Examining the Effects of Neighborhood Characteristics on the Mental Health of Urban Black Male Youth: A Systematic Review

Danielle M. Perry, MSW1, Karen Tabb, PhD, MSW1, and Ruby Mendenhall, PhD, MPP2

School of Social Work1, Department of Sociology, African American Studies, Urban and Regional Planning, and School of Social Work2, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Introduction

Black children are disproportionately more likely to live in high-risk urban neighborhoods, and experience persistent poverty where factors such as acts of violence and crime, gang activity, physical victimization, parents under stress, and limited social supports increase their risk for higher rates of mental health symptoms, such as aggression, depression, anxiety, and stress.

This is especially true for Black males, who report higher incidents of exposure to violence, personal victimization, and antisocial behavior within their homes, schools and neighborhoods. For example, recent research suggests that 70-90% of Black male youth who reside in high-risk urban neighborhoods report knowing someone or witnessing someone being murdered, shot at, or physically assaulted, which is 2-3 times higher than the national average.

Family involvement is one factor that can either improve or worsen the negative effects of poverty and exposure to neighborhood violence on the mental health of Black male youth. However, current census data shows that about 67% of Black single-headed households are living in poverty. This can often contribute to increased family stressors, such as financial strain, which have been correlated to increased depressive and anxiety symptoms.

Aim

Previous studies have found an association between neighborhood disadvantage and mental health outcomes (Sagarstano, Holbeck, Pakoff, & Freundlich 2003; Shackley & Elwert 2011). However, as discussed by Alegria, Molina, and Chen (2004) many of these investigations have failed to consider specific neighborhood contexts. While some research has explored the differences between high risk and low risk urban neighborhoods on the outcomes of adolescent Black males, some studies have ignored factors such as residential stability and cultural heterogeneity that can exist in some urban neighborhoods.

Therefore, this systematic review sought to examine relevant literature in an effort to better understand how mental health symptoms may be triggered by continuous exposure to high-risk neighborhoods. Specifically, this study sought to examine what mental health problems are present among adolescent Black males who reside in high-risk urban neighborhoods.

This study is a descriptive qualitative systematic review that follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) method (Moher et al., 2009).

Method

The focus of the search was to identify articles that examined depression or mood as an outcome of living in a high-risk urban neighborhood. Therefore, the authors included studies that:

- discussed neighborhood and mood symptoms or disorders (e.g., depression),
- discussed adolescent (i.e., aged 11-18) Black males,
- provided ethnic differences in mood symptoms or disorders, and
- provided guidelines/characteristics of the sample.

Neighborhood type was self-reported by article authors, and the neighborhood unit of measure had to be reported (i.e., census track, school attended, poverty-index/neighborhood scale).

Studies were excluded that:

- focused on mental health/physical health issues not relevant to our questions,
- did not mention place or space, race/ethnicity, or mood symptoms or disorders (e.g., depression),
- age categories or birth cohort could not be determined,
- only focused on interventions, and
- was a non-empirical paper (e.g., commentaries, research briefs), or conference abstract/meeting report.

Studies that did not use purely quantitative methods (i.e., qualitative/mixed-method studies) were also excluded due to their inability to contribute accurate rates or numerical experiences of depression/depressive symptomology.

Results

Systematic Review Findings on Studies Examining the Effects of Neighborhood Characteristics on the Mental Health of Urban Black Male Youth 1995-2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Study Title</th>
<th>Study Design</th>
<th>Sample Size</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Neighbourhood Characteristics</th>
<th>Mental Health Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Black males</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>11-19</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>Low-income/neighborhood scale</td>
<td>Depression, anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Black males</td>
<td>Qualitative</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>11-19</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>Low-income/neighborhood scale</td>
<td>Depression, anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Black males</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>2,346</td>
<td>11-19</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>Poverty-index/neighborhood scale</td>
<td>Depression, anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Black males</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>571</td>
<td>11-19</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>Poverty-index/neighborhood scale</td>
<td>Depression, anxiety</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

While our results demonstrate that Black male youth living in high-risk urban neighborhoods display higher rates of depression, anxiety, PTSD, anger, and aggression, it also highlights factors that allow them to experience less psychological distress, such as:

- Higher rates of residential stability and presence of Black families served as a buffer against anxiety.
- The ability to maintain positive parent-child relationships and adjustment to adverse conditions demonstrated a reduction in depressive symptomology.
- When Black male youth feel that they are in control of their personal domains, they experienced less psychological distress symptoms.

Important limitations to discuss include:

- The inconsistency of measures used to measure neighborhood residence and neighborhood poverty.
- The limited number of studies that fit the inclusion criteria.

In addition, this systematic review found that Black males and females are experiencing their neighborhoods in different ways, which should be accounted for when measuring risk for depressive symptomology. Future studies should provide a closer examination of these relationships and their related mechanisms.

Conclusion

Continuous exposure to high-risk urban neighborhoods demonstrated an increase in depressive symptoms, anxiety symptoms, anger expression and aggression, stress, PTSD, among other psychological problems in a large number of participants in this sample, jeopardizing their psychosocial well-being and adult social and economic trajectories. However, in order to fully understand this complex relationship, more research is needed that examines the nuances of Black adolescents’ lived experiences. Understanding this complexity may require the development of a neighborhood measure that can accurately identify what aspects of the neighborhood challenge and promote the healthy development of adolescent Black males.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to all the contributing authors, and the IDEA research team for their support.