

## Youth drop-ins on the rise: Program types and their strengths

There is not a lot of research about youth drop-ins and some studies suggest they are not effective. However, preliminary findings examining youth programs in Canada tell a different story: youth drop-in programs in Canada are high quality and are effective at supporting young people's well-being.

In a preliminary analysis of responses from over 1500 youth in thirty-four (34) youth programs, youth in drop-ins<sup>1</sup> reported higher positive outcomes, such as civic participation and knowledge about their community resources, than youth in other types of programs<sup>2</sup>.

Youth also scored drop-ins highly on key qualities and features that promote positive youth development when compared with other types of programs. For example, youth in drop-ins rated diversity of participants higher than in short- and long-term programs. Interestingly, drop-ins also provided higher-rated safe environments, which may reflect a stronger focus on relationships and ensuring that diverse and marginalized youth feel welcome and supported in drop-in spaces. Some young people described their drop-in programs as “life-saving”.

*[W]ithout this group I probably would have been dead a long time ago [...] it literally saved my life and I know my resources and I know that there's hope and that I can live to see 30.*

*-Youth drop-in participant*

Drop-ins in Canada are characterized by strong relationships with adult allies, positive social norms, and other elements that contribute to a safe haven for young people.

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<sup>1</sup> Youth drop-ins are defined as programs that do not have an expectation of regular participation.

<sup>2</sup> Drop-ins (N=7) were compared with short-term programs (N=6) that have regular sessions over less than 12 weeks with consistent participation, long-term programs (N=15) with regular sessions over 12 weeks and consistent participation, and one-time programs where there is only a single session/event (N=4).

*[I]t's a place where you can come and be yourself and you don't have to pretend, you don't have to put on a persona that you have to do with your family, or at work, or in a different group. You can just be yourself here. And it's okay.*

*-Youth drop-in participant*

Young people often shared that the adults in their drop-ins went above and beyond to meet their needs and support them as they navigated the challenges in their lives.

*He's [staff person] really like, [he]'s the thing that keeps me coming back too, I don't know where else I would go to get resources. I don't know if I'd ever be comfortable getting resources from anyone else.*

*-Youth drop-in participant*

These findings contradict older studies of drop-in programs in Western Europe that had been found to concentrate negative peer influences and increase delinquency. These drop-ins were characterized by low adult presence, and a lack of positive social norms and other structures that provide safety.<sup>3</sup>

While drop-ins were scored highest overall, all program types studied here were found to be high quality and associated with positive outcomes. The following table summarizes the relative strengths of drop-ins in comparison with different program types.

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<sup>3</sup> Mahoney, J. L., Stattin, H., Magnusson, D. (2001). Youth recreation centre participation and criminal offending: A 20-year longitudinal study of Swedish boys. *International Journal of Behavioural Development*, 25, 509-520. DOI: 10.1080/01650250042000456

Strengths by Program Type <sup>4</sup>		Program types			
Program qualities and outcomes		Drop-in	Short-term	Long-term	One-time
Program Qualities	Diversity	✓✓✓ ✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓
	Safe environment	✓✓✓ ✓	✓✓✓ ✓	✓✓✓	✓✓
	Youth voice in decision-making	✓✓✓ ✓	✓✓✓ ✓	✓✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓
	Youth-staff partnerships	✓✓✓ ✓	✓✓✓ ✓	✓✓✓ ✓	✓✓ ✓
	Features of positive developmental settings	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓
Healthy close relationships	Program connectedness	✓✓✓ ✓	✓✓✓ ✓	✓✓✓ ✓	✓
	School connectedness	✓✓	✓✓✓	✓	✓✓
Resources and opportunities	Community involvement	✓✓	n/a	✓	✓✓
	Community knowledge	✓✓✓	n/a	✓	✓✓
	Skills for accessing resources	✓✓✓	n/a	✓	✓✓ ✓
Community engagement	Civic participation	✓✓✓	✓	✓✓	✓

<sup>4</sup> Note on interpretation: The checkmarks provide a visual representation of the variations between program types. However, these may exaggerate differences so please interpret with caution. The checkmarks provide a more indirect representation of average scores and effect size: for example, the highest number of checkmarks indicates the general average scores (i.e., for outcomes that have averages above 4 (out of 5), four checkmarks are indicated) to illustrate which outcomes were generally scored higher or lower across all program types. Small effect sizes (i.e., slight difference between program types) are indicated by a difference of one checkmark, while medium effect sizes (i.e., more noticeable difference between program type) are indicated by a difference of two checkmarks.

