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# GIRLS IN YOUTH SPACES

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*An Evaluation of Young Women's Experiences  
Accessing Youth Drop-Ins*

**Girls in Youth Spaces: An Evaluation of Young Women's Experiences Accessing Youth Drop-Ins**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Girls face enhanced challenges during adolescence. They are more likely to experience a decline in self-esteem, they are sometimes encouraged to compete with each other, and they tend to hold unrealistic expectations for themselves. Teenage girls face a significant amount of pressure from themselves, their parents, and society, and commonly require extra support to effectively cope with it.

Since there is a gap of 20-25 hours per week between school schedules and parents' work schedules,<sup>1</sup> after-school program providers can play an important role in supporting the positive development of adolescent girls. Effective and responsive youth programs have the potential to nurture young people's social, emotional, and physical well-being by providing them with the tools needed to navigate through life's challenges. While children in their early and middle years may be inclined to register in formal after-school programs, teenagers would rather participate in self-directed activities with their friends and for this reason require comfortable and safe spaces.

In Toronto, St. Stephen's Community House initiated a groundbreaking and widely-valued approach to youth drop-ins that was truly made *by youth for youth*. Dedicated space, committed staff and responsive programming separated St. Stephen's from other drop-ins. Community advocates were inspired by the impact it was having and in 2013 pushed the City of Toronto to adopt similar standards. As a result of these efforts, the City committed to opening 10 enhanced youth spaces based on St. Stephen's model.

Shortly after the first four enhanced youth spaces opened, Social Planning Toronto (SPT) undertook a community-led research project to better understand the experiences of girls within these spaces. Focus groups were held on site at Parkway Forest, Antibes, Heron Park, and North Kipling Community Centres.

## Findings

It was found that all the elements that prevented or deterred girls from participating in the youth spaces were either socially-based or program-based. More than any other barrier, young women spoke about how boys' attitudes and behaviours towards them can result in negative experiences. This was sometimes made worse when there was a lack of girl-only zones and programs. At the same time, tension among participants can have an adverse effect on how welcoming and comfortable the space is perceived to be, especially by new and potential space users.

Nevertheless, several components made the youth spaces attractive to girls:

- The spaces were **safe and comfortable meeting spots to hang out** with friends and experience a sense of belonging.
- Attending youth drop-in spaces **positively impacted life outside of the spaces**. Girls felt better able to form their own opinions, be more independent and have more success in school as a result of attending the spaces.

- Young women acquired both **practical and interpersonal skills** during structured and unstructured time at youth drop-ins.
- **Staff supported youth, facilitated relationships and acted as positive role models.** Girls appreciated having staff from the community and that were also women.
- **Easy and consistent access to WiFi** was valued by young women attending the spaces.
- Drop-in spaces connected participants to **field trips and guest speakers.**

While girls consistently advocated for more hair, nails and makeup programs, a theme of empowerment also surfaced. Girls should be provided with positive role models, leadership opportunities and a supportive space to foster their strengths, explore their interests and develop their unique identities.

## Recommendations

Youth need access to spaces that are welcoming, appropriate, safe and respectful of a broad range of identities and perspectives. Good policies, practices and attitudes can encourage girls to challenge social expectations and gender roles, develop meaningful relationships and build the skills needed to successfully transition into adulthood. Based on the research findings included in this report, we recommend that service providers:

- Develop youth spaces to meet the needs of young women,
- Use the spaces to build the capacities of youth,
- Involve youth in decision-making, and
- Continue to build on the role of staff.

