LEAVING CRIMINAL YOUTH GANGS: EXIT STRATEGIES AND PROGRAMS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The objective of this report is to contribute to the development of local approaches to helping youth "exit" from criminal youth gangs.

In Ottawa, youth gangs and their criminal activities are the focus of a significant degree of police activity, and seem to be a concern for both the media and the public. Fortunately though, it appears that the level of the problem is not as serious in terms of volume or severity here as it is in a number of other cities. This presents us with an opportunity to address the problem while it is still relatively manageable.

The goal is not to design an area-wide program for the Ottawa region. Given the size of the problem locally, this is not a realistic approach either financially or in terms of program design and delivery. Our objective is to identify what has been tried and what has worked from experiences elsewhere, and to explore the possibility that these lessons could be adapted to the design and implementation of local gang exit intervention strategies and protocols. The idea is not to create a new program but to build on the work already being done by local youth-serving agencies.

The first section of the report defines key concepts such as youth, criminal youth gangs (CYGs), exiting from gangs and the meaning of "success". We focus primarily on youth between the ages of 16 and 25. CYGs share two attributes: they facilitate and even require crime and violence, and they are collective solutions to shared problems experienced by their members. This suggests that attempts to help youth leave gangs must provide them with options that give some of the same benefits as gang membership. There are many points at which youth can leave gangs, but our focus is on the more seriously involved gang members, especially those who have had contact with the criminal justice system. Finally we discuss the notion of success. Here, we distinguish between "insertion" and desistance from gang or criminal activity, and "integration" which is a more positive approach that focuses on proving the youth with skills, resources and a sense of hope about their chances of succeeding in the legitimate world.

The next section reviews some of the key findings from the literature on desistance from crime and, more specifically, on the issue of leaving youth gangs. The basic theme is that desistance and exiting are processes that occur over time and that are influenced by a combination of individual and situational factors. The most important among these appear to be the following:

- Aging and maturation seem to contribute to an openness to change.
- Youth seem strongly motivated to escape the violence associated with CYGs.
- The development of new social bonds and access to new opportunities to engage in conventional activities are critical.
- Structural barriers originating outside the gang, such as labelling or the lack of employment, limit the ability to leave the gang.
- There is little mention of motives related to law enforcement or of a fear of arrest or incarceration.

The basic theme is that membership in CYGs reflects a complex combination of causal factors, and that youth are unlikely to leave a gang unless and until they have supports and incentives that replace those provided by gang membership.

The next section surveys existing programs and initiatives (summaries of each of these are provided in Appendix A: Review of Youth Gang Exit Programs). These can be distinguished on the basis of the point of intervention, the causes or risk factors they address or the types of services or resources that are delivered. Most of the programs covered focus on factors at the individual level or relational levels, and relatively less attention is given to community or structural level issues. The major theme in this section is the need for programs to be comprehensive and to address the multiple risk factors associated with membership in CYGs. Unfortunately, there is relatively little available on the long term impact of most interventions.

The next two sections attempt to map the services currently available in Ottawa for youth who are trying to leave a gang. Our review of existing databases and our survey of local youth serving organizations confirm that there are many local organizations that provide youth with services that address the risk factors associated with gang membership (see Appendix C: General Resources and Services Currently Available for Youth in Ottawa for an overview). The problem is that these services are not specifically oriented to gang members, and there is no youth specific youth gang exit strategy per say. We argue that we need a more integrated and coordinated approach in this area. We suggest that a case management approach that blends existing services into an integrated exit strategy is the most promising strategy for building on current capacity. This appears to be the most effective and cost-efficient option for improving assessment procedures, designing intervention plans, and delivering services in an integrated and comprehensive manner.

In sum, we argue that youth gang membership is a complex problem that requires an equally complex solution, one that is timely, integrated and well targeted. The final section describes our recommendations for moving forward in developing a youth gang exit strategy. We recommend the following:

1. The city of Ottawa should use the existing *Ottawa Youth Gang Prevention Initiative* (OYGPI) as a responsibility centre for building a comprehensive approach to helping youth exit from gangs.
2. Current initiatives should be supplemented by the inclusion of a focus on addressing the full range of social determinants of health.
3. The initiative should pursue the development of a single case management approach to service delivery for youth seeking to exit gangs.
4. The initiative should provide more services to youth who are not currently involved in the criminal justice system.
5. The OYGPI should work to develop a collaborative service-delivery system that integrates organizations and agencies active in serving local youth.
6. The OYGPI should explore funding options that would help ensure that services and resources can be delivered as easily and effectively as possible.

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FINAL REPORT

LEAVING CRIMINAL YOUTH GANGS:
EXIT STRATEGIES AND PROGRAMS

INTRODUCTION

The objective of this report is to contribute to the development of local approaches to helping youth in the city of Ottawa "exit" from their involvement in criminal youth gangs. The project involves three inter-related activities:

1. Conducting a review of the research literature and of youth gang exit programs in an attempt to describe the lessons learned from current programs and to identify features of these initiatives that might be relevant to the Ottawa context.
2. Developing an inventory of the services currently available in Ottawa for gang-involved young people (ages 16 to 25) who may wish to exit from gang life.
3. Identifying promising practices and approaches to intervention with youth and to service delivery that may be relevant to helping youth in Ottawa exit from gang involvement.

The goal is not to design an area-wide program for the Ottawa region. Rather, the objective is to identify the types of tactics or interventions that appear to have worked elsewhere, and to explore the possibility that these could be adapted in the design and implementation of local gang exit intervention tactics and protocols among Ottawa area agencies that serve youth who are gang-involved.

KEY CONCEPTS: YOUTH, CRIMINAL YOUTH GANGS, AND "SUCCESS" IN THE CONTEXT OF EXIT STRATEGIES

There are two stumbling blocks that impede our understanding and our responses to criminal youth gangs. The first is the challenge of agreeing on a common definition of the problem and on measurable indicators of its existence. The second is the lack of consensus over the explanation of the gang phenomenon, both on the level of the attributes and motives of individual members and of the origins and the persistence of group behaviour. Not surprisingly, the same problems characterize discussions of youth gang exit strategies; there is little consensus on why and how youth leave a gang or on what types of programs work to help accomplish this successfully.

