

Youth Volunteering in a Changing Landscape: Insights from the

EMPATHY ENGAGED



Fondation
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Foundation



Volunteer
Bénévoles
Canada



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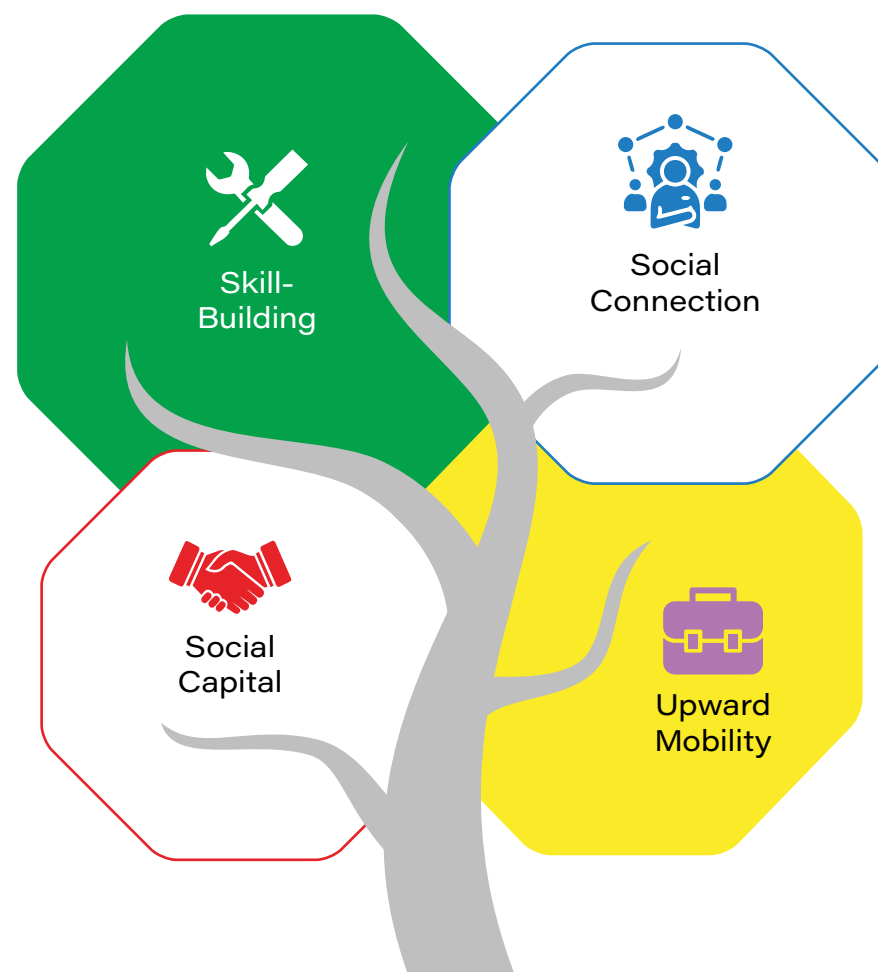
Background and Context

As Canada recovers from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the resilience of our communities is being tested. Communities are also grappling with the realities of increasing precarity, rising costs of living, a growing loneliness epidemic, a rapidly aging population, and the intensifying impacts of climate change. These crises have disproportionately impacted youth in several ways, with effects spanning mental health, education, employment, social development, and overall well-being. There is an urgent need to scale up our collective response to these crises and to support young people more comprehensively.

Volunteerism has historically offered a channel to get involved and scale collective action. It is known to forge stronger and more resilient communities¹ and promote a sense of meaning and belonging.² In a time of eroding social cohesion and growing strain on community supports, volunteerism offers a hopeful path forward. Indeed, youth are already

undertaking the leadership required to solve our most pressing and complex issues and are pushing us to act more quickly and comprehensively.³ For youth, volunteerism can be an avenue to put their leadership and values into action while providing important benefits (see Figure 1).⁴

**Figure 1:
Benefits of
Volunteering
for Youth**



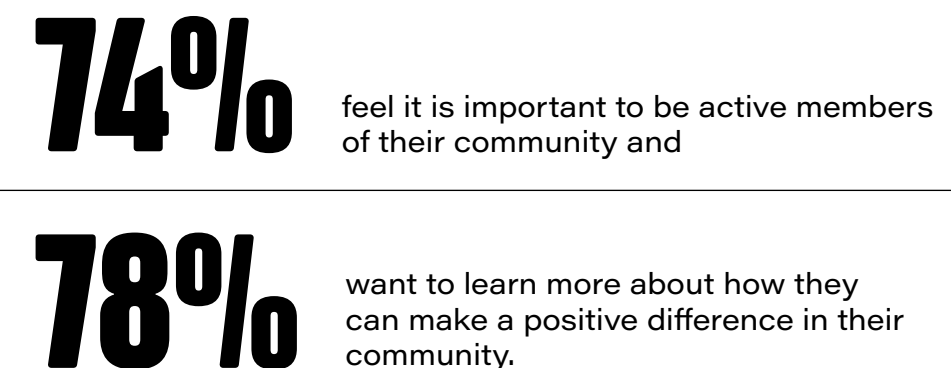
Unfortunately, nonprofit and charitable organizations are facing a significant shortage of formal volunteers,⁵ which has major implications for the resilience of our communities. While youth have historically volunteered at high rates,⁶ they **face different economic and social realities than previous generations**. The COVID-19 pandemic saw youth in Canada impacted by income losses, high unemployment, and learning losses⁷ – with disproportionate negative impacts on Indigenous youth, Black youth, those with lower household incomes, and those with a disability.⁸

We do not yet have a clear sense of exactly how the pandemic impacted youth volunteering but we do know that the pandemic opened the door for new opportunities to get involved in more informal ways,⁹ and that youth increased their online engagement in global movements for climate action and social justice.¹⁰ At the same time, though, the term “volunteer” is resonating less and less with younger

generations, highlighting a clear mismatch between what youth are looking for in terms of volunteering and what organizations are offering.¹¹ Persistent barriers – like not being asked to participate, financial constraints, ageism, and tokenism – often prevent youth from participating in formal volunteering.¹² Youth are more likely to transition between school and work frequently, and are also more likely to be precariously employed¹³ and/or to face some form of economic vulnerability – trends that are much more pronounced for BIPOC youth.¹⁴ While volunteering is often positioned as a way for youth to build skills and professional networks, many cannot afford to volunteer, thus missing out on this opportunity.¹⁵ It’s also important to consider how school-based models of mandatory community service factor into these dynamics.¹⁶

Today, youth in Canada are ready and willing to participate (Figure 2).¹⁷ How they are invited to engage at this time of change is critical.

Figure 2: Youth Community Engagement Trends



There is a growing body of research on wise practices for organizations engaging youth volunteers, and youth have shared extensively their expectations and aspirations when it comes to their volunteer contributions. Yet, the continued decline in formal volunteering signals a persistent disconnect in the relationship between organizations looking to engage formal volunteers and youth. Given the central role that formal volunteering plays in upholding our social safety net, it is critical that we investigate this disconnect, especially as the country confronts the impacts of COVID-19. The Empathy Engaged project aimed to explore this disconnect further.

Project Overview

As part of our broader National Volunteer Action Strategy (NVAS), the Empathy Engaged project contributes to fostering a culture of meaningful participation by addressing the different challenges and opportunities faced by youth in Canada. By exploring pathways to increase youth participation in formal volunteerism and identifying solutions to barriers like ageism and financial constraints, this project supports the NVAS's goal of creating inclusive and interconnected communities through volunteering.

A collaborative project between the Rideau Hall Foundation (RHF) and Volunteer Canada, Empathy Engaged aimed to foster youth engagement through volunteerism while contributing to an understanding of post-pandemic trends surrounding youth formal volunteerism. The goals of the project were to:

Amplify
youth voices

Identify
gaps and
opportunities

Lay the foundation
for a national
youth volunteer
action plan and
commitment
challenge.

