REVIVE

IMMEDIATE AND URGENT:

EXPERIENCES OF BLACK YOUTH NAVIGATING SUPPORTS IN TORONTO

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PROJECT SUMMARY

The purpose of this investigation is to (a) understand the experiences of Black youth who face multiple barriers as they seek and receive support within their communities in Toronto; and (b) surface the ways in which Toronto's youth service providers can better meet the needs of Black youth who are facing multiple barriers.

Black youth facing multiple barriers are left to navigate between multiple informal and formal sources of support to address their complex needs; these supports are often inadequate. Our findings reveal that by the time Black youth facing multiple barriers seek support, they are at critical points where immediate support is needed. Despite their challenges and barriers, the youth in this study reported using forms of cultural capital to navigate multiple support systems in an effort to address their complex needs. Recommendations shared by participants offer insights into how community supports might address emergent and long-standing needs of Black youth facing multiple barriers and shed light on opportunities for Toronto's youth-serving sector to provide better support through multi-level responses.

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About REVIVE:
REVIVE is a social planning firm based in Toronto. We work to address the causes of neighbourhood distress and inequality.

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INTRODUCTION:

DAMION'S OBSERVATION (SERVICE PROVIDER)

"Let me tell a story, I'll leave out his name. A young man (I know of)... in open custody. He was about 16 years old. He'd already been in various types of care before I even met him. Black youth. So, he gets caught up in the justice system, he goes to court, goes to jail. Comes out, gets caught up again, comes back to the group home, gets out again (and joins) another program, a gang exit program... about six months shortly after he leaves the program, unsupported. He gets caught with a gun at about 18, 19 years old, goes to prison for eight years.

We maintained contact throughout that eight-year time, he comes out. When he went in...everybody was using a Blackberry. He didn't even know what a touchscreen phone was, so he was just like, "yo, how do you use this thing?" ... fast-forward (to) about a month ago, he's 34 now, so I've been supporting him for like 17 years. He just got out of (a mental health facility) ... He was pretty much a mess. I'm telling this story just to show what can happen to someone who goes without support. There were so many times in his life where he was unsupported and then fell victim to the system, because the system didn't help him... at the end of the day, this young man (faces mental health challenges)... and has to live with his mom, and can't work, and just tanked down, down, downhill.

"There were so many times in his life where he was unsupported and then fell victim to the system, because the system didn't help him."

Again, I'm telling this story because this is what happens, this is what I see happening to a lot of youth. He's probably pretty extreme, there's other extreme cases where I know people have gone to prison for 20 years or whatever. (There are) those experiences also, but this one hits home to me because it just showed me visually what happens when systems fail, supports fail, or programs close down because of funding and stuff like that.

These kids, these young people are having trouble navigating, they're Black, they're racialized, they're marginalized, they're in every ticked-out box you can put them in, trying to figure it out. If we don't provide support for those people, what happened to that young man will happen to many, many, many more, and I can't even imagine how many more are out there that I don't even know that are in the same situation or worse."

OUR WHY?

The needs of Black youth facing multiple barriers[1] at the time of seeking supports are complex. By the time they get to the point of seeking support, their needs are often immediate and urgent. As such, Black youth facing multiple barriers—specifically, those impacted by the sex trade, housing instability or homelessness, and encounters with the criminal justice system—often do not receive adequate, timely and/or effective support. The journey of finding the right supports can leave youth feeling disoriented and disconnected. Such experiences compound for youth and, as Damion's observation exemplifies, erode their quality of life.

Firstly, there is a loss of time that occurs. The needs of Black youth facing multiple barriers at the time of seeking supports are complex—youth are contending with emergent issues as well as long-standing and compounded issues. By the time they get to the point of seeking support, the needs of Black youth are often immediate and urgent. Youth are left to navigate multiple systems of support to address their complex needs, and they are often doing so amid points of crisis.

Although youth actively seek informal and formal supports, they encounter hurdles along the way, which can leave youth feeling disoriented and disconnected.

Due to the nature of the issues they face, youth are vulnerable to their circumstances and at risk of facing additional barriers. In times of need or crisis, it can be difficult for youth to decipher what informal and formal supports are appropriate or may be effective.

This difficulty is further exacerbated by the availability of supports in their local communities and the quality of responses when supports are accessed. Seeking supports, assessing supports, and working to resolve gaps in supports are exhausting ordeals for Black youth. This exhaustion can manifest into feelings of apathy, being in survival mode, and many other distressful sensations.

[1]The term "Black youth facing multiple barriers" is used cautiously in our report. The use of labels, we acknowledge, comes with risks, particularly when the label is imposed (rather than selected or chosen). On one hand, labels can be reductive and homogenizing. On the other hand, labels can be useful for directing attention to the distinctiveness of the characteristics or experiences of a group. In this case, our intention is to highlight dimensions of the lived realities of Black youth who do not have a living space to call their own, who have faced coercion into the sex trade, and who have experienced multiple encounters with the criminal justice system.

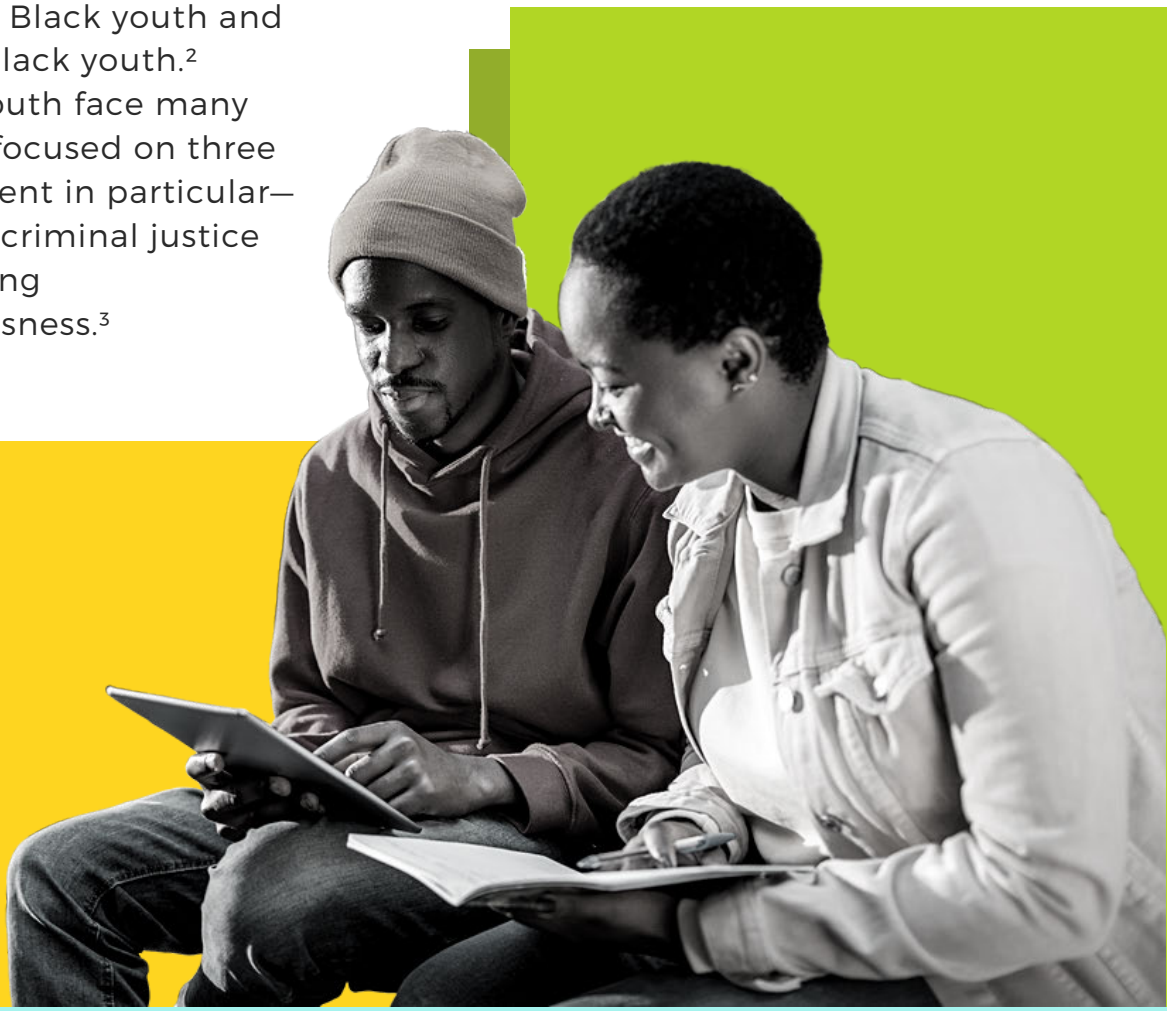
KEY QUESTIONS

Given the deleterious effects of these realities, our report seeks to better understand the experiences of Black youth seeking supports to ameliorate their circumstances. In particular, this report looks at interactions with existing support systems and how those systems can be improved to be more efficacious. The questions central to our investigation are:

- What are the experiences of Black youth facing multiple barriers when seeking and receiving support within their communities in Toronto?
- What are the ways in which Toronto's youth service providers can better meet the needs of Black youth facing multiple barriers?

DATA COLLECTION: OUR HOW?

In order to examine how Black youth facing multiple barriers in Toronto experience support systems, we conducted focus groups and interviews with 10 Black youth and 32 supporters of Black youth.[2] Although Black youth face many barriers, we have focused on three areas of engagement in particular—the sex trade, the criminal justice system, and housing precarity/homelessness.[3]



[2]This project has been reviewed and approved by the Community Research Ethics Board (Community Research Ethics Office).
[3]Although our focus is on three barriers, we recognize that Black youth face barriers beyond those mentioned in our study that remain under-investigated. However, this report serves as an exploratory investigation that we hope will shed light on opportunities to improve the experiences of Black youth seeking supports in their Toronto communities.

