The Toronto Youth Outreach Worker Program for Transitional Aged Youth 12–24: Process Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

A Youth Outreach Worker (YOW) program was initiated to raise marginalized youth's awareness of available community services, engage them in community programs, and strengthen partnerships among the organizations that served them. This process evaluation included records of contacts and referrals for the first year of the program, 3 youth focus groups, and 36 interviews with youths, family members, youth outreach workers, and community organizations. The results indicated that the program had a positive impact, especially for those youths who formed a positive working relationship with their youth outreach worker. The qualitative results support a positive youth development view of youth outreach.

Keywords: youth outreach, marginalized youth, urban communities, positive youth development, access to community services

Our review of the literature highlighted youth issues to be one of Canada's most pressing social concerns (Eckersley, 2011; Kutcher, 2007; United Way of Greater Toronto, 2008a, 2008b). These issues are particularly salient within inner-city disadvantaged neighbourhoods, where the diversity of youth's needs and vulnerabilities have increased, limiting the nature and level of culturally meaningful programs and services available (Archie et al., 2010; Leventhal, Dupéré, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009; United Way of Greater Toronto, 2008a). In Toronto, inner-city youth face many barriers related to the lack of availability, accessibility, appropriateness, and integration of programs serving their needs (United Way of Greater Toronto, 2008a, 2008b). Although youth programs and services do exist, they do not generally correspond geographically to where the youth population is the largest and the needs are the greatest (United Way of Greater Toronto, 2004). Due to the narrow policy mandates and inclusion criteria of some local programs, many gaps exist through which vulnerable youth can fall, especially youth facing multiple barriers (United Way of Greater Toronto, 2008a, 2008b). Researchers have suggested that existing programs operate in silos and are independent of one another, creating fragmented pathways to healthy youth development and limiting the capacity of the youth-serving sector to provide integrated health services (Callaly, Treuer, Hamond, & Windle, 2011; Lipton et al., 2008; Moffat, Sass, Mckenzie, & Bhui, 2009). Youth in the 15–24 age group inherently refrain from seeking required mental health services for various reasons such as apprehension about confidentiality, stigma, and discomfort in disclosing health concerns (Ballon, Kirst, & Smith, 2004; Leavey, 2005; Rickwood, Deane, & Wilson, 2007; Wilson, Bushnell, & Caputi, 2011). To reach these youths, services need to be accessible and coordinated to assist youth in receiving prompt treatment to adapt to and recover from their mental health problems (Cosgrave et al., 2008; Leavey, 2005; McGorry, 2011; McGorry & Purcell, 2009).

In response to these concerns, the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS) launched Youth Opportunities Strategy to target resources at marginalized youth in underserviced areas. The Youth Outreach Worker (YOW) program is one of the arms of the strategy, conceptualized by East Metro Youth Services in 2006, and since then developed by community agencies in six regions across the province working in collaboration with MYCS.

To identify areas and strategies for program improvement, this process evaluation of the Toronto YOW program included both demographic information collected by the youth outreach workers as part of their regular reporting duties, and interview data we collected from service recipients, service providers, and key program stakeholders regarding their experiences with the program. To provide background, we begin by connecting key elements of the YOW program to research on early interventions in community mental health and positive youth development (PYD).

The Youth Outreach Worker Program

The YOW program is one of several interventions supported by the MCYS to prevent problem behaviours among youth (e.g., violence) and to promote the development of skills and civic participation, including that of community/peer leadership. The term *outreach*, which applies to community interventions and refers generally to efforts to increase the availability and utilization of services, has proven to be a successful public health technique for engaging non-treatment-seeking youth (Hayashi, Wood, Wiebe, Qi, & Kerr, 2010; Zanis, Derr, Hollm, & Coviello, 2010). Youth outreach workers aim to locate and engage marginalized youth, aged 12 to 24, who have unsuccessfully connected with school or other community organizations

and services. The YOW program mandate is based on a broader continuum of youth development, one that is inclusive rather than restrictive, and that views both youth aged 12–18 and transitional youth aged 18–24 as facing similar service and access challenges. McGorry and Purcell (2009) as well as Leavey (2005) have highlighted the importance of early intervention with youth from these age groups. Youth outreach workers use a number of approaches to reach out such as posting advertising flyers, communicating by word of mouth, approaching youth in public spaces, serving on community planning committees for networking, and attending community events. Once youth are engaged, the workers provide developmentally tailored short-term support and mentoring to determine their needs and goals and to connect them to appropriate community services.

