

# Youth Violence and Youth Gangs: Responding to Community Concerns

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) is pleased to provide you with this manual. Its purpose is to assist in understanding, planning, and developing responses to prevent or address collective youth violence in Canadian communities, large and small.

This is an issue of increasing concern. It usually requires a comprehensive, community-based, collaborative and balanced response consistent with FCM's "safer communities" approach to crime prevention.

The Manual is based on research findings, many interviews and meetings with community representatives from across Canada, and a national conference held in February 1994.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Over the past several years, there has been an increase in reported youth violence and youth gang activity in both large and small Canadian communities. Public pressure and concern for community safety has made this a major issue in many communities. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) has responded by initiating a focused research project and a national consultation on youth violence and youth gangs in Canada. FCM, in conjunction with the federal departments of the Solicitor General and Justice, undertook this research and consultation.

The federal government has been addressing youth violence concerns more broadly through Family Violence and Brighter Futures initiatives, a national consultation on the *Young Offenders Act* and an overall commitment to a national crime prevention strategy.

Through its Community Safety and Crime Prevention Program, FCM is providing national leadership in promoting a "Safer Communities" agenda. This is consistent with United Nations sponsored initiatives and other international efforts in this area. Crime prevention strategies in western countries, including Canada, have evolved from a traditional

dependence on the criminal justice system to various crime prevention initiatives, including some that address the underlying social conditions that precipitate criminal behaviour.

FCM has adopted a comprehensive, community-based approach to crime prevention. Such a strategy is intended to ensure both the short and long term protection of the public and the prevention of crime. Resources in this strategy may include:

- the police, courts and corrections;
- environmental design to make the physical environment safer;
- target hardening, including alarm systems and opportunity reduction strategies such as block parent programs and;
- social responses intended to address the underlying causes of much criminal behaviour.

It is tailored to meet the needs of individual communities. It takes into account patterns of crime, as well as the community's social, economic and demographic profile. The community's attitude and commitment to solving their crime problems is also considered, as are the resources

available in each community to make the desired changes.

### **1.1 The Youth Violence and Youth Gangs Project**

The FCM project focused primarily on collective youth violence and youth gang activity. To address this many activities were undertaken. These included a detailed review of Canadian materials on the subject, the compilation of an extensive working bibliography, a review of Canadian statistical data and an analysis of media coverage on youth-violence related stories in selected Canadian newspapers and magazines., The core of the project consisted of indepth interviews with representatives of some 40 municipalities across the country. These included municipal politicians, representatives of the police, criminal justice, education, recreation and youth servicing agencies, public transportation, and others involved with youth violence. These were followed by site visits to six selected communities to explore ongoing community-based response

strategies. In addition, a national consultation was held that involved over 225 participants representing the police, youth justice agencies, education, social housing, youth-serving agencies, municipalities and other levels of government. Young people from various communities also participated.

Much of the information gleaned from these activities has been incorporated into this "how to" manual. It is intended to help representatives of municipalities and other levels of government, police, courts, social services, health services, schools and interested groups and individuals to better understand youth violence and youth gangs in Canadian communities.

### **1.2 The Organization Of This How To Manual**

This how to manual describes an overview of the issue. the nature and extent of collective youth violence. as well as describing various approaches for mobilizing your community to plan for and respond to youth violence.

## **2.0 AN OVERVIEW OF THE YOUTH VIOLENCE AND YOUTH GANGS ISSUE**

Currently, what is known about youth violence and youth gangs is based on journalistic accounts, or limited anecdotal information. There is a strong tendency for Canadian authorities to import, in the most literal sense, American definitions and response strategies. The experiences of the two countries are quite different. More specifically, the youth gang problem in the United States bears little resemblance to what is going on in most Canadian communities. American images, however, have strongly influenced the way the phenomenon is being defined in Canada.

One key issue addressed in the FCM project was to determine how community participants defined youth violence and youth gangs with youth up to 18 years of age. They noted a wide range of behaviours. Some were related to the actions of specific individuals such as the schoolyard bully. Others focused on behaviour such as .. swarming" which involves groups of young people victimizing individuals, often stealing items of clothing such as shoes or jackets, or "wilding" which involves indiscriminate acts of violence perpetrated by groups of young people. Verbal, psychological and physical assaults were often noted

as were date rape, sexual assault and hate/bias motivated attacks.

The range of behaviours included in definitions of youth violence makes it difficult to develop a clear definitional picture of what is going on across the country. Some behaviours are covered under existing legislation. while others are not. For example. while harassment by a schoolyard bully may be threatening to victims, this behaviour is less likely to result in criminal charges, and therefore more invisible in official crime statistics. For the purpose of this manual, while violence perpetrated by individuals is important, the primary emphasis is on collective, or group-based violence.

### **2.1 What is the Nature of Youth Violence**

Many recent patterns and trends have emerged in both individual and collective youth violence. For example, youth violence is often more "vicious" today than it was in the past. Also. an increasing number of young people carry weapons for protection. Much youth violence is becoming more intense, and in some cases serious harm is being inflicted. Incidents often escalate very



quickly, and to a serious level. There appear to be few limits or constraints in the use of violence by some young people. These individuals seem to ignore socially understood rules about harming others.

Some young people do not define certain types of aggressive behaviour as violence. For example, "sexing" - a form of sexual harassment that can include both verbal and physical intimidation - is not often considered violence. Dating violence is also commonly not defined as violence, many young people accept it as a normal part of dating relationships. This reflects a greater tolerance for violence for some young people.