BLACK YOUTH

We recruited Black-identifying youth[4] between 16 and 29 years of age, who currently live in Toronto and are impacted by one or more of the following areas: the sex trade,[5] housing instability or homelessness,[6] and encounters with the criminal justice system.[7] We engaged Black youth[8] as co-leaders at all stages of the research process. To recruit Black youth participants, Youth Amplifiers (the title of their positions) alongside members of the REVIVE team designed and developed strategies or reaching out to their social networks.[9] Black youth participants were primarily recruited through word of mouth, with the support of digital flyers.

Due to the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, we chose to recruit participants through remote and virtual means, which presented both opportunities and challenges for the team. Prospective participants were contacted via telephone calls, emails, text messages and WhatsApp messages. However, necessary restrictions of space and in-person engagement generated a distance between our team and prospective participants.
Additionally, given the multiple barriers identified, we are keenly aware that youth who did not have access to technological devices and network connections were unintentionally excluded from our study. Future research is needed on enhancing recruitment techniques for hard-to-reach populations, particularly amid conditions where in-person gathering is restricted.

Similarly, we conducted our interviews remotely with participants. Although convenient for the research team, this technique posed limitations as well: Technical problems resulted in connection failures and distorted audio quality in some cases, which disrupted the flow of interviews at times and interfered

[4]This includes youth of African descent, including but not limited to Afro-diasporic, Afro-Caribbean, Black-Indigenous and/or Afro-Latinx.
[5]This includes trafficking or being coerced into sex work and is distinct from engagement in sex work by choice. See Kimberly A. Tyler and Katherine A. Johnson. "Trading sex: Voluntary or coerced? The experiences of homeless youth." Journal of Sex Research 43, no. 3 (2006): 208-216.
[6] "Housing instability" is a term inclusive of a broad range of individuals who may not necessarily identify as homeless but experience precarity in their living situations (e.g., couch surfing/provisional housing, transitional housing) and are, by definition, homeless. We are using the term in this project to take into account the spatial and temporal dimensions of experiencing housing instability and homelessness. See also Canadian Observatory of Homelessness, "Canadian Definition of Homelessness," 2012, https://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/attachments/Definition%20of%20Homelessness.pdf
[7]This includes frequent carding, arrest, charge, and conviction.
[8] Specifically, individuals representative of the subjects of focus in our investigation. For example, Yolanda Anyon, Heather Kennedy, Rebecca Durbahn, and Jeffrey M. Jenson, "Youth-Led Participatory Action Research: Promoting Youth Voice and Adult Support in Afterschool Programs." Afterschool Matters 27 (2018): 10-18.
[9] Greenwood, Davydd J., William Foote Whyte, and Ira Harkavy, "Participatory action research as a process and as a goal." Human relations 46.2 (1993): 175-192. See also Uzo Anucha, Sinthu Srikanthan, Rahma Siad-Togane and Grace-Edward Galabuzi. Doing Right Together for Black Youth: What We Learned from the Community Engagement Sessions for the Ontario Black Youth Action Plan (Toronto: Youth Research and Evaluation eXchange, 2018); Yolanda Anyon, Heather Kennedy, Rebecca Durbahn, and Jeffrey M. Jenson, "Youth-Led Participatory Action Research;" Karen Sue Danley and Marsha Langer Ellison, Handbook for participatory researchers (Boston: Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation, 1999).

with the quality of some of the data rendered. One focus group was conducted to re-engage community knowledge-keepers to elaborate on points made in their earlier one-to-one interviews. Due to logistical challenges and scheduling misalignments, focus groups were not conducted with youth and service providers as intended. Audio recorded interviews and focus groups were transcribed and analyzed using qualitative coding methods.[10]

SOCIAL & CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

The average age of youth participants was 23.9 years old, with the youngest participant being 19 years of age and the oldest being 27 years of age.[11]

All participants have recently (within the past five years) resided in or currently reside in Toronto. Despite the diverse makeup of the city, the legacy of systemic anti-Black racism is reflected in the social, economic, and political marginalization of Black people in Toronto and in poor outcomes across education, employment and the criminal justice and child welfare systems.[12] Anti-Black racism[13] permeates systems that Black youth interact with, which can be threatening to one's sense of well-being. Such racism can be particularly problematic when it comes to accessing local support services.[14] Due to broader social and contextual factors, youth in this study found themselves in precarious positions and in need of support.

SUPPORTERS

We recruited individuals who support Black youth in different capacities, such as parents and caregivers of Black youth; Community Knowledge Keepers, who informally support Black youth and possess knowledge about community dynamics and perspectives on local issues impacting youth; community organization representatives who have recent experience working with community-based organizations in Toronto that serve Black youth facing multiple barriers; and public sector representatives who have recent experience working in government organizations or funding agencies in youth-serving sectors.

Youth Amplifiers again worked alongside members of the REVIVE team to recruit supporters of Black youth through word of mouth with the support of digital flyers. We observed that there was a higher response rate from supporters of

[10]Johnny Saldaña, The coding manual for qualitative research (4th ed.) (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2021).
[11] See Appendix.
[12] City of Toronto, Toronto Action Plan to Confront Anti-Black Racism, 2017, 1, https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2017/ex/bgrd/backgroundfile-109127.pdf
[13] The City of Toronto defines anti-Black racism as, "policies and practices embedded in Canadian institutions that reflect and reinforce beliefs, attitudes, prejudice, stereotyping and/or discrimination that is directed at people of African descent and is rooted in their unique history and experience of enslavement and colonization here in Canada." See City of Toronto, Toronto Action Plan to Confront Anti-Black Racism, 2017, 1, https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2017/ex/bgrd/backgroundfile-109127.pdf
[14] James D. Chesney and Rafael Jacob Engel, "Racial inequities in the delivery of social services," Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare 9 (1982): 602-612.

Black youth than with Black youth participants.

Although not explicitly articulated by the individuals we were in contact with, we speculate this could be for several reasons, including skepticism about research processes, a disconnect from the potential benefits and inherent risks of participating, and a heightened sense of vulnerability, particularly when recalling lived experiences.

Naturally, this imbalance in response generated bias in the data. We mitigated this by centering themes that emerged from the youth perspectives distinctly from the themes that emerged from collective perspectives of supporters of Black youth. Further, we involved multiple team members in interpreting the findings and invited participants and professionals working in Toronto's youth-serving sector to also review our findings report.

ORGANIZATION OF THE REPORT

The remaining sections of this report surface findings from our investigation. Firstly, we describe the formal and informal supports that youth sought, and the forms of capital embodied by youth. We then highlight the perspectives of youth about their experiences navigating supports. Each section is introduced with a vignette that succinctly highlight the reflections, observations and experiences shared by participants. We then share pandemic-related insights that emerged from our interviews. Finally, we propose solutions and interventions for Toronto's youth-serving sector to better support Black youth. We conclude with a summation of our findings and a call to action for the sector.

FINDINGS

JENNY'S REFLECTION (YOUTH)

"Black youth are capable. We are capable beyond anyone's imagination, sometimes beyond our own imagination, but we need spaces to grow. We need spaces to imagine...

We are just incredible, but we need some help."

FINDINGS: SEEKING SUPPORTS

Due to the multiple and intersecting factors described above, youth find themselves in circumstances where they need to seek supports to help them navigate or remove themselves from marginalizing and oppressive spaces. We found that they would often choose either formal or informal supports for a host of reasons, including their proximity to supports, the nature of their needs and their perceptions about responsivity.

FORMAL

Formal supports are defined here as forms of assistance from local programs and organizations, provided by professionals in public service roles including youth outreach workers, social workers and program managers. Youth reported seeking out formal supports for reasons to do with location and/or their travel means. Youth appreciated the structured nature and predictability of supports offered by formal sources, as well as the service providers' training and expertise that they could benefit from. Youth expressed feeling a sense of relief when they were supported by service providers who shared identity characteristics (such as race and gender) and lived experiences with them. Youth appreciated the privacy and protection from stigma offered by formal services, particularly around traumatic issues (such as working through the trauma of being sexually exploited).

INFORMAL

Informal supports are defined here as forms of assistance received from individuals within immediate social networks, such as family members, friends, partners and trusted individuals in their communities. Youth reported seeking out informal supports for reasons to do with their close proximity. Informal supports offered are less structured than formal supports, which can mean more flexibility. For example, youth explained they did not have to schedule an appointment or be concerned with inclusion criteria when accessing informal supports. These supports were usually a phone call or text away, or located nearby (within walking distance or within the same home). It was therefore a lot easier for youth to build and trust with individuals who provided informal supports. Given that these individuals were often in close proximity to the youth, they deeply understood their lived realities and the subsequent barriers faced.

FORMS OF CAPITAL EMBODIED BY YOUTH

In many ways, despite challenges and barriers, youth participants demonstrated agency and valuable forms of cultural capital.[15]

ASPIRATIONAL CAPITAL

Aspirational capital refers to the "ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers."[16] Amid difficult life circumstances, youth reported drawing on their aspirational capital to leverage the tools, resources and contacts to get them through the difficulties they faced. Youth were driven to transcend the limits they faced and embodied resilience to pursue possibilities beyond their circumstances.

Although Black youth are inherently resilient, there are risks that come with being labelled as such.[17] Resilience is a paradoxical term. The assumption of being resilient often masks the lived realities of Black youth and barriers That compromise their well-being; this can result in their support needs being overlooked.

Despite their aspirational capital, savvy, and navigational skill, youth should not have to be this resilient, as these formal and informal supports often leave them with unmet needs.

FAMILIAL CAPITAL

Familial capital refers to "cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition."[18] Youth participants expressed turning to their familial and community networks in times of need and drawing on the skills implicitly and explicitly taught to them while seeking out formal and informal supports.

