

AT A GLANCE




Beyond Measure?

THE STATE OF EVALUATION AND
ACTION IN ONTARIO'S YOUTH SECTOR

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“When I get told to do an evaluation...a road map is what I’m kind of looking for. I’m also looking for some support in making sure that it’s going to produce data that is going to be useful. I don’t want to waste my client’s time by asking them lots of questions that are not useful in the end. I’ve not only wasted my time but I’ve wasted the time of the kids in our program and our relationships with them are really important to us.”

PARTICIPANT ID 37
LARGE ORGANIZATION
SOUTHWESTERN ONTARIO

In order to gain a greater understanding of the current evaluation capacity of the youth sector, YouthREX undertook a province-wide survey in 2015 to understand the experiences of youth-serving agencies with evaluation. The result of this survey, which included 60 key informant interviews with youth sector stakeholders across Ontario, is the report “*Beyond Measure? The State of Evaluation and Action in Ontario’s Youth Sector.*”

This study set out to identify:

01. The prior knowledge and experience of Ontario’s youth sector organizations with particular research and evaluation strategies

02. The perspectives of youth sector organizations on particular research and evaluation strategies and approaches (e.g., surveys, arts-based initiatives)

03. The strengths and gaps in research and evaluation capacity among youth sector organizations across the province

04. Any opportunities and challenges small and large-scale youth sector institutions face when doing research and evaluation

05. Promising evaluation and research practices within the sector

CONTEXT

Ontario's youth sector provides essential "youth relevant" services and opportunities to youth who may not otherwise have access. While youth-serving and youth-focused programs, particularly small grassroots groups, can use evaluation and research to improve their practice and better understand the impact of their work, they often do not have the capacity to engage in ongoing evaluative work, or broadly communicate successful program level practices, models, and outcomes. Without program evaluation, it is difficult to assess the impact of investments in the youth sector.

RESEARCH AIM & OBJECTIVES

The aim of the study was to provide a contextualized examination of strengths, challenges and areas of opportunity in the sector when it comes to evaluation, to encourage and engage in strategic conversations across diverse stakeholder groups about the state of evaluation in the youth sector, and to consider how to move forward from knowledge to action given the report findings. The study also aims to raise the profile of related issues that influence the capacity and positioning of the youth sector. The findings not only inform our work at YouthREX, but are also useful to youth sector stakeholders including: funders, policy makers, grassroots youth organization, and non-profit agency leaders and decision makers.

197

Organizations completed the online survey

Key Findings from the Survey

01. Youth sector organizations understand the benefits of evaluation and are enthusiastic about it.

02. Youth-serving organizations want to discuss and use evaluation results broadly.

03. Evaluation practices in the youth sector are driven by funder priorities and by the life cycles of single projects.

04. Current expectations for evaluation activities are stretching sector resources to the limit, particularly among grassroots organizations.

05. Youth participation in evaluation activities is still a work in progress.

60

In-depth key informant interviews with youth sector stakeholders across Ontario

Key Findings from the Interviews

01. Evaluation activities are currently focused on the short-term and the project life cycle.

02. The needs of grassroots organizations are not as easily understood by funders who focus return on investment (ROI) as a funding objective.

03. Time is a badly-stretched resource in the youth sector.

04. Youth voices are being crowded out of evaluation evidence.

05. The Northern and rural areas of Ontario are especially under-resourced within current funding structures.



Key Messages

We came up with five integrated key messages from our findings that provide a contextualized understanding of the Ontario youth sector's evaluation strengths, challenges and areas of opportunity.

01



Youth sector organizations understand the benefits of evaluation and are enthusiastic about it.

An overwhelming majority of organizations reported that they understand that evaluation has the potential to improve programs and services, that proving positive impacts of youth-oriented programs is important, and that evaluation is not only useful for fine-tuning individual programs and policies, but can also inform systemic change.

“Every quarter, four times a year, we do a satisfaction survey with our clients. That report is analyzed, compared with the previous quarter to see what is the level of satisfaction and if there is something that needs to be improved, then a plan is developed and at the next quarter, we are hoping when the evaluations come in that they will have addressed that particular gap that was identified by these participants in the previous quarter.”

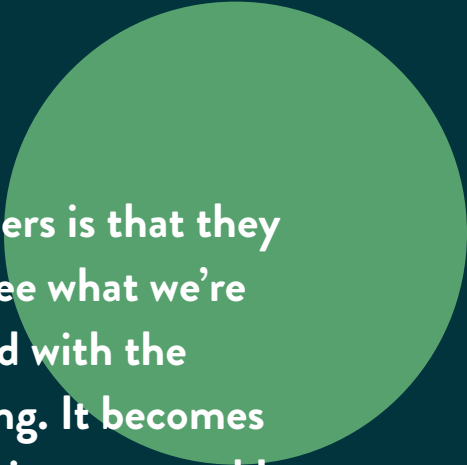
PARTICIPANT ID 70
LARGE ORGANIZATION
CENTRAL ONTARIO

02



There is an urgent need for evaluation processes and practices that can make evaluation less burdensome for programs.

