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# **Meeting the Needs of Youth: Perspectives from Youth-Serving Agencies**

**by**

**Amelia Curran, Evan Bowness, and Elizabeth Comack**

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September 2010



ISBN: 978-1-926888-12-5

Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives–Manitoba

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## Acknowledgements

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Funding to support this research was provided by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Community-University Research Alliance (CURA) grant to the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba (CCPA-MB) for a project entitled "Transforming Aboriginal and Inner-city Communities." The authors would like to

thank Jim Silver, Shauna MacKinnon, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and feedback on earlier versions of this report. We are especially grateful to the members of the Coalition of Community-Based Youth-Serving Agencies (CCBYSA) for sharing their time and insights with us in participating in this study.



Social Sciences and Humanities  
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en  
sciences humaines du Canada

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# Meeting the Needs of Youth: Perspectives from Youth-Serving Agencies

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## The Report in Brief

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This research report provides an overview of the ‘state of youth’ in Winnipeg communities by addressing two main questions: *What are the issues that youth in Winnipeg face? What are the difficulties youth-serving agencies encounter when helping the populations of youth they serve?* To address these questions interviews were conducted with 33 members of the Coalition of Community-Based Youth-Serving Agencies (CCBYSA), a network of 18 after-school and community-based agencies that work to support at-risk and marginalized youth (ranging in ages from 6 to 29) in Winnipeg.

With regard to the issues that youth in Winnipeg currently face, the topic of youth gangs featured prominently in the interviews. Rather than locating this issue in *individualized* terms—that is, that youth are ‘choosing’ to join gangs, and are individually responsible for their gang affiliation—youth workers were clear in situating youth gangs within a *broader, systemic context*: children and young people are doing the best they can in the face of structurally rooted troubles largely beyond their control, including poverty, family problems, difficulties in school, lack of employment opportunities, and racism and discrimination. These troubles are rarely neatly packaged; they are intersecting issues that cannot be addressed in isolation.

In response to these issues, youth-serving agencies in Winnipeg offer a wide range of services and programs. Regardless of their respective programs, when asked about their agency’s greatest achievement, youth service workers typically answer that their real success is in offering youth *a place where they feel they belong*. As such, youth-serving agencies do much more than offer programs such as

recreation, skill development, and job training. They are providing a place for youth to remain attached to pro-social and supportive networks that are otherwise missing from their lives. Programs that youth enjoy and can learn from, paired with staff that youth can identify with and use as role models, are the keys to helping youth through difficult times now and into the future.

When asked about the difficulties youth-serving agencies encounter when helping youth, respondents identified *reaching and retaining some youth in need* and *securing adequate funding* as the biggest challenges they face. With regard to the former, consistency, both in terms of the program schedules and expectations from youth, is crucial for helping these youth. Another issue addressed by respondents was the challenge of attracting certain youth in need to their programs, especially older youth and/or youth that may be prone to joining gangs. With regard to the latter, respondents underscored that because the issues youth face are so complex, they cannot be adequately addressed without the support and the participation of the wider community—including government. However, the current funding structure that involves a shift away from core funding to a project funding model affects an agency’s ability to confront and change the realities youth live in.

A number of insights have emerged from our study with regard to the particular challenges faced by youth-serving agencies in meeting the needs of youth:

**Gangs are *not* the Real Issue:** The public perception of youth—and the social policies designed to address their troubles—need to

be aligned with what those who work closely with youth understand all too well: rather than demonizing and criminalizing youth, we need to ensure that they can access the resources that will enable them to live productive and meaningful lives.

**Connecting Youth to Their Communities:** It takes a commitment on behalf of *everyone* in a community to encourage and present opportunities for youth to be recognized as valued members of society. Youth-serving agencies are well-positioned to support youth and help to make this connection to the wider community, for example, through access to volunteer or employment opportunities and mentorships or skill development training. Strengthening and building upon these connections would go a long way toward meeting the needs of youth.

**Providing Youth-Serving Agencies with Sufficient Core Funding:** More long-term core funding is required to reduce the variability and unpredictability of relying on project funding so that complex social issues that youth face can be addressed in a way that is both preventative in the long run and beneficial to the lives of youth now.

**Advocating for Youth:** In Winnipeg, the Coalition of Community-Based Youth Serving Agencies offers an excellent platform for not only advocating for the needs of individual youth but also targeting the change that is needed on a broader, more structural level—both in terms of helping with the issues youth face and the struggles agencies encounter in accessing funding.

# Meeting the Needs of Youth: Perspectives from Youth-Serving Agencies

by **Amelia Curran, Evan Bowness, and Elizabeth Comack**

Youth—that nebulous period that lies between childhood and adulthood—has been increasingly recognized as a stage in the life cycle characterized by a myriad of troubles, including difficulties in the labour market,<sup>1</sup> lack of recreational facilities,<sup>2</sup> homelessness,<sup>3</sup> and exposure to drugs,<sup>4</sup> gangs,<sup>5</sup> violence,<sup>6</sup> and crime.<sup>7</sup> More often than not, such issues are exacerbated for newcomer youth,<sup>8</sup> youth in foster care or group home placements,<sup>9</sup> and youth facing cultural marginalization.<sup>10</sup> These troubles are of special concern for youth living in Canada’s inner-city communities, where the social and economic conditions of poverty intensify the difficulties encountered. Children in Aboriginal and newcomer families tend to be overrepresented among the ranks of the poor, particularly in the city of Winnipeg. As the CCPA-MB report, *The View from Here*, notes, children of families with at least one member who is Aboriginal or a recent immigrant are at greater risk of poverty.<sup>11</sup>

While information is available from a diversity of reports and data sources as to how these social and economic conditions affect the troubles youth face, studies often focus on one aspect of the lives of youth, such as homelessness,<sup>12</sup> health,<sup>13</sup> or gangs.<sup>14</sup> While these reports offer rich data on segments of the youth population, an overview of the ‘state of youth’ in Winnipeg communities is absent at the present time. The first question we address in this report, therefore, is: *what are the issues that youth in Winnipeg face?*

A key element to the well-being of youth lies in the provision of support and resources made available to them. In Winnipeg, a network of youth-serving agencies exists to meet

the needs of young people. These community initiatives respond to the troubles youth face and endeavour to tailor their programs based on who these youth are and what needs they have. In Winnipeg’s inner city there are agencies that take a regional focus, offering services to youth in their catchment area or beyond. These agencies aim to be highly inclusive and offer a wide range of programming in order to attract and support a large cross-section of youth. Other agencies streamline their services towards particular populations, such as newcomer or Aboriginal youth, offering programs that take into account cultural histories and present challenges. Still others specialize in the social problems that youth face, such as homelessness, gang-affiliation, or youth who have unique educational needs. Many agencies include activities designed to promote tolerance, integration, and harmony amongst those who may come from very different ethnic or religious backgrounds. These agencies provide tremendous resources to a diverse population of youth facing an even more diverse range of social and personal difficulties. In addition to an expanding array of services, many youth-serving agencies have also extended the category of youth to include a broad age group in order to meet the demand for the resources they offer; for some agencies this includes children as young as six and adults up to 29 years old.

Yet, the provision of services to youth in trouble takes place on a contested political terrain. In these terms, agencies and organizations mandated to offer support to youth encounter their own difficulties in a climate of shrinking funding and resources for their own agencies and for social services in general. As such,

the second question we sought to address in this study was: *what are the difficulties youth-serving agencies encounter when helping the populations of youth they serve?*

Both of the questions addressed in this study were answered by speaking to members of the Coalition of Community-Based Youth-Serving Agencies (CCBYSA), a network of 18 after-school and community-based agencies (see: <http://www.ccbysa.com/>). The CCBYSA is a unique collaborative union of organizations that work together to provide high quality programming and services to Winnipeg's marginalized youth. We conducted thirty-three interviews with participant members of the CCBYSA between September 2009 and March 2010. While many respondents work directly with youth several are also in administrative roles and have experience with funding and overseeing programming. We chose to conduct interviews with these service providers because their positions are uniquely situated between working directly with youth on a first-hand basis, and understanding the constraints and challenges of administration and funding processes. The respondents offered rich perspectives on the issues facing youth and on the difficulties facing agencies who work with them. Although there is a striking variation in the programming offered by the agencies that comprise the CCBYSA, they all faced similar issues.

When asked about the issues that youth in Winnipeg currently face, the topic of youth gangs came up frequently in our interviews. This focus is not surprising, given that gangs have figured so prominently in the public discourse concerning 'troubled' youth.<sup>15</sup> Media reports regularly warn of increasing violence, illegal drug use, and crime associated with gangs. More often than not, this public discourse is one that locates the issue of gangs in *individualized* terms: youth are 'choosing' to

join gangs, and are individually responsible for their gang affiliation. Therefore, society requires protection from this 'criminal element.' Those who work closely with youth, however, offer a competing explanation. Specifically, the front-line workers we interviewed were clear in situating the issue of youth gangs within its *broader, systemic context*: children and young people are doing their best in the face of structural impediments largely beyond their control. As such, the 'choice' that youth make to join gangs must be located within the context of the instability and lack of support experienced by so many young people in Winnipeg.