This report is organized around three key concepts. The first is the definition of the notion of youth – our focus is on those in the age group between 16 and 25. Much of the recent work on gangs, especially in Canada, has focused on younger adolescents (especially the 6 to 12 age group), and on how to affect the factors that are associated with joining a gang. However, this project is concerned with young people who are already actively involved in criminal youth gangs, and who are likely already involved in deviancy and crime in a relatively frequent and persistent manner. We want to go beyond the reach of the *Youth Criminal Justice Act* (12-17 inclusive), primarily in an attempt to better capture the increasingly longer transition from childhood and adolescence to adulthood and its attendant rights and responsibilities (Beaujot & Kerr, 2007; Gaudet, 2007).

The second key concept is that of criminal youth gangs (CYGs). There is little agreement on such basic questions as the minimum number of members required to constitute a gang, the level and persistence of the deviant or criminal activities that must be present, or the necessary levels of structure and organization that are required. For our purposes, we will simply say that CYGs share two attributes:

1. Criminal youth gangs encourage, facilitate and may even require deviant or criminal activity, and some of this activity may involve violence. This activity may be partly explained by looking at the individuals involved. However, it is also important to include an analysis of the nature and impact of the group, and of inter-group competition, in any attempt to understand the phenomenon of CYGs.
2. CYGs are collective solutions to shared problems experienced by their members – the key here is to recognize that the decision to join a gang, or to try to leave one, will reflect a combination of individual, relational, local and structural factors. We need solutions to the problem of gangs that are as complicated as the problem itself – one-dimensional interventions are unlikely to have a significant and lasting impact on gangs or their individual members. In terms of exit strategies, this means that the challenge will be to provide youth with options or incentives that give them some of the same benefits as gang membership while avoiding some of the negative consequences attached to their participation in gangs.

The third key set of concepts involve the notion of exiting from gangs and, more specifically the definition of what "success" might mean in this context. For our purposes, we have identified three main types of exit points, each of which presents its own particular challenges.

1. The first involves youth who are involved in a CYG, but who have not yet come into contact with the criminal justice system.
2. The second involves youth who have had formal contact with the criminal justice system, but who have been dealt with either informally or through alternative measures (diversion).
3. Finally there are those youth who have been formally convicted and sanctioned – these youth are usually either under formal supervision arrangements (probation or intensive community supervision) or are being released into the community after a period in custody.

As we move along the continuum, the challenge of leaving a CYG involves an ever greater number of people, becomes progressively more public, and requires facing ever greater challenges in terms of dealing with the negative consequences of exclusion and labelling. It may also become progressively less voluntary.

The notion of "success" is somewhat more controversial and often involves behaviours or attitudes that are difficult to measure. We have chosen to make a distinction between insertion and integration. In the case of insertion, the focus is primarily on the point at which the youth decides to try to leave the gang, to desist from criminal activity and to take up what would be considered a more legitimate path. Usually, the focus at this level is on the absence of recidivism and on reducing the risk that the individual will return to a CYG or to other forms of engagement in criminal activity. Interventions at this level usually involve attempts to increase the willingness and ability of the youth to exercise greater self-control (such as cognitive skills development or anger management programs) and to impose greater levels of external control on the youth (involving intensive monitoring and supervision activities, especially on the part of agents of the criminal justice system).

Integration involves a more positive definition of success. The focus here shifts from a relatively narrow emphasis on recidivism to a more inclusive concern with giving the youth a sense of well-being and of hope, and with the skills and resources to improve his objective standing in terms of agreed upon measures such as the social determinants of health. Insertion and integration are closely intertwined: in our view, it is unlikely that a youth will avoid a return to gang and criminal activity until and unless their chances for success in the so-called legitimate world are perceived to be realistic. We would also argue that the chances of success in this regard are closely tied to the objective levels of opportunity provided by society (access to opportunities for education and meaningful employment), and to the willingness and ability of representatives of these institutions to include formerly gang-involved youth.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

<u>Desistance</u>

An important development in the field of Criminology has been to examine crime over the life course of individuals (Farrington, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993), with an emphasis on three distinct periods relative to involvement in crime: onset, continuity, and desistance. Gang involvement follows similar patterns – youth join gangs, they participate in gang activities, and then, for the most part, they leave gangs (Esbensen, Huizinga & Weiher, 1993; Hill, Lui, & Hawkins, 2001; Peterson, Taylor, & Esbensen, 2004). In order to address the process of youth gang exit, "gang" may be substituted for the typical life course variable "crime" (Pyrooz, Decker & Webb, 2010).

Overall, the desistance literature demonstrates that offenders usually move away from crime as the result of a combination of factors – both internal to the individual and in their immediate environment (Farrall & Bowling, 1999). What follows is a presentation of several interrelated and overlapping themes in the crime desistance literature that may serve as a starting point for examining why and how youth leave criminal gangs.

- *Desistance as a Developmental Process* – the key defining characteristic of desistance is behavioural change; it is normal and expected across the life course (Bushway, Thornberry & Krohn, 2003; Laub & Sampson, 2003).
- *Desistance as a Result of Rational Choice* – the decision to continue or give up crime is based on a conscious reappraisal of the costs and benefits of crime; persisters and desisters are seen as reasoning decision-makers (Giordano, Cernovich & Rudolph, 2002; Laub & Sampson, 2003).
- *Desistance as a Result of Maturation and Aging* – the physical and mental changes which enter into the natural process of maturation offer a major explanation of improvement of conduct as an individual ages (Glueck & Glueck, 1974).
- *Desistance as a Result of Social Bonds and Institutions* – marriage and employment have the power to reshape life-course trajectories for those individuals previously involved in crime (Laub & Sampson, 2001, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993).
- *Desistance as a Result of Social Learning* – the basic variables that explain initiation into crime are the same variables that can account for cessation from crime: association with noncriminal friends and significant others, less exposure to or opportunities to model or imitate criminal behaviour, developing definitions and attitudes favourable to conformity and abiding by the law, and reinforcement discouraging continued involvement in crime (Laub & Sampson, 2003).
- *Social Structures and Obstacles to Desistance* – recent changes in the economy (and to the housing market) have restructured the legitimate routes out of crime and, together with changes in the educational system, have additionally influenced the availability of and access to such routes (Farrall, Bottoms & Shapland, 2010).