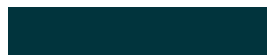
Organizations that participated in this study noted that evaluation methods are disconnected from reality, and that there is a high burden of different reporting requirements by different funders. They also noted the challenge of not having access to readily available evaluation tools that could be easily customized to their program's evaluation purposes. Compared with mainstream organizations, a significantly higher number of grassroots organizations wanted to develop their capacity for data collection, management, analysis and interpretation.



“I think my key criticism of funders is that they never actually come down and see what we’re doing. They’re not really engaged with the organizations that they’re funding. It becomes sort of a check box, yes I got their report and I got their annual report and got their budget back and spending...They don’t really understand the impact that we’re having.”

PARTICIPANT ID 48
MEDIUM-SIZED ORGANIZATION
CENTRAL ONTARIO

03



Youth programs and the broader youth sector may be missing the opportunity for evaluation to inform strategic learning.

By overly focusing on project outputs and outcomes that are emphasized by funders, youth programs are not able to fully leverage the possibilities that evaluation could offer for strategic learning. While funders tend to focus on quantitative-oriented methodology, respondents noted that “learning-focused” approaches such as Developmental Evaluation could substantially build the capacity for evidence-based thinking that funders would like to see in the sector. Such approaches offer a holistic and judgment-free discussion of how to build on strengths and address weaknesses.

“It sort of feels like there’s a view that if you have the most kids signed up for a program that it’s a successful program...when it actually says nothing about what the program is doing. If you were to look at those numbers as compared to other organizations in the city it would look like we were serving less children in those programs but perhaps we were serving them in a better way.”

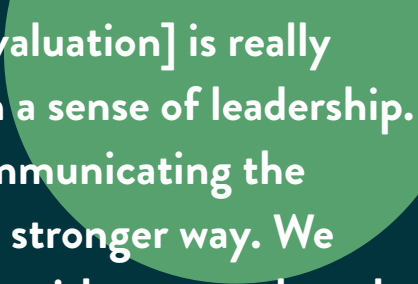
PARTICIPANT ID 42
LARGE ORGANIZATION
SOUTHWESTERN ONTARIO

04



Youth involvement in evaluation is important for youth wellbeing but doing this meaningfully is still a work in progress.

Both our survey and interview results indicate that there is widespread agreement that youth have much to gain from being included in evaluation activities. While many youth-serving organizations involve youth in data-collection as respondents, far fewer organizations involve youth in decision-making processes that shape evaluation activities because of barriers such as supervisory requirements and potential liabilities.



“I think [youth engagement in evaluation] is really important because it gives them a sense of leadership. It’s also just really helpful in communicating the impact of our programming in a stronger way. We have been talking about working with our youth to do a video workshop to share a visual evaluation of the program...It’s also them creating the evaluation in an artistic way.”

PARTICIPANT ID 6
MEDIUM-SIZED ORGANIZATION
NORTHWESTERN ONTARIO

05



The distinctive characteristics of grassroots youth sector organizations – when compared to mainstream organizations – require a distinct understanding and approach to how these organizations engage with evaluation.

These characteristics challenge the dominant model of social investment, as well as traditional evaluation models for assessing the impact of these investments. The grassroots youth-serving sector faces seemingly contradictory sets of hopes and expectations by funders. While the concepts of “grassroots” invoke visions of volunteerism, passionate commitment, democratic voice, and the innovation that springs from on-the-ground experience that is freed from the constraints of large, traditional institutions, there is an increasing focus on improving the “rigour” with which programs measure success.

“Some funders’ expectations for evaluative results are much more superficial or brief. They may just want sort of attendance and satisfaction...Know that what we’re doing is a little bit innovative or new and so we may sort of lean on that developmental evaluation approach and change our path a little bit to try and figure out what we can share with others.”

PARTICIPANT ID 33
MEDIUM-SIZED ORGANIZATION
SOUTHWESTERN ONTARIO



Ten

Recommendations

The five key messages from this report can facilitate critical dialogue and strategic action on how the youth sector can develop responsive evaluation processes and practices that are uniquely suited to the organizational, social and political realities of grassroots youth programs. To begin these collaborative conversations, YouthREX has developed the following ten recommendations for funders of youth programs, youth sector capacity building organizations and youth organizations.

