

# THE **IMPACT** OF YOUTHREX

## HIGHLIGHTS FROM AN EXTERNAL EVALUATION

BY

### THE EVALUATION NETWORK

(2024)



“YOUTHREX IS  
AN INVALUABLE  
RESOURCE”

# ABOUT THE EXTERNAL EVALUATION BY THE EVIDENCE NETWORK

This highlight report is taken from the *Impact Evaluation Report* by TEN that was submitted in January 2024 to YouthREX’s primary funder.

York University engaged The Evidence Network (TEN) in the Fall of 2023 to conduct an **external evaluation** of the impact of YouthREX on Ontario’s youth support ecosystem and the participating individuals and organizations.

The evaluation by TEN used a **theory-based approach** to determine the degree to which youth workers and youth-serving organizations

have made use of – and been impacted by – YouthREX’s resources, programs, and services. This approach relies on an understanding of how a given intervention is expected to work by identifying the various steps in the causal chain – from the intervention activities to the desired outcomes and impacts.

The evaluation was guided by YouthREX’s Theory of Change and focused on the short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes resulting from the support, resources, and platforms provided by YouthREX.

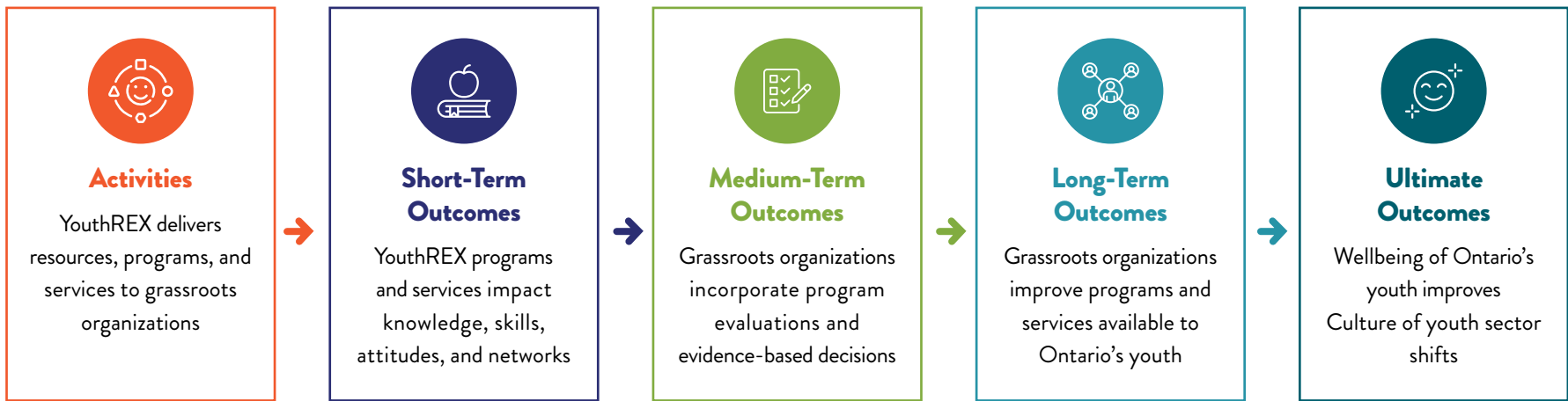
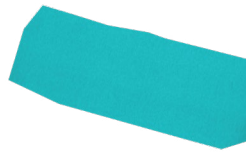


Figure 1. YouthREX Theory of Change

The methodology relied on participants’ judgment to determine the effect of YouthREX’s activities on their knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours by asking standardized questions designed to address a single indicator at a time.

The evaluation included an online survey distributed to the YouthREX community, of which 1,253 individuals responded and 45 one-on-one semi-structured interviews

with representatives from youth-serving organizations that had engaged with YouthREX on Customized Evaluation Supports (CES) took place. The interviews explored the experience and impacts of the supports provided by YouthREX, ways and reasons for incorporating (or not) the learnings into their operations, value-added to their organization from having engaged with YouthREX, and opportunities for improvement for YouthREX.



## ABOUT THE YOUTH RESEARCH AND EVALUATION EXCHANGE

The Youth Research & Evaluation eXchange (YouthREX) is an Ontario province-wide initiative based at the School of Social Work at York University, primarily funded by the Ontario Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services.