The YOW program employs 35 youth outreach workers to work in Toronto's 13 "priority" neighbour-hoods identified in 2004 by the City of Toronto and the United Way as having the highest combination of poverty and unmet service needs (United Way of Greater Toronto, 2004). The YOW program includes a partnership of 21 community agencies that support the youth workers by providing them with office space, supervision, and administrative support. The YOW program is linked to numerous service systems within the community, including education, police, youth justice, income support, and housing. The multiagency, multisectoral infrastructure of the YOW program is a model well supported in the early intervention and community mental health literature (Callaly et al., 2011; Leavey, 2005; Lipton et al., 2008; Moffat et al., 2009).

Efforts were made to hire youth outreach workers with ethnic, cultural, academic, and experiential diversity to ensure their cultural sensitivity to and awareness of issues facing targeted populations. They participated in an 11-day training program covering topics such as youth and community development, and were taught skills in the areas of personal safety, crisis resolution, and suicide risk assessment. The rationale for elements of the YOW training was consistent with research on effective training programs for workers implementing positive youth development programs (Rotheram-Borus et al., 2008; Shek & Joav, 2010; Shek & Wai, 2008).

The Positive Youth Development Framework of the YOW Program

The YOW program is based on a positive youth development (PYD) perspective (Damon, 2004; Lerner, 2002, 2009) and aims to prevent problem behaviours by promoting key features of healthy development, referred to by researchers as the "five Cs": competence, character, confidence, connection, and compassion (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Phelps et al., 2009; Theokas & Lerner, 2006). This PYD approach is closely associated with multisystemic ecological theories of adolescent development (Bronfenbrenner, 1974, 2005). YOW interventions are multisystemic and target the strengths and resources of the youth in the contexts of their peer group, family, school, neighbourhood, and culture. Our review of the literature indicated that there is a dearth of research regarding PYD programs that are based on community outreach.

Unlike traditional deficit-based prevention and early intervention programs that view troubled youth as "broken" and as requiring "fixing," the YOW program operates under the assumption that all young people have strengths that can be developed. YOW interventions are asset-based and operate on the premise that the more developmental assets youth possess, the lower the likelihood of problem behaviours such as violence, and the greater the likelihood of healthy development. This model of intervention is well supported in the

PYD literature (Lerner, Alberts, Jelicic, & Smith, 2006; Lerner, von Eye, Lerner, & Lewin-Bizan, 2009; Taylor et al., 2005).

The YOW program aims to build multiple assets in youth to foster resiliency, the ability to cope effectively with stress, and the capacity to respond constructively to adversity. Youth outreach workers attempt to increase youth's resilience by providing them with connections to community services, such as co-operative housing, employment and income support agencies, the school system, food banks, counselling services, and recreational community centres. These resources have been identified as determinants of health (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010) related to resilience (Boyden & Mann, 2005; Ungar, Brown, Liebenber, Cheung, & Levine, 2008; Wong, Wong, & Scott, 2006) and to the promotion of mental health among youth (Geschwind et al., 2010; Silk et al., 2007).

Youth engagement is a central goal of the YOW program. Researchers have demonstrated that engagement in community (Dawes & Larson, 2011; Klein et al., 2006), school (Li, Lerner, & Lerner, 2010), and recreational-based programs (Zarrett et al., 2009) is associated with decreased problem behaviours and increased positive youth development (Benson & Scales, 2009; Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). The link between youth engagement and PYD may be particularly strong for youths from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Mahoney, Vandell, Simpkins, & Zarrett, 2009; Pedersen & Seidman, 2005). Youth outreach workers aim to engage youth from the targeted neighbourhoods with prosocial programs that build confidence, self-esteem, and a sense of agency and responsibility—intervention strategies recommended by PYD researchers (Larson & Angus, 2011; Wood, Larson, & Brown, 2009).

Research consistently reveals the association between providing a relationship with a caring adult mentor and fostering PYD (Klein et al., 2006; Whitney, Hendricker, & Offutt, 2011). Youth outreach workers seek to create trusting relationships with young people as the foundation for promoting PYD and connecting them to the necessary services to meet their needs. Caring adult mentors can support youth's positive decision-making and actions (Apsler, Formica, Fraster, & McMahan, 2006; Klein et al., 2006; Tebes et al., 2007) while providing the support required to enable them to reach their goals (Larson, 2006). The quality of the mentoring relationship is an important factor in promoting PYD (Baylis, Collins, & Coleman, 2011; Lerner, 2002) and in decreasing problem behaviours such as violence (Benson & Scales, 2009; DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). Therefore, youth outreach workers who are able to establish a trusting and caring relationship with youth may be effective in supporting PYD.

The YOW program aims to foster youth's self-efficacy—their perceptions that they can accomplish their goals through their own actions—by providing youth with the support they require to feel capable of setting and accomplishing their own goals and improve their lives. According to researchers, the promotion of self-efficacy has been found to foster outcomes associated with positive youth development (Eichas et al., 2010).

