

Submitter: Kelsey Woodward
On Behalf Of:
Committee: House Committee On Rules
Measure: HB4131

In the middle of a respiratory pandemic, law enforcement agencies have used tear gas in especially dangerous ways. The chemical agent also seeps into homes, contaminates food, furniture, skin and surfaces, and can cause long-term lung damage.

Tear gas can cause long-term harm, by making people more susceptible to contracting influenza, pneumonia and other illnesses.

Studies of civilians in Turkey found that people who are repeatedly exposed to tear gas are more likely to have chronic bronchitis or chest pains and coughing that can last for weeks. It may also be linked to miscarriages.

Make no mistake: tear gas is a tool of reproductive oppression as used during these protests specifically, protests fighting for Black lives, Black futures, and Black people's choices when it comes to their own families. Since the creation of policing in the U.S., Black people have been subject to disproportionate police brutality and use of tear gas. Black women are already four times more likely to die in childbirth, more likely to experience preterm birth, and more likely to experience pregnancy-related complications because of systemic racism.

Racism and bias in our medical system mean that black women are less likely to be taken seriously when they report pain and to receive medical care. The everyday stress from racism and microaggressions increases the risk of preeclampsia, preterm birth, and other risk factors that make delivery riskier for both Black mothers and their babies.

The effects worsen as people are repeatedly exposed to higher doses, but it's hard to measure the concentrations of tear gas during chaotic protests, and many who are affected will be reluctant or afraid to seek medical help due to lack of resources or financial stability.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, severe tear gas poisoning, particularly if the gas was released in an enclosed space — can blind or kill people through chemical burns and respiratory failure. Prisoners with respiratory conditions have died after inhaling tear gas in poorly ventilated areas.

These chemicals were banned from the military for a reason.

I am requesting the following:

- Support local and state governments in upholding the right to protest and allow protesters to gather.
- Do not disband protests under the guise of maintaining public health for COVID-19 restrictions.
- Advocate that protesters not be arrested or held in confined spaces, including jails or police vans, which are some of the highest-risk areas for COVID-19 transmission.
- Oppose any use of tear gas, smoke, or other respiratory irritants, which could increase risk for COVID-19 by making the respiratory tract more susceptible to infection, exacerbating existing inflammation, and inducing coughing.
- Demand that law enforcement officials also respect infection prevention recommendations by maintaining distance from protesters and wearing masks.
- Reject messaging that face coverings are motivated by concealment and instead celebrate face coverings as protective of the public's health in the context of COVID-19.
- Prepare for an increased number of infections in the days following a protest. Provide increased access to testing and care for people in the affected communities, especially when they or their family members put themselves at risk by attending protests.