Plague of US missing COVID-19 data for race/ethnicity: Debacle continues with vaccination data

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February 8, 2021

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies.
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Author contributions: NK conceptualized and drafted the work; all authors contributed to interpreting the data, revising the draft for important intellectual content, approved the final version for submission, and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

COI: None of the authors have any conflict of interest and no external funding supported this work.

IRB: The research is exempt from IRB review (no human subjects)

Word Count: 400 words

References: 5

Figures: 1

Submitted: February 5, 2021
Abstract

The new Feb 2 MMWR report – which documented that fully 48.1% of persons vaccinated against COVID-19 in the 1st month of rollout (December 14, 2020-January 14, 2021) were missing data on race/ethnicity (whereas only 0.1% and 3% were missing data respectively on age and sex) – was tellingly published on “Groundhog Day,” and evokes the phrase’s other contemporary meaning of an endlessly repeating time-loop (per the 1993 comic film of that title). We also update the data on COVID-19 cases missing data on race/ethnicity: for the most recent period (Dec 2, 2020-Feb 3, 2021), it stands at 33%, only a modest decline since the 43% missing we reported in the HCPDS Working Paper for Aug 28-Sept 16, 2020.
In the US, February 2 is “Groundhog Day,” when the famous Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania groundhog’s sighting or not of its shadow predicts how long winter will last. The phrase also now evokes an endless time-loop, following a 1993 comic film in which an egotistical cynical weather reporter assigned to film the groundhog gets stuck in a time glitch, endlessly repeating the day. He only escapes by learning the errors of his ways, redeemed by critical self-reflection leading to self-improvement and finally authentic love for another person.¹

On February 2, 2021, readers of the US Centers for Disease Control Morbidity and Mortality report² could be forgiven for thinking we likewise had entered a repeating time-loop. Why? Because among the 12.9 million persons who initiated vaccination against COVID-19 during the first month of the US vaccine rollout (December 14, 2020-January 14, 2021), fully 48.1% of persons lacked data on race/ethnicity, whereas only 0.1% and 3.0% were missing data respectively on age and sex² – this despite the reporting form prominently indicating data on race and ethnicity are required (Figure 1). These data are essential to ensure that the vaccine rollout meets stated standards and maintains equity in vaccine access, and vaccine confidence.

We have been here before. In early April 2020, US journalists, advocates, and scientists raised alarm at gross gaps in data on race/ethnicity for COVID-19 cases and deaths, impeding the ability to document health inequities and guide interventions.³ While the percent of COVID-19 deaths missing racial/ethnic data finally now is low (<1%), not so for cases: despite reporting mandates, these data were missing for 43% of COVID-19 cases reported between August 28 and September 16 2020,⁴ and for 33% reported between December 2, 2020 and February 3, 2021.

We are back to square one. Journalists, advocates, and scientists are again decrying the extensive missing data on race/ethnicity for vaccination records, while affluent white persons with good computer access to book appointments are flocking to vaccination sites set up to serve communities of color hard hit by COVID.⁵

At a time of heightened awareness about racial injustice and white supremacy, it is astonishing racial/ethnic data for vaccination are missing. The first month of vaccination occurred in the last month of the Trump Administration. To get out of this pernicious time-loop, self-reflection, learning from past errors, and a commitment to equity is essential. The new Biden-Harris Administration must ensure these required data are reported.
REFERENCES


