

SEEKING BETTER OUTCOMES FOR YOUTH IN HAMILTON

YOUTH SUMMARY



There is a large youth population in Hamilton – almost 70,000 youth between the ages of 15 and 24 are living in the city. Many of them, about 14,000 youth, are living in poverty. Many are leaving school early and many are finding it difficult to find work. In addition, Hamilton has a very diverse population that is reflected in the youth population as well.

Youth in Hamilton have very complex and varied experiences. While some are succeeding well, others are not – we need to look at and understand the issues affecting outcomes for youth in Hamilton.

There are some important issues that affect the healthy development of youth in Hamilton. Eight critical issues that will be outlined in this summary are poverty, early school learning, employment, disconnection, homelessness, discrimination, mental health and substance use.



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POVERTY

Youth face higher than average rates of poverty. In 2005, 21% of all youth in Hamilton were considered to be living in poverty (living below the Low Income Cut Off).

Impacts

When a youth lives in poverty it can contribute to other struggles including:

- ~ Criminal activity
- ~ Violence
- ~ Sex work
- ~ Homelessness
- ~ Poor health outcomes
- ~ Low self-esteem

Best Practices

Youth need:

- ~ Support to complete secondary and post secondary education
- ~ Access to healthy food, adequate housing, health care and recreational activities
- ~ Support to gain meaningful employment
- ~ Programs to assist them financially while they finish high school and gain employment

EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

Leaving high school early can have a huge impact on the future well-being of youth. In Hamilton, the high school drop-out rate is around 30%.

Impacts

Youth who do not complete high school:

- ~ Have lower earnings
- ~ Are more likely to be unemployed
- ~ Are more likely to depend on social assistance and other programs
- ~ Are more likely to experience incarceration
- ~ Have more accidents, poorer health and shorter lives
- ~ Are less engaged in their communities
- ~ Are more likely to become homeless
- ~ Have lower levels of tolerance

Best Practices

Youth need:

- ~ More flexibility in the high school curriculum
- ~ Assistance with nutrition, housing, transportation and low income
- ~ Prevention strategies such as youth outreach, mentoring and incentives

DISCRIMINATION

According to recent research, youth in Hamilton are discriminated against in two ways – based on age and based on intersecting forms of oppression. This is an important consideration given the level of diversity in Hamilton. Of the total youth population in Hamilton, 16.9% are youth of colour.

Impacts

Discrimination on the basis of age includes:

- ~ Exclusion from planning tables
- ~ Police officers exhibiting disrespect for youth
- ~ Store policies limiting the number of youth allowed inside
- ~ Discrimination from landlords

Discrimination on the basis of intersecting forms of oppression includes:

- ~ Racism
- ~ Gender
- ~ Sexuality
- ~ Street-involvement
- ~ Socio-economic status

Best Practices

Youth need:

- ~ Social media and media art to share their stories and solutions to discrimination.
- ~ A youth arts framework approach to unleash their creativity and ideas
- ~ A peer mentorship approach to encourage participation and dialogue

DISCONNECTION FROM FAMILY, COMMUNITY, AND SERVICES

Young people require support and positive connection as they transition to independence and adulthood. Youth who are disconnected have worse outcomes than those who are connected to support systems. Factors that contribute to disconnection include family poverty, family structure, parental unemployment and welfare receipt.

Impacts

Negative outcomes of disconnection include:

- ~ Poverty
- ~ Early school leaving
- ~ Mental health and substance use issues
- ~ Criminality
- ~ Young parenthood
- ~ Lack of employment

Best Practices

- ~ Meaningful engagement in decision making and planning
- ~ Prevention – such as engaging school to work programs
- ~ Presence of caring, supportive, consistent adults
- ~ Participation in the arts to feel more connected to their community and themselves
- ~ Low threshold engagement - opportunities to engage with service providers in ways that are not overly-programmed

HOMELESSNESS

Housing insecurity and homelessness are a reality for many youth in Hamilton. It is difficult to count incidents of youth homelessness in our community since many young people are hidden and services that work with street-involved youth do not have linked data systems.

