

## THE HIGH COST OF RACE-BASED BIAS

### In the Face of Covid-19 is Corporate America Doing Enough?

The so-called “Novel Coronavirus” known as Covid-19 is unmasking the true cost of structural and institutional bias in America; and if I may speak plainly, that true cost is the alarmingly disproportionate loss of human life, especially among our African American citizens. We are seeing a shocking bias toward African Americans in both the infection rate and the death rate during the Covid-19 pandemic. Though not seen initially, individually hard-hit states and the National Centers for Disease Control slowly began to report the racial demographics of the Covid-19 outbreak—and “biased” hardly seems to describe what was revealed.

As the pandemic ripped through New York, Milwaukee, Chicago, Detroit, and New Orleans there was one recurring theme. . . In every hard-hit state and city, we saw African Americans dying at rates up to two and three times their percent of population! Experts continue to warn that Covid-19 is not a respecter of persons. In other words, the virus doesn’t discriminate. It doesn’t check your socio-economic status or your location, or even your racial and ethnic background. It simply seeks and infects almost anyone it encounters. Infectious disease experts like Drs. Fauci and Birx from the National Coronavirus Task Force say this virus is extremely contagious—indeed one of the most contagious we have seen in modern history—but more important, this deadly virus kills. So, I have two questions.

The first question is why are African Americans suffering such a high mortality rate during this pandemic?

Before racial data was released, we heard experts focusing on other causal factors. The federal government took fast action to restrict travel from China, believed to be the source country for Covid-19; and soon after, travel was restricted from Europe which was facing mounting infectious spread. Just as quickly as these orders were given, it became evident travel restrictions would not be enough. Officials at the national, state and local levels urged communities to take particular care with the older population, those with co-morbidities, and those with compromised immune systems.

While all these prudent steps were being taken, the virus was attacking the African American community with alarming precision. It is true that many African Americans suffer from underlying illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes, hypertension and other conditions which can make them particularly vulnerable to the deadly virus, but it is unlikely these factors fully account for death rates among Black people of 2X and 3X their percent of population? In addition to these underlying health issues, officials also expressed concern for health workers, first-responders and front-line workers who were also being infected at alarming rates. Attention was given to the swift deployment of personal protective equipment (masks and gowns) to help slow the spread among these “essential workers” who were treating Covid-19 patients and performing other crucial functions like keeping the food, medical supplies and the other essentials moving throughout the country and flowing unimpeded to the nation’s most

dangerous Coronavirus hot spots. Well—it turns out African Americans were also over-represented among these essential worker groups and many of them found themselves dealt a deadly double whammy!

Still, the presence of any or all these factors among African Americans does not fully explain the disproportionate death rate this group is experiencing. Perhaps the reason African Americans are so adversely impacted by Covid-19 lies deeper than any of these explanations. While Covid-19 may be a “novel” or new coronavirus it is unmasking an old problem: structural, race-based bias which causes most of our key societal institutions to deliver a biased or disproportionate outcome. If a system or institution lacks bias, then by definition it will produce a proportionate outcome. Covid-19 is showing us how our health U.S. care system delivers a biased outcome, and in this case, it is showing us—in real time—how a biased health care system can exact a high and deadly cost on those with diminished access to health benefits and proper medical care.

The second question is what should be done about these biased outcomes?

By now, in this current crisis, we all realize individual citizens can do a lot to help mitigate the spread of Covid-19 by practicing appropriate social distancing and personal hygiene guidelines as released by the CDC and reinforced by State Governments. By now, we can plainly see the sacrifices our health care professionals and others on the front lines of this epidemic are making to treat those who are inflicted with the virus and support those of us who are not “yet” infected.

As a corporate executive, however, my mind turns to the question of what companies and businesses can do to win the battle against this coronavirus; and not only that, but what can Corporate America do to address the structural and institutional bias unmasked by Covid-19?

I understand the pressing urgency of addressing the current crisis. In fact, I’m impressed by the response of so many companies, including my own, to observe stay-at-home orders and enable many to work from home where possible. I applaud the efforts of those companies deemed essential (and therefore continuing to operate) to implement and practice social distancing and step up their hygiene and sanitization protocols. Our company is among those who have retooled production lines to produce much needed protective masks and hand-sanitizer to supplement supplies in our health care system.

Yet, I can’t help thinking ahead to the painful reality that Covid-19 is only showing us the impact of our deeper issues with institutional bias. I can’t help thinking that Corporate America, left to our own devices, might miss the forest for the trees. We might see the carnage of Covid-19 and miss the devastating effect of institutional bias. My question to Corporate America is who among us is willing to Take on Race at its structural foundation? How many companies will step up and say we cannot ignore the deeper implications staring us in the face? These are critically important points when we consider the high cost of race-based bias.

Often, it is hard-working people of moderate means who will pay the ultimate price of our failure to act on the deeper concern. It is indeed our fellow Americans whose lack of access turns deadly in a crisis—and this is perhaps finally evident with Covid-19. In addition to all the good things some companies are doing to serve our hardest-hit cities I'm putting the proverbial moose on the table. I'm asking Corporate America to join us not only in the battle against this coronavirus, but to engage with us in the war against structural and institutional bias which Covid-19 is so vividly revealing right before our very eyes. Failure to do so will have a predictable and profoundly painful effect—the next “Novel” crisis will simply be a repeat of the current crisis. How many times will we put on a mask to cover our biases? Hopefully, this will be our last time. The alternative will prove we are unwilling to take the deeper learning from Covid-19; and as Socrates once said, “The mask which an actor wears is apt to become his face!”

Barron Witherspoon is an executive at Procter & Gamble where he leads the company's Corporate Race Initiative. A coalition of like-minded companies have joined P&G in a national effort called **Take on Race: Advancing Racial Equity**. To learn more about this effort visit [www.pg.com/takeonrace](http://www.pg.com/takeonrace).

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