



A Sexual Violence Strategy Youth Engagement Summary

The Province sought the help of the HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development and Leaders of Today to engage over 100 youth from various backgrounds in 14 safe and inclusive sessions throughout the province. This document reflects some of the key themes participants shared with us. We are grateful to the youth who participated in the provincial sessions, and to their adult supporters for their time and commitment to this issue.

YOUNG AGE IS A RISK FACTOR FOR BOTH BEING A VICTIM AND A PERPETRATOR OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE. ACCORDING TO 2009 STATS CANADA DATA (GSS), 47% OF VICTIMS WERE 15-24 AND IN MORE THAN HALF OF THE REPORTED INCIDENTS PERPETRATORS WERE 18-34.

Understanding of sexual violence varies

Knowledge about sexual violence among youth varies greatly from community to community. The most unclear aspect is consent: what it is, the need for it in all kinds of sexual activity, the influence of drugs/alcohol on consent, and the legal implications for people under 18.

Youth want to talk

For many participants, these conversations were the first opportunity they had to engage in open discussion about sexual violence. Youth want to be involved in their own education and awareness on sexual violence issues. Youth need to see a reflection of themselves in leadership positions within organizations and have a voice in decision making. They feel comfortable engaging with their peers and older youth on the topic of sexual violence. They want more diversity in approaches to education and prevention. Continued engagement is an opportunity to mobilize youth into action.

Removing barriers to support and services

Many youth experience difficulties accessing sexual violence supports because they do not exist, are not visible, or are not in the format they prefer to use.

Prevention

Youth know that there are many factors contributing to the prevalence of sexual violence and they repeatedly identified the need for a complete culture shift in our society. Addressing stereotypes and norms, the issue of hypersexualization, and the harmful use of alcohol were identified as key areas of concern. Youth also noted that different approaches to public awareness are needed so all ages and populations are included.

Barriers to supports identified by youth include:

Fear of negative reaction from the community: disbelief, blaming, shaming and minimization or misunderstanding.

Support environments need to be safe, with service providers who understand their age, identity and experience.

Services have to be more visible and trauma-informed, with more collaboration among providers.

Service providers need more training to prevent stigma, victim blaming, stereotyping, minimizing of experiences and retraumatization.

Youth must see themselves reflected in the leadership and decision-making positions within organizations.

There need to be more supports for specific diverse populations, including access to traditional healing and elders for Aboriginal youth.

More specialized support is needed for youth exchanging sex for goods, services and money.

Schools can be champions

Schools can play a significant role in addressing sexual violence, but first, schools need to be safer places for victims of sexual violence. Youth don't always feel protected from exposure to sexual violence or its negative impacts in schools. They say there are too few consequences for those who commit violence, and prevention measures reflect a victim-blaming perspective.

Participants most commonly identified the need for improved sex education as a critical issue for youth. Youth feel that educators are often uncomfortable delivering the curriculum.

Youth want to learn about:

- What sexual violence is and its causes and consequences?
- How to identify abuse.
- Consent in the context of all sexual activities.
- The perspectives of youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ).
- Healthy relationships and how to deal with peer pressure and a culture impacted by porn.
- Navigating technology and the laws that surround it.
- The harmful use of substances and alcohol.

"Don't teach how not to get raped – teach not to rape."

"Schools don't really go over what consent really is or how important it is. They should."

Improving the justice system

Many youth don't feel they will be believed or supported if they turn to the justice system for safety, protection and legal action to address sexual violence. Some believe that the justice system protects predators while others feel there should be more healing supports for perpetrators. In general, the justice system is viewed to be lacking healing-centered care, and victims deserve more support.

Suggested improvements to the justice system

- Creating a safer space for reporting.
- Making services more inclusive for all populations.
- Addressing overrepresentation of certain populations within the justice system.
- Addressing the oppressive history that has led to neglect of young Aboriginal youth.
- More accountability for offenders – more repercussions and more healing.
- More support for youth exchanging sex for goods, services or money.
- Specific attention and responses to violence perpetuated through the use of technology.

"Guys are afraid to report because they should be considered tough."

"Realize that sexual violence comes in all shapes and sizes and no situation is minor."

Raising community awareness and working toward prevention

Youth see a need for a multifaceted approach to building community awareness and understanding of sexual violence.

Subjects that youth identified as needing exploration include:

- What constitutes sexual violence and what are the related laws.
- Alcohol and substance use.
- Navigating a culture impacted by pornography.
- Media (and how to influence this).
- Oppression and discrimination of identities and populations.
- Hypersexualization of people across gender identities.
- Victimization as non-exclusive to certain populations (not just women).
- Sexual orientations and identities.
- The stigma of mental illness.
- Impact and approach of religious spaces.

"Stop working in silos."

"Don't talk at us. Engage us in conversation."

"Take rape culture out of media."

For the full HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development and Leaders of Today report on youth engagement, visit novascotia.ca/coms/svs/