



Beyond Measure?

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

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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 to better understand the impact of their work. This report presents findings from the first province-wide study of the Ontario youth sector's experiences conducting evaluations of their programs and services. This multi-focal study, led by Ontario's 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, informs YouthREX's service delivery strategy, and contributes to critical conversations around evaluation related challenges and opportunities in the youth sector context.

KEYWORDS

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

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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.”

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FOREWORD

Lekan Olawoye

YouthREX Provincial Advisory Board Co-Chair

As the founding Chair of the Premier’s Council on Youth Opportunities, I had the privilege of travelling across Ontario to meet with youth and stakeholders working to address issues facing young people. Throughout this experience, I was struck by the deep commitment of all the people I met, working tirelessly to realize a vision for an Ontario where all young people are healthy, safe, hopeful and engaged.

This experience of meeting with people across the province confirmed to me that youth issues are varied and complex in Ontario. I’m pleased that the “*Beyond Measure?*” report reflects this complexity, and includes diverse voices sharing about how evaluation is being applied in these many different contexts. I’m also pleased that this report focuses its message on the importance of building a youth sector that is focused on learning and continuous improvement, and highlights how evaluation can be an integral building block to achieving this goal.

As the youth sector becomes increasingly interconnected through policy and dialogue, I hope that we can respond to youth issues equitably. Although issues facing youth vary throughout the province, there are common objectives we all want for youth - that they are healthy, happy and prosperous.

From this research, there are two key implications in particular, that I believe we need to take seriously. First, that there is strong interest in using evaluation to make programs better and more aligned to achieve positive outcomes for youth. Youth-focused organizations are interested in using evaluation to improve their programs and want to learn more about evaluation, especially to broaden their knowledge base about how their programs work and

impact youth. The many people who participated in this study clearly tell us that they want to do evaluation in order to continuously improve their programs and services.

Second, I believe that this report challenges us to think creatively about evaluation –to broaden its definition and recognize that youth programs address complex, human issues that require a broad appreciation of inclusive research methods and objectives.

Evaluating outcomes is important, but it is equally important - if not more so - that we evaluate how youth experience programs, their quality of engagement, and how their interactions in these programs contribute positively to their relationships with peers and adults. The “*Beyond Measure?*” report pushes us to continue thinking through how our sector can approach evaluation in a way that is truly contextualized and inclusive of different voices and approaches.

I encourage you to join YouthREX in continuing this dialogue; help us ask the right questions and find solutions that can work for all youth.

LEKAN OLAWOYE
CO-CHAIR, YOUTHREX PROVINCIAL ADVISORY BOARD
PROGRAM DIRECTOR, STUDIO Y

FOREWORD

Nicole D'Souza and Raven Bach

YouthREX Youth Advisory Council Co-Chairs

MARCH 1, 2016

The YouthREX Youth Advisory Council is pleased to introduce this new report on evaluation work being done across Ontario's youth sector. The Youth Advisory Council is a diverse group of young leaders with a passion for youth wellbeing and a commitment to raise awareness of the great initiatives being led by youth to build a better Ontario for young people.

"Beyond Measure? Evaluation and Action in Ontario's Youth Sector" is the first province-wide study dedicated to understanding how evaluation is contributing to youth-focused programs and services and the first study to consider how youth are being engaged in the process of evaluating youth programs.

This report matters for youth because it lays the groundwork towards ensuring that youth have a voice in shaping the questions that are asked about the programs that affect us. The discovery made in this study that 'youth participation in evaluation is still a work in progress' is extremely important. We hope that the conversations that follow focus on working towards ways of doing evaluation that allow youth to participate in this side of youth work in more meaningful ways.

This study also raises questions for us about how the current agenda of evaluation, which is often focused on information needed by funders of programs, can be expanded to include asking the questions that matter to young people.

Specifically, how evaluation can be re-shaped to ask not only what the impact of programs are for youth, but also how programs can be developed and operated with youth at the decision table. Not only do we believe that this is the most socially just direction for youth programs, we also believe that this approach is the most effective. When young people are involved in shaping the focus and activities of programs and services that they use, these programs are more engaging, relevant and energized. We hope this report generates discussion that leads us in that direction.

NICOLE D'SOUZA AND RAVEN BACH
CO-CHAIRS, YOUTHREX YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL

Acknowledgements

Like all of YouthREX's work, the successful completion of this research was a collective effort by many people who contributed ideas and resources. We are grateful to the 243 youth sector organizations that took our survey and shared their views and perspectives on evaluation. We are especially grateful to the 60 organizations that participated in a key informant interview in addition to completing the survey.

During the early stages of this research, we reached out to several people in the youth sector for direction and feedback. We would like to acknowledge Omar Alhattab (Boys and Girls Club of Ottawa), Kofi Hope (Community Empowering Enterprises), Myles Soulliere (New Beginnings), Philip Ackerman (FCJ Refugee Centre), Mark Campbell (Nia Centre for the Arts), Chris Penrose (Success Beyond Limits) and Hugette Carty (Delico Anishinabek Family Services) for their suggestions on the survey questionnaire and key informant interview guide.

We are also grateful to the many people who widely distributed the survey to their networks across the province. We are particularly grateful to Orville Wallace (Youth Opportunities Fund), Ana Skinner (Laidlaw Foundation), Likwa Nkala and Karim Grant (East Metro Youth Services).

We would like to recognize the leadership and contributions of YouthREX's Provincial Advisory Committee members as well as our five Regional Advisory Committee members who provide thoughtful feedback for all our work including this report. Their contributions make it possible for YouthREX to stay connected to the youth sector and be responsive to issues that are important to youth wellbeing in Ontario communities.

We also acknowledge the contributions of the Academic Directors of YouthREX's regional hubs – Dr. Siu Ming Kwok (King's College at the University of Western Ontario), Dr. Diana Coholic (Laurentian University), Sarah Todd (Carleton University), Dr. Carl James (York University), and Dr. Edward Rawana (Lakehead University).

We are grateful for the support of the Institute for Social Research at York University particularly David Northrup and Stella Park, who made it possible to conduct and analyze 60 in-depth interviews across the province within a very short time.

Finally, we are very grateful to the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services for funding YouthREX and for their vision and commitment to championing youth wellbeing in Ontario.

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 and experience of Ontario's youth sector organizations with particular research and evaluation strategies
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. Any 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. 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 limit, particularly among grassroots organizations.
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. 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

01

Introduction

ONTARIO'S non-profit youth sector provides crucial supports to the wellbeing of youth in the province.

The Province of Ontario, in partnership with and working alongside communities, provides significant investments aimed at supporting positive outcomes for youth, particularly youth that face multiple and often overlapping barriers to wellbeing.

Despite the broad array of services the youth sector provides, and social value it generates, its contributions often lack visibility and are not widely understood. 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. Furthermore, without the tools evaluation provides, it is difficult to assess the impact of investments in the youth sector.

In order to address this gap and respond to recommendations put forward in the “*Review of the Roots of Youth Violence*”,¹ Ontario launched the Youth Action Plan (2012), an evidence driven youth opportunity strategy. Concurrently, the province developed “*Stepping Up – A Strategic Framework to help Ontario’s Youth Succeed.*” *Stepping Up* is an important evidence-based model that identifies key thematic outcome areas to support young people’s wellbeing as they transition to adulthood.

In the strategic framework, the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS) identifies seven significant themes, twenty outcomes and a beginning set of population level indicators. These themes and outcomes are framed by seven guiding principles that emphasize a Positive Youth Development perspective within a social justice framework. *Stepping Up* provides the youth sector with a shared framework for improving the outcomes of Ontario’s youth.

Stepping Up offers the Ontario youth sector an outcomes framework for understanding impact, but without supports to apply it, the framework alone cannot realize our vision of wellbeing for all Ontario youth. Therefore, in order to understand and improve how the youth sector is supporting positive wellbeing outcomes for all young Ontarians, including those who face multiple barriers, MCYS invested in the Youth Research and Evaluation eXchange (YouthREX) in December 2014.

YouthREX is a provincial initiative based at the School of Social Work at York University with five regional hubs located in universities across the province. 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.

YouthREX’s mandate is centred on three areas:

- **Knowledge Mobilization**
Enhancing knowledge of research and evaluation practices, tools, resources and techniques within youth-serving organizations; leveraging practical experiences and knowledge within the youth serving sector (e.g. lessons learned and promising practices) and facilitating the transfer/exchange of this knowledge across the sector
- **Capacity Building**
Increasing the capacity of youth-serving organizations, in particular, small-scale/grassroots groups, to conduct their own program evaluations and improve services based on evidence
- **Customized Evaluation Supports**
Providing direct program evaluation and data analysis services to individual youth-serving organizations in particular smaller scale and grassroots groups – measuring the impact of their youth programming and identifying opportunities for improvement

“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. And I think the numbers that we provide to them are just check boxes. They don’t really understand the impact that we’re having.”

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In order to inform the development of our services and to have a greater understanding of the current evaluation capacity of the youth sector, YouthREX undertook a province-wide survey early in 2015. This study examined the experiences of youth-serving agencies with conducting evaluation of their programs and services.

This report presents findings from our survey of approximately 197 youth-serving and youth-led organizations across Ontario and 60 key informant interviews with youth sector stakeholders. The report provides a ‘point-in-time’ description and analysis of evaluation issues in the youth sector, including current practices, barriers, capacities, perceptions and aspirations related to evaluation.

Based on the findings of the study, we provide ten recommendations 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.

HOW THIS REPORT IS ORGANIZED

The “*Beyond Measure? The State of Evaluation and Action in Ontario’s Youth Sector*” report begins with an overview of the background and context of our study.

Section 2 includes a review of the academic and grey literature that explores the characteristics of the youth sector, its relationship with evaluation, and the questions that guide our study.

Section 3 describes the study’s methodology including a description of our mixed-methods research design informed by the Community Dialogue Approach.

Section 4 presents key findings from the survey and Section 5 presents key findings from our in-depth key informant interviews with sector stakeholders.

The report concludes with key recommendations to youth funding organizations, evaluation capacity building organizations, and youth organizations in order to improve the evaluation capacity of the youth sector.

02

What Are the Issues?

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

THE YOUTH SECTOR is important to Ontario.

ONTARIO'S YOUTH SECTOR

Ontario's youth sector provides essential "youth relevant" services and opportunities that are culturally and locally relevant to youth who may not otherwise have access. As young people transition from adolescence to early adulthood, many face challenges that threaten to undermine their potential.²

In today's rapidly changing and increasingly competitive environment, these challenges can create lasting barriers that prevent them from having a healthy and rewarding life. By offering a range of programs and services, the youth sector is particularly important to those youth who are vulnerable because of barriers and inequities in our society.³

Situated between the private and public sectors, the youth sector, embedded within the broader non-profit service sector, has been tasked with designing community-focused and community-based solutions to community-level challenges.⁴

The sector supports youth in successfully navigating these challenges in a great diversity of ways. From educational and employment supports to programs that encourage healthy lifestyles and mental wellbeing, non-profit youth groups and organizations contribute to the social infrastructure in communities.

In addition to the diversity of the issues and needs that the sector addresses, youth-serving groups and organizations apply a multitude of approaches and strategies to their work, informed by a range of ideas and evidence.⁵

In some ways, the energy of Ontario's youth sector has never been higher. There is a strategic focus on supporting young people who are most vulnerable in our society, whether through fostering economic and educational opportunities, tackling health disparities, or pushing for more civic empowerment among youth. Also, there is now

a widespread desire to approach 'youth work' in ways that build on strengths rather than focusing on deficiencies.⁶

Finally, there is an increasing convergence of values and goals between funders, service providers, researchers and youth in recognition that young people must be meaningfully involved in decision-making— although it is not always clear how to best put this principle into practice.⁷

As in other sectors, youth-focused organizations must engage in steep competition for public funds.⁸ In this competition, there is a strong trend towards demanding rigorously scientific forms of evidence in order to support claims for funding.⁹ Even when organizations can successfully build a case for their programs, funding is often short-term and covers the costs only of particular projects – not the core needs of the organization itself.¹⁰

The move from core funding to project-based funding, which is short-term and unpredictable, exacerbates precariousness. This precarity takes the form of increased part-time and contract employment, lower wages, increased shift-work, and fewer benefits and pensions, eroding the capacity of the sector to achieve its goals.¹¹

Commonly, the organizations and initiatives within the youth sector that are youth-led are small, often having fewer than five employees who are typically no more than thirty years old.¹² Young people themselves recognize the "critical importance of having youth organizations and programs run, developed and staffed by youth, primarily due to reasons of greater social proximity, familiarity and awareness of youth issues and tastes, and hence greater ability to understand and relate to youth, and design and implement programs that youth deem attractive and pertinent."¹³

As social entrepreneurs, these young organizations are responsive to the needs of their peers and community; they innovate solutions to limitations within existing social service and economic frameworks. However, youth-led organizations, which are incredibly important for providing young people with opportunities to exercise their right to meaningfully public participation, face specific challenges

to sustainability including: “staff transition, high mobility, constant orientation, capacity gaps when investment is only in ‘leaders’, tokenism, not taken seriously, lack of core funding.”¹⁴

Young people are drawn to work in the sector because it is perceived to offer meaningful and rewarding work. They are willing “to work more for less” because they believe in their work and it offers opportunities to build experience. It is not uncommon in a small youth-led organization that the Executive Director is also a frontline service provider. Moreover, by virtue of being highly dynamic and responsive to needs “on-the-ground,” the work these organizations do changes yearly and the skills required also change. This makes it difficult to maintain staffed positions that are continuous and full-time.

