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# Weaponization and Prisonization of Toronto's Black Male Youth

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### Abstract

Informed by Galtung (1969), Anderson (2012) and Wacquant (2001), this paper argues that a lifetime of spiralling and everyday state structural violence and overtly racist criminal profiling principally targeted at young Black men living in the Toronto Community Housing Corporation prepares them for prison. Moreover, it contends that interpersonal violence, transmitted from generation to generation and producing a vicious cycle, is a manifestation of institutionalized and systemic inequity. In the context of a hypermasculine culture, young Black men are both victims and participants in a dialectic of interpersonal-structural violence. Routinely precipitated by powerful state actors and agencies of criminal justice, public policy and assorted 'moral entrepreneurs', young Black men have their masculinity weaponized and prisonized by the state's low-intensity declaration of war against them, and, among others, the poor, LGBTQ, immigrants, and First Nations and other people of colour.

### Keywords

Weaponization; prisonization; thecriminalblackman; hypermasculinity; hyperincarceration structural violence; social justice.

### Introduction

Against the backdrop of unfettered markets and enfeebled social-welfare programs, when the penal system has become a major engine of social stratification and cultural division in its own right, the field study of the prison ceases to be the province of the specialist in crime and punishment to become a window into the deepest contradictions and the darkest secrets of our age. (Wacquant 2002: 389)

The weaponization and prisonization of Black youth's masculinity is embedded within state structural violence in the form of marginalization, repression, dehumanization, demonization, vilification, exploitation and other forms of discrimination. The state, in constructing harm and injury as the special province of private citizens rather than the structural nature of capitalism, criminal 'justice' and other state public policy, finds in young Black men a culturally acceptable

'condensation symbol' (Kaufer and Carley 1993) to represent a malevolent force whose *being* is the essence of disorder. Tamari Kitossa (2005), in his examination of the criminalization of African Canadians, referred to this characterization, redolent of the Inquisition's scapegoating of women, as '*Malleus Maleficarum Africanus*'. Specifically, this inquiry demonstrates that masculinities, weaponized and prisonized through state structural violence, are articulated in narratives that originate with children born into spirals of poverty, colonialist and racist child welfare systems, the school-to-prison pipeline, maladaptive interpersonal violence, disenfranchised communities, discrimination, physical and sexual abuse, paramilitary policing, hyperincarceration and everyday racism.

This work emerges from my community praxis aimed at developing a conceptual vocabulary for understanding the violence and hypermasculinity of disenfranchised young Black men living in the Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC). These young men's lifeworlds are defined by their struggles to adapt, cope and resist normalized state structural violence (Galtung 1969) and conditions of social death (Patterson 1982). For Galtung, 'structural violence is violence where there is no such actor' (1969: 170) as opposed to events and contexts of 'direct' or 'personal', violence. He further explains that 'structural violence is the unintended and indirect constraints impeding people from their own self-realization when those structures themselves are not natural and immutable' (1969: 169). Structural violence is abstract in nature, to the extent we are socialized to regard it as such, and not something that can be traced to particular institutions and their representatives (1969: 187). 'Violence', therefore, is not simply a function of individual proclivity but is dialectical; it is 'built into the [social] structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances' (Galtung 1969: 171). While there is reason to question Galtung's concession to the liberal notion of 'life chances', the substance of his theory goes towards recognizing Herman and Julia Schwendinger's (2001) argument that racism and poverty are forms of state and societal violence, which are amplified and compounded by overpolicing and criminalization, factors which contribute to youth suffering multiple traumas. Galtung argues that both direct and structural violence create trauma: 'violence is needs-deprivation; needs-deprivation is serious; one reaction is direct violence. But that is not the only reaction. There could also be a feeling of hopelessness, deprivation/frustration syndrome shows up, coupled with apathy and withdrawal' (1969: 295). Hence, traumas are caused not only by structural disinvestment but also by amplification, as in a feedback loop, where and when *some* individuals react to the structural violence (including gang and interpersonal violence). Failure to offer meaningful responses to repair state and societally induced youth trauma – if indeed the state does not consider as *functional* the crisis conditions it has created (Kitossa 2012) – leaves young and poor Black men to carve out a worthwhile existence in ways that make sense to them, even though surrounding structures suppress adaptive responses. In a classic deconstruction of 'blaming the victim', Stanley Cohen (2007) argues that our society routinely creates problems for poor youth but then blame them for solutions they devise.

Structural violence also filters into areas of social service delivery in the form of demand for treatment of psychological disorders (which often go unattended), provision of child protection or custody, and welfare and social programs. Clearly, a 'violent structure leaves marks not only on the human body but also on the mind and spirit' (Galtung 1969: 294). Data from the 2006 census showed that, in an urban center in Ontario, Black youth represented 65 per cent of all youth in state care but the Black population represented only 8 per cent of the total (Grant and Ojo 2009: 8). Years of this type of socialization and bearing witness to these experiences leads to Black youth becoming marginalized within their 'urban iconic ghetto' (Anderson 2012).

In essence, Black youth living in the TCHC are subjected to '... state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death' (Gilmore 2007: 28). This influences their feelings of despair and, although they are not wholly defeated, shapes their negative reactions to the world (Berger 2006). Furthermore, young men's health suffers in part due to this marginalization but also through persistent structural and systemic racism and psychosocial death. Scholars argue that inequitable treatment due to racism increases rates of morbidity and mortality and reduces overall feelings of well-being. Levels of discrimination vary depending on socially assigned characteristics of race or ethnicity (Ford and Airhihenbuwa 2010). I argue that this form of stigmatization and state structural violence forms, shapes and socializes working-class Black men with two types of hypermilitarized masculinities: weaponization and prisonization. Eliminating structural violence, abject poverty and racism, therefore, goes part and parcel with achieving a higher standard of health as it could encourage these men to adopt non-violent alternatives to conflict resolution (Berger 2006; Galtung 1969; Gilmore 2007).

The carceral<sup>2</sup> concrete living spaces and buildings that represent the physical structures of the TCHC together with the overt racialization experienced within this environment exacerbate feelings of hopelessness. I propose this prepares Black male youth for prison and creates, by extension, exaggerated masculinities including use of weapons. Indeed, Wacquant (2008) suggests that ghettoized communities, given their enforced containment, social control and moral regulation, are effectively open-air prisons. Male peer support within the TCHC, thus, rather than offering positive supportive support roles, encourages the normalization of interpersonal violence. Because young males cannot access programs where they could develop problem-solving and anger management skills, or have community courts that resolve conflict through restorative justice, their coping abilities are limited to risk-taking, violence towards women and other males (DeKeseredy and Schwartz 2002). For some youth, living in the TCHC may feel like prison, paralyzing their abilities to comprehend life outside. This denial of opportunity is a form of psychological violence, restraining mobility like a yoke.

In 2011, family violence accounted for 26 per cent of all police-reported blue-collar violent crime (Statistics Canada 2011) and the bulk of offenders brought before the criminal justice system are racialized men (Rankin and Winsa 2013). Racialization is the process by which groups are demonized and vilified by the media, police and courts, based on race, colour, creed or ethnicity. Racialization draws attention to the process of making 'race' relevant to a particular situation or context, and thus requires an examination of the precise circumstances in which this occurs (Glynn 2014: 12). Feminist and empirical studies also indicate that children who witness violence between their parents are at an increased risk of behavioural and developmental problems and are at a greater risk of becoming victims and perpetrators of violence themselves (DeKeseredy and Schwartz 2002; Jaffe, Wolfe and Wilson 1990; O'Keefe 1998). The structural violence and trauma from these experiences contribute to the violence experienced not only by women and children in the TCHC but also among male peer groups and within homoerotic male bonding incidents.

Criminological evidence indicates that youth from impoverished or working class communities, where the absence of work and racist hostilities undermine their respective self-worth, tend to make decisions which are extremely poor but which can be rational within their perceived context. Sabo, Kupers, and London (2001) inform us that class plays an important role in the types of crimes committed. They point out that adolescents of all classes commit crimes; however, affluent boys raised with vested futures frequently stop short of committing crimes that would land them in jail, whereas working class boys who have relatively fewer opportunities for higher education and satisfying work are disproportionately represented

among the convicted (Sabo, Kupers, and London 2001: 6). In *The End of Work*, Jeremy Rifkin (2004) cites a major epidemiological study by Merva and Fowles (1996) showing that a one per cent rise in unemployment, among other things, correlates with a 6.7 per cent increase in homicide and a 3.4 per cent increase in other violent offences. In essence different types of masculinities are performed within the categories of race, class and gender, as responses to particular contexts and situations. To begin to understand these communities of men, we must understand how state structural violence, social disenfranchisement, abject poverty, chronic unemployment, overpolicing, criminalization and constructed hopelessness have created a lifetime spiral into violence.

### **Over-policing of Black masculinity**

It is said that no one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails. A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones. (Mandella 1995)

Toronto's Black population, according to Statistics Canada, is 6.9 per cent, with the broader category of visible minorities at 42.9 per cent (2006). According to a spokesperson of the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services, typically on any given day the Black inmate population averages between 11-15 per cent (2012). Disturbingly, however, Black subgroup inmate numbers have increased every year over the last 10 years, growing by nearly 90 per cent over that period. Meantime, Caucasian inmates actually declined by 3 per cent over this same period (Sapers 2013: 9). Nevertheless, as a group, Black inmates are not more violent than other identifiable groups. Moreover, on average, Black inmates are no more likely to be serving a sentence for violent offences than the general inmate population. Given that all meaningful employment and, to some degree, educational certifications require criminal record checks, education and employment prospects are bleak for young Black men when released from prison.

Recent media reports remind us of what critical criminological and sociological literature has known for decades: that is, minority communities and socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods are over-policed for minor crime and under-policed for major crime (Crichlow and Visano 2009; Rankin 2010; Rankin and Winsa 2013). According to the United Nations Human Development Report (2011), Canada ranks as one the best countries in the world for living. However, UN Special Rapporteur on Racism, Dr Doudou Diène, noted upon his visit to Canada in 2004 that:

Canada, because of its past history, as in all the countries of North and South America, carries a heavy legacy of racial discrimination, which was the ideological prop of trans-Atlantic slavery and of the colonial system. The ideological aspect of this legacy has given rise to an intellectual mindset which, through education, literature, art and the different channels of thought and creativity, has profoundly and lastingly permeated the system of values, feelings, mentalities, perceptions and behaviours, and hence the country's culture. (Diène 2004: para 68)

This is evident within the Canadian criminal justice system's racial profiling of Black citizens. In February, 2010, Jim Rankin of the *Toronto Star* Newspaper, examined data from Toronto police contact cards in (mostly) non-criminal encounters with the public. The article highlighted a disturbing trend and points to the harrowing realities of black male overpolicing and hyperprisonization:

- If you are Black Canadian and you do something wrong or illegal, your chances of getting caught are much greater than your White counterpart;
- Black Canadians make up 8.4 per cent of Toronto's population, they account for three times as many contacts with police;
- Black Canadian males aged 15-24 are stopped and documented 2.5 times more than White males the same age; and
- Differences between Black Canadian and White carding rates are highest in more affluent, mostly White areas of the city, indicating the presence of the 'out-of-place' phenomenon.

