



Last Updated:
July 3, 2022



Social Influences of Vaccine Hesitancy in Marginalized Communities

Vaccine hesitancy in Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities stem from a history of **systemic racism**, **medical violence**, and **marginalization** that have created distrust in the government, science, and medical institutions.

CASE 1

U.S. Public Health Service Syphilis Study at Tuskegee

In 1932, a study was commissioned by the U.S Public Health Service to study the effects of untreated syphilis.

- Approximately 600 Black men from Tuskegee, Alabama were involved without proper informed consent.
- Researchers were able to diagnose around 400 participants in the study with syphilis, but treatment was withheld despite it being widely available in order to study the progression of the untreated disease.

Systemic racism and scientific racism in the U.S. were used to justify this study.

- Slavery in the U.S. was abolished in 1865 with the addition of the 13th amendment, but racist attitudes continued to be prevalent.

- White people employed pseudoscience to confirm and reinforce racial biases.
 - Before slavery ended in 1865, science was incorrectly used to justify the enslavement of black people.
 - White people held the false belief that African men were biologically fit to be slaves and that they had "primitive brains" that did not experience pain in the same way that white people did.
 - Social Darwinism increased in popularity in the early 1900s and drove the false belief that white people were inherently superior to Black people.
 - In the 1800s and 1900s, scientists falsely believed that Black men had extremely high sex drives and were thus especially prone to sexually transmitted infections such as syphilis.
 - Researchers in the Tuskegee study also believed that Black people could not be convinced to get treatment for syphilis.
 - The researchers justified their unethical actions by labeling the study as an observation of expected behavior instead of a medical experiment.

The U.S. Public Health Service continued to conduct this study for 40 years, during which an estimated 100+ participants died as a result of syphilis.

- The consequences of the study continue to be felt today, especially as distrust of the medical community by Black people.
 - This distrust has led to worse health outcomes in Black communities. This is especially the case for Black men, whose life expectancy at 45 are more than 3 years less than non-Hispanic Caucasian men.

SOURCES: CDC, Tuskegee University, Brandt, Allan M.1978, McGill University

CASE 2

Historical Impact of Smallpox on Indigenous Peoples in British Columbia of Canada

Since the 15th century, European colonizers have brought numerous diseases to North America, including influenza, whooping cough, and smallpox.

- The smallpox epidemic broke out in 1862 throughout Canada, especially in the region that is currently known as British Columbia.

The actions of these colonists worsened the epidemic's impact on Indigenous people.

- During the epidemic, colonists forcibly evicted Indigenous people from their communities. This forced infected Indigenous people to flee to other communities, which contributed to the further spread of the diseases.
- Smallpox was sometimes spread intentionally by European colonists as a means to acquire more of the Indigenous people's land.
- The Euro-centric worldviews of these colonists saw Indigenous people as disposable. This worldview was used to justify and drive the implementation of systemic policies to decrease Indigenous populations.
- The attempts of Indigenous people to welcome newcomers through Peace and Friendship Treaties were met with deliberate attempts to eradicate their populations. This resulted in a severe fracturing of the developing relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

When the smallpox vaccine was first developed, it was at first not made widely available to Indigenous People.

- In British Columbia, Indigenous people did not have ready access to the smallpox vaccine until 1907.

The smallpox epidemic resulted in about 14,000 Indigenous people's deaths, which was about half of the population in the British Columbia area.

- The significant population decline led to the devastating loss of traditional Indigenous knowledge, culture, and traditions. It also fragmented governance in Indigenous communities and created the conditions for colonists to move into Indigenous lands without establishing treaty relations.

SOURCES: The Canadian Encyclopedia, First Nations Health Authority, CDC, Kids Boost Immunity

CASE 3

Nutrition Research and Human Biomedical Experimentation in Canadian Aboriginal Communities

From 1942-1952, the Department of Indian Affairs of Canada, the Department of Pensions and National Health, and several researchers conducted a series of nutritional studies in Indigenous communities across Canada with goal of learning about malnutrition.

- These studies were conducted on children from six residential schools, which were boarding schools created to isolate Indigenous children from their native culture and assimilate them into the Canadian culture.

⁵ These studies were performed unethically without informed consent from the Indigenous children or their families.

- Participants were starved as part of the study. Healthcare was also withheld from participants who had fallen ill from the experiments to allow researchers to further study the impacts of malnutrition on the body.
- Participants were given fortified foods to determine the impact of certain supplements on nutrition. However, some of these foods were banned throughout Canada at the time due to potential negative effects on health.
 - These fortified foods were not shown to improve the condition of study participants. Some even showed a correlation with increased anemia levels among study participants.

These unethical nutritional studies have resulted in lasting effects not only on the individual Indigenous children that were forced into the study but also on the generations following the study.

- The study resulted in increased malnutrition in its participants. This contributed to stunted growth and higher incidences of diseases including type 2 diabetes and obesity later in their own lives, and also in the lives of their children.
- These diseases continue to disproportionately affect Indigenous people today.

SOURCES: York University, Canadian Medical Association Journal

A Way Forward



Vaccine hesitancy has deeply ingrained cultural and social roots including colonialism, systemic racism, and medical experimentation. Working to overcome vaccine hesitancy will require continuous collaborations with affected communities to understand the history of these cultural and social forces, recognize their present impact, and build lasting trust.