



Youth At Risk Development

1. Introduction¹

In response to growing concerns about gang violence, the Youth At Risk Development (YARD) program offered prevention services to high-risk youth and youth involved in gang-related activities in Calgary, Alberta.

Between 2002 and the time of the application for National Crime Prevention Centre (NCPC) funding, Calgary had experienced an increase in gang-related criminal activity with most notably, 14 gang-related homicides, 31 drive-by shootings, 3 stabbings and 3 cases of forcible confinement. The Calgary Police Service was also monitoring 300 gang members who were distributed among 8-10 criminal groups.

Gang membership in Calgary was dominated by males in their early 20s with auxiliary female involvement. Intelligence gathered on gangs indicates gang members often carry weapons, and are involved in the trafficking of real, altered and replica hand guns. They were also almost exclusively involved in drug trafficking, and were believed to be instrumental players in the drug distribution network in Calgary.

Street gangs in Calgary were generally not ethnically or geographically based, but represented a wide range of nationalities/races. All gang-related activity had the potential to impact public safety. The 2005 Calgary Police Service Citizen's Survey of almost 2,000 Calgary residents reported that illegal gang activity was ranked the number one "most important policing problem" with over 43% of respondents reporting this as the most pressing issue for police.

Gangs were also identified as the 3rd biggest safety concern for parents and children in schools. In 2005, the Calgary Police Service conducted a series of focus groups in local elementary, junior and senior high schools. The most frequently identified "safety issue in school" was gang activity, followed by drugs and bullying.

NCPC, through the Youth Gang Prevention Fund (YGPF), contributed \$1,004,309 in funding to the Youth Education and Intervention Unit of the Calgary Police Service (CPS) Community and Youth Services Section (CYSS) to implement YARD. Funding from the NCPC began February 1, 2008 and ended March 31, 2011.

2. Program Description

YARD is a city-wide program that focuses primarily on prevention and intervention, by aiming to address the roots of gang involvement at the individual level through an emphasis on social development and rehabilitation. Toward this end, YARD sought to:

- Decrease youths' anti-social attitudes and beliefs
- Improve problem solving and anger management skills
- Decrease anti-social peer association and positive attitudes toward gangs

¹ This synthesis note is based on the NCPC's research and evaluation team review and analysis of the final evaluation report prepared by Amy Richmond of PRA Inc.

- Improve school attendance and school performance
- Improve attitudes toward employment
- Increase participation in pro-social activities
- Improve family relationships and relationships with supportive adults
- Decrease substance use
- Decrease criminal activity

The program consisted of the following core activities:

Individual assessment

Youth were identified for YARD through an intake and assessment process. Youth eligibility was determined by a combination of referrals, staff professional judgment, and the Youth Primary Identification Screening Tool, which placed youth into low, average, and high categories of risk.

Case management

Based on the assessment of the youth and his/her situation, the participant, their family, and staff developed an individualized case plan that focused on strengthening protective factors and reducing risk factors. Case management was ongoing throughout the youth's involvement with YARD and included monitoring participant progress, and reassessing and modifying service delivery as necessary.

Direct contact with YARD team

YARD staff provided direct interventions by serving as mentors and offering direct support in their interactions with youth and parents. The program had two teams that paired a police officer with a social worker. The teams worked with the youth to prevent them from becoming entrenched in the gang lifestyle.

Referrals

In addition to case management and direct contacts by the YARD team, the program suggested referrals to meet each participant's needs. Referrals were made to a variety of community resources including educational, training and employment programs, leadership programs, counselling services, and recreational activities.

Support services to parents

The program also tried to involve participants' families by providing support by listening, offering referrals such as family counselling or counselling for parents, and by providing assistance with necessities such as food and clothing.

