

# Experiences of racism must form part of evaluation of long-term impact of coronavirus social distancing, experts say

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People's experiences of racism and stigma prior to coronavirus must be considered during any evaluation of the impact of social distancing,

experts have said.

A new study argues a form of social distancing due to racism and marginalization was familiar to those from Black and minority [ethnic backgrounds](#) before the coronavirus pandemic, and this was already leading to discrimination and having a [negative effect](#) on lives, livelihoods, socio-[economic status](#), health, and well-being.

The study says this impact became worse during COVID-19, which has illustrated that "racism and health are deeply co-implicated."

The [research](#) published in *Puncta: Journal of Critical Phenomenology*, was conducted by Luna Dolezal and Gemma Lucas from the University of Exeter.

Professor Dolezal said, "The inequalities and health disparities for minority [ethnic groups](#) that COVID-19 has exposed are part of a systemic and structural racism that has a long history of taking lives. While the COVID-19 pandemic has created enormous challenges that have, in unprecedented ways, impacted populations across the globe, it is crucial that we recognize the ways in which the degree of this impact is unequal because of pre-existing systems of structural inequality.

"People's social position, gender, ethnicity, race, or [health status](#) was not considered when social distancing measures were introduced. All bodies were given the same status as equally dangerous and equally vulnerable. In reality people are not homogenous, biological entities. Nor are we equally vulnerable. There is ample evidence demonstrating that social distancing [public health measures](#) put in place to curtail the spread of the virus, such as lockdowns and quarantines, exacerbated social and health inequalities."

The research, written in autumn 2020 when social distancing measures

were still in effect in the UK, included analysis of existing writing and research on racism, including those from Black and minority ethnic commentators who have described striking similarities between COVID-19 social distancing measures and the routine experiences of racism that are ongoing for minorities in white dominant societies. Many of the writings were [personal experiences](#) of seeing other people keep their distance from them before the pandemic.

One writer, Lisa Braxton, said, "We've long practiced social distancing to keep ourselves safe and lessen our chances of a shortened life span: not because of a contagious disease, but because of racism ... I have experienced white women suddenly clutch tightly onto their purse straps as I've walked past them on the sidewalk. Some have begun to visibly shake, their eyes growing wide, as if terrified, if I happened to make eye contact with them in an elevator."

Gemma Lucas said, "While social distancing can be alienating, isolating, and painful for individuals who occupy positions of social privilege, it will not be experienced in the same manner by those who routinely experience marginalization because of racism. Face-to-face [social distancing](#) was familiar already for many people whose bodies are perceived to be suspicious or dangerous because of, for example, their race, class, or disability.

"Being seen as 'contaminated' and experiencing the wary avoidance of others may be familiar to people whose bodies are marginalized, stigmatized, or marked out as suspicious or dangerous and whose [life experiences](#), as a result, were already marked by ongoing experiences of stigma, shame, and marginalization. This can include others moving away or locking car doors and being watched by security in shops."

**More information:** Luna Dolezal and Gemma Lucas, [Differential Experiences of Social Distancing: Considering Alienated Embodied](#)

[Communication and Racism \(2022\)](#)

Provided by University of Exeter

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