

Brockville and Area Youth Survey Report
Final Report By: Leigh Bursey
Brockville Youth Advisory Committee

In the spring of 2012, the Brockville Youth Advisory Committee began circulating an area youth questionnaire, focusing on demographic issues, viewpoints and local lifestyle trends of our area's young people. In an effort to make the report as comprehensive as possible, the committee (made up of interested citizens, school-aged youth, young mothers, health care professionals, and a council representative) meticulously crafted, selected, and voted on just what questions we would ask the public, and what areas we wanted to cover.

The questions were entirely anonymous, but would focus on some specifics such as where the participating youth live, their age, if they vote, and what gender they identify as, while also asking broader based, open ended questions based on volunteerism, shopping trends, youth engagement, and what can be improved. Some questions were based on discussions we had taken part in previously as a committee, or based on hot-button issues relevant at the time the survey was being drafted. Ideally, once we outlined specifics, our goal was to encourage youth to go above and beyond the simple question/answer format and share their opinions in their own words. In some aspects this was successfully executed, however like any other form of analysis, it is only utilized by those who feel engaged within the process. Therefore, some of our data is very much made up of standardized "yes/no" answers.

The three page questionnaire was then circulated by hand and by email to various youth groups and interested parties (such as the Chamber of Commerce Young Professionals group, the Brockville-wide GSA, and others), and made available to high schools through civics classes, often accompanied by presentations on youth engagement by Councillor Bursey. Questionnaires were made available to the general public at the Brockville Public Library, and through the City Clerk's office at Brockville City Hall. This information was made public through various media appeals to area youth to take part, including articles in the Brockville Recorder and Times, Brocknews.ca, and the St. Lawrence EMC.

The questionnaire data was initially planned to be quantified and made available by June 2012, but being that this was a first attempt for our committee at collecting this type of information, we decided to extend the deadline until at least October 2012 to allow for more youth to participate.

In total, 118 surveys were examined, with another handful arriving following our cut-off deadline for delivery. The Leeds, Grenville and Lanark Health Unit volunteered to enter and transcribe the data on our behalf, thanks to some efforts by Health Unit Youth Engagement Advisor and current Youth Advisory Committee Vice President, David Patterson.

Councillor Leigh Bursey made numerous class presentations at various times at Thousand Islands Secondary School, Brockville Collegiate Institute, the St. Lawrence College, and T.R. Leger alternative education schools. Many surveys were collected through the Brockville Public Library. And a handful were also collected through the Young Professionals group of the Chamber of Commerce. Upon reflection, we would have wished to see more area youth from faith-based groups take part. But we do believe this data to be telling and comprehensive, and we do stand by these results which we believe to

be telling and eye-opening in many ways. No one was intentionally left out or neglected, however some did choose not to participate. Each committee member was also given multiple opportunities to craft questions, and include their own personal thoughts and opinions.

All in all, we had youth and young professionals take part from every age between thirteen and thirty years old. Over 77.6% respondents (90) live in Brockville, while the others live close by and commute to Brockville frequently for school or work. The highest percentage of participants ranged between the ages of fourteen and eighteen, with 78 respondents (or 66.2%) falling between those ages, making this analysis very representative of teenage adolescence, even considering that 38 responses came from mature youth nineteen or older. 46.8% of our participants were male, while 48.9% were female, offering almost a completely even gender-bias. 56.9% of those who identified themselves as eighteen years of age or older, do vote or plan to at their first opportunity.

In an effort to paint a clear picture of the feedback we received when orchestrating this exercise, we will include a number of quotes from participants that we feel best reflect general themes, ideas, and attitudes. Please keep in mind that participants were encouraged to be honest and focus on needs and improvement. Many answers were positive in context, but come across critical.

When asked "What community activities are you currently involved in?" the overwhelming majority of this question's respondents choose physical activities and sports. The number of youth highlighting physical recreation was greater than the combined total for volunteering, arts-based recreation, clubs, and other less common choices. And when asked what other community activities would they elect to be involved in if their choices were made available, again physical activity and sports were the dominant choices by those who chose to respond. Activities highlighted included YMCA summer camps, relays for life, youth dances, and shopping.

