Youth Community Visioning in North & Centre Wellington, ON

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Table of Contents

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Acknowledgments

Summary

To explore youth's vision for their community and to identify desired services, resources, and spaces, The Research Shop conducted a community mapping exercise with Grade 9 and 11 students from Central Wellington District High School in Fergus, Ontario. The students were asked to identify the spaces and resources of Wellington County by placing colour-coded dots on geographic maps. Students filled out a total of 82 maps with 689 dots that represented locations of recreation, youth spaces of inclusion, sites for school, work, and volunteer activities, services, additional spaces, and their ideal community vision. The youth also participated in a facilitated discussion about the placement of the dots on their maps.

The results of this project indicate that youth in Wellington County are very involved in their communities, as they identified locations including services, recreational spaces, and places of employment and volunteering. The community spaces identified by students cover many aspects of daily living, including public transportation, youth entertainment, food, mental health, environment, and career opportunities. When asked about what they picture as their ideal community, their needs and desires reflected a deep understanding of daily life in their region as well as what was lacking in terms of services. Additionally, the results of this project indicate that youth access the same community spaces for different reasons. For example, the community Sportsplex in Fergus was recognized as a space where youth feel welcome and safe (space of inclusion), as well as a space for recreation and employment or volunteering. These results are useful for identifying existing community spaces that are most important to the youth of Centre and North Wellington.

Introduction

This project was prepared for The Community Resource Centre of North and Centre Wellington (CRC). The CRC is a community benefit agency that provides resources and support for the North and Centre Wellington community to fill gaps in community services (CRC, 2018).

The CRC wanted to learn more about youth's priorities in order to create and/or advocate for programming that would best meet their needs. They wanted to engage youth in a collaborative exercise to gauge their opinions on their communities and their visions on how to make their lives better. Therefore, the goal of this project was to gain an understanding of local youth's perspectives on, and visions for their community, with a focus on desired youth services, resources, and spaces in Wellington County.

This project was built upon previous research done by the Research Shop. In March 2019, The Research Shop prepared an annotated bibliography which focused on arts-based participatory action research (PAR) and community engaged scholarship (CES) with youth.

One of the methods that was identified to understand the needs of youth in their local communities was community mapping. Community mapping is both a data collection and communication tool that can be used to identify gaps, assets, and other areas of interest in the neighbourhoods of a community. It is an inclusive, engaging, and empowering research method that encourages youth to share their knowledge, opinions, and experiences (Derr et al., 2013; MacDonald et al., 2011; Robson et al., 2016 in Primeau et al., 2019). One key strength of conducting a community mapping exercise is being able to collaborate with participants to ensure youth experiences are being captured accurately. Moreover, youth can identify specific examples within their own communities leading to a greater understanding of how they envision the environments in which they live. As such, in order to gather youth's perspectives on their communities, the Research Shop and community partner decided to use the arts-informed research method of community mapping.

The research questions that guided the design of the community mapping exercise include:

1. What services and resources do youth believe are currently lacking in North and Centre Wellington?
2. What services and resources would they like to see in their communities in the future?
3. How would these services and resources be offered to be engaging, accessible, and supportive for youth?

Following these questions, The Research Shop engaged youth in the community mapping exercise by asking them to identify the assets of their neighbourhood and cities by placing colour-coded dots on geographic maps. The community mapping exercise took place at Central Wellington District High School in Fergus, Ontario, with two Grade 9 and two Grade 11 classes in the Social Sciences and Humanities Department. Students filled out a total of 82 maps with 689 dots that represented locations of youth spaces of inclusion, recreation, services, sites for school, work, and volunteer activities, additional spaces, and their ideal community vision. The youth also participated in a facilitated discussion about the placement of the dots on their maps.

