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# Supporting Native American Girls During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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# SUPPORTING NATIVE AMERICAN GIRLS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



**Indigenous Adolescent Girls'  
Empowerment Network**

January 2021





# COVID-19 in American Indian/ Alaska Native communities

Coronavirus has had a devastating impact throughout “Indian Country” (geographic areas of sovereign, legally-recognized Native Nations) in the U.S. – the CDC reports the cumulative incidence of COVID-19 cases among American Indians (AI) and Alaska Natives (AN) is 3.5<sup>i</sup> times that of non-Hispanic whites.<sup>ii</sup> COVID-19 has a deadlier impact on the AI/AN population as well, with the likelihood of hospitalization 4.0 to 5.3 times, and mortality 1.8 to 2.6 times, that of non-Hispanic whites.

<sup>iii</sup> Moreover, among persons aged 20–29 years, 30–39 years, and 40–49 years, COVID-19 mortality rates among AI/AN are 10.5, 11.6, and 8.2 times, respectively, those of non-Hispanic whites.<sup>iv</sup>

COVID-19 has magnified existing disparities. Decades of deep, historic neglect have resulted in an underfunded health system, crowded and insufficient housing, persistent food insecurity and a high burden of chronic disease in Indian Country. Many live in multi-generational homes with numerous family members, making social distancing impossible and increasing risk for elders in the community. As lockdowns were implemented in many rural tribal communities, it became apparent that girls and their families would face increased risks of various types. Food insecurity increased since many families live at or below the poverty level and have limited financial and geographic access to groceries and supplies during lockdown periods. Girls are cut off from their sources of socioemotional support – schools, community groups and friends.

AI/AN youth already having among the worst high school graduation and teen suicide and teen pregnancy rates in the U.S.. As schools were shut down and students sent home, AI/AN girls – already a vulnerable subgroup within this neglected population – faced increased risks. Many AI/AN girls live in unstable situations and have limited access to broadband and cell phone service, which threatens school progress as well as reducing tele-options for counseling, health services, mentor contact, peer bonding and social support.



# Location of IMAGEN COVID-19 Relief Recipients



**Alaska**

St Paul Island  
Kake

**Arizona**

First Mesa  
Indian Wells

**Idaho**

Kamiah  
Lapwai

**Iowa**

Sioux City

**Michigan**

Baraga

**Montana**

Blackfeet Nation

**Nebraska**

Babb  
Browning  
Fort Belknap Reservation

Great Falls

**Nebraska**

Omaha

Norfolk

**New York**

Niagara County

Erie County

**Nevada**

Carson City

Gardnerville

Schurz

Yerington

**Oklahoma**

Oklahoma City

Shawnee

Tulsa

**South Dakota**

Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe  
Reservation

Eagle Butte

Dupree

Timber Lake

White Horse

Crow Creek Reservation

Pine Ridge Reservation

Kyle

Martin

Pine Ridge

Porcupine

Rosebud Reservation

Antelope

Mission

Okreek

Parmalee

Rosebud

Spring Creek

Saint Francis

White River

**Utah**

Salt Lake City

**Wisconsin**

Odanah





## IMAGEN'S RESPONSE

The Indigenous Adolescent Girls' Empowerment Network (IMAGEN) is a native female designed, led, and controlled network that adapts, builds, and shares innovative skills and tools to create local Girl Societies that address the needs of AI/AN adolescent girls. Building from decades of programmatic research and lessons learned with indigenous girls across the Americas, IMAGEN brings AI/AN females and organizations together to build state-of-the-art approaches to reclaim matrilineal traditions and accompanying female social infrastructure. Through the Girl Society framework, girl-centered programs are adapted to the local context and impart tribally determined skills, safe havens, and mentor networks to girls.

