

EXAMINING THE TRAUMA RELATED HEALTH EFFECTS OF POLICE BEHAVIOR ON BLACK COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

This research study intends to explore the ways that police violence and over-policing in predominately black, low-income communities impacts trauma related health outcomes among individuals in those populations. The historical and political context of criminalization of black people which operated through slavery, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration will be discussed and paired with the current, and rampant, form of criminalization which is police brutality. The cultural norms that perpetuate a perceived police culture and implicit bias along with the social connotations of black males are expressed to contextualize the occurrence of police violence and to frame contemporary discussions of policies and practices that engender police behaviors and their negative health effects. Research questions pertaining to the relationship between police violence and health will be addressed and assessed utilizing a qualitative, meta-analytical methods.

“Trauma events call into questions basis human relationships. They breach the attachment of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim’s faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis.”

–Judith Lewis Herman 1997

Introduction

The idea of trauma is centered in the forefront of many violent acts done unto individuals in society. The mental effects are considered in terms of sexual abuse survivors, child abuse survivors, and other considerably vulnerable populations. Likewise, children that survived the Newtown, CT shooting were evaluated by mental health professionals (Bryant-Davis, Adams, Alejandre & Gray, 2017). This demonstrates the capacity to understand how an event such as what children in Newtown endured has a traumatic impact that commands a specific approach to healing and treatment. Moreover, there are different levels of trauma that have the ability to impact individuals and communities. Trauma exists and manifests on a community level, as well as individual, and

it involves social-cultural, physical/built, and economic environments (Davis, Pinderhughes & Williams 2016).

However, regarding cultural and societal mechanisms of oppressions that lead to trauma, specifically black men and fatal interactions with police, research has barely scratched the surface (Bryant-Davis et al., 2017). The issue of the negative relationship between Black individuals and police officers are well-documented and have been highly publicized within the recent decade. There is a gap in the public health response to the trauma caused to black men by way of police violence in communities. The idea of trauma is understood in many contexts, but needs improvement when considering conditions prevalent within members of

certain social groups. Reported by the Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, when compared to the general population, blacks are 20% more apt to face mental health problems (Office of Minority Health, 2016). Furthermore, there have been significant findings illustrating that mental issues like PTSD and depression exist at a higher prevalence in low-income black urban neighborhoods than in other places (Smith, 2014). This illustrates the trauma unquestionably present in black communities, and this paper seeks to argue that historical realities (such as slavery and Jim Crow) and policy decisions (such as the National Housing Act and the War on Drugs) have created situations in which certain communities are majority black, low-income, and perceived as high crime. This reality subsequently sets up a situation in which these communities are over-policed, leading to more and more interactions between police and community members, too many of which are fatal.

The concept of policing evolved out of the slavery era to be a form of social control over blacks and continues to exist in a similar function (Bass, 2001). The types of policing tactics employed are dependent on a variety of factors and the outcomes of police interactions with Black individuals oftentimes illustrate the types of intentions held by officers. Policing methods have become highly scrutinized as there has been a slew of black individuals—men, women, children, unarmed, armed—that have been subjected to police violence that leads to severe injury or even death at the hands of police officers. Structural forces such as policy are mechanisms that allow for bad policing tactics and behaviors, such as racial profiling and implicit bias, to exist in certain neighborhoods. Consequently, these lead to experiences of trauma by black men in highly segregated and low-income

communities which have health consequences.

Understanding Trauma

As was discussed previously, there are different types of trauma. As defined by SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration), which is a department of the US Department of Health and Human Services, “individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being” (SAMHSA, 2014, pg. 7). This definition offers insight into the impact that trauma can have on an individual without even considering what type of experience led to the individual’s traumatic feelings. Recently, there has been a drive to explore the concept of community trauma. In a publication from the Prevention Institute, community trauma is described as a conglomerate of different aspects in the community environment, namely people, place, and equitable opportunity (Davis, et al., 2016). Utilizing a community trauma framework is beneficial because it compounds experiences that may not necessarily have to do with an individual, but more the circumstances in which individuals are a part of. Furthermore, many aspects of community trauma See Figure 1 for a visual graphic of these components to community trauma.



Figure 1. This graphic displays the three “symptoms” (components) that the Prevention Institute considers in terms of community trauma. Obtained from Davis, R., Pinderhughes, H., & Williams, M. (2016). Adverse Community Experiences and Resilience: A Framework for Addressing and Preventing Community Trauma. Prevention Institute. Retrieved July 26, 2018.

This model is very relevant considering that while individual trauma is important, people are impacted by circumstances and situations that do not have to do with them directly, but rather as consequences of policy choices and other implementations over the years. For example, the “unhealthy products” portion of the place aspect of community trauma can refer to the fact that some neighborhoods are considered food deserts, meaning that they do not have access to healthy and fresh foods, but a plethora of convenience stores and gas stations that offer choices that lack nutrition (Davis, et al., 2016) Additionally, the equitable opportunity refers to the fact that there are limited options for people to seek employment in certain neighborhoods which contributes to high unemployment levels and high poverty levels.

In order to help conceptualize what individual trauma means, it is helpful to think about the three E’s of Trauma framework that SAMHSA developed. The E’s are Events, Experience of Events, and Effect (SAMHSA, 2014). The event refers to the actual circumstance that threatens physical or psychological wellbeing. The experience part can be an indicator of if the event was traumatic or not. One specific event can be considered traumatic for one person but not for another and that shows the relative and personal nature of trauma. Experience can be shaped by how a person

is emotionally and how they utilize support. The Effect part of the trauma framework deals with how a person responds and act after an event occurred. That includes how a person is able to continue with their day to day life experiences and relationships and connections (SAMHSA, 2014).

Historically, there have been certain time periods that have been traumatic for black Americans. For example, both the periods of slavery and Jim Crow caused high levels of stress and anxiety for individuals. The idea of being taken from a comfortable place to be forced to work in inhumane conditions and oftentimes be separated from family takes a toll mentally. The Jim Crow period also brought about stress and anxiety due to segregation in all aspects of life that prevented black Americans from achieving upward social mobility. The strong presence of racism was also a source of trauma. Along with these two historical events there are also specific policy decisions that created low-income Black communities, which set the stage for further opportunities for trauma to exist in these communities, putting them at a higher risk.

Creation of Low-income Black Communities
One cannot attempt to analyze the concept of racial oppression within American society without considering social and historical structures that contributed to such oppression. The existence of majority Black communities, and those that are also low-income, are products of decades of legislation rooted in racism and one specific policy is the National Housing Act of 1934, which is how the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) came to be created (Gotham, 2000). The FHA handled mortgages and loans, and used the practice of redlining along with guidance from its *Underwriting Manual*, which culminated in discrimination against blacks at the time

(Voborníková, 2014). Redlining involved various designations given to different neighborhoods based on certain factors, predominantly race. These designations would be compiled to a map that represents the different areas of the city. As cited by Kevin Gotham, there were four levels that could be assigned to neighborhoods. The highest distinctions were given to new, all white neighborhoods and lowest distinctions given to both neighborhoods near a predominantly African American community, or the predominantly African American communities themselves (2000). The highest distinctions were green and the lowest were red—hence *redlining*. The great importance of these distinctions between neighborhoods was how the loans were dispersed to residents in these different areas. To provide evidence about the dispersal of loans, an article reports that between the years of around 1930s to 1959, a majority of the FHA insured houses were located in the suburbs. Additionally, of those homes, less than 2% were made out to African Americans (Gotham, 2000).

Moreover, income and crime seemed to act as a proxy for race. The idea of “proxies” for race allow for policies to be racially motivated without ever admitting that. As an example, eventually conditions in the red and undesirable neighborhoods (as classified by distinctions in the Underwriting Manual by the FHA) got worse and worse. In basic terms, the phenomenon of federal funding being continually funneled in to white and more prosperous communities set a precedent and, as Gotham cites, these acts based in racism and discrimination powered a perception that is it necessary to include racism in all aspects of housing, especially funding mortgages (2000). Perhaps the political and racial climate in America created circumstances in which the poor were relegated to inner city slum-like areas.

Due to political bodies like the FHA, these areas got poorer and more destitute, embodying conditions that are consistent with cultural support for policing in urban areas stemming from societal fear.

Another political tool that helped lead to the practical demise of black communities was the War on Drugs. The racialization of drug use is an effect of the attitudes and policies towards drug use of this time period, not a particular provision of the 1994 Crime Bill. This racialization came in the form of a difference in sentencing outcomes of crack versus powder cocaine due to the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986. In the New Jim Crow, it is stated that there were many harsh penalties imposed by this legislation—the most relevant to this paper being that there were mandatory minimum sentences for distribution of cocaine: with much more intense punishments for distribution of crack than cocaine (Alexander, 2010). The difference in sentencing was a 100:1 ratio; meaning that individuals that sold crack were given sentences much longer than those that sold cocaine. Using an example from The New Jim Crow, “a conviction for the sale of five hundred grams of power cocaine triggers a five-year mandatory sentence, while only five grams of crack triggers the same sentence” (Alexander, 2010, p. 112). Crack cocaine and powder cocaine are virtually the same drugs. They are chemically identical but differ in the ways that they are taken by users and also, the effects are slightly different. The book goes on to mention that crack is a vaporized form of cocaine that can be inhaled for a faster and more intense high using less of the drug. For this reason, it was very common for small doses of crack to be sold, making the prices much more affordable (Alexander, 2010). The relevance of this disparity in sentencing for these different drugs elicits a disproportionate effect on the

African American community. According to a report by the United States Sentencing Commission, 88.4 percent of the individuals that were convicted of federal crack offenses in 1995 were African American and only 4.5 percent were White (United States Sentencing Commission, 1995). This statistic shows that not only were African Americans convicted of crack at a higher rate, they were also dealt harsher sentences. Subsequently, Black people were more likely to be imprisoned and for longer periods of time, too.

