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Themes from a review of Justice Canada funded projects for youth in conflict with the law (2014-2019)

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Themes from a review of Justice Canada funded projects for youth in conflict with the law (2014-2019)
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Executive summary

The Department of Justice Canada funds projects through the **Youth Justice Fund** that seek to help youth who are involved in the criminal justice system (CJS). The Youth Justice Fund provides grants and contributions to projects that encourage a more effective youth justice system, respond to emerging youth justice issues, and enable greater citizen and community participation in the youth justice system.

In 2020, the Research and Statistics Division reviewed the evaluation reports that were submitted for pilot projects and received funds from 2014 to 2019. The review does not measure whether each program succeeded in meeting its goals, but rather identifies key program areas that received funding and looks for common challenges, best practices, and gaps identified by the program organizations that might help inform future projects.

Program Areas

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder (FASD)

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder (FASD) is an umbrella term used to describe diagnoses that are caused by pre-natal alcohol exposure (Fraser 2011). People with FASD are overrepresented as both offenders and victims in the CJS. FASD is a lifelong disability, and people with FASD often struggle with other major issues, such as drug or alcohol dependency, depression, and mental health challenges.

Several of the funded programs offer services to people with FASD (or suspected of having FASD). Many offer intensive one-on-one counselling as well as support finding housing and dealing with mental health issues and addiction. Learning difficulties often make education and employment a challenge. Many youth with FASD struggle to live independently and need help with basic needs – housing and food.

Trauma-informed practices

Trauma is a known risk factor for youth involved in the CJS (Wolff and Shi 2012) and several programs focus on helping youth in conflict with the law deal with trauma. Some funded programs use a trauma-informed approach and some encourage general mental health and wellness. Few of the programs define their trauma-informed approach.

Culturally sensitive approaches – specifically for Indigenous youth

Indigenous youth are overrepresented in the CJS as both offenders and victims (Department of Justice Canada 2019). More and more service providers are offering culturally relevant programming to Indigenous clients. Several of the funded programs provide details on the types of activities that they offer. Several evaluations were done to see if staff had the capacity to provide appropriate services.

There is strong support for more culturally relevant programming and more training for service providers.

Culturally sensitive approaches – new immigrants and visible minorities

Several programs receiving funding offer specialized services to marginalized youth. Youth who are visible minorities speak of racism and barriers to success because of how they are perceived. Newcomers to Canada sometimes struggle to adapt. Several programs had notable success with mentoring programs that paired youth with mentors from their communities.

Female youth involved in the CJS

Among youth involved in the CJS, boys outnumber girls (in 2014, 72% of youth charged with a crime were male) (Allen and Superle 2016), but it has long been argued that girls need specialized programming to deal with their specific needs, rather than being included in programs designed for boys. A number of funded projects focus on girls involved in the CJS, including one program in Manitoba, called the “Empower Project” that focuses on girls with FASD.

Substance use and addiction

Problematic substance use and addiction often lead to involvement with the CJS (Health Canada September 2018). Most of the funded programs that help youth deal with substance use issues focus on teaching youth to make better decisions, develop resilience, and improve life skills. Many youth participants in these programs have multiple risk factors – substance use, addiction, experience of trauma, mental health problems, and family conflict.

Gang involvement

Many programs that received funding reach out to youth who are involved in gangs or at risk of becoming involved with gangs. Some of these youth also have issues with substance use, addiction, trauma, and mental health.

In both Ontario and Saskatchewan, there are community outreach groups that are working on developing comprehensive strategies to deal with gangs in their communities.

Life skills / employment

A number of funded programs focus on preparing youth for reintegration into their communities. Some of these programs help youth achieve educational goals as well as provide support in finding employment.

Challenges

- **Finding and keeping appropriate staff**
Many of the programs reviewed struggle to hire and retain staff.
- **Referrals**
Several funded programs describe challenges with their referring partners, where service providers receive fewer clients than expected or fewer clients who meet the profile for their specific program.
- **Funding**
Concern over inconsistent funding is common.
- **Tracking participants after completion of program or sentence**
Several funded programs struggle to maintain contact with participants, thus limiting their ability to solicit feedback from clients after the program finished.

Identified gaps

- **Individualization of programming**

A number of reviews suggest that their clients need accurate assessment and programming that is personalized to individual needs; their clients do not “fit” well into existing curricula.

- **Support for basics**

Many youth, especially those with FASD, need help with basic needs – food and housing – before their problems with substance use, addiction, mental health, family conflict, and skill development can be addressed.

- **More education on Indigenous history and cultures**

There is strong support for more culturally specific programming and training to enhance cultural competencies.

- **More female-specific programing and female staff/mentors**

Several funded programs note that female clients appreciate girl-only outings or programming and requested more female staff and mentors.

- **Reach out to visible minorities and recent immigrants**

Youth who are visible minorities may need specific programs that address racism; youth who are recent immigrants may need support to navigate the challenges of adapting to Canadian culture. Neither are well served by mainstream programs.

- **Support for families, not just youth in isolation**

Several funded programs indicate that youth in contact with the CJS are often dealing with conflict within their own families and that greater support for families is needed.

