



Community Voices Unveiled

Insights and Perspectives on Health and Social Services
and Community Well-being in the Townships

Developed by Engage Rural

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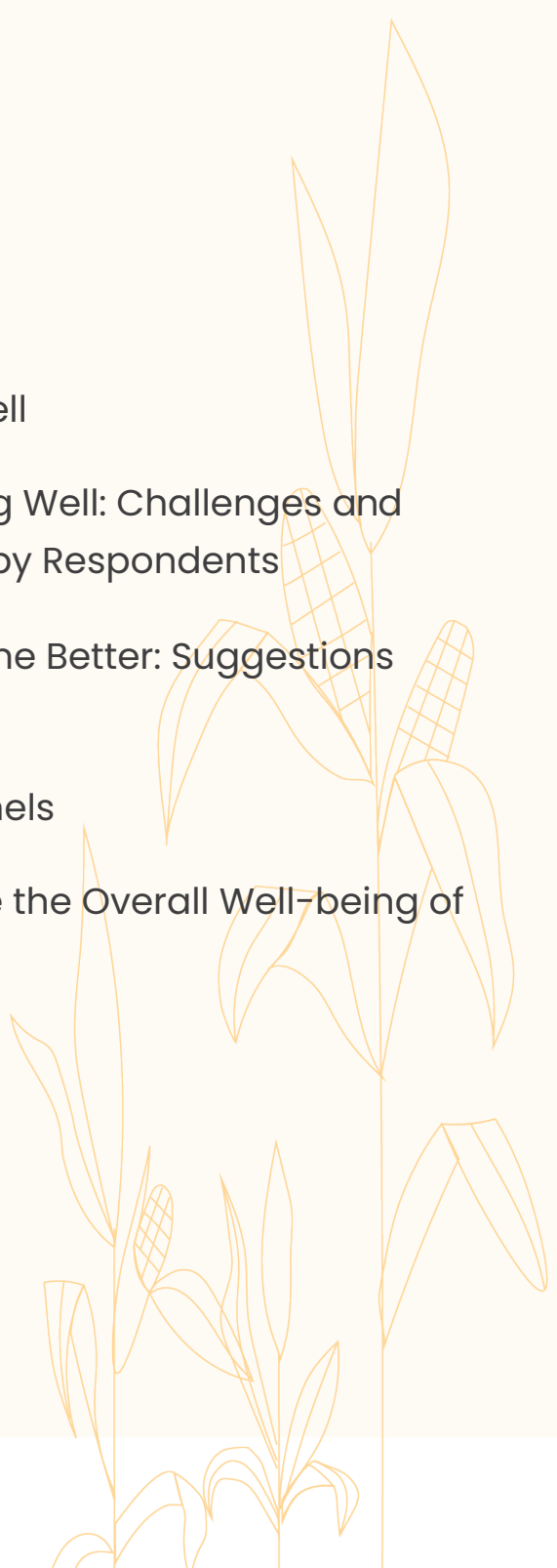
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PURPOSE

Engage Rural set out to connect with community members to help inform the development of a Rural Strategy embedded in upstream thinking. By amplifying the voices of rural residents, community groups and grassroots organizations, we can work towards eliminating barriers, understanding the changing nature of the townships, and creating more impactful and equitable opportunities for all.

METHODOLOGY

Community Engagement Strategy

Survey Design and Development

In April 2023, a Community Engagement team of four community members was contracted to lead the Rural Engagement Strategy and facilitate community conversations and interactions that will inform the development of a Rural Strategy and Action Plan (Phase Two).

To help guide our engagement strategy, the questions, values, ethics, and compensation for the participants were drawn from the Community Engagement Handbook (See attached), developed with the support of regional staff from Public Health's Healthy Environments and Well-being, Healthy Living and Foundational Standards Division, and the Office of Reconciliation, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (REDI).

Coverage Areas: 4 Rural Townships



From April to December 2023, the Community Engagement team developed a comprehensive outreach strategy across the four townships.

METHODOLOGY

Methods, Sample Size and Demographics

Methods



Sample Size



Demographics

The team heard from various equity-seeking populations on their experiences with accessing health and social services in the townships. The rural population as a whole is considered an equity-seeking group, of which include:

2SLGBTQIA+: Also referred to as the “Rainbow” community, includes respondents who identify as part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. We also interviewed parents whose kids identify as such.

Chronic Illness/Disabilities: Includes respondents who experience a chronic illness or disability that limits their ability to work or participate in the community.

Farming Community: Includes respondents working in the farming industry, own a farm and are directly involved with the farming industry.

Low-income Community: Includes respondents with a household income of \$30,000 and under.

Newcomers: Includes respondents who have lived in Canada for 5 years or less.

People of Colour: Includes respondents who identify as Black, Asian, Pacific Islander, multiracial, or of Latin descent.

Seniors: Respondents who are the age of 65 and up.

Youth: Respondents who are the age of 18 and under.

Demographics (cont.)

By actively including perspectives that have been underrepresented, we gain a deeper understanding of our changing communities. This helps us identify current and anticipated needs and gaps, and how we can make necessary adjustments to our services and delivery models. These insights will inform the development of a Rural Strategy and Action Plan, enabling us to embrace a culture of continuous learning and adaptability in our approach.

In early October, our community engagement team member in North Dumfries needed to step down mid-engagement. As a result, the remaining team adjusted its outreach strategy to ensure a sufficient number of voices could be gathered from this township. This may have contributed to the lower numbers in North Dumfries compared to other townships.

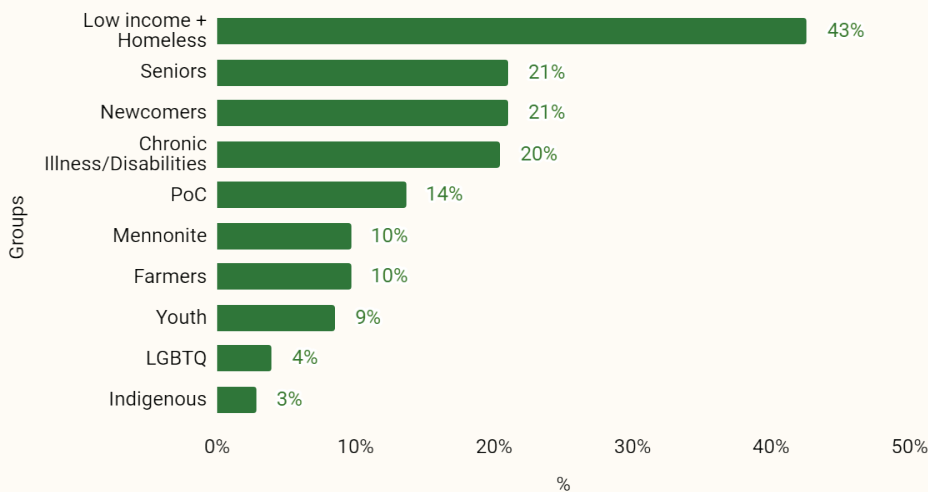
Demographic Data

Township	Percentage
Woolwich	52%
Wilmot	18%
Wellesley	13%
North Dumfries	11%
Waterloo Region and Surrounding Areas	3%
No Response	3%

The Waterloo Region map above illustrates the residents we interviewed: Wellesley, Woolwich, Wilmot and North Dumfries townships. Despite some setbacks in North Dumfries, we were able to successfully gather valuable insights. We valued the feedback we received from residents in various rural hamlets, particularly those in more remote areas, such as William Hastings Line and Punkeydoodles Corners.

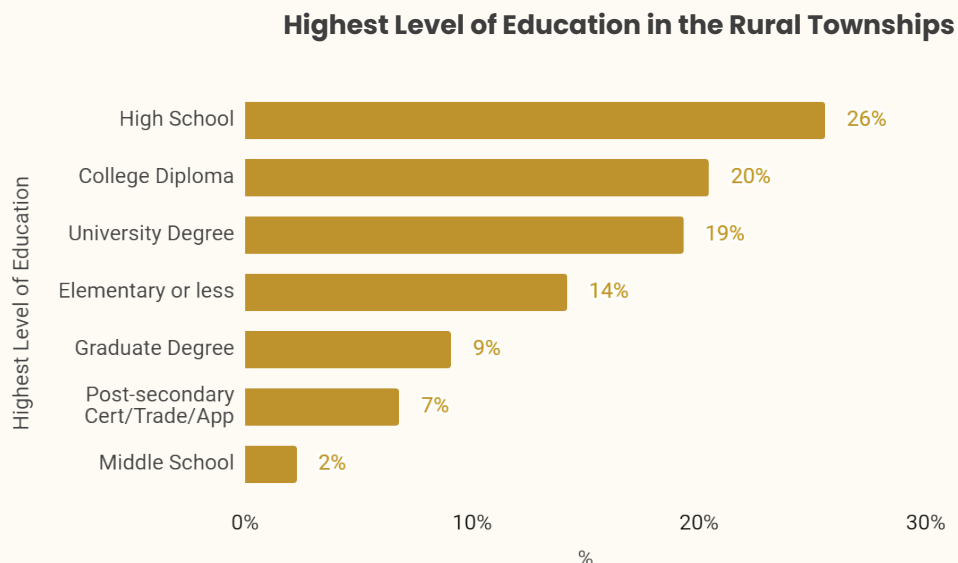


Equity-Seeking Groups in the Rural Townships



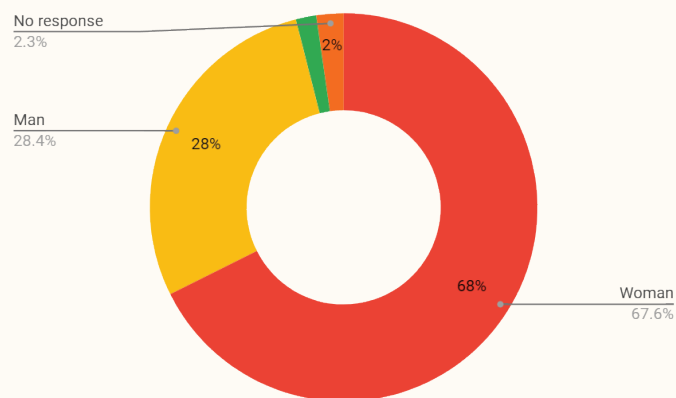
We heard from several underrepresented groups, gaining insights into their unique needs and challenges.

