

Youth Pulse March 2026

Highlights of research, conducted with and for youth, led by The
Students Commission of Canada and the Centre of Excellence for Youth
Engagement

The Students
Commission
of Canada
Centre of Excellence for
Youth Engagement



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



What's Shaping Youth Outcomes? Spaces, Systems & Collaboration

Across Canada, youth are consistently pointing to the same factors shaping their experiences.

Summary trends from the first quarter of 2026:

1. **Smaller third spaces** are experienced by many youth as **safer and more supportive** than larger formal and public environments such as school and work, as well as at home.
2. The **right conditions (safety, values, inclusive structures)** are **key drivers of impact**, rather than program content or information alone.
3. Youth are calling for changes, for protection, from systemic forces they experience. **Awareness of the systemic influences can be a motivating force "to do something"** which in turn supports mental and physical health and engagement in community.
4. **Collaborations across community partners are being more intentionally designed** to align shared values, synergize efforts, and messaging to improve program results.

The Students Commission of Canada (SCC), with academic members of its Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement, works closely with young people and youth-serving organizations across the country. To date, SCC has evaluated 920 programs through focus groups and surveys, with 21,900 unique voices collected through quantitative methods, spanning both major organizations and grassroots groups. Highlight trends drawn from this **wide body of cross-sector data** are being shared **quarterly in these Youth Pulse reports.**¹

"I cannot tell you how much, in every meeting I went [in Germany], with Civil Society, with government, with NGOs and others, how much Canada came up as an example of how to do this [values-based work] well."

Sharif Mahdy, CEO Students Commission of Canada, March 2026

¹ For more details on the data sources referenced in this Youth Pulse, please refer to pages 7-8. **For information on how to become part of data collection for Youth Pulse: info@studentscommission.ca.**

<p>1. Today's world: larger public on/offline spaces are unsafe; small "third" spaces are working.</p>	<p>2. Impact is less driven by program content, information, more by the conditions created.</p>	
<p>3. Youth know! They see issues and solutions at individual, social, and system levels. (Calling for systems to protect them.)</p>	<p>4. Synergy of efforts: stronger collaborations are emerging; more evidence of effectiveness, ways to measure are needed.</p>	
<p><i>"I learned there is a world outside of myself and I would like to get better at seeing it."</i> - Canada We Want Conference 2026 youth participant</p> <p><i>"People only see the choices you've made, not the choices you'd had."</i> - Canada We Want Conference 2026 youth participant</p>		<p>Go Local AND Global</p> <p><i>"Being a global citizen is standing up for not just people in Canada, but for people all over the world."</i> - Canada We Want Conference 2026 youth participant</p>

Highlight Trends (Q1 2026)

1. **Smaller third spaces** are experienced by youth as **safer and more supportive** than larger formal and public environments such as school and work, as well as at home. In these third spaces, youth report greater comfort, connection and ability to be themselves, supported by more consistent and caring adult relationships. Third spaces play a critical role in helping youth navigate pressures experienced across other parts of their lives.
2. The **right conditions (safety, values, inclusive structures)** create the opportunity to process information, co-explore, critically challenge, take positive risks that build skills, and integrate and apply knowledge. Such conditions are **key drivers of impact**, rather than program content or information alone.
3. Youth readily shift their thinking from individual to social contexts, to identifying systemic forces at work. **Awareness of the systemic influences can be a motivating force and/or one of despair.** Providing concrete **opportunities "to do something"** supports youth development, including mental and physical health.

Collaborations across community partners are being more intentionally designed to align shared values, synergize efforts and messaging. This helps **drive longer term cultural shifts at the systemic level (organizations, community)** that support positive behaviours, rather than placing the responsibility on individuals alone. This is difficult to measure within a 3-5 year program and requires more time and effort to evaluate effectiveness.

"We feel validated in our work. We feel more connected to like-minded people."
 - Catapult funded project staff

1. Today's world: larger public on/offline spaces are unsafe; small "third" spaces are working.

"Teachers don't have the tools or confidence to unpack misinformation or online harms."

- Adult staff, Hearing Unheard Moments collaboration partner

"I feel like in school, they don't give attention to that [safety] because there's just so many different types of people, and so they're not able to keep tabs on everybody. Here, everybody's just kind of like similar in a way. So it's like, it's easier for us to feel more safe."

