More Black People Are Dying of Coronavirus

Experts are calling on the CDC to release data on how COVID-19 impacts patients by race.

April 7, 2020 By Alicia Green

African Americans are disproportionately contracting and dying of the new coronavirus at an alarming rate, according to recent health data from several cities and states, ProPublica reports.

Black people are more likely to have chronic conditions such as asthma, heart disease, hypertension and diabetes, which puts them at higher risk of being severely affected by the novel coronavirus, which causes the lung disease COVID-19.

Health officials in Wisconsin tracked COVID-19 and watched as cases of the coronavirus infections mushroomed in Milwaukee County's African-American communities. Many people continued to ignore warnings and dismissed their risk of acquiring the virus.

Now, Black folks in that location account for almost half of the coronavirus cases in the city and about 80% of its deaths, despite accounting for only a small proportion (about 26%) of the county's population.

The city has been purposefully communicating information about how best to slow the pandemic as well as addressing economic and logistical roadblocks that may affect residents' safety. In addition, authorities are being transparent about who is being infected and dying. Milwaukee County even has a regularly updated online dashboard with information on the racial breakdown of diagnoses.

Michigan is also tracking the people who have contracted the virus by race, with African Americans who represent 14% of the state's population accounting for 35% of cases and 40% of deaths. What's more, Illinois's and North Carolina's data on COVID-19 cases by race also show that Blacks are contracting the coronavirus in disproportionate numbers.

Aside from underlying health issues, African Americans may be at greater risk of being exposed to the virus because many live in poverty or in low-income neighborhoods and still must go to work. Many Black people also work health care, transportation, government and food supply jobs that are now considered essential.

Although the Centers for Disease Control has published data on location and age regarding the coronavirus pandemic, the health agency has not yet shared statistics pertaining to race. If this continues, health officials and lawmakers will be unable to address disparities in health outcomes and testing that may come, experts said.

“COVID is just unmasking the deep disinvestment in our communities, the historical injustices and the impact of residential segregation,” said Camara Jones, MD, MPH, a family physician, epidemiologist and visiting fellow at Harvard University.

“This is the time to name racism as the cause of all of those things,” Jones added. “The overrepresentation of people of color in poverty and white people in wealth is not just a happenstance.... It’s because we’re not valued.”

For related coverage, “Yes, You Should Wear a Face Mask to Cut Coronavirus Transmission” and “African-American Celebs Tackle COVID-19.” Also, click here for more coronavirus coverage.

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