



Ryan Lamare

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What organisations can learn from a Black bus driver in Michigan

Structural racism compelled a Black bus driver to risk his own life and work during the COVID pandemic. And the anti-science scepticism stimulated by then-President Donald Trump kept many people defiantly out and about at the height of the pandemic. Ryan Lamare used geolocation data to track movement across different communities in the US during COVID, uncovering the underlying structures that contribute to inequalities. He shares lessons for organisations and policymakers.

On 21 March 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic engulfed Wayne County, Michigan, a 50-year-old Black Detroit bus driver named Jason Hargrove uploaded a [Facebook Live video](#). In the raw, emotional livestream, he fumed that a woman had boarded his bus and coughed near him repeatedly without covering her mouth. Hargrove explained in the video, “We’re out here as public workers, doing our jobs, trying to make an honest living to take care of our families”, and that he was “trying to be the professional that they want me to be” by continuing to come to his job at what was the height of the pandemic in his county.

Although so many of his fellow drivers had stopped reporting to work that the city had been forced to [cancel over 90 per cent of its services](#), Hargrove kept working. At one point, he posted a photo of himself on the bus, wearing a mask on which was printed the text, “#ICannotStayHome”.

Hargrove was an active member of [Amalgamated Transit Union Local 26](#), and his union had pressured the city to do more to protect its members, engaging in work stoppages throughout 2020 to bargain for driver safety. Yet two days after posting the video, Hargrove began feeling ill, and in nine days he would [die of COVID](#). A week later, his grieving wife would write a [Time Magazine article](#) “pleading with the world, to please, if you do not have to be out here, stay home”.

Less than three weeks after Hargrove’s death, ninety miles away in the state capital of Lansing, Michigan, thousands descended to protest the governor’s lockdowns in what became known as [“Operation Gridlock”](#). The majority of protestors were partisan supporters of President Trump, with

the protest having been **partly planned** by the Michigan Conservative Coalition (MCC). The protestors expressed a range of criticisms against the lockdowns, particularly concerns about impacts on businesses and personal liberties that, in their view, outweighed public health guidance. In response to the protests, Trump strongly aligned himself with those violating lockdown policies, tweeting, "**LIBERATE MICHIGAN!**" and calling those who refused to comply with lockdowns "**very responsible people**".

Why did Jason Hargrove feel he could not stay home, exposing himself to an illness that he knew could kill him? Why did partisan Trump supporters continue going about their daily routines at the height of a pandemic that would claim **so many of their lives**? In **my most recent research**, my co-authors and I provide some answers. We argue that systems of **structural racism** led Black communities and the workers in them to feel compelled to travel to work when others were able to stay home. We also argue that **anti-science scepticism** and its **amplification** by President Trump led his supporters to downplay the severity of the disease even as it wreaked havoc on their communities. Our research casts light on the underlying structures that contribute to inequalities in a society, and we hope the research will help companies and policymakers do a better job at protecting vulnerable workers the next time a crisis hits.

To answer the above questions, we use **Google Mobility Reports** data that tracked cell phone location histories of millions of people as the pandemic unfolded in near-real time. These data are aggregated to the county level, and our empirical analysis shows that counties with larger percentages of Black workers were significantly more likely to continue travelling to work than were counties with greater numbers of white workers.

However, mobility rates to other non-work locations like restaurants or retail establishments were identical between counties with high numbers of Black and white workers. This suggests that travel during COVID lockdown may have been driven by workers in Black counties feeling compelled to continue travelling to work and potentially exposing themselves to illness because of structural pressures, rather than a general lack of concern about the disease.

The same data show that Trump-voting counties were also more likely to have higher rates of mobility to workplaces than non-Trump-voting counties. But individuals in these counties were *also* more likely to visit grocery stores, restaurants, retail establishments and the like, suggesting general non-compliance with lockdown rules, more than a feeling of pressure to keep working at all costs.

Our interpretations are importantly supported by individual-level survey data, where we asked workers in two US states about their experiences during lockdown. The survey confirms what we see at the county level, with Black workers indicating that they feared losing their jobs and were anxious about whether they would be supported if they stayed home from work during lockdown, while Trump voters simply indicated that they felt the disease was not a big deal.

Our research also looks at what happened to communities after lockdown ended. As the US reopened and began to live with the disease as vaccines rolled out, Trump-voting areas continued to behave similarly to how they had acted during lockdown. However, we empirically confirm anecdotal evidence that workers in Black counties were **left behind** by the COVID recovery. Once lockdown ended, our data show that work mobility patterns flipped. Workers in white counties were much more likely to travel to work than were workers in Black counties after 2021. This suggests that Black workers may not have been given equal resources or treatment during the recovery phase of the pandemic, even after putting their lives at stake to keep the economy functioning during the lockdown phase.

Ultimately our research has lessons that are relevant for the future, not just a recent past many of us are trying our best to **forget**. When it comes to inequality, we should think of COVID as one of a number of arguably similar health and economic shocks, rather than a singular unrepeatable event. If we think of COVID this way, our research helps demonstrate how **inequality is revealed** more broadly when societies face unpredictable crises. When the next local or global disruption occurs, the same communities and individuals within them will probably feel the same structural pressures or misinformed skepticism regarding expert advice.

How can we use what we learned from our research into the pandemic to help prevent similar tragedies like that which befell Jason Hargrove and many others like him? How do we limit the degree to which political partisanship leads people to act against their own objective interests?

These are hard questions to answer fully, but a few ideas come to mind. First, organisations need to be **aware of structural inequalities** that may result in certain groups of workers feeling compelled to put themselves at risk of harm when other groups feel less obligation to do so. As companies increasingly wrestle with **backlash** to their equity, diversity and inclusion programs, I fear that structural pressures on vulnerable groups of workers will only rise if organisations bow to these sorts of **culture war** concerns.

Second, policymakers must not be afraid to regulate companies to ensure workers are treated equally based on protected legal classifications like race. Given the distinct **lack of interest** many politicians have in regulating corporate behaviour, again I worry that this is unlikely to occur soon, absent a shift in the way many politicians interact with organisations.

Finally, we must do whatever we can to quell the partisan extremism that grips much of the American ideological right. Not that long ago, conservatives were in fact **more trusting of science** than others, not less. We need to find a way to return the right to that era of conservative thinking rather than the climate of anti-science conspiratorialism we see today.

Ultimately, despite some pessimism about the odds of this happening anytime soon, companies and policymakers simply *must* take concrete steps to promote racial equity and to reign in misinformation if they want to avoid tragedies like what we saw with Jason Hargrove and Operation

Gridlock during the pandemic. Otherwise, based on the results of my recent research, I fear things will only be worse for vulnerable communities when, not if, the next crisis hits.

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- This blog post is based on [An Empirical Analysis of Race and Political Partisanship Effects on Workplace Mobility Patterns During Lockdown, Reopening, and Endemic COVID-19](#), by Ryan Lamare, Richard A Benton and Patricia Michel Tabarani, in *ILR Review*.
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About the author



Ryan Lamare

Ryan Lamare is a Professor of Employment Relations and Human Resource Management at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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