



Snapshots:

A Profile of Newcomer
Youth and their Civic
and Political
(Dis)Engagement in
Toronto



The Toronto Youth Cabinet is a non-partisan advocacy organization that strives to improve the quality of life for Toronto's youth. In working together with City Councillors and through fostering partnerships amongst various organizations, the Cabinet is dedicated to providing young people with a forum in which they are able to build an equitable, accessible, and youth-friendly Toronto.

During the 2017-18 term, the Newcomer Working Group was established as part of the Toronto Youth Cabinet with the intention of advocating for the interests of Toronto's newcomer youth and addressing their unique concerns in regards to the City. The group spent the term holding consultations and establishing connections with organizations and individuals that serve newcomer youth. The group explored four key topics of discussion (although they were not limited to these topics): transit, education, accessibility to municipal government, and community services. The purpose of the consultations was to hear directly from newcomer youth regarding their needs and concerns, so that the Newcomer Working Group may direct its future efforts to addressing these issues through the various forums and advocacy tools available to the Toronto Youth Cabinet. The Newcomer Working Group also aimed to familiarize the membership with the barriers experienced by newcomer youth, so that they themselves may play a leadership role in advocating for their concerns at City Hall.



Acknowledgements

MANY THANKS TO the youth and staff of the Arab Community Centre of Toronto, and the countless other young people who shared their time, stories, and ideas with us.

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Published in Toronto

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January, 2019

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The Newcomer Working Group is dedicated to developing initiatives that will ensure the integration, civic engagement, and overall success of newcomer youth in the City of Toronto, including refugee youth, undocumented youth, and international students. The working group is supported its members, the Newcomer Lead and the Director of Organizational Development for the Toronto Youth Cabinet.

This report captures the voices of youth who participated in three consultations held across the city. Throughout these consultations and as a result of the research undertaken to produce this report, it became evident that there are patterns in the barriers experienced by newcomer youth in Toronto. These patterns were along the dimensions of lack of access to information and services in their schools or community spaces. Some of the specific challenges identified included:

Language Barriers:

- Being unable to speak English made it difficult for youth to navigate public transit, build relationships in school, and access information to become civically engaged and to learn about services available in their communities. While newcomer youth explained that English as a Second Language (ESL) programs connect them to youth in similar circumstances, they also highlighted that the structure of these programs exacerbates feelings of isolation in schools.

Lack of access to information and support:

- Youth felt a lack of outreach by community services and civic engagement organizations to their schools. This prevented them from accessing services early in their settlement experience and from learning about municipal government, despite their interest. Newcomer youth explained that beyond information, when it came to navigating employment, they needed support from someone who understood the system, and who would be able to help them navigate it.


Not only do we envision that this report will be a helpful tool for our future advocacy as an organization in our work to advance the inclusion and engagement of newcomer youth in the City of Toronto, but we also hope that this benefits those interested in similar work.




Findings & Recommendations

Education

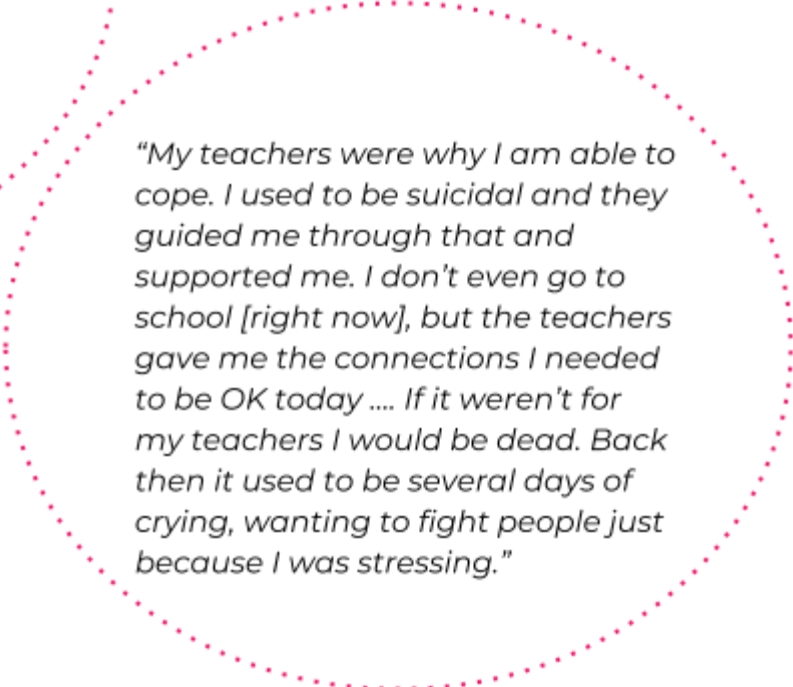
What did we hear?



