



# seen, and heard believed

What Youth Say About  
Violence

for the UN Secretary-General's  
Study on  
Violence Against Children



Canadian Council  
of Provincial  
Child and Youth  
Advocates



**Save the Children**  
Canada



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The views expressed in this report are those of the young people interviewed in focus groups: children and young people affected by violence in their families, schools, institutions and communities.

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# executive summary

Contributing to the domestic implementation of the UN Secretary-General's Study on Violence Against Children, this report presents the voices and initiatives of youth in Canada on how violence affects them. To gather youth voices, we held focus groups comprising approximately 250 young people across Canada between December 2004 and August 2006. The participants included general populations of children, aged 9 to 18 years, and special consultative populations: Aboriginal children, children in conflict with the law, and children in care. The participants were asked to discuss violence against children in each of the five settings that were the focus of the Secretary-General: home, school, community, media and institutions. A research group of five children, aged 9 – 17 years, and two university undergraduate youth assisted with content analyses and the identification of key messages. The findings are presented in this report by setting and within the context of existing social science research.

The focus group discussions indicated that violence is pervasive in the lives of young people. They are acutely aware of the extent and types of violence, and they showed a high level of understanding of the causes and consequences of violence on their mental and physical health and on their prospects to develop. The issues raised by the youth and their major concerns were similar across groups, although children who live or had lived in institutional settings specifically addressed violence in that context.

Overwhelmingly, the youth were much more concerned about adult rather than peer or media violence. Sibling violence they dismissed as normal and unimportant. Peer bullying at school was a problem but much less so than adult responses. Violence in the entertainment media they believed to be a problem only for young children and for those whose home lives were very difficult. In contrast, the youth were harshly critical of the adults in their lives. Four overarching concerns emerged in the discussions: poor adult role-modeling, adult hypocrisy, substance abuse, and parental rejection.

The youth complained about the lack of positive role-models in their families, in their communities and internationally.

The hypocrisy of adults was seen in the gap between what the youth were told they should or should not do, and what they saw the adults in their lives doing. Parents again were targets of harsh criticism. Parents, the youth said, are physically violent, and express negative stereotypes and attitudes supportive of violence, while telling their children not to behave in these ways. Parents enjoy watching sports that are full of and glorify violence, and watch violence on the news. Their children, however, are told not to watch violence or play violent video-games. Schools publish zero tolerance policies on violence but adults regularly ignore or minimize incidents of bullying. Youth are placed in care or justice institutions where adults behave abusively while punishing the youth for any signs of violence.

The causal link between substance abuse and violence was mentioned frequently by the youth. They were particularly concerned with parental substance abuse, describing the financial and emotional neglect of children that accompanied it. They expressed concern also about community violence that was associated with drug-dealing and alcoholism.

Overwhelmingly, the youth voices reflected their sense of rejection and alienation. The physical and emotional rejection they experienced at home made them feel unloved and unwanted. The lack of community facilities, opportunities for participation in the community, and the negative stereotyping of young people heightened their alienation. Some reported gravitating toward gangs as their only means of acceptance and support. The youth shared a profound need to have their voices heard and their participation rights respected.

The effect of violence was well understood by the youth. They talked about the long term and profound effect of emotional scars. They noted the intergenerational cycle of violence that ensues from parental violence. They discussed the compromised education that results from school violence. They expressed their frustration with how youth emerge from child protection and justice institutions with greater difficulties and more experience with violence.

To reduce the endless cycle of violence, the youth called for more accessible supports for child victims of family violence, parenting education, addiction services for parents, and a legal ban on the use of corporal punishment. Child-friendly communities in which young people can participate fully and positive adult role models were seen as key solutions to the problem of community violence. Schools, the youth said, must work to change their ethos such that they are more respectful and inclusive of all students and that adults who work with children, whatever the institution, act with more care and compassion. Above all, they emphasized their need to be listened to.

Recommended next steps and existing youth initiatives to end violence are presented at the end of this report.



# background

## The first global picture of violence against children

Children in Canada, like children around the world, are significantly affected by violence in their homes, schools, communities, and institutions. In 2001, in recognition of the widespread and varied nature of violence, the United Nations General Assembly asked the UN Secretary-General to conduct a global study of violence against children. The UN Secretary-General's Study on Violence Against Children is the first global picture of violence against children in all its forms and proposes recommendations to prevent and respond to violence. The Study was developed through a participatory process which involved regional consultations and gathered the views of governments, professional organizations, researchers, practitioners, children and young people, and many others.

The North American Regional Consultation for the Study, which took place 2004 through 2006, involved over 200 representatives from government and civil society as well as 360 young people from the United States and Canada.

Three themes emerged from the voices of the youth in focus groups across Canada and in other consultation activities:

- Youth are well aware of the pervasiveness of violence in their lives
- Youth are acutely aware of the negative effect of violence on their development
- Youth expect adults to put an end to the violence in their daily lives, and want to be consulted and involved in research and action

# purpose

## In their own words

We know what the experts say. We know what educators, health professionals, media, governments and parents have to say. But what do youth themselves have to say about youth violence? How do they view it? How does it affect them in their daily lives? What are the solutions they feel will work best?

This report is designed to extend the understanding of policy makers, legislators, parliamentarians, community organizations and helping professionals of how youth themselves perceive and experience violence; what measures they believe should be undertaken to reduce violence; and what initiatives youth themselves are taking to lessen violence. Their words may be uncomfortable to hear. They reflect the astonishing fact that *most of the violence young people experience is in the very places they should be safest, with the very people who should be protecting and caring for them every day.*

While many young people can identify exemplary adults in their lives—a parent, a teacher, a coach, a child welfare worker—who mitigate the impacts of violence, too many youth resign themselves to accept violence as an inevitable and pervasive fact of life. A small proportion of young people believe that violence can be reduced, but invest their confidence in adult-driven solutions which too often do not materialize.

The UN Secretary-General's Study on Violence Against Children reaffirms that violence is preventable. But it is only through listening to and working with youth voices and youth initiatives that violence against children can be significantly reduced. Some of these young people's words are difficult to read. Some of these same words were equally difficult for them to say. But all of their comments reflect candid and thoughtful truths from their own sometimes difficult life experiences. We thank you for listening.

# methodology

## Definitions

**Violence** is defined as physical, psychological (psychosocial) and sexual violence to children through abuse, neglect or exploitation, as acts of commission or omission in direct or indirect forms (with an emphasis on intentional violence), that endanger or harm the child's dignity, physical, psychological, or social status, or development.

Under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, a **child** is defined as every person under the age of 18 years. For purposes of discussion in this report, the terms "**youth**" and "**young people**" are also used to describe children under age 18.

## Procedure

### 1. FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups were conducted across Canada by staff or representatives of the offices of the provincial Child and Youth Advocates, and by the Cape Breton University Children's Rights Centre (the Centre). We held twenty focus groups between December 2004 and August 2006, all according to a common interview protocol (see Appendix). The participants included general populations of children randomly selected from classrooms, and special target populations: Aboriginal children, children in conflict with the law, and children in care. As seen in the following table, with few exceptions, most of the participants were under the age of 18 years.

Participants described violence against children in each of five settings: home, school, community, media and institutions. Two university students summarized the focus group transcripts, identifying themes, trends, and exemplary quotes. Acting as facilitators, the two university students presented the summaries and quotes to a group of children (the research group) for analysis.

The research group was set up at the Whitney Pier Youth Club in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. The group consisted of five children and one youth: two were female (aged 13 and 18) and four were male (one aged 9 years, two aged 13 years, and one aged 17 years). Weekly meetings were held throughout July 2006 during which the group analyzed the focus group data. The research group discussed the themes and trends that emerged from the focus group transcripts, identified key concerns, and added background explanations and examples.

It should be noted that the method of data collection precluded analyses by demographic variables. Although most focus group facilitators provided overall information about the participants in their group, they did not record discussion according to demographic variables. However, there was significant consistency in key issues and responses across groups regardless of their composition. The work of this study could be extended by conducting focus groups selected according to gender and other shared demographic or experiential characteristics rather than mixed groups.

**TABLE 1: FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT INFORMATION**

<b>Location</b>	<b>Dates</b>	<b>Ages</b>	<b>Number/type of participants</b>
PARC, Toronto, ON	July-August 2006	15-18	15 youth in care
PARC, Toronto, ON	July-August 2006	15-17	15 youth in care
Alberta	June 2006	Not recorded	youth in care
Urban Native Youth Association, Vancouver, BC	June 8th, 2006	18-24	6 Aboriginal youth
Newton Youth Resource Centre, Surrey, BC	June 7th, 2006	14-16	8 youth
Sudbury Youth Detention Centre, ON (2 focus groups)	Spring 2005	12-16	17 youth in conflict with the law
Drop-in Centre Windsor, ON	March 2005	15-16	3 youth
School, Windsor, ON	March 2005	15-16	13 youth
Richard Rothenburger, UNICEF group, SK	March 15th, 2005	Not recorded	Not recorded
St. Stephen's Community Centre, ON	Fall 2005	15-18	8 youth
Sherwood Park Education Centre, NS	December 10th, 2004	12-15	12 Aboriginal youth
Membertou Elementary, NS	December 9th, 2004	9-11	15 Aboriginal youth
Sydney Academy, NS	December 6th, 2004	16-17	12 Aboriginal youth
MacDonald Elementary, NS	December 3rd, 2004	9-11	12 youth
Glace Bay High, NS	November 25th, 2004	16-17	12 youth
Offices of the Child and Youth Advocate and Choices for Youth, NFLD	Not recorded	16-18	12 youth
Dilico Day program, ON	Not recorded	8-12	6 Aboriginal youth with mental health issues
Dilico, Assessment and Brief Treatment Unit (ABTU), Thunder Bay, ON	Not recorded	11-15	4 Aboriginal youth with mental health issues

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

We reviewed the social science research in Canada over the past five years to isolate knowledge of specific relevance to violence affecting children.

## 3. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

We compared the findings from the youth focus group data with the findings from the social science research. The primary goals of the comparison were to identify:

1. Where and how the observations of youth are consistent with those of social science research findings
2. Whether the concerns of youth have been addressed in the literature
3. How the voices of youth add to our knowledge of violence against children

The quotes presented in this report are from children under age 18 who participated in the focus groups. We chose them to represent common views and to ensure that this report accurately represents the voices of children.