The findings from the focus groups demonstrate that youth are very involved in their communities, both as service-users and providers. The community spaces identified by students cover many aspects of daily living, including public transportation, youth entertainment, food, mental health, environment, and career opportunities. Youth perspectives were integral in understanding what is lacking in terms of services, and what they envision as an ideal community. Additionally, the results of this project indicate that youth access the same community spaces for different reasons. For example, the Sportsplex in Fergus was recognized as a space where youth feel welcome and safe (space of inclusion), as well as a space for recreation and employment or volunteering. These results are useful for identifying existing community spaces that are most important to this demographic.

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Research Methods

Recruitment

To capture the perspectives of both junior and senior high school students, researchers focused on Grade 9 and 11 students from schools in the Fergus region. Specifically, the Centre Wellington District High School was the target population, as the students from all local communities of Centre and North Wellington would attend. Focus group guides were developed for youth in Grades 9 and 11 at Centre Wellington District High School (Fergus).

Procedure

After gaining consent from the school and parents of students, students participated in a focus group discussion and community mapping exercise lasting one hour and 15 minutes during regularly scheduled class time at their school. Four focus groups were conducted in total; two in Grade 9 classes and two in Grade 11 classes. Each student was given maps of the various communities making up Centre and North Wellington, including maps of Fergus, Elora, Arthur, and an overall map of the Centre and North Wellington Region. The names of towns and landmarks were provided to orient students to their hometowns. Students were also provided with a separate blank page where they could add information about gaps in the town and what their ideal vision of the town would be. Students were asked to mark services with stickers, with the following legend:

Sticker colour	Service
Green	Youth spaces of inclusion
Blue	Recreation (e.g. sports centre, parks, religious groups, etc.)
Yellow	Services (e.g. hospital, dentist, hairdresser, etc.)
Red	School/volunteer/work
Small sparkly sticker	Other locations youth frequent (e.g. friend's home)
Large sparkly sticker	Ideal vision of community and extra services they desire (e.g. traffic lights, grocery store, shopping mall, movie theatre, etc.)

Facilitators posted chart paper at the front of the classroom to take notes during class discussion. In this discussion, facilitators and students identified gaps and talked about their ideal visions for their town.

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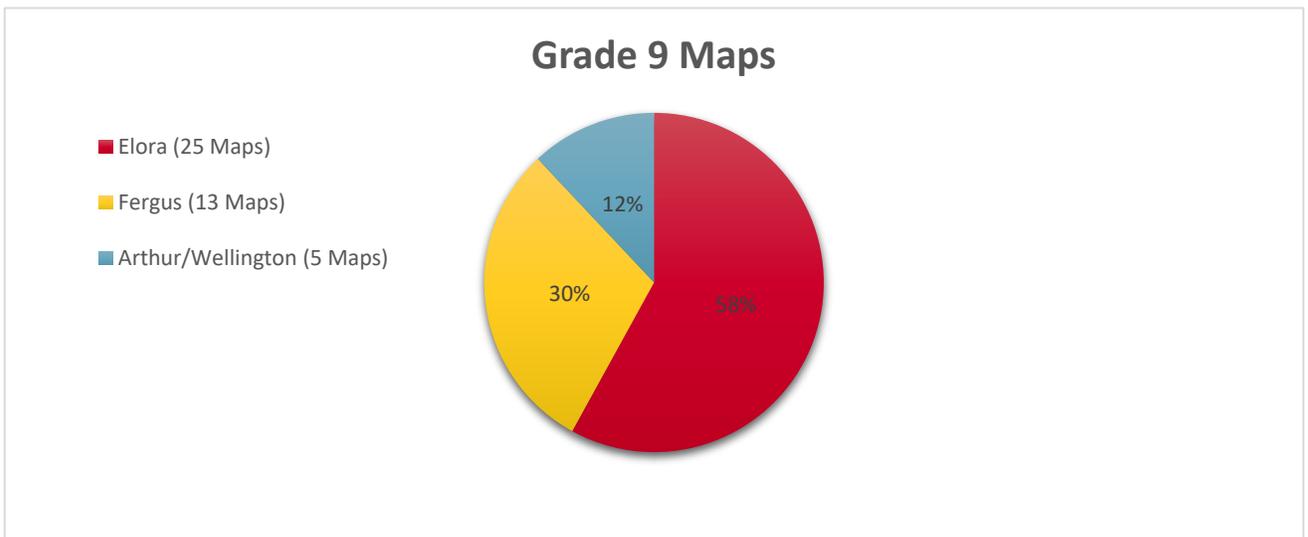
Results & Findings

