

Youths and Violence: Changing the Narrative

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The care and protection of children and youths is widely understood to be the responsibility of adults, communities, and society. The importance of safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments to support children as they grow into healthy adults enjoying meaningful lives has been well documented.¹ Yet, this is not the world that exists for all children, especially those at increased risk of experiencing violence.² Why is this? If children deserve better, why do inequities in risk for violence persist? What accounts for the limited progress on their behalf?³

Story telling is a strategy used in public health to communicate about the lives of people and communities. The term “narrative” is often used interchangeably with “storytelling,” but although these terms are related, “narrative” refers more precisely to connected stories that are articulated and refined over time to advance a central idea or belief. Public narratives are meta-stories that provide an understanding or interpretation of people and situations; dominant public narratives are those that eclipse others and have the most power to shape public consciousness, including society’s collective senses of both responsibility

and possibility.⁴ Words matter, but narrative is about more than words. Narrative is about the ideas that get communicated through language, images, culture, and media. Understanding how narratives operate is critical to violence prevention efforts.⁵

DOMINANT NARRATIVES AROUND BLACK YOUTHS AND VIOLENCE

A dominant narrative in the United States considers violence primarily a problem of personal responsibility.⁵ In terms of youth violence, this results in dominant narratives that conjure images of youth as aggressors, troublemakers, or predators, concealing that youth are children with still-developing brains, some of whom have been adversely impacted by extensive or prolonged stress.¹ Another dominant narrative holds that violent crimes are mostly caused by young Black men living in poor urban neighborhoods, often involved with drugs, guns, and gangs.⁶ Studies of race and crime in media have found that local television news programs often overrepresent Blacks as criminal suspects.⁷ For example, Blacks

are often overrepresented and Whites underrepresented as perpetrators of crime in comparison with arrest records, and Blacks are also less likely to be shown as victims of crime than are Whites.⁸ These stories reinforce negative images of Black youths as dangerous, do not recognize them as developing human beings, and rarely explore the structural causes of violence.⁶

These stories are nested within explanations, often implicit, that attribute violence experienced by youths of color to genetics, bad parenting, or a communal culture of violence.⁹ The practice of pathologizing Black people is longstanding.¹⁰ When uninterrogated, narratives that pathologize the behavior of Black youths allow adults to hold them at a distance, minimizing their humanity.^{6,10} When not confronted, these narratives create a chasm between adults and youths at greatest risk for experiencing violence.⁶

These narratives also influence perceptions and actions in ways that mask recognition of the racial stratification that is woven into the social fabric, disadvantaging some groups while advantaging others.¹¹ Closer scrutiny of how harmful narratives operate would strengthen efforts to examine structural racism and its roots in laws, policies, and practices. Many researchers and practitioners now understand such scrutiny as essential to eliminating health inequities and improving population health.¹¹ However, traditional public health efforts rarely address the harmful impacts of these narratives on Black and Brown communities, including how these narratives contribute to the disproportionate burden of poverty, racially redlined neighborhoods, underresourced schools, abuse and deaths resulting from lethal force by law enforcement,

and incarceration.¹¹ Also unexamined are questions surrounding what it means to be a member of a racial group in a society in which some lives are valued more than others.¹² Race may be a social construct with no biological basis,¹² but acknowledged or not, it is also a lived experience for people of all races based on differences in status and power.¹² Such differences are exemplified in documented historical and contemporary accounts of stigmatization and exploitation of Black people, and are grounded in the belief that Blacks have less intrinsic worth.¹² The oppression experienced by Blacks is often explained away as class oppression.¹² Understanding how these narratives intersect with class is important, but violence cannot be prevented solely by addressing income and wealth inequities.¹³

Some researchers and practitioners have pointed out that adults often expect Black youths to learn to navigate the impacts of structural racism rather than support systemic change within institutions and communities to address structural racism and its consequences.⁵ Seeing the impacts of harmful narratives on the lives of Black youths exposes the limits of holding them, but not adults, accountable for preventing the violence in their lives.⁵ However, once these impacts are seen, communities and society can decide what to do based on shared values. Public narratives are constructed by people and can be changed by people. Exposing harmful narratives and lifting up new narratives that value all youths—no matter their race, income, gender, sexual identity, zip code, or religion—is an important step toward increasing understanding of what is needed for healthy adolescent development.^{4,14}

NEW NARRATIVES OF YOUTHS AND HEALTHY RACIAL IDENTITY

The brain architecture that affects reasoning skills and impulse control is actively developing through the mid-20s.¹⁴ Making mistakes is a normal part of adolescent development; it is important for youths to be able to learn as they grow without experiencing consequences such as racial inequities in school suspension or expulsion that can derail their lives.¹⁴ Black youths' development of their identity is constrained by expectations of conformity to societal standards that repeatedly signal that Black is deviant.¹² For example, educational systems play a vital role in adolescent development, yet most confine Black history to one month per year and teach origin stories that begin with slavery and powerlessness rather than millennia of rich ancestral cultures and accomplishments.¹⁵ Black youths are not blind to narrative representations and expectations about who they are and who they can be in the world.¹² Violence prevention efforts focused on enhancing individual resiliency and conflict resolution skills are necessary, but not sufficient.¹⁶ Given the many challenges Black youths face, there is an opportunity for positive narratives that address the personal, cultural, socio-political, and spiritual aspects of becoming a healthy Black youths and that can support the development of critical and collective consciousness and the promotion of equity.¹⁶ An example of this approach is the Pride, Peace, Prevention campaign, implemented by the Louisville Youth Violence Prevention Research Center (YVPRC) and supported through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Violence Prevention Research Centers. This

campaign addresses histories and narratives informing youth and community development to build skills and power to create a different future (<https://bit.ly/2yTFqgf>). As expressed by Gabe, a YVPRC youth ambassador, "When you learn about your history, you feel proud about your history, and then you're going to see other people who look like you and you're going to say 'Both of us should be proud of who we are'" (<https://bit.ly/2y4d0jk>). Ultimately, it is important to strive for the development of healthy identities for all youths and to address harmful historical and contemporary narratives that have long defined racial and ethnic groups in US society.¹⁷ Healthy racial identity and consciousness are important for all racial and ethnic groups.¹⁸

Narrative change is an important public health strategy for building support to create the conditions in which all youths can thrive. Bridging science, arts, and the media, public health practitioners, political leaders, and communities can develop new narratives with education, justice, and other sectors to create substantive, sustained change based on the values of human rights and social justice. New narratives in workplaces, communities, and homes across the United States can also have an impact on ideas surrounding race and violence that come alive in daily conversations and shared experiences.¹⁹ Adults, communities, and society can all commit to unmasking harmful narratives and lifting up new narratives that reflect the value and connectedness of all people. Starting points for these inquiries and conversations may vary, and things may not go quite right the first time or the second—narrative is an iterative, continuous learning process. However, undertaking efforts to change the

narrative can help ensure that all children, youths, and families have access to safe and healthy living conditions and the opportunity to fully participate as engaged and valued members of society. *AJPH*

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