What good data mean for black youth in foster care

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Kike Ojo is the program manager for One Vision, One Voice, an organization dedicated to improving the lives of black youth in foster care.

NOYA DESIGNS

Not enough snacks, not enough privacy, not enough allowance: Many of the complaints shared by the teenagers at the Power Up conference in Mississauga were common, even timeless.

But other concerns voiced by many of the 130 attendees, all black and all current or former Ontario foster youth, were less universal.

Some spoke about not being invited out to restaurant dinners with their foster families, or not being trusted with a house key. One 19-year-old young man started crying at the microphone. He had bumped into his sister at the conference, but they’ve been in different foster homes for so long that he didn’t recognize her.

After the formal workshops and panel discussions, kids hugged, took selfies and made plans to hang out again. “This cannot end here,” one girl declared loudly. It was a sweet, important gathering and it wouldn’t have happened without race-based data.

“The issue of the African-Canadian community and how it experiences child welfare is something that the community has been speaking to for decades,” said Kike Ojo, the program manager for One Vision, One Voice, an organization dedicated to improving the lives of black youth in foster care.

For years, she said, black parents had been sharing their anecdotal experiences of children’s aid services across Ontario: of being watched more closely than white parents; of having their children apprehended at higher rates; and of having black youth placed largely with non-black foster families, which might be loving but were often unable to help them cope with the daily realities of racism.

But it wasn’t until 2015, when the Toronto Children’s Aid Society released race-based data of the children in its care, that those who work in child welfare began taking the issue seriously. That year, 30 per cent of children in Toronto foster care were black, though only 8.5 per cent of the city identifies that way.
“That was the first time that I saw the data in print,” Ms. Ojo said in an interview. “I can’t overstate how important Toronto doing that was to getting to this moment.”

One Vision, One Voice was formed within months of the data release. It’s since toured cities around the province to give presentations on anti-black racism and equity practices, as well as to hear the experiences of youth, care workers and both biological and foster parents.

It’s also made a list of 11 recommendations for local children’s aid societies, covering everything from recruiting more black foster parents, especially those who can care for babies, to providing better transition services for youth approaching the age of 21 to help them avoid poverty and homelessness as adults.

And it’s recruiting both youth and black care workers for advisory councils, meant to be a permanent resource for the Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies (OACAS).

“So often the system could use a resource to help them … understand how a particular policy or program could impact black youth,” Ms. Ojo said. “Today, other than tapping a random black youth on the shoulder, they don’t have somewhere to go to kind of get that support.”

The Toronto CAS has committed to collecting and releasing race-based statistics annually: In 2017, 34 per cent of children in care were black, compared with 9 per cent of the city’s population, a small but disappointing increase that shows that identifying a problem is just the first step in solving it.

Elsewhere in the province, the current state of such data is patchwork and full of holes. In April, an Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) report on black and Indigenous youth in care stated that a full 20 per cent of the province’s 49 children’s aid societies aren’t collecting it. Perhaps worse, some that do use cringe-worthy, outdated terminology: More than one tracks “mulatto” or “Gypsy” children.

In December, 2017, the Liberals’ Ministry of Child and Youth Services made collecting race-based data on foster children mandatory. All children’s aids societies were supposed to start entering information into an online portal this past February, but a number still don’t have access to the tool.

And while analysis is meant to start in early 2019, there’s been an election in the interim, and the new Conservative Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services hasn’t yet made any announcements about foster care.

That’s a tenuous state for information that’s crucial to providing Ontario’s 12,000-plus foster children with services that allow them to become healthy adults with a strong sense of self. A sense of belonging was another common desire shared by the youth at Power Up, the first gathering solely for black Ontario foster youth.

One 15-year-old said she had been to 15 different schools. She had also never had a black foster parent. “This is the family I’ve been searching for, for a really long time,” she said. A hopeful moment, thanks to good data.
Editor's note: A previous version of this story incorrectly said the One Vision One Voice program made a list of 11 recommendations for the Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies. This version has been corrected.

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