

## A Double Taboo? An Exploratory Study of Mental Health Perceptions amongst Black Aerospace Professionals

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# A Double Taboo? An Exploratory Study of Mental Health Perceptions amongst Black Aerospace Professionals

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## Abstract

This exploratory study delves into the often-overlooked realm of mental health perceptions among Black aerospace professionals, shedding light on a double taboo within a historically stigmatized industry and community.

The study used a mixed methods approach, leveraging a survey that included closed- and open-ended questions to understand the mental health needs and experiences of Black aerospace professionals, which was distributed to the members of the Organization of Black Aerospace Professionals (OBAP).

The survey garnered 110 responses, 75 of which were completed responses from Black professionals and revealed a pressing demand for more inclusive mental health support and resources. Specifically, findings from the study indicate Black aerospace professionals navigate not only the universal challenges of mental health but also complex socio-cultural and workplace factors, such as discrimination, underrepresentation, and the historic reluctance to discuss mental health.

Despite facing increased risks, these professionals are less likely to seek treatment primarily due to deeply ingrained stigma, socioeconomic barriers, and a lack of representation in mental health discourse. This study underscores the necessity of fostering a more supportive work environment and advancing diversity, equity, inclusion, and access (DEIA) practices in the aviation/aerospace sector while also providing access to pivotal resources. The study also highlights the importance of breaking the double taboo—mental health within the aerospace community and within the Black community—which requires targeted efforts to destigmatize and promote open conversations about mental health.

## Introduction

- Mental health has grown in importance in U.S. society over the past five years with a profound spike in awareness, acceptance, and discussion of challenges.
- **90% of U.S. adults believe the country is experiencing a mental health crisis (Panchal et al. 2023).**
- Only 20% of adults in the U.S. experienced mental health challenges (e.g., anxiety) pre-pandemic compared to the now 80% (Nealon, 2021).
- **These figures connote mental health has been more of a "don't ask, don't tell" topic in the U.S.**
- **More than 1 in 5 U.S. adults live with a mental illness; the most common are anxiety disorders, major depression, and bipolar disorders (Access, 2022).**
- Mental health for minoritized individuals and those in Black communities particularly, is exceptionally jarring.
- The impact of mental health challenges for minoritized communities is especially prevalent as they face social exclusion, discrimination, and trauma (Macintyre et al. 2018).
- Yet, due to the significant increase in mental health crises within the U.S., it is receiving the attention it deserves within the community and health care providers.
- **Another more latent barrier impacting the willingness of minoritized individuals, specifically members of the Black community, can be encapsulated in one word: representation.**
- Members of the Black community are less frequently included in mental health research (Charlie Health Editorial Team, 2022).
- **This indicates that they do not see themselves nor their issues represented in such a medium (Albelo et al. 2022). For this reason, how can they reasonably be expected to want to obtain help from a system that does not reflect their experiences, issues, or culture?**
- A similar issue exists within the aviation industry as mental health in general, has been a relatively "taboo topic" (Choy, 2023) that has historically quieted the voices of those experiencing mental health challenges in fear of losing their wings, termination, or shame.
- **While the extant mental health research on minoritized aviation students provides great insight to their needs and impact on academic success, there is little research that exclusively centers on the mental health experiences of Black aerospace professionals.**

## Purpose & Research Questions

- **Purpose:** To understand the mental health needs and experiences of Black aerospace professionals.
- **Goal:** To inform industry leadership of ways they can improve the work environment to ultimately improve the mental health of all aviation/aerospace employees. This may also benefit collegiate aviation programs that tend to possess similar training/education environments to that of industry.
- **Central Research Question (CQ):** How do Black Aerospace professionals characterize their experiences with mental health?
- **Secondary research questions (RQ):**
  - RQ #1: What are the mental health needs of Black aerospace professionals?
  - RQ #2: What factors, if any, contribute to the mental health of Black Aerospace professionals?

## Methodology



### Survey Research – Open & Closed-ended questions

- Provides a quantitative description of the experiences and/or perceptions of a specified group (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).
- Authors collaborated with the Organization of Black Aerospace Professionals (OBAP) to conduct a purposive sample survey to address the identified challenges of gaining access to participants in aviation survey research (Lutte et al. 2023).
- Survey questions focused on: demographics, employer/organization, general mental health, and mental health in the Black community.
- Question groups were designed to understand what the experience(s) of Black aerospace professionals was with mental health issues or challenges within their workplace and in their life as a member of the Black community.

### Data Collection Procedures

- Survey was distributed to current OBAP members in the database via Qualtrics link.
- Survey remained open for 70 days and obtained 110 responses, 75 of which were from members who identified as Black Americans.

