Aboriginal Youth and Violent Gang Involvement in Canada: Quality Prevention Strategies

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RÉSUMÉ

Il y a une épidémie de violence des gangs de jeunes Autochtones dans certaines parties du Canada d'aujourd'hui et ces jeunes s'entretuent et se suicident à des taux qui dépassent ceux de tout autre groupe au Canada. Cet article présente un aperçu de la situation actuelle et décrit cinq grandes voies d'adhésion aux gangs et à leur violence pour les jeunes Autochtones. L'utilisation d'approches qui ont été démontrées inefficaces est ensuite décrite et critiquée. L'auteur plaide pour un passage à une approche de prévention et de santé publique qui traite les voies d'adhésion aux gangs et à leur violence et décrit certaines approches qui ont fait leurs preuves. L'auteur conclut que le refus d'agir dès maintenant se traduit par une situation qui va s'aggraver très rapidement puisque le taux de natalité des Autochtones est en explosion et que la population « à risque » doublera au cours de la prochaine décennie.

ABSTRACT

There is an epidemic of Aboriginal youth gang violence in some parts of Canada today, and young Aboriginal gang members are killing each other and committing suicide at rates that exceed those of any other group in Canada. This paper provides an overview of the current situation, and describes five major pathways to violent gang involvement for Aboriginal youth. It then goes on to describe and critique the use of approaches that have been proven not to work. It argues for a shift to a public health approach that addresses the pathways to gang violence, and describes some evidence-based models that have been proven to work. The conclusion is

that a failure to act now will result in things getting much worse very shortly since the Aboriginal birth rate is exploding and the population "at risk" in many areas will double within the next decade.

Introduction

Overview of Aboriginal Youth Gangs in Canada

The focus of this paper is on Aboriginal youth gang members aged 12-30 years. In Canada, it is estimated that twenty-two percent of known gang members are Aboriginal, and that there are between 800-1000 active Aboriginal gang members in the Prairie provinces (Astwood Strategy Corporation, 2004; CISS, 2005; CSC, 2001a and 2003; Totten, 2008).

Aboriginal youth gangs are visible groups that come together for profit-driven criminal activity and severe violence. They identify themselves through the adoption of a name, common brands/colours of clothing, and tattoos to demonstrate gang membership to rival gangs. Gang-related communication rituals and public display of gang-like attributes are common (Gordon, 2000; Totten, 2000 and 2008). Membership is fluid, there is a lack of organization and structure, and many of these gangs operate independently in small cells. Status is gained through the ability to make large amounts of cash and engage in serious violence. Aboriginal gangs tend to be intergenerational and rely on violent entry and exit rituals to protect the gang from outsiders. The organization of these gangs varies in terms of: the structure and hierarchical nature of the gang; the gang's connection to larger, more serious organized crime groups; the sophistication and permanence of the gang; the existence of a specific code of conduct or set of formal rules; initiation practices; and the level of integration, cohesion, and solidarity between the gang's members (Mellor, MacRae, Pauls, & Hornick, 2005; Totten, 2008).

Membership commitment can be measured in a hierarchical ranking system within the gang. Often, there is not one person who directs other members, although older members have more influence compared to young members (CISC, 2006; Mellor et. al., 2005). Leaders (also called King Pins, Bosses, Presidents or Captains) actively promote and participate in serious criminal activity. These males are generally in their late twenties or early thirties. Veterans (also called Heavies or Higher-Ups) decide which criminal activities the gang will participate in and are considered to be faithful in their loyalty to the gang. Along with leaders, they are responsible for settling internal conflicts within the gang. Core members (also called Regular Members, Associates

or Affiliates) usually have been with the gang since it started, and are experienced, proven members. Most gang leaders require prospective recruits to meet certain criteria and perform serious crimes of violence before they are allowed membership into the gang. These youth want to prove themselves and rise through the ranks; they often earn serious money for gangs. To gain entry, a recruit generally requires sponsorship. It is common for recruits to "do minutes", that is to survive a beating at the hands of some gang members. Strikers (also called Soldiers) are also highly likely to engage in serious acts of violence. Females who participate in Aboriginal gangs are for the most part treated as sexual slaves and are forced to play tertiary roles (look-out for the police, dealing drugs, sex trade work, carrying drugs and weapons). Often, they are traded amongst gang members for coercive sex.

