Youth engagement in rural and remote contexts

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Overview of inquiry

This request came from an Ontario child and youth mental health agency located in a rural and remote context serving a large service area with great distance between each community. The agency wants to further develop their youth engagement strategy and be more inclusive of young people in communities outside of where the lead agency is located. The agency is interested in knowing if there are any documented best practices for engaging young people in rural and remote areas and how to overcome any barriers related to this.

Findings

Information from this report was gathered from academic literature, grey literature and youth consultations with young people in rural and remote areas of Ontario. There is little information available about best practices for youth engagement in rural and remote contexts and so sources consulted were from a variety of countries (e.g. Australia, Canada and the United States) engaging youth in a variety of disciplines (e.g. social entrepreneurship, community development and policy development). Please keep in mind that the information below is intended to provide general guidance for youth engagement but it is essential to first talk to youth in your area about their ideas on what will work for them. Rural and remote contexts differ from one community to the next, as do youth, and so youth engagement across communities can't be addressed with a single strategy (Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies, 2015).

What is youth engagement?

Youth engagement is "a whole community approach to mental health care and an active and ongoing process that embeds youth voice at all levels. It is a set of practices that offer youth opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with adults, learn skills, work on issues they're passionate about and contribute to social change" (Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016a). Youth engagement is important in rural and remote areas because these communities have small populations where it is key that individuals are involved in community activities and decision making, and this should include young people (McCreary Centre Society, 2012). Engaging youth provides them with an opportunity to learn about the community, participate in decision making, develop skills and make change when and where it is needed (McCreary Centre Society, 2012).

Living in rural and remote communities

There is no consensus on how to define a rural or remote community (Reimer & Bollman, 2009). The Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies (ACYS) defines rural communities as "areas outside of larger regional areas but with access to services locally" (ACYS, 2015 p.19). Remote communities exist in "sparsely populated areas that are a significant distance from population centres" (ACYS, 2015 p.19). Some argue that a purely geographical view, focusing on concepts such as distance and density is not an accurate representation. Rural can also be viewed as "social representation or a culture and a way of life" (Moazzami, 2015 p. 5). For the purposes of this report, the terms rural and remote communities include geographic distance as well as culture.

There is a significant focus in the literature on the challenges of living in a rural community typically because they are focused on finding ways to over come those challenges (e.g. geographic distance, outmigration, limited services). However, rural and remote communities also have their advantages. One of the reasons young people value living in rural areas is the level of community support they receive (ACYS, 2015). When developing a youth engagement strategy in rural and remote communities it is important to look at the strengths that exist in the communities and to build on them rather than focusing only on barriers.

Uniqueness of rural and remote communities and how it impacts youth engagement

Geographical distance

One of the defining characteristics of rural and remote communities is the geographical distance from other communities and from larger urban centres (ACYS, 2015; Kirst, Borland, Haji & Schwarz, 2012; McCreary Centre Society, 2012; Ontario Rural Council, 2007). While some young people will live in the community, others may live outside of that community creating even more distance from services and supports. Distance increases the cost of accessing services, employment and education as lengthy travel is often required (ACYS, 2015). Given public transit is rare in these areas, there are often transportation barriers especially if you don't own or have access to a vehicle (McCreary Centre Society, 2012). Travel can be further impacted by poor road conditions in the winter, especially in northern communities (Kirst et al., 2012).

> *Impact on engaging youth*
> As mentioned above, the biggest barrier associated with geographic distance is transportation - getting to where you need to be (McCreary Centre Society, 2012). Because of the great geographic distance between communities it can be hard to engage all of the youth within the area (Kirst et al., 2012). Further, activities often occur after school hours and those who rely on a school bus for transportation are often excluded as it may be the only way for them to get home (McCreary Centre Society, 2012). Youth who want to participate and lack transportation may walk long distances or hitchhike which could put them at risk (McCreary Centre Society, 2012).

That said, it is also important to remember that while distance is a factor, it is not the only reason youth are disengaged. Efforts to address youth disengagement often focus on solving the problem of distance at the expense of addressing other challenges (ACYS, 2015). Be mindful of this when planning your youth engagement strategy.