The results of the analysis are presented below. First, we present the total responses from Grade 9 and 11 students regarding the collective number of dots. Then we explain the dots by thematic analysis.

The following tables demonstrate the number of maps filled out by students, the number of dots they placed on the maps, and the types of services that they frequent (youth spaces of inclusion, recreation, services, school/work/volunteer, additional spaces and ideal community vision).

Overview

Grade 9 Responses
The pie chart below shows the number of maps that were filled out by Grade 9 students. Most students filled out the maps for Elora (58%), followed by Fergus (30%) and Arthur/Wellington (12%), suggesting that most students spend their time in Elora. In total there are 43 maps.

Grade 9 Maps

- Elora (25 Maps)
- Fergus (13 Maps)
- Arthur/Wellington (5 Maps)

12% 30% 58%

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The pie chart shows the number of dots that students placed on the maps of each town. Although more students filled out maps for Elora, most of the dots (72%) were placed in Fergus. In comparison, 22% of students' dots were placed in Elora, whereas only 5% of dots were placed in Arthur/Wellington, suggesting that the services that students access most frequently are in Fergus. In total there are 378 dots.

Grade 9 Breakdown of Dots

- Elora (84 dots)
- Fergus (274 dots)
- Arthur/Wellington (20 Dots)

5%
22%
72%

The table below is a count of the number of dots found for each theme across all maps completed by Grade 9 students. Across all themes and locations, the numbers are very similar. 20% of dots represent school, work and volunteer activities, followed by youth spaces of inclusion (17%). 46 dots represent resources that students wish existed in their communities, suggesting access to services for youth is an area in need of improvement (the resources will be elaborated on further in the report).

