NIH Awards $3.7M Grant to Study Impact of Racism on Aging

Rutgers and Michigan State researchers will work together to explore the effects of structural racism in cognitive aging.

October 29, 2024 By Laura Schmidt

Researchers from Rutgers University and Michigan State (MSU) were awarded a $3.7 million National Institutes of Health (NIH) grant to collaboratively study the effects of structural racism on cognitive aging and physical function decline, according to a university news release.

The five-year grant from the NIH's National Institute of Aging will support a study led by Rutgers associate professor Danielle Beatty Moody, PhD, and MSU assistant professor Richard Sadler, PhD, MPH.

Researchers argue that structural racism in neighborhoods negatively impacts communities where Black people live, work, shop, learn and more, resulting in harmful cognitive and physical changes in terms of aging.

Prior research has shown that Black adults are more likely to experience earlier onset and higher rates of cognitive and physical decline related to aging compared with other racial groups. In fact, overall, Black adults are about twice as likely as white adults to have Alzheimer's disease and other dementias, according to the Alzheimer's Association.

What's more, about 40% of Black adults reported experiencing at least one act of discrimination in the last year. Discrimination—whether overt or subtle—can be a significant source of stress for individuals, which can lead to cognitive decline.

The NIH-funded study will work with 800 Black and white adults who were born in and live in Baltimore. These individuals are part of the Healthy Aging in Neighborhoods of Diversity across the Life Span study, which has been collecting data for about 20 years.

Researchers will explore the role of personal experiences with discrimination and identify biological and social factors that affect risk and resilience. They also plan to examine differences based on social and demographic factors to determine, for example, whether non-Black community members are affected.

“Collectively, our work seeks to call out and disentangle the vast array of tools used to entrench structural racism in the neighborhood environment—past, present and future,” Beatty Moody and Sadler told Rutgers. “We need to comprehensively document what the full constellation of tools, tactics and strategies look like in our urban landscapes to better contextualize why racial inequities emerge and persist across numerous health endpoints, for which all Americans ultimately suffer but for which Black Americans consistently take the largest hits.”

The findings will be used to develop strategies to address racial inequities in accelerated aging, especially in communities with higher populations of Black Americans who plan to grow old there.

For more, click #Aging. There, you’ll find headlines such as “Millions of Aging Americans Are Facing Dementia by Themselves,” “Racial Stressors May Cause Premature Brain Aging in Blacks” and “Discrimination May Accelerate Aging in Black Women.”

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