Focused on youth between the ages of 18 and 25, this project explored how to create meaningful opportunities for formal youth volunteering, promote a sense of belonging, and build a national strategy for youth volunteerism that is inclusive, equitable, and impactful. The central question we asked was: **how do youth perceive formal volunteering in a post-pandemic world?** Sub-questions included:

- What motivators, barriers, and opportunities to youth formal volunteering did the pandemic present?
- What are the essential ingredients of a meaningful formal volunteering experience for youth in a post-pandemic context?
- How are organizations approaching engaging youth in formal volunteering in a post-pandemic context? What gaps exist between what youth are seeking and what organizations are offering?
- How might organizations leverage emerging trends in informal volunteering and other forms of participation to co-create meaningful formal volunteering opportunities for youth?



Activities

Summer 2023

1.

Landscape and Gap Analysis

Secondary research and consultations with Volunteer Centres to assess the current state of youth engagement and identify wise practices, trends, and gaps in the current volunteering and participation landscape.

Winter 2024

4.

Youth Engagement Roundtables

Secondary research and consultations with Volunteer Centres to assess the current state of youth engagement and identify wise practices, trends, and gaps in the current volunteering and participation landscape.

Fall 2023

2.

Planning

Engagement of Overlap Associates for facilitation design and subject-matter expert Ilona Dougherty of the Youth & Innovation Project (University of Waterloo) for advisory and analysis support.

Fall 2023

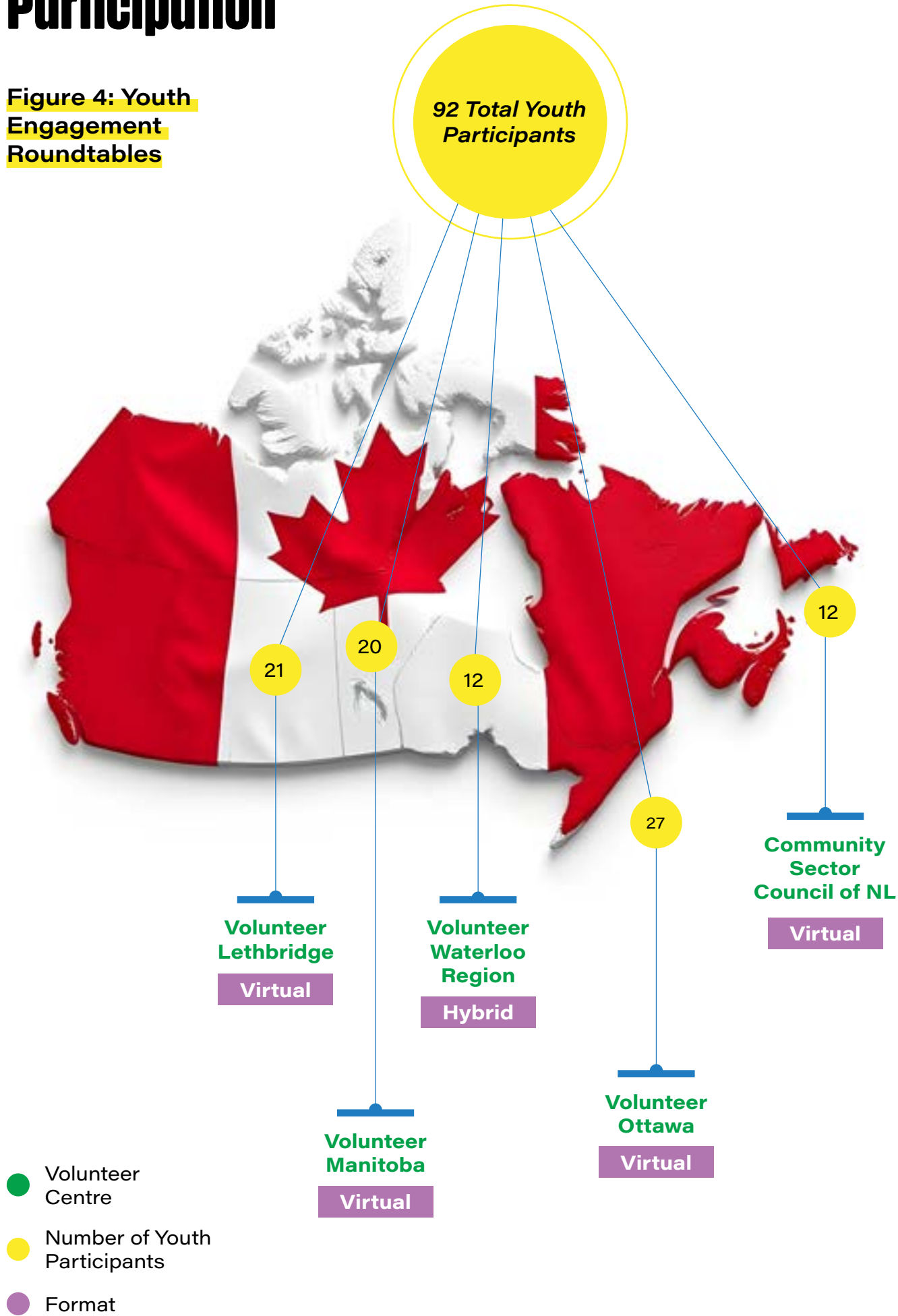
3.

