



ACT FOR YOUTH PROJECT NEWSLETTER

ISSUE #2: WINTER 2012

ABOUT ACT FOR YOUTH

The Assets Coming Together (ACT) for Youth project brings together a multi-sectoral alliance of community stakeholders and an interdisciplinary network of researchers in a program of applied research, capacity building, knowledge transfer, and evaluation that is focused on youth in urban communities, using as a case study the Jane/Finch community. ACT for Youth seeks to develop a comprehensive youth strategy that articulates how urban communities like the Jane/Finch community can energize community assets that support positive youth development.

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COMMUNITY PARTNER PROFILE

Jane/Finch Community & Family Centre

4400 Jane Street, Suite 108, Toronto

The Jane/Finch Community & Family Centre (JFCFC) is a community-based organization driven by passion, innovation, and a strong commitment to social justice, community engagement, and collaboration. Their vision is a healthy Jane/Finch community – strong, inclusive, and socially & politically active, through diversity, opportunity, and participation.

The JFCFC has key locations throughout the community, from which 80 full- and part-time staff and over 400 volunteers provide services to thousands of residents annually. Partnerships have historically served as a core value and principle of the Jane/Finch Community & Family Centre.

Programs & Services

The JFCFC offers programs and services in four different areas to the entire community.

Youth: The Spot drop-in centre for youth (13-30) at Yorkgate Mall; youth programs committed to increasing and building the leadership skills of youth.

Early Years: Programs and services for families and caregivers with children 0-6 years old.

Community Programs: “Getting in Touch”

community mental health program; community development and social justice activities; settlement services; “Financial Advocacy & Problem Solving” (FAPS) program; “Unity in Diversity” seniors program.

Community Office: Connecting residents with social services.

History with ACT for Youth

The Jane/Finch Community & Family Centre has collaborative relationships with several organizations and groups, and belongs to various coalitions and networks. The JFCFC is the ACT for Youth project’s principal community partner.

The JFCFC has been building many successful youth initiatives. Since 1998, the JFCFC has partnered on numerous participatory research projects to identify strategies to increase the well-being of the community’s youth.

“ It has been a wonderful three years working in partnership with the ACT for Youth research project. The ability to work effectively with numerous community groups, organizations and academics is a rare opportunity. With the ACT for Youth project, we will finally have the opportunity to affect change in programs, services and policy.”

- Byron Gray

In February 2012, Michelle Dagnino became the new Executive Director of the Jane/Finch Community and Family Centre (Sue Wilkinson, the former Executive Director, is the Community Co-Chair of our Partnership Group, and is now Director of the Ontario Nonprofit Network).

Michelle is a well-known expert on youth culture and engagement, Generation Y leadership, and student motivation, having served as a Director at The National Alliance of Children and Youth (NACY), and as Director of the Youth Action Network and Ashoka’s Youth Venture. Since 2010, she has provided the JFCFC with management consulting

on board governance, organizational restructuring, program evaluation, and project management.

Michelle's innovative and thought-provoking work has garnered her over a dozen awards, including the 2004 YWCA Young Woman of Distinction award. The Toronto Star named her "a woman to buoy the soul", and the City of Toronto honoured her with the Person's Day Award in recognition of her leadership and contributions to the community. In November 2006, Dagnino was named by The Globe and Mail and the Women's Executive Network as one of Canada's Top 100 Most Powerful Women. She is a graduate of Osgoode Hall Law School, holds a Master's degree in Political Science from York University, and has published extensively on issues of youth development and civic engagement.

We look forward to our continued work with the Jane/Finch Community & Family Centre, and to our future collaborations with Michelle. Please visit www.janefinchcentre.org for more information.

TRANSITIONS AND YOUTH ASSET DECLINE

At the December meeting of the Research Advisory Committee, the Youth Survey Working Group presented an initial analysis of data collected to determine the state of developmental assets and resources among youth in the Jane/Finch community.

