

# Life Course Racial Disadvantage in Exposure to Family Member Deaths

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# Stress and Life Course Framework

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- Systemic Racism
  - Segregation, discrimination → disproportionate exposure to poverty and more stressful environments beginning in childhood
- Stress and life course process of cumulative dis/advantage
  - Stress → social, behavioral, psychological, biological dysregulation  
→ health/life expectancy
- Race differences in life expectancy mean race differences in bereavement across the life course

# National Longitudinal Survey Data

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## The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1997 (NLSY-97)

- 1997-2015
- Youth aged 13-18 in 1997, followed to age 30-35
- Analytic sample: 2,386 non-Hispanic Black, 5,231 non-Hispanic White participants ( $N = 7,617$ )



## The Health and Retirement Study (HRS)

- 1992-2014
- Men and women aged 50 and older (and spouses)
- Analytic sample: 6,681 non-Hispanic Black, 28,076 non-Hispanic White participants ( $N = 34,757$ )

# Family Member Death Exposures

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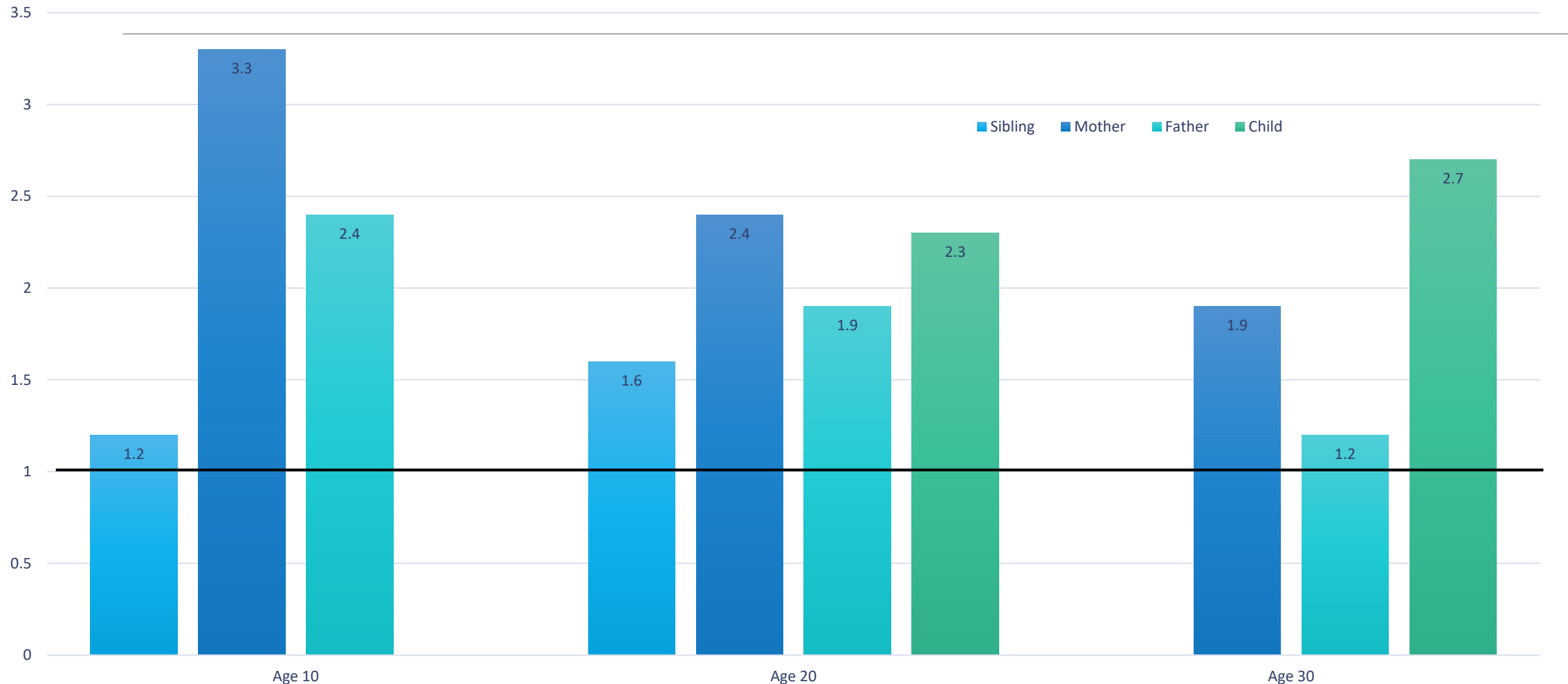
## Specific Losses

