



# Diversity Scholars Address COVID-19: In the News

## Summary

---

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a dramatic impact on nearly every aspect of society. Research and scholarship is critical to understanding and addressing COVID-19 impacts, including focused attention on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. This includes, for example, scholarship which interrogates how existing societal inequalities are influencing health disparities in COVID-19 outcomes based on race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, and disability status, among other characteristics. It also includes critical attention to existing and emergent social and cultural perceptions and attitudes — such as prejudice and bias based on race/ethnicity, nationality, and immigrant status — that underlie discriminatory behaviors and decision making.

In these first weeks and months of the COVID-19 pandemic and aftermath, members of the [Diversity Scholars Network](#) (DSN) have been contributing their expertise to public national discourse, policy, and practices. The DSN, hosted at the National Center for Institutional Diversity (NCID) at the University of Michigan, is an international network of over 900 scholars across a variety of institutions, fields, and disciplines who conduct [diversity scholarship](#).

One of NCID's core mission areas is promoting, catalyzing, and elevating diversity scholarship and its application for positive social change. In this spirit, this brief previews just a few examples of DSN members' recent engagements with national and local media during the COVID-19 pandemic as they offer contributions based in their scholarly expertise. For more information about these valuable contributions, visit [myumi.ch/K4GyE](https://myumi.ch/K4GyE).

Leaders should be particularly mindful of prioritizing inclusive behaviors in workplaces during crises such as COVID-19. Among other things, attending to gender bias is important. [Dr. Melissa Abad](#), a sociologist at Stanford VMware Women's Leadership Innovation Lab, told [Harvard Business Review](#), "When Black or Latina women are stressed, that can be viewed negatively in work communication, compared with other people in the majority expressing the same emotion."

---



In a co-authored [Scientific American](#) article, [Dr. Anthony Burrow](#), director of the Program for Research on Youth Development (PRYDE) at Cornell, examined the impact of age related stereotypes on young people that are working to fight the irresponsible and selfish labels during the age of COVID-19 through volunteerism. The article stated, "What is clear, from our research and that of others, is that most young people possess impressive and far-reaching goals that are often generative and prosocial in nature."

---

[Dr. Jennifer Richeson](#) researches the social psychology of cultural diversity at Yale University. In a recent article in [The Citizen](#) focused on the sharp rise in discrimination based on outward cultural identity in India, she stated, "The truth is that unless parents actively teach kids not to be racists, they will be."

**Dr. Cynthia Wang** is a clinical professor of management and organizations at Northwestern University who has studied the psychology behind conspiratorial thinking. **Kellogg Insight** recently spoke with Wang to discuss why the current pandemic has led to so many conspiracy theories, and what policymakers and leaders can do to ensure that the truth finds a receptive audience.



Describing the needed policy response to the disproportionate impact COVID-19 has had on Black communities, **Dr. Breanca Merrit** of Indiana University emphasized to **RTV6 Indianapolis**, “It boils down to just calling things being related to race. I think often the language gets conflated to things like poverty and crime, when really we’re seeing these racial disparities are happening regardless of income and behaviors that folks like to conflate with race.”





Social distancing is a privilege afforded to many precisely because others are still required to report to work, at the risk of losing their jobs, health insurance, and income. [Jennifer Oliva](#), law professor at Seton Hall University, told [The Nation](#), “Some people simply have to go outside.... You’re not getting your Amazon delivery when you’re in your bougie Bergen County gated community without somebody working.... People still have to do all sorts of things to keep you able to sit in your home and do whatever you’re doing.”

In an article published in [The Pursuit: Trending Topics in Michigan Public Health](#) focused on the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on immigrant communities, [Dr. William Lopez](#) (University of Michigan) and Dr. Nicole Novak (University of Iowa) stated, “If ICE wants to gain a public trust that could legitimately curb the spread of coronavirus in immigrant communities and beyond, it can start by unequivocally stating that collateral arrests will not occur.”

The term used to explain why African Americans are more susceptible to COVID-19 is “comorbidity” — which simply means a person has more than one health condition at a time, said [Dr. Ruby Mendenhall](#), assistant dean for diversity and democratization of health innovation at the Carle Illinois College of Medicine at the University of Illinois. But to understand why African Americans disproportionately suffer from such conditions, Mendenhall [said](#) it is important to examine “the plethora of societal conditions that can create wear and tear on the body and mind, too: grief from the premature death of loved ones, subtle forms of racism, overt forms of racism, substandard housing, et cetera.”

