



Youth Well-being The role of recreation



Recipient: Halifax Regional Municipality

Date: November 17, 2025

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Overview

This brief summarizes key findings from qualitative research with 20 young men (aged 15-18) from socio-economically marginalised communities within HRM, concerning the characteristics, needs, and barriers related to their well-being. Recreation and community play a key role in this. Youth emphasize that access to **safe, active, and supportive community spaces** is foundational to their personal growth and overall well-being. Major barriers identified include **poor public transportation, limited facility accessibility (hours and size), and environmental safety concerns**. We recommend municipal action focusing on enhancing safety, expanding access to facilities and informal green spaces, and improving public transit to better support youth recreation and mental health.

Key Research Findings

I. The Importance of Recreation and Community Spaces

Youth argue that overall well-being is supported through engagement, physical activity, and strong relationships. Community spaces are essential in this process because they provide opportunities for this engagement:

- **Positive Activity and Connection:** Places like the YMCA, BMO (for soccer/sports), public parks, and libraries are vital for socializing, making connections, and finding healthy enjoyment. Youth note that when stimulating resources and spaces are provided, they spend less time on their phones, online, and achieve a better life balance.
- **Recreational Activity and Skills Development:** Participating in activities, like soccer, is crucial for physical activity, happiness, and reducing mental health challenges like anxiety and depression. Engagement in recreational activities can provide a sense of achievement, focus, and confidence. It is also seen as a central building block toward future goals or careers. The ability to practice and train, sometimes at specific facilities like the BMO center, is highly valued. Equally valued, however, is the ability to engage in recreational activities spontaneously and in unstructured ways. It is these casual moments that contribute to in-person socializing rather than online engagement.
- **Sense of Safety and Belonging:** Important community centers feel safe and welcoming, allowing youth the "freedom to explore, to move, and to experiment". They offer a space away from home where youth feel they belong and can meet like-minded peers or role models. They also offer a space where youth can make mistakes and learn from them through positive guidance and role modelling rather than punitive and exclusionary punishments.

II. Barriers to Youth Recreation and Well-being

Several significant obstacles hinder youth access to recreational opportunities and community spaces:

A. Facility Access and Infrastructure

- **Limited Operating Hours:** Recreational spaces and programs often close too early, limiting access for older youth after school. Youth expressed a strong desire for facilities to close much later (e.g., 8 PM) to allow longer access.
- **Inadequate Space:** Youth noted that facilities like the Community YMCA feel "kind of small" and suggested making them bigger to accommodate the number of people who use them.
- **Lack of Specialized Recreational Facilities:** While many facilities focus on basketball, many local youth prefer other activities. The youth in this study, for example, like soccer. But other youth prefer art, music and dance, or martial arts. Youth suggested establishing spaces that can be used in multiple ways, particularly in local communities.
- **Condition of Public Spaces:** Youth highlighted the need for improvements, such as updating consoles or providing newer equipment at libraries. Some participants noted that recreational centers could benefit from a "facelift" or renovation. Youth in this study, for example, highlighted the value of public libraries as spaces to connect, work, and explore. The North end library – in their community -- they noted is not as updated as the central library, reducing the important ways it can be a space for youth in the community.

B. Public Safety and Environment

- **Safety in Public Gathering Spaces:** Areas surrounding key youth facilities, such as the road near the Community YMCA, were described as "scary" and "dangerous" due to drug use and violence. Individuals who have no secure housing, and the presence of drug paraphernalia (like needles) near parks and public libraries can make youth feel uncomfortable, unsafe, and exposed to negative influences. Youth noted the need for safe drug use sites and opportunities for connection to learn and understand other people's experiences. Activities such as human libraries or neighbourhood beautification activities could be used to bring people together.
- **Lack of Community Green Spaces:** Youth noted the absence of green spaces near their homes where they could just "hang out and kick a ball around." When they have to rely on formal recreational programming or travel to a recreational space, spontaneous fun is limited. They noted the connection between this and then defaulting to screentime.

C. Public Transportation

Public transportation reliability and quality are major barriers to accessing recreational sites (like the YMCA, BMO, or the Commons).

- **Unreliability and Frequency:** Buses are often late or unreliable. Youth noted how this can impact their employment opportunities, access to more formal services, and access to formal recreation. They further proposed that buses should run more frequently after hours. They note that current schedules are designed for work and not recreation.
- **Safety and Comfort:** Youth described buses as "unpleasant" and dirty. Additionally, concerns like racism from bus drivers and inappropriate behaviour from other passengers (e.g., swearing, smoking, fighting) mean they are reluctant and even afraid of making use of public transportation.
- **Shelter Infrastructure:** Bus shelters are inadequate; they often lack weather protection.

Policy Recommendations

Based on these findings, we recommend that the municipality prioritize investment in programs, infrastructure, and services that increase accessibility and safety for youth.

Policy Area	Recommendation	Supporting Evidence/Impact
Facility Access & Hours	1. Mandate and Fund Extended Hours: Partner with major youth centers to extend closing times to 8PM, ensuring access for youth after school.	Directly addresses the barrier of early closures and maximizes facility use.
Recreation Infrastructure	2. Increase Active Recreation Facilities: Dedicate resources to building or converting spaces for informal and formal multi-use activities, aligning facilities with youth interests.	Supports spontaneous and formal youth engagement in their preferred activities, fostering dedication and accomplishment.
Public Safety	3. Enhance Security & Support in Public Spaces: Create safe substance use spaces, especially for individuals who are housing insecure. Create opportunities to connect and get to know each other to foster understanding and empathy. Develop non-punitive services, such as a "free ride service" or safe transit initiatives.	Mitigates fear caused by crime/drug use near centers.
Youth Programming	4. Support Broader Activities: Fund programs that allow youth to take more trips and explore the city beyond local parks, especially during the summer. Also, support organizing social activities like mini-game days or movie days within existing after-school programs.	Addresses the need for novelty and prevents boredom during extended breaks.
Public Transit Improvement	5. Address Transit Reliability & Quality: Improve bus frequency, especially in the evening, to better serve youth commuting to and from late-hour activities. Allocate resources to cleaning buses and upgrading bus shelters. Provide bus drivers with opportunities to connect with diverse youth, to foster connection, understanding, and reduce racism.	Ensures youth can reliably and comfortably reach community engagement opportunities.

For more information

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Growing Spaces & Places for Youth Wellbeing
is supported by the
Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR)