

Conference briefing

Protecting Young Black Lives, Celebrating Black Professionals

1-3 October 2023



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Introduction

Concern about the welfare of Black children and young people in the UK, and in particular the role that “protective” services may play in the risks that they face, as well as support they receive, has garnered increasing attention in recent years. However, the experiences of the Black professionals who support them is significantly under-researched. Black children and young people are disproportionately reflected in safeguarding and criminal justice statistics; and the Black professionals who support them are often isolated and without effective/consistent support structures. The Protecting Young Black Lives, Celebrating Black Professionals Cumberland Lodge event provides an opportunity to build upon an emergent UK evidence base, and act as a catalyst for securing progress that professionals, young people and families deserve. This briefing summarises some ideas from latest UK publications on safeguarding Black children and Black safeguarding professionals. It does not offer an exhaustive account of all publications in this field. It is intended to assist in the effective delivery of the Cumberland Lodge event by providing pre-reading for all delegates.

Safeguarding

The term “safeguarding” refers to measures, policies, and practices, that protect and promote individuals’ well-being, safety, and rights, particularly those made vulnerable by virtue of their age or ability. The topic of safeguarding is vast in that its primary goal is to prevent harm, abuse (including exploitation), and/or neglect, and to ensure that individuals can live free from injury or the threat of harm. Key legislation underpinning safeguarding policy and practice frameworks in the UK is as follows:

- 1. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)** is an international treaty that sets out children’s civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. It is a comprehensive framework of children’s rights and protections and outlines minimum standards each signatory must secure for a child. (UNCRC). The UK is a signatory to this.
- 2. The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)** is a treaty in which Member States of the Council of Europe, including the UK, commit to upholding several fundamental rights (ECHR).
- 3. The Children Act 1989, Children Act 2004** and the **Children and Social Work Act 2017**, provide the legal framework for child protection in England, and emphasise the paramountcy of intervening to safeguard a child’s welfare and promote children’s best interests. They also highlight that the responsibility for safeguarding children falls on all parents, communities, faith and community groups, as well as statutory professionals (DfE, 2018; Bernard, 2016).
- 4. Working Together to Safeguard Children** is statutory guidance that sets the framework for inter-agency cooperation in responding to child abuse and neglect, including extra-familial forms of harm (DfE, 2018).

This legislative and policy framework governs the systems in which Black children are disproportionately represented – in both social care and criminal justice systems.

Safeguarding Black children and young people

Children and young people in the UK are exposed to a range of safeguarding risks and harms both within and external to their families. These include familial child abuse (physical, sexual and/or emotional harm) and neglect; sexual or criminal exploitation by peers and/or adults external to the family home; street-based violence; online grooming and abuse; relationship/dating violence; and institutional harm. When Black children and young people experience these issues there are multiple additional factors to consider. Their victimisation may be under-recognised; they may be at increased risk of these harms (for example exposed to street-based violence or exploitation more readily due to being disproportionately excluded from education); or may lack protection when services that have been commissioned fail to reflect their needs and experiences.

As such, according to Claudia Bernard and Perlita Harris (2016), Black children and young people are more likely to experience “individual, familial, community and structural factors that increase risks..., reduce their chances of flourishing and which can create stressors for their parents and carers in their dealings with child protection services” (Bernard and Harris, 2016:11). Adverse experiences, including racial discrimination, educational disparities, economic inequity, criminal justice system inequities, health disparities, and exposure to community violence, may all act as stressors; with systemic and structural factors influencing exposure to harm and exacerbating its impact (Bernard, 2020).

Scholars and practitioners alike have questioned the value of our social care response to these issues given its disproportionately

negative impact on Black children and their families – for example the:

- disproportionate removal of Black children from their families who are placed in the care of the state (DfE 2020; Bernard, 2020; Hunter 2021)
- late or non-diagnosis of neurodiversity or learning needs amongst Black children, impacting their ability to access education (Firmin et al 2021)
- disproportionate exclusion of Black children from UK mainstream education and the so-called “school-to-prison pipeline” that has resulted in their overcriminalisation (Mohdin, 2021; Lammy, 2017)
- treatment of Black young people by the police, including disproportionate and violent experiences of stop and search, and over-monitoring via surveillance, mapping and matrices (Williams, 2018; Connelly, Legane, and Joseph-Salisbury 2020)
- limited commissioning and funding of services either led by Black professionals and/or designed with the needs of Black children, young people and families in mind; with a reliance on stereotypes and misinformation sometimes guiding work that is prioritised over work that is needed (Firmin et al, 2021; Bardowell, 2022).

Such processes have left Black children and young people hyper-visible to punitive practices and under-served in terms of their welfare needs (Firmin et al 2021). Their devastating impacts can be seen in a range of serious case reviews published in recent years, for example:

- Child Chris: who was murdered in 2017 at the age of 14. At the time of his murder, he was not in education, his family did not have a stable place to live, and professionals knew he had been in possession of firearms and was once caught with a sharp knife-like instrument on his waistband. However, responses to him were coordinated by criminal justice and community safety organisations who viewed him as a risk, as opposed to a child in need of support from welfare and social care organisations (Newham Safeguarding Children’s Board, 2018).

