



## Anti-Racist Praxis with Street-Involved African Canadian Youth

### Key Details

#### KEY WORDS

Street-Involved, African Canadian, Race, Racism, Black Youth, Mental Health, Afrocentric

#### POPULATION GROUPS

Racialized Youth  
Newcomer Youth  
Youth Living in Poverty  
Youth Workers

#### STEPPING UP THEMES

Health & Wellness  
Strong, Supportive Friends & Families  
Diversity, Social Inclusion & Safety

#### RESEARCH ORIGIN

Canada

#### SOURCE

Institution

**“...race and racism influence the experiences of street involvement and mental health among African Canadian youth. We...offer a few analytical and practical tools for practitioners to consider for engaging street-involved youth from an anti-racist perspective” (p. 125).**

### 1. What is the research about?

This research is about how racism influences African Canadian youth's experiences of street involvement and mental health challenges. Some research has shown that African Canadian youth are overrepresented among street-involved youth, and there is a lot of evidence that race and racism impact mental health for racialized people. As such, this chapter offers youth workers interested in taking an anti-racist perspective tools to think about when working with street-involved youth.

### 2. Where did the research take place?

This research is a literature review that covers various strategies that can be used to implement an anti-racist approach when working with African Canadian youth who are street-involved.

### 3. Who is this research about?

This research is about African Canadian youth who are street-involved. The authors state that, while they use the term “African Canadian” to refer to youth who have indigenous sub-Saharan African ancestry, they recognize the great diversity encompassed within this broad category. This research is also about people who work with street-involved youth and how they can take an anti-racist approach to their work.

### 4. How was the research done?

The authors reviewed relevant literature on working with African Canadian youth who are street-involved and summarized their findings into suggestions for practice.

### 5. What are the key findings?

In the past, many approaches to working with racialized and African Canadian youth revolved around “cultural competence” or multiculturalism models that focus on understanding the traits and values of specific cultural groups and then customizing programs and approaches to fit these traits and values. However, these approaches often fall short, as they do not account for issues of power, and may ignore important differences and nuances within a group. As such, the authors of this chapter offer suggestions about approaching youth work in ways that encourage the practitioner to take a strengths-based approach, be reflective about their own power, and take an explicit stance against racism.

The following outlines intervention components and implementation considerations:

#### A) Intervention Components:

##### i. Anti-Racist Praxis

Praxis refers to an ongoing process of taking a theory, putting it into action, and then reflecting on the action taken. The theories/concepts associated with anti-racist praxis give us conceptual tools through which we can analyze and challenge racial discrimination and oppression.

**Key Concept 1 – Anti-Black Racism:** acknowledges that Black Canadians face a specific type of racism that is different from racism faced by other groups, both in the forms it takes and its extent; as such, interventions that specifically deal with anti-Black racism are needed.

**Key Concept 2 – Critique of Colour-Blindness:** recognizes that racism is deeply embedded in local and global structures, and that the belief that race does not matter ignores the real impacts of race on people's lives.

**Key Concept 3 – Intersectionality:** examines how multiple aspects of identity shape people's experiences of privilege and oppression.

**Key Concept 4 – Microaggressions:** recognizes the harm caused by (un)intentional, everyday, subtle, (non)verbal insults, slights, and jokes that have a racial connotation.

## ii. Allyship

Allyship is a contested term; however, according to the authors, an ally is someone who recognizes that the privilege they have in relation to others is a result of the unjust patterns of a society, and commits to changing these patterns.

The authors offer some tips for how youth workers can better practice allyship:

- **Listen** more than you speak and be aware of how much space you take up in discussions/conversations.
- **Commit** to ongoing learning about anti-Black racism and whiteness from existing resources.
- **Be receptive to feedback and criticism** from people of colour. If someone points out something you do/say that is hurtful, maintain a stance of humility and take this feedback seriously.
- **Help amplify voices** by supporting organizations for/ by marginalized people. Support can take the form of fundraising, advocacy, or recruiting other allies.

Challenging racism can be intense emotional and intellectual labour. **Allies should not expect people of colour to shoulder the responsibility for this work.** Rather, by reflecting on and challenging racism whenever they encounter it, allies can commit to taking on some of this difficult work.

## iii. Afrocentric Approaches

Afrocentric thought was developed in the 1970/80s and sought to re-centre African values, languages, traditions, etc., that are often pushed to the margins by the dominant Eurocentric framework of Western societies. It was argued that an Afrocentric approach could help build resilience, and reshape

a person's worldview by reintroducing and reclaiming important African symbolisms, names, practices, etc.

