

## **Black Male Hunting! A Phenomenological Study Exploring the Secondary Impact of Police Induced Trauma on the Black Man's Psyche in the United States**

**Allen E. Lipscomb<sup>1</sup>, Mark Emeka<sup>2</sup>, Ishmael Bracy<sup>3</sup>, Vierre Stevenson,<sup>2</sup> Angel Lira<sup>2</sup>,  
Yonatan Barrera Gomez<sup>2</sup>, and Jovon Riggins<sup>2</sup>**

### **Abstract**

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The aim of this phenomenological qualitative research study was to explore the secondary experiences of Black males in the United States who heard, read or viewed the fatal shooting of Stephon Clark by the Sacramento Police Department on March 18, 2018. Utilizing in-depth interviews of (n=62) Black males candidly shared their experiences. Results indicated that 95% of participants reported a theme of post-traumatic stress related symptoms (fear for their own lives; hyper-vigilance; flashbacks) as a result of viewing, hearing or reading about the fatal shooting of Stephon Clark. Three major themes emerged in the study: (1) emotional reactions of anger and sadness among Black men; (2) psychophysiological symptoms of hypervigilance, avoidance and dissociation; and (3) injustices around Black male bodies being targeted. The findings suggest the importance of culturally sensitive practice interventions around understanding and assessing race-based secondary trauma by way of viewing, reading, or hearing racial traumatic events. In addition, further research is necessary on identifying additional cultural and historical barriers that may impede treatment for this vulnerable population if experiencing secondary race-based trauma.

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**Keywords:** black men, mental health, police induced trauma, PTSD ,secondary trauma exposure

### **Introduction**

Over the past six years there has been great visibility of the shooting and ultimately murder of numerous unarmed racially profiled Black males in the United States. Police killings of unarmed Black men helped fuel the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement back in July of 2013. African Americans, accounting for 13 percent of the population, are victims in 26 percent of police shootings and are killed by Law enforcement at 2.8 times the rate of white non-Latinos (Males, 2014). In March of 2018 — the fatal shooting death of another unarmed young Black man by law enforcement was committed. His name was Stephon Clark who was 22 years old and was shot at 20 (8 of which penetrated his body) times in the backyard of the home he was staying in with his grandparents. Sacramento Police officers were reportedly responding to reports of a man breaking car windows. There is overwhelming research that identifies racial profiling as an act of injustice that uses race as the foundation for shaping perceptions and behaviors associated with defining who is and which groups are designated as “criminals” and “targeted” (Carson, 2015; Moore, 2015; Weatherspoon, 2004; Williams, 2013). While racial profiling leading to murder has received considerable attention in the mass media and in academic research (Archbold, Dahle, Fangman, Wentz, & Wood, 2013), there is a dearth of evidence and research highlighting the impact (i.e. psychological and emotional) this has on other Black males who view, read or hear of the killings of unarmed black men via various media outlets.

Research that examines the negative impact that police violence may have on the psychological stability of black men and the black community at large, is severely needed.

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, California State University Northridge, Department of Social Work, USA, [Allen.lipscomb@csun.edu](mailto:Allen.lipscomb@csun.edu)

<sup>2</sup> Research Assistant, California State University Northridge, Department of Social Work, USA

<sup>3</sup> Research Assistant, University of Southern California, Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work, USA

Although the majority of mental health professionals would agree that traumatic events, such as the high-profile police related deaths that have made national news, can increase vulnerability to chronic Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), empirical studies on this particular type of trauma is lacking. In addition, research that integrates the perspectives of those indirectly impacted by said events, would aid in highlighting the different dimensions of trauma that are often overlooked and ignored. Thus, the purpose of this rapid research study (conducted within three weeks of the murder of Stephon Clark) was to explore the experiences of Black males who recently heard, read and/or viewed the fatal shooting of Stephon Clark by the Sacramento Police Department on March 18, 2018 (i.e. post-secondary trauma). Utilizing in-depth interviews (n=62) participants were asked to complete the survey. The information gathered through surveys can provide comprehensive feedback of the unique experiences of Black males who were exposed (secondarily) to the fatal shooting of Stephon Clark.

