Spotlight on Black Youth

Unlocking Doors:



Research on Mentoring to Strengthen Skills & Support Career Pathways for Racialized Young Adults

Mentor Canada

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About the cover illustration:

There are many paths and opportunities available for youth in their lives, but some are much harder to access than others, particularly due to systemic barriers facing racialized youth. Youth should have the autonomy to choose which pathways to take, which doors to open, and with whom they make that journey. To best support youth, mentors can help illuminate the path youth choose and work together with them to overcome obstacles in the way. This illustration captures common themes expressed by research study participants: young adulthood is a time of opportunity but also transitions, which can be both exciting and daunting. Racialized youth express a desire for mentors who walk alongside them and help them open doors to the future they envision for themselves. A draft version of this illustration was presented to research study participants, who agreed that it accurately represents their experiences and ideas about early adulthood and mentorship.

We are deeply grateful to all the participants who generously shared their time and experiences for this research. Your contributions are instrumental in the success of this study.

Table of Contents

What is Mentorship and Why Does It Matter for Black Youth 1

Research Overview 2

Project Summary 2

Why a Report Focused on Black Youth? 3

Key Findings and Implications 4

Findings 5

Lived Experiences 5

Mentorship Experiences 9

References 19

What is Mentorship and Why Does It Matter for Black Youth

Mentorship can be defined as a relationship in which a caring, trusted, more experienced person provides guidance, support, and advice to help a young person develop skills, knowledge, confidence, and navigate life transitions. Mentorship can support youths' success in personal, educational, and professional domains. Mentors include natural mentors, trusted individuals such as extended family, teachers, community leaders, or co-workers who organically develop relationships with youth, as well as program mentors, who are matched with youth through structured programs that come with set goals and timelines. Both natural and program mentors can play a role in addressing systemic barriers faced by Black youth, serving as a tool for young people to build social capital, career readiness, and resilience.

The value of mentorship for Black youth can be illustrated through a case example. 'Amina', a high school student, is interested in a career in law, but does not know a lawyer first-hand. At home, her parents encourage her ambition, but do not have inside knowledge of the educational system or professional pathways. Without guidance, Amina lacks a clear roadmap. She is encountering systemic barriers: classrooms where Black students are disproportionately streamed out of academic pathways, workplaces where representation is limited, and career networks where opportunities are passed hand-to-hand in circles that historically exclude Black youth.

Amina's story reflects the reality of many Black youth, standing in front of locked doors. Behind those doors lie internships, scholarships, and access to opportunities. Mentors can provide a key for Black youth to turn the lock, instilling confidence by saying, "I've been where you are, and I'll walk with you." Mentorship can help Black youth transform their ambition into a plan, affirm their identity, and make their desired futures visible and attainable.

For Amina, this could mean access to a mentorship program that connects her with a Black lawyer who can model what success in the legal profession looks like. Her mentor can explain admission requirements and internship opportunities, and offer reassurance that her dream is achievable, and that she is not alone on her journey. Amina could also benefit from access to a natural mentor, such as a coach who connects lessons on the field to life skills, or a trusted community leader who shares advice rooted in relatable lived experience. Collectively, these mentors can offer Amina a bridge across barriers and a path toward turning her potential into possibility.

Research Overview

The purpose of this report is to share select findings from a broader study examining how mentorship supports young adults aged 18–30 with racialized identities in their career pathways. This spotlight report focuses specifically on the lived experiences of Black youth from amongst the larger sample of the overall study. What follows is an overview of the project, its purpose, design, and the insights it contributes to the broader conversation on supporting Black youth through mentorship.

Project Summary

The impetus for this research project came from earlier national studies, which identified the need for more culturally responsive approaches to help racialized youth connect to meaningful employment through mentoring. The goal was to better understand the skills needed in today's labour market and to design mentoring programs that not only build foundational and transferable skills but also reflect the distinct strengths and experiences of racialized young adults. The overall research question guiding the project was: What is the relationship between mentoring, building and retaining Skills for Success, and youth and emerging racialized adults' access to quality work early in their careers?

The study applied a mixed-methods design. A nationally representative online survey (conducted in English and French in 2024 via Maru Matchbox) reached 3,110 youth and young adults (aged 18–30) across Canada, including 1,618 who identified as racialized. The Black youth subsample, which is the focus of this spotlight report, included 338 participants.[1] The survey was co-created by SRDC, Mentor Canada, and peer researchers, drawing on validated measures from previous studies (e.g., Who Mentored You?, Mapping the Mentoring Gap, Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale, Flourishing Scale, SCALE measures, career adaptability). New items were also developed to capture themes such as community cultural wealth and resistance capital. The survey covered six domains: demographics, school/work experiences, skills, social networks, wellbeing, and mentoring experiences.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted online by peer researchers and SRDC with 23 youth and 13 mentoring stakeholders (individuals/organizations working with racialized youth). Of this overall sample, 9 youth participants identified as Black, and 2 mentoring stakeholders worked with Black youth and/or identified as Black. Qualitative recruitment occurred through youth-serving agencies, social media promotion, and peer networks and snowball sampling. Interviews explored participants' life experiences since age 18, personal definitions of mentorship, qualities of effective mentoring relationships, experiences with or absence of mentors, and recommendations for effective mentorship programs.

The research methods and study protocols (including both the quantitative survey measure and the qualitative interview guide) were reviewed and approved by the Community Research Ethics Office

1 To note, the combination of survey weights and rounding can sometimes result in counts that are slightly different from unweighted survey data, or proportions that total more than 100 per cent. Within the sample of Black survey respondents, 172 identified as men and 160 identified as women. 27 survey respondents identified as Trans. Due to low sample sizes, we do not report on the number of respondents who identified as non-binary or 2S, or who preferred to self-describe their gender. Respondents were not asked about sex, only gender.

in July 2024.

Why a Report Focused on Black Youth?

This spotlight report draws specifically on data from the Black youth and mentoring stakeholders who participated in the overall study, highlighting insights that can inform mentoring program providers and practitioners who work with Black youth. By focusing on Black youth, the intention is to ensure that mentoring supports can be designed and delivered in ways that are responsive to the distinct realities, strengths, and needs of young Black adults. There is an important need for frameworks that explicitly integrate anti-Black racism, decolonization, and culturally responsive approaches into mentoring programs. There is also a need for more attention to informal or natural mentorship, which plays a vital role in Black communities and offers unique contributions that structured programs may overlook.

In the United States, conversations and research on mentoring for Black youth have circulated for decades, shaping both academic literature and program design. In Canada, the focus on mentorship for Black youth is newly emerging. Organizations, community-based programs, and foundations are centering Black youth within broader mentoring efforts, including recent initiatives such as the ***Black Youth Mentorship and Leadership Program*** at the University of Calgary. Through the ***Supporting Black Canadian Communities Initiative*** (SBCCI), close to $200 million has been directed to Black-led and Black-serving organizations. These investments signal a shift toward trusting the knowledge, leadership, and vision of Black communities to design programs, including mentorship, that can truly meet the needs of youth. As the federal Anti-Racism Secretariat has emphasized, solutions must follow the principle of “nothing about us without us.”