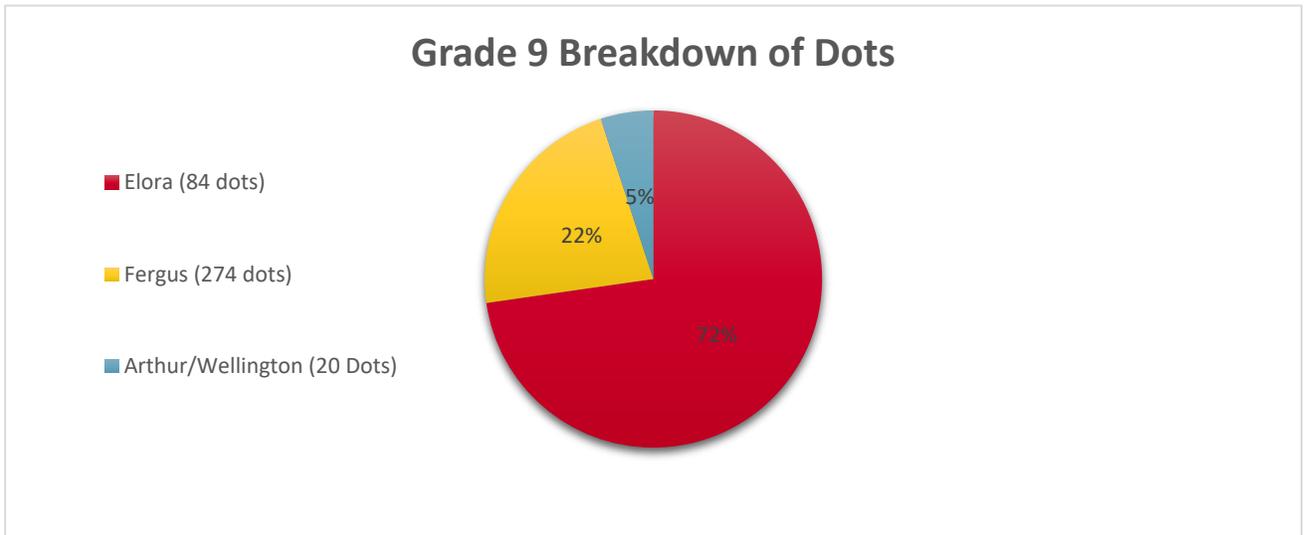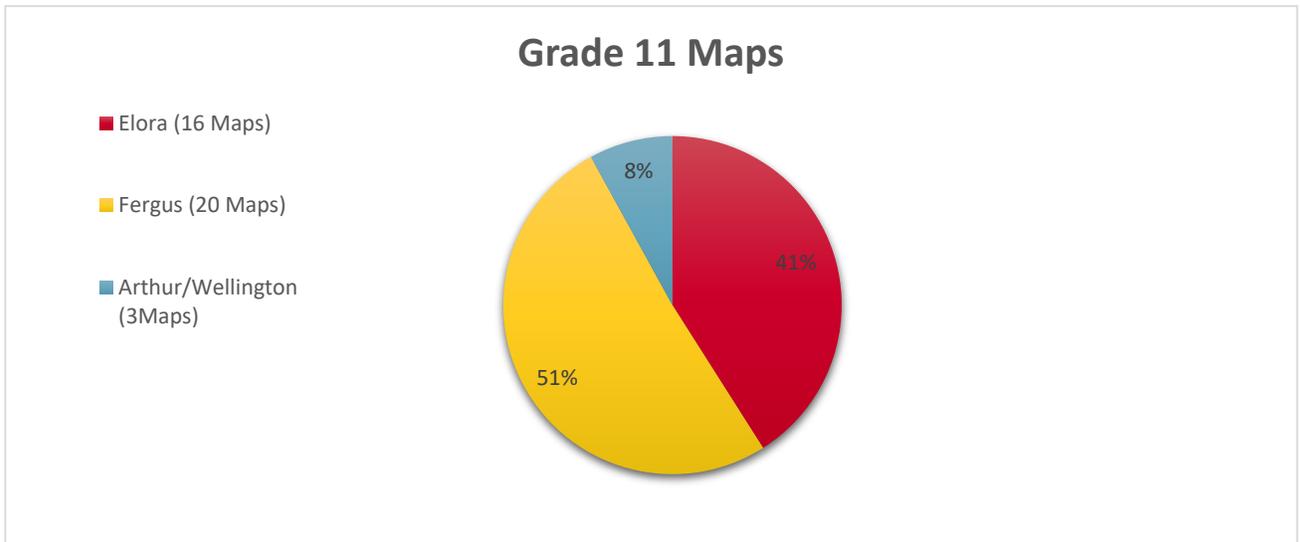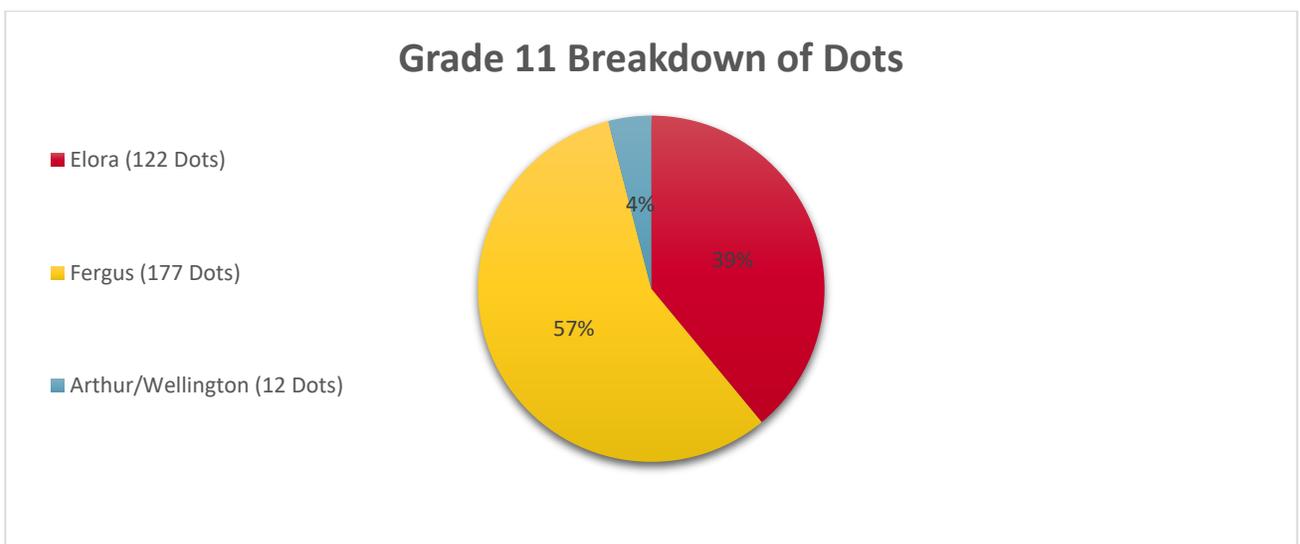| Theme	Number of dots
Recreation	59
Youth Spaces of Inclusion	66
School, work, volunteer	75
Services	67
Additional spaces	60
Community vision	46

