

Use of tear gas by US police may exacerbate COVID-19 pandemic

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The use of significant amounts of tear gas by police against protesters across the United States in the last week could exacerbate the on-going coronavirus pandemic. A chilling report published in the *New York Times* yesterday highlighted the fact that the gas, which is being used without hesitation to disperse protesting crowds, directly attacks the lungs, and its corrosive effects could make people far more susceptible to respiratory illnesses like COVID-19.

The past week has witnessed day after day of popular protests in hundreds of cities around the country following the murder of George Floyd by four police officers in Minneapolis, Minnesota on May 25, Memorial Day.

Scenes of largely peaceful crowds chanting and marching have been interspersed with those of police and military personnel in riot gear wantonly beating protesters, firing rubber bullets and unleashing canisters of tear gas. Justified by the Trump administration and its fascist supporters as essential to maintaining “law and order” against “anarchists,” “thugs,” “looters” and “terrorists,” these measures deserve condemnation given that they are fundamentally undemocratic, illegitimate and deliberately disproportionate. What makes the situation even worse is the fact that it is unfolding in the midst of the deadly pandemic.

Those looking to Trump and his administration for any clues to understanding the current crisis might be forgiven for thinking that the United States has turned the corner and that the coronavirus is a thing of the past. The reality, however, is starkly different.

As of yesterday, the official COVID-19 death toll in the United States stood at nearly 109,000. The number of those infected with the virus is over 1.9 million and continues to increase. These numbers, widely regarded as underreported, would have been even worse but for

the stringent lockdown measures that had been put in place more or less since mid-March. And now, despite the dire warnings of public health experts, those measures are being relaxed around the country. State after state, responding to the bullying tactics not just of the Trump administration, but also the initiatives of Democratic governors, has started opening up, setting the stage for what experts warn will be a far worse wave of infection in the coming months.

In this context, epidemiologists have issued grave warnings about the dangers of the ongoing mass protests. Politicians, like Mayor Eric Garcetti of Los Angeles, have tried to cast themselves as caring human beings by warning people to stay at home since such gatherings could become “superspreader events.” It is indeed true that social distancing is practically impossible in such situations, as is a guarantee that all participants would be wearing facemasks or any protective gear. Specific aspects of protest gatherings—yelling and chanting in close quarters—create a situation that is ripe for spreading contagion.

What the *New York Times* report, however, makes clear is that it is not just the gathering of citizens in close quarters that is dangerous. The specific tactics that are being employed by the oppressive arm of the state apparatus seems almost calculated to ensure the continuation, and increased virulence of the pandemic—herding protesters into smaller areas citing “crowd control”; shoving large numbers of people into vans, buses and holding cells; and using tear gas to disperse crowds.

The immediate effects of tear gas—coughing, stinging in the eyes and throat that can last for about 30 minutes—are only the tip of the iceberg. A 2012 study conducted by the US Army on the effects of CS gas,

the main component of tear gas, found that recruits exposed to the agent had a substantially higher risk of acute respiratory illness several days after exposure.

Unlike the physically fit Army recruits, many people on the streets might have underlying conditions and thus the effects of the gas could be even worse. Sven-Eric Jordt, a Duke University researcher who has studied the effects of tear gas, told the *New York Times* that he was shocked at how often tear gas was being used against protesters and that he was “really concerned that this might catalyze a new wave of COVID-19.”

Tear gas, long used as a riot-control tactic by states, has been linked to higher risk of chronic bronchitis and all kinds of lung ailments. While the research on the effects of the gas has not kept pace with its actual usage, it is considered harmful enough that its use is prohibited in war. Given the nature of the coronavirus pandemic, its use should be considered beyond the pale in any context. Its indiscriminate use by the police, and the incitement to use such tactics by the Trump administration, is yet another illustration of the ruling elite’s callousness and complete disregard for the lives of the working class.



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