

Evidence Brief

Four Approaches to Promote Protective Factors and Support Positive Identity Formation for Black Youth 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", "youth", "justice-involved", "in conflict with the law", "identity", "Black culture", "Black representation", "Africentric protective factors", "Black identity production", "media representation", and "Black stereotypes".

Summary of Evidence: Four Approaches

1. Promote principles of Africentrism to support cultural association and identity formation, and to increase protective factors for Black youth.

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. This holistic perspective emerged to address the totality of African Americans' experience, including their collective disenfranchisement and historical trauma as a result of slavery and persistent racial disparities (Gilbert et al., 2009). Statistically, African Americans continue to experience inequalities in education outcomes, income, and employment opportunities as compared to their white counterparts (Gilbert et al., 2009). Across North America, Black people have experienced deculturalization through historical trauma, and Africentric practices aim to mitigate the impacts by drawing on historical strengths, including a strong achievement orientation and work ethic, flexible family roles, and strong kinship bonds (Gilbert et al., 2009).

Africentric philosophical, spiritual, and cultural value systems provide guiding principles that can assist in addressing systemic issues and support individuals in connecting to cultural knowledge, self-appreciation, and positive racial identification (Gilbert et al., 2009). Seven principles have been identified as rooted in these value systems, and can underpin programming designed for Black youth (Gilbert et al., 2009, p. 245):

- **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.

Programs for Black youth that integrate Africentrism can increase resiliency while decreasing or mediating risk factors for harmful and antisocial behaviours (Gilbert et al., 2009). These programs incorporate values such as communalism and spirituality, offer support to reduce societal pressures and build positive African American ideals, and increase a positive sense of self through African and African American historical examples (Gilbert et al., 2009), thereby increasing protective factors for substance use and improving outcomes for those who are incarcerated (Gilbert et al., 2009). Africentric interventions are valuable tools that address both structural (macro) and individual (micro) challenges, while promoting positive identity formation and wellbeing and maintaining a commitment to social justice for vulnerable populations.

2. Integrate cultural and racial socialization within a positive youth development framework.

Positive youth development is “a comprehensive framework outlining the supports all young people need to be successful” (Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2012), and is crucial for Black youth as they negotiate a social, political, and historical landscape grounded in systemic inequalities and racism (Grills et al., 2016). 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; see also approach #1, above).

A study of close to 2,000 African American youth participants in the Pen or Pencil mentoring program (Grills et al., 2016) suggests that enhancing **cultural consciousness** supports the positive development and identity formation of African American youth. This program used the Five Cs model of positive youth development – **competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring**, which builds the foundation for a ‘sixth’ C – **contribution** (to self, family, and community), understood to be an essential component of positive identity formation (Grills et al., 2016). Researchers identified the following concepts integral to raising cultural consciousness for Black youth (Grills et al., 2012):

Racial Socialization: African American **ethnic socialization** focuses on the transmission of ethnic group values (history, beliefs, and customs), whereas African American **racial socialization** focuses more on messages of racial barriers and cultural pride. Racial socialization enables youth from historically-oppressed groups to positively negotiate and navigate racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity, bias, and strain, thereby contributing to their wellbeing and functioning within these contexts.

Future Orientation: Concerned with thoughts, feelings, hopes, and plans for the future,

positive future orientation predicts several outcomes for African American youth, including academic performance, college enrollment, and positive attitudes. The study revealed that future orientation is a protective factor against violent behaviour and hopelessness, and is associated with increased self-efficacy and ethnic identity.

Prosocial Behaviour: Kindness, care, and concern for others can be an indicator of African-centred cultural orientation, and are considered essential to healthy psychosocial functioning. Prosocial behaviour refers to actions that benefit others, such as **sharing, caring, comforting, and helping** others, as well as engaging in cooperative activities, taking the perspectives of others into account, and donating time.