Demographic Data (cont.)



Of the people we interviewed, most have a higher level of education. 35% have completed post-secondary education, and 16% have completed middle school or less, emphasizing the need for targeted educational initiatives. This information underscores the variance of educational backgrounds within the rural townships.

Respondent-Identified Genders

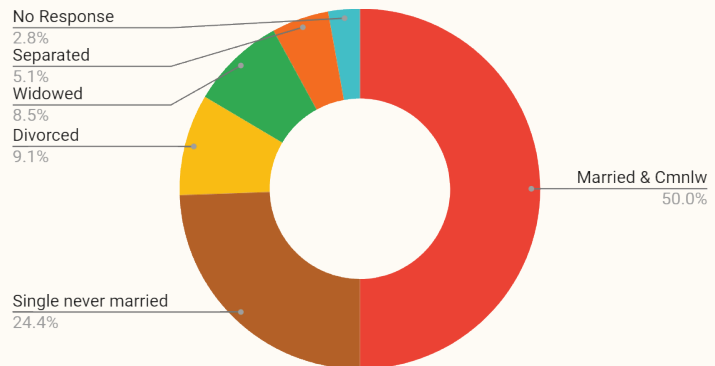


Most respondents identified as women. This gender distribution reflects a higher participation of women in the survey. Another finding shows that 30% of women and 10% of men filled out the online survey, which also signifies the difference in participation levels among genders. Additionally, a small percentage identified as non-binary, transgender women or preferred not to specify their gender, highlighting the diversity of gender identities within the surveyed population.

Demographics Data (cont.)

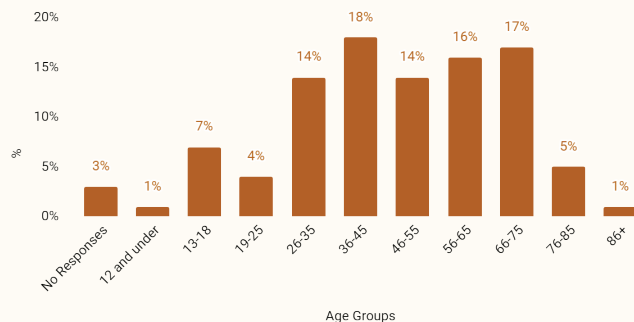
Marital Status Among Respondents

A significant portion of respondents in rural townships identify as married or living with a common-law partner, which comprises 50% of the surveyed population. 50% of respondents are living without a partner, which includes 40% of this subgroup supporting children as single parents. Additionally, the survey indicates that 8.5% of respondents are widowed and 9.1% are divorced.

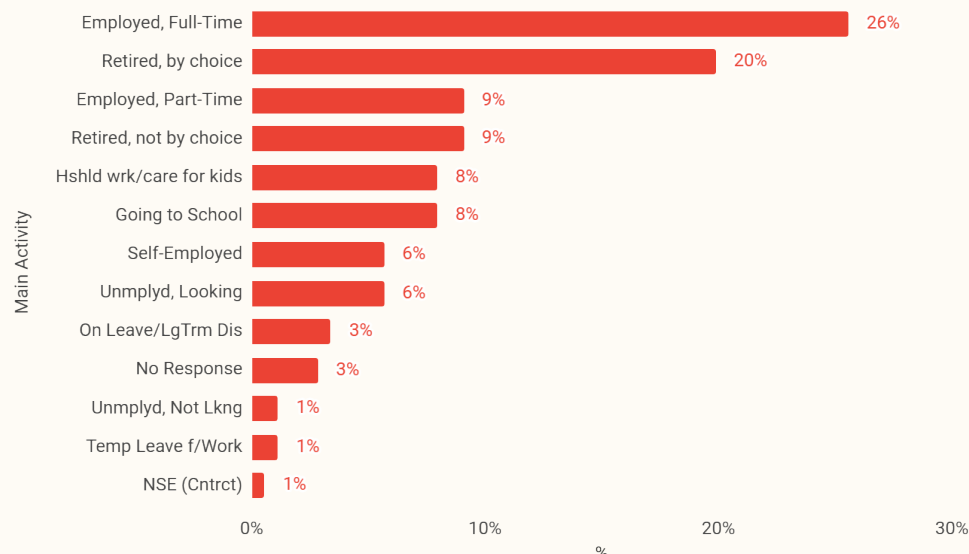


Respondents Age Groups

The age distribution among respondents shows a significant representation across various age groups. A large portion of the surveyed population includes individuals between the ages of 36 and 75, with age groups 36-45 and 66-75 being the most prevalent at 18% and 17%.



Employment/Activity

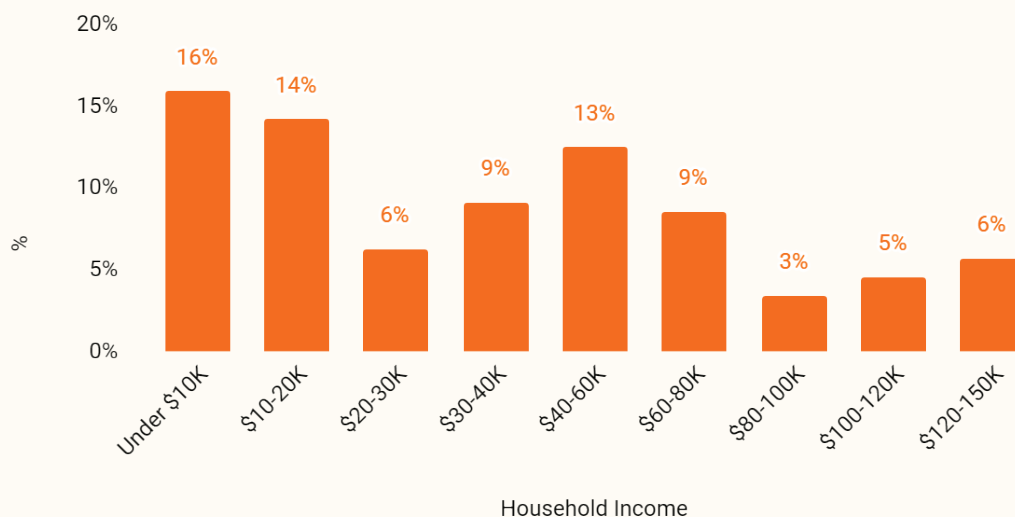


The majority of respondents (26%) are employed full-time and 20% are retired by choice.

Demographic Data (cont.)

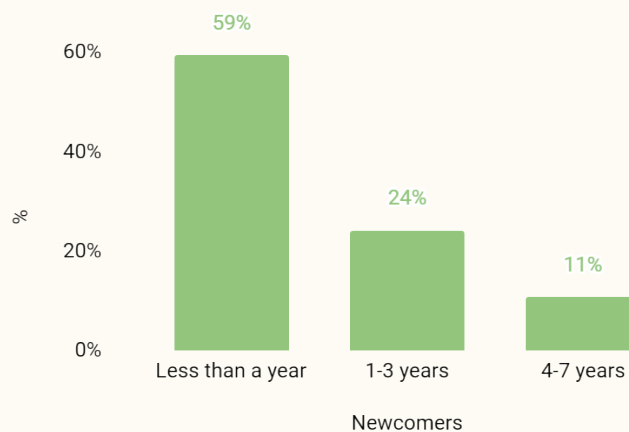
Total Household Income in the Previous Year

We found that respondents we interviewed had a wide variety of income levels in the previous year. 30% of the total respondents earn less than \$20,000 a year.



Duration of Newcomers as a Canadian Resident

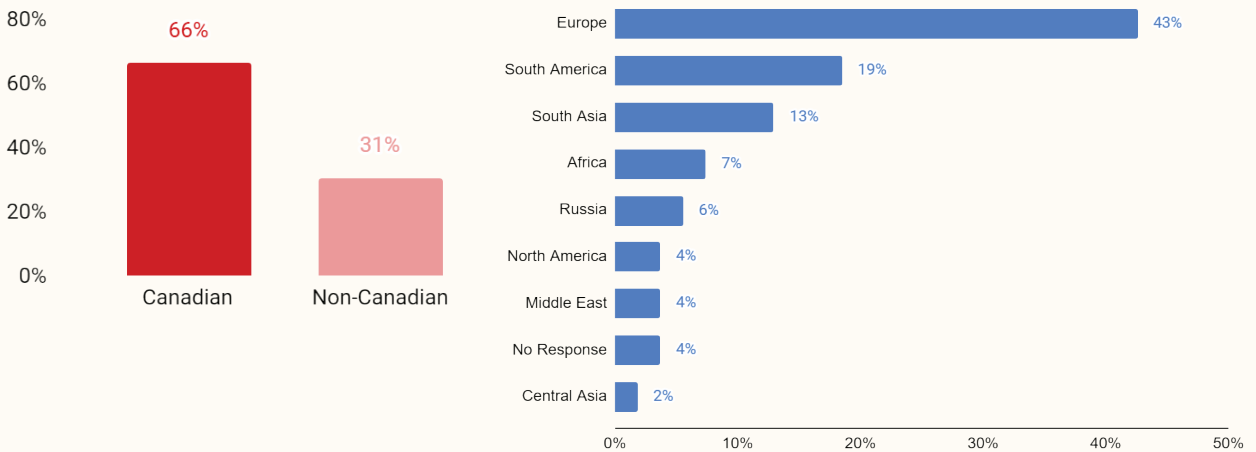
Of the total number of respondents we interviewed, 21% of them were newcomers. 60% of them have lived in Canada for less than a year.



