# Youth Focus Groups: Youth Safer Communities Report

2022/2023



**Chestermere & Area Community Coalition**

Chestermere and Area are known as communities where residents enjoy a high quality of life with small-town appeal. Criminal code offences are decreasing year over year (source: RCMP Chestermere Municipal Crime Gauge) indicating these communities are safe places to live. However, tracked statistics cannot always capture critical aspects of youth mental health and wellbeing.

# Youth Focus Groups:
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## BACKGROUND

The first phase of this work was the Youth Mental Health Safety and Resilience project started by the Chestermere and Area Community Coalition in 2021. This multi-year project, funded by Rural Mental Health Project Community Grants, focused on conducting a Community Youth Survey to determine what youth need to feel physically, emotionally, mentally, and socially safe in their communities. This was in response to an increase in incidents regarding youth safety, and importantly, a youth who died by suicide in September 2020. Please see the Youth Safer Communities Survey Report for the findings of the first phase, and additionally, Appendix A for the definitions of safety and safe spaces generated by youth responses. One recommendation identified the need to hold focus groups (a large group interview) with youth and separately with adults to gather more information, gain more clarification on the survey results, and understand youth safety and wellbeing experiences more deeply.
**This report provides the results of the youth focus groups.**

Please note that the methods we used for this phase of the research are only appropriate for gathering details about experiences and perceptions, not for collecting information about the frequency of such experiences. For that information, please see the Youth Safer Communities Survey Report. This report is interested in describing and deeply understanding the issues we wanted to learn more about. This is why the report is long and contains many quotes.

We ask that you read this document with an open heart and mind. Some of the comments may seem harsh, rude, blunt or unrefined but they are sincere and should be considered in that context. These are real people and their real stories who were brave to share them with their community.

This report contains content that may be distressing or triggering for some individuals. Reader discretion is advised, and individuals who may be adversely affected are encouraged to consider their emotional well-being before proceeding. If you require support or find the content overwhelming, please reach out to a mental health professional or a support service in your area.

# METHODS

## Sample

87 youth participated in the focus groups.

Completed a total of 13 focus groups with youth across Chestermere and Langdon from grades 5 -12 (11 schools from Chestermere, 2 schools from Langdon).

Most participants were from grades 5 to 9 as there were challenges with recruiting youth from the high school age range in both high schools.

We completed 2 focus groups in an elementary school. The data had to be destroyed because the consent forms were misplaced. These data are not included in this report.

We were unable to conduct a focus group in Indus School, East Lake School, and Khalsa School Calgary.

## Procedure

### *Recruitment and Participant Rights*

Ethics approval was given for this project by both the Rocky View School Division and the Calgary Catholic School Board. In the schools, the Child Development Advisors (CDAs) or the Counsellors shared information about the project with the teachers and all students in the age ranges relevant to the project, and then distributed informed consent forms to the youth to take home to their parents. The informed consent forms contained all details about the study, including the purpose of the study, what they were being asked to do, potential risks, and benefits. Contact information was provided on the forms if youth or parents had questions and wanted to contact the research team. If they were wanted to participate, youth returned the consent forms signed by their parents or caregivers to the CDAs/Counsellors, who then returned them to the research team before the focus group. In the focus group, we reviewed the same information with youth, left time for questions, and asked them for their consent to support youth autonomy and decision-making power. Verbal consent was given by all youth. The same procedure was followed for consent with the two community focus groups, but we utilized convenience sampling since we were asking pre-existing groups of youth to participate. We also sent the draft report home to caregivers and students for review and feedback. Feedback was incorporated, and they all received final copies of the report.

## Data Collection

Focus groups were held in classrooms or rooms with closed doors so that confidentiality was maintained. Focus groups are large group interviews where each participant has a chance to answer the question, with the option to pass if desired. They were semi-structured and were approximately 60 minutes. The first portion was dedicated to introducing the study, reviewing the consent forms, and questions. Then, we asked participants the scripted questions. We used Zoom to record the audio of the focus groups to be transcribed later. At the end, the youth were debriefed and given a chance to withdraw or ask questions. They were thanked, given a small snack, and a small wallet-sized list of resources developed by the Chestermere and Area Mental Health Coalition.

Finally, we attempted to have an evaluation and demographic survey emailed to student's caregivers after the end of the focus group. The intention was for youth to fill out this survey with their caregivers to provide their thoughts about the focus group, demographic information, and a box to provide any further information they didn't get a chance to share in the focus group or remembered later. This was an optional step. There were only two responses, therefore this information was not included in the report.



## Instrument

The instrument for this study was the focus group facilitation guide (Appendix B). It consisted of an introduction, the definitions of safety and safe spaces, questions, and a debriefing script. Topics that the questions covered included spaces that felt safe/not safe, different types of safety, stigma, and asking for help. For example, one of the questions asked, "What makes it easier for you to ask for help?" These questions were developed by the research team based on experience serving youth and were reviewed by the Coalition.

The second instrument was the evaluation and demographic survey (Appendix C). Topics covered thoughts about the focus group, demographic information, and additional comments. For example, one of the evaluation questions asked participants to rate their agreement with a series of statements, one of them being "The focus group format worked well."

## Reflexivity Statement

Hanna Mughal grew up in Langdon and went to both Langdon School and Chestermere High School. She was actively involved in the community throughout high school through leadership and was on Synergy's Youth Council. Hence, she has lived experience of being a youth in both Langdon and Chestermere. She has also worked for Synergy in various student work terms for four years, which gave further insight into the experiences of youth in our community.

(Cont.)

Hanna currently attends the University of Calgary and is enrolled in a Bachelor of Science in Psychology. It is important to share this information to acknowledge that Hanna's history gives her insight and knowledge about the communities that aided in the analysis, but also means that it could have negatively impacted the results as there were things she expected to appear in the analysis, such as safety experiences that she experienced or saw peers experience growing up. She reflected on these biases and attempted to minimize them during analysis.

Terry Gill was born and raised in Calgary and earned both a Bachelor of Science in Psychology and a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology from the University of Calgary. His professional background is rooted in research and youth development, reflecting his enduring passion for volunteerism, youth engagement, community involvement, and mental health advocacy. For the past decade, Terry has dedicated his time to volunteering and working within the Chestermere and SE Rocky View County communities. During this time, he has played a large role in facilitating youth programs within local schools and the broader community. Terry has also been a collaborator with local agencies on various services and initiatives. While his expertise in research methodology and his intimate familiarity with the service area are clear assets, it's important to acknowledge that they may influence the outcomes in diverse ways.

Acknowledging these biases in this reflexivity statement was one approach we used to attempt to control for these biases.
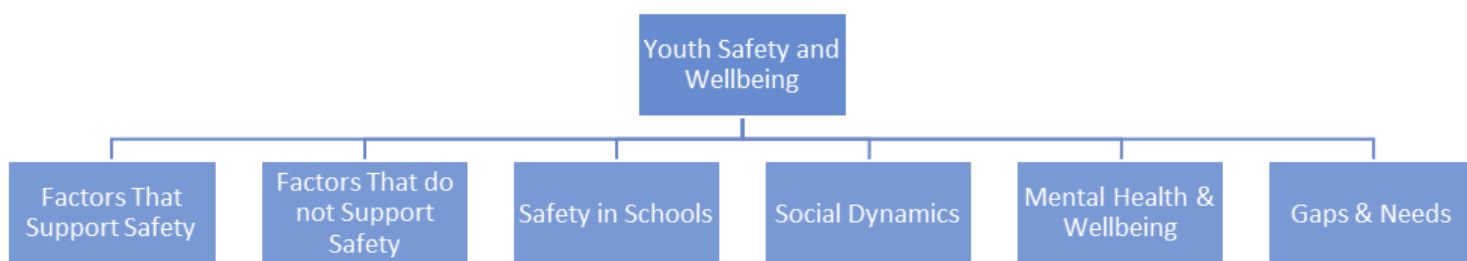


## Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was followed for the analysis of the data. See the article for further details, along with the codebook. Additional to the methods in the paper was the completion of a peer authenticity check. For this, one of the Synergy staff members who had not been included in the coding process reviewed our codebooks to see if they made sense. This was an effort to control for bias and to generally review the analysis so far. They suggested to change some of the language for the codes to make the meaning clearer and all feedback was incorporated.

# RESULTS

The analysis produced 30 codes (Appendix D). Codes are units of meaning that were found in the ways youth described their experiences. Each time one comment was made about a particular experience, that comment was marked with a code. The result was an accumulated number of quotes per code. Please note that the number of quotes per code does not necessarily represent the frequency of the issue occurring, but is still something important to note. As a fictional example, 40 quotes recorded across the focus groups for the code "need for ice cream" does not mean that there are exactly 40 youth who experience a need for ice cream. Instead, it means that youth shared 40 pieces of information regarding how they experience a need for ice cream. It may also be that the need for ice cream was commented on more than the need for candy, which may tell us different things about how youth feel about ice cream versus candy.

These codes were grouped into six major themes (Figure 1). Themes are broad, categories that group similar codes together to tell one part of the story. The remainder of this results section will address each theme and the codes that contribute to the theme. Each code will be described in detail to provide the reader an understanding of that distinct experience. Quotes are provided to give direct accounts of experiences – so you hear directly from youth.

## Figure 1: Visual Map of Themes



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                    ┌─────────────────┐
                    │ Youth Safety and │
                    │    Wellbeing     │
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| Factors That Support Safety | Factors That do not Support Safety | Safety in Schools | Social Dynamics | Mental Health & Wellbeing | Gaps & Needs |

# THEME 1: FACTORS IN THE COMMUNITY THAT SUPPORT SAFETY

This theme included five codes: *locations and/or circumstances where youth do feel safe in Chestermere; locations and/or circumstances where youth do feel safe in Langdon; locations and/or circumstances where youth do feel safe; how people contribute to youth feeling safe;* and *other contributors to youth feeling safe*. Interpretation of these responses also tells us that youth feel physically and/or mentally safe in these spaces or situations.

