



## Faith and Black Youth

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In the United States, Black youth rank faith highest in importance out of all other racial and ethnic groups. Many studies

document strong and significant associations between religion and health for Black adults, yet fewer studies show

how these links may be important for youth.

Although substantial evidence shows strong links between community violence and sexual risk behaviors for adult women who ethnically identify as African American, much less is known about these links for African American adolescent girls. Even fewer studies address the ways in which having a natural mentor (i.e., informal forms of mentorship) or being involved in a religious community may function protectively.



Figure 1 Photograph by Francis Dumbi-ljeh on Pexels. CCO.

### Highlights

**Faith is very important to many Black youth.**

**Religion and religious institutions provide a wide range of resources.**

**Girls with exposure to violence tended to report higher levels of sexual risk behavior one year later.**

**Religious involvement can moderate these effects.**

“...our results suggest that natural mentorship and attending religious services and participating in other religious community activities appear to help African American adolescent girls process negative life events and proceed to make safer sexual health choices.”

Religion and religious institutions have long provided a wide range of social, political, practical, educational, and spiritual resources for Black Americans. Many adolescents have greater access to different social environments outside of their home and school, providing more opportunities to form relationships (e.g., natural mentors) and meaningful forms of participation (e.g., involvement in religious communities). Understanding how adolescents may be involved with their faith at different levels may be particularly useful for individuals and organizations who study, empower, and serve Black adolescents.

### ***Methods***

We looked at how natural mentors and organizational religious involvement may lessen the negative effects of community violence for African American girls to develop sexual risk behaviors one year later. We tested our research questions using data from 273 African American adolescent girls who participated in the Flint Adolescent Study (FAS), which was based in Flint, Michigan. Because the FAS is a study that takes place over multiple time points, we examined the girls' experiences with natural mentors and organizational religious involvement at two different times.

### ***Results***

- Girls with exposure to violence tended to report higher levels of sexual risk behavior one year later.
- Girls who reported moderate to high levels of organizational religious involvement, but no natural mentor, had fewer sexual risk behaviors.
- Girls who reported low levels of organizational religious involvement and a natural mentor reported fewer sexual risk behaviors.
- If girls are more religiously active, they may not need a natural mentor. The need for active natural mentorship may be lessened by organizational religious involvement.
- However, for girls who are not as religiously active, having a natural mentor does make a difference in sexual risk.

## **HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?**

Culturally specific contexts play a significant role in the ways in which Black Americans and other marginalized groups navigate systemic and community risks. Involvement within culturally specific contexts may promote or protect against negative effects of those risks, and more information is needed to unpack the ways in which these contexts function across varying levels of involvement.

## What Does This Mean For?

**Research and Evaluation:** Many studies that examine on the role of religion for Black youth tend to focus on the frequency of service attendance. Yet there is so much more to learn about the role of religion in the lives of Black youth, especially in regard to its impact on health outcomes. More information is needed regarding the social structural and theological elements that characterize religious spaces and the ways in which youth interact within those spaces. These findings may prompt researchers to assess additional indicators of religiosity and religious environments. Researchers can also document sociodemographic indicators that may indirectly contribute to the ways in which youth access and participate in these contexts (e.g., having consistent rides, being a religious minority, being religious in a non-religious family).

**Clinical Practice:** Clinicians may want to ask adolescents and their families what religious involvement looks like for them and if it plays a significant role in how they navigate daily life and make health-related decisions. Religious involvement shapes religious socialization. How individuals have experienced, engaged in, and consider religiosity may yield information that encourages culturally sensitive, client centered treatment as well as enhanced client adherence to treatment plans.

**Social Action:** These findings could be used to enhance curriculum and programs that encourage, educate, and mobilize Black youth to identify healthy and supportive relationships and communities. In addition, for leaders and stakeholders working and serving in high-risk and/or low-resource communities, establishing partnerships with clergy, lay leaders, religious organizations, and families may be key for discovering and nurturing culturally relevant resources and solutions that connect youth with both community-level and individual-level forms of support. Doing so may be an effective way to buffer the effects of high-risk environments on subsequent health behavior outcomes.

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