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Grade 11 Responses

The pie chart below shows the number of maps that were filled out by Grade 11 students. A slight majority of students filled out the maps for Fergus (51%), followed by Elora (41%) and Arthur/Wellington (8%), suggesting that most students spend their time evenly in Fergus and Elora. In total, there are 39 maps.

Grade 11 Maps

- Elora (16 Maps)
- Fergus (20 Maps)
- Arthur/Wellington (3Maps)

The pie chart shows the number of dots that students placed on the maps of each town. As more students filled out maps for Fergus, predictably, there were more dots (57%) placed in Fergus. In comparison, 39% of students' dots were placed in Elora, whereas only 4% of dots were placed in Arthur/Wellington, suggesting that the services that students access most frequently are in Fergus. In total, there are 311 dots.

Grade 11 Breakdown of Dots

- Elora (122 Dots)
- Fergus (177 Dots)
- Arthur/Wellington (12 Dots)

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The table below is a count of the number of dots found for each theme across all maps completed by Grade 11 students. Across all themes and locations, the numbers are very similar. 22% of dots represent school, work, and volunteer-related spaces, followed by services (18%). 54 dots represent resources that students wish existed in their communities, suggesting that there is room for improving access to services for youth, particularly for those in Grade 11.

Theme	Number of dots*
Recreation	51
Youth Spaces of Inclusion	52
School, work, volunteer	68
Services	57
Additional spaces	24
Community vision	54

* The total number of dots is different from the number of dots by theme as some dots were not legible.

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Thematic Analysis

Recreational Spaces

For the purpose of the focus groups, "Recreational Space" was defined as a space youth would go to for recreation and/or entertainment, to engage in activities such as sports, hobbies, and spending time with friends.

Students identified a wide variety of community spaces that they use for recreation, including outdoor areas, sports facilities, and other community institutions. Grade 11 students recognized more recreational spaces compared to Grade 9 students, but the types of spaces noted were similar between the two groups.

Identified Recreational Spaces include:

- Outdoor spaces
    - Elora Quarry and Conservation Area
    - Bissell Park
    - Elora Swan Sanctuary
    - Trail Park
- Physical activity-related
    - CW Sportsplex
    - Soccer fields
- Recreation
    - Elora Centre for the Arts

Youth Spaces of Inclusion

"Youth Spaces of Inclusion" was defined as any welcoming and safe space where young people spend their time. As this definition can include any type of space, students noted a variety of places they would describe as Youth Spaces of Inclusion.

