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# THE NEXUS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND POLICE BRUTALITY PROTESTS IN THE U.S.

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## ABSTRACT

Dozens of black people die at the hands of law enforcement every year. However, the Black Lives Matter movement and racial justice protests erupted massively in 2020 in response to the death of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, Daniel, and many other black victims. It is not just a matter of police shooting. There is another underlying determinant that deserves a deeper investigation contributing to the big chaos last year whose impact is still being felt today. This study intends to discuss the unspoken reasons why Police brutality protests in 2020 were more tense and arousing public concern than in previous years. This study subsumed under a phenomenological study as discriminatory experiences of African-Americans become the main discussion. Further, the analysis of this qualitative study relies on the writer's interpretation. The results show that the vulnerability to the Covid-19 outbreak that began in early 2020 spread unevenly involving race and ethnicity. Black and other minority groups have suffered greater depression as cities with large black populations have become hotspots for the coronavirus and 23% of the deaths from the pandemic are black Americans. The covid-19 outbreak has aggravated the life of black Americans and is a strongly adverse determinant that plays behind the outburst of black Americans' anger at the death of their community members at the hands of police last year.

**Keywords:** *police brutality; BLM protests; COVID-19; systemic racism*

## INTRODUCTION

Human relation issues are not new yet always interesting to discuss. Similar to Indonesia, America has long admitted its multicultural society comprising a multitude of races, ethnicity, believes and thus it is often referred to as a 'salad bowl', a metaphor for a multicultural society embracing different cultures and identities just as the different ingredients of a salad (Mahfouz, 2013). The term however appears as a rejection of 'melting pot', the earlier metaphor of America. During the era of Puritan, America had been traditionally called a 'melting pot', whose originator was J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur in his *Letters of*

*American Farmers* in 1782 that he wrote: "here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men" (Gordon, 1964, in Vesselinov & Cazessus, 2008). It fosters a spirit of monocultural for heterogeneous European immigrants in pursuit of independence from European nations and a promised land. Proponents of multiculturalism, therefore, suggested a 'salad bowl' as an alternative metaphor to describe the diverse American society and avoid disharmony.

However, it has been an enormous challenge for America to prove the practice of 'salad bowl' and elude discrimination against minorities, such as African-

Americans. The legacy of slavery remains to give a pervasive influence on the state of the black community after more than 150 years of the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery in the United States. More than four-in-ten claim the United States has not successfully combat racial inequity, and there is some skepticism, particularly among blacks, that black people will ever have equal rights with whites (Pew Research Center, 2019). Moreover, Americans' perceptions of the current state of race relations under the presidential power of the former U.S. president, Donald Trump, are also negative. Approximately six in ten Americans (58%) consider race relations in the U.S. unacceptable, and few perceive them improving. About 56% of the American respondents presume that President Trump has worsened the race relations instead; only 15% think he has reformed them and the rest 13% think he has miscarried this issue. In addition, two-thirds of the respondents reckon it has become more common for people to express racial hatred during Trump's presidency.

The aforementioned survey data on the country's racial progress prove the legacy of slavery still puts black people in the U.S. at a disadvantage until today. The vast majority of black people (78%) claim the country has not given its best when it comes to fighting for racial equity and equal rights, and the rest say it is impossible to attain them in the U.S. (Pew Research Center, 2019). It is in line with the fact that 71% of Black Americans experiencing racial discrimination or mistreatment during their lifetimes, and nearly half (48%) considering their life is in danger because of their

race. Regarding interactions with law enforcement, 4 in 10 (41%) Black Americans say they have been stopped or pulled over by the police due to their race, and 3 in 10 Black men say they have been victims of police brutality. On the contrary, only one-third as many Hispanics (8%) and few Whites (3%) acknowledge the experience of negative interactions with police (KFF Health Tracking Poll, 2020).

Discrimination and violence against minority groups are intertwined throughout U.S. history as mentioned earlier. Before long they set foot on American soil, white people (European) carry a rooted ideology that they hold the highest hierarchy in the society. Cardoso as cited in Nogueira (2013) states that whites believe to effortlessly receive all the privileges due to the ideology of white supremacy. It makes them seemingly dehumanize other minority groups to maintain white superiority from the African-American community who were massively employed as the whites' slaves. The ideology woefully also results in racial segregation, a system derived from the efforts of white Americans to keep African Americans in a subordinate status. During the era of slavery, white people refused to admit equal access to public facilities and managed to separate their living quarters. Most African-Americans resided in the Southern part of America, mainly in rural areas.

