



# **The Vibe is Respect**

## **SUPPORTING YOUTH WHO ARE GANG INVOLVED: COMMUNITY CONSULTATIONS REPORT**

Final Report – October 2016  
Toronto

Central Toronto Youth Services  
<http://www.ctys.org/>

Ministry of Children and Youth Services  
Youth Justice Services Division

Note: Due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter there is no identifying information included with quotes from participants.



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# The Vibe is Respect

Show us

But before you show us what to do show us that you know us  
If our confidence misplaced caused our mistakes encourage  
our faith in you to grow robust

Show us

Before you define our imperfections show us you're different  
many adults lack direction

We are young, quick, and unwilling to miss moments for  
minimum wage shillings

T.V. taught us entertainers and drug dealings make us killings

We forsook the former our forefathers raised us as cynical

Some of our heroes are criminal while the weaker got  
ridiculed

Show us self-love need not be so conditional

Show us the statistics that say we are beyond typical

Show us our power to create our own possibilities

Show us avenues beyond city sprawl, hunger and hostility

Show us we can feel alive without killing ourselves and pain

Show us the joys to be gained without substances in brain

Show us their grades meant nothing and their standards were  
stupid

Show us the world that invites us and wants differences  
included

Show us a path to transform those bad beats that influenced

We all want bright futures show us our goals are congruent

We are willing to change and we're willing to prove it

Show us we are equals

Here's our respect please don't lose it.

**Lance Bucknor**

Spoken Word Artist and youth participant in the  
consultation process

# PREFACE

In recent years, growing concern about youth gangs in communities throughout Ontario has forced lawmakers, policy experts and service providers to acknowledge that we need to deal more effectively with youth involved in gang activity.

Twenty years ago, Central Toronto Youth Services published a groundbreaking report entitled *Youth Gangs on Youth Gangs*, in which its author, Dr. Fred Mathews, observed that:



“[Gang involvement] does not simply or necessarily reflect pathology in an individual or group of individuals. It is also social in nature and has a social meaning.”

As such, we must take a broader and more systemic view of youth gangs which incorporates their relationships with marginalization, power, money and isolation from family. As governments, institutions and service providers, we must seek to locate ourselves within the solution to this complex, disturbing and costly problem.



Early in 2013, our agency was asked by the Ministry of Children and Youth Services – Youth Justice Services Division to lead a series of community wide consultations intended to inform more effective professional development programs and direct services for community agencies. We were excited about this initiative because it offered the opportunity to engage in direct conversation with youth, their families, service providers, and other stakeholders. We

asked East Metro Youth Services and Yorktown Child and Family Centre to join us as partners. Their role was invaluable and much appreciated.

This report invites us to hear the voices of youth and compare their perceptions with those of adult professionals – social workers, educators, police and others – who are closely and routinely associated with them. More important, the engagement of youth in this project and the richness of their viewpoints provide the motivation, evidence and inspiration to work more effectively toward healthier young people and safer communities for everyone.

Heather Sproule, MSW  
Executive Director, Central Toronto Youth Services

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We know it's scary to meet this way  
It's obvious you are limited in the things you say  
Wouldn't it be nice if a counsellor could think twice?  
I understand the strife  
I too have lived that life



If only they knew what I've had to go through  
I'm really here to show a lot of the experience I know

I just want to be seen  
As more than just a troubled teen



All my life I've been exposed  
To all kinds of youthful cons and pros  
They're all the same  
I have a bad reputation attached to my name  
It's really all a shame  
Because of stigma I get some of the blame



I feel like giving up why should I bother  
No one can be there for me not even my own father



I just need a chance to show you I care  
I hate to see you scared and living in fear

Another day gone I feel more insanity (youth)  
I want to get help and help my reality (youth)

I have a lot of patience and I have lessons to teach  
Believe me I too am struggling with outreach (counsellor)



If we meet your need and meet in your community  
Then we can help each other and promote unity  
Couldn't we all just understand and appreciate both sides of the fence  
Face the truth and each other with less judgmental suspense



**WRITTEN BY ALLISON ASARE**  
**ILLUSTRATIONS BY LANCE BUCKNOR**

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This community consultation report has been developed in partnership with Central Toronto Youth Services and Youth Justice Services Division of the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS).

Through the leadership of Central Toronto Youth Services in developing a vision of collaboration and partnerships, this project demonstrates the benefits of youth and family serving agencies working together to improve service delivery by gaining a better understanding of the needs of those being served.

In the spirit of this collaboration, East Metro Youth Services (EMYS) and Yorktown Family Services provided significant contributions as project team members, and in the facilitation of community consultation sessions. Their well-respected standing in their communities provided invaluable linkages to local agencies and organizations that further supported this consultation process.

Furthermore, the success of this project would not have occurred without the contribution and support of a number of agencies and organizations within the City of Toronto:

Agincourt Community Services Association, Astwood Strategy Corporation, Canadian Training Institute (Breaking the Cycle), Boys & Girls Club of East Scarborough, Elmbank Community Centre, Jane Street Hub, JVS Toronto, Malvern Family Resource Centre (The S.P.O.T. [Success Power Opportunities Teamwork]), and the Scarborough Child and Family Life Centre.

A special thanks to the many youth, parents and service providers who took part in the numerous consultations, for taking the time to support this initiative and for providing their voices in a real, honest and straightforward manner. Their participation provided invaluable feedback and reinforced the knowledge that what we do can make a significant impact on their lives.

In particular, a special note of appreciation and acknowledgement to Lance Bucknor and Alison Asare, who participated in the youth consultations and contributed to the youth section of this report.

*This whole experience has been so fun! From the initial focus group to the four weeks of working on the report, I've learned so much. I learned about the developments of the Canadian justice system and so much more through conversation. I've learned about the perspectives of young people in the city by reading the documented focus group statements. All in all it's been a happy and educational experience of contribution. I liked it a lot!*

– Lance Bucknor

# INTRODUCTION

The issues of youth gangs, violence, and associated criminal activities requires further understanding and analysis on the part of community organizations, service providers, and policy makers working with youth. Of particular interest are why youth become involved with gangs, and how appropriate and effective interventions are in working with at-risk youth.

