

EVIDENCE

Be the Program:

# 5 Year Research Report

COMMUNITY

PEER

SITE

CONTEXT

MACRO



MICRO

CONTEXT



TO

SITE

PEER

COMMUNITY

OUTCOMES

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La commission  
 des élèves du  
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*Le centre d'excellence pour  
 l'engagement des jeunes*

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## Abstract

Supplying safer spaces for youth to explore topics related to healthy relationships and dating in a flexible, responsive approach, while giving them training in specific skills related to critical thinking and influencing others, assists youth positively in their own dating relationships and advising their peers. Be the Program is a youth intervention that curates these safer spaces to equip youth influencers to support their peers to make healthier decisions, with a particular focus on improving relationship health and decreasing the prevalence of teen dating violence. Grounded in evidence from the ASSIST (A Stop Smoking In Schools Trial) in Wales, this five-year study of Be the Program explored the adaptation of the model to a healthy relationship/teen dating violence prevention focus in a national Canadian context. Findings indicate an increase in healthy relationship knowledge and behaviours and correlations between leadership, youth influence, critical thinking, and healthy relationship behaviours. Outcome disparities surfaced between genders, with girls/young women reporting more significant outcomes than their boy/young men and gender diverse peers. Findings suggest that Be the Program's peer influencer model is an effective tool to increase positive messaging to youth about healthy decision-making in relationships, thereby increasing relationship health and decreasing dating violence among youth.

# Introduction

The Public Health Agency of Canada Preventing Gender-Based Violence: the Health Perspective supported the Students Commission of Canada (SCC) to design, deliver and evaluate Be the Program from October 21, 2018 to September 30, 2023 through an investment of \$999,161.00 over five years. The overall goal of Be the Program was to assist young people and the adults who support them to identify the root causes in their environments that facilitate dating violence and utilize that knowledge to influence peers and systems.

Informed by evidence, assisted by specific skills training in motivational interviewing and influencing, youth then engaged peers in conversations and created programs to foster the spreading of knowledge, skills and behaviours that support individual healthy dating behaviours. This included the development of critical thinking skills, the application of new knowledge to individual, social, and system spaces, and the development of leadership and influence skills. Their goals expanded to supporting others to make positive changes related to relationships and teen dating violence prevention. Youth leaders also engaged adults to shift the environments that youth inhabit to address these roots causes and sustain the changes. Ultimately, Be the Program aimed to shift behaviours of youth to prevent gender-based violence perpetration and/or victimization.

During five years, the project was delivered to more than 1800 youth and 1038 adults across Canada in approximately 15 sites each year across Canada. Program partners included Experiences Canada (virtual), the Golden Youth Engagement Network (BC), which encompassed local schools and youth, New Path Youth and Family Counselling Services (ON), Flemingdon Health Centre (ON), GenerationXX (PE), Saskatoon Opportunities For Youth (SK), The ROC (ON), Chokecherry Studios (SK), Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre (MB), and Regional Multicultural Youth Council (ON). In addition, the SCC led programming through a national youth group (virtual), a “guys” group (virtual), the YDM416 youth group in Toronto (ON), and at our national #CanadaWeWant Conference in 2020.

Key findings from the evaluation supported the core program theory of change: that supplying safer spaces for youth to explore topics related to healthy relationships and dating in a flexible, responsive approach, while giving them training in specific areas skills related to critical thinking and influencing others, assists youth positively in their own dating relationships and advising their peers.

## The Evidence Springboard

Several SCC program precursors, including the Blueprint Project and Top Left, as well as local youth groups in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan and Toronto, Ontario, provided the impetus for designing Be the Program. Evidence pointed to youth struggling to navigate and maintain healthy relationships, especially within the shifting landscape of teen dating, with existing in-school curriculums not meeting their needs.

SCC utilized core program theories, including retaining adaptability, flexibility and customization for micro, specific populations (Khanna et al., 2014; World Health Organization, 2009). The cyclical Knowledge in Action (Bowen & Zwi, 2005; Graham et al., 2006; Kitson, Harvey, & McCormack 1998; Lavis et al., 2003; Tugwell et al., 2007) and Influence in Action program models were paired with an emergent and responsive participatory youth-adult partnership approach. This model of peer influencer (Roger's Theory of social contagion) was validated in a randomized clinical trial of the ASSIST program (A Stop Smoking in Schools Trial) in Southwest England and Wales, where schools reported sustained reductions in the uptake of regular smoking for two years after the students' involvement (Campbell, R et al., 2008). Another key component of the program logic model was the grounding of program activities in young people's lived experiences and centering youth as key informants with knowledge to address issues that affect them (Cahill, 2007a; Freire, 1970). Finally, three critical factors identified in the Youth Who Thrive Review of critical factors for youth programming (Khanna et al., 2014) — autonomy, relatedness, and competence—rounded out the basis of the intervention.

## Program Background and Evolution

Be the Program utilized a cyclical approach to adapting and delivering this healthy relationship Influence in Action project to youth in approximately 15 sites each year across Canada<sup>1</sup>. This included delivering the Influence in Action curriculum, working with youth to identify local realities, challenges, and assets while building on these to improve healthy relationships and reduce dating violence among youth populations on individual, social, and system levels. Each year, the program was adapted in response to youth feedback and evaluation findings, tweaked to meet the needs of sites, youth participants, and local communities. Connected to this, SCC, site staff and youth generated resources to support peers and adult allies to better understand

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix I for detailed site list.

and support healthy relationships among youth. Resources were shared internally and externally at conferences, adult ally network meetings and knowledge exchange events.