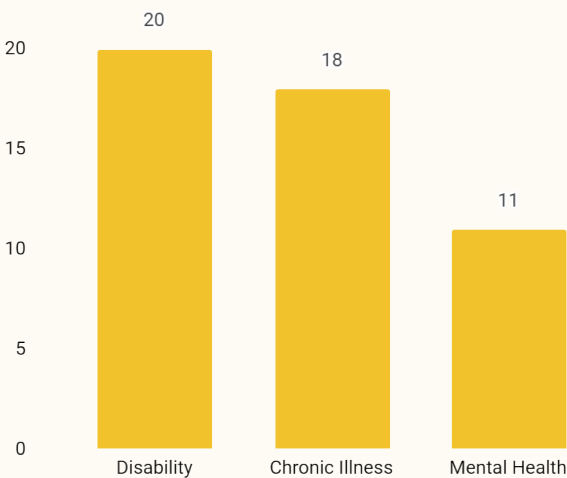
Demographics Data (cont.)

Non-Canadian Respondents and their Birthplace

The majority of the respondents are Canadian-born. 31% of those who indicated they are not born in Canada represent a diverse range of countries in which they have shared where they are born. A significant portion originates from Europe, which includes Germany, Kosova, Slovenia, Ukraine, and the UK. Respondents come from various other regions such as South America (including Ecuador and Mexico), South Asia (India and Sri Lanka) and Africa (Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa). Smaller numbers represent Russia, North America, the Middle East and Central Asia (including Iran, Syria and Kyrgyzstan).



Impact of Disabilities on Community Participation

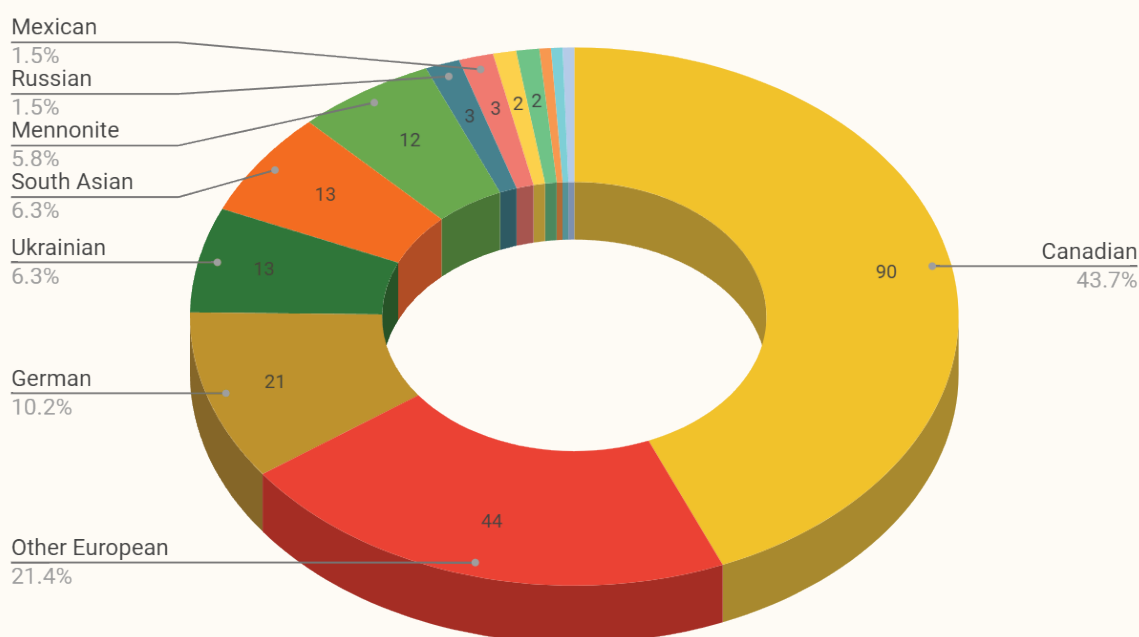


Among the respondents we interviewed, 30% reported living with a disability (20 respondents), mental health condition (11 respondents) or chronic illness (18 respondents) that impacts their participation in the community. We also learned about the diverse health challenges present in the community, including learning disabilities, PTSD, fibromyalgia, developmental disabilities, sciatica, balance challenges, chronic back pain, breast cancer and physical disabilities, diabetic, lung disease, heart attack, autism, down syndrome and intellectual disability.

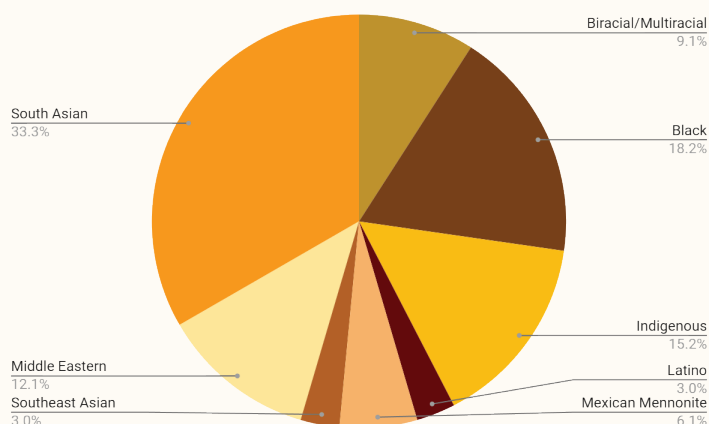
Demographic Data (cont.)

Respondents' Ethnic Origin

Overall the people we interviewed, 90 respondents identify as Canadian and 44 identify as European. In terms of non-white racial backgrounds, the most common identified is South Asian (Sri Lankan and Indian) with 11 respondents. Other racial backgrounds include Indigenous, Black (includes Nigerian and Caribbean) and Middle Eastern (Arab and Kurdish). Respondents also identify as Biracial, Multiracial, Mexican Mennonite, Latino and Southeast Asian. Taking a closer look at the data, European ethnic origins include 8% of white respondents who identify as Mennonites or Low German Mennonites, and 31% of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) respondents who identify as Canadians.

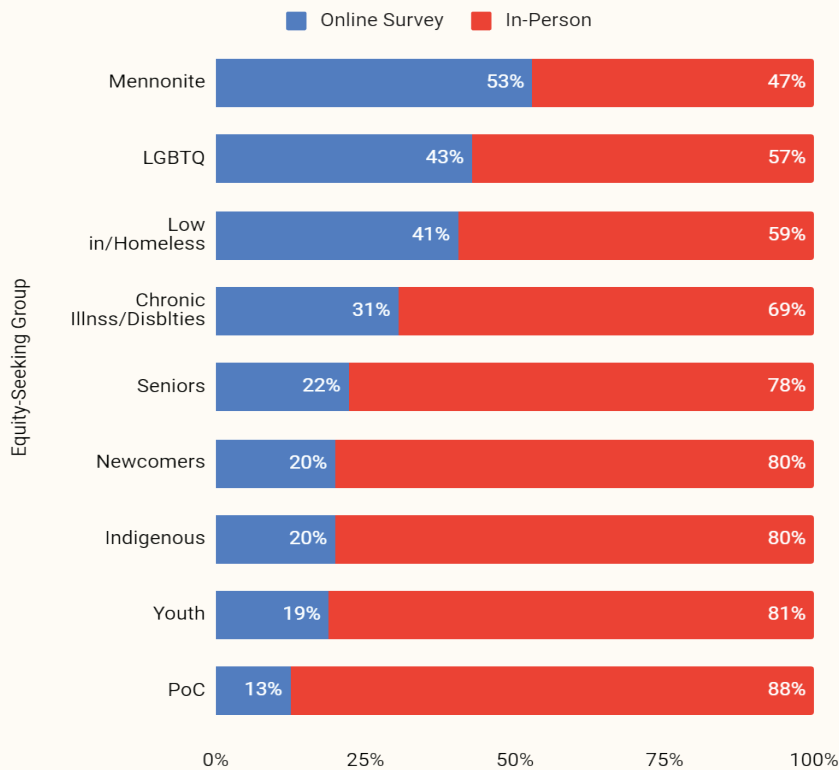


Non-White Racial Backgrounds of Respondents



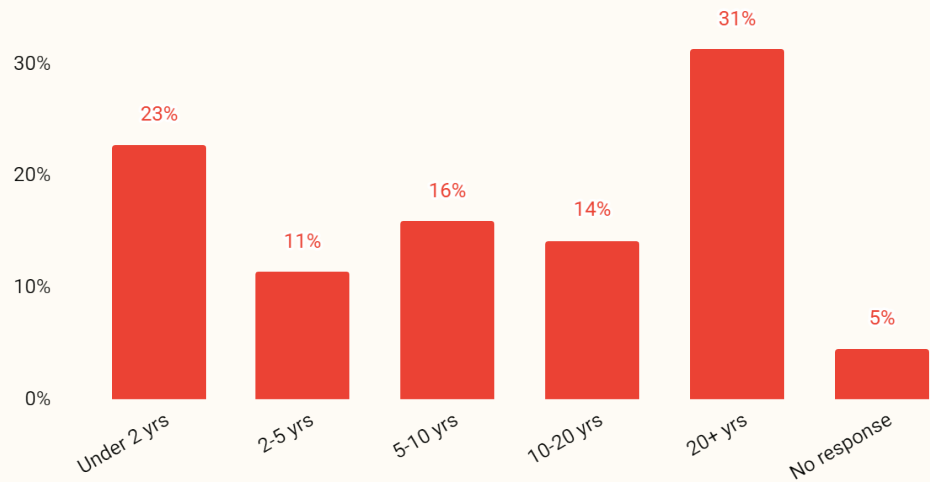
Demographics Data (cont.)

