

Young **RURAL** *Resilient* **PROJECT**

A project of the
Rural Change Makers Program



RURAL
CHANGE
MAKERS 

ROI  **RURAL ONTARIO
INSTITUTE**
Vision, Voice and Leadership

Project Highlights

Young people in rural Ontario face unique challenges distinctive to rural and remote spaces. Access to services, social isolation, and resource insecurities are just a few of the barriers faced by many young rural adults. With support from the Trillium Foundation Resilient Communities Fund, the Rural Ontario Institute (ROI) undertook an important evaluative project - the Young Rural Resilient (YRR) Project to determine the status of rural youth since the Pandemic. The project was instrumental in helping us understand the perspectives of rural youth, challenges faced and what was needed to build back rural resiliency in Ontario through its most precious asset – its young people. The Young Rural Resilient Project gathered fresh viewpoints to meet current demands and a reimagined Rural Change Makers (RCM) program has emerged as a result.

Building on existing strengths the RCM program has adapted to incorporate co-designed elements that aim to support rural retention of youth while building inclusive youth leadership and community-economic development capacity throughout rural Ontario.

Place Matters – Rural Retention of Youth

The 2018 ROI Focus on Rural Ontario Fact Sheet "*Migrants 18-24*" (<http://bit.ly/migrants18-24>) showed that **every non-metro census division in rural Ontario had net-loss of population due to outmigration of youth aged 18-24** between 2011 and 2016. The 2021 Girls E-Mentorship report also highlights youth out-migration being of significant relevance in rural Ontario, and Foster and Main's research suggests that attachment to place and perceptions of meaningful career opportunities are major factors of influence on whether young people stay or leave their rural communities.

Out migration of youth from rural communities in Ontario is of particular concern, as data shows the distribution of children and young adults across Ontario is much higher in rural areas (Census 2016). Although the proportion of working-age Ontarians (above 50 years old), both male and female, is much higher in urban areas, most Ontario residents are shown to reside in rural areas. In rural Ontario, an increased number of youth are facing different challenges than older adults with increased service demand needs. Rural-centric youth opportunities are important to bridge the divide of a youth exodus from rural areas and build sustainable rural communities and economies.

The Importance of “Co-Design” in Rural Youth Programming

Results from the Young Rural Resilient Project are deeply meaningful and have been thoughtfully rolled up into youth programming delivered by the Rural Ontario Institute (ROI). ROI's upcoming Rural Change Maker program has been intentionally co-designed from YRR research and feedback from rural, resilient youth and community members. It has been co-designed to meet needs, narrow gaps and minimize barriers identified by rural-remote-Indigenous youth, while providing transformative leadership skills building and relevant community-economic development opportunities. Creating a sense of community belonging through youth-led rural community engagement. Co-design of the Rural Change Maker program ensures we meet the needs of rural youth where they are at and how they need it.

Connecting, Belonging and Inclusion

In 2018, high-speed internet access was available to 97% of urban households, while only 40.8% of rural households had access to it. Also, the median download speed in urban areas was 26.16 Mbps, while it was a staggering 5.42 Mbps in rural areas (YouthRex, 2021). This highlights the challenge of connectivity in rural communities. Rural youth need innovative solutions to plug into opportunities more readily accessible in urban spaces. In response, ROI and Rural Change Maker partners are working together to provide solutions, such as funding for wrap around supports like the provision of hardware and utilizing existing community resources to create safe and accessible spaces for change makers to learn and connect.

Rural Ontario youth experience higher levels of disconnection not only due to infrastructure inequalities and resource insecurities, but also by physical geographic distance. Creating digital and physical opportunities for youth to connect exposes rural youth to a cross-pollination of ideas and community economic development solutions that traverse cultural, regional, and sector boundaries. Young, rural, resilient youth have told us this kind of discovery is important to them to better understand themselves and each other, as well as their place in the rural landscape. The Rural Change Maker Program has woven this feedback into both the skills training and experiential activities via inter-regional networking, and youth exchange opportunities like a provincial youth summit and community action labs. Through experiential activities change makers will be exposed to the culture and diversity of participant regions, while discovering community development best practices, partner initiatives and unique regional economic projects.