Youth Justice Services Division (YJSD) of the Ministry of Children and Youth Services funds and provides services to youth, aged 12 to 17 at the time of their offence. Services provided to young people who come into contact with the Youth Justice system range from pre- and post-charge diversion programming, community supervision and case management to youth serving open or secure detention/custodial sentences. Through direct-operated programming and contractual agreements with community-based agencies, YJSD supports the development and implementation of policies, programs and service delivery



The objectives for the consultations were to:

- Give youth an influential voice around their program and service needs
- Inform service delivery, training programs and training approaches

systems that support youth and their families in leading pro-social lives and making positive contributions to their communities.

Central Toronto Youth Services (CTYS), an accredited children’s mental health agency, received funding to lead the development and implementation of community consultations with youth, caregivers and service providers in key priority neighbourhoods in Toronto. Given the scope of this process, the community consultations were held in four communities. The young people and adults who participated in the consultation sessions were all connected with and were currently taking part in existing community services (E.g., Agincourt Community Services Association, Boys & Girls Club of East Scarborough, Elmbank Community Centre, etc.).



In total, there were:

- 7 youth consultations with 108 participants
- 1 service provider consultation with 18 participants
- 1 caregiver and service provider consultation with 20 participants

Central Toronto Youth Services brought together staff from East Metro Youth Services and Yorktown Family Services to develop a consultation methodology, engage community members, and launch community consultations. CTYS provided significant support such as contributing resources to the consultation process, sorting the findings into themes, and developing the report.

The objective of this report is to provide an overview of the findings from the community consultations, highlighting in particular, the unique voices of youth involved in the project.



As part of the consultation process, a number of youth, parents and community stakeholders participated from the communities of Jane and Finch, Kingston-Galloway, Malvern and Rexdale. Two youth who participated in the consultations contributed their voices to this report in the form of poetry, sketch work, and reflection pieces.

## Process Methodology

Through the support and initiative of CTYS, youth workers, community agencies, and YJSD staff came together to develop targeted questions for three groups: youth, caregivers, and service providers from community organizations.

The questions focused on the themes of relationship-building

- Strategies to support youth who are gang involved/affiliated
- Safeguards for communities
- Additional learning that service providers need to support gang-involved youth

CTYS identified community agencies in the key priority neighbourhoods to support the development of consultation questions, engage youth in the project, and facilitation of the community consultations. These agencies included East Metro Youth Services, Yorktown Family Services, and youth gang consultants Astwood Strategy Corporation.

Several roundtables were held with these key agencies to ensure that the consultations were developed

and facilitated in a way that was relevant to the communities involved. Consultation was co-facilitated by youth outreach workers from each of the agencies.

A list of the questions asked during the consultations are included in Appendices B - D.

Many additional community agencies were involved in providing an accessible, youth-friendly space for the consultations, along with supporting the engagement and recruitment of youth and service providers to participate in this process. These community consultations demonstrated the collaboration and commitment of communities to support youth, families, and community safety.



# FINDINGS

The findings from the community consultations have been organized into themes, starting with contextual information (E.g. the realities of gang involvement, safety concerns of youth and their caregivers), proceeding through relationship and program recommendations, and concluding with service provider perspectives on understanding and communicating with Youth Justice Services' staff.

Youth from the four identified communities appeared particularly eager to participate in the consultations. Many expressed appreciation for being asked for their input and for being given the opportunity to have their voices heard.



# **1. THE REALITIES OF GANG INVOLVEMENT AND COMMUNITY VIOLENCE**

**Most of the young people who participated in the community consultations were aware of a youth gang operating in their local neighbourhood and were able to acknowledge the impact that youth gangs have on their community and in particular the youth who live there.**

# THE REALITIES OF GANG INVOLVEMENT AND COMMUNITY VIOLENCE

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## 1.1 Why young people join

Service providers identified a multitude of factors, such as lack of education, poverty, discrimination, racism, family breakdown, and lack of neighbourhood safety that may increase the chances of a young person joining a gang.

Youth participants said that, for many youth, a significant motivator for becoming gang affiliated, regardless of the risks involved, is the need to have a sense of belonging to a peer group and to have a place where they feel accepted.

In some cases, youth stated that the decision to join a group is not about being part of an organized gang, but more about:

- Being from a certain neighbourhood or housing complex
- Knowing someone or having a peer in a gang

According to youth, belonging to a gang often provides a personal connection to others and a sense of family that youth lack elsewhere in their lives.

## 1.2 Why it's hard to leave

Youth identified many barriers that may prevent gang-affiliated youth from distancing themselves from gangs, ranging from fear for their safety to fear for a future without prospects. Youth also had suggestions on what could help them resist the lure of gangs.

### **Fear for their safety and social isolation.**

Leaving the gang could result in repercussions from their peers within the gang, or other individuals or gangs with whom they have been in conflict.

*When you're in a gang, family and everything that surrounds you is on the line. After they leave, they are on their own and have no protection and all these people still want to kill you because you were a part of that.*

*Even after you leave a gang, it's a reality that you'll be approached again by gang members, either hostile or friendly. You might have to work hard to leave, go somewhere else, have a plan. Even then, youth may still have some contact with a gang, although they have started to develop other networks and another life.*

**Violence.** Youth spoke on a personal level about the potential violence that can occur when involved or affiliated with a youth gang. Several youth referred to recent violent situations occurring in their communities, and many acknowledged knowing people whose lives have been seriously impacted by violence. (For more on youth's safety concerns, see "2. Personal safety concerns of youth and caregivers").

**A lack of personal skills, strong positive family involvement, or peer supports** that influence the ability to avoid a criminal lifestyle. Consequently, many youth still maintain this lifestyle despite knowing the risks, such as going to jail or threats to personal or familial safety.

**Stigma** that accompanies being involved in the criminal justice system, and the challenges of getting a good job with a criminal record. A number of youth expressed that once you have a criminal record, applying for a pardon is a long and expensive process that many youth cannot afford. This barrier to employment can create a sense of hopelessness, encouraging some youth to return to a life of criminal activity.

