



YOUTH
SERVICES
SYSTEM
REVIEW

EXAMEN DU
SYSTÈME DES
SERVICES À LA
JEUNESSE

What is YSSR?

The Youth Services Systems Review (YSSR) examined the current services addressing substance use for youth (12-24 years old) in Ontario. The project was funded under Health Canada's Drug Treatment Funding Program (DTFP). The main goals of the project were to describe the current services available to youth, identify gaps in services, and develop recommendations to improve services.

What we know

Substance use is prevalent among youth in Ontario, with rates increasing through high school and into early adulthood. Although experimentation with substances is common, substance use can become problematic. Further difficulties can arise if there are co-occurring mental health concerns.

A range of treatment options in Ontario is available, including services funded by the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long Term Care and Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services. Historically, services for youth were modeled on adult services, however because adolescence and early adulthood are unique developmental stages of transition and change, specialized services for youth are beneficial for meeting these distinctive needs. Youth who have complex needs are also frequently involved in other sectors, such as mental health, child welfare, and youth justice.

The goal of the project was to describe the range of services addressing substance use concerns, the extent to which they are meeting the needs of Ontario youth, and to make recommendations to improve the youth services system. In order to learn as much as possible about the system, the project focused on hearing the perspectives of youth as well as family members/other supporters, service providers, and other stakeholders. Substance use/addictions, education, child welfare, youth justice, and mental health service sectors were included in the review.

What we did

Questions for the review were developed in consultation with advisory networks that meet regularly to discuss issues related to substance use and/or mental health services. Over 300 youth and 300 service providers, family members, and other stakeholders were asked to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the youth services system and to provide suggestions for improvement. Seventeen focus groups with 186 youth were conducted across Ontario. Ten service providers were interviewed and 447 stakeholders completed a survey, either online or on paper. Qualitative responses were analyzed using grounded theory and content analysis approaches.

What we learned

Several strengths, challenges, and suggestions for the youth services system were identified. Respondents noted specific services and service providers that demonstrated exemplary models of service delivery. Youth-oriented, harm reduction approaches with collaboration between services were highlighted. Stakeholders also identified six main areas of concern: access, service components, service delivery models and service qualities, service provider qualities, health equity and social determinants of health, and youth factors.

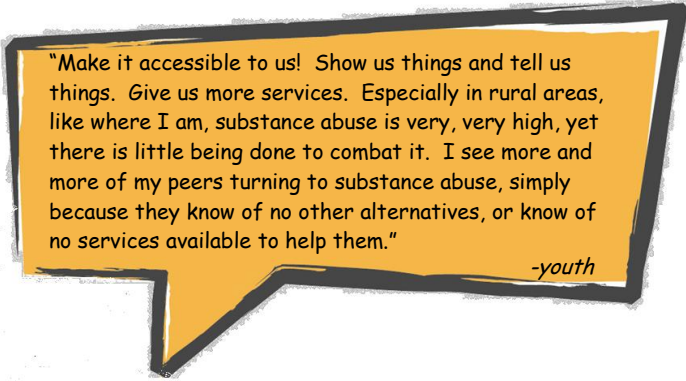
1. Access

Available services – shortages especially in rural areas and in Northern and Eastern Ontario

Awareness of services – not knowing where to look for and how to access services

Barriers to services – wait times, transportation, location, cost, hours of operation

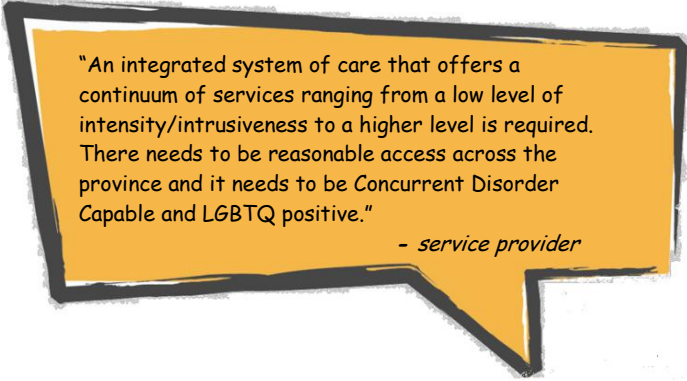
Cooperation and collaboration – required between services and service sectors (e.g. treatment agencies providing services in schools)



"Make it accessible to us! Show us things and tell us things. Give us more services. Especially in rural areas, like where I am, substance abuse is very, very high, yet there is little being done to combat it. I see more and more of my peers turning to substance abuse, simply because they know of no other alternatives, or know of no services available to help them."

