

Planning for a Youth Drop-in Centre in Erin, Ontario

Findings from Youth and Parent Surveys May 2020

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Summary

The Research Shop, part of the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute (CESI), conducted this research in partnership with East Wellington Community Services (EWCS) from September 2019 to May 2020. The objective of this research was to better understand youth recreational, leisure, and personal development needs and interests, along with relevant barriers to participation. It also sought to understand how a youth drop-in centre in Erin, Ontario may address those needs and barriers.

The findings from the youth and parent surveys develop a better understanding of the preferred programming and structure of the drop-in centre, youth limitations to participation in recreation, and how EWCS can share information about events and programs effectively. The results may help inform EWCS's decisions regarding the structure, programming, and launch of the drop-in centre.

Key Takeaways

- Teens shared that they face time, cost, and transportation barriers to participation in recreation, along with pre-existing school, work, and recreational demands. These findings suggest that programming should be casual, flexible, low-cost/free, and in an accessible location with transportation options.
- Youth indicated that the drop-in centre should have varied programming that encourages overall wellbeing with fun, engaging, socially-oriented casual activities and special events. They expressed less interest in physical activity.
- Youth respondents want EWCS to create a safe, inclusive, and welcoming space where youth outreach workers and snacks are available.
 - The importance of inclusivity may be particularly relevant for LGBTQ+ and low-income teens, who expressed considerable interest in this survey.
 - One teen in particular said that the drop-in centre should have “outreach that connects youth with staff and positive role models.”
- EWCS may benefit from being active on several social media platforms, including Instagram for teens and Facebook for parents. Communication about programs and events might be more effective if EWCS specifically tailors it to either youth or parents, depending on the post and the platform.
- EWCS might also benefit from further research that explores the needs and interests of youth, especially groups who were underrepresented in the survey results, such as marginalized teens, male youth, and younger teens. Focus groups may be a useful avenue to explore.



Introduction

This report shares youth and parent feedback regarding the needs of youth in Erin, Ontario, and its surrounding areas, and how a youth drop-in centre may best meet those needs. The Research Shop, part of the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute (CESI) at the University of Guelph, conducted this research in collaboration with East Wellington Community Services (EWCS). EWCS is an organization that supports the community by providing social services, healthcare, and transportation support for people in Erin and Guelph Eramosa Township.

This report uses survey data to explore participant demographics, youth access to transportation, the preferred programming and structure of the centre, limitations to participation, and how to best communicate with youth and parents about programs and events. The results and implications of this research may help inform EWCS as it designs and launches the new drop-in centre.

Research Goals

The Research Shop and EWCS developed the research methods and deliverables around the following goals:

1. To capture youth and parent perspectives about youth recreational, leisure, and personal development needs and interests, along with relevant barriers to participation, and how the drop-in centre may address those needs and barriers.
2. To consolidate findings into a report that allows EWCS to incorporate youth and parent feedback into the design and launch of the drop-in centre in a way that engages youth.

Methods

This research utilized survey methods to better understand youth (defined as those aged 13 to 19) and parent perspectives. The Research Shop team and EWCS designed the surveys collaboratively, which included open and closed-ended questions. Youth and parents had slightly different surveys (see Appendix A and Appendix B for copies). Researchers and EWCS employees solicited survey responses (n=71) online through Qualtrics and in-person at Erin District High School. EWCS promoted the surveys through postcards and on social media from October 2019 to March 2020. Researchers and EWCS were particularly interested in youth responses, so youth were incentivized to complete the survey with a chance to win one of three \$25 Tim Horton's gift cards. This project received 48 youth responses and 27 parent responses, and researchers edited the open-ended question responses for clarity. However, not all surveys were fully complete, which led to discrepancies in the total number of responses per question.

Findings and Implications

The following section discusses the youth and parent survey responses, including quantitative results and qualitative quotes, and it shares relevant implications based on the data.

