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Expert calls on pediatricians to speak out about trauma caused by overpolicing

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Editor's note: For more coverage of the 2020 AAP Virtual National Conference & Exhibition, visit <http://bit.ly/AAPNationalConference2020>.

One expert is calling on pediatricians to use a grand rounds approach — bringing people together across specialties — to help the country address the trauma that Black and Hispanic children experience from overpolicing.

“In this moment, at this time, pediatricians, nurses, health care professionals, all of you who have dedicated your lives to pediatrics and the well-being of children have a special, unique, circumstantially and historically called role to tell the story of America’s children and seek justice on their behalf,” Cornell William Brooks, J.D., M.Div., former president and CEO of the NAACP, said during his plenary address at the AAP Virtual National Conference & Exhibition on Sunday.

Pediatricians can use storytelling, science and data to bring humanity to “imperfect” victims, children who led troubled lives or committed minor crimes and whom some people deem unworthy of empathy. Pediatricians can help the community understand

what children experience whether they are a direct victim of police misconduct or a witness to it.

Children should be treated as “patients in our care, not suspects under our surveillance,” according to Brooks, a professor at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government and director of its William Monroe Trotter Collaborative for Social Justice.

“It’s not enough for us to content ourselves with children not becoming hashtags, not becoming police homicides,” Brooks said. “We have to also consider the trauma of overpolicing and oversurveilling communities of color.”

From 12-year-old Tamir Rice to 26-year-old Breonna Taylor to 46-year-old George Floyd, children repeatedly have witnessed Black people being killed by police. As a result of that trauma, Brooks said, children experience emotional disturbances, anger and fear. Research has found their school attendance and their grades decline.

“Police brutality has an impact on your patients who are overpoliced and beyond the patients who are immediately in front of you, there is a sea ... of millions of untreated, unattended children,” he said. “And this trauma is reflected in the tremor of their voices, the trepidation, the apprehension, the fear that can be discerned and diagnosed ... in their spirits.”

Doctors and nurses are among the most trusted professions and that makes them effective advocates, Brooks said. He pointed to pediatricians Mona Hanna-Attisha, M.D., M.P.H., FAAP, and Fiona Danaher, M.D., FAAP, as examples of making a difference with their advocacy. Dr. Hanna-Attisha spoke out on lead in the water in Flint, Mich., and Dr. Danaher has been an advocate for immigrant children.

“You cannot be content to be on the sidelines in this moment of generationally unprecedented activism,” Brooks said.