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Alabama data shows majority of coronavirus deaths are African Americans

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When news of the coronavirus' rapid spread began to seize the American public's attention, social media was flooded with theories and conspiracies. One particularly hollow rumor was that black people were somehow immune to COVID-19.

In a span of mere weeks, emerging data gleaned from cities and states hit hard by the virus has shown that misguided speculation could not be further from the truth. In places where racial and ethnic figures have been collected — there are less than a handful yet — [African Americans make up an unsettling majority of hospitalizations and deaths due to coronavirus.](#)

And some experts say it should come as no surprise, given the gaps that exist in wealth, health and equity between black and white Americans.

On April 7, the [Alabama Department of Public Health](#) released its demographic data captured since the state began testing on March 5. Its findings now show that black people make up about 39% of confirmed cases and 45% of deaths, despite amounting to only 27% of Alabama's population.

In neighboring Louisiana, more than 70% of reported COVID-19 deaths have been African Americans, though they only represent about 33% of the state's population.

March 13: [Alabama coronavirus: First case confirmed in Montgomery is military base employee](#)

And in Michigan, black people constitute just 14% of the population, but 40% of reported deaths.

"This has been our concern at UAB all along," said Dr. Selwyn Vickers, vice president and dean of the University of Birmingham's College of Medicine. "We have a less than perfect health care system. ...Whenever [crises] are overlaid on a system that has flaws or inequities they don't make those better."

While the virus has been described by some as the "great equalizer," its presence has in fact served to magnify inequality — impacting the poor, disabled, sick and uninsured far greater than those with flexible work options and financial safety nets.

It's well known that people with underlying conditions are among the most susceptible to the virus, and a lack of access to preventative health care as well as differences in the quality of medical care provided, exacerbate the risk to African Americans. Add that to the fact that Alabama is one of 14 states that declined to expand Medicaid coverage under the Affordable Care Act — a debate that's now been reignited given the unprecedented nature of this pandemic.

Infectious disease expert Dr. Anthony Fauci said during a White House briefing recently that the pandemic had put a spotlight on "unacceptable" and well-established health disparities among black Americans that needed to be addressed once the virus is contained.

Alabama data shows majority of COVID-19 deaths are African Americans

“[African Americans] are suffering disproportionately,” he said. “When they do get infected their underlying conditions...wind them up in the ICU and ultimately give them a higher death rate.”

Social determinants of health, the economic and social conditions that influence a person's health status, play a significant role in explaining the differences in black and white outcomes.

Throughout some regions in the state, particularly rural areas, “food deserts” are widespread. These are places where access to healthy affordable food and produce is very limited. In Perry County, for example, which is 68% black, the Tuscaloosa News [reported](#) that about 16% of residents lived more than a mile from a grocery store with no working form of transportation. And research shows that poor access to reliable, healthy food sources can lead to a range of chronic conditions.

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in Alabama, killing more than 12,000 people each year. That risk is highest for black men. In the demographic statistics updated Wednesday, it was the leading underlying medical condition found in patients who died of COVID-19, registering at about 59%.

The state had the fourth highest rate of diabetes in the country in 2015, and according to ADPH black Alabamians are significantly more likely to have the disease and die of it — at two times the rate of white Alabamians with diabetes. It represented the second most common underlying condition found in COVID-19 deaths at about 38%.

Asthma is also reported at higher rates in black Americans who are more likely to live in environmentally polluted areas. Studies have shown higher incidents of asthma among low-income earning individuals and people living below the poverty line. In Alabama, where the median household income for black families is about half that of white families, the black poverty rate is almost 3 times higher.

According to the Center for American Progress, black workers often hold less stable, lower-paying jobs that are less likely to offer comprehensive benefits — meaning they are more likely to work through sickness and to delay medical care until it's too late in order to avoid costly out-of-pocket expenses.

And while 30% of white workers nationally report that they can work from home, just 16 percent of Latino workers and 20% of black workers enjoy this privilege. Many are still working through this pandemic at some of the “essential businesses” that remain open such as Walmart — the largest employer of African Americans in the country.

“It's a two-edged sword,” said Felecia Lucky, president of the Black Belt Community Foundation, which works to improve quality of life for residents across the 12 counties it serves in Alabama's black belt region. The nonprofit has launched an emergency COVID-19 relief fund to [mitigate](#) the impact of the virus on these communities.

“The fortunate part is that [these workers] still have income for their families. The sadness of it all is that they're at risk of being exposed on various levels,” she said.

Observing the CDC's recommended social distancing space of six feet between individuals is even more difficult without private transportation. In Montgomery, black and low-income earners represent most riders on public buses, where it's extremely difficult to avoid coming into close contact with others.

Subsidized housing projects such as William B. Paterson Court also exemplify this issue; with limited indoor and outdoor space as well as minimal distance between apartment units, complete isolation is difficult if not punishing.

The South accounts for more than 50% of the black population, where governors were among the latest to issue statewide shelter-in-place orders. Gov. Kay Ivey issued Alabama's stay-at-home order just last week, one day after neighboring Georgia and Mississippi's orders went into effect on April 3, and four days after Tennessee's.

Alabama is also among at least five other Deep South states that ruled against Medicaid expansion leaving more than a million people uninsured in a state that has lost 17 rural hospitals over the past 10 years; and according to healthcare analytics firm Chartis Group, 40% of those still standing remain vulnerable to closure. Along with Mississippi, Alabama has some of the highest rates of disability beneficiaries in the country — the perfect storm for an impending health crisis.

'Unknown territory': Alabama hospitals brace for coronavirus onslaught lacking resources

If the early racial data trickling in on COVID-19 holds for states across the South, the effects could be particularly devastating for black communities and will require a targeted response.

Assistant State Health Officer Dr. Karen Landers said her department was working to ensure that people with high risk factors, comorbidities and less access to health care were more informed and had accessible testing sites — specifically in rural communities where she said more mobile “pop-up” sites would soon be available.

Throughout the 18 counties that make up Alabama's Black Belt region, which is predominantly African American and as a median household income of \$27,000, 16 official testing sites currently exist. Four are in Montgomery and three are in Barbour County. Seven counties: Bullock, Greene, Lowndes, Macon, Choctaw, Crenshaw and Russell do not currently have testing sites according to ADPH's COVID-19 data and surveillance dashboard; the remaining counties each have one.

Vickers, the dean at UAB, said that addressing the virus' disproportionate impact on black Alabamians would demand comprehensive action from the state.

“Long term, we have to begin to ask the hard questions about how we actually narrow these gaps in the disparities that exist. That won't be a short-term effort.”

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