Identified Youth Spaces of Inclusion include:

- Bissell Park
- Walmart
- Public Library
- Sportsplex
- McDonald's
- Their own houses
- Downtown Elora
- Tim Horton's
- Elora Gorge
- Elora Quarry
- Bissell Park
- Friends' houses
- Starbucks
- The Library
- Centre Wellington District High School

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- Elora Centre for the Arts
- Sparrow's Nest

These findings suggest that both Grade 9 and Grade 11 students recognize Youth Spaces of Inclusion in their communities that are not specifically targeted for youth. While students feel safe in these spaces, many of them do not offer the space or resources for youth-centered programming (i.e. Tim Horton's, Starbucks, friends' houses). It would be worth exploring how students specifically use recreational types of spaces (i.e. Sportsplex, Elora Gorge, Elora Centre for the Arts), and if their use is related to any youth-centered programming.

School, Work, and Volunteer Experiences

"School/Work/Volunteer" was defined as places in which students attend school, go to work, or volunteer. These places may have included students' part-time jobs or where they volunteer in their spare time. The Grade 9 students who participated in the focus group noted a variety of places for volunteering and working, beyond attending school (Centre Wellington District High School; St. Joseph's Elementary School; St. Mary's Elementary School; Elora Public School).

Identified Volunteer or Work Positions by Grade 9 Students include:

- Sports or Exercise-Related
    - Sportsplex
    - Bissell Park
    - The Spring Valley Trailer Park
    - Baseball/softball diamond
- In the Community
    - Elora Centre of the Arts
    - Pharmacy
    - Food Bank
    - Dairy Farm
    - Highland Manor
    - Church
    - Library
    - Fall Fair
    - Babysitting
    - Work/Volunteer at parents' workplaces

The Grade 11 students who participated in the focus group also noted a diversity of places for volunteering and working, beyond attending school (Centre Wellington District High School; St. Mary's Elementary School; Elora Public School; Salem Public School, Victoria Terrace Public School; John Black Public School).

Identified Volunteer or Work Positions by Grade 11 Students include:

- Sports or Exercise-Related
    - Sportsplex
    - Elora Karate
    - Foote Park
    - Sports camp
    - Baseball/softball diamond

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- In the Community
  - M&M Food Market
  - Zehrs
  - McDonald's
  - Café
  - Elora Mill Hotel & Spa
  - Elora Brewing Co.
  - Little Tree Garden Market
  - Savoy Culinary
  - Harvey's
  - Swiss Chalet
  - Shades4U
  - Shoppers Drug Mart
  - Elora Home Hardware
  - Goofie Newfie
  - Church
  - Library
  - Babysitting
  - Elora Centre for the Arts
- Co-Op Placements
  - SV Law
- Leadership Programs

These findings suggest that access to sports or outdoor related services is important for both Grade 9 and Grade 11 students, as their work/school/volunteer activities often overlap in these environments. Grade 9 and Grade 11 students also volunteer or work in a variety of places in the community and contribute greatly to the services that exist in the area through paid work or volunteering. These findings indicate that youth are embedded in a variety of workspaces, and their contributions to the economy of the region should be widely recognized.

Services
Students were asked to identify spaces where they may go for various types of services in the community, such as a family doctor, dentist, counsellor, or other service. The types of services identified were very similar between the Grade 9 and Grade 11 students.

Identified Services by Grade 9 and 11 Students include:

- Medical Services
  - Doctor's office
  - Local hospital
  - Dentists
  - Psychiatrists
  - Optometrists
  - Physiotherapist
- Services that provide goods
  - Walmart
  - Zehrs
  - FreshCo
- Other Services

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- Hair Salon

Additional Spaces
Grade 9 and Grade 11 students were also given an opportunity to identify any additional spaces on the maps, beyond the categories of Youth Spaces of Inclusion; Recreation; Services; and School, Volunteer or Work.