The research findings on mentoring for Black youth in this spotlight report were first presented in May 2025 at the University of Calgary, where the discussion emphasized both the promise of mentorship and the areas where gaps remain. This report expands on that presentation to provide a fuller account of the research and its potential implications.

Key Findings and Implications

The research findings shared in this report hold several implications for mentoring policy and practice. By learning from the insights shared by Black youth and mentoring stakeholders, the mentoring field can better align with the strengths, needs, and priorities of Black youth.

- Mentors can help youth develop skills, as well as a positive sense of self and ability to understand and act in the face of racism and discrimination.
- The different types of support that youth may need as mentees must be considered. There is no one-size-fits all or homogenous approach. It is important to account for mentorships – multiple mentoring relationships at different points, in accordance with youth's needs and choices.
- Mentees must be centred in mentoring programs. Mentors should meet youth where they are and prioritize what supports they are looking for as individuals. Programs should be mindful of some youth's preferences for boundaries and separation between personal and professional lives, and take time to build trust.
- Mentors and mentoring programs must support practices that challenge anti-Black racism in multiple spaces, and should be knowledgeable about the effects that racism has on Black youth mental health.
- It is important for mentorship opportunities to offer Black youth options to learn and connect to culture and affirm their identities.
- When developing programs, practitioners should draw on Black-led mentorship frameworks and trust the knowledge, leadership, and vision of Black communities.
- Programs should consider the role of family and caregivers in Black youth's lives, and investigate ways to involve family directly, as a strategy to build trust and overcome barriers some youth face to accessing mentoring.
- Both program and natural mentoring can play an important role for Black youth, and one or the other may be preferred by some individuals. Programs that embed mentors in community and encourage extended family-like bonds can emulate some of the unique strengths of natural mentoring. Collective, community-based mentoring is a distinct draw for some youth.
- Black youth are clear that all mentors need to be informed on issues of anti-Black racism and must be culturally responsive – and non-judgemental – toward youth.
- Programs should pro-actively invest in outreach and trust-building with Black youth and validate their identity and lived experiences, knowing that some youth may strategically withdraw or avoid participation as a self-protective strategy. Programs must anticipate and address common barriers, including some Black youth not thinking a mentor would be helpful, or not knowing about a program at the 'right' time they need it most.

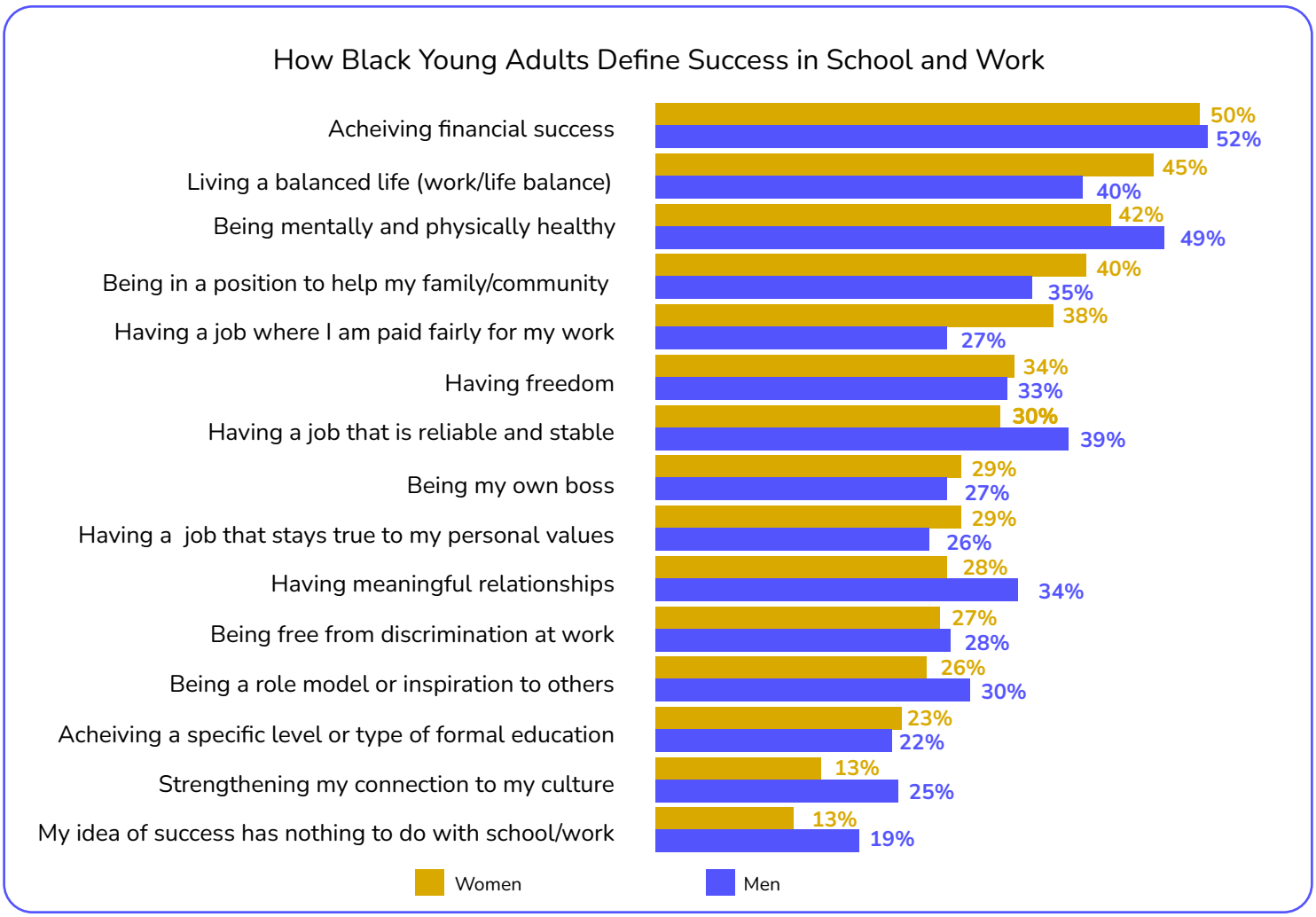
> *There is a lot of work to be done, and it is not the work that youth need to do. This is the work that society needs to do - systems, policies, hiring managers, organizational leaders - to help them.*

Findings

Lived Experiences

Definitions of Success

Black youth conceptualize success in school/work in a variety of ways. In the research survey, when asked what success in school and work means to them, youth's most common response was "achieving financial success," with over 50 per cent of Black youth selecting this option as one of the ways they define success. Having a work/life balance and being mentally and physically healthy were also common responses. For Black women, being in a position to help family/community and being paid fairly for their work were the other top five responses; for Black men, however, having a stable and reliable job was selected more often.[2] A small proportion of Black survey respondents – fewer than 1 in 5 – reported that their idea of success has nothing to do with school or work.



