



BUILD WITH US

Youth as Architects of Change

Effective Youth Engagement in
the Mental Health Sector



ABOUT THE NEW MENTALITY

The New Mentality (TNM) operates as a program of **Children’s Mental Health Ontario (CMHO)**. TNM is a network of youth advocates and adult allies working together to “disable the label” of mental health and mental illness. We strive to amplify youth voices to create change within the mental health system and beyond. We believe that youth with mental illness must contribute to building and improving the mental health system for it to work effectively. Our network comprises youth advocates aged 13 to 25 and adult allies from children and youth mental health agencies across Ontario. Together, we are a community of mental health advocates across the province.

The Youth Action Committee (YAC) is a joint initiative of TNM and CMHO. As an entirely youth-led group, the committee recruits youth aged 12 to 25 annually to develop a policy over a three-year cycle. Previous topics have included racial equity in mental health (“Adjusting the Spotlight”), long wait times to receive care (“Waiting for Change”), and the need for school mental health support (“Speak Up, Speak Out”). Through this collaboration, the YAC continues to bridge the gap between youth lived experience and policy action, ensuring that young people are not only heard but are active partners in shaping a more equitable and responsive mental health system across Ontario.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We extend our deepest gratitude to the 2025 YAC members for their insight, leadership, and commitment to advancing meaningful youth participation across Ontario.

Arwen Cooke, Co-Chair
Tayyba Khattak, Co-Chair
Madeleine Kubi, Member
Arpit Sharma, Member
Boluwatife Ogunniyi, Member
Ravneet Kaur, Member
Ray (Rayla) Prus, Member
Dhara Chauhan, Member
Saiorse Hargadon, Member

This policy paper was shaped and written by dedicated members of the 2025 YAC, a team of passionate youth advocates working in partnership with TNM and CMHO to strengthen youth engagement within Ontario's child and youth mental health system.

We want to thank the adult allies and staff at TNM and CMHO, including Samara Brown, Ananya Gupta, and Caralyn Quan, for their invaluable support throughout this project. Their mentorship, guidance, and dedication to amplifying youth voices were instrumental in bringing this paper to life.

Finally, heartfelt appreciation goes to the 2024 YAC members and youth and adult participants who contributed their time, stories, and experiences through surveys, focus groups, and consultations. Their perspectives continue to inform and inspire the movement toward equitable and authentic youth engagement in mental health.

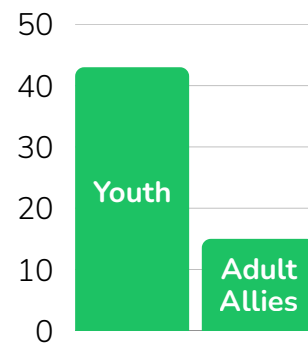
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

As a provincial-wide team composed of youth aged 12–25, the YAC advocates for authentic youth participation in mental health systems through research, consultation, and policy action. In 2025, the YAC focused its policy work on effective youth engagement in the mental health space, recognizing that while youth engagement has become a formalized concept across the sector, its implementation often remains inconsistent, under-resourced, and tokenistic. The committee sought to explore how meaningful, equitable, and sustainable engagement can be achieved across Ontario’s agencies and communities.

METHODOLOGY

To capture both youth and adult perspectives, YAC conducted a mixed-methods study that included a survey of 58 participants (43 youth and 15 adult allies), five focus group consultations with racialized and 2SLGBTQIA+ youth, and a case study with an agency partner.



FINDINGS

The findings from this study identify a clear gap between the ideals of engagement and current practice, revealing how structural, financial, and cultural barriers undermine genuine and effective collaboration.

1. Youth do not feel meaningfully included in decision-making or impact.

Many youth described their roles as limited or symbolic, with 40% reporting experiences of tokenism and a lack of influence. Despite possessing the knowledge and skills to contribute meaningfully, youth rarely saw their input reflected in decisions.

2. Representation, allyship, and inclusion remain uneven across engagement spaces.

Racialized, disabled, and 2SLGBTQIA+ youth reported feeling underrepresented, pressured to “speak for” their identities, or unsupported in navigating accessibility barriers. Authentic inclusion requires trauma-informed and culturally safe adult allyship, diversity in staffing, and ongoing training in anti-oppressive practice and dismantling of harmful norms.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FINDINGS

3. Funding and resources for youth engagement are insufficient and unsustainable.

Both youth and adult respondents identified insufficient funding as a major barrier. Youth and adult allies linked funding limitations to inadequate compensation, a lack of dedicated staff capacity, and limited training or infrastructure to support youth-led initiatives. Without stable financial investment, engagement efforts risk becoming tokenistic, short-term, or dependent on volunteer labour from youth who may already be navigating school, employment pressures, and financial precarity.

4. Lack of fair compensation limits accessibility and reinforces inequalities.

Lack of financial compensation and dedicated staff capacity limits youth participation and reinforces systemic inequities. Adequate funding, particularly for honoraria, training, and sustained roles, must be recognized as fundamental to meaningful engagement.

5. Capacity gaps limit effective youth-adult collaboration.

Youth identified mutual respect, belonging, safety, and empowered decision-making as essential to meaningful engagement. At the same time, adults play a critical role in shaping youth engagement environments. Many require additional training in power-sharing, cultural humility, trauma-informed practice, and youth-adult partnership models. Building capacity on both sides ensures that engagement is not only participatory but developmental and sustainable, enabling youth to contribute meaningfully and ensuring adults are equipped to support equitable, collaborative processes.

Findings highlight what effective youth engagement looks like from a youth perspective. **Youth identified mutual respect, safety and belonging, empowered decision-making, and recognition of impact as the most essential supports for engagement.** These priorities reaffirm that youth engagement must go beyond consultation to embed co-creation, trust, and shared power within organizational structures.

Achieving authentic youth engagement requires structural change, embedding compensation and accountability, investing in allyship training, ensuring diverse representation, and dedicating time to building lasting trust. When youth are treated as equal partners and their insights shape programs, the entire mental health system becomes more responsive, inclusive, and effective for all.

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