

African Nova Scotian Male Focus Groups: Racial profiling as a foundation of distrust and directions for building trust in university sexual assault policies

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27 August 2021

Report Highlights

- Analysis of the African Nova Scotian (ANS) male-identified focus groups held at Saint Mary's and Dalhousie Universities reflected low confidence among participants in their sexual assault policies and associated services.
 - Concerns of participants were strongly shaped by awareness of the problem of racial profiling in our province.
 - Participants saw themselves as disproportionately likely to be named as respondents, but very unlikely to turn to university-based sexual assault policies or services for support. This is an important problem to address.
 - Despite the social invisibility of sexual violence against men and boys, many men and boys experience sexual violence in contexts of hazing, intimate partner violence, or hate crime, and during war, incarceration, or childhood. It is therefore essential for male-identified students across cultural groups to feel comfortable disclosing to service providers made available through their university sexual assault services.
- Focus group participants suggested some avenues to increase trust for university sexual assault policies among ANS men:
 1. Increasing ANS male representation among university-based sexual assault service providers
 2. For service providers of European descent, demonstrating understanding of how institutional racism includes damaging assumptions about Black male sexuality, as well as demonstrating the intention not to be swayed by such assumptions
 3. Paying greater attention to respondent rights in sexual assault policies and services

Policy Distrust Rooted in Experiences of Institutional and Systemic Racism

ANS male participants expressed distrust rooted in knowledge of and experience with racism, in contexts including the criminal justice system and the media. As one participant described, “you

bring in the whole dynamic of how we view um, the relation with police in our community and stuff like that. You know, it brings up a whole can of worms that would make it even more uncomfortable.” Another participant stated: “We live in a system where, as a black man, if you - if you go to any authority figure, you already know that there is a good chance you might not be taken seriously.” One male-identified African Nova Scotian participant expressed doubt that Black males would receive justice under their university sexual assault policies based on experience with police in Halifax: “You know, just based on the experience of living in Halifax, you know, they are pulling brothers over for no reason. That’s sad, but that is the reality we live in.”

ANS male-identified participants also reflected on the role of media in shaping how Black men are seen and therefore how they move throughout the world. An example of this was given by a participant who describes the film *Birth of a Nation*, a movie from the 1920s, where white men played black men as assaulters and rapists. In the words of this participant, “Black men already have that stigmatization, right? We are predators. We are super predators. We are aggressive. We are viewed that way, especially in terms of white women”. Another participant says:

From a young black man’s perspective, it is something that we think about a lot and even fear. Like, I remember going to school and, you know, my parents telling me, like “watch out for little white girls, because you might end up... you know, behind bars [agreement from others] for something you never did.” So, just that side of things, you know - whatever conversation has got to be aware of that.

ANS male-identified focus group participants described survival strategies learned from family and community members that focus on avoiding situations from which accusations might arise. One participant shared that his family would advise him to “always be aware of your surroundings and everything, that you kind of have to have an eye out, because you're going to be the one that things fall on if things go south. It's sad that that's the reality we live in, but, as black men, you know, we're always in harm's way.”

Ways to increase trust in university sexual assault policies

African Nova Scotian Representation

ANS male-identified participants suggested that ANS male representation specifically, or even Black representation more broadly, would be a valuable addition to university-based sexual violence response on our province. One participant expressed, “They should have more like, people of color.

Like a woman or guy of color might not feel comfortable going to someone that would not understand them.”

Another participant said,

It's kind of interesting that we're all in the same headspace. You know, if you were just able to go to, you know, a location where the therapist is going to be confidential, etc., and just, you know, how much weight is off your shoulders and this sigh of relief. You can just breathe when you walk in the room and you see, you know, a person of your skin colour when you're having to talk about something, you know, as sensitive as your sexuality as a man is. I can't even find a word to describe how much that would have increased my comfort level to discuss what actually happened to me, so.

Showing awareness of the dynamics of racism against Black men

Where service providers dealing with a sexual assault disclosure or report involving an ANS man are not part of his cultural community, one participant suggested it would be important for that service provider to demonstrate familiarity with the context of racism, and the intention to resist listening to his perspective through a lens of anti-Black bias:

If I was talking to a white woman about this, then I think it's important for her to address [...] that she's aware of that of that stereotype, and that she's not going to let that take into bias for what I'm telling her. Again, because that sets up a good level of trust for me to actually be open and honest. Because if not, then I'm over here, I'm nervous that anything I say could be taken out of context, right? Or, or could be misunderstood, based off false stereotypes of other people that look like me. And so, I think that anyone who isn't aware of these preconceptions and isn't aware of these stereotypes, they don't set themselves up to be successful in mediating situations like this with the black community.

Attention to respondent rights

Given the experiences of institutional racism and the damaging stereotypes that position Black men as “super predators,” respondent rights were perceived as important to African Nova Scotian male participants. As one participant put it,

I don't know, maybe I might have misinterpreted [...], but it [the university sexual assault policy] doesn't really explain how misuse of the policy – like, if somebody was to be

wrongfully accused.... Where I'm going with this is I feel like - I cannot really reference any specific data on this, but maybe African Nova Scotian males have been, I guess more targeted or more disadvantaged by the enforcement of this policy than any other demographic.

ANS male-identified participants emphasized the importance of consent and of believing survivors. However, awareness of a history of racial profiling, wrongful accusations, and disproportionate sentencing against Black men, specifically in cases involving sexual violence, left these participants with reservations about sexual assault policies that provided no “clear consequences as to somebody who decides to [make wrongful accusations] and enforce maybe some of the measures of these policies which have, like, eternal consequences.”

Conclusion

ANS male-identified participants highlighted distrust in white-dominated systems responding to sexual violence. This distrust was rooted in knowledge and experiences of systemic racism, which has often involved racist representations of Black men’s sexuality. Participants indicated three key ways to enhance trust in university sexual assault policies and connected services. Most prominent was the idea of including African Nova Scotian or other demographics of Black men among service providers handling such cases. Less prominent, but also important, was the notion that white service providers should demonstrate familiarity with how racism has shaped outcomes of sexual assault cases toward outcomes that are deeply damaging to Black men and communities. With this context in mind, ANS male-identified participants called for enhanced attention to respondent rights in our university sexual assault policies.