

Study finds Black adults are losing sleep over killings of unarmed Black individuals by police

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Black adults across the United States suffer from sleep problems

following exposure to news about unarmed Black individuals killed by police during police encounters, according to [new findings](#) published today (Feb. 5) in *JAMA Internal Medicine* from researchers at the University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine.

The issue, researchers said, may compound the risk factors that poor sleep already poses for many chronic and [mental health conditions](#), from depression to post-[traumatic stress disorder](#).

Researchers conducted two separate analyses examining changes in sleep duration in the U.S. non-Hispanic Black population before and after exposure to such deaths of unarmed Black individuals, using data on adult respondents in U.S. Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey (BRFSS) and the American Time Use Survey (ATUS) and data on officer-involved killings from the Mapping Police Violence database, a nationally representative sample of 100,000 Black adults.

"Exposure" was defined by the survey respondent's county or state of residence, capturing the myriad ways in which these events become known to the public, such as viewing [media coverage](#) or participating in community discussions on the topic. The researchers also examined the impacts of incidents of officer-involved killings of unarmed Black individuals covered widely in national media, examining sleep durations for respondents living anywhere in the U.S. surveyed before and after such incidents.

Worsening [sleep duration](#) primarily showed as increases in short sleep (fewer than seven hours a night) and very short sleep (fewer than six hours a night). The findings were specific to exposure to deaths of unarmed Black individuals during interactions with law enforcement, and no adverse impacts on sleep [health](#) were found for white respondents. In the BRFSS, 45.9% of Black respondents reported short sleep versus 32.6% of white respondents; the corresponding figures for

very short sleep were 18.4% versus 10.4%.

"These findings show that poor sleep health is another unfortunate byproduct of exposure to these tragic occurrences," said the study's lead author, Atheendar S. Venkataramani, MD, Ph.D., an associate professor of Medical Ethics and Health Policy. "Exposure of Black Americans to [police](#) violence—which disproportionately affects Black individuals—adversely impacts sleep health of these individuals, a critical keystone that further impacts our mental, physical, and emotional well-being."

The findings build on [previously published work](#) on the impact of structural racism—exposure to neighborhood violence, occupational stratification and shift work, and individual experiences of discrimination—on sleep health.

The researchers also noted that exposure to both lethal and nonlethal police encounters have been linked to poor health outcomes. Researchers suggested that poor sleep could be interrelated with these other health outcomes in several ways. For instance, awareness of the deaths of other Black individuals may diminish expectations about future well-being and longevity, induce hypervigilance, and increased stress including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), many of which have been associated with poor sleep.

In addition, researchers noted "spillover" consequences of exposure to these killings through prominent news media coverage, suggesting that trauma response efforts may need to be deployed well-beyond the communities in which the events occur.

More information: Officer-Involved Killings of Unarmed Black People and Racial Disparities in Sleep Health, *JAMA Internal Medicine* (2024). [DOI: 10.1001/jamainternmed.2023.8003](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamainternmed.2023.8003).

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Provided by Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania

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