



Crime Prevention in Action
Youth Gang Prevention Fund

CPA-7

Youth Alliance against Gang Violence (YAAGV)

The Youth Alliance against Gang Violence (YAAGV) is an initiative for Aboriginal youth who are gang-involved or at high-risk of gang involvement. The project is located in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, and sponsored by the [Prince Albert Outreach Program Inc.](#) (PAOPI). PAOPI is a youth-driven and community-based organization that has been working closely with street and gang-involved youth since 1998. The YAAGV is supported by [Public Safety Canada](#), National Crime Prevention Centre, Youth Gang Prevention Fund. The project started in June 2008, and will be piloted and evaluated under the YGPF until March 2011.

High rates of crime and delinquent behaviour that predominantly include gang involvement, prostitution, theft, substance abuse, and violence exist in the Prince Albert community.¹ In 2006, local officials in the Prince Albert area had identified nine active gangs, and an increasing trend of youth involvement in the local drug trade.² Demographically, Prince Albert's most prevalent populations are children and youth (residents under the age of 20 years old), and approximately one-third of residents in Prince Albert identify themselves as Aboriginal.³

The YAAGV project assists youth to exit or resist joining gangs by providing alternative opportunities designed to develop pro-social competencies and attitudes. YAAGV programming provides youth with a safe location to learn and grow, away from violence, drugs and gang activity. It offers school accreditation, employment readiness, social skills training, anger management, parenting support, skills for non-violent problem solving and cultural guidance. Project activities also provide access to justice system court workers, and specialized health services for youth.

The Evidence Base

The YAAGV activities were developed to address individual, family, school and community risk factors associated with youth crime and gang activity. Two key approaches for addressing a multitude of risk factors and working with Aboriginal youth provide the foundation for the project:

Youth Engagement

The youth engagement approach is designed to help youth effect positive change in their lives and in the lives of their families by building resiliency against a number of risk factors associated with gang activity. It incorporates skill development, experiential learning and education, which allows youth to take leadership in selecting the activities and initiatives that are appropriate for their needs.⁴

Youth Alliance against Gang Violence (YAAGV)

Circle of Courage

Circle of Courage is an approach to youth empowerment that is based on contemporary healing and resiliency research and traditional Native philosophies of child-rearing. This approach encourages the development of four core values that exist among healthy individuals and in functioning communities. These four universal growth needs are: belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. The approach is based on the idea that risk factors for children and youth are related to living in hazardous environments characterized by discouragement. Through the Circle of Courage process, environments are changed to promote courage as a key factor to meet the needs of young people and reclaim them from high risk lifestyles.⁵

Program Participants

The YAAGV works with Aboriginal children and youth aged 9-18 with particular focus on:

- those who have reached the age of criminal responsibility (12 years old) and are engaged in criminal behaviour – the majority of which is non-violent; and
- those aged 14-19 showing signs of wanting to disengage from gangs but who are at risk of violent retaliation

The families of the participants are also involved in the program activities.

Key Partners

The YAAGV involves many partnerships in the community. Some of the key organizations involved include:

- Won Ska Cultural School
- Saskatchewan Rivers School Division
- Saskatchewan Justice
- Saskatchewan Corrections and Public Safety
- Saskatchewan Department of Community Resources
- City of Prince Albert
- Indian Metis Friendship Centre
- Prince Albert Youth Activity Centre
- Parkland District Health
- YMCA
- Project Hope
- Community Resources
- Service Canada

Program Components

Project staff work in schools with Aboriginal children and youth aged 9-18. The schools are located in neighbourhoods with high presence of gangs, high incidents of family violence and addictions, and where there has been reported involvement of students in street crime. School personnel help identify the participants with a special focus on those who have reached the age of criminal

Youth Alliance against Gang Violence (YAAGV)

responsibility (12 years old) and are engaged in non-violent, criminal behaviour and those aged 14-19 showing signs of wanting to disengage from gangs but who are at risk of violent retaliation. The incidence of violence among these older youth influences their unique programming needs.

The YAAGV project has seven main activities:

Won Ska Cultural School

The Won Ska Cultural School is an alternative school designed for high-risk Aboriginal youth who wish to complete their high school training, earn high school credits, increase literacy skills, increase life skills, and participate in employment training.

Group Activities

Under staff supervision, and with intensive programming support, youth who are disengaging from gangs educate young people about the dangers of youth violence, bullying and gang involvement through a variety of youth-friendly activities such as school presentations, hip hop, rap, video production, the sharing of personal stories, and recreation activities. A primary goal is for these youth to develop employment skills through these activities.

