

Study identifies how police violence contributes to mental health woes

2 October 2020, by Jared Wadley



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Police violence—the subject of numerous protests globally—is taking a toll on people's mental health.

A newly published analysis of [police violence](#) and [mental health](#)—conducted by researchers at three universities, including the University of Michigan—found that law enforcement encounters lead to increased stress among civilians.

In addition, the actions could impede a person's ability to cope or recover from such experiences, as well as broadly impact a community or population, the findings showed. The study also aimed to create a framework for studying the factors involving violence and mental health.

The constant media coverage and real-time dissemination of footage on [social media](#) of unarmed African Americans harmed or killed by the police has left many Americans struggling to make sense of the violence, the researchers say. The long perceived culture of inequitable treatment also affects Latinos, Native Americans, and sexual and gender minority communities, they say.

Lisa Fedina, U-M assistant professor of social work, says police violence—which includes physical, sexual, psychological or neglectful acts—has been associated with greater odds for distress and suicide attempts among adults and young people across racial/ethnic groups.

Fedina and colleagues identified eight factors involving police violence, which has increasingly been recognized as a public health concern in the United States.

Some of the factors included:

- Power inequities in state-sanctioned violence. Unlike people who may inflict violence against others, police organizations have been empowered to apply force to maintain social and political order. In many instances, the violence upholds [white supremacy](#), which contributes to the lack of police accountability by members of the racially dominant society.
- Police culture deters internal accountability. The culture upholds a "code of silence" surrounding police officers' abusive behaviors toward civilians, which allows for the perpetuation of police abuse of power and can prevent [police officers](#), particularly those from lower ranks, from reporting such abuses to their superior. This authority over civilians may lead to exacerbated mental health consequences.
- Perceived racial and class bias. White respondents are at some risk of exposure to police violence, but the racial disparities are significantly higher among African Americans, Latinos and other marginalized groups.
- Use of/access to weapons. Police officers have a great deal of legal latitude in determining when to use force, and even fatal force. The perceived threat of police victimization in civilians' interactions with

police may lead to unique mental health implications for communities most affected by police violence.

The factors described in the analysis establish why [police](#) violence—and its mental health consequences—are a matter of public health requiring policy solutions aimed at addressing these root causes, the researchers say.

The research appeared in the *American Journal of Public Health*.

More information: Jordan DeVlyder et al. Impact of Police Violence on Mental Health: A Theoretical Framework, *American Journal of Public Health* (2020). [DOI: 10.2105/AJPH.2020.305874](https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2020.305874)

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