

Youth Alliance Project Literature Review, Survey Findings, and Youth Demands 2008

This is a brief literature review report on survey findings and a list of demands for the Youth Alliance Project (YAP). Funded by the Canadian Women's Foundation, the YAP seeks to make schools and communities safer for young women. The YAP is a youth-driven collective focused on issues of violence against women and girls, which works to strengthen the capacities of youth to advocate for improvements to our city's existing approaches to addressing this form of violence. YAP is a project of the Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children (METRAC), a not-for-profit, community-based organization that works to prevent and end violence against diverse women, youth, and children.

Aboriginal youth and women are 3 times more likely to be victims of spousal violence than non-Aboriginal people. (General Social Survey, 1999 and 2004, www.pcawa.org/wap3.htm)

The discrimination and unequal status Aboriginal women face in Canada results in their increased vulnerability to systematic violence and abuse. This systematic abuse contributes to personal experiences of sexual assault that Aboriginal women face from partners or former partners. Due to social and economic marginalization, the issues faced by Aboriginal women often get ignored and are classified as irrelevant. Issues such as spousal abuse, sexual assault and rape, poverty, alcoholism, and oppression continue to hurt Aboriginal women, their children, and their communities. This statistic from the General Social Survey proves how serious spousal violence inflicted on Aboriginal women is and how needed real solutions are. (www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/cgi-bin/printview.pl?file=/resources/consultations/ges09-2005/aboriginal_e.html)

Black girls and Black youth have to deal with sexist, racist school systems and police officers. (Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, July 2002)

Racist educational systems produce a 43% drop out ("push out") rate amongst Black youth in Ontario. Canadian schools continue to fail young Black women and youth because of racist school practices and policies such as the *Safe Schools Act*, a disengaging and exclusive school curriculum, and an operating system designed to provide education without the best interests of Black youth in mind. Constant suspensions, expulsions, and automatic enrolment into behavioural classes are experiences Black youth face daily. These experiences are discouraging and damaging to learning and students' overall journey through school and life.

The criminal justice system does not adequately solve or even improve the social and political issues that work to criminalize and incarcerate Black youth in an unjust manner. Police profiling, police harassment, and an overall lack of care or understanding about the disparities between Black youth and police contribute to a criminal justice system that focuses on punishment rather than rehabilitation and protection for Canadian citizens of colour. Currently, our (in)justice system has

put \$250 million towards a youth super jail that will imprison, damage, punish, and oppress more Black women and youth. Instead of using this money to properly meet the needs and cater to the root issues that lead to violence, they ignore effective strategies, such as providing adequate housing, effective and sincere social programming, and non-racist and non-sexist schools. Too often, police solely focus on gun violence and blame young Black men for gun violence while ignoring all other forms of violence and their impact on Black girls. Other forms of violence that are just as common, dangerous, and important as gun violence include sexual assault, emotional abuse, and gender and homophobic violence. All forms of abuse are damaging to a person's quality of life. (www.criaw-icref.ca/factSheets/Race%20and%20Gender/racegender_e.htm#Age)

80% of young women with disabilities will be sexually assaulted in their lifetime. (National Clearing House on Family Violence, 2005, Violence Against Women with Disabilities)

Young women who are differently abled experience violence in unique ways. They face challenges such as inaccessible services, stigma, and social neglect, and they are rarely included in discussions about violence against young women. These barriers make it easier for perpetrators (often caregivers) to continuously violate young women with disabilities, as few services and programs exist to cater to their needs and identities. Services that do exist to address violence against women remain exclusive and do not recognize the unique factors and experiences young women with disabilities face, causing women with disabilities to be more vulnerable and less able to find help. (www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ncfv-cnivf/familyviolence/html/femdisabus_e.html)

LGBTTTIQ* youth of colour are not only victimized because of their race but also because of their sexual identities.

