Cost of Darkness: Pandemic Sector

By Julietta Bisharyan

Pandemics, even with their unlikely force, have a disproportionate impact on communities of color. The reality is that Black Americans are experiencing more severe illnesses and death due to COVID-19 than white people.

In [Milwaukee County](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/covid19-racial-disparities), Wisconsin, where African Americans make up just 26 percent of the county’s population, they also make up 70 percent of COVID-19 related deaths.

Likewise, African Americans make up a third of [Chicago’](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/covid19-racial-disparities)s population, while also accounting for half of those who have tested positive for the coronavirus and almost three-quarters of COVID-19 deaths.

For starters, African Americans have high rates of chronic health conditions—called [comorbidities](https://civileats.com/2020/05/05/people-of-color-are-at-greater-risk-of-covid-19-systemic-racism-in-the-food-system-plays-a-role/)—that weaken the immune system, making them more vulnerable to the virus. These health conditions include diabetes, heart disease and lung disease.

But besides this, it is critical to discuss the intersection between race and class, and how this relationship perpetuates the health disparities and social inequities during today’s pandemic.

“These communities share common social and economic factors, already in place before the pandemic, that increase their risk for COVID-19,” says [Sherita Golden](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/covid19-racial-disparities), a specialist in endocrinology, diabetes, and metabolism.

Due to the prior [racial residential segregation and redlining policies](https://civileats.com/2020/05/05/people-of-color-are-at-greater-risk-of-covid-19-systemic-racism-in-the-food-system-plays-a-role/), communities of color had no choice but to live in crowded housing conditions. As a result, this makes it difficult for individuals to appropriately social distance.

Communities of color have also struggled with access to fresh and unprocessed [food](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/covid19-racial-disparities). Minority workers comprise a disproportionate percentage of the food industry, often working for low wages without any medical benefits. Workers in food services also cannot work from home, which puts them in close contact with other people.

Additionally, many people of color have inconsistent access to [health care](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/covid19-racial-disparities) because of their barriers to obtaining insurance. Especially during a global pandemic, being able to afford doctors’ visits and medications to manage chronic diseases is vital in combating COVID-19.

[Stress](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/covid19-racial-disparities) from racial discrimination, income inequality, and other sources can also wear down a person’s immunity and has an association with heart disease, hypertension and obesity.

“There’s also the psychological aspects of being Black in America and the environments of communities of color, where you have lack of access to care and disparities that exist in the healthcare system, including unconscious racial bias as it relates to COVID-19, since Blacks are less likely to be referred for testing in the healthcare system,” said [Daphene Altema-Johnson](https://civileats.com/2020/05/05/people-of-color-are-at-greater-risk-of-covid-19-systemic-racism-in-the-food-system-plays-a-role/), a food communities and public health program officer.

While there currently isn’t an anti-viral treatment for COVID-19, instituting fair housing policies, improving employment opportunities, and taking other steps to diminish economic inequality will benefit people of color in the next public health emergency. The *Cost of Darkness*documentary discusses the issues of pandemics even further as it focuses on the direct impact on communities of color.