Overview of the YOW Program Process Evaluation

We created a Research Advisory Committee specifically to oversee this process evaluation. Committee members included the senior managers of the YOW program from each of the three lead partner organizations, YOW staff representatives, and the researchers conducting the evaluation. Demographic information

was collected by the youth outreach workers as part of their regular reporting duties: They kept records of the number of contacts they made with youth, as well as the age, gender, and neighbourhood of each contact and the types of services to which they connected the youth. Research supports the inclusion of interviews and focus groups with service recipients, service providers, and key program stakeholders to understand the value of the program and to explore ways to improve on its implementation (Flicker, 2008; Franzen, Morrel-Samuels, Reishel, & Zimmerman, 2009). Collecting and synthesizing interview data from youths and family members, as well as from partner agency, system (e.g., Board of Education), and funding representatives (MCYS), offered a comprehensive foundation upon which to conduct this process evaluation and improve the YOW program.

We designed this process evaluation to investigate the YOW program and its impact on the various systems involved, and to identify strategies for improvement. Specifically, we had four process evaluation objectives:

1. Describe and examine the experiences of youths and their family members involved in the YOW program, highlighting key elements and processes of the developing youth outreach worker–youth relationship.

2. Determine whether engagement with the YOW program increases youths' and family members' knowledge of and access to the services and opportunities available in their neighbourhood, as well as identify the challenges in accessing services.

3. Determine whether engagement with the YOW program increases positive development for youth.

4. Determine whether the YOW program strengthens community partnerships and identify gaps in service provision for youth.

METHOD

Participants

The 13 neighbourhoods involved in the YOW program are located across three regions of Toronto (east, west, and north) and vary in size, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, contributing to a diverse sample. To convey a well-rounded picture of the YOW program, and to enhance the evaluation's credibility, we employed convenience sampling and recruited participants from each of the neighbourhoods served by the program. In total across the 13 neighbourhoods, our sample comprised 36 interviews: nine youths, five family members, nine youth outreach workers, six partner agency representatives, five service systems representatives, and two representatives from the MCYS. Additionally, 22 youths participated in three youth-led focus groups, one in each region (nine participants from the east region, 11 from the west, and two from the north).

Procedure

Prior to recruitment for participation in this process evaluation, we obtained ethical review and approval from York University's Research Ethics Review Board, which conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. Before each interview or focus group began, we obtained written informed consent and restated that participation in the evaluation was voluntary and that withdrawal of participation could occur without negative ramifications for service.

To address our process evaluation objectives, we conducted interviews and focus groups between August and December 2007. Youth outreach workers recruited youths to participate from the 13 neighbourhoods. The workers invited youths whom they perceived as verbally articulate and likely to be comfortable in the interview or focus group context. Prospective youth participants could participate in either an interview or a focus group, but not both. A family member of each youth was invited to participate in an interview; however, youths who did not have family involvement were not excluded from the research. The youth outreach workers presented prospective participants with information flyers describing the study, the types of questions that would be asked, and the voluntary and confidential nature of participation. If a youth or family member expressed an interest in participating, the worker asked permission to relay their names to the research team. A researcher then contacted the youth and his or her family to schedule the interview or to arrange the youth's attendance at one of the focus groups. Interviews took place in a public location of the youths' and families' choosing and lasted approximately 30 minutes. We held the focus groups in the lead partner agency for each region, and they lasted 40 to 60 minutes. Participating youths and family members received two bus tokens for their transportation, and a $20 honorarium as a token of appreciation.

We contacted the youth outreach workers and employees of the partner agencies, service systems, and MCYS directly to invite them to participate, and interviews took place in their own offices.

Interview Guides

We developed the interview schedules through a group consultative process with the Research Advisory Committee (Boydell, Greenberg, & Volpe, 2004). Our consultation involved brainstorming then refining preliminary lists of questions to be included in the interview schedules for various informants. Further honing and approval of the interview guides followed consultation and pilot testing with the youth outreach workers, which ensured the questions were culturally and linguistically appropriate.

All the interview guides had four sections:

- experiences with the YOW program (example question asked of the youths: Overall, how would you describe your experiences with the YOW program?);

- changes in perceptions about opportunities and services due to the YOW program (example question asked of family members: Has the YOW program changed the way you think about the neighbourhood you live in?);

- changes in youths and neighbourhoods due to the YOW program (example question asked of partner and system representatives: What difference has the YOW program made for you?); and

- overall evaluation and suggestions for change (example question asked of all informants: Do you have suggestions for how the YOW program could offer better help?).