## 4. YOUTH INITIATIVES

There is plenty of discussion about youth violence, but what initiatives are actually happening today in Canada to prevent it? We conducted web-based research and contacted individual organizations to identify youth-involved initiatives designed to prevent or respond to violence. To be included, the initiative or the mandate of the organization had to either feature youth as partners, or be totally youth operated. For the most part in these initiatives, “youth” are defined as under age 25. However, we did include programs if they were targeted toward children and youth no older than 30 years of age. The information about youth-involved organizations is organized by setting. Since they are broadly based, we listed two initiatives in the “general” category. Those categorized under “school” address school violence or are violence-prevention initiatives undertaken at schools. Interestingly, we found a lack of initiatives that address violence against children in the family, and media violence. It is unlikely that our list is exhaustive; however, it likely is representative.

# youth voices

## “Violence is a very big problem for kids”

Violence is endemic in the lives of children and young people in Canada. The majority of violent acts experienced by children are perpetrated by people who are part of their everyday lives: parents and guardians, schoolmates, teachers, employers, boyfriends or girlfriends, relatives, coaches. During the introductory discussions in the focus groups, the youth quickly and consistently commented on the amount of violence in their lives, and the extent to which they were affected by it. The youth in the research group repeated and agreed strongly with these comments. Violence was described as a “very big problem for kids.” The youth explained that when they are continually exposed to violence, they feel *“angry, unloved and degraded and continue a cycle of abuse.”* And they noted that, *“When you see violence every day, it stops bothering you.”*

These comments were reflected in the overarching themes of the social science literature we reviewed. There is no doubt that violence is the greatest threat to the healthy development of children. Children exposed to violence show a range of developmental problems including anxiety, depression, school failure, and antisocial aggressive behaviors.<sup>1</sup> But they also become habituated to violence and as they grow, they repeat it within their families and in their communities. *“They grow up with it, they’re used to seeing it, and they bring it with them.”* This is how the cycle of violence is perpetuated.

# violence in the family

## “Really bad violence happens in homes”

It is a sad irony that the family, which has the greatest potential to protect children and provide for their physical and emotional safety, is the primary source of violence for many children in Canada.<sup>2</sup> Official statistics, although commonly believed to underestimate the incidence of family violence, show that disproportionately, children are the victims of physical and sexual assault, and of homicide.<sup>3</sup> The most common forms of violence against children by family members, in order of frequency, are:

- Emotional abuse, more recently defined to include neglect and exposure to domestic violence
- Physical abuse, including physical punishment
- Sexual abuse<sup>4</sup>

We found this same pattern in our youth discussions of experiences with family violence, with the majority of their descriptions coming under the category of emotional abuse. They talked about many incidents of parental yelling, rejection, threats, name-calling, racist statements, and violence between their parents. They also frequently mentioned neglect, and perceived it as a form of family violence. Youth spoke of parents who “use grocery money to buy drugs” or who “forgot to feed their children,” and of parents who “leave their kids home [alone] all night to go out gambling.” The second most frequently described incidents of family violence involved physical punishment. Youth discussed being spanked, smacked or beaten. They said that, “Really bad violence happens in homes. Some people beat their kids, push them, slap them, kick them and everything,” and expressed their belief that “Parents shouldn’t be allowed to hit their children.” Sexual abuse is the least common type of family abuse in Canada, and was the least frequently mentioned by the youth.

Sibling violence has been described by social scientists as pandemic,<sup>5</sup> yet the youth said that although it was common, for the most part they dismissed it as normal behaviour: “Siblings fight a lot. I don’t know one person who never fights with their siblings.” There is some evidence that points to sibling violence as a risk factor for mental health difficulties and physical injury. However, sibling violence gets little research or public attention, and most adults—like the focus group participants—dismiss it as a serious problem.<sup>6</sup>

The young people in the focus group were most concerned about the following areas:

- Domestic violence
- Parental substance abuse
- Inappropriate parenting behavior
- Lack of supports for child victims of parental violence

## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

### “Witnessing violence teaches you violence, and makes you hate”

The youth expressed much concern about spousal violence and reported being significantly affected by it. *“Parents fighting with each other is a type of violence that affects kids. You don’t have to be hit yourself to be affected by it.”* Another stated, *“Parents yelling all the time is really bad for kids. When I was young I used to be awake every night listening to my parents yelling and swearing at each other. It was really stressful. That’s all I could think about.”*

Exposure to domestic violence—seeing, hearing or otherwise being aware of spousal violence—was a commonly reported stress factor for children. The youth understood that children are often the target of spillover or misplaced anger: *“They yell all the time because they are frustrated and they take out their problems on the kids,”* and *“Parents should work things out so kids don’t suffer.”* They expressed concern that many children feel that they are responsible for parental conflict, stating that, *“Kids often blame themselves.”* Some children believe they should intervene: *“Sometimes you could separate mom and dad.”* Others expressed their concern about the role-modeling effect of parental violence. *“When parents do too much [verbal or physical violence], kids will end up being violent.”* Another noted, *“Witnessing violence teaches you violence and makes you hate.”*

It has only been a relatively short period of time since exposure to domestic violence has been included in the definition of emotional abuse. Its inclusion results from a growing body of literature demonstrating that children who are exposed to domestic violence are at risk for a number of emotional and behavioral difficulties, and are at increased risk of becoming victims or perpetrators of domestic violence themselves.<sup>7</sup> The seriousness of these effects has led to an increase in exposure to domestic violence being used as a criterion in child welfare investigations, and to suggestions that it should be taken into account in resolving custody disputes.<sup>8</sup>

Risk factors of exposure to spousal abuse<sup>9</sup> have been cited to include harsh parenting styles, time spent in shelters, separations from parents, and custody disputes. The commonality of the concerns expressed by the youth in the focus groups, and their description of the effects of exposure to domestic violence on their psychological well-being, suggest that exposure itself may account for much of the risk of poor social and mental health outcomes.



## PARENTAL SUBSTANCE ABUSE

“Most of the violence happens because of drinking, drugs...”

A second area of concern for the youth was parental substance abuse. *“Fights happen and arguments escalate when drugs or alcohol are involved,”* one youth stated. Why did they believe this?

- The links they had observed between parental intoxication and violence
- Child neglect caused by the financial and emotional costs of drugs and alcohol
- The poor example set by substance-abusing parents

The youth understood the probability of an intergenerational cycle of substance abuse. One youth explained, *“When parents drink too much they might hit their children. And when children are hit they might drink or do drugs to escape. It goes around and around in a circle.”*

Parental substance abuse is a well-documented risk factor for child abuse. Beyond this identification however, there is little systematic research on the effects on children of parental substance abuse.<sup>10</sup> The findings of one recent investigation in the U.S. are consistent with our focus group’s observations.<sup>11</sup> Here, the researchers examined how children are affected when their parents abused methamphetamine and found that the children displayed a range of antisocial beliefs and practices such as lying, stealing, drug use, and violence. Not surprisingly, the children grew to behave like their parents.

## INAPPROPRIATE PARENTING BEHAVIOR

“Some parents just don’t know how to handle being parents”

*“You look up to your parents and you think that what they do is right. If you get beat up by your parents, it can turn into a cycle and maybe you’ll beat your kids too.”* Poor parenting skills and abusive parenting were common themes in focus group discussions. The youth were particularly concerned about the potentially devastating impact for children in homes characterized by abuse. They believed that, *“Kids get beat up at home and are afraid to tell anyone.”*

Describing incidents of financial and physical neglect, our youth most commonly mentioned financial neglect, where a parent used household money for drugs, alcohol or gambling. Achingly, most examples of physical neglect concerned being left alone at night: *“My mom... I get mad at her sometimes. Sometimes she says she’s going out and will be back—leaves at 7:00, back the next morning.”*

The youth also described inappropriate dependency relationships between parent and child. Parents, they said, tend to use their children to release their frustrations, *"They say things kids shouldn't be hearing,"* one told us, and *"they talk about their problems to their children."* At the same time, they pointed out, parents do not listen to their children. The youth were very concerned about this latter point, especially in cases of sexual abuse, particularly incest: *"If they tell, nobody will believe them. Nobody wants to believe a father or a stepfather sexually abused his daughter,"* one child said. Another felt that, *"Parents should listen to their children more."*

Research literature also identifies inappropriate dependency as a characteristic of abusive and neglectful parents.<sup>12</sup> Listening to children is associated with a democratic style of parenting, one that is most consistent with healthy child development. But according to the 1999 National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, democratic parenting is practiced by only one-third of Canadian parents.

According to the youth, many parents set a poor example for their children: *"When violence happens in the home it leads to violence outside the home."* But the poor role modeling described was not restricted to overt violence. The youth also noted that parents promoted attitudes supportive of violence, particularly negative stereotypes. They said: *"...adults need to set a better example for kids. Fights and violence happens, especially bullying, when we try to judge a book by its cover. We're always being told to stay away from bad kids. They brand certain kids as 'bad' because of what they wear or who they hang out with. Then they tell us to give people a chance. No wonder kids bully other kids. Adults need to lead by example. How can you respect someone that labels you as bad?"* The hypocrisy of parents was emphasized: *"They hit people, they make fun of people and they judge people by the way they look and they tell us not to. It is like 'Do as I say, not as I do.'"*

In essence, the focus group participants strongly suggest the need for parent education. Very few researchers, child advocates, child welfare workers, education, medical or justice officials would disagree. The issues identified by the youth in these focus groups provide a guide, with each issue a known risk factor for poor child development and the transmission of violence from one generation to the next.

## **LACK OF SUPPORTS FOR CHILD VICTIMS OF PARENTAL VIOLENCE**

**"If there are places to get help, kids probably don't know about them..."**

Many of the youth participants were concerned that child victims of family violence lacked supports. Stressing the pervasive nature of family violence, *"I think child abuse happens a lot more than we think it does,"* the youth noted a number of difficulties with child victims obtaining help. Some thought that little could be done about child abuse because *"It's hard to stop something that happens behind closed doors,"* and

*“There’s not much you can do to stop adults from beating their kids.”* They described how the idea of reporting parents made them afraid to get help: *“Kids get beat up at home and are afraid to tell anyone.”* Not knowing who to get help from was an additional problem: *“I don’t know who’s there to help kids who are abused. If there are places to go for help, kids probably don’t know about them or are too afraid to look for help.”* Another obstacle identified was that children are not always aware that they are being abused: *“I don’t think kids even know that they are being abused. They probably think that hitting happens in every family and it is okay that their parents hit them. Why would you look for help if you don’t know there is a problem?”*

Overall, the youth believed that children must find ways to deal with parental violence on their own. This was particularly true for child victims of incest: *“When kids are sexually abused, they usually have to deal with it on their own,”* and for boys: *“Males are never believed when they say they were abused,”* and *“When you hear about a guy being abused you think he’s weird because it’s not talked about,”* or *“You never hear about shelters for men who are abused. People think guys can take it. This isn’t fair.”* It is important to note here that our search for youth-involved initiatives in the area of family violence found very few targeted to children or males.

