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Spring 2019

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Metzger, Leah, "Don't Shoot: Race-Based Trauma and Police Brutality" (2019). *Orphans and Vulnerable Children Student Scholarship*. 7.

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Don't Shoot: Race-Based Trauma and Police Brutality

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Introduction

With the growing conversation on police brutality against black Americans, there is an increasing need to understand the consequences this has on black children. Research is now showing that children and adults can experience race-based trauma, which can have profound effects on psychological and physical well-being, and can also impact communities as a whole. The threat and experience of police brutality and discrimination can be experienced individually or vicariously, and traumatic symptoms can vary depending on the individual. Children are especially vulnerable to the psychological and physical effects of police brutality and the threat thereof because of their developmental stages. Definitions and prevalence of police brutality will be discussed, as well as race based trauma, the effects of this trauma, and the impact on communities as a whole.

Police Brutality

Definitions

Ambiguity surrounds the discussion on police brutality, leaving it difficult for many to establish what it actually is. For the purpose of this paper, police brutality is defined as, “a civil rights violation that occurs when a police officer acts with excessive force by using an amount of force with regards to a civilian that is more than necessary” (U.S. Legal, 2016). Excessive force is more open to interpretation and subjectivity, and is considered to be using force beyond what is reasonable and appropriate for the situation. Because of the subjective nature of excessive force and the fact that police are allowed to use physical force when necessary, it can be difficult to prove that the force used was excessive (Champlin, Oldham, Salvatoriello, Zhao, & Fang, 2017). It is clear that force should be used minimally and only when absolutely necessary. Police

brutality is a violation of a citizen's fifth and fourteenth amendment, in regards to protection of the laws and cruelty (U.S. Legal, 2016).

In this conversation, it is important to note that police brutality is not limited to physical attacks. Although excessive physical force is often what one thinks of when considering police brutality, the definition also extends to false arrests, verbal abuse, unnecessary intimidation, and racial profiling (Champlin, Oldham, Salvatoriello, Zhao, & Fang, 2017). Examples of physical police brutality can include, but aren't limited to, pepper spray, batons, tasers, hitting, choking, throwing, and sexual abuse. Contrary to physical force, which police are allowed to use when necessary, verbal abuse is never permitted by law or policy. However, as with excessive force, verbal abuse is difficult to prove (Champlin, Oldham, Salvatoriello, Zhao, & Fang, 2017).

Prevalence and Nature

Due to the subjectivity of the definitions for police brutality and excessive force, it can be difficult to get a solid grasp on the statistics. Nonetheless, more and more sources are emerging, dedicated to uncovering what is really going on in America. In 2017, a study found that police killed 1,147 people, and that black people made up 25% of this number. However, black people only made up 13% of the population at the time, meaning this population is overrepresented (Mapping Violence, 2019). In addition to this, 30% of black victims were unarmed, compared to 21% of white victims. The report concluded that black people are three times more likely to be killed by police than white people (Mapping Violence, 2019). The 2017 Police Violence Report found that, "black people were more likely to be killed by police, more likely to be unarmed and less likely to be threatening someone when killed." Moreover, black children are also more likely to be perceived as older and more dangerous than white children. A study in 2016 found that police officers estimated black youth to be approximately 4.59 years older than

they actually were. Moreover, officers are more likely to view black youth as superhuman and as having a higher pain tolerance, leading them to dehumanize them and justify the physical abuse (Hall, Hall, & Perry, 2016).

The statistics also vary depending on where you live, with some cities having higher levels of police brutality than others. For example, a black person is seven times more likely to be killed by police in Oklahoma than in Georgia. When looking at the one hundred largest police departments in the nation, thirteen of these kill black men at a higher rate than the U.S. murder rate (Mapping Violence, 2019). Additionally, of the people killed by these one hundred departments, 39% were black despite only being 21% of those populations. Ultimately, the report found that 48% of unarmed people killed by these departments were black, meaning they kill unarmed black people at four times the rate they do unarmed white people (Mapping Violence, 2019).