**YouthREX's mission** is to provide the youth sector with research and evaluation resources, tools, supports, and services to promote the wellbeing of Ontario youth.

**YouthREX's vision** is an Ontario where shared knowledge is transformed into positive impact for all youth, and the mission is to make research evidence and evaluation practices accessible and relevant to Ontario's grassroots youth sector through knowledge exchange, capacity building, and evaluation leadership.

YouthREX was launched in November 2014 under the Ontario Youth Action Plan, in recognition of the important role that research and evaluation can play in improving outcomes for youth in Ontario.

YouthREX has been very well served by a community-university model that brings the expertise, knowledge, and resources of community partners and university researchers together to support Ontario's youth sector.

YouthREX in many ways is an example of how universities can be in service to the community in deeply meaningful ways while also providing benefits to the university community.

# Program Objectives

## Knowledge Exchange

YouthREX's Knowledge Exchange activities are focused on facilitating shared knowledge from research, youth work practice, and lived experience between diverse youth sector stakeholders (including youth, youth workers, policymakers, and academics) in formats that are accessible, timely, and relevant.

The website includes a [Knowledge Hub](#), [Community Board](#), [Virtual Café](#), and [REXTV](#).

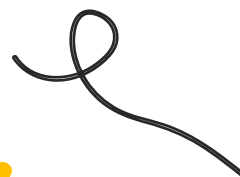
## Learn by YouthREX

Learn by YouthREX provides professional development opportunities for youth workers to build their capacity to support the wellbeing of Ontario's youth. Our online learning platform, [Learn by YouthREX](#), is an easy-to-navigate and fully integrated one-stop platform that houses all our virtual learning opportunities – four certificates and nine workshops currently. All our certificates are connected to a Community of Practice on our Virtual Café for learners to connect with other learners.

## Customized Evaluation Supports

Customized Evaluation Supports offers youth programs across Ontario a comprehensive suite of services to strengthen their use of evidence in the design and development of youth programs. YouthREX works one-on-one with youth programs on Knowledge Exchange, Program Development, and Program Evaluation.

Check out the [Evaluation Framework YouthREX](#) developed for the Ontario youth sector.



# HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE EVALUATION FINDINGS

## 01/ How Frequently do Participants Use YouthREX Supports, Resources, and Platforms?

Majority of participants stated that they use YouthREX supports, resources, and platforms at least once a month, if not more frequently. **76%** use the YouthREX website once a month or more.

