

Evidence Brief

Five Factors That Shape Black Youth's Lived Experiences & Pathways to Criminality

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's online Knowledge Hub, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: "Black", "African American", "youth", "justice-involved", "in conflict with the law", "identity", "Black culture", "Black representation", "pathways to criminality", "Black identity production", "media representation", and "Black stereotypes".

Summary of Evidence: Five Factors

1. Widespread anti-Black racism.

Racism manifests in discriminatory practices, stereotyping, racial profiling, and consistently negative media portrayals (James & Turner, 2015). This can range from "microaggressions" (i.e., daily life hassles that are attributed to racial discrimination) to poignant encounters such as being profiled by the police" (Unnever et al., 2017, p. 351). These interactions negatively affect the self-esteem of young people and make them feel unwelcome within the community (James & Turner, 2015). The stress of being subjected to racism in all its many forms on a daily basis is traumatic (James & Turner, 2015). Black youth can suffer from **depression, low self-esteem, and a lack of motivation** because they are treated as unwanted and a nuisance in their own community. This can also lead to the use of coping mechanisms to protect a sense of identity and self-esteem – behaviours that can be misinterpreted by others.

Research shows that **perceived discrimination is associated with delinquency** (Martin et al., 2011). Some studies suggest that discrimination produces an array of negative emotions – such as anger, frustration, and resentment – that can contribute to crime (Martin et al., 2011). For instance, youth may engage in shoplifting, vandalism, violence, and other crimes to relieve these feelings by fulfilling a need for revenge. Discrimination operates like deprivation by tarnishing a young person's self-image, and offending may encourage youth to develop a code that justifies their prior actions, which may then increase the likelihood of encountering discrimination (Martin et al., 2011).

2. Economic disadvantage.

Black youth living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods experience racial segregation, poverty, residential instability, and low levels of social control, conditions that contribute to high rates of offending in these communities (Martin et al., 2011). These factors contribute to Black youth's **social isolation**, which can encourage the development of a **culture that accepts offending** as a viable means for addressing inequality or expressing frustration (Martin et al., 2011). Low-income neighbourhoods with high levels of criminal victimization are also less likely to have meaningful protection from authorities; as a result, many youth – in particular, Black boys – may exaggerate the importance of being respected (i.e., express a heightened masculinity) as a source of status (Martin et al., 2011).

Racialized youth from marginalized urban communities experience both **greater rates of justice system involvement and differential treatment in the justice system** as compared to other youth (Sharlein & Engstrom, 2018). In fact, evidence suggests that neighbourhoods might be the “key conduit” by which Black youth are disproportionately selected into the justice system for nonviolent crimes (Sharlein & Engstrom, 2018, p. 30). Justice system involvement can, in turn, negatively impact youth in education, employment, psychological development, and future lawbreaking (Sharlein & Engstrom, 2018).

3. Criminalization of schools.

Research shows that Black youth are overly monitored, heavily disciplined, and feel ‘pushed out’ of school (Glogowski & Rakoff, 2019). The **criminalization of schools** refers to a combination of reactive disciplinary policies, surveillance, metal detectors, unwarranted searching, and lockdowns that reflect the contemporary criminal justice system within the school environment (Farmer, 2010). With ideology, language, and practices that promote Black youth criminality, criminalized schools become a racialized, classed, and gendered moral space that feed into the **school-to-prison pipeline**, which pushes children out of school and hastens their entry into the juvenile (and eventually criminal) justice system. Evidence suggests that students who feel discriminated against by school staff achieve lower grades, contributing to their disengagement (Glogowski & Rakoff, 2019).

In Ontario, the implementation of zero tolerance policies in schools contributed to **disparities in the suspension and expulsion of Black youth**. An analysis of high school suspensions at the Toronto District School Board between 2006 and 2011 found that 42% of Black students were suspended at least once (Glogowski & Rakoff, 2019). The consequences of suspensions and expulsions go beyond missing class, as unsupervised time out of school can lead youth to engage in behaviours that put them at risk. High rates of suspensions and expulsions can lead to student disengagement by creating **an environment of mistrust and suspicion** that can lead to permanent school-leaving (James & Turner, 2015). Evidence

suggests that the high school dropout rates for young Black men are underestimated by as much as 40% (Ewert et al., 2014).