Youth Activity Centre

The Youth Activity Centre (YAC) offers a safe environment for recreational, arts, musical, and cultural activities, including set programs and drop in activities. Given that most participants are street-involved and live in poverty, nutritious snacks, drinks and meals are always available. Through the activities run out of the centre, staff build rapport with participants, with the ultimate objective of engaging them in more intensive services targeted at helping them to resist gangs or disengage from gang life.

Van Outreach

Using an easily identifiable vehicle, project staff makes contact with high-risk youth on the street. A nurse joins staff twice weekly to provide health services and advice. Project staff also provide healthy meals and drinks, counselling, information, and referrals for more intensive services. This activity allows staff to build purposeful relationships with the youth with the objective of supporting them to reduce the harms associated with street life and increase their personal safety.

Court Outreach

A justice worker associated with the program visits the court house to provide legal counselling, information regarding the structure of the court system, and referral services to youth involved in the justice system.

Counselling

There are three counselling programs run by the YAAGV project: individual/crisis counselling; employment counselling; and female assistance group counselling.

- Individual counselling typically addresses issues related to substance abuse, trauma, mental health, gang resistance and exit, family dysfunction, loss, safety planning, and relationship issues.
- Employment counselling addresses issues related to employability, resume and interview preparation, job search, and coaching at work sites.

Youth Alliance against Gang Violence (YAAGV)

- The female assistance group program services 8 – 12 young women weekly, and focuses on their unique social, psychological and developmental needs. Topics covered include parenting and baby wellness, sexual abuse, sex trade, body image, sexual orientation, life skills, self harm, and skills for violence-free relationships.

Mediation in Schools/Activity Group

This program targets youth aged ten to fourteen years who attend local community schools. A variety of socio-recreational and group activities are used to address peer pressure, conflict resolution, and gang resistance issues. Some youth who participate in the activity group program choose to be part of intensive counselling after the activity group program has finished.

The Project staff has daily contact with 100-130 youth at the Activity Centre (60% active in gangs), 80-100 at the school program (90% active in gangs) and 50-60 on the street. The primary outreach workers are ex-gang members who are perceived by youth as understanding their experiences. Other project staff include adults who have training in social work and education. The staff are all trained in Aboriginal approaches effective in assisting high risk youth and children in schools, community and family settings⁶.

Evaluation Design

A comprehensive evaluation of the project is being conducted by a third party evaluator. The purpose of the evaluation is to thoroughly document the project's implementation and impacts, in order to build knowledge of what components work to prevent or reduce gang involvement. The evaluation is structured to collect information from participants, criminal justice practitioners, social workers and educators on participants' level of gang involvement and/or level of risk for becoming involved in gangs before program initiation, midway through the program, and upon completion of the program. Analysis of this data will indicate if there have been changes over time in participants' levels of risk and levels of gang involvement.

In addition to measuring and reporting on whether participants join or remain in gangs and what involvement they have, the evaluation will also measure changes in the prevalence among participants of specific risk and protective factors being addressed by the project activities. A non-randomized comparison group design is being used, consisting of a control sample of approximately 100 high risk Aboriginal young offenders through records contained in the provincial young offender database and a treatment group sample of approximately 100 YAAGV youth. Both samples are being followed over the duration of the project in order to investigate changes in offending and risk levels. Official records are used to verify youth self reports of criminal behaviour.

Preliminary Results

The YAAGV worked with 568 individual youth (281 female and 287 male) between March and November 2008.⁷

The project has targeted the appropriate population of youth at risk of gang involvement, and gang involved youth. Of the 91 youth who completed baseline surveys, half reported that they were either current or recent gang members, and the remaining half had many indicators suggesting that they were at high risk for gang recruitment. Reasons for joining gangs cited by participants included having a friend in a gang, in order to get respect, for protection, for money and to fit in better. In terms of offending behaviour, of the two thirds of the youth had been involved in the justice system, 42% had attacked others with intent to harm, 42% had sold drugs, and 11% had carried handguns.⁸

Youth Alliance against Gang Violence (YAAGV)

Implementation Observations

Building Relationships with Participants

YAAGV staff believe that investing resources in building relationships over time with youth participants has increased their interest and involvement. The needs of participants are complex, and while there may be common themes, each person brings his own set of experiences and unique circumstances that need to be understood in order to provide the best combination of resources and services for success. It takes long term relationships to ensure the services and programs are working, to adjust as required, and to support youth participants through the process. Securing stable, multi-year funding to test the YAAGV approach has been essential to developing a strong team of staff who can focus on building effective relationships with youth.