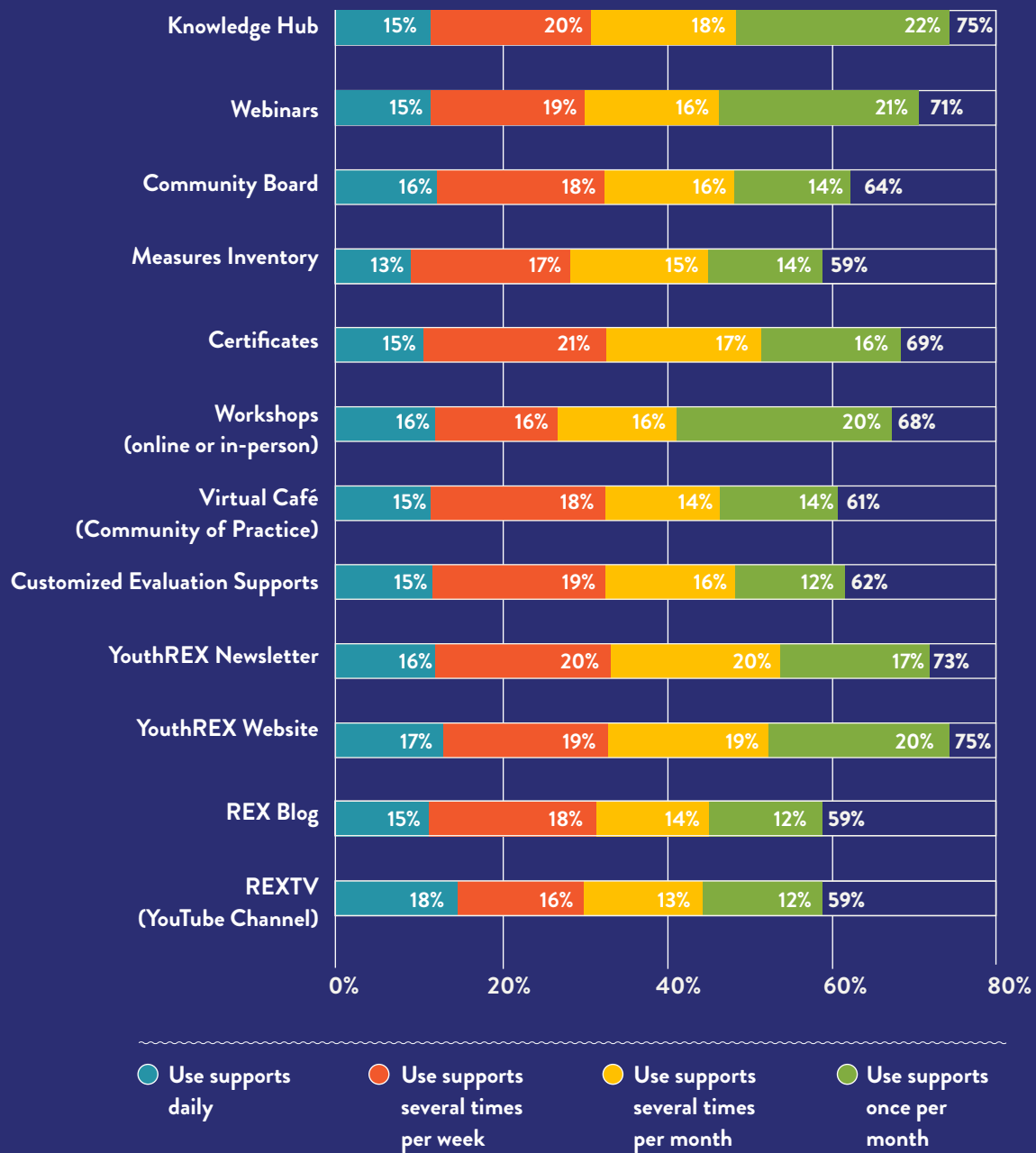


Figure 2. Percentage of participants that use YouthREX supports daily, weekly, or monthly

## 02/ What is the Quality of YouthREX Supports, Resources, and Platforms?

**73%** reported that the supports, resources, and platforms provided by YouthREX were of high or very high quality.

**79%** of front-line youth workers and **77%** of those in management roles within youth-serving organizations reported that they felt the quality of the supports, resources, and platforms provided by YouthREX were of high or very high quality.

