



FACTSHEET

TAKE 5: VISIONING TRANSFORMATIVE YOUTH WORK – INSIGHTS FROM THE ONTARIO YOUTH SECTOR STUDY

YouthREX's **Visioning Transformative Youth Work: Collaborative Design Day** on September 6th, 2023, brought together youth sector stakeholders to explore the joys, challenges, and tensions of youth work. The goals were to connect youth workers in an inclusive and supportive environment to imagine the possibilities for solving pressing challenges in the youth sector, and to listen to and learn with one another. Through storytelling and design thinking principles, participants worked together to craft a vision for creative and viable forms of transformative youth work practices.

Dr. Uzo Anucha, YouthREX's Provincial Academic Director and York Research Chair in Youth and Contexts of Inequity, presented insights from the Ontario Youth Sector Compass research project. This study included online surveys completed by more than 3,500 youth and 400 youth workers across Ontario, as well as interviews with close to 200 youth and youth workers, to better understand what young people need to thrive. Here are five key takeaways from Uzo's presentation, including illustrative quotes from youth and youth worker research participants:

01. A 'GOOD LIFE' IS NOT JUST ABOUT SURVIVING, BUT THRIVING.

Overwhelmingly, youth and youth workers reinforced the belief that a 'good life' is not just about surviving, but about thriving. For many, 'thriving' extends beyond their individual wants and needs, and instead speaks of their desire to see their communities, loved ones, friends, and co-workers similarly well provided for. The 'good life' isn't just about the 'basics' (food, water, shelter, etc.) but about the 'basics +' (fulfilment, joy, balance, etc.).

Just a little over one-third of participants said that they were living a 'good life'; 42% said they were not living a good life and 24% said they were unsure.

“So a good life to me is being able to have enough financial freedom in order to provide for myself without stress. Seeing my neighbours, and my co-workers have the same as well as seeing my community, not just surviving and dealing with their issues, but are thriving and actively solving their issues.”

- Youth Research Participant

02. MANY YOUTH DON'T FEEL AS THOUGH THEY'RE LIVING A 'GOOD LIFE'.

The biggest disadvantages that youth identified as restricting their access to a 'good life' were:

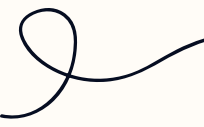
- Structural and socioeconomic barriers
- Mental health concerns
- Networks and interpersonal relationships
- Insecurity, self-blame, and barriers to personal growth
- Barriers related to COVID-19

In response to these barriers, youth called for changes in affordability and the cost of living, increased mental health services, improvements to education and access to youth programs, and strong supports that lead to employment.

“I feel like things were rigged for me from the beginning because I have been paying rent since I left high school. I went from high school to paying rent, to risking it and getting in debt for college and now I'm back to just paying rent. Not having a support system means letting go of dreams I've had for basic survival. People with support go places.”

- Youth Research Participant





03. YOUTH PROGRAM PARTICIPATION SUFFERED SIGNIFICANTLY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.

Participation in youth programs dropped from around 37% to around 22% after the onset of the pandemic, with many youth and youth workers citing inequitable internet access and concerns about privacy and confidentiality as being limiting factors that reduced the number of participants in many youth programs.

Some of the barriers for youth who do not participate in programs include:

- Lack of time due to work, school, or caregiving responsibilities
- Financial constraints
- Social anxieties
- Lack of relevant or interesting programming

“It was OK. I was having panic attacks going there. I wasn’t able to go for the warm-up. And even though they had a social worker, I didn’t find her, like, overly supportive. Like at one point, I asked her, do you know any resources about self-esteem? And she said, oh, actually, no, I don’t know anything about that topic. So, in terms of like real support for my life, I didn’t find her supportive.”

- Youth Research Participant

04. THERE IS A GAP IN MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS AND MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMMING.

More than 83% of youth workers named mental health as the number one issue facing youth.

Young people who knew about mental health services were more likely to say that it was relatively easy to access those services than those who didn’t know of similar services in their communities. Affordability and cost of living in Ontario negatively impact mental health, and there is a relationship between socioeconomic status and mental health (i.e., difficulties accessing mental health services or experiencing poor mental health because of stressors related to lower socioeconomic status).

“In Ontario, mental health services are far and few in between. A person having a mental health crisis may have to wait hours to see a medical professional, and even when they do, their situation may not be taken as seriously as it should be. A lot of key actors in our communities such as teachers, police officers, and guidance counsellors are not adequately trained to support youth dealing with mental health issues.”

- Survey Participant

05. THE PANDEMIC FORCED CHANGES TO YOUTH WORK PRACTICE THAT CAN – AND SHOULD – BE SUSTAINED.

Youth workers had to become more intentional in their work as a result of the pandemic – not due to a lack of care, but rather from a recognition that the socioeconomic climate, delivery mechanisms for programming, and needs of youth all changed in the last four years.

Some youth workers shared that the pandemic forced them to engage with youth where they already were – online. The opening up of the virtual world to youth workers made some programming more accessible; and although there is something to be said for the importance of in-person programming, this also made it easier for young people and youth workers to connect.

“It has made it easier in the sense that I can connect with youth that are further outside of our kind of area that can’t make it in person. So, for example, I’ve been able – I’ve been blessed to actually work with youth that live further up north. I’m currently working with a youth that’s in Sprucedale, which is a youth justice centre up north. And being able to be virtual and, kind of, take advantage of these virtual opportunities such as, you know, Google Meets, or Zoom, or the Justice Video Network, I’m able to kind of connect with youth that need services that aren’t technically available to services up north when there’s – it’s very scarce.”

- Youth Worker Research Participant

Learn more:

[Visioning Transformative Youth Work Design Day Story](#)