Question three in the first section asked "Do you believe there are enough services available to youth in need? If not, provide examples of which ones you'd like to see made available." Two-thirds of our respondents to this question said yes, they did believe that enough services were available to youth in need. Some disclosed utilizing resources that they did not even know were locally available until the time came where they were in personal need, and most seemed fairly enthusiastic. That said, for those that did not feel that our community offered enough services to at risk youth, a variety of items were highlighted including jobs, shopping choices, a youth shelter, free or low-cost entertainment options, more counseling for teens, arts opportunities, and overwhelmingly recreation options or physical activities. Others highlighted more specific items, like more snow clearing on non-priority sidewalks with higher density of apartment dwellers, more housing and affordable housing options, a desire to see more hobby fairs as opposed to just job fairs, and more accessible public transportation options.

"There are great employment resources like the Employment Education Centre, but the 'old boys' town does lack career options for youth." – male, 27 years.

"There are definitely lots of services available for youth. People just choose not to seek them. Most people in this town smile and say hello to me." – female, 16 years.

“I see myself here long-term, or starting life in Brockville in the future because everything I need is here.” – male, 13 years.

“We need more activities to promote healthy lifestyles, and get youth more involved with helping the community.” – female, 22 years.

When asked if youth "feel welcome in this city," nearly three quarters of our respondents said yes, which can be seen as very positive when you consider how often adolescent youth feel isolated, socially awkward, or challenged in any rural or urban setting. The one concurrent theme that seemed to dominate this question's many responses was that even though our youth do feel welcome, they did find that this city tends to focus much of its attention on older adults, which does create cultural challenges. Several comments included statements such as "I grew up in Brockville," that people are "kind and helpful", and that feeling welcome "depends on the time of day and location." We as a committee feel that this question was showcase to some highly positive and promising numbers and responses, but the theme of youth disengagement continues to be a predominant worry, and a noticeable stress throughout the remainder of the survey's answers.

“Most people in this town smile and say hello to me.” – female, 16 years.

“As a youth who has disabilities, people judge very quickly in this town. I want to be passionate, but there are so many roadblocks that it frustrates me.” – female, 23 years.

“A lot of people here are great and they do what they can.” – male, 14 years.

Next, participants were asked "what are three challenges that you feel are facing youth in this community," with the most popular answers predictably being drugs and alcohol, lack of jobs, and lack of things to do. However, bullying was highlighted as a growing concern coupled with social acceptance issues, and youth crime was also highlighted. These answers came up quite a bit in last fall's youth roundtable discussions, as did transportation in a mixed urban/rural setting.

“Bullying is a huge concern. There is a lot that happens here, and I know from experience that is one of the biggest problems facing youth. And it is not just a lack of jobs, but the types of jobs we have available.” – male, 19 years.

"Bullying is a big problem in this town. Many of my friends and myself have been bullied. Another big one is drugs. I have never done drugs, but I have lost friends to drugs that would later ruin their lives. It's also hard to get a job, and whenever one opens up, they get snatched up too quickly." - male, 15 years.

“Most resources are widely available at my current age, but when I was younger, it was much easier to find drugs and sneak out at night than it was to find a place to hang out with kids my age.” – male, 20 years.

“Too many kids are in desperate need of guidance, especially to do with addiction. – female, 21 years.

“The biggest challenge is that kids don't believe in themselves.” – male, 13 years.

“A Challenge is feeling comfortable in networking events when most attendees have already been doing business together for years.” - female, 30 years.

“People are afraid of change and anyone new, though they tend to seem welcoming.” – female, 26 years.

"We need more art education for youth (we can't all be sports stars), for those who fall through the cracks. I feel too old to be a kid, and too young to be taken seriously. There is a lack of non-minimum wage jobs (retaining educated youth). – female, 26 years.

