

# COVID Impacts

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## A Qualitative Analysis of COVID-19's Impact on Indigenous and Migrant Communities in the United States Southwest

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Indigenous and Migrant communities in the southern Arizona borderlands are positioned along a unique social, political, and historical confluence. An analysis of their experiences during the COVID19 pandemic must be understood within the following context:

- Since the beginning of the pandemic, at least **1 in 3** residents in Arizona have been infected, with a total of **2,093,680 reported cases**. At least **1 in 239** residents have died from the coronavirus, a total of **30,400 deaths**. (The New York Times. June, 2022).
- There are a total of 23 Arizona Indigenous tribes, though 22 are federally recognized. This shapes access to tribal and federal resources.
- In Southern Arizona, there are at least five tribal communities, both recognized and unrecognized, whose original lands are near the U.S./Mexico border: the Tohono O'odham, Pascua Yaqui (Yo'eme), Hia-Ced O'odham, Cocopah, and Quechan. All have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- On November 8th, 2021, after an eighteen-month hiatus, the land border between the United States and Mexico was finally reopened to non-essential travel for vaccinated individuals. (Proof of vaccination and COVID testing requirements dropped after we conducted interviews).
- Because the communities on either side of the border are deeply interdependent, the reopening of the border has had an economic and emotional impact for mixed status families.
- On the same day of the border reopening, asylum seekers held a protest near the Nogales ports of entry. With chants and speeches, they demanded more humane treatment and the end to the Title 42 order, established in 2019 under the Trump mandate. Also known as the Migrant Protection Protocol, it forces asylum seekers to remain in Mexico for the duration of the processing time for their asylum cases. (The Arizona Republic. November, 2021).

In this research brief, we outline some of the findings from the individual, semi-structured interviews conducted to understand the experiences of Indigenous and Migrant communities in Southern Arizona during the COVID-19 pandemic. Key themes included: mental health declines, hardship related to employment and finances, and difficulties adapting to virtual modalities during the pandemic. Although we saw similarities across both communities, unique insights emerged for each community as well.