- Mother
- Father
- Sibling
- Child
- Spouse

## Cumulative Exposure

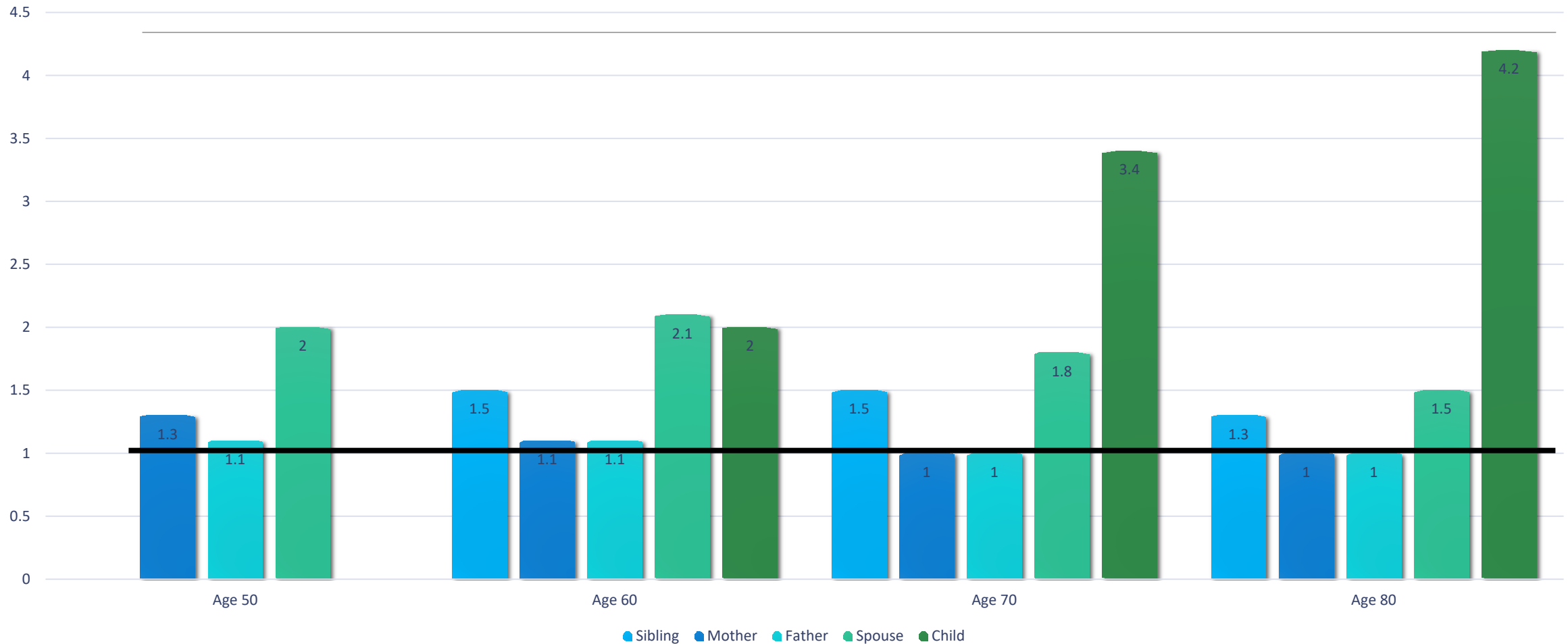
## Life Course Timing of Loss

# Relative Risk of Loss for Black Americans Compared to White Americans by Age 30 (NLSY 1997)



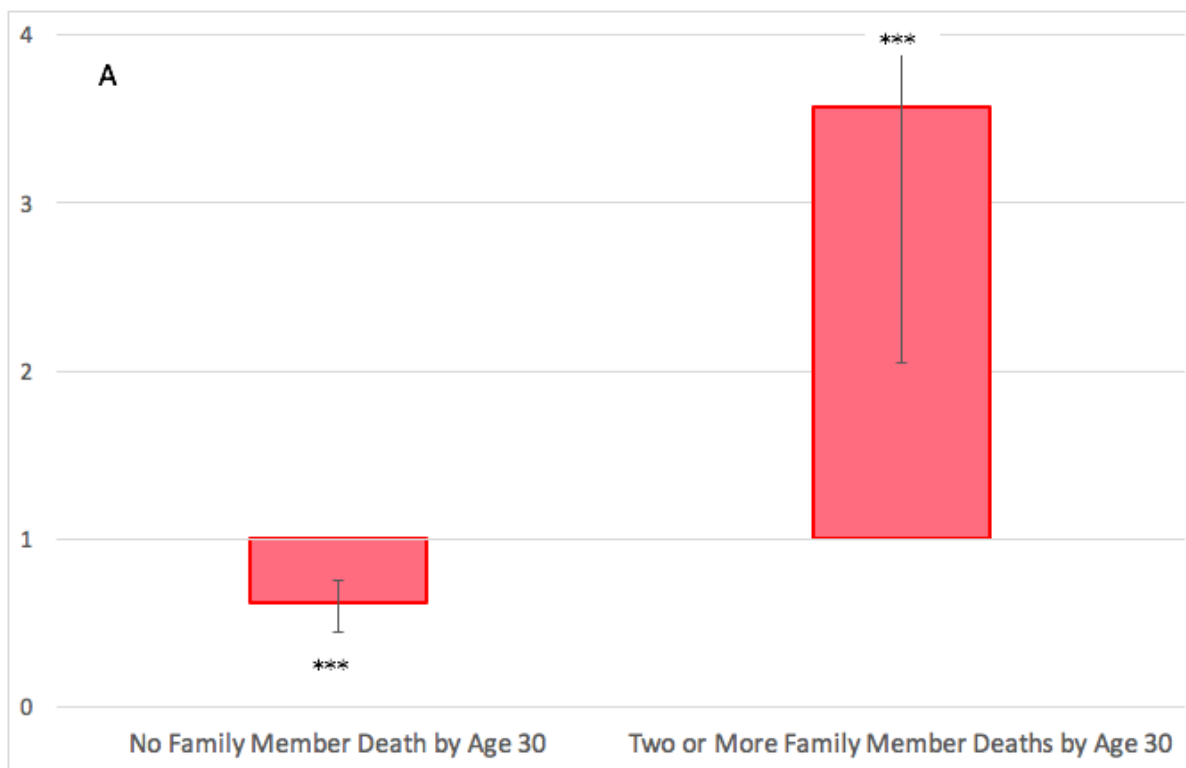
Source: Umberson, Olson, Crosnoe, Liu, Pudrovska, Donnelly. (2017). Death of family members as an overlooked course of racial disadvantage in the U.S. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 114(5). 915-920.