## **2.2 Hate/Bias-Motivated Crime**

Many communities have experienced an increase in hate/bias-motivated crimes. These types of crime occur when individuals are harassed or assaulted because of their individual characteristics, ethnic or racial affiliations, membership in various religious groups, or sexual preference. Victims of hate/bias-motivated crime are often reluctant to come forward fearing further victimization

Schools, police organizations, community agencies and others have initiated programs to teach people about different cultures races and lifestyles, in an effort to

increase tolerance and sensitivity for others. Most agree that educating people and changing attitudes alone is not enough. A more comprehensive response to this type of violence is needed.

## **2.3 School Violence**

School-based violence is another area of growing concern. Unlike the patterns and trends discussed above, school-violence issues focus more on the place in which this behaviour occurs than on its nature or characteristics. Definitions of school violence range from verbal threats to harassment and intimidation to physical assault. In some instances, weapons are used to threaten or harm others. School violence, however, varies from school to school and from city to city.

There are several emerging patterns, trends and perceptions that characterize school violence. Most are consistent with the general youth-violence trends noted in the FCM project. For example, perpetrators are often younger, and violence is becoming more prevalent in elementary schools. There has been an increase in acts of random violence in schools. Further, the number of students bringing weapons - mainly knives - to school is increasing. The traditional "one-on-one" assault has often been replaced with group attacks on individual

students. The attacks can be more vicious and drawn out. There seems to be a pattern of perpetrators continuing to attack their victims over a long period of time. This pattern suggests an increase in the presence of informal gangs. While not necessarily engaging in violent or criminal activity, these gangs often intimidate other students.

Many school boards are developing specific "safe school" policies and procedures. In addition, considerable research is being conducted to determine the extent of school violence, and to develop appropriate response strategies.

## **2.4 Young Women And Violence**

Reports also suggest that young women are increasingly involved in cases of intimidation and assault. Whether this pattern is accurate or a reflection of changing reporting patterns is not yet clear and warrants further investigation. Historically, crime statistics have shown that men and not women have been the perpetrators of violence. Women's use of violence was assumed to be

related to self defence or lashing out in anger. Such activities were viewed as private matters and were rarely included in official statistics

A number of patterns and trends regarding the use of violence by young women have emerged. For example, charging patterns reveal an increase in the number of charges for violent crimes being laid against young women. As well, a greater percentage increase has been noted in charging rates for young women compared with young men. While charging rates for both are rising, they are rising faster for young women.

A key concern in understanding women's use of violence is appreciating contextual and motivational factors. For example, it is not clear whether perceptions about young women's use of violence may be the result of an expanded social role for women. For example, women are spending more time in public places rendering their violence more visible. Women may also be more willing to use violence in self-defence now than they were in the past.

### 3.0 THE NATURE OF COLLECTIVE YOUTH VIOLENCE IN CANADA

During the past decade, there has been growing concern about youth gangs forming in several Canadian cities. These gangs have been responsible for a spate of sensational violent crimes. This has led to public demands for stiffer penalties and greater protection of the public. However, little Canadian research is available on the nature and extent of the youth gang phenomenon. Crimes involving youth gangs are difficult to decipher from official crime statistics. For example, Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) only include charges against individuals. This makes it difficult to obtain a complete statistical picture of the nature of youth gang activity in Canada.

However, a comparison of 1986 and 1992 statistics from the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR), reveals an increase of six percent for both youth and adults charged with violent crimes. This indicates that youth involvement in violent crimes is similar to that of adults. Moreover, UCR data reveals that the proportion of youth charged with homicide has changed only slightly in the last few years. Overall, therefore, the number of youth charged with violent crime has remained fairly stable while

public concerns with this behaviour have increased substantially.

Some of the research on youth gangs indicates that single-sex peer groups are a normal part of adolescent socialization in western societies. These "friendship" groups provide many benefits to their members, including acceptance, status, identity and social and recreational opportunities. These groups help young people make the transition from adolescence to adulthood. For some young people, this transition is much more difficult. They may lack the support from their families or other institutions they need to grow and develop, and may choose to join gangs or become involved in collective youth violence to satisfy their unmet emotional, psychological or social needs.

Immigrant and refugee youth may face a double challenge in this regard. Not only are they confronted with the transition to adulthood, they must also deal with the difficulties of adapting to a new culture. Some of these young people may also choose to join gangs for the benefits, mentioned above, that membership can provide.

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**Figure one:  
A CONTINUUM OF YOUTH GROUPS/GANGS AND KEY  
CHARACTERISTICS**

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**FRIENDSHIP GROUPS**

- loosely organized
- no leadership structure
- spontaneous involvement in violence
- little involvement in crime for profit

**CRIMINAL YOUTH GANGS**

- highly organized
  - definite leadership structure
  - systematic involvement in violence
  - crime for profit is a major activity
- 

**3.1 The Nature of  
Collective Youth Violence**

Respondents were asked to describe groups they considered to be involved in youth violence. A variety of groups were identified ranging from "kids hanging out" on street corners or shopping malls, to rowdy high school students throwing beer bottles after school dances, to highly organized criminal youth gangs.

There is no consistent definition of the term "youth gang" employed in Canada. Some identify youth gangs with criminal behaviour, while others do not. Some suggest that a distinction should be made between groups of young people and youth gangs. Different agencies and organizations have created their own definitions based on the usefulness of such for their own organizations. Rather than trying to develop a single, all encompassing definition of youth gangs, we suggest a continuum

(Figure one) on which distinct types of collective youth violence can be located.

