Mandatory Masks and Racial Profiling

Oregon’s Lincoln County instituted a mandatory mask policy to reduce the spread of the novel coronavirus. The policy included an exemption for “people of color who have heightened concerns about racial profiling and harassment due to wearing face covering in public.” Extreme backlash ensued. “The calls and comments fell into two main categories: ‘There were people saying we were racist against white people,’ said Lincoln County Commissioner Claire Hall. And on the opposite end of the spectrum, ‘We got messages of, to the effect, ‘Why are you participating in a genocide plot to kill people of color?’” Ultimately, the exemption was removed.¹

Long before the coronavirus outbreak, people of color—especially black men—have been adjusting their personal presentation in an effort to counteract racial stereotypes that lead many in their community to see them as a threat. For them, the recommendation that everyone should wear cloth face coverings to slow the spread of the coronavirus came with the added concern that homemade masks could exacerbate racial profiling. As one man explained, “The CDC coming to you and saying ‘put a bandana over your face, walk out and that will make you more safe,’ as a black man in New York City, it’s like them saying put on a hoodie and walk behind a white grandma. That’s not how life works for us.”² Another man put it this way: “I don’t feel safe wearing a handkerchief or something else that isn’t CLEARLY a protective mask covering my face to the store because I am a Black man living in this world. I want to stay alive, but I also want to stay alive.”³

At the same time, communities of color have suffered a disproportionate toll from the coronavirus pandemic. For example, in Chicago, black residents are falling ill with coronavirus at more than twice the rate of other groups, and black people account for almost seventy percent of coronavirus deaths in the city. As one professor of medicine explains, the disparate impact of the pandemic is the result of longstanding health disparities: “The roots of health disparity based in racial and socio-economic status are long and deep-seeded, ranging from pre-existing health conditions to access to health care.”⁴

The Lincoln County exemption was an attempt to balance the protection of all citizens from the virus with the concerns of people of color worried that wearing a mask would put them at risk for violence. But the exemption was swiftly removed due to “unprecedented vitriol” and “horrifically racist commentary” that county leaders received. They explained that “The expressions of racism regarding the exception has created a ripple of fear throughout our

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communities of color. The very policy meant to protect them, is now making them a target for further discrimination and harassment.”

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