

# ‘Policy violence’ against people of color increases COVID-19’s deadly toll

BY ANTHONY ITON *SPECIAL TO THE SACRAMENTO BEE*

APRIL 15, 2020 06:00 AM , UPDATED APRIL 16, 2020 12:19 PM

<https://www.sacbee.com/article242010461.html>

The COVID-19 pandemic has ripped the mask off the genteel charade of equity in our society. In its relentless course through the country, the virus has laid bare the stark reality that our most vulnerable residents continue to be victimized by a callous and predatory system that limits their access to quality, affordable health care, basic employment benefits, housing and education.

This is no coincidence. Whether it be COVID-19, Hurricane Katrina, a heatwave, or the foreclosure crisis, those people made vulnerable by the absence of basic policy protections always pay the biggest price. COVID-19 is reminding us that in the United States, when it comes to your health, your zip code is more important than your genetic code.

Our country manufactures social vulnerability through policy violence. Policy violence is the intentional absence of protective policy in the face of abject need. Policy violence leaves large segments of our society experiencing constant daily stress as they try to navigate a healthy life without health insurance, decent housing, affordable childcare, paid sick leave, or quality education.

American policy violence is so extreme that many of our communities even lack [reliable access to potable drinking water](#). Study after study shows that this chronic stress changes people’s physiology and makes them more prone to heart disease, diabetes, and infections, independent of their behaviors. And then along comes a pandemic, and we all act surprised when [socially vulnerable people die at staggeringly disproportionate rates](#).

A [recent report in The Washington Post](#) points to data showing that COVID-19 “appears to be infecting and killing African Americans at a disproportionately high rate.” The Post also said

the U.S. Surgeon General has acknowledged “the increased risk for African Americans amid growing demands that public-health officials release more data on the race of those who are sick, hospitalized and dying.” The foundation of American policy violence is racism. Scratch the surface of virtually every failed effort at creating universal policies in this country and you’ll find thinly veiled racism at the root.

Other socially vulnerable populations, including other people of color and low-income whites, will likely also have disproportionately negative outcomes when all the data on COVID-19 is finally gathered and analyzed. Racism has a lot of collateral damage. But let’s make no mistake: Our deeply entrenched social vulnerability is [the bastard child of American racism](#).

OPINIO

N

We have known for generations that there is quality health care for the “haves” and something much different for the “have nots.” Health care has never been a right in this country. Like health care, housing, living wage, sick leave, childcare, and education in this country operate as privileges of wealth, not human rights.

This must change. That is one of the reasons that we at The California Endowment are supporting innovative community leaders who are advancing California For All, a new social contract in which proven universal policies protect everyone.

It is not rocket science. This epidemic has shown us once again that our fates are inextricably intertwined. We must reaffirm our commitment to an inclusive society in which all Americans have access to basic opportunities and high-quality community resources.

We all are potential victims of COVID-19, but some of us are much more sheltered from this storm while others live directly in harm’s way. Over a lifetime, the innumerable stressors resulting from constantly living in harm’s way, break people down. So when COVID-19 comes calling, death is much more likely. It doesn’t have to be this way.

We must protect all of our people by rebuilding our tattered social contract and restoring basic human rights as the touchstone for our policies. When this epidemic is over, let’s come together and roll up our sleeves and build the kind of society that our children

deserve.

*Dr. Anthony Iton is senior vice president of the California Endowment overseeing the 14 Building Healthy Communities*

*projects. He has a medical degree from Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and a law degree from the University of*

*California, Berkeley. Follow him on Twitter*

*@dr\_tonyiton.*

RELATED STORIES FROM  
SACRAMENTO BEE