



# Mitigating mental health and wellbeing challenges among young populations: A scan of youth-led initiatives across Canada to inform psychosocial program development

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## ABSTRACT

Youth across Canada are developing creative initiatives that address blind spots and inadequacies in youth mental health services and support, yet few have been formally documented. This study fills this gap, compiling and distilling learnings from youth-led initiatives about the approaches and spaces they have created to support the mental health and wellbeing needs of their peers. Using a decolonizing framework, a systematic scan of the grey literature was conducted to identify youth-led initiatives across Canada. A total of 107 youth-led initiatives were included and information regarding their governance structure, mission, delivery of their programs, and definition of mental health and wellbeing was collected and thematically analyzed using an intersectionality lens. Three important themes were identified that ground the work of youth-led initiatives: 1) Facilitating education, capacity building and access to resources, 2) Ensuring inclusive spaces for healing and social support, and 3) Fostering diversity and pride. The unique narratives, values and approaches projected in youth-led initiatives offer important insights regarding what youth want, and emphasize the importance of engaging youth in the design and development of mental health and wellbeing policies, services, and strategies to improve their responsiveness and cultural safety.

## 1. Introduction

Healthy social and emotional development in adolescence is the foundation for mental health and resilience across the life course (Friedrich, 2017). Yet, it is estimated that one in five youth in Canada will experience mental health challenges before the age of 25 (Mental Health Commission of Canada; Youth Mental Health Canada). Despite an overwhelming prevalence of mental illness, access to appropriate and specialized mental healthcare services is lacking, with less than 20 % of young people receiving appropriate treatment (Mental Health Commission of Canada; Youth Mental Health Canada). Deficits in access are even more pronounced among marginalized and at-risk youth populations, despite a higher level of need (Sapiro and Ward, 2020). For example, youth experiencing poverty are two to three times more likely to develop mental health challenges, and sexual minority youth are three times more likely to report suicide ideation than heterosexual youth (Burton, Marshal, & Chisolm, 2014; Sapiro & Ward, 2020). As leaders and decision makers of a challenging future, the wellbeing and

mental health of young people is even more crucial.

Recent studies have documented an increase in mental health and wellbeing challenges among youth during the COVID-19 pandemic related to social isolation, economic constraints, and uncertainty about the future (Duan et al., 2020; Orgilés, Morales, Delvecchio, Mazzeschi, & Espada, 2020; Wagner, 2020). The pandemic also exacerbated pre-existing disparities in health and wellbeing challenges among youth, across diverse socioeconomic and racial contexts (Gauthier, Smith, García, García, & Thomas, 2021; Miconi et al., 2020; Purtle, 2020). Now more than ever, the need for mental health services that are accessible and responsive to these varying circumstances are apparent and urgent. Especially needed are services that support marginalized and underserved youth who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

Research on youth mental health and wellbeing in Canada increasingly emphasizes the value of engaging youth as a means of better understanding their diverse realities, perspectives, and needs (Allemang, Cullen, Schraeder, Pintson, & Dimitropoulos, 2021; Henderson, Hawke,

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& Relihan, 2018). Yet, few mental health programs and services for youth adequately reflect and respond to this diversity (Ashok Malla et al., 2018). To fill these gaps, youth have stepped up with their own mental health and wellbeing initiatives. In this study, we examine Canadian youth-led mental health and wellbeing initiatives to understand what youth perceive as important to their mental health and wellbeing, and the approaches that they employ to address their needs. These insights can inform tailored policies, programs, and services for youth mental health and wellbeing that are both responsive and effective.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Theoretical framework

#### 2.1.1. Decolonizing and intersectionality frameworks

This review was guided by a decolonizing framework and approach to research. Decolonizing methodologies aim to challenge dominant and colonial ideologies, and hierarchical traditions of knowledge production (Fortier, 2017; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). Thambinathan and Kinsella propose four practices that can be used by researchers to incorporate decolonial processes from research design to the interpretation and dissemination of results. These recommendations include: 1) exercising critical reflexivity, 2) reciprocity and respect for self-determination, 3) embracing “other(ed)” ways of knowing and 4) embodying a transformative praxis (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). This review implemented each of these practices.