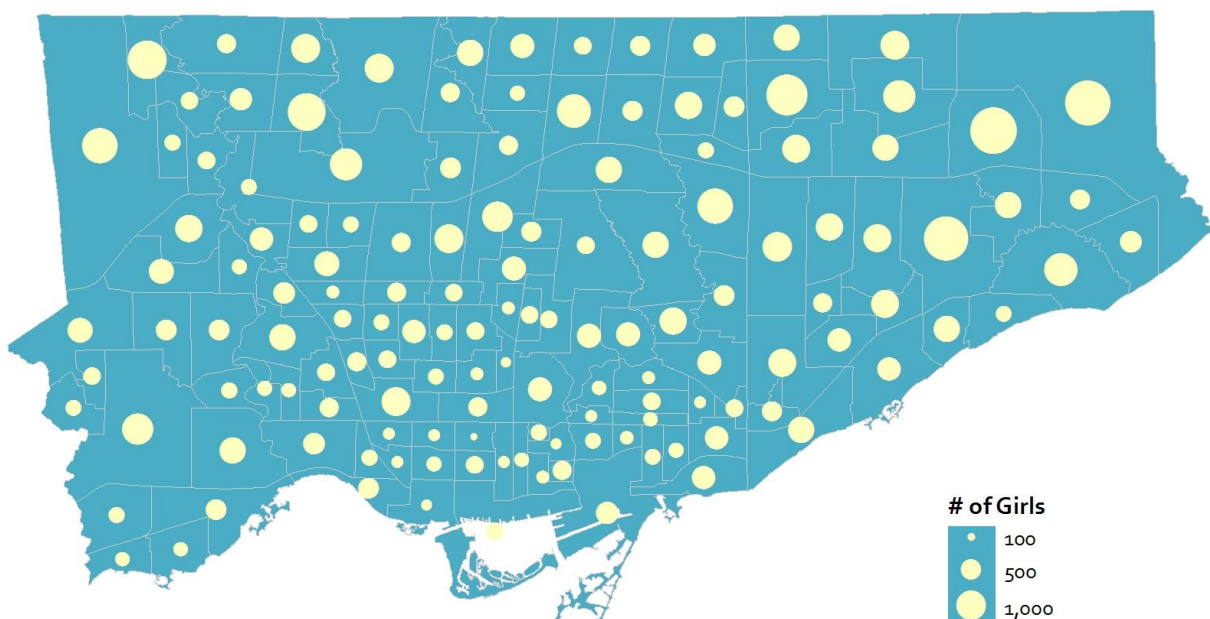
# INTRODUCTION

## Toronto's young people

In Toronto, youth (aged 15-24) make up 12.8% of the population<sup>2</sup> and face many challenges, both individually and collectively. Toronto is Canada's largest and most diverse city<sup>3</sup> and is a city of many opportunities. However, not all youth have equal access to the resources and services the city has to offer. For example, in 2014 youth unemployment was about 18% across the Toronto region and 22% in the City of Toronto,<sup>4</sup> higher than both provincial and national averages.<sup>5</sup>

Toronto's girls reside across the city, with higher concentrations in the centre of the old City of Toronto and scattered through inner suburb neighbourhoods (see Fig. 1).

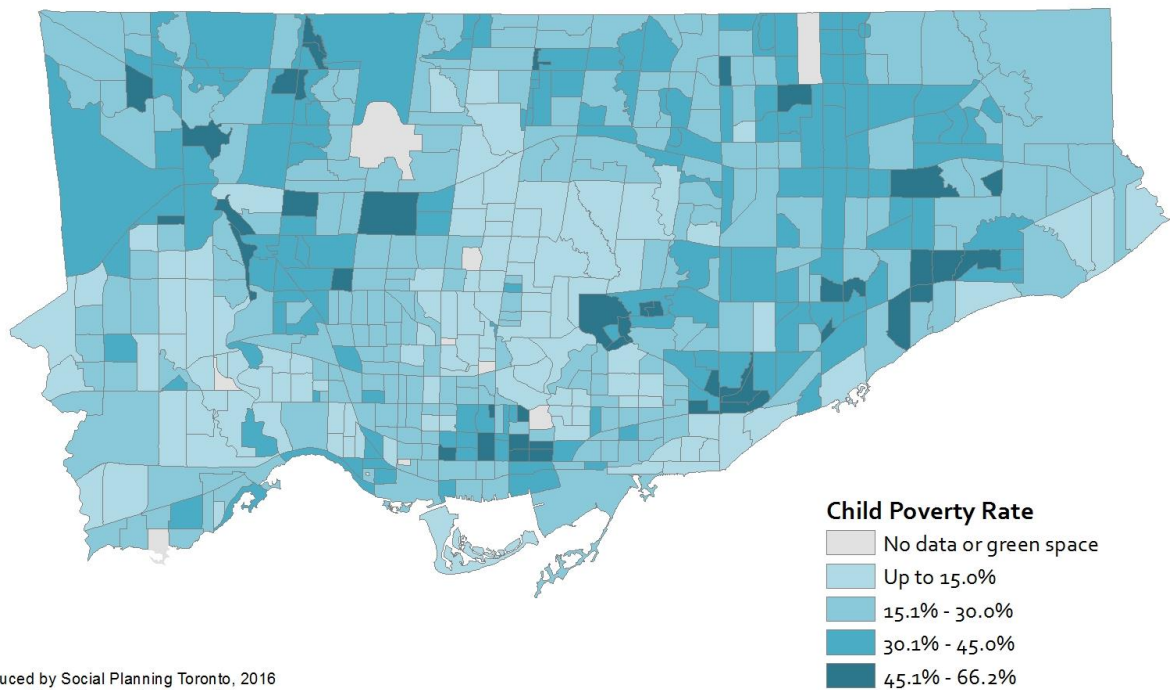
**Figure 1: Population of Girls 13-18 Years Old by Neighbourhood in Toronto, 2011**



Produced by Social Planning Toronto, 2016  
 Source: City of Toronto neighbourhood shape file;  
 2011 Census accessed through Community Data Program

High prevalence of poverty in some of these areas can exacerbate the challenges faced by youth (see Fig. 2). Youth living in low-income families have fewer resources to overcome obstacles which can follow them into adulthood. For example, Toronto youth experience a high rate of obesity (27%) and relatively few young people (60%) spend their leisure time being physically active.<sup>6</sup> These figures are even worse for youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds who are more-likely to be overweight or obese.<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 2: 2013 Child Poverty Rate by Census Tract in Toronto**



Produced by Social Planning Toronto, 2016  
 Source: City of Toronto CT shape file;  
 2013 T1FF Taxfiler data accessed through the  
 Community Data Program

## Developmental stage of adolescence

Adolescence is an important developmental stage in people's lives and is often a time of great cognitive, emotional, social and physical change. It is during this stage that children transition into young adults. They begin to think deeply about their future aspirations, place greater importance on peer relationships, and form their unique identity by further exploring their hobbies and interests.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout these experiences, youth can be influenced by many outside factors including parents, peers, community, culture, religion, school, world events and the media.<sup>9</sup> Further, the current cohort of young people is the most technologically integrated generation<sup>10</sup> which allows them to be even more



connected to these influences. It is vital that young people are supported in cultivating the tools required to make positive life choices.