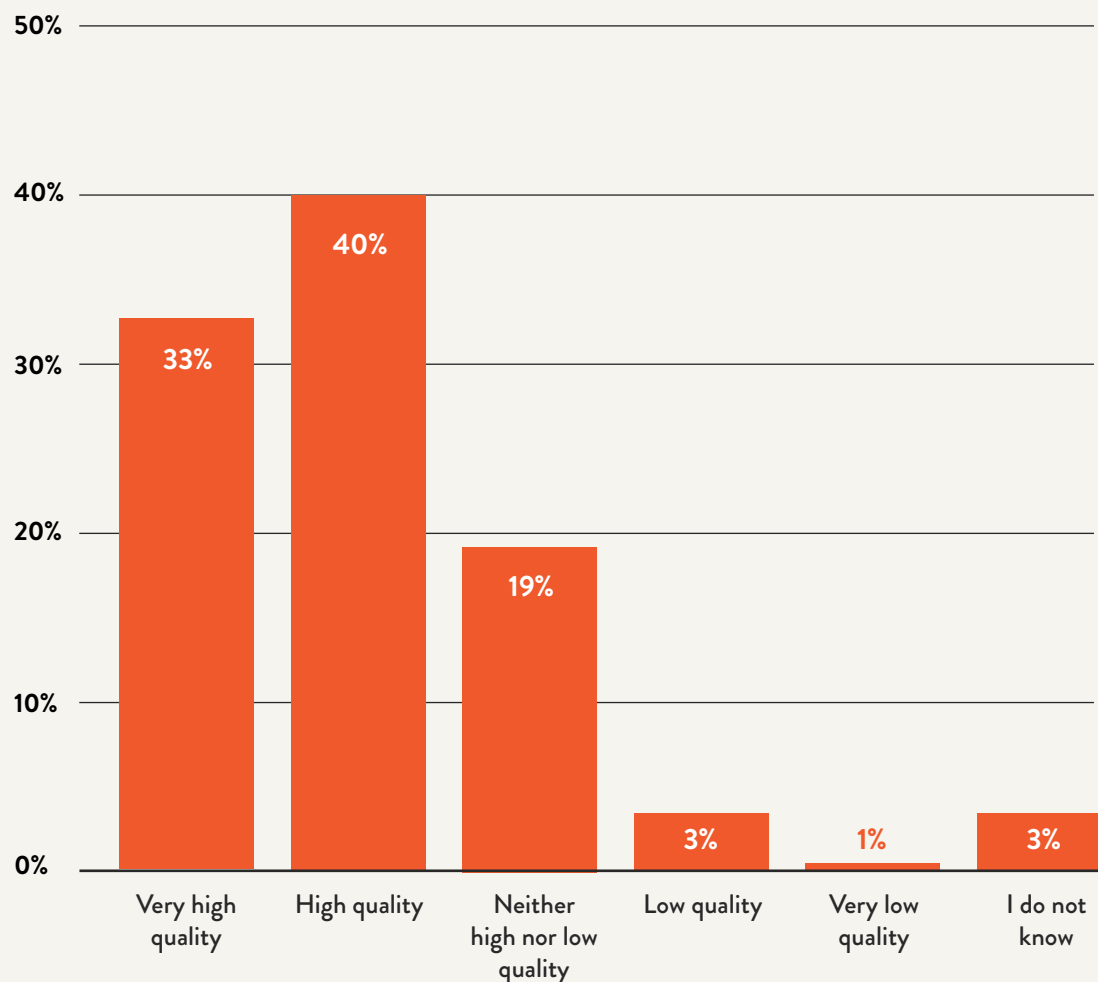


Figure 3. Overall quality of YouthREX Supports, Resources, and Platforms

### 03/ Are the Needs of Participants Met by YouthREX?

86% of respondents indicated that the YouthREX offerings met at least some of their needs while 60% of respondents said that most or all of their needs were met by the offerings.

64% of those in management positions within a youth-serving organization and 62% of frontline youth workers report that the YouthREX supports, resources, and platforms met most or all of their needs.

