Youth Homelessness & COVID-19

How the Youth-Serving Sector is Coping with the Crisis

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canadian observatory on homelessness

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Thank You

We want to express our sincerest appreciation for the work frontline workers continue to do to ensure services to young people who find themselves homeless or at risk of homelessness are not disrupted during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Introduction

"Remind communities that the needs of youth experiencing homelessness are different than adults and they too need a plan in place for them instead of being lumped in with the older population." - Survey Respondent

The COVID-19 crisis is disproportionately affecting people that are precariously housed, homeless, and/or lack access to hygiene and space for physical distancing. For young people, access to stable housing and supports to cope during and after the crisis are essential. Meeting basic needs, navigating the housing and income support systems, staying connected to education/training, and receiving mental health supports are ongoing priorities for youth that are made all the more vital and difficult during this national state of emergency in Canada.

To ensure that the immediate response of governments and communities takes into consideration the unique needs of young people, A Way Home Canada and the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness conducted a survey for youth-serving organizations addressing the needs of youth at-risk of or experiencing homelessness. The purpose of the survey was to identify some of the emerging challenges and needs facing the sector, as well as positive steps being taken to ensure young people are able to receive the housing and support they need.

Participants

60 direct service and advocacy organizations from each of Canada's 10 provinces participated, with rural, urban and Indigenous-led organizations represented among the respondents. Of the 60 participating organizations, 44 provide housing to young people. Two-thirds (66.7%) of the organizations stated that they were connected to the broader homelessness sector community response to COVID-19.
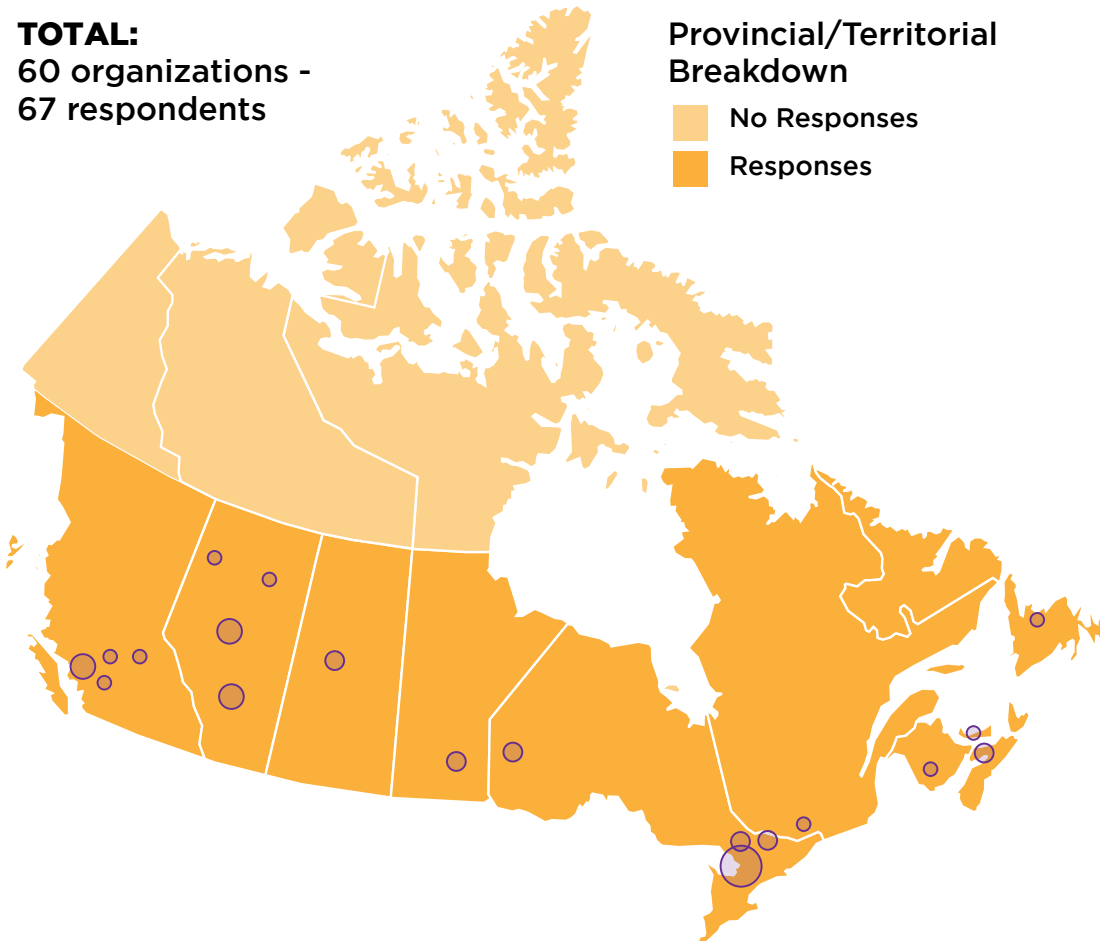
Involved in Homeless Sector COVID-19 Response

