

Talking Through the Numbers – Episode 11

How Trauma-Informed Services Can Promote Positive Outcomes for Black Youth and Families

Through interviews with researchers, community leaders, and service providers, Wilder Research Executive Director Paul Mattessich examines pressing issues facing our communities today to offer insight beyond the numbers.

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Transcript

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Paul Mattessich: Welcome to Talking Through the Numbers podcast produced by Wilder Research. Our goal to provide insight on significant issues, combining sound information with expert knowledge to enrich our understanding of things that affect our communities and our world. I'm Paul Mattessich, executive director of Wilder Research. In this episode, our topic is the role that trauma-informed, culturally specific programs and services in play in promoting resilience and positive outcomes for African American youth and families.

Three experts have joined for our conversation. Adesola Oni works in Hennepin County Department of Community Corrections as the youth equity and innovation manager in the Juvenile Probation Division. She also has experience as an evidence-based practices trainer and a clinical social worker with youth and families in a residential treatment setting. She received her master's in social work from Augsburg University and a bachelor's from the University of Minnesota.

Carmeann Foster is the founder and executive director of Rebound, Incorporated, a grassroots community-based nonprofit in North Minneapolis, Minnesota, which partners with the community to address the over-representation of Black youth in the juvenile justice system by providing holistic, community center, education, advocacy and rehabilitation solutions. She has a Juris Doctor degree from the University of St. Thomas School of Law, a master's degree in social work from St. Catherine University, is pursuing a PhD in public administration from Hamlin University and is a licensed independent clinical social worker.

Lindsay Turner is a research associate at Wilder Research. Lindsay specializes in the criminal legal system and in designing and implementing data collection methods appropriate for vulnerable subjects, such as sexually exploited youth and youth impacted by the legal system. She earned her JD from the University of St. Thomas Law School and her BA from Carlton College. She serves on the board of the Minnesota Second Chance Coalition. Welcome everyone and thank you for joining for this conversation.

Lindsay Turner: Thank you for having us.

Adesola Oni: Yeah. Great to be here.

Paul: So our topic, the role that trauma-informed culturally specific programs and services can play in promoting resilience and positive outcomes for African American youth and families. First good question is definitional, what do we mean by trauma-informed, culturally specific programs and services?

Adesola: Yeah, I think when we talk about trauma-informed care, the premise around trauma-informed care is having an assumption about the impact that trauma has had on folks who may have experienced a number of traumas. And what we know, especially in the juvenile justice system, is that a number of youth who come across our systems have experienced some level of trauma.

Paul: This may seem obvious to you, but when you say trauma, can you give a couple of quick examples? What does trauma mean?

Adesola: Yeah, so trauma could be experiences such as physical trauma, so sexual exploitation often leads to... is often traumatic for folks. It could be growing up in an abusive household where that's traumatic. We have historical trauma in the US, especially for people of color. And so, when we talk about African American youth, there's certainly that. And so, just anything that really impacts your mental, physical well-being in a manner that opposite from perhaps what it should be.

Paul: Sounds like it could have been an individual experience, a systemic issue, a historical issue. Any of those that could feed into the trauma that you're describing?

Adesola: Absolutely. I think some of the more common examples that people maybe can think of is if you got into a car accident and it was significant enough to really jar you in the ways that you think, or maybe even reorient, or perhaps even give you some anxiety and fear about driving in the future. That's traumatic because it's so disruptive. And so, that's what we mean by trauma.

Paul: I see. So, why are these services so important and what are some of the issues that they're trying to address?

Carmeann: Rebound has been pleased to partner with Hennepin County in providing a family group to individuals in the North Minneapolis area who have experienced trauma and we take a very broad definition of the term trauma when we're referring to our families. The very

act of living in communities where violence is a norm or where police brutality is taking place or living in an impoverished situation where basic needs are not always met, all of those things can impact on people's daily functioning.

And so, our group, the Ujima Family Resilience Program, seeks to provide parents with skills and resources to help their children navigate that traumatic life that they're experiencing and to come out on the other end of that with skills and supports and a network that will help them to get to adulthood in a healthy fashion. And we feel that that's important because so much of the community in North Minneapolis is experiencing ongoing community trauma, right?