Another *Toronto Star* investigation titled 'Known To Police' and published in March 2012 reported that, from 2008 to mid-2011, higher proportions of Black people were stopped and documented by police than White people in every one of the city's 72 patrol zones (Rankin and Winsa 2012). On average, Blacks were 3.2 times more likely to be documented than Whites and, in more affluent neighbourhoods, that likelihood can go much higher (Rankin, Bailey, Ng and Winsa 2012).

More recently, the *Toronto Star* Newspaper obtained data under freedom of information that paints a disturbing picture of Black and First Nations overrepresentation in Ontario youth and adult jails. Rankin and Winsa (2013) stated that in 2011, Black male youth made up 5 per cent of boys in Ontario but 24 per cent of male youth admitted to jail. In other words, one out of 20 boys in Ontario aged 12-17 is Black but, in that state's youth jails, Black boys represent one out of five boys. Thus, the proportion of jail admissions for Black boys is four times higher than for the average youth. Notably, although young male incarceration rates have steadily declined since the introduction of the Youth Criminal Justice Act in 2003, Black and Aboriginal boys have not enjoyed the same rate of decline as White boys.

### **Contextualizing the struggles of the Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC)**

The TCHC living conditions shape how racism, state social violence, social determinants of health and gender performance influence outlooks on and outcomes of life. Repressive living conditions of hopelessness, joblessness, violence and police violence from living in the TCHC prepare Black and racialized youth for prison. Rapper and poet Tupac Shakur (1999) describes the young men who grow up in these living conditions as 'roses that grew from concrete' (Shakur 1999). Reiman and Leighton (1995: 7) suggest 'the media, criminal justice official and the state would like for the public to see these young men as "criminals", their race as crime, and as a resurgent dangerous Black urban underclass'. Such a view does not allow for the loving insights offered by Shakur: the possibility for the roses (youth) to grow. For these roses to emerge from concrete and survive takes resilience, agency, will-power, hope and supportive networks. Freire reminds us that:

... the idea that hope alone will transform the world, and action undertaken in that kind of naïveté, is an excellent route to hopelessness, pessimism, and fatalism. But the attempt to do without hope, in the struggle to improve the world, as if that struggle could be reduced to calculated acts alone, or a purely scientific approach, is a frivolous illusion. (Freire 1997: 8)

Toronto is home to some of Canada's largest and oldest government housing communities/projects. These properties are managed by the TCHC. Toronto also is home to some of Canada's most expensive real-estate, condominiums and property taxes. According to Harris (2003), due to 'redlining',<sup>3</sup> Canadian Blacks are less likely to obtain bank loans and own

property; thus, by extension, they are more likely to rent and live in low-income communities or in government housing projects. Within the Canadian landscape, owning property is not only synonymous with economic success but is also associated with having middle- or upper-class jobs, better quality of health, and fewer encounters with the police and other state officials. According to a United Way of Greater Toronto and the Canadian Council on Social Development (2004) report titled *Poverty by Postal Code*, racialized groups, immigrants – whether newly arrived or more established – and refugees were almost three times more likely than others to live in poverty, whether they were employed or not. About 29.5 per cent lived below the poverty line. Among immigrants, 24.0 per cent lived below the poverty line compared to an average of 11.6 per cent for non-racialized Canadians. Open Concept Consulting (2013) indicated that, in 2007, the overall Toronto poverty rate of 19.0 per cent was higher than the national rate of 14.7 per cent. Between 1980 and 2000, the poverty rate for non-racialized populations fell by 28 per cent while poverty among racialized families rose by 361 per cent (United Way of Greater Toronto and the Canadian Council on Social Development 2004). This problem is especially severe when poverty in racialized communities is considered. For the same period, the number of racialized families living in poverty in Toronto increased by 32 per cent, far greater than their population growth. Of all persons living in poverty in 2006 in three of Canada's major cities, racialized minorities comprised 41 per cent in Toronto, 18 per cent in Vancouver, and 17 per cent in Montreal (National Council of Welfare).

A subsequent (2005) United Way Toronto study prioritized 13 socially and economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods.<sup>4</sup> These areas represent Toronto's urban underclass and, as such, the residents are marginal to the dominant culture or society. Every day they face a culture that tells them that they can never achieve or be successful in society. This is especially evident with education and racialization of criminalization. Rankin, Rushowy and Brown (2013) reported in the *Toronto Star* newspaper that:

- Black students make up only about 12 per cent of high school students in the Toronto public board – about 32,000 – yet account for more than 31 per cent of all suspensions.
- For the 2006/2007 school year, suspension rates were highest for Aboriginal students, followed by Black and mixed-race students.
- One of every seven Black Grade 7 and 8 students reported being suspended at least once. The ratio was slightly lower for high school students.

