Measuring Impact in Rural Communities

A KNOWLEDGE MOBILIZATION EVENT

YOUTHREX Research & Evaluation eXchange
Southwestern ON Regional Hub
@ School of Social Work
King's University College, Western University

Fusion youth activity and technology centre
ON JUNE 24TH, 2015 The YouthREX Southwestern Hub and Fusion Youth Activity and Technology Centre joined together to co-host our very first Knowledge Mobilization event. The goal of the event was to provide opportunities for discussion, sharing, and idea generation around collectively working together to support Ontario’s rural youth sector to better utilize research and evaluation practices for the improvement of youth wellbeing.

Dr. Al Lauzon from the University of Guelph was our keynote speaker. Dr. Lauzon provided insights based on his experience in measuring impact in rural communities and moving knowledge into action, sharing specific information from the Ingersoll, ON context.

The following report summarizes the main themes that emerged from the discussions among attendees. Results suggest there are important differences in supporting youth wellbeing in rural communities as opposed to urban communities, and that there are various opportunities to move forward with integrating research and evaluation practices into our work with youth in rural contexts.
A BIT OF CONTEXT

Composition of the Rural Sector

- Rural populations have a higher proportion of youth under the age of 15.
- Youth tend to leave rural areas at a higher rate, which can leave rural communities with an underrepresentation of youth aged 15-24.
- Canadians in rural communities generally have lower-than-average incomes, higher rates of unemployment, and lower levels of education than Canadians in urban centres.
- Rural areas have been shown to have inadequate health facilities and technology, and a shortage of health professionals.

Reference: A Portrait of the Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector in Rural Ontario (2004); Rothwell, Bollman, Tremblay, & Marshall, 2002)

What We Know About Rural Sectors

- Often have lower financial capacity than their urban counterparts.
- Tend to be smaller and receive relatively less revenue from government sources.
- There is more reliance on volunteers in rural areas, leading to concerns for both retention and recruitment.
- With regard to paid employment, rural voluntary organizations have fewer full-time staff with specialized skills compared to urban organizations.
- The literature suggests that there are significant training needs in the rural non profit sector, specifically with regard to technology, strategic planning, program evaluation, and fundraising.
- It appears that rural voluntary organizations are characterized by more informal linkages and often lack the technology necessary to establish more effective networks.
- Urban areas often serve the surrounding rural areas.
- Rural service providers have less access to research and resource partners.
- The evidence base for youth programs and services in rural areas is limited.
- There are less youth-specific programs and services in rural areas.
- There are fewer staff members in non-profit service organizations in rural and remote areas.
- Some programs that focus on stigmatized populations or issues may be harder to implement in smaller communities.
- Ethics, confidentiality, and recruitment may be more challenging in rural areas.

Reference: A Portrait of the Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector in Rural Ontario (2004); Rothwell, Bollman, Tremblay, & Marshall, 2002)
To kick off the day, we wanted to learn more about how the our event attendees are making an impact in the rural youth sector. They identified a multitude of ways, as evident in the chart above! The majority of attendees explained they support youth empowerment (n=8) demonstrated through increased self-esteem and self-identity in the youth they serve. Similarly, others explained that this is accomplished by providing youth leadership opportunities and incorporating youth voice into the programs and services provided.

Others discussed engaging in community collaboration (n=7) through networking and service delivery across the rural sector. Supporting healthy relationships (n=6) through education, therapy, and coping strategies were reported in addition to building the capacity in the rural youth sector (n=4) through mobilizing knowledge across the sector. Increasing youth inclusion (n=4) by providing positive community involvement opportunities, decreasing isolation, and connecting them to resources were also reported.

Finally, program specific outcomes were discussed in terms of how attendees are making an impact in the rural youth sector. This included, enhanced skill development (n=4), for example, by providing meaningful economic development and employment experiences, engaging in youth outreach across the rural sector (n=2), increasing family connectivity (n=1), and decreasing recidivism (n=1). Providing funding (n=1) and mentorship (n=1) opportunities, and addressing youth substance abuse (n=1).
**Challenges Facing the Rural Youth Sector (n=21)**

- Lack of Resources
- Rural Landscape
- Lack of Evaluation Capacity
- Coordination and Collaboration
- Stigma
- Youth Engagement
- Youth Inclusion/Voice
- Sustainability
- Youth Diversity
- Confidentiality
- Homelessness
- Aging Population
- Strained Family Relationships
- Teen Pregnancy
- Substance Abuse
- Lack of Volunteers

**NEXT, WE WANTED TO DIG DEEPER** into the unique challenges faced by the rural youth sector and come up with opportunities to address the identified challenges. Of the challenges identified, a lack of resources (n=13) was the most common. For example, limited staff resources, limited time, a lack of volunteers, and limited funding were noted. Likewise, a lack of capacity to integrate evaluation (n=6) was also discussed. Here, for example, attendees identified the need for a comprehensive evaluation framework, low response rates, and measuring success as specific challenges.