The news reports on the community violence that's taking place so frequently. We know that particularly African American individuals have been disenfranchised in the Twin Cities and that statistically, outcomes in terms of unemployment, income, home ownership, all sorts of economic indicators are severely lower for African Americans in the Twin Cities than they are for their Caucasian counterparts. And so, we have an entire generation of young people who are navigating this extremely traumatic environment and what outcomes they have and how well they're able to traverse that environment will determine who's available to be our future leaders and to head our community as we move forward.

Adesola: Yeah. I was just going to add to that, to say, in terms of the level of importance, often times, when folks do encounter or come across the juvenile justice systems, they're looked at as the problem, right? What's wrong with you?

And so, shifting to a trauma-informed lens really addresses the "What happened?" Right? What happened structurally? What happened individually? What happened and how do we then intervene? Or how do we get folks back on the trajectory of where they wish to go? Which, I think, then adds the pieces around the cultural responsive types of interventions, because there's different ways that people hold their identities, occupy space. And if we can really tap into what's meaningful and important for them, then how do we really use that and capitalize on that to help accentuate strengths and also change structures to meet those goals?

Paul: So, it sounds like there were social forces at work. There was your knowledge of experiences of trauma, especially within the African American population, youth and families. There were some other concerns that you and Carmeann expressed. Those led you to the program, they motivated you to develop the program. Was there anything else that sparked this? That led this program take off when it did?

Adesola: Well for us in Hennepin County, part of what we were thinking about was racial disparities are rampant. We know that youth of color are overrepresented in our detention centers, overrepresented in our placements, overrepresented on probation and across major decision points and with efforts such as the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiatives that we have tried, we participated in, and I think instituted into the ways in which we do our work.

We've seen results, which have been great, but not necessarily for youth of color. And so, really thinking through a racial equity lens and thinking about how is it that we have more significant impact on what it is that we're seeing, especially for youth of color and more specifically for Black youth, Black male youth, because that's who we see largely overrepresented, all of these decision points, what is it that we need to do? So I think some of those conversations, thoughts, the awareness of the issues brought us to a space to start to think through and talk with different folks, which then led to a request for proposal and the creation of some of these programs.

Paul: I see. Sure. Now you've alluded to numbers a couple of times, disparities, maybe we should get in to that just a little bit for the benefit of the listeners. Can we talk a little bit about overall numbers? For example, how many young people live in Hennepin County and roughly how many of those get involved with the juvenile justice system? Do we know that?

Adesola: So, as of the last census, not 2020, but the one prior to that, there was about 118,000... 119, maybe round up, youth between the ages of 10 and 17 that live in Hennepin County.

Paul: So, preteen and teenage?

Adesola: Right.

Paul: Okay.

Adesola: And of those, we know that for example, 70% of the youth who are on probation are youth of color. And of those, we have 93% of youth who are in our detention center. And for youth of color, there are only about 22% in Hennepin County, while white youth are about 67% in Hennepin County. So, when we look at those numbers, it's easy to see that while youth of color constitute a minimal amounts of the population, they're showing up largely at these various decision points.

Paul: Now, when you say decision points, I think you're referring to the process of moving from being in the community to maybe being arrested to maybe investigations happening, being adjudicated, et cetera, and I'm not the expert so I can't... I don't know all those decision points, but I think that's what you're talking about. And I think you're implying that at each stage in the process, at each of those decision points you mentioned, it tends to trend in the direction of more disproportionality for youth of color. Is that correct?

Adesola: Yes.

Carmeann: And I think it's important to note, our view of criminal justice and juvenile justice usually says that if you're being pulled in to that system, it's because of something you did, right? So, it's the young person's fault. And so, you can be called to question, "Well, is it just that there are more kids of color committing crimes?" And so, I think it's important that we dispel that misunderstanding.

There have been lots of initiatives of late that have done research into the actual amount of crime that's being committed among young people and it's roughly equivalent, right? The likelihood that a Caucasian young person will commit a crime as it is that a young person of color will commit a crime. The difference is the way in which the two individuals are policed, the way in which their behaviors are reported or responded to. There's research that says that when a young person of color is encountered, people estimate their age to be three to four years older than they actually are, so the expectations of their behavior and their mannerism are out of proportion with their development and what's developmentally appropriate for them.

