

**THE EFFECTS OF POLICE KILLINGS ON THE MENTAL
HEALTH OF AFRICAN AMERICAN INDIVIDUALS:
A REVIEW PAPER**

Honors Thesis

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Abstract

The purpose of this review is to develop a better understanding of how current racial issues influence the mental health of minority groups. It covers the death of two individuals, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, who were victims and killed by police violence in 2020. Within one week of George Floyd's video being released, it was found that anxiety and depression among African Americans shot to higher rates than experienced by any other racial or ethnic group. Their deaths sparked a wave of civic upheaval aimed within African Americans communities across the country. Research shows that police violence negatively impacts the health of many minority groups. Information for this review was acquired through government publications and peer reviewed articles. Qualitative data was gathered by investigating comments made on these events on various social media platforms. The aim of this paper is to educate people on the impact of racism, police violence and injustice on African Americans lives.

Key Words: African Americans, Police violence, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor

The Effects of Police Killings on Mental Health of African American Individuals

March 13th, 2020, Breonna Taylor, a 26- year-old emergency medical technician, was shot eight times, in her sleep, when officers raided her apartment in Louisville, Kentucky. May 25th, 2020, the nation watched the horrifying cellphone and surveillance video footage of George Floyd being tortured and murdered at the knee of a White police officer. These acts of violence should not be a surprise to us. A comprehensive literature analysis conducted by McLeod, Heller, Manze & et.al. (2020) stated that even though black Americans only make up 13% of the population in the United States, evidence reveals that black Americans account for 23% of those who are fatally shot by police officers. The authors concluded that data on non-lethal confrontations with police in the Black community is less accessible, despite the fact that such experiences may, to no one's surprise, result in emotional trauma, stress reactions, and depressive symptoms (McLeod, Heller, Manze & et.al. 2020). Based on the analysis of 11 research articles on this topic, McLeod, Heller, Manze et al. (2020) conclude that there is a high likelihood of a connection between interactions with police and negative effects on mental health in these communities.

According to the findings of a recent research by Schwartz & Jahn (2020), the risk of death at the hands of law enforcement officers is 3.23 times higher for black

Americans than for white Americans. The research looked at 5,494 fatalities in the United States that were associated with law enforcement between the years 2013 and 2017. The West and the South had far greater rates of fatal contacts with law enforcement officers than the Midwest and the Northeast did (Schwartz & Jahn (2020).

Research by Alang McAlpine & Hardeman et al. (2020) has suggested that police brutality effects health and well-being in several ways. Clearly, it has been shown to be the cause of physical injuries and death among black Americans. In 2018, they acquired data from a cross-sectional survey conducted among 4389 respondents living in metropolitan areas in the United States of America. They found that respondents who experienced negative encounters with the police, even if they judged these encounters to be unavoidable, in many cases ended up having greater levels of distrust of medical facilities. It is possible that this distrust may prevent people from engaging with the healthcare system, which will have an effect on the population's health (Alang, McAlpine & Hardeman, 2020).

Direct exposure to police brutality not only affects health in terms of actual injuries or death, and in terms of trust in other institutions, such as medical facilities, but it was also shown to affect the mental health of those who were not necessarily personally involved (Alang, McAlpine & Hardeman, 2020). This simply means that they might have come across the content by watching the news, talking to peers or while

browsing through their phone. It can be hypothesized that such content has a negative impact on the viewer's emotions, feelings or behavior.

The objective of this study is to address the effects of police killings on the mental health of minority groups. In the case of this review will primarily focus on people who have read or watched videos about police brutality through social media or other indirect means. In the next paragraph, the term "police brutality" will be defined in order to provide a better understanding of the recent occurrences.

What is police brutality?

Chaney and Robertson (2013) defined the term “police brutality” as “the use of excessive physical force or verbal assault and psychological intimidation” (Walker, 2011, p.579 as cited in Chaney & Robertson, 2013, p.3). Amnesty International is an organization that uses detailed research and determined campaigning, to help fight abuses of human rights worldwide. They published an article, Police violence (2022) stating that too often, in the United States and internationally, police use excessive force, sometimes fueled by racism, resulting in the death or severe injury of the individuals they are arresting. Law enforcement officials who use excessive force and cause death or injury seldom face consequences (Police violence, 2022). Police brutality may be considered a violation of human rights since it may involve beatings, physical abuse, murders, and discrimination (Police violence, 2022). Peeples (2020) analyzed statistics on racial bias and police violence. This report also discussed potential measures that may lessen racial

tensions and decrease police brutality. The author stated that law enforcement officers in the United States are responsible for the deaths of around one thousand people each year.