2 Due to low sample sizes, respondents who identified as non-binary, 2S, and prefer to self-describe are suppressed from disaggregated gender data.

Educational Experiences

Black youth reported a varying degree of sense of belonging while attending education or training programs. Among those who had attended an education/training program since turning 18, roughly 60 per cent of respondents felt that they could ask for help and that they could be their full, genuine selves in educational settings. In general, Black young women reported slightly lower levels of belonging than did Black young men: notably, while 72 per cent of Black young men felt like they could speak up in educational settings, only 63 per cent of Black young women did. Overall, roughly 55 per cent of Black youth felt that their racial background was positively represented and included in educational settings and 50 per cent of Black youth reported having a shared racial background as their teachers/professors.

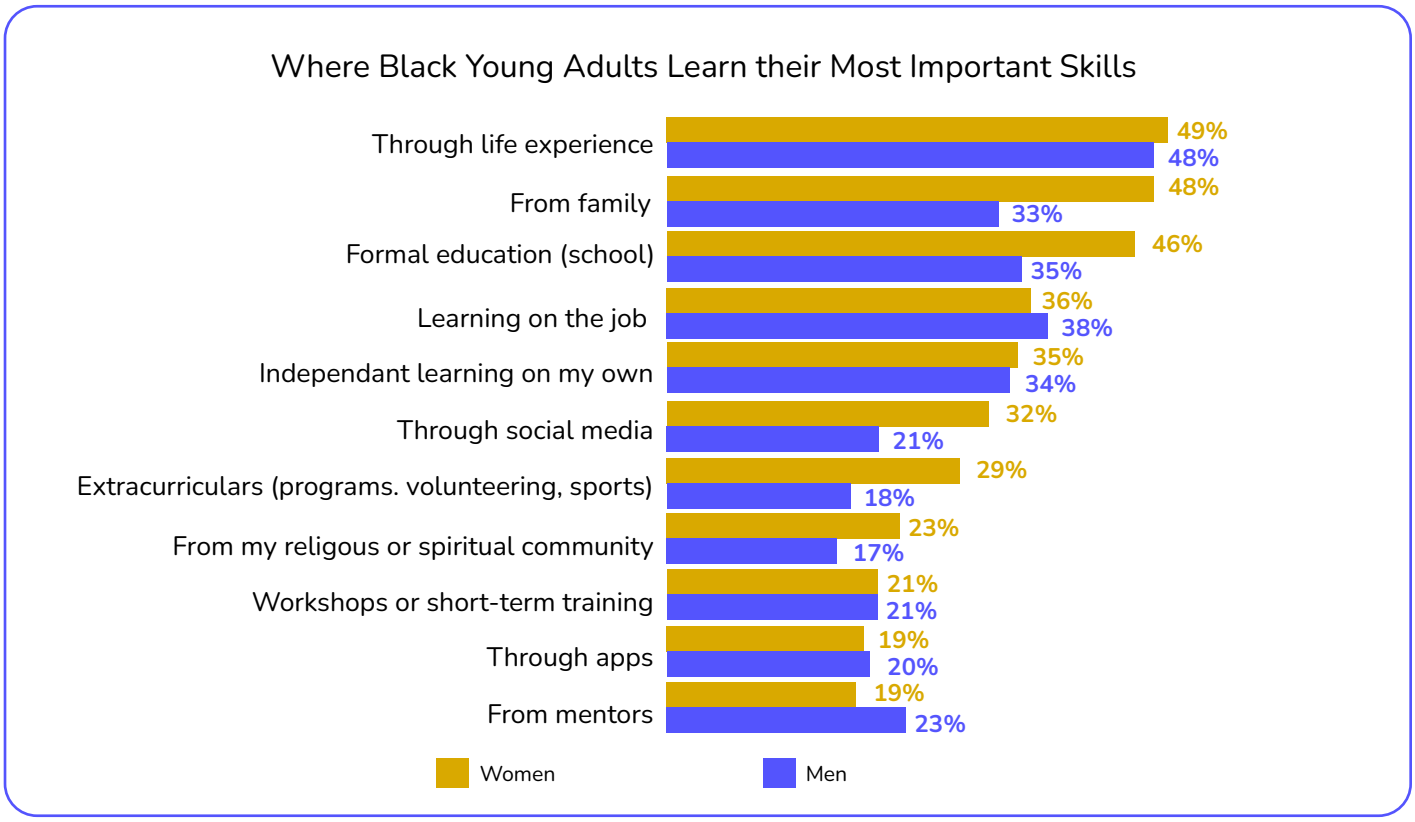
The majority – 72 per cent – of Black youth reported being confident that they will achieve their desired level of education in their lives. However, interruptions and setbacks remain. Roughly 23 per cent of Black youth had experiences leaving an education program without completing it, including because of financial challenges, deciding it was not the right path, and health or mental health challenges.

> ***Educational aspirations remain high among youth,*** *with 94 per cent of Black Canadians aged 15–25 expressing the desire to complete a bachelor's degree or higher, though only 60 per cent believed they would realistically achieve this goal (StatsCan 2020).*

> *It is well-documented in the literature that Black youth experience being steered into 'applied' programs in school, limiting their academic and career opportunities (Paragg, 2023; Shizha, Abdi, Wilson-Forsberg & Masakure, 2020).*

In qualitative interviews, Black youth affirmed the importance of education in their lives. Some youth described the ways in which their family supported their educational goals, such as one youth who talked about receiving financial help for school from his extended family. At the same time, youth also talked about the pressure and anxiety they experienced around education, particularly when they felt familial or cultural pressure to pursue narrow educational pathways toward high-status careers. The research survey findings showed that Black young men were more likely than Black young women both to feel pressure from family to pursue a particular education/career path (31 per cent of Black young men compared to 25 per cent of Black young women) and to report their family not talking to them much about their education/career (15 per cent of young men, 9 per cent of young women).

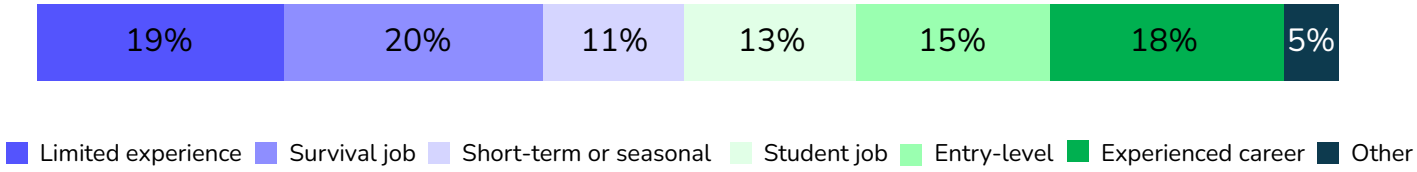
Notably, although education played an important role in youth's lives, Black youth in the research survey also reported learning important skills experientially (i.e., through life experience, learning on the job), socially (i.e., from family; social media and extracurricular activities), and independently. Compared to men, Black young women were more likely to report learning their most important skills from family, from formal education, and from social media.