Introduction

The Department of Justice Canada funds projects through the **Youth Justice Fund** that focus on youth who are involved in the criminal justice system (CJS).

Groups eligible for funding include the following:

- Non-profit community organizations, societies, and associations, which have voluntarily associated themselves for a non-profit purpose;
- Canadian institutions/boards of education;
- Bands, First Nations, Tribal Councils, local, regional and national Indigenous organizations;
- Provincial, territorial and municipal governments and their agencies and institutions;
- Private sector organizations as long as such organizations will not make a profit on the work performed;
- For-profit enterprises, research/evaluation organizations and individuals in order to conduct research and evaluation activities; and,
- Individuals.

The Youth Justice Fund supports the development, implementation, and evaluation of pilot projects that provide programming and services for youth in conflict with the law. It supports professional development activities, such as training and conferences, for justice professionals and youth service providers. Additionally, it funds research on the youth justice system and related youth justice issues. Projects focus on youth who are between the ages of 12 and 17 and currently in conflict with the law, or justice professionals and/or service providers who work with these youth.

In 2020, the Research and Statistics Division (RSD) reviewed the evaluation reports that were submitted for pilot projects and received funds from 2014 to 2019. The review does not measure whether each program succeeded in meeting its goals, but rather identifies key program areas that received funding and looks for common challenges, gaps, and best practices that might inform future projects.

Summary of specific programs/projects

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder (FASD)

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder (FASD) is an umbrella term used to describe diagnoses that are caused by pre-natal alcohol exposure (Fraser 2011). Characteristic features of FASD include growth deficiencies, physical malformations (primarily facial features), and central nervous system deficits. Different parts of the brain can be affected, resulting in problems with achievement, adaptation, attention, cognition, executive functioning, memory, motor and sensory responses, and communication.

People with FASD are overrepresented as both offenders and victims in the CJS. FASD is a lifelong disability, and people with FASD often struggle with other major issues, such as drug or alcohol dependency, depression, and personality disorders. There is huge stigma around an FASD diagnosis, often compounded by stereotypes and myths. People with FASD need lifelong support.

The Department of Justice Canada funds several programs that aim to support youth with FASD (or suspected of having FASD).

No Wrong Door

In Alberta, the McMan Youth, Family and Community Services Association of Calgary & Area received funding for “No Wrong Door”—a program to address housing, substance use and addiction issues among youth with FASD. The program identifies safe and stable living arrangements for youth with FASD who are involved with the CJS and supports these youth in developing life skills. This evaluation is very thorough and examines what went well as well as what went poorly. The report emphasizes the need for training for caregivers and individualized flexibility for clients. This report notes that youth with FASD who maintain friendships with other troubled youth often struggle to deal with poor decision-making and issues related to substance use. The report recommends activities to encourage youth to meet different people and to develop more positive relationships. The report also notes that financial support is often difficult to obtain for clients with FASD and their families. The authors recommend that age limits for youth with FASD receiving services should be flexible – clients with FASD continue to need support well into adulthood. Basic needs, such as housing and food, often have to be addressed before problems with substance use, poor family relations, and lack of life skills can be resolved.

Breaking through the Barriers

In British Columbia (BC), the McCreary Centre Society received funding to conduct a survey (Breaking through the Barriers) of youth with FASD that explores their needs and reviews promising practices in reducing their substance use. The authors reviewed other surveys and solicited information from caregivers and service providers. Some participants with FASD struggled to fully understand the survey questions, but the final report was thorough, providing a wealth of information. The survey identifies promising practices, such as FASD-informed and trauma-informed approaches, personalized support, consistent programming, and skills development. Supportive adults, hobbies, participation in sports, and employment were found to be beneficial. Many youth with FASD have a history of unstable or unsafe housing, report challenges with families, and struggle with mental health and addiction. Youth with FASD are vulnerable to victimization and susceptible to negative peer pressure. Youth respondents to the survey often had conflicting views on the harms of substance use and were dubious about the merits of abstinence. The report offers recommendations on helping youth with FASD thrive.

Empower Project

Most projects are mainly designed for young men as their primary clientele, but in Manitoba, the “Empower Project” provides support to young Indigenous women with FASD who are involved in the CJS. The program used a trauma-informed approach to engage participants. The evaluation revealed that many participants struggled in classroom situations and often failed to attend sessions due to their substance use. Turnover among both staff and participants is high and the girls need adequate resources for individualized programming. There are concerns that the location of the program (downtown Winnipeg) increased exposure to drug use and potential sexual exploitation to the point that some stakeholders choose not to refer low risk clients who do not have substance use problems. Considering the high rate of FASD among Indigenous youth, it was recommended that the program consult with Indigenous stakeholders and improve its cultural competencies.

Starfish

Also in Manitoba, the Starfish program is aimed at helping youth with FASD who are involved in the CJS. The review describes in detail some of the tactics that counsellors use to help their clients to remember lessons, including by using video recordings and text/phone reminders. As with other programs, the review notes that it is difficult to maintain contact with clients once they leave the correction centre. It is also noted that many addiction treatment programs are too rigid to meet the needs of youth with FASD. Staff noted that clients often struggled to attend appointments so Starfish adjusted by setting appointments within a short time frame and providing many reminders in different formats. The program adapted to clients’ learning challenges by working at the client’s pace, repeating topics as necessary and mixing up the order of topics to be covered.