Things to think about
- Consider collaborating with drivers who transport seniors or others in your community to extend the services to youth (Ontario Rural Council, 2007).
- Move youth engagement activities closer to rural areas when possible (Ontario Rural Council, 2007).
- Have small groups of youth meet locally and then connect them to the larger group via social media (Kirst, et al., 2012).
- Encourage carpooling by creating an online *ride board* where people can connect (Ontario Rural Council, 2007).
- Consider transportation costs in your initial planning and if possible work this into the budget (Ontario Center of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016b).

Education and employment

Young people from rural communities often have to leave their home communities for further education or employment opportunities (ACYS, 2015; Ontario Rural Council, 2007). Even while young people are still in high school, finding employment can be difficult as opportunities are limited (Ontario Rural Council, 2007). This means there is often a high percentage of outmigration. It is difficult for young people to move back to communities after receiving further education as employment opportunities in their field are often not available in their local area (ACYS, 2015). In a youth forum organized by the Ontario Rural Council (2007), young people reported that while they are ready and willing to work, the jobs tend to go to older people.

Impact on engaging youth
Education and employment can impact engaging young people in a couple of ways. First, given the amount of outmigration, considerations need to be made for the length of time you want to engage youth (ACYS, 2015). There may be a small window of time you can engage them and it might be difficult to find older youth to engage. Second, rural and remote communities may depend on youth support for some work activities which would make them less available during those times of the year (e.g., farming). (McCreary Centre Society, 2012).

Things to think about
- When planning your youth engagement strategy, consider the context of the local community and times of year when youth may be busy supporting activities such as farming (McCreary Centre Society, 2012)
- When developing a youth engagement strategy consider transition plans for longer initiatives as the youth you have involved may leave the community before the initiative is over.

Small population

Rural and remote communities have small, dispersed populations. The availability of social contact and activity can be low and sometimes rural youth feel excluded from their community (ACYS, 2015). This can lead to reduced well-being, resulting in a decrease in their level of satisfaction with the community (Bourke & Geldens, 2007). Limited access to services is also a concern (ACYS, 2015; Boyd et al., 2011).

Impact on engaging youth

A small population typically means a lack of privacy and a fear of social stigma (Boyd, Hayes, Wilson, & Bearsley-Smith, 2008). This is especially true for rural youth accessing, or not accessing as the case may be, mental health services. This could impact youth engagement efforts as they may not participate for fear of outing themselves. The small population not only means there are less young people to participate, it also means there are less adult allies to support youth engagement initiatives (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2007).

Things to think about

- Recognize that privacy may be a concern for youth (Boydell, Pong, Volpe, Tilleczek, Wilson, & Lemieux, 2006) and consider ways you can mitigate this risk before engaging them.
- A risk factor for rural youth not being satisfied in their community is lack of social contact and activity. Youth engagement provides not only social contact but also investment in the community further demonstrating the importance of creating these opportunities (ACYS, 2015).

Wellbeing

Young people in rural and remote communities have been known to experience more risk factors related to their wellbeing than their urban counterparts. For example, in a technical report produced by the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse examining urban and rural secondary student substance use (grades 7-12) they reported substance use and substance use related risk behaviours might vary based on geographical setting. Specifically, they reported that students who attend rural schools are at a greater likelihood to report drinking and driving, alcohol use and the consumption of five or more drinks in a single instance and cannabis use and driving (McInnis, et al., 2015). Young people living in rural areas also may experience a greater risk for mental health problems. Male youth living in a rural or a remote area were found in an Australian study to be at a greater risk for depression or suicide (Wilkinson & Gunnell, 2000). Further, in an Eastern Ontario study, it was found that living distance from school is a risk factor for suicidality specifically for rural male youth (Armstrong & Manion, 2006).

