

HairStory

ROOTED



A Firm Foundation for the
Future of Black Youth in Ontario's Systems of Care

HairStory

ROOTED

**A FIRM FOUNDATION FOR THE FUTURE OF BLACK YOUTH
IN ONTARIO'S SYSTEMS OF CARE**

A NOTE ABOUT THE ARTWORK

The symbols at the beginning of each section of the report, and that form the shape of the woman's Afro on the cover, were imagined in a co-design workshop by members of the HairStory youth advisory committee. As part of the workshop, each young person shared a story about a time when they advocated for their rights and felt their voice was actually heard. The advisors then looked for common themes that connected their stories. The themes they discovered were persistence, speaking up, understanding, inspiration, sensitivity, and strong values.

The advisors then created sketches for symbols that would visually represent those themes. Taken together, the nine symbols—the candle, heart, wing, tree, rose, diamond, crown, fingerprint, and compass point—put forward a collective vision of what an equitable future for Black youth in Ontario's systems of care should look like. The future they imagine is dignified, humane, supportive, and just, and they are using their voices to build it.

Illustration: LaShawwna Simon

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Website www.hairstory.ca

Instagram [@beyondourhair](https://www.instagram.com/beyondourhair)

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF BRITNEY MARCANO



Dedicated to the memory of Britney Marciano, and all the other young people whose journeys have been cut short. Britney was a beautiful soul that shined her light upon others in the midst of her own darkness. She was constantly spreading her wisdom and comfort to those in need to find their inner peace and beauty. Truly a selfless being who put her worries and issues to the side so that she could help others. My sister was involved with 3 different systems of care. But she fell through the cracks of a broken system. This is prevalent for many Black young people who are involved in Ontario's systems of care.

—RICHARD MARCANO



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LETTER FROM THE PROVINCIAL ADVOCATE

“All institutions serving young people, including our Office and now the Ombudsman’s Office, must strive to understand the experiences of Black youth and examine the systems, service models and institutional practices that need to be changed or adapted to meet their needs.”

I have often thought that an apt way to describe what our guiding legislation asked our Office to do was to “fill the chasm” between the fine words of legislation, action plans, strategies, and the promises of Ontario’s service systems and the lived experiences of young people involved with them. We took on the challenge and worked side by side with young people to raise their voices and encourage decision-makers to listen and partner with youth to improve services.

“HairStory: Rooted” was written to serve that purpose. It may be a difficult read for some. Speaking the truth about racism and how it impacts all aspects of young people’s lives is like that. The thoughts and experiences of the young people who contributed to the report are stark and to the point. Make no mistake; it is their daily lived experience and their truth. It cannot be denied. Ontario’s systems of care have a long way to go to support and meet the needs of Black children, youth and families. The young writers who prepared this report cover ground that



Irwin Elman

has been tread before and none of what they say here should come as a surprise. All institutions serving young people, including our Office and now the Ombudsman’s Office, must strive to understand the experiences of Black youth and examine the systems, service models and institutional practices that need to be changed or adapted to meet their needs.

The young people whose voices are reflected in this report ask government and the province’s systems of care to work in partnership with them to improve services. We must heed their request and act. To do otherwise will bring us face to face with a more fundamental question: why do we choose to do nothing?

I am grateful to the young people who shared their stories and painful moments in their lives to create a better world for themselves, the young people who will follow them, and all Ontarians. I believe Ontario is indebted to them for their work.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'I. Elman'.

Irwin Elman
Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth

LETTER FROM THE HAIRSTORY AMPLIFIERS



Smyrna Wright



Richard Marcano

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Structure of the Report

**“Anchored in their lived experience is a plain truth:
Black youth experience harm in Ontario’s systems
of care and the services they receive often magnify
the already difficult circumstances of their lives.”**

The young people whose voices are reflected in this report are reaching out to government, stakeholders and community service organizations and asking for a working partnership, one they believe will promote more positive life outcomes for Black children and youth. They offer recommendations to improve Ontario’s systems of care and make services more relevant and effective for Black youth in all their diversity.

They speak with passion and courage. Issues discussed in this report may give rise to strong feelings and emotions. Service providers and stakeholders may feel unfairly criticized. Representatives of government may believe the supports and services these young people so desperately seek are already available. However, that is not the intention of this call to action. Anchored in their lived experience is a plain truth: Black youth experience harm in Ontario’s

systems of care and the services they receive often magnify the already difficult circumstances of their lives. What they say is a reflection of their daily experiences. They are hurting and want collective action to meet their needs and address their concerns.

Many of the issues they raise are well documented in the academic literature and government sponsored studies. They feel frustration about the slow pace of change and anger towards a system they believe does not understand the urgency of responding to their needs. Beyond their often strong words they also remain hopeful that needed change will happen and that those entrusted with their care will feel the sincerity of their commitment to work in partnership to create change.

Young people want to see more accountability in the system. They want service providers to know about and acknowledge the discomfort, fear and alienation they feel as they struggle with bureaucratic practices they believe are biased and systems of care that do not serve them well.

They speak plainly about the things they feel are wrong with the system and express gratitude for the programs and services that do support and assist Black children and youth in care. They understand that service providers and government policy makers are well intentioned but do not want government or service providers to create needed change on their own. They are asking for a seat at the table and to work together with common purpose.

A MESSAGE TO GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS AND POLICY-MAKERS

“We need you to step up and address the injustices and inequities that marginalize Black young people.”

After reading this report, you will never be able to say you are unaware of the challenges Black youth face while in care. Once you know, you are accountable to help change a system that does not meet the needs of Black children and youth. If you know and do not act to create change, then we believe you are part the problem.

As Amplifiers, it is our job to raise the voices of our peers in the Ontario Child Advocate’s mandate, in particular Black youth in Ontario’s systems of care. While working at the Advocate’s Office, we have had the opportunity to listen to Black young people from across the province. We have shared inspiring moments, laughter, dreams, goals, and accomplishments, but also sadness, fear and heartache.

We are tired of speaking to you about the systemic barriers we face that prevent us from thriving in life. Black youth and families have been struggling with these issues for generations. This report is not a plea for pity, it is a request for you to listen and take long overdue action.

We understand the present day conditions that negatively impact young Black lives did not start with you, but you are in a position to change them. It may be difficult to understand that services intended to assist young people can be racist, biased, and reflect practices from a longstanding colonial system that deprives us of equitable treatment.

Black youth are living in a system that creates barriers that prevent us from accessing education, employment, nutritious food, safe affordable housing and other necessities of life. It is widely understood that outcomes for children are determined in large measure by the environments in which they live. When systems of care create or replicate environments that lead to the failure of Black children and youth to thrive, can there be any doubt these systems need changing?

As a public servant or an elected official, it is your job to serve all Ontarians. Rights and entitlements of citizenship are not tiered. Black children and youth in care of the state are your children; you are their parent.

Our families and ancestors helped build this country. We deserve better and are asking to be treated equitably. We ask you, as a policy-maker, a government official, someone elected to serve all Ontarians, to use the stories and recommendations in this report to implement change in Ontario’s systems of care so supports and services can better the lives of all young citizens of this province.

“You hold the power and thus have the responsibility for the Black children and youth in your care”.

A MESSAGE TO THE SERVICE PROFESSIONALS AND STAKEHOLDERS IN THE BROADER BLACK COMMUNITY

“Please ask yourself, ‘Have I done all that I can for the young people I serve?’ ‘Have I listened to and really heard what the young people I serve say?’ or ‘What have I done today to create better outcomes for the Black children and youth I serve?’”

To all Black service professionals who are doing their best to support Black children and youth, we want to say we see you and appreciate you. We ask that you continue to try to change the system, continue to learn, and continue to listen to the needs of the young people you serve no matter how hard it gets. You are the safety net we need to fall back on as we struggle to cope with inequality. We see you as a buffer against systems that do not understand our needs.

As Black children and youth living in Ontario, we sometimes experience frustration with our own communities and Black professionals who work in government or service agencies. You too do not always understand our needs. We know you want to be there for us but sometimes we see you get lost in bureaucratic rules and practices that are unhelpful to us. We do not understand why. We wonder if you feel overwhelmed by the challenge of achieving equity.

We respect you, look to you for help, and to be role models; but you confuse us sometimes. We know you face pressure to work within the confines of the system, but the system is broken. We need you to add your voices to ours and help educate those around you. Please do not let us down.

In this report, you will read recommendations you may think will make some aspects of your job more challenging at first, but please consider them carefully. We need you to carry our voices along with you, to speak to the decision-makers in your organizations and to advocate for the change that ultimately will make your job easier. Please ask yourself, “Have I done all that I can for the young people I serve?”, “Have I listened to and really heard what the young people I serve say?” or “What have I done today to create better outcomes for the Black children and youth I serve?”

We encourage you to engage family members, other community members, and Elders in your work to find the best outcomes for young people in your care. The community is an extension of the family. The community is the village that raises the child. If the children in your community are failing to thrive, it is not a reflection of their immediate family, but a reflection of the health of the community around them. We urge you to collaborate with us to create change. We need you.

A SPECIAL MESSAGE TO BLACK YOUTH READING THIS REPORT

“We want you to find hope in this report, hope for a better future.”

We hope that as a young person reading this report you find strength in the words and stories of your peers. We hope you realize you have the power to create change and that your voice matters. We want you to see you are not alone in your struggle for equity.

The words contained in the document reflect our collective triumph over fear to speak loudly and plainly. We want you, as a reader of the words of your peers, to feel inspired to work together, even beyond what community organizations can do for you. We want you to feel empowered to create change and never lose your momentum. We want you to find hope in this report, hope for a better future. We want this report to make you feel inspired to care about yourself, because you have what it takes to attain your dreams and goals in spite of any barriers you may face. Be proud.

Black peoples from many countries and backgrounds built this province and country over the centuries. We have struggled, but we are still here. It is within you to continue that building process. YOU have much to offer.

We want you to remember that peace and unity among all Ontarians and across the generations is what we strive to create. This means accepting each other just as we are and right where we are. It means understanding that some of us are working to better our own situations, while some of us are ready to branch out and create change in the system. Just know that wherever you may be in your journey, there is someone rooting for you.

We want you to know that wherever you may be, this report is a way for you to connect to the aspirations of the broader Black community. By bettering your own situation, you better the situation for all Black children and youth.

STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

“The report provides recollections from the A.R.T.S. forum and other HairStory gatherings, personal experiences in care, letters sharing thoughts, feelings and hope for our future and recommendations and visions to create change in Ontario’s systems of care.”

The report traces the evolution of the HairStory initiative and the working partnership between the Ontario Child Advocate (Advocate’s Office) and Black youth in Ontario’s systems of care. From its humble beginning, HairStory has grown into a vibrant youth-led movement providing a strong voice for Black children and youth in Ontario’s systems of care.

The report provides a glimpse into all the chapters of HairStory and how each one contributed to the next as the initiative grew in size and reach. The bulk of the report is a summary of the recommendations made by over 130 participants who attended the HairStory A.R.T.S. (A Right to Speak) youth forum, an event where information shared by young people participating in HairStory projects over the years was discussed and turned into actionable recommendations to create change.

A number of us contributed to the preparation of this report including current and former HairStory Amplifiers, members of the HairStory Youth Advisory Committee and participants at the A.R.T.S. youth forum and earlier HairStory gatherings. The report provides recollections from the A.R.T.S. forum and other HairStory gatherings, personal experiences in care, letters sharing thoughts, feelings and hope for our future and recommendations and visions to create change in the Ontario’s systems of care.

We divided the report into sections representing recurring themes we found in an analysis of discussions among young people attending the A.R.T.S. forum. In the introductions to each section, in the personal letters, and in quotes about lived experiences in care, you will find vivid accounts of Black young people’s struggle for justice, for systems of care to meet our basic needs and rights to be respected.

Sincerely,

Smyrna Wright and Richard Marcano
Amplifiers, HairStory Initiative



WHAT THE YOUNG PEOPLE SAID ABOUT THE SYSTEMS

The young people painted a complex picture of their experiences in Ontario's systems of care. Rather than feeling supported by this web of systems, at times they felt entrapped, and at other times like they were allowed to fall through the cracks.

"From somebody that has been in multiple group homes, you tend to lose... individuality when you're in a group home and you're just another client and just another caseload"

"They said I had a learning disability. They thought I wasn't educated enough. They just spoke for me. Listen to what I have to say. It shouldn't be a struggle."

"(A police officer said,) 'You are adding to the group of Black people and kids who fail. You're just going to be in the system. You can say bye to your career, bye to your future.'"