**Poverty** and the difficulty of resisting the financial rewards associated with gang involvement. Young people spoke about youth poverty in their communities; many lack the material items needed to survive and see no legitimate means to meet these needs. Some also place a high value on such status items as the latest clothing or cell phones, and may try to obtain these items through illegitimate means.

Youth acknowledged that someone could experience and **live with the consequences of gang involvement for many years.**

Implication: Community and social **supports should be long term.**

*The bottom line is poverty at the root. We need to be paid to attend programming because what happens when people don't get paid, bad decisions get made.*

*The more involved you are and the more money you make, the more you will go back into the neighbourhood*

For some youth, poverty means that they may also have to support their families. This situation can often influence youth with limited skills and few opportunities to involve themselves in a criminal lifestyle.

**Negative use of social media.** Youth described ways in which social media influences young people:

- Youth gang recruitment, bullying peers, retaliation, intimidation of others, and as a mechanism to draw some youth into criminal activity
- Promoting and reinforcing existing disagreements between individuals, neighbourhoods or gang-involved youth, all of which may escalate conflict and cause violence

Youth mentioned that social media and changing technology prevent them from talking to each other, decreasing personal connections and negatively impacting personal relationships.

*No one speaks no more – too much texting – you don't know how to handle things on a personal level anymore. We don't speak to people anymore.*

*With social media, the entire world is watching you. With things like Instagram, Facebook, people will mimic what they see.*



### **1.3 What youth say they need to resist negative influences**

Many youth spoke about the need for positive traits, such as being confident, strong, and wanting to make something of their lives. Some youth find resilience through a positive family environment and involvement with peers.

*Youth don't always see people from their communities doing good things. We need young leaders out of our communities to work with programs so it feels more like a community. More like someone who can relate and show things can be different.*

Youth also spoke about wanting to plan for their future and make something of their lives, recognizing staying in school, furthering their education, and avoiding conflict with the law as pathways to a meaningful professional career.

Youth emphasized the importance of **increasing the presence of people providing supports and services in their neighbourhoods at all times**, not just after a serious incident and/or when a crisis occurs.

Youth repeatedly noted that **being involved and participating in positive community activities can provide an alternative to gang involvement**. These activities include services and programs focusing on violence prevention and targeting youth for early intervention.

*Prevention needs to happen at a younger age. Set up some info sessions for youth because they are very smart and they can make decisions at an early age: 6 and up.*

The young people acknowledged the efforts of particular program staff and the positive influences these staff have had on motivating them to attend programs and change their lives.

*Constant involvement – don't come once a week and not come on other days – encourage us to do something every day – someone in the community every day – has to be consistent – consistency is key to life.*

Some youth indicated that **more programs for venturing out of their local neighbourhoods** and experiencing other parts of the city or province would provide an awareness of potential opportunities outside of their neighbourhoods, helping them grow as individuals and expand their life experiences.

Youth's diverging feelings about leaving their neighbourhood – "I need to broaden my experiences" vs. "I don't feel safe" – serve as a reminder that there's no single approach to programming. **One program doesn't fit all.**

According to service providers, without addressing root causes of gang involvement many interventions will have limited effectiveness and provide only limited support for youth who want to make changes in their lives.



## **2. SAFETY CONCERNS OF YOUTH AND CAREGIVERS**

**This issue surfaced consistently throughout all consultations as a significant barrier to exploring educational options, seeking employment/life skills support, or accessing programs not available locally.**

# SAFETY CONCERNS OF YOUTH AND CAREGIVERS



## 2.1 Safety

*Think about the risks youth are facing and safety. The natural fear is, “I don’t know you.” There is fear of going to jail and getting in trouble or death. Snitching, if it gets back around, usually the end result is death.*

According to some youth, how safely services and programs can be delivered, will determine whether or not youth participate on a consistent basis.

**Having youth from different neighbourhoods come together in a “shared” space** or participate in a group program is a particular concern. Opening up and sharing information about themselves, their family, and the challenges they face in their community, may put participants at risk of being labelled a snitch or lead to conflict with other youth.



*Sometimes it is dangerous for people to get help if it isn’t located where it is safe for them to access. Bring the agency to us instead of us getting to them. Some people can’t move neighbourhoods.*

Service providers shared similar safety concerns for youth, noting that youth may place themselves in danger by:

- **Discussing gangs in a group setting.** Youth often fear for themselves, family, and peers, especially if they have disclosed information to authorities.
- **Travelling by public transit outside of their community,** particularly if they have gang affiliations. This is a significant barrier for many young people exploring educational options, seeking employment/life skills support, or accessing other programs not available locally, and is particularly acute for youth referred to the limited number of gang intervention and exit programs available in the city.

**YOUTH MADE  
THREE  
SUGGESTIONS  
ABOUT PROGRAM  
SAFETY:**

**Bring supports to youth and provide them at times when youth are available, such as after hours and on weekends.**

**Offer late night programs (e.g. recreational) to keep youth busy at these times, and which are safe to get to, be at and return home from.**

**Offer programs and services on both an individual basis and in a group setting.**

Caregivers of gang-involved youth expressed concern about their child being involved in the justice system, and fear for their child's safety and their own if they were seen cooperating with authorities. They identified these potential consequences:

- Social isolation if they are perceived to have disclosed information
- Verbal and physical threats if they report their child is involved in gang activities
- Damage to their relationship with their child

*A youth may be interested in upgrading education but going to the program is not an option, as there are other youth attending that make it dangerous.*

*People don't join gangs for the fun of it. Needs are being met and gangs fill supports with what they are lacking to begin with such as money. Youth may be supporting the family with their gang involvement. Other issues to address could be a family breakdown. Services need to fill the needs of what caused them to join in the first place*



### **3. EARLY INTERVENTION AND GANG EXIT STRATEGIES**

**Service providers emphasized that because gang involvement begins at a young age early intervention is crucial.**

# EARLY INTERVENTION AND GANG EXIT STRATEGIES

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## 3.1 System prerequisites

*Early intervention is needed, as early as ages 10-11, in partnership with schools. We need to inform parents and work with teachers and school systems to let them know what the consequences are. Sometimes youth just grow into a gang if you live in a certain neighbourhood. You are a part of it.*

Service providers emphasized the need for:

- **Greater collaboration and partnership with local schools and community agencies** to identify youth who are at risk of gang involvement along with direct resources to support these young people.
- **A variety of opportunities for youth and their families** to assist them in learning and developing new skills.