- Child Q: who, at the age of 14, was strip-searched on her own by four police officers, who were called by her school when they believed she smelt of cannabis. She was then sent home alone, and her family was not informed of what had happened to her (CHSCP, 2022).
- Child Delta (and their mother): Child Delta’s mother is believed to have been sexually exploited from the age of 15, and was taken into care as a result of this. While in care, she was found to be pregnant. After she gave birth, she was moved initially into a mother and baby foster care placement, then lived with her grandmother, and was then moved into “supported independent accommodation” to raise the child alone. Within four months of living in that accommodation, Child Delta died, having been left alone by their mother for six days (Brighton and Hove Safeguarding Children Partnership, 2022).

Various concepts and approaches have been utilised to address such shortfalls. For example:

- Adulthoodification: recognising approaches in which Black children are perceived as older, more mature, or a greater threat than their White peers. The process of adulthoodification generally takes two forms: “1) a process of socialisation, in which children function at a more mature developmental stage because of situational context and necessity, especially in low-resource community environments, and 2) a social or cultural stereotype that is based on how adults perceive children in the absence of knowledge of children’s behaviour and verbalisations” (Goff et al, 2014: 4; Epstein et al. 2017; Davis, 2022). Davis has led the application of these ideas in a UK context; particularly in the light of serious case reviews in which young people were responded to as adults and/or a threat, as opposed to children and/or in need of support (Davis and Marsh, 2020).
- Cultural competency/sensitivity: recognises the varied and changing nature of local cultures and associated experiences, and the need to consider this in the delivery of services and support. For example, in school contexts, the importance of building knowledge of local cultures, recognising differences between

cultures that exist in a school community (and between staff and students), understandings one's own culture (not solely applying the idea of culture to others), and addressing unequal power dynamics that reproduce cultural oppression (Lindsay, 2022).

- Anti-racist practice: the promotion of anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice that actively challenges racism and its impacts, rather than solely striving to not be racist. These ideas have been promoted in social work practice and social work education (Bentick and Shodeinde, 2022; Reid and Maclean 2021), and recently recommended for inclusion in all teacher training (Evans and Evans, 2022).
 - A Social Model of Child Protection (Featherstone et al 2018): recommends an increased focus on the structural drivers of the challenges that families face, such as poverty, and how these factors may impact parenting and wider family support.
 - Contextual Safeguarding (Firmin, 2020): recommends intervention into social contexts where young people come to harm (such as public places, peer groups and schools), including addressing how services may increase risk, as well as safety, in those contexts as a result of discrimination and exclusion.
 - Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Bernard, 2022): recognises that people experience the world at a meeting of multiple aspects of their identity, meaning that inequalities associated with one's identity are simultaneously experienced.
- However, take-up of these approaches is variable, as is the extent to which professionals in the UK, and organisations in which they work, understand them.

Black safeguarding professionals (BSP)

A seminal report produced by BSP membership organisation Kijiji has identified a range of challenges that Black professionals face when seeking to safeguard Black children and families. The 2021 report, *Opportunities and Support for Black Safeguarding Professionals*, reported online survey results from 100 Black safeguarding professionals from a range of sectors, including children's social care, education, organisations specialising in Violence Against Women and Girls, Serious Youth Violence (SYV), and parent support. Respondents principally described the absence of fair and equal progression opportunities for BSPs, and ethnicity-based discrimination imposing barriers upon BSPs. For example, a lack of Black senior leaders across a range of sectors involved in safeguarding, from social care to policing, was noted. They also noted the lack of spaces in which to safely discuss and address experiences of racial discrimination or racism.

The report findings confirm and extend a small number of other publications (i.e. McGregor-Smith, 2017; Firmin et al. 2021, Reid and Maclean, 2021) that have noted specific experiences of Black safeguarding professionals in the UK.

For example, a study into safeguarding responses to Black boys and young men in the London borough of Lambeth found that many professionals described racism as a feature of safeguarding practices but were unable to name it as such. These participants "were able to describe the shame and broader damaging impacts of racism. Their accounts primarily described racism as something that happens between people, a relational issue that affects Black young men, rather than something that may also be driven/caused/enabled by organisations or broader structures" (Firmin et al. 2021: 11).

Moreover, Davis (2020), in their work on adultification and safeguarding Black children, suggests that practitioners should

have the opportunity for reflective practice and supervision to question and identify knowledge gaps and how they impact decision-making. The Kijiji report (2021) also recommended the provision of a “safe” forum to listen and understand professional experiences of race equality within the workplace. The Building Safety Lambeth report (2021) also noted that, given the emotional toll that safeguarding practices can take, a reflective space for professionals is even more critical when the systems they are operating in can act as a source of harm as well as protection. It would be not only beneficial but ethical to provide safeguarding professionals with this additional level of support.

Collectively, these publications evidenced the need to ensure safe and equitable working environments for Black professionals; environments that are often lacking for those working in safeguarding.

Bringing these ideas into the Cumberland Lodge event

This briefing sets the scene ahead of the Cumberland Lodge event. We anticipate the event being a space in which further knowledge and experience can be added to the ideas set out in this document, from which we can collectively build recommendations for change. The authors of many of the publications set out in this document will be attending the event, alongside practitioners who apply many of their ideas when working with children and families. This offers us a unique opportunity to debate, extend, and, if needed, revise what is outlined here when producing a post-event report and associated recommendations.

Some of the publications referenced in this briefing will be circulated to event participants prior to the event, should you wish to read further detail about the ideas presented here.

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