"For Black youth in particular, the symptoms of mental illness are seen as behavioural issues"

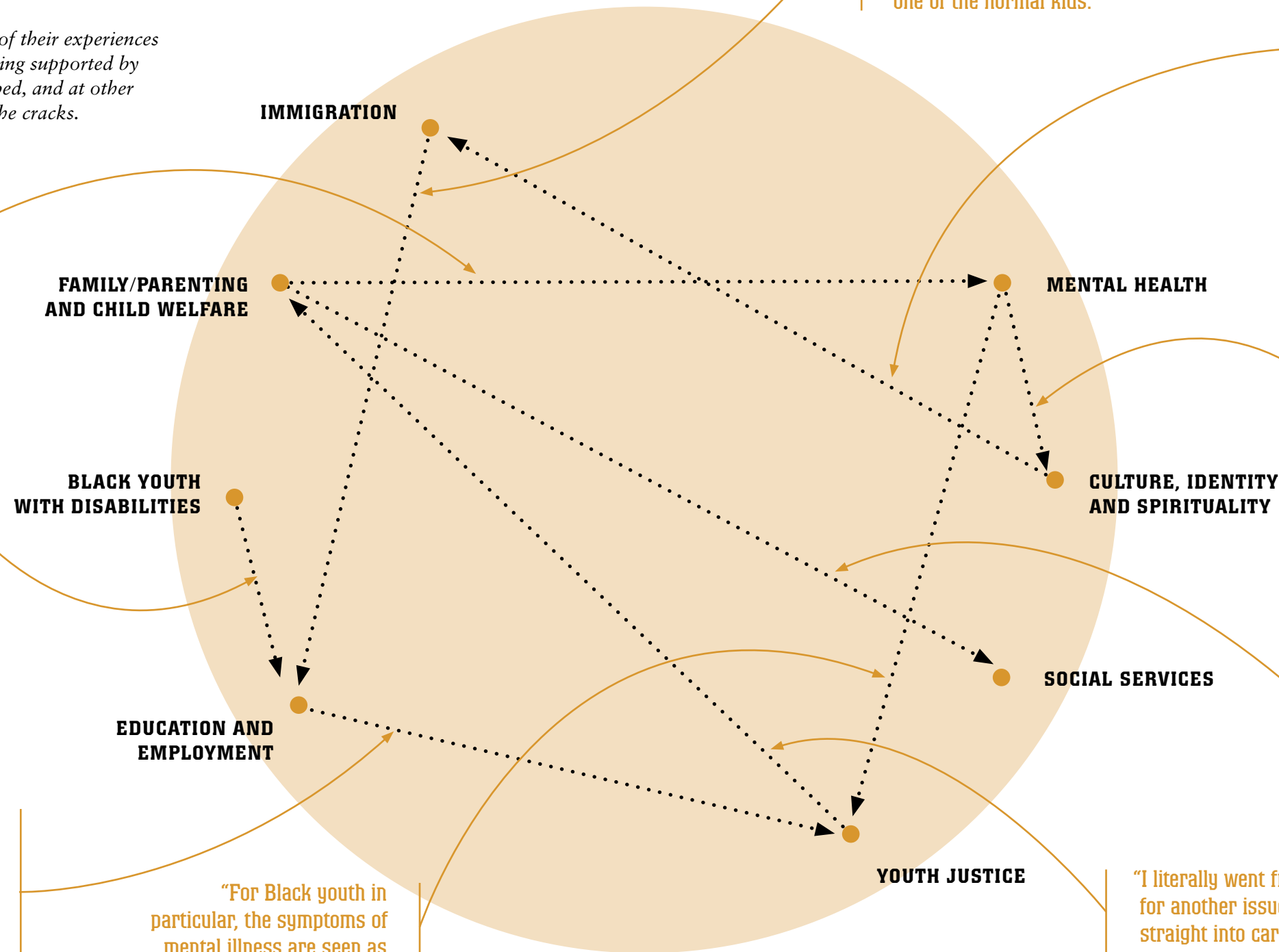
"Black youth require better education placements when coming from different countries. I didn't get a chance to prove myself before being put into a special education program. I had to try harder than everyone else just so I can be like one of the normal kids."

"I came here from the Bahamas to claim refugee status and the chief, he told my friend that, 'She's in the room claiming lesbianism.'"

"Symptoms of mental health are seen as behavioural issues and the stereotypes surrounding our culture are making it less likely for Black youth in particular to be noticed, because it is more likely that we are going to be painted Black in that situation."

"I got kicked out when I was 16, and at 18 I got my stripper license and I stripped for a year in Montreal.—At the end of the day, like, to make ends meet, that's what I have to."

"I literally went from court for another issue, and straight into care, literally, with nothing but the clothes on my back."



A FEW WORDS FROM THE CO-CREATORS OF HAIRSTORY

The HairStory initiative began as a conversation between two of our colleagues at the Ontario Child Advocate's Office—Erica Smith and Ann-Marie Scott—who recognized that Ontario's systems of care were not doing enough to support and meet the needs of Black children and youth. We want to honour and recognize the vision of Erica and Ann-Marie and give them an opportunity to speak to you in their own words.

ERICA SMITH

The narrow definition of beauty that predominates in our society is a deception created by those who feared a mysterious beauty they could not appreciate or understand through their own limited thinking. They created a plan to shave it, cage it and enslave it thus creating a sinister shadow blinding everyone to the true beauty of Blackness. This shadow continues to grow and cast itself across Ontario the place we call, but do not always feel to be, our home.

Over the years, we recognized from the large number of calls to the Advocate's Office that Black youth in Ontario's systems of care were in a constant struggle to be seen and heard. They were denied even basic grooming necessities such as hair care products specially formulated for their beautiful tight curls. We witnessed youth whose self-esteem was compromised due to the fact they had no one to properly style or care for their hair, something so important to helping young people feel accepted and celebrated.

Though their stories varied, the outcomes were the same—feelings of shame and negative self-worth. It could be that their care providers understood and wanted to help, but lacked the resources to purchase the products or services Black young people needed. In other circumstances,

care providers simply lacked understanding of the needs of Black youth. Sadly, in some situations, young people's expressed need for these products were ignored or minimized by insult and ridicule.

It was out of hearing repeatedly these negative personal experiences that the HairStory initiative began. The modest vision of HairStory was to end the neglect of this aspect of Black young people's basic care needs and help staff working in the system embrace and recognize Black hair for its natural beauty.

As we began to connect and dialogue with Black youth in care, we quickly realized that a lack of appropriate grooming products was just one of a multitude of ways the system was failing to meet the needs of Black youth. From its modest beginning, HairStory evolved into an initiative to have ongoing discussions with Black young people in care about their lives. It developed into a partnership to create strategies to improve their living conditions and nurture a movement they could own and lead to confront the cultural and identity struggles and racism they face daily in Ontario's system of care.

HairStory has become a platform for Black youth to make recommendations to government, policy-makers, community leaders, and service organizations based on their lived experiences. Our hope is that service providers from across Ontario will learn from the negative experiences of these young people and implement their recommendations to improve a system in which they are over-represented. We also hope HairStory will provide opportunities for Black youth to speak among themselves to untangle the lies and insecurities that have built up inside them through centuries of negative experiences.

From a barbershop discussion with youth—a safe space for the Black community—to small group dialogue sessions held across Ontario, to a 100+ youth to youth listening event, HairStory has reached out to gather the stories of young people who have been silent and silenced for too long.

It is our hope that in the pages of this report, readers will discover a sense of the everyday life experiences of Ontario's Black youth in care. Our hope is that you will see the urgent need for change and let these young people know your caring concern for them is authentic and unequivocal.

“The modest vision of HairStory was to end the neglect of this aspect of Black young people's basic care needs and help staff working in the system embrace and recognize Black hair for its natural beauty”.

ANN-MARIE SCOTT

“Black youth were ready and willing to make their voices heard and offer recommendations about how to improve systems of care to serve their unique needs.”

The idea to create the HairStory initiative began in discussions with my colleague Erica Smith about the lack of safe spaces for Black people, including youth, to discuss issues affecting their lives. We talked about places like the barbershop/salon and how those spaces are not just places to get your hair done. They are spaces where you go to have a “therapy” session and talk about all sorts of issues that affect your life. From our early discussions, an idea was born to create HairStory, a project that would give Black youth a platform to speak up about their life experiences in any way they chose. The Ontario Child Advocate’s office, where we work, did not yet have an initiative to address specifically the needs of Black youth in care so the timing was right.

HairStory started as an idea to create a space where Black youth could get their hair done and feel safe to talk about issues on their minds. Once the project began to gain traction, the focus shifted from creating a safe space where youth could talk about concerns to an ongoing dialogue about what they wanted to see changed in Ontario’s systems of care.

Along the way, the HairStory initiative has tackled difficult subjects such as marginalization, racism and the over-representation of Black youth in the child welfare and youth justice systems. As the project grew, the value and importance of these focused and sometimes difficult conversations became apparent. Black youth were ready and willing to make their voices heard and offer recommendations about how to improve systems of care to serve their unique needs.

I see HairStory continuing to grow and become something that youth take on and make their own. In young people’s hands, HairStory may end up looking a lot different from its humble beginnings. The aim has always been for HairStory to be youth driven and to provide the means for Black youth to sit at the table with different levels of government and stakeholders to develop action plans that help ensure services respect their rights and address their needs. I want to stress that this project is not about adults getting accolades and stealing the limelight. HairStory is about and for Black youth and must be led by Black youth with support from adults and the wider community. The young people are the ones who should be seen as the champions and be at the forefront of doing the work to elevate their voices.

FROM THE A.R.T.S. FORUM

OVERVIEW OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Below is an overview of key recommendations for action that emerged in discussions at the HairStory A.R.T.S. youth forum. A more detailed breakdown of the recommendations can be found in sections of the report that provide discussion of specific themes raised in young people’s conversations.

1. The Ontario Ministries of Children, Community, and Social Services, Community Safety and Correctional Services, and Education, and all organizations and services funded by these ministries, must **ensure Black young persons who enter care know and understand their rights and entitlements.**
2. Youth care workers across **Ontario should have consistent policies and accountability measures** in place to ensure that discussing rights with young people is taking place at intake, every plan of care, as well as on a need to know basis, in particular during exceptional circumstances.
3. The Ministries of Children, Community, and Social Services, and Community Safety and Correctional Services, and all organizations and services funded by them should **ensure Black youth in systems of care are provided with the life skills they need**, including financial literacy, to help them transition from care to independent living or back home to their families and communities.
4. There needs to be **greater representation of Black employees in all systems of care** and in a variety of staff positions.

“How many stories do you have to hear before a change is made?”

—A.R.T.S. youth
forum participant

“I am passionate that we can make change. This shows that we can all come together as Black youth, without violence, and having fun and having change and that we can make a difference.”

—A.R.T.S. youth forum participant

“Our community is diverse. It’s beautiful. It’s something we should all embrace. We shouldn’t hide it.”

—A.R.T.S. youth forum participant

5. Staff of all government Ministries and community organizations involved in providing care to Black children and youth **must receive mandatory training** regarding anti-Black racism, anti-oppression and the lasting effects of trauma on the mental health of Black youth.
6. **A table of Black youth with lived experience in Ontario’s systems of care should be convened by government** to oversee the implementation of recommendations contained in this report.
 - This table should meet on a quarterly basis and review the progress of implementing the recommendations contained in this report.
 - An annual report card to track the progress of implementing the recommendations should be created by members of the table and provided to all stakeholders in Ontario’s systems of care.
 - Stakeholders involved in Ontario’s systems of care should come together to support the logistics and provide a budget for table meetings and the creation and distribution of the annual report card.
7. Starting at kindergarten, School Boards and the Ministry of Education must **ensure the histories and contributions of Black Canadians** to Canada’s nation-building are a mandatory part of the curriculum.
8. School Boards and the Ministry of Education must **implement strategies to hold school administrators and educators accountable** for improving the safety and school success of Black students.
9. School Boards and the Ministry of Education must **focus on the development of mediation strategies** that keep Black youth in school and reduce or eliminate the use of suspensions and expulsions as the first choice for action when dealing with disciplinary matters.
10. The Ministries of Health and Long-Term Care, Education, and Children, Community and Social Services, children’s aid societies, and youth justice service organizations **must create a mechanism for their staff to receive mandatory training** to help them understand the mental health needs of Black children and youth.
11. When creating and developing strategies, policies, or practices to support Black youth, government ministries, service organizations, and other stakeholders **must work directly with Black youth to provide their input into the process and content.**
12. The Ministries of Health and Long-Term Care, Education, Community and Social Services, and Community Safety and Correctional Services, and children’s aid societies, children’s mental health organizations, and youth justice facilities, **must develop policies and procedures to make it mandatory that young people have direct input into the development of their treatment of rehabilitation plans.**
13. All staff of the Ministries of Health and Long-Term Care, Education, and Children Community and Social Services, and children’s aid societies, youth justice organizations, youth—serving organizations and children’s mental health centres **must be trained on the complexities of Blackness and its capacity to cause life-long trauma.**
14. **Persons providing training on the complexities of Blackness must be from the Black community** and demonstrate a thorough understanding of how perceptions of Blackness impact the development of children and youth.
15. **The Ontario Human Rights Commission should conduct a review of Ontario’s youth justice system** to identify and address any systemic practices that are discriminatory towards Black youth and interfere with meeting the care or rehabilitation needs of Black young people in systems of care.
16. The Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies, through One Vision One Voice, should work in partnership with the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, and a committee of Black youth with lived experience in the child welfare system, to **review the number of organizations that pro-actively support Black children and youth.** Upon completion of this review, government should provide funding to help these organizations develop supports and services necessary to meet the unique needs of Black youth before there is no other option left but to place the young person in care.

“Let Black youth prove themselves before putting them in a box.”

—A.R.T.S. youth forum participant

A BRIEF HISTORY OF HAIRSTORY

HairStory started in 2012 as a platform for Black youth from across Ontario's systems of care to get together to speak about their lived experiences, understand their rights and advocate for change that would lead to better outcomes in their lives. The name HairStory is a reference to the cultural and expressive significance of hair to Black peoples.

WHEN WE SAY ONTARIO'S SYSTEMS OF CARE, WE ARE REFERRING TO THE:

- Youth Justice System and Holding Cells
- Child Welfare System
- Children's Mental Health System
- Systems supporting Indigenous children and youth
- Provincial and Demonstration Schools
- Systems supporting children and youth with Special Needs

Over the years, the Advocate's Office hosted events to celebrate Black History Month. The Office invited performers and speakers to engage with Black youth from various community organizations across the province. When we asked young people how they felt about the Office's Black History Month events, many felt that while the events were fun and enjoyable, they left a gap in terms of what should be happening during the other eleven months of the year. Black youth wanted to see more than just this small window of time and attention given to Black cultures and the issues and challenges Black youth in care face in their daily lives.



The Office's Individual Rights Advocacy Team reported that they were receiving numerous calls from Black youth in Ontario's systems of care, complaining that their needs were not being met and their rights not being respected. It became apparent that the Office needed to look deeper into these complaints and learn more about the source of the problem.

The neglect of proper hair care is an indicator of a range of needs on the part of Black youth that go unmet while they are in Ontario's systems of care. Beyond the matter of their hair, Black youth also complain about the systemic racism and obstacles they face when coming into care, while being in care, and when leaving care. The evidence was overwhelming that Black youth faced discrimination on a systemic level and it was time for the Advocate's Office to find a way to respond more comprehensively to these young people's calls for change.

“What I really want to say is, I matter and I have a voice.”

—A.R.T.S. youth forum Participant

HAIRSTORY—THE YOUTH PANEL

We chose to call the initiative “HairStory” because discussions about hair and the care of Black hair provide an easily understood entry point, both metaphorically and literally, to the many systemic issues Black youth face in Ontario’s systems of care. As the initiative moved forward, we wanted to understand these issues at a deeper level so planning for different “listening events” got underway. The first project of the HairStory initiative was a small panel composed of ten Black youth from across Ontario with experience in different systems of care. Participants were selected via a submission process that asked each young person to communicate their experiences in care and/or their ideas to improve services to better serve the needs of Black youth.

