



## DOES MASK WEARING DEPEND ON COVID VICTIMS' RACE?



Of all of the COVID-19 measures introduced in schools, mask mandates have been among the most fraught, sparking parent protests and even threats of violence.

Although state mask mandates have all been lifted, the latest Centers for Disease Control and Prevention COVID-19 guidance for schools recommends that masking requirements continue in the 40 percent of local communities experiencing high rates of infection as well as in areas with lower rates—on a voluntary or individual basis (e.g., for those who are immune-compromised).

Recent survey results suggest that roughly half of teachers, principals, and district leaders won't be masking up at all this school year, although an additional 36 percent plan to do so under certain circumstances (e.g., on days they don't feel well).

As masking becomes almost entirely a matter of personal choice, a recent study sheds light on one possible impetus behind the decision to cover one's face in public: race. Throughout the pandemic, Black and Latinx Americans have been more likely than their White counterparts to die from COVID-19. And masking, which has been shown to limit the spread of the disease, may have played a role.

In a recent study published in the peer-reviewed *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities*, Berkeley Franz of Ohio University, Adrienne Milner of Brunel University in London, and NEPC Fellow Jomills Henry Braddock II of the University of Miami found that, after controlling for the presence of statewide mask mandates, mask usage rose in states when White COVID death rates increased relative to COVID death rates for Hispanic Amer-

icans and, to a lesser extent, for Black Americans. By contrast, masking rates declined when Black and Hispanic death rates exceeded White death rates. Residential segregation rates (as measured by inclusion of a dissimilarity index) also appeared to help explain the association between mask wearing and race-based COVID mortality disparities.

Here's how the authors explained their results:

There are two plausible interpretations of these findings that may provide support for two complementary models of how racism shapes COVID-19 outcomes: [1] that Americans do not perceive themselves to be at risk when people of color are dying because US communities are highly segregated by race and [2] because many Americans endorse racial apathy, or at a minimum harbor unconscious implicit biases, they may therefore be less concerned about Black or Hispanic deaths.

Although the study did not specifically examine schools, it clearly has implications for education. For instance, given this apparent association between mask usage and race-based disparities in COVID mortality rates, students and school staff might be more intentional about ensuring mask usage based on overall threat analyses rather than on community sentiment.

### NEPC Resources on Diversity: Race, Ethnicity, Class, Culture, and/or Gender

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