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Galvanizing Solidarity Through Chaos: Policing, Surveillance and the Impact of COVID-19 on Black Canadian Youth

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In *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, Simone Browne writes, “Racializing surveillance is a technology of social control where surveillance practices, policies, and performances concern the production of norms pertaining to race and exercise a power to define what is in or out of place.” Browne powerfully articulates how Black people have always been burdened by the white gaze. Since the era of slavery, Black people have been under constant observation, monitoring, and scrutiny by those who are in positions of power and privilege. The present novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic provides for a convenient cover for evermore intensive and overt surveillance practices impacting Black people disproportionately and further accelerating inequities and injustices in the relationships between Black people and policymakers and the criminal justice system. This surveillance draws its roots from racist practices entrenched within laws that allow the police and the criminal justice system to abuse their power and exert control. The same dynamics that shape the systemically racist application of laws also mold the policing practices and policies designed to contain the current pandemic. COVID-19 will exacerbate an already racist law enforcement system and further complicate the dynamic between police and Black Canadian youth. These troubling issues will create an urgent need for Black Canadians to work even closer together to galvanize through the ensuing chaos.

We are experiencing a societal transformation, a time of uncertainty, facing something most of us have never encountered before—a global health pandemic. The government has mandated that everyone “stay at home” and practice social distancing to minimize the spread of the potentially deadly coronavirus. Those caught disregarding these orders are subjected to fines or charges. Maintaining these newly implemented rules on movement and social distancing has created an increase in police presence, especially in marginalized communities where covert surveillance measures have been

in place for some time. This increased surveillance puts Black youth at greater risk of imposed and coercive interventions, this time under the seemingly legitimate guise of public safety. Across Canada, in comparison to their white counterparts, Black youth are disproportionately being targeted, getting fines, and arrested under claims that they are not following the social distancing orders (Bain et al., 2020). For example, the police were called on four Black youth sitting on a bench outside of a Scarborough shelter where they reside. The police indicated that they received reports that the youth were not socially distancing. It was necessary for staff to intervene on behalf of the youth to prevent an escalation and an issuance of fines. The youth felt that they were racially profiled and found the encounter traumatizing and were convinced had they been white the police would not have been called.

In addition to the implications of social distancing and stay-at-home directives, Black Canadian youth are also impacted by health officials' suggestion that we wear facial masks as a means of protection. Due to systemic anti-Black racism and the ongoing criminalization of Black skin, wearing facial masks in public while gathered in groups of more than five could potentially be seen as menacing, threatening, and criminal under the white gaze through which Black people are viewed as dangerous and fearsome. This is not far-fetched - the Ontario Human Rights Commission reports that "between 2013 and 2017, a Black person in Toronto was nearly 20 times more likely than a White person to be involved in a fatal shooting by the Toronto Police Service" (OHRC, 2018). Black youth have been criminalized and profiled by police officers and even private citizens simply for wearing hoodies, both in Canada and in the United States. This fear and criminalization of Black people make it more likely that police will be called on Black youth who cover their faces in accordance with the public health recommendations, leading to increased interactions between police and Black youth and potential involvement in the justice system. While the new Emergency Order in Council allows police officers to demand identifying information if they have reasonable grounds to believe that any order has been violated, the directive around face masks also demonstrates how obeying these orders can be equally troublesome for Black youth. They have to choose between protecting their health or risk being racially profiled.

The physical and mental health risks that Black Canadian youth will endure when interacting with police during COVID-19 cannot be overstated. Working with youth who are homeless, live with mental health concerns, reside in shelters, or live in priority neighborhoods where police presence has increased, we have seen the effects that these orders have, especially on young Black males. It is necessary to advocate in these instances to reduce the possibility of criminalizing these youth.

However, when concerned parents and youth advocates question these inequitable policies and policing tactics, the response is that they are necessary to protect the general public from contracting the virus. The new orders and the enforcement that supports them has left us paralyzed with fear, not only for the youth that we work with, but also for our own Black sons. Black lives have been imperiled by this pandemic, not only by the virus but the policies put in place to eradicate it. The criminal justice system has found an additional way to over-police us, and we expect to see a surge in the race-based data on the over-surveillance and over-policing in Black communities. The implications are increased racial profiling and harassment toward Black youth, who will lose their ability to move around society without confidence that the police will serve and protect them equally.

Acknowledging that the pandemic has adverse effects on the protection of Black youth in no way detracts from the experience of other racialized communities that have distinctive issues with profiling and other human rights violations. However, the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Black people seems to be, in part, an extension of poor policing policies and structural and institutional anti-Black racism that made it a political and social norm to position Black youth as dubious and nefarious in their movements long before this pandemic began. As members of this community, we know first-hand that we are surveilled at disproportionate rates. This is the reason why organizations such as Color of Poverty-Color of Change have sent out a call for human rights oversight of government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, due to the lack of trust we already have when it comes to policing Black bodies, we are certain that in the aftermath of COVID-19, the long term effect is that fear and racism will heighten instances of human rights violations toward Black people, particularly our youth.

But we are not powerless. In the past, despite the over-policing and the criminalization of our basic movements (e.g. driving while Black), we have managed to individually and collectively overcome injustices, empower each other, and unite as a community. We have held hands through freedom marches, prayed together in silent protest of unfair and inequitable policy making, and rallied together through the tragedies of police brutality on Black lives. In spite of the iniquitous targeting of Black communities in Canada (and elsewhere), we still find ways to overcome this adversity. In the long term, it will be vital for us to continue to stand together in solidarity, building stronger community connections, empowering and advocating for our youth, and supporting their mental health and emotional stability, notwithstanding unprecedented pandemics and policing tactics.

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