



SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS  
FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

**Supporting the Empowerment of Underrepresented  
Demographics of Youth in Leadership Initiatives**

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August 2019

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research explores how youth-serving organizations can adapt their outreach strategies to better support the empowerment of youth from underrepresented demographics in leadership initiatives such as organizing community service projects and volunteering. Using TakingITGlobal as a case study, this aim of this research was ultimately twofold: To understand the challenges and successes former #RisingYouth and Samuel Connected North Youth Leadership Fund grantees experienced while conducting their community projects; and conduct a program evaluation of Canada Service Corps youth-serving organizations' current outreach strategies for supporting underrepresented demographics of youth in leadership initiatives.

Key findings of this research identified the main barriers that contribute towards the social isolation of underrepresented demographics of youth which include: socioeconomic status, language barriers, accessibility barriers, stereotypes and social stigma. Additionally, this research explores the lived experiences of underrepresented demographics of youth (15-30 years of age) while participating in leadership initiatives and was able to identify common challenges, common successes, levels of community support, and supports needed. Further, this research explores the current outreach strategies of five youth-serving organizations across the country including: TakingITGlobal, Apathy is Boring, Ocean Wise, The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and Katimavik. Findings also identified the current effective strategies for supporting underrepresented demographics of youth, room for improvement and additional barriers youth encounter.

Recommendations for the youth-serving community moving forward are to actively work on changing the narrative of what youth engagement looks like, make a continuous effort to reach marginalized youth and have a national youth-serving organization conference to explore best practices and lessons learned in order to better support the empowerment of underrepresented demographics of youth in leadership initiatives. Policy and program recommendations include providing: meaningful support for youth living in rural and northern communities, mental health and well-being support, more bilingual programs and support for language minorities, and consistent government funding.

## INTRODUCTION

Youth are the most educated, connected and diverse generation that Canada has ever seen. They are changing our communities, challenging the status quo, and taking the lead on building a better, fairer and more sustainable future.<sup>1</sup> Youth represent one fourth of the Canadian population and reflect Canada's racial and ethnic diversity.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, 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. 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. Further, these developments need to go beyond well-worded mission statements and cosmetic changes. Although it is widely accepted that youth from underrepresented backgrounds are resilient and push through significant levels of adversity, institutional systemic change needs to occur.<sup>3</sup>

The issue at the core of my research explored how youth-serving organizations can adapt their outreach strategies to better support the empowerment of youth from underrepresented demographics in leadership initiatives such as organizing a community service project or volunteering. Using TakingITGlobal as a case study, this research had a twofold aim:

<sup>1</sup> "Canada's Youth Policy," Government of Canada, accessed August 6, 2019, <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/y-j/documents/>.

<sup>2</sup> "Investing in Young Canadians: Budget Plan 2019," Government of Canada, accessed August 6, 2019, <https://www.budget.gc.ca/2019>.

<sup>3</sup> Liebenberg et al., "Validation of the Child and Youth Resilience Measure-28 (CYRM-28) among Canadian youth," *Research on Social Work Practice* 22, no. 2 (2012): 219-226, doi:10.1177/1049731511428619.

1. To understand the challenges and successes former #Risingyouth and Samuel Connected North Youth Leadership Fund grantees experienced while conducting their community projects; and
2. To conduct program evaluation of Canada Service Corps youth-serving organizations' current outreach strategies for supporting underrepresented demographics of youth in leadership initiatives.

#RisingYouth is a program led by the Government of Canada to help youth build and develop life skills by giving back to their communities.<sup>4</sup> Three levels of grants are available (\$250, \$750, \$1500) depending on the amount of resources required for the community service project. Additionally, the Samuel Connected North Youth Leadership Fund was established to support emerging Indigenous youth leaders creating meaningful change within and beyond their communities.<sup>5</sup> These grants are specifically focussed on social entrepreneurship ideas or community service projects. By listening to the lived experiences of former grantees and learning about current initiatives in place by various youth-serving organizations across the country, this research was able to identify organizational strategies that are successfully supporting youth, areas for improvement or implementation, common challenges and barriers youth are experiencing, levels of community support, and how the youth-serving community moving forward can empower underrepresented demographics of youth as a whole.

<sup>4</sup> "Take Action Guide," TakingITGlobal, accessed August 27, 2019, [https://www.risingyouth.ca/files/Rising-Youth\\_Take-Action-Guide.pdf](https://www.risingyouth.ca/files/Rising-Youth_Take-Action-Guide.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> "About," Samuel Connected North Youth Leadership Fund, accessed August 27, 2019, <https://youthleadershipfund.org/en>.