There seems to be an extreme lack of accountability in these cases as well. Of the 1,147 killings by police in 2017, an officer was only charged with a crime in thirteen of these cases, which is less than 1% (Sinyangwe, Deray, & Packnett, 2017). Not only is there a lack of legal repercussions, but departments will also withhold information from the public as well. Of the 1,147 killings in 2017, only 569 cases (50%) released the officers name. Of these cases, at least 48 had shot or killed someone before, and 12 had multiple prior shootings (Sinyangwe, Deray, & Packnett, 2017). The argument can be made that a shooting is the only effective and safe way to disarm/stop a suspect. However, Mapping Violence (2017) found that the violent crime rate in a city did not make it any more or less likely for police departments to kill people. For example, Buffalo and Newark both have high crime rate but low police violence rates, while Spokane and Bakersfield have high rates of police violence despite their relatively low crime rates.

Currently, only four states (DE, IA, RI, TN) have laws in place that require police to attempt other types of force, when reasonable, before shooting someone. In 2017, in cases where someone had a knife, police officers did not attempt any other use of force before shooting 69% of the time. Overall, there would have been 638 fewer deaths in 2017, a 57% reduction, if police had not killed people who weren't posing a threat with a gun (Sinyangwe, Deray, & Packnett, 2017). Finally, it is important to note that the above statistics are looking at shootings committed by police officers specifically, and does not take into consideration physical or verbal assaults that may occur.

Perceptions from the Police

A study from the U.S. Department of Justice (2000) looked at the attitudes and reports of police officers regarding issues surrounding police brutality. Not only did 84% report witnessing a fellow officer use more force than necessary, but 61% indicated that police do not always report the abuse of fellow officers, even when it is a serious criminal violation. Surprisingly, 67.4% reported that police officers who reported fellow officers were likely to receive a "cold shoulder" treatment. Finally, "a majority (52.4 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that it is not unusual for police officers to "turn a blind eye" to other officers' improper conduct" (Weisburd, Greenspan, Hamilton, Williams, & Bryant, pg. 3, 2000). This study indicates that police officers themselves have recognized the abuse that can occur, but also the tendency and risk of ignoring such misconduct.

Race Based Trauma

Definitions and Justification

Trauma is a relatively new concept, and researchers are constantly making new discoveries on what trauma is and the effects it can have on the human body and communities.

For clarification in the coming pages, definitions need to be set in place on several terms. For the purpose of this paper, trauma will be defined as a violent event marked by sudden or extreme force from an outside agent that is perceived or experienced by an individual as shocking, which results in intrusion, numbing, and/or arousal (Carter, 2007). Due to this definition, it stands that this violence can be psychological or emotional in nature, rather than just physical. Carter (2007) argued that people of color are likely to find situations that involve race to be stressful, as they may be expected to represent their whole race and be subjected to various forms of racism. Individual events themselves, as well as the cumulative effect of these events across time, can be experienced as traumatic and result in psychological pain because it poses a threat to one sense of self.

Therefore, it stands that racism or race-based events can produce trauma because it is a form of victimization that can impact one's sense of self or well-being. Furthermore, it is essential recognize the various forms race based trauma can take. Bryant-Davis and Ocampo (2005) claim that threats to someone's well-being can be intentional or not, individual or systematic, and vague or direct. Regardless of the form racism takes, they are a form of emotional abuse, and can therefore can be experienced as traumatic. Here, an important conclusion is reached, that, "in the case of racial discrimination, racial harassment, or discriminatory harassment, the client's subjective appraisal of the experience is valid" (Carter, pg. 73, 2007). If an individual experiences and perceives an event to be negative (pain or threat of pain), sudden, and uncontrollable, an event can be considered to be traumatic. Therefore, racism and race-based events can be experienced as traumatic by individuals and result in post trauma symptoms (Carter, 2007).

Racism is defined as, “a system of oppression that is based on racial categories and domination that designate one group as superior and the other(s) as inferior,” which is then used to justify inequity, exclusion, or domination (Helms, Nicolas, & Green, 2012). Racial profiling is then defined as any police initiated action where the police identify an individual as being, or have been, engaged in criminal activity based on their race, ethnicity, or national origin rather than individual behavior or information (Ramirez, Farrell, & McDevitt, pg. 67, 2000).