At the start of this work, the authors, who identify as women, and/or youth, and/or visible minorities, engaged in reflection regarding how their positionality within colonial power structures impacts their research. In addition, active and intentional decisions were made in the design of the study and choice of methodology to document a diversity of marginalized voices and ways of knowing that are commonly excluded in academic literature. To operationalize this approach, the results were analysed using an intersectionality lens (Crenshaw, 1991) to explore how diverse social identities, and the disadvantage(s) they generate within discriminatory systems, influence the approach and activities of youth-led mental health and wellbeing initiatives.

#### 2.1.2. The typology of youth Participation and empowerment pyramid

There is a growing recognition of the importance of *meaningful youth engagement* in health research, policy development, and program delivery, alongside a growing body of literature defining its essential elements (Larsson, Staland-Nyman, Svedberg, Nygren, & Carlsson, 2018; Macauley et al., 2022; Patton et al., 2016). Hart’s Ladder of Young People’s Participation (Hart, 1992) was foundational in developing a language to define different levels of youth engagement ranging from non-participation to youth-leadership. While important, Hart’s Ladder is limited by its conceptualization of adult-youth partnerships as a hindrance to youth leadership, development, and empowerment (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018; Wong, Zimmerman, & Parker, 2010). The Typology of Youth Participation and Empowerment (TYPE) Pyramid proposed by Wong and colleagues, harnesses research on the impact of youth-adult partnerships and power sharing on positive youth development, empowerment, and overcoming socio-economical, institutional and political barriers to engagement (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018; Wong et al., 2010). The TYPE Pyramid incorporates this growing evidence base by organizing five configurations of youth-adult partnership along the sides of a pyramid representing optimal outcomes in youth empowerment and positive youth development (Wong et al., 2010).

The TYPE pyramid is used as the primary typology of youth-engagement guiding the search terms and exclusion/inclusion criteria of this study. While a pluralistic engagement in which youth and adults share control of a program or initiative provides optimal conditions for youth empowerment and ultimately provides opportunities for youth leadership, evaluating whether the control of a program is equitably shared and free of uneven power dynamics is challenging (Cahill &

Dadvand, 2018; Wong et al., 2010). In this study, we define youth-led mental health and wellbeing initiatives as those which are developed by either youth or adults, but which are governed exclusively by youth. While our focus is on “youth-led” initiatives, we also searched for literature using the less specific synonyms of “youth-driven” and “youth-voice” to ensure that any mention of youth-led mental health and wellbeing initiatives were captured.

### 2.2. Grey literature scan

This study adapted environmental scan (Graham et al., 2008) and scoping review (Mazaniello-Chézol & Corbière, 2020; Peters et al., 2020) methodologies to systematically search the grey literature. This hybrid methodology allowed our team to access a range of smaller, community-based initiatives which are less likely to be studied or published in peer reviewed literature.

The scan on which this paper is based was conducted from September 2020 to January 2021 using the key words listed in Table 1. Data sources included Google’s web browser, as well as national, provincial, and local news and community organization websites. Social media platforms were also included in the search (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter). These platforms were chosen as they are popular among youth ages 10–25 (Schimmele, Fonberg, & Schellenberg, 2021) and can be searched systematically, with some limitations related to their search algorithm. Youth mental health and wellbeing organizations or funding websites that support youth-led initiatives were also used as a data source, such as the Royal Bank of Canada’s Future Launch Initiative.

As youth-led initiatives were identified, information regarding their governance structure, mission, and delivery of their programs was collected. We also noted any definitions of mental health and wellbeing that the organizations employed, and whether youth were given leadership in the design and delivery of initiatives. To ensure the comprehensiveness of the search, and due to biases in social media searches produced by personalized algorithms, each database was searched by two or more researchers, independently.

