



A Better Life? Black Immigrants in the Whitest State

Maine has one of the lowest rates of coronavirus infection in the country, but Black residents of Maine are at a disproportionately high risk of becoming infected by COVID-19.

Ad Break

Zahir Janmohamed: From Feet in 2 Worlds, this is A Better Life? — a podcast exploring the impact of Covid-19 on immigrants in the U.S.

I'm Zahir Janmohamed.

If you live in Maine, as I do, you've probably heard the name Dr. Nirav Shah.

He's the head of Maine's Center for Disease Control and is sort of like our state's Anthony Fauci. Mainers love him. Since the start of the pandemic, he's held frequent briefings about Covid. He rattles off stats, answers questions, and offers words of encouragement.

But Dr. Shah struck a different tone on June 19th. That's the holiday that marks the end of slavery in the United States.

Dr. Nirav Shah: When the history of COVID-19 in America is written and the author sits down to write the chapter on Maine, my question for everyone is: what do you want her to write? The numbers I shared tell us that we're on the right path, but quite clearly, let's all acknowledge — and I will be among the first — to acknowledge that much more work is ahead, most notably to continue addressing the stark racial and ethnic disparities that COVID-19 has shown a light on.

Zahir: [Maine has some of the lowest rates of infection from Covid-19 in the U.S.](#) But Maine is failing in other ways. Black residents are twenty times more likely to contract Covid-19 than white residents. That's the largest racial disparity in the nation.

I'm from California, [the most racially diverse state in America](#). My new home, Maine, is America's whitest state. Of Maine's 1.4 million residents, three percent are Latinx, Asian American, or Indigenous and just two percent are Black. About half of the state's Black population are immigrants from Africa, the largest proportion in the country.

When my wife and I moved to Portland, Maine last year, it was jarring. Maine can be a terrifying place for someone like me, who is not white. I've walked out of restaurants,

parks, even concerts because I didn't feel comfortable. For most of the past year, we've debated leaving Maine. But this summer, I started to think differently about this place.

Clip: "Justice now! Justice! Now!" "Hundreds of protestors stretched across the city of Portland Sunday, marching in response to the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, which sparked similar demonstrations across the country..."

Zahir:

I'm sort of a half-empty glass type of person. After attending protests in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, I experienced a solidarity, and a sense of community, that I did not think was possible in Maine. It's been beautiful to witness this, and I've seen it several times since, including at recent protests in response to the ruling in the Breonna Taylor case.

At one protest, a speaker — a young African immigrant — said she was battling three pandemics: anti-Black sentiment, anti-immigrant sentiment, and Covid-19.

My parents are also African immigrants. But we're Indians from Tanzania and we benefit from the privilege of being brown, not Black.

As a new Mainer, I wanted to learn more, to understand what Black African immigrants were going through at this time. And I also wanted to get advice about staying sane in Maine.

So I reached out to Mickey Kebede, a 31-year-old Ethiopian American attorney with the Maine chapter of the ACLU. He serves as their Policy Counsel. Mickey insisted that we meet outdoors.

Mickey Kebede: We are on the Western prom, which is where the crème de la crème of Portland's wealth owns property and, uh, resides.

Zahir:

The Western Promenade of Portland is one of my favorite parts here.

We sat on a park bench, with a gorgeous view of the river. A lawn mower was running in the distance and I could hear the sound of a train passing nearby. Behind us were mansions, some with Black Lives Matter signs in their front lawns.

Maine has strict rules on wearing masks in public. Most people cooperate, but the other day, a white guy cursed at me for wearing a mask while I was standing in line outside a bagel shop.

With so few cases of coronavirus, Mainers — most of whom are white — can sometimes be flippant or self-congratulatory about their state's response to Covid-19. But that's not how Mickey sees it.

Mickey: Wearing a mask is a signal of solidarity toward people of color who make up the service workers, the home care workers, migrant farm workers of Maine.

They keep Maine running. And so wearing a mask is a signal of solidarity toward people of color. It's just also common sense.

Zahir: Because of unrest in Ethiopia in the 1980s, Mickey's family fled to the U.S., where Mickey was born. In 1989, his grandfather was involved in a failed coup attempt in Ethiopia and was assassinated. After the situation calmed down, Mickey and his family moved back to Ethiopia, where Mickey spent most of his childhood. He returned to the U.S. when he was 17.

