

# Race, environment, young people and mental health

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**To cite:** Craig M-R. Race, environment, young people and mental health. *BMJ Paediatrics Open* 2021;**5**:e000934. doi:10.1136/bmjpo-2020-000934

I am an 18-year-old British Bangladesh conservationist and environmentalist from Bristol. I write blogs as Birdgirl on climate change, Global Climate Justice and biodiversity loss which are closely interlinked as well as the need to prioritise the human rights of indigenous peoples.

The statistics for mental health issues within the black and minority ethnic (BAME) communities are stark. BAME young people are twice as likely to be referred to mental health services through social care/youth justice than through primary care.<sup>1</sup> If we are to be successful in improving BAME mental illnesses then we cannot continue as we have been for the last 30 years.

Of environmental professionals in the UK, only 0.6% are BAME, when the average in London is nearer 40%. Of these professionals, the vast majority are from affluent, middle-class backgrounds, many having attended independent or public schools, and so being well connected within the British 'establishment' including the environmental and wildlife film-making sector. These types of links cannot be underestimated, whatever your ethnic background.

At a basic level, there is minimal access to nature for BAME or inner-city young people. If you have never connected with nature, it is hard to care about the environment and so to campaign to stop climate change or species extinction. I have set up the not-for-profit organisation Black2Nature to facilitate young BAME people experiencing the countryside. I have organised 12 nature camps for BAME children, teenagers and families and have managed to get the young people engaged with nature. However, the teenagers who attend are excluded from the environmental movement including Youth Strikes and Extinction Rebellion Youth. They travel across the city to attend high achieving, predominantly white, affluent schools but describe huge racism in their schools impacting on their ability to do well. Racism also stops them from

## My suggestions

- ▶ Tackle the barriers that black and minority ethnic young people face in connecting with nature.
- ▶ Improve racial diversity at all levels in education, health and the environmental sector.
- ▶ Improve understanding within the environmental movement about the impact of race.

environmental campaigning. Some schools demand a permission letter from a parent for a young person to participate in a youth climate strike. BAME teenagers' parents often have language barriers, so cannot write letters, or may not understand the importance of the strikes. If the teenagers then try to attend the youth strike without a letter, they are put into isolation for the day and threatened with expulsion if they attend again.

The environmental sector is soaked in wealth with extremely privileged young people promoted and highlighted because of their contacts. I have found that as a BAME young person, I have constantly experienced barriers. There is always a 'reason' for the lack of recognition of BAME young people. It is really important that we are not lumped together, as there is a huge disparity in educational achievement between communities.

Tokenism is also rife within the sector, with those BAME young people who do not talk about racism or diversity being selected as 'compliant faces'. Also, choosing people purely because they are BAME and not on merit discredits BAME people who have worked hard for a place at the table.

If we are to improve the mental health of our BAME young people, which is also badly impacted by lack of face-to-face contact, online racism and bullying as well as racism in school, we need those within teaching, the environmental sector and mental health professionals to be ethnically diverse all the way to the top. We also need equal access to nature for everyone but this is changing very



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slowly. I hope that campaigning by my generation will help change happen.



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**Contributors** M-RC is the sole author.

**Funding** The authors have not declared a specific grant for this research from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

**Competing interests** None declared.

**Patient and public involvement** Patients and/or the public were not involved in the design, or conduct, or reporting, or dissemination plans of this research.

**Patient consent for publication** Not required.

**Provenance and peer review** Commissioned; internally peer reviewed.

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