## ***Methodology***

This research was conducted using qualitative methods. The findings of this report are based on interviews, literature review, document reviews and field research in Montreal throughout the period of 16 weeks. Interviews were conducted with five youth-serving organizations who form part of the Canada Service Corps Coalition: TakingITGlobal, Ocean Wise, Apathy is Boring, The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and Katimavik. Additionally, 16 interviews were conducted with youth between 15-30 years of age across the country who self-identify as being a member of an underrepresented demographic and were former grantees of either #RisingYouth Community Service Grants or Samuel Connected North Youth Leadership Fund. All interviewees gave their consent and interviews were conducted over the phone, online or in person.

## ***Key Questions***

Given that this research was twofold, the questions I set out to address varied depending on whether the interviewee was a former grantee or employee of a youth-serving organization. For grantees, the key questions were grouped into five main categories: common challenges, common successes, community support, impact on well-being, and support needed. Alternatively, the four main categories this research targeted for youth-serving organizations were: current strategies that are working well to support underrepresented demographics of youth, what could be implemented to improve support for underrepresented youth, common barriers youth from underrepresented demographics face when trying to participate in programs, and how the youth-serving community as a whole moving forward can better support the empowerment of underrepresented youth.

### ***Profiles of the youth-serving charity organizations***

**TakingITGlobal:** Founded in 1999, TakingITGlobal is one of the world's leading networks of young people learning about, engaging with, and working towards tackling global challenges.<sup>6</sup>

They offer a wide range of programs that give global youth and their allies the tools they need to get inspired, informed and involved in their local and global communities.<sup>7</sup>

**Apathy is Boring:** Founded in 2004, Apathy is Boring is a non-partisan, charitable organization that supports and educates youth to be active and contributing citizens in Canada's democracy.<sup>8</sup> Their vision is a Canada where every young Canadian is an active and creative citizen and youth are meaningfully engaged in all aspects of the democratic process.

**Ocean Wise:** A global leader in ocean conservation, Ocean Wise strives to create a world in which oceans are healthy and flourishing. Their mission is to inspire the global community to become Ocean Wise by increasing its understanding, wonder and appreciation for our oceans.<sup>9</sup>

**The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA):** The YMCA is one of Canada's longest standing and largest charities, with a presence in Canada since 1851 and now serving more than 2.25 million people annually across 1,700 program locations.<sup>10</sup> The YMCA is dedicated to the growth of all persons in spirit, mind and body, and to their sense of responsibility to each other and the global community. The YMCA offers national scholarships, national exchange programs, youth leadership development programs, and employment programs.

<sup>6</sup> "About TakingITGlobal," TakingITGlobal, accessed August 6, 2019, <https://www.tigweb.org/about/>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> "Story," Apathy is Boring, accessed August 6, 2019, <https://www.apathyisboring.com/our-story>.

<sup>9</sup> "About Ocean Wise," Ocean Wise, accessed August 6, 2019, <https://ocean.org/about/>.

<sup>10</sup> "About the YMCA," YMCA Canada, accessed August 6, 2019, <https://www.ymca.ca/Who-We-Are/>.

**Katimavik:** Founded in 1977, Katimavik offers young adults opportunities to gain life skills and work experience while contributing to community development through volunteerism. Katimavik aims to help youth become engaged, caring citizens, and capable contributors and leaders for a better Canada.<sup>11</sup>

## UNDERREPRESENTED DEMOGRAPHICS AMONG CANADIAN YOUTH

It is important to specify who is being talked about when discussing underrepresented demographics of youth. Some underrepresented demographics among Canadian youth include, but are not limited to: youth with intellectual and physical disabilities, Indigenous youth, 2SLGBTQ+ youth, newcomers and refugees, language minorities, and racial and ethnic minorities.<sup>12</sup> Notably, the legacy of colonialism and exploitation of Canada's Indigenous peoples, including forced relocation and residential schools, has wreaked trauma and damage that has lasted several generations.<sup>13</sup> Indigenous youth make up 46 percent of admissions to correctional services while making up only 8 percent of the youth population.<sup>14</sup> Acknowledging this disparity facing the Indigenous community, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission included a call to action stating, "We call upon Federal, Provincial, and Territorial Governments

11 "Rise Up: Adventure Waits," Katimavik, accessed August 6, 2019, <https://katimavik.org/en/>.

