

# The State of Black and Indigenous Youth in Ontario

---

An Examination of the Experiences and Impacts of Policing on Black, Indigenous & Racialized Youth

---

**Executive Summary**  
November 2023



# State of Black and Indigenous Youth in Ontario: An Examination of the Experiences and Impacts of Policing on Racialized Youth

## Executive Summary

# 2023

→ Laidlaw Foundation

### Introduction

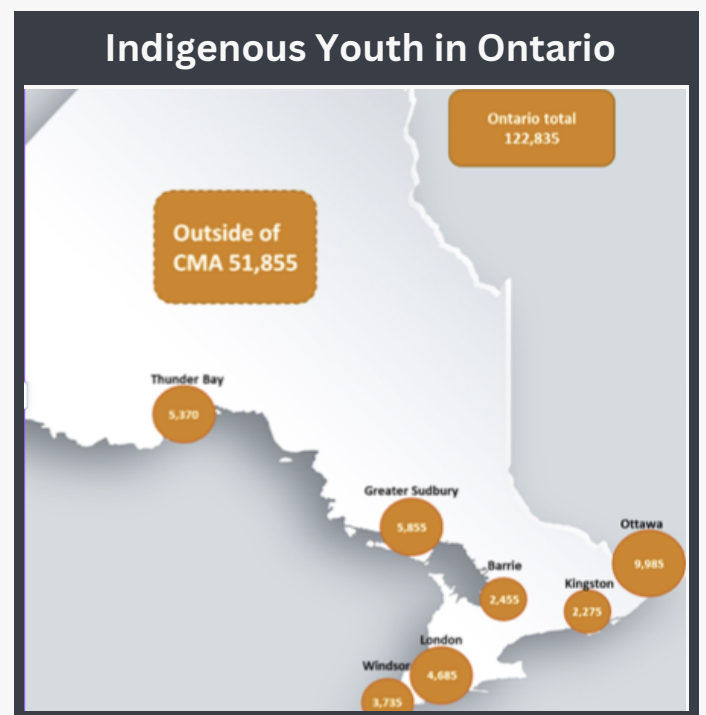
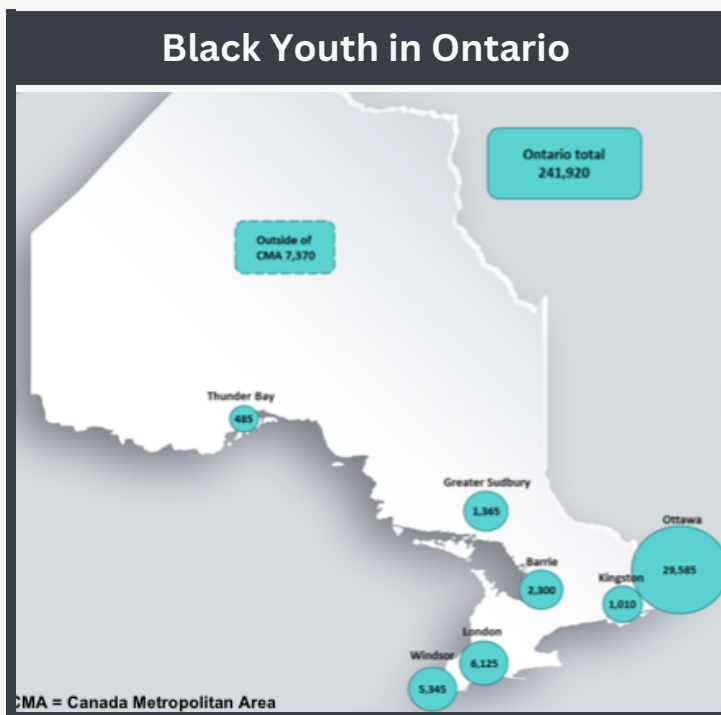
**Historical Context:** The pervasive marginalization of Black and Indigenous youth in Ontario can be traced back to a legacy of historical injustices, which include colonization, the legacy of residential schools, and the Indian Act. This enduring marginalization manifests in various dimensions of their lives, encompassing their disproportionate involvement in the child welfare and criminal systems, erosion of cultural heritage, disparities in socioeconomic well-being, elevated rates of academic attrition, subpar health outcomes, and persistent encounters with stigmatization and discrimination. Confronting these multifaceted challenges necessitates the implementation of culturally sensitive support systems, enhanced access to quality education and healthcare, the dismantling of systemic racism, and the empowerment of Black and Indigenous youth.

**Purpose of the Report:** The "State of Black and Indigenous Youth in Ontario" report illuminates the experiences and repercussions of policing on Black and Indigenous youth in Ontario, with a particular focus on their interactions with the criminal, child welfare, and education systems. This report amplifies the voices of individuals from these communities and lays the groundwork for continuous endeavours to unearth distinctive challenges and advocate for transformative change.