## Relevant Literature

### Racism's Impact on the Mental Health of Black Men

For decades researchers have noted the impact of discrimination and racism on the psychological health of communities of color (e.g., Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2006; Carter & Forsyth, 2009; Comas-Díaz, 2016). Specifically, race-based stress in the United States is a major cause of trauma that can result in a variety of physical and mental health related challenges and stressors (Pieterse, Todd, Neville, & Carter, 2012; Aymer 2016). According to Aymer (2016) the repeated exposure to racism and racial harassment, particularly as it relates to aggressive and abusive policing of unarmed black men, can contribute to the onset of PTSD. Furthermore, Aymer asserts that all too often critical discussions regarding police violence or focused on reforming the criminal justice system, while failing to address the psychological aftermath of sustained police violence against black men. Exposure to racial stress leads to negative emotional conditions, psychological anguish, physiological changes, negative coping mechanisms, strategies and functional impairments (Williams & Mohammed, 2009). Not only does racism traumatize, but it also hurts, enrages, dehumanizes, humiliates and prevents optimal psychological and emotional growth for marginalized and oppressed communities and groups (Alpert 2015; Anderson, 2013). Racial violence and deaths resulting from lynching, were systematically normalized in America; which induced terror in Black men and ended their lives (Archbold 2012). Therefore, the pain expressed by Black men must be understood within a context of an historical narrative of marginality and the psychosocial consequences of an oppressive past. The author contends that the lack of diagnostic criteria that includes raced based trauma, despite there being clinical evidence of its existence, slows down the processes towards promoting nuanced understanding of racialized trauma. Secondary trauma was not covered in this article.

According to Bryant-Davis and colleagues (n.d.). Their research placed special attention to trauma that has come as a result of racially motivated police brutality or the perceived threat of violence perpetrated by police officers against racial or ethnic minorities, framing both phenomena as acts of violence that can elicit symptomatology that is indicative of a PTSD reaction. In regards, to race and gender, statistics show that Blacks, males and younger persons were more likely to have contact with police that resulted in the use of force. In comparison to Whites, Blacks and Latinos were more likely to experience use of force based on total population with more than 70% Blacks and Latinos surveyed feeling that the threat or use of force was excessive (Eith and Durose, 2011). Stress can be defined as “a person–environment, biopsychosocial interaction, wherein environmental events (stressors) are appraised first as either positive or unwanted and negative” (Carter, 2007, p. 18). When an unwanted or negative stressor exceeds an individual's perceived ability to cope or adapt to the stressor(s), an individual experiences stress reaction within the body. Conversely, trauma is a subset of stressors that involve the following characteristics:

...exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence and can take place in one or more of the following ways: (1) directly experiencing the traumatic event(s), (2) witnessing, in person, the event(s) as it occurred to others, (3) learning that the traumatic event(s) occurred to a close family member or close friend and in cases of actual/threatened death of a friend or family member the event(s) must have been violent or accidental, and (4) experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 271).

In some cases, but not always, traumatic events can lead to the development of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013), PTSD involves the development of symptoms such as intrusions, avoidance, negative changes in mood and thinking, and hyperarousal after exposure to a traumatic event.

Thus, these symptoms are often followed by other problems, such as depression, substance abuse, relationship problems, and physical symptoms (Sanders-Phillips et al., 2014). Carter (2007) proposed a nonpathological model of traumatic stress referred to as race-based traumatic stress and injury. Carter's measure differs from other trauma measures in that the event is racial and the criteria do not draw directly from DSM 5 criteria for PTSD. He defines a racial trauma as an event that evokes emotional or physical pain (or the threat thereof) that results from racism in forms of racial harassment, racial discrimination, or discriminatory harassment. Racial encounters can be direct, subtle, or ambiguous. They can occur on an interpersonal level or be the effect of systematic acts. Carter has suggested that for a racial encounter to be traumatic, it must be experienced as sudden, out of one's control, and highly negative. Symptom clusters typically include intrusions, arousal, avoidance, anxiety, anger, depression, low self-esteem, shame, and guilt. Carter's measure is currently the only measure of race-based traumatic stress. Whereas there is utility in using instruments that measure the frequency and stress associated with racial discrimination, it is also important to connect encounters of racism with reactions.

### **The Impact of Police Induced Trauma and Mental Health**

Little is known about how these violent attacks on Black/African Americans impacted their mental health, both as individuals and as a collective identity. It is likely that this developed and intensified feelings of fear, stress, low morale, and low self-esteem and may have translated into intergenerational effects (Anderson, 2013; Sawyer, Major, Casad, Townsend & Mendes, 2012, *Brave Heart* and DeBruyn, 1998). Nelson (2001) adds "Fear, indifference, paranoia, passivity, alienation, and violence are a few of the byproducts of living in a society in which we are the victims of, or silent partners in, abusive, brutal, and racist behavior by the police" (p. 15). While these are very real factors that may be present by communities and individuals facing repression by law enforcement, few have focused on analyzing the direct and lasting psychological impact that these encounters may cause. The slim literature around the historical impact of police abuse on African Americans shows a striking need to add to the research.

