

# NEWCOMER YOUTH ACCESS TO RECREATION IN TORONTO:

Relationships, Resources and Relevance



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## Context

Toronto is one of the top immigrant-receiving cities in the world and home to more than 65,000 newcomer youth.<sup>1</sup> Supports for youth settlement in this context would be an important priority for youth serving systems, as settlement adds to the psychological and social stresses common in adolescence, making it an even more difficult period of transition and adjustment.

Participation in out-of-school-time recreational activities offers benefits to newcomer youth experiencing the challenges of settlement, including opportunities for newcomer youth to make friends and build support networks in their new country, to practice English, to maintain good health and cope with stress, and to foster leadership and employment skills.

Despite the many benefits of recreation, newcomer youth participate at much lower rates compared to their peers. According to the 2005 General Social Survey, 32% of children whose parents were recent immigrants participated in sports compared to 55% of children whose parents were born in Canada.<sup>2</sup>

## Study

In the spring of 2015, Social Planning Toronto (SPT) led a research study on the barriers, facilitators and effective outreach methods for newcomer youth accessing recreation in Toronto. This report summarizes findings from focus groups and consultations with 60 newcomer youth and 50 newcomer parents in Toronto. Results from a small-scale survey with frontline service providers are also included.

## Findings

Youth, parents and service providers identified the following key barriers and facilitators to newcomer youth participation in recreation:

### Barriers

- Both parents and youth identified **high fees and related costs**, such as cost for uniforms, equipment, field trips and insurance, as a significant barrier to participation.
- Recreation service providers reported that **insufficient funding** prevents them from providing incentives and paid opportunities to engage youth in leadership positions.

- Many low-cost or free programs, available through both the City of Toronto and community organizations, **fill up quickly** and can have **long waiting lists**.
- Most programs provide multiple payment options but paying online or over the telephone with a credit card are usually the fastest ways to register. **Families without internet or a credit card are at a disadvantage when competing for high-demand programs.**
- Both parents and youth reported **difficulty finding information** on specific low-cost or free programs that fit the young person's interests and schedule, and are located close to home or school.
- Finding information on subsidy programs (such as the City of Toronto's Welcome Policy), applying for subsidies and registering for programs can be intimidating and challenging for **new immigrants facing linguistic and cultural barriers.**
- Youth reported additional barriers including **lack of time** for recreation due to schoolwork, **long travel times** to access recreation, and **lack of skills** to participate in some recreational activities.
- Service providers reported **lacking space** to run recreation programs.
- Some youth and their parents **prioritize academic achievement** above sports and recreation; they may feel after-school activities take time away from homework, especially in senior years of high school.

## Facilitators

- **One-on-one support from a community liaison**, such as social worker or settlement worker, is important to help connect parents and youth with information on recreation and navigate the subsidy application and program registration processes.
- Youth having a **sense of belonging** within their peer group and forming **trusting relationships with staff** are critical for their engagement and retention in programs.
- **Less structured programs** that allowed youth to be creative and engage in self-directed learning were preferred over highly structured, adult-led programs.
- Youth were motivated to engage in recreation when provided with **opportunities to take on leadership roles and new responsibilities.**
- Supports such as **tokens, meals, and opportunities to gain volunteer hours** were important to facilitating newcomer youth access to recreation.
- **Multilingual outreach strategies** focused on newcomer families can improve access to information and promote the value of recreation.

- **Space-sharing partnerships** is an effective way for small-scale organizations to secure space for programming.

## Recommendations

We recommend that recreation service providers undertake a variety of changes that can:

- Build relationships and strategies that more effectively link newcomer youth to programs
- Ensure programs and staffing are developed to be more relevant to newcomer youth
- Increase availability of appropriate youth programs
- Invest in service strategies that erase economic barriers to program delivery and participation



# 1. INTRODUCTION

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## 1.1 Overview

Toronto is one of North America's most multicultural urban centres and is home to over 65,000 newcomer youth.<sup>3</sup> The settlement process can be a particularly stressful experience for youth who are already making the important transition from childhood to young adulthood. Newcomer youth in Toronto face additional challenges as most live in low-income households, do not speak English as their first language, and are members of racialized groups.<sup>4</sup> Recreation is an important tool in supporting the healthy development of youth and the successful settlement of newcomer youth into Canadian society.

Recreation for adolescents has been defined in literature as “non-school time activities and disciplines that have elements of choice, lead to satisfaction, and encourages progressive learning and enjoyment.”<sup>5</sup> Recreation for this age group can be further divided into three levels: highly structured (e.g. playing on a sports team), moderately structured and requiring moderate commitment (e.g. casual play), and self-led with low commitment (e.g. going out with friends).<sup>6</sup> Research shows recreation in adolescence boosts a young person's physical, emotional and cognitive development, promoting wellbeing and achievement across the life span.<sup>7,8</sup> For newcomer youth, recreation is also a valuable way to build language skills, enrich one's social network, and learn about Canadian culture.<sup>9</sup>

However, despite the many benefits of recreation, newcomer youth have much lower participation rates compared to their peers. According to the 2005 General Social Survey, 32% of children whose parents were recent immigrants participated in sports compared to 55% of children whose parents were born in Canada.<sup>10</sup> In a literature review conducted in 2006, the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants identified multiple barriers to newcomer youth accessing recreation. These barriers included financial constraints, lack of time due to schoolwork and home responsibilities, long distances to recreation sites and lack of transportation, lack of skills around specific sports, and experiences of discrimination.<sup>11</sup> As well, youth with low self-esteem are more likely to perceive barriers to participation compared to their peers with healthy self-esteem.<sup>12</sup> Sports environments can also present barriers as they can be sites where social exclusion, racism and discrimination are experienced by immigrant youth.<sup>13</sup>

## **1.2 Recreation service providers**

In Toronto, recreation providers include the City of Toronto, nonprofit community organizations, community centres and arenas that operate under a public/nonprofit hybrid model, and for-profit businesses.<sup>14</sup> Public and private schools also offer in-school and after-school recreational opportunities.