Experts suggest that employing a continuum is the best way to think about youth groups and youth gangs. Loosely organized "friendship" groups form one end of the continuum. These groups are comprised primarily of young people hanging out on street corners, in front of convenience stores or in shopping malls. These types of groups have little formal organization or leadership structure. They are usually comprised of young people hanging out together to socialize. While they may occasionally be involved in violence, this is not the primary reason these young people getting together.

Moving toward the middle of the continuum, we find groups that come together primarily to engage in criminal activities for material gain. They often have little or no continuing organizational structure,

and disband once the criminal acts have been carried out. For example, this type of group may get together to commit a series of house breakins. Once the crimes have been committed, the stolen property is divided and the group disbands until its next criminal episode. The lack of organization, continuity and leadership structure suggests that this should be considered, a group not a gang.

The far end of the continuum represents the highly organized criminal youth gangs. These gangs have a high degree of organization and an identifiable leadership structure. They may have elaborate initiation rituals, sport similar clothing styles and use specialized graffiti to mark their "turf". They commit crime for

material gain. They use violence in support of their criminal activities, and to exert power and influence in a community. In some cases, criminal youth gangs are linked to adult crime gangs.

Based on this conceptualization, we recommend using the compound term youth group/ gang. The criteria that can be used to locate a particular group/gang on the continuum outlined above include: the level of organization; the existence of a clear leadership structure; the use of distinctive clothing styles, graffiti etc.; the existence of elaborate initiation rituals; the existence of recognized "turf" or gang territory; the continuity or longevity of the group; the centrality of criminal activity; and the group's use of violence.

## 4.0 THE EXTENT OF YOUTH VIOLENCE AND YOUTH GANG ACTIVITY

This section examines the extent of youth violence and youth gang activity in Canada. Its extent varies from community to community, and in different regions of the country. How does one determine the amount of youth violence and youth gang activity? The manner in which this question is addressed may influence how the problem is perceived, and the types of response strategies that are developed.

### **4.1 The Extent of Youth Violence**

There is a great deal of confusion among the public of the extent of youth violence, and youth gang activity. While official statistics indicate an increase in violent crimes committed by individual young people, these statistics must be interpreted carefully. For example, the crime rate for young Canadians has remained stable over the past five or 10 years. In 1992, about 14% of the young people charged by police were charged with crimes of violence (Source: Uniform Crime Report 1986-1992).. Almost half of these, however, were for minor assaults such as slaps or punches.

Greater public awareness, less tolerance and more reporting of youth-violence can lead to more charges, more convictions and higher youth violence statistics. Indeed, there may have been as much if not more youth violence in the past than there is today. Unfortunately, there is little useful historical information on youth violence. It is therefore difficult to assess if there is a difference between current levels of youth violence and those of 10, 15, or 20 or more years ago.

Estimates of the extent of youth violence have also been influenced in recent years by the changes in the legislation governing young people. The implementation of the federal *Young Offenders Act (1984)* has resulted in a more formal and legalistic youth justice system. Many more young people are being charged and incarcerated - for longer periods - under the *Young Offenders Act (1984)* than was the case under the *Juvenile Delinquents Act (1908)*.

Furthermore, the way youth-serving agencies respond to youth violence has changed. Schools and group homes, for example, are increasingly reporting violent behaviour to police rather than

dealing with it themselves, as they did in the past. These factors have contributed to an increase in official youth-violence statistics.

Public perceptions about the level of youth violence have also changed with greater public attention toward issues such as sexual assault, child abuse and dating violence have received. Sensationalized media accounts of youth violence have also heightened public fear and concern. Together, these factors contribute to a climate of growing unease and fear, less tolerance, increased reporting and more vocal public demands for action. Thus, while it is evident that the number of charges involving youth violence has increased in recent years, it is not clear whether the actual amount of youth violence and youth gang activity has increased.

## **4.2 The Extent of Youth Gang Activity**

Youth gangs are primarily a big-city phenomenon, although smaller centres are also reporting increases in youth gang activity. Estimating the extent of youth gang activity is difficult, however, due to the lack of a standardized definition and a systematic way of recording information. For example, police reports do not normally include data identifying an incident as gang related.

Information about gang activity may be contained in the narratives of police incidence reports. However, this information is not included in the official statistics generated from these reports. The main means of determining the extent of youth gang activity in a community is to talk to the people who deal directly with the phenomenon, such as police officers working with gang units which exist in some communities, eg., Vancouver and Winnipeg, detached youth workers and others, or to read the narratives from all youth-related police incidence reports.

Another difficulty in estimating the extent of youth gang activity is that many include both young persons and adults in their definitions. This results in an overestimation of the number of young persons involved in gangs. Evidence gathered for the FCM project suggests that there are very few highly organized criminal youth gangs in Canada. The groups of young people visible to the public on street corners or at shopping malls are usually not organized youth gangs. The public, however, may regard these young people as threatening and consider them to be dangerous or criminal. This includes instances in which groups of young people have come together just to hang out and socialize with other young people.

## 5.0 WHAT CAN YOU DO?

There are many specific strategies for responding to youth violence and youth gangs. We will briefly discuss some of the more salient of these.

### **5.1 Develop an Understanding of the Nature and Extent of Youth Violence in Your Community**

The following should be useful in developing an appreciation of the situation in your community.

