



Community Heartbeat: Behind the Walls

Blueprint Pathways Evaluation Report

Funded by Canadian Heritage

2018 - 2020

Canada



Canadian
Heritage



About Blueprint

Blueprint for Life is an organization that offers culturally appropriate programs designed for youth, founded on hip hop, rooted in traditional culture, and centred on community needs. Built into the programming is the long-term goal of not only promoting the healing of individuals and communities, but also of building long-term sustainability and leaders for tomorrow.

In 2014, Blueprint Pathways was created as a federally incorporated non-profit to extend the reach of Blueprint for Life programming into Urban Centres and Youth Correctional Facilities. Pathways was the recipient of a \$500,000.00 grant from Justice Canada and completed three years of programming in maximum security youth facilities across Canada. Blueprint Pathways is likely the largest group therapy program in the history of Canada's corrections system.

This series of Blueprint programs, *Community Heartbeat: Behind the Walls*, emerged as a response to a call to action by the Canadian Heritage Anti-Racism Action Program for projects that encourage positive interaction between cultural, religious, and ethnic communities in Canada and projects that promote the expression of Canadians' multiple identities.

By offering programs once again through Canadian Youth Correctional Facilities, Blueprint reaches youth whose lives have been deeply impacted by complex societal issues rooted in racism and discrimination. The youth community that exists within the institutional setting often involves rival gangs, many formed along ethno-cultural and racial lines. It is constructive for youth to see each other in a joyful setting, to recognize their commonalities and gain tools for positive interaction and mutual understanding. Blueprint programming provides a real example of what socially inclusive community involvement can feel like and supports the possibility of constructive engagement with society upon release.

Check out this video capturing the spirit of Blueprint Pathways programming:

[Blueprint Pathways Video - Community Heartbeat](#)

And here is one from the projects inside the Edmonton facility:

[Blueprint Pathways Video - Youth Corrections Project in Edmonton](#)

For more information about Blueprint please check out [Blueprint's Website](#).



Our Team

Blueprint Founder and Executive Director: Stephen Leafloor, blueprintforlife@bell.net

Our Funders: Heritage Foundation, Inter-Action Multiculturalism Funding Program

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Thank you to our Partners and Collaborators: William E. Hay Centre, Edmonton Young Offender Centre, Manitoba Youth Centre

A Letter of Thanks

It's been quite the project working in 3 provinces over two years in three different youth Secure Detention Facilities. Not to mention that the final project in Edmonton had to be canceled at the last minute due to the Covid-19 virus and its far-reaching implications for everyone. But having completed 5 out of 6 projects is still a great success.

I judge success by seeing the amazing buy-in and commitment to the programing that the incarcerated youth exhibit. Seeing defensive, angry, in-your-face youth, who all have incredible histories of trauma, slowly unwind and let their guard down is such a beautiful thing. It truly is the starting point based on building trust that must be broached if we ever hope to get to deeper conversations on all the issues that effect their lives. In all my years of doing front line social work with youth this always remains as the roadblock. How do we create environments where there are possibilities for hope and change, while internalizing some new concepts within?

We applaud the Heritage Foundation for making multiculturalism and inclusion a priority, tackling the roots of racism and discrimination and the ugly issues that bubble up when not everyone is treated equal. When these youth become disenfranchised from broader society, they become isolated, turning to gangs, antisocial behavior, racist idealism, and often destructive behavior. We used Hip hop, traditional culture, real-talk, journaling, drumming and meditation, to create bridges for connection and healing. We get to witness youth's love for each other's unique gifts grow. We see empathy and understanding blossom, not only for each other but also in how they treat themselves.

This is why we do weeklong intense programing so that the momentum the youth feel is intense, and they can see and feel daily the progress they are making. It goes without saying that they are different individuals and different as a group by the time we get to the last day and final showcase.

It is difficult to describe as lots of the evidence is in the body language and the vibe of the environment being different as the week progresses. So, to try and capture youth's pride and accomplishments and reflect it back to them, we created a few videos on these projects. In Edmonton we even managed to have a screening of it internally in the facility at the end of the week (we dealt with very real privacy concerns by utilizing masks).

Doing some shout outs and thank you's are always also important. The first big thank you goes to the participants themselves -both the youth and the staff. Without all of your commitment, the program would not work. Its no small thing to coordinate these projects as they are often talked about as the largest group therapy projects that take place in these facilities. There are lots of logistical, programing and security concerns. So much thx goes out to the programing staff at EYOC, MYC, and the William Hay Centre. The youth know you care about them and working with us as a team has some magical results.

On the Blueprint side of things, we have an amazing team of artist that share not only our passions and artforms openly, but in a way that shifts the power of creativity and healing to the youth. We share openly our own pain and struggles in life in a way that resonates deeply with the youth. Ways that they express as being much better than traditional counselling they have received in the past. This team also includes on the back end of things an incredible evaluation team that includes volunteers. Sooo – A huge thx to

the Blueprint Fam that worked on these projects. Troy, Nereo, Sami, Tracy, BJ, Mark, Andel, Alonzo, Emma, Sarah, Susan and Bob. I have so much respect and love for the team!

Shout out to the Edmonton Young Offender Centre, the Manitoba youth Centre, and the William Hay Centre for believing in our work and always welcoming us back as part of your extended teams.

Lets all hope that Canada's commitment to incarcerated youth and youth on the streets continues to grow. There are so many youth who have great trauma and little support in their lives.

I hope this report proves valuable and informative for others who do such work.

Love and Respect

Buddha aka



Stephen Leafloor

BA, MSW, M.S.C, Ashoka Fellow Canada,

Founder of BluePrintForLife.ca

Executive Director Blueprint Pathways





- Credit goes to the talented, anonymous Blueprint participants who have shared artwork, insights and spoken word pieces that are included in this report. Much love, from Blueprint.

Executive Summary

Community Heartbeat: Behind the Walls

Blueprint Pathways is a hip-hop arts and discussion-based program designed to promote social inclusion and citizenship for incarcerated youth. Blueprint's innovative approach includes a) dance, spoken word, meditation, art, journaling, drumming, stomping, ceremony and cultural activities b) role models, mentorship and discussions (on topics such as racism and discrimination, valuing diversity, healthy relationships, gangs, support systems, alcohol and drug abuse, trauma and healing), and c) community, culture and performance. By combining arts, dance and discussion, Blueprint programs activate youth's physical, mental, emotional, social, cultural and spiritual selves. This unique format aims to build a foundation for positive intercultural connection, build bridges towards inclusion, and discover pathways for a life of healthy citizenship. Ultimately, Blueprint wants to help marginalized and racialized young people heal, connect and reach opportunities for social, economic and cultural citizenship.

As part of the Heritage Foundation's, Inter-Action Multiculturalism Funding Program, Blueprint received a grant for 2 years of programming in Young Offender's Centres across Canada. Through the *Community Heartbeat: Behind the Walls* program series, Blueprint worked with secure custody facilities to engage Crown Ward youth, racialized youth, gang-involved youth, first nations youth and youth with disabilities. We delivered 5 week-long intensive programs (9 am – 4 pm) taking place at 1) William E. Hay Centre; 2) Manitoba Youth Centre and 3) Edmonton Young Offender Centre.

Program Evaluation

A mixed method design was used to evaluate Blueprint's programs which included both quantitative (surveys) and qualitative methods (interviews). The main evaluation survey was conducted in a *Before/After* design, to compare scores *After* program completion against the participants' baseline scores *Before* the program. We also implemented a demographics questionnaire which included the Adolescent Discrimination Distress Index to better understand participant experiences of racism and discrimination.

Summary of Results

A total of 155 youth and staff completed the program. The evaluation findings show that Blueprint helped build a foundation for positive interaction through a) increased engagement in healthy activities; b) building confidence, personal achievement, and cultural pride; c) developing open communication and understanding others. Findings showed that Blueprint helped participants build bridges towards a) increased social inclusion, feeling accepted, connected, and valued; and b) improved social and interpersonal trust. The data also suggests that Blueprint helped to youth with tools to enable pathways to citizenship such as: a) coping strategies for developing resilience, b) building support systems, and c) inspiring youth goals and aspirations for positive community participation and citizenship.

Introduction

Background

Multiculturalism and diversity are great sources of Canadian identity and pride. Yet the current reality does not reflect Canada's vision: where all Canadians benefit from equitable access to and participation in economic, cultural, social, and political life (Canadian Heritage, 2019a). For racialized communities, women, people with disabilities, people experiencing low income, the LGBTQ community and other marginalized groups, opportunities are not equitable; systemic racism and discrimination have led to persistent gaps in social, health and economic outcomes (Canadian Heritage 2019b).

Feeling excluded can be especially detrimental during adolescence, a critical time of psychosocial development. Being the target of intolerance is stressful. Youth who sense that they are living in a threatening and unequal world may develop anxiety, hypervigilance, distrust, self-doubt and/or depression (Trent et al. 2019; Fisher, 2000). Systemic racism and discrimination also mean that these youth are more likely to live in poverty and poor community conditions; experience barriers in the education system, family issues, health issues and mental health challenges; and lack social and economic

*Racism [...] is like dust in the air.
It seems invisible - even if you're
choking on it - until you let the sun
in. Then you see it's everywhere.*

- Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, LA Times May 2020

opportunities (Link & Phelan 1995; Paradise, 2006). Inevitably, feelings of exclusion can creep in and youth may seek negative ways of belonging in the form of gangs, antisocial behavior, racist idealism, and/or destructive behavior (McMurtry & Curling 2008).