The guides varied in length from 21 questions for the youth interview to 14 questions for the interview with MCYS representatives. We used a core set of questions across guides in each of the four main sections, with modifications to fit the situation of the group being interviewed with that guide. For example, youths, family members, youth outreach workers, and partner agency and service systems representatives were all asked about whether the YOW program had changed the way they thought about the neighbourhoods in which they lived, worked, or provided services. Some questions were included in the interview guides for

a particular group on the basis of that group's relationship with the program. For example, more questions about life changes and direct experiences with the workers were asked of the youth than any other group; only family members were asked about help with parenting; only service providers and funders were asked about coordination and gaps in services; and only workers were asked about YOW training.

Interviewers and Focus Group Leaders

Because of the sensitive nature of this research with marginalized youth, we recruited interviewers with a minimum of Master's-level clinical training. We hired four female interviewers (average age of 23) to conduct the interviews and four youths (ages 15–18) previously engaged with the YOW program to facilitate the youth-led focus groups. All were provided with a half-day of training, including role-playing the interview or focus group procedures.

Coding the Qualitative Data

Once interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim, we entered the data into the N-Vivo software to organize the analysis (Patton, 2002). Within the context of qualitative inquiry, data reliability and research validity depend upon the extent to which findings are considered trustworthy and credible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The sequential approach we took to analyzing the qualitative data involved three distinct stages and processes intended to maintain and enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of our conceptual interpretations.

During the first stage of coding, the lead author performed the constant comparative (Grounded Theory) method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). This process of inductive analysis allowed categories of meaning to be derived from the data and further analyzed and organized into themes. The emerging themes were supported with quotes and written descriptions. According to Brannen (1992), the sharing and processing of perspectives brought forward by multiple investigators brings caution, perspective, and validity to qualitative inquiry. During the second stage of coding, we reviewed the themes, descriptions, and quotes together to explore meanings of the data, to probe for potential coding biases, and to process and debrief divergent understandings. The third stage involved reviewing the quotes and fine-tuning (wording) the description of the themes through consultation with the Research Advisory Committee.

Results from the qualitative analysis are presented in four major themes, which overlap with our four research objectives of this process evaluation: (a) experiences with the YOW program; (b) changes in perception of the services and opportunities available in the neighbourhood; (c) impact of the program on youths; and (d) impact of the program on community partnerships. Themes and supporting quotes are presented to highlight our process evaluation objectives and the strengths of the YOW program.

RESULTS

Demographic Information

Tabulation of the records kept by youth outreach workers indicated that they collectively made connections with 5,325 different youths (aged 12–21) and 737 members of youths' families between April 1,

2007, and March 31, 2008; 33% of the contacts were from the east region of the city (including seven of the 13 priority neighbourhoods), 23% from the north (four neighbourhoods), and 44% from the west (two neighbourhoods). These 6,062 connections resulted in a total of 5,584 referrals to various service providers. The pattern of referrals is presented, by region and service sector, in Table 1. Employment services were the most frequent referrals in all three regions, followed by education and training, arts and culture, then sports and recreation. There were some differences in the pattern of referrals: sports and recreation referrals were higher in the north region than in others, while housing and income support were more common in the east and legal services in the west.

Table 1
Percentage of Service Sector Referrals by Region

Service sector referrals	East	North	West
Employment	32	30	39
Education/skill development	23	17	13
Arts/culture	10	16	15
Sports/recreation	7	15	8
Income support	5	4	3
Mental health/addictions	3	4	3
Housing	7	3	4
Settlement	1	2	2
Primary health	1	2	1
Legal services	3	1	8
Parenting	2	1	3
Relationship violence	1	1	1
Other	8	5	1
Total number of referrals	2,053	1,123	2,408

Qualitative Results

1. Experiences with the YOW program. This theme related to our first evaluation objective, which focused on describing the experiences of youths and their family members involved in the YOW program. Youths were asked to describe both the strengths and the challenges they had experienced in their connections with the YOW program. All but one of the interviewed youths and all of the focus group participants and family members reported an overall positive experience. Three secondary themes emerged in the analysis.

Importance of practical help in meeting basic needs. In the priority neighbourhoods that the YOW program served, residents faced significant challenges in meeting their basic needs, large and small. When

asked about their experiences with the YOW program, youths and their family members frequently described the importance of having these basic needs met. Responses from the youths included

> They helped me get back into school and now I am working towards my GED [General Education Diploma], and yeah they helped me with other stuff like I stopped smoking weed, so you know they helped me through a lot of difficulties.

> Well, at the time I was unemployed and still am, but because of the YOW program I have two upcoming job interviews this week.

