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**Applying Critical Race Theory to Explore Service Needs and Pathways to Inclusion for
African, Caribbean, and Black Youth in the Greater Toronto Area**

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Abstract

Despite comprising a significant 8.7% of the Greater Toronto Area's population and enriching the city's cultural landscape (Statistics Canada, 2022), African, Caribbean, Black youths face a harsh reality of unemployment rates doubling the national and provincial average (City of Toronto, 2017). This underscores the urgent need to understand and address these systemic inequities. This research applies Critical Race Theory to investigate how systemic anti-Black racism shapes the well-being, service needs, and pathways to inclusion of African Caribbean Black youths in the Greater Toronto Area. Leveraging a virtual digital ethnography approach, this study analyzes secondary data to augment the voices of African, Caribbean, Black youths. The key themes that emerged from the analysis are centring African and Caribbean Black youth voices, dismantling institutional anti-Black racism, transformative change, Anti-oppressive approaches, and systemic anti-Black racism and its impact.

This research aims to inform the development of anti-racist interventions and promote pathways to inclusion that dismantle systemic barriers, empowering ACB youth to thrive within the GTA.

Keywords: Anti-Black racism, youth sector, inclusion, pathways to inclusion, culturally responsive programming, youth workers, Black youth, racism, achievement gaps, teacher beliefs, academic achievement, race, well-being.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Beneath the vibrancy of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), one of Canada's most diverse communities, African, Caribbean, and Black (ACB) individuals comprise 8.7% of the population (Statistics Canada, 2022). With their roots in Africa, the Caribbean, and other regions, the ACB communities bring a rich multi-layered fabric of traditions, music, dance, and cuisine (Oyeniran, 2020). This enriches the city's cultural landscape, from Caribbean carnivals to Afrobeat music nights, influencing fashion, language, and artistic expression (Oyeniran, 2020). Yet, despite their vibrant contributions over the years, they grapple with anti-Black racism and marginalization within the youth sector. For instance, in a report by the City of Toronto (2017), 34% of ACB youth and individuals have an unemployment rate that doubles the national and provincial average.

In Ontario's youth sector, anti-Black racism has a significant effect on Black youths because of racial discrimination (Bernard, 2023). This limits their opportunities, exposes them to unequal practices and hostility, and impacts their resources or chances (Bernard, 2023). Anti-Black racism hinders ACB individuals' progress through personal, institutional, and cultural ways (Ortega-Williams & Harden, 2022). Anti-Black racism within the school system has a particularly profound impact on ACB students.

Research by Pathways to Education (2019) found that ACB students, particularly males, have disproportionately higher suspension and expulsion rates in a school system that is saturated with mistrust and suspicion. The report went on to point out that between 2006-2011, 42% of ACB youths were suspended at least once when compared to their white counterparts at 18%, which is more than double the suspension rate during that period (Pathways to Education, 2019). Similarly, James' (2012) analysis found that discrimination along with stereotyping of ACB students in the school system is done in the same way ACB individuals are stereotyped in

media as “immigrants, fatherless, athletes, troublemakers, and underachievers” (James, 2012, p. 467), which are all prime examples of anti-Black racism. So, what defines the nature of anti-Black racism? It is an embedded network of societal beliefs, attitudes, actions, practices, and behaviours that systematically dehumanize, devalue, exclude, and marginalize ACB people in communities (Comrie et al., 2022; Pieterse et al., 2023; Ortega-Williams & Harden, 2022; Bledsoe, 2020). This sort of unfair treatment is rooted in society-made rank systems based on race. These systems unjustly ignore the worth and respect of ACB individuals and their communities.

Furthermore, anti-Black racism is entrenched in systems like welfare and criminal justice (YouthREX, 2018), which takes on many forms, from the trauma of racialized policing to systemic economic barriers that trap Black youth in poverty. This type of discrimination also fuels mental health struggles, adding layers of harm inflicted on the collective well-being of Black youths (YouthREX, 2018). The City of Toronto (2017) reported that about 42% of ACB youths in the GTA are overrepresented within the child welfare system and that they are 23% more likely to be charged and arrested by police. These forms of discrimination lead to mental health struggles, which exacerbate damage to the collective well-being of ACB youths. “Kwame McKenzie, a professor of psychiatry in the Temerty Faculty of Medicine and director of health equity at CAMH, has found that Black populations face a 200 to 300 percent increased risk for serious mental health conditions” (Singer, 2021, para. 5). The reason for this is that in the world of today, there are still vestiges of past events like the transatlantic slave trade that have perpetuated discrimination and marginalization of ACB communities (Radburn, 2023). These leftover traces of the past still support systems of thought that keep the prominence of whiteness and white supremacy alive. This upheld system of white supremacy has evolved in time to the

point where anti-Black racism born from colonial conquest lingers over the lives of many ACB communities, empowering anti-Black racism to command a suffocating hold on their lives.

Recognizing this deep-seated history of anti-Blackness illuminates the origins of terms like "traders in men" (Radburn, 2023). Coined by British radical Thomas Paine in 1775 to describe the transatlantic slave trade, this term reflects a chilling truth: white European traders sacrificed their consciences and integrity for profit, directly facilitating the brutal theft and murder of African men and women (Radburn, 2023, p. 1). This dehumanizing trade not only resulted in the forced labour and suffering of millions of Africans but also laid the foundation for systemic racism and inequality that still exists today (Radburn, 2023). The legacy of the transatlantic slave trade continues to shape social, economic, and political structures, perpetuating discrimination and marginalization within ACB communities (McPherson, 2021; Bartholomew et al., 2023; City of Toronto, 2017; Radburn, 2023). This resulted in a lack of resources and opportunities for ACB youth, hindering their ability to thrive and reach their full potential (McPherson, 2021; Bartholomew et al., 2023; City of Toronto, 2017; Radburn, 2023).

Anti-Black racism tend to manifest in unfair methods of hiring, unequal chances in education and disproportionate prison sentences in comparison to non-Black people, which creates a problematic cycle for many ACB individuals (Comrie et al., 2022). For instance, 27% of cases involving carding are focused on ACB youths, illustrating that this group faces carding three times their representation in the GTA (City of Toronto, 2017). Anti-Black racism can also be identified as anti-Blackness, which is a unique type of oppression that is not just about class (Bledsoe, 2020). However, it reaches far into institutions to deny ACB individuals the right to be human and therefore illegitimate (Bledsoe, 2020). No matter their class, this reasoning negatively affects all Black societies because of the perpetuated cycles of inequality (Bledsoe, 2020).

By reviewing research on the impact of anti-Black racism, the limitations of needs assessments, and potential strategies for inclusion, this review will synthesize insights to inform more equitable practices and policies in the youth sector. To gather articles for this literature review, the following databases were searched: Omi York University's Library database, ProQuest, and Google Scholar published between 2008 and 2023, with the exception of one article from 2003. The key terms used in the search are as follows: Anti-Black racism, youth sector, inclusion, pathways to inclusion, culturally responsive programming, youth workers, Black youth, racism, achievement gaps, teacher beliefs and academic achievement.

Chapter Two: Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

First, the literature review will explore the systemic nature of anti-Black racism and its ideological manifestations in youth programs, organizations, and systems. It will look at the consequences of anti-Black racism on Black youth's well-being, opportunities, and outcomes. Next, it will research service needs and review gaps, noting the importance of centring on Black youths' perspectives while focusing on the root causes of disparities. Finally, the review will discuss different approaches to designing inclusive pathways for Black youth and the role of youth workers in the process. This review aims to move beyond documenting anti-Black racism as an abstract issue to outlining actionable steps that the youth sector can take to dismantle racism and create environments where Black youth are valued, accepted, supported, and able to thrive.

The impact of anti-Black racism on African, Caribbean, Black youths.

Several in-depth qualitative studies and reports used various methods and methodologies, like case studies, cross-sectional surveys, autoethnography, interviews, community engagement activities, and Critical Race Theory-informed analysis, to examine the detrimental effects of anti-Black racism on the well-being and outcomes of ACB youths (Bartholomew et al., 2023; Rice et al., 2023; McPherson, 2021; Massaquoi, 2023; Douglas et al., 2022). This is exemplified in the work undertaken by Bartholomew et al. (2023), who interviewed five participants, ages 29 to 39, who are therapists from the United States of America (USA). Three participants were women; two identified as White, two as Black, and one as biracial Asian and White (Bartholomew et al., 2023). These participants shared their experiences of cultural comfort and discomfort when Black clients discussed experiencing anti-Black racism during therapy sessions, along with the impact (Bartholomew et al., 2023).