The Aboriginal Burden of Suffering in Canada

First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples comprise 4% of the population of Canada, or approximately 1,325,000 people (Statistics Canada, 2008). The majority lives in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and in the Northern Territories, and almost one-half of the Aboriginal population now live in urban areas. The proportion of Aboriginal peoples is increasing rapidly compared to every other group in Canadian society, and their average age is much younger than the rest of the population.

Most Aboriginal young people who grow up in high-risk environments do not become gang-involved – they have positive school and community supports, and particular protective individual attributes like perseverance and determination. Yet, Aboriginals experience a disproportionate burden of suffering, and this helps explain their participation in gangs. Factors related to this include racism, colonization, marginalization and dispossession; the loss of land, traditional culture, spirituality and values; and the breakdown of community kinship systems and Aboriginal law. Psycho-social problems are linked to these factors, including:

• Entrenched and severe poverty, and overcrowded and substandard housing (Bittle, Hattem, Quann, & Muise, 2002; Dooley, Welsh, Floyd, Macdonald, & Fenning, 2005).

• High numbers of placements into child welfare, mental health and other institutions (Blackstock, Trocme, & Bennett, 2004; Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2006; Trevethan, Auger, Moore, MacDonald, & Sinclair, 2002).

- Alcohol and drug abuse: one quarter to two thirds of Aboriginal young people in remote communities inhale gasoline. The incidence of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is very high (Canada, House of Commons Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, 1990; RCAP, 1996).

- Low educational attainment and high rates of school drop-out and unemployment, which block conventional means of achieving success and bonding to broader Canadian society (RCAP, 1996; Statistics Canada, 2001).

- Ill-health and suicide: the suicide rate for young Aboriginals in many communities is approximately six times higher than the rate for non-Aboriginals (Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003; Shah, 1990; Statistics Canada, 2001; York, 1990).

- High rates of criminalization: Aboriginals are significantly over-represented at all stages of the justice system (Brzozowski, Taylor-Butts, & Johnson, 2006; Calverley, 2007; Dauvergne, 2008; Dauvergne & Li, 2006; Li, 2007).

- High rates of violence, where family violence, sexual assault, child witnessing of spousal violence, and homicide involving Aboriginals as both perpetrators and victims are serious concerns. On-reserve violent crime rates are elevated for both youth and adults. Youth are accused of committing homicides on reserve at about 11 times the rate of youth elsewhere in Canada (Brzozowski et al., 2006; Calverley, 2007; Dauvergne, 2008; Dauvergne & Li, 2006; Li, 2007).

Understanding Forms of Aboriginal Youth Gang Violence

Aboriginal youth gang violence is different than that exhibited by other youth gangs in Canada. Rates of *internalized* violence, including suicide, drug overdose, and self-injurious behaviors are far higher than *externalized* criminal forms of violence. Preliminary Canadian data from the Prince Albert and Regina projects (Totten, 2009a and 2009b) suggest that far more Aboriginal youth gang members die from suicide and drug overdoses than homicide. These data also point to extremely high rates of other forms of self-injurious behaviours such as slashing and burning, particularly among young Aboriginal women. Most acts of physical violence in Aboriginal youth gangs are motivated by revenge, retaliation, and reputation (Kelly & Totten, 2002), and the result is that young Aboriginal men are killing other young Aboriginal men.

Most females who are gang-involved have personal relationships with male gang members, and those who do not become involved through sexual exploitation, forced prostitution, and sexual trafficking. Gang members use many forms of violence to initiate girls into and maintain their involvement in sex trafficking. Most girls are "gang-banged" as part of initiation into gangs. In some communities, family members socialize girls into the sex trade. This is a common way for families to make money and the practice is perceived as legitimate employment.

In general, there is a poor fit between traditional, perpetrator-orientated theories of instrumental and expressive violence, and violence exhibited by Aboriginal gangs. The process behind Aboriginal youth gang violence involves a number of identifiable steps:

1. Members feel loose bonds to the gang and there is fluid membership. Most have a fatalistic outlook on life, believing that they will die in the near future.

