

# Excluding black toddlers from the preschool-to-prison pipeline.

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**Received:** 29 July, 2020, Manuscript No. AAJCP-24-16501; **Editor assigned:** 03 August, 2020, Pre QC No. AAJCP-24-16501 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 17 August, 2020, QC No. AAJCP-24-16501; **Revised:** 01 October, 2024, Manuscript No. AAJCP-24-16501 (R); **Published:** 29 October, 2024, DOI: 10.35841/0971-9032.28.10.2373-2378.

## Abstract

When compared to other racial groups, African American toddlers are more likely to be suspended from school. This work will use Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems framework to examine the "preschool to prison pipeline." This phrase refers to the exclusion of black toddlers from classroom settings that can eventually lead to negative adults outcomes. Since African Americans are disproportionately more likely to be incarcerated than members of other racial and ethnic groups, this work will offer practical recommendations regarding how preschool teachers can help reverse the "preschool to prison pipeline" among black male toddlers whose families have inherent strengths yet are more economically, academically and socially disadvantaged than other racial groups.

**Keywords:** African Americans, Blacks, Ecological systems theory, School-to-prison, Pipeline, Social-emotional development, Toddlers.

Accepted on 12th October, 2024

## Introduction

As a black families scholar that examines factors that contribute to the mass incarceration of black men, this manuscript will use an ecological systems framework to examine the "preschool to prison pipeline." This phrase refers to the exclusion of black toddlers from classroom settings that can lead to negative adult outcomes. Essentially, the "pipeline" refers to the high numbers of incarcerated black men who did not complete high school [1].

There are four reasons why I focus on this segment of the black population. First, even though African Americans comprise 13.4% of the American population, they are more likely than other racial groups to be poor. To put this into context, this means that blacks are disproportionately more likely to live below the poverty line (8.9 million people or 20.8%) than hispanics (10.5 million people or 17.6%) and whites (15.7 million people or 8.1%). Second, suspension rates are disproportionately higher for black preschoolers than other races. According to a national study, "Black children represent 18% of preschool enrollment, but 48% of preschool children receiving more than one out-of school suspension; in comparison, white students represent 43% of preschool enrollment but 26% of preschool children receiving more than one out of school suspension. Boys represent 79% of preschool children suspended once and 82% of preschool children suspended multiple times, although boys represent 54% of preschool enrollment". Third, African Americans are more likely to be incarcerated than members of other racial groups. National data has revealed blacks are incarcerated at a rate of 1,408 per 100,000 while whites are incarcerated at a rate of 275 per 100,000. This means that blacks are incarcerated at a rate that is 5.1 times that of whites. Finally, even though the toddler age extends from 12 months to

36 months, this work will demonstrate why this period as well as the following 12 months, specifically the 36 to 48 month period, is especially important for the life trajectory of black toddlers, in particular, black male toddlers [2].

In the sections that follow, I place this focus on black toddlers within the empirical literature. First, I start by discussing ecological systems theory. Second, I discuss the ecological systems of black toddlers. Third, I highlight the social-emotional development of black toddlers. Fourth, I discuss the mass incarceration of African Americans and how this relates to the school-to-prison pipeline. Finally, I offer recommendations regarding how these educators can reverse the "preschool to prison" pipeline.

## Literature Review

### Ecological systems theory

Humans live in a world in which they are embedded within multiple, complex systems that are "interacting and mutually influential." According to Uri Bronfenbrenner, the pioneer of ecological systems theory, humans are influenced by their immediate environment, which in turn is influenced by the larger contexts in which those environments exist. Hence, "The ecological approach requires that the person, the environment and the relations between them be conceptualized in terms of systems and subsystems within systems." Another significant aspect of human ecology is the recognition that human interaction is a two-directional process through which individuals are impacted by their environments but also influence and restructure the environments in which they reside [3].

In his seminal work, Bronfenbrenner describes five interconnected environments or ecosystems, that influence an individual's development known as the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem. The microsystem is the first and innermost setting in which the person interacts and unquestionably includes the home environment. When commenting on the salience of the home environment, Clark noted, "Children spend most of the first five years of life in the home", so this realm of the microsystem is especially important to a child's development. In addition to the home, the child also interacts with other segments of the microsystem such as the neighborhood, school and extended family. Following this layer is the mesosystem, which are the interrelations between microsystems, such as the relationships between home and neighborhood, home and school and home and extended family. The exosystem refers to the link between environments that do not directly include an individual but has an influence on the individual's immediate environments, for example how parents' workplaces affect children. Past work in this area has found stress in various work environments can invariably affect the lives of children [4].

