

THE BUFFALO NEWS

Two Months after Tops Massacre, a New Look at Racism's Mental Health Toll



Two children write on the memorial wall on the side of a building in the Jefferson Utica Plaza where large photos of the victims of the Tops massacre are displayed. Such tragedies can cause mental health challenges in kids and parents should be alert for the warning signs.

Sharon Cantillon / Buffalo News file photo

[Rod Watson](#)

When Surgo Ventures, a nonprofit organization that uses data to tackle health problems, looked at the [overlap between mental health issues and vulnerability to Covid-19](#), Buffalo – along with Rochester and Syracuse – was one of only 13 cities across the nation that ranked near the top of both lists.

Besides being a dubious distinction for New York State, it's also part of the reason the three cities were picked to host Mental Health in Communities of Color symposiums this week during Minority Mental Health Month.

The Buffalo symposium on Thursday is sandwiched between forums in Rochester on Wednesday and in Syracuse on Saturday. But the session here takes on added significance, coming exactly two months after the [May 14 Tops supermarket massacre](#) that killed 10 and wounded three.

Beyond devastating the victims' families and friends, the mass shooting also traumatized an entire community – trauma that no doubt will be triggered again when the store reopens Friday – because the market was targeted precisely because it serves a predominantly Black neighborhood.

That realization adds to the mental strain Blacks already were dealing with as a result of the disproportionate toll Covid-19 exacted because of socioeconomic disparities that make communities of color more vulnerable. The shooting by a white supremacist also adds to the normal toll imposed by more everyday forms of racism.

Yet, according to a 2020 American Counseling Association article, people of color are less likely to have access to mental health services, less likely to seek out those services or receive needed care, more likely to get poor care and more likely to end care prematurely.

Part of that is because the stigma still associated with mental illness prevents too many people from seeking care. But when it comes to Blacks or other people of color, there's more to it than that.

“I wouldn't say it's worse because, honestly, there's still a stigma in all communities when it comes to mental health,” said Dr. Jonathan Shepherd, president of the Black Mental Health Alliance and a symposium panelist.

What makes it worse for Blacks, Shepherd said, is that disparities in health care make it easier for whites to get treatment. In addition, he pointed to the strong faith element in the Black community and the notion that someone with a problem should just turn to their pastor.

On top of all of that, there is also the issue of cultural competency and the fact that in 2019, according to an American Psychological Association analysis of Census Bureau data, whites accounted for 83% of the U.S. psychology workforce while Blacks made up only 3%, Hispanics comprised just 7% and 4% were Asian.

A joint declaration last year from the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the Children's Hospital Association pointed to “soaring rates of mental health challenges” among young people during the pandemic. But it also noted that “the inequities

that result from structural racism have contributed to disproportionate impacts on children from communities of color.”

In a separate statement, the AACAP noted that Black youth with mental health challenges are often not recognized as such “due in part to bias, discrimination, and structural racism.” Instead, they are misdiagnosed as having behavioral problems and “are more likely to receive poor quality care.”

Such obstacles are what pushed Sara Taylor to become an advocate after a teenage niece she’s raising faced mental health challenges three years ago and Taylor began talking to other parents she met in emergency rooms.

“There was a lot of discrimination, a lot of racism,” said Taylor, who spearheaded the symposiums after founding BIPOC PEEEEEEK, a long acronym for Black, Indigenous and people color working as parents to empower one another to eliminate inequities in mental health care for their kids.

“Our children are often treated like criminals,” Taylor said, explaining that white providers often don’t know what it’s like to have Child Protective Services called on a family whose kid is experiencing mental health problems or to have police show up and wrestle that child to the ground.

“That’s why our movement started,” she said, adding that the field needs more people of color not just as clinicians but also as peer advocates to guide people through the system and to press for change. Those needed changes include expanding access by putting programs tailored to people of color in churches, housing complexes and other community locations.

“Some people will never show up at a mental health clinic, and that’s OK,” said Taylor, who runs the Positive Steps events management company. “But they should not be exempt from care.”

One challenge, though, is recognizing the signs that someone needs help. Shepherd will focus his remarks on what adults should look for in children as they cope with mass shootings like those in the Buffalo store, the Uvalde elementary school and at the July 4 parade in his native state of Illinois.

Shepherd, a psychiatrist and chief medical director with Hope Health Systems in Baltimore, said children respond to such trauma in several ways and it’s important for parents to know their kids so they can spot deviations from normal behavior. Those warning signs could include not being able to sleep or not being able to sleep alone in their own bedroom, changes in eating patterns, not wanting to leave home or being more irritable.

“Just overall being more anxious,” he said.

For those skeptical of the impact traumatic events like the Tops shooting can have, Shepherd noted how the Highland Park, Ill., parade shooting affected him, recalling how he had attended a similar Independence Day event the day before.

“You think about the fact that terror can strike anywhere. It doesn’t have a name on it, or certain neighborhoods that it occurs in,” he said.

The Buffalo symposium will be at Ephesus Ministries on Grider Street. Registration is required at bipocparentvoice.org. Like the other two, it will include keynotes by national experts as well as a panel discussion featuring Shepherd along with the equity director from the state Office of Mental Health and representatives from Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield of WNY, BestSelf Behavioral Health and the Buffalo Federation of Neighborhood Centers.

Taylor said one goal – in addition to spotlighting the need to diversify the industry – is to change the perception of mental illness, removing the stigma so that it’s regarded like diabetes or any other physical illness.

Talking about it openly in forums like these is a good start.