Professional Experiences

Black youth survey respondents reported a wide variety of current employment experiences, with nearly 40 per cent having limited job experience or working in survival jobs.

Career Stages of Black Young Adults



Notably, the age range of respondents is likely reflected in youth's reported career stages, as a number of respondents are young and still in education and training. Most Black youth reported positive experiences overall with their current employment. Roughly 54 per cent per cent of Black survey respondents shared that they feel satisfied with their current job, and 69 per cent reported that they find their work meaningful and fulfilling right now. The majority (69 percent per cent) of Black young adults reported that they feel like they matter at

The employment rate for both Black men and Black women remains slightly lower than their counterparts in the rest of the population. *Black employees are more likely to report unfair treatment or discrimination at work, yet paradoxically, they also reported higher levels of job satisfaction (85 per cent of women and 90 per cent of men) and a comparable sense of workplace belonging (StatsCan, 2020).*

work. Lastly, 71 per cent per cent reported high career decision-making self-efficacy, meaning youth feel confident in their decision-making around their professional paths (for example their belief in their ability to complete tasks such as information gathering, planning, and problem-solving).

Navigating Predominantly White Spaces and Systems

In qualitative interviews, Black youth shared nuanced reflections on their lived experiences navigating predominantly white spaces and systems in their education and career pathways. Intertwined with Black youth's defining moments in their education and career journeys were continuous experiences of racialization (how race is socially produced and read on their bodies by others) and racism. As youth contended with biased systems that privilege certain groups over others, they were learning how to navigate predominantly white spaces and structures, interpersonal racism, and the specificities of anti-Black racism.

For example, one Black youth discussed how she experiences others' stereotypes about Black people being aggressive, but that at the same time, in order to get people to listen to her, she needs to behave in an assertive way, which in turn gets labeled as aggressive (put another way, she is simultaneously invisible and hyper-visible):

> ***I think it's unfortunate that from a very young age [as a Black girl] you're made to kind of feel like you need to be super aggressive and kind of push at people in order to kind of make a way for yourself. I wish that there was more space to just be little girls.***

Racial trauma, sometimes called race-based traumatic stress, refers to the cumulative psychological, emotional, and physical harm caused by both direct and vicarious experiences of racism; *whether overt acts like slurs and violence, or systemic harms such as exclusion, police surveillance, or institutional bias. In the context of mentoring, these insights highlight that* ***mentors cannot ignore the psychological and social toll of racial trauma. Instead, mentors must understand that mentees may come into relationships carrying both visible and invisible wounds of anti-Black racism****. Effective mentors adopt trauma-informed and critically conscious practices: they affirm youth identities, recognize the systemic roots of racial stress, and resist the urge to minimize or "individualize" trauma (Mosley et.al., 2020).*

Mentoring stakeholders also commented on the challenges Black youth encounter navigating predominantly white post-secondary institutions, with one mentoring stakeholder describing how spaces on campus are not always safe spaces and may contribute to feelings of isolation and alienation among Black youth. They also identified barriers to accessing and finding funding/financial opportunities that take into consideration Black youth's lived experiences and identities. Another mentoring stakeholder discussed situations where Black youth do not see themselves represented in

Resilience indicators are higher among Black people in Canada: *44 per cent of Black respondents report that they "always" bounce back quickly after hardship (vs. 33 per cent of the rest of the population), and 65 per cent report that they consistently learn from negative experiences (vs. 48 per cent) (StatsCan, 2020).*

the education and career pathways they are most interested in, and experience fear and anxiety that there is no opportunity for them.

Although these experiences are challenging, both youth and mentoring stakeholders discussed resilience among Black youth, and how their lived experiences also translate into strengths. For example, one mentoring stakeholder explained that Black youth's knowledge of anti-Black racism and other systemic issues does not only come from theoretical understanding, but is based on real-life experiences, making them highly informed and passionate about creating change. As a result, they are often more equipped to understand the gaps in systems and more committed to closing those gaps:

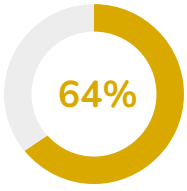
> ***Something that you notice is [youth are] just very informed on these issues. They have probably experienced them, so you know we don't have to explain these concepts to them of, you know, what anti-Black racism looks like for example; they're very well versed in it. And they come to the program and to their [professional] education with that in mind.***

Mentorship Experiences

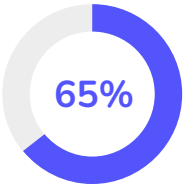
Access

In the survey, Black youth shared their experience with accessing mentorship, defined as both program and natural mentors. Nearly two-thirds of Black young adults had at least one mentor since turning 18. This finding compares to earlier findings from a survey conducted in 2020 that looked at youth's access to mentoring in childhood/adolescence. In this previous study, 59 per cent of Black youth had at least one mentor before age 18 (Mentor Canada and SRDC, 2021).

In qualitative interviews, Black youth offered more insight into their experiences and preferences accessing both formal/program and informal/natural mentorship. One participant explained that she had connected to mentorship through a community arts training program, and she valued the opportunity to engage in a collective community mentoring experience, which she said served as a foundation for advocacy and collaboration and aligned with her community-oriented values. Another young woman talked about appreciating informal mentorship for its flexibility and safe environment. She felt that informal mentoring allows for honest discussions without the pressures of formal settings, so youth can openly address challenges without judgment.