Exiting from Youth Gangs

Many of the themes in the general literature on desistance re-emerge in the work on youth gangs. In general, it appears that maturity, aging and violence are key motivational factors for exiting. The decision-making time frame is also variable: some youth may make an explicit decision to leave, others simply drift away. Finally, youth face challenges and barriers in trying to make new lives for themselves. Our review covers these three main topic areas.

Why Youth Leave Gangs

Overall, a combination of maturational reform, aging, and proximity to violence appears to explain the motivation for leaving the gang. Much of the literature suggests that gang membership is often temporary and that most members age out of the gang. Battin and his colleagues (1998) as well as Thornberry and his colleagues (1994) note that gang membership among adolescents is most often short-lived, typically averaging two years or less. Former gang members often described having "grown up", "grown out of it", "taken on new responsibilities" or simply "got[ten] too old" for gang life. Similar to other studies, Decker and Lauritsen (2002) found that participation declined with age and was associated with involvement in activities in post adolescent stages of the life course (job, family, concern about one's future, etc.).

Experience with violence also appears to be a primary motivation for leaving the gang. While internal violence (initiation rites) and mythic violence (stories of altercations between gangs) may serve to intensify gang bonds, the impact of real violence encourages desistance. Decker and Lauritsen (2002) found that there is a limit to the tolerance individual gang members have for personal experiences of violence, the threat or fear of personal violence, or having family members be the victims of violence. In this sense, the very activity that serves to keep gangs together also appears to provide the impetus for leaving the gang. Further, familial ties and victimization experiences were cited far more often than institutional affiliations as reasons to break ties to the gang.

Finally, there was almost no mention of motives related to law enforcement or the criminal justice system (e.g., fear of arrest or incarceration). These findings point to a mismatch between traditional gang control policies, which seek to deter gang activity through the use of criminal justice sanctions, and the reality of gang membership (Greene & Pranis, 2007).

How Youth Leave Gangs

It is often stated that gang members must be "beaten out" of the gang. However, several researchers found that the majority of former gang members indicated that they "just quit" the gang. Further, they found that leaving the gang is not a process that requires taking exceptional steps, and most ex-gang members report gradually severing the bonds between themselves and the gang (Decker and Lauritsen, 2002; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). Most gang members left the gang through a process similar to their entry into the gang – in a gradual series of steps and commitments. Just as getting married or settling into a job does not typically occur overnight, serving ties with friends in a gang is unlikely to occur instantaneously (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Virgil, 1998).

Members who left the gang typically had developed increased ties to social institutions, particularly to jobs and family. The process of leaving the gang is more difficult than joining, in part because leaving the group means rejecting one's friends and peers. Because a gang provides a source of support and friendship, members do not leave until a suitable substitute has been found. Overall, leaving the gang is a gradual process that often involves increasing commitment to conventional institutions (Virgil, 1998).

Barriers to Leaving the Gang

In their review titled "Youth Gangs in Canada: An Overview of Programs and Services", Mellor and his colleagues (2005) made it clear that the level of difficulty, perseverance, and commitment that is required when exiting a youth gang cannot be overstated. Criminally-centered gangs are difficult and sometimes dangerous to exit. It requires leaving behind a circle of friends who have provided substantial social and emotional support and friendship (Mathews, 1992).

The principal barrier to leaving a gang is the difficulties many gang members face when trying to make new lives for themselves. Individuals may encounter a wide variety of problems when leaving the gang, some stemming from the gang itself, but many having their origin outside the gang. Decker and Lauritsen (2002) observe that leaving the gang may require rejecting one's friends and peers. Lingering ties to the gang are important in understanding the point in time at which the group process loses its power over individuals and they are able to cut their ties to the group. The severing of ties provides a transitional phase between active gang membership and former gang membership (Pyrooz, Decker & Webb, 2010).

Further, despite announcing a decision to leave the gang, ex-gang members may continue to be seen as gang members by their own gang, rival gangs, the police, and the community. Gang identities often remain fixed well after the decision to leave the gang has been made and acted on. Some acts committed while a gang member transcend the period of membership, and past gang activity may hinder an individual's ability to gain employment (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002).

Under these conditions it is easy to imagine why some gang members may decide that leaving the gang is not worth the effort. After all, what incentive is there to leave the gang when it is the source of friendships and when past activities as a gang member cause others to continue to treat them as if they were still gang members? Even though adolescence is a period in life when many affiliations are tried and rejected, the dilemma surrounding gang membership is that it has more enduring consequences than many other affiliations (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002).

YOUTH GANG EXIT PROGRAMS

A review of Canadian and international best practices in youth gang exit interventions was conducted and several youth gang exit programs were identified and examined in detail.[2] Based on lessons learned from these programs, the following represents promising practices and approaches to intervention with youth and to service delivery that may be relevant to helping youth in Ottawa to exit from gang involvement.

Problem and Objectives

Leaving a gang requires addressing the root causes of membership and overcoming a number of obstacles. Root causes may include individual factors such as aggression, hyperactivity, limited social and cognitive abilities, antisocial attitudes and behavioural problems, early violence, and low academic achievement. Other risk factors like interaction with and commitment to delinquent peers, low neighbourhood and/or school attachment, family disorganization, and social disorganization may have helped make gang involvement appealing in the first place (Howell, 2005; NCPC, 2007). Barriers to leaving the gang may include the fear of retaliation from other gang members; having to reject friends and cut ties to the gang; and the lack of education and training necessary to find employment. In addition, the stigmatization of being a gang member or having a criminal record may continue well after an individual has left the gang. The more risk factors and obstacles present in a young person's life, the more difficult it may be for that individual to leave the gang (OJJDP, 2000).

