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**MOTHERS SAY MIDDLE-CLASS STATUS LITTLE PROTECTION AGAINST
GENDERED RACISM FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN BOYS**

Study reveals ways African American mothers parent young sons—via “bias-preparation”—to navigate “Thug” image and vulnerabilities of African American masculinity

Middle-class African American mothers must parent differently than their white counterparts. African American middle-class mothers bear the added weight of preparing their children—particularly their sons—to navigate “gendered racism,” or discrimination based on both race and gender, from a very young age. This is according to a new research study published in the April 2016 issue of *Gender & Society*, a top-ranked journal in Gender Studies and Sociology. While there has been anecdotal evidence regarding the phenomenon, this is the first rigorous analysis of what has been colloquially referred to as “The Talk” or the “Black Man’s Code,” a set of socially circumscribed rules black boys and men feel compelled to follow to protect themselves from suspicion, criminalization as “thugs,” and harm—regardless of class status. It provides more evidence that the phenomenon is widespread, and gives deeper insights regarding the nature of the problem and the role of mothers in addressing it.

“Although the mothers in this study are middle- and upper-middle-class African Americans with more resources than lower-income mothers, this status provides their sons with little protection from gender and racial stereotyping,” says study author Dawn Marie Dow, assistant professor of sociology at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University. “Participants believe that both race and gender trump class, and that the broader society associates poverty, crime, and undereducation with being an African American boy.”

Drawing on 60 interviews of middle- and upper-middle class African American mothers, the study, titled, “[The Deadly Challenges of Raising African American Boys: Navigating the Controlling Image of the ‘Thug’](#),” outlines “bias-preparation” strategies mothers use to address the challenges their sons will face in a society that often criminalizes the bodies of African American boys and men. Importantly, Dow’s study confirms that these mothers are not able to turn to middle-class safety nets in the same way as their white counterparts. While most middle-class white families are depicted as feeling some level of security in their regular interactions with teachers, police officers and the general public, the African American mothers in Dow’s

study saw teachers as potential tyrants, police officers as potential predators, and the general public as a potential threat to their sons' safety, survival, and emotional well-being.

One participant shared a common experience of her mothers' group, "With our sons, we talk about how we can prepare them or teach them about how to deal with a society. . . where black men are held to a different standard than others. What do we have to do to make sure teachers don't have preconceived ideas that stop [our sons] from learning because they believe little brown boys are rambunctious, or little brown boys are hitting more than Caucasian boys?" Another study participant expressed concern about the toll these negative interactions would have on her son's self esteem stating, "Each time a black boy has a racially charged interaction with a police officer, a teacher, or a shop owner, those experiences will gradually start to eat at his self-worth and damage his spirit. He might become so damaged he starts to believe and enact the person he is expected to be, rather than who he truly is as a person."

Dow's research describes a number of parenting strategies mothers employ to navigate the negative stereotype of the "thug" and teach their sons how to navigate their expression of masculinity, race, and class:

- Exposing their sons to a variety of settings that differ by race, class, and gender, helping them cultivate the ability to shift seamlessly between different communities. Examples of this include shuttling sons to different recreational and educational activities in neighborhoods with African Americans of varied economic backgrounds, teaching them about the history of African American men, and exposing them to African American men who express healthy versions of masculinity.
- Managing their sons' daily interactions to exclude exposure to gendered racism. Here, mothers seek out neighborhoods to live in with adequate resources, which are often predominantly white neighborhoods, but where their sons will not face racist assumptions of lower class status and criminality, and instead be seen as "good, middle-class kids."
- Managing their sons' emotional expressions and physical appearance. This includes encouraging their sons to restrain expressions of anger, frustration, or even excitement to mitigate views that they are aggressive or violent, and even having them practice yoga, meditation, and karate in preparation for emotional restraint in daily interactions. It also includes teaching their sons to monitor the way they dress so they will be viewed as middle-class kids and not "thugs" or criminals. Some mothers even present their sons with hypothetical scenarios, such as being pulled over by the police, and instruct their son how to react.

Dow says her research underscores several parenting challenges. She explains, "despite feeling that it is unfair that their sons have to conform to stricter standards, mothers also feel they must encourage them to adhere to them to remain safe. These mothers live with the daily tension of having to teach their sons individual strategies of survival under racist and gendered norms, while also teaching them how to challenge those norms."

Further Information

[Dawn Marie Dow](#) is an assistant professor in the sociology department of the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University. Professor Dow earned a Ph.D. in sociology from University of California, Berkeley, a J.D. from Columbia University, School of Law and a B.A. in sociology from Bryn Mawr College. She is a Faculty Fellow in both the Institute for the Study of the Judiciary, Politics, and the Media and the Humanities Center. Professor Dow's research focuses on the intersection of gender, race, and class within the context of the family, the workplace, educational settings and the law. She is currently preparing a book manuscript that examines African American middle-class mothers' views and decision-making about work, family and childcare and how they approach parenting their children. Dawn Marie Dow can be reached at dmdow@syr.edu. Follow her on Twitter [@Dawn_M_Dow](#) and via her website: www.dawndow.com.

[The Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs](#) is Syracuse University's home for innovative, interdisciplinary teaching and research in the social sciences, public policy, public administration, and international relations. It is America's top-ranked [graduate school of public affairs](#) (*U.S. News & World Report*), offering highly regarded [professional degrees](#) alongside advanced scholarly degrees in the social sciences; and it is home also to [undergraduate programs](#) across the full spectrum of social sciences. Maxwell scholars conduct wide-ranging research through [nine interdisciplinary centers](#), each focused on a topical area within public affairs, such as social and economic policy, conflict and collaboration, public wellness, aging, energy and environment, national security, regional studies, and more. For more information, follow Maxwell on Twitter [@MaxwellSU](#) and please visit: <http://maxwell.syr.edu/>.

Gender & Society is a peer-reviewed journal, focused on the study of gender. It is the official journal of [Sociologists for Women in Society](#), and was founded in 1987 as an outlet for feminist social science. Currently, it is a top-ranked journal in both sociology and women's studies. Articles appearing in *Gender & Society* analyze gender and gendered processes in interactions, organizations, societies, and global and transnational spaces. For additional commentary, you can also read the [Gender & Society blog](#) and follow the journal on Twitter: [@Gend Soc](#). For more information, contact Gender & Society editor, Jo Reger, Professor of Sociology and Director of Women and Gender Studies at Oakland University. She can be reached at reger@oakland.edu.

[Sociologists for Women in Society \(SWS\)](#), currently headquartered at the University of Kansas, works to improve women's lives through advancing and supporting feminist sociological research, activism and scholars. Founded in 1969, SWS is a nonprofit, scientific and educational organization with more than 1,000 members in the United States and overseas. For more information, contact Dr. Joey Sprague, Professor of Sociology at the University of Kansas and SWS Executive Officer, at jsprague@ku.edu. Follow us on Twitter and Facebook: [@socwomen](#) and [facebook.com/SocWomen](https://www.facebook.com/SocWomen).