

# COVID-19 & Youth

## Lessons for Leadership from Youth in BC

December 2023

### Purpose of This Report

The purpose of this report is to share recommendations created by youth at the COVID & Youth Summit in British Columbia (BC) with leadership in governments, public health authorities, education and health and wellness service organizations.

### Where We Started

#### The COVID-19 & Youth study

Soon after COVID-19 was declared a public health emergency in BC on March 17, 2020, public health measures were enacted across the province.<sup>1,2</sup> Similar to the experience worldwide, individuals across BC grappled with the calls for physical distancing, the closure of schools and workplaces and significant changes to essential services. Although life looked different for everyone, the unique impacts of the pandemic on youth and their needs were often left unaddressed.

To learn more about the impacts of the pandemic on youth over time, Dr. JL Henderson (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health [CAMH], University of Toronto) and Dr. Skye Barbic (University of British Columbia) received funding from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR). They partnered with three integrated youth service initiatives (Foundry, Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario (YWHO) and Jigsaw) from three locations: BC, Ontario and Ireland.

Between August 2020 and September 2021, youth ages 14-26 across BC, Ontario and Ireland were interviewed at three time points to understand their

experiences during the pandemic and how they changed over time. A total of 141 youth participated in the study, with 59 of them from 19 communities across BC. Findings were reported for each location (BC, Ontario, Ireland) and then compared across regions for similarities and differences.

This report has been created by the BC study team and presents the findings specific to BC youth.

#### Study results from BC youth

The study revealed the individual and systemic challenges youth experienced during the pandemic.<sup>3</sup> In many cases, these challenges compounded previously existing stressors in their lives. Isolation, social strain and educational and employment disruptions took a toll on youth mental health, and they grieved over missed milestones during the “prime years” (study participant from BC) of their lives. Youth witnessed society become increasingly divided over differing views on public health measures, and some youth saw these views contribute to conflict in their own relationships. When public health restrictions eased, they reported difficulty adjusting to social



environments without masks and to returning to in-person employment and education.

While many youth experienced hardship during the pandemic, some also saw it as a catalyst for positive change and cited the slower pace of life associated with public health restrictions as a protective factor to their mental health. Despite challenges with the abrupt transition to online services, school and work, over time many youth grew to appreciate the increased accessibility of online options. The COVID-19 pandemic also sparked a mental health dialogue, which many described as reducing stigma.<sup>3</sup>

## The COVID-19 & Youth Summit in BC

On May 25, 2023, youth advocates joined the BC study team for the COVID-19 & Youth Summit, a virtual knowledge exchange event. The objectives were to: (1) validate findings from the study, (2) uncover what still matters to youth today, and (3) refine and adapt recommendations for today's context. This report describes these recommendations for leadership in governments, public health authorities, education and health and wellness service organizations.

### What we did

The 12 youth advocates, ages 16-24, who participated in this event were recruited from the original study, Foundry's Provincial Youth Advisory Committee and other research projects. Most participants identified as women (58%) and South Asian (50%). Others identified as men (33%) or non-binary (8%) and white, East Asian or Middle Eastern (17% each). Participants joined the virtual call from urban and rural communities from across BC.

The event alternated between examining the study findings and holding small-group discussions. The

discussions were recorded and transcribed, then coded using an inductive approach.

### What we heard

#### 1. Lessons for leadership in governments and public health authorities

*Short-term recommendations:*

- **Create more opportunities for youth to share their experiences and opinions with policymakers and decision makers:**

Youth recommended forming youth advisory groups to inform government and public health authorities on matters that impact youth. They emphasized the importance of creating safe spaces for equity-denied groups, such as those who are Queer, Transgender, Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (QTBIPOC) to encourage youth from different demographics and communities to participate. Youth request that decision makers share with the advisory group how the information collected has been or will be used to create positive change.

**“Personally, I think there's a lot of priority that should go into really having youth at the table. Especially, you know, QTBIPOC youth and having their perspective really be shown, but also implementing what they say and what they want to put into, you know, into general policy making and just into services in general.”** – Youth advocate at the Summit

- **Tailor public health information to youth audiences:** Use plain language, avoid jargon and use visual media created by youth, for youth (including images, infographics and videos). Aim to be concise and to quickly capture the viewers' attention. Youth also suggested creating one central news platform, such as a website or social media account, that

caters specifically to youth and showcases co-created content.

