



Ottawa Youth Gang Prevention Initiative

*Community Cohesion and Youth Gang
Prevention in Six Priority Areas*

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Table of contents

Executive Summary	4
Findings	5
Recommendations	6
Introduction	7
The Ottawa Youth Gang Prevention Initiative	7
Youth Gangs	8
The Study	9
Method	
Phase 1- Assessing Community Wellness	10
Findings	
Emotional Development index Scores	11
Key Informant Interviews	
Awareness of Youth Gangs	13
Gang Activity in the Six Priority Areas	13
Summary	15
Community Response	16
Discussion	
Recommendations	19
Appendix A	
Framework for an Ottawa Youth Gang prevention Strategy	23
Appendix B	
Ottawa Youth Gang Prevention Initiative –6 Priority Areas	24
Appendix C	
Ottawa Youth Gang Prevention Initiative (OYGPI)	
Member List-October 2009	25

Executive Summary

This project considers the features of six communities – the assets they possess for assisting youth and the gaps in services that would support the community in reducing youth gang-involvement. It considers the question of what is and what needs to be done on a community-level to prevent young people from becoming involved in gangs and to intervene early in their careers with youth who are gang-involved. Its core purpose is to provide a framework for future youth gang prevention activity of the Ottawa Youth Gang Prevention Initiative (OYGPI).

The Ottawa Youth Gang Prevention Initiative (OYGPI) had its beginnings in 2006. At that time there was no initiative per se. Rather the Initiative is what emerged from the process that was followed. The Initiative:

... aims to support youth and families to prevent youth from becoming involved in gang activity and to reduce and prevent the harmful effects of youth gangs in Ottawa through a collaborative, holistic, evidence-based strategy of prevention and intervention (source: Presentation by G. Boyd and M. Justinich).

The Initiative has identified four components as the focus of their response: Healthy Neighbourhood Cohesion, Prevention, Intervention and Suppression. The people involved in the Initiative argue that each of these components requires an integrated approach that unites youth, families, schools, community, social service agencies and police/criminal justice agencies in multi-faceted efforts to prevent and reduce youth gang activity in Ottawa. They also believe that all four components need to be integrated – that is that responding to only one and not to all the components will be less effective. They are creating a web of support connecting communities, families and services that nurture young people and prevent their being attracted to gang life.

The current study builds on earlier work that indicated that there was an emerging youth gang presence in the city and that “now is the time to act”¹ if we are to prevent the problem. This research is the next piece in the process and focuses on two components of the strategy: healthy neighbourhood cohesion and prevention.

This research collected information from 74 key informants living in 6 priority areas for youth gang activity. The data were collected in two stages. The first involved 68 interviews conducted by six researchers. Each researcher interviewed informants in the priority area that they were most familiar with and then additional information was sought through a brief questionnaire administered to the six researchers. In addition, we were given access to data collected on the Early Development Index (the EDI) for the six areas and the city as a whole from the Success by Six program. The priority areas were identified in previous research as being areas with the highest level of youth gang

¹ Now is the Time to Act: Youth Gang Prevention in Ottawa, Michael Chettleburgh, Astwood Strategy Corporation. January 31st 2008.

activity. As such, the features of the communities are important for understanding how to respond to the youth gang problem. The key findings include:

Findings

- (a) Overall gang activity is low “relative to other Canadian cities”. Only two of the six areas, the South East Priority Area and the West Priority Area, reported significant problems and concerns with respect to youth gang activity.
- (b) While activity is low, there is concern youth are at risk for youth gang involvement and there is some evidence in some areas (e.g., the South-East Priority Area) that youth gangs are beginning to emerge.
- (c) The six priority areas lag behind the city as a whole in terms of the Educational Development Index. The EDI data also show that there are other neighbourhoods with similar EDI profiles with no or limited youth gang activity. .
- (d) The primary prevention service gap within communities is a deficit of programs for children in the 6-12 yr age group. This deficit means that young people are often entrenched in anti-social or high risk behaviour by the time they are teens which makes responding to their needs much more challenging.
- (e) Programs for youth exist, are well received, and supported in a six priority areas. However, there are concerns across all the areas around the cost of programs and that types of programs that are available in the evenings and on the weekends.
- (f) Access to programs is a major concern. A range of barriers limit participation including the costs of programs, limited programming within the communities themselves and the inability to access programs outside the community, costs related to transportation, and cultural and linguistic barriers.
- (g) There is a consensus there we need to better engage youth. Poverty and a sense of hopelessness are key concerns for youth in these communities. Giving youth hope for the future is critical.
- (h) Community groups are working in partnership in all the priority areas. Issues around partnerships include expanding the groups that participate and addressing barriers to work together(especially barriers to information sharing).
- (i) Both youth and parents raised concerns about relations between youth and the police within these communities.
- (j) There remains limited information on how we are currently assisting youth who are gang-involved.

Recommendations

1. Implement more programs for the children in the 6 to 12 year age group.
2. Meaningfully engage and empower youth in the planning, development, and delivery of programs.
3. Address barriers to accessing programs.
4. Education is key to prevention. Schools are key partners, engaging them effectively requires commitment at all levels from the Ministry of Education, to School Boards, to Principals and Teachers.
5. It is critical to continue to work community wide and to make working together made more effective.
6. Consider doing research on the comparisons of communities with similar EDIs to the six priority areas but with no youth gang problems to identify key factors or strategies that limit gang activity.
7. Need to have more information on how we are responding to youth who are currently gang involved.