(*LGBTTTIQ = Lesbian, Gay, Two-Spirited, Transsexual, Transgendered, Intersexed, Queer)

Systems of interlocking oppressions such as racism and homophobia hit LGBTTTIQ youth of colour the hardest. Racialized youth who do not identify as heterosexual are faced with more than one problem because they belong to more than one "minority" group. There is a direct relationship between the hatred and discrimination that produces racism and the hatred and discrimination that produces homophobia, which in turn work together to further oppress and victimize youth of colour who are a part of LGBTTTIQ communities. In a society that is heterosexist and does not make space for relationships and sexualities that fall outside of heterosexuality, LGBTTTIQ youth do not only have to deal with the fear, discomfort, or nervousness about telling their families and friends about their sexuality. They also have to deal with the reality that their safety is often jeopardized once this happens. There are rarely any culturally competent health care services, social programs, and/or education that help youth of colour discuss and get help in dealing with the challenges of being a part of a group that is discriminated against in a white-privileged, heterosexist culture. (www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/factsheet/fsglbtq_yoc.pdf)

Non-status immigrant young women and youth don't report domestic abuse because they fear deportation. (Don't Ask, Don't Tell Campaign, 2006, Access Not Fear:

Non-Status Immigrants and City Services, 2006, [www.socsci.mcmaster.ca/polisci/emplibrary/Access%20Not%20Fear%20Report%20\(Feb%202006\).pdf](http://www.socsci.mcmaster.ca/polisci/emplibrary/Access%20Not%20Fear%20Report%20(Feb%202006).pdf)

Muslim young women deal with anti-Muslim discrimination and are more at risk of violence because there are more easily identifiable. (Canadian Council of Muslim Women, Muslim Women's Experience of Discrimination, 2005)

Violence against young women is not a cultural or a religious issue. Women of all races, backgrounds, cultures, religions, classes, ages, and sexual identities can experience violence. North American society constantly associates Islam with "terrorism" and sends out false messages that violence against Muslim women is a religiously justified and normal part of Muslim cultures. Media, news reports, press releases, and political discussions all contribute to propaganda that condition us to think that violence against young Muslim women should be ignored because it is not "our" problem and it is a part of "their culture". But we believe that is everyone's responsibility when any form of violence is inflicted on a woman, and research shows that violence against women is shockingly common and accepted in most communities and groups. Accurate information about Muslim cultures and lifestyles shows that violence is not religiously accepted or praised, even though it still occurs, and we cannot blame one religion or discriminate against a person's background to justify our ignorance about violence and Muslim communities. (www.ccmw.com/documents/FactSheet2.pdf)

Young women experience the highest rates of stalking/criminal harassment. (Statistics Canada, 2004, Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile)

Young women experience higher rates of stalking and criminal harassment and are at even greater risk if they are from marginalized communities. This happens because younger women in this society have fewer rights and get less respect than adult women. Violence is caused by power imbalances and although women of all ages experience violence, young women are more vulnerable as the power imbalances are more extreme. (www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/85-224-XIE/85-224-XIE2005000.pdf)

Over 300 women and children were, in 1 single day, turned away from shelters. (Statistics Canada, 2006, Measuring Violence Against Women: Statistical Trends 2006: Victims' use of services)

Thousands of women and children are in damaging and life-threatening situations. There are several reasons why women may choose not to seek help when facing violence. For example, women may fear the offender, feel embarrassed or ashamed, think that no one will believe them, or have been taught to believe they should be silent. For women who do seek help, they can still experience feelings of fear and shame. According to a 2006 Statistics Canada report, there are over 2,000 women and 2,000 children living in shelters on a single day. Thousands of women and their children turn to shelters to escape violent situations. Unfortunately, not every abused woman gets admitted into a shelter. Every day, hundreds of women are turned away from housing and shelters. This

happens often because shelters are frequently full and don't have the resources to add room and beds. (www.statcan.ca/english/research/85-570_XIE/2006001/findings/services.htm)

27 percent of young women were pressured into doing something sexual that they did not want to in Toronto schools. (CAMH, Feb. 06, 2008, "Sexual Harassment and School Safety: How Safe Do Students Feel?" Press Release)

Recent studies and reports on sexual harassment in Toronto schools show that serious safety concerns exist when it comes to girls and sexual assault. Girls experience being touched, receiving sexual comments and looks, and having their bodies talked about and rated, and they are often pressured to engage in intercourse and oral sex inside their own schools. Homophobic and sexist comments are made towards girls, and it is only recently that attention has been given to this issue. (www.newswire.ca/en/releases/archive/February2008/06/c7573.html)