- BE WARY OF PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF THE PROBLEM. Many communities are responding to youth violence on the basis of a distorted understanding of the situation. This may be the result of:
- DIFFERING VIEWS OF WHAT CONSTITUTES YOUTH VIOLENCE. Some limit the range of behaviours to physical abuse. Others may include emotional and verbal abuse in their definitions. Some limit the term youth violence to include only actions which are criminal in nature.
  - DIFFERENT DEFINITIONS EMPLOYED IN DEFINING COLLECTIVE YOUTH VIOLENCE. Some define the

activity according to their perceptions and descriptions of the perpetrators. This may include young persons who hang around in malls, and who may have been involved in infrequent violence. Definitions may be restricted to more organized youth gangs primarily involved in criminal and violent behaviour. Be careful. Organized youth gangs involved in violence are rare. Much of the violence committed by young persons is in response to particular situations. It is often transitory, spontaneous and unplanned.

- CONFUSED AND DISTORTED "COUNTING". Numbers provided on youth violence can be deceiving. Differing definitions of violence will result in varying estimates as to the extent of violence. Individual organizations which track violence may also provide a limited understanding of the phenomenon. For example, schools may be hesitant to provide information for fear of their reputations.

On the other hand, agencies may exaggerate the incidence of violence. School data, if available, may include a wide range of behaviours, such as verbal abuse, which are not recognized as violent behaviour by some observers. Youth-serving



organizations dealing with high-risk youth may experience a pattern of violence which is not representative of the pattern in the wider community. Reports based on these patterns can distort public perceptions of the extent of youth violence in a community.

- **PERCEPTIONS CAN BE MISLEADING.** Self-report data on the fear of violence among young people may not provide an accurate picture of the extent of violence. They may, in part, represent a response to isolated incidents. They may reflect what is going on in one part of the community. While the fear is real, it may hinder an understanding of the actual nature and extent of youth violence. Similarly, perceptions of persons working with youth at risk may offer a distorted view of youth violence. Their perceptions, experiences, self-interest or other factors related to their work may influence their views.

A distorted understanding of your community's youth-violence situation can lead to serious problems. Young people may be unfairly labelled by the public. A complete "service" system, such as the school system or a public housing community, may be considered to have problems which are in fact limited to a few incidents. Communities may inappropriately direct limited resources such as additional law-enforcement resources to deal

with a perceived problem that is actually very limited in scope.

## **5.2 Where Can You Acquire Information on the Nature .And Extent of Youth Violence in Your Community?**

There are many sources of information you may explore. As noted above, you need to be cautious as to the accuracy, consistency and appropriateness of the information. .Sources may include:

### **THE POLICE**

The police may provide some incidence data on individual as well as collective youth violence, the nature and patterns of the violence, and the locations of frequent violent incidents.

Specialized police services, such as youth units, school liaison programs and store-front operations, may provide particularly useful qualitative information not usually captured in formal, quantitative reports. Police-community consultative committees often address youth-at-risk issues, and may be another useful source.

### **COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS**

Community organizations may also be helpful. Businesses and neighbourhood organizations are often aware of patterns of youth violence in their areas. Ethnic

community groups may address patterns of ethnic youth violence. Special interest groups concerned with women, seniors, gays and lesbians or others who may be particularly vulnerable to violence may also provide helpful information.

#### COMMUNITY AGENCIES

Various community agencies have useful information derived from public health and street-outreach programs. Victim services may be another useful source. Information on youth at risk in your community may be available in research conducted by service agencies, social-planning and health-planning organizations.

Do not forget to contact your public transportation and social-housing security departments. Private security companies may also have some useful information. These organizations are often well versed on patterns of collective youth violence.

#### THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

School authorities may provide information on the nature, extent,

location and perpetrators of violence. Remember that school boards in your community may have adopted safe school policies and corresponding protocols that include specific procedures for reporting incidents of violence.

### **5.3 Working with Available Information**

In organizing the information available, try to ensure that it reflects the various definitions of youth violence which may exist within your community. Clarify the source and nature of the data, whether it's statistical data based on charges or anecdotal information. Make note of the limitations present in the various means of reporting on youth violence. It is particularly important to respect the confidentiality requirements of those providing information. Finally, try to ensure that the description you develop of the nature and extent of collective youth violence is suitably qualified, depending on where your information is coming from.

## 6.0 ORGANIZING YOUR COMMUNITY

Once you have assessed the nature and extent of youth violence, determined your community's concern, and decided that the community should be more involved, you may choose to engage different groups and agencies in planning or providing more effective responses to youth violence. However, before developing your action plan, ensure that one is possible. Some communities may not be ready to act for a variety of reasons. Here are some examples:

- voluntary organizations and their funding bodies are in the process of reorganizing their roles and responsibilities;
- law enforcement, municipal and voluntary organizations are in conflict; and,
- other major community strategies are consuming time and resources, and so many groups cannot "stretch" their mandates to address youth violence concerns.

If, however, you decide that community mobilization is worth pursuing, consider several options.

### **6.1 Use Existing Responses**

Given the limited resources in most communities, you should make an initial assessment of the possibility of encouraging existing agencies or groups to assume greater responsibility for youth violence concerns. You may choose to:

- Seek a more concerted response to the issue among relevant agencies.

Is there a need for school-based violence prevention programs? Do incidents of youth violence require a more focused law enforcement response? Are youth-serving organizations dealing with the needs of high-risk youth?

