Racial Violence Damages Black People's Mental Health

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In the past few months, media coverage of racism, discrimination and anti-Black violence in the United States has escalated. Now, new findings published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences suggest that increasing awareness of these issues might come at a cost, especially for Black viewers, Scientific American reports.

For the study, researchers at the University of Utah assessed 49 high-profile incidents of anti-Black violence—from police killings to legal decisions not to indict or convict police officers involved in those murders—that occurred between 2013 and 2017.

Next, scientists reviewed weekly data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) survey to evaluate the psychological effects on people of all races. (BRFSS collects information from residents in all 50 states as well as the District of Columbia about health-related risk behaviors, chronic health conditions and use of preventive services.)

Findings showed that when two or more of these events occurred in the United States African Americans reported experiencing more days of poor mental health than people in any other racial group. In addition, court rulings that allowed police officers to go unpunished—blatant examples of systemic injustice—triggered the most negative psychological effects among Black people even more so than the initial racist, violent wrongdoing by a law enforcement official.

Black individuals' chronic exposure to racism is unpredictable and they are forced into a state of high alert for self-protection, observed Vanessa Volpe, PhD, head of the Black Health Lab at North Carolina University, one of many researchers studying the effects of racism on the mental and physical health of individuals.

"Over time, your body is going to experience this wear and tear and that will result in greater rates of morbidity and earlier mortality for Black folks, compared to white people," Volpe said. "What can we do so that Black people don't even have that exposure in the first place?"

To learn more about the mental health effects of institutional racism on people of color, read "Systemic Racism Increases the Risk of Psychosis Among Minorities."

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