Identified Additional Spaces by Grade 9 Students include:

- Homes
  - Their own homes
  - Friends' homes
  - Families' homes
- Other Services
  - McDonald's
  - Starbucks
  - Bar Burrito
  - Tim Horton's
  - Cherry Hill Shopping Centre
  - Plaza
  - Farmer's Market
- In the Community
  - Elora Gorge
  - Arthur's Arena
  - Various Farms (Duck, dairy)
  - Various Parks
    - Revell Park
    - Bissell Park
    - Wilkie Park
  - Hairdressers
  - Library
  - Pharmacy

Identified Additional Spaces by Grade 11 Students include:

- Homes
  - Own homes
  - Friends' homes
  - Extended families' homes
- Outdoor Activities
  - Outdoor basketball court
  - Elora Gorge for tubing
  - Grand River
  - Cataract Trail
  - Various Parks
    - Victoria Park
    - Bissell Park
    - Conservation Area
- Other Services

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- Hair Salon
- Gas Stations
- Canadian Tire
- Circle K
- Esso
- Services
  - Dollarama
  - Shoppers Drug Mart
  - Racetrack
  - Restaurants and Shops near the Township Office
  - Taco Bell
  - Movie theatre
  - Library

Ideal Community Vision

"Ideal Community Vision" was defined as what would be required so that young people are fully included and supported in all parts of the community. In other words, youth were asked to identify spaces, services, and/or resources that would make their community an ideal place for them to live in. Students had many thoughts regarding what would make their community more suitable for youth.

The most commonly identified needs for an ideal community vision included constructing a mall and improving public transportation. In addition, Grade 9 and 11 students also identified the following:

- Entertainment
  - Movie theatre
  - Having "nice restaurants" as opposed to fast food
  - McDonald's
- Environmental Initiatives
  - Sustainable environmental improvements
    - (i.e. planting more trees, conserving more green space)
- Youth-oriented
  - Simply "more-to-do"
  - Youth Centre or a place to do homework
  - Mental health resources
  - LGBTQ+ Crisis Centre

In particular amongst the Grade 11 students it was noted that students who do not have access to a vehicle are not able to take post-secondary and/or co-operative opportunities that are offered outside of the local community and are thus placed at a disadvantage. Therefore, post-secondary and professional job opportunities within the local community were also identified as needs for making the community ideal for youth.

Gaps in the Community

"Gaps in the Community" was defined as any spaces that students believed were missing in their community or any service they would have to go to another community to access. Students identified a number of gaps in their region, including the lack of a shopping mall, a grocery store, public transportation, bike lanes and adequate traffic lights. They also proposed updated and

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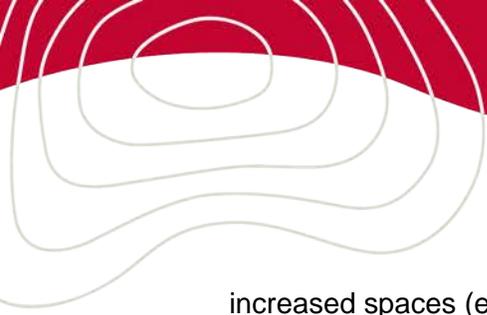
increased spaces (e.g. additional arena) for activities, and a focus on the local population in comparison to tourists.

Shopping Mall
The most prominent gap that was identified by both grades was the need for a shopping mall. Specifically, students mentioned the need for teenage-oriented clothing stores in the local community. Not having access to a vehicle would prevent youth from being able to go shopping in a nearby community. Students would have to rely on parents, friends, and/or friend's parents for rides to nearby malls, and so a local shopping mall would increase access to basic needs.

