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Experiences Of Racial Discrimination Harm Mental And Physical Health

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WASHINGTON, DC -- People who have experienced racial discrimination report greater difficulty in achieving their goals, greater personal discomfort, and the perception that they aren't getting the best health care, according to a study released today by the American Public Health Association.

African Descendants and Latinos who reported experiencing discrimination were more likely to score lower on an assessment of their mental health, even after controlling for age, gender, education employment and health insurance.

"The bottom line is that racial discrimination is a risk factor for mental health, and by extension, physical health," said Gilbert Gee of the University of Michigan School of Public Health, who co-authored the study with colleagues at the University of New Hampshire and the New Hampshire Minority Health Coalition.

"Policies that strengthen civil rights, reduce discrimination or encourage multiculturalism aren't just feel-good programs," said Gee, an assistant professor of health behavior and health education. "They might have an important effect on health outcomes as well."

The New Hampshire Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) Initiative surveyed more than 650 African Descendants (black/African-American), Mexican Americans, and other Latinos living in New Hampshire, which is 95 percent white. Each participant was asked about their experiences of discrimination and interactions with the health care system, and their mental health was measured. The NH REACH Initiative and the study were funded by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

"Having served the minority populations of Southern New Hampshire for the past 10 years, the findings in this study reinforce the need to ensure access to quality health care for all populations," said Jazmin Miranda-Smith, Executive Director of the New Hampshire Minority Health Coalition. "We can help minority populations deal with their experiences of

discrimination by assisting health care providers through cultural competency training. The Coalition is a leader in this field in New Hampshire.

Half of all participants reported that discrimination impeded their ability to achieve their goals, half reported that they felt discomfort in the way others treated them because of their race, and one-quarter reported encountering discrimination in health care. These reports of discrimination are linked to lower mental health and are not explained by access to health insurance, education, employment, income, age or gender.

"Policies designed to reduce discrimination and promote civil rights may not only be a moral imperative, but also a key tool in protecting the public health," said David Laflamme, a research assistant professor in health management and policy at the University of New Hampshire.

"The latest findings linking discrimination to mental health are part of a world-wide pattern that is emerging in such studies," Gee said.

"As a provider of community mental health services, we are witness to the negative impact discrimination has on a person's mental health," said Peter Janelle, president and CEO of The Mental Health Center of Greater Manchester (NH). "Not only does it aggravate the symptoms experienced but it is often a barrier to seeking help and complicates the process of establishing therapeutic relationships. We need to become a more culturally aware society, and mental health providers need to avail themselves of cultural competence training."

The study's authors are Gilbert C. Gee of the University of Michigan, Andrew Ryan of Brandeis University, David T. Laflamme of the University of New Hampshire, and Jeanie Holt of the New Hampshire Minority Health Coalition.

Citation:

"The Association Between Self-Reported Discrimination and Mental Health Status Among African Descendants, Mexican Americans, and Other Latinos in the New Hampshire REACH 2010 Initiative: The Added Dimension of Immigration" appears in the October 2006 issue of the American Journal of Public Health.

Links –

- Gilbert Gee - <http://www.sph.umich.edu/iscr/faculty/profile.cfm?uniquename=gilgee>
- David LaFlamme - <http://www.shhs.unh.edu/hmp/facultyhmp.html>
- New Hampshire Minority Health Coalition - <http://www.nhhealthequity.org/english.html>