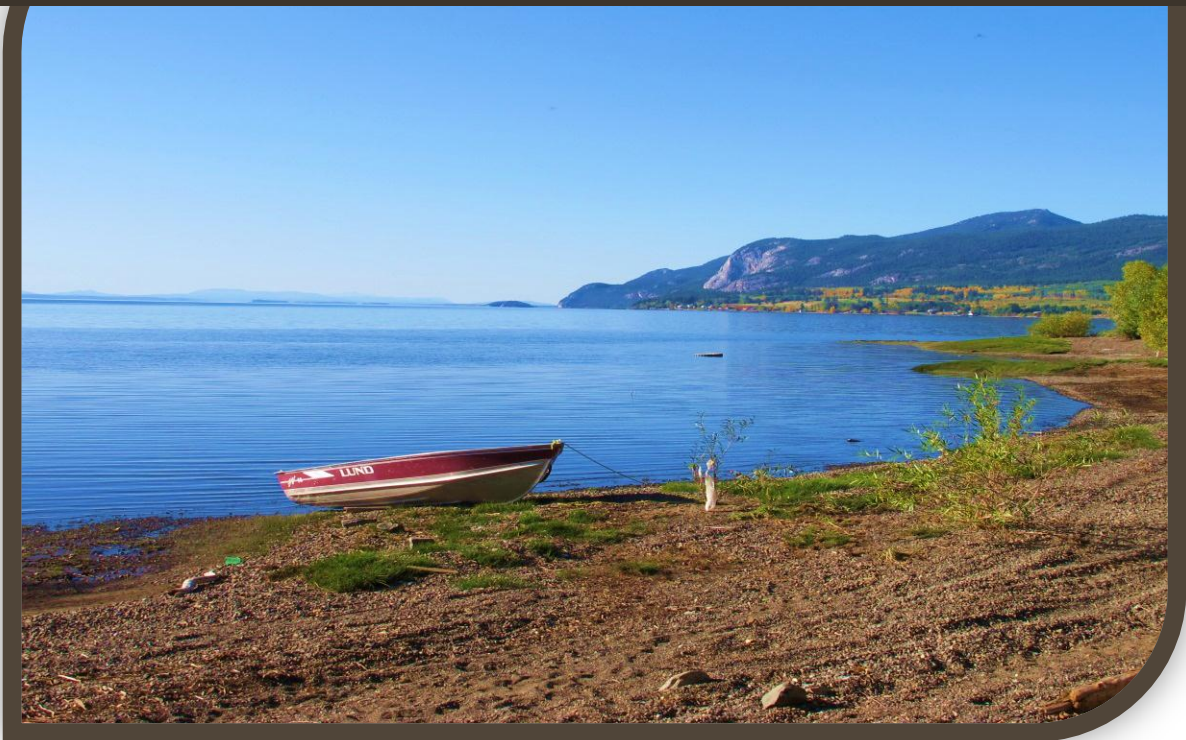


Community Report 2013



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'Town A', British Columbia



COMMUNITY REPORT 2013

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

RADAR (which stands for: Researching Adolescent Distress and Resilience) is a research project funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, and involves researchers from nursing, education, and public health. As the project title conveys, the purpose of this study is to better understand how young people experience emotional distress and resilience. Emotional distress refers to difficult emotions including anxiety, stress, depression, grief, and loss. Resilience is what helps us get through difficult times and helps to keep us healthy.

Our hope is to further the discussion regarding emotional distress and resilience from a youth perspective. We plan to explore and compare this health topic in three communities in British Columbia.

The aim of this report is to communicate the findings of research we conducted in a small town in northern-central British Columbia - for the purposes of this report, we will call it 'Town A'. These findings are based on 27 interviews that the RADAR study team conducted in September 2012 with youth aged 14 through 19 from School 1 and School 2. It is our hope that teens, parents, teachers, school administrators, policymakers, and service-providers alike will find it a helpful resource and, ultimately, that it will provide useful information to support Town A's community in developing strategies to enhance the emotional health of Town A's young people.

We are grateful to all the young people in Town A who participated in this study and shared such rich, insightful and intelligent stories. We are also thankful to the counseling and other staff at School 1 and School 2 who assisted us with our interviewing process. We enjoyed the experience of meeting and working with each of you.

KEY FINDINGS

In this report we share themes from our interviews, using the words and stories shared with us by the youth we met. We highlight the challenges as well as the strengths of young people in Town A.

What's good about living in Town A?

When asked about the positive aspects of living in Town A, youth primarily referred to the beauty of its natural landscape and the numerous outdoor activities that are possible in this setting. For example, youth shared stories that conveyed the outdoor opportunities available in their community:



“You’ve got the lake, your friends are very close and so if you want to do something like go to the beach, go skiing or something, you can.”