12 "Gender, Diversity and Inclusion Statistics," Statistics Canada, last modified July 25, 2019, [https://www.statcan.gc.ca/eng/topics-start/gender\\_diversity\\_and\\_inclusion](https://www.statcan.gc.ca/eng/topics-start/gender_diversity_and_inclusion).

13 "Poverty Disproportionately Affects Marginalized Communities in Canada," Canadian Living, last modified November 9, 2019, <https://www.canadianliving.com/life-and-relationships/>.

14 "Adult and youth correctional statistics in Canada," Statistics Canada, last modified June 29, 2018, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2018001/article/54972-eng.htm>.

to commit to eliminating the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in custody over the next decade, and to issue detailed annual reports that monitor and evaluate progress in doing so.”<sup>15</sup>

Additionally, 34.2 per cent of new Canadians are living in poverty and racialized Canadians are more likely to be poorer than non-racialized Canadians.<sup>16</sup> Newcomers (whether immigrants or refugees) also lose a significant part of their income and autonomy in the acculturation process.<sup>17</sup> An estimated 6.2 million Canadians have one or more disabilities and youth with disabilities are at a higher risk of not being in school or employed.<sup>18</sup> 2SLGBTQ+ individuals may experience multiple forms of marginalization or disadvantage at the same time such as poverty, racism or sexism in addition to homophobia or transphobia.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, applying an intersectional lens and working from a place of reconciliation is critical when working with and discussing underrepresented demographics of youth.

## **BARRIERS THAT SOCIALLY ISOLATE UNDERREPRESENTED DEMOGRAPHICS OF YOUTH**

Social connectedness refers to a society where everyone is valued, seen and heard regardless of their age, race, gender, or ability and has the opportunity to belong.<sup>20</sup> In order to

15 “Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future,” The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, <http://www.trc.ca/assets/pdf/>.

16 “Poverty Disproportionately Affects Marginalized Communities in Canada,” Canadian Living, last modified November 9, 2019, <https://www.canadianliving.com/life-and-relationships/>.

17 Ibid.

18 “Canadian Survey on Disability,” Statistics Canada, last modified November 28, 2018, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/181128/dq181128a-eng.htm>.

19 “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans & Queer identified People and Mental Health,” Canadian Mental Health Association, accessed August 27, 2019, <https://ontario.cmha.ca/documents/lesbian-gay-bisexual>.

20 “What is social isolation/connectedness?” Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness, accessed August 7, 2019, <https://www.socialconnectedness.org/about-us/>.



understand how youth-serving organizations can better support the empowerment of underrepresented demographics of youth in leadership initiatives, a concrete understanding of systemic barriers that contribute towards a lack of social connectedness is required. Social isolation impedes a person from “forming meaningful relationships, exercising agency, engaging in authentic expression, feeling a stake in collective outcomes, or realizing a sense of mission as part of the bigger whole.”<sup>21</sup>

A significant body of interdisciplinary academic research exists addressing social inequalities and systemic barriers marginalized populations face. These studies have helped to articulate the central role of youth-serving organizations in policy planning, programming and community development activities.<sup>22</sup> The findings from outreach and interviews with underrepresented youth for this research support the findings already in this academic literature. Some of the main barriers that contribute towards the social isolation of underrepresented demographics of youth include:

### ***Socioeconomic Status***

An estimated 4.9 million Canadians are living in poverty—that is, one in seven Canadians.<sup>23</sup> Three groups of underrepresented demographics that are disproportionately affected by poverty in Canada are: Indigenous populations, newcomers and racialized Canadians.<sup>24</sup> The national rate of poverty amongst Indigenous people is 25.3 percent, or

21 “What is social isolation/connectedness?” Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness, accessed August 7, 2019, <https://www.socialconnectedness.org/about-us/>.

22 Maria J. D’Agostino et al. “Addressing and Overcoming Barriers to Youth Civic Engagement,” *International Public Management Review* 11, no. 3 (2010): 88-103. <http://journals.sfu.ca/ipmr/index.php/ipmr/article/viewFile/89/89>.

23 “Poverty Disproportionately Affects Marginalized Communities in Canada,” Canadian living, accessed on August 12, 2019, <https://www.canadianliving.com/life-and-relationships/>.

24 Ibid.

roughly one person in every four.<sup>25</sup> This is further exacerbated for people living in remote regions, such as Canada's northern territories, where people pay double for the same amount of food. Youth living in poverty face many barriers that contribute towards social isolation such as food and shelter disparities, which in turn affect their ability to participate in social spheres such as school and extracurricular activities.