No Response
5.0%

No
28.3%

Yes
66.7%
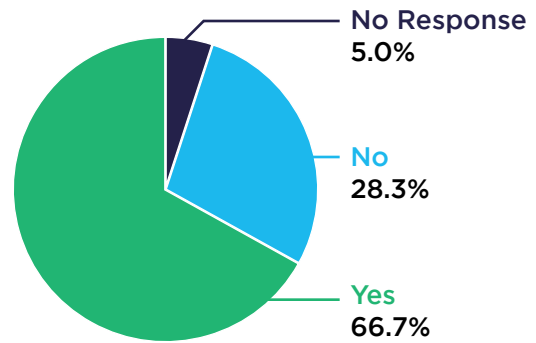
Respondent Breakdown

TOTAL:
60 organizations -
67 respondents

Provincial/Territorial Breakdown

No Responses

Responses

Capacity, Challenges & Needs

Youth-serving organizations are facing a number of challenges to meet the needs of the unhoused and housed youth they serve during the COVID-19 pandemic. Upholding and keeping staff and participants informed of Health Canada's guidelines has put new pressures on youth-serving organizations as they try to maintain the services and supports that youth were accessing pre-COVID-19. The following is a summary of key challenges organizations across Canada are experiencing.

Staying Connected to Young People and Families

> **"Our Community Support clients (former residents that now live independently in the community) cannot come to our facility to access support anymore or attend our programs. We're still providing them with care packages and phone counselling as needed, but social distancing requirements are limiting the services we can provide to these young folks." - Survey Respondent**

While a number of health and counselling services have switched to online platforms, it has become more challenging to stay in touch with youth that do not have access to reliable internet/wifi, phones, or other technology. The cost of phones and technology was noted as a barrier for organizations that want to keep youth connected while physically distanced. This is particularly concerning as the risk of family crisis and breakdown are increased due to close proximity in the home during isolation and the financial strain of the crisis.

Some organizations noted that their outreach services are no longer available, citing loss of funding and/or staff, and the inability to keep staff and youth safe with proper personal protective equipment and procedures. The 80% of organizations that continue to do outreach are significantly impacted by the inability to have face-to-face contact with young people. In this time of crisis when help is needed most, it has become much more difficult to support youth to navigate and access housing, food, health information, and emergency income supports. These real time adjustments in communities highlight the pressing need for prevention focused services and the ability to enhance the focus on supporting families and natural supports.