Feelings of Boredom

While youth shared stories about the natural beauty of Town A's community, many expressed that finding things to do outside of outdoor activities in Town A was often a challenge. The topic of boredom and the sense that there is a shortage of opportunities and activities to engage youth was raised in a number of the interviews.

"Kind of sucks. There's not a lot to do if you don't have, like, a gun or something to go hunting or a snowmobile or a quad. If you don't have that stuff, you're pretty much sitting at home doing nothing. And if you don't play sports, then it sucks even more, too. 'Cause there's not a lot of activities going around in this town."

"...there's nothing for teenagers to do. All there is to do is get drunk, smoke pot, and party, that's all there is. And when you have someone like me who does none of those, I have nothing to do."

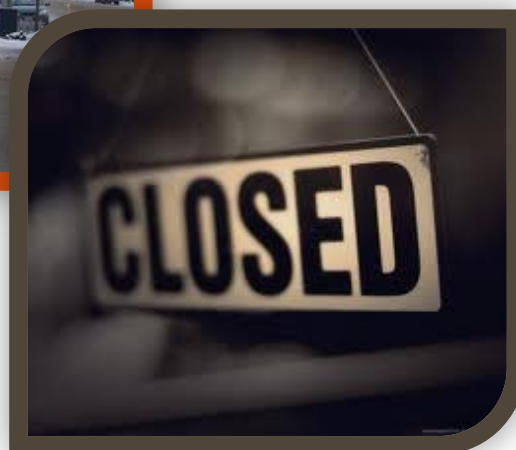


Many participants talked about how the lack of activities available for teenagers influenced their decisions to use alcohol or drugs and to engage in mischievous behavior.

“Sometimes it’s like really boring ‘cause there’s barely anything to do. Cause like, a lot of us get into a lot of trouble.... Like vandalizing things, just for fun, ‘cause there’s barely anything to actually do.”



Some youth spoke about how the closure of the town’s movie theatre took away one of the few remaining options for youth entertainment.



The words of one Town A young person are powerful in describing the impact that the limited options for youth engagement have for young people living there.

“Drink. Basically it. There’s not much to do here. Like, if people lived here throughout elementary, they know every part of this place. The movies, the movies actually shut down because they couldn’t afford it. So there’s no more movies...So you got to go to Vanderhoof or PG to go to movies...”

Small Town Rumors and Gossip

Some young people talked about the difficulties of living in a small town. For example, many participants expressed that because of the size of the community, everyone knows each other’s business. When asked to discuss some of the challenges of living in Town A, one participant responded:

“Things go around fast and they get out of hand and out of proportion.”

Another youth talked about the consequences of town gossip:

“Well, rumours that just randomly go around about people, and you just don’t know who to believe.”

Social Groups

The young people we interviewed often referred to the tensions that exist between the various groups living in Town A. Youth shared stories demonstrating the ways in which these divisions between different people or groups appear.

“I don’t know. It seems like in [Town A] skin colour and where you live is a huge separation.”



“I don’t know it’s a pretty tough crowd, it’s all preppy kids, well, this town it’s got the logging families, so they’re all like loaded and they all play hockey. And the hockey kids just think they’re better than everybody, and they all just get everything just given to them so. They think everybody’s gotta be like that, so they like run all the crowds in school and stuff. Yeah.”

Bullying

Bullying was a persistent issue that emerged in our interviews. Participants shared their experiences with bullying, as those who had been on the receiving end and as those who had been initiators. Some youth described how young people in Town A are often singled out and bullied based on their race and appearance as well as other aspects of “difference”.

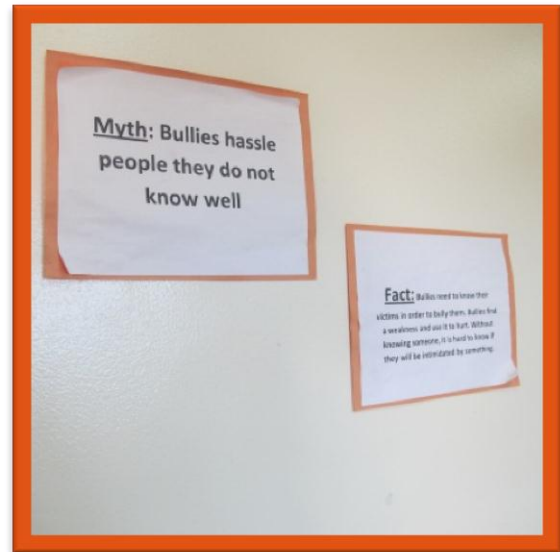
“Like, there’s, like, quite a few frickin’ ignorant people. Like, some people, like, when I was in grade nine—I had just gotten into grade nine, there was this new girl. She came and she was Aboriginal too and, like, they were making fun of her. And they, they picked on her and they called her ugly and whatnot.”