When asked about the difficulties youth-serving agencies encounter when helping youth, respondents identified reaching and retaining some youth in need and securing adequate funding as the biggest challenges they face. The current funding structure affects an agency's ability to confront and change the realities youth live in, especially since youth-serving agencies are increasingly charged with weighty and complex societal responsibilities (such as crime and gang prevention). This is an especially difficult task at a time when social services such as the education system, child welfare services, and Employment Insurance Assistance are facing difficulties providing youth with what they need. With limited resources to pay for long-term programs and staff, the ability to effect change—both at the individual and societal levels—is severely inhibited.

In the discussion that follows, we detail these perspectives and conclude with suggestions for strengthening youth-serving agencies in their mandate to meet the needs of youth. Although the themes that emerged from our interviews are organized under separate headings, it should be recognized at the outset that this separation is very much an artificial dis-

inction. Indeed, given the interconnected nature of the issues that both youth and youth-serving agencies face, these themes refuse to be contained within the categories attributed to them. This complexity reminds us that neither the issues nor their solutions can be approached as isolated events. As well, the findings of our study are, to a large extent, not

new. They reaffirm what has been said many times before by community workers, researchers, and inner-city residents: the troubles faced by young people are rooted in systemic causal factors that need to be addressed in a meaningful manner.<sup>16</sup> Otherwise, the problems youth face will only be perpetuated.



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## Issues Youth Face

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**Hunger, poverty, domestic violence, peer violence or bullying, peer pressure for illegal activities, gangs, gang influences, inadequate clothing, inadequate care and attention at home, disadvantages like FAS or learning disabilities... lack of parenting, a lack of direction, and a lack of care.**

While youth-serving agency workers offered a variety of responses when asked what issues the youth they serve face, the above response encapsulates the myriad of troubles cited by our respondents. These troubles are particularly well known to front-line youth workers, and our interviews with members of the CCBYSA reveal a wealth of knowledge and experience working with a wide range of youth. Respondents were able to speak to the conditions young people live in and the impact of these conditions on their everyday experiences. Key themes that emerged from our interviews included: the impact of poverty; difficulties with family and caregivers; problems at school; barriers to employment; and the prevalence of racial discrimination.

### The Trouble with Poverty

**We make sure that the kids that come through that door have at least one healthy meal a day, and for many of our kids that's probably what it is; you know, they're not getting them anywhere else.**

In 1989, the House of Commons promised to eradicate child poverty by the year 2000.<sup>17</sup> While the proportion has declined since its peak of 18% in 1996, it is still the case that in 2008, 9%—or 606,000 children younger than 18—were living in low-income families.<sup>18</sup> Using the Low Income Cut-Off as a measure of poverty, Manitoba's child poverty rate in 2007 was tied for highest in the country at 19%.<sup>19</sup> This is a reality for many youth in Winnipeg,

where in 2006, 20% of the households—40% in the inner city—were considered impoverished.<sup>20</sup> For staff and volunteers who work directly with youth, these are not just statistics. Poverty has devastating effects on the lives of the young people they serve. In fact, poverty was the most commonly cited cause of difficulties for youth since it affected so many areas of a youth's life, beginning in the family and then branching outwards from there. As one youth worker acknowledged:

**I'd say poverty is the biggest problem that they're dealing with... families with addiction and not having food, not having clothes, not having proper housing—all those issues are associated with poverty.**

Poverty does not simply hinder the quality of life that a youth has while growing up. It also acts as a catalyst, affecting the other institutions youth come into contact with. Poverty creates and compounds the troubles youth face in a way that becomes insidiously cyclical, affecting their ability to succeed in school and to secure future employment. As one respondent who helps youth find employment explained:

**People in this area, that we're involved with, are always on the lower end of the scale and have fewer opportunities, and this is because they're living on incomes that you can't do much with... Depending on how stable the household is, if you're moving a lot, if you're in substandard housing, all of this is going to affect school and their ability to succeed after.**

This was a common theme, as youth workers repeatedly acknowledged that poverty led to a constant struggle for daily survival that restricted the development of future plans and possibilities.

**Our kids have the same dreams that kids in any other part of this city and country have. But they have so many barriers within their own lives to reaching those dreams. For many of them, just basic needs, daily survival, that's where their mind is. It's hard for them to think about their future. It's hard for them to think about their education down the line when all they're thinking about is today.**

In this regard, poverty is not simply about learning to manage with less. It is about learning how to survive day-by-day-and at the great expense of being unable to plan for the future.

Although poverty was often seen as an issue located within the home, there was also recognition that structural factors lead to problems within a family. For example, an agency worker who works with newcomer youth pointed to the transportation debt incurred when immigrating to Canada as a reason youth leave school early.

**... [Y]ou have to pay back the money that [the government] paid for you to come to Canada, the air ticket and the medical examination fee. So a family of six or seven with a single mother who has very young kids comes with a debt of ten thousand dollars. The elder son who is thirteen years old who is in school, the mother has to tell him to find a job so that they can pay this money. And the kids find a lot of pressures, falling out of school and being able to find jobs.**

This situation is compounded for newcomers who move to Winnipeg's inner city, as their "debt levels are increasing faster than incomes."<sup>21</sup> Often youth are relied on to help the family survive financially, and youth struggling to contribute to family incomes become restricted in the opportunities available to them.

Unfortunately, to mitigate the effects of poverty, some youth turn to gang affiliation and are vulnerable to exploitation. For many youth, gangs can be seen to offer many opportunities missing from a life lived in poverty. Gangs provide a sense of belonging within a network, a sense of worth, and a sense of pride. These attractions can be especially tempting for those whose connections with school and/or family have been broken or who have experienced discrimination—all of which can be associated with poverty. This respondent sees gangs as one way youth are able to meet their basic needs.

**The kids that end up being exploited on the street or drawn into gangs ... have those very basic needs of shelter, food, clothing that aren't being met elsewhere.**

With little economic control over their lives, youth bear the brunt of poverty in ways that impede their future wellbeing. The interviews with agency workers affirm that poverty becomes intertwined with troubles found in the home, school, and employment—all of which often affect a youth's self esteem, sense of identity, and future opportunities.

### **The Trouble with Family**

**Youth struggle with a sense of belonging, and that can manifest itself in many ways. A lot of the time it happens in struggling families, single parent families, or where there are crises in the family because of addictions or other life choices.**

Our interviews revealed that youth commonly seek out, and rely upon, the help provided by youth-serving agencies due to difficulties they encounter in the home or with caregivers. Respondents discussed a number of troubled family situations, including absentee or neglectful parents, witnessing or experiencing abuse and violence, and hardships associated with the child welfare system. Yet, youth-care

workers recognize that parents are coping with stresses of their own, including single parenthood, poverty, discrimination, and issues related to immigration and colonization. As previously mentioned, although poverty was cited as the main cause for the troubles youth face, the effects of poverty were most often associated with the home environment.

### *Absentee or neglectful parenting*

Absentee or neglectful parenting was the most common theme that emerged regarding difficulties in the home. Parents are sometimes absent from the home because of demanding employment and educational obligations. In order to make ends meet, parents in some families work two jobs, or have to resort to working late shifts as their only employment option. Within the newcomer community, this situation can be exacerbated by the need to take language courses or other training.

**Our last [family event] had thirteen parents, which is a little low, and every answer that we got as to why they didn't come was because they're working. They're working like crazy. We have a kid that sees his mom once a week, except for sleeping, because she's in English classes, she's working, she's doing everything. And he's at school and then he comes here. And then that's it.**

In some neighbourhoods, the high incidence of single-parent families was identified as an especially difficult situation in which to balance the demands of parenting with employment or other responsibilities.

**I would say 90% [of youth] are from single parent family homes and there's more than a couple of kids in each house and the parents are struggling, and so they can't be super involved in what they're doing. So kids have free time, or maybe not free time, but unsupervised time.**

Some youth care workers also identified the ongoing effects of colonization and residential schooling on the strength and stability of the home lives of Aboriginal youth.

**I think there is a huge impact of the residential school situation that has really affected the capability of some people's ability to parent.**

This viewpoint is consistent with research that shows that in Canada, the systemic disruption of Aboriginal families over centuries has had lasting intergenerational effects on the family and youth, resulting in children and grandchildren experiencing “broken families, broken culture and broken spirit”<sup>22</sup>—an impact described by this agency worker:

**Within the generation of people that attended the residential schools programs, the suicide rate within the Aboriginal community is the same as everyone else, but in the following generation it's eight times higher, and they're thinking that it's because those kids were taken away from their parents and don't know how to show that affection to their kids... It's a huge systemic problem that's generations old.**

What these youth workers identify is the continued repercussions for youth from generations of ‘un-parented parents’ caused by residential schools. In this sense, workers who help Aboriginal youth often do not cite poverty or poor parenting as the root of the troubles these youth face, but instead recognize the interconnection between individual difficulties and a complex series of historical events. Indeed, it is important to remember that today's youth become tomorrow's parents, and the cycle continues. Under-investing in solutions to youth problems today is a sure-fire way of promoting youth problems tomorrow.

