

## **The After Effects of Shooting Our People**

### **“Study Shows Link Between Police Shootings of Unarmed Black People and Health of Black Babies”**

“Fatal police encounters are devastating for the communities in which they occur: families are irreparably ripped apart; trauma spreads through neighborhood institutions like schools and churches; and trust between the community and law enforcement (and, oftentimes, other branches of local government) is broken. Any one of these problems present tremendous challenges to the health and safety of a community—but as it turns out, these only scratch the surface of the problem, particularly when racial injustice is at play.

According to a new study published Wednesday in the journal *Science Advances*, police killings of unarmed black people can affect people before they are even born.

From the Los Angeles Times:

Pregnant black women who lived near the site of such officer-involved fatalities had their babies sooner than mothers who weren't exposed to such incidents during their pregnancies, researchers found. What's more, those infants had significantly lower birth weights — a risk factor for future health problems.

The study, conducted by Harvard sociologist Joscha Legewie, looked exclusively at California, analyzing data from nearly 2,000 police shootings and 3.9 million birth records from 2007 to 2016. As *Wired* reports, Legewie first developed the idea for the study after reading a

New York Times article comparing health disparities between black and white babies; researchers told the paper they were exploring the possibility that those differences could be brought on by stress caused by structural racism. Legewie wanted to see if police violence could be a contributing factor to that stress.

So he compared birth data from California's Department of Public Health with Fatal Encounters, a crowdsourced, national database documenting police-involved killings. After cleaning and coding the data, Legewie found a clear link between shootings of unarmed black men and the health of black infants in the community.

From the LA Times:

Legewie discovered that when an unarmed black person was killed within a kilometer of a black woman's home during the first or second trimester of pregnancy, her infant's birth weight was significantly lower compared with black mothers who were not exposed to such events. The difference ranged from 50 to more than 80 grams, depending in part on how far along the pregnancy was at the time of the killing. (No link was seen in the third trimester.)

There was no link between birth weights and police killings of black people who had been carrying weapons, Legewie found.

The study also found the closer black pregnant mothers were to the sites of the killings, the harsher the impact was on their babies.

Furthermore, the same results were not found when white or non-black Latinx people, armed or unarmed, died at the hands of police officers. This suggests the trauma—and the corresponding spike in stress and anxiety it triggered—was very specific to racial injustice.

Legewie also conducted his analysis several ways to confirm his findings—comparing birth weights of affected infants with that of their siblings, for example. He also controlled for poverty and general violence in the neighborhoods where the killings occurred. Each time, he was met with the same results: black children in the womb at the time an unarmed black person was killed in their neighborhood were disproportionately affected.

“This finding indicates that the effect is race specific and driven by perceptions of discrimination and structural racism instead of general threats of crime and violence,” Legewie wrote in the paper. While he didn’t delve into the exact psychological effects the killings had on pregnant black women, Legewie said the stress brought on by the events likely affected the birth weight of their kids.

Margaret Hicken, a public health researcher at the University of Michigan, expanded on the concept of vigilance—of having to constantly worry about structural racism and discrimination—to *Wired*.

“Black men and women need to continually anticipate and worry about how they are perceived in society,” said Hicken. “They constantly need to prove that they are worthy of their humanity because our institutions don’t view it that way.”

This vigilance forms a steady undercurrent of stress that can spike when traumatic events—like a police killing—hit close to home.

Legewie's study adds another layer to our understanding of secondhand and generational trauma. The cultural conversation around these issues has expanded in recent years, thanks to an expanding body of research, and to explorations of the issue in films, books, and TV shows like *Watchmen*.

One recent study found police killings of unarmed black men were linked to increases in mental health issues for black people who lived in the same state, reports the *Times*. Other studies have supported the theory that racism causes chronic stress in black mothers—which then impacts the health outcomes of their infant children.

Low birth weight, specifically, can have dire impacts on a baby's physical and mental maturation. Underweight babies are more likely to develop chronic illnesses like diabetes and heart disease. According to the CDC, these babies may also experience learning disabilities and delays in social development.

But the idea that trauma may be both racially and culturally specific has major implications. Legewie expressed surprise to *Wired* that officer-involved killings didn't seem to affect Latinx babies in the same way it did black infants. But there were other events that triggered the same devastating results.

From *Wired*:

A previous study found that after an ICE raid in Iowa, Hispanic infants were also more likely to have lower birth

rates. It may be that those events generate less media coverage, or that the history of unjust policing is represented in different ways: fears of deportation instead of fears about shootings. What hits one community might not hold the same emotional significance for another.

Once the cycle of trauma is kicked off, the effects continue to spiral out. Paula Braveman, director of the Center on Social Disparities in Health at UC San Francisco, has conducted studies on chronic stress in black mothers and the impact it has on their children. As she told *Wired*, the disadvantages that befall infants born early or underweight aren't easily reversed.

"If you start off as preterm or low birthweight, you have so many strikes against you," Braveman said. "There's only so much catching up that you can do."

Source: The Root

Link:

<https://www.theroot.com/study-shows-link-between-police-shootings-of-unarmed-bl-1840268164>