Survey Response Preferences Among Equity-Seeking Groups



An interesting observation that almost half of the Mennonites we interviewed filled out online surveys and in-person survey responses.

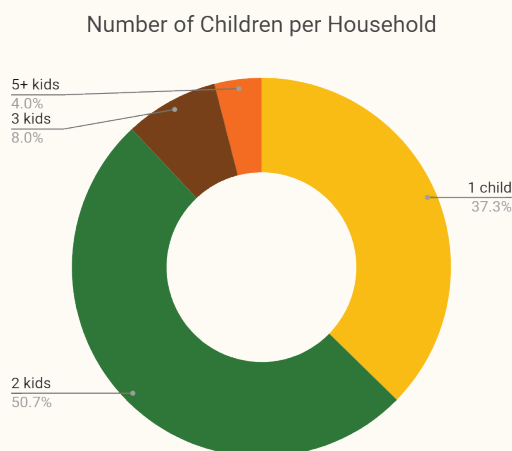
Residency Duration in Current Community



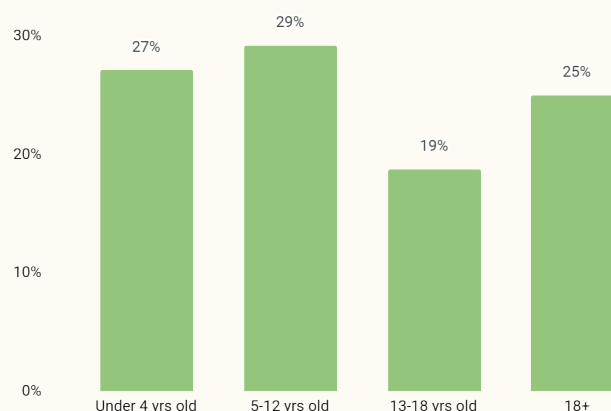
When asked how long they have lived in their community, we found that the majority of respondents are long-time residents, having lived over 20 years in their community. This group represents 80% of respondents aged 46 and up.

Demographic Data (cont.)

Children Living at Home and Distribution



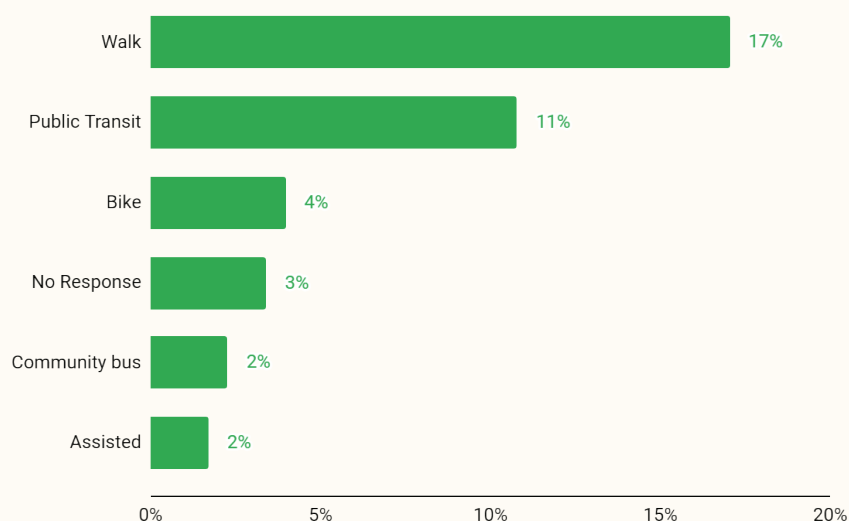
Age Distribution of Children in Households



In the townships, 82% of respondents have children living at home, with a significant concentration of youth aged 5-12. A quarter of respondents with children living at home come from low-income communities.

Primary Modes of Community Transportation

Other than 65% of respondents who primarily use a personal car as their mode of transportation in rural townships, it is followed by walking as the next most common mode of transportation.



1

What's working?

- Services that are meeting their needs and/or expectations
- Services providing the support they are looking for

2

What's not working?

- Services that are not meeting their needs and/or expectations
- A lack of services in the townships



3

What could be done better?

- Specific areas they feel could be changed or improved
- Their thoughts on why the change might not be happening

4

How are they finding out about the services?

5

What can benefit the well-being of the overall community?



FINDINGS

Our findings highlight a summary of the respondent's views on health and social services in the townships. We cover their positive experiences, challenges and barriers. All suggested actions come directly from respondents who offered insights on what they believe would improve health and social services in the townships.

What's Working Well

Across the board, respondents shared positive experiences with health and social services in the townships. A recurring theme is the satisfaction of having local health services and programs accessible in the townships. To have access to professionals in the community was seen as an asset. People spoke about the positive impact of having a local family doctor to being able to work with an outreach worker to get the support they need. They also spoke of the importance of being able to access to basic needs supports and resources such as food banks, clothing and transportation in their community and the warm welcome and support they receive from the staff.

Respondents also noted that by just having these discussions with respondents and engaging with them about their experiences, they displayed a deep appreciation for being heard and felt valued. Continuing to engage with people about their needs is well received.



Experiences with Health and Social Services

Health Services

Respondents with access to health care services express appreciation for their health care teams. Some emphasize the convenience of having a health care centre within walking distance from their homes, while others are willing to travel outside of the townships to access these services. This willingness to travel is often based on the strong relationships they have built with their existing healthcare teams over the years or the convenience of being located near their workplace.

Local pharmacies are widely appreciated and consistently accessed among respondents due to their efficiency, accessibility and professionalism. In particular, one person from the 2SLGBTQIA+ community expressed gratitude for the no-cost access to specific medications addressing frequent infections. Being able to access certain prescriptions through the pharmacist has increased local access to prescription drugs for people with no family doctor.

Among those interviewed, some noted being satisfied with having access to personalized rehabilitation and injury prevention services offered through physiotherapy clinics. Low-income respondents were especially pleased to have access to this service at no cost.

CHRONIC ILLNESS/DISABILITIES

Among the respondents we heard from, those facing disabilities expressed satisfaction with access to bloodwork at their local medical centre. For those who are financially capable, accessing in-home services are seen as convenient, beneficial and efficient. They also spoke positively about their family doctor, appreciating their attentive listening and feeling at ease in their presence, as well as the ability to have access to free physiotherapy services.

LOW-INCOME COMMUNITY

Low-income seniors we interviewed were found to value having support when it comes to accessing prescription medications. Though this is typically offered through the provincial government, improving accessibility for essential medications has promoted better health outcomes for respondents, equitable opportunities, and alleviated financial burdens. Respondents also expressed satisfaction with specialized services including speech therapy and optometry.

Experiences with Health and Social Services (cont.)

MENNONITE COMMUNITY

Most members of the Mennonite community we interviewed expressed being respected and pleased with their primary healthcare centre, with emphasis on its culturally sensitive and welcoming environment.

Health care facilities that respect Mennonite values, tailor services to their unique needs and create a comfortable space foster trust and open communication. This approach not only effectively addresses healthcare concerns but also makes healthcare services more accessible for the Mennonite community.

PARENTS

Parents we interviewed had positive experiences with local midwifery services, noting the excellent maternal care provided. Local access to specialized services such as this fosters a sense of community support during pregnancy and childbirth.

PEOPLE OF COLOUR

A respondent in North Dumfries really emphasized that some people of colour appreciate having access to specialized healthcare services such as physiotherapists and chiropractors. They also expressed deep appreciation for the farming community, emphasizing the value of having access to farm-fresh produce. The convenience of finding all their needs in one place, or a “one-stop shop”, positively contributes to their health and well-being.

Programs and Social Services

CHRONIC ILLNESS/DISABILITIES

Caring staff and the ability to be accompanied to appointments has resulted in a supportive experience among this group. Seniors with physical impairments, in particular, noted the appreciation for having a van service for grocery assistance. Access to transportation for medical appointments and the availability of rides is highly valued.

Access to fresh bread, fruit and grocery gift cards from the food bank helps address financial and physical constraints, ensuring nutrition needs can be met. Respondents also found additional support beneficial, including PTSD support, assistance with subsidized home rentals, and guidance in identifying local health services. They appreciate the opportunities provided by group events and sports activities, enhancing social connections and promoting an active lifestyle.

Experiences with Health and Social Services (cont.)

FARMING COMMUNITY

Respondents from the farming community have expressed their appreciation for community programs and safety workshops that are tailored to their needs. Given the need for mental health support, they were particularly grateful for having access to workshops addressing this topic and providing guidance on how to access support. Essential information and resources like these can enhance targeted information and resources that support the farming community's well-being.



PEOPLE OF COLOUR

A respondent from North Dumfries emphasized their gratitude with the available specialized services and programs available for both adults and children in the community centre, as well as the warm and friendly treatment they receive when accessing these services. The respondent also noted that they chose to move to North Dumfries because they felt that a small community would be more welcoming and would improve their quality of life.

INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY

It was noted that one agency with an elder on staff had much success in reaching the Indigenous community, offering culturally appropriate services in the townships. This has been welcomed by many Indigenous community members.

LOW-INCOME COMMUNITY

Low-income respondents expressed gratitude for the welcoming environment that facilitates seeking help in finding services. They find access to food banks, backpack programs and clothing cupboards in rural townships crucial for addressing economic challenges, meeting basic needs and fostering dignity, warmth and inclusivity. Access to clothing, especially for young ones, is considered essential for the well-being of those with limited income. The service is particularly valued in rural townships where limited transportation options often require seeking support outside of the area.

As well, respondents value the opportunity to attend free community events and holiday dinners, which contribute to their sense of community inclusion, well-being and social connections. This also enables them to access food support without facing stigma, as these events are open to the entire community.

Experiences with Health and Social Services (cont.)