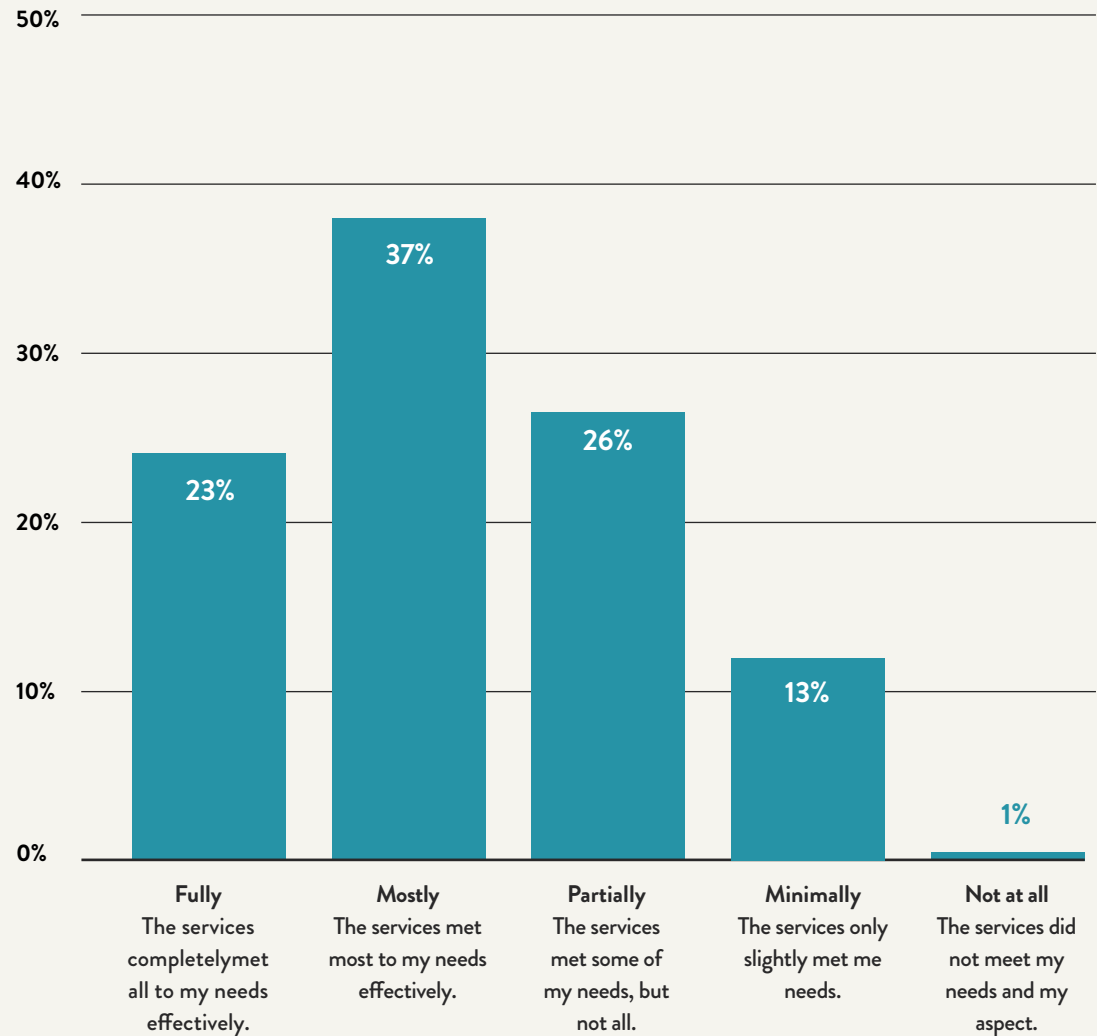


Figure 4. Needs met by YouthREX Supports, Resources, and Platforms

## 04/ What is the Overall Satisfaction with YouthREX?

*“Big fan of YouthREX and all the resources your organization offers to the sector to continue to support us support youth. I appreciate how organized, accessible and informative all your workshops/webinars, website, and Knowledge hub are. I don’t think I have ever left less than inspired and empowered in my work after one of your workshops. Thank you so much!”*

- Survey Respondent

More than 3 in 4 respondents (76%) reported being satisfied or very satisfied with YouthREX offerings.

82% of front-line youth workers and 82% of those in management roles within youth-serving organizations reported being satisfied or very satisfied with the YouthREX supports, resources, and platforms.

