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Crime Prevention in Action Youth Gang Prevention Fund

CPA-8

A Positive Alternative to Youth Gangs (PAYG)

The Positive Alternative to Youth Gangs (PAYG) project works with high risk, ethno-racial minority youth living in the Jane-Finch community of Toronto to prevent them from joining street gangs or getting in to conflict with the law. The project also works with youth who are gang-involved to support their safe exit. PAYG brings together San Romanoway residents, local schools and community partners to develop and implement in-school, after-school, summer, parent and community intervention programs. The PAYG is supported by [Public Safety Canada](#), National Crime Prevention Centre, Youth Gang Prevention Fund and is delivered by the [San Romanoway Revitalization](#) Association. The project began in August, 200 and will be piloted and evaluated under the YGPF until March, 2011.

The San Romanoway neighbourhood, otherwise known as the "Palisades" consists of three high rise buildings with 892 units. The neighbourhood is home to 4400 residents with approximately 2800-3000 children and youth. From 1987 until 2000, the crime and violence within the neighbourhood was 122% above the national average. Comparing the overall number of incidents per 1,000 of the population, San Romanoway residents were experiencing over twice the amount of violent crime than the National and Ontario rates.¹

In 2005, called the 'year of the gun' by the media in the Greater Toronto Area, there were 78 homicides in Toronto with 52 identified as gun-gang related.² Eighteen of these incidents were committed within the Jane-Finch community.³ In 2006, Toronto experienced a slight decline in homicides with a total of 70 and 29 of these were gun-gang related.⁴ The RCMP reported that most of the gun-related homicides occurred in neighbourhoods such as Jane-Finch area.⁵ While rates appear to be dropping somewhat, the history and continued patterns of violent crime and gang activity has left the community with high levels of fear and fragmentation.⁶

In the wider Jane-Finch community, including the San Romanoway neighbourhood, there are 82 different nationalities speaking 102 different languages.⁷ From 1987 until 2000, there were high levels of violence in the community. This violent crime, the high amount of vandalism to properties and the resulting costs to maintain properties led property management, police, residents, community leaders, businesses and a Sociology and Criminology professor to meet for discussion of the issues and options for change.⁸ The PAYG project emerged as part of the response developed from these discussions.

The Evidence Base

The PAYG project is based on evidence from the Milwaukee Wraparound program and the Philadelphia Youth Violence Reduction Partnership.

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Milwaukee Wraparound

Wraparound Milwaukee is a comprehensive program that focuses on delivering strength-based, individualized care to delinquent youth and their families. It was designed to reduce the number of youth being institutionalized by providing family-based treatment and programs within the community. The program targets youth ages 13 to 17 with serious emotional, behavioural, and mental health needs and their families.

The goals of Wraparound Milwaukee are:

- reduce anti-social behaviour;
- help families access available services;
- increase association with pro-social peers;
- increase family cohesion; and
- minimize out-of-home placements.

Evaluation has demonstrated that youth who received interventions from Wraparound Milwaukee had significant reductions in recidivism rates. They had significant decreases in felony referrals, misdemeanour referrals. They also committed fewer sex offences, property offences, assault offences, and weapons offences.⁹

Philadelphia Youth Violence Reduction Partnership (YVRP)

The Philadelphia Youth Violence Reduction Partnership is an intervention project involving members of street gangs in police precincts where the homicide rate among young people is the highest. The project was implemented in the first precinct in 1999 and was later extended to two additional precincts; essentially, the program aims to reduce violent crime-particularly homicide-committed by or against young people.

The YVRP is a result of the close partnership between various public agencies (police, probation) and community organizations (street workers, religious organizations) who work with the client group. Rather than working independently, the YVRP focuses on cooperation and coordination between the organizations. The joint action that results intensifies interventions with young people and further discourages them from engaging in crime. Another goal of this work is to promote social reintegration.

The evaluation data show that the homicide rate attributable to street gangs decreased overall in the precincts where YVRP was implemented and that close surveillance made it possible to detect a large number of offences that were subsequently penalized. The front-line workers were able to persuade a significant number of young people to attend assistance or rehabilitation programs.¹⁰

Program Participants

The PAYG project focuses on ethno-racial minority youth aged 11-14 living in the Jane-Finch community of Toronto who are at high risk of joining street gangs, are gang members or who are at high risk of coming in to conflict with the law.

