

Canadian Council
for Refugees

Conseil canadien
pour les réfugiés

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Embracing Youth Inclusion
and Diversity

Fall 2023 Youth Action Gathering Report

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Introduction to the CCR and its Youth Network

About the CCR

The Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR) is a leading voice for the rights, protection, sponsorship, settlement, and well-being of refugees and migrants, in Canada and globally. CCR is driven by member organizations working with, from and for these communities from coast to coast to coast, and has become recognized as a key advocate for refugee and immigrant rights in Canada, educating the public and putting issues onto the national agenda. The CCR has had a longstanding priority to provide space for youth to gather, reflect, and advocate together through the Youth Action Gathering (YAG) and as participants within CCR's broader membership activities such as at Working Group meetings and the Annual Consultation.

For more information on CCR campaigns and programs please visit <https://ccrweb.ca/>.

About the CCR Youth Network

The CCR Youth Network (YN) has existed since 2006 to center and amplify the voices of refugee and newcomer youth in Canada (ages 16-30) in programs, settlement organizations, and policy.

Working within gender justice and anti-oppression framework, the YN focuses on creating safe spaces for networking and information-exchange for young people doing newcomer advocacy work, while prioritizing skill building, government relations opportunities, and youth leadership. The YN is led by a Core Team that consists of 6 to 9 youth newcomers and refugee leaders who help guide the programs and initiatives of the YN.

Executive Summary: the 2023 YAG Highlights and Impact

The 2023 Youth Action Gathering (YAG) invited newcomers and refugees ages 16–30 from across Canada to meet in Montréal, QC for 3 days to offer a safe space for youth to collectively learn, strategize, and identify priority concerns for ongoing action on issues that affect them. With over 60 participants, the 2023 YAG was the first in-person event since 2019 with the theme of Embracing Youth Inclusion and Diversity. The CCR Youth Network is happy to celebrate the highlights and impacts we achieved during this one-of-a-kind youth event!

Highlights and Outcomes of the 2023 YAG include:

- Participation of over 60 youth newcomers and refugees from coast to coast.
- The first in-person Youth Action Gathering since the virtual YAG in 2021.
- Youth gained new insights, skills, and supports for resilience as well as learning about Indigenous solidarity and history from Indigenous participants and participating in a march for Truth and Reconciliation Day on September 30th.
- Successful engagement of youth and youth workers throughout the 7 different workshop sessions, 3 plenaries, a reflection session, and a social event.
- In-depth exploration and engagement on topics of concern and identification of priority issues for the CCR Youth Network to include in advocacy work.
- Opportunity for youth to compare and learn about the experiences of newcomers with different immigration statuses and challenges across regions of Canada.
- Comprehensive feedback on areas to improve for future YAGs.
- A fully bilingual experience, accommodating both francophone and anglophone participants through simultaneous interpretation and bilingual content.
- A safe space for young newcomers and refugees across Canada to meet on a national level to connect with each other and gain insights on the different challenges across the country for young people.

Overview of the 2023 YAG

What is the CCR Youth Action Gathering?

The CCR Youth Action Gathering (YAG) is a national event for refugee and newcomer youth between the ages 16-30 from across Canada to meet at a national level to share, learn, and strategize together about how to address common challenges that young migrants face.



We were happy to celebrate our 9th annual Youth Action Gathering in 2023!

The YAG objectives:

- Building networks, solidarity and momentum amongst newcomer youth and allies from across Canada.
- Offering a platform for newcomer youth from across Canada to exchange experiences and mobilize on the key issues that affect their full participation in society.
- Providing a space for newcomer youth to develop their leadership skills and engagement on the common challenges affecting them.
- Equipping refugee and immigrant youth with useful skills and resources to increase awareness of the issues identified, and to plan actions to address them at the national and local level.

The YAG 2023: Theme & Workshop Topics

The theme, workshop topics, and structure of the 2023 YAG were developed and voted on by our CCR Youth Network Core Team. This year's theme was:

Embracing Youth Inclusion & Diversity

With this theme in focus, workshops presented at the YAG were chosen and led by the Core Team (and the YAG Planning Committee members) on the following topics:

- Mental Health & Well-Being
- 2SLGBTQIA+ Rights and Intersectionality
- Indigenous Solidarity and Reconciliation
- Navigating Employment and Workplace Rights
- Working towards an Anti-Racist future
- Access to Education and Post-Secondary Institutes
- Community Involvement and Youth Engagement
- Cultural Adaptation: Coping with New Culture

Profile of Participants

The YAG brought participants from all regions and backgrounds together to meet at the national level.

