

# Black and mixed-heritage boys: desistance through a co-creative Critical Race and postcolonial lens

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## Introduction

This chapter explores the everyday lives of Black and mixed-heritage boys in England and Wales, in their families, communities and their experiences of the criminal justice system (Lammy, 2017; HMIP, 2021a, b). Black and mixed-heritage children are disproportionately represented throughout the criminal (youth) justice system in contrast to being only 4% of the general population, the proportion of those children with initial contact with the police is 16%, 35% of those remanded or sentenced to custody and 41% of the child custodial population (Mullen et al, 2014; Taylor, 2016; Lammy, 2017; Robertson and Wainwright, 2020; HMIP, 2021a; YJB/MOJ, 2021). The focus of this chapter is on Black boys, rather than girls, because the experience of rac(ism) and disproportionality in the system is particularly pronounced for boys. Likewise, there are a particular set of circumstances and experiences of racism that Black boys endure inside and outside of the criminal justice system that are different from the form that boys of (South) Asian heritage experience. For this reason, boys of (South) Asian heritage are not discussed in the chapter. Although there are intersecting experiences of commonality for both Black and mixed-heritage girls and (South) Asian boys that resonate with those of Black boys, there is also a particularity for girls and South Asian boys that focuses on differences based on gender and/or faith and culture respectively (Mullen et al, 2014; Lammy, 2017). Taking this as an acknowledged point of departure, Critical Race Theory (CRT) will be used to discuss understandings of Black and mixed-heritage boys' experiences in the criminal justice system and possible strategies of desistance (Crosby, 2016; Delgado and Stefancic, 2017; Dutil, 2020). Likewise, an awareness of the postcolonial *Other* will inform an understanding of Black and mixed-heritage boys' experience within society (Fanon, 1967; Glynn, 2014). A focus on the family, the Black community, contested spaces, the education and the criminal justice system(s) can provide much to inform how

practice and policy can develop effective strategies of desistance (McHugh, 2018; Wainwright, et al, 2020; Wainwright, 2021).

## Black and mixed-heritage boys' experiences of racism

The everyday experience of Black and mixed-heritage boys in England and Wales is very different from their White peers (Harries 2012, 2014). This difference reflects their experience of racism, where individual physical appearance and cultural differences evoke responses from society and its institutions that *Other* them, alienating individuals and constructing them into a despised and denigrated threat and danger (Miles and Brown, 2004; Apena, 2007; Sims-Schouten and Gilbert, 2022) as potential offenders and rarely, if ever, as victims (Wainwright et al, 2020; Wainwright, 2021). In this way, Black and mixed-heritage boys are marked out by a racism that accentuates somatic and phenotypic identifiers that characterise body shape and facial characteristics, respectively, sorting and separating individuals from White society (Roland-Dow, 2011; Walker, 2020). This demonisation of difference identifies them as the Other, insidiously affecting how they feel about themselves and experience the world around them (Walker, 2020; Wainwright, 2021). Black and mixed-heritage boys understand from a very early age that, outside of their family environment, and sometimes within it, the expectations of them from White British society are extremely low and quite often pathologising and criminalising (Byfield and Talbot, 2020; Eddo-Lodge, 2020). Hence, Black and mixed-heritage boys experience a psycho-social world that defines them as inherently of little worth which means that their behaviour is often managed by the state, in particular, the education and the criminal justice system (IRR, 2020).

It is important to explain some of the terms used in this chapter and to contextualise them in relation to Black and mixed-heritage boys and the criminal justice system. Black boys are described in this chapter as those of African and/or Caribbean heritage. Black, here, is capitalised to emphasise a recognition of Blackness as an identity and experience, in a positive cultural and political sense (Wainwright, 2009, 2019). This identification also recognises the persistent experience of individual micro aggressions and structural racism, which, acknowledged by Black boys or not, has a detrimental and debilitating effect on their everyday experiences, curtailing opportunities and limiting their horizons (Harries, 2012, 2014). Likewise, when considering boys of mixed heritage, where one birth parent is of African/Caribbean and one is of White British or European heritage, there is a particular identity and signifier regarding how they experience and where they see themselves in the world (Barn and Harman, 2006, 2013). For this chapter, the term mixed heritage is used, but certain semantic problematics of this are acknowledged: mixed-ness might assume that ethnicities or heritages

