



AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION  
FOUNDATION

Alaska

April 20, 2020

The Honorable Mike Dunleavy, Governor

*via electronic submission:*

<https://aws.state.ak.us/CrmForms/Home/Feedback>

Commissioner Adam Crum

Alaska Department of Health and Social Services

*via email:* [adam.crum@alaska.gov](mailto:adam.crum@alaska.gov)

**RE: Demographic data about COVID-19 in Alaska**

Dear Governor Dunleavy and Commissioner Crum:

On behalf of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the ACLU of Alaska, we write to urge your office to improve the collection and reporting of aggregate race/ethnicity and other demographic data of novel coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) infections and deaths to the extent consistent with medical and health privacy laws. As states and municipalities across the country release racial data of COVID-19 infection and death, it is becoming increasingly urgent to protect all communities and identify communities that are in particular need of support. In order to protect everyone in the state and to save as many lives as possible, we are urging your office to improve the collection of this data to provide a more complete picture of the impact of COVID-19 in Alaska.

Alaska is among the 34 states and D.C. that have shared racial breakdowns of COVID-19 infections, and the 26 states and D.C. that share breakdowns of COVID-19 deaths.<sup>1</sup> Thus far, the data released across the nation show that by and large, Black people are dying at disturbingly disproportionate rates. For example, Black people represent 43 percent of COVID-19 deaths in Illinois, but make up only 14 percent of the state's population.<sup>2</sup> In Louisiana, Black people make up 32 percent of

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<sup>1</sup> "Racial data transparency: States that have released breakdowns of Covid-19 data by race" from <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/racial-data-transparency> (data current as of Friday, April 17, 2020 at 8:00 AM EDT).

<sup>2</sup> See Kat Stafford, Meghan Hoyer & Aaron Morrison, *Outcry Over Racial Data Grows As Virus Slams Black Americans*, AP (April 8, 2020), <https://apnews.com/71d952faad4a2a5d14441534f7230c7c>; *COVID-19*

the state but represent over 70 percent of COVID-19 related deaths.<sup>3</sup> Similarly alarming, in Mississippi, Black people make up 38 percent of the population but represent 52 percent of COVID-19 cases and 71 percent of reported deaths.<sup>4</sup> Cities with larger Black and Latino communities are especially seeing the inequalities in COVID-19 cases and deaths. In Milwaukee, Black people make up 67 percent of people who have died from COVID-19, while making up only 39 percent of the city's population.<sup>5</sup> In New York City, which now has more confirmed cases than anywhere else in the world, Latinos make up 29 percent of the population but 34 percent of COVID-19 deaths and Black people make up 22 percent of the population but 28 percent of deaths.<sup>6</sup>

Existing health disparities and other social and economic inequalities make Black, brown, and indigenous people particularly vulnerable to contracting and dying from COVID-19. While public health officials recommend working from home to stop the spread of the virus, only 20 percent of Black workers and 16 percent of Latino workers are able to work from home.<sup>7</sup> Black people are also more likely to be uninsured and live in communities without access to quality healthcare facilities, leading to disproportionate rates of chronic diseases such as asthma, hypertension, and diabetes.<sup>8</sup> Black and Latina women are overrepresented as essential workers with Latina women making up 22 percent of women grocery store workers and Black women making up 27 percent of women home health aid workers.<sup>9</sup> In

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*Statistics*, Illinois Department of Public Health, [www.dph.illinois.gov/covid19/covid19-statistics](http://www.dph.illinois.gov/covid19/covid19-statistics) (last accessed April 9, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> See Kat Stafford, et al., *Outcry Over Racial Data Grows As Virus Slams Black Americans*, AP (April 8, 2020), <https://apnews.com/71d952faad4a2a5d14441534f7230c7c>, Louisiana Department of Public Health, [ldh.la.gov/coronavirus/](http://ldh.la.gov/coronavirus/) (last accessed April 9, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> See Emily W. Pettus, *African Americans more than half of Mississippi virus deaths*, AP (April 7, 2020), <https://apnews.com/c45118f1f0e98e35a3d89742c751a7f2>; *Coronavirus Disease 2019*, Mississippi State Department of Health (April 9, 2020), [https://msdh.ms.gov/msdhsite/\\_static/14.0.420.html](https://msdh.ms.gov/msdhsite/_static/14.0.420.html).

