

Breaking the Chains: Unveiling Systemic Inequities and Urging Transformative Change for Ontario's Youth

In the heart of Ontario lies a troubling narrative—systemic inequities that disproportionately affect Black, Indigenous, and racialized youth within systems designed to safeguard them. The historical use of policing as a tool for control and marginalization amplifies their encounters with the legal system, starting from childhood and perpetuating fear, mistrust, and enduring trauma within these communities. Unfortunately, this issue extends beyond Ontario; it spans various communities across North America and globally, yet its resonance within the population we aim to serve is particularly disheartening as it hits close to home. Moreover, discussions about policing as a tool for control and marginalization are notably absent from conversations, except when referencing the American experience, often believed to be a concern limited to regions south of our borders. Urgent and comprehensive reforms are imperative to address the systemic marginalization and disproportionate impact on Black, Indigenous, and racialized youth in Ontario's institutions. This necessitates the integration of youth-led initiatives, culturally relevant programs, and the dismantling of entrenched systemic barriers. A collaborative effort among philanthropic organizations, government entities, and communities is essential to create a just and equitable environment where Black and Indigenous youth can thrive, free from the burden of systemic oppression.

Recent tragic events in Canada, as well as the US, have sparked a crucial conversation about policing, highlighting the pressing need for urgent reforms. The loss of Black and Indigenous lives at the hands of authorities, exemplified by the names of Andrew Loku, Joey Knapayasweet, D'Andre Campbell, Regis Korchinski-Paquet in Canada, and George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Elijah McClain in the US, alongside many others in both nations reveals a distressing reality faced by Black and Indigenous communities. The "State of Black and Indigenous Youth in Ontario" report sheds light on the pervasive systemic discrimination within the Education, Child Welfare, and Justice systems, creating pathways to the criminalization of Black and Indigenous youth, resulting in fatal outcomes. The report captures how the intersection of racial discrimination with youth criminalization extends beyond law enforcement interactions to authoritative figures in various spheres through zero tolerance policies, academic streaming, racial profiling, carding, etc... - thereby impacting their education, employment, and overall well-being.

To dismantle this system, a holistic strategy is imperative, recognizing the interconnectedness of these issues. Philanthropy, government, and social service organizations are pivotal in ushering in this transformative era. Through deliberate support for initiatives combatting systemic racism, the philanthropic sector particularly, can catalyze enduring change by incorporating the following practices:

Increase Support for Black and Indigenous Youth-Led Initiatives:

By advocating for and allocating increased funds to initiatives led by Black and Indigenous youth, philanthropic organizations can demonstrate a profound commitment to fostering meaningful change within their communities. It is crucial not only to allocate resources but also to facilitate co-design and leadership opportunities for young Black and Indigenous individuals. Providing them with comprehensive tools and resources empowers them to spearhead positive initiatives that address their community's specific needs.

Empowering youth to take on leadership roles serves as a catalyst to ensure that their voices are not only heard but also integrated into the decision-making processes that significantly impact their lives. This approach guarantees that initiatives are authentically reflective of their experiences and aspirations, thus fostering more inclusive and effective solutions.

Actively supporting these initiatives involves more than just financial aid; it encompasses endorsing and championing specific projects, such as capacity-building programs, mentorship opportunities, and sustainable infrastructure that enables young leaders to thrive and create enduring impacts within their communities.

Invest in Culturally Relevant Programs:

Directing investment towards programs and services that align with unique needs and experiences of Black and Indigenous youth is a pivotal step in promoting their well-being. Prioritizing initiatives that focus on fostering cultural identity, education, and career development tailored to specific community contexts is essential. *E.g.*, investing in youth-led programs that facilitate cultural exchange initiatives ensures that Black and Indigenous young people can actively participate in activities that resonate with their heritage, creating a supportive environment that fosters a strong sense of pride and connection to their cultural roots. By prioritizing these initiatives, philanthropic organizations not only address the specific needs of Black and Indigenous youth but also contribute to their overall development and empowerment within their communities. This targeted investment recognizes the importance of culturally relevant programs in promoting positive outcomes for youth who may face unique challenges stemming from racism. Notable examples of such organizations include:

- [Assembly of 7 Generations](#) in the Ottawa area who offer a wide array of programmes that relate to gardening and harvesting, tanning hides, kayaking, canoeing, crafting with tufting and quills, cooking, camping and survival skills. They also offer traditional ceremonies like sweats and sacred fires.
- [Endoqyaan Awejoo](#) in North Bay, Ontario who promote and preserve cultural practices and traditional knowledge through their programming.
- [Hey Black Girl](#) in Toronto - a project that served as a tool to enhance Black women's success in education. They provided culturally relevant practices to reduce entry barriers. The program was tailored specifically for Black women to equip them with sustainable skills for success.

