Medical Groups Call Racism a Public Health Issue

Hate-based violence and systemic racism adversely affect Black people's health both physically and psychologically, doctors advise.

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While unrest and turmoil over the death of another unarmed African-American man at the hands of police rock the United States, even medical groups are pointing to racism, discrimination and hate crimes as factors that increase the risk of chronic health conditions among Black people, CNN reports.

On May 31, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) tweeted: "Racism is a public health issue" and linked its tweet to the AAP's 2019 policy statement about the impact of racism on the health of children and adolescents.

The tweet also stated, "The AAP condemns violence, especially when perpetrated by authorities, and calls for a deep examination of how to improve the role of policing. Systemic violence requires systemic response."

Prior to that declaration, on May 29, the American Medical Association released a joint statement from board chair Jesse Ehrenfeld, MD, MPH, and president Patrice Harris, MD, MA, calling out police brutality.

"AMA policy recognizes that physical or verbal violence between law enforcement officers and the public, particularly Black and Brown communities where these incidents are more prevalent and pervasive, is a critical determinant of health and supports research into the public health consequences of these violent interactions," the announcement asserted.

Ehrenfeld and Harris also suggested that the violence of police "must be understood in relation to larger social and economic arrangements that put individuals and populations in harm's way leading to premature illness and death."

A key point in the statement focused on how communities of color are being disproportionately affected by both police brutality and the coronavirus pandemic. Ehrenfeld and Harris noted as well that the murders of unarmed Black people by law enforcement negatively impacts the mental health of African Americans—regardless of whether or not they knew the victim personally.

What's more, such trauma can lead to chronic stress, higher rates of comorbidities and lower life expectancy, the health experts explained.

The American College of Physicians (ACP), another medical group, released a statement saying that the organization has long held that hate crimes, prejudice, discrimination, harassment and violence against any person based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, gender identity, sex, sexual orientation or country of origin is a public health issue.

"The issue of how to ensure that policing does not result in discriminatory enforcement and violence is a multifaceted and complex one," said Heather Gantzer, MD, chair of the board of regents for ACP.

For related coverage, read "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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