Black Youth Project

A RESEARCH PROJECT EXPLORING THE ATTITUDES, ACTIONS, AND DECISION-MAKING OF AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTH BY HIGHLIGHTING THEIR LIVES, IDEAS, AND VOICES

The Attitudes and Behavior of Young Black Americans:

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Cathy J. Cohen
Principal Investigator, Professor, University of Chicago

University of Chicago
Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture

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Black Youth Project

Cathy J. Cohen, *Principal Investigator, Professor, University of Chicago*

Jamila Celestine-Michener, *Graduate Research Associate, University of Chicago*

Crystal Holmes, *Graduate Research Associate, University of Chicago*

Julie Lee Merseth, *Graduate Research Associate, University of Chicago*

Laurence Ralph, *Graduate Research Associate, University of Chicago*

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www.blackyouthproject.com

For more information contact:
Black Youth Project
University of Chicago
Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture
5733 South University Avenue
Chicago, IL 60637
773-834-1706
www.blackyouthproject.com

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“When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard nor welcomed. But when we are silent we are still afraid. So it is better to speak remembering we were never meant to survive.”

— AUDRE LORDE

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"What concerns me is having a job and *living*. Will I be alive?… It's a very tough struggle because the United States isn't a fair country."

— 21-year-old Black male

"I think my life is better as time has gone on since the civil rights movement. More opportunities have become available. And there's not as big of a concentration on race as when my parents were children. Not to say that discrimination doesn't exist, but it's not as prevalent. It's not as obvious, so it's kind [of] easier to get around."

— 23-year-old Black female

Introduction

Arguably more than any other subgroup of Americans, Black youth reflect the challenges of inclusion and empowerment in the post–civil rights period. Whether the issue is the mass incarceration of African Americans, the controversy surrounding affirmative action as a policy to redress past discrimination, the increased use of high-stakes testing to regulate standards of education, debates over appropriate and effective campaigns for HIV and AIDS testing and prevention programs, efforts to limit what material is taught in sex-education classes, or initiatives to tie means-tested resources to family structure and marriage, most of these initiatives and controversies are focused on, structured around, and disproportionately affect young, often marginalized Black Americans.

However, in contrast to the centrality of Black youth to the politics and policies of the country, their perspectives and voices generally have been absent from not only public-policy debates, but also academic research. Increasingly, researchers and policy-makers have been content to detail and measure the behavior of young Black Americans with little concern for their attitudes, ideas, wants, and desires. The Black Youth Project begins to fill that void. Specifically, this study serves as a needed corrective to such research, matching observations about the behavior and choices of Black youth with information on their norms, values, and decision-making processes.

In addition to filling significant voids in data gathering, the Black Youth Project highlights and demands that attention be focused on the lives of young Black Americans. These young people deserve the country's attention because

their lives pose critical questions for the future functioning of our democracy. For if we are to measure the country's commitment to and success in reaching the principles of democratic inclusion, justice, and equality, made visible during the civil rights movement and the black power movement, then we must understand and attend to the attitudes, concerns, and needs of this generation. While the young Black Americans at the center of this study did not live under Jim Crow or experience the harshest realities of systematic economic, political, and social exclusion, they represent the generation of Black Americans expected to benefit most from the country's attempts at societal transformation. It seems essential to understand how young people from communities that have been marginalized based on race, ethnicity, and class as well as other sources of stratification think about the political world and their status in it. This insight is especially important if we are to facilitate the inclusion of these often vulnerable and alienated voices, politically empowering these young people to participate in governing and policy-making processes that often target their lives and their communities.

In-depth interviews provide a more detailed understanding of the attitudes, decision-making, and behavior of young Black Americans.

Methodology

The Black Youth Project uses a multimethodological research design, built around a new national survey of young people ages 15–25. Using NORC: A National Organization for Research at the University of Chicago to mount the survey, we secured 1,590 respondents from across the country, including an oversample of Black and Latino/a respondents. Data collection began July 20, 2005, and ended November 10, 2005, resulting in a sixteen-week field period. A total of fifty-nine interviewers worked on the project during this time. The data collection involved a 45-minute computer-assisted phone interview for eligible participants with a 5-minute screener. Eligible respondents who completed the interview received an incentive payment of $20 or $40. A random digit dial sample was used to identify survey participants. The final unweighted interviewer response rate was 62.1 percent. The average standard or margin of error is less than 2 percent.

These survey data are now being paired with in-depth interviews with approximately forty Black respondents who completed the original survey in five cities: Chicago, Illinois; Detroit, Michigan; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; St. Louis, Missouri; and Gary, Indiana. The in-depth interviews provide a more detailed understanding of the attitudes, decision-making, and behavior of young Black Americans. Finally, in spring 2007 the research team will begin conducting a content analysis on our newly created dataset of the top rap songs during the last ten years as documented by the Billboard music chart.

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IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

The nearly 16,000 phone interviews conducted for the study provided researchers in the Black Youth Project with a comprehensive picture of what young people are thinking and feeling and how they are acting. However, we wanted to learn even more, so we conducted in-depth, face-to-face interviews with some of the Black respondents from the national survey. We contacted those who had participated in the phone interviews and who indicated at the end of the survey that they would be willing to be interviewed face-to-face. All in-depth interviewees were paid an incentive of $50 for their time. We began our face-to-face interviews in the summer of 2006. Since that time, graduate-student researchers in the Black Youth Project have interviewed almost forty Black youth living in Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee, and St. Louis. These young people are providing greater depth to our understanding of their initial answers to the survey, especially as they help us comprehend some of the seeming dichotomies or contradictions in the data, such as the feelings of young Black respondents about the war in Iraq and their willingness to serve in the military.

The majority of young Black people we interviewed expressed unequivocal opposition to the war in Iraq. This position is reflected in what one 21-year-old Black man told us: "I think the war in Iraq is crazy! [Bush] started a war that wasn't even supposed to be started. It was basically because he just wanted to live out his daddy's wishes." But an 18-year-old Black female helped explain why so many Black youth consider joining the armed services even if they do not support the war. "Money," she said, was the driving force. "I was going to join the military...the majority of us just want to get out of the ghetto. That's basically what it is." In a similar vein, a 23-year-old Black female added:

> The military advertises an opportunity to have an education for free. Some people look at this as a way to get out of their community or to improve their lives, by any means necessary. So if somebody said, "Hey, you can come go to college for free," if I didn't know any better…if I didn't think it was wrong, I would sign up, too!

The in-depth interviews gave Black youth a chance to speak for themselves. In these interviews, we received more than a one-word answer to a survey question. Through the interviews, young people were able to thoroughly and clearly express their thoughts, experiences, and opinions, such as those about the war in Iraq. All of the researchers in the Black Youth Project are grateful for the time and honesty of our interview respondents.

This new Black youth culture raises some critical questions: how has Black America changed, what new circumstances and conditions have affected its evolution, and finally, what is the legacy of that culture at the dawn of the millennium? If Pac and B.I.G. are to be martyrs for the hip-hop generation, let them be martyrs in beginning an intergenerational movement to answer these questions and resolve those problems that threaten to undermine the very fabric and future of Black America.