NEWCOMERS

Newcomers we interviewed expressed gratitude for the nutritious meals provided by local food banks, particularly those in Woolwich and Wilmot townships. Recognizing their crucial role in easing the transition to a new community, these essential programs foster a sense of belonging, and an inclusive, welcoming and supportive environment during the settlement process. The availability of local food banks addresses immediate nutritional needs and contributes to newcomers' sense of belonging and value within their communities.

SENIORS

Workshops and programs for seniors, like diabetes education, are emphasized by respondents as being valuable as they encourage social connections, and provide opportunities to acquire essential skills and knowledge about various illnesses and conditions. These inclusive initiatives, low-cost programs and free workshops offer a crucial platform for seniors to engage in activities that enhance their physical and mental health, bridge gaps and contribute to personal and professional growth. This fosters a sense of community and empowers them to effectively manage their conditions, which ultimately can improve their overall well-being.

We also heard from low-income seniors who value having access to and assistance with computers, resume writing and tax services, information, online communication and skill development.

Generally, these resources are essential for personal and professional growth, bridging critical gaps and boosting confidence in job applications, ultimately fostering financial stability and overall well-being.

PARENTS

Parents we interviewed expressed deep gratitude for programs such as earlyON centres, engaging library groups, and thrift shops offering affordable items for hobbies and children's clothes. These initiatives are praised for their valuable support network and fostering empowerment.

The Family Violence and Prevention Program is highlighted for its safety, privacy and effectiveness in navigating life situations. They appreciate the support offered through groups, in-home visits and assistance in various situations. The program's accessibility, encouragement of independence, and confidence boost contribute to a sense of belonging and enhanced well-being.

"

I'm finding the opportunities for being able to work through life situations, and even connecting within the groups and that, it's well done because I don't feel so isolated knowing there's other people. Learning to appreciate what I do have, and everything. It's very well run. I really couldn't ask for anything more.

"

Experiences with Health and Social Services (cont.)

Programs such as this that are also tailored for women are described as helpful and supportive communities that boost confidence and provide positive experiences. One respondent reflects, “As life goes on and situations have changed, I’ve had this constant of knowing that I have support.”

Respondents also appreciate having mental health support, including the assistance of counsellors who are considered highly supportive during challenging times. The calming demeanor and direction provided, trauma support, motivating the attendance of group sessions, and support with driving are examples of how these services are acknowledged for significantly improving mental health.

Having access to a wide variety of children and youth programs, such as summer camps, swimming and piano lessons, are viewed as strengthening their children’s growth and development. This support alleviates concerns about skill development and forming connections outside of school, allowing parents to focus on seeking employment opportunities and fulfilling work hours.

The wide range of programs available to parents locally play a crucial role in enhancing their well-being and positive experiences, fostering a sense of belonging and support throughout various life stages.

YOUTH PROGRAMS

Support and access to resources such as school supplies, recreation programs, birthday gifts and library programs are highly valued among respondents from all four townships. Youth and parents of youth believe these programs have meaningfully improved their lives, contributing to education enrichment, community engagement, and youth development. Youth respondents also find youth hubs to be a welcoming and supportive environment that foster engagement, inclusivity and skill development. Accessing programs through local organizations not only allows them to participate in a variety of activities but also enhances their sense of belonging, social connections and overall well-being.

Respondents express gratitude for social programs that build connections, skills and empowerment, valuing tailored services and collaboration. Satisfaction extends to various social services, including counselling workshops, emphasizing their reliability and seamless integration in meeting basic needs. Financial and transportation support, such as Kiwanis transportation, addresses immediate needs and fosters a sense of belonging.



Affordability of Programs and Services

Respondents expressed gratitude for the affordability and reliability of community programs, specifically mentioning local food banks that provide essential support when needed. Additionally, they valued services offering amenities like swimming passes, fitness classes, dinners, community BBQs and Meals on Wheels.

The significance of maintaining accessible and affordable programs and services in rural communities cannot be overstated, as it plays a pivotal role in addressing financial barriers for people in the townships.

Healthcare expenses, including monthly prescriptions and co-pays, are challenging for seniors on fixed incomes, as they feel that it significantly impacts their ability to access drugs and getting adequate treatment for their illnesses. Others feel there is limited access to affordable dental care.

Awareness of Programs and Services

Respondents we interviewed, particularly seniors, showed a heightened awareness of the programs and services tailored to their needs. Informative books prove resourceful in navigating the wide variety of available programs, offering contact information for local specialists and services like legal aid and seniors' homes. They also mentioned that government-issued resource booklets enhance their awareness, serving a comprehensive guide to available services. This ensures that seniors are well-informed and equipped to access the support they require.

Availability of Community Spaces

Respondents, specifically Indigenous community members, expressed gratitude for the positive experiences they have had with Mennonite churches offering space for Healing Circles and kitchens for community meals, fostering a supportive and welcoming environment for healing and cultural activities. There is also a note the slow progression of land becoming available, contributing to the sense of connection and continuity with their cultural practices.

Parents and youth identified that having space available for groups with similar interests to hold events has been essential for fostering a sense of community and connection.

The recognition of the significance of these spaces reflects the community's appreciation for opportunities that enhance their sense of belonging and togetherness.

Affordability and Availability of Housing and Transportation

Community members from various demographic groups express appreciation for the affordability and availability of transportation options in the rural townships. Some commend Kiwanis transit and the GRT for its frequent and reliable transportation to medical appointments, the mall and hospital. Its thoughtful and supportive staff that not only address transportation barriers in rural areas, such as lower costs, but also fosters a sense of independence and inclusion within the close-knit community.

In addition to transportation, respondents value affordable housing, particularly tailored to the low-income community and those that access geared-to-income housing. These positive experiences with housing options highlight the community's commitment to providing inclusive and supportive living arrangements for residents in rural communities.



What's Not Working Well

Challenges and Barriers Identified by Respondents

Experiences with Health and Social Services

Health Services

Across all the demographic groups we heard from, many face similar challenges in accessing healthcare in the rural townships. From the Rainbow community to those facing chronic illnesses, there is a common need for specialized, inclusive and culturally sensitive services. Indigenous communities have an immediate need for culturally appropriate alternatives, while low-income seniors and newcomers stress the importance of increased local resources and improved accessibility. People of colour seek streamlined processes and enhanced accountability within healthcare facilities, and seniors highlight the need for easily accessible local resources. Despite their unique concerns, the overarching trend is the demand for more inclusive, accessible and compassionate healthcare services in the rural townships.

2SLGBTQIA+

In our conversations with members of the Rainbow community, a recurring theme emerged – many expressed a sense of exclusion when seeking specialized healthcare services, including crucial services like breast cancer screening within the townships. Their challenge in locating Rainbow-specific services, such as sexual health resources and psychologists who understand their unique experiences, have led them to turn to virtual support for assistance. When reflecting on finding a local psychologist, one respondent stated:

“ I think that it's unrealistic given my demographic. Where's there to look around here? I need a black woman who understands queerness. ”

Additionally, respondents pointed out an abundance of services catered to the aging population, leaving other demographics underserved. This, coupled with extended wait times, has compelled many to seek specialized services outside the townships, even in emergencies where immediate local care is considered unavailable.

It is clear that the Rainbow community seeks vital support in fostering well-being and acceptance within rural environments.

Experiences with Health and Social Services (cont.)

CHRONIC ILLNESSES/DISABILITIES

Individuals we interviewed facing mental health challenges, physical disabilities or chronic illnesses expressed a feeling of discomfort around specialized healthcare professionals. This kind of experience can be challenging to access necessary support but also discouraging to seek the right care.



One respondent from Wilmot township shared their success in locating a doctor outside of the township; however, they feel that the distance is a barrier, given their fear of having seizures while driving that far. This pattern appears to be a common one, in that healthcare options exist but are often located outside of town. This poses a challenge for those with disabilities who must travel a considerable distance safely. Adding to the challenges faced by people with disabilities, a respondent mentioned their inability to qualify for disability benefits to support their challenges in having frequent seizures. Exploring broader support options for individuals on disability and gaining insights into the qualification criteria can offer valuable benefits to this group.

Respondents on ODSP highlighted a lack of zero-cost services that are easily accessible. One individual shared the feeling of being excluded when they were turned away by a dentist who didn't accept ODSP patients, resulting in the need to seek healthcare outside of the township.

Interestingly, 72% of the respondents who experience chronic illness or disabilities are also part of the low-income community. This implies that individuals facing health challenges are likely to also struggle with financial constraints.

The process of finding healthcare professionals for this group requires dedicated support and time, tailored to their needs, fostering a more accessible and compassionate healthcare environment for all.

Experiences with Health and Social Services (cont.)

INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY

The Indigenous community in the rural townships shared the challenges and barriers they faced in accessing healthcare services, leading to feelings of distress, isolation and a sense of hopelessness. They have experienced racism, discrimination, and mistreatment at healthcare centres, with reported instances of negative comments, and a lack of understanding and compassion. This further heightens the already prevalent feelings of isolation and alienation among Indigenous community members. One respondent expressed, “[It’s hard to find a doctor] who’s truly compassionate and understands the terrible trauma that has occurred in Indigenous peoples’ lives due to systemic racism in the health care system.”

We also heard about the challenges in obtaining permission for smudging ceremonies and accessing local doctors who understand the trauma caused from systemic racism. However, despite the poor treatment they receive, they feel compelled to utilize these services for the purpose of accessing much-needed healthcare support.

“We have no alternative but to go to these institutions for help. When you’re treated so unjustly, it’s a terrible blow when you’re suffering. It gives people no hope when you’re treated like that.”

These experiences develop into a strong reluctance to engage with non-Indigenous services and the requirement of culturally appropriate alternatives. Regrettably, the overall experience at healthcare facilities has led them to limit their use of services to only food banks, which further intensifies their sense of exclusion and hinders their willingness to seek help. One member articulated, “Most of our people don’t want anything to do with anybody that’s not indigenous, now. If you’re offering services, they don’t trust anybody.”

