



Rutgers CLiME

Center on Law, Inequality & Metropolitan Equity

CLiME Fellows Explore the Pandemic and Inequality

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The coronavirus pandemic resembles nothing in any of our lifetimes, and its impact will be felt long after it ends. As an economic story, it will mean immediate loss and uncertainty for many households, probably recession, possibly depression. People who can't afford to hoard or have jobs that can't be done remotely will be exposed more often, putting everyone in their households at greater risk and subject to an overburdened health care system. These effects will heighten the social determinants of health for populations that already struggle with underlying conditions statistically more than others. And, with predictable cruelty, it will target black, Latino and lower-income families for disparate death and loss. Recent reports from counties that keep data on race show that it has.

The pandemic will likely alter broader economic expectations, too. Cities like Newark that are finally poised to reap the financial resources of equitable growth may see investor uncertainty and stalled projects. The shift toward working from home may diminish office development, losing jobs, small businesses and tax base. Right now, however, the effects are experienced in close quarters by each of us in disparate ways depending on our access to resources.

Since the requirement to "shelter in place," we are all coping from the unprecedented vantage of lockdown. Here, we learn of sickened friends and almost sudden deaths. We slowly lose our daily sense of ourselves among others and our belonging to a public. We forgo our cities, our public spaces and our spring. What defines our species' resiliency – relationships to friends, co-workers, classmates, service workers, colleagues, strangers – are now the stuff of mortal risk, put indefinitely on hold. At CLiME, everything about the structure of inequality is about place. For all of us now, everything about place is "home."

More than strange, this new reality reveals a lot about how "sheltering in place" reinforces resources for some while compounding deficits for others. What follows are CLiME Fellows' observations about the different ways in which the COVID-19 viral pandemic illuminates the structure of inequality between us.



School Closures and Single Moms: Risked Paychecks and Achievement Gaps *--Ruby Kish*

The coronavirus is a slow-moving natural disaster, and, like Hurricane Katrina in 2005, its impact will vary greatly between communities. The opportunities and resources that characterize stable communities become most beneficial to residents in times of crisis, providing the necessary infrastructure to weather many challenges. In the struggling, segregated communities where many of our most vulnerable families reside, where everyday life is often a challenge, a crisis like the one unfolding could pose an existential threat. While there are many ways that the virus itself will impact low-income families, public health responses to limit social contact, like school closures, will have disproportionate impact on those families living on the edge of poverty.

A young student required to stay home from school means that a parent is also required to be home. For parents that work paycheck to paycheck, especially single mothers who are the sole providers, missing work, even for a limited period of time, is not a feasible option. Furthermore, the student who is home from school will continue to fall behind educationally, particularly if the school district cannot provide suitable distance learning technology.

Many parents and students across countless communities find themselves struggling because of school closures, but families in some communities suffer a much greater hardship than others. Structural and institutional inequality have concentrated poverty into neighborhoods like the Upper Clinton Hill neighborhood of Newark so that school closures here will hurt many more families than in neighboring suburbs or gentrifying neighborhoods. The Upper Clinton Hill neighborhood is in the South Ward, an area untouched by gentrification, characterized by “high unemployment, low wages, high rates of participation in assistance programs, and high poverty – especially among

children.”¹ The average household income is less than \$46,000, but drops to \$26,000 or less for families headed by single mothers.² This drop in income is significant given that nearly half the families living in poverty in this community are headed by a single female breadwinner.³ To compound the economic instability, families in Clinton Hill are also rent burdened, paying over 37% of their income in rent, sometimes even as much as 51% of income goes towards the rent.⁴

These economic conditions put residents of Upper Clinton Hill, specifically single mothers, in a very precarious position to handle school closures.⁵ For middle-class families, closures may mean working from home, allowing parents to maintain a steady income. In Upper Clinton Hill, the jobs available to these mothers are the low-skilled hourly work that is not conducive to telecommuting, forcing these parents to give up desperately needed income in order to stay home and care for minor children.⁶ One study examining rent-burdens demonstrated that a severely rent-burdened single mother will only be left with \$17 per day once the rent is paid; hardly enough to handle even a small financial blow like a missed day of work, let alone weeks.⁷ For a single mother living in Clinton Hill neighborhood of Newark, even a short-lived school closure could lead to economic collapse, culminating in eviction.

