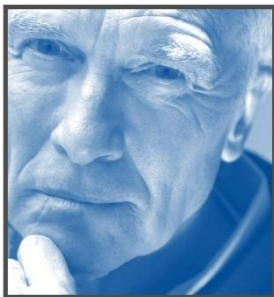
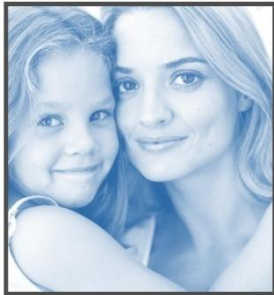
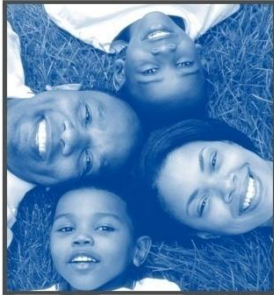




YouthGAP:

The Youth Gang Alternatives Project

An Exploration of Youth Gangs in Edmonton



A report of the Youth Gang Alternatives Project (YouthGAP)
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Edited by Jennifer Hoyer

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An ESPC Youth Internship Project



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The ESPC Youth Internship Program was developed in 2009 to support youth in taking on the projects that they are interested in and passionate about.

Working for change can be challenging, and sometimes it's difficult to access the resources or supports needed to get the job done. Youth sometimes face extra barriers – it's hard to get work published or recognized, to get people to attend events, or to meet with elected officials. The Edmonton Social Planning Council wants to develop young leaders who will continue to work for change in the community through youth-initiated projects supporting social justice in the Edmonton area. By participating in an internship, youth are equipped with skills and experiences that they can tap into for years to come. Seeing their project to completion will require research, organization, networking, writing, and a host of other professional skills. Interns build their own capacity as they work to build a better community.

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Executive Summary and Statement of Purpose

The Youth Gang Alternatives Project (YouthGAP) was founded in 2009. Our goal is to contribute to work currently being done on youth gangs in Edmonton by providing information about the nature and scope of the youth gang phenomenon and the programs and tools available to combat it. This report aims to provide stakeholders currently working on this issue with a more comprehensive knowledge base from which to shape and strengthen their efforts.

A great deal of information exists about the general phenomenon of youth gangs – how they are formed, their activities, and the reasons youths join. As of 2003, there were reported to be 484 youth gangs in Canada with an estimated 6760 members (Wortley & Tanner, 2007). Any youth can be susceptible to youth gang involvement - members are recruited fairly young on average, with an estimated 48% of members under the age of 16. Approximately 25% of youth gang members in Canada are African American and 22% are First Nations, with the remaining 53% composed of various other ethnic groups, including an estimated 18% or more Caucasian members (Mellor et al., 2005).

Unfortunately, less specific information is available about the existence and demographics of youth gangs in Edmonton. The first comprehensive survey on youth gang populations in Canada was not conducted until 2002; according to this, there were 42 youth gangs in Edmonton with approximately 668 members (National Crime Prevention Center, 2007, *Youth Gangs in Canada*). Taking into account the various inconsistencies involved in statistical reporting of gang populations, Alberta's gang activity lags far behind other western provinces. As a result, energies have not been focused on investigating this phenomenon as thoroughly as in other major cities, despite the fact that it remains a major problem in Edmonton.

This study draws on existing resources about youth gangs in Canada as well as interviews with representatives of Edmonton service providers working actively with at-risk and gang affiliated youth. There is currently a great deal of work being done by this city's stakeholder groups to understand the youth gang issue and to react to it with appropriate and effective programs, services, and policies. Defining the problem proves difficult; "youth gangs" have many faces. Youth involvement in gang activity encompasses "wannabe" gangs, street gangs, and criminal business networks. A wide variety of risk factors, related to family, peers, school, self, and community, make youth susceptible to youth gang involvement. The seriousness of a youth's involvement in a gang should also be taken into account when developing strategies to target the problem.

Effective programs for targeting youth gang involvement should minimize risk factors while maximizing protective factors. Currently, various methods of treatment – namely, suppression, prevention and intervention – are employed by programs in Canada and Edmonton. While all these methods can be useful, prevention and intervention are more likely to be effective in the long term because they tackle root causes of gang involvement. Suppression focuses only on the symptoms. Allotment of funds to law enforcement agencies, such as a multi-year \$584

allocation to the RCMP in 2000 for the specific purpose of targeting youth gangs, tends to mainly support suppressive efforts. In contrast, community service providers such as (in Edmonton) Community Solutions to Gang Violence, the Gang Awareness Intervention Network, and Native Counselling Services focus their efforts on prevention and intervention. Community service providers call for long-term program funding in order to best target at-risk or gang-involved youth.

This report discusses the following conclusions and recommendations:

- The importance of developing a suitable definition of the youth gang problem.
- The dangers of understanding the youth gang issue through the lens of the legal system.
- The importance of realizing the role of youth in the illegal drug trade.
- The early development of youth gang predisposition and 'risk factors'.
- The importance of positive role models as a protective factor for at-risk youth.
- The dangers and difficulties facing youth who wish to leave the gang environment.
- The dangers associated with a predominantly suppressive strategy for targeting youth gangs.
- The symbiotic nature of suppression, prevention, and intervention programs.
- The importance of stability and long-term support for programs currently working with children and youth at risk for gang involvement.

The report is divided into three sections. Section I explores each of the above topics using a combination of our primary and secondary research, while Section II provides a summary of feedback received during interviews with community service providers. Section III concludes by emphasizing key points unearthed during the course of this project and by making preliminary recommendations which relate these themes to action taken on the issue.

YouthGAP and the Edmonton Social Planning Council hope that, as a stakeholder on the youth gang issue, you find the information we have gathered informative and useful. We welcome your feedback - if you have an inquiry, comment, or request regarding this publication, please get in touch:



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Section I: Background

Who Cares about the Youth Gang Issue?

The stakeholders in the youth gang issue are those individuals, organizations, or groups who are impacted by the existence of youth gangs and have a vested interest in minimizing their effects. Traditionally, only those actors directly impacted by youth gang activities have been characterized as stakeholders. A list of stakeholders typically includes:

- the **parents** of potential or active youth gang members;
- the **teachers and school administrators** who must work with at-risk and gang-affiliated youths in the school environment, and face the results of their activities in the classroom;
- the **law enforcement officials** who must take measures to suppress illegal or antisocial actions taken by youth gang members;
- the **government and public policy officials** who create and fund programs designed to suppress, prevent or intervene in youth gang involvement;
- the **non-profit and community service providers** who work directly with at-risk or gang-affiliated youth, or who operate preventative programs aimed at high-risk children.

If adequate attention is paid to the effects of youth gang existence, however, it becomes clear that the pool of stakeholders encompasses many more individuals than those directly affected by youth gang activity. Youth gangs pose a double-detriment to communities. First, the activities in which they engage escalate social problems such as violence, property crime, substance abuse and trafficking, and lower secondary education completion rates. At the same time, youth gangs also degrade the possibility of future community progress through their stranglehold on one of the community's greatest resources: its youth population. In this sense, any member of a community who cares about and wishes to develop the health of that community is a stakeholder on the youth gang issue.

A. Defining the Youth Gang Problem

1. Legal Definition

In 2002, Federal Bill C-24 defined gangs as three or more people whose main purpose involved serious criminal offences which, if committed, would result in financial benefit (Police Service of Edmonton, 2000). The usefulness of this definition is limited when it comes to understanding the youth gang phenomenon. It tells us very little about the reasons why youths might form or join these organizations, and how youth membership differs from that of adults.

2. Definitional Discrepancies

We cannot necessarily look to academic literature for a clearer definition of the youth gang phenomenon. Virtually all literature on the topic acknowledges that there is, and has been historically, a lack of consensus regarding the appropriate definition of a youth gang. This discrepancy exists between different stakeholder groups (the Edmonton Police Services, for example, does not necessarily use the same definition of a youth gang as a typical Edmonton service provider dealing with at-risk youth); among the members of individual stakeholder groups (one service provider may have a very different definition than another); and between geographically disparate communities, regions, and countries (RCMP, 2006).

While conducting our primary research, YouthGAP received a small but valuable amount of feedback from stakeholders which challenged the importance of accurately 'defining' the youth gang problem. Other information, however, confirmed our initial belief that an exact definition of this - or any - problem is a crucial first step towards designing approaches and programs to target the problem accurately and effectively. As a recent report by the RCMP states, "the lack of a universal definition for youth gangs impacts whether youth gangs are correctly identified and understood, and how community and law enforcement strategies are designed and implemented" (RCMP, 2006).

3. Commonly Used Youth Gang Classifications

According to the Community Solutions to Gang Violence (CSGV) Gang Prevention Resource Kit, three different 'types' of youth gangs are commonly recognized in Canada, as established by a 1990s study on gangs in Vancouver (Erickson & LaRocque, 2009):

- **'Wannabe' gang groups:** These gangs are typically composed primarily of youths - hence, they are most commonly associated with the 'youth gang' term. According to the results of our primary research, wannabe gangs are generally loose in construction and are formed and disbanded on a more ad hoc basis than other types of gangs (see below). They may evolve primarily as vehicles for socialization (groups of friends 'officiating' their bond) or as a means to meet physical needs. They are more likely than more organized types of gangs to adhere mainly to small-scale criminal activities or activities that are merely antisocial or 'frowned upon' by the community (property damage, shop-lifting, truancy, etc).
- **Street Gangs:** Like 'wannabe' gang groups, street gangs are usually self-formed, and young people typically account for a large proportion of their membership. They tend to be more organized than wannabe gangs and take greater pains to be 'visible' on the street - they often adopt markings, symbols, names, etc, although they may choose to abandon their markings in order to become less visible to law enforcement officers. Their criminal activity is typically more purposeful and more serious than that of 'wannabe' groups and they may have links to criminal business networks (see below).

- **Criminal business networks:** These are organized crime groups with the highest degree of organization of any type of gang. They are created and controlled by adults, but are likely to use a large number of youths as lower-level workers. Their primary business is typically the drug trade, but they are usually involved in other criminal activities as well.

Any sort of progress made with regards to ironing out a definition of the 'youth gang issue' should keep these three distinct types of 'youth gangs' in mind. Research done by the RCMP, for example, has found that many researchers use the term 'youth gang' and 'street gang' interchangeably, even though, as the above distinctions capture, not all youth gangs are street gangs and not all street gangs are composed of or controlled by youths (RCMP, 2006). Proof of this problem is the fact, identified by the RCMP, that different research may even classify specific gangs different ways (one report labels Gang X as a youth gang; another, as a street gang). If the public policy or law enforcement approaches for addressing these different kinds of gangs are different, and labels applied to policy targets are inconsistent, resulting efforts will be equally inconsistent.

4. Other Popular Definitions

Discrepancies persist even when we consider the most popular or commonly adopted definition of a youth gang. This definition was developed in 1971 by sociologist M. W. Klein, who denoted a youth gang as:

any group of 'youngsters' who are perceived as a distinct aggregation by others; who self-identify as a group; and are involved in a sufficient number of delinquent incidents to provoke a consistently negative response from community and/or law enforcement agencies. (RCMP, 2006).

This definition effectively ignores any youth whose involvement with gangs is not with a "group of youngsters," but with an organization founded and controlled by adults (such as a criminal business network or even a street gang). Police estimate that about 80% of the people involved in criminal business networks in Edmonton are young people between the ages of 18 and 30 (Erickson & La Rocque, 2009). Focusing on gangs comprised of youths, rather than youth involvement in gangs, may therefore allow an extremely large number of at-risk youth to go unreported and, therefore, unaided. The more serious a gang is, the more important it is that it not be ignored by the community. Although the 'wannabe' gang groups comprised mainly of youths may be more visible in their communities, it is typically street gangs and criminal business organizations that do the most damage to both their communities and their youth members (National Crime Prevention Center [NCPC] 1999).

