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BEFORE data showed Chicago blacks dying at higher rates, communities of color knew recovery from COVID-19 would be slow

FEEDBACK

By NAUSHEEN HUSAIN and CECILIA REYES
CHICAGO TRIBUNE | APR 21, 2020



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In early January, Renee Mounia, 50, was admitted to Cook County Hospital with an illness that claimed her life in a matter of days. Family members confirmed that her diagnosis was not related to COVID-19, and that no doctor brought up the novel coronavirus when discussing her illness with them — tests were not being administered at that time. But one family member feared that hers had been an undiagnosed case.

Her deterioration, and later her death, partly spurred Tariq El-Amin, Mounia’s brother-in-law, to join others in an effort to lessen the effects of a pandemic that was just beginning to threaten the health of others in his community.

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El-Amin, also the imam of a South Chicago mosque, joined the National Black Muslim Covid Coalition. Before local coronavirus infection data was available, the group explained to the community what many already knew: Stubborn disparities meant the pandemic would affect black communities more.

Even with incomplete data, the COVID-19 fears of Chicagoans of color have been confirmed. Higher rates of infection and death, especially in black communities, paired with broader economic and health issues, mean that recovery will take longer in some neighborhoods than in others. Some community leaders are now trying to brace for the impact.

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Tariq El-Amin at his home in Homewood on April 9, 2020. El-Amin is part of the National Black Muslim Covid Coalition, which is trying to bring awareness to the unique issues black communities face during this pandemic. (Zbigniew Bzdak / Chicago Tribune)

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Black residents on the South Side make up the majority of the population in seven of 10 ZIP codes with the most deaths, according to census data. Auburn Gresham, where more than 90% of residents are black, includes the Chicago ZIP code with the most COVID-19-related deaths in the city, according to the Cook County medical examiner’s office. Two of those 10 ZIP codes were majority-Latino, and the remaining ZIP code was split roughly equally between Latino and non-Latino black residents.

Understanding hardest-hit areas of Chicago

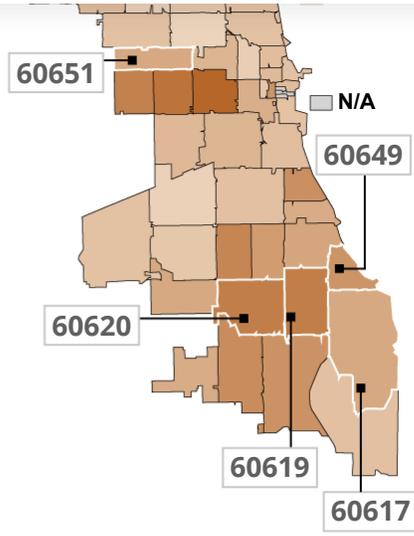
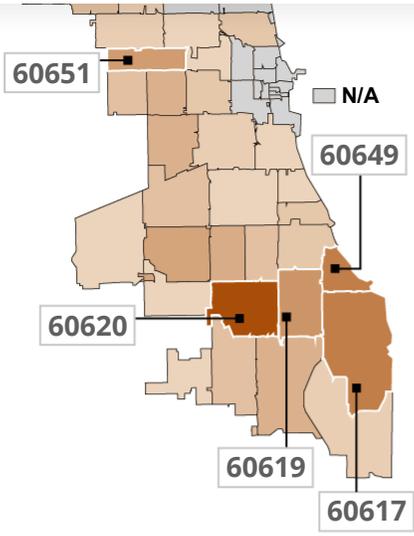
The ZIP codes in Chicago hardest hit by the coronavirus pandemic are also among the areas with the highest percentage of African Americans, with high poverty measures and low levels of insurance.

COVID-19 deaths (April 8)

COVID-19 reported cases (April 9)