- Encourage existing community and/or interagency groups already addressing youth concerns to become more involved with the issue.

Is there an interagency committee dealing with related concerns, such as youth at risk of family violence, that could include youth violence in their work? Are there crime prevention organizations, community consultative police committees or safer community networks involved with youth which could respond to youth violence concerns?

## **6.2 Developing a New Community Response**

If your community agencies and organizations are unable or unwilling to deal effectively with youth violence, you may wish to establish a new community response. The following suggestions may assist you. They may also be useful benchmarks for those with an existing community-based response.

- **BE CLEAR ON THE REASONS FOR MOBILIZING YOUR COMMUNITY**

There may be many reasons for mobilizing. Are parent groups becoming concerned with youth violence? Is there growing public concern based on serious incidents or media coverage which does not accurately mirror youth behaviour in your community? Is there an opportunity to develop a community response to prevent youth violence? Are provincial initiatives such as safe school policies encouraging community action?

Make sure that the mobilizing agencies and community groups understand the nature of the concerns within your community. Is the initiative meant to identify problems or change the community's program response? Could it result in a public awareness campaign? Remember to establish clear goals and directives.

- **BE CLEAR ON YOUR ROLE IN MOBILIZING THE COMMUNITY**  
Several communities across Canada have developed youth violence-related initiatives. Many have succeeded because they effectively organized the community partners. Before you proceed, assess the community's expectations of you and your organization as an initiator, facilitator and partner in a community-based youth violence initiative. Assess which other organizations would be expected to play major roles, then define your role.

Keep in mind that attitudes vary among communities. Where community policing is an accepted practice, the police are often effective partners. Where citizens support the municipal government and its councillors in innovative leadership on such issues, mobilizing community action often works. However, other factors may limit your involvement. Community expectations of an organization, political concerns, ownership issues, attitudes toward young people and past experience with youth violence or related initiatives can influence your effectiveness.

- **SELECT APPROPRIATE PARTNERS FOR SPECIFIC TASKS**  
Effective community responses require selection of appropriate partners. The type of tasks which must be done to deal effectively with your community's needs can

often define the partners you should choose. If, for example, one of the key requirements is a more concerted and coordinated interagency response for dealing with a small number of high risk youth, then it is critical that those agencies involved with these young persons participate in the strategy - schools, corrections officials, police, social services, mental health services and perhaps others. This group may also undertake other community responsibilities, such as providing public education for parents on youth violence. However, they will probably resist the participation of community groups given the confidentiality and information-sharing requirements for effective, coordinated case monitoring and management.

### **6.3 Three Community Mobilization Strategies**

The response strategies adopted in three communities are briefly described below. Each reflects a different approach to community mobilization. However, each has incorporated a comprehensive, collaborative and balanced approach.

**COQUITLAM, BRITISH COLUMBIA**  
Several years ago, the Coquitlam area experienced an increase in youth violence. This ranged from minor incidents involving bullying or intimidation to more serious assaults. In order to address the community's growing concern,

several community-based initiatives were developed.

One such initiative was the Active Youth Network. It is comprised of representatives from various youth-serving agencies in the community, including: local police services, the B.C. Transit Police; representatives from area schools; the Port Coquitlam and Coquitlam Probation Services; and the local Crown Counsel.

The goals of the Active Youth Network are to facilitate improved, consistent and ongoing communication and information-sharing among representatives of the justice system and community agencies who work with active, high-risk youth. Meetings are held every six weeks. Committee members discuss areas of concentrated criminal activity, and surveillance of these areas. They consider programs and activities including case management, participation in public forums and community education sessions.

#### **CALGARY, ALBERTA**

Calgary developed the Community Resource Committee to address its youth violence concerns. The CRC has been developed in concert with a number of police-initiated youth-at-risk activities. These include the Serious Habitual Offender Program (SHOP), a school liaison program and a community-wide Safer Schools Task Force. The CRC consists of representatives of various organizations, including: the

Calgary Police Service, public and separate school boards; the City of Calgary Social Services Department; the City's parks and recreation department; the Chamber of Commerce; the Boys and Girls Club; the Calgary Immigrant Aid Society; and the Calgary Association for Young Immigrants.

The CRC's goal is to prevent the formation and limit the influence of youth violence and youth gangs. It is involved in a number of activities. For example, the CRC evaluates areas within the city where youth violence and youth gangs are a potential problem. It then provides support to community task groups or other organizations responding to these problems. The CRC encourages and coordinates programs, and regularly monitors their activities.

One CRC initiative is PLAY (Participating and Liaising Actively with Youth). This program was designed to target youth at risk and provide alternatives to antisocial and criminal behaviour through outreach workers, supervised recreational activities and educational information. Another example is the Marlborough Mail initiative. The program brought together local business owners, community association representatives, parents and youth, police, and the social services and parks and recreation departments in a community task group to address and mitigate the effects of youth

criminality. The group explored and developed alternatives for local youth at risk.

#### OTTAWA, ONTARIO

The nation's capital is one community which has used a more comprehensive community mobilization strategy. This consists of developing a comprehensive community plan for identifying high-risk youth, having youth-serving agencies collaborate to develop appropriate response strategies, violence-preventing actions by parent groups and young people, and developing programs specifically designed for aggressive or violent youth. It may include efforts to engage the public, young persons and local media to help change attitudes and influence behaviour.