5. Creating a Youth Gang Definition

Although we stress the importance, convenience and accuracy of having a universal definition, we recognize the value for stakeholders of having their own definition. The issue is complex and multifaceted enough that no single, all-inclusive definition of what a youth gang is will be useful to all stakeholders.

The main priority for stakeholders should be to identify, understand and define youth gangs in their respective communities in a way that allows community and law enforcement agencies to best address local problems. Individual stakeholder groups attempting to target specific aspects of the problem (the prevalence of 'wannabe' gang groups in local secondary schools, for example, or the number of youths being employed in local criminal business organizations) should produce their own definition, tailored to the subsection of the problem and at-risk population they are dealing with.

Having an exact definition for one region or sector is an important first step towards a universal definition. By creating, adjusting and collecting various definitions, community stakeholders come closer to a universal description of the problem they are dealing with.

B. Measuring the Youth Gang Problem

1. Statistical Gaps and Research Problems

There is relatively little statistical information available on the youth gang phenomenon in general, and even less information regarding specific municipalities. Part of this gap is due to a lack of concentrated resources. Because Edmonton does not have a reputation as a major gang centre, there have been no concentrated government-directed efforts to gather statistical information about the problem here as there have been in Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal.

There are also a variety of inherent barriers to developing complete statistical 'pictures' of the youth gang problem. These barriers mainly have to do with the nature of the youth gang phenomenon. Reliable statistical information about criminal and delinquent behaviors is notoriously difficult to collect - the relevant populations are difficult to access, and even when located, actors are often reluctant to offer information that may incriminate them or endanger other individuals and groups they affiliate and/or identify with. This problem, present in all research into gang activity, is compounded in youth gang investigations by the fact that most of the data is collected in primary and secondary school environments. Typically, youth who are gang-affiliated or at risk of gang involvement are underrepresented in the conventional school system. Because only information that is reported can be used, the resulting statistical 'picture' is often grossly misrepresented or skewed in some way.

One way around these problems is to contact stakeholders on the issue who have an 'insider's' view of the situation but are not personally compromised by divulging this information. Non-profit service providers are a good example of such a stakeholder group. We utilize this technique to collect primary information on a variety of youth-gang related topics as presented in Section II. Ultimately, however, this is still a second-hand method of gathering information and has many associated weaknesses, the most significant of which is that service providers can only report incidents or trends that are reported to them. This limitation should be recognized.

2. Youth Gangs in Canada: What the Numbers Say

In contrast to the United States, there have been a limited number of studies on youth gangs in Canada, and there are fewer statistics available on the current or historical activities of such gangs in this country. The first comprehensive survey on youth gang populations in Canada was not conducted until 2002 (Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2003). This survey collected statistical estimates from police agencies across the country regarding the presence and activity of youth gangs in their jurisdictions. The particular method used can be critiqued on a number of levels, and these criticisms should be kept in mind when the results of the report are analyzed.

One of the biggest problems with this report was that it resolved the definitional dilemma by asking each agency to use its own definition. This method results in under- or over-representation of the youth gang presence across jurisdictions depending on the particular definitions used. One agency's definition, for example, might only count youth gangs composed of or controlled exclusively by youth, while another might include criminal business organizations with a significant number of youth employees.

Ultimately, the report did attach some numbers to the extent of the phenomenon in Canada. As of 2003, there were reported to be 484 youth gangs in Canada with an estimated 6760 members (Wortley & Tanner, 2007). The greatest numbers of youth gangs and youth gang members were reported in Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia (Mellor, MacRae, Pauls, & Hornick, 2005).

Even laying aside the fact that no common parameters were used to decide what 'counts' in terms of these statistics, these figures almost certainly under-represent the number of youth gangs present in Canada, since they include only those groups known to police. The number of members is likely underestimated as it is doubtful that all of the members of a particular gang will be known to law enforcement agencies. It is not clear whether youth members of non-youth gangs (i.e. adult-controlled street gangs and criminal business networks) are included, or what basis police jurisdictions have for their estimates aside from the number of affiliated gang members who have been involved with the legal system—a relatively poor indicator.

There is very little statistical information available to tell us whether or not rates of youth gang involvement are increasing nationwide. The limited reliable information we have comes from the courts. A 2008 report issued by the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics states that violent crimes and other 'criminal code offences' fell during the last reported period (2005-6), that the

rates for other minor crimes (such as mischief) increased, and that youth crime as a whole at the end of 2006 had fallen 6% from its 1995-6 levels. Perhaps most significantly, drug-related offences had increased tenfold from their levels a decade prior to the study, and although the majority of these crimes were related to possession of cannabis, crimes related to major narcotics (like cocaine) had doubled in the past decade (Statistics Canada, 2008).

While this may seem telling, it is important to remember that a number of confounding factors prevent the use of these statistics for predicting whether youth gang involvement is increasing, decreasing, or staying the same in Canada. For example, a harsher crackdown on drug crimes from 1996-2006 compared to preceding decades could cause a significant increase in drug-related criminal charges, even if actual drug-related activity in Canada stayed approximately the same.

a. Canadian Youth Gang Demographics: What Do We Know?

The same shortcomings which plague statistical information about the magnitude of the youth gang problem in Canada also blur our idea of the phenomenon's demographics. Keeping these shortcomings in mind, it is nonetheless instructive to note current estimates.

Approximately 94% of youth gang members in Canada are male, making the remaining 6% female (Mellor et al., 2005). According to the 2002 Canadian Police Survey on Youth Gangs, youth gangs in the western Canadian provinces may have a larger proportion of female members than in other provinces (Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2003). Members are recruited fairly young on average, with an estimated 48% of members under the age of 16. Approximately 25% of youth gang members in Canada are African American and 22% are First Nations, with the remaining 53% composed of various other ethnic groups, including an estimated 18% or more Caucasian members (Mellor et al., 2005). Although there is a great deal of information on the risk factors that may spur recent immigrants and refugees to gang membership at a higher rate than other groups, there is little information available regarding their membership rates.

b. The Criminal Activities of Canadian Youth Gangs

Previous reports approximate that youth gang members are primarily involved in drug trafficking (43%), followed by extortion (23%) and auto theft (19%). Involvement in other serious crimes like prostitution and human trafficking is likely smaller (Mellor, et al., 2005). However, these numbers do not include smaller-scale crimes such as graffiti and shop-lifting that tend to be perpetrated by 'wannabe' gang groups.

3. Youth Gangs in Edmonton: What the Numbers Say

Research has been particularly limited for Edmonton and the surrounding area. According to data from older publications, youth gangs have been problematic in the Edmonton area since the early 1980s (John Howard Society of Alberta [JHSA], 2001). By contrast, consider that the Canadian cities thought to have the earliest sustained youth gang issues – Vancouver and Surrey – date their problems back to the 1970s. The 2002 Canadian Police Survey on Youth Gangs found that there are approximately 42 youth gangs in Edmonton, with approximately 668 members (National Crime Prevention Center, 2007, *Youth Gangs in Canada*). This was a minority among the Western provinces - from the data collected by the Survey it appears that Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and British Columbia all have more gang activity than Alberta (Mellor et al., 2005).

There is very little published statistical data that can tell us accurately whether or not the youth gang population in Edmonton is increasing or decreasing. For example, a significant decline in property crime was the biggest factor behind an 8.1% drop in overall Edmonton crime rates from 2006 to 2007, but violent crime remained virtually unchanged, and drug-related crimes continued to increase (Edmonton Police Services 2009).

The following information is available with regards to the prevalence and appearance of each of the three major gang 'types' in Edmonton:

a. Wannabe Gang Groups

Little concrete information has been established regarding wannabe gang groups in Edmonton, probably because of the disorganized and transient nature of these groups. In addition, they are less likely than street gangs or criminal business organizations to take part in serious crimes that could come to the attention of the Edmonton Police Services or another reporting agency. We know a lot about what is likely to motivate youths to create or join a wannabe gang group, but less about how widespread this activity is in Edmonton. More is known about street gangs and criminal business networks.

b. Street Gangs

According to Community Solutions for Gang Violence, approximately 30 different street gangs have been identified in Edmonton (Erickson & LaRocque, 2009). Our primary research (Section II) found that although there are several 'fixture' street gangs in Edmonton, their identities and alliances are constantly shifting. There is no real consensus on which ones represent the most threat.

c. Criminal Business Organizations

The most concrete information is known about criminal business organizations; the most problematic type of such organization at the moment is Asian-based organized crime groups.

These gangs are involved in payment card fraud, illegal gambling endeavors, loan sharking, prostitution, human smuggling/trafficking, and the importation, production, and/or distribution of a variety of illicit drugs and substances. Eastern European-based organized crime is also emerging as a concern. Eastern-European groups are most known for credit fraud, drug importation, the export of stolen luxury vehicles, and human trafficking. Outlaw motorcycle gangs such as the Hells Angels are also a concern, but with sustained law enforcement efforts and resources directed against them over the past years their influence has diminished somewhat. The Hells Angels, for example, currently has 34 chapters and approximately 500 members in Alberta. Despite its recent growth in British Columbia and Ontario, however, its influence is weakening in the Alberta region (Criminal Intelligence Service Canada [CISC], 2004).

d. Edmonton Youth Gang Demographics: What Do We Know?

Many street gangs in Edmonton are organized around the basis of Aboriginal ethnicity. According to some reports there are approximately 9 different Aboriginal gangs in the Edmonton area, with several of these forming coalitions and linkages with the Hells Angels (JHSA, 2001). However, not all Edmonton street gangs are Aboriginal or even organized according to ethnic lines. There is less information available with regards to whether or not a similar trend exists within wannabe gang groups. There is little statistical data specific to Edmonton concerning whether certain ages, ethnicities or genders of Edmonton youth are more likely to become involved in youth gangs.

C. The Criminal Activities of Canadian Youth Gangs

According to Community Solutions for Gang Violence, the majority of street gangs and criminal business organizations in Edmonton engage primarily in street-level trafficking of illegal narcotics. Typically, criminal business organizations - such as the Hells Angels and Asian gangs - obtain drugs and funnel them down through smaller-scale criminal networks and street gangs. Division of responsibilities and authority within these networks is complex. When they are involved in these networks, youths are typically employed on the lower echelons as "dealers" - retailers who receive phone calls from consumers and deliver drugs to them. As previously stated, approximately 80% of the 1800 people involved in the drug trade in Edmonton are estimated to be 18-30 years old; this does not account for minors under the age of 18 who may be employed as dealers (Erickson & LaRocque, 2009).

There are probably minors involved in the other criminal activities engaged in by criminal business organizations in Edmonton. It is also well-known that youth-controlled street gangs and wannabe gang groups engage in criminal activities for financial gain. These crimes may include shop-lifting, car theft, extortion, prostitution, underage gambling, drug dealing, etc. In addition, all types of gangs may engage in illegal activities that are not motivated by profit, such as damage to public property or violence against fellow gang members (as punishment for rule infringement) or opposing gang members. Although we know that such activities exist, it is

extremely hard to quantify their occurrence. Again, the only solid data available comes from youth crime statistics held by the Edmonton Police Service. These numbers likely include many youths not actively involved in gangs, and leave out many gang-related incidents that, for whatever reason, are not reported.

