Higher Education Does Not Equal Better Health for Black Men

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When it comes to medical outcomes in the United States, more education typically means better health. But according to a new research review, for Black men, racism is the reason those gains aren't nearly as pronounced as they are for people of other races, reports Kaiser Health News.

Studies show that Black men are more likely to die as a result of poor health outcomes and chronic illnesses, such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and cancer, than white men. In addition, their life expectancy is significantly lower overall.

For educated Black men––those with a college degree or higher––research shows that health outcomes do improve. But the benefits they reap are considerably less than the wellness boost white men with similar levels of education receive.

As for causes, experts say possible risk factors for various diseases and environmental issues could play a role. For example, Black men have a much higher risk of obesity, diabetes and high blood pressure, even among those who are highly educated. Black people are also much more likely to live in areas with high levels of air pollution––leading to an increased risk for respiratory issues, such as asthma and lung cancer.

Findings also showed that other effects of racism and discrimination on Black men's health were pronounced for those who completed high school. For example, researchers noted that Black male high school graduates experienced an added risk for symptoms of depression over a period of 25 years after completing high school.

"When you follow other groups, with more education, depression declines," said Shervin Assari, PhD, associate professor of medicine at the Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science in Los Angeles, one of many experts who commented on Kaiser's research review. "But when you look at Black men––guess what? Depression goes up."

Additionally, frequently, even well-educated Black men don't have a financial and social safety net comparable with that of their white counterparts. This translates into more stress, experts explain. What's more, as educated Black men advance in their careers, many report feeling separated from their communities. This isolation can add to pressures that eventually harm health.

In response, public health experts are calling for policy changes in education, housing and the

justice system that better support Black males who want to achieve success and lead productive lives. To that end, they stress, American society needs to confront its biased attitude toward Black men and its treatment of this group.

To learn more about how racism and discrimination can negatively affect physical and mental health outcomes among Black Americans, see “How Social and Structural Racism Drive Health Inequities.”

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