"Youth are afraid and distrusting and are not wanting to comply with what is in place. With drop-in we can't control the contact and transmission."
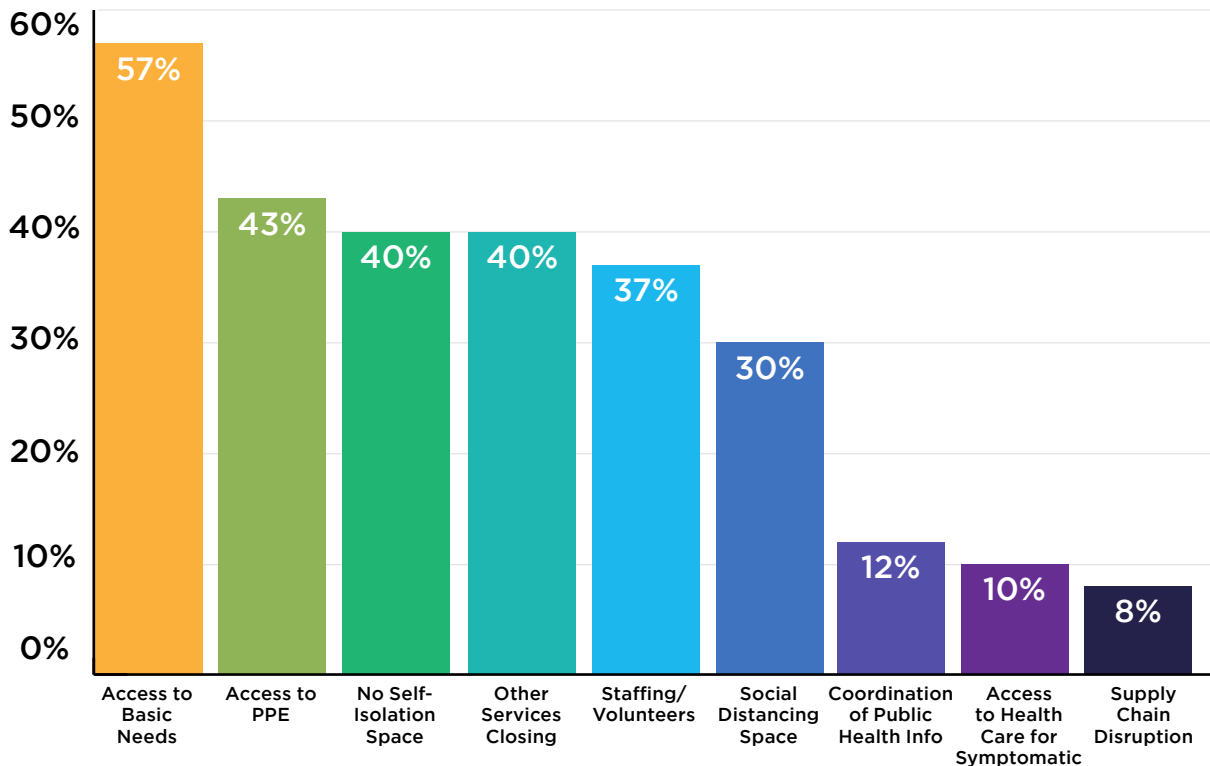- Survey Respondent

Does Your Organization Offer Outreach Services?

No 20%

Yes 80%
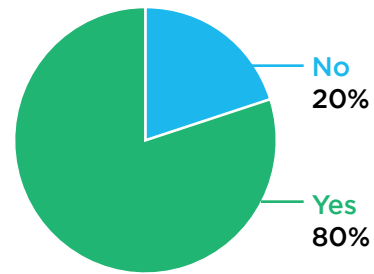
Availability of and Access to Youth Appropriate Services and Supports

Of the respondents working with unhoused and provisionally accommodated youth, 57% noted meeting basic needs, including food and shelter, as one of the largest challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. 10% of respondents also identified difficulty accessing health care for symptomatic youth.

Top Challenges for Serving Youth/Families At-Risk of or Experiencing Homelessness

Challenge	Percentage
Access to Basic Needs	57%
Access to PPE	43%
No Self-Isolation Space	40%
Other Services Closing	40%
Staffing/Volunteers	37%
Social Distancing Space	30%
Coordination of Public Health Info	12%
Access to Health Care for Symptomatic	10%
Supply Chain Disruption	8%

Challenges Facing Youth-Serving Organizations

For youth that are currently in housing, the challenges of staying stably housed are made greater by an increased need for resources around mental health support and coping with social isolation. Accessing childcare support was also a challenge facing housed youth and families during the crisis.