To further illustrate the breadth of this type of research on anti-Black racism, Rice et al. (2023) collected 533 surveys but narrowed the sample size down to 376 respondents, excluding those with incomplete data. The study was conducted in the USA, focusing on the problematic relationship between law enforcement agencies and the ACB communities as an investigation of “guardian-officer vs. warrior-cop literature” (Rice et al., 2023, p.1). In contrast, McPherson (2021) uses an autoethnographic approach that draws from her own experience as a Black individual, other Black women in public spaces and their encounters with surveillance, criminalization, and anti-Black racism. Alongside this, she gathered data from news articles in Canada and the United States, along with accounts of other Black women's experiences in the media. These sources illustrate her position that anti-Black racism, surveillance, and the criminalization of Black bodies have a significant impact on the ability of ACB individuals to engage in play, which are leisure activities (McPherson, 2021). These findings also demonstrate that surveillance and policing of ACB-specific activities, e.g., music festivals, community gatherings, and sports events, restrict their freedom and deny their value as human beings.

Massaquoi's (2023) study, on the other hand, focuses on the impact of anti-Black racism in the healthcare sector, particularly in Canadian healthcare institutions. The study makes clear that healthcare leaders need to fix the system's anti-black racism and power imbalances to make real progress in fighting racism within healthcare. This is because Black communities in Canada are calling for changes as healthcare organizations face backlash for their lack of Black representation and inadequate support for Black health needs (Massaquoi, 2023). Findings from the research illustrate that there is a lack of Black doctors, nurses, and leaders, limited programs, and few mentorship opportunities for Black students pursuing careers in healthcare (Massaquoi, 2023). This underrepresentation of Black individuals in the healthcare sector can have significant detrimental impacts on health equity and access to culturally competent care. Furthermore,

having little to no role models and well-established support systems can lead to lower retention rates among ACB students in healthcare education programs and most importantly, it affects all aspects of their lives in a white-dominant culture.

Building on the findings of Bartholomew et al. (2023), which revealed an increased risk of anxiety, depression, and trauma among ACB youth due to anti-Black racism, highlights a case study by the author on the real-life impact. The study found that a mother expressed concern that her son with selective mutism would face harsher punishment in school if he spoke up, reflecting the fear many ACB families have due to the marginalization of ACB males in educational settings (Bartholomew et al., 2023). This example underscores how anti-Black racism can manifest in everyday situations, leading to psychological distress and silencing of Black voices.

Further research indicates a correlation between anti-Black racism and several negative outcomes for Black individuals, including lower academic achievement due to discriminatory practices in schools, higher unemployment rates, increased police interactions and profiling (McPherson, 2021; City of Toronto, 2017). According to a report from the City of Toronto (2017), Black individuals are often victims of 85% of hate crimes in the Toronto area, which shows how racism is a presence that limits their ability to exist. The report also notes that police often card Black individuals living in Toronto at three times the representation in the population (City of Toronto, 2017). Not only did they card them into the criminal justice system, but they were also streamed into courses that did not allow them to advance in the academic world (City of Toronto, 2017; YouthREX, 2017). As a result, these social and structural dynamics of anti-Black racism compound Black individuals' ability to find gainful employment, creating yet another barrier with reports that show 13% of Black communities in Toronto are affected by unemployment, which seems to double the overall provincial rate (City of Toronto, 2017). These factors perpetuate a cycle of poverty and limited opportunities for upward mobility.

Additionally, research also highlights the various ways ACB communities and individuals develop resistance and psychological protective factors to exist within a society shaped by anti-Black racism. In this context, the article positions play as an essential human need, offering freedom, joy, and self-expression through simple actions like riding a bicycle or participating in basketball matches (McPherson, 2021). For some ACB individuals, embracing playful moments - as simple as expressing a political opinion - becomes an act of defiance, a way to reclaim agency in a world that often seeks to marginalize them. Sadly, these attempts to engage often are met with disapproval, tension, and even violence from their non-Black counterparts (McPherson, 2021). This is exemplified when Fox News commentator Laura Ingraham told superstar basketball players like LeBron James to “shut up and dribble” simply for sharing his political views (Lowry, 2018). This oppressive response stems from a dominant white society that seeks to control ACB lives in every sphere – from exploiting them for entertainment to criminalizing even superstars from ACB communities, all in the name of surveillance (McPherson, 2021).

Research further shows that systemically, anti-Black racism manifests through discrimination in healthcare, education, childcare, and the criminal justice systems, which collectively impact the physical and mental health of Black youths (McPherson, 2021; Massaquoi, 2023; City of Toronto, 2017). McPherson (2021) asserts that this “subjugation of Black humanity contributes to the continued nonstatus of Black people” (p. 365). This, in turn, is an appropriate power structure that allows people of European descent to claim authority over ACB bodies through systems of oppression (McPherson, 2021), in other words white supremacy employ systemic chains of oppression to maintain its dominance over lives of ACB communities. Over time, the observed effects of systematic and institutional racism include the creation and compounding of racial battle fatigue and a lack of social support (Bartholomew et al., 2023; Rice et al., 2023; McPherson, 2021; Massaquoi, 2023; Douglas et al., 2022). This then

contributes to the continued marginalization of ACB youth and their families across all systems in society (Bartholomew et al., 2023; Rice et al., 2023; McPherson, 2021; Massaquoi, 2023; Douglas et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, addressing anti-Black racism will require racial humility, self-reflection and self-reflexivity from leaders, community involvement, and interventions informed by critical race theory to challenge systemic racism across institutions (Stirling-Cameron et al., 2023; Massaquoi, 2023; Badwall, 2016). Research demonstrates the profound and intersectional impact of racism on ACB youths' well-being, access to opportunities, and lifelong outcomes, highlighting the need for integrated remedies to dismantle systemic racism and promote societal equity for Black youth and their families (Bernard, 2023; Comrie et al., 2022; Edwards et al., 2023; Massaquoi, 2023).

Identifying anti-Black racism within services: unmet needs and gaps

Understanding how anti-Black racism within institutions and structures impacts the unmet needs of ACB youth is crucial to closing the achievement gap and ensuring equitable opportunities. By identifying service gaps and discrepancies, targeted interventions can be developed to address their challenges. Research exposes alarming disparities in educational outcomes for ACB youth, including lower graduation rates, limited access to quality resources, and disproportionate disciplinary actions compared to their peers (McPherson, 2021; Rice et al., 2023; Bartholomew et al., 2023). These educational barriers are just one piece of a larger puzzle.

The healthcare system also fails ACB youths on multiple levels. For instance, systematic issues, practitioner biases, personal hesitations, and deep-seated distrust within the community create significant barriers to care (Fante-Coleman & Jackson-Best, 2020). These barriers can result in ACB youths receiving substandard care or being discouraged from seeking help altogether. Even culturally incompetent services may promote feelings of inferiority,

discouraging ACB communities from seeking healthcare (Fante-Coleman & Jackson-Best, 2020). Disturbingly, some research asserts that ACB youth are disproportionately funnelled into the healthcare system through the criminal justice system (Fante-Coleman & Jackson-Best, 2020). This perpetuates a cycle of incarceration and reinforces systemic challenges for ACB communities.

The cycle of disadvantages does not stop there. Economic inequality disproportionately harms ACB youths' well-being through higher unemployment rates, limiting their access to essential support and potentially pushing them to desperate measures like crime for survival (Massaquoi, 2023; Douglas et al., 2022). Furthermore, racism, discrimination and social exclusion are pervasive experiences that detrimentally impact ACB youth's mental health (Bartholomew et al., 2023; Rice et al., 2023). This web of interconnected challenges underscores the urgent need for a comprehensive approach. Research emphasizes the importance of fostering inclusive community partnerships, securing funding, and implementing strategies that promote equity in healthcare, education, and economic opportunities for ACB youth (YouthREX, 2017; Fante-Coleman & Jackson-Best, 2020). Only by dismantling these systemic barriers across sectors can ACB youth have the chance to thrive.