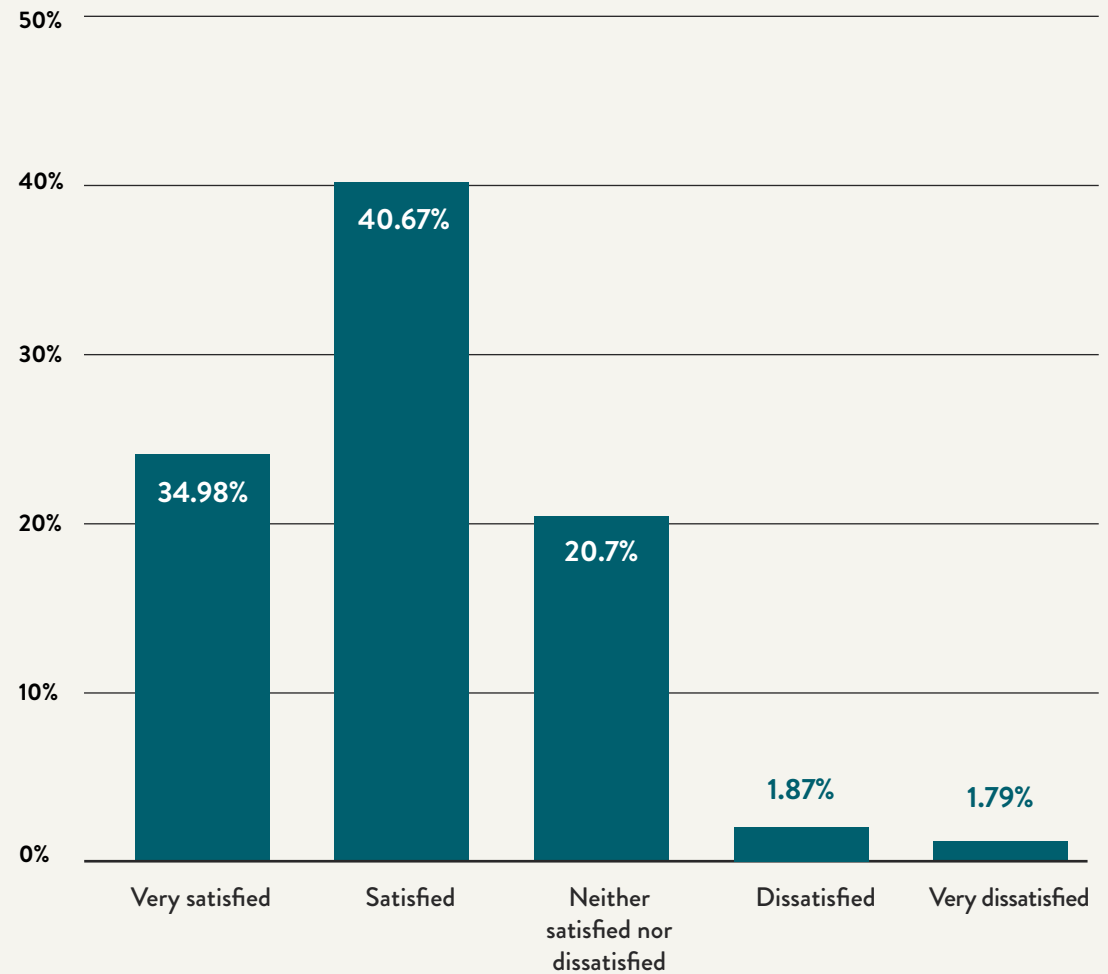


Figure 5. Overall satisfaction with YouthREX



## 05/ What is YouthREX's impact on the youth sector as a whole?

*"YouthREX are experts in what they're doing and I've really enjoyed working with them. There's a vibrancy to the people who choose to do this work. The community is benefiting and YouthREX is impacting client service directly. It's enhancing the lives of young people and benefiting family systems, so they're necessary. I hope that they can continue their work."* - **Evaluation Participant**

Approximately 62% of respondents on average reported that YouthREX has had a positive impact on Ontario's youth support sector as a whole on all metrics.

The metrics for which the respondents most frequently reported positive impact were developing a culture of evidence-informed youth programming (65% of respondents reported positive impact), and increasing the ability of Ontario's youth support sector to contribute to youth wellbeing (64% of respondents).

65% in management roles within youth support organizations reported that YouthREX positively impacted their ability to make evidence-based decisions, while 62% reported that YouthREX positively impacted their ability to develop new programs to meet the needs of youth more effectively.

*"I learned how to set up a proper evaluation right from the start so that the program actually meets its objectives. I went in with a lot of passion and a lot of energy, but not a lot of know-how about metrics."* - **Interview Participant**

*"Since working with YouthREX, I cannot run a program without having an evaluation framework. It's so important. If evaluation is not part of what you do, then how do you know what you're doing at all?"* - **Interview Participant**

*"Evaluation is now a core component of our program design. If you want to develop and implement something of quality, you have to have a framework and a process for continuous improvement."* - **Interview Participant**

*"I admire YouthREX's approach to knowledge-sharing and mobilization very much. Your courses are free, which can be life-changing to someone who is maybe precariously employed in the youth sector and is looking for ways to expand their skills and opportunities. I also deeply appreciate your focus on caring for workers and understanding what it means to work with and love young people in a variety of challenging circumstances. You've helped me see that I don't need to quit."* - **Interview Participant**

Interview participants frequently reported that they had used the evidence derived from their evaluation practices to improve their programs or develop new ones. Interviewees commented that the evaluation tools co-developed with YouthREX often connect much more closely to their work and provide more detailed information about what is and is not working within their program.

*“The survey we do for [our funder] doesn’t give our program enough information, so the reflective survey developed with YouthREX adds a lot of valuable insight.” -Interview Participant*

*“The data that came out of our evaluation provided the grounding for our successful requests for a larger follow-on grant. That funding allowed us to hire full-time staff for the first time and expand our support for the youth in our community.”  
- Interview Participant*

For organizations seeking funding for new programs that have not yet been delivered and have no impacts to refer to in their proposals, the Evidence Briefs provided by YouthREX are critically important. These briefs, which may include landscape reviews and pull from the academic literature, provide research on the need for a program.