Over a weekend in October 2012, a gathering was held in Toronto. At the gathering, the ten young people spoke to an audience of community organizations, Black community leaders, policy-makers and government representatives about their experiences with Ontario’s systems of care. From this event, we learned that we needed to listen more to the experiences of Black youth in care. The youth panelists let the adults at the gathering know they wanted to be involved in the work of making change as equal partners.

We also learned that young people wanted a safe space of their own, with no adult staff present, where they could feel comfortable to speak freely and openly without fear of judgment about their experiences in care and the changes they wanted to make.

“We chose to call the initiative ‘HairStory’ because discussions about hair and the care of Black hair provide an easily understood entry point, both metaphorical and real, to shed light on the many systemic issues Black youth face in Ontario’s systems of care.”



HAIRSTORY—THE DIALOGUE SESSIONS

Lessons learned from the HairStory panel lead to the development of the HairStory Dialogue Sessions. The Dialogue Sessions took place between August and October 2014. HairStory project staff traveled across Ontario from Ottawa to Sarnia and places in between, visiting child welfare agencies, children’s mental health centres, youth justice facilities, youth shelters and other youth programs that serve Black youth. Project staff spoke with the young people in small groups without any of the agency’s staff present in the room. Amplifiers on the HairStory team helped design, plan, and facilitate the dialogue sessions.

In total, 120 Black youth shared their experiences of what it was like to live in various systems of care in Ontario. Notes taken by project staff during the sessions revealed a number of themes or areas of common concern to young people including issues pertaining to: labeling and stigma, programming and treatment, culture and identity, family and parenting, power and systems, mental health, youth justice, and the over-representation of Black youth in many of these systems.

“We need to heal and prosper.”

—A.R.T.S. Youth forum participant





“The plan was to utilize the expertise of the Advisory Committee to work with the HairStory initiative team to seek ways to address the needs and issues raised in the Dialogue Sessions.”

HAIRSTORY—THE YOUTH ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Upon completion of the HairStory Dialogue Sessions, we formed a Youth Advisory Committee comprised of young people who were participants at the Dialogue Sessions. The plan was to utilize the expertise of the Advisory Committee to work with the HairStory initiative team to seek ways to address the needs and issues raised in the Dialogue Sessions.

Initially, the Youth Advisory Committee met every two months. At each meeting, the team presented findings from the Dialogue Sessions and brainstormed how they wanted to see each issue addressed through an action plan. After several meetings, it became clear that the best way to move forward was to bring Black youth together from across the province and various systems of care to work through the issues in discussion groups and speak directly to representatives of government, policy-makers, service providers and stakeholders. Planning began for a forum to bring together all the work of the HairStory initiative in one place.

HAIRSTORY—BLACK YOUTH UNITE FOR A RIGHT TO SPEAK (A.R.T.S.) YOUTH FORUM

On October 19–24, 2016, over 130 Black youth aged 15–25 from across Ontario, and different systems of care, came together in Toronto to participate at the HairStory A.R.T.S. Youth Forum. They came with the understanding they would be a part of an event that would allow them to speak directly to government, policy-makers, and community organizations about their experiences in care and make recommendations for changing the system to better meet their needs.

Over the 6 days of the A.R.T.S. forum, the young people worked in small groups to create presentations. They used various art forms to express their experiences and recommendations for change. They connected with facilitators, artists, and community Elders while at the event. On the final day of the forum, young people gave presentations to representatives from the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS), various police forces, community organizations, and the then Minister of Children & Youth Services, Michael Coteau, who was also responsible for crafting policies concerning the province's anti-racism initiative.

The following section of the report provides a summary, by theme, of the experiences, ideas, and recommendations made by the young people who participated in the A.R.T.S. youth forum. The content presented here is the culmination of the work of the HairStory initiative thus far.

“Just being here and being accepted by everyone no matter where you come from, nobody came up to you and tried to start problems, instead, they wanted to be just like your brother or sister.”

HAIRSTORY TIMELINE

The Ontario Child Advocate begins celebrating Black History Month every February by inviting guest presenters from the Black community to engage with Black youth from various community organizations across the province.

BLACK HISTORY MONTH EVENTS

2007-2011

2007-2011
PRE-HAIRSTORY

2007-2011

WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE WERE SAYING

As with everything that we do, we want to make sure young people are a big part of how we move forward. So we asked all those that attended.

Many indicated that the events were fun and very enjoyable, however, for the other 11 months of the year, their wasn't any attention given to their culture and that they have real issues that were not being addressed.

Black youth in Ontario's various care systems speak out about their needs not being met and their voices not being heard.

Advocate's Office staff put forward a proposal for an initiative to respond to the requests of Black young people for year round opportunities to learn about Black history and to bring attention to the needs of Black youth in systems of care.

BIRTH OF HAIRSTORY

2012

2012-2013
BIRTH OF HAIRSTORY

2012-2013

HAIRSTORY'S ORIGINAL AMPLIFIERS

Two young people were hired immediately to work on the newly created project. Kiwayne and Noterlee.

The HairStory initiative begins by planning an event to provide Black young people in systems of care with an opportunity to speak to policy-makers submissions from youth in care. Ten youth are selected to travel to Toronto to sit on the panel.

HAIRSTORY LAUNCHES

FEBRUARY 2012

OCTOBER 2012

HAIRSTORY YOUTH PANEL

The ten Black youth selected from a submission process meet in Toronto with representatives from government, service providers and community leaders. They share their experiences and offer recommendations to improve Ontario's systems of care.

HairStory Amplifiers and other Office staff travel across Ontario to visit child welfare agencies, children's mental health facilities, youth justice facilities, youth shelters, and other youth programs that serve Black youth.

HAIRSTORY DIALOGUE SESSIONS

AUGUST-OCTOBER 2014

2014
DIALOGUE SESSIONS

New Amplifiers, central to the work of HairStory, join as other Amplifiers move on to complete their education or take on other exciting challenges in their lives. Denise and Priscella join the team. They contribute to the development of the Dialogue Sessions and start the Youth Advisory Committee. Later, Richard and Shantel join HairStory as Amplifiers.

YOUTH AMPLIFIERS-HAIRSTORY ARTS AMPLIFIERS

2015-2018

2015-PRESENT
HAIRSTORY FORUM

2015-2016

HAIRSTORY YOUTH ADVISORY COMMITTEE

HairStory Youth Advisory Committee is formed. The committee is comprised primarily of participants who attended the Dialogue Sessions. The Advisory Committee begins planning the HairStory A.R.T.S. Forum.

OCTOBER 2016

HAIRSTORY-BLACK YOUTH UNITE FOR A RIGHT TO SPEAK (A.R.T.S.)

On October 19-24, 2016, over 130 Black youth aged 15-25 from across Ontario and with experience in different systems of care gathered in Toronto to attend the HairStory A.R.T.S. (A Right to Speak) forum. Over 6 days the young people worked together in small groups to prepare presentations about their experiences in care and recommendations for change. During the event, participants connected with facilitators, artists, and community Elders. On the final day of the forum, they made their presentations to government, stakeholders, service organizations, and police services.



CULTURE, IDENTITY AND SPIRITUALITY

Why was it such a horrible thing to be called “African” my whole life growing up? *Why did I hate that term so much?*

Why did I want my hair to be straight to the point that my mother had to beat me to go to school with my hair in an “Afro”? *Why did I have to hide it? Why was I so ashamed?*

Why did I think my skin was dirty and that my people were “spell-conjurers” that practiced sorcery and had to worship a white man in order to transition to heaven?

Why are my people so lost worshipping material possessions over caring about each other? *Why do we not value each other’s lives?*

We are dying out here left, right and centre, and no one seems to care. Why do we put so much trust in a system that claims it is for the people but then watches us struggle in despair? *Are we not people?*

BY A.R.T.S. YOUTH FORUM PARTICIPANT

CULTURE, IDENTITY AND SPIRITUALITY

INTRODUCTION

By **Kiwayne Jones,**
Amplifier, **HairStory**

It's hard to know how or when the healing process begins in any system of care. Any number of things that promote healing for Black youth can be missing in the design of programming of care settings. For example, there is little application of spirituality outside of acknowledging one's religion by using a checkbox on an intake form. Black youth are not saying they are being denied the means to practice their religion. However, they say they have little to no access to relevant or holistic health practices, including teachings specific to their cultural—based healing traditions.

Knowledge of one's cultural roots and traditions helps a young person understand where they are going in life. This is especially important during traumatic times in life. Black youth want more options when it comes to facilitating their healing. For example, they feel that the use of prescription medications should not be the option of first resort when they are searching for help to restore their mental health.

“They say they have little to no access to relevant or holistic health practices, including teachings specific to their cultural—based healing traditions.”



To be a Black youth in one of Ontario's systems of care is like having two separate lives. On one hand, many young people are happy to be away from the difficult living situations from which they were removed. On the other, the price they say they pay is losing connection with their community and having to create a new identity to help them conform to the care setting in which they are placed. They lose the support and assistance they get from people who share their customs and traditions. The acknowledgement of Black culture by staff in Ontario's systems of care is nowhere near what young people say they need to help them form their own identity for life beyond the care system. Black youth want government to place more emphasis on the importance of building connections between Black youth, their cultural histories and intersecting identities in Canada.

Government needs to listen to the recommendations of Black youth in care and introduce cultural spaces that help them heal and stay connected to their communities. One way this can happen is through the use of Elders to teach, mentor and coach young people when it comes time to reintegrate back into the community at large.

“We were doctors, teachers, and scientists and still are.”

—A.R.T.S. Youth forum participant

“Change in the system is vital if we are to break the cycle of Black youth transitioning from one form of state care to another.”

Culture and identity connect like wings on a bird; a bird needs both wings to fly. Black youth in care report losing connections to the things that nurture a positive sense of self and identity when they enter care. They face challenges related to prejudice and racism in care. They encounter media created bias and statistics about the over-representation of Black youth in the justice and child welfare systems. Many feel they are destined to a life of failure. Black youth in care want to be seen as human beings. They want access to the same supports their peers receive. They want to reach their full potential regardless of the circumstances of their lives.

Black youth feel Ontario’s child welfare system continues to fall short of providing the wraparound services they need when entering or transitioning from the system. Black youth represent a large proportion of young people in care, yet they see few Black staff providing child welfare services.

Black youth often experience culture shock when going through the intake process of the child welfare system. The system has its own culture, one that mirrors the middle class values of predominant wider society. This can make living in care feel foreign to young people from different cultures.

From the perspective of Black youth, the child welfare system creates a sense of dependency. They do not learn the skills they need to adapt and make successful transitions to independence so they end up moving aimlessly from one system to another, from child welfare to the children’s mental health system or the youth justice system. Black youth speak about the need for more transitional supports to help them move from elementary school to middle school to high school and to post-secondary education.

Young people want to see more supports for LGBTQ2S+ and newcomer Black youth in care. They also want the child welfare system to work with the broader Black community to establish culturally appropriate support alternatives for families in need so children have more options than to be placed in care.

Black youth feel that Ontario’s systems of care do not serve them or their Indigenous peers. Some believe there needs to be restitution to compensate for the harms caused to Black youth and their families by their encounters with Ontario’s systems of care.



“Not everyone is Jamaican or African.”

—A.R.T.S. Youth forum participant

One thing is certain, Black youth currently or formerly in care need to be vigilant and work with government to ensure the recommendations contained in this report are implemented. Change in the system is vital if we are to break the cycle of Black youth transitioning from one form of state care to another.

We need to rid systems of care from harmful stereotypes and incorporate services informed by our cultural traditions so they are relevant to us. We must demand more accountability from those who provide our care. We must do this in the spirit of building a better Ontario and systems of care where services are designed and administered by the people they serve. May the changes to come reflect the hopes, dreams and aspirations of Black youth.

WHAT WE TALKED ABOUT

Ontario's systems of care and service providers often have a narrow, stereotyped and negative view of Black identities. Service providers need to understand there is no single Black identity. There needs to be a broader understanding of Black identity in society and collective action to learn more about the histories of Black peoples beyond slavery. A part of this process involves having an understanding of Black identity in its many forms. It is important for everyone to learn about the rich histories of Black peoples from around the world. Black youth want to learn more about their histories and for others to learn with us.

There is frustration with the way Black History Month is used to acknowledge Black peoples' experiences and contributions to Canada. Black history month is one dimensional, filtered, and does not offer any new knowledge year after year. We want the history, stories and experiences of Black peoples from around the world integrated into all aspects of the school curriculum and social life of Canada all year long. This is not simply a matter of validation; it is about forging a positive identity.

Acknowledging and integrating the real histories, stories, contributions and experiences of Black peoples into the fabric of Canadian life will promote feelings of pride and create a sense of belonging for Black youth in Ontario. It will serve to push back against the bias, racism and stereotypes that exist within systems of care and create barriers that deny Black children and youth their rights and the opportunity to thrive.

“We want the history, stories and experiences of Black peoples from around the world integrated into all aspects of the school curriculum and social life of Canada all year long. This is not simply a matter of validation; it is about forging a positive identity.”



Developing a positive identity is further complicated for those of us struggling not only with systemic anti-Black racism but also the stigma attached to other identities that may include disability, mental illness, being LGBTQ2S+ or coming from low income communities or lone parent families.

We often associate being Black with negative things and white people with positive things. We are stuck sometimes thinking white people are the “saviors” of Black people.

There are few places where we feel safe. We feel that racism and stereotypical beliefs make friendships and connections with non-Black persons difficult. For example, some people see a Black person as someone to fear rather than as an individual. Feeling this fear, they cross the street or clutch their belongings tighter. We experience these actions as “micro aggressions”, behaviours of non-Black persons that make us feel unsafe. They reinforce in us a sense that we are “different” and that we do not “belong” in the broader Ontario community.

“Some people see a Black person as someone to fear rather than as an individual. Feeling this fear, they cross the street or clutch their belongings tighter.”



“The natural phenotype for things like our hair is devalued. For example, Black young people feel pressure to relax, straighten or ‘tame’ their hair when working in professional settings. Black men who do not wear suits are considered ‘unprofessional’ or ‘gangsters’”

Media plays a major role in the development and portrayal of these harmful stereotypes and negative Black narratives. We want to see positive images of Black peoples in all our diversity portrayed in every form of media.

We struggle against narrow western standards about “beauty” and “professional appearance”. Our physical attributes are devalued and we are seen as “other”. Because of these narrow standards, we experience discrimination. The natural phenotype for things like our hair is devalued. For example, Black young people feel pressure to relax, straighten or ‘tame’ their hair when working in professional settings. Black men who do not wear suits are considered “unprofessional” or “gangsters”.