The main objective of the majority of the gang exit programs reviewed is to help youth shift their life trajectories from gang-associated behaviours and affiliations to a more pro-social lifestyle. At the individual level, programs seek to increase social and cognitive skills and self-esteem, acquire conflict resolution skills, develop a stronger self-identity, better manage actions and feelings (self-control), and make positive choices. At the family level, projects mainly seek to develop healthy positive relationships with family members. At the school level they encourage improved academic achievement and disengagement from peers with anti-social attitudes and beliefs. Finally at the community level, programs seek to address the problem of inadequate integration of community organizations and the insufficiency of resources available to target gang-involved youth as well as to encourage youth to make positive contributions to their community.

With respect to addressing barriers, most of the programs focus on providing access to educational, training and employment programs in order to better prepare youth to achieve career goals. Others seek to address obstacles to distancing oneself from the gang, and particularly gang-involved peers, by providing youth with what they sought through gang membership – namely supportive relationships, challenging activities and a place to belong.

The youth gang exit programs reviewed were targeted at "youth" from the age of 6 through to the age of 30; most programs focused in the area of mid-teens to mid-twenties. However, very few programs focused exclusively on youth who wished to exit a gang. In addition, several programs targeted youth who were also in conflict with the law, were under

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[2] See Appendix A: Review of Youth Gang Exit Programs for a detailed overview of each of these interventions.

court supervision or who had a custodial sentence. There were several projects that focused specifically on gang-involved Aboriginal youth or ethno-racial minority youth, however all but one program also stipulated that they be engaged in criminal behaviour or involved in the criminal justice system. Finally, some programs were directed at youth who were currently unemployed or not attending school and many interventions also included the families in the program activities.

A few of the programs reviewed were targeted at the community level. In these cases, communities were often chosen because they were areas of substantial gang activity and were also sites of previous crime-prevention efforts – demonstrating significant program investment and strong indicators of citizen involvement.

Response: Program Content

Key Elements of Youth Gang Exit Interventions

The common theme of the programs reviewed is that interventions must be centered on providing gang-involved youth with legitimate alternatives for fulfilling their basic needs such as love, discipline, structure, belonging, personal safety and protection. Within this broad framework, different programs emphasize different tactics to help youth who want to leave a gang. Table 1 (following page) provides an overview of elements that may be most relevant for the design and implementation of local gang exit interventions in the city of Ottawa.

Multi-Dimensional Approach

Gang members often need extensive support to help them make a successful transition to the conventional world (Lafontaine, Ferguson & Wormith, 2005). It is important to provide those who wish to leave the gang with a variety of interventions including pro-social skills training, educational and job opportunities, services to promote a healthy lifestyle, and increased monitoring and supervision during the period of disengagement from the gang lifestyle.

Most of the interventions reviewed attempted to offer individualized service by providing counselling or therapeutic intervention to address specific issues and needs for youth who want to leave gangs. Additionally, group programs offered peer mentoring, curriculum-based programming, and recreational programming. An outreach and referral component was also a common part of reintegration programs, providing referrals and supports to the youth involved. A small number of programs also included a suppression and monitoring component.

Strategies that combine prevention, intervention, and suppression components seem to be most effective in combating the gang problem (Chatterjee, 2006). The programs that were targeted at the community level all emphasized the importance of providing a comprehensive approach to addressing the issue of youth gangs. For these programs, the focus was on community mobilization; social intervention; the provision of opportunities; suppression; and organizational change and development. Additionally, these programs emphasized the integration of evidence-based practices; coordination of programs, technical assistance and evaluation; and close collaboration and effective communication.

Table 1: Key Elements of Youth Gang Exit Interventions

Providing Youth with a Safe Place to Go	Youth gang members may be willing to leave their gang if their safety and that of their family are not compromised. Although some gang members feel safe when walking away from their gang, others may fear retaliation and would like to have a safe place to go.
Individual Counselling and Cognitive-Behavioural Development	The lives of youth gang members may be characterized by a host of problems, all of which can impact on an individual's psychological well-being and make leaving the gang more difficult. Programs and services that help youth to change their attitudes, and deal with their problems have been shown to have a positive impact on the willingness to leave their gang. The majority of the exit programs reviewed sought to provide youth with opportunities for personal change and positive development. In fact, most of the interventions reviewed were targeted at individual behaviour and social issues and offered content focusing on cognitive skills development, self control and personal change.
Education, Training, and Job Opportunities	Some youth join gangs in part to earn money, albeit illegally. Many gang members are willing to leave their gang even for wages that are only slightly higher than minimum wage. Thus, helping gang members to improve their education and offering them training opportunities might play an important role in helping gang members to leave their gang. Almost half of the programs reviewed provided gang-involved youth with access to educational, training, and employment programs. Other programs offered remedial education, life skills and job training services, and mentoring opportunities to encourage youth to develop supportive relationships with employers. However, only a few went on to provide youth with actual employment opportunities.
Peer Mentoring	Peer mentoring programs allow youth to share similar experiences, validate each other's reality, and gain a greater sense of self-esteem as peers feel useful to other group members. The experience of confrontation in a supportive atmosphere allows peers to challenge behavioural responses and support the adoption of new behaviours. It is during this process that a sense of acceptance and togetherness develops. Further, peer mentoring gives gang members the opportunity to learn from those who have chosen to leave the gang lifestyle behind.
Addressing Social Determinants of Health	Some programs and services seek to increase social determinants of health and to help youth to exit gangs safely and live successfully in the larger community. The programs reviewed provided individual supports in the form of mental health interventions, health care, substance abuse treatment and tattoo removal. Family services focus on improving pro-social relationships and delivering family counselling. Finally, life skills development assistance includes housing referrals, court attendance and criminal justice supports, and addressing food and income support needs. These services can be provided by criminal justice system officials, youth serving agencies, schools, faith-based groups and other organizations.
Suppression	These strategies can be coercive or alternative, though many programs incorporate elements of both. Coercive strategies emphasize arrest, punishment, and incarceration in order to isolate gang members. Alternative suppression strategies include community policing, as well as peacemaking negotiations in order to encourage youth to disengage from the gang lifestyle.