Civic and Community Engagement: A sense of community and engaged citizenship should be considered in positive cultural and racial identity formation (Grills et al., 2016). An orientation towards **community, civic engagement, and social justice** can result in African American positive youth development. The sense of community and collectivist orientation affords an opportunity to be ‘be’ in community and to ‘do’ the work of community. Those youth who engage in political and broader civic engagement/activist activities tend to develop a sense of civic mindedness and concern for their community (Grills et al., 2016).

The study found that participants had a positive response to African American **cultural orientation**, which has been identified as a critical protective factor in the psychological wellbeing of African American youth (Grills et al, 2016). Researchers concluded that racial socialization provides youth with coping strategies to manage social stressors (Grills et al, 2016). They also learned that cultural/group consciousness may reinforce equity-based attitudes and beliefs among African American youth (Grills et al, 2016); for example, participants showed interest in addressing systemic inequalities/issues and were willing to help create change (Grills et al, 2016). Black boys benefited from talking about race and racism, as it helped to increase their sense of engagement with their community; talking about their feelings provided a safe space to express thoughts and empathize with others (Grills et al, 2016). Participants engaged in positive dialogue about their perceptions, feelings, and experiences sharpened their **critical consciousness**, and learned how to effectively navigate racialized social environments (Grills et al, 2016).

Critical consciousness involves “a fundamental understanding of oppressive social elements, hierarchical structures, and one’s place in society, and it is developed through education, analysis of personal experience, and critical dialogue” (Albright et al., 2017, p. 369). It further involves “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).

Programs can promote this by integrating social justice-oriented activities, discussions, and training into the foundations of their programming, creating opportunities for youth and practitioners to partner in furthering their understandings of the ways in which social structures privilege and oppress particular communities, and the ways in which communities collectively resist inequities in transformative ways (Albright et al., 2017).

Emphasize the **strengths, assets,** and **excellence** of the Black community in your work with youth. This differs significantly from a deficit-based approach that many organizations and mainstream institutions adopt. A positive youth development framework enables programs to 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” (Baldrige, 2014, p. 467). Develop an organizational culture that reinforces a positive youth development framework, through which staff recognize young people’s strengths, such as resilience, resourcefulness, and agency.

3. Decode social constructs surrounding ‘at-risk’ youth stereotypes in the education and criminal justice systems.

The problematic construction of Black Canadian males as ‘at-risk’ is used to categorize and identify youth who require educational support in the name of instilling discipline (James, 2012). In fact, the language surrounding ‘at-risk’ serves as a euphemism for racism, sexism, and biases based on class, immigrant status, family structure, neighbourhood, cultural assumptions, and other “‘risk-inducing’ social constructs” surrounding Black identity (James, 2012, p. 465). Adults who use the term ‘at-risk’ to regulate and recode Black identities are constructing, categorizing, and identifying potential ‘misfits’ who do not fit ‘normative’ social and academic expectations.

The education system perpetuates and maintains society’s existing power relations (James, 2012); current institutional structures strive to support norms and patterns of behaviour and skills of citizenship that members are expected to learn in order to fully participate in society. Black youth who do not meet societal expectations are effectively punished or isolated and do not receive the same quality of education as their white counterparts (James, 2012). The ‘at-risk’ discourse contributes to the institutional racism that Black youth continue to experience in the education system. Black youth stereotypes contribute to racialization and marginalization, which impacts Black students’ potential, learning outcomes, social opportunities, life chances, and educational outcomes (James, 2012). These stereotypes work together to reinforce educators’ misconceptions of Black youth’s abilities, skills, and aspirations, adding to the systemic oppression and marginalization of Black youth.

There are five common stereotypes of Black youth, categorized as the following (James, 2012):

Immigrant. Black youth are often stereotyped as immigrants or foreigners with cultures from ‘elsewhere’, which is then used to attribute their poor educational performance and disciplinary challenges to their lack of Canadian educational values and their unwillingness or inability to assimilate. Educators may point out high drop-out rates, school disciplinary challenges, and a lack of parental involvement in their children’s education as evidence to support their position (James, 2012).