— BAKARI KITWANA, 2002

"When you grow up in poor neighborhoods and…you see all these drug dealers, or even gangbangers, with these nice cars and everything…all this jewelry, you know how they're getting it. And you know that's an easy way for you to get it….therefore, you get it. You get into that [drug dealing] so…you can have the money. And a lot of them do it, so that way their parents don't have to work so much…"

— 24-year-old Black female

A Marginalized Existence

The continuing and disproportionate social, political, and economic marginalization of Black youth is a fact that is difficult to dispute. For example, while approximately 14 percent of non-Hispanic White children younger than age 18 lived in poverty in 2005, the poverty rate for Black children was 34 percent, more than twice that of Whites.[1] Living in poverty was not the only marker of the marginal existence of far too many Black youth. Unfortunately, education and employment statistics do not provide a more optimistic picture. In 2005, nearly 20 percent of Black Americans 18 years and older had not completed high school, compared to 11 percent of Whites 18 and older.[2] Similarly, data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicate that Black youth ages 16 to 19 suffered an unemployment rate of 29 percent in November 2006, more than twice that of White youth, who had an unemployment rate of 13 percent.[3]

Data from the U.S. Department of Justice indicate that in 2003, 3 of 1,000 White male Americans ages 18–19 were in a U.S. prison, compared to 21 of 1,000 Black males and 7 of 1,000 Hispanic males ages 18–19. The racial disparity grows when we look at males 20 to 24 years of age. Approximately 9 of 1,000 White males 20–24 years old find themselves in prison, compared to 70 of 1,000 Black males and 23 of 1,000 Hispanic males ages 20–24.[4] In 2004, Black males ages 14–24 constituted 1 percent of the general population; however, they comprised nearly 15 percent of all victims of homicide and more than a quarter—26 percent—of homicide offenders. These numbers again suggest the marginal

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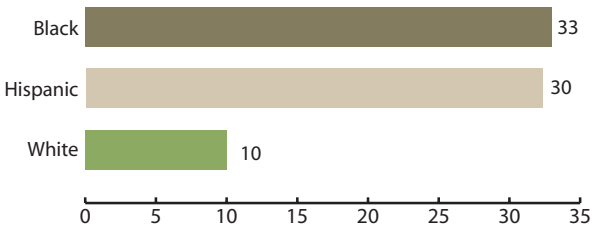
existence that many young Black Americans confront, compared to White males ages 14–24, who constitute 6 percent of the population, 10 percent of homicide victims, and 18 percent of homicide offenders.[5] And while Black youth comprise only 16 percent of the adolescent population in the U.S., in 2004 they accounted for 50 percent of adolescents arrested for murder, 46 percent of those arrested for violent crimes,[6] and approximately 40 percent of juveniles in public and private residential custody facilities.[7]

> While approximately 14 percent of non-Hispanic White children younger than age 18 lived in poverty in 2005, the poverty rate for black children was 34 percent, more than twice that of Whites.

Finally, in the realm of sex, the racial disparity detailed above continues. For example, in 2005, Black high-school students were more likely than White students to report ever having had sexual intercourse—68 percent and 43 percent, respectively—having initiated sex before age 13—17 percent and 4 percent, respectively—having had sex with four or more partners—28 percent and 11 percent, respectively—and having used birth-control pills to prevent pregnancy before last sexual intercourse—10 percent and 22 percent, respectively.[8] Moreover, in 2004, Black youth comprised 55 percent of those ages 13–24 with HIV.[9] Black youth also accounted for 53 percent of HIV infections among young people ages 20–24.[10] In terms of AIDS, Black youth comprised 51 percent of all AIDS cases among young people ages 13–19 from 1981 to 2001 and 61 percent of new AIDS cases in the same age range in 2001, even though they represented only 16 percent of all young people ages 13–19.[11]

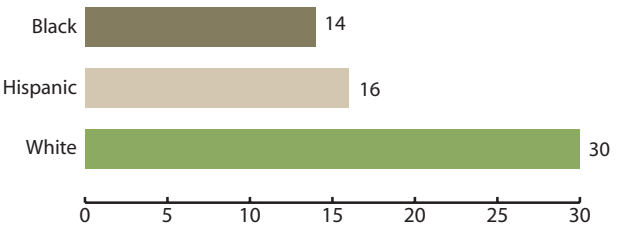
It is this stark reality of poverty, imprisonment, disease, and other life-threatening conditions that makes exploring the attitudes, norms, resources, and behaviors of this population so important. When we asked respondents questions about their existence, we found stark differences among the young people in our sample based on race and ethnicity. Some key findings are:

One-third of Black youth thought things like drugs, violence, gangs, and crime were a big problem in their neighborhood. The percentage of youth who believe this are:

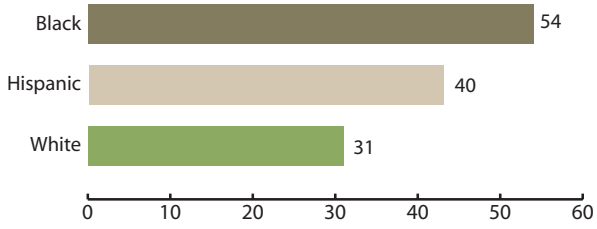


Only 14 percent of Black youth believe that they grew up in a very good neighborhood. The percentage of

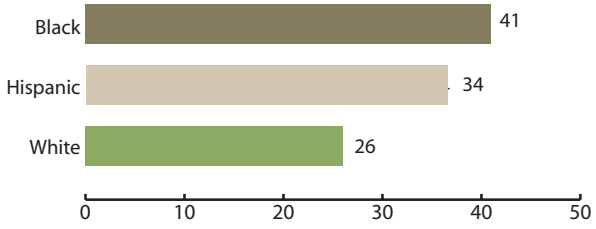
youth who believe this are:



Twenty-three percent more Black youth than Whites believe that Black youth receive a poorer education on average than do White youth. The percentage of youth who believe this are:



More than 40 percent of Black youth agree with the statement that "people judge me by what I can buy and what I own." The percentage of youth who believe this are:



To talk about the depressing statistics of unemployment, infant mortality, incarceration, teenage pregnancy, and violent crime is one thing. But to face up to the monumental eclipse of hope, the unprecedented collapse of meaning, the incredible disregard for human (especially black) life and property in much of black America is something else.

– CORNEL WEST. 1993. *RACE MATTERS*, P.12.

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> "I think [young Blacks] are less [politically active]…I think when our grandparents were growing up, they were fighting for something that everybody could visually see. And now we're fighting for things that are not as obvious. Racism was visual. You walked into a restroom it said, 'NO BLACKS.' You could see that. Now the things we're fighting for, that we're trying to change, are not as visual."
>
> *— 23-year-old Black female*

Politics

Today, researchers actually have less systematic information on the political ideas and actions of Black youth than they did thirty years ago. Specifically, when researchers in the 1980s realized that the data they had gathered on young people were not reliable predictors of adult political behavior, scholars in the social sciences, especially political science and psychology, seemed to lose interest in examining the political development or socialization of young people.[12] As the discipline of political science, and in particular the field of American politics, designated the politics of young people as less important, the subfield of Black politics followed suit and focused its research, especially its national data-gathering projects, on the politics of adults: those Black individuals formally allowed to fully engage in the democratic process and those more easily accessed through surveys when issues of consent were taken into consideration.

Researchers associated with the Black Youth Project take a different approach to research on Black Americans and young people. We believe that even in their teen years, young people are political actors worthy of study. The truth, of course, is that young people today, in particular marginalized and racialized youth, find themselves at the center of many national political struggles and are, therefore, politicized at a much earlier age than more privileged youth. Increased access to information through the Internet, television, and popular culture, as well as the constant presence of the state in the lives of vulnerable populations, means that the age of significant political engagement with the state and other political entities, if

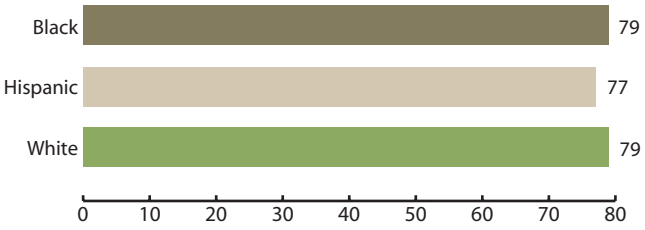
not formal political citizenship, is spiraling downward. It is time, therefore, to once again engage the question of politics among young people, not with an eye toward how such attitudes will influence their behavior when they are adults, but instead with a determination to understand how their current sense and practice of politics broadens the political spectrum and the places where we find politics.

While a number of the individuals in our study are not old enough to vote, they are forming opinions about themselves, their communities, and their government that have important consequences for the study of American politics and more practically for their and our political future. For example, young Black people engage with the state on a regular basis through state-run health care policies such as Medicaid, through their own experiences or their children's experience in the public schools, through the payment of taxes, and through encounters with the police. Thus, researchers are sorely mistaken if we proceed as if young people, who are often the targets of institutional and state campaigns, programs, and policies, do not have strong opinions about and take "political" action to better their position in society, their life chances, and the distribution of power in their communities and the country.

