Community Perspectives Report

THE REVIEW OF THE
rootsofyouthviolence

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The Honourable Roy McMurtry
Dr. Alvin Curling

Ontario

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Introduction

To our community partners:

There are many kinds of communities. Often, we think of a community as something that has a specific location – our own neighbourhood, town or city, or our rural township or region. But we are all familiar with other kinds of communities: those made up of individuals who share common cultures or common interests, or attend the same school or work at the same jobs. In that sense, you are probably a member of several different communities.

This volume of our report on the Roots of Youth Violence is dedicated to all of you, in all your different communities, who participated in this review in so many different ways:

- By joining discussion groups or holding quiet conversations with neighbourhood representatives as communities prepared for the Neighbourhood Insight Sessions[1]
- By giving up your time to attend the Neighbourhood Insight Sessions and speak on behalf of your family, friends and neighbours
- By working with the Grassroots Youth Collaborative to give us an up-close look at the conditions you face daily
- By completing our online survey or calling our toll-free telephone line to give us your thoughts and opinions[2]
- By attending the Urban Aboriginal Youth consultations
- By meeting with us, as individuals and as representatives of organizations, to provide your own unique contributions to our work.

The information you shared has added richness, texture and depth to our appreciation of the issues that Premier McGuinty asked us to review. While it is difficult to truly comprehend the lived experience of those touched by violence and its roots, we believe you have helped us come closer to the truth of these realities.

We especially value your contributions because you told us that you are tired of being consulted by government committees and agencies whose reports never seem to make any difference in your lives. We understand that, and we hope our report is the start of a new process that will lead to real and meaningful change in Ontario. We also hope that our consultation process has left something in each community, and that you will continue to support our work long after this review is finished.

[1] *For more information about our consultations, see the* Neighbourhood Insight Sessions Final Report *and the GYC's* Rooted in Action: A Youth-Led Report on our Demands and Plans to Address the Root Causes of Violence in our Communities*, both included in this volume, as well as Chapter 2 of our report to the Premier.*

[2] *A summary of the results of more than 5,000 submissions to our online survey is included at the end of this volume.*

We promised to report back to you about our work, and this volume is our attempt to honour those commitments. That's why we've called it "Community Perspectives."

We promised to report back to you about our work, and this volume is our attempt to honour those commitments.

This volume focuses on what we heard from our community contacts, most especially from the youth. We've provided the full text of the *Neighbourhood Insight Sessions Final Report (Insight Final Report)*, the Grassroots Youth Collaborative's *Rooted in Action: A Youth-Led Report on our Demands and Plans to Address the Root Causes of Violence in our Communities (GYC Report)* and a report from the Urban Aboriginal Youth consultations, and we've included some of the thoughts contributed by others through our online survey and one-on-one meetings.

In all of what you told us, we heard a lot of agreement about the roots of violence involving youth and what can be done about them, and in Chapter 3, we've summarized your priorities under six themes.

In Chapter 4, we relate some stories about people who are making a difference in their communities; we hope they may inspire you to keep working in your neighbourhoods.

For your convenience, we have included a summary of our recommendations to the Premier in Chapter 5, and we hope that you will see your priorities reflected in them. Even more, we hope you will support them and will make your support known.

Finally, let us thank you once again for your commitment to making your communities better places for everyone, especially for the youth, who are the future of our province.

Roy McMurtry *Alvin Curling*

Co-Chairs

For more information about Co-Chairs Roy McMurtry and Alvin Curling, visit the Roots of Youth Violence website at www.rootsofyouthviolence.on.ca

Section 1:

Community Perspectives

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Chapter 1:

What's the Problem?

"If a person truly believes he/she has nothing to live for or, in fact, has nothing to lose, there is not much chance of convincing them that they should not indulge in violent or 'illegal' activities."

– respondent to online survey

As we travelled around Ontario, we were often asked what we mean by "youth violence" or "violence involving youth." We have taken a fairly broad view, but we have focused most of our attention on the serious violence that led the Premier to request our review: weapons offences, serious assaults and murder. We've been similarly flexible about what constitutes "youth," for the practical reason that there is no standard definition that programs and authorities use.

What you told us is that, behind the headline-making crimes, there is persistent violence that is threatening to become a "new normal" in some of our communities, especially those that are considered the most disadvantaged. This is not to say that violence involving youth does not exist in relatively well-off areas, but these usually have the resources, both financial and political, to respond to the problems. These resources simply do not exist in more disadvantaged neighbourhoods, and so the conditions fester. We heard this many times during our Neighbourhood Insight visits, and your comments are captured in the *Insight Final Report*, which includes a complete description of how these sessions were arranged.

Here's some of what you told us:

"Fear in neighbourhoods is on the rise. . . . In some areas, people are virtual prisoners in their homes. The playgrounds are controlled by drug dealers and gang members, innocent people are put at risk because some shooters pursue their targets with no regard for innocent bystanders. . . . Parents are afraid to let their children participate in the community."

The playgrounds are controlled by drug dealers and gang members, innocent people are put at risk because some shooters pursue their targets with no regard for innocent bystanders.

"Communities, including youth, get desensitized to the violence. Young children are exposed to violence and learn from it – whether it's at home or seeing a violent police 'takedown.' Children as young as nine talk about violence as normal."

"Violence becomes an acceptable way of dealing with conflict. . . . Youth resort to violence to resolve disputes.

They feel they need to be violent in order to survive and to preserve their honour."

"Once youth get involved in a violent lifestyle, it's hard to get out." (Insight Final Report, pp. 75–77)

The review also worked with the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres, which helped us consult with urban Aboriginal youth in northern and southern Ontario. Bullying was often mentioned during the Northern sessions as a major cause of violence. The following is one respondent's comment, typical of many:

"There is a lot of bullying/harassment in school. Some fights no one tries to stop. People tend to make fun of people who are different. For example, my friend who has a good fashion sense and is a guy automatically gets labelled as queer or gay. It really bothers me and I have gone to teachers about the student who uses those words against my friend the most; they tell me to ignore them. I don't see how this helps. The person who does the bullying gets away with it. Another thing with mostly girls — they gossip."

A small boy, about 11 years old, sits at a table that forms one end of an open square in a brightly lit community centre. He is talking about an incident in his public housing complex: a fight, with police called and an area cordoned off so he and his friends had to go around behind some of the buildings to get home. He describes seeing someone on the ground, someone in handcuffs. But it's not the incident that grips the visitors in the room, who have come to hear about the impact of violence involving youth on this neighbourhood. It's the boy's tone of voice as he tells the story, as if he is recounting something from a movie, or a trip to the corner store for ice cream. For him, this is normal.

So, just how bad is violence in Ontario? To answer that question, we asked our research consultant, Prof. Scot Wortley of the University of Toronto, to review various studies. You can read the details of his findings in our report to the Premier, but in essence, here are the trends he identified:

- Poverty is increasingly concentrated in particular neighbourhoods in ways that strengthen rather than reduce the roots of violence involving youth.
- Poverty and violence are increasingly racialized.
- Violence, compared to previous decades, is more likely to involve youth, to take place in public and to involve firearms.

These trends lead us to the conclusion that Ontario is at a crossroads, and we must decide whether or not we are prepared to take decisive action to reverse them.

One of the reasons we have arrived at this crossroads is that we have been too willing to consider violence involving youth as a purely criminal matter that can be dealt with through the criminal justice system. What you told us is that this all too often makes criminals out of young people who could, with a different approach, have been encouraged to become functioning members of society. Instead, we brand them as "at-risk," throw a confusing array of disjointed programs at them and, when these fail, lock them up. In this vein, we think the federal government's recent attempts to "strengthen" the youth criminal justice system are heading in the wrong direction.

Interestingly, many of the police officials we met with, including representatives of the Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police, agree that we cannot "arrest our way" out of this situation. Many high-ranking officers call for a different approach, one that puts more emphasis on prevention and less on enforcement, but they have been unable to change the prevailing police culture.

Maybe there is a different way of looking at these issues, one that takes the focus off the youth criminal justice system.

Again, quoting from our report to the Premier, we said:

> *"If these trends and impacts are seen as akin to a public health issue, then it makes no more sense for those not immediately affected to blame those who suffer from them, and otherwise ignore them, than it would to ignore an infectious disease outbreak in one community or neighbourhood. We know infections can spread and, even if they don't, they can weaken other parts of the body and its systems, with regrettable mid- to long-term consequences. Therefore, we deal with the problem collectively and cure it, because ignoring it will simply make matters worse for ever-increasing parts of our body politic. When we reject this time-honoured approach, we are expressing a very powerful message that our social fabric is in danger." (Volume 1, p. 102)*

Chapter 2:

The Roots of the Problem

"Violence is a cycle; there needs to be an intercepting player earlier in childhood and to follow families to cut the cycle."

– respondent to online survey

As we visited communities for the Neighbourhood Insight Sessions, listened to urban Aboriginal youth, considered the report provided by the Grassroots Youth Collaborative and reviewed your responses to the online survey, you confirmed something for us: there is no one root of violence involving youth. Rather, there are conditions that put certain communities and individuals at risk of becoming victims or resorting to violence; in our report to the Premier, we call these "immediate risk factors." There are many roots to such risk factors, and each community may have its own idea of which should be number 1.

What the roots have in common is that each contributes to a deep sense of hopelessness and alienation from the larger society. They do not in themselves cause violence, and we know that many who live in these conditions do not resort to violence. Nevertheless, lessening the effect of these roots and others we've identified in our report to the Premier will, in our opinion, ensure Ontario is on the right path.

This report focuses on the roots most frequently mentioned by you, the voice of the community. They are:

- Poverty
- Racism
- The education system
- The lack of economic opportunity and jobs.

Poverty

Housing

In neighbourhood meetings and reports, you identified poverty as a root because it contributes to alienation. This risk factor is magnified when it occurs in concentrations, as it does in some housing projects.

It is a fact that many of Ontario's most vulnerable citizens live in conditions that should never be tolerated in a society such as ours. Furthermore, the concentrations of substandard housing that we have created through our policies and practices lack the necessary economic and social supports, creating an even greater sense of hopelessness. And since, as we heard from many community representatives, poverty is becoming racialized in Ontario, it's hardly surprising that most of those living in substandard housing are visible minorities.[3]

We wish we could report that all of the substandard housing is owned by the private sector. Then it would be easy to recommend that municipalities crack down on these individuals and enforce building codes.

> "When someone doesn't have a lot of money, often the only place they can afford to live is in a dilapidated, decaying, roach-rat-infested building that's often in need of multiple repairs." *(Insight Final Report, p. 79)*

Unfortunately, the Province and municipalities own much of the substandard stock in the form of "social," "affordable" or "public" housing units, and these too are generally speaking in desperate need of repair. The Ontario government made a start on addressing this need in its 2008 Budget by setting aside $100 million to help with repairs to about 4,000 affordable housing units. Municipalities will be able to get up to $500 million in low-cost loans, also to repair affordable housing.

Many of you told us that you are becoming frustrated with the lack of positive action to repair the housing stock. The *GYC Report* said:

> *"There is a social housing crisis in Toronto. Not only is there a 10-year waiting list to get into social housing in the city, but also the stock of existing housing is in severe disrepair.*
>
> *"We are also tired of governments (federal, provincial and municipal) passing the buck to each other with regard to how to deal with this issue. We recognize that it is the responsibility of ALL THREE levels of government to make this implementation happen immediately, and that bureaucratic wrangling is no longer acceptable." (pp. 148–149)*

[3] *Prof. David Hulchanski of the University of Toronto, in a brief to the review, pointed out that Toronto's neighbourhoods are increasingly segregated on the basis of socio-economic status, skin colour and housing tenure. In a 2007 Research Bulletin, he pointed out that in areas of the city where average household income has fallen by 20 per cent or more in each census for the last 30 years, 43 per cent of residents are Black, Chinese or South Asian, while these groups make up only 10 per cent of neighbourhoods where income is increasing by 20 per cent or more. You can access this report (Hulchanski, 41) at www.urbancentre.utoronto.ca/hulchanski.html*

Social Services and Mental Health

We also heard that families living in such conditions have a greater need for health and social services, but that these areas are often the most poorly served. Whether you consider settlement services for immigrants, support for single mothers, or recreation and arts programs, there are simply not enough to serve the complex needs of disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

As is so often the case, a lack of funding is at the heart of the problem — too few resources to meet too many needs.

> ***"Social service agencies struggle to keep up with the demand for services.*** *There is not enough funding, and agencies are competing instead of working together." (Insight Final Report, p. 77)*

And while all of the services mentioned above are important, it may be that none are more critical than those devoted to mental health.

The *Insight Final Report* captured what you told us during our visits this way:

> ***"More youth suffer from depression,*** *which can lead to suicide and self-harm, as well as substance abuse. Violence hurts youth self-esteem and stops youth from having ambition to do anything." (p. 61)*

How bad is the child mental health problem? Senator Michael Kirby, chair of the Mental Health Commission of Canada and an advocate for ending the stigma still attached to mental illness, spoke to the Empire Club in May 2008. He cited the following statistics from a speech he gave in 2002, and said that, unfortunately, nothing much has changed since then.

- Fifteen to 25 per cent of young people have at least one serious mental health problem, and those with one problem run a high risk of developing a second or third.
- Only one in six is adequately diagnosed, and then usually long after onset.
- Suicide remains the leading cause of adolescent death, placing Canada third on the list for OECD countries.
- Eighty per cent of adults with mental health problems, including depression and eating disorders, suffered the onset of the disease before they were 18.

But the major barrier to improving mental health services, he said, remains the fear of being stigmatized by admitting to such problems either personally or in one's family. People are reluctant to ask for help: 38 per cent of parents said they wouldn't talk about their children's problems.

The report continued:

> ***"Mental health is not just about learning disabilities.*** *For many youth, it is about stress, lack of self-esteem, peer pressure, anger and frustration coming from poverty, discrimination and a general lack of support from family, peers, role models and the many systems that have an impact on youth. Furthermore, post-traumatic stress from seeing violence around them (at home, on the street, in school) is also an issue for many youth, and especially for some immigrant youth who have witnessed extreme violence in the countries they came from." (Insight Final Report, p. 85)*

Improving this situation will require several important changes. Senator Kirby, in the Empire Club address mentioned above, said Canada suffers from "an embarrassment of shortages" for mental health and cannot put the right resources in the right place at the right time. "It's hardly a 'system' at all," he added. He called on government to make schools the delivery system for mental health, providing more funding and installing trained mental health practitioners. He also called for a national mental health strategy and a cohesive delivery system that would put the child's needs at the centre and have service providers work around the interests of the child.

We also believe that all levels of government and funding agencies must adopt a more targeted approach to providing social and other services, putting their resources where they are most needed and will do the most good, rather than spreading them thinly across the entire population.

Social Pressure

At least some of the serious violence involving youth is a side effect of the drug trade, gang warfare and other illegal activities. Young people may be attracted to these activities because they see no hope of improving their lives through legitimate means. The *Insight Final Report* said:

> *"Hopelessness comes out of poverty. When youth grow up with no money they don't believe the situation can ever change. And so they look at all options on what to do about it, including unlawful behaviour." (p. 81)*

However, this does not lead us to the conclusion that the appropriate response is more police and stiffer sentences — as noted, even the police don't believe we can solve violence with more enforcement alone. Rather, it leads us to ask how we can change the conditions that make criminal activity attractive.

> *"Society tells us that having material things is one measure of success, and then denies youth access to those things. Youth get angry. It has a negative impact on their self-image when they know others can have things that they can't.*
>
> *"Youth get angry when they see their parent(s) working so hard but never getting ahead." (Insight Final Report, p. 79)*

The answer, then, lies not simply in more enforcement, but in understanding the hopelessness that leads to anger that propels young people towards violence. We will deal with the issues of jobs — or rather, the lack of jobs — later in this chapter, but one quote from the *GYC Report* is appropriate here:

> *"Although there is certainly violence that occurs outside of economic hardship, there is a general sense that, if provided with viable and accessible pathways to meaningful economic self-sufficiency, many young people will not be forced into situations that put them at a higher risk of violence." (p. 129)*

Racism

Another primary source of alienation is racism, and we cannot hope to address violence involving youth unless we confront the racism that is still all too common in Ontario. Racism is morally wrong. However, at the community level, it is also the evil fertilizer that nourishes the other roots we have identified: poverty, especially concentrations of poverty; inadequate housing; unfair practices in schools; and the lack of employment opportunities.

The answer, then, lies not simply in more enforcement, but in understanding the hopelessness that leads to anger that propels young people towards violence.

One of the areas you were most concerned about was relations between police and youth. As mentioned earlier, we met with many senior police officers during our consultations, as well as with representatives of the Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police. They also told us about their efforts to emphasize community policing, the importance of community relations and programs to have officers work cooperatively with schools. We have no doubt that the command structure of Ontario's police services is sincerely dedicated to addressing issues of violence, especially in complex-needs neighbourhoods such as those we visited.

It is, however, equally clear that this message is not getting through. In our Neighbourhood Insight Sessions, youth recounted how patrol officers unfairly targeted them. Whether it was Black youth in Toronto or Aboriginal youth in Thunder Bay, the story was the same: if you are young, and especially if you are a member of a visible minority,

you can expect to be stopped for doing nothing more than walking home from a recreation centre or a mall.

Consider this, from the *GYC Report*:

> *"I was double-riding, I was pulled over by two police officers. They stopped us, they explained that double-riding is illegal so then they began to search us. So I started to get angry, I was like 'I don't see what double-riding and searching have to do with each other, cause it doesn't go together. Can you just write me a ticket and let me go?' So they didn't really listen to me, they started yelling 'we're the guys, we know the rules, we know the law, you don't know anything so shut up.' They had us face down forward in the middle of the street." (p. 126)*

Youth we met were quite capable of telling the difference between "good cops" and "bad cops." The "good" ones are those sent to the schools or into the communities in what most of the area residents see as little more than public relations gestures. The "bad" cops are the ones who hassle them on the street at night or conduct early morning raids in their neighbourhoods.

A useful suggestion came from our Jamestown Neighbourhood Insight Session, when a young participant told us youth need to learn how to react when stopped by police. Knowing her rights, she said, and insisting on them politely but firmly, had resulted in a positive interaction.

Here are two more extracts from the *GYC Report*.

> *". . . you know some police they're alright you know, but other police, they like harassing you and stuff. Basically, in Regent Park they do that a lot, you know."*

> *" . . . usually it's the big guys that come in and they try and harass you and stuff – they try and bully you, you know, make you look stupid. That's the thing I don't like about them you know." (p. 126)*

Here's how the *Insight Final Report* summarized our conversations in the community:

> *"Many youth talked about not receiving respect from police, and about experiencing problems with police harassment. They talked about youth that get pulled over for no reason, and who don't feel like they can move freely in their own neighbourhoods. Increasing camera surveillance and heavy police presence can create a feeling of 'community under siege.' Police can be seen as the enemy. Bravado from the police, particularly in their communication with youth, gets in the way of any form of trust and relationship building…There is criminalization of youth and a growing number of arrests. There is also increased racial profiling." (p. 76)*

Some say the answer is better police training in diversity, cultural sensitivity or community relations. At the moment, only a few hours are spent on such topics in the basic constable training program at the Ontario Police College, which all officers are required to attend. The college itself maintains that it's a change in the police culture, not training, that's required. Police services boards and the services' command structures must also take responsibility for changing the behaviour of their officers.

Racism is not, of course, confined to the police service, but we have highlighted it here because it plays such a large role in the lives of those one might expect to be most in need of police protection. We cannot, however, ignore the fact that racism impacts on education, housing, employment and the provision of social services. We heard over and over again that racism is a form of violence, poverty is a form of violence, and both poverty and violence are being racialized — disproportionately affecting Ontario's Black and Aboriginal communities and, to a lesser extent, other visible minorities.

The Education System and the *Safe Schools Act*

There is much to admire in Ontario's public education system and, for most of the province's youth, it provides wonderful opportunities to learn and grow. For some youth, however, it is another factor that further alienates them from society and, in doing so, sows the seeds for violence.

There were three specific things about the system that you identified as creating alienation: the *Safe Schools Act*, the need for a curriculum and work force that reflect communities, and the practice of streaming certain students away from academic achievement:

- The original *Safe Schools Act* created alienation because the weight of suspensions, expulsions and transfers fell disproportionately on visible minorities, in particular young Black males in southern Ontario and Aboriginal males in the North. Some of the school officials and teachers we met said the Act removed their ability to deal with problems without resorting to the criminal justice system.
- Visible minorities feel further alienated by a curriculum that does not reflect the cultural diversity of Ontario and does not engage their interest.
- And finally, students feel culturally alienated when the school staff does not reflect the community; students and parents alike see them as outsiders who do not understand them.

An administrator at the Aboriginal high school in Thunder Bay told us: "We cannot afford to lose a student for even one day."

What was underlined for us was the result of suspending or expelling so many students from schools:

- Once expelled or suspended, students who are already struggling with their academic work fall further and further behind, until success becomes impossible.
- Youth in complex-needs neighbourhoods, if not in school, have limited options and are most likely to "hang out" with other youth with similar problems. We actually heard the original *Safe Schools Act* referred to as the "Gang Recruitment Act."
- Youth expelled from school are often banned from school property, so even if the school offers after-school or other social programs, these youth are unable to access them. This simply makes it all the more likely that they will drift towards the streets and become easy prey for gang recruiters.

Because of the timing of our community visits, many of the viewpoints we heard were based on experiences prior to the recent amendments to the *Education Act* that were designed to correct these problems. The need for formal reviews of every expulsion, the requirement for alternative programming for students suspended for more than five days and restrictions on the use of disciplinary transfers will, we hope, change the way schools deal with troubled youth. We believe there is more to be done, however. For example, students should not have to wait five days for alternative programming. As an administrator at the Aboriginal high school in Thunder Bay told us: "We cannot afford to lose a student for even one day."

The second problem with the education system is that, within the disadvantaged communities, staff and administrators usually do not reflect those communities. One participant at the Strategizing Minds forum that led to the *GYC Report* captured the sense of alienation this way:

> *"If you are disconnected from something how can you then be engaged in it, when you are learning about something that is other than you? . . . These students don't see themselves, but yet they know that they are there." (p. 119)*

The third systemic problem highlighted in our Neighbourhood Insight Sessions and the reports concerns the practice of "streaming" – directing students into particular courses based on something other than their abilities and interests. In Ottawa, one student participant referred to those who engage in this practice as "dream killers" because of the way they dealt with students from visible minorities. The *GYC Report* had this to say:

> *"Streaming has increasingly become an issue in limiting the opportunities for higher education among racialized and marginalized youth. [The For Youth Initiative's] report[4] cites a study released by the Coalition of Visible Minority Women, which reveals that "often times Black students and parents have found that teachers and guidance counsellors have expected less from Black students, and have encouraged them to take non-academic courses or focus on sports suggesting that 'the student did not have the ability to go very far.'" (p. 120)*

[4] This refers to a report published by FYI in 2003, entitled Exploring Empowering Education for Marginalized Youth in Toronto. To obtain a copy of the report, contact FYI at fyi@foryouth.ca

Economic Opportunity and Jobs

Living in poorly maintained social housing complexes on inadequate income, and with little or no hope of improving your condition, is in itself isolating. Your horizons shrink to the limits of the project. At one Neighbourhood Insight Session, a youth worker told us that some of the children he worked with weren't even aware that Toronto was located on a lake. More commonly, we heard that youth are afraid to leave their neighbourhoods. Both these speak to us of serious alienation from the larger community.

These neighbourhoods are often already isolated from the rest of the community because public transportation service is poor or expensive and many community features, such as convenience stores, banks and other gathering places, have left. One of the places we met in Toronto, for example, was a makeshift, storefront youth centre in an all-but-abandoned strip mall hidden behind a derelict gas station. In another neighbourhood, there were no shops, and the local pizza shop refused to deliver because the drivers feared being robbed.

The flight of businesses from areas not only deprives residents of goods and services that most of us take for granted, but also reduces employment opportunities. The lack of meaningful employment was one of the issues youth and their supporters raised most frequently during our Neighbourhood Insight Sessions, and the theme resonates in the *GYC Report*.

With fewer and fewer employment opportunities within their communities, youth are forced to look elsewhere for work. Here too they encounter barriers that are based not on their talents, but on their skin colour and addresses.

This is from the *Insight Final Report*:

> *"Youth want to help, but can't find work. Youth get angry when they want to help out their families but then have trouble getting a job. Youth have trouble finding employment because of the address on their resumés — 'Some jobs are hard to get if you're from the ghetto.'" (p. 80)*

A youth worker told us that some of the children he worked with weren't even aware that Toronto was located on a lake.

And this:

> *"Employers won't hire youth if they see a certain postal code or if they have been in trouble. For some youth, it is necessary to use a friend or relative's address when applying for a job because many employers won't hire youth from what they think are 'bad' neighbourhoods. For youth with a criminal record, even for minor offences, finding employment is even more difficult, as many employers just won't give them a chance." (p. 82)*

The youth voice we heard through the Grassroots Youth Collaborative report also speaks of the barriers to youth employment. A Somali youth at the GYC event described her experience looking for work. She and a friend, she said, with similar qualifications and looking for similar work, registered with the same agency. Her friend, who did not wear a hijab, received many calls about jobs, while she did not. Only after she called the agency and insisted did they tell her about a job opportunity.

According to recently released research, poorer areas of our cities are becoming grocery wastelands. Jason Gilliland, a geography professor at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ont., and his co-author, Kristian Larsen, compared the location of supermarkets in London in 1961 and 2005, then calculated ease of access to those locations. Their conclusion: as supermarkets have moved to the suburbs, residents of poorer neighbourhoods have lost easy access to fresh, affordable food and are forced to pay inflated convenience store prices or eat junk food. – *National Post, p. 2, April 18, 2008*

Chapter 3:

Your Priorities

"The creation of a caring and supportive community that provides support, positive expectations and models —if we don't, the dealers and the gangs are the community and the models.

—respondent to online survey

In the previous chapter, we looked at four roots that you told us could lead to hopelessness and alienation in youth. This chapter takes a similar approach and addresses issues that you have identified as important if we are to get at those roots. In other words, this chapter reflects what is important to you, and especially to the youth who participated in the neighbourhood consultations, the GYC youth-led forum and the urban Aboriginal meetings.

Here are your priorities, listed in no particular order:

- Access to space and programs
- The education system
- Jobs and investment
- Police-community relations
- Support for families
- Youth engagement

Access to Space and Programs

Space

In a province the size of Ontario, it seems strange to be talking about a lack of space, but that's exactly what you told us is needed — more space that is accessible to young people for youth programs, and in particular, more space for programs that are youth-led.

Here's some of what you told us, in the words of your reports.

From the *Insight Final Report*:

"Lack of youth space, and existing programs/centres that are not 'youth friendly.' Unoccupied space is not being utilized — this space should be supervised and operated by appropriate staff who can relate and identify with youth." (p. 86)

"Participants often talked specifically about the value of youth drop-in centres, as they provide a safe haven for kids to hang out with their peers, youth workers and positive role models after school." (p. 93)

From the GYC's *Rooted in Action*:

> *"To talk about space in relation to violence faced by youth is to acknowledge that young people need to be engaged in their day-to-day lives through social and recreational activities that are delivered by like-minded and culturally relevant organizations and people. It is to similarly acknowledge that there is no shortage of space in the absolute sense. Rather, there is an unwillingness to recognize that* all *youth, from* all *backgrounds and* all *walks of life are equal members of our society and thus deserve equal access to* all *the resources that are available." (p. 135)*

All youth, from *all* backgrounds and *all* walks of life are equal members of our society

Andrea Zammit, coordinator of GYC and a former program director at For Youth Initiative, said this at the Strategizing Minds forum, as reported to us in the report *Rooted in Action*:

> *"Having worked in many of Toronto's underserviced/low-income neighbourhoods for the past six years with young people, access to public space has been one of the biggest challenges. Many times young people live in small apartments sharing accommodations with a lot of family members. These young people need space to hang out with friends, quiet space to do their homework, a safe place that is free from police harassment/brutality, to express themselves in the arts, to access social-recreational programming. Community centres and programs run by mainstream social service providers that have facilities are not 'youth-friendly' or accessible to youth, particularly Black youth." (p. 137)*

One suggestion for providing additional space involves opening up schools to community use. Urged on by groups such as the SPACE[5] Coalition, the Ontario government has moved in this direction, most recently announcing that it will invest $33 million in the Community Use of Schools for 2008–09, with that amount to increase annually until it reaches $66 million in 2011–12. The funds are intended to make "…it more affordable for youth, seniors and adults to use local schools for their meetings, practices and other activities."[6]

There are some problems with using schools to expand available space, especially for youth-led activities. We were told some youth, expelled or suspended from school, would be unable to participate in such activities, and others are so turned off by school that they would not voluntarily go into the building, even for recreation. Another problem arises when established groups simply scoop up any additional space before new groups have a chance to apply for permits. And in rural areas, we were told, the lack of transportation makes it virtually impossible for many youth, tied to school bus schedules, to access such programs.

Nevertheless, the government's willingness to recognize the need for additional space and to provide funding to help make it available are welcome first steps.

[5] *"Saving Public Access to Community Space Everywhere" The Coalition's mission states: "We believe that community use of schools is a cornerstone to healthy communities and neighbourhoods. We want to ensure maximized community use of schools space across Ontario through affordable, equitable and consistent access."*

[6] *Ministry of Education news release, Feb. 5, 2008*

Programs

If space can be made available, in schools or elsewhere, the next question is, "What do we do with it?" We heard plenty of opinions on this subject as well.

