**Review Article**

**Emerging Issues in Behavioral Health: A Review of the Literature**

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**Abstract**

Many behavioral health and physical health related concerns and issues have emerged in recent years. Many of these issues and concerns existed prior to the pandemic and only became profound as a result of the pandemic. Issues such as stress and depression, suicide ideation, and intimate partner danger have been the most prominent. This literature review is a compilation of summaries on various health sciences and behavioral science topics submitted by students in the Emerging Issues in Behavioral Health course at Coppin State University, a historically Black College/University (HBCU) in Baltimore, Maryland.

**Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about great disruption to the everyday lives of individuals. In the academic setting, the pandemic has altered how education is delivered and impacted the retention of knowledge due to the shift to a completely online modality. Not only did students have to shift their way of learning, but professors and teachers also had to adapt to conducting classes in a virtual setting while maintaining engagement within classes.

This literature review is the result of students’ written summary submissions in a health sciences course. In this course, students were instructed to research, read for understanding and comprehension, compose, submit, and be prepared to articulate summaries of various behavioral health and physical health related research studies.

Bain K [1] examined the importance of student engagement and how professors can provide students with learning experiences that allow them to make real world connections through the information being taught. According to Bain, a natural critical learning environment is one in which students are fully engaged and ask thought provoking questions that prompt the students to think outside the box and examine problems in their immediate environment that can then be generalized to the larger society.

Many college students in the health sciences, behavioral sciences, and medical disciplines during the COVID-19 pandemic have experienced great stress due to the dire need for health workers to provide care for the vast number of victims of the pandemic. According to Bullock, G, et al. [2], stress is a common factor among graduate and undergraduate students enrolled in the health disciplines and according to Bullock, et al. [2], this stress can easily lead to burnout. Burnout is defined as mental and physical exhaustion as a result of overexposure to select stressors and the inability to produce positive and adaptive coping mechanisms.

**Aim and Hypothesis**

The aim of this literature review is to provide an educational context for those experiencing the before and aftereffects of the pandemic; provide a deeper understanding of the challenges of many of the emerging issues in behavioral health and physical health; and define measures to counter those effects. The hypothesis is existing and emerging health concerns and issues can be better understood and better managed with more and better information. It is postulated that individuals “Would do better if they knew better” and by extension live better, healthier, and more productive lives.

**Background and Literature Review**

A health-related issue that individuals experienced during the pandemic was the enactment of “Stay at home orders” which forced them to stay at home to avoid the constant exposure to pollutants commonly found outdoors and to avoid infecting others. The short and long term impacts of exposure to various air pollutants on the cognition and health and productivity of individuals before the pandemic. Even before the pandemic, Schmidt found that Americans spend 90% of their time indoors and heavy exposure to such indoor pollutants as chemical cleaning supplies, methods of ventilation, and indoor appliances accounted for 11.9% of deaths worldwide. The suggestion is that breathing cleaner air would lead to greater cognition. A 2022 study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) Network Open revealed that living in a “Greener” neighborhood could actually boost cognitive function and reduce the risk of dementia [3] and research by Lee, KE, et al. [4] suggests that simply looking at greenery could improve and sustain attention and cognition.

College students face many stressors that can increase their chances of depression, one of which is grades and grading practices. The issue of grading and grade inflation is discussed by Gray HJ [5] who suggests there has been an increase in grade point averages that are inconsistent with the level of student performance. According to Gray, the literature on grade inflation contains factors that influence grading practices such as student expectations and instructor evaluations. Gray explains that these factors appear to be connected as student expectations can influence teacher evaluations which, in turn, influence teachers’ job security. Gray suggests that while college students continue to advocate for higher grades, their understanding of the subject matter has continued to decrease. What was a ‘C’ in the 1960s has now become an ‘A.’

Bain K [6] emphasizes that the best college students are creative. They are able to look within themselves, understand who they are, and find a purpose for their studies beyond grades. The best college students think about their own thinking, a process that Bain describes as metacognition. This process allows students to engage themselves in their own conversations and question their own thinking. These students are not afraid to take risks and they expect to do well in understanding their studies. In other words, their higher expectations lead to higher and greater understanding.

Expectations in health care concerning cultural competency can influence the quality of health care. According to Truong, TJ, et al. [7], existing reviews of cultural competency in healthcare reveal a lack of evidence and consensus on improved provider behaviors and patient outcomes and ways of improving cultural competency. It is suggested that improvements in cultural competency can lead to reductions in discrimination-based health disparities. In other words, improved cultural competency could improve the delivery of health services for minorities.

Cultural competency, stigma and health inequity is prevalent among health providers and usually begins with misconceptions, notions and faulty beliefs pertaining to minorities. Many racial and ethnic minorities and disadvantaged populations face increased susceptibility to declining health due to discrimination and racial prejudice. According to Truong, et al. [7], cultural competency consists of multiple interventions. Those interventions are geared toward providing more obtainable and effective health care to racial and ethnic minorities. According to Bullock G, et al. [2], there is a high correlation between stress and burnout and many health sciences, behavioral health, and medical students have a decreased outlook on life as compared to their peers. As feelings of burnout increase, empathy and professionalism decreases. Rather than seeking professional help, many students often turn to substance use. Drug addiction is estimated to be up to 100 times more common in physicians and health care workers than in the general population [8].

