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Limited health care access contributes to virus' heavier toll among blacks, Duke profs say :: WRAL.com

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Durham, N.C. — The coronavirus outbreak has had a disproportionate impact on blacks and other people of color, which health care experts attribute to historical disparities in terms of wealth and access to health care.

Although blacks make up just 22 percent of North Carolina's population, they account for 39 percent of more than 5,000 coronavirus cases in the state and 38 percent of the 110-plus deaths, according to state Department of Health and Human Services data.

"We know that there's long-standing health disparities in our system, and I see those playing out in our current COVID-19 crisis. The question is, what can we do about those?" DHHS Secretary Dr. Mandy Cohen said Tuesday.

William "Sandy" Darity, a professor of public policy, African and African-American studies and economics at Duke University, said a national health insurance program is needed.

"One of the factors [of the virus disparity] is associated with the deep historical residue of health disadvantage that already was embedding itself in the black community, particularly in respect to what people now refer to as pre-existing conditions. So they are more vulnerable," Darity said.

He said universal health care is one aspect of "an economic bill of rights for the 21st century." Such an effort also would include a guaranteed job for every American adult and universal broadband access, he said.

"We do come into this crisis in a society which is deeply unequal, and I think we can't forget that. That is our starting place," agreed Andrew Foster, a clinical professor of law and director of the Duke Law School's Community Enterprise Clinic.

The \$2.2 trillion federal stimulus package that President Donald Trump signed into law last month to help American families and U.S. businesses weather the pandemic is "just a drop in the bucket" when viewed against the breadth and depth of the crisis, Foster said.

"The \$1,200 or \$2,400 checks that the IRS is starting to send out, hopefully this week, that's a one-time payment right now," he said. "That really needs to become a monthly payment so that low-income and middle-income families have a source of income for the duration of this crisis."

Durham resident Keith Jacquier said he believes a lack of access to health care is key to the virus' disproportionate impact on blacks.

"Definitely in the poorer communities, they might not have the same benefits, same access to health care — not just because of corona, but just in general," Jacquier said. "Working in a school district, I definitely see that there's a big disparity between that. I think education is a big part of that as well, educating all the populations on the importance of health care, check-ups, diet, everything."

Cohen said the HealthCare.gov online marketplace has opened a special enrollment period for people who have lost their jobs — and their employer-provided health insurance — during the pandemic so they can obtain coverage.

Taking daily medications for chronic issues like diabetes or high blood pressure will help ensure people are as healthy as possible during the outbreak, giving them a better chance to fight off the virus, she said.