Perspectives on Hypercriminalization and Its Impact on Racially Minoritized Youth: Insights from Juvenile and Human Services Practitioners

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ABSTRACT

The criminalization of racially minoritized youth is often examined in the literature on racial and ethnic disparities (RED) and the school-to-prison pipeline. Most of the research in this area focuses on the impact of formalized criminalization on the offending trajectories of racially minoritized youth, often overlooking informal experiences with criminalization and their influence on how these youth construct their self-perceptions. The current study assesses human and juvenile justice service providers' perceptions of the impact of repeated criminalization on racially minoritized youths' self-concept and other outcomes. The results of thematic coding showed that practitioners perceived that the ubiquitous experience of regular criminalization altered racially minoritized youths' self-concept and contributed to other problems, including compounded criminalization, and the development of internalizing and at-risk behaviors. The results suggest that the criminalization process extends beyond juvenile justice processing and access to conventional opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

Recent incidents involving the extrajudicial shooting and killing of unarmed Black youth by police officers and civilians have accentuated how Black youth are targeted for differential treatment and denied the compassion and understanding traditionally granted to White children. Marginalized young people, or racially minoritized youth, often

receive less empathy from society than their White counterparts, harming their overall well-being (Goff, Thomas & Jackson, 2008). This is particularly true in health, depressive symptoms, and school adjustment (Koch & Kozhumam, 2022; Wong, Eccles & Sameroff, 2003). Additionally, racially and ethnically marginalized youth are often left alone and without support in areas where White children are typically given more warmth and empathy by society.

The same is true for racially minoritized youth who are justice-involved. Once adjudicated delinquent, racially minoritized youths' delinquent acts seldom, if ever, are attributed to mitigating factors such as mental health, bullying, immature brain development, or poverty. The adultification and marginalization of racially minoritized youth and the related culpability they are perceived to have for their actions can lead to racially disparate outcomes in the juvenile justice system (Goff et al., 2014). Regarding juvenile courts, Abrams and colleagues (2021) found that Black youth are overrepresented at every stage of the justice process compared to White youth. This includes probation referrals and the decision to file petitions. This likely happens because the belief that racially minoritized youth's actions are solely due to their agency often leads to the view that they deserve the most extreme punishment.

Moreover, research shows that racially minoritized youth are often unfairly targeted and punished in homes, schools, and neighborhoods. Research has shown that the punitive attitude displayed in juvenile justice systems is replicated in homes for minoritized youth (Cooper et al., 2020; Elliott & Reid, 2019). For instance, Elliott and Reid (2019) found that Black mothers often use parenting strategies that resemble the punitive practices of the justice system, including excessive surveillance and discipline. This finding was partly attributed to mothers viewing the adoption of an authoritative parenting style as a means of protecting their children from the hyper-criminalization they predicted their children would encounter outside of their homes.

Similarly, other studies have found that minoritized youth experience punitive treatment in their neighborhoods, leading to constant surveillance and policing (Solis, Portillos & Brunson, 2009; Vera Sanchez & Adams, 2011). One consequence of this has been the marked increase in the proliferation of viral video recordings of civilians interrogating racially minoritized youth in their communities. This is often done in an aggressive or hostile manner and can lead to feelings of intimidation and vulnerability for the youth involved.

To date, no study has illustrated the ubiquitous and pervasive punishment of racially marginalized young people and the processes by which punishment connects to various outcomes as much as Victor Rios's (2011) study, Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys. In this qualitative study, Rios found that 40 Black and Latino male youths faced presumptions of deviance and criminality in their interactions with authority figures in the juvenile justice system, schools, neighborhoods, and homes. Rios also found that Black and Latino boys confronted an invisible and punishing system of control that followed their presumed criminality. Consequently, the racially minoritized youth experienced constant punishment, which led them to further engage in delinquent behavior and to develop a strong disdain for authority.

Though Rios's study only involved a sample of 40 youth, his work, like most qualitative research did not aim to generalize its findings to a broader population in the same way as quantitative studies. Instead, it sought to provide deep contextualized insights into the lived experiences and perspectives of the participants, As a result, Rios's work contributed to theory-building and enhanced our under-

standing of systemic issues the the 'youth control completx' by uncovering patterns and mechanisms that possibly manifest across similar contexts. As a result, Rios's study was well received. However, few additional studies have focused on the criminalization of racially minoritized youth across social settings as Rios has (e.g., Beneby, Glenn & Taylor, 2020; Farinde-Wu, Butler & Allen-Handy, 2022; Maldonado, 2019).

Racially minoritized youth experience a unique form of racialized social control compared to youth of other racial backgrounds. However, we have limited knowledge about the effects of these experiences on their self-concept and other outcomes. In this study, we used the insights of human service and justice professionals to see the impact of criminalization on minoritized youths' self-concept and other outcomes. We relied on the professional testimonies of these groups specifically because they work closely with racially marginalized youth to help transform their behavior and boost their self-concept. The current study asked: How does criminalization impact minoritized youths' self-concept?

States nationwide continue to prioritize the elimination of racial and ethnic disparities (RED) among youth involved in the justice system despite limited success in recent decades. An important next step is understanding how criminalization affects the self-concept and overall well-being of racially minoritized youth. This will help inform and update best practices for reducing RED. Furthermore, understanding these effects can help us understand and discuss initiatives for enhancing the effectiveness of programs that support racially minoritized youth. This is particularly important when considering issues of racial equality and cultural understanding.

Racial Discrimination and Self-Concept

Racism and discrimination often negatively affect young people from marginalized racial groups. Minoritized youth suffer harm from racial discrimination, which leads to their attendance at low-quality schools, limited healthcare access, strained relationships, and other structural inequalities (Njoroge, Forkpa & Bath, 2021). Systematic discrimination affects minoritized youth, but there is limited knowledge of its impact on their self-concept. Self-concept is how individuals see themselves- their abilities, characteristics, and behaviors (Bailey, 2003; Campbell, 1990). Rogers (2013) identified three components of the self-concept. These include the ideal self, the person one wants to be. The second component, self-image, refers to how a person views themselves, while self-esteem refers to the extent to which they accept and value themselves. The term self-concept is often used interchangeably with self-esteem and self-image.

There is limited information about how racial discrimination affects a person's self-concept, and the process is poorly understood. Some experts have tried to explain this process, suggesting that self-concept is mainly influenced by individuals' social interactions with others and societal institutions like the media and schools, especially during childhood and adolescence (Argyle, 2017; Sebastian, Burnett & Blakemore, 2008; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2016). Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory suggests that self-concept is shaped by the groups one belongs to. This perspective is also known as the "labeling theory" in the criminology discipline. According to this perspective, when young people are labeled as deviant or delinquent by the juvenile justice system, they tend to adopt delinquent identities and engage in more frequent and serious offenses (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1951).

Society plays a role in shaping our self-concept. Additionally, parents pass on their views of race and ethnicity to their children. Positive racial socialization fosters pride and a positive view of one's racial or ethnic group. Studies have shown that experiencing positive racial socialization is linked to

better preparation for dealing with discrimination and racism. Furthermore, a positive racial socialization experience can help lessen perceived discrimination's impact on self-concept (Harris-Britt et al., 2007). Positive racial socialization protects against racism and discrimination and strengthens young people's self-concept (Constantine & Blackmon, 2002).

Empirical studies have consistently shown that having a positive self-image is linked to better problem-solving abilities, adjustment, life satisfaction, and popularity among peers for young people (Cornell et al., 1990; Noviandari & Mursidi, 2019; Palacios et al., 2015). Research studies have found that having a positive self-concept is important for young people. It is linked to behavior in the classroom, academic achievement, abstinence from violence, delinquency, feelings of hopelessness, and depression. Several other studies support the positive benefits of a well-developed self-concept (Bidell & Deacon, 2010; Donnellan et al., 2005; Harter 1993; Mier & Ladny, 2018; Murphy, Stosny & Morrel, 2005) and how informal labeling impacts self-concept development. We consider how this relates to hypercriminalization.

Formal and Informal Labeling and Self-Concept

Researchers have extensively studied the relationship between labeling and self-concept and other outcomes for many years, using different research methods. Research in this area suggests that being labeled by formal institutions, like the criminal justice system, hurts how individuals view themselves. For instance, Restivo and Lanier (2015) showed through linear regression models that official intervention and labeling by the criminal justice system result in a more negative and deviant self-perception, lower expectations for positive social behavior, and an increased association with peers engaged in deviant activities. This finding aligns with earlier research on the effects of labeling by formal institutions. Adolescents involved in the criminal justice system are especially at risk of accepting a label assigned to them, developing a delinquent self-concept, and having a lower self-concept compared to their peers. (Chassin et al., 1981; Brownfield & Thompson, 2008; Evans et al., 1981).

Labeling, which occurs in informal circles such as families, educational environments, and among community stakeholders, has been extensively studied. Studies on informal labeling yield more nuanced findings compared to formal labeling. Some studies (Chassin et al., 1981) suggest that when youth face negative informal labels, their self-concepts may become more deviant. However, it does not necessarily mean they will be motivated to engage in further deviant behavior. Researchers have found some evidence that informal labeling leads to negative outcomes. Studies have shown that parents' judgments of their children's personalities are connected to increased delinquent behavior (Matsueda, 1992). Furthermore, Asencio and Burke (2011) found that how peers and important people in one's life label them also influences how young individuals see themselves. In this study, labels from external sources like friends, family, or others were found to be more accurate predictors of delinquent behavior and negative self-concept than the labels that young people give themselves. This is known as "reflected appraisal."

METHOD

Setting

We collected surveys from 79 professionals who work with young people in the justice system. These professionals attended a conference in the United States to learn new techniques for working with justice-involved youth. The surveys focused on the association between criminalization and the self-concept of minoritized youths. The conference did not cover these topics, so it did not affect the responses to the survey.

This study employed qualitative methods not to establish causal relationships in a deterministic or statistical sense, but to explore practitioners' perspectives on the mechanisms and processes through which hypercriminalization influences juvenile outcomes. Qualitative research is well-suited to uncovering the nuances of such complex social phenomena. According to Maxwell (2004), qualitative methods can illuminate causal processes and contextual factors that shape outcomes, providing a complementary perspective to quantitative approaches. The narratives and experiences shared by participants in the study offer critical insights into their understanding of the causal links between hypercriminalization and juvenile outcomes.

Data Collection

During session breaks at the conference, attendees visited a booth staffed by the authors and received a brief explanation of the study's purpose. They were then invited to fill out surveys and rewarded with a small incentive: a t-shirt, lawn chair, or tote bag. The survey was provided in two formats. Attendees could complete a hard copy at the booth or supply their email addresses. Researchers then sent a survey link to those who chose the second choice and were permitted to complete the survey at a time of their choosing. Participants who opted to complete the survey later were still provided with an incentive.

Instrument

The survey had 19 questions about racial and ethnic disparities in the justice system and the criminalization of minority youth. Some questions had multiple-choice answers, while others were open-ended and required a written response. The item used in the study asked, "Have you seen how the criminalization of minoritized youth impacts their self-concept? Explain." It was worded this way to give respondents the choice to answer the question and further elaborate on their response. The question also allowed participants to explain how stigmatization and criminalization affect how young people from minority groups see themselves. The survey took an estimated 15 minutes to complete.

Data Analysis

This study analyzed the open-ended survey responses using NVivo version 12. Like any research, it's important to analyze and code the data systematically. The Creswell (2014) qualitative research approach was used. This involved organizing, coding, and developing conceptual themes to report the qualitative data findings. The authors first read and coded the open-ended responses from the survey. They analyzed the responses based on a description of the respondents' answers. The researchers coded independently and then met to develop a preliminary codebook. They had an open discussion about major codes, their definitions, and direct quotes from the survey responses. After several team meetings and discussions, the codes were combined into conceptual themes. The themes were created from agreed-upon findings about how minoritized youth are treated as criminals and how it affects how they see themselves.

RESULTS

The study participants mainly identified as Black (60%) and White (33.3%). The sample participants reported their occupations. Only 1.3% worked in law enforcement, while 30% worked in court services, community programs (40%), facilities (20%), and other areas (8.8%). Additionally, the sample consisted of administrators (20%), program managers (8.8%), juvenile probation officers (18.8%), juvenile defenders and advocates (3.8%), juvenile detention administrators and supervisors (2.6%), juvenile detention officers (5%), social workers (11.3%), therapists (1.3%), and other roles (28.7%). Sixty-four percent of the survey respondents worked in the state where the conference was held.

Out of the 79 people who filled out the survey, most (85%) reported that they witnessed how criminalization affected the self-image of racially minoritized youth involved in the justice system in their work experiences. Many practitioners listed the negative effects of criminalization on racially minoritized youths' self-concept, but surprisingly, they also mentioned its effects on other aspects of their lives. The coding process identified five themes regarding the effects of criminalization on racially marginalized young people. These themes included concerns about compounding criminalization, the impact on self-concept, the development of internal struggles, engagement in risky behaviors, and a negative sense of racial identity.

Theme #1: Compounded Criminalization

Frequent criminalization leads racially minoritized youth to develop delinquent attitudes and thought patterns, as reported by respondents. These patterns worsen the effects of their criminalization. One respondent mentioned that when some young people start down this path, they develop a mindset that pushes them further into criminalization because they feel resigned to always being in trouble. Respondents also believed that racially minoritized youths' awareness of how others view them as delinquent and criminal makes the effects of their criminalization worse. As a result, the youth are expected to be criminalized.

One respondent mentioned that many racially minoritized youth feel that they are seen as taboo or will be labeled by teachers, principals, and other professionals once they become involved in the system. The data showed that these youth expect to be treated as criminals in different situations by various people, which makes them feel even more isolated. Respondents revealed that racially marginalized young people expressed concerns about unfair treatment and potential criminalization throughout their involvement in the justice system during their academic journey. One respondent pointed out that "minoritized youth receive the message, at every step, that they are considered bad kids." Overall, the data showed that these youth are worried about the possibility of being criminalized repeatedly by various sources throughout the justice process and in various social settings.

Theme #2: Self-Fulfilling Prophecy and Self-Concept

Many survey participants agreed that young people from racially marginalized backgrounds involved in the juvenile justice system are often labeled, creating a cycle of expectations that become true; meaning, minoritized youth often become the societal labels that are forced upon them. One practitioner noted that youth are often labeled as "bad" or compared to negative people, such as parents. The belief that one immoral act defines who they are and will be in life leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy. This directly indicates that young people feel this decides their worth. One respondent said that many young people from marginalized groups feel labeled as "bad kids" due to their interactions

with the juvenile justice system or school resource officers. Another respondent mentioned that several youths had told them, "I have the name, so I might as well play the game." Youth also mentioned that they expect to be involved in the juvenile justice system because "everyone else is."

Many court professionals try to change negative thinking and promote positive thinking. One person said, "We have to remind young people in our programs that they may have done something wrong, but they're not bad. However, it's hard to stop this cycle because they're constantly called delinquents and eventually start seeing themselves that way. Being labeled at home and by society can make them more likely to commit further crimes." One person said that after being constantly labeled, some young people act how others see them. An overwhelming majority of the respondents agreed that labeling a youth affects their self-concept. Respondents said that labeling racially minoritized youth can lead to internalized behaviors that affect their emotional and psychological well-being.

Theme #3: Development of Internalizing Behaviors

In addition to self-concept, respondents mentioned that when racially minoritized youth are treated as criminals, they start to internalize harmful behaviors that affect their mental and emotional well-being. One practitioner mentioned that when these youth are criminalized, it leads to low self-concept, thoughts of suicide, and self-harming behavior. It also makes them feel helpless and hopeless. As a result, they often give up without much hope for a different future or opportunities for change.

These behaviors show how much these young people suffer because of criminalization. One participant in the study pointed out that many young people entering the system lack self-concept, hope, support, and the motivation to help themselves. This supports the idea that some youth face significant challenges

and may be prone to giving up easily. When discussing the well-being of racially minoritized youth, it's important to consider how they see themselves. Their perception is influenced by practitioners, their parents, and society. The previous participant mentioned that racially minori-tized youth start the system with a negative view of themselves. After experiencing more traumatic encounters with the juvenile justice system, these young people's self-perception is altered to the point where they truly believe they are "bad," "hopeless," and "not worth the trouble." It's tough for them to overcome the stigma and reach their full potential. Minoritized youth engage in delinquent and risky behaviors because they believe no one is there to help them, and they give up.

Theme #4: Development of At-Risk Behaviors

Respondents noticed that criminalization had another effect on minoritized youth. It led them to engage in behaviors that increased their risk for delinquency. Respondents testified that once criminalized, racially minoritized youth responded by gravitating toward negative peer groups. One respondent mentioned that these peer groups make bad choices. These peer associations cause racially minoritized youth to engage in self-destructive behaviors, which can lead them to the juvenile justice system and even adult prisons. Criminalization also exposes them to other negative influences, which can change their values. One person said that when young people from racially marginalized communities are treated as criminals, they may start admiring rappers who promote violence and use profanity.

Respondents in the study highlighted several reasons for minoritized youth developing contempt for authority. One significant factor was the association with negative peers and influences. This exposure, coupled with the criminalization of youth, led to the development of antisocial values. One respondent mentioned that racially minoritized youth displayed "no respect for themselves or authority."

This lack of respect extended to various modes of authority, such as laws, norms, rules, teachers, administrators, justice professionals, and the police.

DISCUSSION

Human services practitioners who work closely with the criminal justice system and youth and families have a limited representation in the research literature. Racially minoritized youth are over-represented in almost all aspects of the juvenile justice system. The present study used service providers' knowledge to learn how they see the effects of criminalization on racially minoritized young people. The practitioners in this study gave valuable insights based on their interactions with minoritized young people who were being criminalized. These observations produced important implications for improving the criminal justice system.

Limitations of the current study should be acknowledged. Our analysis is based on qualitative data from 79 professionals who provided their perceptions of how hypercriminalization affects the youth they work with. As such, our findings reflect practitioners' interpretations rather than direct evidence the impact of hypercriminalization on the development of youth self-concept development. While these perceptions are valuable for understanding how professionals conceptualize hypercriminalization's impact, they do not constitute empirical measures of self-concept constructs. Future research incorporating direct assessments of youth perspectives would be beneficial in validating these interpretations.

Manufacturing Criminality

Victor Rios (2011) was one of the first researchers to study how minoritized youth are affected by being seen and treated as criminal and deviant. His research revealed that hypercriminalization is common among these young individuals. He also documented the significant consequences of their increasing involvement in delinquency and their lack of respect for authority figures. Rios' framework suggests that racially minoritized youth accepting labels assigned to them through criminalization leads to their subsequent interactions with the justice system.

Many of these young people may not have continued or gotten worse in their bad behavior and faced criminal consequences if not for their continued stigmatization. The human services practitioners in this study often talked about their observations. They noticed that young people were adopting attitudes that matched their criminal labels. Compounded criminalization and self-fulfilling prophecy show how future delinquency may result from being treated as criminals rather than the behavior they were destined to exhibit. This concept aligns with previous research on the association between labeling and self-concept. Studies have found that youth who receive negative evaluations of their behavior from parents and peers tend to show increased delinquency (Asencio & Burke, 2011; Chassin et al., 1981).

The manufacturing of delinquent behavior was demonstrated through practitioners' perspectives. They focused on internalized attitudes that externalize and manifest into anti-social behavior. Respondents observed youth experiencing suicidal ideation, which includes feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. Moreover, practitioners observed that many racially minoritized youth become so accepting of the labels placed upon them that they reject the idea that their lives can go against these labels. As a result, these attitudes often manifest as

risky, deviant, or delinquent behavior. Manufactured delinquency, unlike organic gang activity, crimes of opportunity, or substance abuse, is a different form of wrongdoing. The labels that come from criminalization appear to be the main cause of continued, law-violating behavior.

Micro-Level Experiences, but Macro-Level Associations

Like Rios's (2011) study, respondents observed that young people face criminalization in various systems and institutions. Criminalization affects individuals, communities, and institutions like schools and families. Previous studies have shown its presence in various settings and among different actors in the criminal justice system. In the present study, respondents reported witnessing instances of criminalization involving school resource officers and members of the community. These observations occur together with racial disparities in the outcomes of minority youth across different systems. Racially minoritized youth often face challenges in education, including unfair discipline, higher rates of mental health diagnosis, and overrepresentation in the juvenile justice system (Chen et al., 2021; Liu & Chen, 2021; Fadus et al., 2020; Fadus et al., 2021; Leiber et al., 2019).

Complex issues related to these different outcomes have been studied for years. Nevertheless, the role hypercriminalization plays in causing these trends is greatly overlooked. Despite the clear disparities seen in the data on how the juvenile justice system handles cases, the experiences of racially minoritized youth are not used to understand how common these disparities are or to guide efforts in reducing racial and ethnic disparities in juvenile justice. The practitioners in this study emphasized the importance of listening to the experiences of minoritized youth affected by hypercriminalization. Their insights can shape future practices in juvenile justice to promote racial justice.

The findings of this study produced two primary recommendations. The first recommendation is to have strong campaigns to educate all stakeholders about racial equity. These campaigns should be implemented in different systems and institutions. Criminogenic labeling occurs in various social institutions and systems. It can be found in schools, communities, the media, law enforcement, and the criminal justice system. Formal systems and institutions that are susceptible to the criminalization process should educate themselves about the United States' complex and tragic history regarding racial injustice. This understanding can inform their decision-making in the present day. Efforts should prioritize this educational initiative. Stakeholders need enough exposure to these perspectives to inform behavior changes regarding criminalization.

The second recommendation suggests that the system institutions and the academic community should intentionally examine the experiences and perspectives of racially marginalized youth in the juvenile justice system. Although there is considerable research on juvenile justice topics, the voices of racially minoritized youth have been overlooked. Research has not given importance to their perspectives on important issues in the field. Racially minoritized youth, disproportionately involved in the juvenile justice system and experiencing negative outcomes in other areas, deserve to have their voices heard on matters that affect their lives. This study aims to advance our understanding of the consequences of hypercriminalization. However, it does not include firsthand accounts. Future studies should focus on capturing these perspectives.

CONCLUSION

Human service practitioners are crucial in the community-based rehabilitative approach to juvenile justice. They can provide valuable insight into young people in the justice system and the policies that

affect them. The process of criminalization and its consequences need to be understood to improve our juvenile justice system and ensure fairness for all young people. To effectively support hyper-criminalized youth and protect their self-concept, practitioners and agencies should adopt trauma-informed care approaches, implement empowerment programs, and engage in culturally responsive practices. Emphasizing positive reinforcement, fostering stakeholder collaboration, and establishing regular feedback mechanisms are crucial for creating safe and supportive environments. By integrating these strategies, practitioners can help combat the negative impacts of hypercriminalization, allowing youth to develop positive self-identities and view themselves as valued members of society.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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