are fixed, ossified and that mixing them is something that is less than human, almost mixing two species or, indeed, ‘races’ (Miles and Brown, 2004; Song and Aspinall, 2012; Caballero and Aspinall, 2018). The terminology does, however, admit consideration of the combination of cultural, social and political perspectives that inform mixed-heritage individuals’ identity and experience (Harman, 2010; Barn and Harman, 2013). This is of particular importance when considering their experiences, their cultural and political identification in their world, their familial experiences and their everyday interactions with their peers in their local neighbourhood and community (Song and Aspinall, 2012; Caballero and Aspinall, 2018). Additionally, this also enables insight into how wider society views and responds to such individuals (Barn and Harman, 2013).

Many boys of mixed heritage, brought up in a family with a Black parent and/or living within a Black or multi-ethnic community, identify as Black. They identify with their predominantly Black peers and may share a cultural, psycho-social and political worldview (Wainwright et al, 2020, 2021). Mixed-heritage boys may also identify with their peers’ everyday experience of racism and institutionally ingrained exclusions from education, employment and other opportunities (Taylor, 2016; Lammy, 2017). Boys of mixed heritage experience the same institutional racism in the criminal justice system that leads to disproportionately anomalous treatment and outcomes. In other words, they are similarly pathologised by many aspects of Whiteness and White society (Gilbourne, 2008; James, 2014).

Conversely, it must be acknowledged that some boys of mixed heritage do not identify as culturally, politically and psycho-socially Black, may have White peers and predominantly reside in a White neighbourhood or community (Barn and Harman, 2006). This may or may not inform whether they experience the education and criminal justice system in such a pathologising way. Many mixed-heritage boys have both Black and White peers, and social class and location play a powerful role in their experiences of family education and the criminal justice systems (Wainwright et al, 2020). Thus, Black and mixed-heritage boys in different temporal and spatial zones negotiate a fluid identity, because of their ‘mixedness’ (Song, 2021). While they present as being Black and of African/Caribbean heritage, with cultural and identity associations with Black peers, many mixed-heritage boys have formative experiences and an ongoing understanding and identification with White peers (Caballero, 2014; Song, 2021).

## **Black boys and adultification**

Black and mixed-heritage boys are also subject to the process of adultification where they are assumed to be older than they are and consequently treated

more punitively in the education and criminal justice system (Davis and Marsh, 2020; HMIP, 2021a). Yet, Black and mixed-heritage boys are undeniably children, defined in terms of their emotional, psycho-social and cultural development (Case and Haines, 2015, 2021; YJB, 2021). They will respond to adverse situations as children, even though they are perceived by authorities as otherwise (Case and Haines, 2021; HMIP, 2021a). For Black and mixed-heritage boys, however, the racist trope of being big, Black and threatening and/or violent prevails in school and when encountering the police and the wider criminal justice system and when in conflict with their peers or persons of authority (Williams and Clarke, 2018; Wainwright and Larkins, 2020; Wainwright, 2021). In other words, Black boys are not perceived, responded to or *treated as children* but often as violent threats (Williams and Clarke, 2018). Although it needs to be acknowledged that children are not treated as children once they offend (Case and Haines, 2015), and within this context the adultification of Black children who do offend is particularly problematic, exacerbating punitive responses (HMIP, 2021a). Such institutionalised racism informs the everyday experiences of adultification for Black and mixed-heritage boys, further exacerbating their alienation from White society (Calverley, 2013; Glynn, 2013, 2016). Moreover, Black boys may not be perceived as vulnerable and/or responding to trauma in their lives but as angry, physical and threatening (Williams and Clarke, 2016; Davis and Marsh, 2020). They are rarely sympathetically understood as victims of violent or other offences. This is despite increasing interest in trauma-informed approaches across public services (Crosby, 2016; Dutil, 2020).

## Blackness: racialisation and CRT

CRT starts with the premise that society is institutionally and structurally racist, that racism has a structural impact on Black people's lives and that White people and Whiteness are net beneficiaries of this (Gilbourne, 2008, 2015). This perspective presents key principles to provide a prism through which to understand and hear the experiences of Black people in society (Dixon, 2018). CRT acknowledges that race and the racialisation of Black people is socially constructed, as is demonstrated by the adultification of Black and mixed-heritage boys. Further, CRT opens up the possibility of a postmodern/intersectional analysis, which provides an opportunity for exploring the multi-dimensional and fluid spaces of Black and mixed-heritage people's experience of rac(ism) and identity (Glynn, 2014, 2016). Importantly, it privileges the (counter-)narratives of the Black community, and in this context those of Black and mixed-heritage boys (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). Thus, CRT provides a theoretical framework to understand the experiences of Black and mixed-heritage boys before, during and after

they enter the criminal justice system to inform strategies for desistance (Glynn, 2014, 2016; Wainwright et al, 2020).