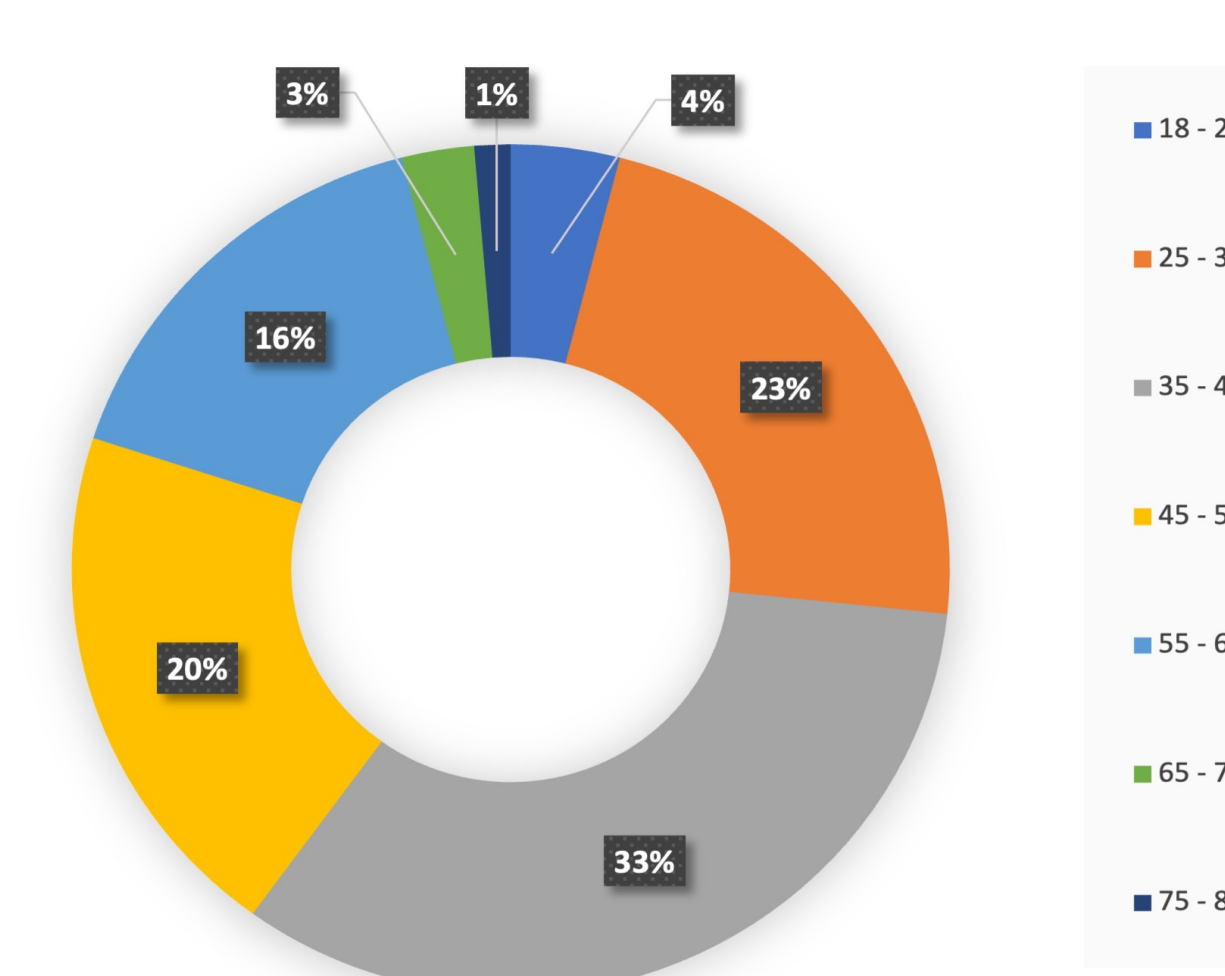
### Data Analysis

- A pretest of the survey was conducted, which resulted in minor revisions to the survey.
- Descriptive statistics were used to filter the demographic data, specifically age, years in industry, and industry occupations.
- Nvivo was used to analyze the open-ended questions.
- The open-ended responses were reviewed twice (once for cleaning and once for categorizing), resulting in 10 themes and sub-themes being derived.

