

BUILD WITH US

Youth as Architects of Change

Effective Youth Engagement in
the Child and Youth Mental
Health Sector



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Land Acknowledgement	3	Findings	11
About The New Mentality	4	Current State	12
Acknowledgements	4	Power-Sharing and Decision Making	13
Executive Summary	5	Representation, Allyship, and DEI	16
Introduction	7	Funding and Resources	18
Background	8	Fair Compensation	19
Methodology	9	Building Capacity and Skills for Youth and Adults	21
Youth Engagement Survey	9	Conclusion	23
Consultations	11	Acronyms	24
Case Study	11	References	24

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Children's Mental Health Ontario (CMHO) recognizes that its work, and the work of its partners and members, takes place on traditional Indigenous territories across the province. We acknowledge that 46 treaties and other agreements cover the territory now called Ontario.

We are thankful to be able to work and live in these territories. We are thankful to the First Nations, Metis and Inuit people who have cared for these territories since time immemorial and who continue to contribute to the strength of Ontario and to all communities across the province.

A Personal Reflection

I live on the traditional land of the Anishinaabeg peoples, which includes the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Pottawatomi nations, collectively known as the Three Fires Confederacy. As a student at the University of Toronto, I also recognize that this institution is situated on the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit. These lands where I live, learn, and work continue to be spaces where First Nations and Métis individuals live and contribute to our communities.

I also identify as a settler, as my family immigrated from Nigeria to Jamaica before coming to Canada. While my family and I may not have had a direct role in the injustices and suffering faced by Indigenous peoples, living on their traditional lands means we are part of a system that continues to benefit from and perpetuate these inequalities. Recognizing this, I feel a deep responsibility to act in ways that challenge this legacy.

As someone passionate about environmental stewardship, I deeply value the Indigenous outlook that sees the land as a living relative deserving of care and respect. The sense of duty is something I strive to emulate in how I engage with my environment and community. I am also profoundly grateful for the opportunities I have been afforded on this land and, while true reconciliation may still be far from reach, I commit to continuously learn, reflect, and take action, using every opportunity I have to help move us closer to meaningful reconciliation and justice.

By Boluwatife Ogunniyi (she/her), Youth Action Committee Member

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

Deepest gratitude is extended 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.

A special thank you to the adult allies and staff at TNM and CMHO, including Samara Brown, Ananya Gupta, Caralyn Quan and our Aboriginal Navigator Gerard Sagassige, 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.

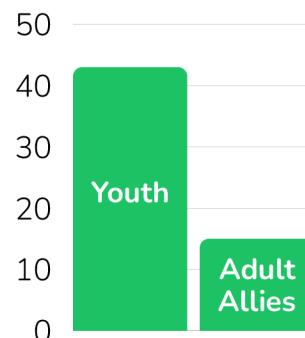
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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, underresourced, 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.

INTRODUCTION

In 2024, the YAC turned its attention to the state of youth engagement within Ontario's child and youth mental health (CYMH) sector.

While youth engagement has long been recognized as an essential pillar of effective and equitable service delivery and support, the committee observed that meaningful implementation across the province remains inconsistent. Despite the existence of guiding frameworks such as the Quality Standards for Youth Engagement developed by the Knowledge Institute (Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2021), many young people continue to report diverse experiences such as tokenism, a lack of representation, and minimal influence in decision-making spaces that are meant to serve them.

This year's committee was driven by a shared understanding that authentic youth engagement is not a symbolic exercise—it is a vital mechanism for building responsive, inclusive, and effective mental health systems. The topic emerged through months of discussion and reflection among YAC members, who drew on their lived experience within mental health services and their observations of broader systemic gaps across Ontario.

Many young people continue to report diverse experiences, such as tokenism, a lack of representation, and minimal influence in decision-making spaces meant to serve them.

Recognizing this disconnect, the YAC set out to investigate how youth engagement currently operates across the CYMH sector, identify what is working well, and uncover the structural and systemic barriers that prevent equitable participation.

To achieve this, YAC undertook a mixed-methods project that included surveys, focus groups, and consultations with both youth and adult allies from across Ontario. The findings highlight several key themes: youth often do not feel meaningfully included in decision-making processes; representation and diversity remain limited; insufficient funding continues to hinder the sustainability and accessibility of engagement opportunities; fair compensation for youth is inconsistent; and there is a need for capacity-building for youth and adults.

Through this research, the YAC developed policy recommendations to guide government bodies, service agencies, and community organizations toward embedding equitable, authentic, and sustainable youth engagement into Ontario's child and youth mental health system.

BACKGROUND

Engaging youth meaningfully in mental health systems is both a practical necessity and an ethical imperative.

Childhood and adolescence are critical developmental periods when mental health challenges often first emerge, making early intervention and prevention essential for long-term well-being. Viewing mental health through a child and youth lens allows for earlier identification of needs, improved access to appropriate supports, and the creation of systems that reflect young people's living and lived realities rather than adult assumptions (Yamaguchi et al., 2023). Meaningful engagement of youth can therefore serve as both a protective factor against mental health challenges and a mechanism for improving health outcomes (CAMH, 2024).