Introduction

This project considers the features of six communities – the assets they possess for assisting youth and the gaps in services that would support the community in reducing youth gang-involvement. It considers the question of what is and what needs to be done on a community-level to prevent young people from becoming involved in gangs and to intervene early in their careers with youth who are gang-involved. It's core purpose is to provide a framework for future youth gang prevention activity of the Ottawa Youth Gang Prevention Initiative (OYGPI).

This report begins with some background information on the OYGPI and the work that led to the current project being undertaken. It then provides a brief discussion of the youth gangs with a focus on prevention. After this background information, the study designs, results and recommendations are presented. This project has been a collaborative endeavour. Within each of the six communities, one local community researcher worked to collect data on community assets, needs and service gaps. A range of techniques was used including interviews, on-line surveys and focus groups. Data on community health and on the city as a whole were provided by Success by Six. Finally, wrap up interviews were held with the local community researchers.

The Ottawa Youth Gang Prevention Initiative

The Ottawa Youth Gang Prevention Initiative (OYGPI) had its beginnings in 2006. At that time there was no initiative per se. Rather the Initiative is what emerged from the process that was followed. The Initiative:

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The Initiative has identified four components as the focus of their response: Healthy Neighbourhood Cohesion, Prevention, Intervention and Suppression. The people involved in the Initiative argue that each of these components requires an integrated approach that unites youth, families, schools, community, social service agencies and police/criminal justice agencies in multi-faceted efforts to prevent and reduce youth gang activity in Ottawa. They also believe that all four components need to be integrated – that is that responding to only one and not to all the components will be less effective. They are creating a web of support connecting communities, families and services that nurture young people and prevent their being attracted to gang life.

The current study builds on earlier work that indicated that there was an emerging youth gang presence in the city and that “now is the time to act” if we are to prevent the problem. This research is the next piece in the process and focuses on two components

of the strategy: healthy neighbourhood cohesion and prevention. In particular, it considers the impact of neighbourhoods on gang activity and the role that neighbourhoods/communities can have in addressing the problems of youth gangs. This research provides a review of six communities in Ottawa that have been identified as having a youth gang problem and the assets and challenges these communities have in addressing the concerns about youth gangs.

Youth Gangs

Youth gangs are a growing concern in the Canadian context. Youth gang activity has increased in many urban centres and there is a need to address the factors that contribute to gang involvement if we are to prevent youth involvement with gangs and to stop gang activity. Responding to youth gangs requires a holistic approach. This includes addressing broader social factors that contribute to youth becoming gang involved, particularly, community development, and working with youth at a variety of stages with preventative measures and early intervention for those at-risk or becoming gang-involved. A holistic approach includes healthy neighbourhood cohesion, prevention, intervention, and suppression.

Prevention and intervention are most effective when the focus is on developing healthy communities rather than solely focusing on youth deemed to be ‘at-risk’. Research indicates that there are key elements to successful interventions in communities. These include identifying the factors that increase the risk of youth becoming gang-involved, identifying the assets within communities that can support youth in pro-social activities, building partnerships among community-based youth serving agencies and identifying and developing community-based resources that are effective in engaging young people in pro-social activities and that increase their chances for success in education and their chances for finding meaningful employment.

Previous research by the OYGPI indicated that, overall, the youth gang activity is quite limited in the city and indicated that prevention was an important element in ensuring that there will not ever be a youth gang problem in Ottawa. One aspect of assessing this was to consider the health of the community, the supports that are in place to assist youth at risk and to identify the gaps in services that would assist the community in better meeting the needs of youth and communities. While the city of Ottawa is described as a community, it is also made up of diverse neighbourhoods. Research identified six priority areas in Ottawa where gang activity was, though relatively low, higher than in other regions.

As we work toward prevention, it is important to understand how well equipped communities are to meet the needs. To do this, this report provides information on community assets and gaps in supports and program for youth in six priority areas/communities in the City of Ottawa. The research considers the ‘health’ of the communities through the use of the Early Development Index (EDI). The EDI is a measure of how well communities and families support the early development of their

children – measured by assessing the readiness-to-learn of children. The EDI is interpreted here as a community level indicator and the intent is for communities to use the information to mobilize resources to address deficits. A core part of developing the community response is to know what programs and services are currently in place, what programs are needed and the barriers communities are facing in developing, offering and attracting participants to programs.

As noted above, previous research identified six priority areas for gang activity in Ottawa. These areas were identified based on police, school board, transit, corporate security and bylaw data on gang and gang-related activity in these areas. This project considers the features of these communities – the assets they possess for assisting youth and the gaps in services that would support the community in reducing youth gang-involvement. It considers the question of what is and what needs to be done on a community-level to prevent young people from becoming involved in gangs and to intervene early in their careers with youth who are gang-involved. It's core purpose is to provide a framework for future youth gang prevention activity of the Ottawa Youth Gang Prevention Initiative.

The Study

Method

This research sought to investigate these six priority areas in more detail to allow for a sense of what the issues were and how communities could best work to respond to the challenges facing each area. This involved using the Early Development Index (EDI) to measure community well-being and then collecting data on community assets and the challenges in delivering programs using on-line surveys, focus groups, and key actor interviews.