Even if a single mother living in Upper Clinton Hill were able to secure childcare, school closures still negatively impact her children. The schools in this community already lag woefully behind other schools in the state in academic achievement.⁸ Extended school closures could lead to a widening of the achievement gap since other wealthier districts will be able to set up their students for distance learning, while Newark Schools will struggle to effectively do the same. In the Upper Clinton Hill neighborhood, 25-30% of families do not

¹ Joy Sanzone et al., *Needs and Segmentation Analysis for the South Ward of Newark*, NEW JERSEY, METROPOLITAN CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON EQUITY AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF SCHOOLS, NEW YORK UNIV. (2016).
https://research.steinhardt.nyu.edu/scmsAdmin/media/users/atn293/reval/needs_segmentation_alalysis_south_ward.pdf

² Data gathered from Policy Map: <http://rutgers.policymap.com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/maps>

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Matt Barnum, *to close or not to close: As schools weigh tradeoffs in light of coronavirus, here's what research says*, CHALK BEAT (Mar. 9, 2020). <https://chalkbeat.org/posts/us/2020/03/09/coronavirus-school-closures-research/>

⁶ Martha Ross & Nicole Bateman, *Meet the Low-wage Workforce*, METROPOLITAN POLICY PROGRAM AT THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTE (Nov. 2019). Indicating that the industries in which more than 75% of the workers as low-wage are “retail sales workers, cooks and food preparation workers, building cleaning workers, food and beverage serving workers, and personal care and service workers (such as child care workers and patient care assistants)”.

⁷ *American Families Face a Growing Rent Burden*, THE PEW CHARITABLE TRUST REPORT, 1, 16 (April 2018), https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/assets/2018/04/rent-burden_report_v2.pdf

⁸ Adam Clark & Stephen Stirling, *Test scores are in for every N.J. school. See how yours compares*. NJ.COM (Dec. 5, 2019). Data from the Hawthorne Ave schools, one of the many elementary schools in Upper Clinton Hill, show that 75% of third graders were not yet meeting requirements or only partially meeting requirements in Language Arts with only slightly better outcomes in math.

have access to high speed internet.⁹ While other school districts may be able to arrange to provide personal hotspots devices to students who need them, that option is less likely in districts like Newark where the demand is so high and budgets already tight. Funding per student is significantly lower for students residing in Upper Clinton Hill compared to the state average, further diminishing the possibility that students will be adequately prepared to engage in distance learning.¹⁰

In reality, the combination of both the economic and educational impact of school closures will cause lasting damage to communities like Upper Clinton Hill in ways that may be unforeseeable. It's not clear that the federal stimulus package goes far enough to reach these families as their needs rapidly accumulate.



Disabled Students' Longer Distance from Distance Learning

--Wendy Nicholson

Colleges and universities in New York and New Jersey have opted for distance learning platforms to continue their current semesters. Some planned well in advance, while others still struggle to mitigate the disruption that is COVID-19. But what of a marginalized student population, one that is prominent at a CUNY campus – those who are deaf or hard-of-hearing? As a former American Sign Language interpreter, I am well-aware of the importance of the facilitation skills interpreters bear upon a deaf student's academic process, and how in-person contact, and communication fosters their sense of belonging.

⁹ Data gathered from Policy Map: <http://rutgers.policymap.com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/maps>. Variation reflects differences between census tracts within the Upper Clinton Hill neighborhood.

¹⁰ *Id.* (Showing expenditure per pupil at area schools in Upper Clinton Hill ranged from \$9,000 to \$13,000); See also Adam Clark, *The 50 N.J. school districts spending the most per student*, NJ.COM (May 14, 2019). https://www.nj.com/education/2018/09/the_50_nj_school_districts_spending_the_most_per_s.html (showing that the average per pupil spending in New Jersey is \$20,000).

These individuals are not privy to incidental learning that happens by way of an overheard conversation. Neither are they able to fully access the distance learning platforms that the higher ed institutions are advancing so heavily right now. Many deaf students rely on their interpreters for expounded and nuanced information in the classroom; without such, they are at an academic disadvantage. Now, they are expected to utilize a new or different platform for their learning, sans interpreters. Expectations that they have internet access at home, and/or that they will be able to navigate an online platform – whether just printed material or watching a live video feed, without interpreters – is shortsighted.

Three months after the initial clarion call about COVID-19, it is inconceivable that higher ed institutions don't have solid, well-thought out and planned processes in place to address the needs of their students. Did no one realize the challenges that distance learning would pose for this population? Deaf students, many of whom are in constant contact with individuals in their lives who cannot fully and effectively communicate with them, and find their communal connections at school, are being cut off from this vital support system. Viral containment and mitigation notwithstanding, distance learning for this population adds an additional burden to their academic journey. CUNY, SUNY, and other institutions of higher education must develop and implement processes and procedures during this pandemic to continue educating their students, deaf students specifically, in ways that do not continue to marginalize this population.