One outcome is that youth with these experiences will be more likely

to end up in the criminal justice system (McMurtry & Curling 2008)¹. For example, in 2016-17, 48 per cent of youth (ages 12-17) in secure custody were Indigenous, compared to 8 per cent of the Canadian youth population (StatsCan, 2019 a). In 2015-16, 12 per cent of young adults (ages 18-21) identified as Black (Provincial Advocate for Children & Youth, 2017)², compared to only about 3.5 per cent of the general population (StatsCan, 2019 b). The youth behind these numbers are also deeply impacted by the experience and trauma (complex trauma and singular events) of their interactions with the justice system.

Moving towards an inclusive society that values diversity starts with ensuring that *all* young Canadians have opportunities to belong, and to pursue their hopes for the future. This includes young offenders who are among the most marginalized youth in Canada. Cultivating healing, hope, trust and open dialogue needs to be done in creative ways that set up safe environments for positive community connections to re-root and flourish. The arts and art culture can be nourished as a safe place for youth to find their voice and learn healthy ways of participating in Canada's rich economic, social, political, and cultural life.

¹ Its also important to consider bias within the justice system itself. A recent Canadian study showed that Black youth were more likely to be charged/less likely to be cautioned than non-Black youth (Samuels-Wortley, 2019).

² Note that, while race-based data in Canada are collected by a variety of criminal justice institutions, national reporting of racial and Indigenous data is sparse, inconsistent, and inaccessible (Wortley & Owusu-Bempah, 2012).

Community Heartbeat – Behind the Walls

In 2018, Blueprint Pathways was funded by the Canadian Heritage Inter-Action Multiculturalism Funding Program for a 2-year (2018-2020) program series, *Community Heartbeat: Behind the Walls*. The program series aims to promote community participation and inclusion in incarcerated youth populations that include youth from racialized communities, Indigenous youth, newcomers, refugees, gang-involved youth, Crown Ward youth, and youth with disabilities.

Through arts-based activities, hip hop, traditional culture, self-reflection and mentorship, youth learn to support each other, gaining confidence and a deeper connection to the people in their community. Youth get nudged out of their comfort zone to dance, stomp, bucket drum, meditate, write and use their voice. This creates unique bonds of trust, enhancing the intensity of the engagement, and sets the tone to have honest and open discussions about the struggles in their lives. Group discussions promote interpersonal understanding and reflections about broader societal issues such as racism, stereotypes, and isolation. Blueprint's dynamic staff team help break down barriers by modelling ways of talking about difficult issues such as bullying, racism, abuse, anger, addiction and finding paths for healing. Youth feel safe to express their vulnerabilities and can relate to common themes that emerge from the experiences of others, thus reducing the "us vs them" mentality. Many youth leave the program with deeper connections to peers from different backgrounds, a new reservoir of coping skills and a sense of belonging.



Our Impact Framework

In this Blueprint program series, our aim is to promote social inclusion and citizenship for incarcerated youth who have been impacted by racism and discrimination. We do this by providing fun opportunities for community engagement, personal achievement, learning and sharing. Having fun together and listening to each other lays the groundwork for interpersonal understanding and strengthening youths support systems, while also teaching youth coping strategies for when life gets difficult. Youth learn to support each other, include, and value each other, and to trust in the goodness of others. Our hope is to create a space for youth to build community and a sense of belonging, and to foster a desire for continued participation and citizenship. The specific program objectives and measurable outcomes are broken down in the Figure below.

Our Impact: To Promote Social Inclusion and Citizenship for Diverse Young Canadians Impacted by Racism and Discrimination.

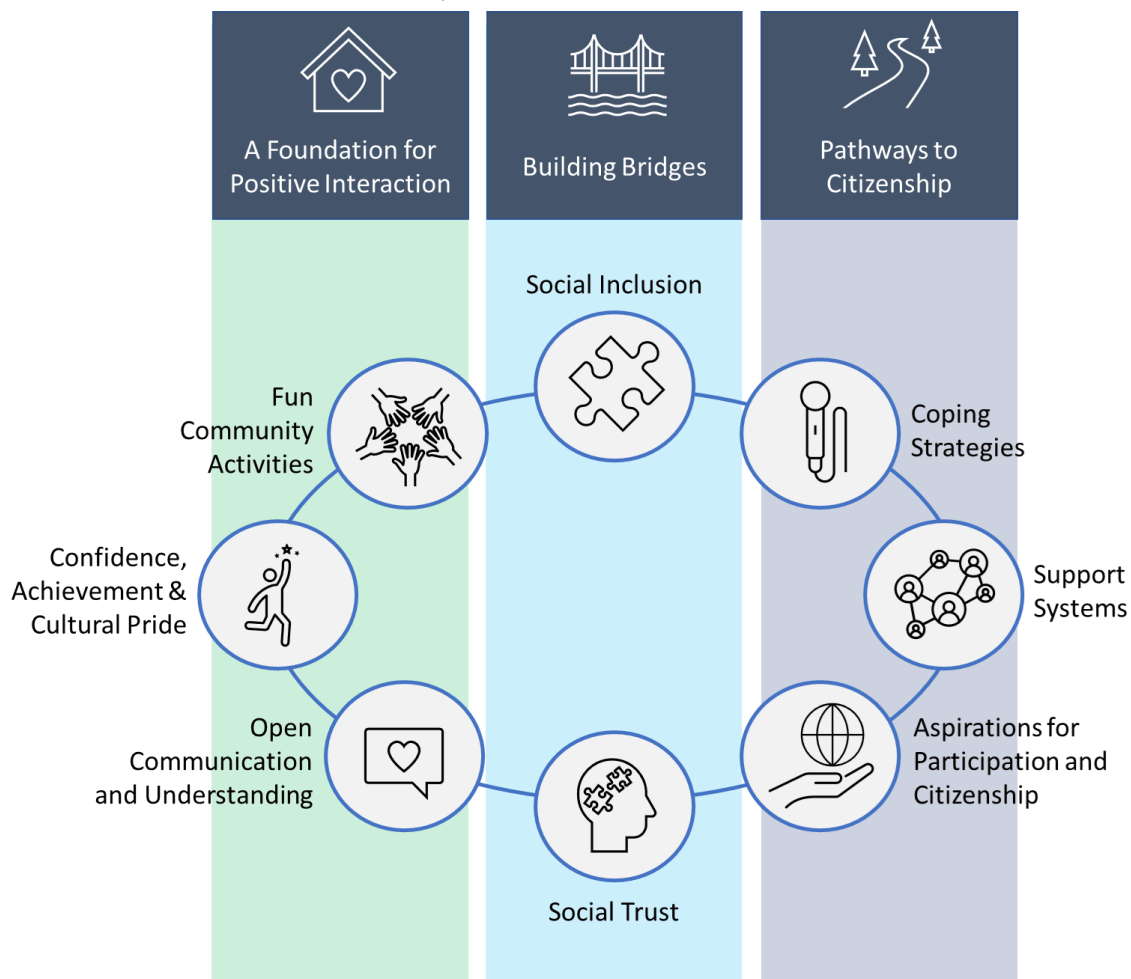


Figure 1. Blueprint Pathways' impact framework for promoting social inclusion and citizenship in youth participants. The three main impact pillars include 1) Building a Foundation for Positive Interaction, 2) Helping Youth Build Bridges, and 3) Supporting Pathways to Citizenship. The expected outcomes that help support each of these pillars can be found in the circles below each pillar heading.

Youth Correctional Facilities

Youth Correctional Facilities are places of secure temporary detention and secure custody for young people between the ages of 12 and 18 who have been charged with a criminal offence under the Youth Criminal Justice Act.

As part of the Community Heartbeat program, Blueprint provided programming to three such facilities across Canada:

William E. Hay Centre (WEHC) in Ottawa, Ontario has 24 – 40 beds for young males, and a large Afro-Caribbean youth population.

Manitoba Youth Centre (MYC) in Winnipeg, Manitoba has capacity for 105 males and 45 females, and a large Indigenous youth population.

Edmonton Young Offender Centre (EYOC) in Edmonton, Alberta is a 286-bed facility with a large Indigenous youth population.



Program Design

Community Heartbeat: Behind the Walls uses the same basic ingredients that has made Blueprint Pathways successful in the past. These include: 1) role models, mentorship and mental health education led through group discussion; 2) breakdance, bucket drumming, spoken word, arts, meditation, journaling, self-reflection and cultural activities (e.g. traditional drumming, smudging); 3) community, culture and performance. In this program series, there is additional emphasis on sharing culture, appreciating the value of diversity, and tackling issues connected to racism and discrimination. By combining pillars of cultural, social, emotional, and physical well-being, Blueprint aims to empower youth with pathways to social inclusion and citizenship.

Blueprint Staff

Blueprint programs are led by a diverse team of top Canadian artists, breakdancers, cultural leaders and youth outreach workers. Many have life experience that the youth relate to. Each staff member has their own unique story about how the hip hop community and culture supported them throughout hardship, trauma and healing. The staff's cultural diversity reflects that of the facility's youth population, giving youth a variety of personalities, stories and perspectives to connect with. Blueprint staff members teach youth how hip hop culture can be a powerful template to engage healthy notions of social support,



community connections and cultural pride. This project was also captured by video with careful editing to keep the youths' identities private. Some facilities would only allow this to be shown within the facility to the youth and staff.