4. **Biased portrayals in the media.**

Persistent negative images in the media – from entertainment to local news reports that overemphasize crime by members of the Black community – produce **stereotypes of Black men as criminals** (James & Turner, 2015). The media’s framing of crimes committed by Black people and other people of colour tend to perpetuate stereotypes about the communities they represent (Baker-Bell et al., 2017). Black children and youth are rarely portrayed as victims or labeled as ‘children’ in the media; instead, young Black victims, particularly Black boys, tend to be presented as guilty adults. Images that portray Black boys as immoral, deviant, and violent have detrimental consequences on young people’s lives (Farmer, 2010).

Research suggests that negative portrayals of Black people in the media can **promote antagonism toward the Black community**, and **divert attention from structural and racial inequities**. These stereotypes affect not only the public’s understanding and attitudes toward Black youth, but also how youth view themselves and their communities (Baker-Bell et al., 2017). In one study, young people expressed frustration that all Black youth are “painted with the same brush” and mistreated based on these stereotypes (James & Turner, 2015, p. 21). Young people are concerned about the media portrayal of Black people, as this marginalizes them and limits their access to educational and employment opportunities. Some youth recognize that being marginalized may push them into ‘anti-social’ behaviours or activities that are deemed criminal (James & Turner, 2015).

5. **The ‘violence of low expectations’.**

Research shows that youth perceive **racial discrimination and a lack of opportunities** – including barriers to post-secondary education – as two major forms of violence in their lives (Dlamini et al., 2015). Discriminatory practices that result in a lack of opportunities for successful schooling can be understood as the **violence of low expectations** (Dlamini et al., 2015). Evidence suggests that youth from disadvantaged neighbourhoods see educators as removed from, and uninterested in, the socioeconomic challenges that youth face, which can lead to feelings of self-paralysis, or the inability to challenge and change one’s station in life (Dlamini et al., 2015).

Youth may respond to low expectations in a number of ways (Ryan, 2012):

- **Embracing/reinforcing** (i.e., conscious and unconscious internalizing of the messaging; buying into the stigma and performing to meet low expectations).
- **Rejecting the stigma by embracing the frame** (i.e., enacting hyper-masculinity).

- **Overcompensating** (i.e., recognizing the negative frame and trying to aggressively counteract that image through overachieving).
- **Transcending** (i.e., appearing not to be impacted by the stigma).
- **Resisting** (i.e., telling another story through activism, art, and one's own voice).
- **Opting out** (i.e., not identifying and removing themselves from community, or attending other schools).

Low expectations **shape what young people imagine as possible or within reach**, and, in the words of a resident of the stigmatized Jane-Finch community in Toronto, “it’s wasted potential when youth don’t see themselves as more” (Ramsaroop, 2015). Poor outcomes are often blamed on the individual, rather than seen as the consequences of an educational system that fails Black youth.

Schools in low-income neighbourhoods disproportionately stream Black students into less academically-demanding courses (e.g., special education, applied, and locally-developed courses). In the Toronto District School Board, between 2006 and 2011, only 53% of Black students were enrolled in academic classes, compared to 81% of white students and 80% of other racialized students (Glogowski & Rakoff, 2019, p. 10). Participation in fewer academically-demanding courses can increase a student’s chances of leaving high school before graduating and decrease the chances of moving on to post-secondary education; between 2006 and 2011, 69% percent of Black students in Toronto graduated high school, compared to 84% of white students (Glogowski & Rakoff, 2019, p. 4).

Low expectations from teachers and school administrators also result in **low self-esteem and self-confidence** among Black students. Black youth are often stereotyped as athletes and underachievers, pulled into sports and pushed away from academic and STEM courses. These discriminatory practices work together to **perpetuate stereotypes, reinforce the achievement gap, and exacerbate the challenges** faced by Black students in an education system plagued by mistrust. Discrimination in the education system perpetuates systemic inequalities, leading to low academic achievement, limited access to post-secondary education, and limited options for meaningful employment (Glogowski & Rakoff, 2019).

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