83

Total participants from across Canada

01 Yukon

02 Alberta

51 Quebec

18 Ontario

02 Newfoundland

05 New Brunswick

04 British Columbia

66

Youth Participants between ages 16-25

65

Racialized Newcomers

21

Have been in Canada for 1 year or less

22

Core Team, YAG Committee, Youth Workers

Day 1 of the YAG

Opening Plenary – Equitas

The YAG kicked off with an interactive session led by Equitas on human rights and advocacy. Participants engaged in an educational game to learn about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Human Rights Values. To foster an inclusive, intentional, and safe space for all participants, Equitas staff invited participants to draw from the Human Rights Values they learned about to:

- Share an intention for the YAG
- Share an offer or commitment to other participants, and
- Think of a question to guide them through the 3-day event.

Answers from youth were written on sticky notes and posted on three different posters for participants to read and reflect on.

Takeaways

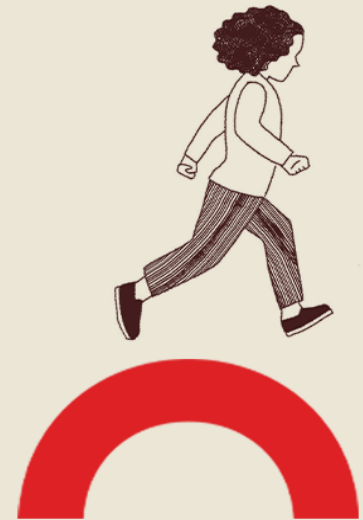
- Youth noted that it felt good to have human rights be the focus of the YAG's starting message as people come from diverse backgrounds and experiences while reflecting on the commitments in the YAG Charter of Inclusion and Respect that participants had to sign.
- One course of action shared was that refugee claimants are still denied meaningful access to education and should be raised during the periodic review of the Human Rights declaration signed by Canada.

Community Involvement and Youth Engagement

This workshop discussed the challenges and solutions that newcomers face with youth engagement as active leaders in their local communities. After learning from three youth newcomer panelists with lived experiences in community involvement and leadership, participants were then put into breakout groups to strategize on these issues. Others discussed finding strategies for how schools, local governments, and community organizations can ensure equitable access to leadership opportunities for newcomers and refugees.

Takeaways

- Youth noted that community involvement and engagement was incredibly important for newcomer and refugee youth. The conversations with participants highlighted the challenges youth face in community involvement, such as discrimination and isolation, while sharing how to increase your community engagement and the benefits of doing so.
- Many participants highlighted the need for settlement organizations and agencies to initiate programs and services for young newcomers to reduce isolation and foster connection, such as accessible language courses, cross-cultural learning, and professional development support. Considering this, many youths also expressed that although these programs may exist, it is difficult to find or access them. Attendees shared that building connections is especially important for them and there must be more effort made in connecting youth with political representatives and government officials to have their voices directly heard.



Access to Post-Secondary Education

Focusing on access to education and post-secondary institutions for newcomer youth, this session shared the lived experience of an international student from the Yukon while comparing the various social and financial barriers amongst different immigration statuses with a focus on refugee claimants.

Through small group discussions, participants exchanged their experiences navigating the Canadian education system. The workshop highlighted what the barriers and solutions to accessing education and post-secondary institutes look like for newcomer youth.

Takeaways

- Access to education is a theme that has been included in many YAGs, which participants felt was important. Youth expressed that many immigrant students have responsibilities to provide or contribute financially to family back in their home country, which is in addition to the day-to-day living costs in Canada. International students shared that even compared to refugees and refugee claimants, they also have a challenging time to make ends meet – often working two jobs on top of school just to be able to cover tuition fees.
- Many students are victims of fraud overseas and receive false information in coming to Canada, leading to a high-risk of detention, abuse, and precarious immigration status when they arrive. Other youth noted that since education systems and processes in Canada are different than other countries, adapting can be challenging.
- One course of action recommended was to advocate for more accountability with immigration consultants in Canada and globally.