Grassroots youth sector organizations and initiatives are well-suited “change agents” for realizing the outcomes laid out in Ontario’s *Stepping Up* framework by virtue of their knowledge of community needs, strengths, and realities.¹⁵ However, they face a number of challenges in addition to those already identified which include: a lack of resources (human and financial), emerging and changing financial administration requirements, and insufficient organizational leadership and governance capacity.

Ironically, the things that make grassroots organizations powerful (being close to the ground, responsive, and non-bureaucratic) are the very things that undermine their organizational longevity.

EVALUATION AND YOUTH WORK

Evaluation knowledge is critical because it is inextricably linked to other elements of organizational capacity. Sound evaluation is based on good planning; strong evaluation can produce information critical development; and evaluation leads to quality improvement (Sobeck, 2008, p. 54).

Generally, evaluation – as a distinct, formal activity – is a relatively new and contested phenomenon in the non-profit sector.¹⁶ Public investments are increasingly made in the

third or not-for-profit service sector in order to deliver much needed social services. Concurrent with these investments is the need to understand and communicate the outcomes of this work. Therefore, organizational incentives to evaluate programs are both external and internal in origin.¹⁷

External drivers of evaluation include public accountability. Both public and private funding is increasingly tied to the ability to demonstrate achievement of stated outcomes.¹⁸ While the for-profit sector can clearly demonstrate “returns on investment” in very concrete terms, measuring outcomes in the social service and youth sector presents more of a challenge given the complexity of context and externalities.¹⁹ Lester Salamon observes that, “in addition to the fiscal and economic challenges confronting the non-profit sector at the present time is a third challenge, a veritable crisis of effectiveness.”

Because they do not meet a ‘market test,’ non-profits are always vulnerable to charges of inefficiency and ineffectiveness. However, the scope and severity of these charges have grown massively in recent years.²⁰ The desire for transparency, public accountability, and efficacy motivates funders to require funded organizations to provide evidence of the impact of their investment.²¹ For youth sector funders, evaluation and performance measurement provides them with the ability to mitigate the perception of risk associated with their investment.

Ideally, evaluation is intended to support action – to make decisions that support improved services and actions that contribute to youth wellbeing.²² From this perspective, evaluation can provide new insights into the impact of programs and services, as well as opportunities for improvement.

Furthermore, evaluations can be used to enhance program effectiveness and make a case for investment in ways that performance measurements alone cannot.²³ Compton, Baizerman, Preskill, Rieker and Miner argue that “when evaluation is perceived as a process that is likely to improve programs and increase the probability of obtaining funding, organizations are more likely to engage in and sustain evaluation activities.”²⁴

However, for many, and especially the grassroots youth-led sector, the promise of evaluation is constrained by everyday struggles for organizational sustainability.²⁵

According to Eckerd and Moulton, “very young non-profits likely do not have the resources available to evaluate and service fee-based organizations tend to act more like market-based firms.” In order to conduct useful evaluations that help an organization to understand and improve its impact, and contribute to securing an organization’s sustainability, organizations increasingly need to either build internal capacity or secure funds to contract a third party to conduct an external evaluation.²⁶ Not only may smaller organizations lack the resources to conduct evaluations but their “exposure to evaluation may be limited depending on the background and experience of the employees and leadership of the organization, the priority of evaluation within the goals of the organization, and the access to evaluation training and expertise.”²⁷

Researchers have identified numerous barriers that non-profit service providers, including the youth sector, face when asked to conduct meaningful evaluations. These include: different funder expectations, staff resistance, lack of expertise, and insufficient economic resources.²⁸ Although organizations are increasingly evaluating their own programs and projects, they often lack the capacity to use the data they generate to contribute to strategic planning or decision-making.²⁹ In resource constrained environments, evaluations are often short-term and focused on reporting rather than learning and improving.

In one of the few studies that focuses specifically on building evaluation capacity in a grassroots youth organization, researchers found that a lack of organizational capacity to contribute meaningfully or steer evaluations processes means that most evaluations are consultant or funder-driven, thereby diminishing the overall usefulness and impact of the evaluations conducted. As such, the researchers stressed the need for evaluation capacity-building strategies that adapt methods to local contexts and can involve multiple stakeholders, including youth, in the co-construction of outcome indicators and evaluation plans.³⁰

EVALUATION CAPACITY BUILDING IN THE ONTARIO YOUTH SECTOR

In order for the youth sector to a) deliver excellent services; and b) demonstrate impact, it requires evaluation capacity building (ECB) opportunities that support organizations/ initiatives to respond to both their contemporary funding context (external) and the needs of their organization (internal).

By building the capacity of organizations to conduct their own evaluations, we create conditions for ongoing systematic organizational learning, practice refinement, and programmatic modifications in the service of improving service delivery and increasing impact, all of which ultimately benefit youth participants.

ECB builds on the idea of evaluation process use put forward by Michael Quinn Patton: evaluation process use emphasizes the need to design evaluations that will help us to learn and improve practices and outcomes. Patton describes evaluation process use as evident when change occurs at the individual, program, and potentially organizational levels as a result of the evaluation.³¹

The notion that evaluations can do more for organizations than perform a function of reporting and accountability is closely tied to the growing focus on strategies for building evaluation capacity. Baron summarizes: “The idea of evaluation capacity building is to engrain evaluation into the everyday practice of the organization.”³² The overall goal of ECB “is sustainable evaluation practice—where members continuously ask questions that matter; collect, analyze, and interpret data; and use evaluation findings for decision-making and action.”³³

At its core, evaluation capacity is a key facilitator of organizational learning; organizations that can learn are more likely to meet outcomes and have greater overall impact.³⁴

Further, organizations with evaluation capacity are more likely to use evaluation practices in routine operations, and use evaluation results to inform decision making and program improvement.³⁶

There are multiple definitions of *evaluation capacity*³⁷ and similarly, there are multiple strategies for building evaluation capacity. The most commonly cited definition of ECB is attributed to Compton, Baizerman and Stockdill:

ECB is a context-dependent, intentional action system of guided processes and practices for bringing about and sustaining a state of affairs in which quality program evaluation and its appropriate uses are ordinary and ongoing practices within and/or between one or more organizations/programs/sites.³⁸

YouthREX adopts Preskill and Boyle's extended definition:

Evaluation capacity building involves the design and implementation of teaching and learning strategies to help individuals, groups, and organizations learn about what constitutes effective, useful, and professional evaluation practice.³⁹

An understanding of evaluation capacity provides some guidance for developing strategies to build evaluation capacity and also for understanding the quality of evaluation research across Ontario's youth sector. In one of the more influential frameworks for understanding evaluation, Preskill and Boyle identify ways through which evaluation capacity can be strengthened across three main categories: Professional Development, Resources and Support, and Organizational Environment.

Drawing on survey and case study data, Carmen and Fredericks found that investment in capacity building – through training and through technological investments (e.g. data management systems) would improve people's collection and use of evaluation data. They also suggest that it is important to embrace multiple evaluation types and foci – rather than relying entirely on outcome evaluations.⁴⁰

Public Health Ontario recently commissioned Hotte, Simmons, Beaton and the LDCP Workgroup to conduct a

Case Example 01 Capacity Building with Grassroots Youth Organizations

WHO: Strengthening Community Organizations to Promote Effectiveness (SCOPE)³⁵

ABOUT: This project provided capacity building for grassroots non-profit organizations in Detroit, Michigan. SCOPE defined capacity building as “activities and actions aimed at improving an organization's ability to fulfill its goals.”

ACTIVITIES: Capacity building activities and actions focused on governance and board development, strategic planning, technology improvements, and management training.

APPROACH: SCOPE's approach to capacity has some resonance with a Positive Youth Development framework – their work is guided by empowerment theory, which focuses on people's capabilities instead of their weaknesses or risk factors. Empowerment theory also stresses the importance of context. SCOPE's approach to capacity building is guided by research and practice in the field of organizational change.

They have a three-stage process:

1. Preparing for change (i.e., assessing organizational strengths/weaknesses; attitudes about change; and capacity for change)
2. Transformation (i.e., knowledge sharing; planning; and enhancing program delivery through development, planning, and evaluation)
3. Readiness for change (i.e., changes made to organizational structures and processes; improved programs; better resource stability; and a demonstrated commitment to organizational changes that align with mission and vision)

The services are targeted specifically to grassroots groups by:

1. Paying attention to sequencing (i.e., assessment, targeted workshops to improve foundational knowledge/skills, and then planning for change)
2. Using empowerment theory to guide the work (i.e., groups are afforded some degree of self-determination)

Case Example 02

Capacity Building with Grassroots Youth Organizations

WHO: Bayview Hunter's Point Community Fund ⁴⁵

ABOUT: The Bayview Hunter's Point Community Fund was a grant-making and capacity building initiative (from 2001-2014) that focused on providing capacity building opportunities to the smaller grassroots youth development organizations.

ACTIVITIES: The Community Fund did things like provide operational supports; access to funds for capacity building; flexible multi-year funding; and limit reporting requirements.

APPROACH: They avoided one-size-fits-all models, instead working with grantees to identify their organizations needs and establish individualized workplans with them. Workplans were carried out with support from the Community Fund. Ongoing coaching was provided during monthly meetings. Where the Fund staff were unable to provide the capacity building supports required, external assistance was sought. Long-term investment, frequent one-on-one meetings, and the use of external technical experts were seen as key to the success of the Bayview Hunter's Point Community Fund.

Their work highlights the importance of creating capacity building strategies that are responsive, individualized, flexible, and included a willingness to learn on the part of the capacity building organization. Capacity builders need to commit to offering flexible and individualized supports, so that organizations can pursue big-picture objectives (like strategic planning and evaluation) and the day-to-day issues that organizational leaders must also address.

scoping review of ECB strategies. They found the field is relatively new and as such the research evidence is varied. ⁴¹ Most research to date on ECB is theoretical and descriptive emerging from case-based studies that lack comparability. However, they did identify 6 recurrent key themes. Successful ECB strategies work interdependently across the following key areas:

1. Leadership
2. Organizational Environment
3. Building Individual Skills, Knowledge & Attitudes
4. Comprehensive Organizational Evaluation Framework
5. Resources
6. External Support


Moreover, Labin, Duffy, Meyers, Wandersman and Lesesne find that ECB "strategies can be directed at the individual level for learning and behavior change and at the organizational level." ⁴² How ECB is designed and directed influences outcomes. ⁴³ Across the literature, researchers caution against a "one-size-fits-all" approach to evaluation capacity building.

In response to this challenge, Harris and Schlappa recommend building hubs of evaluation expertise so that organizations can access customized services that identify unique evaluation capacity needs and craft appropriate designs. These hubs run by intermediary organizations that are neither government nor for-profit will need to "face both ways," straddling the demands of needs on the ground and those of the funders and external stakeholders. ⁴⁴

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT IN EVALUATION CAPACITY BUILDING

Organizational evaluation capacity building requires involving stakeholders in the evaluation. Evaluations have the best chance of being useful and improving program outcomes when stakeholders are actively engaged in the process. ⁴⁶ The capacity of organizations to do evaluation cannot be divorced from the capacities of staff who often report "a lack of resources and internal expertise as primary challenges to implementing sustainable evaluation practices in their organizations." ⁴⁷

Staff need to be supported to develop the skills to not only create but adapt their program logic model and their



In some ways, the energy of Ontario's youth sector has never been higher.

There is a strategic focus on supporting young people who are most vulnerable in our society, whether through fostering economic and educational opportunities, tackling health disparities, or pushing for more civic empowerment among youth.

practices in response to evaluation findings. Therefore, García-Iriarte, Suarez-Balcazar, Taylor-Ritzler, and Luna suggest using multiple methods to build evaluation capacity with staff. These methods include: “immersion approaches, brainstorming meetings, technical assistance, and coaching/mentoring, in addition to training.”⁴⁸

Preskill argues that ECB strategies should employ social learning theory that emphasizes applying learning to context. ECB participants should be actively engaged in collaborative evaluation learning and application; formal stand-alone trainings and readings are less successful.⁴⁹

YOUTH INVOLVEMENT IN EVALUATION

Frontline youth workers frequently express concern that evaluation will interfere with their primary work of providing direct service to and building developmental relationships with youth. Evaluation is often seen as a deterrent to doing what they are committed to and passionate about – working with, and supporting youth.

However, evaluation does not need to get in the way of good youth work; the research is clear that involvement in research and evaluation can support many of the very outcomes that youth workers, and the youth sector as whole, is working to achieve.

As noted above, stakeholder engagement and involvement is a core dimension of evaluation capacity. Who has more at stake in the youth sector than youth themselves?⁵⁰ Effective youth programs offer “youth activities through which to form relationships with caring adults, relations that elicit hope in young people.”^{51, 52} Developmental relationships can be forged through participatory youth-adult research and evaluation efforts.

Engaging youth in evaluation has the potential to benefit youth in many ways – for example, skill development, relationship building, and exposure to diverse opportunities to learn. The value added to the wider research process, however, should not be overlooked.

Supporting youth engagement and leadership in research and evaluation improves the overall quality of the research and evaluation process (especially as a legitimizing voice in the research and inquiry of youth sector) and benefits the wider community as a whole.

Involvement in research and evaluation is also empowering for youth who are “often the subjects of research—targeted interventions—[and a mind-set that] adults must solve youths problems.”⁵³

Walker suggests that youth engagement in research and evaluation directly contributes to validating the diverse experiences of youth and equalizing power relations, which then supports youth in exercising their wider political rights, participating in the democratization of knowledge production and civic engagement.⁵⁴

SUMMARY

In summary, several important issues affect youth sector evaluation capacity in Ontario. These include the influential impact of funding conditions, particularly the impact of program-based funding on core organizational capacities; the variation in the policy and reporting requirements depending on the sub-sectors where groups and organizations operate; issues relating to local and regional variation including availability of partners and resources that can support the development of evaluation capacity; staffing and working conditions in organizations; evaluation leadership in and across organizations; as well as other factors that influence evaluation capacity supported by research evidence.

