Medium-Term Effect of COVID-19 on Disparities by Race and Income

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Abstract: What are the medium-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on racial and income gaps in mortality rates and life expectancy, and what has caused these changes?

Previous work (e.g. Aburto et al 2022; Alsan et al 2021; Andrasfay and Godlman 2021) documents large disparate effects of the pandemic on mortality by race and income, especially in comparison to a pre-pandemic trend of shrinking racial mortality gaps. How has this changed now that the large waves of COVID-19 have passed and most of the population is vaccinated? COVID-19 may drive continued disparities through continued infections or "long COVID," or it may drive a medium-run reversal through a "harvesting" effect (if those who died from COVID-19 were already at elevated mortality risk).

We propose to study these questions using the combination of IRS tax records and US Census data (accessed via the US Census Bureau). These data, which essentially permit analysis on the full US population, enable analysis at a granular level not possible in other survey-based datasets such as the National Longitudinal Mortality Study (NLMS). These data also include direct measures of race, in contrast to administrative datasets used in previous work studying health inequality for individuals with similar incomes (Chetty et al. JAMA 2016).

We will first study the medium-term effects of COVID-19 on mortality rates and period life expectancy, especially as it differs by race and income. We will then exploit variation in these effects across areas in the US – both between and within metro areas – to understand the drivers of the medium-term patterns.

These results will speak directly to the distributional impacts of several SSA programs on the populations that they seek to serve. More generally, our analysis of the persistent racial disparities from COVID-19 will inform our understanding of the structural factors that contribute to disparities by race and ethnicity.

This work will be complementary to other projects on health inequality in these data that are supported by NIH Grant U01 AG076557-01, which focuses primarily on 1) producing a public dataset of granular mortality estimates and 2) understanding the on-going effects of COVID-19 on health inequality in the US.

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References:

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