It was a judicial clerkship that first brought Mickey to Portland after law school.

Mickey: Maine is the whitest geopolitical entity that I've ever encountered. I have been to many, many, many parties in which I was the only — not only Black person, but the only person of color.

Conversations with white folks often take an exoticizing turn very early. They, uh, take a turn toward racial justice in the first words that we exchange. The expectation that I educate the person on, uh, some race issue, pervades our first few interactions, which is absolutely absurd. You know, I'm not a professor of race, I'm not a racial equity trainer. But that kind of role is thrust upon you.

Uh, I encountered Black folks here and there, and we exchanged sometimes nods of recognition, sometimes numbers, and, uh, sometimes became friends. But there are not that many of us and those of us who are here aren't doing too well. We are alienated — marked. And, uh, our life chances are limited as a result.

Zahir: In reporting this episode, I interviewed several African immigrants, most of them young Black men who have been harassed by the police.

One 23-year-old asylum seeker from Angola told me that he once pulled over on the side of the road to help a white family whose car was stranded. The cops came, arrested him, and accused him of stealing their car.

Like a lot of African immigrants I spoke with, he did not feel safe having his name or his voice on this podcast.

When I tell people, especially white people, that I live in Maine, they get excited. They tell me about summer holidays they've spent here, about picking blueberries, about lobster rolls. And all of this exists. It's wonderful.

But there is another aspect of Maine's heritage that isn't mentioned very often.

Mickey: [Of the six new England States where the Klan had its most widespread success, Maine had the most members. Maine had the most Klan members, according to the Imperial wizard of the Klan, in the early- to mid-1920s, of any new England state.](#)

Zahir: The KKK was no small group here. It helped elect a governor in 1925. At its peak, around 23 percent of Mainers were members of the KKK. The Klan put much of their efforts in Maine into terrorizing French-Canadian Catholics. And their headquarters used to be down the street from where I live.

Today, the racial inequities in Maine are staggering. [The national poverty rate for Black Americans is around 27%. In Maine, it's more than 50%.](#)

I had to ask Mickey: Why stay here?

Mickey: I, uh, don't think I can ever leave Maine in a radical way because I love this place. I love the people here. I love the way it looks, the way it feels. I love its mountains and its coastline. And I do love some of its political culture.

Zahir: At the moment, Maine is experiencing a rapid demographic shift. [Since 2010, the Black population has risen about 35% and African immigrants account for a large part of that growth.](#)

African immigration to Maine is not new. People from Somalia have been moving here for decades. Today, the new arrivals from Africa are often Angolan, Sudanese, or Congolese.

When Covid-19 hit Maine, Mickey feared the worst.

Mickey: I knew it would be bad. I didn't think it would be this bad. My first thought was in 1615, a plague that settlers from Europe brought to this land wiped out up to 90% of the inhabitants of coastal New England. That was only 405 years ago. [Sighs.] You know, everything from the Spanish flu to H1N1 disproportionately savaged Native American communities. And the four federally recognized tribal nations in Maine are going to be decimated unless we do absolutely everything we can to prevent that happening.

Yes, Black people, descendants of enslaved Africans in Maine, African immigrants in Maine. Uh, first-, second-, third-generation African immigrants in Maine, they're gonna bear the brunt of it as well. And we have to do everything we can to make sure that doesn't happen. But I did not think it would be this bad.

Zahir: A lot of African immigrants moved to Maine from other parts of the U.S. because they found jobs. Now, those jobs are making them vulnerable.

Mickey: People of color disproportionately make up home care workers and other frontline workers. The system has shoved people of color into substandard healthcare situations, housing situations, educational situations, and has not done for them what it has done for wave upon wave upon wave of white immigration, uh, that has, uh, made Maine what it is.

Zahir: Here's another misperception about Maine: it's doing all it can to help its Black and immigrant residents during this pandemic. Mickey has looked at the budget numbers of aid packages to immigrants here and he says it's not true.

Mickey: Our governor convened an economic recovery commission that released recommendations just recently about how the \$1.2 billion in CARES Act funding — that the state has been sitting on for some time now — should be spent. And none of the recommendations were to mitigate the COVID-19 racial disparity.