Limitation of research

While research can provide foresight into the gaps and needs of social issues surrounding anti-Black racism, there are also limitations to note. For instance, data insufficiency impedes researchers' ability to gain a comprehensive insight into ACB youth experiences that could be used to formulate interventions which target and improve their well-being (Akuoko-Barfi et al., 2023; Edwards et al., 2023). Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge the limitation of generalizing from smaller studies focused on ACB youths and families. For example, these studies may treat the experiences of ACB communities homogeneously, leading to sweeping

recommendations that overlook the diversity within this population (Stirling-Cameron et al., 2023). ACB youth come from various backgrounds and have unique needs. Therefore, factors like gender, socioeconomic status, social location, and immigration status can distinctively shape the challenges and support they need (Stirling-Cameron et al., 2023). Moreover, the socio-political climate constantly evolves in response to immigration, socio-cultural shifts, and demographic changes (Bowleg, 2013). This can render research findings outdated over time for several reasons. First, as public attitudes and policies towards immigration and cultural integration fluctuate, the needs and experiences of ACB youth may also change (Bowleg, 2013). Second, demographic shifts, such as changes in age distribution or geographic concentration of ACB communities, can necessitate adjustments in support services (Bowleg, 2013). Finally, evolving social and cultural norms may impact how ACB youth perceive and respond to the challenges they face (Bowleg, 2013). The review also exposes a critical gap in existing research: the lack of intersectionality. Many studies fail to consider how ACB and 2SLGBTQ+ identities combined to create unique challenges that significantly impact various aspects of these youths' lives (Bowleg, 2013; Rice et al., 2023). These challenges range from mental health disparities to housing insecurity, often compounding one another and leading to the breakdown of relationships with families, friends and cultural communities (Bowleg, 2013; Rice et al., 2023).

Another limitation of the research is the use of small sample sizes that rely on self-reported data, which can lead to biases, as emphasized by Akuoko-Barfi et al. (2023) and Stirling-Cameron et al. (2023). In addition, focusing on the specific geographic location can ignore policies and practices in different jurisdictions that influence the experiences of ACB youth and how that information can be collected (Edwards et al., 2023). There is also an absence of race-based data being collected or a system that collects these data, which is believed to prevent vigorous statistical analyses of systems and how they work to uphold anti-Black racism

(Akuoko-Barfi et al., 2023; Rice et al., 2023). A significant limitation of current research is the lack of focus on co-designing programs and interventions with ACB communities that would center their voices and lived experiences. Much of the existing research takes a deficit perspective and consists primarily of medical discourse and talks, concentrated narrowly on healthcare and mental health issues.

There is a concerning gap in research that engages ACB communities themselves in collaborative program design and decision-making processes. The emerging scholarship continues to overlook the assets within ACB communities and the critical value of their insider perspectives in developing responsive programs tailored to their needs and strengths. More participatory action research uplifting and amplifying ACB voices is needed to create effective, equitable programs, policies, and research. Therefore, two (2) grey literature was introduced to capture those broader perspectives and experiences. However, a limitation of including grey literature is that it does not undergo the same rigorous processes as peer-reviewed articles. Considering the constraints, one can assert that while research proves to be valuable, there is a lack of research on anti-Black racism. Thus, it is crucial to consider these existing limitations for future academic research to critically apply these findings and recognize the importance of diversity, evolution, and intersectionality. Overall, this literature review supports the view that continued efforts are needed to address data gaps through culturally attuned approaches that fully capture ACB youths' experiences.

Co-designing pathways to inclusion

The stark racial disparities ACB youth face in healthcare, mental health, education, and the criminal justice system point to a deeper issue: anti-Black ideology embedded within these very systems. Addressing these service and policy gaps requires dismantling this ideology at the structural level. The literature highlights the need for targeted efforts to promote equity and

inclusion in ACB communities across various sectors. While the concept of co-designing pathways to inclusion was not explicitly discussed in all studies, several key strategies emerge as crucial components. Public Health Ontario (2023) emphasizes the importance of designing inclusive programs and services, which inherently requires challenging underlying biases. As Booker et al. (2023) emphasized, culturally responsive care is a critical step in this direction. Integrating values rooted in the African diaspora and ensuring culturally competent professionals fosters trust and creates a more welcoming environment for ACB youth seeking mental health services. This aligns with the concept of co-designing pathways, as it acknowledges the unique needs and perspectives of the ACB community.

Furthermore, building trust within ACB communities and ensuring initiatives reflect ACB priorities are essential for fostering a sense of belonging (Public Health Ontario, 2023; Jackson et al., 2022). Community engagement allows ACB voices to be heard and directly shapes the design of these interventions, dismantling the idea that solutions can be imposed from outside the community. Dismantling anti-Black ideology and co-designing solutions that address the specific needs and perspectives of ACB youth can create inclusive systems that promote equity and well-being.

Public Health Ontario (2023) also asserts that anti-racist policies and training are needed to dismantle systematic barriers to critically address inequalities in accessing care and support for ACB community members. Jackson et al. (2022) work focuses on recruitment initiatives and calls for more inclusive support services that increase the representation of ACB individuals in faculty and administrative positions because these are critical aspects of creating pathways in the educational and healthcare system. Fante-Coleman and Jackson-Best (2020) also note that at a systematic level, there should be an emphasis placed on reducing wait times for services being

offered to ACB community members through partnerships with community organizations that serve the ACB population.

Investing in community organizations that serve Black communities is crucial. Therefore, a increased funding would allow them to expand essential services like culturally responsive mental health programs and provide other vital support resources (Fante-Coleman & Jackson-Best, 2020).

The City of Toronto's 2017 report offers many recommendations that could be implemented. For example, the report proposes developing top-notch programs for ACB children and youth, including mentorship initiatives that foster "intergenerational and cultural connections" (p. 20). These programs can provide much-needed guidance and build a sense of belonging for young people. Furthermore, co-developing educational programs and resources with parents of ACB 2SLGBTQ+ youth is essential since this collaborative approach, as recommended by the City of Toronto report (2017), ensures that families receive the support they need and that programs are culturally relevant and effective.

Building capacity within ACB communities is also critical. This is because it fosters professional development and engagement when institutions with power partner with ACB-led organizations to co-develop and establish networks for ACB staff (City of Toronto, 2017). This empowers ACB professionals and ensures that services are delivered by individuals who understand the community's unique needs.

The literature review gives an overview of existing research on the impact of anti-Black racism on ACB youth and strategies for promoting inclusion in youth-focused environments. The findings demonstrate the profound effects of systemic racism across education, healthcare, criminal justice, and other institutions, which collectively harm ACB youth's well-being, access to opportunities, and outcomes. Discrimination and exclusion are pervasive experiences resulting

in trauma, anxiety, depression, and overall poorer mental and physical health outcomes for ACB youth compared to other groups. It is apparent in reviewing the service needs and gaps that ACB youth face inequities in accessing quality healthcare, education, employment, and support for personal development. However, research limitations such as lack of race-based data, small sample sizes, and lack of participatory approaches with ACB communities constrain a complete understanding of needs. This signals the need for more community-engaged research to capture diverse experiences and co-develop responsive programs.

While the concept of co-designing pathways to inclusion was not explicitly addressed in all the reviewed materials, several key strategies consistently emerged. These included the need for culturally competent care and professionals to understand and respect ACB cultures. It is also essential to build trust between service providers and ACB communities, dismantling systemic racism through the implementation of anti-racist policies. Increasing representation in leadership positions ensures that ACB voices are heard and reflected in decision-making processes. Partnerships with ACB-led organizations leverage their existing knowledge and deep understanding of community needs. Additionally, providing family support programs strengthens the family's capacity to support ACB youth, while mentorship programs offer guidance and positive role models. Finally, establishing networks for ACB staff empowers these professionals and fosters a sense of belonging within institutions. However, there remains a significant gap in research on participatory program design and decision-making processes that center ACB communities' voices and priorities.

The literature review also highlights that there is a need for intersectional data collection, increased funding for ACB-led/serving organizations, anti-racist training, representation of ACB professionals, mental health supports, and participatory community-based research and program design. The next critical steps will involve partnering directly with ACB youth and communities

to co-develop and evaluate solutions tailored to their assets, needs, and visions. This literature review provides a foundation to inform further research and collaborative action towards equity and social justice in the youth sector.