Currently, an Afrocentric practice approach that has shown promise and is being used with youth is **rites of passage programs**. In these programs, elders and community members support youth in their transition to adulthood, which is a common tradition in many African cultures. By focusing on consciousness-raising, developing healthy living habits, respect for elders, and community involvement and responsibility, rites of passage programs can help youth achieve better outcomes. Evidence on these programs has shown that they have had a positive impact when applied with youth involved in the child welfare system and youth in conflict with the law.

One way youth workers can support street-involved African Canadian youth is to connect them with existing rites of passage programs. The following questions are used to guide the rites of passage process with youth in order to re-centre African identity (p. 132):

- Who am I? What values, history, traditions, and cultural precepts do I recognize, respect, and continue?
- How did I come to be who I am? What were/are the forces, events, and people that have come together to frame who I am?
- Am I really who I think I am? To what extent do I understand, internalize, employ, and reflect the cultural authenticity of my origins?
- What is my life purpose?

## iv. Faith-Based Family Mediation

There are practitioners who argue that this approach may be a promising practice when working with African Canadian youth who are street-involved and their families. As faith-based organizations have tended to play a big role in African Canadian communities, this type of intervention builds on existing relationships and trust.

To determine whether this approach may be a good fit, youth workers should talk to youth about whether they are connected to any faith community and whether they are interested in using this community as a resource.

As faith-based organizations have historically perpetuated homophobic, transphobic, and sexist ideas, it is important (especially when working with LGBTQ2S youth) that the faith-based organization involved is invested in maintaining a safe space that relies on anti-oppressive values.

## B) Implementation Considerations

### i. Advocacy and Structural Change

To engage in anti-racist praxis, we need to see mental health and homelessness not as individual issues, but, rather, to understand the structures and processes that create inequities. Once we take a broader view of the challenges people face, we are forced to re-evaluate what our role is in changing these structures and processes to work in more just and equitable ways. As frontline youth workers see firsthand how youth are impacted by policies and systems, they are ideally positioned to advocate for change, especially if they are able to meaningfully engage youth in these efforts.

### ii. Policy Development

Housing, child welfare, and criminal justice policies often deepen the marginalization and injustice that African Canadian youth face. As such, shaping these social policies is an effective way to make a positive impact for many young people. Frontline youth workers can get involved in policy development by participating in community consultations, joining community agency boards or think tanks, or partnering with university-based researchers on projects that investigate the impacts of policies on youth.

### iii. Community Mobilization and Activism

Policy change often moves slowly, taking incrementalist or accommodationist approaches that don't produce the immediate changes needed for a more just society. As such, people committed to anti-racist praxis may engage in community activism/social action to bring awareness to an issue and pressure those with power to act more urgently.

This work is often done outside of the formal professional role of a youth worker, and it can involve complicated political, ethical, and professional questions for the worker. However, the authors argue that despite these possible challenges, social action is a critical part of anti-racist praxis. Approaches to community activism can include protest and acts of civil disobedience, arts-based activities like street theatre, as well as more indirect actions like engaging in awareness campaigns, publishing articles on an issue, or signing petitions. Engaging youth in these activities alongside youth workers can create a sense of empowerment and teach useful skills.

## 6. Why does it matter for youth work?

Youth workers engaging Black youth need to shift their focus from thinking solely about **service models** to considering how they can use **critical reflection and praxis**.

There are already **culturally relevant services and resources** that exist within communities; youth workers should build their knowledge of these resources so they can try to connect youth to them.

Advocating for **structural change** to mitigate racism should not be seen as outside of the scope of frontline youth workers' roles; rather, those who are interested in anti-racist praxis need to expand their understanding of their role to include this critical systems-level change work.

### FIND IT ONLINE

<https://exchange.youthrex.com/report/mental-health-addiction-interventions-youth-experiencing-homelessness-practical-strategies>



Hasford, J., Amponsah, P., & Hylton, T. (2018). Anti-racist praxis with street-involved African Canadian youth. In Kidd, S., Slesnick, N., Frederick, T., Karabanow, J., Gaetz, S. (Eds.), *Mental Health and Addiction Interventions for Youth Experiencing Homelessness: Practical Strategies for Front-Line Providers* (125-138). Toronto, ON: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.