

Incarceration creates more mental health concerns for African-American men

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Credit: University of Michigan

African-American men who have spent time behind bars show worse

mental health conditions compared with men of the same race with no history of incarceration, according to a new U-M study.

Researchers from U-M, Rutgers University and Texas A&M University found an association between African-American men with a history of incarceration and [mental health](#), with mental [health](#) being defined as psychological distress and depressive symptoms.

Compared to other African-American men, those who have been incarcerated have 14 percent, 13 percent and 16 percent higher severity of depression, distress and discrimination, respectively.

"We found that discrimination explains why African-American men with incarceration history are more depressed and more distressed," said lead author Shervin Assari.

Assari is a research investigator at the U-M School of Public Health and Department of Psychiatry, as well as an affiliate faculty with the U-M School of Public Health Center for Research on Ethnicity, Culture and Health. The study also is authored by U-M investigators Linda Chatters, Robert Taylor and Reuben Miller.

Assari and team analyzed data from the National Survey of American Life, conducted by the U-M Institute for Social Research from 2001 to 2003. The NSAL is a representative survey of African-Americans, non-Hispanic whites and black Caribbeans.

"While most other national studies draw blacks from predominantly white areas, the NSAL has mostly enrolled blacks in the geographic places that they actually live," Assari said. "So, the results are more accurate and valid than other sister studies."

Assari noted that this survey also is distinctive because it only looked at

African-American males.

"Demographic groups should not be lumped together, as life experiences and contextual factors are unique among them. In the U.S., life experiences are not only shaped by race or gender, but also their intersections," Assari said.

"Risk factors and health problems, and mechanisms that operate for African-American men differ from those that operate in African-American women. No other demographic group experiences incarceration as much as African-American men."

Out of all African-American male participants in the NSAL, nearly 27 percent reported a lifetime history of incarceration.

The researchers acknowledge both public policy and service provider implications of their research. The U.S. is a global leader in incarceration rates, and according to the researchers, policymakers have become increasingly aware that this is detrimental to the country.

"The message to the policymakers is that psychological costs of [incarceration](#) do not end at when the individual is released," Assari said. "The individual is stigmatized and experiences more discrimination, which will take its toll on the individual as well as society. There is also a message to social workers and those who work with African-American men. Incarceration history is a major risk factor for their mental health, and those with such [history](#) need extra help."

The research is published in the Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities.

More information: Shervin Assari et al. Discrimination Fully Mediates the Effects of Incarceration History on Depressive Symptoms

and Psychological Distress Among African American Men, *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities* (2017). [DOI: 10.1007/s40615-017-0364-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s40615-017-0364-y)

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