Life Skills Training

Life skills training sessions, such as teaching youth to cook, sew or plan their day, provide opportunities for YAAGV staff to initiate in-depth discussions with youth who are reluctant to share information in other settings. This in turn allows for better understanding of youth needs, and the provision of services and programs to meet them. Program staff has also reported that learning life skills creates resiliency in youth as demonstrated by their use of these life skills when faced with difficult situations.

Family Involvement

Most participants reported serious problems in their families, including verbal abuse, poor supervision, a lack of bonding to parents, and having family members who are gang-affiliated. Almost all youth reported that they had at least one close family member with a serious substance use addiction. These issues point to the importance of enhancing interventions with the family members of participants, including family therapy and parent coaching. YAAGV staff have found engaging families challenging and some families have been reluctant to get involved in the program because of an unfamiliarity with the role of program staff.

Partnership with Schools

The project has developed referral and case management processes based on relationships with local schools. Each week, school principals provide project staff with a list of youth who are experiencing difficulties and would benefit from intervention by YAAGV staff. This process allows project staff to prioritize their work and ensures they know who needs immediate assistance. Through working together with YAAGV staff on training and building understanding of the risk factors associated with gang involvement, principals and teachers have become knowledgeable about which youth are appropriate for referral. Principals and teachers interact with youth on a daily basis, while project staff may interact with them only a few times a week. As a result, school staff are able to help provide accurate assessments about youth who need to receive services immediately and how youth are progressing in their skill development.

Staff Recruitment

Intervention and outreach positions are often difficult to staff because of the diversity of skills and experience required to work successfully with youth who are at risk and/or currently involved in gangs. Additionally, because of the nature of the programming schedule and the need to disperse staff, regular communication amongst staff is often difficult to have.

Youth Alliance against Gang Violence (YAAGV)

Staff Training

Continual learning and training for staff are important for success. Through analysis and discussion of the issues youth participants are presenting, areas for learning are identified. During the first year of implementation, YAAGV staff identified the need for additional training in mental health and parenting issues. These needs emerged from the findings that:

- A majority of youth participants identified depression as a serious problem in their lives. Of the 41 youth with whom the depression scale was administered almost all were scored moderately or highly depressed. Some of these youth report frequent suicide ideation and some have had recent suicide attempts.
- Many participants have young children or are expecting babies. A majority of the children of these participants are in the care of other family members or child welfare. These data point to the importance of teaching participants parenting skills as well as addressing loss issues for those young parents who do not have access to their children due to child protection concerns.

Focusing on Long Term Results

Project staff have learned that even if situations are improving and going well for participants in some areas, different experiences may arise that the youth are not prepared to deal with, and they run into difficulty. As a result, staff have realized the importance of tracking the long term change of project participants and how they respond to difficult situations over the course of the program. Instead of expecting participants to excel quickly, project staff have learned to expect gradual progression, and to focus on providing participants with the tools and skills they can build and transfer into a variety of difficult situations, and experience success.

Data Collection

Project staff find it difficult, within the time available, to balance providing direct service to youth participants with the need to complete records on their interactions with youth.

Additionally, working with an external evaluator is important to develop a system to administer evaluation surveys with clients, maintain participant tracking data and enter data into a central database has been critical to ensuring accurate and complete data is collected for the project evaluation and ongoing assessment and improvements.

For more information on this project please contact:

Executive Director

Prince Albert Outreach Program Inc

1211 – 1st Ave West

Prince Albert, SK S6V 4Y8

Tel.: (306) 763-3552

Public Safety Canada

National Crime Prevention Centre

Prairie Region

700-310 Broadway Avenue

Winnipeg, MB R3C 0S6

Tel.: 204-984-5861

Toll Free: 1-877-302-6272

Youth Alliance against Gang Violence (YAAGV)

If you wish to register to receive crime prevention information please visit the subscription page at:
<https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/prg/cp/ml/index-eng.aspx>.

¹ Statistics Canada. 2000. *Police-Reported Aboriginal Crime in Saskatchewan*. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 85F0031XIE. Ottawa. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85f0031x/85f0031x1997001-eng.pdf>.

² For more information contact the project sponsor.

³ Statistics Canada. 2006. *Census of Prince Albert Population Table*. Retrieved from:
http://www12.statcan.ca/census-recensement/2006/dp-pd/prof/92-591/search-recherche/frm_res.cfm?Lang=E.

⁴ For more information about youth engagement crime prevention visit www.yjb.gov.uk/en-gb/yjs/prevention/yip/.

⁵ For more information visit <http://www.reclaiming.com/content/about-circle-of-courage>.

⁶ For more information contact the project sponsor.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.