

Evidence Brief

Seven Key Considerations When Evaluating Programs 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", "program", "evaluation", "justice-involved", "in conflict with the law", "involved with the law", "criminal justice", and "juvenile justice".

Summary of Evidence: Seven Key Considerations

1. Build evaluation capacity.

Evidence from evaluations of programs for justice-involved youth suggests that **issues of internal capacity are common** (Cramer et al., 2019). Often, staff lack the time and/or knowledge to engage in evaluation activities. Given adequate resources, organizations should consider developing internal evaluation capacity by training and supporting staff in data collection and monitoring. Alternatively, consider partnering with external research organizations to encourage continuous quality improvement and reduce measurement challenges (Cramer et al., 2019; Schultz & Sontag-Padilla, 2015).

2. Use a multi-method approach.

Including qualitative methods in evaluation activities allows organizations to capture some of the **complexity and nuance of young people's lived experience** (Bean, 2017). For example, an evaluation of QUEST Futures, a program designed to meet the mental health needs of justice-involved youth in Queens, New York, includes six case studies ("vignettes") that highlight the "seemingly intractable nature" of some of the challenges that youth and their families face (Henry, 2012, p. 47). Qualitative data can also provide evidence of successes that may not be captured by traditional quantitative measures, such as changes in behaviour and life skills (Spiranovic et al., 2015).

3. Understand how best to communicate with Black youth to ensure effective engagement.

In order to effectively engage Black youth, organizations should **understand how youth communicate**, and learn how to talk *with* them and not *at* them (Anucha et al., 2017). Evidence from community consultations suggests that Black youth can best be reached and heard through storytelling and social media (Anucha et al., 2017; Turner Consulting Group, 2018). Some researchers also suggest that hip-hop can be used alongside social justice-

oriented evaluation approaches to make evaluation more credible and culturally-responsive to marginalized youth (Brewington & Hall, 2018). Organizations should remain proactive in identifying issues relevant to the communities they serve (Anucha et al., 2017).

4. **Engage stakeholders early and often during the evaluation.**

Research shows that engaging stakeholders throughout the evaluation process can **bolster the quality of the evaluation, and support program development** (Cramer et al., 2019).

Organizations should create space for researchers to share interim findings and lessons with stakeholders and obtain their feedback. Make sure to engage youth in evaluation activities in order to build an organizational culture of evaluation and provide young people with skill-building opportunities (Bean, 2017). If possible, programs should also **engage individuals who play a role in young people's lives**. Family and community members may be able to provide a more holistic view of skill development, for example, and offer critical feedback on evaluation findings (Bean, 2017; Cramer et al., 2019).

5. **Be critical of standardized measurements and tools.**

Standardized measures were not developed with Black youth in mind, so content, language, and references may not be relevant (Turner Consulting Group, 2018, p. 106). Since these measures typically assess 'individual' and 'family' functioning, they may fail to take into account extended family and kinship structures, which are common in Black communities. Keep in mind that standardized tools may not capture the holistic way in which Black youth view themselves, especially in relation to spiritual, physical, intellectual, and psychological domains (Turner Consulting Group, 2018).

6. **Use various outcomes to measure program effectiveness.**

Much of the research on the effectiveness of juvenile justice programs focuses on reductions in recidivism (re-offending). However, there are **significant limitations in using recidivism as the primary outcome measure** of program effectiveness. Programs should take the following into consideration (Richards, 2011):

- There is no single definition of recidivism, and the term is used to denote a range of encounters with the justice system, including rearrests, cautions, and reconvictions.
- Official records may not be an accurate measure of actual re-offending.
- Rates of recidivism are influenced by the length of the follow-up period. Short-term follow-up periods are particularly problematic, since adolescence is a peak time for offending.

Juvenile justice programs can often set unrealistic expectations regarding the level of reduction in recidivism rates (Spiranovic et al., 2015). Instead of measuring whether recidivism has occurred, programs should consider changes in frequency, severity, and

length of time between offences. Whenever possible, use long follow-up periods, or adjust your expectations of the program's impact on recidivism.

Relying on recidivism as a primary measure of effectiveness may also **underestimate the importance of other outcomes**, which can have longer-term effects on justice system involvement. Programs should include additional outcome measures, such as improvements in health and wellbeing, education and employment, as well as substance use (Spiranovic et al., 2015). Additionally, consider indicators of socioemotional skill development, such as readiness to change, emotional self-awareness/self-regulation, capacity for conflict management, community attachment, and self-efficacy (Cramer et al., 2019).

7. Set achievable goals.

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). Organizations face significant barriers in providing young people with the kinds of support that produce positive individual-level outcomes. Many of the issues that Black youth face are “institutional and/or structural and cannot be addressed, much less overcome, without greater advocacy and support from entities with the power to change how institutions support impoverished, largely African-American communities” (Schultz & Sontag-Padilla, 2015, p. 20).

References

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