Hearing the Voices of Youth:

A Review of Research and Consultation Documents

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Hearing the voices of youth

A Review Of Research And Consultation Documents

Final Report

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Acknowledgments

Hearing the voices of young people amidst the many other sounds seeking is always a challenging enterprise. To try to collate the views expressed by young people in research reports, consultation documents and other materials was a daunting task. Fortunately I had a lot of help from dedicated professionals in a variety of organizations across the country who work with young people. They helped me identify rich and important sources of information which made my task easier and added to the value of this report. I am truly grateful for the support and encouragement I have received from these people whenever I have asked for their help. In particular I would like to thank the members of the Advisory Panel for their insightful comments and suggestions: Alana Aisthorpe, Mario Gagnon, Martha Kirby, Wendy Lum, Cheryl Osborne, Clleen Ryan, Laura Sackville, and Arleene Seegerts. They confirmed the findings in this document and gave me much to consider when thinking about ways of responding to what young people have said.

I would like to acknowledge the excellent contribution to this project made by my colleague Sylvie Gagnon. Her knowledge of the field and keen insights on issues regarding youth have been a great source of inspiration whenever I have had the privilege or working with her. I look forward to working with her again on youth-related projects.

Finally, I would like to thank Ms. Paula Walters and her colleagues at Health Canada for their ongoing help and support. It is inspiring to be involved with such a dedicated and hard working group of professionals who are so clearly committed to Canada's young people.

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1.0   Introduction

Over the past several years, the federal government has been involved in numerous consultations and research projects focusing on the health concerns of young Canadians. Health Canada, in particular, has played an important role in this process through projects undertaken as part of the Family Violence Initiative, Canada's Drug Strategy, and the Brighter Futures program. A major feature of many of these initiatives has been to invite young people to discuss issues that concern them and to solicit their suggestions as to how best to meet their needs.

This report brings together the knowledge gained from young people through these various consultations and research projects. It is intended for those working in areas related to youth health. It contains information that can be used in program and policy development as well as for designing appropriate services for youth.

This report is based on a detailed review of documents which have recorded the views of youth on health related issues. An extensive search was undertaken to identify relevant materials. This included research reports, conference proceedings, consultation documents and other resources in which the voices of young people were recorded. These documents were then examined to identify key patterns and themes in the comments young people made about their health-related concerns and the suggestions they made for responding to these concerns. Selected quotations reflecting these patterns and themes are presented below.

The primary goal of this report was to gather together the views expressed by young people on such issues as violence and sexuality. In particular, attention was focused on their concerns related to family violence and healthy sexuality. The report was inclusive in orientation, taking note of the multidimensional nature of youth issues and the youth services system. As such, information provided by young people regarding their experiences in the social, cultural, recreational, criminal justice and health sectors was considered. Attention was also paid to the views of youth regarding the nature and extent of their participation and involvement in decisions affecting their lives.

One of the main challenges in preparing this report was identifying and acquiring relevant documents and materials. While standard bibliographic search techniques were used to identify most of the appropriate materials, many important studies and consultation documents that incorporate the views of youth do not appear in such searches. These documents are produced by local community groups for their own purposes and are not usually deposited with libraries. For example, communities may undertake small scale needs assessments or conduct focus group sessions with youth to respond to particular local concerns. While not national in scope, these reports represent a valuable source of information that documents the views and experiences of young people. The challenge for preparing this report was to identify and secure copies of these types of documents.

A multi-faceted strategy was used to identify appropriate materials. First, an extensive bibliographic search was conducted at the Health Canada and Carleton University libraries. An internet-based search of youth-related topics was also completed. Next, key informants from across the country who are involved in youth-related research or knowledgeable in this area were contacted and asked for their assistance. Many of these individuals work in youth agencies and youth-serving agencies in the health, social services, education or youth justice fields.

In addition to this general canvassing, particular emphasis was placed on contacting key informants in six selected communities. These included: Halifax, Montreal, Ottawa, Winnipeg, Calgary and Vancouver. This step was taken to enhance our identification of documents related to regional youth conferences or consultations.. All key informants were asked for the names of other individuals who might be able to assist in identifying materials. Using this snowball technique, over 50 individuals from across the country and in a variety of sectors were contacted and asked for their assistance.

Finally, an advisory panel was selected from the general contact list of key informants. These individuals were asked to review and comment on a draft of this report. Their comments and suggestions have been incorporated into this document. The list of the advisory panel members is presented in Appendix A located at the end of this report.

The steps described above resulted in the creation of a working bibliography containing references to over 100 books, reports, consultation documents and other relevant materials. These were examined for their suitability to the current project. Several decisions were made following this examination to assist us in dealing with this large amount of information. First, we decided to include only those materials produced from 1990 to the present, in order to include information that is relevant to current conditions. Second, we decided to focus on documents which actually included quotations from young people. This resulted in dropping numerous items from the working bibliography which contained the results of surveys conducted with youth but no direct quotations. These two decisions helped us to narrow the scope of the project keep its focus directly on "hearing the voices of youth."

Note: Some quotes have been translated by a translator because the information gathered comes from documents that were published only in French.

1.1 Limitations of this Report

The methodology described above was designed to assist in the identification of relevant materials for this project. Interpretation of the results presented below, however, must proceed with caution given several important limitations. First, the young people whose voices are reported in this document are not a homogenous group. Some are mainstream youth, attending school and involved in ordinary pursuits. Others, however, have runaway from home, are living on the streets and are involved in the dangerous practices associated with this lifestyle. Still others reflect the plethora of unique groupings and clusters that make-up the ever changing kaleidoscope of youth cultures in Canada. There is no doubt that their experiences and values differ from one another, in some cases quite dramatically. This diversity is evident in the quotations recorded below.

Following from this, it is important to recognize that the quotations included in this report were drawn from 25 different sources. Each of these had a different purpose and target audience. Each asked a different set of questions to different groups of young people. As a result, we cannot make the usual claims about the validity, reliability and generalizability of these findings. They should be interpreted with caution and in the context of the overall purpose of this project: namely, to review existing documents and collect the views of youth contained in them.