Demographics

Age, Gender, and Minority Identities

- The average age of youth respondents was 16; 69% (29 respondents) were aged 16-17.
- 66% (31) of youth identified as cis women, 29% (14) identified as cis men, and one respondent each identified as non-binary and genderfluid.
- 22.9% (11) of youth identified as LGBTQ+ and 14.6% (7) as low-income.
- 12.5% (6) of youth selected more than one minority identity as they combined low-income with LGBTQ+, immigrant, and disabled identities.
- Teens with disabilities, visible minorities, immigrants, and Indigenous youth were underrepresented in the survey results. Parents with minority identities were also underrepresented.

Location

- The majority of youth and parent respondents indicated that they live locally in Erin (48.9% [23] and 39.1% [9], respectively).
- Several teens and parents selected the neighbouring towns of Hillsburg and Ospringe (12.7% [6] and 26.1% [6], respectively). Some parents also chose Rockwood (34.8% [8]).
- The remaining 38.3% (18) of youth stated that they live in towns that are 19+ kilometres away from Erin, including 21.3% (10) in Orangeville.

Limitations

- Some groups were underrepresented in the survey results. EWCS may wish to solicit more representative feedback from other age groups (13-15 and 19), male teens, and youth and parents with minority identities.
- Interest in completing the survey was apparent with LGBTQ+ and low-income youth, which could mean that they have a particular interest in visiting the drop-in centre. Therefore, the centre's environment and programming should be LGBTQ+ and low-income friendly.
- Slightly over half of the youth respondents said that they do not reside in Erin. EWCS may want to have the drop-in centre at a location that is easily accessible from the school at the end of the school day to mitigate transportation issues.

Youth Participation in Recreation

Recreational Commitments: Hours and Days Per Week

- The average and most commonly selected pre-existing time commitment to recreation for youth was 1-2 hours per week (50% [22]).
- 22.7% (10) of teens had 3 to 6+ hours per week of recreational commitments, while 27.3% (12) were not involved in recreation at all.
- Most parents had at least one child who participates in recreation, and several had two or three children involved.
- Parents indicated that, on average, their children engaged in recreation 2 to 3 days per week.

Types of Recreational Commitments

- Several teens already participated in sports and fitness, such as aikido, swimming, curling, soccer, working out, powerlifting, hockey, squash, karate, skiing, rugby, dance, skating, football, basketball, baseball, and volleyball.
- Many youth engaged in the arts, including art club and art lessons, theatre and drama, and music, band, and singing.
- Youth also took part in LGBTQ+, environment, and church youth groups, volunteering, robotics club, Scouts, Air Cadets, and Girl Guides.

Transportation to and from Recreational Commitments

- The most common way youth said they travel to and from their recreational commitments was by car as 85.4% (41) of youth reported that they receive a ride from others or drive themselves. Parent responses reflected this heavy dependence on cars.
- 20.8% (10) of youth stated that they walk to their programs and activities, 12.5% (6) bus, and 4.1% (2) bike.

Implications

- There is a clear need for youth-specific programs and activities because over one-quarter of youth reported that they did not take part in any recreation.
- Several youth and parents had pre-existing recreational commitments, which require dedication to show up to every meeting and practice. Based on this reality, EWCS may want to consider having a flexible structure that allows teens to attend when they feel like it.
- Most teens relied on driving or receiving rides from others for transportation, but some parents noted that they already have several daily obligations. The results indicate that the drop-in centre should be in an accessible location and that teens would benefit from alternative transportation options to encourage attendance and minimize stress.

Design of the Proposed Drop-in Centre

Levels of Importance of Programs and Activities

- Youth respondents felt that the most important options available at the drop-in centre were those related to:
 - General health and wellbeing (86% [37])
 - Social activities and special events (69.8% [30])
 - The presence of youth outreach workers (67.4% [29])
- Between 60.5% (26) to 65.1% (28) of youth thought that career and youth leadership development, sports and fitness, and volunteer opportunities were very important.
- The lowest number of teens selected youth accomplishment awards as very important, but 72% (31) still viewed this option as somewhat or very important.
- One teen shared, “I believe that it is very important for youth to be able to come to the centre and feel comfortable with it without any stigma or judgment. **Helping youth succeed in all aspects of their life** (social, academic, health and wellbeing, and career preparation) **is very crucial.**”
- **Parent responses reflected the youth trend** as the majority of parents viewed all of the options mentioned above as very or somewhat important. A considerable number of parents selected youth accomplishment awards as not important (26.1% [6]).