Youth with low cognitive functions, FASD, or mental health issues who are involved in the CJS

Selkirk Team for At Risk Teams (START)

Another program in Manitoba is the Selkirk Team for At Risk Teams (START) program, which targets at-risk youth who have complex cognitive and mental health problems, and require involvement with multiple social services agencies. The report provides a thorough examination of recidivism rates between the START clients and a control group. All START clients have a combination of mental health and cognition issues, although FASD is not specifically mentioned. Many also have gang affiliations and problems with substance use.

Trauma-informed practices

There is good evidence that many youth in conflict with the CJS have experienced traumatic events. Generally, trauma-informed approaches encourage practitioners and service providers to acknowledge that clients may have experienced trauma and to address their behaviour in a way that minimizes harm. More and more researchers advocate for a trauma-informed approach to treating problematic substance use (BCCEWH 2009), supporting clients with FASD (Government of Manitoba n.d.), and providing counselling for youth at risk for gang affiliation (Dierkhising and Kerig 2016).

Yoga Outreach

In BC, Yoga Outreach, a non-profit organization, operates a trauma-informed (also known as trauma-sensitive) yoga program for youth who are involved in the justice system or considered at-risk. Yoga Outreach believes that combining a trauma-informed intervention with other substance treatment programs can support and enhance the efficacy of other treatments and contribute to the long-term stability of these clients.

The McCreary Centre Society carried out an independent evaluation of Yoga Outreach Society's trauma-informed yoga initiative, *Incorporating Yoga as a Trauma-Informed Practice to Enhance Drug Treatment Outcomes for Justice Involved Youth* from April 2017 to December 2019. The results of the evaluation show that youth participants experience improved health and well-being (reduced anxiety/stress, improved mental health, sleep, pain management), improved self-regulation, and improved impulse control.

Staff indicate that the training helps them gain a better understanding of trauma, as well as trauma-informed yoga, and a few commented that the training helps them adjust their approach to working with vulnerable youth. Yoga Outreach is surprised at the low number of agencies interested in providing yoga services; it was suggested that yoga may be seen as a luxury, not as potential therapy.

LiNKs mental health clinic

In Alberta, iHuman Youth Society encourages youth who have experienced trauma to foster positive personal development using arts mentorship, crisis intervention, and targeted programming. Their LiNKs mental health clinic was developed directly by the young people accessing these types of services. There is a strong focus on listening to youth clients describe what works best for them. The program indicates that participation and retention rate of young people addressing their mental health and wellbeing has increased and remains consistent. Recidivism and suicidal ideation have decreased. The program took some time to be established, but was popular once underway. Peer Ambassadors reached out to schools, group homes and on the streets to make their peers aware of the clinic. LiNKs has been recognized locally for the innovation of its service delivery model. However, staff turnover creates some gaps in service. Consistent, sustainable funding is one of the program's biggest concerns, as the clinic's success now makes it an essential and integrated service of the Society.

Culturally sensitive approaches – specifically for Indigenous youth

Indigenous youth are overrepresented in the CJS as both offenders and victims (Department of Justice Canada 2019). Only 8% of Canadian youth, aged 12 to 17 years, are Indigenous; however, about 43% of youth in corrections are Indigenous (Department of Justice Canada 2019). A common theme among funded programs was the need for training on Indigenous culture. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has recommended that Canada provide educational opportunities for people to learn more about Indigenous culture and history as a key component of reconciliation (TRC 2015).

PLEA

In BC, researchers explored whether staff at PLEA's residential treatment centre for people experiencing problems with substance use demonstrate cultural sensitivity – especially with Indigenous youth. Both staff and clients were very positive about the efforts made, although the review was hampered because only a few respondents were Indigenous. Some clients have expressed interest in wanting to learn more about Indigenous art and cultural practices. The general consensus is that more activities – smudges, sweats, and drumming, for example – would be beneficial, but that such activities should be led by Indigenous facilitators.

Beyond a Dreamcatcher

The McCreary Centre Society conducted an evaluation of culturally appropriate approaches for Indigenous youth dealing with addiction in a report entitled "Beyond a Dreamcatcher." The authors note that Indigenous youth dealing with substance use issues may struggle in standard programs. This report reviewed promising practices across Canada as well as internationally. The researchers faced challenges when reviewing BC programs, as few had Indigenous staff, and Indigenous clients were hard to contact. As with the PLEA report, respondents were generally positive about efforts to be culturally responsive, but suggested that more Indigenous staff are needed. Female participants especially like having female staff and mentors.

Urban Aboriginal Justice Society

In Prince George, BC, the Urban Aboriginal Justice Society offers programs for Indigenous youth to re-connect with their culture. Youth participate in activities such as remote camping. The program is popular with clients, but reflecting a common theme, it has struggled to hire and retain staff.