And then also, there's wonderful initiatives like We Are All Criminals, that look at the things that we've all done over time and make it even more personal than research, right? And take us to our own childhoods and the silly mistakes we made that could very well be considered crimes nowadays. Even the threshold for what's a felony, our most serious crimes, if a young person were to steal, say a cell phone, because of how much those costs nowadays, that could be a felony. And so, realizing that our intuition will want us to say that, "Oh, it must just be that kids of color are bad and that's why they're showing up higher in these numbers." But research and our own lived experiences should tell us that that's not the case.

Lindsay:

And I want to pipe up here with a couple of specifics on that overarching body of research. The Minnesota Student Survey goes out to all Minnesota youth who are in public schools and what Carmeann is saying exactly shows up there. White youth report greater rates of alcohol use while they're underage than youth of any other racial background and the rates are relatively even for use of other illicit drugs like marijuana or cigarettes, which is a crime for youth who are underage.

And additionally, we have found in other projects for Wilder Research, for instance, looking into the presence of police officers in schools, that just the presence of police officers predicts statistically significant differences in the amount of contact that youth will have with the juvenile justice system that aren't explained by differences across student behavior. So, Black and Native and youth in particular, our police more heavily within the school system than white youth are and same behaviors across races are treated with greater amounts of punishment for Black and Native youth and greater amounts of restoration for white youth.

Paul:

So, those are clearly examples of the disparities that are plaguing the system. What do we know... This might be an obvious type of an answer, but maybe not. What do we know about what's contributed to those disparities?

Lindsay:

Well, one of the things that we've found through some investigations in Wilder Research is that there are social conditions that we can talk about that predict greater amounts of safety or greater risk of violence or undesirable behavior and those social conditions are not equally distributed across places. Our policies and practices have meant that we relegate some people to live in neighborhoods that face rampant government disinvestment. There's not the same rates of investment in parks and public structures and schools and all that stuff, so that the people who are living in these neighborhoods experience

greater amounts of stress, less amounts of success and greater probability that they're going to be victimized or commit crime or violence.

And some of the social conditions that we found that protect against crime and violence include: economic equity, the ability to access a job that pays a living wage on just 40 hours a week; access to education; feeling hopeful and connected to school; educational achievement; those all promote safety and reduce crime and violence and communities. Access to health care and culturally appropriate accessible treatment, especially for mental health issues and substance use issues.

Those have all been shown to increase safety in communities and we can really easily predict where those resources are by looking at neighborhoods that have been redlined so that they have a higher percentage of ethnic minorities and marginalized folks living inside them.

Paul: There's some neighborhoods you're saying that really are the intersection for social, economic, political, and other kinds of either trends or active interventions that put people at risk in those neighborhood?

Lindsay: Absolutely. When we look at differences across races, when white people live in those circumstances, the rates of violence and crimes are exactly the same as when Black people or Native people live in those circumstances. It's not... What I really want listeners to walk away from is that there's not really any such thing as a bad person, but there is definitely a such a thing as a bad or negative context and we can change policies and change practices in order to mitigate and improve those contexts.

Paul: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Adesola: And I think what I might add to that, just real quickly is that that didn't just happen by accident. It certainly happened intentionally over time to where resources were stripped and people were intentionally disenfranchised from access to support in a way that would not allow them to have the same type of outcomes and successes as white folks essentially in this country, the society. So, I think the pieces around structural racism is really important to note in terms of how we got here and also, in terms of thinking about when we start to talk about, how do we shift this? That it's not just not the idea of just giving out handouts to people. That's not what it's about.

Paul: Yeah. So, the program Rebound, Incorporated, and potentially other programs, but they attempt to counteract this, to deal with some of it, to ease the pain, change things. What do we know about how this program has helped youth and families and communities that it serves?