## Enhanced challenges for girls

Research shows that girls face gender-specific challenges during this period.<sup>11</sup>

For example, while girls are likely to experience a decline in self-esteem lasting until early adulthood, the opposite is true for boys. Physical changes can result in more muscle mass for boys, leading to greater self-confidence as they become more satisfied with their physique. Girls on the other hand tend to develop more body fat, sometimes leading to negative body images.<sup>12</sup>

Girls also tend to internalize their negative experiences resulting in more emotional problems including symptoms of depression.<sup>13</sup> Interpersonal stressors, such as arguments with friends, can play a significant role in this. Girls, more so than boys, base their friendships on intimacy, emotional support, and self-disclosure,<sup>14</sup> placing them in more vulnerable positions.

## Importance of after-school time

There is a gap of 20-25 hours per week between adolescents' school schedules and parents' work schedules.<sup>15</sup> Youth who consistently spend this time without direct or indirect adult supervision are at greater risk of negative outcomes.<sup>16</sup> During this unsupervised time, they are more likely to engage in risky behaviours including vandalism, crime, and sexual activity.<sup>17</sup>

Providing constructive programming and safe spaces for youth to spend these after-school hours reduces these risks and promotes positive outcomes. Through these programs they are also provided with opportunities to develop strong, positive social bonds which further deter them from making negative decisions. When staff in these programs take into account key developmental events experienced during adolescence it results in higher quality services and supports for youth.

However, youth do not always want to attend regular, planned programs during their after-school hours. Research has shown that youth are interested in having safe, accessible spaces to hang out.<sup>18</sup> Youth space has been defined as "permanent, dedicated space that is open the majority of the time for youth to drop in."<sup>19</sup> While some programming may be offered, these spaces mainly serve as safe places for youth to spend their time with informal adult supervision.

## The policy environment

Since the Province of Ontario released its *Review of the Roots of Youth Violence* in 2008 there has been considerably more focus on the wellbeing of youth and addressing the systemic causes of youth violence. *The Review* followed a fatal shooting of a high-school student and delved into the underlying issues affecting youth involvement in violence and crime. The report noted the hours of 3pm-6pm to be a “prime time for crime” and recognized the importance of having safe space for youth to hang out after school.<sup>20</sup> The City of Toronto in particular has launched several initiatives targeting this group, of which recreation has played a significant role (see Fig. 3).

**Figure 3: City of Toronto: Policy timeline**

Nov 2012	City Council adopts the <i>2013-2017 Recreation Service Plan</i> (RSP) to guide planning and delivery of recreation programs and services. The RSP identifies youth as a priority group. <sup>21</sup>
Sept 2013	Council approves <i>Recreation Services for Youth Report</i> including the <i>Youth Recreation Engagement Strategy</i> . This report includes an inventory of youth services and explores options for additional youth drop-in programs. <sup>22</sup>
Nov 2013	Council approves <i>Recreation Services for Youth: Expansion of Youth Spaces</i> which outlines the resources necessary for adding 10 new youth spaces based on an enhanced model. <sup>23</sup>
Feb 2014	Council adopts <i>Youth Equity Strategy</i> to support youth who are most vulnerable to involvement in violence and crime through service coordination and service enhancement. <sup>24</sup>
Sept 2014	Enhanced youth spaces are introduced at four locations: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. North Kipling Community Centre</li> <li>2. Antibes Community Centre</li> <li>3. Parkway Forest Community Centre</li> <li>4. Heron Park Community Centre</li> </ol>
2015	Enhanced youth spaces are introduced at three more locations: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. East Metro Youth Services</li> <li>6. Don Montgomery Community Centre</li> <li>7. Native Child and Family Services</li> </ol>
2016	Enhanced youth spaces are scheduled to open at the final three locations: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>8. Masaryk-Cowan Community Centre</li> <li>9. Centennial Recreation Centre West</li> <li>10. Cluster-model pilot at LAMP Community Health Centre and their satellite Rathburn Area Youth</li> </ol>
2016	City of Toronto launches <i>YouthTO</i> – a comprehensive portal containing services and opportunities available to youth within Toronto. <sup>25</sup> This includes a search engine and interactive map for finding youth services based on service type, language, and accessibility.

## City of Toronto youth spaces

In 2012-13, Toronto City Council adopted the *Recreation Service Plan (RSP)* and *Implementation Plan*. This plan served to “increase overall participation in recreation, decrease financial barriers, and improve local and geographical access.”<sup>26</sup> While the RSP recognized youth as a priority group, Council and community members expressed interest in further exploring recreation services and engagement strategies specifically targeting youth.

The resulting staff report, entitled *Recreation Services for Youth*, recognized safe space and places to hang out as key priorities for youth. It further identified the flat-lining of funding as a key barrier to expanding these youth spaces.<sup>27</sup> Community advocates spoke out about this issue and leveraged public and council support, which resulted in a commitment to introduce 10 youth lounges\* based on St. Stephen’s model over a three-year period.<sup>28</sup>

A Youth Lounge Advisory Committee was formed to direct the start-up and operation of the youth spaces and assist in identifying potential neighbourhoods for new and enhanced youth spaces.<sup>29</sup> The Advisory Committee consisted of one City Councillor, the Director of Community Recreation (Parks, Forestry and Recreation), staff from seven City Divisions, representatives from youth serving agencies, as well as youth.<sup>30</sup>

The Advisory Committee considered the following criteria to evaluate potential sites for the youth spaces<sup>31</sup>:

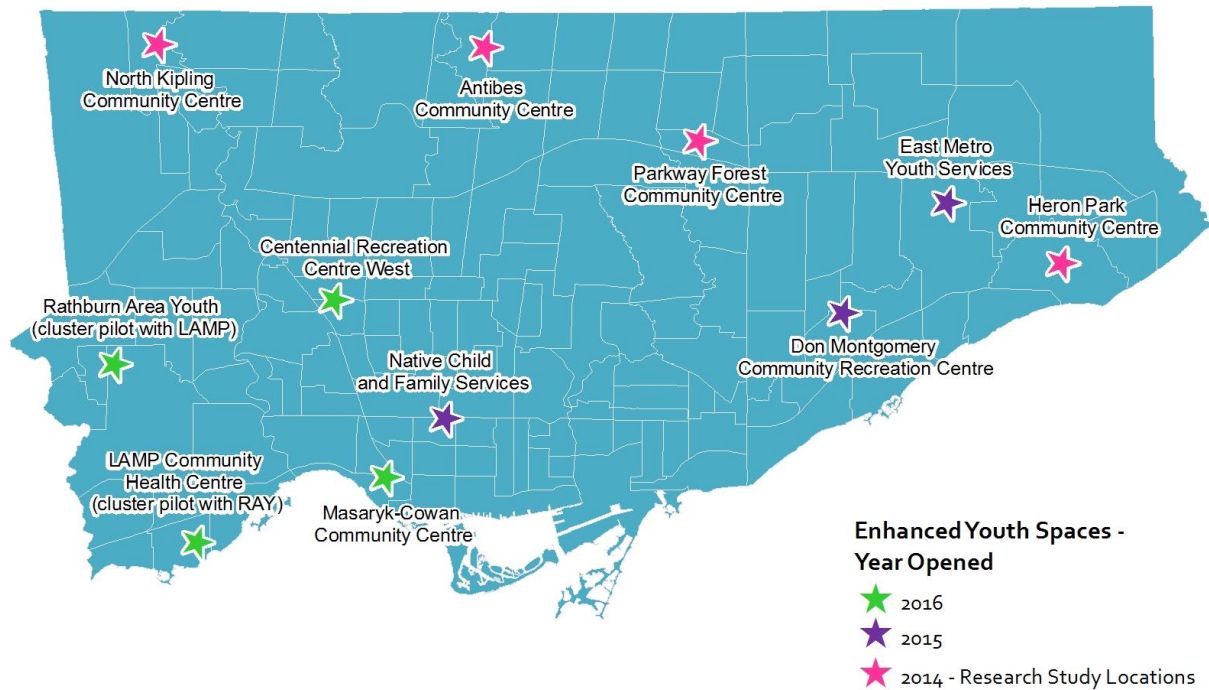
1. Close to Schools
2. High Population of Youth
3. Proximity to Low Income (LIM) tracts
4. Co-ordinated Services
5. Partnership Opportunities
6. Youth Outreach Workers
7. Growth Capacity
8. Kitchen Access
9. Gymnasium Access
10. Demographic Need
11. Underserved Area
12. Space for Staff
13. Barrier Free
14. Safety/Security
15. Accessible by Transit

Fig. 4 shows the final locations of the 10 youth spaces by year opened.

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\* Author’s note: During the initial development of these facilities the term “youth lounge” was utilized. The term “youth space” was later adopted and reflects the current terminology.

**Figure 4: Locations of Enhanced Youth Spaces in Toronto by Year Opened**



Produced by Social Planning Toronto, 2016  
 Source: City of Toronto neighbourhood shape file

## St. Stephen's model

The Arcade Drop-In at St. Stephen's Community House has been identified as an exemplary youth drop-in by community members and advocates. The Arcade operates five days a week and includes a lunch-hour program and a three-hour after school program for youth (ages 12-21). It is free, does not require registration, and provides snacks for the participants. The Arcade includes a combination of open format and structured programming.<sup>32</sup>

In 2007, St. Stephen's Community House commissioned a third-party evaluation of the Arcade. The evaluation generated evidence that the Arcade had positive outcomes for participants in terms of promoting healthy lifestyles, academic achievement, reducing conflict, violence and alienation, and creating safe schools and neighbourhoods.<sup>33</sup>

With St. Stephen's model in mind, the City identified three pillars for its own youth spaces:

- Dedicated space,
- Dedicated staff, and
- Responsive programming.

## City evaluation of youth spaces

In summer 2015, Parks, Forestry and Recreation conducted its own evaluation of the four enhanced youth spaces that opened in 2014 (Parkway Forest Community Centre, Antibes Community Centre, Heron Park Community Recreation Centre, and North Kipling Community Centre).<sup>34</sup> This evaluation focused on user experience and found that participants felt the space to be friendly, welcoming and safe. Participants also identified the important role that staff play, with staff's ability to make the youth feel welcome and safe being the most commonly cited reason for returning to the space.<sup>35</sup>

# RESEARCH METHODS

In 2014/15 Social Planning Toronto undertook a community-led evaluation of the expansion of the City-run youth drop-in spaces that measured the impacts of these spaces. In the City's evaluation the majority of their respondents were male and, consequently, female input into the effectiveness of the youth spaces was lacking. Recognizing the unique experiences of girls<sup>†</sup> in these spaces, it was decided that this study would focus on this demographic.

Focus groups were held with young women who attended the youth spaces at Parkway Forest Community Centre, Antibes Community Centre, Heron Park Community Recreation Centre, and North Kipling Community Centre. These sites were chosen because they were the first to receive funding for enhancement in 2014 and at the time of the research would have been operating for approximately one year.

