

# **Bias in white: A longitudinal audit study of changes in discrimination**

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## **Abstract:**

Discrimination is an outcome resulting from a myriad of theorized mechanisms. Crafting effective anti-discrimination policies requires knowledge of which mechanisms are active and which are not. This paper reports on the elimination of one theorized mechanism – statistical discrimination – as a primary explanation for a very consequential discriminatory outcome – racial disparities in physicians’ treatment of patients. Using a uniquely suited natural experiment in the form of a longitudinal audit study of medical students, we measure the disparities generated by the potential statistical-discriminators-to-be (i.e., medical students) and test for changes in the disparities they generate.

We find a significant increase in the disparities generated by medical students between their first and second years of medical school in a setting where statistical discrimination predicts the opposite. This finding challenges the idea that statistical discrimination is primarily responsible for racial disparities in patient care. In addition to definitively eliminating this mechanism, our findings suggest an institutional mechanism underlying these disparities. The changes in discrimination we observe are consistent with a mechanism where the professional socialization of medical students includes the adoption of subtle cultural norms and scripts that can give rise to disparate treatment.