At the City of Toronto, the Parks, Forestry and Recreation division holds the major responsibility for delivering recreation services. Toronto Public Library also offers a range of recreation programs. Across Toronto, a large number of independent nonprofit organizations, such as the YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs and community-based sports organizations, provide vital leisure opportunities in their respective communities. Operating under a public/nonprofit hybrid model, the Association of Community Centres (AOCCs) with members such as Applegrove Community Complex, Ralph Thornton Centre, and Scadding Court Community Centre, offer a range of programs, including recreational activities. Commercial recreational providers also provide recreational programs. Finally, public and private schools provide extracurricular activities, which accounts for a significant part of many young people's recreation life. Most secondary schools offer intramural and interschool sports such as field hockey, volleyball and soccer, as well as clubs dedicated to art, music, drama and other student interests. The range of activities offered differs from school to school, and activities are most often led by a teacher or parent volunteer.

## **1.3 The policy context**

The City of Toronto plays a central role in recreation as a service planner, direct service provider and funder of community-based recreation programs. Over the years, the City has developed strategies, plans and initiatives that shape leisure opportunities for Toronto residents. In 2012, Toronto City Council adopted the City's first Recreation Service Plan which set priorities and directions for recreation service planning and delivery over a 5-year period from 2013 to 2017. In 2013, Council adopted the Implementation Plan to move the Recreation Service Plan forward.

The Recreation Service Plan recognizes newcomers and youth as priority groups given that they are generally not well served by the for-profit sector.<sup>15</sup> The Plan includes directions and recommended actions that support improved access to recreation for newcomer youth. Recommended actions include developing local recreation plans through resident engagement, developing a comprehensive communication strategy, improving registration and the Welcome Policy (recreation subsidy program) application processes, improving outreach to underserved groups, creating tools and strategies to improve access for diverse groups and newcomers, strengthening partnerships with organizations that

work with underserved groups, and developing a youth leadership program model. The Plan also calls for equitable access to recreation based on geography and demographic groups which would positively impact newcomer youth who largely reside in Toronto's inner suburbs.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, the plan has only received partial implementation.

In addition to the City's Recreation Service Plan, Toronto City Council has adopted the Toronto Newcomer Strategy (2012), the Toronto Youth Equity Strategy (2014) and the PFR Youth Recreation Engagement Strategy (2013). As well, in 2015 Council adopted TO Prosperity: Toronto Poverty Reduction Strategy which includes recommendations for improving the quality of and access to out-of-school-time programs, including recreation.<sup>17</sup> These strategies also shape the recreational opportunities for newcomer youth. Unfortunately, funding for these strategies has been limited.

## 2.METHODOLOGY

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In 2014, SPT received funding to undertake research and knowledge dissemination activities in the area of newcomer youth and access to recreation. In addition to conducting this research project, worked with community partners to organize the Connecting with Newcomer Youth through Meaningful Recreation conference for service providers who work with newcomer youth in recreation or settlement. The goal of these projects was to enable youth-serving organizations to better engage and retain participation in recreational activities from Toronto's diverse immigrant communities.

A steering committee was formed to guide the conference planning. It was made up of staff from Toronto Public Health, Toronto Newcomer Office, Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation, and WoodGreen Community Services. The discussions and insights generated by the steering committee informed the design and implementation of the research activities.

A literature scan was conducted to inform the project and was used to help develop the parent consultation guide and the youth focus group guide. The youth focus group guide delved into youth perceptions of barriers and facilitators and effective outreach methods to support recreation access. The parent consultation guide focused on the barriers that their children faced in accessing recreation and parents' recommendations for improving access. For the purposes of this study, recreation was defined as "anything a young person does for fun outside of class; this can include during lunchtime and after-school, on weekends, and over summer holidays."

Focus groups included youth 13-19 years of age. This age range was used as most young people still live at home during this time and have access to school-time and after-school recreational activities. Community centres and agencies also use this age range when developing youth programming and setting fee categories. Newcomer was defined as those who have lived in Canada for less than 10 years, a definition used in recent Toronto Public Health research.<sup>18</sup>

Youth were recruited through immigrant-serving community agencies such as West Neighbourhood House, Chinese Canadian National Council Toronto Chapter, and Council of Agencies Serving South Asians. Focus groups were conducted on site at each of these agencies.

In total, 7 focus groups were completed with 5-12 participants each. Each group included a mix of boys and girls, and youth of various ages. In total, 60 youth (38 boys and 22 girls) participated in the study. Participants ranged in age from 13 to 19, with a median age of 16. Time spent in Canada ranged from 5 months to

10 years, with the median time being 2.5 years. Participating youth lived in the four quadrants of the City: 33% lived in Scarborough, 26% lived in North Toronto, 23% lived in Etobicoke and 19% lived in Downtown Toronto. 98% of the youth immigrated from one of two regions of the world: Africa and the Middle East or Asia and Pacific. The most commonly reported birth countries were China (30%) and Bangladesh (21%). Other countries included Sri Lanka, Philippines, Malaysia, Ethiopia, Russia, Yemen, Angola, India, Japan and Afghanistan.