[On being discouraged to attend academic level classes] "If I can do the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test program in ESL, then it means my English is good enough for academic classes."



"The good thing about the ESL program is that it gives you the opportunity to show you others facing the same experience."



"My teachers were why I am able to cope. I used to be suicidal and they guided me through that and supported me. I don't even go to school [right now], but the teachers gave me the connections I needed to be OK today If it weren't for my teachers I would be dead. Back then it used to be several days of crying, wanting to fight people just because I was stressing."

Education was the topic where students were most eager to participate in discussion and give their input. For most middle and secondary-school students, they considered language to be the most difficult barrier to their education. Language barriers weakened their communication skills with peers and teachers, which usually led them to sometimes feel isolated. One student stated that if you ask questions in English class, they look down on you coming from ESL. Also, she stated that “they do not clarify words in exam time, so that discourages me from asking the teacher and it affects my marks as a result.”

Participants also stressed the importance of student-teacher relationships in integrating to a school. Some said that their teachers were sometimes unformed, and wanted them to go through training, particularly in schools where a large number of students are newcomer youth, so that they can understand them better. Most, however, said that teachers were great in supporting in newcomer youth - they were extremely supportive and make for a positive experience. Some even attributed to their success solely to the guidance of their teachers, whom they often went to cope with the challenges they faced with moving.

In regards to English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, there was very mixed input among the newcomer youth. Some thought that the ESL program does not offer adequate support for language barriers, and the fact that you were forced to complete all levels before transitioning into classes were considered by many to be a waste of time. Many others also thought that the nature of ESL classes where newcomer students would be separated from the other students exacerbated their feelings of isolation. One student said that they felt that the ESL program was good but it was not enough diversification of what is taught. The English skills taught felt repetitive to them, and they didn't feel as if they reached their full potential in that class. Moreover, many students said that there has to be more support for ESL students in their transition to hybrid classes, and most said that they wanted this transition to be faster than it is currently. Some said they felt that the ESL program connected them to others in similar situations.

What did we learn?

Research suggests, “given the increasing role immigrants are playing in Canada’s labour market, economy, and social fabric, increased efforts must be made to support the transition of newcomer youth in schools.” (Scott 5) Explicitly, “there is a pressing need for ‘a more responsive and flexible approach to classroom instruction, to the school as a community institution with open boundaries, and to the diversity of learning needs, backgrounds and expectations in our changing population’” (Scott 6)

“Studies of school dropout rates of immigrant youth have indicated that over half of immigrant youth whose native language is not English fail to complete high school (Derwing et al. 1999; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Watt & Roessingh 1994, 2001). In this context, the capacity of educational institutions to create a common space in which students feel a sense of belonging and are motivated to learn are integral to

supporting the needs and reducing high school dropout rates amongst visibly minoritized youth.” (Scott 17)

On social integration

“The second generation has the lowest rates of social integration of young people in Canada, regardless of level of family income, as well as a high sense of alienation and exclusion.” (Scott 15-16)

“Young newcomers face social, cultural, and academic adjustments that are often exacerbated by racism, conflicting cultural values, educational gaps, language difficulties, culture shock, physical health problems, poverty, isolation and/or symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) due to war, violence or loss of family members (Ngo & Schleifer, 2005). One in five members of visible minority groups in Canada reported at least one experience with discrimination because of ethnicity, culture, skin colour, language, accent, or religion.” (Scott 16)

“Several suggestions have been made by researchers to improve services and assist with the integration of newcomer youth. They include peer mentoring, social groups for youth, after-school recreational and academic assistance programs, better monitoring of students once they leave ESL classes, better access to services, and greater sensitivity from mainstream society to the needs and experiences of newcomers.” (The Joint Centre of Research on Immigration and Settlement 28)

On language, the ESL program, and other classes

“Even though the demand for ESL services has been increasing, resources for these and other services for immigrant youth are becoming scarce. However, the high dropout rate of immigrant youth, combined with the decrease in funding and supports for immigrant youth, provokes concern around the creation of an inequitable education system.” (Scott 16)

“There are issues with the integration of students into mainstream classes, keeping up with their Canadian peers, and suffering with feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem if newcomer students failed to keep up with school work. Within school contexts, the low teacher-students ratios, lack of resources and appropriate programming for ESL youth, low expectations from teachers of newcomer youth and little understanding of educational, cultural, and family backgrounds of these students contribute to newcomer students’ marginalization.” (Scott 17)

