

Rat problems in poor neighborhoods linked to depressive symptoms

March 16 2016

Residents of Baltimore's low-income neighborhoods who believe rats are a big problem where they live are significantly more likely to suffer from depressive symptoms such as sadness and anxiety, new Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health research suggests.

Those same residents with rodent problems on their block are also plagued by other pressing urban issues such as vacant housing, drug sales on the street and the risk of being robbed and beaten up. The study found that the relationship between [rats](#) and depression is not explained by these other neighborhood conditions. The findings are published in the March issue of the *Journal of Community Psychology*.

"Nobody likes living around rats," says study leader Danielle German, PhD, an assistant professor in the Department of Health, Behavior and Society at the Bloomberg School. "This study provides very strong evidence that rats are an underappreciated stressor that affects how people feel about their lives in low-income [neighborhoods](#). The good news is it's modifiable. If we can do something to reduce the number of rats in these neighborhoods, we can improve people's well-being."

Every time researchers would talk to residents of low-income neighborhoods about the troubling [public health](#) issues they face, German says, they expected to hear about drugs and HIV and access to healthy food. Time and again, she says, they heard about rats and trash. Many cities conduct a regular rat census or survey residents about urban conditions, but this is one of the first studies to examine the

psychological toll of an entrenched rat population.

To conduct the research, German and Carl A. Latkin, PhD, a professor at the Bloomberg School, analyzed data collected from 448 Baltimore residents recruited from impoverished neighborhoods between March 2010 and December 2011 as part of a study designed to reduce drug and sex risk behaviors by addressing depressive symptoms. The participants were mostly African-American (87.3 percent) and male (54.9 percent) with very low incomes.

About half reported seeing rats at least weekly on their block and about 35 percent reported seeing them almost daily. Thirteen percent said they saw rats inside their homes and 5 percent reported daily or almost daily sightings in their homes. More than half said that rats were the sign of a bad neighborhood.

Nearly 32 percent said they consider rats to be a big problem on their blocks. Among that group, 80 percent reported daily rat sightings on the block and 85 percent reported them in the neighborhood.

Those who consider rats to be a big problem were 72 percent more likely to experience acute [depressive symptoms](#) than those who live in similar neighborhoods where rats are not a big problem, the researchers say. They found that people in rat-infested neighborhoods had the same strongly negative perceptions of rats as people in other neighborhoods, but had much more frequent encounters.

German says that the conversation about rats has long been framed as concerns about rats as vectors for disease, "but that misses what it feels like to be a resident of a neighborhood where you see rats every day. There is no reason why rats should be inherent to areas of poverty."

Rats are typically found where they have access to food and shelter,

finding trash to eat and vacant or poorly kept up housing in which to live in low-income urban areas. Many U.S. cities with large rat populations have rat abatement programs but the problem can be difficult to control. The city of Baltimore, for example, is currently going to great expense to give every resident a sturdy trashcan in an effort to reduce the rat problem. But German says that may not be enough. There are still issues, for example, of illegal dumping and garbage-strewn vacant lots.

"Those who live in areas where the perceived rat problem is the greatest are more pessimistic about their own ability to control rats, have less confidence in their neighbors' commitment to rat eradication and have relatively little faith that the city would act if called upon to address the rat problem," German says. "Yes, eradicating rats from Baltimore City is a hard goal, but making it so no neighborhood has to see rats every day is a goal we can strive for. It would go a long way toward improving the outlook of people who live in poor neighborhoods and may be a starting point for conversations about other community health priorities. These data suggest that we need to work together with community members to achieve these goals."

More information: "Exposure to Urban Rats as a Community Stressor Among Low-Income Urban Residents" *Journal of Community Psychology*, 2016.

Provided by Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health

Citation: Rat problems in poor neighborhoods linked to depressive symptoms (2016, March 16) retrieved 23 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-03-rat-problems-poor-neighborhoods-linked.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.