

Youth Service Needs Assessment of Selected Neighbourhoods in East York and Scarborough

August 2025

Disclosure and Citation

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PROJECT TEAM

Project Sponsors: Cliff Ledwos (Acting Executive Director) and Rejwan Karim (Acting Associate Executive Director and Director, Community Programs and Partnerships)

Principle Investigator: Akm Alamgir (Director of Organizational Knowledge and Learning)

Project Lead and Coordinator: Courtney Kupka (Research & Evaluation Coordinator)

Project Implementation: Maiesha Rahman (Peer Researcher)

Executive Summary

Objectives

The objective of this needs assessment of youth services in East York and Scarborough was to establish a comprehensive understanding of the concerns, service requirements, and preferences of youth aged 16-24 years. The findings and implications are designed to guide the improvement and development of programs and services that promote optimal youth health and well-being. The project sought to address the following questions:

- What are the primary concerns and service needs of youth aged 16-24 living or attached to these neighbourhoods?
- Which programs and services are youth aware of and utilize?
- What is the current status (strengths and limitations) of existing programs and services, with a focus on the youth perspectives regarding timing and scheduling?
- How can the gaps between the current and desired states of youth services and programming be effectively addressed?

Methodology

This project employed a mixed-methods community engagement approach. Retrospective quantitative data were collected from reports and registry databases to create a community profile, and prospective qualitative data were collected by in-person and virtual focus group consultations. These group sessions were conducted with youth in the 16-24 age cohort and service providers in the identified neighbourhoods. In-depth ideas were generated by expert consultations. Outreach from community organizations and agencies helped recruit participants by sharing materials, securing venues, and providing experiential insights. A snowball sampling method encouraged youth to refer peers to join the focus groups.

Findings

Demography of Participants

A total of 34 youth participated in focus groups; of them, 60% were female, 34% were male, and 6% did not disclose their gender identity. About 70% of the respondents self-identified as heterosexual. Racially, 43% were South Asian, 12% Black-African, and 9% of mixed heritage. Approximately 70% were born in Canada, while 38% in other countries, and a quarter of them arrived in Canada in 2025. About health issues, 44% reported no illness, 5% reported mental health issues, and 11% did not answer. 82% were comfortable speaking English for services. Regarding family income, 10% reported between \$0-\$14,999, while 66% did not provide any valid answer. Key informant interviews and a virtual focus group were used to engage 16 service providers, encompassing senior leaders, program managers, youth workers, health promoters, and students.

Feedback from Stakeholder Consultations

Priority Concerns and Service Needs

Mental health challenges, difficulty securing employment, inflation and growing financial hardships, a lack of mentorship and career preparedness, substance use, physical and online safety concerns, program reductions, discontinuations, lack of maintenance, insufficient support for newcomer youth, and food insecurity were identified as key issues affecting youth. Other highlighted existing and emerging concerns included challenges in finding a family doctor, a rise in eating disorders and a greater need for sexual health education.

Executive Summary

Current Services & Programs for Youth

Stakeholder consultations demonstrated that youth use diverse services, including health (general, mental, sexual, and addiction support), recreation, employment, education, and settlement supports. Most frequently, they access programs for sports, recreation and tap into social connection and relationship building, often through drop-in centres offering various amenities like food, homework space, and rest areas. Youth benefit from community facilities such as parks, libraries, pools, and shelters. While program eligibility is generally deemed flexible, some services target specific groups or depend on available space. Many youth also seek leadership and volunteer opportunities for school credits, skill-building, and altruistic purposes.

Strengths & Limitations of Youth Programs and Services

A broad spectrum of program and service offerings, geographical and programmatic flexibility, welcoming environments, supportive staff, and the availability of a wide range of incentives and other motivational factors are regarded as key characteristics of successful programs. Conversely, the absence of adequate information promotion regarding programs and services accessible to youth, insufficient sustainable funding, resources and staffing, a potential mismatch between youth needs and preferences and the available offerings, limited hours of operation, long wait times and administrative obstacles, and parental concerns constitute barriers that impact youth participation.

Recommendations for Addressing Gaps:

- Invest in the sector by promoting integrated youth services, ensuring funding, service continuity and staffing that do not concentrate a wide range of responsibilities on youth workers and enhanced coordination and collaboration among youth-serving organizations.
- Address programmatic gaps that create barriers to access through streamlined processes, tailored and efficient referral supports, boosting program promotion, ongoing maintenance of facilities and resources, extending operating hours, and conducting routine evaluation of youth needs and adapting programs accordingly.
- Increase youth engagement in service planning, using evidence-informed engagement practices and ensuring transparency and accountability in relation to how their feedback is used and translated into actionable outcomes.

Introduction

Background and Context

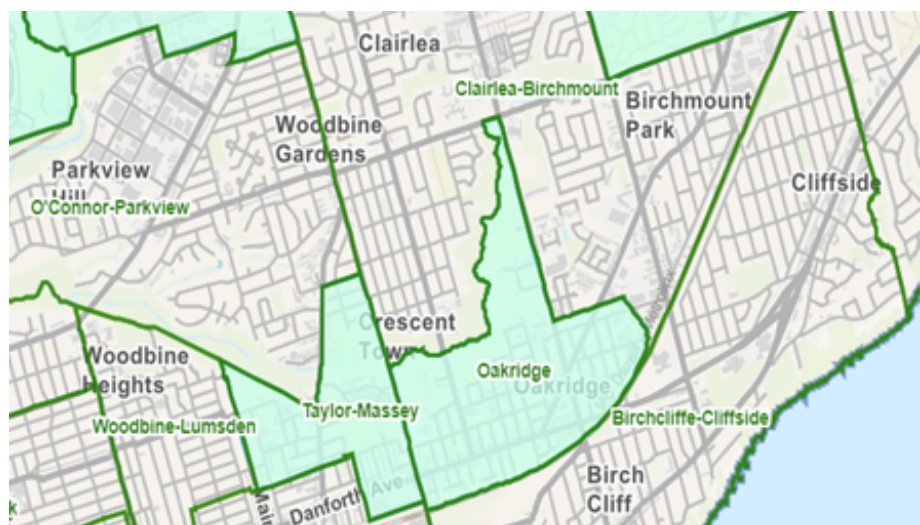
Access Alliance is a nonprofit multiservice community organization that provides health, settlement, community development and other supports to immigrants, newcomers, refugees, and individuals in precarious immigration situations, many of whom are disproportionately impacted by systemic barriers and poverty. Among the populations served by Access Alliance are youth, who face distinct challenges in accessing services and opportunities that impact their health and well-being. AccessPoint on Danforth (APOD), one of Access Alliance’s satellite sites, is situated within the Taylor-Massey Oakridge (TMO), a neighbourhood that is home to a vibrant, culturally diverse community in Toronto’s east end. Despite its rich cultural fabric, the area faces significant social and economic challenges, which have led to its designation as a ‘Neighbourhood Improvement Area’ under the City of Toronto’s Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy. Beyond TMO, APOD serves residents and service-users of O’Connor Parkview, Woodbine Lumsden, East End Danforth, Birchcliffe-Cliffside, and Clairlea-Birchmount neighbourhoods.

There are several notable socio-demographic similarities and key differences across these geographic areas. These areas collectively are located in Toronto’s east end, with total populations rising at a steady rate between 2016 and 2021 [1]. With the exception of Oakridge, all neighbourhoods experienced a decrease in youth populations between 2016 and 2021, albeit a slight variation in range across the two years. Moreover, according to 2021 Statistics Canada Census data, immigrants – particularly those who are first-generation – make up a large proportion of the population in these neighbourhoods [1]. English proficiency is reported to be high among constituents, with limited French-speaking capacities [1].