Newcomer parents were recruited through the four Toronto Local Immigration Partnership (LIP) organizations: Thorncliffe Neighbourhood Office in the Toronto North LIP, the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture in the Toronto South LIP, Warden Woods Community Centre in the Toronto East LIP, and JobStart in the Toronto West LIP. Informal consultations were held on site at each organization to gain parental perspectives on newcomer youth access to recreation. Five consultations were held with 50 parents in total. Parents self-identified as newcomers who used settlement services through their local LIP organization.

Preliminary findings from the youth focus groups were presented at the Connecting with Newcomer Youth through Meaningful Recreation conference in April of 2015. In planning the thematic areas of the conference, a survey was conducted with 16 youth workers with experience in newcomer engagement. Findings from this survey are also included in this report.



## 3.FINDINGS

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### 3.1 Preferred activities

#### Preferred activities

Youth were given lists of common sports and recreation activities, divided into the categories of sports; other physical activities; arts; music and dance; and other hobbies and interests. Youth were asked to mark off activities they participated in and also write down any activities that were not listed.

All of the most frequently reported activities fell under the category of other hobbies and interests and, in descending order of popularity, included:

- going on Facebook,
- watching TV or movies at home,
- hanging out at home,
- listening to music,
- participating in online chat,
- shopping at the mall,
- reading,
- watching movies at movie theatres, and
- going to restaurants.

These activities require little effort for participation, often take place in accessible, familiar surroundings but provide limited engagement outside of established relationships. Activities in other categories were mentioned less frequently (see Appendix A for the thirty most frequently mentioned activities).

#### Desired activities

When looking at the aspirations of youth we see considerable interest in more active and engaged activities. Following the same procedure described above, youth identified the activities that they were not currently doing but would like to take up or to learn. The most frequently reported activities across all categories were: archery, gymnastics, horseback riding, rock climbing, drumming, guitar, piano, hip hop, painting, travelling, outdoor photography, fishing, and taking cooking classes.

Many youth wanted to travel abroad during summer break or after they graduate, but admitted that the high cost associated with travelling made it unlikely. No participants mentioned wanting to do more indoor screen-time activities, such as watching TV or going online.

## Location of activities: School versus community

Youth were asked to mark off where they engaged in recreation: on school grounds (this can include school-based extracurricular activities or simply playing ball on a school court), or in the community (this can include community recreation centres and programs offered by nonprofit organizations).

Participants were asked not to include activities they do at home or activities that are self-led, such as going for a walk or seeing friends.

The majority of participants indicated that they found recreation opportunities both on and off school grounds. Activities that most frequently took place on school grounds were basketball and rugby; activities that most frequently took place in the community included swimming and skating.

## 3.2 Barriers

### Cost and financial considerations

Cost was the most frequently mentioned barrier to taking part in recreation during both the youth focus groups and the parent consultations. Youth talked about having to look for free programs because their parents were unable or unwilling to pay for extracurricular recreational activities. Parents also reported that many families marginally exceed the income eligibility cut-off for the Welcome Policy but still face significant barriers paying for their children's recreation. This is especially true for families with multiple children; parents cannot afford to enroll all of their children in programming at the same time.

Beyond fees, youth shared that many sports, art and music activities required them to purchase equipment, supplies or clothing, or pay for outings, such as field trips and competitions. Parents in particular brought up hockey, a quintessential Canadian sport, and expressed that the cost of equipment made it very inaccessible. Parents suggested that the City introduce a tiered-fee system that allows families to pay based on their income. Parents also recommended that the City provide discounted rates for larger families (i.e. full-price for first child, half the cost for second child, one-third the cost for third child, etc). Other parents suggested that a 'pay-as-you-go' model would give families more flexibility and control over budgeting for recreation. Rather than paying for a full-year membership and making one large payment, service users could pay on a weekly or monthly basis.

Service providers were unable to offer tokens, refreshments and other incentives due to insufficient funding, though they saw these incentives as crucial to youth participation. Lack of funding can also make it more difficult for

"I used to play rugby for school and was really good at it, but it costs us from somewhere from \$300 to \$400 a month."

- male youth participant

“My mom would say  
‘You should focus on  
your studies...if you do a  
whole bunch of stuff,  
you are probably not  
going to get such good  
marks.’”

- male  
youth participant

staff to purchase and replenish supplies, equipment and other materials that can make a program more appealing to youth.

### **Not enough time for recreation**

Youth also spoke about a lack of time to pursue sports and recreation.

Schoolwork was the main activity that took up time after class. Youth talked about being immersed in sports and hobbies in junior high but gradually giving them up as they advanced through the grades. Some youth thought that schoolwork should take priority over “play” in senior years, in order to prepare for postsecondary education. A few young people also mentioned that their parents worry that too many extracurricular activities would distract them from schoolwork. Service providers also noted this in their experience working with recent immigrant families. Youth and parents seemed unaware that extracurricular activities could benefit youth in their applications to postsecondary school.

Both youth and service providers mentioned after-school and summer employment as an important goal for youth but also a major impediment to engaging in recreation. Older youth talked about taking on part-time jobs as a way to pay for recreational programs. However, this reduces the time they have available to participate in such activities. Many youth also have home responsibilities such as taking care of younger siblings, looking after household chores and cooking meals while parents are out working.

### **Distance to programs and lack of accessible transportation**

Youth discussed the time and costs involved in travelling to recreational programs. Unreliable bus schedules, long bus rides, multiple transfers, and the expense of TTC fare all made regular attendance in after-school recreational activities more difficult. Having to wait for a bus for long periods in the wintertime made youth more likely to withdraw or miss sessions. The theme of travel emerged very strongly in the parent consultations, especially with families who resided in the inner suburbs, north-west and north-east areas of Toronto.

