

Study finds higher rates of arrest for Black adults with psychological disorders

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Black adults who are experiencing emotion dysregulation and/or psychological disorders, particularly Black men, are more likely to be arrested than are white American adults with symptoms of the same

level of severity, a new study has found.

Researchers analyzing data from a sample of over 1,500 adults found that this higher risk for arrest among Black people with mental health diagnoses was consistent even when controlling for other factors often linked to arrest, such as substance misuse and low socioeconomic status.

"What we found is that even when people were at the same symptom levels, particularly on the higher end of anger and aggression, the arrest rates were sometimes double, triple, even 5 times higher for Black Americans, and particularly for Black men," said lead author Briana Brownlow, who earned her Ph.D. in psychology at The Ohio State University in 2022. "And arrest rates for Black women were consistently higher than [white women](#), and at times they were tracking the same as or surpassing white men at the same level of symptom severity."

The study is rare for its examination of how racial mental health disparities interact with [racial differences](#) in risk for being arrested in the United States, the researchers said.

"This is not a difference between Black versus white—what we've identified is a difference in how the experience of being Black in America is impacting the outcome of--in this case--being disproportionately involved with the carceral system," said Brownlow, now an assistant professor in psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Duke University.

The research was [published](#) recently in the journal *Clinical Psychological Science*.

Among the study sample of 1,562 adults aged 18-82 living in the Chicago [metropolitan area](#), 62.5% of participants identified as white and 37.5% of participants identified as Black American.

Participants were categorized into three groups: having no evidence of a psychiatric diagnosis, having a lifetime diagnosis of a psychiatric or personality disorder, or meeting criteria for intermittent explosive disorder. The categories were based on diagnostic assessments of borderline personality disorder severity, antisocial personality disorder scores, psychopathy (gauged by measures of callous treatment of others, antisocial behaviors and lack of remorse), impulsive behavior and aggression.

Brownlow and colleagues constructed a series of statistical models to examine associations between individual [psychological disorders](#) and the likelihood of being arrested.

Results showed that across every psychological risk factor for arrest in adulthood, the arrest rate was higher among Black Americans than among white Americans. At the same level of anger, aggression, impulsivity or number of juvenile arrests, Black men's rate of arrest doubled that of white men.

Among women who experienced anger and impulsivity, Black women's rates of arrest were more than 5 times higher than white women's rates of arrest—and Black women's rates of arrest overall were more comparable with that of white men across most psychological risk factors.

Black adults are 5.9 times more likely to be incarcerated than white adults, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, and 40% of imprisoned people are Black—while constituting only 13% of the U.S. population. This study adds to the body of evidence suggesting that structural racial inequality—rather than individual characteristics—contributes to the overrepresentation of Black people in the carceral system, the researchers said.

"These data are objective and were tested again and again, and we got the same robust effect," said co-author Kassidie Harmon, a Ph.D. student in psychology at Ohio State. "Even when considering psychopathology, we still see these same patterns—a much higher rate of arrest for Black men and Black women than for white men and white women when symptom severity is equal."

The tendency to criminalize Black adults' psychological disorders poses not just the threat of arrest and related long-term economic and social ramifications, but also the threat of escalation to a life-or-death encounter with law enforcement, Brownlow said.

There are clinical implications of these findings, as well, said senior author Jennifer Cheavens, professor of psychology at Ohio State.

"A therapist might tell a client to express their anger to get through it, but this work tells us we have to consider potential consequences and not give problematic advice," she said. "People who are working in the mental health community need to understand that consequences of mental health symptoms are different for different people."

Additional co-authors of the study included Jolynn Pek, James L. Moore III and Emil Coccaro, all of Ohio State.

More information: Briana N. Brownlow et al, Criminalizing Psychopathology in Black Americans: Racial and Gender Differences in the Relationship Between Psychopathology and Arrests, *Clinical Psychological Science* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/21677026231217312](https://doi.org/10.1177/21677026231217312)

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