

## Youth-adult relationships: Does community size make a difference?

Young people living in large metropolitan areas and youth in smaller communities may have different relationships with adults in their youth programs.

A preliminary analysis of responses from over three hundred youth in Ontario demonstrated some of these differences, suggesting different strengths in youth programs located in smaller and larger communities:

- The most substantial difference we found is that young people in smaller communities in Ontario were more likely to have strong support from an adult when compared with youth in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).<sup>1</sup> While most differences in youth program outcomes tend to be small, this is a moderate or noticeable difference.<sup>2</sup>
- Young people in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) were more likely to have a voice in decision-making and work in partnership with adult staff<sup>3</sup> than those from smaller communities. Despite these statistically significant differences, it's important to note that youth in both the GTA and in smaller communities in Ontario scored their voice in decision-making and partnership with adults highly and the differences are small.<sup>4</sup>

These findings suggest that youth in smaller centres in Ontario are noticeably more likely to have an adult who they admire, who believes in them, and to whom they can go to for help than youth in the GTA. However, they are slightly less likely than their GTA counterparts to share power with adults in their program or have influence in decision-making.

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<sup>1</sup> Adult support: Analysis includes 51 youth in GTA youth programs and 244 youth from programs in other Ontario communities ( $F(1, 235) = 7.60, p = .006$ ).

<sup>2</sup> Adult support: Medium effect size (Cohen's  $d = .72$ ).

<sup>3</sup> Youth voice in decision-making and Youth-adult partnerships: Analysis includes 129 youth in GTA youth programs and 227 youth from programs in other Ontario communities. Youth voice: ( $F(1, 315) = 2.84, p = .06$ ); Youth-adult partnerships: ( $F(1, 313) = 3.46, p = .03$ )

<sup>4</sup> Youth voice in decision-making: Small effect size (Cohen's  $d = .29$ ); Youth-adult partnerships: Small effect size (Cohen's  $d = .39$ ).

When young people in smaller communities described their strong connections to adults they emphasized how important it was that the adults were from their community, were invested and were not going anywhere:

*Yeah. Yo, 'cause like he could be, like you said, he could relate towards you, right? [I]t's not like some random guy from I don't know where outta town and just come here to do it for a job. You could tell that he has a passion for it 'cause it's a personal thing, right? [S]o, it's more than money*

*– Youth participant in a youth program from a smaller centre in Ontario*

These differences may provide some direction for tailored program improvements in small communities and larger metropolitan areas.

### **Putting knowledge into action**

Young people are looking for a balance of relational and functional qualities in youth-adult partnerships. They want to have a caring (non-parental) adult who is there for them when they need help, encouragement and acceptance. They also want to share decision-making power and have their voices heard when they are trying to achieve something in partnership with adults.

In the GTA, it may be beneficial for youth programs to intentionally deepen relationships with young people who do not have at least one (non-parental) adult who will be there when they need support. This means showing up both in moments of crisis and moments of celebration.

Evidence-based practices for adults to deepen caring relationships with youth<sup>5</sup>:

- Provide emotional support, consistency and encouragement particularly during difficult transitions (e.g., from elementary to secondary education, into parenthood, into independent living)
- Sustain relationships for at least six months with frequent contact, involvement, and closeness
- Offer more structure and guidance to young people who are already dealing with a high level of responsibilities
- Try things outside your comfort zone to demonstrate positive risk-taking and mutual vulnerability

Youth programs in smaller communities may benefit from attention on power imbalances in youth-adult relationships. These may be complex relationships because in some small communities, young people have multiple connections with adults in their programs. For example, the adults in their program may

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<sup>5</sup> Khanna, N., MacCormack, J., Kutsyuruba, B., McCart, S., Freeman, J. (2014). Youth Who Thrive: A review of critical factors and effective programs for 12-25 year olds. Report to YMCA of Greater Toronto and United Way Toronto. Toronto, ON: YMCA GTA. Available online: <http://www.youthwhothrive.ca/resources/Critical-Factors-for-Youth-Thriving-Report.pdf>

have known them their whole lives, may know their parents, and/or may have kids in their school or friend group. While these characteristics may deepen their supportive relationships, they may undermine young people's autonomy and influence in youth-adult partnerships.

Evidence-based practices for adults to support youth voice and decision-making<sup>6</sup>:

- Acknowledge youth perspectives and be responsive to young people's interests
- Prioritize youth voice by stepping back and reminding other adults to make room for youth input
- Invite youth to consider, share, and develop personal and group goals relevant to their lives
- Offer meaningful choices, and opportunities for planning and decision-making within programs
- Build relationships characterized by power-sharing
- Share responsibility for outcomes of projects
- Develop guidelines and processes to hold young people and adults accountable for their actions
- Provide rationale for rules and develop explicit boundaries regarding confidentiality
- Adjust adult practices and norms to better accommodate young people
- Act as a resource broker for young people in order to address uneven access to resources

There is limited research about youth programs, how they differ in different communities, and their benefits. At the Students Commission of Canada, we've made a commitment to learn more. Over the next few years, the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement will build on this preliminary analysis by gathering data from hundreds of youth programs across the country through Sharing the Stories<sup>7</sup> to develop and test a Canadian youth program typology.<sup>8</sup> A Canada-specific youth program typology will guide effective program development and evaluation. We will be able to explore further in future analyses, for example:

- Are there differences between youth-adult relationships in rural and urban communities? In southern and northern communities?
- What are other differences in youth programs that are associated with geographic location or community size?
- What are other program characteristics that influence youth-adult relationships?

## **Background**

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid; Students Commission of Canada. (2018). Youth engagement toolkit. Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health. Available online: <http://www.jcsh-cces.ca/ye-toolkit-mod04/>

<sup>7</sup> Sharing the Stories is a Canadian-based research and evaluation platform that is focused on building an anonymized database of youth engagement information for youth, the youth sector, policy-makers, and funders: [www.sharingthestories.ca](http://www.sharingthestories.ca)

<sup>8</sup> Program typology: A way to classify and group youth programs into meaningful types in order to understand how different types of programs work and their strengths.

Youth involved in this study are participants of several programs funded by the Ontario Trillium Foundation's Youth Opportunities Fund (YOF). The programs included in this analysis serve a diverse range of young people, a majority of whom are first generation immigrants, and youth who identify with varying cultural, linguistic, ethnic and racial communities. The majority live in urban areas, while some live in rural and remote communities. Young people were invited to participate in surveys and focus groups about the qualities of their programs and caring consistent adults in their lives as part of their program evaluation and the broader Sharing the Stories research study.

### **Limitations**

- *Group sizes are different:* There were fewer youth participants from the GTA than from other communities in Ontario, which may influence or exaggerate differences.
- *Geographic regions have a lot of heterogeneity:* Some communities in the GTA are small, while some communities outside the GTA are large so these categories may not be as distinct as, for example, comparing youth experiences in urban and rural communities.
- *Generalizability:* Findings are not generalizable to other communities or programs.