The “Nonessential” Worker

--*Damilola Onifade*

A virus does not discriminate, but there are disparate impacts. The country needs its essential workers to help manage the outbreak.¹¹ However, nonessential workers unable to work from home are most disadvantaged. Fina Koa, an employee at All Star Donuts in Richmond noted, “If we don't work, we don't eat”.¹² With around 14% of workers employed by the food service industry employees must decide between their health or their livelihood.¹³ Consider also the “independent contractors” such as Uber and Lyft drivers who have no employee protections such as unemployment insurance and minimum wage but

¹¹ Guidance on the Essential Critical Infrastructure Workforce, United States Department of Homeland Security (March 19, 2020)

<https://www.cisa.gov/publication/guidance-essential-critical-infrastructure-workforce>

¹² Alana Semuels, *'If We Don't Work, We Don't Get Paid.'* *How the Coronavirus Is Exposing Inequality Among America's Workers*, TIME (March 4, 2020)

<https://time.com/5795651/coronavirus-workers-economy-inequality/>

¹³ Food and Beverage Serving and Related Workers, United States BLS (Sep. 14, 2019)

<https://www.bls.gov/ooh/food-preparation-and-serving/food-and-beverage-serving-and-related-workers.htm>

must still make the difficult decisions to work or heed the shelter in place.¹⁴ However not all workers are even afforded the option. Lora Dobarganes, one of over 2 million domestic workers (house cleaners, nannies and homecare workers), was laid off without pay from any of her employers.¹⁵ Thus like Lora, a vast number of Americans must face the cruel reality that the Coronavirus may not be their biggest fear.

News anchors and politicians are aware of the severe economic impact of the virus. New York and other states are providing relief through paid family leave and disability benefits.¹⁶ However, employees are only guaranteed a minimum amount of sick days (if any at all) and not all employees qualify for paid family leave and disability benefits. Thus, with a virus that can impact anyone it begs the question as to why there is not economic protection for everyone.



¹⁴ Veena Dubal & Meredith Whittaker, *Uber drivers are being forced to choose between risking Covid-19 or starvation*, The Guardian (Mar. 25, 2020)

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/mar/25/uber-lyft-gig-economy-coronavirus>

¹⁵ Sarah Ruiz-Grossman, *House Cleaners Are Out of Work and Unprotected During The Coronavirus Outbreak*, HuffPost (Mar. 18 2020)

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/house-cleaners-domestic-workers-coronavirus_n_5e729603c5b6f5b7c53d9f85?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAHXI0vnfTPtp0FbaCY_vfuqLPA9ymE3E3t6yVZO7rdzcuQ2YoElbgf4ayL9-4nxsu0KFBWGDVfl-Cet__DBUxSRrFdJ7V4Izl8Kqxq-9opxSoBW6i0N2M515oaeJf-ivZfMUIWMyQhN4RZkNBO-h2fEMZy8D2Javzdk_Zm9F11LE

¹⁶ New York State

<https://paidfamilyleave.ny.gov/if-you-are-quarantined-yourself>

Work from Home, Unless You Can't

--Ilma Husain

The government has requested everyone to stay home, but has not provided sufficient resources for everyone to survive this pandemic. The recently passed legislation that provides paid sick leave to certain workers has so many exemptions it is hard to say whether those who need it the most will be covered. Currently, those who cannot work from home have limited options, all of which are negative feedback loops. One group is those who are at home with no income, which can lead to issues such as inability to buy food, pay rent, pay bills, or have health insurance. When adding the burden of school closures, which normally address a multitude of issues for low-income families, such as childcare and meals, the situation for lower income families is quite dire.

The second group is those who are still working. Factory workers, technicians, and hourly wage earners at large corporations are considered vital workers during this pandemic. For example, many airline technicians are still working, coming into direct contact with airplanes that have landed daily from international and domestic travels. Plenty of these workers are older, lower income individuals-- the group most at risk of succumbing to the virus. While the most privileged of us can create new work from home routines, stock up on food, and continue to be safe with little harm to our daily life, many folks conduct a never-ending cost benefit assessment during this pandemic. They have to ask questions like: is getting tested worth the healthcare bill? Is staying home worth losing the paycheck? Is stocking up on food feasible?