Throughout this paper, **youth engagement is defined as the meaningful and sustained involvement of a young person in activities that extend beyond their personal needs and contribute to broader systems or communities.** Youth engagement in CYMH means empowering all young people as valuable partners in addressing issues and making decisions that affect them personally or that they believe are important (Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2021).

Youth engagement happens on a continuum, from youth as passive recipients of services to engaging activities that recognize youth as equal partners in their care (Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, 2021). Beyond its preventive benefits, youth engagement enhances the design and delivery of services. **When young people are directly involved in shaping programs and policies, they help ensure that supports are relevant, accessible, and grounded in lived experience** (Turuba, 2022).

In sectors such as substance use, youth-led initiatives have demonstrated how peer-informed spaces can foster trust, promote equity, and normalize open conversations about mental health (Veenstra, 2025). Through such involvement, youth have been able to co-create safer environments for their peers, influence program direction, and challenge stigmas that often prevent help-seeking (Turuba et al., 2022).

In Ontario, youth engagement has become a key pillar of the CYMH sector. The government recognizes "child, youth and family engagement" as a "key process" to support the provision of CYMH core services (Ministry of Health, 2024). The Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health (2021) outlines principles for meaningful participation, emphasizing respect, shared decision-making, and accountability. Many community-based CYMH agencies across Ontario have contributed to a growing awareness that youth must be seen not merely as service users but as partners and leaders in system transformation. However, significant variation remains among individual service providers, programs, and agencies in how youth engagement is understood and implemented within the CYMH sector.

Continued efforts are needed to ensure that children, youth, and families receive consistent, high-quality opportunities for engagement regardless of where they access services across the province. Conceptual models such as Hart's Ladder of Participation (1992) have helped frame what meaningful engagement looks like by outlining a continuum from tokenistic involvement to genuine partnership and co-creation.

More recent adaptations of the model highlight that lower levels of involvement—where youth are consulted without influence or included symbolically—may be realistic; however, they should be approached with transparency, while organizations strive to reach higher levels of shared power. Despite progress in defining best practices, implementation remains inconsistent across the CYMH system. Youth often report feeling excluded from decision-making or uncertain about the impact of their contributions.

Recognizing this gap between theory and practice, the YAC initiated this project to explore the current landscape of youth engagement in Ontario's mental health sector. **The goal of this project was to identify strengths and barriers within existing practices, evaluate the quality of youth experiences, and develop actionable recommendations to advance equitable, authentic, and sustainable youth engagement. Ultimately, this work seeks to empower youth to be partners in shaping a mental health system that truly reflects their needs and aspirations.**

METHODOLOGY

To better understand the current state of youth engagement within the CYMH sector, the YAC employed a mixed-methods approach that combined survey research, targeted consultations, and a case study. This approach aimed to capture a range of perspectives from both youth and adults who support youth engagement, with particular attention to the experiences of equity-deserving groups.

Throughout this paper, we use these definitions:

“Youth” are individuals aged 12 to 25 from Ontario who are currently or were previously (in the past five years) involved with work that informs or shapes organizational policies, events, programming, and/or processes.

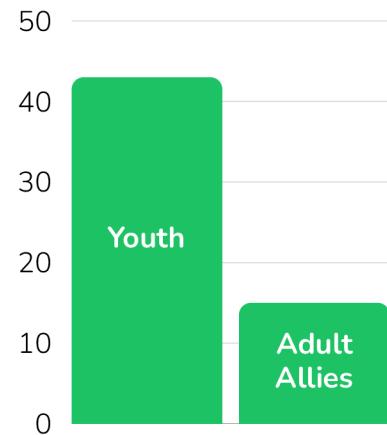
“Adults” are individuals who actively support and collaborate with youth, particularly in youth engagement efforts within the parameters of CYMH. This does not include staff whose role is only to provide clinical support.

Youth Engagement Survey

The YAC developed a survey focused on youth engagement for youth aged 12 to 25 and for adults working in the CYMH sector. The survey was launched through an online platform called SurveyMonkey in May 2025 and remained open for responses until June 2025.

The survey was advertised through multiple channels, including TNM and CMHO online newsletters, social media platforms, and email distribution via the TNM network. Respondents could enter themselves into a raffle to win one of three \$25 gift cards.

A total of 87 individuals responded to the survey, and 58 respondents were filtered. The 29 disqualified participants, all adult allies, were removed from the analysis for skipping all questions in the adult ally-specific sections. **The final sample comprised 43 youth respondents and 15 adult respondents.** Among the youth respondents, two were involved outside the CYMH sector or were unable to participate in youth engagement.



