

Epidemics Reveal Race and Class Disparity

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Monica McCaskill, left, and her daughter Kenya Johnson, at their home in Greenwood, Mississippi. They respectively lost their grandmother and great grandmother, Ethel Huntley, to Covid-19. Huntley lived in a nearby nursing home and the family allege failings in her primary care.

Photograph: Rory Doyle/The Guardian



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Decades ago, during the civil rights movement, Lowndes County was referred to as “Bloody Lowndes” due to its long history of lynching, white supremacy and KKK activity. In 1965, voting rights marchers led by Martin Luther King Jr and the late John Lewis crossed the county on the way to Montgomery from Selma.

But 55 years later, and with the final mission of the civil rights movement to tackle economic inequality never resolved, 30% of residents here live in poverty making it one of the poorest counties in the state. **There is no hospital** in Lowndes, so those like Sandy Oliver and Pamela Rush, sought treatment many miles from home. Census records indicate at least **12% of residents have no form of health insurance.**



Sandy Oliver poses outside her home in Tyler, Alabama. Photograph by Kevin D Liles/The Guardian

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- In 2020, the county's deaths ruled as opioid overdoses are on track to double last year's total number of opioid-related cases, the chief medical examiner, Dr. Ponni Arunkumar, said at a Tuesday news conference. The fatalities, similar to those from **the coronavirus and gun violence crises, are disproportionately affecting Black people**, she added. The majority stem from Chicago's West Side neighborhoods.
- Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle said the briefing was convened **"to sound the alarm" as the three overlapping epidemics** devastate the county's most vulnerable populations.
- "This year continues to illuminate the dangerous consequences we **face as a result of centuries — centuries — of racial inequity,**" Preckwinkle said. "The victims of the opioid epidemic have been quietly dying around us. We must be their voice to prevent future, needless, preventable deaths plaguing our community."



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- Communities of color have endured the **weight of COVID-19, the recession and social unrest**. They're also bearing the brunt of a surge in gun violence.
- Over 1,500 people have been shot in Chicago, almost 900 in Philadelphia, and more than 500 in New York City so far in 2020 — all up significantly from the same time last year (1,018 in Chicago, 701 in Philadelphia and 355 in New York).
- The surge in shootings has been particularly painful **for communities of color, which have disproportionately endured the weight of the COVID-19 crisis**, the economic recession and social unrest following the death of George Floyd in police custody in Minneapolis in May.

Photo credit: 101 pairs of shoes and a casket are laid out during a vigil to represent the 101 shooting victims in the 74 gun violence incidents that took place over the past week throughout New York City, at Borough Hall in New York on July 8, 2020. Angela Weiss / AFP - Getty Images



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According to CDC data released to The New York Times, Latino and Black Americans were three times as likely to become infected and twice as likely to die from the disease from March through May compared to white Americans. Many Native American groups have also been disproportionately affected. Since the pandemic began, the Navajo Nation has had some of the highest novel coronavirus infection rates in the country.

No one factor explains the racial disparity being observed in COVID-19. Rather, the trend is the result of numerous forms of racism conspiring to make Black, Latino, and Indigenous people more vulnerable to the virus and its symptoms.

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Six Important Points to Remember ...

1. Preexisting conditions play a huge role

Utibe Essien, M.D., an assistant professor of medicine at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine and coauthor of ... a study on COVID's racial disparities, says "It's the food insecurity, it's the poor neighborhoods, it's the poverty really that drives a lot of the clinical diseases," he says. "It's the limited access to health care, whether it's through insurance or through bias in our health system. It drives a lot of the chronic risk factors." *

2. Preexisting conditions can be result of systemic and structural racism

"I cannot overemphasize enough that social injustice and systemic racism are the root problems in the disparities," **Geno Tai, M.D.**, an infectious diseases resident at Mayo Clinic and coauthor of a study on the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on racial and ethnic minorities. "The legacy of redlining, for example, has made African American households poorer; their communities have less resources decades after this policy." *

