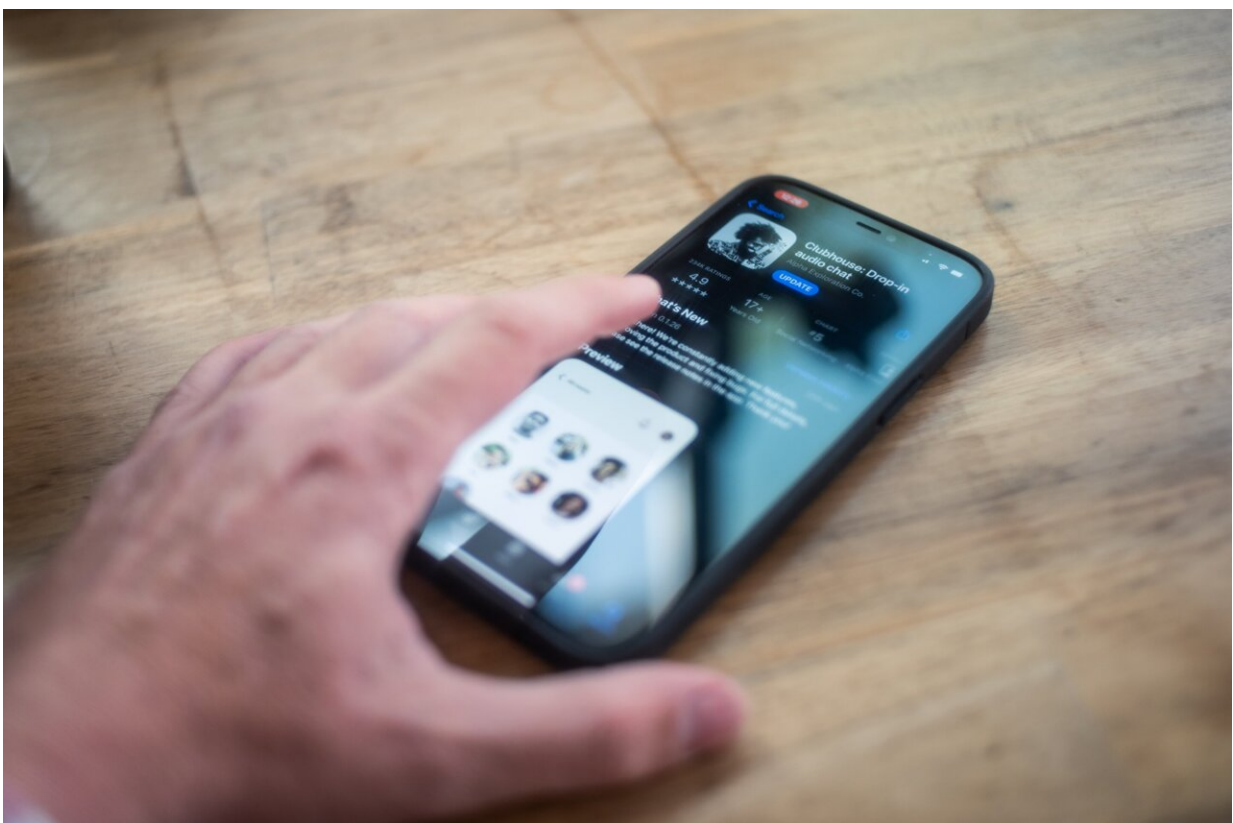


# Two-thirds of physicians and biomedical scientists report harassment since start of the COVID-19 pandemic

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In 2021 the U.S. surgeon general called on physicians and public health scientists to combat misinformation on social media. Many answered the

plea, and many have faced unprecedented levels of harassment on social media as a result.

A new research letter published yesterday (June 14) in the journal *JAMA Network Open* found doctors and scientists are experiencing alarming rates of [personal attacks](#) on social media.

Two-thirds (66%) of [survey respondents](#) reported harassment on social media, compared to [an earlier pre-COVID 19 survey](#) conducted in 2020 by the same group of scientists, which found 23.3% of physicians reported receiving personal attacks on social media.

Women and other gender-expansive respondents were more likely than men to report harassment based on gender (67% and 58% versus 13%) and 82% of Black respondents reported harassment based on race or ethnicity, compared to 52% of Asian respondents, 15% of white respondents and 69% of Hispanic respondents.

First author Dr. Regina Royan, a research fellow at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine and a Northwestern emergency medicine physician, said the results may indicate a connection between burnout and online patterns.

"This study highlights that physicians and scientists changed the way they used social media during the pandemic," Royan said. "Sadly, those that use social media to share public [health](#) messages are more likely to face harassment. These are the people that we can't afford to lose in this conversation, especially at a time when trusted messengers for public health information are essential."

The survey included 359 physicians, scientists or trainees in the United States. Doctors and scientists identified advocacy around topics such as vaccination, masks, firearms, [reproductive rights](#) and gender-affirming

care as topics that fueled harassment. Respondents also were given a platform to share [personal experiences](#) of online attacks that sometimes spilled over into professional and physical threats.

"When I posted a picture of myself with my badge in my [white coat](#) after my COVID-19 vaccination I received hundreds of harassing anti-vax messages including death threats," one respondent said.

Others detailed the impact on their [mental health](#): "I use social media less. I found it was too draining for me, and my mental health was suffering."

Dr. Tricia Pendergrast, a recent Feinberg School of Medicine graduate who led the [pre-COVID-19 study](#) on harassment, recalled several responses from people who feared for their safety.

"The 2020 study was the first to examine the prevalence of harassment among physicians who use social media," Pendergrast said. "Everyone on the team involved in the study—including physicians, scientists and medical trainees—has personal experiences in which they've felt uncomfortable or unsafe."

"We want physicians who are being harassed to feel less alone, and if they are being targeted or feel unsafe or if their mental health is being affected negatively, they are not the only one who has felt like that," she said.

Royan added that physicians and biomedical scientists play an essential role in combatting misinformation on social media—and it's especially important that underrepresented communities see themselves reflected in the authorities sharing information.

"We need physicians of every race and ethnicity in the field and on

social media," Royan said. "At the end of the day, [harassment](#) of [physicians](#) and biomedical scientists on [social media](#) is a health equity issue."

**More information:** Regina Royan et al, Physician and Biomedical Scientist Harassment on Social Media During the COVID-19 Pandemic, *JAMA Network Open* (2023). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2023.18315](#)

Provided by Northwestern University

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