Carmeann: I'd like to just clarify a bit, we're trying to change outcomes, but we're building very much on what already exists within our community. When we came up with a proposal for this program and there was a number of pitch meetings and things like that with Hennepin County, our strong focus was on the fact that there is resilience intrinsic within the individuals living in these circumstances.

The fact is they are still standing and they're still there in spite of a system that's been designed to crush them and destroy them. They're still standing. And so, our program seek to build on the natural sense of community and to get information into the natural networks that are already sharing resources with one another so that we can build on what's already a positive within the African American culture and way of being and help to highlight those things.

Paul: So, is there an example of how you do that in your program? How you use the strengths, the experiences, positives within the backgrounds of the individuals and the families to determine how you provide your programming and what you do with and for people?

Carmeann: For sure. The curriculum that we use is called Strengthening Family Coping Resources and a lot of the conversation is about what your family is already doing that's positive that you can build on. So, we talk about who do you already have within your support network who you can lean on when things are strained? What are the resources that are already available within your community that you can access to maintain stability when you're hit with another traumatic event or when resources become limited? Talk to the participants a lot building networks of support amongst each other. The African American culture is very communal in nature. And so, we build on that sense of community and encouraging participants to stay connected to one another, even after they're done with our programming and encouraging the young men to lean on one another in decision-making and things of that sort.

Paul: So, it sounds like you're addressing the issues squarely and that you are building on strengths, do we have research that tells us how well that works? Where it works? Where it doesn't? It work with all families? Some families? Do we know any of those answers to any of those questions?

Adesola: Well, and maybe even before we get to the research, because I think in a lot of that, which some of it might be the qualitative piece too, but one of the things I really appreciate about the program as well is just the idea of expertise relying upon whomever is involved. So, for me, I know myself the best. Paul, you know yourself the best. You know what your needs are, you know about your experiences and what's going to work for you. So instead of coming in and telling people what they should need, how they should be, how they should function and operate, just this idea of really relying on their strengths, as Carmeann has spoken to, their experiences and their voices to be able to lead and guide what's done, I think is so important as a part of this work. And I'll refer back to Lindsay in terms of some of the outcomes and what works.

Paul: Sure.

Lindsay: Yeah. So, Wilder Research has been embedded in the partnership between the county and the community-based programs since its inception and has been collecting information from program participants, as well as referral sources and staff at the different programs for a number of years at this point, and everything that we're seeing is that participants are really well engaged. And I think that again points to just the trusting relationships and the centering participants' experiences and building on their strengths. And especially

with the Ujima Family Resilience Program, parents and caregivers note positive improvements in their own abilities to recognize stress and trauma in their own life, their ability to cope with stress and trauma in their own life, and then their ability to look at their children that they're caring for and understand better what's going on with their kids and in their family, and how to pull on some of those positive family traditions and structures in order to create more of a connection and deal with problems in a more constructive and just solution focused way.

And so, we have results of interviews and surveys with a number of participants across four different programs that operate under this service provision and the outcomes have been overwhelmingly positive.

Paul: And how long have you done this? And how long are you going to continue to follow up with those surveys?

Lindsay: So, we began programming began in 2018, correct me if I'm wrong Adesola or Carmeann, and data collection began right on its heels and we will be continuing the system-level evaluation piece of things through the end of funding from the county. And so far, it hasn't gone away. So, we're still here.

Paul: Okay. Well, hopefully the research informs the decision-making. So Adesola, in your bio you say that you are an evidence-based practices trainer. Is this program an evidence-based practice or should it be, or do you want it to be?

Adesola: So, I think that there's certainly something worthwhile about evidence-based practices which are supported through research over time that says, here's what works and here's what doesn't. And I think that there's pieces around certainly what's happening with Ujima that is evidence-based and supported in that way. And there are also practices that are promising because maybe we don't have all of the data and information that lets us know that this is certainly evidence-based. I think the curriculum that's being utilized is evidence-based and I think a lot of the principles around resiliency, focusing on strengths, working with the family units, all of those components are certainly evidence-based.

Paul: So, we've discussed the need and we've heard a bit about the effectiveness of the program. Are these programs common? If so, what about that? If not, what are the challenges to creating more of these programs?

