

Physical health varies among American blacks depending on ethnicity

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A Caribbean-born black person living in the United States will most likely be healthier than a U.S.- born Caribbean black person, according to a new national study on ethnic differences in health among the American black population.

University of Michigan researchers examined the relationships among ethnicity, nativity, depressive symptoms and physical health in the two largest groups of American blacks: African American and Caribbean blacks, said Derek Griffith, assistant professor in the U-M School of Public Health and lead author of the study.

African Americans, Caribbean-born blacks who now live in the United States and U.S.-born Caribbean blacks had significantly different self-ratings of their health situations.

The healthiest group was Caribbean-born blacks now in the United States and the least healthy were U.S.-born Caribbean blacks. [African Americans](#) were in the middle. These ethnic differences were true even after considering self-reported depressive symptoms, Griffith said. Researchers found that increased [depressive symptoms](#) predicted physical [health outcomes](#) in all three groups.

"A lot of times in Western medicine we separate mental and physical health, but this is a really an artificial separation. Mental and physical health are highly intertwined and interrelated," Griffith said. "We need to do a better job at understanding how the two affect one another."

Traditionally in public health, blacks are lumped into one racial category, but that doesn't reveal a true picture of the health of the American black population, Griffith said. As is true of other [racial groups](#), where black people are born and their ethnic identity matters for their health.

"This is one of the few national studies that has actually empirically examined ethnic differences in physical health among American blacks," Griffith said. "It helps us to better understand patterns of health in terms of how people experience their social and cultural environment in the U.S., and it also helps us to think about how we need to intervene to address the health of the American black population in general."

Researchers found that American blacks aged 45-59 were less healthy than those 18-44 and those 60 and older.

"We typically expect people to be less healthy as they age but it appears that middle-adulthood is a particularly critical age for American blacks' health," Griffith said. "This is the age when family, friends and employers expect a lot, and the role of being a good employee, spouse, parent and child to aging parents may converge. For many people, personal health becomes a lower priority than success in these other areas of life."

Surprisingly, researchers did not find consistent gender differences in self-rated health. Usually women report worse health than men. Though women did report more instances of chronic [physical health](#) conditions, they weren't more likely to report having fair or poor health.

The paper, "Ethnicity, nativity and the health of American Blacks" appears in the February issue of the *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*.

Provided by University of Michigan

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