Given these limitations, we have considerable confidence that the findings do represent the views and opinions of youth in Canada. This confidence stems, in part, from our extensive experience in this area. As well, the patterns reported below are consistent with published work in this field. The findings of the individual documents we consulted are consistent with the other documents examined for this project. Finally, the comments and suggestions of a knowledgeable advisory panel further strengthen the confidence we have in the findings. The key informants indicated that the findings were consistent with their experiences working in this area.

2.0   Identifying key patterns and themes

An important consideration in preparing this report was deciding on how to organize the vast and disparate array of information that was collected. Once the relevant reports and consultation documents were identified, selected quotations from these documents were recorded in a main data file. An analysis of this material was then undertaken to identify recurring themes and patterns. This process revealed several common concerns and key themes. These included: self-esteem, the family, experiences at school, violence and sexuality. In addition, a list of more general concerns was compiled which included such things as racism, substance abuse, uncertainty about the future, careers, the environment and global issues. Finally, the recommendations of youth were recorded including their views on how best to respond to their needs and aspirations. These concerns were not priorized by the young people but are presented here in a systematic way. That is, we begin with a consideration of individual concerns involving self-esteem then move outward to concerns related to the family, the school, the community and then the more general or global concerns of these young people.

The themes and patterns identified in the data are presented in the following sections of this report. Each section begins with a brief introduction and includes some commentary to introduce the subsections of each of the more general theme areas. The main components in each of these theme areas, however, are the quotations from young people. We have chosen to let the young people "speak for themselves." At the end of the theme sections, the recommendations of youth are presented, followed by a section entitled "Where To From Here?" in which we reflect on the findings and recommendations and offer our observations.

3.0   What Youth Are Saying About. . .

3.1   Self-Esteem

Concern over self-esteem was a recurring theme in many of the documents we reviewed. The quotes from young people show that a variety of factors influence how young people feel about themselves and in turn, this affects how they think and act. The documents show that ". . . self-esteem is a complex mixture of qualities that is influenced by a large number of factors including relationships with family, teachers, and peers, as well as by the [media]..." [5]. In general, young people have a positive view of themselves. While they note that adults tend to overreact and dramatize the problems of youth, their views often reflect the normal challenges associated with growing up.

> *"Teenagers are doing fine. Adults tend to dramatize. They just see the little groups of youth who have behavior problems and who are more visible even if they are not representative of the majority of youth. [2]*

> *"I believe I am responsible, creative and an individual." [6]*

> *"My friends, my home, the fact that I'm basically a good person." [6]*

> *"My achievements, my friends, I like myself." [6]*

> *"I'm healthy and attend school everyday. I'm a hard worker and like to write a lot. I am a female and I can compete with anybody at anything." [6]*

This positive outlook, however, does not apply to some groups of young people. Youth who have been abused, those who are living "on the street," some of the young people living "in care," and to a lesser extent, those living in more isolated circumstances (e.g. in remote northern communities) may experience a much more difficult time with their self-image and self-esteem. The result is that some of these young people may become involved in dangerous and self-destructive behaviour.

> *"I do coke when I get depressed. Sometimes I try to overdose myself." [19]*

> *"(I hurt myself when) I get really depressed. I don't hit anyone anymore so I inflict it on myself." [19]*

> *"I used to carve my arms and burn my hands with a lighter once or twice a week when I was at home." [19]*

> *"Lately, I have been thinking about it (suicide) a lot." [19]*

> *"I didn't like myself very much. I was contemplating suicide. I played with knives. I liked to hurt myself. [My] drug use was increasing. [8]*

> *"I felt horrible. I hated myself. I felt stupid. I hated my body, I hated my looks. I looked inside and I was disgusted. I never felt accepted. [8]*

> *"I just didn't care about myself, didn't care about the way I looked or the way I acted. I beat kids up at school all the time. And I think I was learning from my parents that abuse was okay."* [21]

> *"Interviews with former street youth showed that, "71% had a very negative self image prior to going to the street."* [8]

As noted above, living in remote or isolated northern communities poses problems for some young people. For example, youth from Northern Quebec report being involved in 'adult-type activities' much earlier than their southern counterparts.[23] They also report more serious problems with school, the police, money and drug abuse. [23] This is especially the case for the young men living in these communities. The young women have more problems with abuse, rejection, pregnancies, and abortion. [23]

The young people identified a number of factors which they thought were related to self- esteem. The media were singled out as being particularly destructive to young women's self-esteem. . ."[5] However, one of the most important factors related to self-esteem was having experienced physical, emotional or sexual abuse. These experiences were identified as posing a serious challenge and were linked to subsequent involvement in self-destructive and violent behaviour.

> *"Often with abuse what comes along is low self-esteem, which is why I think I'm critical, you know? I question myself. I question my feelings and I question other people's feelings. I mean so many times I thought when I was a kid that I was just this dirty child."*[20]

The documents show that twice as many girls as boys have negative views about themselves. [5] Girls report that they consult more when they have a personal problem. [10] They are less satisfied with themselves, experience more stress, and are less satisfied with the communication they have with their parents. However, as one young woman pointed out, young men are not immune from challenges to their self-esteem.

> *"Remember", she said, "that men are victimized by the media, too. They have to be macho. Their qualities are also unfairly represented. We should think of human qualities rather than male and female qualities."*[5]

The young people pointed out that it is difficult to address the factors influencing self-esteem. Because self-esteem is connected to many other issues (e.g., education, racism), solutions must be sought on all fronts - in the home, in the school, and in the self. [5] Solutions are particularly difficult because the factors leading to low self-esteem may vary greatly depending on individual circumstances.

> *"Although the psychological (inner) aspects of self-esteem have been studied for centuries, they still defy analytical clarity. It may be more feasible to look at the economic and sociological aspects of self-esteem and to address systemic barriers which prevent many women from appreciating their worthiness."* [5]

> *"The various elements which add to or subtract from self-esteem must be clearly identified and communicated so that barriers preventing young women from feeling good about themselves can begin to be dismantled. . . In particular, barriers relating to poverty, family stresses, and lack of equitable access to education must be recognized."* [5]

3.2 The Family

The importance of the family in the lives of young people cannot be overstated. Youth look to their families for support and guidance. Young people want their parents to be involved with them, to discuss issues that are important to them and to provide information about what life has in store. For many young people, the situation at home is fine. The give and take they experience is part of the normal process of growing up.

