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Race, policing, and Black males in Canadian society

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between law enforcement and Black people in North America is governed by fear and suspicion, leading to inequitable legal outcomes. The ongoing policing crisis for Black males in Toronto, Canada is downplayed by a self-perception of Canadian “innocence” based on a multicultural identity. I argue that the crisis is rooted in a Eurocentric, dehumanizing view of Black masculinity as violent and criminal. I demonstrate how this narrative is perpetuated by Toronto law enforcement and the news media. I propose that embracing Black masculinity as fully human will free both victims and perpetrators from the harms of racial profiling.

KEYWORDS

Black masculinity; racial profiling; news media; anti-Black racism

Introduction

The construction of the Black male as disorderly and prone to criminality is embedded in the prevailing logics through which Black males and Black bodies are apprehended by law enforcement. Importantly, the misperception of Black males as criminal is not just a law enforcement matter, because this perverted logic is central to the composition of the racializing, criminalizing, purist lens of the public eye through which Black male identities are viewed. Crichlow (2014), in the article entitled “Weaponization and Prisonization of Toronto’s Black Male Youth,” argues that the Canadian nation state’s approach to Black youth creates the conditions for them to be dehumanized. It is not an overstatement to say that Black males are feared, stereotyped, and racially profiled by police and law enforcement (see, for example, Brooms & Perry, 2016; Mensah et al., 2021; Mullings et al., 2016; Owusu-Bempah, 2014; Smiley & Fakunle, 2018). As far as the question of justice is concerned, Black males are systematically placed outside of the justice system as an organizing tool where human life is located; indeed, the descriptor “Black male criminality” renders Black male humanity as out of the reach of justice in a “commonsensical” way when it is accepted as the “nature” of Black humanity.

Scholars across disciplines have theorized Blackness as a social, political, and cultural identity with shared, yet often contested, experiences and histories, especially when it comes to police and the justice system (see Bain et al., 2020; Maynard, 2017; Waldron, 2021; Wortley & Owusu-Bempah, 2022). While it is widely understood that discrimination and anti-Black racism is morally wrong and legally prohibited, Black communities have been fighting to end racial discrimination for generations. Recent research on law enforcement and Black community relations have highlighted the ways in which Black communities are

overpoliced, particularly the ways in which Black males and youth are racially profiled in large urban cities like Toronto (see Tator et al., 2006; Wortley & Owusu-Bempah, 2011; Wortley & Tanner, 2005). Since the 2020 re-eruption of the Black Lives Matter protest movement, a body of literature has emerged addressing anti-Black racism in policing and overrepresentation of Black males in the criminal justice system in the Canadian context. Yet, the experiences of Black youth and community members are still categorized as isolated incidents that are carried out by individuals who harbor anti-Black racism (see Fleras, 2022; Tator et al., 2006).

It is essential to connect the issues of justice for and violence against Black males with policing policies and practices *as they pertain to attitudes toward Black males among the general public*. It is important to note that although anti-Black racism and racialization manifest differently through time and space, in both Canada and the United States anti-Black racism is rooted in a history of colonialism and slavery. Canada, as a nation state built on a settler society, was foundationally designed as a society for European settlement. The central argument I will present here is that if society truly valued Black maleness and boyhood, then Black males would not be violently killed disproportionately often and with relative immunity. As a Black male and Black Studies researcher who has lived most of his adult life in Toronto, Canada, Blackness is for me not only a category of self-identification but also an identity with embodied knowledge about the ways in which Blackness is perceived in Canadian urban society as inherently violent. I write from a particular vantage point as someone who has experienced racism and racialization, in order to engage in a critical and reflexive discussion about questions of justice and policing. I draw on my lived experience as a means to humanize Blackness and to draw attention to the ways in which Black male identities are often constructed as inherently dangerous.

Based on a textual analysis examining current events in the city of Toronto, this paper argues that the ongoing policing crisis for Black males in Canada is made worse by the perspective of Canadian “innocence” in comparison with the United States. I will demonstrate that the long-standing and escalating policing crisis affecting Black people in both the United States and Canada is in fact rooted in a Eurocentric, dehumanizing view of Black masculinity as violent and criminal. I will show that this narrative is perpetuated by Toronto law enforcement in the public eye and reinforced by social stereotypes in news media. This article then examines the ways in which we can create a space for law enforcement agencies to have constructive dialogue about the place of Black males in our society.

