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Editorial

Abandoned in Indian Country

By [THE EDITORIAL BOARD](#)

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It's an old American story: malign policies hatched in Washington leading to pain and death in Indian country. It was true in the 19th century. It is true now, at a time when Congress, heedless of its solemn treaty obligations to Indian tribes, is allowing the across-the-board budget cuts known as the sequester to threaten the health, safety and education of Indians across the nation.

Many Republicans have lately taken to dismissing the sequester as a mild headache for a country that needs to tighten its belt. They are willfully averting their eyes from Indian reservations, where the cuts are real, specific, broad and brutal. The victims are among the poorest, sickest and most isolated Americans.

The sequester in a nutshell? "More people sick; fewer people educated; fewer people getting general assistance; more domestic violence; more alcoholism," Richard Zephier, executive director of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, recently [told Annie Lowrey of The Times](#).

The damage is being done to agencies and programs whose budgets rely nearly entirely on federal sources, now being slashed. In signing treaties with Indian nations in return for land, the federal government promised a wide array of life-sustaining services. One of the most important is the Indian Health Service, which serves about two million people on reservations and is grossly underfinanced even in good times. It routinely runs out of money halfway through the year. Though Medicare, Medicaid and veterans' health were exempted from sequestration cuts, the Indian Health Service was not. It stands to lose [about \\$228 million](#) in 2013 from automatic sequester cuts alone, out of a \$4 billion budget. That will mean 3,000 fewer inpatient admissions and 800,000 fewer outpatient visits every year.

On the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, the tribal police force, facing cumulative budget cuts of 14 percent, or more than \$1 million, has let 14 officers go. Its nine patrol cars are already pitifully inadequate for policing a 2.8-million-acre reservation plagued by poverty, joblessness, youth gangs, suicide, alcoholism and methamphetamine addiction. The tribe is cutting a program that serves meals to the housebound elderly. Its schools and Head Start program are cutting back. On a reservation with a chronic and worsening shortage of homes, where families double up in flimsy trailers without running water or electricity, a housing-improvement program with a 1,500-family waiting list was shut down. There were 100 suicide attempts in 110 days on Pine Ridge, officials there said, but the reservation is losing two mental-health providers because of the sequester.

The warnings about the cuts have come from many sources, all ignored. A [report](#) in May from the Center for Native American Youth described the looming damage to housing and juvenile-justice programs, child-welfare and mental-health services, and education. It predicted that sequester cuts to the Department of Education would lead to staff reductions, canceled programs and shortened school years affecting nearly 115,000 Indian youths at 710 schools.

In the Navajo Nation, in Arizona, the Window Rock Unified School District is cutting about \$7 million from a \$24 million budget; it let 14 employees go and shrunk to four buildings from seven. The United States attorney for North Dakota, Timothy Purdon, has warned tribes that sequester cuts could jeopardize public safety. Furloughs at the Justice Department, he said, could reverse the recent gains in the number of federal prosecutions of crimes in Indian country.

Byron Dorgan, the retired United States senator from North Dakota who founded the Center for Native American Youth, demanded in an [Op-Ed article in The Times](#) that Congress hold hearings to examine its broken treaty promises and develop a plan for restitution. He said it should exempt Indian country from sequestration. He is right. Where the deficit zealots see virtue, we see moral failure.

The next time any Republicans get pious about their party's respect for life and the rule of law, someone should ask: What about Pine Ridge?

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