> I found it really helpful when they could provide bus tickets so we could get to our appointments with them and other service providers. That is really helpful.

> What I like most is that they reacted quickly. For example, I told them I needed housing, and the following day they had something for me.

Importance of relationships. When youths discussed their initial impressions of the YOW program and involvement with a youth outreach worker, all of them indicated that they were comfortable throughout their interaction. Typically, youths and their family members said that workers built warm, supportive, and authentic relationships with them. For example, youths noted,

> I liked how they just don't help because it is their job; they help because they care.

> They build my resumé, but more importantly my self-esteem. They are actually there when you need it. I feel I can call any of them and they will listen and help. For somebody who doesn't have parents, like me, I lean on them for support and they're always there for me.

Family members also offered responses that reflected this theme; for example,

> We were going to be evicted, and I didn't have anyone to turn to.… A youth outreach worker became a friend that I confided in.… When I spoke to them they would say not to worry, and they ultimately helped me understand my options in case I did get evicted. He was my supporter through it all.

Personal qualities, knowledge, and skills that support relationships. Youths and family members frequently commented on the personal qualities and skills of youth outreach workers. They described the workers as being reliable, friendly, flexible, good listeners, and very helpful. These qualities allowed the workers to establish trusting, collaborative relationships with youths and their families.

> During our first meeting I felt like they were good listeners, like they never interrupted or judged me. (Youth)

> She knew how to cheer me up and make me feel comfortable and you know, well she'd say, "I can help you out with this or that by taking these certain steps." She just seemed like a real professional. (Family Member)

This theme was also evident when we asked the youth outreach workers what personal characteristics they thought were essential to carry out their diverse and difficult jobs. They said it was essential to be realistic, calm-spirited, organized, focused, compassionate, sensitive, honest, professional, outgoing, open-minded, energetic, adaptable, flexible, knowledgeable, patient, and skillful in communication and problem solving. For example, one worker offered the following response: "Compassion; it's a very emotional job. It's not all textbook theory. Sometimes one has to use discretion and intuition. It's something that you feel from your head and your heart."

The youth outreach workers were very positive about the training they received to build the knowledge base and skills needed in this role. The training topics that they found most beneficial dealt with specific issues raised by the youths they served (autism, anger management, self-esteem, immigration, and suicide intervention) or had particular implications for their own well-being (safety, occupational burnout). When asked how training could be improved, they suggested workshops on homosexuality, gender-identity issues, gang culture, and the available resources in each community. Several youth outreach workers suggested that workshops be based on a peer mentorship model.

Role constraints that interfered with building relationships. When asked about challenges to the YOW program and suggestions for change, many participants mentioned that the role of youth outreach workers as brokers of services interfered with the development of the relationships that were so important to the workers' success. Involvement with youths was intended to end after making a referral to a service provider. This prevented the workers from following up with youths, and interfered with the development of authentic, beneficial relationships. The one youth who described her experience with the program as less than positive gave this lack of follow-up as the reason. Other participants made comments such as

> I think they should follow up with the people they talk to or refer … just to see how things are going, and how things went.… If a youth was referred to a job interview and say it didn't go well, then they can go back to the worker and discuss where they went wrong and how they can improve their chances of getting the job in the future. I think it would help a lot. It shows that someone really cares. (Youth)

> It's building a quick relationship and then referring them off. This is a huge barrier because in this case you are not establishing trust. You are not able to reconnect. You can at times, but the program's emphasis is that you are not to build [long-term] relationships with them. That makes it tough. (Youth Outreach Worker)

> It is really hard to say to someone, "I know that you're really upset now, but I can't talk to you in that way, so why don't you go to this walk-in clinic for help." You can't be like that; it's not a possibility or realistic. (Youth Outreach Worker)

> I don't think I am the only one who has had some frustration with the program. The mandate of the program is to connect with youths who are disconnected, and I think it takes more than a couple of connections to connect with disengaged youth. And so it doesn't seem to make sense, you know, the youth that we are trying to reach and the model of service. I think it would be more useful if the workers could have more of a like short-term involvement, but more than just contact. (Partner Agency)

2. Changed perception of neighbourhoods. This theme related to our second evaluation objective, which focused on the youths' and family members' newly acquired knowledge and awareness regarding the services and opportunities available in each neighbourhood, as well as the challenges and barriers to accessing services. A secondary theme emerged during the analysis, based on responses about how neighbourhood adults' perceptions of the youths themselves had changed.