## Influence in Action Curriculum

The Influence in Action curriculum starts with creating a safer space and generating agreement among participants about the goal of the project: that is to influence peers to make positive and healthy decisions pertaining to relationship health and reducing dating violence. The SCC utilizes its Four Pillars: Respect, Listen, Understand, Communicate™, an evidence-informed anti-oppression framework (Khanna, N, Drabentstott, M, McCart, S, Ramey, H, Legare, M, & Berardini, Y. Forthcoming) and its evidence-informed Social Identity Formation and Safer Spaces Model to build the foundation of a safer space. In practice, this manifests as exploring the Four Pillars, applying them to co-create guidelines for the space with youth, engaging in icebreaker and community building activities, and using these activities to practice staged vulnerability. Staged vulnerability invites participants in the space to share candidly, first through anonymous mechanisms and gradually moving towards named sharing (The Students Commission of Canada and Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement, 2019). It is important that adults and staff/facilitators in the space participate in the curation of the safer space and engage in the practice of vulnerability (The Students Commission of Canada and Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement, 2019). The modeling of these behaviours by an adult or peer who is met with empathy can set the stage for a trusting youth-adult relationship and reinforce vulnerable behaviours among youth participants if the trusting relationship with the adult already exists (The Students Commission and Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement, 2019; Brown, 2012). The curriculum then moves into exploring facts and underlying factors that impact relationship health on individual, social, and system levels. A series of activities support participants to unpack root causes of relationships, including exploring gender norms and facts about teen dating and gender-based violence. Youth work with the CARS acronym (credibility, accuracy, reliability, and sources) to identify facts, explore personal boundaries in relationship contexts, explore healthy/unhealthy relationship behaviours, and apply this learning through scenarios and vignettes to making healthier decisions in relationship contexts. Next steps move into applying skills to address relationship challenges peers are facing, including identifying and leveraging the five Stages of Change (Transtheoretical Model of Change) (Prochaska & DiClemente, 2005), identifying when a peer is thinking about making change in their lives, applying the SCC's Four Pillars™ and utilizing active listening models and key messages to have 'change' conversations with peers.

The Influence in Action Be the Program Curriculum was provided to SCC team members and site facilitators in a comprehensive guide (90 pages) with a package of corresponding materials for

curriculum delivery. This guide included a discussion of the theoretical framework as well as detailed instructions on the delivery of multiple mandatory and optional activities for each module. The curriculum guide was updated based on youth and facilitator feedback as necessary. When Covid-19 pandemic restrictions forced many sites to move to virtual facilitation, if only temporarily for some, virtual activity options along with corresponding virtual platform activities (PollsEverywhere, Mentimeter, Miro Board) were integrated into the curriculum.

This Be the Program curriculum was an adaptation and expansion of an original curriculum related to preventing drug use developed in 2010 by Heather Ramey, PhD Candidate, Brock University and Heather Chalmers, PhD, Brock University with The Students Commission, lead of The Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement. Springing from the core influencer theories of Roger's Diffusion Theory and the ASSIST program, Drs. Ramey and Chalmers added significant curriculum related to motivational listening, theories of behaviour change and the SCC's Four Pillars.

In 2021, the SCC team determined that an alternative to the comprehensive guide would be beneficial for experienced facilitators and those familiar with SCC foundational practices (the Four Pillars™, the Safer Spaces Model). The team created cards, or single sheets for each key activity. Each card included the activity instructions while excluding detailed facilitator scripts that are not necessary for experienced facilitators or those who have previously facilitated the curriculum. Experienced curriculum facilitators utilized the cards for curriculum delivery.

## Site Details

Overall, Be the Program curriculum was delivered at 26 sites, including nine schools, nine community organizations (including the SCC's Toronto location), three conferences, three virtual sites, and two First Nations. Sites were located in British Columbia (6), Saskatchewan (5), Manitoba (1), Ontario (6), Prince Edward Island (1), Nova Scotia (1), and nationally (6) through conferences or virtual means. While the majority of sites (13) were facilitated by SCC staff members, ten sites were facilitated by staff from partner organizations. One organization took a blended approach, having the SCC facilitate some sessions and site organization staff facilitate others. Two sites transitioned from having the SCC facilitate the program to facilitating it themselves.

The core Influence in Action Curriculum was delivered, in some cases, in short sessions (1-2 hours) over a period (weekly or monthly over the course of the year) and, in others, the curriculum was delivered in large chunks (6-8 hours) over a weekend. Curriculum delivery frequency and timing was directed by a number of factors, including: the location of the youth

group (school vs. community site), the frequency of group meetings, the content focus or other priorities of the group or organization, and youth interests or goals.

It is important to note that national virtual programming was intentionally and consistently held virtually, while local sites oscillated between in-person and virtual program delivery over the course of the Covid-19 Pandemic restrictions. Restrictions varied across municipalities and over time. For example, a community health centre located in an urban region had to pause the program from 2020-2022 to address health concerns in its community. In contrast, a community organization in a small town paused programming for a short period of time and returned to in-person programming within approximately six months of the program going on hiatus. A community organization in an urban area moved from in-person programming to virtual programming as pandemic restrictions were levied. As restrictions ceased, the majority of sites returned to in-person program delivery, with one continuing a hybrid delivery style; an in-person and virtual program would begin together, with a shared check-in, and then split into a virtual session on zoom and an in-person session held in-person locally, each with their own consistent facilitator. Diverse and localized pandemic restrictions across Canada meant that the pandemic affected each site differently, requiring the SCC and sites to adapt the curriculum and continue to adapt as restrictions ebbed and flowed.

## Key Activities and Outputs

Be the Program began with a series of design labs with youth, which provided space for youth to share local realities. The result was a curriculum delivered with adaptations for each site.

Most sites had existing youth groups and integrated the curriculum into these youth groups, while some hosted special events or recruited interested youth to deliver curriculum.

Curriculum delivery began in the fall of 2019. Be the Program was delivered on a cyclical basis, with four program cycles over the course of the five-year project. The program was delivered to 26 sites with a total of 1742 youth participants. These youth, alongside adult allies, generated 95 knowledge products, including workshop guides, event guides, and social media and printed media content.

Adaptation	Frequency	Example
Youth steward of discussion topics	4	Integrating mental health activities/discussions
Guest speakers	1	Speaker on trafficking
Adapted for age group	5	Converted discussions to activities; adapted activities/discussions to address platonic relationships for younger age groups; divided youth by age groups so they could address topics in ways that were more relevant to them
Altered activity structure	2	Adapted activities to discussion; completed goal setting through one-on-one interactions with facilitator vs. group setting
Culturally relevant lens	1	Indigenous lens, incorporating material on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW)
Youth-generated content	1	Safe Partying and Sexual Assault Workshop
New activities to explore topics	2	Added yoga and mindfulness sessions to equip youth to deal with difficult topics; added movie nights where youth dissected relationships in media and media portrayals of different genders, their impact on youth

## Phases of Be the Program

### *Recruitment of youth groups or youth participants*

Site partners are engaged to deliver program and evaluation with local youth. Some partners have existing youth groups at which they delivered the programs while others recruit through their networks.

### *Baseline evaluation*

Youth participants complete a welcome package within the first two sessions of the program.

### ***Training of peer influencers***

The purpose of the training program is to equip peer influencers to have conversations with their peers about healthy decision-making, particularly about relationships with the intended outcome of decreasing teen dating violence.

Each program site determines the training schedule for their youth participants, based on need, availability, and capacity. Some site programming was led by local facilitators (10) and some by SCC facilitators (13).

The training aims to:

- a. Develop critical thinking skills so that peer influencers could support their peers to think through relationship challenges critically;
- b. Equip youth with evidence to ensure a clear understanding of relationship violence and how it impacts youth populations;
- c. Develop influencing skills, which focus on applying active listening, critical thinking and leveraging evidence to support peers to make healthy decisions.

Housed within these goals are opportunities to access and benefit from safety, particularly through the co-creation of safer spaces where youth can share, question, and learn candidly; to develop agency by stewarding the program based on their needs, interests and goals; to develop autonomy by engaging with and applying the materials to address peers' needs and goals; to build relatedness through belonging within their group, connection with their peers, facilitators, and local adult allies; and to develop competence, including leadership skills and communication skills.

Methods to achieve these goals and outcomes include youth-adult partnership, participatory action research, experiential learning, co-creation of knowledge mobilization products, and reflection exercises.

### ***Intervention period***

The intervention period varies from site to site. The period includes delivery of the Be the Program curriculum training, the exploration of local challenges, and the co-creation of knowledge mobilization products.

### ***Knowledge Sharing***

In youth-adult partnerships, sites share their knowledge mobilization products with broader audiences to increase relationship knowledge and skills in their communities.

# Methodology

The Program's model was designed to have two levels of intervention and impact: a macro level and a micro level. Findings and learnings from one level were intended to influence the other over the course of the program; for example: local learnings at one site were shared across sites and at national events, while national trends and evidence influenced program activities:

## Project Logic Model

**MACRO core intervention with Design Lab cycle: repeats over multiple years to ensure repeated engagement, ownership, agency of youth influencers and leaders**

Evidence	Design Labs (Online + Conference)	Product Production	Youth Action	Communication	Some of the Outcomes	Evaluation Measures/Tools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Literature Review</li> <li>➤ Youth PAR research: (Sharing Circles)</li> <li>➤ (Needs Assessment)</li> <li>➤ (Adult Assessment of their site Context)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Multisensory</li> <li>➤ Interactive</li> <li>➤ Produces</li> <li>➤ Ownership</li> <li>➤ Engagement</li> <li>➤ Relevance</li> <li>➤ Draft Products</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Core Curriculum</li> <li>➤ Booster sessions for youth</li> <li>➤ Tools for youth and adults to mobilize knowledge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Youth Influencers</li> <li>➤ Youth Audiences</li> <li>➤ Adult Audiences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Youth Advocacy Campaign</li> <li>➤ Youth2Adult workshops</li> <li>➤ Legacy Website</li> <li>➤ Knowledge Mobilization Event</li> <li>➤ Publications</li> </ul>	<p><b>Youth</b> Increased knowledge Healthier dating habits</p> <p><b>Adults</b> Increased knowledge Active on root causes</p> <p><b>Environments</b> Support, engagement of youth voice re root causes and naming of them to reduce TDV effect</p>	<p><b>Youth</b> Healthy Relationship Knowledge and Skills Relationship Management Consistent Use of Healthy Relationship Skills</p> <p><b>Adults</b> Context/Reflection Interviews Activity Maps</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Core Elements:</li> <li>➤ throughout stages</li> <li>➤ Youth voice and engagement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Youth leadership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Youth adult partnership (YAP)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Experiential learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Values Base</li> <li>➤ Four Pillars: Respect, Listen, Understand, Communicate™</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Safety</li> <li>➤ Agency</li> <li>➤ Autonomy</li> <li>➤ Relatedness</li> <li>➤ Competence</li> </ul>	<p>Preparing to Lead Critical thinking Perceptions of Influence Context/Reflection Interviews Activity Maps</p>

### Supports and Capacity Building

Evidence	Design Labs (Online + Conference)	Product Production	Youth Action	Communication	Some of the Outcomes	Evaluation Measures/Tools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Adult Allies (YAP) (Implementation)</li> <li>➤ Academics: REB Ethics oversight, research training</li> <li>➤ Evaluation Coaches (Implementation)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Curriculum Writers</li> <li>➤ Content Experts</li> <li>➤ Program Designers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Training Manual Youth Influencers</li> <li>➤ Training Manual Adult Allies</li> <li>➤ Ongoing monthly Adult Ally Network Meetings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Booster &amp; Reflection Sessions</li> <li>➤ Coaching Services</li> <li>➤ Intervention Research Support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Data Parties</li> <li>➤ Intervention Research Data Collection</li> <li>➤ Process Evaluation</li> <li>➤ Longitudinal Study</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Tested, replicable, peer-reviewed core intervention (above), customizable for a variety of contexts and types of programming (below). Intervention tools hosted on legacy website.</li> </ul>	

## MICRO implementations of MACRO process in Sites and Partner Programs

Evidence	Design Labs (Online + Conference)	Product Production	Youth Action	Communication	Some of the Outcomes	Evaluation Measures/Tools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Local intervention sites</li> <li>➤ Engage, assess (PAR) with local youth in Sharing Circles, review evidence</li> <li>➤ National, provincial partners insert adapted intervention in their programs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Youth Influencers from each site attend national conference</li> <li>➤ Youth Influencers review evidence, design their interventions, engage all youth in core processes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Additional support products for their interventions locally developed by youth (e.g. posters, workshops, presentations, social media images, messages)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Implementation of their interventions for youth, adults</li> <li>➤ Participation in intervention research through reflections sessions, survey completion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Site to site exchanges</li> <li>➤ Presentations, workshops to decision makers</li> <li>➤ Participation in Data Parties</li> </ul>	<p><b>Youth</b> Increased knowledge Healthier dating habits</p> <p><b>Adults</b> Increased knowledge Active on root causes</p> <p><b>Environments</b> Support, engagement of youth voice re root causes tailored to local context and naming of them to reduce effect</p>	<p><b>Youth</b> Healthy Relationship Knowledge and Skills Relationship Management Consistent Use of Healthy Relationship Skills</p> <p><b>Adults</b> Context/Reflection Interviews Activity Maps</p>

The SCC utilized a mixed methods approach to evaluate the process and outcomes of Be the Program. Evaluative data was collected from two populations: youth participants and program facilitators.

