

Listening for Change

GRADES 7 & 8 STUDENTS SPEAK UP



DRUGS

BULLYING & GANGS

ALCOHOL

PEER PRESSURE & FITTING IN

BOREDOM

SCHOOL & HOMEWORK

POLLUTION

SMOKING

MONEY & JOBS

VANDALISM

FAMILY & PARENTS

RELATIONSHIPS

STRESS

HEALTH



From the desk of THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The United Way of Perth County is a locally guided organization dedicated to identifying key local priorities and supporting the mobilization of local resources to create sustainable community improvements. Our communities are forever changing, however, so it is critical that we seek out information about the most pressing and urgent needs our friends and neighbours are facing. For that reason, we were delighted to join with 16 other small, rural United Ways in the Community Matters Project, generously funded by the Ontario Trillium Foundation. Through this process we were able to consult with citizens from across the county about their concerns. They told us repeatedly that they were concerned about our youth. As a result we included focus groups with high school students in the first report and are now following up with this exciting reflection of the perceptions, ideas and concerns of grades seven and eight students from across the County.

We would like to acknowledge the broad base of community support that enabled us to complete this report. First and foremost, we thank the hundreds of students who participated in focus groups and responded to our survey. Your frank opinions and refreshing insights will influence programs, activities and services for youth now and in the future. The principals, teachers and administrative assistants in schools across the county went 'above and beyond' the call of duty, made time available for focus groups, identified and invited youth to participate and provided class time for survey completion. Thank you! Our facilitators, Charlene Gordon and Dale Howatt, contributed many hours and offered considerable expertise facilitating youth discussions about community strengths and opportunities, youth challenges and supports.

Ellen Balmain

About the STUDENTS

In total, 695 grades 7 & 8 students from across the county completed the survey, representing approximately 33% of all 12 and 13 years olds in Perth County, based on 2006 census data. In general, respondents were representative of students in the County and province in terms of gender and geographical location:

Approximately 150 students also participated in focus groups. Focus groups were held at North Easthope, St. Patrick's (Kinkora), Downie Central, Holy Name of Mary (St. Marys), Listowel Central, Stratford Central, Stratford Northwestern, Jeanne Sauve, St. Aloysius, Upper Thames and St. Patrick's (St. Columban) elementary schools.

What the students said about THEIR COMMUNITIES

The first question on the survey asked: "What makes our community special? What are we doing well?"

Students ranked the following things that make their communities great:

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| 1 Good, friendly, trusting people
...everybody knows everybody | 9 Tourists / Tourism |
| 2 Theatre / Artistic Community | 10 Scenery |
| 3 Clean, environmentally conscious | 10 Stores / Shops |
| 4 Sports Programs | 11 Schools / Teachers |
| 5 Clubs, Activities, Things to Do | 12 Church |
| 6 Recreational Facilities* | 13 Youth Centres / Places to Hang Out |
| 7 Small, safe, quiet, peacefull | 13 Charitable / Good Fundraising |
| 8 Parks, Playgrounds | 14 Food / Restaurants |

**includes pool/quarry, recreation centres, bike paths and skate parks*

Most focus group participants felt that they had at least one adult in their lives whom they could trust and turn to for advice. Many felt that they had two or three or more trusted adults in their lives. Students took great pride in the Festival Theatre and the artistic community, although a significant number thought we should pay more attention to local needs.

In general, they felt that we had made great strides in keeping our environment clean – but noted elsewhere in the process that we still had a long way to go in this regard. Respondents highly valued existing sports programs, and expressed desire for a greater range of sporting activities, including more fun, non-competitive leagues. The students also requested a variety of activities, clubs, places to hang out and things to do. Comments regarding recreational facilities varied from community to community. Pools, skate parks and bike paths were mentioned consistently, in addition to newer recreation centres, YMCA, arenas, ball diamonds, soccer fields and other facilities. Overall the students had positive comments about their community, including lots of farms and farmland, law enforcement, nice houses, libraries, local employment opportunities, diversity, wild life, the archives, music festival, and the pork congress.