## 3.2 Assessment requirements

*There are different levels of change. There is a young person who is trying to find their way.*

To engage in effective gang intervention strategies, service providers must be able to assess:

- **The extent to which a youth is ready for change.** The degree of readiness for change could have an impact on intervention. Service providers must learn to assess readiness and need to understand this prior to service planning or program referrals. For example, service providers might determine that a youth needs to focus on a particular goal that the youth might not feel they need to change, which would result in a lack of progress.
- **The degree of gang involvement.** For example, youth in the early stages of involvement might be in a better position to change and exit the gang. Service providers need to have the interviewing and counselling skills necessary to support a youth through the change process.

## **4. BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATING IN PROGRAMS**

**Youth identified a number of barriers including: Judgment and labeling, narrow eligibility criteria, access limitations, lack of awareness, discrimination and racism.**

# BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATING IN PROGRAMS



## 4.1 Barriers

Youth identified a number of barriers including:

**Judgment and labeling.** Other youth may judge them for participating in programs that are related to justice or mental health services. Service providers may label and judge youth who are involved in the justice system before they have started attending a program or service.

*There is a stigma attached to talking about criminal records.  
They need to make services less stigmatized.*

**Narrow eligibility criteria,** such as age restrictions and catchment area limitations.

**Access limitations,** such as:

- Travel distance
- Lack of public transit
- Territory concerns for gang- involved youth
- Lack of childcare

**Lack of awareness.** Many youth said they are unaware of available opportunities, indicating that outreach and dissemination of information to communities about programs and services is ineffective.

Youth want to feel that the community organizations are reaching out to them and care enough about them to make sure that they are aware of opportunities. Their suggestions include:

- Have service providers come into communities and promote information more effectively through door-to-door campaigning





Youth suggested that **outreach and advertisements for programs should encourage all youth to attend** to decrease the associated stigma.

- Have community organizations enhance communication and collaboration with other agencies and probation services
- Conduct outreach in schools to ensure that youth and educators know what is available

*Programs aren't promoted enough. You should hear about it all over the community. Everyone should promote it and hand out flyers.*

**Discrimination and racism**, which marginalized youth stated they experienced regularly. Some youth identified experiencing harassment and racialization at the hands of law enforcement officials, which subsequently led to their involvement with the justice system.

Youth involved in an Aboriginal-specific community consultation felt that barriers such as racism and discrimination were unique to their community. These youth discussed feelings of social isolation and hopelessness, and a distinct divide between themselves and youth from other racial and cultural backgrounds.

*It's like people have racial things – they call us natives drunks – just because of stereotypes. You don't need to worry about it here (at Aboriginal programming) because we all respect each other. Would they come to one of our programs? There are differences like colour. It is judgment and it's a lot of the gang-related stuff. They stereotype us.*

Although these Aboriginal youth are able to attend aboriginal programs and services, they spoke about how barriers such as racism directly impacted their **ability to access programs and services outside of their Aboriginal community.**

Participating service providers recommended that **Youth Justice Services Division service providers working in custody facilities, probation services or community agencies have an understanding of cultural sensitivity, discrimination, racism and other forms of oppression.**

## 4.2 Respecting cultural sensitivity

Service providers also discussed **cultural awareness and sensitivity** as essential for breaking down barriers, indicating that having an understanding of, or having a shared cultural experience, can make a difference.

*With my experiences, what I've noticed is that they like to see themselves in you. When I understand something, it opens up a whole other communication. Also, there are times when they may not want someone of their own culture to work with them. They are ashamed.*

In contrast, service providers also noted that some families might not want services from someone from their own culture or community due to feelings of shame.



Aboriginal youth said they often feel more comfortable in **Aboriginal-specific programming**, and suggested two reasons:

- 1) They often do not feel welcome when attending other programs
- 2) They felt connected to all Aboriginal youth through culture and heritage because their community was not defined by geographic areas

## **5. YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS**

**Service providers must assess and work with youth who have diverse mental health concerns.**

# YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS



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## 5.1 Barriers

**Many youth have experienced trauma** whether as victims of violence or having witnessed violence involving a peer or family member.

*Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an issue. They all suffer from it at different levels. The mental health needs to be addressed.*

**Young people may perpetrate violence and experience subsequent trauma** as a result of their actions.

**Youth who have recently immigrated to Canada may have experienced trauma in their country of origin**, particularly if that region is experiencing conflict. Newcomer youth involved in youth justice may require additional supports as a result of their diverse needs and the barriers they face in Canada.

*Provide trauma training, motivational training etc. for ministry staff. With ongoing training they will be more empathetic.*



**All individuals working with youth and their families require specialized training to better identify possible mental health concerns and trauma, and to develop a better understanding of bereavement.**

An effective service provider requires empathy along with interviewing and counseling skills. Service providers discussed that ongoing training in these areas is crucial.



## **6. RELATIONSHIP- BUILDING: WHAT YOUTH AND CAREGIVERS WANT**

**Youth said overwhelmingly that relationship-building skills are crucial for service providers.**

# RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING: WHAT YOUTH AND CAREGIVERS WANT



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## 6.1 Relationship-building - Youth

Youth said overwhelmingly that relationship-building skills are crucial for service providers.

Service providers need to demonstrate that they are willing to **provide support and act as an ally**. Youth said they want to be able to trust service providers, and that trust can be established through a worker's willingness to build rapport and show that they care.

*Staff need to be honest. If they aren't honest, you can't be. Trust is important. You build trust slowly and get to know them.*

Youth emphasized that building supportive relationships takes time and cannot be expected to happen quickly. Thus, youth will not disclose personal information until they have established a positive **rapport**.

