



Hearing From Our Youth:

A Look at the Nanaimo Youth Resilience Strategy

Focus Group Research Report

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A NOTE TO THE READER

This report is about young people in Nanaimo, not statistics or program outputs. It’s about what youth shared when we asked them, simply and honestly, what it feels like to participate in programs designed to support them.

We heard about moments that made them feel seen. About adults who showed up consistently. About places that felt safe when nowhere else did. And about things they wish were different. We hope this report helps the community understand why this work matters — and fuels the commitment to keep going.

“I became a way better person after coming here”

— Focus group participant

By the Numbers

[26]

youth participated in focus groups

[3]

organizations represented

[4]

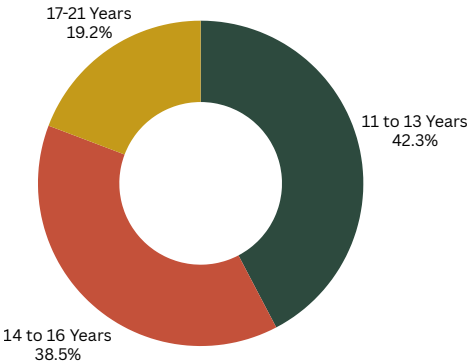
focus group sessions held

Qualitative data was collected in February and March of 2026, through four on-site focus groups in collaboration with:

- Central Vancouver Island Multicultural Society: **Library Club**
- City of Nanaimo & Boys and Girls Club: **Youth Lounge**
- And with special support from: **Nanaimo Foodshare**

Thank you to these programs and members of the Nanaimo Youth Resilience Strategy (NYRS) Steering Committee for their support with this project.

Ages Captured



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Why We Asked

The story behind this research

The Nanaimo Youth Resilience Strategy was built on a belief: broad community engagement is vital to identify and address significant youth risk factors, and mitigating harm requires increased access to opportunities, connections, care, and support.

Programs funded through this strategy work quietly, day after day, with kids who are navigating complicated lives. But how do those kids actually experience the programs? What do they think? How do they feel? That's what this research set out to answer. Not through surveys with checkboxes, but through real conversations, in small groups, where youth could speak freely.

What We Wanted to Know

- How do youth describe their experience in these programs?
- What do the programs do well?
- What's missing or could be better?
- Do youth feel safe, seen, and like they belong?

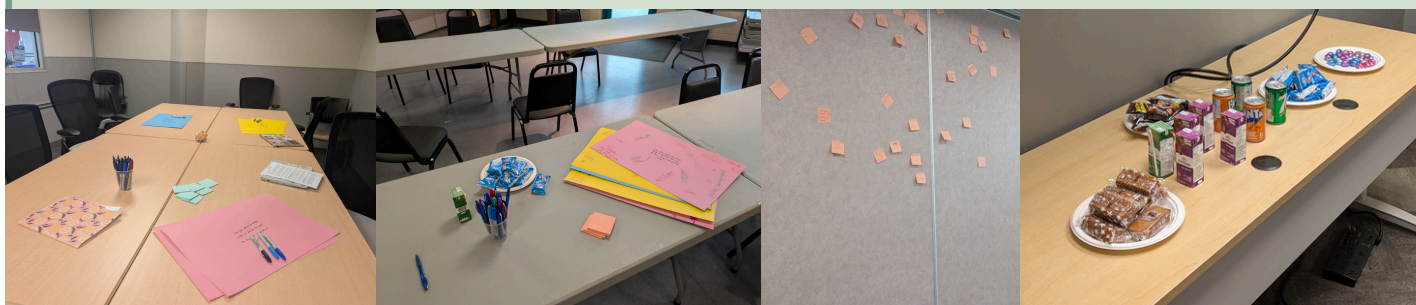
How We Listened

- Small focus groups, not surveys
- Conversations led by VIU student facilitators
- Youth-centred approach
- All responses kept confidential

Focus Group Snapshot

Focus groups ran on-site at participating NYRS-funded youth programs. All sessions lasted around an hour, and included:

- **Warm up questions:** e.g., "What is your favourite part about this program?"
- **Small group discussions with guiding questions:** e.g., "What kind of support have you received from other people in this program?"
- **Activity where youth provided responses to the question:** "if you were in charge, what's one (or more) thing(s) you would change about this program to make it even better?"
- Snacks and breaks were included.