A major critique of this policy is the way in which it contributed to the criminalization of African Americans. The incarceration rates did not begin to increase due to this bill; however, the existing situation was exacerbated by the previously mentioned provisions put into play by the bill. It has been discussed that African Americans were much more dramatically affected than whites. The reality that the criminal justice system targeted African Americans led to a widely accepted perception of black people as criminals. Besides the disproportionate number of African Americans in prisons around the nation, black people were also criminalized in the media. Some researchers have connected exposure to Black criminals in the news with linking Blacks with crime (Dixon & Azocar, 2007). The effects of this connection with blackness and crime arise time and time again. Although African Americans comprised only 15 percent of current drug users in 1995, a survey published in the *Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education* reported that, when asked to imagine a drug user and describe their appearance, 95 percent of people pictured a black drug user and 5 percent of people imagined a drug user of a different race (Alexander, 2010, p. 106). There was a false narrative being created about African

Americans and the media and law enforcement were enabling it.

Policing in Low-income Black Communities

When considering how policing occurs in low-income black communities, it is important to consider what policing behaviors and practices are considered good or bad. One policing practice that is considered good is when police departments exhibit community engagement. A majority of community members want their voices to be heard and taken into consideration when police departments are making reforms. As a publication from HERE states, 73% people said they would be very likely to provide feedback on department policies and practices (Policing Project, n.d.). This shows that community members realize the influence that police departments have on day to day life and that they want to be involved in making changes. Another would be community policing. It is the idea of a police department that is more connected with the community and aware of the needs and issues existing within the community (Micucci & Gomme, 2005).

On the other hand, bad policing practices are those that encourage trauma filled experiences. One bad policing practice is lack of a standard for psychological evaluations to be completed by police officers. Being a police officer is a job in which an individual is placed in high-stress situations each day, and it is necessary to ensure that police officers have the skills and mental capabilities to do their jobs properly. Another bad policing practice is cop culture. It includes culture norms that police rely on to do their jobs. It is based on the hierarchy and chain of command that exists in police departments. Police officers that may try to act justly and report certain incidences can end up being shunned and

ostracized for being disloyal (Micucci & Gomme, 2005).

The reliance on cultural norms is a major driving force in terms of what is perceived as a danger or threat to a police officer—and these norms are based in experiences from their work.^{x5} When officers come to the job with their own preconceived notions combined with potentially biased information they learn when they begin training, the formation of “bad policing” tactics ensue. Excessive use of force is one mechanism through which police brutality thrives in American society. It has been defined as “the use of any force that is beyond what is necessary to control an individual or effect the arrest of a suspect, including the use of any force when none is required” (Hays, 2011, p. 5). Civil rights complaints filed regarding excessive use of force are more prevalent among Blacks and Latinos than Whites (Micucci & Gomme, 2005). This question the manner in which force is imposed onto individuals. While Blacks and Latinos are not inherently criminal and deserving of excessive use of force, there is a gap in reality and police officer perception. These perceptions may be influenced by implicit bias, which is another mechanism through which police brutality endures.

Implicit bias is defined as "attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner" (Kirwin Institute, n.d.). Determining implicit bias can be difficult due to the fact that it is not easily measured and also because people may not realize that their actions are being driven by an underlying bias that leads to disparities in the way people are treated. Moreover, the practice of implicit bias can lead to individuals being unfairly racially profiled. Racial profiling can be described as

targeting a person and criminalizing them based on physical characteristics like race or nationality. (ACLU, n.d.). An example of profiling is illustrated with the practice of “stop and frisk”, which is when police officers who believe that an individual is acting suspiciously stop a person without needing a probable cause and search them (Sewell & Jefferson, 42). This practice is especially problematic because 9 of 10 stops involved either black or Latino individuals and overall, black individuals were stopped more frequently than white individuals (Sewell & Jefferson, 42). A black male in a qualitative study investigating traumatic stressors recalled his experience with being harassed and profiled by police stated: “police officers? ... I feel like they just like to look at everybody on the streets as demons ... They’ll pull you over for no reason ...” (Rich 2005). This displays the demonization that black men feel in terms of how police officers view them.

Conclusion

Trauma exists on many levels and can manifest in different ways in a person’s life. People can experience individual trauma, community trauma, and intergenerational trauma. It is important to consider how they work together to understand how an individual may perceive an experience as traumatic. The implications of certain parts of history are very important to the creation of low-income black communities that still exist today. The National Housing Act effectively segregated many cities in the nation, and led to poor, economically depleted inner-city areas and wealthier suburb areas. Additionally, the War on Drugs contributed to criminalizing black individuals and communities and provided police officers with a reason to deem areas high-crime and thus over police them. These events were traumatic themselves, but also they created the current situation where

there are low-income black communities that are over-policed, leading to traumatic experiences that have negative health consequences.

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