



Weaponization and Prisonization of Toronto's Black Male Youth

“Black street prisonized masculinity is shaped by discipline, enslavement and toughness coupled with the ability to use violence learned from within prison and early childhood socialization. In essence, it is a learned and weaponized response to hegemonic masculinity, both inside and outside prisons, that becomes the survival code of the street and the accepted way of doing masculinity” (p. 120).

1. What is the research about?

State-centered structural violence has created a continuous burden on the mental and physical wellbeing of young Black men. This violence is not only recognized in explicitly oppressive acts – such as overpolicing, racism, and discrimination – but is also built into the infrastructure of communities. As a result, young Black men are being socialized in a way that physically, mentally, and emotionally prepares them for prison.

This research uses the Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) as evidence that state institutions are in fact preparing young Black men for prison. The author argues that the structural violence built into the TCHC socializes and shapes the masculinities of the Black working-class to be ‘prisonized’ and ‘weaponized’. The **prisonization** of masculinity is the internalization and practice of values central to prison culture, such as violence, toughness, and survival. Once developed, this form of masculinity is used regularly as a **weaponized** response to state violence, which further normalizes prison-centered values in these Black communities.

2. Where did the research take place?

The research took place in Toronto, Canada, with a focus on the Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC). The TCHC is the largest social housing provider in Canada, and 38% of its residents are children and youth.

3. Who is this research about?

This research focuses on working-class Black youth and how structural violence forces them to develop prisonized and weaponized masculinities.

4. How was the research done?

The author **reviews both existing literature and data from TCHC** to illustrate the presence of structurally-ingrained violence and its intergenerational impact on Black families and youth in Toronto.

5. What are the key findings?

The research describes the origins of prisonized and weaponized masculinities in TCHC communities, and discusses the factors that contribute to both expressions of masculinity.

a) The Origins of Weaponized and Prisonized Masculinities

Black men face constant tension between conventional gender roles, which construct the ideal man as powerful and self-sufficient, and repressive state violence, which works to prevent them from attaining either of these two qualities. In response, they may feel that the only way to live up to these gendered expectations is to use their prisonized masculinity as a weapon – hoping its force will translate into power and respect.

b) Factors Contributing to the Prisonization of Black Masculinities

i) State Institutions (TCHC)

Toronto's Black youth are constrained because they are contained and socialized in the carceral concrete living spaces of the TCHC, which resemble prisons. These repressed living conditions spur feelings of hopelessness, joblessness, and violence, which contribute to the prisonization of Black masculinities.

ii) Overpolicing

Not only are youth socialized into a living space that often directly resembles a prison, but they are also overtly oppressed by police, who speed up the prisonization process by targeting Black youth. As a result, these youth grow up in a culture that suppresses their every action, sending the message that they can never be successful in society; this feeling of despair further drives the development of prisonized masculinities.

iii) A Culture of Oppression

The author notes that oppression is not only structural and overt, but also socially reinforced. Negative stereotypes in the media portray Black men as "savage and animal-like"; in turn, Black youth do not see themselves as capable of being human and are further drawn to the development of a prisonized identity (p. 120).

c) Factors Contributing to the Weaponization of Black Masculinities

i) Guns and Social Death

Social death is described as "a condition where Black youth are still not seen as human and are constructed as a dangerous class by the state" (p. 123). In response to this form of social oppression, the gun has become a symbol of masculine power and a central component in the lives of street-oriented youth. This adherence to the code of the street, combined with the prisonization of their identities, allows for a culture in which youth are willing to risk violent death rather than be victimized by an oppressive system.

ii) Bill C-10 and Intergenerational Impacts

Bill C-10 (the federal Safe Streets and Communities Act) has been put forward as "legislation to make streets, families and communities safer" by transferring the power of sentencing discretion from judges to prosecutors (p. 124). However, this change may be exercised to the disadvantage of Black youth by increasing prison sentences among Black offenders. As well, experiencing greater criminalization of family, friends, and neighbours is likely to reinforce prisonized values among youth and promote the weaponization of their masculinities.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

The author calls for a focus on **reinstating values of caring, love, and respect into communities**, like those within the TCHC, in order to unlearn the violence with which young Black men have been socialized. Programs that **emphasize engagement with learning opportunities** are especially beneficial in helping to build transferable skills for future education and employment opportunities. In time, the feelings of hopelessness and anger that have endorsed the development of prisonized and weaponized masculinities can then be transformed into feelings of **pride, resilience, and self-respect**.

However, it is important to acknowledge that **youth need to heal before they can succeed**. Most of the time, prisonized and weaponized masculinities are not a choice but a lifestyle from which these individuals may not want to stray. Therefore, when creating resources for young Black men who have been socialized in conditions similar to the TCHC, it is vital that these **values are acknowledged through a culturally-relevant and meaningful lens**. This way, youth are more likely to succeed in these programs while also learning to heal from the structural violence they continue to face.



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