



Centering Youth Voices

**Visions of Personal & Community Wellness
New Leaf Foundation**

A summary of New Leaf Foundation's Youth Wellness Survey Findings
[newleaffoundation.com](https://www.newleaffoundation.com)



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Introduction

New Leaf Foundation is a registered charitable organization based in Toronto, Ontario.

Since 2007, we have addressed the mental, emotional, and physical well-being of young people in marginalized communities through programming that utilizes mind-body practices, such as mindfulness and yoga. We aim to address the causes and impacts of chronic stress on youth and the adults that care for them through sessional programs, workshops, trainings, and mindfulness-based resources that are inclusive, accessible, and trauma-informed.

As an organization addressing youth wellness, it's important to continuously be led by the perspectives, needs, and values of the young people we engage, as defined by them.



Background

New Leaf Foundation’s Youth Wellness Survey was created in the spring of 2021 with the goal of engaging young people in Toronto and the surrounding area to share their vision of individual and community wellness.

Our objectives included using what we learned to inform our programming and approaches, as well as to share the findings for the benefit of other youth service providers and caregivers.

The survey was developed in consultation with YouthREX, a research and evaluation initiative based at the School of Social Work at York University. It consisted of 17 questions and was made available digitally via Google Forms for ease of access and return. Respondents were offered incentives to participate, including a free mindfulness meditation recording and the opportunity to enter a draw to win one of twenty \$50 UberEats gift cards.

The survey was designed around 3 general areas of inquiry:

- Youth’s experience of stress
- How young people define and/or imagine wellness for themselves as individuals, as well as for their broader community
- The role that youth see themselves playing in cultivating personal and community wellness



Key Insights

The youth surveyed:

- shared a holistic vision of wellness that included physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual factors
- see a relationship between community and individual wellness
- emphasized the importance of acceptance, diversity, and inclusion
- identified lack of access as a key barrier to wellness
- are keenly aware of how systems, such as schooling and policing, impact their wellness



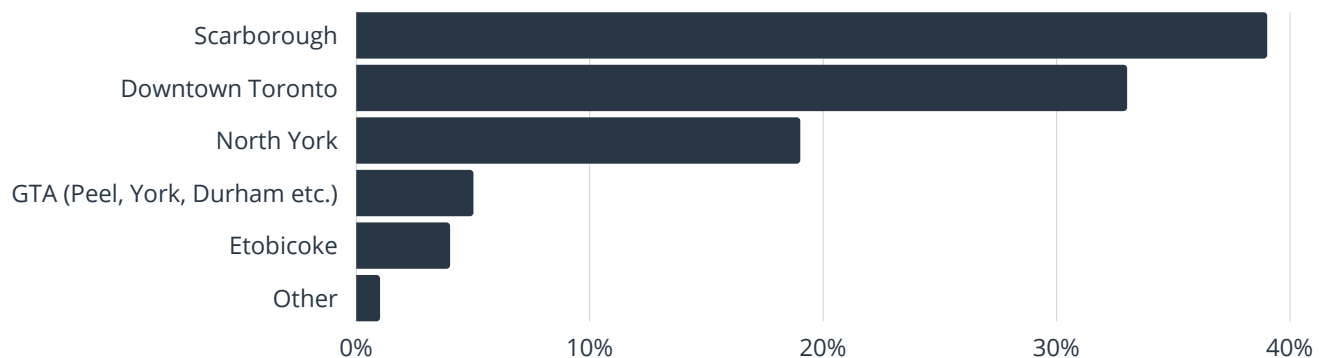
Participants

The Youth Wellness Survey received responses from 187 young people in the GTA.

A majority of respondents were aged 13-17 (n = 154, 82%) while the remaining respondents were 18-20 years of age (n = 33, 18%). Most respondents were from Scarborough (n = 72, 39%), Downtown Toronto (n = 61, 33%) or North York (n = 35, 19%); the remaining 10% of respondents were from other parts of the Greater Toronto Area including Peel, York, Durham, and Etobicoke.