CRT and the postcolonial *Other* provide a lens that enables a critical understanding of the racialising of Black and mixed-heritage boys. The Other is particularly relevant to postcolonialism as it identifies communities and individuals who are Black (of African heritage) or of South Asian heritage to be perceived as inferior, of less worth, both from their continents and countries of origin and within communities in the UK, the United States and Europe. Black and mixed-heritage boys (and communities) are viewed through a prism of being intellectually, culturally and socially estranged, less civilised and outside White society (Fanon, 1967). This provides an opportunity to contextualise how Black and mixed-heritage boys are perceived in everyday society as the Other, a threat and demonised. This Othering is particularly, but not exclusively, experienced by Black and mixed-heritage boys who are from socio-economically deprived backgrounds and contested spaces in their everyday lives (Glynn, 2016; Williams and Clarke, 2016; McKeown and Wainwright, 2020). The postcolonial Other provides a lens on the world that positions Black and mixed-heritage boys' experience of their everyday existence as that of estrangements and exclusions from the White world that surrounds them (Fanon, 1967; Glynn, 2016; Wainwright et al, 2019; McKeown and Wainwright, 2020; Wainwright et al, 2020; Wainwright, 2021).

Importantly, when considering Black and mixed-heritage boys' experience of living in marginalised places and contested spaces of multiple deprivation, an acknowledgement of the structural racism and everyday Othering provides an opportunity to consider how there *are* possibilities for some to consider desistance from offending behaviour, and these examples merit closer scrutiny (McHugh, 2018; Wainwright, 2021; Wainwright et al, 2024).

## Contested spaces and communities

The experiences of Black and mixed-heritage boys reflect urban geographies of structural and economic patterns of disadvantage afflicting contemporary cities and their historical development. Thus, the places and spaces that Black and mixed-heritage boys negotiate are in communities that are economically, socially and culturally marginalised from large parts of their city (Palmer, 2009; Calverley, 2013). Their marginalisation is evidenced by multiple deprivations in terms of familial trauma and an inadequate lack of social service response, an education system that fails Black boys and an absence of youth activities and interventions and inadequate housing (HMIP, 2021a). This is compounded for Black and mixed-heritage boys as they are exposed to the everyday experience of many forms of racism and the subsequent trauma (Hall et al, 2023). Importantly, there is often limited or

no mainstream employment or economic opportunities for Black and mixed-heritage boys to access (EHRC, 2016). This is further compounded by a lack of opportunity to develop social capital skills that are critical to enter and engage in formal and rewarding employment opportunities (McNeil and Maruna, 2008; McNeil, 2018). In this way, Black and mixed-heritage boys are provided with limited or no opportunities for other activities except offending behaviour to enhance their status and/or economic circumstances (Palmer, 2009). This is not to excuse behaviour that may involve selling drugs, or at times the use of serious violence, including guns, as victims and perpetrators, that often accompanies it. Instead, it is to contextualise how they experience their precarious cultural and psycho-social environment and the lack of tangible alternative social, cultural, educational and employment opportunities available for Black and mixed-heritage boys (Calverley, 2013; Glynn, 2014; McNeil, 2018).

For some Black and mixed-heritage boys, along with White boys, their everyday experience and interactions with other children and adults are, at times, precarious and dangerous (Pitts, 2020). Many Black boys describe their local communities as like a “war zone” (HMIP, 2021a). Spaces must be entered and negotiated with an element of trepidation due to an awareness that they always have the possibility of escalating into violence, with the possibility of the use of knives or guns (Pitts, 2020). Black and mixed-heritage boys have described how in some places the spaces they frequent with their peers are only negotiated in groups, or gangs (Palmer and Pitts, 2006; McHugh, 2018). In some metropolitan cities, carrying knives is a necessity for self-defence in these contested spaces, with the potential for violent encounters with other Black, mixed-heritage and/or White groups of boys (Wainwright et al, 2020; Hall et al, 2023). Such contestation involves individuals or groups of boys moving into other boys’ spaces and this being perceived as a threat and/or insult to their pride by other groups of boys (Palmer and Pitts, 2006; Palmer, 2009). In other metropolitan cities, Black and mixed-heritage boys are pulled into activities that involve drugs, by their peers and/or adults who use them for doing the running, buying and selling (Disley and Liddle, 2016; Whittaker et al, 2017). In such circumstances, Black and mixed-heritage boys are far more likely to be drawn into acts of violence, often as victims: either coerced into this offending behaviour or in self-defence, because of competition for a drug market with other groups of boys/young men (Goldson, 2011; Pitts, 2020; Hall et al, 2023).