Police Brutality Against African Americans

Even while police brutality has a long and complex history in the United States, it is almost certain to be more prevalent among African Americans who have run-ins with the police. African Americans have unfairly borne the brunt of police murders. Gaston, Fernandes, & DeShay, (2021) looked at police use of lethal force at the junction of race, ethnicity, and gender. They found that, regardless of race or ethnicity, police killings of men were more common than killings of women. For each race or ethnicity, they reported that Black people had the highest probability of being murdered by police. At the nexus of these identities, the authors reasoned, black males were at the highest risk of being murdered by police.

According to Peebles (2020), statistics show that black men are 2.5 times more likely than white men to be murdered by police at some point in their lives, and that those killed by police shootings are just as likely to be unarmed, regardless of race. Peebles (2020) looked into research by Mark Hoekstra, who compared police responses to 911 calls in an effort to determine whether or not officers' racial bias affected their use of force. Based on analysis of data from over two million 911 calls in two US cities, the research found that white cops deployed to black communities were five times more

likely to open fire than black officers responding to calls from the same neighborhoods (Peeples, 2020).

Police Brutality and the Public's Perceptions

To better understand racial differences in responses to police brutality and protests such as the Black Lives Matter movement, Reika & Leach (2017) looked into recent polling and conducted their own series of investigations. They reported different linguistic analyses of description of images of protests and they found that Black participants understood the causes of protest better and have a more positive view of them than White Americans. Black Americans are of the opinion that there is a glaring racial imbalance in the way the police employ fatal force and the way the government responds to instances of this kind (Reika & Leach, 2017). White Americans have a tendency to hold the belief that the justice system, including the police and the courts, is impartial and that any racial inequality may be attributed to other reasons, such as differential engagement in criminal activity (Reika & Leach, 2017). According to these authors' analysis of several polls conducted at the national and local levels, White and Black Americans have long held views of the police and policing that opposed to one another. These views become even more divergent in the wake of the publicity surrounding police killings of unarmed black males. It is not surprising that more African American people are showing their support for protests since they believe that injustice is at the root of the problem (Reika & Leach, 2017).

Campbell & Valera (2020) conducted research on the perceptions of U.S. college students of the videos of police violence on social media. For their research they had 134 college students from different schools around the country fill out a survey regarding their experiences with the police and their view on police brutality leading to death of unarmed black males. The participants were all students of color from middle class to affluent families who attended both private and public universities. The significant findings of the research stated that it is very common that people learn about police violence through the use of social media; These students, after seeing videos online or from news programs on these events, exhibited PTSD-like symptoms including anger, fear, and sadness. Lastly the authors found that their race was a big factor in determining how they viewed these killings on social media. The authors concluded that college students of color who hear about police brutality via social media had increased anxiety and fear of potential future confrontations with law enforcement. Students' perceptions of police brutality in the media varied by race (Campbell & Valera, 2020)

Although White and Black Americans have different views on the police and their use of force, it is evident from the research cited that African Americans are the ones being negatively impacted by police brutality both physically and mentally. These tragedies not only affect the victims, but their families, friends and loved ones. The purpose of this study is to validate the findings of similar investigations on the effects of these occurrences on the mental health of African Americans. The deaths of George

Floyd and Breonna Taylor, both of which occurred in 2020, are the examples of police violence investigated in this report.

Some Current Cases of Police Brutality

Cecil (2022) covered the death of a 26- year old African American woman, Breonna Taylor, that occurred in the morning of March 13, 2020. According to the paper, Taylor was killed in her apartment, in Louisville, Kentucky as police officers served a no-knock warrant which was obtained in a drug investigation. The residence was owned by Breonna Taylor, who moments before her death had fallen asleep in her room while watching a movie with her boyfriend, Kenneth Walker (Cecil,2022). Police forcefully entered her home minutes after firing 10 shots from the outside of her apartment with the goal of executing the warrant (Cecil, 2022).

