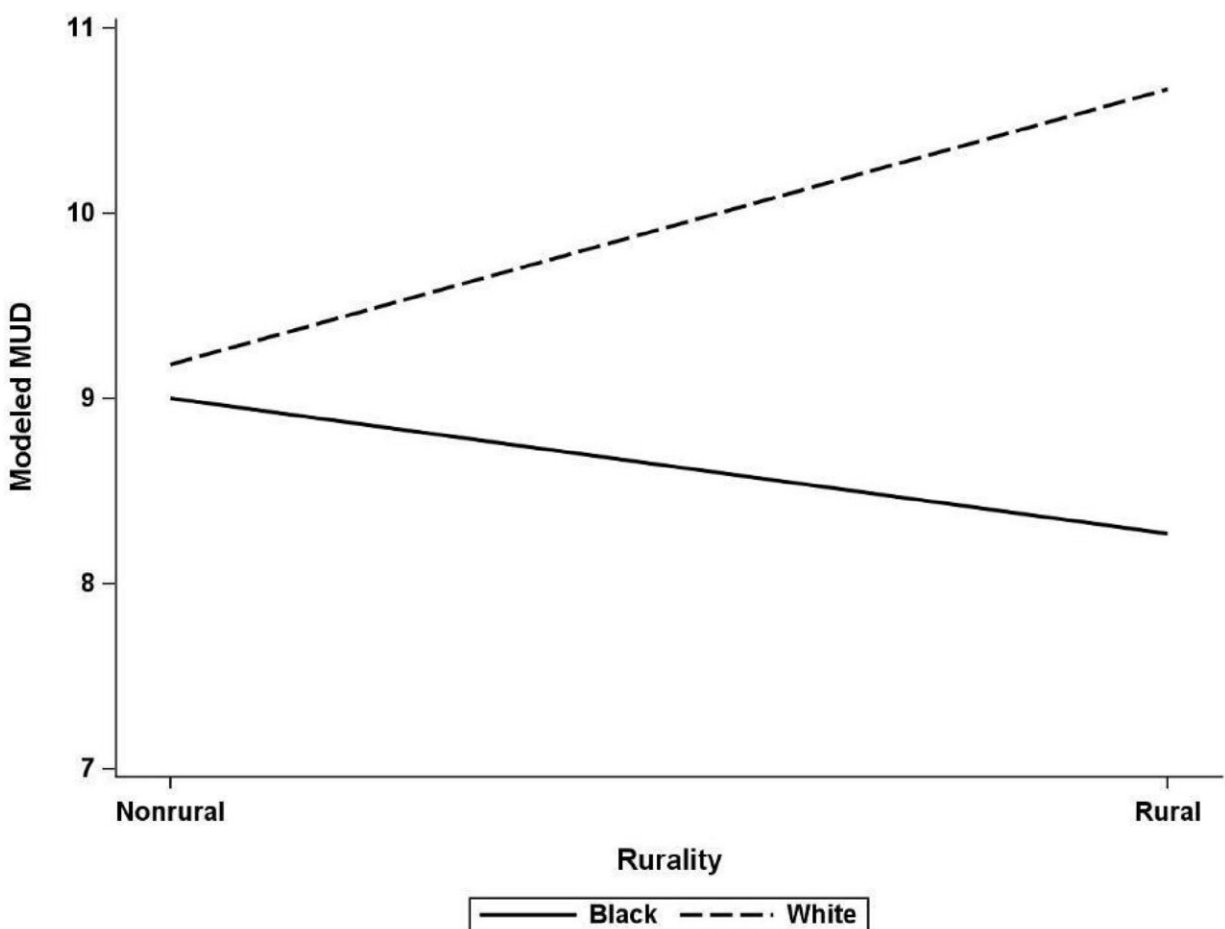


Black people in rural areas have greater mental health resiliency than white people, finds study

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Moderation effect of Black or White racial identity on the relationship between county-level rurality and number of mentally unhealthy days (MUD) in the past 30 days. Credit: *SSM - Mental Health* (2023). DOI: 10.1016/j.ssmmh.2023.100199

Black people living in rural areas of North Carolina were found to have better mental health than white people despite their exposure to various forms of racism and discrimination. This paradoxical finding was reported by researchers at Georgetown University and their colleagues online in the journal *Social Science & Medicine: Mental Health* on March 4, 2023.

"Studies have examined the greater health burdens experienced between people living in rural versus non-rural areas, yet few, if any, have looked at how mental health is experienced across [racial groups](#) in rural areas," says the study's lead author Caroline Efird, Ph.D., MPH, a postdoctoral research fellow in Georgetown's Racial Justice Institute and its Center for Men's Health Equity.

"White Americans commonly report worse mental health than Black Americans, but we wanted to know if this pattern would occur in rural areas, where all residents experience barriers to mental health and well-being. Interestingly, when white Americans' expectations of advantage go unmet, they are potentially susceptible to poor health outcomes, and this is what we think could be going on with rural white residents' relatively worse mental health."

Nearly 20% of people over the age of 18 in the United States live with a mental illness, yet rural adults are at an increased risk of being undiagnosed, according to a report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in 2018. Nearly 62% of places in the U.S. that are classified as mental health care shortage areas are located in rural or partially rural regions, which suggests that rural residents have less access to mental health care resources than nonrural residents.

Using data from the CDC's 2015-2019 Behavioral Risk Factor

Surveillance System (BRFSS) in North Carolina, survey respondents self-reported how many days a month they typically experience stress, depression, and problems with emotions (i.e., mentally unhealthy days). Those days were 10% greater for rural respondents than nonrural respondents.

However, this relationship was moderated by racial identity, with rural white respondents reporting 26% more mentally unhealthy days than rural Black people, nonrural Black people, and nonrural [white people](#).

"People who live in rural areas should not be thought of as a homogenous group who have uniform experiences and mental health needs, which is important because policy makers, researchers, and health care providers need to consider how mental health needs may differ for white and Black residents of rural communities," says Efird.

"Documenting the mechanisms that facilitate mental well-being for Black rural residents could support efforts to sustain and promote their mental health. We also need to determine which mechanisms contribute to rural white residents' relative mental health deficit so that we can tailor culturally relevant options to improve everyone's mental health."

While the scientists did not find significant variation in self-reports by gender or [social class](#), they suggest that future studies should help to affirm the importance of examining mental health in rural areas for people whose identities intersect across race, class, gender and other constructs.

Efird also noted that the researchers are interested in looking at community-based studies in [rural areas](#) to help them better determine how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted [rural residents](#) from all racial and ethnic backgrounds. The scientists could potentially use the BRFSS data from the year's following the peak of the COVID-19

pandemic to determine if trends in [mental health](#) differences have shifted or remained the same.

More information: Caroline R. Eford et al, Rural and nonrural racial variation in mentally unhealthy days: Findings from the behavioral risk factor surveillance system in North Carolina, 2015–2019, *Social Science & Medicine: Mental Health* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ssmmh.2023.100199](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmmh.2023.100199)

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