Individuals can experience traumatic reactions from incidents that involve racial profiling and police brutality, which in turn can negatively impact both their physical and psychological well-being (Aymer, 2016). The next two sections will discuss both physical and psychological repercussions of racial profiling and police brutality in more depth.

Psychological Effects

When an individual experiences a trauma, reactions typically fall into three main categories: intrusion, arousal, and numbing/avoidance. For intrusion, one may have thoughts or images that intrude on their daily life, and continue to experience the event. In regards to arousal, after a traumatic event one may experience sleeplessness, become hyperactive, and have a difficult time concentrating on things. Finally, in avoidance or numbing, someone might stay away from the people or places that remind them of the event, or have memory loss concerning certain features of their experience (Carter, 2007).

Stress is an essential component in the conversation on race-based trauma. Research has shown that stress levels increase when an event is perceived to be ambiguous, negative, unpredictable, and uncontrollable. Even when one is able to adapt and perform under chronic stress, psychological and physiological changes are still occurring (Carter, 2007). However, not all stress is negative. Walkley and Cox (2013) describe childhood stress as being placed on a

continuum. One end has normative and healthy levels of stress that help children build resilience and coping skills. The problem arises when stress shifts to the other end and becomes traumatic, resulting in feelings of helplessness and horror. When this becomes frequent and prolonged, it becomes toxic stress, having profound effects on a child's brain development and health.

Walkley and Cox (2013) go on to describe how when a child experiences trauma repeatedly, their brains develop 'use dependent' alterations involved in the stress response system. They become hypervigilant and overstimulated, which can lead to struggles in emotional self-regulation, anger, physical aggression, and putting emotions into words.

In addition to this, threat of exposure can also have profound effects on psychological well-being since, "responses of vigilance, worry, rumination, and anticipatory stress can prolong the negative effect of stressors and exacerbate the negative effects of stressful experiences on health" (Williams, Lawrence, & Davis, pg. 113, 2019). This study concluded that if someone has a heightened vigilance of discrimination, they are more likely to have depressive symptoms and sleep difficulties. Other symptoms associated with race-based trauma include cognitive impairments, including memory loss and difficulty remembering things (Helms, Nicolas, & Green, 2012). One may also experience diminished self-worth, have trouble maintaining and forming relationships, and have feelings of guilt, shame, confusion, and self-blame (Carter, 2007) (Helms, Nicolas, & Green, 2012). Children are especially vulnerable to these effects due to their age and developmental stages.

Complex trauma is a trauma that occurs repeatedly and cumulatively, most often interpersonal in nature and involving harm or maltreatment, and occurs at developmentally vulnerable times in life, such as childhood and adolescence (Courtois, 2019). Effects of complex trauma are wide and diverse and adversities include a variety of things, including race-based

incidents and discrimination. Psychological effects of complex trauma in children can include difficulties in attachment, affect regulation, behavioral control, dissociation, cognition, and self-concept. Specifically, children who have experienced complex trauma may have difficulty with perspective taking, social isolation, impulsive behavior, self-destructive behavior, executive functioning, planning and anticipating, language development, and self-esteem (Cook, Spinazzola, Ford, Lanktree, Blaustein, Cloitre, & Mallah, 2017). Thus, it stands that children and adolescents who experience race-based discrimination and the fear/threat of police brutality are placed at a higher risk for experiencing the effects listed above. These effects, although formed in childhood, often last in adulthood and become a lifelong struggle.

Physical Effects

In addition to the psychological effects of race-based trauma and the threat of police brutality, there are also a variety of physical effects. Carter (2007) determined that regardless of economic status and resources, research continues to show that people of color fare worse than white people. Both racism and discrimination have been shown to be a major contributing factor in the findings of health and mental health disparities.

There is growing research on the physical effects of discrimination. Thus far, discrimination has been positively correlated with, “increased allostatic load, inflammation, shorter telomere length, coronary artery calcification, dysregulation in cortisol, and greater oxidative stress” (Williams, Lawrence, & Davis, pg. 112, 2019). This study also found that discrimination has positive associations with adverse cardiovascular outcomes, BMI and obesity, hypertension and blood pressure, engagement in risky behaviors, alcohol misuse, and poor sleep. Furthermore, black adolescents who reported high levels of discrimination had higher levels of stress hormones, blood pressure, and inflammation by the time they were 20 (Williams,

Lawrence, & Davis, pg. 112, 2019). If black children and adolescents perceive and/or experience discrimination from police officers, there are physical repercussions that have life-long impacts. It is important to note that the event does not have to be experienced personally, even the looming threat of race-based trauma is enough to result in both psychological and physical consequences.

