
CANADIAN BLACK POLICY NETWORK

Winter 2021 Policy Brief

Mental Health in Black Communities

MARCH 1, 2021

This policy brief summarizes the affects of mental health on Black community members, while also providing insights on how governments and regulators can address these issues to achieve positive impacts and sustainable results.

Last year, the Government of Ontario publicly recognized the distinct impact of anti-Black racism on the mental health of Black people living in Ontario by reading an Act (Bill 178, 2020), declaring the first Monday of March each year as Black Mental Health Day. [1]

As we continue to navigate the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and Anti-Black racism, the CBPN's first Quarterly Policy Brief of 2021 will focus on the impacts of anti-Black racism on our mental health.

Our approach is to (1) provide insight into the issues affecting Black mental health in Canada based on current evidence and (2) provide policy recommendations to governments and regulators for consideration, to address immediate and longer-term challenges.



[1] <https://www.ola.org/en/legislative-business/bills/parliament-42/session-1/bill-178>

Research Summary

Global Context

Mental health challenges and substance use disorders are issues of public health concern worldwide. Almost a billion (970 million) people in the world experience mental health issues and substance use disorders. [2]

In Canada, an estimated 1 in 5 Canadians face mental health issues. [3] The effects of mental health problems and substance use disorders go beyond the individual level and directly/indirectly affect families, friends, communities, and the nation. In fact, the Canadian government spends about \$51 billion on mental illness annually.

Black Mental Health In Canada

There are almost 1.2 million Black people living in Canada. [4] Black Canadians only make up about 3.5% of the Canadian population yet face discrimination, health and social disparities that influence a persisting experience of chronic stress and psychological hurt. [5] This lifelong experience affects mental health outcomes for Black communities in Canada. [6]

There are several factors that contribute to one's risk of experiencing mental health challenges and substance use disorders. Racism, ethnicity, gender, sociocultural factors, housing, and how those identity characteristics interact with health policies can not only impact individual mental health issues, but can also create barriers to accessing mental health services and supports.

*"It is important to collect **robust data** concerning Black Canadians and mental health to support systemic change, otherwise we are demonstrating an intentional commitment to the status quo of underserving Black communities."*

*- Asante Haughton,
CAMH Constituency Council &
Reach Out Response Network*



[2] <https://ourworldindata.org/mental-health>

[3] <https://cmha.ca/fast-facts-about-mental-illness>

[4] <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-657-x/89-657-x2019002-eng.htm>

[5] <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/health-promotion/population-health/what-determines-health/social-determinants-inequities-black-canadians-snapshot.html>

[6] <https://www.camh.ca/en/driving-change/the-crisis-is-real/mental-health-statistics>

Barriers and Facilitators to Accessing Mental Health Services for Black Canadians

Barriers and facilitators to accessing mental health services in Black communities can be felt at the individual and structural level.

Barriers

- At the individual level, cultural beliefs and stigmas leading to minimizing signs and symptoms of mental unwellness, lack of awareness of available services, religion, and **lack of trust in the health system** based on previous experiences of racism are individual/community barriers to Black communities' access and mental health service utilization.

Barriers (Cont'd)

- At a structural level, **lack of mental health services in predominantly Black neighbourhoods, long wait times** in access to specialists and disproportionately high unemployment rates resulting in **lack of coverage** for mental health services present immense barriers to accessing services. [7][8]
- But that's only for mainstream services. There is also a **lack of culturally appropriate health services**, culturally competent and racially aware health and social service providers to address the longstanding issues of lack of trust in healthcare, [9].

Facilitators

- Engaging families, communities and faith organizations can better facilitate mental health access. [10]
- Similarly, the availability of health information in various languages, culturally appropriate services and service providers, and community collaboration in mental health awareness and service delivery [11] are facilitators to the access and utilization of mental health services.

*The amount of time, on average, that Black youth wait for mental health treatment is **16 months**, double the amount of time than white youth, who wait eight. [12]*

[7] https://www.ottawapublichealth.ca/en/reports-research-and-statistics/resources/Documents/MHOBBC_Technical-Report_English.pdf

[8] <https://www.pathwaystocare.ca/research/barriers-and-facilitators-to-accessing-mental-healthcare-for-black-children-and-youth>

[9] <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/race-policy-dialogue-papers/racial-discrimination-and-mental-health-racialized-and-aboriginal-communities>

[10] <https://www.pathwaystocare.ca/research/barriers-and-facilitators-to-accessing-mental-healthcare-for-black-children-and-youth>

[11] <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/race-policy-dialogue-papers/racial-discrimination-and-mental-health-racialized-and-aboriginal-communities>