Youth Advisory Table

Engagement of five youth leaders and five Volunteer Centres to provide guidance and input throughout the project and to facilitate Youth Engagement Roundtables.

Participation

Figure 4: Youth Engagement Roundtables



Limitations

This project was intended as a preliminary exploration and was thus limited in its scope. For example, the five roundtables were hosted in Alberta, Ontario, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Manitoba, which limits the generalizability of the insights across all provinces and territories.

We also did not collect the demographic information of participants in the Youth Roundtables to minimize barriers to participation, to avoid potential concerns over labelling or tokenism, and to prioritize participant privacy and anonymity. So, while the Roundtables illuminated the richness and nuance of youth experiences, perceptions, and ideas from a qualitative perspective, we're unable to gather from these insights how diversity characteristics might impact what barriers a young person faces or what perspectives they might hold about volunteering.

Lastly, we did not collect data from the organizations that youth participants volunteer with, and while we conferred with Volunteer Centres about what they're hearing from member organizations, we're limited in our ability to illuminate an accurate picture of how organizations are approaching youth engagement in formal volunteering.



Key Insights

Perceptions and Experiences

DEFINING VOLUNTEERING

Participants were asked to share how they define volunteering. In keeping with existing research, definitions of volunteering shared by participants were broad, and did not delineate between formal and informal volunteering. As one participant explained: **"[Volunteering] simply means my self-expression of**

my sacrificial willingness to devote my time to contributing in any way needed to improve my community, the lives of others, and the society at large at no cost or without pay."

Another participant echoed this, describing volunteering as: **"When someone spends unpaid time to do something that benefits others."**



THE COVID-19 EXPERIENCE

While some participants described the COVID-19 pandemic as a barrier to becoming engaged in volunteering, the majority of participants said the pandemic provided them with an unexpected opportunity to get involved.

As one participant shared, **"I had my first volunteering experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. I happen to be a social worker. I had not graduated yet. And so, all hands**

were needed and was strange [for] us. We're not prepared for this. So that was my first volunteer work for the community and we were all making sure people can get their masks delivered to them and [food]...delivered to their homes. So, I received all kinds of training and I was, really, really scared. But when I saw the gratitude of those who were receiving all of this from us, the prayers, the joy, praying for us to be protected, and I felt I could even sacrifice my life. I really felt good."

MOTIVATIONS FOR VOLUNTEERING

Youth participants shared the following motivations for volunteering (in order of frequency):

Making a Difference

The opportunity to contribute – to make a difference, care for others, and care for community – was the top motivation shared by participants. As one participant expressed, **"putting the needs of others first and then secondly, the joy they get when they see others happy."** Some explained that at first, they might have started volunteering to gain skills or experience, but, quickly, contributing became the most important reason for them to continue to volunteer. This is consistent with existing research.¹⁸

Social Reasons

The social aspects of volunteering, such as witnessing beneficiaries' reactions, making connections, having fun, and teamwork, are a key motivator. As one participant explained, **"What motivates me to volunteer is that I like to connect with people, I like to work with people."** Participants find it meaningful to connect with both those they were working alongside like peers or employees at the organization and the recipients of the organization's services. The importance of social connections for young people in the context of volunteer experiences has also been well documented in existing research.¹⁹