**Quantitative:**

For youth participants, changes related to program outcomes were evaluated. Outcomes measured were: increased knowledge and skills to understand and identify teen dating violence, increased leadership skills, improved critical thinking, increased perceptions of influence, improved relationship management, and increased consistent use of healthy relationship skills. This was achieved through five quantitative survey tools at the initial data collection and six at all following data collections.

**Initial data collection survey tools (timepoint 1 – welcome package)**

- Preparing to Lead
- Critical thinking
- Perceptions of Influence
- Relationship Management
- Consistent Use of Healthy Relationship Skills

**All following data collection survey tools (all following timepoints – annual start and annual end)**

- Preparing to Lead
- Critical thinking
- Perceptions of Influence
- Relationship Management
- Consistent Use of Healthy Relationship Skills
- Knowledge and Skills

In practice, when a new program was initiated at a site or a new youth joined an existing program, they completed a welcome package. In addition to the above-named surveys, youth also completed a comprehensive demographics questionnaire. Following the welcome package, youth would complete annual start and end survey packages.

### **Qualitative:**

Qualitative data was collected from site facilitators working directly with youth participants. Following the delivery of each session, the site facilitator would complete an Activity Map, which asked questions about who was in the room, what was covered, what conversations had momentum, and if any changes in knowledge, behaviours or attitudes surfaced during the conversation.

At the start of the program, site facilitators participated in a context interview, which outlined the history, social dynamics, and other contextual factors of the space/youth group. At the completion of the program, site facilitators participated in a reflection interview outlining changes they had observed at the individual, social and system levels in their space/among their youth.

***The pandemic and related restrictions impacted program delivery and program evaluation. During the pandemic, to complement the quantitative survey data, which had become difficult to collect in many virtual contexts, focus groups were hosted at three active sites with youth participants. These occurred between March and December 2021, with timing aligning with the site's program cycle.***

### **Study Design and Analysis**

Quantitative data analyses were performed. For each variable, descriptive statistics were collected (means and percentages) for each time point. Correlational analyses took place to examine relationships between some variables. Then repeated t-tests were conducted to examine whether any statistically significant changes took place from the first data collection (time 1) and the final data collection (time 4). Since some program outcomes could have been due to sample differences, we ran independent sample t tests and Anovas to test whether differences existed among some demographic variables (gender differences, grade differences, sexuality, living rural/urban).

Qualitative data was analyzed as an aggregate, applying a combined inductive and deductive approach. Multiple coders worked together to create a coding schema. These codes were grounded in The Students Commission of Canada's Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement's (CEYE) evidence-based Youth Engagement Framework, which includes initiators,

sustainers, and outcomes at individual, social and system levels (Rose-Krasnor et al., 2007), and the Youth Engagement Program Qualities (Khanna et al., 2014) identified in the comprehensive literature review Youth Who Thrive. Beyond these two frameworks, a combination of an in-vivo coding process and descriptive coding process allowed new codes to emerge from the raw data. In this way, both the participants' own words and the interpretation of the responses yielded new codes. The in vivo, inductive, deductive codes were brought together to create our results section. Prevalent codes according to number of mentions are described in the sections that follow with supporting quotations directly from youth, facilitators, and/or site leads (coordinating partners).

## Limitations

Quantitative results were based on responses to self-report surveys, which can be prone to social desirability bias. Survey responses were relatively high at time point 1, demonstrating that perhaps respondents either knew the answer that was favourable or correct regarding social norms or that they overestimated their knowledge or skills based on a lack of information and understanding of the topics. Observational data from Activity Maps completed by program facilitators suggest that youth, over the course of the program, recognized that certain individual behaviours were unhealthy for both themselves and others and made decisions to change those behaviours. This may suggest that youth did not understand as much about relationship violence and unhealthy behaviour as the initial surveys suggest.

The Covid-19 pandemic hindered timely collection of data from program participants leading to decreased survey completion. Many sites had to pause or cease programming when pandemic restrictions were implemented (March 2020). This meant that many participants who completed a welcome package were not re-engaged and did not complete any additional time points. The shift from in-person delivery, often paired with paper survey collection, to virtual delivery and online data collection, meant that rates of survey completion fell. At the end of an in-person program session, with a facilitator nearby for support, many youth did the surveys immediately and submitted them for processing. In the virtual context, youth were provided links and instructions for online completion, but this did not facilitate youth completing surveys. Technical trouble, difficulty comprehending survey language, and potential lack of motivation may have hindered online survey completion. Program staff observed as well that as the pandemic restrictions continued in certain locations for months, youth experienced 'zoom fatigue', not wanting to participate in programming via virtual platforms.

As this was a community-based program delivered at diverse locations across Canada, it was difficult to control for all of the potential variations in data collection. The program was

delivered differently at each site, sometimes over a weekend, sometimes weekly for three months, etc., and duration between timepoints was not consistent across program sites. At certain sites, youth were in the program for multiple years. This led to greater evolution and/or adaptation of the program over time in those spaces, as well as multiple data collections over a longer period of time with more exposure to programming. Some sites had new youth each year or program cycle, meaning that youth likely only had the opportunity to participate in two data collections (welcome and annual end of year). In sites that ran drop-in style, youth were not expected to attend all sessions. This meant that some youth would miss data collection dates. Efforts were made to extend data collection opportunities to youth who missed data collections, but as noted above, on-line data collection did not ensure youth completion of the survey package.

Finally in terms of limitations, while many sites delivered the program along a school year cycle (fall to late spring), some did not, meaning there was variation between annual start time points and annual end time points across sites.

# Analysis

## Demographics

During the five years, the project was delivered to 1742 youth across Canada. A sample of those youth participated in data collection for the intervention research (n=307). The average age of the participants was 18 years old. Of the participants, 35% identified as men, 58.5% as women, and 6.5% as other gender identities (n=294). The majority of participants identified as straight (74.3%), with the remainder identifying as Queer (25.7%)(n=269) — youth used a variety of different terms, grouped as queer. Of the participants surveyed, 14.7% identified as having disability; 19.2% were born outside of Canada, with 72.8% identifying as living in urban settings and 27.2% living in rural settings (n=265). The most represented provinces were Ontario (41.2%), British Columbia (34%), Prince Edward Island (11.3%), and Saskatchewan (8.6%) (n=289).

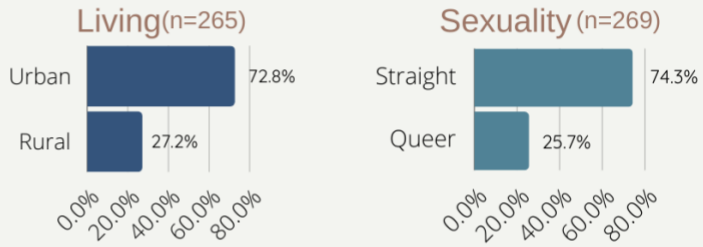
# Demographics Picture

Be the Program Survey Respondents 2018-2023

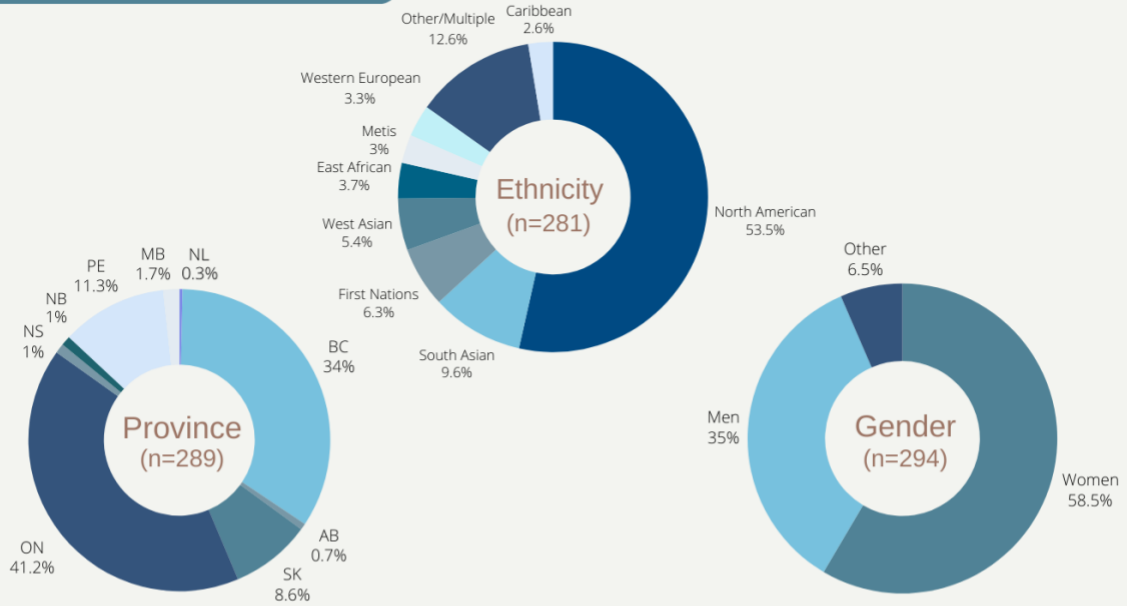
**307** total youth  
**18** avg. age

**14.7%** (n=45) of youth had a disability or accessibility needs

**19.2%** (n=59) were born outside of Canada



(n=289)	English	French	Arabic	Bangla	Other/Multiple
Youth	67.8%	13%	1.6%	1%	28.3%



Do you have enough... (n=281)	Not at All	Hardly Ever	Sometimes	Mostly	Always
Money for Needs	3.9%	1.1%	12.1%	27.4%	55.5%
Money for Wants	4.6%	8.5%	19.2%	35.9%	31.7%

## Quantitative Analysis

Youth in Be the Program learned about healthy relationships and teen dating violence prevention, as demonstrated through the analysis of the survey responses from the end of the program (pre-post comparisons will be detailed below). Of the participants who completed the Knowledge and Skills tool at the end of the program (n=161), 69% indicated an increase in knowledge and 66% indicated an increase in skills. Overall, youth pointed to the application of their learning to relationships; at the end of the program, the Consistent Use of the Healthy Relationship Skills tool indicated that out of 258 youth, 55.4% (143 youth) said mostly and 34.5% (89 youth) said they always used healthy relationship skills. With regards to the Relationship Management indicator of the Social-Emotional Competence tool, at the end of program, of 260 youth, the majority (170 youth, 65.4%) said they practiced apologizing, being tolerable, comforting, and not criticizing to reduce incidence or potential for violence and conflicts.

Specifically, youth noted that they learned about active listening through OARS (Open-ended questions, Affirming, Reflecting, Synthesizing), identifying misinformation, distinguishing myths and opinions, and gender norms. They also indicated gaining a deeper understanding of gender, consent, and harmful relationship behaviours. Youth learned about topics that fell outside of the Be the Program curriculum specifically but surfaced in program discussions. Youth learned about mental health and self-care, reconciliation and issues pertaining to Indigenous wellbeing, and generally the impact of culture on perspectives and understandings related to dating.

Importantly in relation to the program theory, after the program, youth identified they felt increased perception of influence at individual, social, and system levels. This was demonstrated through a statistically significant increase measure in the Perceptions of Influence tool from the first collection to the last (time 1 (n = 86; mean = 2.49, SD = .59) and time 2 (M = 2.62, SD = .56),  $t(85) = -2.4$ ,  $P < .009$ ). The scope and flexibility of the program delivery across sites, particularly during the pandemic, did not provide for measuring the results of youth exercising their influence with peers, however, the core program theory from the ASSIST randomized clinical trial indicates that this type of social contagion transmission of knowledge is highly effective (Campbell, R et al., 2008).

Key findings demonstrate that the outcomes measured are correlated, suggesting that safety, critical thinking, and leadership outcomes are positively correlated with relationship health outcomes.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
Self-Efficacy	-	.25*	.39**	.30**	.39**	.40**
Relationship management		-	.60**	.28**	.56**	.61**
Preparing to Lead			-	.41**	.78**	.65**
Perceptions of Influence				-	.32**	.34**
Critical thinking					-	.58**
Consistent use of healthy relationship						-

**Note:** \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001.

For example, there were large correlations (above .5) between the findings with these Key Performance Indicators: Relationship Management and Consistent Use of Healthy Relationship Skills; Critical Thinking indicators with both relationship scales; and Preparing to Lead indicators with both relationship scales. This means that critical thinking and leadership outcomes are associated with higher scores on relationship outcomes. Supporting youth to build critical thinking skills and leadership skills can have far-reaching positive outcomes as youth begin to apply these new skills across different behaviours. Programming that improves critical thinking and leadership may, in fact, be associated with relationship health even if that’s not the intended outcome. Beyond this, the Safe Environment indicator is correlated with Consistent Use of Healthy Relationship Skills, Relationship Management, and Preparing to Lead (all above .5). This implies that the safety of the space is related to the effective achievement of leadership and relationship outcomes and affirms the SCC’s approach to spend significant time building a safer space with youth participants prior to discussing healthy relationships.

In terms of program efficacy, the SCC wanted to learn more about differences across demographics—was the program more effective at achieving the intended outcomes for certain populations? We learned that youth who identified as straight/heterosexual had greater outcomes associated with perceptions of influence than those who did not [ $t(238) = 3.27, p < .001$  majority sexuality groups ( $M = 2.67, SD = .57$ ) minority sexuality group ( $M = 2.40, SD = .58$ )]. We also learned that those who identified as girls/women scored statistically significantly higher than those who identified as boys/men across a number of outcomes and indicators, including Relationship Management (also significantly higher than those who identified as non-binary), Preparing to Lead, Perceptions of Influence (statistically significantly higher than those who identified non-binary), Critical Thinking, Consistent Use of Healthy Relationship Skills, Safe Environment, Youth Voice, and Youth Adult Partnership. This may mean that the program was more effective for girls/women than other populations. There are several factors that could contribute to this. First, most facilitators identified as women (five site facilitators of 21 over

five years identified as men); having women leading the program may have made it more effective for young women, as discussions may have been more centered around the experiences or opinions of young women. The SCC noted that most youth who opted in to discuss healthy relationships and teen dating violence in youth groups and at conferences identified as girls/women. This may mean that the SCC requires more boy/men-identifying facilitators or more spaces exclusively for boys/men to have discussions about relationships; having girls/women in the space may have influenced the perceptions of safety of the space for boys/men.

## Qualitative Analysis

The below themes were prevalent across sites, although not necessarily reported in the data at all sites.

### Program Qualities

#### *Safe(r) Space*

Generally, youth expressed feeling safety or exhibited behaviours that indicated feeling safe. This included sharing their opinions when they could reasonably assume others would not agree with them. They indicated they were able to have healthy conversations about their differences of opinion. They practiced vulnerability and shared personal details or experiences with their peers and/or the facilitator.

*“It's a safe space, I felt safe coming here.”*

Youth were actively involved in interpreting the Four Pillars, setting group guidelines at the start of programming and were able to remind each other of the guidelines and Pillars when they felt others in the space were not respecting them.

#### *Factors Affecting Safety*

The spaces were not always equally safe for all individuals. Sites reported having some dominant youth who tended to take up a lot of time and space. Facilitators noted that having new youth join the space when the program had been ongoing challenged the safety of the space and the group needed time to return to discussions of safety. Participants were hesitant to share if they were unfamiliar with a person or people in the space or if they were not one of the dominant voices.

This meant that spaces where youth were consistently, electively present in the space reported safety more frequently. Spaces where the program was offered in a classroom or live-in treatment centre where youth did not choose to participate did not report safety as one of their key themes. Sometimes youth in these spaces were disruptive to the safety of the space, causing others to have trouble engaging with the content. Youth in these spaces reportedly were able to acknowledge the behaviours that were disruptive and ask their peers to be more respectful.

Additionally, depending on the subject matter, some youth felt unsafe in their spaces. For example, having conversations around gender identity made queer and transgender youth in some spaces feel unsafe or uncomfortable, especially if they were the only out queer person in the space.

### ***Engaging Sessions***

Facilitators most commonly observed that youth were very engaged and interested in the subject matter of the sessions across sites, years and delivery methods. Even youth who started off quiet or shy, opened up over time and were able to ask questions and engage with the activities.

Youth felt safe and were able to ask questions around sex, dating, family dynamics, mental health, culture and sexuality. A common comment from facilitators was that youth always expressed that there was never enough time for them to discuss subjects, ask all their questions and fully explore the nuances of topics.

### ***Demographics of the Group***

The make-up of the group had an important influence on the space. Several facilitators noted that youth seemed to feel more comfortable sharing when they had someone in the space who they identified with, whether that be by race, age or gender.

#### ***Gender***

Nearly 60 per cent of participants were women/girls and many sites were primarily made up of one gender; facilitators observed that men/boys were less vocal during sessions when the group was mostly women/girls and vice versa. Facilitators noted that the boys would come to them after sessions to share or talk, indicating that the youth were engaged and listening, but perhaps did not feel comfortable enough to speak.

Additionally, there were certain topics and activities that led to divides between gender groups. When completing activities around gender identities and gender norms, each group felt they

had to defend their position against the others. With facilitator guidance, these groups were often able to meet in the middle and agree that the same influences were causing each gender to experience certain expectations.

### *Guys Group*

The Guys Group ran specifically for men/boys; the facilitator noted positive observations. The facilitator noted that the youth at this site needed a space specifically for men/boys to talk about topics such as relationships and intimate partner violence in a judgement-free environment.

Participants at this site were very vulnerable about how their past behaviours had been violent and expressed a desire to change and learn to be a better partner in relationships. Youth at this site valued having a facilitator that shared their gender identity and was able to provide them one-on-one guidance.

### *Age*

Youth in the program across all 5-years varied in age between 11 and 25, with a median age of 18 years old. When the space had youth who were all within 1-3 years of their peers, the participants seemed more comfortable to discuss and share. However, when ages varied widely, older youth held back out of fear of oversharing subjects that were not age appropriate for the younger youth and the younger youth did not engage because they felt as if they did not have enough experience or perspective.

Different programming approaches worked better for each age group. Older youth did not respond as well to 'structured programmed', meaning they were more engaged when the program was unstructured, and modules were used as guidance for conversation versus completing a set group of activities. In contrast, younger youth often needed more 'facilitator led' conversations and prompting to respond, which meant activities helped spark conversations for them.