Key Partners

The Positive Alternative to Gangs project involves many partnerships in the community. Some of the key organizations involved include:

- Toronto District School Board
- Elia Middle School
- Brookview School

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- Greenwin Property Management

Program Components

PAYG activities include the In-School Group Program, After-School Program, Family Support Program Intervention, Summer Program and the Community Program. Youth participate in the school, family and summer programs at a minimum. Youth at higher risk are involved in more components of the project. Participants are referred to the program by their parents, schools, community organizations serving high risk youth and police. Initial assessment leads to the development of a plan identifying which components of the Program will be accessed.

In-School Group Program

Operated in two middle schools at the grade six level, the In-School Group Program involves separate groups for boys and girls. After careful assessment, individual support, mentoring and family support services are wrapped around each youth. During weekly, one hour group sessions, social-recreational, drama, audio-visual, arts and music activities are used to address content areas such as conflict resolution, problem solving, peer mediation, leadership, gender roles, gang resistance strategies, racism and culture shock, addictions, bullying and family violence. The groups take place over the lunch hour and include a meal for the participants.

Mentoring is a key component of the school-based program. Youth most at risk of gang involvement and those in gangs and wanting to exit are given priority for matching one on one with mentors. Other at risk youth are mentored as part of small groups. Teachers are selected and trained as mentors.

After-School Program

Running from 15:15 to 17:15 each weekday, the After-School Program reaches up to 75 at risk youth and offers homework help, reading circles, access to computers, theatre and recreational activities.

Family Support Program Intervention

Two full time Family Support Workers provide support to the parents/caregivers of youth participants. The goal is to help parents understand gang activity and how to keep their children gang-free, keep them bonded to school and to build skills for parenting in areas where they are struggling. Other services related to individual family needs are provided and referrals to organizations providing services such as educational upgrading, job skills training and addictions treatment are made and followed up on.

Summer Program

Offered to all families involved in the School Groups, After-School Programs and the Family Support Program, the Summer Program offers daily social-recreational, music and arts programming during the summer months. Life skills workshops are offered four days a week and meals are provided. Where appropriate, youth are referred to other summer programs being run by community organizations.

Community Program

Three community forums of approximately 50 people each are held each year for residents who have been impacted by gang violence or crime. The Forums are planned and implemented in cooperation with the San Romanoway Youth Committee and Parent Committee and are designed to increase awareness of gang activity and how to deal with it, identification of crime concerns or emerging crime issues and engagement of community members in activities to combat violence and crime.

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An estimated total of 250 male and female students will participate in the project each year. Of this total, 126 students will benefit from the in-school initiatives within the two Middle Schools; an additional 124 students will be supported through the after-school, summer and community-based programs. While all the youth participating are assessed as high risk for gang/criminal involvement, it is expected that approximately 75 participants a year will be in conflict with the law or at significant risk of engaging in gang activity.

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 Positive Alternatives to Gangs project implementation and impacts in order to contribute to the knowledge of what project components work best to prevent or reduce gang involvement.

The project will be evaluated using a quasi experimental design. Data is being collected through participant interviews and surveys administered pre and post program. In addition, interviews and surveys will be administered with stakeholders and parents. The design will enable the evaluators to track changes in the attitudes of the youth involved in the program, gang membership, and gang activity in the community throughout the course of the project. A comparison group is also included in the evaluation.

Preliminary Outcomes

As of December, 2008, 48 youth have participated in the Summer Program and In-School Program. The average age of the youth was 12 years. 35 parents, including 31 mothers, were involved in the Family Support Program.

Thirty three youth have completed baseline risk assessment surveys. Of these youth, two reported they had been arrested at least once in their lives, six said there were gang problems in their schools, and three youth reported they either had been or were involved in gang activity.¹¹

Implementation Observations

Program and Curriculum Development

Project staff found the planned start-up timeframe too short to fully develop the school program. All lesson plans to be delivered in the school had to be approved by the school board before going ahead which took longer than anticipated. Introducing the program at the beginning of a school year also posed challenges as school staff have so much to do at that time.

Human Resources

The design and delivery of age-differentiated, gender-based and culturally sensitive programming in multiple settings requires a qualified and diverse large staff. Variation in program curriculum is required to meet the developmental stages by age and gender. More staff than originally anticipated were needed to implement the program each week. Cultural diversity among the staff has also been identified as an important factor to meet participant needs. Along with these challenges, documenting staff involvement for project monitoring and evaluation also requires dedicated time.