YouthREX acknowledges that evaluation is sometimes ‘political’. Starting where grassroots youth programs are, and understanding what their concerns with evaluation are opens up the space to thoughtfully address these concerns and discuss how research and evaluation can be ‘leveraged’ to improve outcomes for youth, which is what the sector is passionate about.


WHAT DO WE WANT TO KNOW ABOUT EVALUATION IN THE ON YOUTH SECTOR?

YouthREX undertook “*Beyond Measure? The State of Evaluation and Action in Ontario’s Youth Sector*” in order to better understand the context of our work. Findings from this research will inform the design and delivery of our services. This study is the first of its kind and provides a only needs assessment for the sector, and a baseline for our work.

This study set out to identify:

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

The aim of the study is 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, critical 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 will not only inform YouthREX and our work, but will also be useful to youth sector funders, policy makers, grassroots youth organization, and non-profit agency leaders and decision makers.



YouthREX acknowledges that evaluation is sometimes ‘political’. Starting where grassroots youth programs are, and understanding what their concerns with evaluation are opens up the space to thoughtfully address these concerns and discuss how research and evaluation can be ‘leveraged’ to improve outcomes for youth, which is what the sector is passionate about.

03

What Is Our Research Approach?

METHODOLOGY

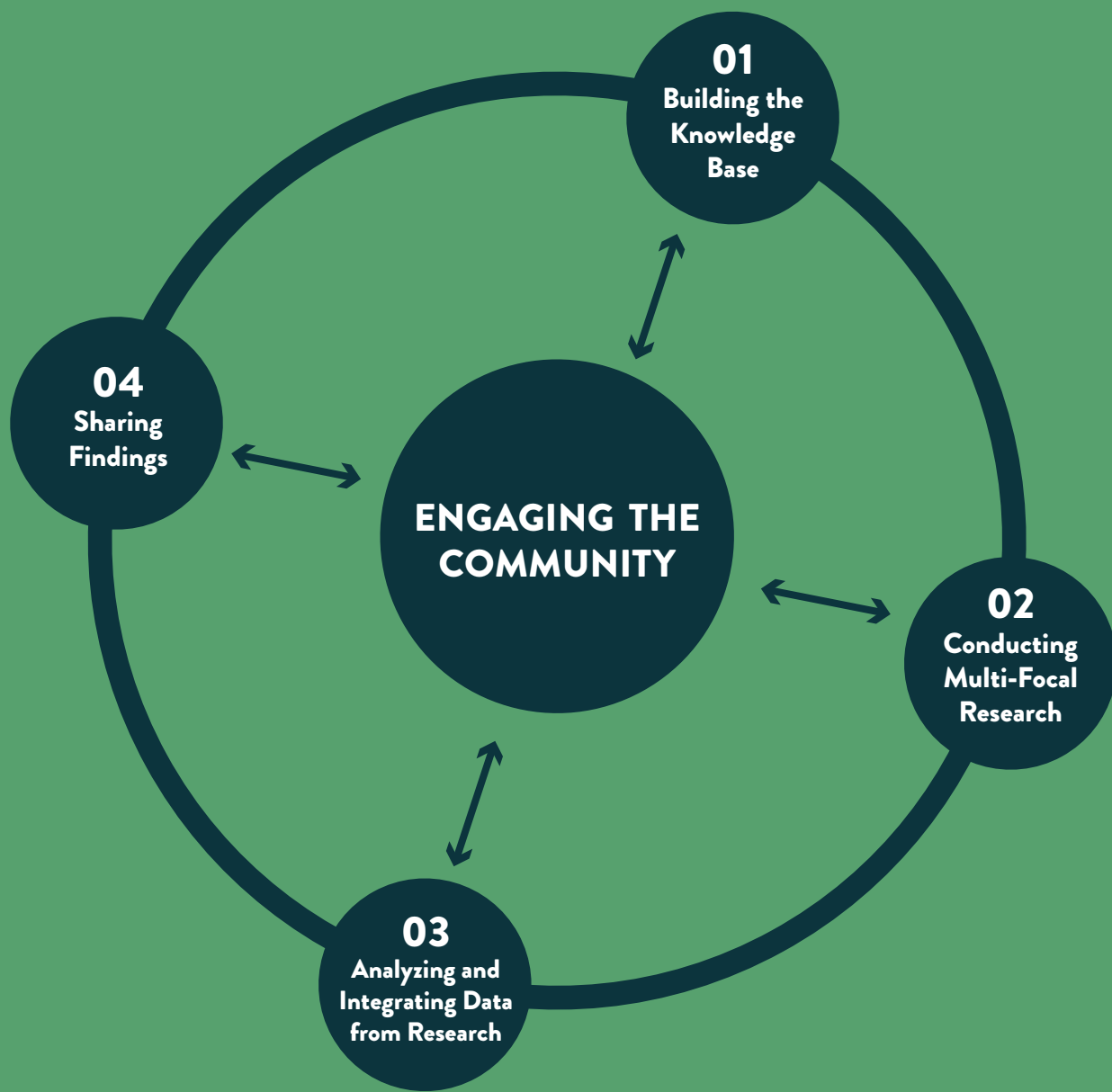


FIGURE 1:
**The Community
Dialogue Approach**

A COMMUNITY DIALOGUE APPROACH

The “*Beyond Measure*” methodology was framed by a ‘Community Dialogue Approach (CDA)’.⁵⁵ This action research process 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. YouthREX began the process of Engaging the Community during the proposal development stage. 19 organizations provided letters of support. The governing structure of YouthREX includes a Provincial Advisory Committee, five Regional Advisory Committees and a Provincial Youth Advisory Committee. Figure 1 is a diagram of the CDA.

The first stage of the CDA, “Building the Knowledge Capacity” involves a systematic review of literature and secondary data analysis of existing data. For “*Beyond Measure?*”, this stage included a comprehensive review of the literature as well as an inventory⁵⁶ of youth organizations. The literature review informed the development of the survey questionnaire⁵⁷ while the inventory of youth organizations was used to prepare a distribution list for the survey.

The second stage of the CDA, “Conducting Multi-focal Research” involves multi-method research. For “*Beyond Measure?*”, the second stage of the CDA included an online cross-sectional survey and qualitative key informant interviews. The study received ethics approval from all of YouthREX’s university partners: York University, University of Western Ontario, Carleton University, Laurentian University and Lakehead University.

The third stage of the CDA, “Integration of Findings” involves integrating findings from the multi-method data collection and identifying leverage points for possible policy and practice interventions. For the “*Beyond Measure?*” report, the integration of findings from the survey and key informant interviews identified five key messages.

The fourth stage of the CDA: “Knowledge Translation and Dissemination” focuses on disseminating findings to both academic and non-academic communities.⁵⁸

YouthREX began this process of knowledge translation and dissemination by sharing emerging findings from the survey at a forum held March 2015 in Markham, Ontario.⁵⁹ This event brought together youth sector stakeholders – youth organizations, funders, policy-makers and young people. We began a critical conversation about the state of evaluation and action in the youth sector at this forum that this report continues.

CROSS SECTIONAL ONLINE SURVEY

The questionnaire for the survey was developed through a two-step process: first, a review of the relevant literature, and second, a consultation with youth-service organizations. Two previous studies were particularly relevant to our literature search: one nation-wide study done in the US in 2012⁶⁰ and another similar study completed in the UK⁶¹ the same year. Both studies focused on similar research questions regarding the evaluation capacity of the non-profit sector but neither were focused on youth-serving organizations exclusively. In order to confirm that these questions were relevant to youth organizations in Ontario, we conducted a series of stakeholder consultations.

We requested feedback from organizations in Thunder Bay, Ottawa, Durham, Toronto, Hamilton, London and Windsor, as well as feedback from our regional hubs and their Academic Directors. The finalized version of the questionnaire and interview guide were translated from English into French and reviewed by a bilingual member of our team for consistency and clarity. The questionnaire is attached as Appendix A. The online survey was conducted in March and April 2015. Our community partners supported the distribution of the survey and our email invitations to complete the survey included a request to share the survey with other youth-serving organization outside our distribution list.⁶² In total, our distribution list had approximately 1,100 distinct groups and organizations.

Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of completed questionnaires by region. Compared with data from our list of youth programs and services, we received a similar distribution of completed surveys by region, except for the Northern Ontario regions, which were underrepresented.

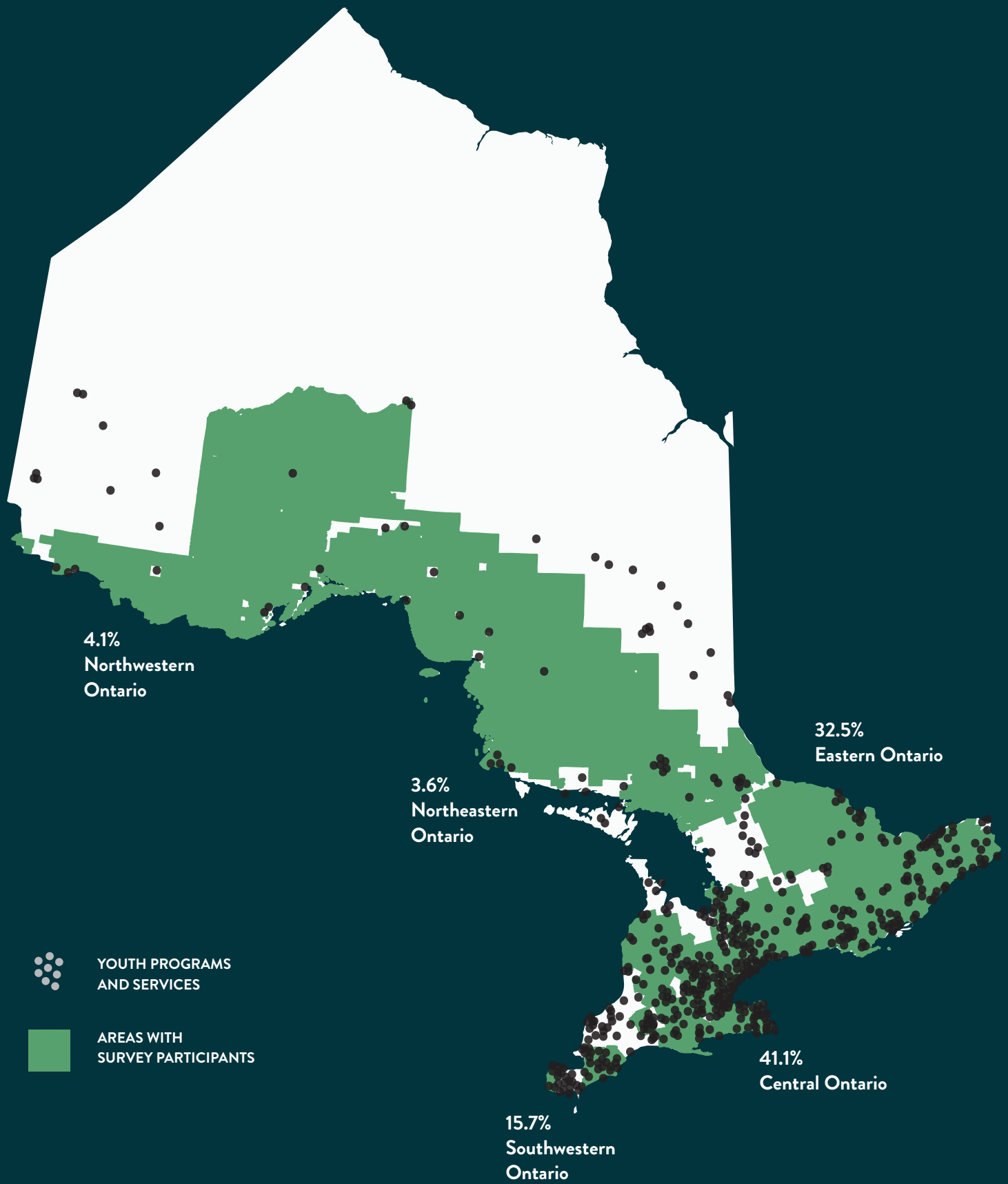


FIGURE 2:
Survey Results by Region

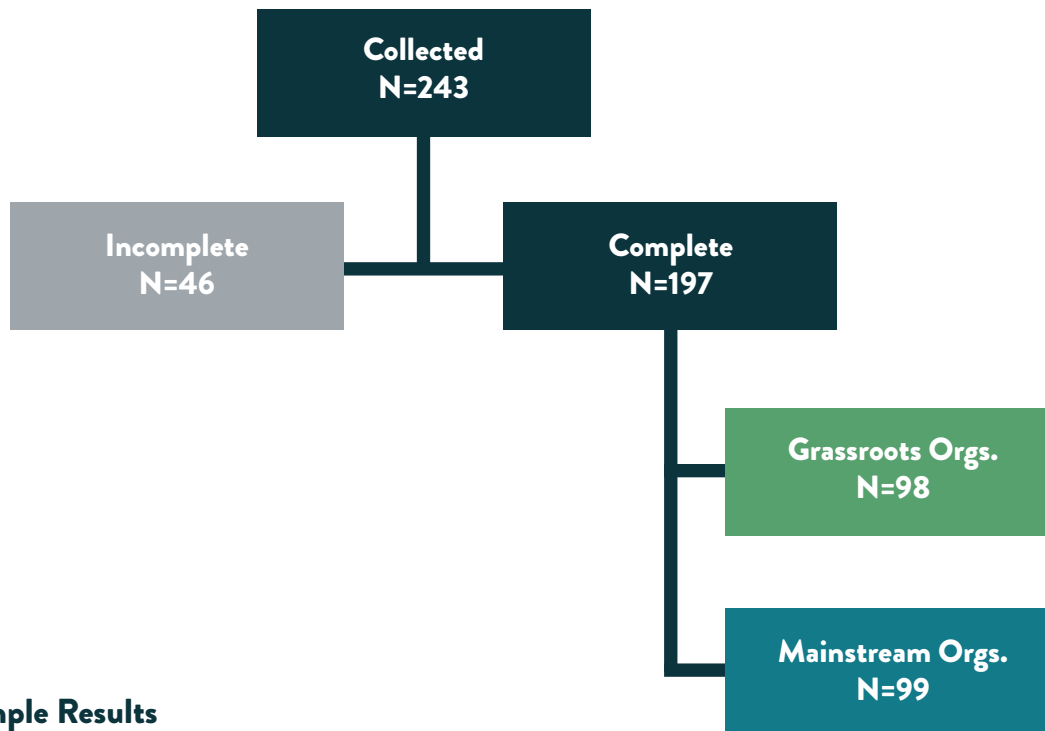


FIGURE 3
Survey Sample Results

SURVEY ANALYSIS

All analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.0. Bivariate statistical analyses (cross-tabulations) were used to summarize relationships between characteristics of grassroots and mainstream organizations to identify statistically significant patterns in the data.