Ethics approval was not required for the literature scan as it utilized published and publicly available literature.

### 2.3. Key definitions

Key terms utilized in this study are defined as follows:

- **Youth-led:** Refers to the exclusive leadership of an initiative by youth between the ages of 10–25 years. Adult-initiated programs or youth-led programs that are embedded in non-youth-led organizations were classified as youth-led if youth have full leadership over the program in question.
- **Initiative:** An event, action, program, opportunity, or project that occurs at least once but does not have to be reoccurring.
- **Wellbeing:** Definitions of wellbeing vary broadly, but usually include at least one of the following nine dimensions, as described by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: physical well-being, economic well-being, social well-being, development and activity, emotional well-being, psychological well-being, life satisfaction, domain specific satisfaction, and engaging activities and work (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018).
- **Marginalized:** Groups and communities that experience discrimination and exclusion (social, political and/or economic) because of

**Table 1**  
Grey Literature Scan Key Words.

“youth-driven”, “youth voice”, “youth-led”;

AND “mental illness”, “mental disorders”, “mental health”, “wellbeing”, “wellness”;

AND “intervention”, “initiative”, “program”.

unequal power relationships across economic, political, and cultural dimensions (National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health).

2.4. Selection of initiatives

A total of 294 information sources were identified (i.e., websites, news, social media, and organization webpages). Each source was screened by 2 reviewers based on the title and summary of the initiative described, and the application of pre-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria related to the leadership, target age group, and focus of each initiative (Table 2). Disagreements in inclusion and exclusion between reviewers were discussed at regular meetings until consensus was reached. This process resulted in the selection of 107 initiatives from which data was extracted (Supplementary Table S1).

2.5. Analysis

A data matrix was developed to extract and organize data of interest, including information about the source (origin, title, and year) and the individual initiatives (leadership, year of inception, frequency, target population, geographic area, approach, and activities). Each of the 107 sources selected for analysis were reviewed by two researchers to ensure the accuracy of the information extracted and to minimize error. More specifically, during an initial round of data extraction KKAW, CE, and MMC each extracted information from approximately one third of the total number of selected sources. Whenever possible, data were captured verbatim from the initiatives' webpages to preserve the voices of youth during analysis. In some cases, relevant information was paraphrased to reduce the length of the text used for analysis purposes. Details regarding the specific source of the extracted information (such as links to social media pages or websites) were also noted in the data matrix. Following this initial round of data extraction, the information included in the data matrix for each initiative was reviewed by a second reviewer (KKAW, CE, or MMC) to ensure credibility. During this second round of data extraction, links to specific webpages and related information were verified.

Thematic analysis was performed to analyze the data. KKAW and CE first reviewed the data matrix independently to identify patterns and generate an initial list of codes across initiatives. After meeting to discuss their observations and to consolidate and define agreed codes, they reviewed the data matrix again, independently, to generate broader themes based on the codes. KKAW and CE then rearranged and recategorized the themes in subsequent meetings, with feedback from AMA. By using intersectionality theory as a lens when generating key themes, special attention was placed on capturing nuances in the approaches used by youth as they relate to their unique identities including age, gender, race, ethnicity and location.

**Table 2**  
Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria.

Inclusion Criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Initiatives in Canada</li> <li>Initiatives led by youth aged 10–25 years of age</li> <li>Initiatives related to youth mental health or wellbeing</li> <li>Sufficient information on youth-led initiative (what, how and why)</li> </ul>
Exclusion Criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Initiatives outside of Canada</li> <li>Initiatives led by adults (aged 25 years and older)</li> <li>Initiatives unrelated to youth mental health or wellbeing</li> <li>Insufficient information provided</li> </ul>

3. Results

3.1. Profile of youth-led mental health and wellbeing initiatives in Canada

The grey literature scan identified youth-led mental health and wellbeing initiatives from four sources, including organization websites, news articles, social media platforms, and the RBC Future Launch database of funded projects in 2019. Over 35 % of these initiatives were established between 2016 and 2020, with only 12 % established before 2016. Most of the initiatives consisted of recurring programming versus single events. While most initiatives indicated an English language focus, a minority offered bilingual programming in French or an Indigenous language.

