

Social ties, self-esteem vital to low-income black, latino boys

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Boys with high levels of ethnic identity reported higher levels of pro-social values and lower levels of depressive symptoms, the researchers found.

A study by University of Virginia researchers finds that attributes such as "a positive sense of self" and "a sense of connection to others" are

associated with decreased criminal activity for low-income black and Latino urban male teens, who were then also more likely to engage in positive social behaviors such as joining school activities. In addition, those with positive ethnic identities had lower levels of depression.

Joanna Williams, assistant professor at the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education and a faculty member with Youth-Nex: The U.Va. Center to Promote Effective Youth Development, led a team of researchers in examining how measures of positive youth development and positive [ethnic identity](#) could be used to inform the understanding of pro-social and anti-social processes among boys of color, who are often viewed through a lens that tends to spotlight problem behaviors.

"Positive youth development" is a strengths-based approach based on theory that looks at the interplay between individual, relationship, community and societal factors. Youth-Nex's work employs this framework, which at its core, emphasizes youths' strengths and their capability for thriving and contributing to society over "problematizing" them, and aims to provide opportunities to enhance these competencies.

The results were published in the April edition of the journal *Applied Developmental Science*. The study, "Ethnic Identity and Positive Youth Development in Adolescent Males: A Culturally Integrated Approach," used data from three waves of the Chicago Youth Development Study, a longitudinal study of about 300 urban black and Hispanic males who were recruited in grades 5 and 7 (ages 11 to 14; median age of 12) and interviewed annually from 1991 to 1996. The study findings were recently highlighted in a national publication by the American Psychological Association on the resilience of black boys.

Counter to popular, negative stereotypes about low-income, urban males of color, most teens in the study endorsed pro-social values like valuing achievement and responsibility, and had positive attitudes toward school

and beliefs about their future, Williams and her colleagues found. These indicators of positive youth development were linked to greater involvement in pro-social activities like school clubs and student government, and less involvement in criminal activity. Additionally, boys with higher levels of ethnic identity – feeling committed to one's ethnic heritage – reported higher levels of positive youth development-related values and lower levels of depressive symptoms, the researchers found.

For Williams, whose research focuses on understanding race and ethnicity as contexts for adolescent development, with an emphasis on identity processes, this work helps validate efforts of institutions like schools and community organizations that encourage and foster the skills and interests of young people. Black and Latino urban male youth in low-income families have several factors that can heighten their vulnerability to stress, she said, and these stressors can increase the odds of engaging in anti-social behavior as a means of coping. However, these youth also have the capacity to thrive, and factors like strong, supportive school and communities, caring adults, pro-social peers and cultural connections can increase the likelihood of positive and healthy development, she said.

Promoting positive association with one's ethnic groups may be an important means for minimizing the likelihood of negative mental health symptoms among ethnic minority male teens, she said. These kinds of cultural assets are particularly critical for boys of color, since they are often exposed to racial or ethnic discrimination, a stressor that can foster poor mental health outcomes, Williams said.

"We are thrilled to see increasing national attention to research that promotes strengths-based messages about black boys and other boys of color," she said. "This body of work addresses an ongoing, critical need to counter pervasive, negative stereotypes that typically criminalize these youth."

"In our study, the personal strengths of black and Latino male teens living in urban poverty were associated with engagement in pro-social activities and avoidance of externalizing and criminal behaviors. As a broader research goal, we're also working on integrating findings across fields that are often viewed separately, with the recognition that, for example, theories of positive [youth development](#) can inform our understanding of theories of ethnic identity development, and vice versa. Ultimately, this can only strengthen our understanding of how to foster positive outcomes for all youth."

More information: The complete study is available online:
[www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10 ... 10888691.2014.894871](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10...10888691.2014.894871)

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