### Code 1: Locations and/or Circumstances Where Youth Do Feel Safe in Chestermere

The code *locations and/or circumstances where youth do feel safe in Chestermere* told us where and why youth feel safe in Chestermere and was coded 54 times. The places described included Tim Hortons, because youth felt welcome and the people grabbing a coffee were nice, along with A&W for similar reasons. Safeway and Anniversary Beach were noted as safe because youth did not feel like they could be harmed there. The canal was also named because youth could use the surrounding pathways. Youth felt safe at the Chestermere Public Library because there are usually lots of people there, it is quiet, and feels comfortable. They host community events and the staff "*are really nice. And if I ever needed help... [I feel like they] would provide that.*" The dog park felt safe because there is typically lots of people there. The Recreation Centre felt safe because youth often knew people there, they were often there with a friend, and there was physical space to have fun. The people at Synergy make youth feel understood and there is always someone to talk to if they need to. Camp Chestermere felt safe because they felt no harm would occur to them, and because "*it's a Christian environment. And I like know a lot of leaders that are willing to help me out if I'm going through anything and I feel comfortable there.*" The supportive community and the availability of someone to talk to at Lakeridge Church were positive attributes for this location, along with their youth group that makes youth feel safe - those who come to the group are trustworthy and available to talk with youth when needed. Extracurricular spaces such as dance studios felt welcoming, along with jujitsu classes because they know others there and are taught how to protect themselves. Youth named the Chestermere Fire Station, No Frills, and Circle K as safe places but did not provide justification. Quite a few youth identified that the community and their neighbourhoods felt welcoming and safe because they had nice neighbours. Some youth noted they had lived in Chestermere for most or all their life and had always felt that it was a safe place to live.

The three *Langdon* focus groups also *identified locations and circumstances where they felt safe* – five comments were recorded. Prairie Grounds was noted as safe because it is fun to be there and the workers are kind, along with Tim Hortons since most people are there to grab food and spend time with others. The outdoor rink was noted as safe. Lastly, youth felt safe going for walks in the community.



## Code 3: General Locations and/or Circumstances Where Youth Do Feel Safe

The code *general locations and/or circumstances where youth do feel safe* describes safe places that could occur in either community or Calgary. It was coded 50 times. Most responses in this code were related to their homes, and subsequently, the way that people in their homes made youth feel safe. Youth said that family at home did not judge them, they felt they could talk to family members, they could trust them, and they would protect them. Additionally, youth felt they could express themselves, they felt no chance of humiliation, and they could do the things they wanted to do. They felt that home was comforting, familiar, and relaxing. A few noted that their rooms felt safe. Second to this were family members' and friend's houses. Family members made youth feel safe and instilled a sense of trust. Youth felt safe at friend's houses because they felt that their friends were good people. It helped that friends already felt safe to them. One youth made the following statement about their friend's house:

> "If I was ever in a situation that I need to like go to their house in a hurry, but I needed like um to get somewhere so I can be safe, then they would [always] accept me, um, for as long as I needed."

The common thread across locations outside of Chestermere and Langdon was that the people in these places made youth feel safe, even if they were strangers. If someone was trying to hurt them in these locations, then the surrounding strangers would do something about it.

Another prominent pattern was that people made youth feel safe, without being linked to a particular location. Hence the code *people contribute to youth feeling safe* was coded 31 times. Youth described that the adults who made them feel safe and protected were their family members, guardians, teachers, family friends, and therapists. When with friends their age, youth felt physically and mentally safer. More generally, youth said that a familiar face and someone they knew automatically made them feel safe. This was sometimes related to trust. Lastly, it was observed that depending on the youth, one person or a large group of people could lead to increased feelings of safety.

*Code 5: Other Contributors to Youth Feeling Safe*

The last code in this theme was *other contributors to youth feeling safe*, which was coded 9 times. Three youth noted that their knowledge of how to protect themselves, due to training in an activity such as martial arts, made them feel safer. First responders, such as police, firefighters, and paramedics were identified as contributors to feeling safe. First responders were included here since these people are part of systems. Closed spaces made one youth feel safe, along with the thought of carrying a weapon. Another youth noted that places with nicer decorations or designs made them feel safer.

# THEME 2: FACTORS IN THE COMMUNITY THAT DO <u>NOT</u> SUPPORT SAFETY

This theme included: *locations and/or circumstances where youth do not feel safe in Chestermere, Langdon,* and *generally; other contributors to not feeling safe;* and *people contribute to youth not feeling safe.* Broadly, this theme describes factors that decrease feelings of safety for youth.

*Code 1: Locations and/or Circumstances Where Youth do <u>not</u> Feel Safe in Chestermere*

*Locations and/or circumstances where youth do not feel safe in Chestermere* was coded 64 times. The most prominent pattern throughout this code was that being alone in community locations made youth feel unsafe, and additionally, strangers in these areas that were perceived as "*random*," "*weird*," "*scary*," or "*creepy*" contributed to this feeling. Parks were named as one location where youth observed strangers that made them feel this way, along with the wider Chestermere community. Youth frequently shared that walking around alone was uncomfortable, especially in the evening in areas that were not well lit in Chestermere. Again, this applied to Chestermere overall, although pathways near the canal and connecting pathways between neighbourhoods were highlighted as areas that were particularly dark.

> "...it's also kind of scary when there's just like some random people"
>
> "...sometimes like the streets can be like... there's like weird people there... Well one time we were walking, and this like, this old guy came up to us and he just like, talked to us about random things for like a half an hour. And we just like sit down [and] talk[ed] to him."

This makes sense in the context of the previous theme; youth told us that being around someone that they knew immediately made them feel safer, therefore, seeing people they do not know out in the community makes them feel less safe. Furthermore, this may be interpreted as knowing community members is a valued part of building a sense of safety for youth.

One large area in Chestermere was referenced at a much higher rate than other areas, which tells us that youth may feel less safe in this area compared to others. This large area included Anniversary Beach, the shops around Tim Hortons and A&W, the parking lot behind the RVS Community Learning Centre, the parking lot above John Peake Park, and John Peake Park. Youth described that they often saw "*weird*" or "*strange*" people in these areas while they were there alone or with friends. Again, we see strangers making youth feel uncomfortable. It was also highlighted that there were groups of youth that would hang out in these areas, which created decreased feelings of safety for other youth:

> "*...we all sat at the beach... we were just having sleepover, hanging out at night at the beach. There's just like a bunch of guys just staring at us, and I mean, they're all on bikes. They're all, like, really terrible.*"

The youth who tended to create these feelings for others were youth who were likely to be involved in conflict in schools. It then follows that these locations feel less safe during after-school hours and on weekends. There was one school that had an in-depth conversation about this area, which is where many of these details came from. They also noted that back alleys near their school were another place where conflict tends to happen, which made these spaces also feel more dangerous due to the risk of something happening. Circle K was noted as another location where conflict often occurred; youth who would hang around here often made fun of other youth, name-called, and became aggressive.

It should also be mentioned that youth had water safety concerns due to the Lake itself, on top of their concerns related to strangers and youth. They told us that they felt there was always something wrong with the lake, they had gotten bumps on their skin after swimming, cow feces had been detected in the water, and a deceased person was also found in the water. These all warning signs and issues for youth who wanted to use the Lake.



Bad drivers and large, busy intersections were noted as dangerous. The intersection at Chestermere Boulevard and East Chestermere Drive, along with the intersection at Chestermere Boulevard and Rainbow Road were identified as risky intersections for these reasons. Darkness and icy conditions worsened this danger.

Lastly, the Chestermere Family Bike Park was highlighted as unsafe because youth sometimes get into physical conflicts there. Sometimes drugs are present. It was mentioned, however, that it feels safer when parents and children are present. Similarly, the skate park near the Centre for Community Leadership building can sometimes feel similar to the Bike Park because the people who are often there can be mean and/or intoxicated. Again, it feels safer with Synergy staff present during the day.

## Code 2: Locations and/or Circumstances Where Youth do <u>not</u> Feel Safe in Langdon

The three focus groups in Langdon did not identify many unsafe places – it was only coded 6 times, so one comment was made for most of these locations. The few that were highlighted included crossing Centre Street near Brander Ave when it was dark out as it felt like cars did not stop for them. Another youth stated that they did not feel safe walking around Langdon, and another agreed saying that they felt someone could kidnap them. Lastly, one youth stated that Langdon Park did not feel safe but did not provide a reason why.

## Code 3: General Locations and/or Circumstances Where Youth do <u>not</u> Feel Safe

The code *general locations and/or circumstances where youth do not feel safe* describes experiences that are outside of Chestermere and Langdon. It was coded 15 times. A few youth noted that being alone made them feel unsafe, along with being home alone. Being away from home was noted as a circumstance that did not make them feel safe or being in other stranger's houses and unfamiliar places. A youth noted that being away from their parents made them feel less safe – note that this was from a younger participant. The large crowds at public attractions such as amusement parks created a sense of potential risk for a couple of youth. For one participant, being around cars felt dangerous due to the potential for accidents. Another youth commented that large, empty fields did not make them feel safe, and another stated that they felt unsafe everywhere.



## Code 4: People Contribute to Youth <u>not</u> Feeling Safe

The code *people contribute to youth not feeling safe* was identified 64 times and deals with how people can make youth feel physically and/or mentally unsafe no matter where they are – the location does not matter. It is the behaviours of the person that are more influential in creating a lack of safety. The comments below explain:

*"I feel like anybody could do bad things anywhere, like it's not something that someone could just do in one place. It could just be done anywhere."*

*"You can probably tell if somebody's not gonna keep an area safe judging by how they're behaving. So I guess what makes it unsafe is just general behaviour of people."*

Note that the patterns in this code were not necessarily mentioned by every single focus group. Some focus groups talked about these issues more in-depth than others. One of the most common patterns was how other youth made them feel less safe. Typically, the youth who created this feeling were in grades 9-11 and were "*hanging around*" in groups. Sometimes, groups of boys/men were noted to create this feeling. One important conversation with youth in middle school outlined that these groups of youth were often peer groups they had conflict with, described as "...*enemies. Rude people*," or "*Ops*" which represents a slang term for "*opposition*." One youth described experiencing harassment from other middle school youth. The below comment provides an example:

> "*When they're like in their gangs and stuff and like, they're roaming around the city with like, no real purpose and it's like... I don't know. It gives off weird vibes.*"

Another common pattern was predatory adults on video games and social media. They were described as pedophiles and were noted to make youth feel uncomfortable on all social media platforms and most video games – although Fortnite and Call of Duty were explicitly named. As an example of what this can look like, one youth shared the story below about what happened to them and their friends while playing a video game:

> "*...there's a guy and he like, we sound like a bunch of like little kids. So he kept, like, calling us, like, cute and hot its—*"

More often than not, youth didn't want to or didn't know if they could share the comments directed at them online, which was interpreted as these comments being so inappropriate that they did not feel comfortable sharing them out loud. It was noted that often this experience is different for boys and girls, although not much more detail was given. In terms of incidents on social media, one youth shared their experience, which occurred despite having their account private:

