

Homicides have life-changing impacts on young black men in Baltimore

May 21 2015, by Laurel Thomas Gnagey

As Baltimore continues to face increased violence since the death of Freddie Gray in police custody, new research by the University of Michigan paints a picture of the individual toll of homicide in the beleaguered city.

By age 24, young [black men](#) in Baltimore have experienced an average of three murders of someone close to them, sometimes a family member but most often a peer.

U-M School of Public Health researcher Jocelyn Smith found that among the 40 [young men](#) she interviewed, 11 had witnessed a homicide. The youngest experience was at age 4 but the majority happened during adolescence and early adulthood.

"These frequent experiences of loss disrupted participants' peer networks, transformed perceptions of safety, self and future, and threatened healthy development across the life course for the young black men in this study," said Smith, the Paul B. Cornely Postdoctoral Scholar and a research fellow at the Center for Research on Ethnicity, Culture, and Health at the School of Public Health.

"The voices of the participants in this study communicate a profound sense of loss as their social networks shrink from the premature and preventable homicide deaths of their peers. Participant narratives also reveal anxiety, hypervigilance, concern of foreshortened futures, accelerated life course trajectories, and other post-traumatic stress

symptoms."

Her research is published online in the *American Journal of Public Health*.

Smith became interested in studying this topic as a doctoral student at the University of Maryland in 2008, and says from that time through her postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Michigan in 2013, there were 1,347 homicides in Baltimore City. Eighty-three percent of the victims were black males, she said.

In 2010, she participated in a research project that examined the transition to adulthood for young black men ages 18-24.

"In our research interviews, we asked participants to tell us about their neighborhoods," she said. "Many young men responded by sharing their exposures to neighborhood violence and experiences of loss resulting from that violence. This got my immediate attention. Here, I was asking young men to tell me about where they lived, and they responded by telling me who died as a result of the conditions where they lived."

The research took place in Baltimore but Smith said the result undoubtedly would be similar in other communities with the same set of dynamics.

"Public health research tells us that the conditions where we are born, grow up, live and age shape our health, well-being and life expectancy. The systemic contributors to violence in Baltimore are certainly present in other economically disadvantaged cities across the country," she said.

"Developmentally, young people are not supposed to die, and burying their peers ought not be part of their regular routines. In order to disrupt this reality, researchers, practitioners and policymakers must recognize

both violence and trauma as [public health](#) concerns that threaten the health and well-being of Americans, of whom black boys and men in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, like Freddie Gray's home of Sandtown, are among the most vulnerable."

More information: "Unequal Burdens of Loss: Examining the Frequency and Timing of Homicide Deaths Experienced by Young Black Men Across the Life Course." *American Journal of Public Health*. e-View Ahead of Print. [DOI: 10.2105/AJPH.2014.302535](https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2014.302535)

Provided by University of Michigan

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