### *Violence, crime, and abuse*

The lack of parental supervision and connection is not the only negative family-related issue. Youth workers also identified violence, crime, and/or abuse as features of family life for some youth. As one agency worker expressed, “There are kids that are experiencing violence on a regular basis, and for a lot of kids we suspect that’s going on at home.” Concerns over abuse and exploitation in the home were also frequently voiced by other respondents:

**Youth have problems like growing up in houses where their parents were drinking right in front of them or fighting in front of them, doing drugs, selling drugs. And even as far as sending a daughter out into the sex trade.**

In order to adequately respond to the problems youth experience at home, several respondents expressed the need to work preventatively with families, as exemplified by this comment:

**When you hear of the violence, very few of the incidents are a stranger versus stranger, right? Most of the time it’s within the family or the victims know each other when the violence happens. The solution is that families are connecting with their kids so that home is a place where they want to be, not where they have to be.**

### *Child Welfare Services*

Often when youth are taken away from problematic family circumstances, their troubles are displaced rather than removed. While placements with Manitoba Child and Family Services (CFS) can provide alternative living arrangements for youth who experience unsafe environments, this system was often criticized more than it was praised by respondents, both in terms of the way the system works and its effects on the youth.

**We’ll phone [CFS] for youth and we’ll say, ‘This and this is going on for this youth, this youth has been abused.’ And Child and Family Services often is so overwhelmed that they can’t do anything about it anyway. Or if the youth does get taken away from their house and they’re put into a foster family who isn’t adequately trained or able to support these youth with these high level needs, then the youth run, and then the cops pick them up and put them back in the system, or they get thrown into the Youth Centre because they can’t do anything else but lock them up.**

As the above comment reveals, the troubles lay in the system and not the individual workers. This point is emphasized again by a worker frustrated at the supports available to youth, but sympathetic to the social workers involved.

**We’ve had several experiences where the best option is to send them to a shelter, or ask them if they have a friend’s house to stay at. So the system—and not to blame it on the social workers at all, because I know that some of the social workers are supposed to have caseloads of thirty, but they have caseloads of over a hundred—so the whole system is set up for these youth to fail, that’s for sure.**

There was a consensus among respondents that more should be done to support the needs of families in Winnipeg, and while Child and Family Services is mandated to achieve this goal, they were often seen as being unsuccessful. These criticisms emerge from the frustration felt from witnessing the negative effects foster placements can have.

**When the kids are actually put into a placement or taken away then the youth have a negative experience. So, unfortunately, we don’t trust the system. It’s the law so we make the reports that we need**

**to make and we disclose the information that we need to disclose. But often that doesn't lead to any positive things, which is super frustrating for us.**

A common complaint is the high degree of transiency in care and the disruption this causes in other areas of children's lives, including the chance to form lasting trusting relationships with adults.

**They're bouncing from home to home to home, sometimes fourteen group homes in one year. I mean, there's no stability there, there's no unconditional love... You learn by making mistakes, and that's a huge part that they don't get when they're in care. They don't get that unconditional love and the chance after chance after chance that most kids do.**

These concerns regarding the negative impacts of foster and group home care are well founded, as research has found that multiple child welfare placements hinder the opportunity to form bonds with adults, maintain school placement, or learn healthy coping skills.<sup>23</sup> In Winnipeg, there is even more cause for concern since the effect of care on Aboriginal youth is more pronounced. The National Council of Welfare reports that while Aboriginal children represent only 23% of all children (0 to 14 years of age), they made up 85% of the 6,629 children in the child welfare system in Manitoba in 2006.<sup>24</sup> Cindy Blackstock makes the point that the number of Aboriginal kids in the child welfare system today exceeds that of any other time in history—including the height of the residential schooling system and the 'sixties scoop.'<sup>25</sup>

### *Homelessness*

Consistent with past research in Winnipeg,<sup>26</sup> troubles in the home and in care were cited by respondents as leading to homelessness. Homeless youth require a large number of

services from agencies, including amenities such as food, shelter, and clean clothes, and help navigating social systems in order to access social assistance, the legal system, or medical help. For example, one youth worker expressed that homeless youth often cannot access services that other youth take for granted:

**Trying to fill the gaps in all the systems is very challenging and sometimes what people take for granted, like, for instance, having ID, you would think systems would help you. But, if you don't have certain things, you're left in the cold from all the different systems, like the judicial system, the welfare system, education system, and healthcare system. There are lots of gaps.**

One of these gaps identified was between child welfare services and Employment Insurance Assistance (EIA) systems. Older youth face particular challenges in regard to homelessness because child welfare systems focus on a younger population.

**Nowadays at fourteen, fifteen a lot of systems just back out, even child welfare. People fourteen, fifteen years old, well, 'We've washed our hands of you, we're not going to go chase you. You don't want to go into the placement we've put you in, well, we're not going to chase you. I can control a five year old. I can't control a fifteen year old. So who am I going to drop?'**

Yet, these youth have difficulty securing social assistance at this age and are often unaware of how to apply for it.

**EIA usually doesn't take youth but if I'm with them, they will make an exception. And also, if I don't advocate on their behalf, they forget what to say, they really don't know what to say.**

If older youth are unable to receive Employ-

ment Insurance Assistance, and Manitoba Child and Family Services no longer provides for them, homelessness is one of their limited options. For homeless youth, jobs are difficult to secure, increasingly so the longer they remain living on the streets.<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, these issues do not simply disappear at age 18 when they officially qualify for EIA, but many of the resources they would need to help them back on a productive path do disappear. According to respondents, youth who turn 18 should not be prohibited from accessing resources for youth since the difficulties they face may still exist, as expressed by this respondent:

**It's the last stop for most of the kids here, so they're without resources, they're without trust, there have been multiple traumas, they are very often homeless, very often illiterate and with no family supports. The great bulk of the kids that we see are between 16 and 24. There's even a bigger sector of kids that are from 18 to 22 that seem to be in that age range where all the services drop off. There's nothing there to support them.**

Some respondents indicated that the instability in the family that results from living with economic and social hardships can leave youth vulnerable to joining gangs. Many stated that gang involvement was either the result of being drawn into gangs in order to obtain a sense of belonging not found within the home or because the family itself is gang entrenched. Responses like this one were typical:

**Well I think that if you don't have a family then you create a family. And you know to meet this sense of belonging, sometimes that is met by gangs.**

Youth who are born into and grow up in gang environments are rarely offered the choice *not* to be gang affiliated, as this would result

in complete separation from the youth's support network.

**If you have a child who comes from a gang-involved family and that's how they survive and that's their way of being, how do you tell a child to disassociate from everything they know?**

The issues youth encounter in the home or in care are not easily addressed. Some are associated with economic or political policies, while others have their basis in Canada's colonial history. While many youth workers addressed the need to work with and support families, there was also a recognition that we need to look beyond the families themselves for solutions. In this regard, our respondents held to the view that to locate fault within the family "is to find pathology in the inability of family relationships to survive the extraordinary stress of living for years under intensely pressured and substandard conditions."<sup>28</sup> From the interviews, it was made clear that helping youth has to be done within the context of helping families, and that the systems in place to do so are not only lacking, they are also creating problems for youth.

## **The Trouble with School**

**The school systems are failing a lot of the young people.**

Youth-serving agency staff also discussed school as a source of troubles for youth in Winnipeg, and felt that issues encountered in school were a common reason that youth needed additional resources offered by youth-serving agencies. Like other issues raised in the interviews, troubles in school were viewed as *relational*: success in school was affected by external conditions, such as poverty and difficult home environments, and in turn, lack of education affects other areas, such as employability and susceptibility to gang affiliation.

There is recognition among youth-serving agency workers that for low-income youth, school is one of the only opportunities available in the fight against poverty. Youth who face poverty and marginalization are the ones who most need education to increase their opportunities; yet, the daily realities of some youth act as a barrier to being able to access education. Inadequate housing conditions, stressful home situations, and hunger were frequently mentioned. For example, one respondent stated:

**[The youth] don't want to be at school, that's what it comes down to, because of various issues, because they're getting bullied in class, because they haven't eaten, lots of our kids don't eat.**

Several agency workers described difficulties faced by youth that make it difficult for them to succeed in class, many of which were connected to the fact that these youth are not having their necessities met or they are being intimidated by other students. Although these are difficult issues in and of themselves, they have the added effect of causing the youth to feel out of place in the school environment. The ability to fit into school was identified by respondents as an important factor in determining whether or not youth stay in school. Thus, while any young person can experience difficulties in connecting with peer groups and teachers, experiences of poverty, discrimination, and learning disabilities only add greater disadvantage. Poverty is an especially potent inhibitor to a sense of belonging, making youth feel different. This feeling of being different can affect more than just their chances of academic success. It hinders the development of confidence and a strong sense of self based on achievements in school. If left unaddressed, this feeling of isolation can lead to poor grades, truancy, and eventually dropping out or getting expelled.

