

Self-determination and Indigenous health

Colonisation is a fundamental determinant of Indigenous peoples' health. Indigenous is a term defined by displacement, and the effects of that displacement are felt by Indigenous peoples around the world. Aug 9, International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, is a chance to look at the continuing effects of territorial removal, the destruction of people, culture, and languages, and the lack of self-determination (the right to determine one's own social, cultural, and economic development), and their impact on Indigenous peoples' health. Any attempt to address the health inequities of Indigenous peoples will require governments to finally grapple with these foundational factors and enact and enforce the rights of Indigenous peoples to self-determination and territorial sovereignty.

There are an estimated 476 million Indigenous people worldwide (6% of the world's population). Indigenous people have disproportionately high rates of poverty, non-communicable diseases, infant and maternal mortality, mental illness, and infectious diseases (such as tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS), and a life expectancy gap of up to 20 years. Indigenous peoples are particularly susceptible to pandemic infectious diseases like COVID-19. According to the Pan American Health Organization, there have been 72 000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 among Indigenous peoples throughout the Americas, but, as in many countries, the true incidence is probably much higher. In the USA, Indigenous peoples have been among the hardest hit by COVID-19, second only to Black Americans (60.5 deaths per 100 000 Indigenous people and 73.7 deaths per 100 000 Black Americans vs 32.4 deaths per 100 000 White Americans).

However, both Australia and Canada have seen relatively low numbers of confirmed COVID-19 cases among their Indigenous populations. This success is partly due to the 2010 H1N1 influenza pandemic, which disproportionately affected Indigenous peoples and led them to prepare response strategies. In Australia, Indigenous groups worked with government health systems to create policies and messages tailored to their communities. By contrast, the Closing the Gap programme, which aims to reduce disadvantages among Indigenous Australians, has so far shown few improvements. The programme has been criticised for a top-down approach that excludes

Indigenous voices. In Canada, Indigenous groups were able to use self-determination to lockdown communities and prevent spread among at-risk populations. Conversely, in the USA, when the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe erected roadblocks into tribal land in South Dakota, instead of working with them, the governor threatened legal action.

Indigenous groups hold customary control of around a quarter of the earth's surface, an area that contains around 80% of the earth's biodiversity. But national governments legally recognise only a fraction of that control. This ambiguity enables illegal mining, logging, and other environmental exploitation to flourish, with governments either ambivalent or actively encouraging it. This exploitation is devastating not just for Indigenous peoples, but also for the world. Illegal mining and logging operations risk exposing isolated Indigenous populations in the Amazon to COVID-19. Emergency measures have required Indigenous people in Brazil to travel to population centres to claim benefits and access health care, risking further exposure and spread in isolated communities. Beyond the pandemic, rising ocean levels threaten to disappear Pacific nations like Tuvalu and Kiribati, and an estimated 20 million Indigenous people live in the Amazon basin, where 200 000 acres of forest are burned every day. Indigenous peoples do not just suffer from the effects of climate change; they are also passionate and effective advocates for confronting the climate emergency.

The health of Indigenous peoples can only be secured if their place in the world is secured. In Australia, Canada, Brazil, and the USA, the commitment to recognising Indigenous rights has depended on who happens to be in power. Governments must make affirmative, legally binding commitments to the rights of Indigenous peoples, including self-determination and the sovereignty of their territories, and work to address discrimination and past and present injustices. The political and economic burdens faced by Indigenous peoples are an inseparable barrier to health. Beyond a permanent political settlement, governments must make substantial investments into the health, education, and economic welfare of Indigenous peoples, and those people must have a voice in any decisions that affect them. Only then can a real foundation for health emerge. ■ *The Lancet*



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For more on **social determinants and Indigenous health** see https://www.who.int/social_determinants/resources/indigenous_health_adelaide_report_07.pdf?ua=1

For more on **COVID-19 and Indigenous Australians** see <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/covid-19-rates-indigenous-australians/>

For more on the **stand-off over COVID-19 checkpoints in South Dakota** see <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/24/us/politics/coronavirus-south-dakota-tribe-standoff.html>