Table 1. List of Neighbourhoods

Neighbourhood	NIA/No
Taylor-Massey	61, NIA
Oakridge	121, NIA
O’Connor Parkview	54, No
Woodbine Lumsden	60, No
East End Danforth	62, No
Birchcliffe-Cliffside	122, No
Clairlea-Birchmount	120, No

Fig 1. Map of Neighbourhoods



[1] City of Toronto. (n.d.). Find your neighbourhood – Neighbourhood Profiles. Retrieved from <https://www.toronto.ca/city-government/data-research-maps/neighbourhoods-communities/neighbourhood-profiles/find-your-neighbourhood/#location=&lat=&lng=&zoom=>

Introduction

Project Purpose, Objectives, and Outcomes

The Youth Service Needs Assessment is intended to gain an in-depth understanding of priority concerns and service needs of youth aged 16-24 years in the identified neighbourhoods. This is to inform the planning and development of tailored programs and services that support youth in achieving optimal health and wellbeing, as indicated by self-reported assessments and agency and community-wide measures (Figure 2).

The project sought to address the following questions:

- What are the priority concerns and service needs of youth?
- What programs and services are youth aware of and use?
- What are the strengths and limitations of current programs and services? What are youth perspectives on the current timing and scheduling of programs and services?
- How can gaps be addressed between the current and desired state of youth services and programming?

Initiative: Assessing the service priorities and needs of youth aged 16-24 in neighbourhoods of interest and developing insights on existing and emerging issues, trends and challenges that facilitate or undermine the planning, development and implementation of services.

Change Mechanisms

- Improving the stakeholder knowledge and understanding of youth and service providers' perceived needs, strengths, weaknesses of current programming and service provision and implications
- Implementing findings in organizational strategic and operational planning, including defining metrics and measures to support continual quality improvement

Impact

- Improved health and wellbeing of youth in neighbourhoods of interest, as assessed by self-reported measures community/neighbourhood-level indicators
- Greater involvement of youth in planning and implementation of services that impact them

Outcome Actions

- Enhanced availability and access to programs and services that meet the needs and priorities of youth, their families and communities
- Improved collaboration and partnerships among community organizations that serve youth
- Funding, research, evaluation and advocacy

Fig 2. Theory of Change Model

Methodology

The Youth Service Needs Assessment employed a mixed-methods community engagement approach. Retrospective quantitative data were collected from reports and registry databases to create a community profile, and prospective qualitative data were collected by in-person and virtual focus group consultations. A series of focus groups was organized with youth aged 16-24 years who live, attend school, participate in recreational activities, use health and social services, or have other vested interests in the selected neighbourhoods, and service providers involved in youth programming in these areas.

Outreach support was solicited from community organizations and agencies serving youth, including community centres/hubs, health centres, and schools. These partner agencies helped spread the word, shared promotional recruitment materials, and assisted in securing venues. Using a snowball sampling approach, youth focus group participants were encouraged to refer others and spread the word among their peers, friends, and family members who meet the eligibility criteria. Led by two facilitators from Access Alliance's Research and Evaluation Department, all youth consultation sessions were held in-person at various locations in the target neighbourhoods – to meet youth where they are. Service provider focus group and key informant interview sessions were conducted on Zoom to accommodate varying work schedules and job responsibilities. In addition to attending the focus groups, youth participants were asked to complete an informed consent form and demographic questionnaire. Youth received a gift card honorarium, Presto tickets, and food refreshments for their time and contributions. The collected data were analyzed using an abductive reflexive approach, whereby major thematic categories were discerned and all transcripts were coded to capture nuances and context.

The needs assessment was underpinned by the Asset-Based Community Development (“ABCD”), a framework focused on identifying and mobilizing existing strengths, skills, and resources within a community [2]. Its main goal is to “enhance collective citizen visioning and production through a process that combines four essential elements: resources, methods, functions, and evaluation [2].” By applying this framework, community assets, jointly with needs and concerns, were examined to create recommendations for addressing gaps in youth programming and services. The goal was to empower the neighborhoods of interest, particularly youth-serving organizations and service providers, to gain evidence-informed insights to address their needs and concerns.

[2] McKnight, J. L., & Russell, C. (2018, January 9). The four essential elements of an asset-based community development process: What is distinctive about an asset-based community development process. Asset-Based Community Development Institute at DePaul University.

Methodology

Limitations in Recruitment

Key barriers to youth recruitment included limited availability (e.g., data collection timeline overlapping with summer vacation; job, school, familial and other commitments) and potentially low interest among eligible youth, lack of information about the focus groups cascaded to youth and youth signing up but not showing up for their respective sessions. Several mitigation strategies were used to improve participant turnout: support from partners in connecting with youth client and service users, peer-to-peer recruitment, sending out confirmation emails once youth signed up for a focus group and offering alternative times for those with scheduling conflicts.

Project Governance and Oversight

The project team consisted of six Access Alliance staff, namely two Project Sponsors (Acting Executive Director; Associate Executive Director, AccessPoint on Danforth), a Project Owner (Director, Organizational Knowledge and Learning), a Project Lead (Research and Evaluation Coordinator), a Project Support (Research Assistant), and a Peer Researcher (independent contractor). A volunteer assisted with transcribing audio recordings from the focus group sessions. Representatives from community organizations and agencies were invited to join the advisory committee. 11 members were recruited for the committee, and a Terms of Reference was developed to guide expectations about the roles of all parties involved.

Stakeholder Profile

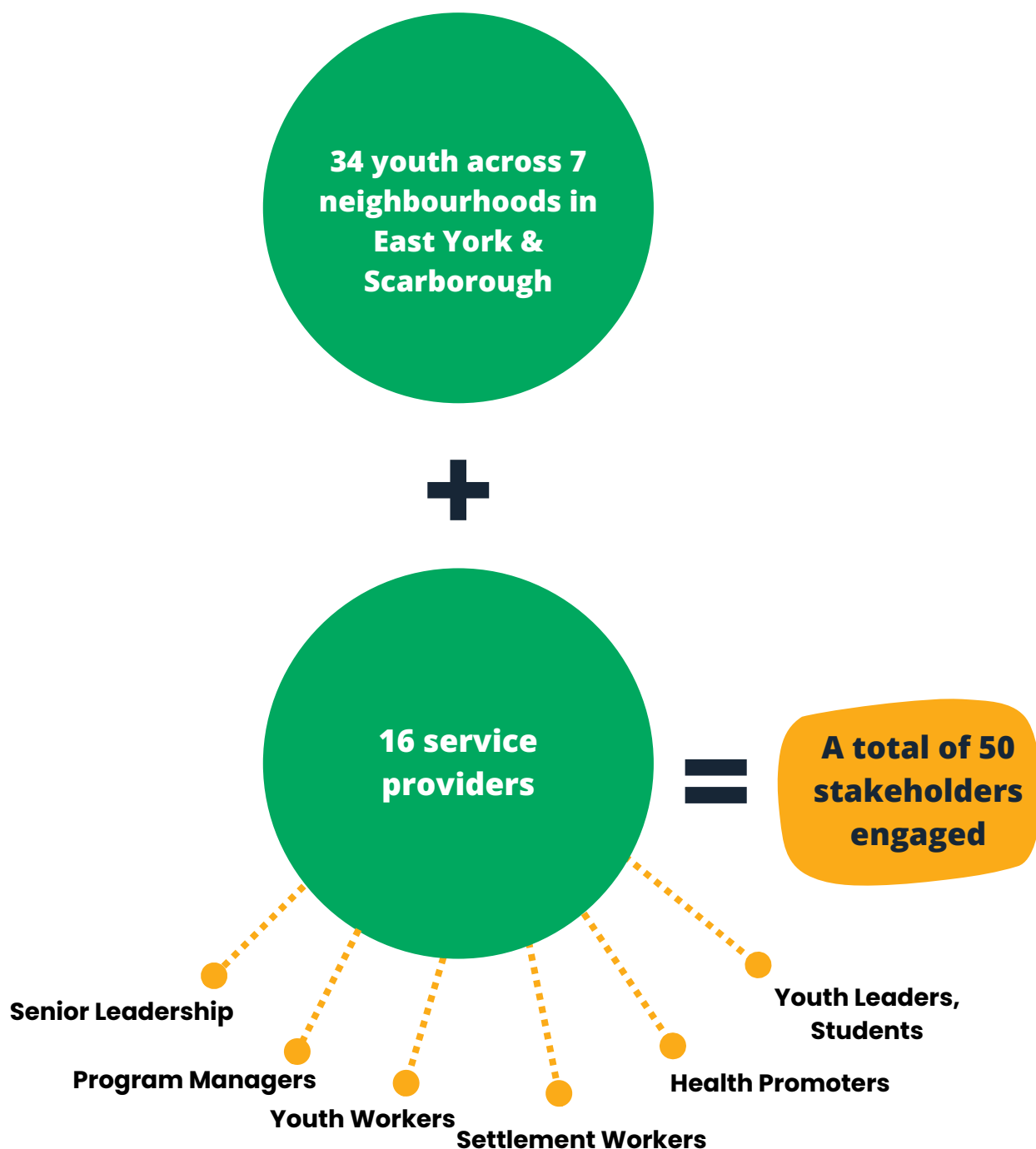
Youth

A total of 34 youth participated in traditional in-person focus groups. Females comprised 60% of youth participants, while 34% identified as male and 6% preferred not to share their sex/gender. Close to 70% identified as heterosexual, 43% described their racial or ethnic group as South Asian, followed by 12% who are Black-African and 9% indicated being of mixed heritage. About 70% of participants were born in Canada, and 38% in other countries; a quarter of foreign-born youth arrived in 2025. About 44% noted having no illness, and 11% preferred not to share about their health status – potentially reflecting the sensitive and often stigmatized nature of self-reporting disease, disability, or disorder. Interestingly, only 5% of respondents reported having mental health challenges. Over 80% of respondents indicated feeling most comfortable speaking in English when accessing services. When asked about total family income before taxes in the previous year, a vast 41% of youth revealed that they did not know, and a quarter preferred not to respond to the question; 10% disclosed a family income ranging between \$0 and \$14,999.

Methodology

Service Providers

16 service providers, holding various roles (e.g., senior leadership, settlement program managers, settlement workers, youth workers, health promoters, and summer students), joined a virtual focus group and several key informant interviews. Both advisory committee members and non-advisory youth service providers were engaged. Service providers offered expert feedback on youth needs and concerns, in addition to engagement best practices during the planning and implementation phases of the Needs Assessment. Demographic information of service providers was not collected.

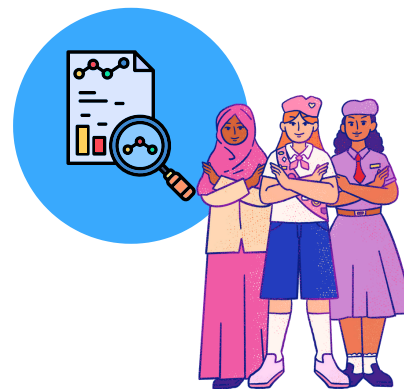


Youth Health & Wellness in Selected Neighbourhoods

In recent years, there have been growing concerns about the mental health of youth in Toronto's east end. For instance, risk-related situations in 2020 comprised only 18% of the total mental health risk-related situations at FOCUS Toronto; this number increased to 34% in 2023 [4]. This rise in mental health incidence is most significant for 12-17 and 18-24 age groups, with a marked increase of 313% and 148% of total situations, respectively. Results from the 2023-2024 Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) of Taylor-Massey and Oakridge also indicate a need for increasing the availability, accessibility, and quality of healthcare services for neighbourhood residents, with mental health services a particular concern for youth [3].

Various factors can influence mental health, including a sense of belonging and participation in community, social, and leisure activities [3]. Furthermore, findings from the CHNA showcase trends in reported feelings and severity of depression [3]. Females, for example, were found to report more symptoms of depression as well as higher severity of these symptoms, which is consistent with findings from the 2023 Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth [6]. While the CHNA was conducted in TMO, results provide insights that may be applicable to other selected neighbourhoods for the current Needs Assessment.

Ontario Health Profiles reports on youth-specific indicators distributed by neighbourhood, namely prevalence of asthma, average annual rate of Emergency Department (ED) visits that are Mental Health and Addiction-related, and average annual rate (/100) of injuries [5]. Data from the last reporting period show that there were higher rates of emergency room visits for injuries, mental health, and addiction-related issues across the sexes in Taylor-Massey as compared to its neighbourhood counterparts [5]. Challenges reported for youth in the realms of mental health are consistent with findings from the recent 2023-2024 TMO Community Health Needs Assessment, potentially suggesting that youth mental health supports are lacking and needs have not been adequately addressed over the past decade [5]. However, as the available data is not recent, any conclusions about current trends should be approached with caution.



[3] Access Alliance. (2024). Community Health Needs Assessment: Taylor Massey Neighbourhood [Internal Report no. Eval2024-1]. Toronto (ON).

[4] Medow Consulting Inc. (2024). FINAL FOCUS Toronto – Rapid evaluation report.

[5] Ontario Community Health Profiles Partnership. (n.d.). Data tables – Ontario [Web page]. Retrieved September 17, 2025, from <https://www.ontariohealthprofiles.ca/dataTablesON.php?varTab=HPDtbl&select1=7>

[6] Statistics Canada. (n.d.). Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth (CHSCY) [Survey description]. Retrieved September 17, 2025, from <https://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p2SV.pl?Function=getSurvey&SDDS=5233>



Priority Concerns of Youth in the Selected Neighbourhoods

Feedback from Focus Group Consultations

Mental Health Challenges

Mental health was identified as a persistent concern for youth. It was described as or in relation to stress, anxiety, depression, eating disorders, substance abuse, self-harm, and identity crisis, whether in the presence or absence of a formal diagnosis.

Participants indicated a range of stressors that affect youth mental health, including academic pressures, interpersonal problems, increased social media usage, and pandemic and non-pandemic-related social isolation. Youth discussed being subject to the effects of intergenerational trauma and, relatedly, ineffective parenting, familial conflict, and other repercussions on mental health.

Experiences of shame and fear of stigma are common and youth are often uncertain about how to navigate the emotional, mental, and relationship complexities. Providers of youth services report witnessing self-harm among their program participants, with scratching a common coping mechanism for anxiety and stress.