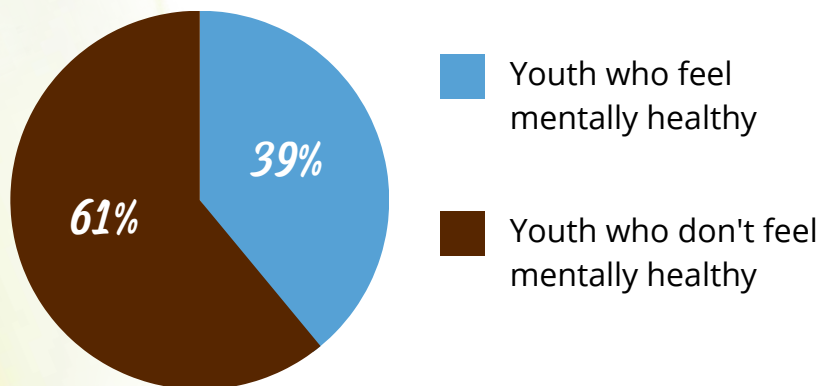
Wellbeing among Rural Youth

A 2021 Youth Impact Survey conducted by the Children and Youth Planning Table found that 65% of rural youth aged 9 to 18 reported having positive mental health, which was higher than their urban peers. However, other factors such as transportation, resource scarcity, isolation and belonging affect a decline in youth well-being. A 2018 assessment in North Dumfries, Wellesley, Wilmot and Woolwich Townships revealed that 36% of rural youth aged 12 to 19 expressed elevated psychological distress, and 77.3% rated their stress level as high or very high. Additionally, 16.3% of rural youth aged 12 to 19 had considered suicide in the past year – a dire statistic needing coordinated response.

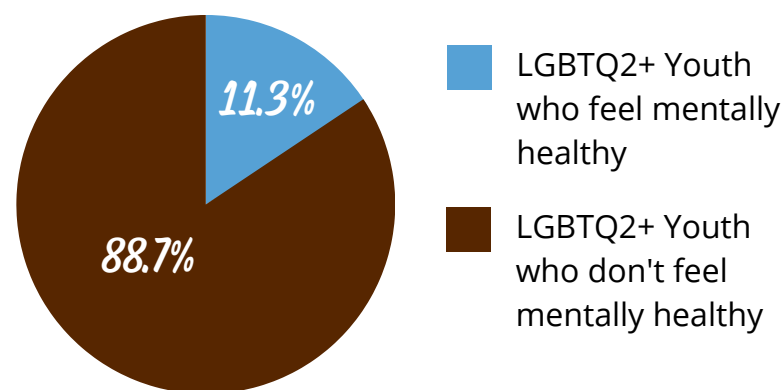
Youth Impact Survey results identify that it is common for rural youth to face stigma around mental health and struggles are often hidden to avoid perceived exposure in small community settings. Rural youth also report increased stress due to career planning, balancing school and work, and managing life skills. Drug use is also a growing concern in rural and remote regions with financial insecurities limiting access to healing mechanisms and counselling supports. Of note is the finding that many young people question the safety of obtaining therapy services in rural areas due to feelings of shame and lack of privacy.

Geographic distance, scalability, dispersed populations, overall health and wellbeing are major challenges faced by rural youth. Survey results from rural Ottawa area youth aged 12-24 show considerable need for mental health and wellbeing supports with most respondents reporting feeling mentally unhealthy. 39% of youth in rural Ottawa described their overall mental health as healthy while only 11.3% of LGBTQ2+ youth described themselves as mentally healthy (@ruralottawayouth).

**Mental Health Survey
in Rural Ontario**



**Mental Health Survey in
LGBTQ2+ Youth of Rural Ontario**



Several solutions can be implemented by youth-focused organizations to help address this acute need.

Resource Inventories – Transformative Training and the Importance of Lived Experience

Re-imagining Rural Change Maker program curriculum to incorporate significant self-development components before advancing to the core skills needed to effectively lead change is a key response to YRR identified challenges.

ROI is working with experienced regional partners to establish supportive mechanisms, like local RCM peer groups with familial kinship ties and shared lived experiences; and mentors, elders, and coaches who can come alongside youth during their change-making journey. Intentional partnerships wrap local support, expertise and lived experience around incoming emerging leaders to the Rural Change Maker Program. RCM curriculum has also adapted in response, to incorporate critical self-development training that builds necessary internal resources, before embarking on core skills training and community economic development leadership. Self-development training will precede core skills training by change makers and explore life-stabilizing approaches like Bridges out of Poverty, Future Visioning, Personal inventories of the 11-essential-resources and co-active coaching. These foundational skills are critical to prepare emerging leaders for the demands of community-development leadership and narrow gaps among equity deserving youth.

