

COVID & a lost generation of Black Men: THE TRINITY OF DEATH -  
Psychological, Physiological & Biological RACISM :

*It's not your  
imagination* Part 1

They were pillars of their communities and families, and they are not replaceable. To explain why COVID has killed so many young Black men, **ProPublica** magazine published this report on Dec. 22, 2020.

While COVID-19 has killed 1 out of every 800 African Americans, a toll that overwhelms the imagination, even more stunning is the deadly efficiency with which it has targeted young Black men. One study using data through July found that Black people ages 35 to 44 were dying at nine times the rate of white people the same age, though the gap slightly narrowed later in the year. And in an analysis for ProPublica this summer using the only reliable data at the time accounting for age, race and gender, from Michigan and Georgia, Harvard researcher Tamara Rushovich found that the disparity was greatest in Black men.

**The Rev. Dr. Kejuane Artez Bates** was a big man with big responsibilities. The arrival of the novel coronavirus in Vidalia, Louisiana, was another burden on a body already breaking under the load. Bates was in his 10th year with the Vidalia Police Department, assigned as a resource officer to the upper elementary school. But with classrooms indefinitely closed, he was back on patrol duty and, like most people in those early days of the pandemic, unprotected by a mask. On Friday, March 20, he was coughing and his nose was bleeding. The next day, he couldn't get out of bed.

Bates was only 36, too young to be at risk for COVID or so the conventional wisdom went. He attributed his malaise to allergies and pushed forward with his second full-time job, as head pastor of Forest Aid Baptist Church, working on his Sunday sermon between naps. Online church was a new concept to his parishioners, and during the next morning's service, he had to keep reminding them to mute their phones. As he preached about Daniel in the lion's den — we will be tested, but if we continue to have faith, we will come through — he grimaced from the effort. That night he was burning up with fever. Five days later he was on a ventilator; five days after that, he died.

It's not just living in poverty that wears down Black men's bodies, but the struggle to break out of poverty. It wasn't just inequality that made them sick, but the effort to be equal in a system that was fundamentally unjust. It's this striving to make something of themselves ... to live their lives with dignity and purpose and to be successful against extraordinary circumstances. They're trying to make a way out of no way. It's the Black American story.

**“Everyone THINKS about racism as something that is personally mediated, like someone insulting me,”** said Linda Sprague Martinez, a professor at Boston University's School of Social Work who conducts community health research with adolescents and young adults. “But the way in which it's really pervasive is how it disrupts life chances and opportunity. These are systems that are designed for you to fail, essentially, and for you to be erased and to be maintained in a certain position in our society.”

Stress is a physiological reaction, hard-wired in the body, that helps protect it against external threats. At the first sign of danger, the brain sounds an alarm, setting off a torrent of neurological and hormonal signals that whoosh into the blood, stimulating the body to fight or give flight. The heart beats faster and breathing quickens; blood vessels dilate, so more oxygen reaches the brain and muscles. The immune system's inflammatory response is activated to promote quick healing. When the threat passes, hormone levels return to normal, blood

glucose ebbs and heart rate and blood pressure go back to baseline. At least, that's how the human body is designed to work.

But overexposure to cortisol and other stress hormones can cause the gears to malfunction. "Your body's over-producing, always working hard to bring itself back down to the normal level," said Roland J. Thorpe Jr., a professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and founding director of the Program for Research on Men's Health at the Hopkins Center for Health Disparities Solutions. "The constant strain resets the normal," he said. As blood pressure remains high and inflammation becomes chronic, the inner linings of blood vessels start to thicken and stiffen, which forces the heart to work harder, which dysregulates other organs until they, too, begin to fail. "Your body starts to wear down," Thorpe said — a phenomenon known as weathering.

Weathering isn't specific to race, but it is believed to take a particular toll on Black people because of the unique, unrelenting stress caused by racism that wears away the body and the spirit, "just like you have siding on the house, and the rain or the sun beats on it, and eventually it starts to fade," said Dr. Jerome Adams, the U.S. Surgeon General under the Trump administration. Shawnita Sealy-Jefferson, a social epidemiologist at Ohio State University says, "the human body isn't designed to withstand such biological and emotional assaults. It's the same thing as if you revved the engine of your car all day, every day. Sooner or later, the car is going to break down."