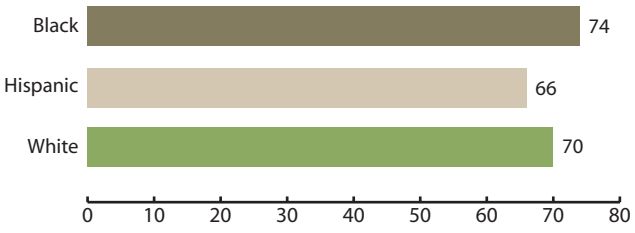
Our findings provide insights into how young Black Americans think about their political status; the political, economic, and social contexts they confront daily; the work of the government; the effectiveness of public policies directed at and disproportionately affecting them; and what they believe must be done to improve their lives. Whether they use the Internet to express their concerns and views or dialogue with friends face-to-face, many of the young people in our study are finding ways to express their political positions.

At the center of this project are questions that focus on the perceived political status of young people. For example, we asked our respondents whether they believe themselves to be citizens, guaranteed full rights and status. Or, do these young people see themselves as inhabiting some lower tier in a hierarchy of citizenship? How do young people who daily confront limited life opportunities come to understand their political status and the ability of politics and specific public policies to significantly change their life and the life chances of those around them? Some of the key findings are:

A strong majority of youth believe that they can make a difference by participating in politics and that they have the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in politics. The percentage of youth who believe that they can make a difference by participating in politics are:



The percentage of youth who believe that they have the skills and knowledge to participate in politics are:



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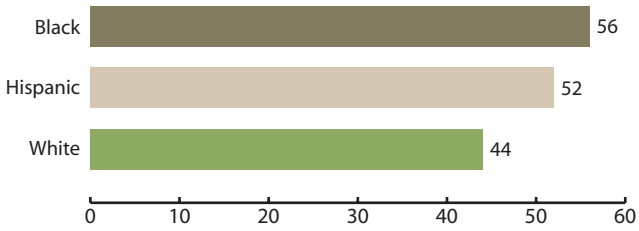
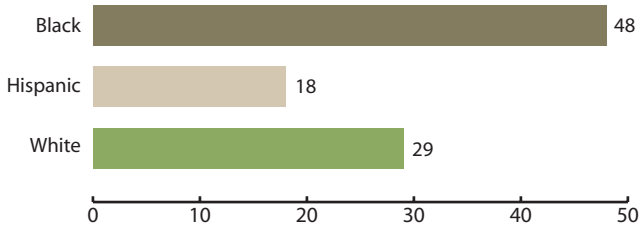
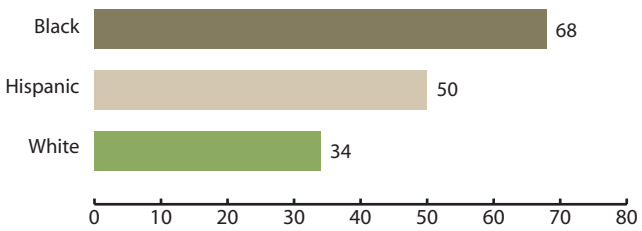
At the same time, the majority of both Black and Hispanic youth believe that the leaders in government care very little about people like them. The percentage of youth who believe this are:



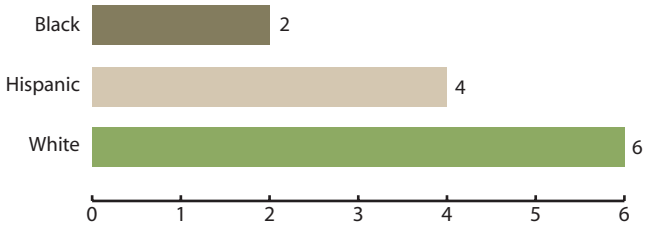
Nearly half of Black youth agree with the statement that "the government treats most immigrants *better* than it treats most Black people in this country." Much smaller proportions of Hispanic and White youth agree. The percentage of youth who agree with this statement are:



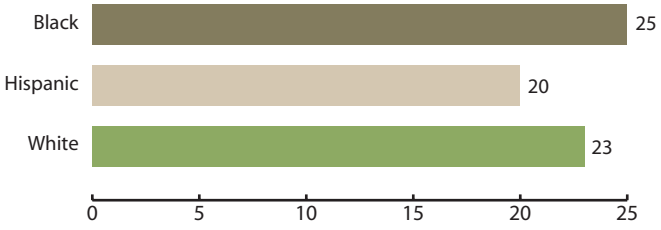
The overwhelming majority of Black youth believe that the government would do more to find a cure for AIDS if more White people had the disease. Again, smaller proportions of Hispanic and White youth agree. The percentage of youth who believe this are:



And while young Black Americans are skeptical of the government, they are finding avenues to exert some political power. Interestingly, while very few young people have engaged in boycotts, nearly a quarter (23 percent) have engaged in *buycotting* (buying a certain product or service because they like the social or political values of that company). The percentage of youth who report participating in a *boycott* in the twelve months prior to completing the survey in 2005 are:



The percentage of youth who report participating in a *buycott* in the twelve months prior to completing the survey in 2005 are:



The world is before you and you need not take it or leave it as it was when you came in.

– JAMES BALDWIN

> "I think…or at least I feel, that if you're going to teach something about sex you shouldn't just teach one side; you should teach both sides. So then…at least, if they choose to go with being abstinent, they know everything about it. Or if they choose to have sex, they know how to do it properly. If you just teach one side and don't cover the other, you leave one side that could potentially be dangerous…then you end up with all the results we currently have today."
>
> *— 24-year-old Black female*

Sex

It is evident from the expanding literature detailing the sexual behavior of young Black Americans that sex and intimate relationships are structuring components in the lives of this population, as they are with all young people. Unfortunately, it is often the most outwardly extreme and seemingly detrimental sexual choices of Black youth that are portrayed in the media, defining how many, if not most, Americans think about this part of the citizenry. Thus, in response to statistics such as those outlined above that indicate the early initiation of sex among Black youth, their higher numbers of sexual partners, and their disproportionate rates of HIV and AIDS, much of the lay and academic discussion of sex among this population has been framed in the language of crisis, risk, and danger. Missing from much of this literature are the opinions, attitudes, and explanations for the sexual choices of Black youth *from* Black youth.

While a number of questions included in the Black Youth Project ask about the sexual behaviors of individual young people, it is the contention of the research team that we cannot understand these seemingly individual decisions without also investigating the systematic pressures, conditions, and desires that influence the sexual and intimate decision-making of this group. Furthermore, we are interested in how young Black people think about not only their sexual decisions but also outside forces such as the role and responsibility of the state to promote healthy sexual lives. Increasingly and consistently, the realm of sexuality, in particular sexuality among racially and economically marginal groups, has

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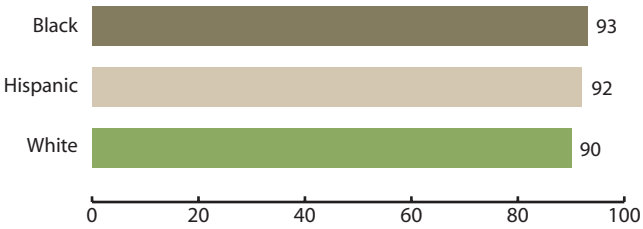
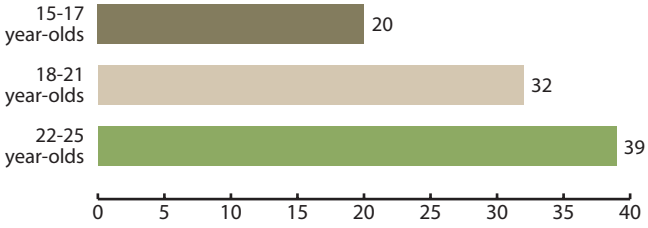
come under the purview of the state, whether it is school boards deciding what constitutes sex education, the Supreme Court deciding if women will have access to reproductive choices including abortion, or national and state governments deciding how much funding, if any, will be devoted to condom distribution in areas devastated by HIV/AIDS. Given the significance of the government in shaping the sexual environment for adolescents and young adults, we decided to directly ask young people what they believed the role of the state should be in the sexual lives and education of young people. Some of the key findings are:

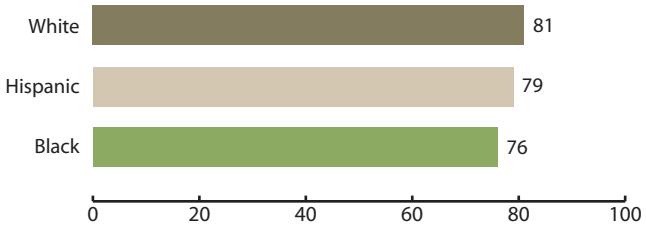
More than 90 percent of young people believe that sex education should be mandatory in high schools. The percentage of youth who believe this are:



The percentage of young people who *strongly* agree that sex education should be mandatory in high schools increases with age. The percentage of those who *strongly agree* are:

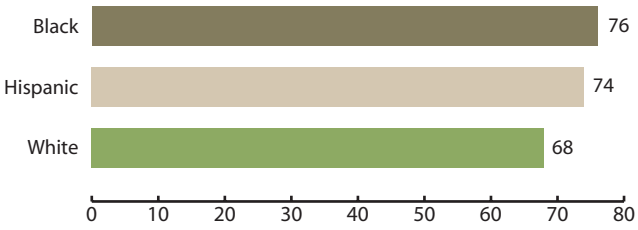


The overwhelming majority of young people disagree that the government should fund only abstinence-only sex-education programs. The percentage of youth who disagree with this policy position are:



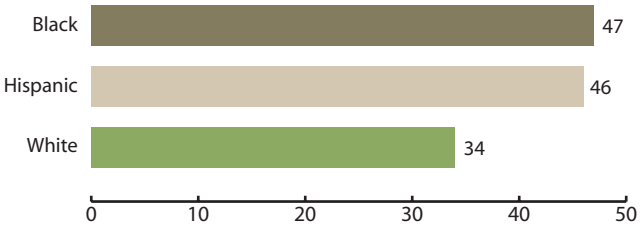
More than 90 percent of young people believe that sex education should be mandatory in high schools.

The majority of young people agree that condoms should be available in high schools. The percentage of youth who agree are:

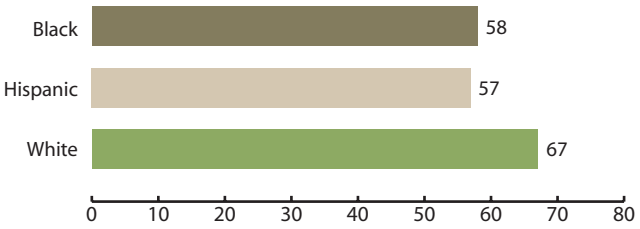


It could be that young Black people strongly support sex education because they fear the consequences of risky or unprotected sex, consequences such as abortion. Nearly

half of Black and Hispanic youth agree that abortion is always wrong. A little more than one-third of White youth agree with that statement. The percentage of youth who agree with that statement are:



Although many Black youth believe that abortion is always wrong, the majority of youth disagree that "the government should make it illegal to get an abortion under any circumstances." The percentage of youth who disagree are:



To be young, gifted and black,
Oh what a lovely precious dream.

— NINA SIMONE AND WELDON IRVINE JR. (1969)

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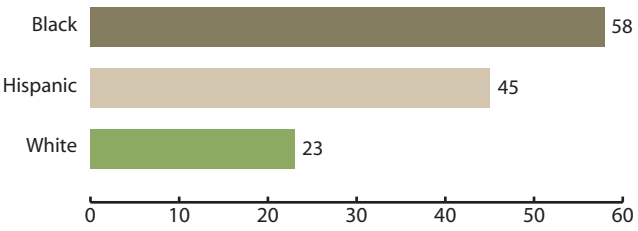
> "In the videos… I dislike the way they objectify women…I think…if you were just to watch music videos and never have met a Black person in your life, you probably would think ill of Black people altogether…White people probably think that Black people don't care about anything but sex and selling drugs and partying all the time. I mean, that's the images you get from rap music videos, pretty much."
>
> *— 17-year-old Black male*

Rap Music and Rap Videos

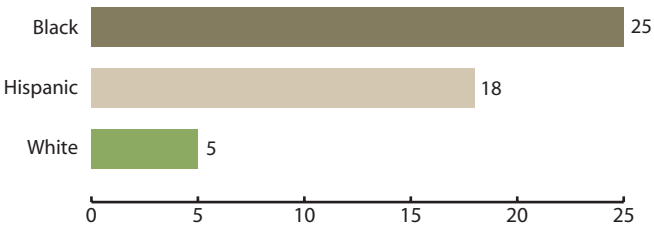
Numerous articles have crowned hip-hop as the defining cultural form in the lives of young people, not only in the United States but also in many different parts of the world. By all reports, hip-hop culture—rap music, graffiti, break dancing, and djing—comprises much of what young Black Americans listen to, watch, talk about, and possibly emulate. And while a substantial literature has emerged detailing the history and current manifestations of hip-hop culture, there also has developed substantial writing and some research warning of the possible negative impact of hip-hop culture on young African Americans, stemming from its focus on and promotion of sex, drugs, crime, misogyny, consumerism, and nihilism. While many "experts" surmise that hip-hop culture, especially rap music, has a negative impact on the sexual decisions of young African Americans, in particular African American girls, there has been limited empirical evidence to back up such claims.[13] The Black Youth Project provides some of the empirical information needed to answer questions about the impact of rap music and rap music videos on the decision-making and behavior of young people, in particular Black youth. Moreover, the data from this project will help us understand not only whether rap music in general has an impact on the attitudes and actions of young Black people, but also what young people, in particular Black youth, think of the images they see in rap videos. Some of the key findings are:

The majority of Black youth say they listen to rap music every day. The percentage of youth that listen to rap music daily are:

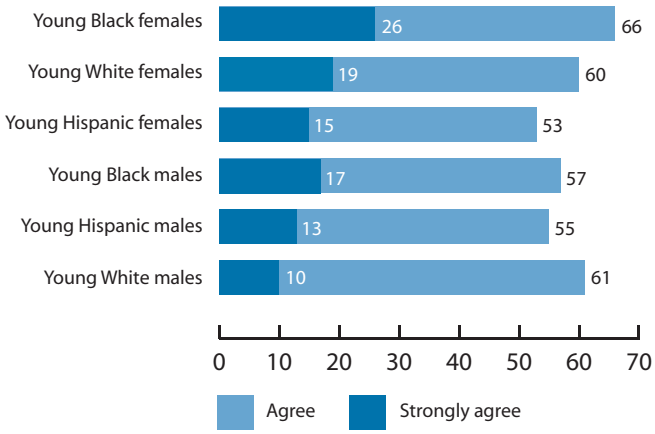


Only 3 percent of Black youth report never listening to rap music, compared to 19 percent of White youth and 12 percent of Hispanic young people.

Five times the percentage of Black young people watch rap music programming on television every day compared to White youth. The percentage of youth that watch daily are:

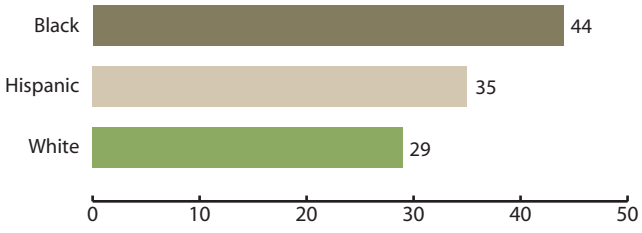


And while young Black Americans are listening to rap music and watching rap music videos, they are also critical of this cultural form. A majority of young people agree with the statement "Rap music videos have too many references to violence." Young women and girls (70 percent) are more likely than young men and boys (59 percent) to agree with the statement.



In general, most young people agree with the statement "Rap music videos portray Black women in bad and offensive ways." However, young Black women and girls are more likely to strongly agree with the statement.