Core skill development through the Rural Change Maker program has also responded to youth-informed priorities with foundational principles of project management, fundraising and financial literacy, leadership styles, community action labs and core community-economic development training built in. Rural Change Makers will share a learning journey that is both hyper-local and inter-regional with wrap-around supportive mechanisms to guide young rural leaders toward positive personal, professional and community outcomes.

Provision of Wrap-around Supports

Many youth programs focused on skill building are modelled on an assumption of “readiness” by participants to engage and succeed. The YRR project showed us that while rural youth are incredibly resilient and passionate to engage, they face mounting barriers that can impact outcomes. We know that rural communities are stronger when youth feel a sense of belonging, connection and value. Where their contributions lead to empowerment through youth-led civic participation that makes a difference in their lives and that of their neighbours. Incorporation of wrap around supports are critical to programming frameworks to ensure inclusion and accessibility among equity deserving youth.

Procurement of necessary funds to ensure financial resource needs of youth are met, including food, travel, accommodation and curriculum resource needs are an important step to success for rural change makers. ROI has actively engaged stakeholders to encourage resourcing that meets the needs of youth and scaled design of the RCM program to reflect stakeholder commitments. Wrap around supports ensure equitable access to programming opportunities and promote positive outcomes and social return on investment.

The Rural Change Maker program model is designed on the principle that communities inherently have the ability and capacity to intimately understand and address local priorities or issues. The program model builds rural outcomes by guiding youth through expert, partner and organization directed learning – to youth led experiential learning where rural change makers mobilize community around self-identified priorities. Youth led community-economic development activities that begin within the RCM program grow to community ownership, maturing beyond the organization or individual and leading to more sustainable outcomes for communities.

Partners and Allies – Building Positive and Inclusive Relations

Alignment of rural youth with regional partners is key for local support and recruitment of youth within familiar locales and existing support networks.

“Training young leaders requires reconciliation through a blend of Indigenous Knowledge and western training methodologies,” says Laura Calmwind, Opiikapawin Services LP (OSLP) Training Manager. “Leadership training and networking with other young leaders from different areas will provide unique professional development opportunities and further our care for the next generation.”

Rural, remote and Indigenous youth engaged through the YRR project expressed a shared priority and need for leadership opportunities rooted in the spirit of reconciliation. A priority of “lighting the 8th fire” among Indigenous and non-Indigenous emerging leaders working alongside each other on a shared path forward, with respect and acknowledgement of the past and hope for the future. RCM has established regional partnerships — including Opiikapawin Services LP (OSLP) representing youth from a collective of 24 remote northern Ontario Indigenous communities leading the Wataynikaneyap energy project, and the Timmins Youth Wellness Hub — to support local

youth on a shared leadership journey. Indigenous governance understanding through a cultural dialogue walk, has been co-designed into the core curriculum of the RCM program. Facilitated by our northern Indigenous partners, this training will offer change makers a deeper understanding of themselves and others with consideration of other world views and ways of governance.

"The Wataynikaneyap Power Transmission Project is the largest First Nations-led infrastructure project in Canada," says Eliezar Mckay, First Nation LP Board Chair. "Our leaders have come together on a regional issue and found a solution. First Nation ownership will ensure responsible development of infrastructure on our homelands and maximize benefits to communities." (August 2022 news release).

The Timmins Youth Wellness Hub is a safe, inclusive and welcoming space for all youth aged 12-25 to access mental health, addictions and wellbeing services, resources and support.

"Creating strong, passionate leaders who are committed and want to give back to the community is important for Northern communities," says Anne Vincent, Executive Director Timmins YWH.

Rural Change Maker Overview

Rural Change Makers is the culmination of 10 years of youth programming delivered by ROI to answer the challenges faced by rural youth. ROI launched a Municipal Internship Program in 2019 as a youth engagement strategy to encourage youth retention, career building, and participation in rural communities across rural Ontario. The program generated long-term outcomes by building civic leadership among youth, increasing capacity for youth engagement, facilitating municipal sector workforce succession, and youth attraction and retention.

