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# **Cascading Collective Trauma and COVID-19 Pandemic: The Impact on African Americans and Communities of Color**

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### **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic led to collective trauma or long-term psychological effects that are shared by a large group of people who all experience an event. Collective trauma is defined as an entire group's psychological reaction to a traumatic event that affects an entire society. Collective trauma can be caused by events such as pandemics, wars, natural disasters, mass shootings, genocides, systematic and historical oppression, recessions, and famine or severe poverty. This paper is a brief report of the impact of cascading collective trauma during the COVID-19 pandemic on African Americans and other communities of color. Cascading collective traumas are defined as a series of compounding catastrophes that may be both historic and concurrent and results have stronger emotional responses with each new exposure. COVID-19 pandemic was almost immediately followed by another trauma, such as the racial unrest and reports of African Americans being beaten ferociously with no apparent causes. Collective trauma is not always equal in populations. African Americans and other communities of color in the United States are suffering disproportionately from COVID-19, compounded by historical trauma, structural racism, and persistent poverty. Policy changes are needed to address the structural racism, collective trauma, and health inequities that negatively impact the physical and mental health of Blacks, Latinx, and other indigenous communities in the United States. More research is needed to examine cascading collective trauma and increased violence.

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**Key Words:** Blacks; African Americans; Latinx; indigenous population; collective trauma; cascading collective trauma; COVID-19; pandemic; structural racism; health inequities; communities of color; poverty

## **Introduction**

In 2019, coronavirus, a respiratory virus emerged from a seafood market in Wuhan, China (Chen et al., 2020; Kennedy, 2021). Afterward, this virus rapidly spread to other countries around the globe. Coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, also known as COVID 19, was declared a global pandemic in March of 2020 (Kennedy, 2021; Schuchat, 2020). COVID-19 is a respiratory illness caused by infection with coronavirus (called SARS-CoV-2).

According to the World Health Organization [WHO, 2022], globally, there are 521,920, 560 confirmed cases of COVID-19, and 6,274,323 deaths as of May 2022. Also, as of May 2022, the United States reported overall 1 million deaths due to COVID-19.

During a pandemic, mass trauma (collective trauma) is when the same events or series of events traumatize a large number of people within some shared time span (Prideaux, 2021). Enduring emotional distress and fear created by COVID-19 cause trauma in children, adults, and the community at large. The mental health and psychosocial consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic may be particularly serious for groups of people.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to collective trauma or long-term psychological effects that are shared by a large group of people who all experience an event (Silver, Holman, Garfin, & 2021). This type of trauma can affect groups of people of any size, including entire nations or societies. The COVID-19 pandemic was shared on a global level impacting people around the world (Masiero, Mazzocco, Harnois, Cropley, & Pravetton, 2020). People experienced

helplessness, uncertainty, loss, and grief. In contrast to individual trauma, collective trauma can persist across generations over time. People will remember the collective memory of the trauma event across generations.

COVID-19 pandemic contributed to both individual and collective trauma (Masiero et al., 2020). Researchers found that isolation and quarantine contributed to many negative psychological effects including panic, feelings of insecurity or being unsafe, depression, hopelessness, anxiety, grief, confusion, anger, violence, and even PTSD (Kennedy, 2021; Silver, Holman, Garfin, & 2021).

### **Definition**

Collective trauma is defined as an entire group's psychological reaction to a traumatic event that affects an entire society (Kennedy , 2021; Silver, Holman, Garfin, & 2021). It is represented in the collective memory of the group and involves not only a reproduction of the event but also an ongoing reconstruction of the trauma. In contrast, trauma typically refers to the impact that a traumatic incident has on an individual or a few people. However, collective trauma refers to the impact of a traumatic experience that affects and involves entire groups of people, communities, or societies. Collective trauma can influence attitudes and beliefs. People who lived through trauma may form specific views as a result of the event. The beliefs that people previously held about their society are shaken or even shattered (Silver, Holman, Garfin, & 2021). People may question the future of their society and whether it's safe or wise to continue their affiliation with the group.

## **Method**

This paper is a brief report on the impact of cascading collective trauma during the COVID-19 pandemic on African Americans and other communities of color. First, the causes of collective trauma and cascading collective trauma will be explored. Second, how structural racism, health inequities, collective trauma, and the pandemic disproportionately affect existing health conditions and deaths of African Americans and communities of color will be explored. Last, proposed strategies for policy development will be identified for future change.

### **Causes of Collective Trauma and Cascading Collective Trauma**

Collective trauma can be caused by events such as pandemics, wars, natural disasters, mass shootings, genocides, systematic and historical oppression, recessions, and famine or severe poverty (Silver, Holman, Garfin, & 2021). During a pandemic, mass trauma (collective trauma) is when the same events or series of events traumatize a large number of people within some shared time span (Prideaux, 2021). Enduring emotional distress and fear created by COVID-19 cause trauma in children, adults, and the community at large. The mental health and psychosocial consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic may be particularly serious for groups of people.

Cascading collective traumas are defined as a series of compounding catastrophes that may be both historic and concurrent and have stronger emotional responses with each new exposure (Silver, Holman, Garfin, & 2021). This occurrence is when one major trauma happens after the next trauma.