The Disparate Impacts of Hoarding

--Aladekemie Omoregie

As I walked up and down the aisles of what had to be the fifth store that I had gone to, it was all gone – there were no wipes, no hand sanitizer, no Lysol® spray, no ibuprofen, no Theraflu®, nothing. I was starting to panic. I was not even there for myself. My younger brother has a friend who is severely immuno-compromised, and our entire family went out to find supplies for them. I had to call my brother to let him know that my search was in vain and that he should let his friend know that there was nothing left.

It is amazing how compassion may wane during a crisis. After my experience in multiple stores, I went on the internet to see how bad it had gotten. I read a series of tweets from people who were either immunocompromised or had immunocompromised relatives who were literally scared for their lives as disinfecting supplies became increasingly hard to find. One mother tweeted: "...I just had my son 3 weeks ago, he has a blood disorder that weakens his immune system. My fiancée and I can't find products...anything helps please; he's already getting sick & I feel helpless at the moment." When people went to the

store and bought all of the disinfecting supplies, they did not consider people like this baby with a weakened immune system, they did not consider people like my brother's friend who has an autoimmune disease, they did not consider older people who have difficulties shopping for themselves, they only considered themselves and their well-being, and for some, how they could profit off of this crisis. Stores are also to blame, once they saw that all of the supplies were dwindling, a limit should have been enforced.



The Horrors of Home

--David Troutt

Too many people may bring too little privacy.
Too close spaces may bring unwanted touching.
Too close together offers little protection.
Too small can't confront too big.
Too angry meets too angry.
Too many days may be just too much.
Shelter in place may mean no escape from the violence of tightly shared spaces.

When we focus on the structure of inequality, we talk about place because institutions mete out the resources on which we all rely differently, depending on where we are. Yet all of those institutions are available to public view — except the household. In a pandemic in which we are forced to shelter in place, the quality of the household as an organizing institution for all the lives within joins with the quality of that shelter itself to define what a lockdown means for people.

We know that home is the site of lasting and devastating predations – sexual, physical and verbal abuse, domestic violence, addiction and alcoholism, depression and a daily series of challenges and solutions for people with physical and mental disabilities. We know that all types of households experience these issues; we also know that their incidence is better documented among poor and working-class households.¹⁷ We cannot know its rate of occurrence during the additional stress of a crisis, but we are pretty sure it's exacerbated.¹⁸ We also know it gets worse when quarters are tight, stresses multiply, fear is high and there's no escape.

Poor people endure more overcrowding (defined as more than one person per room). Poor people endure less sanitary conditions and housing safeguards. Poor people lack access to safe, open spaces. Poor people live farther from food choices. And poor people are virtually the only people who spend significant time confined.

¹⁷ Judith A. Cohen et. al, *Childhood Traumatic Grief: Concepts and Controversies*, 3 *TRAUMA, VIOLENCE, & ABUSE* 307 (2002); Eva Alisic et. al, *Rates of post-traumatic stress disorder in trauma-exposed children and adolescents: meta-analysis*, 204 *BRITISH J. OF PSYCHIATRY* 335 (2014).

¹⁸ See, e.g., Sera Gearhart, Maria Perez-Patron, Tracy Anne Hammond, Daniel W. Goldberg, Andrew Klein, and Jennifer A. Horney. "The Impact of Natural Disasters on Domestic Violence: An Analysis of Reports of Simple Assault Cases in Florida (1999-2007), *Violence and Gender*. Jun 2018.87-92.<http://doi.org/10.1089/vio.2017.0077> (describing increased reports of inter-partner violence during natural disasters); *see also* Zhang Wanqing, "Domestic Violence Cases Surge During COVID-19 Epidemic," *Sixth Tone*, March 2, 2020, available at <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1005253/domestic-violence-cases-surge-during-covid-19-epidemic> ("The epidemic has had a huge impact on domestic violence," said Wan. "According to our statistics, 90% of the causes of violence are related to the COVID-19 epidemic.")



What the Moment Brings

--Amir Botros

This is a sobering moment for the nation. The United States was, undeniably, unprepared for COVID-19. “We are all in this together” is a phrase that is just as applicable outside of health crises because what happens in daily life becomes palpable and amplified in disasters. Better preparation means ability for hourly workers to have an adequate number of paid sick days. Better preparation for similar outbreaks means having a greater stockpile of medical equipment and better funding for agencies on the frontline. Better preparation means reliable health insurance for all Americans regardless of race, ethnicity, age, or socioeconomic status. Difficult moments are precious opportunities for self-examination, honest scrutiny, reflection on seemingly habitual occurrences, and golden chances for change. And if we recognize and do this, then we have achieved a no small thing.

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