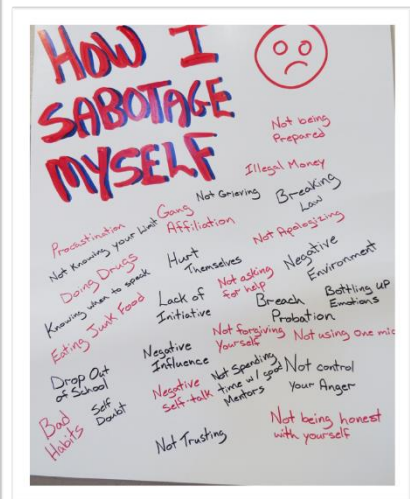
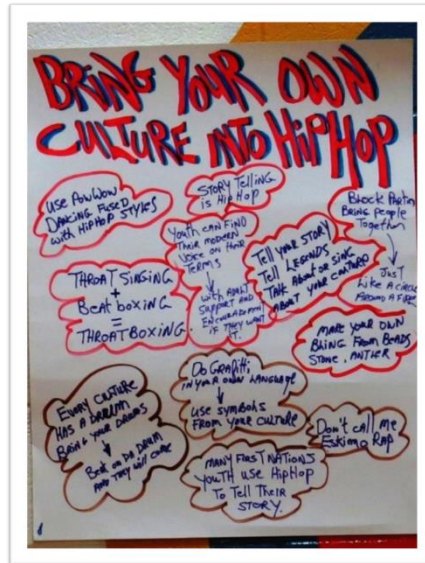
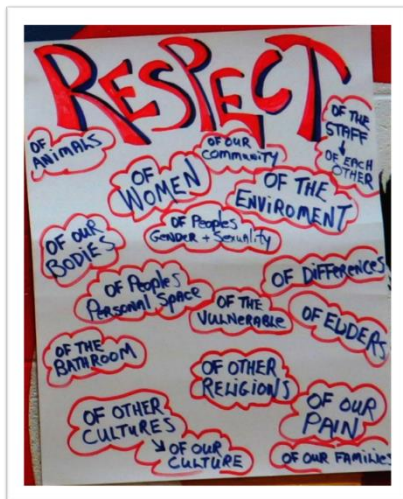
Program Layout

Blueprint programs take place over a single week, Monday to Friday, 9am – 4pm with 5 to 9 staff members. Facility staff are also encouraged to participate along with youth. This gives youth the opportunity to build different and deeper relationships with staff.

Buddha (Stephen Leafloor, Blueprints Founder and Executive Director) along with Blueprint's staff team, lead the group in discussion sessions staggered between dance instruction, and other art-based activities, such as spoken word and artwork. Each evening, participants are given simple 'homework' to visualize or write about lessons and topics in relation to their own lives. Youth work together throughout the week to create a showcase, presented on the final day of the program. This is a powerful way to create a shared sense of pride in the group as a team. While the content and flow of each program is adapted to meet the cultural and educational needs of participants, the programs tend to follow a general schedule of discussion topics and activities, described below.

Program Discussion Topics

- How to cope when life gets hard - finding your 'one mic'³ and Buddha's Story
- Cultural pride and bringing your own culture into hip hop
- Exploring your culture and family history as a healing-tool
- Respect for differences, other cultures, other religions, and women
- Bullying, learning to say I'm sorry, rebuilding relationships and fear of trusting
- Internalized racism, the 'us against them' attitude, and connecting through shared experience
- How we sabotage ourselves, negative self-talk, impulse control, substance use, and toxic relationships
- Why not gangs: a hip hop perspective – getting a new familia
- Healing paths, trauma, sexual abuse and safety. Healing throughout life
- How to reach out for help. Personal Inventory, safety plans and outside resources
- How will you sabotage (and save) yourself upon release from the facility?



Program Activities

- Traditional prayer and smudging led by Indigenous staff (daily)
- Warm up and cool down (daily)
- Dance skills: backspin, top roc, freezes, dance routines – the hustle, stomp, bucket drumming, linking hip hop to traditional culture (lessons that build throughout the week)
- Songs, spoken word and raps
- Visualization/meditation exercises (daily)
- Journaling, self-reflection, and poetry (ongoing)
- Art project (builds throughout the week)
- Homework - Visualization and Written: Top 3 one mics, 3 new one mics; 3 things I'm grateful for; a letter of apology to oneself or someone else; poetry
- Final showcase (families and community members come to see the show)

³ The 'One Mic' concept comes from a song by rapper Nas, with the line 'All you need is one mic'. 'One mic' is a metaphor for having a passion. Whether it's dance, writing, kayaking, singing, or math, all you need is one thing to focus on to keep you going through tough times in life. Blueprint teaches youth that their 'one mic' can be used as a coping mechanism for managing anger and other challenges in life.

Program Evaluation

Design

The evaluation used a mixed method design, including both quantitative (survey) and qualitative (written and interview response) components. For all evaluation components, participants were informed about the purpose of the evaluation, and care was taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity of the data. Completing the evaluation was voluntary and there was no penalty for choosing not to participate.

Demographics

Blueprint captured the demographics of youth participants including their age, gender, immigration/refugee status, and racial/ethnic background. Participants also completed the Adolescent Discrimination Distress Index (ADDI) developed by Fisher (2000). The ADDI measures the perceived nature and impact of racism on youth (Fisher, 2000). For Blueprint, the scale was modified to capture discrimination based on race, culture, language, sexual orientation, gender, age, disability, or income.

Program Impact Survey

The program impact survey was collected using a *Before* and *After* design, meaning that the same survey questions were delivered the week prior and the week following the Blueprint program. This allowed us to compare youths' scores on program outcome measures *Before* and *After* the program's delivery.

- **Frequency of Activities Scale.** Developed by Blueprint, this measure captures the frequency of participation in activities composing the Blueprint program.
- **Ethnic Identity Survey.** Measures aspects of cultural pride (Bosworth & Espelage, 1995).
- **Motivation to Change.** Adapted from the original Contemplation Ladder (Biener, and Abrams, 1991) this scale measures participants' motivation to change positive aspects of their behaviour associated with community participation, coping strategies, and seeking support. Responses capture the stages of contemplation from precontemplation, to taking action for change.
- **Social Trust Measure.** Captures participants' general sense of whether others are fair and trustworthy (Flanagan, 2010).
- **Social Inclusion Scale.** Selected items were used to evaluate various social inclusion constructs such as social isolation, relations, and acceptance (Wilson & Secker, 2015).

Qualitative

Qualitative interviews for youth participants were conducted post program by facility staff in small focus groups (3-6 individuals). Facility staff provided feedback in writing. The semi-structured interview consisted of the following sections:

- **Healthy activities.** Exploring how blueprint activities help youth as coping strategies (i.e. 'one-mic' concept), for personal achievement and building confidence.
- **Diversity and Inclusion.** Understanding Blueprint's impact on youth's attitudes about diversity and sense of social inclusion.
- **Community engagement:** Exploring whether Blueprint has motivated youth to get involved and give back to their communities.

Ethno-cultural-racial Demographics

Figure 2. shows the breakdown of ethno-cultural-racial identities for the program overall and for each facility.