> *"My parents are awesome. Even though they get mad at me I know it is for my own good."*[6]
>
> *"I'm happy with my relationship with my Mom. She's great!"*[6]
>
> *"They'd problem-solve with me."*[6]
>
> *"She would understand and help me."*[6]

For some young people, however, home life is fraught with conflict. Relationships with parents and other family members are strained and for some, they result in violence and abuse. Many young people who run away report severe conflicts at home. Others talk about a history of abuse and neglect. Many note that their parents were involved in unstable relationships. Others said their parents had problems such as mental illness and substance abuse.

> *"My parents don't care. My mother spills her problems out on me but never listens to mine."*[6]
>
> *"Mom is always bitching at me. Dad was 16 years in jail. He was always hitting me. They are divorced now. Mom used to be an alcoholic. Dad used to be on drugs. Dad drinks now."*[19]
>
> *"My stepfather beat me up and my uncle raped me so they put me in CAS."*[19]
>
> *"I was sexually abused by my brothers almost every night."*[19]
>
> *"My mom and her boyfriend do drugs. I was raised by those kind of people."*[19]
>
> *"I was sexually abused a lot when I was nine by my grandmother's brother, my grandfather and my uncle."*[19]
>
> *"My father f——-ed me physically, sexually and emotionally. He is going to jail. I'm going to live with my natural mother."*[19]

The young people identified various factors related to problems in their families. These include: arguing and fighting with parents, feeling unloved, unaccepted or different, being physically abused, parental problems (e.g., substance abuse, mental illness), conflict with step-parents, and the impact of the parents' divorce. [17] Nevertheless, the family remains a central institution in the lives of young people:

> *"During adolescence, family functioning declines and the family unit experiences a wide array of on going problems serious or not so serious in nature. The family cohesiveness may not be the route cause of these problems but they do play a significant role in the development of these issues. However, the family and the parents remain able to adjust to these circumstances and become the individuals who are significant in the lives of these adolescents." [12]*

3.3 The Education System

Many of the young people expressed frustration with the educational system. In particular, they questioned the relevance of what they were being taught. They noted the need for change and felt that the education system was unwilling to make necessary changes. Indeed, some young people pointed out that programs and instructors who presented topical information in an appropriate manner were very well received.

> *"We're concerned with being taught in a modern, real life way, not the old, usual, traditional way. Times are changing, but our school system's not. For example, [the schools should teach] a family life course or even a topic like sex, so teenagers can be taught accurately, not follow "street talk."[6]*

> *"The educators need to be re-educated. They go to workshops, but that doesn't help. They have stereotypes. They can't deal with changing trends in society."[5]*

> *"The system has to change. We have to evaluate teachers."[5]*

> *"In my school, Career and Life Management was taught by the Home Economics teacher. All we learned was how to write resumés. It did nothing for me."[5]*

> *"We learn useless things that we do not need." [16]*

> *"Individuals who drop out of school are those who have the most difficulty in school; If it was up to me, I would make it a priority for teachers to keep a close eye on those students and maybe create an interesting program that would attract these kids." [16]*

Some quotes have been translated by a translator because the information gathered comes from documents that were published only in French.

"Low self-esteem leads to drugs in school, but there are no courses on drugs...No one in the school talks about problems - I know no one in the school has been to rehab and no one knows what it's about. I could tell my story to everyone at the school - but they would just judge [me]." [5]

"The best thing my school ever did for the students that participate is the drug and alcohol counsellor that comes every Thursday to speak to a group of grade 9s. We discuss anything."[6]

The youth also noted the lack of respect they receive in school. Some reported being ignored while others disliked being treated like children.

"Why are we told to act like adults and then treated like children? This confuses me, and it happens especially at school, from our teachers."[6]

"Treat us with respect and intelligence and not as unknowing children. Don't think that by talking about the issues that you are promoting them (i.e., sex)." [6]

"Teachers are rude, but you can't do it in return. Teachers talk down to teens, they should talk to them as a friend. Teachers only have time for smart kids."[6]

"Teachers don't listen until you're in grade 11 or 12. They intimidate students."[6]

"Maybe teachers should learn more about the backgrounds of the students they're teaching. Get to know the students and who they are. Don't be so impersonal."[5]

*"If there were more activities, and liberty, children would stay in school and finish High School."[16]

Some young people have a particularly difficult time making it at school. Those living in marginal situations - such as runaways or street youth - find it especially hard to get the type of educational program they need.

"They treat you different if they know you were a street kid." [19]

"[Street youth] find it hard to adjust to the system." [19]

"[Street youth] need independent learning centres. It is impossible to go to school when you are on the street - the schedules are too hard to stick to." [19]

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Common problems experienced at school include: conflict (violence) with teachers and students, not doing assigned work, skipping classes, and alcohol and other drug use. [9] A recurring theme related to school problems was "not fitting in." [8] Many young people said that they didn't fit in, that they didn't feel like they belonged or that they were loners. This was often related to negative experiences at school and to early school leaving.

> *"I found high school really, really hard 'cause I didn't fit in at all." [17]*

> *"I hated school. I didn't feel accepted. I wasn't treated as a person. No one cared to look at me, just at how I dressed. They looked at us and said there's a loser . . . having peers and teachers treat me like a worthless piece of shit . . . I was always about a 'C+' student but I just got through 8, 9 and 10th grade." [8]*

> *"Bad . . . [I was] picked on all the time. Most of the time because of the way I dressed. I was always really quiet. I was different. I never fit in." [8]*

> *"[I] had no friends. [I] didn't fit in. [It was] really cliquey." [8]*

> *"I changed schools a lot and never really felt I belonged. I never fit into any of the cliques. The people I clicked with at my last high school were the ones I went downtown with." [8]*

> *"Bad . . . I was picked on all the time. Most of the time because of the way I dressed. I was always really quiet. I was different. I never fit in." [8]*

> *"My grades were not that good, a 'C' average . . . Well it wasn't [just what was going on at home], it was two bad things. I'd go to school and be scared at school and I'd go home and I'd be scared [there]." [8]*

While many youth were critical of school, others realized the importance it had for their futures.