[12] <https://www.pathwaystocare.ca/>

What is Working? Evidence from Programs and Interventions

- **TAIBU Community Health Centre (CHC)** is a multidisciplinary, not-for-profit, community led organization established to serve the Black community across the Greater Toronto Area as its priority population.
- **Caribbean African Social Services (CAFSCAN)** offers a variety of social services dedicated to the Black community, including services to support the mental well-being of Black children and youth.
- The **Black Health Alliance (BHA)** is a community-led registered charity working to improve the health and well-being of Black communities in Canada by researching and developing innovative solutions to improve health, and mobilizing people and financial resources to create lasting and systemic change. **Pathways to Care** [13] is a project of the BHA designed to increase access and remove barriers to mental health and addiction services for Black children, youth and their families.
- Ontario's **Enhanced Youth Outreach Worker Program** includes dedicated workers to work **exclusively with Black youth** to provide immediate crisis support and connect them to longer-term mental health services to meet their needs.
- The **Centre for Addiction and Mental Health's (CAMH) Substance Abuse Program for African Canadian and Caribbean Youth (SAPACCY)** [14] provides culturally competent care to African-Canadian and Caribbean youth and their families experiencing mental health and substance use challenges.
- **Kids Help Phone** in partnership with **BlackNorth Initiative** has started an e-mental health intervention for Black youth in Canada.[15] This Initiative seeks to address the structural barriers of access to mental health services tailored to the needs of Black youth.
- **Breakaway Community Services** is a harm reduction agency in Toronto's Parkdale community working to ensure Black communities are well served by creating an internal Anti-Racism/Anti-Oppression Working Group (ARAO). The group is collaboratively developing and implementing policies that ensure current and future employees work in a discriminatory-free environment and can best meet the needs of Black communities.
- **Reach Out Response Network** is a new organization advocating for non-police led mobile crisis emergency response in Toronto.

These are just some of the initiatives being designed by, and for our communities to support mental health and wellbeing.

[13] <https://www.pathwaystocare.ca/>

[14] <https://www.camh.ca/en/your-care/programs-and-services/substance-use-program-for-african-canadian-caribbean-youth>

[15] <https://saultonline.com/2021/02/kids-help-phone-data-shows-black-youth-are-among-the-most-distressed-service-users/>

Policy Recommendations to Increase Access to Mental Health Services for Black Communities

The following policy recommendations build on the ideas generated at the 2019 Toronto Black Policy Conference (TBPC) outlined in our 2019-20 annual report, and emerging evidence. They are intended to **leverage the facilitators** and **address the barriers** to accessing mental health services for Black communities.

(1) ADDRESS LACK OF TRUST BY MANDATING ANTI-BLACK RACISM TRAINING

- **Anti-Black Racism is trauma** and has a direct impact on Black communities' mental health.
- Advocates have called for specialized training for practitioners in Anti-Black Racism.
- Mental health practitioners are guided by **regulatory bodies** that regulate and promote ethical practice. This includes setting the guidelines for training prior to registration.
- Based on our initial scan, regulatory colleges like the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW) **have yet to issue a statement mandating regular Anti-Black Racism Training**. [16]
- While addressing racism broadly is reflected in the Code of Ethics and Ethical Standards, there is no requirement for social workers to participate in dedicated Anti-Black racism training prior to or during their regulated practice.

(2) ADDRESS LACK OF AVAILABLE MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES THROUGH SUSTAINED (NOT CRISIS) FUNDING

- The availability of mental health services **depends on your neighbourhood**.
- Since the COVID-19 pandemic started there has been an increase in **funding** for Black Mental Health (e.g. City of Toronto's Black COVID-19 Response Plan [16], Government of Ontario's COVID-19 Funding for Black Communities [17], and Federal Mental Health of Black Canadians Fund (MHBC). [18])
- However this funding is primarily **short-term, crisis funding** delivered by granting agents.
- Targeted funding for Black Mental Health needs to be **long-term, sustained and embedded in the larger mental health funding envelope**. It cannot be treated as a one-off.
- Sustained funding would help address the systemic challenges of wait times to get a referral and lack of access to services that have been amplified by the pandemic.[19]
- In addition, funding for Black mental health will demonstrate a tangible commitment to the human right of equitable access to healthcare for all Canadians.

