



# Field trials and evaluation of WISE programming in North Simcoe

**Final report**

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Since its establishment in December 1991, SRDC has conducted over 450 projects and studies for various federal and provincial departments, municipalities, as well as other public and non-profit organizations. SRDC has offices located in Ottawa and Vancouver, and satellite offices in Calgary, Halifax, Hamilton, London, Montreal, Regina, St. John's, Toronto, and Winnipeg.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>GLOSSARY</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
Project partnership	1
Background and context	2
The Karma Project model	3
<b>RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND DESIGN</b>	<b>8</b>
Research questions	8
Analytical approach	10
Research methods and data analysis	11
<b>YEAR 2 FINDINGS</b>	<b>15</b>
Youth participation in the SEED program	15
Participant outcomes	16
Project outcomes	26
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>APPENDIX A: PROXY DESCRIPTION AND SOURCES</b>	<b>38</b>

## GLOSSARY

### **Community food security**

Community food security approaches food insecurity and issues as a collective concern that includes broader environmental sustainability and social justice issues, rather than considering food as an individual or household concern.

### **Food security**

“Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO, 2006).

### **Social economy**

“The social economy is characterized by nonprofit, cooperative, and community-based activities designed to combat social exclusion and meet social needs by recirculating value within communities through locally oriented markets” (Wittman et al., 2012, p. 77).

### **Social return on investment (SROI)**

An SROI tool uses financial proxies to capture the economic values of social and largely non-economic activities and outcomes, providing an estimate of the return on investment and supporting a cost-benefit analysis of the project (Rotheroe & Neil, 2007).

### **Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs)**

“WISE models, in contrast to rapid labor-market attachment approaches, provide a first job in a supportive setting with additional skill-building opportunities, ancillary services, and assistance connecting to specific employers in the unsubsidized labor market; an approach that offers work experience and the bridge to a better job” (Cooney, 2011, p. 90).



This project is funded by the Government of Canada's  
Work Integration Social Enterprises Initiative

## INTRODUCTION

This report details the final findings of the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation’s (SRDC) four-year study examining the outcomes of a social enterprise initiative called the Karma Project that has a social mission to support the longer-term employment and well-being of at risk-youth in North Simcoe, Ontario. In parallel with the study of the labour market integration of vulnerable youth, a second objective of this study was to assess the extent to which alternative models of work-integration best support the longer-term capacity growth of Karma’s social enterprise initiatives – to do what they do in a sustainable way – and ultimately how they can best generate the desired positive social impacts in their communities. A final objective relates to the exploration of the cost effectiveness and return on investment that such alternative program initiatives may have both for the social enterprises themselves as well as the communities which they support, which has implications for governments who may support them in different respects.

As detailed in the report, SRDC’s longitudinal research study utilized a mixed methods case study approach to examine the outcomes of a social entrepreneurship training initiative, called the SEED program, that Karma specifically developed as an approach to provide food-based, work-integration training experiences for cohorts of local youth who were either unemployed or at risk of leaving high school prematurely. SRDC’s approach employed a case study design as it sought to understand how the SEED program was developed based on past and current Karma programming to meet both the needs of youth participants as well as address local food security issues. The study utilized mixed methods to incorporate both quantitative and qualitative approaches to data collection and analysis. Primary quantitative data sources included pre- and post- intervention surveys with participants to measure short and medium-term effects on participants for up to two years. Qualitative methods included field observations of SEED training and work placements along with depth interviews with Karma’s leadership and community stakeholders.

## PROJECT PARTNERSHIP

SRDC worked closely with the Karma Project to develop and track the outcomes of this program. SRDC is a national non-profit research organization whose two-part mission is to help policymakers and practitioners identify policies and programs that improve the well-being of all Canadians, with a special concern for the effects on the disadvantaged, and to raise the standards of evidence that are used in assessing these policies. As project lead, SRDC managed the overall workplan and evaluation activities of the project, while the Karma Project lead the development

of the SEED Program’s social enterprise interventions, recruitment, training, and other supports for youth participants.

In the interests of supporting the development of research capacity within Karma through this partnership opportunity, SRDC took a collaborative approach to the research design, implementation, and analysis throughout all stages of the study. SRDC researchers worked closely with Karma to ensure the research design, instruments, and the analytic results could be fully integrated and utilized in the strategic planning and direction of the organization. As discussed later in this report, the Karma Project was able to draw on its strengthened research capacity to engage in new partnerships and pursue new opportunities to expand or extend its programming in response to emerging community needs over the course of the project’s four years of operations.

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Younger Canadians (aged 15 to 30) face increasingly difficult employment prospects compared with previous generations, with fewer youth holding permanent full-time positions and an increased number of youths being employed in precarious jobs or multiple positions (Morissette, 2021). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the youth labour market in Canada, with youth unemployment rates rising substantially throughout 2019 and 2020 (Morissette, 2021). Youth employment issues are further exacerbated by current global economic uncertainties as well as a steady increase in the cost of living, which has only added to the financial strain felt by young Canadians. With young workers likely to feel the impacts of these economic pressures for years to come, many youths are reporting negative impacts on their mental health and education (Statistics Canada, 2020; Statistics Canada, 2021).

These global and national economic issues play out at the local scale in differing and uneven ways for youth who are not in employment, education, or training (NEET). In 2020, the unemployment rate in Simcoe Muskoka reached a fourteen-year peak at 12.2%, impacting women, youth, and precarious workers disproportionately (Muskoka Community Foundation, 2021). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a significant portion of the youth in Simcoe Muskoka region of Ontario were already considered “at risk”, given their degree of social exclusion and significant barriers to employment. For instance, there are high-drop out rates for secondary students, particularly among youth that identify as male. Due to the intergenerational trauma brought about by residential schools and the lack of culturally appropriate supports, these issues are intensified for Indigenous youth (National Collaborating Center for Indigenous Health – NCCIH, 2017). As a result, Indigenous youth are more likely to experience lower rates of educational attainment and are often located in communities with fewer educational advancement and employment opportunities (NCCIH, 2017). The Indigenous population in North



Simcoe is proportionately five times larger than in the Ontario as a whole and is significantly younger and more distant from the labour market (North Simcoe LHIN, 2019).

For at-risk youth, unemployment further impacts their health and well-being, as they are unable to meet basic needs and are at a higher risk of food insecurity. Income and employment are closely linked with social determinants of health, including food security, which describes an individual or household's access to sufficient healthful, culturally appropriate, and affordable food to lead an active and healthy life. Tarasuk and Mitchell (2020) note that Canadian households are more likely to be food insecure if they are low-income, Indigenous, and have lower levels of education.

The linkages between economic uncertainty and household food security were made evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, with Canadians reporting increased food insecurity (Statistics Canada, 2021). According to the 2021 Vital Signs report for the Simcoe Muskoka region, food security is a rising issue due the rising costs of living paired with the impacts of the pandemic, with an increased demand for emergency food services such as food banks (Muskoka Community Foundation, 2021). In effect, one in eight households in Simcoe Muskoka are considered food insecure, which negatively impacts physical and mental health as well as financial stability, all of which contribute to increased stress and social isolation (Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit, 2017).

Reducing food insecurity requires multi-level and coordinated actions among stakeholders, including policy makers, municipal health authorities, and community organizations to help meet immediate food needs and address the root causes of food insecurity. In their Food Security Framework, food is described as a means to addressing broader community health, social and economic issues, including housing and income disparities, fostering Indigenous food traditions and culture, and supporting the local agri-foods sector (EcoEthnomics, 2019). In these ways, community food security actions can help to address multiple goals and issues by using food to help empower individuals to increase their food knowledge and skills while building community capacity (Levkoe, 2006; Fulford & Thompson, 2013). Simcoe County seeks to build upon existing these community food security actions through food festivals showcasing local producers, supporting Indigenous food foraging and school food programs, as well as farmers' markets and community gardens (EcoEthnomics, 2019).

## THE KARMA PROJECT MODEL

### Social entrepreneurship, food, and employment

The Karma Project, based out of the township of Midland in the Simcoe Muskoka region, is a social enterprise that is involved in several of the aforementioned community food security

actions through a multi-pronged approach that links food security, education, and employment training. From community gardens to food box delivery, Karma has a social mission to foster a sustainable and accessible local food system through the provision of education, co-operation, leadership, and creativity for the communities of Huronia, North Simcoe and beyond. Community food security initiatives such as the Karma Project provide important educational opportunities and pathways to employment, wherein people can learn about food production and processing, and provide volunteering opportunities for people to engage with their communities, which reduces social exclusion and helps with the transition to employment (Slater & Yeudall, 2015; Vennen, 2020). As a social enterprise, the Karma Project is driven by the community's social and economic needs and is well suited to address place-based issues, such as unemployment and food insecurity, as the project organically developed programs under local leadership that optimize the use of regional resources in innovative ways.

There are a number of food-oriented social enterprises across Canada, primarily located in urban centers, including the Neechi Commons and the Social Enterprise Centre in Winnipeg Manitoba as well as The Stop in Toronto, which report success in addressing community-specific needs relating to food security, food skills and employment, all while increasing community economic resilience and well-being (Levkoe, 2006; Pearce & Wuttunee, 2015). The Karma Project is distinctive among Canadian food-oriented social enterprises due to the scope of activities in which it is engaged as well as the wide, rural geographic area which it serves. Rural social enterprises such as the Karma Project face unique challenges as they tend to be smaller in size, operate in regions with lower population densities and less developed public infrastructure, have fewer funding and income generation opportunities, and have limited access to support networks (Steiner & Teasdale, 2019). Despite these challenges, small local social enterprises such as Karma have demonstrated their ability to meet the unique needs of rural communities which are experiencing social isolation and high rates of unemployment, and are able to contribute to regional development by building on context-specific resources and capital (Steiner & Teasdale, 2019).

