

# **Mothers say middle-class status little protection against gendered racism for black boys**

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A new study in *Gender & Society* by sociologist Dawn M. Dow of Syracuse University's Maxwell School reveals how middle-class African American mothers parent young sons differently than their white counterparts -- via 'bias-preparation' strategies -- to navigate the 'Thug' image and vulnerabilities of African American masculinity. Credit: Sheray Oliver

Middle-class African American mothers must parent differently than their white counterparts. African American middle-class mothers bear the added weight of preparing their children—particularly their sons—to navigate "gendered racism," or discrimination based on both race and gender, from a very young age. This is according to a new research study published in the April 2016 issue of *Gender & Society*, a top-ranked journal in Gender Studies and Sociology. While there has been anecdotal evidence regarding the phenomenon, this is the first rigorous analysis of what has been colloquially referred to as "The Talk" or the "Black Man's Code," a set of socially circumscribed rules black boys and men feel compelled to follow to protect themselves from suspicion, criminalization as "thugs," and harm—regardless of class status. It provides more evidence that the phenomenon is widespread, and gives deeper insights regarding the nature of the problem and the role of mothers in addressing it.

"Although the mothers in this study are middle- and upper-middle-class African Americans with more resources than lower-income mothers, this status provides their sons with little protection from gender and racial stereotyping," says study author Dawn Marie Dow, assistant professor of sociology at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University. "Participants believe that both race and gender trump class, and that the broader society associates poverty, crime, and undereducation with being an African American boy."

Drawing on 60 interviews of middle- and upper-middle class African American mothers, the study, titled, "The Deadly Challenges of Raising African American Boys: Navigating the Controlling Image of the 'Thug'," outlines "bias-preparation" strategies mothers use to address the challenges their sons will face in a society that often criminalizes the bodies of African American boys and men. Importantly, Dow's study confirms that these mothers are not able to turn to middle-class safety nets in the same way as their white counterparts. While most middle-

class white families are depicted as feeling some level of security in their regular interactions with teachers, police officers, and the general public, the African American mothers in Dow's study saw teachers as potential tyrants, police officers as potential predators, and the general public as a potential threat to their sons' safety, survival, and emotional well-being.

One participant shared a common experience of her mothers' group, "With our sons, we talk about how we can prepare them or teach them about how to deal with a society. . . where black men are held to a different standard than others. What do we have to do to make sure teachers don't have preconceived ideas that stop [our sons] from learning because they believe little brown boys are rambunctious, or little brown boys are hitting more than Caucasian boys?" Another study participant expressed concern about the toll these negative interactions would have on her son's self esteem stating, "Each time a black boy has a racially charged interaction with a police officer, a teacher, or a shop owner, those experiences will gradually start to eat at his self-worth and damage his spirit. He might become so damaged he starts to believe and enact the person he is expected to be, rather than who he truly is as a person."

Dow's research describes a number of parenting strategies mothers employ to navigate the negative stereotype of the "thug" and teach their sons how to navigate their expression of masculinity, race, and class:

- Exposing their sons to a variety of settings that differ by race, class, and [gender](#), helping them cultivate the ability to shift seamlessly between different communities. Examples of this include shuttling sons to different recreational and educational activities in neighborhoods with African Americans of varied economic backgrounds, teaching them about the history of African American men, and exposing them to African American men who express healthy versions of masculinity.
- Managing their sons' daily interactions to exclude exposure to

gendered [racism](#). Here, mothers seek out neighborhoods to live in with adequate resources, which are often predominantly white neighborhoods, but where their sons will not face racist assumptions of lower class status and criminality, and instead be seen as "good, middle-class kids."

- Managing their sons' emotional expressions and physical appearance. This includes encouraging their sons to restrain expressions of anger, frustration, or even excitement to mitigate views that they are aggressive or violent, and even having them practice yoga, meditation, and karate in preparation for emotional restraint in daily interactions. It also includes teaching their sons to monitor the way they dress so they will be viewed as middle-class kids and not "thugs" or criminals. Some mothers even present their sons with hypothetical scenarios, such as being pulled over by the police, and instruct their son how to react.

Dow says her research underscores several parenting challenges. She explains, "despite feeling that it is unfair that their sons have to conform to stricter standards, mothers also feel they must encourage them to adhere to them to remain safe. These [mothers](#) live with the daily tension of having to teach their sons individual strategies of survival under racist and gendered norms, while also teaching them how to challenge those norms."

Provided by Syracuse University

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