

Congress of the United States  
Washington, DC 20510

November 24, 2020

Robert R. Redfield, MD  
Director  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
1600 Clifton Road  
Atlantic, GA 30333

Dear Director Redfield,

We write today to express our serious concerns with the lack of robust data on disproportionate racial mortality rates in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) recent report on excess deaths. As COVID-19 continues to wreak havoc across our nation, it is imperative that the data on nearly 300,000 excess deaths accurately reflects the devastating impact of this pandemic – particularly on communities of color.

On October 20, 2020, the CDC published a study on excess deaths that occurred between late January and October to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on our country’s mortality rates. According to the study, two-thirds of the 300,000 excess deaths were attributed to the coronavirus while the rest were linked to other health-related causes such as high blood pressure, heart disease, and diabetes.<sup>1</sup> Among the deaths associated with COVID-19, two distressing demographic trends emerged. The greatest percentage increase in excess deaths occurred among relatively young adults ages 25 to 44, and people of color faced the largest percentage increase in mortality rates.<sup>2</sup>

Specifically, the report revealed that Latino and Hispanic people faced a 54 percent increase in excess deaths, a 37 percent increase for Asians, a 33 percent increase for Black people, and a 29 percent increase for Native Americans and other indigenous communities.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, white people only experienced a 12 percent rise in excess deaths. As lawmakers, we recognize that these disproportionate mortality rates represent a failure to address structural racism that puts people of color at an increased risk of dying from the coronavirus.

This data makes clear the disparate impact that COVID-19 has on communities of color, but significant questions remain. We respectfully request that you respond in writing to the following questions by December 8, 2020:

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<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Excess Deaths Associated with COVID-19, by Age and Race and Ethnicity — United States, January 26–October 3, 2020” (October 20, 2020)

[https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6942e2.htm?s\\_cid=mm6942e2\\_w](https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6942e2.htm?s_cid=mm6942e2_w)

<sup>2</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Excess Deaths Associated with COVID-19, by Age and Race and Ethnicity — United States, January 26–October 3, 2020” (October 20, 2020)

[https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6942e2.htm?s\\_cid=mm6942e2\\_w](https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6942e2.htm?s_cid=mm6942e2_w)

<sup>3</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Excess Deaths Associated with COVID-19, by Age and Race and Ethnicity — United States, January 26–October 3, 2020” (October 20, 2020)

[https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6942e2.htm?s\\_cid=mm6942e2\\_w](https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6942e2.htm?s_cid=mm6942e2_w)

1. Social determinants of health such as poverty, immigration status, access to care, and underlying health conditions like heart disease shape mortality rates in communities of color.<sup>4</sup> However, your agency's report did not include a breakdown or analysis by race or ethnicity on the remaining one-third of excess deaths. This lack of information is concerning especially when we know that health-related causes of death do not exist in a vacuum. To that end, why has the CDC not provided data by race and ethnicity on the excess deaths that were blamed on causes unrelated to COVID-19? Furthermore, has the CDC examined the intersections between social determinants of health and mortality rates among people of color during the pandemic? If so, please describe specific examples in how the CDC has used an intersectional approach to its data in better addressing the disparate impact of this pandemic on communities of color.
2. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed just how pervasive racism is across our health care infrastructure. In order to pinpoint specific problems and implement effective interventions, the CDC must collect, study, and disaggregate data on race by culture and ethnicity. By combining data on ethnic groups under just a few broad racial categories, lawmakers and public health officials are left with an incomplete roadmap.

The agency's collection of data on COVID-19 in the Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) community clearly illustrates this problem. Within the AANHPI community, ethnic groups are diverse and face different challenges based on their culture and background. However, these groups are often clumped together in data collection, which has obscured or generalized their needs as well as experiences during this pandemic. Pacific Islanders, for instance, are at greater risk for COVID-19 than other Asian ethnic groups and face stigma around infection in their community, and yet, collection of this data has not been standardized or disaggregated by your agency.<sup>5</sup>

These generalizations in data have real world consequences, as evidenced by the increasing mortality rate among AANHPIs that received little to no attention from public health officials.<sup>6</sup> As such, will the CDC commit to collecting and analyzing disaggregated data in order to eliminate gaps in information on communities of color? What concrete actions have the CDC taken thus far to advance equity and address the unique needs of different ethnic groups within communities of color?

3. Public health experts have projected that if current trends continue, our country will reach well over 400,000 excess deaths by the end of this year.<sup>7</sup> How is the CDC utilizing its data on excess deaths to prevent the excess mortality rate from climbing any higher?

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<sup>4</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Health Equity Considerations and Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups" (July 24, 2020) <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/race-ethnicity.html>

<sup>5</sup> Agnes Constante, NBC News, "Why the Asian American Covid data picture is so incomplete" (October 20, 2020) <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/why-asian-american-covid-data-picture-so-incomplete-n1243219>

<sup>6</sup> Anna Flag, Damini Sharma, Mike Strobbe, and Larry Fenn, The Associated Press, "Mounting US deaths reveal an outside toll on people of color" (August 21, 2020) <https://apnews.com/article/a8e3244c77bc31efc826bbbe4a9d19>

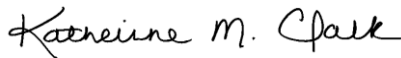
<sup>7</sup> Roni Caryn Rabin, The New York Times, "The Pandemic's Real Toll? 300,000 Deaths, and It's Not Just From the Coronavirus" (October 20, 2020) <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/20/health/coronavirus-excess-deaths.html>

Based on this data, please describe what, if any, interventions the CDC will implement to protect communities of color.

People of color comprise of just under 40 percent of the United States' population but account for over 50 percent of the excess deaths linked to the coronavirus.<sup>8</sup> As our nation continues to confront the COVID-19 pandemic and reckon with racial injustice, the CDC must closely examine whether its system is truly equitable in ensuring the safety of all people. We urge you to address the disproportionate mortality rates and impact of this pandemic on communities of color, and swiftly provide lawmakers and the public with the data necessary to develop targeted and effective interventions. The lives of Americans depend on it.

We appreciate your attention to this matter and look forward to your timely response.

Sincerely,



Katherine Clark  
Member of Congress



Jesús G. "Chuy" García  
Member of Congress

Nanette Diaz Barragán  
Member of Congress

Ami Bera, M.D.  
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Susan A. Davis  
Member of Congress

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<sup>8</sup> Anna Flagg, Damini Sharma, Larry Fenn, and Mike Srobbe, The Marshall Project, "COVID-19's Toll on People of Color Is Worse Than We Knew" (August 21, 2020) <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2020/08/21/covid-19-s-toll-on-people-of-color-is-worse-than-we-knew>

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