

APA Official Actions

Position Statement on Police Brutality and Black Men and Boys

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Issue:

Repeated instances of police brutality against Black men and boys have led to widespread protests and generated national concern. Constant depictions of these incidents have had a profound impact on the emotional and psychological well-being of Black families and communities, contributing to fear and uncertainty. Research shows that Blacks are significantly more likely to experience police brutality than are whites.¹ *The Counted* project—a database of documented killings by U.S. law enforcement—showed that Black males, ranging from ages 15 to 34, were 9 times more likely than any other racial/ethnic group to be killed by police officers in 2015.² Data also showed that Black males were killed at a rate 4 times that of their white counterparts within the same year. Mental health research has demonstrated a causal link between experienced racial discrimination and adverse mental health outcomes.³ Perceived racism and discrimination—either overt or covert (microaggression) or in the forms of implicit or explicit bias—have been associated with depression, anxiety, increased substance use, feelings of hopelessness, and suicidal ideation in Black adults and youths.^{4,5,6} African-American males who are racially profiled to be criminals and perceived of wrongdoing by law enforcement are at increased risk of subsequent symptoms of anxiety and posttraumatic stress disorder⁷.

Development of these mental health symptoms may in turn perpetuate a cycle of violence. It is reported that people with mental illness, especially those who are Black, are disproportionately at risk of being victims of police killings compared to the general population.⁸ As leaders in mental health care, psychiatrists can play a vital role in promoting a positive relationship between law enforcement agencies and the Black community while providing high-quality treatment to those impacted by police brutality.

APA Position:

APA condemns the brutal treatment of Black men and boys, the use of excessive force against Black men and boys, and the use of unwarranted and unnecessary deadly force against Black men and boys by law enforcement agencies and police departments.

- ¹ Kahn K.B., Steele J.S., McMahon J.M., Stewart, G. (2017). How suspect race affects police use of force in an interaction over time. *Law Hum Behav.* 41(2):117-126.
- ² Guardian News and Media. (2015, December 31). Young Black men killed by US police at highest rate in year of 1,134 deaths. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/31/the-counted-police-killings-2015-young-black-men>
- ³ Pascoe, E. A., & Smart Richman, L. (2009). Perceived Discrimination and Health: a Meta-Analytic Review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 135 (4), 531-554.
- ⁴ Gibbons F, G. M. (2004). Perceived Discrimination and Substance Use in African American Parents and Their Children: A Panel Study. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 86:517– 529.
- ⁵ Nyborg V, C. J. (2003). The Impact of Perceived Racism: Psychological Symptoms among African American Boys. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, 32:258–266.
- ⁶ O’Keefe VM, Wingate LR, Cole AB, et al. (2015). Seemingly Harmless Racial Communications Are Not So Harmless: Racial Microaggressions Lead to Suicidal Ideation by Way of Depression Symptoms. *Suicide & Life-Threatening Behavior*, 45, 567– 576.
- ⁷ American Psychiatric Association (2017). Position Statement on Police Interactions with Persons with Mental Illness.
- ⁸ Saleh, A.Z., Appelbaum, P., Liu, X., Stroup, T.S., & Wall, M. (2018). Deaths of People with Mental Illness during Interactions with Law Enforcement. *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 58:110-116.

Authors: Council on Minority Mental Health and Health Disparities; This Position Statement was endorsed by the Caucus of Black Psychiatrists.

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2. American Psychiatric Association (2017). Position Statement on Police Interactions with Persons with Mental Illness.
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