Working Towards an Anti-Racist Future

This workshop's aim was to increase participants' awareness of the issues surrounding diversity, inclusion, racism, and living together in communities. Through the art of storytelling, the facilitator shared a story where they explored the issues of inclusion and discrimination experienced by the characters.

Youth were invited to offer their opinions on the various elements of this tale, to propose solutions to the difficulties they have identified, or to share a story on the subject. Youth concluded the session with a collective reflection on sharing their experiences and what it means to live together with diversity and inclusion in our communities.

Takeaways

- Participants felt that art can be interpreted in many ways but is a very effective way to learn about important topics. The use of art forms to discuss a sensitive and difficult subject was highly appreciated.
- Participants expressed the importance of using creativity to fight against discrimination and oppression through a variety of art forms.
- Youth shared that it was important to not let discrimination get you down and that as there are reasons people discriminate others, there is also an opportunity to breakthrough ignorance and educate society on how to be better allies.

Cultural Adaptation: Coping with New Culture

This workshop focused on the adaptation process of moving to a new country, culture, and society. Youth engaged with fellow participants to learn more about their diverse backgrounds and identities, while learning about the cultural adjustment process and the familiar challenges that come with migrating to Canada – such as language barriers, isolation, and lack of community.

Placed into breakout groups, attendees shared their personal experiences and challenges adjusting to Canada and shared ideas on how to break the misconceptions and stereotypes that often hinder cultural integration for newcomers in Canada.

Takeaways

- The participants of this workshop were from varied immigration backgrounds: international students, refugees, immigrants and second-generation youth who were born in Canada. This second-generation youth noted that they also face barriers with cultural integration as they feel they are not entirely accepted within Canadian culture nor are they fully accepted in the culture of their parents' country. Attendees shared that sometimes people may also carry cultural trauma from their communities back home and seek to build a new culture for themselves in Canada.
- Attendees spoke to the importance for newcomers who have been in Canada longer to be supportive of migrants who have arrived more recently as there is a need for newcomers to feel included and welcomed as they try to build a new life here.

Mental Health and Well-being

Focused on mental health and well-being, the workshop organizers offered a presentation to define what mental health meant and how to work towards breaking the stigma of asking for help and tending to your mental health needs.

During the session, youth were invited to rotate between three different stations in the room to participate in: 1) colouring/painting while talking about the importance of hobbies and interests, 2) to learn about using an emotional wheel to describe specific emotions, and 3) to engage on improving inner speech to encourage kindness towards ourselves.

Takeaways

- Participants felt that they learned new techniques for managing mental health and expressed that there was a lot of laughter and connection during this session, which felt good. They emphasized that the importance of emotions can often be forgotten and that many people come from cultures where mental health is stigmatized, so it felt important to transmit the message that mental health is real and should be valued.
- It was noted that mental health and well-being should be a key theme in future Youth Network events rather than just a workshop topic. Youth were thankful for the resources provided by the workshop organizers and learning about a training certificate called betherecertificate.org for attendees.



Day 2 of the YAG

Middle Plenary – Truth and Reconciliation and Orange Shirt Day

Considering that the YAG event occurred during the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation on September 30th (also known as Orange Shirt Day), the YAG incorporated themes of Indigenous history and solidarity throughout the event. Led by a participant from Fishing Lake First Nation, this plenary was an opportunity for participants to learn about the ongoing history



of Canada’s colonialism, what Orange Shirt Day means, and the generational impacts of residential schools across Turtle Island. The speaker drew parallels between the shared experiences of Indigenous peoples and newcomers, and how we can build solidarity from the similarities in the barriers and challenges that young Indigenous or newcomer people face.

Takeaways

- Participants felt they had a better understanding of the experience of Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island and felt more engaged in honouring the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation Day through reflection and learning.
- Youth and youth workers were very appreciative of the First Nation youth participant’s generosity in sharing their experience and for the opportunity to hear and gain insights from Indigenous participants from other cultures that they can share with others.