# Relative Risk of Loss for Black Americans Compared to White Americans, Age 50-80 (HRS)

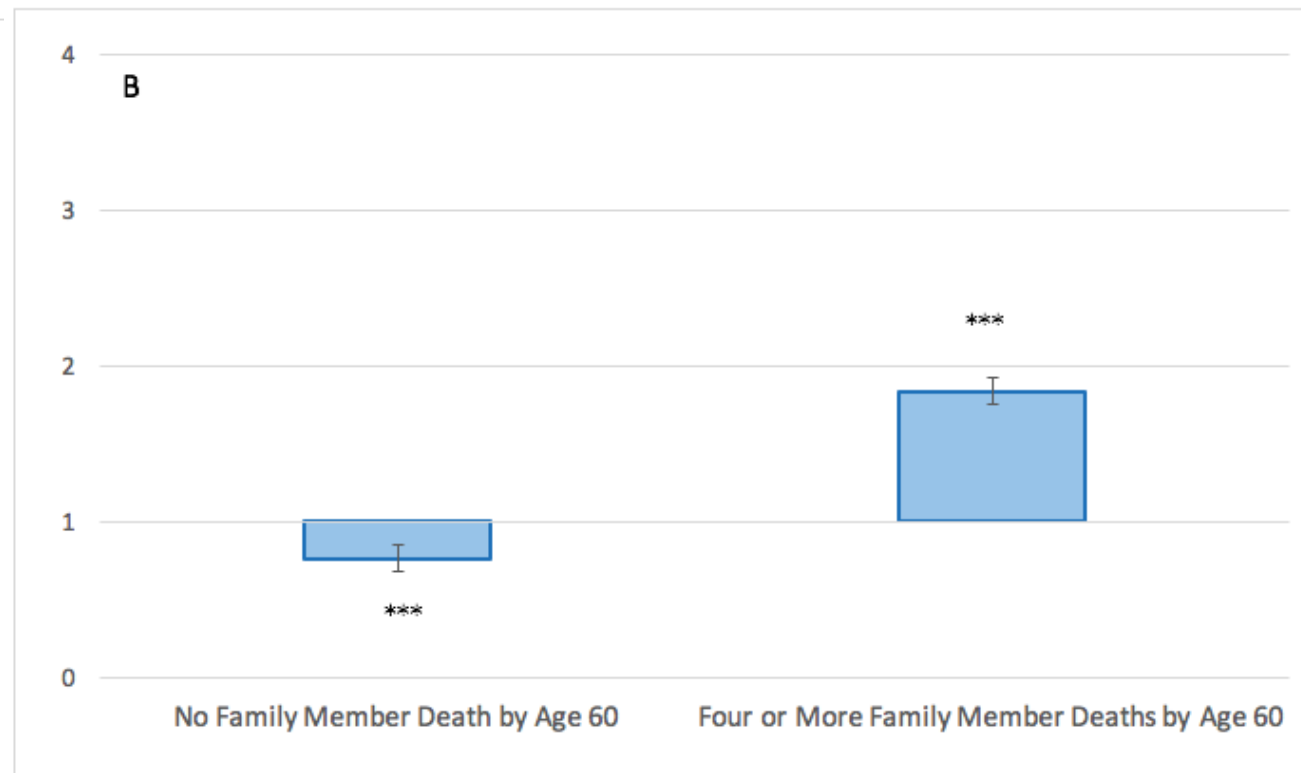


# BLACK/WHITE ODDS RATIOS FOR MULTIPLE DEATH EXPOSURES

## NATIONAL LONGITUDINAL SURVEY OF YOUTH



## HEALTH AND RETIREMENT STUDY



# Unequal Exposure to Loss

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Black Americans are more likely than White