



UNIVERSITY OF
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The Rural Racism Project: Towards an Inclusive Countryside

Unpacking Experiences of Hostility:

Executive Summary 1

This Executive Summary report is part of a series of publications produced as part of *The Rural Racism Project: Towards an Inclusive Countryside*. Our full range of reports relating to this project are listed below and can be accessed at:

<https://le.ac.uk/hate-studies/research>

Unpacking Experiences of Hostility: Full Report 1

Unpacking Expressions of Hostility: Full Report 2

Unpacking the Backlash: Full Report 3

Unpacking Experiences of Hostility: Executive Summary 1

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Unpacking the Backlash: Executive Summary 3

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Executive Summary: Unpacking Experiences of Hostility

This executive summary presents the core findings from the "Unpacking Experiences of Hostility" stream of The Rural Racism Project. This strand explores how racism is experienced, expressed, and navigated by minoritised individuals in rural England, and suggests ways of creating a more inclusive countryside.

Context and Rationale

Despite growing recognition of racism in rural England, persistent inequalities remain, including experiences of racial violence, fear of discrimination and limited cultural visibility. By centring the lived experiences of minoritised individuals, this report provides an evidence base for those committed to making the countryside a more inclusive and anti-racist space.

Methodology

115 semi-structured interviews and numerous informal conversations were conducted with minoritised individuals, White rural residents and White allies actively engaged in anti-racist work across England to:

- understand how racism is experienced by people from minoritised backgrounds living in or visiting rural England
- examine the impacts of rural racism
- explore attitudes of white rural residents towards diversity and inclusion
- highlight examples of inclusion and anti-racism in rural communities

Their diverse life histories, ethnic backgrounds, geographic locations and relationships to rural spaces provided a rich tapestry of perspectives.

Key Findings

1. What is rural life like?

- Rural life is both enriching and exclusionary. It offers access to nature but can be marked by social and material challenges such as lack of transport and economic inequalities.
- Nature plays a central role in physical and mental well-being regardless of ethnic or racial background. However, cultural knowledge and intergenerational experience shape access, with many minoritised individuals disclosing a lack of appropriate gear and knowledge of how to access rural spaces preventing true inclusion.
- Community connections are strong among White British populations, but experiences of belonging vary widely, with minoritised individuals experiencing exclusion, racism and institutional harm.

- A lack of diversity in rural England can lead to isolation for minoritised residents and visitors, reinforcing perceptions of rural Whiteness. Subtle social norms signal who rural spaces are “for”, often excluding those outside dominant identities.

2. What does rural racism look like?

- Rural England is often perceived as a predominantly White space. This is communicated through exclusionary narratives and gatekeeping which foster a sense of not belonging for minoritised individuals.
- **Interpersonal racism** is expressed through persistent and aggressive staring, hostile body language and deliberate isolation as well as through more overtly threatening behaviours such as name calling, racial slurs, physical intimidation and threats.
- **Everyday microaggressions** include being questioned about one’s origins, being subjected to positive and negative stereotypes about one’s identity and feeling scrutinised in rural spaces. These experiences are often unreported, reinforcing the idea that such behaviour is tolerated and fortifying feelings of being an outsider.
- **Racism in rural schools** was frequent. Children from minoritised backgrounds regularly face racial slurs and physical violence, demonstrating how racist attitudes are learned from a young age.
- Reports of **structural racism** include institutional bias in schools and workplaces. The ethnocentric curriculum is often seen as ill-equipped to address racism, while local authorities and institutions routinely dismiss or minimise the perspectives of minoritised individuals.

3. What are the impacts of rural racism?

- Rural racism takes a significant emotional, physical and economic toll on households and communities. For minoritised individuals, it results in chronic stress, anxiety, fear, exhaustion and anger. These feelings stem from direct experiences and the psychological burden of anticipating racism and navigating predominantly White spaces.
- Racism disrupted research participants’ careers, forced businesses to close and prompted relocation to urban spaces. This therefore weakens rural economies by deterring diverse talent and reducing the amount of money that minoritised communities spend and invest in rural spaces.
- Racism also shaped identity and belonging. Participants described how they altered their behaviour, appearance or speech to avoid discrimination. Cultural assimilation became a survival strategy which reinforced the message that minoritised groups do not belong and that conformity to White British norms was the condition for acceptance.

