

## **THE UNTAPPED POTENTIAL IN OUR COMMUNITIES TO ASSIST YOUTH ENGAGED IN RISKY BEHAVIOUR**

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**Abstract:** By drawing upon what is known about risk factors and protective factors with respect to at-risk youth, the author discusses how communities can become more actively involved and supportive of young people, and thereby work towards a model where the community actively promotes resilience among children and youth. She provides a detailed review of the research around resilience to support her contention that many resources, already present in communities but largely untapped, have the potential to encourage vulnerable young people to avoid developing an aggressive posture towards others, dropping out of school, drifting into a criminal lifestyle, or being victimized. She notes the growing and consistent evidence that poverty, unemployment, abuse, family and school problems correlate to crime, and argues that while one cannot say with any certainty that these factors are the causes of crime, they certainly are the causes of disadvantage. It is the disadvantaged, she states, who are the “most thoroughly processed” by the criminal justice system.

There have been numerous studies which confirm a range of individual, family, school, and community factors that place children and young people “at risk” of engaging in offending and victimization behaviour (McIntyre, 1993; Waldie & Spreen, 1993; Leone, 1994; Hawkins & Catalano, 1995; Latimer, 2001; Farrington, 2002). Similarly, studies have shown a host of protective factors which help children and adolescents avoid developing aggressive behaviour, dropping out of school, drifting into offending behaviour, or being victimized (Howell, 1995; Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella-Broderick, & Sawyer, 2003). Attempts have been made to blame crime on everything from diet and violence on television to different skull shapes and sizes. Each of these theories has been limited by the absence of convincing data. There is, however, growing and consistent evidence that poverty, unemployment, abuse, family and school problems correlate to crime. While one cannot say with any certainty that these factors are the causes of crime, they certainly are the causes of disadvantage. The concern lies in the fact that those individuals who are most disadvantaged socially, emotionally, and personally and who lack financial and personal resources are often left behind, and are the people most thoroughly processed by the criminal justice system.

Hawkins (1995) identified a series of multiple risks associated with neighbourhoods and communities, the family, the schools, and peer groups, as well as factors unique to a given individual that increase the probability of violence, health, and behaviour problems among adolescents and young adults. Further, he identified a series of protective factors that “buffer” young people from the negative consequences of exposure to these risks by either reducing the impact of the risk or changing the way in which a person responds to the risk. Drawing on the work of Rutter (1987), Hawkins (1995) suggested that individual characteristics exemplary of a positive social orientation, positive relationships with family members, teachers or other adults,

and healthy beliefs and clear standards about behaviour help to protect young people from the risk of involvement in crime and other related problems. This work was later expanded and utilized in the *Communities that Care* prevention approach, which is a systematic approach that facilitates the delivery of well-coordinated services that reduce risk and increase protection within defined geographical areas (Hawkins, Catalano, & Arthur, 2002; France & Crow, 2005). In an analysis of the effects of the *Communities that Care* approach, Hawkins et al. (2008) have shown that the approach, when implemented with fidelity, has appreciably reduced targeted risk factors for youth in middle school. The “risk factor prevention paradigm” (Farrington, 2000) seeks to identify factors that increase the probability of later anti-social behaviour and intervene to eliminate these risks factors.

The United States Surgeon General’s Report on Youth Violence (2001) suggested that the strongest risk factors during childhood were involvement in serious criminal behaviour, substance use, being male, physical aggression, low family socio-economic status or poverty, and anti-social parents. As children move into adolescence, the peer group tends to supplant the influence of family and the greatest risk factors delineated by the same report were weak ties to conventional peers, involvement in criminal acts, and ties to anti-social or delinquent peers. In identifying these two trajectories for the onset of youth violence, the Surgeon General’s Report suggests that late onset violence prevention is not widely recognized or understood. Moffitt, Caspi, Harrington, and Milne (2002) argue that even after puberty, there is still a need for intervention to prevent late onset offending in the adult years. As shown by Zara and Farrington (2009), there is evidence to suggest that adult onset offending may benefit from intervention in the adolescent years to prevent the occurrence during the young adult years.

Research on adolescent resilience differs from the risk paradigm research through its focus on assets and resources that enable some youth to overcome the negative effects of exposure to risk. This research suggests that despite the presence of numerous risks, resilient individuals have sufficient protective factors in their lives that they do not enter a life of crime and are able to avoid serious delinquency, substance abuse, and other risky behaviours (Smith, Lizotte, Thornberry, & Krohn, 1995; Turner, Hartman, Exum, & Cullen, 2007). In this context, resilience may be seen as, “a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000, p. 543).