### *Group Size*

Site leads indicated that when the group was more than approximately 10 people, it seemed to reduce the safety that youth felt to share. Smaller groups experienced more vulnerability and youth were more comfortable to share. When a group was larger than 10, splitting them into small groups for activities or breakout conversations allowed youth to regain safety and have meaningful conversations with their small groups. They could share back what they discussed in large group. In contrast, having too small of a group reduced the anonymity of certain activities. One facilitator shared that their ideal size was between 5 and 10 youth at a time.

## Individual Outcomes

### *Increased Knowledge and Skills*

#### *Relationship Skills*

A common theme throughout the data is that youth developed new knowledge and skills around a variety of topics. Primarily, facilitators noted that youth improved their social and relationship skills. Youth were able to identify safe and unsafe relationship behaviours in themselves and others and how they may be able to change them. Site leads observed that youth were more aware of what boundaries are, how to identify their own and how to set those boundaries with people in their lives. This aligns with the quantitative findings that indicate increased relationship knowledge and skills.

#### *Behavioural Influences*

Youth were able to have conversations around how different cultural perspectives, family dynamics, past abuses, economic status, capitalism, technology, sexuality and gender identity play a role in the way people show up in their relationships. This empowered them to have conversations with their friends, families and peers who have different experiences than they have had and made the youth influencers more aware of why individuals in their lives may make certain choices.

*"I've become more empathetic; more open to understanding there are different beliefs for people based on their upbringing or cultures and I can use that when I talk to people now."*

#### *Communication and Listening Skills*

Through developing their relationship skills and influencer behaviours, youth were able to improve their communication and conversational skills. Facilitators noted that youth had learned new language to describe their perspectives and were able to engage in more meaningful conversations with peers, partners, families, and teachers. Youth learned the importance of active listening and how this skill is vital to their ability to influence their peers. Youth identified that they were instinctively using OARS (open-ended questions, affirming, reflective listening and summarizing) when engaging with their peers.

Youth shared the following:

*"I learned that when someone is being overprotective that isn't "cute" - that emotional abuse isn't okay. I feel like I've brought light to that in my family"*

*"I have been able to talk to not friends, but to my mom about the things I've learned here. I don't think she really understood bad signs in her relationship. But this has helped me talk with her because now I can describe it."*

Facilitators shared:

*"We [the group] put together a good list of what an influencer is in our own words and language that an influencer can use when talking to friends and peers"*

*"They [youth participants] said they were excited to go home and show their families the TEA consent video and that it would help them talk about something important in a lighthearted way."*

### *Queer Issues*

Youth shared with facilitators that they felt more deeply educated about how dating and relationships differ based on sexuality. Queer youth in spaces felt safe to discuss their experience dating as queer people and how gender expression and sexuality influence them.

*“I've learned a lot about 2SLGBTQ+ communities”*

*“I didn't know a lot about 2SLGBTQ+ communities and I've learned a lot more about this community (specifically around relationships), it made me more open minded.”*

Site leads observed that youth who did not identify as queer were able to reflect on how their behaviours in the past might have been harmful towards their queer peers and some were compelled to take accountability and apologize to the group for comments they had made.

### *Critical Thinking*

Facilitators shared that they saw an improvement over time in youths' ability to deploy critical analysis. Youth would return to the group and share how they had used what they learned the previous session to identify areas of concern in their own lives and the lives of their social group. Additionally, youth developed the ability to consider nuanced perspectives on relationships and what factors may cause a person to make certain choices such as trauma, culture, gender, economic status or family dynamics. Youth became more empathetic to other experiences and how they influence every decision that a person makes.

### *Mental Health and Self-Care*

Due to the flexible and responsive nature of the programming, sessions were youth-driven and sometimes entire days were dedicated to discussing mental health, wellness and self-care. Especially as youth navigated difficulties they were experiencing throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, youth used some of the time to discuss their mental health needs. Participants were able to lean on each other for support and social connection during that time.

Youth were able to determine clearly their boundaries and other protective factors that play into wellness and mental health. The participants developed better language to discuss mental health and how violence in relationships affects wellness.

### *Increased Confidence/Self-Esteem*

During programming, youth set goals for themselves to improve their self-esteem and shared that program activities made them feel better about themselves and their value as people.

Once they accepted themselves and their own value, they were able to see how they were allowing/accepting negative behaviours from others because they did not think they could have something better.

*"I have become more accepting of myself and who I am as a person"*

*"I've been able to see my own toxic behaviours and how they came from my insecurity and now I'm working on those."*

Conversations around how gender norms and societal expectations had an influence on their self-esteem were important for youth to connect with each other and see that their peers were feeling the same things as them.

Confidence to have conversations with their social group was an important improvement that facilitators noted; communication and self-esteem were often mentioned together in the data. Some sites also incorporated mindfulness activities that supported youth to develop their self-esteem.

## **Social Outcomes**

### ***Influencer Behaviours***

Throughout the programming, facilitators noted that influencer behaviours among their participants were emerging or improving over time. Youth were able to identify who the influencers were in their lives or peer groups and what behaviours made them influencers. As they progressed through the program modules, youth noticed that they themselves also embodied influencer traits, noting that having strong opinions on subjects and being vocal about their thoughts made them influencers.

Participants shared with facilitators that they were able to identify instinctively unhealthy behaviours in their families and friends' relationships and in their own relationships, romantic and platonic. Additionally, they expressed interest in talking about healthy/unhealthy relationships at home, in their friendships and with their own partners; they reported back to facilitators that they had done so and felt good about it.

*"I've been able to talk to my friends and bring some things to light that they didn't see in their relationships; things that were not good."*

*"I have been able to talk to not friends, but to my mom about the things I've learned here. I don't think she really understood bad signs in her relationship. But this has helped me talk with her."*

Over the course of the program, youth began to take on leadership roles in their program groups and their classrooms. They were interested in facilitating some of the activities from the program in their own classes or doing worksheets with their friends and partners to identify where they fell on the healthy relationships continuum.

*"I like how everyone is a leader here, it's different than other spaces I've been in, we all share leadership."*

Youth from one site, shared during a focus group that they held an influencer role in their friend group, but that they were unsure they held the social capital required to influence peers at school outside their own friendships.