While the majority of young people agree with the statement "Rap music videos portray Black men in bad and offensive ways," nearly a majority of young Black men and boys disagree with the statement. The percentage that disagree with the statement are:



Black Youth Project

> "HIV and AIDS is just a matter of [people] not being educated about the situation and not taking it as seriously as possible. You know, I think, originally, we were taught that [HIV and AIDS] only happens to gay people. And then as the epidemic spread a lot wider, we realized that it happens to everybody. It's just a matter of taking that extra step. And then some people have that idea that it doesn't…sex doesn't feel as good with protection. Or it takes too long. Or they think they don't have it. It just has to be a commitment that you have to have protection every time you have sex."
>
> *—23-year-old Black female*

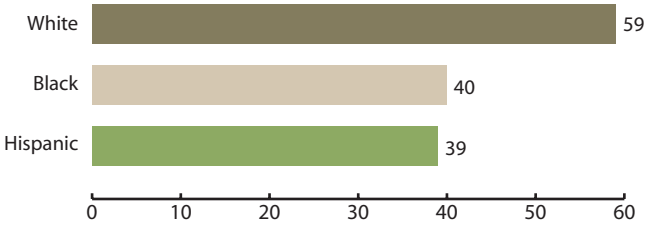
Health

Researchers studying the health of Black Americans and Black youth have produced complicated and empirically grounded models of the health decisions and behaviors of young Black Americans, accounting for biological, individual, and social factors.[14] For example, through the availability of large N studies—those with a large number of respondents—such as the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, the National Health Interview Survey, and the National Survey of Family Growth, researchers now have data that allow them to investigate the prevalence of numerous diseases and health behaviors, exploring also disparities across racial, ethnic, gender, and class groupings.[15]

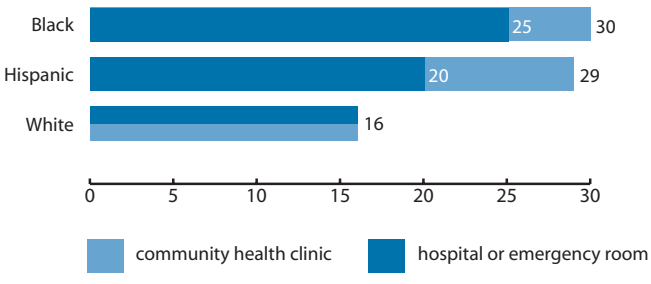
Unfortunately, often missing from work based on large N studies are the voices, opinions, and attitudes of the young people at the center of such investigations. The Black Youth Project addresses some of these shortcomings, by exploring the explanations for the health choices of young Blacks directly from young Black Americans. Through these new data, we are able to generate new theories about Black youth, their conceptions of health, their feelings about the health care system, and their understanding of the impact of health policy on their lives. While researchers have made great strides in accounting for various health outcomes, we have paid little attention to how young people think more broadly about the concept of health. What does being healthy and living healthily mean to young Black Americans? What new factors affect their health decisions and behaviors? And possibly

most importantly, do they perceive race as influencing the health care that they and their communities receive? The data from the Black Youth Project provide new insight into these areas. Some of the key findings are:

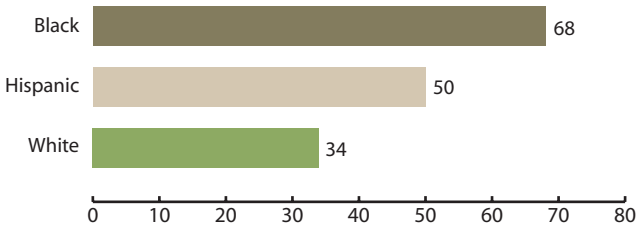
Young people of different races and ethnicities report significant differences in how they access health care. The majority of White youth (59 percent) report receiving medical care from a private doctor, nearly 20 percent more than Black youth. The percentage of youth who report receiving care from a private doctor are:



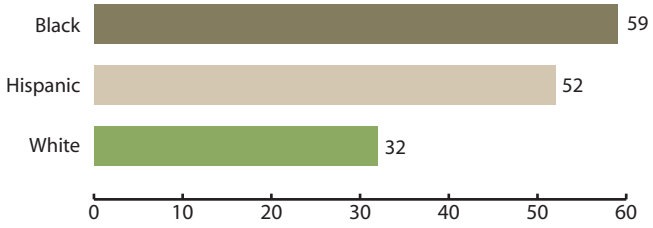
The majority of Black youth receive most of their medical care from a community health clinic or a hospital—or, more specifically, an emergency room. The percentage of youth who report receiving care in these different types of facilities are:



An overwhelming majority of Black youth believe that the government would do more to find a cure for AIDS if more White people had the disease. The percentage of youth who believe this are:



A majority of Black and Hispanic youth believe that Blacks are treated less fairly than Whites in the health care system. The percentage of youth who believe this are:



Black Youth Project

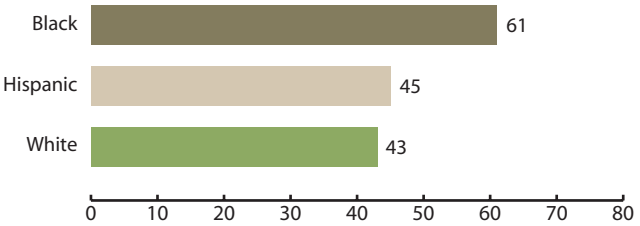
> "I don't think that [racism will be eliminated]…because racism is taught from parent to child, from parent to child. That's something that's carried down. So, it could be [eliminated]. I can hope that it would be. But I don't think that it will be."
>
> *— 18-year-old Black male*

Racial Attitudes

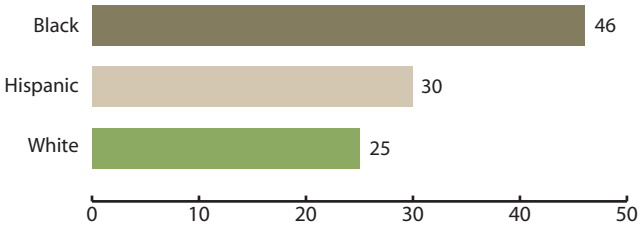
Many of the young Black Americans who comprise the central population of this study have encountered a very different political and racial landscape than the one in which their parents lived. Some of these young people have grown up under the leadership of Black mayors and other public officials. They have not been forced into legally segregated schools, and policies and laws such as affirmative action have been part of the legal currency during their lifetime. It could be argued that never have Black Americans been so politically powerful or experienced such social and economic mobility. Ironically, during this same period, these same young people have also seen, and in far too many cases directly experienced, escalating rates of incarceration, HIV and AIDS, and violence. They continue to live with residential segregation, public-school failure, and racial discrimination. Given the two seemingly conflicting realities of young Black Americans, researchers in the Black Youth Project wanted to explore the racial attitudes of this group. Which message—the one of opportunity in a color-blind society or the one of persistent and systemic discrimination—seems to influence their racial attitudes the most? To find the answer, we asked a battery of questions about the opportunity and discrimination that young Blacks face today. Some of the key findings are:

More than 60 percent of Black youth agree with the statement that "it is hard for young Black people to get ahead because they face so much discrimination." The

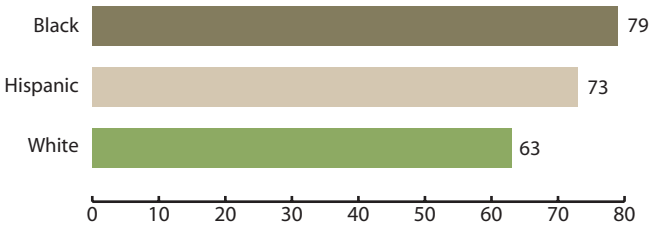
percentage of youth who agree with this statement are:



A near majority of Black youth agree that "sometimes young Black people have to act White to get ahead." The percentage of youth who believe this are:



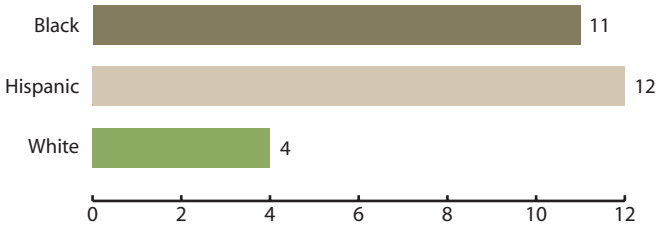
The overwhelming majority of youth believe that on average, the police discriminate much more against Black youth than they do against White youth. The percentage of youth who believe this are:



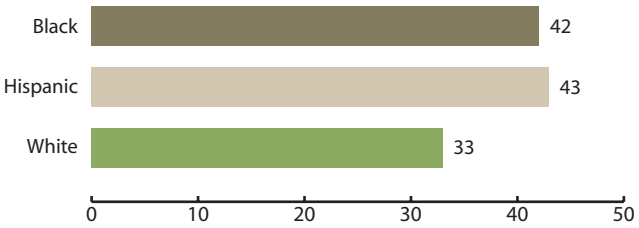
While less than 20 percent of Black youth state that they were very often or often discriminated against because of their race, 48 percent of Black youth report that they were discriminated against rarely or never because of their race.

