

# Black NBA players have shorter careers than white players: study

March 2 2021, by Jeff Grabmeier

---



Race plays a role in how long some NBA players stay in the league. Chensiyuan, CC BY-SA 4.0 , via Wikimedia Commons

Black players in the NBA have 30% greater odds of leaving the league in any given season than white players who have equivalent performance on

the court, a new study finds.

The results were driven mostly by bench players, who are the majority of those in the league, but who average less than 20 minutes of action per game.

These findings suggest that even in the NBA—a league in which Black players make up 70-75% of those on the court—African Americans face discrimination, said Davon Norris, lead author of the study and a doctoral student in sociology at The Ohio State University.

"If there is going to be anywhere in America where you would expect there wouldn't be [racial disparities](#), it would be the NBA," Norris said.

"But even here we find there is an advantage to being white for most."

The disparity is not obvious if you look at raw data on career lengths, because Black and white players leave the league at similar rates, said study co-author Corey Moss-Pech, a Ph.D. graduate of Ohio State who is now a postdoctoral research fellow in sociology at the University of Michigan.

"We see the effects when we account for performance," Moss-Pech said.

"Black players tend to be better than white players, according to the data. They should have longer careers, but they don't."

The study was published recently in the journal *Social Forces*.

The researchers analyzed the career lengths for all NBA players beginning their career in or after the 1979-80 season through the conclusion of the 2016-17 season.

The final sample included 2,611 players, who were considered for the purposes of the study as either Black, white or international.

The average career length in the NBA is only five years, Norris said, most likely because most players are cut by teams before they would choose to leave.

In the main analysis, the researchers evaluated performance using the same advanced metrics that NBA teams use, including player efficiency rating, offensive win shares and defensive win shares.

These measures combine stats like points scored, rebounds, steals and blocks into succinct comprehensive measures of performance.

They separated players into starters/key players (more than 30 minutes on the court per game), role players (between 20 and 30 minutes per game) and bench players (fewer than 20 minutes per game).

After taking on-court performance into account, there were "stark differences" in how long equally effective Black and white players stayed in the league.

For example, take the defensive win shares statistic, which measures the ability to prevent opposing teams from scoring. The researchers compared career length for white and Black players who were identical on this statistic, at the 50th percentile.

The proportion of white players at this level who left the league by their fifth season was 26%, significantly lower than the 33% of Black players who performed just as well but were no longer in the league after five years.

Not all in the NBA were treated similarly.

For those who were starters, there was no significant difference in career length based on race. For role players, Black players were at a disadvantage, but the difference was not large enough to be statistically significant.

However, there was a significant difference in bench players based on race, Norris said. About half of Black players and 65% of white players in the NBA are classified as bench players in this study.

"For those on the bench, being white really gives you an advantage," he said. "We have these cultural stereotypes that white men distinctly lack ability at basketball, but our analysis shows that this has little bearing on how long they last in the league."

The question becomes why. It doesn't appear to be associated with the race of the coach. The study found similar results whether there was a Black or white coach.

While the data in the study can't explain the disparity, Moss-Pech said, it may be that Black players are viewed differently from their white teammates off the court.

"Bench players may be more valued for their 'locker room presence' or for being a 'good teammate' than for their in-game performance. But concepts like 'good teammate' are likely racialized in a biased way that benefits white players," he said.

"White players may fit more comfortably into these team and organizational roles. We need more research that directly examines whether white and Black bench players are perceived differently in the media, by fans, by players or by decision makers."

The results have implications beyond the NBA, Norris said. They

suggest that efforts to objectively measure employee effectiveness won't be enough to eliminate discrimination.

"NBA teams have all these stats available to measure productivity, and distinguish good from bad players, and yet we still see that disadvantages persist," he said.

"There are underlying structural and organizational processes at work that can undermine even the best efforts to objectively measure performance."

**More information:** Davon Norris et al. White Men Can't Jump, but Does It Even Matter? Exit Discrimination in the NBA, *Social Forces* (2021). [DOI: 10.1093/sf/soab009](https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soab009)

Provided by The Ohio State University

Citation: Black NBA players have shorter careers than white players: study (2021, March 2) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-03-black-nba-players-shorter-careers.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.