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UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
DALLA LANA SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH

PEER NAVIGATOR PROJECT TORONTO

MID-TERM EVALUATION REPORT



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Introduction

The Peer Navigator Project (PNP) is a collaborative research project, that brings together researchers and community partners in Canada (Toronto, London, Vancouver) and Kenya (Eldoret/Huruma & Kitale) to explore and evaluate the use of peer supports to increase street connected youth's (SCY) access to HIV and AIDS prevention, testing, and treatment.

A community partner in each site employs one to two Peer Navigators (PN) who are young people with lived experience of being street connected. In Toronto and Vancouver, the PNs also identify as 2SLGBTQ+. The study is funded by the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR). The study started in 2018 and will run until 2024.

Following a mixed methods design, **Phase 1** of the study assessed the acceptability and appropriateness of the PN intervention with the targeted populations through consultations with SCY, health care providers, and community stakeholders in each of the study sites.

Phase 2 of the study follows the PNs as they support SCY. Regular evaluations assess whether the PN intervention is feasible, satisfactory, and ethical. Further evaluation seeks to identify if the PN helps SCY living with HIV start and stay on antiretroviral therapy (ART), and if the PN intervention is equitable and sustainable across all sites.



The PNP project was headed by the late Dr. Paula Braitstein, whose life work was dedicated to improving the health and wellbeing of SCY in Kenya and globally.



The lead investigator is now Dr. Alex Abramovich, PhD. He is a Scientist at the Institute for Mental Health Policy Research, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health and Assistant Professor at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health and the Department of Psychiatry, University of Toronto. He is also a Canadian Research Chair in 2SLGBTQ+ Youth Homelessness and Mental Health.

Background

Street connected youth and young adults (SCY) are people between the ages of 16-29 years who are unhoused or experience housing insecurity (e.g., living on the streets, emergency shelters, transitional housing, couch surfing). In Canada, up to 40% of youth who are street-connected identify as 2SLGBTQ+ (Abramovich et al., 2017). Multiple sexual partners, substance use, inconsistent condom use, and increased risk of sexual violence make SCY at greater risk of contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted and blood borne infections (STBBIs) (Marshall, 2009; Weber et al., 2001). There is a critical need to address the barriers to HIV and AIDS education, prevention, testing and treatment for SCY (Khan, et al., 2022).

One way to improve SCY access to healthcare is through PN (Shah et al., 2019). PNs connect with those they support through shared experiences. They meet SCY where they are at and provide referrals to a broad range of services and supports. **The Peer Navigator Project is identifying what is needed to adapt and scale-up the delivery of PNs for SCY to effectively reach these marginalized and at risk populations.**

Key aspects of the PN's job was determined in Phase 1 (Lee et al, forthcoming):

- PN should be employed in an organization that can provide a supportive, inclusive environment with high-quality supervision and opportunities to debrief about their work. PNs also require access to role-specific training, and mentorship.

- The PN should be committed to their role, exhibit a high degree of empathy and interpersonal skills, be knowledgeable about SCY and HIV testing, prevention and treatment. Notably, while Phase 1 results identified lived experience with homelessness as key for the PN, living with HIV was found to be a positive but not required attribute for the role.

- PN tasks include but are not limited to: non-judgemental support to address the impacts of HIV stigma, HIV education, outreach to SCY who have fallen out-of-care, accompanying SCY to appointments, making health and social service referrals.

PN Activities & SCY Research Engagement

The PN in Toronto is a YMCA employee and works in collaboration with staff at Sprott House, a transitional housing program for 2SLGBTQ+ youth. As part of their job, the PN also work with researchers at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health and CAMH to collect data with consenting youth participants. The aim of this data is to monitor the PNs activities and the impact of the PN model on the HIV Care Cascade* for SCY. While this report focuses on the Toronto site, it has relevance to anyone interested in implementing a Peer Navigator model with SCY.

As of July 2023, the PNs have enrolled seven SCY in the research study**. These youth are diverse in race, gender and sexual orientation. Half of the youth participants depend on government assistance, while others have part-time jobs, seasonal, or other sources of income. Five participants are living in transitional housing and two participants live in rental housing. While one participant is newly experiencing homelessness, the majority (n=5) have been housing insecure for 1 to over 5 years and have no regular contact with family

*The HIV Care Cascade refers to the evidence-based means to reduce HIV transmission through widespread HIV testing, treatment, and viral load suppression (Ontario HIV Epidemiology Surveillance, 2018)

**The PN supports several more youth who have declined to participate in the research, and who are not represented in this report.

