

UK study finds minorities at higher risk of COVID-19 death

June 2 2020, by Pan Pylas and Jill Lawless



Matt Hancock Britain's Secretary of State for Health is driven through the entrance to Parliament in London, Tuesday, June 2, 2020. The British government has decided to scrap a remote-voting system used during the coronavirus pandemic, and has summoned lawmakers back to parliament on Tuesday, but many aren't happy with the arrangements. (AP Photo/Frank Augstein)

People from ethnic minorities have died from COVID-19 in larger relative numbers in England than their white compatriots, according to a study published by health authorities Tuesday.

The Public Health England report indicated reasons for the discrepancy but didn't offer any recommendations. The government didn't offer any solutions, prompting concerns that people from black, Asian and other minority backgrounds will still face a disproportionate risk if there is a second spike in the coronavirus outbreak.

Dr. Kailash Chand, a former deputy chair of the British Medical Association council, said the report could be viewed as a "whitewash" for failing to deliver recommendations.

"This was something to show that they were appearing to do something," he said.

The study, commissioned by the government in April at the height of the U.K. outbreak, found that people of Bangladeshi ethnicity had about twice the risk of death from the virus as white Britons. It said people of Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, other Asian, Caribbean and other black backgrounds also had a higher risk of death than white Britons – of between 10% and 50%.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock said it was inarguable that "being black or from a minority ethnic background is a major risk factor" in the pandemic.

"This is a particularly timely publication because right across the world people are angry about racial injustice," Hancock said at a news conference, referring to unrest in the United States over the death of unarmed black man George Floyd while he was being detained by police.

"I get that," Hancock said of people's anger. "Black lives matter."

Hancock said the government would investigate the issues involved in the coming weeks and months.

"I totally understand the urgency, the importance and the sensitivity of getting this right," he said.

The main opposition Labour Party said the government must act now to protect ethnic-minority groups. It said the review, which drew on official statistics and other data, largely confirmed what was already known about racial and health inequalities.

"When it comes to the question of how we reduce these disparities, it is notably silent," said Marsha de Cordova, Labour's equalities spokeswoman. "The government must not wait any longer to mitigate the risks faced by these communities."

The study did not take account of factors such as obesity—which increases the risk of death from the coronavirus—or the occupations of those who have died. However, it acknowledged that these are "important factors because they are associated with the risk of acquiring COVID-19, the risk of dying, or both."

It did find that care workers, security guards and road transport drivers, all jobs in which ethnic minority workers are strongly represented, had significantly higher than average death rates.

The report noted that an analysis of over 10,000 patients with COVID-19 admitted to intensive care in U.K. hospitals suggested that, "once age, sex, obesity and comorbidities are taken into account, there is no difference in the likelihood of being admitted to intensive care or of dying between ethnic groups."

Dr. Veena Raleigh, a senior fellow at health care think tank the King's Fund, said the report highlighted "profound inequalities" but that there were still some "very big unanswered questions" about the virus' impact on ethnic groups. Raleigh acknowledged the "time constraints" involved in analysing all the data but said future research has to adjust for pre-existing conditions, such as diabetes, obesity, household densities and occupations, among others.

"This is not a lightbulb moment," the epidemiologist said.

The study confirmed that the biggest risk factor with COVID-19 is age, with people aged 80 or over 70 times more likely to die from the virus than those aged under 40.

It also found that working age men were twice as likely to die as working age women. It also found that the mortality rates from COVID-19 in the most deprived areas were more than double those in the least deprived areas, and that that was the case for both men and women.

Rebecca Hilsenrath, Chief Executive of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, said the broader context of entrenched racial inequality across all areas of life needs to be addressed.

"Only a comprehensive race equality strategy will address these issues," she said. "Now is a once in a generation opportunity for government to deliver one."

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Citation: UK study finds minorities at higher risk of COVID-19 death (2020, June 2) retrieved 10 April 2024 from

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