The death of George Floyd was described in a paper by Dixon & Dundes (2020). On May 25th, 2020 Minneapolis police officers were called to a shop that had made a complaint regarding a counterfeit \$20 (Dixon & Dundes, 2020). Mr. Floyd, who "matched the description" of the suspect, repeatedly implored the authorities not to kill him after being found in a parked vehicle (Dixon & Dundes, 2020). The authors reported that he was unarmed. As officers were trying to detain Floyd and attempt to transport him there, he protested, claiming he was claustrophobic and had anxiety (Dixon & Dundes 2020). Floyd stated that he had difficulty breathing while in the police cruiser; this led to the cops lifting him out and placing him on the ground (Dixon & Dundes 2020). In the

footage of the event, Floyd continued to warn the authorities that he was having trouble breathing, a health issue that was aggravated as Derrick Chauvin the police officer, pressed his knee against Floyd's neck for 9 minutes and 29 seconds (Levenson, 2021).

Breonna Taylor and George Floyd are two recent and well-known victims that have been added to the list of many black people that have been killed by a white police officer. These tragic encounters with law enforcement officers have torn apart so many families, saddened many loved ones. Many victims, like Mr. Floyd, have left behind children. In spite of the fact that not all people who are killed by police officers end up in the headlines, these two victims gained widespread recognition. In many protests around the country, their names were repeatedly shouted. They became emblematic of the societal problems of racism and violence.

An article by De Witte (2021) looked into different studies done by Stanford researchers that have determined just how much of a psychological toll it took on people in America, particularly black Americans. According to this article coming out of the Covid-19 crisis, national surveys were tracking how the mental health of the population was being affected. The author reported that more than one-third of Americans reported feeling sadness in the week after the death of Mr. Floyd. Black Americans experienced grief at a much higher rate. Nearly one half of all black Americans surveyed by these researchers reported feeling angry or sad. In the wake of Floyd's death, nearly one million more black Americans screened positive for depression

(De Witte, 2021). Research found that depression increased by 3.2% for black Americans and 1.2% for white Americans. The author mentioned that that 2% difference in increase is equal to an additional 900,000 individuals.

There have been several public arguments over police violence and racism since the killing of Breonna Taylor and the release of the video footage of George Floyd in 2020. Following these events there were numerous protests to persuade the police and the government to take action, whether it was modifying law-enforcement practices or even dismantling police agencies. This research addresses the effects of police killings on the mental health of African American individuals. It is intended to provide a better understanding of how current racial issues such as the ones aforementioned are affecting minority groups.

Method

Participants

Data were gathered by exploring comments made on different social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, New York times comment section which had a space for students to write and express how they felt about Breonna Taylor and George Floyd's killings. Many use these platforms as a way to protest, advocate and share opinions on these events. Only comments from African Americans were selected. To filter out confounding variables such as fake profiles, reposts/retweets, trolls, cyberbullies, a list of criteria was created for comment/ profile selection:

1. A profile picture was required. It had to be the picture of the user.
2. The comment/ post had to be original. It could not be a repost or retweet.
3. The activity on the account was also taken into consideration. How active is this user? When was their last post?
4. Certain applications such as Facebook, also report when the profile was created. That is another piece of information that was also looked at
5. The profiles were examined to make sure that they had other posts on their account
6. Comments had to be recent. They had to be within the timeframe (2020) of both the killings.
7. Comments had to be from different individuals meaning, each comment was from a different profile.

With these selection criteria a total of fifty comments were gathered from different individuals. Social media is not the safest place, meaning there is a lot of identity theft and invasion of privacy. Therefore, many other characteristics such as the individuals' age, level of education or what area of the country they lived in.

Coding

The qualitative data were analyzed through coding. Coding is the process of categorizing data by assigning it to predetermined sections called codes (Baralt, M., 2012). Codes or themes are labels applied to complete or partial texts in order to

categorize essential ideas without losing the context in which those concepts are found (Miles and Huberman 1994 as cited in Bradley, et. al, 2007).

Throughout the comments, the following words or expressions were recorded and counted: Anger, Disgusted, Heartbroken/grief, Hate, Depressed/sadness, Powerless/Hopeless, Feeling belittled. For a better understanding of these Codes, their operational definitions were taken into account. The American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology was used to provide accurate definitions of these terms below.