D. Public Understanding of Youth Gangs: The Popular Media Lens

The tendency of the media to over-report crime and other negative events is well documented. Popular media tends to understand youth gangs through the lens of the crimes they commit - which means they tend to define such gangs as dangerous groups of criminal or delinquent youth. The information disseminated by non-profits, government groups, and law enforcement officials emphasizing the needs-based nature of youth gang formation is often outweighed by popular media coverage. This creates a public perception of youth gangs focused heavily on crime, and consequently a public desire to deal with the problem using law enforcement mechanisms such as incarceration and harsh penalties. These may, in fact, only make the problem worse in the long run.

It is important for the public to remember that reporters work to build their stories within limited time constraints and with limited information that typically does inadequate service to causes of the events or issues in question. Furthermore, the public needs to be reminded that the community has a large role to play in youth gang prevention and that, as citizens invested in growing healthy communities, it is their responsibility to educate themselves on the issue so as to better support effective action.

E. Understanding the Youth Gang Problem: What are the Motivations to Join Youth Gangs?

Children and youths have needs which must be met. Some of these needs are physical - youths must be able to access food, clothing, and shelter. They must also be able to protect themselves. Others are social and psychological - youths want to fit in with a social group, to feel worthy and wanted, and to perceive themselves as having control over their own destinies.

How youths choose to meet these needs is not simply a function of individual choice, but a reflection of the opportunities their environment offers to meet these needs. If a youth's experience with the world is positive, and if sufficient guidance towards constructive ways to meet these needs is available (if educational services available meet the needs of the youth; if he is able to find a peer group with whom he can form constructive relations; if his family and social network provide him with protection and social acceptance), then the youth is likely to make choices that can lead to healthy development. Sometimes, however, these supportive institutions and social groups are not available. In that case, the individual will meet these needs through whatever alternative he or she can access.

Factors that can sway or dissuade youth to gang involvement come in two main forms. Protective factors keep youths away from gang involvement; risk factors make involvement more likely. Since there are a multitude of such factors, we have divided them into the following basic sections: family, peer groups, school, society/community, and self/psychological.

1. The Family

A disrupted family life is one of the most common reasons youth turn towards gang membership. This is, in large part, because the family is responsible for fulfilling so many of a child or young adolescent's needs. First, consider physical needs. If children and youths are neglected, or if their parents cannot provide for them, gang membership may be a rational choice - the gang may provide a surrogate 'family', offering a familial-type safety, physical protection, and a means to meet physical needs.

The family is also the socialization vehicle meant to guide children and youth towards appropriate ways to meet physical and social needs in the future. If family members choose to meet their own needs or the needs of their family through gang or other illicit or illegal activities, their children are socialized to believe that such behavior is positive - or at the very least, a normal option.

It is important that youth and their families are taught how to communicate and fulfill needs so as to prevent the necessity of a surrogate family (Reno, Fisher, Robinson, Brennan, & Gist, 1998). Consistent with these findings, our primary research respondents listed familial gang ties as a major source of youth gang involvement in Edmonton (Section II).

2. Peer Groups

Like the family, peer groups offer two distinct routes for gang involvement. First, the need for social acceptance and the approval of a peer group is very strong throughout adolescence. Youth, particularly those suffering from one or several other risk factors and who are without a strong peer group or are rejected by available peers at a young age, will be disproportionately likely to seek out social approval from alternative sources such as youth gangs (Reno et al., 1998). For these youths, membership offers a sense of acceptance, fraternity and inclusion that may not be available elsewhere.

Youth may also be more likely to join a gang if they have access to a peer group with strong connections to a youth gang. The importance of maintaining peer relations can exert incredibly strong social pressures - a youth might join a gang out of fear of losing peer relations otherwise.

3. School

The performance of a child or youth in school is affected by all of these other factors, but school performance is a factor that may itself lead to gang involvement. How a youth performs in school is, statistically, a relatively good indicator of how economically successful s/he is going to be in later life. When students have problems doing well in school, and/or when they believe

that they will not succeed economically regardless of their academic success because of some other factor (usually a demographic one beyond their control), they may turn to youth gang activity. This may be seen as an alternative means of meeting economic needs that would typically be met by academic achievement and subsequent employment. Statistics suggest that youth can earn approximately \$2500 to \$30 000 per month in illegal activity (JHSA, 2001). When youths feel that the education and/or skills needed to make this much money in the conventional economy are beyond their reach, the choice to participate in youth gangs may seem like an easy one.

The school environment can be an important factor in whether or not the youth succeeds academically. An insufficient, non-attentive, undemanding, overly-demanding, or generally poor academic environment can lead to youth feeling worthless, unintelligent, and/or unskilled. Likewise, lack of educational opportunities such as diverse study tracks and trade apprenticeships create a 'one size fits all' approach to education. This may cause struggling students to turn to alternative employment opportunities. Schools with insufficient disciplinary systems may fail to pick up on and take appropriate action to combat youth gang activities.

Steven Baron conducted an Edmonton-area study in 1997 in which he concluded that a major cause of youth gang membership in the city is a combination of a poor home environment and poor school performance. Specifically, he found that students abused at home (physically, emotionally, or through neglect) tended to suffer from problems in school at a disproportionately higher rate than those students who did not face such abuse. Furthermore, the presence of both of these factors correlated with a strong likelihood of becoming involved in youth gangs (Police Service of Edmonton, 2000).

4. Self

Youth gang membership is tempting because it gives many youth a sense of belonging and security. External factors play an important role in determining whether or not youths are likely to look to gangs for these things. However, psychological temperament is an equally important factor. Youth with self-esteem issues are often susceptible to youth gang recruitment, particularly when they are not able to access support from their friends and family members. To these individuals, youth gang membership may be the easiest option for membership in a social group.

On the other side of the coin, youth gang membership provides a great deal of potential for personal gain, both material and otherwise (Police Service of Edmonton, 2000). Hence, youth who are attracted to the prospect of achieving and wielding power may also be disproportionately likely to join youth gangs.

Youth gang involvement is also likely among youths who are already living the 'lifestyle' of a youth gang member (with components such as alcohol or drug abuse, frequent truancy, behavior/disciplinary problems, and/or negative involvement with the police). The actions necessary to maintain youth gang involvement, and the potential consequences to those actions, are less of a barrier to participation for someone who is already engaged in them. The

presence of such behaviors is not necessarily due to a pre-existing psychological temperament or condition, but this possibility should not be excluded.

5. Society/The Community

A youth's interaction with and perceptions of society can play a significant role in determining the attractiveness of youth gang involvement as a lifestyle option. There are a wide variety of social activities that are available to engage youth as alternatives to participation in youth gangs. Extracurricular activities such as sports, art and music, and volunteering are all options that help youths develop concrete skills while simultaneously directing them to work constructively and thereby develop their sense of self-worth. If opportunities for participation in these programs are cut off for certain groups of youth, through prohibitive expense, parental restrictions, or other factors, those youths have fewer 'productive' activities with which to occupy themselves.

The community that a youth is brought up in can be a significant factor in whether or not youth gang activity is pursued. If the community in question is plagued by a high volume of social problems that typically coexist with gang activity – such as high rates of unemployment or underemployment, low levels of educational attainment, population transience, and high incidence of criminal activity – then significant pro-socialization opportunities are required at home, in school and in the community to avoid the acceptance of these problems as 'the norm.' The most important of these socialization factors is the existence of gangs and/or youth gangs in the community. If a child or youth is socialized to believe that membership in a gang is a normal or even desirable part of life in a community, subsequent gang involvement will be much more likely.

A different problem altogether is the possibility that youths may, for a variety of reasons, see themselves, their peer group, or their family as 'not belonging' in mainstream society. If this belief is strong enough they may decide that membership in mainstream society is an unattainable goal and may engage in youth gang activity as a more accessible alternative. This can particularly be the case with recent immigrants. In a recent Vancouver study on Chinese gangs, members of these gangs were found to be male and recent immigrants to Canada. These youths all had family and school related problems. In addition, they all felt that they were victims of discrimination and that their ambitions for material wealth were blocked by their ethnic origins and relatively poor English-speaking abilities. They saw themselves as excluded from the mainstream population and therefore directed their efforts towards belonging to the youth gang subculture (Wortley & Tanner, 2007).

F. Understanding Youth Gang Activity

1. Stages of Involvement

The youth who is peripherally involved in a wannabe gang group may have a totally different 'youth gang' experience than the hardened street gang member, even though both may have originally joined gangs for the same reasons. Native Counselling Services have developed a set of guidelines through which it is possible to pinpoint a youth's level of involvement in the youth gang lifestyle (Erickson & Larocque, 2009). It is worth noting that these are guidelines only, not boxes into which all gang members may necessarily fit. Although youth typically progress upward through the stages, this is by no means always the case.

Level One Involvement

- Emulation, experimenting with street gang image
- Focus on socialization: belonging, identity
- Infrequent, opportunistic property crime and tagging (graffiti)
- Bullying
- Possible drug-running at this stage
- Generally able to cease activity without serious consequences
- May be victimized by other, more serious street gangs

Level Two Involvement

- Identity crystallizing around membership in the group/cliue
- Greater frequency of drug-alcohol usage
- More serious antisocial behavior: intimidation, vandalism, etc.
- Heightened criminal activity: extortion, theft, burglary
- Increased disruption at home and school
- Leaving may result in threats and/or consequences
- Fledgling rivalries: posturing, making/defacing graffiti, assaults
- Young people at this stage may express concern about going out without backup from other members of the group/cliue, due to potential problems with rivals

Level Three Involvement

- Exclusive relationships: membership is youth's core identity
- Drug use may be at center of socialization
- Established criminal orientation: person and/or property crimes
- May begin 'turf claiming' (controlling territory)
- Likely to be expelled/dropped out of school
- Criminal history likely, incarceration possible.
- Established, violent rivalries involving weapons

- Possible ascension in organization
- Leaving brings serious consequences and may no longer be an option.

Level Four Involvement

- Departure from non-street gang society
- Criminal identity developed
- Incarceration accepted as an aspect of street gang lifestyle; have likely done more than one "bit" of federal time
- "At war" mentality with rivals and police: injury to innocents is acceptable.
- May want to leave street gang lifestyle at this point due to disillusionment.
- Leaving a street gang is not generally an option: attempts may result in death.

2. Leaving the Gang

Generally, the more involved a youth is in a youth gang, the harder it is for that youth to cut off involvement. Youths at lower levels of involvement tend to be members of gangs with looser organizational structures which engage only in relatively minor criminal activities. It is often relatively easy even for core members of these organizations to leave, since membership is fairly fluid and the worry about a youth 'ratting' on the organization is not likely to be as great (the scale of criminal activity is smaller compared to more organized gangs). Conversely, even peripheral involvement in street gangs or criminal business networks can be very difficult to abandon.

It should not be assumed that the desire of a youth to leave the gang environment decreases as he or she becomes more involved. There are a number of possible reasons why youth at higher stages of involvement may become disillusioned with gang activity. This can include experiences with incarceration and/or physical violence. These may lead them to doubt the protective and supportive nature of the gang or to realize that the gang's activities are more risky than previously thought. Other life experiences, such as having children, changing relationships with one's family and peer groups, and/or the introduction of a positive role model, can also produce value shifts that clash with those of the gang lifestyle (Erickson & LaRocque, 2009).

The physical danger of leaving the gang increases with the knowledge that a youth holds on the activities of the gang, the importance of their role in the operations of the gang, and whether or not they are perceived as a liability to other members. The degree of such danger also depends on the specific nature and operations of the gang in question. If the youth is peripheral to the gang's involvement, has no special or intimate knowledge of its workings that could prove a liability, and if the gang's membership is fairly fluid and flexible, exiting could be fairly easy. Conversely, if the structure is rigid, the role the youth plays in the gang's organization is pivotal, or s/he has access to crucial information, then an attempt to leave the gang will likely be met with severe deterrents, including physical violence (Erickson & LaRocque, 2009).

