

SAFE STREETS*

Strategic Overview

Considerable knowledge and experience exists on successful ways to reduce violence by young men, including in “gangs”.

Most young men live positively even in high crime areas. However, a small group of young men are disproportionately involved in violence. These young men often experience negative life experiences from their parents, in school and so on that differ from young men in those areas who do not engage in repetitive violence.

Programs that mitigate these life experiences have been shown in England and Wales (e.g. Youth Inclusions Projects) and the USA (e.g. Quantum Opportunities) to reduce violence by young men significantly.

Municipalities in the USA have cut rates of violence by young men by as much as 50% within a year or two after leading a collaborative planning process which engages police, social services and parents (e.g. Boston and the ten cities using Strategic Approaches to Community Action).

In Canada, some school boards and some non-governmental groups and others are tackling risk factors known to lead to violence (see Fourth ‘R’, SNAP, and others). Several municipalities are developing strategies to reduce violence by young men, including what is gang related.

More can be done to reduce violence by coordinating and investing in preventive strategies which strengthen and adapt successful programs to reduce violence.

Action for Municipal Stakeholders

1. Closely examine municipal strategies in Canada and abroad that have been successful in reducing the numbers of persons victimized violently by young men;
2. Involve the schools and other stakeholders in teaching young men to resolve conflicts without violence and avoid behaviours likely to lead to violence;
3. Support strategies that reduce child abuse in the short term and foster positive early childhood experiences that reduce violence over the longer term;
4. Target programs and investments to areas in cities that have disproportionately high levels of crime and usually poverty, racial discrimination, transiency, lack of services and so on.

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Justification

This Action Brief looks at how to stop violence on the street perpetrated by young men.

Most young men live positively and are not involved in persistent offending. But a small group of teenage and young adult men are involved in frequent and persistent violence — some of this associated with loose networks of men labelled as “gangs”.

Murders involving young men with guns have hit the headlines in the media in several Canadian cities. In 2007, Statistics Canada confirmed that “gang” related homicides continued to increase as they have for more than a decade and accounted for one in five homicides in Canada. Though the headlines tend to come from Toronto and Vancouver, the rates of homicide tend to be highest in cities such as Calgary, Edmonton, Regina, Saskatoon, and Winnipeg.

Statistics Canada surveys show that 2 million adults annually will be victims of an assault, typically young men fighting other young men without weapons, and many will be victimized more than once. Other Statistics Canada surveys of school-aged youth in Toronto show that two out of five are victims of violence every year. Some of this violence occurs in or near schools.

The peak ages for such violence go from early teens to late twenties. Some of the violence is directed against girls. Some occurs within loose networks of young men often labelled “gangs”, particularly when they are trafficking drugs and fighting over territory.

What Has Reduced Violence by Young Men and Their Gang Related Violence?

Internationally, the best known success stories in reducing violence among young men have been led and coordinated by municipalities.

- The **City of Boston** reduced homicides between young men by 50% within two years of implementing a city wide strategy that involved strategic approaches to the use of current police resources, investment in proven programs to help young men complete school and get jobs, and mobilization of mothers to pressure the young men to abandon violent associates. The implementation phase followed a period of diagnosis and development of collaboration. In 2008, the US Department of Justice reported replications of key elements in this strategy under the banner of Strategic Approaches to Community Action Initiative showing similar successes of up to 50% in ten other US cities — several of similar size to Canadian cities.
- The **City of Bogota** reduced street violence by 50% over a ten year period. They diagnosed the patterns of the violence, then acted on recommendations to tackle those causes, such as curfews, limiting access to alcohol, reducing the availability of firearms and counselling victims to avoid revenge killings.
- The **City of Glasgow** instituted a public health strategy to diagnose ways to reduce knife violence between young men that included programs to help parents provide consistent and caring education, efforts to persuade victims to change their lives to avoid re-victimization, enforcement targeted to persistent offenders, and preventing young men from carrying knives.