What the students said about MAKING A POSITIVE CHANGE

Students were asked: What would you like to change about our community? What don't we do well? What do we need to do, add, or improve to make a positive change in our community? Their responses are summarized and ranked below.

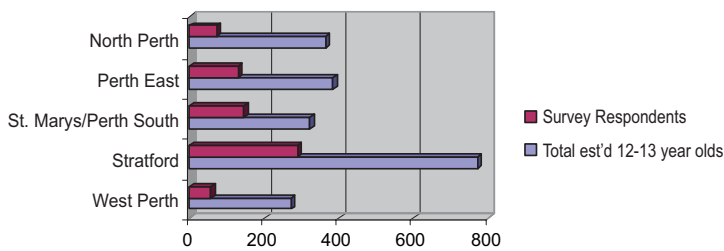
- 1 Environment
- 2 Shopping
- 3 Recreational Facilities
- 4 Activities & Things to Do
- 5 Drugs
- 6 Roads
- 7 Places to hang out
- 8 Safety, Vandalism, Increased Law Enforcement
- 9 Entertainment
- 10 Sports
- 11 Bullying
- 12 Restaurants
- 13 Focus on local citizens instead of tourists
- 14 Programs for people in need of help
- 14 Increase teen involvement in the community
- 14 Decrease / stop smoking
- 14 Decrease / stop new construction

Students are very concerned about the environment. Suggestions abounded regarding the need to increase public awareness, reduction, recycling and re-use activities, to enhance environmentally friendly farming and manufacturing processes, clean up rivers, lakes and streams, decrease littering and more. Comments about shopping also abounded. Students in smaller centres wished there were more stores/malls locally; residents of Stratford or people coming to Stratford to shop expressed the desire for a bigger mall with a greater variety of stores.

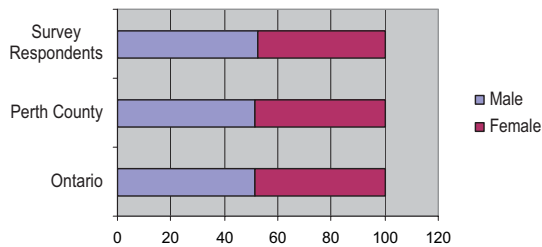
Recreational facilities also topped the list. While students identified recreational facilities as one of the strengths in their communities, they also felt there was a long way to go. Pools, skate parks and bike paths were repeatedly identified as lacking. Although clubs, activities and things to do were identified as strengths in the previous question, a large number of students felt that there was not enough for young people to do. Focus group discussions centred around having a clean, safe, positive place to hang out with supervision, someone to talk to and a variety of activities, including noncompetitive sports. Entertainment and attractions such as movie theatres, theme parks, arcades, laser tag, paint ball, fairs and festivals were mentioned frequently enough to merit a separate category.

Students also expressed concern about drug use in the community and suggested a variety of education, prevention, enforcement and treatment possibilities.

Place of Residence



Gender



What the students said about DIFFICULT THINGS FOR YOUTH

Students were also asked, "What are the three most difficult things facing youth in Perth County today?" The most frequent responses are summarized below.

Rank	Issue	%
1	Drugs	53.7
2	Bullying / gangs	25.4
3	Peer Pressure / fitting in	23.8
4	Alcohol	20.1
5	Boredom	14.0
6	School / homework	12.5
7	Pollution	9.7
8	Money/Jobs	8.2
9	Smoking	6.2
10	Vandalism	5.5
11	Transportation	5.0
12	Family/Parents	3.7
13	Girls/Boys/Relationships	3.5
14	Stress	2.7
15	Health (inactivity/obesity)	1.8

Drugs, bullying, peer pressure and alcohol were consistently identified as the most pressing concerns for youth in Perth County. Focus group participants told us that it is easier for them to access marijuana in their communities than it is to access alcohol or cigarettes. They indicated that the kids using drugs know the risks – so education and prevention programs would have limited impact on their choices. Instead they suggested that adults and service agencies focus on the underlying causes of drug use – which they postulated to be difficult home situations, abuse and loneliness. Students described the pressure to fit in as exceedingly strong – and taking many forms.

