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Youth Experiences of Hate throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic

A report from the Society for Children and Youth of BC

Prepared for British Columbia's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner
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About the Society for Children and Youth of BC

The Society for Children and Youth of BC is a not-for-profit organization based in Vancouver that serves children province-wide. Our mission is to foster the well-being and resilience of children and youth in British Columbia through the advancement of their civic, political, economic, social, cultural and legal rights. Having been in operation for over 45 years, we have a rich history of work and a proven track record of success.

Our current primary projects include Child and Youth Friendly Communities (CYFC), Child Rights Public Awareness, and the Child and Youth Legal Centre. The Child and Youth Legal Centre provides free legal services directly to young people under 19, with a particular focus on vulnerable, immigrant, and Indigenous children and youth. This is an essential service which is not offered by anyone else in BC for non-criminal cases. Our Child Rights Public Awareness campaign delivers workshops and educational materials on children's rights to youth and adult stakeholders throughout the province, with materials available in 7 different languages. Finally, the CYFC program works with young people and municipalities to help build better cities for children and youth through consultation and programming directly for children regarding various planning initiatives.

About this Report

We brought the idea of contributing to this Inquiry to our Youth Advisory Committee (YAC) in February, who were keen to participate and share their experiences. The YAC is a group of 10 youth between the ages of 12-18 from a diversity of backgrounds and located throughout the province, but primarily in the Lower Mainland. The report focuses on the experiences and ideas the Committee shared, with additional input provided by our staff who are direct service providers - including lawyers, social workers, and our Child and Youth Advocate.

Information was collected from the Youth Advisory Committee through a recorded 1-hour group conversation over Zoom, where Committee members freely discussed the Inquiry questions and their responses. Information was collected from SCY staff through 1-on-1 phone or video interviews and supplemented through a review of our collected statistics and data on inquiries.

This report is intended to reflect the experiences we have seen directly through the Child and Youth Legal Centre and our Youth Advisory Committee. The experiences we focus on in our report should not be taken as the ones we view as most important or significant; rather, they reflect what we had the most direct experience with.

Experiences of Hate

Since the pandemic, SCY's Child and Youth Legal Centre has seen a mild increase in inquiries related to, and youth experiences of, hate incidents. The Centre tracks statistics about the general category of all inquiries received; in 2020 the Centre saw an increase in inquiries related to mental health and human rights as compared to 2019. In 2021, inquiries related to mental health remained steady compared with 2020, inquiries related to human rights significantly increased, and inquiries related to bullying also increased. Numerous other factors were changing at the Centre throughout these years, including increased staffing and greater public awareness of the service, and it is impossible to know whether the pandemic had a causal effect on these changes.

Anecdotally, organization staff generally report a mild increase in incidences of hate either being the primary inquiry of a young person or being mentioned or expressed over the course of seeking assistance for a separate or unrelated matter. Staff mention a pattern where youth clients have described experiences staff would categorize as instances of hate, but the client does not use this language themselves.

Several experiences discussed stemmed directly from the pandemic, including issues related to mask wearing, vaccination, personal risk assessment and public health orders.

Many Youth Advisory Committee members identified the truckers “Freedom Convoy” protest as an experience of hate they witnessed, and staff also mentioned this being discussed by other youth clients. Young people described the Convoy as scary and stressful to witness. YAC members were not sure whether the Convoy was an “incidence of hate” as defined for the purposes of the Inquiry because they weren’t quite sure who the person or group of people targeted by the protest was. However, they felt that the protest was broadly hateful, and some described it as “directed at no one” and “directed at everyone.”

Hateful incidents related to mask wearing were the most discussed experience amongst the Youth Advisory Committee. Many members had witnessed or been the target of hateful comments about masks. Members described witnessing verbal arguments and sometimes physical altercations between strangers in a variety of public spaces, particularly on public transit, related to compliance with masking. Those who were frequent transit users described some apprehension in the environment because it is hard to move away from someone who might be bothering you. One member described an experience of being yelled at by strangers for wearing a mask with her friends. Sometimes these altercations were followed up with comments about vaccination, such as “Oh you must be vaccinated too!” said as an insult or explanation for poor behaviour. In terms of impacts, members talked about how masks can become a statement about your values and no matter what you do, you’re making a statement.

Hate incidents related to vaccination status were also discussed both by the YAC and staff. Like others, young people have experienced hate directed towards unvaccinated people by those that are vaccinated, and vice versa. A position that is more unique to children and youth is parental involvement in healthcare decision making. The Legal Centre has fielded inquiries from youth with a wide variety of views on vaccination who are unsure what their rights are in circumstances when their views differ from that of their parents. Young people with strong opinions about vaccination may feel dehumanized or degraded by a parent forcing or pressuring them to take an action that goes against their views. Even for young people who don’t feel strongly one way or another, if their parents do not share the same views on vaccination, they are caught in the middle of a broad societal dispute. Their action or inaction can be automatically viewed by an upset parent as taking a side, and some experience immense pressure and hateful behaviour as a result.

Some young people and staff described feeling or experiencing a reluctance on the part of adults to be around kids, particularly in the period before vaccines were broadly available to younger people. Because young people couldn’t be vaccinated during this period, and because they may attend school, play sports, or participate in other in-person activities, some felt that certain adults viewed them as high-risk contacts or virus carriers. There might be a reluctance on the part of their parents’ friends to

come over if the kids were home, for example. Some staff described noticing this attitude amongst adults they knew as well, though not in their professional capacity at SCY.

