“Strengthening supports for at-risk and gang-involved immigrant youth”

Perspectives of Immigrant Youth on their Pathways to Crime

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Acknowledgements

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Immigration and Crime

- Framework to explain relationship between race, ethnicity, immigration, and crime:
  - Importation model
  - Cultural conflict model
  - Strain/frustration model
  - Bias model

"There is an urgent need for more and better information on immigration, ethnicity and criminal behaviour." (Wortley, 2003)

Phase I – Stakeholder Perspectives

- Phase I:
  - To understand the risk and protective factors perceived by *community stakeholders* to exert an influence on ‘at-risk’ immigrant and refugee youth who eventually come into conflict with the law.
  - Interviews were conducted with 12 stakeholders from social service agencies, community groups, and the criminal justice and mental health systems.

Key Findings

- Educational difficulties considered to have the greatest impact on immigrant youth.
- Strain/frustration model considered to best explain immigrant youths' pathways to crime.

Reference: Rossiter, M. J., & Rossiter, K. R. (2009). Diamonds in the rough: Bridging gaps in supports for at-risk immigrant and refugee youth. *Journal of International Migration and Integration, 10,* 406-429.

Phase II – Youth Perspectives

- Phase II:
  - To explore the factors that immigrant and refugee *youth themselves* perceive to have influenced their involvement in crime, violence, and gangs.

Research Questions

- Primary focus of the study:
  - What factors do immigrant youth who have come into contact with the justice system perceive to have exerted a negative influence on their lives?
  - What protective factors have served to lessen the impact of negative influences in their lives?
  - What services/programs have youth accessed, and what are their recommendations for improving services for at-risk immigrant and refugee youth?

Methodology

- Inclusion criteria:
  - Between ages 14–30
  - Immigrated to Canada between ages 12–20
  - Convicted of a criminal offence and sentenced
  - Proficiency in spoken English

- Semi-structured interviews (60-90 min)
- Content analysis of transcribed interviews

Recruiting Agencies

- Community Corrections
- Edmonton Young Offenders Centre
- Edmonton Youth Attendance Centre
- Fort Saskatchewan Correctional Centre
- John Howard Society
- Youth Criminal Defence Office
- Alberta Somali Community Centre
- Centre for Race and Culture
- Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers
- iHuman
- Multicultural Health Brokers Co-op
- Sudanese Canadian Community Association
- YOUCAN
- Youth Emergency Shelter
- Youth Ventures

Interview Questions

- Background and settlement in Canada
- Supports in the settlement process
- Problems experienced since arrival in Canada
- Experiences of victimization and discrimination
- Understanding of Canadian laws
- Involvement in crime and gang-related activity
- Involvement with the criminal justice system
- Advice for new immigrant and refugee youth

Participant Profiles

- Aiming to interview 25 immigrant youth

- To date, we have 2 participants:
  - Both are males in their early/mid twenties
  - Both are of African descent
  - Both have been in Canada for 8 years
  - One dropped out of high school; one completed at a school for youth with mild cognitive disabilities

Pre-/Post-migration Experiences

- Both experienced violence, and lost family members to violence in their home countries:
  - *"…when we first came I was having some dreams like, you know, like my granddad was shot right in front of me, and that's how I got shot."*
  - *"…in my home country like it was, there was a wars you know in all the, kind of like a made me, I lost my primary family…"*
- Both have experienced homelessness, racial discrimination, and victimization in Canada.

Family Poverty

- Poverty and pressure to contribute to the family income may interfere with academic success for some youth:
    - *"I was working two jobs and I was going to school. You gotta do what you gotta do."*
    - *"…what made me kind of like drop out of school was more like I feel like I can't afford to go to school and pay and still survive so I feel like I had to work."*

Lack of Guidance

- Limited supervision or guidance can leave youth vulnerable to negative influences in their communities:
  - *"…there's no one who's there like to guide you – like here, this is good, this is bad…"*
  - *"He's going there making drug deals. And like this is normal stuff – that's how they see it. So they go and they do it. And they grow up with that mentality."*
  - *"…stay close to family and actually true friends and stuff – like there's some people that would tell you that if you're new and stuff they'll tell you 'oh, selling drugs, it's okay.'"*

Crime and Gang Involvement

- Criminal and gang activity may be considered attractive because it offers an alternative source of income and a sense of belonging:
  - *"If you're not making money you can just go to the street and start selling drugs."*
  - *"…kind of like approach you, like persuade you like the benefit of being in a gang and how much money you can make being in a gang and this and that and just like you know how I could be in power too."*

Knowledge of Canadian Law

- Direct or indirect experiences with the criminal justice system may be the first time youth learn about Canadian laws:
  - *"[I learned about Canadian laws] when I started getting myself into trouble, started getting arrested and going courts and such."*
  - *"I was told you cannot hit a girl. Or whether she's your girlfriend or wife, no, you cannot here. You can get arrested. I found out about that when this girl… when he hit his girlfriend when she was pregnant, and she fainted or something and the cops have to come. That's when I found that was wrong."*

Knowledge of Canadian Law

- Information about Canadian laws should be provided in schools and in the community, ideally as a series of classes or workshops:
  - *"…people don't know about the Canadian law, I can say even people from here too. Not until probably they started getting in trouble or have a specific class that teaches about it but, even in school they don't teach much about it."*
  - *"'Cause some people don't learn stuff in one day, so it's gotta be step by step – something like that."*

Supportive Relationships

- Positive relationships with teachers and helping professionals may serve to lessen the impact of negative influences in their lives:
    - *"I probably like my ESL English teachers, the one that came kind of close to me but other than that I don't recall any relationship with teachers."*
    - *"There was this teacher there [...] she helped me a lot."*
    - *"I guess it's just the fact that like, somebody [a psychologist] listening and giving different advices on how to do certain things and how to control yourself and how to make the right decisions."*

Opportunities for Success

- Community-based organizations offer programs, opportunities, and mentorship that may help keep at-risk youth out of trouble:
  - *"Like programs that would encourage at least like a lot of youth to be involved in like let's say sports [...] different activities than they just take them off the mind of like looking for something else to do."*
  - *"But me coming to this studio, it kinda... I won't say they change me in like you just change your picture and stuff, but I say it kind of lead me to the direction in that I wanted to go."*

Recruitment Challenges

- Mobile nature of the population
- Trauma of revisiting negative experiences
- Fear of disclosing criminal behaviour
- Distrust of researchers
- Reluctance of workers to recruit youth
- Modest financial compensation
- Limited inclusion criteria

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THINKING OF THE WORLD

Thank you.

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See also:

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