G. Taking Action on the Youth Gang Issue

1. Strategies: Suppression, Prevention and Intervention

Typically, three different strategies are used to address the youth gang problem. These strategies are suppression, prevention, and intervention (RCMP, 2006).

- **Suppression** programs deal with gang problems through the use of law enforcement tactics. This typically focuses on the punishment of gang members and the removal of those members from the community.
- **Prevention** approaches work to minimize risk factors and maximize protective factors in children and early adolescents so that when these children reach adolescence, they will not be (as) vulnerable to youth gang involvement.
- **Intervention** works with individuals involved in or at risk of becoming involved in gangs, through the provision of programs that provide alternative means for youths to meet needs that gang involvement could otherwise meet.

a. Suppression

Many measures focus on suppression, such as zero tolerance policies that hold gang members publicly responsible for their actions, and using increased surveillance to monitor and control gang activity. These are likely to be ineffective ways of dealing with the youth gang phenomenon in the long term; they do not address the root causes of gang activity. Indeed, 'crackdowns' on youth gangs will likely lead to increased media attention which may only elevate gangs and gang members in the eyes of at-risk youth, making them seem exciting and elusive.

In addition, the use of harsh suppression measures against youth gang members will typically lead to these members being incarcerated at high rates and for long periods of time. It is well-known among criminologists that incarceration is not an effective long-term method to deal with youth crime. Correctional institutions reinforce gang connections, socialize youths into criminal networks, and reinforce the belief that gang structures are the best way to deal with life. According to primary and secondary research, correctional facilities are one of the main targeted areas of youth gang recruitment (Mellor et al., 2005).

Alternatives for law enforcement agencies

The literature suggests proactive steps that law enforcement agencies can take to more adequately address the root causes of youth gang activity while still maintaining the ultimate priority of law enforcement. These include programs that educate youth on the legal ramifications of gang membership. A variety of such programs exist in Canada and the United

States; one particularly well-documented pilot program utilized the Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT) Program implemented in Tennessee in the 1990s. The GREAT program focused on communicating the consequences of gang membership to elementary school children. Police used class time to conduct lectures, interactive discussion groups, and activities to reinforce how dangerous youth gangs are and to teach students how to avoid recruitment. The GREAT program also offers a component for families to help them understand how to keep their children away from youth gangs (Ramsey, Rust & Sobel, 2003). Programs such as this do not address the fundamental reasons for youth gang involvement, and as such should not serve as the primary strategy of any community for addressing youth gang involvement. They are likely to be useful, however, when paired with programs that do meet needs that youths would otherwise fulfill through gang membership.

Youth Gang Suppression Efforts in Canada and Edmonton

The federal government has provided various law enforcement agencies with an allowance to help them target and suppress youth gangs. In 2000, the RCMP received a multi-year \$584 million allocation to target youth gangs using prevention, intervention, and suppression strategies. Because the RCMP is a law enforcement agency, most of this money was allocated towards suppression efforts. In recent years, the federal government has also examined harsher penalties for violent and gang-related youth offences. The Criminal Code has recently been amended to include a broader definition of gang activity and now allows for harsher penalties for crimes committed by those in youth gangs. In April 2001, federal anti-gang legislation was passed which increased the severity of penalties for youths involved in gangs (JHSA, 2001). After the introduction of the Young Offenders Act the rate of detention for youths in Canada (209 per 100 000) increased to a rate higher than that of adults (151 per 100 000), suggesting that more youths were sentenced under the new Act. Median sentence lengths for youths increased to a length comparable to adult sentences for a number of both property and violent crimes (JHSA, 1998).

Significant resources are also being directed towards gang suppression strategies in Alberta. In October 2008, funding was provided for four new 'enforcement' teams created across the province to combat organized crime. These units came into force in April 2009 (Alberta Strong Communities, 2008). In June 2009, the Alberta government made its latest allocations relating to its long-term crime reduction strategy. This included funding for fifty more sheriff positions throughout the province (Government of Alberta, 2009).

The priority of the Edmonton Police Service remains law enforcement. They also take part in proactive educating and relationship building - for example, they have a tradition of giving presentations to school youths about the dangers of gang involvement. Our primary research indicates that they are working with a number of organizations that currently provide services to at-risk youth not only for the purpose of information sharing, but also to learn more about youth at risk of becoming involved in gangs and the problems that these youth face. As indicated in Section II, development and expansion of positive relationships between these organizations, their youth clients, and the EPS can only be beneficial in the long run.

b. Prevention and Intervention

Prevention and intervention strategies for dealing with the youth gang problem are similar. Both look at the root causes of gang involvement with the purpose of providing alternate avenues through which youths can meet their needs. Prevention programs aim to provide those avenues before youth become involved in gangs; intervention programs focus youth who have already attained gang membership.

These programs are likely to be more effective for dealing with the youth gang problem than suppression programs because they identify and target the sources of the problem rather than trying to suppress its symptoms. The more effectively the program targets the risk and protective factors (in the case of preventative services) or the needs that youths are meeting with youth gang involvement (in the case of intervention services), the more successful the program will be. An added emphasis is put on early action in most of the literature. Preventative programs are effective as early as possible; the more time that an at-risk child has to develop positive relationships and supports before adolescence, the stronger those supports will be. He or she will be less likely to turn to gang activity to replace or supplement them. Similarly, intervening strategies which provide youth with alternative ways of meeting emotional and psychological needs are most successful when youth are in the early stages of gang involvement. During this time, the youth's sense of identity and social network is not as closely tied to gang membership, and there are fewer negative consequences associated with leaving the gang.

Prevention and Intervention in Canada and Edmonton

According to a report prepared by the Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family in 2005, there are 77 anti-gang youth programs available in Canada. Eight of these are located in Alberta, of which five are in Edmonton (Mellor et al., 2005). This tally is problematic, as it only includes programs that have the explicit mandate of reducing youth gang involvement. Any program that develops protective factors and minimizes risk factors is a preventative program, and any initiative that provides at-risk or gang-affiliated youth with alternative pathways through which to meet their needs is an intervening program. A program does not need to have the minimization of youth gang activity as its mandate to make a significant difference.

The most recent development in Edmonton with respect to programs that target anti-gang activity is the final report of the Edmonton Task Force on Community Safety, released in September 2009 (Lindsay & Rayner, 2009). The *Reach Report* is an important landmark because it advocates prevention as the prime tool for minimizing youth violence and crime, aiming to develop supports for at-risk children before youth gang membership is an attractive option. The strategies presented focus on creating relationships between the City, parents, schools, and service providers (National Crime Prevention Centre, 2007, *Addressing Youth Gang Problems*). However, the Task Force report provides no cost projections or allocations of funds. The city

needs to back up this new dedication to preventative and intervening programs with funds and other supports (McKeen, 2009).

It would be impossible to list every program in Edmonton. Government and non-profit programs that assist the family and provide for the physical and emotional needs of children with abusive or absent parents; programs that help children achieve academic success; after-school options that help children form productive peer networks and develop feelings of capability and self-worth - all of these programs are, in a very real sense, gang prevention programs. Because of the age range that they typically deal with it is rare for these programs to specify gang prevention as a goal. However, particularly among programs that operate in 'high risk' areas where gang activity is concentrated, this is an operational goal regardless.

Through our primary research, we became aware of a new preventative program in Edmonton developed by Community Solutions to Gang Violence in partnership with several organizations. This program has the explicit mandate of reducing youth gang involvement. The program will work with children, beginning at age 11, who are at-risk of becoming involved with youth gangs. The program will work to address risk factors and strengthen protective factors with the goal of preventing gang involvement later in life.

As stated previously, any program that provides an alternate way for a youth involved in a gang to meet physical, emotional, and psychological needs through other avenues than the gang lifestyle is an intervention program. These programs can include job information or retraining programs, shelters and missions, and community centers where youths can form alternate social networks. Other programs have the more explicit aim of providing individuals with alternatives from the gang lifestyle. In Edmonton, the Gang Awareness Intervention Network (GAIN), formerly the Edmonton Native Alliance, was founded in 2000 by Rob Papin. As an ex-gang member, Papin is interested in offering aboriginal youth a chance to choose a healthy, constructive lifestyle connected to their traditional aboriginal culture over gang involvement. GAIN assists at-risk, current, and prior gang members with a variety of services and programs (Matwychuk, 2005). Native Counselling Services (NCS) also does a significant amount of work with youth actively or at risk of being involved in gangs, offering programs to help these youths meet their needs through more productive channels. In addition, NCS works with active gang members who have decided to limit or end their gang involvement (Native Counselling Services of Alberta, 2007).

c. Non-program solutions: the role of parents and other positive role models

Parents and other adults who support youth are often pivotal influences in the decision to partake in gang-related activity. Ineffective, abusive, or otherwise problematic relationships create risk factors. Authority figures often struggle to be strong protectors against gang involvement for youths. The following is a list of behaviours that such role models should emphasize when interacting and communicating with these youths (Police Service of Edmonton, 2000; Reno, J. et al, 1998; National Crime Preventer Centre, 2007 *Youth Gang Involvement*):

- Always practice honest and open communication.
- Cooperate with the youth to locate his or her needs and seek out mutually agreeable ways of meeting those needs.
- Guide the youth regularly towards practices or programs that s/he could participate in that would meet those needs.
- Strive to always set a positive example.
- Offer unconditional support and positive regard to the youth.
- Set and maintain boundaries.
- Make sure that the negative consequences of gang involvement are clear.

Section II: What We Heard: Primary Research

Due to the lack of adequate Edmonton-specific information, primary research was conducted in hopes of collecting and analyzing information to create a better overview of the current status of Edmonton-based youth gangs. The goals of our interviews were:

- to determine the primary motivators for Edmonton youth gang membership
- to develop an idea of what programs are currently operating and what programs are needed in the Edmonton area
- to collect the Edmonton community's perception of youth gang activity, stressors and trends

Our primary data collection process consisted of in-person interviews conducted with representatives from five non-profit service providers. We tried to strike a balance among agencies surveyed between the geographic focus of each organization and the main services of the agency. Appendix One lists the names of participant organizations.

Respondents were asked open-ended questions and were given the opportunity to elaborate or add information as they wished. Some interesting patterns, commonalities, and discrepancies emerged among responses. In order to explore and identify these points of interest, we have chosen to discuss responses to each question in aggregate rather than separating the responses of individual agencies. Appendix Two contains a complete list of all interview questions.

1. How would you say that your organization defines 'youth gang'? If your organization does use a standard definition for 'youth gang,' please describe what this term means to you, and/or to your co-workers.

As expected, there were large variations between the definitions used by different agencies. All respondents characterized a youth gang member as a member of a gang comprised of or organized by youth, rather than simply a youth member of a gang. This definition may neglect youths who are members of street gangs or criminal business networks controlled by adults.

This was the only real commonality among definitions. Although the definitions used by different agencies did not directly conflict with one another, they emphasized different things. Some reinforced the importance of common rules or symbols used by the gang to communicate and enforce order, while others emphasized the nature of a youth gang as a vehicle to meet needs, protect oneself physically, and enjoy a sense of belonging and community. Most definitions recognized that youth gangs could exist with varying levels of organizational structure and/or seriousness in crime and criminal intent. At least one respondent emphasized that youth gangs tend to be defined differently by their members than they are by bystanders (particularly adult bystanders). This respondent noted that whereas those who work against youth gangs tend to define them by antisocial actions, to gang members they are frequently chiefly a source of social acceptance and protection. Although criminal and delinquent

behaviors may come hand in hand with this, youth members may not see them as a defining factor.

