

Negative encounters with police have mental health consequences for black men

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Adversarial encounters with police have a powerful negative effect on black men's mental health, as do efforts to avoid such encounters, according to a study from a team at the George Washington University.

"These types of negative encounters exist on a spectrum, from [police violence](#) to racial profiling and casual disrespect," said lead author Lisa Bowleg, a professor of psychology in the Columbian College of Arts and Sciences. "And when all of your mental energy is devoted to avoiding the police—how you dress, how you walk, who's looking at you—that hypervigilance could also have an intense physical effect. So all of that has an implication for individual and [public health](#)."

The study, "Negative Police Encounters and Police Avoidance as Pathways to Depressive Symptoms Among US Black Men, 2015–2016," appeared in the *American Journal of Public Health* last month as part of a special issue on mass incarceration and [health](#).

Dr. Bowleg was prompted to examine the issue after working on the first phase of "Manhood," a 2016 study funded by the National Institutes of Mental Health and National Institutes of Health examining links between black men in Washington, D.C., neighborhoods and HIV risk. While the study asked no specific questions about police encounters, Dr. Bowleg said the issue "was all over the data" as men discussed stress factors in their neighborhoods.

The study found that participants with a history of incarceration who were unemployed reported significantly higher police avoidance and, in turn, higher [depressive symptoms](#).

"There is no data to explain which came first for these men—the police avoidance, the criminal record, the unemployment or the depression," Dr. Bowleg said. But the depressive outcomes seem related to the disproportionate incarceration of black Americans, who make up 40 percent of the incarcerated population despite being only 13 percent of its citizens.

"Not surprisingly, people from the communities most affected by [mass](#)

[incarceration](#) in the United States are also those who experience the most disproportionate and stark health inequities regardless of incarceration status," Dr. Bowleg said.

Some part of the risk of incarceration is related to a population's relationship with police, Dr. Bowleg said. And while individual members of a police force may not be racist, the system itself is available to white citizens in a way it is not to nonwhite and particularly black citizens, Dr. Bowleg said. White children may be taught that the police are their friends, "but there's a whole group of people for whom that is not their experience," she said. "Many black parents are having 'the talk' with their kids about how to behave with police so they won't get hurt."

Even [everyday activities](#) can be sources of stress, since white complainants are more likely to call [police](#) on black people for innocuous behavior.

As a result, "Even people who need help don't feel safe calling," Dr. Bowleg said. "It also suggests a two-tiered system where black people who are citizens and paying their taxes don't have access to the sort of resources that white people do."

Dr. Bowleg said the path forward will require both structural and individual reforms.

"An obvious thing that jumps out is the need for antiracism training," she said "There also needs to be some serious structural reform around the [incarceration](#) piece, and how easy the chute is for black people to find themselves in prison for nonviolent offenses."

More information: Lisa Bowleg et al. Negative Police Encounters and Police Avoidance as Pathways to Depressive Symptoms Among US Black Men, 2015–2016, *American Journal of Public Health* (2020). [DOI:](#)

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