

Gang Prevention for New Immigrant and Refugee Youth in B.C. Community Consultation Paper

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Disclaimer

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Executive Summary

This paper explores why and how immigrant and refugee youth between the ages of 13-23 years old and in Canada less than 5 years may or may not become involved with youth gangs. Community stakeholders involved with the provincial youth gang prevention strategy identified a knowledge gap regarding newcomer youths' participation in gang activities and their unique risk factors and pathways to involvement. The purpose of this research was threefold:

- 1) to identify why and how newcomer immigrant and refugee youth become involved in gangs in BC (i.e., specific risk factors and pathways to gang involvement in BC);
- 2) to review the individual, family, school and community strengths and assets that support newcomer youth to resist gang involvement and build resiliency, and;
- 3) to identify BC-based effective, culturally responsive strategies to prevent or intervene in newcomer youth gang involvement and support their positive development.

Drawing both from contemporary Canadian studies, and consultations with newcomer immigrant and refugee youth and youth workers in Metro Vancouver, this paper outlines the challenges newcomer youth face in their settlement process and advocates for early sustained support to assist youth and their families to adjust to life in Canada. Youth who become marginalized or isolated are at enhanced risk of forming negative peer associations and becoming involved in risky behaviour; youth at the beginning of their settlement trajectory are least likely to become gang-involved, but this risk increases with number of years in Canada. The paper also identifies newcomer youths' strengths and assets, and discusses BC-based culturally responsive approaches that endeavor to enhance strengths while decreasing risk, thus laying essential building blocks for gang prevention. These approaches include: early ongoing support for youth and families; helping families support youth; individualizing approaches; building relationships, reducing isolation and normalizing life experience; building individual and social competencies; empowering and building a positive identity; incorporating anti-oppression elements in programming, and; recognizing the unique challenges and strengths of newcomer youth. The paper concludes with proposed further research directions.

Introduction: early foundations

In August 2007, Maclean's magazine ran a spread entitled, "From Africa, with guns" about how gangs were specifically recruiting refugee youth. The leader to the story claimed, "they survived wars as kids, only to get caught up in the dangerous life of Winnipeg's gangs" (p. 20). Is the story sensationalist journalism fueling moral panic, or does it indicate an actual trend? This paper explores the risks and pathways of youth gang involvement that young immigrant and refugee newcomers to BC face. We also explore culturally competent approaches and strategies that can be engaged in schools, communities and municipalities to prevent youth gang involvement. Recognizing that youth themselves are the best experts of their lived experience, immigrant and refugee youth were directly engaged in the research process. They told us about how they perceived gang activity in their communities, what they see as risk factors and assets to their wellbeing, and programs and supports that they personally view as helpful and empowering. This paper is divided into two sections: a theoretical section based on a review of current Canadian research on youth gangs, and a research findings section based on focus groups and interviews with youth and key informants.

Rather than pathologize individuals and families, this paper advocates for larger societal changes to reduce social inequity, racism and marginalization. Newcomers to Canada face a number of barriers to acculturation and integration. These difficulties include linguistic barriers, others' misunderstandings or lack of knowledge about religious and cultural practices, racism in Canadian society, and institutional disadvantages (e.g., non-recognition of foreign credentials). Newcomer youth face particular barriers as they negotiate potentially different acculturation rates than their parents, their roles within families, and their place in society as youth. The way they are able to negotiate these barriers is affected by the resources available to support them. This paper outlines some of these barriers, and discusses protective factors and supports that can foster resiliency and capacity of youth to make healthy decisions that prevent gang involvement.

Why do youth become involved with gangs? Much literature suggests that gang association often provides social or psychological benefit, and that those who become involved with gangs do so out of unfulfilled needs. These needs include desire for respect, identity, excitement, a sense of belonging, and security (Wortley and Tanner, 2007). Gang association may also offer economic benefit, protection and status. Research on youth gangs in Canada (Wortley and Tanner, 2007; Chettleburgh, 2008) report that gang members cite at least as many practical reasons for joining gangs as status-related ones.

Sustained marginalization can affect the integration process for newcomer youth and their families (Rossiter and Rossiter, 2009). Many of the risk factors for gang involvement outlined in this paper are symptomatic of marginalization. Gang involvement is not an overnight process, as described in the section on pathways. Although immigration status is not correlated with gang involvement, association with gangs may provide a sense of social status and respect – and indeed, power – that youth do not receive at home, school or in their community (Wortley and Tanner, 2007). Wortley and Tanner (2007) suggest that youth who feel particularly stigmatized, isolated or excluded from mainstream society may come to

believe that they are systematically excluded from legitimate opportunities. The authors stress that social alienation, and perceptions in social injustice may be:

“an important factor in explaining why some youth reject conventional social activities and decide to join criminal gangs. It is important to note that perceptions of social injustice seem to develop as a result of actual experiences with discrimination (i.e., racial profiling, hate crime victimization, etc). Thus, racism in Canadian society should also been seen as a possible cause of gang activity in this country.” (p. 85).

Furthermore, alienated youth may perceive gang involvement as an expression of subversion and resistance to social inequality and oppression (Wortley and Tanner, 2007).

Literature review: risk and protective factors to gang involvement

Most current Canadian literature on youth gangs identifies risk factors and pathways to gang involvement. The Alberta-based Community Solution to Gang Violence project (CSGV, 2006) categorizes risk factors into 6 domains: individual, family, school, community, service organizations, and socio-economic. The risk factors are often interrelated and overlap across multiple domains. We build upon the work of the CSGV in this paper, and further flesh out the risk and protective factors specific to newcomer youth, starting with individual factors, and then moving on to factors associated with family, school, and community domains. We do not address service organizations or socio-economic domains here. Strengths and assets to build resiliency and resist potential pathways to gang involvement are also outlined in this section.

Individual factors

We begin with the risk factors associated with the individual. These factors are associated with youths' sense of safety and sense of self, the adults they have in their lives to guide and support them, the connections they have with their peers, and the sense of purpose they have about their futures.

One risk factor is isolation. Wortley and Tanner (2007) assert that gangs are perceived by some youth as providing emotional support and a sense of belonging. Youth become isolated if they do not participate in activities with other youth, or if they aren't connected to others in their community (CSVG, 2006). Rossiter and Rossiter (2009) list some of the individual protective factors for newcomer youth as including a sense of cultural identity and belonging, and prosocial (i.e., marked by empathy and willingness to help with no expectations of something in return) inter-cultural peer programs and relationships. Suggestions made by CSGV (2006) to foster connectedness are to support youth in participating in sports, clubs and organizations, and to give youth useful roles in the community. Young people can provide services to other young people, such as, peer mentorship¹. Isolation is also connected to the specific risk factor of newcomer youth being teased or bullied (CSGV, 2006). Programs and activities that provide opportunities for cultural exchange and understanding can help promote a sense of belonging. Young people who spend time alone or unsupervised, particularly

¹ We will illustrate with a Vancouver-based example later in this paper.

during the after-school hours, can also benefit from programming meant to foster connectedness and opportunities to help youth develop positive peer relationships (CSGV, 2006).

Another risk factor cited by CSGV (2006) is that youth have, or perceive they have few or no adults in their lives to turn to for support. Kanu (2008) and Francis and Yan (2009) mention family support as a key resiliency. One of Aulakh's (2008) main research findings revealed that the girls she interviewed who were involved with gang activity had been searching for a sense of belonging, given the absence of positive parental and family connection in their lives. Aulakh (2008) notes that in keeping with previous research that identified lack of positive role modelling as a risk factor for youth, her participants did not have any safe adult in their lives in whom they could trust and confide in. Positive relationships with adults are an asset in helping young people stay safe and assisting them make healthy decisions.

An additional risk factor cited by CSGV (2006) is when a youth's sense of safety becomes threatened. Wortley and Tanner (2007) suggested that gangs may become attractive to young people because they are perceived as offering protection from predators in the community. The researchers suggest that the need for protection is particularly acute for youth who have left home and are street-entrenched. Aulakh's (2008) respondents also noted a need for protection on the streets, which was provided by friends in gangs and hence facilitated their own gang involvement. The suggested antidote to this would be to create safe spaces and networks for youth. Youth who may have experienced trauma in their lives prior to arriving in Canada may need special supports to acquire a sense of safety and sense of self (Kanu, 2008; Rossiter and Rossiter, 2009). Particular risk factors that may affect refugee youths' sense of safety include distrust of authorities (Rossiter and Rossiter, 2009) or untreated trauma (Staddon and ISSofBC, 2009).