Identity-related conflict and crisis are common, namely among youth from immigrant and refugee backgrounds. Being Canadian while belonging to another cultural or demographic group can bring forth enriching experiences, but also create uncertainty about belonging and lead to feelings of not fully fitting into either group. Frequently, this stems from a lack of shared understanding with family members and peers around norms and expectations about one's perceptions, behaviours, and life choices, and may be associated with interpersonal conflicts, which in their most severe forms can show up as bullying, discrimination, violence, and mental health repercussions for youth. Managing multiple responsibilities, especially when shaped by cultural expectations, can lead to mental fatigue, confusion, and burnout. Service providers observed that parents often express frustration due to a lack of awareness about their child's experiences, whereabouts, and challenges, which can sometimes be compounded by the pressures of managing unfamiliar levels of autonomy granted to youth within the Canadian context. Possible contributing factors are a disconnect between parents and youth, resulting in youth withholding information from their parents, and/or insufficient involvement of youth community programs in engaging parents.

Feedback from youth:

"I think mental health is a huge issue, especially with like exam seasons, or just like personal life things you're going through yourself. I think it's a huge thing. It's not talked about enough."

"...[mental health services] it's become more accessible. But, it's such a like shameful topic for a lot of people to just reach out and be like, hey, I'm struggling."

"...Yeah, you could turn to your parents, but not everyone could do that and stuff like that. Counsellors, for me, are a no-go situation or area, just stuff like that."

"I feel like with like parental expectations. I feel like, not all parents would listen, but like just in general. But, I feel like it would be better, because like, you want someone to like, listen to you so that, like, you know exactly what you wanna do, even if it's still like too early, just like, have a rough idea. Because, yeah, sometimes like expectations from parents and family get a lot so kind of like they tell you to do one thing you don't really want to like go into that yet."

"Mental health, which we all know is a continuous issue and low barrier access to services..."
-Service Provider

Findings

The present mental health crisis is considered to be further exacerbated by barriers to supports – a lack of awareness of accessible and trustworthy informal and formal supports, high cost of services, and administrative and navigation hurdles like time-consuming forms, cumbersome appointment booking systems, long wait times, and, if applicable, complicated insurance claims processes. Further, confidentiality, privacy, and protection of anonymity represent significant priorities for youth and can impact their decision to access to mental health supports. For example, youth often worry that what they discuss with school counsellors and settlement workers may be disclosed to their parents or guardians and therefore choose not to seek support through these avenues.

Barriers to Accessing Primary Healthcare

Several youth revealed that they and their peers are not attached to a physician or another primary healthcare provider. The absence of health coverage through the Ontario Health Insurance Plan or alternative options remains a significant concern, namely for those with precarious status. Long wait times to find or see a doctor are a significant barrier to healthcare access.

Substance Use

Youth reported that substance use, pertaining to a range of legal and illicit substances, is an all-too-common phenomenon impacting themselves and their peers. The use of vapes and cigarettes/e-cigarettes is popular, widely assumed to be safer alternatives to more potent products. Youth shared that more strictly regulated or even illegal substances, such as alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, and fentanyl, are on the rise. Top motivators for substance use cited were ease of access, easy in-school resale, addictive nature of substances, peer influence, and maladaptive coping strategies. The profitability of selling drugs is appealing since the average youth does not generate as much income through other sources, like part-time jobs, combined with limited job prospects, broadly.

Difficulty Finding Employment

Youth reported experiencing difficulty in securing employment, specifically part-time positions. Several youth attributed it to a growing number of people who recently moved to the Taylor-Massey Oakridge and nearby regions – many of whom are older and more experienced – and are also seeking a limited number of entry-level jobs that have minimal qualifications. A shortage of employment opportunities was additionally associated with the increasing use of artificial intelligence in resume screening and the displacement of jobs or job redundancies.

Feedback from youth:

“Dealing, it is a viable way to live...because there's good money to be made from there. I'm not promoting it right, but a couple of my, well, I used to be friends with them, but they within what couple weeks to make like 5, \$10,000...when you see people making that type of money, especially for people who haven't had money in a while or hasn't had money like that.”

“A part-time job, it's not the most important thing in the world, but, I feel like getting a job as a youth in Toronto right now, is actually so freaking hard. Because, I literally apply and I apply, apply, apply everywhere, and, maybe my resume is terrible, but, I don't even get a rejection. I just get ghosted. It's not easy to find a part-time job. And, it can be really important in the future because I need to break into the workforce and stuff like that, so you need experience. How do you expect me to work a corporate job and get hired if I have no part-time experience?”

Findings

Even youth participants who graduated from postsecondary or are currently in or have completed a training program – those who are willing and ready to work – have expressed frustration in finding employment that matches their interests, skills, and experience. With rising financial hardship in the city, youth often have to take on employment to support themselves and their families, and additional responsibilities like filing taxes on behalf of their parents/family. Though educational pursuits are considered important for personal and career development, many youth who are in families struggling to make ends meet are prioritizing employment at the expense of their education.



“I think a lot more could be done, even though there is a lot as well done for career readiness. We still need more programs that sort of have the integration and opportunity to have more hands-on experience. more of that, like hands-on experience would be really great for these youth.”
-Service Provider

Inflation and Rising Unaffordability

The costs of both essential and non-essential commodities are becoming increasingly unaffordable. An example illustrating this issue is the high cost of women's menstrual and hygiene products, such as pads and tampons. Although some of these products may be available in schools, youth participants expressed that the supply does not adequately meet the full extent of students' needs. Educational enrolment may also become a distant possibility for some due to high tuition fees. Youth participants, moreover, emphasized the importance of financial literacy for both managing personal finances during university and as a vital life skill.

Lack of Support with Career Planning

Most youth participants felt well-informed about post-secondary programs and mainstream career options; however, they reported a lack of access to and availability of supports for exploring non-traditional educational or career pathways, such as apprenticeships, vocational training programs, starting a business, and entering the job market. Limited mentorship, job shadowing, and placement opportunities were considered to contribute to this issue.

Findings

According to youth, both school-based staff, such as counsellors and teachers, and community organizations provide insufficient support for effective career planning. This is often perceived as a capacity issue, with there being limited support personnel and resources. Assistance with exploring different career options, establishing a roadmap for achieving desired outcomes, and applying for postsecondary education, training, and jobs are identified as the highest priority needs. Youth underscored the need for additional supports during critical transition periods (e.g., end of middle school/start of high school; end of high school; beginning post-secondary). Greater advocacy from education institutional staff for students partaking in placement and practicum programs stood as a concern.

Safety in Physical and Digital Environments

Youth reported concerns about the general safety of public transit and recounted personal experiences of being victims of incidents such as stalking. Youth expressed that parents at times worry about the safety of youth programming locations and times (i.e., distant venues, late hours). Service providers underscored that youth experience different forms of violence, including bullying, discrimination, gang activity, and domestic violence, and are prone to being groomed towards violence (e.g., trafficking, auto-theft, e-bike theft). Both youth and service providers pointed to the widespread use of digital media and a variety of platforms and their role in growing vulnerability to cyberbullying, grooming, and the distribution of sensitive information – hence, there is an inevitable need for more extensive safeguards for navigating the online world. Service providers stressed that legal services for justice system-involved youth and families are lacking in community-based settings.

Feedback from youth:

“Like any student who is just going to graduate. And she was like in like kind of tense about where should I go like college or university? Maybe college would be a bit easier, or university would be a little bit hard, but like which one should I choose? Or if I go to college, which courses should I take”

“I feel like outside of university programs, there’s not much like guidance. I know you have guidance counsellors, that’s cool and stuff. A lot of it is just general advice and not like specific. So, I think that’d be nice, like having specific advice depending on the field you’re trying to go into.”