RESISTANT CAPITAL

Resistant capital refers to "those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality."[21] Youth have drawn on their resistant capital to employ skills of tact and strategy when seeking support. Youth stated they understood the risks involved in seeking supports and have tailored their asks in an effort to maximize responses to their needs from both formal and informal supports.

[15] As defined in Tara J. Yosso, "Whose culture has capital?: A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth," Race Ethnicity and Education 8 (2005): 69-91.
[16] Ibid, 76-77.
[17] Mahdiani, Hamideh, and Michael Ungar, "The dark side of resilience." Adversity and Resilience Science 2, no. 3 (2021): 147-155; Amy K. Marks, G. Alice Woolverton, and Cynthia García Coll, "Risk and resilience in minority youth populations," Annual Review of Clinical Psychology 16 (2020): 151-163; American Psychological Association.
[18] Yosso, "Whose culture has capital?", 79.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

Social capital refers to "networks of people and community resources. These peer and other social contacts can provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society's institutions."[19] Youth have drawn on their social capital to build networks of informal supports amongst youth and members of their communities. These informal networks exchange information about services and supports available locally and shared lived experiences. According to participants, this has allowed youth to feel a sense of comradery, dull the sense of uniqueness that can be isolating, mobilize knowledge and resources, and build and strengthen ties.

NAVIGATIONAL CAPITAL

Navigational capital refers to skills of "maneuvering through social institutions. Historically, this infers the ability to maneuver through institutions not created with Communities of Color in mind."[20] Youth have drawn on their navigational capital to advocate for themselves when seeking out relevant and responsive support in informal settings (e.g., finding mentors with similar lived experiences) and formal settings (e.g., locating practitioners who are Black and share other attributes such as gender and lived experiences). Youth reported using digital tools and social media platforms to enhance their awareness of what is available to them as well as share knowledge and resources amongst themselves.

[19] Ibid, 79.
[20] Ibid, 80.
[21] Ibid, 80.

YOUTH PERSPECTIVES SEX TRADE

Rachel is being sexually exploited and is in immediate need of a safe place to live and ongoing mental health supports. Most of the supports relevant to addressing her needs are located in Toronto's downtown core or outside of Toronto, locations that are quite distant from her community in Scarborough. When Rachel ventures outside of Scarborough to receive the mental health services needed, there is a lack of diversity in the staffing and among her peers in her support groups, which leaves her feeling uncomfortable.

Rachel stresses the need for more culturally responsive services in her community.

TAYANNA'S REFLECTION (COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE-KEEPER)

"I had somebody in the community who basically got kicked out of her house, and she ended up leaving with a guy, and then that guy ended up pimping her out. Nobody knew until she basically came crying to someone in that community to help her out, because she doesn't have a place to stay that night. She didn't know where to go."

Youth participants impacted by the sex trade described how they were coerced. Some, due to their life circumstances, were confronted and felt it necessary to engage for the purposes of their own survival. Some were forced into engaging in acts without their consent and/or were exploited without knowing it at first. Technology provided the means for coercion and exploitation. For some, grooming took place far before their experiences in the sex trade. Youth endured incidences of exploitation and physical and psychological abuse. Escaping the sex trade was an undertaking for our participants, and that came with the risk of escalated violence or retaliation at the hands of the individuals who coerced them

Youth impacted by the sex trade also found themselves impacted by housing instability. Being in temporary housing and financially precarious situations exposed youth to the risks of being further exploited. These circumstances interrupted their educational paths, and without financial support and with minimal work experience, attempts to escape their circumstances proved difficult.

Youth impacted by the sex trade reported turning to both formal and informal supports for safe living spaces, psychosocial and mental health supports, substance abuse supports, employment and financial supports, and support with exiting circumstances of sexual exploitation. When they accessed formal

KELLY'S REFLECTION (SERVICE PROVIDER)

"For the youth worker that's always been in the shelter setting, I feel as if we've always just dealt with their day-to-day. Honestly, we've dealt with them when they're in crisis and that's often. For those that have been involved in the sex trade, there's always been a lack of awareness, and that can be in their home, in their school, if they've ever accessed any other services, like a community center or so on.

There was nowhere for there to be prevention or early intervention, even, because the education wasn't there. They weren't aware, these youths. I've only ever dealt with females. I know out there, there are males that are being trafficked as well. The majority that I've worked with has always been females."

SUPPORT PREFERENCES FOR YOUTH IMPACTED BY SEX TRADE

FORMAL SUPPORTS		INFORMAL SUPPORTS	
EXPERTISE IN & TRAINING TO SUPPORT YOUTH WITH COMPLEX CHALLENGES	ABSENT IN SOME COMMUNITIES	OFTEN READILY AVAILABLE TO YOUTH WITHIN THEIR COMMUNITIES	ISSUES YOUTH FACE EXCEED SUPPORT CAPACITY
TRAUMA-INFORMED & CULTURALLY RELEVANT SUPPORTS	INADEQUATE RESPONSE TO YOUTH IN CRISIS	SHARED LIVED EXPERIENCES	LACK OF RESOURCES TO HELP ONE ANOTHER TRANSCEND CIRCUMSTANCES
SUPPORTS PROVIDED WITH THE PROMISE OF CONFIDENTIALITY	RISK OF PUNITIVE RESPONSES	MOSTLY RESPONSIVE TO YOUTH IN TIMES OF NEED	FEAR OF STIGMA ASSOCIATED WITH EXPERIENCES
PROVIDERS WHO ARE ACCOUNTABLE TO THEIR ORGANIZATIONS & PROFESSIONAL BODIES	OUTDATED RESOURCES & OUTREACH MATERIALS	TRUST IS ALREADY ESTABLISHED	UNPREDICTABLE & UNSTRUCTURED SUPPORTS

supports, youth encountered absences in the supports available. One youth shared, “there was no programming at all. I would have to go down to the downtown core to actively seek out support.” Seeking supports outside of their communities added the burden of transportation costs and time lost. Not knowing where to go for supports added difficulty to an already arduous journey for youth. Some of the local resources available to youth were outdated (e.g., outdated websites and phone numbers that were no longer in service).

Intake structures and processes in formal settings are not always responsive to the complex needs of youth impacted by the sex trade. Formal youth supports often target specific age groups, which is also challenging for youth who do not meet the inclusion criteria. As one youth reflected, “the resources start to fall away and ironically, that's sometimes when you need them the most …just because you hit 18, or 21, doesn't mean the traumas gone.”

When attempting to access counselling services, especially culturally relevant services, youth have encountered long waitlists. Youth impacted by the sex trade preferred Black female service providers who could decipher the traumatic and emotional nuances of being sexually exploited while also understanding the interplay between race and gender in their experiences. One youth waited for nearly a year to access counselling delivered by a Black practitioner. Although youth shared they did not always feel a sense of connectivity with providers, formal supports offered privacy and protection needed that fostered a sense of safety for youth. Youth felt that service providers, given their expertise and training, were equipped to address their complex support needs. In addition, being accountable to their organizations and professional bodies signalled to youth that, at the very least, service providers would treat them with respect and compassion.

Youth detailed the peculiar ways that they are read and responded to when seeking supports from formal sources. For example, one youth revealed her ordeal when attempting to advocate for herself: “when a Black woman is vocal…she (is) branded as aggressive or an angry Black woman.” In moments of distress and attempts to advocate for oneself, there appears to be a thin line between being interpreted as persistent and being interpreted as aggressive. This reading of and response to Black youth facing multiple barriers is an obstacle to receiving formal supports. We know how problematic misconceptions about Black youth can be; however, this provides some insight about the ways in which anti-Black racism manifests in service delivery.

Relatedly, the fear of punitive responses discouraged youth from turning to formal sources of support when in need. One youth advised,

"instead of arresting (youth impacted by the sex trade), you send them to trauma counseling groups, support job training, and you get them affordable housing, you get them into social support or like government assistance that actually pays enough to constantly go back. You get them legal support, so they can escape violent pimps." The approach taken to meet the needs of youth is layered and complex. Youth turned to informal supports to resolve gaps encountered when accessing formal supports.

At times, youth have found common understanding from individuals who face similar lived experiences and have found ways to share resources amongst themselves. Informal supports can offer a sense of authenticity. Ashley explained, "when I was able to connect with people on the streets or with individuals who had the same experience as me, there was almost a rawness. We were able to be vulnerable with each other in ways that sometimes I'm not able to do so in (formal support settings)... there's still policies in place and there's still procedures that the community centre has to follow in terms of funding or whatever it may be."

At times, given the challenges youth have encountered with finding resources to address their complex needs and the dearth of supports available locally, the needs of youth exceeded their capacity to support one another while facing their own personal challenges. However, youth who reported avoiding informal supports did so to avoid the stigma associated with being sexually exploited, being judged by peers, and the possibility of facing repercussions from their abusers. Formal supports have offered a level of protection (e.g., a sense of confidentiality, reduced sense of stigma, less shock for those providing support) that could not be provided informally.

YOUTH PERSPECTIVES CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

JASON'S STORY (YOUTH)

Jason had been recently released from prison after being in and out for years. He seldom accessed support, which he attributed to not having the same access to resources as other people. Although he's had mentors in his life, he mentions that they were only there temporarily. He understands the reason for this to be the capacity of service providers to support individuals while also navigating their own lives:

YOUTH:

"sometimes as much as they may have good intentions to help...they have their own lives."

Black youth come into contact with the criminal justice system in spaces they frequent on a regular basis, such as their schools and communities.[22] Youth who faced encounters with the criminal justice system shared the impacts it inflicted upon their lives. Often, youth were targeted excessively by police in their younger years. Understandably, youth did not disclose details, but they made it clear that being incarcerated fundamentally changed them.

Leaving the environment of incarceration and transitioning to life outside took a period of adjustment. Coming to terms with the time lost and the challenges ahead with gaining employment and thriving in life, one youth reflected, "once you keep going to jail, you look at things different." Some youth cycled repeatedly between life on the outside and getting locked up.

