

# Racial discrimination may affect whether people respond to email

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Racial bias can unconsciously seep into many aspects of life, causing people to unknowingly act in discriminatory ways. Even when not ill-intentioned, this type of discrimination can still have serious consequences—and a new study suggests this can extend to how we communicate electronically.

In a study of a quarter-million people in the United States, researchers found that Americans were less likely to respond to an email survey appearing to come from a person believed to be Black than a person believed to be white. This was true across all [racial groups](#) except Black Americans, who were just as likely to respond to a Black person as a white person.

Ray Block—Brown-McCourtney Career Development Professor in the McCourtney Institute and associate professor of political science and African American studies at Penn State—said the findings help illustrate the day-to-day discriminations that people of color often face.

"More blatant types of racism like [physical violence](#) and verbal abuse are certainly a problem, but we wanted to look at the subtler, less extreme stuff that has a tendency to build up over time," Block said. "It's the microaggressions and indignities that add up over the course of a person's life. Microaggressions are little things that need to be considered, because we think the [little things](#) matter."

The study was published this week in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

According to the researchers, while there has been a lot of prior research on more overt forms of racism like racial violence and stereotypes against minority groups, less study has been done on smaller, more common forms of racial discrimination.

For the study, the researchers contacted 250,000 email addresses pulled from a nationwide voter registration list and a commercial email list. Participants included Asian American/Pacific Islander, Black, Hispanic/Latino, and white respondents, and the percentage breakdowns for these racial groups were reflective of current population breakdowns.

The email requested the recipients to volunteer to take a survey about contemporary political issues by clicking a link within the email.

The emails were designed to appear as though they were being sent by either an ostensibly Black name or an ostensibly white name. Names were selected based on being considered predominantly Black or white in government records and by whether they were generally perceived as Black or white by the public in previous research.

All recipients received two emails—one from an assumed Black sender and one from an assumed white sender. All recipients received two emails with an invitation to take the survey spaced a few weeks apart. If the first email was sent from an assumed Black sender, the second came from an assumed white sender. This way, each participant received each condition of the experiment.

The researchers then tracked whether people were more likely to open the [email](#) and click on the survey link from the Black or white senders.

"A lot of prior studies on racial beliefs have been attitudinal, where researchers asked people about their feelings about minority groups," Block said. "But in those types of studies, people will often hide or not be truly honest about their beliefs. Our measure of discrimination is behavioral. We didn't care about what people said, we cared about what people did."

Overall, 1.6 percent of the participants responded to the sender assumed to be white and 1.4 percent responded to the sender assumed to be Black. This translated to the Black sender receiving 3,620 responses and the white sender receiving 4,007 responses. This meant that the chance of the white sender receiving a response was about 15.5 percent higher than the chance of the Black sender receiving a response.

"Our definition of discrimination had nothing to do with ill intent and everything to do with disproportionate treatment in some kind of way," Block said. "And we did find that. Additionally, we still found that result when breaking it down by geographic region. People might assume discrimination may be worse in certain parts of the country, but we didn't find that."

In the future, the research team plans to do further study on the data they collected. Because the survey the participants were asked to complete was a real survey, the researchers will also be able to examine the content of survey for further findings.

"Since we were able to capture people's tendency to discriminate in this study, we could use this information as we analyze the responses to the actual questionnaire," Block said. "What if discrimination correlated with partisanship, what if it correlated with opinions about policy? Future research can explore these and related questions."

Charles Crabtree, Dartmouth College; John B. Holbein, University of Virginia; and J. Quin Monson, Brigham Young University, also participated in this work.

**More information:** Are Americans less likely to reply to emails from Black people relative to White people? *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2021). [doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2110347118](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2110347118)

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