

Anxiety, Depression, and Physical Health Problems among Urban, Young Mothers

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Purpose

Accumulating research has documented the relationship between mental health outcomes and physical health problems among women. The relationship between specific mental health disorders, such as anxiety and depression, and physical health problems, however, remains less understood. In addition, few studies have examined these relationships among large samples of urban, young mothers. Findings from the current study are designed to address these gaps in the literature.

Methods

The sample drawn for this analysis includes 4,898 mothers who participated in the first three phases of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a national longitudinal panel study that has a representative sample of marital and non-marital births in U.S. urban cities with populations of 200,000 or more. Baseline data were collected on 3,711 unmarried and 1,187 married mothers. Follow-up data were collected at one year and three years post baseline assessment. This analysis includes data across three time points. Descriptive statistics are used to describe health and mental health profiles in the sample of mothers. Logistic regression analyses and predicted probabilities describe the association between anxiety, depression, and serious physical health problems in urban, young mothers.

Results

Average mothers were 26 years old with a high school diploma or G.E.D. and had a mean total household income of \$31,000. Sixty-nine percent of mothers were not married. The sample consisted of 48% African American, 26% Latina, 21% White, 3% Asian, and 2% Other. Approximately 3% and 15% of the sample have generalized anxiety and major depression, respectively, and approximately 12% report having a serious physical health problem. When examined separately, anxiety and depression are significantly associated with having serious physical health problems among urban mothers, controlling for sociodemographic variables. After accounting for past serious health problems, depression is still associated with having serious physical health problems, but the relationship is no longer significant; however, the relationship between anxiety and having serious physical health problems remains significant.

Implications

This study provides a unique opportunity to examine the relationships between anxiety, depression, and physical health among a large, nationally representative sample of urban, low-income mothers. The study findings provide further evidence of the link between mental and physical health problems in this population. Approaches for assessing and reducing mental and physical health problems among low-income women should be high priorities for health providers. Additional practice and policy implications will be discussed.

