

Testimony on Bill SCR-14
June 9, 2020
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Thank you Chairman Burke, Vice Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Antonio, and members of the Ohio Senate Health, Human Services and Medicaid Committee. My name is Dr. Colleen Waickman, and I'm here to testify in support of Senate Concurrent Resolution 14 (SCR 14) declaring that racism is a public health crisis.

I recently graduated from The Ohio State University College of Medicine and am a resident physician in psychiatry. Today, I would like to speak to you about the effects of racism on the mental health of the Black community, especially Black children and adolescents, which are shocking and yet often ignored.

As I drive downtown, billboards and signs about Nationwide Children's #onoursleeves campaign remind me that there is an epidemic of mental health disorders among all children and adolescents in the United States. One in five children live with a serious mental illness that interferes with their lives, and half of all lifetime mental health conditions start by age 14.¹

If we look more closely at this epidemic, however, we see that there are health disparities for Black youth. Suicide rates among Black youth are rapidly increasing.² Since 1991, rates of suicide attempts for Black boys and girls have increased faster than other groups, with a significant increase in injury from suicide attempts among Black boys. Among children ages 5 to 12, Black children are twice as likely to die by suicide than their white counterparts.² Compounding the issue, Black youth who experience racism are more likely to have thoughts of suicide and death.³ These disturbing trends are tied to effects of racism and adverse childhood events on Black children. We are already in the midst of a mental health epidemic for all young people in the United States, and racism contributes to the disparities within this epidemic for Black children and adolescents. We as a local, state, and national community have a responsibility to address this.

When talking about the mental health of Black children, it is impossible to divorce this topic from racist state and national policies that have led to the mass incarceration of Black people across the country, especially African American men. It has become clear that racist policing and incarceration practices have led to increased rates of mental health disorders among African American children due to the effect of having an incarcerated parent.⁴

An African American child is six times as likely as a white child to have or have had an incarcerated parent. This wide disparity in incarceration between races is largely due to increased sentences for African Americans versus whites in crimes involving drugs. African Americans are more likely than whites to be arrested for drug crimes, but are no more likely than whites to sell or use drugs.⁴ The results of these practices are that one

in ten African American students has a currently incarcerated parent. One in four has a parent who is or has previously been incarcerated.

Studies in multiple disciplines show that parental incarceration leads to detrimental cognitive outcomes that impact school performance. Children of incarcerated parents are more likely to develop learning disabilities such as ADHD, drop out of school, and suffer from migraines, asthma, high cholesterol, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and homelessness. When a child's parent is incarcerated, they are 250 times more likely to have a serious psychiatric disorder.⁵ This is an example of how a racist system has downstream effects that prevent Black contributing to an increased burden of mental health disorders on African American children and preventing them from reaching their potential.⁴

Until the unjust discrimination against African Americans in policing, sentencing, and incarceration is addressed, Black children will continue to suffer from mental and physical disorders stemming from the trauma of experiencing racism on a regular basis. Rates of suicide, suicide attempts, and suicidal thoughts are higher for Black young people, and racism directly contributes to this disparity. By declaring racism as a public health crisis in the state of Ohio, you are taking one step towards a better future for children and families of all racial minority groups, but especially Black children and families, at a time when they deserve so much more from their local and state communities and governments.

I would like to thank the committee and the sponsors of this resolution, Senator Sandra Williams and Senator Hearcel Craig, for being brave to move forward with this critical issue. Thank you.

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Sources:

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4. Morsy, L and Rothstein, R. 2016. Mass incarceration and children's outcomes: criminal justice policy is education policy. *Economic Policy Institute*. <https://files.epi.org/pdf/118615.pdf>. 8 June 2020.
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