*“We needed support with some credible research to further solidify what we know in the community. We know it, we live it, we see it, we breathe it, but it’s very different when the data comes at you from credible institutions that have researched it to be able to back up what it is that we’re trying to do.”  
- Interview Participant*





## UNEXPECTED OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS FROM ENGAGEMENT WITH YOUTHREX

It is impossible to foresee all the ways in which a complex organization with many service offerings will impact the community it serves. As such, an outcome harvesting approach was used to identify the unforeseen impacts of YouthREX beyond those that were expected from the Logic Model. These impacts were collected through the interviews, as well as the open-ended questions in the survey.

**01/ YouthREX is a source for youth worker support** – As one of, if not the only, repository of resources relevant to the field of youth work in Ontario, YouthREX is viewed by many as being much more than simply a source for information and training about evaluation and the use of evidence in decision-making. The resources provided offer youth workers critical information about their field. For example, when the new cannabis legislation came out in Ontario, there were many questions about how it would impact youth and the field of youth work, and YouthREX provided relevant insights and guidance in a timely manner.

Additionally, some interviewees noted that they often find their work isolating, as small organizational budgets typically mean the programs are run by a single individual or a very small team. Seeing resources on the YouthREX Knowledge Hub that are relevant to questions they are asking or challenges they are experiencing in their own work helps youth workers feel less alone.

As one survey respondent shared, *“I admire YouthREX’s approach to knowledge-sharing and mobilization very much. Your courses are free, which can be life-changing to someone who is maybe precariously employed in the youth sector and is looking for ways to expand their skills and opportunities. I also deeply appreciate your focus on caring for workers and understanding what it means to work with and love young people in a variety of challenging circumstances. You’ve helped me see that I don’t need to quit.”*

### 02/ YouthREX materials support onboarding

– Nearly all interviewees commented that their organization, and the youth support sector in general, struggles to retain talent. According to interviewees, this occurs for a number of reasons, including staff burnout, funding limitations holding salaries stagnant, and minimal opportunities for advancement in small organizations. As a result, organizations spend considerable time onboarding new team members but have little time and few resources to develop their own onboarding or training materials.

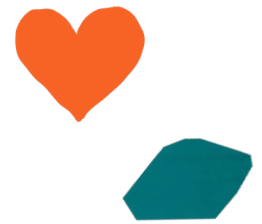
A number of interviewees mentioned that they used materials developed by YouthREX in lieu of their own training documents. In some cases, organizations used the logic models developed for their programs by YouthREX to communicate to new team members how the activities of their programs work to achieve the desired outcomes.

Other organizations downloaded resources from the YouthREX website to use as their on-boarding materials to help new team members understand the sector, as well as to educate them on the importance of program evaluation in their work. Yet

another interviewee shared that they had used some of the content from the resources available on the YouthREX website in organization-wide training they were developing: *“I have been doing some work around training folks just generally on trauma-informed principles of youth work because the buzzwords are everywhere, but the actual breakdown of what that looks like is less accessible, so I’ve been integrating the YouthREX pieces into my training content.”*

### 03/ YouthREX provides expertise around social identity factors and intersectionality

– Although this was an area in which YouthREX was expected to have some impact, what was unanticipated is the extent to which their work in this space is recognized by youth workers and is impacting youth-serving organizations. They are truly viewed as leaders and are looked to by youth workers to provide guidance around the appropriate use of terminology, ways in which implicit biases may be impacting their work with youth, and how to further enhance the inclusivity of programming for youth.



## OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTHREX TO CONTINUE IMPROVING AND GROWING

**01/ Increase the awareness of YouthREX and the supports provided / advocate for the sector** – Survey respondents frequently noted that they were unaware of the full breadth of the YouthREX offerings until completing the survey. Interviewees were more aware of the YouthREX offerings. However, having benefited themselves from the support, they also suggested that YouthREX should work to increase awareness across the province of the organization as a whole and the supports available. Also, YouthREX is viewed as the go-to organization for resources, training, and support within the youth support sector of Ontario and are also viewed as the natural voice for the sector. They should use that voice to advocate on behalf of the sector.