Considerable geographic diversity was noted. While 18 % of youth-led initiatives targeted youth Canada-wide, around 80 % of the initiatives focused on youth in a specific province, with the majority based in Ontario. Still, while many initiatives focused their work within a specific province, few had provincial-wide mandates. Thirty-seven percent of youth-led initiatives operated in areas classified as small population centers according to the 2016 Canadian Census (Statistics Canada, 2017), and 34 % occurred in large population centers.

The focus of youth-led initiatives was identified by applying the CDC classification of wellbeing in nine distinct dimensions (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). While many targeted more than one dimension of wellbeing, the most frequent dimensions were “social” and “emotional” wellbeing (Table 3). Many initiatives embracing these two dimensions of wellbeing addressed the “engaging activities and work” dimension as well. Interestingly, few initiatives focused on the wellbeing dimensions associated with “life satisfaction” or “domain-specific satisfaction” that denote contentment with life, evaluated based on cognitive comparisons with standards of good life and affective information (Table 3) (Veenhoven, 2008).

In terms of target populations, 56 % of the initiatives identified addressed the needs of a broad range of youth, many with the specific goal of being inclusive (Table 4). Similarly, many initiatives were community-wide, emphasizing the involvement of youth as well as their families. In contrast, 40 % of initiatives targeted specific populations, such as marginalized youth, adolescents, and students (Table 4). Even more specific foci included youth who identify as members of the LGBTQ + community, Black youth, Indigenous youth, and youth who live in rural communities, or an intersection of these social locations. This distinction between initiatives that target “youth-at-large” versus “marginalized” subpopulations became a central focus of subsequent analysis.

3.2. Thematic analysis

We identified three major themes, and corresponding sub-themes, that describe key approaches and values considered by youth when designing and implementing mental health and wellbeing initiatives for specific or broad youth communities:

**Table 3**  
Wellbeing Classifications of Youth-Led Initiatives.

CDC Dimensions	Total Initiatives* (n = 107)
Physical well-being	18
Economic well-being	11
Social well-being	67
Development and activity	19
Emotional well-being	56
Psychological well-being	36
Life satisfaction	2
Domain specific satisfaction	0
Engaging activities and work	57

\*Multiple dimensions may be reported by each initiative.

**Table 4**  
Characteristics of Selected Youth-Led Initiatives.

	Number of Initiatives (n = 107)	Percentage of Total (%)
<b>Primary Language*</b>		
English	94	88
French	7	5
Bilingual	4	3
<b>Geographic Area</b>		
Canada Wide	19	18
Alberta	4	4
British Columbia	11	10
Manitoba	4	4
New Brunswick	2	2
Newfoundland and Labrador	0	0
Northwest Territories	3	3
Nova Scotia	10	9
Nunavut	3	3
Ontario	32	30
Prince Edward Island	0	0
Quebec	14	13
Saskatchewan	2	2
Yukon	0	0
Not Recorded	3	3
<b>Population Size of Geographic Area</b>		
Small Population Center (29,000 or less)	40	37
Medium Population Center (30, 000 to 99,000)	4	4
Large Population Center (100,000 or more)	34	32
Canada or Province Wide	26	24
Not Recorded	3	3
<b>Year Initiated</b>		
2000–2005	1	1
2006–2010	1	1
2011–2015	10	9
2016–2020	41	38
2021–present	4	4
Not Recorded	50	47
<b>Frequency</b>		
Recurring	52	49
Single Event	24	22
Not Recorded	31	29
<b>Target Population</b>		
Youth Broadly (youth-at-large)	61	57
Students	7	12
Community	13	23
Non-specified Groups of Youth	41	72
Marginalized/Minority Youth	42	39
Not Recorded	4	4

\*When the language of the initiative was not explicitly mentioned in the selected publication, the language of the article was included for analysis.

