

# The Comprehensive Gang Model and Youth Wellbeing: Practices to Support an Anti-Racist and Anti-Oppressive Lens

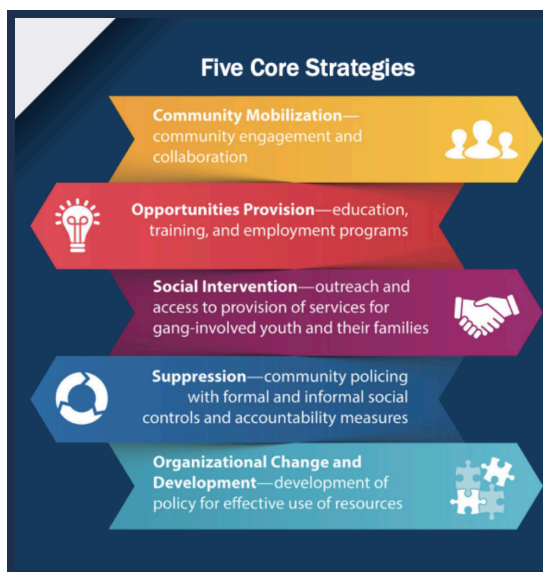


EVIDENCE  
BRIEF

This Evidence Brief summarizes current research on evidence-based approaches to community violence prevention for youth, focusing on community implementation of the Comprehensive Gang Model and exploring how the model can be adapted through an anti-racist and anti-oppressive lens.

The Comprehensive Gang Model offers a structured framework for communities to prevent, intervene in, and suppress community violence through coordinated, cross-sector services for youth. However, the model has been critiqued for lacking explicit attention to race, class, and systemic inequity. Programs serving racialized youth should consider integrating **youth-informed** and **culturally responsive practices** alongside the Comprehensive Gang Model to best meet the needs of racialized youth.

## WHAT IS THE COMPREHENSIVE GANG MODEL?



From the Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention.  
Figure 1.

The **Comprehensive Gang Model** is a multidisciplinary response strategy – created in 1987 by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) in the United States Department of Justice<sup>1</sup> – to prevent and reduce gang-related violence. The model has since been adapted and used in countries around the world<sup>2</sup> to foster community-specific solutions for violence prevention and intervention. The model is built around five core strategies (see Figure 1.) that emphasize community engagement, coordinated services, youth development, and institutional accountability. Together, these strategies aim to create safer environments while expanding opportunities for youth to thrive and participate fully in society. In 2009, the OJJDP published an implementation manual based on best practices from experiences across communities.<sup>1</sup>

## THREE KEY MESSAGES FOR IMPLEMENTING THE COMPREHENSIVE GANG MODEL

### 01. The Comprehensive Gang Model requires coordination, collaboration, and adaptability.

Youth violence prevention programs have been widely used in urban areas over the last 50 years. The Comprehensive Gang Model is one such program that emphasizes that *no single system* can prevent gang involvement or support youth wellbeing.<sup>2</sup> The model is a conceptual structure that brings together community organizations, schools, mental health services, social workers, and law enforcement to create a coordinated response to community violence.<sup>2</sup>

The model is designed to be *adapted* to individual communities in its implementation.<sup>2</sup> To adapt the model to the local environment, the OJJDP guides communities to select appropriate activities within each of the model's five strategic areas – community mobilization, opportunities provision, social intervention, suppression (of gang violence), and organizational change and development.<sup>1</sup>

### 02. The Comprehensive Gang Model requires an anti-oppressive framework.

For the Comprehensive Gang Model to be effective and equitable, it must be implemented through an **explicitly anti-racist and anti-oppressive lens**. Structural racism in housing, education, and employment has resulted in the disproportionate exposure of Black youth to community violence.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the well-documented pattern of Black youth being labelled as 'problems' or 'dangerous' to society has devastating consequences for their wellbeing, as well as for their families and communities. **When violence prevention models are**

**implemented in Black communities without directly addressing the legacy of systemic racism and state violence, they risk reinforcing the very structures they intend to disrupt.**<sup>4,5</sup>

Anti-Black racism is deeply embedded across multiple sectors in Ontario – including education, justice, policing, and mental health – and directly impacts the wellbeing of Black youth, families, and communities.<sup>6,7,8</sup> Youth programs must move beyond violent and pathologizing narratives about Black youth to instead focus on **holistic supports** for Black youth wellbeing.<sup>7,9,10</sup>