[22] For example, Think 2wice, Black Youth Experiences with the Youth Criminal Justice System, 2021 (Toronto: Think 2wice). Ibid.

JANICE'S REFLECTION (PARENT)

One time the police brought (my son) home... and said, "your son was hanging around over at (an undisclosed location) and we've never seen him before and he was with a fellow that is a known drug dealer and we arrested him. But we spoke to your son and he seemed very polite and he said you didn't have a phone number. So, we just wanted to come and just let you know that your son should not be hanging around certain areas and he shouldn't be with certain people but we wanted to give you a heads up."

I say to the cop, "Do you know any programs? Is there anything that you can help me with? Is there anything?" They're like, "No, we don't know anything."

This is me crying to them: "I see the start of a problem and you see the start of a problem or else you wouldn't be here. And you see how decent and polite and kind he is. You see his home." We were living in a huge house... "You don't have anything that can help me?" And they're like, "Nope."

Black youth in Toronto often lack support when navigating different stages of the criminal justice system.[23] In addition to getting used to living in society, youth have to be keenly aware of the risks of returning to jail or prison. In addition, difficulties with finding employment after incarceration deepened participants' precarity and sense of instability. Having charges has hindered youth participants from being able to pursue education goal and employment opportunities and left them vulnerable to barriers in terms of finances, housing and otherwise.

Youth impacted by the criminal justice system described seeking the following: employment and training, financial supports, housing, reintegration supports, supports with fulfilling legal requirements (e.g., completion of community service hours) and avoiding reencounters with the criminal justice system. Seeking supports after encounters with the criminal justice system can be disorienting and lonely for youth.

One youth reflected, "I was lost at first, I wasn't too sure who I was and I felt kind of 'What can I do?'... in the court system, lawyers will tell you 'there's this and that you can do, there are these community centres.' So that gave me an idea of what I can do after this. So my mind went towards seeking help."

In times of crisis, participants accessing formal supports came with hurdles. Intake structures and processes in formal settings were not always responsive to the immediate complex needs of youth impacted by encounters in the criminal justice system. Many organizations have intake processes that are arduous and collect a considerable amount of information (demographic and otherwise) from youth. To access some formal supports, youth have been asked to undergo background checks, which was a deterrent. What is unknown is to whom and where that youth turned for support after being denied access. This is indicative of the need to recognize the dimensions of youths' needs that may fall outside the lines of expectations (which may also be indicative of missed opportunities to engage with youth differently).

Formal supports offer a level of protection (e.g., a sense of confidentiality, reduced critique and judgement) that cannot be provided informally. In addition, formal support providers have the training and expertise to support youth who have faced encounters with the criminal justice system. One youth shared, "I feel very safe going to someone who's been trained to help me." Youth turned to formal supports to leverage the expertise of service providers and navigate reintegration.

[23] For example, Think 2wice, Black Youth Experiences with the Youth Criminal Justice System, 2021 (Toronto: Think 2wice).
[23] Ibid.

SUPPORT PREFERENCES FOR YOUTH IMPACTED BY CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

FORMAL SUPPORTS		INFORMAL SUPPORTS	
PROVIDED WITH THE PROMISE OF CONFIDENTIALITY	INADEQUATE RESPONSE TO YOUTH IN CRISIS	SUPPORT YOUTH WITH ACCESSING FORMAL SUPPORTS	LACK RESOURCES TO HELP ONE ANOTHER TRANSCEND CIRCUMSTANCES
EXPERTISE AND TRAINING TO SUPPORT YOUTH WITH COMPLEX CHALLENGES	RIGID CRITERIA FOR ENTRY	PROVIDE INSPIRATIONAL SUPPORT	ABSENCE OF SHARED EXPERIENCES
ACQUIRED EMPLOYMENT-RELATED SUPPORTS AND TRAINING	RISK OF PUNITIVE RESPONSES	OFTEN READILY AVAILABLE TO YOUTH WITHIN THEIR	DISTRUST FOR OTHERS
SERVICE PROVIDERS OFFERING RELEVANT SUPPORT & NAVIGATIONAL ADVICE	LACK INNOVATION TO MEET UNIQUE NEEDS	SHARED LIVED EXPERIENCES	ABSENCE OF CONFIDENTIALITY

Service providers, particularly those who shared lived experience, gave youth navigational advice for navigating their lives post-incarceration from both formal and informal sources. Through formal supports, youth accessed employment-related skills and training that they leveraged to better their lives. Due to the challenges that some youth faced finding gainful employment, they found innovative means of earning money (e.g., food delivery platforms). Formal supports did not offer strategies for youth to leverage their knowledge and transferrable skills gained by through other means when seeking employment.

Participants shared experiences of youth being denied housing and mental health supports in moments of dire need. Furthermore, the potential of punitive responses discouraged youth from turning to formal sources of support when in need. Stated frankly by one youth, "people are not going to seek help if they're fearful that when (they do), they call the police." For youth who have already had encounters with the law, the risks and consequences are considerably impactful. Such responses to moments of need highlight the added dimensions of challenges with racism that arise specifically for Black youth when seeking formal supports.

Youth who could not access formal supports relied on support from informal sources such as mentors and family. Informal supports often served as a bridge to accessing formal supports. One youth recalls the support he receives: "He helps out with a lot actually. He helps me out with getting to appointments… He helps me out with transportation as well… He helps me out with housing parts too, with seeking housing… He tells me about the various events with jobs." Youth leveraged their personal contacts and members of the community as a "way in" to access formal supports.

Some youth chose to lean on formal over informal supports because they did not trust people in their networks with their personal stories and believed they lacked the capacity to provide relevant support. One youth reflected, "I don't really go to individuals for support. I prefer to go through organizations…I've realized through my lived experience, that friends are only your friends until they're not. And then when they're not your friends, you don't know how far your personal story can travel."

YOUTH PERSPECTIVES HOUSING INSTABILITY & HOMELESSNESS

CHRIS' STORY (YOUTH)

Chris and his family were dealing with ongoing maintenance issues at his apartment and were in need of better living conditions that were also affordable. Although their rent continued to increase, several areas of their apartment were "falling apart" and management failed to attend to these issues in a timely manner. While Chris would have benefited from external community support, he expressed, "I don't see a lack of support but not knowing where to go for support. That's something I thought of a lot." Without adequate support from management in addition to being unfamiliar with where to turn to for his family's housing needs, Chris and his family were left to look for affordable housing and relocate on their own.

TAYANNA'S REFLECTION (COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE-KEEPER)

"I met a woman who just came into the country and her husband, when she came with her husband, her husband died. And her husband's the only person she knew. And she ended up moving to a shelter with her and her child, you know what I mean?

Say you have somebody like that, who's basically facing homelessness, she knows nobody, this is the only - what do you call that? Her English is not 100%. She only knows some English. What do you call that? They're Black and they come to a country and now they have to go share a room with somebody, you know what I mean?"

LAILAH'S STORY (YOUTH)

Lailah had recently gone through a loss of her immediate family member (also the occupant listed on her lease) and was in distress. Lailah faced eviction soon after due to her name not being listed on the lease of her residence. She accessed counseling services at a youth clinic and requested support navigating challenges with her mental health but was most concerned with her immediate housing needs. Although she expressed that her housing needs were immediate, the service provided did not prioritize her needs and instead provided a contact phone number to a local organization without engaging in any follow-up.

This ineffective response "deterred [her] from even going back." On her own, Lailah reached out to property managers, medical practitioners, a local politician, service providers and members of her community. The responses were inadequate. Lailah toggled between multiple informal and formal supports to address her immediate and ongoing needs. Finally, Lailah found temporary residence at another family member's home and continued to cope with the psychological aftermath of experiencing loss and displacement.

9 OUT OF 10

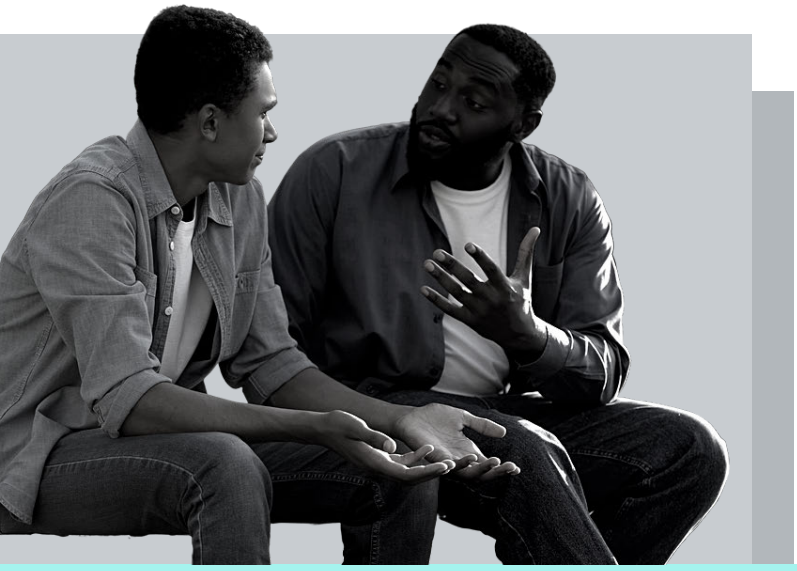
Nine out of ten of the youth we spoke with have experienced housing instability or homelessness within the past five years.

This is telling, considering youth homelessness is on the rise in Toronto,[24] and brings to question the confluence of factors that lead to housing instability and homelessness for Black youth. Youth who found themselves impacted by housing instability arrived there both voluntarily and involuntarily. In situations where they left previous housing voluntarily, they were escaping violent home situations. For instance, Jenny, a youth who faced encounters with the criminal justice system and housing instability after making the difficult decision to leave her family home, recalled, "the abuse had reached its peak in my family household. I knew I needed to leave. If I didn't leave voluntarily, I was going to leave in another detrimental way." In situations where they left involuntarily, they were told to leave by family members or evicted by property management.