Some youth were not comfortable being bystanders to incidences of bullying, and sometimes attempted to intervene:

There was this one guy, he was being so rude to her, I, like, flipped out on him... Like, you don’t need to pick on her because that’s, that’s the way she is. I was, like, it’s not her fault. Like, seriously, just leave her the hell alone. And like, some people can be really rude.”

Others described the frequency of cyberbullying. Many had witnessed or had experienced bullying through social media, specifically Facebook. One youth gave this example of Facebook bullying:

“Like, say one girl doesn’t like this girl—she’ll write a status about them and she’ll still have them on her friend’s list and make sure [the other girl] sees that status. So there’d be conflict on, like, Facebook and a bunch of stupid stuff being said and whatnot.”



Discrimination and Injustice

Youth were well-versed on issues of discrimination based on race, sexuality, and gender that exist in Town A. For instance, one youth described the limited life options afforded to Aboriginal communities due to racial inequalities.

“I like I wish there was more opportunities to life and whatnot. Like, there is, but there’s low chances of Aboriginals to succeed and whatnot.”

Some young people spoke about the existence of homophobia in Town A, which made it feel unsafe for people to be open about this aspect of their identity:

“I think if anybody was gay in this school, they’d be too scared to even say they were.”

A few youth pointed out the existence of double standards in Town A, where there are vastly different expectations around the sexual behavior of boys and girls. One youth discussed the labels assigned to girls in relation to their dating status.



“...if you have a boyfriend and you bounce from boyfriend to boyfriend, you’re considered a whore. If you don’t have a boyfriend, you’re considered a loner. And if you have a boyfriend that you’ve had for a long time then you’re... I don’t know. Lots of people have been together with guys for a long time, then it’s they’re just whatever. They’re just normal.”

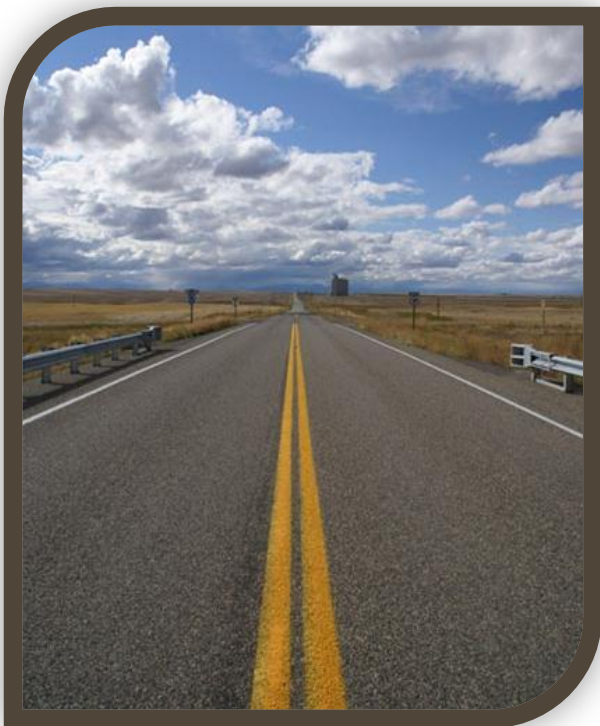
Experiences of Loss, Tragedy, and Hard Times

Many young people discussed the difficult times they had witnessed or endured living in Town A. For example, many participants shared stories of the personal challenges that they faced – strained relationships with family members were a particularly common source of stress for many young people.

“Okay, well, with my mom, we get into a lot of fights, well we used to, I don’t really see her anymore. Try not to. Just so, every time I see her, I just get so aggravated just because of the things she’s done, and um [sighs] and I try to keep it cool though, you know.”

The young people we spoke to also shared stories about community-wide trauma, reflecting on the impact of the “Highway of Tears”, and the frequency of early death.

One youth put it this way:



“It’s just too much pain in this town... it’s just a lot of weird things have happened in this town and strange deaths and, I guess there’s a lot of deaths everywhere but this used to be actually a murderer’s capital, so I don’t know, if I do have a family I don’t want to raise them here.”

Addiction and Substance Use

Young people also discussed the presence of substance use and addiction in Town A, sharing stories of how this issue impacts both youth and adults. The role that some adults play in adolescent drug and alcohol use in their community was also described:

“...there’s always alcohol. You could be just in grade eight. You could be so small and you could walk up to a person ... and say, ‘Hey, can you go get me a bottle? I’ll pay for your next bottle.’ And they don’t care how small you are, they’ll—they just want that next bottle and they’ll go in there and this little kid will end up drunk by the end of the frickin’ day. So that’s kind of, like, one of the crappy parts about town.”