Live Your Magic – Clean Scene Network for Youth Society

There was an evaluation of an Alberta program, called "Live Your Magic – Clean Scene Network for Youth Society", that matched youth who have substance use problems with mentors. Although the program is not designed specifically for Indigenous youth, the majority of participants are Indigenous. Over the duration of the project, the program was modified to be more culturally relevant based on advice from an Indigenous mentor and feedback from participants. In addition to classroom instruction, youth are taken out on field trips that emphasize cultural and spiritual elements. At the conclusion of the project, several recommendations were made, including the need to hire more Indigenous staff and more female mentors.

Jackson Lake Wellness Team

In Yukon, there was an evaluation of the Kwanlin Dün First Nation Department of Justice Jackson Lake Wellness Team, which offers programs for First Nation youth involved in the CJS. They conduct activities, including skiing/snowboarding, ice climbing, hiking, ice fishing, atlatl making, GPteaming, cooking classes, curling, art workshops, glass blowing, fat biking, Gwitchin storytelling, wall climbing, music lessons (guitar), dogsledding etc., many with strong cultural components. Clients enjoyed the activities. Some challenges include hiring and retaining Indigenous leaders. Many youth report that their problems stem from issues in their families; service providers argue that working only with youth is ineffective since the whole family needs support. The authors note that clients often need a balance of counselling and activities.

Bringing Culture Inside

In Nova Scotia, the “Bringing Culture Inside (BCI)” project intends to increase awareness of Indigenous culture among youth in custody and to increase the capacity of service providers to offer culturally appropriate services. Staff met with Indigenous youth who were incarcerated, and offered Indigenous-themed crafts, activities, and mentoring. This program recommends building bridges between youth (since many youth appear disconnected from their Indigenous heritage), service providers, and elders in the local community.

No’kmaq village (Flat Bay Band)

In Newfoundland and Labrador, the No’kmaq village (Flat Bay Band) program offers pre-court diversion services, primarily to youth facing charges for non-violent offences. The program emphasizes the importance of cultural competencies among service providers. Staff conducted a survey to review sharing circles, where participants discussed how justice can apply to youth who are Indigenous and living in rural areas.

SNAP (Stop Now and Plan) handbook

The Child Development Institute (CDI) worked with an Indigenous consultant to create SNAP (Stop Now and Plan) – a program designed to engage young men, aged 12 and up, who are involved in the Youth Justice System to reduce their risk of further contact with the law and/or gang membership. The organizers solicited ideas and input from dozens of Indigenous youth from across Ontario, including a number in detention facilities who played very important roles in the co-development/creation of resources and scripts by providing feedback on layout and design, creating artwork, doing voice-overs for the online modules, and developing culturally safe tools and worksheets. The Handbook and interactive modules were created to reflect and celebrate diverse Indigenous cultures, while helping youth use SNAP to understand their emotions, learn to use self-control and problem-solving skills, and make better choices “in the moment”.

In addition to this work, CDI partnered with Justice Canada to develop a gender-specific SNAP Youth Justice program, designed to meet the unique needs of female Indigenous youth to increase the capacity of Ontario justice-serving organizations.

Fort Providence Youth Wellness Program

In the Northwest Territories, there was a review of the Fort Providence Youth Wellness Program (FPYWP), whose goal is to support youth who have been in conflict with the CJS in reintegrating into the community. The project offers programming during and outside school hours for youth under 12 and a specialized program for girls only. Youth are encouraged to learn about Dene culture and participate in activities, such as a moose hunt. In some cases, whole families receive treatment. While the program is meant to serve youth who have been in conflict with the CJS, respondents in the review indicated that all youth in the community could benefit from support – they indicated that many youth are dealing with family conflict, substance use issues, and hunger. As with many other programs, this project is challenged by high turnover of teachers and support staff. The report provides some clear recommendations, including advice on being holistic and reaching out to families, not just youth.

Through an Aboriginal Lens

The Native Courtworkers and Counseling Association of British Columbia received funding for “Through an Aboriginal Lens” – a three-year pilot project in partnership with the Asante Centre of BC to provide culturally appropriate services to Aboriginal people and communities and assist Aboriginal people involved in the CJS. This program especially focuses on the needs of clients with suspected FASD. No review of the results of this program is available yet.

Culturally sensitive approaches – new immigrants and visible minorities

A few of the funded programs focus on immigrant youth or visible minorities, who may have specific needs (e.g., dealing with racism, adapting to a new culture) that are not addressed in mainstream programming.

Chantier d'apprentissage optimal

The Chantier d'apprentissage optimal (CHAPOP) in Québec offers a program, called “Jeune en action, décolle”, that focuses on youth who are visible minorities and at risk for being involved in the CJS. The program aims to encourage youth to participate in sports, arts, recreation, and school activities and to leave gangs (if they are gang-involved). The goals include teaching participants teamwork and decision-making strategies. The review recommends that programming should be adaptable to clients' needs.