In order to develop comparison groups that reflected core characteristics of ‘mainstream’ and ‘grassroots’ youth-serving organizations, we used the K-means clustering method available in SPSS. K-means is a widely used method for organizing data into reasonably different groups.⁶³ This method develops groups of similar observations based on their standardized distance from the mean for each of the input variables. Where the input variables include categorical data, the computation attempts a match. Based on our understanding of key factors that relate to the conceptual differences between ‘mainstream’ and ‘grassroots’ non-profits, the K-means cluster factored in the following variables: budget size, financial arrangements, presence of core funding, the level of contribution by volunteers, and whether the organization identified as a youth-led collective.

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

The interview guide was developed through a similar process of consultations as the questionnaire. The questions were developed after review of previous studies and then reviewed by members of the YouthREX staff, provincial advisory council members and external stakeholders, including members of youth-serving organizations and funders. The interview participants were recruited using snowball sampling strategies where consultations with internal and community stakeholders identified youth sector stakeholders with direct knowledge of evaluation activities, specifically the person responsible for evaluation at the organization. In total, 77 people were recommended, out of which 60 participants were purposively selected and interviewed between April and May 2015. The interviews were conducted and transcribed by the Institute of Social Research (ISR) at York University and they provided preliminary analysis that guided further thematic analysis by the authors. The interview guide is attached as Appendix B.

04

What Did We Learn?

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY

THIS SECTION of the report presents key findings from the online survey that was completed by 197 organizations. Five key findings were identified from the results, analyzed here in large part through the lens of this sub-group difference (grassroots and mainstream organizations).

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 limits, particularly among the grassroots.

05

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

The survey results allowed us to clearly identify two sub-groups in the Ontario youth non-profit sector, referred to here as grassroots organizations and mainstream organizations.

Sobeck, Agius & Mayers, (2007), referring to Smith (2000), define grassroots organizations as “small in geographic scope, mainly comprised of volunteers with usually one full-time paid staff member, autonomous, informally organized, low to moderate external power, and with few economic resources.”

Grassroots organizations are generally more focused in terms of service provision, have not been around very long, and have fewer funding sources than larger non-profit organizations. Out of the 197 completed surveys, 98 came from grassroots organizations and 99 from mainstream organizations.

There were significant differences between grassroots and mainstream organizations across most key characteristics including their organization type, history of financial arrangements – presence of core funding and experience with financial stewardship, reliance on volunteers, staff size, numbers of part-time staff, and governance (Table 1).

Most grassroots youth-serving organizations are incorporated non-profits or registered charities, though a small minority (11%) in our sample were neither. They are younger organizations on average, though with considerable diversity from one organization to the next.

The day-to-day operations of grassroots organizations are considerably more dependent on volunteers^a and these organizations have much lower proportions of full-time^b and frontline staff.^c Also, grassroots organizations employ more youth than mainstream organizations with close to 40% of staff being comprised of young people on average.^d

^a ANOVA: $F=23.074$, $p<0.001$

^b ANOVA: $F=16.236$, $p<0.001$

^c ANOVA: $F=43.088$, $p<0.001$

^d ANOVA: $F=5.381$, $p=0.022$

Selected Characteristics of Non-profit Youth-Serving Organizations

197

Organizations across Ontario participated in our online survey.

98

Grassroots organizations
49.8%

99

Mainstream organizations
50.2%

TABLE 1 Selected Characteristics of Non-profit Youth Serving Organizations

		Grassroots Organizations	Mainstream Organizations	Overall
Number of Survey Participants		98	99	197
Location	Small Population Centre	18.6%	8.5%	13.6%
	Medium Population Centre	13.4%	14.9%	14.1%
	Large Urban Population Centre	68.0%	76.6%	72.3%
Organization Type	Incorporated Non-Profit Organization	36.7%	50.0%	43.4%
	Not a Registered or Incorporated Organization	11.2%	1.0%	6.1%
	Registered Charitable Organization	32.7%	37.8%	35.2%
	Project/Initiative	6.1%	0%	3.1%
History of Financial Arrangements	No Core Funding	42.9%	13.3%	28.1%
	Our Finances have been Trusteed by Another Organization	19.4%	3.2%	11.5%
	We have Acted as a Trustee for Another Group	11.2%	22.3%	16.7%
Staffing	More than 50% of Organization's Work is Done by Volunteers	45.9%	13.4%	29.7%
	Median Staff Size	22	53	26
	Average Percent of Part-Time Staff	69.5%	49.3%	59.4%
Governance	Youth Led	32.7%	14.4%	23.6%
	Youth Members on Board of Directors ^e	73.7%	90.7%	82.4%

^e Includes only grassroots (N=76) and mainstream (N=83) identified survey participants who reported that the board question was relevant to their organization.

TABLE 2 **Issue-based Focus of Programs and Services in the Youth Sector**

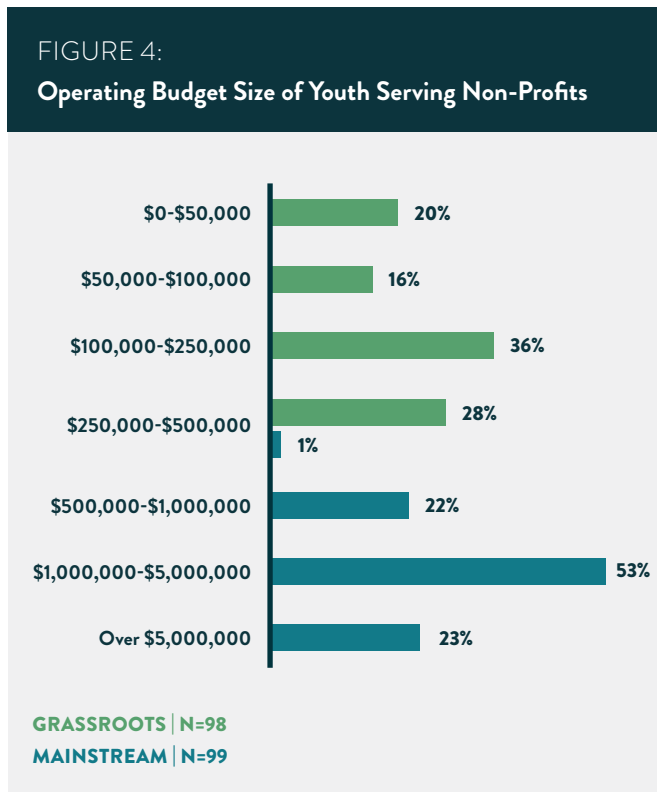
	Grassroots N = 98	Mainstream N = 99	All N = 197
Arts & Culture	32.7%	28.3%	30.5%
Civic Engagement	28.6%	29.3%	28.9%
Education/Skills Development	54.1%	66.7%	60.4%
Employment/Entrepreneurship	29.6%	49.5%	39.6%
Environmental/Nature Conservation	13.3%	5.1%	9.1%
Family Wellbeing (e.g. intergenerational issues)	25.5%	38.4%	32.0%
Faith-based	9.2%	10.1%	9.6%
Food Security	19.4%	22.2%	20.8%
Housing & Homelessness	23.5%	30.3%	26.9%
Intimate Partner Violence	12.2%	23.2%	17.8%
Immigration & Citizenship (e.g. settlement services)	11.2%	16.2%	13.7%
Justice System Involvement/Re-integration supports	26.5%	37.4%	32.0%
Sexual Violence	9.2%	18.2%	13.7%
Sexuality & Gender Issues	23.5%	29.3%	26.4%
Physical Health & Wellbeing	38.8%	41.4%	40.1%
Mental Health & Wellbeing	44.9%	56.6%	50.8%
Mentorship	49.0%	45.5%	47.2%
Substance Use Issues	24.5%	38.4%	31.5%
Recreation/Sports	38.8%	36.4%	37.6%
Young parents	13.3%	26.3%	19.8%
Violence Prevention/Intervention/Gang Exit	18.4%	25.3%	21.8%
Volunteering	43.9%	45.5%	44.7%
Other	10.2%	8.1%	9.1%

Across all regions, education and skill development was a prevalent focus for youth organizations, as well as volunteering, mentoring, mental health, employment and entrepreneurship, physical health, arts and culture and civic engagement (Table 2).

Mainstream youth-serving organizations address a diversity of needs, challenges and issues as shown in Table 2. They often include services for accessing employment and encouraging entrepreneurship.^f They are also more likely than grassroots organizations to implement programs

^f Chi Square: p<0.004, Phi=0.203

addressing intimate partner violence,^g parenting^h and substance abuse.ⁱ Grassroots organizations focus on a diversity of issues, and are more likely to address environmental and conservational issues.^j



According to our sample, grassroots youth-serving organization in Ontario are likely to have a budget of less than \$500,000 in the year before the survey, with the plurality having a budget between \$10,000 and \$250,000 in that period (Figure 4). These very limited financial resources are reflected in a high risk of having no core funding, a situation reported by 40% of grassroots organizations.^k It also contributes to the likelihood of having their finances trusted by another organization in the past – a situation four times more likely to affect grassroots organizations than mainstream ones.^l

^g 23 per cent of mainstream group, versus 12 per cent of grassroots group. Chi Square: p<0.044, Cramer's V=0.144

^h 26 per cent of mainstream group, versus 13 per cent of grassroots group. Chi Square: p<0.022, Cramer's V=0.163

ⁱ 38 per cent of mainstream group, versus 25 per cent of grassroots group. Chi Square: p<0.036, Cramer's V=0.150

^j Chi Square: p<0.045, Cramer's V=0.143

^k Versus 13% of the mainstream group. Chi Square: p<0.001, Cramer's V=0.277

^l Versus 5% of the mainstream group. Chi Square: p<0.001, Cramer's V=0.277

FIVE KEY FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY

Five key findings were identified from the results, analyzed here in large part through the lens of this sub-group difference (grassroots and mainstream organizations):

KEY FINDING #1:

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

The survey included questions about participants' outlook on the usefulness of evaluation, its impact on program delivery (both positive and negative), as well as their perception of funders' concerns with evaluation results. The results demonstrate a sharp contrast between a widespread acceptance of evaluation as an activity which, in principle, can strengthen youth-service organizations – and an equally widespread feeling that organizations lack the capacity to undertake evaluation without severely stretching limited resources.

Almost all of the survey respondents (92%), among both grassroots and mainstream organizations, believe that

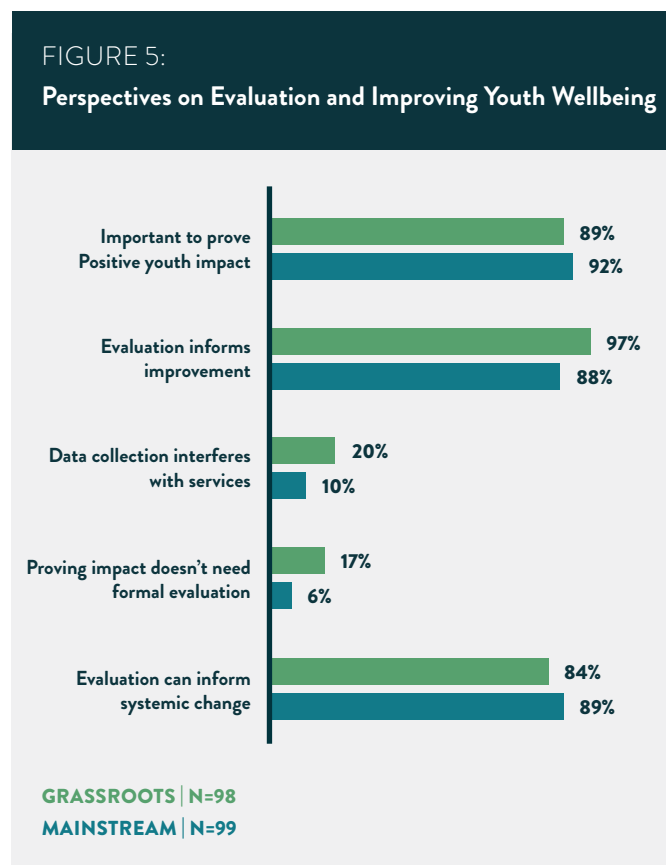
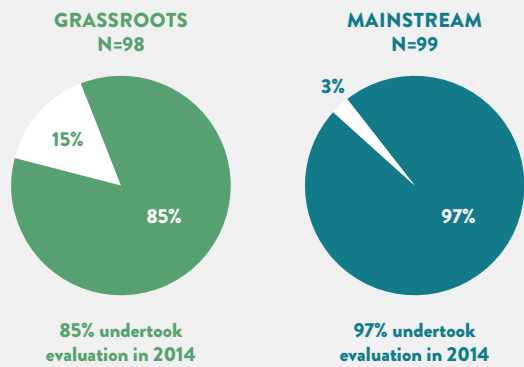


FIGURE 6:
Youth-Serving Non-profit by Completion of an Evaluation in 2013-2014

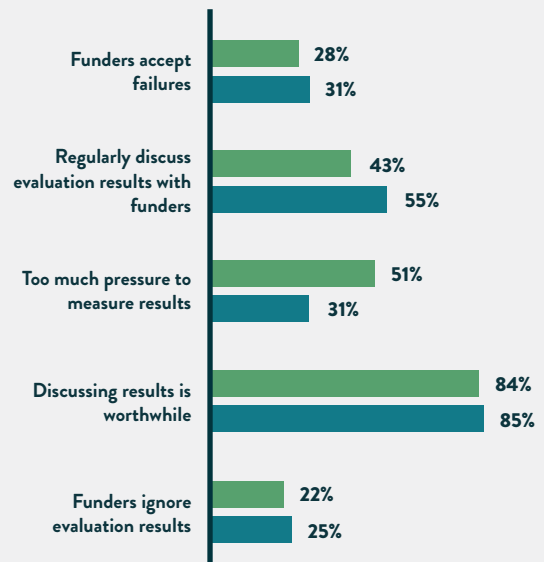


evaluation has the potential to improve programs and services (Figure 5). Similar numbers of respondents also agreed that proving positive impacts of youth-oriented programs was important.