The Ottawa-Carleton Youth and Violence Initiative was started in 1992 to address a growing concern over highly publicized incidents of youth violence. A steering committee consisting of representatives from youth-serving agencies, the school system, the police and other community groups, coordinated a community-wide effort. A community conference was held in early 1993 to mobilize a broad base of support for the initiative. A report prepared from this conference was discussed at a follow-up community meeting held in the spring. Data was collected on the nature and extent of youth violence in the community. It was used to identify key issues for community

action and to explore various ways of organizing the community to effectively address its youth violence concerns.

The results of the data-gathering exercise were presented to the community at a fall conference. Workshops were organized on six key issues identified by the community. Those attending the conference were asked to select one of these issues, and be prepared to commit time and effort to it. Six task groups were formed, and each developed action plans. Currently, all six task groups are pursuing various short, medium and long term strategies. The task groups include representatives of youth-serving agencies, members of the community and young people. The six issues addressed by the task groups include: the service system response; the youth justice response: safer schools; what are we teaching young people about violence?: community awareness and participation; and staff training and development.

## **6.4 Youth Participation**

Most respondents recognized the importance of including young persons in the development and implementation of responses to youth violence. After all, they are the primary focus of concern. Yet, achieving effective youth participation can be a challenge. Many community committees, organizations and agencies that

become involved in youth violence issues fail to involve young people from the start. This can create difficulties when young persons are asked to participate "after the fact", since committee structures and objectives may already be determined. This can create an awkward situation for all.

Again, consider which youth networks or youth organizations exist in your community. They may facilitate effective youth participation. Recognize the transient nature of adolescence in your plans to include young people. Note the organizational means through which young people are comfortable in pursuing, planning and implementing strategies. Consider the following questions in establishing a partnership with the young people in your community.

- How do you find the young people who wish to participate?
- How do you ensure that the appropriate mix of young people is included?
- Are resources available, such as money for bus fare, to enable young people to participate?
- What role do you expect the young people to play?
- Will young people have an opportunity to discuss the issues among themselves?

- How can you ensure long-term involvement of youth given the transitory nature of adolescence?
- Does the process used by adults, such as rules of order and the need to speak before large groups limit the ability of youth to fully participate?

### **6.5 Recognize the Challenges to Effective Mobilization**

There are various barriers which can inhibit or distort the community-mobilization process. They are Often specific to the community and those involved. It is important for your group to anticipate potential challenges, recognize them, and adopt measures to effectively address them. Some of the challenges noted in our review are outlined below.

#### **LACK OF COMMITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS**

The initial roles and responsibilities the group adopts will determine, in part, what commitment is required. Commitment of staff and resources should be taken into account at the initial stage of development of the community process. Are partners prepared to provide time for the tasks? Who will be responsible for coordinating the community initiative? Who will assume responsibility for the costs of support services, such as preparing and distributing minutes and providing meeting rooms?

Are partners prepared to provide the required agency follow-up to the community initiative?

#### **SENSITIVITY TO PARTICIPANTS**

The experience, expectations and capabilities of partners should be recognized and respected in developing a community-mobilization process. The community-mobilization process you will pursue should be examined by all of the partners, to ensure that they can participate effectively. How will the process accommodate the specific perspectives and interests of groups concerned with certain aspects of youth violence, such as those concerned with violence against women? How are the professional attitudes and perspectives of various partners to be acknowledged? How will the community-mobilization process accommodate both professional and nonprofessional experiences? There can be tensions in a new group given differences in agency cultures, histories and ways of doing things. How will the community mobilization process recognize and address the concerns of those responsible for programs responding to various aspects of youth violence, especially if they may now be challenged?

Organizations may be concerned that collaboration could result in resource tradeoffs, pitting one agency against another. Should available community resources be allocated to youth recreation or the



purchase of high tech intelligence equipment for the police? How can the community mobilization process encourage equal opportunity for effective participation among both larger and smaller agencies, community group leaders and others?

Some organizations and professionals such as businesses may not see themselves as key players in dealing with youth violence. They may need support in linking their interests to the wider community agenda. How does the community-mobilization process encourage participation and information-sharing among partners and their constituents?

#### UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Ensure that partners examine what they and the community expect from the community mobilization process. Unrealistic expectations can be dangerous. Are organizations participating as a means of gaining support for new program resources which are not currently available? Is participation based on a desire to take over others' turf with or without Community support? Are partners realistic about what can be achieved within their community - diminishing the incidence of violence, redressing the social and economic status of families, curbing behaviours leading to violence, such as family dysfunction and substance abuse, and so on?

There may also be strong differences of opinion about which program responses are most effective. For example, do opportunity-reduction programs simply move the problem from one community to another? How effective are law enforcement or social strategies in preventing crime?

#### INFORMATION SHARING

Remember that each partner must be clear as to what forms of information they can provide. Further, any restrictions on the use of the information should be noted at the outset, and other partners must agree to respect these limitations. For example, some police data related to investigations cannot be shared. Social agencies and neighbourhood tenant groups may be concerned with protecting their clients.

#### THE MEDIA

The media is frequently considered a problem; it is blamed for presenting the public with an overly sensational and distorted picture of youth violence. In fact, the media usually reports what is provided to it by others - community leaders, police, young persons, and others. In many instances, journalists are given information on specific, isolated issues, without related information on the context of youth activities in a community.

Many communities working to curb youth violence have decided to engage media representatives as

partners in their community strategies. They consider the media a key partner in solving the problem, not as a source of the problem. Specific actions, such as ensuring that the media is regularly provided with information on youth violence are important.

The media must also be made aware of positive measures - often youth driven to prevent violence. This is likely to result in balanced, accurate reporting, even when the media is dealing with a specific, serious incident.

## 7.0 DEVELOPING A RELEVANT RESPONSE

Once you have determined the nature and extent of youth violence, and mobilized a community effort to respond to it, you need to determine the best ways to marshal appropriate program responses. Several suggestions arise from our study.

### DEVELOP A COMPREHENSIVE AND TAILORED RESPONSE

Often specific youth-violence situations require a multifaceted response. The strategy you develop needs to address both the short- and long-term need to protect the public, allay the fear of crime and, most importantly, deal with the causes of violent crime. Thus, for example, chronic violent behaviour perpetrated by youth gangs in a school setting may require a range of responses to stop the violence, reduce victims' and others fears, and develop a safe learning environment. Focused intervention by criminal justice officials may initially be necessary. Charging, ensuring that clear bail conditions which restrict contact with the victim and witnesses are established and enforced, providing victim support, and ensuring adherence to sentences can be important. However, such measures need to be complimented with preventive initiatives, including responses to address the underlying causes of violence.

### RECOGNIZE THE FULL RANGE OF RESOURCES AVAILABLE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

It is harder and harder to find resources for organizations addressing youth violence. The traditional approach to responding to "new" concerns has often been premised on the expectation of acquiring new and more resource support. This approach no longer applies in many communities. Be creative. If the appropriate program response is not available, consider how it may be established with your community's existing resources.

The results of our study suggest that communities can and have addressed "new" youth-violence concerns using existing resources. Youth-serving agencies are sharing training resources and skills with teachers, police officers, and others to deal more effectively with aggressive youth. Interagency collaborative team approaches are being developed to address the needs of high-risk youth. Young people and parents are being encouraged to develop self-help initiatives, such as peer mediation, usually with the assistance of professionals. Mail owners are turning to recreational, employment and other programs for those young people who hang out on their property, rather than

depending on security and law enforcement measured to “keep

them out of the area”.

## **8.0 COMMUNITY PROGRAM RESPONSES**

Our research has shown that many communities have already established successful programs for youth at risk of becoming involved in violent, criminal activity. Strategies include both preventive and law enforcement measures. A summary of various programs that are currently being implemented in communities across Canada is provided below. The programs are organized into six categories based on the groups responsible for their planning and implementation. These categories are: young people; the police; schools; businesses; community and youth-serving organizations; and municipalities. Bear in mind that opportunities exist for all members of the community to be involved. This list notes the most common programs currently being used.

### **8.1 Young People**

Young people share the same concerns as adults about community safety and crime prevention. Their involvement in the development of community responses to violence and crime is important. They have creative ideas to contribute. Many young people are now involved in crime prevention initiatives in their

respective communities. These initiatives include:

#### **PARTICIPATION ON YOUTH COUNCILS AND ADVISORY COMMITTEES**

These councils, which are usually linked to larger city or community councils, are a forum through which young people can voice the concerns of youth and provide suggestions for preventing violence and crime in their communities. In addition, youth committees are often involved in planning and running special events, including sports nights and youth dances.

#### **YOUTH EDUCATING YOUTH**

Concerned young people are often involved in educating and helping their peers through peer mediation, peer counselling and drama troupes which discuss conflict resolution, multicultural relations and other concerns facing youth today.

#### **YOUTH POLICING YOUTH**

Young people are becoming involved in holding their peers accountable for their actions. For example, one community has established teen courts in which young people determine the penalties for the transgressions of other youth. Park patrols is another example. This involves young people patrolling recreational areas to

prevent vandalism. They report vandalism and other potential problems to the police.

to address specific youth issues such as street level crime, entrenched street youth, and youth gang activity

## **8.2 The Police**

The roles which the police assume in Canadian communities are numerous and diverse. They are involved in various prevention and law enforcement activities, including:

### **SCHOOL RESOURCE/LIAISON OFFICER PROGRAMS**

Many police officers are in schools and serve as resource persons to students, parents, teachers and school board officials. Some school resource/liaison officers become directly involved in school life, participating in field trips and sports events. They help students develop programs such as Student Crime Stoppers and attempt to establish relationships with students who are seen as being involved in or at risk of becoming involved in youth violence and youth gang activity.

### **POLICE/YOUTH SPORTS LEAGUES**

One strategy which seems to be successful in reducing youth crime involves the police participating in sports leagues with youth at risk and youth from low-income neighbourhoods.

### **SPECIALIZED UNITS**

Many police departments have developed specialized units, such as ethnic liaison units, street crime units, gang units and youth squads,

### **POLICE YOUTH MENTORING PROGRAMS**

These programs have been piloted in several Ontario communities and in an aboriginal community in Quebec. Evaluations of these programs suggest that they were extremely positive in promoting greater harmony between the police and minority black and aboriginal youth.

### **COMMUNITY POLICING**

A key police response to crime prevention has been the establishment of community-based policing units. Many police services have established neighbourhood police stations with community relations officers and foot patrols. The goal of community-based policing is to develop a better relationship between the police and the public, by making the police more accessible to the community.

## **8.3 Schools**

Many school boards have developed specific strategies in response to the apparent increase in violence in Canadian schools. These include:

### **SAFER SCHOOLS POLICIES**

Most school boards have developed policies and procedures for dealing with violence in schools.

Their goal is to create and maintain a safe, violence-free learning environment.