## The Karma Project: Key components and activities

As a work-integrated social enterprise (WISE), Karma has developed a unique set of WISE programming that centres food as a tool to engage and support local at-risk youth in gaining employment experiences and skills. Karma's use of social entrepreneurship approaches aims to address youth employment and social exclusion issues in the largely rural North Simcoe region by employing a multi-pronged approach that links arts, culture, and education with food security. The Karma Project has generated a number of social enterprises that address the local good food gap while creating a cooperative network for in-demand "green" occupations in North Simcoe. This network sets the stage for youth-at-risk engagement programs that go beyond volunteering to provide opportunities for skills development and social entrepreneurship.



Karma is guided by the following principles: growing food, growing community, and growing change. By ‘growing food’, Karma aims to create spaces for food production and distribution to enhance community food security. The aim of ‘growing community’ refers to activities that seek to develop youth capacity through education and empowerment programs while strengthening inclusive food distribution networks. In ‘growing change’, the organization is involved with food advocacy through the Simcoe County Food Council, undertaking research on an innovative local prescription food program, and working closely with local First Nations communities to Indigenize Karma’s practices. Karma social enterprise initiatives are funded in part by Simcoe County, through the Social and Community Investment Fund, among other sources.

### *The SEED program*

There are multiple activities that currently comprise the Karma Project’s network, including the Affordable Markets, Student Nutrition Programs, and community gardens. The SEED program, which is the primary focus of this report, links each of the enterprises through a WISE approach, encompassing educational and capacity-building opportunities for youth with the ultimate aim to enhance youth employment outcomes. The SEED program is an innovative approach to food education that is facilitated by educators, hosts, interpreters, First Nations partners, local chefs, farmers, and social entrepreneurs. The SEED program is comprised of innovative social entrepreneurship programming that teaches youth about the food cycle, from seed to plate. SEED participants learn food skills in workshops hosted in gardens, kitchens, markets, and classrooms across North Simcoe in order to experience all aspects of the food supply chain. The soon-to-be launched SEED Badge is a youth-developed micro-credential bridging SEED graduates and local employers. This credential will certify the completion of the program and the acquisition of specific skills that can be equated to work experience, including growing, harvesting, processing, marketing, and selling food.

The SEED youth gain work experience through the Karma Project’s other endeavours, and are involved in the Good Food Box, the Student Nutrition Programs, the community garden, the Affordable Market, and the Rx Food program. Each of these programs are described below.

### *Good Food Box*

The Good Food Box (GFB) model was developed by FoodShare, a Toronto-based non-profit, and aims to increase access to healthy foods by offering an assortment of fresh produce at an affordable price. The program has grown to extend across Canada, with non-profits, local health units and other organizations adapting the GFB model to suit the individual needs of their communities (Laporte Potts, 2013). In the Simcoe Muskoka region, many residents have poor access to grocery stores and/or cannot afford healthy foods. For many of these residents, the Karma Project offers monthly boxes that provide an assortment of fresh fruits and vegetables at

an affordable price. In delivering this program, Karma is responsible for acquiring the food, sorting, and packaging the boxes and delivering them to a number of pick-up points across the Simcoe Muskoka region.

### *Student Nutrition Programs*

The Student Nutrition Programs was initiated in 2020 and currently serves 14 schools in North Simcoe, providing monthly deliveries of fresh fruit and vegetables and a Good Food Lunch Kit. The program trained youth at Simcoe Shores Secondary School in food safety and food preparation to serve partner schools with prepared healthy snacks. During the pandemic, Karma partnered with Student Nutrition Ontario to provide deliveries to students' homes to ensure continued access to fresh, healthful foods.

### *Community garden*

Karma's community garden offers local residents education, space, and support with seeding and harvest to grow their own food. A portion of the crops is harvested by staff and interns and the proceeds are donated to local women's shelters. Work placement internships are focused on garden and farming tasks, including garden start-up, seeding, planting, transplanting, plant care, general garden management, and harvesting.

The gardens include a 48ft greenhouse, a community vineyard and herb beds. In 2020, an outdoor kitchen was installed, including a wood-fired oven, enabling members to continue activities while following provincial and municipal COVID-19 regulations. The gardens also serve as an outdoor classroom for SEED programming.

### *Affordable Markets*

The Karma Project's Affordable Markets began in early 2020 as innovative food access points that provide low cost, no cost, or pay-what-you-wish fresh produce that serve to enhance access to healthful foods for local residents. The suggested pricing models were researched and implemented by local secondary students to better understand the importance and challenge of providing inexpensive food access. Simcoe County partnered with the Karma Project to launch the Village Market at Georgian Village in Penetanguishene in 2020 to offer an affordable market to its residents.

### *Rx Food program*

The Rx Food program is a collaborative effort between the Karma Project and a local family physician who is also a researcher with the University of Western Ontario to design and deliver a

model where healthy foods are prescribed and provided as part of a patient’s care. As of March 2022, 76 patients have been enrolled in the program, which is operated out of a brick-and-mortar location named the “Farmacy” and includes “wraparound services, such as dietary consultations, cooking workshops, and an affordable market” (The Karma Project, 202, p.2).

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND DESIGN

To support the objectives of the project, the Karma Project developed the SEED Program as an intensive, social entrepreneurship work-integrated learning program to guide youth through the full experience of launching a social enterprise within the local community. The SEED program was specifically designed to assess whether such an integrated training, mentorship and social entrepreneurship programming would contribute to youth participants' improved skills, career activation, and employability over a 24-month follow-up period. Through the case study approach, the research team was also able to examine other factors of interest to Karma and its partners, including how the social entrepreneurship placements can contribute to positive food security outcomes for both youth participants and their communities.

This research study was guided by the premise that the long-term employment outcomes of vulnerable populations are influenced by the environment, systems, trends, and networks in which they are situated. It also recognized that participants face systematic barriers, such that their outcomes are affected by biases and forms of discrimination they may encounter, involving race, gender, ability, amongst others, that can shape their employment opportunities. Finally, it acknowledged that broader social, economic, political contexts, such as the demands of the labour market as well as the patterns and cycles of people's lives, can play a central role in their employment strategies and choices as well as the opportunities that are available to them in the labour market.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This project was focused on providing a long-term assessment of the effectiveness of providing social entrepreneurship training and work experiences to marginalized youth in North Simcoe, utilizing the combined lenses of employment and community food security to provide a unique intervention to engage young people in a process of learning food skills while gaining important employment-related competencies and experience. The research was focused on the answering the following guiding question:

**Do WISEs provide meaningful opportunities for vulnerable youth populations in rural communities to improve their labour market outcomes and social inclusion?**

The case study and longitudinal participant study focused largely on the integrated training and social entrepreneurship experiences in Karma's cohort-specific youth education programming. As such, the principal focus of the project's evaluation was to understand how these experiences may lead to significant gains in the skills, career activation, and employability of youth

participants in the short-term, as well as improved labour market outcomes and enhanced social inclusion of participants in the medium-term. In addition, the project also sought to provide insights into how participation in SEED programming might contribute to the sustainable livelihoods of rural youth at risk of social and economic exclusion.

Building on the overarching research question, this study also engaged with the following lines of inquiry:

- Does Karma’s integrated training, mentorship and social entrepreneurship programming improve the skills, career activation, and employability of Indigenous and at-risk youth participants? Do these opportunities lead to improved employment rates and earnings over a two-year period?
- Do these opportunities also lead to improved social outcomes of participants including indicators of inclusion, self-esteem, confidence, and improved health and mental health?
- Do participant outcomes vary across the project’s key subgroups of interest?

A supplementary component of the evaluation examined the capacity of the Karma Project to supporting vulnerable youth in their employment journeys, and comprised the following ancillary research questions:

- Does the integration of training and work placement opportunities for Indigenous and at-risk youth improve the short-term capacity of the Karma Project to conduct social enterprise activities in North Simcoe?
- Does this integration lead to longer-term capacity growth of the social enterprises while having the intended social impacts in rural communities?
- What is the return on investment for the Karma Project?
- How do the costs of different approaches to social entrepreneurship compare across the participant cohorts?
- How does the ROI of these models compare for the participating social enterprise and for the government?

## ANALYTICAL APPROACH

### Implementation research

This study consisted of an examination of a socially-innovative program that links relevant social entrepreneurship skills training with integrated experiences that provide relevant essential and job-specific skills that youth could apply should they pursue self-employment or traditional employment opportunities in their community. The study's implementation research was designed to provide a better understanding of how the SEED program engaged, trained, and supported the 59 at-risk youth who had been recruited to participate in the programming and volunteered to join the research study. The project's interim report provides greater detail and context with regards to the SEED programming, which involved cohorts of 15-20 youth participating in four weeks of motivational training and social entrepreneurship work experience focused on food literacy, food skills development, and community food provision. The programming provided youth participants with onsite physical training in gardens, kitchens, and markets, as well as relevant and reflective minicourses that consider the role of the whole individual within the realm of social entrepreneurship.

### Effects on participant outcomes

Consistent with the primary objectives of the study, the evaluation utilized a series of surveys to capture participants' employment outcomes, including improved essential skills, participation in further education and training, job search activities, employment and earnings, and lower income assistance receipt. The surveys were also designed to capture changes in psychosocial functioning of at-risk youth, using validated scales to measure any differences in self-efficacy, career activation, job search clarity, and various metrics of wellbeing, social inclusion, and health over the two-year follow-up period.

