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Authors

Graves, Kelly N

Frabutt, James M

Cabaniss, Emily R

et al.

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DMC in the Juvenile Justice System: Listening to the Voices of Our Youth

KELLY N. GRAVES
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

MARTHA J. GATHINGS
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

JAMES M. FRABUTT
University of Notre Dame

MARY H. KENDRICK
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

EMILY R. CABANISS
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

MARGARET B. ARBUCKLE
Guilford Education Alliance in Guilford County, North Carolina

ABSTRACT

Disproportionate minority contact (DMC) is a nationwide public health disparity, with minority youth comprising 34% of the juvenile population, but representing 62% of the nation's detained youth (Hsia, Bridges, & McHale, 2004). Multiple analytical approaches have been used to address DMC, but to bolster those findings, a qualitative approach is necessary. Using participatory action research embedded within a cultural bioecological framework, the current study explores the reflections and lived experiences of youth impacted by racial disparities in the juvenile justice system. Results are summarized under the themes of neighborhood influences, lack of positive adult role models, disengagement at home, school and community, experiences with law enforcement/court system, perceptions of racial inequality, and what the future holds. Youth-developed solutions for change are offered.

Disproportionate minority contact (DMC) within the juvenile justice system is truly an issue of public health disparity for communities regardless of size or geographic location. DMC is the *rate* of contact with the juvenile justice system among juveniles of a specific minority group that is significantly different than the *rate* of contact for whites or for other minority groups. An often cited nationwide statistic highlights that while minority youth comprise 34% of the juvenile population in the United States, they represent 62% of the nation's detained youth (Hsia, Bridges, & McHale, 2004). These trends are of concern not only for minority youth, but for all people as disproportionate incarceration rates impact the general health and social concerns of the larger community, resulting in collective suffering from a "prison-heavy" nation (Gilmore, 2007). For example, in California, it costs over $31,000 per year to incarcerate one prisoner, resulting in higher taxes

for tax payers. Pope, Lovell and Hsia (2002) reviewed several empirical investigations and noted that disproportionate numbers of minority youth exist at numerous decision points in the juvenile justice system and the effects of that disproportionality may be cumulative (Leiber & Fox, 2005). The participatory action research model recommends that the people affected by a particular issue (in this case DMC) should be involved in the solutions (i.e., voices of change) (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). Thus, the current study uses principles of this research model that capture the voices of youth in order to use these perspectives to inform community-based DMC reduction efforts.

BRIEF HISTORY OF DMC LEGISLATION AND STATE ACTION

The purpose of DMC legislation is to ensure equal and fair treatment for every youth in the juvenile justice system, regardless of race and ethnicity, *across all juvenile justice decision points and not just corrections and confinement*. This includes complaints received and approved, as well as those adjudicated, disposed, and dismissed in the juvenile justice system.

Since 1988, the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (JJDP) Act required states receiving funding under the act to determine whether the proportion of juvenile minorities in confinement exceeds their proportion in the general population. Trends were still so alarming that in 1992 Congressional amendments made it a "core requirement" that states demonstrate their efforts to reduce DMC in order to continue receipt of federal formula grants (Section 223(a)(23)). States failing to make progress on this core requirement were at risk of losing one fourth of their funding (for a more detailed overview, see Leiber, 2002). A revision was made in the JJDP Act of 2002, signed into law on November 2, 2002, which modified the DMC requirement of the Act as follows:

> In order to receive formula grants under this part (Part B), a state shall submit a plan for carrying out its purposes applicable to a 3-year period…In accordance with regulations which the Administrator

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[1]While the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP) and NC GCC definition of minority includes populations other than African American/Black, such as American Indians, Asians, Pacific Islanders and Hispanics (NC GCC, 2008), Guilford County selected to focus on African American/Black because baseline DMC rates suggested that this population was most impacted by DMC issues in the Guilford community. Thus, it is acknowledged that in this report, the use of the term "minority" refers to African American/Black youth. Furthermore, we recognize that there is great diversity within racial/ethnic groups.

shall prescribe, such plan shall…[address] juvenile delinquency prevention efforts and system improvement efforts designed to reduce, without establishing or requiring numerical standards or quotas, the disproportionate number of juvenile members of minority groups who come into contact with the juvenile justice system. This change essentially broadens the DMC initiative from disproportionate minority "confinement" to disproportionate representation of minority youth at all decision points along the juvenile justice system continuum. It further requires multi-pronged intervention strategies including not only juvenile delinquency prevention efforts, but also system improvement efforts to assure equal treatment of all youth. (U.S. Department of Justice, 2002).

Thus, the scope of the DMC was broadened to 'Disproportionate Minority Contact' from the previous term 'Disproportionate Minority Confinement'.

Despite these mandates, little systematic attention has been given to examining and documenting effective ways of achieving these reductions: "What is not reflected in the literature is a systematic assessment of the impact of these efforts on the level of DMC within the affected communities or a systematic effort to identify characteristics of programs that appear to reduce DMC levels" (Pope, Lovell, & Hsia, 2002, p. 9). As a result, challenges persist for communities seeking effective and enduring strategies for lowering DMC rates (Frabutt, Cabaniss, Arbuckle, & Kendrick, 2005).

Given increased social recognition that DMC is a significant issue, federal and state governments (e.g., Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2001), research and policy organizations (e.g., Building Blocks For Youth, 2005; Nellis, 2005), and community initiatives (e.g., Frabutt et al., 2005; Frabutt, Wilson, Kendrick, Arbuckle, & Cabaniss, 2005) have provided more direction in terms of how to address and reduce DMC. For example, North Carolina (NC), through the Governor's Crime Commission, has supported four demonstration counties over the past four years to plan, implement, and sustain locally-relevant DMC reduction strategies. In at least one of these counties (Guilford County), DMC reduction efforts, while headed by a university-based applied research center, have included institutional (schools, courts, police departments) and community partners (youth, parents, faith-based activist groups). As part of the eleven-county Piedmont Triad region (population 1.27 million) of North Carolina, Guilford County is centered along the Piedmont industrial crescent stretching from

Raleigh to Charlotte. Guilford County has the third-highest population in the state at 451,905, and is ethnically and socioeconomically diverse and equivalent to the United States (US) population at large with one main exception; Guilford County has a higher population of African Americans (30.3%) compared to the US population (12.4%) (US Census Bureau, 2006). Guilford County was selected as one of the four demonstration sites because Guilford expressed not only the interest to address DMC, but also had some of the highest rates of DMC across NC, with relative rate indices (RRIs) ranging from 3.79 to 9.20 across the juvenile justice decision points as described earlier (Graves et al., 2008). Relative Rate Index (RRI) is what the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) uses to assess DMC. It tells the rate at which black youth are represented at each decision point as compared to white youth; thus, for every 1 white youth, there were 3.79 to 9.20 black youth represented at the various decision points.

The mission of the Guilford County DMC Committee is to mobilize government and community agencies to take strategic actions that will contribute to a reduction of DMC. To accomplish this work, and in line with national best practices (Hsia, Wilson, Wilson, & Frabutt, 2006), four task-centered subcommittees were formed: (a) data and decision points; (b) training, education, and awareness; (c) community needs and resources; and (d) policy and procedure change. The current paper builds on the work of the data and decision points committee. Since one critical element of DMC efforts is an accurate, systematic, and data-based examination of overrepresentation—its causes and correlates—the data subcommittee collected and reviewed local school suspension data, juvenile crime statistics from law enforcement, and juvenile court data (Hoytt, Schiraldi, Smith, & Zeidenberg, 2002; Nellis, 2005). The committee wanted to move beyond a purely quantitative examination of the issue, however, and embraced a focus group methodology to tap the voices of parents, youth, teachers, court counselors, and faith-based activist groups. There was clear local acknowledgment that to balance institutional and "top-down" approaches to the issue, hearing the lived experience of court-involved youth was imperative in order to truly understand and become personally and emotionally connected to the negative impact that DMC has on our youth, families, and communities (as opposed to merely examining numbers in a report). Moreover, focus groups have been discussed as particularly valuable in exploratory research, as a means of identifying relevant issues, which can be used to inform larger study designs (Neuman, 1997; Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). Additionally, Morgan and Krueger (1993) found that compared to other methods, focus groups enable deeper insights into the motivations that underlie complex behaviors, some of which society

may label "delinquent." Thus, this method seems particularly appropriate for investigating the dynamics and repercussions of a poorly understood and pervasive social problem. However, as with any initiative, it is important that the work be grounded within a strong framework for understanding the findings.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

One way to understand the experiences of youth who have become involved with the justice system is to ask, "Why do youth commit crimes?" To answer this question one must consider that behavior occurs within various contexts. Bronfenbrenner's (1977; Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1983; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) bioecological systems theory views development as a series of ongoing interactions between children and their multiple, changing environments. According to Bronfenbrenner, the environment is composed of a nested arrangement of structures that each have a unique, but connected influence on youth development. These four central layers include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The microsystem includes the immediate environment (e.g., family members, school, peers, neighborhood). The mesosystem is comprised of the connections between the immediate environment players (e.g., the relationship between child's home and school). The exosystem includes the external environmental settings that only indirectly affect development (e.g., the parent's workplace). Finally, and arguably the most important layer for the current study, the macrosystem includes the larger cultural context (economical, political, social subcultures). Inherent in all of these layers is the notion that the biological make-up of the individual influences behavior and interactions at each of these layers, resulting in unique influences on development.

A cultural-bioecological systems theory offers a useful framework for which to understand youth behaviors related to juvenile justice. The framework highlights that each level has its powerful rules and norms that can shape behavior. Perhaps the most relevant layer for the current study is the macrosystem, which has a cascading influence throughout the interactions of all other layers. For example, if there is a cultural belief that "what happens in a family stays within the family," individuals from that culture may be less likely to reach out for services should a problem arise. There are many perspectives as to the cause and effects of this approach, with some suggesting that in certain situations, it may be protective for individuals to refrain from utilizing public service systems because contact with these systems can, in some cases, increase the likelihood of landing in jail (Rios, 2006; Vargas, 2006). Regardless of one's opinion on whether reaching out for services is helpful or harmful, the result is a change in the structures within which

parents (adults) and children interact, which then has an impact at both the mesosystem and microsystem levels. In some cases, if relationships in the child's microsystem are maladaptive (e.g., strained parent-child relationships or school problems), and this is coupled with altered or minimal connections to others at additional layers of the ecological system, some youth may be particularly at risk because they are "free to commit delinquent acts because they lack ties to the conventional social order" (Hirschi, 2002, p. 3). Thus, the strained interrelations between the macrosystem and all subsequent layers must be considered when conceptualizing the problem of DMC rather than pointing the finger at one layer within the system.

Racially and economically charged environments also make up the macrosystem level. Adolescents, in particular African American adolescents, are expected to develop a positive sense of self in a society that continues to struggle with racial and social oppression. The psychological impact of living in oppressive environments affects African Americans on a daily basis, at least at some level, whether it is direct experiences with racism, or maneuvering in a society that was built on traditional, European American values. Youth who feel unvalued and constrained to follow both the spoken and unspoken rules set by Eurocentric, white cultural values may be less committed to conventional values, believing they have less to lose if they engage in deviant behaviors (Nagin & Paternoster, 1993). This perspective has been thoroughly reviewed and coined the rational choice theory (see Ward, Starfford, & Gray, 2006, for a full review).

Given that people of different backgrounds often have different beliefs that influence these layers (particularly at the macrosystem level), the interaction of multiple people from multiple backgrounds across these layers provides some insight as to what might be contributing to disproportionality. For example, the norms and rules of white culture often vary from the norms and rules of the African American culture. This may explain why the same behavior often is perceived differently depending upon the individuals involved. African Americans have historically been repeatedly disenfranchised by both state and federal laws as well as the U.S. Constitution; hence, findings from the Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics (Pastore & Maguire, 2003) that vividly illustrate that juvenile perceptions of justice vary by race are not surprising. When high school seniors were asked to rate the overall performance of the police and other law enforcement agencies, white students were much more likely to rate them as "good" or "very good," compared to African American students. Every year between 1991 and 2003, white students were, on average, twice as likely as African American students to view law enforcement positively, suggesting important racial differences in trust and belief in the legal system.

A related theory that may explain these differences in perceptions

is the symbolic threat theory (Leiber & Fox, 2005; Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006). In this theory, emotions such as fear and/or jealousy that stem from a lack of understanding of cultural differences result in the manifestation of beliefs that minority youth pose symbolic threats to middle-class, white standards. Evidence for this theory can be found in studies showing that African American involvement in delinquency is often viewed as related to something internal and dispositional (e.g., something within the person) whereas delinquency among white youth is often attributed to external causes (e.g., bad circumstances, poverty, etc.) (Bridges & Steen, 1998; Leiber, 2003). This deserves immediate attention given that when racial biases such as these occur early in the juvenile court proceedings, they frequently reappear indirectly at later stages of judicial disposition and sentencing (Leiber & Fox, 2005).

Because of the extent of DMC in Guilford County's public agencies (Frabutt, Kendrick, Arbuckle, & Cabaniss, 2005, Frabutt, Kendrick, Arbuckle, Cabaniss, Horton, & Jackson, 2006), evident at nearly every step of juvenile justice processing and in school suspensions, a multidisciplinary research team conducted a series of focus groups to address the following question: What are the reflections and lived experiences of youth impacted by racial disparities in the juvenile justice system? To explore this research question, we describe our community-driven, qualitative research methodology, present major thematic findings from boys' and girls' focus groups, and discuss those findings in light of theory, research, and application.

METHOD

Participants

Youth who were currently court-involved represented the population of interest. Although some researchers have conducted interviews with youth who have deeply penetrated the juvenile justice system and are housed in state youth development centers, few studies have sought the voices of the vast majority of youth served by this system, those with relatively minor charges. In order to understand the perspectives of this larger population, the committee chose to conduct interviews with youth who were not yet deeply involved in the justice system. To that end, youth were recruited from two particular Guilford county agencies, the Structured Day Program and the Juvenile Detention Center, and youth with very serious or violent charges were not eligible to participate.

Both the Juvenile Structured Day Program and the Guilford County Juvenile Detention Center are governed by the county's Court Alternatives Department. Youth typically spend less than two weeks in the detention center and between four and six months in the Juvenile Structured Day

program. While the detention center serves the juvenile court in the early stages of processing by housing youth awaiting court action or transfer to another facility, the structured day program is a resource available following adjudication. This program is open only to juveniles who have been court-ordered to attend. All study participants, with the exception of one boy, indicated that they had spent some time in the detention center.

Because this is a community-directed project, recruitment of study participants was entrusted to those most familiar with the population of interest. Youth were selected by agency representatives (of the structured day program and the detention center) who have daily contact with youth in their facilities and regular interactions with their parents and legal guardians. Parents and/or legal guardians signed consent for their children to participate in the study; youth signed assent forms. Criteria for selection included only that the youth was willing to participate and provide assent, a legal guardian was willing to provide informed consent, and the youth was not on any type of restrictions at the facility that would have restricted him from participation.

Focus Groups

Since county data indicated differential arrest rates based on gender (i.e., approximately two-thirds of all juveniles arrested in Guilford County in 2004 and 2005 were male), as well as qualitative differences in charges (i.e., boys were more likely to receive assault or affray charges, while girls were more likely to be charged with running away), the committee chose to interview girls separately from boys. Moreover, conducting separate sessions with homogeneous but contrasting groups is believed to facilitate more in depth discussions because participants sharing key characteristics may more easily identify with each other's experiences (Knodel, 1993).

Ultimately, two focus groups were conducted with youth. The first was comprised of ten African American boys, aged 14 and 15, who were participating in the Juvenile Structured Day Program. The second group was comprised of one Caucasian and five African American girls, aged 14 to 16, who were being detained in the Juvenile Detention Center. Girls reported that their initial involvement in the juvenile justice system began between the ages of 10 and 15, while boys first encountered the system between the ages of 11 and 14. For both groups, the average length of involvement in the system was two years.

To encourage in-depth conversations, semi-structured interview questions developed by the research team were open-ended and focused on only a few broad concepts (Knodel, 1993) [See Appendix for specific questions]. Both to protect the privacy of participants and because the

committee was primarily interested in the general experiences of court-involved youth, participants were asked not to discuss their specific charges.

Each focus group was led by three or four members of the DMC committee. In order to maintain consistency across sessions (Krueger, 1994), the DMC Project Coordinator, an African American female, served as the primary moderator for both groups, and the Detention Center Director, an African American male, served as an assistant moderator. Another African American female (YWCA Program Director) served as an additional moderator for the session with the girls, and a white female (university researcher) and an African American male (Director of the Greensboro Education and Development Council) served as additional moderators for the session with the boys. Ideally, moderators and participants would have been matched on race and gender (Knodel, 1993); however, the availability of qualified moderators, as well as Detention Center regulations requiring the director to be present at both sessions prevented such matching in this study. The focus group discussion with girls lasted approximately two hours, and the boy's session lasted about one hour. Each was audio-taped and subsequently transcribed by a graduate research assistant (and DMC committee member).

Analytic Approach

Compared to approaches to analyzing quantitative data, best practices for analyzing qualitative data (i.e., focus groups) continue to be controversial. Although some researchers advocate systematic line-by-line coding of text to ensure consistency, others believe this approach inhibits a full understanding of the context in which these "data bytes" are situated (Kennedy, Kools, & Krueger, 2001; Krueger, 2000; Krueger & Casey, 2000). Because our research attempts to answer questions about the lived experiences of youth impacted by racial disparities in the juvenile justice system, we cannot disregard the important context from which they speak. For this reason, we chose to focus on themes comprising broad conceptual categories (i.e., family dynamics, reflections on the court system, impressions about race), rather than developing extensive sets of detailed codes.

Inherent in this approach, however, is the potential for coding inconsistency. Knodel (1993) suggests that reliability can be considerably enhanced by involving multiple researchers in the analysis process. In this approach, a team of researchers independently analyzes the data and their interpretations are later compared and differences discussed. Krueger and King (1998) advocate a similar collaborative approach to analysis in community-led research projects. In their view, analysis can be guided by researchers experienced in qualitative methodologies, who oversee the

process, offer advice, and integrate into final reports the impressions, written notes, and critiques of others involved in the project.

We chose to model our analytic approach after those discussed by Knodel (1993) and Krueger and King (1998). Hence, data analysis was conducted in several stages and involved multiple analysts. As a first step, the primary session moderator provided a detailed summary of each focus group discussion. Next, detailed, thematic analysis was simultaneously and independently undertaken by multiple analysts (including university researchers). All analysts examined complete transcripts and either attended the session they analyzed or listened to the audio-tape.

Findings from independent analyses were then compiled and common themes summarized. Each team of analysts read these summaries and reconvened to discuss conflicting interpretations and debate the meaning and relevance of data that fell outside of thematic categories. When their concerns were reconciled, a preliminary report was developed for each focus group. These reports were then passed to another assistant moderator from each session who was asked to review it for accuracy and completeness. Their feedback was incorporated into the final reporting of findings discussed below.

<div align="center">FINDINGS</div>

Youth were engaged throughout the focus groups and appeared very comfortable with expressing their thoughts and opinions. Although we expected to find that different issues might be raised by boys and girls, there were, in fact, many similarities. For example, both genders discussed the challenges of growing up in low-income, high-crime neighborhoods; of having few positive adult role models; of troubles at home, in school, and in the community; and of perceived racial inequality. Throughout our discussion, we report combined, general findings from both focus group sessions, unless specifically noted.

Neighborhood Influences

Most boys and girls believed they would have made different behavioral choices if they had grown up in different neighborhoods. In fact, most boys felt that situations arising in their home communities led directly to their initial and continued involvement in the juvenile justice system. One boy described his impression of neighborhood influences in this way: "My neighborhood's just bad. If you grow up in that environment, you gonna be bad, too." One girl described where she lived as "not such a good place." More specifically, youth described living in neighborhoods where violence, gang activity, and drug crimes were common, but adult supervision was not.

Most youth believed having too much unsupervised time at home increased their opportunity to commit delinquent acts. Without responsible adults attending to them, youth tended to look for acceptance and respect from older peers or cousins who sometimes encouraged them to fight or to pick on other kids in the neighborhood. Several girls said that in their neighborhoods, they felt compelled to fight. However, they also believe that adults should intervene and discipline them when they behave inappropriately. When this does not happen, youth feel ignored and unimportant.

Few Positive Adult Role Models

A disconnection between youth and responsible, caring adults was expressed by both groups. Boys specifically wished for an adult male they could look up to. Although most of the boys were cared for by their mothers or grandmothers, they had fewer, if any, meaningful relationships with respected adult males. While they clearly loved the women in their lives, they did not believe they could provide the type of support, guidance, and discipline they were seeking in a male mentor. One boy stated, "If I would've had somebody to look up to, I wouldn't have done this." Perhaps this lack of male mentors is indicative of greater incarceration rates among African American men, resulting in the removal of older males in the community.

Unlike the boys who described loving relationships with female caregivers, girls in the study reported fewer positive connections with any adults and spoke at length about their feelings of alienation and isolation. One young woman commented, "Really, I didn't have nobody to care for me." Many believed that their caregivers had low expectations of them, often excused their delinquent behaviors, and generally took little interest in their lives. One young woman commented, "I think if someone had actually sat me down and talked to me… and really showed me that attention and… love that I needed, I wouldn't be in here."

Disengagement at Home

Many girls, in particular, described highly volatile and unstable home lives, where physical abuse, substance abuse, and sexual assault were common. As a result, many moved frequently between their parents' homes, between those of other relatives, and between various foster and group homes. In many cases, new living arrangements were little improved over past ones. One young woman described her experience this way, "I been living with all my family members and all them said I was bad; I wasn't going to get nothing in life." Others discussed running away from home, with one stating, "I felt like I could do better on my own."

When asked how their experiences at home might influence their behavioral choices in the community, most youth were concerned about having inadequate discipline. Many believed they received too few consequences from caregivers for inappropriate behavior. As an example, a young woman described her mother's response when she learned that her daughter had shoplifted. Instead of punishing her, her mother dismissed the incident as probably unintentional. The young woman felt as though her mother was in some ways condoning petty offending, behavior the youth believed could evolve into more serious offending (and more serious consequences) as she got older. Another girl suggested she may not be facing her current troubles if she had been punished when she was younger for more minor offenses, like stealing from classmates.

Other youth believed their caregivers did not take a sufficiently proactive role in their lives. Several girls reported skipping school because there was no pressure or consequences regarding attending school by their caregivers. As one young woman said, "There were a bunch of days when I wasn't told to go to school… if someone had pushed me to get up and go [I would have]." Another young woman mentioned that when she was 13, her curfew was 10:00 pm, too late, in her opinion, for someone so young. Though adults in their lives have been largely unreliable, youth are not ready to give up on them. They are still seeking positive adult influences. In the words of one young woman, "I feel that we… need some guidance in our [lives]."

Across the themes of Neighborhood Influences, Few Positive Adult Role Models, and Disengagement at Home, it is important to note that neighborhoods and adults also are marginalized and struggle with strained relationships between the layers of the cultural-bioecological system. With those stresses, one should refrain from situating the entire blame upon parents, families and neighbors, but shine the light on unemployment, police brutality, drug epidemics, and poverty across the broader social structure that impact the lives of both children and adults of color on a daily basis.

Disengagement at School

Many youth also described feeling disengaged from their schools. Some spoke about sitting in classrooms and feeling that their teachers were disinterested in what they were learning. They believed teachers preferred to give students failing grades for poor performance than to inquire about personal problems that may be contributing to their academic challenges. Others described feeling excluded from extracurricular involvement. Though most wanted to participate in these activities, often they were ineligible for various reasons: in this school system, sixth graders are not allowed to play junior varsity

sports; participation in other activities is contingent upon earning A's or B's in classes; and breaking certain school rules makes students ineligible for any extracurricular involvement. Youth believe that participation in these activities promotes overall student engagement in school and that policies that exclude entire groups of students are short-sighted. Others suggested that some students only attend school in order to participate in "fun" activities and noted that school attendance is almost always high on assembly or ball game days. One young woman asserted, "If there were more afternoon school events, then more kids would participate during school and do what they have to do so that they can get that other reward, you know, after school is over." Even when these youth are eligible to participate, they often feel activities are designed primarily to meet the cultural interests of white youth; and activities that may be more culturally interesting to African American youth, like step or rap teams, are rarely offered. One youth commented, "They take so many things away from us, and so we're like, really, what do we have to go to school for?"

Disengagement in the Community

Youth described participating in several public and non-profit community programs. In most cases, they reported that they were not very helpful in addressing their needs. For example, youth discussed what they considered to be an ineffective anger management class. In their view, this program ignored the realities of their lives by teaching techniques that simply did not work in their neighborhoods or schools. As one young woman describes: "They be like, "just walk away," but over in the hood, you can't do that…If you walk away from someone, you know if you was to walk away from somebody, you won't know what they gonna do, you know, people is known to hit you in the back of the head, if you gonna walk away from somebody." One young woman said she was ridiculed and attacked while she attempted to count to ten, as instructed in this program, to avoid a fight. She reported, "I don't see that none of this stuff is working because…if you are faced with a problem like that, would you turn your back, I mean, if somebody was hitting with you? If you had an argument or whatever, would you turn your back and start counting to ten? By the time you count to ten, that person already done beat on you, you know what I'm saying, they might hadn't been to anger management class. They don't know to count to ten." Other programs, especially mental health counseling and some medications were described as helpful; however, youth said transportation problems sometimes prevented them from utilizing these services. When asked why they did not take advantage of other community resources, such as those offered by recreation centers and the YMCA/YWCA, youth were either not aware of

them, could not pay for them, or did not believe their parents would enroll them. Most were surprised to learn that many community programs offered scholarships and that applications did not always require parent signatures.

Experiences with Law Enforcement

Youth spoke at length about their adversarial relationships with adult authority figures, especially law enforcement officers, either those assigned to their schools or those they encountered on the street. The numerous interactions they discussed were typically characterized by feelings of distrust and disrespect. In many cases, boys, in particular, did not believe these adults deserved respect unless they offered it first. In discussing an encounter with police officers assigned to his school, a young man asserted: "They be like, you little black-n, you know the racial word. And so that gives us the right to say something back to them." Others felt that law enforcement officers target youth for punishment especially if they have committed prior offenses. They described multiple examples of being detained, arrested, or charged for engaging in the same behavior as other youth who were routinely let go or ignored entirely.

Experiences with the Court System

Both boys and girls reported that they had been to court several times. They expressed great distrust of their defense attorneys whom they rarely met before their court appearance and of juvenile court counselors who do not always appear to be on their side. Youth expected their court counselors and public defenders to represent them favorably before the judge, but were often let down. One young man said, "My probation officer, the last time I was on probation, came by the house once a month and that was only to come by and tell me what was gonna happen in court, with my next court date." But, this young man described how probation officers are not always supporting youth. He said that "they play both sides…yeah, they on both, cause if you cut up, you gotta do the consequences. If you don't cut up, then they on your side." Youth tended to view judges only as punitive figures who are eager to send them to detention, even for minor offenses. As has been mentioned before, it was very important to the youth in this study (especially the girls) that the adults making decisions about them get to know them, and they are disappointed when this does not happen. One young woman commented, "They judge you for things you have done without even knowing you."

Most youth felt under-informed about their cases as they awaited their hearings. Many youth (especially those confined in the detention center prior to their court date) believed court counselors should visit more

often and maintain regular communication until their cases are heard. Youth reported that this rarely occurred. Many youth also complained that their court counselors do not listen to them, but give priority to their parents' wishes. In some cases, youth believe their parents do not want them to return home and will sometimes exaggerate their behavior problems.

Youth were also poorly informed about legal proceedings more generally. For instance, one young woman was not aware that anything she said under oath could be held against her. Another did not understand why her attorney advised pleading self-defense to a charge she did not think was fair. Since she had only just met him, she had no time to ask questions before her case was heard. Youth were also intimidated by the legal process and were afraid to defend themselves, believing they might worsen their situations. One young woman described feeling embarrassed when she heard giggles in the court room after she directly addressed the judge to voice objection to what was being said about her.

Perceptions of Racial Inequality

Both boys and girls in this study believed that African American youth are treated differently than white youth in school, court, and the community. They felt that their schools did not offer activities that met the cultural interests of African American youth, and that white teachers, in particular, are more interested in the academic achievement of white students. Others felt that African American youth are more quickly stereotyped as troublemakers. In the words of one youth, "Everybody looks at us and thinks 'bad juveniles' but you know, we really ain't." Boys, in particular, believed school resource officers and patrol officers target African American youth for punishment and often term their behavior "resistance" while ignoring similar behavior by white youth.

Still others believe African American youth are more often diagnosed with learning or behavioral problems and are over-medicated. One youth asserted, "They done labeled me as being all these kind of letters, ABC, HDS, and all these types." Another said, "I have never seen a white child up in the office taking Ritalin in the morning.... Mostly it's the black kids." Far from helping them with their personal problems, youth believed being labeled in this way only increased their ostracism, especially from adults whom they feel focus more on their diagnoses than on other complications in their lives.

In discussing their impressions of the impact of race in the court, youth believe that most often the people with power to make decisions about them in court are white and have little empathy for their life challenges. One young woman commented, "They are more sympathetic to other races

than to us." Youth offered several examples of witnessing white youth being asked to explain what personal or family circumstances may underlie their behaviors, but they could remember no similar questioning of African American youth, whom they believe are judged more by their perceived "nature" than by their circumstances. Though they did not dismiss the impact of race on their lives, youth clearly believed that the bigger issue was that few adults, white or African American, seem to genuinely care about them. In the words of one young woman, "It's not really racial. It's just that you have people that care about you and people that don't care and people that want to see you fail and people that want to see you succeed."

What the Future Holds

Boys in this study were not very forthcoming in discussing what lay ahead for them. Most suggested that they would try to stay out of trouble, but others indicated they had past injustices to settle and expected to encounter the justice system again. The girls, on the other hand, spoke more freely about their futures. They were generally not hopeful that their lives would change for the better once they exited the court system since they expected to return to the same life situations that brought them to court in the first place. One young woman commented, "I feel that when we get out of here, what're we gonna do besides go back to the same old stuff we used to do?" Another young woman said, "I has problems and stuff after I get out of here…I mean, I ain't got nothing else to do when I get out of here besides look for a job, and I think, when you fill out an application, you're not gonna get a job right then and there…Not unless somebody's desperate, you know what I'm saying? And it's tough to get a job when you don't have an education behind you, too." Some girls believed their life chances would improve if they could find a way out of poverty. Many worried about overcoming the stigma of having been in the juvenile court system, believing their history may undermine their success in school or in securing a job. As one young woman expressed, "It's so easy just to get into the system, but it's so hard to get out."

Youth can imagine themselves succeeding eventually, but are disheartened at the obstacles in their way. In their view, for things to really change for the better for them, the community must take an active role and genuine interest in their lives and offer them more support as they confront particularly difficult challenges everyday. In the simple words of one young woman: "The community needs to start coming together with us."

CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY

Findings from our work suggest that many African American youth who have entered the juvenile justice system have few meaningful relationships with positive adult role models and tend to distrust many authority figures, including parents, other caregivers, teachers and school administrators, law enforcement officers and court officials. Moreover, they often view their schools, neighborhoods, and even their homes as hostile environments. Within these places, they contend with substantial personal challenges, often created, exacerbated, or ignored by the adults in their lives. These youth have few advocates for their needs and are generally disengaged at home, in their schools, and in the community. Understandably, they have difficulty believing in and committing to the values of a society that has largely excluded them.

Despite their generally weak social bonds, the youth in our study view close relationships with adults who care about them as among the most important factors in transforming their lives. This is consistent with Hirschi's (2002) position that relationships in the microsystem (i.e., immediate environmental influences of family members, school, peers, and neighborhoods) are essential to youth feeling supported and are strong deterrents to acting out behaviors. While acknowledging the limitation that the issues raised by the youth we interviewed may not represent the concerns of all youth, particularly since we interviewed a small subset during a short period of time (approximately two hours), these issues do suggest that many adults who are in positions to influence youths' behavioral choices are letting them down. Parents and caregivers often are dealing with their own set of problems, teachers and school officials are poorly equipped to address the range of needs presented by their students, and law enforcement officers are expected to place public safety concerns above the needs of individual youth. When these mesosystems, or connections between the influences of youth, are strained, the connections between the cultural-bioecological levels within people's lives also are strained, resulting in a limited support network at multiple levels. In sum, when connections at the mesosystem level are strained, it appears that youth are less likely to integrate the developmentally supportive aspects of the other ecological layers.

At the macrosystem level, which includes the larger cultural context (economic, political, racial), it was powerful to hear that all youth interviewed, both white and African American, believed that African American youth are treated differently than white youth. Youth voiced that they are perceived as "bad youth", and that the behavior of African American youth is viewed differently that the behavior of white youth. These findings support the symbolic threat theory (Leiber & Fox, 2005; Riek, Mania, & Gaertner,

2006) in that differences in behavior appear to be viewed as deviance that is the result of internal and dispositional causes (e.g., the youth is bad) rather than external causes (e.g., cultural differences, bad circumstances, poverty, etc.) (Bridges & Steen, 1998; Leiber, 2003). These perceptions of inequality reappeared in the court system according to the youth interviewed, with African American youth feeling that their behavior was perceived as something in their "nature" rather than their circumstances.

Many studies have examined decision points thoroughly and have been able to discern patterns of overrepresentation in the juvenile justice system (Butts, Bynum, Chaiken, Feyerherm et al., 2003; Leiber & Fox, 2005; Leiber & Mack, 2003). There are sophisticated statistical techniques designed to hone in on the components of the juvenile justice system that are most disproportionate. While all of that effort and energy is greatly needed, communities that engage in DMC reduction efforts also must listen for the voices of their youth by supplementing their quantitative research with qualitative data (Soler, 2007). Hearing the words of youth enlivens the raw statistics in a way that quantitative analyses never will; their own words lay bare the challenges behind the numbers and give the issue the human face that it needs if it is to ever gain traction in our communities (Soler, 2007). Although it is possible that conformity and/or group influence can contaminate or swap the results, focus group experts suggest that this is not always the case and the benefits of what information you can gain from a focus group outweighs the possible risks of group influence (Morgan, 1998).

By utilizing the principles of participatory action research and listening directly to the voices of youth, communities can create programs with youth rather than for (or, arguably, against) youth. In order to truly hear those voices, a cultural-bioecological systems theory offers a useful framework for which to understand their concerns. When dealing with intractable community issues that are wrapped up in race, gender, and poverty, a cultural-bioecological approach is both essential and instructive as it allows for comprehensive attention to the multiple layers that influence both the target issue (DMC) as well as the lives of youth. By examining disproportionality with a culturally-appropriate lens, we begin to see that the problem is not youth-specific, but rather, a larger social problem of weak and/or failed positive connections between youth and the community as well as strained relationships between the ecological levels. Using this framework, as opposed to more general juvenile justice statistic-type studies, we can begin to develop creative solutions to address DMC across our communities that are driven by, and for, youth. For example, since completing this project and in direct response to the voices of our youth, local community members began examining mentor programs in the area in order to expand and enhance

these programs for African American youth, and additional funds have been allocated to support these programs. Although there are no obvious solutions to the problems that adult priorities and decisions create for youth, the youth themselves suggest a starting point. They genuinely believe that a caring relationship with even a single positive adult role model can change the course of their lives and help them reconnect with and contribute positively to the society that has thus far rejected their behavioral choices. Their concerns are consistent with a cultural-bioecological framework and suggest that each layer must work in harmonic combination within the lives of these youth if we, as a community, are going to be successful and decrease DMC rates in the juvenile justice system.

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APPENDIX

Focus Group Questions Posed to Both Groups

- How old are you now, and how old were you when you first entered the juvenile justice system?
- What, if anything, might have prevented you from entering the system?
- What other programs or services have you been court-ordered to attend or use in the past?
- How does court work – what is the process from your perspective?
- What is the role or job of your court counselor? Your attorney?
- Describe your experiences with your court counselor and attorney
- How will your experiences in the court system impact your future decisions or actions?
- In what ways, if any, do you feel you were treated differently because of the color of your skin?
- What needs to be done, from your standpoint, to prevent your re-entry into the justice system and to keep others from entering it?

KELLY N. GRAVES, Ph.D., is the Associate Director of the Center for Youth, Family, and Community Partnerships at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She is trained as a clinical psychologist.

JAMES M. FRABUTT, Ph.D., is a faculty member in the Mary Ann Remick Leadership Program and a Concurrent Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Notre Dame.

EMILY CABANISS is a doctoral student in sociology at North Carolina State University. She completed her master's degree in sociology at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

MARTHA J. GATHINGS is a doctoral student in sociology at North Carolina State University. She completed her master's degree in sociology at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

MARY H. KENDRICK is a seasoned community organizer and consultant with the Center for Youth, Family, and Community Partnerships at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

MARGARET B. ARBUCKLE, Ph.D., is the Executive Director of Guilford Education Alliance in Guilford County, North Carolina.