Review: COVID and Black California

Alex Gil

1Yale University

Published on: Sep 26, 2022

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21428/3e88f64fa27dff0b

License: Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0)
Project
COVID and Black California

Project Team
Paulette Brown-Hinds, Founder, Publisher, Black Voice News & Founder, Mapping Black California
Stephanie Williams, Executive Editor, IE Voice
Candice Mays, Project Director, Black Voice News
Alex Reed, Project Manager, Black Voice News

Project URL

Project Reviewer
Alex Gil, Yale University

Project Overview
Candice Mays

The dashboard COVID and Black California highlights quick and insightful key indicators reflecting COVID-19’s impact on the state’s Black workers.

The Census Bureau reports that Black people make up 5.8% of the state’s population, represent 12.1% of its total workforce, and comprise 19.4% of California’s essential workers. While COVID-19 has negatively impacted a great number of employees, Black people have been disproportionately affected. For example, in September 2021, the statewide average unemployment rate was 9%, while the unemployment rate among Black people was 11.4%. Addressing these issues, COVID in Black California reveals direct correlations between COVID-19 infection rates and the main Black California employment sectors, such as the service industry and professions where teleworking is not an option.

After the dashboard’s initial publication, the government stopped reporting key vaccination data disaggregated by race. Therefore, we revised the project to reflect the impact of COVID-19 and vaccinations on California’s Black population. Built using ESRI’s geographic information system (GIS) software, this revised dashboard’s intent was the same as the original: to walk people through the story of COVID-19’s impact on Black Californians beginning with caseloads and deaths moving through transitions and lockdowns. The project offers a snapshot of COVID-19’s overall impact on community health and life expectancy broken down by county. Focusing on change over a year, the project culminates with vaccine progress and access in direct relation to variants, vaccination rates, and the well-being of Black Californians as a whole.
Examining the overall impact of COVID-19 on Black Californians specifically was necessary because the data being released was too general and not tied to our communities’ perspectives. Black stories are frequently discredited, even when supported by data from reputable sources. Therefore, we retrieved data from more detailed and widely accredited resources, such as the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and California Health Department, to mine for Black-specific data points.

Our primary aim was to help Black Californians better navigate the COVID-19 pandemic by not only producing data visualizations but also leveraging visualizations to uncover truths hidden within the data. In doing so, we arm Black Californians with data that reaffirms their stories. This service is in honor and love for them and their well-being.

Project Review

Alex Gil

Originally designed as a real-time GIS dashboard showcasing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Black Californians, COVID and Black California is now a snapshot of the first year of the pandemic from March 2020 - April 2021. Built using ArcGIS Online, the project couples data from the CDC with the State of California Health Department. Presented as an embed on the Black Voice News platform, the welcoming page offers a brief paragraph of background information:

More than a year since the state’s initial COVID-19 shutdown, the effects of the virus on all aspects of Black life in California are evident and its impacts as profound in their implications as they are illuminating in their reality.

The dashboard is at its most useful in its attention to vaccination rates. This is data that will surely be of use and interest to historians of the pandemic and Black life in the U.S. in years to come. Project creators might consider the sustainability of the dashboard and underlying data by making it available outside the commercial ArcGIS platform where it resides today.

As with similar COVID-19 dashboards that utilize the ArcGIS template rolled out during the pandemic, users must interpret the statistics on display on their own. There is no accompanying narration nor detailed explication of the data and associated methods. Such choices may pose a challenge for users without statistical training as visualizations do not necessarily speak for themselves. For projects intending to appeal to the general public, the development of narrative explanations greatly augments potential impact.

Exploring COVID and Black California from left-to-right and top-to-bottom, the dashboard welcomes us with four pieces of key statistics regarding California:

- Black people are 6.5% of the total population.
• There had been (up to the end of the data capture) a total of 170,772 cases in the Black population, representing 5% of total cases.
• There had been (up to the end of the data capture) a total of 4,274 deaths in the Black population, representing 6% of total deaths.
• Only 49% of the Black population was “fully vaccinated” up to this point.

Without accompanying narration that would aid with interpreting this information, it is difficult to judge the veracity of these claims, particularly when situated against dashboards that provide additional racial categorizations.

Going from mid-left to center along the bottom row, users encounter a dynamic line graph we can adjust for time span. This line graph shows the ebb and flow of cases and deaths by months. There is an opportunity for comparative work using this graph that could enhance future iterations of the project. Whether focused on racial comparisons, class, or other characteristics, comparative opportunities over the course of the pandemic abound. I was particularly struck by how the pie chart tells us that the vast majority of California was, during the project’s timeframe, under “Widespread Restriction.” Additional information on how restrictions were implemented and data on those who violated California state restrictions would be useful. Finally, the bottom left presents us with a useful breakdown of the different strains of the virus and what percentage of cases pertain to them.

The project’s focus on Black populations is commendable. Too many public health dashboards obscure or hide the nuances of communities on the ground that experience health crises differentially. There is much to be gained from the example of COVID and Black California as it offers a statistical snapshot of the pandemic. Those inspired by this work might consider complementing the statistical approach with narrative and interpretations that aligns with the data. This would allow audiences to interpret the numbers and geographies without any specialist knowledge.