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# **SPORT AND RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMMIGRANT CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN SARNIA-LAMBTON**

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## **RESEARCH REPORT**

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October 2013

In partnership with the Lambton Public Health



### Background

The Sarnia-Lambton Local Immigration Partnership (LIP), established in November of 2009 and part of an Ontario-wide initiative, is a multi-sector council of local organizations that provides a centralized venue for discussions about immigrant and newcomer settlement and integration. In 2010, the Sarnia-Lambton LIP Council conducted research to investigate how to better provide and coordinate services locally, resulting in a 12-strategy action plan (the LIP Settlement Strategy) to increase the community's capacity to welcome and support immigrants and newcomers<sup>1</sup>.

One of the Strategy's recommendations is to increase and promote recreation opportunities for immigrant children and youth in order to assist in their settlement and integration process, a benefit that is well-documented in previous research (Omidvar and Richmond 2003, Paraschak and Tirone 2008). In 2011, a session was held with local stakeholders to examine how the community could increase immigrant youth engagement through sport and recreation programming locally; the positive outcomes of which can include a sense of psycho-social wellbeing, physical wellbeing, opportunities to improve English, and opportunities to gain familiarity with some aspects of Canadian culture (Doherty and Taylor 2007). Those who participated in this session were eager to support immigrant children and youth in their settlement process but felt that the experiences and perspectives from this specific sub-population of youth were needed before moving forward.

To that end, the Sarnia-Lambton LIP organized a series of focus group consultations in collaboration with Lambton Public Health, whose mandate includes identifying the needs of local priority populations such as immigrants and newcomers. This also ties into Parks and Recreation Ontario's policy recommendation that program planners conduct outreach to engage priority populations to ensure that recreation programs are responsive to Ontario's cultural diversity and gender; and are accessible to persons with disabilities (*Affordable Access to Recreation for all Ontarians* 2006). The goal of these consultations was to gather information from immigrant children and youth on their:

- Sport and recreation interests

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<sup>1</sup> For the Sarnia-Lambton LIP, 'immigrant' is defined as any individual who was not born in Canada (regardless of immigration status); 'newcomer' is an immigrant who has been in Canada for 10 years or less.

- Participation experiences
- Barriers in accessing opportunities locally
- Recommendations to overcoming barriers

The findings from these consultations resulted in five recommendations to help improve and support integration and settlement experiences for immigrant and newcomer youth in Sarnia-Lambton.

## Methodology

As an initial assessment, the Sarnia-Lambton LIP distributed a survey to immigrant children and youth in order to gain a better understanding of their interests. The findings of this survey provided some helpful information. However, the findings also showed that more specific information was needed to guide action and that a focus group format would allow for more comprehensive data to be gathered.

Through linkages with the Lambton Kent District School Board, focus groups were conducted in April 2013 at three local schools: Northern Collegiate Institute & Vocational School, St. Clair Secondary School, and Cathcart Blvd Public School. Unfortunately, although approached to host focus groups, neither the St. Clair Catholic District School Board nor the French school boards (Conseil scolaire de district des écoles catholiques du Sud-Ouest and Conseil scolaire de district du Centre-Sud-Ouest) participated in this study due to a lack of immigrant students. In June 2013, a fourth community focus group was held at the Judith & Norman Alix Art Gallery.

The four focus groups were audio recorded, transcribed and analyzed and all confidentiality and consent protocols, according to the Lambton Public Health's Ethics Review Committee, were followed.

## Profile of Participants

In total, 24 immigrant children and youth participated in the four focus groups, ranging from ages 9 to 18. Participants came from a broad range of countries including (but not limited to) China, South Korea, Pakistan, Costa Rica, India and Egypt. Some had come directly to Sarnia from their home country while others moved to the city after living in another Canadian community. Their time in Sarnia ranged from one month to 11 years. The majority of the participants moved as permanent residents with their families, although there were a few

international students as well as three participants who were born in Canada to immigrant parents.<sup>2</sup>

## Findings

### Recreation Activities

Participants were asked about the kinds of recreation activities they were interested in and whether they took part in these activities in Sarnia. All of the participants had specific interests but not all of them were currently involved in these interests for various reasons (see 'Barriers' section below).