Two peer researchers were recruited to co-facilitate the focus groups. These peer researchers were also youth representatives on the City's Youth Lounge Advisory Committee and had significant knowledge of the youth spaces. Focus groups were conducted on-site at each of the centres and consisted of a guided discussion preceded by a short survey that covered related topics as well as demographic information. In addition to general information on attendance patterns and user satisfaction,

topics covered included motivation for attending the youth space, level of participation and leadership, sense of safety, and personal growth and other outcomes.

Each focus group had between five and eleven participants; in total 32 young women participated in the research. Most participants were between the ages of 13-15 (69%), while the remaining participants were 16-18 (31%). Nearly all of the participants were from racialized groups. Participants identified themselves as being from various backgrounds; the majority identified as being Jamaican and/or having multiple racial, cultural or ethnic backgrounds. Two participants self-identified as being new to Canada (having lived here for less than five years) and two participants self-identified as being LGBT.

Study participants reported attending the youth space for 0-9 years, with an average of 1.77 years. Most participants reported attending the youth space every day it's open (66%).

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<sup>†</sup> Throughout this report girls and young women are used interchangeably to refer to adolescent females aged 13-18.

# FINDINGS

## Barriers that discourage girls from using youth spaces

### Influence of boys

The young women discussed the influence boys have over girls' experiences in the youth spaces. They discussed the uncomfortable feeling that boys produce by looking at girls in certain ways, passing judgment and not treating the girls as equals. One participant mentioned how the boys at her youth space treat girls like they "are nothing and [the boys] run everything." Young men often attend the youth spaces in greater numbers, overpower girls' voices, and take over programs. Several girls discussed how this behaviour may deter shy or young girls from attending the youth space.

**“On Mondays and Wednesdays ... you'll rarely see girls in the gym ... And she has to come earlier because she knows that when the guys come, there is no chance of playing [in the gym].”**

### Lack of separate space for girls

**“All the guys and girls are so clumped up together.”**

While boys tend to dominate the youth space, this is sometimes exacerbated by the lack of space and particularly the lack of girl-only space. While the four youth spaces varied in size and set-up, lack of space was mentioned at two of the sites. At one location, the girls spoke about how they could not use certain facilities because the boys dominated those spaces, even during girl-specific hours. Many girls pointed out that the spaces seemed to be designed for guys, commonly comparing the youth space to a "man cave."

**“If you really look around, this is all stuff for guys. This is a man cave ... This feels like a boy's room.”**



## Discontinued or inadequate programming

A number of the young women discussed the important role that programming plays in motivating them to attend the youth space, and mentioned that some programs had been cancelled. At one site the girl-only program had been changed to include males and at another site the dance program, which was frequented by girls, had been cancelled. In spite of this, the girls acknowledged the other benefits the space had to offer, but maintained a “more is always better” attitude that suggested more programs would attract more girls.

“There used to be a lot of girls that would come here but I guess they got tired of coming here.”

## Tension between participants

Several young women mentioned how tension between participants influenced their experience of the youth space. This issue varied in severity among the sites, from the presence of racism to awkwardness between new and regular space users to physical confrontations. One girl suggested that “drama” among the youth discouraged potential space users.

## Facilitators that motivate girls to use youth spaces

### Girl-specific activities

Across all the sites, young women spoke about the importance of activities that target girls. Specifically they were interested in participating in nutrition, singing, dance, hair, nail and makeup programs. They talked about the need to engage girls as a group and the role that the youth space can play in empowering young women. Some girls pointed out there were more activities for boys than girls, such as videogames and foosball. As a result, girls were left with limited options such as chatting with each other and staff, browsing the internet or playing cards.

### Peer relationships

Some girls spoke about how most of their friends attended the youth space and how it was a comfortable and safe place to hang out. Some even compared it to going to a party. The vast majority of girls felt they could be themselves, felt that they belonged, and got to know other youth while at the space. In some communities the youth space is considered the “hot spot” - it is the most popular place to go after school.

**“We treat each other like a family. We’re like sisters and brothers...”**

**“It's like a second home ... because you meet new friends, you can talk with them. Let's say if you're feeling down, there's always a person that can cheer you back up.”**

### Positive impact on life outside of youth space

Many of the young women spoke about how attending the youth space gave them access to information that they may not otherwise have. They felt they were better informed about certain topics and as a result could develop their own opinions. Some described this process as empowering. Other youth spoke about how staff motivated them to complete their homework, sometimes resulting in higher levels of academic achievement.

**“I've found that my grades have been going up ever since I started coming here.”**

## Skill building

Attending the youth space taught the girls both practical skills and interpersonal skills. While some spoke about how attending a structured program taught them something new, for example how to use an oven, others spoke of developing life skills. This included patience, independence and the ability to deal with different people.

## Role of staff

Girls generally had positive experiences with staff and sometimes identified staff as the best part of going to the youth space. The youth talked about how staff motivated them, provided social and emotional support, and served as positive role models. From the discussions some lessons emerged about the role of staff:

Firstly, staff can play a significant role in shaping the dynamics between male and female participants. They have the ability to enforce rules (such as those related to girl-only times) and ensure boys and girls are treated equally (for example, involving both boys and girls in decision-making).

Secondly, the ratio of staff to participants can influence staff's ability to act on these things. A few girls noted that when there were too many participants for the staff to monitor not everyone's voice could be heard.

Thirdly, the social location of the staff seemed to matter to the young women. Girls appreciated having staff that they could identify with

and speak openly with. This included staff who were from similar racial and cultural backgrounds and who were female. One participant felt that the male staff paid more attention to the boys and neglected the girls.

“ [The staff are] so chill, so real and they know who we are ... They're not going to lie to you ... Even if the situation is bad, they're going to tell you the truth.”