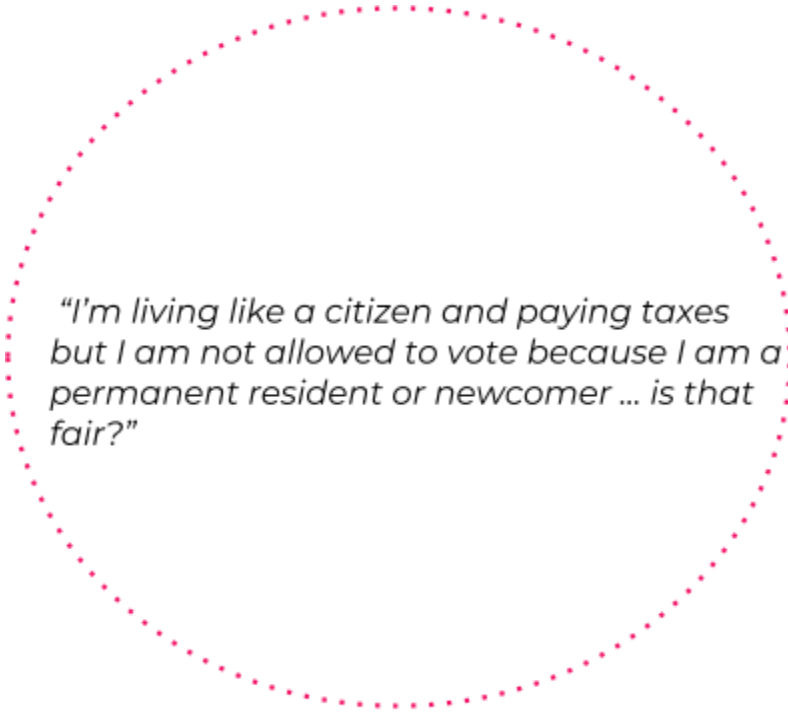
Recommendations:

- Strengthen the ESL Program and diversify the skills learned in its courses to ensure that youth are provided with the appropriate transition preparation once the program is completed.
- Implement training for teachers, particularly in areas with a large proportion of newcomer students, that deals with both cultural competency and the use learning strategies that are responsive to the needs of newcomer youth in the classroom.


- Create and expand existing after-school programs to support newcomer youth, which encompass both recreational and skill-based activities and support.
- Create peer and mentorship groups for newcomer youth to support their integration, learning experiences and overall personal growth.

Access to Municipal Government

What did we hear?



"I'm living like a citizen and paying taxes but I am not allowed to vote because I am a permanent resident or newcomer ... is that fair?"



"We don't matter because we can't vote."

The first two consultations were held in City Hall, and most newcomer youth that participated expressed that they felt very welcomed there, and that they thought the councillors cared about both youth and newcomer youth in particular. They felt that unlike their home countries, they can contribute to government. They also feel like the City is open for communication, by way of them even being invited to a newcomer youth consultation by the Toronto Youth Cabinet. Although many of them feel like City Hall is a convenient place to commute for meetings, they felt that they are out of reach of many civic-oriented organizations such as the Cabinet because they are simply not targeted in outreach, or they do not hear of it at the rate that settled youth do.

Similarly, some youth feel like information about municipal government can sometimes be inaccessible, despite that fact that they are interested in learning what is happening in municipal government. Some had even never heard about the different levels of government and their roles in high school, most likely because they had come into the school after grade 10 civics and careers. As a result, one of the participants explained that in getting prepared to vote, there should be more permanent resources available to inform newcomers about elections and the political process.

Some newcomer youth feel like that it is very unfair that they are not allowed to vote in municipal elections, despite contributing to the city as if a citizen would. Many of them are invested in city politics but because they are unable to vote, they feel marginalized and not taken seriously by the city. For many of them, voting is considered to be the most basic method of civic participation and voicing your concerns as newcomer youth. Also, most newcomer youth would like more municipal services offered in languages other than English.

On civic engagement

“Community engagement can occur through both social and civic participation. Civic participation is comprised of volunteer activities for the benefit of others in the community and may be undertaken individually or in a group.” (Hynie and Lai 93)

“Exclusion from the social life of one’s community has negative consequences for the well-being of excluded individuals, and that of the community as a whole. It prevents excluded individuals from having full access to community resources such as education, employment or housing, and from achieving socially valued capabilities.” (Hynie and Lai 93)

“While recent immigrants may value participation, research suggests that many experience social exclusion as a result of multiple barriers, which include language differences, time constraints, and discrimination.” (Hynie and Lai 94)

Recommendations:

- Implementation of a more detailed and engaging civics curriculum, as well as the concurrent integration of civic and political learning into ESL courses.
- Increase outreach for newcomer youth in civic/political initiatives.
- Increasing community connections for resources on civic engagement for newcomers.

