

This Is Youth Work:

Voices from the Frontlines of Ontario's Youth Sector

Youth workers are a critical factor in the success of a youth program but what is youth work in Ontario really like?

"I have two jobs right now...[I am] not making enough to survive. And so, what I'm being told in the non-profit world, you're supposed to support the cause. And, I push back with well, you're making me the cause at the same time".

— YOUTH WORKER, CENTRAL ONTARIO

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Situated between the private and public sectors, Ontario's youth sector is tasked with designing community-focused and community-based solutions to system-level barriers and inequities for youth.

Youth workers, as frontline staff, are a vital component of such youth programs. They work with youth and often become role models, mentors, teachers and sometimes, even surrogate parents to the young people who participate in youth programs.

We conducted a study to better understand the experiences of these youth workers who are charged with enacting "investments" in youth wellbeing in Ontario's youth sector.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is youth work in Ontario really like?
2. How do youth workers' work intersect with their personal lives?
3. What are the systemic issues, gaps, and barriers encountered by youth workers?
4. How do youth workers navigate these gaps?
5. What issues affect youth workers' ability to do their work with youth as effectively and healthily as possible?

METHODOLOGY

Our methodology includes seven focus groups with 58 frontline youth workers in five cities across Ontario (Ottawa, London, Thunder Bay, Sudbury, and Toronto). Five of the focus groups were in-person focus groups and two were online focus groups. All of the focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The Youth Workers: A Socio-Demographic Profile of the Participants

58
Youth Workers

5
Cities in Ontario

OF YOUTH WORKERS BY REGION

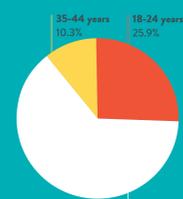
18 Central Ontario	6 Eastern Ontario	4 Northeastern Ontario	16 Northwestern Ontario	14 Southwestern Ontario
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LENGTH OF TIME WORKING IN THE SECTOR

6 Less than one year	20 Between 1-3 years	32 Over 3 years
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AGE

25.9%
of the youth workers were under the age of 25



GENDER



"RACE"

12.1% Indigenous	10.3% South Asian
3.4% Southeast Asian	3.4% Latin American
0% East Asian	3.4% Middle Eastern
8.6% Black	36% White
1.7% Not Listed	

KEY FINDINGS



01. Youth worker identity and lived experience as a resource

Youth workers described a professional identity that is tied to their personal identities because they identify with the young people they work with. Their professional identities as youth workers were "not separated or detached" but part of who they are.

"So for example as a black man getting into a racialized community and working with individuals and just getting to be someone they know and can identify with, it puts a smile to their faces, like hey dude I can identify with you, I see. So for me the sense of commitment, the sense of passion, the choice I make to want to work with that particular population in and of itself opens a greater door for connection, for empowerment and for opportunity to show that it's not helpless but certainly there's that means of empowerment and resiliency".

— YOUTH WORKER, CENTRAL ONTARIO



02. Youth work as numbers work — the pressure of meeting outputs and targets

Youth workers shared that funding and evaluation requirements sometimes require youth work to be organized such that what counts as youth work meets funding and government targets and measures. This pressure to meet targets and numbers frequently means that critical skills and practices, such as relationship-building, mentorship, empowerment, and advocacy, which are difficult to report as numbers, are rendered invisible.

"Because of pressures to get numbers, it's very hard to concentrate on each individual youth ... We have a program that we try to connect youth with volunteer opportunities in a field they are interested in. And what ends up happening is the pressure from up top, the funding, the funders, we, kind of, just start rushing it and try to fit them in where we can instead of actually giving them something that is meaningful".

— YOUTH WORKER, SOUTHWESTERN ONTARIO



03. Youth work as rule bending and unauthorized work

Youth workers described the systems within which youth are embedded — including the education, criminal justice, and housing systems — as having significant gaps for young people. They discussed how they made these systems work for youth. In some instances, this work is unauthorized.

"There are these rules that aren't practical and they're not realistic and you see the struggle that this individual is going to go through. In my head, okay, policy states, you cannot do this, you cannot do that. What am I going to do? I have to go against the grain because, how else is this person going to survive?".

— YOUTH WORKER, CENTRAL ONTARIO

"What makes it [youth work] challenging is the institutions that we work or the systemic level issues within the system... Working in one capacity to help youth with their wellbeing like, one-on-one or something like that. It's often also advocating for them on a system level to say, you know, like, we need to be able to work within these confines and they are actually hindering us as opposed to helping us to do our work. So, just the amount of work that youth workers are really putting in to making sure that youth will be well, is a lot".

— YOUTH WORK, EASTERN ONTARIO



04. The marginality of youth work and invisibility of youth worker's voices, — devalued work and precarious employment

Youth workers described how precarious and insecure their jobs were and how they had to piece together multiple, contract-based jobs to survive. They also noted that the youth sector's precarious and insecure labour market is stratified by race, gender, and sexuality. Through unfair and exploitative employment structures and practices, the youth sector is a site of harm and inequity for youth workers.

"We see that [systemic racism] not only within the youth but also, within our hiring practices and within, like, the frontline staff. Who are the faces of the front line and what voices are not being included in that?"

— YOUTH WORKER, EASTERN ONTARIO

"There's no secure employment. I was the only woman of colour there. There were no LGBTQ people, and there was no secure employment for us. The marginalized people, we were all on contract. And they're here, preaching about precarious work, but yet they are doing the same thing to us. There's no secure employment for marginalized people in this sector."

— YOUTH WORKER, CENTRAL ONTARIO

IMPLICATIONS

These findings provide an understanding of the complexities of youth work that stretches across personal, professional, and political identities as well as the precarious working conditions of youth workers.

The findings also provide an understanding of how youth work is enmeshed in other systems and how factors beyond the scope of the youth sector impact and shape youth work on the ground.

"Youth work can be hard at times. Burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma impact youth workers, and the adult mental health system is just as broken as the youth mental health system. So, unless you are working for an organization with a great Employee Access Plan, it's really hard to get the help that you need".

— YOUTH WORKER, NORTHWESTERN ONTARIO

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