> **"Most kids study seriously. As for me, my studies are important and it is the same for my friends." [16]*

> **"It is the Diploma that forces me to go to school, even if I hate it." [16]*

> **"The individuals who will go to College should work a bit and pay attention to their studies."[16]*

> **"Going to school will allow me to do something later in life." [16]*

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The reality for a large number of youth is that they must balance the demands of school with a part-time job. In one study, 40% of the students reported working part-time, after school or on weekends. [14] Of the remaining 60%, 3 out of 4 said they would like to work. Often, this is a result of financial necessity and not an option for these young people. There are a number of potential consequences, however, for young people who are trying to work while going to school.

> **"It is much more important to finish school and to find employment than to try and change society."[3]*

3.4 Sexuality

Sexuality is an important issue for young people. Many report that they have had sexual relations. [5 and 29] Young people want to have their own experiences and they consider themselves mature and responsible enough to handle them. They express attitudes related to basic social values, such as the need for communication, respect for others, being knowledgeable, acting responsibly and being faithful. [2]

Young people also want to talk about their sexuality and explore what love and sexual pleasure could mean for them. They are interested in learning about the positive aspect of sexuality and not only hearing about the potential dangers. They feel they have enough information on the mechanical aspects of sex as well as on the risks. They deplore the fact that some parents close their eyes to the sexual lives of their children. This makes it difficult for them to communicate with their parents on these issues. Youth think, however, that mothers are more open to discussing these issues than fathers, who are overprotective or as one young person said, "surprotecteurs." [2]

A number of recurring themes were evident in the views of youth regarding sexuality. These included: access to resources; the need for timely and appropriate education; more discussions about various aspects of love and sexuality not found in traditional educational programs; information about gay and lesbian lifestyles and issues associated with "coming out"; information and services related to STI's, AIDS and risk behaviour. [11]

In general, young people felt realistic about their sexuality. They felt able to handle their experiences. Others were scared about the potential consequences - of getting pregnant or of contracting a sexually transmitted disease.

> *"Sexual pressures are a big thing for me right now. Boys expect to have it all. For me, sex comes with marriage." [6]*

> *"I don't have any concerns being in Grade 9 except for the facts of what will happen to me now that I am and have been for awhile, sleeping with my boyfriend. [6]*

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"I like sex and boys. This maybe is a little disturbing but I can't help this, I want it to happen to me. I've made it before with someone." [6]

"Is sex wrong or right at my age (12 years old)?" [6]

"With regards to sexual activity amongst teenagers, I would like to understand what it is that upsets the parents so much if proper precautions are being taken." [6]

*"Here's to their day to day relationships and lasting friendships, this is the message that most adolescents have voiced and hope for. They are too young to take themselves seriously and they see themselves as too realist to believe that this will last throughout life." [2]

*"They long for a love affair and describe it as being progressive, coming from an internal source of energy which develops itself after the passion.. The 'one night stands' do not interest them". [2]

*"Before, you were afraid of getting pregnant and now you are afraid of contracting a disease." [2]

"I don't know how far you're supposed to go until its too far with a guy, and please keep in mind I am a responsible young woman." [6]

"It is not realistic to preach abstention and say No, as that does not deal with the problem." [6]

Many youth sought security in being with people they knew and could trust.

"I feel safe if I believe I'm with someone I'll always be with." [6]

"With my steady girlfriend I feel safe and secure. On one night stands I always use a condom." [6]

*"I would like to know my partner before making love, he has to have some respect." [16]

"I think you should stress to girls not to have sex with just any Tom, Dick and Harry because you can get hurt because guys can be such pigs sometimes." [6]

Dealing with pregnancy and the possibility of having an abortion was also a topic of real concern.

"No way I'd tell my mom. Right now I'd have an abortion like that, but still maybe this kid would be like Bon Jovi, like maybe he'd be famous." [6]

"You could give the baby up for adoption, but you'd have the baby in your arms for awhile, and you wouldn't want to give it up." [6]

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> "Either way once you find out you're pregnant, you've got the whole world turned against you. If you get an abortion, you're going to have a major guilt upon yourself. If you get an adoption, everybody's going to say 'Oh she gave up her baby, that was real bad.' If you keep it, "oh well, I wanna go to the grad party, but I've got to take care of the baby.' Either way you lose. With adoption, every time you see a little kid, you're going to say, "Is that my kid?" [6]

For many young women, sexuality carries an additional burden. Many refer to a double standard and are left guessing about what young men are up to.

> "One big concern I think is the need to find the right guy; intelligent and mature. Nobody really talks about it because unfortunately he does not seem to exist." [6]

> "There are double standards for guys and girls regarding sex. Guys are cool while girls are sluts." [6]

> "I acted from my own needs and didn't respect hers. I stepped over boundaries." [6]

> "Guys think birth control is the girls' responsibility. AIDS and STDs doesn't enter into the thought process." [6]

> "Some ex-boyfriends might understand (pregnancy) but mine would just say 'wow' and be gone." [6]

> "I think that boys should not do what they do to us." [6]

> "Guys still think they are smarter and can do more. Guys think they have all the choices. We don't have the choices that they do." [6]

> "Girls are just looking for serious relationships, boys just want to screw." [6]

> "Girls care more about their looks/fashion. Boys care more about sports and sex. [6]

> "Boys can't get pregnant. But they have pressures too, they have to be macho. The society we live in causes this." [6]

3.4.1   Sexuality and Violence

The issue of sexual violence is a reality for many young people. It can have potentially devastating effects. Yet many young people either don't know who to talk to about this or else they're afraid to speak up.