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What Youth Told Us

Across all focus group discussions, a consistent set of themes emerged—each one deeply connected to these NYRS focus areas:

- Safe Youth Gathering Spaces
- Youth Mentoring
- Youth Outreach

NYRS Focus Area: Safe Youth Gathering Spaces

Activities & Hobbies

Youth were exposed to activities and experiences they wouldn't have elsewhere

- Sewing, games, music, movies, sporting events, skating, etc.

"[I] now often play [badminton] after being introduced [to it] here"

"Painting helped [with] my art class a lot"

Inclusive & Judgement-Free

- Everyone was welcome
- Youth could express feelings safely
- Diversity was embraced & supported
- Youth could express interests in an accepting environment

"It makes me feel safe that everyone is so caring"

Comfort & Freedom

The Atmosphere

- The described it as "quiet", "cozy", and "chill"

The Structure

- Youth appreciated the consistency, familiarity and predictability

"The environment is welcoming"

"[Program] is a place to unwind"

Peer Connection

A Place to Make Friends

- Having a space to just "hang out" increased feelings of safety and connection

Group Connection

- The space and activities allowed youth to be together (rather than in smaller cliques)

Mutual Support

- A place to find help with homework, and people to lean on

"I have felt supported since I started coming here and it has only grown over time."

— Focus group participant

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NYRS Focus Area: Youth Mentoring

Connection with Supportive Rolemodels

Programs provided youth with supportive role models whom they could talk to and receive help from. These adult mentors were also seen to be modelling positive skills and behaviours.

Especially impactful:

- Leaders provided support with daily tasks, such as schoolwork
- Talking with leaders increased feelings of self-confidence
- Program leaders modeled effective communication and conflict resolution skills

“Program leaders always say yes to you when you are asking for help”

Consistency

Youth valued having access to a consistent adult in their lives

- The presence of these adults helped youth feel safe and supported
- Establishing shared interests with these adults bolstered feelings of connection and worth

“The fact that [program leader] is one of the leaders made me feel safe”

Emotional Safety

Adult mentors offered a sense of emotional safety to youth

- They were a safe person to share feelings with
- They appreciated that adults made time to check in with them when they arrived
- Youth mentioned appreciating that leaders would wait outside with them until they got their ride home

“Leaders are considerate; they really do care about your feelings and opinions.”

— Focus group participant

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NYRS Focus Area: Youth Outreach

Physical Resources

Programs connected youth with important physical resources

- Bus passes
- Clothing
- Support with food insecurity
- Other essentials as needed

“We’ve gotten support for groceries”

Social Communication Skills

Youth appreciated the chance to develop social communication and interpersonal skills in this atmosphere

- Building connections outside the program
- De-escalation training
- Including others
- Practicing patience
- Learning how to talk with others

“I used to bully, but was told [by the leaders] that it wasn’t okay”

Job Skills

Programs offered youth support in developing skills to help with future employment

- Planning
- Perspective taking
- Negotiation through game play
- Financial basics

“Before here I didn’t know anything about money managing skills and now I do.”

Emotional Health

Youth experienced an improvement in emotional health through contact with the programs

- The calm atmosphere decreased anxiety
- Self confidence increased
- Improved well-being
- Reduced stress

“Coming to the program has made me less depressed.”

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Suggestions from Respondents

What youth thought could be improved

As part of our conversation, we asked youth what changes they thought might improve the program for themselves or others. Here are some of their suggestions.

What They Wished to See Added



Specific activities and resources were requested, reflecting how exposure to new activities influenced how they wished to spend their time in the future

- “[Program leaders] should set aside a day to watch anime.”
- “I would allow/schedule more sports because I really wanna be good at sport[s] and this club would help.”
- “Add some [musical] instruments”
- “Extra computer tech”
- “Baking, Nerf Wars, more video games”

The Most Common Topic of Discussion: Food

Food played an important role, helping youth feel safe, comfortable and connected

- “Sometimes they bring pizza, chips, sushi, vegetables which make the program a safe place.”
- “Free food is one way I feel supported in the program.”
- “Snacks make the program feel safe.”



“Food at school has pork so I couldn’t eat and was really hungry. When I went to the program after school, it provided me with food.”

— Focus group participant

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Site Specific Results

What youth in this program shared

Our goal was to collect responses about overall NYRS target areas, but some participants gave useful information about the things that were unique and valued about each program. Here are some program-specific insights from the youth.

Library Club

This program was developed by the Central Vancouver Island Multicultural Society, which focuses on supporting families new to the area.

Two unique responses were noted within this group:

1) They appreciated having a space to learn and practice English

- The activities promoted conversation and language practice
- Language support led to positive improvements with
 - Self confidence
 - Relationship building
 - School work
 - Employment

2) They asked for more support feeling safe and secure in their surroundings

- Physical safety:
 - Support getting to and from the program
- Emotional safety:
 - Having someone to talk to about their feelings would be helpful

Youth Lounge

This program was a collaboration between the City of Nanaimo & Boys and Girls Club

Within this group, participants were concerned with:

1) Stability & Access

- Responses showed a pattern of concern about being able to meaningfully access the program in the future (for themselves and for others)
- This included
 - Expanding age ranges to include older youth
 - Increasing funding (suggesting potential concerns for the longevity of the program)
 - Keeping the same leaders for the whole day (suggesting that consistency may be an important aspect of feeling safe within the program)
 - Adding more times (e.g., an extra day during the week) as well as running the program over summer, spring, and winter break

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Final Thoughts

Wrapping it all up

The perspective of youth is invaluable when determining how effective prevention and intervention approaches actually are. Here, youth reported that programs had a positive impact on their lives. These results highlight the necessity of programs offering upstream support.

Individual Programs

- Continue providing access to positive adults and creating spaces for youth to form healthy peer connections, seek out support, and access resources.
- Reduce barriers where possible so more youth can access the protective factors your programs provide. This could mean increasing age ranges and expanding availability.

The Strategy

- These results highlight the importance of collaborative approaches that involve all community stakeholders in preventing youth violence.
- Model future work in the community along the NYRS collaborative model to ensure all voices are considered and to increase impact of prevention and intervention efforts.

Recommendations for The City

- Prepare communication plan to increase public awareness of these programs and the important impact that they are having in the community.
- Highlight that community support can help these programs continue, creating a safer and healthier space for everyone involved.

“They need to make more places like this because this is where I met my people.”

— Focus group participant

Curious about the focus groups? Here's how they were run and what we asked:

Warm-Up Questions (10 minutes):

- “How did you first learn about this program?”
- “When did you first start coming to this program?”
- “What is your favourite part about this program?”

Answers were shared out loud to the group.

World Cafe Activity (24 minutes total):

- “What made it possible for you to feel safe/welcomed here?”
 - NYRS Theme: Safe Youth Gathering Spaces
- “What new skills have you learned through this program? Can you share an example of how you have used these skills outside of the program?”
 - NYRS Theme: Youth Outreach
- “What kind of support have you received from other people in the program? Can you share an example?”
 - NYRS Theme: Youth Mentoring

Youth split into smaller groups and answered questions written on a poster board either aloud or through writing. After 8 minutes, groups rotated tables and answered the next question, until each group had a chance to discuss each question.

5-minute break

Sticky Note activity (8 minutes):

- “If you were in charge, what’s one (or more) thing you’d add or change about the program to make it even better for you? Is there anything you would add or change that would make the program more inclusive/welcoming to encourage more youth to participate?”

Youth received a stack of sticky notes to write their answers on. Sticky notes were placed on the wall and briefly discussed.

Thank You

to every young person who shared their story.

This report exists because of your courage and honesty.

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References