Response: Delivery Mechanisms

Interventions Targeted at Individual Gang Members

There tends to be three basic approaches used in programs that target the individual gang member:

Under the *single case management approach* each gang-involved youth undergoes a screening process and is placed into a low, medium, or high category of risk. Medium or high risk youth are eligible to enter the program, and attempts are made to refer those who do not meet the inclusion criteria to other programs. From there, an in-depth assessment identifies protective and risk factors for each participant, and an intervention plan is tailored to the needs of each youth. Case management is ongoing and includes monitoring participant progress, and reassessing and modifying service delivery as necessary.

Under the *targeted outreach* approach, Youth outreach workers are used to engage gang-involved youth individually and in small groups. Workers can counsel gang members about ways to leave a gang safely and help work out problems with parents, wives, girlfriends, peers or the police. They can counsel youth about the educational and job training programs available to them. Youth workers can also be called on in times of crisis and act as mediators to settle disputes. There are also outreach programs that are targeted beyond the individual gang-involved youth. Community outreach programs provide education and awareness to schools and community agencies, justice outreach programs, young offender programs, and family outreach programs which provide supports to the family members of youth participants.

Under the *programming offered in a group setting approach* youth participate in a series of intensive workshops that explore negative behaviour patterns and begin to develop life and social skills. Small group meetings and peer mentoring are used to encourage gang-involved youth to live a more positive lifestyle. Delivery can also involve a recreational format such as pro-social group program activities.

Interventions Targeted at Gangs

This approach begins with a thorough assessment of gang issues and of local resources and services. The goal is to design a tailored strategy and to foster community mobilization and organizational change and development. This involves organizing local residents, youth, community groups, civic leaders and agencies to plan, strengthen, or create new opportunities or create linkages to existing organizations for gang-involved and at-risk youth, and to coordinate programs and services within and across agencies. The objective is to help community agencies better address gang problems through a team "problem-solving" approach, and to assure the most effective use of resources within and across agencies.

Multi-Agency Delivery

In both individual-focused and gang-focused programs, it is important that service organizations work together to implement disengagement interventions that seek to encourage and help gang members break their ties with their gangs and successfully work their way back into society as law-abiding citizens. In fact, most of the programs reviewed call for collaboration between a network of organizations: law enforcement, justice agencies, the school system, youth services organizations, employers, social welfare agencies as well as community and grass-roots organizations to achieve a more team-oriented approach to the implementation of youth gang exit strategies.

Evaluation

Ideally, impact evaluations should examine notions of "success" in gang exit, whether measured in terms of insertion (as demonstrated primarily by reductions in negative attitudes, indicators of risk, or in gang-related or delinquent behaviours over time) or in terms of integration (as demonstrated in the development of a sense of well-being/self-esteem, the making of positive life choices, or the improvement of social determinants of health). Unfortunately, most of the projects discussed above are relatively new, and there is not as much information available on the results of program evaluations as one would hope.

Further, while many of the youth gang exit programs reviewed purported to conduct impact evaluations that would allow for the measurement of change over time in participants' levels of risk behaviours, positive life solutions or alternatives to gang involvement, at this point in the process, the majority were only able to provide preliminary implementation-oriented results. For most, the preliminary results indicate that the project is reaching the intended population and that the targeted youth are being recruited into the program. For those programs focused on the assessment of individual needs and identification of appropriate services, preliminary results suggest that targeted youth are being referred to the appropriate agencies. Finally for those programs that offer community level intervention, preliminary results indicate that all sites have successfully implemented their respective programs. Hopefully, more impact-oriented evaluations on these programs will be available in the near future.

SERVICE MAP:
SERVICES AND RESOURCES IN OTTAWA TO HELP YOUTH EXIT GANG LIFE

Objectives of the Service Map

The objective of this service mapping exercise was to inventory the resources and services currently available for gang-involved youth and young adults (ages 16-25) in Ottawa who may wish to exit gang life. This service map was prepared using two main data collection methods, namely (1) a review of existing service databases and (2) a survey of youth serving organizations in Ottawa. The methods used and the results of these exercises are described below. An overview of the Ottawa Youth Gang Prevention Initiative (OYGPI) is also provided.

Review of Existing Service Databases

Two main online service databases were searched to identify current services in Ottawa for gang-involved youth and young adults (ages 16-25) who may wish to exit gang life. These databases were:

1. *211 Ontario* (www.211ontario.ca), which provides information on community, health and social services and programs in the province of Ontario. Most of the services listed are provided by non-profit, community-based or government organizations that provide direct service to the public. Some private or commercial organizations that do not duplicate the work of these sectors are also included.
2. *Community Information Centre of Ottawa*, an online inventory of organizations, programs and services in the Ottawa Region (including the City of Ottawa and surrounding Counties), and official provider of 211 Eastern Ontario (http://www.cominfo-ottawa.org/index.html).

In the *211 Ontario* database, searches were conducted for "gang" and "gang exit" in the Key Words and in the Subjects categories. This yielded only 1 result: *Breaking the Cycle: Youth Gang Exit and Ambassador Leadership Program* offered by the Canadian Training Institute in Toronto. There were no listings for programs in Ottawa. Then, every listing under the following Subject categories was scanned and assessed for its relevance to this exercise:

- Gang Programs
- At-Risk Youth
- Young Offenders
- Youth – Counselling / Crisis Support
- Youth - Mental Health / Addictions
- Youth – Education
- Youth – Employment
- Youth – Housing
- Youth – Recreation

Once again, the only directly relevant program was *Breaking the Cycle: Youth Gang Exit and Ambassador Leadership Program* in Toronto. Other listings for Ottawa that were deemed

potentially relevant to this exercise were noted and the organization or service in question was contacted to assess whether they should participate in the online survey.

In the *Community Information Centre of Ottawa* database, every listing under the categories Youth, Young Adults, and Young Offenders was scanned and assessed for its relevance. There were no listings for services in Ottawa for gang-involved youth and young adults who may wish to exit gang life. Listings that were deemed potentially relevant were noted and the organization or service in question was contacted to assess whether they should participate in the online survey.