When asked if youth were attending events within the community, and if so, which events were they attending, most highlighted festivals like Ribfest and Riverfest. With Riverfest no longer being an option for youth, there were concerns expressed that youth will feel that there is even less to do. Sports games were an easy second choice, followed by farmer's markets, carnivals and sidewalk sales. As for why youth may not be attending more events, challenges included money, transportation, and an unawareness of event details.

"What are your favourite stores to shop at downtown?" was our next posed question, and of the 69 responses we received to this survey question, 13 individuals made it clear that they don't shop downtown, while others listed mega-mall department stores such as Wal-Mart or the 1000 Islands Mall as their shopping destination of choice, and did not comment further on why downtown merchants aren't attracting their business. Refreshingly, stores like Limestone and Ivy, Echo, Revolution Skate Shop, Sequence Cyber Cafe and Pete's Music Exchange seemed to snag a fair amount of attention, with an obvious caveat for youth demographics. Clothing stores were the predominant favourites, with the skate shop being the single favourite destination. Book stores, restaurants, and 'every day needs' locations such as pet stores and drug marts would make-up the remainder of responses.

In one of the more unfortunate responses we received, more than half of our participants indicated that they are not currently volunteering in our community, and others made it clear that they don't intend to continue volunteering once completing their mandatory community service hours in high school, or securing more permanent employment. This speaks most tellingly to the old conundrum of needing experience to secure the job, but not being able to get the experience without the job. A common paradox amongst young people, volunteerism is a definitive anecdote to this dilemma, but many times this solution still continues to be ignored. As well, when responses such as "there's nothing to do," or "we need more free entertainment options" continue to crop up in our results, this question exposes a certain level of apathy. It is not that there are no organizations needing help or quality activities to participate in, just apparently they aren't being sought out or enjoyed. Organizations like Loaves and Fishes, CPHC, the YMCA, retirement homes, Operation Harvest Sharing, the Volunteer Centre of St. Lawrence-Rideau, and even TVCogeco were all listed as popular choices for youth volunteers, as were sports teams and religious groups. However, this slim majority may be indicative of a larger problem, in that there are many worthwhile activities to take part in, but they are not being advertised as effectively as may be required, or are simply not reaching their desired audiences.

When this question was followed up with a similarly based question asking what types of

volunteer opportunities would youth be interested in, a plethora of examples and answers were offered, such as activities including children, animals, community agencies, and more sporting events. These volunteer opportunities may already exist in our community, but something is being lost in translation along the way.

“Opportunities to get involved exist, but many residents themselves seem indifferent to many causes.” – male, 27 years.

Hitting on a more common theme for us in the Brockville Youth Advisory Committee, participants were asked if they used Brockville public transit. Of the 102 respondents who answered this question, an overwhelming majority of 82 (or 80.4%) said they did not use city buses. On average the city bus line costs our city well over \$200,000.00 annually, so knowing that youth who have already outlined transportation and financials as primary issues that hinder their involvement in community events and civic life are not utilizing a service that is intended to be economical and accessible raises a few concerns. There is a segment of the population that depends on this service, so we must do all that we can to enhance it, and encourage its consistent use.

When asked "what changes could be made to better improve Brockville Public Transit?" as a follow-up question, a variety of responses were obtained, ranging from improving the aesthetic quality of the buses to the flexibility of routes. More tangible suggestions included schedule changes, clearer signage on residential streets, enhanced holiday availability, and more suitable hours. Many of these same concerns have been brought forward to and discussed by this committee in the past, and have even made it to the council floor in conversation segments. Hopefully, this data will provide more substantive commentary to these concerns.

“Buses need to run longer hours. It’s a pain walking home at 8pm in the pouring rain in the winter six days week because I have a job. It offers me nothing to be passionate about.” – female, 20 years.

“I would make public transit look less like the para-transit and more like a distinct city bus.” – female, 26 years.

We need more buses, more frequency, easier to access bus passes, more hours to accommodate kids at school and/or work.” - female, 20 years.