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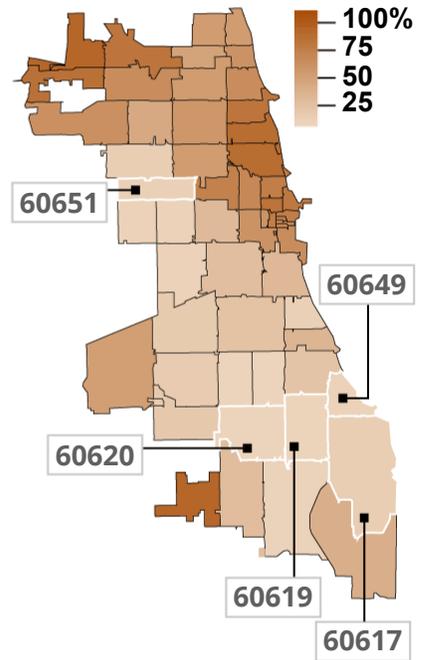
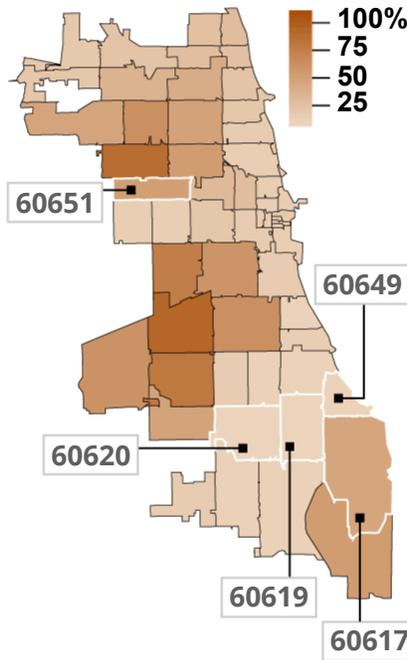
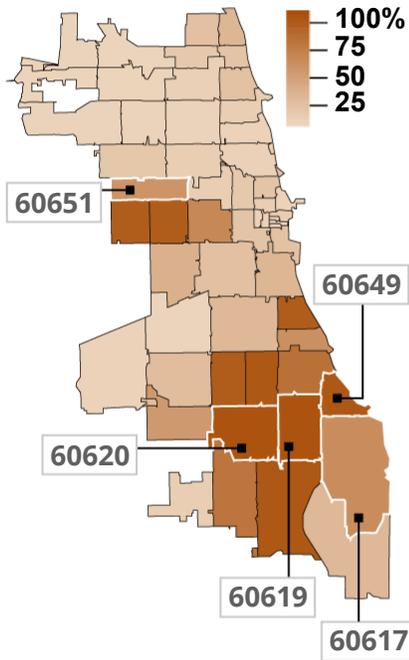
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Percentage black

Percentage Latino

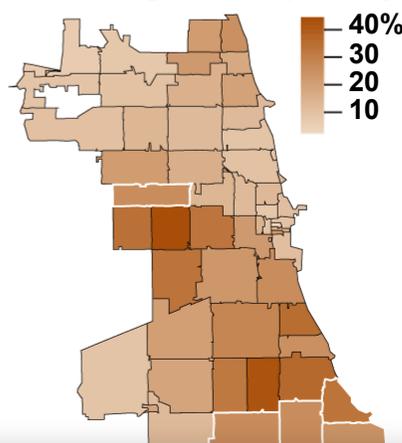
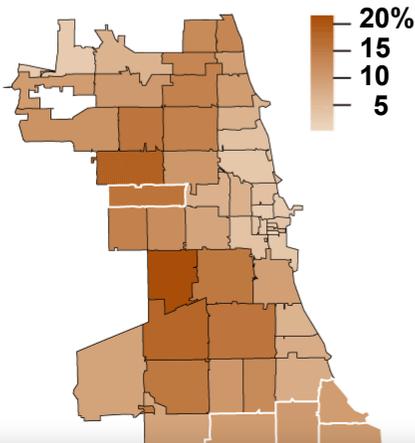
Percentage white



FEEDBACK

Percentage uninsured

Percentage below poverty line



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Demographics for ZIP codes with most COVID-19 deaths

ZIP code	COVID-19 deaths	COVID-19 cases	% black (City 29%)	% below poverty line (City 17.4%)
60620	21	292	96.2%	25.4%
60617	13	226	55.4%	23.3%
60649	13	162	92.6%	33.5%
60619	11	265	95.6%	25.4%
60651	10	177	51.2%	25.7%

Source: Census data on race, insurance and poverty lines is from 2014-18 American Community Survey estimates. COVID-19 deaths are from Cook County medical examiner data, while cases are from the Illinois Department of Public Health.

Cecilia Reyes, Nausheen Husain and Jemal R. Brinson/Chicago Tribune

FEEDBACK



A man walks along 87th Street near the Metra tracks in Auburn Gresham, April 8, 2020. Auburn Gresham, where more

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[Mayor Lori Lightfoot and Gov. J.B. Pritzker](#) have joined people in the hardest-hit communities in pointing to long-standing failures that will hamper attempts to deal with the coronavirus pandemic.

Margari Hill, a co-founder of the National Black Muslim Covid Coalition, listed ways structural racism hits black and brown communities even before a pandemic comes into play: bias in medical care; targeting by the criminal justice system; neighborhoods that don't have fresh food access; and a reliance on public transportation.