### Effects on the Karma Project's organizational capacity

Consistent with the study's secondary objective, the SRDC research team worked closely with The Karma Project to support and assess changes in the organizational capacity of the WISE through regular check-ins and in-depth interviews. The interviews completed with Karma leadership as well as community stakeholders in the final year of the study focused on a range of organizational capacity issues including – but not limited to – strategic planning, governance, administration, funding, and sustainability.



## The social economy

The multiple social and economic aims of the Karma Project place it firmly in the ‘social economy’, which Wittman et al. (2012) define as follows: “The social economy is characterized by nonprofit, cooperative, and community-based activities designed to combat social exclusion and meet social needs by recirculating value within communities through locally oriented markets” (p. 77). In relation to employment, actions within the social economy typically aim to support marginalized and vulnerable groups, supporting those who are often excluded from conventional labour markets through the provision of training, employment opportunities, and job support (OECD, 2013).

Social economies are embedded in particular places and emerge as a result of local needs and are therefore well-placed to address context-driven social equity issues such as unemployment and community food security (Nelson & Stroink, 2019). As a part of the social economy, the Karma Project and its SEED program emerged from a need to address food security and youth employment in the Simcoe Muskoka community. Through the lens of the social economy, SRDC’s research with Karma and its stakeholders considered the role that the SEED project plays in contributing to local economic development through a mix of place-based economic and non-economic activities.

## RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA ANALYSIS

This study consisted of an examination of a socially-innovative program that links occupation-specific skills training with integrated work placements in in-demand "green" jobs through case studies of each of the cohorts. The evaluation of the Karma Project’s SEED program employed a mixed-methods approach to examine project outcomes and impacts for participants, Karma Project programming, and the local community.

Through the entire project, an emphasis was placed on developing research capacity among the Karma Project and its stakeholders. This was accomplished by maintaining a collaborative approach to the research design, implementation, and analysis throughout all stages of the study. SRDC worked closely with the Karma Project and its delivery partners to ensure the research design, instruments, and the analytic results can be fully integrated and utilized in the strategic planning and direction of the WISE. We also worked closely to mentor program staff in the appropriate design and administration of the instruments, and in the analysis and interpretation. This developed capacity within the WISE to determine what needed to be measured and why, and how it should be utilized. In addition to sharing these insights and best practices, SRDC provided the Karma Project with annotated versions of all data collection instruments. Based on the experience during the project and analysis, the annotations will highlight which questions worked best in the field and which questions are most sensitive and effective in measuring

relevant longitudinal change. This information can be used by the Karma Project to create streamlined and customized instruments for future use in ongoing delivery of the SEED program.

## Literature review

A review of academic and grey literature was conducted to highlight the geographic context in which the Karma Project operates and current research on community food security in Canada. Relevant academic sources were identified using Google Scholar and open-access food studies journals, notably the Canadian Food Studies Journal, which includes a number of recent case studies on food security organizations and actions in Canada. Demographic and community health data on employment and food security was extracted from reports produced by local health authorities and municipalities in the Simcoe Muskoka region.

## Quantitative data collection and analysis

The SEED program was primarily evaluated through a series of surveys implemented at intake, three-months, one-year, and two-years, providing an overview of immediate, intermediate and longer-term outcomes. The surveys captured participants' employment outcomes, including employment and earnings, job search activities, participation in further education and training, and income assistance receipt. The surveys also collected data to assess changes in psychosocial functioning of at-risk youth including several validated scales measuring self-efficacy, career activation, job search clarity, and various metrics of wellbeing, social inclusion, and health. The Karma Project and SRDC have also developed a database to capture participant activities in the SEED program as well as referrals to other supports and opportunities.

## Qualitative data collection and analysis

Consistent with the second objectives of the research, the SRDC researchers worked closely with The Karma Project to support and assess changes in the organizational capacity of the WISE through regular check-ins and in-depth interviews with stakeholders. The key informant interviews took place with six project stakeholders via Zoom, lasting up to 45 minutes. The interviews focused on a range of organizational capacity issues, including strategic planning, governance, administration, funding, and sustainability, as well as social and broader community outcomes of the Karma Project's activities, including the impacts on community food security and participants' well-being. Interview data was transcribed and analyzed thematically using QSR NVivo software.

A focus group consisting of three youth currently involved with the SEED program was conducted via Zoom and was followed by a complimentary and optional written reflection. The focus group provided a rich narrative and account of the youths' experience with the SEED program and the impacts of their participation on their personal and professional development. The written reflection consisted of a series of six open-ended questions that were provided to the youth following the focus group, and was intended to allow participants who were uneasy participating in the group setting to express themselves in a confidential manner. The data gathered from the focus group and written reflection was used to provide context and richness to the survey findings.

## Social return on investment (SROI)

Organizations within the social economy often face difficulties imparting the economic value of their non-economic activities, which undermines their ability to communicate their contributions to local economic development (Ballamingie et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2019; Poitevin-DesRivières, 2019). This research aimed in part to understand the return on investment of the SEED program, which posed a challenge for the SRDC research team as the program's activities are largely non-monetary. As such, a Social Return on Investment (SROI) tool was developed to estimate the economic values of the activities and outputs of the SEED program during the final year of the project (April 2021 to March 2022). In this way, the SROI tool not only provides important insights into the economic impacts of the SEED program to complement SRDC's other evaluation approaches, it also provides the Karma Project with a means to report the economic value of their work to funders, stakeholders and their community.

An SROI tool uses financial proxies to capture the economic values of social and largely non-economic activities and outcomes, providing an estimate of the return on investment and supporting a cost-benefit analysis of the project (Rotheroe & Neil, 2007). In this way, an SROI calculation can include projected impacts of a particular project, such as the reductions in costs to the welfare and healthcare system due to a program's activities and outputs (Rotheroe & Neil, 2007). With regards to the SEED program, the economic benefits that this research aimed to capture related to the costs of youth unemployment and the benefits of providing local at-risk youth with work experience and skills. While the broader economic costs of youth unemployment are difficult to capture, evidence suggests that there are long-term consequences of youth unemployment on economic growth, with youth at risk of social disengagement the longer they are not in educational programs or employment (Morrissette, 2021).

For the purposes of this project, the SRDC team's approach utilized the SROI tool as a complimentary analytical device to provide insights into the tangible, employment skills-related benefits of the SEED program. In this way, the SROI tool focuses on capturing the economic value of SEED's workshops and volunteer activities in 2021-2022 in relation to the investments

made in the SEED program, largely in the form of grants and donations. Working collaboratively with the Karma Project, the SRDC research team generated estimates of incremental costs associated with providing work integration opportunities for youth participants, including costs of recruitment, training, employment supports and mentoring, as well as estimates of the financial value of the non-renumerated work in which SEED participants engaged. The estimates were benchmarked against the SROI of other programs that serve similar populations of youth as well as organizations involved in community food security work.

## YEAR 2 FINDINGS

### YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN THE SEED PROGRAM

As discussed in more detail in the project's interim report, the Karma Project formed partnerships with the Simcoe Alternative Secondary School (SASS) and the YMCA in Midland to engage 59 of their students and youth clients (36 SASS students and 23 YMCA clients) in the SEED Program over the first year of the project. Youth clients of the YMCA were referred to the SEED program based on a YMCA staff assessment of their particular need for community-based training and work experience, given their limited skills, job history or other barriers to employment. Similar to the YMCA cohort, SASS students who were invited to engage in the SEED program were particularly at risk of leaving school prematurely due to their personal circumstances or other life challenges. This component of the study was designed to capture the effects of SEED program in supporting the career decision-making of SASS students during their transition from school to work or further education.

Karma worked closely with the partners to develop the programming to engage youth through hands-on training in gardens, kitchens, and markets at community partner locations, such as Sainte-Marie among the Hurons. As further opportunities presented themselves, the SEED program activities were expanded to include garden and kitchen workshops and experience, food safety certification, field trips, storytelling & art workshops, and peer-to-peer activities. The Karma Project worked closely with both partners to align the program with the content and timing of their respective programs, at times providing on-site training and engagement activities to ensure a seamless transition for the youth.

Youth who volunteered to participate in the research study completed an informed consent form (signed by parents or guardians if underage) and an intake survey as part of their onboarding process. Due to the Simcoe County School Board research guidelines, the research team was required to establish to engage SASS students in an anonymous manner while they were still enrolled at the school. The team worked with school officials to develop and implement a participant tracking system that captured SASS students' anonymized program participation and outcome information in a manner where it could then be linked to their demographic data when they graduated or left the school. It was expected that most, if not all, SASS participants would have left the school by the time they completed their final follow-up survey, enabling the study to capture the characteristics of all participants over the two-year period. Further information on the profile of participants who consented to participate in the study is provided in the project's interim report.

