

How Systemic Racism Impacts Coronavirus Racial Disparities

Table Talk: Family Conversations about Current Events



iStock

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has been vast and devastating; its impact on public health and the economy is felt across the globe. Many communities are engaging in quarantine and social distancing. The job losses are staggering. Schools are closed and businesses are shuttered. Every day, people face the threat of illness and death of loved ones along with anxiety about the economic future of our nation and world.

Racial Disparities and COVID-19

Various U.S. cities and states have tracked demographic data which reveals that Covid-19 has had more negative outcomes for communities of color in the U.S., particularly Black, Latinx and Indigenous people. By April 2020, the following data was collected and analyzed:

- In Chicago, Illinois, Black people account for more than half of those who have tested positive for coronavirus and 72% of virus-related fatalities, even though they make up a little less than a third of the population.
- In Milwaukee County in Wisconsin, Black people represent 81% of coronavirus-related deaths, while comprising only 26% of that county.
- In Michigan, where COVID-19 hit early and hard, Black people make up just 14% of the total population but 40% of those who have died from the virus.
- In Louisiana, Black people account for 70% of coronavirus-related deaths in the state, while making up 32% of the population.
- In New York City, Latinx people made up 34% of deaths, despite being 29% of the city's population, and Black people represent 28% of deaths, compared with making up 22% of the city's population.
- The Navajo Nation, in the Southwestern U.S., has more confirmed coronavirus cases per capita than every state except New York and New Jersey.

The trend continued into the pandemic and persisted on a federal level. In an [analysis of federal data by the New York Times](#) in July 2020, the data showed that "Black and Latino people have been (negatively) disproportionately affected by the coronavirus in a widespread manner that spans the country, throughout hundreds of counties in urban, suburban and rural areas, and across all age groups."

Structural Racism

These communities of color are at increased risk of serious illness and death related to coronavirus due to systemic inequities and structural racism in

housing, employment, education and health care systems.

Structural racism is a combination of systems and factors that advantage white people and for people of color, cause widespread harm and disadvantages in access and opportunity. One person or even one group of people did not create structural racism, rather it: (1) is grounded in the history of our laws and institutions which were created on a foundation of [white supremacy](#); (2) exists in the [institutions](#) and policies that advantage white people and disadvantage people of color; and (3) exists across culture (e.g., traditions, language, behavioral norms, values and media) to communicate and reinforce racist ideas, tropes and stereotypes.

Compounding the risk is that Black, Latinx and Indigenous communities have higher rates of underlying health conditions (often a result of structural racism in the health care and housing systems) such as hypertension, diabetes, asthma and upper respiratory conditions that lead to worse outcomes with coronavirus. They likely face increased challenges in being able to access Covid-19 testing and treatment because they are more likely to be uninsured and face barriers such as racial bias in pain assessment and treatment.

Although “social distancing” policies are encouraged (and mandated in many states) and seem to be working, these policies have led many businesses to cut hours, end operations, or close. People who work in certain industries, such as restaurant, hospitality, retail, transportation, and other service industries, are particularly at risk for loss of income and are unable to “work from home” as these social distancing policies prescribe. Those who maintain jobs amid the Covid-19 outbreak, such as grocery store workers and delivery drivers, are at increased risk of contracting coronavirus since they are constantly exposed to other individuals who could be infected. Nearly a quarter of Black and Latinx people (24%) are employed in service industries compared to 16% of white people, putting them at increased risk for job loss and loss of income, or for exposure.

Mask Wearing is Risky for Some

The CDC (Centers for Disease Control) recommends that when people are outside, they wear protective masks—either medical-type masks or homemade masks made from bandanas and other fabric. In some cities and counties, wearing masks is required. However, [because of stereotypes and bias](#), many Black and Latinx people—particularly Black men—fear they will be viewed as “menacing,” criminals, or gang-affiliated if they wear masks in public. There have already been reports of Black men being followed and harassed for wearing masks.

Age

12 and up

Questions to Start the Conversation

- What are your thoughts and feelings upon hearing this information?
- What did you already know, and what is new for you?
- What are systemic inequities and structural racism? How do these systemic inequities relate to coronavirus?
- How is racism a factor in the different rates of coronavirus contraction and fatalities among African American, Latinx and Native American people?
- What do you think about the statement, “Coronavirus does not discriminate?” How is it true? How is it misleading?

Questions to Dig Deeper

- Have you talked with among friends or with others in digital spaces about this? What has the conversation been like?
- How does Coronavirus reveal and worsen racism and racial disparities?
- Are there any actions, large and small, we can take to do something about these inequities?

- How should we acknowledge these racial disparities when we are speaking about our experiences with coronavirus and social distancing or quarantine policies?

Take Action

Ask: What can we do to help? What individual and group actions can help make a difference?

- Raise awareness by helping to organize, lead or participate in an online conversation (using Zoom, Facetime, Google Hangouts) about this topic, sharing information, resources and suggested actions. Or make a video with your thoughts, feelings and action ideas to share on social media.
- Keep up to date on and support legislative and advocacy efforts that help those most affected by the crisis. Reach out to your [members of Congress](#) to share your thoughts and suggested actions, including collecting demographic racial data on a national level.
- Get involved in local or national activism efforts around issues of health disparities and racial justice. See below for our resource on activism.

Additional Resources

- [Coronavirus and Racial Disparities](#) (ADL Lesson plan)
- [Race Talk: Engaging Young People in Conversations about Race and Racism](#)
- [The Coronavirus Surfaces Fear, Stereotypes and Scapegoating](#)
- [10 Ways Youth Can Engage in Activism](#)
- [Helping Students Make Sense of News Stories about Bias and Injustice](#)
- [Race, Perception and Implicit Bias](#)

BACK TO TABLE TALK