

# Shooting, gang violence exposure leads to PTSD

8 December 2016, by Kristin Samuelson

The violence that women in disadvantaged neighborhoods experience and witness can result in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms and full diagnoses, according to a new Northwestern Medicine study that examined a disadvantaged Chicago neighborhood.

Also noteworthy, [women](#) with PTSD diagnosis or sub-threshold PTSD had significantly more severe depression [symptoms](#) than women in the study who didn't report experiencing trauma. Every woman who was recruited had symptoms of depression.

"There are many women who are affected by shooting and gang violence in these neighborhoods," said first author Sunghyun Hong, a research assistant at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. "These women are often overlooked. With this study, we were able to shine a light on this high prevalence of trauma exposure and PTSD diagnosis among the underserved population."

This is one of very few studies to explicitly examine the impact that living in a disadvantaged neighborhood has on PTSD symptoms. The study was published Dec. 7 in the *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities*.

The [traumatic experiences](#) reported in the study were often violent or sexual in nature. One woman disclosed having witnessed the fatal shooting of her son, and another woman reported watching her father be murdered in her home.

The neighborhood from which women in the study were recruited ranked 7th for property crime, 26th for quality of life crime and 35th for violent crime among 77 Chicago neighborhoods.

Thirty-six percent of women in the study had PTSD or sub-threshold PTSD (substantial trauma symptoms that might not have met the full PTSD

diagnostic criteria). Those with PTSD had more severe depression symptoms than other women in the study who did not exhibit signs of PTSD, said principal investigator and senior author Inger Burnett-Zeigler, clinical psychologist and assistant professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Feinberg.

"Even if you don't meet the full criteria for PTSD, you can have enough symptoms to impact your well-being," Burnett-Zeigler said. "There is a substantial proportion of people who fall below the PTSD diagnosis line who might be getting lost in the cracks. It's important for mental health providers to develop a greater awareness around this because untreated PTSD symptoms affect mental health, quality of life and functioning."

A significant percentage of women in a general population who experienced trauma (20 percent) develop PTSD she said.

"But the prevalence of PTSD symptoms is particularly acute in impoverished neighborhoods," Burnett-Zeigler said. "In the study's sample, 71 percent of the women who experienced trauma had PTSD symptoms."

"This wasn't a sample we recruited based on having traumatic experiences, and yet so many women we recruited had experienced something traumatic," Burnett-Zeigler said. "That is really significant in terms of how prevalent of an issue this is in that vulnerable population."

**More information:** Sunghyun Hong et al, The Frequency of PTSD and Subthreshold PTSD among African–American Women with Depressive Symptoms in a Disadvantaged Urban Neighborhood: Pilot Study, *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities* (2016). [DOI: 10.1007/s40615-016-0311-3](https://doi.org/10.1007/s40615-016-0311-3)

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