## **PROPOSED SOLUTIONS**

### **“The best thing to do is have a Kids Helping Kids program”**

As noted, both our focus groups and the research agree that parent education is the overarching solution that will help end family violence. Young people felt parent education was necessary so that they could experience *“parents being what they are supposed to be.”* *“Parents,”* said one youth, *“need to encourage their kids, help them, support them, spend time with them, ask them how their day was, tell them you love them – that feels good.”* Parent education would include:

- Teaching parents the importance of modeling desired behaviors:  
*“Talk to kids and show them wrong and right because beating them does not get you anywhere.”*
- Training parents in anger management skills:  
*“People need to learn a different method of handling their anger so they don’t resort to violence.”*
- Offering addiction services:  
*“Parents are going to keep doing it [being violent] as long as they are drinking and doing drugs.”*

*“Parents have to get away from the drugs and alcohol and focus on their children.”*

- Showing parents the effect of their addictions on their children:  
*“When my parents learned from the counselor how their fighting and yelling was hurting me and my family, they stopped. People need to be educated.”*

Since these types of interventions are beyond the control of young people, some of the youth concluded that, *“The best thing to do is have a Kids Helping Kids program.”* Others believed that, *“Some parents don’t care,”* and *“There’s no way out.”*

In addition to education, the youth suggested that legislation be changed to ban parental use of physical punishment: *“Parents should not be able to hit their children. People don’t think that is violence but it is. By legalizing physical punishment things will only get worse.”* The vast literature assessing the outcomes of physical punishment overwhelmingly agrees with this youth, with the *Joint Statement on Physical Punishment of Children and Youth* just one example of evidence from researchers and child advocates.<sup>13</sup>

## violence in the community

### “Homeless kids need a lot of help”

Community violence describes acts, often random and spontaneous, where the perpetrator’s intent is to harm. These include physical and sexual assault, rape, harassment, robbery, stabbing, shooting, and murder. Children are affected by community violence whether as direct victims of such acts, as witnesses to, or by hearing about them. We generally think of community violence as most prevalent and chronic in disadvantaged urban communities characterized by high unemployment, poor social amenities and low standards of housing.<sup>14</sup> Yet, regardless of their geographic or social status, none of our focus group participants had any difficulty talking about their experiences with community violence. It is notable that only in this setting did the discussion focus more on violence by youth than by adults. For example, one area of discussion in which adult-to-youth violence was raised was of the vulnerability of street-involved youth to violence. The youth were aware that, *“Homeless kids need a lot of help”* and that, *“The government needs to do more to help street kids.”* Street-involved youth are easy targets for predatory criminal offenders, deviant peers, and exploitive adults. To support themselves, many street-involved youth engage in panhandling (begging), drug trafficking, theft, prostitution, or survival sex (offering sex in exchange for food or shelter, or in some cases drugs).<sup>15</sup> As one youth stated: *“When [they] live on the streets and have to fight for the clothes on their back—fighting is all they know.”*

Generally, research focus has been on the adverse developmental outcomes of exposure to community violence.<sup>16</sup> In childhood, exposure to community violence has been associated with a range of emotional,

social, academic, and behavioral difficulties. In adolescence, youth tend to display these difficulties in aggressive anti-social behaviors, and by using drugs and alcohol as coping mechanisms.

The overarching theme that emerged from the focus group discussions and the subsequent analysis by the research group was the link between alienation and violence. The children and youth grasped that community violence, especially gang membership and gang violence, were responses to alienation. Their comments and examples repeatedly reflected a belief that there was no consideration of their needs within their communities, and that youth garner little respect. They also raised other concerns of drug-related violence and violence in sports.

## ALIENATION AND GANG VIOLENCE

“To be known as the tough guy is better to not be known at all”

Youth felt that the most salient form of community violence among the youth was that of gang violence. *“Violence comes from groups of people like gangs, cliques, and crews,”* one said.

*“Gangs intimidate people.”* The youth reported witnessing *“gang beating,”* gang-related *“drive-by shooting,”* and gang violence over *“territorial issues.”* Their observations are consistent with research findings showing high rates of aggressive and delinquent behaviors among youth gang members.<sup>17</sup> Some of the youth were intimidated by gangs and they understood that *“Gangs mistreat others because they are in large groups.”* There was a consistency in their explanations for gang membership, one that suggested why it might be attractive to be part of a gang.

The youth tend to see their neighborhoods and communities as places that neither accept nor provide for young people. They complained that there is *“nobody listening”* to them, that adults *“don’t have time for their kids, for what they are saying, they don’t even want to listen,”* that *“Boredom can lead to violence.”* Adults, they said, are focused solely on their own needs: *“They are too busy building up the community for the older people to make money to worry about having things for the kids.”* The result is few or none of the appropriate facilities for youth. *“There aren’t any places for teens to go—not even dances.”* As well, many of the youth complained about adults’ negative stereotyping of young people: *“Just because I live in a bad neighborhood, I’m told I’m bad. You can’t blame kids for doing bad things when you keep telling them they’re bad.”*

As a result, the youth feel bored, disrespected and disempowered. That means that their path to social acceptance, empowerment, and sense of self is then forged through gang membership and violence. *“Kids might do violent things to feel good about themselves. You feel powerful when you put others down.”* Youth gravitate toward gangs because they are *“looking for acceptance.”* *“Kids want respect and they think that they can get it through violence.”* Another said that, *“Kids get involved to be accepted.”* And as so eloquently

stated by one youth: *“To be known as the tough guy is better than to be not known at all.”*

In light of findings from a recent study of gang membership in Montreal<sup>18</sup>, we found these young people’s observations particularly interesting. The researchers note that well over one-third of adolescent males between the ages of 14 and 16 join gangs, causing them to engage in deviant behavior. As the youth in the focus groups noted, violence among gang members appears to be largely a function of the experience of the gang rather than any personal characteristics of its members. The youth cited here are suggesting that more child-friendly communities would lessen gang membership. This points to one of the most effective routes to reducing community violence.

## **DRUG-RELATED VIOLENCE**

### “People feel ten-feet tall and bullet proof on drugs”

In the social science literature, alcohol and drug use by youth are described as a coping strategy used to deal with the stress from community violence.<sup>19</sup> Our youth focused on *“drug violence”* as a common form of community violence they had experienced. They described three types of drug-related violence. First, was gang territorial violence: the *“stoners vs. chemicals”* (marijuana vs. ecstasy); *“Drugs are linked to gangs and territory and then violence can happen.”* Drug use, drug dealing and drug-related violence are more frequently observed among youth gang members than among non-gang youth.<sup>20</sup> Second, was of the individual behavioral outcomes of drug use: *“You need money to buy drugs so you beat someone up to get it.”* Another child felt that, *“People feel ten-feet tall and bullet proof on drugs,”* and *“People under the influence of alcohol and drugs—that’s why they get violent.”* In fact, research shows consistent findings of a strong association between alcohol consumption and violent behavior in adolescence.<sup>21</sup> Third, the youth described bullying by drug pushers: *“People in my neighborhood ask you to do drugs all the time. If you say no, they will threaten to beat you up.”* Or, *“Teenagers hang around behind the store and do drugs. They try to get the kids... you could get beat up by the teenagers.”* We found anecdotal evidence of bullying over drugs, not only to coerce children into using drugs, but also to give up their medications such as Ritalin, a drug commonly prescribed for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. The research does not specifically address drug-related bullying.

## **VIOLENCE IN SPORTS**

### “After the hockey games sometimes fights break out”

Many Canadian children are exposed to violence in sports as spectators or as team players. Violence that is illegal in other community contexts is embraced in sports, especially in ice hockey where it is understood to be integral to the game. Our youth were well aware of this.

The competitive nature of many children's sports tends to result in verbal and physical abuse of the players from coaches, parents and other players.<sup>22</sup> As the youth said: *"Competitive sports leads to fighting" and parents and coaches are "not promoting fair and fun play."*

As in the research, the youth focused a great deal on ice hockey as the icon of sports violence. *"Violence happens all the time in sports—especially hockey...it can be brutal."* They saw violence as *"a part of hockey"* and noted that *"fights happen all the time at the games."* As spectators, the youth commented: *"A lot of fights happen at hockey games. I was at a game and someone hit the goalie. The other players ganged up on the guy and then a big fight broke out."* And, *"My brother plays hockey and him and his friends get injured all the time. Sometimes it is an accident, but other times players hurt them on purpose."* As players, they experienced *"coaching staff yelling"* and *"parents yelling at players and coaches."* The youth also were aware that violence does not always end with the game: *"After the hockey games sometimes big fights break out. The players attack the players from the other team. Sometimes the fans get involved."* One said, *"I've seen many times that rough play on the ice escalated into huge fights in the parking lot after the game."*

What has not been addressed in the research but was noted by our youth was that hockey games are also used as opportunities to express racism. *"When we play hockey people target us more than the other players on the team because we are native. Players attack us and fans yell at us."* *"A black student got jumped at a hockey game just because he is black,"* stated another.

## PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

### "We need to have relationships with people in the community"

The elimination of community violence may require radical changes to social and economic conditions, and the same can be said for attitudes that are accepting of violence. Our youth called for several such changes:

- Radical social reform, both nationally and internationally, stressing the need for new role models in world leaders at international levels
- More direct forms of education, particularly *"sports violence education, awareness and prevention"*
- Legislative changes, in particular, a ban on handguns and illicit drugs  
*"People need to stop selling handguns"*  
*"The best thing to do to stop violence is to stop making drugs. If there were no drugs people would be less violent"*

For the most part, however, the youth felt most strongly about lessening or eliminating community violence through the development of child-friendly communities. They felt they would be less likely to join gangs if they felt accepted by the adults in their communities. *"We need to have relationships with people in the community."* Young people, they said, would be less inclined to be violent if they had access to recreational facilities: *"The government needs to spend more money building places for kids to go to get off the streets."* And they expressed awareness of the lack of resources in many families: *"They need to make sure that it is free for kids to use because some families don't have enough money for those things."* The youth wanted to feel safe in their communities. They thought they should know *"which areas of the community are safe."* They wanted to be sure there were *"safer environments to hang out at."* They suggested, *"Areas like a community centre can create a safe-house where people can come."*

Community violence would be significantly lessened, the youth suggested, if young people were given opportunities to participate fully in their communities. As they noted, there should be *"youth councils and youth involved in all parts of the community."* The success of community interventions requires knowing and responding to the concerns of young people, their values and their concerns, and it requires acknowledging their rights as citizens of their communities.<sup>23</sup>

## violence in the schools

### "Every year in school violence gets worse"

School violence affects the child's mental health, school engagement, and academic performance.<sup>24</sup> Researchers typically focus on the issue of bullying as the most prevalent form of school violence.<sup>25</sup> Gender differences in bullying have been identified as well as the characteristics of bullies and their targets, and the effects of bullying.<sup>26</sup> Consistent with this research focus, our focus groups described bullying as the most common form of school violence and a major concern.