*Don't ask us all questions about violence because some youth don't want to re-live it. Ask us about other things and sometimes it will start to come out.*



Youth said they need service providers to be **empathetic, respectful, patient, and able to listen** without prejudice and judgment.

*The qualities of workers. They know us, they are cool, not stuck up, won't yell at you, will talk to you, relatable, encouraging, supportive, redirect us in a positive way. If you screwed up, could you come back and talk to someone?*

The service providers' **presence**, such as the way they talk, **dress** and present themselves, can influence a youth's ability to build rapport.

Youth emphasized that the use of clinical **language** is unnecessary and can be confusing. Some youth indicated that they prefer service providers who have some **lived experience**.

Youth do not want a service provider who uses slang and tries to act like a youth. Neither are youth comfortable in an overly formal setting where the service provider is dressed in a suit.

*Sometimes workers want people to change from hot to cold and sometimes they need to ease into things. Workers can't expect a youth to change overnight. It's okay to take baby steps. Change is a process.*

Youth stressed the importance of service providers who are patient and **willing to work with them in their current circumstances**. For example, if youth have problems with punctuality, then work with them to set goals rather than giving up on them.

Youth stated that building on strengths helps them to build confidence and feel empowered. When service providers only discuss existing problems youth feel hopeless and less motivated to attend the service. Youth pointed out that rewarding even the smallest accomplishments can go a long way for someone who is struggling.

*Be patient and take your time with me. Don't look at me as less than I am. Don't judge. There is more than what you are seeing and hearing, so keep an open mind.*

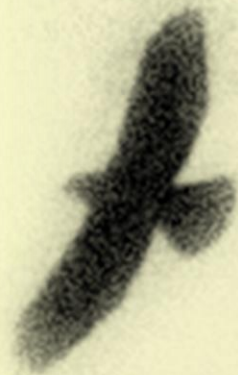




**Youth need service providers who will:**

**Advocate** on their behalf, and support them in navigating systems, as they can be difficult to understand without support.

**Focus on their strengths and interests**, rather than just the mistakes that they have made or areas that need improvement.



## 6.2 Relationship-building - Caregivers

Caregivers placed value on community workers who:

- Are representative of their communities.
- Have a good understanding of their neighbourhoods, including the needs of the community and the conflicts that exist.

*Be gentle, someone approachable, friendly, open, willing to spend time together, rapport building, relatable – someone who I can talk to, someone I can identify with, who knows the neighbourhood/ community, approachable, knows where you are coming from.*

*Because of duty to report, people may not be comfortable to share negative things about their son or daughter.*

Like youth, caregivers also placed value on building relationships with service providers, noting the importance of establishing trust. At the same time, they expressed that there are sometimes challenges in developing a trusting relationship with service providers. Barriers include:

- Limitations of confidentiality
- The worker's duty to report under child welfare legislation
- Potential stigma or other negative consequences

**Youth appreciate service providers who follow up and check in** on their lives and circumstances.

Youth also appreciate when a service provider asks, "How are you doing? Even if the youth is not attending the program.

## **7. RELATIONSHIP- BUILDING: THE SERVICE PROVIDERS' PERSPECTIVE**

**Service providers recognized many of the same requirements as youth and caregivers.**

# RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING: THE SERVICE PROVIDERS' PERSPECTIVE



## 7.1 Relationship-building – Service Providers

*That comes over time, building rapport with individuals especially when it is someone who is hard to serve. They are vulnerable and sensitive to revealing things about themselves. They start to open up once they know that you care and that you will possibly come up with solutions and when there is some form of follow through.*

Service providers recognized many of the same requirements as youth and caregivers, noting that:

- Building supportive and trusting relationships with youth is a key element of effective intervention.
- Trust is built over time and requires patience because many youth feel hesitant to discuss personal topics.
- Meeting youth in their community, where they are most comfortable, is another key element of support.



## 7.2 Service providers' physical presence

A service provider's physical presence, use of language and clothing can impact the ability to form a relationship with youth. Service providers discussed that using clinical language can be a barrier for youth and families, resulting in confusion, lack of understanding, or disengagement from service.

*A combination of the way you talk and the way you carry yourself. Have a non-intimidating presence. Talk real, not textbook or clinical language.*

It is important to find a balance in the way a service provider dresses. Clothing that is too formal can work against service providers by reinforcing power dynamics between them and youth. On the other hand, clothing can be used as a teaching tool in which service providers can model personal presentation skills, particularly in court appearances or times when youth need to present professionally.

### 7.3 Focusing on strengths

When offering services or referring youth to programs, it is the role of service providers to ask youth about their strengths and interests. Service providers emphasized that youth are more likely to participate actively in programming if they feel that it is beneficial.

*Keep them engaged. Find out what their interests are and then create programs that they want to get involved with.*

### 7.4 Building trust to disclose gang involvement

*I won't ask about gang involvement until I have built that relationship. You need to build a relationship before you ask that question.*

**It is essential to be transparent with youth about the reasons for asking about gang associations.**

Avoid using the word “gang” and focus instead on questions about neighbourhoods or community conflicts.

Service providers stressed the importance of building a positive and supportive relationship with a youth prior to asking about gang involvement.

The service providers acknowledged that gaining a better understanding of a youth’s gang affiliation is important if it poses immediate safety concerns for youth and workers. This understanding is also necessary to ensure effective planning and supports.

Some service providers suggested that identifying a youth as gang-involved serves little purpose and may result in labeling of youth, thus perpetuating stigma and judgment. They acknowledged that gang-involved youth face barriers in accessing services and supports because many community programs may be reluctant to accept these young people.

