

Study shows black youth are politically involved, disputes other stereotypes

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Many of the assumptions people have about black youth—that they are politically detached and negatively influenced by rap music and videos—are false stereotypes, according to a new University of Chicago study by Prof. Cathy Cohen, based on surveys and conversations with the youth themselves.

Black youth say they are politically involved, critical of many messages in rap and skeptical of the idea that the country has entered a post-racial era. They also are socially conservative on political issues such same-sex marriage, said Cohen, the David and Mary Winton Green Professor of Political Science and lead researcher of the study.

Using survey questions and focus group discussions, the study provides new insights into a youth culture often criticized and frequently misunderstood. The study comes as attitudes among black youth are being examined in light of the election of President Barack Obama, which brought hope as well as disappointment for people who expected more change, she said.

Black youth are among the most marginalized groups in society, Cohen said. On average they have far fewer resources than other young people and face higher drop-out rates, especially among young black men in urban areas, as well as greater levels of incarceration and dangerous levels of violence. Many of their cultural choices, such as rap music, have garnered criticism from those inside and outside of black communities.

The situation has led to the emergence of popular "partial truths" about black youth behavior, based in part on the images featured in some rap music videos, Cohen said, such as sagging pants, denigrating language toward women and blatant sexuality.

Many people also feel that black youths are uninterested in politics. Those impressions about black youth distract from their real problems, brought on by structural racism and a lack of opportunities resulting from conservative policies that focus on shrinking government assistance to those in need, Cohen said. "In all fairness, black youth are also very honest in highlighting their own faulty decision-making, underscoring their own agency in shaping their life options."

"Ironically, missing from much of the debate over the lives of black youth and the political course of the country has been the sustained and detailed presentation of the voices, opinions and attitudes of black youth," said Cohen, who provides those perspectives in a new book, *Democracy Remixed, Black Youth and the Future of American Politics*, published Sept. 12 by Oxford University Press. "This book fills a void by asking young people directly what they think."

The research for this work, widely known as the Black Youth Project, included a national representative survey of young people ages 15-25 that included an oversample of black youth. The survey was developed by Cohen's research team of graduate and undergraduate researchers and was fielded by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago in 2005. The survey was followed by in-depth interviews and an online panel survey by Knowledge Networks, conducted in three waves between October 2008 and December 2009. Focus groups with black youth aged 18 to 24 also were held in 2004 and 2009. The research was supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Among the findings of the study:

- When compared with other young people, black youth are most likely to be critical of rap music videos. The survey found that 41 percent felt that rap music videos should be more political, compared with 23 percent of whites and 33 percent of Latinos.
- Black youth consistently hold the most conservative views on questions of premarital sex, homosexuality and abortion. Among black youth, 42 percent felt that sex before marriage is wrong, compared with 28 percent of whites and 32 percent of Latinos. Among blacks, 55 percent think that homosexuality is always wrong, compared with 35 percent of whites and 36 percent of Latinos. The survey also found that 47 percent of black youth feel that abortion is always wrong, compared with 34 percent of whites and 46 percent of Latinos. Black youth with more religious backgrounds were more likely to hold conservative opinions.
- Black youth are politically engaged, particularly on the Internet. They are described as a group of "digital Democrats" who are more eager to be involved when digital networks facilitate involvement. When asked if they wrote a blog or sent an e-mail related to politics, 15 percent of black youth, 21 percent of whites and 18 percent of Latinos said they had.
- Voting increased for the 2008 election, driven by Obama's candidacy, and figures from the U.S. Census Bureau showed that black youth had the highest percentage of voters among the three groups studied.

Despite their eager participation, black youth were also realistic about

the meaning of the new age of hope Obama promised. They still expected to experience discrimination throughout their lives. Only 42 percent said they felt "like a full and equal citizen of the country," compared with 66 percent of white youth. Similarly, after the election of Barack Obama, a wide gap in the perception of racism remained among black and white youth. Sixty-nine percent of black youth believe that racism still remains a major problem, compared to 32 percent of whites and 51 percent of Latinos.

Focus group conversations showed that many black youth accepted the limited potential of Obama's election to change their lives. Obama had campaigned as a candidate for all groups and did not position himself as aiming especially to improve the lot of black Americans, Cohen pointed out.

"This group of [young people](#), although exuberant over the first African-American president, realize that they cannot count on him or any other politician to singly change their condition," she said. In their conversations, the black youth repeatedly pointed to the need for community action, also part of Obama's message, as the vehicle for change.

That perspective from young black people on political participation can enhance the nation's politics, Cohen said. "Black youth can help us to remix our democratic principles and practices, recognizing that full membership and the participation of all must be the basis for American politics in the 21st century."

Provided by University of Chicago

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