Forms of discrimination are always changing. The heart-wrenching incident of racially-driven police violence, George Floyd's death, brought the law enforcement's bias against the African American community to global attention. The white police officer senselessly

kneeled down on Floyd's neck for at least 7 minutes with hands handcuffed until he gasped for breath and repeatedly said "I can't breathe" before he was pronounced dead. The tragic death of Floyd, accused of using a counterfeit \$20 at a local deli, spotlights the longstanding crisis of racism in policing. Not to mention, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, Daniel Prude police killings in 2020, and many other black victims massively sparked the outburst of anger not only in the U.S. but also the whole world. This incident has tensioned the Black Lives Matter movement and led to multiple waves of protests across the U.S. despite the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020. The virus itself is claimed to be more likely to kill black Americans 3.5 times than white Americans (Hathaway, 2020). The pandemic possibly puts extra tension on racial issues in the United States and thus triggers an overwhelmingly different reaction towards police brutality cases in 2020 compared to previous years. This writing intends to discuss more how the covid outbreak could trigger the explosion of protests last year whose impact was even felt worldwide.

## METHODOLOGY

This study subsumes a phenomenological study because the writer mainly discusses the discriminatory experiences of the African-American community. This type of study explains "how it was experienced, what was experienced, and the meaning that the phenomenon has in the subjective experience of the individual or group" (Hameed, 2020) or why people can react to such a phenomenon that way. Further, the discussion involves identifications of

ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning the experiences. This also belongs in a case study as it will generate a generalized analysis of violence and racial profiling in the U.S. taken from several police brutality cases (Bahrudin, 2020). The analysis results of this qualitative study heavily rely on the writer's interpretation.

The writer makes good use of numerous resources, for instance, online and printed journals, newspapers, articles, books, periodicals, magazines, and surveys. However, this article primarily utilizes online news sources to obtain any information and data on cases of police brutality and racial profiling that become the object materials of the article. To avoid media bias and inaccurate reporting, the writer picks trustworthy news sources only to rely on, such as *BBC*, *CNN*, *CNBC News*, and surveys from *Mappingpoliceviolence.org*, *Pewresearch.org*, and *KFF.org* (Kaiser Family Foundation). Meanwhile, the secondary data are gathered from relevant books, articles, as well as previous studies to support the analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Last year even to date has been devastatingly historic years for almost all people in the world. The COVID-19 pandemic has hit the world mercilessly and the death toll from the virus has reached 2 million people worldwide. According to McCormick (2021), this has become the biggest contraction since 1946 and the first contraction since 2009. In America only, recorded cases of covid have exceeded 28 million with a total death rate of 525 thousand (Statista, 2021). This data statistically

put America as the number one most impacted country worldwide as of March 8, 2021. Even China, as the first country to detect the contraction of Covid cases, has been separated from the top 10 countries with the largest death cases due to the virus. Grief and loss resound throughout the world and bring drastic changes to the old patterns of human life. Consequently, apart from the aspects of public health and safety, the Covid-19 pandemic also has brought major impacts and on other aspects of life, such as economics, psychology, social, politics, and others, in any country with no exception. It has totally changed from the way people work and school to daily routines like shopping and talking with friends.

Household Pulse Survey conducted by the United States Census Bureau (2021) publishes data on how Americans' lives have been impacted by the pandemic. It is reported that 35.2% of respondents have a loss of employment income, 12.1% reported food scarcity, and 26.5% reported housing insecurity since March 13, 2020. Furthermore, Ruiz, Edward, and Lopez (2021) mention that the ranks of unemployed Americans were more than 14 million (from 6.2 million in February to 20.5 million in May 2020). In consequence, the unemployment rate in the US shot up from 3.8% in February to 13.0% in May 2020. The increase in the number of unemployed workers due to COVID-19 is far higher than the increase of unemployed workers during the Great Recession in which the number of unemployed rose by 8.8 million from the end of 2007 to early 2010 (Iacurci, 2020). Furthermore, Wheelock (2020) also wrote that the downturn in the U.S. economic activity in the

second quarter of 2020 was worse than any other quarterly downturn during the Great Depression during the 1930s. It can be concluded that this pandemic has had a terribly huge impact on a large part of American society.