### ***Language Barriers***

Canada is one of the most multicultural countries in the world. This is primarily a result of immigration, which has substantially increased the racial diversity of the Canadian population.<sup>26</sup> Given that many youth from underrepresented demographics are racial and ethnic minorities, English or French are not always their first spoken language. Therefore, participation in leadership initiatives is limited depending on the resources available for language minorities. While Canada promotes itself officially as a bilingual country, there is a significant lack of resources and programs in place to support Francophone youth especially outside of Quebec.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, language barriers impact employment opportunities, education, involvement in leadership initiatives and ultimately, social connectedness.

### ***Accessibility Barriers***

Many youth face a number of significant accessibility barriers that affect their ability to not only participate, but succeed in leadership initiatives. This research identified a contrasting

25 "Poverty in Canada," Canadian Poverty Institute, accessed on August 12, 2019, <https://www.povertyinstitute.ca/poverty-canada>.

26 Jeffrey G. Reitz et al., *Racial Inequality, Social Cohesion and Policy Issues in Canada* (Institute for Research on Public Policy: Montreal, 2007), <https://irpp.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/reitz.pdf>.

27 "Language Barrier to Integration: A Canadian Perspective," Fiar, accessed on August 12, 2019, <http://interamerica.de/current-issue/galiev-masoodi/>.

relationship between services available for remote and urban youth. Specifically, barriers that youth living in rural communities experience are drastically different than barriers urban youth encounter. Remote communities face several disparities such as a lack of clean drinking water, means of transportation, internet access and basic amenities.<sup>28</sup> Further, limited economic and employment opportunities, combined with the high cost of living, increase the chance of youth living in remote communities to turn to substance abuse and crime.<sup>29</sup> Proper supports and programs need to be in place that address the many barriers youth from remote communities face in order to ensure their participation and success in leadership initiatives.

### ***Stereotypes and Social Stigma***

Race continues to be used as a marker of human difference. Ideas of race have very real effects on the lives of individuals and groups within Canadian society. Further, underrepresented demographics of youth experience discrimination, prejudice and racism due to harmful stereotypes and social stigmas that contribute towards social isolation. A stereotype is a false or generalized idea about a group of people that results in the categorization of each member of that group, without regard for individual differences.<sup>30</sup> Resulting in part from the colonial structures that played a fundamental role in establishing the nation-state, social stigmas create attitudes about who belongs and who does not. The harmful legacies of colonization, racism and discrimination throughout Canada's history are embedded in institutional and organizational assumptions and practices, and therefore, need to be

28 "What We Heard Report," Government of Canada, Accessed on August 12, 2019, <https://www.canada.ca/en/youth/corporate/transparency/what-we-heard.html#toc28>.

29 Ibid.

30 "Racialized People: Equity & Inclusion lens snapshot," City for all Women Initiative, accessed August 12, 2019, [https://documents.ottawa.ca/sites/default/files/racializd\\_ss\\_en.pdf](https://documents.ottawa.ca/sites/default/files/racializd_ss_en.pdf).

acknowledged and addressed when discussing how to empower underrepresented demographics of youth.

## **CURRENT POLICY AND COMMUNITY FRAMEWORKS**

Currently, the range of youth policies and strategies in Canada represent a “patchwork” of agreements among various levels of government, ministries, departments, communities, and stakeholders.<sup>31</sup> This is primarily because youth-serving organizations rely on short-term funding from multiple sources, which results in short-term or time-limited initiatives that are difficult to sustain and challenging to evaluate.<sup>32</sup> In 2018, the Government of Canada launched a national conversation with youth where young people discussed the issues that affected their lives, the types of supports they need to succeed and the ways they wish to be engaged civically and politically.<sup>33</sup> The findings of this conversation helped create what is now known as Canada’s first-ever youth policy.

The main objectives of this policy are to create meaningful opportunities for youth voices to be heard and respected and to provide accessible supports that meet the evolving needs of youth.<sup>34</sup> The Canada Service Corps Coalition was created in light of this policy to empower youth to take action and make an impact through volunteering opportunities. Overall, the policy is a step in the right direction for positively changing the narrative around

31 “Youth Policy: What Works and What Doesn’t?” United Way Toronto, last modified February 2008, [https://www.youthpolicy.org/national/Canada\\_2008\\_Youth\\_Policy\\_Report.pdf](https://www.youthpolicy.org/national/Canada_2008_Youth_Policy_Report.pdf).