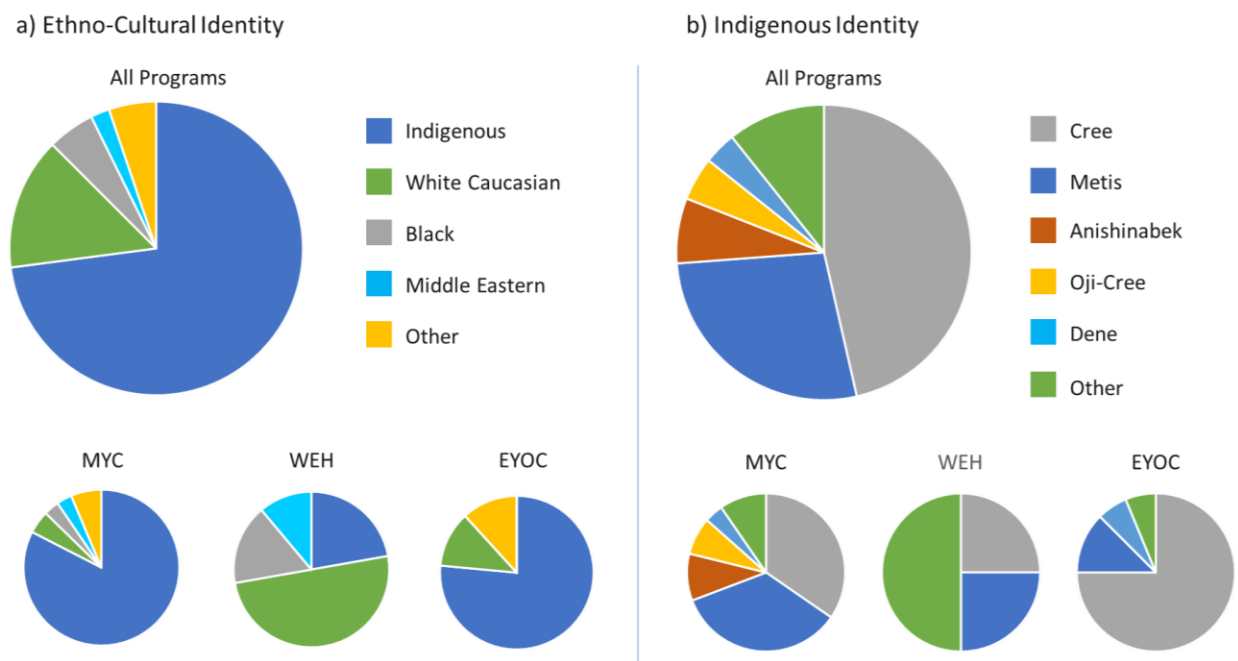


Figure 2. Ethno-cultural-racial identity for Blueprint programs run under the Canadian Heritage Anti-Racism Action Program. Smaller pie charts indicate the demographic breakdown for each facility: MYC – Manitoba Youth Centre; WEH – William E. Hay Centre; EYOC – Edmonton Young Offender Centre. Participants were asked to select all that apply, and data represents the proportion of responses for each ethno-cultural-racial category. a) Ethno-cultural-racial identity; White Caucasian includes White – North America, White – Europe (e.g. Ukraine, Norway); Black includes Black – Africa (e.g. Ghana, Kenya, Somalia) , Black – Caribbean (e.g. Jamaica, Trinidad), and Black - North America; Mixed Background represents participants selecting multiple responses; ‘other’ category includes Indian Caribbean, East Asia, Latin American and those who did not specify; Note that we did not obtain data for one of our programs at William E. Hay, and therefore the overall proportion of Black participants is probably under-represented in the All Programs graphic. b) Indigenous Identity; displays specific group membership identified by Indigenous participants; ‘other’ category includes Blackfoot, Cherokee, Micmac and Ojibway.

Experiences of Racism and Discrimination

Results from the modified Adolescent Discrimination Distress Index (ADDI) show that 97% of youth have experienced some form of discrimination, with race, income, culture and age being the most common explanations (Figure 2a). The average distress ratings as a result of discriminatory experiences varied widely between participants (Figure 2b).

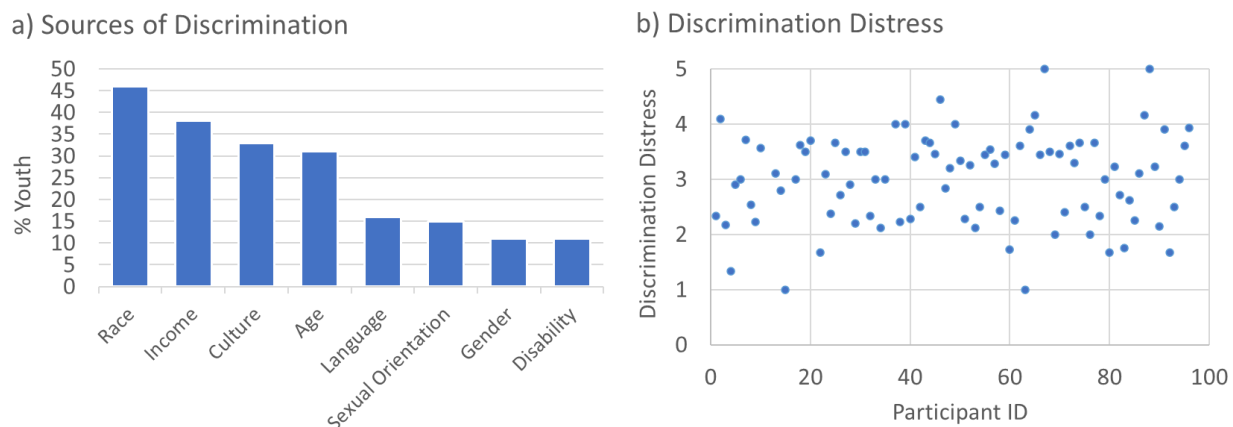


Figure 3. Adolescent Discrimination Distress Index. a) Sources of Discrimination. Youth reported experiencing discrimination due to their race (46%), income (38%), culture (33%), age (31%), language (16%), sexual orientation (15%), gender (11%), and disability (11%). b) Discrimination Distress. Participants average discrimination distress ratings are plotted across subjects. The figure shows discrimination distress ratings (1 = not at all distressing, 5 = extremely distressing) varying widely across program participants.



Findings on the ADDI showed that some discriminatory experiences are significantly more stressful for youth than others. The following list represents the top five incidents most distressing to youth, starting with the most stressful:

1. **Being hassled by police**, experienced by **79%** of participants.
2. **Being called insulting names**, experienced by **79%** of participants.
3. **Being treated as though they were not smart**, experienced by **74%** of participants.
4. **Being threatened**, experienced by **50%** of participants.
5. **Being discouraged from joining an advanced level class**, experienced by **33%** of participants.

Program Impact Findings

Our program impact findings are summarized below and grouped according to our three main objectives.

Objective 1. A Foundation for Positive Interaction



Our findings demonstrate that Blueprint Pathways helped foster a basis for positive interaction between youth. This included opportunities to a) participate in fun community activities, b) build confidence, personal achievement and cultural pride, and c) engage in open communication about a range of topics important to diverse teens.



Fun Community Activities

During the program, youth said they felt free, relaxed and happy. They said the program allowed them to put their problems and differences aside, to 'get outside their heads' and just have fun with each other.

"I was proud that I actually danced, because at first I was like, "I don't usually do this. I usually go and do bad stuff." And I just walked away. Then I thought about it, and I came back. I did it, and I was proud of myself." - Youth Participant

They learned new skills, perfected stomp and dance routines, engaged in dance-offs, performed spoken word pieces and collaborated with their peers to create a community showcase. For many participants, these were skills they never imagined themselves trying, let alone mastering and performing in front of an audience. But they did. Youth who had existing talents, such as singing and beat boxing also got to develop and perform these talents. Some youth, who were typically quiet, withdrawn and known to have a lot of struggles, surprised their peers by being among the most outgoing participants.

"There were lots of good vibes. Lots of positivity and laughs and stuff that doesn't always happen here."
– Youth Participant

There were examples of youth going back to their rooms after the program ended for the day and practicing, listening to music and feeling good. Youth said that Blueprint brought a fun community vibe and purpose to the facility that was rare.

Survey results showed significant increases in participation rates for several healthy activities composing the Blueprint program, with increases in scores *Before* the Main Program as compared to scores obtained *After* the main program (see Figure 3):

- **Journaling** (T (79) = -2.9, p = 0.01) including assignments exploring gratitude and forgiveness.
- **Meditation** (T (79) = -4.1, p = 0.00) with daily facilitation and visioning exercises.
- **Dance** (T (79) = -8.8, p = 0.00) building skills such as backspin, top roc, freezes, dance routines – the hustle, stomp, bucket drumming, integrating cultural elements.
- **Spoken Word/Poetry** (T (79) = -3.2, p = 0.00) building vocabulary and exploring the cathartic properties of writing and finding their voice.
- **Art/Graffiti** (T (79) = -3.5, p = 0.00) including a group art piece that builds throughout the week.
- **Drumming/Stomping** (T (80) = 7.0, p = 0.00) including traditional drumming.
- **Cultural Activities** (T (79) = -4.1, p = 0.00) such as prayer and smudging led by Indigenous staff.