Adesola: So, I don't know that they're common, certainly in terms of thinking across the nation. I think that there are other people, other jurisdictions that are doing similar work and I think it's uncommon because preventative measures are not typically within the scope of corrections. So, we are often kind of responsive, right? Somebody encounters law enforcement, they come into our system and then, we have to find ways to intervene.

And so, I think it's uncommon, but I think, again, it goes to the piece around, "To be truly transformative, what does that require of us to think about and how does that require us to do business a little bit differently?"

I also think it's maybe not as common because some of the processes where any type of governmental organizations to get these types of programs going is not often easy. And so, when we think about smaller organizations and resources and capacities to be able to respond to requests such as these, it's not often an easy thing for folks to be able to do. So again, trying to find ways to support and to ensure that these processes are not as arduous, I think is also important.

Carmeann: Yeah. My recollection in going through the process to be chosen to partner with the county in this work, the county was very intentional about seeking out smaller and community-based organizations, unlike normal RFPs with the county where you respond with just a written product and then, you find out later if they chose you or not.

There were interview processes that included community members in selecting what interventions would be used. It was a very non traditional process, which I would assume was very labor intensive and I'm not sure how practical it is to replicate it for every single decision, but for something that was going to be so close to the community and seek to address a community issue, I really appreciated the way that the county honored community in selecting the providers that were going to be used.

Paul: I see. What about the average person who might be listening to the podcast right now? Consider that person and maybe they care about young people, maybe they've listened and they care or have concerns about this issue. They don't necessarily have a lot of time or money. They're not professionals, but they have an interest in helping in some way, if there are anything that they could do? And if so, what would that be?

Adesola: I think, as we talk about what trauma means and what it looks like, and as we try to think about shifting the narrative, certainly folks taking the time to learn about what that means, to learn about where are they might have individual interests, I think is important. So, just the pieces around just self-education, information, I think all of those are important.

In Hennepin County, we continue to try to work towards transforming the ways in which we do our work to really support the idea of well-being. And we have the Youth Justice Council, so if you go on Hennepin County's website and type in the Youth Justice Council, that's one of the opportunities where we meet with folks across some various aspects of the systems, community, agency advocates, individuals who are just interested in various topics around any of this type of stuff to come in, lend a voice, participate in any of the work groups that might be happening and just join. I think people showing up and being able to speak to their experiences is really powerful.

Paul: Lindsay or Carmeann, anything that you would add?

Carmeann: Yeah. From a community standpoint, my work with Rebound, Inc. grew out of my desire to be the solution I wanted to see in my community, right? And for a long time, I allowed myself to fall prey to the imposter syndrome that I needed more letters behind my name before I could change my community and I really encourage folks to get out and use whatever you have in your hands today to change the community, right? We can be of support to our neighbors. We can be a part of that network that individuals can lean on

when they're experiencing difficult times. You can start a program if you want or you can come mentor kids with Rebound. Just use your time and your expertise to be of support to people in your community.

Paul: Lindsay, anything to add?

Lindsay: Yeah. And I encourage people who are interested in some of the systemic and some of the structures that perpetuate these systemic disparities and the ongoing benefits for these programs and communities to take a look at the Minnesota state legislature. There's so many ways that state level policy impacts people's day-to-day lives.

And for instance, there's an excellent juvenile justice reform package that's moving through the legislature at this point, and I would encourage people to take a look at the Second Chance Coalition or the Minnesota Youth Justice Coalition and consider getting involved or reaching out to their state level representative or senator to learn more about what system level improvements will help improve those contexts in your own city.

Paul: Well, thank you very much. Time has flown and I'm sure that for listeners, there will be many more questions they would like answered and I'm hoping that many of them do dig in the way the three of you had suggested on this issue. Thanks again, to all three of you. Adesola Oni from the Hennepin County Department of Community Corrections, Carmeann Foster from Rebound, Incorporated, and Lindsay Turner from Wilder Research.

Please visit our website, www.wilderresearch.org, for more information on this topic and others that Wilder Research focuses on. If you have suggestions for a future podcast, please let us know. I'm Paul Mattessich from Wilder Research and I look forward to talking through the numbers with you on other topics.

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