public health crisis in the Navajo community was, according to WHO, the reallocation of the water and irrigation systems in the American southwest. Water that was once accessible to farms and other systems in Navajo communities was relocated to source housing developments and golf courses outside of the reservation, leaving the Navajo, who have been farmers since before colonization, without water. Today, finding clean water on the reservation is a challenge.

Residents of Navajo Nation gain access to clean and safe water through traveling miles by foot or car to their nearest well pump. According to the Navajo Water Project, one in three Navajo families haul water to their homes everyday. On top of this, there are constant obstacles that interfere with their water access. Lack of infrastructure and paved roads results in the inability to drive to the nearest water source for extended periods of time. If the reservation is hit with rain, the dirt roads turn into mud and become unusable. Navajo Nation has approximately 18,000 miles of road with 15,000 of those miles being unpaved, leaving many without reliable infrastructure.

To remedy this, some residents drive water trucks with thousands of gallons of clean water, delivering the resource to individual households. Darlene Arviso, a resident of Navajo Nation, is one of the few who drives a water truck. Her route consists of approximately 200 households, and she is only able to get to each home about once a month. While these efforts keep families accessing clean water, none of them have running water.

The people of Navajo Nation strive to self-sustain, but there are many extra barriers to finding safe water on the reservation. If they dig deep enough—around 600 feet—to find water, it is often not safe to drink because it could contain uranium, according to Theresa Daivs from The Salt Lake Tribune. The uranium found in this water is from mining that was conducted during World War II and has caused people to become sick with kidney disorders and cancer.

Daivs said that in 2015, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) “breached a mine tunnel at the abandoned Gold King Mine near Silverton, Colorado sending 3 million gallons of acid mine drainage into the Animas and San Juan rivers.” This not only hurt Navajo farmers for the season, but it caused long term effects for those who used the water and the land. After the chemical spill, the Navajo Farming Agency had to shut off all irrigation points along the river. Turning off this water supply was detrimental to both crops and livestock.

Not only were people and property damaged physically by the spill, but there were spiritual consequences as well. Navajo Nation resident Duane “Chili” Yazzi said that the nation’s elders suffered greatly: “as culturally connected as they are to the land and the water, that was really traumatic for them to know that the water’s damaged.” Yazzi remains skeptical about the fault of the spill, saying that, “It’s been pretty well substantiated that none of that heavy contaminated water got into the irrigation system and onto the farms. But we’re often distrustful as Native people of anything that comes from outside institutions.” This distrust stems from the U.S. government perpetuating broken treaty after broken treaty.

Despite a poor prognosis, efforts are being made to combat the Navajo Nation water crisis. One organization in particular is dedicated to providing residents access to clean, running water. The Navajo Water Project, which began in 2014, is led by Indigenous people and is registered as an official enterprise of Navajo Nation. Not only is it their mission to provide homes with clean and safe, hot and cold water, but it also employs residents of the reservation with high paying jobs that provide benefits such as 100% employer-paid health coverage. The Navajo Water Project develops new sources where water is treated and stored locally, and has home water systems that provide 1,200 gallons of hot and cold running water and solar power.

In April 2020, as a response to COVID-19 relief efforts, Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez said, “We are United States citizens but we’re not treated like that. You can hear the frustration, the tone of my voice. We once again have been forgotten by our own government.” Indigenous communities within the United States are not immune to the outcomes of legislation built on broken promises.

Systemic water poverty leaves thousands of people on the Navajo reservation without the basic security of safe water, and is just one more example of the U.S. government failing the people of Navajo Nation. But, between protecting elders, delivering safe water and maximizing health care access, the people of Navajo Nation have proven the necessity of empathy

in building sustainable and supportive communities during times of public health crises.