2. Members perceive a threat from a rival gang: this increases gang cohesion and solidifies temporary membership. The threat is often irrational, given the high degree of trauma most members have suffered. Intergenerational family ties are important, and often one family is at war with another family.

3. An incident takes place which sparks an escalation of gang violence.

4. The gang responds in a chaotic and violent manner, similar to the process of spontaneous combustion. The fact that most gang members have cognitive impairments due to FASD contributes to the impulsive and unplanned nature of the violence.

5. The other gang retaliates. In this tinderbox-like environment, escalating violence affects the identities of those involved. This helps to spread gangs across neighbourhoods and reserves and increases membership.

Collective and individual violence by Aboriginal gang members, whether directed internally or at other gangs:

- produces more collective violence through the processes of threat and unpredictable combustion;
- increases solidarity of gang members for a brief time, serving to unite them against a common enemy by increasing their dependence on each other and/or disciplining members;

- perpetuates gang values, norms, and the conditions of membership;
- reinforces familial ties in marginalized and transient communities; and
- provides members with a structure and sense of purpose, combating hopelessness and a sense of powerlessness over their lives.

Members talk about feeling a sense of honour, self-respect, and self-esteem when they engage in violence (Totten, 2009a and 2009b). It can also motivate some members to exit the gang when the violence reaches levels that are unacceptable to them. Finally, it can function to impede efforts to settle land claims, implement self-government, and address the criminalization of Aboriginals (researchers have identified some of these factors in African and Latino gangs, including Decker, 1996; Klein, 1971 and 1995; Sanders, 1993).

Pathways into Violent Gang Involvement for Aboriginal Youth

A pathways approach is useful in identifying the primary mechanisms through which Aboriginal youth find themselves involved in violent gang activity. Some gang members are located on one primary pathway; others become gang-involved through a number of different pathways. Aboriginal youth are more vulnerable to these conditions compared to other youth and therefore are at greater risk of going down these paths. Evidence supporting the existence of these pathways comes from initial data analyses from the *Prince Albert Warrior Spirit Walking Gang Project* and the *Regina Anti-Gang Services Project* (Totten, 2009a and 2009b) involving a combined sample of approximately 150 youth, along with the few Canadian studies on this issue (for example, Dickson-Gilmore & Laprairie, 2005; Kelly & Totten, 2002; Totten, 2008; Weatherburn, Fitzgerald, & Hua, 2003). There are five main pathways, each of which is briefly described below.

The first pathway into gang violence is violentization, the process through which survivors of extreme physical child maltreatment and neglect become predators and prey in adolescence. When Aboriginal children suffer these forms of harm, they are at high risk for reduced academic attainment, neurological impairment, and restricted language development. They are more likely to have personality disorders, impaired psycho-social development, and internalizing and externalizing symptoms. Suffering chronic and repeated sexual trauma throughout childhood is also a key driver into gang life. Typical victims experience multiple types of exploitation within a single year, including sexual abuse, commercial sex work and trafficking. These children are most often abused by male family members or men who know them. More girls are victims, although many male youth who participate in violent gang activities report having been

sexually abused (Totten, 2009a and 2009b). This betrayal of trust and abuse of power is aggravated in many communities by sexist beliefs that promote the early sexualization of girls.

The second key pathway into violent gang life is experiencing multiple out-of-home placements in child welfare and correctional facilities (Kelly & Totten, 2002; Totten, 2000 and 2008). These facilities are prime recruiting grounds for gang members, and a significant number of gang members report that they only became gang-involved following placement in such facilities (Totten, 2008a and 2008b). Currently, one in ten Aboriginal children are in foster care and group homes compared to one in two hundred non-Aboriginals. Today, there are about 28,000 Aboriginal youth in care, a number three times the total at the height of the operation of residential schools (Blackstock et al., 2004; Trocme, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004). The main reason Aboriginal kids are brought into care is neglect, including severe poverty, substance abuse by parents, and poor housing (Trocme, 2005). In Canada, most Aboriginal children are placed in White settings, where it is very difficult to learn about Aboriginal teachings and develop a cultural identity. Thus, many Aboriginal children in care experience culture loss and are at high risk of gang recruitment and sexual exploitation as a way to feel loved and survive. Growing up in care often results in attachment disorders, which magnify the impact of childhood maltreatment.

