

November 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since Africans were first brought to this continent against their will by the Spanish in 1526, there have been government and socially sanctioned atrocities against African descendants. Historical trauma and ongoing systemic racism has a toll, not just on the psyche of African Americans, but on their physical health as well. It is well established that experiences of trauma and adversity can “get under the skin” and increase risk for a whole host of significant health problems.

This report is organized into seven sections:

1) The first section provides a concise overview of the historic trauma experienced by African Americans:

The middle passage, slavery, and lynchings are briefly discussed.

2) The second section discusses key structures in American society that perpetuate cycles of disadvantage and ongoing experiences of adversity and trauma for African descendants:

The need for reform in the criminal justice system is highlighted, given the extraordinary rates of mass incarceration in this country and the profound negative effects of incarceration, not just on the ex-prisoner, but on their partners and children as well. Legislation and proposals to address other key structures that perpetuate disadvantage, adversity, and trauma are also discussed in this report.

3) The third section discusses data that links adversity and trauma to a whole host of medical health problems:

Experiences of adversity increase risk for problems with obesity, diabetes, heart disease and more.



African
DESCENDANTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Continued

4) The fourth section provides an introduction to the field of epigenetics and the concept of transgenerational epigenetic inheritance:

Transgenerational epigenetic inheritance is the transmission of the deleterious effects of ancestral traumas through chemical (e.g., epigenetic) modifications to the DNA that are inherited across generations. Through transgenerational epigenetic inheritance, grandchildren and great grandchildren can be negatively impacted by the ancestral traumas -- even when they have not been directly exposed to any adversity themselves.

5) The fifth section reviews state-of-the art research on transgenerational epigenetic inheritance:

While there has been skepticism in the field that chemical modifications to the DNA in one generation caused by stress or other negative experiences could be inherited in subsequent generations, a growing body of animal research on transgenerational epigenetic inheritance strongly suggests that ancestral adversities can negatively impact descendants across multiple generations through epigenetic (e.g., chemical) changes to the DNA in the germline (e.g., sperm, eggs). Epidemiological and clinical studies also support the relevance of this work in understanding the transgenerational transmission of adversity in human cohorts.

6) The sixth section discusses factors that can mitigate the effects of historical and personal trauma and promote strength and resilience:

The animal literature has demonstrated that the epigenetic modifications and deleterious outcomes across generations associated with various negative exposures can be prevented through a range of different experimental manipulations. Trauma-informed clinical services, culturally-grounded preventive interventions, and positive enriching educational, sports, and art experiences have also been found to mitigate the effects of historical trauma and various lifetime adverse experiences.

7) The seventh section delineates policy, practice, and research recommendations to address systemic racism in America:

While more basic (e.g., animal) and clinical research is needed to fully elucidate the molecular mechanisms by which experience can alter the epigenome and impact health and developmental trajectories across multiple generations, more research is not required to demonstrate the need to dismantle the systems that perpetuate disadvantage, adversity, and trauma among African descendants.



Let's Act
NOW

The cost to the individual and to society is enormous. The time to act is now.