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FRAMING A COMPREHENSIVE PRO-YOUTH PREVENTION/INTERVENTION STRATEGY FOR YOUTH GANGS/GROUPS IN METROPOLITAN TORONTO

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Introduction

The explosion of youth violence on Yonge Street this spring was a watershed event for Metropolitan Toronto. Many members of our society, especially the young and visible minorities, are holding up a mirror and showing us that they, and we as a society, are in crisis. The events of this spring in Toronto were, if anything, a sign of what is to come if we do not change our thinking. To believe otherwise is a serious mistake and a reflection of the same denial and apathy that lead us to this flashpoint in the first place.

This disturbing public spectacle was a convergence point for a number of deep and troubling social currents. However, at issue is more than just finding solutions for things that upset the public. It is about choosing a new path and a new vision to address the serious, complex, and increasing problem of youth violence.

In public and private discussions and in stories in the media people have tried to come to terms with this apparent sudden down turn in our collective social well-being. Some believe the violence was caused by opportunistic 'hooligans'. Others feel it was a sign of racial tension or venting on the part of bored, frustrated and disenfranchised youth. All are likely right. One thing is certain; the actions we take now to understand and address the rising problem of youth violence will affect the social environment of our city for many years to come. Our challenge is to respond from a place of reason and compassion, and not to simply react out of fear.

This paper, written for a wide readership, will focus on one aspect of contemporary youth violence - youth gangs/groups. The intended purpose is to open a broad discussion of youth gangs/groups and frame the process of developing a comprehensive prevention/intervention strategy in a pro-youth way.

This paper is a beginning to the process of naming problems and solutions and raises more questions than it answers. Asking more and better questions at the outset of the process may help avoid making costly mistakes later on. Poorly conceived and hastily implemented plans to respond to youth gangs/groups could make matters worse. Simply throwing money at the problem, in the absence of real understanding, could result in an expensive disaster.

The essence of the paper can be distilled down to the following two statements:

How we define or frame the problem will shape our solutions.

The process of developing a comprehensive pro-youth prevention/intervention strategy will be the message of the strategy.

Framing the 'problem' of youth gangs/groups

What is meant by 'framing'? Basically, that the 'problem' is in the eye of the beholder. Our culture, attitudes, values, beliefs, education and training, or the opinions of family, friends, or peers determines or influences the way we see or interpret otherwise neutral events in the world. Our thoughts and beliefs are like eyeglasses we look through into a sea of human interactions. These glasses are invisible and, with or without our awareness, organize the outside world into 'events' or 'intelligible wholes'. The lenses in these glasses focus our attention and literally 'construct' otherwise neutral phenomenon into 'events' or 'problems' or 'non-problems' and help us assign meaning to the situations and actions of others we encounter in our daily lives.

Simply stated, three people looking at the same phenomenon may see it in totally different ways. Depending on one's age, gender, life experiences, cultural background, or socio-economic status, for example, a social problem may look quite different.

Take the example of youth gangs/groups. An adult, business person might have a very different perspective from a high school student. A victim of gang/group violence will likely have a different view than a politician. A police officer might see things very differently than a community activist. A highschool teacher may have a different view from a parent.

Let's look at different ways of framing the youth gang/group phenomenon and see how complicated the problem definition and solution generating process is.

Framed as a racial issue youth gang/group activity is difficult to define with any precision. There is a small number of racially-based gangs/groups involved in organized criminal activities. These gangs/groups tend to focus their activities on persons from their own cultural group and do not generally see themselves in competition with other cultural groups. Conflicts between racially homogeneous gangs/groups in Toronto appear to be small in number and most gangs/groups are racially mixed to varying degrees. However, racial conflict between gangs/groups does exist and may in fact be on the increase.

There are other racial dimensions to the phenomenon which need to be taken very seriously and confronted strongly, namely, systemic and structural ethnocentricism and racism. Basically, 'structural and systemic' ethnocentricism and racism refers to assumptions or behaviours that are an unconscious part of everyday personal interactions or professional and institutional practices. These assumptions and behaviours are often detrimental to people of other cultural backgrounds because they are grounded in our own version of history, and the values, attitudes, and beliefs of our own cultural reference group.

