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## 2 viruses -- COVID and racism --devastate the black community and threaten America's stability

ABC News

9-11 minutes

The suffering has been immense.

Black Americans have died from the coronavirus at a much higher rate than other racial groups. And for as long as anyone can remember, they have also been the victims of police brutality and killings -- also at a disproportionate rate. Add to this systemic inequities that have led to economic, health and housing disparities and the result is exhaustion and exasperation.

The smoldering frustration and discontent exploded late last month when video surfaced of a white Minneapolis police officer kneeling on the neck of George Floyd for an unimaginable 8 minutes and 46 seconds until he died. The video is now burned into the country's consciousness.

Floyd's death galvanized nationwide protests as black Americans and their diverse allies declared that the institutionalized oppression and racial violence that has ended the lives of people of color for centuries needs to end.

"We have two crises that are sandwiched on top of one other," Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey said last week during a press conference -- referring to the concurrency of the coronavirus pandemic and the civil unrest that has swept across the country in the aftermath of George Floyd's death.

For black Americans, that "sandwich" has been more of a deadly vise grip.

The black community is caught in between the pandemic and ongoing police brutality incubated by systemic racism -- dual viruses -- one disproportionately infecting black and brown Americans, the other infecting a nation built on a foundation of racism and systemic inequality, for centuries.

Black men are about 2.5 times more likely to be killed by police over their life course than are white men, [according to research](#) from Northwestern University that was published in the peer-reviewed journal, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America.

Victims of lethal force by on-duty police are disproportionately black, [a 2016 study](#) by the National Institutes of Health found. The study also found that black people were 2.8 times as likely to be killed by police using lethal force than white people.

[Grim statistics](#) also surround COVID-19 and African Americans. A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report from April revealed that 33% of hospitalized COVID-19 patients are black, compared to 18% of residents in the surrounding community, suggesting an overrepresentation of black Americans among hospitalized patients, the agency noted. In New York City, the country's biggest COVID-19 hotspot as far as number of cases, more than 20,000 residents have died. Black and Latinos have been disproportionately hit by the disease.

The recent protests, and in some cases, civil unrest, burn with an intensity even beyond the 2014 demonstrations after the [death of Eric Garner](#) -- whose haunting gasp of "I can't breathe" as he was dying while in a chokehold by white police officer, Daniel Pantaleo -- became the rallying cry for the grassroots Black Lives Matter movement.

The intensity of the rallies after the recent deaths of George Floyd, [Ahmaud Arbery](#) and [Breonna Taylor](#), may be related to the recent pandemic and its devastation on black and brown people according to some experts.

### COVID and health disparities

To Alvin Bernard Tillery, Jr., Ph.D., an associate professor of political science at Northwestern University, the pandemic and the expressed outrage in the aftermath of Floyd's killing, are "absolutely" related, he told ABC News.

"The reality is, is that everything that's happened with the COVID pandemic disproportionately affecting African Americans and police brutality disproportionately affecting African Americans, result from the fact that we've never fixed the fundamental inequalities that stem from racial discrimination," Tillery said.

In a virtual town hall meeting addressed to the nation on Wednesday, former President Barack Obama mentioned the twofold crises and how both are made worse by inequality.

"We can't forget that, even as we're confronting the particular acts of violence that led to those losses, our nation and the world is still in the midst of a global pandemic that's exposed the vulnerabilities of our health care system," Obama said. "but also the disparate treatment and, as a consequence, the disparate impact that exists in our health care system -- the unequal investments, the biases that have led to a disproportionate number of infections and loss of life in communities of color."

The former president minced no words in identifying the origins of America's current crises.

"They are the outcomes not just of the immediate moments in time, but they're the result of a long history of slavery and Jim Crow and redlining and institutionalized racism, that too often have been the plague, the original sin of our society," he said.

### Uneven policing's toll on health

Health organizations have made the association between racism and not only mental but physical health.

[In a statement](#) released May 29, the American Medical Association called out police brutality as a public health issue.

"Research demonstrates that racially marginalized communities are disproportionately subject to police force, and there is a correlation between policing and adverse health outcomes," according to the AMA's statement. "In any season, police violence is an injustice, but its harm is elevated amidst the remarkable stress people are facing amidst the COVID-19 pandemic."

Dr. Oscar Alleyne is an epidemiologist and the chief programs officer for the National Association of County and City Health Officials. Alleyne told ABC News that science has traditionally "devalued" African American bodies and that has led to "wreaking havoc on the health and safety of communities of color."

"You lay a pandemic on top of that which has a significant target to those communities, and those individuals who are high-risk for preexisting conditions," Alleyne said, and that "just illustrates how much, no matter what, you can be in the midst of a pandemic -- the ability for a culture to treat people with a human perspective, for institutions to treat people with a human perspective ... I would say is a causative factor. There's definitely interrelatedness," he said regarding the pandemic and the powder keg of outrage resulting from police brutality deaths.

Ongoing inequality including police brutality may [lead to more protests](#), and that could have a circuitous further detrimental effect on black Americans, Alleyne also cautioned.

"Reinfection due to the previous reopenings and the widespread protests with the mass gatherings and incarcerations, etc. will occur. We will see a resurgence in two to three weeks and the implications to all especially those at a greater risk of infection will be high," he said.

### The impact of economic inequality

Racism has a powerful snowball effect which can keep oppressed people at disadvantages in health care, policing and financially. Some experts point to the importance of economic inequality as a factor in the disproportionate rates of COVID cases and use-of-force by police in the black community.

"Another critical adverse precondition lies at the heart of black-white difference in health outcomes: excess black financial precarity, captured best by the chasm in racial wealth," said said William A. "Sandy" Darity, Jr., Ph.D., an economist and professor of public policy at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy and the co-author of "From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century."

In fact, Darity calls the black-white wealth gap a "comorbidity" just like high blood pressure or diabetes.

However, "while I'm convinced that the inequalities associated with black excess mortality from COVID-19 will be greatly reduced if racial inequalities in wealth are eliminated, I'm not as confident that elimination of the racial wealth gap will ensure that police atrocities will end," Darity said.

That is going to take more direct, legislative action, he explained.

"When successful suits are brought against the police for malfeasance, the financial penalties should be charged to their pension funds. In general, rather than try to change the impulses and attitudes held by police that lead them to engage in racist practices, we should emphasize changing their incentives. And it is imperative that the police be de-militarized; unequivocally, they should not have access to the equipment used by the United States military," he said.

While it's unclear whether the protests sweeping the nation will result in fundamental change, experts liken the energy to that of the 1960s' civil unrest when significant progress to forward racial justice was made at the federal level.

Tillery said the younger generations who have been galvanized to take action, no matter their race, is a hopeful sign of real change. Activists like Black Lives Matter, "have done a fantastic job of raising the consciousness of young whites in the Millennial and the Gen Z generations," he said.

"Increased precarity in the economy, the fact that people don't have stable jobs, housing options -- that's affecting Millennials across the racial divide. I think our political leaders have to understand these protests, yes they are about anti-racism and George Floyd, but they're also a marker for intergenerational change and it's going to take real reform around all of these things to make the protests stop."

*ABC News' Ella Torres and Erin Schumaker contributed to this report.*