America's "Forgotten" People Experience Devastating Impacts from COVID-19

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To the Editor—COVID-19 has had major impacts on communities of color, largely due to adverse social determinants of health that increase risks for not only contracting the disease, but dying or being hospitalized as a result. One group that has been particularly traumatized by COVID-19 is the American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN) population. A recent study published in *Demographic Research* and highlighted in *The New York Times* has demonstrated just how devastating this has been: life expectancy for all US populations has dropped by three years since the pandemic began, but has dropped a staggering six years for AIAN populations [1, 2]. These data are consistent with data reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which show that AIAN populations are nearly two times more likely to get COVID-19, nearly four times more likely to be hospitalized, and nearly 2.5 times more likely to die from this condition [3]. While COVID-19 was the third leading cause of death in the general population in 2020, it was the leading cause of death for AIANs [4].

Unfortunately, this disparity in COVID-19 outcomes doesn't come as a surprise given the alarming number of health disparities that impact this population. The Indian Health Service (IHS) reports significant disparities compared to non-Hispanic Whites for overall mortality, and for sexually transmitted disease, diabetes, chronic liver disease, unintentional injury and homicide, suicide, and respiratory disease [5]. IHS provides health care services for the 574 federally recognized tribes in the United States [6], but not for the nearly 200 non-federally recognized tribes.

North Carolina has the largest AIAN population in the Eastern United States; the 2020 Census indicates that just over 300,000 North Carolina residents identify as AIAN, a 79% increase since the 2010 Census [7]. Similar to what is seen nationally, AIANs in North Carolina experience significant health disparities as well as adverse social determinants of health [8]. While state data are not available for COVID-19-related declines in life expectancy in this population, data from the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services indicate significant disparities in COVID-19-related outcomes for the state's AIAN population compared to the non-Hispanic White population [9]. Increasing life expectancy in our state is a goal of Healthy North Carolina 2030, and the 2016–2018 average life expectancy for AIANs in the state was already almost three years lower compared to non-Hispanic Whites [10].

In November 2021, I was fortunate to be a guest editor of a special issue of the *NCMJ* focused on American Indian health [11]. I would invite *NCMJ* readers to learn more about the AIAN population in our state and how we can best work together to address the unique health and health care needs of these tribal communities. NCMJ

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