



# YMCAs of BC – Key Policy Recommendations for a Healthy and Engaged British Columbia

## HEALTH EQUITY AND HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

Achieving health equity is a way for us to build a better British Columbia and put people and communities first. Health equity means that everyone has access to structures, systems, and conditions that allow us to achieve a high standard of health and wellbeing. Many of these conditions, also called the social determinants of health, are outside of the health care system and include income, education, employment, social supports, gender, culture, race, physical environments, and childhood experiences.

Unfortunately, due to systemic disparities in our communities, health inequities persist. All levels of government have a responsibility to create conditions that enable health equity and dismantle systems of oppression.

## THE YMCAS OF BC SUPPORT HEALTH EQUITY

Organizations such as the YMCA are vital partners in reducing barriers to physical, mental, and socio-economic health and wellbeing. When community members walk into the YMCA, they are exposed to a diverse set of opportunities to reach their full potential. Over many years, the YMCA has advanced health equity through programs and services that focus on the determinants of health. Few entities provide this reach and offer the range of services that we do.

- We help to reduce the strain on our health care system by operating safe and inclusive centres of community for all ages and making **physical wellbeing** more accessible for British Columbians. Additionally, YMCA camps and housing facilities are examples of social infrastructure that support active lifestyles and positive health outcomes.
- The YMCA designs and delivers early intervention and low barrier community-based initiatives to improve **mental wellbeing**. One example is the Y Mind program where young people across all regions of BC gain the necessary tools and support to manage mild to moderate anxiety and depression.
- The YMCA has long recognized the social and economic inequities that influence the health of individuals and communities. Our programs and services improve the **socio-economic wellbeing** of individuals, families, and children. Financial assistance, employment programs, affordable child care, newcomer services, and housing are among the ways the YMCA improves health outcomes for communities.



## The YMCA is a gathering place for people from diverse walks of life and a gateway to community belonging.

That is why we strive to create spaces where individuals, families, and children can pursue their goals, whether it be physical, mental, or socio-economic.

We work with all levels of government, health authorities, and many community organizations to drive positive health outcomes for British Columbians and contribute to greater health equity.

*Mr. Bruce White shares his story of how the YMCA has contributed to his overall wellbeing, starting from his teenage years when he learned how to swim, then transitioning into a role as a mentor, and eventually participating in the healthy heart program.*



## To address health equity in BC, and reduce the strain on the health care system, the YMCA has the following policy recommendations.

### 1. ADDRESS AFFORDABILITY AND REDUCE THE IMPACT OF POVERTY

British Columbians are facing far greater challenges post-pandemic in all aspects of their lives, from health and safety to the ability to make ends meet. Families continue to live in unstable and challenging times with unaffordable housing, food insecurity, climate disasters, and global inflation. Newcomers with hopes to settle and thrive in the province face significant employment-related barriers, such as foreign credential devaluation, cultural bias and discrimination, and financial hardships.

Making life more affordable, reducing the impacts of poverty, and making sure children get the best possible start are among the many things any government can do to improve overall health outcomes and strengthen the healthcare system. The YMCA recommends:

- a. Continue to prioritize investments in affordable, high quality early learning and child care** and focus on workforce, sustainable funding, and school age child care operated by community organizations.
- b. Enhance investments in employment services for youth and newcomers** so they have access to good careers and achieve socio-economic stability.
- c. Improve access to community recreation facilities for lower income British Columbians** experiencing barriers to participation, prioritizing single parent families and newcomers.

### NEWCOMERS AND RECREATION

A survey by the Institute for Canadian Citizenship<sup>1</sup> on newcomer perspective found that 86.7% of respondents reported a disruption or cancellation of their social and recreational activities because of COVID-19. A bigger proportion (95.57%) indicated that they would like to increase their participation and attendance. However, 42.5% of respondents cited affordability as the most significant barrier to participation.

1 Institute for Canadian Citizenship. (2023). The newcomer perspective: Social and recreational activities. Retrieved from <https://inclusion.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Activities-Survey-Report-1.0.pdf>

## 2. PROMOTE HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF YOUTH AND SENIORS

The YMCA serves the health and wellbeing of British Columbians of all ages. However, we are seeing increased needs in two distinct populations – youth and seniors.

The pandemic had a disproportionate impact on young people with increased anxiety, social isolation, and disrupted economic opportunities. While seniors reported greater mental health resilience at the start of the pandemic, they also experienced greater mortality risks than the general population.<sup>1</sup>

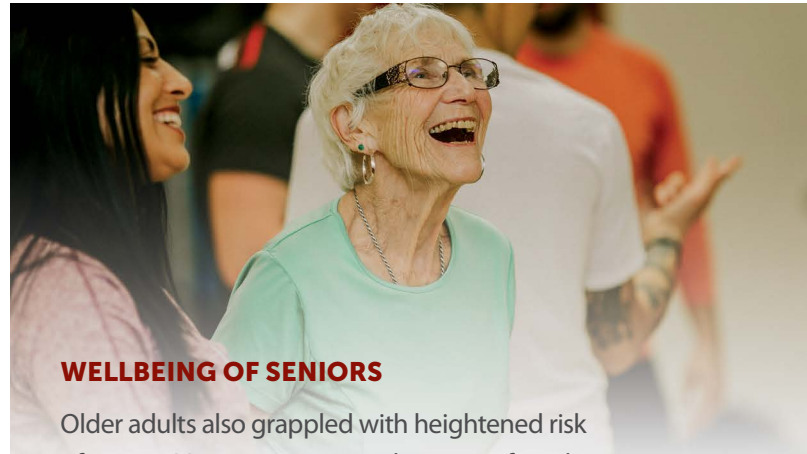
Community-based organizations like the YMCA have an important role in ensuring youth and seniors receive appropriate support. Access to low barrier mental wellness programs promote healthier coping mechanisms for youth. Participation in sports, camps, and recreational activities enhances self-esteem and encourages positive social relations.<sup>1</sup> Employment assistance contribute to financial stability. Access to life-saving programs, including falls prevention, post-surgery rehabilitation, and chronic disease management empowers seniors to pursue a more independent and active lifestyle.