A local community researcher was identified in each area and contracted to do the key informant interviews and collect other data. The interviews focused on the areas assets (programs, services, organizations), whether current services are meeting the community's needs, barrier resident face to accessing or participating in programs and services, and gaps in service provision. The local community researchers conducted 68 interviews across a wide range of youth-service and community-based agencies including: schools, recreation, housing, security, health, mental health, counselling and social services, libraries, and cultural/religious groups. The six local community researchers were also interviewed for a total of 74 interviews.

These interviews were supplemented with a further set of questions that focused on awareness of youth gang activity in the priority areas. Based on interviews with youth, community members and service agencies, the questions explored the extent to which agencies were aware of a youth gang problem, youth/community members' awareness of a youth gang problem and on the attitudes of these groups to youth gangs in their communities.

In addition to the interviews, data were collected on the communities themselves. EDI data was obtained for all six areas and for the city as a whole allowing an assessment of how well these areas are doing compared to the city at large. Then for each area a range of demographic data were collected including – population size, age distribution, income levels, # of single parent households, mean educational levels and cultural/ethnic composition.

Phase I – Assessing Community Wellness

Phase 1 of this project involved reviewing the a mapping of the six priority areas using the EDI. The data provides communities with a sense of how they are doing in meeting the needs of their children. Youth crime and youth gang-involvement are both related to how successful communities are in meeting the needs of their children. More specifically, the EDI “ ... measures children's readiness to learn in school environment in **five general domains identified in the literature: physical health and well-being; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive development; and communication skills and general knowledge** “ Within a city, neighbourhoods can be compared to the city-wide results. Scores are arranged on a percentile bases and percentile scores below the 10th percentile indicate the proportion of vulnerable children in the community – children the community has failed to adequately support. The proportion of children that score between the tenth and twenty-fifth percentiles represents youth who are at risk (see Table 1).

Table 1 - Interpreting EDI Percentile Scores

<i>Not on Track</i>	<i>Vulnerable</i>	<i>Children who score in the lowest 10% for the City</i>
	<i>At Risk</i>	<i>Children who score between the 10-25% for the City</i>
<i>On Track</i>	<i>Ready</i>	<i>Children who score in the middle 50% for the City</i>
	<i>Very Ready</i>	<i>Children who score in the top 25% for the City</i>

The data for this portion of the study was provided by Success by Six. The priority areas do not map directly onto the neighbourhoods used for the EDI data. In particular, the Central A and Central B priority areas are combinations of two neighbourhoods from the EDI data. To assess these areas the data for the neighbourhoods was averaged to produce an Area score. However, it is important to note that in some instances the two regions of the priority area were quite different. Where there were differences between the sub-areas of 5% or greater these are noted in the tables.

In addition to the EDI data, the research collected information from a variety of sources including the 2006 Census. The data provide information on the population of each area including average incomes, renters versus homeowners, proportion of children, and proportion of the population that are immigrants to the Canada. There is also information on language, number of lone-parent households, and the proportion of the population by age category.

Phase 2 of the project involved key informant interviews, an on-line assets survey and focus groups. The information was provided by community-based groups and organizations in each of the six priority areas and where possible from youth themselves. In total 68 interviews were conducted by 6 community-based professionals. One local community researcher from each area was selected based on their knowledge of the area and the key groups and organizations working in it. Sixty-seven on-line surveys of assets were completed and four focus groups were done – two of these with youth.

The key actor interviews asked about existing assets, the effectiveness and reach of programs, barriers to service use, concerns about gaps in services and what the respondents thought would be key elements in an effective gang prevention strategy. Respondents came from a wide-range of community-based agencies including, but not limited to, schools, public housing, employment, community house coordinators, public health, recreation, child care centers, and youth programming providers.

Findings

Emotional Development Index Scores

As noted above the EDI is a useful tool for assessing how well communities are meeting the needs of young people. The EDI data for the six priority areas are examined independently and then are compared to the city overall. As Table 2 shows the proportion of vulnerable and at risk children combined in the six priority areas ranges from 29% to 49%. In the community with the lowest EDI scores almost half the children are deemed to be vulnerable or at-risk. Even the community with the best EDI score at 29% is above the average for Ottawa as a whole where 25.5% of children are deemed to be vulnerable or at risk.

These areas are less effective, compared to the city as a whole, in meeting the needs of their children. Vulnerable and at risk youth are vulnerable to a range of social problems but they are also at risk to become gang involved. Responding to the needs of these children and youth and mobilizing to improve opportunities for them will be key to better futures. While we need to respond to the needs of children and youth – these deficits alone do not account for gang activity. So, it is important to be cautious and to fully understand the complex geometry of vulnerability and other outcomes.

Table 2 – Total Vulnerable and At-Risk for Priority Areas:

Priority Area	Total Vulnerable and At-Risk
West Priority Area	29%
Central West	49%
Central A	47%
Central B	45%
East Priority Area	45.5%
South East	32%
City Average	25.5%

For example, the EDI data indicate that there are other communities within the city where a large proportion of children and youth are vulnerable or at risk which do not have a youth gang problem. A review of the rankings of the various neighbourhoods indicates that five of the six priority areas are overall in the worse 10 EDI areas and the sixth is ranked #11. This raises some interesting questions about how these areas contrast with other high risk areas and what features of other high risk neighbourhoods may be contributing to their not having a youth gang problem. It is recommended that an important next step would be to compare the priority communities with other communities that are performing below average and DO NOT have gang activity to assist in identifying what the key factors may be which contribute to and what factors might reduce the risk of youth gang involvement in these areas.