Other resiliency factors mentioned in the literature deal with an individual's environment, such as the presence of a support system outside of the family (Fergusson & Lynskey, 1996; Richmond & Beardslee, 1988; Rubin, 1996; Valentine & Feinauer, 1993). Losel and Bliesener (1994) discuss personal and social resources that have previously proven to be protective in different research contexts as the theoretical background for their Bielefeld-Erlangen Study on Resilience. They suggest that the most important protective factors for a youth who has grown up in “multi-problem milieux” are: how the youth deals with stressors and copes with problems; the cognitive competence of the individual; a flexible personality temperament that favours effective coping strategies in the face of adversity; stable emotional relationships with at least one parent or other reference person; a supportive educational climate and social support from outside the family (Losel & Bliesener, 1994, pp. 756-757). Places where resilient individuals find this external support are many, including at school, perhaps from a teacher or counsellor, at church, and from neighbours, peers, or even the parents of peers.

Bender and Losel (1997) indicate that resilience research provides an opportunity to understand the specific protective mechanisms that underlie successful adaptation to specific risks for specific behavioural outcomes. Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) also point out that adolescents may be resilient in the face of one type of risk but may be unable to overcome other types of risks. This makes it difficult to identify universal protective factors that might be interpreted to operate in the same manner for all groups, all contexts, or all outcomes.

There has been a considerable amount of research on the value of community-based crime prevention for high-risk youth (Farrington, 1997; Schoenwald, Scherer, & Brondino, 1997; Fiester, 1998; Robertson, Grimes, & Rogers, 2001; Borum, 2003; Ronka, Oravala, & Pulkkinen, 2002). In this work, it has been found that youths who form positive bonds with their community are generally less likely to become involved with the juvenile justice system so that the development of such programs is based on the value of creating an environment where youths can form or enhance positive attachments to their communities.

Shaw (2001) suggests the best way to plan for healthy communities is to ensure the inclusion and support of young people and their families. In determining appropriate prevention programs for 12- to 18-year-old youth, Shaw (2001) has recommended that in addition to universal programs for all young people, there are three additional targeted subgroups worthy of careful prevention programming: youth at risk, with a particular emphasis on those living in poor areas and those with multiple risk factors; youth in care; and youth coming out of the justice system. As Whyte (2004) has pointed out, studies over many years have shown that the “vast majority” of young people who have come to the attention of the formal youth justice system are “poor and disadvantaged”. Further, one must be cognizant of the fact that the profile of both the typical offender and the typical victim of crime share many similarities with regard to age and background. In an earlier study, Whyte (2003) found that 46% of a cohort of persistent young offenders had been accommodated in “public care” at some time in their lives due to abuse or neglect. As a positive outcome for these adverse situations, a number of youth were nonetheless able to become resilient to their negative life situation.

This paper will focus on ways in which the community can become more actively involved and supportive of young people by bringing together what is known about risk factors and protective factors to offer youth who engage in “risky” behaviour an opportunity for resilience. Werner and Smith (1992) suggest that the resilient child is one “who loves well, works well, plays well and expects well” (p. 192). The suggestions that are offered in this paper work toward a community-based model where the community actively engages in the promotion of resilience among children and youth. Hagell (2007) has suggested that it is not feasible to expect resilience to develop among young people who may have had lifelong experiences of adversity unless their communities are willing to support them. Krovetz (1999) suggested that resiliency theory should be the basis on which all our community efforts are founded: “When a community works together to foster resiliency, a large number of our youth can overcome great adversity and achieve bright futures” (p. 121).

## Protection for Children from Home and School

It has been pointed out in the academic literature that youth who have been repeatedly victimized or witnessed violence against someone that they care about are more likely to be offenders as they grow up. Longitudinal research analyzing developmental pathways toward violence and youthful offending have found that youth are more likely to develop a delinquent career if they have parents who are abusive with each other (Baldry, 2003). The National Crime Prevention Council (Government of Canada, 1997) suggested that prevention strategies that address these root causes of crime by supporting families and keeping children safe would help prevent the cycle of violence. They underscored the importance of such prevention activities by stating that prevention programs which support children and families will lead to “meaningful reductions” in human suffering and loss, individual victimization and levels of fear in our communities, and money spent on police, courts, and custody facilities for young offenders. Research suggests that early intervention targeted at socially and economically disadvantaged youth can reduce the likelihood of long-term criminal activity.