These narrow standards have their history in the colonization of North America by Europeans and are reinforced in images in mainstream media. The predominance of these standards creates divisions among and between peers and a sense of not belonging for Black youth. This “colonized lens” for viewing beauty has also created a hierarchy of “shade” or “shade-ism”. Shade-ism is a real issue in our communities and has persisted for years. The consequence of shade-ism is that Black people who are lighter-skinned obtain more and better opportunities in life and are seen more in media images. We, as young people, want to put an end to these narrow standards.

We want to feel welcome and that we belong in the same public spaces occupied by our peers. We want safe spaces where we can just be ourselves with our peers. We want opportunities to show others that our cultures and traditions are great and that we have a lot to offer. We want opportunities for others to indulge in the variety of our cultures all the time. We want all our different cultures represented in and outside of school spaces.

We want our peers and neighbours to realize the impact of faith communities is also significant in our lives. There is no single faith for all Black communities. We are diverse peoples of various faiths. It is important that this be recognized and supported. We feel that having strong ties to our faith communities provides support, a positive identity and a sense of belonging.

“We want safe spaces where we can just be ourselves with our peers.”

YOUTH LETTER

FOR THE GOVERNMENT:

—By Dee,
Youth Participant

“A Black youth in the child welfare system should have the resources they need to be able to survive and thrive when removed from their home. At the listening table there were examples of youth having to adapt to a lifestyle they were not used to. From listening to all of their testimonies, being in care is difficult.

Culture and identity is the feeling of belonging to a group. A part of any person’s self-perception is to feel a connection to their nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, and any kind of social group that has its own distinct culture.

I believe that institutions serving children and young people should have proper support systems to equip them to care for Black children. Black young people need positive images of “Blackness” to develop their racial identity. Institutions providing care should be open to learning about culture. Black youth need “educators” to be open minded, respectful, and knowledgeable about Black history and other cultures. Young people need to feel a sense of belonging in this society.”

CULTURE, IDENTITY AND SPIRITUALITY RECOMMENDATIONS

WE NEED:

1. **Access to successful Black leaders** to act as mentors, teaches, and coaches.
2. **More safe spaces and opportunities** to gather, share experiences and promote awareness and unity.
3. **Access to Elders** who can teach us about the history and cultural practices of our communities and the meaning of “Blackness”.
4. **Acknowledgement of a need for the inclusion of more Black perspectives and expressions** in wider Canadian society, including the media, the arts, and politics.
5. **Service providers to reach out and work with faith communities** to provide support and assistance to meet our needs and provide safe spaces to gather and share and find positive social connections.
6. **Training for service providers** to help them understand the needs and experiences of Black LGBTQ2S+—youth.



FAMILY AND PARENTING/ CHILD WELFARE

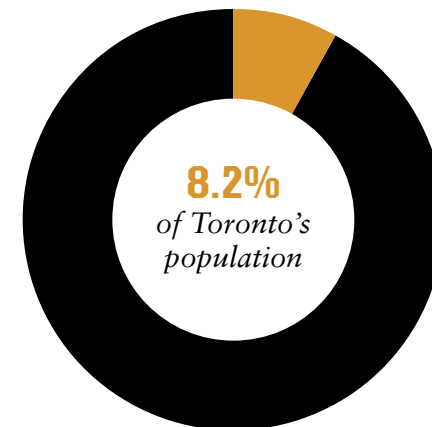
Is it my imagination or does it seem like the system wants to replace the fathers of Black children with government? Our children—especially our sons—are struggling to grow into strong responsible adults because their fathers, who are either caught up in the justice system or denied access to employment so they can take care of their family responsibilities, are absent in their lives. We are dying here and I wish these words were an exaggeration. Uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews are torn by a system that keeps them dependent and teaches them that the only way to survive is through government support in one form or another. Single mothers wait anxiously for “daddy government” to send a cheque so they have just enough to eat before the waiting starts again. Sometimes they have to go without food for a couple days so their children can eat. They struggle, mentally exhausted and frustrated, until “daddy government” returns in heroic fashion. *Hooray, we can eat for another week!*

A lot of people have no idea what it is like to be young and have to be separated from your birth parents; an experience many of us never rise from. Try to imagine living under a roof with guardians who have little or no experience parenting a child from a different race or culture, having to adjust to your guardian’s way of life and to their children who are not that friendly. Imagine being sent away from your home thinking you were not good enough or that your parents did not love you or that you are not worthy of being loved. We all deserve love. No one deserves to just be thrown into a foster home waiting to be scooped up by any random individual who has not even been evaluated on their knowledge of parenting a child from a different culture. *I think it’s fair to say every child deserves to know their roots, deserves to know their roots.*

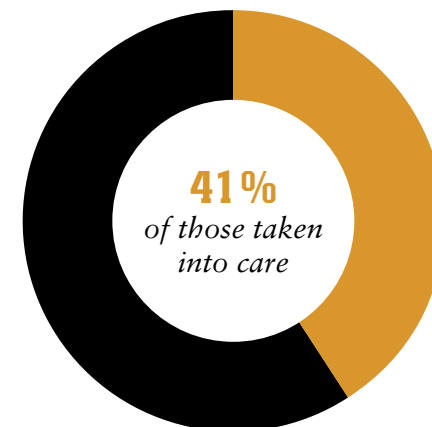
A.R.T.S. YOUTH FORUM PARTICIPANT

OVERREPRESENTATION

Black youth under the age of 18 represent 8.2% of Toronto's population...



...but represent 41% of the children and youth taken into care by the Children's Aid Society of Toronto.¹



¹ <http://www.oacas.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/11childwelfare-reporteng.pdf>

FAMILY AND PARENTING/CHILD WELFARE

INTRODUCTION

By Smyrna Wright,
HairStory Amplifier

If you were to ask each person who read this report to paint a picture of their family, the pictures would differ significantly. Some may have grown up in a lone parent family while others were raised by grandparents or extended family members. Some may have raised themselves or were parented by older siblings. There are abundant ways to define “family” and family structures and this definition is unique to every individual. However, mainstream media, government policies and institutions reflect a bias toward two parent nuclear family structures.

Recognition of different family structures is crucial to understanding how to better support Black children and youth in Ontario. Better support means acknowledging these different family configurations and allocating the support services and financial resources they need to provide optimal care for their children. It means ensuring all families have access to affordable housing, childcare support and nutritious food. It requires policy reform to help them navigate the system.



Acknowledging different family structures or arrangements would help reduce the over-representation of Black children and youth in care. Black youth feel their families are over-surveilled by child welfare authorities because of the differences in family structure common in Black communities. Removing Black children from their homes and placing them in settings that do not understand them and therefore cannot meet their needs must stop. It is time to place the voices and experiences of Black children and youth at the centre of planning so that services will meet their needs.

“It is time to place the voices and experiences of Black children and youth at the centre of planning so that services will meet their needs.”

WHAT WE TALKED ABOUT

We believe our families are always under scrutiny for how we raise our children. Low family incomes, limited access to post-secondary education, high rates of unemployment, lack of affordable shelter/housing and other systemic barriers to life opportunities put tremendous pressure on Black families. This stress, in addition to the micro-aggressions and everyday racism we experience, can lead to high levels of conflict and feelings of low self-esteem that have a negative impact on all family members. We feel strongly that problems experienced by our families relate more to unmet basic needs and a lack of supports than to any dysfunction in our families.

We are concerned that the child welfare system does not appreciate there are different styles of parenting beyond those based on euro-centric norms and values. Also, the child welfare system and its policies do not reflect the impact colonization had, and continues to have, on Black families. Exploited for our labour, Black families and whole communities split apart. Generations of Black males and females lost the stability required to create and maintain continuous family structures and connections between fathers, mothers and children. Over time, the loss of this stability has evolved into functioning alternative parenting styles and family structures that receive much scrutiny from child welfare agencies.

“A foster parent said, I’m not touching your hair. You are doing your own hair.”

—A.R.T.S. youth forum participant

“It’s hard being a Black youth in care, on top of that it’s harder to be a Black youth who is transgender in care.”

—A.R.T.S. youth forum participant

There needs to be acknowledgement of the intergenerational trauma caused by colonization and the separation of families and its continuing impact on our grandparents, parents and communities. Historic injustices caused by racism and oppression continue to contribute to low education achievement, underemployment and substandard living conditions for many Black families in Ontario. These historic legacies mean that generations of Black children will be born into circumstances that force us to rely on a system that, through its cultural bias, is harmful to Black families. The impact of these historic circumstances needs acknowledgment whenever Black families are assessed and decisions to remove Black children from their homes and place them in care are made.

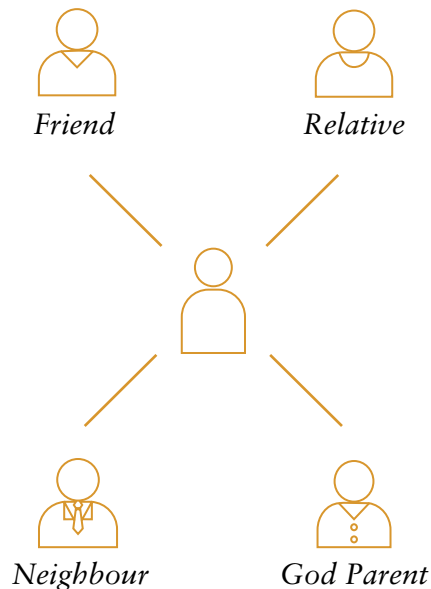
When Black children are placed in care their families are often stereotyped. Child welfare staff look at the structure of some Black families and see a problem; they do not look at our situations in a larger context. Our mothers often work a “double shift”, meaning they are employed outside the home all day and then work similar hours in the home at night.



KINSHIP CARE

Kinship care is a living arrangement in which a relative, community member, or anybody else who has a connection to a child or their parent takes primary responsibility for caring for and raising the child.

There are considerable benefits to placing children in kinship care arrangements while their parents and caregivers work out issues that are affecting their parenting. In many cases they already know and trust the people they will live with.



We believe child welfare workers lack awareness and understanding of the needs of Black young people in their care. We want all staff in child welfare and supporting agencies to recognize the diversity of the broader Black community and to reach out to these communities to obtain more understanding of the unique and specific challenges different Black children, youth and families face while being involved with the child welfare system.

Black youth often do not want separation from their families, but the system does not look at rehabilitation and reunification as an initial course of action. If CAS workers centered youth voices in their decision making process, they would better understand the priorities and needs of the Black youth and families they serve.

It is easy to see how wealth and privilege can be passed on from generation to generation, but so too can poverty and lack of opportunity. For example, Black youth often are not able to take part in extracurricular activities due to the responsibilities they may have preparing meals and looking after siblings while their mother or father is at work. Many Black families cannot afford the fees or equipment for their children to participate in sports, arts or recreation programs.

When removed from our homes by the CAS we are supposed to be placed in settings where we can thrive. However, our experiences in care prove otherwise. Many of us spoke about how transitions through key stages of life while in care are instead a significant source of stress. We feel we do not receive the supports and resources we need to make positive transitions from care to independent living. Furthermore, when we transition out of care we often remain disconnected from our communities and former homes with no support. We call it the “golden boot”.

Simple things like showing us how to open a bank account would go a long way to help support our transition from care. Workers soon forget about us and that makes us feel we are not actual persons.

We need to see more Black professionals working in Ontario’s child welfare system so they can provide us with examples of success and help us form a positive identity. We ask Black adults in the child welfare system to be positive role models and mentor us through our transition to adulthood.

We believe that support services provided by staff who have little or no cultural awareness are not beneficial to Black youth. Those of us who end up placed in white foster homes feel we do not receive culturally sensitive care. After years living in white foster homes, we can be confused about what it means to be Black.

Having access to kinship care arrangements help us stay connected to our culture. Alternatively, having the freedom to express and indulge in our culture while living with non-Black foster parents is important to us too.

We want better cultural matching between us and foster parents, and placement plans that take into consideration our cultural needs. We experience isolation due to difficulties accessing or staying in touch with our immediate or extended families because our placements are often far from our home communities. The child welfare system does not properly support the maintenance of Black families once their children are in care. Black youth in care grow up isolated from their mothers and fathers, not by choice but by the rules of the system.

We feel forced-fit into a system that does not understand our needs and that adds stress to our lives. Caregivers in the placements we inhabit typically lack knowledge about the most basic care of Black bodies and hair. This serves as a vivid illustration of their failure to understand even the most basic needs of Black youth.

When placed in care we typically do not have our rights explained to us. We often receive no explanation about why we came into care and what will happen to us while we are in care.

We want group home staff to receive training in de-escalation techniques so they do not have to resort to calling the police when there are conflicts in our placement settings. We want staff to focus on the tasks they are responsible for during their shifts but not to lose their humanity in the process or their ability to relate to Black youth as people. We also want our placement to have spaces to gather with other young people for mutual support or to engage in sport, recreation, or arts and leisure activities. We want to keep the same worker while we are in the child welfare system.

There was debate about the topic of creating a separate Black child welfare system. It is imperative to know that these discussions continue and that there is no simple solution. Black youth are asking policy-makers and organizations who work with Black youth not to “tokenize” us by selecting for placement only those Black young people that agree with their belief in a need for a separate system. We want to be at the table as equal partners in policy development and in decision making about the design of programs and services or any aspects of the system that affects our lives.

