

Why Focus on Racial Trauma? JDAI Research and Policy Series

Racial trauma and racism affects a Black and African-American person's overall well-being. Black and African-American people are impacted by racial trauma due to the turbulent treatment they faced throughout American history. Black and African-American youth represent the majority demographic makeup in the juvenile justice system in the United States*.² Racial trauma directly impacts how black youth respond to treatment and decisions made during case planning in the juvenile justice system. The trauma informed care practices within system rehabilitation curriculums fall short of incorporating best practices for addressing racial trauma. By implementing practices that acknowledge and address the impact and effects of racial trauma, programs, agencies, and organizations serving black youth would see increased success in black youth's response to treatment and case planning. This brief shares findings on the effects of racial trauma on Black and African-American youth as well as best practices for addressing the effects of racial trauma.

What We Know:

Adolescents enter the juvenile justice system with significant and complicated trauma histories.

- Research shows that greater than one third of children and youth report having had some kind of traumatic experience before the age of 16, however youth of color encounter additional exposure to traumatic experience driven by racial trauma.⁷
- Racial trauma can manifest into physiological problems, substance abuse, behavioral problems, and other psychological symptoms, which include trauma symptoms in children and youth. The racial events that black youth experience can lead to the onset of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is often not identified as a psychological disorder triggered by racial trauma.^{4,7}
- Racial events including micro-aggressions, leave black youth feeling stressed. When black youth experience these stressors their response is flight, fight, or freeze. The young person is faced with the difficult decision of defending one's self or internalizing the racial experience. Black youth internalize these racial experiences to guard themselves against the stressors by redirecting their anger, fear and distrust. The redirection of those feelings often leads to black on black crimes, or complete disassociation from the racial experience through substance abuse or destruction of family structure.⁶
- Experiencing racial trauma physically, historically, or inter-generationally affects a young person's racial identity. A young person's racial identity is developed through his/her racial experience. Racial identity can be established from one's family, as well as through media, systems, and institutions that reach black youth and that can portray negative images and messages about black people. When black youth internalize racially discriminatory experiences, they become traumatized and continuous racially discriminatory experiences causes re-traumatization in black youth. In turn, black youth, who have not developed a positive racial identify and are faced with racially discriminatory experiences, are likely to internalize these experiences as they have not been able to develop healthier coping mechanisms.^{4,7}
- The impact of racial trauma can vary between youth and is influenced by factors like the youth's developmental stage, the youth's family, and certain ecological factors such as the community where the youth resides.⁷
- When black youth enter treatment programs in the juvenile justice system, the treatment plans and case planning often do not factor in the impacts of, or remedies for racial trauma. The focus is instead on the presenting problems without incorporating the influence racial trauma has on the youth's behavior.⁶

"As with other forms of trauma, we ask the wrong question about struggling youth of color. Instead of asking 'What is wrong with them?' we need to ask the trauma-informed question, 'What has happened to them?' ... To work effectively with youth of color, we must understand, address, and ultimately heal the hidden wounds of racial oppression."³

Racial Trauma Preventions

Racial socialization and racial identity practices allow for youth serving systems to shift their thinking from a deficit mindset, that focuses on the current behavioral problems and short-term solutions, to instilling sustainable skills that Black and African-American youth can use to respond to racism and systemic oppressions, while developing coping mechanisms to address those experiences head on without re-traumatization.

Racial Socialization

- Racial socialization is a practice that parents of black children often engage in with their child that educates them on their experiences in a white dominant world in hopes that their children will develop a positive self-identity and defy the odds of what the world "expects" of them. Although these conversations are often initiated by parents, it is imperative they are on-going for black youth, as they are an integral part of the development of a positive self-identity. Some of these practices include but are not limited to (1) Messages emphasizing pride in being black, (2) Warnings about racial inequalities, (3) Messages that de-emphasize the importance of race and instead may emphasize that hard work will ensure someone can overcome racism.^{1,4}

"Racial oppression is a traumatic form of interpersonal violence which can lacerate the spirit, scar the soul, and puncture the psyche. Without a clear and descriptive language to describe this experience, those who suffer cannot coherently convey their pain, let alone heal. The source of their hurt is often confused with distracting secondary symptoms ranging from hopelessness to acting out behavior."³

*In 2019 the demographic breakdown of detention admissions to Massachusetts DYS was the following: 43.5% Hispanic youth, 26.8% Black youth, 21.9% White youth.