One thing youth and front-line youth workers agreed on was that simply creating another basketball court is not the answer. Youth in particular told us there needs to be more variety in the programs offered — more arts, more recreation other than competitive sports, and more opportunities for learning and mentoring. Here's the short version of what we heard at our Neighbourhood Insight Sessions, from the *Insight Final Report*:

> ***"Nothing to do.*** *So youth end up on the street, getting in trouble. There is a lack of activities or services for youths in some neighbourhoods; communities that are isolated and stigmatized do not share in the benefits of programs offered to other communities."*
>
> ***"Something to do, but not relevant to youth.*** *''Nuff programs exist just for programming sake.' The programs that do exist are too mainstream and redundant and are not meeting educational, cultural, and life-skills needs of youth. They are not measurable and/or accountable to the community. Programs are outdated — they have been there for a while and are not updated or relevant to youth. Programming for older youth does not exist or is boring and unappealing. Recreation and youth centres need cool, hip programming, not your typical basketball, to engage them and get them off the streets. There is a lack of quality programs for 'at-risk' youth, a lack of effective programs and activities for youth to address violence, and a lack of prevention and early intervention."*
>
> ***"Something to do, but program staff are not trained to engage youth.*** *Too many agencies are staffed with unaccountable managers, culturally insensitive and uncaring staff, and they run time-limited/short duration programs. Managers and staff are not reflective of the community they serve, and untrained youth workers lack knowledge and skills for real youth engagement."*
>
> ***"Something to do, but no sustained funding. Programs and social services lack sustained funding from government to assist youth.*** *Sustained funding for youth programs is needed to keep people engaged; when we lose youth through lack of programming, we really lose them, and often to the criminal justice system. Programs that work to engage youth aren't funded to make sustainable impact, and sometimes it can take years to tell if something works." (p. 86)*

The same report summed up the advice you gave us this way:

> ***"Strengthen the programs communities have said they need.*** *Participants told us that their neighbourhoods need programs that are positive and relevant. These programs need to include recreation-based activities, but must also go beyond recreation to meet the educational, cultural, vocational and*

life-skills needs of neighbourhood youth. This means providing a continuum of services that offer programs to all individuals, at all ages and stages of development (including parents). That includes income-generating or experience-gaining programs — like apprenticeships and co-op employment.

"There also needs to be an emphasis on mentoring. Youth need that one person in their life that gives them attention, believes in them, supports them. It is important to connect youth with both peer mentors and one-on-one relationships with adult/older role models. This is especially important for youth that are hardest to reach. Gang exit programs are also needed, as are programs for youth who are newcomers to Canada and who need violence trauma counselling and supports.

"Participants often talked specifically about the value of youth drop-in centres, as they provide a safe haven for kids to hang out with their peers, youth workers and positive role models after school." (pp. 92–93)

GYC, in its report, listed three actions that would address the space issues: build and invest in community space, stop the privatization of social spaces such as the Yonge-Dundas Square in Toronto, and develop a plan to fund physical infrastructure for youth-led work. Details of these proposals are included in the *GYC Report*, reproduced in full in Section 3.

The Education System

There are three issues related to Ontario's education system that you told us must be addressed: the future of the *Safe Schools Act*, reforming the curriculum and creating an equitable learning environment.

From the *Insight Final Report*:

> ***"Zero-tolerance policies result in drop outs / 'push outs' from school.*** *When students get suspended or expelled, they're abandoned. Punishing youth by suspending them is not helping. Youth often use that time to find and hang out with others who aren't in school. Idleness causes more damage and possibly violent behaviour. The attitude of some youth is that a three-day suspension is like a vacation. They spend this time hanging out with older unemployed or out-of-school individuals, who may not be positive role models. It is also the time when most youth are recruited into gangs, prostitution or other illegal activity." (p. 88)*

The *GYC Report* sees the *Safe Schools Act* as discriminatory against racialized and marginalized youth and calls for its repeal. It supports the idea that reforming the education system is a requirement of dealing with the roots of violence involving youth:

> *"The idea that education is a path to empowerment is not a new one. Throughout history, around the globe, people have always demanded access to education as a means of asserting their civil rights. Denying such*

access has often been used as a tool of subjugation and oppression. Regardless of the initial purpose or scope, almost all of the previous studies by the various members and allies of GYC have identified some issues relating to education as a critical part of addressing some of the root causes of violence and oppression in our communities." (p. 117)

GYC's report also commends to our attention a study one of its member groups, the For Youth Initiative (FYI), conducted in 2003 with funding from the federal National Crime Prevention Strategy Program. (To obtain a full copy, contact fyi@foryouth.ca.)

"FYI's report is premised on two important assertions: 1) that inequalities are a reality in the existing education system, particularly for Black and indigenous youth, suggesting a need for more relevant and engaging forms of education; and 2) that alternative education has the potential to act as a liberating and positive force in the lives of marginalized young people. . . . Their findings relating to discrimination and racism within the education system were not particularly surprising, and the report itself states: 'Over and over again, students are saying that they feel discriminated against in schools, by teachers and other students. This study was no different, as almost all of the participants described experiences with and perceptions of racism in schools.'" (p. 118)

During our Neighbourhood Insight Sessions, you gave us many reasons for youth getting into trouble in school, but the one you mentioned most often was that racialized and marginalized youth simply find nothing to engage them. Their teachers are not from their neighbourhoods, the curriculum does not reflect their history or culture, and they are not encouraged to hope that doing well at the secondary level will lead to post-secondary opportunities.

The authors of the *Insight Final Report* put it this way:

"Schools don't reflect the youth they serve and don't give all youth the same opportunities. For many youth, what is taught in school is not culturally or socially relevant to them, and is not taught by people who look like them or who can relate to their everyday lives, leaving them feeling excluded from probably the most important institution present in their lives. Youth also described discrimination by teachers who do not respect visible minority or immigrant students, who assume they cannot do as well as white kids, and who subsequently stream them into less academic programming. This blow to self-esteem is tough to overcome and youth can lose interest, motivation and trust in their teachers." (p. 81)

Racialized and marginalized youth simply find nothing to engage them.

One of the facilitators at a northern Ontario consultation with urban Aboriginal youth summed up their discussion about education:

"The youth felt that alternative learning styles should be taken into consideration when approaching the issue of education. They felt that school work would be more interesting if it had more culturally relevant curriculum and practices."

And here is how one of the participants at GYC's Strategizing Minds forum explained it:

> *"The United Way report 'Poverty by Postal Code' named 13 neighbourhoods in Toronto as priorities of special focus — when we look at the areas named — when we step into these geographical spaces — we realize that poverty can be tracked not only by postal code but also by a particular racial constituency. So alienation coupled with financial inaccessibility make universities a distant possibility for many. There is little belief that university is a space they are entitled to, a space where they belong — why should they? Why should we? Rising costs — the message is clear; this place is not for us. Colonial education from kindergarten to grade 12 — the message is clear; this place is not for us." (p. 118)*

The reports from both the Neighbourhood Insight Sessions and GYC forum offer suggestions that we have carefully considered in framing our recommendations to the Premier. We support the idea of schools becoming community hubs; we believe the continuing impact of the *Safe Schools Act* must be studied, and that study will require the collection of race-based statistics; we encourage the education system to consider reforming both its hiring practices and its curriculum; and we urge teachers to consider and nurture the potential of every young person, regardless of his or her race, culture or home address.

Jobs and Investment

> *"Provide meaningful employment."*
>
> ***– respondent to online survey***

While no one solution will cover all of the problems found in complex-needs communities, you made it clear to us that the communities would see creating economic opportunities as a major step forward. Meaningful employment addresses poverty, provides some degree of dignity and self-worth and helps to eliminate the hopelessness that characterizes our most disadvantaged youth.

The irony is that there is a multitude of employment programs, many directed at youth, and many seem to be highly successful. Individuals working in these programs recognize that complex-needs youth require more than just the telephone number or address of a potential employer. Often, they require pre-employment counselling to overcome a variety of barriers, ranging from issues as complex as mental health to as seemingly simple as directions for public transit.

In what is at least a move in the right direction, the government has provided funding directed at providing summer jobs for youth in disadvantaged neighbourhoods under the Summer Jobs for Youth program. The Ministry of Children and Youth Services website describes the program this way:

> *"Summer Jobs for Youth is designed to help young people aged 15 to 18 who live in high-needs neighbourhoods gain*

workplace skills through summer employment. You will receive job training, paid employment placements from July to August, and support after your job finishes. You will get $8.75 per hour and are paid for a 35-hour work week while getting training and experience in a job.

"This will not only look good on your resumé and put some extra cash in your pocket, but also may help you figure out what you want to study at college or university and/or what you want your future career to be."

We heard from many organizations that are seeking to help such youth. Among those attempting to establish "best practices" is the University of Toronto's Boreal Institute, working with the YMCA of Greater Toronto. The project started with focus groups in two of Toronto's high-needs neighbourhoods, during which youth put violence high on their list of concerns. The lack of employment opportunities, the youth said, led to despair and a sense that their neighbourhoods were "just like prisons."

Boreal and the Y set out to provide a program that wasn't designed just to create a short-term job, but rather to help the individual build a career. So far, the lessons learned have included the value of working in small groups, the importance of creating a partnership between the job seeker and his or her counsellor, and the benefit of taking a holistic approach to each youth's needs.

For more information, visit www.utoronto.ca/mcis/boreal/about_us.html

In the previous chapter, under "Economic Opportunity and Jobs," we provided a passage from the *Insight Final Report* that offered a youth perspective on barriers to employment. To overcome these barriers, participants in those sessions suggested that government needs to increase the minimum wage and apprenticeship and/or co-op employment opportunities.

GYC's report was equally direct and calls for an increase in the minimum wage to $15 per hour plus an annual cost of living adjustment, a 40-per-cent increase in provincial social assistance and the Ontario Disability Support Program, and renewed investment in social housing.

Its cornerstone recommendation for youth employment is the creation of a youth self-employment fund. The report says:

"Self-employment is often a means for youth in our communities to extricate themselves from dead-end McJobs in the service industry. However, Ontario's current programs to support youth self-employment are often difficult to access, complicated to navigate and don't always provide youth with the skills/training necessary to ensure that their small business/community enterprise can thrive under the predatory pricing practices of and intense competition from large corporations that receive significant tax breaks and subsidies (corporate welfare) from governments.

"We demand the creation of an open and accessible social enterprise fund that is highly funded (not just another $15 million, three-year investment), staffed by employees knowledgeable and experienced in working with youth entrepreneurial initiatives, open and creative, and helps to build skills. We also demand that the government not tie these types of programs to corporate/bank loans in some sort of private/public partnership that ends up putting youth social entrepreneurs in debt, to the profit of the big banks!" (p. 146)

It's time the private sector and labour organizations take a hard look at their responsibilities and become actively involved in providing jobs and training opportunities in these communities.

This suggestion of a special fund for employment in disadvantaged communities is similar to one we received from the Coalition of African Canadian Organizations. As part of a comprehensive action plan, the CACO calls for "Establishment, by statute, of an African Canadian Social and Economic Development Agency to facilitate government support of community social and economic programs."

Both these recommendations address the need to pump more investment into disadvantaged neighbourhoods and reverse the trend that has seen business investment flee such areas, as illustrated by the study of grocery stores referred to in the previous chapter. We also believe it's time the private sector and labour organizations take a hard look at their responsibilities and become actively involved in providing jobs and training opportunities in these communities.

Police-Community Relations

Racism tinges each of the issues we've already discussed in this chapter, and we believe the government needs new policies and structures to address its influence on poverty, housing, education and employment. We must also confront it as an issue in police-community relations. Building better relations between police and youth in disadvantaged communities would pay huge dividends in reducing violence and the resulting fear that grips neighbourhoods. But it won't be easy.

Ontario Police College representatives told us that there is only so much that can be accomplished by more training, because the attitudes of new recruits are shaped (or reshaped) by the culture they encounter "on the job." The college representatives believe that, to change attitudes, it is necessary to change, among other things, the measures that are used to evaluate a police officer's, or a police service's, performance.

In our community meetings, however, you told us that better training in matters relating to race and the hiring of more officers from visible minority communities, would be a start. The *Insight Final Report* outlined six possible actions:

"There needs to be improved skills training for front-line officers, including diversity training, cultural sensitivity training, anti-discrimination training and customer service skills training. More minority police officers need to be hired so that police reflect the people in the community. It's also

important to fund more community police officers whose job it is to go into schools and develop relationships with youth, and there needs to be some consistency in the police officers working in specific neighbourhoods so that relationships can be built. Quicker responses are required to youth calls, and there's also an opportunity to better educate youth about what 222-TIPS (Crimestoppers) is really about (there are a lot of misconceptions about what the program is about and youth think police come over to their home and hand over a cheque in front of the whole neighbourhood)." (p. 95)

The *Insight Final Report* also offered us advice concerning the youth criminal justice system beyond the police:

"The justice system needs to focus more on prevention than on punishment. Investments in alternatives to incarceration need to be made; as one neighbourhood specifically put it, 'Building a youth super jail is not the answer.' More diversion and restorative justice programs are needed, and every attempt should be made to keep youth out of the courts and placed into restorative justice programs instead. There needs to be more counselling for victims and offenders, and supports for youth when they get out of jail." (p. 95)

The *GYC Report* also deals with police-community relations and other aspects of the youth criminal justice system. Its demands include repealing the *Safe Streets Act*; converting the Roy McMurtry Youth Centre into a community centre for youth from Brampton and the northern part of Toronto[7]; establishing independent, community-based panels to review allegations of police misconduct; and ensuring that residents without full immigration status can access provincial services without fear of arrest.

[7] *While we support the GYC's right to express its opinion on this matter, we believe the call to close the Roy McMurtry Youth Centre is misguided. While we believe the criminal justice system has only a marginal general deterrent effect on the commission of crime in society, and that prevention and social programs are much more important, we accept the reality that for some youth, as for some adults, incarceration is necessary. Furthermore, many of the GYC's objections to the facility are based on misconceptions. The Brampton youth centre, with living units in small pods, a less formal setting, appropriately trained staff and a wide range of programs, will offer youth a much better opportunity for rehabilitation than other youth correctional facilities, and families of youth housed there will be provided with transportation to and from the facility. We conveyed our views to the GYC in a letter dated April 3, 2008.*

Support for Families

Anyone who has been a parent knows how difficult this role can be under the best of circumstances, and life in Ontario's disadvantaged communities is not the best of circumstances. Through the Neighbourhood Insight Sessions, as reflected in the *Insight Final Report*, you told us something about what parents in these areas face:

> ***"Parent(s) are working two or three jobs to make ends meet.*** *Many people talked about the challenges parents face in making enough money to meet their families' basic needs, and the tough choices they face. Some parents are unemployed, and others end up working multiple jobs to survive. Even when they are working at many jobs, they have trouble paying rent, paying for food, paying for bus tickets, and paying for the clothes and other things that youth need."*
>
> ***"There are not enough supports for parents.*** *Parents lack financial supports, as well as other important supports ([English as a Second Language] classes, parenting skills training, educational/skills development classes at community centres, etc.)."*
>
> ***"Parents aren't around.*** *Youth raised the issue of lack of parental supervision as one of the contributors to violence involving youth. Many youth don't get to spend much time with their parent(s) because the parent is always working. Kids as young seven have no adult supervision — there is no one at home when they get home from school or when they need to talk to someone about what's going on in their lives. When parents don't give youth attention, they look for it somewhere else." (Insight Final Report, pp. 79–80)*

The lack of parental supervision has two sides, you told us. One, reflected above, is caused by parents working too many hours to be available to their children. The other, however, has more to do with the lack of parenting skills.

> ***"'There are too many kids having kids.'*** *Many young people who find themselves responsible for raising kids are too young or too inexperienced to know how to parent effectively. They need training and supports to help them, but there really isn't much available to them. There is also an increasing number of single-parent teen mothers, who also lack financial and other supports. On top of the challenges faced by single mothers, there is also a noted lack of positive male role models/mentors in many communities."*
>
> ***"Many people have trouble dealing with their own problems.*** *For many parents, their own challenges related to poverty, lack of education, relationships, substance abuse and other issues are not being adequately addressed, and so they have no capacity to address the needs of their kids. For newcomers, language and cultural issues and post-traumatic stress disorder can also be challenges that must be dealt with first before they can help young people."*
>
> ***"Violence at home sets the standard of behaviour for youth.*** *If youth are seeing domestic violence or other violent behaviours in the home, and parents are the only mentor/role models they have, they will learn that violence is acceptable, a way of life, a way to resolve conflict, and they will use violence to solve their conflicts outside the home, too."(Insight Final Report, pp. 83–84)*

Many of the experts we met with spoke of the need for more support for families and, in particular, single mothers. Early intervention with a comprehensive range of programs designed specifically for each family's needs, as advocated by Dr. Gina Browne of McMaster University and as demonstrated by an ongoing project in Peel Region, seems to be successful at moving people off social assistance and diverting youth from trouble.

The other option many recommended was finding other ways of providing stable adult relationships. Dr. Debra Pepler of York University and Dr. Wendy Craig of Queen's University say this is one important component in reducing bullying behaviours, which their research shows almost always leads to more serious forms of violence.

The *Insight Final Report* said:

> *"There also needs to be an emphasis on mentoring. Youth need that one person in their life that gives them attention, believes in them, supports them. It is important to connect youth with both peer mentors and one-on-one relationships with adult/older role models. This is especially important for youth that are hardest to reach. Gang exit programs are also needed, as are programs for youth who are newcomers to Canada and who need violence trauma counselling and supports." (p. 93)*

In short, both the experts and the community agree that more needs to be done to support families and provide youth with stable adult relationships that provide good role models.

Youth Engagement

As important to you as what needs to be done is how it is accomplished. It is clear from what you told us that youth are tired of having decisions about their futures made without involving them in any meaningful way.

Many organizations across the province are already experimenting with ways of engaging youth. The Youth Challenge Fund, established by the province and administered by United Way Toronto, places an emphasis on youth-led projects, and the City of Toronto has established a Youth Cabinet that has been consulted on major policy issues. Youth-led organizations themselves, such as the members of the GYC, also demonstrate the ability of youth to engage in issues and projects that matter to them, and to do so in an effective way.

The *Insight Final Report* said:

> *"Participants … often focused on the importance of involving youth locally, and involving both youth and communities in provincial policy. Ways to do this could include establishing a Youth Secretariat or Youth Cabinet within the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, with a strong focus on providing planning and evaluation models/tools and methodologies to communities; supporting youth-organized, youth-led forums to engage youth from various neighbourhoods in focused, problem-solving and action-oriented sessions; and encouraging youth input into their own programming." (p. 92)*

Chapter 4:

Community Stories

"Young people need to be supported by healthy communities, where there are chances for intergenerational dialogue, where neighbours know each other and where they feel people care about what they do."

— respondent to online survey

As we travelled around Ontario, we met many individuals who were working hard to make a difference in their communities — far too many to include all their stories in this report. The following five stories, however, are presented as representative of the work going on at the grassroots level. We are not saying these are the best solutions, but we are hoping that they may start you thinking about things you could do in your community. If nothing else, they will let you know that you're not alone as you grapple with trying to find solutions that will meet your communities' special needs.

Thunder Bay: A Youth-to-Youth Approach

The Regional Multicultural Youth Council has provided a voice for youth in Thunder Bay and small isolated communities across northwestern Ontario for more than 20 years.

The council was formed by a group of young people who participated in activities organized by the Multicultural Association of Northwestern Ontario to celebrate the international year of youth in 1985. The council, led by founding president Melanie Goodchild, an Aboriginal high school student from the Pic River Ojibway First Nation, adopted a vision of youth from all backgrounds working together for a common future.

Ever since, the council has maintained its commitment to a "youth-to-youth" approach to enhancing the well-being of children and youth and improving social conditions in the communities where they live.

The youth executive runs the council and speaks for the group on public platforms. The youth leaders represent children and youth on civic committees and organize forums for youth voices to be heard on issues of interest

or concern. They plan activities and involve their peers in organizing events in the schools and in the community. The council liaises with professionals for advice and collaborates with various groups and agencies.

"In this organization, young people are always standing in front," says Moffat Makuto, executive director of the Regional Multicultural Association, the parent organization of the youth council. "The youth have talents and potential to be caring, resourceful and responsible. They need our support to become knowledgeable and capable leaders."

The youth have talents and potential to be caring, resourceful and responsible.

The council engages young people and challenges them to be part of the solution to problems affecting them. It has hosted youth conferences, organized focus groups, promoted peer mediation to resolve conflict, and conducted surveys and interviews on creating safer communities. It has compiled information and produced resource materials to improve police-youth relations, make schools safer, improve safety in local neighbourhoods and increase security at bus terminals. In 1998, it began a "girl power" initiative that has expanded across the region, to address gender issues and encourage young women to realize their dreams.

The council does its homework and comes up with recommendations. For example, it has urged governments at all levels to address poverty, put in place addiction prevention programs, provide funding for after-school activities, support life skills training and job experience programs for youth, and fund drop-in centres as safe places for young people to hang out and grow together.

The Multicultural Youth Centre, which has operated in Thunder Bay since 1992, is the headquarters for the council and a youth drop-in. It provides a welcoming place for young people to be involved in positive activities, get help with homework, meet good role models, learn about resources for youth in the community, and get information to make wise choices and informed decisions. The centre coordinates youth leadership sessions, runs stay-in-school activities, and hosts many social and recreational functions and youth entrepreneurship training.

There are more than 100 young people actively involved in the council's peer leadership initiatives. Their work in schools and communities touches thousands of others.

Many of the council's activities are related to promoting understanding across cultures and races, such as youth-led presentations to promote anti-racism, participation in events recognizing the contributions and struggles of Aboriginal peoples, and information and resources to celebrate African/Black history month. Several of its young leaders have been recognized for this work.

The need to fundraise takes a constant toll. The council itself uses bingos, car washes, dances, craft and food sales, and donations to cover operating costs, but these distract from its program objectives. "I feel that my talents and positive influence would be better used helping my peers, rather than selling candy bars to raise rent money," says Martin Zhang, high school student and current council president.

Meanwhile, the multicultural association tries to cobble together project funding from a variety of sources. But one-time grants do not provide sustained support for programs, and so the association turned to a less orthodox method. It opened a restaurant adjacent to the youth centre to help raise funds to pay for staff and keep the lights on at the drop-in.

The association also receives some funding from fees paid by First Nations for orientation, tutoring, recreation and other services for students who come to Thunder Bay to continue their schooling. But that revenue covers only those individual students.

"We must invest in the next generation," says Makuto. "We need to support all children, reach out to youth who are vulnerable and at risk, and help those whose families, neighbourhoods and communities are marginalized. If we don't provide positive alternatives, the gangs are waiting for them out on the streets with their own welcome wagon."

Hamilton: A Good Place to Be

Getting an education is one of the keys to health and well-being for children and youth. Being successful in school opens doors to the future.

A partnership between the YMCA of Hamilton-Burlington, its donors and schools serving low-income or inner-city neighbourhoods is helping children develop skills, build confidence and engage in learning through an after-school program called the "Virtual YMCA."

The schools provide the space, and the YMCA delivers the program. The program provides academic support, including homework help and literacy skills, recreational activities and development of social skills for children in grades 1-5.

The first Virtual YMCA opened in a north Hamilton school in 2001. In the 2007-08 school year, there were six public and separate schools with programs in the City of Hamilton, and another program is opening in 2008-09 in Burlington.

The YMCA has run after-school programs in Hamilton for almost 25 years. This program is different not only because of its location in the school, but also because of its close links with the school community. In each school, the principal and teachers recommend children for the program. There are about 40 participants in each school who attend the program three days a week.

The impetus for the program in Hamilton was a school principal who approached the YMCA, looking for ways to support students who were struggling. After researching different models of support, the YMCA decided to adapt the Virtual Y program that was operating in New York City.

The program aims to build children's physical, social and intellectual well-being. The academic tutoring helps children go over what they have learned during the day and complete their homework. Some children from recent immigrant families need help understanding a new language. The social skills development provided by the program involves promoting the core values of caring, honesty, respect and responsibility.

The program aims to build children's physical, social and intellectual well-being

"We want the children to have fun, too," says Christina Martin, general manager of outreach for the Hamilton-Burlington YMCA, adding that the children make new friends, participate in drama, arts and crafts, sports and games, and get some healthy exercise. And there is always a nutritious snack.

The program makes a point of involving parents. "If you have a child who is struggling with school work or with behaviour issues, coming to the school tends to take on a negative aspect," says Martin. "We try to build in positive engagement with parents — they come to see their child in a play or watch a chef prepare a special snack. We build positive connections between home and school."

Locating the program in the school that the children attend every day helps them to feel that school is "a good place to be." She says that staff members notice the difference in children's attitudes over the course of a school year. "The children are more engaged. They want to be there."

Dr. Christopher Spence, director of education, Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, says: "Schools cannot and should not be left alone to develop the whole child. We have to continually reach out to our community and demonstrate our commitment to the African proverb that it takes a whole village to raise a child. The Virtual Y is a great example of the kind of collaboration we need."

Kitchener-Waterloo: Walking Alongside Homeless Youth

There has got to be something special about a place where homeless youth who are members of rival gangs sit down and talk with one another. They take off their gang colours and leave anything that could be used as a weapon at the door. The rules are clear: you will be treated with respect, but you must show respect in return.

"They may complain about the rules, like any youth would, but they keep coming back," says Sandy Bell, Executive Director of ROOF (Reaching Our Outdoor Friends), which provides for the safety, support and overall well-being of homeless and at-risk youth, aged 12-25, in Waterloo Region.

What do young gang members see when they look at one another, up close and personal, in the safe environment provided by ROOF? "They realize that everyone's needs are the same. They can see the others as fellow human beings," says Bell.

What began in 1989 with one caring individual providing lunch for some hungry youth has blossomed into a multi-service community organization that works to enable youth to get off the streets, to prevent others from becoming homeless and to educate the public. ROOF serves more than 2,000 youth a year. Its home base is in downtown Kitchener.

Almost everything ROOF does has an impact on the causes of violence involving youth. Youth who are homeless, cold and hungry may fight somebody for a coat or steal for something to eat. Without a high school education and few opportunities to gain job skills, they often feel hopeless about the future.

"First you have to provide for their basic needs: food, hygiene, clothing, health care. Once you've satisfied those basic needs, then you can help the youth envision a different life and be motivated to take on things that will help them to break the cycle of homelessness — like life skills or job skills development," says Bell. ROOF provides hot meals, shower and laundry facilities, storage lockers, clothing and nursing care, along with counselling, housing support, referrals and advocacy, all in the context of what Bell calls "positive regard."

> They need to take some ownership for their lives, and we need to walk alongside them to help – not drag them or push them, but walk with them.

The reasons for homelessness are as diverse as the young people themselves. Some are fleeing violence or neglect at home, some have substance abuse or mental health issues, some have left their homes because their parents had issues they were unable to cope with.

"We meet the youth where they are at and we don't judge them," she says. "They come with various degrees of hurt and anger. They need to take some ownership for their lives, and we need to walk alongside them to help — not drag them or push them, but walk with them. We see their potential, not their past, and we help them to see it too. Many of these young people have lost the ability to dream dreams and set goals.

In their eyes, adults have repeatedly let them down. We work diligently at ROOF to reach out to these youth and let them see that there are adults who will stand by them and support them

"When they trust us, there is a chance to talk about better ways to solve problems other than resorting to violence, and build understanding of accountability and consequences. But you need to build a rapport. In their eyes, adults have repeatedly let them down. We work diligently at ROOF to reach out to these youth and let them see that there are adults who will stand by them and support them."

ROOF is getting into some "social enterprise" programs, which it hopes will help some youth get a foothold in the employment market. In collaboration with various community partners, and with both private and public sector funding, youth are learning about the food industry and getting certified in food handling. The ROOF Lunchbox program prepares and delivers lunches to downtown businesses and homes. ROOF is also developing a second social enterprise to harness the artistic talents of some of the youth.

These kinds of programs help to teach responsibility as well as skills to youth participants, because they have to show up on time and do their jobs to get paid. ROOF is also hoping to get its skills programs recognized as co-op placements for high school credit.

ROOF provides street outreach, meeting the needs of youth who may not be ready to approach formal agencies in the community, and offers drop-in programs seven days a week in the daytime and evenings. ROOF was homeless itself for two years after its building was destroyed in a fire in December 2005 and maintained services in various temporary quarters. Now, in its new building, the organization is looking to address service gaps and find new ways to help youth build on their strengths.

Ottawa: A Place of Second Chances

The young people call it "a place of second chances." The place is the Britannia Woods Community House in west-end Ottawa, which serves an economically disadvantaged, diverse neighbourhood of families. Nearly two-thirds of the 800-plus residents are under the age of 20.

The community house may look like an ordinary townhouse, but it's not. It is a valued community resource and gathering place and a symbol of a neighbourhood wanting and willing to help itself.

Britannia Woods is one of 15 community houses provided rent-free by the Ottawa Community Housing Corporation, which also pays for utilities and building maintenance. The community houses were created in response to tenants who recognized that their low-income neighbourhoods were socially and physically isolated from the larger community. They asked for space to provide programs that would be closer to home.

Residents govern the community houses through a board or association on which they have the majority of members. Community members also set the direction for programming. At Britannia Woods, the major focus of programming is on the community's children and youth because that's what the residents want. Every two years, tenants are surveyed door-to-door on how their community house is meeting community needs.

"The leadership for the community house is coming from the community, and the approach is holistic. It's not a single program, it's an overall approach to creating solutions and building social cohesion," says Britannia Woods Executive Director Beth Gibeault. "We feel the lived reality of the community and that helps to build connections and trust."

Being here in the community gives us the opportunity to provide guidance in a positive and supportive way

In collaboration with the nearby school, for example, the community house is able to access gym space five hours a week. On the way to school, 90 children, on average, pick up a nutritious bag lunch three mornings a week. There is a wide range of after-school programming to support families, including homework support and recreation. There is a small early learning program for preschoolers. A part-time child and youth worker provides a range of supports, including helping youth with employment opportunities and mediating disputes among youth in the community.

"Sometimes, when a young person gets in trouble, they feel they can't talk to their parents, they can't talk to the school, and their friends might not give them the right guidance. Being here in the community gives us the opportunity to provide guidance in a positive and supportive way," says Gibeault.

Violence and criminal activity are a concern in the community. "The last thing I want to see, the last thing the community wants to see, is our youth going to jail. We try to talk to them, talk to their parents, have them evaluate their choices and create goals," says Gibeault. "We also work with the police, and they want diversion (from courts and detention) to work. They know if there's no support for the youth, it's not going to work."