The Survey of Student Resources and Assets was administered in December 2010 through March 2011, to students in grades 6 through 12 at eight Toronto District School Board schools: C.W. Jefferys Collegiate Institute; Emery Collegiate Institute; Westview Centennial Secondary School; Northview

Heights Secondary School; North Albion Collegiate Institute; William Lyon McKenzie Collegiate Institute; Brookview Middle School; and Oakdale Park Middle School. A total of 1,592 students participated in the survey, which was designed to help answer the following project research question: "What assets and resources do youth in urban communities have, and what are the possible ways that communities can increase their development using socializing systems within the community, including the family, neighborhood, congregation, school, youth organization, and place of work?"

The survey report provides portraits of the five fundamental resources and 40 developmental assets of youth in the Jane/Finch community. Developmental resources – the wrap-around supports that young people need for success in life – were identified as: Ongoing relationships with caring adults; Safe places and structured activities during non-school hours; A Healthy start for a healthy future; Marketable skills through effective education; and Opportunities to serve.

The research-based framework of 40 developmental assets provides a comprehensive vision of those factors that young people need to thrive, identified within one of two major types: internal (a young person's own commitments, values, and competencies) and external (positive developmental experiences that surround youth with support, empowerment, boundaries, and expectations, and opportunities for constructive use of time). On average, young people in the Jane/Finch community experience 20 of the 40 assets, with 7% of students reporting 31 or more of the assets.

Across most survey categories, a key similarity emerged: assets decline as youth get older. Youth

express a decline in the support and expectations of teachers, and participate less and less in after-school activities. Youth exhibit a strong belief in the value of education but seem to lack confidence in their own schools, reporting high levels of disengagement. Youth also report experiencing a decline in the expectations of family and community members, and decreased participation in clubs or organizations. The majority of youth surveyed do not feel as if they have adult mentors and role models in the community. They count their parents as an important resource, claiming strong parental involvement in their academic and personal lives, although positive family communication is reported to decrease as youth age.

What assets and resources do youth in urban communities have, and what are the possible ways that communities can increase their development using socializing systems within the community, including the family, neighborhood, congregation, school, youth organization, and place of work?

Most interestingly, there is a marked decline in assets during the transition from middle to secondary school (grade eight to grade nine), particularly with respect to educational expectations and, consequently, educational engagement. Students in middle school, on average, report about 22 assets, but this drops to less than 20 in grade nine and continues to decline with a slight recovery in grade 12. Another important finding is that, on average, young women report having stronger internal assets than young men.

An important and positive asset is that of resilience, with youth reporting positive/healthy identities and

positive projections about their futures.

These findings generated much discussion among those who participated at the meeting, and suggest an opportunity to develop targeted and practical interventions for male and female youth who are preparing for transition years, and improvements in workplace preparation.

MAPPING DISCOVERIES: RESEARCH ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING

On Friday, December 9, 2011, the ACT for Youth Research Advisory Committee met to present key findings from each Working Group, and to collaborate in discussions to determine priorities for action and next steps. The meeting was attended by the community and academic co-chairs of the various Committees and Research-Themed Working Groups, Graduate and Research Assistants, youth interns, and members of the Youth-Led Committee.

RESEARCH UPDATE: FIVE OVERARCHING FINDINGS

The ACT for Youth project has identified five overarching findings that have been derived from the research initiatives being coordinated by each working group. These findings have been categorized and summarized as follows, and will guide us in determining our action plan moving forward:

1. Stigma & Production of Negative Discourse
2. The Violence of Low Expectations
3. Resilient Youth – Weak Systems
4. Conceptualizations of ‘Community’
5. Building & Sustaining Equitable Community-Academic Partnerships

1. Stigma & Production of Negative Discourse

Youth in Jane/Finch are both resisting and perpetuating negative stereotypes about their community.