Prolonged marginalization can affect young peoples' sense of self and sense of purpose in their lives, leading to risk factors such as perceiving limited opportunities for empowerment or lack of opportunity for advancement or access to post-secondary education later in life, and becoming pessimistic about their futures (CSGV, 2006). Kanu (2008) and Francis and Yan (2009) list the individual resiliencies that newcomer/refugee youth draw on to succeed, despite the obstacles they face. These include maturity and self-reliance as well as faith and aspirations that they will use new opportunities in Canada. Schools and communities play important roles in providing opportunities that foster youth's sense of personal power, purpose and hope, such as facilitating opportunities to enhance personal growth, which can range from encouraging youth to assert their beliefs and convictions, to employment and training services, to engaging youth in promoting equality and social justice (CSGV, 2006).

Further protective factors are related to individual's attitudes towards schooling and education. A sense of accomplishment and respect for education are important individual factors that help keep youth engaged in school (Rossiter and Rossiter, 2009; Francis and Yan, 2009). Family members' belief in the value of education was also key in reinforcing the importance of staying in school. Kanu (2008: 934) points out that these youth "had come to internalize the value of school so that they were motivated by both intrinsic rewards (feeling

of being personally valued and important) and extrinsic rewards (the material rewards of education and avoidance of shaming their family).”

Although risk taking and experimentation is a normal part of adolescent development, having good decision-making skills is an important individual protective factor (Rossiter and Rossiter, 2009). Trusted adults and programs can develop youths’ decision-making skills, including healthy lifestyle decisions and attitudes (CSGV, 2006) and other important life skills such as resisting peer pressure, resolving conflict, and developing healthy relationships (Chettleburgh, 2008). Within a new community, youth may lack traditional mentors, and thus the connections to seek advice, or information about risk behaviours. Without access to this social network, newcomer youth may need additional supports and resources to maintain their sense of self and confidence to succeed (Francis and Yan, 2009).

The literature suggests that a particular risk for violent behaviour is an individual’s limited ability to handle conflict in non-aggressive manner. Thus, resources that help youth develop interpersonal and conflict resolution skills are vital (CSGV, 2006). Spirituality or faith can also help with decision-making, and youth have cited being able to draw strength from faith as an important resilience (Francis and Yan, 2009).

The pressure to conform to their peers’ expectations can also be a risk factor, particularly if youth have a poor sense of being able to distinguish ‘want’ from ‘need’ (Rossiter and Rossiter, 2009). This is certainly not specific to newcomer youth; however, in a culture that is marked by conspicuous consumption, perceived symbols of acculturation or ‘success’ such as clothing, cars, lavish lifestyles and so forth, can cloud such distinctions, or fill a void created by capitalist alienation. Youth themselves identified this risk, and also recommended programming to address peer pressure and conspicuous consumption. This will be further discussed in the research findings section.

Family factors

This section discusses risk factors associated with the family domain. We identify factors that are associated with the stresses and challenges that newcomer parents face when they arrive in a new country, such as their own isolation, stress and untreated trauma, as well as factors associated with cultural expectations and different rates of acculturation within the family. In some instances, these factors can lead to family conflict.

Family structure, and in particular, families where there is little parental supervision or lack of parental modeling due to the physical or emotional absence of one or both parents, is often cited as a risk factor for youth gang involvement (Wortley and Tanner, 2007; Chettleburgh, 2008). Rather than stigmatize these families, this paper attempts to discuss some of the underlying issues that contribute to particular risk factors and how they can be ameliorated. One explanation for parental absence is the preoccupation with economic survival: parents may have to juggle multiple, often low paying, jobs. In other families, one or both parents may be away for extended periods of time for work. The effect of this is that parents may be home less to supervise their children (Francis and Yan, 2009), or have little time/energy left to support their emotional and social needs (Wortley and Tanner, 2007).

Furthermore, navigating a new culture can create additional family stresses, and families may not know where to turn for support, especially for psycho-social support. A number of studies cite the enormous strains that families face when they arrive in Canada: these include adjusting to the cultural expectations of the new country while maintaining values from their places of origin. Kanu (2008) notes that the roles played by parents and children may also shift in families. Perceived loss of parental control in Canada, or dependence of parents on their children to help navigate a new culture or language can add new stresses. Children who speak better English than their parent(s) may be relied upon to deal with landlords, banks, utility companies, etc. Youth can experience a shifting sense of power, mixed with normal adolescent rebellion against parental boundaries. Furthermore, lack of psychosocial support, especially for overcoming traumatic experiences and possibly fear of authorities, can undermine parents' ability to provide emotional support and guidance to their children. Communities can provide support to parents in practical ways, for example, through parent groups, child-minding networks, and so forth (CSGV, 2006). Culturally appropriate (or rather, culturally responsive) and accessible trauma therapy and psycho-social support for parents and families, such as provided by Vancouver Association for Survivors of Torture and the Bridge Clinic, can also help families regain a sense of control over their lives.

The ability of parents and/or extended family members to spend time with youth is an important protective factor (Rossiter and Rossiter, 2009), as family connectedness is fostered. Time spent with their children also enables parents and other adult family members to learn about and engage with their children's friends, which has been identified as another strength (CSGV, 2006). Prolonged family separation has been flagged as a particular risk factor for communities facing delayed family reunification, and in BC this pertains particularly to communities affected by the Federal Government Live-in Caregiver Program. Families may experience conflict as children negotiate possibly estranged relationships with parents they have been separated from for extended periods² (Pratt, 2008).

Researchers studying risk factors and pathways to youth gang involvement strongly advocate for early and sustained support throughout the settlement process (Rossiter and Rossiter, 2009; Wortley and Tanner, 2007), and this recommendation has also been unanimously mentioned by all our research informants. Families may experience a sense of disillusionment in the settlement process, which can have a particular impact on youth in both the immediate and long-term period. Family poverty may also be a factor for newcomer families due to the employment challenges many newcomers to Canada face because of language issues, lack of Canadian experience, or systematic non-recognition of foreign credentials (Rossiter and Rossiter, 2009; Francis and Yan, 2009). In some cases, youth may have to work to supplement family income. There is also a non-material effect this can have on the family unit, as 'menial' jobs (e.g., janitorial work, jobs in the service industry) in Canada are not

² A youth worker illustrated the effect of extended periods of family separation while recalling a session between a girl and her mother. After an intense conversation, the youth worker suggested that the girl give her mother a hug. The girl replied, "I don't even know her, why should I hug her?"

highly valued or esteemed in mainstream society³. Francis and Yan (2009) suggest that when youth see their families struggling to survive, they may become discouraged. Additionally, if youth are feeling pressure to contribute financially to their households, they may be reluctant to attend programs important to their own settlement process that interfere with potential work opportunities, or that are a financial burden due to program or transport fees. Furthermore, youth (girls in particular) may have childcare responsibilities for their younger siblings after school which interfere with their ability to attend after school programs and events (Francis and Yan, 2009).

Sustained marginalization or isolation of parents due to language and other factors can also undermine parents' capacity to help problem-solve with their children. Due to exposure to mainstream culture and language through school, youth often become acculturated more quickly than their parents. Different rates of acculturation can pose a potential risk factor if it leads to sustained family conflict due to different cultural expectations (Rossiter and Rossiter, 2009). Youth may also perceive their parents as being unable to problem-solve or offer useful advice⁴. CSGV (2006) suggests that to help support parents learn about raising children in two cultures, communities and schools can encourage families to become involved with their children outside of the home. Kanu (2008) provides an example of the cultural differences in the expectations of how parents were to be involved in the schooling process; her research found that some parents perceived it as inappropriate to interfere with the role and work of the teachers. Thus, outreach efforts to parents need to be thoughtful and willing to further investigate reasons for low involvement or uptake.

School factors

This section discusses risk factors associated with the school domain. We have identified factors that are associated with the stresses and challenges that newcomers may experience in school, and that may lead to a lack of engagement in school. Youth who are not attached to their schools are at increased risk of engaging in risk behaviours, such as absenteeism or dropping out of school, which are also risk factors for gang involvement. We also outline strengths and assets which help youth have a positive school experience.

