

# BLM movement engaged youth, with positive and negative effects

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The police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in 2020 unleashed an historic wave of activism across the United States, including an estimated 8,000 mass demonstrations in support of Black

Lives Matter (BLM).

A new study by Yale researchers focused on [adolescent](#) development finds that this rise in demonstrations and the subsequent media coverage had a profound effect on the nation's youth.

In a [national survey](#) of nearly 5,000 young people across the United States, ages 11 to 15, 70% of respondents reported engaging with the BLM movement through television, [social media](#), or attending in-person demonstrations, and that the events promoted feelings of hope and inspiration. Importantly, though, in addition to reporting positive experiences associated with the BLM movement, Black respondents also noted significantly higher feelings of fear and anger during their engagement.

"Popular commentary likes to suggest that exposure to social justice movements like the BLM movement can add needless stress to adolescents' lives," said Cortney Simmons, co-lead author of the study and Yale postdoctoral researcher. "Yes, adolescents did report stressful experiences and emotions when engaging with BLM. However, these experiences and emotions are essential for development and can motivate adolescents to address the injustices they witness and encounter in their lives."

Arielle Baskin-Sommers, associate professor at Yale in psychology and psychiatry and co-lead author, Simmons, and BJ Casey, a professor of psychology and senior author, surveyed participants as part of the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) study, the largest long-term study of brain development and child health in the United States.

Their findings were reported the week of Oct. 4 in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

According to the [survey results](#), 35% of youth reported that their parents or siblings had attended BLM demonstrations and also that their family's engagement similarly brought about positive emotions.

"I think it is an important message for parents that teens took pride when their parents participated in demonstrations, given that too often parent influence is marginalized and peer influence is emphasized during the period of adolescence," Casey said.

While Black adolescents reported higher engagement in all respects—and described positive emotions at a higher level than white respondents— they also were more likely to report negative emotions, such as fear and anger. Black adolescents, approximately 5%, were also more likely to report witnessing violence at demonstrations they attended than white adolescents (less than one tenth of 1%).

"Engagement in the BLM movement can be a way for Black youth, in particular, to exert collective identity and decrease feelings of powerlessness, but we also must provide appropriate support for youth who experienced negative emotions as a result of their engagement or were exposed to violence," Baskin-Sommers said.

**More information:** Arielle Baskin-Sommers et al, Adolescent civic engagement: Lessons from Black Lives Matter, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2021). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2109860118](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2109860118)

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