Through the generosity of a private donor, Mr. Marty Jeiven, IMAGEN received \$36,000 to directly fund groups that work with AI/AN adolescent girls. To reach as many girls as possible, IMAGEN created micro-grants ranging from \$500-\$2,000 that were dispersed to Native women working with local girls. We received applications from teachers, domestic violence advocates, health professionals, community organizers and child welfare specialists. Between May and October 2020 IMAGEN administered 68 micro grants to 33 Girl Society groups working in 44 communities, reaching over 600 girls. IMAGEN's reach has been broad; we funded groups working with girls in cities, towns and rural tribal communities in 14 states, including Alaska, Arizona, California, Idaho, Iowa, Michigan, Montana, Nebraska, New York, Nevada, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Utah, and Wisconsin.

Groups were innovative in using funds to maintain strong connections with the girls in their communities during a time of isolation and limited access to support systems (see Box 1). Many groups created supply kits that were delivered to girls at their homes and that responded to the unique needs in their communities such as self-care items, gardening, art and mask-making supplies as well as emergency supplies – including food, cleaning supplies, hand-sanitizer, diapers and baby supplies, water and masks for those under lockdown.





The Tinokwe Foundation delivered food and other essentials to families. Credit: Enedina Banks.



The Thunder Valley WWHY Girls Society provided craft and hygiene supplies after learning that girls needed community-focused activities following COVID-19 shutdowns.



Girls of the Aleut community on St. Paul Island painted rocks as a part of a successful virtual seabird camp.

During the pandemic, IMAGEN has continued to connect and support the women running Girl Society groups. All micro-grant recipients became members of the IMAGEN Circle and are invited to the IMAGEN bi-weekly support and check-in meetings where network members share ideas and resources for connecting with girls during COVID-19 and plan for the future beyond the pandemic. IMAGEN facilitates these calls, announces available funding and workshop opportunities, and provides technical assistance to all members of the network. IMAGEN Circle members have the chance to present their work during regularly scheduled IMAGEN webinars that reach a large audience of practitioners, donors, researchers and Girl Society leaders.



## Box 1. List of Activities funded by IMAGEN's COVID-19 Emergency Fund

### FOOD INSECURITY

- Food parcels assembled by and for girls in food-insecure families
- Provision of supplies for virtual baking and cooking sessions which are extremely popular
- Baby food distributed to teen mothers
- Gardening supplies, seeds and food preservation equipment provided to girl-managed gardens

### FINANCIAL NEEDS

- Emergency cash distributed
- Financial assistance to girls in the greatest need, including homeless girls
- Collection and distribution of winter gear and PPE

### HYGIENE

- Hand sanitizer, soap, lice treatment, and oral hygiene products provided in wellness packages
- Diapers and baby wipes delivered to teenaged mothers
- Feminine hygiene supplies, puberty kits and underwear for girls in deep remote areas
- Virtual puberty education classes offered

### ENSURING SPIRITUAL WELL BEING

- Prayer materials such as sage, cedar, sweetgrass and prayer bundles were widely distributed
- Virtual prayer and healing circles for girls held weekly

### CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT

- Sewing kits for girls to produce PPE for elders, themselves and other relatives
- Materials for producing cultural objects (moccasins, beading, ceremonial dresses, parfleche bags, and medicine pouches), and art supplies (paint, drawing paper, and pencils) provided to girls
- Connecting girls still at boarding school to girls in home communities through virtual groups, pen pal activities, journaling, gaming and greeting card making
- Virtual photography bootcamp including purchasing equipment so girls can learn to create content and develop editing skills

### WELLNESS, PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

- Self-defense classes offered to girls via live instruction from local experts
- Self-care and wellness kits including journals, beauty and wellness supplies
- Exercise supplies including jump ropes, hula hoops, and resistance bands included in wellness kits
- Purchasing gear for outdoor education, small group hiking trips, backpacking and rock climbing
- Support for physical activity including girls' basketball and a 10-mile bike, walk and run challenge club for girls
- Substance abuse prevention, creating social media campaigns, PSAs and community outreach

### COMMUNICATION AND CONNECTION

- Provision of cell phones and fee coverage for broadband where available and communication apps
- Live, virtual group gatherings to provide girls with social support, fun, and organized activities
- Incentives such as gift cards for girls to join virtual meetings, ceremonies and other community events to keep them engaged and connected with each other





Care packages were sent to girls throughout the Hopi community with specially designed shirts, stickers, water bottles, locally-made soap, and Hopi food items.