-youth

2. Service components



"An integrated system of care that offers a continuum of services ranging from a low level of intensity/intrusiveness to a higher level is required. There needs to be reasonable access across the province and it needs to be Concurrent Disorder Capable and LGBTQ positive."

- service provider

Continuum of care –for various levels of need, including early identification and intervention, outpatient, residential, and withdrawal management is required across the province

Prevention/education necessary – both within and outside the school system, to reduce stigma, engage family members

Mental health/concurrent disorders – more services that address substance use and mental health concerns, across regions

Peer support/mentorship – opportunities for dialogue with others who have had similar experiences can be helpful and engaging to youth

Services for family and other supporters – more education and support needed

3. Service delivery models and service qualities

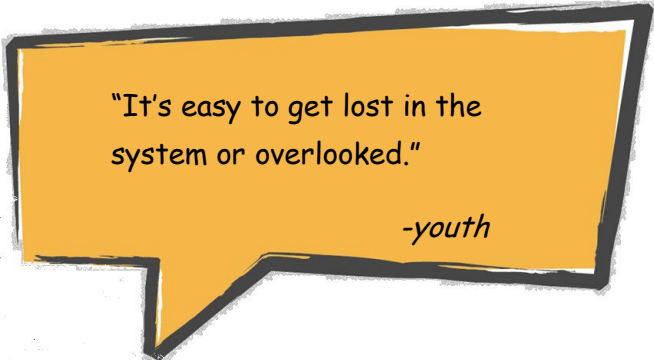
Service delivery models:

Fragmented services – integrated treatment plans, seamless transitions through services, follow-up support needed

Age limits – can prevent younger and older youth from accessing certain services; should be more flexible

Transition to adult services – lack of coordination during transitions; services should take into account the developmental needs of transition-aged youth

Standards of care – increase development and use of evidence-informed and best practices approaches; service providers should be trained in substance use treatment



"It's easy to get lost in the system or overlooked."

-youth

Service qualities:

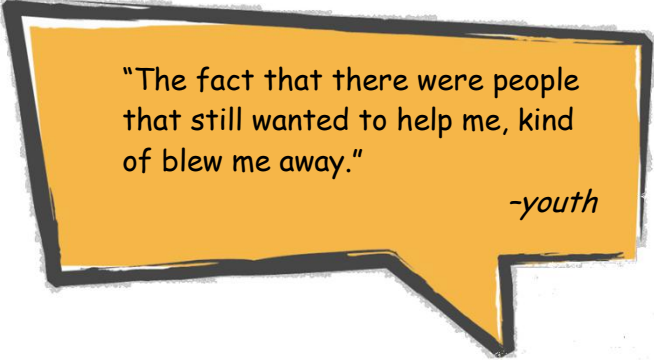
Youth-oriented – services should be appealing, non-intimidating, developmentally-informed (e.g. flexible and respectful of youth autonomy), engaging (e.g. valuing youth feedback), and holistic (e.g. assisting youth in other areas of life)

Philosophy/orientation – most identified harm reduction approaches as accessible and engaging; some preferred abstinence-oriented options; more flexibility and collaboration across the system will help engage youth

Confidentiality – concerns about confidentiality, punishment, and stigma prevent some youth from seeking services; involvement and support of family and other supporters may be limited because of confidentiality requirements

Intake processes – need to be brief and efficient

4. Service provider qualities



"The fact that there were people that still wanted to help me, kind of blew me away."