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF ANTI-VIOLENCE CURRICULA

Most educators agree that learning about violence and its prevention should begin as early as possible. As a result, many school boards have developed curricula for all grades. Curricula include units such as "Values, Influences, and Peers," "Lionsquest," "Second Step," and "Realities in a Changing World." Curricula on dating violence is also being introduced in both junior and senior high schools.

School boards are also educating teachers on how to respond effectively to aggressive or violent students. Some school boards have hired violence prevention educators who act as resource persons for teachers, parents and school officials.

#### SPECIFIC PROGRAMS AND RESPONSES

Many schools train both teachers and students in conflict-resolution techniques. Conflict resolution and peer mediation have helped curb violence in many schools. In addition, when students perpetrate violence they are frequently required to take classes in anger management, to learn how to resolve conflicts without violence. Finally, some schools have pastoral care workers who listen and talk with students who are trying to cope with anger and pain.

## **8.4 Community and Youth-Serving Agencies**

Many community and youth-serving agencies work directly with young people and their families. Some are involved in the development and implementation of violence prevention programs. Examples of programs established by community and youth-serving agencies include:

#### INTERSECTION

This is a program which provides counselling for youth who have or are thinking about dropping out of school.

#### EMPLOYMENT ADVOCACY TRAINING FOR YOUTH

This program provides training and experience to young people so that they can learn how to seek employment. Some communities have established job banks, at which young people can find out what jobs are available and who to contact.

#### PARTNERS IN YOUTH PROJECT

One community has developed a pilot project in which agencies dealing with youth - probation services, public health nurses, the police, child welfare and social services have representatives in the school, and work as a team with students. Existing resources were used to fund the project. Team members provided their own resources, including filing cabinets, desks, etc.

## YOUNG COACHES

The minor hockey association in one community developed Young Coaches, a program that provides training to midget players (who are aged 15-17 years) to be coaches/instructors in the initiation program (for players aged 5-7 years). The association pays for the instructor training and provides transportation if needed. It provides older youth with leadership skills, and the opportunity to be good role models for the younger players. Coaching education is available at the YM-YWCA and various sports clubs.

## MUNICIPALITIES

Many municipalities have developed programs and leadership opportunities, particularly in their parks and recreation departments, specifically geared to young people. The philosophy behind

these programs is that when youth are involved in their communities, they are less likely to get into trouble. Activities include: after-school programs; teen cultural and recreation clubs; sports nights, sports camps; and special events.

## THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY

Many businesses are becoming involved in youth violence prevention efforts by donating resources, space and equipment for the establishment of teen centres. These are designed to meet the specific needs of local young people. In some cities, businesses and staff from local schools have worked together to provide space, tutors, outreach workers and resources to create "storefront classrooms" for dropouts. These classrooms are located in malls where young people, including dropouts frequently hang out.



## **9.0 SOME FINAL THOUGHTS**

Many involved in our study stressed several key points in pursuing strategies to respond to youth violence in their communities. The most salient of these are outlined below.

### **9.1 Violence Is A Societal Problem**

Violence is everywhere - in our movies, music, television programs and sports. It is increasingly evident in many workplaces, as competition has become a dominant feature of people's working lives. Layoff practices in some companies epitomize the dehumanizing way people are treated. Violence and aggression are also evident in many community and political processes. Here, individuals and organizations are constantly trying to gain or maintain control over various "agendas." It is present in many homes, destroying children, parents and families. As these examples show, violence is a community problem. We must all accept responsibility for its solution.

### **9.2 The Impact of Social Forces Must Be Considered**

There is a sense that various new social forces are contributing to aggressive and violent behaviour. These forces include the increased fear of crime, and the anxiety present in many families as a result of economic insecurity. These forces should be considered when a community tries to understand and respond to its youth violence concerns.

### **9.3 Avoid Unnecessarily Blaming Young People**

Young people can be unintentionally and unfairly blamed for youth violence. Most are not involved in violent behaviour. Rather, many are involved in initiatives to prevent violence, such as peer mediation programs. Of the few who perpetrate violence, some are responding to dysfunctional home situations and personal problems. They need help. Youth should be involved as partners in addressing youth violence concerns.

### **9.4 Work Towards A Healthy Community**

A community strategy is often most effective, if developed as part of a comprehensive plan to bring about a healthy community. While not questioning the potential necessity for short-term law enforcement

measures, this perspective calls for all in the community to help create a violence free environment and a healthy community for everyone.

### **9.5 Work Towards a Balanced, Comprehensive Response**

Many communities have stressed the importance of developing a balanced, comprehensive response to youth violence. While the pressure to respond to immediate crises is natural, justifying continuing preventive programs is difficult. The results of preventive programs are often not

readily apparent. Yet, the commitment to preventive measures is essential if we are to deal with the underlying causes of violence in our communities.

### **9.6 Involve The Media As Partners**

Often the media is considered to be a problem in that a distorted public understanding of youth violence is usually the result of media coverage. However, many communities involved in youth violence initiatives have involved media representatives as major partners in dealing with their community's youth violence concerns.

## 10 CONCLUSION

Youth violence continues to be a major concern in many communities. While the incidents of such violence do not suggest a crisis, there is considerable commitment to develop effective preventative strategies. Communities vary as to the extent and nature of youth violence. They have differing

resources available to allocate to this issue. They often organize in distinctive ways to address such community-based concerns. Hopefully, this manual will assist those concerned with youth violence to develop effective community strategies.