**Citation:** Lisa Polen, Kelly Hallman, Stephanie Martinez, Kassel Franco Garibay. 2021. Supporting Native American girls during the COVID-19 pandemic. Indigenous Adolescent Girls' Empowerment Network (IMAGEN) Brief. 7. New York, NY. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.15118.48963/2>

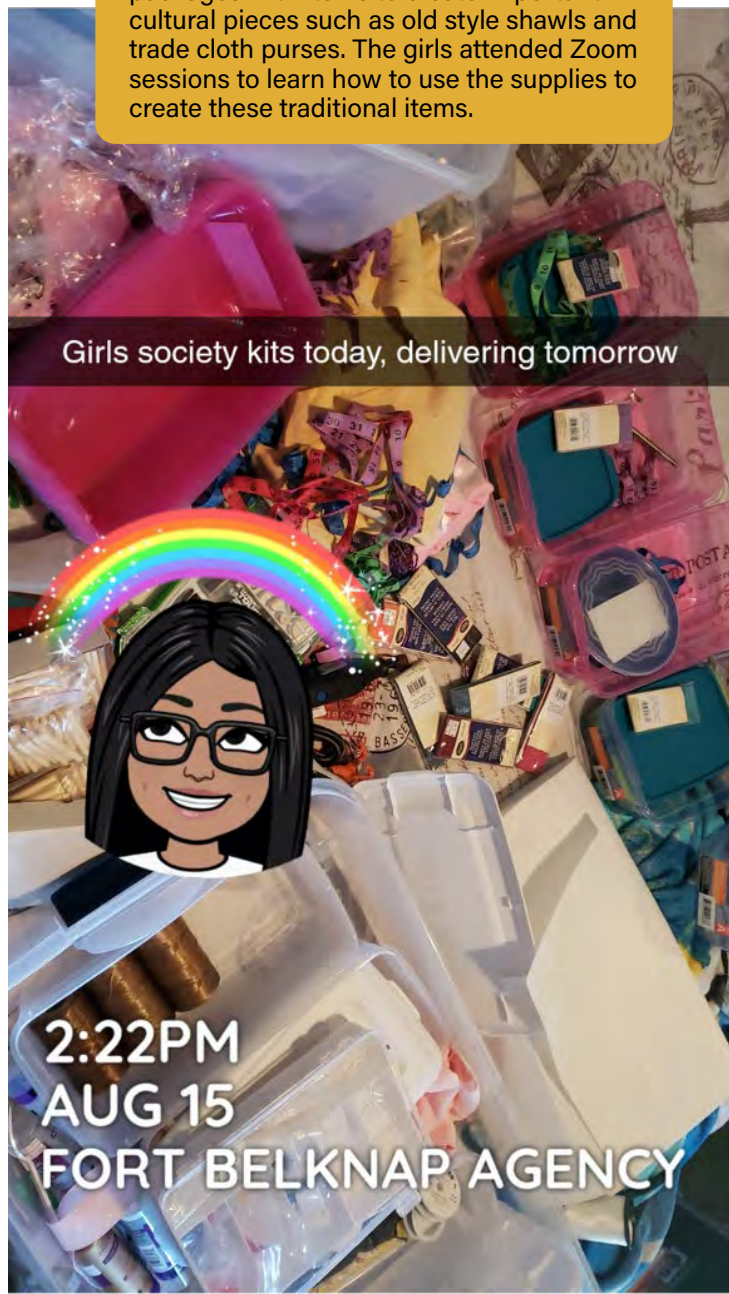
<sup>i</sup> These figures include data from 23 states that report race/ethnicity information. Arizona which has had a large outbreak is not included in these data.

