

# Study: Transition to adulthood brings mental health declines for Black youth who interact with juvenile justice system

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A new study from Assistant Professor in the Department of Social Work Melissa Villodas found that for Black youth who interacted with the

juvenile justice system, mental health symptoms worsened during transition to adulthood (when youth were about ages 19-20). This highlights the transition to adulthood as a key time to provide supportive interventions that reduce mental health challenges.

Black youth make up 14% of the U.S. population, yet 35% of juvenile justice cases. Of all youth in the [juvenile justice system](#), up to 70% report mental health challenges, and Black youth experience the enduring challenge of systemic racism as they navigate meeting their mental health needs during this time.

"At around 18 something happens to patterns of connectedness for Black youth. Existing theories and research on this stage of life tells us that during the transition to adulthood, relationships with others begin to change, while mental health often worsens," said Villodas.

"Our research study found that higher levels of connectedness helped reduce mental health challenges in this sample of youth when they were on average about 16, so we as [social workers](#) need to try leverage important relationships to facilitate this same kind of support in the transition to adulthood as well."

At age 14, Black youth with mental health symptoms reported higher connectedness to their family, community, and peers and this feeling of connectedness increased through age 16. However, at about 18 years old, Black youth reported that their feelings of connectedness began to stall. The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a time when [mental health challenges](#) often intensify and when mental health service use tends to decline.

Connectedness (defined as the degree to which individuals or groups are socially close, interrelated, cared for, and respected by others) has been identified as a protective factor against mental health symptoms. In this

study, Villodas focused on connectedness to family, peers, and community.

"Among Black justice-involved youth in this sample, as mental health grew worse, connectedness scores improved, likely because of the strong support network from the Black youth's family, peers, and community. This shows us that for Black youth, these networks of people are critical in improving mental health and have filled the gap that has been created by systemic racism in [mental health care](#). Our study highlights that in order to help Black youth who interacted with the juvenile justice system during the transition to adulthood, there is more support needed within the juvenile justice system such as equitable [mental health](#) treatments and other rehabilitative services," said Villodas.

The study was a secondary analysis using five waves of data from the Pathways to Desistance Project, a multisite study of serious juvenile offenders from adolescence to young [adulthood](#).

"The Relationship Between Connectedness and Mental Health Symptoms Among Black Youth Involved in the Juvenile Justice System: A Random-Intercept Cross-Lagged Panel Model" was published in *Social Work in Mental Health* in February 2023.

**More information:** Melissa L. Villodas et al, The relationship between connectedness and mental health symptoms among Black youth involved in the juvenile justice system: a random-intercept cross-lagged panel model, *Social Work in Mental Health* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/15332985.2023.2178269](#)

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