Americans to experience family member deaths and to experience deaths earlier in the life course

Exposure to family member deaths across the life course shapes health and mortality risk

Health Consequences of Bereavement

# Life Course Consequences of Experiencing a Family Member's Death

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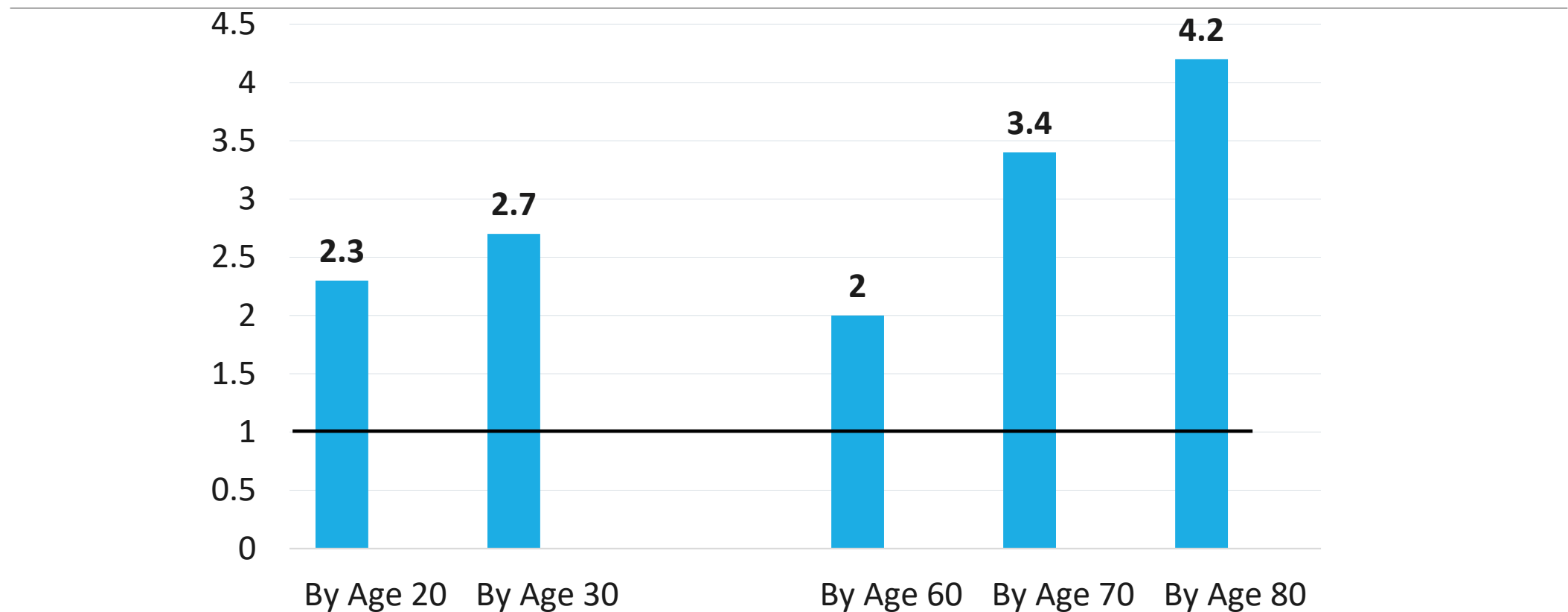
## Outcomes

