Exploring the Relationship between Police Encounters and Mental Health Outcomes among Black Youth in Toronto, Canada

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BACKGROUND

- Black youth in Canada are overrepresented in the criminal justice and child welfare systems, with about half of Black inmates in the criminal justice system being 30 years and below.
- These experiences align with adverse outcomes in educational attainment (e.g., streaming, suspensions), access to socioeconomic resources and representation in mainstream society, all shaped by systemic racism.
- Research from the United States shows that Black youth interactions with the police and welfare systems adversely impact mental health symptomatology.
- Little is known about this interaction in Canada due to the lack of collection of race-based health data and the dearth of localized studies on mental health during and after police and welfare encounters.
- Under the Retooling Black Anxiety project, this study explores the direct and indirect experiences of young Black residents of the Greater Toronto Area with the police and welfare system to understand the mental health outcomes and coping strategies at the interpersonal, familial and communal levels.



METHODOLOGY

- This study was conducted in the Greater Toronto Area, a large metropolitan area in Toronto, Canada, which includes five regions and 29 cities. Most participants came from the **Toronto and Peel Regions.**
- Pilot community-based participatory action research study conducted in partnership with Ghana Union of Canada (a nationwide organization representing the interests of Ghanaians in Canada) and Gashanti (a women's advocacy group representing Somali Torontonians).
- The study is rooted in intersectionality and critical race theories, informed by a **transformative research paradigm** (prioritizing the voices of marginalized groups and connecting the results of research studies to efforts to solve social inequity).
- **Twenty (24) participants** between 16 and 30 were recruited for the first phase of the study. This phase included two self-reported depression and anxiety scales (administered on Question Pro) and semi-structured interviews lasting 40 minutes to 1 hour. Participants received $50 in honorariums.
- Interviews were transcribed orthographically by three research team members. Data were analyzed thematically in MAXQDA24 using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis.

FINDINGS

"…even now, when I go home and see police cruisers and anything like that, outside of my building or in the building beside mine, I'm like, "Is this for me? Is this for anybody I know?". You know, it's always on my mind. In my head, the police don't ever come for anyone else but me and my friends, right? That's how I see it."

Fear, anxiety and hesitation (around police)

"It was like 5 to 10 minutes since I talked to the officer. I'm on the floor of my apartment. Lo and behold, it's like the entire Toronto police, the whole unit is on the floor. And I'm walking past them with an absolute guilt-ridden face like I committed the crime because I snitched."



Spatial patterns as an enabler of adverse encounters and mental health outcomes

"Yeah, 'cuz…yeah, like and in the same respects kinda just makes me lose a lot of respect for the institution entirely, really. Because, it just kinda creates the same atmosphere that I grew up in. Yeah, like this is supposed to be university, like why is this happening? [chuckles] It's ridiculous."

"Even when I was younger, I had to be home at a certain time. One of my parents didn't like the park I was playing at because they weren't comfortable, not because of the crime presence, but I guess the police presence. So yeah, the stuff you were saying, yeah."

Tenuous community relations shaping & mediating mental health outcomes of encounters

"People were thinking he was going to jail, so there was no point in communicating. This idea that people see those going to prison as socially disposable. He understood this because hw was not able to leave his residence. A sense of people not owing him anything."

"With my younger brother…he wasn't formally institutionalized, but nevertheless, he feels more isolated, like social isolation, not having a sense of belonging or sense of connection with anybody. Because he feels like he's the only one that's been through this type of situation. And I find that you know, living in the suburbs, now it's a little bit more of a challenge because when we weren't living in the suburbs, you know it was more communal."

Psychosocial stress and weathering from procedural issues after encounters

"Sometimes you know it's frustration, sometimes I feel like its gratitude. Because at the end of the day, I'm grateful that you know this family has someone like me in their lives that can actually help them with navigation. But then obviously sometimes I need to clone myself. I'm only one person. I get overwhelmed. You know what I mean?"

CONCLUSIONS

- Mental health impacts of police encounters are relational and differentiated by race with significant impact on personal and familial health outcomes.
- Approaches to resolving adverse mental health outcomes among Black youth should critically consider:
  - Centering racial justice as a health priority in spatial planning;
  - Providing culturally sensitive mental health resources;
  - Focusing on intra-communal resilience and capacity-building to heal the psychosocial impact of unjust policing.
  - Advancing sustained efforts to identify and support caregivers/those who abruptly become caregivers as a result of loved ones' criminal justice system encounters.