Bolger and Patterson (2001) found that chronic maltreatment (abuse, neglect, or both) is associated with heightened levels of aggressive behaviour and repeated peer rejection during childhood and early adolescence. Utilizing the data from the Canadian National Longitudinal Survey on Children and Youth, Dauvergne and Johnson (2001) point out that children who witnessed family violence were nearly three times more likely to be involved in physical aggression at school and twice as likely to be involved in indirect aggression (i.e., excluding others, spreading gossip, etc.) than their peers who did not experience family violence. An earlier study (Schwartz, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1997) found that children who were bullied by their peers and showed aggressive tendencies had experienced more punitive, aggressive, and hostile treatment within their families. Patterson (1995) has observed that parents who use extremely harsh parenting styles or parents who are neglectful of their children are at high risk for having children who will be aggressive and coercive in interactions with others. Baldry (2003) reports that exposure to violence between parents is positively correlated with bullying and victimization in school, even after controlling for direct child abuse. In a later study, she found that where children were exposed to both inter-parental violence and abuse by their parents, there was a significantly higher rate of the children’s reporting of animal abuse (Baldry, 2005b). Chronically maltreated children are likely to have had few opportunities to experience and observe empathy and responsiveness in their interactions with parents (Zahn-Waxler & Smith, 1992). This lack of knowledge is likely to impede their ability to develop pro-social skills such as helping, sharing, and cooperation. In other words, both abuse and neglect are likely to contribute to children’s propensity to use coercive and aggressive behaviours in their own interactions with others, which may in turn also contribute to children becoming disliked and rejected by peers.

In a study of individuals who had managed to transcend the cycle of violence and grew up to be non-abusive adults despite a home life that was replete with episodes of family violence, it was found that the presence of other adults and a support system outside of the family that would not stand for the violence they witnessed was one of the key factors to their success (Harris & Dersch, 2001). These subjects felt that having access to environments that did not support the use of violence such as their school, neighbourhood, or a friend’s home was essential in the prevention of intergenerational violence. Rubin (1996) suggested that resilient individuals

have an ability to not only attract others but to use what people can give them and, thus, other people become mentors to the individual. The study by Harris and Dersch (2001) looking at adults who had been exposed to domestic violence and violent homes yet were not currently abusive or violent themselves, found that these adult survivors frequently referred to mentors who helped them cope with the violence in their families of origin. This underscores the importance of helping children who are in violent homes connect with adults who can offer support, guidance, and caring.

Patterson (1995) argues that it is essential that parents encourage pro-social behaviour in children, while discouraging coercive behaviour through effective, non-physical discipline. While some families may continue to be dysfunctional, it has been shown that exposure to alternative forms of caring can break the cycle of intergenerational violence. The Search Institute, as cited in Benson (2006), has shown in their longitudinal research that having three or more positive, non-parent adult relationships can have a significant impact on problems experienced by young people in their relationships. It seems that if we were able to actively involve other parents from our communities to share and model their non-physical forms of discipline and alternative methods of talking to children, we may be preventing future generations of violent episodes. This could become a project that would involve the wider community through the school and recreational programs. It seems that some children never experience another “parent” disciplining children in a way that is non-coercive and the use of parent role models as integral features of programs already being offered could provide some assistance in offsetting the negative risk factors inherent in children who experience child abuse and neglect. Barbara Coloroso (2002) has promoted the concept of involved parenting as a form of additional supervision and guidance to children at schools in order to prevent school bullying.

In a study which looked at deviance and other problem behaviour of a group of children who were involved in bullying at the age of 8 years, and a group of children who were involved in bullying at the age of 12 years, it was found that involvement in bullying is not a transient problem. Rather, psychiatric problems surface at the time of the bullying and continue for many years after. It was found that children who were involved in bullying at the age of 8 years and displayed deviance on psychiatric tests were five times more likely to display deviance at school at the age of 15 years. This propensity is dramatically increased as the age of onset increases to age 12, with those children experiencing bullying and displaying deviance being nearly 40 times more likely to be deviant at age 15. Further, this study found that children who are “bully-victims” at early ages not only have the most concurrent psychiatric symptoms compared to other children, but also have more psychiatric symptoms later in life (Kumpulainen & Rasanen, 2000).