For example, people who would not normally think of themselves as racist might focus only on visible minority youths in a media account of a racially mixed gang's/group's activities. Others might cross the road when faced with having to walk past a group of minority youths on a sidewalk. Think of the kind of suspicion aroused in some people when they see a minority youth in everyday dress simply running down a street. Negative attitudes can quickly form about minority youths as a result of this 'biased' way of viewing the world.

Systemic and structural ethnocentricism and racism is often invisible as it plays out in institutional and professional practices but it can influence the way we understand social problems, define solutions and deliver support services. For example, many new Canadians come from countries where authority figures are feared and to be avoided at all cost because to come into contact with them means peril. Without some sensitivity to this, social service professionals, police, or other authority figures would likely misunderstand these peoples' mistrust and their reluctance to provide information or seek assistance.

Structural racism can shape or influence how we understand the choices some young people make when they decide to become involved in wilfully criminal gang/group activity. It is easy to 'blame the victim' when assessing another person's motivation. What might be construed as 'criminally motivated' behaviour could be nothing more than desperation. Deprive people of opportunities, discriminate against them in the areas of employment, education, housing, or keep them on the margin of mainstream society and they will find other, nonsanctioned means to achieve the 'good life' that is the mark of living successfully in our society.

Solutions for a race-based view of gang/group activity would have to address both macro and micro social levels. Including minority representation in all aspects of social life would be imperative. It would be important for us as an enlightened society to ensure that positive and affirming images of minorities appear in the media and in popular culture mediums such as film, television, and commercials. Communities 'at risk' or in crisis would need to be adequately resourced and serviced in a language and culturally sensitive way. Language skills and literacy, problems in adjustment to life in Canada, and access to employment and housing would also need to be addressed. Public and professional education programs about the harmful effects of racism would need to be implemented.

Framing the problem as a youth alienation and 'disempowerment' issue brings us face to face with inequities in the distribution of social power. However, disempowerment is a relative term. While youth as a group share a common experience of having far less power than adults, not all youth are affected equally. Visible minority youth, young women, and children and teens living in poverty are far more 'disenfranchised' and disempowered than their male peers from middle and upper class family backgrounds.

However, youth as a group, have little control over their lives and seldom are given a voice when it comes to making policy decisions about important things such as education or social services.

Empowering youth would involve adding their voices to the decision making process of community and government institutions at the very least. Creating youth employment would require a direct intervention in the economy by government or business. It would also require government to make children and youth a higher priority in terms of policy and to better resource 'at risk' communities and families in order to help them provide more optimal care for their young.

Framed as a law enforcement issue the problem of youth gangs/groups appears deceptively easy to solve. This is a criminogenic view that defines the problem as being in the individual; in effect, gang/group members are deviant or delinquent and their behaviour in need of punishment. Interventions based on this conceptualization of the problem are fear-based, reactive and short-sighted. Policy formulated along these lines would direct resources to the criminal justice system instead of where it is more desperately needed - to 'at risk' families and communities. Using a criminal justice response the investment of resources may appear smaller, at least in the beginning, but the social costs over time will be staggering.

There is no prevention aspect to this strategy and no social empowerment for anyone except professionals in the criminal justice system. This approach risks encouraging some youth to remain in a life of crime, stigmatizes others, and removes any accountability on the part of government to youth, families, and communities 'at risk' or in crisis. We need to understand that criminal charges will not help young people who become involved in crime because they perceive they have no other choice.

In Toronto, a criminal justice response has been our only response to the phenomenon of youth gangs/groups. We have relied on the police alone to deal with our rising concern about youth violence. Toronto has a bad habit of using the police to try and solve complex social problems. The police already have a difficult and demanding enough job without putting on their shoulders the responsibility for being social workers and youth counsellors. However, the police can play an important role as part of a broader community response.