Youth value education, while recognizing existing preconceptions that others hold about their educational needs and capabilities. Youth also acknowledge that the stigma associated with their address and a lack of systemic supports lead to false preconceptions from potential employers. Some young people are left feeling isolated and despondent, unable to improve their current employment situation.

The media portray Jane/Finch as a crime-ridden neighbourhood, and the political label of “priority neighbourhood” also contributes to the negative branding of the community. This relentless stigmatization is a form of violence for youth, many of whom reject depictions of their community as troubled, but who acknowledge the challenges they face. These youth indicate that living in Jane/Finch has made them stronger and better equipped to face life’s challenges. However, others are internalizing a discourse that is negatively branding their community, making it difficult to dream, imagine, or take ownership of alternative paths.

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Youth are also expressing pride in their community, and in their strong interpersonal networks. A desire to deconstruct stigma was cited by young people as a primary reason for getting involved with the ACT for Youth project.

2. The Violence of Low Expectations

Low institutional expectations are shaping the experiences of youth in Jane/Finch.

Youth report decreased expectations from educators as they progress through school, and a parallel decline in expectations from their family, peers, and community (see also “Transitions & Youth Asset Decline” on page 3). Youth link a feeling that no one believes in their potential to discrimination based on race, youth, gender, and place of residence. They recognize that education, volunteering, and internships are crucial aspects of an employment trajectory, but cite several barriers, including their inability to take on unpaid internships, the costs involved in volunteering (e.g. bus fare), and the lack of access to active professional networks.

Representations of the Jane/Finch community as being both responsible for its problems but unable to respond responsibly contribute to low expectations for Jane/Finch youth.

The ACT for Youth project has an opportunity to examine how we can respond to the needs and concerns of our own youth interns, who describe a keen (and unfulfilled) desire to learn and be mentored by academic and community leaders, and who want more responsibility in leading the research agenda.

3. Resilient Youth / Weak Systems

Youth in the Jane/Finch community are not the problem – the problems are systemic.

Youth disengagement is a process that is shaped by schools, health care institutions, community agencies, police services, and employment services.

Economic and labour relations are such that some young people are important wage earners for their families from a very young age. The dependence of families on their children's economic contributions shapes participation in post-secondary education. Youth link youth-on-youth violence to structural problems (e.g. police activities that are not respectful of the community) and suggest that institutional interventions must also address these links.

The media, politics and policy, the academy, and the non-profit/community sector are all implicated in (and, in different ways, benefit from) the circulation of negative frames. There is a tendency to individualize complex social-political-institutional problems. When "systems" fail, individuals are often identified as the problem. However, despite evident systemic barriers, many Jane/Finch youth share the asset of resilience.

4. Conceptualizations of 'Community'

Community mythologies and the processes of defining community, multiculturalism, and community responsibility have a historical context, and reflect tensions between structures and individuals.

Youth understand that community is multi-dimensional, complex, and paradoxical. They recognize that there are problems within the community, but hold a more nuanced view than one encounters in popular depictions of Jane/Finch. Youth identified that feelings of unity, friendship, and trust among community members are amplified when people are focused on a community problem or issue. Youth identify a need for more opportunities to serve, structured community activities, role modeling & mentorship,

and community safety.

People see the community as a model for caring and cohesive multicultural communities, while recognizing that cultural difference and division impact social mobility.

Despite the predominantly negative stories about Jane/Finch, discourses do exist that celebrate cultural diversity and community strength.

People see the community as a model for caring and cohesive multicultural communities, while recognizing that cultural difference and division impact social mobility.

To some extent, Jane/Finch is an imagined or mythological space. The sensationalized depictions of the community as violent and crime-ridden contrast with people's experience of the community as a neighbourhood much like any other in Toronto. The special and racial variations in police stoppage patterns are the result of formal social control in the form of police stops. For example, police stop black youth in Toronto significantly more often than they stop white youth, and black youth in Toronto are stopped at a younger age compared to white youth.

