

Youth Gang Prevention Programs

This Research to Practice Brief summarizes recent evidence from a report that presents evaluation results on youth gang prevention programs implemented across Canada between 2007 and 2012:

- Smith-Moncrieffe, D. (2013). Youth Gang Prevention Fund Projects: What did we learn about what works in preventing gang involvement? Research Report: 2007-2012. *National Crime Prevention Centre, Public Safety Canada, Ottawa, ON.*

* NOTE: this report has not been pre-appraised for quality.

Background on the Youth Gang Prevention Fund and the Evidence in this Brief

From 2007 to 2012, the National Crime Prevention Centre (NCPC), a branch of Public Safety Canada, funded 17 projects implemented in 23 sites across the country dedicated to youth gang prevention for Canadian community organizations (1). The key objective of the Youth Gang Prevention Fund (YGPF) projects was to reduce participation in gangs among youth (1). Three of the funded programs were not included in the report due to either not having the required evaluation criteria or they ended after the report was completed (1).

Seven different types of program models were implemented in this funding cycle. Some were considered model or promising because they were based on previously identified promising models such as the Comprehensive Gang Model (i.e. Spergel), the Milwaukee Wraparound, and the Gang Prevention through Targeted Outreach. Other projects implemented “hybrid” interventions that included core elements of these gang prevention models as well as additional elements of other evidence-informed approaches such as Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST), Wraparound and Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) (1).

The NCPC provided evaluation tools and resources for project implementers and their third party evaluators. Evaluation requirements included at minimum a pre and post-test repeated measures design. Both standardized and non-standardized instruments were used to measure outcomes related to change in knowledge, attitudes, risk and protective factors, and actual behaviour in accordance with the Stages of Change framework (1). Ten evaluation studies from this funding cycle met criteria to be included in the final data synthesis and reporting of the results (1).

Program Participant Demographics

The projects were designed to reach at-risk youth and in some cases, their families and immediate environment. In total, 1,899 at-risk youth participated in the programs (age range of 9 to 30 years); 188 families participated and 789 youth (age range of 8 to 14 years) participated in [universal](#) school-based programs.

Seventy-three per cent (73%) of program participants were male and 27% were female. Between 32% and 43% of youth participants identified themselves as currently being in a gang. Fifty-six (56%) of participants were considered “high risk” for gang involvement; 23.5% were considered “moderate risk”; 20.5% considered “low risk” (1).

Definition of a Youth Gang

According to Public Safety Canada, there is no consensus on a single definition of a youth gang in Canada (1). According to Peel Regional Police, a gang is “any group of three or more people, formally or informally organized, having a common name or identifying sign or symbol, forming an allegiance for a common, criminal purpose (2). This is similar to other definitions provided by other police services and academia in Canada that study gang activity (1).

Key Findings

Findings related to the gang prevention models tested

- The Wraparound Model, MST (hybrid), and Case Management Model demonstrated the most favourable changes in outcomes related to risk and/or protective factors and behavioural change among participants (1). These models appear to be most favourable for replication in communities that experience youth gang issues.
- The Wraparound Model was the most frequently implemented model. This model consists of a team of professionals and a facilitator coming together to “wraparound” and develop an individualized care plan for the high risk youth. Implementers of the Wraparound Model expressed several benefits including (1):
 - Inclusion of youth with multiple risk factors;

- Ability to collaborate with a range of community partners that can provide additional services;
 - Greater diversity of therapeutic approaches (i.e. cognitive behavioural approaches); and,
 - Access to resources of a diverse group of case managers with practical skills.
- Qualitative findings suggested that the project implementers found the Wraparound and Case Management Models easy to implement due to the flexibility of the models.