> "*I still have like old men DMing me... it's like, really weird. They're like 68, like gray hair. That's, like, really creepy. At one point I got really like sick of it and like this one dude kept DMing me. And then I told him I would call his wife and then he never— really creepy.*"



Related to this were the comments from girls about the way boys and/or men make them feel unsafe while walking on the streets. The stories below paint the picture of how this can occur:

> "*Probably just like creepy men staring at me or catcalling me... Me and my friend were sitting by the lake. And these two guys just kind of came up to us. And [were] like wanna hang out. And [we were] like hmm no. And then were like in their 20s [um] really creepy about it. There's another time where me and my friend were walking and this guy just kind of shouted at us something really weird, but I don't want to share what.*"

> *"Walking alone or like with my female friends at nighttime feels very unsafe, especially if there's guys around. And like getting catcalled as well. Feels very unsafe."*

Youth told us that being alone or the absence of safe people was another factor that decreased perceptions of safety. Comments such as "*kinda like when I'm alone and I don't really have anyone there that I trust,*" highlight that being alone can be frightening for youth, especially younger youth. Being home alone was another similar experience for a couple of participants. Strangers in their homes or being in crowds with strangers were also two related experiences, linked to the fact that again, *"you just don't know what people are gonna do."*

A real concern was the potential of kidnapping, especially for younger youth. Again, this was not about a particular area of Chestermere, but about people's behaviours and actions. In crowded spaces, youth stated that they could get separated from their parents. They also feared white vans. Note that a few of these focus groups were conducted around November 2022, after a white van was spotted near a few schools in Chestermere, which then proceeded to go into a hold in place. This recent experience may have made this fear of white vans more of a concern for some youth. In a similar vein, three youth noted that they had been followed or their friends had been followed while walking in the community.

> *"…you know how there are like kidnappings, of like, safety for other kids at schools, at parks. And just kidnappings just by itself."* [Facilitator: *"Do you feel scared of that like in Chestermere?"*]. *"Yeah, like, it's like, everywhere, but some places it's not as much in other places. It's like really high."*

Lastly, four comments were made regarding how family members sometimes made youth feel unsafe, mostly due to conflict between family members.

### Code 5: Other Contributors to Youth <u>not</u> Feeling Safe

The final code in this theme is *other contributors to youth not feeling safe* and was coded six times. Each of the following factors that made youth feel unsafe was mentioned once: being out late at night; the fact that crimes can happen anywhere; gates in backyards can be opened easily so anyone could walk in; not knowing where the exit in a building is; and hearing about dangerous events from parents.



Please note that often, the previously discussed locations in both Themes 1 and 2 may have been evaluated as both safe and not safe by youth. The feeling of safety in these spots seems to depend on the circumstances and/or the people in those locations.

# THEME 3: SAFETY IN SCHOOLS

This theme describes the ways in which youth feel safe in schools. The codes in this theme are *perceptions and experiences of safety in schools; changes to schools;* and *changes to education.*

## Code 1: Perceptions and Experiences of Safety in Schools

The first code in this theme, *perceptions and experiences of safety in schools*, describes general information and stories about youth's perceptions and experiences of safety and wellbeing in schools. It was coded 78 times. Despite bullying occurring in schools, this information is included in the next theme. We chose to keep this information separate so that there would be one succinct story related to bullying.

Although most of this code identifies factors that lead to a decrease in feelings of safety, it is important to note that there were youth who said school was a safe place for them and that certain aspects of school made them feel safe. Most of these comments stated that the people at school, such as friends, teachers, and the CDAs/counsellors made them feel safe. They have established relationships with people who are supportive, they feel accepted, and importantly, "...*there's like an established like, trust between everyone at the school.*" At the very least, they know the people around them and again, this familiarity creates feelings of security – youth know that if something were to happen, the familiar faces around them would help. They also noted that the chances of something happening in schools are low and that no one can come into the school to hurt them.

Youth shared stories about relationships with teachers. Comments about issues with teachers ranged from how teachers "*just don't seem like the comforting type of teacher*" to the quotes below:

> "...*I feel like it's really hard to get help from teachers now without like. How do I say like? Making it hard or like sometimes scared.*"
>
> "...*on occasion like teachers like the really bad ones, they would... say just like little things and, and other times [teacher A] would be saying big things like one time when [teacher A] told my [sibling] that [they] are just a little crybaby and no one should be friends with [them]. But you know, great teachers!*"



Youth expressed that teachers have an impact. They felt that teachers are hard to talk to, that not being able to connect with teachers can sometimes create problems, and that even just small comments can add up. If you go to them for help, they will tell you that you are fine, or they will ignore you completely. This results in it being hard to talk to them in general. For those who don't feel like they can share their struggles or ask for help at home, feeling this way about teachers does not help their case. Additionally, teachers often add to the stress students experience by creating a heavy workload, making it feel for some youth "*like there's no time to relieve the anxiety.*"

It was also noted by a couple of participants that guidance counsellors may not be a good support. One youth shared that they had gone to the guidance counsellor a few times, and the counsellor was stressed and not welcoming. This made this youth feel like they couldn't go to the counsellor if they needed help.

*"...each school has like guidance counsellors, but not many like students trust guidance counsellors and for good reason."*

Next, students discussed physical safety concerns within schools. Importantly, this conversation was more likely at the middle school and high school focus groups. A few students shared that youth have threatened their peers with physical violence, sometimes referred to as threats of *"getting jumped."* They said this happens approximately weekly, and enough that it should be addressed.

*"Like being like jumped, you know, like, ganged up on pretty much like, I just feel like, you know, people like gang up on someone and then make that person feel really unsafe... and I just feel like that's not right in a school area where you should be feeling safe..."*



Related, participants discussed how students bring weapons to school, such as mace and knives. A story was shared about a student being harmed by mace. Students expressed concern about how the consequences for perpetrating these harmful acts did not feel proportionate or fair to the harm they caused. Further interpretation of this concern reveals that youth may feel that the inappropriate consequences in and of themselves add to decreased feelings of safety.

*"I felt like [they] could have been suspended for more. Not because I don't like [them], but like it's like bear mace. Like and, you're [at a] school."*

Other comments about schools include that youth did not feel that they could share who they are, or that they had switched schools because of not feeling comfortable in their previous schools. There was agreement among a few youth that public school was not safe, but bullying could happen anywhere. The pressure to do well in academics was also related to this feeling of not feeling comfortable in school. The stories below speak for this experience in schools:

*"I didn't really feel safe a lot at school last year because I felt like I just couldn't really share my opinion. And like, I felt like nobody really agreed with me or like, wanted me as like my personality. So I felt like I had to change myself. And that's not a good thing."*

An interesting pattern emerged. Youth in Catholic schools perceived public schools to be less safe than their schools. They either had friends who went to public schools or said that they had heard stories about the environment of public schools. The general feeling was that public schools were not welcoming, students were rude to each other, and sometimes fights occurred. The first quote below represents this perception, while the second quote represents how students feel safe in their schools in comparison to public schools. There were no comments from focus groups in public schools that they perceived Catholic schools to be unsafe.

Related, younger youth in public schools shared how the middle and high schools did not feel like a safe environment. They said that they had heard stories about things that happened in these schools, which may be feeding a more negative or fearful view of these schools. A few had also mentioned that they had gone on field trips there and had not felt safe while in the building.

A handful of youth flagged that the hallways at school put their physical safety at risk due to older students intentionally pushing others in the hall and yelling during class changes, despite teachers asking them to stop. Some students in an elementary school noted that they had seen strangers dressed in dark clothing around the school's field during recess. The presence and behaviour of these strangers made this a scary experience for these young students. Lastly, students flagged that the crosswalk outside of St. Gabriel the Archangel School and Prairie Waters Elementary was dangerous - they had seen students and parents almost get hit by vehicles in the rush before and after school. Students in both schools commented on this.

Importantly, this code emphasizes that schools can be both safe and unsafe for youth, depending on the circumstances and the people around them. The usefulness of this code is that it does a good job of identifying factors that could be addressed at schools to improve perceptions and experiences of safety.

The second code in this theme describes *changes to schools* that youth identify would improve their feelings of safety, care, and overall wellbeing at schools. It was coded 57 times. It includes changes to how schools function, including structures and cultures within schools. Gaps and needs specific to schools are found in this code.

Most immediately, students identified that distracted and dangerous drivers around the school crosswalk in front of St. Gabriel the Archangel and Prairie Waters needed to be addressed. Another topic discussed across multiple focus groups was the feeling that youth go to school only to learn, when they want school to meet much more than educational needs. They identified that they wanted school to be more fun, and for pressure to be decreased by decreasing the amount of homework. Field trips and other learning opportunities were identified as methods to make learning more engaging, but they must be financially accessible. Students also asked for more ways to build relationships and a sense of community. This was particularly important to youth; the topic of school dances and other gatherings was referenced many times as a way to meet students' need for social interaction and belonging to a community. The quotes below tell this story nicely.

*"…make connections with people because at this age, like during your adolescence, it's very important to make connections with people. And make… as many friends as you can because it helps with the development of the brain, you know, emotionally like helps you."*

*"Also, the dances it's more, more like school spirit with the dances and stuff like that because it also gets everyone together and it's a community thing…"*



When asked what would improve their wellbeing at school, one student replied by saying they wanted peers to be more welcoming when interacting with new students. Perhaps some of the changes regarding building a sense of community between students would help address this, especially for new students.

Again, the topic of how to address incidents in schools arose and was discussed in-depth by a focus group in a school that experienced a fair amount of conflict. They felt that the consequences  were not proportionate to the harm the student inflicted, and they felt that the consequences did not contribute to any change in the student causing the issue. Additionally, it was noted that because the consequences often do not support a healthy behaviour change, other students continue to be negatively impacted. This narrative revealed a tension between youth wanting to see proportionate justice applied for poor behaviour but also wanting to see a behaviour change facilitated by the consequences or an intervention. Take the time to read the quotes on the next page that clearly outline this tension.