Findings



Feedback from Service Providers:

“We're seeing more young people getting engaged and having those conversations with some of the older heads that are in community and are trying to groom them into car theft, robbery, e-bike stealing... it is very large in this area. If you follow the Toronto police TPS, it happens very often. Mental health, which we all know is a continuous issue and low barrier access to services. Violence continues to happen in our community, you know, whether it's reported or not, and that can be small, petty theft.”

“You know, they have the internet at their fingertips. Not everything on the internet is true. Learning about that aspect is also very important for young people online, not even just safety, but navigating the online world for young people is really, really important right now.”

Feedback from youth:

“...You're at home, you're just like on the laptop, you're talking to your friends, but then once that cyber bullying comes in, you don't really know what to do because it's online. You like, how are you going to reach out for help? I feel like just the growing and the evolving of social media and for little kids especially, or just youth as well cyberbullying is a huge like factor that affects your mental health as well.”

“Some things that I think could be better, it's mostly just for the TTC, because everything's like really late and really delayed sometimes, and a lot of the news that we hear isn't from the TTC, it's from the people that encountered events, like about a person who died at the tracks. That was only known because of people that recorded it and spread it on social media.”



Findings

Program Cuts, Discontinuation & Lack of Maintenance

Youth expressed being aware of program cuts and discontinuations and reflected on their resulting disappointment. The lack of upkeep of community gyms, sports fields, and parks, and equipment undermines youths' ability to engage in recreational and leisure activities. Alternatives like fee-associated spaces may be out of reach for youth who already experience various socioeconomic challenges. Another related concern is the limited service hours and staffing, which often fail to adequately address the needs of current and prospective program participants.

"The gym, the equipment is either always broken or it's packed, and of course, it's a free gym and there's always going to be a lot of people. Sometimes it takes months to get the stuff fixed. And, at parks, basketball hoops are either damaged or they don't have nets and stuff like that. Soccer fields are not maintained, there's holes in the ground."

-Youth

"...It's the funding piece for children and youth programs which is really challenging, you know, having something that continues to—that is sustainable that helps us provide like, you know, a place of support and longevity for our services to support youth long-term, not just project, not just specific on leadership, but something that is well rounded..."

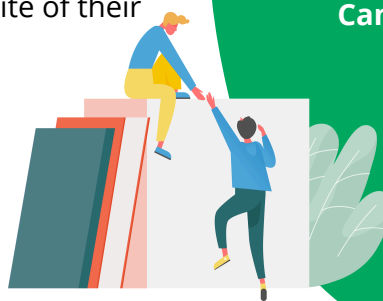
-Service Provider

Lack of Supports for Newcomer Youth

As reported by both youth and service providers, newcomers face the compounded effects of culture shock, language barriers, pressures to integrate and assimilate, financial hardship, and relational problems. Youth noted that several of their peers and friends who are refugee claimants and those with precarious status are unable to enroll in a post-secondary program and are ineligible to receive financial assistance, like the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP), in spite of their academic merits and aspirations.

"A lot of my friends, they're still waiting for like their PR. Even though they've come as a refugee, they're still not getting the protected persons of like their identification as like a protected person to the Government of Canada, so they can't even apply to OSAP, they can't apply to scholarships."

-Youth



Findings

Food Insecurity & Nutritional Deficiency

As observed by service providers, nutritional deficiencies are often linked to intergenerational differences in food preferences within families and, consequently, the food that is prepared and served at home, together with limited opportunities to compensate for these nutritional gaps. Youth also expressed that they or their peers use food programs and benefit from food items/meals provided through youth programming.

Limited Sexual Health Education

Service providers discussed a greater need for sexual health education to be embedded in youth programming, such as engaging youth in workshops and informal discussions on safer sexual practices and sexually transmitted infections. Safe and open spaces for youth to ask uncomfortable questions, beyond school and home, can facilitate enhanced education on these topics.



Perceived Surge in Eating Disorders

Service provider participants noted an uptick in eating disorders. Although body positivity messaging is becoming more prominent on social media, pressures surrounding the achievement and maintenance of an ideal body image are also perpetuated by social media.

Limited Supports for Youth with Learning Disabilities

A youth with a learning disability disclosed being marginalized in the classroom due to it and experiencing a dearth of adequate in-school supports for learning course content, taking exams, and navigating difficult relationships with teachers.

Rise in Homelessness

Youth are aware of the rise in homelessness in the city in recent years and are concerned about ways to address it as a civic responsibility – mirroring the broader concerns of many Torontonians. Youth reported being privy to the situation of friends and peers who are unhoused and require homeless services. They also recounted poignant experiences of encountering people staying outdoors, in encampments, and on public transit.

“So, even their food culture is also different, like depending on the Canada and like home culture... I even heard some families saying they have to ...cook different kinds of food at home, because their members’ preference is different.”

-Youth

“Little bit more around sexual health and just sort of the overall education outside of the classroom. Because, as you know, it tends to be sort of like a big joke between them until it sort of happens, and you know, helping them sort of manage and protection and STIs and stuff like that, and just the places where to go...”

-Youth



Summary of Youth Concerns & Service Needs

ISSUE	SERVICE NEEDS
<p>Health: Mental health challenges, difficulty finding physician, no health card, substance use, need for enhanced sexual health education, food insecurity and nutritional/dietary deficiency</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessible mental health services and supports: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Free and low-cost services ◦ Different formats of care ◦ Increased awareness of confidentiality policies ◦ Culturally-safe practices ◦ Promote preventative and interventive initiatives ◦ Apply life course model and social determinants of health framework when developing and implementing programs and services ◦ Increased collaboration between youth serving agencies, including youth to enhance information sharing • Support attaching to a primary healthcare provider, accessing health coverage • Identifying confirmed or potential instances of self-harm and directing youth to appropriate supports • Harm reduction, addiction, and recovery supports • Increasing education on safe sex, including information about preventing STIs, offering safe and open spaces for youth to ask questions • Information about and access to free and low-cost local food programs • Nutrition education, including cultural/local alternatives
<p>Unemployment, inflation and rising unaffordability, and increase in homelessness</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Career readiness services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Guidance on traditional and non-traditional career paths ◦ Support with university/college applications • Life skills training • Financial literacy training • Referral to social service programs and resources
<p>Lack of safety in digital and physical spaces</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education on safety protocols • Counselling for affected youth, peers, and their families • Legal supports for affected youth and their families
<p>Limited supports for newcomers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community-based legal supports for youth and their families • School-based supports • Tailored community supports – e.g., translation/interpretation
<p>Program cuts and discontinuation, lack of maintenance of shared resources and facilities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainable funding and consistent staffing • Supports during transition phases (e.g., facilitating connections to alternative services and spaces) • Ongoing and up-to-date maintenance of facilities to ensure safety, accessibility, and functionality of resources

Community Assets for Youth

Community assets and resources are key determinants of youth health and well-being and important to consider when addressing both current and emerging needs. Various programs, services, and supports are provided to youth in the target neighbourhoods by community organizations. These offerings span health care, social services, education, community development, employment and training, as well as recreational and leisure activities. Several cultural community-based organizations and agencies operate in these neighbourhoods, providing tailored services to clients and community members who share similar backgrounds and identities.

