



The casket of Gorge Floyd arrives at the memorial service in Minneapolis , Minnesota. (Jason Armond/Los Angeles Times/TNS)

THE FUTURE OF What’s Happening Now

A Crisis Within a Crisis: How COVID Fueled the Protests

The pandemic has hit black people especially hard in terms of health and employment. Those conditions intensified long-simmering anger over police brutality and racism.

Alan Greenblatt, Senior Staff Writer | June 8, 2020 | Analysis

Anger, fear and frustration have boiled over in cities all across the nation. Protests began in response to the alleged murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, but they are also expressions of deeper concerns about police brutality and racism.

It happens every time there are protests and riots triggered by police violence. A killing may bring people out into the streets, but broader and deeper problems keep them there. “A killing is a tipping point – ‘no, we can’t take it anymore’ – but underneath there’s a pattern and practice of police brutality keeping marginalized people in their place,” says Mindy Fullilove, an urban policy professor at the New School for Social Research in New York.

If there’s a pattern, it raises the question of why some killings spark local protests, while others mostly go unacknowledged. Perhaps an even bigger question is why this particular killing prompted protests not just around the country but internationally as well.

The coronavirus pandemic is one possible, partial explanation. Black Americans face not only police brutality, but also systemic racism that causes problems at nearly every turn, including educational attainment, access to health care, and income and wealth levels. All those problems are perennial, but they’ve been made more painful by the pandemic and the subsequent economic downturn.



Stay up to date!

Our GOVERNING Daily Newsletter - a daily brief on the latest headlines & analysis on the future of state & local government email newsletter delivers the latest headlines and analysis of breaking news. Free signup takes less than one minute.

SUBSCRIBE

NOT RIGHT NOW

“This wave of protests is certainly the result of the pandemic killing black and brown people disproportionately, and the way this has exposed the deep inequality in our country,” says Andrea Benjamin, a political scientist and professor of African American studies at the University of Oklahoma.

What was nearly a half-century low of black unemployment in February, at 5.8 percent, shot up to 16.7 percent in April and ticked up slightly in May, to 16.8 percent. By comparison, unemployment among whites went up from 3.1 percent in February to 14.2 percent in April, but then came down in May, per last Friday’s job report, to 12.4 percent.

The death rate from COVID-19 for African Americans is nearly 2.5 times higher than whites; roughly one out of every 2,000 have died. Predominantly black counties are seeing three times the rate of infection and six times the rate of deaths due to the coronavirus than mostly white counties. Latinos are also suffering disproportionately in terms of health outcomes and unemployment.

George Floyd himself tested positive for coronavirus in April.

“The public health crisis in recent months have revealed an ugly underbelly and laid these disparities bare,” says Alma Adams, a Democratic member of Congress from North Carolina. “These disparities are a crisis within a crisis.”

For the country as a whole, cooped up and suddenly unemployed by the tens of millions, there was already the question of how long shutdowns could continue before there might be civil unrest. For black Americans, the brutal strangulation of George Floyd, along with other recent killings including those of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor, turned out to be the fuse that lit a gigantic explosion.

“Damn – we can’t get a break from regular old American racism in the middle of a pandemic that is also targeting our community,” author and comedian W. Kamau Bell said on CNN. “I mean, that’s the thing that hurts us the most.”

Conditions on the Ground

Minnesota is home to some of the worst [racial inequities](#) in the nation. The state ranks last in the nation when it comes to disparities in [high school graduation rates](#). The [incarceration rate](#) in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area is 11 times higher for black people than white people. The local [black poverty rate](#) is four times higher it is for whites. Last year, the NAACP ranked the Twin Cities 92nd out of 100 metros in terms of [racial equity](#).

Minneapolis had already been the site of protests following the police precinct following the death of George Floyd. Jamarion Castile repeatedly at close range. The protests drew national attention, with video streamers capturing the scenes.

Yanez was acquitted of all charges. The woman, after she had called for a protest, some protesters have taken up the torch.