Lastly, youth-serving non-profits in Ontario broadly agree that evaluation is not only useful for fine-tuning individual programs and policies: it can inform systemic change (see also Key Finding #2). Overall, the survey results are very positive towards evaluation.

The enthusiasm for evaluation is not all talk: almost all of responding organizations reported that they had conducted at least one evaluation in the past year (Figure 6). However, grassroots organizations were five times more likely not to have conducted an evaluation – possibly as a result of fewer funder obligations, or fewer available resources (see Key Finding #4). This difference might also be related to the finding that grassroots organizations are twice as likely to feel that evaluation disrupts program delivery – though even in the grassroots group, only one in five agreed that this was the case. Despite these signs of intergroup difference, we can summarize by stating that formal evaluation is an accepted and prevalent aspect of youth-sector non-profit activities in our sample.

FIGURE 7:
Perspectives on Funders’ Responses to Evaluation



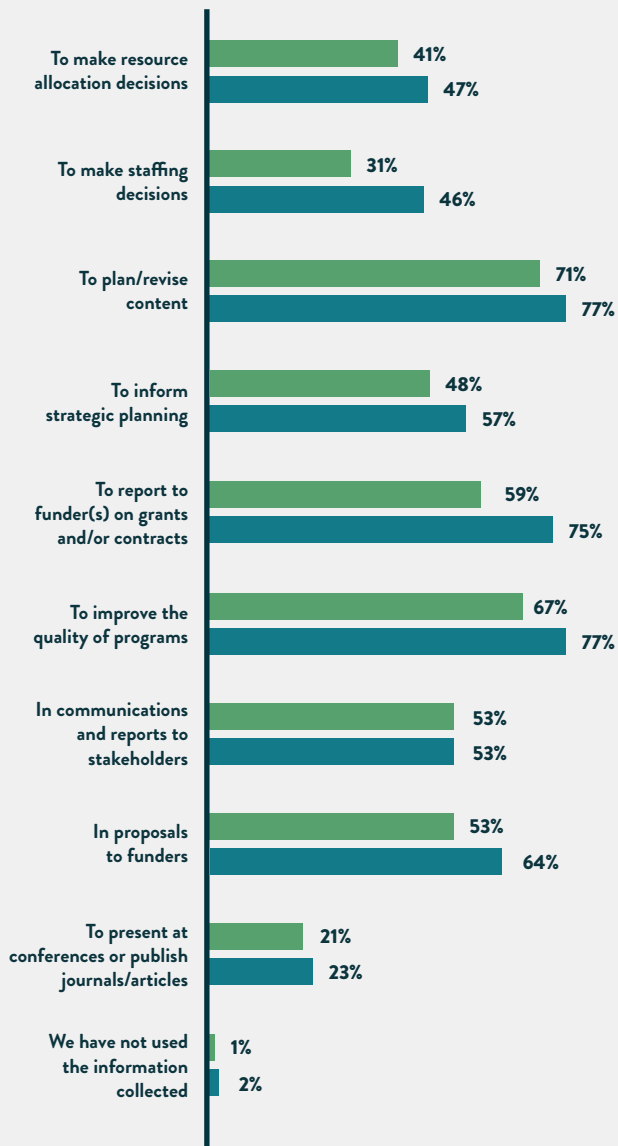
GRASSROOTS | N=98
 MAINSTREAM | N=99

KEY FINDING #2
Youth-serving organizations want to share and discuss evaluation results.

As noted above, the expectations of evaluation held by survey respondents go beyond internal program-based improvements. A large majority reported that evaluation results could foster worthwhile discussions with funders, although a significant minority (one in four) reported feeling that funders ignore evaluation results (Figure 7).

Consistent with this finding, there is widespread effort evident in our sample to put evaluation data into wider practice. The survey found that youth serving organizations use evaluation results in several different ways, particularly to plan and revise programs and services, report to funders and as information in their proposals for additional funding (Figure 8).

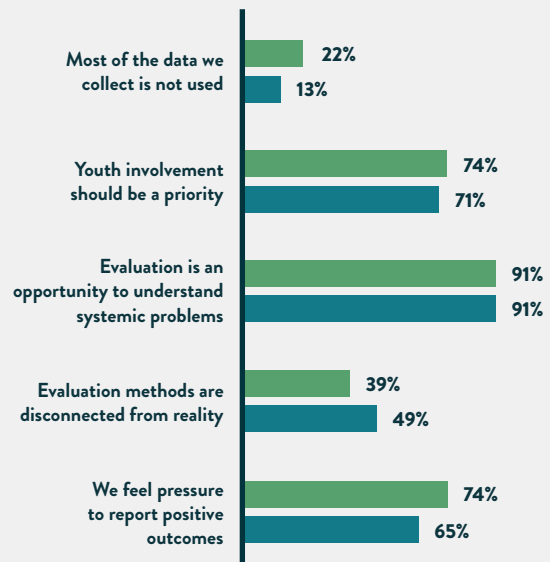
FIGURE 8:
Ways that Evaluation Results are Used



GRASSROOTS | N=98
MAINSTREAM | N=99

Only 1% of survey participants reported that their organization had not used data collected through evaluation in some way (Figure 8). Respondents, significantly, also see the inclusion of youth as a priority in evaluation activities, indicating a desire to integrate evaluation into their overall organizational mission (Figure 9).

FIGURE 9:
Perspectives on Evaluations



GRASSROOTS | N=77
MAINSTREAM | N=85

KEY FINDING #3

Evaluation practices are driven by funder priorities and project life cycles.

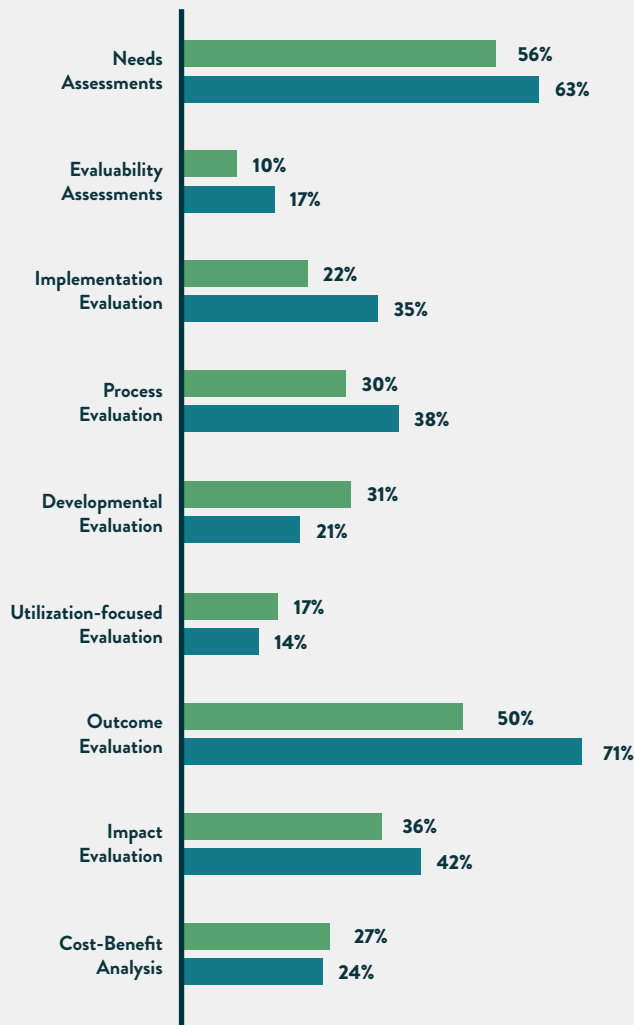
While a majority of youth-serving organizations in our study have a broad understanding of the potential of evaluation to advance youth voices and drive systemic change, in practice evaluation appears to be applied somewhat more narrowly.

A gap emerges between the types of evaluation activities that relate to a single project, and those that contribute more broadly to organizational development and effectiveness.

When evaluations get underway, there are significant differences between grassroots and mainstream organizations with regards to the approaches and methods (Figure 10) used.

Outcome evaluations were the most commonly cited type of evaluation done across the sector, followed by

FIGURE 10:
Evaluation Approaches



GRASSROOTS | N=98
MAINSTREAM | N=99

needs assessments, and impact evaluations. Evaluability assessments – used to identify a feasible approach for measuring program or service performance – was the least cited evaluation activity.

Despite the prevalence of outcome-focused evaluations overall, grassroots organizations were significantly less likely to report undertaking this approach.^m The survey analysis

^m Chi Square: p=0.003, Phi=0.212

Evaluation Approaches

There is an extensive literature on how to best evaluate different styles of program, although most of this theory is not specific to youth. Here are brief definitions of the evaluation approaches that we asked about in our survey:

Needs Assessments determine who needs a proposed program (or range of programs), how great the need is, and what activities might work to meet that need.

Evaluability Assessments determine whether an evaluation is feasible at a given time, and how stakeholders could help shape its usefulness.

Implementation Evaluations monitor how closely the day-to-day work of the program matches the originally proposed strategy and procedures.

Process Evaluations investigate the activities related to delivering the program, comparing their measured effectiveness to alternative delivery procedures.

Developmental Evaluations start with the assumption that a program is operating in an environment highly susceptible to change over the span of delivery, and focuses on innovation and strategic learning rather than on meeting fixed outcomes.

Utilization-focused Evaluations are those who begin with an effort to model how the evaluation data will be used by the delivering organization – and constructs an evaluation plan likely to maximize that proposed usefulness.

Outcome Evaluations try to determine whether a program caused demonstrable effects on specifically-defined target outcomes

Impact Evaluations take a broader approach than the targeted model of Outcome evaluations, assessing the overall effects – both intended and unintended – of the program.

Cost-Benefit Analyses assign dollar values to program inputs and outcomes, and assess the efficiency with which one is converted into the other.

also found that grassroots organizations were significantly less likely to report undertaking implementation evaluations in the past.ⁿ

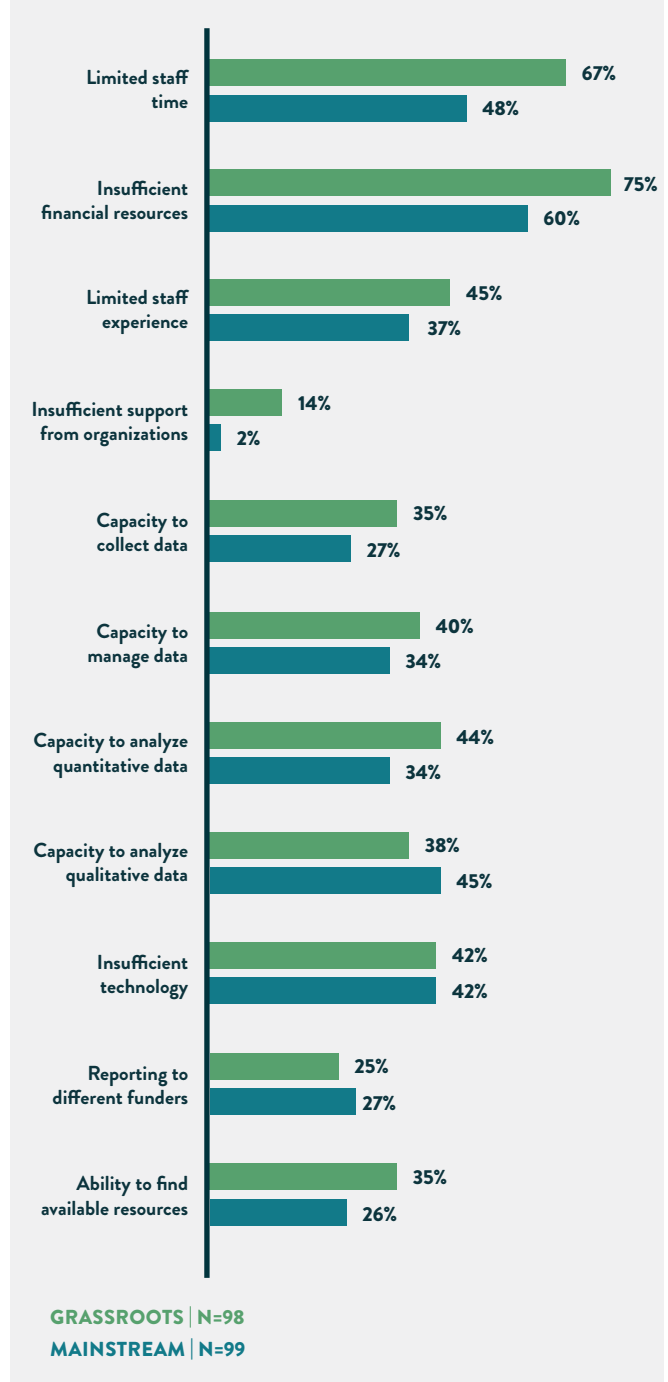
The stark difference visible in evaluation approaches underlines how important the movement to evidence-based accountability has been in promoting evaluation activities. The two dominant forms of evaluation activity are closely related to the cycle of project-based funding: needs assessments (56% - 63%) to establish a rationale for a funded program, and outcome evaluations (50% - 71%) to justify funded activities. By contrast, comparatively few organizations have undertaken evaluation activities that do not directly judge (or predict) project success but may contribute to organizational learning and planning.