The current geopolitical context

Black Lives Matter

In thinking about race, policing, and Black males and the violence experienced by Black males, the political protest movement Black Lives Matter has been a means to claim a Black humanity and to organize against policing violence. Black Lives Matter is a movement born out the 2012 shooting death of a Trayvon Martin, an unarmed 17-year-old boy, by George Zimmerman, a “neighborhood watch” in Sanford, Florida. Zimmerman, under the “stand your ground” statute, claimed self-defense and was acquitted, to the shock and disbelief of many. Consequently, the world witnessed the birth of a grassroots social movement with the central aim of fighting for racial justice. The response of Black activists to the death of Black

males at the hands of police officers has prompted millions around the world to join in protest of such inhuman racial violence. Robyn Maynard (2017), in *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present*, maps out historical accounts of state-sanctioned violence against Black bodies in Canada. Maynard (2017) not only anchors the histories of the Black community in Canada within the colonial context and social milieu, but also highlights the ways in which Black bodies are criminalized much like in the United States. In *Until We Are Free: Reflections From Black Lives Matter in Canada* (Diverlus et al., 2020), the authors speak about the Black Lives Matter Movement in Canada with a sense of urgency, calling for an end to the violence experienced by Black people in Canada by reflecting on the experiences of the Black Lives Canada movement.

Two incidents in the United States in 2020 captured the ontological realities of being Black and male in North America. On February 23, 2020, Ahmaud Arbery was shot and killed. Video footage shows 25-year-old Arbery jogging in Glynn County, Georgia, when a former police officer and son follow him in a pickup truck. The father, Gregory McMichaels, is seen in the back of the pickup truck while Travis McMichaels, the son, gets out of the truck and kills Arbery with a shotgun. The killing outraged millions in the around the world, as did the murders of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamira Rice, Freddie Gray, and Anton Sterling, all unarmed at the time of their death. Ahmaud Arbery's violent death was covered by various news outlets and discussed on talk shows on both television and radio, among other public platforms.

On May 25, 2020, another high-profile murder pushed America to the tipping point. Minneapolis police arrested a 46-year-old Black man named George Floyd for allegedly buying cigarettes with a counterfeit \$20 bill. The surveillance video shows Floyd face down on the ground in handcuffs as officer Derek Chauvin presses his knee on his neck for 8 minutes and 53 seconds. Footage shows Floyd pleading for his life, repeating a number of times that he "can't breathe." Floyd was pronounced dead at the hospital, and his death sparked global protests. Starting in Minneapolis-Saint Paul, the protests spread across the United States and then around the world in solidarity, with demands for justice for George Floyd and calls to "defund the police."

Black lives are undervalued also in Canada

The high-profile murders of 2020 above brought the question of anti-Black racism to center stage in Canada and around the world. Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau, who was caught off-guard when pictures of him in "blackface" surfaced prior to the 2019 federal election, has since acknowledged in parliament that systemic anti-Black racism exists in Canada (Rota, 2020). The issue of anti-Black racism and policing was further taken up by Canadian news media, public institutions, and much of civil society. The end of 2020 saw countless statements of support and solidarity from academic institutions looking for ways to address racism in Canada, along with numerous calls to "defund the police." In 2024, we remain positioned at a moment in history where people across North America and the world are demanding change and calling for an end to systemic anti-Black racism. Although these public acknowledgments of anti-Black racism are long overdue, the outpouring of support is problematic.

The year 2005 was dubbed by news media as the "Year of the Gun" in Toronto, with 52 gun-related homicides occurring over the course of the year. The Year of the Gun left an

everlasting mark in public consciousness and memory in the city of Toronto of a gun violence problem, with public officials offering the explanation that the violence was rooted in young Black males that are out of control in ghettoized Toronto neighborhoods (see Siciliano, 2010). The result of this unfortunate narrative is that very little attention is actually paid to the problem of gun violence so long as it remains within the Black community. The 2005 surge in violence set a modern precedent not only for a new level of acceptable violence against Black bodies (and in particular Black males) but also for a new social vocabulary centered around sensational media images of Black males, gangs, and guns. This narrative allows law enforcement to carry on with a business-as-usual attitude while members of the Black community are racially profiled and targeted by police, which has led to the deaths of numerous unarmed Blacks including Reyal Jensen Jardine-Douglas, Eric Osawe, Duane Christian, and Andrew Loku. Alarming, of the 52 people killed in encounters with Toronto police officers between 2000 and 2017, 19 (36%) were Black, “despite the fact that Black people make up 8.3% of the city’s population” (Dunn, 2018, para. 4).

On top of this, despite all the advances in police technology and the relative decline in violent crime in Canada, the number of unresolved murders of young Black males is astonishing. Over the last 3 decades, homicide has been listed in the top 10 leading causes of death for youth aged 10 to 24 (Matjasko et al., 2012; Snider & Lee, 2009). In Toronto, gun violence has been skyrocketing year after year, reaching 96 homicides in 2019 (Toronto Police Service, 2020). In comparison to other world-class cities, the number of murders in Toronto may not appear to be an endemic or chronic problem. But a closer look at the race and/or ethnicity of both the victims and perpetrators of gun violence paints a grimmer picture, because they are overwhelmingly young Black males. Why have these homicides not been solved? One of the most detrimental myths about Black male murders is that they involve gangsters engaged in criminal activity; the police regularly hold press conferences highlighting how “senseless” the violence is, but most of these cases remain cold cases. Although data on race is never released by law enforcement, according to the Research and Statistics Division of Canada’s Department of Justice (2022), 49% of homicide victims identified by police were Black. Moreover, “the proportion of the homicide victims identified as Black increased by 35% between 2019 and 2021 . . . Black male victims accounted for 51% of all racialized male victims” (para. 12). Occasionally, to mark an anniversary, the media will give attention to a victim’s family, most often represented by a matriarch holding up a picture of the deceased. It is impossible and illogical to deny that the frequency of these crimes is linked to a Black racial stereotype: these victims and perpetrators are young Black male criminals who are known to police and who fit the profile of the “usual suspect.” There is an apparent understanding among law enforcement agencies that as long as these murders take place in racialized neighborhoods, there is less of a public safety concern (see Ilmi, 2017). The general public is outraged, however, when violence that is experienced by Black communities spills over into the Canadian (white) public sphere.

Canada’s problematic self-image

Multiculturalism

Canada is regarded as one of the most tolerant, diverse nations on earth, welcoming over 200,000 immigrants per year. The Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988 signified the

importance of immigration to the Canadian nation state, and Canada has since experienced different waves of immigrants that today account for the cultural, racial, religious, ethnic, and linguistic diversity that is visibly present in country (Brosseau & Dewing, 2018; Kymlicka, 2003). Thus, the official Canadian narrative is that Canada is a unique multicultural mosaic, but this idea of Canadian multiculturalism is problematic when it comes to being Black in Canada. Multiculturalism creates the impression that Canada is a more tolerant country than the United States because multiculturalism proports to encourage people to practice their own ethnic traditions, cultures, religions, languages, and so forth. Canadians therefore claim to pay little attention to questions of race and racism; after all, Canadians say, we are not the American “melting pot.”

Moreover, the discourse of Canadian multiculturalism is very paradoxical when examining the history of Black peoples in Canada, with its history of slavery and racism in the New World. In the face of Canadian multiculturalism, it is difficult to engage Canadians in a discussion about settler colonialism and the treatment of Indigenous Peoples and indeed all nonwhite communities. Walcott (2019) provides an excellent critique of Canadian multiculturalism, highlighting the ways in which Black and Indigenous peoples continue to live under conditions of racism, “confirm[ing] the white founding mythology of Canada, but it does not undo that founding’s execution of its white supremacist logics that dispossessed Indigenous peoples and enslaved and subordinated Black people” (p. 397). Indeed, the façade of Canadian multiculturalism creates room for a discursive disposition. On one hand, Black people as non-Europeans are viewed as non-Canadian, irrespective of how many generations they have been in Canada. On the other hand, the notion of Canadian multiculturalism lumps all those in any given “immigrant” category together, contributing to the conflation of Black criminality with Black humanity. Therefore the underlying question becomes why can’t the Black community be like all the other immigrant communities? This line of thinking makes it easier to stereotype Black males as criminal (Mullings et al., 2016).

The underground railroad

Certainly there are distinct claims of Blackness in the United States vis-à-vis the African American experience and the American melting pot when compared with Canadian multiculturalism. But there are striking similarities across the border when it comes to anti-Black racism, policing, health care, education, housing, and economic opportunity for Black people in both nations. Indeed, the legacies of slavery, segregation, and colonialism have a profound impact on Black people globally. Therefore, the precise geographical location is less relevant as long as Black people anywhere continue to experience imperialism, colonization, and anti-Blackness. In the post-1492 Americas, the slave trade fueled the economic engine of Euro-American modernity and became the bedrock of European colonial expansion, with profound implications for what it means to be Black in the New World then and now.

However, Canada seems to be largely missing from the conversation about slavery and colonialism. This trajectory stands in stark contrast to anti-Black racial sentiment that is systemically embedded in colonial expansion and enterprise, a system in which Black people were mere tools to advance Euro-Americanism, without names, language, culture, and family (see Mbembe, 2017). Colonial expansion required an astonishing

level of coordinated, institutional and *legal* violence to ensure the subjected Black masses were held without legal status as persons. Born out the struggle for humanity and Black self-expression, two distinct identities emerged: the African American identity/experience and being Black in Canada. A common Canadian narrative is to consider Blackness in Canada in comparison with the United States. Rather than a history of slavery, segregation, and structural racism, Canada boasts the narrative of the Underground Railroad, in which Black people were smuggled north of the border to be freed from enslavement (see Cahill, 1995; Cooper, 2017; Whitfield, 2016). And yet, before the Underground Railroad, before the formation of the Canadian nation state in 1867, there *was* in fact a slave code in what was called Upper (English) and Lower (French) Canada:

Both French and English laws defined slaves as chattel, and under the full authority of their owners. Colonial laws and ordinances applied to the everyday life of colonists also covered the lives of the enslaved. Masters thus used the full arsenal of the legal apparatus to control their slaves. They had them arrested, thrown in prison, taken before the courts, whipped, branded, placed in the stocks, and legally murdered (for example, hanged). Slaveholders also exercised tremendous personal power in their ownership of and rule over their human property. (Cooper, 2007, p. 8)

In fact, shortly after the defeat of the British during the American Revolution, the number of enslaved Africans in what was to become Canada increased significantly, and not until the British government passed the Act to Limit Slavery in Upper Canada in 1793 was some legal protection extended to the Black population, although many slave holders regarded the act as just a formality. In an attempt to overlook this dark history, the Canadian narrative has been constructed to focus on the Underground Railroad as a path to Black freedom through escaping from the United States to the British territories to the north as sort of refugee experience. This narrative has created a historical registry in the national Canadian psyche of Canada as the “land of freedom” for Blacks. Not only does this narrative exonerate Canadian history from itself, but it also allows the construction of a historical trajectory that erroneously depicts Canada as a place, distinct from the United States, in which Black freedom is possible.

Racial discrimination manifests on both sides of the border

The broadly accepted narrative in Canada, then, is self-perception as a less violent and inherently less racist country than the United States. Not only is this self-image untrue, but it is also dangerous because it absolves Canadian society of its responsibility for the level of violence and racism that *does* exist, preventing the country from addressing it and allowing racist policing policies and practice to persist. A more nuanced understanding of the ways in which anti-Black racism operates in Canada is necessary, because no amount of racism or violence in a progressive society can be seen as acceptable or safe. The unfortunate and uncomfortable truth, however, is that anti-Black racism is not contained in the United States but is also a Canadian and indeed a global phenomenon (see Bledsoe & Wright, 2019; Hartman, 1997; Mullings et al., 2016; Sexton, 2016; Sharpe, 2016; Wilderson, 2010). Black people and Blackness in North America have a particular kind of relationship with the state and with whiteness in the New World. This relationship is rooted in the history of master

and slave—the dominant class and the dominated, who are seen as a class of lesser, even nonhuman, beings.

The historically rooted legal frameworks for Blacks in Canada is important in understanding the level of violence that was enacted on Black bodies and the origins of the myth of Black criminality. The slave codes and laws in both the United States and Canada laid the foundation for a violent legal system that is inherently anti-Black when it comes to applying the law and ensuring the legal rights of the Black personhood. New World societies were organized around the question of race, making life inherently and unavoidably inequitable for Blacks in either the United States or Canada. This deep-seated racism has made the ideals of human rights, democracy, and freedom less attainable for Black people. This racist legacy is manifest today in a system that is structured to over-police Black communities and to be heavy-handed in the name of law and order, and in creating the conditions for justice to be miscarried when Black persons seek justice for the wrongs committed against them.

Black masculinity dehumanized in the public eye by law enforcement and the media response

Black male masculinities are categorized within a general understanding of maleness, with specific characteristics, behaviors, and ways of being in the world. Through a Western lens, while acknowledging notions of “toxic masculinity,” maleness is linked to ideals of strength, bravery, leadership, assertiveness, power, and control. I argue that solely on the basis of race, Black maleness is viewed through the hegemonic lens as hypersexual, hyperviolent, and prone to criminality, often standing in opposition to white societal norms. This harmful characterization of Black male masculinity in Canadian society has resulted in the dehumanization of Black males since the inception of the nation state. Such aggressive modes of Black masculinities needed to be constructed in the public psyche and it is the dangerous Black male masculinity prosoma that is often displayed on television screens and shared through various local news outlets. This depiction of Black masculinities creates fear of Black maleness while simultaneously becoming the operating logic to target them. In their work *An Analysis of Anti-Black Crime Reporting in Toronto: Evidence from News Frames and Critical Race Theory*, Crichlow and Lauricella (2018) eloquently capture the ways in which media depicts Black male masculinities:

Stereotypical depictions of Black masculinity as wanton and stigmatised are held responsible for the social problems that beset them, rather than the everyday state lynching and racist violence that diminishes their sense of self-worth. These negative portrayals and perceptions are important, because public mass-mediated perceptions have the potential to exaggerate people’s perceptions. Therefore, stereotypes often become the distorted dominant viewpoint whether they are accurate or not. Racist stereotypical perceptions of Black males construct the lens through which the media, as a dominant institution, dehumanises Blacks. (p. 302)

The media’s distorted depiction of young Black males positions Black male masculinity as a moral outcast to be regulated through various practices of law enforcement including carding, over-policing, and the use of excessive force. Media hypersensationalization of so-called Black male issues amounts to discriminatory reporting practices, which creates a public consciousness where inhumane policing practices are acceptable for Black males bodies in Canadian society. Systemic racism manifests in the media not only because of its

institutional moral authority but also through carefully curated words and images stressing the alarming nature of the Black male problem. The media, consciously or not, is therefore instrumental in swaying public opinion and organizing the collective public response to the “Black male problem.”

Law enforcement and policing agencies also play a vital role sensationalizing Black male crimes. Such relations give power to the organization in terms of what stereotypes are perpetuated. As an example, we can look at how the Toronto Police Service (TPS) released the footage of what they called an “active gunfight crime scene” during a press conference at Toronto Police headquarters. The incident in question took place on Tuesday, May 25, 2020, at 4 p.m. on a busy downtown sidewalk (CBC News, 2020). At the press conference, TPS played video footage on a large flat-screen monitor, showing 21-year-old rapper Dimarjio Jenkins, better known as Houdini, walking down the street with two other young Black males. A family is nearby, getting into their car. A young Black male with a handgun emerges from a stationary SUV and opens fire at Jenkins and his two associates; Jenkins’ associates, who are armed, return fire. Jenkins dies on the scene, and a 15-year-old boy and a 27-year-old woman from the by-standing family sustain injuries. At the conclusion of the video playback, Toronto Police Chief Mark Saunders called this shooting “beyond comprehension.”

Media coverage of violent crimes creates panic in the minds of the general public and reinforces narratives about street crime, particularly gun violence. Rather than displaying violence publicly and calling it “beyond comprehension,” law enforcement could instead support the public in asking the question why are these street crimes taking place? As horrific and brazen as any shooting in a major Canadian city in broad daylight is, it speaks directly to larger societal and a systemic issues that have contributed to the social conditions where street crime is a reality. Journalistic media, aided by law enforcement, tends to offer the same interpretation of gun crime whether the Black bodies involved are victims and/or perpetrators: the moral angle associates gun crime with Black bodies and portrays the violence as foreign to Canada’s national innocence (see Crichlow, 2014). Gun crimes become theatrical performances played out on social media and television screens as they happen, allowing the public to detach from it, even consume it as a macabre form of entertainment. The video evidence is then interpreted by media personnel, criminology experts, law enforcement agencies, the judiciary, and the general public as justification for a tougher stance against “Black youth crime” (see Chan & Chunn, 2014; Owusu-Bempah & Wortley, 2014a). All this is narrated through familiar codes, language, and labels that reinforce Black male narratives of crime, deviance, and the need for stronger control of the Black male menace (Fitzgerald & Carrington, 2011; Khenti, 2014; Wortley & Tanner, 2005). Police officers are vigorous in naming the problem and often very speedy in dealing with the issue, and they do not have to justify their actions to the public because of the violent crimes taking place (Tanovich, 2006; K. Welch, 2007). In essence, law enforcement is a central organ of defining the problem.

In the public psyche, gun violence is a matter of major anxiety that translates into discourses such as “the streets aren’t safe,” “Black youth crime is taking over our neighborhoods,” “Black youth are dangerous and need to be controlled/contained.” As far as public sentiment is concerned, it is a simple equation that needs no further discussion. Media coverage reinforces the perception that Black youth are killing other Black youth in a reckless wave of violence that is gripping city streets in total disregard for the value of

human life. Thus, insofar as the public grapples with the root causes of violence, it is portrayed—and therefore viewed—as a Black community problem, and in particular a Black male problem (see Manzo & Bailey, 2005; K. Welch, 2007). The problem is rationalized in relation to urban violence, extreme poverty, poor schooling, and/or Blacks being preconditioned to violence, among other mainstream ideologies (James, 2012; Owusu-Bempah & Wortley, 2014b). All these logics position the Black community as a whole outside the Canadian public performativity of being orderly, law abiding, and morally upright. Black youth are seen as committing these murders against other young Black males, and although the discourse is not articulated as “Black on Black crime,” as is the case in the United States, the notion is implied in Canada. The underlying questions (spoken or not) are, *What is wrong with the Black community?* or *What is wrong with Black boys?* Such questions point blame at being Black in a liberal society, which is backward thinking that contributes to systemic racism.

Racial profiling: Suspects in their own murders

The practice of racial profiling is defined by the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2020) as “any action undertaken for reason of safety, security or public protection that relies on stereotypes about race, color, ethnicity, ancestry, religion, or place of origin rather than on reasonable suspicion, to single out an individual for greater scrutiny or different treatment.” Black communities have been crying out for generations because of racial profiling and its social, economic, and political impact (Tator et al., 2006; M. Welch, 2007; Wortley & Owusu-Bempah, 2011). What is unique about racial profiling is that the racialization on which it is based is often produced and/or reproduced on the basis of the socio-political climate. Despite this fluidity, the idea that Black males are linked to criminality has been long-standing. In the city of Toronto, the image of young Black males as violent hoodlums and street thugs has been normalized in all spheres of society. The presumption of Blackness and criminality are so ingrained in the public psyche that reports of criminal acts to do not even have to mention race (see Barlow, 1998; Hall et al., 2013); code words like *violence*, *youth delinquency*, *thugs*, *guns*, and *gangs* are synonymous with Blackness and Black male youth in particular. The dominant perception here is that crime is a problem disproportionately *perpetuated* by Black male youth. This perception of what it means to be Black and male in Canada permeates the public domains of education, health care, housing, employment, policing and the justice system.

Racial profiling creates the conditions under which Black bodies, especially Black males, are criminalized in the name of public security and policing, thereby reinforcing the concept of Black criminality. Take, for instance, the practice of police stopping Black males under the pretext of street checks, a practice known as “carding” in Toronto (Levins, 2019). This a widespread—yet illegal—practice in which police officers randomly stop young Black males and ask them to identify themselves, harass them, and often charge them with very minor offenses (see Owusu-Bempah, 2014). This targeting of Black youth is rationalized by the assumption that Black youth are more often than not associated with gang membership and criminal activity and therefore pose a threat to public safety. Street checks have become so normalized that they are better known as “driving while Black” or “walking while Black” (Gilroy, 2001; Harris, 1999; Lundman & Kaufman, 2003; Yancy, 2013). This practice is unconstitutional both in Canada and the United States (Ilmi, 2017; Meng et al., 2015;

Owusu-Bempah, 2014; Winsa & Rankin, 2012), yet Black males are routinely subjected to it without any repercussions for law enforcement. Not only do street checks criminalize Black youth and create animosity toward law enforcement through negative interactions, this illegal practice also creates and reinforces the solidified image of the Black male as a menace in the minds of both police officers and the public. Images in the breaking news of Black males in handcuffs being placed in police cars are so constant and pervasive that Black communities themselves have internalized these images and are calling for stronger sanctions against Black males. The presumption of innocence is lost through these interactions, and justice is denied to the extent that even the mainstream discourse is asking why Black males are always being arrested if they are not committing any crimes (Owusu-Bempah, 2014).

Police raids in “priority neighborhoods” in the name of getting gangs and guns off the streets further damage the representation of Black males. Again, in these scenarios, Black males are shown being hunted by police sniffer dogs and arrested by SWAT teams. Tactical units issue warrants, and all of these images are televised. Moreover, these highly publicized events have catchy operational names to capture the general public’s attention and showcase how law enforcement is battling crime. These scenes usually involve a large number of Black males, a large number of warrants, and hundreds of police officers “cleaning up” a neighborhood. In the press conference that usually follows, law enforcement agencies report on the cache of weapons, drugs, and cash recovered in the operation—a success story that reinforces and justifies the narrative of law and order and being tough on crime. In the court of public opinion, these arrests are warranted. But such scenes also divert attention from the larger story about poverty, racialization, and economic marginalization.

Take, for instance, the high-profile case of the Dixon Raids in a 2012 investigation dubbed “Project Traveller.” Toronto police descended on six tower buildings located on the north corner of Kipling and Dixon, where a video had been filmed showing Toronto mayor Rob Ford allegedly smoking crack (D’Aliesio, 2014). Police also raided the nearby home of Muhammad Khattak, one of the men in the video. As the social media world searched for the infamous video of Ford, Toronto police were raiding the local community in which they suspected the youth who were in possession of cocaine were living. The question of illegal recreational drug use aside, police recovered a total of 40 firearms, confiscated \$3 million worth of drugs, and arrested 43 people (Pagliaro, 2013). If police knew that drugs were being heavily trafficked in the area, where were they when all those weapons were being stored in the local community? There were a number of high-profile shootings in the North Etobicoke neighborhood of Dixon, and the community had been speaking aloud and advocating that the Toronto police respond to the violence and make the killings stop (Ghebresslassie, 2017; Shum, 2017). Sadly, when the police chief was asked about the connection between Project Traveller and mayor Rob Ford, he stated, “All of the evidence has been secured and it will come out in court where it belongs . . . We will not jeopardize the case” (Pagliaro, 2013). The killings in Dixon continue to this day, with occasional coverage of the “Dixon Bloods.”

The occurrence of the raids at a time when the online world was frantically in search for the infamous Rob Ford “crack video” inadvertently created a simultaneous narrative of a “crime-infested” Black community. Therefore, the arrests and the publications of those arrests via media news signify a political location in the community, in which Blackness is both pathologized as criminal, and the optics construct a background in which Blackness is

to be publicly condemned in the court of public opinion. Furthermore, because of the public nature of the arrests, guilt, rather than innocence, is presumed as a normative impulse no real grasp of the complete story. This narrative of Blackness as criminal in the greater essence of this scandal also makes it easier for the general public not to even question the sensationalization of these events, because the ghettoized Black lived experience is understood as dangerous and because Black males are presumed guilty based solely on their Blackness and where they live. This narrative creates a sense of perpetual “clear and present danger,” which desensitizes the public and results in less attention paid to crimes taking place in racialized and Black communities.

Even when the general public makes an effort to comprehend the root causes of violence in our society, so long as the problem is misconceived as a Black problem, public discourses about this violence will always be associated with Blackness, without challenging the underlying assumptions. This is quite problematic because it creates a standard for “upright” citizenry (i.e., white and/or non-Black) to distinguish the “Black crime rate,” particularly when it comes to Black males, as a self-reinforcing trope. The (mis)association of crime with Blackness as a default results in the equation of being Black with being criminal. Sensationalizing further serves to fuel ideas about Black criminality and reinforces the justification of social practices like racial profiling, scapegoating, and pathologizing Black communities.

Policy and programmatic implications

In Canada, racial discrimination is illegal, and most policing institutions have policies and procedures against racism, something which they are often quick to point out. These policies and procedures appear to do nothing to actually stop police in many jurisdictions, including Toronto, from racially profiling Black youth. The consequences of racial profiling, as we have discussed, include criminalization, bodily harm, humiliation, and even death. In both my academic work as well as in my lived experience as a Black male in Toronto, I have observed and/or experienced countless examples of these harms. A Black youth is followed around a store or mall by security as they shop; a woman clutches her handbag at the sight of a Black male; car doors are locked by a remote keyless system when a Black youth approaches on the sidewalk. The presumption of “Black criminality” results in Black males being routinely arrested without cause, without even being appropriately questioned first. Anti-discrimination policies will continue to be powerless until we as a society are able to clearly see and acknowledge the lived experiences of Black males. Only then will we begin to have effective conversations about a legal framework to deal with systemic, institutional anti-Black racism. Law enforcement is a powerful institution, and the lens through which it constructs Black bodies as criminal is also manifested in society: that is, the construct is *normalized*. It is reproduced in popular culture and in everyday interactions, leading to further social exclusion and alienation. If the dominant image of the Black male is that of a criminal, how can we overcome the bias that results from our exposure to this narrative? More needs to be done to connect existing policies and procedures with *practice* in order to account for the unequal outcomes and consequences for Black bodies. Law enforcement would do well to use creative approaches to engage with Black males and Black communities that foster human-to-human interactions. Reflexive

practice among members of law enforcement should be the rule, not the exception. Good reflexive practice requires peer support and strong community relations.

Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to shine a bright spotlight on the flaws in Canadian narratives surrounding Black masculinities and anti-Black racism, by highlighting the ways in which Black males are over-policed and systemically racialized on the one hand, while overlooked when they are victims of violent crimes on the other. This predicament is not only unacceptable but also dangerous, because it creates two parallel realities in Canadian society: one for Black communities, where violence is part of everyday life, and the other for the rest of society, where safety and security are the expected norm. It is quite clear that following mass protests of 2020, there was a shift in the national conversation to questions of violence against Black bodies and communities and the role of policing practices in this violence. But the question remains of how to collectively make sense of the ways in which Blackness is centrally located within structures of violence. Why is unadulterated violence acceptable when it is inflicted on Black bodies? And why are the assertions of the global Black Lives Matter movement so incomprehensible as a defining juncture point to steer us toward an understanding of Blackness as fully human? Beyond making political demands, global calls to defund the police are clear calls to action to reallocate public resources in the community to divest from “tough on crime” politics that have criminalized Black bodies by default. Stemming from a long history of struggles against enslavement, colonization and public deaths, the dehumanizing ways in which Blackness is positioned within our society are crucial to understanding how anti-Black racism is manifested. The news of another young Black life cut short by gun violence should not be met simply with demands for more or less policing. For anything to really change, this violence needs to be systemically addressed in all aspects of life—in education, housing, health care, criminal justice, and employment.

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