"Can you see yourself living in Brockville long term and/or starting a life here in the future?" was the next question on the docket for our survey-takers. A slim majority said that yes they could, already are, or are planning to. With a ratio of 60 yes to 44 no, and 14 maybe, this is good news for a small urban centre, but does provide serious room for improvement. As we continue to push to make Brockville a more recognizably "Youth Friendly Community" through a designation process, trumpet our safe community status, and highlight sustainability plans and a focus on attracting and retaining young professionals and families as a strategic focus, there has never been a more important time in our mind than now to make this community as inviting as possible to our youth. We are aware that our Economic Development department's lifestyle sub-committee and satellite university campus committee are attempting to do just that, and it can be seen as obvious by our survey results for this question that we are on the right track. The key will be staying on track.

“I cannot currently see myself living here. The city has been built around older citizens for a while now. I’m very passionate about my community. And I know that nothing will ever be done, or get better just sitting around complaining or talking about it. Action needs to be taken to help the city grow.” – male, 19 years.

“I want to explore, but I do want to come back. Getting meaningful employment is ridiculously hard here right now. Limited events, places and projects that I feel are targeted at mature youth.” – female, 22 years.

Some of the most common questions that come up at our committee meetings focus on the need for more area jobs. However, when asked to identify what types of employment opportunities our youth would like to see here, many of the desired outcomes are already in play. Trades job topped the list, as did the food industry, clothing and retail. There was also a desire to see more social services jobs and business sales jobs made available, especially considering how many of our area college students are working towards jobs in the public sector or towards business diplomas, and are fearful that they may have to relocate after graduation.

As an interesting sidebar to this question, some answers clearly indicated a certain level of frustration in that they didn't know what types of jobs they might want to find in their community. And once again, a small number of participants even left this question blank.

“I’m not sure about what types of employment opportunities, but I would like to see more. Brockville is a beautiful place to live and work.” – female, 25 years.

“We need more jobs to help youth consider career choices, and not just retail.” – female, 14 years.

"We need more business opportunities, like public relations and management placements. I'm stuck working dead-end jobs." - female, 20 years.

I thought I could see myself here and I have been trying, but I have to leave to get a good paying job. I hope to be able to return one day. We need to hire local. - female, 26 years.

In an attempt to be more pointed with our analysis, we asked if participants feel that homelessness is an issue in our community and asked them to explain why. 57.5% of our respondents said firmly that they do not believe this to be a concern locally, leaving the remaining 42.5% to be unsure, or to believe that it is. Many respondents identified being or knowing youth who move from place to place frequently, or couch-surf commonly, but don't see homelessness on our streets and therefore are not sure how to classify it if it remains unseen. The "hidden homeless" are a concern amongst many area youth, keeping in mind that students of different ideological and sexual backgrounds did take part in this questionnaire.

A variety of reasons for youth homelessness are unfortunately commonplace in our western culture, and our marginalized youth are most vulnerable. Despite a majority saying that this is not an issue which we believe is a positive finding, we would caution our community leaders to remain vigilant on this issue, and be aware that couch-surfing is a growing trend, and a youth shelter has already been

identified earlier in this report as one of the services that some area youth feel our community currently lacks.

"I know teens that are moving out at an early age and having nowhere to go." –female, 15 years.

"I feel hunger is more an issue but I do know homelessness is a reality. People go hungry every day." - female, 20 years.

Finally, we asked our youth if they consider themselves to be passionate about our community, and rate Brockville as a place to live and go to school or work on a scale of one to ten. Of 118 respondents, 57 firmly believed themselves to be passionate about our community, with 40 saying no, and 21 still unsure. Of the 112 participants in our rating scale analysis, 52.7% rated Brockville as a six or higher. These final answers are very much reflective of some of the more important themes already clearly present throughout these survey results. We appear to be on the right track in youth retention and engagement, but we still have a long way to go.

"This city has a high rate of kindness." – male, 15 years.

"We have stagnant growth versus the direct conflict that the interests of youth have with the louder interests of any older demographic looking to create a retirement community. I would like to be passionate, but I'm not yet." – male, 22 years.

"This is a great, safe city." – male, 27 years.

"I don't feel the community is passionate about me." – female, 26 years.

"I am passionate about how my community views and treats its members." – female, 16 years.