> *"When I was about fourteen I became really sexually active, but I blame it on being molested. That's one of the side effects. And I was aggressive, I was fighting every other night. Any time you seen me, I was fighting with somebody." [21]*

> *"I pretended it wasn't me and hoped it would go away. I felt I wouldn't be believed." [6]*

> *"I ignored it the first time. The second time it was my boyfriend's friend and I didn't know what to do." [6]*

> *"I kept it to myself, then talked to friends. But that wasn't helpful." [6]*

> *"My uncle abused me and told me it was my fault I was attractive."*

> *"I ate, cried, never talked, absorbed myself in other people's kids. I was too brainwashed, ashamed, to get help even from the transition house." [6]*

> *"Who can you trust these days? I can't be sure it won't happen to me...Guys force you to do things that you don't want to — they presume you'll say yes." [6]*

> *"My sister went out with . . . for a long time and he always beat her up. My mother and I said that he was going to kill her. Like that sounds dumb, but my sister just said, well that won't happen again. They keep on fooling themselves, well maybe he's changed and they keep on going back. If he keeps on drinking the booze, then he's going to keep on changing like that and then he's going to keep on beating her up. You'd always think that maybe it's a one-time thing. Maybe it's a stage, maybe he'll grow out of it. Nobody should treat anybody like that." [6]*

> *"One out of 10 women in society is battered or assaulted. In the Native community it is 8 out of 10. There are no jobs, education, appropriate or clean housing. There is a lot of alcoholism, sexual abuse, physical, mental, and emotional assault. This is a sadness I carry with me every day."[5]*

> *"We have to realize that it's not our fault. We don't deserve the abuse. We [in the shelter] help each other. This is strengthening." [5]*

> *"The problem is that we are not told by people who are important to us to speak honestly about sexual abuse and unite with other women to protect ourselves." [5]*

3.4.2   Sexuality and Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Youth

The fears and uncertainty associated with sexuality are even more intense for gay, lesbian and bisexual youth. [11] Many lack social support and access to competent formal and informal resources. For many gay, lesbian and bisexual youth, sexual orientation is something to hide from others. It is often a source of ridicule and abuse. Few resources are available, particularly for gay, lesbian and bisexual youth living in small towns or rural areas. Many experience rejection from family and friends, isolation, self-doubt and depression. Gay, lesbian and bisexual youth also experience much higher suicide rates than straight youth.

> *"I wasn't allowed to talk about my homosexuality. I wasn't allowed to talk about it at all. We used to have group meetings at night, um. And ... I was living with these people and when I wanted to tell them... I was basically told, 'Don't talk about it, it's not an issue, it's not to be discussed here.' But it was a big part of my life."* [22]

> *"They always asked me, 'Are you sure, are you sure you're a lesbian? Are you sure?". . . It really upset me because I was having to defend myself when I shouldn't."* [22]

> *"[From] how they dealt with the whole issue, I put it together and I went, 'Fuck, they can't deal with this. They think it's a sickness. They think it's a psychiatric problem that needs to be balanced by drugs. And, um, I can't address it because of their issues."* [22]

> *"My friends rejected me when I told them I was gay."* [5]

> *"Be straight or you're not my son!"* [6]

> *"The first time I kissed a woman, it changed by whole world. I knew I was homosexual and my values would be different from a lot of people because of that."* [6]

> *"My friends think homosexuality is gross, so I pretend I'm straight. I go out with a guy and don't say anything."* [6]

> *"The support and encouragement of my gay friends helps me to grow in my self-acceptance as a lesbian."* [6]

3.4.3   Sex Education

Young people have serious concerns about the sex education currently available. They are critical of the nature of the information they are being given and the timing of the courses. Many would like a much broader approach to sexual education to include topics beyond the mechanical aspects of sex or the dangers of STD's and AIDS. They would like to talk about love and sexuality more realistically and explore the positive and pleasurable aspects of sexuality.

> *"If you don't want the information, you should have it anyway. Mostly it's the parents who don't want you to know."* [13]

"Youth have suggested that the information was "(taught) when it didn't matter." and that they "cut us off in grade ten, just when we were starting to be interested." [13]

"Sex education should begin at an early age before children become self-conscious about speaking about their bodies — this should increase awareness and enhance prevention of many issues for adolescents." [6]

"When doing pamphlets and educating kids in junior high and high school, kids should be involved in what education is taught rather than adults deciding because 90% of education on AIDS, drugs, violence, crime and other issues to deal with kids is useless. It goes in one ear and out the other." [6]

"Present sex education so that it is acceptable to voice one's values and beliefs on a topic rather than feeling rejected if one's questions don't reflect the norm." [6]

"Teens have stated that there was "not enough emphasis on foreplay." Youth want to be "talking more about what can happen in foreplay. Like STD transmission and stuff." [13]

"Don't assume we are all heterosexual." [6]

"In a classroom kids are too uncomfortable and embarrassed to ask the really important questions." [6]

"It didn't have enough to do with individual choices and morals." [6]

"Don't just give us narrow social standards." [6]

"Teach us about sexuality before menstruation starts so girls won't get scared." [6]

"They taught me that aspects of my sexuality were evil." [6]

"I was taught in school you could only get pregnant one day in a month." [6]

A recurring theme regarding sexuality was the availability and accessibility of resources for young people. Youth in small towns were especially concerned with confidentiality and privacy. They felt that condoms should be readily available and that young people should have access to safe, competent and confidential services related to their sexual health.

"Keep building social acceptance of the issues surrounding sexuality and the situations that arise so that people won't feel bad about needing resources." [6]

"Society should make youth feel it is natural to be curious, to want information and resources." [6]

"Make resources more accessible to kids will go get help." [6]

"It's a small community and everyone knows if I buy condoms." [6]

"We need a confidential place to get condoms because in this town everyone knows everyone." [6]

"I think there's more I could have if it were not such a small place." [6]

"Kids don't know who to trust." [6]

"My doctor broke confidentiality and told my parents. He makes me mad!" [6]

"Parents should be thankful people are trying to help their kids and back off some." [6]

*"Parent are afraid to see us get older and they make us pay the price. No matter what our age is, in their eyes, we will always be too young to have boyfriends."[16]

"The problem is adults' lack of acceptance of sex as reality, so they condemn it and won't give kids the facts they need. They need to relax and do what is right." [6]

3.5 Violence

When questioned about violence, young people reported a variety of problems in their schools. Some however, pointed out that they were not particularly violent given what was happening in many war torn areas of the world. Moreover, some youth pointed out that the extensive portrayal of violence on television and in other media is a concern.