This observation is borne out by examining the uses to which evaluation data is put. Organizations of all kinds were more likely to use evaluations to revise programs and apply for funding than to inform strategic planning or make staffing decisions (Figure 9).

In terms of the comparison between grassroots and mainstream organizations, there was a significantly higher percentage of mainstream organizations that reported using their evaluations to guide their staffing decisions^o and in their reports to funders (Figure 8)^p. Although the survey data is not conclusive – and may be clarified by the interview data discussed below – it is possible that these differences reflect unequal access to core funding and unequal levels of internal capacity to envision broader uses of evaluation data.

In the absence of in-house evaluation experts (see Key Finding #4 for more, below), it is not surprising that external partnerships were identified as important supports for evaluation work across the youth sector. Funders were the most frequently identified support for doing evaluations with 61% of all survey participants reporting that their organization worked with funders to conduct evaluations in the last three years. There were no statistically significant differences between grassroots and mainstream organizations regarding the types of partnerships that contributed to conducting evaluations.^q

FIGURE 11:
Challenges with Doing Evaluation



ⁿ Chi Square: p=0.046, Phi=0.142

^o Chi Square: p=0.022, Phi=0.163

^p Chi Square: p=0.002, Phi=0.166

^q According to the comments provided for these questions, “Other” generally refers to local businesses and other private sector organizations.

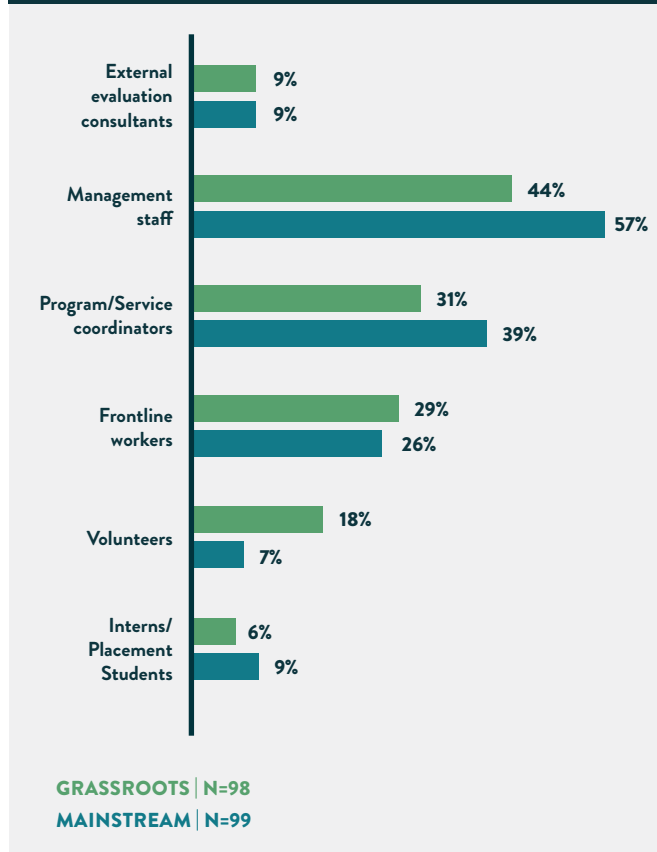
KEY FINDING #4

Current evaluation expectations are stretching resources to their limits.

There are signs that evaluation activities, while accepted as necessary and potentially beneficial, are not yet well-resourced in many youth-serving organizations, especially and unsurprisingly in the grassroots. These findings are also unsurprising in the context of tightly-stretched resources generally. The evidence from our survey that points to this finding can be summarized as follows:

- Respondents perceive a lack of capacity and resources for evaluation.
- There is an absence of specialized evaluation capacity in human resources, with executive leadership and program management taking on evaluation roles.
- There is a limited diversity and uncertain validity of the tools being used to gather evaluation data.

FIGURE 12:
Organizational Staff Responsible for Evaluation



A significantly higher number of participants from grassroots organizations (51%) reported that there is too much pressure being placed on their initiatives to measure results.^r When funding for the sector is perceived as lacking overall, evaluation can begin to seem like a futile expenditure of energy.

The lack of funding is a major evaluation challenge within the youth sector. Majority of survey participants (67%) reported that insufficient financial resources are a significant constraint on their capacity to do evaluation. Of survey respondents, 57% identified limited staff time to dedicate to evaluation as a key challenge; large minorities reported not having sufficient technology for their evaluation work, or lacking the capacity to analyze data.

When asked about who at their organization was typically responsible for conducting evaluations of programs and services, overall about 50% of survey respondents reported that management staff do the evaluation activities at their organization; 35% reported that evaluations were done by program/service coordinators; 27% were done by frontline staff who work with youth and roughly 5% reported that their organization had research/evaluation staff tasked with undertaking this work.

Grassroots organizations were over twice as likely as mainstream organizations to report having volunteers conduct evaluations (Figure 12).^s

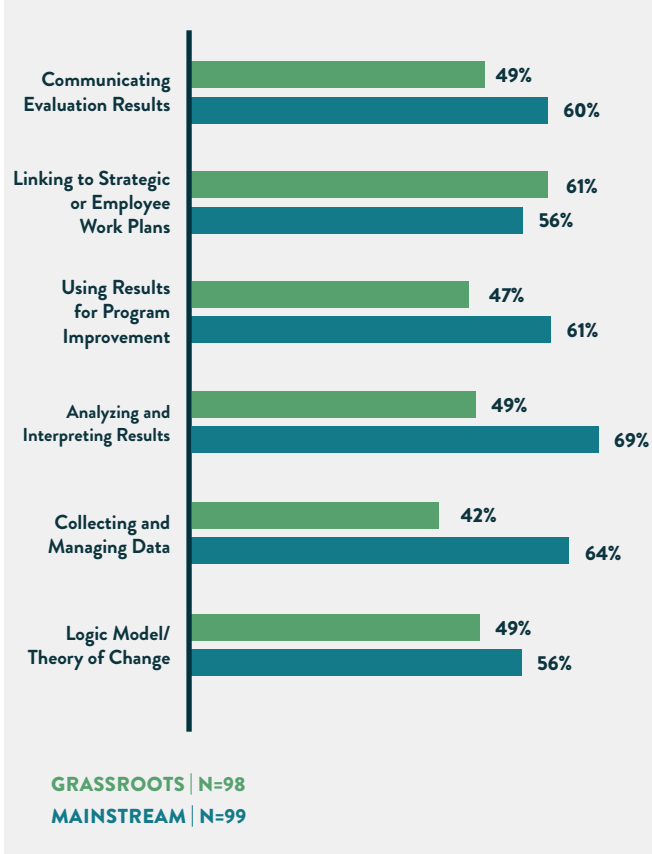
Few survey participants (11%) reported that their organization had at least one full-time employee dedicated to undertaking evaluation, though these positions were much more likely to exist at mainstream organizations.^t This result is not surprising considering the smaller budgets and staff size in grassroots organizations as well as their considerable reliance on part-time and volunteer workers, but underscores the low capacity of the sector as a whole.

^r Mann-Whitney U: p=0.009

^s Chi Square: p=0.017, Phi=0.170

^t 18% versus 5% in the grassroots group. Chi Square: p=0.022, Phi=0.199

FIGURE 13:
Evaluation Methods and Tools



The two major ways that youth-service organizations have tried to adapt to the increased demand for human resources supporting evaluation have been to formalize evaluation roles within the organization, or to seek external partnerships for support. As they move to incorporate evaluation into their organizational life, significant differences in strategy emerge between the grassroots and mainstream groups: these group differences affect the resources deployed on evaluations, the approaches and tools used, and how data is used.

The survey results indicate considerable need for evaluations capacity-building in most areas, with grassroots organizations reporting significantly greater need (Figure 13). Compared with mainstream organizations, grassroots organizations

^u Mann-Whitney U: p=0.008

^v Mann-Whitney U: p=0.017

^w Mann-Whitney U: p=0.049

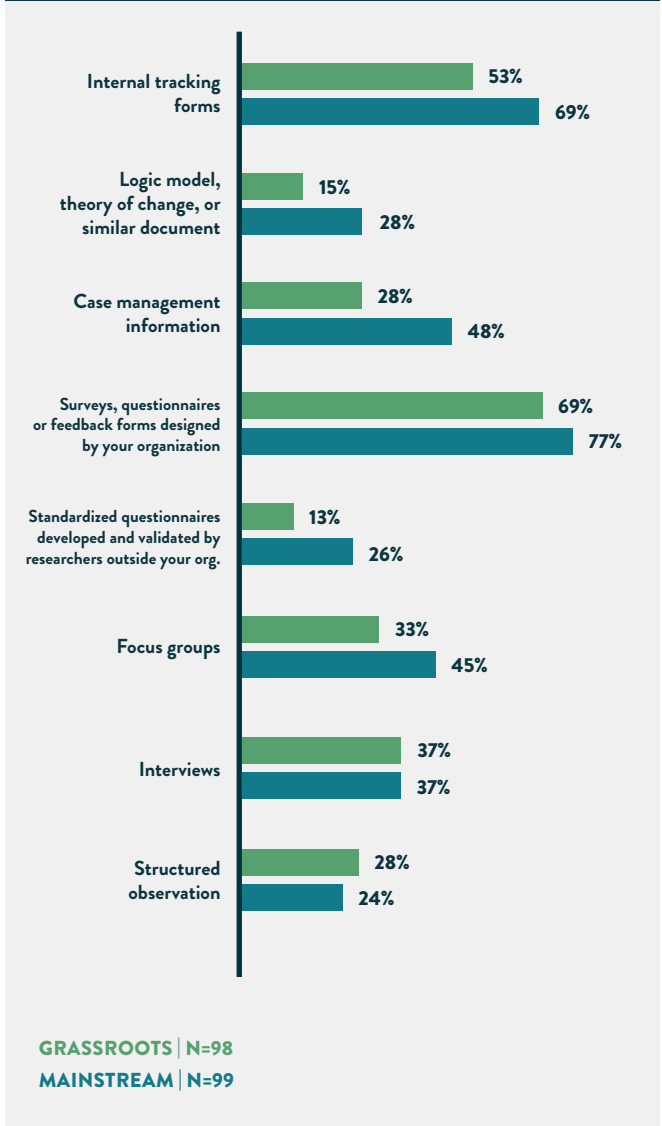
^x Mann-Whitney U: p=0.026

reported significantly higher numbers wanting to develop their capacity to collect and manage data^u and also with being able to analyze and interpret evaluation results.^v

Furthermore, grassroots organizations were considerably more interested in accessing technical assistance^w and evaluation coaching and mentoring^x to build their evaluation capacity.

Majorities reported wanting their organization to develop the capacity to link evaluation results to their strategic planning and employee work plans, to develop more capacity to analyze and interpret data, to report and communicate

FIGURE 14:
Evaluation Capacity Building Needs



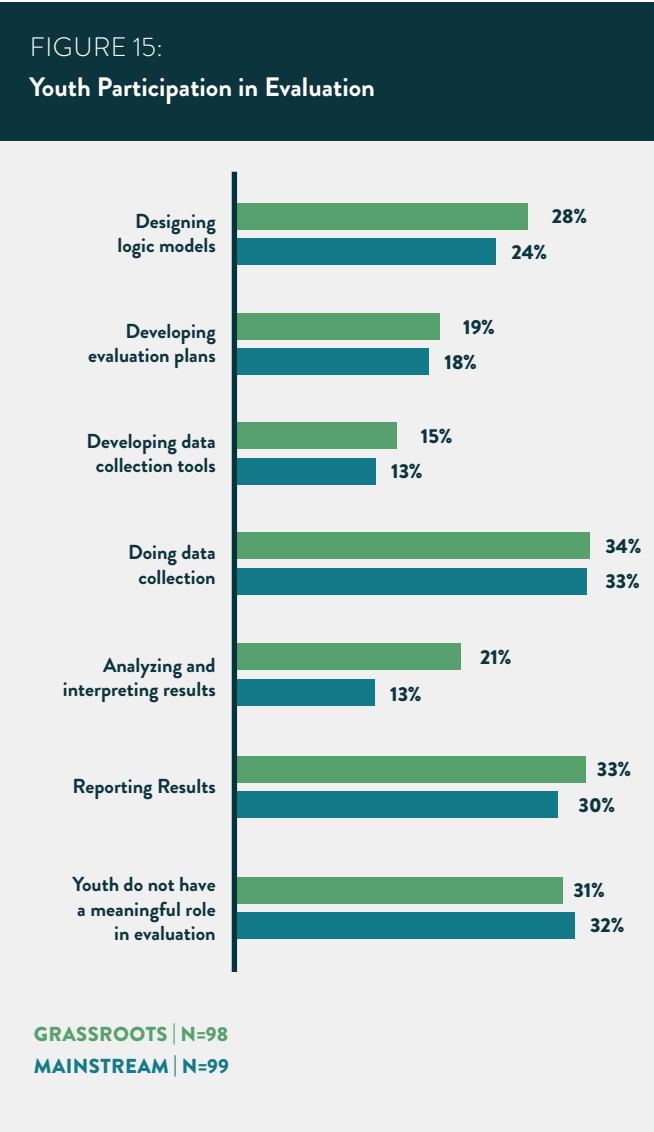
evaluation results. There was similarly considerable interest among survey participants to improve their organization’s evaluation work through a variety of capacity building activities.

