

2020 — An Unprecedented Year: The Virus, the Bias and the Search for Equity

Unprecedented. That's the word that many would use to describe 2020.

“So far, 2020 is like looking both ways before you cross the street and then getting hit by an airplane.” — Unknown

2020 was a busy year for media outlets as reports of the novel coronavirus swept national headlines early into the new year and people across the globe soon found themselves grappling with a rising death toll amid fluctuating shelter-in-place mandates, environmental disasters, and one of the most contentious elections in US history. While the year was defined by hardship and transition, 2020 in many ways served as testament to the power of the people and the undying nature of hope.

COVID-19 & the Return of “Yellow Peril”

Disease outbreaks historically have often been met with stigma and an escalation in bigotry and xenophobia. The 1918 influenza pandemic (called the Spanish Flu) killed over 50 million people across the globe. Interestingly, it did not start in Spain – that's just where widespread deaths were first recorded. Today, the global scientific community (after rigorous research), is widely convinced that the 1918 pandemic originated in a small rural community in Haskell, Kansas. A nearby military base called Camp Funston, (subsequently renamed Ft. Riley), had over 56,000 troops stationed there, many of whom were subsequently deployed to Europe.



Since then, HIV/AIDS was blamed on Haitians in the early 1980s, and the 2014 Ebola outbreak on African migrants. COVID-19 was referred to as the “Chinese virus” and “Kung Flu,” proliferating online hate speech across social media platforms. The rapid spread of the virus in

the U.S. was met with an uptick in harassment and violence against Asians and Asian-Americans.

Flare-ups of anti-Asian discrimination and xenophobia are not new, coinciding with the arrival of the Bubonic plague in San Francisco in 1900 and the SARS outbreak in the early 2000s. In response to re-emerging anti-Asian sentiments, the Asian Pacific Planning and Policy Council launched the Stop AAPI Hate Reporting center in mid-March. The center received over 1100 reports in its first two weeks and continues to track COVID-19 related incidents of anti-Asian hate. Asian-American small businesses, especially Chinese restaurants, were also among the hardest hit by the economic downturn brought on by the pandemic. According to the National Bureau of Economic Research, Asian-American businesses dropped 26% nationwide between February and April, compared to 22% among all small business owners.

While everyone (in the US and across the globe) was dealing with the same challenges of a serious pandemic, those of any Asian descent were being verbally and physically assaulted. In San Francisco, a Filipino high school student was beaten so badly by a group of boys that he had to go to the hospital. In Florida, a 6-month pregnant Chinese woman was verbally and physically harassed. Thus, friends and family often reminded each other to be sure to wear their sunglasses whenever they ventured outside – because it was their eyes that often made them a target.

Unnatural Selection



COVID-19 took no prisoners, disproportionately affecting high-risk groups – People of Color, anyone with pre-existing medical conditions and the world's oldest generations. Black and

Indigenous people in the U.S. experienced higher rates of mortality due to COVID-19 in 2020 than any other racial group. When adjusted for age, Indigenous, Black and Latino Americans were at least 2.7 times more likely to have died from the virus than their White counterparts.

Similarly, school closures and distance learning exacerbated inequalities in education. An analysis conducted by McKinsey & Company found that 40% of African American students and 30% of Latino students in U.S. K-12 schools received no online instruction for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year following shutdowns, compared to just 10% of White students. Lower-income students from all backgrounds without access to high-speed internet, parental academic supervision, or home environments conducive to learning also lagged behind their middle- and upper-class peers.

While school systems varied in their response to the technological inequities affecting many students, there were several interventions by districts to curb learning loss. Nearly 180,000 students in New York City were offered remote summer school (compared to just 44,000 in the year prior) while former Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam launched a tutoring program pairing college students with the state's elementary school kids.

Black Lives Matter

People of Color currently make up nearly 40% of the U.S. Workforce. Devastating lay-offs due to COVID-19 also impacted these communities to a greater extent, in part due to the large ratio of Black and Hispanic women employed in services industries. The names Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd were amplified by hundreds of Black Lives Matter protests taking place around the world in the months following the brutal killing of Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. The diversity of those who showed up and took part in these peaceful protests was unlike anything seen in decades: young and old men and women, members of the LGBTQ+ community and people of every racial/ethnic background marching in solidarity.