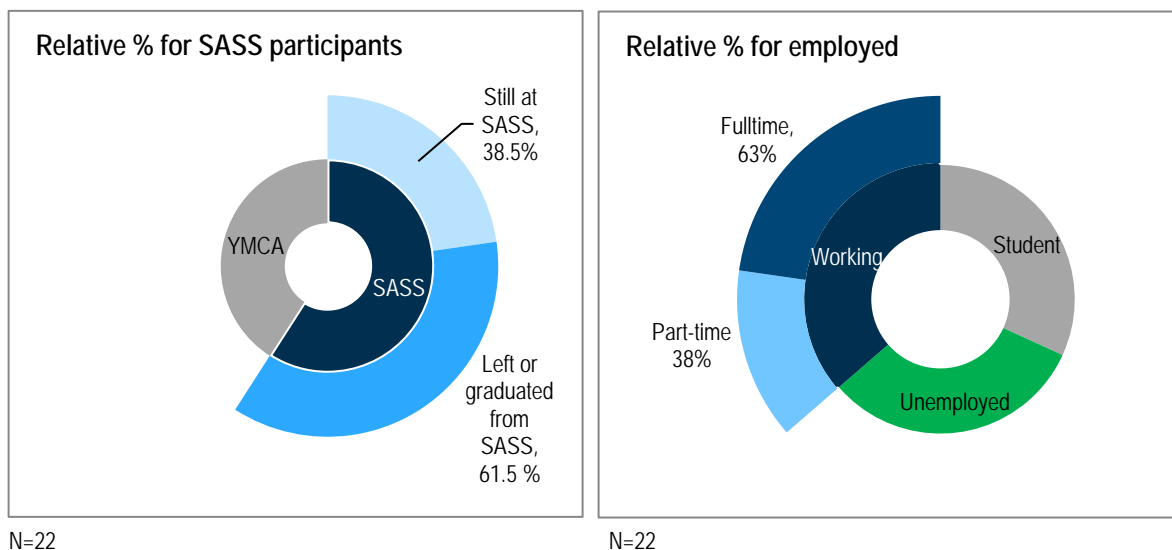
## PARTICIPANT OUTCOMES

In 2021-2022, the project team engaged participants to complete the project’s final follow-up survey to capture outcomes after two years. Due to ongoing challenges remaining engaged with participants during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Karma Project and its partners were only able to support 22 completions of the survey, representing 37.3 per cent of the initial 59 participants. Despite the limited response rate to the final survey, the outcomes captured in the final survey provide important insights into the employment journeys of at-risk youth who have remained living in communities with limited employment opportunities. This section details notable findings from the Year 2 survey combined with insights captured through the participant focus group as well as stakeholder interviews to provide a more in-depth perspective on the impacts of the SEED program on youth participants.

### Employment and career outcomes

Responses to the two-year survey showed that just over 60 per cent of the SASS participants had left or graduated from school at the time of the survey, an increase of 17.7 percentage points from the previous year’s follow-up survey. Just over a third of respondents (36 per cent) reported being employed at the time of the survey. Amongst those who were employed, nearly two-thirds were working full-time (63 per cent). This represents a major shift from the previous year (as detailed in the interim report), where the majority of participants who were employed were working part-time (71.4 per cent).

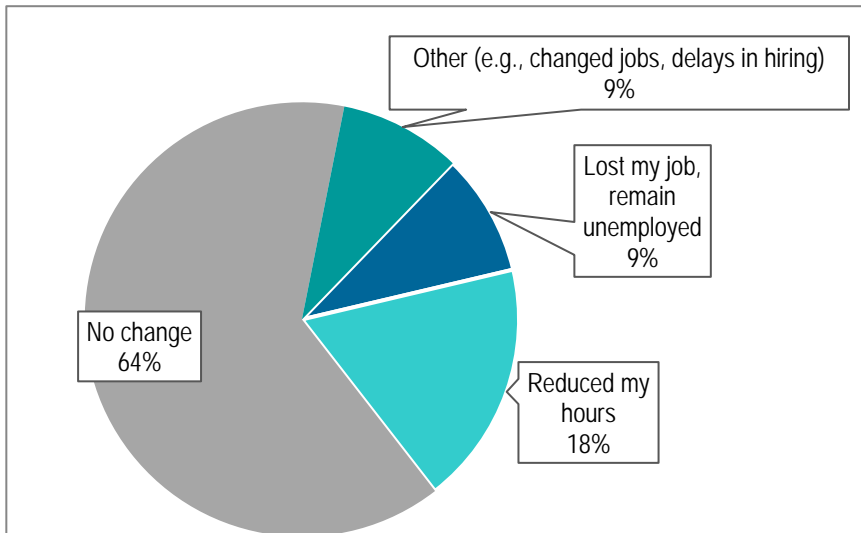
Figure 1 Current educational and employment status





Respondents were asked how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their employment. Nearly two-thirds of participants (64 per cent) reported no impact of the pandemic on their employment situation, while nearly a fifth (18 per cent) experienced a reduction in hours and nine per cent lost their job. While this finding suggests that the pandemic may have had a minimal impact on participants' employment journeys, it is important to note that a large proportion of respondents were still enrolled in school or were still unemployed at the time of the Year 2 follow-up survey; as such, the pandemic may have limited their employment options or affected their decision to remain in school over the past year.

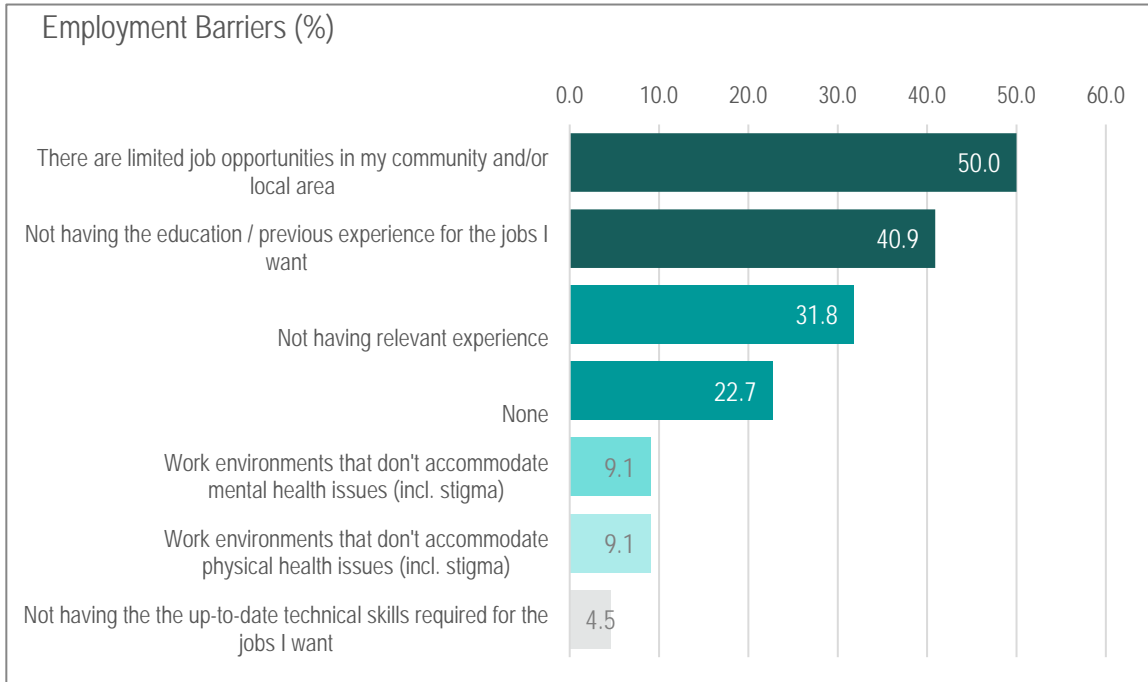
**Figure 2**      **Impact of COVID-19 on employment**



N=22

When asked to indicate any barriers faced regarding employment, the most commonly reported barrier was limited local job opportunities, noted by half of participants. The second most common barrier was not having enough education or experience for desired jobs (40.9 per cent), followed by not having enough relevant experience (31.8 per cent), though nearly a quarter of participants reported facing no barriers to employment (22.7 per cent).

