



The YMCA of Greater Halifax/Dartmouth, with over 30 years of experience in settlement and integration support for newcomers, is dedicated to building healthy communities, focusing on children, youth, and families. Recent concerns about conflict between newcomer youth and long-term residents have prompted the YMCA, in partnership with the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) Public Safety Office and the Recreation Business Unit, to explore better ways of supporting vulnerable youth who have experienced violence or conflict.

To assist in this effort, the YMCA commissioned Narrative Research to conduct a study aimed at identifying available resources for newcomer youth affected by violence and ways to improve the Municipality's support for local service providers in violence prevention and intervention efforts. This report provides an overview of the study's methodologies, highlights, and detailed findings, including a list of community organization assets and summaries of focus group discussions and youth interviews.

## Project Deliverables

Based on their community expertise, YMCA will provide HRM with consulting services as part of this project. They will be responsible for providing the following deliverables to HRM:

- 1 YMCA will give HRM a map of culturally responsive services in Halifax for newcomer youth affected by violence, focusing on equity-deserving youth disproportionately impacted by colonization.
- 2 YMCA will compile a list of culturally responsive mental health services, practitioners, cultural leaders, faith-based supports, and other resources for healing from violence-related harm.
- 3 YMCA will suggest ways for the Municipality to support local service providers in coordinated violence prevention and intervention efforts for newcomer youth, especially in communities disproportionately impacted by colonization and trauma.

## Research Methodology

### PHASE 1: ASSET MAPPING

A review of publicly-available information to identify and examine existing culturally responsive services and resources currently available to newcomer youth in key areas of Halifax Regional Municipality. Specifically, the review sought to develop a list of culturally responsive mental health services, practitioners, faith-based supports, and other resources related to healing from harm related to violence.

### PHASE 2: FOCUS GROUPS WITH MUNICIPAL REPRESENTATIVES, YOUTH ADVOCATES, AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION REPRESENTATIVES

From November 14th to 29th, 2023, three in-person focus groups were held with stakeholders. One group included HRM cross-department representatives and Youth Advocate Workers, while two groups involved community organization representatives. The community organization groups were split based on their geographical area of service: one for organizations primarily in the North End of Halifax and the other for organizations primarily in Spryfield. A total of 25 people took part in the three 90-minute sessions.

Halifax Regional Municipality	Halifax North End	Spryfield
Mobile Youth Support Team	Community YMCA	YWCA
Community Mobilization Team	YMCA School Settlement Workers	Halifax Regional Centre for Education Staff/Educators
Youth Advocate Program	Ummah Masjid and Community Centre	Halifax Regional Police
Halifax Immigration Partnership	Halifax Regional Centre for Education Social Workers	English as an Additional Language (EAL) specialists
Public Safety Office	English as an Additional Language (EAL) specialists	Chebucto Connections
Office of Diversity and Inclusion	Nova Scotia Department of Justice	YMCA School Settlement Workers

### PHASE 3: IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS WITH NEWCOMER YOUTH

From December 19th to 22nd, 2023, a total of 10 in-depth, in-person interviews were conducted with newcomer youth, 16 years of age and older, who had been previously impacted by incidences of violence or deemed at-risk of experiencing such situations. Youth participants were recruited by YMCA. Each interview lasted approximately 25-30 minutes. All interviews were conducted in English; however, as Arabic was the language spoken most often at home for participants, a YMCA Settlement Staff supported communication.

# Asset Review



While there are many resources available for youth affected by violence, few organizations appear to offer resources and services that appear to be culturally responsive and/or focus on equity-deserving youth who have been disproportionately impacted by colonization.



Participants noted that funding restrictions may limit organizations' capacity to meet demand. Few organizations are specifically focused on providing services to newcomers. Limited online promotion of these resources might wrongly suggest their absence or scarcity. Some community organizations believe appropriate services are already provided by existing ones.



A wide-range of organizations currently exists in the region; however, few organizations expressly state online that they offer culturally responsive resources/services or focus on equity-deserving youth.



