

Evidence Brief

Seven Good Practices for Supporting Racialized Youth in Conflict With The Law

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's Library for Youth Work and Google Scholar using the following key terms: "youth involved with the law," "juvenile delinquency," "incarceration," "racialized youth," and "youth violence."

Summary of Evidence: Seven Good Practices

1. Understand youth in terms of their strengths and assets.

Youth organizations can better serve racialized youth by adopting a strength-based approach and recognizing their assets. This differs significantly from the deficit-based approach that many organizations and mainstream institutions adopt. Youth organizations can also engage with racialized youth in a more humanizing, empowering way, by seeing the 'problems' they face as connected to broader social issues, where the deficit is located in society and social structures, not in youth themselves (Baldrige, 2014). Develop an organizational culture in which staff recognize young people's strengths, such as resilience, resourcefulness, and agency.

2. Raise critical consciousness in racialized youth.

Organizations should keep in mind the effects of structural racism (Williams, 2011). There is compelling evidence that overpolicing and racial profiling contribute to higher rates of incarceration among racialized youth (Barker et al., 2015; Crichlow, 2014). In Toronto, for example, evidence shows that Black youth are subject to disproportionately more stop-and-searches than white youth (Meng, Giwa & Anucha, 2015).

Youth organizations can facilitate *critical consciousness* – “the ability to perceive and interrogate the various forms of oppression that shape one's life, and to take collective action against the status quo” (Lavie-Ajayi & Krumer-Nevo, 2013, p. 1701). Staff can do this by listening to youth, offering validation, and encouraging them to reflect on the broader political and social context. Empower youth to speak out against injustice and encourage meaningful civic engagement.

3. Recognize and address gender differences.

Since boys are more likely to engage in delinquency than girls (National Crime Prevention Centre, 2012), interventions often focus on boys' needs. Organizations should recognize that what works for boys might not hold true for girls, and tailor interventions to the unique needs of girls involved with the law (Leve, Chamberlain & Kim, 2015).

4. Empower youth with a sense of program ownership.

Research suggests that promoting protective factors is more effective than attempting to 'fix' challenging behaviours. Organizations should provide youth with a platform to openly express themselves and listen to their perspectives. Involving young people in all stages of program development and implementation can promote empowerment and sustained engagement (Shaw & Tschwula, 2002). Youth-led programs can provide young people with the resources and opportunities they need to develop skills and increase civic engagement (McMurtry & Curling, 2008). A paper commissioned by UN-HABITAT contends that educating young people on the values of citizenship is "an important way of helping them to find a better place in their society and to recognize the value of their own contribution" (Shaw & Tschwula, 2002, p. 67).

5. Provide meaningful mentoring opportunities.

Lack of positive role models is considered a risk factor for engaging in crime (Toronto Youth Equity Strategy [TYES], 2015). Youth in conflict with the law benefit from having at least one consistent, caring adult in their lives (Anthony et al., 2010; TYES, 2015). Evidence suggests that mentoring programs are effective in reducing violent behaviour and substance use (McMurtry & Curling, 2008; Shaw & Tschwula, 2002). Studies have found that participants have higher levels of academic achievement, as well as higher-quality relationships with both caregivers and peers.

Organizations should consider using mentoring as part of a larger intervention that includes employment programming or recreational activities, such as sports or music lessons (O'Connor & Waddell, 2015; Woodward, Sloth-Nielsen & Mathiti, 2008). Invest in high-quality recruitment practices to ensure mentors have the appropriate skills, motivations, and time to commit. Strive to provide long-term mentorship, as short-term relationships can actually reduce feelings of self-worth and enhance feelings of abandonment (McMurtry & Curling, 2008). Make matches based on compatibility, not demographics alone.

6. Create programs that respect and reflect diversity.

In order to engage youth, programs should consider including staff who young people can relate to – socially, culturally, and/or economically. **Cultural competency** of staff is important – their ability to engage youth from different backgrounds and experiences and make them feel comfortable (Kwok, 2009; TYES, 2015). Adults are often seen as 'enforcers' because they fail to

understand youth culture and engage young people in positive ways. Organizations should therefore “start from a premise that all youth have strengths and the role of staff is to reinforce those strengths, recognize the diversity of youth, and value the importance of youth having input into matters that involve them” (TYES, 2015, p. 39).

7. Take a family-focused approach.

There is compelling evidence that family should be involved in prevention and intervention for youth involved with the law (Greenwood, 2008; Kwok et al., 2017; Tewelde & Olawoye, 2013). The most effective programs are those that emphasize family interactions, and provide skills training to parents or caregivers on how to adequately supervise their child (YouthREX, 2017a). Family-oriented programs may be especially relevant to girls and racialized youth. For instance, Kwok’s (2009) study of Asian youth in conflict with the law in Canada suggests that family plays an important role in ensuring the effectiveness of intervention programs.

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