One young woman spoke about the practice of binge drinking and shared a story about her experiences with alcohol:



“For one week there, well, five days, I went on a complete binge and I’m never going to do that again. I can see why a lot of people are messed up from drinking like, so hard core, really harsh on your body...I’m a pretty big klutz, so when I’m drunk, I tend to hurt myself a lot [chuckles] I actually still have bruises from two weeks ago. Um, and also, I notice with my mind, it clouds it a lot, and, and just my overall health, like you feel really crappy and just, like poisoned.”

Participants often talked about using drugs or alcohol as a way to cope, such as this participant about their marijuana use:



“I only smoke it just to like, just to keep me calm. Yeah, it’s just whenever I’m mad I just take one toké and then yeah, I just get all calm and I just keep it that way and get along with everybody else after that.”

Some young people talked about the ways in which drinking alcohol triggered anger and physical confrontations:

“...last New Year’s when I was drinking ... and then that’s when I blacked out and I came to fighting with some ...kid... we were shouting at each other and he came running at me then he hit me and he hit me twice and that’s when I got really pissed off and I started hitting him back. And after I started seeing blood coming from him and that’s when I just stopped and he punched me again I started bleeding and, that’s when I stopped.”

Emotional Resilience

In spite of these difficulties, young people demonstrated strength and discussed a number of approaches for coping with life challenges. While some participants shared the difficulties associated with living in a small town, others talked about how living in Town A allowed for the forging of tight-knit, meaningful friendships:

“My friends and stuff, it’s weird, it’s a small town but I’ve gotten really close with friends.”



In the face of personal difficulties, one young woman remarked upon the importance of laughter as a coping mechanism:

“I’ll laugh a lot. Amazes people, it’s like ‘are you drunk?’ It’s like ‘No, I’m just having a bad day’. It’s like, ‘then why are you laughing?’ ‘Because if I don’t, I’m going to have a mental breakdown.’ So I just laugh, and just keep yourself up and I’m good.”

Another participant shared how he managed to keep his anger under control by 'embracing' it:

"Mmm. I don't try and like actually run away from it, but more like embrace it. So, I can keep it under control sometimes. That's how I keep an eye on it, my anger under control like, instead of fighting it I embrace it...Like I feel my anger flowing through me, but then I start to like, barely flow through me but then I don't actually do it, so. In a way it gives me sort of the adrenaline."



Youth Insights

Several of the participants we interviewed offered fascinating insights and advice on how conditions could be improved for young people living in Town A. These recommendations covered a wide range of issues including ideas to make substance use 'safer' and strategies for combating racism, among many others:



"I don't know they have a lot of school awareness things but it seems like a lot of the people like know that already, and they still just do it [substance use], so I think maybe, instead of telling kids not to do it at all, they should tell them how to do it safer at least."

"I think youth should be told what a good and an unhealthy relationship is, so then they'll be aware of whether they're in a good one or a bad one...A good one is having like options, not being told what to do. And having like a part in the relationship and a bad one, would be being told what to do, not being allowed to do certain things, and just basically having to do what you're told to do."

One youth offered this perspective on how important it is for adults to be attentive and non-judgmental:

“Don’t argue, just listen to what we have to say– we’re, like, stressed out and we need to, like, pour out our feelings or something. Just sit there and nod your head and listen, and don’t try to argue [laughs], because that just makes things a whole lot worse. Because then you’re all like, ‘Oh, I’m just trying to talk to you and you’re arguing with me.’”

One participant emphasized the importance of having a ‘safe space’ for girls:

“Even just like, a place where girls can come and it’s away from everything, like just like a hangout place, like a safe house almost, where we can come and if we want to, we can go talk to somebody if we want, we can hang out, we can eat, we can chill, we can play video games, we can do all that kinda stuff.”

When asked what could be done about racism in Town A, one teen commented on the importance of people from various backgrounds coming together in order to overcome perceived differences:

“If like people actually hung out with each other, I think they’d realize that they’re a lot the same and, I noticed too like with the different races that hang out, they’re a lot alike in ways.”

LOOKING FORWARD

This report provides a sample of key findings from our interviews. It offers insights into young people's experiences with emotional distress and resilience. While there was no shortage of painful experiences among those we interviewed, their stories were also, in so many ways, filled with light: strength in the face of adversity, and possibilities for better tomorrows. It is our hope that Town A can use this report as a way to help further discussion on this important topic.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Based on the stories shared by Town A youth:

- What measures can be put in place to prevent stressors for young people in their community?
- What resources that support resilience in youth currently exist in Town A? How can these resources be improved to better reach youth facing life challenges?
- How can youth resilience best be supported in Town A?