The effects of stress can be seen at the cellular level. Researchers have found that in Black people, telomeres — repeated sequences of DNA that protect the ends of chromosomes by forming a cap, much like the plastic tip on a shoelace. And it was the extraordinarily high rates of hypertension in the Black community that prompted scientists to look at the impact of stress in the first place. By age 55, about 76% of Black men and women develop high blood pressure, versus 54% of white men and 40% of white women, which increases the risk of heart attacks and strokes.

“The way that people deal with stress is by strategies that make us feel better,” such as comfort eating, said Thomas LaVeist, dean of Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine. Stress and anxiety cause sleeplessness, which itself is correlated with weight gain. The result is often a cascade of health problems — hypertension, cardiovascular disease, metabolic syndrome — that strike early and feed off of each other.

As ProPublica examined the lives lost to COVID, themes emerged in the pressure points faced by many young Black men. The wearing down typically begins when they are boys and must become little John Henrys to navigate white spaces or push through the adverse experiences endemic to Black communities. It continues when they grow into men, as most need to navigate the public’s projections of danger with unwavering vigilance. The more they succeed, the more responsibility they feel to lift their families and communities with them, and with that, comes more stress.

High-effort coping can confer mental health benefits even for children raised in the direst of circumstances. **Dosha DJay Joi** endured the kind of trauma that dooms many children — beatings, neglect, sexual abuse. Born in Chicago, he spent much of his adolescence in group homes in the Wisconsin system. For years he was afraid to talk about the abuse and scared to tell his birth mother he was queer. He learned to channel himself into education and advocacy, helping other LGBTQ and foster kids; he especially wanted to make sure children remained connected with their siblings. He was inspired to study social work because of what he’d been through, said his mother, Kecha Kitchens. “Then a family member got sick, and he didn’t like how the nurses were treating the other patients in the nursing home, so he wanted to become a nurse.”

By the age of 28, Joi had a bachelor’s degree in human services, he had trained as a substance abuse counselor and he was working toward his nursing degree. He served as a court-appointed special advocate for kids aging out of foster care and lobbied lawmakers in the Wisconsin capitol and Washington D.C., forming a special bond with Rep. Gwen Moore, who represents Milwaukee in Congress. But the

years of hardship took an enormous physical toll; Joi suffered from hypertension, heart and lung problems and at his heaviest, he weighed more than 500 pounds. When COVID arrived in the Midwest, he was particularly vulnerable. He died on May 14.

**Thomas Fields Jr.** was barely a year old when his father first went to prison. The loss altered the trajectory of his life in ways that many children wouldn't have been able to overcome. His mother, just 17 when he was born, moved with him from the suburbs of Washington, D.C., to Detroit, where her own mother had recently relocated. The city was in freefall: manufacturing jobs were disappearing; crime was surging; middle-class and white flight was stripping away the city's tax base, eroding vital services and causing schools to fail. Just waiting at the wrong bus stop could get you robbed or shot.

In his late 20s, Fields was diagnosed with such a severe case of diabetes that his military career came to a screeching halt. When he returned to Detroit last year, he was a little brawnier, with more tattoos. "Diabetes was something that he was going to beat, because he wasn't going to lose to anything," said the Rev. Torion Bridges, one of his best friends for 20 years. He became a personal chef and motivational speaker, started a podcast and wrote a cookbook. He helped out his mom, who had multiple sclerosis. And he took a job as a "school culture facilitator," working with kids who had discipline problems, at Paul Robeson Malcolm X Academy, the pioneering Afrocentric public school he had attended. He was especially good with troubled boys who didn't have a father at home, said principal Jeffrey Robinson, his onetime homeroom teacher, later his boss. "He could identify with the feeling of the loss." In March, Fields and his mother caught the coronavirus at the same time. She recovered. He did not.