There is a need for a regularly updated formal asset map that is widely distributed and promoted. As new resources emerge, updating the map becomes crucial. The upcoming asset map was created by analyzing each organization's publicly available online information for references to newcomer services, culturally responsive services, or non-native English support. While there are services available to youth in Halifax, only a small portion are specifically targeted towards newcomer youth on their websites.



There is a general lack of cross-promotion/awareness online across community organizations



Few organizations appear to provide a directory of other support services / organizations offering similar/related programming, which may be another contributing factor to newcomer youth's general lack of program/support awareness.



As may be expected, of the resources identified, the greatest service coverage appears to be within the Halifax Regional Municipality. That said, several organizations provide multiple points of access, including virtual support (i.e., in-person, by email and by phone).

# Asset Map Management

1 .....

**After finalization, the Asset Map needs broad promotion and updates.** In particular through social media and among HRM community youth networks to address the lack of awareness about available resources. Stakeholder participants stress engaging with the Department of Education, suggesting a 'youth newcomer champion' to help newcomer youth access services.

2 .....

**Establish a process for ongoing evaluation and updates** of the asset map to identify resource gaps and improve services for newcomer youth through collaboration. The responsible organization can assist youth, families, and community organizations in accessing services. Adequate leadership, financial support, and direct outreach to listed organizations are important for maintaining the map and tailoring programs for newcomer youth and families.

3 .....

**Explore support options, including financial aid, for newcomer families.** Participants emphasized the value of programs for both newcomer youth and their families. Employment services (especially for those with criminal records), English language learning, and recreational programs are especially attractive to newcomer youth while encouraging participation in other supportive activities.

4 .....

**Communicate research results broadly.** A systemic problem requires a coordinated response, which is why it is important to communicate research results and bring in stakeholders from the justice system, government, and education to ensure that problems and opportunities identified in this research are being addressed. In areas where the Halifax Regional Municipality and YMCA lack decision-making power, such as newcomer youth classroom integration, advocacy work will be required.



# Perceptions of the Prevalence of Violence & Barriers to Access (ACCORDING TO YOUTH)

Before discussing barriers to support programs for youth who have experienced violence, participants were asked if they believed other newcomer youth their age experience violence in the community. Many feel it's common, with incidents often going unnoticed or unreported, suggesting the issue may be more serious and on the rise. One participant noted that for every reported instance of violence, many more go overlooked.

## Contributing Factors to Youth Violence

Youth highlight a wide-range of complex factors that contribute to incidents of youth violence including:

Feeling alone or that there is nobody there to help

A general lack of supervision/excessive unsupervised free time (e.g., after being suspended from school)

Ease of access to weaponry

Previous exposure to violence/conflict and history of trauma

Unemployment

Police racism / not taking complaints seriously before they escalate

Various community/society risk factors (e.g., low levels of engagement within the community, including service organizations, schools, etc.)

Involvement with alcohol and drugs

Peer and social risk factors (e.g., peer pressure, conflict within their social circle and/or romantic relationships, fear of social rejection, etc.)

- Conflicts are escalating on social media, allowing them to more easily turn violent in-person.
- Some youth note that exposure to violence is dependent on a person's social circle (e.g., associating with disengaged & discouraged peers), and that they are drawn to these social groups in search of cultural and language familiarity. One youth recalled feelings of isolation after not being able to adjust to Canadian culture or pick up the English language.
- One youth specifically highlights how the way Syrians are treated in the province has drastically changed. When they arrived, Nova Scotians were welcoming and generous but after a few years they felt like they were being "treated like a terrorist."

## Youth interviewed appear to have limited awareness of programs and services available to them outside of legal / judicial services.



Language is a Key Barrier: Overall, language is seen as a key barrier to newcomer youth accessing supports generally. Youth note not having enough time to learn the language before entering school and not having ongoing opportunities to improve and practice English.



Many youth are unaware of available resources for those affected by violence and how to access them. They haven't sought support online or from other services. Some have received limited guidance from the police. Additionally, many youth, especially newcomers, lack understanding of the Canadian judicial system and its impact on their future, like employment prospects.



Those who sought support mainly received general advice on navigating the judicial system, legal counsel, or required IWK services. ISANS was mentioned as an informational resource known to youth. All interviewed youth had previous connections with the YMCA, where finding support in forming positive relationships was mentioned.



