People From Marginalized Groups Report Frequent COVID-Related Discrimination

COVID-19-related discrimination includes threats against or harassment of people perceived to have the coronavirus.

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People from all major racial and ethnic minority population groups in the United States report experiencing more COVID-19–related discrimination than white adults, a new study shows.

COVID-19-related discrimination includes experiences of being threatened or harassed based on someone's perception of another having COVID-19. To date, this is the largest study, with the most diverse participants, to examine discrimination related to COVID-19.

The study was led by Paula D. Strassle, PhD, of the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD), part of the National Institutes of Health, and was published in the American Journal of Public Health on Feb. 23, 2022.

In the study, researchers measured the prevalence of COVID-19–related discrimination in all major racial and ethnic groups in the United States, using data from the COVID-19's Unequal Racial Burden (CURB) survey. They also analyzed the impact of other social and demographic factors on COVID-19–related discrimination.

People from groups that have been marginalized, such as those who speak little to no English and those with lower levels of education, were also found to face more discrimination due to the pandemic.

Researchers collected information from 5,500 American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Black/African American, Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, Latino, white, and multiracial adults. The online survey was administered by YouGov from December 2020 to February 2021 and was available in English and Spanish.

The survey asked whether participants had experienced COVID-19–related discriminatory behaviors, such as being called names or insulted, being threatened or harassed, or hearing racist comments, because the perpetrator thought the participant had COVID-19. The survey also asked

whether participants felt that others acted afraid of them because they belonged to a racial/ethnic group misconceived to get COVID-19 more often.

Results showed that 22.1% of participants had experienced COVID-19–related discriminatory behaviors, and 42.7% of participants reported that people acted afraid of them. When compared to white adults, people from all racial and ethnic minority groups were more likely to have experienced COVID-19–related discrimination. Participants who identified as Asian or American Indian/Alaska Native were most likely to have experienced this hostile behavior, and participants who identified as Hawaiian or Pacific Islander or Latino were also highly likely to have experienced discrimination. Higher rates of discrimination affected participants who lived in a big city; in a rural area; or in Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, or Tennessee.

The results suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened existing resentment toward racial and ethnic minorities and other minority populations in the United States. The study showcases the need for careful and responsible public health messaging during public health crises to help prevent and address discrimination against groups that have been marginalized.

The researchers noted that the study involved some limitations. The survey was administered online and persons with limited or no internet access were less likely to be included, although participants were recruited in a variety of ways, including over the phone and through flyers. It was also a self-reported survey, and discrimination was based on perceived motivations of the perpetrators.

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