Common referrals provided by the PN



- HIV/AIDS education
- HIV testing and counselling



- Food and nutrition



- Reproductive health care



- Employment
- Education



- Mental health services
- Conflict resolution



- Family reconciliation



- Accompany to appointments



- Clothes and sanitation
- Housing



- Health care



- Addiction support



I feel like they're very helpful. My impressions because I'm not really the type to like open up to someone. So, I feel like the peer navigator is just someone that's willingly, like really welcoming and they're not judging, and you can just express like different feelings to them and they're able to help with certain things...and it is really helping.

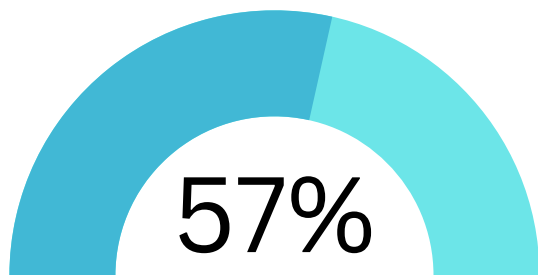
Street Connected Youth

HIV Testing

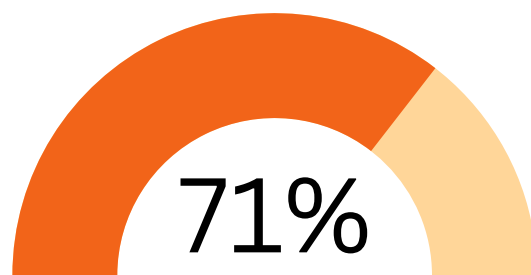
At baseline, four out of seven SCY participants had been HIV tested at least once and the majority (85%) of participants want HIV testing. However, it has been a challenge to find low-barrier HIV testing in the city for 2SLGBTQ+ youth, especially for those that are at risk but do not identify as cisgender men, transgender women, or do not have sex with cisgender men. The PN has connected with several clinics across the GTA to find the best fit for the youth they support. They have also been trained by BlackCap to support the pilot of At-Home HIV test kits. During the study, three participants have been linked to HIV testing and 100% of participants who got tested are HIV negative at last test.

Having the PN focused on HIV prevention and healthcare navigation has brought AIDS back on the radar of youth service provision at the YMCA.

HIV testing at baseline vs. at follow up (n=7)



At baseline



At follow up

We've been able, with the project, to refresh and remind people around HIV and the importance of being aware and being mindful and supporting young people. You know, there's just been so much focus on mental health and substance use and the toxic drug supply that this piece has kind of gotten dropped. So, I think definitely for our drop in staff, it's been a reminder of like, hey, there's still this. And so, I think it's increased an awareness and an additional support for folks to reach out and refer young people too. And in the sector as well, right? We've had conversations in the sector about it. So, I think those are some of the positive things for sure.

YMCA Service Provider

Methods

The Toronto site mid-term evaluation was conducted between March and May, 2022. Following a mixed-methods design, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews and surveys were used to assess the effectiveness of the PN intervention. A total of seven diverse participants who have had direct interaction with the PN were consulted, including three SCY and four service providers at the YMCA. The PN was also interviewed and completed the survey.

Reflections on the PN Role

Service Provider Responses

Item	Response (% agree or strongly agree; n=4)
The PN intervention is providing a useful service	25%
The PN intervention integrates well into the network of SCY services in Toronto	25%
The PN is building trusting relationships with SCY	75%
The PN communicates well with service providers	100%
I feel comfortable referring SCY to the PN	100%

Because we've also had a full staff turnover for the most part in our programs, I would like to think that the staff who are aware of the program really appreciate, see the need for it. I mean, there's definitely no denying that it's a bonus. And it's an added piece that is important

YMCA Service Provider

Reflections on the PN Role

Street-Connected Youth Responses

Item	Response (% agree or strongly agree), n=3
My interactions with the PN have been helpful	100%
The PN intervention increased my knowledge about HIV and AIDS	100%
The PN intervention has increased my access to HIV and AIDS services	66%
The PN is someone I can trust and feel comfortable talking to	100%

So, a lot of people here have social anxiety, like major social anxiety. Especially since the pandemic, but also just a lot of shelters in general, seems a lot of people are socially anxious and they keep to themselves, because it's safer. So, having someone who you know has been vetted, you can trust that person, they're obviously like doing OK. They're not someone who maybe went through school to become a social worker ... So, it was very helpful being like, oh I don't have to explain how this all has worked, because you've got it.