School suspensions coupled with predatory rebellious consumerism (Lipsitz 1994) among some youth creates predatory individualism, ambivalence and a fascination with gangster culture as an alternative to education and conventional jobs. Decrepit conditions of classrooms and communities, coupled with school suspensions contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline. Overcrowded classrooms, racially and socioeconomically isolated environments, a lack of effective teachers and school leaders, and insufficient funding for 'extras' such as counselors, special education services, textbooks, access to professional sporting and physical activities, ESL and daycare services to name a few (Kim, Losen and Hewitt 2010: 1) are also among recognised shortcomings. These deficiencies increase students' disengagement and push-outs that begin with the opening of a school door through expulsion or disengagement and culminate with enclosure in a prison cell. School suspensions expose some youth to a street culture in the absence of parental supervision, making them vulnerable and easy targets for the school-to-prison pipeline. In essence the street gangster and prisonized subculture within TCHC projects become the new teacher/school that coaches them into believing that gangster culture is cool. Ironically, in a real sense, gangster culture, arbitrary and brutal as it can sometimes be, also provides a mutual support network and caring relationships.

Toronto's 13 priority communities are euphemistically referred to by some youth and residents as 'the hood' or 'ghetto'; by Anderson (2012) as the iconic ghetto; and by Wacquant (2008) as the hyperghetto.<sup>5</sup> Living conditions create barriers to upward mobility and economic success, creating conditions for turf and street violence for limited illegal resources, conflict between residents, and fighting among members of different TCHC neighbourhoods. Experiencing everyday police brutality, engaging in street drug hustling and being associated with non-kin violent social networks or 'gangs' is another way to understand how Black youth perform patriarchal masculinity. The war on drugs has led to paramilitary policing of young Black men living in the TCHC, accounting for higher rates of imprisonment than the national average (Rankin and Winsa 2012, 2013).

The conditions within disenfranchised communities initially germinate and then feed turf and street gangs and networks, especially where police manipulation, arrest and gang 'sweeps' create intergroup conflict and leadership and turf vacuums. Defining the term street 'gang' is problematic and consistent criminological, sociological, media and law enforcement meaning is lacking (see Becker 1963; Chettleburgh 2007; Fishman and Cavender 1998). Even more problematic is the reality that, when some have attempted to define gangs, they have focussed exclusively on the criminal Black male in disenfranchised neighbourhoods. A popular culture definition which has gangs comprised of 'hoodies' (Anderson 2012) or 'thugs' employs demonizing and fear-mongering tactics to create the Other as the alien and the criminal. For the purposes of this paper, I replace the concept of youth gang with youth street social violence and suggest that TCHC violence is intricately linked to structural violence and prison violence.

### **Relationship between the TCHC, prisons and jails**

The socialized carceral geography of prisons (and its logic) spreads onto the TCHC, and thus far beyond the confines of gaol walls. The spatial geographies (Kirby 1996; Lefebvre 1991) instil violence as the norm for Black working class youth living within the TCHC and prepare them for the hopelessness of prison. In other words, transition to prison does not require adaption, because TCHC living conditions mentally, physically and emotionally prepare youth for life in prisons. This form of structural violence or social death brought about by such different housing standards is not only about poverty. Rather it is about the implications of different health standards in general, educational possibilities and mortality rates (Galtung 1969: 187).

There are many similarities between the TCHC and prison/jail social structural violence. Both have units, floors and apartments; limited space between neighbours/inmates; rooms for one person, yet families/inmates share small activity spaces; everyday traumas; absence of effective rehabilitation; ineffective care of physical disabilities; elements of gang subculture and violence; concrete playgrounds and iron bars but no green spaces; limited access to services; limited access to fresh food and groceries; canteen junk food services; state social and structural violence as a daily occurrence; fragile relationships; state disinvestment for social services; limited access to political, legal and cultural redress; and personal safety issues – weapons, gang activity, rape, harassment, overpolicing, rampant racism, sexism and homophobia.

Panoptic surveillance of inmates and TCHC residents need not always be experienced in order to be socially controlled. This is because self-monitoring and self-consciousness occurs with TCHC residents and inmates alike once they have been exposed to surveillance (police, courts, prisons/jails and state welfare) through the internalization of state structural violence (Galtung 1969). Power is no longer on the body but on the minds of all TCHC residents and inmates, to look out for themselves and to be self-policed at all times. In essence they both experience being continually under suspicion by authorities, while state social violence instil internalized fear that keeps them 'in their place'.

### **Weaponization and prisonization marriage**

Men's prisons and youth male social violence present key opportunities for the expression and reproduction of hegemonic masculinity (Parenti 2008; Sabo, Kupers and Willie London 2001). Prisonized masculinity is a learned response to hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987), both inside and outside prisons. Sabo also maintained that there is a silence around gender and prison masculinities, partly because prisoners seldom talk about it. Moreover, Sabo argues that 'the hardness-softness dichotomy echoes and fortifies stereotypes of masculinity and femininity' (Sabo 1994: 168). Masculinities that express hardness revolve around a male code for acting tough, being prepared to fight, choosing social death over social life, avoiding intimacy, minding one's own business, avoiding feminine behaviours, suffering in silence, and never admitting you are afraid, among other characteristics (Kupers 1999: 18-22; Sabo et al. 2001).