Other research has pointed to the fact that bullies have been found to have more criminal convictions later in life, and they are also more likely to be involved in serious and recidivist crime (Olweus, 1993; Whitney & Smith, 1993). Hugh-Jones and Smith (1999) pointed out that victims of bullying have internalizing problems, relationship difficulties, health problems, and other adjustment difficulties even on into adulthood. Coloroso (2002) suggests that, “Kids can’t stop the bullying they experience or witness all by themselves. They need adults at home, in the school and in community programs committed to breaking this cycle of violence wherever they

see it and whenever they hear about it”, and further states that, “one of the most effective strategies to make a school safe is the physical presence of responsible adults” (p. 180).

While having strong and supportive adults in the environment is essential, it is important that those adults are apprised of the importance of understanding the bully and bully-victim phenomenon. Research has shown that few children are exclusively bullies and most have experienced both roles in one way or another, at one time or another in their lives (Nansel et al., 2001). Children who participate in bullying can be “assistants” who physically help the bully; “reinforcers” who incite the bully; inactive “outsiders” who pretend not to see what is happening; and “defenders” who help the victim by confronting the bully (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). “Bully bystanders” report feeling bad, “uncomfortable”, and “ashamed” when they see someone get the brunt of verbal or physical bullying and these feelings are exemplified if the bullying goes unchallenged by those in authority on whom the children count for protection (Harachi, Catalano, & Hawkins, 1999; Coloroso, 2002). Baldry (2005a) found that boys were more likely to ignore the bullying taking place than girls, and she argues that ignoring is an indirect way of supporting the bullying. In another study, she found “same gender identification” led to victims of a different gender from the observers being seen as more blameworthy than victims of the same gender. This was true for both boys and girls (Baldry, 2004). Previous victimization did not place bystanders in a positive position to intervene in subsequent bullying episodes. However, Baldry (2005a) did find that students who had been previously victimized were more likely to seek the assistance of an adult teacher than those who were non-victims. She draws attention to the fact that while we may be desirous that children report bullying episodes, we must be careful not to require these because “even if students themselves do not bully, this does not mean that they are willing (or capable) to stop it” (p. 35).

It is important to recognize that in order to implement “safe school” policies, it is not good enough to simply have caring and supportive adults present. The literature on school climate has shown that it is essential that the students, teachers, parents, and administrators have a sense of connectedness to the school (Sprott, 2004; D. C. Gottfredson & G. D. Gottfredson, 2002; Fein et al., 2002). The establishment of trust and connectedness to an adult in the school setting maximizes the chances that students will confide in them if a problem arises, either for themselves or if they hear that a student plans to harm others. Further, in the decision to integrate new programs into a school setting, it is not only important to consider the impact that the program would have on daily operations within the school, but to also build on the concept that the “new” initiative serves a larger purpose for the school (Gendreau, Goggin, & Smith, 1999; Fagan & Mihalic, 2003).

If we are truly committed to creating a community that supports resilient youth, then it will be necessary to tap into the strengths and assets that individual community members possess. Garbarino and deLara (2002) indicate that while parental presence in the school is welcomed in the elementary grades, by the time children graduate to middle school, a parent’s presence may no longer be welcome: “A clear message from the middle school was either that help was not wanted in the upper-grade classes, or that the school felt parents were not competent helpers past the elementary school level” (p. 51). They go on to suggest that parents should offer to volunteer their time in school in “new ways” and recommend that parents be

creative about what they can offer the schools along the lines of additional supervision or security of the environment. Coloroso (2002, p. 181) echoes this concern suggesting that few if any programs have been developed for middle school and high school related to the prevention of bullying. She strongly recommends that parents be involved in helping to create a school climate that supports creative, constructive, and responsible activities that work towards reducing all forms of violence.

Lyznicki, McCaffree, and Robinowitz (2004) of the American Medical Association, suggest that family physicians have an important role to play in advocating for bullying prevention in their communities. They argue that as consultants to schools, police departments, and community groups, physicians can educate other adults about the importance of community environments that “value caring, respect, and diversity”. Further, physicians also have a role to play in identifying at-risk patients and counselling families about the problem. To this end, they prepared a handout on school bullying that has been made available to doctors for their patients.