## Technology

Many girls appreciated having easy access to WiFi while at the youth space. They spent time browsing the internet and watching videos on YouTube. Girls at one site also identified reliable and easy access to WiFi as a way to attract more girls.

## Field trips and guest speakers

The girls enjoyed it when the youth space connected them with people and places outside of the space. At one location, a guest speaker shared his story of overcoming personal struggles. The girls found this inspirational and suggested it be done more frequently. At other locations, the girls applauded the field trips coordinated through the recreation centre.

## Youth input

While all of the youth spaces had invited the youth to provide input about what they would like to see happen at the space, the extent to which these suggestions were realized varied. Girls at some sites felt their suggestions were fully implemented, while girls at other sites felt theirs were neglected.

**“I feel like this [evaluation] is the first time we’ve actually had a proper discussion on what we really want to see.”**

## Leadership

Girls seemed to be most involved in organizing special events, such as field trips and dances, rather than regular programming. Regular programming is led by staff, with varying degrees of youth input.

Youth at one of the spaces reported currently having a youth council with female representation. Another space previously had a youth council and the girls did not feel it was necessary to reintroduce it because they could approach the staff directly with their concerns.

## How to attract more girls

Adding more programs for girls and designing spaces to be girl-friendly were the most commonly suggested ways to attract more girls to the youth spaces. Other recommendations included asking girls to recruit other girls, conducting more outreach, posting flyers within the communities, and hosting a barbeque to promote the space.

## Designing girl-friendly spaces

### Physical space

The young women commonly suggested there could be more space or the space that was available could be utilized more efficiently. Some suggested having separate spaces for boys and girls, and a common space for both sexes. Concerns around safety, privacy and theft were brought up. At one location, the availability of lockers was highly valued for this reason.

### Interior design

Many of the girls highlighted the importance of interior decoration in making a girl-friendly space. Girls almost always identified the walls as an area for improvement. While some wanted the walls to be painted pink or purple, others saw the walls as a blank canvas. They wanted to brighten the space with murals, inspirational quotes and posters of powerful women. They also mentioned various furnishings that would make the spaces more comfortable, including a greater abundance of seating.

**“It would be nice if we had a wall that was just about girls. [It could say] ‘Because I’m a girl’, [and have pictures of] girls that empower us.”**

**“This is like hospital colour ... [It should be] purple or pink”**

### Atmosphere


When asked how they would design the space to be girl-friendly, girls from all the sites wanted it to be more like a spa. They wanted full length mirrors, comfortable chairs, and other amenities for doing hair, nails and make-up. They also suggested adding speakers and colourful lights. They felt that this design would encourage relaxation, communication and a sense of community among the young women.

# DISCUSSION

## Welcoming spaces for girls

While it may sometimes be challenging for youth programs to find activities that appeal to young women, qualitative evidence from this research suggests that this should be given high priority. Teenage girls tend to have widely different interests and hobbies than their male counterparts. This research concludes that girls tend to be most passionate about social aspects of youth spaces. They want to be engaged as a group, have interactions that affirm and empower them, and partake in relaxing activities including doing their hair, nails, and makeup in an environment which fosters relationships. Even without these amenities, girls reported spending their time conversing with staff and each other.

Ensuring the physical space also appeals to young women is another key component to making more female-friendly drop-in spaces. When asked about what that space should look like, young women described a space that was more vibrant and exciting. They wanted more colourful walls, positive images of women, and furnishings to accommodate their preferred activities. Young women need to feel that they are reflected in the space and that it is not a “man cave.”

 **“We just come here to communicate.”**

Offering activities and programs which appeal to young women is crucial to both sustaining current participants and attracting new space users. Structured all-girl programs can act as a gateway to engaging more young women in the space. However, in order to eliminate participation barriers and strengthen facilitators, the voices of young women need to be incorporated into the planning and delivery of these activities. This can ensure that youth spaces are responsive and reflective of girls' particular needs and interests.<sup>36</sup>

## Positive youth development

This study demonstrates the positive impact that youth drop-in spaces have on young women. Young women benefit from having a safe, local, comfortable space to spend their time after school. Qualitative evidence suggests that girls acquire important life skills through both structured and unstructured programming at youth drop-in spaces. Structured time was more associated with hard skills, like cooking and dancing, and unstructured time fostered soft skills, like independence and organization. Through the development of these skills, the young women become better prepared to enter adulthood and face challenges in their future.

Meaningful and sustained participation has been identified as a key factor in attaining positive outcomes<sup>37</sup> through youth programs. Despite the unstructured nature of the youth drop-in spaces, high attendance rates suggest that the youth spaces possess these characteristics.

Participation in the drop-in spaces fostered a sense of belonging among female participants. Young women often referred to the drop-in as a second home, and to fellow participants as brothers and sisters. The positive peer relationships and role models that young women gain from attending drop-ins are important components that support their social and emotional wellbeing. As the findings illustrated, these relationships provide comfort during difficult periods and relieve them of daily life stresses.

## Leadership opportunities

Other research has identified leadership opportunities as an essential component to youth programs.<sup>38</sup> Since the young women at the youth spaces seem to take on few leadership roles, there is potential to expand in this area. As this research demonstrates, young women have several ideas for improving the spaces. Sometimes soliciting youth input is a difficult task that requires more than simply asking questions.<sup>39</sup> Resources need to be devoted to both equipping staff with the skills needed to engage youth and support them in pursuing the ideas they propose. Not only will this increase the effectiveness of the spaces, it will develop the capacities of participants.

