

Community Dispatch

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Growing Up Black in Oakville: The Impact of Community on Black Youth Identity Formation and Civic Participation

Community Development Halton is pleased to join the Canadian Caribbean Association of Halton and the Halton Multicultural Council as a partner in an innovative exploration of the experiences of black youth in our community entitled, "Growing Up Black in Oakville: The Impact of Community on Black Youth Identity Formation and Civic Participation." The report was prepared by Maureen Brown, an Oakville-based consultant and trainer in diversity and social inclusion.

Featuring Oakville as a case study, the research evolved out of growing concern over our preparedness to serve an increasingly diverse population. The study is unique in its focus on a 905 community and in its recognition of the challenges we face as our demographics shift. More than 50% of new immigrants to Canada and two-thirds of those who come to Ontario settle in the Greater Toronto Area. Forty-three percent of residents in Mississauga are new immigrants, the bulk of whom come from the Middle East, Asia and the Caribbean. Over the next 10 years, we expect these trends to increase in Halton.

The new make-up of our communities means that cultural assumptions on which we have traditionally operated may need to be re-visited, in keeping with our commitment to provide inclusive services. The study offers a rare and intimate glimpse into the minds of black youth, as it probes how they are defining themselves relative to their environment. Then, in the youth's own voices, it tells us what service providers need to understand in order to serve them well.

Maureen collected information through focus groups with close to 60 randomly selected black youth in Oakville, ranging from 13-24 years of age. Also interviews were conducted with key

regional leaders, including Regional Chair Joyce Savoline and Oakville Mayor Ann Mulvale. In addition, she interviewed some 20 parents. The youth shared their feelings, experiences and perspectives. Our analysis was built with the help of academic and community-based research about the way communities form and the way youth acquire a sense of 'ownership' in their community. An advisory committee of representatives of Halton-based agencies, institutions (such as school boards and police), youth and parents guided our work. Eminent York University professor, Dr. Carl James, an expert on the topic, advised the research process. Community Dispatch captures the key findings of the report.

*Joey Edwardh
Executive Director*

Black Youth Feel That...

- They have to be perfect to avoid landing in a "social pocket" of pre-set expectations of them.
- Parents, not the youth, choose to live in Oakville. They, however, are faced with the challenge of defining themselves relative to their peers in Mississauga, Toronto and the black community in general.
- Society defines and judges them according to their race. For them, however, race is only one aspect of who they are – and not necessarily the primary aspect. They are as likely to define themselves within the context of family, religion and upbringing as they are by their race. Some youth feel trapped by the judgement of those who

serve or otherwise interact with them because even when they are recognized for doing well they think that their performance is seen as an anomaly.

- Non-black youth are accorded more social leniency than black youth. What for youth from other groups is viewed as indiscretion will, more often than not be viewed in black youth as pathology. They struggle with society's tendency to accept negative media-fed images of young blacks while exempting other youth from the accompanying stigma. When other youth appropriate the style and image associated with black youth such as urban wear and taste in music, they are judged differently.
- They have to choose friends carefully due to lack of social leniency. In the process they sometimes adopt simplistic and even stereotypical images of white youth in particular. These images become intensified when the youth juxtapose their culturally influenced upbringing against that of their white peers. For example, they feel that white youth do drugs, hold 'bender' parties, disrespect parents and take the family car without permission. Black youth believe they do not engage in such behaviour for fear of heavy corporal punishment.
- In Oakville class impacts on race. Black youth who are financially comfortable see no difference in their living standards compared to their white peers. Those who are financially disadvantaged relative to their peers experience the impact more deeply because they feel that they are fulfilling the black/poor /underprivileged stereotype.
- Negative stereotypes and expectations inhibit their full participation in civic

society. They hesitate to volunteer or to attend community-based functions because they feel singled out or because they don't see themselves reflected in these activities.

- Black youth are in a constant struggle to demonstrate high levels of aspirations and capability. They feel they have to fight for opportunities that should have been theirs by right.
- They have to reconcile mixed messages: be black and be full participants in Oakville. It becomes difficult to do this, since the two sometimes seem mutually exclusive. Many of these messages come from parents who want their youth to take full advantage of life in Oakville, without sacrificing who they are. To some youth these messages are inspiring, to others they breed reticence and confusion.
- Being black in Oakville and Halton distinguishes youth from their peers elsewhere. They feel the pull of the larger black society, whose boundaries have been blurred by technology and media. But living here makes its own imprint on their psyche. This dichotomy affects everything from who they date, to how they dress, to their yearning for a chance to have a 'space' of their own, yet not at the expense of their place in society.
- They want to be an integral part of 're-formatting' or re-defining Oakville's identity to include the reality of their presence.

Creating Community

The report presents a format for creating a socially inclusive Oakville and Halton, in light of the youth's observations. It defines the concept of an inclusive community, based on a model that is being developed by the Social

Planning Network of Ontario. A socially inclusive community cultivates a single social fabric that allows for individual group identity. It is a community where diverse people participate by 'giving back' and where they are included at the ground level of *formatting* what that community looks like.

Five keys were identified to encourage greater civic participation among black youth:

- i) Recognize the uniqueness of the 905 region in relation to the GTA metropolis
- ii) Recognize the uniqueness of being black in the 905 region
- iii) Acknowledge the reality of race-based experiences
- iv) Recognize the 'burden of the race' that black youth bear
- v) Create room for personal growth as part of community growth

What the Study Means for Halton Service Providers

The results of the study will:

- i) help regional planners and service providers recognize the many dimensions of youth they are serving and thus enrich their ability to serve them
- ii) generate discussion, introspection and decision-making in Oakville's black population as it seeks to encourage excellence and community participation among its youth; and,
- iii) raise awareness that will help to avoid the difficulties that so often mar communities that are in transition.

The study provides specifics on black youth that will help in serving them or in engaging them as participants. It also raises critical questions, offering a strategic approach that can be adapted to create inclusive work and service environments. Specifically, the study challenges service providers in Halton to:

- Redefine Halton and their constituencies as a diverse community and define diversity in a manner that is distinct from the definition used in urban settings, such as Toronto.
- Acknowledge the impact of race-based experiences on the lives of young blacks
- Acknowledge the unique issues facing black youth in Halton by virtue of their race and our own social constructs, assumptions and expectations. Service providers must filter day-to-day realities into all diversity and youth initiatives. Agencies cannot assume that if they build it, black youth will come. They may have to go an extra mile.

To accomplish these goals service providers may have to review and adjust their policies and service approach. We urge them to engage in information gathering, discussion forums, and strategic initiatives to establish linkages with black youth and to equip their leaders to serve a diverse community. The report thus urges service providers to:

- Equip front line staff with knowledge, skills and sensitivity
- Review policies and recruitment strategies for elements and practices that discourage black youth from participating or from applying for opportunities

- Seek funding assistance or earmark funds to support participation by black youth and youth of diverse backgrounds
- Partner with community groups in initiatives that will help make institutions and services open to black youth
- Become more transparent and accessible to diverse youth
- Bring black youth in at the formative stages of initiatives that will impact their lives.
- Reject negative stereotypes and expectations of black youth

Community Development Halton is pleased to support regional agencies and service providers as they seek to create more inclusive environments for diverse youth. In the fall we will partner with the Social Planning Network of Ontario to host a full day seminar on these topics. Additionally, we will host a half-day session that focuses on diversity issues within Halton, using the black youth report as a case study.

For a copy of the report please go to:
<http://www.haltonspcvc.on.ca>



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