of Black Women had a Mentor in Early Adulthood



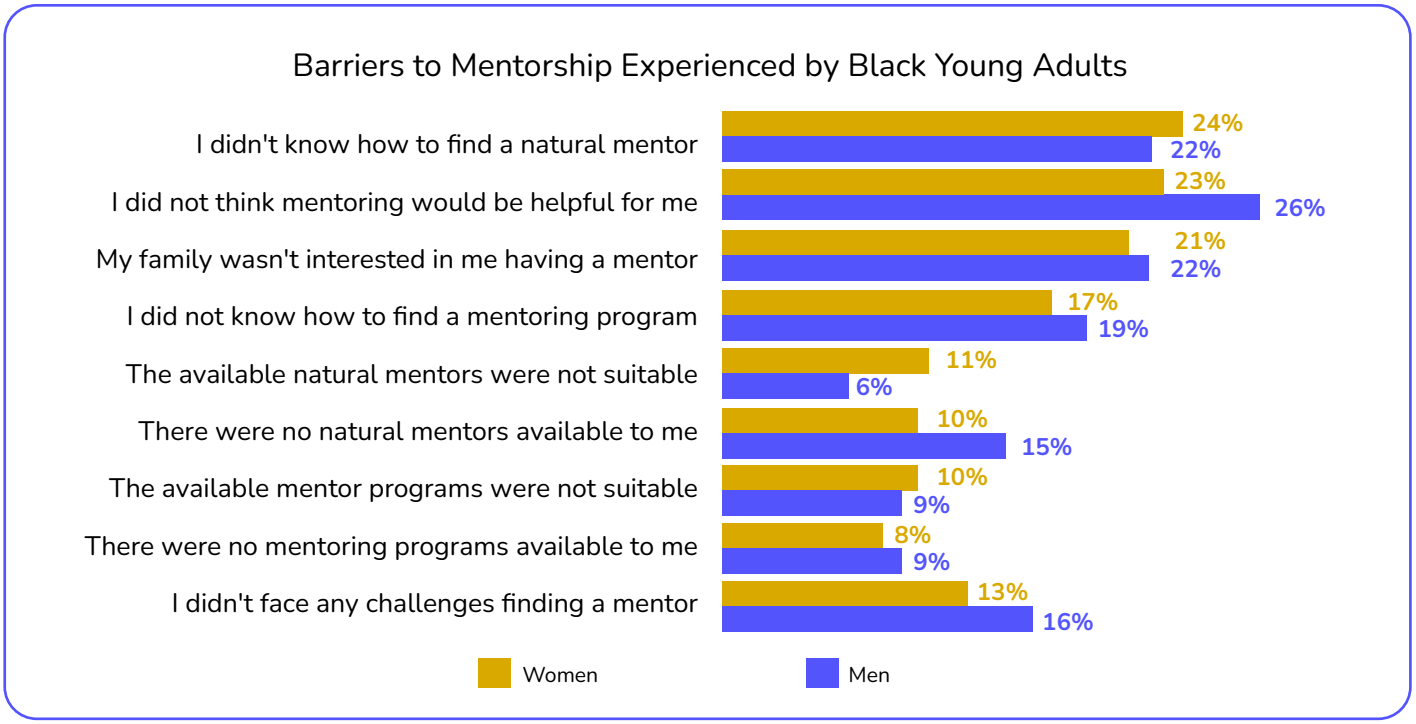
of Black Men had a Mentor in Early Adulthood

In contrast, some Black youth explained that they did not have access to effective informal/natural mentorship, and instead sought out program/formal mentorship. One Black youth said that he was not comfortable with a friend/family member providing the type of support and guidance a mentor would, because he was specifically in need of "objective advice". Another Black youth said that he could not rely on family members for mentorship around academics because they were not familiar with his field and he was the first in his family to go to university. He sought guidance with career skills and network opportunities through access to a formal mentoring program.

Barriers

Black youth also identified the barriers to mentorship that they have encountered. Top barriers to mentorship included not thinking a mentor would be helpful and not knowing how to find a mentor or mentoring program. In the survey, young Black men and women reported similar barriers to mentorship, but men were slightly more likely to report not thinking that a mentor would be helpful (28 per cent compared to 23 per cent of women). In general, mentors or mentoring programs not being *suitable* was as common a barrier for Black young adults as mentors/program not being *available*. Only about 1 in 6 Black young adults reported no barriers to finding a mentor.

Among those Black youth who reported no mentoring experiences since turning 18, 76 per cent shared that they would be open to having a mentor if they had the opportunity to do so. However, about one-quarter (24 per cent) of the Black youth respondents who reported no previous mentor experiences expressed no interest in having a mentor in the future. To note, these findings stem from a relatively small sample size. However, it is important to consider why some youth may not be interested: perhaps more work is needed to support youth to overcome barriers to access. Systemic factors should also be considered, and it is important not to dismiss why youth are not interested. For example, previous negative experiences with mentoring, including racism, and not feeling safe or a sense of belonging, could play a role in youth's openness to mentoring.



Unfortunately, among Black survey respondents who had mentorship in early adulthood, one in three (33 per cent) reported a negative mentoring experience.

In qualitative interviews, Black youth expanded on these themes. Some youth shared that they have found a disconnect in how mentoring programs are marketed, in that they did not know that mentoring-type programs existed or they found out about them too late. Several youth also had negative experiences that dissuaded them from engaging in mentorship. For example, one Black youth had experienced mistreatment when participating in a community-based program with an employment-matching opportunity:

> ***When they put me in the job, like, I was not treated very well. I actually experienced racism working [in the café]. They were like trying to dangle the idea that I would be hired full-time after the five-month program. And then they made up some ridiculous argument with me. It's like they were trying to provoke me or something. They were gaslighting me, like being rude to me and not allowing me to be a part of the group chat... and they were acting like I was being hostile... I don't know what they told [the community-based program], but I was not hired to work. So that was a really terrible and traumatic experience for me personally. I didn't feel like I got much advocacy either, from [the program].***

Another important narrative amongst Black youth in the research interviews was the idea that they are "shy" and therefore hesitant to "put themselves out there" to connect with mentors or to access mentoring programs. One Black youth talked about his emphasis on self-reliance, such as by doing self-directed research to support his own career decision making. These themes of perceived 'shyness' or preferences for self-reliance may be a self-protection strategy, grounded in a well-founded lack of trust and lack of safety, after experiences of being continuously rejected when reaching out for help within predominantly white spaces.

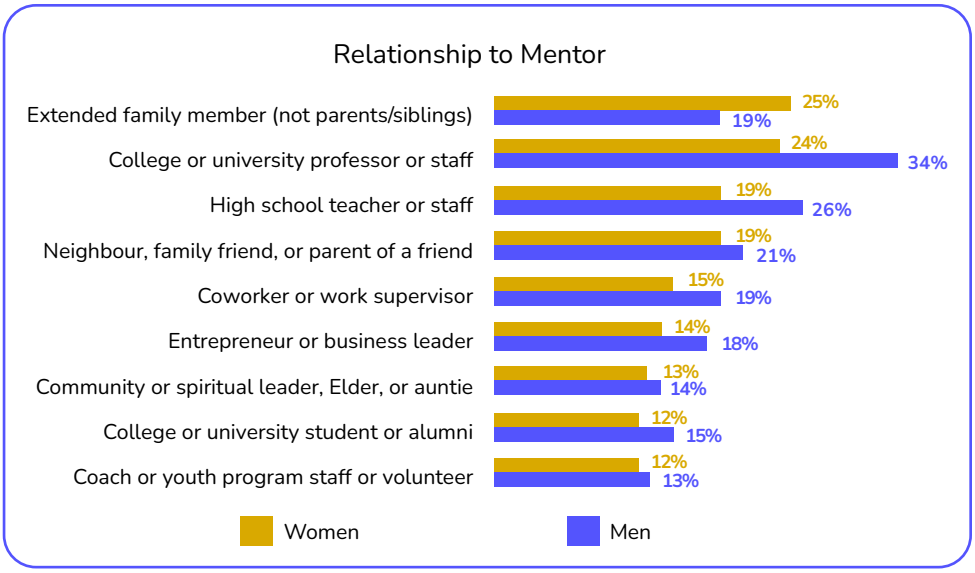
To bridge this gap, both youth and mentoring stakeholders identified a need for mentorship that is proactive rather than passive and recognizes the impact of anti-Black racism and exclusion on Black youths' mental health. Instead of waiting for youth to 'seek help,' programs should actively reach out to Black youth and be structured in ways that recognize historical and systemic barriers. A targeted approach that recognizes what happens to Black youth in systemically racist