5. Building & Sustaining Equitable Community-Academic Partnerships

Both community practitioners and youth on the ACT for Youth project are benefiting from opportunities to exchange ideas with, and learn from, the academic project stakeholders. Students and youth identified the significance of an opportunity to create knowledge and noted that this is not the learning model used in schools. This learning is multidirectional, and the academic stakeholders are equally benefiting from the knowledge made

possible through these partnerships with community practitioners and youth. However, a need for better communication between partners is one to which all community-academic partnerships must attend, and this continues to be identified as a priority for the ACT for Youth project.

YOUTH BLOG

Our Youth Interns and members of our Youth-Led Committee regularly contribute to our youth blog (<http://actforyouth.apps01.yorku.ca>) on a variety of issues – from the rising costs of post-secondary education, to the challenges of being a teen mother, to the pain and joy experienced in relationships with family members and friends. We want to share a few excerpts from some recent postings, but encourage you to visit the blog regularly, and to comment on and share what you read.

Crackberry

Posted by Talisha Ramsaroop

Do you remember the time when one actually played outside, or met up with friends and actually spoke, or when people actually had physical communication and did not hide behind the screens of their phones all day long? Those days no longer exist. Instead, today much of the Western population, youth especially, spend their time behind the screens of their phones rather than face-to-face. Blackberries, iPhones and all other media devices have become an addiction for many. ...

Misunderstandings

Posted by Henry Appiah

My mother raised me in priority neighbourhoods all my life. She never once acknowledged the repercussions that definitely seem to follow. I can remember the day I was moving into Jane and

Finch, and we were given a tour of the home by the superintendent. I recall declaring out loud how I disliked the house. Mother only reassured me that it was good enough, and that was that. Of course at first it was scary sleeping in the area. There was a dog next door constantly barking. Furthermore, the bullet holes in two of the three bedrooms weren't exactly welcoming either. I was too young to understand why mom didn't just pick a normal house for us to move into. I remember almost being upset with her. It wasn't until I matured a bit that I realized, mother was only doing everything she could for us. ...

Redefining the Words 'Young Mother'

Posted by Grace Good

For the Teen Mother:

We know who we are.

We are individuals, each with our own story

and our own dreams.

We are women who had our babies in our teens.

We know who we are.

But do you?

We hear people talk about us on the street,
in the store.

We read about "teen mothers" in the paper.

We wonder-"Who are they talking about?"

UPCOMING EVENTS

Community Forum

June 2012

The ACT for Youth Community Forum will provide an opportunity for representatives from our five Research-Themed Working Groups (Youth Survey, Youth Voices, Youth Education & Employment Strategies, Reframing Discourse, and Evaluation & Monitoring) to connect with stakeholders in the Jane/Finch community. The project will share its current research projects and findings, and encourage feedback from community members that will inform next steps and future research objectives.

Stay tuned for details on our website at www.yorku.ca/act, or contact actadmin@yorku.ca for more information.

Research Findings – “Brown Bag” Sessions

September 2012

Beginning this fall, ACT for Youth will present a series of lunchtime sessions to share research findings from the five Research-Themed Working Groups. More details to be provided in the coming months.

Youth-Led Conference

October 2012

By Nnali Simon, Co-Chair, Youth-Led Conference
The Youth-Led Conference is still in the works, and the planning is coming along really well! The Conference planning committee has been hard at work brainstorming, debating, and putting everything together in the hopes of a day that runs smoothly and that is free from technical difficulty. The Conference will be focused on youth and research, and we are working on a great line-up of

presenters and performers. The Conference is set to take place in October 2012, and we look forward to providing our participants with an educational, entertaining, and fun-filled day. See you all in October!

WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!

Is there a topic, issue, group or event that you would like to see profiled in a future issue? Let us know. We want to hear from our partners and supporters, and need your input to make future newsletters representative of our work together. For more information, contact Tka Pinnock, Project Manager, at actadmin@yorku.ca.

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