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Stark inequality in covid-19 deaths

Death figures reveal the huge ongoing impact the virus is having on ethnic minority groups in England, reports Jason Arunn Murugesu

Since the pandemic began, the coronavirus has been involved in more than 30 per cent of all deaths in people aged over 30 in England whose ethnic group was recorded as Bangladeshi, Black African or Pakistani, a New Scientist analysis of Office for National Statistics (ONS) data reveals.

This is more than double the proportion of covid-19 deaths during this period among people whose ethnic group was recorded as white British (14 per cent). These figures are based on the number of people between the ages of 30 and 100 who died between 24 January 2020 and 1 December 2021 in England.

“There are a number of reasons why ethnic minorities are more likely to contract and die from covid-19,” says Azeem Majeed at Imperial College London. Ethnic minorities are more likely to have lower incomes, work in public-facing roles and live in densely populated areas or households with multiple generations, he says.

Deaths were classed by the ONS as involving covid-19 if it was mentioned on a death certificate. This could be due to a person testing positive for the coronavirus prior to death or because a doctor made a covid-19 diagnosis based on a person’s symptoms.

Covid-19 was involved in a higher proportion of deaths in all ethnic minority groups than in white British people during this period. People of Bangladeshi descent were hit hardest, with covid-19 being involved in 39 per cent of deaths. It was involved in 35 per cent of deaths in people of Pakistani descent, 31 per cent of deaths in people of Black African descent and 20 per cent of deaths in people of Chinese descent.

These ethnic disparities haven’t improved over the course of the pandemic or since the roll-out of vaccines. Analysis of ONS data from 13 June to 1 December 2021 – corresponding to England’s third wave – shows that more than a quarter of deaths in people of Bangladeshi descent involved the coronavirus during this time, while this was the case for only 5.5 per cent of deaths in white British people (see graph, below).

“These findings highlight the importance of improving vaccine uptake across all ethnic groups,” says Yize Wan at Queen Mary University of London. “The impact of not doing this may be an important reason why we are seeing these continued differences in the third wave.”

According to January data from the records of family doctors, 80 per cent of Black people over the age of 80 in England have received the first dose of a coronavirus vaccine compared with 98 per cent of white people in this age group.

Studies suggest that ethnic minority groups are more likely to be vaccine hesitant due to historical racism and a lack of trust in the medical and political establishments.

“These figures are staggering,” says a spokesperson for the race equality charity Runnymede Trust, commenting on New Scientist’s analysis. “Alongside other charities, in 2020 we called for door-to-door vaccination units in urban areas with a high density of multigenerational households, to make healthcare services more accessible for groups that traditionally have a harder time getting the care and services they require.”

It is important to note that these figures aren’t perfect and that just because covid-19 was recorded on a person’s death certificate, it doesn’t mean they died from the illness, says James Nazroo at the University of Manchester, UK.

When contacted about these findings, the UK Department for Health and Social Care referred New Scientist to the Cabinet Office, which, in turn, referred us to a statement from December 2021 on a report into the disproportionate impact of covid-19 on ethnic minority groups.

In this statement, equalities minister Kemi Badenoch said: “Our understanding of how Covid-19 affects different ethnic groups has transformed since the pandemic began. We know now that factors like the job someone does, where they live, and how many people they live with, impacts how susceptible they are to the virus and it’s imperative that those more at risk get their booster vaccine or their first and second dose if they are yet to have them.”

Ethnic minority groups were hit hardest by England’s third wave of covid-19, despite the country’s vaccine roll-out

Percentage of deaths among 30 to 100-year-olds involving covid-19 in England between 13 June and 1 December 2021, broken down by recorded ethnic group

| Ethnic group      | Percentage |
|-------------------|------------|
| Bangladeshi       | 27.15      |
| Pakistani         | 23.16      |
| Black African     | 16.07      |
| Black Caribbean   | 14.78      |
| Other             | 13.97      |
| Indian            | 10.41      |
| Chinese           | 9.02       |
| Mixed             | 8.48       |
| White other       | 6.85       |
| White British     | 5.52       |

Source: ONS