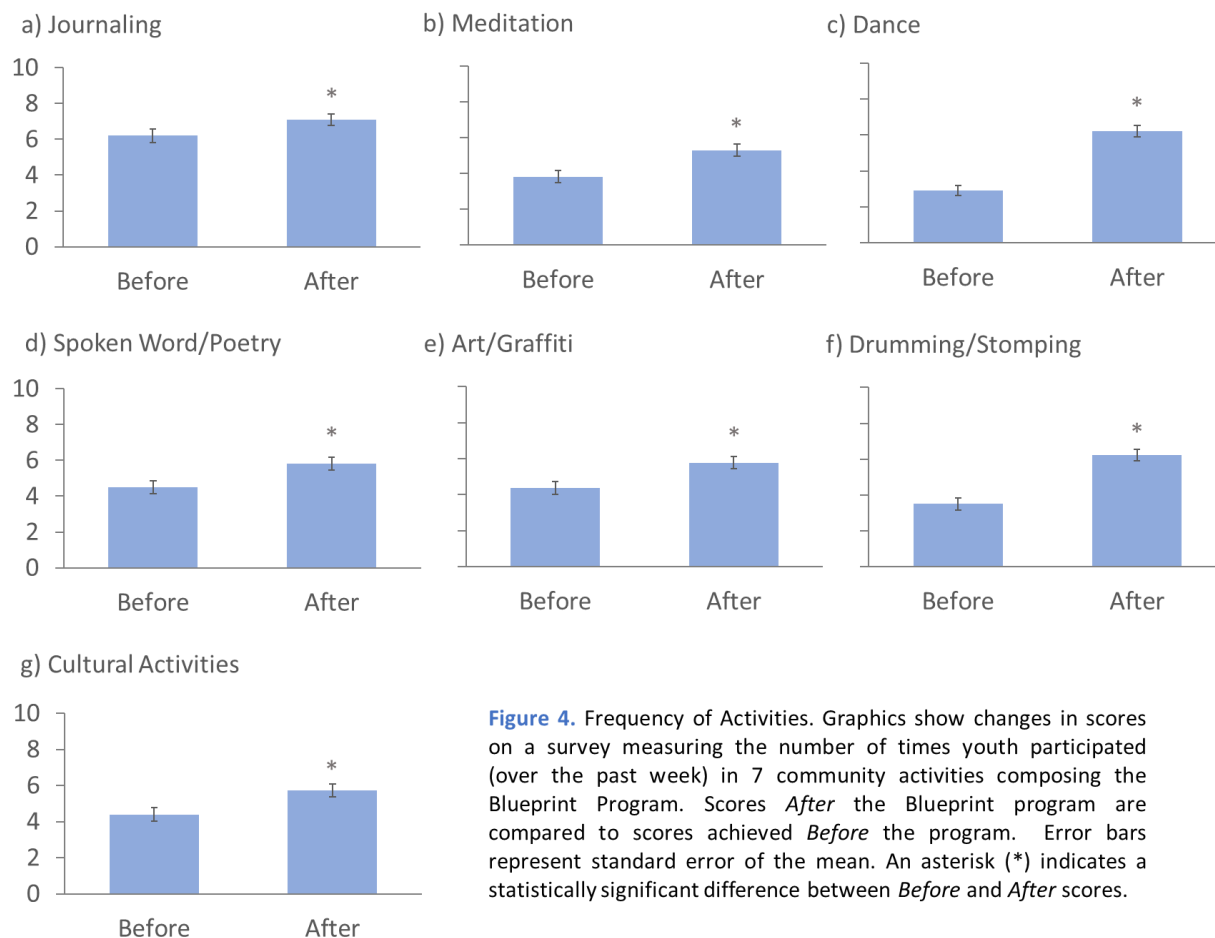


Figure 4. Frequency of Activities. Graphics show changes in scores on a survey measuring the number of times youth participated (over the past week) in 7 community activities composing the Blueprint Program. Scores *After* the Blueprint program are compared to scores achieved *Before* the program. Error bars represent standard error of the mean. An asterisk (*) indicates a statistically significant difference between *Before* and *After* scores.

Confidence, Achievement and Pride



Youth talked about being pushed outside of their comfort zone and felt that, while scary, this helped them learn to support each other, build confidence, and overcome self-doubt. A lot of youth were proud of themselves for trying something new and challenging. Many youth expressed that most of the time they would just walk away, but in this program they stayed and they tried their best, often finding the outcomes surprising; that they could master these difficult skills with a little support, determination and practice.

Many youth talked about learning ‘to not care about what others think’. Not feeling the need to worry about external judgement gave them space to explore their abilities and interests. They said they built confidence to try new things, and even to get up in front of a group to perform them. Youth felt they learned to put themselves out there, to trust themselves, allow themselves to be vulnerable, and to do it with humility and respect. Many youth felt the confidence they gained in Blueprint would help them be more outgoing in other areas of their lives and open them up to new experiences.

“Yeah, whenever they were saying ‘go out of your comfort zone’ and now I’m more ready to do that. I’m like more open to new ideas sort of thing.” – Youth Participant

At Manitoba Youth Centre, survey findings revealed a marginally significant increase in scores on items measuring Cultural Pride on the Ethnic Identity Survey (Bosworth & Espelage, 1995) *After* the Blueprint program, as compared to *Before* scores ($T(43) = 1.9, p = 0.062$). Results from other facilities did not reveal any statistically significant changes in measures of cultural pride.

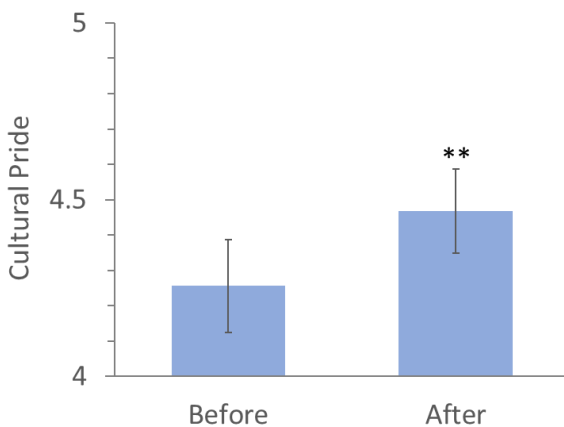


Figure 5. Cultural Pride. Scores on a measure of cultural pride *After* the Blueprint program, as compared to scores achieved *Before* the program. High scores indicate greater feelings of Cultural Pride. The graphic depicts findings from participants at the Manitoba Youth Centre. A double asterisk (**) indicates a marginally significant difference between *Before* and *After* scores.

Open Communication and Understanding



While the hip hop helped youth bring their guards down, the talks gave youth the opportunity to share experiences and explore topics that were important to them in a group setting.

Youth said they appreciated the opportunity to be heard, and to learn about the experiences of their peers. They discovered that their struggles were often more universal among their peers than they expected, and said it felt good to know they were not alone. They also really valued the opportunity to learn about other people's successes, as well as their struggles. This helped them learn different ways to deal with the difficulties they face in their own lives. Youth found that the guidance Blueprint staff offered helped them see positive ways of dealing with really complex issues such as racism and discrimination, trauma, mental health challenges and toxic relationships, seeing that there are ways to overcome really hard things and even draw inspiration from them to do something positive.

"It makes me change how I think about things and other people that have other struggles. And they're making a benefit out of it. And they maybe hit rock bottom or that they thought is rock bottom and they just flipped it right around and can show everybody that they can do it. We can do it."
 – Youth Participant

"Just understanding that everyone has their things, their struggles. That's what it really taught us. Try to put yourself in their moccasins."
 – Youth Participant

Learning about other people's journeys also helped youth better understand and respect each others' differences. They talked about realizing that everyone is different, that everyone has problems, and that everyone's problems are different. They learned to consider these differences before judging people, to try to see things from another person's perspective before reacting. Many youth said that they came to deeply understand and genuinely believe one of Blueprint's core messages, that everyone deserves respect.

Program Objective 2: Building bridges towards inclusion



Our findings demonstrate that Blueprint helped youth to build bridges within the institutional community by a) increasing feelings of social inclusion by feeling connected, accepted and valued, and b) improving both interpersonal and social trust, with youth gaining faith that people are generally fair and trustworthy.

Social Inclusion



Our interviews with youth showed evidence of youth becoming more accepting and inclusive with each other as they collaborated and developed as a group. One group of youth talked about how, in planning for the dance-offs, they built on their strengths and weaknesses as a group, developing into something they were all proud of and where everyone played a valuable role. We also heard multiple anecdotes about youth who had previously been isolated or excluded in some way, becoming accepted and included by their peers through their artistic accomplishments and confidence, even becoming viewed by their peers as leaders in some instances.

“He's always been the type of kid that everyone's always picking on. So for him to be able to just get out there and dance in front of everyone, that's pretty cool. He proved us all wrong, that we can't pick on him no more about dancing. None of us.”

– Youth Participant

“I want to say that we are not all natives in here. There is different races and we were all like working together. We were a team. In unison. It doesn't really matter what race you are.”

– Youth Participant

Youth also talked about how there was unity in the group despite their differences, whether those differences were based on race, gender or age, they all came together and even celebrated this diversity.

Aligning with what we heard in interviews, the survey findings showed a significant increase in scores on the Social Inclusion Scale, as well as its three subscales (Wilson & Secker, 2015) at all facilities *After* the Blueprint program, as compared to *Before* scores:

- **Social Inclusion Overall** (T (81) = -5.1, p = 0.00)
- **Social Isolation Subscale** (T (79) = 2.7, p = 0.01) refers to the amount of contact an individual has with other people.
- **Social Acceptance Subscale** (T (81) = -3.8, p = 0.00) measures a person's sense of being accepted within their social contexts.
- **Social Relations Subscale** (T (81) = -4.3, p = 0.00) measures to the quality of interaction between people.

