Lower Cognitive Performance Seen in Black Adults Raised in the South

Childhood socioeconomic status, location and race were taken into consideration when examining cognitive performance.

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Black adults raised poor and socially disadvantaged in the South are more likely to experience cognition problems later in life than white adults with a similar background, according to findings from a Rutgers School of Social Work study.

While previous research has focused on single social determinants on brain health later in life, this study observed the combination of childhood socioeconomic status, race and location of childhood residence.

“Our study provides empirical evidence that addressing structural barriers that reinforce systems of oppression for Black people, particularly for older adults who grew up in the South, are essential to reducing cognitive disparities,” Addam Reynolds, a doctoral student in the Rutgers School of Social Work and lead author of the study, said in a news release. “The data support policies that work toward racial equity, beginning in childhood, as an important element of healthy brain aging initiatives.”

With data obtained from the Health and Retirement Study, a biannual survey of older Americans, 8,299 adults (1,165 Black and 7,134 White) ages 65 and older, researchers analyzed how race, residence and childhood economic status influence brain function in older adults.

Researchers found that childhood residence in the South was strongly associated with lower levels of baseline cognitive scores among Black adults regardless of childhood economic status, while white adults from the South who had a higher childhood socioeconomic status scored higher.

Findings suggest the prevalence of socioeconomic disadvantage, rurality, poorer nutrition and decreased access to technology-based resources in the South are risk factors for poorer cognition in later life. Researchers theorized that segregation endured by Black communities in the South during the Jim Crow–era also factored into the lower cognitive performance seen in older Black adults.

“I look at these findings as a cautionary tale against structural racism,” Reynolds said. “The goal

for policymaking should be equity throughout multiple domains in life, and one of the ways that we can measure the effectiveness of those policies is through cognitive aging."

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