### **Lack of affordable space for local programs**

Lack of affordable space was highlighted in the service provider survey.

Respondents wrote about the tremendous challenges they encountered in trying to find affordable and suitable space to run after-school programs. Sometimes a space is affordable and available but is far from where youth participants live. Youth may come out once but are unable to keep up regular attendance.

## **Pace of activity and competitiveness**

Many newcomer youth reported that they lack the skills to participate in programs, such as playing in a band or in an organized sports team. When a program offered instruction, the pace was often too fast for these students to keep up, resulting in an overall negative experience which discouraged them from trying again. Specifically with regard to western sports, such as basketball or hockey, some youth reported feeling uncomfortable with the competitive and physical nature of the games and were worried they might get hurt.

## **Belonging and peer relationships**

A number of youth talked about the uncomfortable feeling of being “different from the rest” in a group, with respect to age, gender or ethnicity. In response to this, youth wanted programs where they could identify with the participants or programs where there is diversity in attendees. One young person spoke poignantly about the challenges of joining a new social group and concerns about the impact on established friendships.

“A lot of my friends, they never really talk about sports. Like I am the only guy in my circle of friends who have any idea how the Raptors or the Leafs are doing...long story short, nobody’s that interested in sports as far as I know. The few people I know who are interested in sports...they are all in a separate clique than the one I am in. It is really hard to get into one of those groups...and if you take the chance to try to join them, the previous group (your old clique) will basically knock on your head wondering ‘what...what just happened?’ ...I actually think it is kind of like trying to light a fire; you have one match to get it right. Once you light it up then it is alright, except you don’t have anything to light the match with.”

*- male youth participant*

## **Inaccessible information**

Newcomer parents reported being unaware of recreation opportunities, and lacked time to seek out this information. Limited English language skills were also mentioned as a barrier as most outreach and promotional materials are not translated into the parents’ native languages. Similarly, service providers spoke about the barriers resulting from lack of funding to translate materials and provide interpreters at events. Parents suggested mailing a recreation flyer to homes in a given area. Even if materials are in English, there would likely be someone in the household that could explain the content to family members. Parents also suggested that recreation programs be advertised at local libraries which are frequented by many newcomers.

“The teacher would ... show you how ballet works, like the fundamentals [of] it. But she doesn’t really teach you how to be creative with it, and make up your own stuff ... you just follow her.”

*- female youth participant*

“I went to a leadership training program but it was really awkward because everyone there including staff was of a certain race, and I was the only different race there. I thought ‘What would have I come into right?’ So I just went there for one day didn’t even go the next day. It was just too much.”

*- female youth participant*

“I wanted to try out new things ... I didn’t want to go alone at the same time, so I forced my friend to join.”

- female youth participant

“Sometimes parents or family treat you like you’re a child but they’ll expect you to act like an adult. Here you know she [the staff] trusts us.”

- female youth participant

## **Unmanageable registration process**

Parents identified challenges in navigating the City’s recreation registration process. Some parents expressed frustration with being unable to register online or over the telephone due to lack of internet access or a credit card. Residents can go in person to sign up at specific locations on or after registration day. However, many parents cannot take time off work or arrive early enough to register before spots are filled.

## **3.3 Facilitators**

### **Knowing people in a program**

Youth identified having friends accompanying them or knowing friends who are already attending a program as significant motivators for participation. One young woman described recruiting friends to accompany her, relying on her friends to help her overcome initial anxiety.

At the same time, participants acknowledged that sports and recreation can be a way to step out of one’s comfort zone and bond with people from other social networks. This was seen as a way to maintain a sense of inclusion in the changing dynamics of high school social life.

### **Responsive and invested instructors**

Participants frequently mentioned having a trusting relationship with staff as an important factor in their motivation to continue with a program. When asked to describe what that looked like, youth talked about instructors who listened to what they said, valued their contributions and accorded them the same respect given to adults. At the same time, participants acknowledged the need for a supportive learning environment and the teacher or staff person to be attentive and caring with youth. Some youth highlighted the importance of teachers or staff allowing participants to exercise their creativity while learning and playing, and not to make the program overly structured.

In the survey with service providers, respondents reiterated the important role staff play in youth engagement and participation. Respondents reported that staff who are both caring and skillful in working with newcomer youth are key to cementing relationships that will sustain participation. In contrast, some respondents suggested that staff who appear uninterested in youth work or display judgmental attitudes cause youth participation to decline. A number of youth workers highlighted the need for anti-racism anti-oppression training to be implemented widely across the youth work sector, with special attention

given to working with religious minorities, individuals who identify as LGBTQ, and persons living with disabilities.

### **Leadership, responsibilities and skill building**

Several youth shared that they enjoyed being given tasks or jobs by staff, despite the fact that these roles came with no monetary compensation. Youth believed that acting as leaders, taking on responsibilities, and learning new skills all motivated them to identify more deeply with the program and their fellow participants. Youth felt trusted by staff and experienced increased self-esteem as a result.

Youth emphasized their need to acquire volunteer hours and work experience. Furthermore, participants talked about their preference for programs that combined recreation with the development of practical skills that could help with employment in the future. Examples of such learning opportunities include First Aid/CPR, camp counsellor training, babysitter training, filmmaking and working with media technology.

Service providers also highlighted the “for youth by youth” model and mentorship model where youth with more experience are paired with newly arrived immigrants. Not only do these models foster leadership among participants, they can lead to meaningful friendships.