32 Ibid.

33 “Canada’s Youth Policy,” Government of Canada, accessed August 12, 2019, <https://www.canada.ca/en/youth/programs/policy.html>.

34 Ibid.

the participation of underrepresented demographics of youth in leadership initiatives. Additionally, the policy strives to help eliminate the social isolation of underrepresented demographics of youth and foster social connectedness by sending the message that, “Treating young people as equal members of society will strengthen social cohesion and help build stronger communities.”<sup>35</sup>

## **KEY FINDINGS FROM LIVED EXPERIENCES OF UNDERREPRESENTED DEMOGRAPHICS OF YOUTH**

### ***Common Successes***

Interviewees were asked what they were most satisfied with about their experience as a grantee and their community projects. Common successes included: unanticipated findings such as different thoughts and reactions towards community projects, large turn-out at community events, personal growth and skills development (i.e. public speaking skills, professionalization), forming new relationships, high levels of community support, and feeling proud about what they had accomplished.<sup>36</sup> Many interviewees tended to be surprised by their ability to successfully host and organize a community event on their own. A common theme among all grantees was that this experience gave them the confidence and self-esteem to pursue future projects.

### ***Common Challenges***

In order to learn what strategies can be implemented to better support the empowerment of underrepresented demographics of youth in leadership initiatives, we need

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Individual Interviews (youth aged 13-30), interviewed by Alexis Gardner in Montreal, QC, July, 2019.

to have a concrete understanding of the challenges youth faced while carrying out their community projects. Common challenges experienced by grantees included: trying to be respectful and considerate of the target audience needs, efficient time management, engaging and supporting rural communities, effective communication skills, reliable volunteers, attendance from target audience, and limited funding.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, some grantees expressed challenges involved with knowing what steps to take when organizing an event due to lack of experience. These challenges correlate with the previously stated barriers that youth from underrepresented demographics face on a macro level including stereotypes and social stigma, accessibility barriers, language barriers, and socioeconomic status.

### ***Community Support***

A successful community project requires the involvement of the community. Grantees were asked about their experience with community support and how it impacted their project. Many grantees reported having overall positive support from community members through people volunteering and helping out in any way, to promotion and raising awareness about the project that largely contributed towards its success. Support from the community also reassured grantees that people care about their cause and believe in their ability to succeed. Community support also put some pressure on grantees to make sure they were representing their communities in a good light and to challenge perpetuating stereotypes about their communities.<sup>38</sup>

### ***Support Needed***

<sup>37</sup> Individual Interviews (youth aged 13-30), interviewed by Alexis Gardner in Montreal, QC, July, 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Individual Interviews (youth aged 13-30), interviewed by Alexis Gardner in Montreal, QC, July, 2019.

Interviewees were asked to not only share what challenges they experienced while conducting their community projects, but also what supports would have helped them handle these challenges better. Responses varied depending on whether they lived in urban or rural environments, as well as the community size and style of the community project. Main supports needed include: reliable transportation, recruiting reliable volunteers, on the ground support for planning stages, a “guide” teaching grantees how to create and balance a budget, and organizations willing to use their platform to advertise events. Additionally, almost all interviewees expressed the importance of having a mentor within the community to do frequent check-ins.

## **KEY FINDINGS FROM YOUTH-SERVING ORGANIZATIONS**

### ***Current Strategies Working well to Support Youth from Underrepresented Demographics***

There are currently many strategies in place for supporting the empowerment of underrepresented demographics of youth in leadership initiatives that are working well for youth-serving organizations. Given that each organization has a different target audience, vision and mandate, outreach strategies vary across the country. However, after conducting interviews, this research was able to identify several themes and areas in which youth-serving organizations are currently excelling. Staff members from all five youth-serving organizations reported that current outreach strategies reflect the goals of the organization and strive to work with youth in a positive way by recognizing that youth are the experts on their own

communities.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, organizations recognize the importance of having a culturally diverse team that represents the demographics with whom they are trying to engage.

Examples of current outreach strategies that support the empowerment of underrepresented demographics of youth include: Katimavik's weekly lessons on truth and reconciliation that they implement within their youth housing program. This strategy was implemented to help educate youth from various demographics about Indigenous culture and ways of knowing and the impact of colonization on Indigenous communities. YMCA's youth-led staff utilizes an anti-oppression framework which involves doing training with staff around empathy, cultural sensitivity and allyship. YMCA also strives to eliminate the rigidity of programming and eliminate the barrier of timing by having an open-door policy and not being too strict on attendance.

