

# Evidence Brief

## The Overpolicing of Black Youth

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### How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's online Knowledge Hub, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: "Black youth", "overpolicing", "police", "brutality", "killings", "harassment", and "racial profiling".

### Summary of Evidence: The Impacts of Overpolicing on Black Youth

#### 1. Police harassment and brutality are traumatic for Black youth.

Black youth describe the police as **a threat to their wellbeing**, and report feelings of fear, anxiety, anger, and powerlessness in relation to police encounters (Aymer, 2016; Desai, 2020; Nakhid, 2017; Nordberg et al., 2018; Rengifo et al., 2017; Staggars-Hakim, 2016; Stuart & Benezra, 2018; Syed et al., 2019). They are deeply aware that "any and every police stop carries a serious risk of ending in physical violence, and even death" (Stuart & Benezra, 2018, p. 179). Black youth from all walks of life identify with well-known victims of police killings, and share a common fear: '**it could be me**' (Desai, 2020; Nordberg et al., 2018; Rengifo et al., 2017; Staggars-Hakim, 2016). When they occur, police stops can be traumatic and produce symptoms consistent with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Aymer, 2016).

#### 2. Black youth often take on the burden of avoiding interactions with the police.

Given that police officers are rarely held accountable for causing harm, many youth **focus on their own actions and their own accountability** to prevent involvement with the police (Nakhid, 2017; Rengifo et al., 2017; Stuart & Benezra, 2018; Staggars-Hakim, 2016). In addition to dealing with the challenges of adolescence, Black youth must remain hypervigilant to cope with the constant threat of police violence. Young people routinely examine themselves through the eyes of officers, altering their dress and behaviour "to communicate that they are too empathetic, too invested in others, and too passionate about hobbies (and thus life in general) to commit remorseless acts of violence against others" (Stuart & Benezra, 2018, p. 181).

#### 3. Overpolicing results in the criminalization of Black youth.

Evidence suggests that experiences of racial profiling may lead to feelings of resentment, alienation, and difference, which in turn encourage anti-social behaviour (Nakhid, 2017). A study of 1,401 predominantly Black and Latino boys in grades 9 and 10 found that being

stopped by police predicts **increases in self-reported criminal behaviour**, regardless of prior delinquency (Del Toro et al., 2019). The authors discovered that psychological distress (as discussed above) partially explains this relationship. In other words, criminalization can “cause youth to see themselves as having no other future ... severely restrict both their opportunities and their own sense of those opportunities ... destroy hope and feed alienation” (McMurtry & Curling, 2008, p. 15).

#### **4. The overpolicing of Black youth can disrupt family and community wellbeing.**

Concerns about young people’s safety causes **stress and anxiety** in young people’s families and communities (Bundy, 2019; Desai, 2020). Many Black parents/caregivers educate their children on how to interact with the police through an unsettling ritual known as ‘**the talk**’, a set of strategies focused on ‘making it home’ (Bains, 2020; Bouchard, 2016; Malone Gonzalez, 2019). Some evidence suggests that young people’s encounters with the police can also produce feelings of **shame and alienation**, especially within immigrant families (Nakhid, 2017). Negative encounters can cause additional harm by creating **distrust towards the police** in racialized communities, leaving many feeling disempowered and without a voice (Bundy, 2019; Nakhid, 2017; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2017). Research indicates that incidents of police violence can even have ‘spillover effects’ on the mental health of Black people *not directly affected* by this violence (Bor et al., 2018).

### **Summary of Evidence: Five Practices to Support Black Youth**

#### **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” (Baldrige, 2014, p. 467). Develop an organizational culture in which staff recognize young people’s strengths, such as resilience, resourcefulness, and agency.

#### **2. Recognize police brutality as a child and youth advocacy issue.**

Staggers-Hakim (2016) notes that the “failure to hold police accountable sends the message to police that they are untouchable and to children and other vulnerable groups that they are unprotected from reckless actions and abuse of police officers or other authority figures” (p. 398). This might be especially painful for justice-involved youth, who are “drilled with the word accountability, and ... told time and time again to be accountable for their actions” (Desai, 2020, p. 9). Given the tremendous impact of racial profiling and police

brutality on young people's lives, organizations should advocate for fundamental police reforms, including the recognition of anti-Black racism.

### **3. Raise critical consciousness in Black youth.**

Young people understand that police harassment and violence are rooted in anti-Black racism, and, in particular, negative stereotypes of Black men (Nakhid, 2017; Nordberg et al., 2018; Staggars-Hakim, 2016). At the same time, youth may also internalize these stereotypes, and blame themselves for 'provoking' police actions (e.g., by dressing or behaving in a particular way). Youth workers can support youth in externalizing the problem by raising *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 do this by listening to Black youth, offering validation, and encouraging them to reflect on the broader political and social context(s).

### **4. Create safe spaces for youth to share their feelings.**

Discussions of police killings usually fail to account for the impacts of racial profiling, brutality, and racial harassment on the mental health of Black youth (Aymer, 2016). Young people may benefit from safe spaces where they can give voice to their feelings and concerns, especially in the aftermath of publicized cases of police violence (Staggars-Hakim, 2016). This can contribute to self-empowerment, the lessening of traumatic reactions, and alleviated feelings of self-blame (Aymer, 2016).

### **5. Foster critical hope and promote radical healing.**

Youth workers can provide Black youth with *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). Critical hope lends itself to *radical healing*, a process that builds the capacity of young people to act and respond to social forces in ways that contribute to collective wellbeing (Ginwright, 2010). 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).

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