Top Challenges of Keeping Youth & Families Stably Housed During COVID-19

Challenges Facing Youth-Serving Organizations
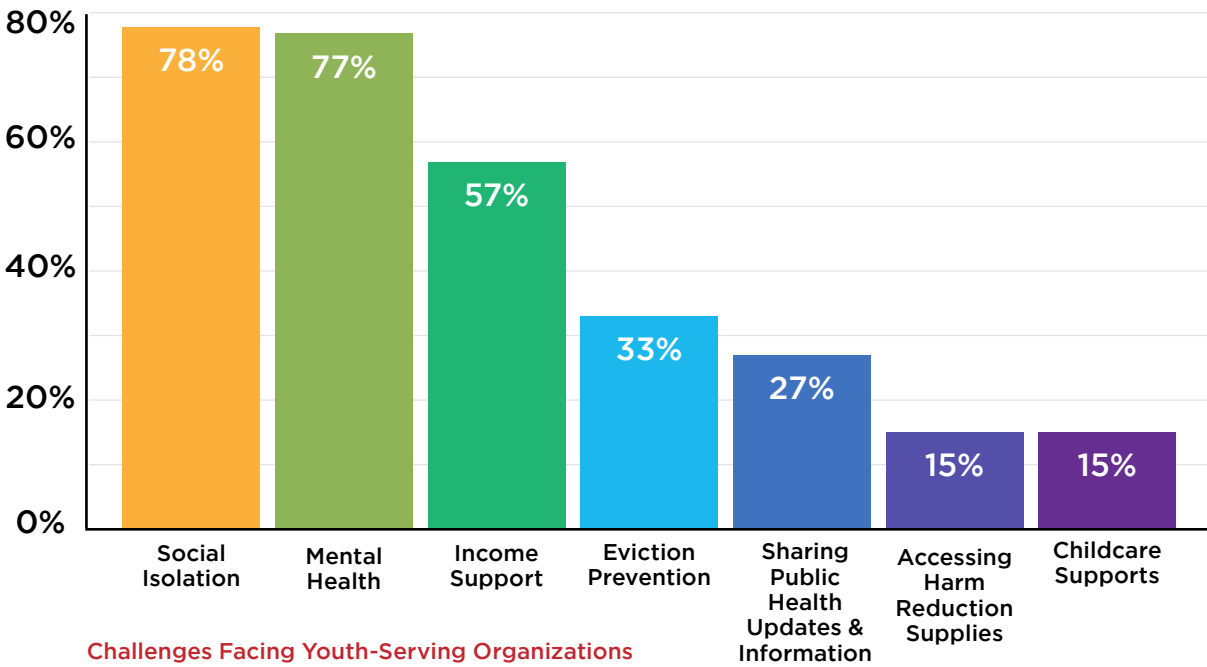
A number of supports that would typically be available for youth in crisis, such as hotel rooms, youth drop-in and shelter spaces and in-person social programs, have shut down or are not taking on new clients. Communities that did not have youth housing and/or emergency shelters before the crisis are more acutely struggling as permanent, scattered site housing options remain unaffordable. One organization noted that some youth are remaining in unsafe living arrangements during the crisis. There appears to be larger community planning efforts in response to the pandemic that youth serving organizations/services have been left out of. This has created a wedge in their ability to respond in a timely manner and suggests the need for an equity lens on these efforts to ensure vulnerable people aren't being left out of critical interventions.
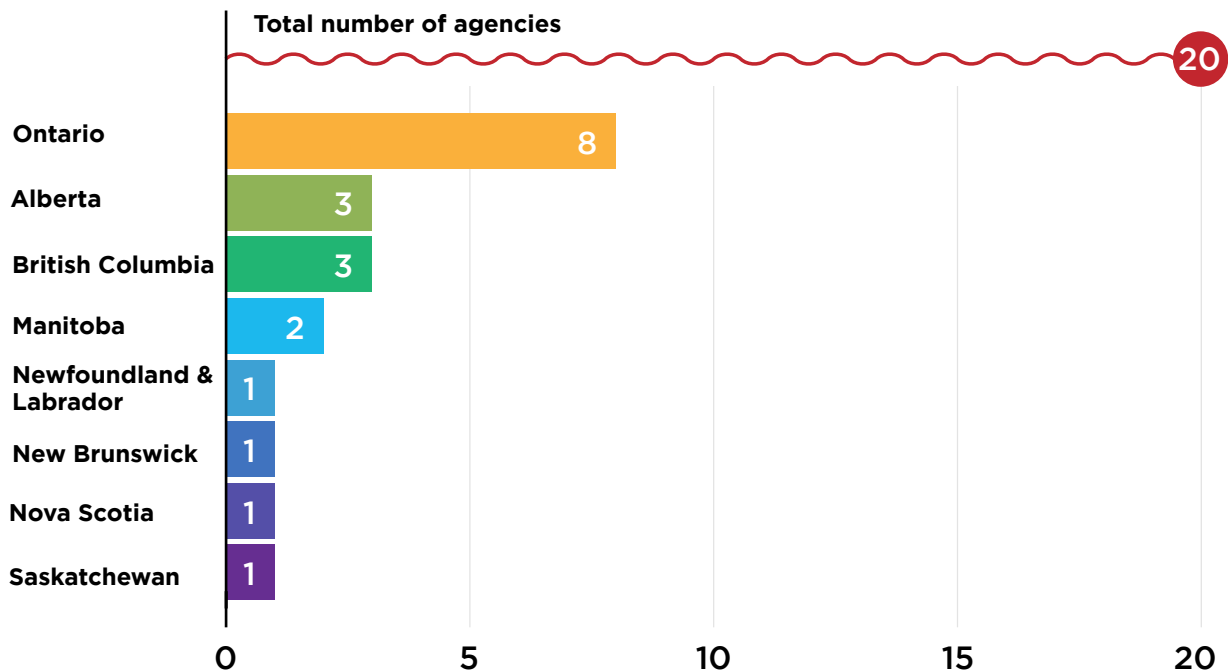
Many communities are unable to communicate with and refer youth to the programs and services that are youth-specific and meet their unique needs/situations.