<sup>ii</sup> Hatcher SM, Agnew-Brune C, Anderson M, et al. COVID-19 Among American Indian and Alaska Native Persons — 23 States, January 31–July 3, 2020. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2020;69:1166–1169. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6934e1>

<sup>iii</sup> CDC COVID-19 Hospitalization and Death by Race/Ethnicity: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/investigations-discovery/hospitalization-death-by-race-ethnicity.html>

<sup>iv</sup> Arrazola J, Masiello MM, Joshi S, et al. COVID-19 Mortality Among American Indian and Alaska Native Persons — 14 States, January–June 2020. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2020;69:1853–1856. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6949a3external icon>

The Fort Belknap Girls Society sent packages with items to create important cultural pieces such as old style shawls and trade cloth purses. The girls attended Zoom sessions to learn how to use the supplies to create these traditional items.



Girls society kits today, delivering tomorrow

2:22PM  
AUG 15  
FORT BELKNAP AGENCY



As a part of wellness outreach, Nez Perce adolescent girls were provided with kits that included toiletries, skincare and haircare supplies, antibacterial wipes, and information about helpful local resources.

Believe  
IN  
yourself

**SUICIDE PREVENTION RESOURCES**

You don't have to be suicidal to call. If you or a loved one need to talk, reach out. Someone is always there for you on the other end of the line.

**NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION HOTLINE:**  
1-800-273-TALK

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is a United States-based suicide prevention network of over 160 crisis centers that provides 24/7 service. It is available to anyone in suicidal crisis or emotional distress.

**STRONGHEARTS NATIVE HELPLINE:**  
1-844-7NATIVE

StrongHearts Native Helpline is a safe domestic, dating and sexual violence helpline for AI/AN, offering culturally-appropriate support and advocacy daily from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. CT. Anonymous and confidential.

**CRISIS TEXTLINE:**  
741-741

Crisis Text Line is a global not-for-profit organization providing free mental health texting service through confidential crisis intervention via SMS message.

**WERNATIVE.ORG**

A comprehensive health resource for Native youth, by Native youth, providing content and stories about the topics that matter most to them. For weekly health tips, contests, or life advice, text NATIVE to 97779

**DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND WELFARE:**  
208-799-4440

Community Crisis Response and Services to Adults with Severe and Persistent Mental Illness or children with a serious emotional disturbance. Serving: Clearwater County, Idaho County, Latah County, Lewis County, Nez Perce County

**TREVOR TEXT:**  
678-678

Text START to 678-678 to begin confidential text messaging with a Trevor counselor. Available 24/7/365

\*\*\*TrevorSpace — An online international peer-to-peer community for LGBTQ young people and their friends.

**IDAHO SUICIDE PREVENTION HOTLINE:**  
208-398-4357

Call or Text Idaho Suicide Prevention Hotline provides 24/7, free and confidential support for people in distress.

[www.imagen-network.org](http://www.imagen-network.org)



With generous support from:  
Marty Jeiven  
ForGood Fund  
The Ford Foundation  
Jerry Cunningham Family

**TAKE A MENTAL HEALTH TEST**  
Online screening is one of the quickest and easiest ways to determine whether you are experiencing symptoms of a mental health condition. Mental health conditions, such as depression or anxiety, are real, common and treatable. And recovery is possible.

**TREVOR LIFELINE:**  
1-866-488-7386  
Trevor Project is an American non-profit organization founded in 1998 focused on prevention efforts among lesbian, gay, transgender, queer, and questioning youth.

**ADOLESCENT BEHAVIORAL HEALTH:**  
1-800-922-4724  
The Behavioral Health Department is promoting wellness in Nimipuu Health Center by offering evidenced-based, confidential, and supportive treatment within a well-coordinated behavioral health system.

**IT WILL BE OKAY**