Youth described the sense of distress that accompanies being pushed out of the space where they once lived, as well as the sense of disorientation experienced when in search of a place to stay shortly thereafter. Youth on the pathway to finding alternative housing were often left to rely on living situations that are temporary and at times unsheltered.

[24] City of Toronto, "Street Needs Assessment Highlights," 2018, www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/99be-2018-SNA-Results-Report.pdf

Youth participants impacted by housing instability and homelessness were seeking the following: housing and financial supports. They encountered an absence of formal supports in the immediacy of their need. As one youth pointed out, "there's no number to call when you're facing eviction." One youth recalled spending "hours in the public library, just Googling things and (doing) so much of my own. I had the time because obviously I was homeless, I wasn't doing anything else and I knew I needed the support so I had to actively find it but I know other people that I was around, just didn't have that same mental drive as me." Youth turned to informal supports while waiting to receive support from formal sources. For example, youth on the pathway to finding permanent alternative housing were often left to rely on temporary living situations that are at times unsheltered. During this time, they relied on people within their social and familial networks for temporary housing while they awaited housing provision from formal sources of support.



Formal supports proved to be inadequate when the needs of youth facing housing instability or homelessness were urgent and immediate. When they accessed formal supports, youth encountered supports—for example, shelters—that were often at capacity.[25] At times, informal supports were inadequate for addressing their needs. As one participant explained, "services for street folks should have a trauma-informed approach since so many of us are living on survival mode, have endured or witnessed traumatic events, and our psychology has been wired to operate from a place of fight-flight-freeze. This also contributes to why there's so much hypervigilance, wariness, lack of trust, and anxiety around looking for and receiving both formal and informal supports."

In some cases, given the complexity of their needs, youth attempted to access multiple programs at once, which, at times, was not permitted. Some services, such as counselling services, required referrals, which was a barrier at the point of intake. This is especially true for youth who may not have forms of government identification, which poses additional barriers to accessing other essential services, such as medical care. What was not taken into consideration by providers were the additional barriers youth encounter when accessing medical services.

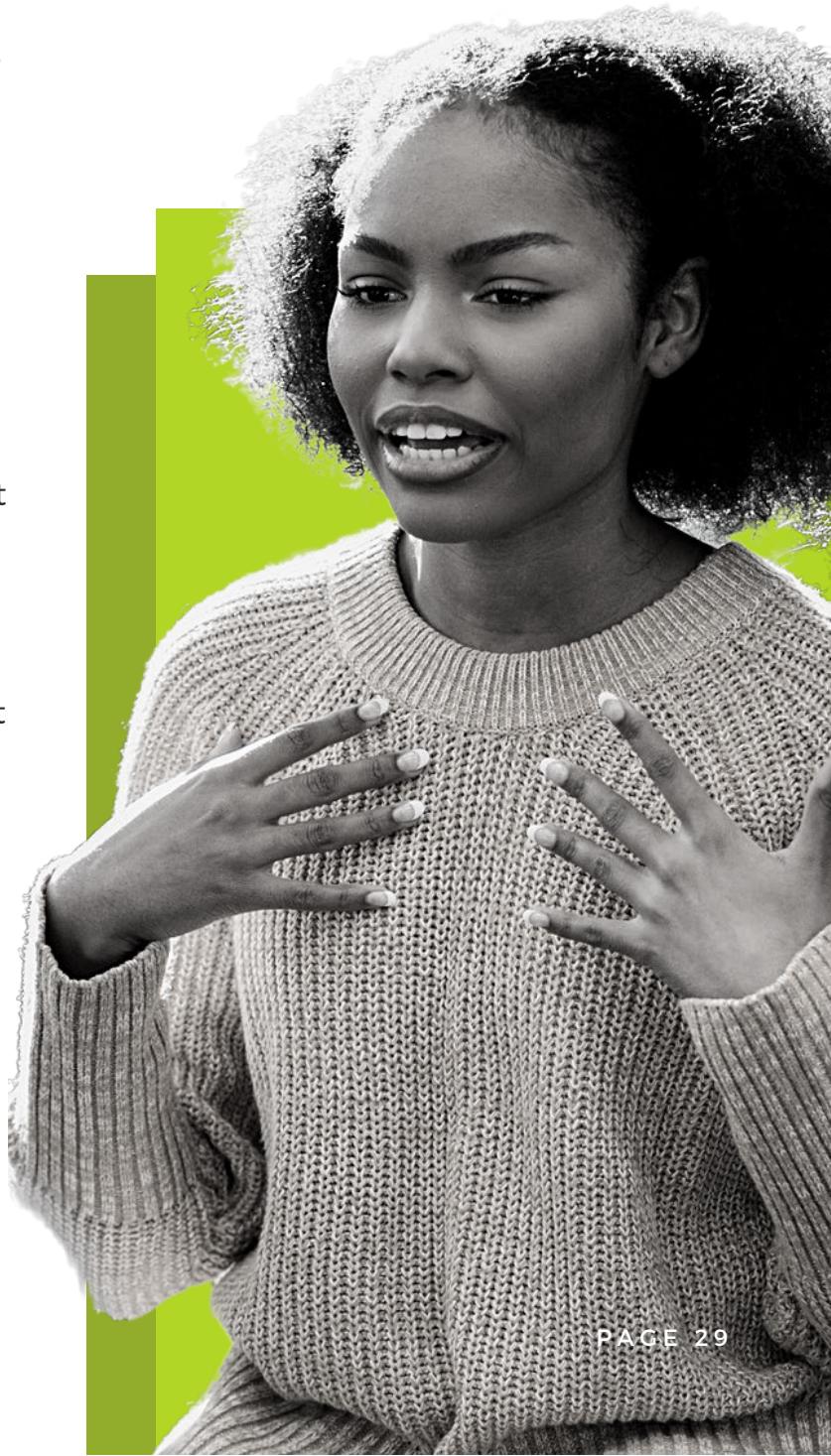
[25] Existing studies highlight this as a long-standing issue in Toronto. See Ali Jadidzadeh and Ron Kneebone, "Patterns and intensity of use of homeless shelters in Toronto." Canadian Public Policy 44, no. 4 (2018): 342-355.

SUPPORT PREFERENCES FOR YOUTH IMPACTED BY HOUSING INSTABILITY & HOMELESSNESS

FORMAL SUPPORTS		INFORMAL SUPPORTS	
RESOLVE THEIR HOUSING NEEDS IN THE LONG RUN	INADEQUATE RESPONSE TO YOUTH IN CRISIS	ADEQUATE RESPONSE TO YOUTH IN CRISIS	LACKING RESOURCES TO HELP ONE ANOTHER TRANSCEND CIRCUMSTANCES
OFFER COPING STRATEGIES	EXCLUSIONARY PRACTICES	SHARED LIVED EXPERIENCES	SUPPORT OFFERED TENDS TO BE TEMPORARY & TRANSIENT
BETTER EQUIPPED WITH RESOURCES TO ADDRESS HOUSING NEEDS	EXPOSURE TO ADDITIONAL VULNERABILITIES & RISKS	RELY ON INFORMAL SUPPORT IN THE INTERIM BETWEEN RECEIVING FORMAL SUPPORTS	ISSUES YOUTH FACED EXCEEDED SUPPORT CAPACITY
ACCESS SPACES TO MAKE CONNECTIONS & BUILD INFORMAL SUPPORTS	AGE AS A BARRIER TO FINANCIAL SUPPORTS	SUPPORT YOUTH WITH ACCESSING FORMAL SUPPORTS	FEAR OF BURDENING & INCONVENIENCING OTHERS

When housing supports were acquired from formal sources, the living situations that youth were placed in were not always conducive to their well-being. This was especially the case for youth who faced mental health challenges and had specific housing needs that would enable them to live optimally. Additionally, age was a reported barrier to accessing supports needed. Youth have found accessing financial supports (e.g., Ontario Works assistance) difficult due to their age. One youth went through the process of emancipation to gain access to the financial supports needed.

There are added dimensions of these challenges that arise specifically for Black youth when seeking formal supports. Rachel, a youth who faced housing instability and was impacted by the sex trade, explained, “I was talking to her about race and… there was a lot of gaslighting going on, a lot of gaslighting! She was not validating my experience, she's like well ‘Canada's not like the states, you know, Canada, more polite’ just like full security that racism does not exist in Canada, and I hated that. I hated that I felt like my feelings stop being heard.” In formal settings, service providers who lack the competence to provide culturally relevant support to Black youth risked causing further harm.



YOUTH PERSPECTIVES MULTIPLE BARRIERS

CRYSTAL'S STORY (YOUTH)

Crystal has been impacted by the sex trade, housing instability and encounters with the criminal justice system and was experiencing symptoms of distress. When seeking out support and services to manage her mental health, providers identified many barriers when trying to access the support she needed. The lengthy medical referral process to attend a youth clinic, receive mental healthcare, and a specific request for a Black female therapist prevented her from accessing timely support. Crystal also experienced age as a barrier when reaching out to mental health groups and realized that as "you age out of the system and you age out of supports, [they] tend to care less because they hold you more individually accountable for figuring out your life." As a result, Crystal was turned away from a number of programs that had a cut off age for folks in their early twenties, leaving her age bracket at the time with fewer options. Crystal had also identified eligibility criteria as a significant barrier in accessing relevant supports. She was struggling to avigate her family's backlash while trying to come out, so she decided seek out LGBT support and counseling. However, when she connected with an advocacy support group focused on LGBT clients, she was told "we can't really support you because you are not HIV positive." In spite of Crystal being in crisis, the agency refused to help her because of not meeting that criterion.