*"If you love someone, you are supposed to want their well being at all times. We should have more control over ourselves."[15]

*"Yes, we are more violent than our parents were. This is because of violent television shows and the media.." [15]

*"In comparison to adults, we are not violent. Look at what happened in Bosnia. Adults are killing themselves, us we want peace."[15]

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*Some quotes have been translated by a translator because the information gathered comes from documents that were published only in French.

Youth in larger communities voiced their concerns that violence was on the increase. [7] They noted that while this could be a problem for some young people, many develop strategies for dealing with the violence in their milieu. They avoid unfamiliar neighbourhoods and mind their own business by "being cool" and avoiding potential problems. Young women, however, report considerable concern for their safety and many take special precautions such as not going out at night or travelling in pairs or groups. [7]

For some young people, crime and violence are a common feature of their everyday lives. Those living on the street, for example, are often involved in criminal activities to survive such as shoplifting, theft, and break and enter. Others are involved in the drug trade or work as prostitutes. This routinely exposes them to violence and other dangerous situations. [8, 9, 12]

> *"There are a lot of people [in the Calgary youth detention centre who are in there] just for fighting with other people. Kids are going to fight no matter what…Kids are kids. Kids have to make their own mistakes. Locking them up isn't going to help. It's just going to make it worse. They're going to get more angry." [4]*

Many young people know what they are doing is wrong and feel shame and remorse for their actions.

> *"It's really embarrassing. You see all these people looking at you like: 'oh yeah. There goes another punk kid.' And you just feel like turning around and saying: 'hey — I don't do this all the time.' You know? It makes you feel really bad. You're so ashamed of yourself. When my mom came in there and started crying, I thought: 'Oh no. My mom's ashamed of me.' And that's what hurts the most — having people you love ashamed of you." [4]*

> *"I guess I realized my mistake and I said I'll never do it again. When the judge was making a decision, I felt so embarrassed. I was sitting crying and I felt ashamed and embarrassed and sorry…" [4]*

> *"It's embarrassing when people talk about [what I did], when people know about it…Some of my friends know about it and take it like it is. But some people go: "She did that. Look at her. She's bad." It's still, sometimes, for me, hard to live with." [4]*

> *"You can't respect the law when it doesn't respect you. The things I did were about survival. No one ever asked me why I did what I did." [4]*

The issues of having jobs and having "something to do" was a common point. [7] When pressed, young people who had been involved in criminal activities stated emphatically that they would have stopped if they had a job.

> *"What the justice system needs is to exchange the negative highs in doing b and e's and stuff like that and put a positive reinforcement…Let the person or individual show that they can accomplish something through a program …" [7]*

> *"When I was young and into my b and e's, I was doing it for fun because there was nothing to do and no money to be made. There's no jobs. There's nothing..." [7]*

For youth in some Canadian communities, youth gangs have become a part of everyday life. Many turn to gangs to meet needs not satisfied in their families or schools. Gangs provide money, power, excitement, friendship, protection and a sense of belonging or "fitting in." Some youth said that in order to reduce the gang problem, we have to offer attractive alternatives to potential gang members to keep them from joining gangs. They also stated that we need appropriate resources to help those currently in gangs to get out.

> *"I have a friend being pressured to join a gang. Her brother's in a gang. Her friends are in the gang. She wants to get out." [13]*

> *"You just can't get out just like that. They don't want to leave. It's hard. It's all they know. What can we give them that equals what they have - they have money, drugs, friends -how can we change that and what can we offer?" [13]*

> *"Employment and shelter are needed to help people out." [13]*

> *"They leave and they have no money - welfare won't give you enough to move. Some of the workers don't care and won't do anything. If you come in looking like a gang member, you won't get anything." [13]*

3.5.1   Violence In School

Another important area of concern for many youth was violence in schools. There are many forms of violence that are apparent in and out of schools. These include violence in relationships, families, peer groups as well as sexual harassment and gay bashing. [13] In one study, the majority of the students who participated indicated that they had been exposed to violence at school either as a victim themselves or through knowing someone who had been victimized.[24] The types of violence reported included being threatened, beaten-up, robbed, verbally harassed, and picked on. The most commonly reported offenses were being verbally harassed and being physically threatened.

Some of the students believed that violence was not being taken seriously enough by school officials. [24] They called for harsher penalties for perpetrators including more school-related punishments, such as detentions, suspensions and expulsions, and more involvement from the police and the courts. [21, 10]

> *"In our school if someone whispers the word "fight', there are automatically about three hundred to five hundred students (gathering to watch)." (Female student) [18]*

> *"We had three physical assaults this year with the vice-principal. People came back to beat up our vice-principal. They break up a fight and then people take it out on them."(Male student) [18]*

"As soon as you hear the word 'fight', everybody is out the door."[15]

"There was a fight in our cafeteria and people were standing on the tables to watch. This girl was just slugging another girl; you couldn't even walk because people were just crowding in, cheering them on." [15]

"It doesn't matter who is fighting; everybody is egging everyone on." [15]

"They [gangs in general] have a circle of silence." [15]

"The Asian gangs are more highly organized than your average East end group of white, East Indian, and Spanish kids who just go around beating people up. The Asian gangs for some reason or another have developed a hierarchy and an organized structure." [15]

"It comes back to the ethnic thing with the bonding rituals. They see each other as brothers and will enact revenge if one of their brothers gets hurt. They look out for each other."[15]

Students offered a number of suggestions on how best to respond to the violence in their schools. They supported student involvement in school programs, especially as peer counsellors, because young people relate better to other youth than to adults. Similarly, the youth advocated initiatives started by and for youth to foster more harmonious school climates. They suggested that teachers should be more respectful and play a more active supervisory role in preventing school violence. They felt that teachers set the tone and are crucial in developing a sense of community within the school. [15]

"Our high school last year was very unorganized. You could skip class all the time without any problem. This year they have this code of behaviour — attendance people sitting outside the door. If you are late, they call home every day. If you miss three classes, they will call you to the office. They got rid of a lot of people who were selling drugs, those that were influencing violence. It has really calmed down." [15]

"If you throw the problematic kids from school to school, they will eventually get fed up and quit. If you don't let them back into the educational program, you're putting them out into society to become criminals. That's not dealing with the problem; that's just putting it off until later. What you have to do is get the principals to deal with the individuals instead of just throwing them out. I think you can make the vast majority of them conform but they need a bit more than the regular students. They need a bit of pride." [15]

3.6 Other Concerns

Among the vast array of concerns identified by young people, several recurring themes and patterns were evident. Some are associated with the types of concerns that all youth experience in making the transition from adolescence to adulthood. These include: concerns about school and what types of jobs or careers they will have; apprehensions and aspirations about the future; and being able to balance the many demands on them.