Chapter Three: Critical Race Theory

Scholarship on anti-Black racism delves into key debates and perspectives on how it operates within social and institutional structures. A central question remains: Is Anti-Black racism best understood as individual prejudice or as a deeply embedded system woven into the fabric of institutions? (Bledsoe, 2020). Some scholars theorize that anti-Blackness is an ideology that dehumanizes ACB individuals and underpins historical and ongoing oppression (Bledsoe, 2020; McPherson, 2021). Alternatively, other works focus more narrowly on interpersonal racial prejudice and discriminatory actions by individuals, overlooking structural factors (McPherson, 2021). Related debates examine whether anti-Black racism is fundamentally a manifestation of class inequality versus a unique form of racial subordination that impacts ACB individuals regardless of class status (Bledsoe, 2020). Prominent critical race scholars argue that anti-Blackness produces racial hierarchies that position Blackness as inherently inferior, fueling systemic devaluation that creates barriers for ACB communities (Ortega-Williams & Harden, 2022; Bledsoe, 2020). This systemic lens sees anti-Blackness as historically rooted and reproduced through policies, practices, and resource allocation patterns across education, healthcare, employment systems, and more (Clarke, 2022).

Building from these scholarly considerations, my research was grounded in critical race theory (CRT) for its effectiveness in challenging narratives that uphold racial hierarchies that marginalize ABC communities. However, it is crucial to distinguish CRT from intersectionality, a complementary concept. Intersectionality, a cornerstone of CRT, emphasizes how social identities like race, class, and gender intersect, shaping unique experiences of oppression and privilege (Gillborn, 2015; Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006). Black women, for example, face a distinct pressure to embody the "strong Black woman" trope, managing family health and racial trauma, leading to unique health burdens (Stirling-Cameron et al., 2023, p. 361). This differs

from white women, who experience less pressure due to the absence of this stereotype. CRT, on the other hand, offers a broader lens. As Delgado & Stefancic (2023) explain, CRT is an academic and social movement that analyzes the interconnectedness of racism, racial dynamics, and power structures. This expansive framework incorporates economic factors, historical context, environmental influences, collective and individual benefits, emotions, and unconscious biases (Ray, 2022). Importantly, CRT views race as a social construct, not biological, and racism as embedded within societal systems – not just individual prejudice (Ray, 2022). Therefore, CRT provides the foundation for understanding racial inequality, while intersectionality adds depth by acknowledging the unique experiences arising from overlapping social identities (Ray, 2022; Gillborn, 2015). This combined approach ensures a comprehensive examination of the challenges faced by ABC communities (Ray, 2022; Stirling-Cameron et al., 2023).

Furthermore, CRT emerged from legal scholarship and has expanded its influence into other areas, such as education, political science, gender studies, ethnic studies, sociology, theology, and philosophy (Ray, 2022; Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). In addition to academically analyzing how society and social systems are structured and ordered along racial lines, CRT theory also has an activist component seeking to use such insights to transform society to be more equitable. CRT recognizes that racism is not just an individual act but a systemic issue deeply ingrained into society (Ray, 2022; Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Clarke, 2022; Radburn, 2023).

By addressing the structural and institutional barriers perpetuating racial inequality, CRT aims to create a more just and inclusive society for all individuals, regardless of race or ethnicity (Reed et al., 2022). This transformative approach has sparked both support and controversy, with proponents arguing for its potential to dismantle systemic racism, while critics claim it promotes division and ignores individual responsibility (Reed et al., 2022). For instance, 41 states in the

United States of America have instituted bans on teaching concepts associated with CRT in schools, many of which are under executive orders from former President Donald Trump and his allies (Reed et al., 2022). These bans prohibit education around specific ideas linked to CRT, sparking heated public debate and backlash (Reed et al., 2022). This reactionary approach toward CRT demonstrates a willful lack of understanding regarding the dark history of racism and how current injustices are rooted in past oppressive systems. By refusing to reckon with the full legacy of racial oppression, critics instead strategically exploit ignorance of systemic racism's origins as a key tool to delegitimize critical examinations of enduring racial inequities foundations (Ray, 2022).

According to Ray (2022), critical race scholars also utilize what opponents consider “controversial techniques,” like the use of anecdotal stories and allegories to convey the personal impacts of systemic racial inequities. The controversy stems from critiques that these methods deviate from traditional scientific inquiry. Critics argue that the methods need more rigour of positivist, empirical approaches (Ray, 2022). However, as part of its analysis, CRT examines the foundations of the "liberal order, [such as] equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and principles of constitutional law" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023, p.3). In addition to critical legal studies and radical feminism, the ideologies that influenced the movement came from European philosophers and traditional revolutionary figures like Martin Luther King Jr. and W. E. B. Du Bois, Sojourner Truth, César Chávez, Frederick Douglass, the Chicano and Black Power movements in the 1960s and early 1970s (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023).

Rather than consider difficult truths, opponents weaponize uninformed attempts to erase history as justification to condemn insightful scholarship addressing present-day consequences of North America's racially unjust foundations (Ray, 2022). It is the uninformed backlash that attempts to discredit CRT knowledge production without understanding the academic

framework, like Donald Trump's assertion that CRT is an evil device that is destroying the very fabric of America (Ray, 2022). Considering this, a growing number of white parents are tearfully protesting a body of scholarship that is primarily not taught in elementary schools (Ray, 2022). As a result of the weaponizing of ignorance on the topic of systemic racism and its legacy that preserves inequities in institutions, opponents will then use this as an opportunity to renounce any analysis that sheds light on the truths about race and power (Ray, 2022). In doing so, opponents achieve their goals through misrepresentation and fearmongering (Ray, 2022). In response, some states in America have even implemented systems to file complaints regarding using CRT concepts in education, which is then used to penalize educators (Reed et al., 2022).

This is why applying CRT to address service gaps experienced by ACB youth in the GTA involves recognizing that these youth face systemic and everyday racism. The systems in place make it tougher for these youth to succeed in school, get culturally competent healthcare support, and find jobs (YouthREX, 2017). Framing service needs in a way that connects to broader community interests, as suggested by CRT's concept of interest convergence, could build more support. Recognizing race as a societal concept allows providers to counter stereotypes and craft services that connect better within communities. Tailoring services to the distinct challenges faced by specific ACB communities, as noted in CRT's differential racialization, makes them more relevant. Emphasizing ACB youth voice, agency, and participation aligns with CRT's focus on marginalized groups and ensures their needs shape service development and delivery. So, with a CRT-focused approach, youths in the GTA area may benefit from a service boost. This helps bring more ACB young folks into the fold, making things fairer and better.

Chapter Four: Research Question & Methodology

Research Question

My research explores two fundamental questions central to the field of social work: What are the specific service needs and gaps faced by ACB youth in the GTA? And how can we proactively design pathways for their inclusion in the youth sector?

Methodology

This research applied a qualitative approach since it is “concerned with the understanding of meaning... [,] ...how people make sense of their world and how they interpret and experience different events” (Wilson & Sharples, 2015, p. 120). More specifically, I applied a secondary analysis of data collected through virtual ethnography. As defined by Long et al. (2015), virtual ethnography is a method that leverages digital technologies to examine online communities, cultures, and social interactions within virtual spaces like social media, discussion forums, and more. Additionally, virtual ethnography (also known as online ethnography or digital ethnography) is a “new subfield within the social sciences... [;] ... it studies the cultural and social domains of human interaction through the Internet technologies they use” (Elon University, n.d.). In the case of this research, it was used to examine textual data like forum posts or comments to analyze how participants communicate on strategies and gaps related to transformative action. Furthermore, this research incorporates ethnographic approaches tailored to online communities' ever-changing and exciting contexts.

This research leverages the data collected from a Virtual Café owned and operated by YouthREX, a research and evaluation organization focused on the youth sector. Furthermore, YouthREX is an Ontario province-wide initiative that aims to empower youth and youth workers by fostering reflection and dialogue through the Virtual Café. This platform elevates the voices of marginalized communities and, in one instance, sparked a call for an accountability toolkit.

This demand culminated in the co-creation of the "Centering Black Youth Well-being, Accountability Toolkit." The research underpinning this effort focused on a specific Virtual Café discussion (Module 3) centred around a crucial question: "Let's dream and envision programs and services where Black youth are not experiencing anti-Black racism. How might we move beyond identifying the service needs and gaps Black youth face, to pro-actively designing pathways to inclusion in the youth sector?" This was based on an online discussion with 114 members, which mostly involves youth workers, educators, and service providers, sharing their perspectives on moving beyond just identifying service needs and gaps that ACB youths face to creating and designing pathways to inclusion in the youth sector.

The Virtual Café serves as a pivotal online platform for data collection, engaging in virtual ethnographic inquiry through rich discussions focusing on ACB youth's well-being. This online forum is dedicated to elevating marginalized voices, offering critical insights into perspectives that traditional research often overlooks. Applying virtual ethnographic techniques to these meaningful exchanges allows for an in-depth investigation of how participants express themselves online, including emotions, the flow of communication and social practices surrounding the empowerment of ACB youth.

