

[Reflection]

Black youth and the institutions that shape them

Recently, I found myself reflecting on the institutions that shape the lived realities of Black youth, after watching a recording of the Black Legal Action Centre (BLAC) symposium “*Living in Colour: Black Life, Law and Belonging in Canada.*” held on February 18, 2026. The conversations stayed with me because they reflected patterns I often see in my work at Laidlaw Foundation, particularly through B3 organizations (Black-led, Black-focused and Black-serving) responding to ongoing challenges in criminal justice, child welfare, education, environmental racism, and other systems.

BLAC is a community legal clinic in Ontario that provides free legal services to low-income individuals who might otherwise not have access to representation, especially where rights have been violated and voices continue being unheard. Their work focuses on addressing anti-Black racism through legal advocacy, public education, and system change. This context shaped how I listened to the symposium, especially as I have been thinking more about why Black communities remain both overrepresented in systems like criminal justice and child welfare, yet are still underserved by them. One idea that stayed with me from the symposium was the tension between visibility and belonging. The speakers shared that Black presence in Canada is highly visible in culture and public life, yet this visibility does not always translate into how institutions make decisions or define problems. Canada, according to one of the speakers, is often described as multicultural and inclusive, but in systems like policing, child welfare, and poverty, a different reality emerges.

Some of the speakers emphasized that institutions carry history with them. This stayed with me because it helps explain why present-day outcomes cannot be separated from the past. Even when discriminatory laws in housing, education, immigration, and employment are removed, the structures they created don’t simply disappear. They often remain and shape how institutions continue to function, often in less visible but deeply persistent ways. As a result, injustice continues across generations in ways that are less visible but deeply embedded.

This raises an important question: how do systems understand harm when their foundations are shaped by history? The symposium emphasized that institutions tend to respond most easily when harm appears as a single incident rather than a pattern, such as a mistake, or a violation. Structural harm is harder to name and because of this, racial inequity is often explained through “neutral” terms like ‘risk factors’ or ‘low-income’ rather than race itself. When race is removed from the explanation, the outcome remains, but the cause becomes harder to see. Over time, this produces what one speaker described as belonging without power: Black communities are visible and often celebrated, but less present in how systems define problems or shape solutions. Inclusion exists, but recognition and influence do not fully follow. So then, if law cannot name race, it cannot meaningfully address racial harm. Belonging is therefore not just about visibility, but it is about recognition within systems that shape outcomes.

Although not a central focus of the symposium, I also found myself thinking about environmental racism, which follows a similar pattern. Racialized and low-income communities are more likely to live near

polluting industries, contaminated sites, and under-resourced infrastructure. These outcomes are shaped by long-standing policy and planning decisions. What connects environmental racism and criminal justice is that both show how inequity is produced through systems that appear neutral on the surface. The harm is patterned, not random.

I came away from this symposium with one key takeaway, the importance of moving beyond documenting disparities toward changing the systems that produce them. Across the symposium, there was a strong emphasis on community leadership and the importance of Black voices shaping solutions, not just being included after decisions are made. This reflection builds on my previous three reflections on [education](#), [child welfare](#), and [Indigenous Evaluation](#), all priorities of Laidlaw Foundation. Across these pieces, a consistent theme has been how systems shape belonging, opportunity, and fairness, and how important it is to centre community knowledge and lived experience in understanding them.

In that spirit, Laidlaw Foundation is launching a dedicated granting stream for Black youth (the Black Youth Fund). Taken together, my previous reflections on education, child welfare, Indigenous evaluation, and criminal justice, point to a common thread: that the experiences of Black youth are shaped across multiple interconnected systems, and that meaningful change requires centering Black-led knowledge, leadership, and lived experience. This initiative reflects that commitment by supporting Black youth-led ideas, strengthening community capacity, and addressing the barriers that continue to shape young Black people's access to opportunity and justice in Ontario.

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