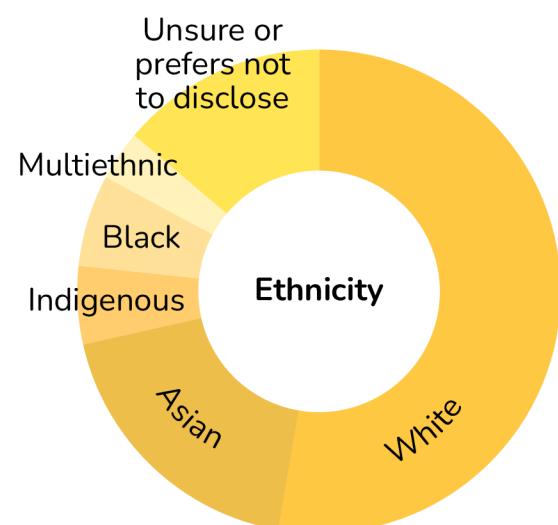
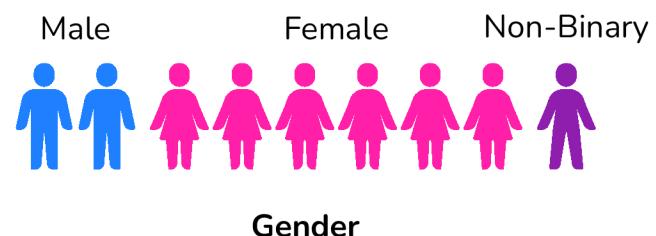
Survey Sample Characteristics

Of the 58 respondents, most were involved in youth engagement. The majority of youth participants (50%) were transitional-aged youth (18 to 25 years), followed by youth aged 12 to 17 years (27.6%), and 22.4% respondents were over 25 years. Although “youth” was defined as individuals aged 12 to 25, one respondent was over 25 and was included in our analysis, given our interest in perspectives from those no longer directly involved in the sector. Among adult respondents, most were over 25; however, three were within the youth age bracket by definition.

In terms of gender, the majority of respondents identified as female (62.1%), followed by male (15.5%), and non-binary (12.1%).

Most respondents identified as White (53.4%), followed by Asian (19%), Indigenous (5.3%), Black or African (5.2%), and multiethnic (3.4%), while the remainder were unsure or preferred not to disclose their identity.

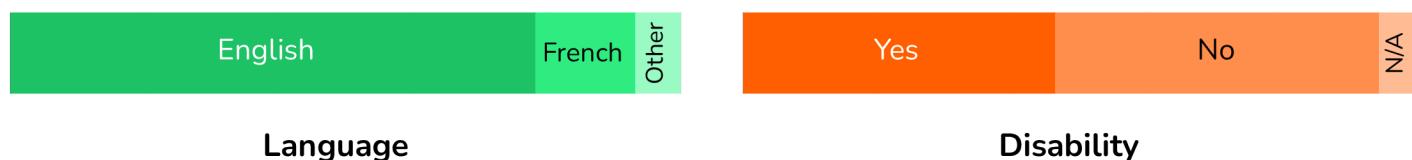
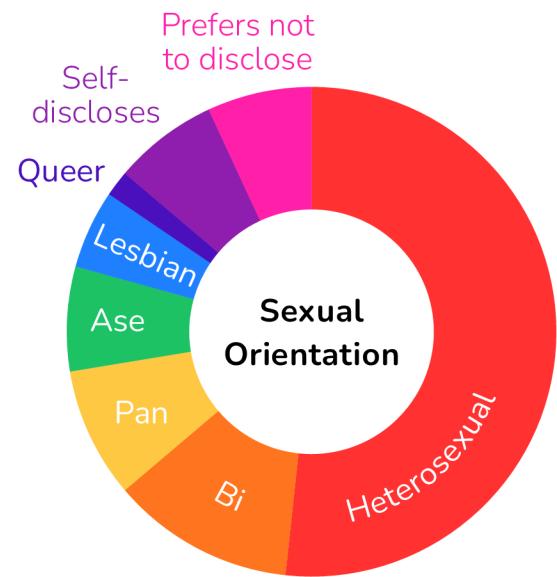
There were notable differences between youth and adult respondents. The youth sample was more diverse, with 44.7% identifying as White and the remainder representing a range of other ethnicities. In contrast, most adult allies identified as White (86.7%), with one identifying as Asian and one choosing not to disclose.



Regarding sexual orientation, just over half (51.7%) identified as heterosexual, followed by bisexual (12.1%), pansexual (8.6%), asexual (6.9%), and lesbian (5.2%). Smaller proportions identified as queer (1.7%) or preferred to self-describe (6.9%), while 6.9% preferred not to disclose their sexual orientation. No respondents identified as gay or Two-Spirit.

All respondents spoke English, with 19% also speaking French and 8.6% speaking other languages.

Nearly half (46.6%) identified as having a disability, 48.3% did not, and 5.2% preferred not to say. Youth were also more likely to identify as having a disability (55%) compared to adults (27%).



Consultations

Following the survey, five focus groups were held for youth who identified as racialized, part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, and/or a person with disability. Consultations were held both in person during TNM's annual leadership retreat, Disable the Label, and online via Zoom.

Case Study

To assess youth engagement from a managerial perspective, the YAC conducted an interview with staff and management from an agency partnered with TNM.

FINDINGS

The project's findings are organized into six sections. The first provides an overview of the current state of youth engagement in the CYMH sector based on our survey results. This is followed by five themes that were identified and analyzed using survey data, focus group consultations, and the case study.

