

# Discrimination may harm your health

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Racial discrimination may be harmful to your health, according to new research from Rice University sociologists Jenifer Bratter and Bridget Gorman.

In the study, "Is Discrimination an Equal Opportunity Risk? Racial Experiences, Socio-economic Status and Health Status Among Black and White Adults," the authors examined data containing measures of social class, race and perceived discriminatory behavior and found that approximately 18 percent of blacks and 4 percent of whites reported higher levels of emotional upset and/or physical symptoms due to race-based treatment.

"Discriminatory behavior very well may be a 'missing link' in the analysis of racial and ethnic health disparities," Bratter said. "It's important to acknowledge and study its impact on long-term health.

Unlike most of the research on this topic, Bratter and Gorman's study examines the health risks of discrimination among both whites and blacks, as opposed to just blacks. Their analysis was based on data from the 2004 wave of the [Behavioral Risk Factor](#) Surveillance System, an ongoing collaborative project between U.S. states and territories and the U.S. [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

"This racially comparative focus is important because we examine whether discrimination is equally harmful to the health status of black and white adults – or whether experiencing discrimination is disproportionately harmful to either black or white adults," Gorman said.

"For example, since, on average, black adults typically experience more health risks in their social and personal environment than white adults (including higher poverty and lower-quality medical insurance), they may be especially vulnerable to negative health effects as a result of racial discrimination."

A greater number of blacks report poor health due to discrimination, and the study did find that black-white disparities in health are shaped in part by the differential exposure of blacks to the harmful effects of discrimination. However, Bratter and Gorman also show that while perceiving [discrimination](#) exacerbates some of the economic-based [health risks](#) more typically experienced by black adults, patterns differ for white adults. Regardless of social-class position, white adults who perceive unfair treatment relative to other racial groups in either workplace or health care settings report poorer health.

"A relatively small proportion of white adults report unfair treatment that is race-based, but those who do say their [health status](#) is harmed more than blacks who report the same experiences," Gorman said.

Both Bratter and Gorman hope that their research will raise awareness about the impact [racial discrimination](#) has on health and wellness.

"Ultimately we hope that practitioners and researchers in the medical field recognize the dual contribution of social class and interpersonal treatment in shaping health outcomes among persons of all racial populations," Bratter said.

**More information:** *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, September 2011 vol. 52 no. 3 365-382 [doi: 10.1177/0022146511405336](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022146511405336)

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