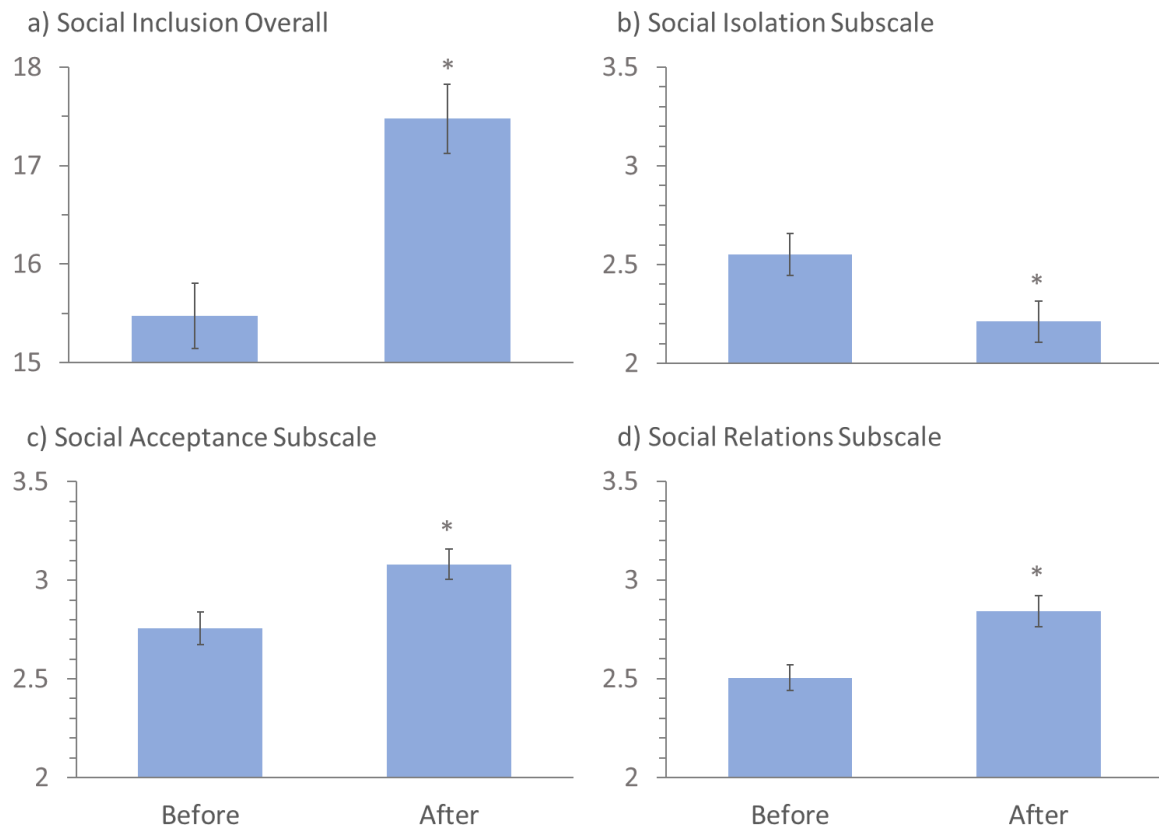


Figure 6. Social Inclusion. Graphics show Social Inclusion scores *After* the Blueprint program compared to scores achieved *Before* the program. a) Social Inclusion Scores Overall were calculated by reverse coding the social isolation subscale to amalgamate all three subscales into one score. b) Social Isolation, high scores indicate higher feelings of social isolation among youth. c) Social Acceptance, high scores indicate higher feelings of social acceptance among youth. d) Social Relations, higher scores indicate more frequent and higher quality social relations among youth. Error bars represent standard error of the mean. An asterisk (*) indicates a statistically significant difference between *Before* and *After* scores.

Social Trust



Youth told us, that despite their pre-existing differences or issues they had with each other, they felt a sense of togetherness and mutual support. Between choreographed dances and building their own group routines, youth felt so far outside their comfort zone; they said they had to rely on each other to put on a good show. They put their differences aside to help each other out, taking risks and developing a sense of trust and cohesion in the process.

“So it was like, I’m going to put my foot in the water a little bit and I’m going to take it out and then put it in and take it out. [...] Then after awhile you got to see some really cool things happen. Just the whole togetherness, taking risks, and supporting each other through these risks.” – Youth Participant

Scores on the Social and Interpersonal Trust Measures (Flanagan, 2010) showed significantly increased scores at all facilities *After* the Blueprint program, as compared to their *Before* scores:

- **Social Trust** ($T(81) = -1.90, p = 0.061$) captures participants’ general sense of whether others are fair and trustworthy.
- **Interpersonal Trust** ($T(81) = -1.93, p = 0.057$) measures feelings about the levels of trust in youth’s relationships with their closest friends and peers.

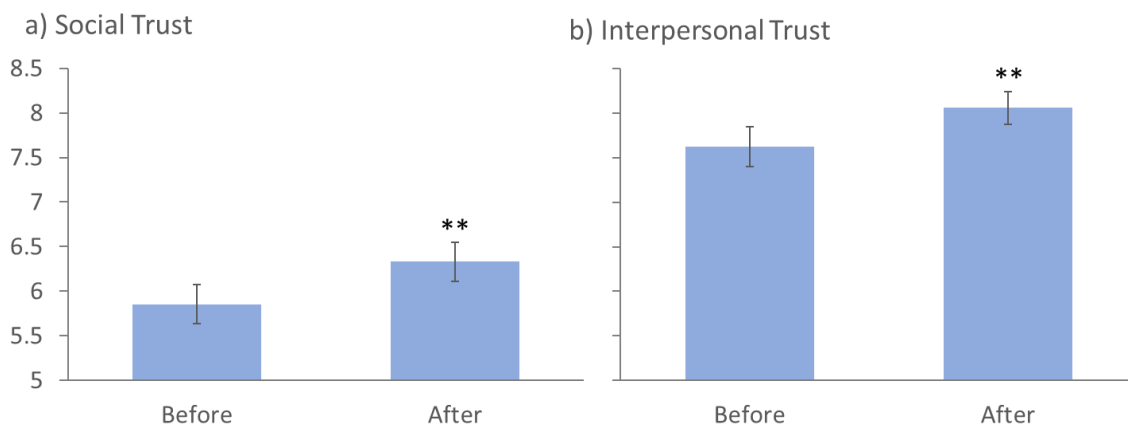


Figure 7. Social Trust. Graphics show Social Trust and Interpersonal Trust scores *After* the Blueprint program compared to scores achieved *Before* the program. Higher scores indicate stronger beliefs that people are generally fair and trustworthy. Error bars represent standard error of the mean. A double asterisk (**) indicates a statistically significant difference between *Before* and *After* scores.

Objective 3. Pathways to Citizenship



We found that Blueprint helped equip youth in navigating new pathways to citizenship by gaining a) a toolkit of coping strategies for when times get tough, b) a strengthened support system, and c) aspirations for community participation and citizenship.

Coping Strategies



Youth saw the one mic concept as a practical tool to cope and take control of their lives. They saw their one mics was a way to let their energy out, connect with positive people, express themselves and have safe, constructive and healthy fun. Several youth talked about realizing they could actually have a lot of fun while sober and without the negative consequences of drugs and alcohol. Youth described how they will use their one mics (such as snowboarding, skateboarding, writing, dancing, singing, traditional culture, working out and talking to friends) to manage stress, put themselves out there, develop as a person, express their emotions, and ‘stay grounded’ in tough times.

“Like for the one mic, you're more focused on something so you can spend your time and money on that instead of going out and doing dope and stuff and doing crime.”
– Youth Participant

Another coping strategy that emerged as important was the meditation component, with some youth identifying the exercises as something that helped with mental health issues, and something they hoped to continue using as a proactive coping strategy going forward.

Support Systems

Youth spoke about learning the benefits of surrounding themselves with positive influences. They realized that they could choose to connect with people that build them up instead of deflating them, people that engage in positive activities and have positive goals. Youth talked about how the healthy relationships in their lives need to outweigh the unhealthy ones. They felt they gained tools to find this balance with family and with peers. They learned strategies for connecting with positive networks through their one mics, or by reaching out to local community groups and organizations, including the Blueprint network.

Within the institution itself, peers had begun to develop more positive, supportive relationships with each other. Youth talked about how the Blueprint program - the activities, sharing, teamwork and discussions - brought them closer together, and helped them develop new ways of supporting each other. We heard about youth reaching out to each other after discussions, offering mentorship to younger peers that were going through something they had experienced in the past.

“It's better to put yourself and surround yourself with good influences than bad influence because If you're going to be hanging out with bad people you're going to be doing bad things, but if you're with good people you're going to go do good things.” – Youth Participant

Facility staff told us that getting the chance to participate alongside the youth helped strengthen their relationships with youth by creating the opportunity to participate in something as their equal and celebrating their achievements together in a fun setting. Staff said the program also helped remind them about the complex experiences some of their youth have been through and inspired some new ideas to engage and support them.

Aspirations for Participation and Citizenship



Youth talked about many barriers and circumstances that have led them to being incarcerated or making ‘bad choices’. In the interview’s youth alluded to mental health problems, intergenerational trauma, residential schools, gangs, family problems, and growing up in poor community conditions. Throughout the interviews, youth said they began to see options more clearly, different life paths they could take and understand how to take control of their journeys through life. Youth said they realized that they don’t need to let things ‘just happen’ to them; they can make choices and strive for what they want.

Many youth talked about experiencing personally transformative insights as they participated in group discussions. One youth said the discussions changed his perspective on his drug use, inspiring him to change his habits. A young woman felt that talking about her experiences helped her let go of past trauma that has followed her, and to just focus on the possibilities her future brings. Another youth talked about how the insights he gained in discussions about forgiveness spurred him to reconnect with his father, whom he had not spoken to in many years.

Some youth identified they wanted to make changes in their lives by expanding their interests, to meet new people and learn new things. They aspired to be more outgoing and put themselves out there to find out new things they might be passionate about and ways they might contribute to their community.

Other youth talked about having a stronger resolve, after Blueprint, to use their existing talents and interests, and apply them in positive ways to help their peers, family members and community. For example, several youth talked about how they planned to teach friends, siblings or cousins some of the activities they learned through Blueprint. In doing so, they hoped to give their friends and family the same

“It builds your confidence too. When you think of teaching younger siblings or cousins, it also builds your confidence as a leader and teacher. Then we’ll all discover new talents doing it. Teaching others, having them discover new things that they would be good at.” – Youth Participant

“I think the talks are always good reminders of either what we may at times be dealing with, or what to keep in mind when engaging with the kids. This program also helped me to realize some of the impact on the youth I work with everyday. I saw this in how they turned to me for support, to share their work with me, as well wanting me to participate with them.”

– Facility Staff Participating in Blueprint

tools they gained to channel their energy and stay out of trouble. One youth talked about using his beat boxing skills to teach other youth his passion. He felt he could gain employment doing so and was excited to be connected through Blueprint to a community of artists that might help him reach his goals. Another youth realized he was really good at supporting and listening to people in need, he began to see the younger kids as ‘little brothers’, and to see himself as a positive support system for them.