*"But like for something like actually like pulling out a weapon on someone, I think that deserves more of a severe punishment than just two days [suspension]."*

*"I feel like we should be able to, you know, more suspensions or actually expel students because there are so many students in this school who do not care at all. And the school's like, "oh, well, you have to keep them in the classroom or else they're just going to skip." And that's not our problem if they skip basically. And we're like, well, now they're stuck with us and now we can't learn. We can't engage because they're interrupting everything."*

*"I don't think we need to bring back suspensions and expulsions because I know those actually cause more problems with students... When you restrict a child, don't do this, don't do this and it's a bunch of like, don't, don't, don't. We're going to go... break the rules, it's just normal like behaviour. I don't know how to explain it but if you say don't skip, I'm more tempted to go skip, right... Those punishments are not going to work... What are they going to learn just from being disciplined? ... they should start teaching, you know, students why not to do this behaviour, why it's wrong and like what to do better next time and what's a better way to express yourself than going and macing a kid that said they were going to jump you..."*

The main takeaway was that only punishment was not helpful, but neither was removing all consequences. There needs to be a mechanism by which youth are *both* held accountable and learn how to change their behaviour.

A critical youth noted that the changes that had been identified in this code would likely not be possible without funding:



*"I'm sorry to interrupt, but I feel like the problem is that there's never money here to actually fund these things, or like you always have to pay such a high amount, you know like... Financially, it's not accessible."*

Students at both Rocky View Schools and Calgary Catholic Schools noticed that there was an overall lack of funding, and this needed to be addressed. Some of the indicators of this lack of funding, noticed by youth, are below

- Band teachers had to pay for music sheets.
- Old textbooks.
- Teachers have no extra pencils to hand out.
- Computers that do not work.
- The CDA's support space was not viewed as meeting their needs.
- Field trips were financially inaccessible.

Related, two youth flagged changes they would like to see regarding staff resourcing. One noted that *"a lot of the teachers are overworked and like they don't have time to do their stuff,"* which should be addressed. Another stated that they would like to see two guidance counsellors, each managing a separate portfolio: one who only supports course choices and career choices, and another who only supports mental health needs.

Youth said that they would like to see more extracurricular activities and/or clubs offered within schools, such as a school floor hockey team. It was emphasized that these should be free and accessible to all. A youth shared why:

*"I don't know about other schools, but in my school, there's like, no clubs at all. And I feel like clubs would be good because I kind of feel like in Chestermere, if you don't play hockey, you don't really matter. So I feel like more just like special interest clubs."*

The confidence of youth to ask for their needs to be met within schools was inspiring. They challenged the duration and frequency of breaks. They felt that just five minutes more minutes would be enough to make breaks feel longer.

*"Sometimes I feel like we just don't have enough time to eat. Or even like go to breakfast club get to school and like get breakfast in the morning. Not enough time."*

*"We only get one lunch break. It's been scientifically proven that like a human brain can only focus for like 20 minutes until we need a 5 minute break. We don't even get those breaks. We're expected to learn, learn, and learn. But we're not learning. That's the problem, right?"*

They also challenged the food options available to them in the cafeterias or lunchrooms. They felt that there needed to be more food options, healthier food options, and treats like ice cream. One school identified that they simply needed a cafeteria. One of the focus groups in Langdon felt strongly that the water tasted weird and wanted better quality water.

Note that some of these changes may seem trivial or 'nice to have,' but they carry a lot of significance to youth, especially when considering the context outside of schools. For example, youth may not have access to healthy food or extra pencils at home, so experiencing these barriers at school as well can feel unsupportive to many youth.

The code *changes to education* deals with changes specific to learning and the curriculum. It was coded 12 times. The topic of having fun at school arose again, but this time about the content they learn and the way they engage in learning. Some youth identified that they do not feel engaged in learning and they do not have fun learning. This had more to do with the ways teachers instructed and the information shared. They felt that some parts of the curriculum do not contribute to real-life application. The insight here may be that the reasons for why they learn this information are not clear or obvious to youth. The quote below is a fair representation of this perspective that challenges the way students learn:

> *"I feel like school's not even engaging anymore. Like you just sit there, you write down your math notes, and then the math test comes up, and then now you're all worried because you don't understand because there was no engagement... Sometimes, yeah, it can be your fault, but like the way that teachers teach nowadays is terrible, especially the teachers that I have... If it was like my issue, then I would have been like the only one saying that. But it's the whole class literally saying that that they have a problem learning in [teacher B's] class, that they're not learning anything, that it's like hard to actually engage in [teacher B's] class."*

Along a similar line, youth asked for more variety in the options/electives available to them. Youth at the middle school stated that they wanted options/electives that were similar to the ones offered at the high schools. They felt that options were repetitive and wanted new topics to engage with.

# THEME 4: SOCIAL DYNAMICS

This theme gives details about social dynamics between youth. The codes in this theme are *understanding of bullying; social relationships between youth; bullying online; safety online;* and *racism.*

## Code 1: Understanding of Bullying

An interesting pattern was identified during analysis – the code *understanding of bullying* reveals how youth understand bullying and how they define it. This informed their attitude that bullying is wrong. These details are also a good indication of how education and awareness campaigns on this topic have positively changed knowledge and attitudes. This code was identified 17 times.

Importantly, youth described that there is a difference between teasing and bullying. One grade five focus group shared that they had a discussion in their classrooms about this. One of these students observed that people do not realize when they cross the line from teasing to bullying, which can result in youth not understanding the impact of their actions and cases of bullying getting missed because it's seen as teasing. Their comment is below:

> *"Well, maybe... they're just doing this for fun and they don't know limits 'cause they haven't been taught by the parents yet... Yeah, it's a very like thin line and so that makes it hard to believe. But sometimes you gotta take the benefit of the doubt and be like, "Yeah, okay, that's hard" and give them like support or help..."*

Bullying is a cycle that is difficult to get out of, especially when you have been bullied for a long time or when multiple people think it is okay for the behaviour to continue. Youth felt strongly that it is not right to bully, and that it is a serious matter. It has an impact on the person being bullied:

> *"...like, it's not a joke, to like, tell someone about their like body, or like, tell them to do something, which bossing them around controlling them. And they knew that like, wasn't okay."*



Youth also shared insight regarding the bully. These comments came from a place of empathy – a perspective that wanted to understand why the bully felt they needed to hurt others and that the bully is in need of help themselves. The quotes below are also from another grade five focus group and show the nuanced understanding youth at this age hold.

> *"...only hurt people bully. Only extremely hurt and unhappy on the inside people would hurt others and those people don't know... how to deal with it."*
>
> *"Sometimes bullies... they have a problem in, um, their life... they just kind of take it out on others and basically bully them because they don't really know what to do. They take it out on others like it's their fault. But really, it's no one's fault."*
>
> *"...but some [bullies] just need some attention and support."*
>
> *"... they want to try and reach out, they they're begging for help, [looking for] support, but they're driving people away. And they don't know how to reach out and communicate."*

### Code 2: Social Relationships Between Youth

The code *social relationships between youth* is a large category dedicated to negative relationships between youth. Youth described stories about bullying, how often they feel that it happens, and what the impacts are. Youth also shared experiences that they didn't perceive as bullying, such as being teased, hearing rude comments, or peers and/or friends being mean – which may appear as bullying to an outsider. Physical conflict between peers was also discussed. It was coded 105 times.

Before we dig in, this code requires a brief reminder about the methods of this research; qualitative research methods do not give us information about how often bullying or conflicts between peers occur or how many youth are impacted. Therefore, the following information does not describe this. Instead, these methods allow us to understand details about youths' experiences and provides insight into what they are required to grapple with as they navigate these experiences. So, the following section will contain a lot of details about bullying, but these details do not necessarily represent the experience for all youth and do not mean that youth are in a constant unsafe state. That being said, there is a portion of youth who have these experiences. Hence, these details will help us understand how to address these issues – we are reminded that one youth experiencing bullying or conflict is one youth too many.

It is important to highlight that there were a handful of youth who told us they did not have any experiences with bullying. There was also another handful of youth who said they personally had not experienced bullying, but they knew people who had. Often, this resulted in youth sharing stories about how their friends or siblings had been bullied.



Youth shared that bullying could happen both in and out of schools, although a lot of the stories occurred within schools. This is most likely due to youth spending a large majority of their time at school with peers. The stories they shared with us were either experiences that had happened a while ago and the bullying had stopped by the time the focus group had occured, or they were stories based on current and ongoing experiences. Some youth noted bullying had happened to them for years. When youth were asked how often they were bullied, they said it occurred anywhere from a few times a week to "*all the time.*"

Youth said they are most often bullied for physical appearance such as clothing choice, body size, hair, and generally the way they look. Sometimes, youth noted that they were "*made fun of*" for these things and may not have used the word 'bullying' to describe this experience, as one of the quotes below highlights. Other reasons youth were targeted included how their perspective was different, for who their friends were, insecurities, and one youth noted they got picked on because of their sexual identity. We found it interesting that only one comment was made regarding bullying due to sexual identity. In practice, Synergy staff often hear that youth get bullied for sexuality and gender, and the adult focus groups identified this as well.

> "*...even if I'm like wearing like a different style shirt or something. Sometimes I get made fun of because that's not normally what I wear.*"
>
> "*Like my weight my appearance was stuff like that. And then recently this just this year, the other guys are bullying me and just because why not?... And he's also like, pretty inappropriate towards me like he always like, touch me, like rather inappropriately, but no one will do anything about it. Because it's just boys being boys.*"

Youth told us what bullying or harmful relationships with peers could look like. Saying or yelling mean comments, getting shoved into lockers, being called names such as "wuss," being called slurs "like the c slur," or not being taken seriously were ways bullying is experienced. Another youth made the following observation:

*"…I feel like bullying can happen in ways that like you don't really expect in school as well, like it's not only the physical bullying but like other people just pressuring you to act a certain way or like kind of controlling your actions."*

Interestingly, a few dismissed they had experiences of bullying. They tended to downplay the seriousness of the issue by stating that it was "*just little things*" or "*little sly remarks.*" However, from the way they described it, their experience may be considered bullying. A few youth from both middle and high schools were heard making these comments, such as the ones below.

*"I don't really know how to explain it, like it wasn't like intense bullying. Like I wasn't like, shoved into lockers or whatever. Just kind of, just like teased, really…, it's just kind of like tiny like remarks and stuff like that, that they would just kind of bring up over and over again…"*

*"But I feel like occasionally you always find that person that's just like finds it fun to make fun of you and make you feel down, like not good about yourself. Yeah, like not bullying, just teasing. And rude things happening."*



Not surprisingly, there was a range of people in youths' lives who committed these acts. Most often, it was peers their age or in their classes. Two youth noted that popular youth bully others. Siblings could be perpetrators of bullying. Sometimes youth do not know the bully – they may just be "random" peers in the hallway who feel the need to shove them into lockers. Additionally, a common experience shared between youth was friends being bullies. Sometimes they were hurt or betrayed by friends when they shared something in confidence. Bullying from friends could look like being made fun of for something personal to comments like telling "*you to kill yourself.*" The result of this was that some youth struggled to make friends, experienced feelings of isolation, or lost friendships. Lastly, a unique observation was made by one participant who stated "*…one thing that really goes unnoticed is when like adults bully kids.*" This links back to some of the previous comments shared about how teachers' remarks or language choices towards students can be harmful.