Many of those issues can foster the spread of diseases like COVID-19. Riding public transit puts people more at risk of being exposed. In Chicago, food and pharmacy deserts are concentrated on the South Side, and eight of the 10 ZIP codes with the highest percentages of people without cars are on the South and West sides.

“Because the African diaspora is diverse, we are thinking about the rights of the undocumented. We are thinking about all poor people. We are thinking about the Muslim ban,” said Hill. “But I do feel that it’s a good strategy to focus on the most impacted because that will help all of us.”

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Jocelyn Wilder, a doctoral candidate at the University of Illinois School of Public Health, said she wouldn't want people to look at COVID-19 outcomes and conclude the disparities stem from one group choosing to not socially distance.

“Attribute the difference in mortality and infection rates to socioeconomic factors that preceded the epidemic,” Wilder said.

While [there's already evidence of higher rates of infection and mortality among black Chicagoans](#), data on coronavirus deaths in Chicago's non-black Latino communities remains incomplete — the Cook County medical examiner has labeled no death as “Latino” and more than a quarter of the city's confirmed illness

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County data does show that in the 10 ZIP codes with the most coronavirus-related deaths, three have a Latino population of at least 40%: One is in Chicago Lawn, near Midway Airport; another ZIP Code is split between Humboldt Park and Austin; and a third is in North Lawndale.

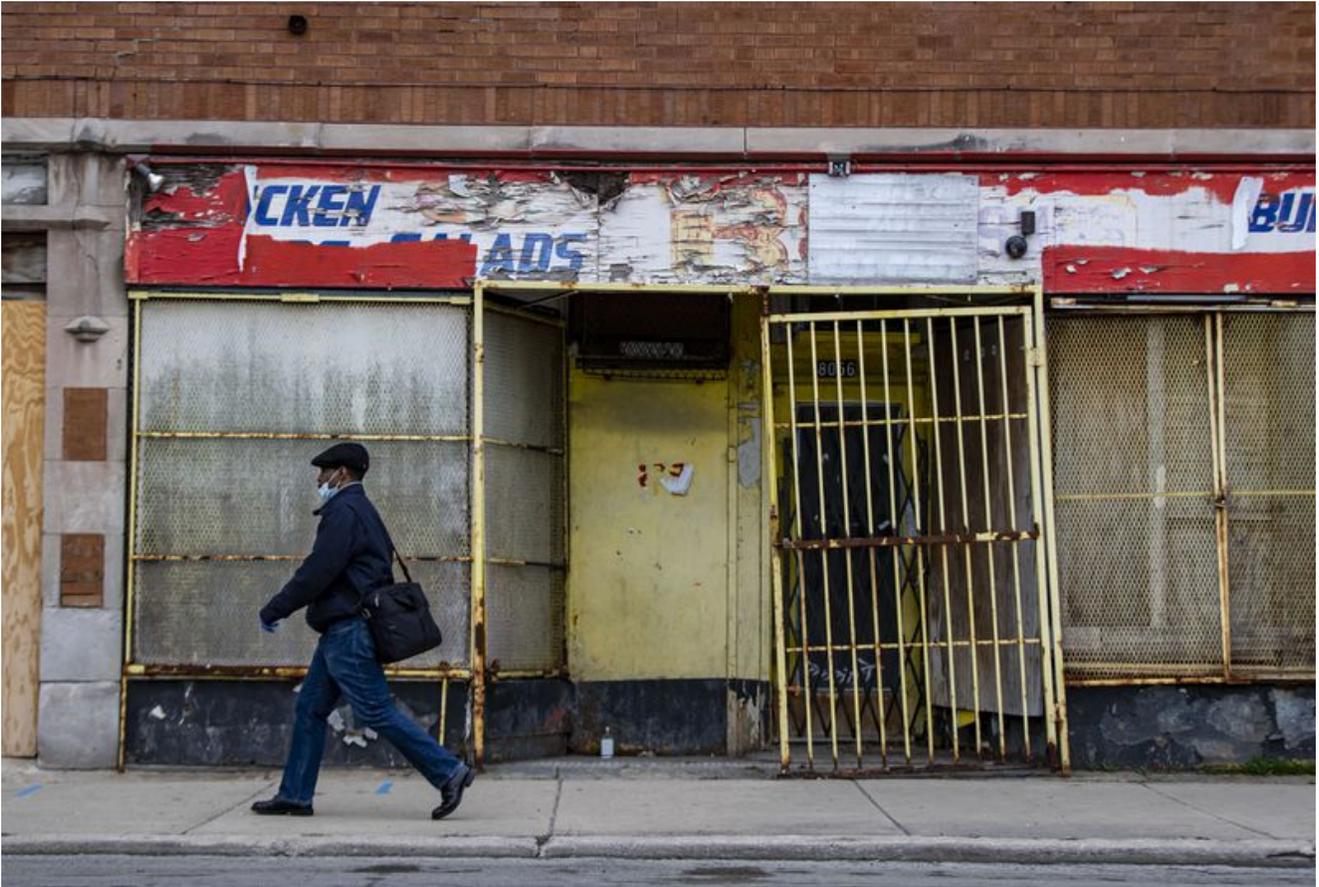
Despite the lack of accurate numbers, health care providers at the CommunityHealth clinic in West Town, where 60% of the patients are Spanish-speaking, are brainstorming new ways to help patients get food and hygiene products. It's an issue they dealt with before the coronavirus hit, but the pandemic has made things worse.