What does a second chance look like? One incident involved a break-in at the community house. A group of younger teens ate some food and made a mess. Gibeault found out who the instigator was and went to his home and sat down with him and his father. She said charges would not be laid, but she wanted to know that he took responsibility. He avoided her for a few months, but eventually he apologized. He became a fixture around the community house, helping out wherever he could. "He is really turning his life around," she adds.

The community house gives part-time work to three youth from the community who act as positive role models as they help with recreation and other programs. "Ordinarily, you never see the good role models. They are at school or at work. All you see are the bad role models hanging around. We try to change that," says Gibeault.

Community houses have been working in and with their communities in Ottawa for a long time. The first one was created in 1968. Britannia Woods opened in 1978. Since 1997, the City of Ottawa has provided annual funding to provide coordination of community houses. In 2004, the city increased its investment in coordination and youth outreach. The community houses partner with other agencies to bring in needed services and apply for funding from other sources, like the United Way, for additional programs.

In 2006, Britannia Wood used one small pot of money to deliver African drumming lessons. Lots of children participated, but a few had real talent and stuck with it. The Royal Ritchie Drummers (named after a street in the community) now give concerts around Ottawa. The youngest drummer is nine and the oldest is 14. One of their biggest supporters is the Ottawa police service.

Toronto: Engaging Youth Through the Arts

"It is such a good engagement tool."

"It" is the arts, particularly music that speaks to the issues of disaffected or marginalized youth, their frustrations and anger, but also their aspirations for a better life and a fairer world. Robert Wraith, youth programs coordinator for the San Romanoway Revitalization Association, says music helps to open doors. It attracts young people to a place where they can be mentored and supported because it's cool to be at "the studio."

The three apartment towers of San Romanoway, which have about 4,500 registered residents, are located in the Jane-Finch area of Toronto. Once known only for its violence and poverty, Jane-Finch is building a new identity as a community that is determined to tackle the socio-economic problems that underlie its troubles, particularly among its youth. The revitalization of San Romanoway is one example of that spirit.

The Youth in Charge project at San Romanoway has space in one of the buildings where it has a recording studio, an area with computers for Internet access, a kitchen, and an area where young people can just hang out together.

In a community where the refrigerator may often be empty and where home may be a place of conflict, having a meal regularly with friends in a safe and relaxing atmosphere can make a difference in a young person's life.

Two youth from San Romanoway work as staff on the Youth in Charge project. Wraith says these young people show others that you can make a positive difference in your community. Wraith, who studied accounting and finance, volunteered for three years in the area before joining the staff of the association.

We learn what's going on in their lives, and then we try to figure out how to help

Not everyone is going to be a recording star, but many youth enjoy using the studio at the youth centre to express themselves. The microphone can draw out someone who doesn't say much in conversation. If a young person is focused on a career in the business, the project will connect him or her with an urban arts program like the Remix Project.

Connecting youth to services and opportunities is an important part of what the Youth in Charge project does. "We act as a catalyst," says Wraith. "We can connect them to services that are available for job training, skills training or high school equivalency. We can help with resumé writing. We have a display of current job opportunities and community events. We get to know them and build relationships. We learn what's going on in their lives, and then we try to figure out how to help."

There are about 20 young people at the centre every day. "That is close to our limit. With 25, we are too packed," says Wraith. "This is a safe, friendly place where nobody says 'Why are you here?' We could have six other youth centres in this neighbourhood and they'd all be full."

Youth programming has had its ups and downs at San Romanoway, but they just keep trying. "The needs are huge and there's only so much you can do with a program like this," says Wraith. "But one of the lessons we've learned in this city is you must take action. You can figure out what works best as you go along."

The youth program at San Romanoway depends on grants from a number of sources. The San Romanoway Revitalization Association also runs a children's breakfast program, an after-school club for 6–12 year olds, summer camp, sports activities, and programs for seniors and parents. All this began back in 1999 through collaboration between the private owners of the complex (who provide space for programming), residents, the police, community organizations and local businesses. They came together to form the association and make San Romanoway a model for creating safer neighbourhoods.

Another program that builds on the arts is Beatz to da Streetz, started in 2005 at the Touchstone Youth Centre, which serves homeless and at-risk youth in Toronto's east end. This youth-led arts program leverages the connection between young people and music to promote creative expression and self-discovery. It links youth to mentors who are professionals in the music business, builds life skills and helps youth work towards educational and employment goals. Beatz to da Streetz works with partners, such as Centennial College and the Scarborough Arts Council.

Chapter 5:

Our Recommendations

In this chapter, we outline how we addressed your priorities in our report to the Premier. We have not reproduced the recommendations, which you may find in the report, but instead have summarized how they relate to what you told us about Ontario's communities.

There are three broad categories of recommendations: structural changes, advice for action on specific issues and some general advice that does not fit elsewhere.

Structural Changes

The recommendations to create additional government structures may seem to have little to do with communities, but we believe they are key to starting and continuing the changes you told us are necessary.

The goal of the structural changes we recommend is to enable the government, funders, service providers and communities to focus their efforts on agreed outcomes. For years, millions of dollars have been spent on programs that may have been effective on their own, but there has been little or no coordination of their efforts. We believe this must change.

At the provincial level, the way to ensure it does change is to create a responsible body, a Cabinet committee or equivalent, to coordinate the government's efforts. We also recommend that this committee be supported by an administrative, policy and planning unit in Cabinet office[8], and that it make use of experts from outside government as it goes about its work.

[8] *The Cabinet Office is the Premier's ministry. It provides administrative support to the Office of the Premier and provides the Premier and his Cabinet with advice and analysis to help the government achieve its priorities.*

Another important recommendation concerns the need to develop a comprehensive youth strategy. This recommendation is designed to focus the attention of the several ministries with responsibilities for youth, along with other levels of government and agencies, on common outcomes. We believe it is crucial that the government consult with communities, services providers and especially youth while developing this strategy. And once the strategy is in place, it's equally important that ministries develop new ways of working together to get maximum results from their efforts.

Organizing the government to do its work more effectively is only half the solution. Communities must be able to participate, and so we recommend more support at the community level, including Neighbourhood Strategic Partnerships (NSPs) that would bring together the community, service and program providers, and the three levels of government; support for creating networks of residents that can participate in community development and work through the NSPs; and local coordinating bodies to manage and improve coordination among neighbourhood service providers.

We also recommend that the government adopt a "place-based" approach to addressing the roots of violence involving youth. Using a place-based approach means concentrating your resources where they are most needed, not spreading always-scarce resources thinly across the entire province. To determine those "places," we think the government should use a formula developed by York University's Prof. Desmond Ellis. The formula results in an Index of Relative Disadvantage and will allow the province, working with the municipalities, to determine which communities or neighbourhoods most need additional services and supports.

We should emphasize that this is not just about spending more money on these problems. It's about taking an approach that prepares communities to play a greater role in their future, puts the right resources in the right places and leads to meaningful changes that address the roots of violence involving youth.

When adopted, these structural changes will provide a much-needed focus to youth-related programs and services and ensure that those programs and services are delivered more effectively. Taken together, they address the confusing, disjointed and often counterproductive service and program delivery model that so many of you told us about.

Advice on Specific Issues

We have also provided the government with a broad range of recommendations, including those that respond to your specific priorities as described in Chapter 3. These were:

- Access to space and programs
- The education system
- Jobs and investment
- Police-community relations
- Support for families
- Youth engagement

Here's how we propose the government should address each of these:

Access to Space and Programs

Our key recommendation about providing space calls for the creation of hubs for community activities, including meetings, recreation and the arts, and for local service providers. Wherever possible, these hubs should be in or near schools.

We also recommend the Province do much more to provide full access to schools for community activities by having facilities managers lease and operate school properties during non-school hours. The manager would work with the community to identify priorities for the use of the space.

Because we are advocating a place-based approach, we believe community hubs should be established first in those communities that top the Index of Multiple Disadvantage and do not have such facilities and other key services. And although it will take several months to develop the index fully, we believe most municipalities will already have a good sense of their most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, and some, like Toronto, may have formally identified them. Therefore, as a priority for this fall, we recommend the Province start planning to establish community hubs in those neighbourhoods and, at the same time, lease space in those neighbourhoods for youth activities. To quote from our report to the Premier: "Another winter and spring should not go by in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods with there being no safe place for youth to gather and play."

Our report to the Premier makes it clear that we value youth-led activities, and that the space in community hubs and elsewhere must include provision for such activities. We also believe that a wide variety of programs must be offered if we are to allow all youth to develop their interests and potential. The importance of this is clearly reflected in the reports from our Neighbourhood Insight Sessions and the Grassroots Youth Collaborative consultation report.

To further emphasize this, we recommend that the government recognize the value of sports and arts in supporting the learning, development and creativity of youth. Indeed, fully accessible sports and arts programs should become standard features in the priority neighbourhoods. We suggest that the Province work with municipalities, school boards and community agencies to remove roadblocks, including income levels, transportation and, of course, the lack of usable space. The willingness of the education system to open its facilities to broader community use is an important contribution to the success of this strategy.

The Education System

There is no doubt in our minds that Ontario's education system must play a central role in addressing the immediate risk factors of violence involving youth.

We noted in Chapter 3 that recent amendments to the *Education Act* have tried to address some of the more damaging results of the safe schools and zero-tolerance eras. While we do not feel these reforms have gone far enough, we recognize that they are a start. We also note in our report to the Premier that the Ministry of Education is working to implement anti-bullying and diversity programs.

Nevertheless, we feel it is important to recommend that the Province act to remove barriers and disincentives to education that exist for many children and youth. As one of its anti-racism initiatives, we suggest the Province take the necessary steps to ensure that teachers and school administrators better reflect the neighbourhoods they serve. It should also develop and provide a curriculum that is racially and culturally inclusive, better connects schools to families and communities, and find ways to encourage students to stay in school, engage in learning and seek further education. While these are worthy objectives across the education system, we feel they are especially important in the priority neighbourhoods.

It is important to know if our schools are making progress towards these objectives, but at present there is no adequate way of measuring that progress. In our report to the Premier, we call for much more attention to be paid to high-quality evaluation of programs based on their outcomes, not their activities. That is, rather than measuring how many students are served by a particular program, we want to measure what difference it makes in their lives. This will mean a change in the way we collect information both for longer-term evaluations and for ongoing policy adjustments.

We therefore recommend that the Province begin to develop ways of collecting race-based information in key areas, including education. This should be done at the school and neighbourhood level, so that individual problems are not hidden in high-level reports and averages. For somewhat the same reason, we also recommend measuring results against minimum standards rather than averages. For example, if one measure is graduation rates from secondary education, an improving average may mean simply that the good schools are getting better, while schools performing poorly are unchanged or worse. Instead, every school should have a minimum objective below which it must not fall. These are sometimes known as "floor targets."

Jobs and Investment

As we reported in Chapter 3, you made clear to us that you would see creating more economic opportunities as a major step forward. Meaningful employment, you told us, addresses poverty, provides some degree of dignity and self-worth, and helps to eliminate the hopelessness that characterizes our most disadvantaged youth.

In our recommendations, we are calling for a two-pronged approach. The first prong would see the Province adopt a broad strategy to prepare youth for work and help youth from disadvantaged communities get and keep jobs. The second prong calls on the private sector to look at the barriers preventing youth from gaining meaningful employment, then working with the Province to overcome those barriers.

We have not made specific recommendations to the government as to how these goals can be accomplished, but we suggest that regulatory, tax or other incentives could be offered to businesses that create jobs in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, or that provide lasting jobs with opportunities to get ahead for youth from these neighbourhoods.

Police-Community Relations

We view improving relations between Ontario's police services and disadvantaged communities, especially the youth of those communities, as absolutely critical to addressing the roots of violence involving youth. And while your focus is very much on police-community relations, we are convinced that many of the same challenges exist in the other parts of the youth criminal justice system.

Because of the urgency of the situation, we recommend three specific actions that the government should take this fall. As mentioned under "The Education System" above, it should move quickly to develop ways to collect race-based data. It should provide the funds for community-based youth-police liaison committees, and it should begin front-line officer training programs to improve the way police relate to youth.

We also recommend that all ministries and other public sector agencies be required to develop and publish specific anti-racism plans with measurable objectives and timelines. Police services would be included in this requirement.

Recognizing that there are problems within the youth criminal justice system that go beyond police conduct, we recommend that the Province establish a Youth Justice Advisory Board for the three ministries — Attorney General, Community Safety and Correctional Services and Children and Youth Services — that are responsible for the youth criminal justice system. This new board would work to improve coordination among

the ministries and provide a more balanced approach to funding across prevention, enforcement, diversion, prosecution and rehabilitation.

Finally, we believe the Province should also take steps to reduce the over-criminalization of Ontario youth when compared to other large jurisdictions. In part, this would mean developing more and better alternatives, including diversion programs and youth justice committees, at all stages of the justice process.

Support for Families

The importance of improving support for families in disadvantaged neighbourhoods was a recurring theme not only of our Neighbourhood Insight Sessions, but also from many of the service providers and community agencies that are now struggling to provide that support.

One issue that we view as especially urgent concerns children's mental health services, which at the moment are woefully under-funded, under-staffed and disjointed. We need to overcome the stigma that keeps far too many parents from seeking help for themselves and their children, and we have to be sure that when they do seek help, it is available and accessible in the community.

We have been told that the cost of implementing community-based, universal youth mental health services is estimated at $200 million. Given the potential savings in future health costs from early diagnosis and treatment, and the savings to the youth correctional system, we feel this is a reasonable, necessary investment.

Support to families also means support to neighbourhoods. Therefore, we recommend paying more attention to providing high-quality services, recreational and arts facilities, parks, and schools, and making the neighbourhoods safe. Improving the quality of life and the options available close to home will, we believe, have a positive impact on family life.

We are also sensitive to the plight of single parent families, and the difficulties one parent has when trying to hold onto more than one job and at the same time provide effective guidance for children. We believe our recommendations to improve the status of youth workers and to provide better training and support for mentors will help. The government should work with communities and agencies to assist every child to have access to at least one adult who provides nurturing and support.

Within our communities, there are groups that not only suffer the deprivations of poverty and racism, but also must cope with being strangers in a new environment. Support for all families must be local, integrated and culturally specific, but it is especially important that the Province have programs that connect new settlers to community structures and supports.

Youth Engagement

During our consultations and especially our visits to neighbourhoods, we were impressed by the contributions that youth themselves were making to their communities. Youth are not simply the consumers of services; they are often the most effective providers through any number of youth-led groups. They have every right to expect to be engaged when decisions are made that affect their futures.

All too often, however, youth are shut out of positions that would give them their rightful voice. Understandably, after repeated rejections, they come to believe that they are not welcome around the decision-making tables, and they stop asking. Ironically, at that point, the adult world accuses them of being "disengaged."

We feel it is vitally important that youth be re-engaged at all levels of the community, and we recommend including youth representatives as full partners in the various structures that we have recommended. We recognize that most will not have had an opportunity to participate in such forums; that is where the youth worker or mentor will be an invaluable advisor, helping them to become responsible members and leaders in their communities.

As a start, we recommend youth be involved in decisions concerning such things as the location, facilities and programs offered at the proposed community hubs, and at least one youth-led organization should be funded in each disadvantaged neighbourhood to address issues of violence involving youth. We also recommend that all sectors working with youth, for example in mentoring programs, adopt meaningful and sustained measures to include youth in their governance structures.

The work of the review benefited greatly from having youth lead our Neighbourhood Insight Sessions. We doubt that we would have received the depth and breadth of advice without their hard work and dedication. We also recognize that the Grassroots Youth Collaborative, youth-led and youth-inspired, provided us with some valuable insights that we would not have otherwise obtained. The government and all other organizations should welcome such contributions as they move ahead with their youth strategies.

Other Advice

The recommendations and advice outlined above deal with ways of repairing damage that has been done over many years. When implemented, we believe it will provide the kinds of social supports that can help reduce violence involving youth by creating stronger, more vital and more resilient communities. But what of the present?

We believe the Province must complement prevention with interventions designed to treat and reintegrate those youth who have already committed acts of violence, or who indicate they are likely to do so. As our literature review demonstrated, there is a multitude of programs that have been proven, through high-quality evaluations, to work in similar contexts. These should form the basis of Ontario's intervention strategy.

We also recommend that the Ontario government continue to press the federal government to enact a ban on handguns and, on its own, explore every possible means at its disposal to minimize the risks presented by these weapons.

Finally, while we recognize that the federal government has primary responsibility in matters relating to First Nations, we recommend that the Province open a dialogue with First Nations leaders to determine if our recommendations might apply to their communities. We also recommend that the Province take steps to provide more meaningful programs and support for children from First Nations communities who must leave their homes to attend high school in urban centres.

Chapter 6:

What's Next

As we said in our introduction, this volume of our report honours the commitment we made to communities that gave so generously of their time to participate in our consultations. We hope this document demonstrates that we listened to what you told us, and that you can see your influence at work in our analysis and recommendations.

Many people were disappointed that we couldn't visit more communities. We understand that, but feel we made the best use of the time available to us. More importantly, our Neighbourhood Insight Sessions have provided a model for consultation that other communities could follow on their own. The concept of relatively informal discussions followed by a meeting of representatives from a broad range of organizations, most certainly including youth, led to many useful connections that were not there before. We know of at least one community where our meeting resulted in agreement among participants to continue getting together on a monthly basis. We hope other communities will follow that lead.

We also hope that this report will be useful to you as you continue the good work that is going on in so many parts of the province. Perhaps one of the community stories in Chapter 4 will start you thinking or inspire you to try something similar in your community, or perhaps just getting together to talk about these issues will prove to be a catalyst for community development.

For our part, we will continue to be advocates for the recommendations we are making to the Premier. Both of us have been involved in such issues for most of our careers, and we have no intention of changing now. We believe Ontario is at a crossroads, and that only a change in policy and program direction and in the way the government organizes itself to achieve and sustain programs, as described in our recommendations, can take us down the right road and prevent more generations of suffering and hardship.

We thank you all for your trust in us and for your invaluable contributions to this report.

Appendix:

The Roots of Youth Violence – Online Survey

Introduction

To give all Ontarians the opportunity of contributing to our review, we conducted an online survey regarding the roots of violence involving youth. The survey asked respondents to indicate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with 32 statements concerning violence involving youth. It also provided opportunities for respondents to offer their own comments. The survey is reproduced in an appendix to Volume 1 of the report.

We received a total of 5,395 responses from across the province. The results are very similar to what we heard at our Neighbourhood Insight Sessions and are close to the results obtained in professionally conducted academic surveys. Many of the comments pointed us to additional areas for consideration and offered concrete suggestions for tackling these challenges. We were very pleased that so many people responded to the survey. It demonstrates the keen interest that many Ontarians have in the issue of violence involving youth.

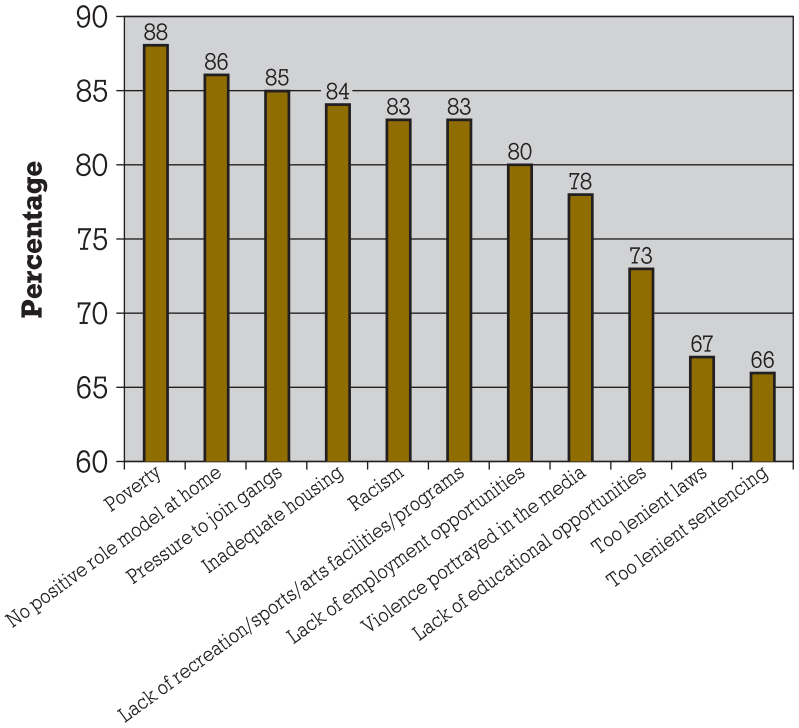
Because the study is not based on a random sample of residents, we cannot conclude that the results are representative of the province's entire population. Nearly two-thirds of our respondents were from the Greater Toronto Area and four per cent were from Northern Ontario. Some 80 per cent indicated that they hold qualifications from a university or college, including 24 per cent with graduate or professional training. Finally, 55 per cent of respondents were at least 37 years old.

Respondents' Positions

1 Youth violence is a complex issue with multiple, interrelated roots.

Respondents were asked to indicate their degree of agreement with 11 possible roots of violence involving youth. Although the majority of responses somewhat or strongly agreed that systemic challenges such as poverty and racism are roots of violence, more personal issues such as the lack of a positive role model at home or the lack of employment opportunities were considered almost as important. As this chart indicates, there was a strikingly consistent level of agreement regarding most of the suggested roots.

Per cent of Respondents Who Agree That Specific Listed Factors Contribute to Youth Violence



The open-ended response section further demonstrated that the causes of violence involving youth are complex. The comments mentioned most often are shown in the following table.

Key Themes			
Individual	**Family**	**School and Community**	**Society at Large**
• Mental health issues • Feelings of depression, alienation, insecurity • Belief amongst youth that they are trapped in their circumstances • Desensitization to violence	• Prevalence of single-parent households (particularly single mothers) • Inability of parents to properly supervise their children due to work-related time constraints • Lack of discipline or instilled values in young people	• General shortage of affordable, accessible youth programming • Lack of sustained funding for community programs • Poor urban design and transportation, resulting in isolated communities • Lack of positive community role models • Breakdowns within the school system, particularly the inflexibility of the *Safe Schools Act* in dealing with at-risk youth	• Entrenched, spatially concentrated poverty • Lack of economic opportunities for youth • Institutionalized racism within all levels of education, justice and community services • Failure of governments to consider youth perspectives in formulating policy • Glorification of violence in the media

Beyond referring to these roots time and again, many of the respondents explicitly warned the review against oversimplifying the issue. Said one:

> *"I just want to stress that it is a combination, a converging of the above-noted factors which make up the root causes of youth violence. It would be a great mistake to take the stance that there is just one or two discrete causes. They are intermingled, interrelated, and inseparable."*

2. Social factors are at the root of violence involving youth.

Most of those responding to the online survey believe that social factors — including poverty and racism — are at the roots of youth violence. For example, the top five causes that respondents somewhat or strongly agreed were the roots of violence involving youth were poverty (88 per cent), no positive role model at home (86 per cent), pressure to join gangs (85 per cent), inadequate housing (84 per cent) and racism (83 per cent).

The trend to emphasize social factors over enforcement and punishment was consistent throughout the survey. When presented with a series of questions concerning specific actions that might be taken to reduce violence involving youth, 71 per cent somewhat or strongly agreed that youth violence could be reduced through more frequent police visits to schools and 62 per cent somewhat or strongly agreed that police officers should refer young people to social programs instead of arresting them.

When compared to social factors, significantly fewer respondents (67 per cent) somewhat or strongly agreed that youth violence is caused by too lenient laws and even fewer (57 per cent) somewhat or strongly agreed that governments should pass tougher laws regarding young offenders. Similarly, while 66 per cent somewhat or strongly agreed that too lenient sentencing of convicted offenders is a root of violence involving youth, just 52 per cent somewhat or strongly agreed that such violence would be reduced by courts handing down longer sentences.

Interestingly, only 33 per cent believed that governments should raise taxes to pay for stricter law enforcement, including more police officers, more courts and more prisons.

In the words of one respondent:

> *"More police, more prisons, more punitive measures are not the answer to reducing youth crime or gang activity. . . . [R]eactive strategies feed the problem, while positive interventions such as mentoring, working with young people in a wide range of activities, sports, recreation, arts, internships, camping, programs that teach life skills, all provide opportunities for youth to acquire a greater sense of hope and a feeling of self-worth and empowerment."*

3. Programs for youth need to be greatly expanded.

Respondents to our survey clearly indicated that community and youth programs need substantial improvement. Just 38 per cent of respondents somewhat or strongly agreed that current programs are helping at-risk youth and making their communities safer, while only half knew of any non-governmental programs (e.g. United Way, faith-based programs) offered to youth in the community.

Similarly, while 54 per cent somewhat or strongly agreed that youths have sufficient educational opportunities, less than 40 per cent somewhat or strongly agreed that youth have enough employment or recreational opportunities. Finally, only one-third of respondents somewhat or strongly agreed that youth are benefiting from programs designed to prevent violence.

These concerns were also evident in the comments of respondents. Many claimed that there were simply no programs available for their children, while others cited the high cost of youth programs for low-income families. The need to make community programs "cool" for at-risk youth was frequently emphasized, as was the importance of communicating the existence of available programs within marginalized communities.

4. There are many important steps to be taken that could help eliminate violence involving youth. . . .

Respondents endorsed a wide variety of possible solutions to reduce violence involving youth. A full 86 per cent somewhat or strongly agreed that governments should create employment and educational opportunities, and many of the open-ended responses suggested that a strong and inclusive education system is a precondition for reaching that goal. For many respondents, ensuring full access within marginalized communities to educational and employment opportunities was the single most pressing requirement.

There was a similarly broad consensus that Ontario's families require greater levels of support. Common suggestions on this front included increasing the availability of day-care and after-school programs, expanding health and mental health interventions within marginalized communities, and ensuring that community programs are accessible and affordable to all. Many also proposed expanding the availability of parenting courses within Ontario's secondary schools and strengthening anti-violence initiatives aimed at children aged 6–12. In addition, it was frequently asserted that having a positive role model or mentor could prevent many youth from engaging in violence. Accordingly, a number of respondents urged further development and support of mentoring programs. In the words of one respondent:

> *"Young people need to be supported by healthy communities, where there are chances for inter-generational dialogue, where neighbours know each other and where they feel people care about what they do."*

5. ...but above all else, Ontario requires systemic change through greater collaboration among stakeholders, greater consistency by funders, and greater participation and input from youth themselves.

Although the examples above indicate the wide range of proposed measures, our respondents concurred on one point: stakeholders must show courage and long-term vision by taking action to tackle the systemic roots of violence involving youth head-on. Instead of "band-aid" solutions to the challenges faced, our respondents demanded effective and coordinated interventions to openly confront core issues such as poverty, racism and social exclusion.

Without diminishing the importance of localized action, the comments told us that Ontario must develop a comprehensive youth framework, one that brings together many different actors and programs to achieve the best possible outcomes. To illustrate why such a strategic vision is necessary, our respondents often highlighted the shortcomings of Ontario's current approach. Many responses contained personal experiences with duplicated efforts or gaps in service, and expressed frustration at the apparent lack of collaboration between families, communities and governments. Further, it is felt that the precariousness of government funding has left many community organizations unable to fulfil their potential. One respondent said:

> *"There must be more integration and cooperation between and among government funding programs and program delivery groups. Society cannot afford to fund groups competing with one another to deliver splintered objectives and needs. Groups with a strong track record of working well with youth should be given long-term funding contracts so they can focus on program delivery."*

Still others discussed the lack of youth participation in formulating youth-related policies.

Only 36 per cent somewhat or strongly agreed that youth have a meaningful role in designing their communities programs, leading one respondent to suggest that Ontario:

> *"...introduce a quarterly youth forum within communities, where youth are able to come in and discuss issues that they are deeply concerned about, issues that are making them vulnerable."*

Taken together, this vision for fundamental change is best summed up by the following comment:

> *"All of us — the policy-makers, the teachers, the police officers and the youth themselves — we need to start looking at the bigger picture. We simply cannot afford to waste another day talking the talk without walking the walk. By working together at all levels to tackle the ROOTS of youth violence (and not the symptoms), we can make this province safe and inclusive for the generations to come. The real question now is not how we are going to do this, but rather, how in good conscience could we not?"*

Section 2:

Neighbourhood Insight Sessions

Final Report

January 2008

Submitted to:
Review of the Roots of Youth Violence Secretariat

Submitted by:
Anjana Dooling & Nicole Swerhun

I've been told that I'm gifted
Free spoken and different
Though those in authority see a weed smoking delinquent
I got into hip-hop around the age of ten
Nobody knew that I'd never be the same again
Attended class
Teachers tried to cage me in
No entertainment as a youth so I played with a pen
Became a Poetic Prodigy
Constantly advancing like technology
But this life of Poverty
Had me turning to drugs and robbery
People tried to talk to me
And convince me to do it properly
But I was tired of hypocritical political policies
Man of the house at sixteen
I couldn't save my allowance
So I hustled
And let my Future hang in the balance
I did what I had to do
Never was a bad dude
Went to school
Failed in the classroom
But made sales in the bathroom
Then I thought – damn
If I can Slaughter the language
Why shouldn't I use my voice to make some positive changes
See, I believe everybody from the gutter
Has got a little bit of good in 'em
And everybody that's got it good
Has got a little bit of the 'hood in 'em
It doesn't matter if it's East Hamilton or Toronto
The youth of today are the leaders of tomorrow.

Mike Goodale
McQueston Neighbourhood, Hamilton

A note on this report...

This report was written by Anjana Dooling and Nicole Swerhun, independent consultants retained by the Review of the Roots of Youth Violence in October 2007 to support the design and lead the implementation of the Neighbourhood Insights Sessions (NIS). It is intended to reflect a synthesis of the feedback and advice received from the eight neighbourhoods visited as part of the NIS process, and is based directly on the individual reports written by the facilitators retained to lead the insight-collection in each neighbourhood. A draft of this report was sent to participants in the Neighbourhood Insight Sessions for their review prior to being finalized.

The facilitators are an incredibly capable, passionate, professional and locally connected group: Waqar Khan and Nneka Perry (Kingston-Galloway, Toronto), Moffat Makuto (Fort William, Thunder Bay), Orville Wallace (Jane and Finch, Toronto), Wayne Robinson (McQueston, Hamilton), Ali Abdullahi (Jamestown, Toronto), Joshua Dills and Pat Howarth (Downtown Market, Kitchener Waterloo), Kaje Johnson and Leyland Gudge (Steeles-L'Amoureaux, Toronto), and Dave Farthing (Pinecrest-Queensway, Ottawa).