The majority of participants reported needing in-person training (60%), 53% felt their organization would benefit from coaching and mentoring in evaluation; and 52% identified online learning opportunities as a resource their organization could use to improve their evaluation capacity.

There were also significant differences between grassroots and mainstream organizations regarding the tools used to collect evaluation data (Figure 14). Grassroots organizations reported lower use of any tools (including significantly lower

use of internal tracking sheets,^Y as well as lower numbers reporting the collection of case management information).^Z Of all respondents, 73% reported that their organizations undertook quantitative methods through the use of questionnaires; however, only 20% of organizations reported using standardized questionnaires that had been validated, and grassroots organizations were significantly less likely to report using such validated tools.

The survey also found that 61% of organizations used internal tracking forms, 39% conducted focus groups, and 22% used logic models, theory of change or similar evaluation planning tools. The overall picture suggests that evaluations are mostly conducted with the tools that are closest to hand, developed in-house to meet short-term and project-based needs, consistent with the expressed desire for capacity-building activities surrounding evaluation.



**KEY FINDING #5
Youth participation in evaluation is still a work in progress.**

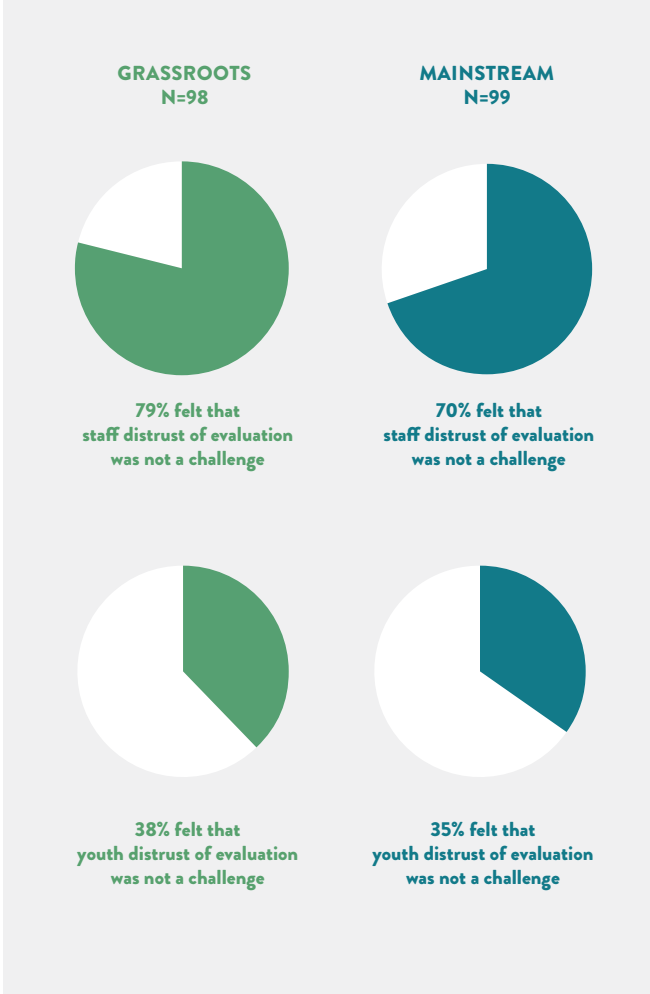
A solid majority (72%) of survey respondents agreed that youth should be involved in their evaluation activities. This fits in with a wider and welcome trend that views youth voices as crucial to effective and credible youth services. Here, as in other areas, organizations we classified as grassroots versus mainstream have emphasized different pathways for including those voices: grassroots organizations were more likely to identify themselves as youth-led organizations – and to rely on youth in their staff – whereas mainstream organizations were more likely to report having youth members on their governance boards.^{aa} How have these efforts translated to youth voice in evaluation activities?

Although 69% of respondents reported that youth were involved in at least one aspect of evaluation work, considerably fewer had youth voices represented in the decision-making and analysis-framing steps of their evaluations (Figure 15).

^Y Chi Square: p=0.025, Phi=0.160

^Z Chi Square: p=0.002, Phi=0.216

FIGURE 16:
Staff vs. Youth Distrust of Evaluation



neither of which necessarily indicate that youth voices are heard within an organization. The standard presented in the survey question was “meaningful involvement,” rather than “leadership,” so more professionalized roles (such as developing data collection tools, for example) still do not exclude the reasonable possibility of making space for youth.

Distrust of evaluation by youth participants in their programs and services is also seen as a considerable problem (Figure 16). Of survey participants, between 70% and 79% stated that they faced no challenges from **staff** to their evaluation agenda, but only 35% to 38% said the same was true of youth. The reasons why youth participants distrust evaluation processes merit further study.

We can reasonably conclude from these results that youth engagement in the evaluation process is presently limited across the sector. Youth engagement in evaluation is an important learning opportunity that helps young people build research, planning and leadership skills as well as gain useful experience.^{bb}

^{aa} Chi Square: p=0.003, Cramer's V=0.244

The most common steps for youth to be involved in were data collection and the reporting of results. In both cases, it is worth noting that “meaningful participation” could include **being surveyed**, or **servng as a critical audience**,

05

What Did We Learn?

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

THIS SECTION of the report presents the findings from the in-depth key informant interviews with 60 youth sector stakeholders. The findings allow a deeper exploration of recent experiences with evaluation in the sector. Thematic analysis identified five key themes, keeping in mind the differences between grassroots and mainstream organizations.

01

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

02

Funder models of evaluation are mismatched with the needs of youth-serving organizations, especially for grassroots organizations.

03

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

04

Youth voices are being crowded out of evaluation evidence.

05

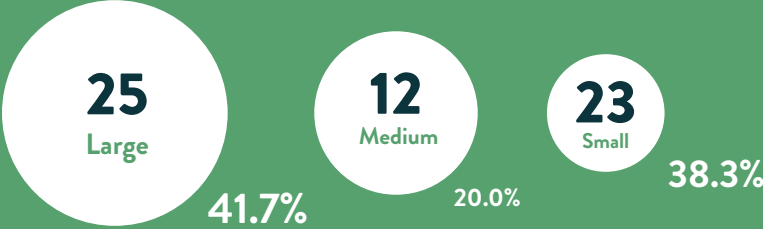
The Northern and rural areas of Ontario are hurting under the current funding model.

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Key Informant Interviewees

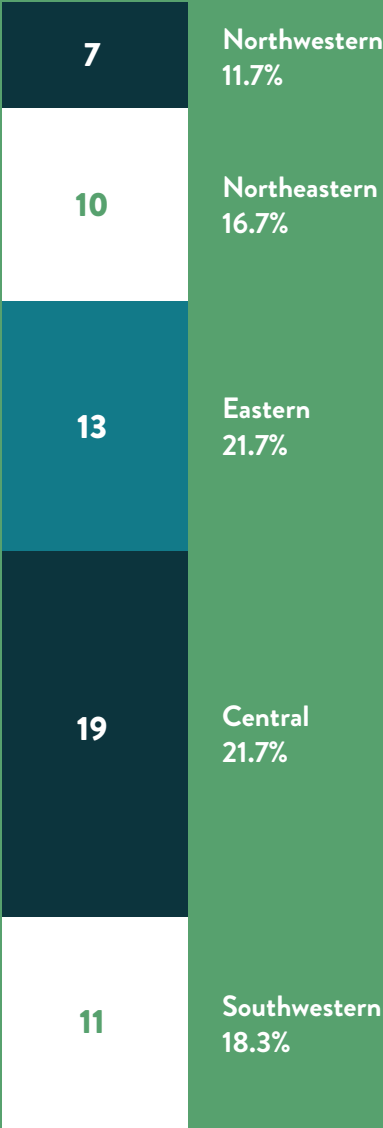
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Youth sector stakeholders across Ontario participated in in-depth key informant interviews

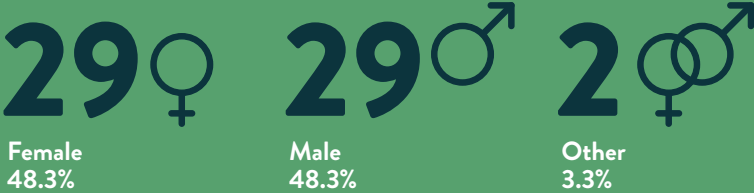
BY SIZE OF ORGANIZATION



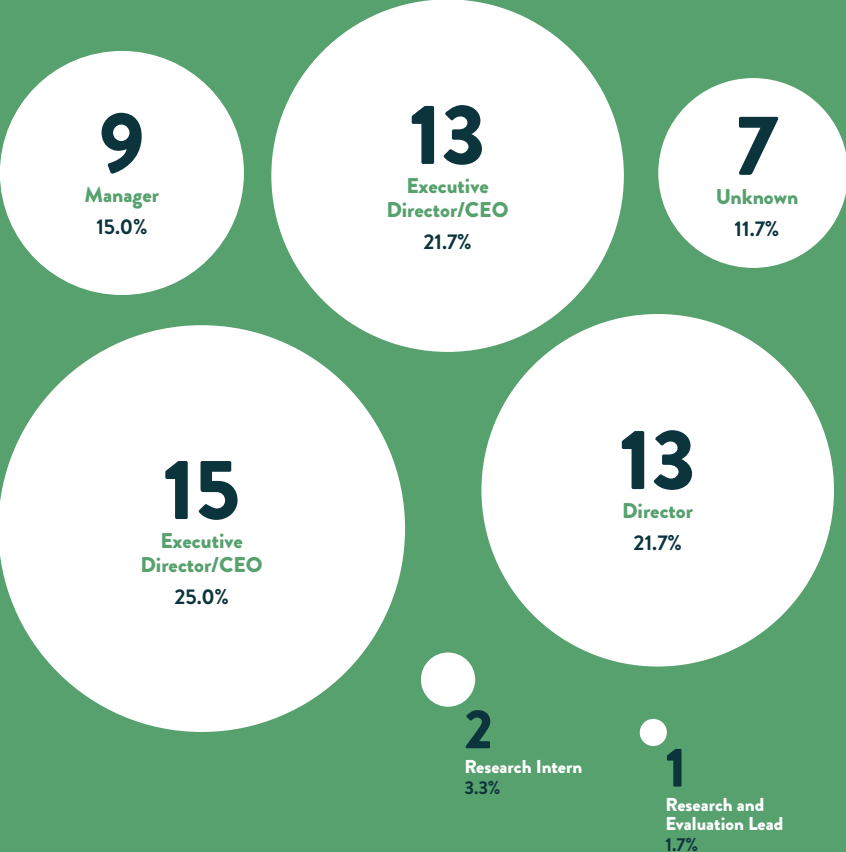
BY REGION



BY GENDER



BY JOB TITLE



KEY FINDING #1

Evaluation activities are focused on the short-term and project life cycles.

Funders are a major driving force behind the broader acceptance and implementation of evaluation activities, but funders do not necessarily have consistent requirements or expectations. This can become particularly burdensome when youth-serving organizations are balancing multiple grants and partnerships.

Youth sector organizations are worried about their ability to meet the needs of different funders, which includes varying levels of emphasis and effort in data collection. Program evaluations vary where they are funder-driven, with each funder having specific expectations regarding the effectiveness of programs, their rate of improvement, and/or the importance of learning in organizations:

It varies dependent on the expectations of the funder, so some funders' expectations for evaluative results are much more superficial or brief. They may just want sort of attendance and satisfaction, you know, participation and satisfaction. And then some partners or projects we will go more in depth. Especially, I think, if we're learning something new that may be an area where we're more internally driven to explore a little bit further. 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).

For some organizations, especially those running many programs, this problem can run to extremes:

We have 20 different funders that we have to report to on a quarterly basis. And we've been doing it for so long that we don't really think about it. It's just something that has to be done. But it is challenging because not all of the ministries or province or federal, municipal people look at the same kind of consistency in what it is. It would be nicer to have one bigger evaluation and then the different ministries take the pieces that they need from it as opposed to really having us do ten evaluations. (Participant ID 4, Large Organization, Northwestern Ontario)

Project-to-project changeover, combined with a persistent lack of capacity, can hamper a youth-serving organization's efforts to stabilize and deepen productive relationships with funders.

There was variation in who is responsible for conducting evaluation activities at organizations emphasizing their often ad hoc character. In most cases, particularly in smaller size organizations, it was the Executive Director, or the program staff who took on this additional role.

However, if organizations were fortunate to have a separate funding allocated for evaluation purposes, they hired a 'third-party evaluation specialist' outside from their organization or even had a 'research and evaluation lead' position available within their organization.