### 3.2.1. Theme 1: Facilitating education, capacity building and access to resources

A shared objective across initiatives serving youth-at-large and marginalized youth was the promotion of educational opportunities, capacity-building, and resource distribution to facilitate the acquisition of new skills and personal growth. Although these themes emerged in both groups, the initiatives that targeted youth-at-large focused primarily on educational opportunities, whereas those that targeted marginalized youth focused primarily on accessibility to resources.

*Supporting the growth and development of youth:* A variety of initiatives aimed to foster curiosity among youth and to increase their interest in learning and obtaining an education. These initiatives offered youth the opportunity to participate in workshops or courses to build skills in leadership, project planning, and communication, while also exploring options for higher education. Among these initiatives was a youth-led program named “High School to Research in STEM” located in Ontario that animates student interest in STEM and STEM-related research by connecting high school students to STEM research groups at local

universities. Outreach programs responding to the environmental, social, and economic concerns of youth are another example of initiatives focused on youth development. These initiatives foster social agency of youth to drive change around causes of significance to them and their peers. As a student leader of an environmental club “Keeping Up and Cleaning Up” explained:

“We... and the (Northumberland) County...are doing a lot of cool stuff with environmental education. We want to try to get that word out there a bit and implement new recycling bins, explaining what goes in the garbage to limit the mix-up, to try to reduce waste that is going into our landfills and to recycle the right stuff.” (Derived from: <https://trenchillsnow.com/2019/11/18/grants-celebrates-youth-leaders-in-campbellford/>)

*Nurturing Youth Voice:* Multiple initiatives targeting youth-at-large aimed to connect and amplify the power of youth voices and experiences in driving change. Some initiatives fostered connection by inviting youth to attend meetings with community leaders, providing them with a platform to express their concerns, or by making explicit efforts to include youth in research. Initiatives that targeted marginalized youth also focused on bringing youth together to discuss and take action on important factors impacting their mental health and wellbeing.

In both target populations, initiatives assembled youth to act on issues in education and healthcare, or obstacles faced by specific youth subgroups (such as at-risk youth or Indigenous youth). The work of “Uusdaadaouw: Let’s Build”, an indigenous organization in Quebec, is an example:

“A lot of us identified problem spots, whether it was lateral violence, alcoholism, the need for recycling programs in their communities, sexual education ... [We are] not blind. [We] see what we’re lacking, ... and want to be heard.” (Derived from: <https://discover.rbcroyalbank.com/the-uusdaadaouw-lets-build-project-fosters-resilience-with-youth-led-creative-interventions/>)

*Facilitating youth awareness:* Many youth-led initiatives organized educational events, interactive activities, and campaigns to raise awareness around various social issues, especially as they relate to mental illness and suicide. Drawing attention to the devastating impacts of poor mental health, and the need for youth to develop strategies to care for their mental health, many such initiatives highlighted the overrepresentation of certain youth groups in suicide statistics, and the negative effects of mental health stigmas on help-seeking. Described by one of the volunteer organizers of “Active Minds”, based in Ontario:

“In our community, mental health is not really discussed... It’s kind of like a stigma. Nobody really wants to talk about it. So, it’s important that they learn about it and get exposed to it... [As a child of immigrants], I know about mental health, and I’ve been exposed to mental health awareness [but] our families are not used to that. So, they’ll be like, ‘Just pray,’ or ‘Just ignore it.’ They look past it. Not because they don’t care, but just because they don’t know any better. They don’t understand it.” (Derived from: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/mental-health-stigma-cultural-communities-ottawa-1.4207288>)

By increasing awareness, youth leaders hope to reduce mental health stigmas, improve access to resources, and inspire other youth to contribute towards positive change in their mental health and wellbeing.