Impact on engaging youth

Meaningful youth engagement moderates the relationship between well-being concerns (e.g. risk behaviours, depressive symptoms) with suicidal ideation. Meaning, the more personally meaningful the engagement is, the less likely youth are to have clinically significant suicidal thoughts and risk even if they demonstrate depressive symptoms and risk behaviours. (Armstrong & Manion, 2013). It has also been reported that youth engagement is related to lower suicidal ideation scores in rural male youth (Armstrong & Manion, 2006). This suggests that youth engagement is important to reducing suicidal ideation in young people and has also been found to support their

general well-being (Mahoney et al., 2002; Ramey et al., 2010 as cited in Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016a). In relation to substance use it has been suggested that youth living in rural areas may be bored which could be tied to increased substance use (McInnis et al. 2015; Kelly, Comello, & Edwards, 2004).

Things to think about

- Given the impact youth engagement can have on supporting the wellbeing of youth, these benefits should be extended to youth living in rural and remote communities. This is especially important when you consider the increased risk factors noted above. When developing your youth engagement strategies or plans always consider how you can incorporate all youth living in your service area, particularly if it is both urban and rural.

General considerations for engaging rural and remote youth

Get to know the community you are working in

- Take time to find out about the community, who the young people are and where and how to connect with them (ACYS, 2015; McCreary Centre Society, 2012; Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016b). Sometimes this understanding can come from publically accessible secondary data or having an adult involved who is aware of the local youth population and already has the trust of both youth and their parents (Erbstein, 2013).
- Getting to know the community is also important because to individuals in rural and remote communities it can feel like people are *parachuting in* to work with the young people. When planning your initiative, consider having an adult ally in the community that can help with sustainability (McCreary Centre Society, 2012).

Work with the wider community

- Working in the larger community is a key factor to successful engagement. This allows for a pooling of resources and creates networks within the community (ACYS, 2015). New opportunities can be created by working with or through the school, with local organizations with similar mandates (Z. Johnstone, personal communication, September 14, 2016), or with those outside of your sector (ACYS, 2015).

Engage local adult allies

- Adult allies are an important part of youth engagement initiatives (Erbstein, 2013; McCreary Centre Society, 2012). One study reported that the most important factor to sustained involvement was the ability of adults to build authentic relationships with young people (Erbstein, 2013).
- Part of building authentic relationships is to deeply respect and care for the young people you are working with. This involves holding youth accountable while remaining respectful to the fact that they may be dealing with difficult circumstances and conditions in their personal lives (Erbstein, 2013).
- Training for adult allies is important (Erbstein, 2013; McCreary Centre Society, 2012). In rural and remote communities, allies may have known the young people all their lives which might require a change in mindset and expectations (McCreary Centre Society, 2012). Also, adult allies may require professional development to help enhance certain skill sets such as understanding adolescent development, knowing how to adapt and

facilitate activities, anti-oppressive practice and effective communication (Erbstein, 2013). This is also important because they will teach youth skills that are important for community change efforts (Erbstein, 2013).

- If you have a number of adult allies supporting your initiative at rural sites, provide opportunities for them to debrief and support each other (McCreary Centre Society, 2012).

Meet youth where they are at

- Often when we talk about youth engagement we talk about bringing youth into our spaces. It is important to understand where their spaces are within the community and meet them in those spots. These are the spaces where they feel safe (CYCC, 2015).
- Consider how you can partner with the communities and spaces that young people already found (ACYS, 2015; CYCC, 2015).

Consider using technology to connect rural and remote youth to the larger initiative

- Connect your remote and rural sites to the larger initiative using technology and social media where possible (Kirst et al., 2012; Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016b).
- Remember that while technology provides many benefits it also can create gaps – different generations, different abilities, different perspectives and different levels of access. These are things you need to consider when using technology to help bridge distance (Ontario Rural Council, 2007).

> This recorded Google Hangout on using technology in youth engagement provides some perspectives on how you can protect an individuals' privacy and safety when using social media for youth engagement (CYCC, 2015).

