How Racism, Activism and Stress Affect Black Youth

Young Black adults who experience racism and participate in antiracist activism reported psychological and physiological stress.

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A North Carolina State University (NC State) study highlighted a correlation between racism, stress and antiracist activism in young Black people.

In particular, Black youth in their late teens and 20s experienced stress caused by both racism and fighting racism.

“The burden of ‘solving’ racism falls largely on the people most affected by racism,” Elan Hope, corresponding author of the study and associate professor of psychology at NC State said in a press release. “The more we understand that burden, the better able we will be to support the people who are doing the work.”

The study assessed 443 Black adolescents (ages 14 to 17) and 447 Black emerging adults (ages 18 to 29). Participants were asked questions aimed to examine psychological and physiological stress attributed to anticipation of racist events. The survey also asked how much and to what degree participants engaged in antiracism activism. For example, low-risk activism included wearing a Black Pride T-shirt, while high-risk activities included protesting publicly demonstration. Participants were also asked the degree to which they had experienced various instances of racism.

Researchers found that participants who experienced more racism-related physiological stress were more likely to engage in high-risk activism.

Using statistical models, the study also attempted to discern whether participants with high stress levels were more likely to engage in high-risk activism or whether they were more likely to engage in such activism because they had higher stress levels.

Among emerging adults, higher levels of physiological stress were linked to high-risk activism, and engaging in high-risk activism was associated with higher levels of physiological stress.

This was not the case for adolescents. The models suggested that high levels of physiological

stress were, in fact, associated with high-risk activism but such activism was not compounding physiological stress.

Both adolescents and emerging adults reported racism-related psychological stress and engaging in low-risk activism. This relationship was reciprocal for emerging adults but, again, not for adolescents.

“These findings are important for youth organizers and adults who work with youth on social justice initiatives,” Hope said in the press release. “To support youth, it is important to help them process the stress associated with racism and antiracism activism. While young people seek to make changes in their communities, they must also pay attention to how their activism is impacting their own mental and physical health. Our findings show that these relationships might be different as people transition from adolescence to young adulthood.”

To learn more about the affects of racism and stress, read "Systemic Racism Increases the Risk of Psychosis Among Minorities."

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