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- The openness of the plenary speaker was very impactful, and many attendees left the session with a better understanding of why September 30th is not a holiday, but a day of action to make space for and learn about reconciliation and amplify the resilience and voices of Indigenous Peoples.
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Truth and Reconciliation March and Reflection Session

Many YAG participants joined the 3rd annual march for the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation on September 30th (also known as Orange Shirt Day), led by the Native Women’s Association and local partners. Participants were given Every Child Matters orange t-shirts purchased from Strong Nations, an Indigenous business located on traditional Snuneymuxw territory. After participating in the march, YAG participants were brought together to reflect on what they had learned and experienced throughout the day.

Takeaways

- Youth noted that they had all learned something new about Indigenous Peoples history and themes of Truth and Reconciliation during the YAG, and the responsibility for newcomers and refugees to do their part to ensure they do not contribute to the further marginalization of Indigenous communities. Many participants highlighted the similarities between the culture of Indigenous peoples and that of many Indigenous newcomers in Canada, such as the parallels between clothing, tradition, connection to earth, and food.
- Many youth and youth workers expressed that they had a stronger understanding of the need to offer solidarity towards a better future for Indigenous Peoples and newcomers and refugees across Turtle Island.



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- Participants were very grateful for the contributions of the Indigenous participant throughout the weekend. Their courage to share their lived experiences and educate attendees on the history of residential schools, as well as the purpose of truth and reconciliation highlighted that we cannot have reconciliation without acknowledging the truth of the past.
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Navigating Employment and Workplace Rights

With a focus on employment and workplace rights, youth began the session with brainstorming questions and engaging in games to create an interactive environment to discuss career and labour rights.

The panelists presented about labour rights and their experiences navigating employment as a newcomer and continued the conversation in small groups to brainstorm policy changes and next steps in empowering youth newcomers within the Canadian labour market. The participants reflected and learned more about the different experiences and skills to improve their access to employment.

Takeaways

- Youth noted that they learned a lot about workers' rights and the hiring process in this session. Many participants felt they experienced discrimination in the workplace due to language barriers, racism, sexism, and ageism. It was shared that many did not think it was worth reporting this discrimination or quitting their job and continuing their employment despite the challenges. Youth highlighted that there are limited work options, specifically for those who are not permanent residents or citizens as the lengthy process for the paperwork for them to work often jeopardizes the job opportunity.

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- It was highlighted that member organizations should educate newcomers on their workplace rights to avoid exploitation, and how to report instances of labour rights violations. Other suggestions included advocating for the government to provide permanent residence for all, as well as widening the scope of which immigration status can be included for government jobs (eg. Canada Summer Jobs that are specific to permanent residents and citizens).
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2SLGBTQIA+ Rights and Intersectionality

Participants began with a presentation and panel to learn about the definitions and applications of intersectionality, and the experiences of those who are a part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

Youth were then placed into groups and offered case studies of different people with intersectional and 2SLGBTQIA+ backgrounds and to brainstorm together on what barriers and challenges they could face in terms of immigration and discrimination within their home countries and in Canada.

Takeaways

- Participants stressed the need to understand how intersectionality is conceptualized and how people's identities can be fluid or show up differently in all kinds of aspects in their lives. It was noted that many people who are part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community do not have a choice to avoid discrimination and that some people have fears of being allies to this community as they want to avoid discrimination as well. Youth noted that often people are scared to speak to newcomers and refugees about gender or sexual orientation due to stigma and cultural differences, yet the importance to address this subject was recognized as it is the reality of people throughout the world and avoiding it does not achieve anything.

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- Some action items included more qualitative sensitivity training for frontline and administrative staff across the government, newcomer-serving sector, and in youth spaces. Many participants advocated for public education programs to build awareness and that these communities often need a support system to navigate society.
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Day 3 of the YAG

Closing Plenary – Review and reflection of the 2023 YAG

The Core Team members and CCR staff gave an overview of all the YAG sessions and activities to socialize the reflections and knowledge generated throughout the event. Youth were invited to share their thoughts on each of the sessions. The final plenary helped conclude the 2023 YAG with shared inspiration, a celebration of new experiences, and a warm farewell.

