TuSalud

How Gun Violence May Help Shape Racial Health Gaps

Exposure to gun violence may contribute to higher rates of hypertension and diabetes among Black and Latino Americans.

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Exposure to gun violence may help explain persistent racial disparities in chronic conditions (blood pressure and diabetes) and general health among Black people and Latinos in the United States, according to a new study from Rutgers University researchers published in the Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities.

"Gun violence is not only a public safety problem, it is also a public health issue that contributes to racial disparities in health," said the study's first author, Daniel C. Semenza, PhD, the research director at the New Jersey Gun Violence Research Center at Rutgers, in a press release. "Black and Hispanic Americans experience substantially higher levels of gun violence exposure, and those differences help explain disparities in both self-rated and chronic health problems."

Certain chronic conditions disproportionately impact Latinos and Black Americans. For example, according to the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Minority Health, in 2024, Black Americans were 24% more likely and Latinos were 13% more likely than the population overall to have diabetes. And although that same year's data showed that Latinos were 29% less likely to have hypertension than the population overall, Black people were 26% more likely to have high blood pressure.

Researchers used 2024 health survey data on 7,066 Black, Latino and white adults and a structural equation model to measure whether gun violence had an effect on self-rated health and chronic conditions, such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes, and found that exposure to gun violence was associated with lower self-rated health scores and more chronic health issues across all races. However, Black and Latino adults experienced higher baseline levels of gun violence throughout their lives because, according to the study, "Black and Hispanic Americans are much more likely to live in neighborhoods where gun violence is a routine threat." Thus, gun violence acts may serve as a predictor of general and chronic health.

The study’s findings add exposure to gun violence to the long list of social determinants of health, including low income and low educational attainment, that negatively impact certain individuals and groups.

“Our findings suggest that reducing exposure to gun violence may be an important pathway for improving health equity in the United States,” said Semenza. “Most discussions of gun violence focus on injuries and deaths, but the health burden extends much further, to chronic disease and overall well-being among millions of people who may never be physically injured but live with repeated exposure to gun violence.”

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