Newcomer youth may experience that their culture, ethnicity, language and religion differs significantly from not only that of their peers, but also from their teachers and the school system. Refugee youth additionally may have also experienced disrupted schooling as well as exposure to violence and other trauma (Staddon and ISSofBC, 2009). Despite an increase in the number of high needs refugee admissions to Canada, appropriate educational and other specialized support has not kept pace. Students with low literacy due to interrupted schooling

³ A quote from one of our interviews clearly illustrates this effect: “there is a cycle of poverty that kids imbibe. A kid said to me, ‘what is the point of being a manager, you get paid 50 cents higher but you have all these responsibilities.’ I asked the kid where he was coming from, where his mom worked, and he said that his mom worked at McDonalds.”

⁴ A youth worker saliently illustrated this perception by saying, “Kids still love their parents, but when it comes to problems they may think their parents don’t have the skills or knowledge to help them problem-solve, because their parents have a lack of knowledge about the system.”

and/or traumatic experiences face considerable challenges in the school system and may take a number of years to catch up academically. Further challenges augmenting these barriers may include lack of academic support at home, family separation, fear of authority figures, fear of speaking out in class, and inappropriate grade placement (Kanu, 2008; Staddon and ISSofBC, 2009). Factors supporting newcomer/refugee youth and their resiliencies include resources to meet students' unique educational needs. Several studies (Kanu, 2008; Rossiter and Rossiter, 2009) have noted the lack of resources and appropriate programming for English as a second language (ESL) youth. Furthermore, school staff may also have limited understanding of the unique needs and circumstances of these students, or lack the institutional support to be able to sustain long-term attention for these students and their families. Thus, further strengths in the school setting would be resources to support teachers and staff to deal with the social needs of students and their families. In the Metro Vancouver area, the Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) and Multicultural Liaison Workers programs have been implemented to assist in the settlement and integration of immigrant youth, although Francis and Yan (2009) suggest that the number of SWIS may be insufficient to meet demand. Parent programs (Chettleburg, 2008; CSGV, 2006) can also help engage and support parents with practical skills to assist their children to succeed in school, as well as to provide clarity about the Canadian school system.

Lack of school engagement has been identified as a risk factor for gang involvement (Chettleburgh, 2008), and there may be multiple issues underlying lack of school engagement. Kanu (2008) noted the importance of having extra-curricular activities that speak to and address the needs of newcomer youth. Sport, for example, needs to be accessible. Academic support, academic peer coaching, extended English language support, homework clubs and efforts to make the school a more welcoming place are vital components to help refugee youth develop school attachment and engagement (Kanu, 2008 and Chettleburg, 2008). Opportunities for informal interactions between students and teachers can help youth foster positive, sustained connection with teachers and a sense of belonging (CSGV, 2006). Positive relationships with adults in the school setting is an important protective factor for youth (Rossiter and Rossiter, 2009), as youth gain confidence that there are adults they can trust and confide in. Teachers who are connected to their students may also notice if youth are absent from or skipping class.

Bullying is a potential risk issue for newcomers in school. The effects of such violence on victimized youth are well documented; however, the defense mechanisms employed by victimized youth can work against them. Rossiter and Rossiter (2009: 9) note that "survival skills that some youth developed" to protect themselves from violence are "neither understood nor tolerated in educational or other community settings." Sometimes teachers and other school staff are challenged by how to respond to disruptive or unacceptable behaviour. Aulakh (2008) noted that most of her respondents had dropped out of school due to negative school experiences – suspensions typically happened not due to gang affiliation per se, but due to other behaviours such as fighting, drug use and discipline problems. Expulsion has been identified as a factor that increases youth's risk to becoming gang-involved. Instead of expulsion, a strength that schools could cultivate would be developing an awareness of and addressing the root causes of behaviour and needs of students (CSGV, 2006).

Community factors

This section discusses risk factors associated with the community domain. We identify factors, many of them socio-economic, which can lead to marginalization of youth. We also identify suggestions to foster community assets and reinforce youth resiliencies.

In their quantitative and qualitative studies of youth gangs in Toronto, Wortley and Tanner (2007) found that youth gang affiliation was strongly related to socio-economic indicators such as low levels of parental education, high levels of parental unemployment, and residence in public housing projects or neighbourhoods of extreme poverty. Lack of affordable and safe housing has been identified in multiple Canadian studies (Wortley and Tanner, 2007; Kanu 2008; Rossiter and Rossiter, 2009) as a risk factor for youth risk behaviour. Neighbourhoods which experience violence and drug dealing as a regular part of daily life pose particular risk to marginalized youth. This is not meant to identify poor neighbourhoods as “bad” neighbourhoods. Not everyone who is poor or who lives in a poor neighbourhood is at risk of joining a gang, nor are poor neighbourhoods necessarily violent and unsafe. Low income people also care about their neighbours and communities. In fact, sometimes poor communities are also strong communities that have lots of protective factors. However, youth who live in these neighbourhoods may not have access to the same resources and programming as youth in other neighbourhoods. Furthermore, Chettleburgh (2008) suggests that peer pressure can play an important role in the behavioural choices of youth, and having peers involved in gang-related activities is a potential pathway to gang involvement. Aulakh (2008) found that some girls joined gangs because their friends, family members and neighbours were gang members, and thus gang affiliation was a normal way of life for these youth.

Aulakh (2008) explored the effects of structural inequalities on gang involvement: her respondents were mainly racialized youth from inner city families of low socioeconomic status. She found that the girls she interviewed regarded their gang involvement empowering in some aspects because it afforded them opportunities to exert control in their lives. Gang involvement provided escape from abusive home environments and status and monetary opportunities. Nurge (2003, in Aulakh 2008: 194) calls this “achieving individual liberation” and upon reflection, Aulakh’s participants noted that their gang involvement had not necessarily been an optimal choice, but certainly a viable one at that point in their lives. Aulakh (2008: 203) warns, “the fact that gangs were more readily available than were other social institutions to meet the respondents’ needs should make us examine current social and economic policies regarding education, child care, and welfare and their effects on inner-city neighbourhoods.” For some young people, gang-related criminal activity provides opportunities to make significant amounts of money. Some Canadian research has suggested that gang-involved youth view earning money from drugs and other gang-related activity as being more dignified than working low-paying low-status jobs in the service industry (Wortley and Tanner, 2007).

It is crucial to point out the nexus of suitable housing, community support, and integration. Delays in obtaining appropriate housing (i.e., affordable, safe, sanitary, appropriately sized) can undermine newcomer families’ ability to settle. While BC may not experience the same geographic patterns of poverty and deprivation as American cities, we do have our own

localized pockets of concentrated low quality and low cost housing (Sherrell and ISSofBC, 2009). This, unsurprisingly, tends to be where refugee families are able to land housing, substandard as it may be, due to lack of other alternatives. This situation is unlikely to improve as low-cost housing stock decreases, especially in the face of revitalization. The other effect of decreasing affordable housing stock in the Metro Vancouver area is that families are forced to search in further outlying areas for places to live. These areas are often poorly served by public transit, which can impact people's ability to access programs and services appropriate to their needs.

Communities in under resourced areas may not have had the same opportunities to build protective capacities, such as facilities and programs to serve youth and nurture their interests. Neighbourhoods lacking safe spaces for youth may also have limited opportunities for safe interactions between adults and young people, or adult mentors who are able to support youth. Organized after-school programs that provide meaningful activities for youth between the hours of 3 and 7 pm, as well as youth worker or adult involvement during this evening period when parents may be working, have been identified as important resources to help keep youth engaged and safe (Chettleburgh, 2008; Rossiter and Rossiter, 2009). Chettleburgh (2008) also discusses the need for programming that might appeal to youth who may not want to participate in traditional extra-curricular activities, such as competitive sports. These youth may be attracted to other recreational opportunities, such as non-competitive sports or arts programs. Programs need to be youth-friendly and appropriate: in other words, catering specifically to the needs of youth, and sometimes to the particular needs of diverse youth from different backgrounds (Francis and Yan, 2009). For newcomer youth, meeting these needs may mean that programs are ESL-friendly, mindful of cultural expectations, and actively seek the involvement of youth and/or the support of parents.