They recommended \$7 million out of the 1.2 billion for ensuring that immigrants participate in the workforce. I didn't see anything that sought to address the historic injustices of chattel slavery and its aftershocks, which are still with us. I mean, African Americans are dying at incredibly disproportionate rates everywhere.

Zahir: Just before I sat down to interview Mickey, I learned that [a family of five Senagalese immigrants was burned alive in their home in Denver, Colorado](#) in what is now being investigated as a possible hate crime.

I shared this news with Mickey and I asked him if he had ever experienced any xenophobia himself in Maine.

Mickey: Xenophobia is alive, almost everywhere in the world. That's what I'll start with. Ethiopia, where I grew up deeply xenophobic place, believe it or not. Virtually all-Black country. Chinese people face xenophobia — fierce, vicious xenophobia in Ethiopia.

Maine — there's nothing in anyone that isn't in everyone. Xenophobia here as well.

There are many, many, many, many, many instances of hate crimes that I've personally heard about. For instance, a few years ago, a Black man was walking out of a 7-11, I believe. And two white men rolled up in a truck, pursued him, beat him to a pulp with a pipe. Fortunately, or unfortunately, I don't know what it fixes, but they were arrested and they're being prosecuted.

So one of the ways that African immigrants can thrive here is by, um, getting involved in, uh, its struggles for power and its, uh, economic life and its cultural life and its social life. And I see that happening and it's a beautiful and lovely thing.

Zahir: One of the people that gives Mickey hope is Safiya Khalid.

Clip: Don Lemon on CNN: "Lewiston, Maine made history yesterday, electing 23-year-old Safiya Khalid to a seat on the city council. She's the youngest person and the first Somali American to win a seat there. And she did it in spite of hate from racist online trolls from as far away as Alabama..."

Zahir: Ever since I moved to Maine last summer, I've wanted to meet Safiya.

Growing up in California, I got spoiled. In my undergrad, in the 1990s, students of color were the majority at UC Berkeley. It made me comfortable speaking out, in being bold.

But in Maine, I've had to learn to make myself small all over again. It sucks...but then, I have it easier here. I'm not Black. I'm not a woman.

Safiya though? She's fearless. I love this about her and I wish I had her courage. I wanted to ask her how she does it.

We met in her home town of Lewiston, a small city of about 35,000. Today, the most common non-English language spoken at Lewiston Public Schools is Somali.

She insisted on wearing a mask and lamented the fact that the Maine government hasn't really done enough to provide masks, especially to those who cannot afford them. That's how she's spent most of the pandemic — raising money and passing out masks, mostly to African refugees like herself.

I asked her if she wears one all the time.

Safiya Khalid: I try...set an example, especially for the young kids, too. Yeah. The youth.

Zahir:

Safiya was born in Somalia and fled at a young age with her family to a refugee camp in Kenya. When Safiya was seven, they moved to the U.S. They briefly lived in New Jersey and eventually settled in Lewiston because several of their fellow tribe members were already living there.

Safiya: Back in Somalia, I never, like, looked at my Blackness as, like, different. It doesn't, like, come to our mind, the color of our skin back home. But coming here, like, you're just, you're judged based off of your skin color or look differently based off of your skin color. Yeah. It's hard. It's hard. I remember one time I was at a drive through and I was wearing, you know, my head scarf. I have a lot of identities. And this guy, like, looked at me very harsh and said the F word to me, but also, like, I'm an immigrant too. So it's just like identities that people attack just your appearance because of your appearance and the way you look like, and back home, that really never happened.

Zahir:

Growing up in Maine was not easy. A year after 9/11, the then-mayor of Lewiston sent an open letter to the Somali community telling them not to move there anymore. In 2012, [a different mayor advised Somalis in Lewiston to “leave their culture at the door.”](#)

Safiya: Well, you know, like any, any other community, Lewiston has its challenges and we're not all perfect. So there are, you know, some few people who try to like, you know, intimidate immigrants or don't want immigrants or say some things, et cetera. Like, there were several incidents of, like, anti-immigrant treatments such as, like, there was a pig's head that was thrown into the mosque a few years back.

Zahir: That pig's head thrown into the mosque? That happened in Safiya's mosque.

I hear these stories and I think: I have the privilege of being able to pick up and leave Maine. Safiya — she's tied to this place.

