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With coronavirus, racism is the underlying condition

By **Jeneé Osterheldt** Globe Columnist, Updated April 10, 2020, 12:46 p.m.



A man wearing a mask walked past Brooklyn's Sogho Express African Hair Braiding salon, which is closed due to the coronavirus pandemic. MARK LENNIHAN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

In the era of coronavirus, we are all fighting for our lives. But that struggle is nothing new to Black Americans.

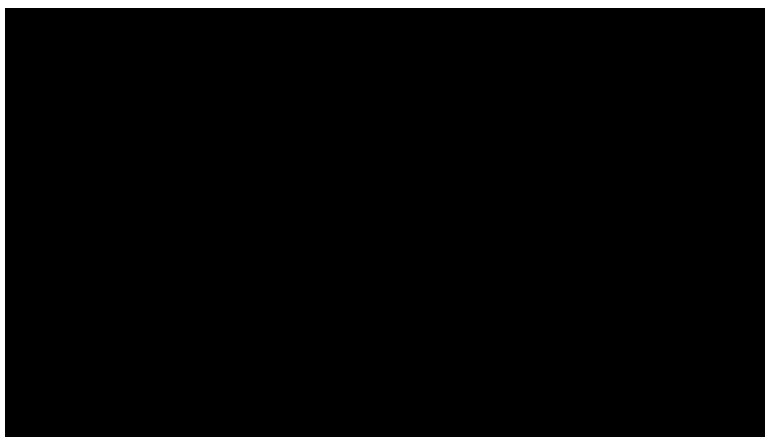
The inevitable has happened. Early data on the virus show Black and Latinx people are being infected and dying at higher rates.

Hyde Park, Mattapan, and East Boston are already seeing [high clusters of infection](#) as coronavirus blankets Black, Latinx, and immigrant communities. Of the cases in Boston in which a patient’s race was identified, [more than 40 percent](#) were Black. Yet Black people only make up a quarter of the population.

On Wednesday, the [Centers for Disease Control released a study](#) based on 1,482 hospitalized COVID-19 patients across the country. Not everyone is releasing racial data yet, but even a limited report showed that among 580 of those patients, 33 percent are Black. For comparison, Black Americans make up [13.4 percent](#) of the US population.

And where hospitals and states are willing to look, the stark difference occurs again and again. In Illinois, Michigan, Connecticut, D.C., Louisiana, Alabama, and on and on, [coronavirus is taking Black lives](#) at a rate disproportionate to the population.

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In New York City, [Black and Latinx people are being killed by COVID-19](#) at twice the rate as white people. It matters.

Coronavirus is incapable of racism. But America is rooted in oppressive systems that were designed to hurt and disenfranchise Black folk and people of color. The [health care system](#) has always been part of that practice.

Of course, dehumanizing Black people isn't exclusively American. Just this month, a French doctor suggested Africa be the testing ground for a COVID-19 vaccine.

"If I could be provocative, shouldn't we do this study in Africa where there are no masks, treatment, or intensive care, a little bit like we did in certain AIDS studies or with prostitutes?" [Jean-Paul Mira](#) pondered in ignorant glory. His post-backlash apology doesn't erase his intention.

And in America, anti-Blackness in health care is longstanding.

David Williams, a professor of public health at Harvard, said coronavirus is exposing the roles economic injustice and racial bias play in health care.

"Coronavirus has not created health disparities," he said Thursday during a conversation on "Epidemics and Health Disparities in African American Communities" [at Harvard's Hutchins Center](#). "What it has done is it highlighted these disparities."

We live in an America where Black people have been historically dehumanized. Even now, Black men are [scared to wear masks](#) they need to protect themselves because Blackness is perceived as [threat enough](#). Black people have an abusive and distrusting relationship with doctors stemming from a history of [medical experimentation](#) and racial science. Remember Henrietta Lacks and Tuskegee?

It's a legacy of disdain and distrust that continues today. When a Black patient and white patient exhibit the same ailments, Black patients will often go undiagnosed and

untreated because doctors don't register their pain. Black patients are [22 percent less likely](#) to receive pain [medication](#) than white patients. Black women in America are [three to four times more likely](#) to die during or after delivery than white women. Even [Serena Williams](#) had to fight to live after giving birth, and push for a CT scan.

"The most difficult social problem in the matter of Negro health is the peculiar attitude of the nation toward the well-being of the race," W.E.B. Du Bois [wrote](#) over 120 years ago. "There have, for instance, been few other cases in the history of civilized peoples where human suffering has been viewed with such peculiar indifference."

An antipathy lens still haunts Black Americans. Earlier this week, Dr. Anthony Fauci exposed the medical field's ongoing disregard for Black life.

"We've known, literally forever, that diseases like diabetes, hypertension, obesity, and asthma are disproportionately afflicting the minority populations, particularly the African Americans," he said.

Both the government and the medical field could have taken action long ago. They just didn't care. And now, the disparities they ignored have set Black folk up to die.

For that reason, it is imperative that we not only be sure every hospital and state is collecting racial data, but that we use this information to take action and upend the inequities and negligence that create health disparities.

In Massachusetts, data wasn't made available [until this week](#) and it's so limited, it only gave racial and ethnic data for less than one-third of our coronavirus cases. And yes, it repeats the national trend. Black people account for 18 percent of the patients yet 9 percent of the population. While Latinx people make up 12 percent of the population, they make up 23 percent of the confirmed cases. We cannot ignore this.

Last month, Representative Ayanna Pressley, Senator Elizabeth Warren, and other lawmakers [sent a letter](#) calling on the US Department of Health and Human Services to

collect racial and ethnic demographics for coronavirus patients.

“Although COVID-19 does not discriminate along racial or ethnic lines, existing racial disparities and inequities in health outcomes and health care access may mean that the nation’s response to preventing and mitigating its harms will not be felt equally in every community,” they wrote.

We must make sure Black and Latinx people are not erased in the fight against coronavirus and that the allocation of resources is just.

In Greater Boston, where a [2015 report](#) found the median net worth for non-immigrant Black American households is \$8, who do you think is working so many of those essential jobs at your grocery stores, postal services, transportation, and caretakers?

Who is [sacrificing](#) the most while getting the least? Who do you think is being disproportionately pummeled by this pandemic?

When you factor in redlining and economic injustice, Black and Latinx people are already more likely to face longer commutes, live in [food deserts](#), and suffer from [air pollution](#) in neighborhoods near factories, and are less likely to have access to good health care.

And then people sit back and wonder why Black people suffer so disproportionately from asthma, diabetes, hypertension, and conditions that amplify one’s chances of death during a pandemic?

The root cause of coronavirus disproportionately destroying Black and brown lives is America’s festering and forever-infected wound: racism.



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