Ocean Wise has created a program structure that focuses on building trust and relationships among youth. This is done through one-on-one mentorship between staff and youth who meet on a weekly basis. Apathy is Boring prides itself on their flexibility and response towards youth culture. Their mission is to create a space where youth can feel comfortable and safe to share their experience of the program and provide the organization with feedback on how to make improvements. TakingITGlobal acts as a bridge between communities and the resources available for those communities.<sup>40</sup> They have Youth Engagement Activators located in every province across Canada that provide direct support for youth applying or completing community service projects.

39 Individual Interviews (youth serving-organizations), interviewed by Alexis Gardner in Montreal, QC, July, 2019.

40 Individual Interviews (youth serving-organizations), interviewed by Alexis Gardner in Montreal, QC, July, 2019.



### ***Room for Improvement***

Interviewees were asked about one thing that could be improved or implemented to better support the empowerment of underrepresented demographics of youth in leadership initiatives. Drawing from their lived experiences working hands-on with underrepresented demographics of youth and within an organization, staff members were able to identify several areas in need of improvement. Responses varied depending on the program, although the main recommendations included: a need for more on-the-ground and hands-on support within communities (both urban and rural), more allocated resources within programs for underrepresented youth, an increase in accessibility and support for rural youth, greater mental health and financial support for youth participating in programs, and drawing clear boundaries between genuine representation and tokenism.<sup>41</sup>

Furthermore, a general theme among youth-serving organizations revolved around implementing better outreach strategies to support Indigenous youth living in rural and northern communities. Recommendations included having more funding allocated towards travel (both for staff members and youth), additional on the ground support, specifically someone dedicated solely to the social work aspect of supporting youth in leadership initiatives, and setting up a mentorship program for youth who have applied for grants and live in communities where mentors are lacking.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Individual Interviews (youth serving-organizations), interviewed by Alexis Gardner, Montreal, QC, July, 2019.

### ***Additional Barriers Youth from Underrepresented Demographics Face***

Interviewees were asked to reflect on their experiences working with underrepresented demographics of youth and identify common challenges and barriers the youth faced when participating in leadership initiatives. In addition to the previously stated barriers of socioeconomic status, language, accessibility, stereotypes, and social stigmas, staff members also mentioned additional barriers such as time restrictions, lack of childcare, motivational barriers, mental health challenges and lack of organizations available to fully support their needs (for example, the limited ability of Francophone organizations to support Francophone youth outside of Quebec).<sup>43</sup>

## **SUPPORTING THE EMPOWERMENT OF UNDERREPRESENTED DEMOGRAPHICS OF YOUTH**

### ***What Does Meaningful Support Look Like?***

The nature of non-profit work often revolves around supporting individuals and communities. However, to prevent the term “support” from becoming nothing more than charity jargon, it is important to specify what meaningful support looks like when working with underrepresented demographics of youth. First, support should be multidimensional and intersectional. Meaningful support recognizes that each individual experiences the world differently and will require varying levels of support depending on those lived experiences. Second, meaningful support requires active listening. Providing undivided attention towards youth and fully acknowledging the message being communicated by responding with questions

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

or feedback ensures that youth feel heard and respected.<sup>44</sup> Third and finally, meaningful support involves taking action. In order to fully support the empowerment of underrepresented demographics of youth in leadership initiatives, their voices need to be heard ensuring youth are no longer seen as beneficiaries of support work, but rather as agents of change in their own communities. This can be done by incorporating youth voices throughout policy and program decisions. After all, underrepresented demographics of youth deserve to have an integral role in matters relating directly to them and their future.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### ***The Youth-Serving Community Moving Forward***

Although many youth-serving organizations across the country are committed to supporting the uniquely complex and multifaceted experiences of underrepresented demographics of youth, improvements can be made at both the policy and grassroots level. Staff members of the five youth-serving organizations were asked how the youth-serving community as a whole moving forward can better support the empowerment of underrepresented demographics of youth in leadership initiatives. Based on their answers, this research was able to identify a list of recommendations and strategies that should be implemented moving forward.

<sup>44</sup> "Active Listening," Mind Tools, accessed on August 15, 2019, <https://www.mindtools.com/CommSkll/ActiveListening.htm>.