Street Connected Youth

Successes and Challenges



Key Successes:

PN has built trusting relationships with SCY who are otherwise disengaged or reticent to join in YMCA programming; The PN group programming built community in Sprott House. Being able to accompany youth to appointments and other outings has been a useful addition to the wrap-around services provided for SCY in Toronto. PN has raised awareness of HIV and increased access to HIV testing.

Interviewer: Was HIV something that you were concerned about before you met [the PN]?

Respondent: No, I wasn't, but it just helped inform me of like HIV and the possibilities and all that stuff. Interviewer: And have you followed up in terms of like accessing HIV support? Like getting testing or – Respondent: Yeah, I've been like following up with testing and stuff.

-Street Connected Youth



Challenges:

SCY are struggling with access to mental health support and making social connections, which can take priority over HIV concerns. COVID limited the PNs ability to connect with youth and YMCA staff. Confusion over the scope of the PN's role and the focus on HIV can inhibit the likelihood of staff to refer youth to the PN. The employee status of the PN inhibits the sharing of information with other staff and may impact collegial support and referrals. Continuity of support for the PN in this new role has been disrupted by significant staff turnover and changes in supervisors.

The scope [of the PN role] is so narrow, that I don't know how many referrals I can actually make that would be appropriate.

-YMCA Service Provider

We do workmanship change with the team; we use SMIS - a shelter management information system, which is like an online database where we can upload notes. But we don't have those crossovers with the peer navigator program. So we didn't have any method of communicating with the [PN].

-YMCA Service Provider



Unique Role:

The PN's ability to do outreach and accompany youth to appointments offers a novel addition to YMCA services. The focus on HIV and AIDS, especially as it relates to sexual and reproductive health, was identified as an important addition. PNs build special relationships with SCY, which enables emotional and social support on a broad range of issues.

I think that's so valuable to have someone who can accompany someone to appointments, especially around like sexual health and sexual, like STD testing and stuff that can be like very intimidating, especially for young people who already feel like stigmatized in certain ways. I think that's really, really valuable to have someone who can offer that one-on-one support throughout the process.

-YMCA Service Provider

Conclusion

The research team is struck by the **positive feedback** regarding the PN intervention. The findings highlight that PNs are providing **meaningful supports** to youth who are homeless and street-connected. Having a PN who can connect with youths' shared lived experience and accompany them to appointments is a highly valued role for YMCA staff and community. Having the PNs as members of the YMCA team has expanded what the organization is able to achieve in communicable diseases outreach, particularly with this hard-to-reach and marginalized population of youth. Clarifying the PN role to YMCA staff and instituting more regular PN presence and programming at the YMCA will likely strengthen the support for the PN and create referral opportunities.



We see emerging evidence that this is a successful intervention, with opportunities for improvement. Given that reserach funding is time-limited, our first and key recommendation is to consider opportunities for funding a PN who is focused on supporting street-connected youth who identify as 2SLGBTQ+.

Recommendations

Based on the mid-term evaluation of the PN intervention data, the research team recommends the following:



01

Sustain the PN positions

- Identify permanent position funding
- Commit to ongoing, SCY-focused health promotion and disease prevention
- Consider capacity by increasing the number and diversity of PNs across YMCA facilities
- Consider expanding the PN role to include a more explicit focus on mental health support

02

Enhance Role Clarity

- Conduct information sharing and re-introduce the PN to YMCA staff and other community stakeholders
- Ensure ongoing, supportive supervision
- Develop communication pathways between YMCA staff and PN that support the PN to connect and make appropriate referrals for SCY

03

Develop regular programming

- Support regular programming run by the PN for 2SLGBTQ+ youth accessing YMCA services.
- Ensure adequate funding and resources for programming activities
- Consider setting regular meeting hours where SCY can connect with the PN

04

Raise Awareness

- Advocate among SCY and in broader community settings to end stigma towards HIV and AIDS
- Conduct regular PN intervention evaluations
- Share evaluation findings broadly with relevant stakeholders and communities

I feel like it is a great complement to the services and supports definitely, that we're providing in the downtown core. I think it's a needed program in our downtown core.

-YMCA Service Provider

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