

Study: Common wisdom about troubled youth falls apart when race considered

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One of the most widely accepted beliefs about the differences between troubled boys and girls may need to be revised, according to new research.

Experts have long believed that girls tend to internalize their problems, becoming depressed or anxious, while boys externalize, turning to violence against people or property.

But a new study found that this oft-repeated idea didn't hold true for African-American youth who were in the juvenile justice system. For them, whether they internalized or externalized depended not on gender, but on what was happening within their families.

The results suggest more attention needs to be paid to the intersection of race, gender and family when it comes to dealing with troubled youth, said Stephen Gavazzi, co-author of the study and professor of human development and family science at Ohio State University.

"If you look at most studies involving internalizing and externalizing among youth, they generally look at white, middle-class samples," Gavazzi said.

"Most research has not paid attention to race. And when studies do look at race, they are not likely to look at family and gender as well."

In this study, the results showed that Black girls and boys showed similar

levels of externalizing and internalizing behavior, once family dysfunction was taken into account. In these families, boys and girls were more likely to show outward aggression if they lived in families with higher levels of dysfunction. Such a relationship was not found in white families.

"Family issues affect children in African-American families differently than they do in white families," Gavazzi said. "That is something that really hasn't been found before."

This study, published in the July 2008 issue of the Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, involved 2,549 youth who appeared before a juvenile court in five counties in Ohio.

The youth were assessed using a measure developed by Gavazzi and his colleagues called the Global Risk Assessment Device (GRAD). The measure is an internet-based assessment tool that asks youth a variety of questions to determine the risks they face for further problems in life.

GRAD asks about prior brushes with the law, family and parenting issues, substance abuse, traumatic events and a variety of other issues. For example, GRAD asks how often they get into fights with adults in their homes, if they have friends who have been in trouble with the law, and how much trouble they have in controlling their anger.

Gavazzi said it is not surprising that family issues affect African-American children differently than they do white children.

"Researchers who study ethnicity and culture have long noted the primacy of family for African Americans," he said. "That's telling us that families matter in a different way for African-American youth than what we're finding for whites."

Gavazzi said he and his colleagues are now trying to identify exactly what is different in African-American families that affects whether youth internalize or externalize problems, and how to best help them.

They are looking, for example, at issues such as family conflict and the amount of monitoring parents do of their children.

"We want to find out if there is some different constellation of things happening in African-American families that can explain some of our findings," he said.

Source: Ohio State University

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