# Evidence Brief

## Eight Best Practices for Supporting Black Youth Who Have Been in Conflict with the Law

### How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's online Knowledge Hub, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: "Black", "African-American", "justice-involved", "youth", and "in conflict with the law".

### Summary of Evidence: Eight Best Practices

1. **Understand youth in terms of their strengths, assets, and excellence.**
   Organizations can better serve Black youth by adopting a strength-based approach and recognizing their assets. This differs significantly from the deficit-based approach that many organizations and mainstream institutions adopt. Youth organizations can also engage with Black youth in a more humanizing, empowering way, by seeing the 'problems' they face as connected to broader social issues, where the "deficit is within a society and a school system that has failed Black youth" (Baldridge, 2014, p. 467). Develop an organizational culture in which staff recognize young people's strengths, such as resilience, resourcefulness, and agency. For Black youth, this approach could prioritize both **cultural** and **critical consciousness-raising**, as well as a **connection to Africentric values and culture** (Grills et al., 2016; Washington et al., 2014).

2. **Raise critical consciousness in Black youth.**
   Many Black youth want to talk about the issues affecting their lives, but schools and educators may shy away from, or shut down, conversations about race. Youth organizations can facilitate *critical consciousness* – "the ability to perceive and interrogate the various forms of oppression that shape one's life, and to take collective action against the status quo" (Lavie-Ajayi & Krumer-Nevo, 2013, p. 1701). Youth workers can foster critical consciousness by listening to Black youth, offering validation, and encouraging them to reflect on the broader political and social context(s).

   Organizations should make space for youth to examine the ways in which social structures privilege and oppress particular communities, and the ways in which these communities collectively resist inequities in transformative ways (Albright et al., 2017). Consider integrating social justice activities, discussions, and training into the foundations of youth programming.

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3. **Promote principles of Africentrism.**
   *Africentrism* – also referred to as Afrocentrism – is based on the principle of re-instilling traditional African and African American cultural values in peoples of African descent. Africentric interventions address both structural and individual challenges to promote wellbeing, and, as such, are consistent with a social justice approach (Gilbert et al., 2009). Many of these interventions draw on the seven principles of the Nguzo Saba value system (Karenga, 1996, as cited in Gilbert et al., 2009; see also Loyd & Williams, 2017):
   - **unity** – striving for unity in family, community, and race;
   - **self-determination** – defining, naming, and creating for oneself;
   - **collective work and responsibility** – building and maintaining community, and solving problems together;
   - **cooperative economics** – building and maintaining the economic base of the community;
   - **purpose** – restoring people to their original traditional greatness;
   - **creativity** – enhancing the beauty and benefits of self and community;
   - **faith** – belief in the righteousness of the Black struggle.

   Evidence suggests that the endorsement of Africentric values may contribute to **positive developmental outcomes in youth**, such as prosocial behaviour, future orientation, and civic mindedness (Grills et al., 2016). Africentric interventions have been shown to reduce externalizing behaviours, counter negative stereotypes (see #4 below), and promote the development of a positive ethnic-racial identity (Adams-Bass et al., 2014; Aston et al., 2017; Loyd & Williams, 2017).

4. **Challenge racial stereotypes.**
   The media, schools, and other institutions routinely characterize Black youth as criminals, underachievers, and troublemakers (Baker-Bell et al., 2017; James, 2012). These stereotypes **affect how youth view themselves and their communities**, reduce self-esteem, and lower expectations (The Opportunity Agenda, 2011). Evidence suggests that experiencing discrimination, such as racial profiling, may also contribute to delinquency and offending through the production of negative emotions (Del Toro et al., 2019; Nakhid, 2017).

   Programs can challenge racial stereotypes by incorporating Africentric values, and promoting *critical media literacy*, which "works toward healing the wounds of youth who are affected by racial violence and… provides youth with opportunities to investigate, dismantle, and rewrite the damaging narratives that mainstream media… use to construct and oppress Black youth" (Baker-Bell et al., 2017, p. 138). Teaching Black youth to recognize how the media and other institutions represent them in inaccurate and hurtful ways, as well as how

they can respond to these representations, can be healing (Baker-Bell, et al., 2017).