Participants by Location





Survey Results

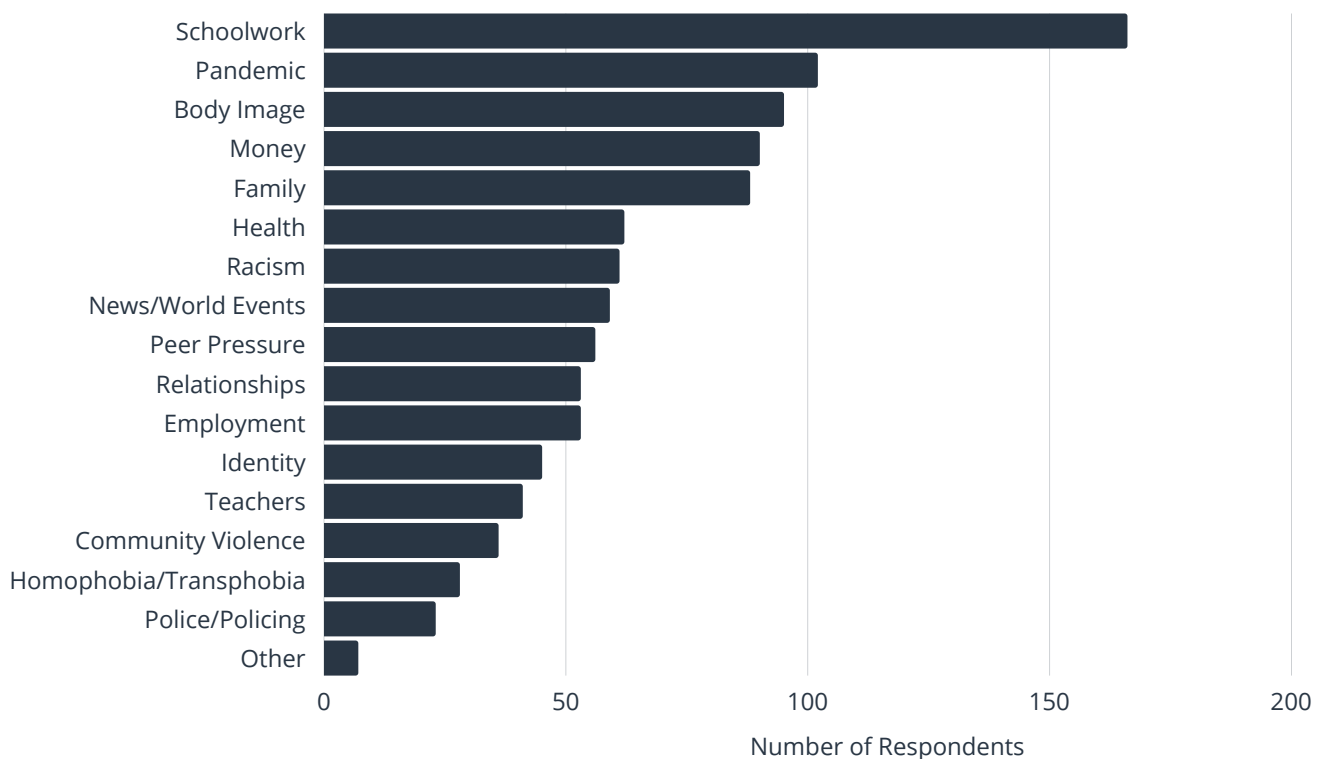


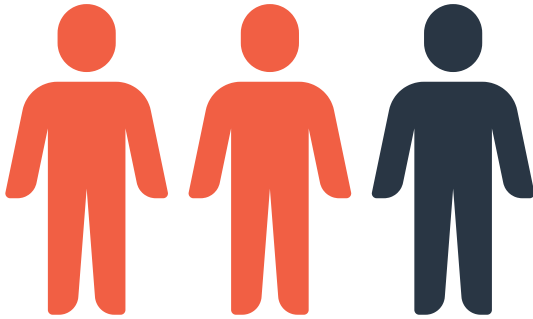
Coping with Stress

The survey asked youth about the most common causes of stress for them.

It asked youth how much control they feel they have over their stress and how they generally cope with it. The five most common causes of stress for young people were schoolwork, the pandemic, body image, money, and family.