## Positive role models

Additionally, the staff play very influential roles at the youth drop-in spaces. The staff are positive figures, often from the community, who young people can go to for advice and aspire to be like. Staff have the important challenge of creating an environment which is safe and yet comfortable, where youth can be themselves without fear of judgment and explore their interests. Exploring ways that the youth spaces can connect young women with more role models will be important moving forward. This could include mentorship programs or employing older youth.

## Imbalances between boys and girls

Findings from this study also highlight some of the challenges that young women face, especially in terms of their experiences and interactions with boys. While they often spoke about the youth as a family, the perceived power differentials between young men and women surfaced in the focus group discussions. Some of the girls described the strong presence of males within the space, in part because they are there in larger numbers. They sometimes felt that the boys were favoured, had stronger voices, and monopolized certain activities. They also commented on the way boys treat girls within the space, sometimes as inferior or as objects.

### Value of girl-only spaces

Girl-specific zones have the potential to alleviate some of these issues. Girls experience adolescence differently from boys and girl-specific programming provides opportunities to explore and respond to some of those differences in a safe space.<sup>40</sup> In these spaces, girls can also discuss their experiences from a gendered perspective without fear of judgement. They are able to consider what is happening around them with people who have common experiences. More so, some of the enhanced challenges that girls face, such as low self-esteem, poor body image and unrealistic expectations for themselves, tend to lessen when they are supported by other women in an environment that celebrates their strengths.<sup>41</sup>

Additionally, providing girls with a space that is free from boys, they are more likely to develop their relationships with each other. When boys are around, girls are sometimes distracted from realizing their potential or exploring their

interests.<sup>42</sup> Sometimes competition is encouraged between girls based on who is the prettiest and most popular with the boys.<sup>43</sup> All-girl spaces allow girls to explore themselves and learn about each other outside of these influences.

Considering nearly all of the women in this study were also racialized, providing girl-only spaces would provide them with safe spaces to explore that aspect of their identities. Young women benefit from having comforting, safe spaces where their voices are valued and race, gender and class issues are taken into consideration.<sup>44</sup> A qualitative study found that teenage women of colour have aspirations for themselves that contrast with dominant images of dependent, materialistic women but they often doubt their ability to live up to these expectations.<sup>45</sup> Young women who are also from diverse racial and ethnic communities should have spaces to explore the challenges of racism, sexism, classism, and cultural hegemony in order to develop a critical consciousness and pursue acts of resistance. Youth drop-in spaces have the potential to support girls in this process and help them to develop a critical consciousness and pursue acts of resistance.

### Empowerment

A theme of empowerment emerged from the conversations with the young women. Some wanted to be inspired by posters of powerful women while others wanted empowerment incorporated into programs and the management of the space. While the young women's understanding of the concept of empowerment was not explored in this study, it can be broadly understood as taking more control over one's



life.<sup>46</sup> It is normally associated with capacity building processes and the redistribution of power.

Girls seem to lead or initiate very few activities at the youth spaces. The activities that they do lead occur infrequently, such as dances. Their concern with empowerment suggests there may be interest in changing this. One way that the youth spaces can empower young women more is by sharing responsibility with them. For example, staff could support girls in developing and implementing their own programs. Not only would this nourish a sense of pride and ownership among the participants, it would provide them with much needed girl-focused activities. One participant suggested that if they started a nail program, they could also organize a bake sale to raise funds and ensure all the young women could have their nails done for free.

These themes suggest that the young women who attend the youth spaces have identified areas for improvement, especially when it comes to their social location as females. Youth programs can build on this by further exploring girls' understanding of their identity and empowerment. It is important that youth workers think critically about power dynamics and engage youth in related discussions. Youth programs need to pay special attention to treating male and female participants *equitably* in which all participants, no matter their gender, are given the tools and resources to strive.

**I'd let all the girls choose how to design it. Everyone is different and you want them to be in a space where it feels comfortable."**

## Understanding of femininity

The young women who participated in the study clearly differentiated between the gender roles of females and males. When asked how to get more girls out, they frequently recommended having more 'girl activities,' implying that girls' interests are universally understood. Their interests and examples of activities also suggest that the young women have an understanding of femininity which pertains largely to body image. Girls were widely interested in hair, makeup and nails – all of which are considered a form of cosmetology. This focus on beauty is a growing trend amongst teenage girls<sup>47</sup> and youth-serving agencies need to take this into account when planning programs.

It is important that staff at youth programs are aware of the changes young women are experiencing. It is during this time that girls begin to develop a sense of body image and may be more sensitive to messages about body images.<sup>48</sup> While the young women seemed to view their emphasis on beauty as a hobby, there are physical, social and emotional components driving it. While cosmetology programs may be an effective way to recruit and retain female participants, other objectives should be incorporated into these programs. This could include conversations around empowerment, gender equality, and inner beauty.

The assumptions of what being female entails also surfaced in the proposed interior decoration of the space. Pink and purple walls were commonly suggested in order to make it more girl-friendly. These are traditionally feminine colours and reflect the participants' understanding of what it means to be a girl, and

the implications of these assumptions should also play a role in programming and planning.

## Staff training

Given the invaluable roles of frontline staff, it is important that they be supported with ongoing opportunities to build their capacities. Staff can further engage youth in meaningful discussions and empower them to take ownership over the spaces. Staff often act as confidants to the youth and, as such, need proper training to respond to the various dilemmas experienced during adolescence.

Additionally, variances in youth input and leadership opportunities between the spaces suggest that these components may be influenced by staff. All youth input should be valued and thoughtfully deliberated, and as often as possible staff should report back to youth on the implementation of their recommendations. Youth should not feel unheard and programs or opportunities should not be affected by staff changes.