Very few young people believe that racism will be eliminated during their lifetime.

The percentage of youth who believe that it is very likely that racism will be eliminated during their lifetime are:



The percentage of youth who believe that racism will not be eliminated during their lifetime are:



Please wake me when I'm free / I cannot bear captivity / Where my culture I'm told holds no significance / I'll wither and die in ignorance / But my inner eye can c a race / Who reigned as kings in another place

– TUPAC AMAR SHAKUR, *THE ROSE THAT GREW FROM CONCRETE* [MTV BOOKS/POCKET BOOKS NY 1999]

Black Youth Project

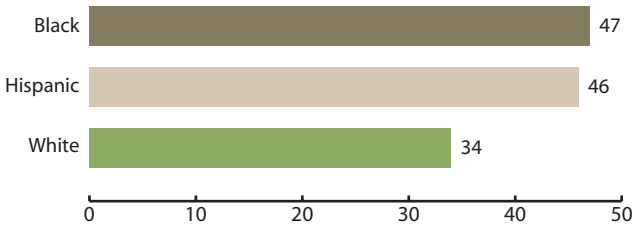
> "Abortion is a very personal issue. I think people should be able to make their own decisions."
>
> *— 19-year-old Black female*

Social Issues

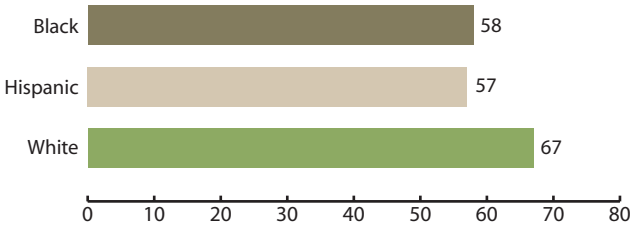
Both popular and academic emphasis on the "deviant" behaviors of Black youth has obscured our understanding of these young people's ideas, attitudes, and opinions. The purpose of this study is to act as a necessary corrective to such tendencies, by highlighting the perspectives of Black youth across a wide range of social and political issues. Yet, insofar as this research centers on and explores the attitudes of young Black people, it also reveals multifaceted, layered, and sometimes puzzling patterns. In the midst of such complexity, it is tempting to try to identify some unified and consistent viewpoint that can make sense of the apparent contradictions observed. However, doing so may be counterproductive because the paradoxes that we observe in the attitudes of Black youth, some of which may be cause for concern, are precisely what help us to locate the sites for deeper engagement, activism, and advocacy. Opinions in the realm of social attitudes are particularly relevant to this line of thinking. Two prominent examples have to do with abortion and homosexuality, and some key findings are:

ABORTION

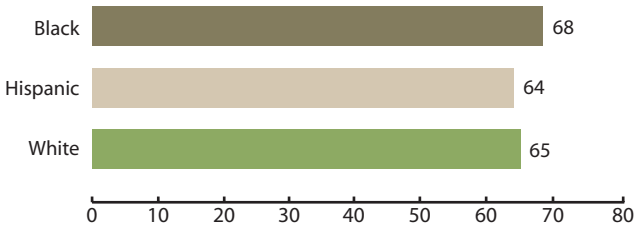
Black and Hispanic youth are most likely to agree that abortion is always wrong. The percentage of youth who agree are:



Yet, despite the fact that nearly half of Black youth agree that abortion is always wrong, 58 percent think it would be wrong for the government to make it illegal to get an abortion under any circumstances. The percentage of youth who believe this are:

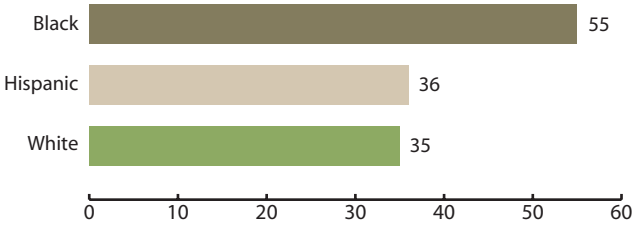


Young people have complicated ideas about issues such as abortion. For example, while they believe that generally the government should not be involved in a woman's decision about abortion, two-thirds of all youth disagree that "abortion should be available to teenagers without the permission of their parents." The percentage of youth who disagree are:



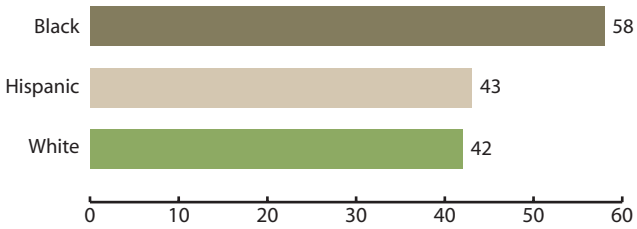
HOMOSEXUALITY AND SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

The majority of Black youth believe that homosexuality is always wrong. This was especially true of males. The percentage of youth who believe this are:



- 48 percent of all males surveyed
- 29 percent of all females surveyed

The majority of Black youth disagree with the statement that "the government should make it legal for same-sex couples to get married." The percentage of youth who disagree with this statement are:



At first glance, these findings may seem perplexing. Many young Black people think abortion is always wrong yet also believe that it is wrong for the government to make it illegal. One 19-year-old woman whom we interviewed in-depth expressed what appears to be a widespread orientation toward abortion among Black youth, saying, "Abortion is a very personal issue. I think people should be able to make their own decisions." Thus, right

or wrong, Black youth do not perceive abortion as a decision for the government to make. Yet, lest we believe that we have a handle on the social viewpoints of Black youth, their perspectives toward homosexuality and same-sex marriage seem to defy the "personal issue" approach observed in the abortion example. Like abortion, many (in fact, even more) young Black people believe that homosexuality is always wrong. Yet, unlike abortion, the majority of Black youth do not believe that this is a "personal issue"; instead, many consider it an arena in which government intervention is warranted. What can explain the reluctance of Black youth to extend the logic they use to resist government intrusion in the arena of abortion to other realms such as same-sex marriage?

While there are no easy answers, these findings may suggest that the messages Black youth receive about gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people are more strident and condemning than those articulated about the decision to have an abortion. While it is not uncommon for those who oppose gay rights to make an argument about the inherent immorality of homosexuals, rarely does one hear the claim that women who have abortions are inherently bad or evil. Thus, for many Black youth, abortion may be conceptualized as a decision, while homosexuality is understood as part of one's fundamental constitution. This latter perspective may then justify their support for state intervention to bar gay men and lesbians from marrying their same-sex partners.

Whatever the logic of the majority of young Black people regarding issues of homosexuality and same-sex marriage, it suggests that activists, advocates, groups, and organizations concerned with the social and political well being of African American gay and lesbian people, and gay and lesbian people in general, may need to make explicit and direct efforts to engage young Black people. The choice of which communities and venues to work in, where to direct organizational resources, and how to forge alliances may have to be made with an eye toward connecting with Black youth.

"God is the most important thing…I think believing [in God] affects how I interact with other people, how I treat other people, how I conduct myself as a person. It affects who I give credit to, you know? It affects everything. A lot of Black people, in general, have a Christian culture…most people grew up in a home with a Christian grandmother, or at least a religious or spiritual grandmother who taught you…that God comes first. And so religion plays a bigger part in most Black people's homes. Even the ones out…on the street, when they get in trouble they call on God. They don't call on anybody else. So I think, yeah…God is very important."

— 23-year-old Black female

Religion

Activists and scholars have often focused on Black religious institutions to understand and explain the political, social, and cultural behavior of African Americans.[16] This attention stems undoubtedly from the recognition that Black religious institutions have served repeatedly as the glue and mortar of Black communities. If any activity was expected to touch every segment of the group, it was assumed that such efforts would be based in Black religious institutions. The work of scholars ranging from Gunnar Myrdal to Aldon Morris to Lincoln and Mamiya provides multiple examples of the role that religious institutions have played in struggles for the liberation and rights of African Americans. It was Black religious institutions that imparted political information, molded community norms and values, and helped build social networks. And while African American religious institutions are possibly the most significant institution in Black communities, some raise the question of whether their role as social regulator and political mobilizer has waned in recent years.