Most Common Causes of Stress



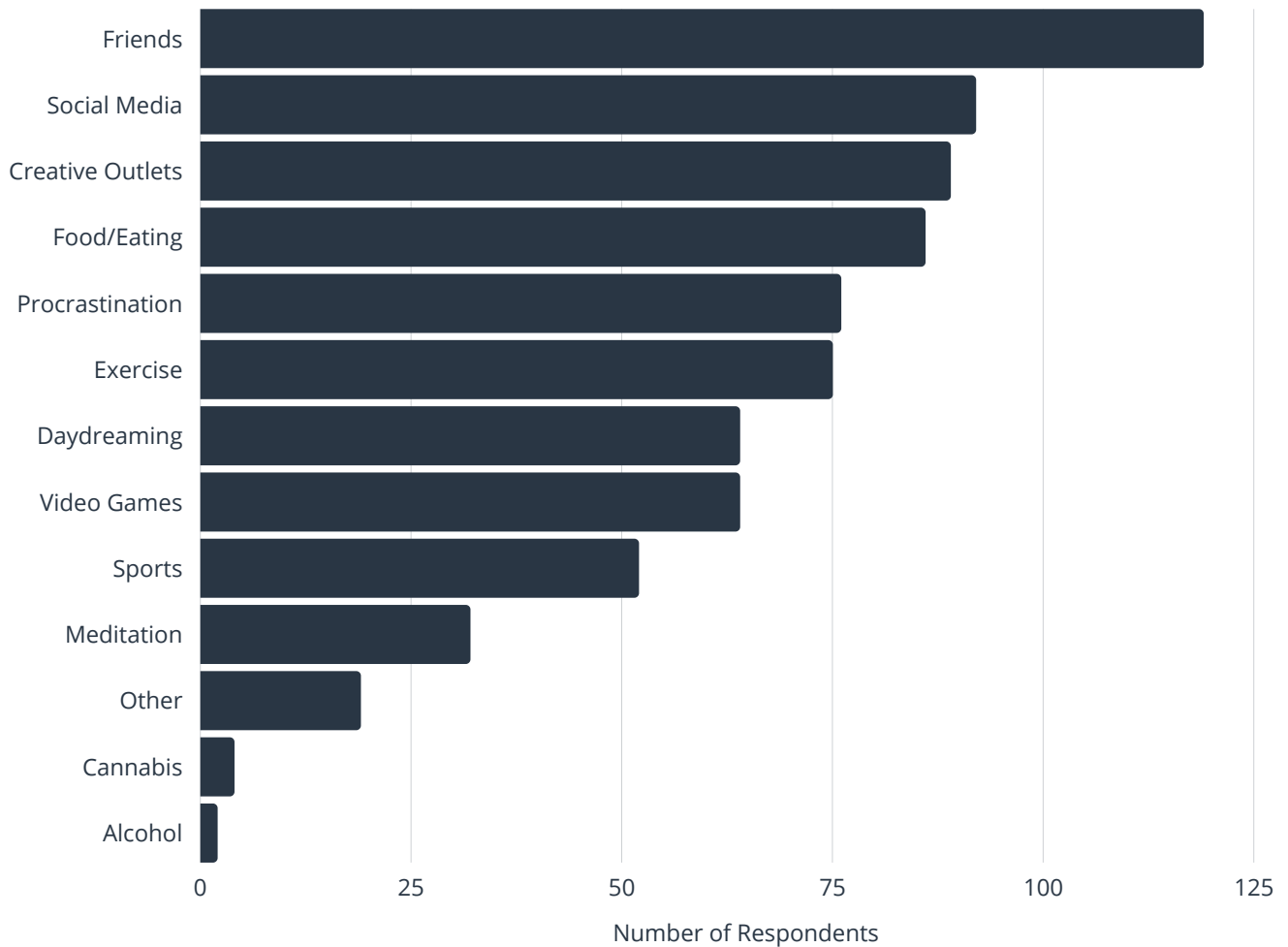


Nearly two-thirds of respondents felt that they had little or very little control over things that cause them stress (n = 119, 64%), while only 30% (n = 55) of respondents said they have quite a bit or a lot of control over their stress. Six percent (n = 12) said they have no control over the things that cause them stress.

Youth who responded to the survey reported using multiple ways to cope with their stress.