To create a more inviting atmosphere for the Indigenous community, it’s essential to explore ways of bringing existing Indigenous-specific healthcare services, such as SOAHAC, into the townships. This approach ensures they have access to a space that honours their traditional practices and respects their culture. While this change should be implemented across all healthcare facilities, these initiatives can make a significant difference in fostering a more inclusive and respectful environment.

Experiences with Health and Social Services (cont.)

LOW-INCOME COMMUNITY

Low-income seniors shared that they are willing to travel outside of the township to access healthcare that offers less wait times with less volume. One respondent from the Woolwich township had a doctor in St. Jacobs, but due to their access being cancelled unexpectedly with the doctor in that location, they were forced to use a doctor that is located outside of the township. The unexpected cancellation of something that was available closer to this respondent, on top of being unable to drive due to disabilities outside of the township, poses as a significant barrier for accessing healthcare.

These hurdles underscore the challenges low-income community members face in accessing healthcare services in the townships, emphasizing the need for increased local healthcare resources and improved accessibility for this demographic.

NEWCOMERS

We heard from many newcomers that face a lack of diverse and tailored support networks and professionals who have a solid understanding of different cultures. Experiences like this intensify feelings of isolation and underservice, and restricts their ability to navigate the healthcare system effectively.

Language barriers further compound the difficulties for respondents in this group, impeding effective communication with health professionals and hindering their access to essential care. Resources that support communication between individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds and the healthcare professional can foster more inclusive and accessible healthcare services for newcomers in rural townships.



Experiences with Health and Social Services (cont.)

PEOPLE OF COLOUR

Individuals from this demographic voiced their frustrations during our interviews in finding local healthcare professionals, enduring prolonged wait times at walk-in clinics, and receiving impersonal care.

Beyond primary care, several respondents shared their difficulties in accessing specialized services, such as massage therapy, which often requires appointments to be booked months in advance. Balancing these appointments with the demands of an already hectic schedule, particularly for those with children needing to be picked up from school, adds an extra layer of complexity.

Some respondents feel stuck without a solid healthcare plan, due to their struggles in securing essential services like dentists, chiropractors and pediatricians. In addition, one respondent stressed the importance of accountability at healthcare facilities, sharing instances where doctors shifted blame when faced with challenges.

To create a more positive and reassuring healthcare experience for individuals in this demographic within the rural townships, improvements they seek include accessibility, streamlined appointment processes, and enhanced accountability within healthcare facilities.

SENIORS

Seniors in the rural townships, particularly in Wellesley, identified the need for easily accessible local resources, as it is seen as a non-walkable town for essential services. Concerns over the lack of healthcare services in close proximity to their homes contributes to an added layer of stress. One respondent notes, *"It's not a 15-minute walkable community. Absolutely not for essential services"*.

The lack of faith-based mental health resources, and access to essential services, such as blood work and specialists like allergists highlights the need for expanded and diverse healthcare services within the rural townships to avoid trips outside of the townships. Respondents, particularly in Elmira, highlighted the need to travel to the Fergus hospital to benefit from shorter wait times and reduced patient volume.

Proximity to healthcare facilities in senior residential areas offering reduced wait times and access to doctors, specialists and faith-based counseling services, is seen as a means to enhance the well-being and alleviate barriers of seniors living in the rural townships.

Experiences with Health and Social Services (cont.)

Programs and Social Services

Many respondents in the rural townships face challenges in accessing mental health support, especially for those with mobility issues when dealing with transportation and accessibility barriers. The necessity for specialized services, such as faith-based options and Rainbow-friendly supports, often compels them to seek assistance virtually or outside the townships. This lack of tailored programming leaves respondents feeling overlooked, impacting their overall sense of well-being.

Stigma acts as a significant barrier for some respondents, particularly parents and youth, hindering access to certain programs and services and deterring them from seeking essential assistance.

Respondents also note the lack of early learning and age-specific programs for parents, specialized healthcare for seniors, and culturally inclusive services for people of colour and newcomers. This further amplifies the sense of being underserved.

The multifaceted challenges experienced by various equity-seeking communities underscore the pressing need for more inclusive and accessible programs, as articulated by respondents.

2SLGBTQIA+

Respondents emphasized the critical need for workshops, support groups, and specifically counselling services, to be provided by professionals who identify with the Rainbow community. They also shared the importance of having such specialized services locally available, rather than having to seek them outside the townships. Accessing these resources within the community is not only more convenient but also highly preferred, demonstrating the shared desire for easily accessible and locally situated support for this group.

INDIGENOUS

There is a historical mistrust of Family and Children's Services, facing ongoing challenges today. One respondent shared the troubling experience of an Indigenous youth with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), who lacked mental health support and was wrongly isolated in a healthcare facility. There is also a pervasive fear and lack of trust towards these services, "because they apprehend their children so quickly." The trauma faced among the Indigenous community is acknowledged to be slowly improving but there remains much more work to be done to address these deeply rooted issues.

Experiences with Health and Social Services (cont.)

CHRONIC ILLNESS/DISABILITIES

We heard from several individuals with disabilities and/or chronic illnesses who feel a sense of detachment due to the lack of inclusive post-pandemic initiatives. Many programs offered by agencies haven't resumed after being cancelled pre-pandemic. As a result, they expressed missing out on accessible opportunities for fun and engaging activities.

Those relying on ODSP services expressed frustration with the lack of communication with their worker, negative situations they experienced, and the need for enhanced support. This demonstrates their desire for a meaningful connection with their worker, easily accessible information, and a thorough understanding of the available services. Hearing their preference for purposeful interactions beyond typical formalities underscores the importance of fostering compassionate and supportive care to effectively address their needs.

When accessing driver services, they have experienced long wait times to be picked up after an appointment, which makes it challenging for those with disabilities.



Experiences with Health and Social Services (cont.)

LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES

Individuals in the low-income demographic have raised concerns about accessing food banks, specifically expressing confusion about the distribution of monthly food hampers. Although monthly food hampers are meant to supply three days worth of food, they are often mistakenly believed to last individuals for an entire month. This is particularly challenging for respondents when a significant portion of their nutrition depends on these food services. There is also the perception that meal delivery services are specifically catered to seniors and diabetics, as they often lack flavour and options for those with dietary restrictions, which further adds to the struggle. Some respondents noted disparities in food availability between local food banks and external sources, emphasizing that this has resulted in financial burdens as they are forced to spend money on healthier alternatives. Consequently, they perceive organizations as struggling to keep up with growth, indicating a need for enhanced resources to address the growing needs of the community.

Certain hamlets within the rural townships with limited counselling services prompt individuals to seek services outside of the townships. However, those who manage to access local services sometimes face mistreatment, hindering their reliance on mental health support.

Some respondents noted limitations in government support, including a restricted number of weeks for financial coverage, which poses challenges when seeking mental health services. One respondent expressed, "If I had more time [with a counsellor] and more in depth, it would have helped even more, but the government only grants so much, I think, so many weeks for it." Requirements, like the necessity for both parents' consent for counselling services and proving financial responsibilities to access food banks, pose barriers for low-income individuals. This is especially challenging for divorced parents, those with injuries, and individuals living with parents on ODSP, adding an extra layer of complexity to an already stressful situation.

Disparities, lack of clarity in provided services, and the limitations faced by these respondents highlight the need for improved accessibility, more comprehensive support, and responsive services that address the challenges faced by individuals in rural townships.

Experiences with Health and Social Services (cont.)



NEWCOMERS

Several newcomers shared their struggles with the limited availability of mental health services in rural areas, posing a significant challenge in accessing suitable resources. The stigma surrounding mental health issues deters them from seeking assistance. Navigating government requirements, especially for tailored support, becomes an added hurdle due to perceived limitations in resources and outreach programs in rural areas.

There is an urgency to seek English classes and tutors due to expectations to acclimatize quickly. However, the lack of local language programs

and services makes it difficult to communicate their needs. This is compounded by the additional need for assistance with accessing government or social service agencies. The difficulties newcomers face in understanding and completing required documentation further intensifies their overall experience.

The geographical distance from major urban centres presents another barrier, preventing respondents from easily accessing immigration offices or support services. This leaves them feeling isolated and overwhelmed, as illustrated by one respondent who expressed frustration with the lack of local assistance: *"I was using the organization out in Kitchener... same like a multicultural centre. There is no help from any organization here around for helping to find a job or rent or making your resume or even to register your kids in the school."*

In the youth demographic, respondents expressed a willingness to utilize the services, programs and support networks offered by local agencies if better outreach efforts were in place. This emphasizes a clear need to enhance outreach initiatives to better reach and connect with newcomer youth, who could significantly benefit from the assistance provided by these agencies.

Experiences with Health and Social Services (cont.)

PARENTS

Some parents in rural townships express feelings of isolation due to a lack of centralized spaces like child care facilities and the discontinuation of early-year drop-in programs. This situation necessitates accessing services outside of the townships, posing challenges when scheduling activities around baby nap times. The need for childcare/minding to participate in support programs is evident, impacting engagement in community programs and employment searches.

Low-income parents face obstacles in accessing age-specific programs that cater specifically to parents, including those with unique family structures, such as those with foster children. The focus on programs supporting seniors exacerbates these challenges. Additionally, there are difficulties with kids' food programs, where one parent highlighted the need for food to be provided at the beginning of the week to ensure coverage for their kids' lunches throughout the school week.

In terms of mental health support, there's a stigma associated with seeking counselling when parents share their children's experiences, particularly when local services are situated across from a high school. This creates a sense of discomfort and deters their children from addressing their mental health challenges. The perception that mental health organizations operate in silos limits the interconnectedness of various activities across organizations. One parent whose child is experiencing trauma and depression struggles with limited options, including the inability to call an EAD counsellor for their child.

