



RESEARCH BRIEF #66

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COVID-19 Deaths Soared among U.S. Whites in 2021

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COVID-19 deaths in the United States increased significantly in 2021.¹ Throughout the pandemic, people of color have disproportionately borne the brunt of lives lost,^{2,3} particularly in the summer of 2020 when Blacks and Latinos were dying from COVID-19 at rates 3.5 times higher than Whites.⁴ Yet, for the latter parts of 2020 and into 2021, the racial/ethnic COVID-19 mortality gap narrowed. While Indigenous Peoples, Latinos, and Blacks still died at higher rates than Whites in 2021, the growth in White deaths due to COVID-19 between 2020 and 2021 outpaced that of other racial/ethnic groups.⁴

KEY FINDINGS

- There were approximately 514,000 COVID-19 deaths in 2021, representing a 70 percent increase from 2020.
- COVID-19 deaths rose 90 percent among non-Latino Whites between 2020 and 2021 -- two to three times faster than the rise among racial/ethnic minority groups.
- Whites younger than 65 doubled their share of COVID-19 deaths between 2020 and 2021.

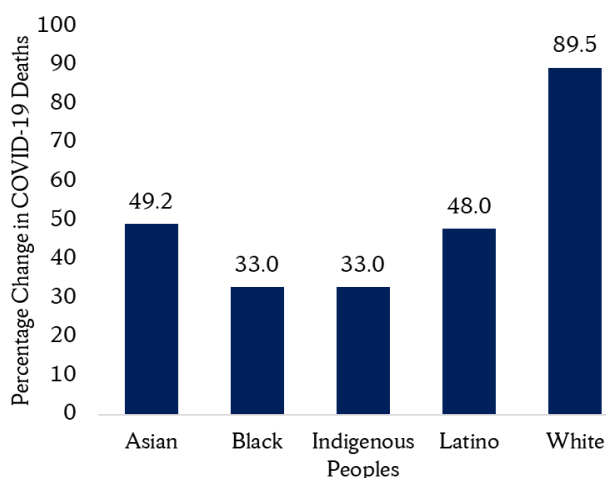


Figure 1: Percentage Change in COVID-19 Deaths, Last Week of 2020 to Last Week of 2021

Data Source: [CDC Provisional COVID-19 Deaths by Race and Hispanic Origin, and Age.](#)

This brief summarizes the results of our recent analysis using data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention⁵ to examine the rate of change in COVID-19 deaths across racial/ethnic groups between 2020 and 2021.

COVID-19 Deaths Surged among Whites in 2021

The pandemic claimed approximately 514,000 lives in 2021, which equates to 212,000 more lives than in 2020 - a 70 percent increase.

Racial/ethnic minorities fared much worse in the first year of the pandemic compared to non-Latino Whites. Compared to Blacks and Latinos, White COVID-19 mortality rates were less than one-third in the summer of 2020 with White deaths

largely consisting of persons aged 65 and older. In the week ending on August 22, 2020, the age-adjusted COVID-19 death rate for Whites stood at 33.7 per 100,000 persons compared to 115.9 for Blacks and 104.9 for Latinos. Furthermore, by the end of 2020, 89.4 percent of all Whites who had died from COVID-19 were 65 years of age or older compared to 63.3 percent of Latinos and 71.5 percent of Blacks. Over the last year, the number of Whites succumbing to COVID-19 soared by 89.5 percent, much faster than the rise among Asians (49.2 percent), Latinos (48.0 percent), Blacks (33.0 percent), and Indigenous Peoples (33.0 percent) (see Figure 1).

COVID-19 Death Rates Have Increased Faster among Whites in Nearly all Age Groups

COVID-19 mortality rates increased more among Whites than among racial/ethnic minorities in nine of ten age groups, the exception being at age 85+. Increases among Whites were particularly pronounced for ages 15-24, 25-34, and 35-44, where White deaths increased more than 500 percent between 2020 and 2021 (see Figure 2). The disproportionately larger increases in COVID-19 death rates among the population less than 65 years of age dramatically changed the demography of people who have died from COVID-19 between 2020 to 2021.

