

**Ottawa Child & Youth Initiative Virtual Town Hall
September 14, 2022**

Background:

In 2021, the Ottawa Child & Youth Initiative (OCYI) participated in two activities that together led to OCYI's 2022 annual meeting being held in the format of an interactive Town Hall. The first activity involved OCYI partnering in the pilot of the UNICEF Canada Child & Youth Survey of Well-being. This survey was administered in April-June 2021, with over 600 Ottawa children and youth ages nine to 18 participating. The results from the survey are now published in a series of Data Briefs summarizing the participant responses within nine indices of well-being for Canadian children and youth. The Data Briefs can be found on www.ocyi.ca under "Communications" and the subheading "Child & Youth Well-being Survey," or at this [direct link](#).

The second activity entailed the development and finalization of a new OCYI Strategic Direction. Starting in 2019, OCYI's Steering Committee began developing a new Strategic Direction for OCYI. This work was paused during the initial years of the COVID-19 pandemic. In June 2021, a Plenary Session brought together the greater OCYI community to discuss what Ottawa's children and youth need to grow up great, and how OCYI can best support organizations working with children and youth. The conversation from that event was reviewed by the Steering Committee, leading to the adoption of a new Strategic Direction in December 2021. The centre of the Strategic Direction is the long-term objective, which guides the umbrella of OCYI's work:

Increase awareness, access, and alignment of mental health, substance use health, appropriate use of technology, and gambling resources in each Ottawa neighbourhood to achieve equitable, diverse, and inclusive support for infants, children, youth, and their families.

Once completed, these two pieces of work, the survey Data Briefs and the newly adopted Strategic Direction, came together to form the foundation of the OCYI 2022 Town Hall. The Town Hall was further designed to be an opportunity to discuss the Data Briefs, and thus further understand how OCYI's Steering Committee and Task Groups can progress in working towards the long-term objective.

Event and panel:

The Town Hall took place as a virtual event on Wednesday, September 14, 2022. First, a welcome and review of 2021-2022 OCYI activity highlights, by Steering Committee co-chairs Johanne Levesque and Kelly Raymond. Then, focus shifted to the Data Briefs. Dr. Sue Bennett of CHEO provided some background information on the Child & Youth Survey of Well-being, and OCYI project coordinator, Karen Kennedy, offered a brief summary of Ottawa's responses and limitations. The rest of the Town Hall was composed of a youth panel and then audience breakout rooms to further discuss the Data Briefs and the panel conversation.

The youth panel, moderated by Rachel Gouin, Executive Director of Le Centre d'appui et de prévention (Le CAP), an OCYI Steering Committee member, featured five youth panelists: Akeelah, Alex, Angelina, Munea, and Niteesha. These youth panelists ranged in age from 15 to early 20s, and were identified for participation through OCYI partner organizations. As one known limitation of the survey responses was that there was not a representative sample collected, the panelists were able to share and amplify voices that were underrepresented in the survey results.

Thanks to the enthusiastic preparation and advance study of the Data Briefs undertaken by each panelist, the panel conversation flowed both naturally and easily. Taking turns, the youth panelists illustrated their shared passion for the support of the mental health and well-being of Ottawa's young residents. The conversation was grounded in three questions:

1. What in the survey results resonated with you?
2. What is missing in the survey results?
3. What should OCYI and the organizations represented here today be doing to better support Ottawa's children and youth so that they can grow up great?

What was heard:

Throughout the panel conversation and in the subsequent breakout rooms, facilitators kept notes, summarized below. The purpose of this transcription is to hold OCYI and those present accountable. The youth panelists identified some key takeaways OCYI and its network of organizations could readily implement to better support the mental health and well-being of Ottawa's children and youth. As that this is directly aligned with OCYI's long-term objective, the results of the OCYI Town Hall have provided a timely opportunity for action and response.

Survey:

- The children and youth who would have most benefitted from having their voices heard by the survey seemed to be those who were missing the most from the responses
- The survey results missed a number of cultural backgrounds, did not touch on non-binary or gender fluidity groups, did not go into detail about complex and/or chronic medical conditions and disabilities, had a low Indigenous voice, unclear on rural or children/youth in care voice; the lack of diversity is concerning
- Modernize data collection: the survey is not overly inviting of youth to share their experiences
- Surveys can feel authoritative, bureaucratic, and institutional
- Survey data around substance use and addiction does not match the experience of the panelists nor the audience members, seems to be an underreporting
- Only a quarter of the respondents were male, disengaged male youth was a noted concern of several attendees
- Often the people most passionate about change are the ones who need it, and were least likely to have access to responding to the survey
- Surprised to see that 68% of respondents said they were comfortable talking to their parents, this sentiment was not reflective of participants' experiences
- Surprised to see the differences between francophone and anglophone on well-being; curious why this is
- Heartened to see youth said they felt a linkage in a crisis, can that be strengthened?
- Data set said 60% felt a strong sense of belonging, not sure that number is reflective
- Housing instability can often be hard to see for youth
- Going to school can be a positive escape for many youth with negative home experiences, the pandemic lockdowns made that very hard
- Survey language and wording could have used youth input
- Several notes suggested that it would have been nice if the school boards were involved in collection of the data as that this may have increased diversity of respondents
- This survey is a good conversation starter
- Survey can feel overwhelming if a youth is already feeling marginalized
- Poor mental health can and does result in loss of life, meaning that those individuals are not in the data

- 25% of respondents were age nine to 12, many from this age group have not returned to before and after school child care and may be missing out on peer engagement

Youth engagement:

- Belonging is important to wellness and youth engagement
- Having an actual space for youth to be is important
- Including the voice of youth should be baked into how youth-serving programs operate, and it should be in a way that is accessible to youth
- Even younger voices (under 12) should have the opportunity to be included in shaping programs for them
- Potential mechanism for incorporating youth voice into OCYI's work: have a youth panel validate action plans of the Task Groups and Steering Committee
- "Picnic tables over meetings, motions and movements"
- Human support, both in peer friendship and through family, is key for all of the panelists
- OCYI should work with existing partners that have youth groups
- Digital divide inhibits engagement
- Kids/youth don't always know how to access resources and often don't know what resources are available, they want/like to hear from their peers
- The pandemic magnified the issue of not safe enough outdoor activities for kids to do
- To incentivize those kids to speak, it REALLY needs to be a safe space: 1:1 and as non-judgemental as possible
- We need to figure out how to hear the voices of the quieter kids/youth and then make sure they are heard.
- Kids and youth want to be involved
- Connecting with youth needs a qualitative approach

Lessons, actions and questions:

- More advocacy for children in care
- School boards need to advocate for the children and youth in their care each day
- Youth want more early preventative health conversations
- Is it a human right to have access to connectivity?
- Lessons learned from the pandemic: encourage more contact, using land based activities as mechanisms to favor connection and collaboration
- Advocacy is key, children and youth need to be prioritized today
- There is a difference between mental health and mental illness
- Cultural lenses affect stigma around mental health, so support needs to be culturally sensitive
- Support the youth who are taking on projects
- Supports in lower income neighbourhoods were acknowledged, with panelists particularly noting value in BGC clubhouses and the support some had received via CAS Ottawa
- Audience members expressed how impressed they were impressed with the way the young panelists were able to speak with such authenticity, clarity and confidence
- A suggestion was made that perhaps there should be more consideration of how agencies serving the 0-6 age group could also support families who also have older children