Resources and services tailored for already marginalized 2SLGBTQIA+, Indigenous and racialized youth sheltering in place or without homes are especially needed. Additionally, harm reduction services and supplies are needed to manage the potential for increased risk behaviour among young people that are isolated and struggling with substance use challenges.

> **"You name it - for youth it is access to water, soap, hot food, bathrooms, there is nothing for them to find anymore from looking for cans, cigarette buts, drugs are scarce and we see risky behaviours. EMTs no longer respond to overdoses as they are only code red and hospitals are signaling that they are code purple (overwhelmed). Health care is already being prorationed, Fentanyl deaths are up. We are also seeing more girls in difficult straits with signs of violence. There is no one on the street to see them when they are working so not only are they at high risk of COVID but of increased victimization." - Survey Respondent**

The lack of transportation options has also become a barrier to youth accessing support. Physical distancing measures restrict staff's ability to offer transportation and some organizations have had to rely on taxi services to get youth to appointments and services.

Provincial Breakdown of Agencies Facing Challenges Around Eviction Prevention

Total number of agencies

Province	Number
Ontario	8
Alberta	3
British Columbia	3
Manitoba	2
Newfoundland & Labrador	1
New Brunswick	1
Nova Scotia	1
Saskatchewan	1

20

0   5   10   15   20

Organizational Infrastructure & Capacity

Space & Supplies to Comply with Health Guidelines: Many organizations noted that it has been difficult to provide youth with space for social distancing and self-isolation. Some shelters have closed or reduced capacity in order to offer clients more space to physically distance themselves, but the reduced number of spaces available poses challenges for youth that are in crisis. Additionally, about 43% of the participating organizations noted a lack of access to personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies to keep staff and youth safe while in operation.