Weaponized and prisonized masculinities contribute to the confinement and debasement experienced by those living in the TCHC. Life before prison closely resembles life within prison for some; hence there is an easy transition into a prisonized masculinity when incarcerated. Negative stereotypes of Black men as savage and animal-like are constantly portrayed in the media and popular culture and play a role in weaponizing their masculine identities. Prisonization only adds to these damaging effects and portrayals that some Black men internalize as norms about themselves. Burdened by the injuries of class, racism and masculinity, some, despite the prospects of being 'roses in concrete', lose sight of their human worth and become caught in a web of constructed hopelessness about life and their futures. Again citing Shakur (1999), some believe they are born to die.

The prisonization of Black masculinity as practice and performance is heightened and celebrated upon release from prison back to their original spaces as subjects within and of the TCHC. Kirby (1996: 11) argues that the 'space and where we are in it, determines a large portion of our status as subjects, and obversely, the kinds of subjects we are largely dictates our degree of mobility and our possible future locations'. In other words, in the absence of educational and effective rehabilitative social programs which could provide a foundation for youth to have a vested interest in their communities and society at large, the TCHC and prison socialization encourages gang formations and the misdirection of masculine exuberance.

Prisonized masculinity is not a smooth transition to manhood or adult life; it is fraught with a socialized, policed and disciplined form of patriarchal and violent masculinities. Emphasis is placed on a façade of toughness, hyper-masculinity, street-smart skills and surviving daily repressive and brutal police violence. Anderson (1999: 72) argues that this 'street code' is typically learned in childhood and, by the time they are teenagers, youth have internalized the street culture and understand the status, respect and violence that accompany it, sometimes with fatal consequences. For many men, crime may serve as a suitable resource for showing that they are manly. Black street prisonized masculinity is shaped by discipline, enslavement and toughness coupled with the ability to use violence learned from within prison and early childhood socialization. In essence, it is a learned and weaponized response to hegemonic masculinity, both inside and outside prisons, that becomes the survival code of the street and the accepted way of doing masculinity.

As Anderson has noted, the code of the street and street-smart skills is an informal system governing the use of violence, particularly among Black working class youth. It emphasizes that one must be on guard, while maintaining and demanding respect from others through a violent and tough identity, and a willingness to exact retribution in the event of disrespect, being 'rolled on', or physically assaulted (Anderson 1999: 73). Employing Anderson's code of the street frame

of reference, one could argue that Black working class youth's performance of masculinity or 'theblackmale'<sup>6</sup> body, is an everyday street weapon: always ready, always guarded by toughness and aggression as protection from violence (1999: 130). Aggression and violence must be constantly maintained in the face of systemic disrespect and stigmatization with minimal expectations of success. There is limited police efficacy against and in some cases complicity in the drug trade. Police routinely arrest for 'suspicious' behaviors. Simply living in the TCHC is equated with suspicion. As Anderson rightly notes, in some disadvantaged neighbourhoods, simply walking the street and going outside of one's home requires that one 'adopt the code of the street' as armour and to protect others from messing with them (Anderson 1999: 92). The TCHC is a disadvantaged area that requires emotional armour, a troubling and saddening hypervalorization of the hard, tough, strong, invincible, young Black male. A man develops without a relationship to the pain he is experiencing; always ready for battle, he refuses any form of emotional tenderness, while being overly committed to his violent persona.

Just as in prison where some of these men have used their bodies to display strength and prisonized masculinity to be feared, TCHC compounds become another site for such bodily prisonized display. The prison demands 'survival of the fittest' and gangster culture within the TCHC demands the same Social Darwinism, as bodies spill out from prison into the TCHC and from the TCHC into prison. Further, many within the gangster and prisonized subculture shape the way the law sees them and law is essentially a product of culture.

Within the Canadian context, young Black men living in the TCHC are socialized by these men who act as their mentors, keeping a legacy of enslaved prisonized mentality alive among the youth. Similarly in the United States, where many Black Canadian men look for (representations of) African American role models, among Black youth:

- one in three African-American boys born in 2001 stands a lifetime risk of going to jail (American Leadership Forum cited in Alexander 2010);
- in 2007, one in every 15 Black children had a parent in prison;
- there are more African-American men in prison, on probation or on parole in the US now than there were enslaved in 1850 (Alexander 2010);
- Because felons lose the right to vote, more African-American men were disenfranchised in 2004 than in 1870, the year male franchise was secured (Alexander 2010).

A study by Reiman and Leighton (1995) is grounded in the actual living conditions of disenfranchised communities where chronic youth unemployment combines with abject poverty and the stigma of demonized racialization. Gaynes (1993) has described this situation for young Black males as: Young + Black + Male = Criminal Suspect. It is not uncommon to hear young men who socialize within the street subculture of violence and illegal activity internalize this equation. They then develop and echo woefully constructed, distorted, hopeless peer views that hustling, being incarcerated, committing acts of robbery, and participating in gangs provide alternatives to postsecondary institutions for graduation and diplomas.