#### Sports

When asked what types of activities they liked to do in their free time, many of the participants cited sports, including team sports such as soccer and basketball; as well as more individual sports like swimming, biking, tennis, squash and martial arts. A small number of the participants played on intramural teams but the majority played sports outside of school and in an informal way. Some, although interested, were not currently a part of any sports activities since being in Sarnia. None of the participants, however, felt that Sarnia lacked any sport opportunities for them, should they want to get involved. It is worth noting that not one participant mentioned ice hockey, a quintessentially 'Canadian' sport. Furthermore, aside from swimming, no other water sport was mentioned by participants despite Sarnia's close proximity to Lake Huron and the St. Clair River.

#### Arts

Recreation activities relating to the arts were also mentioned often by participants, many of whom played a musical instrument (e.g. piano, flute, ukulele), or sang. More often than sports, these activities took place during school (e.g. as part of the school band or choir). Some participants were part of dance groups, in particular groups that specialized in ethnic or cultural performances.

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<sup>2</sup> Although these participants did not fall directly into the Sarnia-Lambton LIP definition of 'immigrant' - see footnote 1 - their thoughts and experiences as second generation immigrants has relevance to the intent of this project.

Participants also identified fine arts as something they liked to do in their spare time, in particular, drawing (e.g. creating comic books and anime). However, this was one area where participants felt that Sarnia lacked programming and a number wished for art clubs in their schools or art classes in the community.

## Other

Aside from sports and the arts, participants identified a number of other activities they enjoyed in their free time including hanging out with friends, online and computer gaming, shopping, baking and cooking, reading and traveling.

A number of the students also mentioned the desire to volunteer but many stated that they did not know where to find opportunities:

*[We] can listen to announcements to learn about volunteer opportunities...but they are within the school and we would like to have a volunteer job outside of the school...don't know where to get that.*

*I am looking to volunteer but don't know where I can go to do that.*

None of the students were aware of services in the community, such as the local volunteer centre, Sarnia Gives, which has specific programs to promote and support both youth and immigrant volunteerism. Participants who did volunteer did so in the hospital, with children, at local events (e.g. Artwalk) and through their religious institutions.

## Barriers to Accessing Recreation Programming

The findings show that all of the participants had numerous recreation interests but that not all participants were actively engaged in them in Sarnia-Lambton. Those that did not take part in sport and recreation opportunities locally provided reasons as to why not.

## Cultural Differences and Challenges

While participants overwhelmingly agreed that Sarnia is a very welcoming place, some still commented that in certain situations they felt excluded from recreation activities because of cultural differences; a barrier that has been examined in other research (Doherty and Taylor 2007). This was particularly evident for female participants who were Muslim where specific expectations related to clothing were required:

*Last year in soccer they weren't going to let me play because I can't wear shorts. But I said [to] my mom, what if I wear tights under my shorts. But I would really get excluded because they didn't like that I had tights on. They didn't understand.*

*I've had a few issues because I wear a scarf...and whenever I do gym, I am not allowed to do gym [with my scarf on]. But it stopped after I got my mom to write a note and said I was allowed to wear [it during gym].*

Clothing was not the only concern for these participants. Restrictions around physical contact between the sexes also led to misunderstandings about their capabilities:

*In those sports you are supposed to be aggressive and take the ball away and stuff and in my culture I am not supposed to touch a boy.*

All of these participants agreed that more understanding was needed by teachers, coaches, and peers on these cultural differences so that they could be more involved and feel more included in sport and recreation programming; a sentiment echoed in other parts of the country (Livingston, Tirone, Smith and Miller 2008). Outside of this ethno-religious group, no other participants identified specific barriers related to cultural differences.