More than 400 youth and adults contributed their feedback and perspectives to the Neighbourhood Insight Sessions. From this large group, the facilitators invited approximately 15 people from each neighbourhood to smaller in-person meetings with the Review Co-Chairs to represent their neighbourhoods' views on the questions outlined in the Discussion Guide (see page 3). This report is a synthesis of all the feedback received (i.e., from the 400+ participants), and not only the 15 people involved in the Co-Chairs' meetings.

Lastly, we wanted to say that we consider it an important gift when people share their experiences and perspectives through processes like this, and we can't overstate how much we appreciate that so many people gave the Review, the facilitators, and us enough benefit of the doubt to be a part of this work. It was a privilege to meet and work with you.

If you have any questions or comments on this report, please feel free to contact us: Nicole Swerhun (nicole@swerhun.com or 416-999-2665) or Anjana Dooling (anjanadooling@rogers.com or 519-927-0572).

Anjana and Nicole

Summary

In June 2007, the Premier of Ontario asked Roy McMurtry and Alvin Curling to lead a Review of the Roots of Youth Violence. Their task was to identify and analyze the underlying factors contributing to violence involving youth, and to provide recommendations to help Ontario become a better province for all of its youth and communities.

The Co-Chairs have shared their belief that lasting change will be built on the shared experiences, insights and wisdom of youth and others. As a result, one key component of the Review's work involved learning from people whose daily lives are affected by violence involving youth. To facilitate this learning, eight neighbourhoods were visited, four in Toronto and one in each of Hamilton, Thunder Bay, Kitchener-Waterloo and Ottawa. More than 400 people were involved, including a mix of youth (in school, out of school, single parents, homeless, involved in gangs, employed, unemployed, and with or without experience in the criminal justice system) and adults (parents, teachers, parole officers, police, elected officials, social service agencies, and others).

This report documents the feedback and advice received. In summary, here's what we heard:

- There is a mix of frustration and hope. Governments often ask communities for feedback and advice. Many people are fed up with these kinds of processes because they don't see any follow-up action. Those who agreed to participate often did so because they were willing to hope that this process would be different — that it would reflect the advice from neighbourhoods and keep them involved.
- The violence takes many forms. The violence that youth in these neighbourhoods are most often victim to, and sometimes perpetrate, includes the use of guns and drugs, domestic abuse, robberies, prostitution, sexual assaults, knife attacks, swarmings and poverty. They're also victims of institutional violence.
- The impact of the violence is far-reaching. Fear in neighbourhoods is on the rise, and codes of silence are followed. Communities and youth get stereotyped, and often desensitized to the violence. Gang "turf" issues become a problem, and youth are afraid to leave their neighbourhoods because of the threat of violence from rival gangs. Police presence increases. Focusing on school is harder and teaching is harder. More youth suffer from depression, self-harm and substance abuse. Violence hurts youth self-esteem. Social service agencies struggle to keep up with the demand for services. Inaction leads to hopelessness.
- The violence grows from many roots, including poverty and discrimination in the systems designed to help youth "get ahead." Also, good local programming often isn't available or

sustainable, and role models and mentors can be hard to find. Violence is all around, and becomes normal. And if young persons make a mistake, the system abandons them.

- The solution? Take action! Governments need to do their part to strengthen both local communities and the larger systems in place to support them. This includes involving youth and communities in understanding and addressing problems, strengthening the programs that communities say they need and supporting the effective delivery of those programs. It also involves improvements to systems — especially the education, policing and criminal justice systems, but also government and social services, relationships with aboriginal peoples, housing, employment and media.

We know that a one-page summary can help provide a quick understanding of a report, but in this case we thought three more pages summarizing key messages from the Neighbourhood Insight Sessions would also be helpful. The following pages address key messages in the following theme areas:

The Review process

The violence involving youth

What to do about it

Key Messages

...About the Review Process

1. People were wary about participating in the Neighbourhood Insight Session process and contributing to the work of the Review of the Roots of Youth Violence.

Several of the people who were approached to participate in this process said that they've been asked questions related to youth violence and community safety before, have given their advice to governments before, and still they don't see anything happening. They're tired of people dropping in on their communities to help and then not delivering what they say they will. The people who come to help don't live where they live. Their friends aren't being shot. Despite these sentiments, many people did participate. Many said they were prepared to put their hopes on the line one more time, in large part because of the credibility of the Review Co-Chairs, Roy McMurtry and Alvin Curling.

2. It's not just the Review's credibility on the line – it's everyone's who was involved.

When the Review sought feedback — particularly in local neighbourhoods — an expectation was created that the Review intends to do something with the feedback and advice provided by the neighbourhood. If nothing happens, it's not only the credibility of the Review that's at stake, but also the personal relationships and trust that were developed by the facilitators, youth leaders, and others who encouraged people to participate in this process. It's critical that the community sees itself in the recommendations of the Review, and that the government encourages and resources communities to act on those recommendations.

3. The Review needs to build on the work already done on the factors that contribute to violence involving youth.

Participants in the process referenced previous consultations — some going all the way back to the 1992 Report on Racism in Ontario by Stephen Lewis — and many others referred to more recent work of organizations like the United Way, the City of Toronto, and the Toronto District School Board. There are many good recommendations already out there, and it's critical that the Review's work consider and build on them.

4. Take the time to do it right.

Understanding communities takes time. There were many participants who went out of their way to accommodate the tight schedule of the Review — some happily, some reluctantly. Some who were reluctant, or chose not to participate at all, said that the condensed timeline of the Review's work perpetuated the disrespect that they feel governments and policy-makers often show communities. That being said, many people said they were encouraged by the Review's decision to hire local youth as facilitators

to engage the community in providing feedback to the Review, seek at least as much participation by youth as by adults, reach out to the hardest-to-reach youth, provide honoraria to youth participants, and provide the flexibility to facilitators to refine their approach to best meet their neighbourhood's needs.

5. Please follow through and keep neighbourhoods involved.

People repeatedly asked for the Review to return to their communities with the recommendations and the resources to make them happen. And if the recommendations can't be implemented all at once, that's fine. Just explain why, and engage communities in making things happen — incrementally.

...About Violence Involving Youth

When asked about the roots of violence involving youth, people emphasized the importance of not stigmatizing youth as perpetrators of violence — *many, many more youth are victims.*

There were several common themes to people's descriptions of the roots of violence involving youth. Some of the most frequently identified roots of violence involving youth included:

1 Living without much money — poverty.

When families don't have much money, parents work long hours to make ends meet, and often don't have a lot of time to spend at home. A limited budget forces tough choices between food, bus tickets, new shoes, or after-school recreation programs. Rent is a big expense, even in buildings that are decaying, moldy, roach- or rat-infested, and badly in need of repairs. It's frustrating, and can be embarrassing and dangerous, to live in run-down, neglected places. Family relationships can become strained.

2. The systems designed to help youth "get ahead" often discriminate.

Many youth want to earn money, but because they're young, or lack skills, or have the wrong address, or have the wrong skin colour, or are more ambitious than what they see as dead-end jobs can offer, it's hard to find work. At the same time, post-secondary education can seem like an unattainable financial goal, and even less of an option if your teacher has already streamed you onto a technical or vocational path that doesn't lead to college or university.

3. Good local programming is sometimes not available or accessible, usually not sustainable, and role models and mentors can be hard to find.

Successful community-based programs are too often supported by short-term funding and contract workers who work hard to engage youth, and then disappoint and disillusion because they disappear. Many programs that do exist are not relevant to youth and/or aren't accessible because of fees, location, lack of transit, and because turf issues make it unsafe to leave the neighbourhood, even to travel to programming.

4. Violence is all around, and becomes an easy option.

Violence is all around youth as a way to resolve disputes — bullying, police raids, movies and television, domestic violence, war. It's come to the point where some youth said they'd rather shoot someone than risk being beaten up, losing face or being embarrassed. Safety and belonging comes in numbers, and joining a gang for protection is an option. It's also a way to make money selling drugs. Doing drugs becomes a way to self-medicate deal with a youth's vision of a hopeless future. All this in a society that more and more defines your success by your material things — BLING.

5. And then when young persons make mistakes — at school or in the community — the system abandons them.

This approach is the opposite of what many communities say is needed. Being kicked out of school or put in jail takes away the supports, skills development and encouragement needed to put and keep young people on a positive track.

...About What Needs to be Done

It's time to act! Participants at all of the Neighbourhood Insight Sessions expressed frustration with the inaction on the part of government in responding to community needs. The provincial government needs to:

- **Involve youth and communities in understanding and addressing the problems where they live.**
- **Strengthen the programs communities have said they need** — particularly those that are positive and relevant, and go beyond recreation-based activities and meet the educational, cultural, vocational and life-skills needs of neighbourhood youth. Communities also need programs that are income-generating and/or experience opportunities for youth and their parents. Programs need to put an emphasis on mentoring, target the youth that are hardest to reach, and provide a continuum of services throughout the development of individuals.
- **Support the effective delivery of those programs.** This means making sure funds get to the youth that really need them and investing for the long term. It means hiring the right people — people who can relate to youth, are from the same neighbourhood and can relate the experiences of youth in that community, and who are well trained to deal with the issues facing youth. Often, these people are youth. It also means providing holistic and flexible funding, reducing competition for funding, providing youth-friendly service delivery, removing barriers to participation and supporting the evaluation of community work.
- **Recognize the influence that provincial systems have on communities, and fix the parts that many people in communities think need fixing.** This includes looking at upgrading the living conditions of people who live in subsidized housing and increasing the minimum wage. It also means working to provide more flexibility in the education system, revisiting the approach used to suspend, transfer, and expel students, hiring more teachers that reflect and care about the kids they teach, and helping schools become community hubs. For the police force, it means hiring more minorities to increase diversity, improving cultural sensitivity, and anti-discrimination training for front-line police officers. The criminal justice system needs to focus more on prevention rather than punishment, and on helping youth avoid jail. The media needs to stop glorifying violence, and stereotyping and stigmatizing communities and youth. The unique challenges faced by First Nations communities in the far north need to be addressed. And governments need to break down silos between departments and ministries, stick to their commitments and see things through to the end.

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I. An Overview of the Process

In June 2007, the Premier of Ontario asked Roy McMurtry and Alvin Curling to lead a Review of the Roots of Youth Violence. Their task was to identify and analyze the underlying factors contributing to violence involving youth, and to provide recommendations to help Ontario become a better province for all of its youth and communities.

The Co-Chairs believe that lasting change will be built on the shared experiences, insights and wisdom of youth and others. As a result, one key component of the Review's work involved holding a series of Neighbourhood Insight Sessions to learn from people whose daily lives are affected by violence involving youth. The other two key components of the Review's work were:

- **Research:** reviewing Canadian and international academic research and other literature on the root causes of youth violence and on community crime prevention strategies, and developing an inventory of Ontario programs concerning or addressing youth violence; and,
- **Targeted consultation:** meeting with representatives of social agencies, the justice community, youth groups and others who may offer advice.

Objectives

The Co-Chairs' objectives for the Neighbourhood Insight Sessions were to gain a better understanding of:

- The dynamics of youth violence as it is experienced in individual neighbourhoods, and how it affects residents and the community as a whole
- The neighbourhoods' perspectives on the broad issues facing the Review, with particular emphasis on structural or strategic reforms that could provide real impetus and support for efforts to address the root causes of youth violence in Ontario
- The government/community/neighbourhood initiatives that have been developed, and the opportunities, lessons and challenges associated with them
- The local strategies, programs, and coordination mechanisms that the neighbourhoods would propose
- The neighbourhoods' assets, capacity and needs to support existing and proposed initiatives
- The potential for ongoing collaborative work at the neighbourhood level, involving residents and representatives from the broader community and its institutions.

Approach

Designing the approach to implementing the Neighbourhood Insight Sessions was a combined effort of the Review and the consultants retained to support the design and implementation of the sessions: Nicole Swerhun and Anjana Dooling. Anjana and Nicole also sought advice, informally, from a number of youth with experience leading youth-led, youth-serving organizations in Toronto.

The Review established the following criteria for the design of the process:

- Focus the sessions in neighbourhoods
- Hold up to eight sessions, both inside and outside Toronto
- Work with local facilitators, ideally youth, who could work as objectively as possible within their neighbourhoods
- Seek feedback from a large group of both youth (including the hardest to reach youth) and adults (parents and those working with youth or as a part of systems that affect youth)
- Channel the feedback from the large group into a smaller group discussion with the Co-Chairs
- Complete the sessions within a condensed timeline (the process of planning the sessions began in late October 2007, the first session was held in late November, and the final session was held in early January 2008).

The Neighbourhoods

The Review selected eight neigbourhoods for visits:

- Kingston-Galloway (Toronto)
- Jamestown (Toronto)
- Jane and Finch (Toronto)
- Steeles-L'Amoureaux (Toronto)
- McQueston (Hamilton)
- Fort William (Thunder Bay)
- The Downtown Market (Kitchener-Waterloo)
- Pinecrest-Queensway (Ottawa).

In selecting these neighbourhoods, the Review was striving to learn from areas located both inside and outside Toronto that have different experiences with violence involving youth, that are at different stages in responding to issues related to violence involving youth and using different approaches, and where youth facilitators had the credibility, knowledge, and networks required to complete the work within tight timelines.

Terms of Reference and Discussion Guide

Guided by the Review's objectives for the Neighbourhood Insight Sessions and the logistics of delivering the work, Nicole Swerhun and Anjana Dooling developed Terms of Reference for the process in collaboration with the Review of the Roots of Youth Violence Secretariat and a Discussion Guide for distribution to participants.

The discussion questions in the Guide asked participants the following questions:

1. Describe the violence involving youth in your neighbourhood. What impact is it having?
2. What do you see as the roots of violence involving youth?
3. Tell us about what's happening in your neighbourhood to help address violence involving youth. What's working? Why?
4. What isn't working? Why?
5. What are the two or three most important things that could be done to address violence involving youth in your neighbourhood?
6. Describe the capacity that already exists in your neighbourhood to address violence involving youth (e.g., people, knowledge, programs, other resources that the community already has). What additional supports would help existing and proposed activities succeed?
7. Beyond what can be accomplished locally in your neighbourhood, what do you think can be done across the province to address violence involving youth?
8. Do you have any other advice for the Review?

Participants

Participants in the process included the team of facilitators contracted to lead the discussion in each neighbourhood, and the 50 people (on average) they each connected with to seek feedback and advice. In total, more than 400 participants were involved (see Participant List in Appendix).

The participants all lived and/or worked in the eight neighbourhoods. The youth included were in school, out of school, single parents, homeless, involved in gangs, employed, unemployed, and with or without experience in the criminal justice system. The adults included parents, teachers, parole officers, police, elected officials, social service agencies, and others.

II. Violence Involving Youth

There are many types of violence involving youth. Most of the time, youth are victims; some of the time, they are perpetrators.

The summary below describes what we heard about the violence experienced in the eight communities we visited (listed in no particular order). It is meant to illustrate the range of experience we heard about. Not all communities experienced the same types of violence and not all the violence we heard about is prevalent in all communities.

> "I've seen mothers come from war zones and go back to war zones because they don't want their kids to be here."
>
> *Jamestown meeting*

- **Gun violence.** Youth are getting guns at younger ages, sometimes as early as 10. Certain homes are known to store guns (e.g., collectors), and gang members know these people and steal from them. It's easy to buy guns and rentals are available, too. To purchase a gun can be as cheap as $250 and as high as thousands of dollars.

- **Drugs.** There has been a growing trend towards the selling and use of hard drugs (crack, cocaine) and designer drugs (ecstasy, mushrooms). Neighbourhoods are being divided by north and south, east and west for control over "turf" to sell drugs. Some houses and apartments are vacant and used solely for the production of drugs. This leads to violence, shootings, home invasions etc.

- **Robberies on the street.** For shoes, clothing, MP3 players, and money — people are either being jumped from behind or approached up front and intimidated.

- **Gangs and claims of turf.** The main gangs are the Bloods (red) and the Crips (blue). Participants talked about the age of gang-involved youth dropping — where gangs used to attract primarily 17–21-year-olds, today they can attract members as young as 12 or 13. In at least one neighbourhood, this was traced directly to the power vacuum created after the police did a gang sweep three years ago. Young people stepped in to fill the power gap.

- **Attacks with knives.** Knives are often used as a tool of intimidation. They're also easier to purchase and discard.

- **More girl-on-girl violence.** Most gangs have female recruits. Some try to show their male

counterparts that they're just as bad or as strong as they are. More girls are carrying weapons or drugs for guys (these girls are known as dolgers) and if they get pinched (i.e. arrested), it's understood that the dolger will take the charges for the leader.

- **More fights at school and school bullies.** Fights from school carry over to the streets. Being bullied has led many youth to travel far distances to avoid attending the same schools as a bully. Or, they skip school as an avoidance mechanism.

- **Home invasions.** In one community, we heard about people who are known to have drugs, cash or other stolen property becoming victims of home invasions.

- **Threats to witnesses.** One example we heard was about an individual who testified in court and was supposed to be protected, but he received threats on YouTube and MySpace and was subsequently killed for cooperating with the police. Incidents like this create little faith in the system's ability to protect people who want to help.

- **Sexual Assaults.**

- **Violence in Sports.** An example presented to us was of parents who fight with other parents at hockey games in front of kids. This sends the wrong message to youth, who think, "it's okay to fight because my Dad does it." Violence in sports also happens at high school games where spectators from a school travel to another school to support their team, but are jumped or "rushed" for coming on the other school's "property." This causes spectators to come armed, or to be banned from attending in the first place.

- **Prostitution.** Women work in plain sight of the residents of the community and work at all hours of the day. The younger girls usually have pimps who control their money and lives. A growing concern is also massage parlours and holistic centres that run "special services" for their clients.

- **Clashes between different groups/cultures.** Sometimes these are hate crimes or clashes over religious differences.

- **Verbal abuse, intimidation, threats.**

- **Swarmings.**

- **Domestic abuse.** Parents beating each other up or beating up their kids.

- **Institutional violence.** Participants talked about the violence that's in the systems they deal with every day: government structures and policies that discriminate against them, schools that have a zero-tolerance policy and kick youth out for minor things, a police force that is prejudiced against youth and harasses and intimidates them and a criminal justice system that emphasizes punishment and can lead youth to become hardened and professional criminals.

III. Impact & Consequences Of The Violence

In talking to communities about the violence involving youth, the line between the roots and the impact was often blurred. It quickly became clear that this was the case because many of the impacts of violence eventually become roots of more violence and a negative cycle is created. The consequences of violence, described below, are felt by youth, communities and our society as a whole.

- **Fear in neighbourhoods is on the rise.** "The neighbourhoods we live in are not safe." In some areas, people are virtual prisoners in their homes. The playgrounds are controlled by drug dealers and gang members. Innocent people are at risk because some shooters pursue their targets with no concern for innocent bystanders. People grow afraid of each other, and unwilling to help each other. Shootings aren't always reported; therefore, the resources to address gun violence are often not allocated to the community. Parents can be afraid to let their children participate in the community. Youth are afraid to leave their neighbourhoods because of turf issues, and won't access programming or other services outside of their borders. When communities live with fear, they often internalize it and see others as outsiders, which leads to further isolation.

> "I hear sirens like nursery rhymes; if you don't hear them something is wrong."
>
> *Jane-Finch meeting*

- **A code of silence takes hold.** There is a fear of retaliation if someone calls the police to report a crime or give a witness statement. Ineffective witness protection programs serve to reinforce the "snitch code." This fuels a code of silence. The level of fear in some neighbourhoods is indescribable, especially among some mothers—there is significant intimidation to ensure that people don't talk to the police.
- **Communities and youth get stereotyped.** People are afraid of youth, especially those who travel in groups, and especially if they wear hoodies and baggy jeans. One participant said that some people think "All black youth are gangsters and all Muslim youth are terrorists." The media portrays a negative stereotype of the community and the people from the community start believing that stereotype. Youth can't get jobs because of where they live. When people focus on how bad youth are in a community, they lose sight of the bigger tragedy of how youth have been failed.

- **Communities, including youth, get desensitized to the violence.** Young children are exposed to violence and learn from it — whether it's at home or seeing a violent police "take-down." Children as young as nine years old talk about violence as normal. Children in elementary school are heavily affected, because they are now drawing gang symbols and wearing gang colours, trying to emulate their older siblings.
- **Violence becomes an acceptable way of dealing with conflict.** When violence goes unaddressed, it perpetuates violence. Youth resort to violence to resolve disputes. They feel they need to be violent in order to survive and to preserve their honour. For some youth, the issue of respect goes so far that they would rather shoot a rival and get them "out of the way" than be embarrassed by them in front of their peers.
- **Gangs are created.** Gangs are often linked to criminal activities, but youth also hang out in groups as a way of looking out for each other. The problem is that it can be hard for people to tell the difference, and groups of youth — regardless of their intent — can intimidate people.
- **Increased police presence and the criminalization of youth.** Many youth talked about not receiving respect from police, and about experiencing problems with police harassment. They talked about youth that get pulled over for no reason, and who don't feel like they can move freely in their own neighbourhoods. Increasing camera surveillance and heavy police presence can create a feeling of a "community under siege." Police can be seen as the enemy. Bravado from the police, particularly in their communication with youth, gets in the way of any form of trust and relationship-building between police and youth. There is criminalization of youth and a growing number of arrests. There is also increased racial profiling.
- **More youth end up "in the system."** Violence involving youth ends up directing more youth to places like Children's Aid, the criminal justice system, and Ontario Works (provides employment assistance and temporary financial assistance). Being part of this system is not generally viewed as a positive step in the lives of youth — instead, it's viewed more as a confirmation that too little has been done to give youth the skills and resources they need to avoid the "system." Some participants went so far as to share their belief that there are institutions that benefit from youth in trouble — the continued need for their services supports the sustainability of their organizations.

- **Focusing on school is harder for students, and teaching is harder.** Living in an environment without security drains people's mental energy. Trying to meet the needs of students with a high teacher-to-student ratio is already a difficult task, and with the added challenges created by poverty, a lot of students fall through the cracks.
- **Schools are not safe places.** Youth get bullied at school, and bullying becomes more violent. Growing numbers of youth are expelled from school. They carry weapons to protect themselves, and drop out more frequently or transfer because schools aren't safe.
- **More youth suffer from depression,** which can lead to suicide and self-harm, as well as substance abuse. Violence hurts youth self-esteem and stops youth from having ambition to do anything.
- **Social service agencies struggle to keep up with the demand for services.** There is not enough funding, and agencies are competing instead of working together.
- **Once youth get involved in a violent lifestyle, it's hard to get out.**
- **Inaction leads to hopelessness.** People get fed up because they see no changes, and they become discouraged and demoralized. There is alienation between youth, community leaders and institutions.

IV. The Roots

What are the roots of violence involving youth? It's complicated. Not all reasons fit all situations, and discussions in different neighbourhoods focused on different things. But the key messages were clear. Every neighbourhood we visited traced violence involving youth back to the basics — the experiences youth have growing up in their communities.

a. Having little or no money

Many people talked about poverty being a root of violence involving youth.

Poverty is linked to violence involving youth in many ways.

> "Poverty is not about geography because it can happen anywhere. When we as community members enrich the experiences of youth — culturally and educationally — then we really get at the problems."
>
> *Ottawa meeting*

- **Society tells us that having material things is one measure of success, and then denies youth access to those things.** Youth get angry. It has a negative impact on their self image when they know others can have things that they can't.

- **Without a lot of money, families are forced to live in moldy, decaying, roach and rat-infested buildings.** When someone doesn't have a lot of money, often the only place they can afford to live is in a dilapidated, decaying, roach/rat-infested building that's often in need of multiple repairs. They know that people with more money don't have to live this way, which makes them different from everyone else. Some families (usually single-parent households) spend more than 50% of their income on housing. This leaves very little money for food, clothing and transportation (usually public transport).

- **Parent(s) are working two or three jobs to make ends meet.** Many people talked about the challenges parents face in making enough money to meet their families' basic needs, and the tough choices they face. Some parents are unemployed, and others end up working multiple jobs to survive. Even when they are working at many jobs, they have trouble paying rent, paying for food, paying for bus tickets, and paying for the clothes and other things that youth need.

- **There are not enough supports for parents.** Parents lack financial supports, as well as other important supports (ESL classes, parenting skills training, educational/skills development classes at community centres, etc.).

- **Youth get angry when they see their parent(s) working so hard but never getting ahead.**

- **Parents aren't around.** Youth raised the issue of lack of parental supervision as one of the contributors to violence involving youth. Many youth don't get to spend much time with their parent(s) because the parent is always working. Kids as young seven have no adult supervision — there is no one at home when they get home from school or when they need to talk to someone about what's going on in their lives. When parents don't give youth attention, they look for it somewhere else.

- **Youth want to help, but can't find work.** Youth get angry when they want to help out their families but then have trouble getting a job. Youth have trouble finding employment because of the address on their resumes — "Some jobs are hard to get if you're from the ghetto." They don't want to be humiliated by taking a job at McDonald's or Tim Horton's; they would rather make more money and have opportunities to get better experience and skills, but often have no choice. "I'm not going to get ahead, wasting my time, don't bother trying." Many youth have given up on themselves. Some look for other ways to earn money, like selling drugs. It is easier to buy a gun than it is to find employment; the reward for selling drugs is instant and easy cash.

- **Drug involvement,** particularly with gangs, is like a business — youth invest in a product and get dividends, and then hire people to work for them. It becomes an informal economy. Violence comes from drugs because gangs work to protect their market or "turf." Violence is used when outsiders come in and try and access the market.

- **To cope with the issues they face, people use drugs and alcohol,** which plays a big role in the violence that takes place within the community.

- **Hoods.** When poverty is concentrated, it creates "hoods" where many people are struggling financially. These areas are often stigmatized, and everyone who lives there is painted with the same brush. Infrastructure spending goes elsewhere first.

- **There is typically scarce recreation space and equipment.** Poor neighbourhoods are often higher density, with more youth needing access to services. Yet poor neighbourhoods are often under-serviced. Fees for recreation activities limit accessibility to those who can afford to pay.

- **Poverty and homelessness create consequences for education.** It's too difficult for a youth who is worried about food, shelter, and safety to think about school or any future. When youth are homeless, they lose the ability to dream. School becomes secondary to survival. Even with a home, without proper food, concentrating on school is difficult. Without money for books, youth don't have the tools to learn. Youth living in poverty know that their family won't be able to afford post-secondary education, so they either don't try to pursue it or they see yet another incentive to find alternative ways to make money. Young people's basic needs have to be met before they can look at the world and start thinking about who they want to be.

- **Hopelessness comes out of poverty.** When youth grow up with no money, they don't believe the situation can ever change. And so, they look at all options for what to do about it, including unlawful behaviour.

- **Lack of support for youth in trouble.** Parents who are living paycheque to paycheque are less likely to attend court and show judges that they are involved in their children's lives. Courts view youth who come unattended as individuals who do not have support systems or caring parents.

b. Not all youth are treated equally

Systems are supposed to be in place to level the playing field. Systems — especially employment and school — are set up for everyone to access, but youth often can't access employment because of their skin colour, address, age and lack of experience, or because they have made mistakes and have been in trouble with the law. In school, they're streamed in a particular direction based on preconceived notions of their capabilities. Many people told us that they see discrimination present in many systems, institutions and programs that have an impact on youth.

- **Schools don't reflect the youth they serve and don't give all youth the same opportunities.** For many youth, what is taught in school is not culturally or socially relevant to them, and is not taught by people who look like them or who can relate to their everyday lives, leaving them feeling excluded from probably the most important institution present in their lives. Youth also described discrimination by teachers who do not respect visible minority or immigrant students, who assume they cannot do as well as white kids, and who subsequently stream them into less academic programming. This blow to self-esteem is tough to overcome and youth can lose interest, motivation and trust in their teachers.

- **There are more barriers to success for immigrant students.** Newcomer and immigrant youth who face race and cultural barriers have the added disadvantage of an ESL system that

does not allow them into regular classes until they have finished their language training, which puts them far behind their peers and often makes them unwilling to integrate and learn with much younger classmates. In one community, we heard that for some immigrant families, despite the considerable financial challenges, sending their children to private school is the only option they feel they have to facing a public system that does not work for them.

- **Social service agencies that exist to serve youth are often the ones labeling them in negative ways.** Community members pointed to the common practice of many agencies and organizations of calling youth "high risk" to get funding, and to the dangers of the negative impact that this has on youth who access services or programs at the agency and who feel stigmatized by this label. Some individuals also noted that agencies are not always sensitive to people with different backgrounds, and that some agencies will not admit youth with a criminal record into programming — leaving them with nowhere to go.

- **Employers won't hire youth if they see a certain postal code or if they have been in trouble.** For some youth, it is necessary to use a friend or relative's address when applying for a job because many employers won't hire youth from what they think are "bad" neighbourhoods. For youth with a criminal record, even for minor offenses, finding employment is even more difficult, as many employers just won't give them a chance.

- **When a youth ends up in jail, there is no support or training for when they get out and have to make their way in society.** There is a severe lack of supports for youth in custody. There is also no help for them to gain employment once they have been released. If youth do manage to find employers who will hire them, sometimes they face problems with probation. With so little support, many youth simply turn back to a criminal life when they get out of jail because they feel they have no other options.

- **The media stigmatizes youth and communities.** Labeling youth is part of the problem. The media is too quick to use labels such as "high-risk youth," "social housing," and "ghetto" when describing youth and where they live, and this takes choices and opportunities away from youth. Because bad news sells, the media does not highlight the positive in many communities, choosing only to focus on crime, which further stereotypes and often criminalizes entire neighbourhoods.