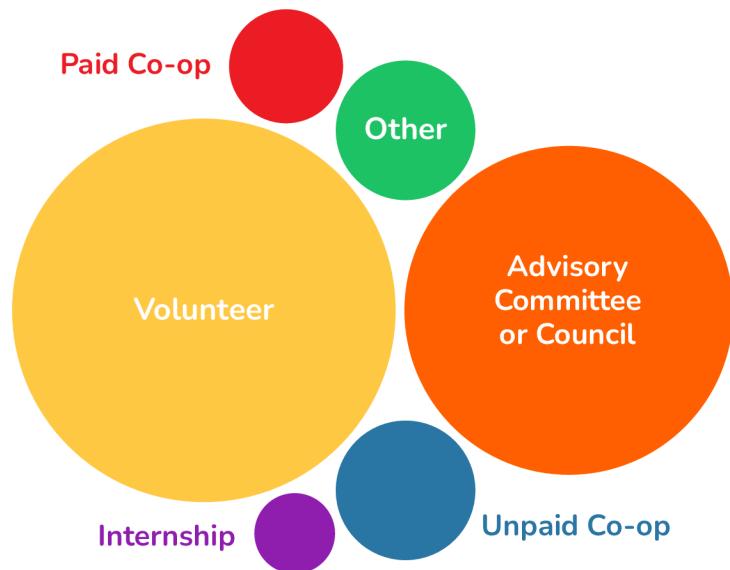
Current State

Meaningful youth engagement is vital to the development of responsive and effective CYMH systems. Despite its recognized importance, there remains limited evidence on the current state of youth engagement in Ontario—particularly regarding awareness of engagement standards and the quality of young people’s experiences. Through the survey, the majority of respondents (81.3%) indicated current involvement in youth engagement activities. Another 9.9% reported participating in 2024, 6.3% prior to 2023, and 3.1% in 2023.

Engagement Format

Engagement occurred through a range of formats: 43.8% participated primarily virtually, with some in-person interaction; 25% mainly in person, with a virtual component; 21.9% entirely in person; and 9.4% fully virtual.

Youth were most often engaged through volunteering (68.8%) and participation on advisory committees or councils (50%), while smaller groups held unpaid co-op positions (9.4%), paid co-ops (6.3%), internships (3.1%), or other roles (9.4%).



Barriers to Participation

Among the two respondents who were not involved or had to drop out, all cited a lack of financial compensation (100%) as the primary reason. Additionally, half of the respondents mentioned other priorities (50%), scheduling conflicts (50%), and not receiving funding (50%) as barriers to participation in the survey.

Comfort in Engagement Spaces

When assessing comfort levels in engagement spaces, most youth reported feeling able to share their experiences openly: 37.5% reported feeling comfortable, and 25% very comfortable. However, 28.1% felt only somewhat comfortable, and 9.4% reported not feeling comfortable at all, highlighting opportunities to strengthen psychological safety and inclusivity in engagement settings.

Nature of Engagement

When examining the depth and nature of engagement, nearly half of the respondents (46.9%) reported playing a meaningful role, contributing to planning and decision-making alongside adults and feeling that their ideas were respected. Others described more limited involvement: 21.9% felt their participation was mostly symbolic; 12.5% said their input was incorporated into decisions; 9.4% reported having little or no role; 6.3% were directed on what to do; and 3.1% were only informed about activities.

Engagement Quality Standards

Youth engagement experiences can vary widely across different organizations and contexts. Establishing consistent quality standards is therefore essential to ensure effective and equitable CYMH services across Ontario. Quality standards outline best practices that support meaningful, respectful, and impactful participation. When participants were asked about their awareness of youth engagement standards—such as those developed by the Knowledge Institute—over half (56.3%, or 18 participants) reported being unaware of them.

Overall, these findings indicate that while many young people in Ontario are actively and meaningfully contributing to CYMH initiatives, the quality and consistency of engagement experiences vary significantly. The following section explores in greater depth the key themes that emerged from our analysis of youth engagement experiences.

1. Power Sharing and Decision-Making

Effective youth engagement improves the quality of interventions, programs, and policies that serve youth (Bailey et al., 2024). However, the survey and consultations revealed that many youth did not feel meaningfully included during youth engagement activities. While there is recognition of the multiple ways youth can be involved—from co-creation to consultation—nearly 40% of respondents reported experiences in which their role felt limited, tokenistic, or lacked real influence. In contrast, less than half (46.9%) of the respondents felt they had a genuine role in planning and decision-making with adults.

One survey respondent shared, *“Due to a lack of visible impact, it doesn't feel like I've done much to help.”* This sentiment captures a broader frustration voiced by many respondents: youth perceived a lack of decision-making power, influence, and impact.

When asked to identify the top barriers to youth engagement, the most common responses were: contributions not taken seriously and the lack of opportunities to make or influence decisions (the number one barrier for 16.7% of respondents and among the top three barriers for 30% of respondents); and a lack of visible impact from involvement (the number one barrier for 13.3% of respondents and among the top three barriers for 43.3% of respondents).

Research supports these findings. Past studies have shown that youth are often involved in early stages of projects, such as consultation on research and policy development, but are rarely involved in implementation and evaluation, limiting their ability to influence real outcomes (Yamaguchi et al., 2023).

Studies also indicate that a lack of power-sharing—in which youth are not treated as equals—serves as a barrier to youth engagement in mental health research (McCabe et al., 2022). O'Connor (2013) also found that youth commonly reported challenges related to power, such as adults not respecting them, not having confidence in them, or not listening to them.

