

# **Hennepin County – Department of Community Corrections and Rehabilitation (DOCCR): Trauma-Informed, Culturally Specific Programs**

## *2021 Annual Summary*

Wilder Research is partnering with the Hennepin County Children’s Mental Health Collaborative to evaluate a system of trauma-informed, culturally specific programs for African American male-identified youth. Of primary interest is whether programs help participants be grounded in their culture as a source of strength, better identify trauma and stress in their lives, and better cope with this trauma and stress. Based on surveys, interviews, and referral data collected in 2021, program participants continue to say that the programs are engaging and positively impactful, and staff say programs adapt during challenging times to meet participant needs.

Since fall 2017, Wilder Research has been working with the Hennepin County Department of Community Corrections and Rehabilitation (DOCCR) to develop culturally specific, trauma-informed programs for African American male-identified youth, and evaluate the implementation and benefits of these programs with a focus on preventing and intervening in juvenile justice system involvement.

Each program has unique eligibility requirements, specifically:

- **Ujima Family Resilience Program** - Families must reside in North Minneapolis, have at least one Black male child age 8-12, and have some experience with traumatic stress. Ujima Family Resilience Program staff network with schools, organizations, and agencies in the North Minneapolis community to reach and recruit families to participate. Ujima also runs a cohort model, where a small group of families participates in a structured weekly curriculum for between 12 and 16 weeks.
- **HOPE** - Participants are all African American males age 12-17 who are referred after a first contact with law enforcement. HOPE has weekly meetings with group participants, and accepts new participants into programming on a rolling basis.
- **Nia** - Participants are all African American males residing in or near North Minneapolis, age 12-17, referred by Hennepin County Juvenile Probation. Nia participants attend weekly groups, and staff check in with participants weekly. Nia accepts new participants into programming on a rolling basis.
- **Nehemiah** - Participants are all male-identified youth ages 15-19 residing in or near South Minneapolis, referred by Hennepin County Juvenile Probation. Participants attend two group meetings per week for 12 weeks, and work individually with a case manager.

While specific goals and outcomes for participants vary based on which program they access, common outcome goals are that participants:

- Improve their ability to identify traumatic, stressful, and/or challenging life experiences
- Improve their ability to address and/or positively cope with traumatic, stressful, and/or challenging life experiences
- Consider the program to be reflective of their culture
- Improve their grounding in their culture
- Improve their connections to a positive support network

## Evaluation details

Wilder Research is conducting an implementation process and outcome evaluation to help understand how these programs enhance and/or improve services and outcomes for African American boys in Hennepin County (and their families). Hennepin County began funding these programs to prevent and intervene in juvenile justice system involvement. This is the fourth annual report, which summarizes information collected in 2021. For more information about previous year's findings, find the first annual report [here](#), the second [here](#), and the third [here](#).

In 2021, Wilder Research engaged program staff, referral sources, and participants in interviews and surveys as part of the evaluation. Figure 1 outlines who has participated in evaluation activities from January 1 through December 31, 2021. Each year, program staff also report outputs, or the number of youth and families served by programs, services provided, and program completion rates. Evaluators analyze interviews and surveys for themes, and report interview, survey, and output data on an annual basis.

### 1. EVALUATION PARTICIPANTS IN 2021

Informant type	Number interviewed	Number surveyed
Program staff	7	-
Program participant	17	7
Total	24	7

Note: Wilder Research gathered information from a number of informants, including program staff and program participants. Wilder interviewed youth who participated in HOPE, Nehemiah, and Nia, and adults who participated in Ujima (though not the children in their care).

## Evaluation findings

Here we present findings from 2021 data collection activities. We report those themes, or common ideas, expressed by three or more interviewees.

### Program participants

Wilder asked program staff to describe the people they serve in their programs. All staff used positive descriptors when talking about their participants and the theme that emerged is that participants are resilient.

Program staff also tracked information about how many people were referred to, participated in, and successfully completed programming. Figure 2 summarizes how many people or families the programs reached in 2021. In total, 9 families and 34 youth participated in one of the four programs. All staff used positive descriptors when talking about their participants, describing participants as resilient.