- **The government does not support new immigrants.** Many immigrant families need settlement support, job support, and sometimes post-traumatic stress support for the violence they have witnessed in their home countries. Parents often have trouble navigating the system

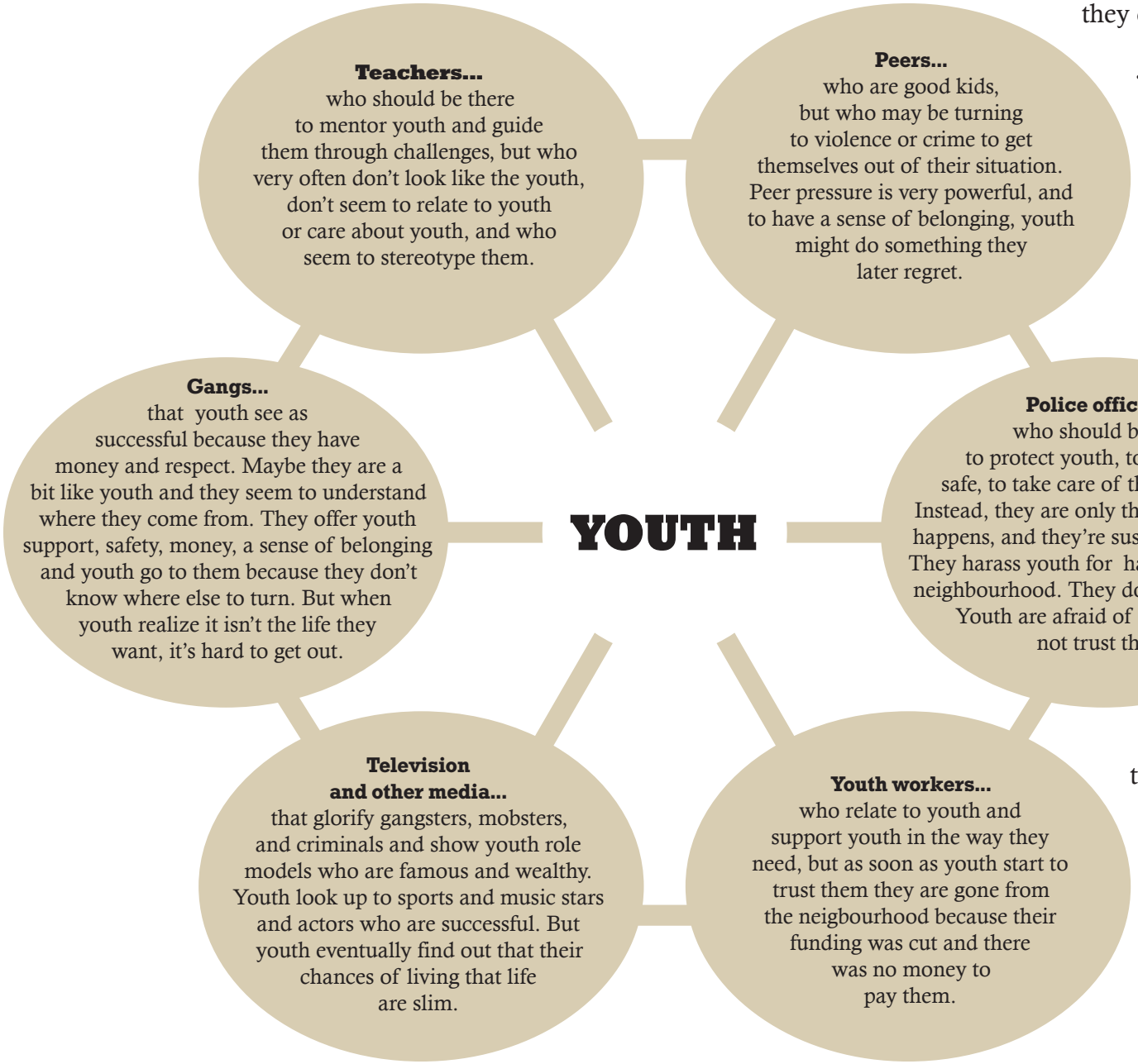
themselves, because of language or cultural barriers, and they cannot help their kids do it. Many immigrant youth need supports, but there are no services specifically for youth. For many new immigrants, because their foreign credentials and work experience are not recognized, they cannot find work in their fields and end up in low-paying jobs. The lack of supports and respect for new immigrants has a huge impact on their children, because it continues a cycle of poverty, living in poor social housing, and a lack of opportunities. Youth see their parents being discriminated against by the government that is supposed to help them.

c. Lack of supports and people who care

Most people agreed that parents are perhaps the most important role models for young people, and that they need to spend more time at home with their families. For many youth, however, parents are not able to be effective role models or mentors because of many competing demands or because they have their own problems that they are unable to address.

- **"There are too many kids having kids."** Many young people who find themselves responsible for raising kids are too young or too inexperienced to know how to parent effectively. They need training and supports to help them, but there really isn't much available to them. There is also an increasing number of single-parent teen mothers, who also lack financial and other supports. On top of the challenges faced by single mothers, there is also a noted lack of positive male role models/mentors in many communities.

- **Many people have trouble dealing with their own problems.** For many parents, their own challenges related to poverty, lack of education, relationships, substance abuse, and other issues are not being adequately addressed, and so they have no capacity to address the needs of their kids. For newcomers, language and cultural issues and post-traumatic stress disorder can also be challenges that must be dealt with first before



they can help young people.

- **Violence at home sets the standard of behaviour for youth.** If youth are seeing domestic violence or other violent behaviours in the home, and parents are the only mentor/role models they have, they will learn that violence is acceptable, a way of life, a way to resolve conflict, and they will use violence to solve their conflicts outside the home, too.

If they don't or can't see their parents as role models, youth turn to others in the community in the hope that someone else will fill that empty space. But for many youth, the only people they have to turn to for support are perhaps the worst role models of all.

◀ **When youth seek other role models to rely on, disappointment can be found in every direction.**

d. Mental health

Mental health and coping with stress are very serious issues among the youth population. A young person's mental health and his or her self-image can be dramatically affected by violence. In many cases, it is shaped entirely by that violence, and through the images and messages they internalize because of their experience of poverty, discrimination, and marginalization. Most youth don't know how to cope with these issues, and either don't have access or are too embarrassed to access resources to help them. Some deal with issues on their own — through violence, substance abuse, gang involvement and other criminal activities. Many are in total isolation from society, and they become criminalized and even further marginalized and harder to reach.

> "When a kid dies in school they send a crisis worker but we had the biggest police raid a while ago and families and people were traumatized but there were no crisis workers. [The raid got reported] in the media but the damage done by cops was not reported on."
>
> *Jamestown meeting*

- **Mental health is not just about learning disabilities.** For many youth, it is about stress, lack of self-esteem, peer pressure, anger and frustration coming from poverty, discrimination and a general lack of support from family, peers, role models and the many systems that have an impact on youth. Furthermore, post-traumatic stress from seeing violence around them (at home, on the street, in school) is also an issue for many youth, and especially for some immigrant youth who have witnessed extreme violence in the countries they came from.

- **The stigma of talking about mental health is huge.**

- **When youth do go to get help they too often find that the doors are closed.** Wait lists for services and programs are too long, and youth can't get help they need when they need it.

- **Agencies hire the wrong people for the wrong reasons.** There seem to be lots of qualified child and youth workers, but not enough who relate to people in the community, who really seem to care about the youth they are serving, and whom the youth feel they can trust. Those expected to address mental health issues with youth — teachers, social workers, youth outreach workers — are not given enough training or supports to handle these often complex issues and cannot provide the help that youth need.

e. Having things to do, being engaged

- **Nothing to do.** So youth end up on the street, getting in trouble. There is a lack of activities or services for youths in some neighbourhoods; communities that are isolated and stigmatized do not share in the benefits of programs offered to other communities.

- **Something to do, but no space to do it in.** Lack of youth space, and existing programs/centres, are not "youth friendly." Unoccupied space is not being utilized — this space should be supervised and operated by appropriate staff who can relate to and identify with youth.

> "There are no funds to engage the youth that most need it; 90% of the time the funds do not to trickle down to the youth that really need it."
>
> *Kingston-Galloway*

- **Something to do, but not relevant to youth.** "'Nuff programs exist just for programming sake." The programs that do exist are too mainstream and redundant and are not meeting educational, cultural, and life-skills needs of youth. They are not measurable and/or accountable to the community. Programs are outdated — they have been there for a while and are not updated or relevant to youth. Programming for older youth does not exist or is boring and unappealing. Recreation and youth centres need cool, hip programming, not your typical basketball, to engage them and get them off the streets. There is a lack of quality programs for "at-risk" youth, a lack of effective programs and activities for youth to address violence, and a lack of prevention and early intervention.

- **Something to do, but program staff are not trained to engage youth.** Too many agencies are staffed with unaccountable managers, culturally insensitive and uncaring staff, and they run time-limited/short duration programs. Managers and staff are not reflective of the community they serve, and untrained youth workers lack knowledge and skills for real youth engagement.

- **Something to do, but no sustained funding.** Programs and social services lack sustained funding from government to assist youth. Sustained funding for youth programs is needed to keep people engaged; when we lose youth through lack of programming, we really lose them, and often to the criminal justice system. Programs that work to engage youth aren't funded to make sustainable impact, and sometimes it can take years to tell if something works.

f. Youth see violence as a way to solve problems

Many youth see violence as part of their lives from the time they are very young. Domestic violence, violence in the media and on TV, violent clashes in school and with police become the norm for resolving conflicts. Everywhere youth look, they see that violence is solved by violence, and fear, intimidation, and violence become the only tools that many young people can use to gain power, respect or recognition, or to solve their own conflicts.

- **Violence as conflict-resolution starts at home.** When youth see violence from an early age and in their homes, it becomes normalized and creates a standard of behaving violently to resolve conflicts. Exposure to violence for very young children allows them to both internalize violence and become immune to it, which can lead to a lack of respect for the lives of others and a lack of concern for the consequences of violence.

- **Police use violence to stop violence.** Outside of the home, violence on the streets is just an extension of the reality youth already know. Youth come to see police take-downs as everyday events in their neighbourhoods. If police respond violently to these situations, youth begin to fear police presence instead of trusting it. If youth are targeted in these arrests or regularly do not feel respected by police, they quickly lose trust in law enforcement and in its ability to work for them and not against them.

- **TV and media show us the only way we can be.** The role of the media in strengthening this belief in youth cannot be ignored. Not only does television glorify violence and criminal activity, but also, media reports stereotype entire communities, labeling them as dangerous or high-risk, thus criminalizing the people who live there. Adults learn to fear youth because of what they wear, if they travel in groups, and because of where they come from. These labels stick and can easily become a reality for youth, because they do not know anything else but the negative stigma of who others say they are and what they say they will become.

g. When youth get in trouble, the system abandons them

When violence leads youth to be expelled from school, or transferred to the criminal justice system, they often feel that it is just another institution that does not care about them or believe in their future. The systems created to support them very often abandon and marginalize youth, when they most need respect, education, support and skills development to gain a second chance.

> "Tougher sentences are a finishing school to make better criminals."
>
> *Thunder Bay*

- **Zero-tolerance policies result in drop outs/"push outs" from school.** When students get suspended or expelled, they're abandoned. Punishing youth by suspending them is not helping. Youth often use that time to find and hang out with others who aren't in school. Idleness causes more damage and possibly violent behavior. The attitude of some youth is that a three-day suspension is like a vacation. They spend this time hanging out with older unemployed or out-of-school individuals, who may not be positive role models. It is also the time when most youth are recruited into gangs, prostitution or other illegal activity.

- **Teachers are overworked, so it is easier to wait until the problem is bad enough to call the police** to deal with it, rather than dealing with it proactively and early — that takes too many resources and too much energy.

- **Legal Aid lawyers do not put forth the same amount of effort for youth as they do for regular paying clients.** They are less likely to communicate with their clients, less likely to show up for bail hearings or other court matters, and often advise youth to plead guilty so that they can move on to other files.

- **Being in custody is a waste of time.** When a youth goes to jail, there are no supports while he/she is in there. There is no education or skills training to help them when they get out. Many youth will simply do their time, and when they get out, slip back into the same negative relationships or gangs because they have no better options.

h. No hope

Youth lose hope because of the many factors outlined above that work against them. The following is an attempt to illustrate the path of many youth who find themselves hopeless in the face of many, many challenges. While it is not directly quoted from the youth consulted, it is an amalgamation of the many voices heard during the Neighbourhood Insights Session.

A cycle of poverty

What's the use of me working hard when I see my parents doing it and they don't get ahead?

I'm embarrassed and ashamed about where I live but we can't get out of social housing.

I'm told I need all these material things but I can't afford to buy them.

I want to go to school but know I won't be able to afford it.

The only job I can get is at a fast-food place and for minimum wage.

I might as well deal drugs because I can make more money.

It's easier to deal drugs, get a gun and be a thug than it is to get a decent paying job.

Why bother trying when I know I won't succeed?

Isolation, stigmatization, marginalization

I am discriminated against by school, police, employers, media, all systems that have an impact on me.

I have no one who really cares for me, who listens to me, who I can trust and turn to when I have a problem.

My teachers tell me I can't go to university and push me out of academics.

My youth worker, the one person I trusted, no longer works in my neighbourhood.

Police harass me and think I am up to no good.

The only thing people know about me and where I come from is violence and criminals.

No one believes I have any potential.

I am alone in the world.

Systems are broken

My mom can't make enough money to support us and there is no support from anywhere else.

I need help but I have to go to six different places to find it and I don't fit with any of them.

I can't get a job because I have a criminal record.

There are no services in our neighbourhood and the one community centre costs money and is too far away.

The one program I loved and that was good for me got cut last year.

I am powerless to make anything better.

Politicians and people in power cannot be trusted

They keep coming back and asking me what to do and tell me it will change and then it doesn't.

They produce reports that no one reads.

They are not accountable to my community and don't really care about what we need.

Nothing ever changes.

V. What To Do About It

Participants in the Neighbourhood Insight Sessions spoke again and again about the need to create communities where youth are, and feel, valued; where they get respect and have a sense of belonging. They also talked about the need to build a feeling of trust in each other, in communities, and in institutions, and the need to treat the community like a family.

They said that Band-Aid solutions are not the answer. Addressing the roots of violence involving youth requires a dedicated, long-term, well-resourced effort on the part of the provincial government, communities and others, that recognizes the value of community action and supports it. It also requires making improvements to the larger systems — like education, housing, employment, recreation, criminal justice, and other services supporting communities.

> "Putting the money in the right hands makes a huge difference. We tend to put it into the wrongs hands of huge institutions, but in terms of reaching the hard-to-reach, the money is better used by quickly moving, adaptable, grassroots organizations who can make a difference immediately."
>
> *Kitchener meeting*

They also said that, most importantly, addressing the roots of violence involving youth requires putting words into action — collaborative, sustainable, creative, asset-based action.

1. Recognize the value of community action, and support it

"You need real people who live in the hood to tell you straight what is wrong. We want action now. Is there really going to be change? Because we want change; at the end of the day I live in the hood and I want change, not another report to sit on a shelf. We're talking now and in two weeks another kid will be dead."

Jane-Finch meeting

The provincial government and communities both have a responsibility to engage youth and empower them. Neither group can achieve this without the other. As many communities have shown, success comes when communities are accountable and take action locally; successful government support comes when governments support the things that communities and youth know are working. Communities not only need financial and structural support, but also they need to know there is a shared philosophical approach to addressing the challenges they face, and that the governments are listening to their needs and their advice on how to make positive change.

"You need real people who live in the hood to tell you straight what is wrong. We want action now. Is there really going to be change? Because we want change; at the end of the day I live in the hood and I want change, not another report to sit on a shelf. We're talking now and in two weeks another kid will be dead."

Jane-Finch meeting

a. Involve youth and communities in understanding and addressing the problem. Any effort to better understand and address violence involving youth needs to make youth and the community an integral part of the solution. The people living in neighbourhoods are the most valuable assets of the neighbourhood, and their ideas, insights, experiences, and vested interest in the future of their neighbourhood can be enormous contributions to the process.

Participants in the Neighbourhood Insight Sessions often focused on the importance of involving youth locally, and involving both youth and communities in provincial policy. Ways to do this could include: establishing a Youth Secretariat or Youth Cabinet, within the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, with a strong focus on providing planning and evaluation models/tools and methodologies to communities; supporting youth-organized, youth-led forums to engage youth from various neighbourhoods in focused, problem-solving and action-oriented sessions; and encouraging youth input into their own programming.

b. Strengthen the programs communities have said they need.

Participants told us that their neighbourhoods need programs that are positive and relevant. These programs need to include recreation-based activities, but must also go beyond recreation to meet the educational, cultural, vocational and life-skills needs of neighbourhood youth. This means providing a continuum of services that offer programs to all individuals, at all ages and stages of development (including parents). That includes income-generating or experience-gaining programs — like apprenticeships and co-op employment.

There also needs to be an emphasis on mentoring. Youth need that one person in their life that gives them attention, believes in them, supports them. It is important to connect youth with both peer mentors and one-on-one relationships with adult/older role models. This is especially important for youth that are hardest to reach. Gang exit programs are also needed, as are programs for youth who are newcomers to Canada and who need violence trauma counseling and supports.

Participants often talked specifically about the value of youth drop-in centres, as they provide a safe haven for kids to hang out with their peers, youth workers and positive role models after school.

c. Support the effective delivery of those programs.

Sustained, long-term, holistic, flexible funding is key to making any difference — starting with the organizations, programs and services that we know work. Competition for funding needs to be reduced, so that youth-serving organizations (and especially youth-led youth-serving organizations) can devote their energies to delivering programs and working with youth instead of fundraising. There is also a vital need for sound evaluation of agencies serving youth (to be carried out by funding bodies) to ensure effective delivery of programs and services. It was also suggested that consideration be given to establishing a Youth Entrepreneurial Fund.

The other key to effective program delivery is hiring the right people, offering a good wage, and making a commitment to the employee for the long term. Youth-serving organizations need to hire people who relate to youth, look like the youth from the neighbourhood, understand the neighbourhood, are credible in the neighbourhood, and have a vested interest in the future of the neighbourhood. Most of the time, these are youth. It's more important to find someone who can connect with youth, and then train them, than to train someone and then hope that they can connect with youth.

Effective delivery also means youth-friendly delivery, and accessible delivery. Programs need to be available and youth need to be aware of their availability. Participants also talked about program accessibility in terms of cost (zero or low cost), location (on what turf the program is offered), timing (when the program is offered), the types of programs offered, etc.

2. Recognize the influence that big systems have on communities, and fix the parts we know need fixing

Many participants talked about the need for large-scale provincial measures to address some of the long-term, systemic issues that contribute to the roots of violence involving youth. Those systemic issues related to such things as housing and community infrastructure, education, and the criminal justice system. The points below summarize the recommendations put forward. Additional details related to these recommendations can be found in the individual reports from each Neighbourhood Insight Session.

a. **Housing and Community Infrastructure.** This includes upgrading the living conditions of people who live in subsidized housing, and looking at opportunities to rebuild social housing and reintegrate social housing residents with middle income residents. It also means installing more lighting and safety features, and helping change perceptions about neighbourhoods (e.g., by considering renaming them).

b. **Social Service Agencies.** There's a need for longer hours and shorter wait lists at youth-serving agencies, as well as more partnerships and/or effective coalitions among agencies serving youth to make sure youth get the help they need when they need it. The co-location of youth services in one place would be helpful in providing youth with a "one stop shop." Culturally sensitive training programs also need to be provided (both cross-cultural and those with an emphasis on anti-black racism) to staff working with culturally diverse youth.

c. **Employment.** This includes increasing minimum wage and increasing apprenticeship and/or co-op employment opportunities.

d. **Immigration.** This includes providing new immigrant youth with settlement support, sometimes post-traumatic stress support, and supports for new immigrant parents who have credentials and need to have those credentials recognized.

e. **Education.** The things that are working in the education system need support and strengthening, including: Pathways to Education and other alternative education programs; student involvement; anti-bullying programs in schools; and school uniforms (they avoid issues related to material things and youth wearing gang colours). An emphasis on anti-bullying initiatives has been used in one of the elementary schools and has led to a 25% reduction in the amount of suspensions.

Other key recommendations from participants included: be more flexible; put more social workers and counselors in schools; change the Safe Schools Act; and create more post-secondary options for kids who are not interested

in college or university. It is also important to recruit more teachers who reflect and care about the kids they teach ("teachers that look like me, understand my culture"), and to stop discriminating — just because a kid is from a different cultural background, it does not mean the kid should have fewer opportunities than other kids, especially when it comes to post-secondary education.

Finally, a number of people talked about the importance of making schools community hubs.

f. **Police.** There needs to be improved skills training for front-line officers, including diversity training, cultural sensitivity training, anti-discrimination training and customer service skills training. More minority police officers need to be hired so that police reflect the people in the community. It's also important to fund more community police officers whose job it is to go into schools and develop relationships with youth, and there needs to be some consistency in the police officers working in specific neighbourhoods so that relationships can be built. Quicker responses are required to youth calls, and there's also an opportunity to better educate youth about what 222-TIPS (Crimestoppers) is really about (there are a lot misconceptions about what the program is about and youth think police come over to their home and hand over a cheque in front of the whole neighbourhood).

g. **Criminal Justice System.** The justice system needs to focus more on prevention than on punishment. Investments in alternatives to incarceration need to be made; as one neighbourhood specifically put it, "Building a youth super jail is not the answer." More diversion and restorative justice programs are needed, and every attempt should be made to keep youth out of the courts and placed into restorative justice programs instead. There needs to be more counseling for victims and offenders, and supports for youth when they get out of jail.

h. **Media.** The media needs to stop glorifying violence, and stop stereotyping and stigmatizing communities and youth. They need to highlight the positive things that happen in communities.

i. **Unique challenges faced by youth in small, isolated, northern First Nations communities need to be addressed.** There are 90 First Nations communities in northern Ontario, spread over an area covering two-thirds of the province. The communities are separated by vast distances, with sparse populations, and are often accessible only by air. Schools in remote communities stop at grade eight, so all Aboriginal young people who want to continue past grade eight must relocate. When these 13-year-olds entering grade nine get to urban centres for high school, often without their families, they have exceptional support needs that must be met.

j. **The government.** Participants repeatedly talked about the importance of breaking down the silos between youth-serving government ministries and departments, because better communication, coordination and partnership will lead to better serving the needs of youth and communities. It was also suggested that the province identify a point person for issues related to violence and crime involving youth. The importance of sticking to government commitments was also stressed — governments need to see things through to the end.

Finally, a lot of advice focused on the value of youth workers and the important role of the province in supporting specific and comprehensive training programs for youth workers.

VI. Advice On What To Do With This Advice

All of the Neighbourhood Insight Sessions paid a lot of attention to process, including advice and requests regarding the role, responsibilities, and approach of the Co-Chairs and their Review team. Many participants made the following points:

- They would like their neighbourhoods and communities to be kept up to date on and involved in the work of the Review.
- Communities need to see a sense of optimism in the report.
- The report needs to be visible to communities, and not stigmatize their communities any further.
- Their neighbourhoods would like to be able to read the Review's report and say "this is what came out of what we said."
- If the Review's recommendations can't happen quickly, they want an update on what is happening and how resources are being used.

> "The best antidote for frustration is positive action."
>
> *Paul Ifayomi Grant (from SLAM meeting)*

Expanding on the previous points, participants also provided the following additional advice on next steps for the Review:

Demonstrate ownership, openness, accountability and commitment. Many participants requested that the Co-Chairs make a commitment to producing a report, with recommendations, that reflects a prioritized, phased developmental action plan with a specific timetable. They also would like to see the Premier respond to the Review's work with a clear commitment to action on approved recommendations.

Keep youth and communities involved in the Review's work. Review Co-Chairs should consider involving youth in a public event to present the Review's report to the Premier. This will demonstrate that youth made a significant contribution to the work, and recognize the value of youth having ownership over the results. It was suggested that the Co-Chairs do a press conference when the report is released (and ideally a press conference in each of the eight neighbourhoods visited) — especially since the Review's work is about roots. Prior to submitting the report to the Premier, a number of neighbourhoods requested that the Co-Chairs return to provide an overall perspective of their recommendations to each community.

Keep people engaged in the ongoing work related to the recommendations. In some communities, people said that it doesn't really matter what comes out of the Review, since communities will continue doing their work. Others said that the Review can help strengthen neighbourhoods by identifying things that neighbourhoods can do on their own as a result of the Review's work and by engaging them in this work.

Appendix:
Participant List

The following list identifies the majority of the over 400 participants in the Neighbourhood Insight Sessions, including over 200 youth and over 130 different organizations. All participants were assured that they would remain anonymous. This list is provided solely to indicate the breadth of the consultations.

Action For Neighbourhood Change

African Canadian Legal Clinic, Community Worker

Agincourt Community Centre, Executive Director and Youth Coordinator

Algonquin College, Professor

Alliance for Children and Youth

Area Residents (from each of the 8 neighbourhoods, no names provided)

Bay Mills, Outreach worker

Blacus Ninja Inc., Hip Hop Artist

Borden B.T.I, three Youth

Boys and Girls Clubs, Executive Director and Youth Worker

Breakaway Relief Care

Breaking The Cycle Gang Exit Program, Executive Director

Britannia Woods Community House, 11 Youth, Youth Worker and Executive Director

C.L.A.S.P. (Community and Legal Aid Services Program), Director

C.W. Jeffreys CI - Stay Connected Program

Cameron Heights CI, Working Against Youth Violence Everywhere

Carefirst Chinese Youth Program, Executive Director and Youth Coordinator

Carleton University, Two Professors and a Researcher

Centennial College, Consultant and Student

Centennial College, Placement Student

Central Toronto Youth Services

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), Education and Health Promotion

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), Mental Health Court

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Discipline Chief of Addiction Therapy, also a member of LGBTQ

Chester Le youth residents

Children's Centre

Choices for Youth

City Chief Executive Officer

City of Kitchener, Downtown Community Center

City of Kitchener, Youth Council

City of Ottawa Parks and Recreation

City of Toronto Councillor, Ward 39

City of Toronto, Community Development Officer, Parks and Recreation Staff, Youth Outreach Worker, City Development Unit, Community Safety

City of Toronto, Steeles-L'Amoreaux Community Outreach Worker

City of Waterloo

Community Activist

Community Justice

Community Justice Initiatives, Resolve Program Coordinator

Community Self led

Conflict Mediation Services Downsview

Correctional Services Canada, Intern

Crime Prevention Board of Directors

Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School Student Consultation, six students

Dilico Child and Family Services, Youth Worker

Dilico/Children's Aid

Downtown Community Centre, Youth Services Coordinator

Drop In Services, Manager of Food Program

East Scarborough Boys & Girls Club, Manager, Youth Facilitator and Executive Director

East Scarborough Boys & Girls Club, Provincial Youth Outreach Worker

Elementary school, Two Youth

Elevated Grounds, Youth and Parents

Elizabeth Fry Society of N-W Ontario

Evergreen Action for Neighbourhood Change

FGDM (Family Group Decision Making) and Stride, Program Coordinator

Firmfaith Ministries, Church Leader

Gate Way Café, Employment Worker

George Brown College B.E.S.T Program, Placement Student

George Brown College, Placement Student

Glendower, Outreach Worker

Grand River Hospital Mental Health

Griffin Centre

Hamilton Wentworth Detention Centre

High School Student

Hinks Dellcrest

Humber College, Placement Student

Involve Youth

Islamic Chaplain

Jamaican Canadian Association

Jane and Finch.com

John Howard Society, Community Aftercare

St. Mary's

Justice for Dustin

JVS Toronto, G.E.D. Program

JVS Toronto, Placement Student

JVS Toronto, Youth Reach

Kitchener-Waterloo Counselling, OK2BME

Kitchener-Waterloo Sexual Assault Support Centre, Public Education Coordinator

L'Amoreaux Community Centre, Executive Director & Youth Coordinator

Lakehead Public Schools

Lawyer - AG's Office - Civil

Lawyer - Criminal Defense

Leave Out Violence

Local Auto Mechanic

Maplewood High School, Vice Principal

Margaret Best M.P.P Scarborough Guildwood, Office Staff

Mary Ward Catholic Secondary School, Principal

Mary Ward Catholic Secondary, Students

Mayor of Thunder Bay

Mennonite Immigrant New Life Centre, Executive Director

Mennonite Immigrant Resource Centre – Birchmount & Sheppard Avenues, Executive Director

Midnight Basketball at Michelle Heights, five Youth

Mothers, three Single

Muslim Community Leader
Nishnawbe Aski Legal Services Corp.
Nishnawbe Aski Nation
Nishnawbe Aski Nation, Deputy Grand Chief Alvin Fidler
Ottawa Police, Community Liaison Officer
Ottawa Police, Detective, Youth Unit
Ottawa Police, Staff Sergeant, Youth Unit
Ottawa Probation, Three staff from the Youth Unit
Ottawa University, Two researchers
Ottawa Youth Gangs Working Group, Chair
Ottawa Youth Justice Services Network, Chair
P.E.A.C.H., Youth Outreach Worker
Pinecrest Queensway Community Health Services, 13 Youth
Pinecrest Queensway Community Health Services, four Youth Workers
Por Amor, Co-Director
Probation and Parole
Provincial Youth Outreach Worker
Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada, Researcher
Ray of Hope
Real Estate Agent, Scarborough
Regional Multicultural Youth Centre
Revive, Program Coordinator
ROOF (Reaching Our Outdoor Friends), Kitchener
Ryerson University, Criminologist
Salvadoria Canadian Community of Waterloo Region
Salvation Army Church, Birchmount Avenue, Youth Coordinator
San Romanoway Revitalization Association
Scarborough CAN (Civic Action Network)
Service Canada, Supervisor
Shop Community Initiative
Sir Robert L. Borden High School, Guidance Counsellor
Sir Winston Churchill Collegiate Vocational Institute, seven Students
Somali Youth Basketball League, 14 Youth
SouthCore Improvement Committee
St. Patrick High School, 25 Students
St. Paul's High School, Principal
St. Stephen's Community House Mobilizer
Stephen Leacock Collegiate Institute, Principal
Stephen Leacock Collegiate Institute, Students
Storefront Services, Community Worker
Storefront Services, Manager and Volunteer Coordinator
Sweda Inc., Part time Community Worker
Thunder Bay Indian Friendship Centre
Thunder Bay Police Services
Thunder Bay Police Services, Police Chief
Thunder Bay Shelter House
Thunder Bay Shelter House, Youth -Ex-gang member
Timothy Eaton Secondary School, Principal
Timothy Eaton Secondary School, Students
Timothy Eaton Secondary School, Teacher
Toronto Community Housing (Orton Park), Property Manager
Toronto Community Housing, Community Worker
Toronto Community Housing, Head of Security
Toronto Community Housing, Health Promotion Officer
Toronto Community Housing, Manager
Toronto Community Housing, Recreation Coordinator
Toronto District School Board, Teacher
Toronto District School Board, Youth Boost – Pre Employment Program
Toronto Parks & Recreation, Curran Hall Manager and Youth

Outreach Workers
Toronto Police Services Division 42, Community Relations/Youth Program Officer
Toronto Police Services, 31 Division CPLC Officers
Toronto Public Library – Children's Services
Toronto Social Planning Council - Community Planner
Toronto Victim Services
Tropicana
Unemployed Youth
United Sisters, Eight female Youth
United Way of Thunder Bay
United Way, Kitchener-Waterloo Area
University of Toronto, two Students
Urban Aboriginal Strategy
Waterloo Catholic District School Board, Teacher
West Hill Community Services, Youth Worker and Manager
Westgate High School, Student
William Creighton Centre
William Hayes Centre, five closed custody Youth
Woodroffe High School, five Youth
Woodroofe High School, Principal
Woodroofe High School, Teacher
YAY (Youth Assisting Youth)
Y-Connect
YMCA Employment Centre
York University, Student
Youth - Alternative education
Youth - Alternative education
Youth - Attending special education
Youth - Attending special school
Youth - College Student
Youth - Computer Intern
Youth - Confederation College
Youth - Co-op student doing community hours
Youth - Ex gang member
Youth - Former President of Youth Council at Boys and Girls Club
Youth - George Brown College
Youth - High School Student
Youth - Hillcrest High School
Youth - In Treatment
Youth - Part Time Dancer
Youth - School drop-out
Youth - Singer in a Rock Band
Youth - Single mom
Youth - Student at Confederation College
Youth - Studying to become a Police Officer
Youth - Studying to become an automotive mechanic
Youth - University Student
Youth - University Student
Youth in a TCHC Program
Youth Job Action Centre
Youth Outreach Worker
Youth Services Bureau, Executive Director
Youth Centre Volunteers, two Adult
Youthinc. JVS Toronto
Youthlink, Provincial Outreach Worker
YouthScape
54 Youth (no affiliation provided)

Section 3:

Rooted in Action:

A Youth-Led Report on Our Demands and Plans to Address the Root Causes of Violence in Our Communities

Grassroots Youth Collaborative

Written by:
Alpha Abebe & Craig Fortier
with the support of youth and staff of the Grassroots Youth Collaborative

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The Grassroots Youth Collaborative

The Grassroots Youth Collaborative (GYC) was formed in May 2004 to advocate for policies that empower young people to have a voice and contribute to their communities. We are a collective of culturally and racially diverse youth-led organizations working in underserved, lower-income, racialized, and marginalized communities where violence, especially youth violence, is regularly in the media spotlight. The programs our members deliver reach out and engage young people who are typically missed by more mainstream youth programming.