### Connecting with Canadian Peers

Some participants also felt that being new to the school or community made it difficult for them to connect with their peers and, in turn, prevented them from participating fully in sport and recreation activities.

*The people that have been here forever already have all their friends so I would rather be with students who are all new to the area. It is hard when everyone else knows each other.*

*[W]hen I got here 6 months ago everyone was talking so fast and I couldn't understand. It would be nice to be with someone who talks slow.*

It may be surprising to note that the above quote is one of only a few references to language mentioned in all four focus groups. However, when asked whether specific recreation programming for immigrants and newcomers should be established locally, the majority of participants said it did not matter either way. Many preferred, in fact, not to be separated out from their peers.

## Lack of Knowledge about Opportunities

Some participants commented on how "there isn't much to do" for youth in Sarnia-Lambton compared to other communities such as London and Toronto. Sarnia, some said, is "more of a retirement community." However, participants conceded that there could be activities for them that they just didn't know about. For example, one participant didn't realize that go-karting was available locally but was excited to hear that it was. This lack of knowledge about where to go to get information about recreation programs and services was also a barrier identified during the focus group process.

Similarly, some participants felt that there weren't as many opportunities available to play sports in a non-competitive setting. A number of students enjoyed sports but only wanted to "play for fun", something that intramural sports teams in school couldn't provide. And if less competitive sports programs existed in the larger community, none of the participants knew about them or how to connect with them.

## Lack of Time & Transportation

Participants also felt their busy schedules held them back from taking part in sport and recreation activities.

*Lots of people like to do sports. I know sometimes you are really busy with your homework and you can't if you can't finish your homework [before] you have to go to a sport afterschool. Maybe in school, in recess, would be better.*

This sentiment was echoed by others who said they were 'too busy with my studies' or that 'just time is keeping me' from doing recreation activities.

Finally, reliable transportation was also a barrier for participants who, if they didn't or weren't old enough to drive, had to rely on their parents, friends or the public transit system to get to and from activities. This wasn't always possible or convenient.

*I went out for rugby [but]...the city bus doesn't run after 5 or 5:30 and it takes an hour. Time consuming. Friends drive me to school but if I stay late then I have [to] count on the bus.*

*When we have cross country the practice is early in the morning and my parents can't drop me so I can't do that.*

Participants didn't suggest an overhaul of the city's transit system. However, most felt that offering more options in terms of time for recreation opportunities (e.g. during recess, weekends) might help alleviate this transportation barrier.

## Recommendations

In an effort to reduce the barriers outlined above, there are five recommendations:

1. Provide diversity training opportunities for coaches, teachers, and administrators of sports teams and recreation programs
2. Establish a youth group with a focus on the arts
3. Encourage schools to offer non-competitive intramural sport opportunities for students
4. Promote and market current sport and recreation programming to cultural and ethnic groups
5. Enhance promotion of volunteer opportunities to immigrant children and youth (and youth in general)

## Conclusion and Next Steps

The results of these focus groups show that immigrant children and youth, like all children and youth, have varied sport and recreation interests; and that the majority of their interests can be met by existing programs and services locally. However, the findings also show that this sub-population of youth is not aware of how to access programs and services. Furthermore, the results show that some immigrant children and youth face specific barriers in participating in recreation activities particularly in relation to cultural differences.

The five recommendations outlined above can help to alleviate these barriers and, along with the rest of this report, will be circulated to relevant stakeholders including school boards, sport and recreation organizations, settlement service providers and other community collaborators. The Sarnia-Lambton LIP will also establish a working group made up of these key stakeholders to devise a work plan and implement these recommendations. Once implemented, they will help immigrant children and youth participate more fully in sport and recreation activities locally and, ultimately, help them participate more fully in the Sarnia-Lambton community.



## References

*Affordable Access to Recreation for all Ontarians Policy Framework*, Parks and Recreation Ontario 2006.

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