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Making the case for citizenship-oriented mental healthcare for youth in Canada

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1 Abstract

Purpose: Varying stakeholders have highlighted how recovery-oriented mental health services such as youth mental health services have traditionally focused on supporting individual resources to promote recovery (e.g., agency) to the exclusion of addressing structural issues that influence recovery (e.g., poverty). One response to this criticism has been work helping people with mental health problems recover a sense of citizenship and sense of belonging in their communities. Work on citizenship has yet to influence youth mental healthcare in Canada's provinces and territories. Approach: The arguments described in this paper were established through discussion and consensus among authors based on clinical experience in youth mental health and an understanding of Canada's healthcare policy landscape, including current best practices as well as guidelines for recovery-oriented care by the Mental Health Commission of Canada. Findings: Here we propose several recommendations that can help young with mental health problems recover their sense of citizenship at the social, systems, and service levels. These include addressing the social determinants of health; developing a citizenship-based system of care; addressing identity-related disparities; employing youth community health workers within services; adapting and delivering citizenship-based interventions; and connecting youth in care to civic-oriented organizations. Originality: This paper provides the first discussion of how the concept of citizenship can be applied to youth mental health in Canada in multiple ways. Our hope is that this work provides momentum for adopting policies and practices that can help youth in Canada recover a sense of citizenship following a mental health crisis.

Keywords: Recovery, citizenship, youth mental health, Canada

Introduction

Mental health challenges such as psychosis typically occur during adolescence and young adulthood; can incur tremendous disability and suffering; and can lead to significant disruptions to life trajectories (McCarthy-Jones et al., 2013). Yet, it is widely recognized that youth can also

recover from such challenges. Two interconnected forms of recovery are widely cited in the literature: clinical recovery and personal recovery. Clinical recovery reflects symptom remission and the resumption of functioning and is normally clinician-defined. Personal recovery reflects how people with mental health problems subjectively define recovery and often reflects attempts to live a full, meaningful life in one's community despite the limitations that may accompany such challenges (Slade, 2009). Personal recovery can include feelings of connectedness; hope and optimism for the future; identity; meaning in life; and empowerment (Leamy et al., 2011). Supporting clinical and personal recovery are important goals that mental health services seeking to support full recovery (i.e., recovery-oriented services) have sought to achieve (Davidson et al., 2007).

The World Health Organization has recently put forth new guidelines for mental health services in promoting person-centered and rights-based approaches. The documents note services must protect people's rights to self-determination in their care and overall life goals (WHO, 2021). In Canada, the Mental Health Commission of Canada has created guidelines for recovery-oriented practice which include supporting social inclusion of people with mental health concerns while also advocating for their right to accessing the social determinants of health (2015). Although foundational, these guidelines do not address the particular needs of youth and young adults with mental health problems.

In Canada, youth are typically defined as the developmental stage occupying adolescence to early adulthood between the ages of 15-29 (Government of Canada, 2021). Over the past 10 years, the Canadian federal, and several of its provincial, governments have made significant financial investments into supporting the mental health of young people. One fruit borne from these investments includes the establishment of youth mental health services (Malla et al., 2019). Such services aspire to provide recovery-oriented care and are typically community-based, one-stop shops where youth can receive integrative support for varying needs in one setting. Such services typically offer early, rapid access to free, youth-friendly treatment; as well as person-centred, hope-inspiring and strengths-based support where decisions may be shared among youth, families and clinicians. These services also support young people's educational, occupational and social goals; and provide opportunities for youth and families to provide input on the organization and delivery of services. Many youth mental health services have developed strong connections and partnerships with community organizations and agencies (Hawke et al., 2019; Settipani et al., 2019).

Despite the strengths of recovery-oriented forms of care, activists and scholars have lamented that such care has generally become overly focused on helping people develop the individual resources needed to support their recovery (e.g., self-efficacy) to the exclusion of addressing the broader social, personal and economic conditions that support recovery and community life (Davidson et al., 2021). These include loneliness, poverty, and economic insecurity. To promote a more collective form of recovery, people with mental health problems, activists, clinicians, and policy makers have begun calling for a new approach to recovery, one that can help people recover a sense of citizenship (Rowe & Davidson, 2016). By addressing the broader social and economic issues that impact mental health, people with mental health problems may recover their sense of citizenship in their communities (Rowe & Davidson, 2016).