*Leveling the playing field:* Some youth-led initiatives supported the mental health and well-being of marginalized youth by facilitating access to needed services and resources ranging from food security, education, employment retention, and access to clothing and computers. Initiatives accomplished this by raising awareness about available community resources or by organizing fundraisers to reduce the financial barriers associated with accessing these resources. Initiatives also sought to introduce youth to tools and skills to help them acquire

resources on their own without the need of a formal service or organization. Examples of the latter include initiatives that aim to reduce poverty and food insecurity by teaching youth and community members how to build urban food systems, or those targeting social inclusion by providing free clothing to at-risk youth. One high school poverty intervention initiative in Ontario referred to as the “Gym Bag Care Package Program” provided packages including school-branded clothing, socks, and personal hygiene and toiletry products to students in need to help them feel included.

In some cases, initiatives provided youth with needed tools and resources with the additional aim of demonstrating understanding, community, and support. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the “BQYC COVID-19 Assistance Project” in Ontario offered emergency support to Black youth requiring assistance to cover basic needs and household items due to job loss or unemployment. Participants also received shopping guides, financial tips to combat hunger, and advice on how to prevent the spread of the coronavirus in the Black community.

### 3.2.2. Theme 2: Ensuring inclusive spaces for healing and social support

Another area of focus among youth-led initiatives was the creation of inclusive spaces where young people can connect socially and find a welcoming community of peers.

*Community-building and peer support:* To foster a sense of unity and belonging, some youth-led initiatives implemented activities, projects, or programs with the objective of connecting youth and providing them with opportunities to support one another. Initiatives that targeted youth-at-large often focused on creating stronger, accepting communities that would foster respect and encourage youth to speak up on the issues that they care about. Initiatives targeting marginalized youth tended to foster unity and safety by connecting youth through cultural and traditional activities. In both instances, peer support and personal stories were used in building community. Hope and resiliency were nurtured by recognizing that their experiences and feelings are important and that they need not feel alone during challenging periods. A youth-at-large initiative that exemplifies this approach is “Outward Bound for Grieving Youth”, in British Columbia:

“The grief work that is purposefully woven into every aspect of the curriculum is not intended to provide therapy, but rather to facilitate an environment where young people can connect, build relationships, and share in a relevant healing experience with real-world outcomes.” (Derived from: <https://www.outwardbound.org/expeditions/>)

*Spaces to connect, move and heal:* Some initiatives focused on building physical spaces, such as community and sports centers, to provide youth with a place to socialize and engage in physical activities and play. Some of these sought to create non-judgemental spaces for marginalized or minority youth to freely express themselves and their identities. Examples include one initiative that aimed to make skateboarding more inclusive for queer persons, and another initiative that provided LGBTQ+ youth with reserved theater space and workshops as places to explore their voice and identity.

Among initiatives targeting youth-at-large, a large majority take place within school or university settings. However, the pivot to virtual events during the COVID-19 pandemic served to extend the accessibility of youth-led mental health and wellbeing initiatives to youth outside of school settings. Examples of these efforts were livestream and pre-recorded personal stories and peer-to-peer mental health education delivered by youth leaders trained by [Jack.org](https://www.jack.org/), a non-profit organization that advocates for youth mental health and suicide prevention across Canada ([What is Jack, xxxx](https://www.jack.org/)). While these virtual events drew a large youth audience, lack of technology and connectivity represents a barrier to engagement.

### 3.2.3. Theme 3: Fostering diversity and pride

Various initiatives sought to empower youth to embrace their culture

(s) or to appreciate the diverse cultures around them by bringing youth together around common community projects.