2. Do you now or have you dealt with members of the Edmonton youth population who were designated as at-risk for youth gang activity, or whom you knew had participated or were participating currently in youth gang activity? If yes, can you please elaborate on those experiences? Would you be willing to estimate a proportion of youths that you deal with who are involved in these activities in some way?

The proportion and variety of gang members seen by respondents tended to depend on the geographic area of Edmonton in which that respondent's organization was located, and on the specific type of at-risk youth serviced by the organization. Most programs reported that a very high proportion of their youth clients were involved in gang activity (one organization reported an approximate rate of 60-75%). However, most of these ties are somewhat superficial, involving name association or small-scale employment such as drug handling or 'running' drugs for money, versus actively taking part in the gang as a lifestyle choice.

Another respondent said that almost every youth who participates in her program knows someone—a family member, a friend—who is involved in a youth gang. Rates of involvement are particularly high among youths who are living on and off the streets and in and out of shelters, because these youths are lonelier and have fewer means to meet their physical needs than other youths. The outlier in the group was a small service provider based on the Southside which reported affiliation rates of 2-3 youths out of about 50 per day. Like other respondents, this organization reported that the majority of gang members they meet do not have serious ties to criminal organizations – they are individuals who were former gang members but are no longer involved, people familiar with the 'lifestyle' because of their friends' and family's involvement, or individuals involved in 'wannabe' gang groups but had little experience with more serious gangs.

3. Would you be willing to estimate whether or not this proportion has increased, decreased or stayed approximately the same among the individuals that you worked with during the last decade, or during the time you have been in your current positions?

All agencies reported that, as far as they could tell, the number of youth clients their organization had dealt with who were affiliated or at-risk of youth gang involvement had increased in the last few years, although no agency could offer statistics to back up this perception. One agency stressed that although there has been an increase in gang affiliations, more importantly there has been a recent increase in staff awareness of gang activity. Recent developments have caused some organizations to initiate increased dialogue about youth gang involvement both among staff members and between staff members and at-risk youth. Several organizations mentioned that dialogue about this topic had been hampered in the past by policies that required all gang 'colours' and insignia to be removed before services were rendered. This policy resulted in youths getting the impression that gang involvement was

'frowned upon', and as a result they didn't talk about it much. Now that some organizations have adopted more open policies, dialogue is increasing.

4. Could you estimate the number of Youth Gangs in the Edmonton Area.

No respondent was willing to go on record and estimate an approximate number of youth gangs in the Edmonton area. This was not unexpected. As already discussed, wannabe groups and even street gangs are a quickly changing phenomenon, and multiple factions may quickly form, link with other gangs, and then disappear. There are likely also numerous gangs that exist but never make it into the consciousness of service providers and law enforcement officials simply because membership is not reported.

This quick-changing nature supports the assertion that youth gangs are not simply a law enforcement problem to be eradicated through a numbers war, but a symptom of deep-seated social problems that can only remedied by addressing root issues.

5. Through the course of your work, have you become aware of specifically large, well-known, or problematic youth gangs in Edmonton? If yes, please describe what you know about these gangs.

No respondent was willing to go on the record with a specific number of well-known gangs, but almost everyone had specific names they had heard a lot either historically or recently. Red Alert, Indian Posse, and White Boy Posse were commonly mentioned. Interestingly, different respondents typically named different gangs, a phenomenon partially explained by the fact that they worked in different areas of the city. However, more than once a coworker responded with different names than a colleague had. This suggests that there are a number of well-known or problematic gangs in Edmonton that are composed of youth or actively recruit youth members, and that there is no consensus on which of these gangs pose the biggest threat to youths.

Respondents also mentioned that, although some gangs are mentioned more than others, the majority of youths affiliate more with 'crews'. These are loose groups of young people that come together for the purpose of non-criminal activities like graffiti and partying, or to fulfill social and/or physical needs.

Again, it was emphasized by several stakeholders that specific details of gang affiliation are not frequently discussed with organization staff. It is the policy of many organizations not to question youth about their gang involvement, both because this could create legal complications and because it could put youth at risk. Other service providers have no such policy, but representatives report that youth don't tend to discuss their involvement because they know that, if they discuss it, staff will attempt to dissuade them from continuing it. They also know it could be grounds for termination of services (such as losing a spot in a group home, etc).

6. Have you experienced working with youths with a wide range of seriousness in youth gang involvement (informal organization versus semi-formal organization versus serious criminal organization)? Would you say that any one of these affiliations is any more common than the others, or are they all pretty much the same/equally prominent?

Every respondent mentioned having seen the full range of 'seriousness' in youth gang involvement. However, most also said that the majority of gang affiliations that they see are with minor 'wannabe' groups rather than serious criminal gangs. Several respondents mentioned that 'hard core' or serious gang members tend to be turned off by service providers because of the rules such organizations have against showing gang colours or speaking about gang affiliations while on the organization's property.

7. Would you say that the involvement of youth you deal with in serious criminal endeavors (like drug trafficking, prostitution, large-scale theft, etc.) has decreased, increased, or stayed the same during the past several years (we're looking at recent trends, so whatever time frame works well for you).

Respondents confirmed that the youths they work with do participate in these activities but either could not offer any information on whether or not such activities had increased or decreased, or mentioned that they had not seen a big increase. A common thread among respondents was that youths who are seriously involved in these activities typically do not access the resources they offer. If the youth is involved enough in a gang to participate in these activities, his needs are most likely being met by these activities and he does not require a service provider to meet them.

8. Do you think that Edmonton youth gangs are more involved in "minor" illegal activities (such as petty theft, vandalism, underage drinking) than they were a decade ago, less involved, or do they have approximately the same level of involvement?

Response to this question were relatively limited. The general perception is that, among youths that they work with, minor crimes – particularly those related to financial gain (car theft, shoplifting, breaking and entering, etc.) – have increased within the last year or two. It is possible that this increase in activity, if representative of the experiences of organizations in general and not just our sample, could be the result of increased economic hardship brought about by the recession. However, we do not know enough about other possible factors to determine whether causality is present or whether another factor is responsible for this increase.

9. Do you think that violence between gangs/gang members is becoming a bigger issue, a less important issue, or an issue of the same importance now as it was a decade ago?

Most respondents reported that there has been a general increase in violence among youth, but are not sure how this increase is related to gang activity since it is also affecting youths who are not affiliated with a gang. One respondent stressed that, in her experience, the increase has

been not just in the amount of violence but also in the level of hostility: her program has seen more violence with weapons, and more brutal bodily violence in general. This trend has occurred mainly within the last year. Another respondent reported that although reporting rates of violent incidents may have increased, her personal experiences with violent conduct haven't changed during this period.

It is worth noting that much of the information about violence comes from second-hand accounts: representatives from shelters and group homes report that typically there are no violent incidents on the property, but youth clients often speak about threats of violence or arrive back at the shelter in conditions that make it clear that physical violence has occurred. It is quite common for youth to avoid places or situations to avoid threats of violence. However, this is neither limited to youth involved in gang activities nor is it necessarily a new phenomenon.

10. From your experience working with your organization's target population, what would you say are the greatest determinants of youth gang involvement (factors such as socioeconomic status and opportunities, socialization/being raised into a gang environment, friendships, physical protection, etc)? Do you, personally, see some of these being a greater determinant than others?

Relationships

Respondents unanimously pointed to the support systems and relationships of at-risk youth as the number one determinant of youth gang involvement. Their responses strongly support and echo our conclusions from secondary research that familial and peer relationships are some of the most important motivating factors behind gang involvement. If the support system of a youth is family or friends who are already involved in the gang lifestyle, risk of involvement becomes much greater for the youth. Conversely, if the youth is lacking a peer support system and finds it difficult to access one through socially approved pathways, the likelihood of gang affiliation also increases. The same logic extends to familial relations; when the family does not provide for the physical and emotional needs of the youth, s/he may then turn to gang participation to fill those needs.

Several respondents noted that youth living on the street or in shelters are more likely than those still living at home to become involved in youth gangs. This is because these youth lack protective relationships – they are separated from their families and do not have basic physical and emotional needs met. In addition, they are typically either not involved in a peer group (making gang involvement attractive for social reasons) or are fraternizing with other at-risk youth who are also disproportionately likely to be involved in gang activity.

One respondent mentioned that when discussing the strength of familial and peer relations, societal acceptance of these relations should also be considered. If the larger society's values do not connect with those of a youth's immediate circle they may feel as though they do not belong in society and may look to other sub-cultures more accepting of their values. The

respondent noted that she sees this phenomenon most commonly with Aboriginal and recently immigrated youth.

Socioeconomic status and opportunities

A lack of socioeconomic opportunities was mentioned as a secondary factor that is still important in determining risk for gang activity. Poor educational achievement, access or success severely limits the kinds of jobs that youths have access to. Youths involved in or at risk of becoming involved in gangs are, according to our respondents, disproportionately likely to suffer in school. Whatever social acceptance youth in this situation may gain from gang involvement is secondary to the gang's ability to provide for the youth economically. The risk of this reasoning increases when youths are socialized into an environment that sees gang involvement as positive or unremarkable. Respondents note that it is not uncommon in some areas of the city for children to grow up wearing gang colours and identifying with members of a certain gang from a very young age. This kind of socialization also typically makes getting out of the gang lifestyle more difficult and therefore less likely.

Self

As noted in the secondary research, self-esteem can play a big role in whether or not a youth chooses to become involved with gangs. A youth's sense of self-respect and capability can play a large role in determining to what extent he or she will seek out external validations (such as being accepted into a youth gang), or how capable he or she feels acting independently as opposed to with a group. Psychological factors play an especially important role when combined with some of the risk factors described above. If a youth with low self-esteem has a supportive peer and/or familial network, he or she is likely to turn to them for support and validation before gang involvement becomes a possibility. If these networks are absent, there is a much greater risk of involvement.

There is strong anecdotal evidence to suggest that youth with positive role models are much less likely to get involved in youth gangs. This is true even if the role models are not members of the youth's family or peer group, and even if they are acting in a paid or 'official' capacity (i.e. teachers, counselors, non-profit workers, etc).

Gang image

Finally, respondents stressed that an explicit desire to form a gang or be involved in the gang lifestyle is not as important a factor as is commonly thought. This is particularly true with youths who form or become involved in 'wannabe' gang groups. One respondent stressed that if youths have one or several of the risk factors above, gang involvement can seem like a non-choice. A youth living on the street without a strong support network faces violence and the other negative factors that many people associate with youth gang involvement whether or not he or she is actually involved in a gang – these are simply features of his or her environment. For at-risk youth, non-participation in gangs may mean a lack of physical safety, the loss of a way to meet physical needs, or the end of an opportunity to gain or maintain a social network.

This is not to say that youths don't identify with or idolize the members of more serious street gangs and criminal business organizations, or that a sense of pride in membership is not a powerful attractor. In most cases, though, the desire for this pride and new sense of group identity is produced by, and secondary to, the fact that the gang fulfills so many of the needs left unfulfilled due to the risk factors above. Particularly with young members of 'wannabe' groups, while a certain admiration of criminal gangs is often present, the 'gang' typically starts as a social group and evolves organically into a gang that may organize a certain amount of criminal behavior. Often there is no explicit direction to this evolution, and criminal behavior is not the fundamental reason for the gang's existence.

11. From your experience working with your organization's target population, would you say that there is any difference between recent immigrants and Canadian-born youth as far as risk for youth gang involvement, or are there merely different factors at work in each case (please elaborate on these factors)?

