

Highlighting COVID-19 racial disparities can reduce support for precautions

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New research from the University of Georgia suggests that highlighting coronavirus racial disparities could reduce white Americans' fear of the disease and empathy toward Black and other minority groups. More awareness of those disparities can also make them less supportive of safety precautions such as mask wearing and social distancing.

And that lack of support for safety precautions can exacerbate the devastating effects COVID-19 is having on [minority populations](#), the

researchers note.

Published in *Social Science and Medicine*, the study found that highlighting health disparities may perpetuate the very racial inequalities reporters and those sharing information on disparities are trying to correct.

"Sharing this information could be doing the exact opposite of what we want it to do," said Allison Skinner-Dorkenoo, lead author of the study and an assistant professor in the department of psychology. "Ignoring disparities can't be the answer. But we need to be thinking about what role reporting and the sharing of this information might be playing in perpetuating or making the problem worse."

The first part of the study assessed nearly 500 white Americans' perceptions of COVID-19 [racial disparities](#) and their knowledge of contributing factors to the disparities.

Participants reported whether they believed COVID-19 infection rates and deaths had a greater impact on white populations or people of color. They then ranked their agreement with fact-based statements about the systemic and structural contributors to COVID-19 racial disparities.

For example, participants were asked to rank their agreement with statements including: "Relative to White people in the U.S., people of color are disproportionately employed as 'essential workers'—increasing their risk of exposure to COVID-19" and "People of color in the U.S. are less likely to have access to drive-through testing services (relative to White people), which increases the spread of COVID-19 among people of color."

Participants were also asked to rank their fear of contracting COVID-19 or having a loved one contract the disease, and whether they supported

public safety precautions and their agreement that the public should follow public health recommendations.

The researchers found that white Americans who believed there to be greater racial disparities in COVID-19 were less fearful of the disease and less likely to support safety precautions. In contrast, participants who acknowledged the structural causes contributing to these disparities were more fearful and supportive of safety measures.

In the second part of the study, more than 1,500 participants were randomly assigned to read one of three articles about the impact of COVID-19 on the U.S. public. One discussed the disease in general but didn't focus on racial disparities. Another mentioned racial disparities and highlighted the differences between people of color's health outcomes and those of white people. The third article discussed the disparities in the context of preexisting [social inequalities](#).

Participants who read the articles with information on racial disparities were less fearful of the virus and less supportive of [safety precautions](#). But the group given the information about systemic inequalities were even less concerned than the other group.

"What we found is the article that provided added context about systemic inequalities didn't actually help at all," Skinner-Dorkenoo said. "It actually made it worse. Whenever there is an issue where people can say, 'It's not me. It's not my group that's being affected,' that generally lessens their concerns about it."

More information: Allison L. Skinner-Dorkenoo et al, Highlighting COVID-19 racial disparities can reduce support for safety precautions among White U.S. residents, *Social Science & Medicine* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2022.114951](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2022.114951)

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