The third pathway reflects the lifelong impact of brain and mental health disorders that result from prolonged childhood trauma and FASD, and of the accompanying developmental impairments and emotional vulnerability. These leave Aboriginal children with little time and energy to grieve their losses. Suffering severe abuse is directly related to experiencing mental health problems such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Borderline Personality Disorder, Depression, and Bipolar Disorder. Major childhood losses and disrupted attachments can result in youth who don't want to feel anything because it hurts too much. Many Aboriginal gang members who engage in violence have a state of "terminal" thinking that leads them to focus on survival only. Their wounds are so profound that their souls are barely alive. Many young Aboriginal gang members hide behind the armour of violence and emotional detachment; their sense of security, safety and trust is never developed. Hardy and Laszloffy (2005) theorize that the net impact is a state of psychological homelessness wherein unresolved and buried grief results in monstrous acts of rage which camouflage deep-rooted sorrow.

The fourth pathway revolves around the social exclusion and devaluation related to social class, race, sexual orientation, and gender. Colonization and forced assimilation have resulted in the disintegration of family units, and the

loss of language, culture, economic status, and parenting capacity in many communities. The loss of cultural identity, combined with social and economic marginalization, fuels gang violence. Gang-related activities offer employment and income for many members. Some Aboriginal girls are vulnerable to gang involvement, and can become sexually exploited and trafficked in urban settings because they can not meet their basic needs.

The final pathway relates to the development of hyper-masculinities and sexualized femininities. Violence is used to construct masculinity, and sexuality to construct femininity. For male gang members, the experience of prolonged sexual abuse at the hands of men relates directly to the construction of violent gang identities. Many young men who were abused around the time that they reached puberty report having deep-seated fears about their sexual identities. They report feeling responsible for the abuse because they became sexually aroused; many believe that they must be gay because they "had sex" with men. Violence compensates for these threats to heterosexuality (Totten, 2000, 2009a, and 2009b). Even for male gang members who have not suffered violent trauma, the elimination of traditional means of achieving masculinity (such as supporting families through hunting and trapping) is compensated for by a hyper-masculine exertion of power and control over women and children (Blagg, 2000). Aboriginal girls in gangs negotiate gender roles outside of traditional femininity – the gang is a space to "do gender differently" (Campbell, 1991).

These pathways can intersect to form compounding challenges for some Aboriginal youth. Pathway four, for example, can be associated with all other pathways.

Quality Violence Prevention, Intervention and Suppression Approaches

Although there are many Canadian gang prevention, intervention and suppression initiatives, few focus exclusively on Aboriginal youth, and most have not been adequately evaluated. It is hoped that this situation will change in the near future, given that the National Crime Prevention Centre is currently funding a number of multi-year projects, all with robust evaluation designs. We do nevertheless have some basis for determining what types of programs or approaches are likely to fail or to succeed.

What Doesn't Work?

In Canada, unproven gang suppression strategies have won out over evidence-based treatment and prevention, and scarce resources are usually spent on

"get tough" approaches. The approaches described below are proven to be ineffective and should be stopped.

- *Gang suppression program* evaluations have found mixed results. These programs seek to prosecute and convict gang members, especially gang leaders. Although effective in decreasing gang-related crime in the short term, they fail to address psychosocial issues such as child maltreatment, mental health, substance abuse, education and employment. Suppression initiatives should only be utilized to complement a range of interventions.

- *Incarcerating gang members* does not reduce future criminal behaviour (Aos, Miller, & Drake, 2006). Studies in the U.S.A. and Canada demonstrate that locking up gang members increases the chances of re-offending and staying in the gang (Benda & Tollet, 1999; Nafekh, 2002; Nafekh & Stys, 2004; Olson, Dooley, & Kane, 2004). Grouping early onset, high-risk youth together increases the negative bonding amongst members and leads to even more entrenched anti-social and criminal behaviour. Individualized approaches in facilities work best (such as cognitive-behavioural individual and family therapy), but gains are only maintained if adequate resources are provided to support long-term transition into the community following release.