JENNY'S STORY (YOUTH)

Jenny is a young Black woman who has had encounters with the criminal justice system. She lived in a home environment where she experienced physical violence and was in need of immediate housing and mental health supports. She recalled, "I remember one day I broke down and I told a friend, I was like, I really don't want to go home after work today." Jenny's friend recommended a local support service targeted to support for women of colour. Jenny's friend had accessed these supports in the past and had positive experiences with addressing support needs. To access services at this organization, Jenny observed that she "needed a point of contact with somebody who was already in, to help [her] sign up." Jenny waited a year wait before accessing housing, a period during which she had to navigate and survive the violence at home and faced precarity in her living situation in the interim. The referral process period for this organization subjected the participant to greater vulnerability.

For youth, the impact of facing these multiple barriers were far-reaching and impacted their health over the course of their lives in a number of ways. For example, one youth described the day-to-day impact of facing multiple barriers: “our mind is constantly (in) survival mode. How do I survive being at school with these girls bullying me, and then how do I go home and also cope and survive all of this abuse that's going on? Right? Those constant turmoils.” Some youth attributed physical manifestations, such as loss of appetite and fatigue, to long-term and persistent exposure to stress. Existing research confirms the long-term impact of adverse experiences early in life.[26]

IN SUMMARY

Although youth participants expressed actively seeking and accessing supports, they have encountered hurdles along the way.

At times, when seeking supports, youth have encountered absence of services and programs in their local communities, leaving them to either go without supports, seek informal supports, or seek supports in communities outside of their own. Youth have been left with the scars of disappointment and exhaustion from navigating multiple systems of support in an effort to meet their support needs, and the gaps are glaring.

Youth participants embodied navigational, social, familial, resistant and aspirational capital to navigate multiple systems of support to address their needs, and these processes of support were self-driven and put them on sinuous pathways. Regardless, given the compounding nature of the barriers they faced, the needs of youth were unmet or only partially met. Having to navigate this process results in being disillusioned, with compounding impacts of the barriers Black youth face producing overall exhaustion, which occurs as a result and eroded the quality of their lives. Although youth have made varying degrees of progress since seeking supports, the reality of facing compounding challenges is that youth will spend a long time unpacking and working to resolve such issues.

[26] For example, Julia I. Herzog and Christian Schmahl, “Adverse childhood experiences and the consequences on neurobiological, psychosocial, and somatic conditions across the lifespan.” Frontiers in Psychiatry 9 (2018): 420.

SUPPORTER PERSPECTIVES

“When a young person walks through the door, how are they being treated? How are they being supported? Who is coordinating supports for them? How are their needs prioritized?"

CHALLENGES WITH FORMAL SUPPORT

ANTI-BLACK RACISM AND COLOUR BLINDNESS

Within the sector, this includes systemic failures to adequately address the role of race and racism in impacting the provision of services.

This is exemplified through:

- Lack of capacity to address anti-Black racism
- Existing policies that may be marginalizing and dehumanizing to Black youth
- Eurocentric frameworks coupled with a lack of Afrocentric approaches
- The inability of systems to provide practitioners who have lived experience and can be a race match for youth

Some service providers lack the expertise and tools to address anti-Black racism. As a result, youth experience explicit and implicit forms of racism when accessing formal supports. This shows up as assumptions about deviant behaviour when attempting to advocate for themselves, palpable lack of compassion, and inadequate responses to youth when in crisis.

Organizational protocols, although well-intended, can be dehumanizing and contrastive to Africentric approaches. One service provider reflected, “we’re told that you can't touch, you can’t hug. You can’t hug. You need to establish those very clear boundaries from a Eurocentric standpoint when we know as Black people, yes, touch must be appropriate. We are not encouraging inappropriate touching of minors. That is standard. But sometimes, young people just need somebody even just to rub the top of their eyes, to let them know, because we know how touch is soothing and healing.” The lack of representation of Black leaders and over-representation of Black service providers in some organizations brings to question who sets policies, and the frame from which practices are upheld.

SERVICE PROVIDER:

"The systems are set up in ways that we sometimes feel intimidated to challenge even though we know what needs to be done because... we risk losing our employment."

POLICY AND WORKING CONTEXT

This includes the limits of service provision as exemplified through:

- Cumbersome and rigid policies and practices
- Intersecting barriers faced by providers (lack of racial safety to raise concerns)
- Improper compensation for staff, especially given all of the invisible labour they provide (and the safety concerns they present)

Service providers are often stretched thin (overworked and underpaid), especially when they go above and beyond to support youth. Service providers described the labour taken on that is not recognized by their workplace (invisible labour). Examples included being in contact and checking in with youth (and in some cases, their caregivers) beyond hours allocated for their workdays, and the time taken to engage with communities to use the knowledge shared to shape and inform their practices. Given that this work often falls outside of the lines of what is required, service providers are vulnerable to burn-out.

It can be difficult for service providers to resolve challenges they face in their workplaces. As one service provider explained, “people are a little bit more comfortable disclosing information, when they have something in common, or they share like a cultural background, because there's gonna be things that… you're more privy to, or that you understand as opposed to somebody who comes from a different culture from.” Additionally, according to participants, policies in place (such as anti-discrimination policies) and the ways in which they are enforced often do not respond to the realities of service providers and are ineffective in shaping actions around addressing issues with Anti-Black Racism (ABR).

Attempts to raise these issues were not always productive for participants. One service provider explained, “the conversation get coopted, the focus gets shifted and these persons who start crying and become emotional. But again, we don't have the opportunity to do that as Black individuals because every day we get up, we look in the mirror, we are the story we have revisited over, and over, and over again.” The post-George Floyd era has provided fertile ground upon which to address some of the challenges around these issues in organizations and in the sector more broadly. For Black-focused organizations, however, it can have what one participant referred to as a “cannibalizing effect,” with Black-focused organizations competing for the same talent and expertise.

In some cases, organizational policies that underpin service providers’ work were identified as being cumbersome. Policies are out-of-date and misaligned with the realities of supporting youth. One service provider shared, “policies are not responsive because the people who are doing it do not understand the lived experiences of the people who are impacted by them, that means that you have a radically ineffective policy.” For organizations to be responsive to their employees and populations served, it is incumbent upon them to revise policies to align with the contexts in which they exist.

Concerns were also raised regarding organizations recruiting individuals who have lived experience but not

providing the means for them to access the supports they may also need. At times, individuals who formally and informally support Black youth are facing similar and multiple barriers. For example, one service provider reflected on his own experience: “The challenges of my clients are my challenges, and based on my experiences, I’m able to help them navigate while I’m still trying to help myself navigate many of these things…I still don’t get stopped any less by police or anything like that. I still get followed around going to the store, and so on… those typical kind of racist things.”

Another services provider reflected on her experiences: “I was still down and out, still trying to help out others, trying to get myself back up again. There’s times where I’ve had to leave jobs because the same thing I’m trying to preach is something that I’m still involved in.” Youth also recognize that service providers they turn to also need support: “they have good intentions, they just have their own stuff to deal with.” Nonetheless, service providers have found ways to leverage their lived experiences through their work of supporting Black youth: “Now working in this sector for 13 years now and telling my story and helping someone get through certain life situations that we have similarity, it’s a give and take, it’s a healing process. As I’m healing them, they also help heal me.” However, these insights shed light on the possibility of scaling up resources within organizations to service the needs of service providers and other front-line workers.

EFFECTS ON POST-SUPPORT

Anti-Black racism and the policy and working context affect the ability to provide support and post-support to Black youth. This includes:

- A lack of consistency
- Impact on establishing and maintaining trust with youth
- Poor follow up, which may act as a deterrent for youth
- Youth issues not being fully resolved

The needs of youth are not always fully resolved after they have accessed supports. For example, a youth seeking employment services may need the transportation means to get to work. A youth accessing programming in the evening hours may require further follow-up to their safe arrival home. Service providers who understand the dynamics of the community take up this post-support labour that is invisible and not formally recognized.

Participants recommend processes in place that are better attuned to attendees’ safety needs when programming concludes. A community knowledge keeper explained, “if a program ends later, to have a buddy system in place, even if it’s like a staff or a volunteer. You don’t have to go straight to their

home, but like, at least like an area where you can see everything that's going on. That's probably one of the biggest things when it comes to support because that has been hindrance to a lot of youth attending certain programs" Youth highlight the importance of engaging them after they access supports: "call and follow up and right after the group session to make sure you're showing up for the next one."

CHALLENGES WITH INFORMAL SUPPORT

SHIFTS IN COMMUNITY DYNAMICS

- Leave youth feeling alone and siloed
- Produce a lack of shared Black safe spaces to connect with those who have shared lived experiences and deep understanding

The landscape of support within communities are shifting, and attitudes and approaches reflect less collective and more individualistic posturing. Many participants alluded to these shifts impeding youth from seeking supports within their communities. As relations across generations change and the willingness to hold one another accountable dwindle, it can feel like "the community has turned a blind eye to everything."

Additionally, as community spaces continue to disappear across communities and social dynamics continue to shift, supports will become increasingly difficult for youth to find. Community centres, in some areas, were once places where folks gathered and sought and received formal and informal supports they needed in pre-pandemic times. Without a centralized space to find and access the many supports they need, youth have been left navigating and trying to access multiple services. Centralized hubs can be spaces where youth can access different resources when in need of supports that take into account, in both design and approach, the multiple and complex needs of Black youth facing multiple barriers.

COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE-KEEPER:

"Programs have died in the community. I don't see as much as I (saw) growing up."

SUPPORTING OTHERS WHILE FIGURING IT OUT

- A lack of resources and/or training
- A lack of supporters knowing how to help the youth

Community knowledge-keepers are immersed in community and have the capacity to be responsive to the needs of youth in ways that are unencumbered by formal structures.

However, they lack the resources and expertise to address the complex needs of youth and the resources available in formal spaces. Nonetheless, community knowledge-keepers have been able to maximize their supports with little resources. In addition, supporting youth often involves co-learning and discovery (or “learning as you go").