Covid-19 Impact on Rural Youth

Many youth-centred organizations and service providers observed a sharp decline in youth participation during the Covid-19 Pandemic where resource insecurities drove disconnection and instability. The YRR project was undertaken in direct response to this growing concern. The YRR project involved surveys and a listening tour among rural, remote and Indigenous youth. ROI also conducted interviews with partners, scholars and professionals (including university lecturers, board members and directors of NGOs), as well as youth community

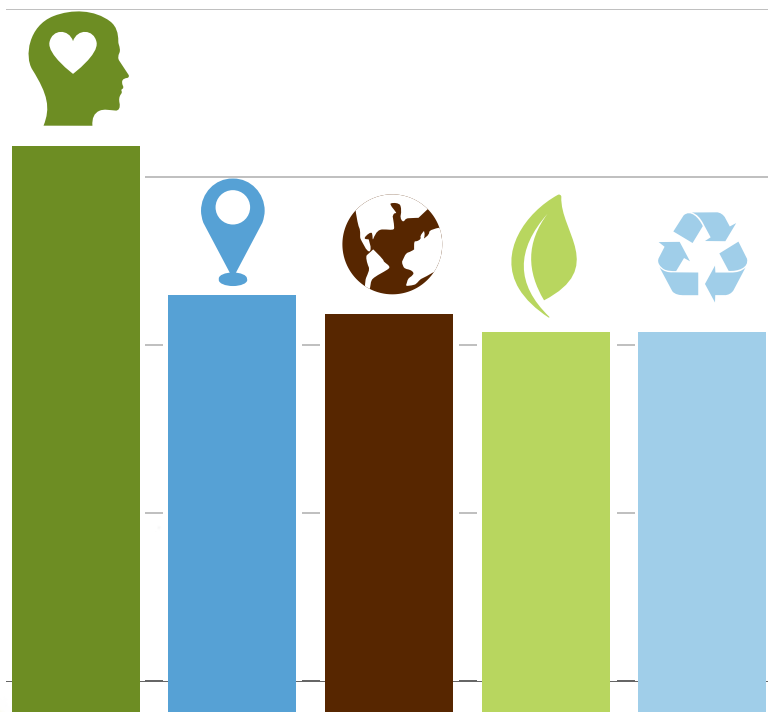
conductors and employees, to identify current challenges facing rural youth. YRR participants identified the following challenges:

- Difficulty in connecting and networking with one another and broader institutions.
- Fewer opportunities for youth in comparison to 15 years ago, making it difficult to transition into the adult world.
- Young people have different priorities and values now, so programs must respect and represent them.
- Uncertainty about the future, such as finding a decent job or having a house, has led to increased anxiety, depression, and mental health issues.
- Limited opportunities and spaces for rural youth to gather and spend time.

Interviewees also identified how ROI can better serve rural youth:

- Raise awareness among rural youth about the importance of community involvement and support them in building their connections and sense of identity.
- Explore opportunities for grants and funding to improve rural networking, providing platforms for youth to engage in inter-county social activities and workshops while amplifying their voices.
- Conduct focus group research with youth and youth groups to explore well-being and career-building strategies, including training on useful tools such as organizational structures like cooperatives.
- Provide opportunities for all groups of youth in a community, including those from different socioeconomic backgrounds, education levels, and marginalized groups, with a holistic approach to support their social, vocational, and personal goals.

TOP 5 priorities of rural youth



70% Mental Health and Wellbeing

51% Land Use/Land Rights

49% Climate Change

47% Environmental Stewardship

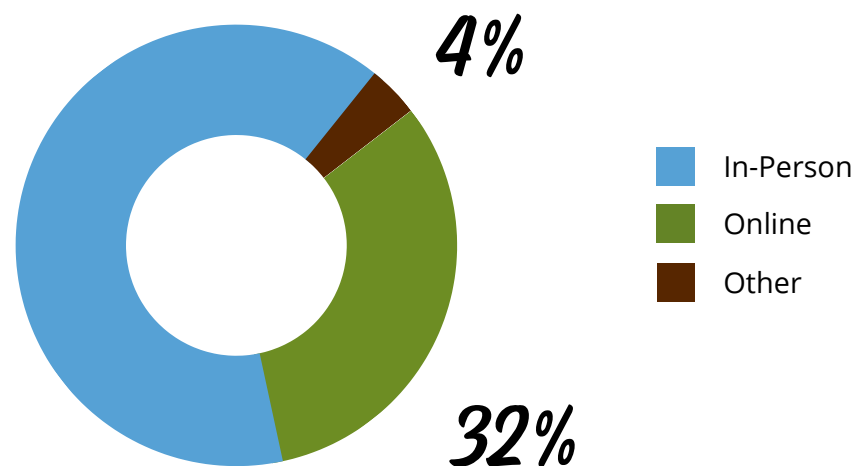
47% Sustainable development

47% of YRR respondents also reported human rights and equality, and sports and recreation as important priorities.

