

**PERMANENT COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF  
RACIAL, INDIGENONS AND MAINE TRIBAL POPULATIONS**

**AN OVERVIEW OF MAINE'S GROWING CORONAVIRUS RACIAL DISPARITIES  
COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS AND FINANCIAL AFFAIRS**

**June 30, 2020**

**Data**

Black and indigenous African American Mainers are experiencing disproportionate harm from COVID-19, as are other people of color in Maine.

- These disparities have been steadily growing since the data on race and ethnicity first became available on April 29, 2020.<sup>1</sup> In that week when the data became available, racial disparities were already evident, with Black and indigenous African American Mainers making up 5.1% of positive cases even though we/they are only 1.6% of the population in our state and Mainers of color making up 9.3% of positive cases even though we/they make up only 5.3% of the population in our state. Those disparities have grown significantly in the weeks since then.
- More than 1 in 4 people (26.9%) who have tested positive for COVID-19 for whom race is known are Black or African American even though we/they make up only 1.4% of the population in Maine.<sup>2</sup>
- Black people, Indigenous people, and People of Color (BIPOC) make up 33% of the positive COVID-19 cases where race is known. That means nearly 1 in 3 Mainers who have tested positive for COVID-19 are people of color even though people of color are only 5.7% of the population in Maine.<sup>3</sup>
- While people who identify as Hispanic make up 1.7% of the population in Maine, we/they are 4.4% of positive COVID-19 cases where ethnicity is known.<sup>4</sup>
- While 94% of the population in Maine is white, only 67% of the positive COVID-19 cases where race is known are white.

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<sup>1</sup> Maine CDC data for tests conducted through June 29, 2020, 11:59pm. Population data from US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 1-year estimates, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Excludes analysis of Hispanic/Latinx population in Maine.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

- As described in [an article in the Portland Press Herald](#) on June 21, 2020 and based on [data from The COVID Tracking Project](#), Maine has the nation's largest racial disparity for COVID-19.<sup>5</sup> Black and indigenous African American Mainers are contracting COVID-19 at 27 times the rate of white Mainers.
- Recently released Maine CDC data on hospitalizations also shows shocking disparities, with Black and Indigenous African American Mainers being hospitalized at eight times the rate of white Mainers. This again is the largest disparity of any state reporting racial and ethnic disparities in COVID-19 hospitalizations.<sup>6</sup>

## **Root Causes**

People in Black and indigenous African American communities, Latinx communities, and other communities of color are at greater risk for COVID-19 for many reasons, including:

- Lack of access to comprehensive health care that can help prevent or manage chronic diseases that make people more vulnerable to COVID-19—diseases like diabetes, heart disease, and asthma. For example, while 12% of white Mainers don't have a regular doctor or other health care provider, the same is true of 24% of Black Mainers, 21% of Hispanic/Latinx Mainers and 18% of Native Americans in Maine.<sup>7</sup>
- The existence of systemic racism throughout our health care system. Even for individuals of color with access to health care. Their experiences can be vastly different than the experiences of white people. Black people and immigrants face well-documented challenges in our health care system that can make it harder for them to receive the care they need.
- Systemic racism and implicit bias are deeply ingrained in our health care system leading to inferior care and worse health outcomes for Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color.<sup>8,9</sup> Experiencing racism, which is a daily reality for Black Mainers, Indigenous Mainers, and other Mainers of color, negatively impacts the health of Mainers of color.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <https://covidtracking.com/race/dashboard>

<sup>6</sup> Maine CDC data as of June 24, 2020. Maine Center for Economic Policy analysis of 50 states' CDC data.