While we need to be concerned about the large numbers of vulnerable and at risk children and youth we also need to recognize that these communities are endeavouring to support them. The EDI data also show us that the six areas are successfully supporting their young people to varying degrees. Thus, the West Priority Area is meeting the needs of almost 71% of its children, while the Central West Priority Area is meeting the needs of only 51% of their children. To further explore this we will consider the scores on the subareas of the EDI (see Table 3).

As the data in Table 3 indicate, the six priority areas are performing more poorly, on average, compared to the city as a whole in all the subareas of the EDI. The exception is the South East Priority Area which is above average on Health and Wellbeing. But, these data also indicate the communities vary in their specific needs. For example, Physical Health and Well-Being is less of a concern in the West and South East areas than it is in the Central and East areas. Similarly, the proportion of children with emotional maturity deficits is quite high in the East area compared to the others. In addition, we know that some communities include diverse populations and have both youth that are extremely well prepared and then clusters of youth facing deficits. These may account for some of the variation in scores. These community differences need to be further explored and developed to understand what they reflect.

Table 3 – Total Vulnerable and At Risk for Subareas of the EDI for the Six Priority Areas:

Priority Area	Emotional Maturity	Learning & Cognitive Development	Physical Health & Wellbeing	Social Competence	Communication Skills & General Knowledge
West	27%	35%	19%	34%	29%
Central West	26%	37%	32%	31%	47%
Central A	23.5%*	30.5%**	41.5%	43.5%***	46.5%
Central B	34%	45%	32%	37%	45%
East	42%	44% ⁺	33.5% ⁺⁺	39.5% ⁺⁺⁺	45% ⁺⁺⁺⁺
South East	26%	28%	15%	32%	32%
City Average	24%	25%	18%	26%	29%

[*20% and 27% CT higher; **34% and 27% Dal higher; ***62% and 25% - Dal higher +52% and 36% OB higher; ++ 36% and 31% OB higher; +++46% and 33% OB higher; ++++52% and 38% OB higher]

Key Informant Interviews

The six local community researchers undertook a total of 68 interviews. These interviews provided information on the awareness of professionals and youth of gangs, demographic information on specific areas, community assets and input on what was needed for a city-wide youth gang prevention framework. Key informants included youth, parents, and professionals working within the community. Agency staff interviewed included: youth-serving agencies, schools, health, community housing, community houses, community centers, and recreation.

Awareness of Youth Gangs

One of the core issues was awareness that there were youth gangs operating in the priority areas. Each area was identified by the OYGPI as experiencing youth gang activity but it was not clear how aware those working and living in the communities were of gang activity. The interviews indicate that awareness varies from community to community and within communities among different agencies and other groups operating within them. Overall, the information indicates that gang activity is present but relatively low in most areas. Two areas – the South East and West Priority Areas – had high levels of concerns with gang activity. The remaining four areas reported limited levels of gang activity but a commitment to preventing youth gang activity from developing in their areas. Below is a summary of the information provided on youth gang activity for each of the six priority areas.

Gang Activity in the Six Priority Areas

The South-East Priority Area has a long history of youth gang activity. In this area, virtually all professionals were aware of gang activity. There was also consensus on the nature and extent of gang activity. In part, this is due to an annual community survey done in the area that also asks questions about youth and criminal activity. Parents and other community members remain concerned about how to respond to the problem. They raised concerns about police and community-housing security responses – in particular that the emphasis is on enforcement and not prevention. The concern with prevention is shared by professionals within the community. One core concern is how to prevent a new generation of youth from becoming gang involved. There is a perception that a coordinated approach is required and that there is a need to build trust between residents and the police.

In the West Priority Area concern is extremely high among both professional and community members. There is also a lot of police activity in this area. However, one key concern is how to establish the extent of youth gang activity. Respondents indicated that the presence of certain activities held to be gang-related led people to conclude that gangs had a strong presence in the community. For, example one basis for assuming gang activity has been the presence of graffiti. Another is that there are groups of young men, primarily from racial minorities, who ‘hang out’ in the neighbourhoods. Both these features are leading many people to conclude that gangs are already entrenched. The presence of graffiti and groups of young men hanging out are serving to exacerbate concern among some residents about the amount of gang activity and the level of risk. The high level of concern was contributing to some problematic responses. Some parents, for example, were refusing to provide their sons with any money because they were afraid they would become involved in drug use. On the other hand, some residents were down playing the level of gang activity and arguing that they were being over-policed unnecessarily. So, some parents were concerned that the Police were harassing the youth in the community and indicated that this was leading them to be distrustful of the Police. Youth reported being stopped by the Police for “no apparent reason”. The community is working on this issue through ‘Youth-to-Police’ dialogues. The local community researcher in this priority area felt that there was a need for better awareness and education for both professionals and community members. Misinformation is leading both those who fear there is a gang problem and those who deny the actual level of gang activity to react rather than respond.

In the remaining four areas youth gangs were less of a concern, though there is variation in the level of concern. One common pattern is that those who were most aware of gang activity in their neighbourhoods were either young people or agencies working most closely with youth. In the Central ‘A’ priority area, for example, the school officials reported a high level of concern with gang activity. This was due, in part, to conflict on school campuses and to alleged gang involvement in drug selling in the school. Their concerns were shared by youth and some community residents. Here the issue was intimidating behaviour and young people being afraid to go to certain areas or of

particular people. However, for service providers youth gangs were not an issue, though they identified a range of unmet needs for youth that were risk factors for becoming gang involved.