## Sample Demographics

### Indigenous Community (N = 15)

**Age:** M = 28.1 years, SD = 8.0

**Gender:** 46.7% cisgender men; 53.3% cisgender women

**Residence:** 73.3% living off the reservation; 26.7% living on the reservation.

### Migrant Community (N = 27)

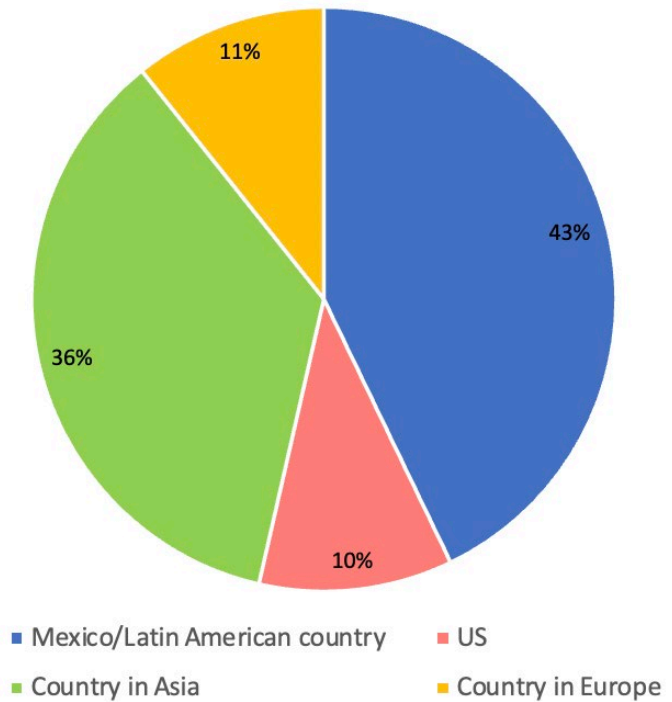
**Age:** M = 26.4 years, SD = 7.5

**Gender:** 22.2% cisgender men; 77.8% cisgender women

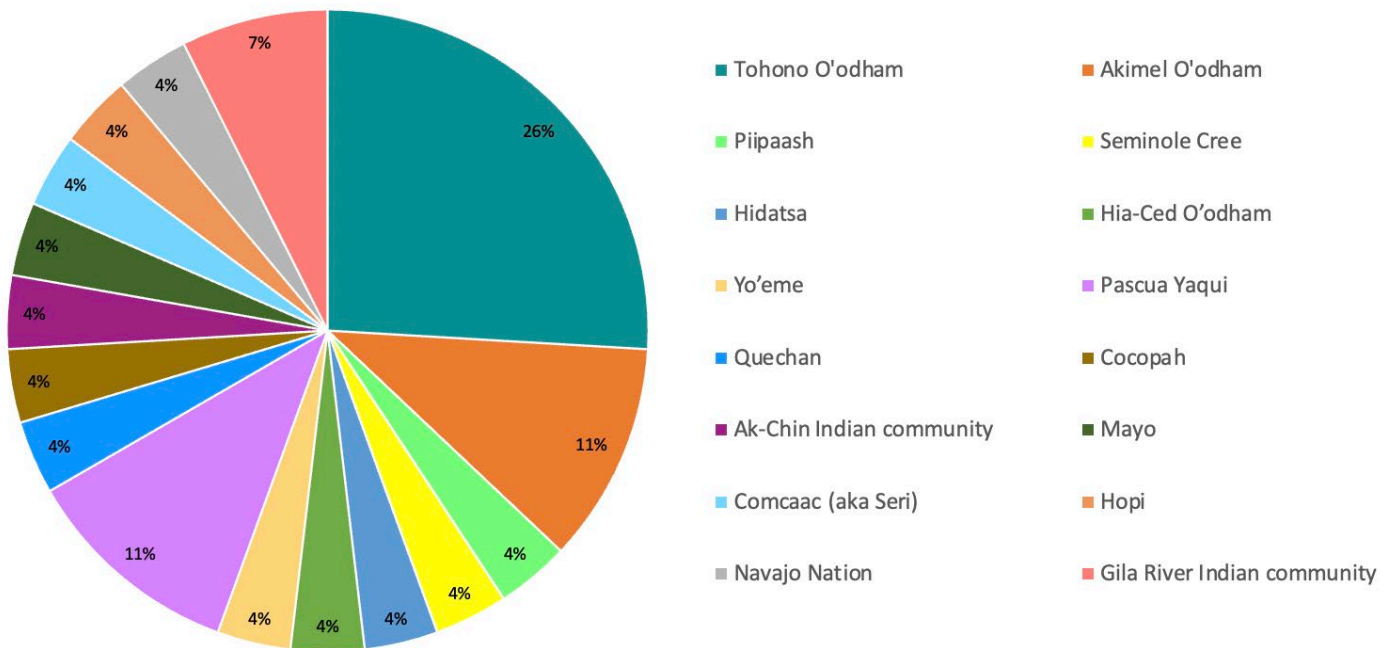
**Years in the US:** M = 11.7, SD = 8.1

**Language of interview:** 26.0% Spanish; 74.0% English

## Migrant Country of Origin



## Indigenous Tribal Affiliations



Note: Across the Indigenous sample, there were 16 different tribes that individuals were affiliated with, and many participants reported affiliations with one or more tribe.



## Mental Health, Financial Hardship, and Virtual Work Modalities

Across both communities, it was common for individuals to express **declines in their mental health** because of the pandemic, particularly related to uncertainty and fear.

Another key insight related to experiencing unexpected **employment and/or financial hardship** (e.g., getting laid off, having their hours/pay reduced, etc.) due to the pandemic.

It was also common for individuals to express experiencing **difficulties adapting to virtual modalities** in their work and/or school settings. This was uniquely a challenge for those who worked with the community.

## Indigenous Community Themes

A prominent theme to emerge among the Indigenous participants was tied to **community support & mutual aid participation**. Many individuals described community and family coming together to provide support and aid to one another during the pandemic.

