
If We All Had a Mask

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In light of the current epidemic the globe finds itself in, it is hard to ignore certain systemic issues being revealed as the problem progresses. States across the country find themselves battling for basic medical supplies while attempting to stay financially stable as businesses are forced to close or drastically lower operating costs. In the midst of this entire fiasco, there is another grave issue at hand; the disproportionate rate in which people of color are contracting and dying from COVID-19. This paper will look at how the Trump administration is handling aspects of this pandemic from January to the last weeks of April and how their actions perpetuate systemic racism and environmental injustice.

In the month of January on the 29th The White House starts its coronavirus response taskforce, headed by Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar. Dr Anthony Fauci, the head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, is appointed to the taskforce and will become a key figure in the Trump's administration's response. On the 31st of January Trump issued an executive order blocking entry to the US from anyone who has been in China in the last 14 days. Which took effect on February 2nd. The month of February involved the president downplaying the virus stating that there are only 12 cases in the United States and alluded that those infected were all recovering. On March 4th the House passed the \$8.3 billion emergency bill to help combat the spreading of the virus. March 11th travel bans were enforced specifically Italy and China, two of the

largest hot spots initially. March 27th Trump signs the \$2.2 trillion emergency bill. April 2nd 6.6 million file for unemployment and on the 14th Trump halted funding to the World Health Organization (WHO). As of today, April 21st, the president of the United States is working out the details of an indefinite travel ban into the country. Effectively halting all immigration.

When discussing how the current presidential administration's actions are normalizing systematic racism and environmental justice in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic there are multiple avenues to take. It is important to note as of this paper being typed multiple civil rights and doctor groups are urging the federal government to release race and ethnic data on COVID-19 cases. According to data collected by states around the United States such as Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, Chicago, and Louisiana they all show a common trend. In each of these states the minority black population accounts for a majority of deaths due to COVID-19. These communities are enduring devastating effects from this virus and need immediate assistance and monitoring. It is also important to note COVID-19 can prove fatal to individuals with asthma, hypertension, diabetes, etc. All of these conditions are common in black and/or lower income communities. This section will highlight the administration's inaction / distance to states and relaxation of environmental regulations. What the Trump administration has managed to do from the beginning of the pandemic was distance themselves from the situation entirely,

faulting governors for their lack of awareness. From this stance the administration tells the states to allocate resources for themselves with very limited federal presence. This forces already struggling states to bid for medical supplies necessary to treat at risk patients; who are disproportionately of color and of lower income. Governor Charlie Baker of Massachusetts began to bid for dire medical supplies only to be outbid by the federal government. He was perplexed and was only able to receive a minute fraction of the necessary medical supplies for his state. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo was quoted at a press conference last month saying, "This is not the way to do it, this is ad hoc, I'm competing with other states, I'm bidding up other states on the prices." The economy of states are in a spike and to add the ridiculous notion of overpaying for essential medical supplies seems unfathomable. As states begin to lose income it is essential to allocate resources stringently and tailor approaches for communities feeling the most affects. However, if states are forced to pay exorbitant prices to combat the spreading and impact of this virus it will prove difficult as the demand for supplies increases. Leaving the most vulnerable communities to suffer with no government presence or assistance. One of the most blatant acts of environmental injustice currently taking place is the administration's manipulation of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). On March 13th the administration stated the EPA will enforce the "enforcement discretion policy". Effectively they will no longer penalize polluters if

they state their inability to follow environmental regulations was due to the COVID pandemic. This includes not having to monitor underground oil wells or oil reserves. During a pandemic to monitor the viability of groundwater for drinking at first glance seems essential. The administration believes the lax oversight over the president's preferred industries, oil and coal, have more importance than the health of the environment and communities at risk of the pollutants. This action will not only harm the environment but the negative externalities have the potential to cause more Americans to die due to pollutants entering the atmosphere. This is especially worrisome for communities located near refineries, predominantly poor and colored, who decide to capitalize on the lenient environmental regulations. And these are the people most in harm's way, not just from the excess pollution that would be allowed under this policy, but from the many burdens imposed by COVID-19 itself (both health and economic). Importantly this policy has no end date. It is common for an extension of enforcement discretion to always have an end date. This date correlates with the agency's expectation about how long the "event" or "circumstance" will stand. Knowledge here could be life-saving, but nothing in EPA's new policy will ensure that such information ever becomes available.

This section will highlight how the Trump administration through environmental rollbacks throughout his presidency caused the exponential death of black lives and lives of lower income individuals to be lost. Since his presidency Donald Trump has routinely stated his disdain for environmental regulations and monitoring. A few notable rollbacks and repeals the president has done while in office include: repealing Obama-Era Clean Power Plan, directing agen-

cies to stop using "social cost of carbon", stopped enforcing 2015 rule prohibiting the use of hydrofluorocarbons, and most recently the enforcement discretion policy by the EPA. According to the Bureau of Economic Research there were 9,700 more air pollution related deaths in 2018 than 2016. Taking into consideration the fact the social cost of carbon is no longer a variable in the policy equation this can have devastating effects. This all plays a huge factor when discussing COVID-19 and pre existing conditions that make the virus especially dangerous. Lower income black communities in the United States regularly have higher rates of asthma, hypertension, and diabetes when compared to national averages. Many of the lower income communities are unable to practice effective social distancing since they have limited living space. Many of them also live multigenerational, akin to Italy, which can exacerbate the contagion while affecting a wider range of individuals. These communities are often located near polluters only worsening the health of the community making them susceptible to the virus. In turn this situation also keeps their home value relatively low, denying them the ability to leverage economic mobility through renting, selling, or applying for a loan. A physiological reaction to this mounting stress can and does manifest itself physically in hypertension which may lead to heart disease and/or stroke. Hypertension and asthma are two pre-existing conditions to make a lethal COVID cocktail.

According to a recent study published by Harvard, researchers found that long-term exposure to air pollutants increases the vulnerability to the most severe COVID-19 outcomes. As we begin to look at data at the state level this becomes abundantly clear. In Michigan where 14% of the population are black they accounted for

40% of current deaths. In Wisconsin specifically Milwaukee County, the 26% black population accounted for 81% of current deaths. Lastly, in Louisiana where 33% of the population is black 70% of the deaths are attributed to black people. It is clear to see that any leniency of environmental regulations is a direct attack at communities of color and lower income. These are the communities who absorb the negative externalities that now make them susceptible to the lethal virus. As the Trump administration continues to distance itself from the necessities of the people more people will continue to pass without proper medical attention or care. As stated previously the neglect will lead states to scramble for supplies often leaving many without care. This can also be seen in prison populations around the globe. The current administration is struggling to manage the overcrowded prisons. These locations quickly become incubators for the virus to thrive. There is no form of enforceable social distancing and with lack of equipment the virus is able to spread easily. There are articles of prisoners in New York and Ohio pleading for guards to supply them with protection yet to no avail. As of today the Trump Administration stated that prisoners were no longer considered for pre-release if they served less than half of their sentence. This change came abruptly to the surprise of the inmates destined for early release. In an effort to drastically lower inmate numbers thousands of prisoners will stay incarcerated.

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