Safiya: I think there's this, like, connection to Lewiston that really, like, molded me and made me who I am. I feel like if I moved to another city, I wouldn't have been, like, an elected official. But being here from the beginning and knowing so many community members and creating relationships, there's just a connection to Lewiston that I can't let go of. You know, it...Lewiston is who I am.

Zahir: We'll be right back. Stay with us.

Ad Break

Zahir: This is A Better Life? from Feet in 2 Worlds. I'm Zahir Janmohamed.

At a young age, Safiya Khalid got involved in civic affairs, in large part because she saw how much Somalis in her hometown of Lewiston, Maine were suffering. This summer, she made news once again, this time for pushing the Lewiston City Council to pass a resolution calling for anti-bias and de-escalation training for police.

For Safiya, it was the least she could do, especially given how much she was affected by the killing of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis.

Safiya: Um, oh my God. I cried...like any other person who would have watched that. I literally just kept picturing my two brothers. I showed it to my mom. She did the same. Actually, she really yelled at me for showing that to her. Um, and it's just horrible. Just absolutely horrible.

Zahir: According to data released by the FBI in 2017, Maine had a higher number of hate crimes per capita than the national average. Some African immigrants I met in Maine told me they don't even report all the abuse they experience. So the number could be way higher.

Part of why I resonated so much with Safiya's story is because I kept thinking about my mother. My parents and I are Muslim, just like Safiya. A few years ago, my mom started wearing hijab and she's been harassed a few times since. And that's in California, not Maine.

Safiya: I literally became numb to — to any hate, like...but there are times that I'm like, oh, wow. Like, you know, like, still hurts...

Zahir: Yeah.

Safiya: But the majority of it, I just...[Sighs.]

Zahir: I'm sorry, I'm just so sorry that you have to go through that, you know, like...your journey to America was already so difficult, like, I'm really sorry that you had to deal with that.

Safiya: And I continue to deal with that. Um, it's, you know, I'm an outsider...even on the council, and people are just, you know, micro-managing everything that I say or do. But yeah, like, I definitely became numb to it. I'm only 24 and, like, running when I was running for council, not even just, like, right now, but like the amount of hate I received just running was just — it was unbelievable.

Zahir: Do you ever get afraid for your own safety?

Safiya: Oh my God, my mother, I was doxed on Facebook when I was running. And my mom was like, 'You're not going to live in your apartment for a few days.' Even the first time I ran, my mom was like, 'You're not running.' Because, you know, I would be knocking in very rural areas with my traditional, you know, Islamic clothing and my mom would be like, 'You're just a tiny, small Black girl in these neighborhoods. I'm terrified for your life. You're not running.' And I really had to, like, sit with her and convince her, like, it's not about me. It's about the community and what, you know, the change that we really need.

Zahir: Did you ever think about removing your hijab, if I may ask?

Safiya: Never. I still continue to, like, hold onto it very tight. [Laughs.] It's like a protection. It's a shield. I feel like it's a shield. It's a protection for me.

Zahir: A week before we met, her cousin passed away.

Safiya: Oh, this is still very hurtful. Um, but yeah, all I can say is that he died of COVID at the age of 25...last Thursday. Oh, wow. It was a week ago from today. We're still very traumatized. My mom had to call his mother to tell him that her son has died. Just very sad. And we buried him Monday.

Zahir: As an elected official, Safiya often hears people say that immigrants in Maine are responsible for their higher rates of infection.

Safiya: I do hear, like, 'Oh, they're not doing a good job of social distancing. They're not doing a good job of wearing mask. They're not following the rules, the guidelines.' Yada, yada. But the question then becomes, okay, anyone can follow a guideline, but at the end of the day, you know, your life is on the line. Whether you have COVID or not, and we really, like, need to, like, step back out of our own privilege and see how these families live and why we're getting more Black people and Somali people testing positive for COVID is because of the way they live. And it's because of, you know, housing discrimination and because of, you know, um, of the health care disparity and, and, you know, the economy and all of this. A lot of them are our frontline workers and they live, you know, very condensed housing situations where they have, you know, large family members, with just

three bedroom bedrooms. So it's really hard to, you know, isolate and social distance in a situation like that. So if one gets the it's more likely to, all of them will get infected.

It's just heartbreaking, absolutely heartbreaking. And we're not even, like...we could do so much, you know, but, like, where do you start?

