



“Importantly, youths’ testimonies reveal a space in the legal process which fails to recognize or account for the meaningful distinction between youth and adulthood: policing” (p. 19).

1. WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

Racialized communities, particularly those that are Black and Indigenous, are disproportionately represented in the Canadian criminal justice system. Encounters with police are often the first point of contact for Black youth with this system. Many Black youth feel their age is not considered by police; rather, Black youth are treated as older than they are, and as wholly responsible for their actions, a process known as **adultification**.

The Youth Criminal Justice Act guides the processing of youth aged 12-17, emphasizing procedural justice and advocating for rehabilitation, rather than retribution, through diversion programs to keep youth out of the criminal justice system, which can occur pre-charge (by the police or the Crown) or post-charge (by the court).

In Toronto, policing is carried out by a municipal police force, the Toronto Police Service. Despite claims of race-neutrality, the Toronto Police Service has faced accusations of systemic anti-Black bias in policing practices, and demands were made for immediate and direct action to address this bias. Although incidents of anti-Black racism have been widely documented, little attention has been paid to the unique experiences of Black youth in the criminal justice system.

In addition to centering Black youth’s experiences, this research explores how age, perceptions of age, and Blackness intersect with the criminal justice system.

2. WHERE DID THE RESEARCH TAKE PLACE?

The research took place in the Greater Toronto Area of Ontario.

3. WHO IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

The research is about Black youth living in the Greater Toronto Area who had previous contact with police between the ages of 12 to 17 under the Youth Criminal Justice Act.

4. HOW WAS THE RESEARCH DONE?

This article presents findings based on the experiences of 47 Black youth, mostly Caribbean-Canadian youth, taken from a series of interviews conducted as part of the Rights for Children and Youth Partnership, an international research project. Participants had been recruited from the Greater Toronto Area between August 2018 and January 2020, including through word of mouth, social media, flyers at universities, and direct outreach to youth and Black community organizations. The research team conducted 39 **one-on-one interviews** and two **focus groups** with eight participants. Interviews were audio-recorded and **transcribed** (written out word-for-word).

Researchers used two theoretical frameworks to analyze the data and make sense of the experiences of Black youth in the criminal justice system:

i) **intersectionality**: enables researchers to consider all social and demographic characteristics shaping experiences, recognizing many forms of inequality and exploring how they interact; and

ii) **anti-Black racism**: enables researchers to identify and frame the historical and systemic ways policies and practices are perpetuated, acknowledging that the oppression of Black and racialized individuals is intertwined with capitalism, the political status quo, and institutions that uphold white privilege.

Counter storytelling, a qualitative narrative design rooted in Critical Race Methodology, was used by researchers to

- collect stories of youth’s lived experiences; and
- rewrite “experiences of Blackness to cast doubt on the existing dominant narratives constructed from myths and stereotypes... embedded in society based on white supremacy” (p. 8).

In this way, researchers “can create new conceptualizations of social issues that emerge directly from narratives, which more closely approximates lived experiences” (p. 9).

5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS?

Three main themes reveal how Black youth are negatively constructed and perceived by police, which greatly impacts their experiences in the criminal justice system:

i) Young and policed: Black youth often encounter police at an early age, and these experiences can make youth feel embarrassed, mistreated, abused, and vulnerable. Youth expressed concerns about their physical safety and wellbeing when encountering police.

ii) Adulthood and expectations of responsibility: Black youth are expected to know how the criminal justice system works, including their rights and responsibilities. Police often fail to communicate with Black youth in an age-appropriate way, presuming criminality based on race. Most police stations lack separate holding cells for youth, contradicting youth justice laws that require youth to be treated differently due to the vulnerability of their age. Racism results in police responses that are disproportionate to the offense itself.

iii) Adaptive strategies to offset violence: Black youth are forced to accept responsibility and engage with adaptive strategies to offset the potential for mistreatment, which include changing their physical appearance, their behaviour, and even how they talk to avoid experiencing severe punishment or violence from police. Black youth's experiences of police retribution conflict with the Youth Criminal Justice Act, which acknowledges that youth make mistakes, offers opportunities for them to learn, and emphasizes rehabilitation.

6. WHY DOES THIS RESEARCH MATTER FOR YOUTH WORK?

Police tend to view Black youth as Black bodies first, reinforcing negative stereotypes and asserting that Blackness is a negative identifier. Regardless of age or vulnerability, **Black youth feel that police perceive them as agitators to be feared rather than as children in need of protection.** Instead of fostering positive relationships between police and Black communities, police presence in neighbourhoods and schools where Black youth are overrepresented serves to threaten their physical, emotional, and psychological safety, and sustains the overrepresentation of Black youth in the criminal justice system.

In every interview, Black youth described receiving little or no support or information from police during interactions. Youth workers should keep these dynamics in mind, **recognizing Black youth's cynicism and mistrust of police**, not only in discussing the criminal justice system or encounters with police, but also in **considering how and when police are invited into program spaces or contacted in a crisis.** Youth workers can allow for open dialogue, problem-solving, and the affirmation of young people's experiences. Engaging youth participants in conversations about organizational or program policy, specifically with respect to crisis responses, can support **opportunities for de-escalation and interventions that may be more protective of Black youth.**

Because Black youth must often learn about the criminal justice system on their own, youth workers can also **provide access to relevant information**, including their legal rights and responsibilities, and **appropriate referrals.**

Q Akuoko-Barfi, C., Olivo, V. E., Rampersaud, M., Parada, H., & Shuster, R. (2023). "I feel like I was targeted." Black youth navigating policing in Ontario, Canada. *Child & Youth Services*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0145935X.2023.2243436>