<sup>5</sup> *Milwaukee County COVID-19 Dashboard*, Milwaukee County, <https://county.milwaukee.gov/EN/COVID-19> (last accessed April 10, 2020); *Milwaukee city, Wisconsin*, United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/milwaukeecitywisconsin> (last accessed April 10, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> *Fatalities*, New York State Department of Health, <https://covid19tracker.health.ny.gov/views/NYS-COVID19-Tracker/NYSDOHCOVID-19Tracker-Fatalities?%3Aembed=yes&%3Atoolbar=no&%3Atabs=n> (last accessed April 10, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> See *Economic News Release*, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (Sept. 24, 2019), <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/flex2.t01.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> See Reis Thebault, Andrew Ba Tran, & Vanessa Williams, *The Coronavirus Is Infecting and Killing Black Americans at an Alarming High Rate*, Washington Post (April 7, 2020), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/04/07/coronavirus-is-infecting-killing-black-americans-an-alarmpost-analysis-shows/?arc404=true>.

<sup>9</sup> See *The Wage Gap Has Made Things Worse for Women on the Front Lines of COVID-19*, National Women's Law Center (Mar. 30, 2020), <https://nwlc.org/blog/the-wage-gap-has-made-things-worse-for-women-on-the-front-lines-of-covid-19/>.

addition, people of color are overrepresented in industries that are rapidly laying off workers, leaving many uninsured.<sup>10</sup>

Given the vast disparities across the country, it is likely that Black people, Alaska Native people, and other communities of color are disproportionately impacted in Alaska as well. In order to effectively address this pandemic and direct resources where they are most needed, government officials and entities must standardize, collect, and release race and ethnicity data surrounding COVID-19. Alaska state data, however, show considerable gaps:

- Ethnicity data (Hispanic/non-Hispanic) is “unknown” for nearly one-third (32.1 percent) of COVID-19 cases and 44.4 percent of COVID-19 deaths; and
- Race data is “unknown” for approximately one-fourth (24.3 percent) of COVID-19 cases and 22.2 percent of COVID-19 deaths.<sup>11</sup>

Without knowing the breadth of how COVID-19 is affecting communities in the state, public health officials, advocates, and affected members of the public will not have the tools necessary to tackle the inequalities this pandemic is exacerbating. Government entities must also provide adequate protections for all essential workers, especially those most vulnerable to the threat posed by COVID-19, including ensuring the equitable distribution of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)/ventilators.

We urge your office to evaluate, standardize, and improve data collection practices and protocols for race/ethnicity and other demographic data of COVID-19 infections and deaths, to the extent consistent with privacy laws, so that we may glean a more complete picture of the impacts of COVID-19 to better protect all communities and identify those that are in particular need of support. Please do not hesitate to reach out if we can be of assistance.

Sincerely,



Triada Stampas  
Policy Director

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<sup>10</sup> See Dan Burns, *How The Coronavirus Job Cuts Played Out by Sector and Demographics*, Reuters (April 4, 2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-usa-jobs/how-the-coronavirus-job-cuts-played-out-by-sector-and-demographics-idUSKBN21M0EL> (showing that Asians and Latinos faced the highest rate of increase of unemployment and that the rate of unemployment for Black people is now 65% higher than the rate of unemployment for white people).

<sup>11</sup> “Demographic\_Distribution\_of\_Confirmed\_Cases” data table downloaded from <https://coronavirus-response-alaska-dhss.hub.arcgis.com/> (data current as of April 20, 2020).

Governor Dunleavy, Commissioner Crum

*Demographic data about COVID-19*

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cc: Chief Medical Officer Dr. Anne Zink  
State Senate President Cathy Giessel  
State House Majority Leader Bryce Edgmon  
State Senator David Wilson, Chair, Senate Health & Social Services Committee  
Representative Tiffany Zulkosky, Chair, House Health & Social Services Committee  
Alaska Federation of Natives President Julie Kitka  
First Alaskans Institute President & CEO Liz Medicine Crow  
ANCSA Regional Association Executive Director Kim Reitmeier  
Native Peoples Action Executive Director Kendra Kloster  
Native Movement Executive Director Enei Begaye  
Anchorage NAACP President Kevin McGee