Figure 3 Self-reported barriers to employment

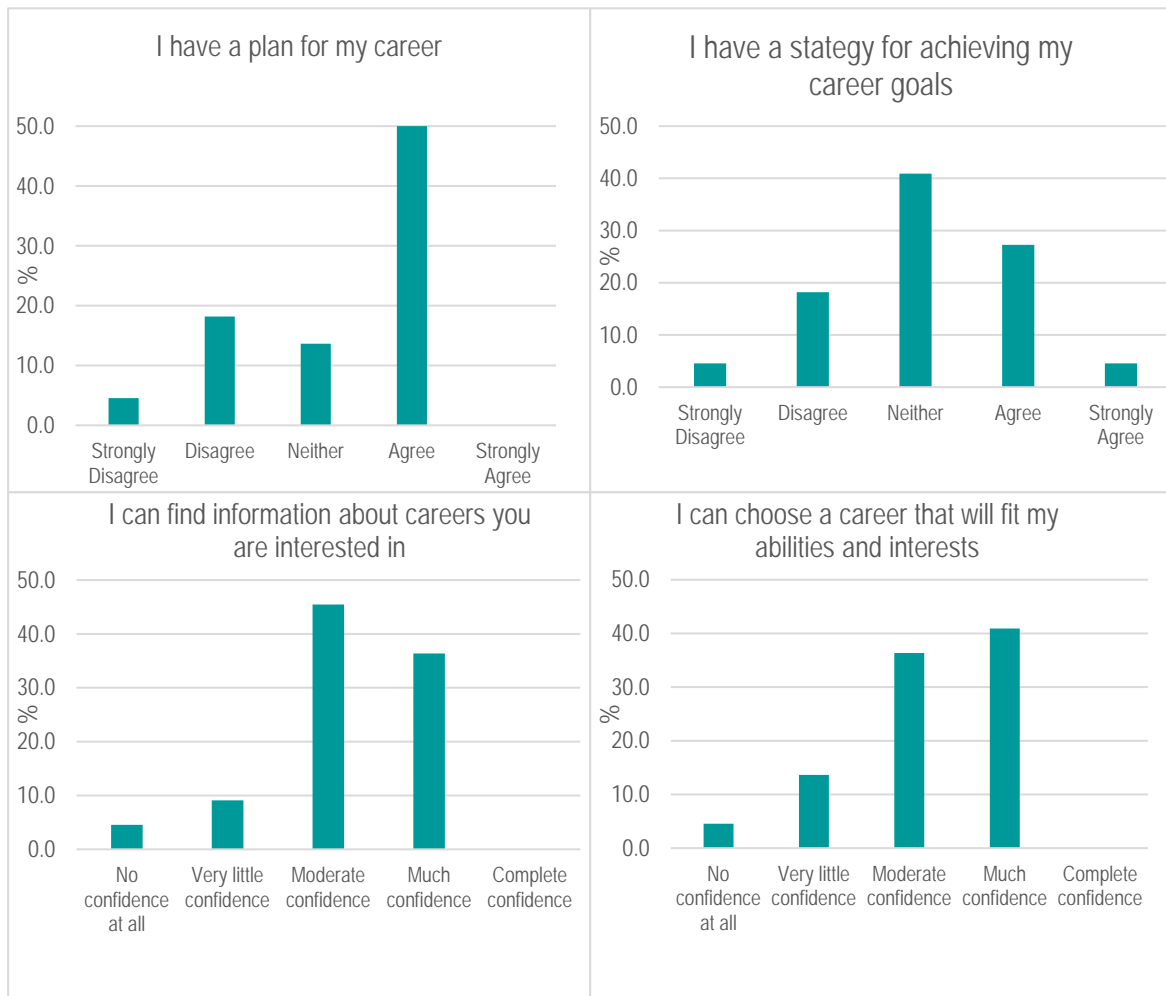


N=22

### Career plans

Respondents were asked to consider their career plans, and the following charts illustrate that as of the final follow-up, many participants were still in the process of deciding their career plans. Among the participants who responded to the Year 2 survey, half (50.0 per cent) agreed they had a plan for their career and nearly a third (31.8 per cent) indicated that they had a strategy for achieving their career goals. Respondents had moderate to much confidence in both their ability to find information about careers (81.8 per cent) and to choose a career that fit their abilities (77.3 per cent). All participants responded that they were looking for long-term or better work, suggesting that even for those in full-time employment, they were not yet in the job that they envisioned for their long-term career.

Figure 4 Current state of career planning



N=22

### Participants' perceptions of WISE impacts

When asked about impacts their WISE experience may have had on employment, the greatest percentage of respondents (77.3 per cent) indicated that they gained work experience or training, followed by gaining certificates (68.2 per cent). Nearly two-thirds of participants recognized the impact of support from the Karma staff during challenging situations (63.6 per cent). More than a third of participants (36.4 per cent) were unemployed and received support in finding a job, just under a quarter reported receiving help finding a new job (22.7 per cent) and close to a fifth (18.2 per cent) reported that their WISE experience helped them find a better job than the one they currently held.

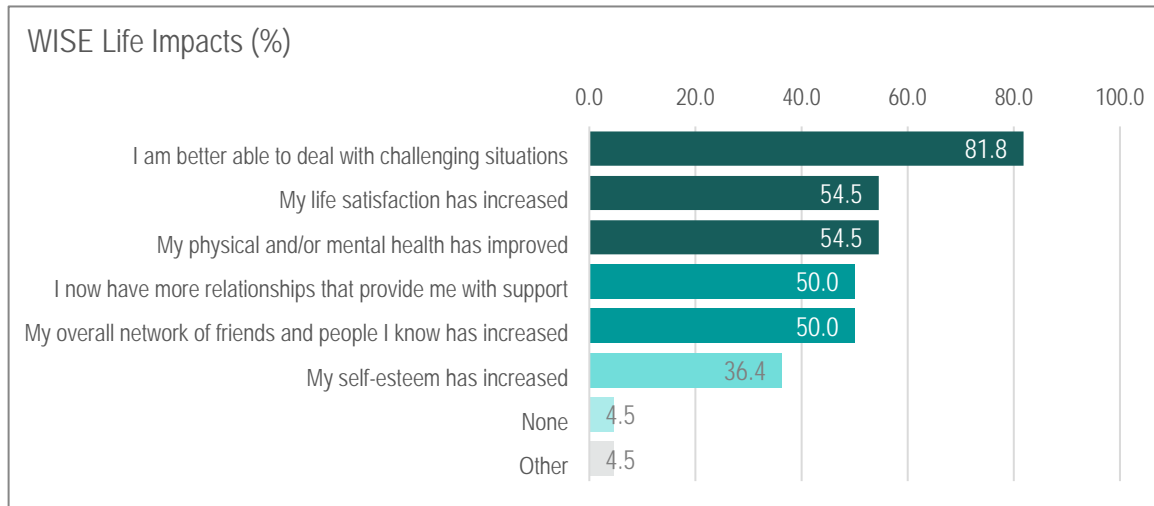
Figure 5 Self-reported impacts of WISE intervention on employment



N=22

When asked about other impacts their WISE experience may have had on their lives more generally, a large proportion of participants (81.8 per cent) indicated that they were better able to deal with challenging situations as a result of the SEED training and work experience. Over half of respondents (54.5 per cent) reported an increase in their life satisfaction and a similar proportion indicated an improvement in their physical and/or mental health. Half of respondents also reported that they had more supportive relationships and that their overall social networks have increased. Just over one-third (36.4 per cent) indicated that they experienced a boost in their self-esteem as a result of their experiences with the SEED program.

Figure 6 Self-reported impacts of WISE on health, outlook, and life satisfaction



N=22

In the focus groups, the SEED youth commented on the skills they've gained through the program that have enabled them to seek better employment opportunities, with one youth mentioning that the food handling certification they obtained through SEED program enabled them to pursue a particular job opportunity. The agri-food industry and tourism are significant sources of employment in the Simcoe Muskoka regions, and SEED youth participants shared that the program provided them with valuable experiences in food work, such as cooking, food safety and handling, and food processing, that are directly relevant to these local industries.

In their interviews, stakeholders relayed several success stories where they observed that SEED youth participants were able to not only develop tangible workplace skills through the program, but vital soft skills such as self-confidence, problem solving skills and communication. In particular, stakeholders observed that working on the SEED badge micro-credential and the marketing of their food products enabled youth to take charge and develop their leadership skills and creative capacities.

*"We help them develop the skills that they need right from day one of going to work, the willingness to get up and go to work, the being appropriately prepared to go to work. And, honestly, from start to finish, we provide support on all the steps."*

Karma Project stakeholder

*“Very good success stories... And sometimes they’re not related to food sustainability or the economic development. But the sheer fact that they were able to get into a program, connect with people, learn those preemployment skills, like working on a team, speaking to adults, even just walking in... For example, we had one participant ended up working at a mechanic shop after doing the program and was very happy about that, and probably wouldn’t have had the confidence to do that otherwise.”*

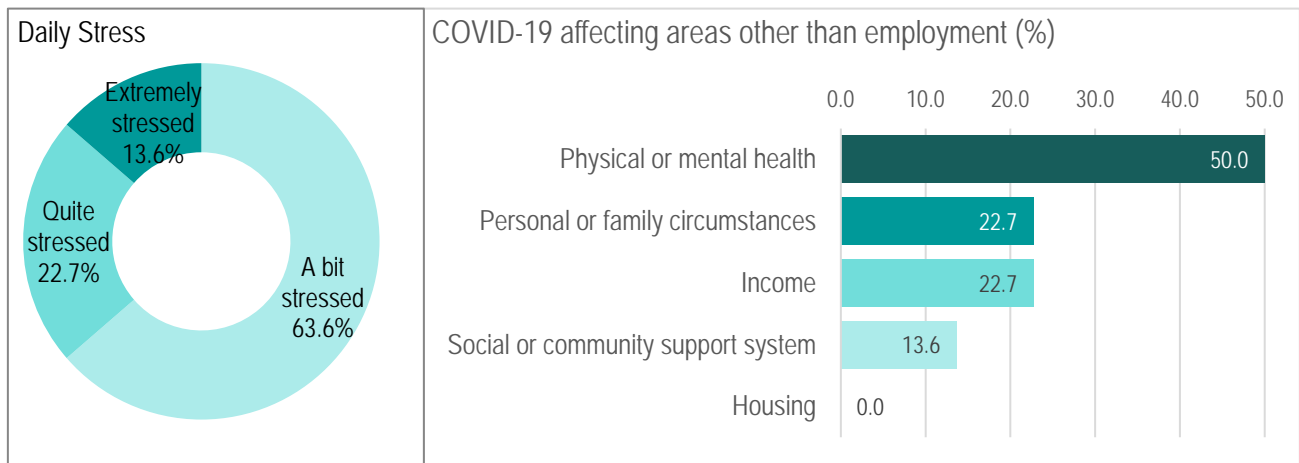
Karma Project stakeholder

### Participants’ well-being outcomes

Participants were asked about several questions to form a broad picture regarding their well-being. In general, respondents reported moderate stress levels; most participants (63.6 per cent) reporting being only a bit stressed on a daily basis, a fifth (22.7 per cent) reporting being quite stressed, and a smaller group (13.6 per cent) reported being extremely stressed.

When asked about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their lives beyond employment, half of participants reported that the pandemic had affected their physical or mental health (50.0 per cent), followed by personal or family circumstances and income (both 22.7 per cent), and a smaller portion of participants felt an impact to their social support system (13.6 per cent).