### 2. PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

Number of people in 2021 who...	Ujima	HOPE	Nia	Nehemiah
Were referred to the program	17 families	16 youth	12 youth	22 youth
Received some programming (though may not have completed)	9 families	18 youth <sup>1</sup>	10 youth	16 youth
Received a referral to other service, including mental health, chemical health, health care, or pro-social activities	9 families	3 youth	12 youth	0 youth
Successfully completed program in 2021	3 families	11 youth	10 youth	6 youth

Note: Some youth may have received services who were referred in calendar year 2020

## Staff perspectives

### *Program staff adapted in response to urgent challenges*

All programs identified three main challenges to the COVID-19 pandemic and racial justice uprising:

- The ongoing pandemic
- The continual trauma of systemic racism, state violence, and community violence
- A decline in the number of youth referred to their program

Program staff reported adapting to address the challenges in a number of ways, including shifting programming from in-person to virtual (and, in the case of Nia and Ujima, back to in-person due to participant needs), creating more space and partnerships to explore systemic racism and violence, and shifting programming and funding streams to expand the pool of youth who could be referred into the program. Due to the low number of referrals, program staff reported having presenters cancel groups, and youth not receiving the benefit of peer support and connection.

### *Program staff draw on community and participant strengths to address challenges and achieve success*

As in last years' summary, program staff reported that their programs were driving success. When asked to describe program success, all staff noted that youth and families connecting with the programming during another difficult year was a success. Staff also noted increased engagement, either through accepting 100% of referrals during the year, or expanding the age range or geography of eligible youth. Staff also noted that participants were engaging deeply in the program, reflecting on their choices, and making changes to improve their families and their lives. One staff person said,

*We've seen kids that have gone from being completely mute during groups to talking a lot, being the first one to raise their hand and all that. They also start speaking for themselves where maybe before their parent was answering for them. And this helps the parents make sure that they're focusing more on their kids' feelings and experiences.*

Additionally, program managers felt that staff staying with the program through seasons of low numbers was an additional success. They noted that program staff worked hard to build positive relationships with program participants, which was mutually fulfilling, and led to participants being vulnerable and achieving more progress in the program. A final success staff noted was better outcomes, including a higher percentage of successful completes, and fewer youth removed from programming due to out-of-home placement.

Staff reported that engaging youth and family depended on drawing on community strengths in a variety of ways. Some programs brought in positive community members with lived experience with incarceration or violence to connect with youth in a mentorship role. Other programs created new partnerships, including with a jobs program, and funder to help families meet basic needs.

Interviewers asked staff to identify participant strengths and challenges. Staff reported that their participants are resilient and emotionally intelligent. One staff person said,

*There's a different type of optimism that comes from being continually traumatized through suffering systemic racism, and all this violence, but still looking for and feeling the blessing of waking up every morning, and making sure that each day has something to look forward to.*

Common challenges were participants' trauma, lack of clarity on diversion or probation requirements, struggle to meet basic needs like stable housing and living wage work, and lack of consistent support. While program staff reported a variety of ways that they address participant challenges, no themes emerged.

### **Program staff report positives and areas for improvement in working with Hennepin County**

We asked program staff what it was like working with Hennepin County during 2021. All staff reported that they found Hennepin County staff to be dedicated, creative, and flexible in their approach with the programs. Program staff mentioned that Hennepin County contract managers were especially understanding and focused on helping program staff achieve good qualitative outcomes even if the numbers of families or youth engaged were lower than in pre-pandemic years.

Staff also reiterated the challenge of low referral numbers from the county. Program staff also reported inconsistent relationships with direct-service county staff, and probation officers. While not a theme, one program staff person said that the lack of follow-through that program participants had had in the past with county workers led them to be mistrustful of program staff, in addition to being challenging because it meant that participants had to struggle harder than necessary to access county resources. Other program staff identified the lack of equity in transparency and accountability as a challenge. One staff person said,

*We're reporting all this stuff to probation officers, and held accountable on turnaround times on referrals, and checking in with probation. We're held accountable – but they're not, if they're not getting back to us, or aren't connecting us with youth who could benefit.*

### **Participant perspectives**

Wilder Research interviewed and surveyed 17 program participants on two main topics: what the programs are like and their perceived impact. Here, we report those themes that emerged across three or more participant interviews and, where applicable, survey responses.

