

The Weathering Hypothesis as an Explanation for Racial Disparities in Health: A Systematic Review

Allana T. Forde, PhD¹, Danielle M. Crookes, MPH¹, Shakira F. Suglia, ScD^{1,2}, Ryan T. Demmer, PhD^{1,3}

¹Department of Epidemiology, Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, 722 West 168th Street New York, NY 10032 USA

²Department of Epidemiology, Emory University Rollins School of Public Health, 1511 Clifton Road NE Atlanta, GA 30322 USA

³Division of Epidemiology and Community Health, School of Public Health, University of Minnesota, 420 Delaware St. S.E. Minneapolis, MN 55455 USA

Abstract

Purpose.—The weathering hypothesis states that chronic exposure to social and economic disadvantage leads to accelerated decline in physical health outcomes and could partially explain

racial disparities in a wide array of health conditions. This systematic review summarizes the literature empirically testing the weathering hypothesis and assesses the quality of the evidence regarding weathering as a determinant of racial disparities in health.

Methods.—Databases (Web of Science, Ovid MEDLINE, PubMed and Embase) were searched for studies published in English up to July 1, 2017. Studies that tested the Weathering Hypothesis or any physical health outcome and included at least one socially or economically disadvantaged group (e.g., Blacks) for whom the weathering hypothesis applies were assessed for eligibility. Threats to validity were assessed using the Quality in Prognostic Studies tool.

Results.—The 41 included studies were rated as having overall good methodological quality. Most studies found evidence in support of the weathering hypothesis, although the magnitude of support varied by the health outcome and population studied.

Conclusions.—Future evaluations of the weathering hypothesis should include an examination of additional health outcomes and interrogate mechanisms that could link weathering to poor health.

Keywords

weathering; race; health disparities; health inequalities

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