Greater perceived accessibility of services and opportunities. The goals of the YOW program for assisting youths included increasing their awareness of and access to services and other opportunities in their community. We asked participants whether their experiences with the YOW program had changed their perceptions of the neighbourhoods they lived in and the services available to them. All of the youths and family members who participated reported that they had increased awareness of available opportunities and services, including housing, employment, training workshops, access to computers, and community and peer networking. For example,

It's opened up opportunities for me and has let me know what's out there. (Youth)

Before I met up with a youth outreach worker, I didn't know about programs and opportunities in the community, but now I feel like there are a lot of programs opening up. (Youth)

I see the youth outreach workers as advocates for the youth. I was informed that one youth went into the [name of bank] planning to start up a bank account and was denied.… I don't know if it was the way they talked or the way they dressed, but no teller would allow them to start up an account. Once a youth outreach worker walked in with them, the service changed and they were able to open up their first bank account. (Family Member)

More positive perceptions of youths. Not only had youths' perceptions of their neighbourhoods changed through the YOW program, but how outreach workers and family members perceived youth appeared to have changed, too. For example,

I feel that we realize that, you know, the youth care about themselves and the whole entire community and how the community is looked at, so I think our opinions of youth must have changed. (Family Member)

I have realized how willing these youth are to make things happen for themselves when given the opportunity. (Youth Outreach Worker)

3. Impact of the YOW program on youths. This theme related to our third evaluation objective and included responses about how involvement with the YOW program had affected youths' positive development. Two secondary themes emerged in the analysis.

Facilitated prosocial relationships for youths. The program was described as having made a difference for youths by providing a setting for prosocial relationships and experiences. Many of the youths reported meeting like-minded people and having increased self-esteem. One youth stated, "I have met a lot of people that have similar interest as me, you know; all these new relationships have helped build up my self-esteem."

Increased self-efficacy. When asked if they felt more empowered or confident following their experiences with the YOW program, many youths said they had. For example,

Yeah. Like I am more powerful and confident. Like I think positively now. I am going to be what I want to be. I have changed my life and the way it's running.

Well because my mind is not all over the place now, you know, I am not thinking that I don't know what I am going to do, you know. I am actually saying, okay, I'm going to be a nurse. I don't think I am. I know I am going to be a nurse. Yeah.

Enhanced decision-making. The youths were asked whether they were making choices now that they would not have made before the YOW program. The majority of youths said that, as a result of their experiences with a youth outreach worker, they were more motivated to plan for the future and to make informed decisions that had positive consequences. They frequently reported receiving guidance and advice from a worker that positively influenced their problem solving and decision making in areas such as resolving conflicts with friends and family, learning different things, going back to school, developing independence and a sense of freedom, and getting a job.

Yeah, it goes back to the whole school thing. I wasn't really thinking about going to school or anything and then the whole YOW program made me realize, no, I should go back to school because I need it.

I am making good choices now, better choices. I like my freedom. I love my freedom. I make good choices like coming here every day or just getting up. Being determined to get what I need to get things done. Go to college. Go to work. This made a big change in my life.

Yes, definitely. My choices back then were definitely different from what's going on right now because back then I wasn't really pushed to go do things. Like here, when we want to get something done and we don't do it, they push you to do it, which is very good in my opinion.

4. Impact of the YOW program on community partnerships. This theme related to our fourth evaluation objective and included responses about whether or not the YOW program had accomplished its goal of strengthening community partnerships. Two secondary themes emerged in the analysis.

Strengthening community partnerships. This theme encompassed responses about the development of new cooperative relationships among the various informants involved and the benefits that accompany such partnerships. For example,

I know that our presence in the communities is great because we're not only challenging the youth to change the way they think, but we're challenging institutions to change the way they approach the youth. (Youth Outreach Worker)

It's been positive working with the YOW program. A sense of unity has been established in these areas as we involve the communities themselves.… The youth and their parents are building stronger bonds with services they are referred to.… It's a great program. (Partner Agency)

It has brought the core youth-serving agencies closer together and it has resulted in the agencies understanding each others' programs and services. (Partner Agency)

It has been positive working with the YOW program. A sense of unity has been established in these areas as we involve the communities themselves. (Partner Agency)

Yes I've noticed a difference. The YOW program has helped change the youth and their families' feelings towards the services and opportunities available in the neighbourhoods. It has also made the government sector more aware of all the organizations that are out there. (Partner Agency)

Some participants offered suggestions for how partnerships could be further strengthened to improve the impact of the YOW program:

I know there is a population of youth that show up to school every day, but are, in fact, not engaged in the educational process. It's these same youth that eventually drop out or get pushed out of the system and ultimately become the youth we serve on the streets. Why not allow us to accomplish preventative work, rather than wait to carry out interventions later on? (Youth Outreach Worker)

Have the youth outreach workers available at the school.… If you want to know about jobs or whatever there would be an after-school program where you can hand in your resumé.… I think kids will be more motivated to get help if they see them located at school, you know? (Youth)

Identifying service shortfalls and gaps. A secondary theme emerged in the data, indicating that the role of youth outreach workers as service brokers in the neighbourhood also raised the awareness of partner agencies and funders about what services needed to be created, improved, or extended. For example, one MCYS representative said,

Certainly it has increased our awareness of the networks of services. For example, we are aware where there aren't enough services, but we are also aware of where there are absolutely the right services but they aren't accessible to everyone because they are overextended.