How rural youth connect

64%

of youth said they prefer to connect with friends and their community in person.



What inspires rural youth

Seeing people take steps to make change, and incorporate community members into the process. Also, when you know that community members are allies.

Seeing how passionate and aware youth are. There is a generation of change makers on the horizon and we're ready to create action.

What inspires hope in me is that I'm not alone in my concerns. I'm not the only one who sees issues and wants change. It brings me hope that others I know stand against problems.

Life is all about change. There is no way to be certain that the hardships we experience now will remain in our future. There is always the chance that things will get better.

I hope for togetherness & LIGHTING THE 8th FIRE*

***Lighting the 8th Fire** - Out of the Anishinaabe's seven fires comes the idea of the 8th, Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations on a continuous path, informed by the past, but whose course can be change by working together with hope for future generations.



Aspirations and concerns of rural, remote & Indigenous youth

Inspiring and serving my community and building resources that weren't available to me.

I am interested in land use planning in rural areas. As well as, how to manage climate change and climate disasters.

Mental Health and Addictions, LGBTQ+

I'm passionate about influencing communities. Specially those who are marginalized and want their voice to be heard! I believe in advocacy and decentralization.

The health of the earth, helping by giving a hand-up to vulnerable people of all ages.

Community well-being and inclusion.

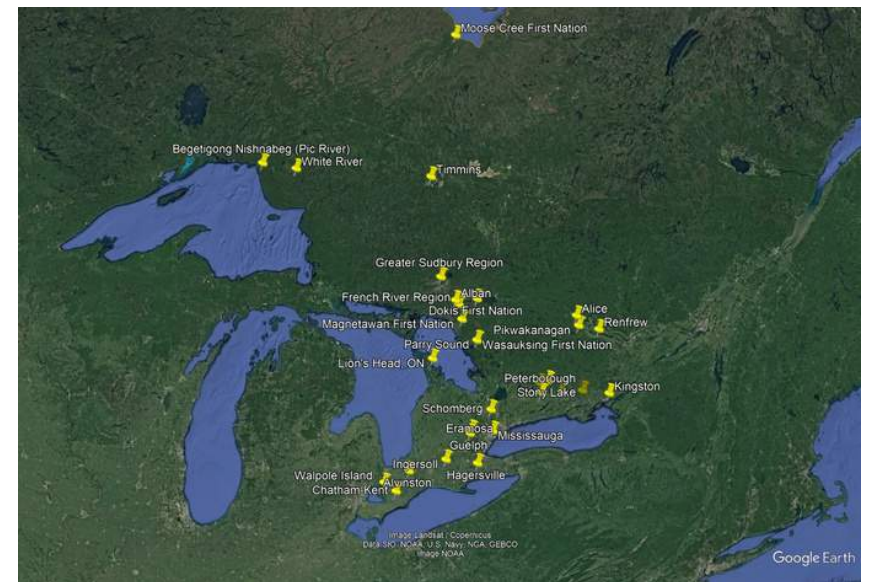


I am passionate about my Indigenous culture, I am very passionate about the language (Ojibwe) and am taking time to learn it.

Regional Impact of the YRR project



There were more than 250 respondents who participated in the Young Rural Resilient project with 5 Rural Change Maker Program Participants including ROI staff leads, YRR project Ambassadors and RCM 2 participants. Regions represented in the outreach spanned rural Ontario and included many northern, remote and Indigenous communities