Demonstrations also took place in the UK, Finland, Germany, South Korea, Australia, Brazil, and elsewhere in support of BLM as protestors around the world took down statues honoring slave traders and imperialists. Black Americans and allies demanded police reform, calling for increased accountability and the overhaul of harmful police practices.

With each passing day, tensions continued to rise. Many organizations of all sizes felt compelled to do something. For many, diversity, equity and inclusion were things they'd paid little to no attention to other than the typical non-discrimination, sexual harassment prevention types of mandatory training.

But 8 minutes and 42 seconds caused a seismic shift. Business Leaders wanted to do something to acknowledge to their employees that they too were upset by what they had seen. Many struggled, however, with knowing what to do and how to demonstrate their support, with most admitting that they were so concerned that they might unintentionally offend someone that they tended to avoid initiating conversations.

Unfortunately, the pain of the Black experience doesn't come with an off switch. How can you pretend that everything is okay? What's the best response when managers and co-workers ask "How are you doing?" Despite being asked, will they be judged harshly if they give an authentic answer? Can they really say that they are sick and tired of feeling sick and tired? Wondering if it will ever end? Will they ever really feel as safe as other Americans?

The steady wave of protests prompted companies across the U.S. to voice their solidarity with the Black community. Major streaming sites like Netflix and Amazon Prime added genres celebrating Black stories. Disney pledged \$5 million to support non-profit organizations that advance social justice. Paramount Pictures canceled the long-running TV series *Cops*. When an Executive Order banning diversity training was implemented in Sept., many of the largest corporation's CEOs stood up against this ban, demonstrating the far-reaching cultural and fiscal impacts of BLM and the power of racial justice advocates to promote positive change.

2020 Elections



The end of 2020 was topped off with one of the most hotly contested elections in U.S. history. While much has been written in years past about voter suppression, especially in lower income minority neighborhoods, many citizens refused to be deterred from voting even if it meant standing in long lines for hours.



Voting for those in the Navajo Nation can be even more challenging. In 2020, a young member of the Navajo Nation, Allie Young, started “Ride to the Polls” in early October – leading groups on horseback along a 10-mile route from Church Rock in Navaho County to polling stations in Kayenta, Arizona. Young said, “I am doing this to honor our ancestors who fought for our right to vote.”

Blue Skies

2020 also featured groundbreaking progress in the arts, politics, and sports. Early on in the year, the film *Parasite* by South Korean director Bong Joon-ho made history by becoming the first non-English film to win the Oscar for Best Picture. Furthermore, in June the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences announced its *Academy Aperture 2025* initiative, which will require future Oscar nominees to meet specific representation and inclusion standards in order to be eligible for the enviable Best Picture award.

In June the Supreme Court in a 5-4 ruling overturned the termination of DACA, marking a huge victory for immigrant communities. The Court’s decision allowed participants of the program to once again apply for renewals in order to remain in the country.

In the following month, amid ongoing protests and mounting pressures from stakeholders, the NFL’s Washington R*****s changed its name to the Washington Football Team until a permanent name is decided on. The rebranding marked the long-awaited termination of an anti-Indigenous racial slur carried by the team since 1933. 2020 also saw the NBA and the MLB demonstrate increased commitment to Black Lives Matter and Nike ramped up their support for Colin Kaepernick with their “You Can’t Stop Us” campaign in 2020.

Despite the escalating pandemic death count, more Americans voted in the 2020 election than ever before in our nation’s history. 2021 begins with a Presidential cabinet that is destined to be more representative of all citizens of the United States than ever before. Kamala Harris will be the first Black, Asian American and the first woman to hold the position of Vice President of the United States. This short video said so much to so many who have waited for so long. We encourage you to watch it and share with others. https://youtu.be/hTU_YbsKWiU