Based on this review of existing service databases, a list of general resources and services currently available in Ottawa for youth was developed. These services target at-risk youth and/or young offenders and they provide resources in key areas including counselling and support, crisis support, mental health and/or addictions, education, employment, housing and recreation. While these resources are not explicitly targeted at gang-involved youth who wish to exit the gang life, they include organizations that may come into contact with gang-involved youth within their broader mandates and services.[3]

Survey of Youth Serving Organizations in Ottawa

An online survey of youth serving organizations in Ottawa was conducted to identify resources and services currently available to gang-involved youth who wish to exit gang life. Organizational representatives were recruited in person, by phone or email through existing contacts and relevant service networks. Over 40 potentially relevant organizations in Ottawa were asked whether they currently had a strategy, initiative, program or services that provide resources to gang-involved youth (aged 16-25) who may wish to exit gang life. Representatives who responded "yes" were asked to complete the survey online using Survey Monkey (at www.surveymonkey.com/s/OttawaGangExitResources). The survey had a total of 17 questions, with a mix of multiple choice and open-ended questions.[4]

This survey focused on agencies, programs and resources playing a direct and deliberate part in supporting gang-involved youth and young adults who wish to exit gang life. It did not include other organizations that may come into contact with gang-involved youth within their broader mandates and services (e.g., Boys & Girls Club of Ottawa, Roberts/Smart Centre, etc.).

A total of 7 of the organizations contacted filled out the online survey, reporting they currently have a strategy, initiative, program or resources to support to gang-involved youth (aged 16-25) who may wish to exit gang life. These organizations are:

1. Ottawa Police Service – Victim Crisis Unit
2. Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS) - Youth Justice Services – Probation
3. John Howard Society of Ottawa - Non-Residential Attendance Centre
4. Eastern Ontario Youth Justice Agency (EOYJA) - Youth Gang Strategy

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[3] See Appendix C: General Resources and Services Currently Available for Youth in Ottawa for a complete list.
[4] See Appendix B: Survey of Resources Available in Ottawa for Gang-Involved Youth Who May Wish to Exit Gang Life for the complete list of questions.

5. Eastern Ontario Youth Justice Agency (EOYJA) - Community Support Team and St. John Bosco Achievement Centre
6. Operation Come Home
7. Youth Services Bureau (YSB) William E. Hay Detention Centre

The results of the survey reveal that most of the resources and services currently available in Ottawa for gang-involved youth and young adults wishing to exit gang life are provided by elements of the criminal justice system (CJS). *Operation Come Home* is the only service where youth are not necessarily involved in the criminal justice system when they come to the attention of the organization (see Table 2 for the point of contact with youth). Most gang-involved youth come to the attention of services linked to the criminal justice system through referrals made from within the organization, or from other criminal justice agencies. The *EOYJA Community Support Team* and *St. John Bosco Achievement Centre* also accept requests for service.

Table 2: Point of Contact with Youth

Youth Has No Contact with the Criminal Justice System	1st Point of Contact	Sentence in the Community	Detention/Custody
	Ottawa Police Service	MCYS Probation & John Howard Ottawa	EOYJA: Youth Gang Strategy & YSB: William E. Hay Detention Centre
	EOYJA Community Support Team & St. John Bosco Achievement Centre		
Operation Come Home			

All of these services are available to both young men and young women with the exception of the *YSB William E. Hay Detention Centre* which only provides services for young men. Most respondents reported coming into contact with an average of three to five (3-5) gang-involved youth on any given month, mostly young men. *Operation Come Home* reports seeing as many as fifteen (15) gang-involved youth on any given month, mostly young men. The gang-involved youth encountered by the *John Howard Non-Residential Attendance Centre* and all the *EOYJA* programs are typically 16-19 years old. *Operation Come Home* reports serving mostly 20 to 24 year old gang-involved youth. The *Ottawa Police*, *MCYS Probation Services* and *YSB William E. Hay Detention Centre* deal with a range of ages. The *EOYJA* programs typically have a waiting list for the services they offer, while all other service providers typically do not.

The types of resources currently available range from the *Ottawa Police Service – Victim Crisis Unit* which provides youth and young adults wishing to exit gang life with information and referrals for service (victim support, housing/shelter, financial assistance, etc.) and *Operation Come Home* which additionally offers a drop-in and resource centre (including on-site counselling) to the *John Howard Non-Residential Attendance Centre* and the *EOYJA St. John Bosco Achievement Centre* which offer youth and young adults specific evidence-based interventions – individual counselling/cognitive restructuring and education/job training, respectively – to the *MCYS Youth Justice Services – Probation* and the *YSB William E. Hay*

Detention Centre which employ a single case management planning process and individualized approach to identify areas of risk and need, set goals, and refer youth and young adults wishing to exit gang life for various services. Case management is ongoing and includes monitoring participant progress, and reassessing and modifying service delivery as necessary. Finally the *EOYJA – Youth Gang Strategy* and *EOYJA – Community Support Team* build on the single case management approach by incorporating a socio-ecological model and collaborative problem-solving. These case management services work with both formal and informal supports, including the family, and typically collaborate with a range of other local agencies and services already involved with the identified youth.

The Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS) of the Government of Ontario (Youth Justice Branch) funds the *Probation* services as well as the *EOYJA* programs and the *YSB William E. Hay Detention Centre*, and contributes funds to the *John Howard Non-Residential Attendance Centre*, which also receives funding from the United Way Ottawa. The *Ottawa Police Victim Crisis Unit* is funded by the Ottawa Police Service, while *Operation Come Home* is funded primarily through fundraising and individual donations.

Ottawa Youth Gang Prevention Initiative (OYGPI)

Created in 2007, the *Ottawa Youth Gang Prevention Initiative* is co-chaired by Crime Prevention Ottawa and the Youth Services Bureau of Ottawa. Its vision is 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 through a collaborative, holistic and evidence-based strategy of prevention and intervention.