Fatherless. Black children from single parent households are viewed as ‘dysfunctional’ and ‘damaged’ (James, 2012, p. 474), which can influence concerns that educators and other institutional agents express about the schooling and disciplinary challenges of Black youth.

Troublemaker / Underachiever / Athlete. The absence of male figures is perceived as connected to the underachievement or ‘troublemaking’ of Black youth, and this connection can be internalized by Black youth, impacting their confidence (James, 2012). Low academic expectations can harm the self-esteem of Black youth; their contributions to the education system are reduced to their bodies, or their ‘athletic nature’ (James, 2012). The athlete stereotype is a ‘double negative’ label because it constructs athletes as ‘dumb’ or ‘unintelligent’; if they are good at sports, the assumption is that they are also poor students and come from low socioeconomic backgrounds (James, 2012, p. 477). The issue with this stereotype is the limitation it places on Black youth in terms of their career prospects; they are pushed into what seems to be a ‘positive’ stereotype, but being labelled the athlete often has the opposite effect because it reinforces structural inequalities that already exist – resulting in Black students being less likely to gain other necessary skills required to enhance their lives (James 2012).

The stereotyping of Black youth could be classified as racial profiling (James, 2012). In a ‘moral panic’, educators take the ‘tough’ approach when disciplining Black students by giving ‘time-outs’ at the principal’s office, resulting in detentions, suspensions, and expulsions. These disciplinary measures are counterintuitive, feeding into the narrative of Black youth as ‘troublemakers’. Unfortunately, the zero-tolerance approach taken by educators plays a role in the surveillance of ‘at-risk’ students and feeds into the school-to-prison pipeline (James, 2012). Research shows that Black and racialized youth were more likely to identify themselves by how they were perceived by others (Saperstein & Penner, 2010). The cultural association between Blackness and crime makes it possible for politicians, law enforcement, and educators to target the Black population, which creates a vicious cycle of poverty and incarceration. Given that society has long associated Blackness with crime, racial stereotypes can easily become self-fulfilling prophecies (Saperstein & Penner, 2010). It is essential to understand and debunk racial stereotypes and challenge the systems that maintain them; this creates an opportunity for educators and other community

leaders to find alternative approaches that benefit Black youth and acknowledge their lived experience.

Youth's behaviours are influenced by their contexts and the conditions in which they live. Practitioners can avoid further stigmatizing youth who likely already face daily criticism and challenges by striving to offer a strong, unwavering message of hope and resilience (Watson, 2015). Youth programs can inspire hope by connecting youth to Black role models who have overcome adversity (Jarjoura, 2013). Research suggests that opportunities for Black youth and Black role models/mentors to share previous and present challenges, and healthy coping responses to experiences of overt and covert oppression, violence, and racism, can promote positive youth development and critical consciousness-raising.

4. Amplify diverse and positive media representations and images/imagery.

Historically, depictions of Black people in media have framed and influenced both positive and negative identity development for Black youth. Increased exposure to media influences the messages about norms and behaviours that Black youth come to understand, internalize, and model. Critical media literacy “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).

One study that explored the relationship between exposure to Black media stereotypes, racial socialization, and the racial identity of Black adolescents (Adams-Bass et al., 2014) found that racial socialization and knowledge of Black history influence television-viewing preferences, hours of viewing, magazine reading, and identification of stereotypes. Media-generated stereotypes of Black women are often sexualized; youth who watched more television were more likely to attribute heightened importance to physical appearance and would more readily accept media portrayals of unrealistic images, feeling pressure to meet these ideals of physical attractiveness (Adam-Bass et al., 2014). Youth who receive affirming racial socialization messages were able to identify negative and positive stereotypes as compared to youth who did not. Youth with greater knowledge of Black history were more likely to identify stereotypes but less likely to endorse negative stereotypes as valid representations of Black people. Youth who were aware of Black history had a higher regard for Black people, even when representations Black people were negative. 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.

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