Further, much has been written about whether Black and mixed-heritage boys and older Black young men are involved in informal social and group networks, or ‘gang’ activity (Palmer, 2009; Pitts, 2020). Williams and Clarke suggest that there is no formal pattern of offending activity by Black and mixed-heritage boys in local communities, any more than their White peers, just fluid networks that focus on opportunities that emerge in streets

and communities, including profiteering from drugs (Williams and Clarke, 2016, 2018). Williams and Clarke argue that ‘gang’ is an appropriated and racialised name that the state imposes on Black and mixed-heritage boys to justify their criminalisation through specific workings of the criminal justice system. A narrative of gangs, for example, can serve to legitimate excessive stop and searching by the police and disproportionately punitive treatment and sentencing in the courts and custodial settings (Williams and Clarke, 2016, 2018). In contrast, others argue there is significant evidence, particularly, in London, of groups of Black and mixed-heritage boys having formal networks of operations, some with clear lines of command and management, that are organised as gangs to ensure an effective and protected drugs operation and/or protection of their specific places and space (Palmer, 2009; Whittaker et al, 2017; Pitts, 2020). Either way, in London boroughs particularly, groups of Black and mixed-heritage boys are engaged in informal networks that involve serious violence towards other Black (and White) children over contested spaces for drugs and their [profits from selling drugs] (Whittaker et al, 2017; Pitts, 2020). This offending behaviour can involve Black and mixed-heritage boys being key protagonists in county lines drug dealing, where the expansion of their drug markets is extended to rural towns (Hall et al, 2023). Often this involves Black and mixed-heritage boys being in various levels of authority in the drug-selling network (Whittaker et al, 2017; Pitts, 2020).

## Desistance

Desistance is a term used to describe the processes by which individuals work their way towards a crime-free life and ultimately to a non-criminal identity. It is centrally important, therefore, to how children, young people and adults understand and develop strategies and resources to avoid repeating offending behaviour (Robertson and Wainwright, 2020; Burke, et al, 2023). In many ways, the challenges and difficulties that Black and mixed-heritage boys experience in considering moving away from offending behaviour are like those experienced by their White peers (Wainwright and Larkins, 2020; Wainwright et al, 2020). Yet, the possible role of race, ethnicity and structural racism and their potential effect on the capacity to desist from crime have been neglected in many studies of desistance (Calverley, 2013; Durrance et al, 2013). These include the intersectional challenges of class, multiple deprivation, alienated neighbourhoods and communities, community and family trauma, the psycho-social impact on children and the violence that may follow (Glynn, 2016) and the navigation of everyday experiences of racism, being *Othered* and pathologised by the education, welfare and criminal justice system (Fanon, 1967; Calverley, 2013). Much of the available work on desistance focuses on the intersectional challenges



that children experience (Glynn, 2014, 2016), but because of the significant variance in this experience at a community, individual and familial level, it is naïve to assume there is a generic strategy or intervention that can encourage Black boys to stop offending (Calverley, 2013; Glynn, 2016). There is also an understanding that if Black and mixed-heritage boys do desist from offending, there need not be a linear process of achievement, and often they may relapse back into offending behaviour (Glyn, 2013).

Thus, the desistance process is likely to involve relapses, and generic and homogenised interventions are unlikely to be effective and should instead be replaced by individual, holistic services (Farrall, 2002, cited in Moffatt, 2014). In a similar way, cognitive behavioural programmes, used within *what works* initiatives, do not accommodate the specific challenges experienced by Black and mixed-heritage boys involved in offending behaviour (Calverley, 2013). Indeed, many desistance theorists question the efficacy of the *what works* approach on the basis that it is far too instrumental and detached from the complex structural and individual challenges children and adults experience when trying to desist from offending (McNeil and Maruna, 2008; Burke et al, 2023).