In the Central West Priority Area youth were the main group that reported gang activity in the area. Youth linked the activity to drug dealing and to recruiting young women to work as prostitutes. Youth also reported police activity in suppressing gangs but were concerned about its effectiveness. They found that the police come and pick-up suspected gang members but they return to the community relatively quickly. The Community Center, where many youth hang out, was also aware of gangs coming to the area to recruit youth to deal drugs for them and to recruit young women for prostitution. But other groups and agencies were either unaware or much less aware of the gang-related activity. The Community Center in the Central 'B' Priority Area was also aware of gang activity. In this area the Schools were also aware and concerned. In Central 'A' Priority Area the School Board was identified as being the main group concerned about youth gang activity. In addition, one community worker from the community centre reported that young people were telling her that gangs were a serious problem and that the "neighbourhood was very different at night when the workers 'go home'" than it was during working hours. The youth reported drugs and intimidation.

Finally, in the East Priority Area there are two distinct neighbourhoods. The key informant interviews showed quite different levels of gang activity and concern. In one neighbourhood they were witnessing the emergence of organized groups of youth – while not formally recognized by respondents as gangs they were recognized to be coming into conflict with the law. Further, in this neighbourhood there was activity by outside gangs involved specifically in the drug trade and with prostitution. These gangs were trafficking drugs in the neighbourhood and soliciting young women to work in prostitution. Concerns about groups of youth becoming connected to such groups and becoming more organized were raised. These interviews suggest that gang activity is low and that there may be a risk of increasing activity.

Summary

Youth gang activity varies across the Priority Areas. The perception is that there is some activity in all the areas and that in all areas there are risk factors for youth becoming gang involved. Overall, youth reported more awareness of gang activity than did professionals. This includes both area specific gangs and/or gangs from other areas expanding their field of operation into these neighbourhoods, threats, intimidation, and recruitment for low level gang involvement as dealers. Some youth also report attempts to recruit young women to work for gangs as prostitutes. One of the reason youth are more aware of gang activity may e that much of this activity goes on after the professional supports 'close up for the night' and in spaces where youth gather. This led to a second tier of people who were aware of gang activity – youth serving agencies especially schools and community centres where youth congregate, where problems emerge and where youth share their experiences with workers. Given these reports by

youth and by youth serving agencies, professionals seeing that gangs have emerged in some neighbourhoods are concerned that it is only a matter of time until youth gangs are active in their communities.

Community Response

The final area of research deals with the community services, service gaps and barriers to service that are important for responding to youth at risk for gang involvement and for gang activity within the priority areas. In considering the question of community preparedness, I use the Spergel Model which identifies 5 key strategies or core components (community mobilisation, social intervention, opportunity provision, organisational change and development and suppression) for effectively responding to youth gangs. These strategies neatly fit the concerns raised by key informants in the study.

1. Community mobilization involves mobilizing local residents, youth, community groups, civil leaders and agencies to plan, strengthen, or create new opportunities for youth. It also requires strengthening linkages among different organizations and the coordination of programs and services. Community mobilization requires input from diverse groups within the community. Groups, agencies, and community members must work together to respond effectively to the needs of children and youth in their communities.

The review of community assets (groups, agencies, programs and activities) provided insight into the ability of the priority areas to mobilise. All six areas have multiple agencies working within them providing a range of programs and services. Agencies have established partnerships and are working together on a number of projects. So, there is considerable activity and concern for children and youth in the priority areas. Respondents were rightly proud of what they had accomplished. They noted that there was a need to showcase their successes – to celebrate what they had accomplished. However, they also were facing a number of challenges.

While all these communities have mobilized to act, they all had concerns about maintaining that activity. Specifically, interviewees were concerned with sustaining activities – this concern was, in part, due to concerns about the lack of sustained funding and, in part, by the loss of workers. This latter issue is problematic because when a community worker leaves a job it took a new person coming into the community a considerable amount of time to become connected to key individuals and agencies in the community.

There was also a call to increase mobilization through expanding partnerships and reaching more groups within the community, especially youth. With respect to expanding partnerships respondents identified a need to include more agencies, in particular the schools in their activities. They noted that expanding partnership requires considerable time investment and commitment. Of particular concern, was building

partnerships with local schools. While these were the key partners, respondents also felt that there is a role for School Boards and for the Ministry of Education in supporting these partnerships. So, for example, engaging the schools meant that the School Board had to agree to have someone spend time at meetings and to working with others. The Ministry was seen as having a role in education and awareness programs. There are barriers to mobilization and communities need support to continue to build links to key partners.

A second group that needed to be mobilized was community members. There were a number of issues here. First these are diversity communities and respondents felt that it was essential to mobilize community members across groups. Parents face many challenges in being involved including that many are single working parents with little time to come to meetings, language barriers that limit participation and a lack of awareness to what is happening in the community. Further, there are some problems related to trust especially between parents and the police. Building trust between community members and the police is critical.

While respondents recognized youth as have a key role here and youth engagement and empowerment as important, they also noted that few youth are engaged. While they strove to ask young people about their needs, interests and concerns, they reported that if youth were integrated into community activities and meaningfully consulted then more youth could and would be engaged.