Virtual ethnography in this context involves an immersive engagement with online communities and platforms that allows for digital communication and interaction analysis. This platform facilitates the analysis of digital communication and interactions, fostering a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of ACB youth and youth workers involved in the TRAC project, which stands for "Transformational Action" in the context of moving beyond anti-Black racism to transformational action.

The Virtual Café, for instance, hosts discussions with over 500 participants in order to showcase the power of research in shaping programs and services. This online forum was not

just about networking or critical conversations within youth sector communities of practice (CoPs) (YouthRex, n.d.) but one that actively contributed to the development of the TRAC project itself. In doing so, the process was to ensure it addressed the needs identified through these online interactions.

Through collecting and analyzing data from these online interactions, this research aims to contribute to scholarship that aids in elucidating the distinct barriers and unmet needs that ACB youth face in accessing and utilizing youth services in the GTA. Additionally, this research strived to identify actionable solutions to ensure ACB communities can readily participate in and shape local youth programs. The research will also deeply explore online dialogues between ACB youth, youth workers, and invested stakeholders by applying virtual ethnographic techniques. Analyzing their technology-mediated interactions within spaces created for and by ACB youth will provide direct insight into marginalization perpetuated by current youth systems and sectors.

Additionally, this community-centered investigation will uncover grassroots visions for equity-based reform that align with the transformative goals of the TRAC project. This research asserts that transformative change must uplift those impacted; thus, virtual ethnography and thematic analysis (TA) guided by CRT will be vital for directly spotlighting the lived realities and priorities of ACB youth and their collaborators. Fundamentally, this research strives to progress beyond awareness to co-create youth programming where ACB young people are centred as valuable knowledge producers and leaders able to name urgent needs and solutions for responsive, anti-oppressive youth services.

Methods

The primary data source for this research will be YouthREX's Virtual Café transcript of discussions online.

Data Collection with Confidentially and Anonymity

The data collection will involve two steps. First, to identify relevant posts, the Virtual Café thread will be searched using keywords such as "service needs," "gaps," "inclusion," "anti-Black racism," "centring black voices," "anti-Black approaches," and relationship building," just to name a few.

Eleven (11) quotes were selected from a pool of 115 participants' responses. This selection will focus on quotes that best capture key insights and themes related to the service needs and gaps ACB youth face in the youth sector. All quotes will be de-identified using an anonymization system to ensure participant confidentiality. Before quote selection, each participant will be assigned a unique identifier (Participant 1, Participant 2). This identifier will be used throughout the analysis instead of names or any other personal details. The anonymized quotes will also be stored securely on a password-protected laptop accessible only to the researcher. There will be no physical copies of data, as all coding and analyzing will be done using the same password-protected biometric laptop. Furthermore, this analysis will help understand specific challenges for ACB youth and youth workers and will serve as a foundation for proactively designing pathways to inclusion.

Data Analysis

In analyzing the selected posts or quotes, thematic analysis (TA) will be guided by the principles of CRT. This approach aligns with qualitative research's interpretive and situated nature, allowing the researcher to move beyond surface meaning and identify how implicit racial biases and power structures are reflected within the data (Guest et al., 2012). TA excels at

capturing the nuances of textual content, making it ideal for uncovering users' perspectives about race and navigating their experiences within potentially racist structures.

Specifically, the research utilizes a TA approach by Braun and Clarke (2017) to identify recurring themes and interpret patterns within textual data. In addition to this, TA is not tied to one specific theory or ideology in ways similar to other qualitative methodologies (Clarke & Braun, 2017). This is a great tool for research as it can be guided by various theoretical lenses, such as CRT and others (Clarke & Braun, 2017). TA approach involves a cyclical process of coding data segments, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, and ultimately interpreting the themes within the context of CRT for this research paper. By employing CRT as a lens, with a particular focus on counter-storytelling, the paper will analyze how participants' experiences are shaped by, or challenge, dominant racial narratives and existing power structures. This focus on counter-storytelling allows for amplifying the participants' voices and perspectives, potentially revealing how racial biases and power structures manifest within their experiences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Coding process

The coding process played out in three distinct stages. I used open coding in the initial round to identify broad themes within the online discussions, and then I utilized axial coding to refine these themes to explore the relationships between them and to develop a deeper understanding of the data. Finally, I then used selective coding to identify core categories for analysis that integrated the most significant themes and provided a unifying theoretical perspective. During the entire process, I realized new themes were emerging, and that prompted me to refine and expand the initial coding framework. This ongoing exchange ensured a grounded and complete analysis, which is a key tenet of the thematic analysis approach. Also, in the coding process, I grounded the coding framework in CRT, which allowed me to examine

power, race, and representation issues within the discussions. This helped me to select better themes geared toward my research questions. For instance, I employed CRT principles in the initial coding process, which helped to focus the coding on the experiences of marginalization, anti-Black racism, and the disregard of ABC youths throughout systems like the youth sector. This critical lens helped me to uncover the racialized power dynamics at play and how white supremacy manifests in systems and its effects.

The iterative nature of the coding process aligns perfectly with the core principles of digital ethnography and is also what makes TA so effective. Like digital ethnographers immersing themselves in an online community, each person passes through the data, which allows a deeper understanding of the themes and nuances at play (Elon University, n.d.). Initial codes, generated from initial impressions and surface meanings, evolve over time. With each iteration, these codes are refined and reorganized, mirroring the ethnographer's developing insights into the complexities of the online environment. This process emphasizes the interpretive nature of both digital ethnography and TA. The researcher's understanding of the community and the meaning embedded in the data evolve simultaneously, ultimately identifying robust and nuanced themes that truly reflect the lived experiences within the online space (Elon University, n.d.; Clarke & Braun, 2017).

Ethical Considerations

It is crucial to acknowledge my personal background as a Jamaican immigrant who came to Canada eight years ago and who identifies as a Caribbean, Canadian and a Black individual. I have realized through this research that many stories and opinions resonate deeply with my own because they echo familiar experiences and struggles that I have endured. As I read the accounts and research into these experiences of oppression and marginalization, I found myself deeply impacted, even overwhelmed, by the emotional weight of the shared struggles within my

community. I had to take several breaks from writing and researching as a result of what I was reading and finding. Nevertheless, having this unique experience positioned me in a way to understand the experiences that ACB youth have to face, and this then brings a sense of disillusionment from now seeing Canadian systems through a different lens. I must say it is truly disheartening to discover how deep-rooted systemic barriers are and the level of discrimination that exists in a country like Canada, which prides itself on multiculturalism.

In line with ethical research standards, participant rights and welfare will be safeguarded throughout this study utilizing the publicly accessible Virtual Café platform facilitated by YouthREX. While public viewing of discussions is enabled without an account, those choosing to actively participate in the Virtual Café by posting comments or content must first consent to YouthREX's terms and conditions.

Members of the Virtual Café were informed about the nature of the platform, its objectives, and how their contributions (posts and comments) would be used or could be used. Participants who registered for the virtual café did so voluntarily, with the right to withdraw and delete their account at any point without any detrimental consequences. As stipulated in the terms of services, "Members retain the rights to any copyrighted content or information that is shared across the platform. [However], by sharing content to the platform, you give YouthREX the perpetual and unrestricted right to reproduce and/or re/distribute that content for any purpose" (YouthREX, n.d).

Since the research involves young individuals aged 15-16, special attention was paid to ensuring their protection. This included avoiding any form of communication or data collection that could be considered intrusive or distressing. Also, all participants will be treated with respect and sensitivity. Their contributions will be valued, and their perspectives will be felt throughout the research process. The researcher will avoid making any discriminatory or offensive

statements or comments. A research proposal was sent and included the detailed methodology and ethical considerations, which were reviewed and approved by the ethics committee. This ensured that the study met all required ethical standards.

Chapter Five: Findings

This research examined the perspectives of youth workers, educators, and service providers, offering insights into how to dismantle anti-Black racism within youth services effectively. Analysis of the online discussion revealed a resounding call for transformative change led by ACB communities. Central themes emerged, emphasizing the need to prioritize the voices of ACB youth, dismantle systems that perpetuate inequity, and adopt anti-oppressive approaches. These findings resonate with the core principles of CRT, highlighting the urgency of moving beyond superficial inclusivity toward systemic transformation.