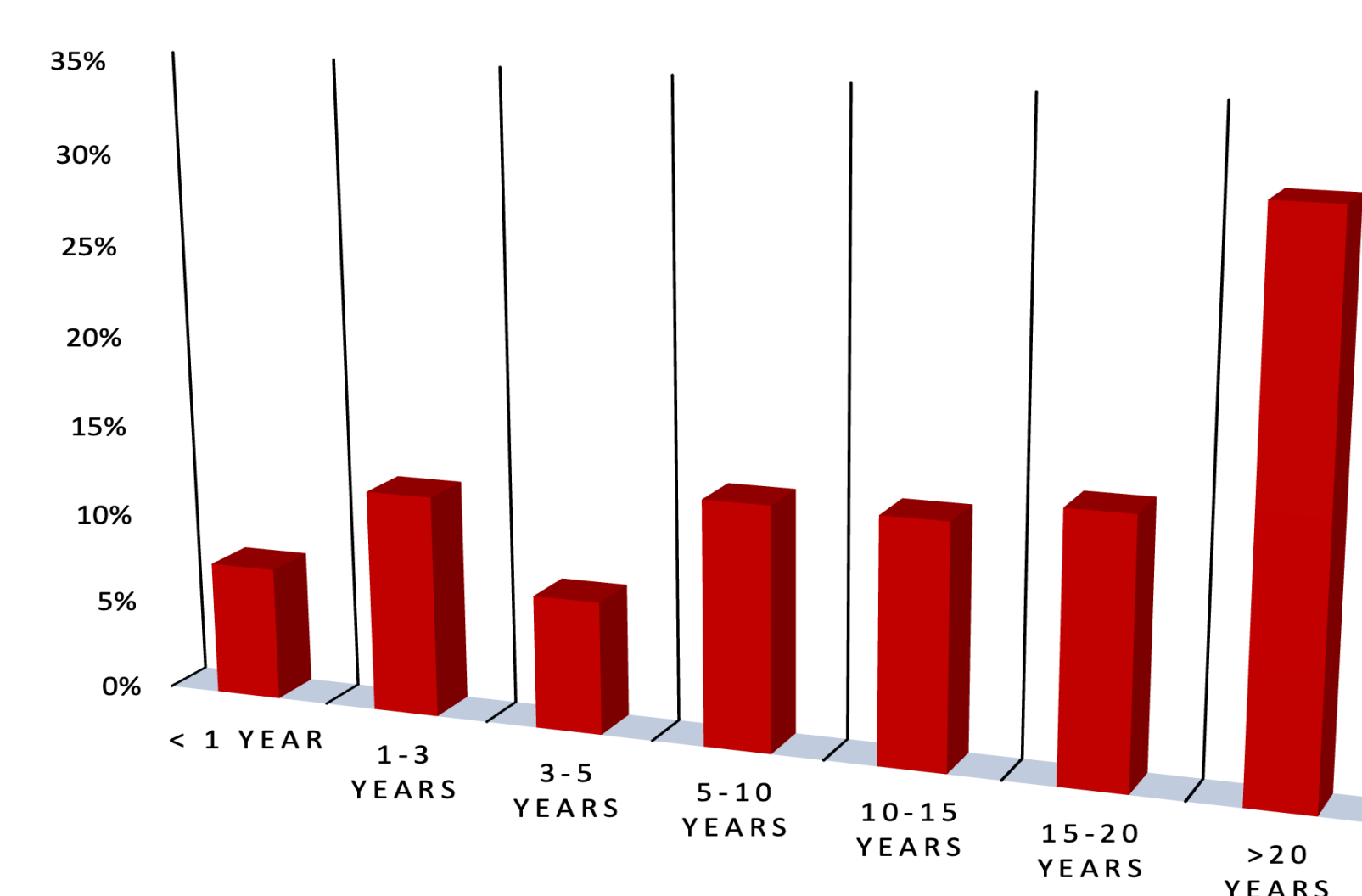
This project received Institutional Review Board approval (IRB #0091-22-EX)