The significance of African American religious institutions to the lives of young Black people cannot be denied. For example, numerous studies have detailed with various degrees of rigor the significant role that religious institutions play in influencing not only the sexual behavior and attitudes of young African Americans, but also their levels of stress, psychological problems, and what some deem their involvement in deviant behavior (Cook 2000; Johnson 2000; Whitaker 2000). It seems clear

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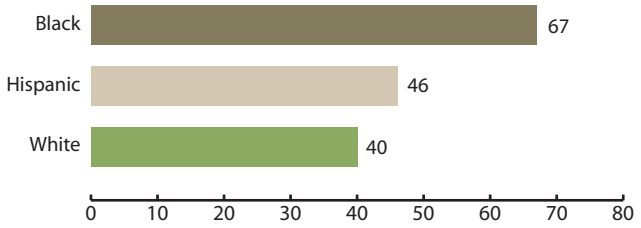
from this literature that involvement in religious activity and attendance at religious services (religiosity) provide young people with structured alternatives to seemingly less productive behavior.

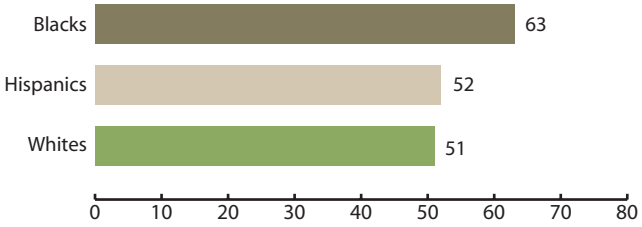
However, while religious institutions often serve as an important resource for young African Americans, there are limits to the sexual behaviors and lifestyle choices that religious leaders will regularly endorse or acknowledge. For example, Coyne and Schoenback, using a convenience sample of clergy from African American churches, find that 76 percent of respondents had discussed issues such as drugs, violence, HIV/AIDS, pregnancy, and alcohol in church.[17] Not surprising, however, was the additional finding that nearly one-third (30 percent) of the same clergy indicated that they excluded subjects such as anal sex, bisexuality, homosexuality, masturbation, and oral sex from those discussions, with only 6 percent of clergy indicating they would make condoms available in their churches.

These initial data from the Black Youth Project explore the degree of religiosity among young Black Americans. Future analyses will examine the extent or degree of influence that religious institutions have on the social and sexual behaviors and attitudes of young African Americans. Some key findings from the Black Youth Project are:

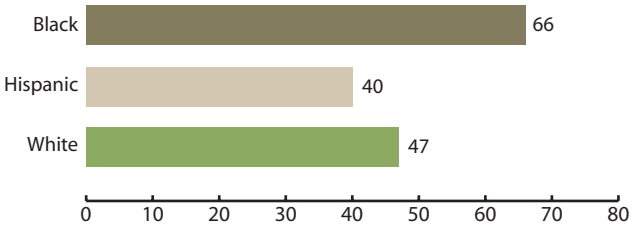
Black youth are significantly more likely than Hispanics and Whites to say that religion is "very important" in their lives. The percentage of youth who agree that religion is "very important" in their lives are:



Black youth report attending religious services more often than Whites and Hispanics. The percentage of youth who attend religious services at least once or twice a month are:



Black youth are much more likely to engage in religious activities outside of their place of worship (i.e., praying at home, reading scripture outside of church, etc.). The percentage of youth who engage in such activities are:



"I don't think [men and women] should have different roles or tasks; they should be able to do both jobs completely and thoroughly, so that way there's never any dependency. Because then it changes the foundation of the relationship [from] being a loving relationship to a relationship that 'I need you here because without you, I couldn't [survive].'"

— 24-year-old Black woman

Gender Roles and Discrimination

The political and lived experiences of African American youth are unmistakably and significantly shaped by dominant public discourses surrounding gender and sexuality in Black communities. From welfare policies and reproductive rights to crime and punishment codes, family structure as well as attitudes toward child care and employment among African Americans too often are deemed cultural pathologies and are increasingly viewed as heavy burdens on the U.S. government and society. The Black Youth Project research team believes that the views of young people of color are critical to, yet currently missing from, discussions of gender roles, discrimination against women, and discrimination against lesbians and gay men both in the country as a whole and in their own racial and ethnic communities.

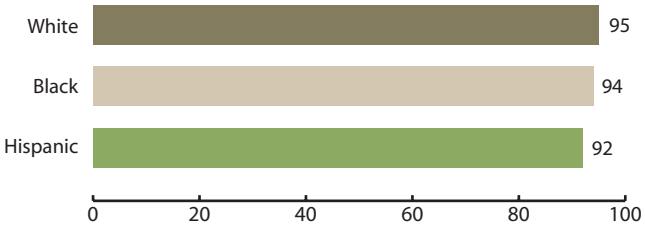
Unfortunately, previous and often outdated research on attitudes concerning gender and sexuality among African Americans is extremely limited. For one thing, few studies have attended specifically to Black youth. But whether focused on younger or older age groups, the majority of research in this area is inadequate on several key counts. Perhaps most problematically, researchers seem to be inattentive to the growing body of research that demonstrates the need to view social identities as simultaneous, multidimensional, and "intersecting." Many studies treat race and gender as though they act discretely to structure the social and political lives of people of color. Moreover, most research concerned with gender roles and discrimination neglects to consider discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Black Youth Project

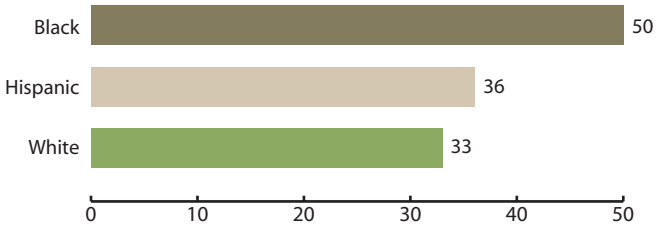
The Black Youth Project addresses these limitations. Because we want to hear what Black youth think about gender roles and multiple forms of discrimination, we asked them directly. Throughout our analysis, we take an intersectional approach to understanding the attitudes and behaviors of young people in Black communities concerning race, class, gender, and sexuality. Some key findings are:

> The political and lived experiences of African American youth are unmistakably and significantly shaped by dominant public discourses surrounding gender and sexuality in Black communities.

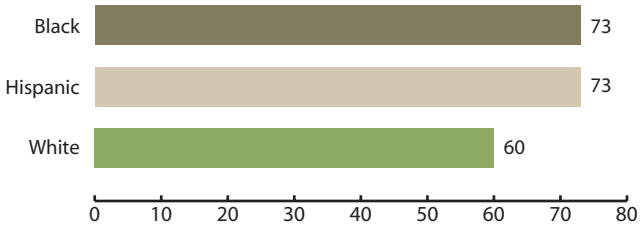
There was nearly uniform agreement among young people that "men and women should share equally in child care and housework." The percentage of youth who agree with that statement are:

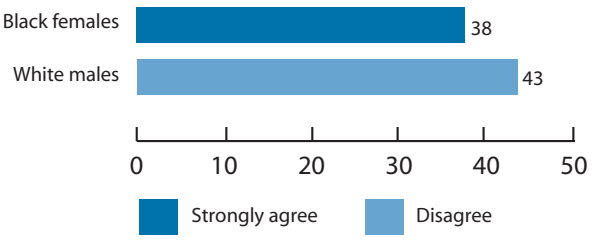


Yet, both male and female Black youth across age groups were much more likely to believe that "it is better if a man is the main financial supporter of his family." The percentage agreeing with that statement are:



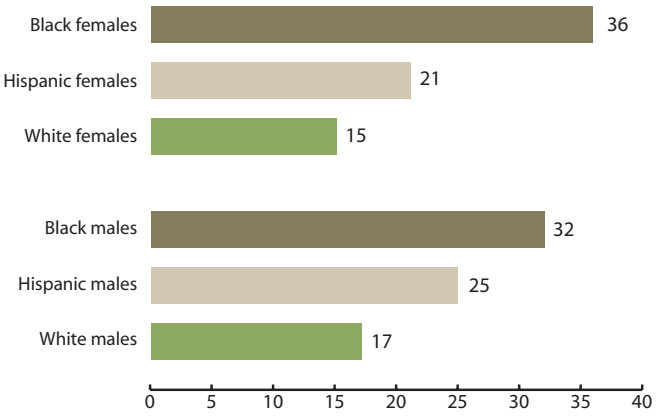
While the majority of youth agree that "a single mother can bring up her child as well as a married couple," Black and Hispanic youth were more likely to agree with that statement. Black females most intensely agreed, while White males were most likely to disagree. The percentage who agree with that statement are:



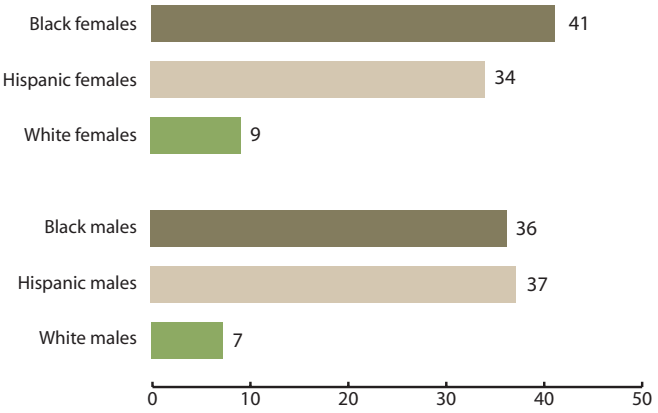


Black youth, both males and females, are much more likely than White males and females to believe there is a

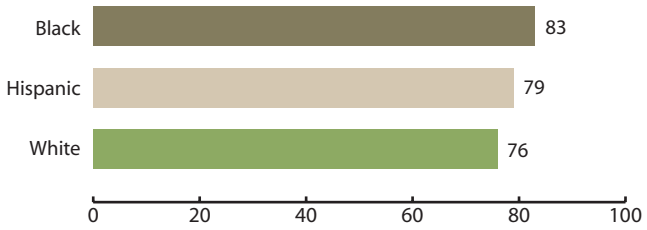
lot of discrimination against women in this country. The percentage of youth who believe this are:



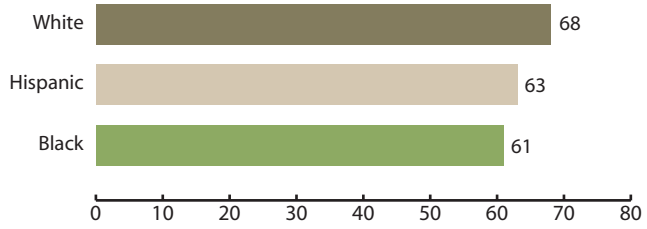
Black and Hispanic youth are more likely to believe that women in their community face a lot of discrimination. The percentage of youth who believe this about women in their community are:



The overwhelming majority of young people believe that there is a lot of discrimination against lesbians and gay men in this country. The percentage of youth who believe this are:



A strong majority of young people believe that in their racial or ethnic community, lesbians and gay men face a lot of discrimination. The percentage of youth who believe this are:



I no longer search for people I want to be, I decided to become her.

— JESSICA CARE MOORE

Black Youth Project

> "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."
>
> — W. E. B. DuBois,
> *The Souls of Black Folk,* 1903

Conclusion

The data gathered through the Black Youth Project provide an important and empirically grounded glimpse into the complicated and at times conflicted thinking of young Black Americans. The young people whose voices and opinions comprise this study are clearly aware of the larger political, social, and economic realities that they and their peers face. They are able to point to the discrepancies in the opportunities that White youth are presented with and the economic, social, and political challenges that they face as Black youth. These young people experience life at the intersection of multiple regulating systems and, when asked, are able to articulate an intersectional analysis that explains their complicated lives. So at the same time that young Black Americans detail the larger discriminatory context that surrounds and influences their lives and decision-making, they are also willing to discuss and highlight the personal responsibility that individuals have in terms of bettering their lives and their communities.

Far from ranting about their failures and engaging in the blame game, these young people provide a complex and balanced analysis of the intersection of opportunity and will in their lives. Black youth are searching for answers and opportunities. They are trying to make sense of the two worlds they inhabit—one that proclaims to be a color-blind society and the other still rooted in racism and a racial hierarchy. Given this existence of double-consciousness that W. E. B. DuBois noted in Black Americans more than a century ago, it is not surprising that Black youth agree both that "it is hard

for young Black people to get ahead because they face so much discrimination" and that "too many young Black people have the wrong morals about important things like sex and work."[18] Such findings underscore the need for researchers to make the time and effort to map the complicated thinking of this group. If we take the time to listen to young Black Americans, they are willing to reveal the challenges they face and the strategies they deploy, not just for survival but with the hope of securing joy, pleasure, and progress in their lives and for the country.

I have come to believe over and over again, that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood.

– AUDRE LORDE

You need to get out your house, get off your block, and see somethin / Go do somethin, go CHANGE somethin, or else we fall for nothing / You need to, travel the world / And when you come back, tell your girl and your girl and your girl… / and your man and your man and your man… you understand? So spread the word

– JEAN GRAE, "BLOCK PARTY"

Black Youth Project

Researchers and Personnel of the Black Youth Project

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

Cathy J. Cohen
Professor, Department of Political Science

Cathy J. Cohen is Professor of Political Science and former Director of the Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture at the University of Chicago. She is the author of *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (University of Chicago Press, 1999) and co-editor with Kathleen Jones and Joan Tronto of *Women Transforming Politics: An Alternative Reader* (New York University Press, 1997). Cohen currently serves as co-editor with Frederick Harris of a book series from Oxford University Press entitled *Transgressing Boundaries: Studies in Black Politics and Black Communities*.

Cohen's general field of specialization is American politics, although her research interests include African American politics, lesbian and gay politics, and social movements. Her work has been published in numerous journals and edited volumes including the *American Political Science Review*, *GLQ*, *NOMOS*, and *Social Text*. She also has received numerous grants and awards including a recent Robert Wood Johnson Investigator's Award and a Ford Foundation research grant for her work on Black youth.

PROJECT MANAGER

Rolisa Tutwyler
Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture

GRADUATE RESEARCHERS

Paula Nicole Booke
Department of Political Science

Jamila Celestine-Michener
Department of Political Science

Andrew Dilts
Department of Political Science

Tanji Gilliam
History of Culture

Marissa Guerrero
Department of Political Science

Crystal Holmes
Department of Political Science

Mosi Ifatunji
Department of Sociology, University of Illinois, Chicago

Ainsley LeSure
Department of Political Science

Tehama Lopez
Department of Political Science

Julie Lee Merseth
Department of Political Science

Charles Miniger
School of Social Service Administration

Laurence Ralph
Department of Anthropology

Michael Ralph
Department of Anthropology

Scott Roberts
Department of Political Science

Deva Woodly
Department of Political Science

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCHERS

Alexandra Bell

Jamie Bharath

Aron Cobbs

Justin Hill

Jerusalem Melke

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Ford Foundation
(Headquarters)
320 E. 43rd Street
New York, NY 10017
telephone: 212-573-5000
fax: 212-351-3677

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
P.O. Box 2316
College Road East and Route 1
Princeton, NJ 08543
888-631-9989

Division of the Social Sciences, University of Chicago
1126 E. 59th Street
Chicago, IL 60637
773-702-8799

Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture, University of Chicago
5733 S. University Avenue
Chicago, IL 60637
773-702-8063

NORC: A National Organization for Research at the University of Chicago
1155 E. 60th Street
Chicago, IL 60637
773-256-6000

Footnotes

[1] U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2006 Annual Social and Economic Supplement, Detailed Poverty Tables, Table 5, at http://pubdb3.census.gov/macro/032006/pov/toc.htm.

[2] U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2005 Annual Social and Economic Supplement.

[3] United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Employment Status of Civilian Population by Race, Sex, and Age." Table A-2, http://www.bls.gov/new.release/empsit.t02.htm.

[4] U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. *Prisoners in 2003*, Bulletin NCJ 205335 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, November 2004), p. 9, Table 12.

[5] U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. "Homicide Trends in the United States: Age, Gender and Race Trends," http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/tables/proportiontab.htm.

[6] Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics Online: http://www.albany.edu/sourcebook/pdf/t4102004.pdf, Table 4.10.2004.

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