

Title: Maintaining connection: a model for virtually engaging experiential young people in community-based research during COVID-19

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Thematic Importance: COVID-19 has led to increased feelings of isolation and disengagement for adolescents around the world. It has emphasized the need to address the inequalities that exist for vulnerable adolescents, especially those with experience of government care (child welfare). It is critical for programs to find ways of ensuring that young people have equal access to participate.

Introduction and Objectives: This study focuses on the impact COVID-19 has had on training experiential young people in community-based research in British Columbia, Canada. Since 2016, the Youth Research Academy (YRA) has been supporting youth aged 16 to 24 who are in and from government care to design, deliver, and disseminate research projects of interest to these youth and the statutory and non-statutory agencies that serve them. Prior to COVID-19, the in-person delivery model of the YRA was successfully engaging these young people. When public health restrictions forbade in-person gatherings, it became crucial to find ways of maintaining engagement as these youth tend to have less systems of support and are often at higher risk of isolation.

Method: The in-person delivery method of the YRA was adapted to a virtual delivery method. This meant rethinking the approach to skill-building as well as participant safety and engagement. For example, some youth did not have the adequate technology to take part virtually, others did not have a safe space from which to participate. Therefore, equipment such as laptops, headphones, and software subscriptions were purchased so that youth could access the tools needed to engage in the work, and safer spaces were explored. Pre-packaged snacks and gift cards were delivered to participants' houses by staff and virtual celebrations were held, to continue that crucial element of connection.

Results: To date, 3 cohorts (N=18) have been engaged in a virtual delivery of the YRA. While the virtual delivery poses challenges, it also opened opportunities not previously available. For example, YRA alumni were able to return and work in the YRA and youth from diverse geographic locations joined. It also allowed for youth to have opportunities to engage broader audiences with their research projects. One cohort was able to present their research findings to over 50 government employees and several youth participants were able to present at an international conference that was being held virtually.

Conclusions and implications: Finding ways to overcome the digital divide experienced by this population of youth has led to a continuity of participation and had a positive impact on their well-being. A YRA participant summarized the value of their experience: *“With the world still in the midst of the pandemic, it was difficult for many of us to find jobs and stay connected to our social circles. For many of us it also allowed us to stay connected to people we knew and return to a routine we had familiarity with.”*