

Lynchings of the past affect health today

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Counties with higher rates of lynching between 1877 and 1950 showed higher mortality rates between 2010 and 2014. A new study by researchers from the University of South Carolina in the US, led by Janice Probst and Saundra Glover, looks into the relationship between past occurrence of lynching—unpunished, racially motivated murder—and recent death rates. The research, published in Springer's *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities*, shows that when socio-economic and educational factors are taken into account, the death rate for the overall population of a county was higher between 2010 and 2014 if lynching events had taken place there in the past.

Much research shows that there is a link between historic lynching in a community and contemporary issues such as housing patterns or incarceration rates. In this study, Probst and her colleagues analysed the association between a history of lynching within a county and the county's present [mortality](#) rates.

From the Equal Justice Initiative, the researchers obtained county-level data about the number of lynchings between 1877 and 1950 for 1221 counties in 12 Southern states. Counts were standardized to the 1930 population figures, then divided into four categories, from lowest (no lynchings) to highest.

The team next obtained age-adjusted mortality rates for each county for 2010 to 2014 from the CDC Wonder database. Without adjusting for differences in county demographic circumstances, mortality ranged from 863 deaths per hundred thousand people in counties with no history of

lynching to 910 in the counties where such crimes were committed most.

Their final analysis statistically adjusted for factors that could affect mortality, such as the percent of county residents with health insurance, education levels, local unemployment rates, and similar considerations. With these factors accounted for, the researchers concluded that living in a county with the strongest history of lynching, versus no such history, was associated with higher mortality rates.

They estimate that living in a high-lynching county is associated with 34.9 additional deaths per hundred thousand per year for white males, 23.7 deaths for white females, and 31 deaths for African American females.

"While white [mortality rates](#) were still consistently lower than those of their African American counterparts, this relative advantage was somewhat lessened by living in a county with a history of racial violence," explains Probst, who is still perplexed by the link between historic lynching and white mortality. "This means that while being the target of race-based bias is the more severe condition, bias also has a cost for the dominant population."

"Strange fruit yields strange harvest, among both Black and white populations," adds Probst. "While we cannot change the past, we can identify key problems and work to change the future."

The group therefore urge epidemiologists and researchers focusing on health services to expand their focus to also include aspects of historic and current racism as a dependent variable.

"Racism in America has broadly negative effects. This landmark study may suggest that tackling racism head-on could provide health benefits in the future to not only Blacks, but to whites as well," stated Cato T.

Laurencin, Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities*.

More information: Janice C. Probst et al, Strange Harvest: a Cross-sectional Ecological Analysis of the Association Between Historic Lynching Events and 2010–2014 County Mortality Rates, *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities* (2018). [DOI: 10.1007/s40615-018-0509-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s40615-018-0509-7)

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