BENEFITS OF KINSHIP CARE

Children in kinship care can maintain their racial, cultural, and religious ties. They are living with families where they are, for example, speaking the same language, getting the same kind of food they are used to, and the family traditions are very similar, if not the same. It strengthens their identities and allows them to remain connected to their community.²



Food



Language



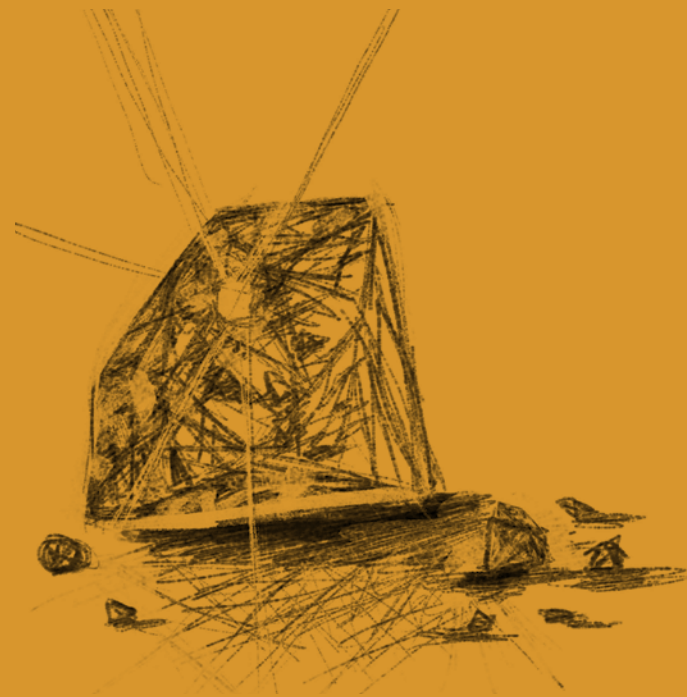
Culture

² <http://www.oacas.org/2017/09/keeping-kids-connected-sharon-cabrera-talks-about-how-kinship-families-are-improving-child-welfare-outcomes-for-children-and-families-in-ontario/>

FAMILY AND PARENTING/CHILD WELFARE RECOMMENDATIONS

WE NEED:

1. **Service providers in the child welfare system to receive mandatory cultural sensitivity training** so they have better understanding of the needs of Black children and youth in care.
2. **Child welfare staff to understand how anti-Black racism, stereotypes and bias harm Black families** and contribute to the over-representation of Black children in the child welfare system.
3. **More supports and resources to help Black youth** transition into and out of the child welfare system.
4. **More access to cultural supports and resources** including investment in kinship care.
5. **Child welfare staff to receive mandatory training** to learn how to prevent, diffuse and manage conflict so they do not have to resort to calling the police.
6. **Government to invest in communities** so that more Black youth, including youth in care, have access to cultural, recreation and sports activities after school, in the evening and on weekends.
7. **Supports and services that are free of anti-Black racism** so they can be of greater benefit to us and meet our needs.
8. **A more youth/child-centered process for decision-making in our placement settings** and more input from us in the selection process when it comes to choosing our placements.
9. **More surprise check-ins on care providers and child welfare staff** to see if they are responding to our complaints, in particular, anti-Black racism on the part of staff and in house policies.
10. **More accountability from CAS workers** to actively follow up and respond to our complaints about our foster parents and group homes.
11. **The system to exhaust all possible resources and supports** before separating us from our families.
12. **Freedom to express, and opportunities to indulge in, our cultures** while living in care.
13. **Increased supports and knowledge about “ageing-out” of care** so we are better prepared emotionally and financially for independent living.
14. **Our rights explained** to us more frequently.
15. **More in-depth investigations** into the circumstances of Black young people and their families before deciding on apprehension by the CAS.
16. **More education for parents, caregivers, and Elders in the Black community** about the child welfare system and how to effectively interact with it to support the welfare and growth of Black children and youth.
17. **More funding for community collaborations and proactive services and supports to Black families** to ensure Black youth do not need to enter the child welfare system in the first place.
18. **An equity and diversity department in all CAS’s** that focus on the cultural needs for all youth in care.
19. **More involvement in the development of policies and procedures** in care settings that affect our lives.
20. **Mandatory training for child welfare staff** to provide them with information about the impact of anti-Black racism and intergenerational trauma on the formation of our identities and our mental health.
21. **To know that foster parents receive an in-depth screening and assessment** before they qualify to provide foster care for Black children and youth.
22. **To visit our planned placements and have meet-and-greets** with potential foster parents.
23. **Closer examination by our caregivers** of the intersectionality between being in child welfare care and the systemic discrimination faced by Black youth in other aspects of our lives.



EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

We are at war here and the fight is for the right to learn at the same level as everyone else. I spoke with a woman who brought to my attention that her 4 year old child had been told that “white is right”. *LOL, what does that even mean?*

So as a Black boy growing up, I should follow the lead of Bill, Dick, and Barney because they’re right and they are smarter than me! Why? Because “white is right?” *We cannot let statements like this slide because we are seeing the affect they have on Black children and young adults.*

Educators “stream” us away from academic courses and into basic level classes that move us in the direction of going to college instead of university. By the time we reach high school, we may not even have any interest left in education. This type of mental hypnosis needs to be erased from the system because Black youth are in great danger of selling themselves short, thinking they do not belong in a system that is trying so hard to help them succeed *with Tom, Dick and Harry because “white is right”. LOL. Foolishness.*

—A.R.T.S. YOUTH FORUM PARTICIPANT

EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

By Denise Dunn,
HairStory Amplifier

Only 44% of youth in care graduate from high school compared to 81% of their peers.³ Being a youth in care places a label on a young person that they carry with them into the education system. Being both Black and a youth in care adds even more labels. Black youth, burdened by these labels, can be “streamed” by educators into basic level courses that are below their abilities.⁴ Black youth routinely are encouraged by teachers and guidance counsellors to take applied or basic courses instead of academic level courses and apply to college rather than university because it would be easier.

The challenges do not stop there. Black students make up only 12% of the high school student population of the Toronto District School Board

³ <http://www.oacas.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/11childwelfarereporteng.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/study-black-students—toronto-york-university-1.4082463>

“Black youth routinely are encouraged by teachers and guidance counsellors to take applied or basic courses instead of academic level courses and apply to college rather than university because it would be easier.”



but account for more than 31% of all suspensions.⁵ Why? We believe the way the Ontario education system is designed sets Black youth up to fail. One reason we feel is important is the lack of representation of Blackness in the learning environment. Black students feel disconnected from school because they see so little Black history and culture in the school curriculum and Black educators in the ranks of school administrators and teaching staff. The Black community has expressed how important this form of representation is, not only for Black youth, but for non-Black youth as well.

⁵ https://www.thestar.com/yourtoronto/education/2013/03/22/high_suspension_rates_for_black_students_in_tdsb_need_to_change_experts_say.html

“Instead of building us up, they’re breaking us down.”

—A.R.T.S. youth
forum participant

When our school books and teaching staff reflect our cultures, and we see ourselves in the curriculum, it supports us to be better understood, feel safer and welcomed and confident that we can achieve academically. Black education matters. In 2011, a pilot Afrocentric Alternative School opened in Toronto. The main objective of the project was to document outcomes for Black students attending a school with an Afro-centric curriculum and effective educational practices and resources for use in educating Black students. At the end of the school year, research on the pilot project concluded that high expectations of students, integration of African-centred knowledge and practices, the model of parent and community involvement and engagement used, and the addition of appropriate supports had a positive impact on students' identities, self-confidence, social development, awareness of African culture and critical thinking skills.⁶

Cost is another concern for youth in care attending school. Black youth have repeatedly expressed a need for more accessible information about available grants and scholarships. When this support is not available, they become disillusioned, uninterested and unmotivated to pursue their education. A little financial support could easily help them further their education and increase their life opportunities. There should be no barriers in the way of Black youth in systems of care obtaining access to information that helps further their education.

⁶ <http://edu.yorku.ca/2015/11/ycec-and-tdsb-complete-research-on-the-afrocentric-alternative-school-research-report-available/>



“What bothers me is that because I’m Black, teachers and principals treat me like I can’t do well in school. They are always around me if an altercation occurs and assume I am involved. If I walk with my friends in a group we are treated as criminals or people assume a fight is about to happen. Teachers hover over my desk even after I told them I understand the work because they feel I’m not smart enough.”

—A.R.T.S. youth forum participant



Black young people have told HairStory project staff that if there were more financial supports available, there would be a rise in the number of Black youth in care graduates from high school, colleges and universities. They also believe that a goal of the education system should be to cut the high dropout rate for Black students and support those youth who wish to achieve more academically. Black youth involved with the youth justice system also need access to information to help them obtain a proper education.

Many Black youth who spoke with the HairStory project over the years did not feel welcome or included in the education system. They felt like outsiders. Many expressed that it would be nice to have the support of, or access to, Elders to look up to when in school.

“A Black youth got into a fight with another student who called him a “n*gg*r, but they both got suspended. The Black student questioned why he got suspended when it was he who was verbally assaulted.”

—A.R.T.S. youth forum participant

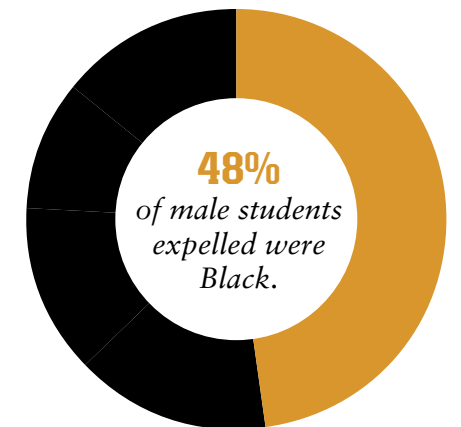
EXPULSIONS

A study completed by the Toronto District School Board found that

BETWEEN 2011–12 AND 2015–16, THERE WERE 307 EXPULSIONS

issued to TDSB students in total. Among the 307 expulsions, the vast majority (94%) were in secondary schools. Male students accounted for 89% of the expulsions.

Of those,
48 per cent
SELF-IDENTIFIED AS BLACK STUDENTS⁹



followed by Mixed (15%), South Asian (13%), and White (10%) students.

⁹ <https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/research/docs/reports/Student%20Expulsion%20Rpt%2030Mar17.pdf>

WHAT WE TALKED ABOUT

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

The EVERY STUDENT SURVEY REPORTS (1970–1993) of the Toronto District School Board consistently show that African Canadian students do not do as well academically as their non-African Canadian counterparts.⁷

⁷ https://archive.crin.org/en/docs/Canada_African%20Canadian%20Legal%20Clinic_CRC%20Report.pdf

There are many sides to the story of Canada. Black youth want to see more in the curriculum about the contributions Black peoples made to the building of this country, and the ways we have been exploited. We believe our history and lived experiences remain obscured in the curriculum taught in Ontario schools at all levels. Making all students aware of our stories and contributions through a more inclusive curriculum will help break negative stereotypes about Black peoples and show there is more to our history than just slavery.

We are concerned that bias and negative stereotypes about Black children and youth held by teachers and others in the education system limit our chances for success in school. We are often labelled as being troubled children and disproportionately targeted for school discipline.⁸

⁸ Ibid

Also, it is common for us to hear we should be taking medication, attending separate classes, and receiving independent learning plans that don't properly prepare us for employment and success in our future lives.

We want our teachers to believe in us and invest time in us. We want educators to express to us the same passion, belief in our abilities and encouragement they would to any other student.

We believe educators who do not like their job, or any of their students, should not be teaching because our lives, our futures, and our emotional well-being are at stake. We challenge our teachers to see us as individuals not just as “another Black kid”. Do not judge us by our actions or the actions of our peers; rather try to understand the circumstances of our lives that affect our behaviour.

We believe the education system does not support us or meet our educational needs. Too many of us receive multiple suspensions, a stigmatizing experience that creates self-perceptions of being “bad” simply for being Black. We want to see more alternative interventions to support Black youth, ones that keep us in school and help us avoid being suspended or expelled from school.

We know little about our rights as citizens of Ontario. We want to know more about our rights and believe schools should provide that information and help us apply it to all aspects of our lives. It is important that these resources be readily available and written in language that makes the material accessible and easy to understand. We also need an in-house formal body to whom we can report incidents of anti-Black racism, rights violations or discrimination that occur at school or on school grounds.

MISSION STATEMENT, MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, PROVINCE OF ONTARIO

“Ontario is committed to the success and well-being of every student and child. Learners in the province’s education system will develop the knowledge, skills and characteristics that will lead them to become personally successful, economically productive and actively engaged citizens.”



We need our “difference” as Black peoples acknowledged by the education system. We ask educators to recognize that there is no single “correct” way to express oneself in English. For example, “patois” is English and speaking with a Caribbean or African accent or patois does not mean we lack the ability to speak and understand English. We want these things validated in the curriculum, especially for Black newcomers. These differences in patterns of speech hold us back in school. Having patois recognized as a legitimate form of speech would allow us to excel in our own way.

We feel over-surveilled by teachers. Displays of justifiable anger or defensive reactions on our part to acts of anti-Black racism can get us suspended or expelled from school. We are concerned about this over-surveillance because it has a lasting impact on our futures including involvement with the justice system, stigmatization and compromised life options such as finding employment. When the education system caters to certain young people more than others, it fails to honour its function to prepare every child to be successful and reach their highest potential.

YOUTH LETTERS

CHANGE NEEDS TO HAPPEN

By Adriesca,
A.R.T.S. Forum Participant

“I trusted nobody at school because the teachers were all the same. Always implying my dreams, hopes and desires were unreachable, suppressing my abilities, motivation, and determination. Everyone deserves a fair chance. We can’t say what everyone will do with their chance at life, but having an equal opportunity to be successful in life matters.”

At age 15, I was destroyed by someone I was told to trust. Now, I don’t seek help, I have trust issues, and don’t believe in myself. I went from knowing exactly what I wanted in life, how I was going to get there, and with success being the motivation to better myself and my family members’ lives, to being confused about what I’m allowed to become. Everything I went on to become was to prove to everybody that said I wouldn’t make it, that I could make it. Broken and focusing more on how I was perceived by others was a scary place. Once I was done proving myself, I realized that I was lost. This thing I was doing was no longer for me. The need for support, reliable support is very important. Reinforcements are necessary to ensure students are being properly educated. When somebody lacks support in their environment, they will seek it from any other place that will provide it.

Think about the people who aren’t as resilient. Just imagine where they could end up. Think of all the possibilities—gangs, prison, drugs, or even death—all because they were failed by the education system, a system that supposedly was put in place to empower young people and provide them with the tools they need to be successful.

Schools are producing broken people and pushing them into society. How can we preach hope for a better world if the people that make up this world are treated with such carelessness?”

IT IS TIME FOR US TO BE TRANSPARENT

By Mercy,
A.R.T.S. Forum Participant

“It is time for us to be transparent. Take away the ignorance; take away the fear of hurting others because kids are already being hurt. Children are already facing adversity. Racism exists and I am Black. A system that automatically designates my people and those of a darker skin tone as inferior is the system I’m trying to navigate.

To teachers I would say, “Check your privilege”. Take note of the Black kids you are teaching and in charge of. Take note of the Black kids you teach in history class who hear that their history stems from slavery while the rich history of Africa and the Moors who travelled the oceans and crossed seas long before Columbus did is ignored.