The 2023-2024 Community Needs Assessment of Taylor-Massey Oakridge identified key community strengths and assets of residents and service users. Participants highlighted assets as strong sense of belonging, convenient access to amenities such as retail stores and banks, the presence of parks and green spaces, multiculturalism, the availability of community programs, a safe and clean environment, and proximity to public transportation and schools [3].

Feedback from Youth and Service Providers

Stakeholder consultations demonstrated that youth utilize a wide range of health services (general, mental health, vaccination clinics, sexual health, and support for substance use and addiction), recreational services, employment, education, and training services, and settlement supports. The most commonly used services focus on sports, recreation, social connection, and relationship building. Youth access drop-in programs that offer space for sports, recreational activities, homework, rest, food, and socialization. Youth have access to amenities like community centres, parks, sports fields, pools, libraries, transit, food establishments, educational institutions, places of worship, local food programs, and homeless shelters. Community spaces within selected neighbourhoods often serve as third spaces- places where youth commonly find opportunities to rest and recover from the stresses of home and school, promoting youth development and supporting overall well-being. Eligibility to participate in youth programs is generally flexible; however, some programs and services may be sub-demographic-specific (e.g., high school students only; cultural or racial identity), and eligibility may be contingent on space availability. Moreover, youth are frequently interested in accessing leadership and volunteer opportunities for not only school requirements and skills development purposes, but also for altruistic reasons (e.g., chance to deliver food to unsheltered people).

Findings

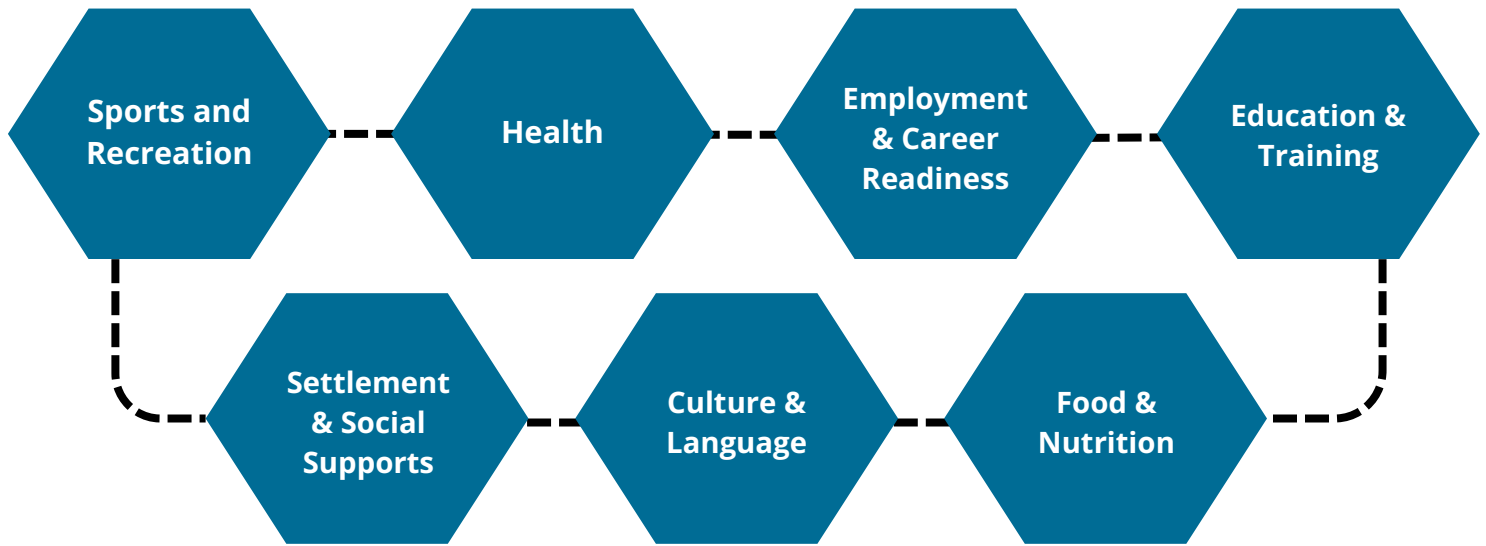


Fig 3: Examples of program and service type accessed by youth based on feedback

Learning & Educational Opportunities

Public schools are critical community assets, offering universal access to educational opportunities and improving equitable outcomes for students. The Learning Opportunities Index (LOI), established by the Toronto District School Board, assesses educational disparities in educational opportunities by ranking schools through assigned scores based on external challenges that can affect student success [7]. Variables that determine the LOI include median family income, percentage of families whose income is below the low-income measure (before tax), percentage of families receiving social assistance, adults with low education and adults with university degrees and non-two-parent families [7]. The majority of the schools in the target neighbourhoods demonstrate a high to moderate need for support, implying a greater or mixed socioeconomic level of barriers. Youth residing in selected neighbourhoods have convenient access to a range of educational institutions via public transportation or personal vehicles. These include several universities, colleges, and specialized training institutions. Local trade and pre-apprenticeship programs are also available to support career development. Youth, furthermore, reported the importance of first Aid/CPR training, tax clinics, free printing services, and driving instruction to support their learning and development.

[7] Toronto District School Board. (2023). The 2023 Learning Opportunities Index: Questions and Answers. <https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/research/docs/reports/LOI2023.pdf>

Findings

Strengths of Current Programs and Services

Stakeholders noted several strengths within existing programs and services, describing them as valuable community assets that contribute to enhanced outcomes for youth.

Broad Spectrum of Service Offerings

Youth are aware of a diversity of programs and services within the target neighbourhoods and engage with and utilize many of them to meet their needs – whether they are in the realms of health, social services, education, employment, recreation and leisure, cultural or religious identity, or family supports. Available services and programs respond to the various needs and interests of youth, facilitating participant recruitment and sustained engagement. Focus group participants expressed the benefit of adapting programs to different youth sub-populations, given that youth are not a uniform group and have varying needs and priorities. Despite programs being different in their structure and scheduling (e.g., eligibility criteria, offered on an ongoing or ad hoc basis), they all share a common goal: to support young people by improving access to resources and enhancing their overall well-being.

Accessibility

Programs and services within target neighbourhoods are often situated within or in proximity to places regularly frequented by youth, can be accessed by public transportation, and are available free of charge or at a nominal fee (e.g., provision of public amenities allows free access). Information about programs disseminated through social media, schools, and community organizations enhances awareness and access to these programs. Youth participants indicated that a majority of the programs in which they are involved offer accessible registration processes and are flexible regarding attendance. Community organizations typically maintain service offerings throughout the year – for instance, sports and recreational programs and activities available in public community gyms address the need for space year-round, especially in the winter.

“... we’re very active with community centers. For example, like Secord, like Access Alliance and stuff. Of course, some of our friends they work there. But...you can play basketball there, you can play different sports, you can take part in different activities...we used to volunteer at Access Alliance together at the afterschool tutoring program... people go there to print stuff. Use the computers there...it [neighbourhood] basically has almost everything that you need.”

-Youth

“We’re happy to say that we have a good gym...we hold a lot of drop-in programs, which is basketball, volleyball, soccer, for most ages to from grade 5 all the way up to even 25...We’ve seen that there aren’t that many spaces, especially in the winter, where youth can just be and play sports...We also have one particular program that isn’t sport-related because not everyone plays sports. We call it “Youth Hangout”. How it came about was... we noticed that when our evening programs ran from 6 to 8, we noticed that there was a big group that would stay and that we didn’t really have anything for them at the time. And, so, Youth Hangout came about as to provide a space where they can just be. And, so, we provide food. We provide activities. We do gift card raffles sometimes, too.”