-youth

Perceptions of care – caring service providers were inspiring to youth, less caring service providers were demoralizing; system barriers can limit the level of support that can be provided

Inspiring trust – service providers need to be nonjudgmental; there needs to be an assurance of confidentiality for youth to engage in services

Relatable – youth want their perspectives to be understood and validated; some youth prefer service providers who have personal experience of substance use

5. Health equity and social determinants of health

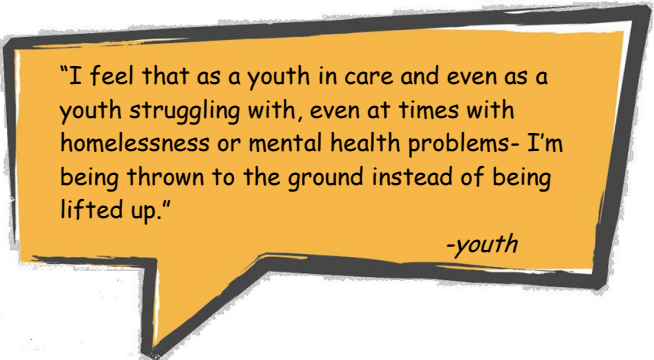
Population-specific concerns – Aboriginal, newcomer, ethnic minority, LGBTQ youth may experience stigma, discrimination, or inequities in availability of resources; youth with learning or neurodevelopmental disabilities have different needs; more culturally-informed services are needed

Languages – shortage of services in French and other languages and for Deaf and hard of hearing youth across regions; professional interpreters need to be available at no cost to youth and families

Diverse experiences – increase access and availability of services for youth who are street-involved, homeless, or involved in the child welfare or youth justice systems

Social determinants of health – poverty makes it more difficult to access services; opportunities for youth education, employment and training should be incorporated into recovery to provide structure and engagement and to build confidence

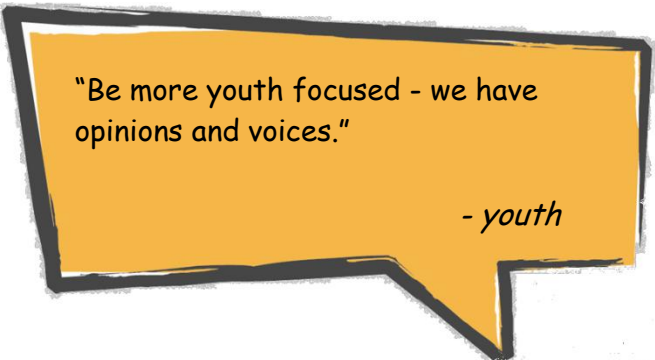
Intersections – issues in all of these different areas need to be addressed simultaneously



"I feel that as a youth in care and even as a youth struggling with, even at times with homelessness or mental health problems- I'm being thrown to the ground instead of being lifted up."

-youth

6. Youth factors



"Be more youth focused - we have opinions and voices."

- youth

Importance of relationships – positive relationships with service providers are important for youth to access and remain engaged in treatment; transitioning through different services can make it difficult to maintain relationships with service providers; trust and assured confidentiality are essential for youth to disclose substance use concerns

Stigma and fear – youth have difficulty seeking help because of embarrassment, guilt, stigma

and fear; positive experiences when treated non-judgmentally

Flexibility and autonomy – being able to make choices about treatment programs, goals and activities is meaningful to youth; accountability, as well as "second chances" after "slip-ups" are important to youth

Reasons for using – youth prefer holistic approaches that address their reasons for using, which can include problems (e.g., trauma, family conflict), pleasure, and social environments

Alternatives to substance use – youth want opportunities and support for alternatives to using substances such as sports, community projects, and vocational or employment opportunities

Recommendations

The report made recommendations based on the feedback received from youth, family/supporters, and other stakeholders. A need for collaborative, developmentally appropriate, and evidence-based care provided by well-trained staff was highlighted. In order to reduce barriers to services, issues related to regional gaps, lack of awareness of services, age limits, transportation, hours of operation, and wait times need to be addressed. For transition-aged youth, there is a need for additional services, as well as increased flexibility in age requirements and collaboration with adult services. Youth autonomy, such as youth involvement in setting treatment goals, should be encouraged. More services for family and other youth supporters should be available. Services should meet diversity needs by being culturally-informed and sensitive to diverse experiences such as involvement with the youth justice system or child welfare systems and/or being street-involved or homeless.

We want to hear from you!

Thank you to everyone who gave input on how the service system could improve to address youth substance use concerns. We welcome your feedback on our project and report. Visit our website at yssr.org to see the full report and tell us what you think. Let's work together to build a better system of care!

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