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Boyd and Blaser: An Uneven COVID-19 Toll in Orange County and Elsewhere — Orange County Isn't the World, But is Part of It



By Art Blaser and LouAnne Boyd August 4, 2020

We've been thinking a lot lately about Orange County and COVID-19. We're faculty members at Chapman University in Orange. We hope to avoid rushes to binary judgment. Too many analysts claim either that Orange County will emerge virtually unscathed from the COVID-19 crisis, or that we're all doomed.

Although the crisis is making many issues about humanity, disability, and normality more vivid, for the most part it is a new manifestation of thorny issues that were present before, and will continue in the future. But things won't be the same. We hope for awareness of the uneven toll of coronavirus in Orange County. We offer three overlapping points of reflection, relevant specifically to Orange County, as part of California, the United States, and the world.

First, Orange County shows a frequent tension, stemming from elitist and exceptionalist desires to be apart from the rest of the world and to promote individual self-interest. This desire is exemplified by the current controversy over renaming John Wayne airport, subject of a Voice of Orange County essay in which our colleagues Fred Smoller and Mike Moodian opined, ["John Wayne in no way represents Orange County today and its thriving communities of color."](#)

Orange County cannot avoid being part of California, the U.S., or the world. We're not exempt from global exchanges of ideas, goods, people, and diseases. This is becoming even more so with time, efforts to fight this are futile. Much of Orange County thrives because of our interaction with the rest of the world. Acknowledging our interdependence is crucial in promoting equity—especially now.

Second, Orange County's problems and potential are evident—yet not new—in the COVID-19 crisis. A “new normal” of telecommuting, inconsistent transportation, unreliable healthcare, and do-it-yourself solutions was not new for many in disability communities in Orange County [and elsewhere](#).

Parts of the Orange County public and U.S. President Donald Trump profess an exceptionalist desire to somehow not be subject to the global toll that the virus has brought. Instead, what's been “exceptional” as described by the [New York Times](#), has been the wish to “flout scientific advice and send mixed messages about the seriousness of the virus.”

Reports from [Germany, Brazil, Hong Kong, South Korea, New Zealand, and elsewhere](#) offer possible lessons. The best cases reflect an important role of trust and an active civil society, rather than unrestrained individualism. The COVID-19 toll falls much harder on some people and some communities than others. We might be thankful we don't live in Los Angeles, but if we live in the Orange County jail or in a [nursing home](#) we are very much at risk. [Santa Ana and Anaheim have higher death rates than other communities](#). Differences are much closer to 400% than to 40%.

[Black and Latinx communities](#) have been especially hard-hit. Reasons for this are related to several factors including the higher ratio of essential workers—on whom others are dependent. Again, Orange County is not exceptional; the County mirrors patterns found elsewhere in California, the United States, and the world.

Third, most Orange Countians acknowledge the COVID-19 crisis, but must also consider the question of what we can do about it. We need to resist Orange County's temptation to presume that problems will go away on their own or through technical solutions.

Technology's implementation must be taken into account. Again, accounts from many U.S. communities, from Hong Kong, Belgium, Germany bear this out. But as researchers from Human Rights Watch and elsewhere have indicated, [not all is likely to work well](#). Where contact tracing has worked best, in Germany and in several Asian countries, it has been accompanied by access to technology and a large amount of social trust.

In contrast, France 24 reported that [“France's Covid-19 tracing app fails to engage.”](#) By June 23, only 14 users of the app had been alerted of contacts with people who had tested positive for the virus, while almost half a million people had uninstalled the app. A [University of Maryland poll](#) found that “nearly 3 in 5 Americans said they would be unwilling or unable to use Google and Apple's contact tracing technology.”

A very important global right, especially evident in COVID-19 efforts, is a right to have [access to technology](#). Application of technology is one of many partial COVID-19 measures that will be more effective were accompanied by social engagement. This means shifting from past patterns of passivity, or activism based on self interest.

In Orange County, we have very good data (with appropriate caveats) from the [Orange County Health Agency](#), and from the local media including the [Orange County Register](#), [Voice of Orange County](#), and [Los Angeles Times](#). Orange County is host to great educational institutions, including Chapman University, University of California at Irvine, and California State University at Fullerton.

Orange County has strong community organizations. *Voice of Orange County* recently reported on *Latino Health Access* in: “[OC Partners With Community Group to Reduce Coronavirus Impacts on Anaheim, Santa Ana](#).” The disability community (which we both identify with) is evolving, from passive to participant, focused on COVID-19. Orange County’s [Dayle McIntosh Center](#), the [California Federation for Independent Living Centers](#) promote the important realization that countering dependence requires interdependence where diverse contributions are valued.

Orange County must avoid the temptation to “go it alone.” We need to think critically before accepting technical solutions. The oft-heard meme “We won’t be ‘returning to normal’” raises questions of who we’re talking about. When talking about COVID 19 respecting human differences and recognizing that the County’s part of a changing California, United States, and world are good places to start.



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