Many of the smaller organizations lacked a formal evaluation procedure set up and used ad hoc evidence, such as anecdotal stories or records of youth attendance, as assessment tools to measure the effectiveness of their programs:

[Evaluation] has been a huge challenge for us to be honest. ... We did one survey in English. And so that is the only way we really gathered it. So most of the information is very ... anecdotal stuff; kids love the program ... We think we're doing a good job, we are pretty sure we are. Most people say we are so, so we probably are (Participant ID 12, Small Organization, Eastern Ontario).

Some larger organizations have found space, however, to develop stronger internal cultures of evaluation. They provide examples of being able to use evaluation more strategically:

Every quarter, four times a year, we do a satisfaction survey with our clients. And so, 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 individuals identified by these participants in the previous quarter. So four times a year, we are able to measure the satisfaction of participants in there. (Participant ID 70, Large Organization, Central Ontario)

KEY FINDING #2

Funder models of evaluation are mismatched with the needs of youth-serving organizations, especially for grassroots organizations.

Throughout the interviews, evaluation activities were closely associated to relationships with funders. Findings showed that there might be differences between the perceptions of youth work held by funders versus those held by youth-serving organizations. This sense of a mismatch between youth sector and funder expectations around evaluation could go in one of two directions.

For some respondents, funder expectations were overly pro forma, an exercise in accountability without a deeper engagement on how to accomplish organizational mission:

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, you know, and 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. And those numbers that we provide to them I think are just check boxes. They don't really understand the impact that we're having (Participant ID 48, Medium-sized Organization, Central Ontario).

For other respondents, the forms of evidence expected in evaluation activities did not match what they felt were the most powerful indicators of their success. Despite a long-standing discussion of the value of diverse models of evidence⁶⁴, the horizons of credibility in evaluation still seems narrow:

Somehow take qualitative data more into account and not just quantitative data. I mean, sometimes it feels like we're asked a lot about specific numbers... It sort of feels like there's a view that if you have the most kids signed up for a program that's a successful program. When it actually says nothing about what the program is doing. And we do have a few of our programs ... that we intentionally keep small so that we can have ... a higher adult to child ratio. You know, but then 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).

Funders are often also integrating evaluation data from multiple organizations. In the modern not-for-profit sector, granting organizations increasingly use this data to make decisions about how to allocate limited funds, resulting in winners and losers in the so-called "funding wars."

Evaluation activities contribute to the tension that arises between organizations who are competing for program funding and clients – all while being expected to collaborate and share best practices in the delivery of services:

Collaboration is always an issue. Also, the not-for-profit sector is set up in a situation where it needs to compete so there is a vested interest into...seeing the positive and not the negative (Participant ID 40, Large Organization, Southwestern Ontario).

Non-profit work has become increasingly professionalized as funders, including governments, sharpen expectations of quality and the return on social investments⁶⁵. Some respondents commented that the traditional lean staffing model of grassroots non-profits is increasingly bumping up against the demand for sophisticated and specialized skill sets:

I think one of the most ridiculous things about the non-profit sector is they expect people to become experts in every single field of the whole shebang. You have to be a grant writer, facilitator, administrator, and supervisor, now evaluate (Participant ID 51, Small Organization, Central Ontario).

These skill sets include knowledge of research methodology and strategy, as well:

We have access to a ton of data and you sometimes can just be swimming in data and not sure how to disseminate it into useful impactful reports (Participant ID 42, Large Organization, Southwestern Ontario).

“I don’t need evaluation; I need the government to invest in Northwestern Ontario. I need policy makers to invest their time in changing that because until that happens evaluation is completely out of the [door]... I don’t need training; I don’t need evaluation assistance. I need money for operation.... just that. We’re going to close our doors in July if something doesn’t change. There’s going to be 500 youth, the majority of them homeless, that are going to have again no place to go.”

PARTICIPANT ID 5
SMALL ORGANIZATION
NORTHWESTERN ONTARIO

KEY FINDING #3

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

Time-pressure is a consistent theme throughout the interviews – not an unusual experience in non-profit organizations. When reflecting specifically on evaluation experiences, respondents often drew attention to the need for robust and flexible tools that can be adapted to a variety of uses, and just as importantly, be accepted as valid by a variety of funders or trustees:

My gosh, it's a nightmare ... every funder has different ways they want us to measure. So it becomes very, very taxing not just to our staff to do those evaluations, but also to the youth. And so... we're looking at this online system. And we're hoping to really streamline the evaluation piece so it doesn't take as much time. But also trying to work with our funders... So that we have one report that we would provide to, you know, 20 some odd funders (Participant ID 38, Medium-sized Organization, Southwestern Ontario).

Even from a county level, for us to be able to provide other information like how many homeless youth do we serve? ... We don't have a shelter or we don't have transitional housing and so ... we don't even have those stats to back up why we need programs and how we can evaluate. So as a collection of youth centers and youth-serving agencies, we are just now starting to pull together common intake forms and common assessment forms so that we can at least be able to answer these. (Participant ID 15, Small Organization, Eastern Ontario).

Given the short-comings of staff experience and capacity, many of the respondents perceived evaluation as a challenge or 'burden' – neither possessing the appropriate skills themselves, nor receiving agency supports with systemic evaluation procedures (such as well-documented data collection guidelines):

I'm a social worker. I took research methods but it wasn't exactly a rigorous experience for myself. I don't work with anybody in this building who has a real firm grasp on what that looks like. So, 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).

KEY FINDING #4:

Youth voices are being crowded out of evaluation.

Youth engagement in evaluation is an important learning opportunity that helps them to build research, planning and leadership skills as well as gain useful experience.

Promising practices: In a small number of agencies, youth were involved not only as participants, but also in designing and supporting the implementation of the evaluation process (e.g. marketing) for staff. These organizations valued the 'youths voice' in the services and viewed them as 'key stakeholders' and were pro-active in learning from the youths about the best of practices in a practical way. Some organizations even had a separate youth advisory committee within their organization for youth to play a key role in the decision making process in implementation of programs:

I think it's really important because it gives them a sense of leadership. But it also - it's just really helpful in communicating the impact in a stronger way of the kind of programming that we do. So like one of the things we have been talking about doing is working with youth to do a workshop - a video workshop that would kind of show a visual evaluation of the program. But we'd have youth learn how to conduct the interviews and learn how to create the video themselves. So that it's not only like them evaluating the program visually, but it's also them creating the evaluation in an artistic way (Participant ID 6, Medium-sized Organization, Northwestern Ontario).

Also, some organizations have implemented creative solutions to engage youths in the evaluation process: I think a challenge to find more ways of being more creative in terms of engaging them [youth] and engaging their feedback and looking at outcomes, etc., and developing tools that are applicable to a different learning styles and abilities. So, you know, there was a time where we were very focused on doing questionnaires, but that's not a very effective for some people who hate writing or have low literacy. ... So, you know, group discussions, finding ways of making evaluation interactive, where there's movement, where there's some creativity. They're drawing pictures, or painting, or doing a video, just finding way of making the process of self-reflection and also giving feedback on programs and services

received much more appealing to young people. (Participant ID 60, Large Organization, Central Ontario).

Challenges: Youth engagement in the evaluation process is limited across the sector. Unfortunately, for two out of every three organizations interviewed, youth had limited involvement in the evaluation process. Typically, the youth were involved only as ‘service-users/clients’ completing the evaluation feedback forms. When probed further about limited youth involvement in the evaluation process, respondents raised concerns of confidentiality, time constraints (to train and supervise youths), and their own limited knowledge in the evaluation techniques:

Well, probably the reason would be limitation, staff limitation, basically the focus is on – we only have two staff for all York region and basically just doing the work, not a lot of time to supervise anybody. There’s no staff who could supervise the youth, we’d have to do so ourselves (Participant ID 45, Large Organization, Central Ontario).

Probably confidentiality to be honest with you because some of them may know the children that they would be talking to... London is a relatively small community and we do have children involved from almost every elementary school in the city. So if we were to involve children or youth there may be a chance that confidentiality in terms of what’s going on in a child’s family or something might be broken (Participant ID 42, Southwestern Ontario, large).

KEY FINDING #5

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

Without a doubt, Northern Ontario’s youth sector organizations face the most difficult challenges in their attempt to provide programs and services to area youth. In their bid to thrive and succeed they have to compete for funding not only with other social programs but also with infrastructure demands:

I don’t need evaluation; I need the government to invest in Northwestern Ontario. I need policy makers to invest their time in changing that because until that happens evaluation is completely out of the [door]... I don’t need training; I don’t

need evaluation assistance. I need money for operation.... just that. We’re going to close our doors in July if something doesn’t change. There’s going to be 500 youth, the majority of them homeless, that are going to have again no place to go (Participant ID 5, Small Organization, Northwestern Ontario).

Northern Ontario’s population is not simply small and widespread, but linked through tenuous infrastructure and exposed to extreme resource constraints. These constraints exist to such a degree that “evaluating” local grassroots efforts – rather than broader provincial and national duties of care – seems absurd:

Well, I think that being in Northwestern Ontario and Thunder Bay we are the hinterland of Ontario. And a lot of resource allocation provincially wide goes down to the heartland where the majority of the population is located. However, there’s very special challenges up here even though the population isn’t as big as the GTA. We are servicing over 250 First Nation remote communities that sometimes don’t even have running water, which seems to be ignored, especially with the immigration of individuals leaving those remote communities to Thunder Bay. And seeing Thunder Bay as a metropolis, we’re severely under resourced and not funded enough. (Participant ID 5, Small Organization, Northwestern Ontario).

Resources are commonly stretched tight in non-profit work, but in densely-populated regions, there are at least markets for the kind of support that might bridge gaps in capacity – such as external, temporary or part-time consultants. In remote areas these supports may be unavailable even if there’s money in the budget to buy them:

Here, up north, you’re limited by your resources and of your staff, or our community partners they’re limited by people that can be involved in the evaluation. And sometimes you need not only someone who has expertise in evaluation but you might also need, for example, someone who is part of the clinical staff that takes hours away from them seeing clients. So it’s a challenge and that’s what I mean ... In Toronto you can hire a consultant. You can hire someone ... here you really don’t have that. You’re a little bit more limited (Participant ID 76, Medium-sized Organization, Northeastern Ontario).

Some organizations in the Northwestern, Northeastern, Eastern, Southwestern Ontario regions and rural areas emphasized additional challenges such as difficulty in data collection, access to community partners, networking opportunities, and costly transportation costs to attend training sessions outside of their area:

With it being rural, we're very, very spread out. ... We're 103,000 people that live in Chatham-Kent. But we have such a huge landmass that it's crazy. ... We do our surveys ... but we're not nearly scratching the surface of how much we're doing. We have our funded agencies send us in reports but that's once a year when they're coming for more funding. So, I mean, we really need help in this, in this [new] realm. ... And, I mean, it's difficult because everything is so spread out. I have youth that come from a half an hour away to come to my meetings ... once a month (Participant ID 35, Small Organization, Southwestern Ontario).

Certain organizational resources that are taken for granted in models based on southern or urban areas – such as ready access to the web – may be unavailable or strictly limited outside these areas:

We don't have the tools we need. For instance Internet connection at the office, things like that. There is certain information we can't take out of the office and we can't work with it at the office because we don't have Internet connection. (Participant ID 26, Small Organization, Northeastern Ontario).

One respondent offered a blunt summation of these systemic issues, suggesting that any evaluation model that works for the whole of Ontario must first acknowledge that many important, basic needs haven't been met:

Give us more money. ... offer some sort of fund and recognize that there is actually a higher need even though the population is smaller up here in Northern Ontario ... I need the government to invest in Northwestern Ontario. I need policy makers to invest their time in changing that because until that happens evaluation is completely out of the [door] (Participant ID 5, Small Organization, Northwestern Ontario).

“I think one of the most ridiculous things about the non-profit sector is they expect people to become experts in every single field of the whole shebang. You have to be a grant writer, facilitator, administrator, and supervisor, and now, an evaluator.”

PARTICIPANT ID 51
SMALL ORGANIZATION
CENTRAL ONTARIO

06

How Might We Build Evaluation Capacity in the Youth Sector?

Using a *Community Dialogue Approach* that included a survey of 197 organizations and in-depth key informant interviews with 60 youth sector stakeholders, this study provides a contextualized understanding of Ontario youth sector's evaluation strengths, challenges and areas of opportunity.

The *Community Dialogue Approach* emphasizes the integration of findings from a study's multi-methods to identify leverage points for possible policy and practice interventions. With this in mind, the "*Beyond Measure*" study integrated findings from the survey and key informant interviews, identifying the following five key messages that have policy and practice implications for the youth sector.

KEY MESSAGE #1

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

There is no evidence that youth sector organizations are hostile to evaluating their programs to understand the impact of their work with youth. Rather, 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.

KEY MESSAGE #2

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.

KEY MESSAGE #5

Youth programs and the broader youth sector might 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 Evaluation⁶⁶ 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 or realign away from weaknesses.

KEY MESSAGE #4

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.

KEY MESSAGE #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.

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 sector faces seemingly contradictory set 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. Our findings indicate that grassroots youth programs need more than a framework of quantified accountability. They need stable, ongoing relationships that can support fulsome conversations about both tacit knowledge and new evaluation data gathered through appropriate and realistic methods.

TEN RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS, YOUTH SECTOR CAPACITY BUILDING ORGANIZATIONS AND YOUTH PROGRAMS

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 dialogue and 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 10 recommendations for funders of youth programs (#1 to #4), youth sector capacity building organizations (#5 to #8) and youth organizations (#9 to #10).

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 – evaluation 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 realistic evaluation expectations to 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 take 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 transferable 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 hand-held 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 road map 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.

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