Need for clear communication. Although all but one of the partner agency representatives described their experience with the YOW program as positive, half of them indicated that the role of youth outreach workers had not been communicated clearly to them. Youth outreach workers, too, frequently commented on the need for clearer communication.

> Better communication is needed. At this point, I don't think the youth outreach workers are aware what other youth outreach workers are doing, and that makes many of us feel lost. Some of us are confident that we're doing the right thing, but it may have nothing to do with our original job description. We need meetings and the creation of an open dialogue to put us all on the same page. (Youth Outreach Worker)

> An ongoing issue is who the YOW program is targeting to help. First, we are told that the youth outreach workers were to look for marginalized youth that are not visible in the community, but then we hear that that is not correct and the target group is not just marginalized youth but everyone in the community.… Mixed messages make it very confusing for us to do our job. (Partner Agency)

> If the program's objectives are to target youth at risk, we must clearly define "at risk" so that we all understand the program's parameters. (Youth Outreach Worker)

> It has never been clear what their relationship to our organization is. (Partner Agency)

There was some indication that youth outreach workers were successfully negotiating a clearer definition of their roles by the time the evaluation interviews were conducted. One worker reported the following development:

> We had the meeting with the Ministry and they gave us the freedom to express what we thought our roles were, and then they gave us their revised description of our roles. That was a fine-tuning moment. Things are clear now.

DISCUSSION

This process evaluation enabled us to examine the meaning and impact of the YOW program and to identify areas and strategies for program improvement. Demographic and interview data reflected our first process evaluation objective, which focused on describing the experiences of those involved with the YOW program. Consistent with other researchers who have found outreach to be a successful public health technique for engaging non-treatment-seeking youth (Hayashi et al., 2010; Zanis et al., 2010), our findings indicate that the 35 youth outreach workers engaged over 5,000 different youths (age 12–24) and many of their family members during the first year of the program. This rate of connection is substantial based on a review of American outreach programs released by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (2009).

The workers connected youths to a range of community services including, but not limited to, income support, mental health, education, employment, and housing. These services are linked to determinants of healthy development (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010) and are ecological assets closely linked to youth resilience (Boyden & Mann, 2005; Ungar et al., 2008; Wong et al., 2006) and the promotion of mental health (Geschwind et al., 2010). According to the youth outreach workers and consistent with adolescent help-seeking research, training in particular interpersonal skills such as good communication and flexibility is essential for building the caring relationship necessary to promote positive youth development (Rotheram-Borus et al., 2008; Shek & Joav, 2010; Shek & Wai, 2008).

Our second process evaluation objective focused on the participants' changing perceptions of the youths and the neighbourhoods because of their mutual engagement with the YOW program. It appears that participants perceived the program positively. Youths and their family members reported greater awareness of and accessibility to opportunities and services available in their neighbourhoods. As a result of engagement with the program, youth outreach workers and family members reported a clearer understanding of the youths' ecological circumstances and needs, resulting in a more positive view of the youths.

Findings reflected our third process evaluation objective and highlighted the impact of the youth outreach worker–youth relationship on positive youth development (PYD). It appears that over repeated contacts, the quality of this relationship strengthens, promoting PYD. These findings are consistent with research that highlights the importance of a relationship with a caring adult for promoting positive outcomes (Baylis et al., 2011; Klein et al., 2006; Lerner et al., 2006; Whitney et al., 2011). Our findings indicate that it was critical for youth outreach workers to expand their role to include a follow-up component and the development of the worker-youth relationship. The multisystemic approach of the youth outreach workers contributed to a supportive social environment for youths—directly, through the worker-youth relationship, and indirectly by helping family members, peers, and other adults support youths more effectively. Participants noted significant PYD outcomes such as more prosocial relationships, increased self-efficacy, and more informed decision-making, findings consistent with PYD outcomes reported by other researchers (Klein et al., 2006; Tebes et al., 2007).

Interview data supported our fourth evaluation objective. It appears that the YOW program has been effective in strengthening community partnerships and revealing pathway gaps in the services found to be important in other studies of marginalized youth (Callaly et al., 2011; Lipton et al., 2008; Moffat et al., 2009).