<sup>7</sup> US CDC, Behavioral Risk Factors Surveillance Survey, 2014-2018 5-year average. Retrieved using the Web-Enabled Access Tool.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.rwjf.org/en/library/collections/racism-and-health.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/news/2020/03/27/482337/coronavirus-compounds-inequality-endangers-communities-color/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/topics-objectives/topic/social-determinants-health/interventions-resources/discrimination>

- Language and cultural barriers can make it challenging for immigrants and other people of color to participate in testing and contact tracing or get appropriate information about the virus. More than one in four Black Mainers has limited English proficiency, as does one in five Asian Mainers.<sup>11</sup>
- Working in frontline and high-risk jobs that do not allow for social distancing or have high contact with the public. Recent analysis reveals that Black workers, women, and immigrants are most likely to hold jobs on the frontline of the coronavirus fight.<sup>12</sup>
  - These include jobs in health care, direct care, food processing, and retail.
  - Many of these low-wage workers do not have access to paid sick days or paid leave that would allow them to stay home if they are at high risk or if they feel symptoms. Some are excluded from the Unemployment Insurance system and have no income options if they must stay home or lose their job due to the virus or economic shutdown.
  - Many of these workers lack adequate protections in the workplace to keep them safe.
  - Low-income workers are also more likely to need to use public transportation or carpool to get to work, which also increases exposure.
- Discrimination by individual employers, as well as unfair treatment in the education system, holds back the earnings of people of color even when they attend college. A woman of color in Maine with a college degree earns only slightly more than a white man with a high school diploma.<sup>13</sup>
- Many factors come together to hold back economic prospects for Mainers of color in all aspects of their lives. Mainers of color typically experience unemployment and poverty at twice the rate of white Mainers.<sup>14</sup>
- Centuries of racist policies and individual actions have left generations of people of color without access to wealth or credit. While three quarters of white Mainers own their own home, the same is true for fewer than one in four Black Mainers.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 1-year estimate, 2018. Share of the population aged 5 and older who speaks English less than “very well.”

<sup>12</sup> <http://blog.mecep.org/2020/04/coronavirus-relief-for-frontline-workers-has-big-implication-on-gender-and-race-equity/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.mecep.org/fact-sheet-data-on-racial-inequality-shows-need-for-solutions-to-advance-racial-justice/>

<sup>14</sup> [Ibid.](#)

<sup>15</sup> [Ibid.](#)

- Inequities in access relief programs such as the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) could exacerbate existing economic disparities. For example, the Small Business Association recently reported that because it failed to provide guidance to lenders about the guidelines to prioritize borrowers in underserved and rural markets, “rural, minority and women-owned businesses may not have received the loans as intended.”<sup>16</sup>
- Inequities in housing that exist for people of color can both make people more vulnerable to COVID-19<sup>17</sup> and deepen economic inequality<sup>18</sup>.
- For immigrants and indigenous African Americans with low incomes, safe housing is a challenge. Many reside in apartment buildings with shared entrances and spaces that increase their exposure if anyone in the building has COVID-19. Some families need to share housing or live in spaces without any spaces to keep someone separated from others in the household, which can make it impossible to isolate someone who has symptoms, tests positive, or is exposed. In Maine, Black-led households are more than six times as likely as white-led households to be overcrowded, which the Census Bureau defines as living in a space with more than one person for each room.<sup>19</sup>
- People of color and especially Black and indigenous African Americans are also disproportionately harmed by our policing and incarceration systems. People who are arrested and housed in jails or prisons face increased risk of exposure when an outbreak in any of those facilities occurs.
- The criminal justice system treats Black and white Mainers differently. Black Mainers are six times as likely to be incarcerated as white Mainers. This is especially true in cases of substance misuse. For example, even though Black Mainers make up just 1.1% of Maine’s cannabis users, they account for 5.1% of arrests for cannabis possession in the state.
- Disparities already exist in our education system for people of color and immigrants. The changes made to schooling to protect students, staff, and their families from the virus are also likely to lead to increased disparities for students of color.
- Disruptions to school-based learning due to COVID-19 could worsen the achievement gap for students of color that in turn will negatively impact existing disparities in all other areas of life.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> [https://www.oversight.gov/sites/default/files/oig-reports/SBA\\_OIG\\_Report\\_20-14\\_508.pdf](https://www.oversight.gov/sites/default/files/oig-reports/SBA_OIG_Report_20-14_508.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/covid19-racial-disparities>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/reports/2019/08/07/472617/systemic-inequality-displacement-exclusion-segregation/>

<sup>19</sup> US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 1-year estimates, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-student-learning-in-the-united-states-the-hurt-could-last-a-lifetime#>