Because the police are out in the community 24 hours a day they often come into contact with 'at risk' youth before any social service agency. With a backup system of integrated community resources police would have an option to divert many young people to the kind of support services that could help prevent them from having further difficulties with the law. However, we are far from having this kind of comprehensive community involvement. Mobilizing resources to meet the needs of 'at risk' youth, families, and communities will have a more permanent impact on the problem of youth gang/group violence than simply a punishment-focused criminal justice response.

It is important to understand the concept of 'framing' because it can help us separate out the many difficult and challenging issues that are typically a part of any social phenomenon. Framing also helps us prepare for the challenge of engaging in real dialogue on controversial subjects. When peoples' perspectives on a problem differ or appear to be irreconcilable core issues can become lost or clouded in rhetoric and blaming. In these circumstances the original problem can become explosive or escalate. However, entrenched positions, rhetoric and finger-pointing are imobilizing and an obstacle to achieving a well-informed and comprehensive understanding of the issues.

Engaging in open, honest dialogue is rarely a straightforward or simple process because it requires suspension of one's own frame of reference (literally taking off one's eyeglasses) and looking at or listening to others with a more objective or detached point of view. Yet difficult as the process of dialogue may be, the consequences of not listening are tragic - for all sides. Winning an argument rarely leaves people with anything more than their limitations. If we are to come to terms with and solve complex and difficult social problems we will have to move past 'identity politics' and personal bias and towards real dialogue and an attitude of right thinking and action. The future well-being of our young people - and thus of our cities and nation - will depend on our success in this process.

The foregoing discussion on framing demonstrates how complex and hard to define the problem of youth gangs/groups is. Gang/group activities range from overzealous teen pranks to acts that are organized, often violent, and wilfully criminal (for a typology of different gangs/groups see Mathews, 1990). We also need to be realistic about what we can hope to accomplish as we move through the long and tedious process of defining the problem and struggling to find solutions. Some problems will be easier to define and solve in a short period of time. Others will take a lot longer and require fundamental changes in the way we organize our society and share power and resources.

The process of the strategy is the message

What is meant by 'the process is the message'? Simple. If government tries to impose a plan of action to confront youth violence on communities, schools, etc., without consulting young people and all the stakeholders involved, few will have an interest in supporting what is offered.

Young people are giving us a clear message. They feel powerless and left out. Involving them in the planning process will convey a message that we as a society value their opinions and are prepared to tap their energy and creativity in the struggle to find solutions together in community. To do otherwise is to replicate the paternalistic patterns of social relations in bureaucracies that young people face every day of their lives, patterns that dis-empower youth and create many of the problems of youth unrest and violence in the first place.

How did we get here in the first place?

Examining media reports, talking to school officials or the police, and soliciting the views of social workers who deal with this issue it is possible to draw up a list of 'signals' indicating there is a 'problem' with young people and violence today. The following list covers the behaviours most often reported:

1. youth gangs/groups commit many insensitive acts of gratuitous violence
2. kids involved in gangs/groups are getting younger in age
3. there has been a rise in the number of girls involved in gang/group activity
4. first knives or other weapons, and now guns are being used
5. actions are bolder, little apparent regard for authority or legal consequences
6. some racial overtones and organizing along ethnic lines
7. gang/group activities have become a public spectacle and are more visible
8. activities are becoming more organized
9. noticeable amount of macho male gender role hype and posturing
10. victims are typically other young persons

Gang/group activities are usually characterized by words or expressions such as "insensitive", "gratuitous violence", "power and control", "indifference to feelings of others", "objectification of others", "use of force", "spontaneous sexual assaults", "extortion", and "disrespect for authority". People exposed to media accounts of youth gang/group violence are often shocked at some of the behaviours they see portrayed. But how did we get here in the first place? What has happened over the past few years that has brought us to a point where our young people are increasingly resorting to violence to deal with their problems, achieve status, or to feel powerful and efficacious as persons?

The words or phrases used to describe the activities of youth gangs/groups should alarm but not surprise us. Let's take the focus off young people for a moment and consider the 'social backdrop' to the question, the world young people take in every day. It is imperative to examine this backdrop when attempting to understand youth violence or the behaviour of any individual young person.

