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As the nation confronts the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the legacy of racial inequities that the disease highlights, there is an opportunity to review how diverse communities across the United States are planning for, mitigating, and recovering from the pandemic’s effects. Here, we take a deeper look at San Juan County, N.M., exploring the impact of and the county’s response to COVID-19 based on information available through early June 2020.

Community Overview

San Juan County\(^2,3\) is located in the Four Corners region of New Mexico. The Navajo Nation Reservation makes up approximately 60 percent of the land in the county. The county has experienced a history of severe environmental contamination due to the oil and gas extraction industry that includes activities like mining, dredging, and quarrying.\(^2\)

In the 1970s, the county was considered a national energy sacrifice zone, a designation given to a geographic area that has been permanently impared by environmental damage.\(^4,5\) The largest local industries still include mining and extraction, as well as retail and health care.\(^6\) Over two-thirds of students in the county are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch.\(^7\)

New Mexico adopted and implemented Medicaid expansion in 2014. As a result, from 2013 to 2017, the state experienced a 51 percent reduction in the health uninsurance rate.\(^8\) American Indians and Hispanics in the county experience disproportionate rates of diabetes, liver disease, alcohol-related injuries, suicide, depression, and alcohol abuse. Lack of transportation, high rates of health uninsurance, and severe physician shortages contribute to the disparate burden of disease and poor health outcomes among these groups. In 2014, New Mexico had the highest rate of alcohol-related deaths in the nation.\(^9\) San Juan County has more recently placed priority on bolstering behavioral health resources in the community.\(^10\)

### About San Juan County

| Population: 123,958 |
| American Indian: 41.1%* |
| Asian: 0.6% |
| Black: 0.8% |
| Hawaiian, Pacific Islander: 0.1% |
| Hispanic or Latino: 20.5% |
| White, not Hispanic: 38.0% |
| Two or more races: 2.8% |
| High school graduate: 84.2% |
| Median income: $50,582 |
| Age 65 and older: 14.9% |
| Persons in poverty: 23.1% |
| Uninsured: 13.4% |

* Percentages of population by race/ethnicity may add to more than 100 percent because categories are not mutually exclusive.\(^1\)
COVID-19’s Community Impact

The state of New Mexico had about 9,000 COVID-19 cases reported at the end of May. Across New Mexico and within San Juan County, healthcare workers experienced surges in infection rates in May. San Juan County’s unemployment rate increased from 6.3 percent in February to 13.3 percent in April. Further, there has been some concern about whether and how to open casinos safely, given the significant source of revenue those businesses offer the county.

The Community Response to COVID-19

In mid-March, the state of New Mexico issued stay-at-home orders, primarily led by the governor and state health secretary. The orders closed all nonessential businesses, limited restaurants to take-out and delivery services only, and reduced hotel and related lodging to no more than 50 percent occupancy. At the time, the state issued notice that it would institute surveillance to ensure compliance with the order, and use levers of license suspension, fines, and possible jail time for any violations.

While the governor allowed nonessential small businesses to reopen May 16 with some social distancing requirements, San Juan County was among the three jurisdictions remaining under restrictions as the county has been designated a COVID-19 hotspot.

COVID-19 in San Juan County, New Mexico

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total cases: 2,081</th>
<th>Total number of cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cases per 100,000: 1,679</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of state’s cases: 21.8%</td>
<td>&lt;20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As of June 13, 2020

Map was obtained from the CDC website on June 13, 2020. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/county-map.html?state=NM
position has been met with some opposition from Republican lawmakers who wanted business restrictions to be lifted more quickly; the governor contended, however, that restrictions must stay in effect, particularly with respect to high-risk businesses such as dine-in restaurants, gyms, and hair salons. Closures also have been met with protest from nonessential small business owners and residents.

In San Juan County, the three main cites—Aztec City, Bloomfield, and Farmington—declared states of emergency on March 23, primarily to reinforce state orders and to secure emergency response funds for their communities in need of support. The county has consolidated all relevant information about COVID-19 in one place, and its website includes information about COVID-19 cases in the county, links to state press releases, links to local resources, as well as a wealth of information from state and national resources. The Navajo Nation Department of Health also provides resources for members of the Nation on its website. Early in March, the county began working with assisted living centers, hospitals, schools, and adult detention centers to plan for COVID-19 spread and containing the virus.

Outside of city and county governments, a number of organizations have provided the community with additional information on COVID-19. Prior to COVID-19, health leaders in the community included the regional health care system (San Juan Regional Medical Center) and the San Juan Safe Communities Initiative (SJSCI), a nonprofit working to bring community leaders and organizations together to improve quality of life in the county. SJSCI in particular has been a connector in the community, elevating the resources offered by social service providers in San Juan County, coordinating health promotion programs, and providing a platform for messaging about health on its website and YouTube channel. Since COVID-19 began affecting the community, the San Juan Regional Medical Center has provided a weekly COVID-19 video update, and the SJSCI shared links to a number of resources with a particular emphasis on resources to support behavioral health needs due to COVID-19.

**In San Juan County, support of businesses and local nonprofits included:**

- The Southern New Mexico Nonprofit Coalition conducted presentations on the impact of COVID-19 on the vitality and resiliency of local nonprofits.

- The Farmington Chamber of Commerce provided information for businesses on its website with guidelines on safely reopening and links to relevant small business loan programs.

- The Small Business Development Center at San Juan College provided support for small business owners seeking low-interest loans and assisted businesses in the application process.
The Role of Health Equity

The county has experienced historic racial tensions and mistrust from the Navajo Nation and the Hispanic community, given a history of oppressive policies and anti-immigrant sentiments, respectively.

The tensions and disparities in economic and health outcomes are reflected in the distribution of COVID-19 cases, with individuals of the Navajo Nation comprising over half of the state of New Mexico’s cases. One source illustrated the disparate impact: “If the Navajo Nation were a U.S. state, it would rank number three for per capita COVID-19 infections, behind only New York and New Jersey.” On May 20, the Navajo Nation surpassed New York City in terms of COVID-19 infection rate, at an estimated 2,449 cases per 100,000. Infrastructure challenges are being cited as drivers of infection; for instance some areas in the Navajo Nation Reservation lack basic plumbing, preventing people from being able to follow hand-washing guidelines. Contact tracing can be difficult as well, given that not all Navajo Nation members have phones and some live in remote locations that can make notifications difficult.

The San Juan Community Collaborative for Health Equity, which pre-dates COVID-19, is linked to the state of New Mexico Health Equity Partnership. The state-level effort has been tailoring COVID-19 resources to specific populations, particularly the Hispanic and American Indian communities, as well as providing broader state and county resources. In addition, there have been community conversations about the health equity issues related to the virus across New Mexico, though it is unclear how many of these conversations have occurred in San Juan County itself.

What’s Next

As the crisis disproportionately impacts some groups, it will be important in future reports to track how San Juan County’s pre-virus collaborations to address health equity will help continue to shape the county’s ongoing COVID-19 response.
References