First, the narrative around what youth engagement looks like needs to change.<sup>45</sup> The youth-serving community has the power and platform to work on normalizing different types of engagement, who can do service, what that service is, and value each type of service at the same level. If we want to create an atmosphere that is truly inclusive and supportive, youth need to feel that their vision of engagement is just as valid as anyone else's. This can be achieved by equal representation of varying types of engagement, the language used to describe types of engagement and providing consistent support towards community projects regardless of their format. Second, the youth-serving community needs to put a conscious effort to access youth who live in the margins.<sup>46</sup> This means providing more holistic support to youth by building long-term relationships with them and their communities, by physically visiting these communities and by identifying mentors within communities, especially for Indigenous youth.

Finally, a consensus recommendation from all five youth-serving organizations is the need for a national conference for youth-serving organizations across the country to share best practices and lessons learned, while building new relations.<sup>47</sup> Given that much of the work conducted by youth-serving organizations is similar in nature, a competitive environment can sometimes transpire among organizations reaching for certain demographics of youth.<sup>48</sup> A national conference would allow organizations to learn about alternative programs and

<sup>45</sup> Individual Interviews (youth serving-organizations), interviewed by Alexis Gardner in Montreal, QC, July, 2019.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Individual Interviews (youth serving-organizations), interviewed by Alexis Gardner, Montreal, QC, July, 2019.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

organizations that could potentially better support and meet the priorities and interests of youth, and streamline efforts at the national and communal levels.

### ***The Power of Policy***

By adapting 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. Many non-profits 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 on both micro and macro levels.

Multiple stakeholders are involved when it comes to the construction of policies, allocation of funding and developing outreach strategies. My recommendations are targeted towards non-profit youth-serving organizations and Federal, Provincial and Municipal Governments. Acting as the gatekeepers to resources and programs, youth-serving organizations play a pivotal role in supporting youth empowerment. Without non-profit 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.

Additionally, the Canadian government plays a crucial role in deciding the fate of many non-profit organizations. Specifically, with respect to funding, many youth-serving organizations

rely on government grants and contracts as a large source of income for their programs.

Although government funding is extremely beneficial, it is not always a guarantee, which makes the nature of non-profit revenue streams complex.

### ***Supporting Youth Living in Rural Communities and Working from a Place of Reconciliation***

As mentioned previously, youth-serving organizations should be aware of the general disparities faced 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. These outreach strategies should address the accessibility barriers rural Indigenous youth face such as lack of clean drinking water, limited internet access, high costs of living and lack of resources and amenities.

All Canadians have a critical role to play in advancing reconciliation in ways that honour and revitalize the nation-to-nation Treaty relationship. The destructive impacts of residential schools, the *Indian Act* and the Crown's failure to keep its Treaty promises have damaged the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.<sup>49</sup> Youth-serving organizations should work from a place of reconciliation and acknowledge the inequities faced by Indigenous communities. Some key components of working from a place of reconciliation include: acknowledging and respecting Indigenous rights and title, acknowledging and letting go of negative stereotypes and perceptions, learning about Indigenous history, and supporting the reclamation of identity, language and culture.<sup>50</sup> By building trust and

49 "Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future," The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, <http://www.trc.ca/assets/pdf/>.

50 "Working Effectively with Indigenous Peoples," [Indigenous Corporate Training, accessed August 27, 2019, https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/what-reconciliation-is-](https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/what-reconciliation-is-)

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 in a positive less stigmatized way. Therefore, policies and programs of youth-serving organizations should reflect the shift in societal views about normalizing mental health. Almost every youth-serving organization interviewee expressed a large presence of mental health challenges youth from underrepresented demographics face when trying to participate in leadership initiatives. Youth-serving organizations should have mental health supports and resources in place (i.e. counselling services, Mindshift app) when working with youth from underrepresented demographics and allocate funding towards providing such services annually.

Given that many youth-serving organizations are able to establish trusting relationships with youth through outreach strategies and programs, having mental health services available might encourage youth who require these services to access them. Additionally, providing services in a community centre or familiar space would help eliminate the social stigma attached to using mental health services. Offering mental health services would also help eliminate financial and time barriers that are often associated with seeking help elsewhere (i.e. private practice, hospital). Organizations should actively work on eliminating stigma and stereotypes by focusing on awareness-raising of youth mental health issues through workshops and hands-on activities.

### ***Bilingual Programs and Supporting Language Minorities***

Successfully running a fully bilingual program is challenging. Oftentimes youth who identify as being a language minority can fall through the cracks of a program with primarily English-speaking participants. However, if a youth-serving organization promotes itself as being bilingual, policies and practices need to reflect that. Bilingual organizations should have a majority of staff members who identify as being bilingual. If there is a lack of bilingual staff members, bilingual mentors should be identified within communities who can work with language minority youth. Additionally, all promotional materials, documents, applications or any resources available to youth should be offered in at least one other language other than English. Youth-serving organizations should also have internal policies in place that support the empowerment of bilingual staff members by offering workshops and other educational services in languages other than English.