According to Parks, Forestry and Recreation, 11 out of the 17 new program staff hired to work at the enhanced youth spaces that opened in 2015 had previously attended or volunteered at one of the other enhanced youth spaces.<sup>49</sup> While this practice supports the objectives of providing youth with pathways to employment and having staff that can identify with the communities being served, it sometimes requires additional investment to build that young person's capacities. All staff need to be aware of and able to respond to power dynamics and systems of oppression in order to create an inclusive space. Some new staff may require additional training or supervision to build the skills needed to cultivate girl-friendly youth spaces.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Results from this study indicate that girls experience gender-specific challenges within youth spaces. The following recommendations are offered to support youth drop-in centres in fostering welcoming and inclusive environments, overcoming participation barriers, and meeting the needs and interests of adolescent girls.

## Develop youth spaces to meet the needs of young women:

- Establish programs and protocols that create safe and welcoming spaces that are free from sexism and other forms of discrimination and oppression.
- Continue to offer a balance of structured and unstructured activities to meet the range of needs of young women and ensure there are activities in both categories that appeal to girls.
- Explore alternative layouts of the spaces to maximize their effectiveness. Consider designating male-only, female-only and male-female spaces or times.
- Provide free, accessible and reliable WiFi at all youth spaces.
- Ensure female-only hours are established and maintained for particular facilities, including weight rooms and gymnasiums, as demand and feasibility permits.
- Allow young women to decorate and design spaces to reflect their interests and styles.
- Improve data collection, evaluation and research to better understand and document the positive impacts and areas for improving youth spaces.

## Use the spaces to build the capacities of youth:

- Continue to connect youth with opportunities outside of the space by sharing events, projects, groups, and services that are happening within the community.
- Introduce youth to inspirational adults and positive role models by inviting guest speakers to share their experiences and facilitating mentor-mentee relationships.
- Incorporate opportunities for youth to build practical skills into both the structured and unstructured activities to improve their capacities and prepare them for adulthood.
- Whenever possible, use programs and activities to address power imbalances between male and female participants.

## Involve youth in decision-making:

- In consultation with youth, establish drop-in space guidelines which foster respect and comradery between participants.
- Engage youth in ongoing discussions to evaluate the effectiveness of the space and tailor it to meet their needs.
- Encourage young women to explore possibilities for new programming and support them in pursuing those ideas. Provide them with meaningful leadership opportunities.

## Continue to build on the role of staff:

- Train staff and implement an empowerment approach to service delivery to ensure that all youth have the chance to be meaningfully engaged within the space. Ensure male staff are educated on female empowerment and gender discrimination.
- Establish hiring protocols which ensure staff are from the neighbourhood being served and/or reflect that community. Strive for gender parity among staff.
- Engage in succession planning to guarantee that the provisions of programs and opportunities are not affected by staff changes.

# APPENDIX A: STUDY LIMITATIONS

This study evaluated girls' experiences at the first four youth spaces that received increased funding and underwent an enhancement process in 2014. Two out of the four youth spaces were operating before their enhancement and many of the young women attended the space and/or the centre before this change.<sup>‡</sup> Many of the girls described their experiences at the youth space both before and after the enhancement and did not differentiate in these descriptions. While this study was able to accurately assess girls' experiences, the impact of the "enhanced model" would have been better measured with a pretest-posttest design. This method would more accurately document the changes that resulted from the enhancement.

The youth who participated in this study attended the youth spaces voluntarily and were likely to be frequent users of the spaces. It is therefore reasonable to assume that they are among the people who are more likely to enjoy the space and find it comfortable. To more closely examine how to attract more young women, the experiences of infrequent space users would need to be better understood.

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<sup>‡</sup> North Kipling Community Centre and Heron Park Community Centre had existing youth lounges. Parkway Forest Community Centre was a new facility and many of the participants compared this youth lounge to a nearby one located at Oriole Community Centre.

These youth could potentially identify a more comprehensive and accurate list of barriers to participation. Research involving staff, particularly youth outreach workers and recreation programmers, or parents may provide further insight into the effective outreach strategies.

Few participants identified as being LGBTQ<sup>§</sup>, new to Canada or living with a disability. This made it difficult to assess the extent to which the youth spaces are comfortable and welcoming for youth who identify in these ways. This is something that service providers and policy makers should seriously consider as they act on the findings included in this report. Further investigation needs to be done to understand the extent to which the youth spaces are meeting the needs of youth who belong to these groups.

The survey was administered at the beginning of the focus group and was relatively long (32 questions). The vast majority of respondents answered positively to nearly all of the questions and some of the survey results did not correlate with the findings from the focus group discussions. This implies that the survey may have been compromised by response bias.

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<sup>§</sup> The term LGBTQ refers to individuals who identify along the spectrum of lesbian, gay, bisexual, non-binary, transsexual, transgender, 2-spirited, queer and questioning.

The respondents may have answered without really considering their own opinion, sometimes resorting to their friends' responses, and may have grown fatigue by the amount of reading involved. Administering the survey at the beginning of the focus group may have prevented participants from answering honestly. Respondents may not have fully understood the meaning or implications of each question or may not have developed the necessary trust towards the research. Because the survey lacked reliability, findings and analysis relied on the focus group discussions. Furthermore, safety protocols required a staff member of Parks, Forestry and Recreation to be present during the focus groups. While best efforts were made to minimize the potential effect of this, it may have influenced how the participants responded.

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