

# Evidence Brief

## Impacts of Early Exposure to Volunteerism and/or Mentorship on Youth

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### How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's Library for Youth Work, and searched online databases using the following key terms: "outcomes of youth mentoring," "outcomes of youth volunteerism," "youth," and "Ontario."

### Summary of Evidence: Impacts of Early Exposure to Volunteerism and/or Mentorship on Youth

#### 1. Volunteering enables youth to build social capital and social connections.

Social capital includes the "web of networks, norms, and trusting relationships that enable people to address community issues through collective action" (Flanagan, Kim, Collura & Kopish, 2014, p. 296). A large Canadian study of adults and youth found that volunteering builds social capital in immigrants and newcomers, which can assist in the settlement process (Handy & Greenspan, 2009). One study focused on youth found that adolescents who volunteer also reported higher levels of perceived social support, and indicated that they felt "there were people they could go to for help" (Flanagan et al., 2014, p. 306). In order to facilitate this, program staff should strive to build personal connections with youth volunteers and foster a safe, welcoming space where youth feel valued.

#### 2. Youth who *value* volunteering experience positive health and wellbeing outcomes at increased levels.

Volunteering is associated with many positive outcomes for youth, but these outcomes also depend on youth's attitudes towards volunteering. Canadian youth volunteer at significantly higher rates than the rest of the population; a full 66% of youth age 15 to 19 reported volunteering in 2013, compared to 42% of adults age 20 to 34 (Turcotte, 2015, p. 5). However, this figure is likely linked to mandatory volunteerism requirements enforced by schools (Turcotte, 2015). One study explored the activities that are important to youth, such as education, socializing or substance use. Youth who identified volunteering as the most important activity in their life "reported significantly higher self-esteem, stronger connections to others, greater coping, lower concerns, and less depressive symptoms compared to youth not reporting an important activity" (Ramey et al., 2010, p. 249). This suggests that volunteering is not enough for youth to experience the benefits of

volunteering. Additional research has found that youth benefit from engagement in activities when those activities are meaningful. Armstrong and Manion (2013) found that “the more meaning found in engagement, the less likely youth were to report suicidal thoughts in spite of risk factors” (p. 20).

### **3. Youth who engage in meaningful volunteerism can experience a decreased risk of suicide.**

Most of the research examining the link between volunteerism and mental health focuses on adult volunteers, not youth. Despite the focus on adults, this research has shown that adults who volunteer demonstrate “fewer depressive symptoms and higher life satisfaction” (Kim & Morgül, 2017, p. 163). Researchers believe that volunteerism provides psychological resources, such as self-esteem and confidence, which can bolster a person’s ability to cope with negative feelings, and further that volunteering facilitates social connections and support, which reduce feelings of isolation (Musick & Wilson, 2003; Kim & Morgül, 2017).

Ramey et al. (2010) evaluated whether, and how, youth engagement is related to suicide risk. The study found significant differences in suicide risk based on a young person’s activities and the value they associate with that activity. The study looked at youth engagement in volunteerism, extracurricular activities, employment, education, sports, socializing, and organized clubs. Activities that are social or structured were associated with decreased risk of suicide, whereas unstructured and solitary activities were associated with increased suicide risk (Ramey et al., 2010). Youth who listed a valued, important activity (such as volunteering) had a decreased risk of suicide compared to youth who did not have a valued, important activity and youth who listed a problematic behaviour (i.e. substance use) as their most valued activity (Ramey et al., 2010).

### **4. Youth experience positive outcomes when mentors and teachers have high expectations of excellence and believe that youth can grow and change.**

Organizations may offer formal, structured mentoring to youth, or mentoring may occur informally through personal relationships with youth. Research shows that Black youth can experience improved academic performance, in part, when mentors and teachers “provide feedback to African-American students emphasizing that they have high expectations of their students/mentees, that they believe that their students/mentees can meet these expectations, and that they believe that their students/mentees can grow their abilities” (Sánchez, 2016, p. 12). These approaches can translate into improved outcomes for mentees.

Mentors can support youth by emphasizing their agency and encouraging them to take a strength-based approach to understanding their own lives. Importantly, mentors must be able to hold hope for mentees when they are struggling. Organizations should offer a strong, unwavering message of hope and resilience. Youth programs can inspire hope by connecting youth to role models who have overcome adversity (Jarjoura, 2013, p. 7); it is particularly impactful and meaningful for Black and

racialized youth to be exposed to mentors who are also Black or racialized and have overcome adversity.

### **5. Mentoring can facilitate positive outcomes for immigrant, refugee, and/or racialized youth.**

Formal and informal mentoring relationships are particularly helpful to first-generation immigrant and refugee youth as they adapt to a new culture, language, and school system. Youth who are immigrants and refugees “are in critical need of reparative and protective relationships with nonparental adults and older peers who can serve as caring role models, cultural interpreters, and academic guides” (Oberoi, 2016, p. 6). One study found that Black male youth benefitted from mentoring by learning to trust others, ask for help, and feel comfortable with emotional vulnerability (Sánchez, 2016). Research has found that Black male youth benefit in many ways from mentoring, including a decreased likelihood of using substances or participating in, or witnessing, physical or gun violence (Sánchez, 2016). Organizations that work with youth who are immigrants or refugees must take care to develop staff and volunteers’ intercultural competency and foster a safe, welcoming space that affirms young people’s identities and lived experiences.

Albright, Hurd, and Hussain (2017) argued that many programs that aim to serve marginalized or racialized youth “hold the potential to reproduce rather than reduce inequality” (p. 363). Many mentoring programs seek to target marginalized youth, and in these settings the “prototypical mentor is a White, middleclass adult and the prototypical protege is an economically disadvantaged youth of colour” (Albright, Hurd, & Hussain, 2017, 363). Mentoring is most impactful and meaningful for racialized youth when their mentor has overcome adversity (Jarjoura, 2013, p. 7) and can relate to shared life experiences. Organizations should strive to adopt a social justice lens within their organizational culture and actively recruit and hire staff and mentors who reflect the community they serve.

## References

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