ABSTRACT. We study the action of the fundamental group  $\Gamma$  of a negatively curved 3-manifold M on the universal cover M of M. In particular we consider the ergodicity properties of the action and the distances by which points of M are displaced by elements of  $\Gamma$ . First we prove a displacement estimate for a general *n*-dimensional manifold with negatively pinched curvature and free fundamental group. This estimate is given in terms of the critical exponent Dof the Poincaré series for  $\Gamma$ . For the case in which n = 3, assuming that  $\Gamma$  is free of rank  $k \geq 2$ , that the limit set of  $\Gamma$  has positive 2dimensional Hausdorff measure, that D = 2 and that the Poincaré series diverges at the exponent 2, we prove a displacement estimate for  $\Gamma$  which is identical to the one given by the  $\log(2k-1)$  theorem [ACCS] for the constant-curvature case.