*"Depends on status, in my own circle, yes but my voice wouldn't be heard in comparison to someone with more social status intervening."*

*"You can in your friend group but there is more to worry about when outside of it."*

### ***Improved Relationships***

Through qualitative analysis, youth shared that they ended relationships based on their learnings from Be the Program. Youth mentioned (n=11) that they began taking accountability for behaviours and actions they committed; this included ending relationships, attending counselling to address abusive behaviours, understanding the impact of past homophobic comments, and changing relationship behaviours (for example, pressuring partners to engage in sexual activity). Others supported their peers through decision-making processes around relationships. A site facilitator shared, “one couple broke up! It was mutual and they felt supported by their peers because they realized they were no longer on the same page. It was a huge relief for them and a great experience for their peers.” Another shared that a participant identified that, “he is trying to change how he treats romantic partners and is currently in a relationship with someone. He is trying to focus on his past mistakes in relationships so that he doesn’t make the same mistakes this time around.”

Youth from various sites shared with their facilitators that relationships with their partners, friends and families were improved by increased abilities to set boundaries, communicate and think critically.

Additionally, facilitators shared that they could see the strengthening in relationships between group members and with the facilitators themselves. Youth felt more comfortable sharing difficulties and experiences with others and confiding in facilitators for support or guidance.

*"I have made new friendships!"*

*"Now I have someone to talk to who knows what they are talking about."*

### ***Changed Behaviours***

The information that youth gathered, and the skills developed during this program led to some youth taking actions to change their behaviours or end unhealthy relationships.

Youth learned about boundaries and were able to set and maintain them in their relationships, both romantic and platonic. Youth were engaged to be more vocal about their friends and families' relationships and how their relationships could be causing harm.

*"I was able to uphold my boundaries, I was able to talk to someone about their negative behaviours effect on me"*

Youth were able to deploy their critical thinking skills to determine when a relationship was not healthy for them and one youth in the program ended their relationship. This set a good example for the youths' peers and friends about how they can respond to unhealthy relationship dynamics.

*"I have ended relationships that were not good for me anymore"*

Youth from different sites were able to recognize the violent and harmful behaviour they had exhibited in past relationships and express desires to change, to repair broken trust with a co-parent, and to exhibit healthier behaviour in future intimate partner relationships. Other youth were able to reflect on how their own unhealthy behaviours had hurt themselves and others in the past.

*"I've noticed that I've learned about toxic traits that everyone has that people don't know – even about myself – I tended to point people out and tended to shift the blame on someone else."*

Finally, youth felt they left the program more open-minded than when they started. They were more aware of other people's feelings and experiences and were more accepting of themselves and others.

*"It definitely helped me with keeping an open mind on having different answers on certain situations."*

## Recommendations

Youth shared a variety of topics they were interested in discussing more deeply and actions they felt should be taken with regards to improving relationships and decreasing instances of intimate partner violence (IPV), teen dating violence (TDV) and gender-based violence (GBV).

The chief recommendation was offering a similar program for adults. Participants expressed that no one taught concepts like this to the adults in their lives, so these adults lack the information to pass on good relationship habits to youth.

Online safety was suggested as a future topic; unsolicited explicit images, adults contacting youth, and dating apps were named as challenges that youth face and they feel adults are unaware of. Another topic for future workshops was the way in which family, diverse upbringings, and the examples of relationships youth see in childhood influence the way youth and young adults interact and date. Additionally, youth suggested running virtual options so more youth can participate if they don't live near the sites.

As far as raising awareness of issues surrounding IPV, TDV and GBV, the participants suggested making a school course about relationships, writing and putting on a play about some of these concerns, acting out scenarios in health classes and educating parents and adult allies.

## Implications of Findings and Conclusion

Be the Program had positive impacts on youth participants at individual and social levels, developing knowledge and skills, yielding increased healthy behaviours, and improving critical thinking and leadership outcomes. Youth reported making decisions to improve their relationships, including, when necessary, ending unhealthy relationships.

Be the Program's intentional adaptability to meet the needs of diverse communities and diverse need was a great strength. Site facilitators could integrate the program into existing structures or create new structures to deliver it; they could adapt program activities for different populations or create new ones to build on a topic of interest for their youth. In particular, during the pandemic, the program's design allowed for site facilitators to address participants' immediate needs within the framework of the program. Despite the adaptability, core elements of the program surfaced and proved impactful for youth outcomes.

Critical thinking and leadership outcomes were tied to relationship outcomes. As well, the Safe Environment indicator was correlated with relationship and leadership outcomes. This suggests that grounding the program in a safer space and focusing on critical thinking and leadership were core elements in achieving outcomes. Regardless of adaptations made by a site facilitator, these three elements remained as threads throughout the program, integrated into each module and activity. It would be beneficial to identify if these three elements could yield other positive behavioural/knowledge outcomes across diverse topics, whether in addition to or outside of healthy relationship outcomes. It could also imply that even without the topical focus on healthy relationships, a program grounded in a safer space and focusing on critical thinking and leadership could lead to positive relationship outcomes. This would be beneficial to test.

The difference in outcomes between young women/girls and other gender populations also raises some key questions around program delivery and outcomes. Young women/girls attended the program in higher numbers than their counterparts (young men/boys and non-binary youth) and reported significantly better outcomes across a number of indicators. While the prevalence of women/female-identifying facilitators may have impacted this, as noted above, it may also be valuable to explore if the content or structure of the workshop did not meet the learning and personal growth needs and goals of young men/boys or non-binary youth. As noted above, the disproportionate number of young women/girls in most groups may have compromised the safety of the space for young men, meaning that one of the core elements was not present as needed.

The program evaluation would benefit from two key additions to the evaluation framework: an exploration of the peer influencing process and a deeper exploration of systemic changes resulting from the program. The peer influencing process was described in interviews with the youth participants in the program, but evaluation of it in greater depth was difficult to implement particularly within the confines of pandemic restrictions.

In certain circumstances, broader community or system changes were named in the data, such as in the Activity Maps, but were not collected in a comprehensive way, which would allow for an in-depth analysis of systems changes. Through Activity Maps, one site facilitator shared that a teacher was allowing a student to bring their learning from the program into the classroom space; this could be considered a change within an institution. However, without additional examples of changes in the school community, it would be difficult to ascertain if this was a change across the school or limited to one teacher.

Overall, Be the Program proved a valuable program for youth participants, their peers and their families. Further delivery and evaluation would allow for a deeper understanding of the outcomes at individual, social, and system levels, as well as outcomes for indirect program participants, such as peers and family.

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