"Because of Brockville's close proximity to rural areas, some youth in need may not be properly addressed. The Brockville Arts Centre consistently hits above its weight as in theater and performance productions. I would like to see more creative industries such as high-tech and cultural industries. Many people in Brockville are passionate about the city and its future. However, the competition of visions has put meaningful initiatives at a crossroads that could threaten Brockville's future capacity to draw young newcomers and industries." - male, 22 years.

"It would be nice if there were better help for the working youth instead of so much for the unemployed youth. I'm not really informed about activities that are to be involved in throughout the community. I have nothing bad to ever say about Brockville but I'm not passionate for this place." - female, 24 years.

Many of these findings probably accurately depict life throughout small urban and rural eastern Ontario. But regardless of how common some of these feelings tend to be, there are certain action item suggestions that could make way for improvements in many of these areas. Simple and worthwhile changes, such as better public transit signage on residential streets and making bus passes available at other key destinations outside of Brockville City Hall and the Gord Watts Municipal Centre. Local non-profit organizations have to be open to new and more effective ways of advertising volunteer positions,

with more emphasis being placed on maximizing volunteer potential for building employable job skills, as opposed to focusing only on the minimum forty-hour commitment. Remind our youth that there is plenty to do in our community, but opportunities need to be sought out and explored.

"I do believe there are many different activities and groups within this community for youth. I also believe there could be more made available to those who are less fortunate financially. Like many other communities youth face the challenge of simply being young and the stigma that goes along with that. I don't believe that Brockville specifically has any more challenges than any other community in Ontario or Canada. Brockville simply needs to continue to look at how to get their youth involved through volunteering and engaging them with sports, clubs, and social events targeted towards letting youth have their own voice. I have lived in Brockville for the past 5 years, and plan on living here for some time." - male, 30 years.

As a community, we need to become more aware of the struggles facing marginalized youth who have to leave home for whatever reason, and may be unprepared. Sometimes, these reasons are not always by choice. It is not uncommon for a youth to leave home after an unexpected pregnancy, or coming out to their family about their sexual identity (ie. four of our respondents chose not to identify a gender when asked), or for problems with the law or domestic disputes. As a community, we do have a number of services available to these youth, but we need to ensure as not just civic leaders, but as a society that these youth have options available to them moving forward. The lack of non-denominational youth groups in our community is a concern that has been outlined heavily, not only in these surveys but also at the youth roundtable discussions in October. Preventative measures can be put into place by providing community supported safe spaces, recognizing organizations such as the Youth Volunteer Crew, Girls Inc., or more prominently the Brockville Public Library youth programming. Desperation can lead to a whole list of other moral, ethical, health and criminal challenges, so we must be aware that this problem does exist, even if we don't see it first-hand every day.

"We have a lack of free community-use space that is not religiously affiliated. We have a lack of organized recreational activities. The mall is not a destination to meet up with other youth." – female, 14 years.

"I would like to see a bigger and well-maintained youth centre and shelters for youth. There's not a lot to do for youth. We need more programs and centres for youth to go and be involved in. I am passionate about my community. I just wish there was more for our teens and youth." - male, 21 years.

It is fundamentally important to our local economy that niche' market entrepreneurs are encouraged to invest in our city. Having youth-focused retailers will provide more balance to our downtown business improvement strategies, as we have already seen through retailers who have been successful in catering to a youthful demographic, either entirely or by including youthful marketing or advertising. As well, it is clear by many answers early on that sports tourism and physical recreation is a powerful economic driver, which we should continue to focus on and be excited about.

Overall, this exercise was eye-opening, thought-provoking, and a progressive first-step for our committee. Many thanks to the Leeds, Grenville and Lanark Health Unit who helped us to quantify this information, to our committee members who collected responses and were integral in helping to craft questions, to the Brockville Public Library and our clerk's office for being a pick-up/drop-off point for these surveys, and to all of the youth who participated for their willingness to contribute and their spectacular feedback.

"I think what you're doing with this survey is great. This is great community activism. I do consider myself passionate about the community." - female, 16 years.