- Youth participant, Building Safer Communities Program Vancouver



Third spaces deliver results

"...builds a stronger sense of community. You're able to find other people that have somewhat of the same values of you, but on different paths of life. You're able to connect with people that are different from you in a deeper and more genuine way than you normally would."

- Make Your Mark 2025 youth participant

"I think it's all about just sharing opinions casually and just trying to learn about each other, instead of trying to coerce people into thinking like you. That is what is brilliant."

- Make Your Mark 2025 youth participant

Trend 1: Third Spaces Are Working

"*Nowhere is safe.*" Schools, recreation, media, political, civil, employment, financial systems, and even the home, are experienced as unsafe and stressful for youth themselves and their families. In effective youth programs, staff are seen as caring, present, and invested, in ways youth rarely encounter in the formal systems. For example, in programs funded by the City of Vancouver Building Safer Communities Program, **youth reported feeling 8.0% safer and 8.4% more welcomed** in their community compared to youth in the wider Vancouver community.

In effective third spaces, there are **explicit values that prioritize being curious and accepting of each other, creating safety** and support for each other, and being invested in something outside of the self, often **growing from self-care, to care for the group**, to caring for, and **contributing to something larger** such as community or a global cause. These third spaces become spaces where youth experience some **agency and control in a turbulent world**. They feel safe, relaxed, and able to be themselves, supported by a sense of trust, familiarity and community. This allows them to let their guard down and talk about pressures they say they can't talk about elsewhere.

Intergenerational responsiveness and program skills can extend impact beyond individual experiences, especially when adult allies help **connect youth insights to broader systems**. In a Prince Albert Youth Group, for example, adult staff facilitate recurring meetings every seven weeks to bring youth together with City representatives to share their perspectives on pressing issues and improve City services for youth. Training for **increased adult capacity** in these third spaces coupled with **cross-sector collaboration** is contributing to more **supportive youth ecosystems**.

"I already have ideas on how to apply this both in programming and in my life. I have many personal and professional interactions where having this framing, language, and tools are super helpful."

- Adult staff, Hearing Unheard Moments collaboration partner

"It helps to have someone physically present. It makes you feel more connected."

- Art of Work youth participant

2. Impact is less driven by program content, information, more by the conditions created.



"You don't always need to have the answer or feel like you have to solve their problems, it's about being that person who stands beside them."

- Adult facilitator, Prince Albert Youth Group

"... (the activity) is low pressure, like not high stakes. Just having that simple connection is really pleasant."

- Cultural Curiosity youth participant

Impact through approach above content

"So having a space where these kids see a lot of faces and other kids that look similar to them. It's very important, especially because they are a minority in their schools here in Halifax."

- Catapult funded project staff

"Even though I don't agree with what they said, I got curious and asked questions, and we found out it wasn't hate, it was about the curriculum."

- Adult staff, Hearing Unheard Moments collaboration partner

Trend 2: Right conditions drive impact

Programming that creates impact is often *"driven by curiosity,"* according to a Prince Albert Youth Group facilitator working with a core group of 25 young people across multiple youth programs. While sessions may be shaped by initiatives such as Hearing Unheard Moments, Art of Work, or Be the Program, conversations are not confined to set content. Instead, **adult allies and facilitators create safer, low-pressure spaces where conversations can evolve naturally.** A discussion about increased crime, for example, might move from lack of safe spaces, to mental health, to stereotypes, as youth explore how these issues show up across school, home, and community.

These environments don't happen by chance. Adult allies prioritize **deep listening, curiosity and presence over having the "right" answers.** Their role is not to direct, but to stand alongside youth, creating space for respectful dialogue, open-mindedness and pro-social engagement. **A strong sense of belonging** is also central. This means **reflecting youth identities and lived experiences, and building spaces that feel physically, emotionally, culturally and relationally safe.** With shared expectations and a willingness to learn together, young people are more likely to show up as themselves, often leading to unexpected moments of growth and connection.