Youth that were experiencing bullying or hurtful comments were sometimes made to feel that it was not a big deal, that it was a joke. The below quotes tell this story:

*"It's kind of just like oh, just joking. And then you hear that, it's kind of like oh, okay, well then I shouldn't make a big deal out of it though. If everyone's saying that it was just a joke."*

*"Another thing is a lot of problems just get ignored because they're not as big of a deal, people like completely ignore them or like say… that can't happen to you instead of like actually doing anything about it."*

And yet, it goes without saying that bullying has an impact. Many stories shared with us revealed frustration with how peers continuously said hurtful things to them, unprovoked. One youth simply stated, "*thankfully, I don't deal with that now, but the aftermath, I'm still [stuck] with a little bit.*" Hearing rude comments from peers in classes made a student feel like they "*didn't really connect with anyone like, sometimes people were really against me instead of with me. Like, it was an odd feeling and I just didn't feel like I should be there...*" Often, those who bullied thought their comments were funny, it was a big joke, and "*everybody laughs you know, but deep down inside that you don't, you don't feel that.*"

The details provided about how youth have attempted to address bullying highlight that youth may struggle to do this. Sometimes, youth try to deal with it on their own by staying out of it or backing out of it. One youth noted that if they tried to stand up for themselves in front of the bullies, they would receive threats about being physically harmed or "*jumped*" in response. They may also tell someone. Yet, if they do tell someone, youth noted it did not do much to address the bullying. For example, one youth told us they asked to be moved away from the person who was bullying them in class, which the teacher agreed to do, but never did. Another told their parent, who "*basically said to try to get over it.*" The below story is another case of telling someone about the bullying.

> "*...I brought it up with a lot of people and some of them have tried to help and at this point... I'm about to tell people or like tell my teacher like it's gone on for way too long.*"

A middle school focus group discussed the presence of gossip or spreading rumours among peers. It can vary in how it appears and could occur both in-person and online. Youth told us that "*it's kind of like over... stupid stuff mostly*" and "*half the time it's [made up].*" The general feeling shared in this group that it was not a serious problem, and that "*it's not really harmful. It just ends a couple friendships. It's kind of funny though.*" However, despite the lack of concern towards this experience, we know that gossip and rumours do have an impact, as the following quote speaks to:

> "*...there's just times of like if I wanted to share something [it goes] around [and] becomes something that I didn't want it to be.*"

The topic of conflict between youth was prevalent in another middle school focus group. The conflict was summarized by two youth:

> "*All the beef and the fights, like the mace... stuff like the weapons*"

> "*A bunch of different friend groups that don't mix well.*"

In fact, youth stated that conflict appears to be between white and Lebanese youth. Youth consistently referred to the groups they had conflict with as "*ops*," which stood as slang for 'opposition.' An important characteristic of this was the verbal conflict between youth:

> *"...like if one of them, like, hear you like talking smack."*
>
> *"If one group hears something that the other group said, and like you're both in like 6 feet distance of each other, then that's like when problems happen"*
>
> *"... say slurs like that... it's not even like they're scary, it's just like they act like there's something more than what they are, and they intimidate you. And so you think you're scared."*

This tension then leads to physical conflict between youth. They would threaten peers with weapons or flash them. These weapons included knives, bear spray/mace, batons, airsoft guns (often incorrectly called BB guns), and it was noted that a gun was present in at least one instance of conflict. Further, the above quotes highlight the occurrence of physical fights. Note that although this issue wasn't discussed by other focus groups to the same extent that this particular one did, other focus groups noted the presence of "*gangs*" that cause problems such as hurting others with airsoft guns. Hence, youth outside of the one school likely notice these issues.



### Code 3: Bullying Online

The next code in this theme discusses *bullying online,* which includes bullying that occurs on various media platforms such as texting platforms, Snapchat, TikTok, and various video games (Roblox, Bed Wars, Fortnite, etc.). It was coded 20 times, so there were not nearly as many details provided on this topic compared to the one prior. Note that some of the younger youth (i.e., grades five to eight) did not have social media so they said they did not experience cyberbullying on these platforms. Youth told us that bullying online could look similar to bullying face-to-face. They can be bullied online by their friends, by people from school, or by strangers. Being bullied by strangers is more prevalent in video games where they play in large groups of other players. Name-calling and rude comments occur frequently on video games and they told us that "*it's mostly people who are just mad because they're losing. So they decide to take it out on like, the teammates.*" And "*a lot of it [happens] in our Fortnight... It's like sad and stuff,*" almost to the extent where it has become normalized:

> *"Like a lot of online things that like normalize bullying like to the point where like, you can like just like try to be playing game with your friends and then just like having people just like... yelling at you, like swearing at you... they get mad and so like try to leak your IP address so then a bunch of people shut off your wifi..."*

The added complexity of bullying online is that youth can become anonymous. They told us that sometimes, peers will create alternative accounts on social media so they cannot be traced back to their actions online. Sometimes there will be large groups of youth involved in the account, which makes it harder to trace who is making posts and comments from that account. Participants told us they had heard of both girls and boys having nude photos of themselves shared around. They were *"bullied for that and people post[ed] about it."* Again, not surprisingly, cyberbullying harms youth:

> *"..there's many times where like my cousins or some friends, they would feel really good about themselves, and then post a photo of themselves thinking that they look really pretty. And then you'd look on their comments, and then it'd be just other girls or guys like, putting them down. And then you see them adjust themselves in your life... they start eating less because they say that* "oh, you're too fat," *or* "you're too skinny." *So they started eating more, or they dress differently..."*

## Code 4: Safety Online

The next code, *safety online*, describes strategies or stories about how youth stay safe around peers online, and how technology and/or media impacts their feelings of safety. This code also acknowledges positive attributes of online platforms (e.g., connection). It was coded 32 times. Aside from cyberbullying experiences, youth found that having their location visible to others and the security of video games also influenced how they felt safe online. Youth also noted that being online can be a positive thing, such as creating online friends to play video games with.

Youth relayed a wide range of strategies they use to stay safe online. The most frequently used strategy was only playing with friends or people they knew online. If you have friends in the game, then they could stand up for you if something negative were to happen. They noted that if negative comments were being said in a group-style game, then they could put that person on mute, report, or block them, as outlined by the quote below. This applies to social media and messaging apps as well. Sometimes, youth said, playing as a solo player (i.e., not in a group game) is a good solution.



> *"It's always having that report or block option. So like if I'm in chatting or like I get sent something that's not very like appropriate or like is bullying or like the start of bullying or teasing... Or block them, and so they're just like out. And I don't have to see them or talk to them anymore."*

When it came to connecting on messaging apps or social media, youth felt that if they shared something with a friend they trust online, then it would not reach anyone else. However, we know that this might not hold true, and may be something to consider clarifying with youth. One youth highlighted an important feature of apps by saying *"Something that makes me feel safe is having private accounts,"* and observed that control over friend requests important feature for feeling safe online. Additionally, the ability to stop sharing your location publicly was a key safety feature of apps and/or games.

This code discusses how youth experience *racism*. It was coded 13 times and describes experiences of racism and prejudice against youth with varying ethnic/racial identities. Most often, youth told us that being called slurs was how they experienced racism. They said their friends would call them racial slurs, and despite being asked to stop, they continued because they thought it was funny. Peers in schools can also engage in this behaviour, as one youth described below. A younger participant observed that white peers in school would say that movements like Black Lives Matter were not important. Sometimes, it was strangers in the community yelling racist slurs while they were outside. Similarly, people in video games would call others racial slurs; one youth shared how they had heard their friend attacked in a video game for their ethnicity many times before.

*"I've had… like their eyes pulled out at me [gestures to their face, pulling eyes apart], like in this school specifically."*

The intersection of ethnicity and religion is also important to acknowledge, considering the role of religion in our communities. The first quote below shares the experience of some youth whose realities sit at this intersection. The second quote below shares a story about how a student ironically experienced racism during a culture day event at their school – an event designed to celebrate and foster appreciation of the diversity in our community.

*"I did have… experiences with bullying and it was like groups of girls that just didn't like me and I think it was because of religion. So I'm Muslim and we both came from the same religion, but there's different parts of it, right? They were Sunni. I'm Shia like they didn't like that."*

*"I actually had a bunch of white women calling my dress a costume which I found offending because… like when you think of a costume you think of like Halloween dress up type of thing. That's not a costume. It's like a traditional dress. And then I actually tried to correct a bunch of them, and they either walked away and didn't listen, and I got in trouble… attitude I guess."*

# THEME 5: MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Part of this project was understanding mental health and wellbeing. The codes in this theme were: *attitudes towards mental health and wellbeing; suicide; barriers to expressing needs*; and *youth support characteristics.*

## Code 1: Attitudes Towards Mental Health and Wellbeing

The first code of this theme is *attitudes towards mental health and wellbeing.* It was coded 52 times and describes broad attitudes, perceptions, and understandings youth hold towards mental health and wellness. This does not include comments related to specific barriers of mental health, even though you could consider youth perceiving negative attitudes as a barrier; instead, we have included these comments in the code *barriers to expressing needs.*

Youth told us their thoughts about mental health and wellbeing. Most who commented on this said that it is good to talk about how you feel. The paraphrased comments below show the range of individual perspectives:

- You need to go to the "*right person*" when you talk about how you feel.
- It is a problem if you do not talk to others about your mental health with others.
- As an individual, they do not judge others by their mental health state.
- Empathy is important because everyone is going through something. It doesn't matter how severe you think it is – it feels difficult for that person.
- As an individual, they preferred to deal with their problems independently and not share with others.

Participants did an excellent job of describing the landscape of attitudes and reactions they have observed in their peers. Some youth said that there was no stigma around mental health and that when "*talking to kids my own age, I think they're pretty supportive.*" This group felt that there is typically no judgment if you ask for help. Some youth said that it depends, or sometimes there is a stigma. This was mostly dependent on the person they talked to, although not many other details were given. Some people would be very empathetic, while others could be rude if you tried to share about your wellbeing or showed displays of emotion. An example is below.