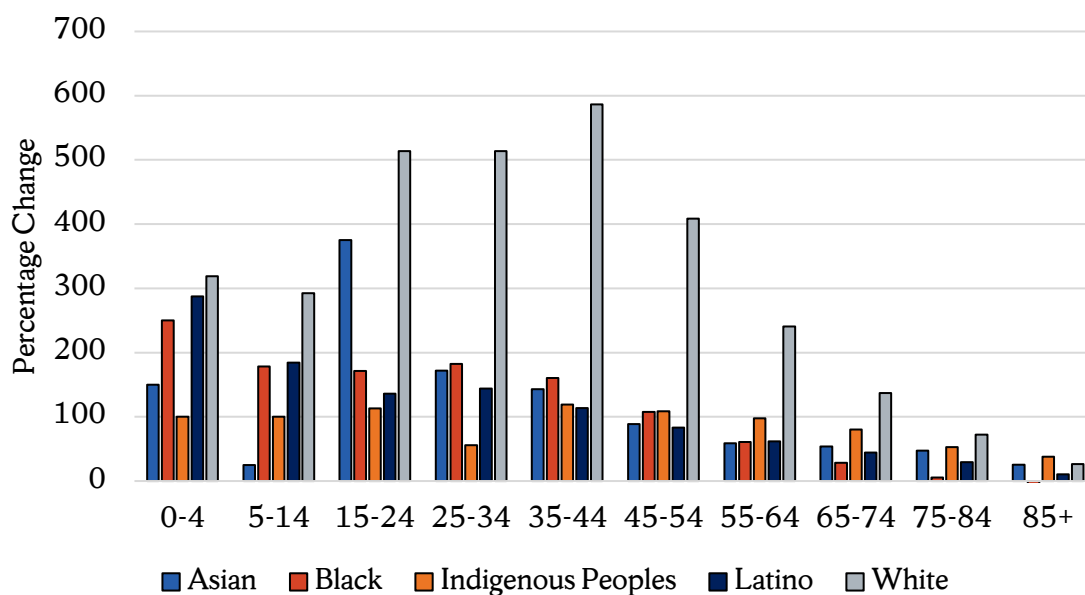


Figure 2: Percentage Change in Age-Specific COVID-19 Death Rates (Deaths per 100,000 Population) by Race/Ethnic Group and Age Group, 2020 to 2021

Data Source: [CDC Provisional COVID-19 Deaths by Race and Hispanic Origin, and Age](#)

White COVID-19 Deaths Have Disproportionately Occurred among Older Adults, but This is Changing

Early in the pandemic, Whites who died from COVID-19 tended to be much older compared to Indigenous Peoples, Latinos, and Blacks. For most of 2020, nearly 9 out of 10 Whites COVID-19 deaths occurred among ages 65 and older compared to less than 2 out of 3 Indigenous Peoples, Latinos, and Blacks. However, in 2021 we saw larger shares of COVID-19 deaths in younger age groups. Among all Whites who died from COVID-19, the percentage younger than age 65 more than doubled from

10.6 percent in 2020 to 22.5 percent in 2021. Among all Blacks who died from COVID-19, the percentage younger than age 65 rose from 28.5 in 2020 percent to 40.2 percent in 2021. The average age of COVID-19 deaths among Latinos, Indigenous Peoples, and Asians also decreased in 2021, but less so than was the case with Whites and Blacks (see Figure 3).

