

THE CHRONICLE  
of Higher Education

## RESEARCH

# Black Scientists Face a Big Disadvantage in Winning NIH Grants, Study Finds

By Nell Gluckman | JUNE 03, 2020

*Updated at 2 p.m., Eastern time, on June 6, with further detail from the study.*

Black researchers applying for funding from the National Institutes of Health consistently receive lower scores than do white applicants in the first phase of the grant-application process, according to a report released on Wednesday by scholars at the University of Washington.

Those scores are a key reason black researchers receive far fewer grants from the NIH than do white applicants, say Elena A. Erosheva, a statistics professor, and Carole J. Lee, an associate professor of philosophy, who with four other colleagues prepared the report under an NIH contract to study racial disparities. “The overall award rate for the data we were looking at for black applicants is 55 percent of that for white applicants,” Erosheva said.

When the NIH receives grant applications, they’re read and scored by reviewers on five criteria: significance, innovation, approach, environment, and how well suited the investigators are to the project. Applications also receive an overall score. About half the



Sipa USA via AP

The Department of Health and Human Services, which operates the National Institutes of Health

applications make it past this round to a phase in which they're reviewed by a panel. Those reviewers don't know applicants' race, but they can see applicants' names and some information about their other published work, Erosheva said.

Erosheva and Lee focused on the actual scores that applications received from 2014 to 2016. They found that in every metric, black researchers tended to score lower than white researchers did. The new study does not ask why, but earlier research, including an analysis published last year by the NIH, has found that black applicants are more likely to propose studying health disparities, which are less likely to be funded by the agency.

The NIH introduced numerical scores for the five criteria in 2009 to bring more transparency to the process, Lee said. There's still room, though, for bias in how those scores are awarded. Lee and Erosheva wrote that racism, or "implicit racial bias," could explain the differences in scores.

Erica T. Warner, an assistant professor at the Harvard Medical School who studies risk factors for breast cancer, said that black researchers often propose topics such as how environmental factors contribute to health risks in black communities. When studies of those factors are not funded, health risks are more likely to persist.

"We're seeing it right now with the Covid-19 pandemic," she said. "As new infectious diseases arise, the existing disparities get replicated."

Warner, who has also conducted research on mentorship, noted that another explanation for the lower award rates could be that underrepresented-minority scientists tend to have smaller professional networks.

"Their exposure to what that quote-unquote standard approach is might be different," Warner said. "Sometimes when we see something differently, it can be evaluated as worse off."

Black Americans have been disproportionately affected by the coronavirus pandemic. A recent report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that 33 percent of hospitalized patients were African American, though black residents made up 18 percent

of the population studied. In New York City, the CDC said, citing data from the city's health department, the death rate in the black and African American population was 92.5 per 100,000 people, while it was 45.2 per 100,000 among whites.

Lee said the NIH's Center for Scientific Review is looking into whether it should simplify how the criteria are scored. "I'm hoping they'll keep these issues in mind as they think about how to reform that process," she said.

"The approach that the NIH has taken in the enhanced peer-review system is to say, If we give reviewers clear, objective criteria, then the decisions they make will be solely merit-based," said Warner, who reviewed the new paper. "It doesn't appear that that's enough."

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