

# ADDRESSING DETERMINANTS OF SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED AND BLOOD BORNE INFECTIONS AMONG STREET-INVOLVED YOUTH: EXPERIENCES WITH THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

## BACKGROUND

This fact sheet examines experiences with the criminal justice system as a determinant of sexually transmitted and blood borne infection (STBBI) vulnerability among street-involved youth in Canada. It is one in a series based on an analysis of current literature and findings from Cycle 6 of the Enhanced Street Youth Surveillance system.<sup>1</sup> Others address mental health and mental illness; unstable housing and homelessness; education and employment; and access to health services.

### Quick facts from Enhanced Street Youth Surveillance System (E-SYS) Cycle 6:

- Between 2009–12, the most common laboratory confirmed STBBIs among Canadian street-involved youth included: herpes simplex virus -2 (“genital herpes”) (14%), *Chlamydia trachomatis* (9%), and hepatitis C seropositivity (6%).
- 67.9% of street-involved youth had spent time in detention or prison at some point in their life.

These fact sheets provide considerations for community organizations, public health professionals and federal, provincial and territorial governments of ways to address determinants of vulnerability to and resilience against STBBIs among street-involved youth. Street-involved youth are defined as youth aged 15 to 24 who have no permanent home and spend significant time on the street.<sup>2</sup>

## WHAT IS THE LINK BETWEEN EXPERIENCES WITH THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM AND STBBI VULNERABILITY AMONG STREET-INVOLVED YOUTH IN CANADA?

- Street-involved youth experience higher levels of crime and violence compared to youth in the general population.<sup>3</sup> Females are more likely to report being victims of crime than males and report higher levels of sexual assault, intimate partner violence (IPV) and abuse.<sup>3</sup> Experiences of IPV and abuse increase risk for STBBIs, such as limiting the ability to negotiate condom use. It can also further increase isolation and negative coping mechanisms such as drug and alcohol use.



- Causes of homelessness among street-involved youth often include family conflict, a history of physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse, and involvement with child welfare services. The younger and earlier they leave home, the more vulnerable they are to criminal victimization.<sup>3</sup>
- Street-involved youth who experience homelessness may be exposed to crime and become involved in criminal activities for a variety of reasons. The longer they remain on the streets, the more likely they are to engage in different forms of crime.<sup>4</sup>
- The crimes that street-involved youth commit most frequently include stealing and selling drugs. These crimes are committed as “survival crimes” and are a direct response to the conditions of poverty they face.<sup>5</sup>
- Street-involved youth may become involved in gangs to build a sense of belonging, identity, self-esteem, and protection.<sup>6</sup> Gang involvement can lead to increased violence, substance use, delinquency and other behaviours that increase vulnerability to STBBIs and incarceration. It can also lead to decreased attachment to school and employment.
- The prevalence of STBBIs among people in prisons is higher than the general Canadian population.<sup>7</sup> Overrepresented populations in Canadian prisons (e.g., Aboriginal people) are also overrepresented in reported rates of STBBIs in Canada.
- Some street-involved youth may engage in criminal activity to gain access to shelter, food and other health services provided in correctional facilities. For some, living conditions in correctional settings are safer and cleaner than those of living on the street.<sup>8</sup>
- Experiences with the criminal justice system also increase the risk of unemployment due to the stigma associated with having a criminal record. Employers are often unwilling to hire individuals who have been imprisoned or have a criminal record.<sup>9</sup> Unemployment may contribute to boredom, frustration and anger and is linked to increased involvement in criminal activities and negative coping mechanisms that can directly increase risk of STBBIs.<sup>10</sup>
- Due to their high visibility on the streets and the involvement of some street-involved youth in criminal behaviours, street-involved youth can be stigmatized with a criminal reputation by police and the general public. As a result, street-involved youth are often excluded from many places, services and supports that other youth have access to, forcing them into unsafe and marginalized areas. This can make them more vulnerable to crime, violence and STBBIs.<sup>11</sup>

## WHAT CAN BE DONE TO ADDRESS EXPERIENCES WITH THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM AS A DETERMINANT OF STBBI VULNERABILITY AMONG STREET-INVOLVED YOUTH?

- Partner with local service providers and law enforcement to identify and provide continuous learning opportunities for staff working with street-involved youth. For example, host community training workshops on:
  - key issues and health needs among street-involved youth
  - strategies for building trust and improving relationships with street-involved youth
  - health information and tools (e.g., checklist for assessing mental illness)
  - available community supports and resources.

Strategies that enable service providers to improve the health, safety and well-being of street-involved youth can benefit those who are vulnerable to violence and crime associated with life on the streets.

- Develop and tailor skills-building programs that support street-involved youth making the transition out of the criminal justice system. For example, organize workshops at local drop-in centres which offer basic health and literacy skills (e.g., reading, writing and computer skills) required to deal effectively with health information and the health

care system. Providing street-involved youth with opportunities to develop their personal health skills and practices can improve health outcomes, reduce their vulnerability to criminal victimization and reduce involvement in high risk (e.g., sex work) or criminal activity (e.g., selling drugs).