3.6.1   School

> *"[The most moving disclosures for me were:] "My mother didn't get an education and we don't have much" and "If you don't plan for tomorrow you'll have nothing in the future," [6]*

> **"Concerning teachers, one would think that all that matters is that we don't disturb them and get good grades. It is not necessary to put so much pressure on us. We are aware that it is our future that we are preparing."[2]*

> *"Homework and marks are very stressful...[6]*

> **"While in school, adults are preoccupied about arguing with us, instead of listening to what we are telling them." [2]*

3.6.2   The Future

My future really concerns me, I want to be successful but I don't how what I'm interested in or which way to turn."

> *"Will I have a job after I have completed my schooling?" [6]*

> *"One quiet girl said she feared most in her future (20 years hence) the aspect of being poor — living in a "poor" house — she was nervous — this was her only contribution." [6]*

> **"Adults talk about pollution, unemployment.... They tell us that we have no future but this is false and we will prove them wrong." [2]*

> *"Girls my age are very concerned about their future. Opposite of what adults perceive of us, we are not only concerned in boys, makeup and parties. We the teens of this country are not just having sex, taking drugs and partying. We are planning, thinking and dreaming for the future." [6]*

> **"Adolescence, it's very nice but what will be available for us after that?" [12]*

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*Some quotes have been translated by a translator because the information gathered comes from documents that were published only in French.

"I would like to be reassured of where I'll end up when I get older. What if I can't make it anywhere? I don't want to be pushed away and just forgot about like so many other people are." [6]

*"The lecture implying that we are a generation without a "soul" must stop." [2]

3.6.3   Balancing Work and Family

"It is scary knowing all the expectations that we have placed on ourselves and society has placed on us for the future; balancing a career, a relationship with our husband, children, family, having a good body, women friends and still time for ourselves seems like it will be very difficult." [6]

*"Adolescents hope that their parents and themselves can come to a mutual understanding between the time an adult spends on a career and the time spent with the family." [2]

3.6.4   Not Being Taken Seriously By Adults

*"It's not because we are under the age of 20 that we don't know anything." [12]

*"I hope that adults will change their views on children." [12]

*"Adults tend to generalize and judge people due to their appearance." [12]

*"What is missing with parents is communication. They do not listen to us. They have their job and that comes first." [12]

3.6.5   The Environment and Other Global Issues

"I'm concerned about the environment and the threat . . . to Confederation. The drugs available to junior high school students is also pretty scary." [6]

"I myself am concerned about environmental issues, animal rights and the decisions that our government is making for Canada's future." [6]

"(I worry about) environmental issues. How to have some impact on government decisions which may radically alter our country." [6]

"I worry about the greenhouse effect and environmental concerns. Will I make it in the real world when the time comes?" [6]

*"To get a government reaction nowadays, you almost have to be on a hunger strike....." [3]

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*Some quotes have been translated by a translator because the information gathered comes from documents that were published only in French.

3.6.6   Substance Abuse

"We are accused of being a generation of drug users. For example, my mom thinks that because I hang out with people that smoke, I smoke to. People tend to generalize to quickly."[16]

"I do not think that we should be concerned of the drinking and drugs use of today's youth. What is dangerous is the abuse. I think that drugs and alcohol are part of the developmental process that children must go through." [16]

"There are only a minority that use drugs but the media focus only on these individuals." [16]

"There is so much drugs going around. Kids get messed up doing too much drugs. Lots of peer pressure." [19]

"I used drugs from the age of thirteen, fourteen maybe. I used drugs to cope. I just didn't like myself." [20]

"I drink heavily every day but I don't consider myself an alcoholic yet because I always eat first." [19]

"If children are using drugs and abusing alcohol, it is often related to problems in the home, at school or because of other problems." [16]

"Why are they such consumers? Are they doing this to be like their friends and or to imitate their parents that smoke, that drink and use drugs." [16]

Other concerns, however, were related to the characteristics or situations of specific groups of young people. For example, youth who are members of racial or ethnic minorities have expressed particular concerns about systemic racism. Concerns were also expressed about discrimination against youth with disabilities. Gay, lesbian and bisexual youth have a host of concerns associated with their sexual orientation, including the fear of being rejected or suffering violence at the hands of others. Young people with HIV/AIDS experience a particular set of challenges dealing with family and friends and in getting the services they require.

3.6.7   Racism

"I was stereotyped as - all Indians are drunks. She'll be pregnant before she's 16." [6]

"When I got there and he saw my face - I'm mulatto - he said the apartment was taken." [5]

Some quotes have been translated by a translator because the information gathered comes from documents that were published only in French.