Personal Growth

Personal growth (e.g., fulfilling personal values, learning, finding a sense of purpose, goal achievement) was an important motivator for many participants. As one participant explained, **"It's obviously [...] super impactful when [volunteering] is something that we're super passionate about. So, again, something that's fun, interesting and engaging, that that really ties into our personal passions."** The research shows that connecting volunteer experiences with young people's passions increases the likelihood that young people will gain skills and stay engaged.²⁰

Other Motivations

Other motivators named by participants included instrumental reasons (e.g., skill development, gaining experience, career/employment exploration), external reasons (e.g., encouragement from friends/family, school requirements), and tangible rewards such as snacks and t-shirts.

Benefits of Volunteering

Youth participants shared the following benefits they perceive or experience from volunteering (in order of frequency):

Social Connection

Participants cited the opportunity to be social – to make new connections, connect to their community, and work collaboratively – as a top benefit. As one participant explained, ***“My first volunteer experience was a food distribution program where we give food to people in need or who can’t afford food for this week, and one of the biggest impacts that I had was seeing the smiles on peoples face as I handed them food. You know, thank you. You know, see you later, see you next Thursday. All those little interactions.”*** This is consistent with research that demonstrates that social connections are important to ensure a meaningful experience for young people.²¹

Personal Growth

Participants identified volunteering as an opportunity for personal growth. One participant noted that ***“Volunteering allowed me to build my confidence and the confidence of those I was supporting. Volunteering allowed me to hear, understand, and reflect on the ‘silence’ of others in the community. Volunteering also gave me enthusiasm.”***

Other Benefits

Other benefits of volunteering included instrumental benefits (e.g., skill development, employment, career exploration, financial stability) and improved well-being (e.g., improved mental/physical health, positive attitude, happiness, joy).



Barriers to Volunteering

Youth participants shared the following barriers to volunteering (in order of frequency):

Lack of Knowledge

Participants cited a lack of knowledge, including a lack of awareness of opportunities and a lack of information about volunteering, as a major barrier to volunteering. Per one participant, ***"I had the desire to volunteer... [but] I had no idea where to go. I had no idea where to look. I had no idea what to do. I mean, I had no idea how to be a part of it."*** Participants in the Newfoundland and Labrador roundtable explained that, in the case of international students, if there was no translatable experience in their home country, it was a challenge to understand the concept of volunteering, let alone figure out how to volunteer.

Connection Obstacles

Participants commonly described the difficult and confusing experience of trying to get in touch with organizations. One participant shared that ***"One of my friends, she was trying to look for volunteer hours... and she was looking through different websites and she couldn't really find any and she also went to the official Ottawa website because they also have some volunteer opportunities on there. But that website was not clear... And she tried reaching out to someone, and they were also unclear, and some of the volunteer opportunities on that website, they were unavailable. So, when you try to like apply for them they said 'ohh, we already found someone.' So, I feel like the websites that do have volunteer opportunities, they're inefficient."***

Organizational Bureaucracy

Closely related to the challenge of finding a volunteer experience is the challenge of contending with organizational bureaucracy to begin volunteering. One participant explained ***"I would like it to be as easy as possible to give my time. I don't want to have to go through a bunch of stuff and talk to a bunch of people to be able to volunteer. I would like to talk to one person. Then tell me what to do and then I do it. That's kind of how I thought and that would sometimes detract me from volunteering as if I had to talk to five or six people to be able to volunteer at an organization. It kind of diminished my motivation to volunteer for them."*** Or, as another participant in shared, ***"I think that it can be***

challenging, especially if you make an application and then you don't hear back or you're waiting around. It can be hard to put yourself on the line and then not hear back."