Stay up to date!

Our GOVERNING Daily Newsletter - a daily brief on the latest headlines & analysis on the future of state & local government email newsletter delivers the latest headlines and analysis of breaking news. Free signup takes less than one minute.

SUBSCRIBE

NOT RIGHT NOW

an 18-day vigil outside a police officer, shot Philando Sneed. The protest drew national attention. The protest was led by Justine Damond, a white woman. The protest was a wake of Lloyd’s killing, “Noor’s sentence is a

victory for white America, too, because he had to pay for the sin of mistakenly killing a white person,” wrote [Keith Mayes](#), an African American studies professor at the University of Minnesota.

Tensions between Minneapolis police and residents were thus already tense, prior to the Floyd killing. Recent demonstrations began there but, as with the 2014 protests prompted by the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., anger at the police was also seething elsewhere.

“When you see data that indicates that COVID-19 disproportionately affects people of color, that can breed distrust that the government is not protecting all lives equally,” says Gregory Price, an economist at Morehouse College who studies trust. “That may not be the case, but there’s a signal that government is not protecting people of color and another signal that police are encroaching on people’s lives. Both of those signals can fuel protests.”

Making Things Worse

Complaints about police brutality against black people are nothing new. The killing of George Floyd was particularly brutal and captured on video for all the world to see. But it came about at a time when conditions had suddenly grown worse for black Americans in general.

Many commentators have recently revived an old expression: When America gets a cold, black people catch pneumonia. Now, America has a virus, but it's black Americans who are dying in disproportionate numbers.

Going into the crisis, black people had worse access to health care and outcomes by numerous measures. That left them more vulnerable to the novel coronavirus. As they became infected, there were numerous reports that black individuals who sought care were being turned away. In May, the federal [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) sent an advisory to medical professionals, alerting them to disparities in care for black and Latino patients.

Nationwide, black people make up 13 percent of the population, but 25 percent of COVID-related deaths. In some places, the differences are even more dramatic. In Kansas, for example, [black residents are dying](#) at seven times the rate of whites. Black residents make up 6 percent of the population in Wisconsin, but more than a quarter of the deaths. In Michigan, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer created a task force in April to examine disproportionate death and infection rates among black people. At the time, black Michiganders accounted for 40 percent of deaths in the state, despite being 14 percent of the population.

Thirty percent of black Americans and 26 percent of Latinos know someone who has died due to COVID-19, compared with 10 percent of whites, according to an [ABC News/Ipsos](#) poll released last month.

Black people are dying more, but many sensed disinterest about their plight from the broader public. In April, Atlanta Mayor [Keisha Lance Bottoms](#) received a text calling her by the n-word and demanding that she “just shut up and RE-OPEN ATLANTA.”

“It’s not lost on black people, brown people, maybe white people who are paying attention, that as soon as the data came about who is dying from this, you start hearing ‘it’s time to reopen,’” Benjamin says. “You look at the states that are opening quickest and it’s where black people live,” in southern states such as Alabama, Georgia and Florida.

Alongside the health disparities, black people have suffered economically from the pandemic. More than 40 percent of black adults are part of households that have experienced job loss or income reductions during the pandemic, according to the [Urban Institute](#). Black people who are still working are more likely than whites to work in jobs deemed essential during the pandemic, increasing their risk – at grocery stores, warehouses, transit agencies, and in delivery and trucking. One-quarter of meatpacking workers are black and 44.4 percent are Hispanic, according to the [Center for Economic and Policy Research](#).

[Black workers are less likely than white workers](#) to have jobs that can be done remotely. Access to computers, broadband and live instruction is creating [disparities in remote learning](#) as well.

“These are the people mostly likely to lose their jobs, the people who have to go to work and are not being protected, who fear losing their apartment,” Fullilove says. “In communities that are hardest hit, you have both a long pattern and an acute crisis. The result is hundreds of cities have demonstrations.”

How Black People Have Been Treated

The alleged murder of Ahmaud Arbery took place on Feb. 23, before the nation went into shutdown mode. The video of the killing was not posted until May 5, however. It immediately drew national attention and helped prod the arrest of his alleged killers.

The video is brutal and dramatic, but there were other viral videos and stories of black individuals being mistreated. A [delivery truck driver](#) was blocked for half an hour by a white man, who called the police to remove [birds](#) in Central Park.

If you were black in America during the pandemic response. Many Americans have shared stories of how they were treated. Some of the hobia were part of the



Stay up to date!

Our GOVERNING Daily Newsletter - a daily brief on the latest headlines & analysis on the future of state & local government email newsletter delivers the latest headlines and analysis of breaking news. Free signup takes less than one minute.

SUBSCRIBE

NOT RIGHT NOW

In terms of enforcing social distancing restrictions, black individuals have been far more likely to be arrested or cited than whites. The numbers involved were small, but showed a striking pattern. In Chicago, between March 20 and May 21, every arrest and 85 percent of the citations were issued in majority black and Latino neighborhoods on the city’s South and West sides. Of the 40 people arrested in New York City between March 17 and May 4, 35 were black, four were Hispanic and one was white. In Toledo, Franklin County (Columbus) and Hamilton County (Cincinnati), black people were at least four times as likely to be charged as whites for [violating stay home orders](#).

“In general, protests against political and governing authorities signal a collapse or a reduction in trust,” says Price, the Morehouse economist. “People are only willing to play by the rules if they trust that the rules are going to be valid.”

Add everything up – unemployment, disease, death, racist mistreatment from official and unofficial quarters – and you have the wellsprings of the frustration that turned into the “fed-uprising” of the past couple of weeks. “At the individual level, it’s hard to see that the society values black and brown lives,” says Benjamin, the University of Oklahoma political scientist.

She felt like she had to protest herself.

“Although I’m on the extreme end of anxiety about coronavirus, I still felt like it was important so people in my city knew this had to stop,” Benjamin says. “The reality is, if there’s a vaccine, I can survive COVID-19. I don’t know if I can survive an accidental shooting or a knee on my neck.”

[Alan Greenblatt](#) *Senior Staff Writer*
agreenblatt@governing.com | [@AlanGreenblatt](#)

More From THE FUTURE OF What’s Happening Now

[GOV Virus Spikes While Local and State Officials Bicker Over Face Mask Mandates](#)

Governors are battling with local leaders over mask requirements. Some state executives have enacted a statewide mask requirement while others are leaving it up to local leaders to decide.

[Trump Continues Border Wall Construction Amid Pandemic](#)

Border towns are concerned with the health risks as workers come into their neighborhood to continue working on the Mexico-border wall. Many believe the work and millions in spending should be paused during the pandemic.

[As States Reopen, Contact Tracing Becomes Complicated](#)

As states continue to allow residents to return to gyms, restaurants and bars, the contact tracing caseloads have soared. But even when contact tracing works, the method still relies on people’s cooperation.

The Future of States & Localities

Where Government is Going – One Headline at a Time Delivered to your inbox everyday.

Sign Up Now

Special Projects

 [Salesforce Government of the Future](#)

 [Government 360](#)

 [IBM Put Smart to Work](#)

 [Eye On 65 Podcast](#)



Stay up to date!

Our GOVERNING Daily Newsletter - a daily brief on the latest headlines & analysis on the future of state & local government email newsletter delivers the latest headlines and analysis of breaking news. Free signup takes less than one minute.

SUBSCRIBE

NOT RIGHT NOW



City Accelerator Program



Google Future Ready



Accela CloudScore



Verizon Better Citizen Experience



Stay up to date!

Our GOVERNING Daily Newsletter - a daily brief on the latest headlines & analysis on the future of state & local government email newsletter delivers the latest headlines and analysis of breaking news. Free signup takes less than one minute.

SUBSCRIBE

NOT RIGHT NOW