The most commonly used methods of coping with stress were spending time with or talking to friends, spending time on social media, using creative outlets such as arts or music, eating, procrastinating, and exercising.

Most Common Ways to Cope with Stress





Personal Wellness

The survey asked youth a series of questions related to their personal wellness, including how they define “wellness” for themselves personally.

There was a diverse range of views on wellness that emerged from the survey. Some respondents defined “wellness” in relation to the feeling they associated with it. Terms like feeling “*happy*”, “*safe*”, at “*peace*” and being in a “*state of balance*” were used to describe feelings youth associated with personal wellness.

Most others defined wellness in relation to what it means to be “well” and how wellness can be achieved. For instance, a few respondents defined wellness as “*being free from illness*” but most others felt that wellness “*is not just the absence of being ill*” but a combination of physical, mental, social, and, for some, even spiritual health. A small number of youth also stated that they did not know how to define wellness and one young person was unsure if it was related to “*eating or drinking herbal foods or drinks*”.

”

Personally, I define wellness to be having a healthy body and mind. Not necessarily having a skinny muscular fit, but more about eating healthy foods and getting proper sleep and exercise. Having a healthy mindset that knows how to deal with stress and negativity!



I define wellness as making the active effort to take care of my mental, physical, and social health. Not being "sick" does not equate to my [optimum] wellness. Wellness affects every aspect of my health, not just my physical wellbeing.

The range of views on wellness also highlighted several key factors that youth felt contributed to maintaining their wellness.

Firstly, respondents felt that maintaining “*healthy relationships*” was an important part of their personal wellness. This included regular contact with those who were close to them but also letting go of negative emotions towards others such as not “*holding grudges*”. Some youth also felt that it was important to distance themselves from those who negatively impact their well-being in order to maintain personal wellness. Self-acceptance and self-love were also mentioned as contributory factors to their overall wellness.



Wellness is when I accept myself for who I am and am in terms with it. Also, when I know I can't change what people think of me so I must keep going and be myself.

Some young people also felt that stress was a factor that negatively impacted their wellness and therefore associated a state of wellness as a lack of stress or being stress-free.



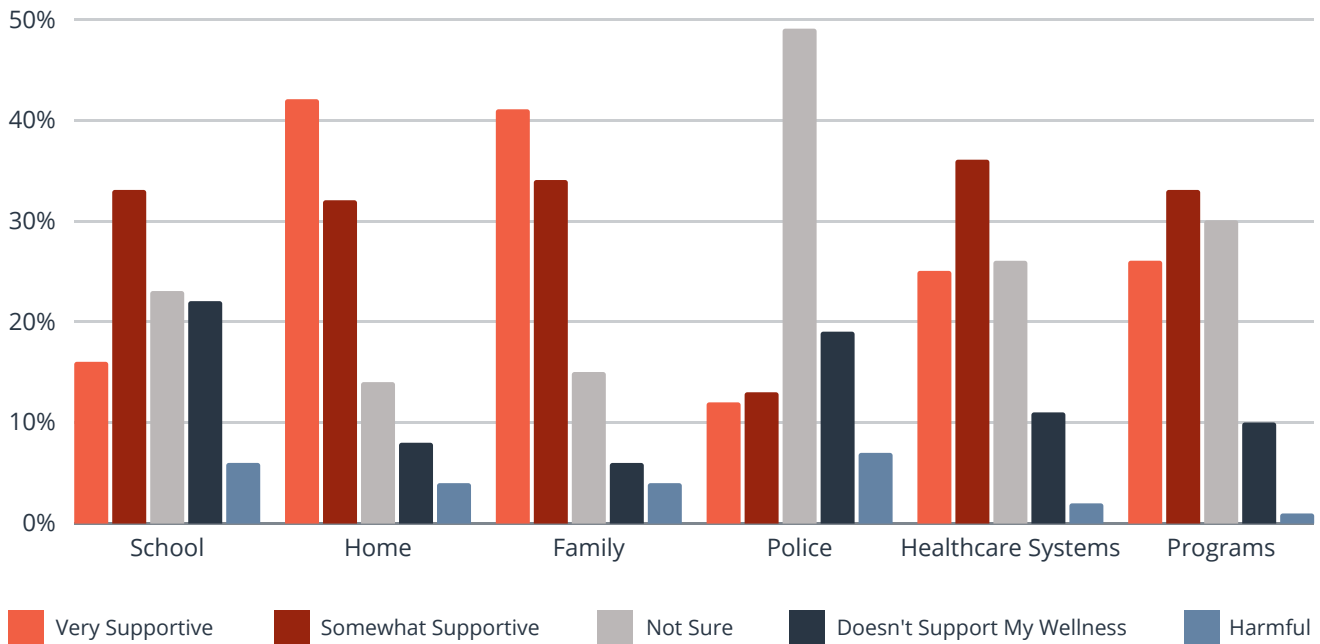
Being stress-free. Not worrying about any deadlines, or my family and close ones getting affected by the coronavirus.