FUNDERS

01. Embrace a contextualized evaluation approach

There is an urgent need for funders to encourage expanded notions of evaluation to include evaluation methods that allow youth programs to tell rich and nuanced stories of their program's processes and outcomes that acknowledge the complexity and dynamism of youth work. Funders need to embrace the rich, contextual insights that mixed-methods can provide an evaluation of a youth program.

02. Embrace a learning-focused evaluation model

Funders should emphasize a 'use-oriented' purpose of evaluation by recognizing that program evaluation for grassroots youth sector programs is better focused on improving the program, rather than just proving the worth of the program. Evaluation can help programs develop insights and findings that a program can learn from to improve outcomes for youth; it can help a program do what they do, better. Funders should become more engaged in the evaluation process, and offer feedback on completed and submitted evaluations.

03. Match evaluation expectations to realistic resource constraints

It's important to acknowledge that at the same youth sector organizations are expected to expand their evaluation activities, they also face shrinking funding and financial instability. Often, frontline staff who deliver programs and support youth are also the ones who are entrusted with the task of evaluation. Funders should provide enhanced funding (in addition to, and separate from the program fund) to support evaluation in these organizations.

04. Streamline the reporting burden on youth organizations

Funders should collaborate to develop streamlined evaluation and standardized tools (that are customizable) to reduce the burden of creating multiple reports for multiple funders.

YOUTH SECTOR CAPACITY BUILDING ORGANIZATIONS

05. Meet youth organizations where they are

While grassroots organizations share many similarities, they are also unique, have different histories, work in different contexts and have staff with varying capacities. Youth sector capacity building organizations need to take the time to learn about these unique aspects of a youth organization so that the supports they provide takes into consideration the organization's social and political realities.

06. Provide opportunities for frontline staff to learn the fundamentals of evaluation

Evaluation is a skill and also a great opportunity for professional development. Opportunities to learn about evaluation and build transferrable skills should always be extended to frontline staff so they can participate in evaluations of their programs, strengthen these evaluations and grow professionally. Evaluation is always better when stakeholders are engaged in the process.

07. Develop a strategy for supporting evaluation in Ontario's Northern, remote and rural communities

These communities are generally under-resourced and less likely to have access to evaluation supports and capacity building opportunities that organizations in Southern Ontario, especially in the Greater Toronto Area, have. Youth sector capacity building organizations should develop a strategy to provide evaluation supports to these communities including connecting them to well-resourced research and evaluation institutions like universities, colleges and health sector institutions.

08. Develop innovative, "ready to use" tools and encourage standardization where appropriate

Youth sector capacity building organizations should develop a suite of common evaluation tools including measures for both process and outcome evaluation at the program and youth levels that can be easily customized. Ideally, these tools should have the potential to be either completed online or with a handheld device and uploaded to a secure online storage space.

YOUTH PROGRAMS

09. Embrace an understanding that evaluation activities are part of youth work practice and incorporate evaluation activities into organizational learning and strategic planning

Evaluation should not be seen as getting in the way of good youth work. Involvement in research and evaluation can support the outcomes that the youth sector is working to achieve; it can be an important roadmap for decision-making for youth organizations. Organizations/programs should seek ways to broaden the knowledge base that informs youth work practice by developing a knowledge strategy that encourages documentation and a culture of learning.

10. Keep exploring how to meaningfully engage youth in evaluations of youth programs

Both our survey and interview results indicate that while there is widespread agreement that youth have much to gain from being included in evaluation activities, there are barriers to making this happen. Youth programs can broaden the knowledge base that informs youth work practice by developing a knowledge mobilization strategy that encourages the sharing of experiences and learning meaningfully engaging youth in evaluation. This would build the capacity of the sector as a whole to learn from day-to-day program implementation and governance.



**For more information about this study, and to read
the full report, visit www.youthrex.com!**

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ABSTRACT

Program evaluation has the potential to inform and improve youth work practice, as well as help youth sector organizations and initiatives better understand the impact of their work. This report presents findings from the first province-wide study of the Ontario youth sector's experiences with conducting evaluations of their programs and services. This multi-focal study, led by Youth Research and Evaluation eXchange (YouthREX), used a Community Dialogue Approach. Grounded in an extensive literature review and drawing on survey and interview data, the report puts forward ten key recommendations for three youth sector stakeholder groups: funders, evaluation capacity builders, and youth sector organizations. The study's contextualized examination of the youth sector's evaluation strengths, challenges and areas of opportunity, informs YouthREX's service delivery strategy, and contributes to much needed critical conversations.

KEYWORDS

Evaluation capacity, evaluation capacity building, youth sector, politics of evaluation, developmental evaluation, organizational learning, needs assessment



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