*Connecting to culture:* Many youth-led initiatives targeting marginalized youth organized opportunities for participants to engage in cultural programming to learn traditional teachings, languages, and heritage. Among these was a project that incorporated traditional Indigenous teachings in a self-defence program, while another, called the “Medicine Wheel Garden” (in Manitoba), provided a “sacred circle” in which youth can explore their Indigenous identity, and “listen, teach, observe, read and write, be together, be in solitude, sing, and paint, and dance, and act, think and meditate, speak and be silent, question and answer, experiment and discover.”

*Celebrating cultural differences:* Among initiatives targeting youth-at-large, an emphasis on exploring and embracing diverse cultures and building a respectful community through storytelling, art, or presentations was common. Certain initiatives targeting specific marginalized groups also tackled issues of historical inequities and reconciliation but in a manner that celebrates resilience and cross-cultural dialogue. As a member of the “Youth Leading Reconciliation” initiative in British Columbia explains:

“Forgiveness is ongoing...forgiveness is lifelong...if I walk with no forgiveness, then I’m setting myself up to be hurt again ... for me truth and reconciliation is being right here with the kids and drumming with them, teaching them how to dance, teaching them how to pray, teaching our language and telling them that each one of them matter.” (Derived from: <https://www.nanaimobulletin.com/news/nanaimo-youths-share-perspectives-around-truth-and-reconciliation/>)

Only one youth-led initiative targeting youth-at-large addressed cultural differences in a similar manner. The “Diversity retreat” in central Alberta, brought together diverse youth to practice inclusion through cross-cultural awareness and exchange, and to apply this awareness within their communities.

*Strengths-based and creative methods:* Many initiatives targeting marginalized youth implemented strength-based approaches that allow creative expression through art, music, and performing arts, while emphasizing resiliency and self-determination. In the “Whapmagoostui Youth Album” project based in Northern Quebec, Indigenous youth were encouraged to capture their stories and emotions through song. As described by participating youth, Matthew A. Iserhoff:

“Having that creative outlet where they can release whatever it is they need to release, you [could] see the progress of the youth as we were working — how certain things were shedding off of them.” (Derived from: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/art-whapmagoostui-cree-matthew-iserhoff-quebec-1.5401450>)

Other initiatives hosted community events involving youth and their family members featuring music, games, yoga, and face-painting with the aim of fostering youth engagement and inclusivity. Youth-at-large initiatives sometimes implemented creative approaches (such as t-shirt design contests for fundraisers), but more commonly used conventional methods, such as poster campaigns and presentation. Social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and their initiative’s websites were also employed to allow youth to engage and share their perspectives, viewpoints, or stories.

## 4. Discussion

In this grey literary review, youth-led mental health and wellbeing initiatives were identified and analyzed to better understand youth priorities in, and approaches to, addressing their mental health and wellbeing needs. Three major themes were identified that characterize the value base and approaches that youth-led initiatives employ: 1) Facilitating education, capacity building and access to resources, 2) Ensuring inclusive spaces for healing and social support, and 3)

Fostering diversity and pride.

Definitions of youth mental health and wellbeing are varied and have been criticized in the literature as being imprecise and vague (McLeod & Wright, 2016; Barkham et al., 2019). This lack of clarity has impeded efforts to gather and coalesce a robust evidence-base from which youth mental health services and programs can be developed or evaluated (Barkham et al., 2019; McLeod & Wright, 2016). Of particular note is the scarcity of literature documenting how youth define their own mental health and wellbeing (Christmas & Khanlou, 2019; Laliberte & Varcoe, 2021). In Canada, this scarcity is fueled by a lack of meaningful engagement of youth in mental health and wellbeing research (Henderson et al., 2021). As demonstrated in this study, youth-led mental health and wellbeing initiatives in Canada provide rich insight into how youth define their mental health and wellbeing. Consistent with findings from studies in the USA and Australia, a common attribute was the multifaceted and context-specific nature of these definitions, and their implications for action (Brough, Gorman, Ramirez, & Westoby, 2003; Marsters & Tiatia-Seath, 2019). For example, study findings revealed that the dual dimensions of social and emotional wellbeing were central to many youth initiatives, reflected in actions that emphasize the development of peer-support networks and connecting youth with services. These actions were often paired with activities nurturing youth engagement and development, and enabling capacities of leadership, teamwork, advocacy, and creativity. Findings also revealed that the content and approach of youth activities varied substantially across initiatives depending on the context-specific needs of the youth concerned.