- Collaborate with community organizations to develop programs that focus on the social determinants that lead to crime, violence and STBBI vulnerability. For example, organize community workshops that focus on communication, healthy relationships, positive mental health, partner violence, and conflict resolution. Programs can provide support in fostering healthy child development, family connectedness and community involvement, and can reduce experiences of crime and violence in later years.
- Establish mentorship opportunities for street-involved youth and youth at risk of becoming street-involved. For example, connect them to street nurses and mental health workers. Mentorship relationships can increase confidence, self-esteem and respect among street-involved youth, and help them learn to make positive choices and develop life skills. Mentorship also engages them in health services and encourages empathy and concern for others, both of which play a role in keeping street-involved youth away from criminal activity and reducing their vulnerability to STBBIs.
- Increase access to resources in safe houses and drop-in centres that help street-involved youth address a wide range of health issues in a single location. For example, resource centres could provide information on and access to screening and treatment of STBBIs, abuse, substance use and mental illness. Creating streamlined points of access to care is a promising practice to help meet the complex needs of street-involved youth.

## PROMISING PRACTICES IN ADDRESSING EXPERIENCES WITH THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM AMONG STREET-INVOLVED YOUTH

The following are examples of programs and resources which show promise in addressing determinants of STBBI vulnerability and building resilience among street-involved youth.

### ABBOTSFORD YOUTH CRIME PREVENTION PROJECT (ABBOTSFORD, BRITISH COLUMBIA)

[www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/bbtsfrd-yth-prvntn/index-eng.aspx](http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/bbtsfrd-yth-prvntn/index-eng.aspx)

The Abbotsford Youth Crime Prevention Project provides services for youth involved in or at risk of sexual exploitation, drug abuse, gang involvement, and homelessness. The project fosters crime prevention by providing mentoring and outreach services tailored to individual risk and needs. Youth set goals and realize their strengths by participating in activities such as intramural sports, structured activities, counselling, and family support services.

### JUST TV, BROADWAY NEIGHBOURHOOD COMMUNITY CENTRE (WINNIPEG, MANITOBA)

[www.thebnc.ca/programs/](http://www.thebnc.ca/programs/)

This program provides youth with opportunities to express themselves through multimedia in a safe, fun, creative environment as an alternative to negative influences such as drugs, gangs, and violence. Youth are recruited through an outreach worker who provides links with social support services. Participants engage in all aspects of the audio and video industry and are required to make a video based on their interests, experiences, activities, and lives including work aimed at dissuading young children from drugs, crime and gang activity.

### PROGRAMME DE SUIVI INTENSIF DE MONTRÉAL – GANGS DE RUE (MONTRÉAL, QUÉBEC)

[www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/prgrm-sv-ntsf/index-eng.aspx](http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/prgrm-sv-ntsf/index-eng.aspx)

This program targets youth and young adults aged 15 to 25 involved in or at high risk of becoming involved in criminal gang activity. A focused, intensive plan of action is developed for each participant and their families involving three to four meetings weekly between the youth, family, project staff and community organizations. Weekly group workshops cover topics such as communication skills, alternatives to violence, conflict resolution, empathy and problem solving.

### REGINA ANTI-GANG SERVICES (REGINA, SASKATCHEWAN)

[www.nccaregina.ca/rags/](http://www.nccaregina.ca/rags/)

The Regina Anti-Gang Services project is a Canadian initiative for Aboriginal gang-involved youth living in north central Regina. The program is built upon four premises: programming for young men, circle keeper program for young women, intensive gang exit counselling, and outreach to schools and institutions. Together, they aim to reduce involvement in gangs and criminal behaviour. Outcomes included a decline in gang affiliation, decreased involvement in violent and non-violent crime, decline in approving acts of aggression or retaliation, and a greater level of attachment to the labour force.<sup>12</sup>

### STREET YOUTH LEGAL SERVICES, JUSTICE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH (TORONTO, ONTARIO)

[www.jfcy.org/slys.html](http://www.jfcy.org/slys.html)

This specialized outreach and education program provides street-involved youth aged 16 to 24 with legal advice, representation, referrals, and education in drop-in centres and shelters through workshops and individual consultations. Program results and outcomes related to reducing the risk factors for homelessness include resolving criminal justice issues, obtaining and retaining housing, and helping youth to earn an income.

### YOUTH PHOTO VOICE PROJECT, AIDS COALITION OF NOVA SCOTIA (HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA)

[www.northernaidsconnectionsociety.ca/youth-photo-voice](http://www.northernaidsconnectionsociety.ca/youth-photo-voice)

This collaborative project between AIDS Coalition of Nova Scotia and AIDS Prince Edward Island Community Support Group works with street-involved youth to capture their personal experiences with conflict with the law, addictions, mental health concerns and risk taking behaviours. Partnering agencies such as the Truro Police Service, Mental Health and Restorative Justice for Youth help in choosing candidates to participate in this project. The Photo Voice project has been offered at junior and senior high schools throughout Northern Nova Scotia, and will expand to PEI.

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## ENDNOTES

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