

*Written comment on the House Ways and Means Committee hearing on The Disproportionate Impact of COVID-19 on Communities of Color, May 27, 2020.*

New Orleans is suffering. The brass bands and second lines are gone, Frenchman and Bourbon streets are empty, and historic restaurants are boarded up. Each New Orleanian has sacrificed to defeat one of the worst outbreaks of COVID19 anywhere in the world. We have lost so many lives to this virus, from legends like Ellis Marsalis to our friends, families and neighbors. In our city, which attracts nearly 18 million visitors annually, one out of every five residents is employed in the hospitality industry. These workers are too often underpaid and living on the margins, without basic protections like paid sick leave and health insurance. The economic and health effects of COVID19 are a dual storm of a caliber unseen since Hurricane Katrina, and our hospitality and service workers are bearing an outsize burden of this tragedy. Black New Orleanians are disproportionately represented in this often essential work, with little job security, and rely on tips to meet minimum wage requirements. During the pandemic, many New Orleanians find themselves either jobless or obligated to work without adequate personal protective measures or hazard pay. We are outraged at this disproportionate morbidity and mortality from COVID-19 that has fallen on Black New Orleanians and on Black communities across the country. We ask you, our elected officials, to take bold and immediate policy action to rectify the death toll on Black America wreaked by racial capitalism in the storm of a global pandemic.

For far too long, our country has allowed commercial interests to exploit our workers while failing to provide basic protections that would strengthen our society. Weaponized discrimination against Black and indigenous communities, in the form of structural racism, has historically abetted their criminalization and marginalization while distracting from the exploitation of workers of all colors and creeds. The tragically outsized impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on communities of color evidences just how deep these inequities have cut into our national fabric, and how far we have to go in healing the wounds of racial capitalism.

Environmental racism is one mechanism by which COVID-19 exacts an outsized toll on communities of color. Black communities are more likely to be exposed to environmental pollutants (<https://www.lung.org/clean-air/outdoors/who-is-at-risk/disparities>), which has been implicated in higher death rates from COVID-19 (<https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/covid-pm>). In New Orleans, the residents of the Gordon Plaza neighborhood, built atop a toxic industrial landfill, have been suffering the health consequences of toxic soil for decades, leading to the 2nd highest rate of cancer diagnoses in Louisiana. These elderly Black New Orleanians are sheltering-in-place from the coronavirus on a Superfund site, in homes that are killing them. In solidarity with the residents' decades-long demand for justice, we call for a fully-funded relocation for the residents of Gordon Plaza (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/dec/11/gordon-plaza-louisiana-toxic-landfill-site>).

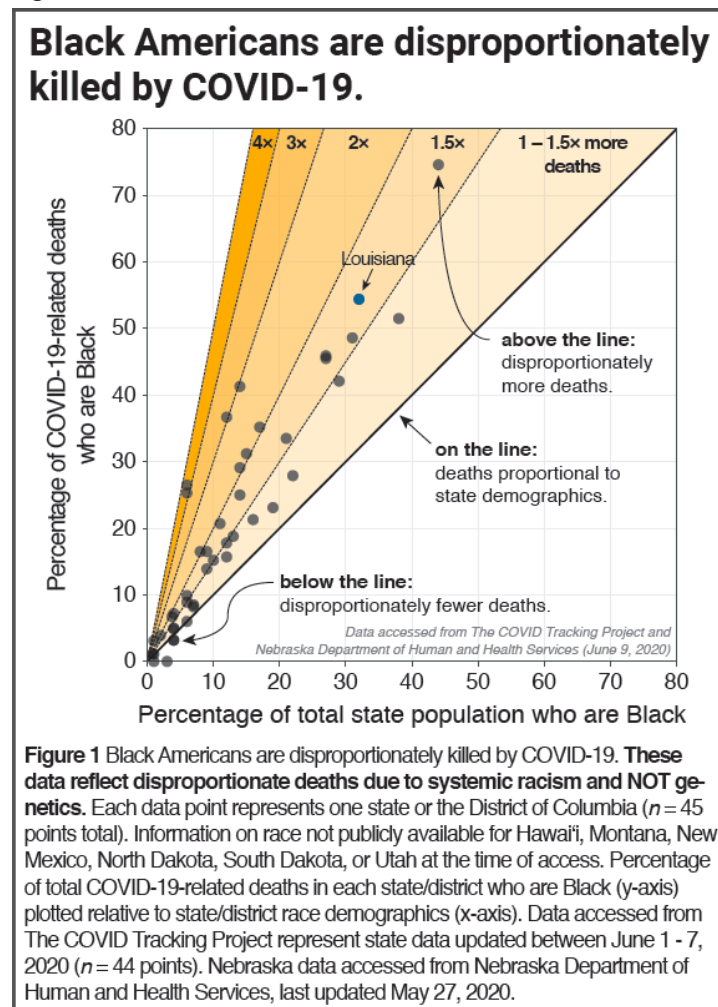
The recent uprisings in response to a wave of visible incidents of police brutality against Black men and women have amplified a call for shifting funding away from policing and towards communities. Investments in health and mental health care, public education, childcare, and housing are the best vaccine against disease ([https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(05\)71146-6/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(05)71146-6/fulltext)). We call for reallocation of funding away from police departments and into communities to build and strengthen the conditions that create health.