"Because of what they had heard about Blacks, they thought I was going to steal." [5]

"People think Native people are going to steal their stuff, too." [5]

"Some people treat you as if you haven't got a brain just because you have an accent with your English." [5]

"The educational system is not sensitive to young Native women in the community I grew up in." [5]

"Interracial dating is a big issue - it seems to be OK for boys but not for girls." [5]

"Visible minority women face double discrimination." [5]

"A customer refused to be served by the Black girl behind the counter. He did not want any "nigger" touching his food, but insisted that another employee or the manager should serve him. The manager told him that if he had a problem with McDonald's staff he was sure that there would be another restaurant to suit his attitude." [5]

"In the media, who are the robbers? Who are the police? The media have a lot to do with racism. [5]

"People think Natives are totally primitive or else getting too big for their boots. It's because of media images. They see police shooting Black guys and figure they're all violent and criminal." [5]

"The teacher pays no attention when nobody asks us Native girls to be part of their group." [5]

"If they don't experience racism, it's not their fault. But they must admit it happens! They don't think they're racist, but they are [through their indifference]." [5]

"My community is racist, but you can't tell because everyone is the same. They tell jokes and everyone laughs because there are no representatives of the groups 'put down'." [5]

3.6.8   Discrimination Against Disabled Youth

"We learn to accept the disability - and then we are confronted by a brick wall - society." [5]

"People make the equation that a weak muscle equals a weak mind." [5]

"They turn away, as if they don't see you." [5]

3.6.9   Concerns of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Youth

"I had to make money cause I was thrown out of my family for being gay. I couldn't support myself or survive on Student Welfare so quit school and got a job. [1]

"I couldn't attend [school]. I had to make money. There was a lot fighting and name calling ... [the other students] called me queer, a lot of torment." [1]

Many youth feel that sex education would be better if it would include the 10% of the population who are lesbian, gay or bisexual. They don't support the total heterosexual bias. "Be gay positive," they say. [6]

3.6.10   Youth With HIV/AIDS

"I remember long boring meetings. We talked about how I got infected. . .they wanted to get [the man who infected me] to see if he knows he's HIV+, but as far as I know they never did. They gave me pamphlets ... etc." [1]

"[Counselling] was not helpful. I was too overwhelmed by the positive diagnosis. They gave me all this information prior to testing, and then information about services afterwards." [1]

"I didn't get any support when I tested. No one knew for two years. I had know support while I waited for the test results. I had a lover that I didn't tell for two years." [1]

"I was alone and basically pushed it to the back of my mind." [1]

"I didn't even tell my roommate. No one knew. For two weeks I lived in hell. I did more drugs than usual. When my roommate brought up the subject I would cut him off." [1]

"Being HIV+ has changed the way family and friends behave around me." [1]

"I have a better idea of who my real friends are and it has brought my family closer together." [1]

"It hurts when friends avoid you." [1]

"It hurts having to keep it inside. I told one or two but they didn't believe me cause I'm a joker." [1]

"I won't go to [youth AIDS counsellors]. I'm not ready to expose myself. I'm afraid of discrimination." [1]

"I worry that I will be treated differently by agency workers if they know that I am HIV+." [1]

"I avoid going to some agencies because I don't want to be asked if I'm HIV+." [1]

4.0   Recommendations

A review of the documents examined in preparing this report revealed a number of common themes in the recommendations made for future action. Unlike the voices recorded in earlier sections of this report, most of the material related to recommendations was not in quotations but in summary form. This material was analyzed and an overview was prepared which includes both recommendations and barriers to working with and responding more effectively to young people.

4.1   General Recommendations:

1. Recognize the strength, abilities, talent and energy of young people. They are a valuable resource in our society.

2. Provide youth with opportunities to participate in the decisions that affect them and their communities.

3. Educate adults (parents, teachers, those who work with youth) about the value of youth, the need to involve them and the best way of working more effectively with them.

4. **Respect the rights of young people** including their right to be treated fairly and with respect. Emphasize their right to privacy and confidentiality.

5. **Recognize that schools are an important site for interacting with young people**, and for providing them with information and opportunities to participate. Schools are also a primary site for providing youth the services they need.

6. **Young people identified the need for special services and programs for youth**. The following are the types of programs routinely identified by youth as important:

   ➢ self-esteem programs.

   ➢ programs stressing personal safety at home, school and in relationships.

   ➢ educational programs dealing with sexuality which include information about sexual orientation, HIV/AIDS and STI's.

   ➢ programs dealing with issues of concern to youth such as racism, substance abuse, suicide, etc.

   ➢ programs that focus on employment and the concerns youth have about their future.

   ➢ programs that provide a place for young people to "hang out" with other youth in a safe and healthy environment.

   ➢ programs that provide appropriate recreational opportunities for young people.

   ➢ programs that deal with global issues such as the environment, politics and the role of the government.

7. **Awareness of and accessibility to the programs and resources intended for youth should be stressed**. Outreach and advertisement aimed at making information available to youth is vital. Steps should be taken to ensure that young people have easy access to the services they need.

8. **Develop strategies for working with the media so that a positive image of young people is projected**. Emphasize the fact that most young people are law abiding and make many valuable contributions to their communities.

9. **Recognize the value of peer-based programs**. Young people emphasize the effectiveness of peer programs for involving youth. Many point out that young people are more likely to respond to other youth. Peer programs are also seen as a positive healing opportunity for some youth.

4.2 Barriers

1. *Existing stereotypes that adults have of youth.*

    These inhibit cooperation between adults and youth and especially the involvement of youth in program planning and service delivery decisions.

2. *Competing goals and values:*

    Young people and adults may not always share the same goals and objectives. This may cause tension and make it difficult to cooperate. Disagreements may exist in deciding what is needed, how things should be done, who should do what and how long it should take.

3. *Continuity:*

    Adolescence is a transitory period and young people move on. It is hard to maintain continuity when young people move on to other activities or when their goals and interests change as they mature.

4. *Unequal ability to participate:*

    Young people often find it difficult to participate on a par with adults. They may lack access to opportunities to participate. Once asked to participate, youth are often outnumbered (token youth delegates) in groups or committees and may feel overwhelmed. They may not know what is expected of them or what they can actually do as members of an organization. Finally, youth lack the time and other resources which adults have to attend meetings and be involved in groups and committees.

5. *The need for training in communication and organizational skills:*

> Young people need training in communication and organizational skills. They have to have opportunities to learn how meetings are run and how to participate in them. They need experience and training in communicating their ideas effectively.

6. *Sharing power:*

> Adults have to recognize the importance of involving youth in decisions that affect their lives. Many adults are unaccustomed to doing this. They find it difficult to share power with youth. However, young people have to be treated with respect and adults have to acknowledge their right to participate in important decisions affecting their lives.

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Appendix A

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