The most well-developed model of citizenship defines it as the strength of a person's access to the rights (e.g., freedom to wear a religious symbol to work), responsibilities (i.e., actions that are important to people), roles (i.e., positions occupied in society), and resources (e.g., money) needed to live a full and meaningful life; as well as the relationships (e.g., community connections) that promote a socially validated sense of belonging. Experiencing citizenship relies on the full participation of people with mental health problems in social and community life and in turn being valued by one's community for that participation (Rowe and Davidson, 2016).

The responsibility to support recovery rests on multiple stakeholders and systems (Pope et al., 2019). Although community organizations and peer-run organizations often play a key role in supporting young people's sense of belonging, mental health care in Canada's provinces and territories are not tailored towards supporting citizenship-based recovery. In addition, various actors working within youth mental health services may lack an awareness and the capacity to support citizenship. The need for citizenship-oriented mental health care is further underscored by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Young people were at higher risk of anxiety and depression during the pandemic, feelings which were exacerbated by loneliness (Horigian et al., 2021). Providing opportunities to connect with one's community is therefore paramount as an intervention to alter the negative outcomes associated with isolation, loneliness, and other COVID-19 sequelae. Given its importance, it is imperative that policies and practices aimed at helping youth recover a sense of citizenship be adopted in several ways, as described in this paper.

Recommendation one: address the social determinants of health

One way to help youth recover a sense of citizenship is by addressing the social determinants of health, as lacking access to such determinants may prevent youth from accessing the resources and relationships that can support their sense of citizenship (Ponce et al., 2016; Clayton et al., 2020). Key social determinants include income inequality, food security, poverty and housing affordability (Bryant et al., 2011).

A recent review has highlighted how the social determinants of health can be addressed by targeting multiple aspects of a person's life (e.g., social, economic, physical) (Wahlbeck et al., 2017), such as through programmes that support parenting, housing and employment as well as access to mental health services. For example, Housing First approaches, which advocate for housing as a human right, have been found to assist youth with mental health problems in achieving housing stability (Kozloff et al., 2016). Researchers have noted the importance of programs such as vocational rehabilitation to assist youth with mental health concerns in obtaining meaningful work (Halvorsen & Klette Bøhler, 2017).

A key Canadian organization addressing the social determinants of health among youth is Generation Squeeze, which has successfully lobbied governments to better address issues such as climate change, childcare costs, and the astronomical cost of housing (Kershaw et al., 2017). By developing stronger partnerships between such organizations and the various levels of government, the social determinants of health that are relevant to youth may be better addressed, thereby supporting young people's sense of citizenship.

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Recommendation two: develop a citizenship-based system of care

Specific mental health outcomes (e.g., recovery) are best supported when systems under which clinical care is provided are oriented towards such outcomes (e.g., recovery-oriented systems of care; Davidson et al., 2007). Thus, the provinces and territories that administer Canada's mental health system may need to shift their attention to helping youth recover a sense of citizenship by developing a citizenship-oriented system of care. Such a shift may first require the adoption of key values that underpin the belief that adopting a citizenship-oriented system of care for youth is a worthy goal. Such values include recognizing the importance of close relationships, respecting the autonomy of people, and recognizing the worth of people living in communities (Reis et al., 2022). On a practical level, systems within each province may need to develop stronger networks and communication with actors and stakeholders that support community belonging but typically operate outside the healthcare system. One recent paper highlights how the state of Connecticut achieved this by linking local mental health agencies to the various authorities, governing bodies, and community organizations at the city, county and state levels, with the goal of promoting inclusion of people with mental health problems at all levels of their communities (Davidson et al., 2021).

To implement a citizenship-oriented systems of care, stakeholders can look to implementation frameworks that have been developed for implementing recovery-oriented care. For example, a recent systematic review of the implementation of recovery-oriented care in hospital-based mental health services discussed the barriers and facilitators to implementation using the Promoting Action on Research Implementation in Health Services framework (Lorien, Blunden, & Madsen, 2020). The authors note the prevailing biomedical approach to mental healthcare as a barrier to implementation of recovery-oriented care. Facilitators of implementation include knowing the evidence for recovery, promoting organizational cultural change, and facilitating multimodal staff training, programs, and changes to care planning. The implementation of citizenship-oriented youth mental health care may follow similar implementation processes by having strong leadership, providing staff with education to increase buy-in, and involving youth in the implementation planning and process.