- Mortality
- Overall physical health
- Cardiovascular health
- Mental health
- Physical disability status
- Cognitive health

## Factors that increase probability of loss may also increase health risk

- Race/ethnicity, gender, age
- Socioeconomic status—education, income, employment status, marital status, region of birth (South vs. other)

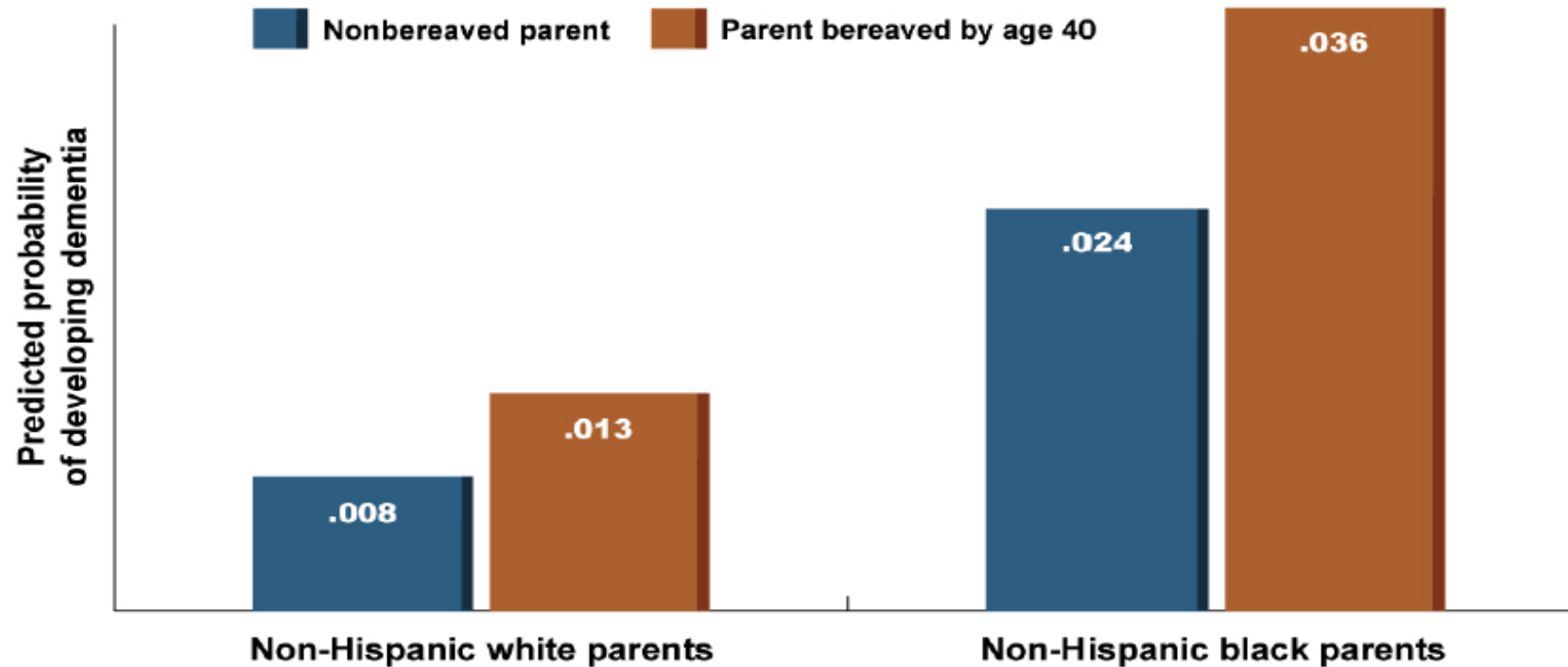
# Relative Risk of Losing a Child for Black Americans Compared to White Americans