### **Travel time and transit fare**

Youth reported that they would be much more likely to try out a program if it was located close to home. Others said a travel time of 30 minutes is acceptable and would allow them to participate on a regular basis, but with longer travel times their attendance might decline. However, if transit fare were provided, they would be willing to make longer trips. Ideally, youth preferred programs located within walking or biking distance to their home or school.

## **3.4 Outreach and channels of information**

Youth were asked how they first heard about the recreation programs or activities they participate in. Most youth reported that their information came from word-of-mouth, or through their network of friends and family. Youth also received recommendations from teachers, coaches and social workers at school to join certain programs in the community. Adults encouraged young people to take up activities after noticing an emerging interest or talent, or seeing a need in the young person’s life. Youth mentioned that if they could not find the information they were looking for, they would search online or ask staff at their local community centre or library for assistance.

“The staff are really kind and they give you responsibilities. It’s like a job but you don’t get paid with money you get paid in volunteer hours and experience ... you learn a lot of cool things.”

*- female youth participant*

“The more you are part of things, the more you hear of other things.”

- female youth participant

“At the school ... they know who is newcomer in Canada, so the social workers give us information. They tell us: ‘What we don’t know we can find for you. What is difficult to find we will find for you.’”

- male youth participant

“The cooking class I found out because of the people who ran it. They have a garden outside of the place and my mom likes to garden and she told me and my sister to do it.”

- female youth participant

A number of youth talked about the chain reaction that occurs when one starts to get involved: participating in one program leads to other opportunities in the community.

Parents reported several sources for obtaining information about recreation, including: recreation/community centre, library, email distribution list, independent research online (City of Toronto website, community centre website), community meetings, word-of-mouth and advertisements posted in public spaces. Many parents found free and low-cost programs through the Parks, Forestry and Recreation FUN Guide™, a publication that includes general information about how to access City-operated programming and what programs are being offered.

On this question, service providers noted the importance of having a diverse staff body, preferably with staff members who reflect the cultural and linguistic communities they serve. Hiring staff who can speak the language(s) of the community can also be a cost-effective way for organizations to overcome many engagement barriers.

### **School-based outreach and referrals**

Most youth mentioned that service providers came to their classrooms to announce new or ongoing recreation opportunities. They felt this was the easiest and most accessible way to stay informed. Other youth reported getting information through school emails, school website, Facebook page and Twitter. Still others mentioned seeing programs on posters in school hallways. Finally, some youth mentioned that a referral person, such as a social worker, guidance counsellor or settlement worker in the school, helped them connect to recreation information and opportunities.

### **Parents as allies in youth engagement**

Youth talked about the role their parents played in encouraging them to explore out-of-school-time activities. Parents heard about opportunities through their own networks, such as faith communities or cultural groups.

Some service providers wrote about the need to reach out to parents as a way to engage youth. Some parents are unfamiliar with the extracurricular activities that are offered outside of their ethnic communities, and are uncomfortable sending their children to them. One suggestion was to offer more family-based programming, like family swim, Zumba, gardening or cooking classes that would allow both parents and their children to participate.

## Taking time to build interest

Some youth mentioned that they signed up for a program only after hearing about it multiple times or from multiple people. Often, recruitment gained momentum after the first year or the first round when youth heard positive reviews from their peers. Other times, youth developed an interest in an activity after they learnt that their friends were interested in it.

## How to engage newcomer youth

Youth were given a scenario in which a youth worker was trying to promote an after-school recreation program to a newcomer family with two teenage children. Participants were asked how to best engage the teens. The following suggestions were provided:

- Provide schools with flyers to distribute and post in school hallways; make announcements over the PA system
- Post flyers in community centres, libraries, and coffee shops where youth frequent
- Make face-to-face presentations in classrooms; talk about the program with the students
- Inform teachers so teachers can tell students about opportunities
- Email students or use social media, such as a school Facebook or Twitter account, so that students can share it with each other
- Advertise on school websites
- Include details of the activity in promotional materials so students know what is involved
- Offer refreshments at the program
- Provide TTC tokens or student tickets for participants using transit
- Provide volunteer hours
- Create a schedule of all upcoming programs in one semester so students can think about them ahead of time
- Hold fun events, such as holiday parties and tournaments
- Set the program at a reasonable time for students, not too early or late
- Ensure that the program operates out of a safe location and close to a transit line
- Ensure it is accessible for all

“My mom told me [about the program], and I thought it was boring. Then they [my friends] told me, then I came.”

- male youth participant

## 4. DISCUSSION

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### 4.1 Building relationships of trust - the role of staff

As supported by other studies,<sup>19, 20</sup> the findings here indicate that fostering a sense of belonging is key to engaging and retaining participation from newcomer youth. This involves staff both building relationships of trust with youth and supporting youth to form healthy friendships with their peers in the program. A thriving youth space is one where there is both safety and possibility, where young people can feel free to express themselves without fear of judgment, yet be challenged to take on new responsibilities, and be exposed to new ideas and new people. Effective youth work builds resilience in young people and prepares them for the challenges they will encounter in the rest of their lives.

Ensuring that newcomer youth encounter staff and fellow participants who share their backgrounds and experiences helps to support the development of strong relationships. Diversity in the staff teams and among participants are assets in creating future accessibility.

As staff play a critical role in building relationships of trust, they too need support in order to perform at their best. Professional development and training are key supports for youth workers. With training and support, staff can better respond to the needs of newcomer youth and other marginalized groups. This requires commitment on the part of management and resources to invest in training.