Recommendation three: address identity-related disparities

There is a recognition that intersecting forms of oppression and marginalization may influence people's sense of belonging in their communities (Yuval-Davis, 2007), thereby influencing their sense of citizenship. Such forms of oppression may intersect with experiences of mental health stigma, which may in turn negatively impact young people's sense of belonging and feelings of citizenship (Jordan et al., 2022a). Youth with marginalized identities also often experience profound disparities to mental healthcare and often feel their needs are not fully met, which may negatively impact their recovery (Saunders et al., 2018). Thus, to help youth recover a sense of citizenship, it is incumbent on provincial and territorial health authorities in Canada to address such identity- related disparities; and for laws that result in minority groups feeling excluded from their communities be dismantled. Such laws may include Bill 21, which was

recently passed into law in the province of Québec. Bill 21 bars people from wearing certain religious symbols (e.g., hijabs) in several workplaces, which may result in young people from certain faiths feeling excluded from society and being denied the same employment opportunities afforded to others. The law has led to an increase in feelings of social exclusion and deterioration in mental health, particularly among women (Association for Canadian Studies, 2022) and has been subject to several court challenges.

Recommendation four: employ youth community health workers within youth mental health services

Youth mental health services typically do not engage with the full spectrum of community settings that can support citizenship in their jurisdictions (Hawke et al., 2019). Such settings may include, but are not limited to, places of work, education, worship, and recreation that promote a sense of belonging. Youth mental health services can help youth connect to such settings by working with community health workers. Such workers often have a strong understanding of the local needs and resources available in communities (Olaniran et al., 2017) and can link youth with community resources; as well as engage in advocacy, community organizing and mobilization with, or behalf of, youth (Torres et al., 2014). Youth with lived experience of mental health problems may be particularly well-suited for community health worker roles, as a review has shown they may be able to form authentic, empathetic and nonjudgemental relationships with other youth; be particularly sensitive to the developmental and cultural needs of other young people; and have a deep understanding of specific challenges and adversities that young people today face (de Beer, 2022). Youth in such roles may also have a particular aptitude for knowledge of local communities with personal experiences of recovery (Ehrlich et al., 2020; Rowe et al., 2007). Combined, such knowledge and life experience can model and support youth to recover a sense of citizenship. Indeed, research on the role of peer support workers in connecting adults with mental health problems with their communities has shown promising results (Mutschler et al., 2019).

Recommendation five: Mental health services should deliver citizenship-based interventions

Clinicians working in youth mental health services can also help youth recover a sense of citizenship by delivering specific citizenship-oriented interventions. Although these interventions have largely been delivered with adults outside of Canada and may need to be tailored to youth—they still show promise. These interventions may be implemented within youth mental health services; however, they may also be implemented in other settings frequented by Canadian youth, including secondary and tertiary education settings and community mental health centres. Apps and video games that can help young people develop a sense of community and improve mental health are becoming increasingly commonplace (Lehtimaki et al., 2020). As such, these interventions can also eventually be developed into digital, youth-friendly formats.

For instance, in the Citizenship Project participants are enrolled in peer-run classes and take on socially valued role projects (e.g., training police officers to treat people with greater

empathy and respect) (Clayton et al., 2013). These projects provide opportunities for people with mental health problems to make meaningful contributions to society that are valued by community members and people carrying out such activities. The Citizenship Project also supports the development of strong relationships and community ties; as well as supporting the pursuit of individual and collective goals, thereby fostering a sense of citizenship among students. Classes support the learning of new skills and knowledge; offer the opportunity to engage with invited speakers; and provide opportunities for participants to discuss their interests and skills. In addition, participants are invited to propose new course topics that typically centre on community, neighborhood, and mental health issues; as well as individual-level issues such as problem-solving skills. The sole evaluation of this project among American adults with serious mental health problems revealed that it led to reductions in substance use, and greater satisfaction with social activities, finances, work and quality of life (Clayton et al., 2013).