*What is the definition of a gang? Do we damage the relationship if we ask about gangs? There is fear of stigma or being labelled (as a gang member). It is hard even as professionals not to have these judgments.*

## **8. YOUTH ON PROGRAMMING**

**Youth recommended that some programs have structured, clearly defined outcomes, while others provide a safe space for youth to socialize. A diverse selection of programming is essential, as not all youth will want to engage in sports or arts-based programming. Programs that provide practical information such as employment skills, technical skills to learn a trade, or life skills can help youth build their confidence.**

# YOUTH ON PROGRAMMING



## 8.1 Relationship-building – Service Providers

*Some like sports, some music, some arts, need a variety of options to keep youth engaged and their minds off the street.*

*Youth need opportunities for learning trades. Work experience programs to keep youth from being idle while also teaching them skills.*

*Prevention needs to happen at a younger age... Set up some info sessions for youth because they are very smart and they can make decisions at an early age: 6 and up.*

## 8.2 Rewards or acknowledgement

Youth state that attending programs or participating in the community helps build a sense of accomplishment. Receiving a certificate of completion or letter of reference could help them when applying to other programs or seeking future employment. Other suggestions on keeping youth engaged included financial compensation for attending programs, or connecting program attendance to high school credits.

*Need to celebrate even the small accomplishments. People need to feel good. There is a value to a certificate. Give them a pat on the back.*

Youth suggested that programming should be:

- Available in areas with no existing conflict in order to ensure accessibility
- Offered later in the evenings and on weekends, when youth are available

### 8.3 Role models

Youth indicated that role models are one of the major motivators for finishing school and taking positive steps in their lives. They suggested having program graduates come back to speak with youth, or engaging them in the community as important ways to reward success. Programs such as Breaking the Cycle that use ex-gang members to share their life experiences are inspiring to youth. They view these programs as having credibility.

*Programs where ex-gang members speak to youth have credibility with youth and can inspire them. But it's the youth themselves that have to change. No one can do it for them.*

Identifying role models in their neighbourhoods who are older and have a positive influence can also engage or motivate them to change. Many youth indicated a lack of positive male role models in their lives, and the need for father figures to help them navigate challenging times.

*Youth don't always see people from their communities doing good things. We need young leaders out of our own communities to work with the programs so it feels more like a community, more like someone who can relate and show that things can be different.*

Seeing success is possible and attainable helps to motivate youth to accomplish more. Provides a positive influence for them.

### 8.4 Navigating through systems

Youth emphasized that many young people are inexperienced in navigating systems and advocating for themselves. When being discharged from a detention or custody facility, they have no supports in place in their community.

**Youth need a transitional plan that includes community supports prior to a release from detention/custody.**

Without a structured plan, many youth re-enter the justice system.

Youth feel that community agencies must work together and communicate in order to support the best interests of the youth.

*Institutions need to meet as one and communicate with services so that when a youth is released they are not abandoned out there.*



## **9. CAREGIVERS ON PROGRAMMING**

**Caregivers noted that they are often the primary source of support for their child. With this in mind, they offered two guiding principles, as well as suggestions on program attributes and content.**

# CAREGIVERS ON PROGRAMMING



## 9.1 Caregivers suggested program attributes include the following:

- Cultural sensitivity
- Recreational space for mothers and fathers
- Support for caregivers to improve parenting skills
- Insight into the systems that may impact their children

## 9.2 Suggested program content included the following:

- English as a second language
- Homework support programs
- Educational upgrading (GED)
- Second career support
- Recreational programming
- Job skills

**Offer programming beyond regular business hours to accommodate caregivers who are working.**

*Family support programming, the whole family, so that everyone can participate – not segregating anyone.*

## Caregivers recommended that:

- **Caregivers be actively involved in services provided to the child**
- **Community organizations provide programming that is more inclusive and accessible to the whole family**

According to caregivers, job skills in particular are essential especially for youth involved in the justice system.

*I want my child to become something, be a better person, a gentleman, finish school, and have a great job.*

Caregivers emphasized that programs for youth do not always need to be classroom-based, but could include field trips or alternative forms of programming to keep them engaged.

They felt, as did youth participants, that:

- Providing youth with financial compensation would promote their participation and consistent attendance at community programs.
- Male youth need positive community role models.

Consequently, they said, it is important for community organizations and service providers to reach out to and **engage men**. Caregivers discussed the possibility that men may not feel comfortable receiving services or support from a woman, and suggested involving more male service providers.

*There are lots of women working in community organizations.  
This may not make it the most comfortable for men to speak.*



## **10. AGENCY AND COMMUNITY COLLABORATION**

**Service providers stressed that community agencies offering services to youth and families, along with probation services and detention/custody staff, need to work in a more collaborative manner to effectively support youth.**

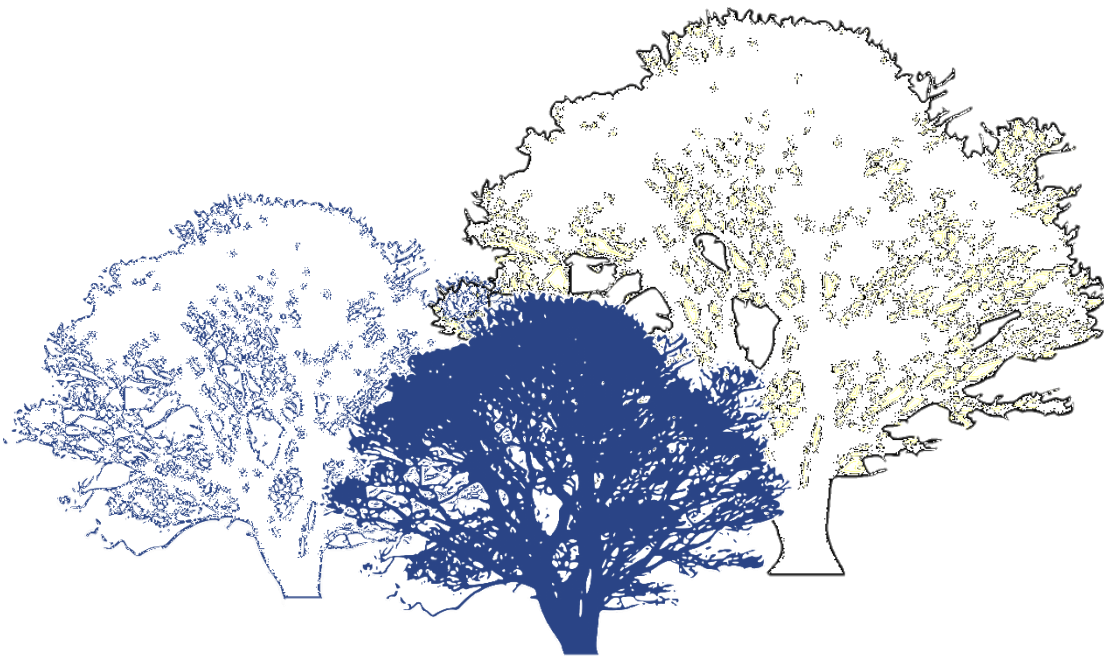
# AGENCY AND COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

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## 10.1 Greater collaboration would improve communication and lead to more effective and integrated supports and interventions.