Many may claim that the spread of the disease knows no borders. However, it may be arguable in the United States. Vulnerability to Covid-19 spread unevenly which involves race and ethnicity. Several surveys and studies mention that the disease spreads at a higher rate in the black community. Early data on Covid-19 according to British Broadcasting Corporation (2020), 72% of people who died of coronavirus in Chicago were black as of early April 2020 despite the fact that black people make up only one-third of the city's population. Furthermore, 80% of the population of Detroit, Michigan is black and the city accounts for about 80% of reported coronavirus cases. Other cities with large black populations, including Milwaukee, New Orleans, and New York, have also become hotspots for the coronavirus. According to Lovelace Jr. (2020), as of May 2020, about 23% of the deaths from the pandemic are black Americans even though they actually make up only thirteen percent of the total population in America.

Those things happen due to the presence of income inequality between white and black families in America that remains until today. That economic vulnerability is incorporated to the lack of nutrition and less access to healthcare insurance and medical treatment. In fact, African Americans are more likely to suffer from diabetes, heart disease, and hypertension than whites

(U.S. Department of Health and Human Service, 2021) and those illnesses can weaken the immune system making them more susceptible to extreme Covid-19 symptoms. Furthermore, in racially segregated residential, such as Milwaukee the most segregated city in the U.S, it is found that poverty is an inevitable risk for black people which shows “a significant wealth disparity (more than seven-fold) between Whites and Blacks” (Pew Research Center, 2016). Massey and Denton (1993) in *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* also claim that racial segregation has made the majority of African-Americans to be condemned to experience a social environment that is poor and full of unemployment. Besides, ethnic minority households which include BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) in Northern America are found to mostly live near incinerators, landfills, hazardous waste sites (Martuzzi, Mitis, & Forastiere, 2010) which increases the risk of disease exposure. These residential areas offer many health risks to their residents, for example, disproportionate exposure to air pollution which can cause respiratory problems or asthma and can exacerbate the health conditions of African Americans who are exposed to Covid.

On the other hand, African-Americans are not excluded from the national policies following the precarious situation. Some of the policies are universal paid sick leave, expanded unemployment insurance, student debt relief, cash payouts to low- and middle-income Americans, vaccination, and many more. Although these policies benefit African-Americans, they will not be

able to completely erase the trauma of the dark history of the past, such as slavery, the Jim Crow laws, and structural racism which is still happening today. On vaccination, for example, black people still hold tight the trust issue in medical treatment because of the history of unethical and abusive medical treatment for black Americans. “Medical Apartheid” written by Harriet A. Washington in Mills (2009) revealed how the government fallaciously convinced black American men that they were obliged to receive medical treatment for the Tuskegee syphilis experiment when it was not necessary. However, medical treatment continued to be implemented for 40 years. In the 1800s, J. Marion Sims, known as the “father of modern gynecology”, performed experimental vesicovaginal fistula surgery on the enslaved black girl without anesthesia or proper medical treatment at that time. He did it on the racist argument that black people have higher pain resistance than whites. That horrific and racist history in the health and medical fields makes sense if black people do not want to rush to get Covid-19 vaccination even though it is cost-free and the government says it is every citizen’s right.

The large mortality of black people in the U.S. reminds the writer of the Jim Crow and the New Jim Crow Law. Concerning the nexus of covid-19 and police brutality protests in 2020, the New Jim Crow and the covid outbreak have several similarities, namely resulting in massive deaths for black Americans, using violence as resistance, and having roots in racial inequality. It was all started with racial segregation, or what is known as “separate but



equal", which occurred in the southern United States under the Jim Crow Law between the 1840s and 1967 (Kousser, 2003). Public schools, public places such as restrooms, restaurants, and drinking fountains, and public transport facilities were separated for blacks and whites. In fact, the facilities provided for black people were always worse than for white people, and sometimes, there were no facilities for the black community at all (Kousser, 2003). This regulation caused white people to abuse their power and consider their community to be of a higher social status. This was performed as an effort to uphold White Democracy in which white citizens believe that they are born with a more advantageous position than those who are not white (Olson, 2004). After 1945, the Civil Rights movement gained widespread support and Jim Crow Laws were considered constitutionally legal no more.