2. Social Intervention – includes early intervention and the provision of social service supports and programs to assist youth and families in need. Service needs and service gaps are key here. All six priority areas are providing a wide range of programs and services. These include recreational services, community houses and community resource centers, health services, education (both schools and homework clubs), tenant's associations, and culturally and linguistically appropriate services (e.g. WABANO).

Despite the wide range of services there were also gaps. One area of concern was the provision of on-going, long-term support to youth and families in need. Too many services were seen as being crisis or short-term and therefore inadequate to deal fully with problems, especially mental health problems. There was also an absence of programs for children in the 6 to 12 year age group. This group was considered a key group to reach to prevent youth from becoming gang involved. Respondents noted that trying to intervene with teens was often too late. Reaching younger children with information, support, positive role models and opportunities for pro-social involvement was deemed key for prevention.

One key area of social intervention was the provision of recreational programs for children and youth. A variety of recreation programs were present in all six priority areas, but youth faced barriers accessing recreational programs and opportunities. Space, culture, language and fees all limit access to recreation for many young people. There is insufficient recreational space within these communities to meet the demand. Many youth can not afford even minimal fees and are, as a result, excluded from programs. For

some, there is limited or no information in their home languages so informing parents and getting permission can be blocked. In addition to barriers, respondents also identified gaps in programming. While there are programs offered on evenings and weekend, respondents indicated that there are significant gaps in terms of the types of programs being offered and some key programs being offered during the day but not at night or on weekends. There was also need for education and programs raising awareness on youth gang issues and programs addressing addiction issues. Programming also needed to be more responsive to the interests of youth and this issue was common to all areas. Engaging and empowering youth was seen to be critical to making intervention effective.

Overall, interviewees adopted a holistic approach to responding to the needs of children and youth. They indicated that effective social intervention required not simply programs but, as is noted in section 1 above, strengthening ties among agencies and developing an integrated approach to youth gang prevention. To assist in developing an integrated approach they called for a Youth Resource Network that would link groups and agencies and communities to programs and respond to needs.

3. Opportunity provision – providing youth with increased opportunities through education, training programs, employment programs and other such services is also important for youth gang prevention. Youth who have hope for the future – of getting a good job and for a productive life - are less likely to become gang involved. On the positive side, the priority areas do have some programmes and services directed towards keeping youth in school, increasing school success and there are some programmes that provide job opportunities for youth.

There is room for improvement. There is a general sense of hopelessness in these communities which are characterised by high levels of poverty, poor quality housing, parents who are under or unemployed, and where school success is low. Keeping young people in school and supporting school success is seen as important. But, current programs are clearly not working given the low rates of school success. One recommendation with respect to improving school success was to increase trades education. It was felt that this would be beneficial to youth who were not academically inclined because it would provide them with skills to get good jobs. But, we do need to be cautious. There are barrier to success that if addressed would allow more young people to stay in school. These need to be developed and expanded. In this area, the key need for partnership with the schools was noted and for early intervention. Finally, respondents indicated that there is a need for better access to employment programmes. These programmes are important for youth who have already dropped out of the education system but can also assist youth in staying in school.

4. Organisational change and development – it is important to facilitate organisational change to better facilitate a problem-solving approach to address youth gangs and the problems that contribute to youth becoming gang-involved. Change must be directed at allowing agencies to respond more effectively to new issues and challenges emerging in their neighbourhoods. A considerable amount of organisations development has already gone on: (i) partnerships among social services, not-for-profits, city agencies and other youth serving agencies have been developed in all six areas, (b) there has been increased

information sharing among agencies, and (c) there is shared concern, commitment and interest in improving the situation for youth.

But, here too challenges remain: (a) there are still barriers to information sharing that would improve effectiveness, (b) there remains a need to better coordinate activities and to expand partnerships, (c) there is a need for more gang awareness and prevention training for both professionals and community members. Organisational change and development are critical challenges to developing effective, holistic responses. One major barrier identified here is confidentiality which can limit information sharing. Effective information sharing can allow groups to more fully understand issues facing youth and their families and to respond more effectively.

5. Suppression – suppression also plays a role in responding to youth gangs. Suppression involves both formal and informal suppression. This research focused on prevention and therefore did not explore the role of formal processes. It considers the role of the community in suppressing youth gang activity as it emerges. Key to this is the use of informal social control mechanisms to reduce gang activity and holding youth accountable for their actions. This was an area of concern. Respondents noted that informal responses to concern about youth involvement in crime and gangs were either absent or ineffective. Closer supervision of youth was held as something that parents could do to suppress gang activity. But, to involve parents requires increasing their awareness for the nature and extent of the gang problem. So, while there is recognition of an important role for parents there is also a recognition that work needs to be done to assist parents and other community members in this.

Discussion

This project provided key information on the conditions within the priority areas vis á vis youth gangs and on the ability of the communities to respond to the needs of youth. It provides us with a sense of the key areas of concern with respect to youth gang prevention. Overall gang activity is relatively low in the city. Only two of the six areas, the South East Priority Area and the West Priority Area, reported significant problems with respect to youth gang activity. The other areas are aware of activity but it is not a major concern at this time. Respondents in all six areas are aware that the conditions in their communities put youth at risk for gang involvement and they would like to be able to act now to prevent gangs from emerging.

One key finding in regards to these communities being ‘at risk’ was the EDI data which do indicate that the six priority areas do lag behind the city as a whole. However, the data also indicate that there are other neighbourhoods with similar EDI profiles where there is no or limited youth gang activity. It would be useful to compare the high activity areas with similar areas with respect to EDI scores to develop an understanding of the key factors that are contributing to youth gang activity. Comparisons may also allow us to identify factors that may prevent or limit youth gang involvement.

