

How love, health, and neighborhood intersect for Black Americans

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August Jenkins, postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, explored how romantic relationships and neighborhood quality affect mental health for Black Americans. Credit: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Romantic relationships and neighborhood quality are both important

predictors of mental and emotional well-being. But the larger societal context also influences how these factors affect individuals. A new study from the University of Illinois looks at the intersection of relationships, neighborhood, and mental health for Black Americans.

"We know romantic [relationship](#) functioning is associated with [mental health](#) outcomes. But a lot of this work has focused on white Americans and less is understood about such connections for Black Americans. And there's reason to think these might be unique," says August Jenkins, postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, part of the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences at U of I. Jenkins is the paper's lead author.

Mental and emotional [health](#) are also impacted by socioecological and neighborhood factors. And because residential context is one of the most striking examples of structural racism in the U.S., Jenkins notes, limited access to better neighborhoods and neighborhood resources can contribute to mental health disparities for Black Americans.

"When we look at the effects of racism, we often focus on individual experiences of discrimination and only consider the interpersonal-level factors. But the neighborhood context is very salient for Black Americans for multiple reasons. It has a long, historical legacy," she says.

Jenkins analyzed data from the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) study, a longitudinal epidemiological study of health and aging that includes assessments of psychological factors. Using data from MIDUS's second and third wave, collected in 2004-2006 and 2013-2015, she included participants who identified as Black or African American, and who were in a romantic relationship at the first time point.

One of Jenkins' main findings was a significant effect of neighborhood

quality on mental health for both male and female participants. "People living in better-quality neighborhoods showed lower levels of negative affect, or mood, and higher levels of positive affect 10 years later, even when accounting for their initial levels of emotional health a decade prior. This really speaks to the powerful effect of the community you're in and the amount of stress or support that you might get from your neighborhood," she notes.

Surprisingly, the researchers found no overall effect of [romantic relationships](#) on mental well-being. Jenkins says this may be due to the study's focus on emotional affect rather than depressive symptoms or timespan between the first and second wave of data.

However, there was a significant interaction between relationship functioning and neighborhood quality for Black men, but not for women. Specifically, men showed more emotional distress if they reported better romantic relationship functioning but poorer neighborhood quality 10 years earlier.

"The way we interpret that finding is that Black men who are in good relationships want to provide the best for their partners. But they may have ambient stress that is signaling to them they're not safe or maybe not living up to the ideal of protecting and providing for their family, or that is interfering with their attempts to do so, which is distressing," she says.

Research on neighborhoods and mental health often focuses on the effects for women and [older adults](#), who tend to feel more vulnerable to potential safety threats, Jenkins explains. But there is increasing evidence highlighting that Black men are also particularly sensitive to environmental stressors and neighborhood context. Although the link between relationship functioning and [emotional health](#) did not vary by neighborhood quality for Black women, Jenkins notes that they may still

experience the effects of their neighborhood indirectly through their romantic partners.

The results indicate the importance of attending to broader ecological and intersectional factors when addressing structural racism and utilizing strength-based perspectives to highlight opportunities for resilience, Jenkins notes.

"The neighborhood context is an important place to start. And intervening at that level might have major mental health impacts for Black Americans," she concludes. "From a policy perspective, it motivates additional efforts to remediate disadvantage and invest in neighborhood beautification and elevation. And it also is encouraging because individuals and neighborhoods can exercise their own agency by investing in themselves, strengthening community social ties, safety resources, and physical environment."

The paper is published in the *Journal of Psychopathology and Clinical Science*. Authors are August Jenkins, Steffany Fredman, Alyssa Gamaldo, Valarie King, and David Almeida.

More information: August I. C. Jenkins et al, Love, health, and the 'hood: An examination of romantic relationship adjustment and perceived neighborhood quality as predictors of partnered Black Americans' long-term psychological health., *Journal of Psychopathology and Clinical Science* (2023). [DOI: 10.1037/abn0000821](https://doi.org/10.1037/abn0000821)

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