The Community Gang Model's multi-layered, community-informed structure could be a powerful tool – particularly if **adapted and led by Black community-based organizations using anti-oppressive frameworks**. These organizations are best positioned to foster culturally grounded and community-specific responses to violence that promote safety and healing. Evaluation has indicated that the Comprehensive Gang Model is less successful when there is not a clear lead agency and where community engagement is weak.<sup>2</sup>

For the model to explicitly confront anti-Black racism, there must be Black leadership and **meaningful community engagement** must be prioritized at every stage. The model's data-driven approach is amenable to anti-racist frameworks, where the first steps include a community assessment and convening a steering committee to develop a tailored implementation plan.<sup>1</sup>

### 03. The Comprehensive Gang Model requires the provision of holistic prevention and intervention supports.

Over time, implementation of the Comprehensive Gang Model has moved from a focus on *suppression* and *intervention* to include more **prevention** strategies,<sup>1</sup>

focusing on creating safe, supportive environments for youth through mentorship, afterschool programs, and other opportunities for personal and academic growth.<sup>2</sup> Effective prevention strategies incorporate skill-building and opportunities provision, such as programs to support Black youth's education and employment opportunities.<sup>1</sup> Organizations can do this at both the structural and individual levels. This may include actions such as advocacy against exclusionary practices and policies that disproportionately target Black youth, or through providing professional development opportunities to Black youth.

Intervention efforts provide individualized support for youth already involved in gangs, helping them transition out through counseling, job training, and community engagement.<sup>2</sup> Suppression of gang violence efforts involve law enforcement but can be **reframed to emphasize restorative justice practices** that prioritize healing over punishment.<sup>2</sup> Given the over-policing and over-representation of Black youth in the criminal justice system,<sup>6</sup> critique of suppression efforts in Black communities is justified. In current applications of the Comprehensive Gang Model, suppression is emphasized as the last resort.<sup>2</sup>

## **SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE: FOUR PRACTICES TO SUPPORT IMPLEMENTING THE COMPREHENSIVE GANG MODEL WITH AN ANTI-RACIST, ANTI-OPPRESSIVE LENS**

### **01. Support Black youth wellbeing.**

Mental health is among the top 10 concerns for Black youth and their families in Ontario.<sup>6</sup> Among all Canadian youth with mental health concerns, fewer than 20% receive appropriate treatment,<sup>11</sup> which is particularly concerning given that early

intervention is critical to reducing the burden of mental illness across the lifespan.<sup>12</sup> Extensive research demonstrates that Black youth face serious **negative mental health consequences due to anti-Black racism and racial trauma.**<sup>13,14,15,16,17</sup>

Black youth also **face unique barriers** to accessing mental health care, including racism and discrimination from providers,<sup>18</sup> lack of culturally competent providers,<sup>19</sup> and internal and community stigma.<sup>20,19</sup> These barriers are in addition to obstacles youth experience accessing appropriate mental health services, including barriers related to location, cost, and wait times.<sup>21,22,17</sup>

**Combatting anti-Black racism** is a critical step in supporting Black youth wellbeing. Organizations attempting to mitigate the impacts of anti-Black racism must also look beyond the support of individual youth and the promotion of their resilience to the use of their **structural power** to promote the elimination of any barriers.<sup>10</sup>

### **02. Prioritize leadership from, and engagement with, Black-led organizations.**

Black community-based organizations are vital to holistically supporting Black youth, as they are best situated to provide Black youth with critical access to community social capital, critical consciousness, and intergenerational relationships.<sup>9</sup> Racial socialization, or the direct and indirect communication between youth and their loved ones about race, has been shown to increase the wellbeing of Black youth through supporting their ability to navigate racial stressors.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, research shows that youth workers who have strong community ties or share similar lived experiences with young people are especially effective in supporting them.<sup>24,25</sup> Familiarity with the neighbourhood or wider community may also help youth workers to establish trust and rapport.