Five key themes emerged from the analysis, with the first centring on ACB voices, with participants stressing the need for compensation, partnerships, and leadership development for ACB youth. Second, the importance of dismantling systems that perpetuate racial inequity and anti-Black racism was underscored. This included challenging policies, narratives, and structures upholding white supremacy, colonialism, and other forms of oppression. Third, participants advocated for transformative change beyond tokenism, calling for a shift driven by ACB communities, moving away from superficial reforms. Fourth, anti-oppressive approaches were highlighted, emphasizing the need to tailor services to the diverse needs of ACB youth and reject one-size-fits-all approaches. Finally, participants discussed systemic anti-Black racism and its impacts, exploring how interconnected systems like education, justice, and healthcare perpetuate disadvantage for ACB youth.

Centering African, Caribbean and Black Voices

A strong theme emerged around the urgent need to center ACB youths' voices and lived experiences in creating and leading programs, policies, and interventions that serve them. The findings strongly demonstrate the material consequences of anti-Black racism, revealing the necessity of centring ACB youth perspectives in order to create transformative change.

For example, Participant One shared, "I think centring black youth voices is key. A lot of times, programs are designed for black youth without actually asking or listening to the community in terms of what they need to thrive". This quote underscores how the lack of ACB youth participation directly leads to programs that fail to address the material consequences of anti-Black racism. These programs miss the mark on what ACB youth truly need to improve their educational opportunities, economic prospects, or safety. The solution is to center the voices of ACB youths and ensure they have genuine decision-making power in designing the programs meant to serve them. Rather than superficial adjustments to existing programs and policies, a transformational approach is necessary. According to participants, this means shifting white supremacist power away from well-meaning outsiders and into the hands of those who directly experience material inequalities.

Furthermore, ignoring this fundamental principle would significantly diminish the program's potential for positive impact. Other Participants, like Participant Two, further stress that centring ACB voices must involve fair compensation and leadership opportunities since this would enable greater participation and ensure ACB perspectives are valued and respected.

Centering the voices of Black youth is key and paying them for their hard work and insight. I would suggest including honoraria for youth from the very beginning of applying for funding and making sure there is enough to pay the youth well, at least a living wage if not more. This makes it more likely that youth will be able to participate. If possible, consider hiring youth leaders for more than just one-off sessions. – Participant 2

Participant Two, above, reinforces the idea that centring the voices of ACB youths is key and paying them for their hard work and insight is crucial. Providing honoraria or suitable employment opportunities that demonstrate a thorough understanding of the value of the time and expertise that ACB communities offer. It also acknowledges the potential economic barriers to participation that many ACB individuals face and the importance of fostering equitable power

dynamics and true collaboration relations. Participant three joins in on the conversation and states that:

I think that in order to be proactive about our anti-racism practices, we need to ensure that 'nothing about us without us' is put into practice. This means that Black voices need to be heard before decisions are made about what is best for Black folks... I also think that it is important to include youth voice when it comes to decisions regarding education and youth programmes because they are the ones who will be affected by the decisions made. – Participant 3

This further reinforces the importance of directly involving those impacted by anti-racism efforts. Firstly, it argues for the application of the "nothing about us without us" principle, which means decisions affecting the ACB communities must center on ACB voices and should not take place without their direct involvement. This shows that this participant believes without a doubt that decisions that are made without ACB perspective will likely miss the mark. Secondly, the quote emphasizes the crucial role of including ACB youth voices in decisions that shape education and youth programs. Since youth are directly impacted by those decisions, therefore their input should be considered invaluable and sought after in order to support the creation of effective and relevant programs for them.

Institutional Anti-Black Racism Dismantling

A crucial element in dismantling institutional anti-Black racism lies in creating programs that go beyond simply addressing the needs of ACB youth. As Participant Four shares:

By celebrating diversity, fostering mentorship, and actively involving Black community leaders, these programs can create environments that not only address the service needs and gaps faced by Black youth but also actively dismantle the barriers of discrimination and inequality– Participant 4

Participant four's quote offers a model designed to challenge institutional anti-Black racism directly. Rather than simply treating the symptoms of systemic inequality, this approach goes to the heart of the issue. By celebrating diversity, fostering mentorship, and involving ACB leaders, it fosters empowerment within the ACB community. This enables ACB youth to navigate and

challenge discriminatory systems while working with community leaders to dismantle those very barriers within institutions. Unlike programs that may address immediate needs but leave underlying racism in place, this approach works to dismantle the institutional foundations of inequality.

Participant five adds that the true inclusion of ACB youth in the youth sector cannot be achieved without addressing the broader, foundational systems of oppression that shape our society. It also emphasizes that decolonization, along with dismantling white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism, is crucial to breaking down the institutional racism that excludes ACB youth. Furthermore, the quote recognizes that addressing anti-Black racism requires more than just surface-level changes within the youth sector; it requires challenging the very power structures that perpetuate inequality and disadvantage. Participant Six points out that:

In a future where anti-black racism is dismantled, we must first and foremost acknowledge the overt and covert racism that had long hindered Black people from receiving the quality of care and support they are entitled to. Alongside this acknowledgement, I believe the youth sector need to actively participate in restorative justice to establish a trust with the communities who have long been marginalized –
Participant 6

This quote highlights the importance of acknowledging past injustices as a starting point for dismantling institutional anti-Black racism. It emphasizes that both overt and covert forms of racism have systematically denied ACB people the quality of care and support they deserve. It further stipulates that dismantling racism requires an honest confrontation with this history, as attempts to ignore it only allow the problem to continue.

Transformative Change

Thematic findings revealed a deep understanding of the possibilities for transformative change, yet the ways in which historical injustices persist in present-day society create a complex tension. This tension highlights the ongoing need for visionary solutions and a clear

understanding of the past's enduring influence. Participant Seven, for instance, highlighted the interconnectedness of systemic oppression and the need for radical change: "... To ensure pathways to inclusion within the youth sector, we must dismantle white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism. Furthermore, creating a future that is abolitionist, divests from binaries, and centers transformative justice is imperative in creating a truly inclusive youth sector."

Participant Seven believes creating an inclusive youth sector requires a fundamental shift in society's functions. The quote suggests that dismantling oppressive systems like colonialism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism is essential to removing the barriers that exclude ACB youth. The emphasis is on building a system that actively works against these power structures. Furthermore, the quote envisions a future rooted in abolitionist principles, challenging systems that perpetuate harm against ACB communities, and it also calls for moving beyond rigid binaries, likely referring to gender, and embracing a more inclusive understanding of identity. Finally, transformative justice is seen as a key tool for addressing the harm caused by oppression, focusing on restoration rather than simply punishment. By taking these steps, the youth sector can pave the way for a society where ACB youth experience true inclusion and belonging.

While Participant Seven emphasized systemic change, Participant Eight's comment shifts the focus inward, hinting at the emotional complexities that can come with working within a cause advocacy framework.

"This might also relate to the feelings we sit with if we try to work from a cause advocacy framework too. Lots to unpack for me here..." – Participant 8.

Participant Eight's comment hints at the emotional complexities that can come with working within a cause advocacy framework. This approach means actively championing a particular social or political cause. The speaker acknowledges that this type of work can stir up difficult

feelings, likely related to privilege, complicity, or the overwhelming nature of systemic problems. The phrase "lots to unpack" suggests that taking on a cause requires both self-examination and deeper analysis; it's not simply about action but also about understanding one's own position within the issue. This introspection hints at a potential for transformative change. By reflecting on their role within systems of power, participant eight might be undergoing a personal shift towards greater awareness and a more nuanced understanding of social justice. Furthermore, their reflection could lead to a transformed approach towards advocacy itself, emphasizing internal transformation alongside external action.

Participant Seven further argues that in order to fight anti-Black racism and empower ACB youth, different organizations need to work together and be flexible. We need to consider the specific needs and goals of each person and group involved, not just what an organization typically does. If ACB youth are asked for their ideas, organizations must be willing to change their practices based on what they find after having those communications with the ACB communities. It is not enough to include more ACB people in organizations; they must also be ready to make changes based on their input.

Anti-Oppressive Approaches

Highlighting the importance of dismantling traditional power structures, Participant Eight exemplifies an anti-oppressive approach. They critiqued the tendency for programs to involve youth superficially, arguing that this dismisses their valuable insights.

Designing youth-centred programs and services requires youth involvement from conception to inception to evaluation. Too often, youth input is gathered in things like focus groups, they get some token of thanks, then the “adults” run with the information.—Participant 8.