Youth generally lack the awareness or knowledge of what supports may even be helpful or beneficial to them in dealing with violence. This is further complicated by newcomer youth having limited to no understanding of the Canadian judicial system, including dispute resolution, court-based litigation, and the impact criminal charges can have on someone's future (e.g., making it difficult to find employment).

# Ways to encourage use of Support Services

While building awareness of programming aimed at supporting newcomer youth who have experienced violence, notable effort may be required to encourage youth to participate.



## Better Awareness:

Perhaps unsurprising given the general lack of awareness of support resources available to those who have experienced violence, increased education and promotion of such resources is deemed essential in encouraging youth to access services. Several of the youth noted the importance of promoting such services through a variety of mediums, including through the school system, organizations specifically focused on providing assistance to newcomers with YMCA and Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia ISANS being most commonly mentioned, and within the justice system. In addition, several youth noted the importance of having such services promoted online and via social media.

## Put in the Work to Highlight Benefits:

Many youth are interested in support services for those who have experienced violence but doubt their peers would use them due to unfamiliarity and difficulty perceiving benefits. Encouraging participation may require significant effort, with highlighting tangible benefits being crucial. For instance, youth recognized the importance of employment but noted that those with a history of violence may struggle to find jobs. Thus, accessing support services for employment assistance could be a first step in encouraging further help-seeking.



## Desired Services and Programs:

Without knowing the type and scope of resources that may be available to them, youth struggle to identify relevant resources they would like to see offered. That said, youth stressed the appeal of programming that is not only aligned to their personal interests but helps them better integrate into the community. This would provide more positive activities, thus diminishing opportunities for violence to occur. Of those who gave suggestions, a range of specific offerings and resources were mentioned including:

- **Employment Services:** Youth want jobs and programs designed to connect them with employment opportunities appear to have the best chance of success. Youth know the benefits of employment, mentioning that having a job means staying out of trouble, earning money, improving English, gaining workplace experience, and “feeling hopeful for the future”.
- **Recreation:** Newcomer youth need opportunities to simply ‘be youth’ through recreation (both structured and unstructured). They want to know about events, outings, and programs that give them the opportunity to have fun and meet others their own age.
- **Safe Spaces:** Facilities that youth can access during their free-time, that are appropriately monitored and supervised.
- **Legal Information:** Providing newcomer youth with a general overview of Canada’s judicial system and the consequences of certain behaviours.
- **English Language Programs:** Easier access to opportunities to learn English.
- **Mentorship:** One youth mentioned the important of having a mentor 2-3 years older to instill good values.

Finally, when thinking of what would help make future programming more welcoming to newcomers in general, youth commonly noted the importance of having appropriate staff in place (e.g., individuals who are knowledgeable and relatable), having both in-person and online resources available, and having been designed to be culturally responsive in their delivery. Several youth note the benefit of seeking support and advice from a person or organization familiar to them.

# Barriers to Access


Overall, four notable gaps currently exist when it comes to newcomer youth accessing support.


- 1 Lack of awareness of resources available to support newcomer (especially refugee) youth among those working in the community. As previously mentioned, while organizational stakeholders are largely aware of community assets in general, they may not be aware of the full breadth and scope of services available through each asset, and how these services may align with others. Several organizational representatives were surprised to learn that students who had been suspended from school could go to the YMCA to access resources and supports.
- 2 Limited awareness of an individual or organization that seeks to help newcomer families (especially refugee and non-English speaking families). Despite best efforts in promoting available resources and supports, organizational stakeholders note that newcomers in the community are often not aware of the various resources available to them in the community. Across all groups, participants note the importance of proactively promoting such services and resource that extend beyond legal and social services, including awareness of afterschool programs, recreations, support and parenting groups. That said, participants acknowledge that while many resources may be available to youth who have experienced violence, current program offerings often lack appropriate cultural sensitivity (e.g., language, familial roles). As a result, it is felt that some families will never use these services because they are not culturally relevant.
- 3 There is no collective responsibility for the success of high-risk youth, with organizations often struggling to meet resource demands. Participants readily acknowledge that organizations may not currently have the resource capacity or time to effectively and proactively keep track and address the needs of priority youth, including those they refer to services. There needs to be someone checking in on the youth and their family before they end up in the justice system.
- 4 Current support services are not meeting demand. Participants noted that the Youth Advocate Program can fulfill the role of building a support network for youth, but two challenges emerge. The first is that Youth Advocate Workers are not always available to youth and more immediate back support needs to be identified. The second is that each Youth Advocate Worker currently has five youth on their case load, five on their waitlist, and growing demand. Additional support for the Youth Advocate Workers can help address challenges faced by youth who are at the highest risk of further exposure to violence.