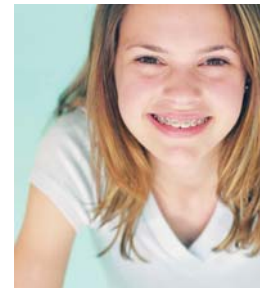
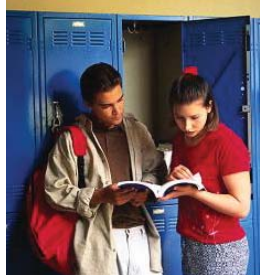
Respondents also mentioned abuse, pressure to make competitive teams, lack of bike paths, bad roads, poverty, homelessness, tourism, worries about going to high school, cost of participating in physical activity (pools, teams) as difficult things to handle.

What the students would like IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

Students were also asked what changes they wanted to see in their communities in the next five years. They responded:

- 1 Environment
- 2 Recreational Facilities & Opportunities
- 3 Better Shopping
- 4 Decreased Drug Use / Increased Prevention & Treatment
- 5 Youth Activities
- 6 Safer communities / decreased violence, bullying, graffiti
- 7 Better Roads
- 8 Decreased Construction
- 9 More Restaurants
- 10 Better Places to Hang Out
- 11 Increased Youth Employment
- 11 Better Schools
- 11 Population Growth
- 12 Less / No Smoking
- 13 Increase Youth Involvement
- 14 More generosity

Students also mentioned: more trees, preserving farm land, new street lights, public transportation, decreased smoking, racism, school drop outs, healthier, more active children, new library books, a higher minimum wage, lower taxes, more tourists, a children's museum and help for people who need it.



What the students would fund IF THEY WERE THE UNITED WAY

Students were asked: If you were the United Way of Perth County, what kinds of services / activities for youth would you fund? They responded as follows:

- 1 Sports and sporting equipment
- 2 Activities for youth
- 3 Recreational facilities & opportunities
- 4 Entertainment
- 5 Places to hang out
- 6 Mall
- 7 Counselling Centres
- 8 Schools
- 9 Fundraisers
- 10 Camps
- 11 Parks, Playgrounds
- 12 Job Fairs, employment services
- 12 Social & Health Services

The theme of 'things to do' pervaded this consultation. Suggestions for recreational facilities and opportunities varied from community to community, but included new or updated recreational centres, pools, arenas, ball diamonds and soccer fields, skate parks, and bike paths.

Focus group participants talked at length about merits of places to hang out and the kinds of activities that would appeal to them. Opinions about existing youth centres varied from community to community. Students agreed, however, in their description of the 'ideal' hang out: it would be safe (i.e. supervised) and offer a variety of activities, including non-competitive, fun sport leagues or drop in games, dances, arts and craft activities, etc. It would be great to include a snack bar / café on site. Fun, trustworthy adults would ensure that bullying and drug use were not allowed. They'd also be there for the kids to 'drop in' and talk to. Respondents also suggested drug education/prevention programs, free days at the quarry or local pools, concession booths at sporting events.



NEXT STEPS

In May of 2007, as part of this process, the United Way of Perth County also convened a forum of community partners and service providers to discuss priorities for youth in the County. Participants agreed that it was important to not only consult youth as we did during this process, but also to include youth in the priority setting and planning process. To that end, a small committee was struck to plan a Youth Forum for the fall of 2008. The Forum will gather youth from across the county and ask them to respond to this report – both in terms of its accuracy and in determining priorities for action. United Way is pleased to partner with the YMCA and Perth District Health Unit to plan and implement the forum.

The United Way of Perth County also supports the Social Research & Planning Council of Perth County, which is currently completing a Voices of Youth report which we believe will complement this report. Both reports will be used in the planning process identified above. We will continue to re-examine and re-evaluate how we work with our community youth in light of the concerns identified and expressed in this document and throughout the consultation, to listen for change, to ensure that our actions respond to the needs identified by our community.

In addition, the results of this process will be combined with those of similar consultations conducted by 16 other small, rural United Ways across the province to form a final report which will be submitted to both the Ontario Trillium Foundation and the Government of Ontario.