Additionally, attention should be focused on the ‘complex individual identities’ of Black and mixed-heritage boys (Durrance et al, 2013, p 146). Consideration must also be given to differences in patterns of desistance between different ethnicities (for example, Somali, Jamaican and Nigerian) that constitute Black and mixed-heritage boys’ heritage (Calverley, 2013). Further, while also considering an assessment of risk of offending behaviour, there is a need to explore the Black and mixed-heritage boys’ values, goals and strengths. A key element of working towards these individual goals is through exploring positive and negative influences of family and social networks within relevant spaces (Durrance et al, 2013).

Arguably, Black and mixed-heritage boys may not develop the same kind of social capital or resources from their families as some white children, which may hinder their ability to desist. For example, resettlement after a prison sentence may be particularly difficult as Black boys are often not able to return to their family home (Calverley, 2013). A lack of post-prison resettlement support is also connected with the racialised and structural barriers that Black and mixed-heritage boys experience. For Black boys who are 16 years or older, this includes a paucity of training and education opportunities after leaving prison (Glynn, 2013, 2014). There is a dearth of studies acknowledging the identity of Black and mixed-heritage boys while they are in the criminal justice system and in prison, with the Lammy review a notable exception (Jacobson et al, 2010; Glynn, 2013; Lammy, 2017). Further, their intersectional needs regarding masculinity, class, poverty and at times chaotic social networks formed in contested places and spaces are often not addressed within the criminal justice system (Glynn, 2014, 2016).



Some suggest desistance needs to be predicated on human and social relationships and strategies that develop social capital among people (McNeil and Maruna, 2008; Mullen et al, 2014; Burke et al, 2023). For Black and mixed-heritage boys to desist, social capital is particularly important in developing resilience in their local communities. Yet, much work on desistance is focused on generic offending and not Black and mixed-heritage boys, and there needs to be much more of a focus on their complex and multifaceted identities (Calverley, 2013; Glynn, 2014). There is also significant evidence that the education, criminal justice and wider welfare systems have not been able to provide adequate and sustainable pathways for Black and mixed-heritage boys to be able to move away from offending behaviour (HMIP, 2021a, b). This includes a lack of alternative education that provides motivation and genuine opportunity for Black and mixed-heritage boys (Calverley, 2013; Glynn, 2016). These alternative pathways can often be located within the Black community, led by authentic and credible Black role models in the voluntary sector, or community spaces where discussions of possibilities for a future of hope for Black boys can take place. These discussions can focus on education and training that is co-created and acknowledges and explores racism, poverty, familial difficulties and contested spaces. Importantly, though, these community spaces can enable an affirmation and celebration of Blackness, of being of African heritage and how this can be galvanised as a catalyst to focus on achievable strategies to engage in learning that enables a pathway to active employment and citizenship (Larkins and Wainwright, 2020 Wainwright et al, 2020).

There is also inadequate social/children's services provision to acknowledge and address the trauma that Black and mixed-heritage families experience in their everyday lives (Crosby, 2016; Glynn, 2016; Dutil, 2020). There are very few or no alternative housing opportunities to move Black boys away from peers that are involved in offending, nor the opportunity to find decent training or employment opportunities that can be successfully accessed and maintained (Calverley, 2013). In other words, for many Black and mixed-heritage boys, the contested spaces, the violent places, provide an environment where there is little alternative but for them to continue offending behaviours with their peers, and there is no incentive to change and take responsibility for their actions and no coherent strategy from those agencies that should support them in this process (Glynn, 2016; McHugh, 2018; Pitts, 2020; HMIP, 2021a). For many Black and mixed-heritage boys, there is little hope and no opportunity to change, or pathways to achieve it.

## Co-creating desistance through CRT

This chapter has suggested that there needs to be a recognition of some key principles when working with Black and mixed-heritage boys to support

individual desistance journeys for Black youngsters. These encompass the reality that racism, along with multiple deprivations, is an everyday experience for Black and mixed-heritage boys (Glynn, 2014, 2016; Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). Acknowledging this and an identity of Blackness and the *Othering* they experience is central to an understanding of developing strategies for them to desist (Fanon, 1967; Apena, 2007). Further, strategies for desistance with Black and mixed-heritage boys can only have any real effect when their voices, their (counter-)story telling is at the centre of this process (Crosby, 2016; Delgado and Stefancic, 2017; Dutil, 2020). By listening to their voices and placing their experiences and perspectives at the centre of strategies to inform practice and policy, there is an opportunity to develop multi-dimensional, flexible and bespoke interventions that address the intersectional needs of Black and mixed-heritage boys (Freire, 1973; Glynn, 2016). The risk of violence, serious at times, that Black and mixed-heritage boys face as perpetrators and victims is an everyday reality in many contested places and spaces for Black and mixed-heritage boys. When co-working with them, there needs to be a realistic acknowledgement of the trauma experienced that has led to and is a consequence of this behaviour (Palmer and Pitt, 2006; Whittaker et al, 2017). The places and spaces in their local communities that Black and mixed-heritage boys inhabit are often contested by other Black and White boys and young adults (Wainwright et al, 2020). Further, it is important to acknowledge the psycho-social, emotional and multi-faceted deprivation that many Black and mixed-heritage boys' experience in their communities which provide traumatic challenges for them negotiate in their childhood

Desistance narratives must be underpinned for all boys, Black, mixed heritage and White, by the authenticity of their experiences and reality and not downplayed or ignored when racism is a clear factor. In other words, working with Black and mixed-heritage boys involves anti-racist practice, and this is good practice.

First, the (counter-)voices of Black and mixed-heritage boys need to be at the centre of any meaningful desistance strategy. This means that to enable Black and mixed-heritage boys to develop a way of moving away from offending their perspectives, their stories, challenges and aspirations need to be heard and placed at the centre of any transformational plans for change in their lives (Dixon, 2018; Wainwright and Larkins, 2020; Wainwright et al, 2020). This will acknowledge their experience of racism, of *Othering*, of everyday threats of violence from peers and adults, and harassment by the police. But, it will also acknowledge the individuality and intersectionality of their identities and aspirations (Apena, 2007; Glynn, 2016). Importantly, the world, their world, will inform any co-created solutions for desistance.

Secondly, developed spaces for Black and mixed-heritage boys can provide an opportunity in the context of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement,

which offers alternative, positive narratives for Blackness and boys of African heritage. BLM provides a prism that radiates a positive message with an alternative worldview where to be Black is to be proud and loud, listened to and heard. The ideas of BLM are presented as assertive, strong, potent and possibly life changing in their liberatory messages for Black boys, young people and Black communities. The BLM messages also provide a means to develop alternative masculinities that need not feel emasculating but nevertheless are more pro-social, collectivist and community focused. These are physical spaces of difference where masculinities can be developed and co-created with Black and mixed-heritage boys that have the resilience to resist psycho-social and physical pressure by their peers and adults to join groups or gangs of boys and young men who are involved in offending behaviour. These liberatory messages, this movement, could provide a counter-space to the narrative of pathological stereotypes and violence (Dixon, 2018; Kelly et al, 2020; Wainwright, 2021). In contrast, a creative, cultural, assertive Black masculinity can be encouraged to flourish where it is acceptable to be a Black or mixed-heritage boy, to be male, but to eschew violence and gangs for a more proactive, positive and empowering Black identity; a Black identity with a future of optimism, not of anger and alienation (Dixon, 2018; Kelly et al, 2020).

Thirdly, Black and mixed-heritage boys' worlds are often shaped by the trauma their parents experienced in their own lives, through economic, political and cultural exclusion from society (Gilbourne, 2015). This trauma, in part, is manifested through racism in their everyday experience of poverty, alienation from mainstream society that has a psycho-social impact on Black and mixed-heritage parents, leaving them feeling diminished and worthless (Crosby, 2016; Whittaker et al, 2017; Dutil, 2020). In turn, this can place unbearable pressure on their relationships with their partners and undermine their resilience to parent their Black and mixed-heritage sons in a consistent and nurturing way (Calverley, 2013). Black and mixed-heritage parents often have multiple types of low-paid employment, which can mean they are often away from the family home for long periods (Davis and Marsh, 2020). With limited contact with their parents, Black and mixed-heritage boys can rely on their peers in their local neighbourhood as an alternative source of support, which provides a space to become involved in offending behaviour (Palmer, 2009). To encourage desistance and move Black and mixed-heritage boys away from engaging with groups of boys that offend, their needs to be a strategic response by the local state to fill this space left by parents who are, for many understandable reasons, not present (HMIP, 2021a, 2021b). This may involve more youth services, a supportive child welfare service to work with the trauma of Black families to support parenting, wider provision of kinship (in family) caring and a housing service that responds to crisis and the needs of Black and mixed-heritage boys (Glynn, 2014, 2016).