One survey respondent shared this sentiment: *“Listen to youth voices and value them so they continue giving you input, but don't JUST listen to them. Also take action, take those words and put them into action. Because without action, words aren't much.”*

Despite these challenges, there is a strong foundation of capability among young people. Although opportunities for engagement remain limited, the majority of youth (87%) reported having the skills and knowledge to meaningfully contribute to youth engagement work.

Consultations and focus groups also revealed positive examples of authentic engagement where youth contributions are recognized and respected. Programs like TNM demonstrate effective models in which youth lead initiatives and adults serve as allies—ensuring authenticity and avoiding tokenism.

An adult ally shared that, *“We have had a TNM group in our agency for many years. However, it works tangentially to the agency. The youth are not embedded in the organization. However, the work within the TNM group is developed by youth for youth; adult allies are present only to support and provide guidance. We are mindful of the Hart's Ladder of Engagement. There is no tokenism; we have equity, and the adults are truly following the youths' lead.”*

Through the survey, adult allies shared additional examples of how youth have meaningfully contributed to projects and had a tangible impact—such as co-developing key documents, including terms of reference and engagement policies—demonstrating power-sharing and co-creation in practice. One adult ally said, *“We have a terms of reference developed by youth for youth.”*

Transparency emerged as a critical factor in meaningful youth engagement. Youth emphasized the importance of being kept informed about how their feedback is used—or, if not adopted, understanding why it was not included. Providing clear, honest communication about decision outcomes strengthens trust and helps youth see the value of their participation. As one adult ally shared, they regularly inform youth about how their feedback has been implemented and, when it has not, discuss the reasons for the non-implementation to maintain transparency and accountability.

Despite these challenges, there is a strong foundation of capability among young people. Programs like TNM demonstrate effective models, where youth lead initiatives and adults act as allies.

Studies have shown that setting clear expectations and defining roles and responsibilities for youth and adult allies are integral to youth engagement (McCabe et al., 2022). Similarly, our consultation and focus groups found that clarity around expectations helps manage assumptions and identify realistic opportunities for impact. One participant summarized this insight well: *“Once you know what you can't do, you can do everything you can do!”*

Authentic youth engagement requires shifting from consultation to collaboration, in which youth are not only heard but also have real influence in shaping decisions that affect them. Embedding youth voice across different levels of governance strengthens accountability, transparency, and the overall quality of programs and policies serving young people. Therefore, we are recommending the following:

Recommendation 1.1: Strengthen and Prioritize Youth Voices in Relevant Governance and Decision-Making Spaces

Youth participation should extend beyond advisory or consultative roles to include meaningful involvement in governance, program design, and decision-making—particularly in areas that directly impact young people. Wherever possible, organizations should integrate youth perspectives into decision-making bodies such as boards, working groups, or leadership committees. While full inclusion at all levels of governance may not always be feasible, prioritizing youth participation in programs, services, and policies that serve or significantly affect youth is essential. In these contexts, agencies and networks should establish structured opportunities for youth to contribute. These roles should have clearly defined responsibilities and influence, and transparent communication channels, to ensure that youth perspectives meaningfully inform strategic priorities and policy outcomes.

Recommendation 1.2: Institutionalize Feedback Loops

Organizations should establish formal and transparent feedback mechanisms to demonstrate how youth input has influenced decisions, programs, or policies. When specific recommendations cannot be implemented, clear explanations and next steps should be communicated. Regular feedback cycles foster mutual trust, demonstrate respect for youth contributions, and make engagement processes more accountable, transparent, and outcome-oriented.

Recommendation 1.3: Establish Clear Role Descriptions & Expectations

Organizations should develop and share position descriptions for all youth engagement roles. These should outline the role's purpose, specific responsibilities, expected time commitments, decision-making authority, and compensation details. Clear and transparent role descriptions promote accountability, support informed participation, and help youth understand how their contributions influence organizational decisions. We recognize that many youth may find it challenging to understand the responsibilities and expectations pertaining to their role. To support them, the "Setting Expectations" section of our youth engagement toolkit provides guidance on having those important conversations.

2. Representation, Allyship, and DEI

Diversity in youth voices—across age, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and lived experience—is critical to ensuring that youth mental health programs, services, and policies meet the needs of Ontario’s diverse youth population (McCabe et al., 2022). However, youth engagement efforts across many organizations continue to lack this diversity (Yamaguchi et al., 2023).

The YAC’s policy paper, [Adjusting the Spotlight](#), highlighted how the lack of diversity among mental health service providers contributes to Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) youths’ experiences of discrimination, racism, and cultural insensitivity. Similarly, during our focus group consultations, youth frequently expressed concerns about limited representation among staff, leadership, and youth engagement groups, as well as about outreach efforts that fail to effectively reach equity-deserving populations.

Moreover, it was found that 68% of youth participants could not relate to their mental health service providers because their identities were not reflected in those providers (The New Mentality Youth Action Committee, 2022). This disconnect undermines relationships between youth and their adult allies or service providers.