Zahir: I asked her if Covid-19 and the killing of George Floyd made her think about the U.S. in new ways.

Safiya: It definitely made me re-think of the American dream, which is a complete lie, I feel like. Because of all the horrible things Trump says, right? To like...these disparities, but also, like, watching George Floyd, you know, die on the street like that. He could have been anyone, he could have been my brothers. So we really first need to come to the realization that there is a problem, and then come together and really figure out how to solve that problem. And then hopefully the American dream can, I don't know, renew itself in some form or fashion. [Laughs.]

Zahir: In many ways, she is one of the lucky ones. When she came to America, she did not speak English. Now, she is an elected official.

Safiya: Yeah. I definitely did find a better life, in terms of, you know, living conditions and stuff, like not worrying about what I'm going to eat next, all of that. Right? But still, it's not perfect in that right now, like, back in Somalia, I wouldn't have to worry about the color of my skin. You know, like, I would be, like, judged off of a system or, like, a job or whatever would judge me based, you know, rather than my character.

But in America, that does happen. So is that, you know, a better life? Because I'm afraid for every time my brothers walk out the house, I tell him, like, 'Don't put your hat on, like, be respectful, smile, like, walk straight, don't make trouble.' Like, I have to have this conversation with my little brother, a 17-year-old, every time. But if I was back home, would I have done that? America definitely provided opportunities that I wouldn't have had back in Somalia. My mom came here to imagine a life that she really never imagined for herself, but it's not like it's not perfect. And I mean, I'm not saying it's perfect, but at least there's a big problem here. And we really need to realize that.

Zahir: Each month, Safiya earns a small stipend of a few hundred dollars for her role on the city council. But that's not what drives her.

Safiya: What got me through everything is my mother. Um, she's definitely a role model and, you know, family and good community members. And I don't look at vocal hateful folks that, you know, do all this. Like when I was pulling in earlier, there was a guy with a big truck with a Trump sign with an American flag, and he started, like, beeping at me 'cause apparently I was going slow. And...but there are just few of those, you know, there's few of those individuals. There are a

majority of a tolerant, welcoming America and we need to focus on them. I definitely have gotten a lot of hate, but I have definitely also have gotten a lot of love and welcome, especially from the people who matter. So for any little, um, young person listening to this, I want them to know that, like, there's a larger community out there that is supportive of them and who they are.

Zahir: Back in Portland, I asked Mickey of the ACLU the same question: if Covid-19 and the killing of George Floyd have changed his view of America.

Mickey: It's shifted my idea about the malleability of America. I thought America was more rigidly intransigent before the George Floyd uprising and the Breonna Taylor uprising. Now I think the United States is actually changeable. Is actually capable of being improved. I thought it was too captured by big corporations, billionaires by forces that, uh, empower themselves at the expense of the vast majority of human beings. But now, what I'm seeing in small towns throughout Maine — Rockland, for instance. Rockland is a tiny town in coastal Maine in the mid coast. They just circulated a petition to defund their police. There are white folks in rural towns all throughout the country, organizing BLM rallies, working class white folks, poor white folks organizing, uh, with poor Black folks, poor brown folks, poor queer folks...organizing in a way that I just have not seen. And frankly, that brings tears to my eyes. I did not think that was possible. I didn't think this level of solidarity across identity, across class, across race, across gender, across everything. I didn't think that would happen. It happened. And my view of the social structure in the United States has been completely shattered...I'm feeling excitement, foreboding, joy, inspiration, exhilaration, impressment. I'm feeling a host of complicated emotions.

Zahir: Mickey's feeling of being conflicted — I relate to that. A few days before I interviewed Mickey and Safiya, my wife told me the most incredible news: she's pregnant. It's our first child and I couldn't be happier. I've wanted to be a dad for so long.

There's so much I love about Maine. But I always thought I would raise my kid in a place where more people looked like me. I am still struggling here, but meeting Mickey and Safiya — it made me feel less alone.

I will always be connected to Maine. And even if my wife and I leave Maine, it means the world to me to know I can someday tell our kid that they were born in a state that was slowly changing.

That's all for this episode. Thanks to Mickey Kebede of the Maine ACLU and Safiya Khalid of the Lewiston City Council for speaking with us. Thanks also to my wife for her support.

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Thanks for listening.

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Ad Break

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