*"I try and talk about how my brain functions and how some things don't work with me for certain things, and usually I'm helped, but sometimes I'm put down."*

Unfortunately, outside of the few comments above, most youth felt that there is a stigma around mental health and attitudes towards it may not be supportive. They felt they would be judged if they started to talk about their mental health, the person might not understand what they meant, or the person might tell them that they were wrong. Peers "...*would say it doesn't really matter, they'd start talking about themselves.*" Displays of emotion, especially crying, were noted to be met with judgment. The reality that people make assumptions about your mental health was brought up, such as making assumptions that "*you can't be struggling with your mental health, you look so happy.*"

Interestingly, there were a handful of comments outlining that if you overshared about your mental health or well-being, you may get teased about it or made fun of for it. Apparently, this usually doesn't turn into an ongoing bullying situation and will stop after 1-2 days. For example, no one will judge you if you say "*you're going through some minor, just like, you're feeling something. But like, if you say like, like, overly specific stuff like that, something that like your classmates shouldn't know,*" then you may get teased, made fun of, or may "*get like weird look[s] or something.*" Also, "*bringing [mental health/wellbeing] up like a lot, and always using that as an excuse to do or not do something… then people will like stop talking to you and [stop] wanting to talk to you*" was another result of supposedly 'oversharing' about your well-being.

Empathy is a big part of being supportive when receiving someone sharing about their wellbeing and mental health – and yet the prior and following comments make a very clear argument that some youth struggle to be empathetic and supportive to peers when sharing about mental health and wellbeing. Not taking mental disorders seriously was mentioned a few times – peers asking if they can have some of your ADHD medication because they think taking medication is cool, for example. Mental disorders are "… *no big deal, you know, like they just kind of walk all over it.*" Another youth noted that when you share your problems, the listening peer made it seem like it was their problem. The lack of listening and diminishing was noted as very problematic, and as one youth stated, "*it's like nobody listens anymore, you know, nobody's like actually listening.*" The three stories below provide more detailed explanations.

*"…if you ever try opening up to anyone, it's like they don't even listen anymore. Like you're like,* "oh yeah like I had this panic attack." *And then they're like,* "well, I've had panic attacks like this many times. And now look at me." *Or it's* "oh, but I've also been through this." *Like I literally did not ask for your experience. I'm sorry, but this is a 'me' moment. Just listen."*

*"I feel like at this point everyone is just comparing mental health. Just because like someone went through something worse or not like as bad as one another, like it still shouldn't be compared. I don't know why people are starting to compare their mental health."*

*Like say I went up to [peer]. And I'm like,* "oh, I'm panicking" *and everything. Most people these days are going to be like* "oh I've had like four of those this morning."

Some important observations were discussed by the focus groups. They identified that boys face more stigma than other genders, illustrated by the statement "*I think a lot more guys have to deal with not being able to talk about it,*" and that boys "*…can't say anything because then it's like soft or something.*" They also discussed that the attitude parents have towards mental health can directly impact the attitudes youth have towards mental health. It depends on how youth were raised – if they grew up with mental health being discussed by their parents, then they usually have a good attitude towards it. But if they didn't, they might not know what it is and how to discuss it. Additionally, "*…a lot of kids have just been raised to just deal with it.*" The intersection of culture in this context was noted from personal experience:

*"I know a lot of brown parents don't really talk about mental health. They [would] think it's non-existent or an overreaction… I think that just gets passed down to their kids and they can't get out of that. So they're stuck feeling reacting the same way as their parents do."*

When asked what they think would improve this, the participant said that it would be hard to change parents' attitudes, so instead, youth should learn or be supported to become more empathetic towards each other, especially at a young age *"because not caring about mental health is like a lack of empathy towards another person."*

Only 2 comments were made in the youth focus groups regarding *suicide*. This code is the acknowledgement that a girl died by suicide last year. One comment stated, "...*we can't forget that I believe a girl committed suicide because of bullying at school*." The other comment noted that every time she tried to reach out for help, she was told she was overreacting. Note how this aligns with some of the comments above about how youth are told they overreact when they share about their wellbeing.

## Code 3: Barriers to Expressing Needs

The next code, *barriers to expressing needs*, is specific to the barriers that youth experience when expressing needs, sharing personal matters, or asking for help. This includes the reactions and perceived stigma when youth express needs. Attitudes towards asking for help are another key aspect of this code. It was coded 33 times.

The consensus on this matter was that the biggest barrier to expressing needs is the variation in reactions that are possible when sharing your needs or concerns – it really depends on the person. For many youth, this variation creates a sense of uncertainty and prevents them from expressing their needs, as one youth intends by saying "*you never know how people are gonna react so you'd rather just keep it to yourself.*"

Below is a list of the types of reactions that are possible when youth share their needs or concerns with peers in their lives. The most cited reactions were judgment and rumours. The latter was a big concern for a group in middle school.

- The peer judges you: "...*oh, they're just being dramatic, oh they're probably emo,*" and *"you are attention seeking."*
- The peer spreads rumours about you. This has consequences and often creates a greater sense of decreased safety.
- The peer does not understand: "... *a couple of my friends don't really understand that I'm a little bit different than them.*"
- The peer does not believe you.
- The peer makes fun of you or bullies you. This makes you "*feel isolated and alone.*"
- The peer lectures you.
- Conflict occurs between you and the peer you shared with.
- The peer comforts and supports you.
- The peer ignores you.

Youth shared the possible outcomes when expressing their needs to an adult. Again, the uncertainty here can prevent youth from expressing their needs.

- The adult does not understand.
- The adult does not help when they are asked to help, is dismissive or ignores them.
- The adult helps, but what they do only doesn't create any change.
- The adult helps, but what they do only helps a little bit.
- The adult helps, but what they do only makes things worse.

The last barrier was snitching. Only two comments were made on this. Youth who ask for help are seen as "*weak*" and are likely to get bullied even more after the bullies find out they snitched. This all being said, it is important to know that there are youth who do not experience barriers to sharing needs or concerns: "...*it's just always been easy.*"

## Code 4: Youth Support Characteristics

The last few codes highlighted that youth are very aware of how people can vary in their attitudes towards mental health and their willingness to be empathetic to their needs. How do we move forward and address some of the identified issues? Who are the 'right' people? Who are the people that youth go to express their needs and what characteristics do they have? This next code will give some starting places. *Youth support characteristics* identifies the individuals who are supports in youths' lives. It also describes the characteristics of these individuals that contribute to safety. Lacking these characteristics results in youth not seeking support. Some youth noted that they were unsure or did not have any support in their lives. It was coded 126 times.

In order of most frequently named to least frequently named, the list below contains the people youth told us they go to for help. Importantly, the common factor across all these people was the deep and established relationship youth held with them.

- Friends. Note: three youth said that online friends can be supports in their lives
- Parents
- Teachers
- Siblings
- Cousins
- CDAs/counsellors at school
- No one
- Adults in youth community programs
- Counsellors/therapists
- Pastors

Youth noted that sometimes, the difference between going to your friends or your parents about something is based on who you feel comfortable sharing with and the type of information you need to share. Sometimes, youth may not feel like talking to a person. They shared a few strategies they might use if they feel this way:

- Talk to pets.
- Go outside.
- Go to their room and relax.
- Write a letter to the person you are struggling with.
- Write in a journal or the notes app on their phone.
- Online resources or helplines such as the Distress Centre.
- Talk to themselves.

Lastly, the list below provides the characteristics of people youth evaluate to be safe. These characteristics were very important to youth feeling like they could go to that adult or peer for help, or to simply be listened to. These characteristics are ordered from most to least frequently referenced.

- You trust them.
  - Youth noted that trust is something that is built over time.
- They give good, genuine advice and they know how to help.
- There is privacy/confidentiality – what you say won't be shared.
- They truly listen.
- They really care for you and are kind.
- There is reciprocity in the relationship.
  - The person is there for the youth, just like how the youth is there for them.
  - The person shares how they are feeling as well. This can often help youth feel like it is not just them feeling that way or that there is permission space to share feelings.
- They understand what the youth is experiencing.
- There is no judgement.
- They feel comfortable with the person.
- They do not make it about themselves.
- Their values align.
- They do not diminish what the youth is going through.
- They follow up with the youth to make sure they are okay.
- They are available.

Critically, a commonality across this list was empathy as an enabling factor; in order for people to have these characteristics, they needed to be empathetic. They had lived through what youth were struggling with, they had similar experiences, they had contextual knowledge, or they simply just understood. Some stories below highlight this.

*"...especially my parents because like they've been there and they've done that. So I know that whatever they tell me, it's something that they've experienced and they've learned from."*

*"...my best friend [Name], like, we both struggled with the same problem. So... we both feel like we can talk to each other."*

# THEME 6: GAPS & NEEDS

These are gaps and needs in each of community – things that are missing that would improve their safety and wellbeing. The codes in this theme include: *facility and amenity enhancements; social, recreation, and special interest programming; social support services; shift in culture; a safe youth hangout space; food wants; support for local businesses;* and *perceived safety improvements.*

## Code 1: Facility and Amenity Enhancements

The first code in this theme was *facility and amenity enhancements*, which outlined that youth see the need for facilities and amenities to be enhanced to build a sense of community belonging (Table 1). They are noted as being connection points for youth. Importantly, these facilities need to be accessible. The lists in Table 1 are ordered from most to least frequently commented. This code was recorded 26 times for Chestermere and 11 times for Langdon. In both communities, youth mostly identified facilities and amenities that provided activities for youth to do. It may be interpreted that youth are looking for activities to stay entertained, active, and to enjoy with friends. This was summarized nicely when one youth from Langdon said they wanted *"...one big recreation center where there's like, just a ton of stuff you can do and there's like some sort of activity happening every day because I usually find myself bored at home."* Specifically in Chestermere, a swimming pool was most frequently discussed, which makes sense in light of the comments at the beginning of the report that identified the issues youth have with the lake – perhaps they view a swimming pool as a safer way to engage in play in the water.

