

TAKING STOCK

How Canadian Child and Youth Agencies are Responding to Economic Challenges

Case Study #14: The Youth Justice Network of Toronto

In Conflict With the Law:
Supporting Professionals Working With Crime-Involved Youth

Case Studies prepared by
Michelle Dagnino
Larry Gemmel

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National Alliance for Children and Youth
130 Albert Street, Suite 1705
Ottawa ON K1P 5G4
www.nacy.ca

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**In Conflict With the Law:
Supporting Professionals Working With Crime-Involved Youth
The Youth Justice Network of Toronto**

Background of the organization

The Youth Justice Network of Toronto (“YJNT” or “Network”) is a network of more than 445 youth outreach workers, social workers, teachers, police officers, community activists, probation officers and others who work with youth in conflict with the law or at risk of conflict with the law. Their goal is to:

- Encourage collaboration in pursuit of access to justice;
- Promote new thinking about issues related to youth in conflict with the law and the justice system more broadly;
- Develop the Network as a vibrant, progressive leader on issues of youth justice, and;
- Increase members’ understanding of the law and legal justice issues.

Recognizing the need to share best practices, collaborate across programs and services and talk through challenges and struggles, the network members come together bi-monthly to support each other’s work with young people. Information is also regularly shared via email.

The group is hosted by JVS Toronto, a 65-year old community non-profit organization that assists more than 23,000 people a year achieve success in school, work and life through their responsive career, employment, training and psychological services. Over the years, they have offered such programs as the Prevention Intervention Toronto (PIT), a gang-prevention project that had a significant presence in many of Toronto’s priority neighbourhoods during 2009 - 2012, including over twelve years coordinating Youth Reach, a youth outreach program working with crime-involved youth.

There are very few professional development opportunities for youth workers in Canada, and workers serving youth in conflict with the law often find themselves the only staff person in their organizations tasked with working with this target group of youth. They typically have little time to search out resources beyond their own programming, and have few opportunities to network with others who can support their work with youth in conflict with the law. The YJNT is a unique gathering of workers that rely on the supports provided through the Network to enhance their own work and impact with youth.

Issue or situation

It is widely acknowledged that youth involved within the criminal justice system are one of the most vulnerable sub-segments of the youth population and one of the least-served populations of youth. Toronto has a wide range of youth programs across the sectors, but the availability, accessibility and appropriateness of programs is unevenly distributed. Accessibility challenges include lack of awareness of programs by youth and their parents as well as staff in different agencies. The short shelf life of programs, as a result of project based funding, adds to the confusion about program availability and access.

Studies show that providing youth in conflict with the law with meaningful supports and services, while holding them accountable for their actions, helps to steer them away from crime, make better choices and lessens the likelihood they will re-offend. While youth are in contact with a youth outreach worker they are less likely to be involved in criminal behaviour, less likely to succumb to negative peer influence, more likely to have access to supportive adult mentors and more likely to think through the consequences of negative behaviour before engaging in it.

The increased immigrant population in Toronto has resulted in a corresponding increase of the diversity of youth needs and has impacted the nature and level of programs and services available to them. Significant barriers to service, particularly for youth from diverse backgrounds, have emerged. These barriers are related to the availability, accessibility and appropriateness of the programs. Concerns raised about serving “hard-to-reach youth” have given the issue of resolving barriers to service a greater sense of urgency. All the members of the Network share a strong desire to move from an individual “fix-it” approach to a more holistic approach involving youth, families, neighbourhoods and communities.

According to the most recent Statistics Canada census, there are 318,655 youth between the ages of 15 and 24 and they comprise roughly 13% of the total population of Toronto. Youth remain a steady yet vital minority of the Toronto population. Additionally, the youth immigrant population rose dramatically between 1991 and 2001 by 24.5%, a period that saw the visible minority youth population become larger than the non-visible minority youth population. Of particular note, more than 30% of all immigrant children were members of families who lived below the poverty line. It is expected that the youth population will steadily increase until 2014 and the demand for educational, social and recreational services will continue to increase.

Challenges

These demographic changes have brought about significant challenges for youth workers. First, many organizations have identified the difficulties in reaching youth. Organizations are finding they need to invest a lot more in outreach activities, getting to know the communities better, getting to know where and how youth “hang out” and understanding the culture of different youth groups. Disseminating information about programs and services is a challenge at the best of times, but it is a particular challenge for providers of programs targeting vulnerable youth populations, who serve their youth in a range of locations, often outside of ‘normal’ organizational spaces, including serving youth in prisons and halfway homes.

Second, the diversity of youth characteristics and needs has meant that there is a greater requirement for a broad range of programs and services, along with the pressure to recruit and train staff and youth leaders that reflect the diversity in the target groups. There is continuing need for special programming, but because of limited resources this occurs on a piecemeal basis, creating only a few targeted programs. This has often meant that some youth groups are not offered targeted programs.

Actions taken

YJNT created a dedicated, permanent network that brings together a range of workers from across the youth justice system, and provides them with a wide range of resources and enhanced training to support a consistent understanding of the philosophy, goals and expected outcomes of their work with youth in conflict with the law. The YJNT is steadily gaining momentum through communications that are raising awareness of what they are doing. They are developing a strong foundation for youth workers that will help them discover best practices and ensure that their work is effective in supporting youth to be safe. They are providing a professional forum that offers youth workers an opportunity to be engaged, to learn and to do their best to help youth make better decisions.

Outcomes

Still in its fledgling days, YJNT is making a difference to professionals working in a field that provides few professional development opportunities. Their bi-monthly meetings bridge the gaps in communications, facilitate sharing best practices and information about new and existing programs and emerging trends, and provide a forum for raising issues relating to the population they serve. By continuing to develop ongoing, structured opportunities for educational training specifically related to working with youth in conflict with the law, YJNT members will be able to engage their youth more effectively as well as increase the capacity of the agencies, community groups and institutions they are working in.

Over the next year YJNT plans to develop a series of monthly professional development sessions, led by experts in the field, on topics such as prevention practices, restorative justice, youth victimization, the intersection of poverty, physical and mental health as risk factors for youth offenders, and trends in youth crime. Future planned activities of the YJNT include forming a steering committee, forming a youth advisory board and planning a conference for the 8th anniversary of the Network.

For further information contact:

Orville Wallace

Program Manager/Chef de programme
Youth Opportunities Fund

Ontario Trillium Foundation
800 Bay Street, 5th floor
Toronto ON M5S 3A9
Tel: 416.963.7917 | 1.800.263.2887
Fax: 416.963.8781
www.otf.ca