Upfront Theatre Reintegration Through the Arts

In Toronto, the Upfront Theatre Reintegration Through the Arts Project (RTA) Project aims to support African/Caribbean-Canadian girls, aged 12 to 17 years, living in the Jane-Finch community of Toronto and in conflict with the law or at risk of involvement in gun, gang and drug activities. The girls receive counselling, meet with mentors, and are placed in high school and post-secondary programs, apprenticeship programs, employment agencies, bridge programs and/or daycare programs, as appropriate. The girls receive marketable skills training in theatre and participate in media and arts programming, along with established artists. The review suggests modest improvements in the clients' behaviour, but does not offer recommendations.

We're Here Now: Peer Leadership in Ethnocultural Communities

Another program is the “We're Here Now: Peer Leadership in Ethnocultural Communities” project that intends to establish a peer-mentor leadership program, where youth mentors can help recent immigrants who are at risk of being involved in the CJS. The youth who are recruited to the program come from a wide variety of backgrounds and speak a number of languages. Originally, it was hoped that at-risk youth would graduate to being peer-mentors. This did not happen as planned because many of the students scattered to schools that were not involved in the program. Nevertheless, the report indicates notable success with its youth participants.

Project OASIS II

In Manitoba, there is Project OASIS II, a program of New Directions for Children, Youth, Adults and Families that offers services to newcomer youth who are involved with the youth justice system. The goal of OASIS II is to reduce criminal activity among newcomer youth by supporting them to acquire employment skills, obtain a job, and/or succeed in school. Some of the participants face barriers to employment due to gang involvement, poor literacy skills, problems with substance use, and mental health issues. This report identifies three main challenges facing their clients: housing, access to mental health services, and timely access to substance use treatment. It also notes that some areas of conflict are inter-generational, where youth and parents need support to adapt to changing circumstances.

Building Lives on Community Cohesion

In Toronto, the For Youth Initiative (FYI) developed and piloted a community-based project, entitled Building Lives on Community Cohesion (B.L.O.C.C.), that focuses on providing capacity and social supports for youth in conflict with the law. Black youth in the program identify three major issues: trouble with police – the participants argue that police are unfairly targeting them; a need for more positive role models in their community; and racism, which makes reintegration difficult. Although program staff are experienced in working with marginalized populations, a sharp increase in clients who are newcomers to Canada has presented new challenges. These clients have different needs – they often struggle with the Canadian school system and their parents are unable to provide as much support as they would like. The report identifies useful new strategies to meet clients' needs.

Female youth involved in the CJS

Although girls make up a smaller proportion of youth charged with a crime (in 2014, 72% of youth charged with a crime were male) (Allen and Superle 2016), there is growing awareness that at-risk girls need programs designed for them, not merely access to programs designed for boys. Several reviews highlight recommendations to have more female staff and mentors to support girls.

Oshkabaywis “My Helper”

In Manitoba, there is the Oshkabaywis “My Helper” project hosted by Ka Ni Kanichihk, which aims to develop a culturally based mentorship program for Indigenous girls in Winnipeg who are associated with gangs. The evaluation notes that, for this demographic, one-to-one contact has been more successful than group mentoring. As with other programs, staff turnover makes matching youth clients to suitable mentors difficult. In addition, some of the participants need help meeting basic needs – food and housing.

Upfront Theatre Reintegration

The program described above – Upfront Theatre Reintegration in Toronto focuses on African/Caribbean-Canadian girls who are at risk of being involved with the CJS.

Empower Project

In the FASD section above, there is a description of the “Empower Project”, which is a program in Manitoba that provides support to girls with FASD who have been involved in the CJS. The program teaches girls life skills, including sexual health knowledge. Program staff describe participants as “extremely vulnerable” to becoming sexually exploited and in fact eight participants in this study (53%) are known to have been sexually exploited and four are suspected to have been (27%). The case studies reveal that several program participants have children, but it is not clear if their children live with them or are in the custody of others. While nearly all the participants have been charged/convicted of offences, they are also seen as vulnerable to victimization.

Substance use and addiction

Drug and alcohol addiction often leads to involvement with the CJS (Health Canada September 2018). Few of the programs provided details on how they addresses substance use and addiction with youth. Most of the programs described below focus on teaching youth to make better decisions, develop resilience, and improve life skills. Success is mainly measured by the number of youth who: return to school; succeed in school; obtain employment; stay out of trouble; indicate better, healthier decision-making; and express a more positive outlook. Among these reports, only MASCOTS and Salvation Army specifically measure whether clients have reduced their substance use.

Live Your Magic – Clean Scene Network for Youth Society

An Alberta program (also described above under the heading “Culturally sensitive approaches – specifically for Indigenous youth”), called “Live Your Magic – Clean Scene Network for Youth Society”, offers intervention for youth, aged 12 to 17, who are involved in the CJS and are dealing with substance use issues. Youth are matched with mentors who help them work through 60 hours of programming to encourage better decision-making and develop life skills. The mentors supplement classroom training with field trips. The participants are positive about the program, although it is generally agreed that there needs to be more Indigenous input and more female mentors.

Get a life project

In Saskatchewan, a review was conducted of the “Get a life project”, which aims to support youth already involved in the CJS to overcome problematic substance use and to develop a healthy lifestyle. The pilot

project emphasizes the benefits of a forensic recreation therapist (FRT). The project received mostly positive reviews, but did encounter challenges in retaining staff and raising awareness of their program within the community. Follow up was also difficult since the clients tend to be somewhat transient.