As of the date of publication, GYC consists of 11 member organizations: 4Unity Media Arts Association (4Unity), Beatz to Da Streetz, Canadian-Tamil Youth Development Centre (CANTYD), For Youth Initiative (FYI), Phase 1 Step Team, Rathburn Area Youth (RAY), Regent Park Focus, The REMIX Project, Schools Without Borders (SWB), the Somali Youth Association of Toronto (SOYAT) and the Young Diplomats Ethiopian Youth Development Group.

GYC is committed to building the capacity of young people in the City of Toronto, and also to developing solutions to problems and barriers in our communities. Our collaborative emerged in 2004 when youth-led organizations were struggling to maintain services and programs after close to a decade of severe cuts to funding for social service agencies. The cuts affected many of the large mainstream organizations, and they became more reliant on project funding rather than core funding. But grassroots youth-led organizations were hit harder, and many were teetering on the brink of extinction.

GYC came together to break the isolation and social/cultural/political barriers preventing young people from taking control of their own communities and lives. The GYC focuses on three broad fields of work: (1) resource-sharing and capacity-building for youth-led organizations in the City of Toronto; (2) fundraising for youth-led organizations in the City of Toronto; and (3) advocacy, research and action in addressing social issues facing youth in our communities.

From the Roots Up!

In March 2006, the GYC held a two-day forum: "From the Roots Up! A Youth-Led Forum on Building Safe & Healthy Communities." The forum brought out 250 youth from the racialized and marginalized communities in which we work and live to discuss tangible and concrete policy demands to improve the quality of life in our communities. It led to a report and documentary that outlined the root issues facing youth in the GTA and the responses and policy recommendations they put forward to all levels of government.

The following are some key recommendations that came out of this process:

- Coordination among all levels of government (Federal, Provincial, Municipal) to work with communities and implement long-term sustainable programs that address the root causes of violence in our communities (i.e. poverty, racism, lack of meaningful employment opportunities, Indigenous rights, migrant rights, etc.)
- Focus away from policing and law-enforcement and towards holistic community-based policies that help to build communities
- More meaningful government job opportunities for youth to help them to build and support their communities
- Re-writing of Ontario High School Curriculum that moves away from Eurocentric worldviews and encapsulates the stories, histories and resistance of Indigenous, African, Asian and South American/Caribbean peoples in Canada
- Repeal of Safe Schools and Safe Streets Act, which both target and criminalize poor youth, Indigenous youth and youth of colour in the schools and on the streets.
- An immediate halting of funding/construction of the "Toronto Youth Centre" set to open in Brampton, Ontario– with a focus away from incarceration and as a step in that direction towards small, open-custody and diversion programs as suggested in the Meffe Report.

GYC presented the recommendations to a delegation of 50 representatives of various levels of government on April 3, 2006. Since then, GYC has continued to work towards the implementation of all the recommendations in the report on the forum.

The Review of the Roots of Youth Violence Secretariat

In October 2007, GYC and staff members of the Review of the Roots of Youth Violence Secretariat began to discuss how the two parties could collaborate in compiling research and putting forward the perspectives of the GYC membership and participants in a meaningful way that addressed root issues of violence in our communities.

Weary of the lack of action following the From the Roots Up! process in 2006, many GYC members were apprehensive about once again engaging in any research process that was consultative but not action-oriented in the best interests of the community. In our discussions, GYC members cited numerous examples of government inaction on commissioned reports (i.e., the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples; the 2006 Meffe Inquest Report). They wanted to ensure that any work dedicated to supporting the Review of the Roots of Youth Violence and its report would have positive, action-oriented implications and impacts in our communities.

After serious discussion and assurances by the staff at the Secretariat that Co-Chairs Roy McMurtry and Alvin Curling were committed to addressing the social issues that impact our communities, GYC agreed to propose a project to the Secretariat. Our project would enable us to conduct research, mobilize community members and put forward to the Government of Ontario a clear plan of action to address the serious social issues facing our communities.

GYC presented its proposal in November 2007, and the Review of the Roots of Youth Violence Secretariat accepted it after limited discussion. It was to have three main components:

1) Document the Experience

a. Scan what youth-led organizations have published or released on underlying causes contributing to youth violence.
b. Collaborate with concurrent research projects.

2) Conduct Community Educationals on Barriers and Solutions

a. Work with communities and neighbourhoods to contribute a thick analysis of the issues at the root of violence in our communities and the tangible solutions young people are putting forward to address them.
b. Get feedback on the accuracy and relevance of our data collection and local/international research.
c. Explore who is saying what about what the roots of violence are, and begin to map proposed solutions.

3) Develop Recommendations

a. Develop recommendations that flow from the research, in the following areas:
   i. Youth-led strategies for building safe and healthy communities
   ii. Supporting youth-led initiatives and community-based work
   iii. Creating structural changes that will improve the conditions that impact violence in our communities
b. Present recommendations from the perspectives of diverse youth in the City of Toronto. To ensure that they are action oriented, provide immediate, middle-term, and long-term strategies, and simple evaluative measures, in the recommendations.

The Research Process

After submitting the proposal, GYC representatives met with Roy McMurtry and Alvin Curling, Co-Chairs of the Review of the Roots of Youth Violence, to discuss the research and to push for a process that is inclusive, transparent and serious about action.

Mr. McMurtry emphasized that the *process* of conducting the research would be the legacy of this work. In other words, the means by which we begin to address the issues at the root of violence in our communities is as important as the goals we seek to achieve. The GYC has consistently placed an emphasis on process in our work in communities, and we are encouraged by Mr. McMurtry's acknowledgement of its importance.

The following section sets out some key process issues that GYC identified as important to conducting research with racialized and marginalized youth, and to our experiences as part of the Review of the Roots of Youth Violence. It is meant to contribute important reflections with respect to our experiences as staff and participants in youth-led organizations within this study. In the interest of truly making the process itself the legacy of this research, we must highlight the importance of creating an open and public discourse and a culture of respect in the collaboration between directly affected communities and government research studies in developing and implementing social policy legislation.

Timelines and Context

The work of the Review of the Roots of Youth Violence must be understood within the context of the social and political climate in which it emerged. Reacting to the shooting death of Jordan Manners in the spring of 2007, the Ontario government and the federal government proceeded to implement reactionary policies that sought to address a perceived "increase in violent crimes" among youth in the City of Toronto through a "tough on crime" agenda:

- July 27, 2007: Premier McGuinty announces $26 million and the hiring of 200 new police officers to "fight gun crimes."
- December 6, 2007: Premier McGuinty announces a $51 million "guns and gangs" strategy that proposes to step up enforcement of the "guns and gangs problems" in the City of Toronto.
- Construction of the $100+ million "Roy McMurtry" youth superjail continues, in conflict with the recommendations of the 2006 Meffe Inquest report.

Most recently, the federal Conservative government has passed Bill C-2, which they call the "violent crimes act." The Act will impose more stringent bail conditions, minimum jail sentences for young offenders, and harsher sentences for gun-related crimes, drunk driving, etc. This omnibus bill passed with little or no public debate and no year-long research studies that could prove the effectiveness of such measures (measures that have become antiquated and discredited in many US states).

To counterbalance this "tough on crime" agenda, Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty sought to conduct research on policies that would target the root issues of youth violence. Funding of $15 million (for three years) for the "Youth Challenge Fund" was announced, and the Review of the Roots of Youth Violence Secretariat was created.

The "root causes" (i.e., poverty, displacement, racism, racial profiling, Eurocentric education curricula, lack of affordable housing, lack of meaningful employment or opportunities), identified for decades by social justice advocates, community members and grassroots organizations, have been largely ignored or exacerbated by government policies (particularly since the Mike Harris era). They have not been addressed with the urgency with which the government sought to invest hundreds of millions of dollars in the prison industrial complex.

Thus, a comprehensive plan of action for addressing these root issues should include the multitude of research, reports and studies that grassroots organizations have released over the last decade. With time constraints and limited resources, these small community-based organizations have made hundreds of important and timely contributions to addressing issues that impact the wellbeing of their communities, with little or no interest from most government agencies. Moreover, there has been even less interest in coordinated and comprehensive implementation strategies, organized among all three levels of government, to address some of the most critical social issues underlying the roots of violence in our communities.

The timeline to complete the work of the Review of the Roots of Youth Violence was one year. However, the time given to GYC (following the signing of the contract) was less than 12 weeks. Although our collaborative felt that it was important to contribute to this research initiative, time constraints significantly impacted the breadth and inclusiveness of both the process and the research. GYC would have liked to have been given more time to undertake this research and to provide input on matters of policy, not just during a reactionary political period, but *throughout long-term social policy planning initiatives*.

Transparency and Trust

GYC is a strong advocate for transparency and openness within community consultation and research processes. We feel that, too often, governments have tended to obfuscate, bureaucratize and drive research to ensure that the results reflect the political ideology of the government in power. This lack of transparency can manifest itself in many tangible ways:

- Lateness in advising communities about a research initiative that impacts them directly
- Hiring civil servants with little or no community experience with the people directly impacted by the study to complete the research
- Lack of full disclosure of information that would be considered important or relevant to the communities participating in the research process
- Strong focus on contractual obligations and bureaucracy and little focus on the urgency and social realities of communities undertaking the research
- Under-resourcing communities, or contracting "research experts" rather than those directly impacted by the issues being researched in the study

The Review of the Roots of Youth Violence Secretariat attempted to address some of these issues of transparency and trust in our initial meetings. They contacted GYC early in the process and stayed in fairly consistent communication with our staff and membership throughout the process. The secretariat also funded GYC's research contribution. The work the staff did to get an in-depth understanding of the issues facing the communities they were seeking to research should not be overlooked, despite the significant time constraints and the lack of funding to conduct a comprehensive study that would truly and more broadly encompass issues impacting youth in Ontario.

Although this work by secretariat staff helped to build a working relationship with GYC, there were obvious issues of transparency and trust breached by the McMurtry-Curling research, which had a direct impact on our ability as a collaborative to conduct meaningful research and to trust that our work and the words of our program participants would be taken seriously by the government and by the Co-Chairs who would present this research.

First and foremost was our view that of one of the Co-Chairs of this study, former Chief Justice of Ontario Roy McMurtry, lacked impartiality because he gave the Government of Ontario permission, in July 2007, to name after him the youth superjail under construction

in Brampton. The building of the Roy McMurtry Youth Centre, a 192-bed secure custody facility for youth prisoners, contradicts the recommendations of the Meffe Inquest, which resulted in the closing of the Toronto Youth Assessment Centre (TYAC) after the suicide death of David Meffe in 2002. What concerns GYC most about this link between the youth superjail and Mr. McMurtry is that the construction of the jail directly contradicts a clear recommendation in the Meffe Inquest. This gives us cause to worry about whether recommendations arising from this research process would be disregarded in the same way.

Second, while staff at the secretariat were genuinely concerned and interested in seeking the ideas and experiences of racialized and marginalized youth in the study, they had not built long-term trusting relationships within the communities in which they sought to conduct research. The process to make tangible long-term change in our communities must include a long-term commitment from government staff to support and work with communities, on a consistent basis, to identify the issues they face.

Clear Mandate, Collaboration and Action

Historically, youth-led organizations have seen little action on the implementation of recommendations and policy initiatives brought forward by community members. Although there has been no shortage of consultations and forums and research, there has been little action by governments (federal, provincial or municipal) that shows a clear mandate and a strong commitment to work with communities to implement policy that would have a positive and long-term impact.

This lack of action is in sharp contrast with the reactionary and swift actions that often follow a public shooting or a crime involving youth of colour. Specifically, increased budgets for police forces, "guns and gangs" task forces, and the construction of the Roy McMurtry youth superjail were all implemented without broad community consultation or supporting research, and (in the case of the superjail) contrary to existing research and recommendations coming from a public inquest. The volatile and contradictory nature of youth justice legislation has led to a lack of community trust that government will act to implement long-term sustainable policy directives that would help to address some of the most crippling root social issues facing racialized and marginalized communities in Ontario.

This report and the documentaries and community action forums that resulted from the research process seek to directly challenge the Government of Ontario and all political parties in Ontario to adopt policy legislation that is long-term, sustainable and community-driven. We are also writing this report directly to fellow members of our communities as a call to action to ensure the implementation of these policy demands happens promptly, effectively and with participation from our communities.

Alternative Thoughts, Alternative Action '08 and Beyond

This "report" on the roots of the violence that youth face is far from a report in the conventional sense. GYC was invited to take part in this review to provide the review with a perspective straight from the youth in our communities. However, we decided to opt out of the well-worn method of organizing youth focus groups and distilling their voices into a report. We felt that this approach would be both irresponsible and unethical at this stage. Almost all of the individual organizations within GYC, as well as the collaborative itself (see *Youth on Youth* and From the Roots Up!), have initiated or have received funding to commission similar reports before. To return to these same youth and ask that they reiterate their experiences and frustrations when the recommendations from previous reports have not been implemented, would betray our community-oriented philosophy. Feminist methodological literature, which drives many of our organization's practices, has identified similar ethical concerns in its critique of Western research in the Global South. It has been described as "'pillage of raw data for export' akin to colonial powers' exploitation of the Third World's material resources" (Miraftab, 2004: 596).

Fresh Voices

"I am often amazed at the passion, tenacity and professionalism displayed by my peers. The greatest revolutions were driven by young people and I believe the only thing necessary in order to see the same type of widespread change in our communities is a conscious process of political education – where young people begin to see their private issues as public ones and shift their gaze from their immediate surroundings to the communities that they belong to"

Alpha Abebe, Young Diplomats Strategizing Minds Participant

This document has brought together excerpts from previous reports from grassroots youth organizations, whose content and recommendations are just as relevant in today's context as they were when they were written. We have also included notes from "Strategizing Minds: Alternative Thoughts, Alternative Action '08 and Beyond." This event was held on January 26, 2008, as part of this review, to bring together youth organizers from marginalized and racialized communities in Toronto for a day of collaboration and strategizing. Structuring this forum as a strategizing meeting rather than a focus group was part of our attempt at making this *process* just as important as the *outcome*. The event brought together a number of young people, from a wide variety of organizations, all of whom are amazing social entrepreneurs and community organizers who had identified and begun to address the roots of the violence that youth face long before this report was commissioned. The result was an important meeting that yielded great strategies for how our communities can continue to tackle

the issues that directly impact violence and oppression in our communities, and how the various levels of government must join in this effort by addressing the policies identified as hindering this process.

Through our community work and contacts, we identified four general categories of issues that contribute to the violence affecting our communities in the City of Toronto. These categories are not comprehensive, but they attest to the experiences and realities facing youth participants, the staff of GYC member organizations and our peers in the city with respect to four broad categories: 1) education; 2) criminalization; 3) economics and opportunity; and 4) space. The breakout sessions at the Strategizing Minds forum were organized around these categories, as are the following sections of this document. Each section begins with relevant quotes, taken directly from the Strategizing Minds forum, which speak to each issue. The section discusses how the issue is a core contributor to the violence youth face in Toronto and outlines specific policies or lack of action that serve to perpetuate the problem. As a collaborative of motivated, capable youth organizers, we feel that it is important to always meet grievances with a plan of action. Thus, we have included examples of how communities have already begun to organize around these issues, both in the report and in the *Grassroots Action* sections. Additionally, this report will end with a set of *demands*. We challenge the Government of Ontario to implement them in a timely and effective manner, and to show their serious intention to act on the work of the study they commissioned one year ago.

Education

Brazilian theorist Paolo Freire wrote in his 1970 book, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, that "[e]ducation either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" (Freire, 1970). The Ontario curriculum has long been an instrument to suppress and dismiss the contributions and work of marginalized and racialized communities. A history of racism, Residential Schools and a Eurocentric curriculum continues to permeate today's more "multicultural" education system.

Strategizing Minds

"The education that we all have has taught us to think in bubbles — like Black History Month. The history of African people is also North American and South American history!"

Strategizing Minds Participant, 2008

The idea that education is a path to empowerment is not a new one. Throughout history, around the globe, people have always demanded access to education as a means of asserting their civil rights. Denying such access has often been used as a tool of subjugation and oppression. Regardless of the initial purpose or scope, almost all of the previous studies by the various members and allies of GYC have identified some issues relating to education as a critical part of addressing some of the root causes of violence and oppression in our communities.

In 2003, the For Youth Initiative (FYI) published a report entitled *Exploring Empowering Education for Marginalized Youth in Toronto* after receiving funding from the federal Department of Justice's National Crime Prevention Strategy Program. FYI is a youth-led GYC member organization that uses popular culture to bring critical theory and social systemic change to the streets of the former City of York, North Etiobicoke and West Toronto. Since this organization attempts to provide capacity-building opportunities to youth through education, training and other forms of engagement, the findings from their study are particularly relevant to this report. Further, considering that the National Crime Prevention Strategy Program, the principle funder of FYI's study, has a mandate to approach crime prevention through a focus on the *root causes of crime*, the findings and recommendations put forward by FYI should be seriously considered in the report of the Review of the Roots of Youth Violence. The FYI report is briefly discussed below. To obtain a full copy, please contact fyi@foryouth.ca.

FYI's report is premised on two important assertions: 1) that inequalities are a reality in the existing education system, particularly for Black and indigenous youth, suggesting a need for more relevant and engaging forms of education; and 2) that alternative education has the potential to act as a liberating and positive force in the lives of marginalized young people. Their report includes a critical literature review, as well as the results of their qualitative study that included five focus groups and 15 in-depth interviews with educators and youth from various backgrounds in Toronto. Their findings relating to discrimination and racism within the education system were not particularly surprising, and the report itself states: "Over and over again, students are saying that they feel discriminated against in schools, by teachers and other students. This study was no different, as almost all of the participants described experiences with and perceptions of racism in schools." (FYI, 2003: 13-14) These sentiments were most poignant when expressed by youth who had prematurely left the education system.

Fresh Voices

"The United Way report 'Poverty by Postal Code' named 13 neighbourhoods in Toronto as priorities of special focus - when we look at the areas named - when we step into these geographical spaces - we realize that poverty can be tracked not only by postal code but also by a particular racial constituency. So....alienation coupled with financial inaccessibility make universities a distant possibility for many. There is little belief that university is a space they are entitled to, a space where they belong - why should they? Why should we? Rising costs - the message is clear; this place is not for us. Colonial education from kindergarten to grade 12 - the message is clear; this place is not for us."

Amanda Parris, Co-Founder of Lost Lyrics
Strategizing Minds Participant

In the super-industrialized service economy of Canada, it is well known that access to the job market is highly regulated by the mainstream educational system. The core issues in education relating to the violence that youth face are access to education, discrimination within the educational system, a Eurocentric and colonial curriculum, and limited alternative educational strategies and programs. Most of the young people implicated in youth violence have had encounters with or are still within the Canadian educational system. The policies, curricula and attitudes that shape their experiences have a lot to do with why many youth are either unsuccessful or no longer within this system. Although it has become common knowledge that those who are pushed out or who drop out of high school are vulnerable to economic and social insecurity, and that this can often lead them into situations of violence, there has been a shortage of critical assessment of all the institutions implicated in this situation.

For example, in 2004 The Learning Partnership, a national organization that conducts research and develops policy

alternatives for the Canadian education system, came out with a report entitled *The Quality of Public Education in Canada: Students At Risk*. This report used data from the Child Poverty Rate, the Dropout Rate, and the Vulnerability Index to assess what they saw as the key factors that put students "at risk" of being unsuccessful. They listed the four key factors as poverty, a child's natural development, parental influence, and the neighbourhood (Levin & Peacock, 2004). Here we see an example of the common unwillingness to challenge the educational system head on in order to hold it responsible for the ways in which it creates the environment of insecurity invoked by its own discourse on "risk."

For the purposes of this report, we felt it necessary to contextualize the various issues with regard to the policies, programs and institutions that relate to them. This is an overt attempt to avoid the possibility that these issues will be seen as philosophical ones. Rather, we wish to contribute to a widespread political education that would enable young people to see their private issues in very public ways. A lot of the disillusionment that young people express towards school has to do with their inability to relate to the material taught. In their report, FYI refers to the document *Removing the Margins: The Challenges and Possibilities of Inclusive Schooling* (from the Canadian Scholars' Press), which states that "understanding curriculum as the 'whole environment' and culture within which schooling takes place, means that representation in education is achieved through creating a sense of *presence* for all students in school" (FYI, 2003: 9). Thus, it is not so much a matter of building more "inclusion" into the education system (i.e., trying to add more cultures to a primarily white, Eurocentric, male-dominated curriculum), but rather, what is required is a "re-centering" of curriculum within a model that values the histories and struggles of indigenous people, racialized communities, women, queer communities, disabled communities, and other poor and/or marginalized communities.

Fresh Voices

"If you are disconnected from something how can you then be engaged in it, when you are learning about something that is other than you?... These students don't see themselves, but yet they know that they are there"

Ian Kamau, Schools Without Borders Strategizing Minds Participant

Although Black History Month is a wonderful opportunity to celebrate and remember the contributions and struggles of Black people in North America, there has been no serious attempt at making the entire Ontario curriculum representative of and appreciative of the histories and knowledge of indigenous, poor, racialized and marginalized communities in Canada in a way that reflects and values the students in our schools. As one contributor at the Strategizing Minds forum said, "We are not the only ones

that need to learn our history, but white people need to learn about it too because they are also implicated in it." Ian Kamau, another participant of Strategizing Minds added to this:

> *Our entire education system is built on a European structure, with European ideas and a European concept. And that wouldn't even be okay if was only European's or people of European descent sitting in those classes. It is made even worse given the fact that our schools are so diverse and there are people from different cultures, religions, geographical locations, and economic settings. It should be a natural thing that the full reality of the world would be taught* as history — *but not just history, also things that happen in a contemporary context so kids have an education where they learn about the whole world not just one part of the world —* ***I don't think that is unreasonable****... When they do talk about Black history they just speak about slavery, which is only a particular part of the black experience for a specific group of Black people. Or when they teach about the First Nations they only talk about residential schools — but there are so many other major experiences and contexts that we don't spend more than a day or page in the curriculum on.*

Ian Kamau, as well as many other contributors at the Strategizing Minds forum, explained how these issues with the curriculum have deep-seated implications and are well overdue for serious consideration.

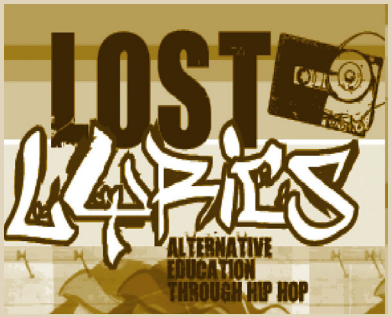
In 2006, GYC received funding from Justice Canada to organize From the Roots Up!, a forum on building safe and healthy communities. One of the recommendations from the forum's report was that Ontario's Ministry of Education revamp the current high school and grade school curriculum. This recommendation came out of concerns with the current curriculum as expressed by the youth at the forum. One of them said, "It makes you think... why is it that we receive 11 months of European history... no months of indigenous history and only one month of the histories of the many people who helped to build this country?" (GYC, 2006: 12) Even with more recent prospect of building a Black-focused school in Toronto, the issue of a Eurocentric and colonial curriculum remains at the forefront of preventing education from being more relevant, accessible, honest and empowering to all youth in Canada. However, discrimination in the school system is not confined to the curriculum. Marginalized youth are encountering barriers to education through educational policies such as differential streaming and the Safe Schools Act.

Streaming has increasingly become an issue in limiting the opportunities for higher education among racialized and marginalized youth. FYI's report cites a study released by the Coalition of Visible Minority Women, which reveals that "often times Black students and parents have found that teachers and guidance counsellors have expected less from Black students, and have encouraged them to take non-academic courses or focus on sports, suggesting that 'the student did not have the ability to go very far'" (FYI, 2003: 34). Many of the experiences of youth in GYC member organizations validate this finding. For example, the outreach workers from Young Diplomats, a youth-led organization that runs a mentorship program for Ethiopian youth in Toronto, often have to do "damage control" and intensive

mentoring with youth in their community whom educators have discouraged from proceeding in the education system.

The Safe Schools Act (SSA) is another policy that has been the target of criticism from youth, parents, community workers and even educators since its introduction in 2000. The criticism stems from the fact that the SSA sets the terms for *mandatory* expulsion and suspension and from the widespread evidence showing that it is predominantly Black and Aboriginal youth who suffer the brunt of this policy. While many amendments have been made to the Act since 2000, the most recent being the changes taking effect on February 1, 2008, policy-makers have ignored the call to repeal the whole Act and put provisions in place "to actually make schools safer places" (GYC, 2006: 22). At a Scarborough community forum organized to discuss the recent revisions to the SSA, a lawyer from the African Canadian Legal Clinic urged the group not to be too quick to celebrate the changes made to the SSA. She reminded everyone that the Act was not simply changed because the school board felt it needed to be — the Act was changed because Black students and their parents were filing human rights complaints against the school board. She explained that, many times, a student's reaction, which subsequently warranted disciplinary action, was actually the result of low teacher expectation and racial harassment in the school. Further, the overall language of the SSA very much supports the stereotype of "the troublemaker," which is highly racialized. In an attempt to correct discriminatory policy, and ultimately to get at the roots of the violence that youth face, policy-makers must stop making surface changes to policies that are inherently damaging, like the SSA.

Grassroots Action



Lost Lyrics is an alternative education after-school program that uses Hip Hop culture as a way of defining who we are and expressing a knowledge of self. This eight-month program provides an encouraging atmosphere, using relevant mentors and facilitators who work with youth ages 11-14 in the Jane/Finch and Malvern neighbourhoods. The goal of Lost Lyrics is to get youth to critically analyze the world around them and utilize this new lens through creative arts such as rhyming, film, photography, beats production and more.

Alpha Abebe, Young Diplomats Strategizing Minds Participant

Criminalization

Rather than discuss *criminality* with regard to youth violence, which would suggest that the root cause is within the youth him/herself, we have chosen to discuss *criminalization* instead. The culture of criminalization implicates not only the criminal justice system, but also every other institution that structures our society. Criminalization is the manifestation of prejudice, fear and oppression, and it shapes the way certain people are monitored and subsequently treated. In some senses, criminalization does not belong in a report about the roots of youth violence, as it often is a precursor, setting the terms for *what* is viewed as violence and *who is chosen to be seen* as perpetrating this violence. That being said, we felt it critical to bring this issue to the fore in our report in an attempt to challenge policy-makers to recognize how young people are being marginalized in very real and damaging ways.

Strategizing Minds

The thing on my head don't mean a damn thang

People think a do-rag means you gang bang

And it's kind of funny how y'all stare

When really I'm just a kid who wants waves in his hair.