### 03. Cultivate critical consciousness and collective action.

Black youth must be given opportunities to talk about the issues affecting their lives, the challenges in their communities, and the ways in which they experience and resist anti-Black racism. Youth programs should not shy away from opportunities to raise critical consciousness and support Black youth's ability to contextualize their experiences and learn from how Black communities have resisted inequities in transformative ways.<sup>24</sup>

**Critical consciousness** is a concept that includes both an understanding of systemic inequities and a willingness to act to transform those conditions that is promoted as a tool for combatting racism.<sup>24,25</sup>

Programs to support Black youth can go beyond supporting youth's navigation of anti-Black racism to supporting **transformational change** in the ways that society enacts anti-Black racism.<sup>10</sup> Youth programs should cultivate critical consciousness to **build a strong racial identity** and support youth's expectations for positive community change.<sup>9</sup>

### 04. Promote strategies identified by Black youth.

Evidence highlights the impact of youth-engaged research in the context of community violence prevention and intervention. One youth participatory action research study resulted in the Day of Hope rally, led by Black youth to share their experiences with gun violence through **storytelling** and poetry.<sup>26</sup> The day ended with a pledge to continue **engaging in critical dialogue and action** among rally participants, including the police chief and policymakers.<sup>26</sup>

In developing a model of community resilience with Black youth, researchers identified “Power Through Black Community & Unity” as a core theme. They found that Black youth prioritized **supportive teen spaces, collective care, and shared racial understanding** as key to community violence prevention.<sup>27</sup>

Confronting community violence for Black youth in Kansas City and Atlanta meant **acknowledging the presence and legacy of anti-Black racism and anti-racist interventions**. They suggested interventions that should be prioritized, such as promoting **knowledge of Black history**, including offering courses in Black history taught by Black instructors, and **nurturing mentoring relationships**, such as connecting Black male mentors to Black youth.<sup>3</sup>

The team behind the Urban Youth Trauma Center emphasizes the importance of **trauma-informed services** for youth impacted by community violence.<sup>28</sup> Youth engagement in youth programming is critical to ensure programs remain specific to youth's needs and priorities.

## HOW DID WE COMPILE THIS EVIDENCE?

We searched YouthREX's online Knowledge Hub, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: “OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model”, “supporting Black youth”, “Black youth mental health”, “violence reduction”, “anti-racism AND violence prevention programs”.

## ENDNOTES

1. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). (2009). [OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Model planning for implementation](#).
2. Gebo, E., Bond, B. J., & Campos, K. S. (2015). [The OJJDP Comprehensive Gang Strategy: The Comprehensive Gang Model](#). In S. H. Decker & D. C. Pyrooz (Eds.), *The Handbook of Gangs (1st ed., pp. 392–405)*. Wiley.
3. Woods-Jaeger, B., Knutzen, K. E., Lucas, D., Cave, N., Latimer, S. K., Adams, Hsd, A., Bates, Hsd, A., & Renfro, T. L. (2023). [Anti-racist violence prevention: Partnering with Black youth to identify intervention priorities](#). *Health Promotion Practice*, 24(2), 223–231.
4. Burrell, M., White, A. M., Frerichs, L., Funchess, M., Cerulli, C., DiGiovanni, L., & Lich, K. H. (2021). [Depicting “the system”: How structural racism and disenfranchisement in the United States can cause dynamics in community violence among males in urban black communities](#). *Social Science & Medicine*, 272, 113469.
5. Wendel, M. L., Nation, M., Williams, M., Jackson, T., Jones, G., Debreaux, M., & Ford, N. (2021). [The structural violence of white supremacy: Addressing root causes to prevent youth violence](#). *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing*, 35(1), 127–128.
6. Anucha, U., Srikanthan, S., Siad-Togane, R., & Galabuzi, G. E. (2017). [Doing right together for Black youth: What we learned from the community engagement sessions for the Ontario Black youth action plan](#). Youth Research and Evaluation eXchange (YouthREX).
7. Black Health Alliance. (2016). [A sound mind II: Mental health and youth](#). *Black Health Alliance*.
8. Radebe, P. (2024). [Anti-Black racism in the Ontario public school system: Problematizing the labeling of young Black students as troublemakers](#). *Journal of Black Studies*, 55(6), 513–532.
9. Ginwright, S. A. (2007). [Black youth activism and the role of critical social capital in Black community organizations](#). *American Behavioral Scientist*, 51(3), 403–418.
10. Jones, S. C. T., Simon, C. B., Yadeta, K., Patterson, A., & Anderson, R. E. (2023). [When resilience is not enough: Imagining novel approaches to supporting Black youth navigating racism](#). *Development and Psychopathology*, 35(5), 2132–2140.
11. Mental Health Commission of Canada. (2017). [Children and youth](#). *Mental Health Commission of Canada*.
12. Wilens, T. E., & Rosenbaum, J. F. (2013). [Transitional aged youth: A new frontier in child and adolescent psychiatry](#). *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 52(9).
13. Cave, L., Cooper, M. N., Zubrick, S. R., & Shepherd, C. C. J. (2020). [Racial discrimination and child and adolescent health in longitudinal studies: A systematic review](#). *Social Science & Medicine*, 250, 112864.
14. Durham, J. I. (2018). [Perceptions of microaggressions: Implications for the mental health and treatment of African American youth](#). *Journal of Infant, Child, and Adolescent Psychotherapy*, 17(1), 52–61.
15. Gajaria, A., Guzder, J., & Rasasingham, R. (2021). What’s race got to do with it? A proposed framework to address racism’s impacts on child and adolescent mental health in Canada. *Journal of the Canadian Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 30(2), 131–137.

16. Jernigan, M. M., & Daniel, J. H. (2011). Racial trauma in the lives of Black children and adolescents: Challenges and clinical implications. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, 4(2), 123–141.
17. Salami, B., Idi, Y., Anyieth, Y., Cyuzuzo, L., Denga, B., Alaazi, D., & Okeke-Ihejirika, P. (2022). [Factors that contribute to the mental health of Black youth](#). *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 194(41), E1404–E1410.
- [YouthREX Research Summary →](#)
18. Chow, J. C.-C., Jaffee, K., & Snowden, L. (2003). [Racial/ethnic disparities in the use of mental health services in poverty areas](#). *American Journal of Public Health*, 93(5), 792–797.
19. Vázquez, A. L., & Villodas, M. T. (2019). [Racial/ethnic differences in caregivers' perceptions of the need for and utilization of adolescent psychological counseling and support services](#). *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 25(3), 323–330.
20. Kranke, D., Guada, J., Kranke, B., & Floersch, J. (2012). [What do African American youth with a mental illness think about help-seeking and psychiatric medication?: Origins of stigmatizing attitudes](#). *Social Work in Mental Health*, 10(1), 53–71.
21. Fante-Coleman, T., & Jackson-Best, F. (2020). [Barriers and facilitators to accessing mental healthcare in Canada for Black youth: A scoping review](#). *Adolescent Research Review*, 5(2), 115–136.
22. Salami, B., Denga, B., Taylor, R., Ajayi, N., Jackson, M., Asefaw, M., & Salma, J. (2021). [Access to mental health for Black youths in Alberta](#). *Health Promotion and Chronic Disease Prevention in Canada*, 41(9), 245–253.
23. Anderson, R. E., Jones, S., Anyiwo, N., McKenny, M., & Gaylord-Harden, N. (2019). [What's race got to do with it? Racial socialization's contribution to Black adolescent coping](#). *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 29(4), 822–831.
24. Albright, J. N., Hurd, N. M., & Hussain, S. B. (2017). [Applying a social justice lens to youth mentoring: A review of the literature and recommendations for practice](#). *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 59(3–4), 363–381.
- [YouthREX Research Summary →](#)
25. Freire, P., Macedo, D. P., & Shor, I. (2018). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.; 50th anniversary edition). Bloomsbury Academic.
26. Marsh, L. Trenton. S., Haynes, J. D., Ilesanmi, I. O., Belkin, L. D., Reed, A., & Scott, J. (2024). Confronting gun violence through youth-led participatory action research as a form of critical allyship with Black Youth: Insights for policymakers. *Journal of the Center for Policy Analysis and Research*, 66–83.
27. Grant, N., Neville, H., Ogunfemi, N., Smith, A., Groth, S., & Rodriguez, N. (2023). [An emerging youth-centered model of community resilience in communities impacted by gun violence: Power through Black Community and Unity](#). *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 71(3–4), 355–370.
28. Abdul-Adil, J., & Suárez, L. M. (2022). [The Urban Youth Trauma Center: A trauma-informed continuum for addressing community violence among youth](#). *Community Mental Health Journal*, 58(2), 334–342.