Next is the macrosystem or the societal conditions in which the developing person lives, which includes cultural attitudes and ideologies. Thus, culture refers to "the physical objects, activities, patterns of living, meaning, values and social structures that are shaped by the experiences of early generations and elaborated by later generations". The chronosystem, is the final layer of the ecological system and includes all of the experiences that a person has had throughout their lifetime, which includes environmental events or major life transitions. Examples of environmental events and major life transitions are natural disasters (*i.e.*, hurricanes, floods, tornadoes) and major life transitions can be the addition or loss of a family member due to natural causes or environmental events [5].

The ecological systems theory of development has evolved since its initial inception. In his initial theory, Bronfenbrenner did not examine the personal characteristics of individuals and of those they have direct interactions with, which motivated him to evolve his theory. In the final version of the theory, known as the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model, Bronfenbrenner expanded further on the impact interactions between people, personal characteristics, layers of context and time have on an individual's development. According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris, "human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects and symbols in its immediate external environment". Thus, interactions that take place in the immediate environment are proximal processes and can directly affect the development of black toddlers [6].

### ***The ecological systems of black toddlers***

Society and the individuals within it are not static and are constantly in a state of flux. Over forty years ago, Bronfenbrenner brought attention to this fact when he wrote,

"An ecology of human development must be concerned not only with the developing child, but also with the developing ecology; that is, changes both in the micro- and macrostructures which envelop the child and those in his immediate environment." When examining the realities regarding how African American toddlers develop, it is imperative that we recognize the various environments in which these children generally live.

Consider the microsystem influences human development and consists of all the immediate environments in which the child interacts with such as the home, neighborhood, school and extended family. When compared to toddlers of other races, black toddlers generally have larger extended family networks, yet are more likely than toddlers of other racial groups to be born to poor, unwed, mothers, to live in neighborhoods marked by poverty and unemployment, violence and failing and low-performing schools. Following this layer is the mesosystem, which are the interrelations between microsystems, such as the relations between home and school. Scholarship in this area has revealed the relationship between home and school is strained when black toddlers are suspended from school [7].

The exosystem refers to the link between environments that do not directly include the child but has an influence on the child's immediate environment, for example how parents' workplaces affect children. In light of national media attention on the fragility of black lives, particularly as it relates to police violence against black bodies, this recognizes that although black adults are more likely than black toddlers to lose their lives in this manner, black toddlers can be effected by these changes. Stated more clearly, even though they do not have a mastery of language, black toddlers can be negatively affected socially and emotionally by the anxiety and unrest that they feel from adults within their environment.

The macrosystem includes societal conditions in which the developing person lives, such as cultural attitudes and ideologies. As it relates to black Americans, scholars have found that members of this group frequently experience individual, structural and institutional racism. Since African American toddlers are influenced by those within their environment, negative perceptions from adults can motivate them to behave in ways that are detrimental toward these children. One notable empirical study revealed preschool teachers have a negative bias against particular children, specifically black boys. Gilliam et al. primed preschool teachers with scenarios about black girl's, black boy's, white girl's and white boy's behaviors and asked these teachers to imagine these children were in their classrooms. Using an eye-tracking device, these researchers identified teachers' gazing more closely and for extended periods at black boys in comparison to the other students. Thus, teacher gaze was linked to the expectation of the child demonstrating disruptive classroom behavior. From the extended watching of black boys, it could be extrapolated that these children were not necessarily misbehaving more than their peers; but, that these children were being caught in the act of misbehaving more often. The teachers' belief that black males would harm other children, were less innocent, more mature and most likely to be

perpetrators of misbehavior, contributed to the action of using exclusionary discipline [8].

The chronosystem is the final layer of the ecological system and includes all of the experiences that a person has had throughout their lifetime and includes environmental events or major life transitions. Research has found frequent residential mobility can have a negative effect on the lives of preschool children, particularly in regards to their academic performance and social development. Perhaps the most significant environmental event to occur within the past few months is the coronavirus or COVID-19. This virus is believed to spread from person-to-person, through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talk, regardless of whether the person is showing symptoms of having the virus. Although children that contract COVID-19 generally do not become as ill as adults, the mortality rate for blacks is 2.2 times higher than that of Latinos, 2.3 times higher than the rate for Asians and 2.6 higher than the rate for whites. Essentially, this means that for every 100,000 Americans (of their respective group), about 43 blacks have died from the coronavirus, a mortality rate more than double the rate for Asians and Latinos and 2.6 times that of whites (17 deaths per 100,000) centers for disease control and prevention.

## **Discussion**

### ***The social-emotional development of black toddlers***

The first five years of life is a time of remarkable physical, cognitive, emotional and social development for toddlers and during these years black toddlers are constantly understanding and reacting to their surroundings. In regards to this, Haight et al, note, "Human beings are complex biological and social beings who actively contribute to their own development by interpreting, finding meaning and responding creatively to the world." During these years, the brains of toddlers are experiencing remarkable growth and with proper guidance, toddlers are learning how to develop social-emotional skills, which will help them to manage their emotions, build healthy relationships and feel empathy toward others during their lives. During this time, children are able to make friends, develop self-confidence and become aware of what others are feeling [9].

The home-community setting is where students first develop or fail to develop their social abilities to express themselves maturely and intelligently, be attentive, concentrate, volunteer, comply, engage in constructive self-directed activity, initiate work interactions, enjoy orderly social interaction, accept responsibility, carry through and complete tasks, hold positive concepts of "learning," manifest leadership skills, exercise self-control, show sensitivity to the needs of others and enjoy a sense of accomplishment about goals achieved.

Generally, black toddlers lack the ability to sort words and meanings and because of this, many see children as a "tabula rasa," or a blank tablet. However, these children are inclined to notice and react to the emotions of those around them. In other words, even though they cannot articulate what they are

feeling, black toddlers have the capacity to remember and associate their feelings with events that occur during this stage of life. Although the mind is not fixed yet, the child's long-term memory is being established. Recently, Zhang used these words to describe this process:

At birth, both the declarative long-term memory and the procedural long-term memory are essentially blank. With an empty declarative long-term memory, any information sent to the brain cannot be further processed. This is why some researchers consider the minds of newborns as "blank slate" or Tabula rasa. However, this statement is imprecise, because, despite the inability to interpret, the brain still perceives sensory information. Therefore, Tabula rasa should refer to human long-term memory, not the mind [10].

While black toddlers can perceive positive emotions from those within their microsystem, they can also notice negative emotions or stressors felt by these individuals. This heightened awareness of the feelings of others is one of the milestones of black toddlers as they are more "likely to be especially sensitive to the feelings of others adults and children alike and to enjoy making people happy. When he sees they're hurt or sad, he'll show sympathy and concern. This probably will come out as a desire to hug or "kiss the hurt," because this is what he most wants when he's in pain or unhappy."

### ***The mass incarceration of African Americans and the school-to-prison pipeline***

Although the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world, there are notable differences in the racial make-up of prisoners. According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) in 2018 black males accounted for 34% of the total male prison population, white males 29% and hispanic males 24%.

Furthermore, "While their rate of imprisonment has decreased the most in recent years, black Americans remain far more likely than their hispanic and white counterparts to be in prison. The black imprisonment rate at the end of 2018 was nearly twice the rate among hispanics (797 per 100,000) and more than five times the rate among whites (268 per 100,000)." While scholars have examined various factors that contribute to the incarceration of African American men, it is important to recognize these men are part of an ecological system in which their immediate family members, which includes their children, are negatively affected by their absence. In particular, the incarceration of black men minimizes the marital prospects of black women, leads to black children being reared in single-mother headed families, increases depressive symptoms and psychological distress among African American women, reinforces existing wealth and income disparities and decreases the likelihood that black children will attend college as they age.

Extant scholarship on the school-to-prison pipeline spans several decades. Research in this area has generally focused on correlates for the school-to-prison pipeline, the need for legal reform and dismantling this deleterious system. Essentially, there are three comparisons between the mass incarceration of African Americans and the school-to-prison pipeline for

African American toddlers. For one, blacks are overwhelming represented in the penal system and are heavily overrepresented among those most harshly sanctioned in schools. Also, out-of-school suspension and expulsion are risk factors for a range of negative developmental outcomes that generally lead to mass incarceration. Research in this area has found African American males who are frequently suspended or expelled become academically disengaged, increase their association with deviant peers, become resentful of school personnel and experience a heightened sense of alienation. Finally, humans, regardless of where they are in the life cycle, need to connect to others. Since social-integration bolsters the physical, mental and emotional health of prisoners, it is logical to acknowledge that exclusion from the learning environment places the wellbeing of black toddlers at risk over time.

### ***Recommendations for reversing the school-to-prison pipeline among black toddlers***

To reverse the school-to-prison pipeline it is important that educators recognize that black toddlers are part of an ecological (family) system whose lives will be affected by their continued absence from school. Even though African American families are more likely to be poor and live in neighborhoods that are socioeconomically-disadvantaged, they generally possess an ethos of hard work and a strong desire to succeed. Given the context of the present discussion, there are several hallmarks of African American families that are important to mention. Several decades ago, noted black scholar Robert Hill identified five characteristics that facilitate the survival, stability and advancement of black families, namely: 1) strong kinship bonds; 2) strong work orientation; 3) adaptability of family roles; 4) strong achievement orientation; 5) strong religious orientation. However, the school-to-prison pipeline weakens African American kinship bonds, discourages work efforts, necessitates that individuals within families adjust to the absence of their family member and increases the likelihood that black youth will not graduate from high school or enter college.

Since the preschool years places black toddlers at risk for not receiving the amount of attention they need, I provide several recommendations to help reverse the “school-to-prison pipeline.” First, it is important that educators be aware that early life experiences create the template for that African American child’s life. Essentially, this means that educators must be mindful that how they speak to and behave toward black children can increase or minimize these children’s feelings of self-efficacy and readiness for future life changes. I concur with Haight et al. and her colleagues when they wrote, “Human development does not end in childhood or adolescence; rather, it extends from conception to death. Each age period of the life span presents unique opportunities and challenges, which can shape the developmental trajectory from birth to death. The concept of development from a life-span perspective includes not just growth in the sense of maturation and advancement, but lifelong processes of adaption to change over the life span, but cultural resources, such as wisdom, can increase, giving rise to new adaptive processes”. Thus, the

process of interacting with black toddlers must be couched within an awareness that they will not remain in this stage of life and that what happens during this period socially and emotionally matters.

Second, educators must acknowledge the racial realities of black toddlers. Since black Americans are more likely to be poor, have children suspended from school and have incarcerated family toddlers within these homes can feel the depression and psychological distress of their mothers or others within their microsystem, which can impact their long-term memory. Since cumulative stress can cause African American toddlers to behave in ways that they cannot understand or verbalize, it is imperative that preschool teachers not perceive the actions of these children as willful disobedience and disruptive. Furthermore, unexpected changes in the life of the black toddler, such as incarceration, may threaten the secure attachments these toddlers develop between themselves and adults with whom they spend much of their time.

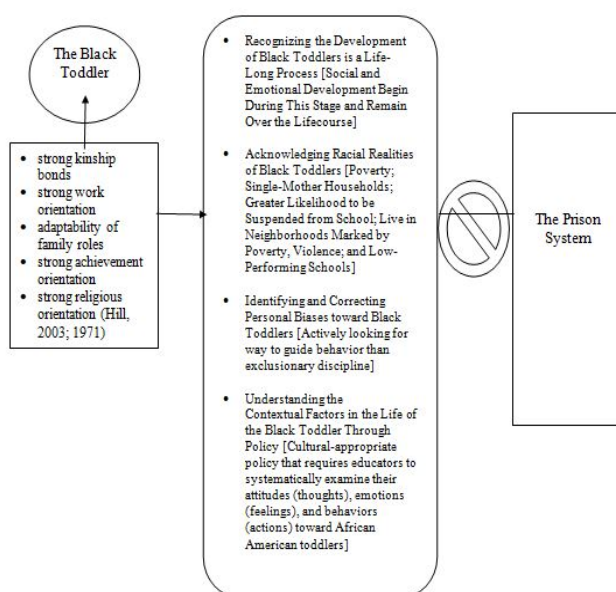
Third, educators must be identify their own preconceptions of the children in their care. Early educators that are not cognizant of their own biases may unconsciously perceive poor black youngsters as more problematic (e.g., more likely to harm other children, less innocent, more mature and more likely to be perpetrators of misbehavior) and thus be more inclined to curtail their actions *via* exclusionary discipline. Since achievement gaps can be detected among black and white children as young as 3 years of age, it is imperative that teachers not widen this gap by having negative perceptions of black toddlers. Hence, it is imperative that educators correct their negative biases toward African American children. If the educator does not correct their attitude, their negative perceptions may motivate them to suspend black children during a key moment of their social-emotional development. The more days that black American toddlers do not receive classroom learning, the more likely they are to have a negative view of school, not perform well in school and eventually drop out of school. When black youth drop out of school they are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior that usually results in their entry into the juvenile justice system and as adults, fully-grown correctional institutions (*i.e.*, prisons).

Finally, to reverse the “preschool to prison pipeline,” I recommend that schools initiate culturally-appropriate policy to help preschool teachers become and/or remain aware of the various ecological systems in which African American toddlers grow. Although older models of socialization used a “top-down approach,” or a directional approach in which children passively accept the socialization of adults, more recent scholarship has recognized a bidirectional approach in which adults and children, influence and are influenced by one another. Thus, a culturally-appropriate educational policy is primed to develop specific criteria through which educators can systematically examine their attitudes (thoughts), emotions (feelings) and behaviors (actions) toward African American toddlers. In addition, policy should recognize the agency of educators and couch this agency within specific knowledge of the black toddler and the family from which he comes. In addition, I recommend that culturally-appropriate policy

consider this context before exclusionary discipline is administered. Specific aspects of policy that early child educators can address as they critically examine how they perceive black children can use the following questions as guides for self-reflection:

- Who are the most influential individuals in the life of this black toddler, which includes their immediate and extended family networks?
- What stressors might those in the immediate and extended family of this black toddler currently be experiencing?
- What is the emotional state of the mother of the black toddler (depressive symptoms and psychological distress) and how might this emotional state be affecting the actions of this black toddler?
- What is a more effective ways of correcting the behavior of black toddlers than exclusionary discipline?
- Where does this black toddler receive the most support, from home or school?
- What are strengths of the black family that I can utilize as I care for this black toddler?
- How might the coronavirus (COVID-19) impact the relationships that this black toddler has with various family members?
- How can I demonstrate personal concern (sensitivity) for this black toddler through words and actions?

All in all, in spite of the economic, academic and social challenges that they face, black toddlers are reared in families with inherent strengths. When educators recognize these strengths they are more likely to recognize the development of black toddlers is a life-long process, acknowledge the racial realities of black toddlers, identify and correct personal biases against black toddlers, as well as understand the contextual factors that may motivate the child to behave in certain ways (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework for keeping black toddlers out of the school-to-prison pipeline.

## Conclusion

Toddlerhood is a thread in the life of the black child, however that thread must connect to other threads to create a life tapestry. During this time the child is learning how to perceive themselves based on the image that adults in their world reflect to them. If the adult's image of the black child is positive, he or she will try to live up to and oftentimes exceed adult expectations. On the other hand, if the adult's image of the black child is negative, the youngster will learn to mirror that image and over time, this image can cause them to disengage from school and become a candidate for "the school to prison pipeline." As Berlin et al. state, "People contribute to their own development by interpreting, making meaning from their experiences and acting intentionally". In closing, I implore early child educators to be intentional in their care and attention towards African American children. Although black children do not share many of the economic, academic and social advantages as their counterparts, they boast a strong legacy of family whose pillars are strong kinship bonds, strong work orientation, adaptability of family roles, strong achievement orientation and strong religious orientation.

As African American toddlers grow, it is absolutely imperative that adults charged to care for these youngsters see the potential of what they can be. I wholeheartedly support Patel's view that self-esteem is "perhaps the most critical part of a developmental environment that encourages children to believe in their own ability and autonomy, thus leading to meaningful self-esteem." In order for African American children to be valuable to their families and society, it is important that negative perceptions and subsequent suspensions be replaced with intentional positivity, which involves seeing the black child through a positive lens and purposefully tapping into the generational strengths of the child's family. Bolstering the self-esteem of a black toddler can impress on their long-term memory that adults care about them, they bring value to the world and make them truly confident that they will succeed in life.

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