To lessen school violence, a number of violence prevention initiatives have been instituted.<sup>27</sup> These include:

- Situational control strategies such as locker searches, metal detectors, and on-site police officers
- Punitive strategies such as zero tolerance policies
- Peer mediation programs

None has proven fully effective. What has been suggested in some of the social science literature, but has been given very little attention, is bully-reduction interventions with teachers. Interestingly, the focus group participants were strongly critical of adult behaviors and identified them as facilitating factors of bullying. The youth's main concerns in the discussions centred on bullying, adult behaviors, and the effects of bullying.



## BULLYING

### “...bullying can be a child’s cry for help and attention”

The pervasiveness of bullying in schools has been well documented, but the research is less clear on whether it is actually increasing. There seemed little doubt among our youth: *“Every year in school violence gets worse.”* They defined bullying to include *“gossip, rumors, racism”* as well as physical violence among which incidents of *“shoving against lockers”* appears to be very common.

Some of the youth raised the issue of cyber-bullying. Of particular concern were technological developments that allow manipulation of messaging: *“Going on MSN can start fights. Everyone can see what you’re saying and they might not like it. If someone knows your password they can go back and change the things you wrote to make it look like you said things about someone else.”* Online or cyber-bullying can be an extremely vicious form of bullying because the social inhibitions of face-to-face confrontation are removed, the bullying is very public, and bullying can occur around the clock. An emerging literature indicates that online bullying is a significant issue for a number of youth, with at least six percent of those who use the Internet reporting being bullied online.<sup>28</sup> The growth of cyber-bullying may in part be accounted for by findings that show that youth who are victims of traditional bullies are significantly more likely to bully others online than in person.<sup>29</sup> It has been suggested that the Internet provides socially marginalized children a safe outlet to express retaliation in ways that are not normally accessible to them.

Researchers have identified the typical bully to be a child who has experienced difficulty in the family, and in particular the parental use of aggressive methods to manage difficult family situations; parental abuse or neglect; parental substance abuse; or a lack of parental involvement.<sup>30</sup> As understood by one youth: *“... bullying can be a child’s cry for help and attention.”*

The targets of bullies may have poor social skills or low self-esteem; what they have in common is some sort of difference from their peers.<sup>31</sup> Historically, the differences that have elicited bullying have been visible minority status or physical or cognitive challenges. This does not appear to have changed: *“Minority races like natives and black people...are bullied because of racism.”* Another child noted, *“It’s really bad for kids in resource classes. They get picked on more than anyone else in school.”* More recent victim characteristics include obesity and sexual orientation.<sup>32</sup> Some young people become empowered by *“beating on someone who... is overweight.”* Others pick on sexual minorities: *“There’s this guy in grade eight that we heard is bisexual, he gets picked on and threatened because of it.”* Another youth shared that, *“I got death threats in my locker almost every day for a few months because of my sexuality.”* In fact, according to the youth, any difference at all seems to elicit bullying. *“Anything you do differently or look differently than anyone else, you’ll get picked on.”* There is strong peer pressure for conformity in looks and behavior: *“I get picked on because I look different. I try to be good to people and I do well in school, but because I look different kids make fun of me and adults think I’m bad. Just because I have blue hair and wear black clothes doesn’t mean I’m bad.”*

Youth expressed one concern not addressed in the social science literature as the apparent double standard in peer physical violence. The literature notes that although there are no sex differences in the rates of bullying, girls are more likely to engage in social or verbal forms of bullying, whereas boys are more likely to use physical aggression.<sup>33</sup> The youth noted the same general pattern in their own lives. However, they also pointed out that girls do sometimes use physical aggression and that when they do, it is ignored. *“I see girls hit their boyfriends right here in school and nobody has a problem with it. If he hit her back everyone would think it was awful,”* one youth stated. *“It seems okay for girls to hit guys but not for guys to hit girls,”* said another. *“It shouldn’t be worse for a guy to hit a girl but society thinks it is.”*

## TEACHER BEHAVIORS

### “Save it for recess”

Focus group participants were very much in agreement that teachers play a role in both the reduction and in the perpetuation of school violence. Commenting on teacher apathy and how they ignored violence, some youth said, *“Most teachers do not want to waste time on that sort of thing.”* They gave a number of examples of teacher violence: *“When I lived in . . . the teachers were violent. They would grab kids by the back of the neck and grab them by the ear to take them to the office.”*

The youth were particularly concerned with the behaviors of teachers that maintained violence. *“The teachers know that it is happening but they don’t do anything to stop it. They turn a blind eye—out of sight, out of mind.”* And, *“They tell us in school that the way to stop a bully is to stand up to him. The teachers don’t even do it. They turn the other way—out of sight, out of mind.”* And as the research group explained, among the more common teacher responses to peer fighting in the classroom is the admonition to *“Save it for recess.”*

Although there has been relatively little study of teacher behaviour in bullying, there is evidence that teachers may ignore incidents of peer bullying.<sup>34</sup> Why this is the case has not been assessed. It may be that too many teachers are not sufficiently aware of the bullying. One youth did suggest that *“Teachers need to be more aware.”* Another explanation was that violence was assumed to be normal at schools. Teachers do not respond because, *“Teachers in school expect violence.”* A third hypothesis offered by the youth was that teachers are afraid of intervention: *“Not too many teachers want to get in the middle of two hockey players when they start swinging at each other.”* Teachers need to be supported to address bullying consistently and effectively as part of a school climate and ethos of respect for all—exactly what is showing success in a growing number of schools.

## IMPACT OF BULLYING

“If you are being bullied in school, you might not want to go to school”

Our youth focused on three outcomes from school bullying:

- Negative psychological effects
- Reduced academic performance
- The perpetuation of bullying

Researchers have identified a spectrum of disorders that result from bullying. Victims can suffer both short- and long-term psychosocial maladjustment, most notably depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances, increased incidence of stress-related illness, and psychosomatic complaints.<sup>35</sup> The youth talked about fear and believed that victims commonly *“experience anxiety.”* They noted the effect of bullying on academic performance: *“Violence might stop children from doing their best in school,”* and *“Grades go down.”* Research does indeed show that academic performance suffers when a child is bullied. The anxiety elicited by bullying impairs the child’s concentration or leads to the child losing interest in school work. School absenteeism and early school leaving sometimes result. Research findings and the youth both agreed that children who are chronically bullied *“stop going to school,”* and that sometimes they *“drop out of school.”*<sup>36</sup> One youth commented that it is not always a question of dropping out, but difficulty attending the school of choice: *“I wanted to go to a school because it had an excellent art program but it had a violent reputation and so I was not allowed to go.”* Avoidance of victimization is an important criterion of school attendance and a predictor of school performance. In the words of one youth: *“If you are being bullied in school you might not want to go to school. If you don’t go to school you can’t learn.”*

Recent studies of bullies have shown that the most severe outcomes are found among children who are sometimes bullies, and sometimes the victims of other bullies: the bully-victims.<sup>37</sup> The youth were aware of the *“vicious cycle— sometimes you are the target, sometimes you’re the perpetrator.”* And *“From being bullied you can actually become a bully.”* This may provide a partial explanation for the finding that 75 percent of school shootings over the past decade have been in some way related to bullying.<sup>38</sup> As one youth explained: *“Kids get sick of being told they’re not as good as other kids or that they’re losers because they don’t hang out with the popular kids. Not making it in the popular crowd leads to frustration and violence.”* The bullied become the bullies.

## PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

### “If you knew someone was being violent, you could try to be kind to them”

Like the research literature, the youth were clearer about what does not work to lessen school violence than on what does. For the most part, the youth discussed the situational control strategies that are commonly used, but are shown to be ineffective. *“To help stop violence in the school, the school had video cameras installed. But it didn’t really help.”* They explained that the video cameras didn’t work because the school leaders ignored them. There was some agreement that on-site police officers may function to reduce bullying at school, but there were concerns about spill-over bullying: *“Our school has a police officer... there are not many fights because of the police officer but once you leave school he can’t help you.”* And *“If you stop it in school we’ll bring it to the street.”* Comments about suspensions revealed considerable insight into why they tend to be ineffective in reducing bullying: *“The principal suspends kids who are violent or get in fights. Sending them home doesn’t work. They don’t go home and think about why what they did was wrong; they just use the suspension as a vacation. They don’t learn from this.”* The youth were also aware that suspensions are ineffective because they do not address the root cause of bullying. *“Suspensions may be good for the rest of the kids at school—creates safety—but not necessarily for the kid kicked out.”* According to the evaluation literature, zero-tolerance policies are the least effective of all control strategies.<sup>39</sup>

Situational control strategies tend to either displace the problem by relocating the violence to another part of the school, or neighborhood, or they inappropriately punish non-violent children. Moreover, they are ineffective in reducing school violence because they teach only what is not allowed.<sup>40</sup> In contrast, strategies that help children with conflict resolution, that create a constructive learning environment, and that enhance students’ social and emotional development have been demonstrated effective in reducing school violence.<sup>41</sup> Most important perhaps are interventions that improve the classroom social climate. It is particularly important that children perceive and experience their classrooms as fair, respectful and inclusive, and that social and cultural acceptance be the expected and modeled norm.<sup>42</sup> The youth were well aware of this. Consistent with the literature, they proposed the following solutions:

- Change the school ethos, altering the perception that *“schools do not care.”*
- Teach appropriate conflict resolution strategies:  
*“You are not taught how to deal with violence and bullying and stuff in school. We need to learn strategies we can use.”*
- Provide therapeutic interventions for the bullies:  
*“Bullies need help because something is wrong because they like to beat little kids.”*

We believe there would be much less violence in schools if these three suggestions were implemented. And there would be much less violence everywhere if the understanding and sensitivity shown in the following

youth's suggested solution to school violence were more widespread: *"If you knew someone was being violent, you could try to be kind to them. Maybe they don't mean to be bad—maybe somebody hurt them or maybe they don't have any friends to support them. You could try to make friends with a bully and maybe they would change."*

## violence in the media

### "Everyone knows it's just a movie"

There was general consensus among the youth that violence is pervasive in the media, but most saw it as harmless entertainment with effects vastly exaggerated by adults. *"I don't understand the big deal,"* one declared. *"I don't know what the big deal is. Everyone knows it is just a movie; if not they have a problem,"* another maintained. And *"It's cool but it doesn't mean I'll do violent things."* Adults make a fuss about media violence, they suggested, because they don't want to accept that they themselves are responsible for raising violent children. *"I think to blame violence on TV is just a cop-out. There was violence hundreds of years ago before there was TV to blame it on."* And *"Adults try to blame the video games and the Internet. I think you learn more from the parents; when they spank you they show you violence is okay."*

Many seemed quite angry at any suggestion that violent entertainment media caused violence. *"People say all the time that music and TV causes violence. I hate that. I use my music to calm me down."* And *"I get really disgusted when I hear people blaming all the violence on TV and video games. I just don't think that's right."* They also noted the hypocrisy of adults expressing concern about violence on television when the news, which primarily is watched by adults, is full of violence. The news was one of two major areas of concern that emerged in the focus group discussions.

## **VIOLENCE IN THE NEWS**

### "You see more violence in the news than in average TV shows"

In the group discussions, our youth were clear about differentiating between media violence that was obviously entertainment, and that which was an inherent part of the daily news. They believed that too much adult attention is focused on the putative problems of entertainment violence, and too little on the real violence that permeates the news. *"The news is something we don't think of as violent but it really is,"* and *"You see more violence on the news than in average TV shows."* The news, the youth said, is about little

other than *“suicide bombers, stabbing, terrorism, war, and racism,”* and *“killing . . . shooting and fighting.”* They suggested that news stories should include some positive or happy news, and that *“There should be less focus on violence in the news.”* The older youth in the focus groups saw violence as a marketing tool for an audience: *“Violence draws people in to read the paper and watch the news.”* And they lamented how easily one becomes used to real violence: *“After you see so much violence . . . on the news, unless it happens to you . . . it doesn’t bother you,”* and *“We’re all desensitized and don’t give a fuck.”* That was amplified in chilling detail by another youth: *“I saw a guy get shot dead in the head right in front of me . . . and I just went about my business. I have become desensitized.”*

Most social science research has examined violence in video games, television, and movies. After decades of debate there is now a general consensus that media violence is a risk factor like other risk factors that interact with characteristics of the child, the family, and the community, in contributing to the development of aggressive behaviors, fears, and sleep disturbances.<sup>43</sup> And like other risk factors, the greater the level of exposure to violent media, the greater the likelihood the child will be affected by it. It is also now well documented that exposure to media violence does desensitize the viewer just as our youth described.<sup>44</sup> But little attention has been paid to the amount of or effect of violence in television news, although researchers have observed that it is increasing.<sup>45</sup> What limited evidence is available shows that violence in the news may well be a problem. Although only a few children watch TV news, those that do report increased worries and fears for personal safety.<sup>46</sup> What is interesting is that when the youth were asked what came to mind when they heard the word “violence,” among the answers were *“people coming up from the States with guns.”* None answered “television,” “video-games,” or “movies.” Children may be much more aware of news-related violence than all of us realize.

## IMPACT ON YOUNGER CHILDREN

### “Violence is wrong, but little kids don’t understand”

The youth did express concern about the impact of media violence on younger children. Media violence, they said *“really affects the under-13s.”* Their comments resonate with research conducted in Toronto showing that the majority of children younger than age 12 believe they should be protected from television programs, web sites, and video games that are disturbing or frightening. The youth explained that younger children lack the maturity or understanding to differentiate between real and fantasy violence and as a result, may be more affected by exposure to media violence.<sup>48</sup> *“When little kids play violent video games they can’t comprehend that it is not real.”* And *“Violence is wrong but little kids don’t understand.”* One child gave an example of what can happen when younger children do not understand: *“When I was younger I hit a kid with a big piece of ice. I was Sub-Zero from the video game, and that’s what he does.”* It is the case that many younger children have difficulty telling the imaginary from the real, and that they are exposed to a great deal of media violence. The youth also believed that younger children might become anxious and afraid if

constantly exposed to violence in the media and that *“We need to protect children from things like that. There is no need for kids to see so much violence.”* As we mentioned, research supports this, showing that exposure to violent television programming can induce fear, anxiety, nightmares, and other sleep disturbances among children.<sup>49</sup>

At the same time, youth also believed that not all younger children are affected by television violence. As one noted: *“I watched it and I turned out okay.”* Some youth offered explanations for why some children might imitate or be afraid by media violence whereas others are not affected: *“Kids who have problems might not be able to distinguish between what is real and what is not.”* And *“Depends on how you’re brought up—if you don’t have good supports, parents, friends, school...you’re more likely to be influenced by violence.”* These explanations are entirely consistent with research findings. Children who are most vulnerable to imitate media violence are those who have experienced parental neglect, abuse, harsh physical punishment, parental conflict, parental depression and/or parental substance abuse.<sup>50</sup>

## PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

### “Parents need to take responsibility”

Our youth suggested solutions of rating systems and parental monitoring to reduce children’s exposure to violence, the same solutions most frequently discussed in the literature.

Parents can check ratings on television programs, then use a V-chip to block the child’s access to inappropriate programming. There are, however, three problems that reduce the effectiveness of rating systems. One, neither news nor sports programming is subject to ratings. As the youth noted, the news may well be the most frequent and real of all media violence. Second, the rating systems are rather vague and unsatisfactory. Children’s programming is categorized primarily on the basis of the program-maker’s intentions and the anticipated impact of the material on a child. The rating of “C” is given for programming intended for children under the age of eight years. A “C” rating indicates that there are no themes that may threaten children’s sense of security and that depictions of violence are imaginary rather than real. Unlike the youth in the focus groups, ratings give little attention to young children’s difficulty distinguishing real from imaginary. Third, parents don’t always use V-chip technology. In fact, many parents report being unaware of the existence of the V-chip.<sup>51</sup> Those who are and wish to use it must pay an additional fee from their cable providers. There have been calls for more legislative control of media violence instead of the existing emphasis on industry self-regulation, but as one astute focus group participant commented, *“There should be much more restrictions—but when there are, people go crazy.”*

It is rare for parents to use ratings for television programming, movies, or video games.<sup>52</sup> Frequently, we heard comments such as: *“Ratings don’t matter to parents.”* And *“Nobody pays attention to those things [the ratings].”* Or, *“Violent movies are easy for kids to rent, nobody enforces the ratings”* and finally, *“The ratings*

*are there to make sure that kids don't play games that have too much violence, but it doesn't stop us. My parents know I play the games and they don't care."*

The research suggests that it may not be that parents do not care, but that they do not understand. Surveys have demonstrated that few parents understand ratings and V-chips; few parents have knowledge of the harmful effects of media violence; and few are aware of the amount of exposure to violence their children experience through television watching, the Internet, and video games. Not surprisingly, parents exert little control over their children's consumption of media, violent or otherwise.<sup>53</sup> It is important that we provide education in each of these areas.

The youth felt very strongly that, *"Parents need to take responsibility."* *"Kids have to be taught the difference between violence on TV and violence in real life. This is the parents' job to educate their kids,"* and *"Kids gotta know where to draw the line, they learn that from parents."* They were also very clear on how parents should educate their children. *"Parents should watch their kids when they are watching TV,"* and *"How many kids are downstairs being influenced by video games? Parents need to be downstairs playing the games."* Or, *"Parents should monitor what their children watch on TV and what games children play."* Finally, *"Parents should show a child that violence exists but is not acceptable."* Our youth are not alone in their feelings: the research consistently demonstrates that if parents watch television together with their children and offer appropriate commentary on the violence, and if they monitor their children's video games, the effect of violence is significantly reduced.<sup>54</sup>

## violence in institutions

**"When people have too much power, they use it to be violent"**

The youth focused their discussion on child protection and justice institutions. Throughout, they emphasized children's experiences of violence at the hands of adult authorities, and the authorities' *"abuse of power."* Violence happens, one youth said, *"when people have too much power...they use it to be violent."* The violence the youth described included *"strip searches," "verbal abuse," "police brutality," "stabbings," "jumpings,"* and the inappropriate use of medications and restraints. The impact of these actions, they said, only heightened the violence, in particular self-directed violence in the form of suicide attempts and self-injurious behavior (cutting). The youth realized that those taken into child protection or the justice system were children in need of help. Consistent with recent studies, however, they believed that many children leave the institutional systems exhibiting more problem behaviors than when they came in.<sup>55</sup>



## CHILD PROTECTION INSTITUTIONS

### “If you act out, they give you injections”

The numbers of children being admitted into care has increased dramatically over the past few years. This can be attributed to:

- A rise in high-risk conditions for parenting (e.g., maternal depression, poverty, and cut-backs in funding to support programs)
- An increase in the reporting of maltreatment
- An expanded definition of a child “in need of care”<sup>56</sup>

Many youth report that their foster placement is an improvement over the home from which they were removed.<sup>57</sup> However, some youth do experience violence in their family placements.<sup>58</sup> Those particularly vulnerable to violence are children taken into care who are placed in group homes due to a shortage of foster families.<sup>59</sup> The Canadian National Youth in Care Network has critiqued the widespread use of chemical and physical restraints to control children’s behavior in group homes.<sup>60</sup> Our focus group participants echoed the Network’s concerns about increased exposure to violence.

