

# Social Stratification and Racism During Covid-19

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### **Introduction**

Throughout Covid-19, racial minorities—African Americans, Hispanics, Latinx, Asians, and Indigenous—have suffered the most due to the existing social stratification and racism. Racial minority groups have endured job loss and mortality rates much higher than their White counterparts since the beginning of the outbreak. In fact, 20% of Hispanics and 16% of African Americans reported being laid off (Jan & Clement, 2020) and 12.14% of the African American population in the US represented 21.46% of Covid-19 deaths (Roger et. al, 2020, pg. 4). Many racial minorities already live in the lower class and have poor housing in which Covid-19 only further perpetuated these circumstances. The purpose of this paper is to apply the theories of stratification and racism to interpret why there is inequality between Whites and racial minority groups.

### **Theories of Stratification and Racism**

Racial minority groups are impacted negatively by social stratification, the hierarchical differences in economic position, status, social honor, and power (Ritzer & Murphy, 2020, p. 188). The US stratifies society into upper, middle, working, and lower classes which act as a vessel for systemic discrimination. Differences across racial groups in the theory of stratification place minority groups in a disadvantageous position in the US housing (Finnigan, 2014; Massey & Eggers, 1990), employment (Mincy, 1989; Peterson, 1991; Jan & Clement, 2020), and medical system (de Plevitz, 2007; Walker, 2021). These differences can be a result of racism. Racism is when someone defines a group as a race and attributes negative characteristics to them (Ritzer & Murphy, 2020). Key components in racism are prejudice and discrimination. Prejudice is the attitude one holds towards a minority group, and discrimination is the action itself that is taken against a minority group. Two forms of discrimination are evident during Covid-19:

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individual and systemic. Individual discrimination is classified by the actions of an individual or a small group of individuals whereas, in systemic discrimination, there is neutral intent in treating everyone equally while inadvertently highlighting the negative effects on minority groups (Pincus, 1996).

### **Prejudice and Individual Discrimination**

It's important to study prejudice to understand the different types of racism racial minorities experience during the pandemic. While much of the racism endured by Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous throughout the pandemic has been systemic, Asians have been met with racism on an individual level through prejudice. Whether the abuse was verbal or physical, Asians suffered greatly. Over the course of a year, nearly 3,800 hate incidents have been reported in comparison to the past year of 2,600. These incidents range from being shunned, called racial slurs, as well as physical attacks (Yam, 2021). In one instance where a 77-year-old Asian man was pushed to the floor by a random man, the man walked away without saying a word (Eyewitness News, 2021). Another incident occurred when a White man walked into three spas on a rampage killing eight people, five of which being Asian women (Fausset et al., 2021). These incidents against Asian Americans were initially incited by former President Trump's prejudicial statements. Former President Trump promoted a negative attitude towards Asians and publicly shared his prejudice on social media calling Covid-19 "Chinese virus" through various tweets with anti-Asian hashtags (Hart, 2021) as well as calling it "Kung-flu" at the Tulsa, Oklahoma rally (Rogers, 2021). While former President Trump did not directly take discriminatory action against Asians, those who supported him did. This dangerous attitude led to the unfortunate deaths of innocent Asian Americans.

### **The Underclass**

White people disproportionately occupy the upper levels of society whereas visible minorities are overrepresented in lower social classes (Ritzer & Murphy, 2020, pg. 255). The 2019 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS ASEC) figure "Ratio of Proportion in Poverty Relative to Total Population by Race and Age" showed Black and Hispanic minorities as over-represented in poverty. Black Americans represented 23.8% and Hispanics 28.1% of the population in poverty. On contrary, White, Non-Hispanics, and Asians were under-represented in poverty (U.S Census Bureau, 2020). Meanwhile, according to the 2016 American Community Survey, 26.2% of Indigenous people were in poverty (U.S Census Bureau, 2018).

### **Struggles with Unemployment and Poor Housing**

Racial minorities, specifically Hispanic, Latinx, and African Americans have faced an increase in unemployment which has led to housing insecurity. Tight labor markets, such as the Covid-19 recession, often favor Whites seeking employment over Black individuals (Mincy, 1989, pg. 257) leaving many African Americans unemployed. This was exhibited at the start of the pandemic where, compared to Whites, Hispanics were twice as likely to lose their jobs (Jan & Clement, 2020). This is because industries where Hispanics and Latinx are overrepresented, occupations such as service and construction, observed a 27.2% and 15.7% respective decline in employment, thereby suffering the most from the pandemic (Alvarez, 2020). This decline was systemic and had no intentions to discriminate specifically against the Hispanic and Latinx communities. Coincidentally, those minority groups overrepresented in those specific

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occupations and as a result, suffered. Racial discrimination in the labor market has been illustrated through Black workers being less likely to be hired or paid equally (Alvarez, 2020).