**Figure 7** Current stress levels and impact of COVID-19 on other areas of life

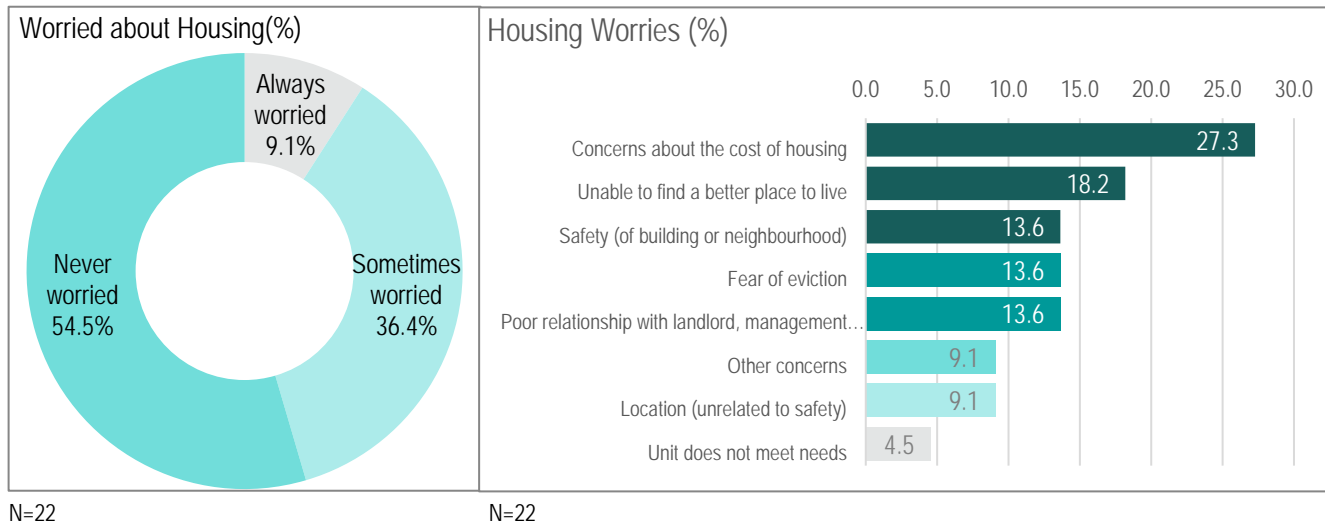


N=22

Regarding housing, no participants experienced impacts on their housing situation specifically due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and just over half of participants indicated that they were never worried about housing (54.5 per cent). The most common worry among respondents was the cost of housing (27.3 per cent).



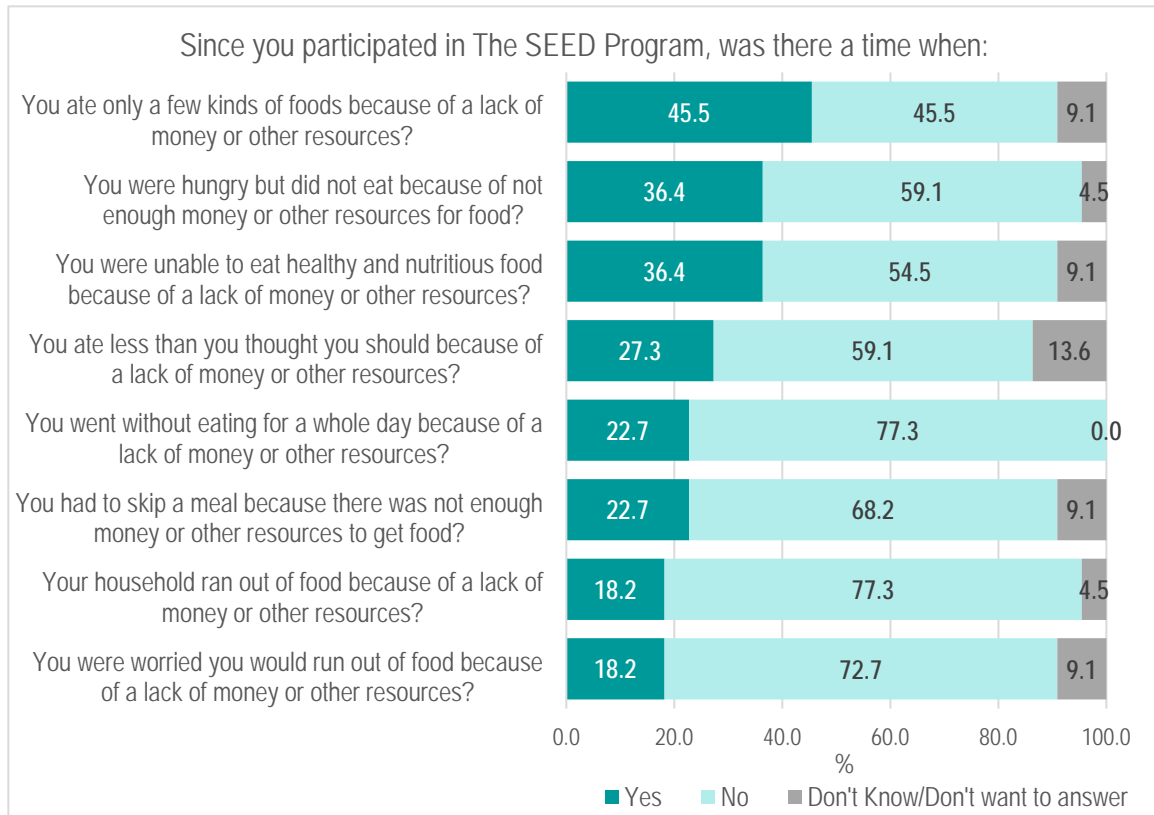
**Figure 8** Current outlook on housing situation



To better understand participants’ daily life experiences, two optional questions were added to the final survey to ask participants about their experiences with discrimination. These questions had provided important insights into the experiences of other populations of racialized youth; the project team agreed that these questions would also be relevant to SEED participants, many of whom are racialized as well. Overall, few participants indicated that they experienced racial discrimination, with nearly three-quarters of respondents (73 per cent) indicating that they had not experiences of racial discrimination in the past few months, while very few (9 per cent) experienced isolated incidents and even fewer (5 per cent) experienced discrimination from time to time (results not shown). Given the small response sample to the final survey, it is not possible to conduct any further analysis of these findings or compare the outcomes of participants who had experiences with racial discrimination from those who had not.

Given the focus of SEED programming on food-related knowledge and skills, the survey also asked participants about their level of food security using the UN Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES). The results indicate that a substantial share of participants still have food security concerns. While the proportion of participants facing food insecurity issues did decrease from the Year 2 survey, from an average of 38.7 down to 28.4 per cent across all items, this still represents a substantial number of participants. The main concerns faced by participants revolved around lacking money or resources for food. The finding that nearly a quarter (22.7 per cent) of respondents indicated that they had gone for a whole day without food due to a lack of money speaks to very real concerns about food accessibility and affordability among a substantial proportion of participants, which remains consistent with the survey results from the previous year.

**Figure 9 Experiences of food insecurity since WISE participation**



N=22

### Participants' social outcomes

The survey results highlight the ongoing challenges faced by SEED program participants due to their personal circumstances as well as limited opportunities in their community. The focus group and stakeholder interviews provided important insights into how the SEED program brought together cohorts of youth from a wide range of backgrounds, and allowed them to build relationships and emotional connections through their shared experiences and their investment in the Karma Project's work.

Focus group participants shared how many of the youth who engaged in the program face daily isolation living in rural communities, and the SEED program allowed them to expand their social network and build confidence. Stakeholders also commented on the personal growth of SEED participants, who are often lower-income and face mental health struggles. In this, the SEED program aimed to address these issues through wellness-oriented workshops, including yoga and meditation sessions. By integrating employment skills with personal well-being, the

stakeholders reported that the SEED program was of benefit to the youth's mental health and their self-esteem.

*"The experience of going through the SEED program is very beneficial for their mental well-being and their self-esteem. And through they are better prepared for life in general, when it throws sidebars and makes something difficult... they have learned how to think around it."*

Karma Project stakeholder

*"We've been there as time progresses and I can see the friendships... And it's phenomenal watching how they will step up for each other, to look after each other and to create plans on when to get together, when to connect. And then their self-esteem – I see in the group, as they get more comfortable with me, I start to see some specific people start to show leadership and kind of rise. You kind of see them rise from the rest of the group as natural leaders that maybe they didn't see before."*

Karma Project stakeholder

As captured in the survey results, food security remains a major personal concern for many SEED participants, given that many participants reported that they lacked access to affordable, healthy foods. Several Karma Project stakeholders noted that youth often joined the program with limited food knowledge, especially around healthy food choices and preparation, and that participation in SEED helped to alleviate food security issues amongst the youth as well as the broader community.

*"The other thing is, prior to doing these projects, the students didn't realize they lived in food deserts, not a lot of them. But I would probably say about 30 percent of our population live in a food desert. So you have access to a convenience store, but that's it. And if you live out, you know, we have Honey Harbor, which is it's pretty far out if you don't have a ride into a grocery store, you certainly can't afford anything, and maybe you're eating chips for dinner. And that whole that whole cycle of nutrition is so important for well-being, for health, for everything... Like, it's generational because they don't know any better. And just bringing awareness to it, I think is really important and letting students realize that they're missing out on that link and hopefully, creating a form of advocacy for themselves eventually down the road. To advocate and say: 'You know what, this isn't right. How come I don't have access to fresh fruits and vegetables just because I live out in the middle of nowhere?' And I mean, that goes with everybody, including our indigenous population who live on reserves."*

Karma Project stakeholder

*"I learned about different kinds of food that I like, I really like pickled vegetables, for example. We made a lot of those and that was really nice. We make so many new dips and things in the kitchen, and it was always so fun and exciting to see what we'll pick next. Taking that home and having it at home to enjoy... All the ways we learned how to make homemade food was so helpful, being able to cook up my own, for example, that big help."*

SEED program youth

## PROJECT OUTCOMES

### Community and economic development outcomes

#### *Community food security*

Stakeholders emphasised that the main goal of the Karma Project, of which the SEED program is a key initiative, is to provide good food for the community. The Karma Project and the SEED program use food to develop not only address people's food needs social ties within the community, through public events, workshop, and markets. In this manner, the Karma Project's work is fundamentally connected with different organizations in the community, including the YMCA, of which the Employment Centre is a key partner, SASS, and local Indigenous organizations.

According to the Karma Project stakeholders, the SEED project participants were reportedly passionate about helping to address food insecurity in their communities, with a small number of former SEED participants remaining involved in some capacity with the Karma Project through volunteer positions. Likewise, the most recent SEED cohort expressed that the program helped them to form deeper connections with their community by helping to address food security concerns.

*"Like a sense of community is like probably one of the biggest things, especially in Midland. I've lived here for quite a while and I always seen it as like somewhere that I'm just here. I had no ties to the community, I could have probably cared less about it, to be honest. But through Erin, she's really showed me that there is a lot of willing people that care about the community here, and it's kind of nice to be a part of that. Especially with the partnerships that she has connected with through with schools in the township and stuff like that, we're really able to help a lot of the less privileged and less fortunate people with food that they wouldn't be able to have access to before or just not the time to make. Yeah, it just feels really good to be able to do something that isn't just for me."*

SEED program youth

Equally, the youth were vital to communicating the Karma Project's objectives with their own local communities. One stakeholder noted that is often difficult to share information about the Karma Project with smaller communities, particularly given the large geographic area that Karma serves, and that the involvement of the youth helped to spread the message about available services and programs. The 2021-2022 SEED cohort expressed a keen awareness of the food security issues plaguing their communities and an interest in contributing to solutions, particularly with regards to the cost of food and the limited access to grocery stores in rural communities.

*"And I'd also like to add the fact that...it is affordable.... Like that's like our main goal is to make sure everyone has access to it, not just people that can go to a farmer's market and spend six dollars on an apple. You know what I mean? We really try to make it something that everyone can enjoy it."*

SEED program youth speaking about the Affordable Market

### *Economic impacts and local economic development*

Given its role in the local social economy, the economic contributions of the SEED program's activities and outputs are difficult to capture as they typically do not have a financial value associated to them. The SROI tool developed in collaboration with the Karma Project sheds light the economic value of the training and work experience that the SEED program provides to youth. The economic values associated with each of the SEED program activities are drawn from monetary proxies that provide the financial value of similar activities (see appendix A). Table 1 details the estimated value of the SEED activities, which includes the courses and workshops and the estimated value of the SEED participants' labour.

The actual social return on investment for the seed program is calculated using the total estimated value of SEED program activities (\$20,362.56) relative to the investments into the SEED program. These investments total \$10,775, which includes a portion of the grants and donations received by the Karma Project, along with revenues from various project activities that are reinvested into Karma's work. The calculation below provides the SROI for the SEED program, which is estimated at \$1.89 for every dollar spent on the SEED program.

$$\text{[SROI]} = \frac{\text{[Value of Benefits]}}{\text{[Value of Investment]}} \qquad \text{SROI} = \$1.89 = \frac{\$20,362.56}{\$10,775}$$

During the interviews, one stakeholder remarked the SEED youth gain skills and work experience that can help them attain better employment positions, not just low-skill, minimum wage work, which will allow them to participate more fully in the local economy. One of the SEED youths spoke about the future possibilities that have opened to them due to the SEED program, in which their aspiration to own and operate a food-related business seemed more possible with the knowledge and skills gained through the program.

*"I would say, I want to open a small business and the ties that I see Erin has with local communities and farmers that do organics and stuff like that... Just so many different connections that she can has to build up her book. Everything that we do, it's kind of like a glimmer of hope in a sense, because doing this without knowing it, I probably would've been so overwhelmed. I don't know if I would have known where to start, so I probably would not have done it. And seeing that when Erin first came in, and seeing where she was to where now she has four loyal volunteers, you know what I mean? Like coming into a classroom, just hoping that somebody like enjoys the program. Seeing that has definitely shaped what I think can happen in my life alone. So very different than what I thought was achievable."*

SEED program youth

Stakeholders also noted that the economic benefits of the SEED program spread beyond the youth themselves, and impact local economic development and local businesses. Specifically, the SEED program helped to create connections between different local businesses through collective goals and community events stemming from the Karma Project. For instance, the various Karma Project enterprises that the SEED youth participate in, such as the Affordable Market, the RX Food program, and the Good Food Box, acquire their foods from local producers, suppliers and retailers wherever possible.

*"In terms of actual economic development, again, we're creating job opportunities, or job skills for job opportunities, down the road for students that are more than a minimum wage paying job at a fast-food outlet, which I think is huge. And if you can get our students to work real jobs, that means they're on social assistance and that also promotes economic development when you have people spending their own money, right?"*

Karma Project stakeholder

Table 1 SROI tool – Estimated economic values of non-economic SEED activities

SEED Project activities	Activity description	Data description	Data	Proxy <sup>1</sup>	Estimated financial value
SEED Project workshops and knowledge development	Yoga and mindfulness	Half hour/week – yoga, meditation, walks	6 weeks, 4 participants	\$17.50 for one 1-hour class/person (\$8.75 per 0.5 hour)	\$210
	Cooking knowledge development	Cooking, food processing, and recipe development basics	4 participants	\$95 for one class/person	\$380
	Gardening knowledge development	Learning how to garden and grow food	4 participants	\$20 for one class/person	\$80
	Mixology/Beverage Making	Twice this summer @ 2hrs – learning mixology basics, industry discussion, making and developing a youth-inspired drink	4 hours total (2 classes), 4 participants	\$69.71 for one class/person	\$557.68
	Business Planning	2 hrs/month, June–September – all aspects of business planning (4 months)	8 hours total, 4 participants	\$15 per one class/person	\$506.56
	Training for youth in food safety and preparation	Certificate on food safety and preparation per youth (4 youth)	1 certificate per youth, 4 participants	\$112.94 per certification/person	\$451.76
	Marketing	2 hrs/month, June–September (4 months)	8 hours total, 4 participants	\$15 per one class/person	\$506.56

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A for detailed description of financial proxies.

SEED Project activities	Activity description	Data description	Data	Proxy <sup>1</sup>	Estimated financial value
Community Garden and Kitchen	Food work (planting, harvesting, processing, and packaging)	Number of volunteers + hours worked per month or week	6 hours per week, 25 weeks, 4 participants	Minimum wage in Ontario 2021 (\$14.52 per hour)	\$8,550
Affordable Markets	Retail work	Number of volunteers + hours worked per week	4 hours x 8 weeks, 4 participants	Minimum wage in Ontario 2021 (\$14.52 per hour)	\$1,824
RX Food program	Food packaging	Number of volunteers + hours worked per month or week	10 hours x 6 weeks, 4 participants	Minimum wage in Ontario 2021 (\$14.52 per hour)	\$3,420
Student Nutrition Program	Volunteer opportunities	Number of volunteers + hours worked per month or week	6 hours x 6 weeks, 4 participants	Minimum wage in Ontario 2021 (\$14.52 per hour)	\$2,052
Good Food Box	Volunteer opportunities	Number of volunteers + hours worked per month or week	4 hours x 8 weeks, 4 participants	Minimum wage in Ontario 2021 (\$14.52 per hour)	\$1,824
<b>Total estimated value</b>					<b>\$20,362.56</b>



## Program capacity

### *Impacts of COVID-19 on the Karma Project and SEED program*

The COVID-19 pandemic had significant impacts on the SEED program, with health authorities placing restrictions on in-person gatherings. During the 2021-2022 season, the number of youths who could participate in the SEED program was greatly reduced to accommodate limits on in-person gatherings (four youth participated, along with one facilitator). Though many of the activities and workshops could take place outdoors in the community garden, the Karma Project also invested in an outdoor kitchen to allow the youth to keep processing their harvests in a manner that adhered to public health recommendations. In their interviews, stakeholders noted that the pandemic significantly impacted the Karma project's capacity to support youth and the local economy as many activities, such as markets and workshops, were cancelled. As well, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, stakeholders observed improved employment rates for former SEED participants, and commented that the pandemic may have negatively impacted the employment opportunities for SEED graduates – both past and present.

Despite the challenges posed by public health restrictions, the COVID-19 pandemic deepened the need for the Karma Project and the SEED program's community food security efforts in the Simcoe Muskoka region. As a result, the Karma Project shifted and/or expanded their activities to meet their community's pressing food needs, working with community partners to mobilize extra capacity to provide over 85,000 lbs of fresh produce throughout 2020 to their clients and community members. To help support emergency food programming in response to the pandemic, the Karma Project received a \$40,000 Community Food Centre's Canada Good Food Access Fund Grant, which is funded in part by the Government of Canada's Local Food Infrastructure Fund. This grant allowed the Karma Project to support the food needs of vulnerable communities, including the Wahta Mohawks First Nation near Bala, Ontario.

### *Key challenges for WISE sustainability*

Interviews with Karma leadership and stakeholders provided insights into the key challenges that Karma is currently facing in terms of meeting local community needs and sustaining its business operations. While many of these challenges are specific to the Karma Project and the community in which it is situated, they provide some insight into the broader context of WISEs that aim to provide similar supports or programs to vulnerable populations in their communities.

