

How to Start an Essay on COVID-19

We all have been affected by the current COVID-19 pandemic. However, the impact of the pandemic and its consequences are felt differently depending on our status as individuals and as members of society. While some try to adapt to working online, homeschooling their children and ordering food via Instacart, others have no choice but to be exposed to the virus while keeping society functioning. Our different social identities and the social groups we belong to determine our inclusion within society and, by extension, our vulnerability to epidemics.

COVID-19 is killing people on a large scale. As of October 10, 2020, more than 7.7 million people across every state in the United States and its four territories had tested positive for COVID-19. According to the *New York Times* database, at least 213,876 people with the virus have died in the United States.^[1] However, these alarming numbers give us only half of the picture; a closer look at data by different social identities (such as class, gender, age, race, and medical history) shows that minorities have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. These minorities in the United States are not having their right to health fulfilled.

According to the World Health Organization's report *Closing the Gap in a Generation: Health Equity through Action on the Social Determinants of Health*, "poor and unequal living conditions are the consequences of deeper structural conditions that together fashion the way societies are organized—poor social policies and programs, unfair economic arrangements, and bad politics."^[2] This toxic combination of factors as they play out during this time of crisis, and as early news on the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic pointed out, is disproportionately affecting African American communities in the United States. I recognize that the pandemic has had and is having devastating effects on other minorities as well, but space does not permit this essay to explore the impact on other minority groups.

Employing a human rights lens in this analysis helps us translate needs and social problems into rights, focusing our attention on the broader sociopolitical structural context as the cause of the social problems. Human rights highlight the inherent dignity and worth of all people, who are the primary rights-holders.^[3] Governments (and other social actors, such as corporations) are the duty-bearers, and as such have the obligation to respect, protect, and fulfill human rights.^[4] Human rights cannot be separated from the societal contexts in which they are recognized, claimed, enforced, and fulfilled. Specifically, social rights, which include the right to health, can become important tools for advancing people's citizenship and enhancing their ability to participate as active members of society.^[5] Such an understanding of social rights calls our attention to the concept of equality, which requires that we place a greater emphasis on "solidarity" and the "collective."^[6] Furthermore, in order to generate equality, solidarity, and social integration, the fulfillment of social rights is not optional.^[7] In order to fulfill social integration, social policies need to reflect a commitment to respect and protect the most vulnerable individuals and to create the conditions for the fulfillment of economic and social rights for all.