Responsive, youth-driven programming also reflects effectiveness in achieving impact. In Be the Program, for example, participatory activities allow youth to guide discussions on topics such as consent, boundaries, gender, sexuality, and red/green flag behaviours. Youth bring in their own cultural contexts and lived experiences, helping them reflect on how they understand relationships in their own lives. Adult staff, teachers, youth are looking and grateful for training that assists them in creating these conditions.

"It was really heavy, but I feel better equipped to have conversations."

- Adult staff, Hearing Unheard Moments collaboration partner

"..seeing enhanced capacity to understand and overcome root causes of trauma, mental health challenges..."

- Catapult funded project staff

"[This] made me so happy! We literally did that."

- Prince Albert Youth Group participant on Instagram sharing the City's changes to transit



3. Youth know! They see issues and solutions at individual, social, and system levels. (Calling for systems to protect them.)

"When I scroll, I try to guess why the creator made it, what do they want from me [...] why do they want that?"

- Be the Program youth participant

Holistic lens: Self to system

"I've learned a lot of this stuff through lived experience... I also had challenges with the healthcare system as it's very binary... They weren't looking at uncertainty; they were looking for absolute. We exist so much in the middle." - Canada We Want Conference 2026 youth participant

"I think that if we can get youth involved in their local spaces, like the local city council, they can see actual, immediate change."

- Canada We Want Conference 2026 youth participant

Trend 3: Calling for systemic supports

"We're not adults. We're not equipped to do this on our own. We need a [supporting] adult."

- Prince Albert Youth Group participant

Youth are clear that while they see issues and solutions across individual, social and system levels, **they cannot act on them alone.** In youth programs such as Cultural Curiosity, youth engage in conversations about cultural differences, lived experiences and topics that matter to them but may not be discussed in their daily lives.

Listening to different perspectives broadens their understanding of the world and helps them recognize shared struggles across communities and history, as well as across individual, social and system levels. These shared learning experiences strengthen young people's sense of connection with one another and inspire them to stay engaged and pursue opportunities to create positive change in their communities. At the same time, **youth recognize that translating this awareness into action often requires support from adults and systems beyond their immediate reach.**

"By listening to different points of view and learning about people's everyday lives, I feel more connected and aware of the world around me. It helps me realize that even though our experiences are different, we share similar struggles and emotions."

- Cultural Curiosity youth participant

"I'm hearing a lot...about fear and affordability and employment, 'How am I going to feed and shelter myself?'"

- Adult Ally from Ontario attending the SCC Adult Ally Network meeting

"Climate change is the greatest threat to earth. I want to learn how to cope with ecoanxiety."

- Youth quote shared in the SCC Adult Ally Network meeting

"The conversations and meetings we have with youth in Prince Albert through the work of SCC are some of our most productive and meaningful. This work goes far beyond paying 'lip service' to youth engagement. Participants come to the table prepared to identify local challenges and, more importantly, to propose ideas and solutions. These conversations have already led to real, tangible change."

- City of Prince Albert Official

"A lot of the times, within this work, it is easy to feel as though you are 'in it alone'. However, that moment of realizing that we are all in this together was one that I will remember forever."

"We feel validated in our work. We feel more connected to like-minded people. We feel excited to carry on this important work alongside the Catapult community."

- Catapult funded project staff

"There's overlap between initiatives but not enough coordination."

- Adult staff, Hearing Unheard Moments collaboration partner

4. Synergy of efforts: stronger collaborations are emerging; more evidence of effectiveness, ways to measure are needed.



Strengthen collaboration

"I cannot tell you how much, in every meeting I went, with Civil Society, with government, with NGOs and others [in Germany] how much Canada came up as an example of how to do this well."

- SCC Chief Executive Officer

Trend 4: Synergy beyond collaboration

Comprehensive literature reviews related to effective youth programs have for years identified that **synergy of efforts (family, home, school, business, etc) produces better outcomes than individual programs** (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Khanna et al, 2014)).

Research and practice across multiple initiatives, including the Building Safer Communities Program Vancouver, Catapult Canada, Hearing Unheard Moments, Pathways to Education Canada, Be the Program, and the Adult Ally Network, reflect the significance of collaboration. When organizations come together, they are better able to align on the issues youth are facing, **share programs and resources, and coordinate more effectively** to address system-level challenges.