The presence of barriers to productive development, rather than one's origins, determine how likely one is to become active in youth gangs. Canadian and immigrant youth face different obstacles and, depending on their circumstances, neither group necessarily faces more than the other. Immigrant youth may be more likely to suffer the obstacles described in the 'family' section above. Parental figures may find it hard to adjust to life in Canada and may face economic barriers which make it hard for them to devote adequate attention to their children. The reality of life in a strange country, moreover, can make it harder for youth to adjust to school life or peer groups to find the support and encouragement they are not getting at home.

These circumstances, however, are by no means limited to recent immigrant families. There are a myriad of other reasons family structures may not be available or effective. These include purposeful and avoidable abuse or neglect. There is no reason to believe that these problems affect either immigrant families or native-born Canadian families to a greater extent. Several respondents compared the situation of recent immigrant youth to the situation of Aboriginal youth – they, too, may have difficulty adjusting to and/or interacting with Canadian socialization structures, they may see mainstream culture as unfamiliar and alienating, and may face splintered social networks and family environments where parents are afflicted with a disproportionate number of problems (substance abuse problems, low education and employment rates, etc).

Refugee populations may face different barriers than the general immigrant populations not only because of often-inadequate socialization into Canadian culture. They may have past experience in violent environments where antisocial behaviors were rewarded because they allow for survival. Several respondents mentioned that beliefs held by refugee youth and children when they arrive in Canada are very conducive to early membership in youth gangs in Canada. Refugee youth and children often believe that law enforcement is ineffective, that violence is an inevitable way to solve problems, that physical protection comes at a premium price and that gang membership is an effective and acceptable way of dealing with all these

problems. However, it must be acknowledged that such beliefs may also be developed by children who have grown up in similarly violent and socially problematic neighborhoods elsewhere in Canada or Edmonton.

Youths with these socialized expectations may find the prospective of leaving the gang lifestyle particularly difficult or unattractive. One reason for this is that the gang in which the youth is involved may effectively *be* his or her peer group. A recently immigrated youth who has been unable to connect with friends at school or in extracurricular activities may be unable to imagine a social circle outside of the gang. Along the same lines, as mentioned above, one of the reasons why these youths may be attracted to youth gangs is because the structure and ideology of such gangs is more in line with the paradigms into which they have been socialized. Mainstream society and the conventional labour market may not be in line with these paradigms, making the prospect of forging a life in this society overwhelming and unattractive.

One major difference between recent immigrant youth gang members and Canadian-born members is that recent immigrants tend to join gangs with a very strong, homogenous ethnic affiliation (Chinese immigrants, for example, are more likely to join a 'Chinese' youth gang than they are a heterogeneous gang). Canadian born youth are more likely than recent immigrants to join gangs with a more heterogeneous membership. The exception to this general rule is Aboriginal youth, who tend to join gangs that self-identify as Aboriginal gangs based mainly around ethnicity.

12. In your experience, would you say that there is a specific ethnic group that appears to be the most vulnerable to youth gang involvement in Edmonton?

There was considerable difference among responses to this question. Several respondents answered that youth gang membership as seen by their organization is more strongly correlated with other factors than it is with ethnicity. In the words of one respondent – “membership doesn't follow any rules or trends – any youth could be involved.” Another respondent reported that Aboriginal Canadian youth at her Southside organization tend to be particularly susceptible to youth gang involvement.

One respondent noted that many of the richest adult-controlled criminal business networks in Edmonton tend to be based along ethnic (Asian or Eastern European) lines, but this does not necessarily mean that youth from these ethnic groups will be more likely to join gangs than youths of other ethnicities. Another respondent mentioned that youths involved or at risk of involvement in 'wannabe' groups tend to idolize gangs formed along their own ethnic lines (Caucasian youths at this particular organization, for example, tended to idolize the Hell's Angels, while Aboriginal youths tended to idolize the large Edmonton Aboriginal gangs like Red Alert and Indian Posse.) This does not indicate an increased susceptibility for involvement, however – only that the youths in question are able to identify with the members of these gangs because of their ethnicity, because of the structure of the gang, or for other reasons altogether.

13. From your experiences dealing with your organization’s target population, how strong does the link appear to be between youth gang involvement and socioeconomic status?

Respondents frequently noted that the nature of their programs meant that the youths they worked with were those that came from lower socioeconomic environments. Several reported that, while it is rare for them to see an individual of middle or upper socioeconomic status involved in gang activity, this is probably because they rarely see such individuals at all. One respondent noted that while she does see a minority of very affluent youth becoming involved in gangs, these gangs are typically ethnically-based criminal business networks, and the youth is introduced via family connections. Membership in wannabe gangs and street gangs, conversely, tends to correlate more strongly with a lower socioeconomic status.

One respondent noted a stronger correlation between youth gang activity and homelessness, and that although homeless youths may have little money themselves, they are not necessarily disproportionately likely to *come from* homes with lower socioeconomic statuses. The respondent’s organization, a youth shelter, sees youths from across the full range of socioeconomic status. This respondent also noted that there is some differentiation between the reasons why youths with different socioeconomic statuses will join gangs. Youth from an affluent home might have a self-perception of having fewer ‘street smarts’ and might want to join a gang out of desire for physical protection. In contrast, a youth from a lower socioeconomic neighborhood where gang activity is more common might join one because others in his peer group join.

14. Based on your experience with adolescents, what would you say is the typical and/or most problematic/at-risk age for Edmonton youth to be recruited into an Edmonton gang? Related to this, what would you say the age range is for recruitment into and/or involvement in youth gangs in Edmonton (i.e. what are the youngest and oldest ages at which youth gang involvement becomes a problem?)

All of the organizations surveyed worked with youth populations – the total age range was very young adolescents (12) to early twenties (22). Although all respondents stressed that youths are vulnerable throughout this entire period, two ‘at risk’ categories were mentioned.

First, respondents noted that children and younger youths tend to be especially vulnerable. This is a volatile time for the development of peer networks, and also an age where youth are still very dependent on external providers (family and school) to meet their needs. One respondent noted that younger youth who are just entering the streets are one of the most vulnerable groups, as there are few avenues for them to access physical protection and emotional support. A respondent from a youth shelter organization also mentioned that there is an unspoken ‘code’ on the street and in shelters dictating that older youths take younger ones under their wing and support them – younger youths may end up being introduced to youth gangs this way.

The other highly at-risk age group mentioned was 17-18. This is what one respondent called “the lost age.” Typically, governed funded programs such as Children’s Services are cut off at this age, and this is the maximum enrollment age for many non-profit programs as well. Youths are expected to be taking on adult responsibilities such as employment and maintaining living arrangements by this point. If they have not developed the skills to do this and cannot access help from the government and/or non-profit groups, they become vulnerable to recruitment by gangs.

Respondents stressed that prevention programs need to target not ‘at-risk’ ages, but earlier: ages 6-12 was the most common age range cited. This is a time when important socialization is occurring, relationships with family and peer networks are being established, and the youth is forming a relationship with his or her school environment. Programs that aim to minimize risk factors listed above need to target children in this age range so that when youths get to the ages identified here as ‘high risk’ such factors will be minimized or eliminated.

15. What has been your experience with female youth gang affiliations (anything you can think of – are affiliations as common? Can you tell me anything about the most common ways for females to become affiliated, and whether or not they differ from male affiliations? Does involvement tend to be as serious?).

Responses confirmed the general trends for Canada and North America – female youth gang membership in Edmonton is starting to become more common. Most respondents reported that males are still more likely than females to report gang involvement. However, one respondent pointed out the possibility that there is less incentive for or more barriers against females reporting such activity than males, and that this self-reporting may not be an accurate representation of the numbers. If this is true, female gang membership may be becoming even more common in Edmonton than suspected. One respondent commented that her organization works with more females who are willing to openly declare their gang involvement than males, but this may be because in her experience such gangs are relatively minor ‘all-girl’ gangs that act primarily as social groups (although their seriousness should not be underestimated). Most respondents noted that females involved in more serious gangs (street gangs or criminal business organizations) are typically brought in by male relations (especially boyfriends) and, less commonly, by friends.

All respondents mentioned that when the females they worked with were involved in more organized gangs they were given a different place in the hierarchy than males, and consequently different tasks. These tended to be more minor roles (moving drugs, etc) and more sexualized roles (sexual favours for gang members, involvement in prostitution and other activities).

Several respondents noted that the gang-involved females they worked with tended not to want as ‘serious’ involvement as their male counterparts, and that they tended to get tired of the gang lifestyle faster than males do. This could be because they are more likely to be involved in gangs peripherally (by their boyfriends), or for a multitude of other reasons.

16. Do you have any personal experience with youths attempting to leave their gang affiliations, in whole or in part? If so, can you comment on how easy or difficult this transition is, and related factors?

Respondents were generally in agreement that how hard it is for youth to extract themselves from a gang depends on how deeply they are involved in that gang, and on the type of gang. With an informal 'wannabe' group, even core members may find it relatively easy to leave. Conversely, abandoning even peripheral membership in an organized, established street gang or criminal business organization is not an easy task. Leaving these kinds of groups compromises them – youth “know too much” and become a liability. Typically the exits of youths involved with these more serious gangs pose the greatest risk and are thus the most memorable for service providers.

The primary danger that respondents emphasized with respect to leaving more serious gangs was the danger of physical violence – without fail, youths who came to them with a desire to leave these gangs were extremely concerned for their physical safety (one respondent remembered that she had “never seen a more terrified kid in her life”). In many cases, serious measures were taken by the organization to remove the former member from the gang as quickly and completely as possible in order to minimize the risk of exposure to other members and physical harm. However, more than one respondent spoke of other tactics in addition to physical harm used by gangs to keep members from leaving. There is often a significant amount of mental and emotional pressure placed on gang members who express the desire to leave. Threats of violence and other deterrents are presented to discourage members from acting on these desires.

Membership in 'wannabe' groups and informal gangs can be difficult to abandon – even if there is little risk of physical danger or harm from such actions, the psychological and emotional repercussions can be dramatic. These groups often represent closely formed peer groups, and the loss of these relationships can be traumatic.

Even after leaving, several respondents reported that it was difficult for youths to remain removed from the gang environment. Respondents report that when former members are removed from the youth gang environment by time and physical distance this 'hold' seems to lessen, but a residual desire to return often remains. One respondent spoke of a female former gang member who has lasted six years without a relapse into gang involvement but who still talks about being attracted by the freedom, access to drugs, opportunity to make a significant amount of money (though prostitution and other means), and the social connections she experienced as a gang member.

If the gang environment is easily accessed (because of physical proximity, because the youth still sees many peers who still belong to the gang, etc.) then the motivating factors which caused youths to join the gang in the first place will still be present and it will be harder to resist

reentry. The same principle applies if the youth has difficulty meeting his or her physical needs outside of the gang environment.

One respondent representing a group home for at-risk youth stressed that it is often a struggle for environments such as theirs to offer a 'better' atmosphere than the youth gang, despite having provisions in place to help youths meet their needs. Organizations necessarily enforce more rules and offer less freedom than the gang, and cannot replace the very close social relationships that existed while the youth was a gang member. As much as they are constructed and operated with the goal of serving these youths, service providers will always be institutions that enforce the rules of mainstream society. Gangs are, in this capacity, hard to compete with. The experience of one respondent is that even if youth do choose to abandon active involvement in gangs, they typically keep their affiliation. Cutting off all contact and going totally "straight" is extremely difficult once a gang becomes an integral part of a youth's social structure; it doesn't happen often.