*Being able to work with community partners and linking community agencies to Youth Justice Services is key. There should be a link from custody to probation to the community. All working together connection and partnership – the connection piece is important.*

Service providers also identified several **challenges** that they face in their work with community partners and Youth Justice Services, including excessive paperwork, difficulty in connecting with probation officers, being unable to visit youth in custody, and lengthy referral processes.



# **11. UNDERSTANDING AND COMMUNICATING WITH YOUTH JUSTICE**

**During community consultations, service providers expressed frustration with communication issues involving Youth Justice Services.**

# UNDERSTANDING AND COMMUNICATING WITH YOUTH JUSTICE



## 11.1 During community consultations, service providers expressed frustration with communication issues involving Youth Justice Services.

Many who may have worked with youth and their families for some time were concerned about:

- Not being included in case plan
- Being unable to connect with probation officer
- Being unable to maintain contact with youth after they enter a custody facility

*We need contacts, someone who knows us instead of going through 10 different people to get what we need to help a youth. Our job is easier once we get those connections. We will be able to support youth better.*

They also expressed frustration with a lack of access to basic information. For example, few of the Youth Outreach Workers who participated in the consultation knew where the nearest Youth Justice probation office is located.

Many experienced difficulty with answering system-related questions, limiting support to parents of youth who have recently been placed in a custody facility. Caregivers also expressed a need for better insight into systems that may impact their children during discussions on programming.

**Reintegration planning is vital. For many youth who are in a custody facility this can be a difficult time. It is imperative that the referrals and supports provided reflect the strengths, needs and interests of youth.**

## 11.2 How service providers can contribute.

Service providers believe they can contribute and provide support to families of youth in the Youth Justice system by helping them:

- Navigate the youth court process
- Overcome barriers such as transportation costs
- Assist with visitation of their child in detention/custody facilities

Service providers noted that many families in these communities have a fear of authority and may be reluctant to share or take part in “systems” that are providing services to their child. In these situations, service providers see themselves as allies who can assist youth and families in becoming more engaged in the process.

*Sometimes parents don't understand the information they receive like the court process or what charges such as breach or robbery mean. Maybe it's their first experience. What is open detention? They may not understand the process or the information. Talk to families.*

Many service providers also felt they could support MCYS Youth Justice staff through their established rapport with the young person and knowledge of the communities they work with.

For instance, if probation officers were made aware of neighbourhoods where conflicts exist, and the risks this presents to youth, there would be less likelihood of youth being penalized for not attending probation or school when it is unsafe to do so.

*Probation officers need to know the issues that are facing communities. Youth are set up for failure. They can't travel safely and they get penalized for it.*





# MESSAGES UNDERScoreD

The collaborative process behind this report – three agencies consulting with youth, caregivers and service providers in four Toronto communities on behalf of the MCYS - Youth Justice Services' Division – has enriched the process and provided us with insights into what would be most helpful for working with gang-involved/at risk youth.

Their feedback can help us form meaningful, supportive relationships with better outcomes.

# WHAT WE LEARNED



**Here are some of the lessons we learned about service delivery from the groups we consulted with:**

**Building real and genuine relationships with the people who receive services matters.**

Opportunities include:

**Being aware** of how service providers look and how they engage with their clientele, which can reflect power dynamics or empower those for whom services exist.

**Adopting a strengths-based approach.**

**Being transparent** about the intent behind questions we ask youth, working harder to understand what they genuinely want, and helping them build achievable exit plans.

**Individualized approaches that look at individual, familial and community circumstances are important.**

Opportunities include:

**Providing programs where and when they are needed.** This may require outreach within communities, committing to more continuous programming, and scheduling programs at times that are suitable to youth and families. Youth and caregivers will have varying preferences, interests, and comfort levels in leaving their community to access services elsewhere.

**Recognizing existing and common service providers.** Some communities need and/or have more access to service providers. Their involvement in and knowledge of existing services and referral processes can help support youth in the community.

**Young people often present multiple needs that cannot be fulfilled by a single agency.**

Services are often most effective when they are planned, coordinated and delivered within a **collaborative framework.**

# SPECIAL THANKS

This project was a collaborative effort between community agencies and the Youth Justice Services Division of the Ministry of Children and Youth Services. Without the leadership, coordination, facilitation skills, collaboration and commitment of all those involved, this project would not have been successful.

The following agencies and community centres were generous to allow the use of their space for community consultations and played a vital role in supporting the recruitment of consultation participants: Agincourt Community Services Association, Malvern Community Centre – the S.P.O.T., Boys & Girls Club of East Scarborough, City of Toronto- Elmbank Community Centre, Canadian Training Institute- Breaking the Cycle, Jane Street Hub, Scarborough Child and Family Life Centre and JVS Toronto.

The following agencies and organizations took part in the service provider consultation sessions: Agincourt Community Services Association, Boys & Girls Club of East Scarborough, East Metro Youth Services, Malvern Family Resource Centre, Neighbourhood Link, Rosalie Hall, and Youthlink.

## **Central Toronto Youth Services**

A special thank-you to Heather Sproule and Calvin Facey for their leadership in the project; to Carol Skacel for her part in drafting the report, as scribe at many of the consultations and her engagement of youth for the report; and to Roger Rolfe for his assistance in organizing the scribed notes from the consultations into themes.

## **East Metro Youth Services**

A special thank-you to Karim Grant, George Kartos and Kwesi Johnson for their role in facilitating consultations in Malvern and Kingston/ Galloway. Also, a special thanks for their insight on appropriate consultation questions and for their role in engaging youth, service providers and caregivers to participate.

