



**Abstract Title:** The power of youth engagement in policy, programs and knowledge translation

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## **Introduction/Background**

Though national and international bodies articulate the need for the engagement of persons with lived experience of illness into the design of their own care, we don't yet know enough about how to do this. At the population level, young people have traditionally been excluded from shaping public health policy and/or programs in a significant way. Yet, youth engagement is recognized in various disciplinary areas as an effective strategy for individual and community development.

Engagement in the decisions that affect them is positive for both youth and services across various sectors (Checkoway, 2013). The Lancet Commission on Adolescent Health and Wellbeing (2017) concurs that youth engagement supports youth wellbeing (Lancet Commission, 2017). Young people hesitate to seek mental health treatment because of their lack of knowledge about mental health and treatment options, stigma, as well as negative health care experiences (Dunne, Bishop, Avery & Darcy, 2017). However, when engaged, young people are likely to maintain a commitment to recovery and seem to develop additional coping skills (Dunne et al, 2017). Youth engagement can lead to increased social inclusion, which is a support for mental wellness, and youth engagement seems particularly effective in health promotion services (Burns & Birrell, 2014). Research has also found lower levels of mental health issues reported amongst young people who have been engaged (Berry 2007 as cited in Burns, 2014). In addition, youth-engaged spaces and processes can help overcome stigma as a barrier to treatment (McGorry, 2013). Increased benefits are derived from fully participatory models where young people are engaged in program identification, design and implementation (Dunne et al, 2017). Done well, with positive youth development principles at the core, youth engagement is good for everyone.

However, processes of engagement require specific approaches, with evidence showing that effective participation differs amongst groups and in different contexts. An organization that commits to youth engagement implicitly commits extra time, effort and resources — as well as a certain loss of control — to bringing youth voices to the table.

## **Purpose**

This presentation will provide an overview of current youth engagement in research and programming that supports the mental health and well-being of children and youth in challenging contexts, drawing upon the experience of Wisdom2Action.

## **Approach or action**

Youth engagement is at the heart of all that we do at Wisdom2Action. It's a commitment, an approach and a promising practice that we promote across the youth serving sector. Young people gather on our Youth Advisory Committee, they sit on our Governing Board, identify and develop projects, lead mentoring projects with other organizations on youth engagement and lead our community engagement events. Since 2013, we have been providing guidance and training to organizations and governments across Canada and internationally on youth engagement. We have also modelled youth engagement as a promising practice through our public events.

In 2013, we completed a knowledge synthesis report on youth engagement (Zinck, Ungar, Whitman, Exenberger, LeVert-Chaisson, Liebenberg, Ung, & Forshner, 2013). In 2018, this report was updated in advance of the first national Canadian conference on youth engagement led by Wisdom2Action.

## Outcomes

An external evaluator recently coordinated a participatory evaluation of our youth advisory function and found the benefits of youth engagement for W2A and its youth advisors has been mutual.

## Conclusion

There are organizations across Canada who are leaders in the field of youth engagement with a focus on mental and physical health such as the Ontario Centre of Excellence on Child and Youth Mental Health, the Assembly of First Nations and the Young Canadians Roundtable on Health. On the other end of the spectrum of youth engagement, there are youth-serving organizations and public health agencies that struggle to identify how to undertake youth engagement from governance to services. Organizations are concerned about their own capacity to support youth engagement, and engagement processes that are not well designed can lead to tokenism, manipulation, and exploitation. There is evidence to support organizations in undertaking meaningful youth engagement that is aligned with organizational purpose, resources and capacity. In public health, many young people who are inspired to become involved in policies and programs do so because of their own lived experience. Working with young people with lived experience requires additional considerations and contextually specific approaches.

We would like to share the W2A story and lessons learned from organizations across Canada.

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