

The impact on Indigenous Peoples of Trump's government shutdown and border wall obsession

written by M. Tiahui
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Women in Indian Health Service waiting room.



Tohono O'odham protest against border wall.

The U.S. federal government's partial shutdown that began in December has resulted in 800,000 federal employees furloughed or working without pay. About a quarter of the federal government is without spending authorization from Congress.

Millions of people have grave concerns over being able to file for and continue to receive basic life-sustaining benefits such as Social Security and SNAP (food stamps). If the Grinch-like government shutdown stretches into February, [nearly 39 million people may face severe reductions in food stamps](#), and the Department of Agriculture won't even say how long it can keep paying out benefits for those who depend on the program each month.

All of this creates massive disruptions to people's lives and wellbeing.

But even with such widespread fallout from the shutdown, there is a disparate impact on Indigenous peoples, as Trump and his cronies hold millions hostage unless

funding is granted for some type of wall or barrier along the border between the U.S. and Mexico.

Indigenous people in the U.S. are always disproportionately impacted by any federal cutbacks and shutdowns because so many Native programs are funded by the U.S. government, often on a short-term basis rather than many months in advance.

Contrary to what some believe, these programs are not some kind of giveaway to Native peoples. They exist because of the historical settler colonial theft of nearly all Indigenous lands and resources and the way in which the U.S. government largely stripped Indigenous people of even basic resources required to feed and house themselves — including forbidding Indigenous people from hunting or fishing on their own lands.

Indigenous poverty persists because of this history and because of the ongoing colonialism and white supremacy that Native people continue to experience.

Attack on survival programs

The federal shutdown affects the Bureau of Indian Affairs and other departments that run or fund programs for Native nations.

Thousands of Indian Health Service (IHS) and other “Indian Country” employees have been [working without pay](#) since December. The IHS, urban Indian health programs and many others that provide direct services to tribal nations were already underfunded and are now facing large funding gaps.

Addicts may not be able to get services they need in the midst of an addiction crisis and Native treatment centers may need to shut down. Critically ill people and their families worry about whether they will be able to get the care that they need, in addition to tribal concerns about the availability of day-to-day services. Cash-strapped tribal governments are being forced to use their own resources to fill in the

gaps as much as they can, but that is not sustainable.

Education, roads, the tribal justice system — all this and more are affected.

The shutdown also has a big impact on Indigenous women, who suffer the highest rates of sexual assault and domestic violence in the U.S. The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), intended to help survivors of domestic abuse and sexual assault, [expired with the government shutdown](#). Payments for programs are cut off until funding is reauthorized.

If Congress does not restore funding to food programs such as the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, [up to 100,000 tribal members may be negatively impacted](#). The consequences could last for months.

During the 2013 government shutdown, for example, FDPIR found that the demand for their food increased. Some FDPIR sites were forced to close, with food then left to rot in locked warehouses, while hungry people waited outside.

Even when funding was restored, the programs were so disrupted that many FDPIR program sites lacked access to fresh fruits and vegetables or adequate protein for 4 to 6 months afterward.

Who pays for border barriers?

As [Chief Harold Frazier of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe recently said](#) about Trump's proposed border wall: "The President of the U.S. should quit trying to build a wall that would have been better served [if Indigenous people had put one up] at Plymouth Rock. ... Indigenous people are not immigrants to this land."

Indigenous peoples traveled freely for millennia, long before the current borders were set. The current border was established after the U.S. grabbed millions of acres of land from Mexico — all of it land that was originally stolen from the many

Indigenous nations who were there first.

The vast majority of refugees who have been coming to the U.S. or attempting to do so in recent years are not “Hispanic”; they are Indigenous peoples. When Trump and others use vicious anti-immigrant rhetoric, they are targeting and scapegoating Indigenous humans. The wall meant to keep largely Indigenous people out of the U.S. is part of an overall attack on Indigenous peoples everywhere.

Why are so many refugees seeking to come to the U.S.? Because they are trying to escape the extreme poverty and violence caused in large part by U.S. policies in countries like Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, policies enacted by Republicans and Democrats alike.

Ultimately, Indigenous people are paying for U.S. border policies and barriers with their lives.

Indigenous children are losing their lives in the custody of U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Jakelin Caal Maquin, 7, and Felipe Gómez Alonzo, 8, both died in U.S. custody in December. Thousands of children and adults are locked up in barbaric conditions. Refugees have died in U.S. custody. We don’t even know exactly how many people die trying to cross every year.

We do know that the Border Patrol and other U.S. agencies (as well as racist vigilantes) engage in monstrous actions against those trying to cross, including destroying food and dumping out jugs of water that helpers leave in the desert, physically attacking refugees and, in recent times, spraying tear gas on people trying to cross near Tijuana.

Indigenous people also pay a high price because the borders are an attack on their sovereignty and lands. Some Native nations, including the Tohono O’odham, would have proposed border barriers running right through their lands without their

consent, and any of the barriers would also have a devastating wildlife and environmental impact in the areas.

