

Researcher examines model to foster just and equitable youth engagement in residential facilities

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Recent research by Andrew Nalani, a faculty member at Vanderbilt Peabody College of education and human development, examines the

viewpoints of youth care workers in juvenile residential facilities and their desires for fostering more just and equitable systems through youth-adult partnerships.

Youth-adult partnerships (Y-APs) are a model for promoting social justice development for system-impacted youth. Y-APs have typically been employed in community-based settings and schools, giving youth opportunities to collaborate and make democratic decisions with adults overseeing their care.

Nalani's study—[published](#) by the *American Journal of Community Psychology*—is the first to examine whether Y-APs exist within juvenile justice facilities and [child welfare](#) congregate care group homes and the systematic conditions that enable or constrain the emergence and sustainability of Y-APs in these settings.

"While reform efforts in these settings aim to promote positive youth development, they do not adequately include and consider the perspectives of those most impacted—the youth themselves and the frontline care workers," said Nalani, assistant professor of human and organizational development.

Through a series of interviews with 21 [frontline staff](#) in [juvenile justice](#) and congregate care facilities, Nalani finds that the success of Y-APs, while elusive, is heavily influenced by frontline workers' recognition of and commitment to resisting systematic anti-Black racism. Nalani names three prevailing organizational processes that hinder Y-APs:

- Selective racial cognizance in hiring: valuing frontline workers' racial/ethnic identities and experiences to support program compliance among youth but devaluing these traits as assets for fostering positive youth development and promoting frontline workers into more senior roles.

- Color-evasive and elitist training: training that avoids issues of race and values academic perspectives over frontline workers' experiences. The avoidance of race fails to adequately set up frontline workers for success by ignoring how societal racism shapes dynamics in facilities, which can perpetuate anti-Blackness.
- Racialized blame-shifting: shifting blame onto frontline workers, predominantly those of color, for systemic failures, rather than seeking to improve systems.

According to Nalani, these organizational dynamics perpetuate a system of social control and stymie positive youth development. Based on their experiences with youth, the study participants shared guidance on alternative practices and policies to support a system that recognizes the humanity of workers and Black youth, including the need for administrators to periodically work in facilities to understand the realities of youth and workers.

More information: Andrew Nalani, Freedom dreaming in carceral spaces: Youth care workers' imagined alternatives to anti-Black racism in residential facilities, *American Journal of Community Psychology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1002/ajcp.12762](https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12762)

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