Gary Younge (2012), writing for *The Guardian*, tells the story of a young man whose entire family of males are, or have been, incarcerated. For Jeffery Gamble:

... the luckiest day of his life was when his car hit the kerb at the corner of Jefferson and National in Los Angeles while he was drunk-driving. It flew over a fence, falling 80ft into a creek below, leaving him with a broken neck and paralysed. 'If I hadn't had that accident, I would be dead - or in jail for the rest of my life, just like my brothers', says Gamble, 47. (Younge 2012)

Prison, for the Gambles, is as common a destination as university might be for a middle-class family. His two brothers are both in jail. Ricky, who was convicted for burglary and assault with a firearm under the three strikes law, is in for 110 years to life. Mike got life without parole for the murder of a local councillor. His father was in jail for a series of alcohol-related offences.<sup>7</sup> His son, Khalif, has also been in jail for dealing drugs and possession.

Vale de Almedia, writing on masculinity in Portugal (1995) alongside Chevanne (2001), Reddock (2003) and Crichlow (2004, 2012) writing on masculinity in the Caribbean, points out how patriarchy places prestige, pride and power in the symbolic capital of masculinity and encourages men to be family providers. The gendered expectations and nature of male work to provide for family places extra pressure on men to show and see their strengths as hypermale providers and not failures or effeminate men. Sometimes the only way to provide for one's family is through creative and productive activities of gang and drug life. In essence, for some, participating in gangs, hustling and being incarcerated are almost rites-of-passage, badges of honour, that ensure their prisonized and militarized hypermasculinities will translate to power and respect. According to Anderson (1999) and Sampson and Lauritsen (1994), violence in disenfranchised neighbourhoods is used as a tool for gaining respect, controlling the turf and gaining credibility among peers of similar minds. Anderson (1999: 131) also observed that some youth deliberately look for fights to build street respect, to inform others who they are. Likewise, Wilkinson (2001) found that young men committed acts of robberies to secure their masculinist hypermasculinity, while impressing other youth. Given that masculinity and competitiveness go hand in hand, hustling in turn informs how these young men will perform or imitate prisonized masculinity.

Julius Lester (1969) defines the practice of hustling which exemplifies the life practice of Black youth weaponized and prisonized masculinities in the ghettos:

... in actuality, many blacks have consciously rebelled against the system and 'dropped out'. After all, why waste your life working at a job you hate, getting paid next to nothing, when you make more money with half the effort. So, a new class is created, the hustler who gambles, runs numbers, pushes drugs, lives off women, and does anything to avoid going to 'meet the man' five days a week, year in and year out. It is dangerous, rough, and a none too beautiful life, but it has some compensation: A modicum of self-respect and the respect of a good segment of the community is gained. (Lester 1969: 11)

Prisonized and weaponized masculinities is characterized by the sagging baggy pants which youth see as challenging authority, police, parents, societal dress-codes and school officials. Black youth's hypermasculine prisonized performance, through themes of gun play, sexual prowess, body tattoos, piercings, and shaved heads, is symbolic of stylistic resistance and is a reflection of how thug life functions within and outside prison walls. It is not uncommon, then, for law officials to use the culture of resistance, its symbolic representation and themes as evidence to be admitted in gang trials. This was most evident in murder trial of Mitchell Celise, age 17. The three-month trial included more gang evidence than ever before admitted in a Toronto courtroom, including six *YouTube* videos, scores of text messages, rap lyrics, jailhouse letters, photos of graffiti and tattoos, and testimony from gang and handwriting experts (Powell 2012).

The revolving circulation of Black men from prison to the TCHC and the iconic ghetto, (Anderson 2012) and the transfer of culture from father to son, create a 'normalized' understanding of a hypermasculinist weaponized, prisonized, and paranoid masculinities that

become contagiously exciting and titillating to younger Black men through socialization. Youth social violence or gang culture and the everyday performativity of hyper- and prison-masculinity in the TCHC socialize other young men into doing masculinity as learned violence. Black youth socialization into state structural violence, hypermasculinist aggression, and toughness, is a recipe for becoming desensitized to pain and, by extension, for the development of morbid pleasure as entertaining and normative. As a consequence street youth then take pride in owning firearms, acting tough and weaponizing their masculinity. The gun has become prized as a symbol of masculine power but also as a lethal weapon leading to increasing death rates among the blackmales.

### **Years of guns and social death**

Hong cited in Cacho (2012) reminds us:

... when the alternative to social value is social death, and social death means brutally exacerbated conditions of racialized violence, incarceration, and coercion, the allure of legibility is undeniably difficult to resist. Indeed, imagining a politics based on the refusal of social value is an impossible, unthinkable option, one, in truth, outside of any available notion of the political. (Cacho 2012: 31)

In Toronto 2005 was named as the year of the gun after a young woman named Jane Creba was accidentally shot while shopping on Boxing Day. In that year there were a total of 232 shooting incidents, 196 persons shot and 55 killed (Weinreb 2005). The year of the gun among this city's disenfranchised communities can also be called the year of youth 'social death' (Gordon 2011; Hong 2009; Patterson 1982), a condition where Black youth are still not seen as human and Blacks are constructed as a dangerous class by the state. According to Francis (2013):

Conceptually social death captures hierarchies of difference and manipulation of power within the confines of slavery. The enslaved are conscripted by institutional domination of slavery, but it does not curb their attempts to remake their quotidian lives even if the end result is failure within a greater systematic frame. (Francis 2013: 4)

Vigil and Yun (2002) in their study of youth gangs created a cross-cultural theory to explain why racialized youth join gangs in Los Angeles. Vigil and Yun's (2002) hypothesis on cross-cultural theory describes how unattended social problems within families, schools, and community lead some racialized and socially disadvantaged families to street and prison socialization and gang involvement (Vigil and Yun 2002: 161). Applying the framework of Vigil and Yun (2002) to the TCHC, Toronto's neighbourhood gangs prey on racially marginalized youth who are susceptible to recruitment due to the economically and socially disadvantaged spaces they occupy in urban life.

