

Study examines COVID-19 pandemic's effect on Black, Latina women's mental health

February 27 2023, by Sharita Forrest



Black and Latina women reported high rates of depressive symptoms and anxiety early in the pandemic, according to an online survey conducted by kinesiology and community health professor Sandraluz Lara-Cinisomo and graduate student Mary Ellen Mendy. Credit: Fred Zwicky

Concerns about job disruptions and loss of income were associated with

increased depressive and anxiety symptoms in Latina women early in the pandemic, researchers found in a study that explored Black and Latina women's mental health in mid-2020.

Slightly more than 30% of women in the study experienced depressive symptoms and more than 28% reported symptoms consistent with anxiety, according to the screening tools used by the researchers. However, Latinas reported significantly higher rates of these symptoms compared with Black women.

Although the team expected that mental health symptoms would be high among women in the study, they were surprised to find that nearly one-third of respondents were experiencing them, said first author Sandraluz Lara-Cinisomo, a professor of kinesiology and [community health](#) at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

More than 1,000 women participated in the study, an [online survey](#) that was conducted from May to July 2020. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 85.

Published in the *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities*, the findings add to a growing body of research that suggests older people in the U.S. fared better psychologically during the [pandemic](#) than younger people.

The Center for Social and Behavioral Science at the university collected the data used in the study, which was co-written by doctoral students Biniyam Melesse and Mary Ellen Mendy.

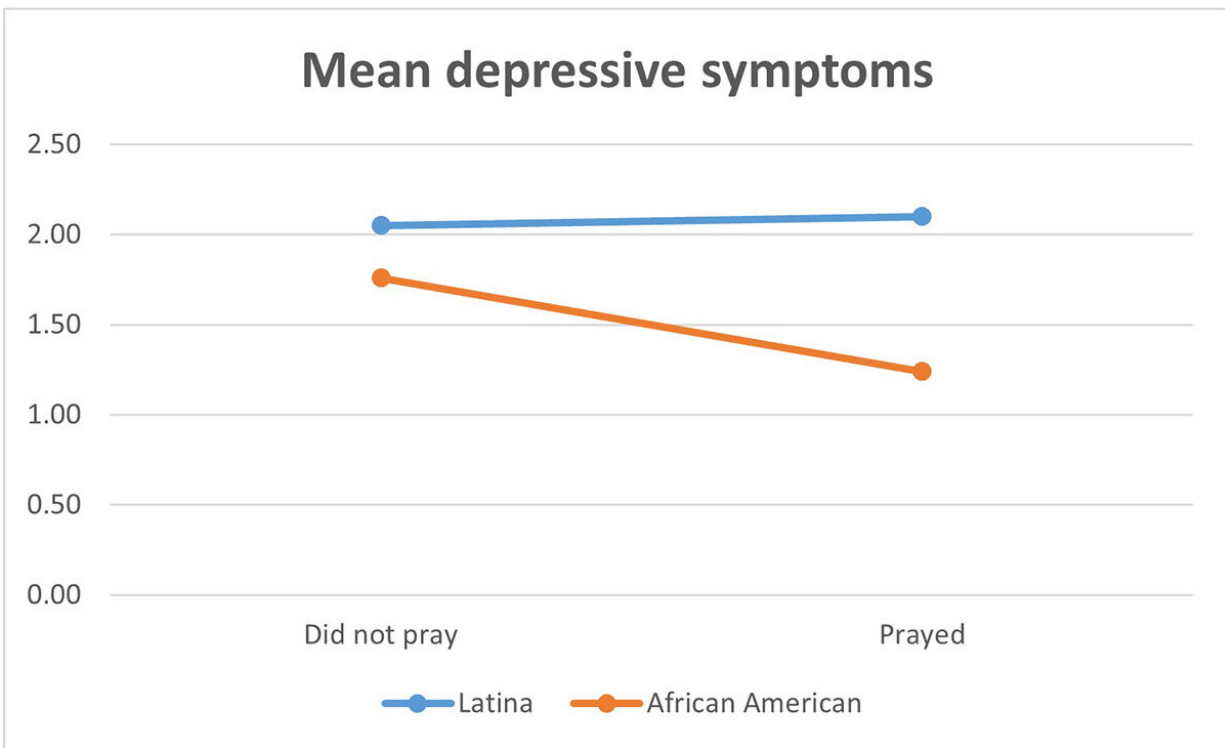
"What I found peculiar was that age was a protective factor against anxiety and depression," Mendy said. "Older women are at risk for being isolated and lonely and more prone to these types of mental health symptoms."