The barriers outlined above speak to an overall barrier that has been identified in the research when engaging young people in volunteerism. Young people are much less likely to volunteer when they are not proactively asked to become volunteers but, instead, they have to search out volunteerism on their own and then jump through multiple frustrating barriers to volunteer.²² One participant summed up part of the reason for this: ***"Volunteering takes a lot of courage at first, but once you can get past that it becomes better."***

Lack of Support

Many participants identified a lack of support once they secure a volunteer position as a deterrent to continue volunteering or to volunteer again later on. One participant, who has been leading a Girl Guides unit for a long time, shared that ***"[...] This year, there's something about this group of kids that is really challenging me, and oftentimes [I wonder] am I the right person for this unit? Like do I need more skills than I have to kind of manage these guides? I think sometimes you can feel like maybe you're not enough, or maybe you don't have enough support."*** Ensuring that young people have the support they need throughout their volunteer experience is an important theme often repeated in existing research.²³

A lack of support can also be experienced as discrimination. Participants spoke of ageism, with one participant explaining that there is a ***"lack of older people, in particular, taking young people seriously, so wanting to get involved in volunteer opportunities with more responsibilities like being on a board or something like that and being dismissed because you're young."*** Participants also described a lack of support manifesting as a lack of agency in their volunteering experiences - in other words, many experienced being forced or "voluntold" to do something. Several participants voiced that mandatory school volunteer hour programs were ineffective and turned them off volunteering. As one participant expressed, the idea of the mandatory 40 hours of volunteering ***"makes volunteering... something that is forced, and it might prevent a young person from seeing the benefits and true purpose of volunteering."***

Material Constraints

Participants identified other common barriers related to time constraints, access to transportation, and financial constraints. Participants in the Newfoundland and Labrador round table explained that often, volunteer opportunities are not compatible with school schedules, typically offered during business hours when youth might not be available.

Similarly, getting to in-person volunteer opportunities is also a challenge, especially for youth who don't drive or who don't have access to a vehicle, or who live in an area with limited or lacking public transportation. As one participant explained, ***"I know we're talking about transportation as a barrier...for some people, it's not just [taking] the bus [that is the challenge] ... [but that the] bus is late. It's also they cannot afford the bus tickets."*** Participants commonly cited financial constraints as a barrier. As one participant shared, ***"Volunteering is a privilege, people's time is usually spent making money."***



Other Barriers

Participants also cited having a lack of connections or encouragement to facilitate volunteering, accessibility, and personal health issues as barriers that young people face.



Ingredients for Success

Youth participants shared the following ideas for how organizations can successfully engage young volunteers in formal opportunities (in order of frequency):

Co-Creation

Participants shared that organizations should offer opportunities for young people to be engaged in decision making and to co-create opportunities. As one participant in explained, ***“So a big thing [is] the idea of having freedom and kind of creative license over what it is we were doing and feeling like our opinion and our thoughts and ideas were valued and that they very much mattered...a sense of respect and trust over what we were doing.”*** Ensuring young people have a sense of agency and are given the opportunity to co-create their volunteer opportunities is a leading practice identified in the existing research.²⁴

Consistent Support and Adaptation

Participants noted that organizations should ensure that young people are meaningfully supported throughout their volunteer experience. Participants from the Newfoundland and Labrador focus group expressed that more care is needed when coordinating young volunteers as they felt that volunteer coordinators do not seem well equipped to support them. One participant shared the example of being turned down for a job with an organization, then promptly being offered a volunteer opportunity similar to the job. The organization failed to consider that this might be viewed as exploitative by the young person.

Participants also emphasize that support should include adequate orientations and training. One participant explained, ***“First orientate them on what [the role] is about, then prepare them for their chosen roles via trainings and [have] a resource like a network to fall back to in moments of need.”*** Ensuring that young people have adequate support through their volunteer experience is a leading practice identified the literature.²⁵

Several participants also identified financial support as an important element of engaging young volunteers. As one participant explained, “There should also be some financial support [because] most volunteers are young, jobless, and students.” In addition to recognizing the economic realities of young people, participants emphasized that organizations should recognize the broader needs

of young people and adapt volunteer opportunities accordingly. One participant shared the following examples: ***“Providing opportunities that require less time commitment, and that have less structure and heavy requirements (for example, some students might have to work, take care of family, and complete schoolwork).”***

Recognition

Participants shared that they need to feel that the organization is valuing their volunteer contributions. One participant explained the power of this type of recognition on their likelihood of coming back, sharing that ***“When I went to donate blood, they were so supportive of me. They kept saying thank you. You saved a life. They just kept sending me emails. Thank you. Thank you. And you know, I was OK, I’ll come again.”*** Another participant emphasized that young people want to ***“hear the actual results”*** and understand the impact their volunteering has had.

