Why Are Black Communities Hit Hardest by COVID-19?

Crowded households and lack of insurance contribute to a greater risk of coronavirus cases and deaths in predominantly Black counties.

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As previously reported, African Americans are disproportionately contracting and dying of the new coronavirus. Now, findings from a new study by amfAR, The Foundation for AIDS Research, reveal just how significantly higher the rates of infection and mortality are in Black counties in the United States.

For the study, amfAR compared COVID-19 cases and deaths in counties with a greater number of African Americans when there were 547,390 diagnosed cases and 21,634 deaths nationally. These counties were mostly in the South.

Results showed that counties with more Black residents had an increased number of COVID-19 diagnoses and deaths. More specifically, although Black counties account for only 22% of all U.S. counties, they account for 52% and 58% of cases and deaths, respectively.

In addition, 97% of predominantly Black counties registered at least one COVID-19 diagnosis, compared with 80% of all other counties, and 49% of Black counties recorded at least one COVID-19 death compared with 28% of all other counties.

COVID-19 struck Black counties more often whether they were located in urban or rural areas and regardless of their size. The South, where more than 90% of counties populated by Black people are located, was hit hardest.

Furthermore, researchers found that underlying health conditions, such as diabetes, hypertension and heart disease, which could increase the severity of COVID-19, were more prevalent in Black counties. But even after adjusting for these factors, COVID-19 cases and deaths remained greater.

Besides these race-related chronic illnesses, socioeconomic and environmental issues such as being uninsured or unemployed, household crowding, poor air quality and reduced ability to practice social distancing were more common among people living in Black counties, which put individuals at an increased risk of acquiring COVID-19.

“These study results arise from more than health system shortcomings,” said Greg Millett, MPH, amfAR vice president and director of public policy and the study’s lead investigator. “Greater efforts are needed to eliminate structural racism and address broader social, environmental, economic and other inequities.”

Millett noted that studies about COVID-19 disparities among Latino, Native American and other populations should also be conducted.

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