-Service Provider


Findings

Welcoming Environments & Supportive Staff

Beyond accessibility, youth deem successful programs and services as those that foster an inclusive and welcoming environment. Youth shared they value programs that promote diversity, cultural safety, and religious tolerance, and respect participants regardless of age. Trust and rapport with staff, reinforcing a general perception that staff are genuinely invested in youth wellbeing, is a marker of programs with high retention. Welcoming environments are also conducive to establishing social connections and combating the widespread experiences of social isolation among youth. Youth recognize the importance of staff who are knowledgeable and are aware of youth concerns and needs. Youth indicated they appreciate when staff reflect a similar age or cultural demographic group as program participants. By contrast, the presence of police and other authority figures can act as a deterrent to program participation.

Incentives and Motivational Factors

Incentives like TTC tokens/Presto tickets, food, and monetary or in-kind incentives (e.g., gift cards, acknowledgement of one's participation/contribution) play a role in encouraging youth participation. Other motivational factors include an established/positive organizational reputation, volunteer opportunities that appeal to youths' altruistic motivations, leadership-building opportunities, letters of reference, and a record of volunteer service hours. Feedback from participants also highlighted the importance of having caring adults, mentors, and peers present at programs as an incentive for participation.



"I think it's really about the young people we work with having a sense of belonging, whatever space that is. You know, whether it's leadership, whether it's a drop-in program, it's feeling safe and welcoming in that environment and then building a space that meets the needs of the young people that come to it, you know, and being able to pivot services to support the young people that come through the doors."

-Service Provider

"...If there's 2 programs, one just providing the fun, and one providing fun and volunteer hours, a reference letter or an honorarium, I think a lot of people will be attracted to the one that's more, because within that short amount of time you're getting a lot more."

-Youth

"I think a lot of the programs we have here is thoughtful and inclusive, like there's no, I haven't seen any discrimination. Anyone's open to joining."

-Youth

Planning Implications: Recommendations for Addressing Gaps

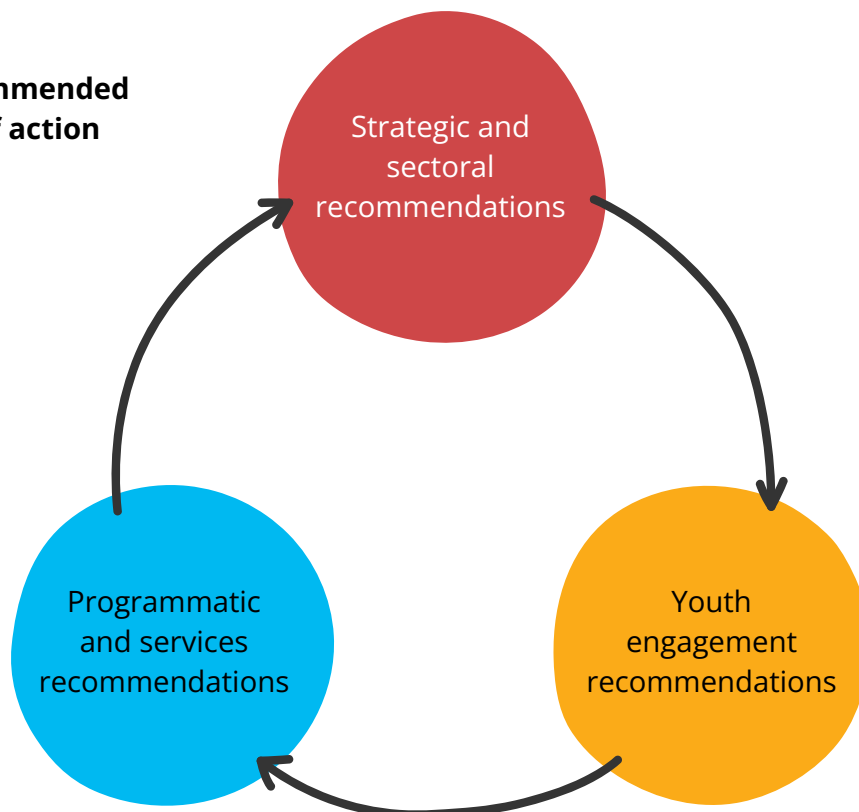
Existing Gaps

Looking ahead, it is important to recognize and address existing gaps in the planning and execution of services and programs:

- Insufficient sustainable funding and resources are available to support youth initiatives.
- Inconsistent staffing levels and low remuneration for youth workers and related positions challenge service delivery.
- Limited opportunities for collaboration hinder effective implementation of the Integrated Youth Services framework, impeding process optimization and resource gap mitigation.
- There is an identified need for more targeted attention to broad social determinants affecting youth health and wellbeing, including poverty, homelessness, access to nutritious food, and financial supports for educational attainment.
- A notable risk exists regarding disparities between youth needs and preferences and the current suite of services provided.
- Information campaigns concerning accessible programs and services for youth remain inadequate.
- Extended wait times and administrative barriers complicate the process of accessing essential services.
- Current service delivery hours are not accessible to all youth, particularly those who are older and possess various educational, job, and personal commitments.

Stakeholder feedback and insights warrant focus on three areas of new and ongoing actions:

Fig. Recommended areas of action



Findings

Strategic and Sector Recommendations

Commitment and Collaboration to Applying Integrated Youth Services

The Integrated Youth Services (IYS) model centralizes and combines services like mental health, substance use, primary care, education, employment, and housing into a single youth-centered system. Youth service providers collaborate to facilitate access, prioritizing equity, inclusion, cultural responsiveness, trauma-informed care, and anti-oppressive practices. IYS models prioritize active youth engagement and address the diverse needs, particularly those of equity-deserving communities. Agencies and organizations serving youth in the selected neighbourhoods should reinforce their commitment to more efficient collaborative models to mobilize strategic priorities, tackle service gaps, and enhance outcomes for their youth participants and service users.

Address Funding and Resources Constraints on Program & Service Continuity

The ability to secure funding and maintain organizational capacity ensures the continuity of successful programming and readiness to pivot activities in response to changing needs. Short-term funding, understaffing, limited space capacity, and a lack of coordination intra-organizationally and between youth-serving organizations undermine program success and the ability to sustain positive outcomes achieved. Collective advocacy by youth sector leaders targeting funders, donors, and government entities is especially vital. Additionally, strengthening relationships and collaborations among organizations is crucial, as is introducing policies that promote fair and equitable working conditions and compensation for youth workers. Effective funding and resource distribution will not only ensure service continuity but also facilitate the expansion of programs and introduction of new ones to respond to the multifaceted needs of youth (e.g., City or community organization-funded job training programs).

Better Implementation and Uptake of Best Practices

Youth-serving organizations are recommended to utilize best practices from successful programs to inform improvements and enhancements. Sectoral best practices should be identified and leveraged to tackle cross-organizational issues. This can encompass the use of incentives, fostering an inclusive and welcoming environment that upholds cultural safety and tolerance, protocols ensuring physical accessibility and safety, and organizational commitment to including youth in program planning and implementation.

“Maybe we could serve better to the youth because we are serving overlapping services to the same youth, or maybe like different youth. But, we don't have the resources. We know they have the nutrition issues, but we cannot serve them the nutrition. We know they have the identity crisis, or maybe cultural shock issues, but we cannot give them the mental health services and whatever we give them is not enough, so, but, we are offering from different organizations the same things, almost the same services, even somewhere some organizations maybe don't find enough participants.”