#### **Participants found most program topics helpful**

When asked what topics that were discussed during their time in the program, interviewees said the following, in order from most to least frequently:

- Coping skills or managing their emotions
- Participants' feelings
- Trauma, including gun violence, police violence, and incarceration

Nearly all (N=16) found the topics to be helpful. Explaining how group topics helped, program participants said:

*It's helped me learn more about feelings, understand more about how other people feel, and how other folks handle their emotions or stress.*

*Talking about experiences in being in the Juvenile Detention Center, to know that we are not alone, and reassuring us that we are not bad people just because we ended up there.*

*It was helpful because being me – I get mad fast. I have to learn that you can't always jump to get mad, you gotta figure out the situation, to go about it in a different way.*

**Participants felt centering Black identity, culture, and resilience was a positive**

All interviewees said the program centered Black identity, culture, and resilience. In order from most to least frequent, interviewees reported the following impact of being in a program where racial identity is openly discussed, and Black culture and resilience is celebrated:

- Enjoying talking about racial identity, culture, and resilience
- Feeling more grounded in history
- Feeling more comfortable opening up and sharing aspects of their lives in group

Interviewees said:

*We were talking about how it's more difficult for Black males, going through a lot of different things that comes with race, what we go through that's different than what other people go through, and how others got through stuff like that back in the day.*

*I would say that it is a good conversation to have because I went to a predominantly White school and I can't have those conversation with my friends, but I like to talk about our roots and where we came from and I like to embrace my culture.*

*I'm more sure of myself in certain environments, I can handle a lot of situations that have to do with racism or systematic racism, or stereotypes and stuff -- I can recognize that it's part of stuff that's been going on for a long time. And if the people who went through worse pushed through, I can push through and keep moving forward.*

Interviewers asked if there was anything different that program staff could do to better center Black identity, culture, and resilience. The only theme that emerged was that interviewees would like more information about racial identity and how that impacts their experiences, including more conversations around systemic racism and policing, and more information about other cultures and subcultures (i.e., Latino identity and culture, or the experiences of LGBTQ+ Black people). Survey data bolsters this theme (Figures 3 and 4).

**3. WHILE IN [PROGRAM], I COULD TALK ABOUT HOW MY RACIAL OR CULTURAL IDENTITY IMPACTS MY LIFE.**

	#	%
Strongly agree	7	100%
Agree	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%
Strongly disagree	0	0%
Skipped	0	0%

**4. WHILE IN [PROGRAM], WE TALKED ABOUT THE POSITIVE ASPECTS OF MY RACE.**

	#	%
Strongly agree	7	100%
Agree	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%
Strongly disagree	0	0%
Skipped	0	0%

**Participants felt one-on-one time with program staff was a positive**

Most interviewees had one-on-one support from program staff, and they got the support they were looking for out of the one-on-one meetings.

*I really like [one-on-ones]. I feel like I need a male figure to talk to in my life, a younger one. I have my grandpa, but I need a younger male figure to talk to, and I have that here.*

*The useful part is being able to talk about my feelings and being able to express myself one-on-one.*

Survey data bolsters this theme (Figures 5 and 6).

**5. I HAD A POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH [PROGRAM] STAFF.**

	#	%
Strongly agree	6	86%
Agree	1	14%
Disagree	0	0%
Strongly disagree	0	0%
Skipped	0	0%

**6. [PROGRAM] STAFF TREATED ME WITH RESPECT.**

	#	%
Strongly agree	6	86%
Agree	1	14%
Disagree	0	0%
Strongly disagree	0	0%
Skipped	0	0%

**Participants reported improvements because of the program**

Interviewees reported that their program had improved their ability to understand trauma and stress (N=12), improved their ability to cope with trauma and stress (N=9), and improved their connections to other resources in the community (N=6). Interviewees said:

*When I get stressed I immediately know what it is that's bothering me. That kinda goes hand-in-hand with the communication thing I was saying earlier. Before, I didn't know exactly what was bothering me or know how to put it into words.*

*It brought up a lot of things that my family has been through and it helped me identify things a little better and see what's going on with my kids. Having the other kids open up in front of the adults and say what's going on with them helped mine open up.*

*It's been easier to handle my emotions. I found a way to reflect before and think about what the consequences are and how I'm going to avoid the bad ones before it comes to me getting in trouble or hurting someone. It's not hard to get angry. It takes a lot of strength and self-control to calm yourself and think about what's right and wrong.*

*It helped when they explained that it's natural not to trust people, and have trust issues when you've been through what I've been through. Me knowing that I'll feel that way because of my past, I'll give people more of a chance because now I see it's not all about my past.*

*Some of the ways that they've introduced me to I would try if I needed. Breathing, trying to confront the situation when I'm calm instead of living in the moment in my emotions. Trying to keep a lid on my actions and not act off of impulse.*

*A couple weeks ago I got in an argument, but before I took it too far, I thought about the consequences, which helped me out.*

Survey data bolsters this theme (Figures 7 – 10).

**7. WHILE IN [PROGRAM] I USED SOMETHING I LEARNED ABOUT POSITIVE WAYS TO DEAL WITH CHALLENGES IN MY LIFE**

	#	%
Strongly agree	5	71%
Agree	2	29%
Disagree	0	0%
Strongly disagree	0	0%
Skipped	0	0%

**8. NOW, I FEEL BETTER PREPARED TO POSITIVELY DEAL WITH STRESS THAT I MAY FACE IN THE FUTURE.**

	#	%
Strongly agree	5	71%
Agree	2	29%
Disagree	0	0%
Strongly disagree	0	0%
Skipped	0	0%

**9. I WILL REACH OUT TO FRIENDS, FAMILY, OR OTHER SUPPORTS WHEN I NEED IT.**

	#	%
Strongly agree	6	86%
Agree	0	0%
Disagree	1	14%
Strongly disagree	0	0%
Skipped	0	0%



## 10. NOW, I FEEL MORE HOPEFUL ABOUT MY FUTURE

	#	%
Strongly agree	7	100%
Agree	0	0%
Disagree	0	0%
Strongly disagree	0	0%
Skipped	0	0%

Interviewers also asked Ujima participants if they noticed any changes in their children’s ability to process emotions, or in their own ability to help their children cope with difficulty. All Ujima interviewees (N=4) reported improvements in both regards. Interviewees said:

*Ujima has a way of looking at kids that they're not really kids, they're little adults. I grew up in an era where kids are meant to be seen but not heard. I started raising my kids that way. Working with Ujima, me and my son we have more conversations now and I feel like he knows he can come and talk to me.*

*It was nice to see him open up. It was really helpful. We had the feelings worksheet to help him break down the emotions -- I like that worksheet to go back to that.*

*I allow them to be angry. The things we went through -- I let them be angry and I talk to them when I see them calm down. Try to teach them that they're giving their energy away and we talk. I didn't used to do that.*

### Programs earn praise from participants

When asked if there was anything else they wanted people to know about the program, all interviewees responded with positive thoughts about the program. In order from most to least frequent theme, interviewees reported:

- That they found the program helpful
- That they had positive relationships with peers in the program
- That they had positive relationships with program staff

Interviewees said:

*This has been the best thing that has happened to me in my life. The staff are super-cool. They just want to be there to support you and not judge you—so that's the main thing I think people should know. I think it's a good environment to meet other kids in similar situation, and also having that one-on-one, having that someone to talk to when you need them, and they are always available, so I really appreciate that. And they are really patient with us.*

*Some people say that the program won't help you. It will because it gives you time to think and reflect on yourself and your life and there's other teenagers in the program that have been through similar stuff so you can make connections and it tells you that you're not the only one going through tough stuff if you think you may be. You learn off each other and can start to build each other up. It's a good lesson.*

*[Program] is good to meet people, get other's people opinion and way of thinking. You can make friends probably too.*

*I think it's a pretty good program. It helps you make better decisions and makes you realize new things. It's been helpful.*





## Next steps

As in the past, Wilder Research staff will continue data collection efforts in 2022, including interviews and surveys with program participants, and working with Hennepin County and programs to conduct further implementation interviews with program staff, referral sources, and possibly other program stakeholders. We will continue to analyze and report information gathered through these sources, as well as output data collected by the programs.

## Wilder Research®

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