She said she also found it surprising that age was a buffer against mental health symptoms, given that older Black and Latina women in the [general population](#) were at greater risk of contracting COVID-19 and experiencing serious long-term health problems from it.

However, the team found a significant and [positive association](#) between women's concerns about the effects of COVID-19 and their mental health symptoms.

Lara-Cinisomo hypothesized that the study population may have included greater numbers of older adults who were more resilient. Accordingly, older Black and Latina women in the study may have benefited from the support and protection of family members.

"There is a growing body of research that suggests we can learn from the wisdom and perspectives of our older generations, who may have called upon coping strategies" they had used in the past to withstand the uncertainties and stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic, she said.



Depressive symptoms were higher among Latina women who prayed; however, these symptoms were lower among Black women who prayed. Credit: Sandraluz Lara-Cinisomo

"Black and Latina women are vulnerable populations. Research on the mental health effects of the pandemic on these women has been limited, which is why this study was so important," she said.

About 45% of those in the study used prayer as a coping mechanism during the pandemic, but the researchers found that its effects differed by race. Depressive symptoms were lower among Black women who prayed, whereas they were higher among Latina women who prayed.

Prayer was not associated with [anxiety symptoms](#), the team found.

"While prior research suggests that prayer has protective effects, we don't know what people were praying for or how often they were praying," Lara-Cinisomo said. "We need further research to explore the factors related to prayer that may have benefited Black women but not Latinas."

If prayer isn't yielding the benefits people expect, that may be an opportunity to look for other resources to help them cope, she said.

"We need to help our communities identify resources that are accessible to them and make sure the message is clear that you can reach out for support from your mental health provider or referrals from your physician at any time in your life, regardless of whether there's a global health crisis," Lara-Cinisomo said.

The findings also underscore that risk factors, experiences and coping strategies may differ among racial and ethnic groups, she said. "We know that the pandemic will have lasting effects, and this is just the start of our understanding of how it is impacting the mental health of Black and Latina women. We need to better understand the effects of job changes and employment insecurity for these women."

Prior to the pandemic, about 61% of the participants had household incomes below \$50,000 per year. Conversely, about 11% of the women reported annual household incomes of at least \$100,000.

Worries about losing their jobs or declines in their paid hours were associated with greater mental health symptoms, compared with women whose jobs and livelihoods were not threatened early in the pandemic, the team found.

Slightly more than 14% of those in the study indicated that they had lost their jobs, while more than 20% experienced reductions in their paid

hours. About 10% of the women surveyed expected to undergo job changes, but more than 55% reported no differences from their pre-pandemic employment. About 39% of the respondents said they worked from home.

The findings also underscored the positive mental health effects of health insurance. More than 82% of the participants said they had health insurance, and those with coverage reported significantly fewer [depressive symptoms](#) compared with the women who lacked these benefits. Far fewer of those surveyed—27%—indicated that they had paid sick leave, however.

More information: Sandraluz Lara-Cinisomo et al, Demographic and COVID-19-Related Factors Associated with Depressive and Anxiety Symptoms Among African American and Latina Women in a Midwestern State, *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities* (2023). [DOI: 10.1007/s40615-022-01495-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s40615-022-01495-0)

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Study examines COVID-19 pandemic's effect on Black, Latina women's mental health (2023, February 27) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-02-covid-pandemic-effect-black-latina.html>

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