Interest in Activities

- Youth were most interested in participating in the following activities at the drop-in centre:
 - Hanging out (66.7% [32])
 - Cooking (62.5% [30])
 - Movies (56.3% [27])
- Some of their suggestions about desired activities were as follows:
 - Programs that develop reading, writing, and music skills.
 - “A volunteer youth group would be cool because you can make friends while volunteering at different places.”
 - “Something like a youth committee that encourages civic engagement and allows us to be **independent and creative.**”
 - Another youth said there should be casual weekly events (e.g., “every Thursday night has a different fitness activity”), along with special “one-off” events (e.g., “have a karaoke talent show where all are welcome”). They stated that the combination of consistent and special events is important because sometimes people want to be a part of a group, and sometimes, they just want a fun night out.
- **Parents** were **most interested** in youth participating in:
 - Fitness/sports (66.7% [18]). However, one parent commented that while sports are great, “not all kids are sporty.”
 - Cooking (59.3% [16])
 - Hanging out and health and wellness (both 55.6% [15])
- **Youth** had the **least interest** in the following activities:
 - Dance (16.7% [8])
 - Health and wellness (33.3% [16])
 - Career development (41.7% [20])
- **Parents** had the **least interest** in teens partaking in:
 - Dance (18.5% [5])
 - Movies (25.9% [7])
 - Visual/media arts and playing games (both 44.4% [12])

Ideas About What Contributes to a Youth-Friendly Environment

- The following options display what youth thought most contributes to a youth-friendly environment:
 - Casual drop-in with flexible programming (77.1% [37])
 - Snacks and a sense of safety (both 62.5% [30])
 - Inclusivity for everyone (58.3% [28])
 - Dedicated youth space (56.3% [27])
- One teen suggested that the drop-in centre should have “outreach that connects youth with staff and positive role models.”

Implications

- Youth thought that general health and wellbeing was the most important programming option at the drop-in, but they also had a low interest in health and wellness activities. The contrast may mean that they are more interested in activities that promote social and mental wellbeing (e.g., hanging out and watching movies with their friends) than they are

in health-specific activities (e.g., physical activity that does not incorporate a fun element).

- Based on the results, teens want a dedicated youth space that is casual, safe, inclusive, has snacks, and offers them a place to socialize with varied, low-pressure, positive programming that keeps them engaged.
- Parent responses were different than youth, which suggests a disconnect between what parents think their teens need and what youth themselves desire. EWCS should continue to prioritize youth feedback regarding the design and structure of the proposed drop-in centre.

Limitations to Participation

- Although 16.7% (8) of **youth** respondents felt like nothing limits their participation in recreation programs, the majority believed the opposite. Below are the top five barriers to their participation and relevant written elaboration.
 - Time (43.8% [21])
 - “I work as well as [other programming], [which leaves] me with little time for other things.”
 - Transportation (also 43.8% [21])
 - “I live further away (not in Erin).”
 - “[I would like] a service that would be able to get me to said program and home.”
 - School (37.5% [18])
 - “[Recreation] takes up 20+ hours a week. To balance that with school, I have to sacrifice other things I want to do.”
 - Interest (33.3% [18]).
 - “I won’t go if my friends aren’t there.”
 - Location (also 33.3% [18]).
 - “Erin is a very small place. Not all activities are available.”
- Almost 1 in 5 teens felt that cost is a concern (18.8% [9]).
- Some youth also believed that age (12.5% [6]) and parental permission (10.4% [5]) are limitations.
- **Parents** mostly echoed youth feedback about limitations. Their top five choices for limitations, along with some written explanations, were as follows:
 - Time (33.3% [9])
 - “Work [is an issue].”
 - Location (29.6% [8])
 - “There is limited availability of programs locally.”
 - “Not much to offer for this age group.”
 - Interest (also 29.6% [8])
 - “[Recreation for teens requires a] coolness factor.”
 - Transportation (22.2% [6])
 - Cost (18.5% [5])
- However, one parent had positive feedback regarding recreational opportunities as they said, “My children have a fairly rich opportunity to participate in multiple recreation programs.”