The OYGPI has four components:
- *Healthy Neighbourhood Cohesion*: building positive relationships in gang affected neighbourhoods to reduce fear and strengthen the community fabric.
- *Prevention*: activities, programs and supports which seek to positively engage young people with their families, their schools and their communities before they are attracted to gang life.
- *Intervention*: programming that engages with youth who are involved or beginning to be involved in youth gang activity.
- *Suppression*: targeted enforcement aimed at criminal gang activity.

The OYGPI has four Working Groups that focus on: (1) data acquisition and analysis; (2) funding and policy development; (3) education and awareness; and (4) OYGPI membership. Finally, the OYGI brings together a variety of stakeholders including law enforcement and criminal justice agencies, the school system, youth services organizations, social welfare agencies, recreation services, as well as community organizations and faith groups.

STRENGTHS, LIMITATIONS AND BARRIERS OF EXISTING RESOURCES AND SERVICES FOR GANG-INVOLVED YOUTH IN OTTAWA

The purpose of this overview is to provide insight into the strengths, limitations and barriers of current services and resources in Ottawa, and to help explore how a model of service might be improved going forward.

First and foremost, the research literature has demonstrated that responses to local gang problems are most effective when they contain a combination of prevention, intervention, and suppression components. Prevention strategies focus on youth who are at risk of joining gangs, intervention strategies aim to provide services to youth who are involved in gangs, and suppression strategies engage law enforcement in an aim to target and rehabilitate the most violent entrenched gang members. The city of Ottawa has recognized the importance of taking a comprehensive approach to the problem of youth gangs as evidenced in the development of the *Ottawa Youth Gang Prevention Initiative* and its collaborative, holistic, evidence-based strategy of prevention, intervention and suppression.

With a strategic framework in place, the focus can be shifted to the intervention component and the strategies, services and resources important to helping gang-involved youth and young people to exit the gang lifestyle. The review of the research literature and current youth gang exit programs have demonstrated that youth gang members often need extensive support to help them make a successful transition to the conventional world. It is important to provide those who wish to leave the gang with a variety of interventions including pro-social skills training, educational and job opportunities, services to promote a healthy lifestyle, and increased monitoring and supervision during the period of disengagement from the gang lifestyle.

While the city of Ottawa does not have a youth gang exit strategy or dedicated program per say, there are a variety of individual resources and services addressing particular issues that are currently available and which may be helpful for gang-involved youth wishing to exit gang life. These general resources and services available for youth align with the key elements of youth gang exit programs discussed previously. Youth in the city of Ottawa have access to individual counselling and crisis support services, recreational programs as well as education, job training and skills development services and employment resources. Additionally, there are several services available that seek to improve social determinants of health including addictions and mental health resources and housing supports. Finally there are services particularly directed at addressing the needs of young offenders who have already come to the attention of the criminal justice system.

With the availability and accessibility of key services in Ottawa, what is needed next is an integrated service approach with a coordinated delivery of resources. What is clear in the research literature is that exiting from a criminal youth gang is a multi-dimensional problem that requires a holistic solution; one-dimensional interventions that deal with one symptom at a time are unlikely to have a significant and lasting impact on gangs or their individual members.

Based on the current level of gang activity in Ottawa, a single case management approach may be the most appropriate strategy moving forward. Under this approach youth gang members undergo an in-depth assessment to identify risk and protective factors. From there an individual intervention plan is designed and tailored to meet the needs of each youth. Key services are identified and may include counselling, life skills and anger management programs, education or training programs, recreation, employment, cultural activities, etc., and their delivery is arranged. Case management is ongoing and includes monitoring participant progress, and reassessing and modifying service delivery as necessary to ensure that it is responding to the needs of the youth. As noted in the research literature, this approach allows for flexibility in service delivery.

Several of the organizations and agencies providing resources and services for gang-involved youth and young adults wishing to exit gang life in the city of Ottawa have already adopted the use of an intensive case management approach to service integration and delivery. Representatives of this approach felt the strengths of their model include the following:

- intervention is based on individual needs, goals and level of motivation of the youth;
- family and community partners are incorporated in case planning and intervention;
- there is a focus on the capacity of the organization to engage youth in the process; and
- for youth involved in the criminal justice system, this coordinated approach creates opportunities to continue service beyond their stay in detention or custody.

Organizations such as the *YSB William E. Hay Detention Centre* used a case management planning process to identify individual goal areas for the youth in their custody and then to administer appropriate individual and group programming focused on social skill development, employment apprenticeship opportunities and/or individual counselling. While some of the organizations and agencies provided programming in partnership with community resources, most relied on services and resources available within their own facilities or on referrals to other organizations.

The research literature demonstrates that the delivery of multi-dimensional solutions requires the collaboration of well integrated partners. Most of the youth gang exit programs reviewed acknowledged the need for service organizations to work collaboratively to implement interventions that encourage and help gang members break their ties with their gangs and successfully work their way back into society. These programs call for a partnership between a network of organizations to achieve a more team-oriented approach to the implementation of youth gang exit interventions.

The *Ottawa Youth Gang Prevention Initiative* encourages collaboration between various service providers. Unfortunately, it seems that actual attempts at inclusive multi-agency delivery of youth gang exit interventions are less frequent and often difficult to sustain. Most service providers offer individualized interventions to address specific issues and needs for youth who want to leave gangs, and when youth serving organizations in Ottawa work together it is often through a referral process. What is needed is the development of genuine collaboration between a network of organizations and agencies already involved in the lives of gang-involved youth (law enforcement, justice agencies, the school system, youth services organizations, employers, social welfare agencies as well as community and grass-roots organizations) in the development and implementation of individual case management plans.

Most of the resources and services currently available in Ottawa that specifically target gang-involved youth and young adults wishing to exit gang life are provided by organizations affiliated with the criminal justice system: the *Ottawa Police Service*, the *Ministry of Children and Youth Services – Youth Justice Services – Probation*, the *Eastern Ontario Youth Justice Agency* and the *YSB William E. Hay Detention Centre*. The comprehensive case management approaches that currently exist are often reserved for youth who have had formal contact with the system and services are provided to those who are under formal supervision arrangements (probation or intensive community supervision) or are being released into the community after a period in custody. In this instance, there may be a heavier reliance on control and insertion, and success of the intervention may be measured in terms of desistance from criminal activity and decreasing levels of recidivism.