"Before COVID times, we could help them connect to food pantries or housing assistance or other classes they may need," said CEO Stephanie Willding. "Now we don't know if those places are even open."

Another concern at the clinic, whose population is uninsured and low-income, said Willding, is a fear of seeking care that could be counted as a public charge on immigration applications, or encountering federal immigration agents at a health facility.

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"Our immigrant communities are afraid to go to hospitals, they're afraid to get tested, they're afraid to get treatments," she said.



A man in a mask passes an abandoned storefront in Auburn Gresham on April 8, 2020 during the coronavirus pandemic. (Brian Cassella / Chicago Tribune)

FEEDBACK

Of the 10 Chicago ZIP codes with the highest percentages of uninsured people, six are Latino-majority, according to census data. And even when people have access to insurance through an employer, it doesn't mean copays and premiums are affordable in an emergency.

Cynthia DeLira of West Humboldt Park would count as insured, but said she is having trouble monitoring the myeloma she was diagnosed with at 22.

She's been in remission for four years and recently qualified for Medicaid, but needs to see a doctor every quarter for biopsies and PET scans, which has proved difficult when medical providers are backed up.

DeLira said she took a leave of absence from work in early March to not put herself at risk; she has left her apartment only four times since then. Her daughter, who is

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some meals from Chicago Public Schools. She said she's still paying off debt from previous radiation treatments, which were only partially covered by insurance.

"For me," she said, "the biggest concern is where the next chunk of change is coming from."

It's too early to say how much factors like car ownership and the low-wage service jobs determined as "essential" will play into the pandemic, but experts said earlier crises, such as the Great Recession of 2007-08, show there could be slow economic recoveries for the same communities now seeing starkly high rates of coronavirus. In ZIP codes with the greatest number of COVID-19 deaths, the median household income is between \$22,992 and \$42,019, compared with the city's median income of \$55,198. Roughly 1 in 4 individuals who live in these areas have incomes at or below the poverty line.

In response to the disparities, Lightfoot announced a Racial Equity Rapid Response Team to mitigate the spread of the virus in communities hit hardest, though [black officials are asking for other financial relief](#).

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For small business owners on the South Side, where it's already hard to make a profit, the question is: "Will I have a business to return to?"

Corzetta Mubarak, who owns A Child's World Early Learning Center in South Chicago, said she was hoping the stay-at-home order would be manageable, but the business quickly ran out of money.

"Friday I made payroll and that was it," she said. "There are no more funds. I can't pay the mortgage, I can't pay Peoples Gas, I can't pay myself."

Mubarak said she considered keeping the center open as an emergency child care center, an option offered by the city. But only 10 children could stay at the center each day, and she didn't know how she'd choose.

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“If I can go back at all,” she said of the center, “it’ll be like starting a whole new business all over again.”

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Note: An earlier version of the story did not make clear that Renee Mounia’s family members confirmed that her official diagnosis when she was hospitalized was not COVID-related. The story has been updated to reflect that.



Nausheen Husain



Nausheen (pronounced no’-sheen) does data analysis and visual projects on the Tribune Graphics team, and reports on migration and Muslim communities in Chicago. Nausheen is an alumna of the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism and New York University; she’s worked at Newsweek International, the Huffington Post and the Chicago Sun-Times.

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Cecilia Reyes



Cecilia Reyes is a reporter who uses data to uncover systemic abuses and bolster investigations. She's written about racial disparities in the pricing and waste of drinking water around Chicago, and is interested in housing and criminal justice. Born and raised in Mexico City, Reyes also worked as a fellow at ProPublica in New York.

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