Implications


- Both youth and parents thought that time was the most significant limitation to participation in recreation, and youth reported that they face heavy demands from school and work. These constraints highlight how programming should be flexible and low-pressure, so teens can come and go as they please.
- Interest is a consistent concern while trying to reach and engage with teenagers. EWCS may wish to solicit further youth feedback with specific recommendations about how to make the drop-in interesting to them. Focus groups may be a useful avenue to explore.
- Many teens and parents felt like Erin does not have a lot to offer regarding recreation and that transportation to and from activities was challenging. While the drop-in has the opportunity to address a gap in services, the results suggest that it must be in an accessible location that offers transportation options to ensure youth can attend the centre and get home safely.
- Parents and youth shared that cost is also a barrier, so EWCS may want to make activities low-cost or free or provide subsidy options when there is a cost.

Program Promotion

- The **top three** ways that **teens** find out about programs and events are:
 - Word-of-mouth/from friends (58.3% [28])
 - Instagram (47.9% [23])
 - Parents (39.6% [19])
- One youth stated, “[EWCS should] get on **social media platforms and be active**. [It should] make the content appealing to youth. Youth follow online trends, so if EWCS could **keep up-to-date with the trends and use them to promote fundraisers or events**, I think more youth in the community would find and support EWCS.”
- The **least frequent** avenues that **youth** gather information from included:
 - Twitter (6.3% [3])
 - EWCS website (10.4% [5])
 - Facebook (14.6% [7])
- The **top three** ways **parents** learn about events and programs were:
 - Facebook (70.4% [19])
 - Word-of-mouth/from friends (55.5% [15])
 - Posters (37% [10])
- It was much **less common** for **parents** to gather information from:
 - Twitter and Snapchat (0%)
 - Text (3.7% [1])

Implications

- There was a significant contrast between how youth and parents gather information. EWCS could benefit from being active on several social media platforms to reach all of its intended audiences, particularly via Instagram for youth.
- While Facebook was one of the least common ways youth learn about programs and events, it was the most common way parents do. EWCS may want to continue to update their Facebook page, especially because many youth shared that they hear about programs and events from their parents.

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- Communication about programs and events might be more effective if EWCS specifically tailors it to either youth or parents, depending on the post and the platform. EWCS may consider using youth-friendly branding and language on platforms that teens frequent.
 - A strong social media presence is also valuable because effective online engagement can help share information secondarily through word-of-mouth, which was another top way youth and parents learn about programs and events.

Conclusion

The results of this survey show that there is enthusiasm and support for a youth drop-in centre in Erin. Two teens shared their final thoughts about the proposed drop-in centre:

- “This is a great idea. Maybe this will help kids make more friends and be a little better with their confidence.”
- “I can’t wait. This is definitely going to benefit the students and youth so much. Thank you.”

Youth and parents repeatedly noted that a range of socially oriented programming and a flexible structure in an inclusive, dedicated youth space could garner youth interest and engagement. Respondents also shared that transportation, cost, interest, and time constraints are barriers to participation. EWCS may take several steps to encourage attendance and address these barriers, including by providing transportation options, making programming free or low-cost, soliciting further youth feedback, and allowing teens to come and go from the centre as they please. Further research that centers diverse local youth voices, such as focus groups, could help generate a more robust understanding of their needs, interests, solutions to barriers, and how to keep youth interested and involved in the drop-in centre’s programming.