

HEALTH

The Virus Is Showing Black People What They Knew All Along

COVID-19 doesn't discriminate by race, yet it has still laid bare the brutality of racism in the United States.

By Patrice Peck



Todd Heisler / The New York Times / Redux

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All skinfolk ain't kinfolk, but as Black people in America, we still feel a connection with one another. A reciprocated smile as we pass one another on the street; a spontaneous, but still synchronized, "Swag Surfin'" dip at the club; a "Cupid Shuffle" kick at the cookout. Small moments like these reinforce the bond I feel with other Black people. But these days, as I quarantine at home, the Black faces sparking that

sense of familiarity are not nodding in solidarity or swaying in unison. They stare back, frozen in photographs accompanying obituaries that announce yet another Black life lost to the coronavirus. I do not know these people. I am not even one of the [31 percent of Black people](#) in America who personally knows someone who has died of COVID-19. But in these faces I see my loved ones. I see myself.

I thought of these obituaries last week, when the United States passed yet another grim pandemic milestone. More than 50,000 Black Americans are now dead from COVID-19, according to data from the [COVID Racial Data Tracker](#), a collaboration between the COVID Tracking Project at *The Atlantic* and the Boston University Center for Antiracist Research. (And even that number is likely an undercount: We don't know the race or ethnicity of roughly 20,000 of the 319,000 Americans whose lives have been claimed by COVID-19.) Everyone in the U.S. is at the mercy of the coronavirus; it doesn't discriminate by race or class or gender or age. And yet, from the very beginning of the pandemic, the virus has exposed and targeted all of the disparities that come along with being Black in America. We are dying at 1.7 times the rate of white people from this virus, which means that the toll of these disparities has never been easier to quantify: 19,000 Black people would still be alive if not for systemic racism.

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For centuries, Black people have spoken about the struggles we face, pointing to root causes like poverty, housing segregation, unemployment, and environmental degradation. And for centuries, those concerns have largely gone ignored. The same thing has happened with the pandemic. Long before any data confirmed our worst fears, Black people knew that the coronavirus would disproportionately devastate our already vulnerable communities. Driven by that foresight, I launched a newsletter, [Coronavirus News for Black Folks](#), in early April. As the death toll crept up and up, the brutality of American racism became even clearer. Black people with clear symptoms of COVID-19 were [turned away](#) from receiving tests, sometimes on multiple occasions, only to die at home. Black families were [entirely destroyed](#) as members died within weeks and days of one another. By the end of July, [twice as many](#) Black children as white children had died of COVID-19: In Michigan, the first child to die from the virus was a [5-year-old Black girl](#) who spent two weeks on a ventilator.

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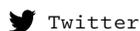
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While a large swath of Americans, myself included, are able to safely stay at home, Black people are disproportionately essential workers, who have no choice but to brave the pandemic and head to work. Many have lost their lives working jobs they felt were unsafe and underpaid. “Our white executive director has not been in the office for the past six weeks, has not asked how any of us are holding up, and has not emailed us to say thank you,” a 20-something security guard told me in April. “I feel betrayed. I used to love my position and the people I work with. Now I’m resentful of the protection some people are afforded while others, like myself, are sent out to the front lines.” (The security guard was granted anonymity for fear of professional reprisal.)

As if the havoc wreaked by the virus weren’t already bad enough, the racial disparities will persist as the U.S. works its way out of the pandemic. Just as one in three Black people knows someone directly who has died from COVID-19, one in three Black people has said they will not get the vaccine, according to a recent Kaiser Family Foundation study. Clinical trials have shown that the vaccine is safe and effective, but a long-standing mistrust in America’s predominantly white medical institutions is only deepening, and so the number of Black lives lost to this virus will continue to rise, even though we now have a way to end it.

Thankfully, moments of Black kinship still emerge even during all the suffering. The same week that marked more than 50,000 Black deaths saw a horizon of hope. Sandra Lindsay, a Jamaican-born nurse in Queens, New York, became the first person to be vaccinated in the United States, after receiving the shot from Michelle Chester, also a Black woman. Even a pandemic can’t break the resilient bond of Black America.

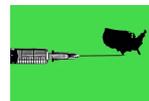
Patrice Peck is a freelance writer based in Los Angeles and Brooklyn. She is the founder of the newsletter [Coronavirus for Black Folks](#).



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