As Participant Eight argues, an anti-oppressive lens demands dismantling this power imbalance. It means ensuring youth are not merely consulted but active collaborators at every stage of

designing programs that affect them, which will see a shift from tokenism to genuine youth involvement that aligns with the anti-oppressive goal of empowering those most impacted by a system that shapes their own experiences.

The findings suggest a strong need for anti-oppressive frameworks that prioritize these very elements: collaboration, youth-centred approaches, and critical self-reflection (Participants eight, nine, ten). As expressed by several participants, these elements are crucial for creating change. By working together, listening to ACB youth, and ensuring that systemic biases are not hindering progress, then society can move towards a future where programs and policies are designed with and not for ACB youth, which will then foster a more inclusive and empowering environment.

These participants assert that to truly address the challenges faced by ACB youth, a collaborative approach is essential. This means working with police services, community resources like Why Not City Youth Missions, and crucially, going beyond collaboration to listen to the voices of ACB youth actively. Instead of simply creating more resources, the system needs to engage with ACB youths, design programs that meet their expectations, and involve them in shaping those programs. For any of this to be effective, it is imperative that those systems critically examine their biases and assumptions. Only then can society actively work with ACB youths to create genuinely inclusive spaces and policies that reflect their needs and empower their voices.

Systemic Anti-Black Racism and Its Impacts

Participants expressed deep concerns about systemic racism and its impacts, including how anti-Black racism permeates the youth justice system. This was evident in reports of disparities in sentencing, with ACB children facing harsher penalties than their white peers for similar offences. Furthermore, participants highlighted the issue of over-surveillance, where

ACB youth are subjected to increased scrutiny and more frequent police stops. As one participant succinctly stated:

“Black children who end up in the youth courts are sentenced more harshly than their white peers. Black children/youth are also over-surveilled, leading them to be stopped by police more often, being known to the police in their neighbourhoods, etc.” – Participant 10

The quote highlights the systemic inequalities and racial biases in policing that exist within the criminal justice system and impact ACB youth disproportionately. It describes a cycle where ACB children and youth are subjected to increased police attention and surveillance, even without necessarily engaging in criminal activity. This over-policing leads to more frequent arrests and a higher likelihood of them becoming known to the police within their own communities. When ACB youth do end up in youth courts, the quote asserts that they receive harsher sentences than their white counterparts committing similar offences. This reveals a deep-rooted bias within the system that puts ACB youth at a significant disadvantage from the very beginning of their interaction with law enforcement.

Participant Eleven expressed that low-income ACB families face complex and interrelated challenges.

Black families who live in poverty or are working-poor may struggle with food and housing security (also resulting in possible interactions with family services and/or the legal systems), this may lead them to shelter systems. It is often more difficult being racialized to find housing, in addition to the discrimination of being poor, potentially on social assistance, not having a home or landlord reference/credit rating, etc.. – Participant 11.

This means that ACB families experiencing poverty or working in low-wage jobs face considerable challenges in securing fundamental necessities like food and housing. This lack of food and housing security can, unfortunately, lead to interactions with family services or even involvement with the legal system. This is because the stress and instability caused by

inadequate resources can strain family relationships and increase the risk of negative outcomes for children.

The additional burden of racial discrimination compounds the struggle to escape these circumstances. ACB families may experience bias from landlords, stigma related to receiving social assistance, and difficulties due to a lack of traditional housing references or credit history – all barriers to obtaining stable housing. This underscores how economic hardship and systemic racism intersect. Low-income ACB families face a complex web of challenges that can trap them in a cycle of instability, making it incredibly difficult to break free (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018).

Participants also raised concerns about the ‘school-to-prison pipeline,’ particularly the impact it has on ACB children. One participant shared that “When children begin school, for black children the school to prison pipeline is real. What are often deemed behavioural/challenging issues that result in disciplinary actions, and DD and LDs are overlooked and go undiagnosed...” – Participant 11

The quote highlights that the “school-to-prison pipeline” is a harmful system where ACB children face a greater risk of being pushed out of the education system and into the criminal justice system. It emphasizes how behaviours in ACB children are often deemed disruptive and punished while underlying issues like undiagnosed learning disabilities or developmental delays are overlooked.

Furthermore, negative school records can create biased perceptions among future teachers and administrators, perpetuating a cycle of disadvantage and increasing the risk of even harsher treatment within the school system and beyond. Additionally, when ACB children are repeatedly labelled as "bad" and face ongoing disciplinary action, they can start to internalize this negativity. This damages their self-image and can lead to further disengagement from school.

Participant Eleven further highlights how ACB mothers, particularly those facing poverty, substance use issues, or engaged in sex work, are subjected to intense scrutiny from the state. This disproportionate surveillance often leads to unwarranted interventions from child protection services or family services. Sadly, statistics confirm a troubling trend: ACB children are more likely to be removed from their homes and placed into care than white children (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018). This demonstrates clear systemic bias within institutions meant to protect children.

Participant Eleven went on to say, “Black women are also more likely to die from complications during childbirth than their white peers because they are not taken seriously. Both the health care system and family services can and do lead to family breakdowns”. Participant Eleven response express concerns that ACB women are gravely disadvantaged within the healthcare system. They experience higher rates of complications during childbirth and are more likely to die than white women – often because their health concerns are dismissed or not taken seriously. This unequal treatment and lack of adequate care represent a profound failure to provide equitable healthcare to ACB women.

The compounding effects of these systemic failures are devastating. The hyper-surveillance of ACB mothers, combined with their diminished access to proper healthcare, actively contributed to the breakdown of ACB families.

Overall, the findings from this research captured the voices of ACB youths, youth workers, educators, service providers and service users in a way that offers insight into what can be done to support the fight in dismantling anti-Black racism in the youth sector. The analysis of participant’s responses revealed a resounding call for transformative change led by ACB communities. The key themes emerging from the discussion are centring African and Caribbean Black youth voices and lived experiences in programs, the dismantling of institutional Anti-

Black racism and adopting an anti-oppressive approach that recognizes ACB communities. These findings resonate with the core principles of CRT, highlighting the urgency of moving beyond tokenistic inclusivity toward systemic transformation.

Chapter Six: Discussion/Implications for Social Work

The findings in this research resonate with the established principles of CRT in that it highlights the vital importance of dismantling systemic anti-Black racism and actively centring the voices of African, Caribbean, and Black (ACB) youth in the fight against societal barriers of inequity and white supremacy.

These findings strongly support the notion outlined by CRT that the lived experiences of marginalized communities offer indispensable insights into systems of oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT emphasizes that people of different races have fundamentally different experiences due to racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Therefore, the call for transformative change, driven by ACB communities themselves, reflects the need to shift power away from non-ACB actors who often uphold systems of white supremacy through well-intentioned but ultimately ineffective programs. This is because those non-ACB actors might not fully understand the impact of racism. After all, it did not disadvantage them in the same way it would have for the ACB communities. Hence, to achieve this power shift in the context of program planning, ACB youth need to be compensated for their expertise and time— an acknowledgment of the economic barriers that limit their involvement.

Furthermore, the youth sector needs to adopt research practices that center the ACB community throughout the process. This means abandoning inaccessible research methods focused solely on the researcher's benefit and replacing them with methods that empower the communities being studied, give them a genuine voice, and directly benefit them (Pieterse et al., 2023). This highlights the importance of centring ACB voices in dismantling anti-Black racism within the youth sector. Additionally, qualitative research approaches can help to address this issue by providing a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of ACB individuals, and informing strategies for meaningful change. This connects to Delgado and

Stefancic (2017) who asserts that sharing stories can empower marginalized communities. This is particularly useful in giving voice to ACB experiences, which not only fosters solidarity but allows them to collectively identify and challenge the various forms of racism they face. Furthermore, genuine inclusion requires fostering opportunities for ACB youth leadership within research, placing their voices and aspirations at the forefront of decision-making processes.

My research study also highlighted the crucial need for programs and initiatives within the youth sector to go beyond surface-level diversity efforts. Anti-oppressive practices that dismantle institutional anti-Black racism involve creating environments that foster empowerment within the ACB community. This entails celebrating cultural diversity, building mentorship between the ACB community and ACB leaders, and actively working to dismantle the barriers of discrimination and inequality. As outlined by CRT, it is crucial to address these systemic issues, as they create a web of disadvantage that disproportionately impacts Black communities, including discriminatory practices in housing, employment, lending, and other essential services (Ray, 2022).