First, it is noteworthy that the youth strongly criticized children’s experiences in some parts of the child welfare system. *“Group homes—they are not a fair place,”* and they *“can make it worse”* or *“ruin it for us when we are young.”* The youth’s lack of confidence in child protection services comes through loud and clear: *“75,000 kids taken [in] by the CAS [Children’s Aid Society] for what reason? They are only protecting about 100 of those kids.”*

The youth provided examples of violence in foster homes and in group care. *“My best friend got assaulted in foster care,”* and *“When I was in foster care, my foster mom and me fought and she shot me against the wall,”* or *“Foster parents mentally and verbally abuse the kids.”* Those who were experienced with group care, like those in the Canadian Youth in Care Network report, complained about violence in the form of behavioral restraints. They described being “overmedicated in group homes” and they complained that *“if you act out, they give you injections.”*

## VIOLENCE IN THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

### “I was planning on killing myself in there”

Violence permeates many youth justice institutions. There is peer violence and adult-to-youth violence. Staff who use physical and verbal violence toward youth in custodial settings is well documented.<sup>61</sup> Whether as a result of direct experience or hearsay, the focus group youth were acutely aware that violence is pervasive in the justice system. *“Kids who are in trouble with the law sometimes are treated pretty rough by police and*

guards and stuff. Mostly I think the most violence for these kids is fighting between themselves in jails or detention centres. These places get rough. I know kids who got in some pretty serious fights in places like that. And they can be intimidated a lot by other kids in these places.”

Although the youth noted that *“staff don’t care,”* most of their discussion described an abuse of power by police officers. *“Cops are really rough with kids,”* one said. *“Cops are really aggressive with kids, they slam kids on the ground and when they strip search you they are rough,”* and *“A cop dropped me to the ground and I banged my head,”* or *“...[the] police threw him [a young boy with a slingshot] out of the car, up against the car, punching him ... a bruise on his side and scratches on his face.”* One youth offered a rather different example of the abuse of power by police officers: *“Cops—they, like, take our drugs and smoke them.”*

The youth also associated the probation system with violent experiences: *“Probation—if you break a law you get probation, you get conditions and if you break one you get a breach for every little thing; if it keeps happening you are exposed to more violence,”* and *“The first time I broke the law I was on probation and was breached and was given more probation. All of those probation rules and then there were more breaches and charges, it messes it up for the rest of our lives.”* The “messed-up lives” are the result of subsequent detention in the correctional system: *“The biggest thing in the correctional system is the guards who over-exercise their power,”* and *“young people in custody”* were identified as those most in need of help.

The effect of experience with violence in institutions is to perpetuate and teach further violence. Experienced youth are aware of this narrowing path, characterized by violence, that takes them from early child welfare involvement to foster or group homes and then into juvenile justice institutions.<sup>62</sup> Tragically, some turn the violence inward: *“I was planning on killing myself in there.”*

## PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

### “Kids should know their rights”

The youth had very little to offer on how to solve the problem of violence in institutions. The only specific suggestions were that, *“Kids should know their rights”* and that *“Staff should know kids’ rights.”* A recent analysis of youth detention centers in Nova Scotia did demonstrate that where staff and police had been educated on children’s rights, there were fewer complaints of violence.<sup>63</sup>

Overall, the young people, like child advocates and child development researchers, realized the importance of much earlier interventions: *“Childhood is the time that matters most and what happens to you as a child will stay with you the rest of your life.”*

# summary

## “We should be allowed to express ourselves”

The youth were harshly critical of many of the adults in their lives. Parents, coaches, teachers, community leaders, child protection workers and justice officials came under fire as hypocritical, uncaring, and apt to behave violently toward children. It is this very real violence that the youth believe to be harmful and want stopped. Violence in the entertainment media, in contrast, was understood to be a problem for few children.

There were four issues that emerged repeatedly in each of the family, community, school and institutional settings:

- **Poor adult role-modeling:**  
*“Violence is a cycle. We see our parents being violent and then we do violent things and then our kids do violent things.”*  
*“Adults need to set a better example for kids.”*  
*“We need role models—there are not enough in the community.”*
- **Adult hypocrisy:**  
*“You come home drunk because you see your parents drunk and then you get slapped around for coming home drunk.”*  
*“They tell us in school that the way to stop a bully is to stand up to him. The teachers don’t even do it.”*
- **Substance abuse:**  
*“Physical fights and verbal abuse happens because of drugs and alcohol.”*  
*“Fights happen and arguments escalate when drugs or alcohol are involved.”*
- **Rejection:**  
*“[parents] make them [children] feel that they are not loved or accepted for who they are. This is emotional violence.”*  
*“Children heal from physical violence, but emotional scars go deeper.”*

Although some youth described violence as “fun,” most wanted substantial changes to reduce violence in their lives. They called for **understanding and help** for children who are exposed to violence and who are violent. They wanted **child-friendly communities** in which youth are accepted and involved. They emphasized the need for **caring and committed parents** who know how to parent effectively. They longed to be treated with **respect at home, in school, and in the community**. And above all, the **youth want their voices heard:**

***“Asking kids what they think is so important. It makes kids feel good and it tells people what we think.”***

***“Sometimes violence is all about attention.”***

***“We should have a say if we are suspended from school...it just makes you madder.”***

***“Nobody ever thinks to ask the kids how we feel. Things that might not seem very important to you are very important to us. We should be allowed to express ourselves.”***

The voices of youth in this report have contributed profoundly to our knowledge of what youth think about violence. At the same time they have paved the way for more effective partnerships with adults to reduce violence. Youth told us early in this process that, “You need to get representation from all groups of kids. The popular kids and the bad kids, older kids and younger kids.” Although we agree with the youth who reminded all of us that, “there are no bad kids, only kids who do bad things,” we believe we have made a good start in hearing from a diverse group of young people. Their insights and their sensitivities provide hope for a less violent future.

# recommended next steps

## 1. DISSEMINATION

- a) The key messages in each of the settings were identified by the youth research group and posters were designed to disseminate the messages to adults. With funding from the Public Health Agency of Canada (Family Violence Prevention Initiative), these posters currently are being produced for distribution.
- b) Supported by UNICEF Canada, youth are presenting the report at the WorldForum 2006: Future Directions in Child Welfare, Vancouver, B.C., November, 20, 2006.
- c) Assisted by Save the Children Canada and UNICEF Canada, youth will be available to the media to discuss the report on National Child Day (November 20).
- d) The Cape Breton University Children's Rights Centre will make copies of the report available to teachers for inclusion in their children's rights education curricula and encourage its adoption by students for peer education, art and journalism projects.
- e) The report will be presented to the Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights.
- f) The report will be presented to the Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children for inclusion in their 2009 monitoring report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.
- g) Copies of the report will be provided to the youth groups listed within it, and to those who participated in its development. Each will be encouraged to disseminate the information in the manner best suited to their community and mandate.

## 2. EDUCATION

In addition to the education that is an inevitable corollary of dissemination, it would be helpful to have specific education initiatives organized and run by youth. The youth research group stressed the importance of parents, teachers, and those who work with youth in social service or justice settings, being made aware of the extent to which children are affected by violence. Policy makers and legislators would also benefit from a deeper understanding of youth perspectives on issues of violence. The partners in this project (UNICEF Canada, CBU Children's Rights Centre, Save the Children Canada, Canadian Council of Provincial Child and Youth Advocates) can facilitate youth-designed and youth-led education initiatives at community locations such as schools, shopping centres, and workplaces. In addition, it may be possible for youth to educate adults through the electronic media, radio, television and the Internet. Education may take a number of forms such as talks, art displays, drama performances, role-plays, and making and presenting documentaries. The partner organizations continue to advocate for mechanisms that support the participation of children and young people in administrative, legal and policy decisions affecting them.

### **3. RESEARCH**

The key messages identified by the focus group participants need to be followed up in a systematically controlled research study that stratifies the perspectives of children and young people according to different demographic and experiential variables. A rigorous approach would allow the identification of variables that may be expected to affect the experience and understanding of violence. Such variables include: the age and developmental status of the child, the child's gender, socioeconomic and ethnocultural status, family structure, and sexual orientation.

# youth initiatives against violence

## family

### Labrador West Family Crisis Shelter

**AREA SERVED:** local, Labrador, NL

**MANDATE:** to support families who are experiencing violence

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** women, children/youth, families

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** adults with youth

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** Young Women's Forum

This is an annual interactive weekend conference with 20 to 25 female participants between the ages of 13 and 15. Youth help design the forum. Young women are educated on violence prevention topics including dating violence, conflict resolution, self-esteem building, harassment, bullying, and family violence.

### Canadian Women's Foundation

**AREA SERVED:** national

**MANDATE:** to provide grants for projects designed to prevent violence and to help women and girls become independent

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP** children, youth and women

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** adults and youth

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** Chocolat Rencontres (Quebec)

A grant was provided to fund this violence prevention initiative. The "hot chocolate meetings" is a self-help group for 12 to 15-year-old girls who have been exposed to domestic violence. The goals are to support the youth, help strengthen their self-esteem, and to prevent the transmission of family violence.

### Women's Habitat

**AREA SERVED:** local, Toronto, ON

**MANDATE:** to provide shelter and support for women and children fleeing a violent relationship, and programs dealing with the prevention of partner violence

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** youth and adults

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** mainly adult-led; programs dealing with youth violence provide peer-youth training

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** Peers Helping Peers on Issues of Dating Violence

Peers Helping Peers is a student awareness program that educates students about violence against women, with the goal of eliminating date violence and the sexual harassment of youth. The program stresses peer education, training student volunteers on dating violence and woman abuse using the program's training manual.

## school

### East Metro Youth Services (EMYS)

**AREA SERVED:** local, Toronto, ON

**MANDATE:** to provide prevention and public education services, individual treatment and community interventions to encourage the healthy development of youth and responsible social behavior.

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** youth, ages 12 to 24

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** adults with youth

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** RISE (Respect in Schools Everywhere)

RISE focuses on bullying and dating violence. Trained senior high school students hold violence prevention workshops in schools for younger students. Topics include anger management, conflict resolution, bullying, cyber bullying, racism, homophobia, and gang violence. Youth facilitators also provide workshops to parents and teachers, organize violence prevention events, make referrals, and are involved in program evaluation.

### Making Waves

**AREA SERVED:** local, Fredericton, NB

**MANDATE:** to prevent dating violence

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** youth aged 22 to 30, younger students

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** youth aged 22 to 30

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** Waves Weekend

Between 12 and 16 schools send four students each (two male, two female) to an annual weekend retreat.



The students engage in workshops that teach them about topics such as media stereotypes of gender roles, self-esteem, recognizing healthy and unhealthy relationships, sexual boundaries, and how to help a friend who is in an unhealthy relationship. These students then raise awareness about these issues in their respective schools.

## Toronto Rape Crisis Centre/Multicultural Women Against Rape

**AREA SERVED:** local, Toronto, ON

**MANDATE:** to provide support for those who have been raped or abused

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** women, children, and youth

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** young women

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** Webgrrls.talk

This is an interactive website that provides information on safe dating, self-defense, and healthy sexuality. This website was created by young women in 11 school districts in Toronto with help from teachers, counselors, and university faculty.