"All of these different organizations that are serving youth coming together and being able to get on the same page with what issues youth are facing, as well as sharing the programs that each of them are offering increase their ability to navigate systems for youth. They also uncover opportunities to collaborate on different innovations or solutions, so that we can address the issues that youth are raising."

- Adult staff, Hearing Unheard Moments collaboration partner

These collaborations also **create new connections across sectors that would not otherwise occur**. These efforts help build the relationships and coordinated action needed to **drive more sustained, systemic change**.

"There were nonprofit people, settlement workers, the [organization], people from the US, and there were also people who clearly, sort of live in the space of tech... so it's like this bridge between two very, very different worlds, like I would never have met these people if [facilitator] hadn't connected us."

- Adult staff, Hearing Unheard Moments collaboration partner

We listen to youth and assist them to put their ideas for change into action ...



"I think another thing is that these youth yearn to be heard as well. Because, as well, I used to be a youth. I'm 20, I'm old now, but like I used to always get shut down when I would use my voice."

These trends point to a clear direction: supporting youth requires intentional spaces, conditions, and collaboration across systems. The work ahead lies in deepening and sustaining these efforts.

"I remember having discussions in our groups about some of the challenges that we faced as a charitable organization. We then were able to share these thoughts out loud and hearing that other organizations were facing the exact same challenges that we were was very validating. A lot of the times, within this work, it is easy to feel as though you are 'in it alone' however that moment of realizing that we are all in this together was one that I will remember forever." Catapult adult participant at knowledge mobilization Gathering of funded projects.

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Summary profiles of the data sources:

- SCC's **Sharing the Stories research and evaluation platform** with data from 19,500 unique users who have consented to research (+ 2400 consented to evaluation only) participating in ~920 programs with focus groups for most programs, from ~450 organizations. Participants are youth engaged in programs and services across Canada and staff working in organizations and services for youth.
- **Research, evaluation, consultation and strategy development** with national, provincial, regional, municipal, local and grassroots organizations, initiatives, and youth investment funds, including:
 - Catapult Canada (Rideau Hall Foundation), currently involving 33 funded projects dedicated to increasing equity of learning access for youth
 - Building Safer Communities Program Vancouver, focused on upstream prevention initiatives to address gun and gang violence with 10 multi-year funded programs, with intentional collaboration and knowledge sharing
 - Pathways to Education Canada, operating in 30+ communities across Canada
 - Kids Help Phone
 - Mentor Canada
 - Trans Trail Canada
 - Knowledge Development and Exchange (KDE) Hub
- SCC's own year-round programs executed by SCC itself, and scaled in delivery through implementation with partners across the country, including:
 - Art of Work, a national youth workforce readiness program involving ~120 youth and ~30 employers
 - Be the Program, focused on healthy relationships, delivered through 18 community partners and reached 386 participants
 - Cultural Curiosity, focused on cross-cultural learning and exchange among ~1,000 youth across Canada
 - Hearing Unheard Moments, focused on preventing grievance-based violence with 10 national collaborating partners and community-wide collaborations in 15+ communities
 - SCC's national youth conferences: Canada We Want (CWW), Make Your Mark MYM), both overnight events lasting at least two nights
 - SCC's adult events: Against the Current Knowledge Exchange, monthly Adult Ally Network Exchange meetings

References

Gootman, J. A., & Eccles, J. (Eds.). (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development*. National Academies Press.

Khanna, N., MacCormack, J., Kutsyuruba, B., McCart, S., Freeman, J. (2014). *Youth Who Thrive: A review of critical factors and effective programs for 12-25 year olds*. Toronto, ON: YMCA GTA. Available online: <http://www.youthwhothrive.ca/resources/Critical-Factors-for-Youth-Thriving-Report.pdf>

Students Commission of Canada Report to the City of Vancouver's Building Safer Communities Program (2026): *City of Vancouver Building Safer Communities Program BSCP youth reported feeling 8.0% safer ($r = 0.22$) and 8.4% more welcomed in their community ($r = 0.20$) compared to youth in the wider Vancouver community. They also perceived greater positive community norms around safety and respect, reporting 8.0% higher agreement that bullying or aggression is not tolerated ($r = 0.17$) and 5.1% higher agreement that they are treated with respect ($r = 0.11$) in their communities.*