"Do-Rag" was performed at the forum by local artist TWest — also a social entrepreneur from Lawrence Heights/Jungle

The issues raised by the **criminalization** working group at the Strategizing Minds forum were quite varied. The contributors found it difficult to discuss criminalization without discussing opportunity — and found it hard to discuss opportunity without outlining the lack thereof. The barriers and challenges relating to criminalization included housing, employment, racism, homophobia/heterosexism, political agendas, wrongful spending, policing culture, criminalizing legislation, and hypocrisy. One of the contributors described the problem broadly as "political and economic structures that keep certain people in positions so they may stay in power, and creates barriers for others to influence or gain power." There was an overall consensus that certain groups, neighbourhoods and schools were the target of excluding and criminalizing practices. However, there was also the acknowledgment that part of criminalization is the social contexts, which push young people into anti-social and violent situations that subsequently lead them to encounters with disciplinary institutions. The reality is that young people are growing up in environments that are structured by barriers to accessing conventional means of economic and social sustenance.

From: Strategizing Minds: Alternative Thought, Alternative Action

What is Criminalization?

Policing focused on existing biases and prejudices

- There are no less drugs in some high schools than others, however, certain schools are perceived as having more or being more problematic

Negative police focus

- Who gets arrested/targeted is affected by greater police presence in certain neighbourhoods

Classism influencing judgement of justice

- An 'industry of criminalization': The response towards 'summer/year of the gun' was $55 million towards a policing task force, $100 million towards a youth super jail, and only $15 million towards youth programme funding

There seems to be unwillingness, however, to look at the institutions that contribute to such environments, and, instead, a preference for criminalizing those who must live in these environments. GYC has previously raised concerns over certain terminology, like "at-risk youth" and "youth violence," which demonstrate the tendency to locate the problem in the individual rather than the context. (See *Youth on Youth: Grassroots Youth Collaborative on Youth Led Organizing in the City of Toronto* for discussion.)

Scot Wortley, a leading criminologist at the University of Toronto, has been at the forefront of exposing the racialized practices of criminal justice workers in Canada. His work has also shown that this does not stem from some conspiracy within the system, but rather reflects deep-seated prejudices running through the whole fabric of our society. On October 19, 2002, the *Toronto Star* began publishing a series of articles on race and crime. Their analysis revealed that Blacks in Toronto are highly overrepresented in certain charge categories, and that this is consistent with the allegation that Toronto police engage in racial profiling. Their rather modest account of the issue has been substantiated by a wealth of evidence, both in the academic sphere, by scholars like Scot Wortley, and by grassroots accounts. In response to the *Toronto Star* series, the Toronto police led a campaign of denial, spearheaded by then-Police Chief Julian Fantino, who declared that, "[w]e do not do racial profiling .... There is no racism ... We don't look at, nor do we consider race or ethnicity, or any of that, as factors of how we dispose of cases, or individuals, or how we treat individuals" (Wortley & Tanner, 2003: 368). Canadian criminologists have published numerous accounts that demonstrate otherwise, including quantitative analyses of diversion, charge, and sentencing data, as well as qualitative accounts from hundreds of diverse Toronto youth whose personal experiences with the police speak volumes against Fantino's claim (e.g., Ruck & Wortley, 2002; Wortley & Tanner, 2003; Tator, 2006; Wortley, 2006).

The Neglected is a song written by two budding young rap artists from Toronto, Abel Shimeles and Rosie Marfo. This song was written and recorded specifically

for GYC's documentary on the roots of youth violence as part of this project. The powerful lyrics of this song demonstrate that young Canadians are very conscious of the institutional forms of racism and criminalization in their communities, despite the fact that many of the authority figures in these very institutions refuse to recognize it themselves. The following lyrics from the second verse in *The Neglected* speak to the ways in which Black youth are stereotyped, how these perceptions stifle their ambitions and dreams, and how these young people often find ways to be resilient nonetheless.

> *I'm the neglected, constantly tested. The government he want me arrested, society's minds are infected. By the bullshit that is taught through institutions that me and u invest in .... Too many blacks living in a stereotype. That was put on them from the beginning constantly sinning. For what, corruption within our own race. Like a race with no prize to chase it doesn't make sense. Hence why I spit bout this. I see through system like lens on the other side of the fence. When expression is answered with neglecting. It usually leads to violent ways to show aggression. Anger builds with depression. But God's been there for me with protection. That's why I count all my blessings.*

Regent Park Focus Youth Media Arts Centre is a non-for-profit GYC member organization that is youth-driven and committed to exploring issues and developing resources that sustain healthy communities and address systemic barriers to equitable social participation. This centre was established in 1989 and has been an innovative leader in engaging youth through youth-led media productions.

Fresh Voices

GYC: Youth on Youth (2005: 25)

"My problem is with the basic assumption implied by at-risk...in terms of narrowing it down. I personally think that there are a lot of institutional barriers that prevent young people in general from participating fully in society. This whole category of at-risk is a way of not facing those barriers... not facing barriers of institutional racism, not facing barrier of poverty, not facing barriers relating to housing ... those are the real issues. The at-risk terminology hides those issues because they say, we can't face these systemic barriers, we only want to focus on programming to those youth in the community who are unable to cope with the barriers that we put up — youth who react to those barriers in ways that are destructive to themselves and to others."

Adonis Huggins, Regent Park Focus

Regent Park TV (RPTV) is an Internet broadcast station, run by the youth at the centre, which airs interviews, debates, short dramas, documentaries, news shows, public service announcements (PSAs) and Super8 films — all of which provide a forum for local youth to voice their

Fresh Voices

RPTV: Police and Youth Relations Part II

"...usually it's the big guys that come in and they try and harass you and stuff – they try and bully you, you know, make you look stupid. That's the thing I don't like about them you know."

Regent Park youth resident

"...you know some police they're alright you know, but other police, they like harassing you and stuff. Basically in Regent Park they do that a lot, you know."

Regent Park youth resident

RPTV: Police and Youth Relations Part III

"I was double-riding, I was pulled over by two police officers. They stopped us, they explained that double-riding is illegal so then they began to search us. So I started to get angry, I was like 'I don't see what double-riding and searching have to do with each other, cause it doesn't go together. Can you just write me ticket and let me go?' So they didn't really listen to me, they started yelling ... 'we're the guys, we know the rules, we know the law, you don't know anything so shut up.' They had us face down forward in the middle of the street."

Regent Park youth resident

experiences, share their stories and explore issues that affect them and their community. (Please visit www.regentpark.tv or http://www.catchdaflava.com for more information.)

RPTV ran a youth-directed three-part PSA series on *Police and Youth Relations*, in which youth explored issues of racial profiling, police harassment and police corruption through interviews, personal narrative and drama. The short videos (found in the website's archives) included young people's real life negative experiences with Toronto police. They also included some very innovative solutions to the problem, which came from the youth themselves. In response to the problem that youth have with police harassing them in their neighbourhoods, one PSA suggested that "during their patrols police should build better relations with young people by informing them about job opportunities, programs and services" (RPTV: *Police and Youth Relations* Part II). Another PSA suggested that "the government should set up an independent police complaint process and all complaints should be investigated thoroughly" (RPTV: *Police and Youth Relations* Part III).

This suggestion was echoed at the Strategizing Minds forum, where contributors stressed the need to "police the police" with an independent police monitoring system. Another relevant recommendation, previously made to Justice Canada by GYC, was the need to "support community based safety initiatives that are independent of the Toronto Police Services or any other branch of enforcement" (GYC, 2006: 18). As demonstrated in the decision to build a $100 million youth superjail rather than invest those dollars into youth programming, politicians and justice workers have shown that their responses to youth crime have been politically rather than socially motivated. The meaningful inclusion and committed support of community-based approaches to safety would be a much-needed step in the other direction, and would do much more to alleviate the violence that youth face than any other law-and-order approach.

Grassroots Action

No One is Illegal (Toronto) is a group of immigrants, refugees and allies who fight for the rights of all migrants to live with dignity and respect. Some of their demands include an end to detentions and deportations; an end to racial or religious profiling; and recognition of indigenous sovereignty. They were the force behind TDSB's 2007 decision to adopt a Don't Ask Don't Tell Policy in Toronto schools — preventing schools from asking for, reporting or sharing information about a student's immigration status, therefore providing all youth access to education without fear.

Economics & Opportunity

Although there is certainly violence that occurs outside of economic hardship, there is a general sense that, if provided with viable and accessible pathways to meaningful economic self-sufficiency, many young people would not be forced into situations that put them at a higher risk of violence. There is a myriad of issues that surround economics, including *meaningful* employment, self-determination, career options, glass ceilings, discrimination in the workplace and overall access.

At the Strategizing Minds forum, the **economics and opportunity** working group engaged in a lively discussion about the related challenges and barriers that youth in Toronto face. Many of the institutional barriers that put youth in compromising social circumstances also threaten the organizations that are dedicated to empowering and engaging them. Policy responses aimed at creating more opportunities for marginalized youth — economic or otherwise — must be coupled with sustained support for the organizations and groups that best relate to the lives and culture of these young people. Mario Murray (a.k.a. TheVoyce) was an organizer of Strategizing Minds. He is also the Workshop Facilitator and Operations Coordinator for Beatz to Da Streetz, a GYC member organization that runs an innovative arts program aimed at empowering and opening up opportunities for professional mentorship, education and income generation for homeless and underserved youth in Toronto. As part of the **economics and opportunity** working group in Strategizing Minds, Mario noted that "in the world, money keeps moving, all we have to do is have some move through our organizations so our youth don't always have to flip burgers but can get some real experience and skills from our administrative, coordinating and arts heavy work."

Strategizing Minds

"There are brilliant young people who are inspired by our organizations but are not met with support from the outside world. These are people I would hire in my own company to be my second hand but instead are working at Tim Horton's."

Strategizing Minds Participant, 2008

We have separated this report into the categories of education, criminalization, economics and opportunity, and space for the purpose of convenience, but it is important to note that none of these issues are mutually exclusive. Rather, all of these issues feed into each other in fundamental ways. It is impossible to discuss economics and opportunity without highlighting the effect that a lack of education has on getting a job, the near impossibility of gaining sustainable employment with

Fresh Voices

TYC: Catch Us Before We Fall (2004: 7)

Education and training:

- Homeless youth face numerous barriers of entry while enrolling in schools or other formal educational institutions, including internships and apprenticeships, further depriving them of their right to education.
- Homeless youth also face barriers of entry to employment enrichment programs.
- Homeless youth with mental illness and/or substance use issues lack adequately-focused support systems like harm reduction programs.
- Zero-tolerance in Safe Schools policies and legislation place at-risk youth in increasingly harmful situations, through suspensions and expulsions without productive activity and supports during these times.

Employment:

- Homeless youth surviving on social assistance have trouble finding jobs that pay a living wage. Whether they work or only receive social assistance, they currently receive virtually the same amount of money. Regular youth employment centres do not help youth with substance abuse issues.
- Complex barriers exist which prevent homeless youth with mental health and/or substance use issues from obtaining employment.

Report on Youth Homelessness

a criminal record, and how a lack of community space to run youth programming impedes organizations from providing critical life and social skills to marginalized youth. Nowhere do so many social determinants intersect as sharply as they do with homeless or street-involved youth. In 2004, the Toronto Youth Cabinet published a report on youth homelessness, *Catch Us Before We Fall*, based on a two-part forum on shelter and housing issues. Their report challenged policy-makers to appreciate the ways in which mental health, substance abuse, education policies, and social welfare systems all contribute to the precarious living conditions of so many young Torontonians. This is yet another example that demonstrates the need to take a multi-faceted approach to youth development.

In 2006, the Somali Youth Association of Toronto (SOYAT), a youth-led GYC member organization, partnered with the Toronto Training Board to publish a report that helps elucidate this problem. *Towards an Integrated Strategy: Maximizing use of local resources* is a report on best practices and barriers to the use of North Etobicoke employment services by Somali youth. SOYAT spoke with employment agency staff, Somali parents, and Somali youth to understand why so few Somali youth used the employment agencies in North Etobicoke. (To obtain a full copy of SOYAT's report, please contact info@soyat.org.)

SOYAT found that 82% of Somali youth surveyed had never taken part in any employment training program or service, which was consistent with the initial impetus for the study. The next step was an analysis of what the barriers were for Somali youth in accessing these

services. Although "many agency staff emphasized personal barriers such as single mother households, lack of role models, and parental shielding of children from the job market … the youth stressed institutional and systemic barriers such as racism, ageism, and institutional bias" (SOYAT, 2006: 5). There were also very practical concerns that reflected the shortcomings of the programs that *do* exist. For example, when asked to rank in order of importance the most common barriers affecting their ability or willingness to use employment services, transportation was by far the number one barrier cited by Somali youth who had never visited an employment agency. "They said they needed transportation or bus tickets when looking for jobs or starting work and these are not supplied by any of the agencies. The youth noted that many of their families are on social assistance". (16). While some youth faced very practical barriers, others who had been through such agencies explained how their experiences with discrimination in the agency, the workplace, and during the hiring process have made them disillusioned with such programs.

The inadequacy of many employment agencies and programs for youth is compounded by the reality that many of these young people are in dire economic situations. Young Diplomats (YD), a youth-led GYC member organization that works with Ethiopian youth in Toronto, conducted a community-based research project commissioned by the UN University for Peace in 2006. In *Youth Perspectives: Challenges to peacebuilding and development in the Ethiopian community*, YD presented their findings from their surveys and focus groups with over 175 Ethiopian youth from the GTA.

Fresh Voices

SOYAT: Towards an Integrated Strategy (2006: 17)

"When it comes to the agency, I have friend, she doesn't wear hijab or anything, she's not even a Muslim, but me and her are registered with the same agency, and we both have the same qualifications. With these agencies, you sit at home until they call you and find you a job. She keeps getting these calls about jobs and telling me about it, while I'm not getting any calls. And I have to call them and tell them to tell me about the job, and that's how I found it."

Somali youth participant

Youth were asked to describe their biggest challenges and problems in their day-to-day lives without any pre-selected options for their answers. Of the nine general categories under which their responses fell, the category of "finding a job/money problems" elicited the most responses, with 25.5% of the youth citing it as a primary concern (YD,

Fresh Voices

GYC: Youth on Youth (2005: 50)

"I think [high turnover of projects and staff] affects young people around their housing because there are young people here who have rent to pay....There is an assumption around that youth are not living on their own and are thus not relying on a job like this [and] when they lose that support in a lot of ways they go backwards....They have to take a meaningless job at McDonald's which is not giving them the skills to get into school to make it to the next stage."

Adonis Huggins, Regent Park Focus

2006: 35). Through the questionnaires and focus groups, YD found that youth repeatedly stated that they lacked positive role models and, as a result, they "resorted to non-constructive activities; were ill-informed about educational opportunities; had difficulty identifying resources in the community; and suffered economic constraints" (41). As this research was participatory and action-oriented, YD recommended that a comprehensive mentorship program be implemented for these youth, which would encompass social, academic, and professional streams. This resulted in a highly successful program, which YD implemented with funding from The Youth Challenge Fund and Toronto Community Housing. (To obtain a full copy of YD's report, please contact info@youngdiplomats.org.)

Grassroots organizations can be utilized not only in helping youth find employment opportunities, but also as a source of employment. The funding provided for and generated by such organizations creates opportunities to hire young people to run programs, and also to find ways to pay youth through the programming activities and outputs. In GYC's report *Youth on Youth*, Gavin Sheppard from IC Visions (now the REMIX project) explained that there was a great benefit to what is described as "social entrepreneurial ventures" — something that deviates slightly from the non-profit norm.

The same GYC report also highlighted the importance of paying appropriate wages to the youth who work in these grassroots non-profit sectors. For many of them, it is their only source of income and they demonstrate their entitlement to adequate and sustainable wages through their excellent work. Overall, support has to be coming from all directions: youth need more meaningful employment; relevant and equitable employment agencies must be established; grassroots organizations need sustainable funding; and there must be commitment to providing *all* youth with full access to opportunities after they do receive training and skills development. As with everything else presented in this report, there is a need to direct policies and dollars in more relevant and community-oriented ways.

Grassroots Action

The Remix Project is a youth-led arts program driven by young people aspiring to start careers in the urban arts sector. This program acts as a bridge to employment, education, and mentorship by supporting youth's skills and aspirations in fields as vast as radio, music, film and television, animation and web design, graphic design, creative writing, and photography, and creating opportunities for professional and creative development in these sectors.

Space

To talk about space in relation to violence faced by youth is to acknowledge that young people need to be engaged, in their day-to-day lives, through social and recreational activities delivered by like-minded and culturally relevant organizations and people. It is to similarly acknowledge that there is no shortage of space in the absolute sense. Rather, there is an unwillingness to recognize that *all* youth, from *all* backgrounds and *all* walks of life are equal members of our society and thus deserve equal access to *all* the resources that are available.

The For Youth Initiative (FYI) has been at the forefront of a movement that has been lobbying for more access to youth-friendly space for grassroots organizations. As an agency serving the former City of York, they have been frustrated by an overall lack of community space made accessible to organizations, like their own, that work with youth from racialized and marginalized communities and yet have so little space in which to do their work.

Strategizing Minds

"There is an article written by a group of paediatricians ... what they said was that until it's a white child that gets hurt there is no human view on it; they don't really see it as a social problem that needs therapy, they see it as a criminal thing. So when we go and ask for space, they ask — Space for what? For drug dealers, for hiding criminals? Although they use the idea of multiculturalism to sell Toronto, they haven't really adopted it themselves. When we talk about space, they don't understand that it is not theirs — it's not their space to give — it's all of our space."

Strategizing Minds Participant, 2008

With funding from the Trillium Foundation, FYI partnered with urbanArts in 2005 to conduct a comprehensive study that was primarily an investigation of space and asset mapping in the former City of York (Wards 11 and 12). Meetings and interviews with service providers, youth, and stakeholders during their study brought out some critical issues relating to space and program scarcity for youth in Wards 11 and 12 — but also raised critical awareness around general issues surrounding youth space in Toronto.

Accessing public space was also an important theme that surfaced from discussions with GYC members back in 2005, as documented in the collaborative's report *Youth on Youth*. Cutty Duncan from Rathburn Area Youth (RAY) described the difficulties in achieving his organizational mission and mandate because of a lack of space: "We pretty much serve all of Central Etobicoke .... it's a big area [we're supposed to service] and there is not an agency

Fresh Voices

FYI: Thinking About Tomorrow's Space Today (2005: ii)

Space Issues:

1. The need for opening up school space
2. Inadequacies of existing space
3. Limited time availabilities and location of space
4. The monopolization of space by longstanding permit-holders
5. The lack of space specific for youth that is "youth-friendly"
6. The "political minefield" behind advocating for and securing community space
7. The sub-standard conditions of current facilities. (FYI, 2005: iii)

Youth Recreational Programming in the Former City of York

here... So the space that you see downstairs is the only space that we have for community space, so we can't even promote it and stuff because then we would have too many people here...and we just don't have the space and facilities" (GYC, 2005: 45). GYC members chronicled the many institutional barriers they faced in their attempts to secure adequate and safe spaces to run youth recreational programming. The bureaucracy that community organizations must go through in their attempts at securing space for youth programming is highly unnecessary — not to mention counterproductive.

Vathany Uthayasundaram, the former Program Coordinator at Canadian Tamil Youth Development Centre (CANTYD), a youth-led GYC member organization, described the "drawn out and oft unsuccessful bureaucratic process" that her staff go through, just to get space for a basketball drop-in: "Even in trying to run a basketball drop in we have to run around asking all the community centres for a gym... some [of which] are prebooked a year ahead of time....And then there's funding for permits....There is a whole process you have to go through.... You call a certain department and then you fill out an application and then take it to another department ... but you don't have that time...and are often unsuccessful, and youth don't understand the process.... We have money issues, space issues, permit issues!" (GYC, 2005: 45). Staff are usually underpaid and overworked, and the tasks involved in simply securing space often take valuable physical and human resources out of the organization's programming.

Some of the reluctance to open up existing municipal space to grassroots organizations is shaped by fiscal concerns (e.g., paying janitors to stay after hours). However, participants at a recreational forum held in 2002 by the Laidlaw Foundation have quite successfully argued that the gains of supporting enhanced recreational programs and infrastructure (even if they are only calculated in numbers) can easily outweigh the costs: "Investment in recreational opportunities for youth pays for itself. In the short term, low-income families who have access to recreational services leave social assistance in greater numbers and reduce their need for a broad range of social and health services. Over the longer term, recreational opportunities for youth result in stronger school attendance and achievement records and

higher academic, social and interpersonal competence, and is a strong predictor for success in higher education and subsequent careers" (Cited in FYI, 2005: 9).

Contributors in the working group organized around **space** at the Strategizing Minds forum also conveyed a similar optimism relating to the impact that such opening of community space can have. They explained that many youth have a "geographic connection" to their neighbourhoods but lack a "real connection to the issues that the community faces." Extending full access to community resources could begin to seriously change this — as youth would see themselves as full members of their communities, and their physical access would translate to civic access that could begin to mobilize youth around the issues that affect their communities. Andrea Zammit, the current co-coordinator of GYC and former Program Director of the For Youth Initiative, further explained the importance of opening up youth-friendly space during Strategizing Minds:

> *Having worked in many of Toronto's underserved/low-income neighbourhoods for the past six years with young people, access to public space has been one of the biggest challenges. Many times young people live in small apartments sharing accommodations with a lot of family members. These young people need space to hang out with friends, quiet space to do their homework, a safe place that is free from police harassment/brutality, to express themselves in the arts and to access social-recreational programming. Community Centres and programs run by mainstream social service providers that have facilities are not "youth-friendly" or accessible to youth, particularly Black youth.*

The last report published by GYC, *From the Roots Up!*, included a recommendation to the City of Toronto to increase the use of facilities and space for youth-led programming. It is promising to see that there have been incremental steps towards this goal; the most recent being the announcement that Ontario will increase its investment in the Community Use of Schools program to $66 million over the next four years. The February 5, 2008 news release from the Office of the Premier stated that the new funding will:

- Expand the existing program
- Provide free after-hours access to about 500 schools in communities that need it most by 2011/2012
- Provide new Community Outreach Coordinators who will engage communities and local schools to improve group use and create more programs and activities. (Office of the Premier, 2008)

At the time of writing this report, this still remains a promise, and only time will reveal the authenticity of this promise. Since the writing of FYI's report *Thinking About Tomorrow's Space Today* in 2005, the City has also agreed to look into building a community centre in their ward — the only one in the city without one. There are still problems with the City's proposed plan, as it would still include barriers to access for low-income residents. And, like the

Fresh Voices

FYI: Thinking About Tomorrow's Space Today (2005: 25)

"If we mobilize the people in our community, we can raise the voices loud enough to say you know what, we pay tax dollars like everyone else. We're not begging. We're asking for what is rightfully ours"

Youth Voice, FYI

provincial news release, it remains political rhetoric until it is implemented on the ground. Regent Park Focus Youth Media Centre is another organization that has been put in a precarious situation because of city redevelopment and lofty support from governmental agencies. As Adonis Huggins of Regent Park Focus explained, the centre was granted space in the new Regent Park redevelopment; however, it has been made clear to them that they will no longer get this space in kind, and TCHC and the City will have to recover the market rent for it. At Strategizing Minds, he commented that "[t]he question is why is the City abdicating their responsibility to build social infrastructure in stressed neighbourhoods and why does TCHC and the City feel that it can no longer be a partner in the provision of social capital in neighbourhoods that are owned by the TCHC/City? Part of their rationale is lack of investment from the Feds as they are too busy building SuperJails yet they (TCHC) have no problems investing in security cameras, which if diverted could be spent building a neighbourhood center in every public housing area in the city."

As one of the contributors at the Strategizing Minds forum expressed, we are "not arguing that a community centre is the answer." All the issues outlined in this report warrant responses that translate into capital gains, but they also warrant responses committed to engaging youth at *all* stages of developing these gains. As the Strategizing Minds forum and all of the texts cited in this report demonstrate, young people are qualified and entitled to be consulted and included beyond token positions in decision-making processes. Youth violence is not an issue — it is a symptom. By resurrecting some of the many reports that have been published by grassroots organizations relating to these symptoms, the "findings" of this report reflect hundreds of voices, over several years, across numerous communities in the City of Toronto. Anyone who is honest about their desire to reduce the violence that youth face — whether they are city residents, community workers, policy-makers, or youth themselves — will take steps at addressing its roots, many of which have been outlined here.

Grassroots Action

SOYAT
Somali Youth Association of Toronto

Somali Youth Association of Toronto (SOYAT) is a non-profit youth-based community organization, serving Somali youth in Toronto since 1992. The organization places itself as a conduit of access for Somali youth, and also collaborates with stakeholders to innovate appropriate services for Somali youth, children, and other marginalized youth in their community. While there are a number of community, recreational, and employment centres in the North Etobicoke area that Somali youth have tended not to utilize, SOYAT's space has proven to be youth-friendly and culturally relevant, and as such, their centre and programs are highly utilized and effective.

Demands

Since its inception, the GYC has been asked and encouraged to make recommendations to governments; some examples include deputations to the municipal government, the Police Services Board and the Toronto District School Board (on multiple occasions). GYC has also attended and spoken on panels at municipal and provincial forums on "gun violence" and at the federally funded From the Roots Up! forum. We have seen little or no changes in policies from these government bodies.

Violence is a direct result of oppression and internalized oppression, which requires governments to first acknowledge the colonization and genocidal policies against indigenous nations and land, systemic racism, poverty, ableism, ageism, sexism, heterosexism, etc., and it is not until then that governments can begin to create effective policies and programs that will have a meaningful impact on communities where high levels of violent incidents occur. Many of the young people that we work with have no trust in public institutions. After much encouragement from governments to participate in public processes, and a failure on their part to make much needed systemic changes to reduce violence in communities where many members live and work, GYC has recognized the need to create and sustain our own structures.

Education

1) Repeal The Safe Schools Act

Safe schools are not schools in which racialized youth, queer youth, or differently abled youth are targeted for suspensions and expulsions. Rather, they are a place where students, teachers and parents work together with staff and administration to build a safe and open educational environment for all students.

The Safe Schools Act pushes students (particularly racialized students) out of the education system and criminalizes them. We believe that this Act has done more damage to our schools by minimizing the relationship of trust and education between teachers/principals and students and supplanted it with a relationship of authoritarianism and control.

We do not feel that the reforms presented on February 1, 2008 actually address the serious issues brought forward by the Ontario Human Rights Commission, including:

- Acknowledging the widespread perception that the Act has a disproportionate impact on students from racialized communities and students with disabilities

- Confirming that the concept of "zero tolerance" has no place in the legislation, regulations or policies
- Considering the application of progressive discipline as an alternative to suspensions and expulsions
- Requesting expansion of the regulations on mitigating factors and requiring principals and school boards to consider such factors prior to suspending or expelling a student
- Providing students who have been suspended or expelled with access to alternative education opportunities
- Supporting the collection of data on suspensions and expulsions and making this information available
- Requiring significant training initiatives for principals, vice-principals and teachers on anti-racism, anti-discrimination, cultural awareness and disability accommodation, along with training on amendments to the Safe Schools provisions
- Working with the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities to promote, advertise, and recruit teachers from racialized communities, persons with disabilities, and other under-represented groups
- Holding a provincial Safe Schools Symposium with participation by the Commission following passage of any amendments
- Annual reporting to the Commission on progress on the agreement until completed.

We have no confidence that the reforms presented by the government will legitimately address the issues noted above. Instead, we call for a complete repeal of this regressive legislation and a process of consultation with students, families and communities on developing school governance policies that are truly meant to make schools a safe and meaningful learning environment.

2) New Ontario Education Curriculum

The Ontario Education Curriculum isolates students, creates silos and streams that limit a student's ability to grow and is not adaptive to the multiplicity of issues, needs and educational goals of Ontario's students. This inevitably leads to an extremely high push-out rate amongst indigenous and racialized youth in our communities. The new curriculum and standardized testing implemented by the Harris Conservatives in the mid/late 1990s has had a significant negative impact on developing learning environments that are adaptive and supportive of the diversity of cultures, learning styles and needs of students in Ontario.

The curriculum in Ontario is meant to align with the interests of the corporate sector, which requires an exploitable, docile and expendable workforce to maintain the profits in its industries. This leads to issues of streaming, Eurocentric academic curriculum, and labelling of students as "troublemakers," rather than addressing some of the root issues that cause students to rebel against or to lose hope in the current education system.

The Ontario curriculum should be redeveloped to include a diverse, integrated and honest account of history and society that is reflected within all courses (not just history or social sciences).

The Ontario curriculum should be redeveloped in collaboration with students, parents and other organizations that have done a number of studies and proposed numerous improvements. Education is not simply about training someone to get a job, but also about building the whole robustness of experience that shapes a young person's life.

We believe that it is incumbent on the Government of Ontario to ensure that Ontario's education system reflects not just a history that shows Canada as a peace-keeping, multicultural, utopian society, but rather is one that is honest about Canada's ongoing genocide of indigenous nations, the slavery of African peoples, the exploitation of migrant labour and the multitude of challenges and oppressions being fought by ordinary people.

Education should be flexible and adaptive to the needs of students and should be focused on building solutions with the community (not simply the next-generation workforce).

3) Make Post-secondary Education Accessible

While admissions to post-secondary institutions in Ontario may be on the rise, the cost and the process for admission has become more limiting. The astronomical increase in tuition fees in Ontario since the early 1990s has left more students in debt or tied to employment opportunities that simply allow them to pay their student debt.

Education is a right. It should not be restricted to those who have the means to pay for it! We demand a drastic reduction in tuition fees immediately! This must be coupled with the reintroduction of a system of grants and scholarships that reduce a student's reliance on debt to finance their education and with a university environment free from corporate interference.

We also demand that being on social assistance not hinder the ability to receive funding to go on to post-secondary eductation, and call on the Ontario government to end the practice of disallowing people living on welfare from obtaining loans from the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP).

Criminalization

1) Repeal The Safe Streets Act

The Safe Streets Act is a social cleansing bill that aims to criminalize and attack the most poor and vulnerable people in our city. Particularly offensive is the way it targets poor and homeless youth, and its impact on their ability to obtain jobs and social services that would address some of the root issues that they face on the street.

With a ban on "aggressive panhandling," and no definition of what constitutes "aggressive," poor, homeless and marginalized youth are often targeted and harassed by police officers for occupying public space in the downtown core. We believe the Safe Streets Act actually makes the streets more dangerous for poor and homeless youth and can lead to significant abuses of power by police officers and security guards.