- Racial socialization can be practiced through creating a space for youth of color to have discussions about racial social structure and their beliefs. Ongoing dialogue will help yield healthy responses when youth experience racial or discriminatory interactions.⁴
- Implementing dedicated spaces for dialogue within the juvenile justice system's care model would help promote a positive group identity, and it would help deepen a young person's understanding about the role race plays in society, making them better prepared to combat negative racial experiences. Racial socialization builds skills that help a young person to prevent internalizing racial experiences and instead acknowledge what is happening and use their tools to address the problem.⁴
- Further research shows that youth who engaged in racial socialization generally do better than their peers who have received little to no messages about being proud to be black.¹

Racial Identity Development

- Racial identity development is necessary to treat racial trauma, for a black youth's racial identity development is affected by the racial experiences that he or she has encountered. Developing a positive racial identity creates a heightened awareness of the impact that race has on everyday interactions, and in turn, a young person's ability to resist internalizing discriminatory experiences.⁴
- Repeated identification of black youth as the recipients of disciplinary actions, black youth depicted as the aggressors, and other negative representations compared to their white counterparts reveal stereotypes that exist in the larger society suggesting black youth are inferior and prone to behavioral issues. These inaccurate depictions of black youth can deepen and reactivate racial trauma. Black youth developing a positive racial identity is beneficial in coping with racial trauma associated with negative stereotypes.⁴
- Supporting black youths' racial identity development is fundamental to recognizing and treating racial trauma. Developing a positive self-identity allows for a black youth to process and work through attitudes and beliefs of internalized racism and develop a strong awareness of racism and oppression.⁴

Creating a space for racial socialization and racial identity development develops a heightened awareness of racism and oppression, allowing black youth to develop better coping mechanisms when faced with racial oppression. This in turn repurposes the experience and promotes positive behaviors to fight against the youth's negative racial experience. An example of this is youth of color striving to perform better in schools to defy the odds of systemic oppression.⁴

Program Examples

- The Youth Advocacy Foundation of Massachusetts piloted a project titled *Ethnic-Racial Identity Development*. The project piloted in Middlesex County and focuses on enhancing youths' self-confidence and combatting stress related to racial trauma through exploring youths' racial identities. <https://www.youthadvocacyfoundation.org/>
- Wee The People is a Boston-based social justice project that aims to teach kids ages 4-12 about activism, resistance, and social action through interactive workshops by way of visual and performing arts. <https://www.weethepeopleboston.org/>
- Racial Reconciliation and Healing is a project that support youth ages 16-21 by creating a platform that expose, discuss, and address structural racism and inequities, with a particular focus on health. It is designed to be a tool for lifelong engagement in the work of racial justice and liberation. <http://www.racialrec.org/>

Examples of Racial Trauma

Racial Trauma occurs on an array of levels for Black and African American people. The major categories include the following:

Micro-aggression: daily verbal, non-verbal or environmental slights, snubs, and insults. Example: "You don't act like a normal black person".⁴

Micro-assault: non-verbal or verbal discriminatory action to hurt someone through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminating. Example: Confederate Flags, racial stigmas, etc.⁵

Micro-insults: subtle verbal and nonverbal communications that are rude and insensitive and demean a person's racial identity. The purpose is to point out that the person is slight exception to the stereotype. Example: "I couldn't tell that you are only black because you speak so well."⁵

Micro-invalidation: comment or action that dismisses the experience of a person of color. Example: "Racism doesn't exist we had a black president."⁵

Sources

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