**School shouldn't be another place that**

**attacks my sense of self because I can't read, I can't do any of these things. And I don't want people to think I'm stupid so I get out of school or I create an incident. I do something that gets me kicked out.**

In addition, fewer opportunities for extracurricular activities for poor or marginalized youth means that if they feel alienated at school, these youth are not joining and participating in other group activities where they can foster this sense of belonging. These difficulties in school are exacerbated for newcomer youth, whose cultural and educational experiences may have been very different from those encountered in Canada. A respondent who works with newcomer youth discussed the difficulties of fitting into a new cultural environment. Not speaking the same language as other youth worsens this isolation.

**[Newcomer youth] go to school, everybody speaks a different language, the teacher speaks a different language, their colleagues in class speak a language they don't understand. Imagine going to a class where you don't speak the language and the teachers speak English, everybody raising up their hand and you have nothing to offer.**

The lack of supports within the school was also mentioned with regard to other youth that face barriers to completing school, such as Aboriginal youth. In particular, more resources need to be allocated to helping young people who need extra support. While the public school system does a fine job of meeting the educational needs of most, it often misses those on the margins. Those marginalized by poverty and related issues are precisely the ones who fall between the public education cracks, as expressed by this respondent:

**The system is set up for these youth to fall through the cracks and that's really unfor-**

**tunate. The whole system needs to be relooked at, the education system needs to be relooked at to deal with youth with significant barriers.**

In these circumstances, youth may resort to finding a sense of belonging outside of school through their involvement in gangs. Feeling isolated from both family and school obviously makes this option more attractive. While the following quote speaks of the appeal for newcomer youth to join gangs, the same basic theme applies to any youth who feels cut off from pro-social institutions such as school:

**There's a fairly high turnover rate of newcomers dropping out of high school, for example... [I]t seems like they're really struggling to 'fit in' in school, and often, although it's a small minority, some of our youth will get involved in gangs. They just don't have the supports they need to fit in and choose the streets instead of other options... The gang problem is very inviting with flashy money and all these things. Kids in the gangs speak the same language as them, they appreciate what they do, they offer some kind of a brotherhood, and they find it the most fitting place to belong to.**

While our respondents acknowledged that schools should be doing more, this perspective was tempered with the realization that schools are being leaned upon to perform an ever-widening role as a social support outside the realm of education, and teachers are simply unable to offer solutions to what are often broader, systemic social problems. These realities put teachers and administrators in difficult situations, especially when the programs relied upon in schools to help manage this issue may be failing to address the increased needs of the students.

**[Teachers] are already trying their best by putting in daycare for the young babies**

**and food programs in the morning for these starving kids. There's no social service support for these teachers and they're still demanded to put this curriculum through and teach them math. Well, math is the least of their worries if you're the kid whose starving and just watched Dad beat up Mom last night.**

While schools are not always successful at offering youth adequate resources to help mitigate these external circumstances, it is unrealistic to expect they should be able to. Youth are facing structural and systemic issues that have their origins outside of the school system, and large scale changes to policy and resources are needed. If they cannot access these supports in school, youth sometimes find a more welcoming environment in community agencies, and troubles in school was cited by youth service workers as a common reason why youth access their programs. For example, at one after-school program, one-on-one reading time has become a priority:

**So what we do here is to be able to match them with the volunteers and staff who are able to help them read and catch up with the other colleagues in school.**

Youth-serving agencies also offer youth a safe environment to feel like they can be who they are and where they can develop a sense of identity based on positive activities. Programs that offer tutoring and other academic help are important, but so too are programs that focus on self-esteem and confidence building. The development of these aspects of a youth's identity helps with the reintegration into the school environment. For example, one agency worker talks about how recreation programs have helped foster a sense of pride in youth that enabled them to succeed when they returned to school:

**We have a lot of young people that the school systems have looked at and**



**branded them ‘unteachable’—‘they’re bad kids and get them out’. But when we get them, when we’re building through recreation, we’re really building on their skills. We have kids that are now going to school full-time because of their association with the hockey program. They’re now on high school hockey teams and to be on the high school hockey team you’re expected to maintain a certain level of behaviour and academic standing. The kids are doing really well now.**

Youth often need more than extra help with homework. They also need to feel like they belong somewhere and are productive members of a group. This sense of pride gives young people the tools to cope with, and succeed in, the school environment.

### **The Trouble with Employment**

Incomplete or inadequate schooling leads to difficulties in the job market. This disadvantage exists in tandem with already diminishing employment opportunities available to youth in general, and especially for marginalized youth who are already under-represented in the labour force. For example, in 2000, immigrant youth faced the highest unemployment rate in Canada, at 20% for those aged 15 to 24, compared to the national rate of 8%.<sup>29</sup>

It comes as no surprise, then, that youth-serving agency workers identified difficulties in securing employment as another main trouble encountered by youth. For example, one respondent discussed the difficulties Aboriginal youth in the North End face due to the lack of employment opportunities and discrimination by potential employers:

**They can’t get jobs at Safeway ‘cause it’s all unionized, and other than that, there’s really no other major commercial things until you get out to Garden City where I**

**believe that there’s a prejudice issue saying, an Aboriginal kid coming from the North End, they’re not going to show up or whatever. Otherwise, there’s not much around.**

Our interviews revealed that, due to these realities, youth even have difficulty envisioning employment as a viable plan for the future. As with other issues, this barrier is often discussed within the context of how gangs become one of the only sources of income for marginalized youth. One respondent who helps youth develop employment skills had this to say:

**It’s very easy for kids to get money by running drugs up and down the street, while it’s very hard for them to get a job. And if they do, they’re making an hourly wage and busting their butts, where they can make that much money in an hour running up and down the street.**

Although this particular agency offers excellent volunteer opportunities for youth, the workers acknowledge that volunteer work does not always meet the realities of the youth they serve.

**[Youth] need that income for whatever it might be, whether it’s for their family or for themselves, there’s a need for income. And they can’t get that through volunteering. ‘Cause youth in this neighbourhood—and when I say youth I guess I’m talking about teenagers at this point—they have a lot of immediate concerns and not that long-term future, they need to deal with the immediate, the ‘here and now.’ As opposed to planning to go to university, they need to plan to eat tomorrow.**

Whereas youth who have resources in the family and connections in the community are able to use their family, school, and volunteering to access the jobs that are available,

marginalized youth are left with few skills to compete against those with more social and cultural capital.

## **The Trouble with Discrimination**

**The other kids taunt and tell them ‘You are developmentally delayed’... They have very difficult experiences in the schools and a lot of stereotyping and prejudices that they face.**

In addition to all of the barriers that youth run up against, their lives can be further burdened with having to endure racist or prejudicial treatment. Youth as a population, especially those who are marginalized and disadvantaged, are readily blamed for a myriad of social ills.<sup>30</sup> Several of our respondents indicated that this level of discrimination was especially prevalent for Aboriginal and newcomer youth. This comment comes from a respondent who works predominantly with Aboriginal youth in the North End, and explains how youth internalize the way others stereotype them, an issue youth-serving agencies have to address:

**[A youth thinks] like, ‘Okay, well, they think I’m going to do this so I might as well because they expect that of me.’ But, I mean, I try to help them to get out of that, like, no, you don’t have to do that just because the stereotype, says ‘Oh they’re Aboriginal, they’re dirty, they drink a lot or they do a lot of drugs or whatever.’**

Similarly, a youth worker in a newcomer agency explains how difficult it is for the newcomer youth to form a positive identity given the discrimination they face:

**They find the police are racist and stereotyping because five kids who are of colour, walking together in the street, are always stopped by the police because of how they are dressed, and searched. And sometimes police use nasty words to them**

**and push them against walls, humiliate them. And if a kid is exposed to that kind of a thing five times, you know, ‘I may as well be what they want me to be.’ These are the kind of challenges that kids face.**

These respondents identify what almost all described: for some Aboriginal and newcomer youth, racism and discrimination are pervasive, often invasive, features of their lives that radically reduce their chances of success and ability to cope with adversity. Racism also offers particular challenges because it is not something youth can choose to avoid or act to mitigate. In fact, racism can follow youth throughout their lives, regardless of the other burdens they manage to overcome.

## **Intersecting Troubles: ‘Bad Choices’ or ‘Best Choices’?**

What quickly becomes apparent from these interviews with youth-serving agency workers is that the troubles faced by youth are rarely neatly packaged. Instead, these troubles intersect with and affect other areas of their lives. Troubles in the home can limit a youth’s ability to succeed at school and, in turn, doing poorly in school can be debilitating to a child’s self-esteem and future opportunities. Adverse conditions at home or in school can lead to youth falling through the cracks of the educational system, making job opportunities scarce and increasing opportunities for involvement in negative activities. Racism and discrimination hinder the ability to cope with the troubles they face, and prejudices against youth can develop as they become further marginalized from pro-social institutions.