Staffing: More than a third (37%) of the participating organizations noted challenges regarding staffing and volunteers. Concerns were raised around the ability to continue to provide services if staff members become ill and self-isolation measures are required. Some communities are already seeing decreases in their staff numbers, and increased fear among staff with the lack of PPE and uncertainty around their ability to maintain physical distance from young people.

> **"Front line workers are at extreme risk and we lack PPE and access to facilities to wash hands, and there is a shortage of hand sanitizer." - Survey Respondent**
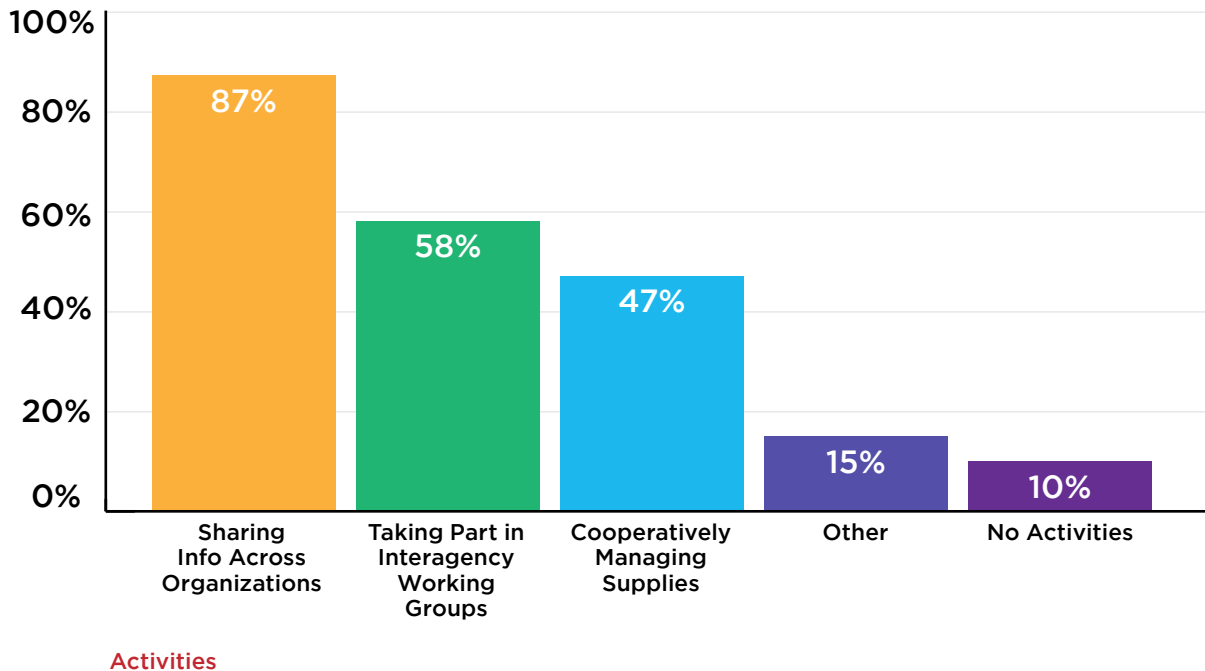
Funding: Social/physical distancing measures are posing new challenges as many organizations that rely on fundraising events, such as galas, are unable to proceed. Some organizations noted that increased federal funding for the homeless-serving sector will only be given to organizations that were already receiving federal dollars. Flexible funds were noted as a need for organizations to adapt and continue services.