A similar intervention named Project Connect seeks to help people with mental health problems pursue activities and interests they find meaningful in their communities, such as joining local arts-based collectives. By doing so, the intervention can support aspects of citizenship such as new roles, responsibilities and a new sense of belonging. The peer-run intervention is based on the premise that intervention participants should determine the types of community connections they wish to establish for themselves. During an initial meeting, participants are invited to describe their interests, passions, and the types of community connections they are seeking. A Project Connect intervention worker then relies on networks within local healthcare contexts, the participant's own social network, and the community at large to link participants to the meaningful community activities they seek to partake in (Bromage et al., 2017).

An approach to fostering citizenship that provides individuals with opportunities to take collective action (e.g., painting a mural in a community space) has also been developed. The group is grounded in ideas of collective forms of citizenship and seeks to address dimensions of citizenship that are embedded within structural issues through encouraging collective advocacy and challenging discrimination. The Focus, Act, Connect Every-day (FACE) group does this by creating a space where members are free to discuss issues in their community and strategies to collectively address those issues. A peer support worker helps members strengthen their sense of personal identity and become better community activists. An experienced community organizer facilitates group meetings, helps recruit members, schedules meetings, takes notes, and bridges connections between individual members and community organizations (Quinn et al., 2020). This collective citizenship intervention allows for peer collaboration while working towards a collective goal.

Community-based services, such as the Clubhouse model of psychosocial rehabilitation may be an important avenue for youth as they begin to reclaim their citizenship. A qualitative study by Pardi & Willis (2018) of youth Clubhouse members found that being involved in Clubhouse work, improved confidence and experiences of reciprocal relationships. Valued employment in this context included work that was thought to be meaningful and could build skills that could be used for future careers. Further, participation in the Clubhouse often led youth to explore other avenues for community involvement (Pardi & Willis, 2018). Due to their

recovery-oriented values, Clubhouses and other community-based programs may provide youth with a starting point for getting involved with their communities and gaining active citizenship.

In addition to the mental health and community-based service sector, stakeholders in academic and research settings can also provide opportunities for active citizenship for youth through research. Prati and colleagues (2020) used youth-led participatory action research as a citizenship intervention. The intervention aimed to involve youth in this intervention that focused on social issues the youth identified as relevant, while also eliciting solutions to these problems from political institutions. The results found that those who were in the intervention group reported increased scores on social well-being, institutional trust, and participation, and decreased scores on political alienation compared with the control group. Interventions may also integrate principles from green space interventions, as studies have shown green spaces and outdoor nature-based interventions can have positive associations with mental well-being, while providing a needed intervention to the environment (Burls & Ashton, 2021; Reece et al., 2021).

Recommendation six: Connect youth in care to civic-orientation organizations

Civic involvement can promote community building and recovery (Jordan et al., 2022b) as well as meaning in life (Klar and Kasser, 2009). Hence, clinicians or community health workers can consider linking youth with civics-oriented organizations, such as Apathy is Boring (https://www.apathyisboring.com/). This Canadian non-profit organization trains young people on ways to become actively engaged in the democratic process, such through voting; supports youth to develop community-based projects oriented towards strengthening "the democratic fabric"; and offers training to young people on how to advocate for change within government and social institutions. Apathy is Boring has found that youth are able to make considerable impact in their communities (Ho, Clarke, & Dougherty, 2015). Important areas of future study include evaluations on the impact of participation in civic-oriented organizations on youth, such as increasing sense of community and well-being.

Conclusions and future directions

In Canada, mental health care for youth is often designed to support the individual-level resources that may promote recovery. There is an additional need to help young people recover a sense of citizenship within their communities. A multipronged approach to supporting citizenship is needed that involves addressing the social determinants of health; developing a citizenship-based system of care; addressing identity-related disparities; employing youth community health workers within services; adapting and delivering citizenship-based interventions; and connecting youth in care to civic-oriented organizations. Implementing these recommendations may rely on multiple systems and stakeholders, including governments, community organizations, mental health services and non-profit organizations. Several citizenship-based interventions that have been developed for adults in the United States form an important basis of our recommendations. The call for citizenship-oriented mental health care is timely due to the significant impact of COVID-19 on youth mental health and well-being.

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