## Findings

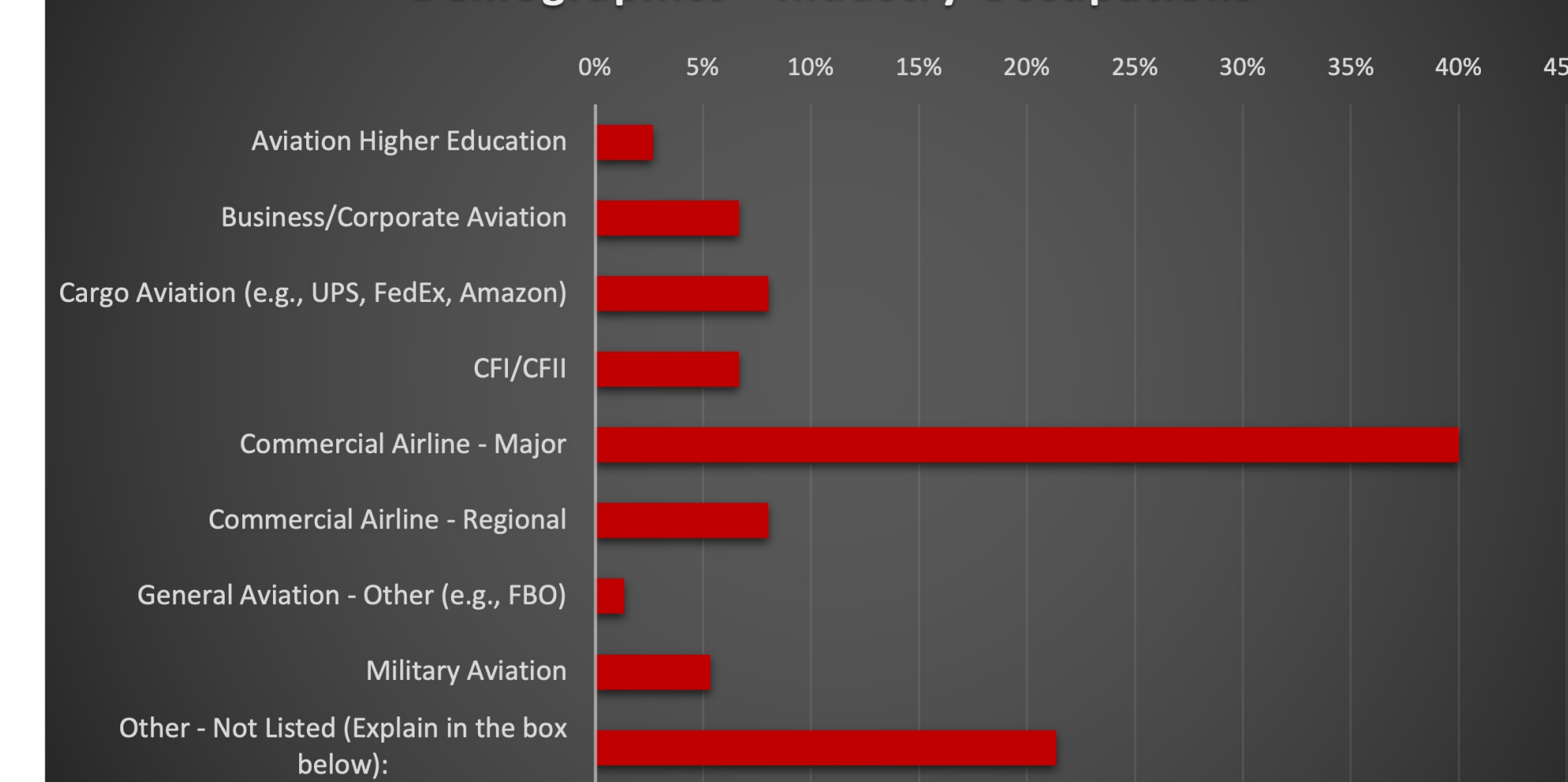
Age Ranges of Respondents



DEMOGRAPHIC DATA - YEARS IN INDUSTRY



Demographics - Industry Occupations



## Thematic Overview

Theme	Name	CQ/RQ Addressed
1	Being a Black American/Aerospace Professional	CQ
2	"Everyday" Struggles	CQ
3	Culture of Fear	CQ & RQ #2
4	Mixed Managerial Messaging	RQ #1
5	Mental Health Prioritization	RQ #1
6	Jeopardizing Job Security	RQ #1 & RQ #2
7	Sources of Support (SOS)	RQ #1 & RQ #2
8	Representation Woes	RQ #2
9	Lack of Standardization	RQ #2
10	Societal Acceptance, Awareness, and Access	RQ #2

### Theme #1: Being a Black American/Aerospace Professional

"Every black aerospace professional has to deal with people that think the black pilot only got the job because of a diversity program."

### Theme 3: Culture of Fear

"There is a culture of fear in the flying world because of this when it comes to keeping up mental health."

"Because I fear that my employers will see me as a liability rather than an asset."

### Theme #6: Jeopardizing Job Security

"...knowing that if I did have an issue, I wouldn't be allowed to pursue mental health options without jeopardizing my flight status."

"If I discussed my mental health, management would hold back on company/professional progression."

### Theme #10: Social Acceptance, Awareness and Access

"In the past, mainly due to lack of awareness and due to the fact that seeking mental health was stigmatized in my household."

"The cost of a therapist or access to the resources."

## Discussion

- **CQ –** For many, mental health experiences have been characterized by an immense fear of losing their medical, job/career, and livelihood if they were to be candid about mental health challenges. Consequently, there is a reluctance to share and for those willing, they may lack access to mental health resources and are trepidatious due to the stigma.
- **RQ #1 –** The primary needs include: more understanding and supportive management/employers, environments where professionals can express challenges without repercussions, objective guidance from regulating bodies, representative mental health professionals.
- **RQ #2 –** The contributing factors consist of: a lack of standardized policies governing mental health, pressure of being the "only" coupled with "everyday" struggles, and an absence of mental health acceptance/recognition in their culture and upbringing (i.e., household).

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This study would not have been possible without the participation of members of the Organization of Black Aerospace Professionals (OBAP). We thank them for their participation.