In these terms, it also becomes evident that an individualized approach that situates gang involvement by youth as a ‘bad choice’ — that youth should simply ‘know better’ — entirely misses the mark. Rather, it may well be the case that these youth are making the ‘best

choice' they can under such adverse conditions. As one worker explained:

**It's hard to ask a youth, who is feeling unsafe and that belongs nowhere and who ends up having to spend a night in a shelter, to make a better choice about homework or to make a better choice about who they hang out with when they have almost no choice really about who they hang out with.**

Indeed, many of the agency workers spoke of the resiliency of youth who do what they can to survive on a day-to-day basis, some of whom have suffered—and continue to suffer—from physical and emotional abuse, sexual exploitation, neglect, discrimination, homelessness, hunger, and health concerns. So instead of focusing on all of the negatives relating to youth, a respondent who works in a gang prevention program explains that the youth he works with need to be understood differently:

**What we should hear them saying is, 'Look at how hard I'm trying, and I'm still surviving. Could you survive in this situation?'**

While it was acknowledged that some youth are involved in criminal or antisocial behaviours, these actions were interpreted by work-

ers as “survival mechanisms” in difficult and often harsh environments or attributed to the lack the alternative options to which other youth are privileged.

**For many [youth], particularly when you look at kids who come from gang entrenched families, when you see kids who are involved because it's a survival mechanism, you know, that's who is taking care of them. It's hard to place a judgement on that, right? So it's just really looking beyond all those labels—and our kids are so labelled—and seeing who they really are, and then building on that.**

In opposition to the perspective that society needs protection from these youth, a consistent message from youth workers was the need to focus on offering increased supports and options for youth. At the heart of all the labels that the public attaches to youth—such as 'gang involved,' 'criminal,' or 'violent'—in the life of a child these labels represent a much more serious issue: feeling isolated and detached from meaningful social relationships and pro-social arenas. For many youth-serving workers, the focus on youth as the problem is simply misguided-and absurd.

**As a community we blame the kids... Like, how does that even make sense to people, to blame children?**

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## Meeting the Needs of Youth

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### Providing a Place to Belong

As this study affirms, youth face significant troubles and require support and resources to address these issues. In Winnipeg, support is available through a network of youth-serving agencies that work with youth at a front-line level. The programs they offer range considerably, depending on the neighbourhood they are in or the population their programs target, such as newcomer families, Aboriginal youth, homeless youth, or those involved in the criminal justice system or gang activity. Although these youth may come from varied backgrounds and situations, what is common to the majority of youth who use these services is that they face significant disadvantages.

These agencies, through careful and creative consideration of programming and services, are able to assist youth in establishing a connection to the community and positive societal participation. The services offered by the member organizations within the CCBYSA operate on principles of ‘best practices’ in providing resources and programming to youth in need.<sup>31</sup> Regardless of an agency’s target population, the ways in which they respond to the issues youth face are as diverse as the issues themselves, and all provide a variety of activities, programs, and projects. Many offer after-school drop-in programs on a regular basis that provide a safe place for youth to go to spend time with positive mentors and engage in a wide range of recreational activities, including sports, art, cooking, and dancing. Many also provide necessities to meet nutritional, physical, and mental health needs. For some youth, this can entail simply having a place to shower—something most people take for granted. Within these agencies, programs range from helping young parents to youth with addictions. All agencies focus on the safety of youth, demonstrated by, for ex-

ample, providing emergency shelter or transitional housing, or ensuring that youth make it home safely at night. Directed skills training programs, and leadership and community involvement initiatives help to present the youth with employment opportunities, while tutoring and scholarship programs are in place to assist in finishing and furthering education. Additionally, some agencies take a crime prevention role or target gang-affiliated youth. There is also a wide diversity in cultural programming that allows youth to connect with their heritage and maintain involvement in traditional customs and beliefs.

Youth-serving agency workers, across all of these approaches, tell success stories of how the lives of youth have changed, how they have advanced, and how they have grown—stories that are reinforced by studies that address the impact such agencies have on the youth populations they serve.<sup>32</sup> Some workers reference the improvement in relationships between youth and their family, their teachers, or with other youth in a neighbourhood, while others speak of the improvements of skills, such as in artistic endeavours, athletic ability, or employment training. Here, a respondent in an afterschool program talks about the success they had in teaching a child to read.

**Having a child come in here and not be able to even recognize the alphabet and then... it took about a year and a half but she read her first book and that was an awesome achievement. She went around to every staff, every kid, and read to them. It was so fantastic.**

While improvements in skills and relationships for youth are important milestones, success was most frequently expressed in terms of the benefit youth-serving agencies had on

the confidence, resilience, and self-esteem of the youth they served. This aspect of success takes place throughout all of the programming, regardless of what activities the youth partake in. As the response below shows, this can be achieved through participation in sports and other recreational programs that help youth feel included and valued.

**We've had girls who are about eleven, twelve years old who are very self-conscious and not really comfortable with their bodies and then all of a sudden gain confidence just from being here... They're winning awards on our sports night, we do a hockey and basketball tournament and they're winning MVP.**

What this comment demonstrates is that more than athletic ability is being accomplished. Youth are offered safe places to develop a sense of self through the guidance of mentors they trust, and for some youth, youth-serving agencies are the only place where they consistently find this, as is demonstrated by the routinely long hours some youth spend at after school programs.

**They're sometimes here from three-thirty right after school 'til ten o'clock at night. So there's definitely not that same family support, I guess. I mean, when you think about it, where were these kids going before? It blows my mind sometimes to think, like, were they all on the street?**

In this sense, regardless of their respective programs, when asked about their agency's greatest achievement, youth service workers typically answer that their real success is in offering youth a place where they feel they belong. This sense of belonging is incorporated into all activities as a main overarching theme, as explained here:

**When we talk about safety, it's physical safety but also that emotional safety that we**

**try to encourage at each of the sites. Some youth may be experiencing bullying or some of them are left out of activities, so we try to have a very welcoming environment for all the youth that come through the door. All the staff are encouraged to make sure everybody's participating or feel like they're welcome to participate.**

Being able to identify with a place where they belong enables youth to experience the most benefit from any youth-serving agency. These programs attract youth who commonly feel cut off from supportive social bonds, as difficulties in the home, school, or community leave youth feeling disenfranchised and alone. The strength of an agency therefore lies in its ability to connect in a meaningful way to those who need it.

As such, youth-serving agencies do much more than offer programs such as recreation, skill development, and job training. They are providing a place for youth to remain attached to pro-social and supportive networks that are otherwise missing from their lives. Much in the way negative experiences spill over into other areas of a youth's life, this sense of belonging also spills over, enabling youth to pull through difficult times. Helping youth improve their reading encourages youth to stay connected to school, for instance, while developing a sense of pride can help youth find the confidence to pursue other goals.

Providing a place to belong also serves as a powerful counterpoint to the sense of belonging and sense of identity that youth may be offered through gangs and other street level groups. Agency workers are well aware of the need to compete with this attraction of the gang:

**In some areas of the city, youth gang activity is prevalent and gang activity provides an opportunity for youth to belong to something. It provides safety**

**in numbers to a certain degree, it provides money and employment opportunities to a certain degree, and really plays on those kids that have low self-esteem and are looking for a place to belong and looking for support. I think as an organization we're trying to provide those things that are lacking in their lives in terms of a sense of belonging.**

Countering the appeal of the gang is a goal that youth serving agencies have achieved—and with positive results. For instance, respondents spoke of their success at providing youth with a safe alternative to gangs by offering programming that youth want to be a part of:

**Our youth have told us that they've been approached by gangs and that they're just not interested because then they wouldn't be able to come here and then they wouldn't get to see their friends and everything else. And we're hoping that that pulls them a little stronger than the gang family that they're being promised.**

This sense of belonging, though, takes time to develop. For youth who have experienced uncertainty and instability in their lives, particular emphasis must be placed on building relationships in a stable environment. For example, maintaining a steady routine helps to foster this sense of trust and predictability. One respondent sums up what many youth workers acknowledged:

**A lot of the time I think it has to do with just wanting to be part of something that's steady in their life, something that's consistent. We're always here, we're always open.**

Similarly, another respondent credits the agency's success in attracting youth to its consistency both in terms of the program schedules and expectations from youth:

**We have people who came when they were kids and they're now bringing their kids and they'll just randomly show up on a day knowing what's happening 'cause we haven't changed anything... We're very consistent, it's known as a very safe place in the neighbourhood. The kids know what the expectations are and if they don't follow those expectations they're asked to leave. I think that's a huge part of why we get so many kids.**

A safe recreational and learning environment, however, would be impossible to achieve without relationships with positive role models. Respondents consistently expressed the importance of the staff mentorship role in the programs offered to youth, especially for youth who may have had difficulty bonding with other adults or authority figures:

**What we offer is a place that they feel safe...where they can have some kind of a positive mentorship; where they can have healthy relationships with the other kids and also with older people who they can identify with easily.**

These mentorship roles do more than attract youth to the programs; connection with staff or volunteers is especially important for modelling positive behaviours that youth can take with them into their daily lives. As such, these relationships become paramount in the program's ability to engage youth in a meaningful way.