17. Are there neighborhoods in Edmonton that you think are specifically at risk for youth gang involvement, or where youth gang activity seems particularly prevalent (especially neighborhoods where this kind of activity has just been initiated)?

Several respondents pointed to downtown Edmonton as a major focal point of youth gang activity, with certain neighborhoods in the West End developing an increasing amount of activity as well. There is a relatively small amount of youth gang activity concentrated on the Southside, mainly in Old Strathcona and other areas close to downtown. It is important to note that these concentrations merely indicate where gang activity occurs, not where the youths involved are coming from. Such youths are likely to come from neighborhoods and communities of lower socioeconomic standing, as discussed later in this section, and many of these neighborhoods are located on Edmonton's north and west sides and in the downtown core. In contrast, one respondent noted that her organization sees a wide variety of youth from all over the city, from communities adjacent to Edmonton (such as Sherwood Park and St. Albert) and from smaller rural communities such as Fort Saskatchewan. It is not really possible to predict which youths will join gangs based on their community of origin.

One respondent noted that reporting biases may cause gang activity to be reported more in low-income neighborhoods than in more affluent neighborhoods, simply because there is an expectation among the public and law enforcement officials of finding such activity. There may therefore be significant unreported youth gang activity in other neighborhoods which do not garner as much notoriety as those on the North side or West End.

Significantly, almost all respondents noted that park areas are often hotspots for the formation of gangs, particularly loosely organized 'wannabe' gang groups. Homeless youth sleep in these areas in the summer and tend to develop loosely-knit communities. The summer of 2009 saw several organizations report a lot of experience with such informal gangs in the Mill Creek ravine, close to downtown and the Strathcona area. One respondent likened this to developments in Tent City some years back where youth gang activity was also a problem. All

respondents indicated that this high level of activity in the Mill Creek ravine, particularly youth gang-related, had rarely occurred before, and that the volume of this activity Edmonton-wide in the summer of 2009 has been unprecedented.

18. Are there any public policy approaches that you would like to see adopted for dealing with the youth gang issue, or do you think that the present policies are likely to be the most effective ones?

Maximizing protective factors

Respondents were unanimous in their assertion that public policy needs to be more concentrated on the real reasons why youth join gangs. One respondent in particular mentioned that public policy tends to overemphasize the importance of minimizing risk factors to youth gang involvement and underestimate the impact of maximizing protective factors. There was a consensus among respondents that preventative programs which encourage the development of protective factors at as early an age as possible should be a priority of public policy. In particular, given that an unsupportive or negligent family environment is one of the main reasons youths can become involved in gangs, programs to help families meet the physical and emotional needs of their children should be a priority. Emphasis should be placed on families that may have a harder time interacting with or integrating into mainstream society such as Aboriginal families and recent immigrants. It should also be recognized by the government that common practical skills which are frequently taught in the home are not available to children with parents who are abusive or neglectful, and thus alternative programs to teach these skills are very important.

Trouble forming a peer group is another leading reason why youths turn to gang involvement – public funding of community programs where youths are able to make peer connections without resorting to gang affiliation, particularly in very young years, should be funded and encouraged.

The considerable efforts being made by the school system to help youths graduate are meant, at least in part, to keep youth away from risky situations and activities (including youth gangs) and give them access to approved economic means (trade apprenticeships, etc). Unfortunately, many youth simply cannot succeed in a secondary school environment. Programs that provide youth with easily accessible alternatives to academia, while still building practical skills and providing alternative ways for youths to meet their emotional and physical needs, would provide youths who are unsuccessful in the formal educational system with an alternative to gang involvement.

Several respondents also mentioned the need to adopt measures based on principles of harm reduction rather than measures designed according to what one respondent called “best and worst case scenarios”. Programs that offer alternatives to high school may not assist the traditional ‘best case’ scenario of all high school students graduating. However, by offering

practical skills and a chance to develop peer relations they present an alternative to gang involvement.

Long-term projects

A big role of public policy is funding non-profit or government-operated projects; there was a consensus among respondents that funding needs to be constant and long-term. Membership in a youth gang reflects, for most youths, that they are unable to meet certain needs through mainstream channels. All the reasons for this are long-term. This means that any effective action taken must also be long-term. One year pilot projects that are closed up at the end of 12 months catch the public eye and make it look like progress is being made, but these are ineffective in addressing the problem. Several respondents noted that one year is not enough time to even form a relationship with a youth, let alone to start tackling issues that might lead to youth gang involvement. For this reason, 1-3 year funding schedules currently utilized by the government damage the potential success of programs. Timelines and operational plans are short, meaning that long-term progress is often not a priority. Consistent, long-term funding of a smaller number of organizations and programs would help address this problem. One respondent mentioned a trend in public policy over the last several years that has seen funding cuts to a number of early preventative programs designed to foster healthy peer and familial relations, among other preventative factors. If this trend is not reversed, there is little hope of sustainable long-term progress being made.

Several respondents mentioned that a new approach by Edmonton and Area Child and Youth Services called the High Risk Youth Unit has been very effective. This unit, according to respondents, uses a new approach that underscores harm-reduction, long-term progress, and client-centered goals. It maximizes protective factors that can motivate youth to stay away from gangs and criminal activity. However, there are only enough resources at the moment to operate one unit, which means this new approach is helping a limited number of youth. Several respondents felt strongly that resources should be allocated to allow for the expansion of this program.

19. Are there any law enforcement approaches that you would like to see adopted for dealing with the youth gang issue, or do you think that the present policies are likely to be the most effective ones?

All respondents acknowledged that the first priority of police officers and other members of the law enforcement community is to enforce the law, and that they cannot sacrifice this priority in favour of other goals. However, several suggested that working to maintain a more cordial relationship with at-risk youth might make the job of law enforcement officers easier. A trusting, or at least affable, relationship with law enforcement can make youth gang members more likely to provide information about past or future crimes. It may also cause youth gang members to question their own involvement in such activities. Positive, non-confrontational relationships may take surprisingly little effort to establish. One respondent recalled attending a forum with several youths who spent the time interacting with three police officers. One of

the officers adopted a casual, friendly stance with the youth, and later, the youth remembered meeting only two officers – they did not see the casual, courteous one as a law enforcement ‘threat.’

Two respondents mentioned that law enforcement agencies and the courts do not pay enough consideration to the fact that prison and juvenile detention centers are often the best possible places for youth to learn crime-related information and develop gang affiliations. These institutions often serve to socialize youth further away from conventional societal norms. This reality is one of the strongest arguments for alternative sentencing whenever possible

Several respondents mentioned a tendency of law enforcement officials to label all at-risk youth who have trouble with the law as necessarily bad. If kids are “known” to be gang members, they are “written off,” and any attempts to form a trusting relationship between the EPS and these individuals are often written off as well. One respondent reported a similar problem with regards to geographic biases – troubled youths who came from neighborhoods or communities where crime and gangs are established problems are more likely to be labeled as “lost causes” than youths from other areas of the city.

Respondents generally recommended that close partnerships between the EPS and agencies that deal with at-risk youth (as well as the youths themselves) need to be pursued. Nearly all of the organizations surveyed mentioned maintaining a close working relationship with the Edmonton Police Service. Some mentioned that operating sustained projects in conjunction with the EPS is helping officers get to know individual youths and understand the challenges they face (one youth shelter has been sending representatives, including youths, to attend squad meetings and give presentations).

20. Do you think that stakeholders working on youth gang involvement would benefit from increased explicit public policy attention (lobbying, etc)?

The consensus is that enough public attention is paid to youth gangs but that it is not the right kind of attention or is wrongly directed. Respondents noted that most public attention towards youth gangs is directed by the media. Media stories tend to focus on the negative elements of gang activity (crime, delinquent behaviors, etc.) while ignoring deeper, more fundamental needs that can be filled for youths by gang activity. The impression among respondents was that the average person, particularly one disconnected from environments that fosters youth gang activity, does not really ‘get’ the fundamental workings of a youth gang and sees it instead solely as a vehicle for delinquent behavior.

Respondents differed, however, on whether or not they thought that alternate information would improve the public’s understanding of youth gangs. One individual thought that resources designed to educate the public about the root causes of youth gang involvement would be very positive because they would enable a wide range of people (parents, teachers, etc.) to more accurately understand and target risk factors. However, another respondent predicted that even if the kind of information on youth gangs available to the public is changed

substantially, the youth gang issue will still be an unpleasant and difficult topic about which the majority of people may *prefer* to remain uninformed. The challenge faced by those who want to raise awareness about the youth gang issue is therefore to balance outreach to the general public with creation of sustained dialogue among individuals who genuinely want to learn more.

21. In your opinion, what components do ideal anti-youth gang programs incorporate? What good programs already exist in this city, and/or what programs should be created?

As reviewed in Section I, there are two main types of non-law enforcement programs available to minimize the existence of youth gangs in Edmonton: preventative programs and intervening programs. The consensus among respondents is that both of these types of programs are needed in the Edmonton area in order to adequately address the youth gang problem.

Extra-curricular Programs

Several respondents mentioned that extracurricular activities like organized sports, music, art lessons, and leadership activities should be seen as preventative programs (or even intervening programs) and that strong efforts should be made to make these programs affordable and accessible. Cost is obviously a significant obstacle for youths from low income families (or whose parents are simply not inclined to spend the money), but it is by no means the only barrier. The application processes for these activities are often long and tedious, and may be difficult for a parent with a low reading level or a poor grasp of the English language. Many activities – particularly sports – demand time and involvement that may not be forthcoming from a parent who is either struggling to make ends meet or not interested in being involved in the child’s life. Programs to include as many interested youths as possible in these activities, while allowing and compensating for barriers, would be welcome additions to the city’s array of preventative programs.

It was noted that some parents are unwilling to let their children participate in programs that are specifically for at-risk children and youth. This may be because there is a stigma against accepting ‘charity’, or because the parent is afraid that the values instilled by the program are going to undermine those taught in the home. This unwillingness is certainly more difficult to get around than other barriers but must be recognized so that it can be addressed.

One respondent mentioned Edmonton’s Crystal Kids program as a good example of a program which currently provides access to sports and physical education to at-risk youth. The respondent remembered a martial arts program run by Crystal Kids which was extremely successful in involving a lot of high-risk youth. It ultimately sent several youth to compete at high levels. This program provided not only a place for youth to go to remove themselves from gang exposure, but also an alternate source of belonging, pride, and skills.

Family Programs (Holistic Preventative Programs)

More than one respondent stressed the importance of providing holistic preventative programs. If the peer group or family is problematic, preventative programs often create a more positive environment by eliminating exposure to this group. This can result in the youth not fully attaching to the program or reaping its benefits. Several respondents mentioned that preventative programs should work to include as many members of the family and original peer group as possible, and should strengthen positive bonds and relationships rather than severing them.

In addition, there needs to be a more explicit focus, for both intervening programs and preventative programs, on anti-gang work. The program's goal of providing youths with alternatives to gangs should be articulated early and often. This will put everyone on the same page and encourage open sharing of information available about gang involvement, which will direct the program more explicitly.

Community Programs

Alternatives to traditional schooling are an important factor. Public policy tends to emphasize getting as many youths as possible to finish as much formal education as possible. Community or city programs are left to provide alternatives for youths who are incapable of or uninterested in doing this. The best programs are typically those that work closely with the community. The Youth Emergency Shelter Society kicked off a program in September 2009 to provide this kind of alternative to formal education. The Armoury Program is planned as a safe 'hang-out' place for at-risk youth – a warm, inviting space – with serious educational components dealing with practical topics such as healthy relationships, going back to school, the justice system, etc. Medical services, a laundry and other tools will also be offered.

