Black Moms' Midlife Decline in Health Linked to Discrimination Faced by Kids

Unfair treatment of offspring more likely to harm the health of African-American mothers compared with Hispanic or white counterparts.

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According to a new study published in the Journal of Health and Social Behavior, Black mothers experience a decline in their health when their children are discriminated against. These findings provide some insight into the health disparities between Black and white mothers, reports Ohio State News.

For the inquiry, scientists studied mother-child pairs—3,004 mothers and 6,562 children—using data from a nationally representative sample of men and women who were polled regularly for over 40 years. Researchers focused specifically on adolescent and young adults' answers to survey questions about acute or chronic discrimination and the self-reported health of their mothers at ages 40 and 50.

Acute discrimination included such occurrences as being unfairly fired from a job or a threatening encounter with police. Chronic discrimination was measured by assessing the frequency of routine interpersonal exchanges that left individuals feeling disrespected, insulted or demeaned.

Scientists found that young Black people experienced the most instances of discrimination, with almost 22% of them reporting instances of acute discrimination—compared with 14% of Hispanics and 11% of whites. In addition, findings revealed racial disparities in the health status of these youngsters' mothers. By age 50, 31% of Black mothers reported that their health was fair or poor compared with 17% of white moms and 26% of Hispanic mothers.

The female parents of children who reported moderate or high levels of acute discrimination were up to 22% more likely to face a health decline in their 40s and 50s than mothers of kids who experienced low levels of this form of discrimination. (Similar findings were found among moms with children who experienced frequent chronic discrimination. Declines in their health were smaller but still significant.)

Additionally, findings showed that children's experience with acute discrimination explained almost 10% of the gap in health declines between Black and white women, while chronic discrimination accounted for about 7% of the disparity.

“We have known for a long time that people who are treated unfairly are more likely to have poor mental and physical health,” said Cynthia Colen, PhD, associate professor of sociology at The Ohio State University and the study’s lead author. “Now we know that these negative health effects aren’t restricted to the person who experiences discrimination firsthand—instead, they are intergenerational, and they are likely to be a contributor to racial disparities in health that mean people of color can expect to die younger and live less healthy lives.”

For related coverage, “Racism May Place Black Mothers at a Higher Risk of Death” and “Police Killings May Negatively Affect Health of Black Infants.”

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