## Barriers to Access (ACCORDING TO STAKEHOLDER GROUPS)


 Availability of language interpretation services for both youth and parents is an issue.


 The lack of language services for parents often forces children to interpret, even if their English skills are limited. This can lead to parents not fully understanding their child's situation and children missing school to fulfill language interpretation roles.


 Interpreters are often members of the community, which means youth and families often lose control over the confidentiality of their experiences. Even if the interpreters maintain confidentiality, youth and their families will still interact with these individuals regularly. As such, youth may not always feel comfortable seeking out assistance.

 Even with language interpretation in place, organizations readily recognize that language barriers may still exist. One participant in particular notes that information regularly gets lost in the interpretation at all levels of service (e.g., the word 'stress' is often misinterpreted). In addition, differences between communication styles regularly cause problems between newcomer youth and those at school.

 Limited English vocabulary can also lead to misunderstandings. For example, a threat to fight may come out mistranslated as "I am going to kill you," which can rapidly escalate situations. Limited vocabulary, mistranslation and miscommunications can cause issues between newcomer youth and other students at school.


 Newcomer youth, especially refugee youth in junior/high school, are not being set up for success in school, with students not given 'time to immerse' and learn English before entering the classroom.


 Language barriers pose significant challenges for newcomer youth, who often enter the school system with limited English skills. This can hinder their understanding of classroom content and make it difficult for them to express themselves, leading to frustration and lack of motivation.


 Limited funding within the educational system also means a lack of language interpretation, English as an Additional Language (EAL) supports, and school settlement workers to adequately meet demand. Without such resources, youth often lack the supportive environment necessary for them to build their confidence and proficiency in English.



 There is a need for transitional support for some newcomers before starting school.

 Organizational representatives often seek more transitional support for newcomers in schools, particularly refugees. They advocate for a counselor who can offer language assistance and emotional support, acting as a trusted figure for students to turn to for advice and social connections before they even start school.

 Across both community organization sessions, participants consistently point to Ontario as a potential example of pre-classroom integration programs for high school and junior high school give youth a better chance for success.

 There is a missing piece for services towards newcomer students with physical and learning disabilities, as there are significantly more barriers for newcomer youth living this intersectional experience.

# Barriers to Access



*Schools often play a crucial role in either increasing or decreasing the risk of violence.*



In the session held with HRM, discussions focused on the response to incidents of violence. Community organization representatives emphasized the importance of violence prevention and de-escalation of situations that may result in instances of violence or demonstrated aggression. That said, across all groups, participants identified idle time (e.g., roaming) as a critical risk factor in creating situational conditions that can lead to incidences of disruptive behaviour and violence. Those who are not actively engaged or have little interest in school are considered particularly vulnerable, which in turn can result in increased exposure to situations involving violence or the potential of violence.

Participants felt that some youth, particularly refugees, are not succeeding in school for several reasons:



- Little to no understanding of English.
- Literacy issues in both English and first language.
- Lack of previous educational opportunities due to a variety of reasons including gender, family responsibilities, COVID-19, geographical challenges, experiences of trauma (leaving home, experiencing war/conflict/violence, living as a refugee), etc.
- Limited parental support, often due to language barriers, in navigating a school system that parents have limited familiarity with.
- Significant familial pressure to do well in school. For these youth, getting into trouble and/or doing poorly in school, can lead to additional stressors at home.



In the long term, a youth's lack of success in school (academic and social) often leads to them feeling like a failure and seeking reassurance and acceptance elsewhere. Unsuccessful and unsupported students may drop out. This in turn can affect their trajectory towards independence, jobs and education.