Research findings: consultations with youth and youth workers

Project methodology

Our primary data collection period ran from late November 2009 to mid February 2010. During this time, we conducted focus groups with 25 immigrant and refugee youth aged 13-23. We also talked to key informants: we conducted two focus groups with a total of 8 youth workers, 4 interviews with multicultural liaison workers and program managers in schools, and one informal interview with a former youth gang member. For the purposes of simplicity and confidentiality, we are referring to all key informants in this report as "youth workers". The purpose of the consultations with youth and youth workers was to learn about the risks and potential pathways to gang involvement that people experienced or saw in their day-to-day lives. Youth were encouraged to think about and provide examples from their own and friends' lives, rather than what they had heard second-hand from other people or from the media. We also wanted to hear from youth and youth workers what resources youth drew upon to make healthy choices for themselves and what resources currently exist or could be put into place to help newcomer youth stay safe and achieve success.

At a Preventing Youth Involvement in Gangs conference sponsored by Victim Services and Crime Prevention (BC) and the National Crime Prevention Centre, held on March 24, 2010 in

Vancouver, workshop participants were invited to participate in a mapping exercise that we had used in key informant focus groups. Conference participants included members of the police, youth workers, and others who work closely with gang-involved youth, and thus were viewed as a potential source of additional insight and expertise. The purpose of this final data collection was to either validate or challenge the findings of our primary research. Nearly everything shared by workshop participants that day validates our findings. In this report there are just two areas where information from workshop participants further shape our findings significantly (where we discuss length of time in Canada as a risk factor, and where we discuss directions for further research). A complete summary of the mapping exercise and results is provided in Appendix B.

We originally defined ‘newcomer youth’ as having been in Canada for five years or less. However, upon the recommendation by several youth and youth workers in our focus groups, we widened our definition of ‘newcomer youth’ to include those who had been in Canada longer. Of our 25 youth participants, all but seven of these youth had been in Canada for less than five years, and of those seven youth, three had been in Canada for six years, one for seven years, two for nine years, and one for thirteen years. Our initial consultation strategy was to talk to newcomer youth considered to be “at risk”⁵ as well as from particular ethnic communities; however, given the time constraint of the project and the nature of organizing youth focus groups we also knew we had to be realistic. The youth who participated in focus groups were recruited from social services and youth programs where youth congregate – for example, youth drop-in centres. We were unsuccessful in organizing a focus group with youth in the school setting.

Overall, no youth participant identified as gang-involved, or mentioned they had close friends they thought were gang-involved. However, the majority of youth stated that they felt youth gangs were a serious issue for newcomer youth, although a number of participants also strenuously pointed out that the issue was no more significant than among non-newcomer youth. We suggest that the number of gang-involved newcomer youth is small. Totten (2008) suggests that less than 0.5% of young people in BC are gang-involved. According to 2006 Canada Census data for the Greater Vancouver Area (including Surrey and Langley) there are 285,700 young people between the ages of 15 and 24 (BC Stats, 2007). By this account, there should be less than 1,500 youth who are gang-involved, and of these, youth who are also new to Canada would be substantially fewer. Furthermore, Wortley and Tanner (2007) demonstrate that youth born in other countries are less likely to be gang-involved than Canadian-born youth, while *recent immigrants are the least likely to report gang membership*. This sentiment has been echoed by our research participants. Dinovitzer *et al* (2009) also assert that immigrant youth engage in fewer illegalities than Canadian-born youth. They suggest that the immigration process itself may encourage capital (i.e., bonds and

⁵ Youth are considered “at risk” due to factors such as socio-economic status, environment, peers, family situation, behavioral issues, and/or physical or mental health. “Experiential youth” often refers to youth living on the street or involved in the sex trade; we knew from the onset of the project it would be difficult to access this population within the short project timeline.

commitments to, for example, their families and education⁶) that assist youth in achieving successful outcomes. However, we do not wish to suggest that there are not newcomer youth caught up in gang activity. We caution that our research sample is small. Furthermore, youth connected to safe places and trusted adults are less likely to become gang-involved. Thus, despite anecdotal evidence that gangs are recruiting newcomer youth, it is unsurprising that our participants did not report this experience. To learn more about newcomer youth's direct experience with gangs, we suggest interviewing youth who have been already identified as gang-involved through tertiary intervention, gang-exit programs and youth detention facilities.

Pathways to gang involvement

Many of the risk factors that make youth vulnerable to gang involvement have been outlined in our literature review, and our findings from the interviews and focus groups are consistent with the literature. Youth respondents identified individual risk factors such as isolation and having few peer connections, but they also pointed to newcomers' lack of education/knowledge about how things work in Canada, and specifically about how gangs function. Youth workers emphasized the desire for power, attention and connection that at-risk newcomer youth may not receive from peers, family or schools. Different youth workers, at different times, emphasized, "gangs are just a symptom of the underlying issues in [youths'] lives." Youth themselves noted that supports lacking elsewhere may be offered by gangs. One youth remarked, "it is hard for newcomers to fit in [...] so we are happy to have friends and we don't know how things work here [...] people in gangs treat you nicely and don't make fun of your accent". Another youth commented, "we share our problems with people who seem to care and they offer a solution ... they have a solution to money ... the solution is to join their group".

Other risks identified by youth consistent with the literature include disenfranchisement from school, and society/school peers not being inclusive or respectful of difference (manifested by bullying, teasing or simply indifference). Youth also mentioned the pressure to fit in/belong through peer association, behaviour or having the right appearance. One youth remarked, "there is pressure to have cool things and clothes [...] so people don't look at you with disdain." Youth also identified 'needing money' as a particular risk to gang involvement, which may be linked to the perceived need to accumulate and display material wealth. Youth in one focus group told us that money was needed to have a 'normal life' in Canada. When asked to explain what a normal life entailed, the youth clarified that a normal life meant having money to buy things whenever wanted; in other words, to have disposable income.

Length of time in Canada can also be seen as a risk factor. Participants in our focus groups told us that newcomers don't join gangs immediately, but that this process takes a few years. When youth first arrive in Canada, they are preoccupied with school and navigating a new culture. Youth workers also noted that newcomers are too focused on getting established during their early 3-4 years in Canada to be attracted to gangs. One youth worker commented that youth committing criminal acts tended to be those who were already established in Canada, an observation also backed by Wortley and Tanner (2007) who suggest that among

⁶ Refugee youth may also be gang-averse because of prior events in their lives; we discuss this further in the recommendations section of this paper.

immigrants, gang activity increases with time spent in Canada. Another youth worker shared that in her experience with youth, it takes about one or two years for at-risk newcomer youth to begin “changing crowds” [to risky peer groups]. However, participants from the *Preventing Youth Involvement in Gangs* conference challenged us to rethink this view, suggesting that for some youth the ‘immunity’ period may be much shorter, and were able to offer examples where newcomer youth became gang-involved as soon as one year after arrival in Canada.

All focus group and nearly all interview participants stressed the need for early, ongoing support for youth and families to assist them in the settlement process. This requires a number of interconnected policy changes to ensure newcomers’ needs⁷ are being met, which range from assisting families to find affordable suitable housing, to more ongoing approaches such as helping youth stay engaged in schools and encouraging their social and linguistic competence. A risk factor flagged by all youth focus groups is lack of meaningful/interesting/dignified employment opportunities for themselves and their family members. Youth told us that they wanted satisfying and decently-paid employment. Youth also told us that gang involvement might fulfill a newcomer’s desire to gain or regain a sense of power in their lives, which reflects Aulakh’s (2008) findings that some youth may find gang involvement (initially) empowering, despite its potential for violence and victimization. A converging mix of risk factors – such as sustained marginalization, aspirations for material goods, and a perception that they are shut out from legitimate opportunities to succeed in life or escape low paying, menial employment – provide some youth both practical and psychological incentives to become involved in gang-related activity.

We are unable to suggest definitive pathways through which newcomers become gang involved, but there are a few common themes between the research and consultation data. Respondents told us that some newcomer youth are engaging in or are on the receiving end of violent behaviour, such as fighting, while other youth may be engaging in criminalized activity, such as drug consuming or selling. While these are risk factors for gang involvement, participating in these activities do not necessarily mean a young person is directly gang involved. Even among those youth workers who work directly with at risk and experiential youth, there is disagreement in terms of what constitutes gang involvement. One youth worker stated “any youth that is selling or dealing drugs [is] being identified as someone who has gang involvement at some level.” Part of the disagreement stems from lack of consistent definition for ‘youth gang’. Totten (2008) integrates two multidimensional frameworks (developed by that of Brian Mellor and his research associates, and Robert Gordon), to define gangs as “visible, hardcore groups that come together for profit-driven criminal activity and severe violence” (p 4).