Cultural safety, inclusivity, and representation are well-established facilitators of meaningful youth engagement (Yamaguchi et al., 2023). Youth with marginalized identities reported feeling uncomfortable or excluded within engagement settings due to institutional and structural barriers such as complex registration processes, inaccessible forms, or limited outreach that does not clearly explain what “youth engagement” entails.

Racialized youth and 2SLGBTQIA+ youth described feeling pressure to break down stereotypes about their communities, act as “good” representatives, or being pigeonholed into issues tied to a single aspect of their identity. These dynamics negatively impacted their comfort and participation. The YAC similarly highlighted cultural insensitivity toward BIPOC youth, particularly through racial stereotypes (The New Mentality Youth Action Committee, 2022).

Youth also emphasized that the absence of truly safe, identity-affirming spaces remains a major barrier to participation. Queer youth described discomfort when adults or non-queer individuals dominated queer spaces, sometimes bringing ignorance, microaggressions, or subtle transphobia. BIPOC youth reported experiencing racism, tokenism, or exclusion due to accents or cultural differences, often describing engagement environments as “white-centered” or overly corporate.

One adult ally survey respondent shared that they *“give ample time for connection before starting to work. It took our group 6 months to form good connections and to feel safe(r) in our spaces. After this, we were able to start many meaningful projects. Trying to complete projects in the first 4-6 months was a bit difficult because we did not yet have the buy-in from our group.”* A sense of belonging and trust must be built over time to enhance the quality of youth engagement.

Accessibility remains a significant concern, as youth living with disabilities were more likely to report barriers to participation. One youth respondent said, *“In some spaces, as I use a wheelchair, I have not been able to get around the space.”* Another youth participant described feeling unsupported during a mental health flare-up because there was only one adult ally present, who lacked the capacity to assist while also facilitating the session.

Across consultations, youth identified a strong sense of belonging—feeling accepted and valued within a group—as the most essential requirement for meaningful youth engagement. Building safety, trust, and community among youth and between youth and adult allies requires time and intentional effort.

Similarly, participants emphasized that diverse staffing and leadership can help foster a stronger sense of belonging and support. One 2SLGBTQIA+ youth shared that *“when [their] agency hires more queer people, it’s like planting vibrant flowers in a garden. Allies are great to some degree, but with queer people, it’s seeing yourself feel reflected—someone who has lived experience, someone who knows what it feels like.”*

For youth engagement to be truly meaningful, it must reflect the diversity and lived realities of the young people it seeks to serve. Equitable representation and culturally safe practices foster belonging, trust, and inclusion—key conditions for effective participation. The YAC’s policy paper, [Adjusting the Spotlight](#), and [CMHO’s Provincial Health Equity Strategy](#) recommended prioritizing staff diversity and mandating training. We are putting forth recommendations along similar lines.

Recommendation 2.1: Prioritize Diversity in Staffing and Leadership

Agencies should actively recruit, retain, and promote diverse representation across race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, and lived experience in both youth and adult ally roles. Representation in leadership positions and program materials should mirror the diversity of the communities served. This ensures that youth engagement efforts are informed by diverse perspectives and that all participants can see themselves reflected in decision-making spaces.

Recommendation 2.2: Mandate Ongoing Equity and Anti-Oppression Training

All staff, adult allies, and youth leaders involved in engagement activities should receive regular training on anti-racism, anti-oppression, accessibility, and trauma-informed practice. These training sessions should not be one-time sessions but ongoing opportunities for learning and reflection. Ensuring that youth and adults share a common understanding of equity principles helps create safer, more inclusive environments where power is shared, and diverse experiences are respected.

Recommendation 2.3: Foster Inclusive and Accessible Environments

Agencies must ensure that youth engagement spaces—both physical and virtual—are inclusive, accessible, and responsive to the diverse needs of youth participants. This includes providing mobility accommodations, culturally safe and trauma-informed practices, mental health supports, and accessible communication formats. Emphasis should be placed on creating environments that are physically, emotionally, and culturally safe so that all youth can participate fully, comfortably, and equitably.

3. Funding and Resources

Sustainable funding refers to consistent, adequate, and long-term financial resources that ensure youth engagement efforts are meaningful, accessible, inclusive, and high-quality. However, funding is not simply a financial issue—it is connected to accessibility, inclusion, and the quality of engagement itself. Across surveys and consultations, both youth and adult allies identified inadequate and inconsistent funding as one of the most significant barriers to effective youth engagement. Youth and adult respondents linked insufficient funding to low or inconsistent compensation, lack of dedicated staffing, and limited training opportunities for adult allies—all of which affect the sustainability and quality of engagement. During consultations, many participants emphasized that without adequate financial investment, even well-intentioned engagement efforts risk becoming tokenistic or unsustainable.

One adult ally said, *"It eventually boils down to funding. All of the things that we, that young people might want to do and that we are unable to do, it boils down to funding. Funding is the key piece. If there's money and I have a good, you know, change, absolutely we can create something. But that's not the case all the time."*

A lack of stable funding also limits organizational capacity to staff youth engagement roles effectively. In our survey, 50% of adult allies reported that youth engagement was only one component of a broader position rather than a dedicated role. As one adult ally explained: *"Supporting at-risk and vulnerable youth sometimes takes a lot of our time and energy. And so sometimes TNM is at the back of our mind... which is unfortunate because of that capacity issue."*

These findings reveal a structural problem: although youth engagement is widely recognized as essential within Ontario's mental health system, it is not funded at a level that reflects its importance. Agencies must balance frontline service delivery with engagement work, often at the expense of quality, continuity, and youth retention.

