OPTIMISTIC BIAS AND CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE RISK FACTORS AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTHS

Monique S. White¹, Clifton C. Addison¹, Brenda W. Jenkins¹ and Mary Lou Gutierrez²

¹Jackson Heart Study, Jackson State University, Jackson, MS, USA
²University of Tennessee, Memphis, TN, USA

Abstract: Optimistic bias influences behavior of youth causing them to underestimate their susceptibility to negative health outcomes. This false belief about one’s vulnerability to the multitude of health risk factors could result in at-risk individuals ignoring the preventive actions that could reduce their chances of contracting diseases prematurely. The purpose of this study was to explore adolescent behavior practices, examine the prevalence of high blood pressure and obesity, and the relationship to optimistic bias. This study can help to highlight areas of deficiencies in children’s daily practices, their attitudes, and behaviors that can be improved to promote cardiovascular health. 433 African American high school students were administered a survey and had their obesity and blood pressure measured by the school nurse. Descriptive statistics were used to examine optimistic bias and health outcomes. Three-way cross-tabulations of optimistic bias by clinical outcome (BMI and Blood Pressure) by gender was tested using the chi-square statistic. Two-thirds of the students did not perceive themselves to be at risk of developing cardiovascular disease despite presence of clinical risk factors for hypertension and obesity, with males at greater risk than females. Lifestyle changes for many young people are recommended, and reducing health optimistic bias among youth is viewed as an effective way of motivating young people to adopt more positive behaviors. Schools should implement intervention programs that promote positive health behavior among youth to develop individual responsibility, as well as to reduce health disparities.

Key Words: Optimistic bias, cardiovascular disease, African American, Students

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