**Leslie Lamar Parker** grew up in the Minneapolis suburbs, in a state that was 84% white. Like many John Henrys in this story, he was large — tall and wide — in a way that made him stand out to cruel classmates and clueless teachers. Bigness can be perilous for Black boys, who are often seen as older, stronger and less innocent than their white counterparts, stereotypes that underlie higher rates of

school discipline and police violence. Parker learned to play the class clown and questioned authority. “School couldn’t hold his attention, not because he wasn’t smart. He wouldn’t go,” his mother, Tyuon Brazell, said. Because he wasn’t on track to graduate, she did what other parents might not and suggested he drop out his junior year. That’s when he started to thrive, earning his GED, graduating from college and becoming an IT specialist in his old school district, where he mentored students of color, ordering them lunch from DoorDash and supervising the tech club. “That was really important to him,” said his wife, Whitney, “making sure they didn’t fail any other brown kids like they failed him.”

Parker was constantly scanning the horizon for threats against his family and his kids at school, wondering whether there was something more that he could do for them. He projected a cool demeanor, his argumentative wit camouflaging worries that his mother knew kept his head in overdrive. “I kept telling him: ‘Son, you need to rest. You don’t have to do everything in a day.’” He was diagnosed with high blood pressure at just 27 and worried it, and the extra pounds, would keep him from seeing his two children grow up. He died in May from COVID at the age of 31.

**Joshua Bush**, who died in April of COVID-19, slammed up against racial stereotypes in his work as a nurse in South Carolina. There were funny looks from people who didn’t expect to see a Black man when he arrived at job interviews and white patients who refused to let him touch them. He told them, “That is your choice, but you’re missing out on great help,” his mother, Linda, recalled. He and his wife, LaKita, saw the health care industry as their route to upward mobility. She worked in hospital administration; at 30, he was studying to become a registered nurse, working as an LPN.

Bush also suffered from a rare enzyme abnormality that caused severe muscle cramps from overexertion, and because of it, trips to the emergency room weren’t uncommon. He’d come to accept that the first image doctors and nurses saw — someone Black and overweight — influenced their bedside manner. They treated him like he had no medical knowledge and lectured him about diabetes, though it had nothing to do with why he was seeking care. His experience informed the way

he cared for his own patients, part of his “fight against the system,” his wife said. At the same time, she could see her husband’s stress “all over his body.”

## COVID & a lost generation of Black Men: THE TRINITY OF DEATH - Psychological, Physiological & Biological RACISM :

# *It's not your imagination* Part 2

In the Brookhaven, Mississippi, of **Eugene Thompson's** youth, Black business owners understood that Brookway Boulevard — at least the stretch that ran through downtown — was for white businesses. The election of Barack Obama was a turning point; Thompson figured if a Black man could become president of the United States, surely he could rent a modest space on “the Boulevard.” Publicly, his goal was to grow his client base by cutting white people’s hair, too. His family knew his aspirations were grander. “He wanted to do something in Brookhaven to help Black people to get off their knees,” his mother, Odell Edwards, said. “We are on our knees.”

It's not easy earning a living in Mississippi, where the single most common job is working as a cashier and the \$7.25 minimum wage hasn't budged in a decade. Cutting hair came naturally for Thompson, who started on himself at 12. He attended a local beauty academy before he could afford to go to barber school and over the years took the same methodical approach to growing his business — buying secondhand equipment, doing the construction himself, all without bank loans, mentoring or government support.

But Thompson's real ambition was to start his own school. “He always tried to encourage the boys in the community, or people who had been in prison and couldn't find a job — ‘I can teach you how to cut hair and you can have your own business,’” his younger sister, Dedra Edwards, said. After three years spent earning

his teaching credential, Thompson opened his TaperNation Barber Academy for students last fall. Then he realized graduates needed places to work, so he launched his next project: renovating a second shop nearby where other barbers and hair stylists could rent chairs. “It was running him ragged,” Odell said.

At 46, Thompson was severely overweight and suffered from lifelong respiratory problems as well as anxiety and sleeplessness. High blood pressure and diabetes ran in his family, but Thompson’s true health status was unclear — like more than 15% of Black people in Mississippi, he wasn’t insured and avoided going to the doctor except in an emergency. When he started feeling symptoms of COVID in late March, he shrugged them off at first; he’d been having heart palpitations and panic attacks, which his family attributed to stress from work.