A number of other approaches to maintaining personal wellness, such as making good life choices and decisions, practicing healthy habits, making time for yourself and taking care of yourself, being active and energetic and working towards self-improvement, were also mentioned by youth.



To take a moment in your daily life to destress and take a deep breath in to unload baggage from you mind.

Youth were also asked what effect school, home, family, police, healthcare systems and neighbourhood programs had on their personal wellness.



Home and family were seen as the most supportive factors towards young people's personal wellness. Three out of four respondents felt that their home and family were very supportive (n = 78, 42% and n = 76, 41%, respectively) or somewhat supportive (n = 60, 32% and n = 63, 34%, respectively) factors towards their personal wellness.

One third of respondents felt that their school was a somewhat supportive (n = 61, 33%) factor towards their wellness while a fair number of students also reported school as a factor that either didn't support (n = 42, 22%) or was harmful (n = 12, 6%) to their personal wellness. Another 23% (n = 43) were not sure if school supported their wellness.

Healthcare systems and neighbourhood programs were seen as being fairly supportive factors towards personal wellness with one in four respondents considering healthcare systems and neighbourhood programs to be very supportive (n = 47, 25% and n = 48, 26%, respectively) to their wellness. In contrast, only 12% (n = 23) respondents felt that the police were a very supportive factor while nearly half of respondents were not sure (n = 91, 49%) if the police were a supportive factor towards their wellness.



Community Programs

The survey examined the level of young people's participation in community programs that supported personal wellness.

There were as many respondents who had not taken part in a community program that supported personal wellness (n = 95, 51%) as those that had (n = 92, 49%).



Personal wellness programs youth had taken part in the past included those specific to subgroups such as Black youth or LGBTQ+ youth wellness programs, mental health programs, mindfulness, drug addiction, STEM education, leadership and empowerment programs, mentoring programs, and sports such as soccer, basketball, tennis and swimming. The top three reasons respondents liked these community programs were that they were free and or affordable, they gave young people the opportunity to learn new things, and they were fun.



Healthy Community

In the next section of the Youth Wellness Survey respondents were asked to describe their image of a healthy community and explain what is missing from this image in their own communities. A few key themes emerged from young people's description of a healthy community.

Strong Sense of Community

The strongest view that emerged from their images of a healthy community is the importance of a strong sense of community in the neighbourhood. It was clear that a community where "everyone knows each other", "interacts with each other" and "supports each other" was an important factor in young people's image of a healthy community.



Everyone talking to each other and sharing food and smiling.



[In my image] I would include people getting along together, where no one is alone. They would be playing sports, talking, or doing something.

Youth noted that a closely-knit community would also be one that respects one another and is free of judgment. A community where everyone is free to be themselves was important to young people.



“ [My image] would include people from within the neighborhood interacting with each other. For example, people hanging out with each other or someone helping out another person. I would also include members within the community doing things by themselves to show that everyone in the community doesn't need to be friends but that they are still nice to each other.



If I had to imagine I think of a place where people won't be scared of who they are. There's no judgment. People live their lives and mind their own business. A place where people can talk and feel like they're being heard. People may have their own opinions but we can all come together and agree to disagree.



People helping others without thinking about it. No judgement of people for things you can't control. Everyone in the community lifting each other up instead of bringing them down.

The aspects that contributed to building a strong sense of community were aspects some youth felt their own communities lacked. Many young people expressed feeling a sense of isolation in their communities.