YAC members also discussed anti-Asian hate incidents and particularly ones they had seen or heard about on the news, such as unprovoked attacks in downtown Vancouver. Some members said that even though they hadn't been personally targeted by anti-Asian hate during the pandemic, hearing about it has made them feel more aware and conscious of being Asian. Some expressed a changed perception of their city since seeing a rise in anti-Asian hate, and more reluctance to go out alone or at night.

Role of the Pandemic

YAC members discussed what role they thought the pandemic might have played in rising instances of hate in the province. Many described it as a time of fear, isolation, and instability all of which they identified as potential contributors to rising hate, particularly because these feelings might lead to a desire to find someone to blame.

Virtual school and the online realm was a large topic of discussion for the YAC. They talked about the pandemic being isolating and the virtual school experience leading to doing a lot of socializing online, both positive and negative. There was a general sense that online comments or movements, either good or bad, aren't taken very seriously by adults. They felt things were misconceived to be "just a trend" because they were online and should be taken more seriously.

Some also expressed an increase in "cliquey" or insular behaviour arising out of the need to keep to close contacts during the pandemic. They expressed more hesitancy about hanging out with people they don't know well, because they have apprehensions about whether they are vaccinated, how risky their behaviours are, etc.

Some members expressed that they and/or their friends are more scared to go out alone or at night since the pandemic, because they are worried about being the target of racism or other hate. They expressed sadness about this and a hope that things will be turned around soon.

In terms of impacts unique to youth, one topic discussed was increased awareness of current events and particularly "negative" or scary things happening in the world. Members expressed feeling more aware of systemic inequities and global issues now than they were prior to the pandemic and feeling a greater need to stay on-top of current events and be engaged and involved. This desire to be engaged was partly positive, but also derived from reduced trust in adults and the government. One member expressed wanting to leave the world "better than we found it" and not feeling that previous generations have been doing that for them.

Members also talked about a growing sense of anxiety and stress and feeling hyper-aware of their surroundings. They wondered whether other young people were experiencing this, and whether the Inquiry would report on rising mental health issues for youth. Particularly around mental health issues, members felt frustrated about seeing "band-aid solutions" to systemic issues and a desire to see root causes better addressed. When asked for their feelings about the future, many members identified with feeling mildly hopeful but also very uncertain, and others said they felt mostly pessimistic. None identified with being "very hopeful." One described thinking about the future as "walking on eggshells" and another said since the pandemic they feel more focused on the present and less able to plan for the future.

What Could Have Been Done Differently

Taking things that happen online more seriously was a significant request from YAC members. Some felt that hateful comments, violent threats, or other forms of harassment aren't given as much weight if they happen online or are thought of as "not part of real life." Members expressed it's easy to forget people are real people online, and you can become desensitized. When asked why they think adults don't take things online seriously, members talked about how Gen Z is strongly associated with social media and older people aren't, and that therefore social media may be thought of as "just a bunch of kids." This was related to a broader desire for young people in general to be taken more seriously and given more opportunities to participate in society.

Members also expressed a desire for the pandemic response to have been more serious from the start and expressed regret that more action wasn't taken more quickly in the beginning. They expressed confusion and frustration about changing public health orders and things going "back and forth" and "dragging out" over such a long period of time. This was identified as a contributor to growing anger and frustration and increased instability and stress. Around the issue of vaccination in particular, YAC members expressed frustration at the way things have gone and the divisiveness of the issue. Some expressed that they wish more education was done by the government to help make people comfortable and understand what vaccines are. Most were not aware of what, if anything, had been done to provide the public with education about vaccination.

Services and Mechanisms

For the most part, YAC members were not sure of services or mechanisms to report hate or support people who have experienced it. There was discussion about the positive use of social media in these instances to share your story and find other people who identify with it. Some also knew of their school district's website for reporting hate or bullying at school, which they identified as positive because it is anonymous, focused on students and school faculty, and doesn't involve the police. Other members were also aware of services within their school like support and counselling that they could access by request. A challenge of school reporting mechanisms that was identified is reports not being taken seriously. Some members spoke about having personally reported or known friends to report issues between other students, and with teachers, and not having anything done. They said the process can be very slow to "get up the chain" and it can feel like there isn't much point in using this system. When asked about non-school resources, members identified the police non-emergency line and the existence of "hotlines and websites" although they weren't sure about specifics.

SCY staff are aware of a wide variety of services young people can access, including our own Child and Youth Legal Centre. Official reporting channels can be difficult to access for young people as there are significant barriers. For example, the BC Human Rights Tribunal process cannot be accessed by children independently – any complaint they are interested to make must be made by an adult on their behalf. A child may be able to make a report to the police independently, but there can be issues with how seriously the matter is taken. Young people struggle to be taken seriously in many contexts, including in the reporting of hate incidents. Through our Child and Youth Legal Centre SCY regularly supports young people with advocacy issues around getting their needs met, and we often find that the involvement of an adult increases the likelihood of success. We are glad to be able to provide this service but would like to see changes that enable young people to better advocate for themselves independently as well.

Conclusion

YAC members and SCY staff are appreciative of the opportunity to be part of this Inquiry and look forward to seeing the results. We feel it is important to ensure young people are involved and included in the Inquiry and are grateful for the flexible engagement formats the BCOHRC has offered (verbal, virtual, or written submissions). The YAC was especially interested in what the next steps will be following the Inquiry and would be happy to host someone from the BCOHRC as a guest at a meeting to help communicate updates in the future. While their experiences are intersectional with that of adults in some ways, young people have also experienced the pandemic uniquely and have important insights to offer regarding its impacts and the solutions for the future. Should the BCOHRC be interested in further youth engagement for the Inquiry, SCY would be happy to provide support or assistance in whatever way we can.