# Findings

## Quick Facts: Black and Indigenous Youth in Ontario

- **Population:** Based on Statistics Canada data from 2021, the count of Black youth aged 15-34 in Ontario exceeded 240,000, while the number of Indigenous youth aged 15-24 reached a little over 150,000. These figures represent an increase from 2016 when the respective counts were approximately 196,000 and 115,000.(1)(2 )
- **Geographic Distribution:** The majority of the Black youth population primarily resides in urban centres such as Toronto, Ottawa, Oshawa, and Hamilton. In contrast, Indigenous youth were more evenly distributed across both urban and non-urban areas, with urban concentrations in regions like Thunder Bay and Greater Sudbury.(3)



(1) Statistics Canada (2021k). *Chapter 4: Indigenous Youth in Canada*,

<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/42-28-0001/2021001/article/00004-eng.htm>

(2) Statistics Canada. (2021a). Table 98-10-0429-01. *Highest level of education by census year, visible minority and generation*

*status: Canada, provinces and territories, census metropolitan areas and census agglomerations.*

<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=9810042901>

(3) Ibid.

> **Racial Profiling and Over-Policing:** Racial profiling and over-policing play a significant role in exacerbating the school-to-prison pipeline, particularly impacting Black and Indigenous youth. Harsher treatment in schools can lead to increased interactions with law enforcement, and over-policing can further lead to a rise in school-based arrests, potentially funneling youth into the criminal system. Frequent police interactions can be traumatic, affecting mental health and increasing the likelihood of future legal entanglements. Disproportionate representation in the juvenile justice system deepens the problem, perpetuating a difficult-to-break cycle. Early criminal records create enduring barriers to education and employment. Addressing this issue necessitates equitable school treatment, reduced police presence, and restorative approaches. It's crucial to confront systemic racism and bias to ensure equal opportunities for all students.

### How Colonization Impacts Black and Indigenous Youth Today:

- **Intergenerational Trauma:** Historical injustices have left a lasting impact on Black and Indigenous communities, leading to intergenerational trauma. This trauma results in mental health challenges, the adoption of unhealthy coping mechanisms, and self-destructive behaviors. To break this cycle, there's a critical need for culturally sensitive support and interventions.
- **Systemic Policing Issues :** Recognizing the systemic nature of policing and its impact on the lives of Black and Indigenous youth is essential for advancing social justice and equity. Policing disproportionately affects Black and Indigenous communities, revealing systemic racism rooted in policies and behaviors stemming from a system and country that was not designed to support them but rather to control them. Acknowledging the influence of discriminatory practices and policing is vital for effective policy development, advocacy, law enforcement reform, and proactive prevention of future inequities.

“I am so happy that Black and Indigenous youth are sometimes able to lean into the love of their communities and families to find a way through, but positive development for young people does not have to continuously test the limits of their resiliency.”

— Smyrna Wright, Youth Advisory Committee Member

## Discrimination, Profiling, and Policing:

**> Overrepresentation in Child Welfare:** Black and Indigenous youth are overrepresented in the child welfare system, leading to challenges upon aging out of care. The overrepresentation suggests systemic bias or discrimination in the child welfare system. It implies that Black and Indigenous youth are more likely to be removed from their homes and communities and placed in care, which is an injustice that reflects historical and contemporary inequalities. Removal from their families and communities can lead to the erosion of cultural ties and a loss of cultural identity. This disruption has long-term consequences for their well-being and sense of belonging. Involvement with the child welfare system can be a traumatic experience and stigmatization and discrimination within the system further exacerbates the emotional and psychological challenges faced by young people. Aging out of care without adequate support while in care and while transitioning out, can limit opportunities available to them as they come of age. They may struggle to access education, housing, employment, and healthcare, making it more difficult to achieve independence and self-sufficiency. Thereby increasing their risk of homelessness, which can lead to a cycle of poverty, vulnerability, and other social issues.

The overrepresentation of Black and Indigenous youth in the child welfare system highlights systemic issues that need to be addressed. It's not inherently bad that youth are in need of support, but the overrepresentation suggests that the system is not serving Black and Indigenous communities equitably. It is essential to work towards more equitable, culturally sensitive, and supportive child welfare systems to ensure that all youth have a fair opportunity to thrive as they transition into adulthood.

**> Education Disparities:** Black and Indigenous youth are encouraged to take basic courses and apply to college rather than university, contributing to disparities in education. This approach perpetuates the belief that higher education is unattainable for them, limiting their long-term career prospects. It also inadvertently conveys a message that they are not capable of pursuing more challenging paths, contributing to the opportunity gap and reinforcing stereotypes. To create a fairer educational system, it's crucial to offer equal opportunities and support tailored to individual abilities and aspirations, whether that leads to college or university, while addressing systemic biases and inequalities.