“There's a lot of fear, a lot of apprehension, the anxiety, but ... everyone was very supportive of one another and you know, people who were sick, families and people would **provide meals, do what they could leave food at the doorstep, get cleaning supplies, delivered or arranging for things to, to get delivered** for people who had to be in lockdown and quarantine so I think everyone in the community would eventually- was **supportive of one another due to the fact that they understood the, the hardships that everybody was facing.**” – Indigenous woman, 49 y/o

Another salient theme to emerge surrounded experiencing **cultural loss and impact on cultural practices/traditions** (e.g., loss of knowledge keepers/elders, impact on cultural ceremonies) due to the pandemic.

“... especially during the Easter ceremonies... that's like **a cultural duty that is supposed to be performed every year, so I kind of didn't feel like, like we weren't doing it right**, so it was hard but I feel like they—like the tribe, did the **best that they could to try to keep everyone safe...** so it was just like, it was just a really difficult thing to do.” – Indigenous woman, 22 y/o

“Coming from a community and a tribe that's family driven, I know it affected me, it affected, you know, my relatives, and also the fact that **a lot of cultural things couldn't happen because [pause] like that, everyone was scared.** A lot of funerals couldn't happen, a lot of things were pushed aside because everyone was scared, and I know that affected a lot of people such as myself.” – Indigenous man, 22 y/o

Individuals were asked to discuss their thoughts on their **tribe's response to the COVID-19 pandemic**. Generally, individuals felt positive about their tribe's response to the pandemic and felt that those in charge did the best they could. Some highlighted ways this could have been improved (e.g., providing more support to those off the reservation, better communication) and the fact that having resources and infrastructure was a unique barrier/challenge. Few expressed that they felt their tribe was not prepared at all. Importantly, these sentiments varied according to tribal affiliation and resources.

## Migrant Community Themes

A prominent theme to emerge was tied to **family/community support**. Participants often described giving or receiving support during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly surrounding the **family**. Some participants also discussed the way this was tied to their occupation and their dedication to serving the community.

“Actually, I did [help people in my community]. My grandparents are from Mexico. And they, they're, they usually don't have the same resources as we do. So we help them with some groceries we sent over there and face masks and hand sanitizers for them, because they're already older. So we were like scared for



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them as well.... I know, my church actually did a whole, which I was a part of, the dinner, food pantry, as well, for the communities.” – Migrant woman, 21 y/o

Another less common, but notable theme to emerge surrounded **vaccine hesitancy**. Among those who expressed vaccine hesitancy, a variety of reasons were given such as fear of side effects and histories of abusive research.

“I was feeling skeptical because of my own knowledge of history .... Yeah. So, **the forced sterilization of Puerto Rican women in the 60s and 70s, Tuskegee Airmen experiment, things like that made me skeptical and I was like, I don't know if I want government officials to be injecting me with things that I do not even know how to pronounce.**” – Migrant woman, 30 y/o

Another notable theme to emerge among migrant participants was related to **differences in COVID regulations and precautions outside of US**. Some described the way in which countries outside of the US, such as Mexico, took the pandemic more seriously and implemented quicker and stricter precautionary measures.

## Finding Community and Strength During COVID

Although common themes to emerge highlight the negative impacts of COVID-19 pandemic, both communities described finding support in their families and communities during times of hardship. Some individuals also described experiencing benefits to their daily routines and behaviors (e.g., eating healthier, working out more) from being able to be home and slow down during quarantine. Others found outlets to cope by keeping busy such as picking up or returning to hobbies or seeking out strategies to cope with their mental distress. Overall, both communities described various acts of strength and coping during times of stress.

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## ABOUT THE PROJECT

**The researchers:** A cross-national team of over 30 researchers led by Dr. Lori Wilkinson, Dr. Kiera Ladner and Dr. Jack Jedwab, received funding from CIHR for this study *COVID-19's differential impact on the mental and emotional health of Indigenous Peoples and Newcomers: A socioeconomic analysis of Canada, US and Mexico*.

**UArizona Team:** Dr. Michelle Téllez, Kayla Osman, Alejandra Encinas Garcia, and Erika Tenorio. With local funding support from Inclusive Community Collaborative.

**The study:** The team has been collecting data in Canada since March 9 and the United States since March 27, 2020. Ongoing survey waves now include Mexico. Our goal is to measure and follow the changes in attitudes, behaviours, health and socioeconomic outcomes among persons living in all three countries using a mixed methodology of surveys and unstructured interviews.

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