While YARD was originally proposed as a wraparound model, its approach evolved into a hybrid of case management with features of a wraparound model. Consistent with a case management model, YARD provided risk and needs assessment and comprehensive case planning. Case management was ongoing throughout the youth's involvement with YARD. It included monitoring participant progress, and reassessing and modifying service delivery as necessary. YARD also referred parents to appropriate resources where there was a need and an interest in a referral.

YARD deviated from some of the traditional features of the wraparound model in that while it worked cooperatively with parents and other supports in developing, implementing and monitoring the case plan, it did not have a defined wraparound team that met regularly to review the case plan and progress of the youth. Instead, a case conference approach was used. It involved the youth, family, YARD and other supports, such as school staff, probation officers, and counselors. The time-intensive nature of the wraparound approach was considered too onerous, and would have reduced the number of youth YARD could serve.

Program Participants

YARD targeted primarily youth between the ages of 10 and 17 who were gang-involved or at risk of engaging in gang-related activity. To participate, youth did not need to be involved in the criminal justice system or have committed a criminal offence.

Between April 22, 2008 and December 31, 2010, YARD admitted 82 youth. Of this number, only 71 consented to participate in the evaluation study. The average age at entry was 14.3. Most participants were born in Canada (78%) and the vast majority were male (96%). Nearly half of participants were Caucasian (43%) while 16% and 10% respectively were African or Aboriginal, respectively. Nearly three-quarter (73%) indicated that English was their first language.

The majority of participants had been exposed to gangs at the time of intake. For 78% of participants, gangs were present in their community. Seventy-three percent had friends or associates involved in gang activity. Slightly over half of participants (57%) were in schools with a gang presence. A small percentage of participants (17%) wore gang insignia. Five participants had parents who were gang-involved and the same number had gang-involved siblings.

When combining risk factors into a “gang exposure” variable, most youth participants had at least one risk factor. The vast majority (94%) of YARD participants were either gang-involved or had any one of the following risk factors: parent or sibling (past or current) gang involvement, friends or associates involved in gangs, wore items/had tattoo(s) that are gang insignia, gangs present in their schools, and/or gangs present in their community.

In addition to gang involvement or exposure to gangs, the youth exhibited many other risk factors that the YARD program intended to address. At the family level, 56% of participants were in a family where violence was present and where financial concerns were prevalent. Almost half of participants had a parent who used alcohol (49%), One-third had parents who used drugs (33%) and who were or had been involved in criminal activity (38%). A small percentage (7%) had siblings who were involved or had been involved in criminal activities.

Most of the participants (83%) were registered in school at the time of admission into the program, and almost two-thirds (65%) were experiencing attendance problems at their school. The majority (51%) did not enjoy the last school they attended. Just over one-third (35%) had a learning disability. Only a small percentage of participants (15%) were involved in extracurricular activities at school or in their community. Nearly half (48%) were supervised by an adult after school.

A majority of participants had friends or associates who were involved in criminal activity (88%), gang activity (73%), and/or drug/alcohol use (87%). Although 42% had been bullied by peers, on the positive side, almost two-thirds (67%) also had friends who exerted positive influences.

Nearly half of participants used alcohol (42%) and smoked cigarettes (45%) while almost two-thirds (61%) took drugs. The average age of initiation into alcohol, tobacco or drugs was 13.

Several participants had been charged with property (35%), violent (29%), weapons (19%) and/or drug-related (12%) crimes. Several more had been listed as ‘offender not charged’. The term, ‘offender not charged’ is used when there is sufficient evidence to support a criminal charge but police use their discretion and deal with the offender in another manner (warning, alternative measures, etc.). Of the ‘offender not charged’ group, nearly half of participants (43%) had been involved in property crimes while 16% had been involved in violent crimes, and a smaller percentage had been involved in drug-related (9%), and weapons (6%) crimes. A little bit more than half the participants (54%) had been involved with Child and Family Services.

Finally, YARD staff indicated that the majority (84%) exhibited risk-taking behaviour, and two-thirds (68%) had issues with anger management.