According to Mitchell (2000), "Police brutality is defined as any act of unmerited excessive and aggressive physical, mental, and/or emotional abuse, above and beyond the law, enacted upon by an individual or groups of individuals in law enforcement" (p. 2). But what about race-based police brutality and its psychological impact. As recent years of police killings and brutality towards unarmed people of color have inspired uproar from communities standing up against police brutality, the media has increased its attention towards these issues. As statistics continue to show an increase in police contacts as well as incidents of police use of physical and deadly force towards males of color, literature has failed to focus on the long-term adverse effects of police abuse towards Black and Latino males as those who are most impacted by police violence. Few studies have generally touched on this topic with minimal scope. Geller, Fagan, Tyler, and Bruce (2014) write that qualitative research suggests that the physically invasive and often rough manner in which officers approach citizens raises the risk of injury. Men are often thrown to the ground or slammed to the wall during street stops in which individuals may face emotional trauma in the face of unwarranted accusations of wrongdoing (Geller et al., 2014). Proactive police stops, usually predicated on low levels of suspicion and wrongdoing, may trigger stigma and stress responses and depressive symptoms (Geller et al., 2014). Stresses can be compounded when police use harsh language such as racial invective or taunts about sexuality (Geller et al. 2014). Threat of death or actual witnessed death at the hands of police officers can also impact a person's mental health and perceptions of the world. In fact, studies have shown that people who witness killings or murders in public may display symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Elklit and Kurdahl, 2013). This is significant due to the fact that the rate of police killings, especially that of Black and Latino men, has drastically increased over the years.

### **Methodology**

This study espoused a phenomenological research methodology and utilized a semi-structured interviewing method of data collection (Creswell, 2013). This methodology has advanced as a means for exploring participants' perspectives of their interactions with other social situations (Crotty 1998). The main premise is to provide a first-person account of an experience. Phenomenology requires the researcher to place their interpretations aside and present the raw descriptions provided by the participants.

This, undeniably, is limited as it seeks to isolate the researcher's cultural impositions, social location in society while at the same time not be suspicious of the participants' interpretation of their own lived experiences surrounding a situation (Crotty 1998).

Nonetheless, the researcher is responsible for reporting emergent themes of the participants' narrative descriptions, it is noticeable that phenomenology has a degree of objectivity as it relates to the selection of the participants' lived experiences (Creswell 2013).

The method utilized, as described in depth below, was directed towards collecting and analyzing data and in so doing highlighting the voices of the individuals who participated in the study. In addition, a Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) approach was honored during the recruiting and collection of the data. The essential elements of CQR are the use of open-ended questions in semi-structured survey, which allow for the collection of consistent data across individuals as well as a more in-depth examination of individual experiences. The rationale for the utilization of this approach was to allow Black men to choose to participate without coercion, deceit or manipulation. Specifically, the research questions posed were the following:

1. How do Black males who witnessed the fatal shooting of Stephon Clark (i.e. viewing on various media outlets) respond?
2. How does the killing of Stephon Clark impact Black males personally?
3. Do Black males worry about being shot/fatally killed by law enforcement?

### **Sampling Procedures**

Approval was obtained from the Institutional Research Board at the authors' university to conduct a rapid research study. Participants in this study were selected via snowball sampling and purposeful sampling in order to provide for what is often known as "information-rich" cases in the likes of qualitative research (Patton, 1990). The participants consisted of (n=62) Black/African American men (M=30) with an age ranging from 18-65. 90% of the participants resided in California of which 15% lived in Northern California area.

