

More research is breaking new ground on often-overlooked group: African American youth

One study found that children’s personal experience of racial discrimination significantly predicted greater childhood anxiety symptoms, for both boys and girls. It also stressed that these experiences occur early in childhood and have important implications for children’s mental health.

By Jeffery M. Leving | Dec 14, 2022, 8:00am CST

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A sign advertises Father’s Day gifts as a shopper buys building materials in the background at Atlanta Home Depot store on June 8 , 2006. | AP

A recently published study on how African American fathers envision prevention programs that support African American boys who are at risk for depression and/or aggressive behavior is a rare look by researchers at a group that is disproportionately impacted by societal ills.

One of the study's authors, Associate Professor Otima Doyle of the University of Illinois at Chicago Jane Addams School of Social Work, says studies focusing on the behavioral health needs of young African American boys, as well as the strengths, contributions, and challenges faced by fathers (especially men living away from the child) have been on the rise.

But, she said, there is much to still be learned.

The **study** Doyle co-authored was published this year in the Journal of Child and Family Studies and centered on how a father-focused approach to programs can prevent the onset of depression and aggression among African American youth. Doyle conducted extensive interviews with 30 African American fathers whose biological sons, ranging in age from 8 to 12, were at individual, family, or community-level risk for developing aggressive behaviors and/or depressive symptoms.

Despite the negative perception among much of society, African American fathers are often involved in their children's lives, even when they do not live with their children and when they are no longer romantically involved with their children's mother.

Opinion

Numerous fatherhood interventions have been developed, yet Doyle and her colleagues believe that "it is important to look deeper into the lived experiences of African American fathers."

Many African American youth are exposed to risk factors that can lead to the development of aggressive behaviors and depressive symptoms, such as lack of neighborhood safety, poverty, and racism. Moreover, "African Americans' experiences with mood disorders, such as depression, may be particularly chronic and burdensome, and they are less likely than their White peers to receive care," Doyle said in the study.

"Those who receive treatment may be misdiagnosed due to nuanced clinical presentations of depression, which, on the surface, might look like anger, aggression or irritability," she said. "Such misdiagnoses increase the risk of suicide, which rose by 60% between 2001 and 2017 among African American adolescent males."

In the study, fathers emphasized the importance of a strength-based approach that recognizes the reality of their lives, and they endorsed group interventions characterized by a safe space, bonding opportunities with fathers and sons, and hands-on activities.

The study's findings, Doyle said, have direct implications for father-focused interventions.

“They highlight the importance of creating safe spaces for African American fathers to interact with each other and their sons, as well as the need to incorporate — or center — kinesthetic activities,” Doyle said.

The findings of this study are important. But it's also significant that this research, along with several other recent studies, are focusing on the often-overlooked needs of African American males.

Other similar recent studies **include** “African American Children's Racial Discrimination Experiences and Mental Health” from psychology faculty members at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia.

That study found that children's personal experience of racial discrimination significantly predicted greater childhood anxiety symptoms, for both boys and girls. It also stressed that these experiences occur early in childhood and have important implications for children's mental health.

Another recent **study**, “The Role of Parents' School Climate Perceptions on Attainment Expectations for Black Middle Schoolers” examined whether parents' perceptions regarding how they and their children are treated in school were related to parents' own attainment expectations. The results also provided insights into the ways in which African American parents beliefs about the school environment impact their beliefs about their children.

While these are only a few of the many studies that are finally focusing on African American youth, as Doyle said, there is indeed much yet to be learned. Let's hope researchers continue on this path.

Jeffery M. Leving is founder and president of the Law Offices of Jeffery M. Leving Ltd., and is an advocate for the rights of fathers.

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