Program Participation

YARD provided all youth with intensive mentoring and case management services.

Contacts

YARD averaged 18 contacts with the youth with a wide range of 0 to 84 direct contacts. While the program involved direct support to youth, much of that support also occurred indirectly through contact without either the youth or parents present. Just over two-thirds (68%) of contacts did not include the youth and almost three-quarters (74%) did not include the parents.

The most common contacts after the youth and parents were: the YARD police team member (56%), YARD probation officers/social workers (51%), youth probation officer (12%), school staff (11%), representatives of programs YARD referred youth to (6%), and therapists/counsellors (6%), social worker/child welfare worker (4%), police not in YARD (3%), community support worker (3%), tutoring services (2%), and group home workers (2%).

These types of contacts occurred as appropriate, depending on the individual situation with each youth. The majority of contacts were to obtain information on a participant's status (44%). Almost one-quarter of these contacts (22%) were to determine an approach or direction to take with the youth while another 20% were to determine or discuss the approach or direction for the case. Other reasons for the contacts included set up/check on referral (15%), providing parent/family support (13%), and gathering information to assess eligibility (10%).

YARD addressed a wide range of youth issues. For over three-quarters of youth involved in YARD, the topics of pro-social activities, education, behavioural issues, employment, and assistance with necessities were addressed beyond what was required to determine the youths' eligibility for YARD. These subjects were followed by counselling needs (72%), parenting issues (71%), criminal activity (70%), the provision or receipt of updates on the youth (68%), and gang involvement (67%).

Referrals to services

Another measure of the intensity of programming is the number of referrals to services provided to youth. Of the 82 participants, YARD did not make any referrals for 15 of them. These youth were either very recent entrants into YARD or were early entrants into YARD. Of the 67 youth who received at least one referral, the average number of referrals per participant is 3.4. The number of referrals per participant range from 0 to 12. Most youth received referrals in at least one of five areas: recreational sport activities, counselling, employment assistance/skills training, education training/assistance, and other recreational activities.

Program Adherence

By December 31, 2010 of the project, 21% of YARD participants had dropped out of the program. The reasons for youth disengagement from YARD included prolonged incarceration, parent/guardian withdrawal of youth, or a lack of willingness of youth to participate in YARD.

By the same time period, 15% had completed the program. This includes graduates as well as youth who became ineligible when reaching 18 years of age. Caution should be exercised when interpreting these numbers. The classification of youth into either disengagement or graduated from the program proved to be challenging for staff, and remained so up to nearly the end of NCPC funding.

3. Evaluation of the Program

The evaluation covered the period April 22, 2008 to June 2011. A mixed design was used to assess the impact of the program on participants. Pre-post-test comparisons were made using *t*-tests methods. Effect sizes were determined using Cohen's *d* index. The sample size at entry was 71 and at post-test, 39. Comparisons were made at entry into the program, and after 6 months.

Youth involvement with police pre- and post-YARD was assessed based on the number of charges or incidents, as well as the type of criminal activity by weighting the data using the Crime Severity Index. The analysis included a determination of the effect size. Paired samples *t*-tests were used to measure the significance of the difference in means and complement the effect sizes.

Case studies were conducted with 14 youth to provide qualitative support for key findings. School data were used as an additional qualitative source of evidence. School performance data were partial and only available for a few youth.

4. Evaluation Findings

Attitudes

Attitudes toward gangs

While youth's attitudes toward gangs at entry were generally negative, results of the pre-post testing show a 49% decrease in positive attitudes toward gangs.

Peer relationships

While results of the pre-post comparisons were non-significant, trends in the data show that youth's relationship with negative peers had decreased.

Attitudes toward anti-social behaviours

While results of the pre-post comparisons were non-significant, data show that youth's attitudes toward anti-social behaviours improved somewhat.

Family bonding

Using a scale of family bonding and communication with their parents/guardians, results of pre-post analyses show a small improvement in youth's attitudes toward family bonding and communication. Results approached statistical significance at a .06 level. The case studies mirror the statistical results.