- *Curriculum-based prevention programs* targeting youth at-risk for gang involvement, such as the American Gang Resistance Education and Training program (G.R.E.A.T.) and the D.A.R.E. program effect modest, short-term change. However, follow-up studies have found program participants to be as likely as non-participants to become gang members in the long-term (Esbensen & Osgoode, 1999; Esbensen, Osgood, Taylor, Peterson, & Freng, 2001; NIJ, 1998; U.S. Surgeon General, 2001).

- *Traditional detached-worker programs* are ineffective and can do more harm than good by increasing gang cohesion (Klein, 1995). Modern detached-worker programs have included curriculum components addressing consequences of gang involvement, peer pressure, and substance abuse. These programs remain ineffective unless they are integrated into a comprehensive and coordinated community-wide approach.

- *Community development approaches* founded on the premise that there is a singular and cohesive "Aboriginal community" do not work. In reality, there are many competing interests in most reserves and urban neighbourhoods, and divisions reflecting religious and spiritual lines, access to income and

wealth, gender, clans and ethnicities, family and gang allegiances. Programs must effectively engage these subgroups and address the concerns and priorities of each.

- *Child welfare models* that bring youth into care are replicating Canada's sad legacy of Residential Schools. Grouping teens with varying degrees of antisocial conduct and attitudes in child welfare facilities leads to delinquency training. Negative attention-forcing behaviour is highly resistant to change: reprimands serve as rewards because they are reinforced by the reaction of peers. Longitudinal studies repeatedly show association with deviant peers is the strongest correlate of escalation in problem behaviors in adolescence. Children living in group care face much higher risks of being victimized by bullying, sexual abuse, physical restraints by staff, and ultimately being criminalized. A lack of permanency planning contributes to many Aboriginal children being moved from placement to placement, which contributes to attachment problems and deep-rooted feelings of rejection and shame.

What Works?

Evidence-based approaches are presented below along the five key strategic areas identified by the National Working Group on Crime Prevention (2007) as elements of success: collaboration and problem-solving partnerships, concentrating investments on highest needs, developing and sustaining community capacity, adequate and sustained supports and resources, and public engagement. Lessons learned from three Canadian projects currently being evaluated by this author are included in the discussion. All three projects have mainly Aboriginal staff teams, many of whom have past experience in gangs, the sex trade and street life; Elders are employed in each project as well. All are gender-responsive, culturally competent, and have the capacity to respond 24 hours a day, year-round. These programs are:

- *The Warrior Spirit Walking Project*, delivered by the Prince Albert Outreach Program Inc., targets 12-20 year-old Aboriginal gang members and youth at high-risk of gang membership. The Circle of Courage model (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002) is the foundation for this program.

- The North Central Community Association's *Regina Anti-Gang Service* project (RAGS) targets 16-28 year-old gang leaders and their partners and family members. Core services are based upon the Wraparound and Multi-Systemic Therapy models (Henggeler, Schoenwald, Borduin, Rowland, & Cunningham, 1998).

- The Vancouver Aboriginal Youth – Vancouver Police Department Working Group *Creating Healthy Aboriginal Role Models* (CHARM) Project targets youth aged 12-18 years in East Vancouver who are most at risk of being recruited into gangs. All core services are based upon principles of positive youth development and asset building.

Collaboration and Problem-Solving Partnerships

Community-wide, cross-sectoral strategies are required to address the multiple factors related to gang violence. Silos separating sectors, including Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), must come down. There are excellent models from other parts of the world that can provide inspiration (see Capobianco, 2006; Capobianco, Shaw, & Dubuc, 2003). In the U.S.A., Spergel's (1995) Comprehensive Gang Model is a good example of a community-wide response to gangs. The model assumes that the youth gang problem can be explained by a lack of social opportunities and social disorganization within a community, where contributing factors such as poverty, institutional racism, poor social policies, and a lack of or misdirected social controls are important. It consists of five core strategies which flow from an integrated and team-oriented problem solving approach using secondary and tertiary prevention. These strategies include: community mobilization; social intervention; provision of academic, economic, and social opportunities; gang suppression; and facilitating organizational change and development (Howell, 2000; OJJDP, 2006; Spergel, 1995). The Little Village Project in Chicago has shown the most positive outcomes of any comprehensive gang intervention program[1] (Spergel, 2006; Spergel et al., 2003). The Project, which involved 200 youth, was credited with a significant decrease in the number of self-reported offences and arrests over a two-year period, including arrests for violent crimes. Results indicated that gang members who participated in more individual counseling sessions were more likely to reduce involvement in gang activities. The hardcore gang youth demonstrated the most significant decreases in arrests, but there was not a major decrease in the overall gang crime in the Village. This could be due to a number of factors, including the fact that many gang members in Little Village did not participate in the project.