Canadian children are socialized through an overwhelming variety of sources. They internalize the direct and subtle messages they receive from adults, friends, peers, school, and the media and popular culture. Young people are, in effect, what they have learned from us and what we have taught them to think about themselves.

Consider for a moment the world young people see everyday. We are, in many respects, a paternalistic, self-absorbed, underparented, and sexist society motivated by greed, envy, competition, power, and the primacy of the individual. Our advertising messages aggrandize extravagance and consumption, sexualize childhood and adolescence, exclude many visible minorities, and exploit women. We have little or no sense of community and use violence as a form of entertainment. Our young (i.e., males) learn about sex more often through pornography than from caring informed parents or other positive

adult role models.

At a time when our communications technology allows us to phone anyone at any time virtually anywhere, we have never been so isolated from one another in terms of true intimacy and connection. This isolation places us in smaller and smaller circles of influence and breeds 'enemy thinking', mistrust of others who are different in any way, and a tendency to irrationally lash out against whoever or whatever challenges our increasingly narrow worldview.

The move towards a global economy and the resulting unemployment caused by displaced industries and workers is seriously affecting the lives of young people and their families. Canada is losing its political and cultural sovereignty to market forces. Decisions affecting young peoples' present and future lives are being made in circles of influence far removed from their lived reality. Kids now not only have to compete against their neighbour in the next desk or across the street but with strangers half way around the world in the Pacific Rim or in Europe or South America. Economic tough times are especially hard on minorities, single parents, and children and youth.

Much of the world young people live in is in turmoil. High youth unemployment, the perceived irrelevance of their education (it is only about getting a job), and the pressure to be a full consumer participant in the expensive (and adult created) youth subculture adds great stress to lives of young people. Governments are struggling to reduce expenditures and are being forced to cut back significantly on what used to be "basic" services such as child welfare, social services, education, and health care.

We give our young little reason to trust adults. Children and youth in Canada are neglected or abused physically and sexually at home or in care in such numbers that it is impossible for the average person to comprehend. Some young people have no choice but to flee their abusive home environment. They typically end up on the street and some are forced to work in prostitution or become involved in illegal activity to survive because often there are no resources available to help them in their communities.

Parents struggling to pay mortgages and keep up with the bills often have little energy left to give their offspring. Young people today are faced with a bewildering array of choices, stresses, and conflicting messages and often have no where to turn for support. Peers can help but are often confused and scared themselves. It is an absolute tragedy that the bond - call it love, mutual trust, respect, intimacy, reciprocity, whatever you choose - that is singularly the most important anchor point in a young person's life, perhaps in all our lives, is often missing these days. Without that connection life in a fast-changing and uncertain world can be scary.

Finally, we have created for our children an environment with contaminated soil, air, and water and sunshine that can now cause life threatening cancers. Our garbage is piling up faster than we can safely dispose of it. And we dare to ask what is wrong with young people today? It is an affront to the concept of justice that we deprive our young of information about sex, abuse them in unimaginable numbers, leave them out of important

decisions affecting their lives, compromise their environmental heritage, then presume to have the right to simply punish them when they act out.

Returning to the question of how we got to this point in the first place adults should be seeing something very familiar in the behaviour of young people. They are reflecting back to us who and what we are as a society.

More and Better Questions

The phenomenon of youth gang/groups in Canada is evolving and we are only in the beginning stages of trying to understand all its complexities. Having more questions than answers is far from comforting but it should not keep us from acting. However, it should force us to pause and thoughtfully consider our next steps. At this point in time we have an opportunity, a 'teachable moment', to reflect on the events of this spring and decide where we are going as a society and the message we wish to send to our young. Saying 'we do not know' is the first step on a path to knowledge. Acting as if we know - and we don't - is a path to calamity. This is a time for us to ask more and better questions.

What is happening to relationships among young people? Why are they targeting each other for violence, sexual assault, theft, or extortion? Can it be that young people as a disenfranchised group may be turning on each other because another youth is a safer target? Is it misplaced aggression? Are young people lashing out at just any target because they cannot identify the source of their frustration and anger?

Are frightened, underparented youth testing the boundaries only to find them soft with indifference? Is the gang/group activity of some youths a desperate call for limits, real intimacy and connection?