All 14 case studies had supportive, involved parents or guardians. However, according to YARD staff, for a few of these cases, the relationship was not healthy. Furthermore, even with supportive parents, some youth were experiencing difficulties. This may have influenced their responses on the family bonding and communication scale.

Six of the youth had been living in group homes or on the streets at some point with YARD. Of these, three youth had moved back with their family or gone to live with another family member at another point in time with YARD. There were two doing very well, while three others struggled and eventually disengaged from YARD. Post-YARD, one of these youth was found living outside the home and part of a gang.

School commitment and attitudes toward school

At the time of entry into YARD, 80% of youth were registered in school. Less than half (47%) had skipped school in the previous four weeks and had been suspended from school. Approximately one-third (32%) had seriously thought of quitting school in the previous six months.

Of the 36 program participants in grades 9 to 12, 14 had failed a course credit and eight had dropped a course. When asked whether they wanted to finish high school, less than half (42%) indicated that they wanted to finish high school, and 52% indicated that they wanted to go to technical school, a community college or university.

At post-test, the number of youth in school had declined to 27 (from 32). Other indicators of commitment to school have remained essentially unchanged. Youths' attitude toward school was also measured. Results show that youths' attitude toward school has remained unchanged between the pre- and the post-test.

Qualitative analyses of the case studies illustrate the difficulties in keeping at-risk youth in school. Of the 14 cases, eight were still registered in school at the post-test, one had been expelled, and another was attending an alternative school when he exited YARD.

Three other youths were still in school but were struggling with attendance and behavioural issues, including suspected gang-related activities. The four youths who had left school were struggling with gang involvement, substance abuse, bullying and being bullied. For two of these youth, leaving school was a positive decision as they remained out of gangs and one secured employment.

Attitudes toward employment

Youths' attitudes toward employment were assessed using a scale developed from a series of questions taken from the *Attitudes Toward Employment – Work Opinion Questionnaire*. They had generally positive attitudes toward employment. Of the 71 respondents at entry, the majority (92%) thought working hard would pay off in the end, thought they could succeed at work and that they had enough skills to do a job well. Most (83%) thought they

were ready for part-time employment. In addition, approximately 60% to 63% did not believe that most jobs are boring, did not admire those who get by without working, and almost half (53%) did not think that the only good job pays a lot of money. Almost two-thirds of youth (63%) indicated that they would take almost any kind of job to get money. Results of the pre-post-test comparison show a small but significant improvement in youth's attitudes toward employment.

Skills

Pro-social activities

While youth participation in pro-social activities increased from their point of entry into the program, the level of participation in sports and extra-curricular activities remained unchanged.

Anger management

Results at pre-test indicate that youth were generally able to manage their anger positively and not engage in negative behaviours such as drinking or using drugs. At post-test, their ability to manage their anger remained unchanged.

Behaviour

Substance use

At entry, almost half of the youth (46%) had reported drinking alcohol. At post-test, the number of youth who self-reported on alcohol consumption dropped from 20 to 14. More youth reported not using marijuana at post-test. When asked how often they used alcohol or marijuana, more youth reported decreased frequency in marijuana use than youth who reported an increase. The rate of alcohol consumption remained the same. Review of case notes and interviews with program staff indicate that youth who engage in serious drug use and are unwilling to address their addiction tend to have difficulties engaging in YARD and usually drop out.

Gang involvement

At entry, eight program participants identified themselves as gang members while the YARD staff estimated that 17 were gang members. Of those who had declared themselves as gang members and had completed the post-test, one had exited the gang. Results of the case studies show that four of the 14 case studies involved youth who had been gang members at entry and had been involved in criminal activities. At post-test, two of these four gang-involved members had successfully left their gang, and one was still involved. The status of the fourth self-declared gang member is unknown.