IN SUMMARY

Overall, supporters of Black youth face their own barriers that are structural in nature. These barriers impede their ability to provide robust support to youth and can negatively affect re-engagement and continuity of supports. These impedances encountered by supporters of Black youth interfere with their capacity to provide support that timely and effectively addresses the complex needs of Black youth. As a result, the needs of youth are either only partially met or unmet altogether.

SERVICE PROVIDER:

"I'm facing my own shadows as well. I find that it's challenging to keep up with the youth...I'm going through things. I don't have that emotional capacity"

FINDINGS: PANDEMIC EFFECTS

The global pandemic has complicated an already problematic landscape for youth. It has created additional barriers to receiving supports locally and further exacerbated the conditions faced.

For supporters of Black youth, the pandemic has further impeded their capacity to provide support that is timely, responsive and effective.

Shifts in service delivery formats have added new dimensions and challenges to seeking and receiving supports from formal sources. Participants observed inconsistencies in the delivery of services, such as decreased programming during the pandemic and existing events and programs being cancelled. The pandemic has put strains on services, some of which were already strained prior to the pandemic.[27] For example, youth participants in need of housing encountered shelters that were at capacity, an issue that existed prior to the pandemic. Additionally, restrictions and the demand for distance further placed a strain on the shelter system. This was especially the case in the earlier waves of the pandemic. Service providers were burdened with increased workloads during the pandemic, which pushed some of them to leave their roles.

Interacting virtually was identified as both a challenge and an opportunity for youth and their supporters. Some service providers observed reduced inhibition among youth in their interactions.

Others, however, related that there were some communicative elements lost in distance communications: “it's a little bit impoverished when you don’t have that in person contact, even in a context like this, where we have cameras, there’s less of the body language. We’re catching the tone.” For youth who did not have access to technological devices or stable internet services, accessing formal supports was out of the question during this time. Service providers and community knowledge-keepers alike expressed concern about youth who they fell out of contact with amid the pandemic. Despite boosts in sectoral support,[28] further work is needed to produce effective approaches for supporting hard-to-reach populations during pandemic restrictions.

YOUTH:

"Mostly, I was getting 'Due to the pandemic this program is on standby.'"

[27] See Ali Jadidzadeh and Ron Kneebone, “Patterns and intensity of use of homeless shelters in Toronto.” See also Adam Labas, “Visualizing Toronto Homeless Shelter data Across a Global Pandemic,” 2022, https://www.tellingstorieswithdata.com/inputs/pdfs/paper_one-2022-adam_labas.pdf

[28] For example, Nadine Yousif, "'We've got to get ready.' Province urged to boost support for children's mental health services as demand grows amid the pandemic," Toronto Star, September 4, 2020, https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2020/09/04/weve-got-to-get-ready-province-urged-to-boost-support-for-childrens-mental-health-services-as-demand-grows-amid-the-pandemic.html

Amid global crisis, barriers are amplified, and youth who faced barriers prior to the pandemic have experienced greater difficulty with resolving their compounding challenges. Informal and formal supports, stretched prior to the pandemic, simply lacked the resources to effectively support youth.

The broader responses to the pandemic have ignored the intersecting effects on Black communities across sectors, as exemplified acutely here.

YOUTH:

"Before, it (accessing formal supports) was a very lengthy process.

Now, because of the pandemic, and they realize...everyone's going through something, whether they're directly impacted, or they know someone being impacted.

Now, most of it's online. It's streamlined a lot of processes."

SUPPORTER PERSPECTIVES

"The worker came out and just walked ahead...with the young person trailing her. What a difference it would have made if that worker came to the front desk, introduced themselves to the young person and walked alongside the young person to their office and just asked...How did you get here? What was that experience like? How was it like sitting in the waiting room? (Did) you feel comfortable? Is there something that we can do differently for you? Was there something else that we could have done to make you feel welcomed and comfortable?

...This is not rocket science. We're not dealing with inanimate objects. We're talking to human beings and we need to humanize the experience. And that is one of the things that is lacking. We have not found effective ways to humanize the services and the interrelationship that we have with one another."

SOLUTIONS & INTERVENTIONS

"Why is that (recommendations) are always the last (consideration)? So, what is that, the biggest thing that we're hoping for that would never happen? Come on, man...it's pathetic."

"If you design programs and responses in isolation of the communities that's supposed to be benefiting from them, you're starting on the wrong foot."

"We can help individuals make individual life choices, but in order to have impact at the population level, (support is needed) over long periods of time or over lifetimes and generations"

"Instead of mapping out a brand-new program, map out the gaps and focus on the gaps, focus on the continuum of service delivery"

01 SUPPORTS THAT ENABLE RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

The recommendations provided by participants have been synthesized as the following proposed high-level solutions:

Key recommendations:

- End-user-driven programs and services
- Sustainable programming that remains consistent in objectives, approaches and outcomes despite circumstantial shifts
- Timely interventions
- Supports that are accessible and located in the communities they serve

At times, when seeking supports, youth encountered an absence of services and programs in their local communities, leaving youth to either go without supports or to seek informal supports in communities outside of their own. Additionally, participants suggested the need for formal supports to be less process-driven and instead, end-user-driven and more relevant and actively responsive to the needs of youth.

Further, given the complexity of their needs, youth need access to sustainable supports that remain consistent in objectives, outcomes and approaches regardless of mergent sociopolitical shifts (e.g., shifts due to elections or new directors). The issue of timing, as it pertains to youth receiving supports, also emerged in the data. Service providers, in particular, expressed concern about the timing of when supports are sought. Often, youth seek support when they are in crisis.

Nonetheless, there are opportunities or "salient points of programmatic intervention" that arise prior, when intervention would be effective and potentially shift the trajectory of youth's lives.

Participants raised concerns over the time allocated to service providers, which is insufficient for addressing complex support needs of youth. The negative consequences of time limits in service provision have been highlighted in research.[29] Given that service providers are often supporting Black youth facing multiple barriers through long-standing and emergent issues, it is incumbent on the sector to further address issues around time allocation in supporting youth. The solutions presented align with the Ontario Black Youth Action Plan,[30] which calls for preventative supports, and the Ontario Ministry of Health's call for improved youth and stakeholder engagement in mental health supports.[31]

[29] For example, Rosa Maria De Geest and Reitske Meganck, "How do time limits affect our psychotherapies? A Literature Review." Psychologica Belgica 59, no. 1 (2019): 206-226.
[30] Government of Ontario, Black Youth Action Plan, 2017, https://www.ontario.ca/page/Black-youth-action-plan
[31] The Child and Youth Mental Health Lead Agency Consortium, Moving on Mental Health: A system that makes sense for children & youth, 2017, https://newpath.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/MoMH-Report-EN-Print.pdf Government of Ontario, Black Youth Action Plan, 2017.

02 COMMUNITY-INFORMED AND AFRICENTRIC PARADIGMS

The recommendations provided by participants have been synthesized as the following proposed high-level solutions:

Key recommendations:

- Black communities shaping what service pathways and experiences look like
- Intergenerational spaces that are also youth-centered in their approaches to care
- Building capacity via recruitment of staff from community who use youth-centered approaches, which address internal biases

It is clear from participant recommendations that those who are accessing local supports should be involved in the design and delivery of supports within their communities. Supports should include people who are from the community and who have lived experience. It is particularly important that these voices are not included in a tokenistic way and are being included in strategic and leadership roles such as board membership, staffing, advisory committees, etc.

Additionally, supports provided to youth need to address implicit and explicit biases and prejudices in service delivery and should be inclusive regardless of youth. appearances. The solutions presented align with the Ontario Black Youth Action Plan,[32] which calls for collaboration cross-sectorally and across communities to affect systemic change; the Ontario Anti-Racism Strategic Plan, which calls for community partnerships and community-focused interventions;[33] the Ontario Anti-Racism Directorate's Roadmap to Racial Equity in the Ontario Public Service, which calls for enhancing competency and capacity to apply anti-racist practices and enhancing organizational diversity and promoting accountability for inclusion and anti-racism.[34]

[32] Government of Ontario, Ontario's Anti-racism Strategic Plan, 2017, https://www.ontario.ca/page/ontarios-anti-racism-strategic-plan
[33] Government of Ontario, Ontario's Anti-racism Strategic Plan, 2017, https://www.ontario.ca/page/ontarios-anti-racism-strategic-plan
[34] Nosa Ero-Brown, Ontario's Anti-Racism Directorate: An overview, 2021, https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2021/cr/bgrd/backgroundfile-167152.pdf

03 FUNDING MODELS

The recommendations provided by participants have been synthesized as the following proposed high-level solutions:

Key recommendations:

- Financial transparency
- Addressing the role and potential dominance of funder perspectives and wants in the "strings attached" to funding
- Shifting from short-term funding models to long-term and reliable funding models
- More accessible and equitable funding application processes
- Clear framing of accountability measures attached to funding
- Equal valuation of both quantitative and qualitative measures of success

There is a lack of public awareness about how services and programs are funded and how local organizations are putting the funds received to use. Funders need to balance increased transparency against factors that may exclude some individuals and groups from accessing funding opportunities, such as not being designated as charitable among other criteria. There were increased funding opportunities available during the pandemic that were responsive and adaptive to the needs of communities, which highlights the possibilities for new approaches moving forward.

Formal supports that are funded privately or publicly can run into dilemmas whereby the orientation and approaches employed by funders can overcast the issues and needs they intend to address.[35] Participants observed that funding models were not always responsive to the needs of communities. As one youth reflected, "funders have their own political interests. So, when programs apply for grant proposals, and their positioning a design for a program, you have to align with the interests of the funders." Further, funding models prioritize quantitative measures of success over qualitative measures and impact. As such, programs cater to the interest of the funders more than they do the needs of the youth accessing services.