### 4.2 Providing opportunities for youth to exercise creativity and leadership

Trusting relationships also require staff to be responsive to the needs and desires of youth. Many youth want a space to develop their leadership capacity and creativity, whether this is in organized sports, instructional classes, or social or cultural groups. Through less-structured programming staff can maximize the capacities of the youth by having them create their own content or take turns leading an activity. Having less structured programming also gives newcomer youth a chance to share their experiences, knowledge and skills they bring from their home countries. Staff can establish formal leader positions, such as peer mentors and program assistants, to more meaningfully employ the energy and talents of youth. Secondly, staff can do more to involve youth in decision-making. Beyond asking for input on programming, staff can provide opportunities for youth to take part in budgeting, program planning and the

development of new programs. This can give youth a sense of pride over the program activities, increasing their own sense of worth and self-confidence.

With the input of youth participants, staff need to ensure programming not only targets the specific interests of the youth, but is appropriate for the age and developmental stage of the participants.<sup>21</sup> Programming should be structured to welcome newcomers at all skill levels, and to emphasize comradery over competition.

### **4.3 Engaging youth through a family-oriented approach**

A family-oriented approach to outreach can be an effective strategy for recruiting and retaining newcomer youth in recreation. This study suggests that parents play a vital role in youth engagement. A number of youth talked about their own attitude or their parents' attitudes toward recreation, seeing it as relatively unimportant compared to their academic responsibilities. Given the demands of settlement, and academic achievement, it is understandable that the benefits of leisure time are overlooked. To more effectively engage newcomer youth, youth workers can adopt a family-oriented approach to outreach, and partner with organizations that commonly interact with newcomer parents. Building on the dreams newcomer parents have for their children, youth workers can raise awareness around the value of recreation in supporting children's academic performance. Promotion of community-based recreation programs should emphasize how recreation enhances a young person's awareness of their social context and supports the healthy development of their social, emotional and cognitive skills.

### **4.4 Addressing financial barriers to participation**

With over half of all newcomer youth in Toronto living in low-income families,<sup>22</sup> it is not surprising that cost is the most common barrier to recreation. Poverty compounds the pressure already placed on families through the settlement process. In addition to learning English, establishing one's social network, and adapting to a new cultural environment, immigrant parents often have to work multiple low-wage jobs to make ends meet.<sup>23, 24</sup> These conditions significantly reduce the time and energy parents have available to invest in leisure activities for themselves and their children. Young people feel the impact of their family's financial hardship and may be reluctant to even ask their parents to pay for recreation.

Incentives such as tokens, food, subsidized equipment or supplies, and monetary supports are important components of programs serving this group. Staff should also recognize employment and career building as chief concerns for many newcomer youth, and incorporate skills training and networking in recreation programming wherever appropriate.

## **4.5 Increasing access to recreation in key sectors**

For the most part, youth and parents in this study did not distinguish between extracurricular activities offered through schools, City-operated recreation centres, nonprofit organizations, and those organized at a resident level or offered by the private sector. However, based on participant discussion it is evident that youth accessed recreation from all these sources. Important issues emerged regarding newcomer youth access to recreation in three key sectors - nonprofits, schools and City-run recreation centres. The following sections will briefly explore some of the issues and challenges relevant to each of the three sectors that surfaced in this study.

### **A) Nonprofit community services – Building partnerships**

Partnerships allow service providers to develop better-informed programming, and increase their outreach capacity. Many factors *outside* of recreation programs impact youth participation and experience *in* the program. Building partnerships with a broader base of community services and advocacy groups allow recreation service providers to demonstrate responsiveness to the priorities of youth by engaging in knowledge exchange and ongoing learning around emerging issues that impact the populations they are serving.

Partnerships also allow community organizations to provide local programming close to where youth live and go to school, in order to help overcome transportation related barriers. Evidence shows that recent immigrant families are increasingly settling in the inner suburbs of Toronto where public transit is poor. In his Three Cities research, Dr. David Hulchanski from the University of Toronto referred to the north-west and north-east corners of Toronto as City 3, an area home to a large population of immigrant and racialized residents, which is characterized by high rates of poverty and lack of services including public transit.<sup>25</sup> From 1997-2006, City 3 saw a 30% increase in the number of immigrants residing within its boundaries, while the average increase overall in the city was 13%. Using the Three Cities categories, the Martin Prosperity Insights report examined transit accessibility in Toronto. City 1, the higher income and better-resourced areas of the city were 3.5 times more accessible by public transit than City 3.<sup>26</sup> While it is necessary to improve public transit in underserved areas, transit-related barriers to recreation can be reduced by

increasing recreation sites in these neighbourhoods, which are home to many newcomer youth. Access to recreation close to home and school results in more responsive programming and fosters a sense of community among residents.

Nonprofit service providers overwhelmingly identified scarcity of space as a major impediment to developing locally-based programs. They recommended that youth-serving organizations partner with other organizations, both public and private, that have space. Service providers especially emphasized building reciprocal relationships where partners utilize each other's assets. For example, in exchange for using an organization's meeting space, one may provide outreach and resident engagement services. Space-sharing agreements could also be explored with for-profit recreation providers. Affordable access to appropriate space is a key challenge for recreation providers which requires long-term systemic solutions.