Selection of Participants

Identifying youth at high-risk of gang involvement or already gang-involved is challenging. Clear selection criteria are very important but the application of the criteria also has to be

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discussed. The original criteria for PAYG were very specific and narrow to avoid having youth not at high-risk of becoming involved in gangs. As a result, few of the youth staff knew were at risk or already gang involved met the criteria as it was being applied. Program staff worked with the Project evaluator to adjust the selection criteria and its application and this led to the identification of youth appropriately. Community organizations, school officials, police and others who refer participants have been provided with guides on completing a referral checklist which increases the consistency of the application of selection criteria.

Intake Assessments

Once accepted in to the project, detailed assessments of risk and protective factors for each youth are undertaken. Early in the project, it became clear that there was greater diversity in the risk factors than anticipated. Non-traditional risk factors were then included to accommodate for this diversity. The tools used to assess risk were refined to accommodate additional risk factors as they were identified. Program staff also found it challenging to reconcile the different perspectives on risk factors from parents, students, school officials and others referring youth. Often there were conflicting views of which risk factors were most relevant. Discussion led to the revision of assessment tools to better capture the diverse perspectives and come to decisions about which risk factors would be focused on for youth participants.

Parental Consent

Staff found that parents were often reluctant to give consent for their children to participate. They were concerned with the potential ramifications for themselves and their children of being associated with a gang project. Initiating the in-school groups and associating the program with schools was a successful way to mitigate these concerns and increased the numbers of parents consenting to their children participating in the program.

In-School Groups

Using the lunch period for in-school group sessions was not successful because it did not allow enough time to complete the life skills curriculum content for that day. Through negotiations with school administration, more time for the in-school groups was scheduled at one of the participating schools and after-school sessions were organized in addition to the lunch period sessions in other schools.

The in-school sessions are popular and students have begun to bring their friends. Participation at lunch and after-school is both high and consistent. Program staff have identified one person in each school to assist the teachers and guidance counsellors with the assessment process and other issues that arise. This helps to ensure that implementation issues are discussed and resolved immediately.

Family Support

Completing family assessments is an important component of the program. It increases understanding of the context and environment the youth are in and this allows the services and activities to be tailored. Parents and other family members are often reluctant to disclose personal information. One of the strategies for engaging parents has been outreach. Program staff meet family members in their homes and in the community and have informal discussions about what is going well and what is concerning them. This often leads to connecting parents to appropriate resources and support and as confidence is gained, parents become involved in a parents group where babysitting is provided and they enjoy the benefits of interaction with other parents in the community who are going through similar experiences. The increased communication and understanding of family circumstances can be recorded for discussion regarding what the youth participants will benefit from most.

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For more information on this project please contact:

Executive Director

San Romanoway Revitalization Association

10 San Romanoway, Ground Floor, North Wing

North York, Ontario, M3N 2Y2

Tel: 416-739-7949

Public Safety Canada

National Crime Prevention Centre

Ontario Region

25 St. Clair Ave E, Suite 401

Toronto, ON, M4T 1M2

Tel: 416-952-0395

Toll Free: 1-877-302-6272

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¹ Rigakos, George S., David Sealy, and Alka Tandan. 2002. *The San Romanoway Community Crime Survey: Base-line Data*. Ottawa: Law Commission of Canada.

² Statistics Canada. 2005. "Homicide in Canada, 2005". *The Daily*. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/061108/dq061108b-eng.htm>

³ Contact the project sponsor for more information.

⁴ Statistics Canada. 2006. "Homicide in Canada, 2005". *The Daily*. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/071017/dq071017b-eng.htm>

⁵ RCMP. 2006. *Feature Focus 2006: Youth Gangs & Guns – Canada*. Retrieved from <http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/pubs/yg-ja/toronto20-eng.htm>

⁶ Rigakos, George S., David Sealy, and Alka Tandan. 2002. *The San Romanoway Community Crime Survey: Base-line Data*. Ottawa: Law Commission of Canada

⁷ Contact the project sponsor for more information.

⁸ Rigakos, George S., David Sealy, and Alka Tandan. 2002. *The San Romanoway Community Crime Survey: Base-line Data*. Ottawa: Law Commission of Canada

⁹ For more information visit: <http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/res/cp/res/2008-pcpp-eng.aspx>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Contact the project sponsor for more information.