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Study analyzes racial and ethnic disparities in COVID-19

- **As of June 2020, more than 2.3 million Americans contracted COVID-19 and over 120 thousand died, with starkly different rates of sickness and death across different racial and ethnic groups**
- **This is the first attempt to investigate racial and ethnic disparities in COVID-19 using zip code level data instead of county level data and reveals significant disparities for both blacks and Hispanics in confirmed cases, even after controlling for a battery of other demographic and economic factors**

Given current discussions around race in the United States, the disproportionate share of COVID-19 infections and fatalities from the black and Hispanic population has been the center of much debate. Until now, only coarse, county-level analysis has been conducted to investigate this discrepancy. However, a new study coauthored by University of Kentucky Assistant Professor of Health Management & Policy Joseph Benitez, ISFE Director and Associate Professor of Economics Charles Courtemanche, and ISFE Affiliate and Professor of Economics Aaron Yelowitz is the first to analyze these discrepancies at the zip code level and find that these discrepancies remain even after controlling for demographic and economic factors that may affect infection and outcomes.

Drs Benitez, Courtemanche, and Yelowitz analyze COVID-19 cases per capita and fatalities in 436 zip codes from six metropolitan areas: New York City, Chicago, Atlanta, San Diego, St. Louis, and Baltimore. They merge this data with other zip code level data sources to control for demographics, housing, socioeconomic status, opportunity, occupation, transportation, human mobility, health access, and population health.

According to the study, with the full set of controls they are able to account for because of

their zip code level data, there is strong evidence that majority black and Hispanic neighborhoods were disproportionately at risk for infections and fatalities due to COVID-19, with disparities largest in Hispanic neighborhoods. The authors note that "ZIP code level data allow us to examine a much wider range of variation in racial and ethnic composition than other studies using county-level data, and we also contribute to the literature by exploring numerous possible explanations for the disparities using decomposition methods. Differences in social mobility, demographics, and long-run opportunity arose as important contributors to COVID-related disparities."

The authors continue, "even though we are able to explain some of the racial and ethnic disparities as attributable to different concentrations of socioeconomic risk factors, the fact that most of the case disparities remains unexplained demonstrates the difficulty of addressing deeply embedded racial and ethnic inequalities in health outcomes."