## **B) Schools – Reducing fees**

Many of the concerns youth shared around the cost of recreation relate to fees charged by schools, especially for school athletics. While the Province's fee guideline prohibits schools from charging money for core materials central to the curriculum, schools can still charge fees for extracurricular activities and enhanced programs.<sup>27</sup> People for Education found that 78% of secondary schools charge athletics fees, ranging from \$5 to \$1,200.<sup>28</sup> Most schools have formal and/or informal means for supporting students who cannot afford to pay; nevertheless this often requires the student or parent to self-identify to staff in order to receive assistance. Previous research found that parents and students often experience stigma in disclosing their financial need, and many students simply skipped the activity or chose not to enroll.<sup>29</sup> Newcomer parents and students who face language barriers and lack familiarity with Ontario's education system may be even less likely to advocate for themselves.

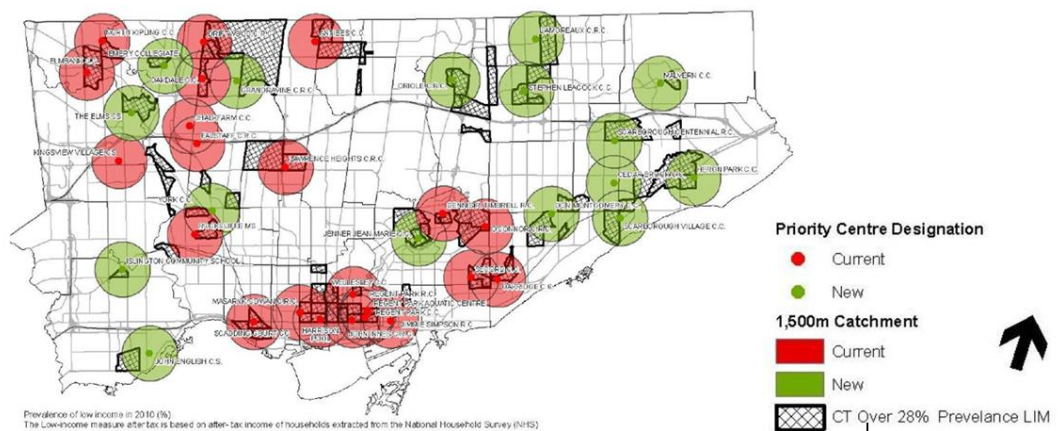
Some schools are able to subsidize fees for extracurricular activities through fundraising, but schools with the most marginalized student populations also have the least ability to raise funds. According to research, "the 20 least marginalized primary schools fundraised 36 times the funds than the most marginalized 20 schools."<sup>30</sup> Charging fees for important extracurricular programming reinforces the opportunity gap between children whose parents can afford to pay and those who cannot. Better funding for the public education system is needed so all schools can provide students with equitable opportunities for broad-based and enriched learning experiences.

### C) The City of Toronto – Reducing financial barriers

At present, City-run community recreation centres operate under one of two models. Some charge fees for registered programs and offer limited, free drop-in programs such as swimming and skating. Others are designated as Community Centres Where Programs are Free, previously called Priority Centres. The latter are located in low-income, underserved neighbourhoods and offer all programs free to residents.<sup>31</sup>

Through its Recreation Service Plan, in 2014 the City of Toronto increased the number of Community Centres Where Programs are Free from 23 to 39. All 16 of the new centres are located in the inner suburb areas of Toronto.

Fig 1. Map of Community Centres Where Programs are Free<sup>32</sup>



City of Toronto. (2013). *Staff report: Designating community centres where programs are free (Priority Centres)*. Retrieved from <http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2013/cd/bgrd/backgroundfile-63957.pdf>

Ninety-five community recreation centres continue to charge fees for programs, yet Toronto remains a top destination for new immigrants and the rate of child poverty is also steadily increasing.<sup>33</sup> Having community centres which offer free programming is an asset to building healthy and vibrant neighbourhoods. It offers residents a place to gather, play and recreate, to meet new people, build trust and develop resilience. Continuing to expand free programs would further enhance access especially for newcomer youth.

People with low-income who do not attend a Community Centre Where Programs are Free can apply for a recreation subsidy under the City's Welcome Policy.<sup>34</sup> To be eligible for this subsidy program, a household's income has to be below Statistics Canada's Low Income Cut-off (LICO). For a family of 4 the LICO is \$45,206 a year. Individuals receiving social assistance automatically qualify. The application form is only available in English, which presents a challenge for immigrants who do not speak English as their first language. To complete the

application, a person needs to provide proof of identification, proof of residency (such as a lease agreement or utility bill), and proof of income (such last year's tax return). Again, for newcomer families unfamiliar with Canadian systems, these documents can be difficult to compile without outside help.

Once a person is accepted into the subsidy program, he or she receives a PIN to register for programs offered through the City's recreation centres. Spots fill up quickly; the fastest, most convenient method is to register online or over the telephone. However, these methods require the person to have internet access and/or a credit card. Without these tools, he or she must register in person at one of the designated sites on or after registration day. Parents who are unable to take time off work or arrive early enough on registration day are heavily disadvantaged by this competitive process. Parents in this study drew on their lived experiences and began to identify alternative models that the City could employ in order to reduce the financial burden of recreation on families (see discussion on page 10). A review of the Welcome Policy through in-depth community consultation, especially with recent immigrant families, is needed in order to enhance the accessibility and effectiveness of this important program.



## 5. STUDY LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

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This study recruited participants through immigrant-serving community agencies. Youth participants were connected with at least one service provider and likely others. We recognize that there are many newcomer youth who are not well connected to mainstream youth services and their perspectives have not been captured here. However, given the barriers we found with our sample, we can reasonably conclude that youth less connected to services can face greater challenges. Future studies can recruit through other channels, such as schools, to reach youth who are less engaged.