Definitions

Angry: anger is a feeling of tension and hostility that comes from frustration, real or imagined harm done by another person, or a sense of unfairness. Aggression is different from anger, but anger is a big part of what makes people act aggressively, which is a behavior that is meant to hurt someone or something. Even though they affect each other, anger is neither necessary nor enough for aggression to happen. Excessive anger may create physical and mental health concerns (VandenBos, 2015).

Disgust: Disgust is a strong aversion, for instance, to the taste, smell, or touch of anything judged unpleasant, or towards an individual or action deemed morally repugnant (VandenBos, 2015).

Suffering/ Heartbroken: is the physical or mental feeling of pain or extreme anguish in reaction to a physical trauma or a major event, especially one that is frightening or includes loss. This can also be identified as Grief, which is grief following

a severe loss, generally a loved one's death. Grief causes physical suffering, separation anxiety, bewilderment, desire, obsessive pondering on the past, and future dread. Grief may be regret for something lost, guilt for something done, or grief for oneself (VandenBos, 2015).

Hated- a violent emotion characterized by extreme sentiments of loathing, rage, and often a desire to do damage. Also known as hatred. Acts of violence motivated by hate or prejudice towards the group to which the victim belongs (VandenBos, 2015).

Depressed: Depression is a negative emotional state that gets in the way of daily life. It can range from unhappiness and discontent to extreme sadness, pessimism, and hopelessness (VandenBos, 2015).

Powerlessness: Individuals who lack or think they lack control or influence over things or events that affect their well-being (mental or physical), personal life, or society (VandenBos, 2015). *Hopelessness:* is the feeling that you will never feel better or that your situation will get better. Hopelessness is common in severe episodes of major depression and other depressive disorders, and it is often a factor in suicides and suicide attempts (VandenBos, 2015).

Belittling: is defined as doing, saying, or thinking in a manner that reduces the perceived worth or status of the target or someone (VandenBos, 2015)

Results

The coding process generated a total of 113 quotes out of the 50 comments.

Quotes can be defined as the amount of time the individual reported feeling the emotions aforementioned throughout the comments. They were classified into 8 different codes:

Angry, Scared, Disgust, Suffering/heartbroken, Hated, Depressed, Powerless/hopeless,

Feeling belittled. The percentage of quotes within each code was calculated. The

following were depicted to have the highest number: Depressed (19.8%),

Suffering/Heartbroken (17%) and Feeling belittled (16%).

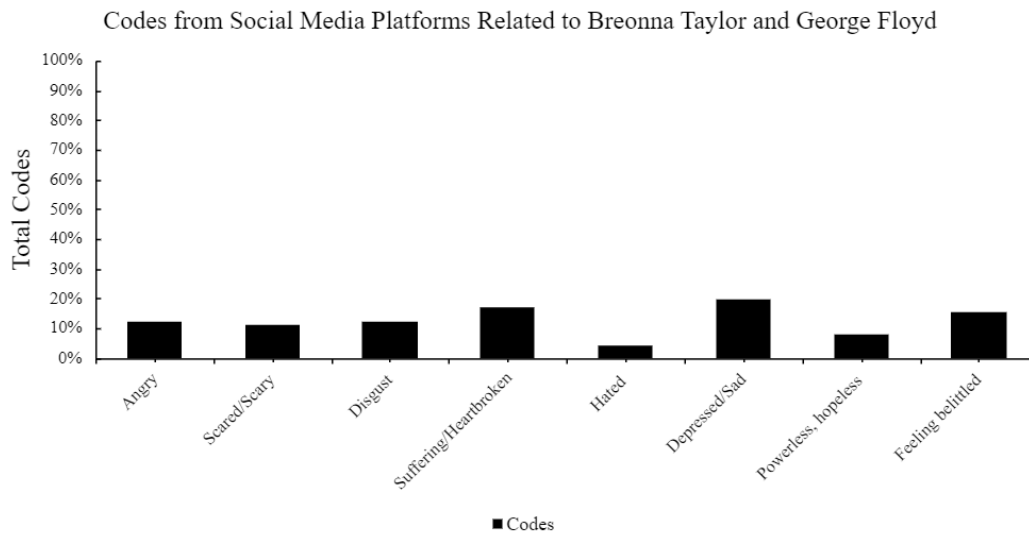


Figure 1. *This graph depicts the percentages of codes from comments gathered on social media platforms related to the death of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd.*