## **Yorktown Family Services**

A special thank-you to Natalie Hay and Robyn Howlett for their participation in the development of consultation questions, and for facilitating consultations in Rexdale. A special thank-you to Robyn for her role as a scribe.

## **Youth Justice Services Division (Ministry of Children and Youth Services)**

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A thank-you to all community consultation participants for your wealth of knowledge and important feedback.

**The Vibe is Respect**

# APPENDIX A:

## Community Consultations: Dates, Locations, Facilitators and Participants

Dates (2013)	Type of Focus Group	Focus Group Location	Facilitators	# of Participants	Age	Male	Female
January 23	Youth	Malvern Community Centre – the S.P.O.T.	Karim Grant George Kartos	22	15-24	20	2
January 25	Youth	Boys & Girls Club of East Scarborough	Kwesi Johnson Karim Grant George Kartos	19	19-28	12	7
January 26	Youth	Elmbank Community Centre	Natalie Hay Robyn Howlett	17	12-15	17	0
February 15	Youth	Breaking the Cycle	Natalie Hay Robyn Howlett	8	15-22	6	2
February 25	Service Provider	East Metro Youth Services	Karim Grant Kwesi Johnson George Kartos	18	N/A	9	9
March 7	Youth	Jane Street Hub	Natalie Hay Robyn Howlett	9	16-22	0	9
March 18	Family and Service Provider	Agincourt Community Services Association	Kwesi Johnson Karim Grant	20	N/A	0	20
March 28	Youth	Scarborough Child and Family Life Centre	Kwesi Johnson Karim Grant George Kartos	24	11-24	13	11
April 4	Youth	JVS	Andrew Bacchus Calvin Facey	9	16-28	9	0
<b>TOTALS</b>				<b>146</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>60</b>

# APPENDIX B:

## Consultation Questions: Youth

### RELATIONSHIP BUILDING TO ASSIST YOUTH IN DISCLOSING GANG INVOLVEMENT

1. How can we make it easier for you to talk about things?
2. What are the characteristics of the people you feel comfortable talking to?
3. Do you have any ideas that might prevent you or your friends from getting involved in gangs?
4. What are some supports and strategies to help prevent youth from entering or re-entering a gang?
5. How do we safely engage gang-involved youth without isolating them from their neighbourhoods and/or acquaintances?

### GANG EXIT STRATEGIES/ SUPPORTS

1. What supports should we have in place to help young people leave a gang?
2. What would prevent you from using/accessing those supports? (i.e. what prevents you from getting a job.)
3. What are some of the realities for youth to exit a gang? (i.e., I can't feed my family.)

### COMMUNITY SAFEGUARDS – KEEPING A COMMUNITY SAFE – EXITED OR ABOUT-TO-EXIT GANGS OR CUSTODIAL SETTING, AND THOSE WHO ARE PRESENTLY IN THE COMMUNITY

1. Are you connected to a community organization?
2. What would the system need to do to get you engaged?
3. What would keep you engaged and coming to a service?
4. Why would someone stop coming?
5. What do you need from your community?

### OVERALL STAFF LEARNING IN ORDER TO BEST SUPPORT YOUTH (EDUCATION AND TRAINING)

1. What more do you think we need to learn?
2. What would they need to learn? What would be the best case scenario regarding your connection/support to Youth Justice Services providing programming to a youth? – question across the board.

# APPENDIX C:

## Consultation Questions: Caregivers

### RELATIONSHIP BUILDING TO ASSIST YOUTH IN DISCLOSING GANG INVOLVEMENT

1. What can service providers do to make you feel safe enough to disclose your child's involvement in a gang? How can we make it easier for you to talk about these things?
2. What are the characteristics of the people you feel comfortable talking to?
3. What are the risks associated with youth disclosing this type of information? How do we safely engage gang-involved youth without isolating them from their neighbourhoods and/or acquaintances?

### GANG EXIT STRATEGIES/ SUPPORTS

1. How can we broaden the support we offer to families?
2. What would prevent you from using/accessing those supports?
3. How can we make programming more accessible and more successful for families?
4. What supports could we put in place for youth to help them exit or avoid entering a gang?
5. What are some of the realities for youth who are exiting a gang?

### COMMUNITY SAFEGUARDS – KEEPING A COMMUNITY SAFE – EXITED OR ABOUT TO EXIT GANGS OR CUSTODIAL SETTING AND THOSE WHO ARE PRESENTLY IN THE COMMUNITY

1. How can community service providers support you to support your child to make healthy choices (e.g., going to school)?
2. What are the community's needs in supporting youth?
3. What would keep you coming to a service? Why would someone stop coming?
4. What supports can we provide to families of youth coming out of custody?

### OVERALL STAFF LEARNING IN ORDER TO BEST SUPPORT YOUTH (EDUCATION AND TRAINING).

1. What would be your three wishes for your child? What more do you think we need to learn?

# **APPENDIX D:**

## **Consultation Questions: Service Providers**

### **RELATIONSHIP BUILDING TO ASSIST YOUTH IN DISCLOSING GANG INVOLVEMENT**

1. What can a staff person do to make youth feel safe enough to disclose involvement in a gang? How can we make it easier for youth to talk about things?
2. What do you think are some of the risks associated with youth disclosing this type of information? How do we safely engage gang-involved youth without isolating them from their neighbourhoods and or acquaintances?
3. What exactly constitutes a gang and is it fair/appropriate to ask this question?

### **GANG EXIT STRATEGIES/ SUPPORTS**

1. How can we broaden the support we offer to families?
2. What would prevent families from using/accessing those supports?
3. How can we make programming more accessible and more successful for families?
4. What supports could we put in place for youth to help them exit or avoid entering a gang?
5. What are some of the realities for youth who are exiting a gang?

### **COMMUNITY SAFEGUARDS – KEEPING A COMMUNITY SAFE – EXITED OR ABOUT TO EXIT GANGS OR CUSTODIAL SETTING AND THOSE WHO ARE PRESENTLY IN THE COMMUNITY**

1. How can community service providers support youth to make healthy choices (e.g., going to school...)?