



MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes, February 2021

Immobility Sparks Mobility: Black Lives Matter protests in the United States

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Abstract

Pandemic-related immobilities have provided fertile ground for protest mobility, offering one explanation for the sustained protests following the death of George Floyd in May 2020.

Keywords

pandemic, United States, protest, Black Lives Matter

To be quoted as:

Remus, Angela. 2021. Immobility Sparks Mobility: Black Lives Matter protests in the United States. *MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes*. Department 'Anthropology of Economic Experimentation'. Halle/Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.
<https://doi.org/10.48509/molab.8592>

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Following the death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police in May 2020, Black Lives Matter protests erupted across the United States. The deaths of Ahmaud Arbery (killed by two white men while jogging) in February and Breonna Taylor (killed by police in her home) in March were fresh on the public's mind, but did not spark nearly the same backlash. However, when Floyd died, many states were in the midst of a rapidly unfolding pandemic, implementing lock-downs and imposing limits on gatherings. These conditions created a rare opportunity for an extraordinary and sustained mobility of protest.

While some explanations for the vigour of the protests centre on the circumstances of Floyd's death,² there are also intuitive and compelling explanations rooted in the immobility caused by the pandemic.

The frustration caused by pandemic-related inequities may have been one driving factor behind the mobility of Black Lives Matter protesters. As one author observed, "Covid-19 has exacerbated the problems of racial injustice, isolation, frustration and stagnation."³ Unemployment increased the most for Black Americans than any other racial group.⁴ Americans who are Black have also faced the highest death rates from the virus.⁵ A scholar of African-American Studies observed, "Mass mobilization may be more likely in such circumstances where people feel they have little to lose... and so much at stake."⁶ This sentiment may have been especially acute for Black Americans, given the dire and disproportionate socio-economic and public health consequences of the pandemic. This view is reflected in the comments of Karissa Lewis, a national field director of the Movement for Black Lives: "Issues like police brutality, health inequality, and racialised poverty have merged like multiple storms converging at once, created by the most visible arm of racial capitalism—police terror—leading to mass uprisings globally."⁷

Pandemic immobility may also have had a practical impact on people's ability to protest. People simply had time. As one author wrote, "Covid-19 has ... caused higher unemployment, which provides the time to air these grievances [about racial injustice]."⁸ The BBC made a similar observation: "The U.S.'s 13% unemployment level means that more people than usual can protest and campaign without juggling work commitments."⁹

Further, the pandemic and associated immobility may have meant that Americans had more time to sit with the media coverage of Floyd's death: "You have a situation where the entire country is on lock-down, and more people are inside watching TV. ... [M]ore people are being forced to pay attention—they're less able to look away, less distracted," the BBC report continued.¹⁰

² Cheung, Helier. 2020. George Floyd death: Why US protests are so powerful this time. *BBC News*. Available online at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52969905>. Last accessed 28 December 2020.

³ Nakhaie, Reza and F.S. Nakhaie. 2020. Black Lives Matter movement finds new urgency and allies because of COVID-19. *The Conversation*, 5 July 2020. Available online at: <https://theconversation.com/black-lives-matter-movement-finds-new-urgency-and-allies-because-of-covid-19-141500>. Last accessed 28 December 2020.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2020. COVID-19 Hospitalization and Death by Race/Ethnicity. *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. Available online at: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/investigations-discovery/hospitalization-death-by-race-ethnicity.html>. Last accessed 28 December 2020.

⁶ Ortiz, Erik. 2020. Racial violence and a pandemic: How the Red Summer of 1919 relates to 2020. *NBC News*. Available online at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/racial-violence-pandemic-how-red-summer-1919-relates-2020-n1231499>. Last accessed 28 December 2020.

⁷ Columbia Politics Collective. 2020. The Pandemic Has Invigorated Protest Movements—and Repressive Governments, Too. *Columbia University*. Available online at: <https://globalreports.columbia.edu/blog/2020/08/cpc-protests-movements/>. Last accessed: 28 December 2020.

⁸ Nakhaie and Nakhaie. 2020.

⁹ Cheung. 2020.

¹⁰ *Id.*

Protest mobility spurred by immobility may not, however, be the only dynamic at play. In fact, there is some evidence that the mobility of protesters may have contributed to the immobility of non-protesters. One study found, based on analysis of cell phone data, that “cities which had protests saw a net increase in social distancing behaviour for the overall population relative to cities that did not.”¹¹ Put simply: those who were not protesting remained at home. These decisions may have been prompted by fears of protest-related violence,¹² curfews imposed by mayors seeking to curb violence,¹³ or police and protester-created barriers designed to limit travel to or through protest areas.¹⁴ Their ability to immobilise in the home also may have been an effect of the pandemic.

It is impossible to say definitively what precise combination of circumstances preceded the sustained and widespread wave of Black Lives Matter protests in the spring and summer of 2020. Nevertheless, there are compelling reasons to believe that the mobility patterns of protesters, as well as the responsive immobility of other urban residents, are attributable to the unique circumstances created by the Covid-19 pandemic.

¹¹ Dave, Dhaval M. et al. 2020. Black Lives Matter Protests, Social Distancing, and COVID-19. Center for Health Economics & Policy Studies (CHEPS) at San Diego State University. Available online at: <http://www.nber.org/papers/w27408>. Last accessed 28 December 2020.

¹² Kaur, Harmeet. 2020. About 93% of racial justice protests in the US have been peaceful, a new report finds. *CNN*. Available online at: [cnn.com/2020/09/04/us/blm-protests-peaceful-report-trnd/index.html](https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/04/us/blm-protests-peaceful-report-trnd/index.html). Last accessed 28 December 2020.

¹³ Baker, Mike et al. 2020. Cities on Edge as Fires Burn Near White House. *The New York Times*. Available online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-protests-live-updates.html>. Last accessed 28 December 2020.

¹⁴ NBC News. 2020. Black Lives Matter Holds Rally Supporting Individuals Arrested in Chicago Looting Monday. Available online at: <https://www.nbcchicago.com/news/local/black-lives-matter-holds-rally-supporting-individuals-arrested-in-chicago-looting-monday/2320365/>. Last accessed 28 December 2020.