Fourth, the education system has consistently blamed, pathologised and disproportionately excluded Black and mixed-heritage boys from mainstream schooling and placed them in pupil referral units (PRUs) (Wainwright et al, 2020). Personal testimony from Black boys and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) studies have demonstrated that taking Black boys out of mainstream schooling is often the catalyst for their journey into mixing with peers who are involved in offending behaviour (Wainwright et al, 2020; HMIP, 2021a, b). Further, evidence suggests that removing them from mainstream schooling sends a direct message of failure and blame to Black boys that can push them towards alienation from formal education and closer to peers who provide an alternative source of opportunity and income through offending (Palmer, 2009; Dixon, 2018). Yet a postcolonial and CRT lens suggests that being *Othered* and alienated from society needs a response that acknowledges their (counter-)voice, their identity and their understanding of their experience of being Black (Gilbourne, 2015; Glynn, 2016). Thus, mainstream schooling, PRUs and Black community educational provision needs to develop a coherent strategy to focus on keeping Black and mixed-heritage boys in purposeful schooling. The teaching needs to be led by positive male Black role models able to provide an education that reflects a Black cultural heritage and has relevance to their everyday lives (Apena, 2007; Wainwright and Larkins, 2020). Further, the education provided should ensure a genuine pathway of opportunity for training and employment for Black and mixed-heritage boys (Wainwright et al, 2023). Exclusion is particularly problematic for Black children because 60 per cent of Black and mixed-heritage boys who are subject to court orders are seen as disruptive and are excluded from school, often permanently (HMIP, 2021a). Further, they are twice as likely to be excluded from school permanently compared to their white peers (HMIP, 2021a).

This process of school exclusion contributes significantly to Black and mixed-heritage boys becoming criminalised, being drawn into and disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system (DfE, 2019; IRR, 2020; HMIP, 2021a). In a recent report, the Institute of Race Relations suggests that PRUs are a *pipeline to prison* for Black children (IRR, 2020).

Black and mixed-heritage boys are often excluded from school, placed in PRUs and have to negotiate fractured family lives where the only space to spend more time with their peers is in their local space, or places some distance from where they live, where everyday life can be much more perilous.

Fifth, evidence suggests that Black and mixed-heritage boys listen and respect peer mentors who have had a similar experience to them and been excluded from school and involved in offending behaviour, including serious violence (Apena, 2007; Larkins and Wainwright, 2020; Wainwright et al, 2020). Importantly, this peer-led mentoring should challenge offending

behaviour from a prism of Blackness that understands the everyday experiences of these boys in their local places and spaces in their communities (Wainwright et al, 2020). While it is acknowledged that there are many mitigating reasons for offending behaviour, it is important that peer mentors work with the boys to talk about the risks their offending poses to their local community, their peers and themselves (Larkins and Wainwright, 2020). For any change in behaviour to move away from offending to desistance, the peer mentors need to commit to a long-term working relationship with the Black and mixed-heritage boys (Wainwright et al, 2020). However, to provide the space for Black peer mentors to work with Black boys, potential barriers of institutional racism, because of exclusion for example, organisational criminal records checks on individuals that work with children and young people may need to be more flexible and accommodating of those who may who may have a record of criminal offences in the past to encourage and support members of the Black community committing to this role. Further, the role of Black peer mentors needs to be given the status and financial remuneration that is commensurate with engaging in affirmative life-changing work that may benefit Black and mixed-heritage boys and the wider (Black) community (Apena, 2007).

