

# I'm a Black sociologist, and a mom. By listening to other Black mothers, I've learned about their pandemic experiences

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I spent the 2020 spring break week setting up to teach my college courses online while helping to care for my 14-month-old grandchild,

whose daycare had closed. At the same time, I couldn't help thinking, [being the sociologist I am](#), of the devastating consequences of COVID-19 I saw for women like me, Black mothers, whom I have studied for over a decade.

### [Social science research can influence policy](#)

. Sharing Black mothers' stories in their own voices may ultimately lead to more compassionate policies. My work is part of a small body of descriptive research, mostly by researchers of color, countering negativity and victim-blaming in earlier studies of Black families.

My research partner, sociologist [Barbara Scott](#), lives in Chicago, where I grew up. In our studies of Black mothers there, we've explored [parenting in violent communities](#) and living with [inadequate health care](#). In 2019, before COVID-19 hit, we were preparing to study parenting practices.

But when lab conditions change, scientists need to reorganize their work. I am a [social scientist](#) and society is my lab, where the pandemic dramatically altered the conditions of my research.

We adjusted, preparing to interview remotely instead of in person. We added new questions to investigate, like: How were Black mothers coping with pandemic conditions? How did the murder of George Floyd and the resulting protests affect them? Our research would now include the pandemic and the country's racial upheaval, highly unusual factors complicating Black mothers' already challenging lives.

## **Researching with rapport**

The first challenge was finding participants. We put up fliers in and around schools, churches, the YWCA and other places Black moms go when not at work. Even in the best of times, though, they face practical

barriers to joining a research project. Child care responsibilities might be theirs alone. Taking time off from work means their paychecks take a hit not nearly covered by the \$25 gift cards we offered.

But they called. Some just wanted to sign up after looking me up on their phones. Others, who may have known that the [federal government oversees](#) studies involving people, asked why I was studying them and what I would do with their information. I knew that if any of the women thought talking with me might bring embarrassment or other trouble, they might be less forthcoming or decide not to participate. My findings would be much less credible.

I assured the moms that I would keep their responses confidential and that they had a right to leave the study whenever they wanted to.

None of them did. We signed up enough moms for two focus groups of five to seven participants each. I ran group meetings and conducted 12 one-on-one interviews via video conferencing.

To start our 60- to 90-minute sessions, I introduced myself and got the mothers talking with an ice breaker question like, "What is the farthest place from your current neighborhood that you've been?"

I also tell them that I have a Black mom, and that I am one. And then, because my [skin tone](#) is fair, I mention that I have an Italian father. I didn't want to be mistaken for white; the moms might feel [less comfortable discussing certain topics with me](#). But after realizing that I'm Black too, a few of them said things like, "I knew there was something about you!"

I share my belief in centering—and that's the word I use—Black mothers' lived experiences and exploring their parenting from a strength perspective. That's when I got a lot of smiling and nodding.

## No time for racism

Black mothers don't need a pandemic to face impossible choices. But it took a pandemic for others to see that. As nearly everyone else [stayed home](#) to stop the spread of COVID-19, it became obvious that Black women were more likely [than any one else](#) to be [essential workers](#) in [front-line jobs](#). And despite risking COVID-19 infection to keep their jobs, Black workers were more likely to [lose them anyway](#) during the pandemic.

I asked the mothers about the pandemic's effect on their lives. They talked about the trickiness of trying to isolate or distance in small or crowded homes. They hated being unable to get masks and hand sanitizer when stores closed during the George Floyd protests, which none of them attended.

I asked why they didn't go, given their stated frustrations with racism affecting their lives. Some didn't want to risk getting sick. But most of these Black mothers told me they don't dwell on racism, saying things like, "Yeah, racism is bad, but I got things to do."

And so they did those things. While at work, they sent their kids text reminders to go to remote school if it was available, or if it was not, to study. The moms came home from long shifts and helped with homework, worrying about their kids falling behind academically. The mothers worried about getting COVID-19 and losing custody of kids if they became too sick to parent well.

## Keeping the conversation flowing

The qualitative research I do is about words and meanings, not just numbers and statistics. It allows me to explore the lives of Black moms

in depth.

In my interviews, I don't ask closed-ended questions—the kind where the answer is simply yes or no, true or false, or limited to a set of multiple-choice answers. For example, if a participant can only respond to the question, "How safe is your community?" with the options "very safe," "somewhat safe," or "not safe," that's a closed-ended question.

In qualitative research, however, questions are often open-ended. Participants decide what a question means to them, then answer in any way they choose. I've been asking the Black mothers questions like: "How do you feel about Chicago as a place to live and raise your children? How do you feel about working and raising your children during the COVID-19 pandemic?"

Reading the transcribed interviews later, I look for general thoughts, or themes, in the mothers' collective responses. For example, when I asked about violence, the overall sentiment was that it was around, but avoidable. One participant told me, "You have to know where [to go] and where not to go, when to go and when not to go." And she called Chicago "a great place," with "great opportunities" for anyone who wanted to be there.

This response was common: The moms know that Chicago can be violent, but many focus on the positive aspects of the city. My theory is that this is their conscious or unconscious way of explaining why they stay in a violent community. That question has come often enough—usually from those with far more options—to hang over the heads of these Black moms, even if no one asks them directly.

A related sentiment the moms had was that moving away is pointless since violence "is everywhere." They may simply want to stay close to the generations of family and community ties they have. But it's also true

that moving isn't affordable for many of these mothers.

Identifying these themes helps me present a picture of Black mothers' lives as a corrective to the earlier research. Documenting their experiences as the center of my research gives them a voice and validates their lives as worthy of exploration.

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