Even though Jim Crow Laws had been banned constitutionally, the practice and legacy of segregation and racism persist. Only the manifestations of racially discriminatory actions change, just like what happened amid the pandemic these years towards African-Americans. Alexander (2010) explained that the U.S. criminal justice system used the War on Drugs mission to persecute African-Americans which were later referred to as The New Jim Crow. The participating governments including the U.S. government and the UN have made drugs illegal. The War on Drugs is a global campaign that aims of reducing the illegal drug trade in the United States. In 1971, President Nixon declared drug is "public enemy number one" and that would be

directed toward eradication, interdiction, and incarceration (Barber, 2016). This is a new mode of racism whose targets are already planned by the government, namely the massive incarceration of African-Americans despite the fact that whites are more likely to commit drug crimes than black people. According to NAACP (n.d.), "5 times as many Whites are using drugs as African Americans, yet African Americans are sent to prison for drug offenses at 10 times the rate of Whites". This happens because White supremacy is still being upheld covertly and the white community, especially white supremacists, hide distress about the growth of the black people which is getting outperformed the white Americans if it is left unchecked, which can be viewed as the manifestation of white fragility.

According to DiAngelo (2011), white fragility is a term to describe how white citizens cannot tolerate racial stress, no matter how small it is, which can then manifest in several identifiable moves. These moves tend to be defensive in nature that is expressed with emotions such as anger, anxiety, sadness, guilt, disappointment, as well as particular behaviors such as arguing, being silent, withdrawing from situations that trigger stress. The massive "Black Lives Matter" protest in response to the death of a series of black people due to police brutality last year which was debunked by the "All Lives Matter" slogan by some groups of whites is an example of white fragility. It was both the outburst of anger and the feeling of being threatened because a large number of studies and censuses speculating that by 2045 white Americans would become a minority

group in terms of numbers (Frey, 2018). Historically speaking, white Europeans as colonizers in America needed to show their superiority or what is then called white supremacy towards indigenous people and people of other races as they usurped native Americans' lands. They therefore deliberately create social inequalities between races and place their race at the top of the hierarchy.

War on Drugs has had a profoundly negative effect on racial equality and the mobility rate of black people. With mass incarceration dominated by black people, they are disproportionately labeled as "criminals" which certainly has a big impact on aspects of employment, housing, education, public benefits, health, and others (Alexander, 2010). This eventually leads to the disguised fact that white Americans can maintain their racial caste which perennially puts blacks at the lowest bedrock, as the KKK and other white supremacist groups always fight for. This social problem afflicting the African-American community is the responsibility of the American government because it is a consequence of the discriminatory government policies they made. Alexander (2010) also conveyed that the mass incarceration policy is "a comprehensive and undercover racial control system that functions in a very similar way to Jim Crow" and then referred it to as The New Jim Crow.

The New Jim Crow indirectly led to the rampant police brutality caused by racial stigma or racial profiling against blacks that they inherited criminal behavior. The police more often make arrests, arbitrary searches, and pull over African-Americans while driving by reason of checking illegal items such

as drugs and weapons. On the other hand, innocent victims who receive an unproven discriminatory action will more likely to have conflicts with the police and culminate in police violence. The Breonna Taylor case that occurred on March 13 last year is one of the examples. Police shot her to death 8 times after a search of Breonna Taylor's apartment as part of a drug trafficking investigation. The police said that Breonna was shot for the sake of police protection because Breonna fought back when being investigated. However, police found no drugs at her apartment after she was killed.

It concludes that the perennial culture of police brutality against black people in the U.S. occurs as a result of a structural racism pattern that has not changed since centuries ago. The legacy of slavery and discrimination against black people since the era of slavery still exists. The discriminatory prejudice over the low quality of African-American students' academic is still causing black people to hardly achieve equal payment and job promotion in the working world. It all leads to poverty which becomes "the mother of crime" (Dong, Egger, Guo, 2020). The large number of poor black people who feel discriminated against will have the tendency to violate government policies to find a way to survive. Misery and transgression of the lives of black people are the old schemes of white supremacy. Changing rules, regulations, and conditions may be a disguise to continue creating negative prejudice against black people and running systemic racism. Therefore, the minority group will be easily controlled and oppressed without being too "visible", unlike what happened in the era of slavery. In the

end, there are going to be various manifestations of White Democracy to cover up white fragility. It is in line with one of the tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) that the manifestation of racism changes and develops over different times (Bonilla-Silva, 2015, p. 74).