Sixth, the intersectional experiences and fluid individual identities of Black and mixed-heritage boys need to be acknowledged and addressed within work on desistance (Durrance et al, 2013). Resources need to be invested in the Black and mixed-heritage places and spaces that are often contested by individuals and groups of Black, mixed-heritage and (sometimes) White boys. A change of narrative needs to be initiated whereby there is a flexible package available for communities to work with Black and mixed-heritage boys using methods that are grounded in their realities, familial trauma, of contested spaces, the use of violence, overuse of stop and search by the police and disproportionality throughout the criminal justice system (Glynn, 2016). This could include a comprehensive, flexible and bespoke youth service package that is culturally relevant to the everyday lives of Black and mixed-heritage boys (Wainwright et al, 2019; Wainwright et al, 2020). For instance, establishing hubs that are centres of the many and ever-changing representations of Black culture, including music and conversations about racism, contested spaces and conflict over drugs, respect and dignity, guns, knives, family and peers. These hubs need to be in the most dangerous places, the most violent spaces, and to be relevant and authentically owned and led by peers in the Black community (Palmer, 2009; Wainwright et al, 2019)

Seventh, co-creative action research could be developed with Black and mixed-heritage boys to explore their world from their perspective to create solutions for offending behaviour, in particular the cultures, economy and psycho-social world that drives serious violence, guns and knives in contested spaces (Larkins and Wainwright, 2020; Wainwright and Larkins, 2020;

Wainwright et al, 2020). Black and mixed-heritage boys' worldviews need to be at the centre of desistance strategies, as it is only by understanding their experience, and co-creating alternative models of intervention that acknowledge the fluidity and ever-changing reality of their everyday lives, that there can be a genuine opportunity to bring about changes that can lead to desistance, in the short and medium term (Wainwright et al, 2020; Wainwright, 2021).

Eighth, in this chapter the idea of a contested space has been described in physical/material terms, specifically the violence that Black and mixed-heritage boys experience. However, there is also a possibility to explore the notion of a contestation which is about a collision of ideas. To develop this further, there could be open and honest discussion between Black peer mentors and the push of desistance in contrast to the pull of criminality. By definition, the physical contestation of these ideas will also coincide with physical conflict in a space where, quite literally, older Black peers physically coerce Black and mixed-heritage boys back into offending or otherwise manipulate, bully and entice them psycho-socially to do the same. This conflict of ideas is between those of liberation from the push of desistance and appreciative enquiry<sup>1</sup> (Cooperrider et al, 2008; Dixson, 2018; Kelly et al, 2020; Larkins and Wainwright, 2020) that focuses on the positive aspects of hope in Black and mixed-heritage boys' lives in contrast to the pull of offending they experience from the local drug market, violence and guns. These conversations could be articulated and argued in alternative, safe, community resources that are accessible and credible spaces to Black and mixed heritage boys (Cooperrider et al, 2008; Dixson, 2018).

This practice manifestation of psycho-social space could be designed to actively keep out offenders, protecting the space for active desisters (or those trying to desist), maximising, modelling and facilitating positive pro-social relationships. These resistant spaces could be designed practicably and include investing in and developing resources available to Black and mixed-heritage boys, for example: training, employment, pro-social modelling and the development of a liberatory Black network and safe and comfortable accommodation away from peers who may pressure them to offend (Cooperrider et al, 2008; Dixson, 2018; Larkins and Wainwright, 2020).

CRT and a postcolonial prism suggest opportunities to critically appreciate how Black and mixed-heritage boys' cultures are constantly changing depending on the spaces they are in, the ethnicity and intersectional identities of their peers, the fluidity of migrant identities and how this informs their understanding of Blackness, Othering and racism (Mullen et al, 2014; Pitts, 2020; Wainwright, 2021). Strategies to encourage desistance need to be sensitive to the constant movement and shifting identities of Black and mixed-heritage boys and how this is central to their sense of self and wellbeing (Apena, 2007; Wainwright et al, 2020).

In sum, CRT and a postcolonial lens through co-creation and inspiration from BLM provide opportunities for practicable, credible and durable strategies for Black and mixed-heritage boys to desist from offending. All these strategies need investment, in resources, from the state, Black communities, peer mentors and most importantly from Black and mixed-heritage boys at the centre of the milieu of contested places, spaces, racism, offending and too often, violence. Yet, surely, it is time for all involved to invest the necessary energy, resources to change the (counter-)narrative for Black and mixed-heritage boys. The (ongoing) alternative is too damning to contemplate.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> Appreciative enquiry is a method of working with children that focuses on the positive aspects of their lives, for example familial relationships, peers and/or a particular skill or hobby they enjoy. Within the context of working with Black and mixed-heritage boys, it is suggested that co-creative work in spaces with appreciate enquiry can be a particularly positive and potentially liberating experience for them.

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