In Louisiana, our communities are directly impacted by the expansion and privatization of prisons and ICE detention centers which directly contribute to health inequities.

(<https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/10.2105/AJPH.2019.305446>). The conditions and quality of care available to detainees is inhumane, and particularly horrifying in the face of this pandemic, creating a public health nightmare (<https://thelensnola.org/2020/04/09/ice-detention-is-a-danger-to-louisiana-communities/>). We call for freeing detainees and incarcerated people.

To echo the expert witnesses from the May 27 hearing, the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on communities of color is a direct result of racism and exploitative economic systems. In New Orleans, we have witnessed the unacceptable toll racial inequality takes on our American citizens. The COVID pandemic has crippled our hospitality and tourism industries, leaving 25% of New Orleanians jobless ([https://www.theadvocate.com/baton\\_rouge/news/coronavirus/article\\_002ae7b2-9168-11ea-b697-afdddeba33da.html](https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/coronavirus/article_002ae7b2-9168-11ea-b697-afdddeba33da.html)). Black New Orleanians continue to provide disproportionate support to the city as essential workers, performing the critical functions which allow so many other New Orleanians to remain safely at home. Despite the vital nature of this work, basic protections were slow to be provided, if at all. It is therefore both tragic and unsurprising that Black Louisianans have died from COVID at a rate nearly double their share of the population (Figure 1). The pandemic will continue to ravage our communities until Black workers can rely on consistently enforced paid sick leave, ubiquitous PPE, and comprehensive health coverage. The citizens await your action.

Figure 1:



We thank the committee for addressing the issue of racial disparities as laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic. This conversation is a beginning, but real change must be undergirded by financial investment. The budgetary commitment of the Ways and Means Committee is urgently awaited. Together we can leave health disparities behind us, and emerge from this pandemic with renewed strength.

We stress the urgency of a platform that prioritizes families and communities over corporations. We urge you to adopt strategies for community safety that prioritize education and meeting people's basic needs in health and employment instead of increased policing. Investment in communities leads to improved health outcomes, and would make significant progress towards eliminating racial disparities such as that we are witnessing from the coronavirus pandemic. Our policy recommendations are in alignment with platforms put forth by Black-led movements, as follows:

A) *The People's Bailout* (<https://thepeoplesbailout.org/>)

1) Prioritize health:

- Free and accessible testing, treatment, and protective equipment
- Paid sick leave and paid family leave for *all* workers, including undocumented immigrants
- Expanded federal funding for Medicaid
- Full funding for Indian Health Service

2) Provide economic relief directly to the people:

- Livable cash payments to all families for the duration of the crisis
- Broaden unemployment insurance
- Vastly expand food assistance programs
- Extend housing assistance
- Expand childcare for working families
- Relieve student debt
- Halt evictions, foreclosures, and utility shut-offs

3) Rescue workers not corporate executives:

- Direct financial assistance to workers, not corporate executives or shareholders
- Promote pro-worker conditions, including a livable wage of at least \$15 per hour, worker representation on boards of directors, and “ban the box” hiring policies

4) Make a down payment on a regenerative economy while preventing future crises:

- Create millions of good, family-sustaining jobs,
- Direct investment in communities of color and indigenous communities
- Tackle the climate crisis

5) Protect our democratic process:

- Expand vote by mail
- Fully support the 2020 census

B) *8 to Abolition* (<https://www.8toabolition.com/>)

- 1) Defund the police
- 2) Repeal laws that criminalize survival
- 3) Demilitarize communities
- 4) Invest in community self-governance
- 5) Remove police from schools
- 6) Provide safe housing for everyone
- 7) Free people from jails and prisons
- 8) Invest in care, not cops

C) *Movement for Black Lives* (<https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/>)

- 1) End the war on Black people
- 2) Reparations
- 3) Divestment from police and investment in Black communities
- 4) Economic justice
- 5) Community control
- 6) Political power
- 7) Respect the rights and safety of protestors
- 8) Immediate relief for communities affected by COVID-19