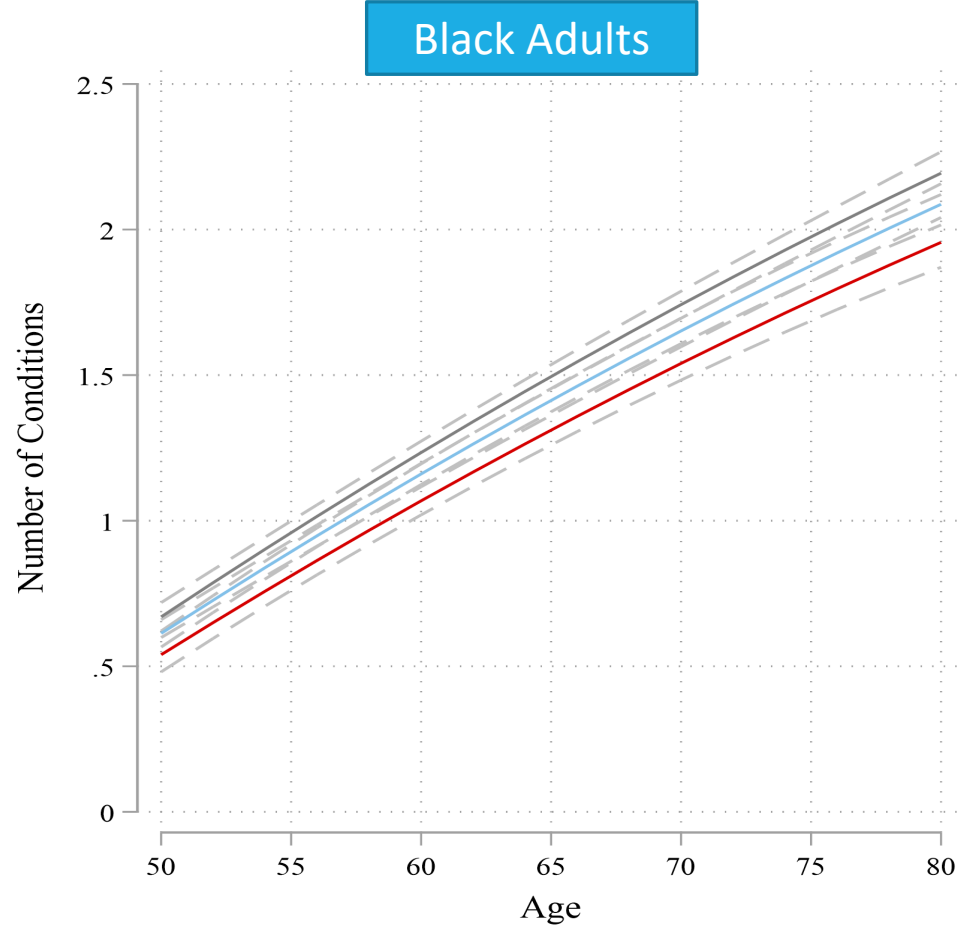
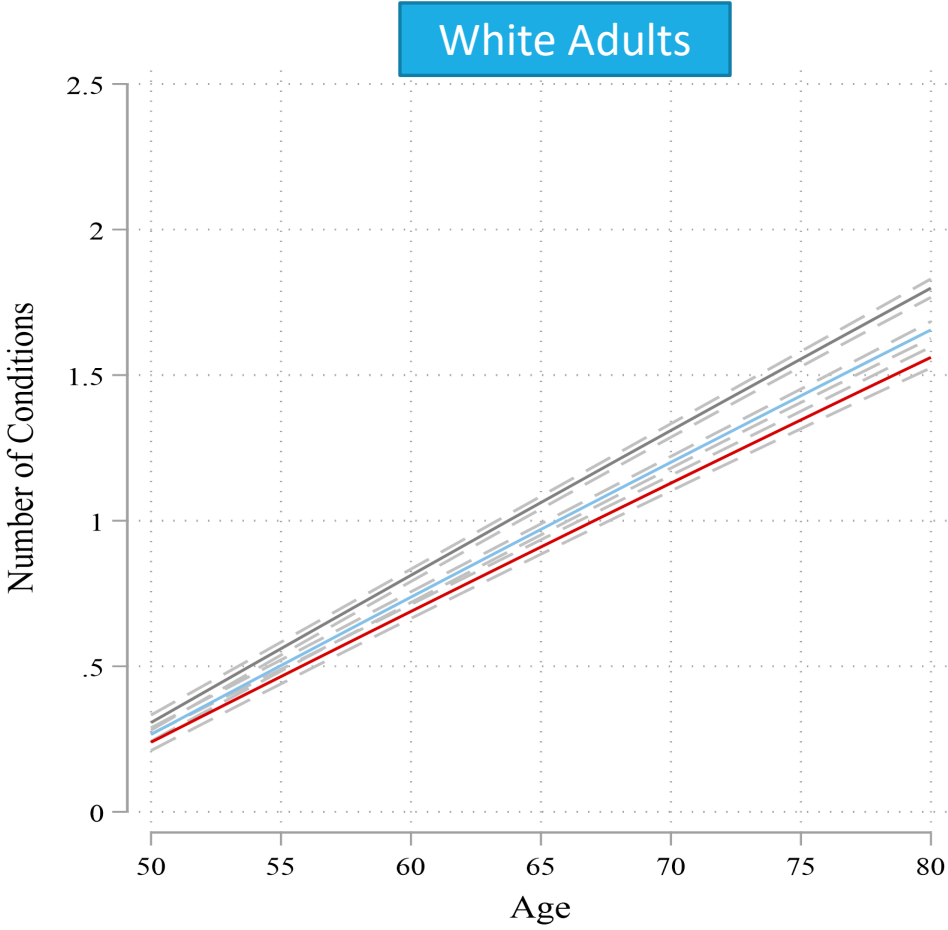
Source: NLSY-97 (by age 30); HRS (by age 80); reported in PNAS 2017, Umberson et al.)