> **"Our core funding is community donations/fund raisers so that has slowed to a trickle. We've reduced services or postponed certain programs to adhere to social distancing requirements which has made it more difficult to connect with everyone we need to." - Survey Respondent**

Successes and Adaptations

In response to COVID-19, the majority of organizations are supporting their local efforts by sharing information across organizations (87%) and taking part in interagency working groups (59%). Almost half (48%) have found ways to cooperatively manage supplies to make sure they are better distributed within their communities. Respondents noted other activities such as advocacy, creating a shelter strategy, working with partners to create youth-specific isolation centres, connecting with 2SLGBTQIA+ organizations, and sharing staff and funding to remain open.

Engaging in the Community Response

Activity	Percentage
Sharing Info Across Organizations	87%
Taking Part in Interagency Working Groups	58%
Cooperatively Managing Supplies	47%
Other	15%
No Activities	10%

Activities

Participants were asked to share about positive developments in their community's response to COVID-19. A number of themes emerged that are explored below.

Sector Coordination & Collaboration

Respondents identified a number of instances where there was increased and even improved communication, coordination and collaboration within the homelessness sector, and with other sectors and orders of government. Some examples of improved coordination and collaboration include:

- Sharing community spaces like local high schools to give young people enough space to social distance or self-isolate;

- Working closely with all community partners on a focused and continued basis to ensure the homeless sector has access to health care, food security and public health supports in a prioritized, integrated way;

- Youth serving agencies working together to advocate for youth-specific isolation beds;

- Cross-sectoral collaboration between youth serving organizations and mental health practitioners to meet youth mental health needs;

- Community hub-style daily/weekly sharing of agency updates on available services to other agencies, and;

- Coordinating community clusters to provide services across regions for clients needing support.

Innovation & Creativity in Connecting With Youth

Organizations are having to be creative to stay connected and deepen connection with youth during COVID-19. The following are some examples highlighted by participants:

- Utilizing technology and unique platforms like Discord to stay connected with young people;

- Using Zoom to continue weekly family dinners with youth in supportive housing where everyone cooks together in their own places;

- Using the increased quality time to engage youth meaningfully (ex. Cooking meals together, playing games, doing puzzles, making crafts);

- Offering weekly check-ins for 2SLGBTQIA+ youth, alongside peer support hours, and online events;

- New focus on social and emotional well-being and changing the methods of engaging using new platforms with supports, resources, daily group/individual video/audio/chat check-ins;

- Utilizing a government-created website Helpnextdoormb.ca where volunteers can be matched with individuals in need;

- Creatively rearranging spaces/buildings to continue to provide direct service;

- Holding online Youth Council meetings to engage participants in conversations about concerns. This includes online chats with high profile community members to boost participant morale (ex. Local MPPs);

- Purchased "kids" yard toys to keep participants active (bubble guns, skipping ropes, sidewalk chalk, etc), and;

- Seeing more young people accessing mental health services with online options becoming available.

Increased connection to broader public

Another area of positivity has been the way that the public has stepped up in communities to support youth-serving organizations to meet the needs of young people. A number of respondents noted community efforts around ensuring youth have access to food during the crisis. Examples of the broader community response include:

- **Increased food and money donations from community;**

- **Starting online fundraisers;**

- **Rallying around food banks and the issue of food access;**

- **Increased communication with supporters to secure basic needs, support and information;**

- **Local stores have reached out to shelters and group homes offering extra cleaning supplies and hand sanitizer;**

- **Civil society groups on Facebook to provide a community-based access point for crowd-sourced support - ex. "Helping During Coronavirus - Pictou County" which has over 5,000 members providing relevant, local and factual information. Volunteers from within the group have been driving for the local Food Bank to deliver groceries to vulnerable people in the community. Organizations have been able to partner with the group to provide gas and grocery cards to volunteers and to vulnerable people in the community.**

