

# COVID-19: BLACK SKINS, NO MASKS

A POLICY BRIEF BY QUITO SWAN  
DIRECTOR, TROTTER INSTITUTE

**As of April 24 there were 7,617 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Boston. Black Bostonians made up 1,996 (42%) of the 4,774 cases identified by ethnicity--the largest racial group affected by the virus. Black people make up 25% of Boston's population.**

02125. I became Director of the William Monroe Trotter Institute in February 2020, after having joined the Africana Studies Department at UMass-Boston in the Fall. I chose to reside in Dorchester, not too far from where my late uncle once lived in Mattapan. Over the years, my family traveled from Bermuda to visit him at his residence off of Blue Hill Avenue. My parents were at the Franklin Park concert in 1974 when Sly Stone walked off the stage after performing only one song. My uncle had his own musical ambitions. A bass guitarist, we visited him as he moved between Boston and Providence looking for gigs. Those transformative trips helped me to understand the scope of the Black world.

02124. I have spent much of my short time here mapping my family's footprints along the city's culturally rich roads and tightly twisting trails, each of which tell the tall truths and tales of the highs and the lows of Black Bostonians.

02126. For me, Black Boston lives, struggles, and thrives through its African American Jazz clubs, chess games in Nubian Square, Afro Caribbean grocers, community gardens in Codman Square, vendors at Black Market, portraits of Big Papi in Dominican barbershops, wifi in public libraries, botanicos, Majah Hype comedy shows, African fabric stores, Black Trivia, salons, poets, higglers, homeless savants, MBTA employees, football and baseball games, Sizzla Kalonji concerts, UMass-Boston students, staff, and faculty, Haitian flags, Capoeira, Puerto Rican bandanas, and jumma on Fridays. Black Boston wears baseball caps, hijabs, fades, blowouts, elekes, locks, kufis, braids, and tams. It tastes like coffee from Ripple Café, Cesaria, Flames, El Oriental De Cuba, Slades, Mofongo, Phoa Hoa, Blue Nile, and Darryl's. Black Boston sounds like Afro-Beat, Spanish, Jazz, English, Salsa, Patois, Kreyòl, Gospel, Kriolu, Dancehall, Yoruba, New Edition, Ebonics, Tigrinya, Merengue, Hip-Hop, French, Caribbean Carnival, Arabic, Reggae, Portuguese, and Stone Love at Russell Auditorium.

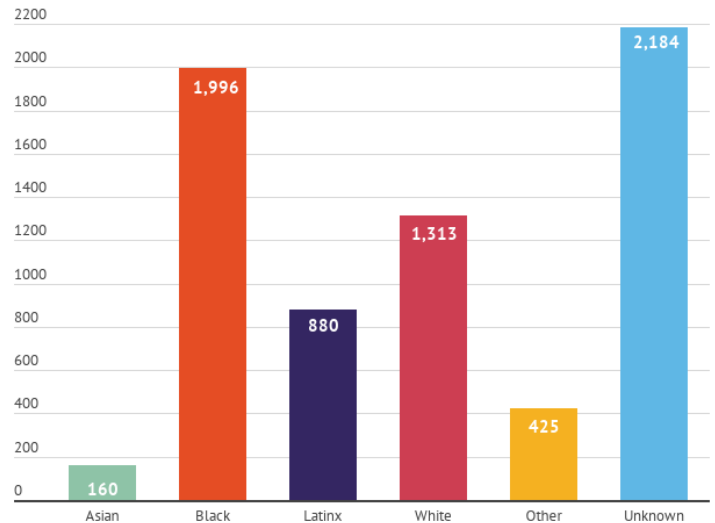
**It is painful to see the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on these Black communities, which are critical economic, social and political stakeholders in Boston and their diasporas.**

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**The Trotter Institute pledges to not only help to address racial disparities in the current crisis of COVID-19, but to also challenge the preconditions of structural racism that have created the context for these inequalities.**