The Global Mental Health Action Network (2023) and McCabe et al. (2022) identify limited financial and human resources as major barriers, and recommend that organizations set flexible budgets with contingency funds to support youth-led initiatives and ensure operational sustainability. **Sustainable and meaningful youth engagement cannot exist without stable, dedicated financial and structural support.** Funding limitations often constrain staff capacity, training, and the ability to implement youth-led ideas, reducing both the quality of engagement and youth influence.

Recommendation 3.1: Create Dedicated Youth Engagement Roles When Feasible

Organizations that engage youth should seek to establish at least one funded staff position dedicated to youth engagement strategy, coordination, and capacity-building. These roles must not be add-ons to existing responsibilities but recognized as core functions with clear mandates, adequate resources, and institutional backing. Where full-time roles are not feasible, organizations should ensure that staff time for youth engagement is protected, prioritized, and supported.

Recommendation 3.2: Advocate for Flexible, Multi-Year Funding

Governments, funders, and partner agencies should prioritize multi-year, flexible funding models for youth engagement. Moving beyond short-term, project-based grants toward sustained base funding allows organizations to maintain ongoing relationships with youth, retain trained staff, and implement youth-led initiatives effectively. Multi-year commitments also provide the stability needed to meaningfully integrate youth voice into planning, implementation, and evaluation.

Recommendation 3.3: Provide Infrastructure and Resources to Support Youth Participation

Organizations should invest in the infrastructure, resources, and capacity required to sustain meaningful youth participation. This includes adequate funding, staffing, technology, and administrative supports, as well as training and capacity-building for adult allies to effectively facilitate youth engagement. Strong infrastructure ensures youth participation is consistent, well-supported, and integrated into organizational decision-making processes.

4. Fair Compensation

Several youth who discontinued their involvement in engagement activities cited a lack of compensation as a primary reason for stepping back. Without financial recognition for their time and expertise, youth described feeling undervalued and unable to continue participating, especially those balancing employment, caregiving, or school responsibilities.

This exclusionary dynamic turns engagement into a privilege rather than an equitable opportunity, allowing only youth who can afford to volunteer to participate fully. As one adult ally noted, both youth who left their program explicitly cited lack of compensation as the reason for their decision.

One adult ally said, *"I feel so bad that they're spending their voluntary time being here, putting in so much work, putting in so much effort—that a gift card doesn't suffice. You want to honour and recognize their work and the amount of effort they put in. Yes, it looks good on a resume, but we also want to make sure they're being compensated for their time beyond an honorarium."*

These insights highlight that unpaid engagement can unintentionally reproduce structural inequities, privileging youth with existing resources while excluding those who cannot participate without financial support. O'Connor (2013) similarly identified competing priorities, scheduling conflicts, and a lack of incentives as key challenges for youth advisory committees.

Fair compensation is not only an equity issue, it is a cornerstone of authentic engagement. When youth are invited to join advisory committees, co-design projects, or research initiatives without adequate pay, participation becomes exclusionary and unsustainable. Meaningful compensation acknowledges youth expertise, reduces barriers to participation, and helps retain diverse voices. It also reflects a broader principle of justice: that youth contributions hold equal value to those of adults in collaborative spaces.

This need is especially urgent given the current economic climate. According to recent analysis by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Canada is facing a deepening youth employment crisis. Between 2019 and 2025, youth unemployment in Ontario increased sharply across all age groups.

Another adult ally added, *"The barrier to having youth paid for their voluntary work is that young people are at a transformative time between the ages of 17 and 23. They're trying to get their life together, to be financially independent and responsible. Being part of something voluntary might be why some are less engaged, because they're also trying to find stable employment."*

At the same time, the average duration of unemployment nearly doubled, with many young people spending 15–20 weeks searching for work. This economic context amplifies the need for fairly compensated, stable engagement opportunities not only as recognition but as a form of social and financial inclusion.

Meaningful youth engagement requires that young people are valued for their time, expertise, and lived experience. Compensation and support are key to equitable participation, ensuring opportunities are accessible to all youth, including those who may face financial, accessibility, or caregiving barriers.

The YAC's policy paper, [From Crisis to Quality](#), addressed fair compensation practices, and our recommendations here build on them.

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Recommendation 4.1: Recognize Compensation as a Standard Practice

All youth engagement activities—including advisory roles, consultations, policy development, and or program co-design—should provide fair and consistent compensation. This may take the form of hourly wages, honoraria, stipends, or other supports that reflect both the time commitment and the level of expertise provided. Compensation should also account for participation-related costs, such as transportation or accessibility needs.

We encourage youth to discuss compensation (e.g., honoraria, experiences, professional development opportunities) with their adult allies. Our Youth Engagement Toolkit provides youth with information on different forms of compensation, when they apply, and guidance on starting this conversation so that they can make informed decisions about their participation.

