



By Angela Glover Blackwell

Many of you have heard about the [curb-cut effect](#), solutions designed to serve the most vulnerable lead to large-scale positive impacts. Never has this idea been more relevant—and urgent.

The idea is based on those cutouts in the sidewalk at the corner. They exist due to the advocacy of people in wheelchairs. But almost everyone can point to a time when curb cuts were helpful: pushing a stroller, pulling a cart, or dragging luggage. They even save lives by [orienting pedestrians to cross the street at the corner](#). Once you know what to look for, the curb-cut effect is easy to spot: a ban on smoking in public spaces began with flight attendants advocating for their health on airplanes; [Head Start efforts in Mississippi designed to serve poor Black children](#) gave national momentum for universal early childhood programs. In each instance, solving the challenges facing the most vulnerable, with nuance and specificity, created broad societal benefits.

The COVID-19 crisis, raging out of control, is the most dramatic example in recent memory of what happens when [the needs of the most vulnerable are ignored and pushed to the margins. Decades of [neglecting Black people and Black neighborhoods created the surfeit of pre-existing conditions](#)—diabetes, hypertension, asthma—that have led to [a COVID-19 hospitalization rate for Black people that is five times that of Whites](#). Latinx people, who make up [the highest concentration of low-wage frontline workers](#), are also

getting sick in disproportionate numbers. Prison inmates and immigrant [detainees in overcrowded facilities](#) are testing positive for COVID-19 at astronomical rates. And the failure to provide basic infrastructure to Native communities has resulted in the Navajo Nation—where [about one-third of households lack running water](#)—having the [highest COVID-19 infection rate per capita in the United States](#).

Think of the suffering that could have been avoided and the lives that could have been saved if these and other vulnerable groups had been targeted early for massive awareness, support, and protective interventions. Imagine where we would be now if, at the first appearance of the novel coronavirus, there had been a national effort focused on protecting residents and staff of nursing homes, where [43 percent](#) of COVID-19 deaths have occurred. Consider what the impact would have been if sufficient personal protective equipment (PPE) had been provided to all frontline workers, such as [bus drivers](#), grocery clerks, and [meatpacking and food plant workers](#), not to mention health care workers—and if free testing had been available in low-income communities of color. Thousands of lives would have been saved. The entire nation might be moving back to normalcy instead of watching the death toll mount daily, with no end in sight.

As we struggle to find ways to successfully open the economy it is imperative that we consider the curb-cut effect and act accordingly. But that is not happening. The rush to get back to business as usual has predictably led to a [spike](#) in infections.

Neither government nor businesses nor everyday residents have stepped up aggressively and urgently to place a priority on protecting the most vulnerable.

Wearing masks has become a political issue. Saving businesses is valued over saving lives. Overcoming boredom seems more important than protecting the health of elderly and vulnerable family members and neighbors. There is an urgent need to roll out sustained economic supports for frontline workers. They must not be asked to choose between their lives and their livelihoods.

If all sectors—government, business, and civic—make it a priority to focus on the health of the most vulnerable people and the workers who put themselves in harm’s way, and if we collectively respond with nuance, specificity, and generosity, we can beat this virus and create a fairer, more inclusive economy.

The nation has yet to fully grasp the lesson of the moment: if the most vulnerable do not thrive, the nation will not. Our destinies are intertwined. It’s the curb-cut effect.



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