Mental health declines and behavioural issues increase due to war-related trauma and attachment issues and are not being properly managed through early intervention.



*Navigating the social and justice systems is a challenge.*



Stakeholder participants note that newcomer youth and their families face an added barrier of not understanding the Canadian legal system, compounded by important information getting lost in translation. For example, the concept of a peace bond is widely unfamiliar to newcomers. A lack of awareness of the Canadian legal system was echoed during the youth in-depth interviews, as youth commonly note having limited understanding of the legal system, and the consequences that may be experienced when incidences of violence occur.



Youth and their families may not know what recreational and social services are available to them. Orientation services when they arrive can be overwhelming, making it easy for some of this information to get overlooked. As such, the concept of a comprehensive asset map was well received, with many believing such a resource would not only be beneficial to newcomers, but would be very useful to them personally as community organizations were not always aware of the full breadth and scope of services being offered by their counterparts.



It is also noted that the type and scope of services accessible to newcomers often changes from when they first immigrate to Canada to after receiving their Canadian citizenship. This transition is not as effectively communicated as newcomer-related services. As such, participants feel it would be important for the asset map to clearly indicate not only the type of services and resources offered, but also the specific audiences being served by each organization.



*Newcomer youth involved in the justice system may benefit from the inclusion of a report about cultural history and personal traumas that may be included in their defense or court proceedings. For African NS communities this is called the - Impact of Race and Culture Assessment IRCA and for indigenous communities it is called a Gladue Report. IRCAS are completed by the African NS Justice Institute and the Gladue are completed by MLSN (Mikmaw Legal Support Network). There needs to be a legal body that could advocate for and prepare reports of this nature for newcomers. More research could be done in the area of judicial support for newcomers.*

# Recommendations for Improvement

At the end of each group discussion with stakeholders, participants were asked to provide recommendations as to what additional efforts could be made to support newcomer youth. The following provides an overview of key suggestions.

- 1 Several participants feel that the appropriate and culturally responsive services are already in place; however, funding is a critical issue. Rather than creating new organizations and positions, participants felt money (specifically government funding) and resources should be directed to those services that are already established. Several community organizations noted the need for specific funding from HRM around addressing language barriers within schools. That said, a few note the services can only be used and be effective when they can be delivered in multiple languages, which can pose additional financial challenges.
- 2 Efforts aimed at supporting youth dealing with violence, also need to explore supports and resources for helping newcomer families broadly. Community organizations feel there is clear opportunity for HRM to provide support through its Youth Navigators or other such positions to serve as a bridge or contact for other organizations within the community and navigating services. Several participants note the importance of selecting the 'right person' for these positions (which in turn requires these positions to be properly funded), to ensure they are able to effectively and reliably engage with newcomers.
- 3 Additional support for parents, including parenting groups is seen as an important step.
- 4 After school programs are considered a key way of mitigating potential instances of violence, and can contribute to success stories, including building relationships and supporting newcomers who may face suspension or leave school early.
- 5 There is a general consensus that the Department of Education has a large role to play; however, the challenge is bringing them to the table and identifying a suitable person who would be responsible for collaboration. Having a 'youth newcomer champion' within the Department of Education was mentioned as a critical component to helping these youth transition into the school system.
- 6 Several participants noted a need for additional supports for youth who are not able to learn English before graduation for many reasons (e.g., age of arrival in Nova Scotia). More information needs to be provided to youth about High School equivalency programs.
- 7 Many felt that there should be additional funding and concerted efforts to raise awareness of social spaces and events that bring communities together and offer newcomer and refugee youth opportunities to 'be youth' (activities that would appeal to older youth - e.g., going on the Harbour Hopper, seeing local beaches, sporting groups etc.).
- 8 In addition to language barriers, several participants note transportation as a potential major barrier for any programming aimed at supporting newcomer youth experiencing violence. Without a vehicle, youth are dependent on walking or bus schedules, which can often prevent them from accessing support sessions.
- 9 Follow up this research project with sharing the information especially with the stakeholder groups and youth participants. Present information in different ways including accessible language (translation).
- 10 Establish ways to bring youth serving agencies and systems together (justice, education, health) to share information and review services offered to cross refer, identify gaps, and work together. First identify existing networks.