- Racism affects also White communities more broadly. It corrodes trust, reinforces social divisions and limits opportunities for connection.

4. Why does rural racism happen?

- **Fear:** Rural racism is often rooted in a pervasive fear of change and difference. Tight-knit communities may perceive newcomers, especially those from racially or culturally different backgrounds, as threats to local identity. This fear is intensified by economic insecurity and a strong sense of localism or nationalism.
- **Ignorance:** Many rural residents lack knowledge about minoritised groups and the harms of racism, often because of limited education on these issues and the social homogeneity of their community. This ignorance is sometimes maintained deliberately to avoid taking responsibility for racism.
- **Learned Behaviour:** Racism can be learned and passed down through families and reinforced by monocultural environments and education systems that avoid critical engagement with Britain's own history of racism and colonialism.
- **Populism:** Nationalist and exclusionary ideas about British identity are commonly reinforced by right-wing populism, which frame minoritised individuals as outsiders. This increases the normalisation and legitimacy of racist attitudes.

5. What are the compounding challenges?

- **Barriers to reporting** include access to support and reporting mechanisms. A lack of culturally appropriate services, low institutional trust, and rural isolation all contribute to under-reporting and unaddressed harm.
- **Personal barriers to seeking support** include individuals trivialising their experiences or fearing retaliation if they spoke up. Even when people did report, the responses were often limited to performative gestures, leaving victims feeling disillusioned.
- **Geographic and social isolation:** Limited exposure to diversity due to geographic isolation allows myths and stereotypes to flourish unchallenged. The lack of direct contact with minoritised groups leads to suspicion, scapegoating and the persistence of exclusionary attitudes and behaviours.
- **Barriers to anti-racism:** Attempts to challenge racism often provoke backlash. Anti-racism efforts were frequently dismissed as 'political' or 'divisive', and participants described being harassed or excluded for speaking out. Others highlighted that being perceived as racist or losing social status led to inaction. This fear often manifests in performative anti-racist gestures rather than real change.
- **Discomfort about anti-racism:** White participants expressed anxiety around 'getting it wrong', resulting in silence. Others disclosed a lack of

awareness and understanding around subtler forms of racism, and how to appropriately respond.

6. How can we make the countryside more inclusive?

- **Structural change and policy reform:** Inclusive rural policy that actively promotes diversity as part of rural regeneration and community well-being is key to generating change. This should be supported by intersectional investment that addresses overlapping forms of disadvantage, with inclusion as a guiding principle.
- **Representation in decision-making:** Diverse voices, especially those with lived experience of exclusion, must be included in leadership and decision-making roles across rural institutions. Public sector policies and local planning must embed transparency and protections for minoritised groups.
- **Accountability and leadership:** Clear, transparent frameworks are needed to track progress and enforce anti-racist policies. Accountability must be built into institutional mandates whereby every decision-maker, not just senior leaders, must take responsibility for driving and sustaining change.
- **Making rural spaces welcoming and accessible:** Facilities and services should reflect the needs of diverse communities, making rural spaces genuinely welcoming. Safety and cultural sensitivity must be considered from the outset in rural planning and infrastructure to increase accessibility for all.
- **Building meaningful connections:** Facilitating positive and healing experiences in nature helps to foster a sense of belonging for minoritised individuals. Positive rural experiences, when shared, can encourage wider participation and counteract exclusionary narratives.
- **Empowering allies:** Education and learning are key to challenging racism and fostering greater cultural understanding. This can be facilitated through celebrations of diversity to build connection and belonging, and through the prioritisation of honest dialogue, where people can speak freely, and learn from one another.



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