Absence of a Grocery Store in Elora
Another common gap pointed out by both Grade 9 and Grade 11 students was the need for a grocery store in Elora. Students noted the challenge of not having a grocery store that was within walking distance. Furthermore, requiring a car in order to travel to a nearby community for groceries creates a barrier to accessing healthy food.

Lack of Youth Activities
Grade 9 students recognized many gaps related to youth activities. For instance, they mentioned that the existing arena needs improvement and/or an additional arena in the community was necessary. The arena with new services should also have "fun stuff" such as bowling. Students mentioned that the current places they identified for youth entertainment are often too busy, such as Dairy Queen and the hockey rink. They noted there was no gym in the community for youth to access. Proposed ideas for youth entertainment included a movie theatre, laser tag, an arcade, and a zoo.

A unique gap was identified in Elora, where students discussed that Elora should focus more on the community (i.e. local population) than the tourists. They felt the needs of tourists are given priority over the needs of the community by local officials.

Traffic Lights
Grade 9 students also noted the need for more traffic lights, especially in school zones. They discussed the issue of speeding cars in school zones and suggested more traffic lights as a solution to curb speeding.

Daily Living
Grade 11 students identified gaps related to daily living as well as youth activities. Regarding daily living, they identified a gap in public transportation (especially between Elora and Fergus as well as a need for transportation to and from Guelph). The need for bike lanes between Fergus and Elora was also identified. Other gaps related to daily living include the need for a store for outdoor equipment, the need to update both arenas, and the need for shared economic initiatives (they provided Uber Eats as an example). Related to youth activities, students proposed paintball, an arcade, and bowling.

Conclusions

The goal of this project was to explore youth's vision for their community in Wellington County, and identify desired services, resources, and spaces. The results of this project indicate that youth in Wellington County are very involved in their communities, as the focus group

participants highlighted many services, recreational spaces, and employment/volunteer opportunities. The community spaces identified by students cover many aspects of daily living, including public transportation, youth entertainment, food, mental health, environment, and career opportunities. Additionally, the results of this project indicate that youth access the same community spaces for different reasons. For example, the community Sportsplex in Fergus was recognized as a space where youth feel welcome and safe (space of inclusion), as well as a space for recreation and employment/volunteering. These results are therefore useful for identifying existing community spaces that are most important to this demographic.

The results of this project highlighted some areas for future research and consideration by community officials. Firstly, student participants who focused on the community of Elora mentioned feeling less prioritized by the community than tourists, as tourism is one of the major industries in the area. Future studies could explore this further, and investigate the impacts of a large tourism industry on youth community visioning and inclusion. It will also be important to identify ways of incorporating youth into community planning, and ensuring their voices are heard and opinions are expressed to local officials. Additionally, it is necessary to explore the utility and potential of expanding public transportation to Wellington County communities, as youth participants indicated that a lack of public transportation prevents them from travelling and accessing the services/spaces they need or desire. Public transportation may also increase access to healthy food options. Fast food locations were mentioned several times as spaces where youth spend time, and the absence of a grocery store in Elora was also highlighted by many focus group participants. It is important to acknowledge the gaps in the community for youth and to identify ways in which community planners and local officials can work to address these gaps and promote healthy behaviours.

Overall, this project highlights the importance of including youth voices in community planning. Youth in Wellington County are very involved in their communities, and they greatly contribute to the local economy through paid and unpaid labour, and as such their thoughts, opinions, and feelings should be acknowledged by the community and taken into consideration to develop community spaces and services that are beneficial and accessible to all residents.

Limitations of the Report

There are some limitations associated with this project. Most importantly, the opinions and views presented in the results may not reflect the opinions of all Grade 9 and 11 students in Wellington County. The results cannot necessarily be generalized beyond the study sample (i.e. the students who completed the maps). Additionally, maps weren't always labelled accurately or specifically, so we might not be capturing the exact locations, spaces or services that the students were trying to identify.

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