Perceptions and Community Environment

Perceptions of the Police

Not only can police brutality and the threat thereof have profound individual and personal effects, it also impacts the overall community environment. In a survey in 2017, 92% of black Americans said they believed discrimination against their racial group still existed, and over half said they had experienced discrimination in the workplace or with police (Bor, Venkataramani, Williams, & Tsai, 2018). Another study found that 87% of white respondents had a favorable view of local police compared to only 58% of black respondents. In addition to this, 53% of black men between the ages of 18 and 34 reported being treated unfairly by their local police. Additionally, a 12 city survey found that although the majority of black Americans felt satisfied with police services in their neighborhood, their level of dissatisfaction was twice that of white communities (Ramirez, Farrell, & McDevitt, 2000). This study concluded that although the majority of police officers are responsible and upright, the perceptions of officers who engage in racial profiling continue to foster resentment and distrust. Ultimately, this means “communities of color are less willing to trust and confide in police officers, report crimes, participate in problem-solving activities, be witnesses at trials, or serve on juries” (Ramirez, Farrell, & McDevitt, pg. 3, 2000). Although many communities of color appreciate and applaud the work

of police officers, there is a simultaneous recognition of the flaws and bias that still exist, and a call to right these injustices.

Vicarious Trauma

Briefly mentioned before, race-based trauma does not have to be experienced personally in order to result in traumatic symptoms. The threat of discrimination and brutality by police is enough to result traumatic symptoms and powerful effects on someone's psychological and physical well-being. Similar to this, race-based trauma can also be experienced vicariously in communities of color. Research done by Bor et al. (2018) supports the claim that not only can individual threats of harm impact mental health, but news of police killings of unarmed black individuals can also compromise health of other black Americans. Vicarious effects of race based trauma can include "heightened perceptions of threat and vulnerability, lack of fairness, lower social status, lower beliefs about one's own worth, activation of prior traumas, and identification with the deceased" (Bor, et al., pg. 308, 2018).

Using a quasi-experimental methodology, Bor et al. found that the killings of unarmed black Americans by police have a significant population level impact on mental health. Their study estimates that the mental health burden from police killings are nearly equivalent with the mental health burden from diabetes. There was no evidence of adverse mental health among white individuals in response to police killings of unarmed black individuals. Researchers suggested that black Americans are ascribing meaning to these killings in light of historical and institutional contexts, and they are therefore perceived as manifestations of racism (Bor, et al., pg. 308, 2018). Furthermore, the traumatic responses and symptoms black individuals exhibit after personal or vicarious race-based trauma is often diminished by society as a whole.

Oftentimes, the events or reactions are not seen to be severe enough to warrant trauma or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Butt, 2002).

Not only do individual threats of discrimination and brutality impact the psychological and physical health of children and adults, but so does vicarious trauma. When other black Americans experience discrimination and police brutality, the black community as a whole can be subjected to a mental health spillover effect, increasing their fear, vulnerability, and self-concept. Although all individuals are subjected to this, it is especially impactful on children, who are in developmentally sensitive periods (Courtois, 2019).

Conclusion

Although the vast majority of police officers may be upstanding and responsible while acting in the line of duty, occurrences and threats of police brutality are having immense and diverse effects on the psychological and physical well-being of black Americans. Children are especially vulnerable to these effects due to their developmental stages, with the potential for lifelong consequences on their brain development, hormonal and immune systems, as well as their self-concepts and self-esteem. Additionally, race-based trauma can be experienced repeatedly and cumulatively, as well as vicariously. Police brutality and discrimination, as well as the threat of it, is damaging to individuals as well as the efforts of police departments themselves. There is an urgent need for preventative measures to be put in place in police departments, increased awareness and discussion on the issue, more research on the effects of police brutality, as well as resources for people who have already been impacted.

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