02125. On February 2, 2020 it was confirmed that a UMass-Boston student had been diagnosed with COVID-19. The bombastic comments from the White House at that time about some magical disappearance of the corona virus left the nation in suspense for well over a month. Meanwhile, a conspiracy theory claiming the virus was a left-wing hoax invented to undermine President Trump was allowed to take hold. As of Thursday, February 27, the CDC classified the health risk posed by COVID-19 as being low but asked institutions to prepare for the eventuality of an outbreak. Carrying the base level of informed paranoia that many people of African descent have for the global western structures of health, I was somewhat skeptical of these estimations. If you are not sure why, read Harriet Washington's [Medical Apartheid](#).

02121. Still, that Friday night, I found myself standing outside of William E. Reed Auditorium for well over an hour, shamelessly waiting to see a performance by Reggae artist Tarrus Riley. But I was not alone in this quest. More than one hundred people stood shivering in the cold, trying to wait out a power outage that had disrupted the entire block. At the time, a curious narrative was circulating among some Black communities—that Black people could not be harmed by COVID-19. Proponents of this theory cited the limited confirmed cases across the Black world-Africa, the Caribbean, as proof. That's not the story anymore, and it never really was-Africa experienced a 43% jump in virus cases just last week.



COVID-19 Confirmed Cases by Race/Ethnicity, as of April 23, 2020. Source Boston Public Health Commission.

02124. UMass-Boston moved to remote instruction on March 9. Over a month later, it feels as if Boston's curve of Corona is being carried on the backs of Black people-essential workers, health care employees, those denied tests or sent home from hospitals, those who cannot walk into a testing center in Roxbury because apparently there is none, the unemployed, the bus drivers and subway takers who have to go to work, those who filed for unemployment but have yet to receive checks, the students who care for younger siblings because their parents are both health care workers who now have COVID-19, the business owners who are yet to get relief, undocumented persons concerned about getting tested, the homeless, and those were not able to breathe since before Eric Garner.

According to the Boston Public Health Commission, as of April 24, 2020, there were 7,617 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the city. There is racial/ethnic data for 4,774 of these cases. Boston's circa 180,000 Black persons make up some 25.4% of the city's population of 695,000. Yet, Black people make up 1,996 (42%) of those cases of COVID-19. 1,313 persons are White (28%), 880 persons are Latinx (18%), and 160 persons are Asian/Pacific Islanders (3%).

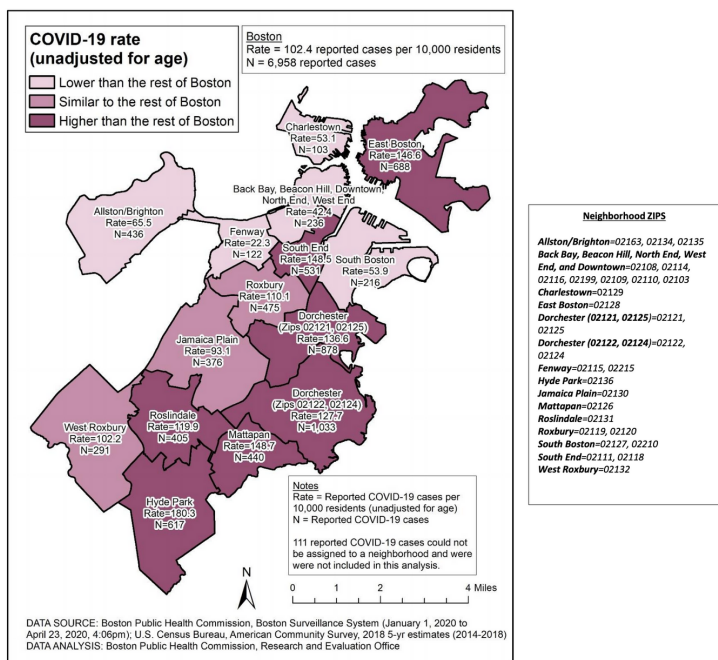
**Of the 232 Bostonians who have all tragically died from COVID-19, 84 were White (44%), 59 were Black (31%), 23 were Latinx (12%) and 20 were Asian/Pacific Islanders (10%).**