Safety considerations

- Consider local protocols when working with young people (e.g. activity is taking place during school hours and the youth abruptly leaves – what do you do?) (McCreary Centre Society, 2012).
- If you bring young people to the urban setting for the initiative, build in time for leisure activities as these opportunities may not be available in their home community (McCreary Centre Society, 2012).
- Youth may have to travel long distances to participate. Have snacks ready for when they arrive and tailor the program to accommodate (e.g. don't have young people and allies travel home late at night) (McCreary Centre Society, 2012).
- Check weather forecasts as conditions can change quickly. Be ready to alter plans or shorten an event so people can make it home safely (McCreary Centre Society, 2012).

Youth as stakeholders

- Recognize youth as stakeholders and support them in their personal/professional growth through their involvement in youth engagement initiatives (Corriero & Walker, 2004; Erbstein, 2013).

- Ensure youth engagement initiatives have a clear purpose and clear supportive pathways to help them reach their goals. Disengagement happens when young people can't see opportunities for pursuing their interests (ACYS, 2015).

What Ontario rural and remote youth had to say

In 2015, the Centre supported lead agencies across Ontario to conduct consultations with youth in their service areas. Throughout the consultation, youth were asked a series of questions relating to their knowledge of mental health services and the challenges that may prevent youth from accessing services in the community. The consultation ended with a discussion around how best to engage youth in mental health agencies in this region. Reports from lead agencies in rural and remote areas of Ontario were reviewed and any salient points are included below. Keep in mind some of these points may have been made by only one youth participant. Also, much of what young people said echoes information found in other sources demonstrating their applicability to an Ontario child and youth mental health context (Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2016c).

Challenges to youth engagement in a rural and remote context
- Fewer youth are engaged in small communities which leaves more work for those who are engaged.
- There is limited availability of adult allies which can result in fewer engagement opportunities.
- Limited access to transportation.

Opportunities for youth engagement identified by young people
- Young people demonstrated interest in engaging through peer support within their communities and suggested this could potentially happen within the school setting. This would provide an opportunity for them to learn new skills.
- Some young people felt they could be engaged to help raise community awareness about mental health potentially through discussion groups or delivering presentations.
- Some young people wanted more youth centres where they contribute to programming.

> Connect Youth was referenced as an example that could be followed and built upon.

- Young people want to see a focus on action and not just discussion.
- Young people want the opportunity to be viewed as leaders both in paid and unpaid roles.

Conclusion

In summary, engaging young people in rural and remote communities does come with its challenges. However, there is also great value in overcoming those challenges and helping youth become active members of their communities. As

discussed, little research exists examining how to best engage youth in rural and remote contexts but people have taken time to write about their particular youth engagement efforts, the barriers they came up against and some of the ways they have solved or plan to solve these challenges. It is important that this information is considered in your particular context and perhaps can serve as things to think through with local youth you wish to engage. Rural and remote communities are unique from each other as are the youth within them so it is always best to plan these programs with youth input from the beginning.

For more information about youth engagement and how to plan youth engagement initiatives, please see the Centre's youth engagement toolkit: Walking the Talk: A Toolkit for Engaging Youth.

Report context

This Evidence In-Sight report involved a non-systematic search and summary of the research and grey literature. These findings are intended to inform the requesting organization in a timely fashion rather than providing an exhaustive search or systematic review. This report reflects the literature and evidence available at the time of writing. As new evidence emerges, knowledge on evidence-informed practices can evolve. It may be useful to re-examine and update the evidence over time and/or as new findings emerge.

Evidence In-Sight primarily presents research findings, along with consultations with experts where feasible and constructive. Since scientific research represents only one type of evidence, we encourage you to combine these findings with the expertise of practitioners and the experiences of children, youth and families to develop the best evidence-informed practices for your setting.

While this report may describe best practices or models of evidence-informed programs, Evidence In-Sight does not include direct recommendations or endorsement of a particular practice or program.
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Answer search strategy

Databases searched: Medline, PsycInfo, Psychology and EBSCO Behavioral Sciences Collection, EBSCO Academic Search Complete, ProQuest Social Sciences, Google & Google Scholar

Search terms

We used the following terms or combination of terms to find literature for this report: youth, young people, engagement, youth engagement, mental health, rural, remote, population, well-being, and risk.

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