Despite the variety of approaches undertaken by youth-led mental health and wellbeing initiatives, a number of unifying aspects were apparent. Among these were values of inclusivity and diversity that permeated the design and implementation of many such initiatives. Here, an important distinction was identified in narratives around diversity comparing initiatives targeting youth-at-large and those targeting marginalized youth. While youth-at-large initiatives embraced diversity through programs supporting cross-cultural understanding and respect, initiatives targeting marginalized youth emphasized the importance of diversity through actions that tackle inequities and work towards reconciliation. Other unifying values in youth-led initiatives included a frequent emphasis on individual self-expression, identity, belonging and cultural connection across project activities. Attention to these narratives and values will be crucial when designing youth-responsive mental health and wellbeing initiatives, policy, and services.

Findings also highlighted how youth are building new spaces, communities, and approaches to support the mental health and wellbeing priorities of their communities. Youth are finding creative ways to fill gaps in existing mental health and wellbeing services through education, art, music, cultural activities, or peer-support. The breadth of approaches apparent across initiatives emphasizes a need for research that considers their effectiveness, and the benefits of broadening the remit of mainstream youth mental health services. Also of note were salient differences between initiatives targeting youth-at-large and those targeting marginalized youth with respect to equitable access. While well-resourced youth-at-large initiatives promoted a range of opportunities to support youth mental health, measures to support equitable access were not always apparent. By contrast, accessibility considerations were central to the design of initiatives targeting marginalized youth. Similar attention to the diversity of youth needs and opportunities are needed in youth-at-large initiatives to ensure that access inequities are identified and addressed.

Findings from this review should be contextualized within the methodological challenges of grey literature searches, for which little guidance exists. These include the limited availability of advanced search options in grey literature search engines, and a lack of mechanisms to control the influence of algorithms on search results. These challenges were particularly apparent in social media searches and may have impacted the scope of initiatives identified by the research team.

Additional limitations imposed by the search methodology include the exclusive use of English terms despite Canada's multilingualism. This may have limited the research team's ability to identify non-English speaking youth-led initiatives. Beyond limitations to the search methodology, the nature of grey literature produced challenges in applying a decolonizing approach. For example, it is difficult to control what news websites decide to publish and therefore what youth-led initiatives they highlight and make visible. Future research should strive to develop standardized methods to systematically search the grey literature to reduce such limitations. Nonetheless, the lack of a gold standard for this grey literature review was also a strength of the study, allowing the research team to be flexible, creative, and iterative throughout data collection and analysis.

## 5. Conclusion

In recent years, Canada has made large investments in the transformation of youth mental health services to address systemic issues in their availability, access, and appropriateness (Halsall et al., 2019; Malla et al., 2019). Youth-led mental health and wellbeing initiatives yield crucial insights that can inform this transformation. These initiatives offer new narratives, spaces, and approaches that address the social, economic, and psychological dimensions of wellbeing, nurturing inclusion, capacity building, healing, community, and pride. The voices and experiences of youth projected through these initiatives are an untapped source of expertise that should be engaged in the development of mental health and wellbeing policies, strategies, and services to enhance their responsiveness and cultural safety.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Khandideh K.A. Williams:** Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Project administration. **Charlotte Evans:** Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Maud Mazaniello-Chézol:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Validation, Writing – review & editing. **Alayne M. Adams:** Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

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