



SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS
FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

Policy Brief:
**Supporting Youth from Underrepresented
Demographics in Leadership Initiatives**

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www.socialconnectedness.org

August 2019

ISSUE AND EVIDENCE

Youth represent one fourth of the Canadian population and reflect Canada's racial and ethnic diversity.¹ Therefore, it is our responsibility as a country to create meaningful opportunities for youth by developing youth-centric policies and programs that address the many challenges and barriers to equity, access and inclusion that today's youth face. Some underrepresented demographics among Canadian youth include, but are not limited to: intellectual and physical disabilities, Indigenous, 2SLGBTQ+, newcomers and refugees, language minorities, racial and ethnic minorities.² Youth who identify as being from an underrepresented demographic encounter a number of significant roadblocks that continue to be a barrier to integration and social cohesion. Four commonly known barriers include: weakened social networks as a result of systemic barriers; a lack of meaningful opportunities; lack of accessible and affordable transportation; and racism and structural discrimination.³ Additional barriers such as heterosexism, classism, a colonial legacy and homelessness also contribute to the social and economic marginalization of underrepresented youth.⁴ Applying an intersectional lens when working with and discussing underrepresented demographics of youth is critical, as lived experiences vary significantly depending on multiple intersecting factors. Supporting youth requires a collaborative approach. Although many youth-serving organizations across the

¹ "Investing in Young Canadians: Budget Plan 2019," *Government of Canada*, 2019, <https://www.budget.gc.ca/2019> .

² "Gender, Diversity and Inclusion Statistics," *Statistics Canada*, 2019, <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/eng/topics-start/>.

³ "Escalator Jobs for Youth Facing Barriers," *Civic Action*, 2014, <https://www.civicaction.ca/escalator/>.

⁴ William Little, *Introduction to Sociology: 2nd Canadian Edition* (Vancouver: Campus Open Source Textbook, 2016).

country are committed to supporting the uniquely complex and multifaceted experiences of underrepresented youth, improvements can be made at both the policy and grassroots level. This policy brief is informed by outreach and interviews with youth from underrepresented demographics and employees of various youth-serving organizations across the country. By adapting outreach strategies and policies to better support the realities that youth from underrepresented demographics face, in addition to working from a place of reconciliation and by incorporating the voices of those directly impacted throughout the process, we can help eliminate the social isolation of underrepresented youth and begin fostering an environment of social connectedness.

STAKEHOLDERS

Many nonprofits strive to provide services and resources to those who need it the most. Therefore, underrepresented demographics of youth are often the target audience for many youth-serving organizations. Being the target audience means that the policies and programs of youth-serving organizations impact underrepresented demographics of youth the most on both micro and macro levels. However, multiple stakeholders are involved when it comes to the construction of policies, funding and developing outreach strategies.

Nonprofit Youth-Serving Organizations

Acting as the gatekeepers to resources and programs, youth-serving organizations play a pivotal role in supporting youth empowerment. Without nonprofit youth-serving organizations, our society would have even fewer resources to offer youth from underrepresented demographics given significant gaps in services rendered and resources distributed by the government. Therefore, the existence of youth-serving organizations is vital when discussing

supporting underrepresented youth in leadership initiatives. Fighting for systemic change happens both in and outside the workplace. Youth-serving organizations need to have inclusive policies and best practices established within the workplace to create a safe and positive environment that reflects the work they are trying to conduct within the community. Youth-serving organizations also serve as a channel where underrepresented youth can express their immediate needs and concerns.⁵ They provide youth with a platform that otherwise may not be available to them and thus, serve as active agents of change. Research on youth-serving organizations indicates that advocating for youth from underrepresented demographics seemingly made a difference in the nature and quality of opportunities and resources available within specific communities.⁶ For example, TakingITGlobal is a youth-serving organization that tackles social, cultural and geographic barriers faced by underrepresented youth including rural indigenous communities. Their leading edge program Connected North fosters student engagement and enhanced education outcomes by delivering immersive and interactive education services, through Cisco's high definition, two-way TelePresence video technology.⁷

Federal, Provincial and Municipal Governments

The Canadian government plays a crucial role in deciding the fate of many nonprofit organizations. Specifically, with respect to funding, many youth-serving organizations rely on government grants and contracts as the main source of income for their programs. For example, currently the federal government is funding the Canada Service Corps coalition made

⁵ Milbrey McLaughlin, et al., *Between Movement and Establishment: Organizations Advocating for Youth* (California: Stanford University Press, 2009), <https://books.google.ca/books?hl=en&lr>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "What is Connected North?" *Connected North*, 2019, <https://www.connectednorth.org/en/>.

of twelve nonprofit youth-serving organizations that help young Canadians gain valuable life and work skills, while benefiting their communities.⁸ Although government funding is extremely beneficial, it's not always a guarantee, which makes the nature of nonprofit revenue streams complex. Further, government funding is not always value neutral as it is often tied to the political party in power. Meaning, public funds flow into some fields of nonprofit activity and avoid others. This is problematic because depending on the interests and incentives of the current government, certain initiatives will take precedence over others. Government grants and contracts also tend to come with certain expectations and deliverables that youth-serving organizations have to incorporate into their policies and practices. For one, organizations must agree to non-partisanship in order to receive funding. This increases the pressure on nonprofits to professionalize their operations and to introduce a degree of bureaucratization which can lead to altering the initial goals of the organization.⁹

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Supporting Youth Living in Rural Communities

Youth-serving organizations should be aware of the general disparities among youth from rural, northern and remote communities. Targeted outreach strategies and programs should be created when working with youth from rural communities as their experiences vary drastically from urban youth. Youth-serving organizations should work from a place of reconciliation and acknowledge the inequities faced by Indigenous communities. By building

⁸ "Canada's Youth Policy," *Government of Canada*, 2019, <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/y-j/documents/>.

⁹ Peter Frumkin and Mark T. Kim, "The Effect of Government Funding on Nonprofit Administrative Efficiency: An Empirical Test," last modified Fall, 2002, https://ash.harvard.edu/files/effect_of_government_funding.pdf.

trust and communicating with members of rural communities, youth-serving organizations can begin to collaboratively create realistic ways to empower rural youth.

Mental Health and Well-being

The narrative regarding mental health and well-being is changing. Therefore, policies and programs of youth-serving organizations should reflect the shift in societal views about normalizing mental health. Youth-serving organizations should have mental health supports and resources in place (i.e. counselling services, Mindshift app) especially when working with youth from underrepresented demographics. Organizations should actively work on eliminating stigma and stereotypes by focusing on awareness-raising of youth mental health issues.

Consistent Funding Allocated Towards Programs Supporting Underrepresented Demographics of Youth

In order to sufficiently support the empowerment of youth in leadership initiatives, organizations need the necessary funding required to run specific programs and resources. Governments at all levels should invest in creating meaningful opportunities for youth to succeed. On a community level, youth-serving organizations should ensure funding is allocated appropriately to specific areas that youth from underrepresented demographics need support in. Additionally, youth-serving organizations should allocate certain amounts of funding towards mandatory training workshops for their staff on topics such as: cultural sensitivity, anti-oppression, tokenism and mental health.

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