5. **Inspire hope by emphasizing Black youth's agency, resilience, and potential.**
   Black youth can benefit from critical consciousness, but talking about systems of oppression can also leave youth feeling disempowered. Some research suggests, for example, that talking excessively about anti-Black racism can cause Black youth to want to distance themselves from identifying as Black. While youth programs should create space for youth to talk about their experiences, these messages "must be balanced by **a strong emphasis on agency, empowerment, and the overcoming of obstacles**" (Briggs, 2018, p. 547).

   Practitioners should strive to **offer a strong, unwavering message of hope and resilience** (Watson, 2015). Foster *critical hope* by recognizing the forces that impact young people's lives, and working alongside youth to examine possible paths toward a more just society (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). This lends itself to radical healing (see #6, below), as both practices "work in concert to help oppressed youth understand the root causes of structural oppression and reclaim power through resistance" (Desai, 2020, p. 4).

   Programs can also inspire hope by **connecting youth to Black role models** who have overcome adversity (Jarjoura, 2013). Provide opportunities for role models/mentors to share previous and present life challenges, as well as strategies for overcoming them (Washington et al., 2014). Black youth are most likely to benefit from culturally competent mentors who can inspire the development of a positive ethnic/racial identity (Jarjoura, 2013).

6. **Promote radical healing.**
   *Radical healing* is a process that builds the capacity of people to recognize the ways in which they are being oppressed, and inspires them to take action to change oppressive conditions by reimagining, and then recreating, the world in which they want to live (Ginwright, 2010). In other words, healing involves "identifying the source of trauma, engaging in collective resistance against that source, and fostering hope" by actively working to prevent recurring trauma (French et al., 2020, p. 19).

   Organizations can promote radical healing by **raising critical consciousness**, **promoting civic engagement**, and **creating spaces dedicated to healing** (Ginwright, 2010). Healing circles may be particularly beneficial, as they encourage youth to share testimony, bear witness, (re)build community, learn how to navigate racism, and talk about issues that matter to them without the help of mental health professionals (French et al., 2020; McArthur & Lane, 2019; Nygreen, 2017). Practitioners should also consider the following practices (French et al., 2020) to support their radical healing work:

- Be aware of and continually assess the power dynamic in your relationship with racialized youth;
- Work with youth in a manner that is collaborative and bidirectional;
- Bear witness to youth;
- Respond with urgency to racism;
- Encourage the externalizing of challenges faced by youth by locating their external source(s);
- Make your choices understandable, and understand a young person's choices;
- Engage with the young person's community to better understand them.

7. **Seek feedback from families, and provide opportunities for engagement.**
Research suggests that family-focused programming is beneficial for racialized youth who have been in conflict with the law (Kwok et al., 2017). Organizations can better serve Black youth by **expanding the notion of 'family'** to include a variety of caring relationships within Black communities, such as informal parents/caregivers (Anucha et al., 2017). Black youth and their families have stressed the importance of engaging parents/caregivers, as well as the wider family and community, in youth programming (Anucha et al., 2017).

Organizations should **seek feedback from families and caregivers** to better understand whether and how they want to be engaged in programming, and to identify barriers to participation. If possible, provide multiple opportunities for engagement. For example, consider hosting programs in a familiar setting (e.g., church, community centre, neighbourhood venue), inviting caregivers to participate in-person, and sharing information with those who cannot attend but still want to stay connected. Address structural barriers to participation by ensuring programs are affordable, accessible by public transit, and culturally-appropriate (Moodie & Ramos, 2014).

8. **Set achievable goals and use various outcomes to measure program effectiveness.**
When setting program goals, organizations should "**understand and account for the impact of culture, family, and community** on both program delivery and the ability to 'move the needle' on key program outcomes" (Schultz & Sontag-Padilla, 2015, p. 20). Given that many of the issues that Black youth face are institutional and/or structural, there are often significant barriers in promoting positive individual-level outcomes.

For instance, evidence suggests that many juvenile justice programs fail to achieve significant reductions in recidivism (Spiranovic et al., 2015). Rather than relying on recidivism as a primary measure of effectiveness, programs should **consider additional outcome measures**, which can have longer-term effects on justice system involvement. These may include indicators of socioemotional skill development, as well as improvements in

education, employment, and substance use (Cramer et al., 2019; Spiranovic et al., 2015).

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