**Hopefully there will be that one person that has an impact on them, that makes them think 'you know what, this isn't what I want' if they are influenced by people that are taking them towards at-risk activities, and instead they will be empowered to make positive decisions.**

Programs that youth enjoy and can learn from, paired with staff that youth can identify with

and use as role models, are the keys to helping youth through difficult times now and into the future. For marginalized and disenfranchised youth, the importance of these centres of support and guidance cannot be underestimated and should be available to all youth in

need. Yet, as will be discussed below, the accessibility and stability necessary for agencies to reach these youth are severely restricted due to the funding structure through which resources are allocated.

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## Issues Facing Youth-Serving Agencies

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### **Accessibility of the Programs and Services Offered**

Given the importance of safe, stable programming and positive role models, circumstances that limit these aspects are recognized by workers as barriers to helping the youth they serve. For example, this respondent notes that losing a staff member that a youth has bonded with can mean losing that youth from programming as well:

**We've seen kids bond really well with staff, so when some of our staff leaves it really affects the kids. They end up wondering: 'Where did this staff go, where did this staff go?' And then we gradually lose the kids from the program... later you hear that things aren't so great for them.**

Youth workers also acknowledge that they are simply unable to offer all that the youth in their community need, especially in terms of the resources required to provide stable programs and staff. Even hours of operations influence how effective these programs can be.

**You don't feel like you have enough time to spend, and the most rewarding part of it I think is being able to develop relationships with each of the members and time is always a barrier in terms of developing relationships.**

Accessibility means more than just hours of operation, though, since scarcity of programming in some areas of the city is also identified by some agencies that are attracting youth from outside their communities.

**We get kids from as far as St. James and from The Maples and Transcona... It is quite a distance, there's no question, but there's not enough out in those areas. I mean, in The Maples there are a few**

**programs, but there's nothing in those other areas. We get kids from Fort Richmond, Fort Rouge, St. Boniface.**

While youth in the inner city face some unique challenges, this agency worker's comment serves as an important reminder that youth throughout the city are a vulnerable population that deserve the resources youth-serving agencies can provide.

### **Reaching Older Youth and Those Susceptible to Joining Gangs**

Another issue addressed by respondents was the challenge of attracting certain youth in need to their programs. This group was most often identified as older youth and/or youth that may be prone to joining gangs. Respondents were consistent in expressing the appeal of gangs for youth who feel disenfranchised from pro-social arenas, lending support to what the literature already suggests: that youth gangs offer a sense of belonging that many youth are not afforded elsewhere.<sup>33</sup> Youth living in poverty are particularly vulnerable in that gang members are often there to fill the gap left in the lives of these youth, to "look after them."<sup>34</sup>

**I think just the biggest challenge is really reaching out to those youth that are already involved in the risky behaviours or in the gang and drugs and alcohol, and I think the biggest challenge would be targeting that behaviour and [helping youth] recover from that. Hopefully, being here we're making a difference for the kids for the future, but I think reaching the kids right now that are involved would be our biggest challenge.**

These youth need extra support in developing a sense of self and belonging, not only



within a youth-serving agency, but also out in the community. If this support is not found through legitimate avenues, street gangs can be perceived as an alternative, offering a sense of identity, a sense of pride, and a sense of belonging to disenfranchised youth. In these terms, providing the support these youth need relies on the ability of agencies to connect youth with formalized networks that help develop a sense of belonging in positive ways. This connection with community was identified as a much needed component to helping older youth and/or youth who may be susceptible to joining gangs.

**It's not just about our kids but it's about their community and it's about their families and it's how do we support the change in the community. And we're not just talking the North End, I mean, that's one step, but how do we support beyond that you know? ... It's about showing them, it's about opening doors, it's about creating opportunity. In the end, it will be up to them how they use that opportunity, but at least it's been created. And to me, that's sort of the success story, that they're able to move forward in their lives, in a good way, you know.**

### **Building Bridges with Families and the Wider Community**

One way agency workers believed this connection could be achieved is through building relationships with the families of the youth they serve and through building bridges with the community members in the neighbourhoods where the youth live. These were areas of programming that many respondents mentioned they would like to see strengthened. For example, this respondent comments on the support he would like to see from the newcomer community in supporting youth and their families through difficult times:

**I really would like the cultural community to do more with their kids, particularly with our kids. When kids start getting into trouble there's a bit of ostracizing of the families and the kids and a lot of shame. But I think that cultural community is an important factor.**

Other agencies achieved family/community building through introducing youth to language and customs that help them identify a positive connection between their sense of self and a larger cultural community. This seemed to be especially important for Aboriginal youth, who may experience a different cultural reality than their parents and grandparents, as expressed here:

**A lot of the Aboriginal youth in the city don't know their language or don't know where they came from or, or who is in their ancestral family tree. So we try to keep that alive with them. We had one staff worker who taught the Cree language to some of the kids, just like animal words, numbers, some greetings, little things here and there that they could say go and take back to their parents and say like 'oh look at this word I learned today.'**

For many agencies offering support to Aboriginal youth, incorporating cultural programs was seen as a way of combating some of the troubles rooted in colonization because these programs helped to strengthen a sense of identity that had been broken. For instance, one youth worker explained that cultural programs raise a youth's self-esteem in the face of social barriers—a necessary step in completing school, raising their own children, or finding employment. According to this respondent (and many others), it is important to take into consideration these historical factors:

**If you're dealing with traumas and past traumas—and I think it's pretty far rooted**

back to residential schools and then all the generations past that—and when you deal with those issues then it builds self-esteem. With self-esteem they can deal with addictions issues, then they can get jobs or they can go to school or they can care for their kids better.

For other youth, especially older youth, there remains a strong need to help rebuild a sense of personal identity in society, something that other youth might find through completing and/or continuing at school, or through recognition at a job or for a particular skill. While many youth workers recognized this as something all youth need, this respondent identified this aspect of identity building as especially important for Aboriginal youth:

**The people coming from northern communities, I mean, when you take a look at how we in urban centres identify ourselves...for the most part we're defined by our employment. In northern communities where there's 90% unemployment rate, identity is very, very different... I don't think that we do enough to prepare people or families for that. And it's often, I think, misinterpreted by the general population in terms of what people are facing.**

Helping marginalized youth feel connected to something larger can be done through pursuing community partnerships with businesses, established centres of training in arts or trades, or mentors who can help guide youth to associate the skills they learn with a future plan and a strong sense of self. For example, one agency worker spoke of the impact of programs that allow for some aspect of community recognition:

**It lets them have a chance to be recognized for their talents and their skills. They still have a lot of stuff going on in their lives and it's not like all of a sudden a perfect life because they're doing this,**

**not at all. But they have that experience, and I think it just really makes those people believe in themselves just that much more and have that much more experience as being a valid and talented member of society... but also having happiness and joy.**

According to the respondent cited above, the goal of the agency is to be a liaison between the youth and employment or skill-building opportunities that they would have difficulty accessing on their own. This sets the groundwork for intercepting the allure of gangs that offer resources and a sense of belonging. Others have noted that making this connection can also help reduce the dependence on social services as youth move into adulthood, as expressed by this agency worker:

**We want them all to be independent and feel good, hold their heads up high and be a contributing member to society. We don't want to create dependencies on us; our goal is to make them independent and to be knowledgeable of how to navigate the systems.**

Respondents underscored that many of the troubles youth encounter stem from broader social issues that result in their marginalization from mainstream society. As such, the responsibility for 'fixing' the troubles youth encounter cannot simply fall on the shoulders of youth-serving agencies. Because the issues youth face are so complex, they cannot be adequately addressed without the support and the participation of the wider community—including government.

## **Funding Constraints**

Since our interviews underscored that successfully engaging youth relies on being able to provide a safe place where they can feel a sense of belonging, it is important that enough resources are available to secure consistent

and long-term programs, hours, and staffing. Yet, securing funding to ensure that these features of an agency are met was a concern mentioned by all respondents. In part, this is due to the structure of funding for non-profit and community-based youth-serving agencies, which depends on securing both core and project-based funding.

### *Core versus Project Funding*

Traditionally, governmental funding has been allocated to cover both programming and administrative costs of the provision of many of the community services now offered by not-for-profit youth serving agencies. During the past 20 years, there has been an adoption of neoliberal policies where funding bodies have shifted into a “project-funding regime.”<sup>35</sup> Core-funding is now reserved for administration, whereas community organizations are responsible for soliciting project-specific funding from private donors. The main characteristics of this new system of allocation are “increased accountability, short-term funding, hiring on contract, use of information and communication technologies, and forced partnerships,”<sup>36</sup> which reduces consistency and flexibility of programs offered while increasing the work load of staff. Agency workers we interviewed, especially those in administrative roles, expressed considerable frustration with a model that necessitates short-term, labour intensive funding applications that take precious resources away from programs and youth.

**About 85% of our budget is made up of project funding, which is really problematic... There’s a lot of reporting to do, different reporting dates, different intake dates, every week someone here has one or two mid-term, interim final reports to do or applications for new funding. It really is an administrative nightmare and the way the governments look at it, they**

**allow you to spend no more than 15% on administration. Well, that’s very problematic, especially with the stringent reporting that you have to do.**

Katherine Scott’s study of the funding structure for non-profit and voluntary organizations found that this move away from the core funding model means that funding for programming is provided for increasingly shorter time frames, is less predictable, and has resulted in increased reporting requirements.<sup>37</sup> Scott’s findings are echoed in our interviews.