In his *Groundings With My Brothers*, Walter Rodney wrote, “There is nothing with which poverty coincides so absolutely as with the color black—small or large population, hot or cold climates, rich or poor in natural resources—poverty cuts across all of these factors in order to find black people.” He might as well have been referring about COVID-19. If the proverbial proof is in the pudding, then the troubling truth is in the zip codes.

Dorchester (02121, 02125, 02122, 02124), Mattapan (02126), Hyde Park (02136), Roslindale (02131), East Boston (02128), and South End (02111, 02210) all have registered higher rates of COVID-19 than the rest of Boston. Strikingly, most of these neighborhoods are predominantly Black or have significantly Black populations - Mattapan (82.8%), South Dorchester (46.2%), Hyde Park (48.4%), Roslindale (25.5%), North Dorchester (22.2%), and East Boston (56.2% Latinx).

Are these numbers due to “pre-existing conditions” among Black people? And if so, what kinds of conditions? Structural racism? Historical disparities in the health care system? A “legacy of class, race, and gender inequities,” as UMass-Boston Professor of American Studies Lynnell Thomas suggests? Thomas’s “Hurricane Corona” draws on the lessons of Katrina—Black communities are at high-risk in disasters due to “entrenched income and wealth inequality, housing and food insecurity, substandard healthcare and education, increased environmental vulnerability, and staggering levels of poverty.” The Trotter’s own 2019 “African Americans in Boston” report highlighted such issues around predatory lending, disenfranchisement, and segregation.

**Call to Action.** As the city’s only public research university, UMass-Boston must address the impact of COVID-19 on the city’s Black communities. UMass faculty, staff, students and families live in and have concrete relationships with the zip codes listed here. Many of us are on the frontline of the crisis and need support. The campus is home to a mass of Black intellectual expertise; this nexus of public outreach, scholarship, and praxis is uniquely positioned to explore COVID-19 in the Black world. We need more data and resources to research intersections between COVID-19, black communities and businesses, immigration, coping mechanisms, mental health, incarceration, social media, gender, racial profiling, youth, education, sport, and survival strategies. City and state leaders should engage Black faculty at UMass-Boston as they look to tackle this crisis. To not do so is to reflect disparities that existed before COVID-19. All of our Institutes need more resources to fulfill our interlinked charges. The Trotter is ready to plan, work, and advocate with our communities. Our **Project Resilience** aims to document and archive Black resilience in the moment of COVID-19. We want to hear from you.



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**RESILIENCE** is the William Monroe Trotter Institute for the Study of Black Culture's policy brief series. The Institute was founded at UMass Boston in 1984 to address the concerns of Black communities in Boston and Massachusetts through research, technical assistance, and public service. The Institute takes its name from African American activist William Monroe Trotter, whose radical journalism placed Black communities across the United States, the Caribbean and Africa in critical conversation.

Through the nexus of digital humanities, social advocacy, and innovative community engagement, the Trotter hopes to map, disseminate, and archive Black Boston's complex narratives of political agency, cultural heritage, and socio-economic concerns. This includes research driven explorations of the intersections between race, resilience, sustainability, community development, culture, health, gender, diasporas, and environmental justice.

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**CONTACT US:**

William Monroe Trotter Institute  
for the Study of Black Culture  
Healey Library, 10th Floor, Suite 12  
University of Massachusetts Boston  
100 Morrissey Blvd., Boston, MA 02125-3393  
Phone: 617.287.5880  
Fax: 617.287.5865  
Email: [trotterinstitute@umb.edu](mailto:trotterinstitute@umb.edu)  
Twitter: @TrotterUMB