

Childhood adversity launches lifelong relationship and health disadvantage for black men

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Greater childhood adversity helps to explain why black men are less healthy than white men, and some of this effect appears to operate through childhood adversity's enduring influence on the relationships black men have as adults, according to a new study in the March issue of the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*.

"Our findings suggest that [childhood adversity](#) launches a lifelong process of relationship and health disadvantage for [black men](#)," said lead author Debra Umberson, a professor of sociology and a faculty associate in the Population Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin. "I was surprised at the power of childhood adversity to influence racial disparities in health for men via its detrimental impact on adult relationships."

Umberson said exposure and vulnerability to stress are the two primary ways childhood adversity negatively affects relationships in adulthood.

"Exposure to childhood adversity may cause stress and lead to a sequence of stressors over time that take a cumulative toll on relationships," Umberson said. "In addition, childhood adversity may trigger an enduring pattern of psychological and physiological vulnerability to stress that undermines relationships in adulthood. Past research, including some of my own, has shown that bad relationships often lead to worse physical health."

Titled, "Race, Gender, and Chains of Disadvantage: Childhood Adversity, Social Relationships, and Health," the study relies on data on black and [white men](#) and women from a nationally representative longitudinal survey of Americans aged 25 and older. Respondents were interviewed four times during a 15-year period and were asked about childhood adversity (e.g., family economic hardship; parents having marital problems; living with someone who was violent), stress in adulthood (e.g., stressful life events such as divorce or the death of a spouse, child, or parent; chronic sources of stress such as financial or job issues), quality of relationships in adulthood (e.g., with partner/spouse; children; parents), and health in adulthood.

"Black men are exposed to 28 percent more childhood adversity than white men and the negative effect of childhood adversity on the quality of relationships in adulthood is three times stronger for black men than white men," Umberson said. "This pathway from childhood adversity to lower quality relationships in adulthood explains part of the race disparity in health among men, something that has not been recognized in previous research."

Just as white men are healthier than black men, white women are healthier than black women. However, the study revealed that neither childhood adversity nor the quality of relationships in adulthood explain much of the racial disparity in health among black and white women.

"I was surprised that childhood adversity had such a minor impact on black women's health in [adulthood](#), especially since the effect was so strong for black men," Umberson said. "I think this is best explained by women's tendency to seek out social contact in response to stress. Generally speaking, women tend to have more close relationships and to share their feelings with others. This is true for black and white women. Supportive relationships protect health."

Overall, and consistent with prior research, Umberson and her co-authors found that [black women](#) are least healthy, followed by white women, black men, and white men.

In terms of policy implications, Umberson said the study suggests policymakers should put a greater emphasis on improving American children's quality of life. "Creating programs that provide children with access to stable environments and nurturing adults at the youngest possible age may be particularly important for black male youth—with health and well-being benefits that last a lifetime," Umberson said.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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