As seen in Figure 1, most of the individuals reported feeling upset and very sad (19.8%) as a result of both homicides. The category that ranked second highest was suffering and being heartbroken. This category accounts for 17% of the quotes and these individuals reported some sort of pain either physical or mental to these traumatic events. 16% reported that seeing these videos online made them feel inferior to others, like decreasing their worth. Although less prominent, the categories of Angry (12.1%), Disgust (12%), Scared (11%), Powerless/Hopeless (8%) and Hated (4.3%) nonetheless account for a significant portion of the data.

Discussion

As noted throughout this paper, the death of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd really impacted the nation. Based on this review, the representation of police violence on social media or news programs really takes a toll on the mental health of African Americans. The data gathered showed that 19.8% of the codes were from African Americans reporting that they felt depressed when it comes to these events. A few of the following quotations may be found in the depressed code: *"I'm just depressed"*; *"I have been so intensely depressed about the murder of George Floyd"*; *"...and I'm sad"*. This confirms the findings of Campbell & Valera, (2020), that stated that black college students reported feeling PTSD like symptoms such as fear, anger and sadness. And depression is defined as extreme sadness. In this research, although they were not as prominent as feeling depressed, many reported that they felt scared (11%) and angry

(12.1%). Many people, even in this day and age, have the tendency to downplay the seriousness of the mental illness that is depression. It is known for having many detrimental consequences on someone's life. These individuals' lives were deeply affected by the deaths of the victims, despite the fact that they were not personally acquainted with the deceased.

17% stated that they have experienced the emotional anguish associated with the tragic events that occurred. It seems as though they were mourning with the families of those who were lost. Several of the people gave the following statements: *"It's painful"*; *"I was so sad & heartbroken that I live in a world like this"*. The Black Community experienced the consequences of police brutality on a personal level because of the strong social and cultural ties that exist between them and the victims. *"I feel like I may be another George Floyd or Brianna Taylor tragedy due to hate"*; *"My heart aches..."*. These quotes are examples that black people who learn about police brutality in the news or online also black people experience the consequences of it. They are able to relate it to it more. They are the same race and a target by many laws' enforcement officers as aforementioned. Blacks are more likely to get killed.

These events create panic and fear in many people that identify as Black. *"I'm scared for myself, for little brother, for my mother...for my father who is younger than George Floyd"*; *"Being a black person in this country is scary"*; *"Every day that I step out of the house I worry for myself and my family"*; *"I fear that my child's life could be*

taken at any point...” These are quotes from the scared category that shows that African American fear for their lives as a result of these traumatic events.

“It's heinous because it reveals that many in authority believe that people like me should be treated as 2nd class citizens”; “Because of situations like this I feel that this had led to many in my community to truly believe in themselves as inferior”; “My family will be black, and we're not valued.”; “Treated without respect, without dignity, and without sympathy.” Many of the respondents (16%) said that they had feelings of being belittled, which suggests that the manner in which George Floyd and Breonna Taylor were handled by these police officers have left them feeling as if they are of lesser value in the eyes of society. As was noted before, Mr. Floyd held an officer's knee on the back of his neck for almost nine minutes. It's very possible that it could have been another young black male. The behavior of the police officer brings into question the perceived value or dignity of African Americans.

Although this study did validate previous findings there were several methodological constraints. The sample size (50) was insufficient implying that it does not represent the overall population concerned. Smaller sample sizes make it harder to spot patterns and draw reliable outcomes in research. Additional studies examining demographics like age, gender, and geographic area would be useful in determining who is most impacted by the problem of police brutality and where. Due to the fact that this

is an academic research paper, the submission of this study was subject to several time constraints.

Conclusion

Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, two recent and high-profile deaths, have been added to the list of unarmed black people murdered by white police officers. This study uses its results to shed light on the devastating effects of racism, police brutality, and injustice on the lives of African Americans. Police brutality may include things like beatings, physical abuse, killings, and discrimination, all violating human rights. African Americans are disproportionately affected physically and mentally by police violence, including those who learn about it via social media or the news. Fear spreads across the black community as a result of this. Consistent with previous research, this study confirms that these events harm African Americans' mental health.

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