Limitations

We recognize limitations of this process evaluation given that the data were primarily qualitative, and our sample recruitment and selection procedures may have biased our sample toward youths and families who may have perceived their experiences with the program more positively. Nevertheless, our findings provide a meaningful understanding of the services and support delivered by the YOW program, and have created a foundation for enhancing the program and designing future evaluations.

Recommendations

Drawing upon the process evaluation data, consultations with the Research Advisory Committee, and the current research literatures, we have shaped our recommendations to reflect the "voices" of all the parties involved.

Ensure follow-up between youth outreach workers and youths. Researchers have highlighted the importance of a relationship with a caring adult (mentor) for promoting PYD (Baylis et al., 2011; Klein et al., 2006; Lerner et al., 2006; Whitney et al., 2011). Participants in this process evaluation reinforced that a follow-up component between the youth outreach workers and the youths ensures that the needs and goals of the youths are being supported, not just in the short term, but over the extended period of time required to enable significant developmental advancement. To support and foster the development of the worker-youth

relationship, we recommend (a) developing a framework to track the youths' progress toward their immediate and long-term goals; (b) having youths report back to youth outreach workers with updates; (c) obtaining consent for workers to reconnect with youths to obtain updates; (d) keeping records of first and last names or assigning all youths an identification number; and (e) developing a system for regular follow-up with agencies to which youths have been referred.

Provide ongoing training and support for youth outreach workers. The youth outreach workers stated they would benefit from ongoing training. Researchers have identified common factors in effective training for workers to implement adolescent PYD and prevention programs (Bonnell & Zizys, 2005; Rotheram-Borus et al., 2008; Shek & Joav, 2010; Shek & Wai, 2008). Specifically, we recommend (a) providing workshops on evidence-based best practices, emerging issues for youth, and areas of particular local concern; (b) mapping areas of specialization among the youth outreach workers; (c) having youth outreach workers lead workshops on topics in which they specialize; and (d) establishing a mentoring program, in which long-serving workers support and guide incoming workers.

Strengthen links with community partners and systems. The youth outreach workers and partner agency representatives recognized the value of strengthening community partnerships. They expressed concerns consistent with community research on the need to find ongoing mechanisms to improve communication and promote stronger integration among youth health services (Callaly et al., 2011; Lipton et al., 2008; Moffat et al., 2009). Specifically, we recommend (a) initiating organized consultations among the YOW program, the partner organizations, other service systems, and the funders; (b) mapping the services and opportunities available in the neighbourhoods and nearby areas; (c) identifying the gaps in service pathways and available opportunities; (d) identifying where services are overextended; and (e) developing a program of targeted outreach informed by this knowledge.

Future Research

Given that this is a process evaluation of the YOW program, future research will include a more rigorous outcome evaluation. We seek to bridge research, theory, and practice by developing a theoretically derived training program, which includes a tracking and reporting protocol to guide outreach and supervision, as well as to foster the promotion of the youth outreach worker–youth relationship. Furthermore, research indicates that effective PYD and community programs have a common framework for guiding program integrity and for understanding program outcomes (Lerner et al., 2006; Sawyer, Borojevic, & Lynch, 2011; Shek & Wai, 2008). Therefore, in future research we expect to implement the Stages of Change theory (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1986) and the Encounter theory (Hepworth & Larsen, 1993) to increase youth outreach workers' capacity for case management and data collection. This process evaluation provides support for this youth outreach model in which caring adults spend time connecting with marginalized youth, guiding them to seek community services to meet their needs, and enabling them to engage constructively in community life.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet article, nous évaluons un programme d'intervention auprès des jeunes qui a été mis en place dans la région de Toronto ; le but du programme est d'informer les jeunes marginalisés des services qui sont

disponibles pour eux dans la communauté et de les encourager à participer à des programmes communautaires, ainsi que de renforcer les partenariats établis entre les organismes qui leur offrent ces services. Notre processus d'évaluation s'appuie sur : l'analyse des dossiers des interventions faites auprès de jeunes et des services qui leur ont été proposés pendant la première année du programme ; la tenue de trois groupes de discussion ; et 36 entrevues avec des jeunes, des membres de leur famille, des travailleurs qui interviennent auprès des jeunes et des responsables d'organismes communautaires. Nos résultats indiquent que le programme a un effet positif, particulièrement parmi les jeunes qui établissent un bon lien avec les personnes qui travaillent avec eux. Les résultats de cette recherche qualitative confirment l'utilité de ce genre de travail auprès des jeunes pour favoriser chez eux un développement positif.

Mots clés : travail auprès des jeunes, jeunes marginalisés, collectivités urbaines, développement positif des jeunes, accès aux services communautaires

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