However, recidivism does not assure the successful reintegration of youth wishing to leave the gang lifestyle over the longer term. Integration requires providing youth with the skills and resources to develop a sense of well-being/self-esteem, to make positive life choices, and to improve social determinants of health. While several of the above-mentioned service providers employ interventions including individual counselling and cognitive behavioural development as well as providing youth with education, training and job opportunities, interventions to address social determinants of health tend to be lacking. As noted in the inventory of general resources and services currently available for youth in Ottawa, interventions to address issues of mental health and addiction, employment and housing currently exist in the city, and referrals are often made to these programs. What is needed is their incorporation into the current case management approach. Further, a comprehensive solution to youth gang exit also requires integrated service delivery for gang-involved youth and young adults who have not yet come into contact with the criminal justice system. While criminal justice organizations play a critical role in the development and implementation of gang exit interventions, it cannot be the responsibility of this group alone.

Finally, a key barrier to the development and implementation of a multi-dimensional, collaborative approach to addressing the issue of youth gang exit in Ottawa is establishing and maintaining funding, resources and commitment. Many of the youth serving organizations surveyed noted a lack of funding and difficulty in maintaining commitment from services and resources to work in a holistic manner over the long-term. Many agencies also noted a lack of trust on the part of youth and an overall lack of knowledge for serving this particular population as key barriers to their services. Funding options are needed that would help ensure that services and resources can be delivered as easily and effectively as possible, and on a more permanent basis.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our review of the research literature and of current youth gang exit programs, and our overview of strategies, services and resources currently available in Ottawa, has allowed us to identify some key recommendations for intervention and service delivery that may be relevant to helping youth in Ottawa exit from gangs.

1. **Use the *Ottawa Youth Gang Prevention Initiative* (OYGPI) as a starting point for building a comprehensive approach to the problem of youth gang exit in the city of Ottawa.**

- Through the establishment of the *Ottawa Youth Gang Prevention Initiative* (OYGPI), the city of Ottawa has recognized the importance of taking a comprehensive approach to the problem of youth gangs.
- The OYGPI emphasizes the importance of a collaborative, holistic, evidence-based strategy and so it makes sense that the city of Ottawa should use the leadership and service brokering capacity of the existing OYGPI to build a comprehensive approach to helping youth exit from gangs.
- The OYGPI should be assigned as the responsibility centre to coordinate youth gang exit initiatives in the city of Ottawa. In this capacity, the OYGPI could support and manage partnerships, be a focal point for sharing strategic information; provide technical support for the development and implementation of initiatives; and develop strategies to mobilize financial resources.

2. **Build on the development of current multi-dimensional interventions through the incorporation of services and resources to address social determinants of health.**

- A multi-dimensional youth gang exit intervention is needed to provide youth with viable alternatives to gang membership, provide them with the same benefits as the gang, and to fulfill their basic needs for supportive relationships, belonging, structure, financial security, personal safety and protection.
- Current youth gang exit interventions are effective in the administration of services such as individual counselling and cognitive behavioural development as well as providing education, training and job opportunities which are important in the development of a sense of well-being/self-esteem and making positive life choices.
- What is needed is the incorporation of interventions to address social determinants of health. Resources and services to address issues of mental health, addiction, employment and housing are already in existence, they need only to be better integrated.

3. **Continue to use and incorporate additional best practices into the *single case management approach* to service delivery for youth seeking to exit gangs.**

- Several of the organizations providing resources and services for gang-involved youth and young adults wishing to exit gang life in the city of Ottawa have adopted the use of an intensive case management approach to service integration and delivery.
- It is important to recruit experienced, skilled but diverse staff to administer this approach. These individuals should know how to effectively engage with gang-involved youth and young adults who may wish to exit the gang lifestyle in order to build trust with these

youth over time. Building trust may allow gang-involved youth to see the staff member as a person that they can look to and count on and to whom they may be more receptive to the identification of possibilities other than staying involved in gangs.

- In moving forward, best practices can be taken from *Wraparound Milwaukee*, a comprehensive individualized care program that focuses on delivering strength-based, individualized care to delinquent youth and their families.

4. **Broaden service delivery to include gang-involved youth and young adults wishing to exit gang life who have not had formal contact with the criminal justice system.**

- Currently youth gang exit interventions are overwhelming provided to individuals who have had formal contact with the criminal justice system. While this should remain a high priority population, interventions should be developed for youth who wish to exit from the gang lifestyle at an earlier point – before becoming involved in the criminal justice system.
- This would necessitate that service providers other than criminal justice organizations and agencies become involved in and responsible for administration of the single case management approach.

5. **Commit to a collaborative partnership between various organizations and agencies.**

- In order to promote the success of a case management approach for the delivery of a multi-dimensional gang exit intervention, the OYGPI should work to develop a highly collaborative partnership comprised of different organizations and agencies active in serving local youth. These groups can provide a comprehensive array of resources and services in order to tailor an individualized plan and to effectively deliver the supports needed.
- Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) are an important key to developing the necessary structure to collaborate across various organizations and agencies.
- One of the main challenges of multi-agency delivery is the sharing of information across partnerships. Legal mandates and ethical requirements of individual organizations and agencies – including difficulties related to issues of confidentiality and accountability – make these collaborations complicated. Mechanisms need to be developed and implemented to facilitate communication across service systems.

6. **Explore funding options to ensure that services and resources can be administered easily, quickly and flexibly.**

- The OYGPI should explore funding options in which funding for the population of youth and young adults wishing to exit gang life may be combined into a pool so that services and resources can be administered easily, quickly and flexibly and so this population can be served most effectively and efficiently.
- This means that the current silos of service funding should be broken down. Funders should convene to devise a new process where collective funding can be administered in a different but accountable manner.

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