What is the appeal of gangs/groups? What needs do they meet that aren't being met elsewhere? Young people by nature tend to gather in groups. Peers are important confidants, models, supporters, comrades in the developmental transition to adulthood. Gangs/groups give opportunities to try out roles, get support, form an identity, and obtain security and a sense of connectedness and belonging. This latter point is especially true for abused, abandonned, or neglected youth. Gangs/groups provide instant access to power, self-esteem, and personal efficacy.

Are gang/group members more vulnerable to influence or open to intervention at different ages and stages of their adolescent development? Are all youths equally at risk of becoming involved in gang/group activity?

Media and popular culture images often portray gang/group members as outlaws with mythical and romantic dimensions. Males with poor self-esteem and a desire to be macho can get caught up in this glamorized fiction about gangs/groups. But if gangs are about macho male hype why are so many young girls now targeting other girls for acts of violence?

Is much of the behaviour we see motivated simply by a desire to copy the American gang scene? What accounts for the overwhelming involvement of middle class youth? What moved the gang/group phenomenon from a street-based problem three and a half years ago to one more centred around schools?

The above questions represent only a beginning to the process of moving towards a more comprehensive understanding of this troubling phenomenon. As we move as a community into the process of searching for answers we will need to be mindful of the message our work is conveying to youth and all members of our society.

The following first principles are intended for use as a guide in the search for a pro-youth strategy.

First Principles For The Development of a Comprehensive Pro-Youth Strategy

Recognize that the process of development is the message of the strategy.

Recognize the power and creativity of youth.

Validate the creativity, power, and knowledge of youth by involving them directly in the process of naming the problem and in the search for solutions.

Recognize that most young people are law-abiding, honest, caring, and responsible.

Recognize and respect that the process of empowering youth will be painful and fear-provoking for some adults because it means letting go of control.

Involve all stakeholders in the search for solutions, including gang/group members.

Recognize that young people learn responsibility by having responsibility. Youth need to have a voice with respect to their schools and education, social services, community programs, and in government policy and planning directed towards them.

Recognize that the well-being of children and youth will continue to be compromised until they become a first priority in the policy of all government.

Encourage peer self-help for gang/group members.

Recognize the need for community-driven solutions.

Recognize that there is a link between the economy and families, communities, minorities, and youth at risk.

Recognize the need to address the risk as the problem not the youth.

Recognize that young people caught committing wilfully criminal acts should be held accountable for their behaviour using alternatives to the criminal justice system wherever possible.

Recognize that the victims of youth gang/group violence need to be protected, supported and encouraged to disclose.

Recognize that we need to closely examine our institutions and professional practices and confront any and all structural and systemic paternalism, ethnocentricism, racism, homophobia, and sexism.

Recognize that paternalism, ethnocentricism, racism, homophobia, and sexism contribute to youth violence.

Recognize that youth violence is a community problem and that solutions must be found in community.

Recognize the centrality of the school in the lives of young people and link educational institutions to community resources that can support youth and address the risk or vulnerability factors that motivate young people towards involvement in gang/group activity.

Recognize the need for schools to offer or link up with services for victims of gang/group activity.

Recognize the need for government policy to resource families (however defined) to provide optimal care to children and youth.

Recognize that a pro-youth strategy is a pro-social strategy and a vision of hope and optimism that we can heal our young, our communities, and ourselves.

Other CTYS Papers on Youth Gangs/Groups

Mathews, F. *An Exploratory Typology of Youth Gangs/Groups in Metropolitan Toronto.* Toronto: Central Toronto Youth Services, June, 1990.

Mathews, F. *Youth Gangs in Metropolitan Toronto: A Discussion Paper.* Toronto: Central Toronto Youth Services, July, 1990.

Forthcoming

Mathews, F., Banner, J. and Ryan, C. *A Demographic Study of Youth Gangs/Groups in Metropolitan Toronto.* Toronto: Central Toronto Youth Services.

Mathews, F. *Youth Gangs on Youth Gangs.* Toronto: Central Toronto Youth Services.