



THE CITY OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE COMPTROLLER
SCOTT M. STRINGER

April 7, 2020

Mayor Bill de Blasio
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

Dr. Oxiris Barbot
Commissioner
New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene
42-09 28th St
Queens, NY 11101

Re: Tracking COVID-19 in New York City by Race, Ethnicity and Occupation

Dear Mayor de Blasio and Commissioner Barbot:

I am writing today to add my voice to those urging the City to release demographic data that reveals the race and ethnicity of those who have been afflicted by the COVID-19 virus in New York City, which I was heartened to learn the Administration is currently working to accomplish. By all accounts, this crisis is deepening systemic social and economic inequalities in New York City and the consequence of these disparities is reinforcing a cycle of transmission, mortality, lost income and poor health care that disproportionately affects lower-income people of color. Our response and relief efforts must consider impacts of these widening divisions, which is why I think it is so important for the City to fully assess the role played by race and ethnicity in this outbreak.

That said, I hope you will also consider collecting and compiling data not just the race and ethnicity of those who have been hospitalized or died, but also the occupation of those who have been impacted. While occupation is not normally delineated by the City when examining public health outcomes, it is beyond dispute that certain workers – among them EMTs and other first responders, doctors and nurses, pharmacy and grocery stores workers, building employees and other frontline workers – are today at greater risk of contracting the virus than others who are able to self-isolate at home. We cannot fight what we cannot fully see, and we will remain partially blind to the contours and trajectory of the current COVID-19 outbreak if we are not analyzing its spread by occupation and other important demographic factors.

Indeed, a report by my office on the demographics of private-sector frontline workforce suggests that these New Yorkers are already disproportionately likely to experience poorer health

outcomes due to inequities in access to health care. Our report found, for instance, that 75 percent of all frontline workers are people of color, while 19 percent are non-citizens and 8 percent lack access to health insurance.ⁱ While gathering occupation data may require additional efforts by City government, I believe strongly that we owe it to all our first responders and frontline workers to fully assess the risks that may be inherent in specific jobs, and to take more aggressive steps to mitigate those risks for them and their families going forward.

Without a complete and thoroughly transparent demographic profile of those who have been impacted by the novel coronavirus and the acute respiratory disease it causes, our city will be denied critical information needed to identify and address the health inequities that plague so many of our communities, as well as information that could better protect those who may be more at risk today simply because of their occupation as an essential, frontline worker.

The sad fact is that research on past infectious disease epidemics has found that structural inequality is itself an underlying condition, and that poverty and lack of access to healthcare can often accelerate the spread of any virus.ⁱⁱ As a city, we need to be constantly striving to close the gaps in our social safety net, but the only way to do that it is by constantly measuring where those gaps exist and developing policies to address them. Ultimately, we need to undertake a broader conversation about access to healthcare, and how we as a city and a nation can better ensure that all our citizens -- regardless of their race, immigration or economic status -- can be guaranteed access to quality preventative care and acute healthcare services when needed. More immediately, we need to make sure that all our frontline workers are provided free healthcare and the personal protective equipment they need to stay safe, because going to work should never be a decision with potentially devastating financial and healthcare implications.

These are deeply challenging times for our city, and I know how hard your team is already working to try and stem the tide of this virus and keep our communities safe. But I think maximum transparency is itself a tool that can help government deploy resources in the most effective way possible, and also help to better understand how the threat posed by COVID-19 interacts with already entrenched inequalities in our city and society at large. More data will help New Yorkers better understand their risks and make better decisions. More data will help outside researchers better understand what is happening, recognize patterns, and make informed recommendations for containing the spread of infection.

Thank you for your attention to this matter, and I look forward to hearing your response.

Sincerely,



Scott M. Stringer
New York City Comptroller

ⁱ <https://comptroller.nyc.gov/newsroom/comptroller-stringer-releases-new-data-profiles-of-frontline-workers-and-calls-for-protections-amid-covid-19-pandemic/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/15/world/europe/coronavirus-inequality.html>