There's a weird energy in my neighborhood and almost a consensus that we don't need to interact. It's uncomfortable.



My neighbors don't communicate much with us because they're concerned with their own lives, but they have never shown any act of discrimination towards my family.

In addition to a lack of communication among neighbours, a few young people noted that there was a general lack of respect or tolerance of views that were different from one's own in their neighbourhoods. They felt that their neighbours tended to be judgemental and critical of others.



People don't mind their own business they always put their opinion and force it down your throat. If someone has a different opinion and someone else, they're automatically bad or messed up.

Not surprisingly, there was also a view that while their communities used to be fairly close-knit, due to the need to maintain social distancing during the pandemic, they had lost their sense of community.



My neighbourhood has a sense of community but the pandemic has stopped everything.

Many young people felt that community programs and events were a crucial aspect of building a stronger sense of community. Their images of a healthy community included programs and events that brought people of all backgrounds and ages together, something they felt their own communities lacked.

Diverse & Inclusive Community

Closely linked to the need for a strong sense of community was the view that a healthy community would be an inclusive community that consisted of people from diverse backgrounds. Youth who expressed this view highlighted that their image of a healthy community includes people of different races, genders, sexual orientations, and age groups and a community that accepts and celebrates these differences.



A picture of healthy community is a neighborhood that has people from different backgrounds, religions and colour. All the people are peaceful and united despite their difference of appearance.



A community where racism doesn't exist, all types of people in the same community sharing the environment. No signs of community violence, or poverty/homelessness.



In this picture, I'd include pictures of people from diverse backgrounds and situations (ex. people of different cultural identifications, people with disabilities, etc.)



Within my drawing of a healthy neighborhood/community, I would include an accepting and supportive community of different races, genders, sexual orientations, etc. where everybody lifts each other up and no one is ever left behind. There would rarely be any conflict, and if there were disagreements they would be handled in an appropriate and respectful way. No one is discriminated against, and people are free to share their opinion without fear.

Once again, youth noted that while this is an important aspect of their image of a healthy community, some of their communities were either not accepting of diversity or lacked diversity altogether.



What's missing is youth and elderlies getting along with each other because in my community, I notice there are often elderlies who seems lonely and looks down on youth for being disrespectful. Youth in my community often don't look after elderlies.



When comparing my neighborhood/community to that picture, I think [acceptance of] different sexual orientations and people of colour is missing.

Young people of colour particularly felt stigmatized in their communities, with some noting that youth were constantly racially stereotyped by the adults in their communities.



I have noticed that in my community, youth are seen in two ways. The first way is ghetto or gang as they say. Then they have the other kids who are quiet. I feel that the youth in my community are being put in a situation where we are judged wherever we go. And its usually put amongst black youth.

For young people who experienced such stereotyping in their own communities, a community that respects everyone, regardless of age and race, was a crucial factor in their view of a healthy community.

Safety & Security

Another important aspect of a healthy community for youth was the need to feel safe within their community. Young people’s image of a safe neighbourhood included feeling safe to walk freely within the community, a community free of gun violence, and a community where young people felt safe to express their views and opinions.

”

Happy community, people within the community helping each other out with the smallest things, no gun violence and people abusing alcohol and drugs...

”

Walking outside your home feeling safe because the neighbors are very friendly. Not having to worry about being assaulted because the streets are safe. Being able to talk to the leaders of the community without feeling scared...

”

I imagine not being afraid to step outside at night and being able to go on an evening walk with less concerns. I imagine less hate speech in my school...

In contrast to their images of a healthy community, many youth noted feeling unsafe in their own communities. Some felt unsafe walking down their streets, often due to high crime rates, gun violence, and potential conflicts with the police.

”

I feel like the biggest thing that’s missing for me is the ability to feel safe while I’m walking down the street in my neighbourhood whether it is daytime or nighttime.

”

I don’t experience conflict with police as I am white passing but seeing my friends go through that makes me feel terrible.



I think that if I were to draw a picture of a healthy community, I would have a park in the middle of a circle of townhouses. The houses would all be unique to each other as they represent different families and cultures. There would be kids running around and playing and dogs being walked. There would always be local farmers markets where the residents could get fresh produce.