3. People of Color are hit harder by COVID-19 no matter where they live

4. Native American Reservations face numerous challenges for containing the virus

5. The racial demographic data for COVID-19 is incomplete

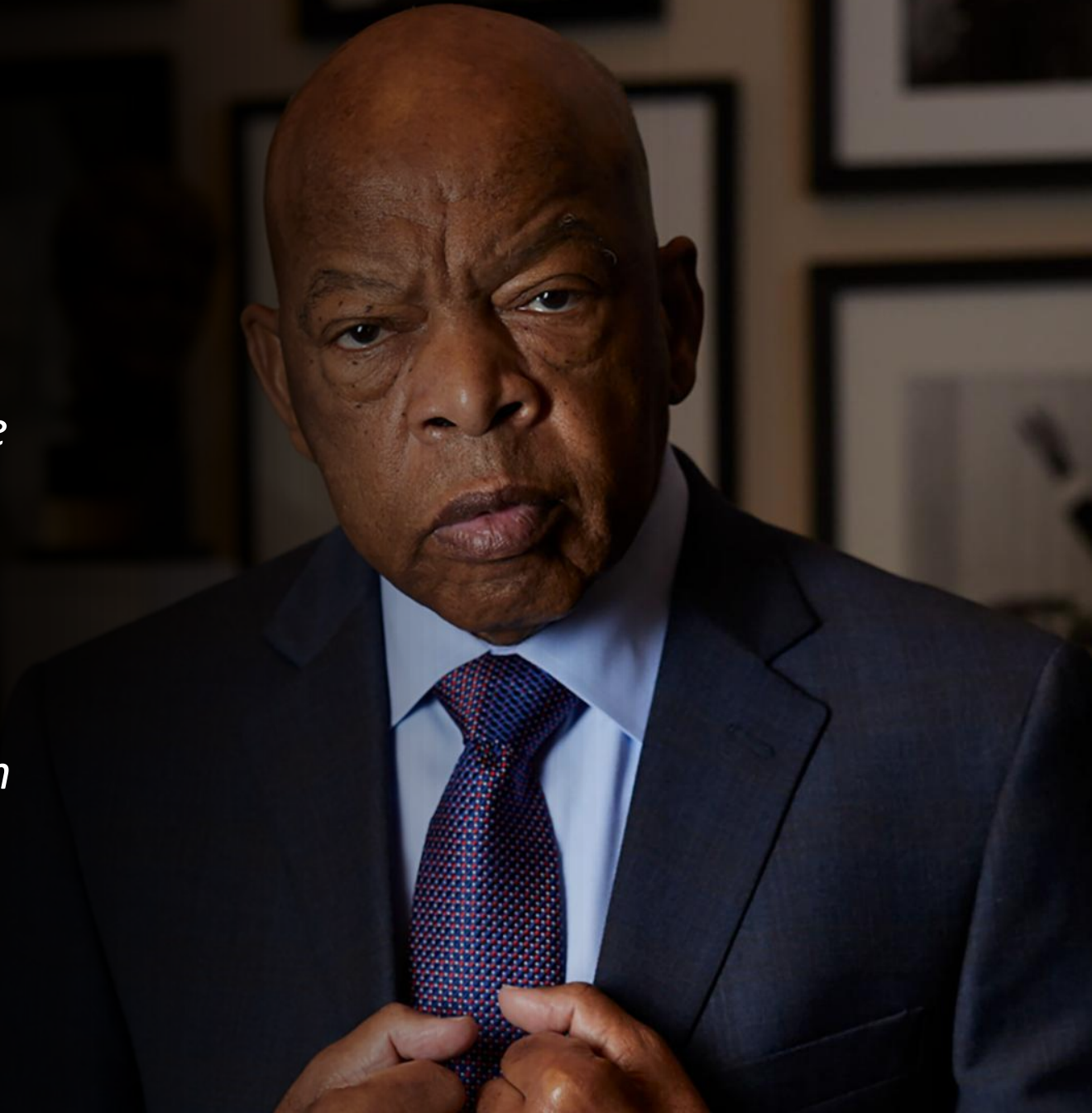
6. Medical community needs to build trust with People of Color

* adapted from 10 Facts by Michele Debczak, Mental Floss, 2020

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"Though I am gone, I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe. When you see something that is not right, you must say something. You must do something. Ordinary people with extraordinary vision can redeem the soul of America by getting in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble."

— John Lewis



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