

The Perfect Storm

Racism Makes the Pandemic Worse

Sterlin Reaves

BEFORE YOU READ: Learn the word “concurrency.” What is a “perfect storm”?

A Powerful Concurrence of Factors

Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines a “perfect storm” as “a critical or disastrous situation created by a powerful concurrence of factors.” When we think of storms we usually think of an act of God, a creation of mother nature that leaves death and destruction in its wake. But sometimes, the concurring factors aren’t just acts of God, they are also acts of people.

Today, the U.S. finds itself standing in the eye of exactly that type of perfect storm. Already reeling from the effects of Covid-19, the whole world watched as a Minneapolis police officer’s knee drained the life from a defenseless black man begging for mercy and repeatedly stating that he couldn’t breathe. This episode set into motion a tidal wave of protests bringing attention to the ways racism devalues Black lives in our society.

Inequities in Healthcare

Let’s look at our health system, for example. Income inequality and healthcare inequities cause Black and brown people to die at higher rates from diseases like Covid-19. According to the Centers for Disease Control, Native Americans and Blacks die at five times the rate of whites. Latinos die at four times the rate of whites.

The pandemic reveals how racism shows up in our health system. So maybe it is time to figure out a way to provide free or affordable healthcare to ALL Americans so everyone can get the healthcare they need.

Inequities in Prison System

Let’s look at our prison system. During the pandemic, prisons are one of the worst places to be.

As of April 29, more than 70% of people incarcerated in federal prisons who were tested for Covid-19 had the virus. Black and brown people are arrested and convicted at higher rates than white people, and we are sentenced to prison for longer terms.

Here, the pandemic reveals how again, it is Black and brown who absorb a disproportionate share of the harm caused by the coronavirus. We should put pressure on police departments to stop profiling people of color. Once a person is arrested, that person should be guaranteed adequate legal representation. Also, let’s get all mandatory sentencing laws that disproportionately affect minorities off the books.

Will Protest Bring Change?

In prison, my job as a block worker is to keep my area safe. I sanitize frequently-used surfaces and pass out facemasks. What’s sad is that prior to Covid-19, I had the same job but had to use watered down chemicals that didn’t actually clean anything. I am hopeful that the protests will pressure these institutions to make changes and that these changes will trickle their way into the prison system as PRISONERS’ LIVES MATTER TOO!

Source: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/racial-ethnic-minorities.html>.

Sterlin Reaves is a frequent contributor to The Change Agent. He is in prison in Pennsylvania.

AFTER YOU READ: According to the author, what are two ways racism makes the pandemic worse? Read the article on p. 6 and do the activities.



People rally in support of inmates in Santa Clara County jail system in San Jose, CA, August 2020.