Challenges persist in finding inclusive support, as exemplified by a divorced father who encountered gender discrimination when accessing counselling services, witnessing preferential treatment given to mothers. This experience has fueled feelings of exclusion and added barriers to supporting their children's mental health journey.

In contrast, other parents appear to be complacent with limited availability of mental health support, noting the possibility of accessing these services online. One respondent observed, "You can have a counsellor anywhere. They don't need to be here."

These experiences among the respondents highlight the need for more inclusive, tailored and accessible programs that address the unique needs of parents in rural townships.

Experiences with Health and Social Services (cont.)

SENIORS

We heard from several seniors, especially those without access to technology, facing challenges in providing feedback on programs offered by health and social agencies. This limitation affects their participation in surveys and virtual feedback sessions, which ultimately keeps them from voicing their specific needs.

Some respondents highlighted difficulties in finding assisted living and nursing care facilities in Ayr, forcing them to seek these services outside the township. The process of personally visiting each facility to identify the most suitable one becomes burdensome, leaving them feeling dissatisfied with in-home services. One senior emphasized, *“Relatively soon, we will need assisted living and nursing care. Neither is currently available in Ayr. This is a serious issue particularly when one spouse needs care and the other can no longer drive.”*

To compound their challenges, seniors felt discouraged when the meal delivery service from churches was discontinued, adding another limitation that prevents them from accessing nourishing meals – a crucial support highly relied upon among seniors.

The primary concern we consistently heard among the seniors we spoke with revolves around the lack of availability and accessibility of crucial services close to home, forcing them to seek alternatives outside their community. As a result, there is a pressing need for assisted living and nursing care facilities in Ayr, more convenient and satisfactory in-home services, and improved access to meal delivery services to enhance the overall well-being of seniors in rural communities.

YOUTH

In certain rural townships, concerns were raised by youth regarding the lack of a centralized hub or easily accessible platforms, hindering their ability to navigate and connect with age-specific community resources and programs. There is also a stigma attached to the use of counselling services, as some expressed being reluctant to be seen accessing them. The locations where these services are provided lack privacy, discouraging individuals from seeking mental support and exacerbating their challenges in addressing mental health issues.

The identified need for a hub underscores the importance of consolidating services in a single area where youth can access multiple services discreetly, ensuring that the type of service they are attending remains confidential. The addition of programs and activities for youth within this centralized hub can enhance their sense of belonging and connection to the community.



Affordability of Health and Social Services and Programs

Many community members in rural townships are troubled by the affordability of essential programs and services. A respondent from the Indigenous community clearly illustrates these challenges, stating:

“Our people don't have any health care. They have almost no money, they're marginalized, they're impoverished. So anything that isn't part of the OHIP plan, they can't get access to. Massage therapy sounds really good, but they can't do it. I'm supporting everybody. I have a son who's not able to work and has drinking problems...I pay half his rent, I'm just struggling.”

Grocery price hikes driven by inflation force residents, especially those with dietary restrictions and low incomes, to seek budget-friendly options outside the townships.

Seniors on fixed incomes encounter difficulties affording essential needs, services and wellness programs, exacerbated by limited offerings with seniors' discounts. There were also concerns that additional expenses for monthly prescriptions and co-pays, further contribute to a sense of inadequate support. The prospect of future housing seems unattainable due to accessibility issues in existing apartments, preventing seniors from downsizing. The stigma associated with seeking financial assistance compounds these challenges, viewed by some as a rural norm. This lack of affordable housing compels retirees, including Mennonites, to explore alternative options outside the townships.

Newcomers shared their experience in facing obstacles with high costs for essential services like dental care and translation services during long medical appointments, amplifying their challenges in adapting to a new community.

Individuals with disabilities struggle with limited funding in order to rely on ODSP for vital healthcare needs, with the added burden of feeling overlooked and misunderstood. One respondent emphasizes the general financial strain felt among community members, stating, “Just to walk out your door, it costs money.” Being in this position leaves them feeling helpless, as they believe their health prevents them from contributing to the economy.

Affordability issues also deter individuals from seeking mental health support, as counselling fees pose significant barriers for some. A sole parent with limited financial support expressed feeling stressed in caring for their parents while navigating their own PTSD challenges, impacting job flexibility. These challenges create barriers for those facing difficulties in maintaining a steady income due to mental and physical health challenges.

The prevalent challenges among residents in the rural townships underscore the urgent need for enhanced accessibility, comprehensive support and responsive services tailored to address the various needs within these communities.

Awareness of Health and Social Services and Programs

Based on the interviews with community members in all four townships, it's evident that a significant issue exists – a widespread lack of awareness regarding available programs and services. This gap in awareness is particularly noticeable among different equity-seeking groups, such as the Rainbow community and people of colour, who express feelings of being unaware of services specifically designed to meet their unique needs.

Respondents with disabilities and chronic illnesses reflect on times when more reliable information channels, like informative packages and welcome services, were accessible. The lack of these resources creates a sense of loss within this community, heightening the challenges they face in staying informed.

Newcomers also share their struggles in connecting with culturally sensitive healthcare. With the added challenge of language barriers, they find it difficult to seek essential information and support locally, presenting additional hurdles for those attempting to integrate into the community.

Parents echo common feelings of unawareness, expressing difficulties in keeping track of children's activities, community events and deadlines for program sign-ups. This shared frustration implies the challenges parents face in providing enriching experiences and educational opportunities for their families due to the lack of information.

Among the seniors we spoke to, the gap in program awareness seems more noticeable, with long-time residents potentially benefiting from available services but remaining unaware of what's accessible. Changes in local newspaper advertising further contribute to their lack of knowledge. One respondent emphasized the issue by noting the difficulty of obtaining information when unaware of what to ask, stating, "So how is anybody supposed to know anything if they don't know what to ask for?"

These diverse sentiments underscore a widespread challenge in understanding and accessing local programs and services. The need for more accessible and tailored communication channels is apparent and essential for bridging these information gaps, ensuring that all community members have equal access to the resources available. The frustrations expressed by respondents highlight the urgency of addressing these issues to foster a more informed and inclusive community.

Availability of Community Spaces



Limited social infrastructure and tailored activities make it difficult for respondents in rural townships, particularly impacting parents and newcomers who find it challenging to connect.

There is a pressing need for centralized information hubs that bring together support groups, special interest groups and resources for children with special needs. The lack of

awareness of these spaces amplifies feelings of isolation, affecting various equity-seeking groups within the townships.

Respondents also expressed challenges in finding suitable locations for both indoor and outdoor activities. The lack of free facilities and programs, coupled with a limited variety of programs available, compounds these challenges. Addressing these issues require community-driven initiatives and collaborative efforts to establish inclusive spaces for programs and activities that cater to the unique needs and preferences of newcomers, ultimately fostering a healthier and more integrated community.

Youth in rural townships face their own set of challenges with limited recreational facilities and gathering spaces. Some feel bored and frustrated due to the lack of dedicated venues. It is evident that community initiatives tailored to different equity-seeking populations, combined with collaborative efforts among multiple organizations, are essential for establishing spaces that motivate residents in the rural townships to access available services and cater to the unique needs of these demographics. These initiatives play a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging and connection within their communities.

Affordability and Availability of Housing and Transportation

Transportation challenges in rural townships significantly impact the daily lives and well-being of community members, particularly those who heavily rely on public transportation. A prevalent sense of isolation arises due to the lack of reliable service, especially affecting individuals with disabilities and accessibility needs. Challenges with mobility and access to essential services intensifies feelings of isolation, making it challenging for these respondents to actively participate in the community.

For newcomers, access to transportation is vital for accessing various cultural needs, such as ethnic grocery stores, functions, places of worship and community groups. The lack of reliable transportation in the townships further isolates them, as they struggle to connect with the broader community located outside these areas. Respondents with limited income express facing daily challenges, particularly when they do not meet qualifications to access local buses, which leads to additional barriers.

The dependence of family members for transportation creates a significant burden, especially for youth attending social gatherings or going to the mall. Their perceptions regarding the lack of alternatives to personal vehicles, as noted by some families in Ayr and Linwood, contributes to feelings of being “stuck” in their communities, further intensifying feelings of isolation and exclusion.

Respondents from the homeless population emphasize the importance of having public transportation to access shelters and housing options. Having a stable place to live is closely connected to finding and keeping a job, highlighting how having a secure home is related to being part of the workforce.

Challenging bus routes and irregular schedules further complicate transportation for equity-seeking groups, particularly affecting seniors, low-income communities and those with disabilities. Navigating this service becomes particularly challenging in employment situations, sometimes forcing difficult decisions like resigning from a job. Seniors, in particular, express frustration with unreliable transportation services, highlighting issues like last-minute cancellations and long wait times that impede their access to medical appointments.

Geographical barriers, increased travel distances, and financial constraints are common challenges faced among many communities, especially for those who need to make regular healthcare visits. The need for more improved and more accessible transportation services is evident to address the multifaceted challenges faced by residents.

Affordability and Availability of Housing and Transportation (cont.)

These challenges are further compounded by the lack of affordable housing, as noted by some respondents. Those with low incomes find themselves navigating a restricted market with limited alternatives, leading to financial strain due to the limited availability of cost-effective living arrangements. This underscores the pressing need for equitable access to safe homes. Respondents feel there is also a lack of geared-to-income housing and spaces for seniors on ODSP, making it particularly challenging for those without savings to access retirement homes.

Newcomers we spoke with face difficulties in securing housing, and experience challenges in rental applications despite having access to financial resources and employment. Some seniors express concerns about being waitlisted for affordable housing and feel cornered into limited options. The increasing rent, especially in low-income housing, adds financial burdens, creating difficulties for seniors on limited incomes.

