

# A parental paradox for Black girls in the justice system

March 4 2021, by Emily Caldwell

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For Black girls in the juvenile justice system, attention from a caregiver might amount to too much of a bad thing, a recent study suggests.

Though parental attentiveness would generally be considered beneficial to troubled youths, the finding hints at the possibility that a history of trauma in a household's adults may filter down to younger generations, researchers say.

The study, examining how family and peer [social support](#) influenced post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms in Black girls who were in detention, found that lower self-esteem, less optimism about the future and higher negative behaviors by peers were associated with greater PTSD symptoms in these girls. But one more factor also correlated with those symptoms: a higher level of caregiver support.

"This finding really pushed me to focus on parents and the girls, because initially it was just the girls," said Camille R. Quinn, lead author of the study and assistant professor of social work at The Ohio State University. "So I started digging. And research I found explained how this could be an intersection between moms and girls. If mom had a history of violence, how she coped or didn't cope with that trauma influenced the girls.

"More and more, I saw that this described parents with experiences of not just present-day, but historical, trauma. And if they had a limited ability to resolve or heal, that would dictate their perception of their

child's suffering. So they might say, 'Get over it.' And the girl might say, 'OK, fine.' But she's still struggling."

Quinn has applied for a grant from the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities to follow up by working with Black girls and their parents and caregivers on proposed interventions that would equip these girls with faith in their own power to heal while also acknowledging the historic victimization of Black girls and Black women.

The study is published in a recent issue of the journal *Criminal Justice and Behavior*.

Quinn will discuss the paper and its implications for social work practitioners in a plenary talk at 11:30 a.m. (Eastern) Sunday, March 7, at the annual conference of the New Jersey chapter of the National Association of Social Workers. The talk is titled "The Strength of Justice-involved Black Girls and Women in Spite of Adversity: Identifying Assets to Enhance Well-being."

Girls are the fastest-growing group in the U.S. [juvenile justice system](#), and Black girls are overrepresented in that detained population. Their higher likelihood to have a history of abuse also predisposes them to PTSD symptoms, such as hypervigilance, reliving trauma in nightmares, and seeing a threat at every turn. In most cases, however, chances are that they are not diagnosed, and therefore receive no help in learning how to get through the day, Quinn said. They might abuse drugs, steal food or hit someone and end up in trouble, when they are really trying to survive—what is called survival coping.

With an eye toward improving interventions for youths who engage in law-breaking behavior, Quinn conducted a secondary analysis of data that had been collected from 188 Black girls for an earlier study. The

girls were age 12 to 17 and living in a detention center before their criminal cases were heard.

Using a variety of established research measures, the survey collected data on the girls' PTSD symptoms, history of abuse, caregiver support, negative peer norms such as friends who skip school or steal, self-esteem and future orientation—how optimistic they were about, for example, graduating from high school or being respected in their communities.

More than half of the girls, 56%, reported being subjected to emotional abuse, 43% experienced physical abuse and 24% reported sexual abuse. As a group, their symptoms for PTSD were considered clinically relevant. The analysis looked at how factors individually and in combination were associated with PTSD symptoms, with higher rates of caregiver support, higher negative peer norms, lower self-esteem rates and lower future orientation rates correlated with greater PTSD symptoms.

In the paper, Quinn suggested that comprehensive treatment programs for delinquent Black girls should include caregivers and peers, and emphasize healing to bolster self-esteem and hopefulness. In her talk, Quinn will note the need for practitioners to recognize the historical context of trauma and violence in the lives of Black women and [girls](#), and give thought to societal barriers these clients may have encountered on the way to seeking help.

"The population we're talking about are the least likely to receive any kind of services, the least likely to be referred, because they can be seen as scary," said Quinn, a longtime practitioner before becoming a professor. "They're perceived as aggressive. But if you think about it historically, they're also some of the individuals who have been the most victimized and the most dehumanized. And that is how they then become criminalized. I want my work to humanize them and help them

heal."

**More information:** Camille R. Quinn et al, The Influence of Familial and Peer Social Support on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Among Black Girls in Juvenile Correctional Facilities, *Criminal Justice and Behavior* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0093854820972731](https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854820972731)

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