On our way

In Ontario, the program “On Our Way” is focused on retaining youth in treatment for substance use issues and on reducing risk-taking behaviour. The program struggles with high staff turnover, which affects their ability to offer service and evaluate success. An important lesson noted in this report is that flexibility is essential – clients need service when they need it, not on a schedule.

MASCOTS

The Making a Strong Connection Overcomes Temporary Solutions (MASCOTS) is a program for youth in conflict with the CJS due to the possession of illicit substances, drug dealing or gang involvement that offers such youth an opportunity to participate in an Equine Assisted Therapy Program. The review found that the program received fewer referrals than expected. Some community partners suggest that MASCOTS might be more useful as a crime prevention project rather than limiting its services to youth who are already involved in the CJS.

Salvation Army Community Based Drug Treatment Program

The Salvation Army piloted a three-year Community Based Drug Treatment Program that was available to youth, 12 to 17 years old, living in St. Thomas and Elgin County who were struggling with substance use issues and involved with, or at risk of becoming involved with, the CJS. The review included a survey of clients that revealed that most have complex needs and multiple risk factors, such as a family history of abuse, experience of trauma, and/or mental health issues.

Partners for youth / Alliance pro-jeunesse

In New Brunswick, partners for youth / Alliance pro-jeunesse conducted consultations with service providers and youth clients, to understand what activities were most effective. Both boys and girls participated as well as staff at various corrections facilities. The youth, who were dealing with substance use issues, were asked about gaps in service options and were solicited for ideas on ways to improve substance use/addiction treatment. They advocate for post-treatment support, more employment training, more support for educational achievement (GEDs for example), among other suggestions. There are noticeable differences between the youth participants and the adults (who are mostly service providers) in their opinions on the influence of families and the value of existing programs.

Projet Oxygène

The Motivation jeunesse (projet Oxygène) in Québec encourages youth at risk for drug use and gang involvement to develop healthier habits. The program promotes a healthy lifestyle and increased participation in sport. Many clients have rather instable lives and they struggle to attend programs regularly or to deal with the centre’s strict rules.

Daring to begin / journey of choice

The “Daring to begin / journey of choice” program in Ontario uses online tools, such as remote counselling, to help youth reduce drug use and reintegrate into society. Satisfaction with counselling services appears high, although some clients dislike having to access counselling through the online tools. There were fewer referrals than expected, and some of the clients are more high risk than anticipated. Some are dealing with more issues than problematic substance use. There is also resistance among parents who feel that their at-risk children should not be exposed to youth with substance use issues.

Caritas School of Life

The Caritas School of Life conducted research on how to adapt and enhance their existing substance use treatment program to be more culturally relevant and effective for youth involved in the CJS. They challenged their staff to consider how culture affects treatment among distinct groups of people. The program works with men of all ages, not just youth, and regularly includes introduction to religious and cultural traditions.

Youth Impact

A New Brunswick organization, called Youth Impact, evaluated their drug intervention program in Moncton. They note that their clients often have other problems, such as concerns over finances, limited access to healthy food, worries about accommodation, and limited cellphone services that prevent them from communicating with support staff or potential employers. Clients are frustrated with limited support for alternative educational strategies. This agency maintains consistent staffing and emphasizes flexibility and one-to-one support when dealing with their clients.

Beyond a Dreamcatcher

As mentioned in the section “Culturally sensitive approaches – specifically for Indigenous youth”, the McCreary Centre Society provided a report called, “Beyond a Dreamcatcher”, that evaluates culturally appropriate approaches for Indigenous youth dealing with substance use issues in BC. This project was led by youth members of McCreary’s Youth Research Academy (YRA), who themselves are youth aged 16 to 24 and are (or have been) in government care. Indigenous youth are over-represented in BC’s substance use and youth justice programs, but they need culturally appropriate, multidimensional approaches. Mainstream treatment programs are often ineffective. The report provides examples of successful programs in BC and elsewhere. Although the researchers wanted to interview Indigenous youth on their experience with Indigenous leaders, they struggled to find participants with relevant experience. Few youth have experienced Indigenous adults in leadership positions within substance use and addiction services or experienced Indigenous-run services. Many youth respondents report being reluctant to ask for help and report leaving treatment services early. Several mention feeling disrespected or misunderstood. Some youth respondents advocate for a harm-reduction approach, rather than a firm abstinence-only approach.

Gang involvement

SNAP (Stop Now and Plan)

In Ontario, the SNAP® Youth Justice (SNAP YJ) project is a framework designed by Child Development Institute (CDI) to engage young men, aged 12 and up, who are involved in the Youth Justice System to reduce their risk of further contact with the law and/or gang membership. Initially developed for use in custody, it was extended to probation and community sites. An external evaluation was conducted in 2018 by the Effective Programming and Evaluation Unit, Operational Support and Program Effectiveness Branch, Youth Justice Division, Ministry of Child Community and Social Services (MCCSS, Ontario Government). Pre-post data analysis shows increases in social competencies and self-control with reductions in cognitive distortions in both custody and community settings.