Partnerships are also required to develop new models of child welfare and Aboriginal justice. Aboriginal leaders and various levels of government must

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1 Data consisted of 127 individual interviews between Time I and Time III, monthly activity reports to the Chicago Police Dept., gang member surveys and self-reports, project worker summary reports, field observations, focus group findings, and police arrest and incident data. These data were compared to data collected during a three year pre-project period, and with two control groups obtained through arrests of non-targeted young people at program entry.

develop effective mechanisms for sharing information. This begins with the early identification and support of high-risk children and families, in order to provide intensive programs and practices that maintain permanent family connections for all children. Family empowerment and connectedness should be targeted in a flexible manner; the goal is to have a continuum of connections and to repatriate kids to their home environments. A proven method to reduce reliance on residential placement and keep youth in their neighbourhoods with intensive supports is the *Wraparound Process*. There are many examples of the effectiveness of this approach with Aboriginal peoples in other countries (for example, see Wyles, 2007). Today, however, the INAC Child and Family Services Program gives 22% less funding per child than provincially-funded child welfare agencies.

New models of youth justice are also required. Incarceration often takes place before youth are recruited into gangs, or, it serves to increase gang cohesion and membership for those who are already gang-involved. The Canadian Aboriginal Justice Strategy has not reduced rates of crime, victimization, and incarceration among Aboriginals. The Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA) has a special set of criteria and measures for Aboriginal youth, but Provinces and Territories are not always implementing the Act as intended. Unless we can dramatically reduce the number of young Aboriginals who are incarcerated, gang violence will only increase.

New collaboration and problem-solving partnerships must be culturally and gender competent; this goes beyond "cultural awareness" (knowledge about a group) and "cultural sensitivity" (some level of experience with another group). The Medicine Wheel is an important symbol in Aboriginal teachings; it is a circular, holistic approach as opposed to the linear approach used in many Western settings. Aboriginal ways of learning place communal generosity and sharing above individualistic and materialistic gain. The Wheel is highly valued by the Prince Albert, Regina and Vancouver gang projects as an approach to preventing violence and supporting gang-involved youth to figure out their journey in life. However, not all youth want or have a connection to traditional teachings. In such cases, these projects support youth in exploring other spiritual avenues, such as faith-based alternatives. The principle of gender responsiveness is also highly valued in these projects, and addressing the unique needs of females is prioritized. These young women need non-punitive, strength-based and non-hierarchical, relationship-based programs. It can be dangerous to mix both genders of high-risk youth in the same program – many females report physical, sexual and verbal abuse by young men in facilities, and that hyper-sexualized relations with male peers and

staff are common (Totten, 2002 and 2004a). There are excellent examples of quality programs in Ontario youth justice that address these concerns (see Covington, 2003; Myhand & Kivel, 1998).

Concentrating Investments on Highest Needs

The best way to prevent Aboriginal youth gang violence is to intervene early in the lives of children (ages 0-6) and families who are at greater risk of negative outcomes, where children may be exhibiting early onset aggression. One proven approach is in-home, culturally competent public health nurse visitation with young, high-risk mothers over the long term, using the "Families First" model (Browne et al., 2001). If implemented in an intensive manner, physical child abuse and neglect can be reduced by as much as 80% in high-risk communities (Duggan et al., 2004; Olds et al., 1998).

Comprehensive FASD prevention programs are also required, as are school readiness and family literacy programs, infant stimulation and Head Start programs, and other health promotion programs. The best way to address the sexual exploitation and trafficking of gang-involved Aboriginal girls and women is to prevent child sexual abuse and implement broad-based education programs to confront sexism and the early sexualization of girls. Gender inequalities can be reduced by engaging women in positions of power and leadership in individual communities (NWAC, 2007). Finally, quality programs for men who sexually abuse should be implemented in a comprehensive manner (see CSC, 1997 and 2001b; Macgregor, 2008).