### **Interviews and Instruments**

The interview guide was developed by the researcher using information obtained from the current literature, clinical direct practice work and research with Black men around post-secondary race-based policed induced trauma. From a qualitative perspective, electronic interviews provided the best means for obtaining a more authentic and detailed account of participants' experiences as it relates to their experiences. The interview guide was provided to ignite insight into their thoughts and reactions to the fatal shooting of Stephon Clark.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The interviews were administered using an online electronic semi-structured interview guide. Participants were given a short demographic questionnaire to complete before starting the interview. Data was analyzed based on responses to the interview questions as well as information obtained from the demographic portion of the questionnaire. In the second phase, the authors met monthly for several months in an iterative process to review transcripts and modify the coding to include "emerging codes"— codes that were consistently found in the interview analysis process were then discussed among authors. Data was analyzed taking significant units of textual evidence and categorizing the coded information. Categorized transcribed data was then used to develop overarching themes and were based on the various categories and subcategories that emerged from the analysis.

### **Results**

The results in this study are not intended to be generalizable since it would not be realistic to assume that all Black/African American men across the Black diaspora who witnessed (via various media outlets) the fatal shooting of Stephon Clark or other Black men in the United States will have the same psychological and emotional experiences as the 62 men represented in this study. Rather, the results are intended to bring about awareness in how clinicians assess for and treat post-secondary exposure to police induced race-based trauma. The research questions that guided this explorative study resulted in the emergence of themes. The themes were then clustered into three main categories based on an iterative and interpretive analysis process (see Figure 1 below). In addition, pseudonyms have been provided to each participant quote utilize in the following section in order to humanize their lived experiences and bring to light their narratives.

## Emergent Themes

**Theme 1: Emotional Reactions of Anger and Sadness.** Participants expressed having strong emotional reactions to viewing, hearing or learning of the fatal shooting of Stephon Clark by Sacramento Police. The following are a selection of quotes that speak to this theme:

**Carson, Northridge California-**“Anger, at first it was disbelief, then the anger took over as I remembered the many others before Clark and still is going on.”

**Devin, Sacramento California-** “Devastated and paralyzed...each time I hear or see killings of unarmed black men it stops me in my tracks and takes my breath away.”

**Keith, Van Nuys California-** “Angry that another innocent unarmed man was robbed of a successful life he began. Hopefully changes comes.”

**Kingston, Bellflower California-**“I can’t stand watching history repeat itself.”

**Alvin, Albany New York-**“Outraged! This is becoming an epidemic and sooner or later will hit closer to home than I am ready for.”

**Theme 2: Psychophysiological Symptoms of Hypervigilance, Avoidance and Dissociation.** Participants shared their physical and psychological experiences. Emotional wounding that is caused on the psyche and how this begins to manifest into hypervigilance, avoidance and dissociation in order to psychologically cope. The following are a selection of quotes that speak to this theme:

**Samari, Schenectady New York-**“My guard is up daily.”

**Hubert, Houston Texas-**“I’m conflicted to accept this as my reality.”

**Sean, Seattle Washington-** “I have to watch my back everywhere I go in Sacramento.”

**Percy, Pasadena California-** “I am very hypervigilant about law enforcement.”

**Omarion, Oakland California-** “I don’t feel safe even in my own home.”

**Theme 3: Injustice around Black Male Bodies being Targeted.** Participants shared their experiences of being Black in America noting that there is true concern for their Black bodies and how they navigate movement through society given the continued murders of unarmed Black men in the United States by law enforcement. The following are a selection of quotes that speak to this theme:

**Jason, San Jacinto California-**“Concerned of being stereotyped as a threat.”

**Najeer, Nashville Tennessee-** “You can be shot by police not because you’re doing some illegal, but just because you’re black.”

**Craig, Denver Colorado-**“Fear for my son. I try to prepare him, but I feel he is naive to the dangers of being black in America.”

**Terrance, Dallas Texas-**“When will they stop killing black men.”

**Lawrence, Las Vegas Nevada-**“Yes, whenever I travel I’m fearful that I will be targeted for no cause or reason.”

Figure 1. Emerging Themes



## Discussion

This study sought out to identify the role of social media as a vehicle to the exposure to police induced secondary trauma. There were 69% of participants reported learning of the murder of Stephon Clark via social media. Each of the narratives reflected in the data tell the exact same truth; the truth of a Black man who feels fear, powerlessness, aggression and sorrow. The data reveals that the Black men in this study struggle to figure out why their Black skin is synonymous with mortality.

The narratives highlight pain among Black men who are forced to choose their poison: death by a fear-fragility induced bullet or the psychological anguish that inevitably comes from not being able to simply live and be. Black males have been subjected to prove the value of their psychological and emotional existence each day, no matter what privileges Black males may carry from being male.