However, though creating environments conducive to empowering and celebrating cultural diversity are important steps, merely focusing on empowerment within the ACB community will not fully address the systemic issues of institutional anti-Black racism. This suggests that actively challenging and undoing the structures and policies perpetuating discrimination and inequality will, in turn, support the efforts to create lasting change. This means going beyond individual acts of support and advocating for policy changes that address discriminatory practices in housing, employment, healthcare, and law enforcement. By working on both the internal empowerment of ACB communities and transforming the external systems that perpetuate oppression, the youth sector can help dismantle the barriers facing ACB youth and create a truly just and equitable society.

CRT further argues that racism is not just about prejudice but rather a deeply ingrained system woven into the fabric of our society, indicating that systemic oppression is intricately interconnected. This means widespread and persistent discrimination is built into laws, institutions, and policies, which is not always intentional or overt, but it creates disadvantages for groups like the ACB communities. Furthermore, these systems of oppression do not just operate in isolation, but they are linked in that they reinforce each other. For instance, discrimination in housing might limit job opportunities, which in turn could affect access to healthcare (Douglas et al., 2022; Pieterse et al., 2023). Therefore, one must note that you cannot address anti-Black racism by just looking at isolated incidents, but it should encapsulate the whole picture and how different systems interact. The fight against anti-Black racism demands a multifaceted approach that extends far beyond individual programs. For instance, persistent racial disparities in the educational system create unequal opportunities for ACB students to succeed (Bartholomew et al., 2023; McPherson, 202; Pathways to Education, 2019). Often, this is played out through the “school-to-prison-pipe line” phenomenon (Morgan, 2021). This refers to systemic patterns of funnelling ACB youths into the criminal justice system out of the education system, marked by limited access to resources, support, and mental health services. According to a report made by the Toronto District School Board (2017), 48% of ACB students accounted for almost half of school expulsions, while their white counterparts were at 10%. This connects to Morgan’s (2021) argument that ACB youths disproportionately experience suspensions and exclusionary practices at an alarming rate when compared to their white peers. This also leads to them becoming more involved in criminal activity because of the systemic discrimination they experience within these institutions and the lack of support that ensues (YouthREX, 2018; Morgan, 2021).

Furthermore, discriminatory practices in housing by landlords and real estate agents have historically denied ACB families access to safe neighbourhoods with “quality schools” and

resources (Teixeira, 2008). Additionally, implicit bias within healthcare systems can lead to misdiagnosis, undiagnosed and inadequate treatment for ACB youth, negatively impacting their overall well-being (Noguera, 2008; Comrie et al., 2022). Hence, the dismantling of structures that uphold oppression is a crucial step in the fight against anti-Black racism and not just simply addressing its symptoms.

Participant responses call for transformative change in the research findings, envisioning a world rooted in abolitionist principles, focused on transformative justice, and rejecting rigid societal constructs (Davis, 2003). This shows the importance of why systems that perpetuate harm should be challenged, like the criminal justice system, and further dismantle broader systems of power and privilege.

That said, it is clear that systemic oppression does not exist in a vacuum. It is a complex web that strangles opportunity and diminishes the livelihood of many ACB communities, but recognizing this truth is only the first step. We need a commitment to action for a just and equitable society – a society that breaks free from the status quo and actively works to repair harm. This means advocating for change that does not just tweak the edges of the system but tears it down and builds something entirely new, guided by abolitionist principles. It means striving toward a world rooted in justice, equality, and the unwavering belief in human liberation. To shatter these oppressive systems, our society, alongside the state, needs to forge a path toward genuine inclusion and empowerment for the ACB community, who have been used and silenced for too long.

The voices of ACB youths and families can be centred through education that challenges comfortable narratives, activism that forces change, and co-collaborators that amplify the voices of the ACB youths and families and demand that they be heard. It also means a messy and often difficult confrontation with internal biases and how Eurocentric identifying individuals

unknowingly benefit from a system not designed for everyone. This is a lifelong process of learning and unlearning; with collective action, solidarity, and unwavering determination, our society can chip away at this injustice and lay the foundation for a future where every person, regardless of their background, has the chance to thrive and live with dignity.

While anti-oppressive frameworks offer a valuable foundation, their effectiveness hinges on genuine implementation. The research underscores the need for the youth sector to move beyond mere rhetoric and hold itself accountable by prioritizing equitable power dynamics, youth-centred approaches, and critical reflexivity within organizations (Badwall, 2016). This accountability needs to be evident in resource allocation, policymaking, and ongoing evaluation with the involvement of ACB communities at the leadership levels.

Badwall (2016) argues that this level of critical reflexivity in accountability must be careful not to centre whiteness on how power dynamics are addressed but rather prioritize the voices and experiences of marginalized communities and allow that to permeate the decision-making processes. This emphasis on shared power is crucial because traditional power structures that position adults as the sole experts in shaping youth programs must be challenged. Genuine empowerment means shifting the paradigm from tokenism and consultation towards active collaboration and leadership development of ACB youth, aligning programs with their lived experiences and needs. Anti-oppressive work necessitates a willingness of those working with ACB youth to deconstruct their biases and dismantle structures that critically perpetuate inequality.

Systemic anti-Black racism is a singular force, but rather a complex web that ensnares ACB communities across various institutions in education, the criminal justice system, and healthcare are just a few entangled threads. Disparities in sentencing, over-policing, and the

notorious “child-welfare-to-prison pipeline” starkly reveal the profound impact of this web on the well-being of ACB youth (Davis, 2003; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018).

According to a report from the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2018), ACB youths placed in the care of the state are at a higher risk of being involved in the criminal justice system. This is because many ACB families face systemic barriers, such as living in poverty (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018). Additionally, many ACB youth are from low-income communities, and oftentimes, their families are not able to afford housing and food supplies, which then subjects them to maltreatment-related investigations by child welfare authorities (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018). As a result, these ACB youths are then placed in the care of the state, in which they are more likely to experience discrimination and marginalization, leading to a disproportionate rate of youth homelessness, unemployment, and low income (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018). These disparities perpetuate a vicious cycle, and as a result, poverty fuels marginalization, which in turn fuels further disparities.

The findings of this research underscore a core principle of social work: the importance of actively centring the voices and experiences of marginalized clients in designing interventions and driving change. By demonstrating the transformative potential of ACB youth leadership, this study highlights the urgent need for social work practice to move beyond tokenistic consultation and embrace genuine co-creation. Social workers have an ethical obligation to prioritize research methods and program design that empower, rather than merely study, ACB communities. Additionally, this includes dismantling traditional power structures within research practices that perpetuate whiteness, as outlined by Badwall (2016), ensuring that ACB voices and experiences guide the decision-making process.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

This digital ethnography project underscored the urgent need to dismantle systemic anti-Black racism in the youth sector. Centring ACB voices, dismantling institutional structures of inequality, and adopting anti-oppressive approaches are vital to this process. Moving beyond performative inclusivity requires systemic change founded on a deep understanding of how anti-Black racism operates across various sectors of society. By embracing a collaborative, anti-racist lens, the youth sector can play a pivotal role in fostering a more just and equitable future for ACB youth.

In closing, this research highlights a resounding call from practitioners for transformative, anti-racist changes within the youth services sector. The identified themes underscore the depth and complexity of the challenges faced by ACB youths, revealing the urgent need for action. Centring ACB voices, dismantling oppressive systems of white supremacy, and rejecting tokenistic solutions are not simply aspirational goals but vital imperatives. Additionally, these findings align with Critical Race Theory principles, exposing the ingrained nature of racism and calling attention to the necessity of radical transformation. Participants' quotes acknowledge that addressing anti-Black racism requires more than incremental changes or surface-level diversity initiatives and requires organizations to critically examine their own complicity in racist systems, relinquish power, prioritize the lived experiences of ACB youths, and actively participate in dismantling oppressive structures.

While offering valuable perspectives, these findings underscore the necessity of amplifying the voices of Black youth themselves and not just playing tokenistic politics to give the appearance of inclusivity. Future research, policy development, and program design must prioritize ACB leadership and lived experiences, which would then facilitate the building of

equitable youth services where ACB youths are not just beneficiaries but key architects of the systemic shifts that they deserve.

This study is a call to action for the youth sector. Anti-Black racism is a pervasive reality that requires a fundamental restructuring of how youth services engage with communities, allocate power and shape programs. Practitioners, organizations, researchers, and funders alike must be willing to embrace the discomfort of change and work alongside Black communities to create a truly inclusive and just system for Black youth to thrive.

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