The cultural competencies of schools can be enhanced by increasing the number of Aboriginal teachers and administrators, teaching traditional language acquisition, reducing the suspension and expulsion of Aboriginal students, and reshaping the curriculum to reflect Aboriginal approaches to knowledge and teachings. Primary schools are excellent places where children can safely work on grief and trauma; creative arts techniques and play therapy are proven interventions (see Crenshaw & Garbarino, 2007; Sklarew, Krupnick, Ward-Wimmer, & Napoli, 2002). Schools are also good venues to implement quality suicide prevention programs (see White & Jodoin, 2004).

Developing and Sustaining Community Capacity

We must address the link between individual life experiences and the social and economic inequalities experienced by Aboriginal people. Strategies must confront the lack of social opportunities and the social disorganization that

characterizes many communities. Gang-related activities offer employment and a good income; we cannot reduce gang violence without replacing the lost income and jobs which gangs provide to members. Quality programs include those that confront low educational attainment, unemployment, poverty, unstable and crowded housing conditions, high residential mobility and substance abuse. Programs must respond to the many competing interests on many Reserves and urban neighbourhoods. There is a sound body of evidence supporting the relationship between Aboriginal self-government and positive outcomes. Efficient settlement of land claims is directly related to improving the overall standard of living for Aboriginal peoples (Capobianco, 2006; Capobianco et al., 2003; Blackstock & Trocme, 2005).

Adequate and Sustained Supports and Resources

Most gang-related resources go to law enforcement and corrections – yet, things will not get better until more resources are dedicated to prevention. This means re-dedicating existing resources and getting players in the justice sector to behave differently. There is much resistance to doing this. One small example is the proven ineffectiveness of the RCMP curriculum-based drug and gang prevention programs (Ennett & Tobler, 1994; U.S. Surgeon General, 2001). This money should be reinvested in proven school-based programs involving police such as the intensive mentoring, supervision and support of very high-risk students and their families, beginning in elementary school (Schumacher & Kurz, 1999; Totten, 2004b). Although the most effective method of preventing youth gang involvement is reducing child maltreatment, the vast majority of Aboriginal child welfare funds go to strategies that don't work, such as placements in residential facilities. Money can be saved by closing some facilities and investing the savings in intensive, home-based programs. Finally, we should extend National Crime Prevention Centre (NCPC) funding for Aboriginal gang prevention projects far beyond 2011, and assure that other prevention initiatives have long-term funding and robust evaluations.

Public Engagement

In Canada, few seem to care about the burden of suffering of Aboriginal youth. Young gang members, most of whom have survived trauma in childhood, are committing suicide and killing each other at alarmingly high rates – and things will only get worse with the rapidly shifting demographics in many communities. There are thousands of missing and sexually trafficked Aboriginal girls in this country, many of whom are gang-involved. But, the average Canadian faces little or no risk of being harmed by young Aboriginal gang members, who arguably are killing the Aboriginal part of themselves.

Public education is required to confront the huge gap between what we are currently doing to address gang problems and what the evidence says works. The Federal Public Apology in June 2008 and the Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission present excellent opportunities to engage the Canadian public on the unique historic, social and economic context enveloping Aboriginal youth gang violence.

Conclusion

Aboriginal youth gang violence in Canada has reached epidemic levels in many communities. If we fail to act now, we will pay dearly within the next decade. Many remote and urban communities in Western Canada will have double the number of young Aboriginal men within the next ten years – it is these male youth who are most at risk of gang involvement. Prevention strategies must interrupt the main pathways into gang violence, including serious and prolonged child maltreatment, long-term institutionalization in child welfare and youth justice facilities, brain and mental health disorders caused by trauma and FASD, social exclusion and devaluation, and the development of violent and sexualized gender identities. In general, there is a poor fit between traditional theories of violence and that exhibited by Aboriginal gangs. These models do not incorporate factors related to loss, trauma and developmental impairments, nor do they focus on historic, social and economic conditions. Most of our current strategies to address youth gang violence are not based on sound evidence. Repression approaches are very costly and do not offer long-term solutions; in fact, a substantial body of evidence suggests that law and order approaches actually increase gang activities. We should shift our focus and our supports to more proven and promising ways of addressing Aboriginal youth gang violence.

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