

Impact of COVID-related stress on mental health and psychological resilience of the Black population in the United States

Identification of the Problem Space

Racial disparity has always been a problem and this has exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. The African American population is seen to be highly affected during this critical period especially in the United States. For instance, in Chicago, the Black population constitutes 50% of all COVID cases and 70% of all COVID deaths although they make up only 30% of the population. However, the impacts of this disease are not just apparent physically, but they have also taken a toll on their mental and emotional health. According to a recent report by Kaiser Health News, the Black population has a 20% higher chance of experiencing mental health issues like anxiety and depression during this pandemic (Ibrahimi et al., 2020).

Factors that have led to increased mental health effects on the Black population in the United States include legal and social inequalities, financial issues, disparities in physical well-being, inaccessibility to quality healthcare services, and systemic racism. The economical impacts and high rates of unemployment have specifically affected the Black population deeply resulting in loss of health insurance, unstable finances, food insecurity, loss of shelter in some cases, and an uncertain future. These causes of stress have resulted in increased rates of anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and suicide among these people. The most vulnerable of this population are those who suffer from pre-existing mental and emotional health conditions. They not only suffer from prejudice due to their colour, but also marginalization due to their mental illness, and the pandemic has proven to be most challenging for these people (Ibrahimi et al., 2020).

Background of the Study

Coronavirus-2019 (COVID-19) is a severe respiratory outbreak caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus that was first detected in Wuhan, China and then spread to different

countries of the world. As it can be rapidly transmitted between humans, several local governments enforced regional lockdowns in order to curb the spread of the disease. The result of these lockdowns was social distancing and isolation, and closure of workplaces, educational institutions, and entertainment venues which are considered places where spread of the disease can take place very easily. Although this did help in controlling the spread of the infection to a certain extent, it negatively affected people's social lives and their emotional and mental health (Singh et al., 2020).

It has come to light during the course of the pandemic that elderly people are more severely affected with COVID as compared to those belonging to the younger age groups. This is because of a weak immune system, presence of co-morbidities, social isolation, and staying away from busy children who are quarantined elsewhere. Social distancing is considered to have an extremely negative impact on the mental health of the elderly making them more susceptible to COVID and other infections. It can lead to distress, anxiety, and depression among these people who are uncertain of the future and do not understand the dynamics of a pandemic. Warning symptoms of mental illnesses in these people have been observed to be frequent emotional outbursts, irritation, shouting, and changes in sleeping and eating schedules (Javed et al., 2020).

Mental health consequences in the Black population are more pronounced than in the general population. The Blacks already face high levels of mental illnesses and significant barriers to mental health treatment. Added to this is fear and uncertainty regarding the COVID pandemic in the Black population. It has been reported that only 31% of Blacks with mental illnesses undergo treatment as compared to 48% of Whites suffering from the same conditions. Among those who receive treatment, the condition is so serious that they, in most, cases require hospitalization. Due to this gap, the situation of mental disorders in the Black population has become alarming due to the pandemic as neither do they access mental health services nor do they engage with mental health practitioners for their pre-existing conditions (Sneed et al., 2020).

One of the major problems is fear in the Black communities where around 33% of people are extremely concerned that they will develop serious infection and require hospitalization. Due to several factors such as poor physical health and inaccessibility to

healthcare services in this population, the Blacks are more likely to know someone who has been hospitalized or died due to COVID. They themselves are acutely aware of their health status and thereby their fear levels regarding the pandemic are quite high. Additionally, most news channels focus on the plight of minority communities in this pandemic, and therefore, they live the trauma vicariously by repeatedly watching the suffering of people belonging to their community. This type of traumatic experience can lead to both physical and emotional symptoms such as headache, nausea, helplessness, depression, and anxiety. Another fear that is deeply rooted in this population is the fear of racial bias in testing and treatment in case they become infected. This fear of racial discrimination has been reported to result in extreme psychological distress, worry, and anxiety. Due to increased burden of COVID in the Black community, most people experience loss and grief multiple times in a short span leading to prolonged grief disorders. Added to this is the fact that social distancing has prevented people from consoling and being there for each other during these tough times, thereby increasing the grief and stress faced by people who have lost their loved ones to the pandemic (Sneed et al., 2020).