We call on the Ontario government to legislate an immediate repeal of this repressive piece of legislation and to actually address issues that cause people to be on the street in the first place, including: inadequate supply of affordable housing; lack of funding for emergency support services for homeless or under-housed people; lack of strong legislation to protect tenants (the Tenant Protection Act primarily serves to protect landlords).

2) Stop The Construction Of The Roy Mcmurtry Youth Superjail

The rate of incarceration of young people in Ontario is significantly higher than in most jurisdictions in Europe and even some in the United States. It is clear that indigenous and Black youth are statistically overrepresented in the prison system, and particularly in the youth prison system. Most youth offenders continue to be non-violent offenders, yet the Ontario government's and the mainstream media's framing of violent crimes involving youth in Toronto as "the Summer of the Gun," and stigmatizing poor and racialized communities as "violent" or "dangerous," has created a sense of panic within our communities and has resulted in increased targeting of Black youth by police.

The Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA) that came into effect in 2003 attempted to redress some gross injustices that were apparent in the Young Offenders Act that preceded it. One such issue was the logical step to minimize the rate of incarceration of young people and to provide young people with alternatives to incarceration. We believe that Bill C-2, the federal government's "Anti-Violent Crime Legislation," is a direct attack on the progress that was fought for and won by our communities in the YCJA, and will undoubtedly result in increased incarceration of young people and further disparities with regard to the incarceration rate of young people.

In 2004, after a coroner's inquest into the suicide death of David Meffe at the Toronto Youth Assessment Centre (TYAC), the report from the inquest made a clear statement that large closed-custody youth prisons

were counterproductive, overly punitive and not likely to facilitate support for the youth incarcerated.

Specifically, the Meffe inquest report called for:

> *RECOMMENDATION # 4.*
>
> *Location of New Toronto Youth Detention Facilities - New Facilities for the custody and detention of youth in Toronto (replacing TYAC) to be constructed as smaller stand alone facilities located throughout the GTA. Potentially, have one location for each of the major cities (Scarborough, North York, Toronto, Etobicoke, etc).*
>
> *Rationale:*
> *This would reinforce the Ministry's commitment to a philosophy of family and community involvement in treating and managing youth in custody and detention, as well as compliance to the "United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child". This would also acknowledge the fundamental difference in support needs between adults and youth. This recommendation is aligned to the research and expert witness testimony submitted on managing youth in detention. Multiple small locations will;*
>
> - *Facilitate critical family access and community support for the youth.*
> - *Allow management of youth in smaller groups allowing more one- on-one time to develop custodial relationships and reducing the risk of peer on peer violence.*

Instead, the Ontario government has made the decision to continue the construction of the Roy McMurtry Youth "superjail[8]," a 192-bed facility that will cost Ontario over $100 million to construct, and which directly contradicts the recommendation for small stand-alone facilities that would bring Ontario in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Although youth incarceration rates dropped under the YCJA, we believe that the new federal legislation will inevitably lead to a rise in incarceration of youth, longer sentences and harsher penalties.

We call on the Ontario government to immediately halt construction of the Roy McMurtry superjail, to renovate the uncompleted prison into an actual community centre for youth in Brampton and North Toronto, and to take the recommendations outlined in the Meffe inquest seriously. We do not want more jails in our communities; we do not believe they make our communities safer.

[8] *We reject the Government of Ontario's using the term Youth Centre to describe a prison. We think it is an affront to the work of youth centres throughout Ontario that engage in positive and community-based work. This facility, at 192 beds, the largest youth incarceration facility in Ontario is more aptly described as a "super jail."*

3) Implement An Independent System Of Police Monitoring: Stop Police Brutality And Harassment

For too long, police impunity has been prevalent within Ontario (and particularly Toronto). From the murders of Dudley George, Jeffrey Reodica, Edmond Yu, Alwy al-Nadhir and Byron Debagassie, to the constant harassment, profiling and disrespect of racialized, marginalized and homeless youth in the City of Toronto, we have witnessed some of the most blatant cases of police violence and oppression in our communities. We say: "Enough is Enough!"

We demand that the Ontario government implement a comprehensive and independent police-monitoring and abuse-reporting system that is community controlled and that addresses the serious issues facing community-police relations. We want less talk about community policing and more talk about policing the police! Police officers should respect and be driven by communities, not intimidate, harass and violate them at will.

The Ontario government continues to be reactionary in the face of violent incidents within our communities by hiring more police officers, increasing funding for "guns and gangs" squads and building expensive super jails for youth. We think this is the absolutely wrong approach, and it completely contradicts any work towards addressing the root causes of violence in our communities.

Police complaints should be processed through independent community-run police complaints tribunals in each police division in the city. These community-run police complaints tribunals should have the power to suggest to the Toronto Police Services Board and the Chief of Police the suspension, firing or criminal prosecution/investigation of police officers.

The militarization of our streets, our schools, our youth organizations and community centres through increased police presence only exacerbates the problems, tensions and issues that impact our community. The ballooning police budgets in our cities is a direct affront to those who have fought for more social housing, better funding for schools and youth organizations, and more access to community space.

We demand that the Government of Ontario start taking police violence seriously!

We demand that the Government of Ontario begin to conduct research studies similar to those in the United States, which show that increased enforcement and incarceration have no/little correlation with a decrease in crime rates.

We demand effective and frequent human rights/anti-oppression training for police officers, especially with regard to new policies and procedures (i.e., the "Don't Ask" policy with respect to undocumented people passed by the Toronto Police Services Board in February 2006).

4) Pass A Provincial "Access Without Fear" Policy to Ensure That Residents of Ontario Without Full Immigration Status Have Access to Essential Services

There are estimates of over 500,000 people living and working in Canada without full immigration status, with more than 80,000 of those people living in the City of Toronto alone. As youth organizations, and in our communities, we work with undocumented people on a regular basis, sometimes as some of the only social services that they can access without fear of being detained or deported.

We are endorsers and supporters of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" campaign, and demand that the Ontario government support the rights of all those living and working in Ontario without full immigration status to access essential community services like schools, women's shelters, community centres, youth programs, health services and emergency services, without fear of detention and/or deportation.

Further, we demand that the Government of Ontario use its powers under immigration law to immediately begin implementing a system to grant permanent residency to undocumented workers in Ontario.

Economics and Opportunity

1)Raise the Minimum Wage to a Living Wage

As Ontario continues its transition into a service-based employment economy, many secure, reasonable-pay unionized jobs have been replaced with precarious, part-time, service-based jobs that pay wages well below what one needs to subsist in cities like Toronto.

Youth in this province are convinced and coerced into finding more and more service sector jobs through "job seek" programs and government ads with the express intention of ensuring that the corporate sector has a cheap and exploitable workforce. The lack of employment opportunities that are full-time, non-contractual and pay reasonably continues to fall, and this is not reflected in the "unemployment rate."

There have been calls for an increase in the minimum wage to $10/hr in Ontario. According to our calculations, even if one is able to find a full-time job (37.5 hrs/wk) at that rate, one would only gross $19,500 per year. We believe that this remains criminally low and does not ensure that someone working at minimum wage can afford to subsist in the City of Toronto. We call on the Ontario government to implement a "living wage" minimum wage of at least $15/hr, plus a cost of living adjustment (COLA) on an annual basis.

2) Youth Self-employment Opportunities

Self-employment is often a means for youth in our communities to extricate themselves from dead-end McJobs in the service industry. However, Ontario's current programs to support youth self-employment are often difficult to access, complicated to navigate and don't always provide youth with the skills/training necessary to ensure that their small business/community enterprise can thrive under the predatory pricing practices of and intense competition from large corporations that receive significant tax breaks and subsidies (corporate welfare) from governments.

We demand the creation of an open and accessible social enterprise fund that is highly funded (not just another $15 million, three-year investment), staffed by employees knowledgeable and experienced in working with youth entrepreneurial initiatives, open and creative, and helps to build skills. We also demand that the government not tie these types of programs to corporate/bank loans in some sort of private/public partnership that ends up putting youth social entrepreneurs in debt, to the profit of the big banks!

3) 40% Increase in Social Assistance and ODSP Now!

Since the drastic cuts to social assistance and ODSP under the Mike Harris regime, impoverished people in Ontario, and particularly in the City of Toronto, have been living in dire poverty, often having to make decisions around whether to spend money on food or shelter. This is appalling, and the Government of Ontario under Dalton McGuinty have done nothing but a meagre 3% increase in rates to relieve people of the starvation and homelessness that this cut has produced.

The health of young people in Ontario is being significantly compromised by the criminally low rates of social assistance and ODSP. We demand an immediate 40% increase in social assistance to more closely align welfare rates with the subsistence rates prior to the Harris era. While the purchasing power of Ontarians (and particularly those in Toronto) continues to diminish, the government has stepped back, as people are forced to choose between shelter and food for their children, as food bank use hits all-time highs and as jobs become more precarious than ever before.

4) Increase Social Housing and Repair Current Social Housing Stock

There is a social housing crisis in Toronto. Not only is there a 10-year waiting list to get into social housing in the city, but also the stock of existing housing is in severe disrepair. We are concerned that the practice of social cleansing, like the gentrification of Regent Park, has been confused with meaningful and real solutions for the housing crisis we are facing. We do not want to be forced out of our homes and communities. Rather, we want the government to step up and start to build and repair social housing that accommodates all those who can no longer afford housing in the City of Toronto.

We support the 1% solution put forward by the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee and other academic and social groups. We believe that housing should be a right for all

people living in Ontario, and that the realities of youth homelessness are directly linked to the fact that housing in the City of Toronto is unaffordable. We call on the Ontario government to stop propping up the business of condominium development and speculation (which artificially inflates the cost of rent for all people living in the city) and invest in social housing and repair that makes our communities safer and healthier!

We are also tired of governments (federal, provincial and municipal) passing the buck to each other with regard to how to deal with this issue. We recognize that it is the responsibility of ALL THREE levels of government to make this implementation happen immediately, and that bureaucratic wrangling is no longer acceptable.

5) Investment in TTC and Transportation

Transportation costs in the City of Toronto continue to skyrocket. Youth and youth organizations who depend on the TTC have been systematically shut out of travel in this city due to the exorbitant costs of transportation. Toronto's transportation system has been placed in a crisis because of downloading and lack of investment from the federal and provincial governments.

We demand that the Ontario government acknowledge its responsibility to addressing the funding crisis for transportation in the City of Toronto. The $2.75 per trip is higher than almost any other jurisdiction in North America and has created significant issues of isolation and immobility for youth across the city. The Ontario government must invest immediately in both infrastructure and operating expenses for transportation. Moreover, the Ontario government must work directly with the federal government and the City of Toronto to lower the cost of fares, improve the infrastructure of the TTC, and o invest in the future of public transportation throughout the province.

6) Universal Day-care Program

In the current economic context, working parents have little or no affordable options for child care. This lack of affordable options leads to significant economic constraints and missed job opportunities.

We believe that universal child care is a quintessential part of a social system that ensures the full participation of both men and women, single parents and young families. We also must condemn the exploitative practices of the "live-in caregiver" program that uses Filipino and Caribbean women as cheap and exploitable labour. We believe that child care needs to be respected as the important work that it is.

As such, we demand a universal child care program that pays workers fairly and that ensures access and quality child care for all people living in Ontario.

Space

1) Build and Invest in Community Space

There is a significant shortage of accessible and good quality community space, which is needed for youth organizations, small social enterprises, community groups and neighbourhoods. Most city-controlled space lacks in accessibility, and many neighbourhoods in Toronto lack any kind of community centre. Spaces in low-income neighbourhoods do exist within Toronto Community Housing, the school system and in mainstream organizations, and while the racialized youth within these communities could benefit the most from this space, they find it the least accessible.

We demand that the Government of Ontario invest in a fund that directly supports the building of community centres that would be controlled, kept up and staffed by community members themselves. We feel it is critical for more youth-led spaces to exist in the city that are creative and that evolve with the changing needs of the community. The physical spaces do exist, but the bureaucracy in accessing such spaces is a massive barrier for youth and youth organizations. Barriers must be removed that prevent access for groups or individual young people who want to run study groups, hold dance practices, basketball games or even start their own drop-ins or after-school programs.

Moreover, we believe that schools are an integral part of building community and demand that all schools be made available for free use by the community after school hours. We also call on the Government of Ontario to put programs in place to help integrate community groups with student groups and build stronger neighbourhoods and spaces of learning.

2) Stop the Privatization of Social Spaces

Increasing privatization of social spaces, like the developments happening at Yonge-Dundas Square, have led to increased policing of social spaces and an increased sense that to be a part of a community, one must be a consumer in it. This type of exclusion of poor people and youth from "legitimate" social spaces has created a culture of supervision and policing that is far more aggressive than ever before. The use of regressive policies like the Safe Streets Act to cleanse these privatized "public" spaces is readily apparent.

Public space creates a hub for communities to engage in positive activities, have an outlet for physical activity, and mobilize as a collective around the issues that matter to them. The proliferation of privatization that we have witnessed in our communities has brought increased policing, bureaucracies and financial exclusion, which renders these spaces inaccessible to many of the people who live in these very communities. We have also seen an increase in public facilities charging general public user fees, and thus these spaces should no longer be called *public*.

We demand that the Ontario government begin a process and consultation with Ontarians about the use of public space for private and commercial purposes. We want the hypocrisy of commercialized spaces being given the right to poster throughout the city, while many poor and marginalized people are being ticketed for simply being on the street, to stop!

3) Develop a Plan to Fund Physical Infrastructure for Youth-led Work

A critical part of building safe and healthy communities is supporting and developing safe and open spaces for young people to develop programs, run workshops and support their communities. This must be done in such a way that youth-led initiatives have the space and resources to effectively take on the work that is needed in their communities. The provincial government should invest in social capital and physical infrastructure in marginalized and racialized communities (as well as in the downtown core) to provide services directed towards youth. These spaces should be youth-centred, and not simply extended to mainstream social service providers.

Community development can only happen if people have the space to congregate, build their communities, and work with each other in collaborative and creative ways. The current context of instability in funding for youth-led initiatives, and being forced to move from space to space, creates insecurity, precariousness, and an inability to maintain long-term programs in particular communities. All of these issues would contribute to the alleviation of violence, poverty and lack of resources in our communities.

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Section 4:

Report on Consultations with Urban Aboriginal Youth Concerning Violence Involving Youth

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Introduction

The Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres (OFIFC), a provincial Aboriginal organization that administers a range of Aboriginal youth programs, organized and facilitated consultation sessions with Aboriginal youth living in urban areas. Representing 27 friendship centres across Ontario, the OFIFC is uniquely situated to reach out to Aboriginal youth living in urban centres in a culturally appropriate way. The Ontario Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs helped pay for this consultation.

The Aboriginal youth consultations explored:

- Youth violence as it is experienced by Aboriginal youth, and its impacts on communities
- Local strategies, programs and mechanisms to address the issue of violence involving youth
- Broader structural or strategic measures to address the roots of violence involving youth
- Further recommendations for the Review to address violence involving youth.

An Overview of the Process

In June 2008, the OFIFC organized and facilitated Aboriginal youth consultations in two stages. In the first stage, the OFIFC worked with local friendship centres to arrange consultations in northern Ontario urban areas (Kenora, Fort Frances, Thunder Bay, Sault Ste. Marie, Sudbury, Timmins and North Bay). In each location, 15 youth were invited to the local friendship centre to talk about violence involving youth and their communities. The OFIFC provided a facilitator and note-taker. Following each session, the OFIFC compiled a summary of the discussion and the recommendations.

In the second stage, the OFIFC organized a full-day session at its Toronto offices, bringing together 34 youth from urban areas in southern Ontario (Toronto, Ottawa, Hamilton, London, Niagara/Fort Erie and Barrie). Two OFIFC staff members facilitated the session. To help focus the discussion, youth participants at both the northern and southern consultations followed the same discussion guide that was used in the community consultations (please see the *Neighbourhood Insights Final Report* included in this volume). A local elder and an OFIFC education programmer spoke with youth about their roles and responsibilities. Again, the OFIFC provided a summary of the proceedings.

Participants

Youth that participated in the northern consultations offered perspectives from many different backgrounds and experiences. They were attending high school or post-secondary institutions, they were young mothers, they had just moved from a First Nation or small town to a larger urban centre, or they were living in the care of child and family services or in a variety of other circumstances. Many had close ties to reserve communities.

Youth that participated in the southern consultations were mostly in high school; however, some were attending post-secondary institutions or working. Other participants lived in shelters or foster care, and a few had been in custody. Some participants had close ties to reserve communities, while others had grown up primarily in large urban centres.

Violence Involving Youth and its Impacts on Communities

Participants in both the north and south had experienced violence involving youth and had been subject to a number of the immediate risk factors often identified for violence involving youth. Both northern and southern participants cited the following as roots of violence involving youth in their communities:

- **Gangs:** Generally, participants associated gangs with drug-dealing and other problems.
- **Alcohol and drug use:** One youth explained that "some youth turn to drugs and alcohol for many reasons, such as a bad home life, being abused, watching parents abuse themselves." Another youth said, "Many kids drink, smoke and get high" in his/her community. Some worried that alcohol and drug use would have a very negative impact on the next generation.
- **Peer pressure:** Several participants spoke about being teased or gossiped about, or feeling pressure to fit in and join cliques at school. One North Bay youth said, "There is no outlet for youth to express their negative energy in a positive way, [so] they resort to trying to fit in with what others are doing," including using violence. Another said, "Violence involving our youth is getting more intense physically. Nishnawbe youth turn against each other in a cry for help. Since there is no one to stand up and say no, the problem/ impact travels beyond into our families and in turn creates more violence."
- **Bullying:** One youth explained, "Youth violence is pretty bad; kids get bullied and pushed around [and]…have to be walked to school." Another said, "[T]here is a lot of bullying in school.… [P]eople tend to make fun of people who are different. For example, my friend…gets labelled a 'queer'.… [I]t really bothers me and I have gone to teachers.… [T]hey told me to just ignore them. I don't see how this helps." From the discussions, bullying seemed to be also prevalent on reserves.
- **Racism (and gender) discrimination:** Many participants talked about racism and racial tension, stereotyping and being called hurtful, racist names, including "savage, chief, Pocahontas, wagon-burner, low-life and drunk." Some also talked about experiencing gender discrimination. In Kenora, the facilitator commented that each member of the group "had a story about some type of racism against them…in schools, shopping centres and everywhere." The participants

My Experience of Youth Violence

I never experienced youth violence until I entered high school. I found violence comes in every shape and form and from people you'd least expect it. I found people were the most violent towards people who were so-called, "un-cool," people who have a different sexual orientation, and people who are from a lower class and don't have money.

Growing up was very difficult and I was always aware of violence. I would even walk home from school after everyone else had left because I used to be so terrified. I was also very self-conscious.... I used to feel so sorry for people that got picked on, beat up or made the centre of attention, even though I was always in the same boat.

But here I am, out of high school, living downtown in a shelter and some people terrify me. I have had phones, money and even my dignity stolen. Violence really is everywhere, in all races [and] parts of the city.... I even got punched in the face when I was confronted [for] money. Then, I was in an awkward position whether to tell or not—the person would centre me out more and more. I don't know if these people are unsure of themselves or whatever [or] how long violence will go on for. Will we ever escape it? I think people need to learn acceptance, then they will understand.... [B]ullies really don't know how it affects the victims.

I'm not sure how to cure violence, but I think there should be commercials, billboards, groups, and things to make violence awareness everywhere and help people who experience [violence] or [give them] someone to turn to.

Toronto session participant

attributed racism largely to cultural barriers and to lack of understanding about Aboriginal peoples among non-Aboriginal youth, parents and teachers. Some felt that violence was their only defence. They were very much aware of the history of social exclusion and racism, including the continuing impact of the residential school system on Aboriginal families and communities.

- **Abuse:** Participants talked about verbal, physical and emotional abuse within and outside the family. They also spoke of abuse within couple relationships, sexual assault and rape.
- **Suicide:** The participants repeatedly raised the issue of the prevalence of suicide among children and youth. They also discussed depression and feelings of low self-esteem, fear and anxiety.
- **Unsupervised parties:** Some said that unsupervised parties sometimes get out of control and escalate to violence.
- **Family dysfunction:** The participants considered bad parenting a root of violence involving youth. Some felt that if children see violence in the home, they might think it is okay to be violent towards others. They talked about some parents abusing their kids and the stress that it creates in a young person's life. One youth said, "Some parents drink and do drugs and it is not a very good home life. This leads to not doing well in school and failure."
- **Poverty:** Without the necessities, people may turn to crime to survive.

- **Education:** Being expelled from school can lead young people into involvement with violence. Kenora participants also noted that schools test Aboriginal youth "to see if they are smart or not." They are treated as though they were "dumb" and given different assignments from those given to non-Aboriginal youth, which makes them feel angry and ashamed.
- **Media:** Participants pointed to the influence of television, music and video games on perceptions about violence. One youth said, "A big influence on young people is the media, whether it is TV, movies, books/magazines [or] music. They all have a big influence on young people's thoughts."
- **Lack of recreational and employment opportunities:** Some youth said that, with little else to do, being bored led them to violence. In Fort Frances, for example, there were few recreational activities for youth.

There were differences between north and south in terms of the way youth experienced violence. In the north, participants seemed to focus more on the effects of racism, family dysfunction, alcohol and drug abuse, suicide and depression. The young people in the north had closer ties with reserve communities and they mentioned outsiders coming into the community as a cause of violence. Youth in southern Ontario urban centres pointed out that larger cities like Toronto and Ottawa have many diverse neighbourhoods, and their experiences of violence depended on where they lived.

Local Strategies, Programs and Mechanisms to Address Violence Involving Youth

Aboriginal Youth in Northern Urban Centres

Aboriginal youth living in northern urban centres said local strategies and programs to address violence involving youth include youth centres, family services, youth programs and youth workers, and programs offered by organizations like Big Brothers and Big Sisters and the Salvation Army. The participants felt that elders, traditional healers and traditional medicine help youth to better address violence. Participants mentioned a healing and wellness program in North Bay that they believed could be helpful. Counselling, particularly youth counsellors or peer counselling, was also said to be helpful.

Several specific local programs were cited as effective. In Fort Frances, for example, the participants mentioned a substance abuse program, the Atikokan Crisis Centre for women and the local Al-Anon program. In Sault Ste. Marie, participants mentioned "The Hub," which is associated with the Children's Aid Society. Throughout the province, many Aboriginal youth felt that participating in sports and leisure activities like going to movies helped youth to keep busy and relieve stress. Neighbourhood Watch programs made youth feel safer and made them feel more like going home. Some felt that police helped to make their neighbourhoods safer, and in Sudbury, one youth suggested that security in co-op housing areas helped to decrease violence in his neighbourhood.

To address racism in northern urban centres, youth mentioned a race relations committee and a group of students working against bullying in a school in Fort Frances. In North Bay, Warriors Against Violence Everywhere (WAVE) was also cited. This group takes a stand against violence towards youth and adults in native communities.

Simply having a place to go was often mentioned. For example, the YMCA in North Bay provides a meeting place for young people, and in Fort Frances, the Urban Multipurpose Aboriginal Youth Centre, sponsored by the United Native Friendship Centre, provides educational, social, recreational and cultural activities for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth ages 13–24. The participants also felt that local friendship centres, which offer programs including drumming workshops, youth programs and traditional teaching by elders, helped them feel more connected to their communities and gave them a place to go.

Despite these promising efforts, some young people said that nothing was working. Some felt that more police were needed to prevent and deal with violence, but others said that police involvement with Aboriginal youth was mostly negative.

Aboriginal Youth in Southern Urban Centres

As in the north, participants from southern Ontario commented on programs and services in their neighbourhoods that help to address violence involving youth. Some felt that intramural and recreational activities (e.g., after-school programs and the YMCA) helped keep youth busy and out of trouble. Many youth found youth-led initiatives (e.g., youth councils and peer mentoring programs) to be particularly useful in helping them relate to other youth. They also mentioned the importance of local anti-bullying and mental health counselling programs.

A few participants talked about the Akwe:go program (Akwe:go means "everybody" or "all of us" in Mohawk). The Ministry of Children and Youth Services and other provincial agencies provide funding to the OFIFC for this program, which promotes healthy development in ways that respect cultural backgrounds and traditions. The program is for Aboriginal children ages 7–12 and is run in 27 friendship centres across Ontario. The program provides an action plan for each child, elder teachings, culturally relevant programs, recreational and after-school programs, peer support, health resources, and program referrals and awareness.

Some participants mentioned Job Connect, a provincial government program delivered through community delivery sites, some of which are sponsored by Aboriginal groups. It provides access to career/job information, training and employment placements. Youth from Barrie mentioned Simcoe Outreach Services, an agency funded by the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, which provides counselling to individuals and families dealing with alcohol, drugs and gambling problems.

Like northern youth, Aboriginal youth in southern urban centres found support at local friendship centres. Many felt that friendship centres can help youth avoid violence. They found help lines effective when they needed someone to turn to, and they felt that Children's Aid Society shelters and safe houses were useful in dealing with violence.

Native Youth Centre drop-in programs, the Youth Council at Native Child and Family Services of Toronto and the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto's youth program were also considered positive influences in preventing violence. Police, teachers, parents and grandparents, volunteers, schools and counsellors were mentioned as helpful resources.

Nevertheless, some participants had no hope that violence could be stopped. Participants from London said that a helpful youth group had existed there, but had been cut because of lack of funding. Some young people expressed the view that many youth programs do not truly engage youth and are not accessible enough or are not delivered to youth where they are. Some youth felt that having police in their neighbourhoods helped deter violence. Others talked about harassment by police, and some said that they had been harassed or arrested by police based on their race.

Strategies, Programs and Mechanisms to Address the Issue of Violence Involving Youth

Participants were asked about the most important things that could be done in their neighbourhoods to address violence involving youth. In the north, participants recommended:

- Make more facilities and buildings available for youth (e.g., shelters for young women).
- Provide more youth support and community workers in schools and on reserves.
- Give kids more time to be kids. Many felt that they had too much school and too many structured activities.
- Teach youth how to talk out their problems and walk away before violence escalates.
- Encourage better parenting and provide programs to support young parents (e.g., child care). Some youth talked about the difficulties of being teenage parents. They were finding it hard to manage financially and personally, and some youth delayed or stopped their education when they became parents.
- Talk about violence and bullying.
- Provide employment opportunities.
- Provide positive role models (e.g., youth mentors and elders).
- Establish programs in schools to make them safer.

Aboriginal youth living in the south recommended:

- Programs to help Aboriginal youth explore their culture, languages and traditions (e.g., traditional medicines)
- Cultural sensitivity training for agencies working with Aboriginal youth
- Programs and providing resources to ease the transition for youth who are moving between reserves and cities
- Drop-in centres, panels, conferences and violence awareness days to help young people confronted with violence
- Youth advocacy, youth leader and youth centres to give young people a voice in the issues that affect them
- Housing facilities, which are urgently needed for many Aboriginal youth
- Childcare and support for young parents
- More funding for programs that are working
- More male role models for Aboriginal youth

Aboriginal youth in both northern and southern urban centres recommended:

- **Safe spaces for youth:** Areas such as parks and drop-in centres should be available to hang out, where youth do not have to deal with violence, drugs or crime. In Sudbury, for example, the youth centre is in a "rough" downtown neighbourhood, where the young people do not feel safe. They would prefer a youth centre in an accessible and safe place. Some suggested that such places should be located in every neighbourhood. Friendship centres and youth centres should have longer hours and be open on weekends, and there should be more drop-in centres for youth and young parents.
- **More recreation and arts programs that are affordable or free:** For example, participants in Kenora explained that not many Aboriginal youth were involved in after-school sports because of the cost and because some felt discriminated against when they tried to participate.
- **More accessible and affordable transportation**
- **More help lines:** Youth need better access to call and talk to someone willing to listen and to help.

Broad Structural or Strategic Measures to Address the Roots of Violence Involving Youth

Consultation participants both north and south offered suggestions to help address the roots of violence involving youth in their communities. The suggestions were similar throughout the consultations and are here presented in general categories:

Connecting Aboriginal Youth With Each Other

There should be a networking system to connect Aboriginal youth, as well as a provincial powwow. Powwows and other gatherings help youth develop a stronger sense of community. Youth also suggested that traditional ceremonies (e.g., sweats, smudging and using sweet grass) help them spiritually and in terms of their physical and mental health. Friendship centres should have programs or trips for youth from all over the province so that they can learn about each other. There should also be more youth conferences and gatherings to talk about issues like violence involving youth.

Youth and Aboriginal Representation

Youth should have a place on city councils and in governments, particularly in planning and policy-making. There should also be more advocacy and youth engagement in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal agencies running programs for youth. Ontario needs more politicians who are Aboriginal, more youth-oriented politicians and youth leaders.

Education About Violence

The Province should develop anti-violence programs for younger children to stop violence before it starts. A mandatory youth anti-violence class for credit in high school should be created, and there should be an anti-violence day and a provincial youth anti-violence conference.

Racism and Bullying

Racism- and bullying-awareness presentations should be made in schools, and there should be posters, television and Internet public service announcements directed at youth to help them make better choices. These may be more effective if youth give the presentations, sharing their own experiences with racism and bullying. Local anti-bullying presentations (such as OPP bullying presentations) can also make young people more aware of violence and ways of stopping it in their communities, homes and schools, as well as in society generally. There should be more sustainable funding for anti-bullying and anti-racism programs, and the programs should include real experiences related by youth who have dealt with violence.

Funding for Friendship Centres and Programs

More sustainable funding should be available for programs for and by youth and for traditional programs. Spending should be increased for current systems and programs that are working.

Further Recommendations to the Review

The participants were asked if they had any other advice for the review. Youth from both northern and southern consultations recommended:

- Listen, be tolerant, and try to better understand youth.
- Take the opinions of youth seriously, and do something — don't just write a report.
- Have youth representatives present the review's final report.
- Help build new and better schools for First Nations communities.
- Consider alternative schooling (Native schools).
- Develop ways to make the media accountable for their portrayal of violence, crime and Aboriginal people.
- Promote cultural awareness and recognize the contributions of Aboriginal peoples.
- Create youth councils.
- Let consultation participants know the outcomes of the report.