

President's Message – June 2020

Acting for a Better World

Communication in my career often involves formulas, symbols and coding. Trying to find words to capture and convey what I'm feeling at this time is not easy.

The world has been shaken by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. With millions of positive cases and hundreds of thousands of deaths, the health consequences of this virus are still being felt. The economic punch with millions out of work including two of my children adds to the stress many feel. More recently, protests in my country and around the world have emerged in response to deaths of black people from police violence. Too many such events over too many years demands attention and action.

The catchphrase of ISI is *Statistical Science for a Better World*. What can we do to move towards a better world? How can statistical science contribute towards this movement?

Nick Fisher and Dennis Trewin, former ISI Executive Committee and Association leaders, contributed to the public discussion of what is needed to better understand the details of the pandemic ([SSA webinar](#), [S+S podcast](#)). They contributed papers to national newspapers advocating national random sampling programs to get data that will tell us what we really need to know about the extent of COVID-19 in the population, how the virus is spreading, rates of infection and re-infection, and more. Statistical colleagues from around the world are collaborators on the development and fitting of infectious disease and epidemiological models and on the design and analysis of clinical trials for evaluating vaccines and treatments to mitigate disease. You might be interested in the [web page](#) with COVID-19 resources compiled by the ISI Public Voice Committee.

The impact of the pandemic on the global economy is addressed by many including ISI elected member and former Council member Haishan Fu (see World Bank blog [New results from the International Comparison Program shed light on the size of the global economy](#)). They note "Given the immense and long-term costs to our global economy as a result of this pandemic, accurate and timely economic measurement will be essential to global recovery." Good statistics and good decisions are paired once again.

Problems associated with understanding, treating disease and developing vaccines seem very simple when compared to problems associated with racism and prejudice. How can statistics contribute to responses to racism and prejudice in our world?



What is the problem? The third item in article 2 of the [United Nations Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice](#) (adopted 27nov1978) states:

Racial prejudice, historically linked with inequalities in power, reinforced by economic and social differences between individuals and groups, and still seeking today to justify such inequalities, is totally without justification.

What can we do? We need to advocate for all in our community, particularly for those who are at the highest risk of being persecuted for appearing or believing or loving differently than a majority in the community. We can collaborate with social science colleagues to collect data to understand the magnitude and predictors of racial injustice, police violence and inequity and analyse information associated with interventions to reduce these pathologies of society. We see groups of statisticians such as the [Human Rights Data Analysis Group](#) working towards promoting human rights. Kudos to them and a challenge for us. ISI and the Executive Committee reaffirms our [Community and Conduct policy](#) that denounces unacceptable behaviour towards individuals or groups defined by gender, sexual orientation, disability, race, ethnicity, religion, age, national origin, politics, culture, gender identity or expression.

I wish that I could end this column with a simple plan of action. A famous quote states: “The first step in solving a problem is recognizing there is one.” Racial injustice is not a new problem but an ongoing problem that requires our vigilance and attention. I challenge all of us to consider how we can apply our time and talents to working on the pressing problems of our day.

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