Information

Participants emphasized the importance of awareness-building to ensure young people know about volunteer opportunities. As one participant shared, ***“I learned from this session that there are a lot of volunteering opportunities and few volunteers. That’s why we need to advertise more opportunities in our different ways.”***



RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations emerged from the Youth Roundtables:

For Organizations

- Proactively recruit young people as volunteers rather than waiting for them to find your organization.
- Ensure that the process for becoming a volunteer with your organization is streamlined and as welcoming and accessible as possible.
- Take the time to develop relationships and a sense of belonging with young people who volunteer.
- Ensure that young people have support throughout their volunteer experience as well as agency to co-create their volunteer experience and engage in decision making within your organization.
- Say thank you and let young people volunteering know the meaningful impact they have had while they were volunteering with your organization.

For Policy Makers and Advocates

- Collect and analyze data from organizations that currently engage young volunteers to determine how organizations are approaching engaging youth in formal volunteering in a post-pandemic context and what gaps exist between what youth are seeking and what organizations are offering.
- Prioritize enhancing the capacity of organizations to host meaningful volunteer placements for young people. Ensure that these organizations are youth-friendly and that they offer appropriate support and meaningful engagement of young people. This could take the form of training and increased funding for organizations that successfully engage young people as volunteers.



WHAT'S NEXT?

Volunteer Canada is working with our partners to continue fostering youth engagement in volunteering and to contribute to the development of a national youth volunteer action plan. Next steps include:

1. Capacity Building and Support: Develop tailored training programs and resources for organizations to bolster their ability to engage and support young volunteers effectively. Advocate for increased funding and resources to aid organizations, especially those serving marginalized communities, to involve young volunteers successfully.	2. Sharing Findings: Widely disseminate the project findings and a comprehensive report to key stakeholders, including non-profit organizations, government agencies, policy makers, and youth advocacy groups.	3. Implementation and Evaluation: Work closely with stakeholders to implement and assess the effectiveness of the recommendations in enhancing youth engagement in formal volunteering.
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Volunteer Ottawa, Volunteer Waterloo Region, the Community Sector Council of Newfoundland and Labrador, the five members of the Youth Advisory Table, and all the young people who participated and shared their valuable insights and experiences throughout the Youth Roundtables.

APPENDIX A – GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Engagement	Participation in the political process and in organizations, groups, or networks built around a common interest. Sometimes the goal is to address major social issues, while in other cases it is simply recreational. Engagement can also include caregiving, which is when individuals provide care and support to people in their families and communities. ²⁶
Youth engagement	The intentional, meaningful, and sustained involvement of young people in actions to create positive social change. ²⁷
Volunteerism	The participation in purposeful helping activities without monetary compensation. It can involve a variety of activities, taking place occasionally over the course of a year, or a more consistent and sustained commitment, such as a weekly commitment to a specific cause. ²⁸
Formal volunteering	Doing any activity without pay on behalf of a group or organization. This includes any unpaid help provided to schools, religious organizations, or sports or community associations to name a few. ²⁹
Informal volunteering	Help given on one's own, that is, not through a group or organization. It includes help given to friends, neighbours, and relatives, but excludes help given to a person living in one's household. It also includes help given to improve the community directly through activities that are not on behalf of a group or organization. ³⁰
Mandatory community service	Mandatory community service programs and policies require participants to perform specified number of hours of service in the community in order to receive concrete benefits or to avoid serious consequences. This can include the completion of community service hours to graduate from high school or to receive social assistance. It can also stand as an alternative to prison time. ³¹
Youth	The age group of people aged 15 to 34. ³² This project focuses specifically on a subset of this group: youth aged 18 to 25.

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