Rural youth's hope for the future of their communities

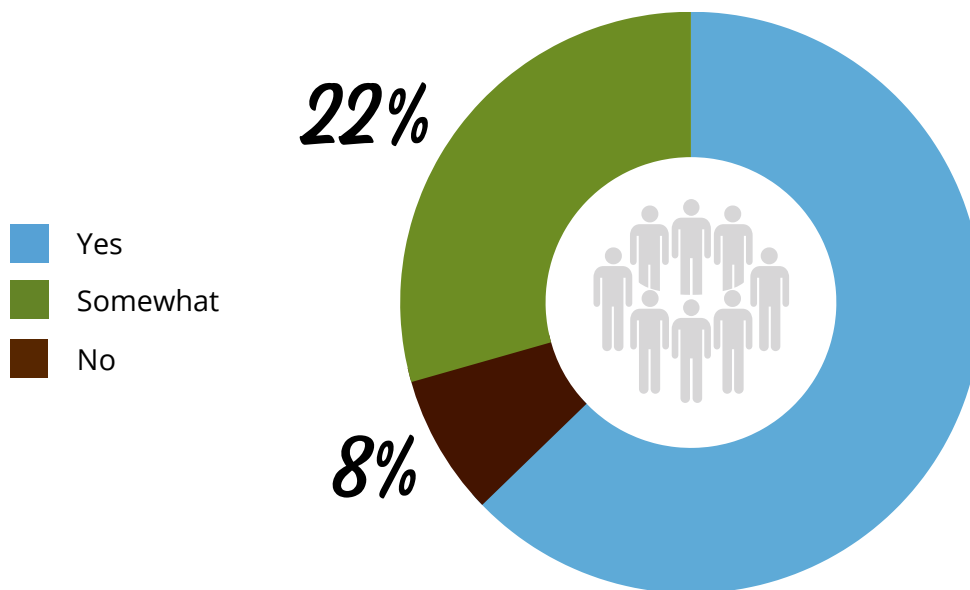


That there is greater equity, more support for those that want and need connecting, more housing options, less poverty, less climate damage

Public transportation would improve the lives of many in our area. Protecting our access to healthcare and making those services more accessible is also important. Fibre optic expansion. Affordable housing

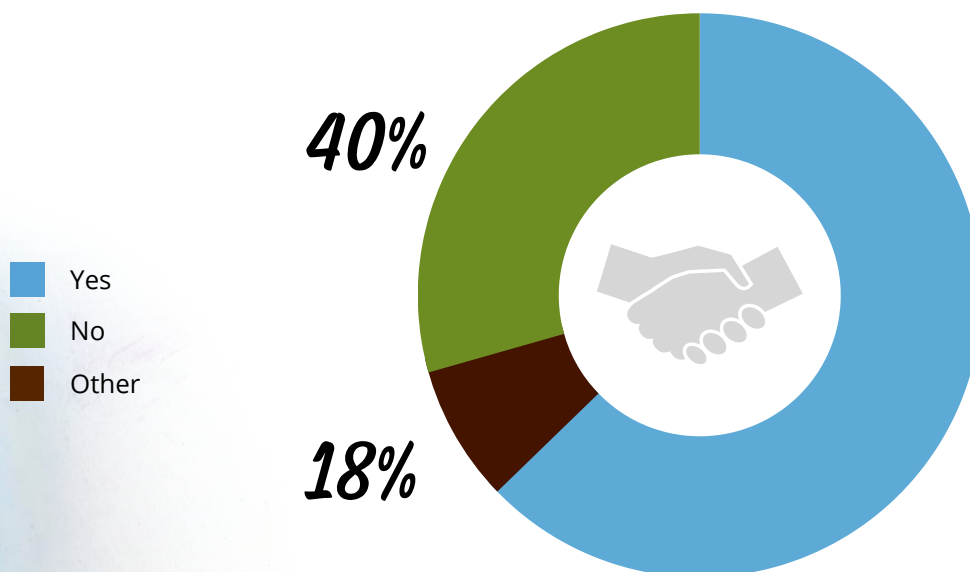
I want to see strong leaders of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds take up the challenge to improve our local infrastructure (transportation, housing, food) and ensure no one is left behind.

Rural, resilient youth – belonging and connection



63%

of YRR participants said they feel a sense of belonging and connection to their community.



42%

of youth that responded had someone they could call on for guidance as a mentor.