Communities are working to provide youth with the social, emotional, recreational, educational and training needs required to build positive and productive futures. However, when considering prevention it was noted that there was a primary service gap within communities with children in the 6-12 yr age group. This deficit means that young people are often entrenched in anti-social or high risk behaviour by the time they are teens when more programs become available. However, by waiting until youth are entrenched in or exposed to antisocial behaviour to intervene which makes responding to their needs much more challenging. Prevention requires that youth be assisted earlier.

Overall, there is consensus that the support programs that do exist are well received and important. There are a number of concerns around the nature and extent of programming and concerns about sustainable funding. Across all six priority areas, there are concerns that about the nature and extent of programs available in the evenings and the weekends. Expanding programming into these time periods is considered essential. Access to programs is another major concern. A range of barriers limit participation including the costs of programs, limited programming within the communities themselves and the inability to access programs outside the community, costs related to transportation, and cultural and linguistic barriers. Funding is also a concern – in particular stable on-going funding that will allow communities to plan for on-going prevention activities and to intervene early with young people who are struggling.

In responding to youth and their needs and in working to prevent youth from becoming gang involved there is a general recognition that community agencies need to work together and with youth and other community members. Community groups do work in partnership in all the priority areas. This allows them to provide better service to young people and their families. There is a need to expand the partnerships and to address some of the barriers (especially information sharing) that limit the effectiveness of partnerships. Further, there are threats to partnership related to staff turn-over. Staff moves frequently and it takes a long time for a new person to learn about the community and to develop working relationships with others. If there were ways to make this learning and connection process more efficient and/or to reduce staff turnover (e.g. through stable funding) this would go a long way to making partnerships more effective. Having a community-wide network of youth serving agencies and supporting the work of that network is seen as key.

Education is seen as a key agency and a good education is seen as critical to assisting youth in building better futures. There is agreement that schools need to be better integrated into agency partnerships and that the agencies have important insights into the educational needs/concerns of young people. In particular there is a need for more training programs in schools and for working with the schools to assist these programs in moving forward (e.g. community agencies using their community contacts for trades on-the-job apprenticeships). Involving schools mean a commitment from School Boards and from the Ministry in assisting Principals and Teachers to become involved in community efforts to prevent youth gang involvement.

Community members also have a role in the prevention process – this includes engaging them as agents of informal social control, providing them with information/education and support, and hearing their concerns about their youth and their experiences. Outreach is essential – whether it is something as simple as having information in a variety of languages or whether it is going to parents and other community members and asking for their input and involvement. Trust is an important aspect of engaging the community and issues of trust were both raised and are being addressed.

Core to a successful prevention approach is to have programming that is meaningful and engaging for young people. There is agreement on the need to consult and involve youth in developing appropriate programming for young people. This involvement needs to recognize that there are diverse constituencies of youth within the communities and to ensure a broad representation. Poverty and a sense of hopelessness are key concerns for youth in these communities. Giving youth hope for the future is critical. This includes providing them with support to stay in schools, success stories and, for some, in providing trades education that will give them the skills to get good paying jobs.

Recommendations

1. Implement more programs for the children in the 6 to 12 year age group. This is a common gap across the priority areas and early intervention is key to prevention. Programmes need to be evidence-based and research indicates that the most effective programmes address risk factors such as ensuring children and youth are adequately supervised, providing youth with assistance with homework and increasing school success, and providing pro-social recreational activities.
2. Meaningfully engage and empower youth in the planning, development, and delivery of programs. This must include an awareness of different youth constituencies within communities, there are multiple youth voices in the community and these need to be integrated.
3. Address barriers to accessing programs. This is a community-wide concern and will require both monetary and non-monetary interventions. There are a number of barriers to accessing programs. In particular, the cost of access to programs prohibits many youth from participating. Other barriers include language, the absence of trust between community members and service providers, and the lack of knowledge about programs.
4. Education is key to prevention. This includes early identification of youth at risk and connecting them to supports and services within the community. Schools are also important in building hopeful futures. But, doing this effectively requires involving education professionals at all levels for the Ministry of Education, to School Boards, Principals and Teachers.

5. It is critical to continue to work community wide sharing information on support and programs for youth and on the agencies and staff working in the communities. However, this work can be made more effective by finding new ways for groups and agencies to communicate with one another.
6. Consider comparisons of communities with similar EDIs to the six priority areas but with no youth gang problems to identify key factors or strategies that limit gang activity.
7. One final area of concern is how we are responding to youth who are currently gang involved. It is important to investigate current intervention services to assess the nature and extent of such services and to address issues that emerged from this research vis a vis coordination of activities, information sharing and funding.

Framework for an Ottawa Youth Gang Prevention Strategy

In order to prevent the harmful effects of youth gangs in communities and to prevent young people from becoming involved in gang activity, a four component approach is proposed: Healthy Neighbourhood Cohesion, Prevention, Intervention and Suppression.

Each of these components requires an integrated approach that unites youth, families, schools, community, social service agencies and police in multiple efforts to reduce youth gang activity in Ottawa. The different components also need to be integrated together to create a web of community, family and services that nurture young people and prevent the attraction of gang life.