**One thing I find difficult is the trend to only give yearly grants. So you get a one-year grant and then you have to reapply the next year. So your staff have no stability, you don’t know what’s happening from year to year, you can’t plan long-term. And I think that’s a real disservice to the community but also to the non-profit groups... Year-to-year funding means that our time isn’t being spent being accountable to our community and delivering services. It’s being spent writing more grants and evaluations and reports.**

While this funding structure affects all not-for-profit and community groups, it is particularly challenging for the youth-service sector because it undercuts the very elements that youth-serving agencies require: stable and consistent programming and staff. Since project funding is short term with an emphasis on finding new projects with each renewal, funders can require changes to the goals, times, and criteria of programming. The change in the focus and times means some youth who used to attend may be no longer able or willing to join. Changes in the criteria of who can attend also negatively affects youth involvement since some projects specify age ranges, maximum attendance numbers, or other limiting characteristics. Short-term project funding can also affect staffing since

some funders impose hiring specifications, such as particular training or hiring only students. Changes to projects can also mean that fewer staff are employed. Thus, reliance on project funding reduces the potential for youth to connect to programs and staff over longer periods of time, a necessary aspect to positive long-term outcomes for youth, as this program manager explains:

**People need to realize there's never an overnight fix. People will get this mentality, 'Well, you've got this programming, how come you're not fixed?' Because it takes time. You've got a fourteen year old, it's taken fourteen years for this kid to get where they are, they're not going to change overnight, you know.**

Just as past research on organizations in Winnipeg's inner city has demonstrated,<sup>38</sup> our interviews show that adequate core funding is necessary to ensure agencies are able to offer both a stable roster of programs and competitive wages to attract long-term staff. While too little funding lends insecurity to the functioning of an organization in general, *the way* funding is allocated specifically impacts an agency's ability to ensure there is real and significant change in a youth's life—something the whole community benefits from. The respondents in this study explained that insufficient core funding can, to varying degrees, affect the ability to compensate adequately long-term, committed employees on the front-line and provide a stable roster of programs that remain constant over time, while those with higher levels of core funding had increased stability in these areas. In effect, sufficient core funding enables youth-serving agencies to do what they do best—provide services to youth that affect life-long positive changes—which would be enhanced by project funding. Undoubtedly, this funding regime increases the stability of agencies, the stability in the lives of youth, and the stability of the community.

### *A Decentralized Approach*

While there was an acknowledgement that the move away from government-run social services for youth has led to challenges in attaining the funding needed by community or not-for-profit agencies, overall youth serving agency respondents did not suggest a return to past social welfare models as the solution. Instead, the youth workers we spoke to tended to favour a decentralized approach that allows agencies to customize services to meet the needs to the community around them, as this respondent explains:

**I think it takes a mix. You can't just say government needs to come and do it 'cause it won't work right. The thing that we do well is that we take the community development approach and we come from the community up so we're basically finding solutions at the community level and working with the community rather than trying to impose other systems onto them. We're working with them to meet their needs and develop programming at the level they need it, so I think it's a mix.**

The 'mix' discussed above refers to the need for continued investment from government and other funders in the commitment to addressing the social issues youth face. Community agencies have the ability to find solutions that work through empowering the families and youth in their surrounding areas, but implementing strategies for change needs considerable financial commitment.

**I think it's good to have a variety of non-profits delivering services in the community because, being a grassroots organization, I think we have very strong connections within the communities that we serve. We know them well, we know their needs, we have built trust with them. So in that regard I think we are the best to respond to those needs. But, at the same**

time, if you want us to offer quality programs and remain accountable to our funders and our community, we need enough resources to do that in a way where we're not burning out and having a high staff turnover. There needs to be more thought in terms of making sure we have the supports we need to deliver quality programs.

### *Trust and Partnerships*

Proposed changes in funding structure between agencies and core funders was often described in terms of envisioning a change in the nature of their relationship toward one of trust and partnership, and away from one of continual uncertainty and struggle.

**Instead of the model that we are all under right now whereby I'm going to this government department with my hand out, it's more I'm going to a government department with a handshake and finding those departments that mesh well with the work that we do. So it then becomes scenarios where government is purchasing our services because we have a track record and this is what we do and we do it well... so that we don't have to keep changing our programs. We can have a long-term relationship with this government department and sign three, four, five year funding commitments, then we can start to do some long-term planning. But it's impossible to do strategic planning...when 85% of our budget is year-to-year funding.**

The development of a stronger partnership with core funders is the key to being able to achieve the outcomes expected of youth-serving agencies, especially by government funders, since this funding is often allocated with the expectation that these agencies do more than help youth; they are also endowed with social tasks of reducing crime and violence and preventing gang membership.

**I mean, there's really high expectations on groups like this—do research, do really detailed proposals for programs, do gang prevention, which is a really big complex social issue. But you're unable to hire people with training or education... because there's such low wages.**

This point was also expressed in terms of needing more infrastructure to be able to take on bigger projects that would have more long-term impacts in the neighbourhood, as this respondent expresses:

**We try to work on some basic needs stuff and we do address some issues, but we're not funded enough to address it on the scale that's needed... I think we could probably tackle a lot of the root causes through our organization, but at the same time that's all about capacity and it would take a lot of funding, a lot more infrastructure, for us to be able to do that right.**

### *"Mission Drift"*

Concerns regarding 'mission drift'<sup>39</sup>—whereby organizations must tailor their programming to what project funders want to fund rather than to the needs of those who use their services—was also a challenge raised by agency workers. Although, for some, remaining at an arm's-length from government lets them maintain some of the control over their mandate, as this respondent explains:

**I like the idea of us being arms length. I like the idea of us not being mandated by the government. We used to get federal funding... [but] now you have to have studies done and you actually have to change your programming. You can't just say, 'This is what we believe is a good program and this is what works.' And if we were to say, 'It's providing positive activities for the community and positive activities can act as crime prevention'**

**then we would be okay with that... [but] basically we're not going to change our program to be a government study.**

## **Collaboration and Coalition-Building**

Agency workers would prefer to see more collaboration between the goals of government and the knowledge of agencies, and this spirit of partnership already exists for youth-serving agencies in Winnipeg through the Coalition of Community-Based Youth-Serving Agencies (CCBYSA). This coalition currently allows for networking—the sharing of resources, information, and activities—and broadens the range of programming open to youth whose interests may be better suited at another centre.

**Coalition members find out what's going on all over the city and then find out where kids can take part in things. The more things kids are involved in the better, and we are not going to be able to meet every need and give a kid every option so we need to find where those options exist and then plug the kids into those.**

This collaborative initiative has helped ease the struggle for funding to a certain degree, but it is unable to address underlying issues of funding insecurity that core funding could mitigate, such as staff wages and long-term planning.

## **Advocating for Youth**

Many agencies offer individual advocacy work as part of their programming. This work could include accompanying youth to legal or medical appointments or helping them access resources such as Employment Insurance Assistance—complex processes that youth find difficult to navigate. This form of advocacy is an important aspect of helping individual

youth as their needs arise; yet, there is also the recognition by youth-serving agency workers that more must be done to help youth succeed than can be offered through youth-serving agencies. This youth worker talks about the limitations of agency services in the lives of youth who face other substantial social barriers.

**In this neighbourhood, if a kid grows up in a family that is gang involved, it takes a lot to help that kid ... An after-school program is not, like, maybe it's a piece of it, but it's not going to be the answer. We can give that kid some great experiences to have in his memory and hopefully that will help as he's coming along. But there's so much going on in his or her life 24/7.**

There is also the recognition that helping youth now does little to stem the tide of the difficulties youth experience, who will need their services in the future. While individual youth benefit, something more needs to be done to prevent youth from relying on social services as their main support system. As this respondent discusses, structural issues like poverty seem to be increasing, and with it the need for services is rising as well.

**I think the challenge is there's so much need in the city... like the things that are happening in Winnipeg in terms of the poverty rates, and it feels like things are getting worse overall and the need for our services is just getting higher and higher.**

There is no doubt that providing support to those in need positively affects both the day-to-day lives of youth, and their future opportunities. Yet, helping individual youth does less to address the underlying causes of structural issues such as poverty and discrimination. Individual treatment also has limitations in reversing the impact of a lifetime of surviving within impoverished neighbourhoods and families. These issues must be tackled to

some degree beyond the individual in order to create changes that reduce the systemic conditions that lead to the troubles youth face. In other words, providing resources to youth is an essential component of a healthy society, yet *solely* targeting youth only treats the symptoms of more deep-rooted problems. In this regard, respondents expressed a common concern for the limitations agencies face when other social systems are working against the youth they serve.