---

The University of Michigan’s [Dr. Melissa Creary](#) was featured Michigan Radio’s [Stateside](#) program where she discussed how COVID-19 exacerbates health inequalities in marginalized communities. She states “disease is not just about biology... but public health has said over and over again about how we have to pay attention to the social determinants of health.”

[Dr. Paul Fleming](#) studies the social determinants of health behavior and health education at the University of Michigan. In [this article](#), he discussed the impact of COVID-19 on the city of Detroit as its systematically marginalized residents are particularly vulnerable. He highlighted the work community-based organizations are doing to support the residents in this time of uncertainty.

---



[Dr. Alana Biggers](#), a University of Illinois internal medicine physician, contributed her expertise to a [Medical News Today](#) article that gathered professional advice and information for the public on COVID-19. She stated, “I wish my patients knew that coronavirus is not just a “bad flu.” It is a major respiratory infection that can cause detrimental health effects on people of all ages.”

---



In addition to not having access to water to wash their hands, residents of Detroit’s most polluted zip code are also experiencing the impact of poor air quality on their health during the pandemic. [Dr. Amy Schulz](#), a University of Michigan public health professor, contributed to [FOX2 Detroit](#), “There’s evidence that people who get COVID and have those conditions experience much greater severity and are much more likely to be hospitalized and much more likely to die.” These combined factors have contributed to multiple COVID-19 risk factors as Detroit’s diagnosis rate continues to rise.

---

COVID-19 has amplified the structural inequalities that are causing African Americans to die at disproportionate rates. [Dr. Alford A. Young Jr.](#), University of Michigan professor of sociology, told the [Atlanta Journal Constitution](#), “Not only do many live in densely populated areas where it’s hard to social distance, but they also live in households that are more crowded than the homes occupied by more privileged Americans.”





“Most college students go to places that have much less not only in endowment sizes, but also in resources, to buffer the effects of closing a campus,” said [Dr. W. Carson Byrd](#), a sociologist of higher education at the University of Louisville. Less wealthy schools will have trouble with a host of processes, he told [The Atlantic](#), “whether it’s trying to promote online learning, or helping students figure out, How do you finish the semester? How do you graduate?”

As college and university residence halls close down, [Dr. Anthony Jack](#), assistant professor of education at Harvard University, told [Inside Higher Ed](#), “To say, ‘Don’t come back after spring break,’ assumes that students leave in the first place, and that is fundamentally not true, because the reality is a significant number of students — disproportionately those from lower-income backgrounds — remain on campus because they can’t afford to leave, they don’t have anywhere to go or they know that home and harm are synonymous. On the last point, that last group includes those who have fraught relationships with their families for reasons from political ideology to gender roles to sexual identity.”



Diversity scholars [Dr. Melissa Borja](#) (University of Michigan), [Dr. William Lopez](#) (University of Michigan), and [Dr. Sam Museus](#) (University of California, San Diego) are among those confronting the rise of anti-Asian and anti-Asian American racism during the COVID-19 pandemic. Museus commented in [Inside Higher Ed](#), “... there’s a long history of physical illnesses being weaponized against communities of color in our society and used as a way to spark fear and animosity toward immigrant populations in order to advance political agendas.”



In a piece in the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#) offering advice on supporting students during the shift to online learning, [Dr. Anthony Jack](#), assistant professor of education at Harvard University, emphasized the importance of faculty sharing their stories. He encouraged faculty to exercise vulnerability with their students: “We are scared, too, we are people. We are not automatons that are able to spew data and facts regardless of the circumstances.”



### **About the Diversity Scholars Network**

This research brief was compiled from scholarly contributions by members of the NCID's Diversity Scholars Network (DSN), an international scholarly community committed to advancing understandings of historical and contemporary social issues related to identity, difference, culture, representation, power, oppression, and inequality — as they occur and affect individuals, groups, communities, and institutions.

For more information on joining the DSN, email [diversityscholars@umich.edu](mailto:diversityscholars@umich.edu).



NATIONAL CENTER FOR INSTITUTIONAL DIVERSITY  
**DIVERSITY SCHOLARS NETWORK**  
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN