

# Differences in the Associations Between Exposure to Stressors and Institutional Misconduct

## in White and Black Adolescent Boys



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### Introduction

Previous research on the association between stressful events and problem behavior in at-risk adolescents has focused primarily on traumatic events. For example, experiencing traumatic stressors has been associated with symptoms of PTSD and reactive aggression (Cruise et al., 2013) and an increase in the exposure to violence has been positively correlated with traumatic stress (Jaggers et al., 2016). Additionally, a commonly used measure of childhood stress, the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Scale developed by the CDC and used in many large studies focuses exclusively on traumatic events and major problems in a child's life.

However, there are indications that non-traumatic stressful events (e.g., problems with grades or peer relationships) contribute to involvement in substance use among at-risk adolescents (Charles et al., 2015). The purpose of this study is to explore the relationships between both traumatic and non-traumatic events and engagement in institutional misconduct among non-Hispanic White and Black adolescents in a residential boot camp facility for youth aged 16-19 who have dropped out of school. These findings could be imperative for re-structuring programs to be more applicable to and inclusive of youth from various ethnic and racial backgrounds.

### Methods

#### Sample

- 155 at-risk adolescent males aged 16-19 years of age ( $M = 16.8$  years)
- The sample was 67% White

#### Measures

- **Stressors:** The Stressful Life Events Schedule (Williamson et al., 2003)
- **Misconduct:** The facility provided information about the youths' institutional misconduct (e.g., fighting, noncompliance, violating facility rules)

### Results

- There was no difference in the number of traumatic events experienced by White and Black Youths ( $M_{overall} = 2.6$  events).
- White youths reported more non-traumatic stressors ( $M = 24.0$ ) than did Black youths ( $M = 19.4$ ).
- Black youths were recorded as committing more misconduct overall, and across many of the specific domains of problematic behaviors

	White boys M (SD)	Black boys M (SD)
Physical Aggression	.97(1.47)	1.78(1.94)
Verbal Aggression with Peers	1.08(1.67)	2.75(3.09)
Verbal Aggression with Adults	2.02(3.67)	3.65(6.57)
Rule-Breaking	2.70(5.09)	4.75(5.57)
Disruptive Behavior	3.03(4.41)	4.69(5.25)

- Exposure to traumatic and non-traumatic stressors were not related to any category of misconduct among White boys
- Among Black boys, experiencing both traumatic and non-traumatic events was associated with institutional misconduct

	Physical Aggression	Verbal Aggression with Peers	Verbal Aggression with Adults	Rule-Breaking	Disruptive Behavior
White boys					
Traumatic	.10	.09	.03	.08	.00
Non-traumatic	.14	.05	.05	.09	.03
Black boys					
Traumatic	.24	.23	<b>.37*</b>	<b>.33*</b>	.18
Non-traumatic	.11	.08	<b>.28*</b>	.26	.19

### Discussion

- These findings emphasize the importance of considering a broad range of potential stressful life events when considering which youths may be most vulnerable to developing problem behaviors such as aggression and noncompliance.
- Although Black youths report less exposure to non-traumatic stressors and similar exposure to traumatic stressors as do White youths, the association between stressors and disciplinary misconduct is only significant among Black youths, suggesting they may be especially vulnerable to externalizing/acting out behaviors following stressful events.

#### Implications

- The results of this study support continued research into the nature of stressors occurring in at-risk youths' lives, as well as how these stressors may relate to different outcomes among different subsets of youths.
- It is possible that interventions that improve coping abilities may reduce institutional misconduct among Black youths.

### References

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