### ***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. Furthermore, government funding should not place pressure on youth-serving organizations to become bureaucratic or amend the initial goals of the organization. On a community level, youth-serving organizations should ensure funding is allocated appropriately to specific areas in which youth from underrepresented demographics need support. This support will vary depending on geographic location and demographic. 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. In order to fully support the empowerment of youth, organizations need to implement policies and practices that will also fully support the empowerment of its staff members.

## **IMPACT**

The findings of this research not only address the realities youth from underrepresented demographics face when participating in leadership initiatives, but also the ways in which youth-serving organizations can adapt their current outreach strategies and policies to better support the empowerment of underrepresented youth moving forward. The Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness (SCSC) and all youth-serving organizations across the country who work with underrepresented demographics of youth have the capacity to play a vital role in supporting the empowerment of underrepresented demographics of youth in leadership initiatives. By creating an environment that fosters social connectedness and embraces diversity, we can work towards eliminating the social isolation of underrepresented demographics within our society.

The Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness (SCSC) can take the findings from this research and apply it to their programs, policies and everyday practices. For instance, this Fellowship program is a great example of youth participating in a leadership initiative. SCSC supports the empowerment of its Fellows by encouraging all demographics to take part, identifying the needs of remote Fellows, offering hands-on support and mentorship and connecting Fellows with community partners and resources. Additionally, they can use their

platform within the field of academia and the youth-serving community to share these research findings at workshops, roundtable discussions or community events.

Other youth-serving organizations across the country can also implement the findings of this research into their policies and practices to better support the empowerment of underrepresented demographics of youth in leadership initiatives. Further, the findings of this research can inform organizations of the challenges youth from underrepresented demographics experience of which they may not have been aware. Alternatively, this research can inform organizations of the current strategies that work well for youth and what supports are needed. My objective is that youth-serving organizations take the findings of this research and, at the very least, reflect on the current policies and practices in place and ask themselves, “Is there anything we could be doing better to support underrepresented demographics of youth?” If the answer is yes, the implementation of even one of these recommendations would positively affect a youth’s experience. The intention of this research is not to emphasize what is being done “wrong,” but rather to focus on how the youth-serving community can do better.

One way this Fellowship has positively impacted the community, and specifically underrepresented demographics of youth who have participated in leadership initiatives, is through my community engagement initiative #Célébr’Action! The purpose of this event was to celebrate the completion of over 2,000 #RisingYouth Community Service Grants across the country. Additionally, #Célébr’Action included a storytelling session and graffiti art workshop where former grantees could share their lessons learned and best practices while conducting their community projects. This event was held in an open public space which allowed for other

members of the community to take part. Many youth who attended expressed how nice it felt to be celebrated and appreciated.

## **CONCLUSION**

Youth-serving organizations across the country are without question working tirelessly to create opportunities for underrepresented demographics of youth. However, in spite of current efforts, certain demographics of Canadian youth, including youth with intellectual and physical disabilities, Indigenous youth, 2SLGBTQ+ youth, newcomers and refugees, language minorities, and racial and ethnic minorities, still remain underrepresented in many leadership initiatives. The best way to learn how youth-serving organizations can better support the empowerment of underrepresented demographics of youth in leadership initiatives is to listen to their lived experiences and incorporate their voices throughout the policy and decision-making process.

This research identified some of the main barriers youth from underrepresented demographics encounter when trying to participate in leadership initiatives, common challenges and successes youth have when conducting community projects, levels of community support, and supports needed moving forward. Additionally, this research outlined current outreach strategies working well for youth-serving organizations, areas of improvement and how the youth-serving community moving forward can better support the empowerment of underrepresented demographics of youth as a whole.

Areas that could be explored further in future research include hearing from grantees who did not fully complete their community projects and understanding what obstacles they encountered, learning more about the experiences of rural Indigenous youth and northern

communities and interviewing youth-serving organizations across the country that specifically work with language minorities. Best practices from this research include giving youth a platform to share their stories and experiences which can be done by establishing trust and creating safe spaces for conversation. Youth are already changing the world with innovative and unique ideas, but it is up to us all to empower youth by creating meaningful opportunities and providing environments that foster social connectedness and embrace diversity.

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