Due to the small sample size, this study was not able to consider distinct experiences of newcomer youth by gender, race, age, ability, and neighbourhoods. Future research can focus on specific groups such as female adolescents, youth from certain ethnic communities, and youth who identify as LGBTQ. Literature suggests these groups have lower participation rates compared to their peers.

The study revealed relatively little about the experience of newcomer youth in accessing recreation through for-profit businesses. Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation has noted that for-profit recreation providers tend to cater more to working-age adults.<sup>35</sup> For this reason, the division has included a strong focus on access to recreation for youth, as well as, other underserved groups, including newcomers and seniors.

The data collection with parents and service providers was informal in nature. However, their lived experiences added richness to the youth focus group findings and therefore were included in the analysis. Future research endeavours can focus specifically on either newcomer parents or community organizations serving newcomer youth.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

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Based on the research, we have produced a list of recommendations to increase youth engagement in recreation, specifically targeting newcomer youth. Recreation can support youth in developing the emotional and social skills required for adulthood and provide them with opportunities to make lifelong memories and relationships. Ensuring that all youth have access to quality, responsive programming is an important pillar to building strong neighbourhoods and communities.

We recommend that recreation service providers:

**Build relationships and strategies that more effectively link newcomer youth to programs, by:**

- Supporting a **buddy system or mentorship model** where youth who have more experience with a program or with Canadian culture are paired with newcomer youth to help youth to broaden their social connections and make new friends.
- **Building relationships with parents** as ways to reach youth, recognizing that broader social determinants affect youth participation.
- **Establishing relationships with local schools, teachers and principals** and finding mutually beneficial ways of collaborating where classroom education and after-school recreation transition seamlessly.
- **Mailing out or hand delivering promotional material to residents** in order to reach newcomer families not connected to existing networks.
- **Providing multilingual materials** where possible; use simple, clear wording in English language to reduce comprehension problems.

**Ensure programs and staffing are developed to be more relevant to newcomer youth, by:**

- Meaningfully engaging youth in program planning, decision-making and program delivery. Foster space for **youth creativity and leadership** through **less structured** programming.
- **Designing programs in consultation with newcomer parents and youth**, in order to tailor content to meet the needs and interests of specific communities.
- Implementing a **hiring and capacity building protocol** that ensures staff can effectively work with racialized newcomer youth, and supports the development of a staff team that reflects the cultural and linguistic diversity of the communities being served.

- Arranging ongoing **professional development** opportunities for frontline staff to ensure they are adequately prepared to address systemic issues experienced by youth. Topics may include anti-racism, anti-oppression or cultural responsiveness.

**Increase availability of appropriate youth programs, by:**

- Providing **tokens, food, and opportunities for youth to gain volunteer hours** whenever possible.
- Offering recreational programs where youth gain **employable skills and establish professional contacts** to bolster their postsecondary educational and career aspirations.
- Providing less competitive, **more instructional programs** so newcomer youth who are unfamiliar with a certain sport or activity can develop their skills in a safe environment.
- Building **space-sharing partnerships** with organizations that have surplus space; seek ways to build relationships of reciprocity.
- **Increasing funding for newcomer youth recreation programs** to support community organizations offering affordable out-of-school-time programs and activities that meet the needs of hard-to-reach populations and service-scarce neighbourhoods.
- Partnering with school boards and other stakeholders to **develop community hubs** in low-income, inner suburb neighbourhoods where service gaps exist.

**Invest in service strategies that erase economic barriers to program delivery and participation, by:**

- Providing **more free and low-cost recreation programming**, especially in low-income, underserved neighbourhoods with high concentrations of new immigrants in order to reduce waiting lists and ensure all residents have equitable opportunities for participation. We recommend the continued expansion of the number of Community Centres Where Programs are Free.
- **Reducing permit costs** to ensure meeting spots are accessible for program and service delivery.
- Conducting **a review of the Welcome Policy** to ensure that this subsidy program is maximizing recreation access for low-income residents and is funded at appropriate levels. The review should include in-depth community consultations, incorporating the voices of new immigrant families and youth.

We offer these recommendations to support action that improves the lives of newcomer youth and families through better access to recreation. The City of

Toronto, schools, nonprofit and for-profit recreation providers need to work together and in partnership with immigrant communities to ensure that every young person arriving in Canada can benefit from the rewards of play.

## 7.CONCLUSION

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Recreation is an important way to promote lifelong health and wellbeing in newcomer youth, as well as support successful settlement in Canadian society which enhances academic success and employment outcomes. This study highlights the challenges faced by newcomer youth in accessing recreation activities in Toronto, the factors that support access, and effective outreach methods to connect newcomer youth to recreation opportunities in Toronto. The City of Toronto, nonprofit recreation providers, and schools can all play an important role in opening doors and removing barriers to recreation for newcomer youth by adopting the strategies outlined in this report.



## 8. REFERENCES

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- <sup>3</sup> See note #1
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- <sup>11</sup> See note #9
- <sup>12</sup> Yu, P. & Berryman, D. (1996). The relationship among self-esteem, acculturation, and recreation participation in recently arrived Chinese immigrant adolescents. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 28(4), 251-273.
- <sup>13</sup> See note #7
- <sup>14</sup> City of Toronto, Parks, Forestry and Recreation (2012). *Recreation service plan 2013-2017*. Retrieved from <http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2012/cd/bgrd/backgroundfile-51832.pdf>.
- <sup>15</sup> See note #14

<sup>16</sup> Data from the 2011 National Household Survey shows that most newcomer youth in Toronto live in the inner suburbs. Data accessed through the City of Toronto's Community Data Program.

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<sup>20</sup> See note #2

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<sup>35</sup> See note #14

## APPENDIX A