I would say bring up the topic of anti-Black oppression and not speak of it as something that happened in “19–whatever” because that implies that it was a problem of the past and minimizes the fact that it is the reality of today. Words have power and to take that away perpetuates a system built on, and continues to benefit from, the silence of the oppressed, the silence of Black people.

I would say that this is not a “Black peoples” problem. “White” people or other people who benefit from having privilege, need to be taught from a young age—from the institutions in which they’re learning—that the oppression of others is not okay, that ignorance is dangerous, that Black people are not suspicious and that Black people are not to be feared. All children should be taught not to swallow the distorted and biased beliefs that are fed to them and so easily observed everywhere.

Education in Canada has taught me the resilience of Black peoples, which comes from breaking free of the literal shackles of slavery. Yet, education in Canada does not provide a space to speak of the mental illness and physical trauma encoded into our DNA from anti-Black oppression in the past and present.

Let’s remove the stigma and negativity associated with being Black. Let’s recognize that Black boys and girls are not a problem and teach them in a way that equips them for future and present-day success.

School has always been my refuge and learning came easy to me. I understand that education is a key to unlock doors and help bypass obstacles I face. This is what I tell myself and I’m fortunate to have not become a negative statistic.

Even if I had authority figures put limits on me, I would not let that affect my performance or how I react. But for the kids who already struggle it’s not the same.

To build on what I said at the listening table, I would say, let’s stop whispering about racism, specifically anti-Black racism and discrimination. Let’s create a dialogue, let’s create schools where educated students know the consequences of racism and little Black boys and girls are united in brotherhood, where inequality is not tolerated, where people can speak up for justice for oppressed minorities, for Black people, where Black youth and Black people can assume their power and achieve success by their own hands.”



EDUCATION RECOMMENDATIONS

WE NEED:

1. **Public education programs to eliminate cultural stereotypes** about Black youth.
2. **More books by Black authors in the school curriculum** and to purchase those books directly from Black authors and Black owned businesses.
3. **Black history to be part of the curriculum** from elementary to post-secondary school for all students.
4. **Improved curriculum in faculties of education** so educators are better prepared to work with Black students.
5. **Curriculum that includes lesson plans about holistic healthcare, cultural teachings and drumming specific to Black peoples** and for this curriculum to be taught by respected Black Elders in the community.
6. **More Black educators and administrators** in schools.
7. **Advocates within schools** to work specifically with Black youth.
8. Accountability from schools, school boards, the Ontario Ministry of Education, teachers unions, and provincial oversight commissions for teachers in the form of policies and practices to **address discriminatory or racist actions, promote the well-being of Black students, and improve the safety and success of Black students in school.**
9. **Safe spaces in school** to meet with other Black youth and opportunities for peer mentorship.
10. **A mechanism in schools or the school board** to file reports and address the complaints of Black students.
11. **More supports to help Black youth** transition from elementary to middle school, to high school, and post-secondary education.
12. **Curriculum that covers the life experiences of Black LGBTQ2S+** young people for all students.
13. **Anti-Black racism curriculum in schools to counter the stereotypes and biased beliefs** that lead to the promotion of hate and bullying of Black youth.
14. **School curriculum that explores the intersectionality of Blackness with trauma, racism, stereotypes, living in poverty and other factors** that contribute to the stigmatizing of Black youth, the criminalizing of our behaviour and the formation of a negative identity.
15. **Government to educate employers and provide incentives to create “first jobs”** for socially marginalized or racialized youth, including Black youth.
16. **Guidance counsellors and teachers to provide individualized support and strategies to Black students** to achieve their goals as opposed to dissuading them based on their personal judgements of what is best for the student.
17. **The Ministry of Education, school boards, principals, and teachers to focus policies and practice on strategies** that keep Black youth in school instead of resorting to suspensions and expulsions.



IMMIGRATION

The land of opportunity, the most multicultural city, all the cover-ups for the biggest lie! From my perspective, when newcomers arrive in this country, they are welcomed with a nice broken down apartment with mice and roaches. The rent will be set at a price just above what they will earn at a job that they will have the hardest time to get because employers know they have very little experience, maybe even no experience at all working in this country. *Oh, and you were a scholar in your country? Great! You ever think about going back, because we are just going to push you back a few grades even though what we teach here is basic knowledge where you come from? Try not to be bored to death!*"

—A.R.T.S. YOUTH FORUM PARTICIPANT

IMMIGRATION

INTRODUCTION

By Smyrna Wright,
HairStory Amplifier

In Canada, many people feel a sense of pride about our diversity and multiculturalism. People feel excited to be a part of the many festivals and cultural celebrations that are put on throughout the year. “We’re a melting pot”, many would say with pride. But this pride has diminished for me. Parts of Canada may be diverse, but to what extent do we measure diversity and multiculturalism? For some, it may be by the faces you see every day when entering the transit system. Or you may measure diversity by the number of international food places you can count while walking down the street. I measure it by equitable access to resources, employment, housing and education for newcomer families and children.

Black immigrant families and children do not receive equitable access to housing, work opportunities, and education because of immigration policies that are inherently Anti-Black. This bias has its historical roots in the federal government’s “preferred list” of countries from whom immigrants were accepted. This list did not include African or Caribbean nations until more recently in Canada’s

“Black youth require better education placements when coming from different countries. I did not get a chance to prove myself before being placed in a special education program. I had to try harder than everyone else just so I can be like one of the normal kids.”

—A.R.T.S. youth
forum participant



history.¹⁰ Prior to the 1970s, immigrants born in European countries such as the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands accounted for most of the immigrant source countries. In 1971, with Canada’s adoption of multiculturalism as an official policy, Black immigrants from Caribbean and other countries began arriving.¹¹ Immigration from Caribbean countries peaked in the 1970’s.

The federal government committed to supporting multiculturalism by assisting cultural groups in their development, assisting individuals in overcoming discriminatory barriers, and encouraging intercultural exchange. With the passing of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988, the federal government promised to protect the cultural heritage of all Canadians, reduce discrimination and encourage the implementation of multicultural programs and initiatives within

“I had 3 workers who were not able to help my brothers and I get our Canadian Citizenship. I waited 10 years.”

—A.R.T.S. youth
forum participant

¹⁰ <https://ccrweb.ca/en/hundred-years-immigration-canada-part-2>

¹¹ <https://pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/canadian-immigration-acts-and-legislation>



institutions and organizations.¹² While it all sounded good at first, this support has never reached the levels necessary to be true to its intention. The failure on the part of government to make good on these promises has ended up causing harm to newcomer Black children and families.

Over time, Canada's immigration policy has shifted back to a points-based system that favours immigrants who are skilled, professional or who have technical experience and education. This points system discriminates against peoples from poorer and developing nations and family reunification applicants. This too has had a negative impact on Black individuals and families. Considering these policies and the lack of supports, is it any wonder Black people in Canada, whether being born here, a citizen or in the process of becoming a citizen, feel they do not belong?

In order for Canada to claim to be a truly diverse and multicultural country, different levels of government must come to an agreement about how best to support children and youth who are refugees, immigrants or first generation Canadians struggling to navigate the different systems and organizations that offer care and support. Without a well-funded and coordinated web of supports and services, Canada is simply selling a dream, telling lies to incoming immigrants, and failing large numbers of Black children and youth. The Ontario government must be a part of these conversations and vocal advocates for Black children and youth whose voices so desperately need to be heard. If not, Ontario is a part of the problem.

¹² <https://pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/canadian-immigration-acts-and-legislation>

WHAT WE TALKED ABOUT

Canada's immigration policies negatively affect Black youth and their families. Black young people emigrating from various countries around the world reported in HairStory discussion groups that they had met with immigration staff they felt held negative stereotypes about Black newcomers. These Black newcomer youth reported instantly feeling a sense of not being welcome, experienced questioning they felt was strongly biased, and faced lengthy wait times for services from immigration officials and customs officials.

Some told us that when they arrived in Canada, their teachers placed them in grade levels that did not reflect their academic abilities. The education officials that placed them viewed them as outsiders and unintelligent. They received independent education programs typically used for students with learning challenges. These young newcomers believed educators thought they would not be able to keep up with the Canadian curriculum. English-speaking immigrants with accents, particularly accents from Caribbean and African countries, said they were treated as if they had language deficits and were streamed into 'English as a Second Language' classes that did not support their educational needs and could hinder their ability to thrive.

“English-speaking immigrants with accents, particularly accents from Caribbean and African countries, said they were treated as if they had language deficits and were streamed into ‘English as a Second Language’ classes that did not support their educational needs and could hinder their ability to thrive.”

Authority figures in school, child welfare agencies, and youth justice facilities also had little understanding of Black youth and their immigration experiences. Young people reported their families worried they might be deported if their children became involved with the justice system. Young Black immigrants reported living in constant fear of deportation or incarceration when they were forced to reside in communities where there was widespread poverty and criminal activity and over-surveillance of Black persons. This constant state of high nervous system arousal affected their mental health and well-being.

“I gave up everything
to come to this country,
thinking I was coming
to something better and
this is the welcome that
I got.”

—A.R.T.S. youth
forum participant



IMMIGRATION RECOMMENDATIONS

WE NEED:

1. **More services to ensure Black newcomer youth to Canada receive the supports** required to make the transition to Canadian society and establish their new lives.
2. **More resources and supports** to help Black youth newcomers become aware of and manage their way through government bureaucracies to obtain needed documents such as social insurance numbers, health cards, and/or driver's licenses.
3. **More training for educators** to assess the academic abilities of newcomer students and recognize the academic standing they held in their countries of origin.
4. **More awareness of the immigration experiences** of Black youth newcomers on the part of government, schools and social service agencies and their staff.



BLACK YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

It is odd to me that even with a clear disadvantage, a human being can still suffer mistreatment at the hands of others. *If you are blind, they will still help you walk in the wrong direction. If you're Deaf they will still smile in your face while telling you to f*** off.*

My friend, whoever this may concern, even if you are paralyzed and in a wheelchair, this system we are governed by *will still remove the ramps and ask you to take the stairs if it saves them money.*

The greed and destruction of this system is outrageous and needs to come to an end. My people do not deserve this disrespect and we will no longer accept this whether our skin is brown, blue, yellow or green. *We demand respect! We demand that "you" as a system do better.*

—A.R.T.S. YOUTH FORUM PARTICIPANT

DISABILITIES

INTRODUCTION

By Wynnika Matthews,
Amplifier

We need to look more carefully into why government and Ontario's systems of care do not listen to Black children and youth in care who live with disabilities. We live on the margins of society and more outreach needs to be done to ensure we know our rights and that our needs are met by support services. Most importantly, we need to know about all supports available to us and how we can access them as soon as we arrive in care.

Black young people with disabilities want to be seen as people first, not as Black or living with a disability. We want caregivers to use strength-based approaches to service that build on our capabilities, and acknowledge our cultural beliefs, traditions and practices. We are whole persons with likes, dislikes, needs, and a cultural identity.

Our lives are made more complicated when systems of care lack awareness of our cultural identities. Some of us may not be able to speak or advocate for ourselves, which creates a need for caregivers to work closely with our families. Service providers must also be open to combining conventional forms of practice with culturally informed healing methods.

“They will always see me as disabled. But I want to be viewed as a person with strengths and weaknesses.”

—A.R.T.S. youth
forum participant



Wherever possible, caregivers must help Black young people express themselves and include us in the decision-making processes that affect our care. Depending on our disability, we may need access to support services 24/7 not just during business hours.

Black youth with disabilities who are in the education system can easily fall through the cracks if they cannot communicate for themselves or have someone to advocate for their rights. Many of us are easily capable of succeeding academically and many more would thrive in school if we received the supports we require to help us meet our learning needs.

“In school they said I had an IEP and ADHD, they said I had to go to all applied classes, all my work was modified for me, I had people speaking on my behalf because they thought I wasn't educated enough”

—A.R.T.S. youth
forum participant

WHAT WE TALKED ABOUT

Having a disability is not something we want others to pity. Our real barriers come from the limitations imposed on us by care providers who assume we cannot do anything for ourselves. Professionals in systems of care, including the school system, assume that because we have a disability our other identities do not matter to us. It is assumed that we don't share the same experiences of discrimination, racism, bias and stereotypes as other Black youth. Being Black with disabilities, people assume we don't have our own voice and cannot speak for ourselves. We assure you we are more than capable of speaking for ourselves.

Our disabilities may be visible or non-visible, cognitive or physical. We sometimes find that because we are Black, our non-visible disabilities are neglected or ignored and we are treated as "problem children". We are punished for behaviour that is rooted in our disabilities when we should be supported.

We need more spaces to explore our personal experiences with Blackness and our intersectional identity with disability and work out how it affects our mental health. We need access to the same supports and resources as our able-bodied peers plus the specific kinds of assistance we require to manage our disability and reach our fullest potential. We need to be seen as young people who feel, need love and affection, and experience pain and hurt the same as anyone else our age.

"The teachers always said, "Oh, she has ADHD, she can't do it, she can't get through this curriculum, it's too much for her." They just tried to put me on pills and stuff like that."

—A.R.T.S. youth forum participant

YOUTH LETTER

WE NEED TO CHANGE

By Miracle
A.R.T.S. Forum Participant

"We need to change the narrative of how individuals with physical challenges are viewed, including by our own communities. Having physical challenges is difficult enough; we don't need others burdening us further with the label of being "disabled". Instead, we need to be given opportunities to feel empowered. In the past, people with physical challenges were executed or sold into slavery because they were "abnormal" or "diabolical" rather than a full member of society.

It is important to educate people everywhere and in all communities about young people with physical or other challenges in order to eliminate stigma and judgment. We refuse to be subdued by any diagnosis or label or have any limitations imposed on us. It is also necessary for able-bodied persons to avoid offering solutions they think will "fix us".

Being globally aware is important too because professionals in many developing countries lack the training to properly diagnose people with certain physical, cognitive, visible or hidden disabilities. Educating these professionals will help them stop viewing our challenges as being negative and start helping our families learn how to support and accept us. For example, growing up with developmental challenges, I was deprived of opportunities to learn about my identity. I would have preferred to know more about my condition earlier in life because it would have helped me and my family understand my capabilities and potential sooner.