[16] <https://www.ocswssw.org/2020/06/15/recognizing-and-reflecting-upon-anti-black-racism/>

[17] <https://www.toronto.ca/news/city-of-toronto-unveils-the-black-community-covid-19-response-plan/>

[18] <https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/59757/ontario-investing-in-new-opportunities-for-black-youth>

[18] <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/funding-opportunities/grant-contribution-funding-opportunities/promoting-health-equity-mental-health-black-canadians-fund.html>

[19] https://www.ottawapublichealth.ca/en/reports-research-and-statistics/resources/Documents/MHOBC_Technical-Report_English.pdf

(3) INCREASE AVAILABILITY OF SERVICES BY CULTURALLY-ADAPTING EXISTING MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMS

- Many mental health care programs, such as those based on cognitive behavioural therapy, may not be suited to support Black individuals and families, because they are based in “euro-centric” or “white, settler, colonial” models that fail to recognize the systemic factors that influence mental health for Black Canadians, such as anti-Black racism. [20]
- One approach to addressing anti-Black racism in mental health services/programs is through **cultural adaptation**.
- Cultural adaptation “moves beyond surface modifications (e.g., language, racial makeup of frontline staff, visuals used in programming)” [21] and includes “understanding and addressing systemic, cultural and historical oppression faced by members of Black communities.” [22]
- Cultural-adaptation can help **increase the availability of services that meet Black community needs** by ensuring that every service provider can adapt their existing models to serve Black clients. [23]
- There are existing models in Canada of culturally adapted mental health services (e.g. the Stop Now and Plan (SNAP) Program under the Ontario Black Youth Action Plan). [24]
- However, these cultural adaptations require **investments in research directly with Black communities to explore opportunities for the adaptation**.
- Not only governments, but **academia and major mental health hospitals** (e.g. CAMH) need to consider **prioritizing funding into cultural adaptation for Black communities**.

(4) SHIFT MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES BY FUNDING RESEARCH AND IMPLEMENTATION OF NEW CULTURALLY-RESPONSIVE MODELS

- Cultural adaptation is one way to build on existing practices.
- However, even with adaptation the **foundation of many mental health services is based on euro-centric models of well-being**.
- As noted above, **Black families, community-knowledge, culture and faith are facilitators to positive mental health**.
- Investing in culturally-responsive services goes beyond cultural adaptation, and explores the development of new models that **build on the Black communities' cultural strengths**. [25]
- Government regulators need to **recognize the validity of culturally responsive models** to ensure that Black service providers are eligible for core mental health funding provided to mainstream service providers.



[20] <https://globalnews.ca/news/7102404/defund-police-canada-mental-health/>

[21] Coard, S. I., Herring, M. H., Watkins, M. H., Foy-Watson, S. A., McCoy, S. Z. (2013). Black Parents Strengths and Strategies (BPSS) Program: A Cultural Adaptation of the Strong-Willed Child Program. In C. Clauss-Ehlers, Z. Serpell, & M. Weist (Eds.), Handbook of Culturally Responsive School Mental Health. New York, NY: Springer.

[22] Ministry of Children and Youth Services. (2017). Stop Now and Plan Program: Call for Proposals.

[23] <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/race-policy-dialogue-papers/racial-discrimination-and-mental-health-racialized-and-aboriginal-communities>

[24] <https://cafcac.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Report-1-Research-Report-FINAL-1.pdf>

[25] <https://www.columbiapsychiatry.org/news/addressing-mental-health-black-community>

Conclusion

As we emerge from the immediate crisis of COVID-19 into the recovery phase, it is imperative that we do not forget all that this pandemic has brought to light. The outcomes disparities for Black Canadians accessing mental health services have always been a challenge, it is only now that the pandemic has made it one that we cannot ignore.

Moving forward, our hope is that the pandemic recovery will result in fundamental changes to the delivery of mental health services to ensure that Black Canadians have access to the care they need.

We are excited about the work that is underway as highlighted by some of our partners. Our goal now is to work together to ensure the momentum continues.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Paul is a strategist, urban planner and Interim Executive Director at the Black Health Alliance. Paul has spent the last decade designing interventions focused on: health and well-being, community violence, mental health and addictions, and the social service sector as it relates to improving outcomes for Black children, youth and families. His work is currently focused on social planning, health equity, and addressing the causes of neighbourhood distress and inequality.

Asante Haughton

Asante is an advocate and consultant for mental health causes, supporting CAMH, VICE Media Group, Bell Let's Talk and the Government of Canada in broadening their understanding of systemic barriers impacting Black Canadians' access to mental health services. Asante is also the co-founder of the Reach Out Response Network, an organization advocating for non-police led mobile crisis emergency response in Toronto. Additionally, Asante is a 2x TEDx speaker, a CAMH Difference Maker, and one of the top 150 mental health influencers in Canada. Asante also works with Stella's Place youth mental health agency on the Community Healing Project, a mental health and trauma program aimed at supporting youth exposed to community violence.

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