Address Systemic Barriers:

Advocating for and actively supporting initiatives designed to dismantle systemic barriers and rectify inequities faced by Black and Indigenous youth is a crucial commitment to fostering positive change. This work involves supporting initiatives that challenge, dismantle, and reform policies contributing to the disparities faced by these communities. For instance, actively backing campaigns focused on addressing discriminatory practices

within the criminal, education, child welfare systems, and the environment is an impactful way to contribute to systemic change. By advocating for systemic change at a policy level, we work towards creating more equitable and just systems that address the root causes of institutionalized colonialism and white supremacy imposed on Black and Indigenous youth. This proactive stance aligns with a commitment to social justice and recognizes the need for comprehensive changes to ensure justice and liberation for all. The [Revitalizing Our Sustenance project](#) in the Hamilton Area produced an educational documentary addressing environmental concerns, including the issue of illegal dumping on Six Nations of the Grand River Territory. The goal was to raise awareness and advocate for change to preserve and protect the land.

These examples illustrate how each strategy can be implemented, fostering a more detailed understanding of their practical application and potential impact.

Government service providers and policymakers must also be attuned to unique challenges faced by Black and Indigenous youth, offering tailored support tackling the fundamental causes of systemic oppression, by implementing the following:

Early Intervention Supports to “At-Risk” Youth:

Establishing a mentorship program aimed at providing educational and emotional support to “at-risk” youth in the community is a proactive step toward preventing the escalation of challenges they face. Early intervention is crucial in addressing underlying issues before they lead to involvement in the criminal justice system for instance. A mentorship program can play a vital role in connecting “at-risk” youth with positive role models who offer guidance, educational support, and encouragement. By fostering a supportive and constructive environment, this initiative contributes to breaking the cycle of challenges faced by “at-risk” youth and promotes positive development. This approach aligns with a commitment to creating opportunities for growth and success, ultimately benefiting both the individuals involved and the community as a whole. [Success Beyond Limits](#) is an example of a youth-led community-based program that supports “at-risk” youth complete their education in the Toronto area.

Meaningful Engagement with Black & Indigenous Communities:

Establishing community advisory boards involving Black and Indigenous young people, parents, elders, and community leaders in decision-making processes for educational policies and youth programs is a vital step toward fostering meaningful engagement. Ensuring Black and Indigenous communities are at the table when making decisions that impact Black and Indigenous youth is central to community-informed self-determination. Establishing advisory boards offers a platform for youth, parents, elders, and community leaders to provide valuable insights, contributing to the development of policies and programs that align with the cultural values and aspirations of communities. This collaborative approach not only strengthens community ties but also enhances the effectiveness and cultural relevance of educational initiatives and youth programs, fostering a supportive environment for the holistic development of Black and Indigenous youth.

At Laidlaw Foundation, an Indigenous Advisory Committee was formed to provide guidance and direction, informing the Indigenous Youth & Community Futures Fund (IYFFF) operations, knowledge building, and funding strategies in Indigenous communities across the province of Ontario. Through the Youth Action Fund (YAF) granting stream, members of both Black and Indigenous communities serve as external advisors -

individuals who bring valuable expertise gained from lived and professional experiences within the Education, Child Welfare, and Criminal Justice systems.

By incorporating these strategies, all levels of government as well as philanthropic organizations can actively contribute to dismantling systemic barriers and provide more effective, culturally responsive support for Black and Indigenous youth. Central to this transformative journey is the active involvement of youth. Their voices and experiences, often unheard, shape policies and practices profoundly affecting their lives. Empowering young people is not only a matter of equity; it is essential for lasting change. They must be active participants in systemic change processes, guiding towards systems that recognize and respect their existence and experiences.

In essence, the call for systemic change is a collective commitment to justice, equity, and community well-being. Acknowledging and dismantling racial discrimination structures pave the way for a future where every youth in Ontario can thrive without systemic oppression—a shared responsibility demanding collaboration, empathy, and dedication.

“The State of Black and Indigenous Youth” report emphasizes Black and Indigenous youth as resilient and determined, deserving of opportunities for growth, free from barriers imposed by an established and threatening system. Black, Indigenous, and racialized youth face systemic issues that are deeply rooted in oppression, transcending generations. Meaningful change requires a reimagined system, with justice, education, child welfare, philanthropy, and social services working collectively to address root causes of anti-Black racism and anti-Indigeneity - policies and practices birthed during the period of colonization and the transatlantic slave trade to control, commodify and dehumanize Black and Indigenous people. This transformative approach is essential to facilitate community healing. Youth are also vital leaders in the reform process, and their empowerment is key. The call for a paradigm shift is definitely not new. Transparency, accountability, data-driven systemic change, cultural safety training addressing anti-Black racism and anti-Indigeneity, and oversight are crucial. The report is not just a snapshot; it's a call to action for a more just and inclusive Ontario where Black and Indigenous youth can thrive. It's time to break the cycle and build a brighter future for and alongside Black and Indigenous youth.

To access Laidlaw's full report: [**The State of Black and Indigenous Youth in Ontario: An Examination of the Experiences and Impacts of Policing on Black, Indigenous and Racialized Youth.**](#)

We'd also love to hear what you think of the report, this article or any other topic you would like for us to explore. Please share your comments and feedback to imanh@laidlawfdn.org.