

LETTERS

Edited by Jennifer Sills

Academic societies' role in curbing police brutality

The shocking death of George Floyd is unfortunately not a singular event in the United States. Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Amadou Diallo (1), and Breonna Taylor (2) are just a few examples from a long list of unarmed Black people who have died at the hands of the police. This pattern of violence is deeply rooted in the history of Black-White relations in the United States and the failure of the leaders of this country to deal with systemic racism. As professional physicists, we suggest that professional science and humanities organizations such as the American Physical Society (APS) take action by refusing to hold conferences in cities where police brutality takes place.

The APS and many other professional societies host large meetings in cities across the United States. APS cancelled a 2018 meeting in Charlotte, North Carolina, to oppose a law that discriminated against the LGBT community (3). The American Association for the Advancement of Science (the publisher of *Science*) has also selected cities for meetings based on their record of civil rights, including excluding the "Jim Crow" South from consideration and supporting states that ratified the Equal Rights Amendment (4). In this spirit, professional societies should protect Black people by meeting only in cities that implement evidence-based policies to limit the use of force by police. Academic societies should also assess cities' responses to police brutality, such as the transparency of communication and whether offending officers have been fired and charged with a crime. Social scientists have researched policies that can reduce police violence [e.g., (5)], and we encourage science societies to use this evidence to develop a set of criteria.

Economic pressure has historically been an effective strategy in bringing about social change. A decision to stop doing business in cities with inadequate protective policies would be similar to the divestment movement in South Africa in the 1980s (6), which was pivotal in ending apartheid. It would also be in keeping with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s boycott of businesses in the South that refused to hire Black people (7). Academic societies should encourage positive change by sending a powerful message: Cities that reduce police

brutality through egalitarian reforms will yield substantial financial benefits.

By using their power of the purse to oppose racist policing, professional societies would also be protecting their minority members, who might, for example, decide during a meeting to take a run through city streets while being Black. The ongoing protests demonstrate that established norms of social and race relations are changing. It is time for professional societies to live up to their charge of positively affecting society by taking a stand against police brutality in deed as well as in word.

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Pandemics' historical role in creating inequality

In her News Feature "An unequal blow" (15 May, p. 700), L. Wade explores how past pandemics disproportionately affected marginalized groups. It is important to recognize that in addition to exacerbating marginalization, pandemics set the stage for inequalities that have persisted for centuries (1). Historically, pathogens introduced by European conquistadors and colonists contributed to Indigenous population collapses throughout the Americas, facilitating colonial exploitation (2). Abrupt declines in the health and size of Indigenous populations, socio-cultural dislocation, and opportunistic grabs for resources became a strategy used by successive colonial governments (3). As scientists, we have a role in dismantling this colonial playbook to prevent coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) from further marginalizing Indigenous communities.

Today's Indigenous peoples are facing a pandemic crisis. In North America, the Navajo Nation battles the virus across a



vast region with irregular access to health services as a result of insufficient federal funding (4, 5). The United States relies on agricultural laborers from Central America to maintain its supply chains but is deporting contagious workers (6, 7), thereby seeding outbreaks in Mexico, where the disenfranchisement of 22 million Indigenous people makes the spread of disease difficult to control (8). In the Brazilian Amazon, Manaus is a national COVID-19 hotspot. The health system is overwhelmed, and Indigenous people previously displaced by the local government struggle to avert a 21st-century demographic collapse while fighting seizure of their lands (9).

Solving the crisis demands more than overhauling health infrastructure; it requires changing power relations to redress structural inequalities borne of colonialism. The path forward involves listening to Indigenous communities, promoting human-centered investment in sustainable development, and enforcing treaties and Indigenous land rights. For scientists, COVID-19 does not justify perpetuating extractive practices or pressuring communities to engage in research (10). Acknowledging Indigenous sovereignty is now more vital than ever. We must seize the opportunity this pandemic presents for societal transformation: Only through Indigenous self-determination, collaboration, and research partnerships rooted in



COVID-19 victims are buried daily in this cemetery in Manaus, Brazil, where the health system has been overwhelmed.

mutual respect can the Americas write a new playbook that fulfills the often stated but seldom realized ideals of equality for all.

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Recent immigrants at increased pandemic risk

In her News Feature "An unequal blow" (15 May, p. 700), L. Wade discusses the vulnerability of poor people and members of minorities during both past and present

pandemics. However, the article overlooks recent immigrants, who have also been particularly vulnerable to pandemics in the past and are threatened now by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.

Human migration was also taking place during epidemics of the past. During the Black Death, some of those who died in London originated from distant portions of Britain (1), and rural refugees in Cairo, Egypt, exhibited a higher susceptibility to death (2). During plagues of the late preindustrial era in Milan, Italy, the death rate was higher among poor people originating from surrounding villages (3). In Dijon, France, during early recurrences of the Black Death, poor newcomers were more likely to die than were poor people who were long established in the city or who had recently settled but were members of established families (4).

The COVID-19 pandemic poses similar risks. In the U.S. states with newer Latino communities, Latinos have tested positive at higher rates than people with comparable income. In contrast, in some states with long-established Latino communities, Latinos are getting sick at rates similar to other population groups (5).

Although the comparative importance of frailty factors accounting for the present situation is a matter of debate, socio-economic and environmental factors are essential (6). This is consistent with the long-term historical perspective: During preindustrial European plagues, the vulnerable short-range migrants likely differed from the host population only in housing and working conditions. As past and present data demonstrate, recent immigrants should be included in discussions of risks to marginalized groups.

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