

Research explores race politics associated with wearing a mask in public to combat COVID-19

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Lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic that can improve the lives of Americans are still ongoing, thanks to the help and insight of

UNM's Center for Social Policy (CSP.)

CSP Director and Political Science Professor Gabriel Sanchez and Ph.D. candidate Melanie Sayuri Dominguez just published research with one of these major findings in [*Political Science Quarterly*](#).

The pair, along with Arizona State University Researcher Edward Vargas, highlight the turmoil which existed when it came to the wearing of masks, race and the politics of it all. Were people more or less likely to wear masks based on the color of their skin, and how did they feel about that experience?

"You saw mask-wearing protocols starting to be enforced across the country, and they were met with extreme violence. Security guards were being killed. It was pretty insane. We can easily forget about a lot of these nuances to what life was like as the pandemic first took hold because so much has happened since then to cause concern," Sanchez said.

Funded essentially by themselves, Sanchez used some of his research funds housed at UNM to collaborate with other scholars interested in viewing changes in restrictions and the changing of responses in real time. The scholars funded a panel study to collect information from the game group of people over several months.

"I got a ton of calls from reporters back then asking about masks, like: 'What do you think this mandate of having to wear a mask means for society? Is this going to continue after the pandemic?' We were fortunate," Sanchez said. "We had the ability to get into the field with studies fast, so when you're blessed to have access to put surveys in the field, we said, why don't we do this panel study to help inform decisions states were having to make?"

Real-time also meant directly incorporating the nationwide protests related to the Black Lives Matter movement, starting in 2020. The high rates of excessive force experiences among Black and Hispanic men, the research team thought would make mask-wearing a tough decision for these Americans.

"As men of color who ran this study, we all have had unfortunate experiences with law enforcement in our lives and understand why wearing a mask might make you more worried about being pulled over by law enforcement. Sanchez said.

That timing and the answer Sanchez sought was incredibly relevant as a sign of the times.

"I'm already more likely to be potentially targeted by police just because of my race or my gender. If I'm wearing a mask, is that going to accentuate all of that? That was our research question, which we were able to get in the field at the perfect time when all of this was at its most extreme high," he said.

Eight hundred people in four different areas, including New Mexico, gave their opinions, answered questions, and stayed in touch with Sanchez and Dominguez for eight months.

"This project aligned with my general interest in studying marginalized communities. We each had different strengths and skill sets," Dominguez said. "Wearing [face masks](#) wasn't fully the norm yet, but analyzed that particular item, asked the follow-up question of whether people wore masks even if they feel criminalized, and started finding distinct patterns for different racial groups."

Following the death of George Floyd and heightened scrutiny of the force displayed by [law enforcement](#) against people of color, the growing

protests revealed only more of that. Sanchez, as a result, found people of color, especially Black and Latino men, had greater fears while wearing masks.

"The main take-home message was right. You see high percentages of people of color very likely to say, "Yes, I'm conscious of the fact that if I wear a mask in public, I might be bringing more unwanted attention from police and security," Sanchez said.

This was even more of a worry when Black men and Latino men were isolated in the survey. They believed this would bring unwanted attention from police and security—36% and 38%, respectively.

"Especially in the context of COVID, there were a lot of additional institutional, structural, and social barriers that racial and ethnic minorities faced that are sometimes not that obvious and complex," Dominguez said.

Here's where the study really gets interesting, Sanchez says. Despite this statistically proven increased risk of racial profiling, populations of color still were more likely to wear masks than their White counterparts.

"Even when we put it in a statistical model to control for things like that, that segment of the population was more likely than white males to say that they would wear a mask and continue doing so to protect themselves and others," he said.

That's because although concerns over being mistaken for a criminal were extremely viable, anxiety over spreading or contracting the virus remained a top priority. In the [second wave](#), CSP found Latinos were most likely to know someone (45%), followed by Black people (40%) and Asian people (34%) who had been infected.

"If you asked people who were wearing a mask, what was the number one reason why they intended to do so? the number one reason we consistently found is because they see we're all part of the same community," Sanchez said. "If you asked Americans their number one reason for not wearing one, they would say, 'It's my right as an American to choose not to do so.'"

It's clear through this study that communities of color were truly stuck between a rock and a hard place between 2020 and 2021.

"The COVID pandemic didn't just create problems for racial and ethnic minorities but rather exacerbated and worsened existing issues. I think this paper really highlighted this, showing the difficult choice of wearing a surgical or face mask was for members of certain racial groups," Dominguez said.

This was especially difficult for members of the Asian community. This group faced undue persecution from total strangers just by walking down the street. Despite the destruction of Asian-owned businesses, physical violence towards members of Asian populations, and the name "China-virus," Asian Americans were 2.5 times more likely than white people to wear a mask to combat the virus.

"The mask-wearing take-home message for me was that communities of color were more likely to see potential problems with mask-wearing but were much more likely to buy into the community-oriented ideology that 'we're all in this together, and we got to protect each other,'" Sanchez said.

Sanchez and Dominguez also analyzed other factors that may have played a role in the decision to mask-wearing. Partisanship and race impacted the results even more. There was a 14% gap across the board for Black Democrats and Latino Democrats—who were more likely at

75% to wear a mask versus 61% of their Republican counterparts.

There's much left to explore on this specific topic, especially as vaccinations came into play and restrictions changed. Still, it's an early testament to the dedication many New Mexicans showed to their neighbors in mask-wearing.

"I think continuing discussions of COVID are important because looking back, there are a lot of behaviors and attitudes that we can identify that may come up again in other times of crises," Dominguez said. "There are a lot of lessons to learn from the pandemic and hopefully we can create solutions that help better protect marginalized folks in future 'extraordinary times.'"

More information: Gabriel R Sanchez et al, The Race Politics Associated With Wearing a Mask in Public to Combat COVID-19, *Political Science Quarterly* (2023). [DOI: 10.1093/psquar/qqad103](https://doi.org/10.1093/psquar/qqad103)

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