Criminological evidence (Miller 1980; Sabo, Kupers and London 2001; Vigil and Yun 2002) indicates clearly that youth from impoverished communities are more prone to making extremely poor decisions. This was apparent at the Danzig Street barbecue party shooting in Scarborough, Ontario where Shyanne Charles and Joshua Yasay were killed and 23 others wounded on 16 July 2012 (Taddese, Ferenc and Fernandez-Blance 2012). The *Toronto Star* crime reporting files state that 31 people were shot in the city in the six days prior to the Danzig street barbecue party. Summer of 2012 will go down as the 'year of the gun and gang violence' among Toronto's Black youth (Taddese et al. 2012). The street code of killing and shooting is particularly entrenched among hard-core, street-oriented youth who are willing to risk dying violently rather than allow themselves to be 'dissed' or victimized (Anderson 1999: 92). The

code of the street emerges where police protection ends in the name of social death, where residents avoid calling the police for major crime problems because 'a man goes for himself, takes up for himself, and calls on no one else to fight his battles' (Anderson 1999: 307).

The decades since the 1980s are often referred to as the decades of street gangs, youth social violence and years of the gun and youth social death (Becker 1963; Chambliss 1999; Parenti 2008; Zatz 1987). As a response to the shootings of 2005, the increase in rates of violence involving firearms and other weapons, and the decrease in perceived community safety, the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (2011) announced the Youth Opportunities Strategies.

### **Bill C-10: Racializing weaponization**

... life and death for Black youth are linked in complicated ways and nowhere more so than in the extent to which racism explains not just who becomes a prisoner – almost everywhere and at all times the poor, dissidents, and racial and ethnic and religious minorities – but also what the prisoner becomes. Imprisonment is a medium of racialized state-craft and prisoners are usually, and definitely in the United States, considered in law and social practice an inferior race in and of themselves. (Gordon 2011: 17)

Racism and in particular antiblack racism linked to crime is a reality within Canadian society. Auditing Canada's history allows for a deeper analysis and understanding, starting with its legacy of legalized slavery, state racism and authorized racial discrimination (Walker 1997; Winks 1997). Canadians have always used law to control, contain and subordinate members of racial, gendered and sexual minority groups – for example, through the Canada Immigration and Protection Act under the offices of Canada Border Service Association: Detention and Removals Program.<sup>8</sup> In a like fashion, on 20 September, 2011, the conservative government tabled Bill C-10, an omnibus bill titled the Safe Streets and Communities Act. Bill C-10 proposes to make fundamental changes to criminal law. The Bill combines amendments from nine separate bills that had failed to pass in previous sessions of parliament. Bill C-10 proposes to make fundamental changes to almost every component of Canada's criminal justice system.

Bill C-10 has been put forward as legislation to make 'streets, families and communities safer' (Department of Justice Canada 2011). The Bill removes discretion with respect to sentencing from judges to Crown prosecutors. Prosecutors will now have the power to proceed, dismiss, or stay a charge to which a mandatory minimum sentence is attached (Department of Justice Canada 2011). Research suggests that this discretion will be exercised to the disadvantage of Black young Canadians, in particular TCHC youth (African Canadian Legal Clinic 2012; Gordon 2011: 17; Lewis 1992).

Within the Canadian context, antiblack racism is an ideological political campaign used against Black men as a tool for voter support or winning the ballot with a tough-on-crime agenda, employed by political parties on the right. At the same time as they reinforce candidates' colonial power, antiblack racist political campaigns absolve the actual centers of power from addressing the conditions and structural violence that cause Black youth social violence and the reasons why they are frustrated with the system. By not addressing the inequities, racialization, racial profiling, political disenfranchisement and injustices they experience, the state demonizes them. In essence antiblack racism is about demonization of Black youth street violence.

Bill C-10 attempts to tell the Canadian public that society and, in particular, urban centers are slipping into a crisis (see Hall et al. 1978). But Bill C-10 does not inform the public that the race-

crime-youth nexus is about an attack on racialized urban black youth and the construction of the criminal as a 'the black male', often stereotyped as of Jamaican Caribbean heritage. Bill C-10 does not but should ask, according to Hall et al. (1978: viii): To what social contradictions does this trend towards the disciplined society or 'safe street', powered by the fears mobilised around mugging, really refer? What social forces are constrained and contained by its construction? What forces stand to benefit from it? What role has the state played in its construction? What real fears and anxieties is it mobilising? The intention of and reaction to Bill C-10 is clear: mass prisonization, paramilitary policing and the creation of a 'prison nation' (Davis 2005; Herivel and Wright 2003); and over-incarceration of Black male youth who are already over represented in the Ontario prison system (Rankin and Winsa 2013). Bill C-10 will allow for the policing of TCHC communities as an occupying force (Baldwin 1966). It will restrict their ability to move outside of the criminal justice system and the TCHC, where most of the gang activity is presently occurring, by creating a symbiotic relationship over time with prison and the TCHC for younger generations to come. Children who have seen their older family members and friends being restricted from taking part in civic society due to criminalization and criminal convictions are likely to follow the same path.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper was to develop a conceptual understanding of the cycles of violence Black youth living in Toronto's urban iconic ghetto, the Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC), experience as participants and victims. Carceral geography and the social symbiotic relationship between life in the TCHC and experiences of everyday state structural violence, abject poverty and hyperincarceration shape the limited life chances of Black males. State structural violence is further compounded by over-policing and racial profiling as a response to the moral panic around Black youth blue-collar street crime. Due to widespread plea-bargaining, these criminalization processes result in disproportionate numbers of poor Blacks in prison. This is structural violence. Young Black men have been anaesthetized and socialized with state structural violence and have become compulsive consumers of violence and self-destruction. Thus a whole set of young Black men in the TCHC – through their demonization, criminalization and vilification – are akin to prostitutes, refugees, disenfranchised youth and newly arrived racialized immigrant groups; they are essentially social nonpersons (Patterson 1982: 5)