Yet another respondent suggested that youth gang involvement can be perceived as a continuum:

⁷ Rossiter and Rossiter (2009) draw inspiration from Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Adler, 1977 in Rossiter and Rossiter, 2009) to outline the settlement needs of immigrant families, including: physiological needs (e.g., enough food to eat, a place to live), as well as social needs (e.g., love and acceptance), and esteem (e.g., belonging). Self-actualization, at the top of the pyramid, is difficult to attain if physiological and social needs have not been met.

“if we look at it like a spectrum, if we look at ‘stable’ or ‘resilient’, and over here is ‘gang associate’, the jump is not abrupt. There is often a long continuum. And people go back and forth between the two. So looking at protective factors, there has to be some sort of event that allows youth to move toward gang associate.”

The continuum theory suggests that early behavioural indicators precede gang involvement. This respondent further explained, “their protective factors start to fall and have less of an impact on them, and the risk factors start to increase”, meaning that young people may have certain behaviour standards but as their involvement with gang members and activity proceeds, these behavioural standards and attitudes may begin to change. He added, “once you start to associate and identify with that negative peer group, it is very hard to shift and correct that behaviour.”

However, even using this continuum model we are unable to pinpoint where or how someone metamorphoses from being at-risk to gang-involved. Mathews (1993) suggests there may be different youth group configurations, including “friendship groups”. These friendship groups may engage in mischief, petty theft, vandalism, or even spontaneous violence, but there is little involvement in crime for profit. Where/when a friendship group crosses that line between mischief and illegal behaviour can be spontaneous or planned, but Mathews argues that it does differ from the actions and perceptions of a “hard-core” gang.

Youth in our focus groups identified specific risk factors and pathways for newcomers in BC, which was augmented by suggestions from youth workers. Some youth seemed to be aware of the continuum of gang-involvement. One young person noted that involvement starts slowly, with drug dealing as the starting or entry point. Youth participants frequently made a connection between drugs and gang activity. One youth commented on the level of drug consumption (including marijuana) he felt was endemic in his neighbourhood, and disclosed that he was frequently offered free drugs. Other youth also commented on their perceptions of drug consumption and solicitation by other youth. One youth participant pointed out that in his observations, once someone starts selling drugs, or is perceived as selling drugs, they are regarded as bad influences and stigmatized by their community, which could further someone’s isolation.

There appears to be diverse opinion as to whether youth themselves seek gangs, or are recruited by gangs. One youth worker suggested that dark-skinned youth are specifically targeted for recruitment to sell drugs. Another youth worker noted that one of her clients had gotten involved with delivering packages, and eventually was asked if he wanted to sell drugs within the school. One youth worker observed that dealing drugs was an attractive option if meaningful work was not available, while another youth worker suggested that “youth proactively try to get their needs met”. Both these last statements underscore the potential attraction of gangs to young people.

One of the challenges our research team had in determining particular pathways to gang involvement involved not only disagreement as to what constitutes gang involvement, but also the issue of gang labeling. Totten suggests there is a social panic about youth gangs, and cautions that “the large majority of youth who are mistakenly classified as ‘gang members’ are instead involved in anti-social behaviours which, although serious nonetheless, are not

gang-related” (2008: 21). These mistaken classifications not only perpetuate negative stereotypes about youth, but they also obfuscate particular pathways to gang involvement which makes it difficult to assess the effectiveness of prevention and intervention programs. Gang labeling may also undermine gang prevention strategies and research as youth feel unfairly targeted and are reluctant to participate. Some of the youth workers explained the complexities in their role as educators in working around the gang label to make the gang prevention message relevant to youth. For example, fighting was mentioned by some as a potential pathway to gang involvement, or a step toward gang activity on the continuum. One youth worker explained:

“There is youth gang activity happening, but the youth don’t think they’re in a gang. It’s just their group of friends. The police identified two groups of guys in the school as being gangs, and the youth were like, ‘what are you talking about? We don’t even have a name’. But somewhere along the line, the police assigned names to them ... but the youth never came up with names for themselves. The youth didn’t like being called a gang, but yet they were the ones fighting each other. So youth gang activity happens, but the youth themselves don’t identify it as gang activity.”

Another youth worker offered,

“most youth don’t consider what they are doing as being gang-related, so often times what we are doing is talking about preventing violence, preventing drug misuse, drug dealing, all these smaller kinds of activities that when you cluster them together you get risk factors that make them vulnerable to gang involvement.”

One youth worker commented that one of the youth she worked with “pulled a knife on another youth. [She] asked him, ‘why are you carrying that?’ He said, ‘for protection, because there is a group of guys [he got into a fight with] and they keep coming after me so I carry a weapon with me now.” Another youth worker suggested that youth “band together, because they share commonalities. So just for that they’ll be [classified as trouble]. And they might have violence coming at them from other communities. As far as I know, that *is* the trajectory for gang violence.”

What is clear from these examples is that fighting, an anti-social behaviour, is taking place. What is unclear is if or how this behaviour translates into gang-seeking or gang recruitment activity, or when a group begins using violence to pursue profit-driven criminal activity. The next section outlines some approaches that can be used in youth programming to buffer the attraction of gangs.

Practices in BC: culturally responsive approaches that are currently used or that are recommended by participants

Youth and youth workers identified a number of programs and recommended approaches to foster inclusiveness and newcomers’ aspirations, thus engaging youth in creating their own successes and strengthening aversion to gang-related activities. These programs and approaches include: early, ongoing support for youth and families; helping families support

youth; individualizing approaches; building relationships, reducing isolation and normalizing life experience; building individual and social competencies; empowering and building a positive identity; incorporating anti-oppression elements in programming; and, recognizing the unique challenges and strengths of newcomer youth.

Early, ongoing support for youth and families

All of the focus group and almost all interview participants recommended early support for families and youth to keep them engaged as a key prevention step. As one youth worker stated, “it has everything to do with how well the family settles – it is all interconnected”. A different youth worker remarked, “there needs to be more services to support people. There is no shortcut to deal with this matter.” One youth worker suggested that an effective strategy would be to identify and support vulnerable youth early in their settlement trajectories. Another youth worker recognized schools as an important resource for reaching youth and families, stating,

“we need more SWIS workers who speak [multiple] languages. The first few years for immigrants are so important. It is really hard to reach people once they leave school. We need to be more active in reaching people and families through the school. We need more services to connect people early in their settlement process.”

Youth also identified a one-stop-shop/no-wrong-door model that would be able to deal with various components of youth life under one roof (e.g., counseling, family engagement, sports, etc.) as a valuable resource for those who are new to Canada and who are unfamiliar with how to navigate the various number of resources and procedures.

Approaches that help families support youth

Different youth workers explained at length the challenges that parents experience parenting in a new culture, including communicating with their children in the face of changing expectations and different rates of acculturation, and supporting them in the Canadian school system. Hence, various participants recommended outreach approaches that understand the reality of many newcomer parents (outlined in the literature review) and efforts to make the outreach relevant and accessible to parents (e.g., time and venues that work for them and their schedules). Home visits were seen as an effective way to reach out to parents and families. What was also mentioned as an effective settlement strategy is having workers speaking the same language as the parents and youth they work with, such as the SWIS and multicultural liaisons. Other resources to support families include culturally appropriate/responsive mental health services, and in particular family services counseling that is accessible, affordable, and available in different languages. To help effectively engage parents and youth, Surrey School District 36 has recognized that parents may not attend a traditional parent education night, but they will attend an event where their child is performing. Hence the school district has developed and evaluated “First Step”. In this project, kids workshop issues and create theatre vignettes which are performed in their parents’ language. More information about this project can be found at <http://www.sd36.bc.ca/safeschools/index.html>. Immigrant Services Society of BC in partnership with the Burnaby School Board has provided interpreter supported parent forums for Afghan refugee parents to meet with school administrators in structured dialogues as an outreach strategy.

Individualized approaches

Several youth workers mentioned employing individualized plans and assessments for experiential youth. Family genograms⁸ are also sometimes used to identify traditional and non-traditional risk factors for experiential and gang-involved youth, which can be used to develop targeted gang prevention programming. Wraparound programs were also mentioned by some youth workers as being an individually tailored, culturally appropriate strategy to “wrap” services and support networks around gang-associated youth, rather than vice-versa (Totten, 2008). Wraparound strategies have been engaged in Surrey and Abbotsford. Nearly all youth and youth workers identified programs that facilitate one-on-one time between youth workers and youth as being an effective way to build connections between youth and trusted adults.