The review provides mixed results, with many participants indicating that they have used skills learned in SNAP and would recommend the program, and other participants complaining that some of the scenarios provided are too childish or not appropriate for their specific experience. It is recommended that SNAP consider the specific life experience of participants from specific geographic regions such as Northern Ontario and consider developing a female-specific version of the program.

Road to Redemption

In Ontario, there was a review of the “Road to Redemption” program, which supports the rehabilitation and reintegration of youth involved in or at risk of gang involvement. The program is designed to equip youth with life skills to exit gangs and reintegrate into their communities. The deliverables include the development of manuals, one for male offenders, one for female offenders as well as one specific to Indigenous people (Miigaazowini Wachag “moving forward to a good life”). Due to a lack of female youth in open custody, some participants were recruited from a youth court diversion program, meaning that not all the young women in the program were necessarily at risk of gang involvement. Participants were generally positive about the program, although not necessarily confident that they had learned new skills.

Youturn Youth Support Services Ottawa

Youturn Youth Support Services Ottawa provided a review of their community-based counselling project that is aimed at youth, between the ages of 12-17, who are involved in or are vulnerable to gangs. The report measures recidivism and scores the youth participants on a number of risk factors. The proportion of youth in the program who committed a new substantive offence while participating was 29% (4/14). Three of the four youth who completed the program in six-months or less reduced their overall risk scores. Four out of six youth who spent longer than six months in the program reduced their overall risk scores. The authors note that participants often need help with accommodation, mental health, and family relations, which falls outside the scope of the proposal.

Projet Oxygène

The Motivation jeunesse (projet Oxygène) in Québec is also described above in the section on substance use and addiction. This program encourages youth at risk for drug use and gang involvement to develop healthier habits. The program promotes a healthy lifestyle and increased participation in sport.

Coastline Employment Program

In BC, the “Coastline Employment Program” supports youth to find suitable employment opportunities. The majority of their clients are involved or at risk of being involved with gangs; all of the participants have used substances, such as alcohol, tobacco, or drugs. Almost all have mental health diagnoses. The program experienced challenges due to changes to their main referral source and thus received fewer clients than expected. The number of participants who completed the post-program survey was too small to draw conclusions regarding the success of the program.

Blueprint Pathways

There was also a review of Blueprint Pathways, a hip-hop arts and mental health discussion-based program that is designed to empower youth in correctional facilities to build better futures. It operates in six secure detention facilities across Canada and emphasizes art, positive role modeling, and community support. More than 300 participants completed a survey regarding their experience. Results suggest an increase in self-esteem and a decrease in fatalism. The report documents great support for the program.

Oshkabaywis “My Helper”

As mentioned above in the section for female youth involved in the CJS, there is a program in Manitoba called the Oshkabaywis “My Helper” that aims to develop a culturally based mentorship program for Indigenous girls in Winnipeg who are associated with gangs. The recommendations suggest one-to-one mentoring; however, staff turnover makes matching youth clients to suitable mentors difficult.

STR8 UP

In Saskatchewan, “STR8 UP” conducted community engagement to develop a Saskatchewan prevention/intervention street gang strategy. The consultations were thorough and emphasized grassroots outreach to communities. The report defines gangs and discusses substance use, violence, toxic masculinity, and trauma. The report makes 24 recommendations for action by the province to address the problem of gangs.

Creating constructive alternatives for our youth

One report details a series of meetings in Toronto, where service providers discussed creating a network of inter-connected services for youth at risk of becoming involved with gangs. This report, *Creating constructive alternatives for our youth*, discusses solutions to the shortage of suitable places to meet, suggesting that schools and places of worship might be useful. The service providers also note that, if prevention is a goal, then intervention needs to start much earlier than is currently the norm and support needs to be extended to families, not just the youth at risk. Geographic limitations on programs need to be lifted, as some youth prefer to stay close to home, while others prefer to seek service away from their neighbourhood in order to avoid being recognized. Job training needs to be tailored to the needs of youth and providing educational options for updating skills is essential. Older ex-gang members also need services, otherwise they return to a

life of crime since that is all they know. Mentoring could be an option, but current rules bar adults with criminal records from working with youth.

Life skills / employment

Conseil économique et social d'Ottawa-Carleton

In Ottawa-Gatineau, the Conseil économique et social d'Ottawa-Carleton created a program to provide employment opportunities for young Francophones involved in the CJS, especially for those involved with guns, gangs, or drugs. The program struggles to recruit youth, especially from their target group, but eventually, some youth were recruited from Gatineau. The program had limited success due to recruitment challenges.

RoadMap

In New Brunswick, the RoadMap program aims to teach financial literacy and employment skills to youth involved in the CJS. Researchers conducted two surveys with youth, once while the youth were in corrections and another after they had been released, to measure what they had retained from the RoadMap program and to track their progress post-release. The surveys post-release exposed some gaps in data collection – for example, it is very difficult to track youth offenders once they leave corrections or become adults.