A recurring theme in the Canadian literature is the deep mistrust Black communities feel toward state-affiliated mentorship and institutional programs. *Government and corporate sponsors often frame mentoring in terms of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) numbers or corporate image rather than genuine care for youth. This fosters skepticism and a sense of extraction, where Black bodies and experiences are used to meet institutional metrics rather than to provide authentic support. For mentorship to succeed,* ***programs must therefore invest proactively in trust-building, ensuring that Black communities, not external sponsors, shape priorities and frameworks.***

The Canadian evidence shows that Black youth often carry the weight of being stereotyped as deficit-laden. These stigmas influence how young people see themselves and whether they step forward to engage with institutions. Youth strategically withdraw or avoid participation because they anticipate bias, misrecognition, or exclusion. When mentoring validates identity, it disrupts internalized narratives of inadequacy and creates safer conditions for youth to fully engage (Yuzyk & Wesley, 2025).

and predominantly white spaces is needed. This can be framed as another key aspect of cultural humility: working to understand the myriad ways that systemic racism functions and thrives. Further, this approach needs to be one that does not place the burden on Black youth to overcome deeply ingrained barriers alone but instead meets them where they are and provides youth with the tools to navigate spaces that have excluded them.

Who are Black Youth Receiving Mentorship From?

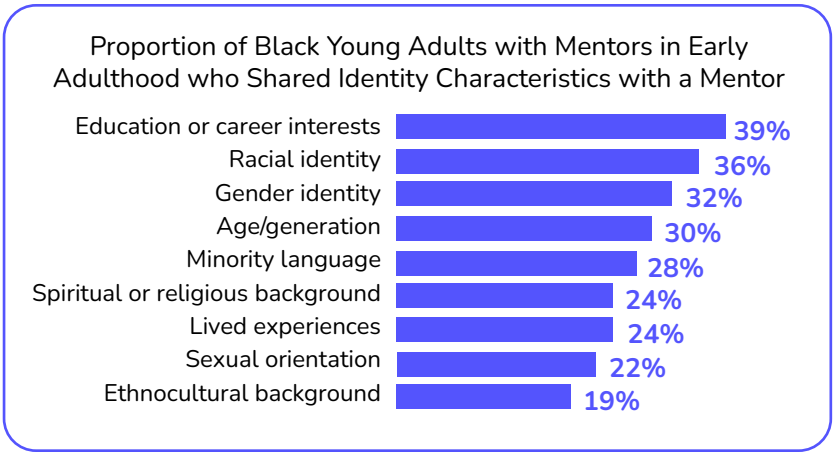


Black young adults reported a variety of relationships with their mentors. Of survey respondents who reported a mentoring experience, most Black youth reported that their mentorship opportunities had come from a post-secondary or high school teacher, extended family member or family friend, or coworker or supervisor. Notably, Black young men were more likely than Black young women to report that their mentor was a post-secondary or high school teacher. Black young women were more likely to report that their mentor was an extended family member.

> ***When mentors are seen as "fictive kin" - extensions of the family unit - they provide a buffer against the isolating effects of predominantly white spaces.*** *Programs that embed mentors in community contexts and encourage family-like bonds model a more holistic support system, guiding youth not only through interpersonal challenges but also through structural inequities (Mitchell, 2022)*

Mentor-Mentee Matching

In the research survey, Black youth who had mentorship experience described the characteristics they had shared with their mentors, with education and career interests reported most frequently. Nineteen per cent of Black youth reported that they had experience with a mentor with shared ethnocultural background, and 36 per cent had experience with a mentor with shared racial identity.



In qualitative interviews, Black youth shared nuanced insights into the importance of mentors' personal characteristics, including aspects of identity. Several youth explained the value they saw in having a mentor who is racialized, such as one youth who commented:

> ***There are so many different experiences and [like] roadblocks on a path for me than it would be for a white mentor. So I don't think they could offer the same guidance because there's really no chance that our path to success would look similar or the same at all....Coming from a BIPOC mentor, that (guidance) would be a lot more helpful. So I actually understand how they climbed over roadblocks or [like] obstacles... Like sometimes you don't wanna have to educate someone else in order for them to help you. You just prefer to have someone who can understand you better and has been through the same experiences as you...I think that it's really helpful to see [kind of] a reflection of yourself in what you would like to see as success...if you're seeing someone successful...who is like yourself, it kind of helps [you I guess] see yourself becoming that one day.***

Another Black youth, living in a small town, explained her hesitancy to receive mentorship from a white mentor:

> ***With a white mentor, especially like in rural communities, you kind of have your guard up a little bit cause you don't know where they're coming from or like, you know, some people are racist.***

One youth explained that her preference for a Black mentor depended on what type of mentorship she was specifically seeking. When looking for a mentor who could help her in their career, she was less concerned about shared racial background and instead wanted a mentor who had relevant career experiences. By contrast, when looking for a mentor to support her with cultural mentoring, shared racial identity mattered:

> ***With general mentorship...it'd be open to more [career] areas that I wanted, but with like the Black mentorship it'd be more narrow to my needs I guess.***

This reinforces the concept of mentorships – youth need multiple mentors – and that youth choice is key.

It was clear from interviews overall that there is no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to mentor-mentee matching. Although matches based on racial identity were important to many youth, youth also expressed a strong preference for mentors with similar education or career interests. They felt that match quality depends on individual needs, shared experiences, and mutual respect, such as one youth who commented:

> ***It would depend on people's like values and interests [to be] a determining factor to match them together.***

Some youth had first-hand experiences receiving mentorship from white mentors. One Black youth explained:

> ***I'm starting to cultivate a really beautiful relationship with this woman...she is white...and I think that is shifting some of my preconceived notions of me thinking that I can only be mentored by specific people. I think what's interesting and beautiful about that...it's like opening up my reality...and I'm also learning things from her that I never learned from other people before.***

Another Black youth said:

> ***I'm open to not always being mentored by people who look like me, as I think it's also good to be well-rounded and learn different things...even though you can still be well-rounded in your community.***

One youth in particular talked about a preference for mentorship from someone with a different racial identity from herself, due to the value she placed on maintaining boundaries, and her concerns about judgement around her mental health. She explained,

> ***I do notice that sometimes if I do get matched with someone who is the same race as me, sometimes what could happen is like a break in professionality or there's like, too much like comfort... they might say things that are like stigmatising [about my mental health], and I do believe that this comfortability is because we're both the same race.***

Overall, both youth and mentoring stakeholders underscored the importance of choice, and involving youth directly in the selection/matching process, such as by having an initial meeting to see if expectations between mentor and mentee align. On the whole, 'racially-matched' mentorship may be particularly important to help youth navigate structural issues like systemic racism in white institutions, but may be comparatively less important for some forms of career-focused mentoring. Nevertheless, many Black youth participants consistently agreed they would welcome mentoring spaces and programming targeted to them specifically.