Approaches that build relationships, reduce isolation, normalize life experience

All youth and youth workers identified relationship-building programs and programs that foster protective factors (e.g., connection with peers, adults, schools, communities) as effective and desirable. Programs can fulfill multiple purposes such as building connections, engaging youth during the unsupervised after-school period, providing youth with tools to address issues of identity and belonging, and enhancing their sense of wellbeing and self-worth. Both sports and the arts were mentioned several times by several youth and youth workers as being activities that effectively engage youth. Youth also told us that these programs need to do more than merely exist, but that youth also need support and encouragement (e.g., financial support, transportation, support from teachers and parents) to help keep them involved in programs and activities. As one youth worker pointed out, in Canada there is an assumption that if the resources exist people will automatically access them. Immigrant Services Society of BC operates an after school (art, sports, computer training and academic support programs) and summer programs for African and Afghan refugee youth in Burnaby that incorporates transportation allowance, food, and free tickets to sporting and cultural events.

Several youth workers stressed the importance of having youth workers who share the same ethnicity/cultural background of the parent and youth. Language skills were also flagged as vital. As one youth worker explained,

“This is not to say that people from other ethnicities don’t have an important impact, but to bring an inherent understanding and language skills [...] someone who has a deep understanding of the culture, hopes, dreams and desires, what people want to accomplish and what it means to them ... this will make us better able to serve [youth and families], to help them achieve success.”

Another youth worker commented, “youth and families need someone who speaks their language ... so that rules out most teachers and counselors.” Another youth worker stressed the importance of having someone with a similar background, stating, “what youth need is one-on-one time with workers who can relate to their lived experience. And who understands

⁸ Genograms visually map out family history such as family structure, pattern repetition in families, family relationships, and family processes.

them within a framework of anti-oppression⁹ [...] *not* the youth teaching the worker, or escaping the clutches of the worker because [the worker] doesn't get it."

Interestingly, youth did not mention that youth workers had to share their ethnicity, but what they *did* stress was that programming and services should respect individual values, for example, faith and culture. All youth focus groups flagged faith and culture as key assets that helped keep them safe. Youth also told us that they valued programs like MYCircle run by Immigrant Services Society of BC (ISSofBC) where there are peers with similar experiences, explaining "you are around people who share your life experience, and you are part of a group who understands you ...". Another youth articulated, "you don't have to explain yourself; you aren't worried about being judged why you don't eat pork, why you need to pray, why you don't touch people of another gender". ISSofBC My Circle program offers an 80 hour youth leadership and facilitation training program for newcomer youth. Newcomer youth, upon completion of the program, return to their schools and communities to support their peers through various activities.

Approaches that build individual and social competencies

Youth workers commended programs that help newcomer youth develop communications skills (particularly around communicating emotions), as well as the ability to reach out and seek help. One youth worker explained, "Even for me in my profession, I more comfortable expressing my feelings in English than in [language]. Often when I work with parents, they don't say, 'I feel', they say 'I think'." This youth worker pointed out that youth may have difficulty communicating their emotions to their parents, or opening up about their challenges, adding, "We have to develop the skills to reach out. But [youth] don't know who to talk to, or how to bring it up, or if they should talk about it. Because that requires skills to open up."

Youth themselves mentioned life skills they had learned in Canada, for example, anger management, as being valuable in helping them make healthy choices for themselves. Anger was brought up by several youth in focus groups as an issue and possible risk to gang involvement. One youth summarized, "gangs affect newcomers because they [youth] are poor ... and angry because of what happened to them". Approaches that foster life skills build youths' capacity to respond to difficulties with options other than anger and violence. Conflict resolution and confrontation skills were named as important resources to prevent conflict escalating to violence. Youth workers also flagged the importance of violence prevention programs that seek to understand issues underlying behaviours such as fighting, and how these issues are connected with the experiences of their communities (for example, prolonged family separation). Respect Safety and Violence Prevention (RSVP) run by Family Services of Greater Vancouver was mentioned as a useful resource that enabled youth to develop the skills for healthy relationships.

One youth worker flagged programs that help youth explore their values, expectations and challenges, explaining "I help them explore what is helpful and good about the values they brought with them, and what is not helpful." This comment took place within a larger

⁹ Anti-Oppression work seeks to recognize oppression (e.g., colonialism, racism, sexism, ableism, classism, and homophobia) that exists in society and attempts to mitigate its effects.

discussion about culturally-influenced behaviour: in Canada individual decision-making is rewarded whereas in collectivist cultures people may be more accustomed to making decisions in groups. A culturally responsive prevention approach would consider how this affects the way youth navigate peer pressure and group behaviour.

Approaches that empower and build a positive identity

Almost all youth and youth workers were able to identify resources in the Metro Vancouver area that are youth-friendly, non-judgmental, and that ask about and support youths' aspirations and strengths. One youth worker explained why he encouraged youth to learn about the supports and programs that exist in their neighbourhoods:

“Mobility is a part of an immigrant’s life ... often, we need to travel across the city even to buy our [traditional] food. We don’t know what is happening in our neighbourhood – it doesn’t concern us - and so we don’t have a sense of belonging. A sense of belonging gives me a sense of identity. And so that’s what we work on together in the drop-in sessions with the kids. We suggest that they get involved with their communities, that they contribute to their communities.”

There are programs that are neighbourhood-based and that support youth to take a leadership position. For example, Frog Hollow Neighbourhood House in East Vancouver offers a Youth Connection befriending project that connects newcomer youth with more established youth. Frog Hollow also runs a BASE (Building a Safer Environment) mentoring project in conjunction with Vancouver Technical Secondary School to address bullying, harassment, discrimination, and the transition from elementary to secondary school. BASE is a youth-led initiative; it was founded in 2002 by Van Tech students who wanted to address issues of personal safety at their school. We include this example to illustrate that youth have a pretty good idea about what their needs are, and programming would be well served by encouraging youth input. As another youth worker put it, “youth are already saying what they need”, and concluded “if youth are asking for space, give them space to hang out [where they will not be criminalized].” Youth told us how much they value spaces and activities that are clearly meant for youth, such as youth centres or other youth-friendly places that are welcoming and facilitate engaging things to do to occupy their time. Youth also told us the value of activities and spaces that are open in the evening. One youth remarked, “night hoops [Friday night drop-in basketball] keep kids out of trouble, and it is an evening program”. Sometimes youth just want a safe place to relax with their friends, and sometimes they also want to be engaged with opportunities for learning and growth. These can be as simple as popcorn and movie nights, an actual suggestion made in one of the youth focus groups.

Youth also told us that they desire the opportunities for dialogue with their communities. Some projects, like the Surrey Urban Youth Project are specifically about youth empowerment. This initiative uses creative expression as the means through which youth explore their own personal lived experiences and social issues affecting young people in Surrey. Creative expression is coupled with trainings in facilitation, conflict resolution and anti-oppression. Youth use art as a means for advocating for youth issues with decision-makers (e.g., schools, municipalities) in their community. MOSAIC’s NuYu program is another promising practice example that combines creative expression with facilitation skills for newcomer youth.

Approaches that include anti-oppression elements

Service providers, communities, neighbours and co-workers also have an important role in ensuring newcomers' wellbeing and early gang prevention. This role includes being aware of our own actions and attitudes that marginalize newcomers and taking steps to mitigate their effects, such learning to respect difference when behaviours do not adhere to societal norms. We can teach these values to our own family members, neighbours and colleagues. Programs and schools can create environments where diversity is embraced. Such environments demonstrate to youth that no form of discrimination is acceptable, and that if an incident occurs someone will intervene. Anyone who works with youth should have a clear understanding of the needs and settlement experiences of newcomer youth. Suggested educational topics for youth-serving professionals include learning about the differences between various immigration categories and processes and how the related policies impact youth and families.

Some people may struggle with the difference between culturally competent approaches and stereotypes, and this can hamper gang-prevention efforts. Specifically, we need to take care to avoid assuming that particular communities or ethnicities are more gang-prone than others. One youth worker illustrated with this comment, “a colleague suggested that perhaps the [gang-prevention workshop for parents] was popular because gangs are so widespread in [my] community.” Another youth worker pointed out that a competent approach would also avoid labels, observing “if you can't identify with the label that's being put on you that is all about 'gang prevention', then where is the prevention part?” The issue of labeling does seem to be problematic for gang prevention efforts, as youth workers told us that youth shy away from programming that they feel isn't relevant to them, or that they perceive as carrying a stigma.