- **Project capacity:** One of the key challenges the Karma Project stakeholders emphasized was the Karma Project and SEED program's reliance on a very small number of staff and

volunteers. In particular, a majority of activities and programs rely almost exclusively on the work done by Karma Project’s founder and manager, Erin Chapelle. Stakeholders expressed some concern that the reliance of the Karma Project on Chapelle places her in a difficult and stressful position. With new funding from the Government of Ontario’s Skills Development Fund, the Karma Project has been able to hire SEED program graduates to lead programming in the gardens, kitchens, markets, and even mentorship with other youth. This funding has enabled Karma to complete the development of the SEED micro-credential as well as host a third SEED cohort of youth participants recruited through SASS as well as from the broader community.

- **Geographic context:** The geographic region that the Karma Project’s enterprises serve is vast, encompassing a diverse set of rural and remote communities in the Simcoe Muskoka region. Stakeholders commented that making meaningful ties with certain communities is challenging, resulting in less buy-in and support for the project. Similarly, the SEED program youth mentioned that this lack of community ties and support is an important challenge for the Karma Project, resulting in less appreciation for and recognition of the Karma Project’s contributions to community food security.
- **Funding and revenue:** Currently, the Karma Project and the SEED program are largely funded through grants and donations. In their 2020 financial statement, the Karma Project indicated that they received \$3,410 in donations, \$119,740 in grants and \$10,370 in other revenues. While profitability is not a main goal for the Karma Project or the SEED program, the reliance on funding can limit the ability of the organization to plan for project sustainability and future opportunities and projects. Stakeholders noted that any profits that are made through Karma’s enterprises are directly reinvested in the business, and an increase in revenue would be able to enable the WISE to offer a living wage to workers, most of whom are currently volunteers or paid through honoraria.

*“I would just like to say that while we are not for profit cooperative. We worked very hard to earn every cent of profits back into future programs or future food access or to pay for someone’s access to a future program. Where we very much believe that food access, food security is a very serious problem, especially in medicine, and we try to support that as much as possible.”*

Karma Project stakeholder

- **Program growth:** While funding poses a challenge to the progress of the Karma Project and the SEED program, there are nevertheless opportunities for the project to grow and scale-up their activities. In effect, during this research project, the Karma Project has expanded their programming, including the development of the Rx Food program through a partnership with a local physician. As of July 2022, the initiative has launched its new Rx Food website ([www.rxfood.ca](http://www.rxfood.ca)) and is starting its second year of operations with 100 patients.

### *Key lessons learned for WISE policy and practice*

Beyond its specific findings with respect to the outcomes and impacts that the SEED program has had within its local region of North Simcoe, the project also provided insights into the key features of the Karma Project's WISE approach that may be of interest to practitioners and policy makers interested in supporting innovative WISE approaches to addressing local community needs.

- **Food as a tool:** The SEED program's multi-pronged approach to youth employment is centered around food and provides participants tangible skills in food work as well as addressing more personal, food security needs. Community food security organizations not only aim to enhance access to and availability of healthy foods, but also use food as a means to establish connections and relationships with both people and place (Nelson & Stroink, 2019). The SEED participants were brought together through growing, preparing and eating food, which enabled them to develop ties to each other, their communities, and the natural environment. In this way, food is both an objective and a tool for the SEED program and the Karma Project.
- **Adaptability:** Over the course of its existence, the Karma Project has taken on many forms and included a diverse assortment of community food security activities. One of the key strengths of the Karma Project, and by extension, the SEED Program, is the ability to adapt effectively and efficiently to the needs of participants and the food needs of the community. The unprecedented impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the Karma Project's adaptability, as the SEED program was able to continue to support youth both online and in-person, and Karma was able to accommodate their addressed increased community food security needs.
- **Financial viability and social enterprise:** As mentioned, one of the key challenges for the Karma Project and the SEED program is funding, in which they are not alone as a social enterprise. Profitability and financial viability remain challenging for social enterprises, as they often encompass a large range of social aims that are placed before the pursuit of profit (OECD, 2013; Poitevin-DesRivières, 2019). Equally, rural social enterprises, like the Karma Project, face additional challenges operating in sparsely populated regions, namely recruiting workers and serving clients, and therefore face higher costs per capita than urban social enterprises (Steiner & Teasdale, 2019). In comparison to a similar food security WISE operating in a more urban region, the Karma Project is more likely to experience slower growth given that the client base and potential revenues for the urban WISE are much larger. The stakeholders noted that profitability is not a key factor the success and future growth of the Karma Project and the SEED program, rather it is the ties to and the buy-in from community that are most important. There is also a need for funders to recognize the value of the context-specific goals and structures of rural social enterprises, as their

structures and impacts are inherently different than social enterprises operating in urban settings (Steiner & Teasdale, 2019). In this, expressing value through measures such as an SROI may be of benefit to the Karma Project, as they are able to clearly communicate the economic values and impacts of their work.

## CONCLUSION

This pilot study of the Karma Project's SEED program in North Simcoe, Ontario has provided important insights into the role that an innovative, community-focused social enterprise model can have in terms of providing a unique offering of integrated training, mentorship and social entrepreneurship programming improve the skills, career activation, and employability of Indigenous and at-risk youth participants. The longitudinal study illustrated that in spite of challenges with a struggling local economy that was particularly hard-hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, program participants demonstrated small but improving gains in terms of their employment and perspectives on future work opportunities at the end of the two-year follow-up period. Participants attributed these gains to their experiences with the WISE programming, indicating that the program provided them with valuable and relevant training and work experience while providing important supports and connections to new job opportunities.

The outcomes study also illustrated how a WISE intervention such as the SEED program can support at-risk youth in key ways. For the Karma Project, developing a food-based program not only provided an important way to engage youth in interesting and relevant work experience, it also connected to deeper issues concerning food security that affected many youth participants on a daily basis. This two-pronged approach enabled youth to connect to the program at a personal level while experiencing its impact on the broader community through the provision of a variety of affordable, healthy, and sustainable food options to community members in need.

While the project's participant engagement and data collection activities were challenged due to restrictions placed on in-person activities, the evaluation was able to generate insights into the broader impacts that the Karma Project, and the SEED program specifically, are having on the local community. It was also able to provide an estimate of the return on investment for developing and delivering this form of WISE social entrepreneurship programming for youth, which in the case of the SEED program was determined to be nearly two dollars for every dollar of investment from various public sources of funding. The value that the SEED program is providing to local community members, and at-risk youth in particular, is further evidenced by the continued funding that the program has received to engage additional cohorts of youth beyond the lifespan of the project.

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## APPENDIX A: PROXY DESCRIPTION AND SOURCES

Type	Activity	Description of proxy	Sources
SEED Project workshops	Yoga/mindfulness	Average cost of drop-in yoga class in Midland ON = \$17.50 per person/class; 0.5 hour per participant = \$8.75 per class	<a href="https://yogahousegbay.ca/Fees">https://yogahousegbay.ca/Fees</a> ; <a href="https://soulset.ca/pricing#1_pricing">https://soulset.ca/pricing#1_pricing</a> ; <a href="https://www.growthinthegrove.com/classes">https://www.growthinthegrove.com/classes</a> ; <a href="https://nobordersfitness.com/pricing">https://nobordersfitness.com/pricing</a>
	Cooking	Learn-to-cook cooking class = \$95 per class (\$575 for six classes)	<a href="https://cestboncooking.ca/adult-chef-series/">https://cestboncooking.ca/adult-chef-series/</a>
	Gardening	Gardening class @ the Toronto Botanical Garden = \$20 per person	<a href="https://torontobotanicalgarden.ca/learn/adult/inperson/gardening-in-shade-plants-and-plans-for-the-darker-side-of-gardening/">https://torontobotanicalgarden.ca/learn/adult/inperson/gardening-in-shade-plants-and-plans-for-the-darker-side-of-gardening/</a>
	Mixology/beverage making	Average cost of cocktail classes in Toronto, Ontario (duration 40 minutes to 3 hours) = \$69.71 per person	<a href="https://www.blogto.com/eat_drink/2015/02/the_top_5_bartending_schools_in_toronto/">https://www.blogto.com/eat_drink/2015/02/the_top_5_bartending_schools_in_toronto/</a>
	Food safety certificate	Cost of leading food safety course and certification Ontario = \$112.94	<a href="https://www.foodsafety.ca">https://www.foodsafety.ca</a>
	Business planning	\$190 for six-week class (two classes per week) online at Waterloo University; \$15.83 per class	<a href="https://pd.uwaterloo.ca/OnlineCourse.aspx?courseCatalogID=5ec2bbdf-cd8c-4129-8227-63584cff327c">https://pd.uwaterloo.ca/OnlineCourse.aspx?courseCatalogID=5ec2bbdf-cd8c-4129-8227-63584cff327c</a>
	Marketing	\$190 for six-week class (two classes per week) online at Waterloo University; \$15.83 per class	<a href="https://pd.uwaterloo.ca/OnlineCategory.aspx?category=SalesMarketing">https://pd.uwaterloo.ca/OnlineCategory.aspx?category=SalesMarketing</a>
Labour costs	SEED volunteer work	Ontario minimum wage for 2021: \$14.25/hour	<a href="https://www.ontario.ca/document/your-guide-employment-standards-act-0/minimum-wage#section-0">https://www.ontario.ca/document/your-guide-employment-standards-act-0/minimum-wage#section-0</a>





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