29 out of 51 young women surveyed said they do not feel very comfortable reporting incidents to the police. (Youth Alliance Project in partnership with THRIVE, the Multicultural Women's Coalition Against Violence and Oppression, 2008, Young Women's Survey; see below for full findings)

There are a number of reasons why many women do not report experiences of sexual assault to the police. Some of these include fear of not being believed and the humiliation and shame attached to telling someone about being sexually assaulted. Women who are victims of sexual assault may not want their family or friends to know what happened or may fear getting blamed for what happened to them, as it is common for victims be blamed and re-victimized during the long process of reporting and providing legal evidence about sexual assault. Also, a woman may not have much faith in the legal system and the police, and she may not believe that her situation will be improved thorough reporting. The rate of sexual assault reported to the police continues to be low and thousands of Canadian women have very little access to justice through the legal system.

Young Women's Survey Findings and Results

YAP partnered with THRIVE, the Multicultural Women's Coalition Against Violence and Oppression, to come up with a survey for young women that would help us learn more about the needs of racialized young women with respect to violence and oppression. The THRIVE Coalition is made up of diverse women from across the GTA who work to advance the movement to end violence and oppression against women of colour, Aboriginal women, and their communities.

We asked fifty-one young women in and outside of the City of Toronto a series of questions about their opinions and experiences of violence. The survey discusses young women's relationships to violence and systems of policing and schooling, as well as their input on what they consider to be top priorities for young women facing violence.

General Information

Fifty-one young women between the ages 13 and 29 were surveyed. Out of these young women, the majority were between 13 and 17 years of age (37% were 13 to 17, 24% were 18 to 20, 25% were between 21 and 24, and 14% were 25 to 29). Fifty-seven percent of all participants were born in Canada and 24% of them have lived in Canada for at least fifteen years. The remainder had been in Canada from 1 to 15 years.

The young women surveyed lived in a variety of regions including Peel Region, the City of Toronto, York Region, and Durham. Their ethnicities were even more diverse than their region of residence; they identified as a part of Caribbean, East, West, South and North African, East and South Asian, Latin and South American communities, as well as Middle Eastern and European communities.

When asked which groups they belonged to, 33% disclosed that they were a part of low-income families, 14% said they were a part of the LGBTTIQ communities, 4% were Deaf or Hard of Hearing, and 31% belonged to a community of faith (mainly Christian and Muslim communities).

Top priority regarding violence/oppression against young women in general

Young women answered the question, “What is the top priority regarding violence/oppression against young women?” in a variety of ways. We broke the findings into the following five categories.

Focus on specific types of abuse:

Twenty-five percent of young women specified which types of abuse they felt were most important. A large number pointed out that emotional abuse is a form of violence that should be prioritized, and physical and verbal violence followed. Often, one or more types of violence are interconnected and can happen at the same time; for instance, physical violence can lead to emotional hurt, and emotional violence can lead to physical abuse, both inflicted by others and by oneself. In some cases, some respondents revealed they cope with abuse by cutting themselves.

Systemic causes of violence (poverty, racism, sexism, classism, and ageism):

Eighteen percent of young women identified that poverty, racism, sexism, classism, and/or ageism are an important part of the reasons that violence occurs and felt that such systemic issues are a top priority. They recognized that systemic factors contributing to violence in relationships and communities are hard to tackle because they are complex and multi-layered.

Safe spaces and prevention:

Twelve percent of respondents identified a need for safe spaces to be created so that young women do not feel afraid or ashamed to report incidences of abuse or talk about it. Emergency and crisis-response services do exist, but many community programs do not address the issues before they occur.

Education and awareness:

Four percent of women surveyed emphasized the importance of education and awareness to address violence and oppression. One key barrier for women speaking out against violence is that they feel they don't know enough about it, which can hinder their ability to recognize when they are in a violent situation.

Lack of and difficult access to resources:

Another 4% of women discussed the scarcity of resources to address violence, specifically violence against young women, and they emphasized how necessary access resources and services is. Accessibility continues to be a problem as many violence-related services are not culturally or linguistically-appropriate, do not focus on unique issues that young women, women of colour, and Aboriginal women face, and are not accessible for young women living with disabilities.

Top priority regarding violence/oppression against young women of colour and Aboriginal young women

Young women answered the question, “What is the top priority regarding violence/oppression against young women of colour and Aboriginal young women?” in the following ways.