What is needed in a leadership program to lead change



45% Financial Incentives

55% Training and Skill Development

45% Community Connections/Support

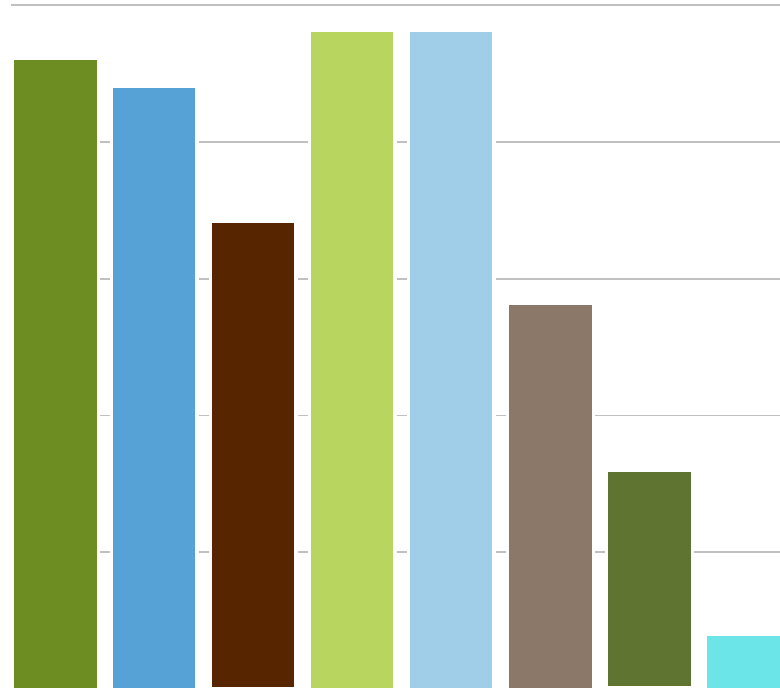
51% Access to Opportunities/Existing Projects

39% Mentorship and Guided Learning

20% All of the above

> 1% Other

Aspects of the Rural Change Maker experience that interest youth:



47% Soft Skill Self Development

16% Core Skill Development

35% Action Labs

49% Community Project Participation

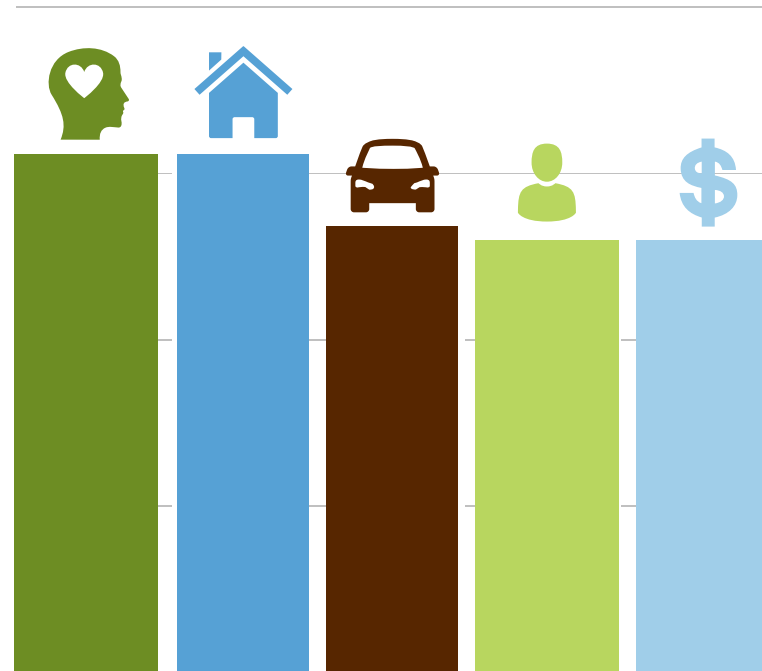
49% Cultural Exchange (experiential learning in rural, remote and Indigenous Ontario communities)

29% Provincial Youth-Led Event

16% All of the above

4% Other

TOP 5 identified barriers and challenges rural youth face



63% Mental Health and Wellbeing

63% Access to services like affordable housing, food and health care

55% Transportation

53% Isolation

53% Financial Insecurity



55%

believed that current events are severely impacting youth wellbeing.

TOP 6 events impacting rural, remote & Indigenous youth wellbeing:

71% Pandemic

49% Climate Crisis

41% Legacy of Residential School System and Child Burials

35% Ongoing war

33% Civil Unrest

33% Environmental disasters

CONTACT US



info@ruralontarioinstitute.ca



519-826-4204



www.ruralontarioinstitute.ca
www.roiconnect.ca



canadahelps.org/en/dn/12160



7382 Wellington Road 30, R.R. 5
Guelph, ON N1H 6J2