Simultaneously, there is an existential loss experience around a Black man's social autonomy in relation to the loss of past ways of being and existing in the community; the loss of embodiment and navigation whereby no longer feeling safe in their existence within and within the larger society. The feeling of being hunted as a Black man continues to be a sentiment that is widely experienced among the community. Ultimately, the findings verified that there are significant potential psychological and emotional effects that may be experienced and felt by Black men in the United States who have seen, heard or read about by police induced trauma. In addition, 95% of the participants reported society needing to recognize the attack on Black male bodies. 72% of the participants reported that they worried about being fatally shot by law enforcement on a daily basis. One participated said, "It's a shame that a man can be gunned down in his own backyard for no reason. I've seen videos where police made an extra effort to de-escalate a situation, but it seems overwhelmingly black males are not given that courtesy. It feels like we are being hunted. There is no justice for the men who lost their lives over trivial circumstances. The police are taking the law into their own hands and carrying out death sentences out on the streets." Although much of the results from the study reflected the literature, there are unique nuances that must be considered.

### **Clinical Implications**

In recognizing the psychological and emotional impact that this form of exposure has on the Black male psyche, there needs to be culturally appropriate clinical interventions for assessing and treating this form of trauma (i.e. post-secondary police induced race-based trauma). Additionally, it is important that clinicians remain mindful of the various ways in which this trauma may show up in the lives of Black males (i.e. anger, sadness, avoidance, dissociation and hypervigilance). Black male distrust towards law enforcement has been widely associated with the notion that a Black men's vigilance is a result of their fear of being caught in a deviant act. Contrary to this notion, many of the narratives captured in this research showed that even in the absence of deviant behavior, there still remains a significant fear and distrust towards law enforcement. Considering the results of this study, clinicians should be open to being less rigid in treating clients who show signs of suffering from PTSD symptoms, yet do not completely meet the diagnosis criteria due to their proximity to the precipitating event. In clinical practice it is essential that professionals utilize a culturally appropriate anti-oppressive critical lens when assessing and treating Black men. By not recognizing the secondary traumas that are embedded into the psyches of Black men, clinicians are failing to capture significant information about their clients and the ways in which they navigate the social world.

Clinicians who do macro and policy work should challenge the current criteria for the PTSD diagnosis, based on the results of this study, to include secondary trauma via viewing a video clip on various media and social media platforms, as a way one can be impacted by exposure to violence. By having this form of trauma recognized and published in future DSM, clinicians can begin to hold themselves accountable for identifying and addressing a major need in Black communities. Clinicians, armed with the revelations that came from this study, would be wise to hold the awareness that secondary trauma is always a threat, and assess for it in clinical spaces; particularly when working with men of color around the all too often occurrence of police killings on all media platforms.

### **Limitations of Research**

The sample included mainly young adult Black men. Perhaps having Black men from late-adulthood may have yielded different results. In addition, one limitation of the study is that it did not account for the educational status of the participants. The other limitation is that the study did not account for the participants having prior mental health histories. Another limitation regarding the sample relates to socioeconomic status. We did not obtain participants from varying socioeconomic statuses, which could have enriched the study due to the increasing economic and financial divide among this population. Likewise, additional research is needed to explore the psychological impact on the Black family.

### **Future Research**

The experience of the Black man in the United States continues to be threatened by law enforcement and socially through accepted racial discrimination.

The emergent themes from our participants indicated the fear and collective experiences that many Black men throughout the United States in different neighborhoods and communities experience on a daily basis. This research could be applied to other racial identities such as the Latinx community and Middle Eastern community as they are often discriminated by systems as well. By expanding the phenomenological experiences of other people of color, it could show that the experiences of many communities that are continuously harassed and seen as targets by law enforcement.

The research regarding Black men and their psychological and emotional responses to the fatal shooting of unarmed Black men in America could be expanded in a number of ways to expand the breadth and depth of the literature. One area in which the research could be expanded is regarding race and gender. A study that includes Black women's responses to the same phenomenon could provide additional information regarding contextual factors particular to them. In a future investigation, a sample consisting of Black women could be utilized to explore cultural group gender differences and psycho-emotional responses. A future study could also utilize a sample of transgender identified Black men to see if their experiences are similar or different from heterosexual, cisgender Black men as it relates to shifts in intersectional identity construction. Additional ways to expand the research include interviewing Black men and their familial systems as well as incorporating advanced statistical mixed-methods design.

“Not everything that is faced can be changed.  
But nothing can be changed until it is faced”  
-James Baldwin

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