Physical Environment & Public Services

There was also a view that the image of a healthy community would include a pleasant physical environment and access to public services. Youth described images filled with nice houses, plenty of green spaces, recreational activities for children and youth, well-maintained roads, good schools, good transport services, proper waste management, “friendly police”, access to essential services, and access to fresh and healthy foods. A litter-free and clean environment was considered to be important to a healthy community.



As such, a healthy community is one in which all residents have access to a quality education, safe and healthy homes, adequate employment, transportation, physical activity, and nutrition in addition to quality health care...



Kids playing in a playground with a working slide, swings, monkey bars, etc. with parents watching over the kids under shade. Healthy trees and flowers and grass and maybe a community barbecue where everyone gets along.

In contrast, they felt their own communities tended to be full of construction sites, lacked greenery and outdoor spaces for children to play, and consisted of unclean public spaces. A few youth felt that their communities lacked certain services and recreational activities such as basketball courts, swimming pools, community centres, libraries, art galleries, theatres and fitness centres.



There isn't a community centre in my community, well nothing I've been aware or heard of. A community centre should be built as it can be the main source of de-stressing residents, in the community.

It was noted that existing services did not always cater to the diversity within the community. For example, one youth noted that while there is a large Muslim population in their community, it lacked a community gym that provided female-only days that allowed females in the community to gain the same benefits as others.

Community Programs & Supports

Some youth noted the need for a healthy community to have community programs and supports, and in particular, the need for mental health services. Other types of community programs mentioned included after-school programs for children, disability supports, sports programs, neighbourhood clean-up drives, programs to support self-esteem and socialization skills, financial supports to low-income families, food banks, and clothing banks.



We need more programs and support for people who face physical and mental health issues, like youth with disabilities because supporting them will help better our community as a whole.

Cost of Living

Young people felt that an image of a healthy community would be incomplete without the families living in the neighborhood having adequate finances to manage their living costs. Due to the stark income inequalities they have experienced, they felt that personal wealth and access to affordable food and housing was an essential aspect of a healthy community.



Money because many families in my community cannot afford to put food on tables for their family and pay for children's post-secondary fees.



Although there are financial supports in place, there are still many families in need, but they do not know of any programs that can support them. If there were a way to reach more families, my drawing of an ideal community would be complete.

Overall, young people's image of a healthy community consisted of several key components including a diverse neighbourhood with a strong sense of community, safety and security, a pleasing physical environment with access to good public services and community supports including recreational activities for children and adults, and affordable food and housing for those of all income levels. Their images of a healthy community were often linked to what they felt was missing in their own neighbourhoods.



Youth Leadership

Youth were asked how they could be leaders in building healthier communities.

Many young people felt that volunteering in community programs was a good way to become leaders in their communities. Some felt that it was important to take the time to learn and gain new knowledge, while others felt that they could already start influencing change within their own individual spheres of influence (e.g., school, home, etc.). They also felt that it was important to start by having conversations with peers and adults, and use the mediums available to them, such as social media, to voice their views and ideas.



Youth can be active in their community such as joining clubs and programs, volunteering in events or festivals, being part of a youth advisory groups.

Another view was that young people can gain valuable leadership skills by gaining experience through paid work, as well as through mentorship and guidance from adults in the community. If the desire is to have youth truly become leaders in the communities, respondents felt it was important to be provided with more leadership opportunities and ensure youth voices are present in decision-making.



Being included in conversations instead of blocked out and being “concealed” from important topics.

However, as one respondent pointed out, while youth should be included in the conversations about their community and the things that impact them, *“it shouldn’t be a teenager or a child’s job to make a community safe and engaged, an adult should already be doing that.”*