Systemic oppression:

Understanding how systemic oppression and structural inequalities feeds into violence that young women of colour and Aboriginal women face, including colonialism, racism, sexism, poverty, and heterosexism, was by far was the most common answer (43%). Respondents explained how young women of colour and Aboriginal women face multiple oppressions on top of the violence they may already experience.

Exclusion:

Twenty-one percent of women expressed a need for women of colour and Aboriginal women to be heard, as their unique experiences of violence are often excluded from discussions about violence.

Access and resources:

Twenty-three percent of young women identified the need to develop accessible educational resources that are culturally appropriate and do not feed into stereotypes about women of colour and Aboriginal women.

Blame:

Thirteen percent of young women pointed out that they are too often blamed for the violence inflicted on them and that the ways young women of colour and Aboriginal women are depicted and get criticized must change.

Experiences with violence and support

Each respondent was asked whether or not they experienced violence and/or oppression in their communities. Seventy-four percent answered “yes”, 18% answered “no”, and 8% said they were “unsure”.

Those who answered “yes” were asked to specify what type of violence/oppression they had faced and/or are facing. Their responses included:

- rape
- physical and emotional and verbal abuse
- school fights and gangs
- name-calling
- police brutality and harassment
- abusive relationships with romantic partners
- bullying
- family violence
- sexual assault
- racism

- sexism
- classism

Of these answers, rape, police harassment, and physical/verbal abuse were most common. When asked how they respond or cope with this violence, answers were very diverse and included:

- talking to someone about it
- cutting wrists
- keeping silent
- writing poetry
- seeking a therapist or counsellors
- praying
- seeking communities that could relate to their situation
- suppressing feelings
- brainstorming how to escape/leave the violence situation
- ignoring it

The survey also asked if young women knew where they could direct a friend dealing with violence and/or oppression. Sixty-seven percent said they knew where to direct a friend, 27% responded that they did not know, and 6% did not answer. Of the 67% who responded “yes”, they listed places and people they would direct their friend to, which included:

- shelters and agencies that deal with violence
- family
- METRAC
- kids help lines and other phone lines
- police
- counsellors
- trusted community leaders
- community and/or health centres
- support groups

Relationship with police and school authorities

When asked how comfortable they would feel reporting incidents to the police on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being “not comfortable” and 5 being “very comfortable”, 39% of young women indicated “1” (“not comfortable”). Twenty percent of respondents indicated “2”, 25% indicated “3” (“somewhat comfortable”), 6% indicated “4” (“comfortable”), and 10% indicated “5” (“very comfortable”).

The high percentage of girls who do not feel comfortable reporting to the police suggest that barriers may exist between police and young women, which makes it difficult for them to report. Common reasons given for the poor relationship between youth and police included:

- distrust of the police
- fear that information disclosed to police would not be confidential
- fear that police do not provide adequate protection from perpetrators
- a sense that the police are not there to serve and protect
- a perception that police themselves are violent and cause abuse
- a perception that police themselves do not report the illegal actions of their peers and co-workers to the community

When young women were asked how comfortable would they feel reporting incidents in their schools to adults (e.g. teacher, guidance counselor, principal, social workers), 25% indicated that

they do not feel comfortable by circling “1” on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being “not comfortable, 5 being “very comfortable”). Nineteen percent indicated “2”, 22% indicated “3” (“somewhat comfortable”), 15% indicated “4”, 19% indicated “5” (“very comfortable”).

Research shows that sexual harassment and assault are commonly inflicted on girls in schools. These numbers reveal that there is still not enough action happening on the side of school authorities and boards to help young women feel safe reporting, and school authorities may not have adequate training and support to know how to deal with gender-based violence.

The Youth Alliance Wants YOU to...

Recognize that youth violence isn't just gun violence.

Youth violence in Toronto and in other cities is, time and time again, defined as an issue of guns, gangs, drugs, poverty, and racialized male-to-male violence. This ignores the high level of sexual assault and physical violence against girls and young women. Solutions to youth violence can start with recognizing that girls and young women experience violence differently from boys and young men and, therefore, separate interventions and prevention approaches are required.

Make sure you're ready for us ...

