

# *Engaging with Black fathers in the youth justice system*

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# ENGAGING WITH BLACK FATHERS IN THE YOUTH JUSTICE SYSTEM

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In his 2017 review of the criminal justice system in England and Wales, MP David Lammy stressed the importance of system engagement with the parents of global majority children. In 2020, the Ministry of Justice published a review of the progress of the youth justice system in meeting Lammy's challenge (Youth Justice Policy Unit, 2020). Stakeholders participating in the review described much of the engagement with families of global majority children as 'tokenistic,' and said that more work needed to be done to meet the needs of parents in the system. The reviewers concluded that youth justice services should offer suitable and appropriate support and interventions to address the over-representation of minoritized ethnic groups in the system.

The child welfare and youth justice systems have faced scrutiny for their roles in separating children and families; this has long-term consequences for children's well-being. These harms have powerful consequences for global majority children—especially impoverished Black children and their families, who are disproportionately overrepresented in these systems (Cénat et al., 2021, Webb et al., 2020, Hunter, 2022).

However, one area where these issues remain challenging is in engaging with fathers of children in the child welfare and youth justice systems (Harty and Banman, 2023). Children whose fathers are not engaged in their lives face poor long-term outcomes (Coakley, 2013). Black fathers in particular – particularly non-resident Black fathers— receive the lowest level of engagement amongst child welfare and youth justice practitioners (Gupta and Featherstone, 2016). A recent U.S. study (Arroyo et al., 2019) found that child welfare agencies were less likely to identify, engage, and locate Black fathers, relative to white fathers.



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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, we will use the term 'global majority' as a term which encompasses Black, Asian, African, dual heritage, and indigenous to the Global South as opposed to BAME or 'ethnic minority' in order to recognise that these groups constitute a majority of the global population.

There are several reasons why engagement with fathers, and in particular Black fathers, is challenging. One of those reasons is the role that stigma plays in shaping frontline worker assumptions about Black men (Gupta and Featherstone, 2016). In public discourse, 'absent Black fathers' are often identified as criminogenic (Cooper et al., 2021). Yet, the often-negative assumptions about Black men have powerful consequences for their long-term life outcomes, from health and well-being to the likelihood of incarceration. Scholars have challenged the narrative of the absent Black father by pointing to the various ways that Black men engage in caretaking and support which are not often recognized in mainstream research and media coverage, although recent shows like ITV's *Black Boys Can Cry* offer counter-narratives.

Indeed, data indicates that fathers are engaged with their children and that lone parent Black families are the exception rather than the norm. In 2021, the Office of National Statistics data identifies that in families with dependent children, 80% of children are raised by two parents. Lone mothers make up 18% of the families with dependent children (although it is important to note that being a lone mother does not mean that the child or children do not have access to their father or to the paternal family). 18% of Black family households in the UK are made up of a lone parent. A report by the US-based Centre for Disease Control (Jones and Mosher, 2013) states that Black fathers – even those who do not live with their children – are more actively involved in their children's lives than male parents of other races.

Another area which contributes to the challenges facing workers in engaging with Black fathers is the use of mandatory risk assessment instruments. Risk assessment plays a role in

determining removal and sentencing and in identifying preventative programmes. However, some researchers have argued that risk has become a proxy for race, and that risk assessment tools can amplify some of the existing problems of racial disproportionality in the child welfare and youth justice systems (Font et al., 2012, Harcourt, 2010). Given the intersection between experience of arrest and race and other systems of disadvantage, it may be possible that Black fathers have disproportionately experienced contact with the justice system, for example. The extent to which this may then impact on a worker's decision to engage with those fathers is an open question.

## The Unheard Gender Workshop

In response to the Ministry of Justice review and their own experiences in the field, two global majority youth justice restorative practitioners (Doherty and Walker, authors of this article) formed an ad hoc professionals group focused on fatherhood in the youth justice system in June 2022. The group was made up of practitioners from local London authorities who came together to discuss their experiences and strategies for facilitating systemic change. The members of the group were Black men and women who reflected on their own practices in the context of their identities as Black workers, but also, at times, as Black parents.

The Father's Group identified a recurring theme of fathers not being contacted, consulted or included in the assessment process by youth justice workers. Discussions in the group identified that this occurred across services and hypothesised that this may be related to how fathers are perceived.

A consultant to the group (Doherty) suggested that a workshop could be developed to assist services and enable them to critically assess their engagement with fathers. The Unheard Gender workshop was subsequently developed to explore institutionalised marginalisation of fathers, focusing on how youth justice and children's services engage with Black fathers.

In children's services, men are arguably the 'unheard gender'. Family and social work practices and research predominantly focuses on fathers in terms of their function in the family, with limited consideration of their roles, needs, thoughts, feelings and experiences. In addition to developing the workshop, the group worked with Dr. Alexandra Cox to develop a plan for conducting an evaluation of the research and its effects on system practices. They collectively developed a survey aimed at assessing worker perspectives on engaging fathers. The survey has a mix of several questions which assess the level of practitioner engagement with fathers, and in particular, Black fathers, using a Likert scale. It also has questions which inquire about the barriers and challenges in engaging with Black fathers. To date, over 190 workers have been surveyed and three workshops have been conducted for child welfare and youth justice workers in London councils, and over 30 workers have participated in a survey conducted immediately after two workshops. Dr. Cox conducted participant observation at both workshops and Mr. Doherty has conducted a focus group with a group of Black fathers whose children are in the youth justice system. This article focuses on some early findings from this research.

## Findings

### Barriers to Engagement

The survey and subsequent workshops revealed that there are several key barriers which shape worker engagement with fathers, and Black fathers in particular. Some of those barriers stem from the life histories and experiences of the workers, who shared negative experiences of parenting and being parented by and with Black fathers, which may shape their judgements of the fathers they work with and their subsequent reluctance to engage with Black fathers in practice.

Workers also frequently reported that they would often only contact mothers or female caregivers because those mothers were the primary caregivers of a young person, or the primary gatekeeper to the young person. In the context of very heavy caseloads, workers feel that the additional work required to contact fathers or male caregivers was not possible. Over the course of the workshops, some workers reflected on their own biases about women as primary caregivers which may have also shaped their decisions to contact only those women.

### High Levels of Interest in Engagement, but Low Levels of Actual Engagement

The pre-workshop surveys demonstrated that practitioners identified themselves as being confident in their knowledge of the role of Black fathers and fatherhood in children's lives; however, this confidence is not being translated into practice.



The survey has consistently identified low levels of engagement with fathers and even lower levels of reflection of the role of Black fathers in their children's lives. Given the high confidence levels, it would be reasonable to expect that fatherhood was high on the agenda and that innovative, progressive processes and lines of enquiry were being developed; that practitioners would be regularly discussing and engaging with fathers. However less than a third of Black fathers were consulted during the statutory assessment process in one council that is under study.

We also expected that given the number of services whose policies relate to Black families, e.g. disproportionate numbers of Black children entering the criminal justice system and high numbers of Black children entering the care system, that fatherhood would be a thematic line of enquiry for the services. The survey identified that fatherhood was rarely discussed or prioritised in team meetings.

Despite this mismatch between knowledge and action, when workers were asked for ways in which they could better engage fathers, the responses were practical and achievable. Most responders were able to come up with at least one suggestion and admitted to not spending enough time engaging fathers or exploring how fathers were being positioned by services. The survey participants also identified the multiple barriers, societal, cultural and economic, which got in the way of their own understandings of Black fathers.

## **Father's Voices**

One of the key aspects of the workshop has been holding sessions with fathers who are currently being statutorily or voluntarily supported by Children's Services. We have interviewed 14 fathers to date and have identified a number of common themes in our data. Fathers felt pre-judged based on dominant narratives of disengaged or uninvolved fathers. They reported that they were under consulted, and in most cases had not been asked to contribute to family assessments. Those messages were relayed through their partners, rather than directly to them, and this led to a lack of clarity, mistrust and a sense that their input was not valued. The lack of diversity in the workforce was also a common theme, particularly the low numbers of men. At initial contact with services, there was a real disconnect with all fathers saying that the workers did not appear to see them as individuals and that historic misdemeanours that they had committed were often presented as if they were current. This added to the feeling that fathers were not being seen as capable of raising their children: fathers said that they constantly felt they had to prove themselves to practitioners and were only seen as perpetrators even when they were the lead carer or victim of domestic violence.

## **Risk Management**

Another key theme was the issue of risk when engaging black fathers particularly where there had been domestic violence issues.

Practitioners on the workshop, expressed concerns that engagement where there had been concerns regarding abuse or violence increased their sense of being unsafe or at risk of harm from the fathers they're working with, despite the lack of evidence to support that the risk of harm is more likely when engaging black fathers. There were indicators that negative narratives were not being challenged or discussed in reflective practice sessions. It would seem that standard practice is to abstain from engaging with or discussing fathers. In turn, this raises serious questions about how erroneous and negative narratives on fathers are challenged and how this lack of engagement is perceived experienced by Black fathers.

## Recommendations

Practitioners should be encouraged to explore issues of parenting as they intersect with race and racism. For example, parents might be exposed to negative experiences of the stop and search of their children, which might be useful to explore in initial assessments. Team leaders - supported by system leaders - should provide opportunities for practitioners to discuss dominant narratives about Black men and Black fathers encourage them to reflect on the impact these narratives may have on their practice. These opportunities should be supported and embedded throughout supervisory practices, quality assurance, and other methods of feedback and supervision.

Systemic practice is an approach to working with families that locates them in a broader social context, understands and validates the importance of the constellation of relationships in a family, and appreciates the ways that fathers are situated in families and the broader perceptions of Black fathers in the social

world. Our research indicates that those teams which have been exposed to this practice are more likely to be able to engage in uncomfortable conversations and challenge of their practice and are less likely to take defensive positions that limit or restrict change. The Youth Justice Board could play a role in encouraging all youth offending teams to receive some training in systemic practice.

Our early research also indicates that more needs to be done to understand the impact of low practitioner engagement with Black fathers on youth offending teams. One way this can be achieved is by adapting data systems to include the collection of data on fathers. e.g. by asking specific questions on father's involvement with their children and recording father's information in initial assessments. For example, the Asset Plus assessment tool can be modified to ask workers to engage with the perspectives of any and all caregivers and providers. Teams can also ensure that effective quality assurance involves checking to see whether sufficient outreach has been done to all available caregivers.

Supervision templates to be reviewed and - where needed - adjusted to invite curiosity from practitioners about how and whether they conduct outreach to Black fathers and ask specific questions on engagement with fathers.

Taken together, these recommendations will enable youth offending services to ensure that they are fully responding to the findings of the Lammy review and the Ministry of Justice's Youth Policy Unit's call to more fully engage with the families of global majority children. This will have a substantive impact on how practitioners engage and support Black fathers and their children.



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