Investments addressing the four components will be focused in those neighbourhoods most in need of assistance, ensuring they get the evidence-based tools and resources necessary to tackle this problem.

Healthy Neighbourhood Cohesion refers to building positive relationships in gang affected neighbourhoods to reduce fear, strengthen relationships, increase evidence of positive social interactions and increase community capacity to recognize and address unacceptable activities. This can include community celebrations, Neighbourhood Watch, community clean-ups and other activities.

Prevention refers to activities, programs, curriculum and other supports, which seek to positively engage young people with their families, their schools and their community before they are attracted to gang life. This could include after school programming, pro-social recreation, mentoring, outreach, supports to stay engaged in learning and /or school, mental health supports, employment programs, parenting programs and other activities.

Intervention refers to programming that engages with youth who are involved or beginning to be involved in youth gang activity. This can include exit programming, intensive employment programming, programmes for suspended or expelled students, mental health programs, intensive employment programs and other interventions.

Suppression refers to targeted enforcement aimed at criminal gang activity. This can include highly visible policing, such as the Direct Action Response Team (DART) and it can also include collaborations between landlords and the Police on targeted evictions.

To implement this approach, the strategy must rely on research with regards to the evidence on what actually works and the dissemination of information. There must be a plan to effectively educate, inform, and engage service providers and the community. Parents, teachers, community agency staff and police need accurate up to date information with regards to youth gangs and youth gang prevention in order to act effectively.

The strategy must build on other relevant initiatives and existing services to ensure coordination, the most effective use of resources and a holistic approach to achieving desired outcomes. Finally our approach will be strength-based. We need to build on the assets in our communities: the natural leadership and successful services that already exist. We must engage youth and their families, using diversity and cultural assets to ensure positive outcomes for our youth.

Ottawa Youth Gang Prevention Initiative (OYGPI) 6 Priority Areas

West priority Area boundaries:

South (Highway 417)

North (Ottawa River)

East (Pinecrest Road - straight north through Britannia park to the river)

West (West side of Woodridge Crescent south to the river)

Central West Priority Area boundaries:

North (Carling Avenue)

West (Clyde)

South (Caldwell and Kingston)

East (Fisher)

Central Priority Area "A" boundaries:

Central Area "A"

East (Elgin)

South (Highway 417)

North 1- (Laurier)

North 2 - Bayview to Parkdale and north to Scott - adds in "Mechanicsville")

West 1 - Parkdale (at the "Mechanicsville part)

West 2 - Baysview/Bayswater up to the 417.

Central Priority Area "B" boundaries:

North (river)

South (Rideau Rd.)

West (King Edward)

East (river)

Central East Priority Area boundaries:

North (Beechwood and Hemlock)

West (Vanier Parkway)

South (Highway 417)

East (Aviation Parkway)

South East Priority Area boundaries:

South (Empty area to the south of Ledbury Park - Rail corridor from Bank Street to Hawthorne)

West (Bank Street to Alta Vista Drive up to Heron)

North (Heron Road to Walkley to St.Laurent - North on St. Laurent to Russell Road)

East (Russell Road south to rail corridor)

Ottawa Youth Gang Prevention Initiative (OYGPI) Member List – October 2009

Boys and Girls Club of Ottawa
Carleton University (Sociology/Women & Gender Studies)
Children's Aid Society
City of Ottawa (City Councillor)
City of Ottawa (Client Service Strategies)
City of Ottawa (Employment & Financial Assistance)
City of Ottawa (Parks, Recreation and Cultural Services)
City of Ottawa (Youth Zone)
Conseil des écoles publiques de l'Est de l'Ontario
Crime Prevention Ottawa (Co-Chair of OYGPI)
Crossroads Children's Centre
Elizabeth Fry Society
Giant Tiger Canada
John Howard Society of Ottawa
Justice Canada
McHugh Education Centre
Minister of the Attorney General (Youth Crown Attorney)
Ministry of Children and Youth Services
Ministry of Children and Youth Services
Ministry of Children and Youth Services (Alternatives to Custody)
Ministry of Children and Youth Services (Ottawa Secure Custody)
Ministry of Children and Youth Services (Program Supervisor - Eastern Region)
Ministry of Children and Youth Services (Youth Justice Trainer)
Ministry of Children and Youth Services (Youth Probation)

Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services (Probation and Parole Services)

Multiculture Media

Ontario Provincial Police (Provincial Coordinator-Gang Issues)

Ottawa Carleton Detention Centre

Ottawa Catholic School Board (Principal)

Ottawa Catholiuc School Board (Vice-Principal)

Ottawa Community Housing Corporation (Community House Director)

Ottawa Community Housing Corporation (Community Safety Services)

Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization (OCISO)

Ottawa Neighbourhood Watch Executive Committee

Ottawa Police Service (Diversity and Race Relations)

Ottawa Police Service (Victims Services Unit)

Ottawa Police Service (Youth, Guns and Gangs)

Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (Board Trustee)

Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (Principal)

Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (Superintendent)

Peace Tower Church

RCMP - GRC (Drug and Organized Crime Awareness Service)

Rendons Ottawa Sécurité Ensemble (R.O.S.E)

Rhema Ministries Ottawa

Roberts/Smart Centre

United Way / Centraide Ottawa

University of Ottawa (Dept. Criminology)

University of Ottawa (Dept. of Education)

Vanier Community Service Centre

YOUCAN

Youth Services Bureau (Co-Chair of OYGPI)

Youville Centre