Alternative Program for Young Offenders: Supporting Integration and Smart Choices

In Québec, the Batshaw Youth and Family Centre offers the “Alternative Program for Young Offenders: Supporting Integration and Smart Choices”, a pilot project to help rehabilitate and reintegrate youth in custody as they transition back into the community. Clients participate in programs that include cooking, art, music, computers, and anti-violence training. Since there were fewer clients living in closed communities (in custody) than anticipated, the program expanded to offer services to a wider range of clients. The program encountered challenges with high turnover of managers.

Feedback from service providers

Intensive Support and Supervision Program

One report is an extensive review of feedback from service providers regarding the Intensive Support and Supervision Program (ISSP) in BC. This report looks at services offered to justice-involved youth, including community-based alternatives to custody and transition programs to help youth move from custody to the community. Service providers note that, although high-risk youth need to be prioritized, there should be room for youth who are at risk to receive intervention before becoming involved with the CJS. Respondents identify challenges, including a lack of diversity among staff, high staff turnover, inadequate resources for Indigenous clients, delays in accessing treatment for substance use and addiction issues and mental health services, and poor communication.

Challenges

- **Finding and retaining appropriate staff**
 - Many programs talk about the challenge of hiring appropriate staff – especially for programs that want to offer culturally appropriate programming to specific target groups – Indigenous youth, visible minorities, and immigrants from specific cultural groups for example.
 - Several programs struggle to retain staff and high turnover creates gaps in service levels.
 - High staff turnover undermines trust, as youth are frustrated to lose staff with whom they have developed close relationships.

- **Referrals**
 - Several programs describe challenges with their referring partners. In some cases, contracts are cancelled or partner organizations are re-organized. Several groups received fewer clients than expected or fewer clients that met the expected profile for their specific program.
 - In some cases, service providers are prepared for clients with specific needs (substance use or addiction, gang affiliation for example), but they receive clients with different needs (trauma, mental health, lower or higher risk than expected) that the programs are not designed to serve.
 - A few programs face resistance from youth families or referring organizations who are concerned about exposing low risk clients to higher risk youth.
- **Funding**
 - Concern over inconsistent funding is common.
 - Lack of funding affects whether programs have access to suitable meeting spaces or adequate technology for service delivery.
 - Many service providers express frustration with the fact that funders often dictate terms of projects, and that funding is often limited to short-term projects and does not promote long-term stability of the projects/programs.
- **Tracking participants after completion of program or sentence**
 - Several programs struggle to maintain contact with participants, especially those dealing with substance use and mental health issues since many live rather transient lives and are difficult to track.
 - Privacy requirements limit researchers' ability to measure recidivism once youth graduate to the adult CJS.

Identified gaps

- **Greater individualization of programming**
 - A number of reviews suggest that their clients need programming that is personalized to their individual needs; their clients do not “fit” well into existing curricula.
 - Clients need accurate and comprehensive assessments to get the most useful services. Service providers note that some clients are identified as being at-risk for gang involvement for example, but they may have other issues as well, such as trauma or mental health issues.
- **Provide support for basic needs**
 - Many youth, especially those with FASD, need help with meeting their basic needs – food and housing – before their issues with addiction/substance use, mental health, family conflict, and skill development can be addressed.
- **More education/awareness on Indigenous history and cultures**
 - Many programs intend to offer culturally specific programming or provide their existing staff with training to enhance their cultural competencies. Participants mostly appreciate the efforts and many recommend that training and awareness of Indigenous history and cultural practices should be offered to more people – both Indigenous clients and non-Indigenous Canadians.
- **More female-specific programming and female staff/mentors**
 - Several programs note that female clients appreciate girl-only activities or programming and request more female staff and mentors.

- **Provide programs tailored to visible minorities and to recent immigrants**
 - Some programs are designed for at-risk youth who are visible minorities or recent immigrants.
 - Some youth participants who are from visible minority groups speak of being “profiled” by the police and express distrust of authorities. Service providers need to earn the trust of racialized youth and programs need to help youth who are experiencing racism.
 - Some immigrant youth (and their families) appear to be struggling to adapt to life in Canada . One program that did focus on immigrant youth had notable success pairing at-risk youth with mentors from their own culture.
- **Provide support for families, not just youth**
 - Several programs indicate that youth in contact with the CJS are often dealing with conflict within their own families and that greater support for families is needed.
 - Recently arrived immigrant families might also benefit from support and mentorship.

Conclusion

The reports reviewed here provide a wealth of useful information on a wide variety of projects. The format and depth of the reports vary significantly. Some of the organizations contracted experts to conduct thorough investigations, including surveys and interviews of clients and service providers. Others conducted self-assessments. Most of the reports indicate that the projects met their goals.

In this review, we were less focused on the success of each individual program and more interested in identifying common themes, challenges, and recommendations. Overall, we identified eight key program areas. Across the country, many organizations identify high staff turnover, difficulties with referrals, and inconsistent/lacking funding as key challenges in providing services. Among recommendations provided in the reports, many respondents call for a holistic approach to helping families, not just youth. Several service providers also advocate for better assessments and more personalized programs for clients.

Moving forward, it is hoped that this information can help inform future programming.

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