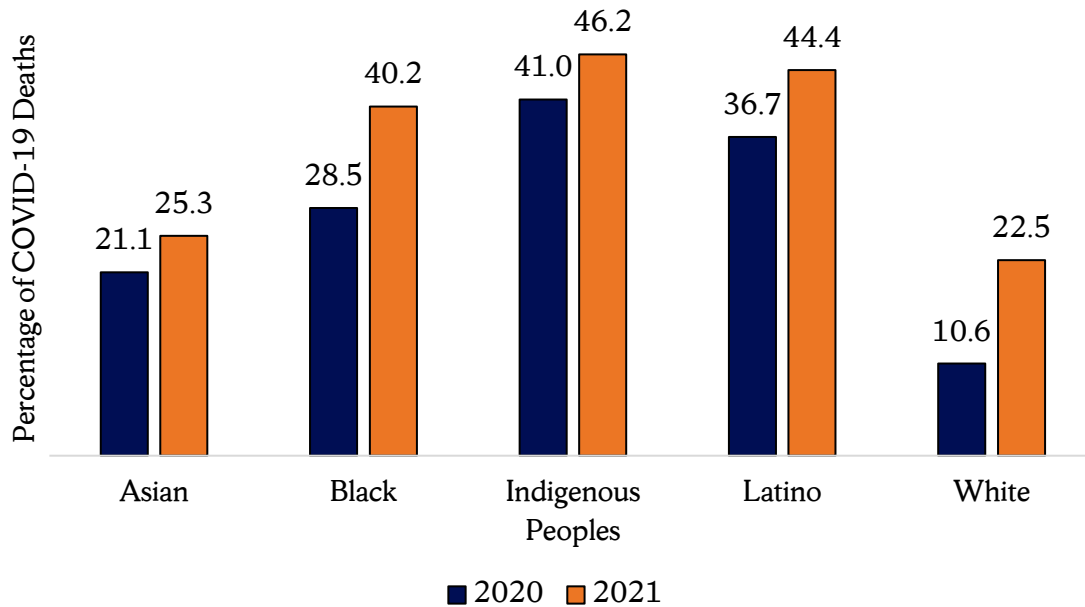


Figure 3: Percentage of COVID-19 Deaths Occurring among Persons Younger than 65 Years of Age by Race and Ethnic Group, 2020 and 2021

Data Source: CDC Provisional COVID-19 Deaths by Race and Hispanic Origin, and Age.
<https://data.cdc.gov/NCHS/Provisional-COVID-19-Deaths-by-Race-and-Hispanic-O/ks3g-spdg>

No Group is Exempt from COVID-19 Health Risks - Public Health Policy and Practice Should Support Populations with Troubling Trends

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated health disparities in the United States. A variety of factors have contributed to racial/ethnic and age differences in COVID-19 throughout the pandemic. While our research did not explicitly test factors underlying the shifting age and racial patterns of COVID-19 death rates, there are several potential explanations.

COVID-19 vaccinations and public health precautions such as masking and social distancing are highly effective at reducing the risk of COVID-19 infection or death⁶ (WHO 2022). Racial/ethnic and age group differences in vaccination status and mask-wearing likely influenced mortality rates in the second year of the pandemic. At the end of 2021, vaccination rates were lower among younger age groups (under 75 percent of ages <65 have had at least 1 dose of the vaccine versus 86 percent of those 65 and older) and were slightly lower among White adults (75 percent) than among Latino (77 percent) and Black (80 percent) adults. Blacks and Latinos also report much higher rates of mask-wearing than Whites at the end of 2021.⁷ Public health leaders should implement outreach and policy strategies focused on increasing vaccination among groups with low vaccination rates.

Partisan differences in COVID-19 risk perception and lower support among Republicans for public

health precautions and vaccination⁸ may also contribute to Whites' lower rates of vaccination and mask-wearing and adverse 2021 mortality trends (Whites are more likely than racial/ethnic minorities to be Republican). Outreach efforts directly focused on increasing trust in vaccines among Republicans, such as the House GOP Doctors Caucus PSA, may be promising strategies for increasing vaccination rates in this group.⁹

Worse COVID-19 outcomes for younger adults in 2021 may also reflect increases in social activities and a return to in-person work for this age group. Public health strategies to reduce health risks for younger adults include targeted outreach to encourage vaccination or employer vaccine mandates, increasing access to rapid testing, and continuing indoor mask mandates in areas with high community spread of COVID-19.

Differences in COVID-19 mortality between 2021 and 2020 may also reflect the severe death toll COVID-19 took in 2020 on racial/ethnic minorities and older adults, especially among those with multiple risk factors, such as essential workers, persons residing in nursing homes, and people with multiple chronic conditions. The losses experienced in 2020 may have contributed to lower increases in deaths among older adults and racial/ethnic minorities in 2021 because some of the population at higher risk of COVID-19 mortality had already succumbed in 2020.

The dynamic health impacts of COVID-19 over the course of the pandemic show the importance of continued public health surveillance during ongoing pandemic response and in future pandemics. Our findings point to the need for a tailored approach to public health outreach and policy to ensure disparities are reduced and vaccination rates increase enough for the U.S. to transition out of the pandemic response phase. Increasing vaccination rates is the most effective method to gain some control over the pandemic, and strategic and multipronged public health approaches are needed to increase vaccination uptake among younger adults and Whites.

The massive number COVID-19 deaths since late 2019 has implications for the U.S. population trends. While the U.S. population grew at a relatively slow pace before the pandemic,¹⁰ it has slowed even more during the pandemic, and the White population is likely to decline even faster if COVID-19 deaths continue to climb.

Data and Methods

We obtained data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for 2020 (February 1, 2020, to December 26, 2020) and 2021 (January 1, 2020, to December 25, 2021). Given that both datasets represent cumulative death data, we subtracted deaths for 2021 from deaths for 2020 to obtain the difference.

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