	Sociopolitical control	✓ ✓ ✓	✓ ✓ ✓	✓ ✓ ✓	✓ ✓
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These results suggest that program types have meaningful differences.

As expected, program outcomes are rated lowest at one-time events where young people do not have the option to return: deeper connections require time to develop. Drop-ins may be associated with highly rated positive outcomes because they are designed to welcome a diverse range of youth at any point and as a result, have a stronger focus on relationships and support than on advancing program content. Drop-ins may also be more accessible to young people who face barriers and/or have other responsibilities that make commitment to ongoing programs and curricula impossible.

Short-term and long-term programs may perform less well in terms of diversity because youth who continue to participate may be those who know each other well and are already friends, and/or these programs may be more likely to be attended by youth who are not facing multiple barriers to consistent involvement.

Interestingly, school connectedness is rated highly in short-term programs and lowest in long-term programs. This may be influenced by how young people are recruited. For example, youth may be recommended to long-term programs precisely because they are disconnected at school, while youth who are invited to short-term programs may be given the opportunity by people in schools with whom they have strong relationships. Further investigation is needed to confirm or test these interpretations.

### Putting knowledge into action

Young people benefit from high quality youth programs. Funding to keep high quality drop-ins accessible and resourced with consistent staff is critical to support young people in our communities, and may be especially essential for those who face multiple barriers.

Different program types have different benefits for different young people. Learning about these differences can help to tailor the program structure to the specific young people, their needs, and context in your community. Offering a breadth of different types of youth programs will benefit a broad range of young people; they can pick and choose the programs that are right for them.

There is limited research about youth program types, their benefits, and for whom they are most beneficial. At the Students Commission of Canada, we've made a commitment to learn more about how program types influence youth outcomes. Over the next few years, the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement will build on this preliminary analysis by gathering data from hundreds of

youth programs across the country through Sharing the Stories<sup>5</sup> to develop and test a Canadian youth program typology<sup>6</sup>. A Canada-specific youth program typology will guide effective program development and evaluation. In future analyses, we will be able to explore this question further, for example:

- Are specific youth invited/attracted to specific program types or do specific program types lead to different outcomes?
- How do other program characteristics (e.g., youth roles, program focus, funding, etc.) influence quality and outcomes of youth programs?
- Who benefits most from different program types?

## **Background**

Youth involved in this study are participants of thirty-four (34) programs funded by the Ontario Trillium Foundation's Youth Opportunities Fund (YOF). The programs included in this analysis serve a diverse range of young people, a majority of whom are first generation immigrants, and youth who identify with varying cultural, linguistic, ethnic and racial communities. The majority live in urban areas, while some live in rural and remote communities. While most of the youth involved in these programs have enough money to meet their basic needs, fifteen percent do not. Young people were invited to participate in surveys and focus groups about the qualities and outcomes of their programs as part of their program evaluation and the broader Sharing the Stories research study.

## **Limitations**

- *What comes first:* This analysis does not test whether the program type has an impact on outcomes or whether youth who are more likely to score highly on these outcomes are attracted to particular types of programs. Furthermore, there may be other variables that explain these differences.
- *Small number of programs:* While the overall number of programs represented here was substantial (N=34), when categorized by type, the number of programs was relatively small (ranging from four to fifteen programs in each program type category).
- *Generalizability:* This analysis cannot be generalized beyond these programs.

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<sup>5</sup> Sharing the Stories is a Canadian-based research and evaluation platform that is focused on building an anonymized database of youth engagement information for youth, the youth sector, policy-makers, and funders: [www.sharingthestories.ca](http://www.sharingthestories.ca)

<sup>6</sup> Program typology: A way to classify and group youth programs into meaningful types in order to understand how different types of programs work and their strengths.