While the Motivation to Change (Biener, and Abrams, 1991) scores did not reveal consistent findings across all programs, we found marginally significant trends when the data was broken down by facility:

- **Motivation to Change – Participation in Community Activities** ($T(40) = -1.78, p = 0.082$) such as recreation, youth programs, events, community groups, and volunteering (changes observed at Manitoba Youth Centre).
- **Motivation to Change - Reaching Out to Support Services** ($T(11) = -2.03, p = 0.067$), such as counsellors, outreach workers and other organizations designed to help and support youth (changes observed at Edmonton Young Offender Centre).

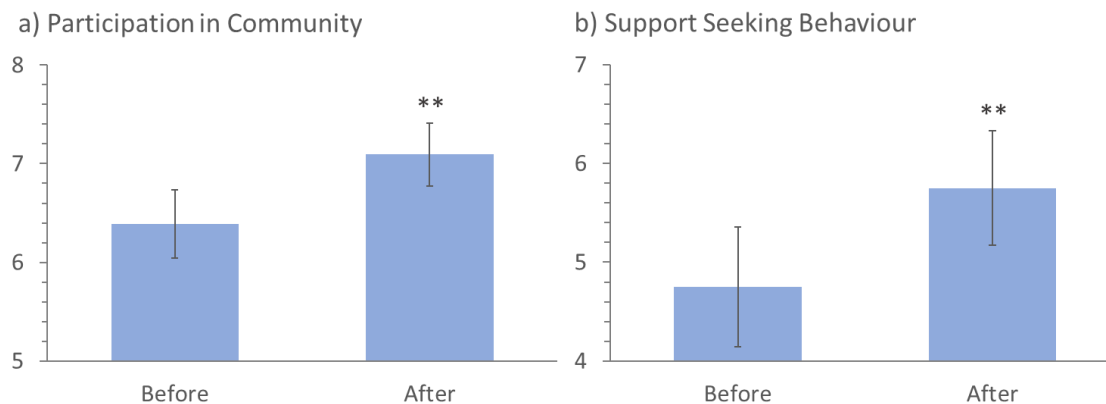


Figure 7. Motivation to Change. a) Motivation to Change Participation in Community scores *After* the Blueprint program, as compared to scores achieved *Before* the program. Graphic shows findings from participants at the Manitoba Youth Centre. b) Motivation to Change Support Seeking Behaviour scores *After* the Blueprint program, as compared to scores achieved *Before* the program. Graphic depicts findings from participants at the Edmonton Young Offender Centre. Higher scores indicate a higher motivation to take action to change behaviour. A double asterisk (**) indicates a marginally significant difference between *Before* and *After* scores.



Discussion

The evaluation suggests that this *Blueprint Pathways* program series, *Community Heartbeat: Behind the Walls*, has been successful in achieving many of the outcomes set out in our three program objectives. Overall, we obtained evidence supporting our Impact Framework (Fig. 1). Specifically, our data yielded evidence supporting the following:



BLUEPRINT ENGAGED DIVERSE YOUNG CANADIANS EXPERIENCING RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION.

- Participants had experiences of multiple forms of discrimination and racism causing significant distress as rated by the Adolescent Discrimination Distress Index.



BLUEPRINT HELPED BUILD A FOUNDATION FOR POSITIVE INTERACTION THROUGH:



- Fun community activities (dance, drumming, spoken word and art) that build a social environment where youth support, value and include each other.



- Personal achievement and confidence to try new things, set goals and build skills. Participants also experienced cultural pride in expressing their personal and cultural identities through the arts.



- Engaging in open communication and learning about each other while discussing important topics such as discrimination, respect, drug abuse, gangs, and toxic relationships.



BLUEPRINT HELPED YOUTH BUILD BRIDGES TOWARDS INCLUSION BY:



- Experiencing social inclusion by learning to respect, value and support each other. Participants felt valued and that their contribution and talents mattered to the group.



- Building social and interpersonal trust, believing that people are fair and will not simply act in their own self interest (i.e. being loyal, true to one's word and accountable for one's actions).



BLUEPRINT HELPED YOUTH CREATE PATHWAYS TO CITIZENSHIP BY:



- Healthy coping strategies, using Blueprint's one-mic concept, youth built a toolkit to deal with difficult emotions and challenges.



- Nurturing social support systems that protect youth from social isolation and offer a network of support for life's daily challenges.



- Aspirations for participation and citizenship, inspiring youth to develop goals to teach, help, and expand the opportunities in their future.

Blueprint Engaged Diverse Young Canadians Experiencing Racism and Discrimination

Many participants in this program were from systemically marginalized populations in Canada, with an over-representation of Indigenous participants in the Manitoba and Alberta facilities, and an over-representation of black youth (Afro-Caribbean descent) in the Ontario facility.

Scores on the modified Adolescent Discrimination Distress Index (ADDI) showed that participants have experienced discrimination, predominantly on the basis of race, income, culture, and age, but also due to language, gender, disability and sexual orientation. Of the youth experiencing discrimination, many reported extreme levels of distress as a result, especially in incidents involving police, threats, insulting slurs and/or being treated as though they were not smart.

We know that higher levels of discrimination distress in adolescents are associated with a host of challenging outcomes such as low self-esteem, mental health problems (depression and anxiety), poor academic performance, and cultural mistrust (distrusting the motives, intentions, and behaviors of the dominant group) (Fisher, 2000; Benner & Graham 2013; Priest et al 2013).

We also know that there are several protective factors that can help to mitigate the negative effects of racism and discrimination on youth. These include access to inclusive community supports (such as recreational opportunities), the encouragement of cultural pride, the presence of positive mentors and role models, and education about topics related diversity, discrimination and racism (Cooper et al. 2013; Harris-Britt et al. 2007). Blueprint's activities and program outcomes align with these protective factors.



Blueprint helped build a foundation for positive interaction.

Against the backdrop of hip hop culture – which, at its roots, values peace love, unity and having fun - youth felt joy together, connecting through music, dancing, drumming, performance and spoken word.

The program shaped a positive space for youth to share their unique individual and cultural identities and to explore their strengths and weaknesses. Hip hop as a culture has established rituals and practices - cyphering, battling, sampling, tagging, calling and responding, organizing, representing, signifying and teaching - that have been organically designed to give space for the expression of a range of lived experience and diverse cultural identities (Rose, 1994). As a result, hip hop represents a safe environment for youth to explore and share their identities and forge unique connections with people and cultures they may not otherwise interact with (Sule, 2011).



Youth learned to support each other as they were pushed out of their comfort zones to share their vulnerabilities and take risks. In doing so, Blueprint activities helped youth build confidence: bringing youth from imagining themselves doing something, to actually *doing* it. We know from research that when youth develop this sense of control over their abilities in a recreational setting, they also feel more in control overcoming other challenges (Caputo, 2003). Indeed, our findings suggest that youth gained confidence in other areas of their life, such as connecting with community, making friends, trying new things, enacting leadership or reaching out for help.

While the program's effects on measures of Cultural Pride (Bosworth and Esplanage, 1995) were only marginally significant, boosted scores at one facility suggest that the

program may have helped increase at least some youth's self-esteem associated with their culture (Harris-Britt et al. 2007). Cultural pride helps youth become resilient against the effects of racism and discrimination, reducing their risk of developing anxiety and mental health problems (Bannon et al. 2009). For marginalized youth especially, this type of culture-connected resilience could be a critical factor supporting re-integration success after youth are released from custody.

A special feature of Blueprint is the combination of joyful activities and discussion-based group therapy. The fun parts of the program help youth break down internal barriers to communication, while simultaneously setting up bridges of trust and support to share their vulnerabilities. Blueprint staff encourage and model emotional vulnerability by sharing their own stories and openly discussing topics often considered taboo but that youth relate to and are eager to discuss (such as drug abuse, racism and discrimination, gangs, self-sabotage, bullying, and toxic relationships). Over the week, the group transforms into a supportive open discussion where many participants make personal discoveries and learn new ways to deal with their own tough problems. Discussions also helped youth gain a wider view of the issues and a more complex, nuanced understanding of their peers' perspectives and backgrounds. Furthermore, nurturing this discourse in a diverse context (multicultural, with both young men and women present) helps youth understand the diverse narratives behind the issues, while also challenging any entrenched attitudes and stereotypes they may hold (Saguy, & Halperin, 2014). This helps youth contextualize their own experiences but also equips them with knowledge to understand different mechanisms at play, the broader societal impacts, and the hidden ways it may impact their own lives and communities. Educating youth gives them the tools and the vocabulary to talk about their experiences. Creating an inclusive and diverse discourse about the issues only strengthens their voice.