Findings related to the outcomes measured¹

- Where measured, over half of participants (57 - 66%) increased their knowledge about the risks of crime and gangs. This could possibly increase the chances that participants' attitudes, risk and protective factors may improve (1).
- Where measured, 27 - 38% of participants made favourable changes in their attitudes regarding pro-social values, more positive views of law enforcement, and views on aggression and violence (1).
- Where measured, one quarter to half (25 - 50%) of the projects were able to demonstrate favourable results for modifying risk and protective factors of the participants. The most common favourable changes were seen in: increasing self-esteem and personal integrity; increased positive attachments to the workforce; decreased depression and mental health issues; and decreased impulsivity and risk taking behaviour (1).
- Four projects reported positive changes in behavioural outcomes (1). The most frequent outcomes reported to have improved were: gang involvement, police contact, violent and non-violent offending (1). Three of these four projects were mentioned in the report: the Gang Prevention Strategy in Ontario, the Youth Advocate Program in Nova Scotia, and the Surrey Wraparound in British Columbia.
- For the four projects that measured gang exit rates at the end of the program, between 41-67% of the youth were no longer gang-involved (1). These four projects were: Youth At Risk Development in Alberta, Youth Alliance Against Gang Violence in Saskatchewan, Regina Anti-gang Services Project, and the Gang Prevention Strategy in Ontario.

¹ Not all projects measured the same outcomes.

Considerations for Implementation

The NCPC identified four common implementation challenges across all of their funded gang projects:

Program Fidelity

- Staying consistent with the original program design, sometimes referred to as program [fidelity](#), is important. The amount of service (i.e. dosage) affects the program's outcomes (1). Program fidelity was hard to assess with many of the projects because they implemented "hybrid" models and were testing new approaches whereby elements of fidelity, including dosage, is not fully established.
 - On average, programs from the YGPF projects were 233 hours long (or 39 weeks).
- Another key finding related to program fidelity was the realization that it is also critical to adapt the program to fit the local Canadian context (1). Many of the models tested were developed in the United States where there are higher rates of youth gang activity and violent crime (1). Although it is important to keep the evidence-based elements of the models, it is also critical to adapt the tools, language, and partnerships to the targeted community and participants (1).

Reaching the Appropriate Target Audience

- The data from these projects demonstrated that programs that were able to attract higher-risk youth showed greater reductions in key risk factors and behaviours (1).
- To recruit potential participants, both partnerships with key organizations (e.g., police, youth centres) and street youth worker skills are required (1).
- Using a risk assessment tool can help to identify the highest-risk youth (1).

Establishing Relationships with Families

- Due to the stigma associated with gangs and many other barriers that parents of high-risk or gang-involved youth face, parental involvement in the gang projects was limited, despite their important role in providing a supportive environment and relationship (1).

Establishing Partnerships within the Community

- Strong relationship with partners is important for the implementation and success of programs (1). Program implementers reported that they found it challenging to find partners that were willing to work with violent youth or that could provide specialized services such as mental health and drug treatment (1). It is important to consider this and establish formal relationships prior to implementation.

Additional Resources

Public Safety Canada – Youth Gang Prevention Resources

A suite of resources is available on the Public Safety Canada website that includes:

- Descriptions of specific gang prevention programs tested in Canada
- Risk factors for youth gang involvement
- A publication that discusses different [risk assessment tools](#) for offending and reoffending.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – Prevent Gang Membership

Resources and information on preventing gang membership, including a link to:

- [The National Gang Center](#) (in the United States)

References

1. Smith-Moncrieffe, D. (2013). Youth Gang Prevention Fund Projects: What did we learn about what works in preventing gang involvement? Research Report: 2007-2012. *National Crime Prevention Centre, Public Safety Canada, Ottawa, ON*. Retrieved from [July 24, 2014]: <http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/yth-gng-prvntn-fnd/index-eng.aspx>

PeelThinkShare Research to Practice Briefs

This is one of a series of Briefs prepared by the Community Health Initiatives Team, Region of Peel, Health Services in order to support community-based organizations in the Peel Region with accessing and using high quality research evidence.

The intent of these Briefs is to present the key evidence-based findings, considerations for implementation and links to more resources to support evidence-based practices and actions in the community.

These Briefs and other resources can be found at: www.peelthinkshare.ca

Is there a topic that you are interested in, that has not been covered in our *Research to Practice Series* yet? Let us know by emailing peelthinkshare@peelregion.ca.

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