Family members of both youth who exited their gang believe YARD was instrumental in assisting their child in exiting the gang, by supporting the youth through their court dates and by being persistent in their efforts to reach the youth. YARD also supported these youth through referrals for therapy, employment counselling, and involvement in pro-social activities. Both youth also had the assistance of supportive parents, other family members and girlfriends. One of these youth has been successful in maintaining full-time employment for about six months. The youth who has remained in the gang experienced some set back, including not being able to maintain employment. As a result he resumed his associations with friends who were gang members.

Through the case studies, review of the case notes and interviews with YARD teams, the evaluation found evidence that at least seven of the 17 youth identified as gang members by staff have successfully left the gangs they were involved in.

Number of incidents involving charges

Of the 82 youth in YARD, 36 youth (44%) did not have any charges either before or after their involvement in the program, and 34 youth (42%) were never listed as 'offender not charged.' That is, there was sufficient evidence to support a criminal charge, but police officers used their discretion and dealt with the offender in another manner, such as giving a warning or alternative measures. Overall, 20 of 82 youth (24%) did not have any police involvement before March 31, 2011, the end of the project. As a result, the effect of the program on youth criminal involvement is determined by the results of roughly 60% of participants.

Results of pre-post Paired samples *t*-test analyses show a significant and small decrease (from $M = 0.33$ to $M = 0.19$) in the mean number of charges for gang-involved youth, and a significant and slightly larger decrease (from 0.49 to 0.16) for youth at risk of gang involvement.

Number of incidents with no charge

The number of criminal incidents with no charge for youth in YARD was analyzed pre-post. Results show significant and moderate declines (from $M = 0.09$ to $M = 0.01$) in the monthly rate of offenders with no-charge cases post-YARD for youth involved in gangs. The numbers remained unchanged (from $M = 0.06$ to $M = 0.04$) for youth at risk of gang involvement, because most had not been involved in these types of incidents at pre-test. When youth at risk of gang involvement were listed as offenders with no charge, the number of incidents dropped by more than 50% at post-test.

Severity of charges

A Crime Severity Index was used to assess whether the seriousness of the charges laid against YARD participants had changed pre-post. Results show a substantial decline (from $M = 62.52$ to $M = 13.58$) in the monthly rate in the severity of charges after the youth has been admitted to YARD. However, none of the results were statistically significant, mostly due to the large variance of the monthly weighted charges as demonstrated by the very large standard deviations.

The table below provides a summary of key results.

Outcome Results

	<i>n</i>	Pre-test		Post-test		Test Results		
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Cohen d</i>
Attitudes								
Attitudes toward gangs	39	0.24	0.18	0.17	0.20	-1.85	.07	0.40
Peer relationships	39	1.23	1.10	0.88	1.04	-0.78	ns	0.32
Anti-social behaviours	39	3.22	0.72	3.28	0.72	-0.48	ns	0.08
Family bonding and communication	39	2.89	0.44	3.05	0.49	-1.92	.06	0.37
Attitudes toward school	39	2.59	0.50	2.65	0.62	-0.80	ns	0.13
Attitudes toward employment	39	2.78	0.57	3.00	0.43	-2.02	.04	0.35
Skills								
Anger management	39	2.83	0.65	2.77	0.78	-0.06	ns	0.10
Behaviours								
Substance use – marijuana	39	1.08	1.24	0.89	1.21	-0.87	ns	0.16
Monthly rate charges – gang involved youth	17	0.33	0.51	0.19	0.36		.04	0.27
Monthly rate charges – youth at risk of gang involvement	45	0.49	1.03	0.16	0.33		.01	0.32
Monthly rate of offenders not charged cases – gang involved youth	17	0.09	0.15	0.01	0.03		.06	0.52
Monthly rate of offenders not charged cases – youth at risk of gang involvement	45	0.06	0.10	0.04	0.11		ns	0.23
Monthly rate in severity of charges – gang involved youth	17	21.90	35.47	18.11	38.79		ns	0.11
Monthly rate in severity of charges – youth at risk of gang involvement	45	99.28	526.66	10.81	25.00		ns	0.17

Legend: *M* = mean, *SD* = standard deviation, *t* = test value, *d* = Cohen *d* effect size index.