**Table 1:** Facility & Amenity Gaps/Needs

| Chestermere | Langdon |
|---|---|
| • Swimming pool<br>• Pathways/sidewalks: youth want more pathways/sidewalks in Chestermere because "...*it can be really difficult to walk places. Like sometimes there's a crosswalk, sometimes people are parked in the crosswalks. And sometimes the sidewalks are to icy so you can't walk on them.*" Additionally, the crosswalk by Tim Hortons was identified as a hot spot that needs to be addressed.<br>• Need more places/locations to hang out with friends in Chestermere | • Recreation centre – there needs to be programming at this centre available for youth, an activity happening every day<br>• Hockey rinks available for play<br>• The gravel road in the park was flagged as an issue when muddy for youth with accessibility needs. Paved roads would address this problem.<br>• A library<br>• More tennis courts<br>• More activities for play in Langdon Park<br>• Another Field House<br>• A location for social programming, such as Synergy programming |

| Chestermere (cont.) | Langdon (cont.) |
|---|---|
| • Need more business or places that are geared towards different cultures, religions, and spiritualities. For example, if you need to buy a new hijab, you must go into Calgary.<br>• A bigger, updated recreation centre<br>• A gym for youth, similar to commercial adult gyms<br>• Aquarium<br>• Roller coasters<br>• Paintball range<br>• Zoo<br>• Sandboxes<br>• Fossil digging site<br>• Basketball courts<br>• Outdoor hockey or roller skating rink | • Be mindful of locations of facilities and amenities in Langdon – youth value the ability to walk or bike. |

## Code 2: Social, Recreation, and Special Interest Programming

The second code was *social, recreation, and special interest programming*. This was coded 35 times in Chestermere and 10 times in Langdon. This code describes arts programs, youth groups, and clubs, and includes the comment that youth wanted to play a role in the development or leadership of these. See Table 2 for the specific details in each community, although there was considerable overlap.

Descriptive details not included in Table 2 are that youth said that these types of programs and activities are important for wellbeing and mental health. Additionally, they asked for more funding to be directed towards these initiatives as they observed that there is often a lack of funding. There was a request for more teen programming, as it was also observed that there are often programs for younger youth and older adults but teens are missed. The sentiment that "...*there's nothing to do unless it's like summer, when like the beach is there...*" and "*once you're older... there's just barely anything to do,*" reflects the need for youth to have activities in the community to engage in. This was heard in both Chestermere and Langdon. Again, youth noted the need for these to be no/low-cost activities. Lastly, a comment was made that these types of programs are felt to be safe spaces for youth of all ages, which again speaks to the need to bolster this area of programming in our communities.

**Table 2:** Social, Recreation, and Special Interest Programming

| Chestermere | Langdon |
|---|---|
| • More recreation activities<br>  ○ Hockey<br>  ○ Teams for girls<br>  ○ Swimming clubs<br>  ○ Bowling<br>  ○ Horse riding lessons<br>  ○ Mini golf activities in the parks<br>  ○ Outdoor basketball hoops<br>  ○ Drop in football & basketball<br>• More youth recreation programming out of the recreation centre, library, and in community spaces like John Peak Park.<br>  ○ These locations were identified as accessible and easy to drop into.<br>• More creative programming<br>  ○ Cooking and baking lessons.<br>  ○ A place to create pottery or other artifacts.<br>• Greener, nature spaces to explore and have fun – this includes parks and keeping the golf course.<br>• More youth groups such as Lakeridge's youth group or Synergy's youth programs. | • More extracurricular activities and/or clubs for teens.<br>• Creative programming – art studios where youth can attend. lessons/workshops and create artifacts.<br>• More parks with spaces to casually play sports such as baseball, soccer, football, etc.<br>• A museum – so that they do not have to travel to one.<br>• Social programming, such as rehabilitative/support programs for bullies. |

## Code 3: Social Support Services

The code *social support services* identify the systems and professional supports listed that youth identified as missing in their community and are necessary to make them feel safe. It was coded 11 times in Chestermere.

**Table 3:** Social Support Services

| Chestermere | Langdon |
|---|---|
| • Medical care, such as a hospital.<br>• RCMP – higher RCMP visibility increases feelings of safety for youth.<br>• An animal rescue program and shelter.<br>• Houselessness supports.<br>• Therapists/counsellors.<br>• Places you can call for help and support. | • N/A (See adult focus group for gaps and needs in this area). |

## Code 4: Shift in Culture

Something interesting that came up in the focus groups was how youth described they wanted to see a *shift in culture* in their community. It was coded 10 times for Chestermere and once for Langdon focus groups. These comments are likely in response to the problems youth identified throughout this report. The most frequent comment was youth asking for bullying to stop. They asked for people to stop being mean and threatening others, for example, but also for others to care, listen, and be kind. They wanted it to be taken seriously, for others to "*believe that someone's going through something hard or they are being bullied even though it doesn't look like it.*" This also applies to mental health experiences and reducing the stigma around it.

Youth asked for events or gatherings such as block parties or festivals – these tend to make youth feel safer because they can meet new people in their community and be around the people who already make them feel safe. It creates a feeling of community, one that "*brings everyone together and it's just like good vibes all around.*" Additionally, youth asked people to stop littering. Two other participants asked for "*better care and effort towards pedestrians,*" which includes removing ice from sidewalks – again, directly linked to some of the concerns we heard earlier in the report. Lastly, youth asked for more opportunities like these focus groups where youth can share their concerns, and opportunities that include adults too. It is clear that youth want to be heard.

## Code 5: A Safe Youth Hangout Space

Another distinct pattern was the need for *a safe youth hangout space*; it was coded 9 times. This was something that stood out to the research team considering the problems youth shared and the previous gaps and needs. Requirements of this space were that it needed to be easy to get to and that it would be open during the weekends and/or when adults were at work in the summertime. Mostly, youth just wanted a space where they could hang out with each other and talk. Another said that it would be good to have someone there that they could talk to as a support person if they needed someone to talk with. The quote below shares this broad vision:

"*…just like a place where like kids can hang out, accept you're different, where just kids can like socialize and like, do what comes to mind… there's sections like people can enjoy video games or people can do art people can… whatever comes to mind with like your imagination.*"

## Code 6: Food & Businesses

Improvements that would lead to an increase in perceived safety
E.g., RCMP, "more safety workers," "more security"

Businesses that offered food was something that youth requested. In Chestermere, 5 comments were made that included asking for McDonald's (this was before the new McDonald's was announced), healthier food options, and a place where youth can simply just share food and have fun without getting negative reactions from those around. In Langdon, four comments were made. Ice cream locations, a place like the Postcard Café, and more fast-food places were requested. Only Langdon, youth were interested in businesses and wanted to see more shops – we interpret this to be youth involved and caring towards local community businesses. One specific comment noted that they would love to see Prairie Grounds Coffee House expand and offer workshops or activities for youth. It was coded 6 times in Langdon.

## Code 7: Perceived Safety Improvements

Only discussed in Chestermere focus groups, youth told us *perceived safety improvements*, which are important considering some of the reasons why they felt less safe shared earlier in this report. It was coded 8 times. The most frequent comments were that more RCMP, "*more safety workers*," and "*more security*" in community spaces would make them feel safer. One youth said that decorations and community beautification make a community feel more vibrant and safe, and another said that street lights for dark-lit areas, especially walking paths and the backs of buildings would also help.



# LIMITATIONS

Limitations are important to acknowledge as they impact our interpretation of these data. Below are the limitations we have identified:

- We only conducted one focus group with high school aged youth, so these results likely do not accurately represent the experience of this age group. This is similar to the limitation of the youth survey in phase one of this research.
- We were unable to do a focus group in Indus, East Lake, and Khalsa School Calgary, so similarly, these results likely do not accurately represent the experience of these youth either.
- A limitation of using focus groups as the data collection method is the presence of other people when participants are asked questions. Negative effects on responses such as groupthink (people in a group tend to easily agree on the same thing) or fear of reprisals/unintended consequences enacted by other youth could have occurred.
- Another limitation could be the perceived power dynamic between an outside organization coming into a school and being asked questions by adults external to the school. Youth may have been hesitant to share with us because of that.
- Again, due to the method, the findings in this report are specific only to the communities of Chestermere, Langdon, and SE Rocky View.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are broad and overarching, created based on the results.

1. **Community Effort:** There needs to be community buy-in and sustained collaboration on all levels – schools, parents/caregivers, community service organizations, government, Protective Services, businesses, etc. There needs to be continuous and frequent open lines of communication between all levels. This is imperative to creating change.

2. **Youth Engagement:** This report very clearly outlines that youth are the experts in their experience. Youth must be consulted in discussions about responses to safety concerns, allowing them to voice concerns and identify solutions. They must also be engaged throughout the implementation of the solution or should be a part of the solution if possible. Empower them to become safety advocates.

3. **Address the Lack of Empathy:** Across the themes, there was a consistent pattern of youth and adults lacking empathy. Youth found that both peers and adults lacked empathy when they shared about their mental health, well-being, and/or bullying experiences. For instance, youth said that when sharing about well-being with a peer, the peer may respond with a dismissive statement or a competitive statement. Therefore, find ways to cultivate empathy within and between youth, plus empathy in adults. The way to address this issue will need to be holistic: awareness campaigns about why empathy is important, education both in and out of schools about how to be an empathetic person, role models/mentors that demonstrate empathy-related skills and intelligence, and programming with outcomes to develop these skills are a few examples of approaches that come to mind.

4. **Continuous Evaluation:** Continuously assess and improve safety interventions based on feedback, incident analysis, and changing community needs. If possible, conduct evaluation utilizing youth engagement in evaluation design and planning.

We have also provided a list of recommendations in Appendix E that are directed toward the following systems in the community: City/County government; community/recreation services; parents/caregivers; protective services; and schools. These recommendations are specific actions that each system can take. Please review these with your team and utilize them as actionable steps forward.

# CONCLUSION

Thank you for taking the time to read this report. The stories youth shared with us gave incredible insight into how youth experience safety and wellbeing in Chestermere and Langdon. Many different factors in the community contribute to youth feeling safe and not safe, and similarly, there is a range of factors that contribute to safety in schools. Youth described relationships with peers that can be challenging, negative, and harmful. Youth also provided details about the culture of mental health and wellbeing and what they need for support in this dimension of their lives. Gaps and needs as identified by youth were provided at length – all of which are potential solutions to some of the problems they identified. This story highlights some significant challenges that youth are experiencing. We hope that the recommendations give actionable steps forward. We also hope that parents, caregivers, professionals, and all others who are involved in the lives of youth use the information shared in this report responsibly and in the best interest of caring for and supporting youth in our community.

Please contact us if you have questions, concerns, or would like to discuss the findings of this research.