Research has shown that after a year of mentoring, Black youth assigned a same-race/ethnicity mentor had slightly higher increases in self-perceived school ability and less favourable attitudes towards risky behaviours when compared to youth with differing-race/ethnicity mentors, but differences were small (Champion et al., 2021).

Mentor Training

Black youth and mentoring stakeholders were clear about the importance of effective anti-racism training and education for mentors. While they expressed openness to mentorship from white mentors, they required those mentors to be culturally responsive. Youth shared different ways that mentors who do not have shared identities (i.e., race, gender, class) can build trust with them and what they can offer them as Black youth. First, youth emphasized the

importance of mentors being willing to listen, learn, and be supportive of their experiences. It is vital for mentors not to question or invalidate mentees' experiences: youth are the experts on their own lived experiences. Additionally, knowing that mentors share a framework of anti-racism can create a safer space for Black youth.

One youth explained:

> ***I think that for mentorship the person could really honestly be of any race. [However] I could see how possibly if someone is not culturally competent, how that could be an issue.***

Another commented:

> ***I think I'm open to now be mentored by other women who have similar practices or similar interests... I think if they're not Black and if they are women of colour or like white women, I think there needs to be like a central theme of decolonization or them just learning or knowing how to be a safe space.***

Mentoring stakeholders suggested that mentorship programs could partner with cultural community groups/organizations who could endorse and amplify their programs, so that youth could have some assurance in advance that the program would be culturally safe. They also emphasized core skills training for mentors, coupled with yearly 'refresher' training focused on how current events are impacting racialized youth. Mentors who engaged in critical personal development were seen as being better able to build authentic relationships with Black youth – this could include guided self-reflection on privilege and bias, recognition of how systemic racism shapes youth identity and opportunity, and skills to have open conversations about race and justice.

Cultural mistrust is a consistent barrier for Black youth, who may find it difficult to build meaningful relationships with white mentors or mentors from different racial/ethnic backgrounds. Families may hesitate to fully embrace mentorship programs without evidence of cultural sensitivity. Several studies have found that failed relationships stem from mentors' lack of awareness of cultural nuances. Family and caregiver involvement has emerged as vital to overcoming these barriers, with youth perceiving mentorship as more trustworthy and supportive when mentors engaged their parents or caregivers directly. This suggests that proactive trust-building through open family engagement and respect for cultural practices is not a secondary add-on, but a central condition for sustainable mentoring (Mitchell, 2022).

Mentors with strong multicultural competence are better able to form effective connections, report greater satisfaction, and support youth identity development. When mentors and mentees from different racial or cultural backgrounds interact under the right conditions - such as shared goals, equal status, cooperation, and institutional support - cross-racial relationships can reduce prejudice and promote empathy, tolerance, and respect. But this requires intentional program design; without cultural sensitivity, cross-racial mentoring may falter. Importantly, when mentors acknowledged and affirmed their mentees' racial and ethnic identity, for example, by engaging in cultural discussions or activities like visiting Black history exhibits, youth reported feeling supported in developing pride and resilience. Yet, many mentors avoided or minimized race in the relationship, missing critical opportunities to affirm identity and address the realities of racism (Jones et al., 2022).

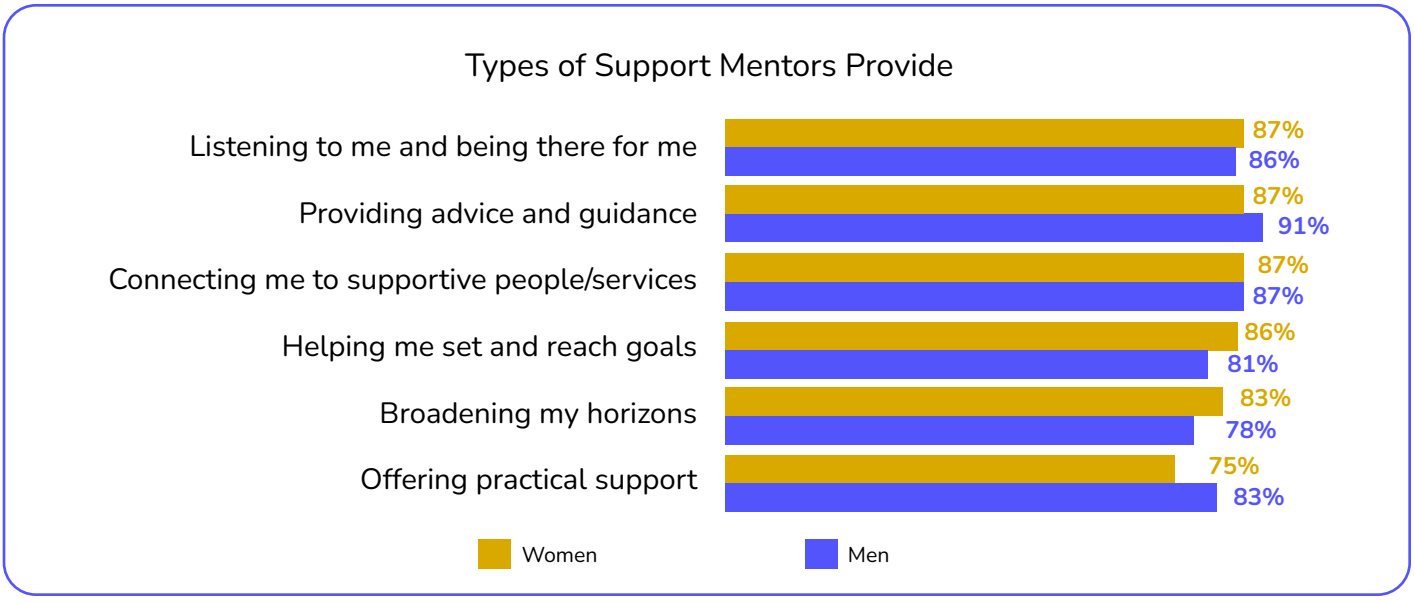
Social capital is not always distributed equitably and sometimes reinforces exclusion. Mentoring programs can enhance social capital by strengthening both the relationships young people hold and the resources they are able to access through those relationships. Strong individual social capital means having quality relationships with people who can open doors to opportunities and provide forms of support and practical help. At the community level, social capital is generated through collective belonging and group membership. It emerges when young people are part of organizations or cohorts that connect them not only to their peers, but also to institutions, employers, and alumni networks. The benefits here extend beyond individual gains to include a sense of cohesion, solidarity, and empowerment, as well as the capacity for collective action. This dual perspective highlights why mentoring is such a powerful tool: it can simultaneously broaden a mentee's personal networks and connect them to communities that provide solidarity and empowerment (Scales, Boat & Pekel, 2020).