During pandemics, it is observed that there is a rise in mental health illnesses all over the world due to different stressors stemming from the infection. As people from different countries have come together to fight COVID-19 and prevent related deaths, the healthcare for other diseases, both physical and mental, have been largely neglected. Several global phenomena of the COVID pandemic have been dwelled upon extensively; however, every pandemic affects communities and societies at a very personal level. Consequently, the burden of mental health illnesses have increased worldwide due to stress related to the pandemic, allocation of a majority of healthcare resources in the pandemic, and negligence of mental and emotional illness symptoms in patients (Javed et al., 2020).

Foundational Theory

Since the start of the pandemic, most healthcare workers have focused on the physical aspects of the COVID-19 infection. However, it has come to light that the mental and emotional aspects of the disease are as devastating, if not more, as the

physical implications of the disease. Before COVID, there was already a mental health crisis in the United States due to increased number of cases and insufficient mental health resources. This has worsened during the pandemic due to stressors such as social isolation and distancing, loss of jobs, and inaccessibility to entertainment centres. Food insecurity and financial stress are two key aspects of COVID that have resulted in increased depression and anxiety in the population (Semo and Frissa, 2020).

It is historically known that pandemics are comparatively more severe for minority populations as compared to majority communities, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are blatantly visible in the Black population of the United States. As a result of widespread racial discrimination still persisting in many regions, family members and friends are the only people from whom the Blacks can seek solace, comfort, and consolation. The current social isolation and distancing policies have taken away the most important source of comfort from the Blacks thereby pushing them in a deeper and darker hole of loneliness that already surrounds their existence (Semo and Frissa, 2020).

Given the current situation of COVID-related mental illnesses among the Blacks, it is an important responsibility of the government to allocate resources, both financial and human, for taking control of the situation and helping those who require comfort and support in these uncertain times. It is also the responsibility of mental healthcare institutions to reach out to the Black communities and provide them with any kind of support required so that they can sufficiently take care of their mental and emotional health and face the pandemic confidently (Semo and Frissa, 2020).

Problem Statement

The emergence of mental health illnesses during the COVID-19 pandemic has led to disastrous consequences for the affected population. This public health emergency has exacerbated the addiction and loneliness epidemics that have existed in the United States since many years. Many mental health practitioners have expressed concerns over the increasing cases of anxiety, depression, and stress in people due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite widespread use of social media platforms, teenagers

and young adults constantly complain of loneliness which further leads to suicidal thoughts, depression, and substance abuse. These emotions have heightened during the pandemic due to social distancing and isolation. Most people's support networks have been taken away from them due to stay-at-home orders and this has had a toll on their emotional and mental health (Horigian et al., 2020).

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there has been a sharp spike in the numbers of suicides, violent encounters, and substance overdose incidents. These cases have been found to be more prevalent in the minority communities such as the Blacks as compared to the majority communities. Surveys that have investigated the number of people having suicidal thoughts have found that the largest number of these people belong to the Black communities, young adults, unpaid caregivers, and the unemployed. The pre-existing opioid epidemic has also worsened since the start of the pandemic, and there are rising number of overdose cases reported in the minority communities. Additionally, the number of first-time drug users is also increasing due to stress factors related to the pandemic. Mental health problems, stress, and anxiety are known to weaken a person's body defenses thereby making the person more susceptible to infections. As a result, one of the ways to bring down the severity and spread of the pandemic is to specifically address the mental and emotional issues faced by people during this time (Horigian et al., 2020).

Rationale for Qualitative Methodology

This research study seeks to identify the presence of mental health issues in the Black population and how the affected people can cope with it considering the constraints of the current pandemic. It also seeks to identify the role of healthcare workers and government bodies in helping people showing these symptoms appropriately. Based on these research objectives, the more appropriate methodology for this study will be qualitative rather than quantitative. The data collection instruments and the intervention monitoring instruments will be qualitative so that all possible themes and topics can be captured completely in this study pertaining to the Black population of the United States. If only quantitative data is collected, it will only give

information about the number of people experiencing mental health symptoms which will not help fulfill the research objectives.

This qualitative study not only seeks to identify the prevalence of COVID-related mental illnesses in the Black population, but also identify approaches that can help bring down this prevalence. It also seeks to understand the current strategies being employed by medical professionals and government bodies in mitigating mental health conditions in this population, and propose new strategies that can be more helpful in the future as long as the pandemic lasts. As this investigation can uncover different types of information pertaining to the research questions, a qualitative approach will help capture all possible data appropriately.

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