Impacts

Youth who are homeless are more prone to:

- ~ Be victimized
- ~ Be hungry
- ~ Have poorer primary health
- ~ Have concurrent mental health and substance use issues
- ~ Face emotional hardship
- ~ Experience feelings of loneliness, shame, sadness and fear

Best Practices

- ~ Prevention and early intervention strategies
- ~ Street-outreach services
- ~ A multi-service approach to service
- ~ Services that are youth-centered, client-centered, accessible and flexible
- ~ Emergency shelter beds
- ~ Transitional housing with supports
- ~ Services that look at mental health, suicide prevention and substance use and misuse
- ~ Services that address unemployment, lack of education and concrete skills
- ~ Access to primary health services

EMPLOYMENT

The unemployment rate for youth in Hamilton is twice as high as that of the entire population of the City. Youth are more likely to work part time rather than full time and young women are more likely than young men to work part time jobs.

Impacts

- ~ Young people are more likely to engage in work if they live in poor families
- ~ Newcomer youth and youth of colour are less likely to be employed than other youth
- ~ Youth in rural communities have far higher participation in work than urban youth.
- ~ Youth who are street-involved and homeless face many barriers in becoming employed including a lack of education, training and stability
- ~ Aboriginal youth also face barriers to employment including a lack of tailored support services, systemic racism and negative stereotyping

Best Practices

Youth need pre-employment programs that include:

- ~ Life skills development
- ~ Group work
- ~ Opportunities to experience work
- ~ Incentives
- ~ Ability to graduate to different stages
- ~ Opportunities to build social supports

MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Mental illness is defined as a broad spectrum of mental distresses, disorders, and illnesses. When Hamilton youth are asked to self-report on their mental health nearly 40% indicate that their mental health is very good. However, more than twice the provincial average rate their own mental health as fair or poor.

Impacts

Youth experiences of mental health along the spectrum include:

- ~ School performance anxiety
- ~ Attention deficit disorder
- ~ Schizophrenia
- ~ Bipolar Disorder

Youth experiences of mental health are affected by factors including:

- ~ Personality
- ~ Family Life
- ~ Socio-economic situations
- ~ Access to treatment

Best Practices

Youth need:

- ~ Attention to risk factors that could indicate mental health concerns
- ~ Intervention in multiple settings especially school
- ~ A focus on skill building, empowerment and respect
- ~ Trained non-professionals to establish trusting relationships
- ~ Involvement of multiple stakeholders
- ~ Comprehensive support systems
- ~ Multiple interventions

SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Substance use can be defined as the use of a substance or multiple substances which have a noted impact or negative effects in a person's life. Youth in Hamilton are using substances at higher rates than the provincial average.

Impacts

In Hamilton:

- ~ 12.3% of youth aged 12 – 19 years old smoke daily or occasionally
- ~ Youth are slightly above the provincial average in terms of how often and how much they drink alcohol
- ~ 62.9% of Hamilton youth aged 15 – 19 years old have had at least one occurrence where they consumed 5 or more drinks in a single occasion within the past year
- ~ Youth are more likely than the provincial average to use a wide range of drugs including cannabis, hallucinogens, stimulants, Ecstasy and cocaine.

Best Practices

Youth need:

- ~ Outreach that focuses on youth engagement
- ~ Staff who are youth friendly, client-centered, open-minded and non-judgmental.
- ~ Service providers such as shelter workers, teachers, outreach workers who are trained in issues related to substance use
- ~ A focus on building trust with youth
- ~ Substance use and treatment conversations that include a young person's system of supports (family, community, etc)
- ~ Approaches that take emotional, mental and physical aspects of the young person into consideration
- ~ A harm reduction strategies approach

WHAT KIND OF PLANNING IS NEEDED TO ADDRESS THESE ISSUES?

Planning with youth - engaging youth in order to build on their experience, knowledge and capacity to define effective strategies for change

Working in collaboration - to foster collaboration between providers and public institutions in the health, education and social service sectors

Looking at diversity - to plan for change using a diversity lens, as suggested by the recently released Framework for Human Services Plan