

Research Brief: Racism as a Public Health Crisis - How Declarations Shape Local TV News Attention to Racism

Why We Did This Study

Racial and Indigenous communities continue to experience persistent health disparities driven by systemic racism. Yet, prior to 2020, structural racism received limited explicit attention in public health discourse. The dual crises of George Floyd's murder and COVID-19's disproportionate impact on communities of color catalyzed governments to declare racism a public health crisis—a policy tool designed to raise awareness and spur action. While some research has examined selected declarations and how they were covered in media, there are still gaps in knowledge about the determinants of and response to these declarations. By analyzing declarations as both political acts (shaped by local contexts) and communicative tools (influencing media attention), we sought to uncover how policy, politics, and media intersect to frame racism as a public health issue. Based on these motivations, we examined three research questions in this study:

1. What is the geographic distribution of declarations of racism as a public health crisis between 2020 and 2022?
2. What local (media market-level) characteristics predict which communities made racism declarations in those communities?
3. Were racism as a public health crisis declarations associated with attention to racism on local TV news?

Our findings equip advocates and policymakers with evidence about how racism declarations can be an agenda-setting tool in communities to engage in attention on structural racism.

How We Did This Study

We analyzed 250 declarations naming racism a public health crisis (2020–2023) to identify adoption patterns and their impact on media attention. Using logistic regression, we tested how declaration likelihood correlated with local partisan voting (2016 Trump vote share), racial demographics (% Black residents), and health inequities (uninsured rates, infant mortality). To measure media attention, we tracked racism-related keywords in closed captioning of local TV news across all U.S. media markets, and measured the associations of declarations and the volume of news coverage, controlling for political factors and social-demographic characteristics of the media market.

Key Findings:

- **Declarations related to increased media attention:** Enacting a racism public health crisis declaration associated with an increase of 294 mentions of racism in local TV news in that community.
- **Temporal nature of attention:** Despite increased attention, media coverage declined rapidly following the declarations, reflecting a short news cycle.
- **Political and demographic divides:** Declarations were more likely in areas with:
 - Lower percentages of Black residents and uninsured individuals.
 - Lower Trump 2016 vote shares (Democratic-leaning regions).
- **Limitation:** Study measured volume of media attention only—not tone or framing of coverage.

What We Found

Racism declarations were not distributed across all states and communities. Communities with higher shares of votes for Trump in the 2016 election were associated with fewer declaration enactments, while areas with larger populations and those with higher infant mortality rates were associated with more city-level declarations. Areas with higher proportions of uninsured residents and Black populations were also less likely to enact declarations, despite being populations most affected by structural racism and health disparities.

Our analysis also revealed patterns about the media response to declarations of racism as a public health crisis. Declarations were associated with immediate spikes in local TV news coverage, with markets enacting policies experiencing an average increase of 294 mentions of racism in the subsequent months. However, this heightened attention was short-lived, with coverage typically returning to baseline levels within 3–4 months, reflecting the ephemeral nature of news cycles around racial inequities (see below Figure). While declarations appear to have succeeded in amplifying the volume of racism-related news attention, our data could not assess the quality of that news coverage—whether narratives focused on solutions, systemic causes, or polarized narratives. Notably, June–July 2020 accounted for 42% of all declarations, coinciding with the peak of national protests after George Floyd’s murder, suggesting that policy action and media attention are tightly linked to external events. These findings underscore that while declarations serve as potent tools to temporarily elevate racism in public discourse, their long-term impact depends on sustained efforts to combat media fatigue and political resistance.

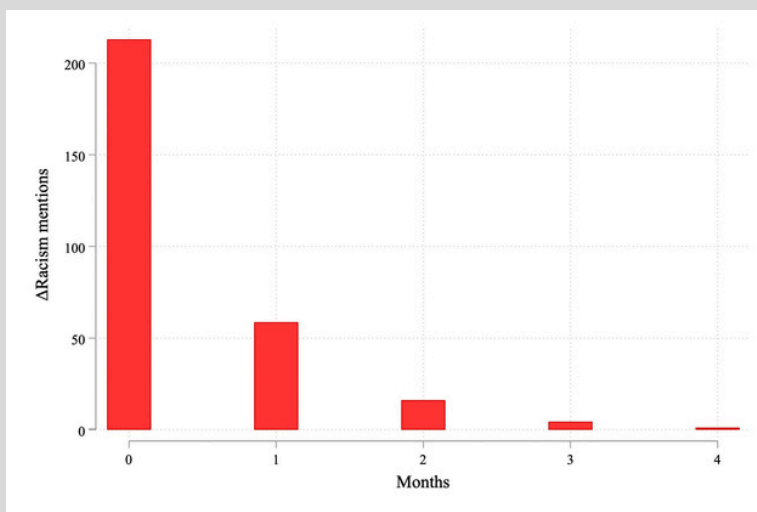


Figure: Estimated lag distribution of changes in racism declarations on media attention to racism.

What These Findings Mean

These results suggest that declarations of racism as a public health crisis may serve as effective but temporary catalysts for media attention, revealing both the power and limitations of policy-driven discourse. The short-lived nature of coverage spikes suggests that while declarations may put racism on the agenda, they do not inherently sustain meaningful public dialogue—a critical gap, since enduring change requires prolonged engagement.

The brief surge in media attention following declarations highlights a key challenge: while policies can spark discussion, they cannot maintain it without additional strategies. This reflects the broader pattern of local news cycles quickly moving on from systemic issues, raising questions about whether short-term coverage translates to real shifts in public understanding or policy change. Importantly, our market-level analysis shows that declarations influence entire media ecosystems, reaching audiences beyond the jurisdictions that enacted them—including suburban viewers who may not directly benefit from the policy.

Three important caveats shape how we interpret these findings:

1. **Tone and framing matter:** Increased coverage volume could include constructive dialogue, polarizing debates, or superficial reporting. Without analyzing content, we cannot assume more attention leads to progress.
2. **Local factors play a role:** Grassroots organizing and community partnerships likely influence both the adoption of declarations and sustained media attention, though these dynamics weren't measured in our study. [Research by Berkeley Media Studies Group](#) colleagues complements our findings.
3. **Timing is key:** Our study focused on declarations between 2020 and 2023, a period that overlapped with the COVID-19 pandemic and racial justice protests—events that may have independently shaped coverage.

Implications for Practice

To maximize impact, racism as a public health crisis declarations should be:

- **Paired with media engagement** (e.g., press kits linking racism to local health data);
- **Tailored to potentially resistant areas** by leveraging trusted messengers;
- **Evaluated for their response in media content**, not just volume, in future research to assess whether coverage advances structural understanding or reinforces division.

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