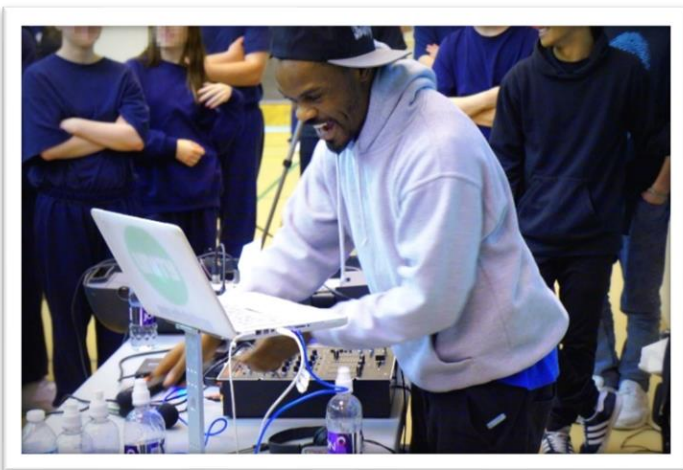
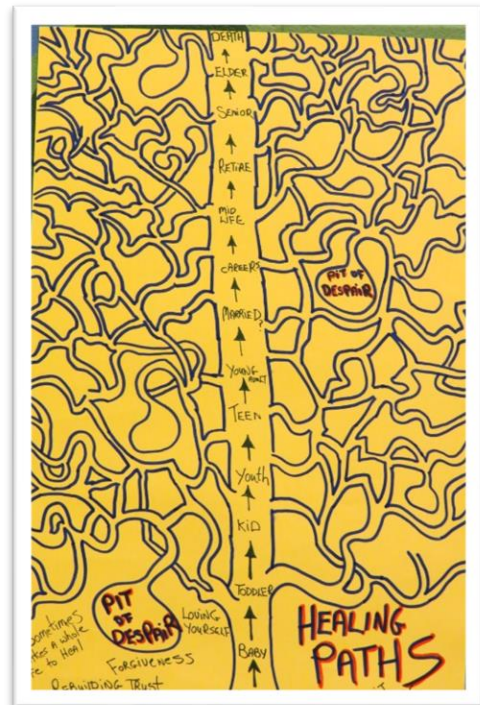
Blueprint helps youth build bridges

Increased scores on the Social Inclusion scale (Wilson & Secker, 2015) suggest that Blueprint successfully created a social environment where youth felt connected, valued, accepted, and able to participate in ways that were enjoyable and accessible for them. We also found evidence that the program impacted youth's sense of social and interpersonal trust.

Youth felt they belonged to something where their talents and contributions mattered, and where they felt accepted and free to express themselves. Blueprint fostered a safe environment where it was ok to be different and where their differences were not simply accepted but celebrated. This sets up a virtuous cycle. If youth are more accepting of each other's differences, they are also more likely to identify with and feel psychologically accepted in diverse settings and groups; and when they are exposed to diverse settings, they are more likely to embrace people's differences (Homan et al. 2007).

Having a sense of social inclusion is also vital to a youth's ability to genuinely access opportunities and resources for supporting their success, such as recreation, employment, education, or health services. If youth do not feel that they belong in these settings, they do not have equitable access to them. By creating opportunities for social inclusion within the institutional setting and creating habits for youth to include and value each other, Blueprint hopes to give youth tools to identify and engage in positive inclusive spaces that help them succeed on their journey both in and outside the facility.

Feeling included is also a critical starting point to building trust. Indeed, our evaluation revealed that Blueprint had an impact on both Social Trust (trust of people in general) and Interpersonal Trust (trust of people they know; friends, family, trusted adults) (Flanagan, 2010). Feelings of trust reflect an individual's belief that people are fair and will not simply act in their own self interest (i.e. being loyal, true to one's word and accountable for one's actions). Blueprint may have helped shape social trust by creating an atmosphere where youth felt respected. When youth sense they are valued and their voice is being heard,



it opens the door to believing the intentions of others are good (Flanagan, 2010). Such positive views of humanity are important for incarcerated youth to succeed both within the facility and upon release. When youth feel they can trust others, they are also more likely to work cooperatively with others, be tolerant and open-minded, and participate in opportunities that could benefit them such as support services or community programs (Uslaner, 2002; Putnam, 2000).

Blueprint helps youth find pathways to citizenship

One of Blueprint's goals was to support youth in mapping more positive pathways for engaging with their communities going forward. Towards this goal, youth were equipped with coping strategies and support systems. We also found evidence that Blueprint influenced youth's goals and aspirations to participate in community and connect with programs and services designed to support them on their journey.

The idea of using recreational activities, or 'one-mics', as a coping strategy resonated with youth and felt intuitive to apply in daily life. The hip hop arts are known to be positive tools for cathartic release, problem solving, self-discovery and self-expression, ultimately helping to strengthen self identity and resolve (Sule, 2011). Youth explored these activities, as well as other passions and interests they had, as tools to sort through difficult emotions, connect with others, get in touch with their creative thoughts and escape from stress. Youth walked away, not only with confidence and tools to cope, but also with a plan to find support and direction in times of uncertainty.



Blueprint's inclusive whole-community setting also helped youth connect and build healthy and supportive relationships with both adults and peers. They learned about healthy relationships, toxic relationships, how to understand the difference and what to do about it. Many youth took away a desire to surround themselves with positive influences, and they learned new tools to do so. When we talked to facility staff, many felt they had developed closer relationships with youth, helping them to understand and support them better. Many were also inspired by some of Blueprint's strategies for youth engagement and gleaned tips for their own practice. The diverse group setting also broadened youth's social networks to include youth and adults from diverse backgrounds who they did not typically interact with. Opening up youth's networks to diverse others and experiences is known to enhance learning, civic engagement (Sule, 2011), and social capital (Putnam, 2000): ultimately helping youth to build the emotional intelligence, social skills and networks that can help them overcome obstacles and thrive.



While the Motivation to Change survey revealed some promising trends, hinting at youth's desire to participate in community and reach out to support services, it was the stories of individual youth that really showed the program's impact on youth's goals and aspirations. With youth feeling valued, included, supported, and more trusting of others, they were able to quiet their inhibitions, and dream for a brighter future. By giving youth some tools to find confidence, cope with stress and connect with community, the hope is that they have gained the edge needed to have a chance at success.

Conclusion

When we nurture inclusion and diversity, both the social climate and the diversity within it are viewed as safer and less threatening (Simmons et al. 2010). From inclusion grows trust, a renewed sense of faith in people, open communication, strengthened support systems and a sense of citizenship. These are meaningful outcomes, especially for a group of marginalized youth who have been discriminated against, excluded, and have experienced intense psychological distress because of it. The very fact that these youth are incarcerated is essentially an institutional and socially accepted form of social exclusion. These youth need to know they are valued and belong if we are to support them in finding more positive forms of community and social connection.

Hip-hop has grown into an international entity representing the voices of the stigmatized, the oppressed, and the silenced; it is a cultural instrument of self-expression and community cohesiveness for those that reside on the social periphery (Rose, 1994). It is this community and social support piece that manifests such common statements as 'hip hop saved my life'.

Blueprint's work helps to shape a vision that hip hop culture, combined with careful mental health education, can be leveraged as a tool to help marginalized youth find healthy community and social connections. By investing in creative approaches like this, perhaps someday Canada can move beyond concepts of inclusion towards genuine multiculturalism: where all Canadians benefit from equitable access to and participation in Canada's rich economic, cultural, social, and political life. The youth in these institutions, like any Canadians, deserve to be supported in their participation and citizenship.



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A Spoken Word Story from William E. Hay

Growing up, crime commit itself all around me. No one had to be present for bad things to happen, barbeques on my block just as easily another block shooting. Looting, break-ins, people mistaken, scrapes, abrasions, all a piece of what I was and where I have been. Drugs, money, guns, running, slugs pumping at my living room window. Hold ups, blow ups, cops show up, just at the store we at from. The Roma was a place we bought bread and butter where I rand and I sat and shuddered shook and worried. A place of safe and grace, yet crime went in and out. I sat inside my home alone thinking about my future, where am I going? Where will I be and how am I going to get there. Everything around me was negative, at six years old I had seen things people only ever see in video games. I was brought to a safer place where school made me think a lot. My thoughts made me want nothing more than a job and a place with my band of brothers. Where guns are needed to stay alive and I would fight for my country's pride. As I grew older and the visions of where I once had been again became reality. Drugs, guns, stealing cars for fun yet losing sleep from being on the run, was something I lived with constantly. Hiding, driving to providing myself with everything I could have ever wanted. Illegal funds from crack head's and bums was just a way of living. Although the thoughts of wanting a job had become unforgiving. I was stuck, broken and messed up and I never let anyone test me. Which brought me here, where I am now, a place you don't want to be. A place where your rights are stripped and your privileges minimalized down to a list. Here is your last stop, a place where you need to learn from your mistakes in order to flip to the next page and begin a new chapter. A place where they try to help you get better, but better...Is not always the best. Where I am going is a place I can be happy and free, pleased and at ease. A job, a house, a dog and a spouse with a life to be lived freely. My band of brothers fighting for freedom yet free to live our lives. I will reside, beside a lake and that lake will be my place to stay, until the day I die...

A Spoken Word Poem from Manitoba Youth Centre

A journey lies ahead
For all teenagers today
A journey to adulthood
Our youth to kiss away

But, as we go, we find ourselves
At a truly awkward stage
Were too young to know
What we actually want at the age

Were old enough to make a choice
Yet still young in many ways
Too young to pack our bags and go
Too old to want to stay

Young enough for fun and games
Too old for carefree lives
Young enough for hopes and dreams
Yet for reality we strive

Old enough for heartfelt pain
Too young to find the cure
Too old for childish was of past
Too young to be mature

Old enough to fall in love
And give our hearts away
But still too young to understand
Just why we feel this way

Like an uncompleted work of art
We're awkward, unsure, half-baked
But be patient please,
For we're on our way
To becoming something great.