Participants raised the importance of grant-making and funding programs that are specific to the needs of communities (e.g., targeted and tailored) and which establish models of funding that are flexible and responsive to the needs of communities. As one participant put it, "do not punish good ideas for badly written applications." In addition, funding agencies should apply qualitative measures of success, and they should be transparent about the outcomes of the initiatives they fund. As one participant suggested,

[35] For example, David Jefferess, "On saviours and saviourism: lessons from the #WEscandal." Globalisation, Societies and Education (2021): 1-12.

"if we're all part of the solution then we need to all be accountable to the outcomes of our investments." Reducing the distance between funders and community may make more salient the humanity of people on both sides of the fence and opportunities to leverage partnerships to better serve the needs of communities.

Improving access to crucial information can help broaden the distance between funders and the community. At a minimum, organizations and funders can improve access to information by publishing on their website information from their Registered Charity Information Return (assets, liabilities, revenue, expenses, staff compensation, fundraising, and programs).The solutions presented align with the Ontario Black Youth Action Plan,[36] which calls for funding opportunities for supports that are focused on and led by Black youth; and the Ontario Anti-Racism Strategic Plan, which calls for enhanced community collaboration.

PUBLIC SERVICE EMPLOYEE:

"It can't be Black Lives Matter this week... how do you create an opportunity for connections to be made with Black youth so that they're given the opportunity to be more than just a statistic?

Long-term spaces, sustainable investments... looking at the systems as a whole, not just creating positive spaces for them."

[36] Government of Ontario, Black Youth Action Plan, 2017.
[37] Government of Ontario, Ontario's Anti-racism Strategic Plan.

DIRECT ACTIONS

Improving services to Black youth facing multiple barriers will require infrastructural, human capital, and cultural transformations. Actions that will aid with sectoral change are:

- Supporting hubs that are designed to deal with multiple and intersecting barriers faced by youth. These hubs should be designed through robust community engagement, grounded in Africentric paradigms, and include Black communities in governance and leadership roles.

- Providing direct partnership support the Black mandated, Black-led, and Black Serving (B3) to build programming that responds directly to the needs of Black youth facing multiple barriers.

- Improving Black cultural safety amongst informal and formal service providers. Gaining new skills and capabilities will enhance service offerings to Black youth facing multiple barriers and options for navigating stressors.

- Developing workflows and standard operating procedures that incorporate informal supporters who provide significant emotional, financial, and navigational support to Black youth facing multiple barriers. The workflows can contemplate a mix of solutions, including the inclusion of informal supporters in organizational staffing strategies, improving access to organizational work and community spaces, and providing training and skill-building opportunities.

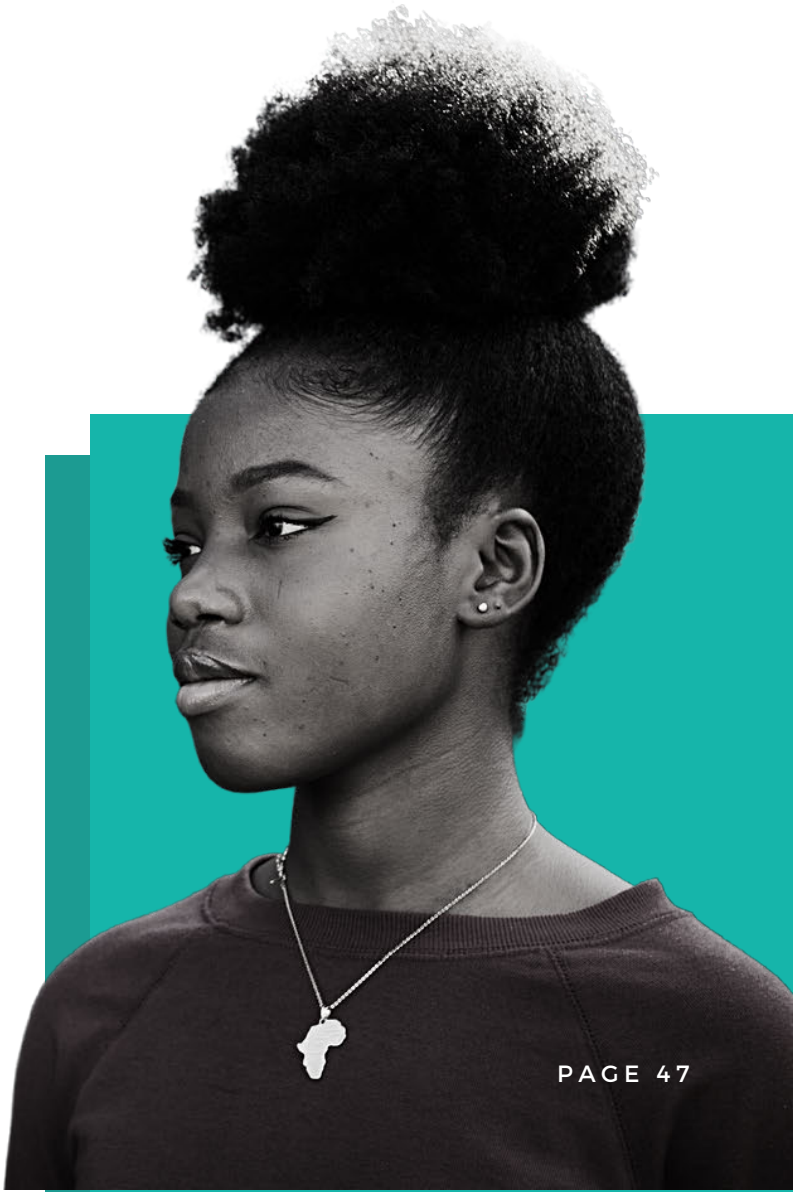
[35] For example, David Jefferess, "On saviours and saviourism: lessons from the #WEscandal." Globalisation, Societies and Education (2021): 1-12.

CONCLUSION

Many Black youth are in crisis, experiencing multiple and intersecting barriers and facing significant challenges due to a host of factors that contribute to their engagement with the sex trade, encounters with the criminal justice system, and experiences with housing insecurity and homelessness.

When they seek supports, they face additional barriers, which often exacerbate their situations and leave them with unmet needs. The supporters of these youth also face barriers in delivering support and following up in sustainable, robust, and effective ways. These barriers also contribute to leaving Black youth with unmet needs, which has deleterious effects on their physical and mental well-being and overall quality of life.

There are key points of intervention where change can occur by fostering relationship-building, implementing community-informed and Africentric paradigms in formal support spaces, and transforming existing funding models. Implementation of the direct actions proposed is very possible because they fall within existing policy and governmental paradigms. If we want to move towards fulfilling national, provincial and municipal commitments to end homelessness and human trafficking and combat inequities in the criminal justice system, Toronto's youth-serving sector must take into consideration systems of support available at the community-level to address the complex needs of individuals impacted by these barriers. Further, there is the necessity to cultivate systems of community support that leverage relationships with community to combat Anti-Black Racism (ABR) and establish practices and frameworks designed that are relevant and responsive to Black youth facing multiple barriers. It is imperative for Toronto's youth-serving sector to continue the collection of data to better understand the lived realities of Black youth and make data-informed improvements within the sector to better meet their needs.



APPENDIX

FIGURE 1: DEMOGRAPHIC DETAILS OF YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

PSEUDONYM	AGE	GENDER	COUNTRY OF BIRTH	PARENTS' COUNTRY OF BIRTH	LOCATION IN TORONTO	DISABILITY	CARING ADULT(S)	SEXUAL IDENTITY	EMPLOYMENT STATUS	HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION	RELATIONSHIP STATUS	PARENTAL STATUS	PRIMARY BARRIERS FACED
KYLE	26	MALE	CANADA	AFRICA	DOWNTOWN	YES	YES	HETERO SEXUAL	SELF-EMPLOYED	HIGH SCHOOL	SINGLE	NO CHILDREN	HI, CJ
CRYSTAL	25	FEMALE	CANADA	CARRIBEAN	NOT DISCLOSED	YES	YES	BISEXUAL	UNEMPLOYED	COLLEGE	SINGLE	NO CHILDREN	HI, CJ, ST
ASHLEY	26	GENDER QUEER	CANADA	CARRIBEAN & CANADA	MIDTOWN	YES	YES	BISEXUAL	EMPLOYED, ON CONTRACT, SELF-EMPLOYED	COLLEGE	SINGLE	NO CHILDREN	HI, ST
LAILAH	22	FEMALE	CANADA	CARRIBEAN	EAST	NO	YES	HETERO SEXUAL	UNEMPLOYED	HIGH SCHOOL	SINGLE	NO CHILDREN	HI
RACHEL	24	FEMALE	AFRICA	AFRICA	EAST	YES	YES	HETERO SEXUAL	UNEMPLOYED	HIGH SCHOOL	SINGLE	NO CHILDREN	HI, ST
CHRIS	22	MALE	CANADA	CARRIBEAN & CANADA	EAST	NO	YES	HETERO SEXUAL	EMPLOYED, FULL TIME	COLLEGE	SINGLE	NO CHILDREN	HI
MALCOLM	25	MALE	CANADA	CARRIBEAN	WEST	NO	YES	HETERO SEXUAL	UNEMPLOYED	HIGH SCHOOL	SINGLE	NO CHILDREN	HI
JENNY	27	FEMALE	AFRICA	AFRICA	WEST	YES	YES	HETERO SEXUAL	UNEMPLOYED	HIGH SCHOOL	SINGLE	NO CHILDREN	HI, CJ
JASON	23	MALE	CANADA	CARRIBEAN	EAST	NO	YES	HETERO SEXUAL	UNEMPLOYED	SOME HIGH SCHOOL	SINGLE	NO CHILDREN	CJ
RUSSEL	19	MALE	CANADA	CANADA	EAST	PREFER NOT TO SAY	NO	HETERO SEXUAL	UNEMPLOYED	SOME HIGH SCHOOL	SINGLE	NO CHILDREN	HI, CJ