- **Share reliable public health information quickly:** Youth reflected that during the pandemic misinformation seemed to travel faster than information from reliable sources. To counter this, they suggested rapidly sharing reliable information before misinformation has the chance to spread.
- **Share information about mental health, substance use and physical health services alongside public health announcements.**

*Long-term recommendations:*

- **Foster a culture in society that supports a slower pace of life:** Encourage work/life balance, remote work and education options, taking care of one's mental health and taking sick days or providing more days off.
- **Prepare for future outbreaks, pandemics and crises and learn from past mistakes:** Youth emphasized that leaders need to learn from the wealth of knowledge built during the COVID-19 pandemic and use it to better equip communities for future crises. A plan should be created in collaboration with youth and shared back once complete. Youth priorities included effective public health communication, accessible mental health and substance use care and the allocation of resources, such as financial support for youth and funding for social programs at schools or community centres.
- **Address the cost-of-living crisis and bolster affordable supports for youth:** Youth expressed concerns over being able to afford necessities during and after the pandemic. They emphasized the need for affordable housing,

**“A lot of people I knew in college were suffering from food insecurity throughout the pandemic. So things like tuition, housing increases, were incredibly damaging because it pushed people like further into things like food insecurity or just not being able to meet their basic needs.”**

– Youth advocate at the Summit

food and health services, as well as more job opportunities and supports to find employment.

## 2. Lessons for leadership in education

*Short-term recommendations:*

- **Promote existing health and wellness supports for students that are offered by schools and community organizations:** Youth suggested showcasing pamphlets and posters and sending emails to advertise free or low-cost services, with clear steps on how to access them.

**“Personally, I feel like people aren't gonna reach out for help unless they actually know that help is out there.”**

– Youth advocate at the Summit

- **Host counselling pop-ups:** Youth suggested hosting counselling pop-ups in collaboration with external organizations to promote conversations around mental health and increase the availability of supports at school.
- **Invite youth health and wellness organizations to host educational sessions for students directly in schools.**

*Long-term*

*recommendations:*

- **Normalize the discussion of mental health in educational settings:** Educate teachers, guidance counsellors, professors and residence advisors on mental health and substance use and available resources. This will support staff members in facilitating conversations with students in one-on-one or group and classroom settings.

- **Build groups of student representatives within schools to share back to the government:** Youth expressed a desire to share their thoughts with policymakers and decision makers about updating curricula, preparing for future crises and improving mental health, substance use and physical health services.
- **Advocate for digital literacy and mental health components to be added to school curricula:** Youth suggested this would help them navigate information and misinformation online and destigmatize seeking support for mental health.

### 3. Lessons for leadership in health and wellness organizations

#### *Short-term recommendations:*

- **Prioritize inclusive and culturally safe services for equity-denied youth:** Youth explained that, when support is culturally safe, it helps clients feel more comfortable and better understood by their clinician or peer support worker, which often facilitates healing. Organizations need to allocate funding and personnel towards the development of these services.
- **Continue offering virtual and in-person options for various services:** This includes mental health and substance use support, peer support, physical and sexual health services and social services.
- **Collaborate with youth advisory groups to find ways to increase awareness about available services.**
- **Educate family and caregivers about mental health.**

#### *Long-term recommendations:*

- **Make health and wellness services more accessible over time:** Youth wanted to see common barriers being addressed, such as

privacy concerns, affordability, wait times and challenges with system navigation, all of which were exacerbated by the pandemic.

- **Use the data already being collected effectively:** Youth advocates suggested using data collected about the clients accessing services to observe trends across demographics and to uncover the populations not accessing these services to understand and address these barriers. Service organizations can then explore new ways to engage with underrepresented populations and address their specific barriers to accessing support.

**“Why are certain youth who aren't represented in that data, why aren't they coming? Like, do you need to have certain service providers who look more like them or, do you need to have it, available in different languages or like there's so many things that I think could be learned from even just looking at like, the data that is being collected already at Foundry and then working backwards.”** – Youth advocate at the Summit

- **Build a network of services across community organizations:** Create partnerships with other health and wellness community organizations with specialized services to provide seamless transitions and referrals to further support youth.

### Next steps in BC

The results of the COVID-19 & Youth Summit and study have implications for policy and practice beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, including for novel pandemics, political discourse and the climate change crisis, among many others. The BC study team will work in partnership with Foundry to support the mobilization of the findings by sharing youth's recommendations with the key audiences identified by youth.

## Acknowledgements

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The BC study team acknowledges, with much gratitude, that our work takes place on land steeped in rich Indigenous history and home to many First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples today. We recognize and respect Indigenous Peoples as traditional stewards of this land and the enduring relationship that exists between Indigenous Peoples and their traditional territories.

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## Further Reading

- Learn more about Foundry Research at: [foundrybc.ca/research](https://foundrybc.ca/research)
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5. Rossouw J, Carey E, Doyle E, O'Brien G, Cullinan S, O'Reilly A. **A year in perspective: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on engagement with Jigsaw youth mental health services**. *Early Interv Psychiatry*. 2022; 16(7), 792-799.