“ I’m feeling very grateful and privileged to attend to the YAG, I learned a lot and my soft skills were developed successfully.”

“ The event was well done; it was amazing at the same time seeing fellow youths being part of the contribution of the event.”

“ It was great. I think we should organize more of these kinds of gathering to let young refugees living in remote areas of Canada know that there are different organizations that contribute to the development of young refugees and immigrants.”

“ Both personally and professionally, I found it to be a valuable opportunity to gain insight into the refugee perspective, their experiences, and their opinions on issues that profoundly impact immigrants. This is a perspective I rarely encounter in my personal and professional life, making the event all the more enlightening. I have no doubt that this event has been deeply moving and inspirational for many youths. Witnessing the passionate commitment of immigrant and refugee youth to issues such as fairness, representation, equity, and equality is truly awe-inspiring and sends shivers down my spine.”

Celebrating Youth Safety, Joy, and Solidarity at the YAG

Wellness Hub

The CCR would like to offer a special thank you to Equitas for providing the Wellness Hub, which acted as physical safe space for participants to access mental health supports in the case of triggered emotions, and/or the need for a quiet, comfortable space. Youth were thankful to have specialists and activities to support them in their time of need.

Charter for Respect and Inclusion

All participants committed to a Charter for Respect and Inclusion, which set out expectations and requirements for all to maintain a safe and inclusive environment during the event. (See Annex) 1 The Charter created a shared commitment from all participating to ensure respect and inclusion throughout the YAG, concerning expectation for behaviours, respect for facilities, participants, and all the collective activities and experiences shared during the event.

Social Event

To celebrate youth joy, the YAG invited all participants to join us at our Social Event on Friday, September 29th from 6pm to 9pm at the Centre St Jax. Connecting with one another through dinner together, the social event included a talent showcase and a trivia game to create stronger connections through celebration, fun and entertainment.

ANNEX

Charter of Inclusion and Respect

YAG 2023 Charter for Respect and Inclusion

The Youth Action Gathering brings together refugee and newcomer youth from across the country to build a national community of support and connection. This Charter lists the expectations of all participants during the event in order to ensure a culture of respect and inclusion. All participants are required to commit to the Charter and sign below. Any participant or youth worker who violates this charter is subject to removal from the event.

During the YAG, I will:

- Respect privacy: what is said here stays here, what is learned here can be carried forward.
- Approach conversations from an anti-racist, anti-ableist, decolonial, and gender equity lens.
- Share the space, be mindful of speaking time, and hold space for others to speak.
- Exercise generosity with active listening.
- Lean into silence. Allow time to process. Take care of myself.
- Prioritise the sharing of different perspectives and respect that we're all present with different ages, lived experiences, and embodied expertise.

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- Practice “I” language, in particular to avoid speaking for others or sharing someone else’s stories or experiences.
 - Be aware of power dynamics within a space or conversation, including my own privilege, and work to ensure an equitable participation for all.
 - Be open to naming harmful attitudes, as well as be open to critical self-reflection.
 - Understand that we are all in a place of learning and vulnerability. Be willing and open to learn new things. It’s okay to not be in your knowledge comfort zone.
 - Remember that it’s okay to be inarticulate: invite people to speak instead of waiting to have a perfect thought formed.
 - Be mindful of sharing a space together and respect noise levels, personal space, and belongings of participants.
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I acknowledge the following is prohibited behaviour:

- Possession or consumption of alcoholic beverages or drugs in the hostel or other YAG venues or participating in the YAG while under the influence of drugs or alcohol.
- Harassment of another participant, staff member or volunteer (verbal, physical, sexual or visual).
- Conduct endangering the safety, health or well-being of others.
- Bullying or taking unfair advantage of any participant.
- Destruction or damage of the venue, hostel, or belongings of participants.

Acknowledgements

The Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR) is grateful for the contributions of our supporters in making the 2023 Youth Action Gathering (YAG) a success. A special thank you to Equitas for providing the YAG with their Wellness Hub and Opening Plenary. We wish to thank the members of the YAG Planning Committee, the Youth Workers, and the Youth Network Core Team for their commitment, time, and dedication in putting together the 2023 YAG in Montréal, QC! The Youth Network of the CCR gratefully acknowledges the financial support from:

