

Beyond Measure? The State of Evaluation and Action in Ontario's Youth Sector

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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.

To understand and improve how the Ontario youth sector is supporting youth wellbeing, the Ontario Ministry of Child and Youth Services invested in the creation of the Youth Research and Evaluation eXchange (YouthREX), a province-wide initiative based at the School of Social Work at York University with five regional Hubs based in universities across Ontario. YouthREX's mission is to make research evidence and evaluation practices accessible and relevant to Ontario's grassroots youth sector through knowledge mobilization, capacity building and evaluation leadership. Our vision is an Ontario where shared knowledge is transformed into positive impact for all youth.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

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 study set out to identify:

1. The prior knowledge of, and experience with particular research and evaluation strategies by Ontario's youth sector organizations
2. The perspectives of youth sector organizations on particular research and evaluation strategies and approaches (e.g., surveys, arts-based initiatives)
3. The strengths and gaps in research and evaluation capacity among youth sector organizations across the province
4. Opportunities and challenges small and large-scale youth sector institutions face when doing research and evaluation
5. Promising evaluation and research practices within the youth sector

METHODOLOGY

The "Beyond Measure" methodology was framed by a Community Dialogue Approach (CDA), an action research process that re-imagines research as a community dialogue that must fully engage diverse community stakeholders. The CDA is made up of a four-step research process that is centred on equitably Engaging the Community during all phases of the research process.

Our study's multi-focal research included an online survey of 197 organizations and in-depth key informant interviews with 60 youth sector stakeholders from across the province of Ontario.

WHAT DID WE LEARN? FINDINGS

Key findings from the online survey included the following:

1. Evidence indicates that youth sector organizations understand the benefits of evaluation and are enthusiastic about it.
2. Youth-serving organizations want to discuss and use evaluation results broadly.
3. Evaluation practices in the youth sector are driven by funder priorities and by the life cycles of single projects.
4. Current expectations for evaluation activities are stretching sector resources to the limits, particularly among the grassroots.
5. Youth participation in evaluation activities is still a work in progress.

Key findings from the key informant interviews included the following:

1. Evaluation activities are currently focused on the short term and the project life cycle.
2. The needs of grassroots organizations are not as easily understood by funders who focus on return on investment (ROI) as a funding objective.
3. Time is a badly-stretched resource in the youth sector.
4. Youth voices are being crowded out of evaluation evidence.
5. The Northern and rural areas of Ontario are especially under-resourced within current funding structures.

KEY MESSAGES

The findings provide a contextualized understanding of Ontario youth sector's evaluation strengths, challenges and areas of opportunity. Integrated findings from the study's multi-focal research identified the following five key messages:

1. Evidence indicates that youth sector organizations understand the benefits of evaluation and are enthusiastic about it.
2. There is an urgent need for evaluation processes and practices that can make evaluation less burdensome for programs.
3. Youth programs and the broader youth sector may be missing the opportunity for evaluation to inform strategic learning.
4. Youth involvement in evaluation is important for youth wellbeing but doing this meaningfully is still a work in progress.
5. 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.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The five key messages from the “*Beyond Measure? The State of Evaluation and Action in Ontario’s Youth Sector*” report can facilitate strategic and critical conversations 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 10 recommendations for funders of youth programs (#1 to #4), youth sector capacity building organizations (#5 to #8) and youth organizations (#9 to #10).

Recommendations for Funders:

1. Embrace a contextualized evaluation approach
2. Embrace a learning-focused evaluation model
3. Match realistic evaluation expectations to resource constraints
4. Streamline the reporting burden on youth organizations; develop streamlined evaluation and standardized tools to reduce the burden of reporting to multiple funders

Recommendations for Youth Sector Capacity

Building Organizations:

5. Meet youth-serving organizations where they are
6. Provide opportunities for frontline staff to learn the fundamentals of evaluation
7. Develop a strategy for supporting evaluation in Ontario's Northern, remote and rural communities
8. Develop innovative, “ready to use” tools and encourage standardization where appropriate

Recommendations for Youth Programs:

9. Embrace an understanding that evaluation activities are part of youth work practice and incorporate evaluation activities into organizational learning and strategic planning
10. Keep exploring how to meaningfully engage youth in evaluations of youth programs