**02/ Provide additional training –**

There is a strong demand for more online certificates and training opportunities, with a desire for these resources to be available in a flexible format that accommodates busy schedules. The topics requested range from addressing burnout and providing mental health resources for youth workers, to broader social issues such as harm reduction, to more advanced evaluation topics such as data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

As there are few other professional development or educational resources dedicated to the youth support community of Ontario, the provision of additional training opportunities would ensure that YouthREX continues to provide value across the province. Furthermore, the interviews reveal that the training courses are typically the entry point for organizations that then go on to more deeply engage with YouthREX. Providing more opportunities for training offers YouthREX more opportunities to become a relevant resource for youth-serving organizations in Ontario.

**03/ In-person events** – During the interviews, respondents shared how isolating it can be to be a youth worker. Although their time and resources are limited, many of them mentioned that there would be considerable value to the sector to have more in-person events and perhaps even conferences hosted by YouthREX. There is a desire in the community to better connect with other service providers, learn from each other, and learn from experts in their field. Also, interviewees suggested that using these events as opportunities to honour local expertise by having more Canadian speakers would celebrate the capacity of Canada's youth support community.

**04/ Expansion of services / expand the scope of delivery** – Respondents suggested expanding the scope of YouthREX to younger children and families. One survey respondent commented, *“Focusing on younger children and families could be a preventive measure to avoid the issues that youth are currently facing. The sector that provides services to younger children can benefit from the knowledge and expertise of YouthREX.”*

Respondents also suggested extending access to the full complement of YouthREX offerings beyond Ontario. At present, the Knowledge Hub is available to anyone online. However, the more in-depth training opportunities

YouthREX provides are restricted to Ontario-based organizations. Respondents from out of province reported that their own provinces do not have an organization comparable to YouthREX, so despite their geographic location, they look to YouthREX for resources and support and would welcome the opportunity to attend the more in-depth training provided by YouthREX.

**05/ Provide microlearning opportunities**

– Given their busy schedules and the many competing demands for their time, there is a desire for microlearning opportunities to enable quick and targeted skill-building among youth workers.



# CONCLUSION

*The evaluation revealed that YouthREX is a critical component of Ontario's youth support sector.*

The results of both the survey and the interviews indicate that the support and resources provided by YouthREX are of high quality and truly meet a need within Ontario's youth support sector. The results also demonstrate that YouthREX has impacted not only the knowledge and skills of youth workers in the province, but that they have also positively impacted the capacity of youth-serving organizations.

YouthREX's offerings are invaluable to the youth sector and provide participants with the requisite tools and information needed to better support young people in a diverse range of roles and settings. The support and resources provided by YouthREX are of high quality and truly meet a need within Ontario's youth support sector.

This contribution to capacity occurred across all metrics but YouthREX was found to be particularly impactful around addressing issues of equity in program delivery and enabling organizations to make evidence-based decisions.

While the customized evaluation supports were found to be very impactful for the majority of organizations that accessed them, the training and resources provided through the Knowledge Hub are having the greatest impact on building the capacity of youth-serving organizations.

Importantly, the organizations that have incorporated program evaluation and evidence-based decision-making into their operations have been able to improve their programs, more effectively demonstrate their impact to funders, and communicate their impact to their stakeholders.

The evaluation revealed that YouthREX is a critical component of Ontario's youth support sector. Resources offered by YouthREX provide critical knowledge and new perspectives, or help deepen understandings of strategies or practices that support youth work.

Through the provision of training, resources, and networking platforms, they have provided youth workers across the province opportunities to learn and enhance their skills and have contributed to increasing the capacity of youth-serving organizations to conduct program evaluations and make evidence-based decisions.



Thank you to the 1,253 individuals who took the time to complete the survey and the 45 representatives from youth-serving organizations that participated in one-on-one interviews about their experiences with Customized Evaluation Supports ❤️



**OUR VISION** is an Ontario where shared knowledge is transformed into positive impact for all youth!

**OUR MISSION** is to make research evidence and evaluation practices accessible and relevant to Ontario's grassroots youth sector through knowledge exchange, capacity building and evaluation leadership!

**YouthREX** is primarily funded by the Ontario Ministry of Children, Community & Social Services with contributions from the York Research Chair in Youth and Contexts of Inequity held by Dr. Uzo Anucha at the School of Social Work, York University.

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