

Both Essential and Expendable

Folks of Color on the Front Lines of Our Collective Survival and Our Losses

April 30, 2020

The coronavirus has and will forever change our communities and our nation. It has taken tens of thousands of lives in the United States and our collective losses continue to grow. The only thing that is preventing a far greater and grimmer tragedy is the willingness of most Americans to comply with crucial and science-based orders to stay at home. It is an enormously costly remedy— one that brings immense economic hardship and insecurity to almost all of us. Of course, despite dangerous proposals to “reopen the economy,” we really have no choice but to continue following the guidance of public health officials. There is simply no sustainable economic recovery until community spread is contained, cases are isolated and traced, and dying is slowed.

As we grapple with the horrible human costs of this disease and the frightening price we must pay to defeat it, one awful reality must be acknowledged and addressed. Black, Latino, and Native communities are clearly bearing a vastly disproportionate share of those impacted and killed by the COVID virus AND they are also the groups enduring disproportionate sacrifices and hardships to defeat the disease.

In the last eight weeks there has been an abundance of reporting, data collection and analyses that continue to reveal what many already knew – that stark disparities in well-being outcomes could undoubtedly lead to disproportionate loss of life.* In the United States African Americans are dying at a rate nearly twice their share of the population (13% of the population and 28% of the deaths) while whites are less likely to die given their share of the population (61% of population but 47% of the deaths).¹ By contrast, the Latino and Asian population deaths from COVID-19 do not at this time appear disproportionate to their representation in the overall population.

Notably, in Wisconsin the preliminary data reflects, to varying degrees, national trends. African Americans account for 35% of the deaths from COVID-19 but only comprise 6.4% of the state’s population. This means that African Americans in Wisconsin are dying at over five times their share of the population. The numbers for the Latino population indicate that the expected number of deaths are in line with the population (7% of population and 6% of deaths). Yet, the known cases of COVID-19

*Notably, these numbers are only preliminary and do not reflect all states or all reporting, is reflective of testing conducted, nor do they necessarily account for the increasing number of folks that are dying at home, or potentially from related complications of COVID-19. A truer and likelier darker picture will emerge as the months progress and more information is available.

¹American Public Media Research Lab, <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race>

among Latino people are disproportionately high statewide, constituting nearly 15% of those diagnosed with COVID-19.² This latter trend may be a consequence of a disproportionate level of exposure, given the communities presence in agriculture, manufacturing and other service jobs. As of mid-April, Native Americans were neither disproportionate in deaths nor in known cases in Wisconsin, but that is not true throughout the nation as evidenced by the number of deaths experienced by the Navajo Nation.

Moreover, communities of color have also endured unequal sacrifices arising from stay at home orders. They face real costs and challenges presented by social distancing such as: lack of internet access for working and learning remotely, food insecurity, lack of health care access, and enduring unsafe or unstable housing to comply with stay-at-home requirements, among others. Furthermore, as if that wasn't sacrifice enough, many are employed in jobs that are now considered essential – janitors, nursing assistants, home health-aids, nursing home attendants, delivery drivers, transit operators, factory and food processing workers, and grocery store clerks -- working for low-pay, limited benefits, no wealth or savings, and often no consistent private transportation options. Therefore, the demand that the economy re-open without adequate testing, substantial contact tracing, readily available personal protection equipment, and ample hospital capacity will not only increase the disproportionate loss of life, but also compound the burden endured by communities of color. Already beleaguered and grieving communities will once again be asked to provide essential services for others' benefit and at an extraordinary risk to themselves and their families. It begs the question: "How can these folks be both essential and expendable?"

The virus doesn't discriminate, but we do - our society continues (and has for centuries) to choose and preferentially treat the privileged, the resourced, the housed, the wealthy and White people in its policies, practices, and systems at the expense of Black and Brown folks, the oppressed, vulnerable and marginalized, the disabled, poor, veterans, and elderly. COVID-19 reveals the awful consequences of maintaining structural racism, economic inequality, and the practice of "othering". These economic, racial, and social injustices that exacerbate the crisis must be addressed and, not in empty promises but rather, in action – it requires us to act differently.

This can begin with committing to protecting and working on behalf of saving lives. It begins with seeing people not as "others" but as our family members, loved ones, sisters, mothers, grandparents, children, friends, spouses, neighbors, and coworkers. If we do not prioritize controlling the virus by putting lives first we will see wave after wave until no one is left unscathed.

Yet, in recent weeks, we have demonstrated as a nation that we can make critical and immediate changes to policies to ease the burden on those less resourced and expand our safety net to include paid sick leave, enhanced unemployment benefits, and elimination of health care barriers. We know we can do it and we know we NEED to do it.

Consequently, when we do arrive at a place where we can re-engage with each other and the economy in a more comprehensive way, we MUST focus on moving to a new future, one that prioritizes people of color, the marginalized, the most vulnerable, and the oppressed. We do this by:

- expanding our social safety net,

² Wisconsin Department of Health Services <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/covid-19/deaths.htm>

- demonstrating respect for workers through increased pay and benefits,
- addressing food insecurity,
- providing affordable, accessible and comprehensive health care
- meeting childcare needs,
- eliminating educational inequities,
- ensuring housing affordability and quality,
- remedying environmental degradation, and
- assuring fair and accessible participation in our democracy for all.

If we expect America to be a cohesive and prosperous nation after the virus, we must be uncompromising in our commitment to realizing a more equitable.

Erica Nelson