What Mentors Can Offer Black Youth

Black young adults identified many ways in which having mentorship benefited them, including having mentors who have helped them develop or strengthen skills such as adaptability, communication, and creativity; supporting them to cope with everyday challenges; providing moral support; and offering practical and information supports.

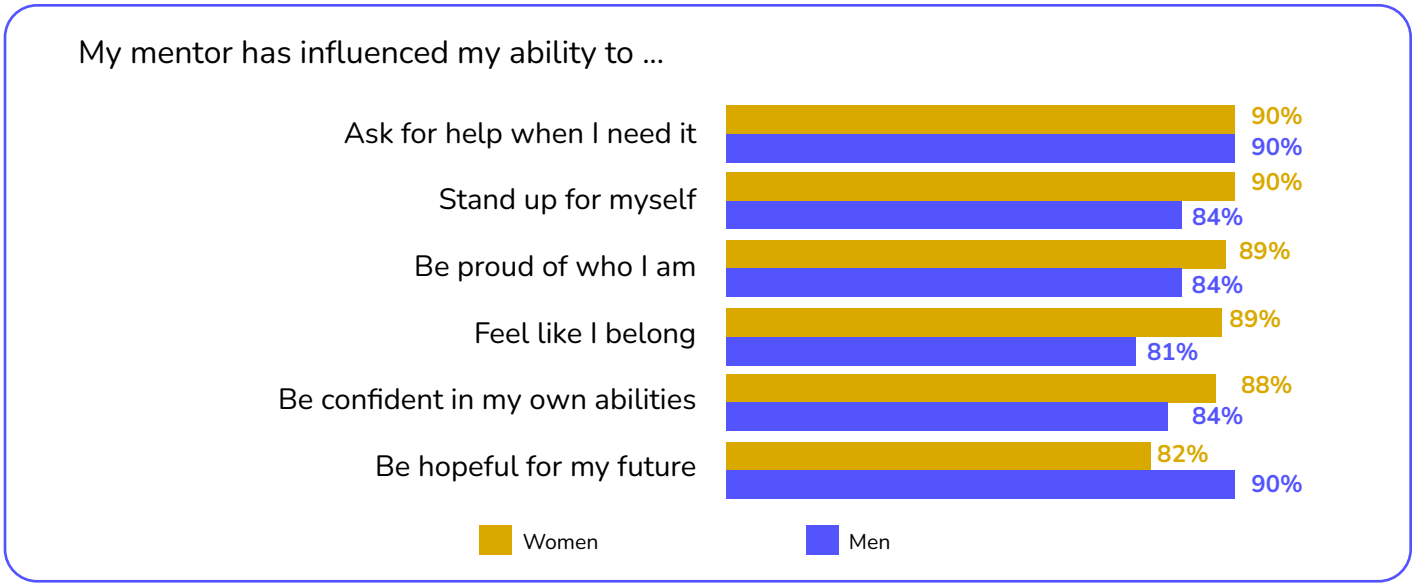
Varying Types of Support

Black young adults with mentoring experience reported receiving high levels of "social capital" support from their mentors – meaning they have someone in their life who listens, helps them understand themself, and provides information and support. Black young adults with mentors also reported receiving high levels of instrumental and informational support from their mentors, such as a mentor referring them to support services and providing advice and guidance, and practical support, such as offering rides or assisting with basic needs like housing.



Psychosocial Support and Resistance Capital

Among ratings of psychosocial support (such as help-seeking or standing up for oneself), Black young men were especially likely to "strongly agree" that a mentor influenced their abilities compared to women (though overall levels of agreement were similar).



Between 79-86 per cent of Black young adults with mentors agreed that their mentor provided them with a safe space to process and validate their experiences with discrimination, and to think critically about racism and injustice.

These themes also emerged in qualitative interviews, where both Black youth and mentoring stakeholders discussed the value of mentoring in helping youth challenge anti-Black racism and navigate predominantly white spaces. In some cases, mentorship acted as a buffer, providing Black youth with advocates who helped them navigate racism while affirming their identity and aspirations. One mentoring stakeholder talked about how mentorship helped Black youth gain knowledge of how the systems they interact with work, such as understanding job application processes:

> ***navigating the nuances of what it's like to go through that process as a Black and racialized person.***

Because of the barriers placed in the pathways of Black youth, mentor stakeholders noted the importance of helping youth learn about where to look for scholarship opportunities or work study programs, and how to navigate systems like social insurance, Service Canada, and filing taxes.

Racial Oases

Youth and mentoring stakeholders also identified ways in which mentoring can function as a safe, affirming space that offers youth a reprieve from predominantly white spaces. Youth described

mentors who made them feel seen, validated, and encouraged, and said that they developed confidence, networks, and tools to persist in their educational and professional pathways. For example, one youth lived in a predominantly white rural area, and said that she often felt a lack of representation and struggled with a sense of disconnection and lack of belonging:

> ***not feeling like I fit in the white space or the Black space.***

She saw culturally relevant mentorship as a way to support her mental health and her journey toward self-acceptance through guidance and affirmation. Other youth similarly talked about their desire for spaces where they could express themselves and feel connected to their racialized identities. One mentoring stakeholder explained:

> ***We're providing kind of a safe space for them to talk about those things and be themselves and share their stories, where other professional environments may not make them feel as comfortable in doing so. And they might feel like they have to hide their true opinions or their true, you know, motivations. Their stories might not feel totally appropriate in all professional contexts. But in this one, hopefully they're encouraged to talk about that. You might not be able to talk about how you maybe felt discriminated against at your place of work with your professor or someone you worked with in the past. But you could do it with a mentor who specifically is matched with you through the social justice mentorship program, right? That feels like a safer space to share those stories.***

Black youth, families, and communities experience race-based violence in daily life through discriminatory attitudes, microaggressions, and overt racism. Unlike white peers, who can often retreat into racially homogeneous environments, Black students must continuously navigate predominantly white spaces, heightening their exposure to racialized stress and limiting opportunities for recovery. A study of African Canadian post-secondary students illustrated how a racial oasis - a physical, virtual, or symbolic space - can mitigate these harms. Racial oases provide safety to discuss experiences of racism, affirm youth's identities, and help youth develop confidence. Racial oases are described as essential for building self-esteem, fostering community, and accessing supportive networks that help youth persist academically and socially (Daniel, 2021).

In interviews and focus groups with Black young adult program participants, key themes included the importance of youth being exposed to multiple frames and conceptions of Blackness (Daniel, 2018).

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Note that the quantitative youth survey dataset from this study is available to researchers interested in pursuing further analyses. Contact Reuben Ford, SRDC Research Director, at ***rford@srdc.org*** for details.

To learn more about Mentor Canada's mentoring research and the Unlocking Doors project, contact ***info@mentorcanada.ca*** ***or visit*** ***mentorcanada.ca*** for more information.