Synergy Youth and Community Development Society

In partnership with the Chestermere and Area Community Coalition

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Youth of Chestermere, Langdon & South East Rocky View
Adults who care about Youth
Rocky View Schools & Calgary Catholic School Division
Chestermere & Area Community Coalition Members

## References
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## TERM DEFINITIONS

These definitions were generated from the results of the <u>Youth Safer Communities Survey</u> data. This means that these definitions were created by and for youth in Chestermere, Langdon, and SE Rocky View County.

<u>Safety</u>
To youth, safety means that:

- Their body will not be harmed.
- They have access to emergency services, basic necessities, and a place and/or person that they can go to when they need them.
- They do not feel scared or anxious.

<u>Safe Space</u>
Characteristics of a safe space are:

- It includes positive ideas, friends, and fun things.
- It is non-judgmental, quiet, and private.
- Youth feel accepted, welcomed, loved, happy, respected, and comfortable.
- And it is a place where they can think freely and express themselves freely.

# FOCUS GROUP FACILITATION GUIDE

**Preamble:**

Hi everyone, thank you so much for joining us today. Before we get started, I want to introduce myself. My name is Hanna, I'm a student working with Synergy on this project and I will be the facilitator today. Also joining us today is [second Synergy staff], introduction…

I would also like to recognize the land that we are on today by offering a land acknowledgement: I acknowledge the Treaty 7 territory - ancestral lands of the Blackfoot Confederacy: Kainai, Piikani, and Siksika as well as the Tsuu T'ina and Stoney Nakoda First Nations including Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Wesley. This territory is also home to the Métis Nation of Alberta, Region 3. I acknowledge the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people who have cared for these lands for generations. I am grateful for the Elders and Knowledge Keepers who are still with us today and those who have gone before us. I make this acknowledgement as an act of reconciliation and gratitude to those whose territory we are all fortunate to live within.

We have consent forms from all of you that your parents/caregivers signed, but we also want to give you an opportunity to provide consent. I'm going to give a brief overview of the research project, what you are involved in and what you will be doing here with us today, and based on that, you can consent or choose to leave the session. You are not required to participate, even if your parents/caregivers signed a form. This research project is organized by the Chestermere and Area Community Coalition. The goal of this project is to learn more about the safety and wellbeing of youth so that we can make changes to support youth. This session is the second part of the Youth Survey project, which involved students throughout the schools in Chestermere, Langdon, and Indus. Some of you may have done this last year. Based on the results of this survey, we had some more questions and wanted to hold focus groups with youth to dig into some of the pieces we were interested in. A focus group is a group discussion between the group of us here. I will ask a question about your safety and wellbeing, and then you can respond if you would like – you can share your thoughts, opinions, or any experiences. There are no correct answers, and you do not have to respond (you have the right to pass). If you choose to participate now, but change your mind either during the focus group or after, you can still withdraw by either leaving the room or letting us know after. We will also be recording the focus group using Zoom so we can create a written version of our discussion for looking at after. Lastly, we are asking that you agree to keep what is shared in this group private, so please don't share what we talked about with anyone outside of this session. This is to protect and respect everyone's privacy.

We are holding focus groups in other schools in the area as well, so what you share will be combined with what students in the other school share, which will all be put into a report to summarize what youth think about safety and wellbeing. This information will then be used to make decisions and change in our communities. This also means that you agree to not share what we talk about in this next hour. Based on all of the information I shared with you – would you like to participate? Please your hands if you would like to.

[Hanna makes note of those who respond yes, and if anyone does not agree, they can exit the room].

**Ground Rules:**
To allow our conversation to flow more freely, I'd like to go over some ground rules.

- Only one person speaks at a time. This is doubly important as our goal is to make a written transcript of our conversation today. It is difficult to capture everyone's experience and perspective on our audio recording if there are multiple voices at once.
- Please avoid side conversations.
- Everyone doesn't have to answer every single question, but I'd like to hear from each of you today as the discussion progresses.
- This is a confidential discussion in that I will not report your names or who said what outside of this room. Names of participants will not even be included in the final report about this meeting. However, we have a legal and ethical obligation to disclose and follow up on anything regarding risk to self or others and to protect you or others from harm of any kind. If there is something you would like to disclose to any of us in private, we will be available right after the meeting, and you will have our contact information in case you would like to contact us afterwards for ANY reason.
- We stress confidentiality because we want an open discussion. We want all of you to feel free to comment without fear your comments will be repeated later and possibly taken out of context.
- There are no "wrong answers," just different opinions. Say what is true for you, even if you're the only one who feels that way. Please do not let the group sway you. But if you do change your mind, let me know.
- Let me know if you need a break or must go to the bathroom.
- If you need to leave the room because you are uncomfortable or feel triggered by anything that is said, we will be following you to ensure you are okay.
- Are there any questions?

Great, thanks everyone. We'll begin the recording now. We are going to get started by first reviewing what "safety" and "safe spaces" mean. These definitions were created from the survey results. These definitions are what we mean when we talk about safety and space spaces going forward.

*Review definitions*

Questions:

What places in [Chestermere/Langdon/Indus] do you feel safe? Why do you feel   safe here?
    a. Prompt: are there specific times of the day/week when you do feel safe here
2. What are the places where you do NOT feel safe? Why do you NOT feel safe here?
3. In the survey, we found that lots of youth talked about their physical safety. We want to learn more about what youth think about their physical safety. What makes you feel physically safe?
    a. Prompt: why does this make you feel physically safe?
    b. Prompt: where do you feel physically safe? Is it all the time, or only during certain hours that you feel safe in these locations?

4. What makes you NOT feel physically safe?
    a. Prompt: why?
    b. Prompt: where do you NOT feel physically safe? Is it all the time, or only during certain hours that you feel safe in these locations?
5. Stigma is the sense that someone is different than you and that difference is negative. A set of negative and often unfair beliefs that people have about something. Stigma adds to feelings of shame, hopelessness, and isolation (feeling alone). Do you feel that there is a stigma around talking about mental health?
    a. Rephrased for the younger kids – do you feel that people are judged when talking about their mental health and/or wellbeing?
    b. Prompt: do you feel judged for talking about mental health?
    c. Prompt: Why/why not?
    d. Prompt: have you had any personal experiences with stigma when talking about mental health?
4. What makes it easier for you to ask for help?
    a. Prompt: who do you ask for help?
    b. Prompt: Why do you ask this person/these people for help?
    c. Prompt: What makes them good people to go for help?
5.  Can you tell me about your experiences with bullying?
    a. Bullying – not teasing. Bullying is done with the intention to hurt that person and make the bully look better/stronger. It is done repeatedly and can become a constant in the victim's life. It can become threatening. If the victim gets upset, the bully typically won't stop. In comparison, teasing is more playful, it is not constant, and the teaser will likely stop when asked.
    b. Follow-up: can you tell me about safety online/cyberbullying?
6. What is something you would like to see in your community that would improve your wellbeing?
    a. Prompt: why do you want to see this?
7. Any final thoughts?

Debrief:

Great, thank you everyone for that discussion. You all shared some very important thoughts. That's the end of the questions and now there are a few things we need to cover to wrap up, and after you will be free to go.

1. Review purpose of the research
   a. I mentioned at the beginning, the purpose of having this discussion was to gain a deeper understanding of the Survey results from youth.

2. What they can expect next
   a. Your parents will be sent a short evaluation and demographic survey from the school admin. You can fill this out at home with their help. Just like participating in this group, the survey is entirely optional, but still useful information so we can make sure we are collecting information from a diverse group of students. You also have the chance to give us feedback about this session.
   b. Next steps for us will be transcribing the recording and holding more focus groups with other schools. We will analyze everything and send your parents a draft report in Dec/Jan that you can look at, you can provide any thoughts or feedback you may have at that point. After, the report will be shared with the wider community.
   c. You can get in contact with us at any point or ask your parents to contact us if you decide to withdraw participation.

3. Lastly, we just want to remind you to please not share anything that we spoke about today. This is important to respect and protect everyone's privacy. Based on everything we talked about, and what you shared – if you want to withdraw what information you shared today, please come speak with us afterwards, send us a message, or have your parents/caregivers contact us.

4. Does anyone have any questions or concerns?

5. Thank you everyone for your time and for sharing your thoughts, this was a great conversation and you all have helped to make your community a better place.

6. Before they leave, give students the Chestermere and Area Mental Health Coalition resource & Synergy's contact info.

# EVALUATION AND DEMOGRAPHIC FOLLOW UP SURVEY

(This survey was administered over Google Forms)

Please note that all of these questions are optional. Your responses will be kept anonymous. Your participation in this survey will not affect your ability to access community resources, programs, or services. By participating in this survey, you are providing their consent.

**Evaluation Questions**
The following questions are optional and are intended to gather feedback on the focus group that you participated in.

1. Please rate your level of agreement for the following questions
Mark only one oval per row.

| | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| The focus group format worked well | | | | | |
| I felt that my voice was heard in the focus group | | | | | |
| I felt like I learned about important issues regarding youth safety in my community | | | | | |
| I felt like I had improved knowledge of community supports due to participating in the focus group | | | | | |
| I have a greater understanding of the impact of youth safety on my community | | | | | |

2. If you have any additional information or insight regarding the questions about youth safety and wellbeing that you were unable to share during the focus group, please provide it here:
_____
_____
3. If you have any additional feedback regarding the focus group, please provide it here:
_____
_____

**Demographic Questions**
The following questions are optional. Demographic details are useful for us to know so we can ensure we gather a diverse range of perspectives when conducting this research.
1. With which gender do you best identify? (you may choose more than one option)
o Woman/girl
o Man/boy
o Transgender
o Non-binary
o Gender-fluid
o Prefer not to answer
o Other: _____
2. Do you identify as Indigenous, Metis, or Inuit?
Mark only one oval.
o  Yes
o  No
o  Prefer not to answer
3. Do you identify as a non-Indigenous person of colour and/or racialized individual?
o  Yes
o  No
o  Prefer not to answer
4. Do you identify as a newcomer to Canada? (A newcomer is someone who is dealing with the challenges of being new to a country or an area regardless of how many years they have lived in the country or area)
o  Yes
o  No
o  Prefer not to answer
5. Do you identify as a person who experiences a disability? (A disability is any physical, cognitive, developmental, psychological, or invisible condition that interferes or limits a person's ability to engage in either specific or daily actions)
o  Yes
o  No
o  Prefer not to answer
6. Do you identify with any marginalized or underserved group that has not been identified here? If yes, please describe:
_____
_____