# Child Bereavement & Dementia

Parents who lose a child by age 40 are more likely to develop dementia than parents who do not lose a child by that age



# Multiple Losses and Cardiometabolic Conditions (HRS)



- 0 Death
- 1 Death
- 2+ Deaths

# Conclusions

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## **Death of a family member(s) increases long-term risk**

- No race or sex differences in effects on health

## **All is not equal**

- **Black Americans at higher risk of loss *and* health disadvantage apart from loss**
- **Losses occur at earlier ages**
- **Multiple losses**

## **Each loss affects many survivors**

- **Multiple losses—Verdery & colleagues estimate 9 bereaved people for each loss due to COVID-19**
  - Source: Verdery, A. M., Smith-Greenaway, E., Margolis, R., & Daw, J. (2020). *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 117(30), 17695–17701.

# Gaps and Future Directions

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## Measures

- Need measures of bereavement in national surveys

## Exposure to bereavement

- Cumulative lifetime exposure to bereavement (and timing)
- More focus on the early life course
- Geographic variation (states, neighborhoods, regions)

## Bereavement and health

- Race-specific pathways linking bereavement and long-term health outcomes
- Consequences for other populations (e.g., Latinx, Native American)
- More attention to intersection of race and gender

## Bereavement as Public Health Issue

- Need action on screening, policy, and interventions

# Thank You

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