Even when they obtained a job, African Americans continuously "earned less than similarly qualified Whites" (Mincy, 1989, pg. 262; Alvarez, 2020). Since the pandemic upended the economy, 16% of Black workers reported being laid off in contrast to 11% of white workers. This phenomenon is known as the "last hired, first fired" (Alvarez, 2020) and is not an uncommon practice. This practice is most common during labor shortages where employers would hire minorities at the height of the business cycle, however, once the "business cycle turn[ed] downward, minorities [were] the first to be fired" (Peterson, 1991, pg. 631; Clark, 2020). This increased rate of job loss and a spike in unemployment amplified a tenuousness of residency as renter households of color have suffered disproportionately from the shutdown of the economy as many households experienced income losses (Kolomatsky, 2021).

Racial minorities in the lower class often are located in metropolitan areas and poor overcrowded neighborhoods (Massey & Eggers, 1990, pg. 1155). This is because non-whites access to homeownership is often limited as they are restricted to homes in unstable resourcepoor neighborhoods that increase the tenuousness of their residency (Finnigan, 2014, pg. 2). Those living in poor housing are unable to physically distance themselves as this can be compromised by their living conditions. Living conditions that would increase their risk include overcrowding and lack of access to plumbing and sanitation, as these factors contribute to the spread of infectious disease. (Ahmad et. al, 2020, pg. 2). In a study using Covid-19 data, researchers discovered that for each 5% increase in households with poor housing conditions, there was a 50% higher risk for contracting Covid-19 with a 42% risk of Covid-19 mortality (Ahmad et. al, 2020, pg. 7). Due to a disproportionate number of racial minorities living in the underclass with

poor housing, this systemically places them at a greater risk than Whites to suffer from Covid-19.

### **Racial Minorities as Essential Workers**

Racial minorities in the underclass who are also essential workers experience an increased risk to Covid-19. While workers were urged to work from home, only a quarter of all jobs can be performed from home (Baker, 2020, pg. 1128). This left people with the choice to continue working and risk increased "exposure or experience job insecurity, disruption, and displacement due to workplace closure" (Baker, 2020, pg. 1129). For many in the lower class, not working means not eating, leaving them no choice but to work. While being able to work from home was feasible for many Whites (depending on occupation) in the middle and upper class, many racial minorities found themselves employed as essential workers working in "transportation and material moving, health-care support, food preparation and serving, cleaning and maintenance, and personal care/service" (Rogers et. al, 2020, pg. 4). Therefore, being an essential worker greatly increases a person's risk for Covid-19. As noted by Rodriguez (2020), African Americans who are essential workers must take even greater precautions because they are predisposed to high blood pressure and heart disease. These risks reinforce the racial disparity in Covid-19 mortality rates amongst essential workers between African Americans and Whites. The inability to distance oneself and quarantine properly as an essential worker is exhibited through the drastic increase in the hospitalization of essential workers (Khullar, 2020).

### **Healthcare and Regionalism**

Government distribution of resources also systemically discriminated against racial minorities living in rural areas resulting in an increase in Covid-19 deaths amongst racial

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minorities. This is due to the government distributing Covid-19 relief money into cities, thereby diverting it away from the areas that desperately need it. The government claims it will not fund proper services if it does not think it is economically viable (de Plevitz, 2007, pg. 57). Access to a Covid-19 test/diagnosis and the necessary medical help is dependent upon where someone lives and may not be readily available, requiring travel that is hours away. This act of discrimination played a role in indigenous woman Matalynn Lee Tsosie's death. The local Indian Health Service (IHS) hospital was not equipped to handle her severe symptoms and was transported to a better equipped hospital two hours away where she later passed (Walker, 2021). The IHS has been long neglected by the government and this was clear in their response to Covid-19. The agency failed to provide the proper health guidance on poverty-wracked reservations and as a result, much of the protective equipment sent to IHS hospitals had expired and there were too few beds and ventilators to handle the number of patients (Walker, 2021).

### **Conclusion**

The study of the theories of social stratification and racism clearly demonstrates that racial minorities have struggled with inequality long before Covid-19, due to individual and systemic discrimination. The Covid-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the consequences which stem from discrimination.

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