After he died in early April, leaving behind six children, TaperNation had to shut down. “You have to have a barber’s instructor license to keep it going, and no one else in the family has one,” his sister said. “We had to sell almost everything.”

Recent disasters — Hurricane Katrina, the Great Recession — have shown that Black communities aren’t just more vulnerable than white populations to economic and social dislocations; they recover more slowly. The impacts of the pandemic are likely to be magnified because so many deaths have occurred among Black people under age 60, the peak earning years when people raise families, start businesses, amass social capital and create lasting legacies. In addition to the lives it took, COVID has robbed wealth that these brothers were beginning to accrue and toppled what they had begun to build for themselves and those around them.

In many cases, they were the structural beams, holding everything up. “These are people who help pay bills for people who aren’t their biological family members,” said Sealy-Jefferson, the Ohio State social epidemiologist. “They bring food when somebody dies. They watch kids when a single mother has to work.” Some of the biggest losses are intangible, she said: “social support, emotional support, resource sharing, encouragement, storytelling, role modeling— all of these things that are vital for African Americans in particular, given our history in this country.”

Weekday mornings have been quiet without **Kendall Pierre Sr.** puttering around the house before sunrise so he could open his barbershop by 5 a.m. That's when workers from nearby chemical plants would stop in for a cut or shave after their graveyard shifts. Sundays are different without his sermons at Mt. Zion Baptist Church, in the little town of Ama, Louisiana, followed by a family breakfast his son always looked forward to. "My grandmother would come. Some of my aunties and cousins. He would put Aunt Jemima batter in the waffle iron and say: 'See? This is better than Waffle House!'" Since his dad died in May of COVID-19, Kendall Pierre Jr., a 20-year-old student at Louisiana State University, has felt an overwhelming absence and, at the same time, his father's equally consuming presence. "I can still hear him," he said.

Don't drive with your hoodie on.

Work twice as hard.

Real men don't wear slippers in public; put on some shoes.

The only child of a single mother, 45-year-old Pierre Sr. took his role as father figure seriously. To nieces and nephews, he was Uncle Dad. To his sons' basketball teams, he was Coach Kendall with the pep talks.

If a task has begun, never leave it until it's done.

Be the labor great or small, do it well or not at all.

When players couldn't afford uniforms or travel for tournaments, he would pay. "Their parents would send them with all they could, which was sometimes only \$5," Pierre Jr. said. They could count on him for food, deodorant, even a haircut. "He would bring his clippers to make sure all the players looked nice."

When the killing of George Floyd roiled the country, Pierre Jr. had no doubt about how his father would have reacted. He would have talked to officials at the sheriff's office, school board administrators, government leaders. He would have organized community meetings at the church.

His son thought about that when his friend texted him about organizing a Black Lives Matter protest. “Since my dad passed, I’ve had this newfound courage, and this urge to act on things ... to just do things outside of my comfort zone,” he said.

“If we don’t speak about systemic racism and police brutality, no change will ever happen,” he said. “I feel like it’s something that I have to do and be a part of something bigger than just me.” He knows his father would have been proud. His mother was. But she worries, too. Her husband didn’t make enough time for doctor’s appointments to monitor his Type 2 diabetes, nor did he get much sleep. “I would tell him, ‘Kendall, you need to rest,’” recalled Sabrina, his wife of 24 years and a registered nurse. “He would say he could rest when he’s dead and gone.”

We all must, Black Man. All hands on deck !

You can't defend yourself against or fight what you can't see.  
By the same token you cannot fight what you cannot define.  
Racism equals white supremacy. White supremacy equals racism.

*If you do not understand racism what it is and how it operates, everything else that you think you understand will only confuse you* **Dr. Neely Fuller**

Racism is a system of thought speech and action practiced by those who identify themselves as Caucasian or white, used to dominate or control people of color in nine areas of human activity: sex, law, war, labor, religion, politics, entertainment, education and economics.

A prejudiced (to pre-judge) or bigoted person is ONLY expressing their opinion. It is correct to classify this person as prejudiced or a bigot - NOT a racist.

A racist has the power (power - the ability to determine circumstances) to reinforce or support their opinion - know the difference.

**CBC**