Approaches that recognize the unique challenges as well as the unique strengths of newcomer youth

In 2007, school boards in the Metro Vancouver area and other areas of BC instituted the Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS) program, and many schools also have Multicultural Liaison Workers who work with students, families and schools. These resources meet a need that has been identified in the literature: connecting families and school and assisting newcomer youth through the Canadian school system. One further gap that has been identified by youth and youth workers in our study are the challenges facing underserved youth who are 18-24 years of age, as they are too old for high school and many youth programs, but are not engaging in post-secondary learning. Without age-appropriate services, these youth may not have the confidence to go to adult school and instead may be vulnerable to engaging in risky behaviour.

We wrap up this section by highlighting the unique strengths possessed by newcomer youth that provide some immunity to gang involvement. Refugee youth may be averse to gangs and violence *because* violence may have affected their lives before coming to Canada. One youth told us how he valued the personal freedoms and peace he experienced in Canada. Furthermore, the refugee youth from our focus groups told us that they were driven to seize the chances and opportunities they felt were offered in Canada. Dinovitzer *et al* (2009) argue that immigrant youth who are committed to and invested in their own education process tend

to be averse to (illegal) activity that would threaten that commitment. One youth worker summarized by saying,

“they just want to come [to the youth drop-in], focus on school, learn English ... half of them don’t know if they are going to be living in Canada in a year and a half because they might be sent back, so they need to take all the time right now they have to educate themselves.”

Many youth expressed the value they placed on education and their desire to succeed in life. As one girl articulated, “[gang involvement is unattractive because] I have high personal expectations of what I want in life”.

Directions for Future Research

We conclude by discussing gaps and questions that were uncovered during the course of this project, and identifying further areas for research. Much of what is known about *newcomer* youths’ involvement with gangs in BC comes from police data and anecdotal evidence. A potential research area would be to gather the insight of youth themselves. In-depth one-on-one interviews with youth identified as gang-involved, such as those conducted by Wortley and Tanner (2007), would provide deeper insight into the unique risk factors, pathways and trajectories into gang life that some newcomer youth experience. Accessing gang-involved youth within a research context would require cooperation across multiple sectors, not only with community-based organizations, but also with tertiary intervention programs, youth detention facilities and police. Access to vulnerable populations, such as gang-involved youth, is often an issue for researchers as organizations engaging in intervention work may be concerned about jeopardizing tenuous relationships with their clients through the presence of outsiders. A literature review of data collection methodologies with experiential, criminalized or incarcerated youth populations would yield interesting approaches that have been used elsewhere. A valuable policy-related objective for any research undertaken with gang-involved newcomer youth would be to track the settlement process of these youth to see how and when protective assets recede and are outweighed by risk factors.

A second proposed area of study is with unaccompanied minors who travel to Canada. Unaccompanied minors are youth under the age of 18 who enter Canada unaccompanied by and not destined for a parent or non-parental adult relative legally responsible for them. The unique risk factors and vulnerability of unaccompanied minors to gang recruiters was identified by the research team, but we did not encounter any youth worker or youth with this experience. However, the issue came up again during a series of workshops sponsored by Victim Services and Crime Prevention (BC) and the National Crime Prevention Centre in Vancouver on March 24, 2010. Participants in each workshop identified examples of gang-related youth who had also been unaccompanied minors. Unaccompanied minors are often refugee claimants who have experienced trauma either in their place of origin or/and en route to Canada. They rarely have a support network to draw on in Canada, and often they reside in group homes and with foster families who may or may not be equipped to deal with their unique challenges. We surmise that these youth may be vulnerable to isolation, lack of family support and other risk factors that precede gang involvement.

Summary and conclusion

This paper explored the risks to gang involvement faced by newcomer youth in BC as well as their strengths and resiliencies in the multiple and intersecting scales of the individual, family, school and community domains. Isolation in individuals and families underscored by lack of connection with prosocial peers and positive adults, language barriers, poor mental health, systematic marginalization and racism, and family conflict were seen as risks to gang involvement, as were lack of supports in schools and community settings. Also discussed were healthy development and strengths to foster personal achievement including meaningful connection with family, friends and mentors, support in school, safe spaces in schools and community to freely express oneself and become engaged in activities, and opportunities to pursue valued goals and leadership.

Our findings from interviews and focus groups briefly touched on potential pathways to gang involvement; however these findings are not conclusive as our respondent sample size was small and did not include any youth who identified as gang-involved. Suggested BC-based gang-prevention approaches based on respondents' needs are outlined, and the primary recommendation for gang prevention is early and sustained settlement support for youth and families so that youth do not look to gangs to fulfill their desires for belonging, respect, empowerment and financial security. This requires commitment beyond an individual and family scale; it also requires action at a community and societal level.

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Appendix A: Questions for focus groups and interviews

Questions for youth focus groups

1. Youth gang definition activity
2. How serious of an issue are youth gangs for newcomer youth?
3. Gingerbread/community assets mapping activity
4. Why do newcomers to Canada become involved in gang activity?
5. What are some reasons why young newcomers to Canada do not become involved in gang activity?
6. What are some supports that could be put into place in your community that would make a difference in preventing newcomer youth from becoming involved in gangs?
7. What makes (the above) resource/program/service good?
8. Of all the issues we talked about today (or maybe some that we missed) related to youth gangs, what do you think is the most important?

Questions for key informant focus groups

1. Youth gang definition activity
2. How are the newcomer youth you work with affected by the issue of youth gangs?
3. Why do the newcomers that you work with become involved in gang activity?
4. Journey mapping activity
5. Identifying strategies and resources
6. Identifying essential components of prevention strategies

Questions for key informant interviews

1. How are the newcomer youth you work with affected by the issue of youth gangs?
2. Why do the newcomers that you work with become involved with gang activity?
3. How do you identify youth at risk of gang involvement?
4. Identifying strategies and resources
5. Identifying essential components of prevention strategies

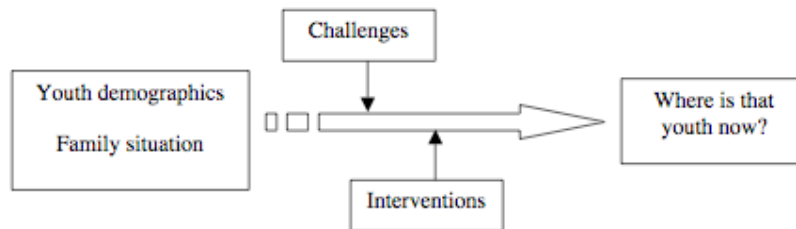
Appendix B: “Journey Mapping” exercise at the *Preventing Youth Involvement in Gangs* workshop held on March 24, 2010

Participants in each workshop session were facilitated through an interactive journey mapping exercise. This was the same mapping exercise used in focus groups with key informants.

Participants were asked to think of a newcomer youth they knew who was gang-involved. They were then instructed to silently compose a list including:

- 1) demographics of this youth (i.e., age, gender, country of origin, length of time in Canada, and immigration status);
- 2) characteristics of his/her family situation (i.e., family composition, socio-economic status);
- 3) a brief summary of the youth’s trajectory to gang-involvement, including *challenges* that may have influenced his/her decision to become gang-involved, and any *interventions*;
- 4) a brief summary of the youth’s current gang status.

Participants then worked in small groups to summarize their findings. They were asked to emphasize common characteristics. Groups were provided a specific format to record their findings on flipchart paper.



Each group was asked to identify a recorder and reporter. The reporter provided a brief summary of their group’s findings to all workshop participants. The following is a summary of all written and orally delivered reports from the exercise. The flipchart responses are verbatim. A brief summary (ours) precedes responses. Not all participants were able to completely answer questions (e.g., demographics), but we have included their partial answers (thus, numbers may not add up). Furthermore, not all participants had experience with immigrant/refugee gang-involved youth; they participated in the exercise, but we have not included their responses in this summary.

Demographic representation

Age range	Gender	Country of origin	Length of time in Canada	Immigration status
13 (x2)	Male (x16)	Afghanistan, Bosnia	From one	Refugee (x6)
14	Female (1)	Britain, China, Europe	month to ten	Immigrant (x6)
15 (x4)		Honduras (x3), India	years.	
16 (x4)		Iran, Iraq (x2), Jamaica		
17 (x2)		Latin America	Months: 1	
20		Philippines (x2)	Years:	
23		Rwanda, Sudan, Vietnam	2, 3, 4, 5 (x3),	
25			10	

Family characteristics

Summary: Participants described family composition, including the absence of one or both parents. A number of participants mentioned youth who had arrived in Canada as unaccompanied minors. Participants also described family socio-economic status (which varies from “low income” to “well-off”). There were a number of participants who also commented on family members’ familiarity with crime and/or their own gang-involvement.

