"We're Such a Small Community": A Qualitative Study of COVID-19 Pandemic Experiences in Rural New Mexico

Dr. Kate Cartwright, Madison Gonya, Lila Baca, & Audrey Eakman
University of New Mexico

Background
- Rural NM communities faced different COVID-19 challenges (Ranscome 2020; Mueller et al. 2021; RHI 2021)
  - Fewer ICU beds
  - Fewer providers of all kinds
  - Older populations
  - Populations with higher health risks
- New Mexican rural communities experienced uncontrolled community spread of COVID-19 later than most of the US (RHI 2021)
- New Mexican rural communities are more diverse than the average US rural community (RHI 2021)

Objective: To explore NM rural communities’ experiences of COVID-19

Methods
- 16 semi-structured interviews (45-60 min. long)
- Interviews conducted by Zoom or phone
- Inclusion criteria: 18 years old and live in a rural community in New Mexico
- IRB approval from UNM Main Campus IRB

Thematic qualitative analysis with an iterative coding strategy

Sample Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>% (N=16)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health Care Professional</td>
<td>50% (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifelong New Mexican</td>
<td>69% (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglo/White</td>
<td>44% (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>56% (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-35</td>
<td>25% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-64</td>
<td>69% (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Older than 65</td>
<td>6% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>69% (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>31% (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Party Affiliation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>50% (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>31% (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unaffiliated/Undecided/No Answer</td>
<td>19% (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>19% (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Degree/Professional Certification</td>
<td>19% (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's Degree</td>
<td>31% (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Degree</td>
<td>31% (5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Theme 1: Physical Health & Health Care Challenges
- COVID-19 related health concerns
- Missed doctor’s visits
- Physician and provider shortages
- Caretaker challenges increased

Quote: “We had to take him and of course, those were difficult decisions every time we did that, because, you know, he’s at high risk … And to be honest with you lately he’s just like, “No, I would rather just stay here if it gets really bad. I’m just gonna—we’ll just deal with it. Or if I die here at home, I die here at home, but I don’t want to go to the emergency room anymore. I don’t want to go” (Participant #5).

Theme 2: Mental Health Challenges
- Isolation
- Increased stress
- Increased depression
- Loss of loved ones due to COVID-19
- Family and community grieving disrupted
- Adolescent mental health crises

Quote: “My mom had been living in [an adjacent state] in assisted living. And she contracted COVID from one of her caretakers. They identified her on April 5 of having COVID. And she passed away the 1st of May. She was sick with it for 30 days. And I didn’t get to see her. I got to FaceTime with her. But that was very hard” (Participant #9).

Theme 3: Changing Behaviors
- Switched to remote work and school
- Job loss
- Higher stress at work
- Fewer social contacts
- More social contacts via technology
- More services accessed via technology

Theme 4: COVID-19 Health Literacy
- Wide range of sources: including from health care professionals, government sources, internet, television, radio, and loved ones
- Biggest differences between health care workers and non-health care workers

Quote: “...the CDC and the Department of Health. And also UNM ECHO: the infectious disease department at UNM was doing three times a week ECHO calls during lunch hour for clinicians. ... And then our organization has created a COVID team, and representatives at every clinic to disseminate information from our COVID team” (Participant #6, Health Care Worker).

Quote: “I try not to watch too much news on the TV because it’s just tough. ... it’s really probably the internet—trying to look at whatever trusted sources I think of, maybe the articles I want to read, because at least there you can pick and choose” (Participant #7, Non-Health Care Worker).

Theme 5: Political Responses to the Pandemic
- Widespread frustration with politicization of COVID-19
- Unified around helping people in community
- Tensions noted between economic wellbeing and protecting community health

Quote: “I have to try my best to stay as neutral as I can, no matter how much I disagree with some of the policies personally. ... But as the director, I have to stay neutral and I’ve got I’ve got to support what our government says, and as hard as it may be, personally, I still do it” (Participant 13, Republican).

Quote: “[Our county] is kind of a purple county, so we have a subset of the population that feels that COVID is a farce … it’s hard when you’re really tired and you see that and you just get kind of fed up” (Participant #10, Democrat).

Limitations
- Interviews were conducted in a short time frame:
  - Interviews conducted before the peak spread of COVID-19 in these communities
  - Interviews conducted before the vaccine was approved
  - Interviews conducted mainly conducted before the 2020 presidential election
- No participants had experienced COVID-19 directly
- Sample was younger and more educated than average rural resident
- Due in part to IRB constraints, missing the perspective of Native American voices

Conclusions
- Rural communities want policymakers to better understand their unique challenges
- Rural communities need better access to quality health care
- Rural health care workers need better support
- Rural communities and health care workers want continued access to telemedicine
- Rural communities need better internet infrastructure
- Some economic costs of the pandemic will be permanent
- The long-established connections and strong ties of rural communities makes them resilient

References
Full citations available upon request. Please email Kate Cartwright at kcartwright@unm.edu.