There has to be a better system in place when it comes to supporting our participation in the labour force. Canada is a rich nation and we have the financial resources to make this happen. I am not ungrateful for the support I do receive but it doesn't help me realize my potential to contribute and give back. For instance, while the Ontario Disability Support Program—ODSP—offers financial support to cover my health care costs and some of my living expenses, the amount I receive is not always enough. If I am able to find employment to make up any financial shortfall I experience, I risk having a portion of my ODSP benefit reduced by that amount. I believe that is unreasonable because it keeps me dependent on a subsistence level of income from government.

Finding employment is challenging for young persons with disabilities. If the business and corporate world made workplaces more accessible it would increase employment opportunities for young Black people with disabilities. For those of us with severe physical or cognitive challenges, doors to finding employment are virtually closed. Government needs to work more closely with the business community to provide incentives for employers to hire us and create more accessible workplaces.

As an immigrant, I was put in a difficult position with respect to my academics because back home I had not been diagnosed as having a physical disability. I was in grade one when I should have been in grade five. When I came to Canada, I was placed in grade six with my same age peers but most of the time I was streamed based on my diagnosis rather than on my academic ability. I am still trying to make up for all those years I lost.

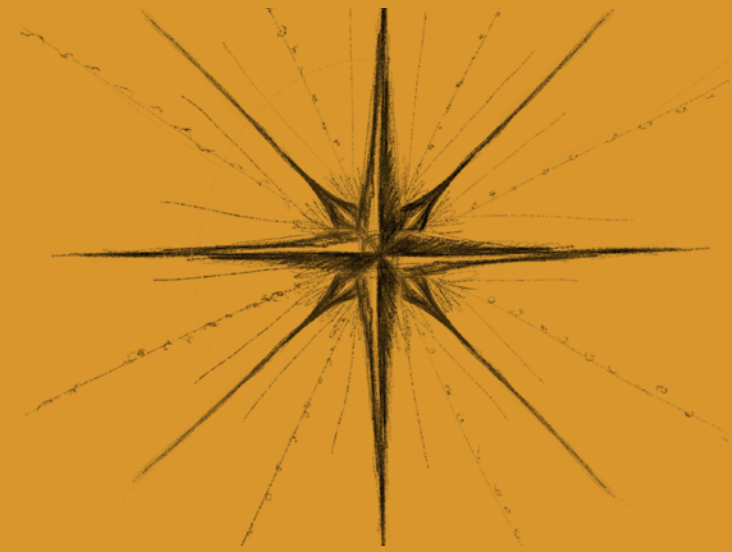
I highly recommend government support the development of a peer mentorship program to help disabled Black youth newcomers achieve their academic goals and help navigate their educational environment or support services in the broader community. Also, it should be a requirement for Canadian school boards to establish an education stream that prepares young people with disabilities for admission to college or university.

Government also needs to review the youth justice system and evaluate how the law is applied to young people with physical disabilities or other challenges. Court and law enforcement personnel should apply the law only after they have taken into consideration the needs of young people with physical and other challenges.”

DISABILITIES RECOMMENDATIONS

WE NEED:

1. **Child welfare staff to address Black youth with disabilities** from a strength-based youth-centred approach, where the young person is regarded as someone capable of understanding their own best interests.
2. Policy-makers and community organizations **to study the experiences of Black youth with disabilities in care** and continually improve services to meet their needs.
3. The Ministries of Children, Community and Social Services, Community Safety and Correctional Services, Education, Health and Long-Term Care, Seniors and Accessibility, and Training, Colleges and Universities, and school boards, hospitals and healthcare practitioners, **to develop policies and practices that support Black youth with disabilities** using a youth-centred, strength—based approach.



MENTAL HEALTH

Beaten since I was a child, stuck living door to door with other unhappy people struggling in anger and sorrow, keeping each other down, not knowing why or how they ended up there. I think poverty is eating us from the inside and out. On the inside, it attacks us as that voice saying, *“Hey you! You Suck. You will never amount to anything. You don’t belong here!”*

You fold into your insecurities and begin to believe that voice. It attacks us in our surroundings, through our peers, siblings or an angry parent upset that they couldn’t get that job or follow their dreams, or external voices that keep telling us, *“You will never make it”* or *“Ha-ha, look at how many people tried that and failed!”*, or even better, *“You’re stupid”*.

My advice to whomever this may concern is, *“Never Give Up”* because that voice isn’t you. Don’t let any one project their fears on you!

–A.R.T.S. YOUTH FORUM PARTICIPANT

MENTAL HEALTH

INTRODUCTION

By Denise Dunn,
HairStory Amplifier

The Canadian Oxford Dictionary defines mental health as, “a person’s condition with regard to their psychological and emotional well-being”. Many people underestimate the impact that poor mental health has on young people. Black youth usually turn to friends or the community to help them cope, but when the state of their psychological and emotional well-being becomes too much to handle, some choose suicide. In Canada, suicide accounts for 24% of all deaths among youth between the ages of 15 to 24.¹³ However, the suicide rate specifically for Black young people in Canada is not known. Suicide among Black children and youth, the short-and long-term impact of anti-Black racism, trauma, stigma and coping mechanisms, and the types of mental health treatment services needed by Black youth in Ontario, all require more study.

“I just want to get the help and opportunities I need and deserve”

—A.R.T.S. youth forum participant



When a Black young person is removed from their family and community and placed in the child welfare system, they encounter barriers to accessing mental health treatment. But shouldn’t access to proper treatment be easier to obtain in care? During HairStory’s Dialogue Sessions, young people shared that quality mental health supports to meet their mental health needs are lacking in Ontario’s systems of care. Young people report they are tired of being offered medication as the first option for treatment. What happened to supportive one to one counselling or group programming? Why are those not the first options tried when treating the mental health needs of Black youth.

Black youth in Ontario’s systems of care report that culturally specific mental health treatment should be the first option used to assist them instead of medication. They say they just want to be heard and understood, but culturally based mental health services are not available where they live.

“The stereotypes surrounding our culture is making it less likely for Black youth to get noticed”

—A.R.T.S. youth forum participant

¹³ <https://cmha.ca/about-mha/fast-facts-about-mental-illness>

Some Black youth in the Dialogue Sessions wondered if they had received diagnoses from service providers whose training did not provide them with any understanding about the impact of stigma, anti-Black racism or poverty on mental health. Does this lack of awareness lead to Black youth being labeled as having a “behaviour problem” or given a diagnosis of ADD, ADHD, and ODD?

Many thought they received medication needlessly for a diagnosis they felt was incorrect. Instead of trying to understand and address the root cause of their behaviours, young people felt their service providers assumed they were “acting out”.

All too frequently, the behaviour of a Black youth with untreated mental health needs is criminalized and they become caught up in the youth justice system. When this happens, it leaves their needs unmet and the young person vulnerable to repeated contact with the system. Conditions like these lend support to the belief that the justice system, as currently designed, fails Black youth.

Black youth in Ontario’s systems of care shared at the A.R.T.S. Listening Table that they struggled with their mental health needs because appropriate services were not available or accessible. These



“For Black youth in particular, the symptoms of mental illness are seen as behavioural issues”.

—A.R.T.S. youth forum participant



youth wanted a connection to mental health service providers who understood the complex nature of their mental health needs. They wanted service providers who were able to look deeper into factors within systems of care that affected their mental health including, social exclusion, biased diagnostic criteria and discrimination.

Young people wanted service providers to reach out to the broader Black community to provide information to help reduce the stigma associated with mental illness and promote greater awareness of available supports and services. They also wanted staff in all organizations that serve children and youth to be culturally sensitive when they work with Black youth and their families.

Black young people in care suggested that workshops or presentations in schools and care settings should help young people learn more about mental health and where they could reach out to if they needed support. They believed it was time to break down the barriers that stopped them from receiving proper treatment for their mental health needs. They suggested it would be helpful for Black children and youth to have access to Elders or community leaders to whom they could reach out to for support. They realized their rights and basic needs were being neglected, and that this might help explain the over-representation of Black children and youth in all aspects of Ontario’s systems of care.

“They realized their rights and basic needs were being neglected, and that this might help explain the over-representation of Black children and youth in all aspects of Ontario’s systems of care.”

WHAT WE TALKED ABOUT

We feel that the mental health needs of Black youth go unmet by a system that does not take the time to recognize the layers of stressors that we face on a daily basis. We constantly struggle with intergenerational trauma, the lasting impacts of colonialization, internalized racism, anti-Black racism, systemic racism and institutional racism.

We spend chunks of our adolescence learning how to protect our mental health. We've learned to be resilient, which is great, but in the end we just want to be ourselves. Being resilient means having the ability to overcome a negative situation countless times and that a person is strong enough to handle whatever is coming next. If Ontario says it wants to raise a generation of resilient Black youth, what that means to us is that the province expects Black youth to be repeatedly exposed to different forms of adversity, violence and mental abuse. We cannot be expected to use our strength in a constant struggle for our well-being. We need those adverse situations to be removed from our lives. We want an end to the negative experiences of dealing with uninformed staff in Ontario's systems of care.

We lack safe spaces to get together to discuss our mental health and wellness concerns. Access to appropriate mental health services is limited. When we do get access to services, the treatment framework

“We cannot be expected to use our strength in a constant struggle for our well-being.”



doesn't consider the larger context of the relationship Black peoples have with Canada, a relationship that contributes to our poor mental and physical health. Service providers possess a generic understanding of mental health and mental wellness that does not take into account the impact of our home and family lives, the living conditions in our communities, the role of our religions, and our history. Service providers don't recognize the complex needs and cultural considerations that need to form part of wellness plans for Black youth.

When accessing mental health services we find there are few Black mental health practitioners in Ontario's systems of care. This makes us mistrust the system. This lack of representation of Black care providers makes it hard for us to open up out of fear that we may be misunderstood. Negative stereotypes about Black people and societal expectations make us feel that we must always be strong and minimize our mental health needs.

Improving our knowledge about wellness would help families and communities create healthier environments in which Black children and youth can thrive. Improving our knowledge and understanding about mental health would equip us with the skills necessary to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Finally, addressing the biased systemic issues that amplify our mental health needs and concerns would help create healthier care environments and institutions where we would feel safe and culturally supported.

“I don't want you to sit here and think this is another part of your busy schedules. This is a life changing moment for me that I want you to take in and consider and go back to your offices and be like, wow.”

—A.R.T.S. Youth Forum Participant

YOUTH LETTER

DEAR GOVERNMENT MINISTER

By Kayla
Youth Advisor

“Accepting the belief that politics is the art of the possible, is there anything you would want to change if you resided in Ontario’s systems of care?”

If I was in your shoes, I would first make resources easily accessible to Black youth because, in my experience, support programs have criteria that are too strict; someone has to refer you, programs are not affordable, and they have long wait times. It would also be helpful if there was a single point of access to the system, like a central intake for resources, available by contacting a service agency directly or online. I would also create programming that was more in-depth and supportive, where staff don’t just give you handouts, but actually take the time to engage with you, and teach you the skills you need to be independent and succeed.

I would create resources to teach young people about their culture or support them using culturally-based programming and providing opportunities for kids like me to connect with my community.

I would change the way we approach mental health in the system. I would study the long-term outcomes for young people who use the system and make improvements so young people wouldn’t end up back in the system or stay stuck in it.

If I was in your position as the Minister, I would listen to young people and learn from all of the experiences they have had and make the changes that are needed to create more positive outcomes for youth in systems of care. So, I ask, “What would you do to change the system having heard our stories?”

Regards,
Kayla

MENTAL HEALTH RECOMMENDATIONS

WE NEED:

1. The Ontario Human Rights Commission, working alongside members of the Black community and Black youth, to **deliver a report that identifies practices in the province’s systems of care** that support anti-Black racism, oppression and the exclusion of Black children and youth from participating fully in society.
2. The Ontario Ministry of Health to **provide more mental health education** and accessible community-based mental health programs specifically for Black children and youth.
3. Mental health organizations, children’s aid societies, and youth justice institutions **to hire and train more Black mental health professionals.**
4. **Mandatory cultural sensitivity training for staff** working in children’s mental health organizations, children’s aid societies, and youth justice institutions and who provide mental health services to Black children, youth and families.
5. The Ontario Ministries of the Attorney General, Children, Community and Social Services, Community Safety, and Correctional Services, Education, and Health and Long-Term Care, **to work with Black young people and Black communities** to determine how to improve mental health supports for Black children and youth by using a combination of cultural and conventional healing and therapeutic methods.
6. All School Boards within Ontario **to work with Black young people and the Black community to develop culturally appropriate public education materials** about mental illness and mental health.
7. The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities **to work with Black children and youth to create or improve curriculum** for the preparation of mental health professionals to work with Black children and youth.
8. All mental health practitioners working with Black youth **to be trained on the complexities of Blackness and intergenerational trauma** and how each impacts the mental health of Black peoples.
9. Mental health practitioners **to adopt a youth-centered approach to treatment**, one that considers the young person’s experiences and recommendations.



SOCIAL SERVICES

“Single Mother? Single Father? Hungry? Need shelter? Clothing? Well, you just qualified for our bundle and if you depend on us, we’ll provide you with money for shelter, food for your children and a light snack for yourself. If you can show us proof that you can work and help yourself, even better. We’ll give you less money because you’re capable of standing on your own two feet! Please don’t complain to us about not having enough money for food because it all went to rent. We know rent is through the roof but there are food banks and if you’re willing to wait in those long lines they will provide you with enough food, hopefully.”

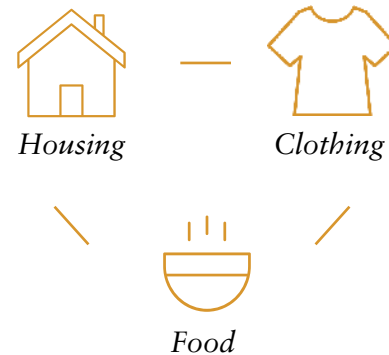
—A.R.T.S. YOUTH FORUM PARTICIPANT

SOCIAL SERVICES

INTRODUCTION

RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

According to Article 27 of the UNCRC All children “have the right to food, clothing, a safe place to live and to have your basic needs met. You should not be disadvantaged so that you can't do many of the things other kids can do.”¹⁴



By Smyrna Wright,
Amplifier, HairStory Project

In 1991, Canada ratified the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of The Child* or UNCRC, making a commitment to uphold all the principles of the convention. Yet, here we are in 2018 and Black young people in care report they struggle to have their basic needs met and face an abundance of systemic barriers and disadvantages that prevent them from thriving relative to their peers. These barriers follow Black young people throughout their development making it difficult for them to transition successfully into adulthood.