Challenges due to the rural landscape (n=11) such as transportation and access to available services were also discussed. Additional challenges included the “outmigration” of youth to more urban communities and a lack of focus on youth programming due to an aging population. Likewise, a need for greater coordination and collaboration (n=5) among service providers was also discussed. For example, some attendees discussed a “silo effect” among the rural sector.

Challenges related to stigma (n=6) were also noted. For example, some individuals reported challenges in recruiting youth to attend services due to a negative stigma. Likewise, others discussed challenges in confidentiality due to a fear of “running into people they know”.

Other challenges focused on youth engagement (n=4) and ensuring youth “buy-in” as well as youth inclusion and voice (n=3) in service delivery and program development. Furthermore, other attendees identified more specific challenges in terms of service delivery such as, youth diversity (n=2), youth homelessness (n=1), strained family relationships (n=1), school related issues (n=1), teen pregnancy (n=1), and substance abuse (n=1).
We also wanted to look at the unique opportunities facing the rural youth sector so that we can work towards solutions to address the identified challenges. Attendees discussed various opportunities facing the rural youth sector moving forward. Opportunities for greater collaboration (n=10) was most commonly noted. For example, a focus on cross-sectorial partnerships and increased networking were discussed.

Others discussed opportunities to expand service provision (n=8) via program/organizational scope, throughout the rural region. Other opportunities focused specifically on incorporating evaluation and measurement (n=6) to demonstrate impact and create an evidence-base of knowledge for the rural youth sector.

Ensuring youth engagement (n=6) in program development and implementation was addressed as an opportunity. For example, a need to ensure “youth voice” and “ownership” was indicated.

Other opportunities attendees addressed focused on a need to address transportation (n=1) challenges, mobilize research and evaluation knowledge (n=1) to the rural youth sector and increase the capacity (n=1) of the sector.
FINALLY, WE WANTED TO learn more about how YouthREX can support the integration of research and evaluation into the work being done in the rural youth sector. Here, the majority of attendees expressed a need for greater accessibility to tools and resources (n=7). This includes the development of consistent templates, strategies, and streamlined standards. Likewise, more opportunities for training and workshops (n=4) on research and evaluation were suggested as opportunities moving forward.

Again, ensuring there is collaboration among organizations to foster greater partnerships and resource sharing was discussed. Others suggested integrating collective/shared measurement (n=2) as potential opportunities moving forward as well as a focus on decreasing competition for funding (n=1) streams.

Finally, some attendees suggested a need for greater direction in “getting started” (n=2) in the initial steps of thinking through how to incorporate program evaluation.
CONCLUSION

This report draws on challenges and opportunities discussed by attendees from the knowledge mobilization event hosted by the Southwestern YouthREX hub and Fusion Youth Activity and Technology Centre. The results represent a small section of the rural youth sector and are by no means representative. However, the data gathered from this event provide a starting point for further discussion and focus moving forward.

We, at the YouthREX Southwestern Hub, would like to thank everyone who attended our first event and shared their experience and knowledge as it relates to youth wellbeing. We would also like to thank our collaborators at the Fusion, who are exemplary leaders in rural community mobilization around youth wellbeing in a rural context.

We look forward to utilizing the results obtained from this event to develop resources and tools to work towards an Ontario where shared knowledge is transformed into positive impact for all youth!

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OUR VISION
An Ontario where shared knowledge is transformed into positive impact for all youth.

OUR MISSION
To make research evidence and evaluation practices accessible and relevant to Ontario's grassroots youth sector through knowledge mobilization, capacity building and evaluation leadership.

ABOUT US
The Youth Research and Evaluation eXchange (YouthREX) is a province-wide initiative based at York University with five regional Hubs across Ontario that promote the integration of research evidence and evaluation in the development and delivery of Ontario's youth programs. YouthREX regional hubs engage local grassroots youth serving organizations, academic partners, youth and policy stakeholders in capacity building, knowledge mobilization, research and evaluation opportunities.

YouthREX is primarily funded by the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services with extensive contributions from York University and the three YouthREX partner universities.

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