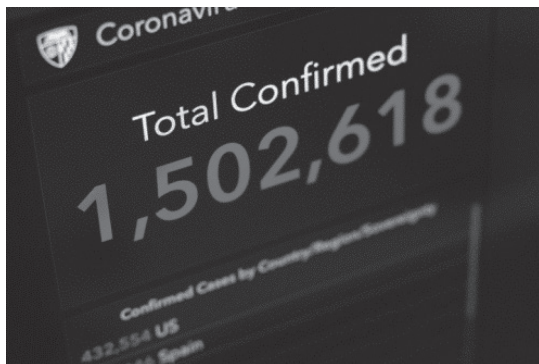# COVID Black: Organizing Information on Racial Health Disparities and Living Data

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On March 27, 2020, following weeks of general data released about the spread of COVID-19 in the US and abroad, Democratic lawmakers and politicians such as Senators Elizabeth Warren, Kamala Harris, Cory Booker, and Rep. Ayanna Pressley stated in a letter to Health and Human Services Department Secretary Alex Azar that it is imperative that the Center for Disease Control collect and report racial and ethnic health data by state.[1] This call came in light

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1. Morrison, Aaron. "Democratic lawmakers call for racial data in virus testing". PBS. 30 March 2020.https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/democratic-lawmakers-call-for-racial-data-in-virus-testing. Accessed 14 April 2020.

of the reality that low income communities of color would be greatly affected by COVID-19 due to multiple overlapping systems of inequality and racism, such as location and food deserts, lack of access to health insurance and care, pre-existing conditions and comorbidity, working in industries at greater risk for virus spread, intersectional marginalization, and many other concerns.[2] As the data came in, it was no surprise to learn that a disproportionate number of deaths from coronavirus in the United States have now been attributed to members of the Black community.[3] This initial data has resulted in the visibility of "hot spots" of racial health disparities, where Black people are a minority in the general population but a large portion of the reported coronavirus deaths.[4] Even outside of the United States, there is a significant amount of data which points to the global resonances of these racial health inequalities.[5] Even with this information, the collection of data remains incomplete, and as of today some states have not reported comprehensive racial health data on coronavirus deaths and diagnoses.[6] As COVID-19 continues to claim lives, those who are the most vulnerable among us deserve to be recognized and to have citizens mobilize around causes which seek to bring greater light to these inequalities by pressuring institutions and government systems to create solutions. COVID Black serves as one such example of how citizens are responding to these concerns.

Initiated by Kim Gallon, Nishani Frazier, and Faithe Day, COVID Black - a Taskforce on Black Health and Data is a Black Digital Humanities (Black DH) collective and an early response taskforce on Black living data that organizes resources and actions that are designed to respond to discourse around health disparities within Black diasporic communities. Utilizing the critical and justice-oriented frameworks of Black Studies, Black Digital Humanities, and Public Health research, we seek to collectively build awareness and outreach around the role that intersectionality and ethics play in issues of information, science, technology, and medicine. As a Black DH collective, COVID Black foregrounds an understanding of race as a technology in order to recover the role that systemic

2. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. "Ten equity implications of the Coronavirus COVID-19 Outbreak in the United States". *NAACP*. https://naacp.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Ten-Equity-Considerations-of-the-Coronavirus-COVID-19-Outbreak-in-the-United-States_Version-2.pdf. Accessed 14 April 2020.

3. Johnson, Akila and Talia Buford. "Early Data Shows African Americans Have Contracted and Died of Coronavirus at an Alarming Rate". *ProPublica*. https://www.propublica.org/article/early-data-shows-african-americans-have-contracted-and-died-of-coronavirus-at-an-alarming-rate?utm_source=pardot&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=majorinvestigations. Accessed 14 April 2020.

4. Kendi, Ibrahim X. "Stop Blaming Black People for Dying of the Coronavirus: New data from 29 states confirm the extent of the racial disparities." *The Atlantic*, 14 April 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/us/coronavirus-race.html?action=click&module=Spotlight&pgtype=Homepage. Accessed 14 April 2020.

5. Boyd, Connor. "Coronavirus warning for people from black and minority backgrounds as NHS data suggests they are at more risk of life-threatening complications". *Daily Mail*. 6 April 2020. https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8191443/NHS-data-suggests-people-black-minority-backgrounds-vulnerable-coronavirus.html. Accessed 14 April 2020.

6. "Action: COVID-19 Open Data by State." *Data 4 Black Lives*. http://d4bl.org/action.html. Accessed 14 April 2020.

racism always already plays in the politics of platforms, publics, and policy.[7] Specifically, we are focused on the ways in which digital tools and technology can be used to not only to collect numerical data, but to facilitate collaboration, creation, and community through the collection of information and discourse which highlights the lived experiences of Black people during and beyond the coronavirus pandemic.

While many are writing about this pandemic as an unusual occurrence that has shed new light on the many injustices of our world, for those who exist as part and in study of Black communities, COVID-19 has only exposed one of the many ways that marginalized folx and communities of color are disenfranchised by centuries old systems of inequality. Instead of just focusing on collecting data detailing the effects of the virus, COVID Black pinpoints the historical resonances of Black health discourse and research in order to address larger systemic issues of racial and ethnic injustice within government, institutions, and healthcare systems. In this sense, COVID Black is built on a framework of ethics, justice, and community care. Like other projects within the field of Black DH and Black Digital Studies, this organization pinpoints the interrelations between data collection, curation, curriculum, cultures, critique, and custodial models through the centering of Black diasporic people and communities. We also understand that the lived experiences of Black diasporic people are important and that analyzing living data is just as relevant in this time period as the collection of posthumous data and statistics. Therefore, COVID Black is not only invested in the stories that the statistics tell us, but also the social stories which are currently being generated online and in the media, as well as the stories which have persisted about and within Black diasporic communities around health and well- being for centuries. COVID Black also attends to the question of how we can tell stories and craft visualizations that make information, data, and policy available, legible, and useful to Black communities.

To collect these stories and statistics, the first action step of the COVID Black taskforce has been to mobilize academics and community members to reach out to their local health departments and scholarly communities to collect racial and ethnic health data on coronavirus.[8] Our next call focused on intersectional data, and the need for heterogeneous data on how COVID-19 is impacting marginalized communities.[9] The collection of this data is essential to understanding the scope of the effect that the coronavirus is having on Black communities now, while setting the groundwork for practitioners and policy makers to offer solutions for the future—especially as Black diasporic people live with undiagnosed mental and physical health conditions every day. These conditions are only exacerbated

7. Gallon, Kim. "Making a case for the Black digital humanities." *Debates in the Digital Humanities* (2016): 42-49.

8. COVID Black Letter to Health Departments - https://docs.google.com/document/d/1X2xg spKswla6a6gyG9VFSDqydmqmx6GlZJA93a81PPQ/edit

9. COVID Black Call to Collect Intersectional Data - https://docs.google.com/document/d/1d5su5mf4BeGh2Hq3nc9_buUuvseogiX4CNcuXvEnjqQ/edit?usp=sharing

by the intersections of class, ability, gender, sexuality and many other valences of identity and experience. Instead of allowing this time period to become one more archival silence in the record of Black experience, COVID Black does the work of collecting, archiving, and analyzing the digital data and ephemera of this extraordinary moment in our collective history.

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