**I really think that there needs to be a broader picture. I feel like we're putting out fires all the time, we're dealing with crises. Lots of time we're mentoring these youth and we're giving them recreation activities and stuff like that, but if we're only with them two hours a day then what happens the other twenty-two hours, when they don't have a place to stay at night, what happens when they go, like, we have eleven year old kids who are selling crack, like, what happens to those eleven year old kids when they leave us? We can help them through a crisis, we can call Child and Family Services, we can find them a place to stay for the night, but often those things unfortunately don't do anything and the problems just continue to circulate.**

These frustrations were often expressed explicitly in relation to particular social issues such as housing, education, and employment, as this respondent who works with Aboriginal youth in the North End of Winnipeg does:

**I would prefer organizations like ours not to have to exist, but we exist because we've created a society that has basically left an entire population of people out in the cold. You have to focus now on what needs to change, and that's everything from housing to education to employment. There are all these barriers that are preventing our young people from being successful.**

Issues with housing were also raised in relation to newcomer families who are forced to compete with other low-income Winnipeg residents for extremely limited housing, and the effect this has on youth.

**Newcomer kids who are living in decrepit apartments, a family of six or seven living in a two bedroom apartment, kids don't get a good time to sleep at night, going to school and dozing in class the whole day is a big problem because if the vacancy rate for housing is less than 1% in Winnipeg and we are bringing more than twelve thousand immigrants and refugees every year, you can imagine the problem.**

Thus, while individual youth do face troubles, the solutions need to be addressed socially. The public misconception is that youth are the problem, but society has created structures, processes, and political beliefs that leave youth "out in the cold." That is the real problem, and that is the problem that urgently needs to be addressed.

### **Public Advocacy**

These concerns point to the need to look beyond treating individual youth as the sole target for intervention. Addressing this need preventatively requires a shift towards a focus on public advocacy for policy reform that increases safety and stability in the lives of youth in their homes, their schools, their neighbourhoods, and their opportunities for employment. This approach is especially important when working with a population that is "disenfranchised from the democratic process at all levels of governance."<sup>40</sup> Problem-oriented political engagement, initiated by community-based organizations, can provide a strong and unified voice for the city's youth. If youth issues are not politicized as a product of inadequate housing, cultural marginalization, lack of employment oppor-

tunities, and other systemic issues, individuals will remain the target and change will happen only marginally.

In Winnipeg, a piece of the infrastructure needed for policy-directed advocacy exists through the CCBYSA. This community initiative has set the groundwork for a platform to raise awareness of the structural conditions affecting the lives of youth. For instance, the following comments expressed a common theme amongst respondents: the needs of youth require attention from other areas if systemic issues are to be addressed adequately, and the coalition could be a vehicle for change in these areas.

**The Coalition is great because it's a collective voice saying, like, these are the needs of our youth and this is what we need and lobbying towards governments and schools and saying, like, this is also what we need.**

**We've talked about advocacy and that's one of the things that we're really wanting to build, is really becoming that united voice. We all work with young people, we all share a lot of the same perspectives, and we're seeing the same issues and that we want to build... We're all individually**

**representative of our organizations, but we really think that that's an opportunity through the coalition to be a united voice so that we can go to government and we can try and influence policy and legislation... I think individually we're strong, but together we're that much stronger.**

This united voice is even stronger because it represents the voices of those it serves—the youth themselves, as summed up by this comment.

**Front-line workers can tell you this is the reality of people, and your policies are not working.**

The Coalition can also do advocacy work in support of increased funding and resources for not-for-profit agencies that help youth. The Coalition has been a powerful resource in the face of low funding, and their initiative to collaborate has been helpful in getting youth what they need in spite of funding shortages. Yet, this should be seen as a way of enhancing already stable programs, not as a result of struggling to continue to offer programs. In this regard, the Coalition can speak as the public voice of agencies asking for stronger core funding and changes to the restrictions on how core funding is spent.



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## Concluding Remarks

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As so many of the reports produced by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba (CCPA-MB) have already documented, the impacts of poverty reach far beyond people's wallets.<sup>41</sup> Poverty invades all aspects of a person's life—housing, education, recreation, employment, relationships with family and friends, and personal health and well-being. As this study has shown, impoverished social and economic conditions readily create the terrain for the myriad of troubles encountered by youth in our communities. Troubles in the home, school, and workplace, and with discrimination make coping with everyday stresses an often overwhelming task, especially since youth have fewer means of accessing resources and fewer rights than adults. This increased dependency on others leaves a marginalized youth population vulnerable to negative social influences and opportunities—including involvement in gangs, drugs, and crime.

In this context, youth-serving agencies offer a strong network of aid to youth who have been put at a disadvantage by impoverished social and economic conditions, and these community agencies help youth reconnect to pro-social activities, friends, and mentors within their programs. Youth-serving agencies also have the ability to liaison between the youth and systems that can benefit them, both in terms of acting as a personal advocate through interactions with the law, social services, school, and caregivers, but also with connecting them to mentors, employment, training, and skill development in the community.

While poverty is at the root of so many of the troubles encountered by youth—and steps have been taken to formulate a poverty reduction plan to attend to the devastating impacts that poverty inflicts on too many members of our community<sup>42</sup>—a number of insights have emerged from our study with regard to the

particular challenges faced by youth-serving agencies in meeting the needs of youth:

- **Gangs are *Not* the Real Issue**

Publically and politically, the issue has been largely framed as one of 'troubled' youth who are involved in gangs, and many youth serving agencies have been funded and mandated to realize crime prevention and gang intervention goals. Nevertheless, framing the issue in this way puts the onus—and the blame—on individual youth while drawing attention away from the broader social and economic conditions that generate the appeal of gangs and involvement in drugs, crime, and violence. Front-line workers who engage with youth on a daily basis are very much alive to this issue. What emerged from our interviews was a portrait of youth who are managing as best they can within very difficult environments. What can appear to be 'poor choices' that put themselves or others in danger, are in fact often the 'best choices' in the lives of youth who do what they can with limited resources, supports, or coping skills. Fundamentally, then, *the public perception of youth—and the social policies designed to address their troubles—need to be aligned with what those who work closely with youth understand all too well: rather than demonizing and criminalizing youth, we need to ensure that they can access the resources that will enable them to live productive and meaningful lives.*

- **Connecting Youth to Their Communities**

Youth-serving agencies on their own cannot resolve the myriad of troubles that so many youth confront. It takes a commitment on behalf of *everyone* in a community to encourage and present opportunities for youth to be recognized as valued members of society. Nevertheless, youth-serving agencies are well-positioned to support youth. But *more atten-*

tion needs to be devoted to the ways in which these agencies can connect youth to the wider community. For instance, older youth need to be able to access volunteer or employment opportunities and mentorships or skill development training in ways that help build their future plans. These opportunities can start within youth-serving agencies, but ideally need to move out into the community so that youth can form an identity within pro-social arenas. Many agencies already participate in this community networking. For example, one art-based agency connected youth with commercial art projects taking place in Winnipeg, while another agency met with local businesses to encourage them to “take youth under their wing” and offer job training and experience. *Strengthening and building upon these connections would go a long way toward meeting the needs of youth.*

#### • **Providing Youth-Serving Agencies with Sufficient Core Funding**

One of the things that youth-serving agencies do best is to provide youth with a ‘place to belong.’ So long as social and economic conditions continue to exacerbate the life circumstances of so many of the youth in our communities, this resource will be required to mitigate the damages caused by poverty. Our interviews underscored that for youth-serving agencies to meet this important need, they require consistent and long-term programs, hours, and staffing. As such, *more long-term core funding is required to reduce the variability and unpredictability of relying on project funding so that complex social issues that youth face can be addressed in a way that is both preventative in the long run and beneficial to the lives of youth now.*

This vision of a new model of funding was most frequently expressed in terms of the *formation of increased partnerships that foster long-term and trusting relationships between funders and agencies.* Funders—especially government funders—need to recognize the importance of

adequate core funding that can reasonably cover the costs of administration, staffing, and stable programming. Accessing project funding should enhance the already strong programming made possible through core funding. This is especially important for agencies working with youth because connecting with this population takes long-term commitments, and because funders often want agencies to address complex social issues for which easy fixes are not possible.

#### • **Advocating for Youth**

Once the troubles faced by youth are reframed as social issues, it becomes clear that many of the solutions required are beyond the control of individuals. Insufficient social assistance rates, lack of access to childcare, job opportunities, and affordable housing, and the persistence of racism and discrimination result in crises in families that negatively impact parents’ abilities to care for their children. Older youth—those between the ages of 18 and 29—are especially vulnerable to disenfranchisement. Turning 18—the age that legally marks the transition to adulthood—should not automatically prohibit youth from accessing the resources they need. Similarly, both youth and their families need increased resources and supports, and more attention needs to be directed towards implementing policy changes that would mitigate these struggles.

In Winnipeg, the Coalition of Community Based Youth-Serving agencies offers an excellent platform for targeting change on a broader, more structural level—both in terms of helping with the issues youth face and the struggles agencies encounter in accessing funding. *Coalition building contributes to the sustained effort and political will required to create the changes needed to address the systemic causes and effects of youth in trouble.* Working with and advocating for youth, their families, and their communities are important mechanisms by which meaningful change can occur.

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