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT, PHILANTHROPIC SECTOR, AND THE PUBLIC

The recommendations provided below offer a glimpse into the broader array of actions detailed within our report. While they do not encompass the full scope of our findings, they serve to emphasize critical steps necessary to bring about the transformative change that Black and Indigenous youth have longed for throughout history. These actions represent significant strides towards addressing their longstanding aspirations.

## Government (all levels):

- **Prevent School-to-Prison Pipeline:** Introduce holistic wrap-around services within the child welfare, justice, and education systems to address root causes and systemic barriers.
- **Early Intervention and Culturally Responsive Services:** Invest in early intervention and prevention programs, culturally responsive child welfare services, and trauma-informed care.
- **Culturally Responsive Curriculum:** Implement a culturally responsive and inclusive curriculum in education and address disproportionate treatment.


## Criminal System:

- **Rehabilitation and Diversion:** Increase funding for rehabilitation and reentry programs, and invest in diversion programs and community-based alternatives, such as restorative justice.

## Philanthropy:

- **Funding Youth-Led Initiatives:** Provide increased funding for youth-led initiatives focusing on the unique needs and aspirations of Black and Indigenous youth.
- **Culturally Relevant Programs:** Invest in culturally relevant programs and services, addressing impacts of systemic racism, identity, mental health, education, and career development.
- **Removing Funding Barriers:** Provide flexible funding and simplify reporting requirements for grant recipients.

# CONCLUSION



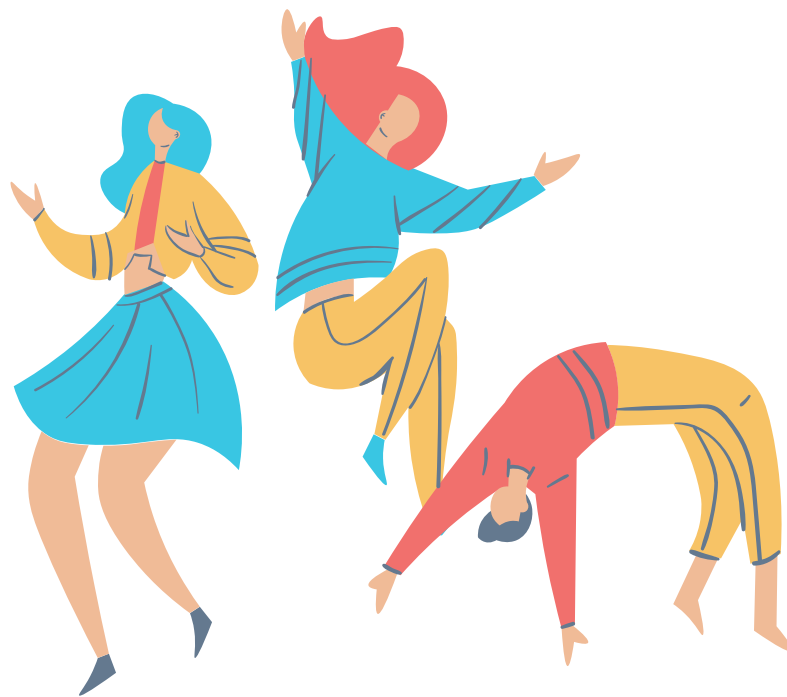
“We hope this report will not turn into just another research finding telling us the same issues that plagues Canadian society, without proactive decisions taken by funders (such as Laidlaw Foundation), policy makers, and organizations that work with and serve Indigenous and Black youth in Ontario. Centering the voices of Indigenous and Black youth in the decision-making process, without tokenism, would directly address ways we can dismantle anti-Indigeneity and anti-Black racism, which is negatively shaping their lived experiences.”

— Hodan Ahmed, Youth Advisory Committee Member

The "State of Black and Indigenous Youth in Ontario" report serves as a foundational document for understanding the challenges faced by the rapidly growing Black and Indigenous youth population in Ontario. This inaugural report provides an initial insight into some of the issues they confront and presents specific calls to action directed towards all levels of government, our philanthropic peers, community organizations, and the general public. Future reports will strive to amplify the voices of Black and Indigenous youth, advocate for change, and empower them. Subsequent editions will delve more deeply into the lives and experiences of Black and Indigenous youth.

To access the full report, visit [www.laidlawfdn.org](http://www.laidlawfdn.org).

2 St. Clair Avenue East Suite 300  
Toronto, ON M4T 2T5  
(W): [www.laidlawfdn.org](http://www.laidlawfdn.org)  
(E): [info@laidlawfdn.org](mailto:info@laidlawfdn.org)  
(P): (416) 964-3614



Suggested citation: Laidlaw Foundation (2023). The State of Black and Indigenous Youth of Ontario: An Examination of the Experiences and Impacts of Policing on Black, Indigenous and Racialized Youth. Toronto, ON: Laidlaw Foundation.

**LAIDLAW**  
FOUNDATION