

Study finds violence among young black men associated with sense of powerlessness

September 21 2015, by Matt Shipman

New research from North Carolina State University and Palo Alto University finds that young black men and teens who are most likely to be victims or perpetrators of violence are also those who feel that they have the least power to effect social change - highlighting the importance of ensuring that young black men do not feel alienated by society and social programs.

"We wanted to address stereotypes associating young black men with [violence](#)," says Elan Hope, an assistant professor of psychology at NC State and co-author of a paper on the work. "We wanted to explore both the extent to which black men are victims or perpetrators of violence and which factors are related to this behavior. For example, do patterns of exposure to violence exist for different groups of young black men?"

"Ultimately, we want to identify points of intervention where we can make a positive difference in the lives of these young men," Hope adds. "That has ramifications for both policy development and clinical treatment. How can we address the institutional biases that these young men are so keenly aware of? How can counselors or social workers intervene effectively?"

The researchers looked at nationally representative survey data on 287 black male adolescents and young men between the ages of 15 and 25. The data was collected as part of the Black Youth Project's 2005 Youth Culture Survey. The researchers found that survey participants tended to fall into one of four groups.

The largest group, including 54.7 percent of participants, consisted of "low victim-perpetrators." Young men in this group were exposed to very little violence either as victims or perpetrators. "On average, this group consisted of people who may have seen or been in a fight once in the past year," Hope says.

The second largest group, at 25.4 percent, was labeled "precautionary victim-perpetrators." They were more likely than most survey participants to carry a weapon at least once a week or know someone who did - but were not more likely to get into fights.

Third, at 12.9 percent, were "high victim-perpetrators," who reported carrying weapons and threatening people with weapons weekly, fighting almost weekly, and being injured several times in the last year.

The last group, "injurious victim-perpetrators," made up only 7 percent of survey respondents and were distinguished as being injured almost monthly - but were no more likely to carry or threaten people with weapons than other participants.

The researchers found that young men who fell into the "high victim-perpetrator" group were also the [young men](#) who felt the most disenfranchised - they had experienced the most racial discrimination, were most aware of institutional discrimination, had the most experiences with the criminal justice system as both victims and suspects, and were the most cynical about politics. The "precautionary victim-perpetrator" group was also very aware of institutional discrimination and was very politically cynical.

"In short, these are people who feel they do not have an equal opportunity in everything from education to the justice system, and they don't feel they have any power to change the status quo," Hope says. "These are clearly issues that are strongly associated with high-risk

behavior.

"This highlights the need to include young black men in policy development in a very real way," Hope adds. "We need to find ways to bring these people into the process of governance, and give them meaningful opportunities to be heard and to make a difference.

"We'd like to get an opportunity to explore the effectiveness of programs that work with young [black men](#) to help them navigate issues related to institutional discrimination and give them the tools they need to feel empowered to effect change."

More information: The paper, "Walking Away Hurt, Walking Around Scared: A Cluster Analysis of Violence Exposure Among Young Black Males," is published online in the *Journal of Black Psychology*.

jbp.sagepub.com/content/early/.../98415603539.abstract

Provided by North Carolina State University

Citation: Study finds violence among young black men associated with sense of powerlessness (2015, September 21) retrieved 26 April 2024 from

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