Transit

What did we hear?

The concerns presented by the newcomer youth at our consultations mixed both general concerns about the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) as well as ones that were specific to their experiences as newcomer youth. One repeated concern was in regards to public transit fares, which many newcomer youth think were too high. The other main concern was in relation to accessing TTC and the language barrier that many newcomer youth face, with many of them saying the system (inclusive of buses, subways, Rapid Transit (RT), and streetcars) is difficult to navigate because information is unavailable in a variety of languages. Beyond language, newcomer youth also discussed disorganized timing and delays in the TTC and a lack of readily available travel time information.

What did we learn?

“Lack of language proficiency can form a barrier in education, employment, and social settings.” (AMSSA 2)

In regards to financial instability, research suggests that a “lack of credit history can be a significant barrier to newcomer financial security. In order to overcome this problem, it would be useful to provide immigrants with literature and online information, prior to their arrival, on the Canadian financial system and how to build a credit history. A step-by- step guide would be particularly useful. In this way, immigrants can become familiar with the Canadian financial system and be better prepared before they arrive in Canada, as well as knowing what to expect .” (Esses and Medianu 11)

Even though newcomer youth are twice as likely to use public transportation than their Canadian-born counterparts, research shows that accessibility to transit is “essential to attending training, job placements and language classes.” Moreover, specifically to the city of Toronto, “transit cuts and service reductions [including fewer routes and longer wait-times] across the city have primarily affected Toronto suburbs where most newcomers live. (Toronto Newcomer Strategy 36)

“Poverty is another limitation affecting some new immigrants and many refugee families. Settlement support is modest, and doesn’t meet basic needs for newly arrived refugee families. Government-assisted refugees are required to repay medical and transportation costs associated with their travel to Canada, which further undermines their ability to escape patterns of poverty ... They encountered barriers to getting around the city, making connections, and networking since they found transportation very expensive.” (Fresh Voices Report 12)

Recommendations:

- Make transit spaces more accessible and friendly to newcomer commuters by diversifying services to accommodate different languages. Some of the ideas explored included developing an app for newcomers and multi-language interactive maps at central TTC stations.
- Make public transit more affordable for newcomer youth and their families, i.e. subsidized transit passes for newcomer youth.
- Mandate and provide resources for settlement organizations to have orientations to transit, as well as other aspects of Canadian life that newcomer youth and their families must learn about.

Community Services

What did we hear?

“There’s a lack of outreach by services provided to newcomers. I could have done much better if there were proper services in place when I arrived in Canada. There are services, but were hardly aware of them until someone informs us.”

“We need a stronger focus on newcomers at the beginning. Stronger incentives for employers to work with newcomers can help us practice English from the start.”

Most youth consulted discussed the need for better partnerships between community service providers and schools. They perceived a lack of outreach by community services to schools which prevented them from accessing services early in their settlement experience. The issue was raised not as a lack of services but rather a lack of information about and promotion of those services in schools.

Newcomer youth stressed the need for timely and robust settlement services. Having the right information about daily life, school, immigration, work and health services, at the right time, allowed them to adjust to their new environment. However, oftentimes, information was not enough. Newcomer youth needed someone who was well informed to support them in advocating for themselves. Youth mentioned that this was particularly relevant when it came to finding employment, since they felt that the process was difficult to navigate.

What did we learn?

“It is apparent that a collaborative effort must be made in order to meet the needs of newcomer youth most effectively. The recommendations made by researchers allude to the important role played by the school system in promoting settlement and integration. It can be used as a forum for disseminating information, gaining access to families and consequently inviting greater participation in their children’s education, referring newcomers to services, and assisting mainstream society to become more culturally sensitive to the needs and experiences of newcomers.” (The Joint Centre of Research on Immigration and Settlement 14)

“Lack of information is a serious problem for many newcomers. The majority of respondents to a survey in Halton had little or no knowledge about the critical issues that they would have to deal with in their settlement process. Respondents indicated that one of their concerns was the lack of information. It is clear from the literature that it is essential that the newcomer understand more than just how to access services. Respondents in this study requested information about a multitude of topics, such as Canadian culture, parental roles, the expectations of the education system and the roles of teachers, as well as acceptable behaviour and mainstream values.” (The Joint Centre of Research on Immigration and Settlement 29)

Recommendations:

- Increase partnerships between schools and community services/organizations that provide services to newcomers to ensure that information and services are reaching youth.
- Increased information sharing to newcomer families, which also must happen in the beginning of the newcomer experience (proactive) rather than only when they need services (reactive).



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