Recommendation 4.2: Ensure Transparency and Alternative Supports When Compensation Is Limited

When funding limitations prevent financial compensation, organizations must be transparent with youth participants from the outset. This includes explaining why compensation is not possible, setting clear expectations, and offering meaningful alternatives, such as certificates, professional references, training, mentorship, or skill-building opportunities. Clear communication helps maintain trust and prevents perceptions of tokenism.

5. Building Capacity and Skills for Youth and Adults

Understanding what young people identify as necessary for meaningful engagement provides valuable insight into creating environments where they can thrive and contribute effectively. In the YAC survey, participants were asked to select the top three factors they considered to be essential for effective youth engagement in the mental health sector.

Adults play a critical role in creating these environments. Through both our survey and case study, we learned that agencies offer different types of training for adult allies and that adults value these opportunities because they equip them with the skills needed to create safe, supportive, and empowering spaces for youth. This highlights a clear need for consistent, sector-wide training to ensure that all adults facilitating youth engagement are prepared to uphold these priorities and foster respectful, equitable relationships.

Across 32 respondents, mutual respect and a sense of belonging and safety emerged as the strongest priorities: 55.6% ranked mutual respect as the most important, and 47.6% selected a sense of belonging and safety as their top choice. These findings indicate that youth want to be treated as equal partners and feel emotionally and physically secure within engagement spaces.

The next most frequently selected factors were feeling heard (41.7%), empowered decision-making (50%), and recognition or seeing your impact (30%), demonstrating that youth not only wish to participate but also want their contributions to meaningfully influence decisions. Other priorities, such as fun (40%), supportive adult allies, and opportunities to learn new skills and values, highlight the multifaceted nature of effective engagement.

Open reflections from participants reinforced the importance of tangible impact, authenticity, and the ability to learn and demonstrate those learnings. These insights underscore that **meaningful youth engagement is not solely about participation; it is a reciprocal process that develops both youth and adults. When youth feel respected, safe, and empowered, they are better able to contribute their perspectives and skills.**

Similarly, adults facilitating these spaces require capacity-building to ensure that engagement is genuinely collaborative, equitable, and sustainable. Recognizing that engagement is a two-way learning process provides a clear rationale for implementing structured capacity-building initiatives for both youth and adult allies. Therefore, we are recommending the following:

Recommendation 5.1: Recognize and Support Skill Development

Youth engagement initiatives should intentionally promote the development of transferable skills, including leadership, communication, facilitation, research, and policy literacy. These competencies prepare youth for future professional opportunities and strengthen their confidence as decision-making partners. Organizations should make these skills explicit to participants and provide tangible recognition, such as certificates, reference letters, or documentation of learning outcomes, to validate their contributions and growth.

In addition, our Youth Engagement Toolkit includes a module on translating experience into a resume, which is designed to help youth articulate the skills they have developed and their impact on the mental health sector to support future educational and/or employment opportunities.

Recommendation 5.2: Build Capacity for Adult Allies

Adult allies and staff play a critical role in creating safe, empowering, and equitable engagement environments. Regular training in youth-adult partnership models, power-sharing, EDI, trauma-informed practice, and culturally relevant environments should be mandatory for those facilitating youth engagement. Investing in adult ally capacity ensures that youth voices are genuinely valued and that organizational practices evolve in line with the principles of shared leadership.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings of this paper reveal that while youth engagement has become a central value across Ontario's CYMH system, its practice often falls short of being truly equitable and sustainable. Youth continue to face barriers such as tokenism, underrepresentation, inadequate funding, and limited decision-making power. These challenges prevent youth from fully contributing to the system designed to serve them.

To move toward genuine youth engagement, the CYMH sector must go beyond symbolic inclusion and commit to structural change. This includes embedding compensation as a core standard of accessibility, ensuring diversity and representation at every level, and investing in adult allyship training rooted in anti-oppressive and trauma-informed practices. Creating safer spaces where youth feel a sense of belonging and mutual respect is not only essential, it's necessary for effective, long-term change.

Every young person deserves to have their voice heard and reflected in the policies and services that shape their mental health care. Our recommendations provide a practical roadmap for embedding youth voice, strengthening accountability, and creating systems that enable young people to influence the decisions that shape their lives. Moreover, through the results and recommendations in this paper, we are helping to build the standards for youth and family engagement, as outlined in the activities of CMHO's Provincial Health Equity Strategy.

Ultimately, meaningful youth engagement is not an optional addition to the mental health system; it is the foundation of an effective and inclusive one. By implementing the recommendations outlined in this paper, the CYMH sector can begin to close the gap between intention and impact.

Our Youth Engagement Toolkit offers ready-to-use, actionable strategies to help youth navigate their roles in youth engagement spaces with confidence and clarity. The toolkit will discuss setting expectations, communicating your needs, navigating conflict, understanding compensation, and turning your experiences into skills you can proudly translate to a resume.

While meaningful change takes time, intentional action, adequate funding, and sustained collaboration between youth and adults can pave the way for a system that truly values youth as equal partners.

ACRONYMS

BIPOC = Black, Indigenous, or People of Colour

CMHO = Children's Mental Health Ontario

CYMH = Child and Youth Mental Health

TNM = The New Mentality

YAC = Youth Action Committee

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