## WAYVE (Working Against Youth Violence Everywhere)

**AREA SERVED:** local, Waterloo, ON

**MANDATE:** to provide peer education, raise awareness on ways to deal with violence and discrimination, and link youth with the community.

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** children and youth

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** youth volunteers with adult assistance

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** Youth Helpline

This is a phone hotline that young people can call and talk with youth volunteers about a variety of issues.

## Muskoka Parry Sound Sexual Assault Services

**AREA SERVED:** local, Parry Sound, ON

**MANDATE:** to end sexual violence

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** women and youth

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** women and youth

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** Peer Support Program

The program has trained over 300 youth from grades 9 to 12 to be peer support workers. They deal with topics such as dating violence, body image and self-esteem, communication skills, substance abuse, suicide, and diversity. The youth also have been involved in a variety of initiatives, such as date violence radio and television commercials, delivering training on teen issues to police, and anti-bullying campaigns.

## Thames Valley District School Board— Safe Schools Program

**AREA SERVED:** local, Thames Valley, ON

**MANDATE:** to provide a safe school experience for all students

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** kindergarten to Grade 12

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** youth and adults

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** Drama and Violence Prevention Plays (grades 7 to12)

Students design plays to demonstrate the effects of violence, and how to prevent violence. Grade 11 students are also trained to be anti-violence facilitators for group discussions with younger grades.

## Expecting Respect: A Peer Education Program

**AREA SERVED:** local, Edmonton, AB

**MANDATE:** to train students to become peer educators on health and anti-violence issues

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** school-aged children and youth

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** youth

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** Expecting Respect

This program comprises youth led school curriculum activities designed for those in grades 6 to 9 and 10 to 12. The topics include bullying, healthy relationships and media awareness for the younger students, and sexual health and relationships, conflict resolution strategies and addictions for the older students.

## Gladstone Safe School Project

**AREA SERVED:** local, Vancouver, BC

**MANDATE:** to provide pro-social training and promote involvement in the school

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** youth in grades 8 to12

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** youth

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** SafeSpeak Week

During SafeSpeak week, all grade 8 students are trained in conflict resolution strategies. Students also participate in the School Climate Committee, which is responsible for school safety. Students write scenes for and act in plays dealing with issues related to safety, violence, discrimination, and isolation.

## Canadian Public Health Association

**AREA SERVED:** national

**MANDATE:** to help participants gain skills in critical thinking, communication, peer mediation, rights and responsibilities, assertiveness, and community relation-building

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** youth with literacy issues and out of school youth

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** youth and adults

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** M.O.V.E. (Mind Over Violence Everywhere)

This initiative was created with help from The Students Commission.

It offers a series of youth-directed 10-day workshops. The workshops are interactive and rely on art, theatre, sports, music, and group work to portray themes of violence prevention.

## YOU CAN

**AREA SERVED:** national, (intervention teams are located only in Ottawa, Toronto, and Edmonton)

**MANDATE:** to provide peer training on non-violent conflict resolution and violence prevention, nationally and internationally

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** high school students

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** youth

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** Resolve IT! Conference (annual)

This is a youth conference on peace-building and conflict resolution. Three conference days are spent conducting and/or taking part in workshops, delivering speeches and/or listening to speakers, and engaging in fun activities. On average 500 Canadian youth and 100 international youth attend each year.

## community

### East Metro Youth Services (EMYS)

**AREA SERVED:** local, Toronto, ON

**MANDATE:** to provide prevention and public education services, individual treatment and community interventions

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** marginalized youth in vulnerable communities.

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** youth and adults

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** VIP (Violence Intervention Project)

VIP is an umbrella program that is designed to empower youth to deal with violence. Youth design and conduct research on violence and community needs, facilitate violence workshops for other youth, make additions to the website, work with the media, fund-raise, coordinate volunteers, represent VIP at conferences, and sit on the project advisory committee. They also educate professionals working with youth on how best to reach out to youth. Another portion of VIP targets older high-risk youth who are looking to re-enter the workforce or school system. A youth internship program is offered to these youth and focuses on life skills development to aid in reintegration.

### City of Toronto Culture Division and the Downsview Park Arts Alliance

**AREA SERVED:** local, Downsview Park, Toronto, ON

**MANDATE:** to improve relationships among youth of different ethnicities, demonstrate to the community that youth do care about the community, uplift the community through art, and relieve personal stress through art and expression

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** youth from the Jane-Finch community

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** Five youth from Jane-Finch of different ethnic backgrounds

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** Youth Mural Project

Youth coordinate and design murals in Downsview Park.

## Black Youth Coalition Against Violence

**AREA SERVED:** local, Toronto, ON

**MANDATE:** to focus on the strengthening of social supports to reduce gun violence

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** youth and adults

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** youth

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** Project B.L.I.N.G. (Bring Love In Not Guns)

This is a Toronto-wide initiative to mobilize black youth to take a stand against violence in their communities. The aim is to spread a message of empowerment and activism against gun violence among young people. Activities include youth-led workshops, speakers, discussions and art.

## H.E.Y.Y. (Hearing Every Youth Through Youth)

**AREA SERVED:** local, Toronto, ON

**MANDATE:** to provide confidential and inclusive peer support

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** youth

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** youth

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** HEYY LINE

Youth call in to receive information and referrals on health, sexuality, employment, housing, and school problems like bullying. The HEYY line offers support and information in 16 languages.

## METRAC (Metropolitan Toronto Action Committee on Violence Against Women)

**AREA SERVED:** local, Toronto, ON

**MANDATE:** to eliminate violence against women and children

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** youth aged 13 to 24 years.

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** youth

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** ReAct (Respect in Action)

A series of youth-friendly, youth-created, and youth-led workshops are provided on topics related to violence against women and children. Samples are: "What's Love Got To Do With It (dating violence)," "Words Hurt (emotional abuse)," "Tough Guise (designed for young men to understand media portrayal of masculinity)," "Feeding or Starving the Hype (for youth-at-risk)," "Going Beyond the Massacre (media literacy)," "Ending the Silence (violence in the home)," "Why the Looks? (bullying between young women)," "Speak Your Truth (empowerment for young mothers)," "Love or Obsession (stalking)," "The Bully Factor." Youth facilitators also train service providers, educators, community workers, and leaders.

## Toronto Youth Cabinet (TYC)

**AREA SERVED:** local, Toronto, ON

**MANDATE:** to provide a youth voice at City Hall to address youth-related issues, and to ensure proper services for young people

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** youth aged 13 to 24 who live in the Toronto area

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** youth

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** Recreation Not Ammunition Program

The TYC learned that \$40 million was going to be set aside for the creation of a police department firing range. The youth instead lobbied for that money to be used for the creation of four youth recreation centres in high-risk neighborhoods across Toronto. The TYC also organized a Youth/Police Forum (see Summit details in YAY entry below).

## YAY (Youth Assisting Youth)

**AREA SERVED:** local, Toronto, ON

**MANDATE:** to provide youth-mentoring for at-risk or vulnerable children, educate the community about youth issues, provide support to immigrant youth and youth from diverse communities, to contribute to the community and advocate for youth service improvements.

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** children and youth, ages 6 to 15

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** youth aged 16 to 29

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** Rallying Toronto Against Violence Summit: In Search of Community-based Solutions (2004)

This summit was organized by the Toronto Police with help from youth-based agencies like YAY. At the summit, service members consulted with a diverse cross-section of young people and adults to establish and prioritize the issues connected with violence in public places.

## Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre (KWMC)

**AREA SERVED:** local, Kitchener-Waterloo

**MANDATE:** to promote cultural diversity in the community, to aid new Canadians by promoting racial harmony and cultural integrity

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** immigrant and refugee youth and adults

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** adults and youth

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** Youth Against Racism and Violence

The KWMC partnered with Catholic Family Counseling to work with youth in grades 7 and 8 to come up with non-violent methods to respond to racism. The class eventually developed a video for other young people about non-violence and anti-racist topics. Grade 6 youth also held a competition to design an anti-racism brochure to be distributed on the International Day for the Elimination of Racism.

## WAYVE (Working Against Youth Violence Everywhere)

**AREA SERVED:** local, Waterloo, ON

**MANDATE:** to provide peer education in classrooms, raise awareness on ways to deal with violence and discrimination, and link youth with the community.

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** youth

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** youth

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** Youth Helpline

This is a phone hotline that young people can call and talk to youth volunteers about a variety of issues.

## The Warriors Against Violence Program

**AREA SERVED:** local, Vancouver, BC

**MANDATE:** to prevent violence through peer teaching of traditional and contemporary skills.

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** Aboriginal youth

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** Aboriginal youth

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** Youth Leadership Program

A youth leadership program is offered in two cycles. If youth are successful at completing the first, they will be involved in delivering the second training cycle. Program components include the medicine wheel, stress management, sweat lodge, effective communication, anger management, assertiveness training, drugs and alcohol, oppression/ racism, and group dynamics.

## Rainbow Youth Coalition

**AREA SERVED:** regional, Peterborough, Northumberland, Haliburton, and Kawartha Lakes, ON

**MANDATE:** to provide education, advocacy, outreach, support, and develop social networks

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans-gender (LGBT) youth aged 14 to 25

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** youth with adults

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** LGBT Education

Workshops, events, and community education are used to address isolation, fear, stigma, and to create positive spaces for sexual-minority youth.

## Regional Multicultural Youth Council (RMYC)

**AREA SERVED:** regional, Thunder Bay, ON

**MANDATE:** to link youth in small, isolated Northern Ontario communities

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** Aboriginal youth

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** Aboriginal youth

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** Youth For Safer Communities Project

This project was a conference initiative targeted towards reducing violence among Aboriginal youth. A focus group was held consisting of 22 Aboriginal youth from urban and rural communities where they raised a number of points about the causes of violence. Youth were then trained to run focus groups and peer mediation sessions. In addition, the RMYC, has created a number of violence prevention initiatives. The Leadership and Organizational Training project provides youth with the skills to plan their own activities and



keep themselves busy. The Stay-in-School program gives peer-mentoring, tutors, and career training directed towards providing a proper education for youth. A number of community-building programs, such as volunteer coordinating and multi-cultural programs are aimed at some of the core causes of violent behavior.