This paper argues that a 'prison' isn't confined to the acres where correctional facilities stand; rather, carceral geography (and its logic) spread far beyond the confines of the prison walls. For a segment of Toronto's Black urban under-class and marginalised youth living in Toronto's TCHC, the primary structuring factors and institutions (Prisons, Capitalism, Corporations, and the State) influence their prisonized and weaponized masculinities. Prisonization, overpolicing and the war on drugs take this process and cast it beyond the individual 'identity' to the spaces where people live and what those spaces assume, allow and constrain. To paraphrase Wacquant (2001), there is a deadly symbiosis when ghetto and prison life meet and mesh; the challenge is to break the symbiosis for young Black men who have been cast out as our urban underclass. One trap of this deadly symbiosis is the ways in which Black bodies are policed differently, especially for marijuana possession charges. Alexander (2010) and Reiman and Leighton (1995) call for decriminalization and or legalization of marijuana to allow poor people to trade legally and make comfortable incomes for themselves and their families, a daily ritual for some living in disenfranchised communities. They could then learn to develop formal business skills, develop critical literacy, and create a generation of legal business entrepreneurs. This could be where we begin to undo some of the structural violence that has destroyed the analytic abilities of these young Black men and limited their capacities to unlearn violence, by invoking a part of their life narrative as ritual and rehabilitative.

Long overdue is a commitment to projects that promote caring, love, respect and multiple forums for literacy and art focussed especially at those living on the margins of our urban underclass. Culturally relevant and culturally meaningful programming and educational engagement with subsequent employment opportunities can also work to deter youth from gang associations and develop their sense of worth, pride, esteem, confidence and resilience. Some of the best teachers and mentors for socially disadvantaged youth are youth themselves. Transforming their weaponized and prisonized masculinities will require nothing short of a drastic metamorphosis and counter hegemonic revolution in consciousness and action.

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<sup>2</sup> 'The concept of a carceral archipelago (meaning a prison consisting of a series of islands) appears in social theorist Michel Foucault's work on surveillance systems and their technologies over modern societies and its practice of social control and discipline over its population in all areas of social life. Taken from his work *Discipline and Punish: Birth of the Prisons* (1975), modelled on the principle of and related to the nation state, and ideally employed on the idea of an incarceration system producing society's need for prisons, it employs physical boundaries to gain control of urban space' (Wikipedia 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Redlining is the practice, in the American social system, of denying, of charging more for services such as banking, insurance, access to health care or even supermarkets, or denying jobs to residents in particular areas which are often racially determined.

<sup>4</sup> Toronto's 13 priority neighbourhoods are: Scarborough Village; Eglinton East/Kennedy Park; Weston-Mt. Dennis; Lawrence Heights; Steeles-L'Amoreaux; Jane-Finch; Westminster-Branson; Flemingdon Park/Victoria Village; Dorset Park; Jamestown; Malvern; Kingston-Galloway; Crescent Town (United Way of Greater Toronto 2005).

<sup>5</sup> The coupling of the transformed core of the urban Black Belt, or hyperghetto, and the fast expanding carceral system was fortified by two concurrent series of changes that have tended to 'prisonize' the ghetto and to 'ghettoize' the prison (Wacquant 2001: 103).

<sup>6</sup> I use the concepts 'thecriminalblackman', ' theblackmale' and or 'thecriminalblackmale' to describe a racist, harrowing and upsetting human condition. These state, police, media and popular culture constructs and concepts have succeeded in anaesthetizing the Canadian public imagination into accepting and contributing to the hypervilification, hyperdemonization, hypercriminalization, and hyperincarceration of young Black males. This does not mean that one should not also think seriously about what is happening to young Black women and LGBTQ youth in the TCHC in relation to structural violence and criminal injustice.

<sup>7</sup> In conversation with a Director from the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services Toronto, he informed me that not only are gangs a concern for prisoner safety but the concurrent incarceration of fathers, sons, and brothers is also a security issue. He said in some cases they all share or are housed in the same prison cell which is an increased concern for prisoner family safety.

<sup>8</sup> Under Immigration Refugee & Protection Act SC (2002), foreign nationals and permanent residents can be detained if the officer is satisfied that any of the following situations exist: the individual poses a danger to the public; there is reason to believe they will not appear for immigration proceedings; their identity cannot be confirmed; or they are believed to be inadmissible for security reasons or because of human or international rights violations (Canadian Border Services Agency 2010).

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