Conclusions

"The more youth-focused informational resources we have to provide to our youth, the more we can ensure our youth are informed of prevention and safety during this crisis. For instance- what is physical distancing and why it's important or harm reduction strategies for those with addictions still using during this time, etc. Youth focused information is a need!" - Survey Respondent

This survey marks one of the first of many actions A Way Home Canada and the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness have taken to understand the needs of the youth-serving sector in order to provide a coordinated and timely response to the ongoing and evolving crisis of COVID-19. We are working closely and collaboratively with other organizations within and outside of the homeless-serving sector to ensure that the needs of youth are prioritized and met both during the pandemic and beyond. Our commitment to transforming the response to youth homelessness across policy, planning and frontline practice remains unwavering.

Participants are eager for information that can support their staff and teams, as well as young people and their families through the crisis. Our teams are working to ensure every community and youth-serving organization has access to highly relevant and factual information and are providing space to elevate needs/opportunities and receive support from others within the sector. We are also capturing stories of both the challenges and innovations that will inform community and government responses now and into the recovery phase.

Preferred Formats for Receiving COVID-19 Tools & Information
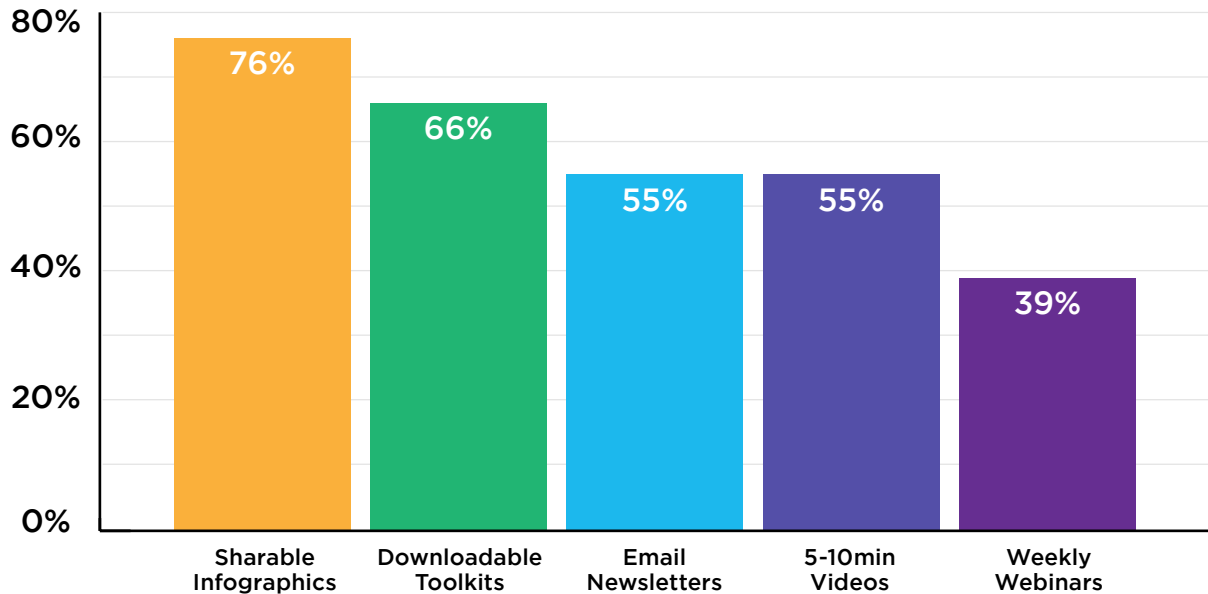
Although all young people and families can be affected by COVID-19, we know that for some already marginalized groups, the risks and impacts are that much greater. Social location and the barriers of discrimination for youth of colour and in the 2SLGBTQIA+ community compound the challenges of housing instability and homelessness. In the coming weeks we will be following up with further activities to better understand the nuances and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic for specific populations and groups of young people in Canada. As a nation we must ensure that there is equitable and just access to support for all young people in our response to the crisis and as we move into conversations and actions for recovery and rebuilding.