

# How do encounters with police affect the mental health of black Americans?

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Black Americans comprise 13 percent of the US population, yet data suggests that they represent 23 percent of those fatally shot by police officers. Data on non-lethal encounters with police in the black community is limited but suggests that these encounters can result in emotional trauma, stress responses, and depressive symptoms.

In order to assess whether interactions with the police are associated with [mental health outcomes](#) among black Americans, MPH alumna Melissa McLeod and other CUNY SPH researchers conducted a [systematic review](#) of 11 studies and published the findings in the *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities*.

The researchers found that most of the studies (6 of 11) revealed statistically significant associations between police interactions and mental health outcomes (psychotic experiences, psychological distress, depression, PTSD, anxiety, suicidal ideation and attempts), indicating a nearly twofold higher prevalence of poor mental health among those reporting a prior police interaction compared to those with no interaction. Although better quality studies are needed, the findings suggest an association between police interactions and negative mental health outcomes.

"This review finds that the nature of policing in America is contributing to black Americans experiencing poor mental health symptoms," says McLeod. "We call upon police departments to participate in the multi-level approach needed to address this public health concern."

Changes in law enforcement policy, development and implementation of a validated instrument to assess police experiences, improved community outreach, a federally mandated review of policy and practice in police departments, and expanded police training initiatives could reduce the potential negative mental health impact of police interactions on black Americans, she added.

**More information:** Melissa N. McLeod et al. Police Interactions and the Mental Health of Black Americans: a Systematic Review, *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities* (2019). [DOI: 10.1007/s40615-019-00629-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s40615-019-00629-1)

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