Violent street crime between young men in age ranges from 15 to 25 tends to be concentrated geographically in areas of disadvantage, social exclusion and relative poverty. Extensive studies in many different countries have identified the life experiences that predispose some young men in these areas to persistent offending and violence. Those with more negative life experiences such as inconsistent

parenting, identified as acting out in primary school and abandoning secondary school are more likely to be persistent offenders.

In response to these problems, several experimental projects have demonstrated “scientifically” that it is possible to overcome the negative experiences. For instance, demonstration projects in other countries, and occasionally in Canada, include:

- Programs such as **Quantum Opportunities** that reach young men likely to drop out of school to keep more of them in school and mentor them with the result of reducing violence by those men.
- **Stop Now and Plan (SNAP)** – This helps children and parents to regulate youth aggression. It was developed in Toronto and has been subjected to rigorous evaluation which demonstrated positive outcomes among children under the age of 12.
- **Youth Inclusion Projects** – Programs developed in England and replicated in over 100 disadvantaged housing estates. These reach the most difficult teenagers and significantly reduce their offending and the rate of crime in the area.

What Are Canadian Municipalities Doing Already to Reduce Violence between Young Men?

Municipalities have a police service which reacts to calls for service (911) when assaults are reported. Police services at the municipal level often have a youth section that deals with teenage offenders and school liaison officers. They may also have a specialized unit dealing with gangs and a unit focusing on violations of bail, probation and parole agreements. These enforcement strategies are sometimes guided by crime analysis units so that they focus on the problem but the extent of their impact on reducing violence is not known.

The municipality may pay for recreation, sports, housing and library programs that could have some impact on crime. Little is known about the extent to which these services prevent young men from drifting into violence or gangs or persuade them to avoid violence or leave gangs. However, Edmonton has led the way on social marketing by changing attitudes so that young men avoid violence and citizens act responsibly in bars.

Importantly, some municipalities manage their own programs directly related to the prevention of violence among young men. Many of these are described in the IPC report on Safer Cities and others are coming on line with NCPC funding, including:

- Montreal has invested significant funds in establishing centres to provide services to youth in difficult areas. Local districts have established ways for schools, social services and police to collaborate around solutions to youth crime.
- Crime Prevention Ottawa supports the “Ottawa Youth Gang Prevention Initiative” which has mobilized more than 30 agencies in the city. It has hired Canadian experts to diagnose the problems, look at what is underway and explore what else might work. It has held two conferences for those working in the area and a public forum.
- Toronto has an advisory panel to the mayor on community safety that provides strategic advice and support for strengthening neighbourhoods through the City’s targeted, place-based approach to community safety and neighbourhood investment. Toronto City Council has designated 13 neighbourhoods as priority neighbourhoods for investment supported by collaborative Neighbourhood Action Partnership bodies. These engage the public and coordinate, enhance and increase disadvantaged youth and young adults’ access to a variety of services and supports.

Within cities there are other programs that are not the responsibility of the municipality. Hospitals have emergency rooms to respond with medical care to victims of assaults. Victims often go to hospitals more than to police. In Scotland and England and Wales the emergency room provides an opportunity to persuade young men to change their activities to avoid violence. Also epidemiologists such as those working with the Scottish Executive use these data to identify interventions that will prevent violence.

School Boards provide primary and secondary educations for young men growing up in the city. School Boards face the consequences of bullying and youth involved in violence and gangs because some of it occurs on school grounds. Today, some boards have police called “School Resource Officers” stationed in the schools though the impact on youth violence is not known.

Some school boards have adopted an anti-bullying strategy, such as the proven “Olweus” program. In some school boards, the curriculum includes the Fourth ‘R’, developed to prevent youth violence, date rape and abuse of alcohol — a program started in London, Ontario and being tested in a broad range of schools.

The Surrey School Districts are recognized leaders in the Province of British Columbia and have won international awards for their programs to replace school suspension with W.R.A.P. which mobilizes a number of different agencies to tackle the risk factors leading to violence in schools.

How Can Municipalities Better Address the Causes and Gaps in Service?

Many actions want to reduce violence among young men in Canadian municipalities. The challenge is how to do more of the actions that **in fact** reduce youth violence. This brief suggests several strategies that will be successful if built around the planning and coordination steps in Series 1 of the Action Briefs.