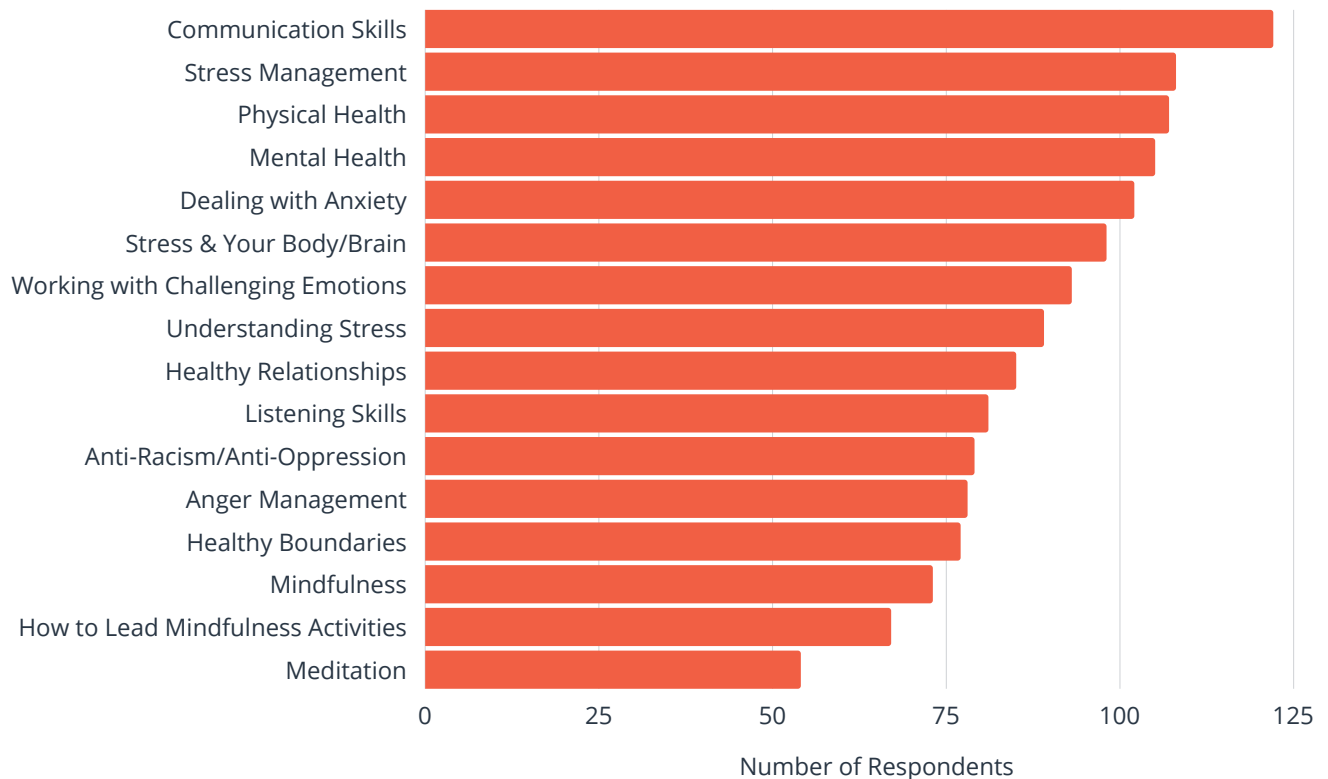
Training to Support Community Health & Wellness

The Youth Wellness Survey sought to find out what would motivate young people to take part in a training program to support community health and wellness and what they would be interested in learning at the training.

Having something to add to their resumé, receiving an honorarium for their participation, and the opportunity to build new skills were the top three factors that would motivate youth to take part in a training program.

The topics respondents were most interested in learning about during a community health and wellness training included communication skills, stress management, physical health, mental health, and dealing with anxiety.

Topics Most Interested in Learning About





Conclusion

Reviewing the results of the survey, we are inspired by the powerful vision of wellness that youth have for themselves and their communities.

Overall, participants shared a holistic and layered view of wellness for themselves and their communities, demonstrating a high level of awareness about what they need in order to cultivate wellness at the micro and macro levels; they know how the systems they take part in are either helping or hurting them, understand the connection between mental, physical, emotional, social and spiritual health, and see the critical importance of relationships, acceptance of differences and a sense of togetherness and belonging.

Our intention at New Leaf Foundation is to reflect deeply on the insights that were shared with us in order to better meet the needs of the people we engage in our programming. We hope to expand on these findings through further exploration with young people, as well as invite the broader community of service providers, educators, and parents into an ongoing dialogue around the findings of this survey so that we might all rise to the standard of care that youth have outlined for us here.

Far too often young people are not given credit for knowing what they know. This survey is another example of how much insight and knowledge they hold. Now, all we need to do is listen.