COVID-19 pandemic was almost immediately followed by another trauma, such as the racial unrest and reports of black Americans being beaten ferociously with no apparent causes. Cascading collective trauma is not only when these events happen one after the next, but individuals experiencing these mass traumas are unable to heal from one trauma before they are beset by the next one (Silver, Holman, Garfin, & 2021). For example, the global COVID-19 pandemic was followed by race-based historical trauma including the brutal killings of unarmed African Americans such as George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and Jacobs Blake. The nation watched the videotaped of George Floyd played continuously while being killed unmercifully by a White police officer during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the country watched the police shooting Jacob Blake in the back several times. During the pandemic, the public viewed multiracial protests. This period was a time of social unrest political divisiveness and violence in the street.

The killing of unarmed Black Americans created mistrust, fears, anxiety, and other adverse effects on the mental health of the Black community (Silver, Holman, Garfin, & 2021). During the COVID-19 Pandemic, the anger and sorrow from years of racial inequality resulted in heated protests across the country. Stress over the United States 2020 election divided the country, and even some families. The rise in crime and murders in the United States cities is believed to be the results of stressors and mental health crises from the ongoing cascading and collective trauma.

During the pandemic, the loneliness and the traumatic experiences made it harder for others to feel safe in this world (Panchal, Kamal, Cox, & Garfield, 2021). Social isolation contributed to more mental health conditions (e.g., depression, anxiety, stress, substance abuse). When people don't feel safe they act out of fear resulting in violence.

Historically, traumatic experiences often lead to destructive behavior (Brewster, 2021). COVID-19- pandemic lead to destructive behaviors in others. Increased in gun violent was approximately 26 % since 2019. The number of mass shooting increased from 417 to 611 during this period (Brewster, 2021). Black males were especially at high risk for high rates of death among demographic groups. Some criminal justice experts suggested the rise in violence is partly due to COVID-19 pandemic because of economy, unemployment, social disconnection, and policy ineffectiveness.

### **Structural Racism and Health inequities**

Structural racism is pervasively and deeply embedded in the system, laws, policies written, and unwritten that perpetuate unfair treatment and oppression in people of color and adversely affect health outcomes (Kennedy, 2009; Kennedy, 2013; Kennedy, 2021). Historically, African Americans and other people of color are disproportionately affected by systematic and historical oppression, recessions, and famine or severe poverty. Collective trauma has a stronger emotional effect on these groups For example, the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affects the existing health conditions and deaths of African Americans.

Collective trauma is not always equal in populations (Kennedy, 2021). Blacks, Latinx, and other indigenous communities in the United States are suffering disproportionately from COVID-19, compounded by historical trauma, structural racism, and persistent poverty. The greatest burdens tend to fall on these most vulnerable populations. The lack of access to health care, resources, and adequate support serves to exacerbate this trauma (Kennedy, 2021). Trauma and fear can result in people feeling unsafe and mistrusting people outside of their immediate group or community (Kennedy, 2013; Kennedy, 2021; Kennedy, Mathis, & Woods, 2007). This is especially true for systemic inequities, like police brutality, gender-based violence, and other hate crimes. For example, people may fear the group associated with the event, like the abuse targeted at members of the Asian community during the COVID-19 pandemic. Asian Americans were blamed or scapegoated for the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Strategies for Policy Development**

Policymakers need to address the structural racism and health inequities in our society (Kennedy, 2009; Kennedy, 2013; Kennedy, 2021; Kennedy, Mathis, & Woods, 2007; Silver, Holman, Garfin, & 2021). Structural racism and health inequities resulted in widespread protests and the need for change. Policy development is needed in addressing the disparities in communities of color. (Kennedy, 2021; Silver, Holman, Garfin, & 2021). Blacks, Latinx, and Indigenous communities in the States are suffering disproportionately from COVID-19. The government needs to allocate resources to underserved populations and communities of color (Kennedy, 2021). The lack of resources and adequate

support will exacerbate the trauma. Financial support, social, and emotional support are needed for these groups especially those at low socioeconomic levels.

People living with health disparities born of historical and racial trauma, long-term economic turmoil, and loss of health insurance may exacerbate chronic health conditions resulting in devastating consequences (Kennedy, 2009; Kennedy, 2013; Kennedy, 2021; Kennedy, Mathis, & Woods, 2007; Silver, Holman, Garfin, & 2021). Access to health care is needed for those people who are not working resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Policymakers need to promote resources available to support health and enact policies that directly address economic and racial inequity in the burden of these crises (Kennedy, 2021; Silver, Holman, Garfin, & 2021).

Trauma has a long-term effect if left untreated therefore the impact of COVID-19 could remain long after the pandemic is under control (Bridgland et al., 2021). After the pandemic is over, there will be uncertainty about how many people will be experiencing mental health conditions. If trauma is not treated it may result in poor health outcomes (e.g., physical, and mental health) the risk of suicide or self-harm, and a greater risk of substance use and violence.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, cascading collective traumas negatively impacted our society especially the communities of color. Policy changes are needed to address the structural racism that negatively impacts the physical and mental health of Blacks, Latinx, and other indigenous communities in the United States. These groups are suffering disproportionately from COVID-19, compounded by

historical trauma, structural racism, and persistent poverty. More research is needed to examine escaping collective trauma and the increased violence.

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