



**AMERICAN
PSYCHOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION**
SERVICES, INC.

For additional information, contact:
Kenneth Polishchuk
202-336-5945
kpolishchuk@apa.org

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Mental Health Needs of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) Students

Black students experience unique stressors, and students at HBCUs require attention to psychological health, especially in response to struggles with identity, trauma, threats of violence, and systemic oppressions.

HBCU Students Exhibit Increasing Mental Health Needs

Although increased demand for mental health care among college students is not a new priority, the impact of COVID-19 and the national reckoning with racism has further increased the necessity to address these needs. This is especially the case for students of color, as they face increased social and financial pressures and exposures to trauma that negatively impact their psychological well-being and overall health.¹ Depression, anxiety, and stress are among the major concerns reported by Black students at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs).² One HBCU in the Northeast U.S., which had students self-report psychological stress found that 49% of students met the clinical cutoff for depression, 39% for anxiety, and 52% for depression and/or anxiety.³ These findings could be directly tied to academic, socioeconomic, and pandemic-related concerns.

Black students experience disproportionate exposure to traumatic events compared to other racial or ethnic groups.⁴ Intergenerational trauma resulting from racism can have significant mental health implications.⁵ This is further exacerbated for students at the intersection of multiple underrepresented groups. For example, Black students who identify as LGBTQ+ report experiencing stressors such as identity development, stigma, ostracization, discrimination, and adverse experiences, as well as the pressure of success in education while facing internalized oppression and structural violence through systems and institutions.⁶

Even on HBCU campuses, many Black students continue to experience oppression, which presents consequences to their academic and social engagement, racial empowerment, and identity development. Identity struggle and exposure to adverse experiences are common themes among Black students at HBCUs.⁷ In addition, over a third of HBCU students have experienced a situation in which they felt their life or well-being was in jeopardy.⁸ Black women especially face an increased risk of physical aggression, including higher levels of sexual assault and harassment.⁹ As such, it is crucial that mental health services and support for HBCU students include acknowledgment and targeted interventions for trauma and healing. Despite this, recent data show that while majorities of students of color at colleges and universities exhibited signs of mental health concerns between 2020 and 2021, they were less likely to receive treatment than their white peers.¹⁰

Along with mental health concerns associated with identity and trauma, financial stressors have been shown to impede access to and completion of higher education.¹¹ Data show that due to a lack of generational wealth Black students tend to disproportionately rely on debt to finance their education.¹² This is especially true for Black women.¹³ Rising prices of college tuition contribute to a cycle of systemic oppression in black communities, leaving many students with debt and the burden of financial stress. HBCU students report that student loan repayment, financial assistance and education, and future educational expenses, are major contributing factors to stress.¹⁴

The confluence of these stressors among HBCU students presents a compelling case for increased resources and attention, including from the federal government, toward mental health services and supports within institutions and communities. Students and institutions alike must receive evidence-informed, culturally competent, and targeted interventions to improve health and well-being. However, interventions should not just be limited to mental health services. Rather, it is essential that programs are considered to address systemic racial barriers in housing, educational attainment, overall healthcare, and economic mobility, all of which have downstream effects on mental health.

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