Intervention Programs

The most common comment with respect to intervention programs was that they should adopt a harm-reduction strategy and accept that change is incremental rather than all-or-nothing. As one respondent said, it is not acceptable to assume that when a youth enters a program he or she has been 'saved', only to 'fail' when he or she later returns to gangs or to the street in some capacity. Intervention programs are run primarily to serve the needs of the youth they work with, and in order to meet those needs a client-centered approach must be taken.

Several respondents noted that intervention programs should focus on youth in the early stages of gang involvement. Leaving the lifestyle at these stages carries fewer penalties and is therefore more attractive than exiting later (see Section I).

There are literally hundreds of programs run by dozens of organizations in Edmonton. In many ways, this proliferation is positive: more small organizations can effectively reach niche populations and serve the needs of small communities better than a few larger, centrally

located organizations could. However, there are also some problems with this large number. One respondent noted a level of redundancy among organizations that leads them to fight over funding and jurisdiction, when they would be better off pooling their resources or working in partnership. Although respondents generally feel that cooperation and communication among organizations with similar goals has improved over the last several years, there was also a sense that the large number of organizations and programs currently in existence can be a labyrinth for youth and organizations to traverse.

22. Is there any information related to youth gangs in Edmonton that your organization would like to access but cannot currently find, or anything you would generally like to see us cover in the report? If yes, please describe.

Statistical data on youth in general is extremely difficult to find, for reasons detailed in Section I. Although general statistics are available for Canada, these are often flawed. There is typically even less reliable information on these problems in Edmonton. Although most organizations surveyed do report recording some information on the youths they work with, they are aware that this information can tell them little about city-wide or even community-wide trends.

Interestingly, one respondent mentioned that the biggest information barrier for her organization comes in the form of expense – they use popular media and government sources because these are affordable or free of charge, but they don't always contain the most comprehensive information. More useful sources, such as academic journals discussing the youth gang phenomenon, are often prohibitively expensive. Their use is limited mainly to government and academic institutions. The respondent's opinion was that many organizations dealing with service provision would benefit greatly from affordable or free access to the academic journals in which such service provision is discussed.

Section III. Conclusion

A. Project Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

This project faced two major limitations. Manpower and resources were limited; YouthGAP's information was gathered by two Edmonton Social Planning Council interns working for approximately four months with a negligible budget. This affected both primary and secondary information-gathering. Although we endeavoured to make our secondary literature review as comprehensive as possible, we acknowledge that some relevant articles and publications are likely to have been missed. We encourage future researchers to cast a wide net beyond this report when looking for information on the youth gang phenomenon.

Second, our primary research was somewhat limited. The best source of information about the gang affiliations and activities of at-risk youth is collected from youths themselves. Ultimately, we did not have the resources to gather this kind of information in a systematic or representative way, or to navigate the obstacles represented in collection of such data. Direct interviews with at-risk or gang affiliated youth have the potential to yield a wealth of information. We present this as a future research project that should be given high priority.

Our stakeholder interviews were conducted within a limited scope. We had planned to collect data from a representative range of stakeholders - government members, teachers, academics, and parents, as well as non-profit service providers. We ultimately opted to interview solely in the non-profit sector. More sustained data-gathering from other stakeholder groups should, therefore, also be a priority for future research. We emphasize that every stakeholder in the youth gang issue offers information that can contribute to understanding and combating it.

Despite barriers to gathering accurate statistical information, a sustained effort has been made to develop localized qualitative information about the youth gang problem in other Canadian cities with reputable gang activity. This report concludes that youth gangs are a serious problem in the city of Edmonton. Serious dedication of government efforts and funds towards the study of this topic is necessary to give Edmontonians comprehensive knowledge about how, why and to what extent youth gangs operate here.

B. Recommendations

This section underscores key themes that emerged during the preparation of this report which we think have particular use for those currently at work on the youth gangs issue.

The importance of developing a suitable definition of the youth gang problem.

The youth gang phenomenon is too complex to be defined in one all-encompassing, all-appropriate model. Stakeholder groups should examine the specific nature of the present or future gang involvement they are attempting to address and construct a definition accordingly. After this definition is developed, it should inform program and policy developments so that the efforts of the stakeholder are focused and consistent.

The dangers of understanding the youth gang issue through the lens of the legal system.

Statistics generated by the criminal justice system will invariably and systematically under-represent the extent of youth gang membership and activity, since only events that are known to the law enforcement system can be reported. The picture painted by these statistics will be skewed in ways that are not always readily apparent, and they should be used with caution. Similarly, the public should temper popular media reports of youth gang activity with the recognition that such reports are typically generated with little regard to fundamental causes. These reports focus disproportionately on the crime aspect of youth gangs because this is easy for the public to understand.

The importance of realizing the role of youth in the illegal drug trade.

Street gangs and criminal business organizations are more involved in the procurement and trafficking of illegal narcotics than they are any other kind of activity. Even wannabe youth gangs are more involved in the drug trade than they are any other kind of 'serious' crime.

The early development of youth gang predisposition and 'risk' factors.

Both YouthGAP's primary and secondary research suggested that the risk factors that predispose youth to gang membership begin to develop at a very early age - far before the age when traditional, explicit 'anti-gang' prevention and intervention programs begin. The early development of these risk factors suggests that resources and services should be in place at before this in order to be most effective.

The importance of positive role models as a protective factor.

Interview respondents emphasized that the presence of positive role models - even if such models are acting in a paid or 'official' capacity - can be a strong protective factor for youth at risk of gang involvement. The formation of individualized, long-term relationships between such role models and youth are crucial for the development of this protective factor.

The dangers and difficulties facing youth who wish to leave the gang environment.

We often speak idealistically about 'drawing kids away' from gangs, but the reality is that, particularly in the later, more 'serious' stages of gang involvement, youth who wish to abandon the gang lifestyle face serious barriers. The choice to leave a youth gang at the early, less serious stages of involvement is not necessarily easier. The maintenance of social support systems and physical needs is woven tightly into the fabric of gang membership for many youths. After an exit has been achieved, re-entry is tempting and likely if social and other needs are not met through alternative avenues.

The dangers associated with a predominantly suppressive strategy for targeting youth gangs.

Because the public understands the youth gang phenomenon predominantly through the lens of law enforcement and popular media, there is a lot of enthusiasm for harsher punitive measures and legal 'crackdowns' on youth gangs as a way to address them. However, such efforts can ultimately make such activity more pronounced; suppression programs, although necessary, should be balanced with other strategies.

The symbiotic nature of suppression, prevention, and intervention programs to deal with youth gang involvement.

No single approach is the most successful in combating the youth gang issue. Suppression should focus on education and alternative sentencing. Preventative programs should start as early as possible and devote significant resources to the accurate identification of the needs of at-risk children. Intervention programs should be client-centered, target youth as soon after they enter the gang lifestyle as possible, and focus on harm-reduction strategies that are satisfactory to both the youth and the service provider.

The importance of stability and long-term support for programs currently working with children and youth at risk for gang involvement.

Many of our primary research findings stressed the importance of stable long-term relationships to productive work with at-risk and gang affiliated youths. The government's short-term (1-3 year) funding schedules put extreme stress on the creation of this type of environment.

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Appendix One: Primary Research Participant List

YouthGAP would like to thank the following organizations and individuals who participated in interviews for the preparation of this report. This report does not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of these organizations or individuals.

Karen Drynan
Old Strathcona Youth Society

Karen Erickson
The Community Solution to Gang Violence

Saleena Haworth
Youth Emergency Shelter Society

Khatidja Khalfan
Edmonton Inner City Children's Project Society

Heather Peddle
Edmonton John Howard Society (Project REE*Start)

Appendix Two: Interview Questions

The following is a complete list of the questions asked during consultations with the primary research participants.

1. How would you say that your organization defines 'youth gang'? If your organization does use a standard definition for 'youth gang,' please describe what this term means to you, and/or to your co-workers.
2. Do you, or have you ever, dealt with members of the Edmonton youth population who were designated as at-risk for youth gang activity, or whom you knew had participated or were participating currently in youth gang activity? If yes, can you please elaborate on those experiences? Would you be willing to estimate a proportion of youths that you deal with who are involved in these activities in some way?
3. Would you be willing to estimate whether or not this proportion has increased, decreased or stayed approximately the same among the individuals that you work with during the last decade, or during the time you have been in your current positions?
4. Estimating the approximate number of Youth Gangs in the Edmonton Area:
5. Through the course of your work, have you become aware of specifically large, well-known, or problematic youth gangs in Edmonton? If yes, please describe what you know about these gangs.
6. Have you experienced working with youths with a wide range of seriousness in youth gang involvement (i.e. informal organization versus semi-formal organization versus serious criminal organization)? Would you say that any one of these affiliations is any more common than the others, or are they all pretty much equally prominent?
7. Would you say that the involvement in serious criminal endeavors (drug trafficking, prostitution, large-scale theft, etc.) of the youths you deal with has decreased, increased, or stayed the same during the past several years (we're looking at recent trends, so whatever time frame works well for you).
8. Do you think that Edmonton youth gangs are more involved in "minor" illegal activities (such as petty theft, vandalism, underage drinking) than they were a decade ago, less involved, or do they have approximately the same level of involvement?
9. Do you think that violence between gangs/gang members is becoming a bigger issue, a less important issue, or an issue of the same importance now as it was a decade ago?
10. From your experience working with your organization's target population, what would you say are the greatest determinants of youth gang involvement (there are factors like socioeconomic status and opportunities, socialization - being raised into a gang environment, friendships, physical protection, etc)? Do you, personally, see some of these being a greater determinant than others?

11. From your experience working with your organization's target population, would you say that there is any difference between recent immigrants and Canadian-born youth as far as risk for youth gang involvement, or are there merely different factors at work in each case (and please elaborate on these factors)?
12. In your experience, would you say that there is a specific ethnic group that appears to be the most vulnerable to youth gang involvement in Edmonton?
13. From your experiences dealing with your organization's target population, how strong does the linkage appear to be between youth gang involvement and socioeconomic status?
14. Based on your experience with adolescents, what would you say is the typical and/or most problematic or at-risk age for Edmonton youth to be recruited into an Edmonton gang? Related to this, what would you say the age *range* is for recruitment into and/or involvement in youth gangs in Edmonton (i.e. what are the youngest and oldest ages at which youth gang involvement becomes a problem?)
15. What has been your experience with female youth gang affiliations (anything you can think of - are affiliations as common? Can you tell me anything about the most common ways for females to become affiliated, and whether or not they differ from male affiliations? Does involvement tend to be as serious? Etc).
16. Do you have any personal experience with youths attempting to leave their gang affiliations, in whole or in part? If so, can you comment on how easy or difficult this transition is, and related factors?
17. Are there specific neighborhoods in Edmonton that you think are specifically at risk for youth gang involvement, or where youth gang activity seems particularly prevalent (especially important are neighborhoods where this kind of activity has just been initiated).
18. Are there any public policy approaches that you would like to see adopted for dealing with the youth gang issue, or do you think that the present policies are likely to be the most effective ones?
19. Are there any law enforcement approaches that you would like to see adopted for dealing with the youth gang issue, or do you think that the present policies are likely to be the most effective ones?
20. Do you think that stakeholders working on youth gang involvement would benefit from increased explicit public policy attention (lobbying, etc)?
21. In your opinion, what components do ideal anti-youth gang programs incorporate? What good programs already exist in this city, and/or what programs should be created?
22. Is there any information related to youth gangs in Edmonton that your organization would like to access but cannot currently find, or anything you would generally like to see us cover in the report? If yes, please describe.