To improve health equity among youth and seniors, the YMCA recommends the following:

**a. Increase investments in low-barrier community-based programs for youth and prioritize** early intervention mental health programs, wrap-around mental health supports as part of employment/training programs, and outdoor recreation/leadership opportunities for youth.

**b. Enhance funding for community-based chronic disease management and injury prevention programs by:**

- 1) Providing subsidies for seniors to access services that reduce morbidity and promote a high quality of life.
- 2) Fostering and funding effective partnerships between health authorities and community organizations to deliver chronic disease management and injury prevention programs.



### WELLBEING OF SENIORS

Older adults also grappled with heightened risk of severe COVID-19 outcomes because of weaker immunity and higher prevalence of underlying chronic diseases and conditions. In fact, a health profile of Canadian seniors before the pandemic showed that approximately 37% of older adults indicated having at least two of the ten common chronic diseases.<sup>2</sup>

### WELLBEING OF YOUTH

The COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing inflation have created or exacerbated social, emotional, and economic disruptions in the lives of young people. Statistics Canada<sup>3</sup> shared that only 44% of youth aged 15 to 24 reported a strong sense of community belonging and those aged 25-34 reported lower numbers (37%). Despite the majority of youth respondents indicating good or excellent mental well-being in the 2023 BC Adolescent Health Survey<sup>4</sup>, the province has experienced an overall decrease in positive mental health ratings among youth over the past decade. Following COVID-19, youth were dealing with precarious work, job losses, and disrupted training and education that had long-term economic consequences.

<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada. (2021). Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Canadian seniors. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2021001/article/00008-eng.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Community Foundations of Canada. (2019). Sport & belonging. Retrieved from [https://communityfoundations.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Vital\\_Signs\\_Sport\\_and\\_Belonging.pdf](https://communityfoundations.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Vital_Signs_Sport_and_Belonging.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Statistics Canada. (2022). Almost half of Canadians report a strong sense of belonging to their local community. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/daily-quotidien/220819/dq220819b-eng.pdf?st=qLGKvBfl>

<sup>4</sup> Smith, A., Poon, C., Peled, M., Forsyth, K., Saewyc, E., & McCreary Centre Society. (2024). The Big Picture: An overview of the 2023 BC Adolescent Health Survey provincial results. McCreary Centre Society. Retrieved from [https://mcs.bc.ca/pdf/2023\\_bcahs\\_the\\_big\\_picture.pdf](https://mcs.bc.ca/pdf/2023_bcahs_the_big_picture.pdf)





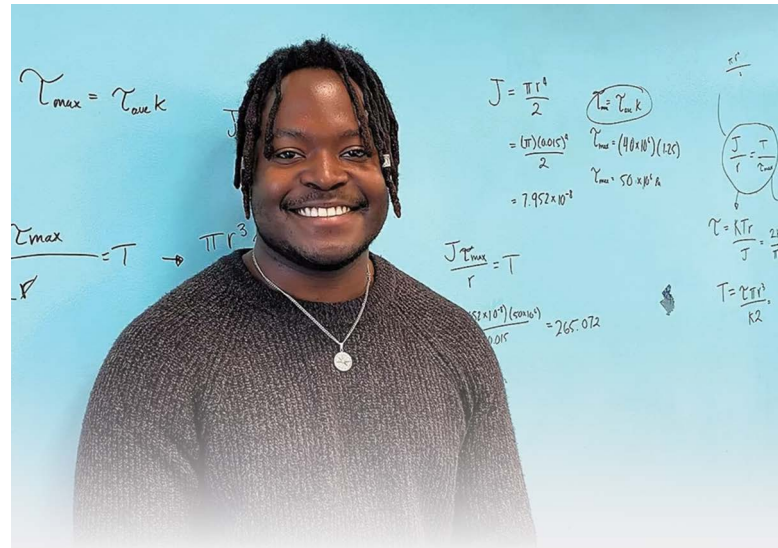
### 3. PRIORITIZE COMMUNITY SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

The YMCA brings people together in community facilities that support health equity across BC. For youth, our facilities provide a safe space to explore activities and engage with peers while seniors find belonging in our centres of community. Our early learning and child care centres and overnight camps encourage healthy development and meaningful, formative experiences for children. Our housing programs provide stability for British Columbians experiencing vulnerabilities.

Investment in social infrastructure enables belonging, acceptance, healthy living, and socio-economic equity. As British Columbia's population grows, particularly as we welcome record numbers of newcomers, we need a corresponding expansion of social infrastructure to enable communities to thrive. Effective partnerships between the public, non-profit, and private sectors have been proven to fill community needs in cost-effective ways.

To increase access to life-saving community programs and services, the YMCA recommends the following:

- a. Increase investments in community social infrastructure** including new builds and maintenance of aging community facilities.
- b. Create more avenues for non-profits to access capital funding directly** for community social infrastructure.
- c. Encourage and incentivize municipalities to partner with non-profits** in the planning, building, and operating of facilities.
- d. Promote safe, inclusive, and affordable outdoor experiences** for young British Columbians by investing in overnight camps.



Read [Jeremy's story](#) about how he found belonging at the YMCA and his journey from social isolation to self-acceptance and eventually finding his own community.



The YMCA is a charity that provides vital community services to advance health and wellbeing. We work with all levels of government and community partners to help British Columbians connect and thrive.

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