Cost Analysis Findings

Between February 1, 2008 and December 31, 2010, the total cost for the program, including in-kind contributions was \$1,914,539. The average cost per YARD participant (N= 82) was \$23,348.

Evaluation Limitations

Besides the lack of comparison group, other threats to validity limit the ability to determine program effects on outcomes. The following threats should be considered when interpreting the results:

Selection

The tool used to screen youth who were gang-involved, or at risk of gang involvement, proved to be unreliable. As a result, youth that did not fully meet the selection criteria were admitted into the program. Additionally, the program redirected its focus mid-way through implementation to adopt a stronger prevention role. Admission was lowered from age 12 to 10, to admit more youth who were at risk of gang involvement versus gang-involved youth.

Instrumentation

There were delays in the start of the evaluation. Early participants were not able to complete the pre-test until several months into the program.

Construct validity

While the instruments were adapted from standardized instruments and modified to fit the needs of the program, their reliability was not measured.

Attrition

The sample size dropped from 72 to 39 between the pre- and the post-tests.

In spite of these limitations, the evaluation has enough strength to warrant a fair capacity to attribute some outcomes to program activities, specifically outcomes related to youth leaving their gangs.

5. Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Program Delivery

Intake/referrals

During the first year, the majority of referrals YARD received were not eligible. In addition, the assessment of the appropriateness of referrals to YARD often occurred after youth had been on the wait-list for a lengthy period of time. Although occurring after the end of NCPC funding, the lessons learned during YARD's first three years are now being used to develop a new referral process. It will clarify the appropriateness of the referral early so that ineligible youth are not on the wait-list. In addition, YARD is instituting an approach where the wait-list is reviewed regularly, and, although the general rule is still to accept youth in the order referred, youth of high need who are at a critical juncture can receive expedited admittance to the program.

Police-social worker dyad

Stakeholders consider YARD's use of multidisciplinary teams (police and probation officer/social worker) to be one of the program's strengths. Police officers provided 2 key functions. Intelligence gathering on gang activities enabled police officers to more appropriately identify at-risk or gang-involved youth. Police officers also served as male role models for the youth, who often did not have positive male figures in their lives. As an indirect added benefit, these constructive experiences with YARD police officers altered youth's and in some cases parents' views of police. Social workers brought their expertise in case management and their knowledge of community resources to the teams. Social workers also served as role models to youth who came to perceive them as adults they could count on.

Partnerships

YARD has established a presence in Calgary, as evidenced by the 208 referrals it received during 2008-2010. The breadth of referral sources also indicated that YARD has become known in many sectors, although probation services, school, and police remained its main sources of referrals. In addition, family and friends were a major source of referrals, which demonstrates that knowledge of YARD is reaching the broader community.

6. Conclusion

YARD was successful in reaching its targeted population and appears to have had a positive impact on the lives of its participants. While the program changed its focus mid-way through implementation, YARD did reach youth who were gang-involved or at risk of gang involvement.

Youth gang involvement declined as did positive attitudes toward gangs. Youth's attitudes toward employment, family bonding and communication improved. Youth also made some positive changes in their relationships with peers, attitudes toward anti-social behaviours, drug usage and their ability to control their anger.

Given that the YARD's processes and delivery model has become more settled, the program is now better situated to serve its target group.

For more information or to receive a copy of the final evaluation report, please contact the National Crime Prevention Centre by e-mail at prevention@ps-sp.gc.ca.

If you wish to register for the NCPC mailing list to receive information from the Centre, please visit the subscription page at: <http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/prg/cp/ml/index-eng.aspx>