Homelessness further compounds these challenges, with long wait lists and experiences of discrimination leaving some respondents feeling hopeless. Some identified stability as a crucial factor for well-being, and affordable housing is considered as a prerequisite for accessing employment and maintaining stability, as exemplified in the following statement:

" I think our biggest thing is affordable housing. For me, I'm a worker. You need to be housed before you can actually go to a job everyday, properly. You need a shower [and] facilities. You can't go to work dirty. You need stability. That's a big one for us. Being stable.

The community's response to housing challenges varies, with some expressing concerns about safety risks associated with increased housing developments, while others advocate for more housing options to support the growing community. People in this demographic also noted that once their subsidizing for housing comes through, they would have to leave town. Meaning that they couldn't afford to live off that funding in their own community.

Addressing these transportation and housing challenges in the rural townships can help foster inclusivity, reduce isolation and enhance the overall well-being of community members.

Respondents shared what they would improve in the townships...

They suggest the following improvements:

Establish centralized information sources to enhance communication and increase awareness of available programs.

Expand food bank offerings to accommodate dietary restrictions and cultural considerations.

Provide increased employment support, including education workshops and access to minimum-wage opportunities linked to major bus routes.

Offer diversity and inclusion training to address racism and disparities within organizations.

Ensure access to stable, affordable housing, especially for seniors and homeless communities.

Enhance existing meeting spaces or develop plans for a centralized hub to be more welcoming and accessible, particularly for youth.

" I would love it if we had something that was basically...you can walk in [and] see what's available...a central location where things happen. "

Diversify programming to include support groups and social activities tailored to various demographics, such as parents, youth and seniors.

Increase mental health support with a focus on youth and homeless communities.

Redirecting funds from foster care to initiatives that promote stability, like affordable housing and education.

" It's so inexpensive compared to what they pay for group homes and foster parents. If they put half the money that they put into foster care into helping the families get on their feet, have suitable housing, have good jobs, finish high school...Lots of people are in university now, but it's still a small proportion, but it's coming. But even there, we have big gaps. "

What Could be Done Better

Improve communication, transparency and accountability within rural services to build community trust.

Reinstate discontinued programs due to COVID, particularly for mental health and disability challenges.

Provide more affordable services within the townships, especially for seniors and low-income communities.

Enhance transportation services to prevent rural residents from relocating to urban areas.

Implement enhanced safety protocols to address challenges related to increased drug use.

By addressing these suggestions, agencies can better meet the needs of rural township residents and foster a more inclusive and supportive community environment.



INFORMATION CHANNELS

Understanding how different community members access information is crucial for effective communication and outreach by health and social service agencies. Respondents access information through the following channels:



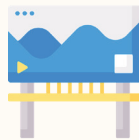
Word of Mouth

Social workers, family members, referrals) for groups such as low-income seniors and individuals with disabilities and chronic illnesses



Print Advertising

Magazines, newspapers, e-newsletters



Signage

Posters and flyers located at community hotspots such as the grocery store, pharmacies, churches or recreation centres



Digital Platforms

Google, Facebook and other social media, and official websites

Respondents use a variety of tools and channels. It's important to use a variety of marketing methods in a variety of locations to enhance overall awareness of available services in the townships.



INFORMATION CHANNELS

NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES

Seniors shared their reliance on traditional sources, such as local magazines and newspapers (such as The Observer), e-newsletters, and radio stations to stay informed. Many have not adapted to digital platforms or lack access to them, making these conventional a preferred and frequently utilized means of obtaining information.

PHONE

Mennonites we interviewed prefer using WhatsApp to stay informed on local programs and events specific to their community. They feel comfortable receiving direct and frequent updates on their phones rather than through email, highlighting the significance of trust, especially among the diverse Mennonite groups. However, it's important to note that some more conservative groups may not use technology, requiring traditional communication methods for effective outreach.

PRINT MARKETING AND SIGNAGE

Youth expressed interest in gathering information from various sources like school posters, Tim Horton's street posts, word of mouth and community boards. Limited interaction with agency social media pages and print materials necessitates diversified strategies.

WORD OF MOUTH

Parents noted their reliance on a mix of channels, including digital: online searches, e-newsletters and social media; print: flyers, newspapers, signage, grocery store bulletin boards and community center bulletin boards; and in-person: door-to-door communication and community events. The clear trend remains to be word of mouth when it comes to obtaining reliable information, especially for newcomers, individuals with disabilities and low-income community members. Facebook community groups also serve an alternative method for those engaged with social media. This emphasizes the importance of personal connections.

The diverse accessibility to services across various equity-seeking groups underscores the necessity for multiple communication strategies tailored to different demographics. Building trust, especially in more conservative communities, is closely tied to personalized communication. It is crucial to recognize the many preferences among these communities, which suggests the importance of implementing strategies through digital platforms, print materials and community engagement. The respondent's recommendations emphasize the importance of an active social media presence, strong community connections and culturally sensitive approaches such as translation services for comprehensive and inclusive outreach in service delivery.

WHAT CAN IMPROVE THE OVERALL WELL-BEING OF THE COMMUNITY

Living in the rural townships is generally cherished among respondents, as they appreciate the close-knit community and the sense of belonging. The vast outdoor spaces offer opportunities for various activities, from community gardens to walking/biking trails, which contributes to their overall well-being.

Respondents stressed how much they value having family-friendly activities, including access to libraries and a variety of programs for parents and children, which contribute to a strong sense of community. Participating in community events and volunteering, especially for seniors, allows them to strengthen connections, generating feelings of gratitude for the chance to give back.

Woolwich's inaugural Pride event marked a positive shift, addressing concerns of hate and discrimination and showcasing the community's responsiveness to inclusive improvements. Services and programs are also adapting to changing needs, particularly noticeable in traditionally less inclusive environments like hockey.

There is a growing need for health and wellness, as respondents embrace sports coaching, utilize recreation facilities, and frequent gyms to stay active. Those with dietary restrictions express a need for more food options to reduce reliance on trips outside of the townships.

Inclusive efforts to address microaggressions and racism within communities and schools are crucial for promoting a sense of belonging. People of colour find comfort in forming connections with others of similar backgrounds, which can relieve feelings of isolation and support job-seeking and service recommendations.

Despite this, challenges persist, such as discrimination against religious beliefs, particularly targeting Mennonites. An Indigenous community member faced racism, noting that it prevented them from maintaining their business, which ultimately led to its closure. This highlights the need to combat injustice and discrimination in small communities.

When it comes to education, we spoke to youth who have encountered discrimination, which has impacted academic success and contributed to a sense of exclusion. Eliminating discriminatory practices, promoting cultural understanding and establishing inclusive environments are essential for the well-being of the Indigenous community.

WHAT CAN IMPROVE THE OVERALL WELL-BEING OF THE COMMUNITY

The trend of diverse individuals moving to rural townships aligns with historical patterns where newcomers sought better educational environments. A respondent from North Dumfries highlighted the motivation behind the move, emphasizing that:

“...they didn’t want their kids going to school in these larger communities because it was a little too aggressive and a little too crazy...coming to these smaller towns, there’s a little more control and less fear for your children when they’re at school. They’re not going through metal detectors and there’s not a policeman (sic) on patrol in the hallways of the school. It’s a little safer. So, they came here, just like how our parents left third world countries to come here for us to have a better education, they’re kind of coming to take their kids away from the troubles so a lot of them can focus on education. That’s usually the answer I get from people coming from bigger cities.”

Our discussions with various families highlight that they are drawn to smaller communities due to the perceived safety and a sense of control they offer. This becomes a more favourable setting for parents seeking better and safer education for their children.

The rural townships offer a well-rounded community life, where residents actively engage, contribute and appreciate the evolving and inclusive nature of their surroundings. These insights can guide community initiatives toward fostering a more supportive and connected environment for the well-being of all residents.

NEXT STEPS

Respondents shared suggestions to enhance the services offered in their communities. People want access to services close to home. People are struggling to meet their basic needs and need support. Equity-seeking groups face additional challenges when moving to a small rural community, such as language barriers and understanding cultural norms. We all have a need for belonging and connection. A more coordinated approach is crucial to acknowledging the intersectionality of rural living and the needs of underrepresented groups.

Through our community outreach, Engage Rural has gained valuable insights that highlight key priorities for enhancing supports and services across the four townships. The top five recommended action items, as suggested from respondents include:

1. **Communication and Engagement:** Ongoing communication, engagement and evaluation to ensure that programs and services are responsive to the evolving needs of our diverse demographic and contribute to the overall well-being of our rural townships.
2. **Embracing Changing Demographics:** Better reflecting the changing rural communities, including education, training, representation and cultural responsiveness.
3. **Program Variety:** Responding to the changing demographic by offering a variety of programs for the evolving needs of residents.
4. **Space and Identity:** Recognizing the importance of utilizing both existing or newly constructed physical spaces to raise awareness of programs and services, while also supporting community identity.
5. **Welcoming Environment:** Emphasizing the importance of creating welcoming environments that foster a sense of belonging among community members.

By incorporating these recommendations into our rural strategy and action plan, we can improve the accessibility, affordability and inclusivity of health and social services, paving the way for a more vibrant and supportive community.

ENGAGE RURAL



North Dumfries • Wellesley • Wilmot • Woolwich

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January 2024

**COMMUNITY
CARE
CONCEPTS**
of Woolwich, Wellesley and Wilmot

ICC
Interfaith Counselling Centre

North Dumfries
COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTRE

PORCHLIGHT
SERVING CAMBRIDGE AND NORTH DUMFRIES SINCE 1960
COUNSELLING + ADDICTION SERVICES

**Wilmot Family
Resource Centre**

WCHC
COMMUNITY
HEALTH CENTRE

**WOOLWICH
COMMUNITY SERVICES**
Together Making A Difference

**WOOLWICH
COUNSELLING
CENTRE**

Funded by:

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