

COVID-19 and Systemic Racism

By **Rachel Robison-Greene** - Jul 1, 2020



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As more information about COVID-19 and its effects comes to light, it is clear that the impacts of the disease are not the same everywhere or for everyone. Some communities are hit harder than others. In many cases, COVID-19 hot spots highlight systemic problems that existed before “coronavirus” was a household word. The public action that a society takes when things get rough reflects its values, in this case, its judgments about who and what is really important. Unsurprisingly, the circumstances of marginalized groups are not sufficiently taken into account in the construction of social programs and systems. When these social programs serve as the circulatory system of a nation during a pandemic, marginalized groups are the hardest hit. One lesson that this great tragedy should teach us is that we must recognize and embrace the diversity in our communities. Respect and appreciation for our cultural differences can help us to construct preemptive, life-saving policies.

If we're willing to collectively put forth the work, the multiple tragedies we've recently gone through as a nation could give rise to transformative action. The murder of George Floyd and the subsequent protests to amplify the message that Black Lives Matter have cast the issue of racial justice onto center stage. The disproportionate effect of COVID-19 on communities of color can and should help people to understand what it means for racism to be systemic. One barrier to meaningful dialogue about racism is that some people think that for an action to be racist, it must be done with an explicit, hateful, discriminatory intention. Certainly, there are cases in which these conditions are met—some people are explicit, hateful racists. Systemic racism, however, has the potential to be even more pernicious and impactful. Understanding systemic racism requires us to think more holistically. We need to ask ourselves: How do we design our cities? Where do we put institutions that generate pollution and waste and why do we put them where we do? What social programs do we provide and to whom? What steps are we taking to see to it that upward mobility and human flourishing are attainable for all members of society? When answers to these questions suggest that people of color are consistently more negatively impacted by our practices, we have problems of systemic racism to fix. We find ourselves in just that situation when it comes to our response to COVID-19.

One critical component of emergency response is the transmission of information. Across the country, there have been huge challenges to information dissemination, created by a cluster of assumptions. Chief among these assumptions is the idea that everyone can speak English or is in regular contact with someone who can. For instance, meatpacking plants have been among the hardest hit institutions worldwide. As I have written in a [previous article](#),

conditions in slaughterhouses create a perfect storm for the spread of coronavirus. People work shoulder-to-shoulder doing strenuous activities that cause them to sweat and breathe heavily. Many employees at these facilities are immigrants and refugees who don't speak English. Even if health and safety materials about COVID-19 are being created and widely disseminated, if a person can't understand that material, they are in a poor position to help themselves or those around them. In crafting public health policy, we need to take into account the diverse nature of our communities. We need to provide information in more than one language. What's more, we need to find ways of being proactive with these communities. We shouldn't assume that everyone has access to television or the internet.

Florida governor Ron DeSantis made [headlines](#) last week for blaming his state's spiking COVID-19 cases on migrant farm workers. This is a common move from the emerging coronavirus playbook—blame an outbreak on one event or group of people and imply that the spike is, therefore, somehow *not real*. Far from being exculpatory, increased cases among migratory farm workers is evidence of failure in governmental strategy. Florida public policy officials are aware that migrant farm workers exist in their state. However, in thinking about public health and the economy, concern for what might be happening on the margins came much too little and too late.

Racial injustice often leads to a snowball effect of harms. Consider the case of Louisiana's [infamous](#) "Cancer Alley," an 85-mile stretch of land along the Mississippi River that is home both to a majority black population and to roughly 150 petrochemical plants. The pollution in this area causes a range of health issues for those who live there. According to the EPA's 2014 National Air Toxics Assessment, residents of this area are 95% more likely than most Americans to develop cancer from air pollution. These communities were already disenfranchised; pollution makes it worse. Pollution also causes pre-existing conditions, so, unsurprisingly COVID-19 has ravaged communities in Cancer Alley. At one point in April, a [community in the area](#) had the highest per capita COVID-19 death rate in the country.

The Navajo Nation has also been disproportionately affected by COVID-19—at one point it had [the unfortunate distinction](#) of having the highest per capita infection rate in the United States. The Navajo community has enacted strict lockdown and prevention measures, which have appeared to [flatten the curve](#), at least for now. Help was slow to arrive. The CARES Act set aside 600 million to assist the Navajo Nation in its fight. To combat such an infectious disease, assistance is needed urgently. However, in order to receive the money to which they were entitled, the Navajo Nation had to [sue](#) the U.S. Treasury. By this point, people were already dead. Given the position in which the United States government stands to native people, swift assistance should have been a top priority.

When we say that Black Lives Matter and when we say that the lives of people of color matter, we take on responsibilities. We need to be reflective and active not just about our criminal justice system, but about the broad social and economic systems that give rise to inequity and injustice.

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Rachel Robison-Greene

Rachel is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Utah State University. Her research interests include the nature of personhood and the self, animal minds and animal ethics, environmental ethics, and ethics and technology. She is the co-host of the pop culture and philosophy podcast I Think Therefore I Fan.