In the midst of the pandemic, all its fatalistic effects, and national endeavor to flatten the curve, the police brutality cases remain to occur in America throughout this hard time. Police have killed 1,127 people in 2020 and put African-Americans at higher rates to be victims than whites in 47 out of 50 largest US cities (Mapping Police Violence, 2021). From January 1 to August 31, 2020, Cohen (2020) made a list of 164 Black men and women who were killed by cops. America was boiled over due to two pandemics; Covid-19 and systemic racism. One of the largest movements in U.S. history was taking to the streets to condemn police brutality, especially in response to the death of Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, George Floyd and other racial violence. As the Covid-19 crisis drags on, it is becoming obvious that black and other minority groups have suffered greater depression. Only two months after WHO declared publicly COVID-19 as a global pandemic in March, a video of George Floyd's being brutally arrested by a white police officer until he died was circulated in cyberspace like rapid fire. The double burden seemed to ignite the outrage of the black community especially to demand justice for their people despite lockdowns and physical distancing. Peaked on June 6, 2020, approximately half a million people marched in more than 500 locations

across the United States for the Black Lives Matter protests.

Across Hollywood, Los Angeles only, it was estimated that 100,000 citizens took to the streets in the BLM movement (Braslow, 2020). The massive amount is inseparable from the role of the coronavirus which has resulted in a surge in the highest unemployment since the Great Depression and the existence of a health protocol to stay at home. People are most likely or are forced to pay attention to what is in digital media such as TV and social media to find some entertainment, stay updated with news about Covid, stay connected with the closest family at home until the footage of George Floyd's tragic death spread across the world. As a result, this pandemic has contributed to at least 13% of BLM protesters who are unemployed (Cheung, 2020). They took to the streets without the need to consider office and company regulations.

The facts above prove that in the U.S. race-based disparities in health, income, employment is a major problem for African-Americans. The history of colonialism in America plagues contemporary behaviors though many white Americans support the BLM movement in the hope of combating systemic racism. One of the fundamental notions of CRT is that race is socially constructed and thus racism is endemic in American society, and socio-politically sanctioned racial patterns from the past (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) that favored whites and disadvantaged people of color. Regarding Covid and public health, it is easy to imagine that access to adequate health care and the availability of reliable health workers is difficult to find in poor areas, where

black Americans are dominating such places. Although CRT proponents claimed that race is socially constructed with no biological meaning, the country's political system continues to intensify racism's impact on minorities, especially black people. This will be very dangerous and fatal if health workers commit racist acts or injustice to patients, in this case, covid patients, who are racially different.

### CONCLUSION

The incident of racially-driven police violence, Floyd's horrifying death, brought the law enforcement's bias against the African American community to global attention. Not to mention, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, Daniel Prude police killings in 2020, and many other black victims massively sparked the outburst of anger around the world. This incident has tensioned the Black Lives Matter movement and led to multiple waves of protests across the U.S. despite the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020. Covid-19 spreads unevenly which involves race and ethnicity. As of May 2020, about 23% of the deaths from the pandemic are black Americans even though they actually make up only thirteen percent of the total population in America. The presence of income inequality between white and black families in America worsens the condition. That economic vulnerability is incorporated to the lack of nutrition and less access to healthcare insurance and medical treatment. In fact, African Americans are more likely to suffer from illnesses that can weaken the immune system making them more susceptible to extreme Covid-19 symptoms. Furthermore, in racially segregated

residential, it is found that poverty is an inevitable risk for blacks which shows "a significant wealth disparity between Whites and Blacks". Ethnic minority households in Northern America are found to be mostly live near incinerators, landfills, hazardous waste sites (Martuzzi, Mitis, & Forastiere, 2010) which increases the risk of disease exposure. These residential areas offer disproportionate exposure to air pollution which can cause respiratory problems or asthma and can exacerbate the health conditions of African Americans who are exposed to Covid. The pandemic situation exacerbated by this systemic racism has multiplied the plight of the black community.

Furthermore, during the pandemic, people are required to stay home in order to avoid transmission. Most people are forced to pay attention to what is in digital media such as TV and social media to find some entertainment, stay updated with Covid cases, and many more until the footage of George Floyd's tragic death spread across the world. As a result, this pandemic has contributed to at least 13% of BLM protesters who are unemployed. They took to the streets without the need to consider office and company regulations. These factors are the stressors of the outrage of black Americans over the death of several community members at the hands of law enforcement in mid-2020. The facts above prove that in the U.S. race-based disparities in health, income, employment persist. Racism is endemic in American society, and socio-politically sanctioned racial patterns from the past that favored whites and disadvantaged people of color. Hence, it makes sense that the

BLM protests due to police killings against numerous black people last year were many times more massive than the protests in previous years.

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