

# Trauma exposure linked to African-Americans, criminal justice system

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Frequent traumatic exposure to crime can take a toll on most people.

For African-Americans, [trauma](#) significantly increases their odds of being arrested, jailed or imprisoned, a new study shows. In addition, [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) also contributes to their involvement in the [criminal justice](#) system.

Researchers at the University of Michigan and Virginia Commonwealth University examined the frequency of trauma exposure, development of PTSD, and arrest and incarceration history in nearly 5,200 African-Americans.

This population is disproportionately affected by trauma and the criminal justice system. The researchers said it is a complex issue with many layers: race, a concentration of crime in certain neighborhoods, and tension between law enforcement and citizens, especially those who are poor.

"These factors cannot be ignored when trying to understand the ways in which arrest and incarceration impact the lives of black men and women in the United States," said Daphne Watkins, associate professor at the U-M School of Social Work and assistant professor at the School of Medicine.

A third of the respondents in the study had a history of arrest and 18 percent had been incarcerated. In both categories, men were more likely than women to have contact with the criminal justice system.

Respondents were asked about more than two dozen traumatic experiences, ranging from being victims of sexual assault to seeing someone badly injured or killed.

Overall, 80 percent reported at least one traumatic event. Nearly 9 percent met criteria for PTSD,

which contributed to their involvement in the criminal justice system.

Lena Jaggi, the study's lead researcher from VCU, noted that she and her co-authors did not discount that incarceration may be a setting where trauma occurs, and that a history of imprisonment may increase the likelihood of subsequent trauma after the person is released.

In fact, [incarceration](#) has a lingering effect that can exacerbate health disparities throughout the lives of former inmates, especially those with social and financial challenges, the researchers said.

**More information:** L. J. Jaggi et al. The Relationship between Trauma, Arrest, and Incarceration History among Black Americans: Findings from the National Survey of American Life, *Society and Mental Health* (2016). DOI: [10.1177/2156869316641730](https://doi.org/10.1177/2156869316641730)

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