The relationship between stress and the genetic risk of bipolar disorder was examined in a study by Wilcox HC, et al. [9]. According to Wilcox et al, individuals with bipolar disorder are at a substantial risk for such suicidal behaviors as to suicidal ideation, suicide attempt, and self-harm. In this study, Wilcox et al aimed to determine whether bipolar disorder relatives are at greater risk of suicidal behaviors, whether genetic risk indicates suicidal behaviors, and whether genetic risk interacts with traumatic events to increase suicidal risks. According to Dome, P, et al. [10], bipolar disorders are one the most common psychiatric disorders. Patients with bipolar disorder have poorer life expectancies, with a decreased lifespan of up to 17 years compared to the general population.

Genetics may play a role in the development of bipolar disorder, and it is possible genetics plays a role in blood pressure as well. A study by Quinlan, J, et al. [11] investigated blood pressure through genetic analysis of African Americans living in Tallahassee, Florida. According to Quinlan J, et al. [11], hypertension is a leading risk factor for cardiovascular disease and African Americans are disproportionately affected. This suggests that sociocultural factors are major indicators of high blood pressure among minorities, consumer advocates, mental health professionals, and law enforcement. The police Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) models are more than just training they include such important factors as the collaboration and shared knowledge of community resources. Bratina found that the majority of encounters involving CIT trained police officers resulted in diversion rather than arrest. However, Rogers MS, et al. [12] explain that evaluating the relative efficacy of different models of CIT training has been challenging for researchers, yet despite these challenges CIT has been shown to have positive effects, particularly in officer-level interventions and outcomes.

According to Alang [13], literature that describes perceptions of mental illness among African Americans is limited. Alang cites works that debate the perception of mental illness in Black communities which suggest that Black communities relate mental illness to disorder and disharmony rather than a disease to be treated. These notions are what might contribute to judgment and shame around mental illness among minorities. Alang [13] found that participants in this study viewed depression as a sign of weakness. One study participant stated that Black people don’t get (clinical) depression and that depression is depended on an individual’s inner strength. These misunderstandings play a significant role in patient care and is one reason minorities do not seek professional treatment for mental illness and clinical depression.

Haag, HL, et al. [14] investigated the impact of COVID-19 on survivors of intimate partner violence and brain injury as well as that impact on their service providers. Haag, et al. [14] describe intimate partner violence as actions committed by a spouse or significant other that can be physical, sexual, emotional, or psychological in nature. These actions result in significant emotional and bodily harm. Blunt force trauma, violent shaking, and strangulation are often experienced during intimate partner violence and can lead to brain injury and produce a change in brain function or pathology.

Moreira, et al. [15] explain that intimate partner violence is a global pandemic and victims appeared long before COVID-19. They explain that one in every three women experience physical or sexual violence during their lifetime, and that although men can also be victims, men are far less likely to disclose abuse. Previous studies have revealed that intimate partner violence increases during emergencies and the COVID-19 pandemic reveals this same tendency (Moreira and Pinto de Costa). Piquero, AR, et al. [16] explain that the pandemic heightened factors associated with domestic violence such as high male unemployment, stress of childcare, financial insecurity, and poor coping skills and strategies.

Just as the previously mentioned interventions play a role in adult health outcomes so can childhood experiences. In a study by Fuller-Thompson, et al. [17], associations between Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and substance dependence outcomes were investigated. According to Fuller-Thompson, et al. [17], an estimated 22.2 million Americans 12 years old and older are classified as having substance use disorders. Substance abuse is associated with several health risks. Adverse childhood experiences, which can include sexual and physical abuse, have been associated with substance abuse in adulthood. Thulin EJ, et al. [18] examined ACEs in adolescence and the relationship to intimate partner violence in adulthood and found that experiences of ACEs in adolescence is predictive of interpersonal violence 15 years later.

**Conceptual Framework of the Study**

The conceptual framework of this study is built around the concept of community engagement as defined in 1997 by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC). The CDC defines community engagement as the “Process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people.”

**Summary and Conclusion**

Many of the issues and concerns expressed in this literature review emerged long before the pandemic. Of particular concern among HBCU students during in-class discussions and debates is the topic of adverse childhood experiences. It was concluded that many of the negative behaviors experienced in the college classroom, on campus, and in the community were the result learned negative early childhood experiences. Another highly debatable in-class discussion was the question of whether air pollution makes one less productive and it was concluded that simply visiting the neighborhood park or adding indoor plants to the dorm room or household, and simply looking at greenery can boost brain power, reduce dementia, and sustain attention span.

Healthy People 2020 suggests that mental health concerns and behavioral health concerns such anxiety and depression can also influence socioeconomic status and influences diabetes, hypertension, cancer and many of the other diseases that disproportionately affect minorities. This is in keeping with in-class discussions on the connection with the social determinants of health, health disparities, and the previously mentioned Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and contextualizes student responses. It was revealed that postal zip codes are a more important predictor of poor physical and mental health and well-being than the genetic code, meaning where an individual lives determines their health, economic, and overall well-being. Social Determinants of Health include the substandard housing in which many HBCU students live; their poor and/or unequal education, most HBCUs are in lower socioeconomic communities; and these students are subjected to racism and poverty from a very young age [19].

Healthy People 2030 has set as its goals to increase treatment for individuals with depression, increase the quality of life for individuals suffering from cancer, reducing the suicide rate, reducing substance use and alleviating the social determinants of health among others [20].

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