## NAN Youth (Nishnawbe Aski Nation), Youth Decade Council

**AREA SERVED:** provincial, ON

**MANDATE:** to give NAN (Nishnawbe Aski Nation) Aboriginal youth a voice in the decision-making processes that affect their future; to promote youth issues, increase recognition of youth rights, and train youth in leadership and advocacy skills

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** NAN youth in Ontario.

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** youth aged 18 to 29

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** Girl Power

This program teaches self-esteem building and aspects of physical and emotional health to girls ages 15 to 18. The goal of Girl Power is to prevent violence against women and reduce incidents of sexual harassment and date rape by enhancing youth involvement to create “girl friendly” communities.

## Nights Alive (Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General of British Columbia, Policing and Community Safety Branch)

**AREA SERVED:** provincial, BC

**MANDATE:** to undertake youth-designed and -led projects in partnership with the police, and the community

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** youth

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** youth with adults

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** Arts and Education Programs

Through Nights Alive, youth have developed sports, arts, and music programs, and participated in youth forums and other youth-driven activities. Training is provided in conflict resolution, peer mediation, and life skills.

## Youth Taking Action (Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General, Policing and Community Safety Branch, Community Programs Division)

**AREA SERVED:** provincial, BC

**MANDATE:** to empower youth to work with partners to identify and take action on the issues that affect them in their school and community

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** youth aged 13 to 19

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** youth with adults

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** Youth Taking Action

Workshops facilitate youth teams to develop their own interactive presentations for other youth. Each participant receives the Youth Taking Action Resource Manual, which provides information about understanding problems, taking action, building a team, developing and delivering presentations, promoting events, and getting support from partners. Youth workshop leaders address topics such as peer pressure, bullying, racism, youth violence, drugs and alcohol, sexuality, suicide, prostitution, poverty, and unemployment.

## POWER Camp National

**AREA SERVED:** national, based in Montreal, QC

**MANDATE:** to teach girls about violence through action, dialogue, and creative expression.

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** girls aged 11 to 15

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** youth and young adult women

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** Girls' Club

Girls' Club is an after-school program for children between the ages of 11 and 13 years from economically disadvantaged areas. Girls' Club utilizes education workshops, discussions, physical movement, arts-based activities, and games to teach girls how to think critically and act on issues of violence and discrimination.

## The Student's Commission

**AREA SERVED:** national (conferences held in Kemptville, ON)

**MANDATE:** to train youth to facilitate community workshops on a variety of different topics, to promote peer education and youth initiated projects dedicated to reducing discrimination and violence, and improving the education system, among other things

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** youth

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** youth

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** Youth Directed Anti-Violence Project

In order to empower pre-teen children (ages 7 to 13) to reduce their exposure to violence, an age-appropriate booklet was created to raise violence awareness and elicit social change.

## media

### TakingITGlobal

**AREA SERVED:** international, headquartered in Toronto, ON

Mandate: To create a global online community where youth can find inspiration, access information, get involved, and take action in their local and global communities; to promote a better understanding of diversity through e-discussions of cyber-bullying, multiculturalism, disability, HIV/AIDS, refugees, environment, peace and conflict, poverty and globalization, social justice, and human rights

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** online youth

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** youth

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** Language as Violence, Violence as Language

TakingITGlobal youth staff lead workshops with disadvantaged youth between the ages of 12 and 18 to enhance their analytical, leadership, and technology skills. Youth explore such issues as: violence in the daily lives of youth; violence and the media; communication, conflict resolution, and alternatives to violence. Anti-violence education is also offered in schools.

### Aboriginal Youth Theatre Project

**AREA SERVED:** local, Vancouver, BC

**MANDATE:** to engage youth in the development, training, mentoring, and implementation of a new Aboriginal youth-run Theatre Company in Vancouver

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** youth aged 10 to 29 who are at risk or street-involved

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** Aboriginal youth

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** Drama

The youth developed culturally relevant plays that touch on issues of concern to them. Plans are to develop a performance that will debut on National Aboriginal Day, a play to travel to the schools in the fall, as well as job-shadow training for two youth in the artistic direction and general management of the company.

## **METRAC (Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children) Replay Program**

**AREA SERVED:** provincial, ON

**MANDATE:** to address violence against women and children

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** youth aged 8 to 14

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** adult with youth

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** Replay

The Replay program is a video gaming project funded by the Ontario Women's Directorate and was launched in 2005. It promotes healthy relationships through the creation of youth-friendly, culturally competent video games designed with youth.

## **V.O.I.C.E. (Violence Overcome in Creative Ensemble)**

**AREA SERVED:** provincial, ON

**MANDATE:** through the use of the arts, helping women and children recover from experiences of violence

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** women and children who have experienced violence

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** women and youth

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** Public Education

Youth conduct workshops at school for teachers and students and in the community for service providers. The workshops provide information on violence in the home, school, society, racism, sexism, homophobia, sexual harassment, class issues, and ageism. Two award-winning documentaries were created that were aired on national television ("Fires of Transformation" and "The Children's Voice"). A children's rights poster series was developed and distributed in Ontario cities.

## Young People's Press (YPP)

**AREA SERVED:** international (based in North Bay, ON)

**MANDATE:** to empower youth and young adult writers to have a voice in the mainstream media and provide them with the ability to affect public opinion.

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** youth and adults

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** youth aged 14 to 24

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** E-magazines

E-magazines are written allowing youth to voice their stories, thoughts, and creativity on various topics relating to violence: Recent sample titles are: No Hurt, No Crime, and Equality Today.

# institutions

## National Youth in Care Network

**AREA SERVED:** national, based in Ottawa, ON

**MANDATE:** to give a voice to those presently in care or who have experienced care. To inform, educate, and provide assistance to social service workers, foster parents, and policy makers

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** youth who are in or are recently out of care, ages 12 to 17

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** youth aged 14 to 24

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** Primer

Primer is an education and sensitivity workshop delivered by youth who are in or recently out of care. Youth share personal stories and experiences and pair their experiences with academic research. Presentations are given to social work classes, university students, foster parents, and professionals with the goal to improve the quality of foster care.

## Dufferin Mall Youth Services

**AREA SERVED:** local, Toronto, ON

**MANDATE:** to support youth and their families living in the neighborhoods surrounding Dufferin Mall

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** youth and adults

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** youth under the age of 18 years who have had personal experience in the child protection or juvenile justice system

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** The Connect to Youth program (C2Y)

C2Y recruits youth who have had to navigate the “system.” They are trained to create and deliver workshops to inform social service providers, businesses, and parents. Workshops are designed to reduce conflicts for youth in care by promoting healthy relationships and understanding of the issues youth in care face.

## VOICES – Manitoba Youth in Care

**AREA SERVED:** provincial, MB

**MANDATE:** to provide support, and advocacy to youth who are in care, those making the transition out of care, and those moving into adulthood; to raise awareness of the experiences and challenges youth have while in care

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** youth in care or who were once in care

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** youth aged 12 to 30

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** System Kidz

This is a radio program heard on CKUW 95.9 FM. Youth in care, youth who have been in care, adult survivors of the system, social workers past and present, and foster parents share their stories and experiences.

# general

## LOVE (Leave Out Violence Everywhere)

**AREA SERVED:** international

**MANDATE:** to train youth who have been touched by violence to help themselves, and other youth

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** youth aged 13 to 18

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** youth

**SAMPLE INITIATIVES:** Violence Prevention Education Tools

LOVE programs target schools, community, and media. Youth create artistic representations of violence through pictures or writing, which are distributed across the country. LOVE also holds leadership training seminars for youth, who then hold workshops in elementary and high schools.

## Voices for Children

**AREA SERVED:** provincial, ON

**MANDATE:** turning knowledge into action for the well-being of Ontario's young people

**POPULATION SERVED AND AGE GROUP:** children, youth and adults

**PROGRAM FACILITATORS:** adults with youth

**SAMPLE INITIATIVE:** Just Listen to Me (October 2003 – June 2004):

The Ontario Office of Child and Family Service Advocacy and Voices for Children organized a series of roundtable discussions around the province led solely by young people. Approximately 80 youth, ages 13 to 24, assembled in six regions across the province, including Kenora, London, Manitoulin Island, Ottawa, Thunder Bay and Toronto. Youth participants were entirely responsible for the direction of the discussions, with members from The Office of Child and Family Service Advocacy and Voices for Children acting as listeners and recorders. A final discussion was held in Toronto and the youth released a report in November 2004.

# appendix:

# focus group protocol

## PART I: FORMS AND MAGNITUDE OF VIOLENCE

1. When you think about violence, what do you think it is?
2. Do you think violence is a problem for children and young people?
3. What are the most common forms of violence that affect children and young people in your community?
4. What kinds of violence happen at/in:
  - School?
  - Home?
  - Community (locations, workplace, recreation)?
  - Institutions (youth in care, justice system)?
  - Where else?
5. How much violence do you or other young people you know see or hear on television, in movies, video games, newspapers, Internet, other sources?
6. Is this kind (media) of violence just fun, or should children be protected from it?
7. Who is it that hurts children (in each of the above)?
8. Are there any special measures that have been taken (in each setting) to help protect children from violence? Should there be? If so, can you think of some?
9. Can you think of a time when you or your friends were involved in a violent incident? Where? How? Could it have been avoided? How so?
10. What kinds of violence are you most concerned about?

## PART II: IMPACT OF VIOLENCE (VICTIMS AND PERPETRATORS)

1. How do you think children feel when they experience violence? (e.g., given situations described in Part I).
2. How else does violence affect kids (e.g. health? family relationships? activities? school?)?
3. Does violence stop you from doing things in your life?
4. Why do some kids get involved in violent actions?
5. How do their actions affect the kids who create violence?



## PART III: RESPONSES TO VIOLENCE

1. If you knew someone was being violent, what could be done to stop him or her?
2. What things are done in your school/community to try to stop violence against children and young people?
3. What needs to be done to stop violence against children and young people?
  - At home?
  - At school?
  - In the community?
  - In other places?
4. Who could help stop violence? What could they do? You may think of things that could/should do done by:
  - Family members
  - Schools
  - People who work with kids
  - The media – TV, video game and movie producers, web hosters
  - The government
  - Children and young people
  - Others
5. What groups of kids do you think need the most help?
6. Who could help those kids?
7. What other things would you like to talk about regarding violence against children and young people?
8. What recommendations do you have for this work?
  - Are we asking you the right questions?
  - Was there anything during the meeting that you liked the most?
  - Are there any specific groups of children and young people that we should make sure to involve?
  - How do you think we could get children and young people like you more involved in this consultation?

# endnotes

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