Depression affects the physical and psychological well-being of those who are diagnosed with this disorder. According to the American Psychological Association (2010), depression is caused by various factors which can include genetic, chemical, psychological, or social components. Minority women and other underrepresented groups experience depression at a rate that is the same or higher than white women (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007). However, many low socioeconomic status (SES) minority women do not receive mental health treatment. This problem is heightened in the criminal justice system, where minority women may be labeled as angry instead of being properly diagnosed with depression.

Introduction

In the United States, minority women who are diagnosed with depression account for only 7% of the total women treated for this disorder (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007).

Nicolaidis et al. (2010) reported that minority women feel that the healthcare system is racially biased and that practitioners do not understand the problems they face on a daily basis.

According to Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2007), this experience is due to society rarely perceiving minority women as feminine or sympathetic (p. 30). Therefore, African-American women feel the need to portray the role of the “strong Black woman.”

Additionally, some argue that mental illness is ignored in minority populations due to stereotypes that link behaviors to criminality or violence instead of psychopathology (Thompson, 2011).

Due to the stigmas associated with mental illness and racial stereotypes, minority women often do not obtain mental health care in their community or while incarcerated.

Research Questions

Q1: What factors lead to the lack of treatment of depression in minority women?

Q2: What is the relationship between mental illness and incarceration of minority women as compared to white women?

Q3: Does the type of crime committed contribute to stereotypes associated with minority behaviors?

Results

Black women are 1.5 to 4.0 times more likely to be placed in jail when compared to white females (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2015).

The Bureau of Justice Statistics (2006) reported that white, female, and young inmates reported more mental health concerns (prison = 75%, jail = 71%) compared to minority women (prison = 55%, jail = 63%).

Recommendations for Future Research

Limitations of this study included the use of statistics that are, in some cases, several years old. Future research would benefit from recent data to obtain a better representation of the prison population.

The findings suggest that more in depth research needs to be conducted regarding mental health diagnosis and treatment in the criminal justice system.

The number of inmates with current and lifetime psychiatric illness who are not identified as mentally ill shows the need for assessment screens.

Our findings provide an understanding of racial disparities in the incarceration of minority women with depression; however, additional research would help determine plans of care for this group of women in the judicial system.

This research will aide attorneys in examining aspects other than criminality that may lead to sentencing decisions of minority women.

References

American Psychological Association. (2010). Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct. Available at:


Thompson, M. (2011). Gender, race, and mental illness in the criminal justice system. National Institute of Corrections