- Service Provider



Programmatic & Service Recommendations

Boost Program Promotion

Low participation can result from youth simply having limited knowledge of what is available to them and how these programs and services can be accessed – not necessarily a reflection of program success. There is a determined need for enhanced program promotion through channels accessible to youth (e.g., TikTok/Instagram, organizational website, school, community organization) and the dissemination of up-to-date information and materials. Website links and program contact information should be routinely updated. Social media was consistently the most preferred method of receiving information, with youth sharing content with peers in real-time being a primary advantage. A centralized, well-known location for youth program information and updates (e.g., City website) can prove to be effective, as well as a more coordinated referral system among organizations serving the same clients. Youth service providers are recommended to share easy-to-understand information about confidentiality and privacy policies at the time of admission/program joining and throughout youth participation in the program and services (e.g., in response to inquiries).

Address Long Wait Times & Administrative Hurdles

Streamlined processes, simplifying appointment booking and reducing administrative barriers (e.g., long, complex forms), are essential for improving timely access to services. Resources, including Wi-Fi and printers, are crucial for youth when completing administrative tasks in a timely and efficient manner. As emphasized by staff, if youth are unable to receive support at critical times of need, it becomes much more difficult for organizations to engage or re-engage them later, and at worst, risk losing them altogether.

Increase Range of Program & Service Options

The uptake of youth services can be improved by offering both virtual and in-person options (e.g., appointment booking) and conducting routine evaluations of youth needs to adapt programs accordingly (e.g., providing youth-tailored harm reduction services in response to growing substance use issues). As has been undertaken and proven effective by some youth-serving organizations, more programs are recommended to introduce supports for both youth and their families in intergenerational contexts.

Enhance Tailored and Referral Supports

Recognizing that youth do not make up a homogenous group, differing in types and need levels, tailored supports are required – for example, translation and interpretation of program materials and one-on-one assistance with OSAP and scholarship applications. Mentors and peer navigators can offer individualized support, whether informal or formal, and foster trust and understanding in comparison to more bureaucratic structures. For health services, person-centred care necessitates the offering of various service formats, such as individual and group sessions, including family counselling. Moreover, when services are terminated or scaled back, youth are often left stranded to find alternatives. Connecting youth clients with other appropriate services through formal referrals or information sharing can facilitate continuity of access.

Findings

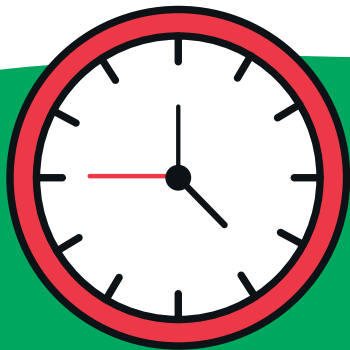
Ongoing Maintenance of Facilities & Resources

As noted by youth service users, recreational programs are in high demand among the demographic, despite the frequent subpar or inadequate maintenance of shared facilities. Improper maintenance can pose safety hazards and result in the temporary or prolonged closure of facilities. Organizations should address such issues on an ongoing basis and instate accessible feedback and complaints procedures whereby program participants can submit reports on maintenance and other related needs.

Expand Timing of Services

Focus group participants were asked to provide feedback on the suitability of the current program timings. There was consensus among participants that scheduled program timings are convenient for youth, namely high school students, as they typically occur after school. However, extending operating hours to the evening and weekends, for instance, can promote greater participation among youth who are in postsecondary education, other educational or vocational programs, or have job or personal commitments. Several youth indicated a desire for population-specific hours.

For instance, women who observe modest wear often find it difficult to participate in sports and other physical activity in co-ed environments – hence, having designated hours, through expanded hours of operation, can boost more equitable access to shared facilities and community services. Expanding service hours will require adequate funding, sufficient staffing, and feedback from key stakeholders to inform and support the design of the expansion. In addition, youth-serving organizations should be committed to developing sophisticated and easy-to-access appointment/program booking systems and processes to help facilitate the timely coordination and efficient delivery of programs.



Feedback from youth:

“There are certain days... where I'd be more reluctant to go than like certain timeframes that I've been less reluctant to go. So, for example, today's Friday, tomorrow is going to be what Saturday, Sunday. So today, it's not gonna be too much of a problem, whereas, like, I don't know if I had school tomorrow, you know, I might be reluctant to go or something like that. So yeah, the time and place.”

“I'm going to speak for my experience in my community, there's a lot like a lot more hijabis and like people who actually would prefer spaces for women only, especially like our community center gym, I really want like, because women, they want to get fit. But, there's no way for them, because they're all wearing abayas, right? And it's going to be hard to work out in like modest clothing, that just, they're kind of like skirts. And so, if we could get more women spaces to not only that talk of mental health like woman health, just everything in general.”

Findings

Recommendations for Enhancing Youth Engagement

Increase Youth Engagement in Service Planning

Youth emphasized the importance of including them in the development and adaptation of programs and services that impact them. When engaged, they expect transparency and accountability regarding how their feedback was used and, ideally, translated into actionable items. Engagement strategies should be evidence-informed, guided by the specific needs of subgroups, and co-developed by service providers and users. Over-consultation with no meaningful change is futile and can inadvertently discourage youth from participating in feedback initiatives that may ultimately impact them and future cohorts. Transparency about program cuts and discontinuation is also important to youth in establishing trust with staff and the organization.

Building on the lessons from this current Needs Assessment, it is essential to ensure that the spaces and timing for engagement suit the targeted youth demographic. For example, holding consultation sessions during weekday evenings, nights, exam seasons, or holiday periods may result in low attendance. Moreover, the power of connections is especially vital for recruiting youth – this can include enlisting support from youth leaders to contact and motivate other young people to join initiatives. Monetary incentives and other motivators like community service hours and recognition of participation can help maintain involvement and retention.

Feedback from youth:

“Getting input from the community because I know a lot of people try to get input, but it doesn't really work out, because sometimes community members feel neglected—like they do give input, but nothing seems to be happening. So, where's that input going? So...it's actually to see that input go somewhere.”

-Youth

“So we do this youth council thing, where, like we have once a month meeting and at the end of every meeting they'll just take a photo and like stuff we did or like, oh, stuff we discussed. So, what we do there is like we do various like community stuff where... we try to plan stuff. So, for example, if we weren't here today, we would probably be volunteering. So yeah, just stuff like that, that gets awareness out to like, let people know that stuff like this is happening. So, if you see it, you can be motivated.”

-Youth



Conclusion

The Youth Service Needs Assessment of Selected Neighbourhoods in East York and Scarborough aimed to establish a better understanding of youth needs and the current state of youth programming and services, and develop recommendations for future improvements to address the diverse challenges affecting this demographic group. The Needs Assessment validated common beliefs that youth experience vast health and socioeconomic challenges, with mental health and unemployment being the top concerns. Findings demonstrated that youth programs should account for the varying needs and differences between subgroups (e.g., high school students versus mature/postsecondary students, employed youth). This predominantly involves using holistic, coordinated, and collaborative strategies and efforts across youth-serving organizations, including schools, to respond to service planning and sectoral-level issues. Moreover, routine evaluation of needs, embedding youth engagement, ensures that current programming and services are adequately meeting the needs of its participants and other stakeholders.



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Access Alliance

Multicultural Health and Community Services



340 College St Suite 500,
Toronto, ON M5T 3A9



+416-324-8677



www.accessalliance.ca



research@accessalliance.ca