Young people and their families are often forced to choose between paying rent or buying food and other necessities. These financial struggles leave Black parents little opportunity to permit their children to participate in extracurricular activities that help build life skills, create opportunities for networking and increase their capacity for success.

¹⁴ <https://www.provincialadvocate.on.ca/about/our-office-and—the-uncrc/uncrc-childfriendly.pdf>



Ontario needs to follow through with the commitments Canada made by signing the UNCRC. The current system, as designed, leaves Black youth vulnerable to falling between the cracks. The amount of support offered to Black young people is either not enough or not what they need. They need more life skills and stronger ties to their roots in order to thrive and break repeating patterns of being stuck in a low socio-economic status. Black youth deserve to live in safe homes and communities, they deserve to eat nutritious food, and they deserve the same opportunities enjoyed by their non-Black peers.

“We need more guidance before and after starting independent living”

—A.R.T.S. youth forum participant

WHAT WE TALKED ABOUT



Many of us have had negative experiences with the Ontario Works program and other forms of social assistance. Those of us who rely on Ontario Works worry constantly about being able to pay our bills and cover the rent. Ontario Works does not provide enough financial aid for us to meet even our most basic needs. It can also affect our education and ability to attend school.

We aspire to be self-sufficient but the way the system is set up creates dependency. We receive no support to help us find housing and the wait list for affordable accommodation is long.

Those of us who depend on social assistance know these services do not provide the amount of support we actually need. We believe non-Black social workers are unable to provide appropriate care because they do not understand our unique cultural needs. We want to see more Black workers in the system and mandatory cultural sensitivity training for non-Black social workers.

“If I want to go on a school field trip I have to save up 3 different welfare cheques, I can’t spend any of that money”

—A.R.T.S. youth forum participant

We also need supports beyond receiving money. We need a caring adult to check-in on us during the transition process of “aging out” of care, someone who can inform us about our rights and the resources we require.

We typically do not have any connection to the support systems and guidance we need until something serious happens in our lives such as an arrest, unplanned pregnancy, development of an addiction or onset of a serious physical or mental illness. Without the supports we need to make a successful transition to independence, we become stuck in an endless cycle of dependency on one failing system after another.

“Ontario Works does not give enough money to support me even by today’s most basic living standards”

—A.R.T.S. youth forum participant

YOUTH LETTER

By **Trey L,**
A.R.T.S. Forum Participant

“I want to emphasize the importance of setting up support programs for young people who are in or about to begin the process of transitioning to independent living. I think a big part of the program should focus on budgeting and money management skills to help us build a solid financial foundation for ourselves. There are other things we need to know too, like how to grocery shop and how to do our taxes. I would like to see more support around searching for housing, and more counselling supports.”

I also want to highlight that young people who are in child welfare care should be put into homes that are more culturally oriented for them. For example, as a Black youth I would want to be placed with a Black family because they would understand my cultural needs as a Black person.”

SOCIAL SERVICES RECOMMENDATIONS

WE NEED:

1. **Government to reassess the amount of financial support available from Ontario Works** to ensure that we are able to survive—i.e., pay our rent, bills and meet other financial responsibilities. The reassessment process should involve the input of Black children and youth who have experience with Ontario Works.
2. **Access to sports and recreation programs** in care and post-care.
3. **More Black service providers** in Ontario’s social service agencies.
4. **Mandatory training of non-Black service staff** to make them more culturally aware and sensitive to the cultural needs of Black youth in all our diversity.



YOUTH JUSTICE

Young children in chains—they call it discipline. I think it is inhumane. Like what could a child do so wrong that makes it acceptable to be locked in a three by four foot metal cage for hours, only seconds away from going totally insane? *Did he steal, fight, or sell an illegal product he thought was his only way out of poverty?*

Treatment like this puts Black youth in conditions where they begin to believe they are lower than the rest. No wonder there's a repeating cycle we seem to be seeing in neighbourhoods all over the city. Being chained and locked in a cage, then having families forced to pay bail higher than their rent, just for their child to be considered guilty until proven innocent doesn't seem like justice to me. *And no youth deserves for their life to be played with like that for a mistake only committed once.*

—A.R.T.S. YOUTH FORUM PARTICIPANT

YOUTH JUSTICE

INTRODUCTION

**Danian Walker, Amplifier,
HairStory Project**

Being involved in the youth justice system can be overwhelming. Having a “one size fits all” system causes problems with respect to promoting the rehabilitation of individual youth. Black youth spoke specifically to this concern when they recounted their experiences in the youth justice system.

For almost a decade, Amplifiers working at the Ontario Child Advocate’s Office have spoken out about the need for young people to be treated equitably. Meeting this objective requires the youth justice system to examine the needs of young people on a case by case basis and create rehabilitation plans to address the factors that led directly to their offending. This means providing them with access to educational assessments and appropriate learning plans. They also need support services that are culturally relevant and tap into the strengths of community supports and resources.

“How helpful is it for staff in group homes to call the cops at the first sign of difficulty?”

—A.R.T.S. youth forum participant



Perhaps most important is the role of policing and the relationship between Black youth and local police officers. Opportunities to establish meaningful relationships with youth in the community are lost when officers fail to keep their word or react to situations out of fear instead of compassion or concern for young people. Some of us deep down want to trust the police but feel let down by the way we see them behave toward our peers. Respect cannot be obtained through the use of force. Police officers who deal with Black youth enter their lives at an important and pivotal point of their development. How they handle this relationship and contact requires diligence and care.

When Black young people become involved with the justice system, they need support to address the root causes that led them to involvement with the system and assistance to help put them back on a path to becoming positive, responsible contributors to the community. This means all professionals in the system that work with Black youth must be aware of the unique pressures, larger context and social influences that can have a detrimental impact on their behaviour. If we can create a culture in Ontario’s systems of care that aims to get to the core of young people’s behaviour and treat all its youth with pride and dignity, we can be an exemplar for the rest of the world.

“I heard a comment say, ‘Oh there’s still a lot of good police out there’ but what are the good police doing? If they’re silent they’re just as bad as the bad ones.”

—A.R.T.S. youth forum participant

WHAT WE TALKED ABOUT

We see numerous things in Ontario's systems of care we believe contribute to the over-representation of Black youth in the justice system. We see how the failure of one system to meet our needs leads to many of us to becoming involved with yet another failing system. In fact, many of us feel that the failure of Ontario's school system to meet our learning needs leads directly to Black youth ending up involved with the justice system. What is consistent between the different parts of Ontario's systems of care is that they perpetuate forms of bias, cultural blind spots and anti-Black racism.

There are strong feelings that Ontario's youth justice system—as currently designed—does not help Black youth transition from custody back into mainstream society. We believe this happens because staff in the justice system do not understand the complex interacting needs that leave Black youth vulnerable to involvement in the justice system. Because the system fails to address the needs that lead to our offending in the first place, many of us reoffend. Involvement in the justice system seems to us to be the inevitable end stop after being failed and let down by the education, children's mental health and child welfare systems.

“Because the system fails to address the needs that lead to our offending in the first place, many of us reoffend.”



Black males and females alike feel harassed by police. We feel judged by police, service providers, educators and the general public simply by the neighbourhood in which we live. We believe the justice system does not “correct” us; it just pulls us further down.

We would like to see the creation of a “Gladue-type” process in the justice system to provide judges with a deeper understanding of the background and context of an individual Black youth before sentencing. A Gladue process, developed to address the over-representation of Indigenous peoples in the justice system, requires judges to consider the historical trauma and other harms suffered by Indigenous peoples when sentencing. With a Gladue process, judges are required to explore alternatives to simply handling out punishment.

“My whole life, I’ve been getting stopped by the police for no reason, like just walking out my door, like even if my mom was there or what not. They’ll stop me and search me in my neighborhood and my friends, all my friends. Like your parents can’t stop it, there’s nothing they can do about it. They just harass you, search your clothes if they want to, go into your bag and throw your stuff on the floor and make you pick it up. Yeah, it’s been happening my whole life so that’s why it resonates with me.”

—A.R.T.S. youth forum participant

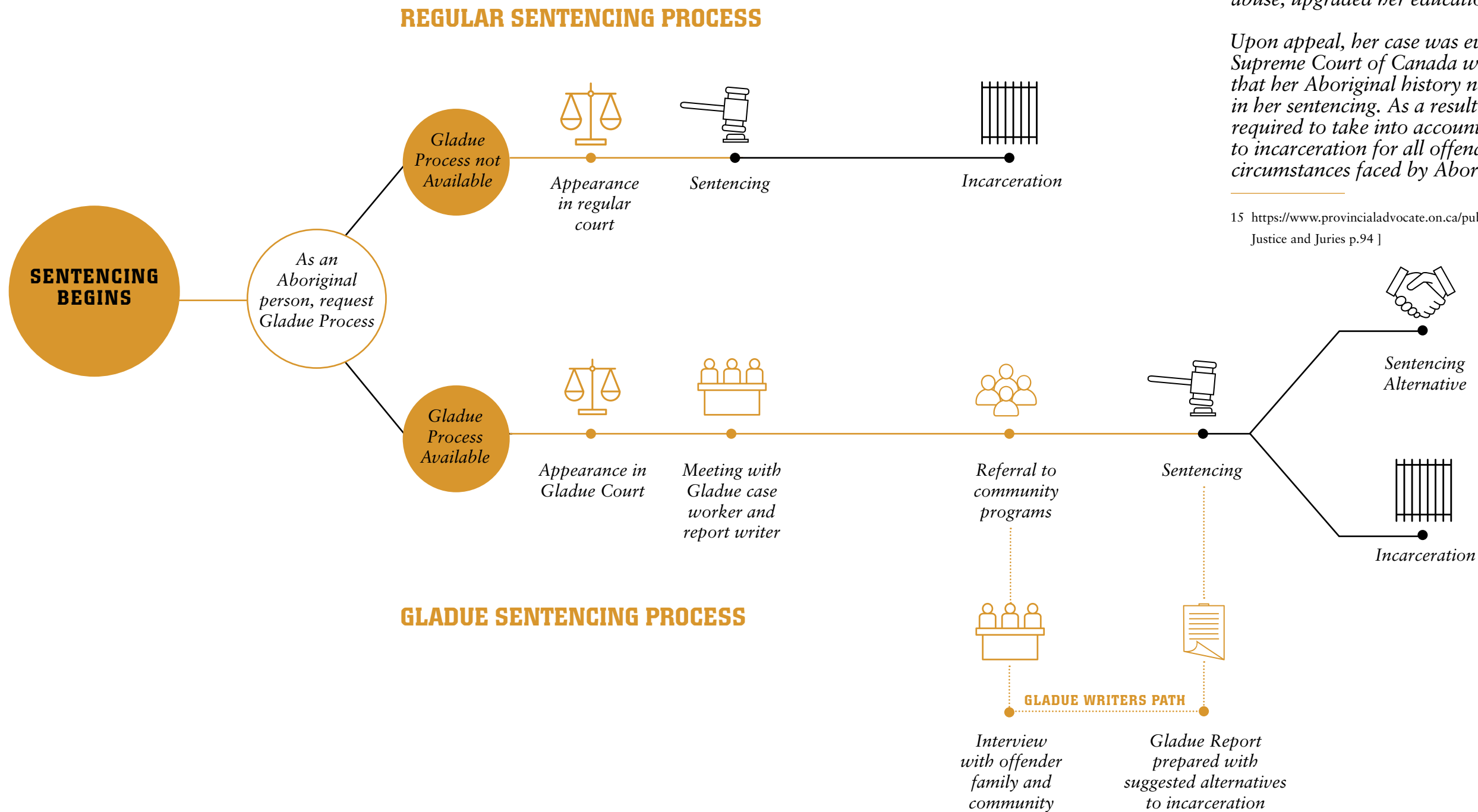
GLADUE SENTENCING PROCESS

THE ORIGINS OF THE GLADUE PRINCIPLE

Jamie 'Tanis' Gladue was a Cree woman from Alberta who was living off-reserve. She was a 19 year old mother of one and pregnant at the time of being charged. She had no prior criminal history. Tanis was charged with the murder of Reuben Beaver. According to the court record, Tanis thought Reuben was having an affair with her sister. They argued and Reuben was verbally abusive towards Tanis. In the heat of the moment she stabbed him. Tanis was granted bail, and over the 17 months leading up to her trial and sentencing, she entered into counseling for substance abuse, upgraded her education and supported her family.

Upon appeal, her case was eventually heard by the Supreme Court of Canada where the court decided that her Aboriginal history needed to be considered in her sentencing. As a result of her case, judges are required to take into account all reasonable alternatives to incarceration for all offenders and the unique circumstances faced by Aboriginal peoples.¹⁵

15 <https://www.provincialadvocate.on.ca/publications/initiative-reports> [Feathers of Hope: Justice and Juries p.94]



YOUTH JUSTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

WE NEED:

1. **A review of Ontario's youth justice system** to look for any systemic practices that interfere with meeting the rehabilitation needs of Black youth.
2. **Mandatory training for correctional staff, police, judges, court personnel and lawyers** to deliver more culturally relevant supports and services to Black youth involved with the justice system.
3. **Government to hire more Black service providers** to work throughout the justice system.
4. **More sports, recreation, arts and leisure programs** in custody settings to create opportunities to interact with positive pro-social peers.
5. **Support programs** to address the issues that lead Black young people to involvement with the justice system, including incarceration, in the first place.
6. **Access to life skills and other training** to facilitate successful transitions and reintegration back to families and communities.
7. **The establishment of a 'Gladue type' court process** so judges have access to a comprehensive understanding of the complex social and other factors that influence the behaviours of individual Black youth and more alternatives to incarceration.
8. **Police to eliminate** the practice of "carding".

They're surprised when I speak
For many reasons than just one.
Staying in the background for so long
That I've become the forgotten one.

Shackles lay heavy on my soul
I'm losing pieces of my identity
I'm a targeted modern day outlaw
Just traded plantations for the cities.

This predetermined pigmentation has caused me so much grief
Yet steady I stand
Diamonds transformed under heat.

This predetermined pigmentation will cause me so much grief
Yet steady I stand
Like diamonds that are transformed under the heat.

They are surprised when I speak
"You're so articulate", they say
Excuse yourself
My capabilities are Limitless

Watch as I lead the way.

BY MERCY
A.R.T.S. YOUTH FORUM PARTICIPANT



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