- Mother back home; father sponsored him and his siblings. Lives with father and stepmom. Low income family.
- Older brother gang-involved. Single parent, no father involvement. Working poor.
- Father killed, single mom. Involved in organized crime, middle child.
- Mother involved in illegal activity
- Financially well-off, missing dad (“back home”)
- Oldest child; parents split up
- Youngest, has older sister; with both parents and grandparent
- Second eldest of five kids; mom and step-dad
- Both parents very educated; lives with mom (who travels a lot); dad often back home; older sister responsible for his care
- With both parents and his siblings. Lived in refugee camp.
- Lives with mom and younger brother; father murdered back home; family speaks English
- Came as unaccompanied minors; on own, no family here
- Live with two sisters, mom; no dad
- Have three siblings, mum; no dad
- Family in home country but sister is here. Came [to Canada] as unaccompanied minor.
- Parents divorced, lives with mom and step father. Stepfather alcohol abuse; physically abusive.
- [We often see issues of] inconsistent parenting; addictions; not all facing poverty issues; parents speaking different languages
- Comes from broken family
- Has one “auntie” in Canada; MCFD involved.
- Family separated; domestic violence
- Came to Canada with both parents and sibling(s).
- Came as unaccompanied minor. Parents criminally involved in Rwanda.

Challenges contributing to gang-involvement

Summary: Participants described the challenges that youth faced in family life (sometimes due to family responsibilities, or issues pertaining to settlement, such as trauma and mental health or financial hardship), and at school. Several participants reported the isolation youth experienced due to language barriers or lack of positive adult role models in their lives. A number of participants mentioned lack of adult presence as a particular challenge contributing to gang involvement. Some issues that were flagged by participants that we did not mention in the report include addiction and sexual exploitation.

- He had a lot of family responsibilities (to provide breakfast and take siblings to school), and consequently he was always late for school and often sent to the office.
- He had weak English language skills; lack of parental support and supervision. One day in class and was playing with his lighter and lit a piece of paper. He was transferred to a new school. The relationship he had with his school counselor and settlement worker whom he trusted, that trust was broken. He joined a gang to gain a sense of power and support.
- Learning disability; foster care (trauma); financial need; money attractive; connected to brother; home invasion; youth detention
- Dating gang member and has baby; sexually exploited on craigslist
- Not welcomed at school
- Single working mom and step family; lack of parental involvement (x2) or no father involvement; drugs; cultural identity; learning disability; lack of role model (x3)
- No adult supervision; became involved with older youth from Iran and Afghanistan involved in gangs; had problems adapting to new culture; language/cultural barriers.
- Lack of support for newcomer parents to understand their parenting roles and expectations; lack of parental clarity around responsibility for youth supervision. Parents denied [his] gang involvement.
- No friends at school, most friends are out of school; gang members pose a threat to family and school (being chased after); declining academic achievement (ESL); minimal friendship, little self-confidence; language barriers. School wanted to suspend him.
- No positive male role model; had to assume parental role for younger brother; culture shock; financial difficulties; lack of extended family; lack of involvement in school; criminal involvement
- Walked to US [from Latin America], travelled overland to Canada; on street, alone; criminal and gang involvement; attended school in Canada; no money; language barrier; cultural differences
- Walked to US [from Latin America], travelled overland to Canada; on own; unable to attend school; financial hardship; selling drugs; gang involved; language barriers; cultural differences
- Language difficulties, took offense to jokes
- Mom enabled gang activities, she accepted all the expensive gifts from son
- Limited English skills; had limited connection to school and dropped out, thus no structure; isolated; undiscovered purpose; had spiritual need that went unmet; disillusioned; mom came for short visit (increased his loneliness); no support; self image problems, need for material goods
- Abuse from stepfather, not sure of relationship with bio dad; fights with mom; not doing well at school, doing drugs, drinking, skipping class; involved in fights at school; runs away; affiliated with bad kids; unlikely to graduate high school; currently deals drugs
- [Often we see issues relating to] inconsistent parenting; lack of resources; settlement issues (trauma, PTSD, language); mental health issues (assessment tools are not culturally sensitive); access issues to services; foster care system

- He didn't graduate; has poor financial situation; weak social network; looking for support; insecure; his social network became gang oriented (one bad apple became twelve bad apples); sold and couriered drugs for financial gain.
- Was one of four youth from same province in Honduras and similar trajectory to Canada; possibly selling drugs in DTES, hanging out with dealers; language challenges; lack of family history; service provision is polarized between social services and justice system; exit out of drug trade may pose safety problems for family at home; cultural issues
- Family domestic violence; family mental health issues; low income; trauma; history of witnessing violence; language issues; cultural issues; sexually exploited; poor parenting/lack of supervision; drug addiction
- [Often we see issues relating to] lack of social networks/family support; lack of developed life skills; stresses/challenges of unwell family members; lack of financial resources (immediate needs not being met); PTSD; settlement responsibilities falling on elder children (better ESL levels = access to more community resources); language challenges; lack of adult supervision. Intervention programs not as well accessed (as youth programs) to due to challenges, e.g., language, and lack of workers who are of same ethnicity as youth.
- Not much education; financial challenges; cultural challenges; lack of social network of same ethnicity; definitely gang-involved.
- Lived in refugee camp before coming [to Canada] as unaccompanied minor. Random assignment of age by immigration authorities, led to problems at school.

Interventions

Summary: Participants described interventions – mostly programs and practices, but often also individuals – that had been made at some point during the young person's journey in becoming involved or entrenched in gang activity. A number of participants mentioned interventions made within the school environment, or by the legal system. Participants also flagged some of the challenges associated with intervention.

- School counselor and settlement worker.
- CATS program; parent info night; counseling; school x2; MCFD x2; youth worker connection; police protection; Children of the Street Society
- Y.I.P. (youth intervention Surrey RCMP; RECONNECT; WRAP; school; probation officer; MCFD)
- Changed schools.
- Connected him to support groups
- Pinnacle school; ISSP program; youth support worker; probation officer; employment program; Genesis school staff
- Intervention from school and supports in place; is doing well
- No intervention
- Jail time
- Police, youth workers
- Increased church involvement, Catholic peer support (there is not much other support in rural communities where emphasis tends to be on Aboriginal gang prevention)

- Some sports involvement, he has a job and someone to support him at this job
- Settlement workers in schools; community organizations; parenting programs that are culturally/linguistically specific; wraparound assessments; connect youth with community resources
- Several interventions tried but to no avail as money was too good [from gang-related activity]
- Relationship building; collaboration between different government and NGO agencies in different communities; resources (e.g., MCFD, Spanish-speaking youth worker) available but youth doesn't want them.
- Counseling; police intervention; school intervention; family supports; multicultural supports
- SWIS, community youth groups, youth centres. Counseling.
- SWIS, multicultural liaison workers. Need interventions around drug selling.
- No intervention done.
- Individual tried to intervene and support youth.

Current status: where is that youth now?

Summary: participants reported a variety of outcomes. Some youth had died as a result of their gang involvement, others had disappeared or had been deported from Canada, and some youth were in prison. Some participants reported positive intervention outcomes.

- Shot and died at age 17.
- Still in school
- At school; contemplative regarding gang involvement
- Jail?
- Withdrawn from services (x2); withdrawn from home (x2)
- Attending adult education.
- Relocated to another city/area; whereabouts unknown
- Working on completing grade 12 in an alternative program; also working full time. Applied to VCC for auto mechanics course. Living at home. Possibly still gang-involved; has girlfriend who may be part of the gang. Facing new criminal charges and trial. Overall, fairly entrenched but interventions have supported him and allowed him to spend time away from the criminal element.
- Deported [two youth outcomes]
- In a coma, was shot 8 times
- In jail
- One youth was shot and killed through gang involvement; other is still involved
- One youth is in jail; one is in foster care; one is on probation
- Dead from overdoses. Suspicious circumstances.
- AWOL. Service providers trying to track him down; concerned for his safety.
- In jail, or in hiding.
- Still gang-involved.