Assess how youth friendly your committee, organization, and board of directors are. Ask yourself: what do we need for youth to be successfully and meaningfully integrated into our governance structure? Are we already strong in some areas related to supporting youth involvement, or do we have specific areas that require major growth? See the organizational assessment information listed below, as well as YAP's Board Youth Friendliness Checklist.

Believe in US and trust our ability to make really big change!

Overcome your own stereotypes about young people. Just like adults, we're not all lazy, party-crazed, and irresponsible people who are unmotivated about life. We are very active in our communities and aren't provided with enough outlets to start our own new, innovative projects. Even though we already know we deserve the right to have our voices heard, it sounds nicer when we hear it from you too.

Recruit US! And provide incentives!

Before creating your committee or decision-making body and selecting new members, include at least two young people, from diverse backgrounds, in the process and on the final committee. Budget for honorariums, TTC tokens, food, and refreshments to show how much you value our experiences and knowledge and show how eager you are to have us on board.

Talk to us, not at us!

First, watch how you speak to us. In most professional settings, adults often speak in textbook, academic language in an attempt to prove how smart they think they are. Youth are real and speak with words that real people can understand and relate to. Social work jargon, abbreviations, and references to other organizations that may be commonly known to other adult staff bore us. Taking the time to hear what we have to say and trying to understand it from our perspectives speaks volumes. Acknowledging and paraphrasing what we've said also reflects your commitment to involving our voice.

Train us and provide resources.

For some of us, this may be our first time on a governing body. These opportunities are best when we get a chance to grow and personally develop. Skills like creating and understanding how to read a budget and information about committee structures and how they work are helpful pieces of information. Also, pairing us up with a cool, down-to-earth, seasoned member on the committee that can provide guidance and advice helps too.

Be Flexible.

Hold meetings at times that we can actually make them. We have school and sometimes even after-school jobs. Work out meeting locations, dates, and times with us. Also, please have an interactive agenda. Talk, talk and no play is very disengaging. Be creative and ensure everyone gets an equal opportunity to speak.

What Works...

Peer-led youth initiatives, committee, programs and organizations

The Toronto Youth Cabinet (TYC) is a volunteer-based organization that is the official voice for youth at City Hall. The TYC consistently advocates for various youth issues and strives to ensure that there is a focus on youth programs and services. The City of Toronto gives them an annual budget and TYC's youth members are given full decision-making power over how and what they would like to spend their budget on.

Supporting peer-led trainings and education

METRAC's peer-to-peer violence prevention program, Respect in Action (ReAct), offers trainings for service providers and youth workers in addition to youth workshops. ReAct's work is done with a gender-based analysis and an anti-oppression framework, and it offers solutions and strategies to address violence in the lives of diverse youth. Many adults have never carefully considered the assumptions they hold about young people. ReAct's trainings prove that youth have the capacities to do anything and provide resources on how adults can be good allies for young people.

Youth Networks

TakingITGlobal.org is an online community that connects youth and youth organizations around the world to help them access information, get involved, and take action in their local and global communities. By being networked with other youth leaders, young people see that they are not alone in their work and that other youth care about the same issues.

Organizational Assessments

The Laidlaw Foundation in Toronto offers grants and resources to not-for-profit organizations that would like to find ways to include youth into their organizational structures. Laidlaw helps groups determine what is required in order for youth to be successfully integrated into their governance structures.

Including two or more young people (consider 25%) on committees/governing bodies

Adding more than one young person to an adult governing body offers more support to youth in governance positions. It is important that young people do not feel alone or isolated in your group.

For Youth Initiative (FYI), a Toronto-based for youth, by youth organization, has a policy that says they must have at least two youth directors on their governing board.

Additional Resources

InvolveYouth 2: A guide to meaningful youth engagement

<http://www.toronto.ca/involveyouth/youth2.htm>

Making Space, Making Change – Youth Involvement Research – Creating Youth-Adult Partnerships – Building Community: A Tool Kit – Organizational Assessment, etc.

<http://www.atthetable.org/resource.asp?ID=2>

Board Youth Friendliness Checklist

www.metrac.org

The Youth Alliance Project is an initiative of METRAC, funded by the Canadian Women's Foundation. METRAC is a community based not-for-profit organization that works to prevent violence against women, youth, and children.

