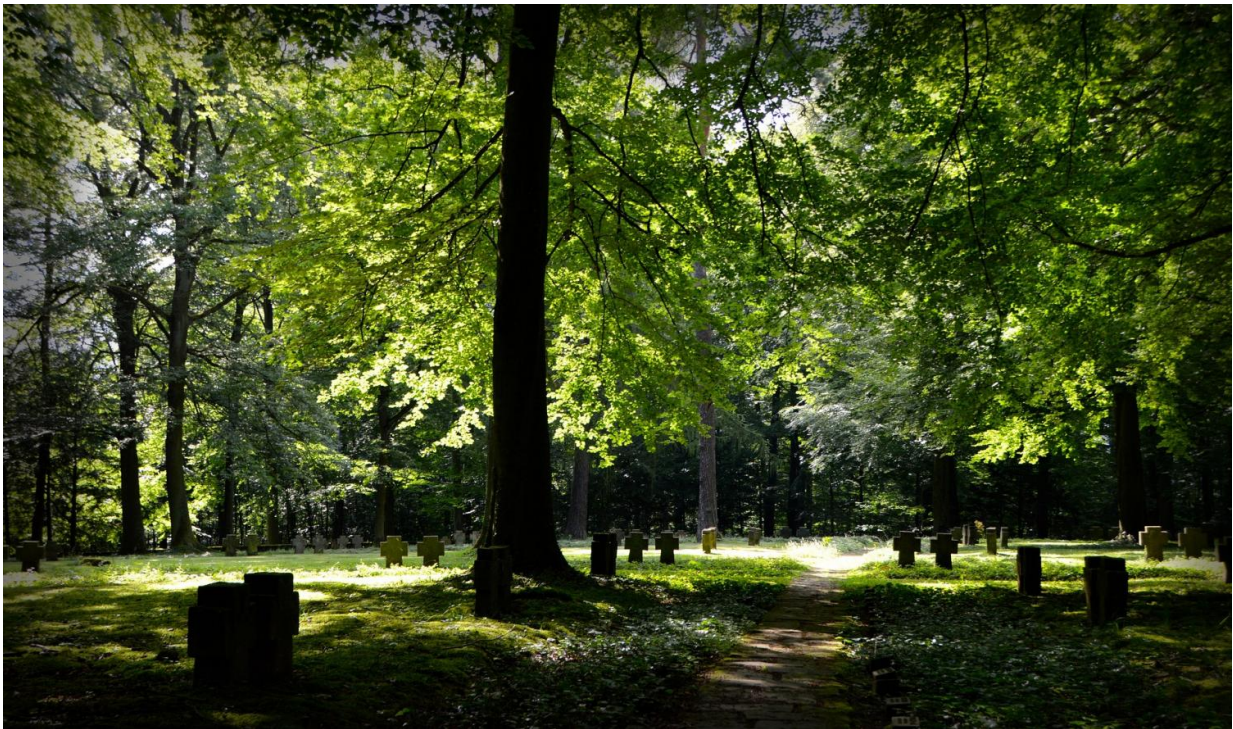


Blacks experience more family member deaths than whites, on average: study

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African-Americans are more likely than whites to experience the loss of a parent during childhood and more likely to be exposed to multiple family member deaths by mid-life, according to a study by the Population Research Center at The University of Texas at Austin.

It's a trend that is likely to be damaging to the health of black Americans in the long run, the researchers said. Racial disparities in life expectancy and mortality risk in the United States also suggest that blacks are exposed to more family member deaths earlier and throughout their life than whites.

In a study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, UT Austin researchers examined racial disparities in exposure and timing of family member deaths to uncover an underappreciated layer of racial inequality, which results from reoccurring bereavement that may lead to the intergenerational transmission of black health disadvantages.

"The potentially substantial damage to surviving [family members](#) is a largely overlooked area of racial disadvantage," said Debra Umberson, a sociology professor who is the director of the Population Research Center. "By calling attention to this heightened vulnerability of black Americans, our findings underscore the need to address the potential impact of more frequent and earlier exposure to family member deaths in the process of cumulative disadvantage."

Using nationally representative datasets of more than 42,000 people, Umberson and her colleagues compared non-Hispanic black and non-Hispanic [white](#) Americans on their exposure to death of biological parents, siblings, children and spouses, as well as the total number of deaths experienced at different ages.

Umberson emphasizes that bereavement following the death of even one close family member has lasting adverse consequences for health. Premature losses are especially devastating.

"If losing a family member is a disadvantage in the present in ways that disrupt the future, [racial disparities](#) in these losses over the life course is

a tangible manifestation of [racial inequality](#) that needs to be systematically documented," she said.

The study showed that blacks experienced more family member deaths overall than whites. They were twice as likely to experience the death of two or more family members by age 30 and 90 percent more likely to experience four or more deaths by age 65. In stark contrast, whites were 50 percent more likely to never experience a family member death by age 65.

The researchers found overall that blacks were at greater risk of losing a mother from early childhood through young adulthood, a father through their mid-teens, a sibling in their teens and a child by the age of 30. The race-gap diminishes only slightly at ages 70 and up when whites begin to experience more loss, the researchers said.

Specific findings include:

- In a cohort born in the 1980s,
 - * Blacks were three times more likely to lose a mother, more than twice as likely to lose a father and 20 percent more likely to lose a sibling by age 10.
 - * Blacks were two and a half times more likely to lose a child by age 30
- Among several older cohorts born in the 1900s to the 1960s,
 - * Blacks were nearly twice as likely as whites to lose a spouse by age 60.
 - * Blacks were 50 percent more likely to lose a sibling between the ages of 50 and 70.
 - * Between the ages of 50 and 70 Blacks were three times more likely than whites to lose a child.

"This is the first population-based documentation of earlier and repeated

bereavement experiences for Black Americans," Umberson said. "Death of family members is highly likely to disrupt and strain other family relationships as well as the formation, duration and quality of relationships across the life course, further contributing to a broad range of adverse life outcomes including poor health and lower [life expectancy](#)."

More information: Death of family members as an overlooked source of racial disadvantage in the United States, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1605599114

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

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