### **Extending our Prevention Programs for Youth to the Community of Older Adults**

It is compelling to note that young people (ages 15 to 24) not only commit the most crime, but they also have a personal victimization rate over twice the national average (Shaffer & Ruback, 2002). Conversely, people over the age of 65 have a personal victimization rate too low to make a statistically reliable estimate (Jakobsson, 2005). One reason for the low rate of victimization among older adults may be that older adults expose themselves less to potentially dangerous situations. It is not clear whether this is due to age, illness, or other factors associated with aging, or whether this is due to fear of crime. If there is a direct link between age, victimization, and the fear of crime, it has not been well researched. The aging process for many people means a slowing down of their activities and elicits fears because of greater personal vulnerability to accidents, illness, solitude, and poverty. However, we do not know to what extent the fear of crime is due to the aging process in restricting the activities of the elderly and consequently reducing the probability of their becoming victims (Brillon, 1987).

In an analysis of adolescent fear of crime, May and Dunaway (2000) conclude that factors that affect adult fear of crime are similarly important for adolescent fear, namely neighbourhood incivility and perceived risk. In particular, those who are regularly exposed to the threat of criminal victimization suffer a heightened level of fear of crime. As has been pointed out, many young people do not feel safe in their schools and feel even more vulnerable on their way to and from school (Astor, Meyer, & Behre, 1999). Even those young people, who have already been adjudicated by the youth criminal justice system, still indicate that they are afraid of becoming a victim of a criminal offence (Lane, 2006). In looking at the fear of crime research, it has been found that people who live in areas with a lot of disorder, decline, and crime report higher levels of fear than those living in other areas (Taylor, 2001). Ditton, Chadee, Farral, Gilchrist, and Bannister (2004) found that with older adults, those who lived in semi high-rise buildings designed for elderly persons and who also watched television news reported a higher fear of crime.

Hagestad (1998), in her keynote address to the United Nations to begin the Year of Older Persons, commented on the importance of moving toward a society for all ages. In an attempt to

create such a society there is a need to fight age segregation, she argues, given that in many industrialized societies the old and the young spend much of their time in “age-segregated enclaves”. Residential patterns, activities, and institutions such as schools and institutions for the elderly lead to further segregation. Stereotypes flourish under conditions of inadequate contact and are reinforced through the segregation of youth and the elderly. She discusses the importance of maintaining conversations: “When the old are not allowed to tell their story, the young grow up without history. If the young are not listened to, we have no future”.

In an attempt to break down barriers between youth and older adults, it seems that one method of creating a greater awareness of each “age segregated enclave” is to work on creative ways to bring seniors and youth together. If, as has been pointed out earlier, youth gain resilience when they have caring and supportive relationships with another adult, then it seems that a caring and supportive older adult could be the untapped community resource for many “youth at risk”. With the changes to our modern lifestyles, it is rare to have access to an extended family and older adults may provide a “pseudo family” to young people who live in chaotic and non-nurturing families. Fergusson and Lynskey (1996) talk about the isolation that many children and youth from abusive families experience. It may also serve the interests of older adults who are isolated from their grandchildren and who have much to offer young people in terms of mentorship, guidance, and the mutual caring and support exemplified in the literature on resiliency. In a qualitative study of youth and older adults, de Souza (2003) reports that the youth in her study believed that contact with older adults could prevent violent behaviour and drug abuse among young people. Similarly, the elders indicated that they could provide affection ties that would encourage trust, reciprocity, and autonomy for children and youth from disrupted families.

As we move into the years ahead, it is essential that we consider the demographic distribution of our population. Youth currently comprise over one billion people on the planet and account for approximately 20% of the world population, while just over 10% of the world population consists of seniors over the age of 65 years. It has been predicted that the current ratio of youth outnumbering older people (1.5:1) will be dramatically altered over the next 50 years, and that by the year 2050 older people will outnumber youth (1.8:1). From 1980 to 1990, the growth rate of those in the age range of 15 to 24 years was the highest growth rate of any other age cohort and constitutes the largest generation of youth in history. However, this youthful generation will decline as the growth rate of those 60 or older will reach 2.8% annually between 2025 and 2030 (United Nations, 2001). Before 2050, the number of those over 60 will surpass those under 15 for the first time in history. Over the next half century, the median age of the population is projected to reach the age of 47 in the more developed regions of the world. These projections show a dramatic change in the two ends of the lifespan, yet very little has been put in place to deal with the competing demands and requests for services for both youth and seniors.

Berg (2001) suggests that the key issue in bringing the generations together is the perception that the “generation in the middle” might believe that both youth and the elderly are liabilities and not assets to society. He goes on to suggest that for youth this bias might be called “adulthoodism” as those in the middle generation think only those in the middle can have responsible attitudes. To the elderly, the bias might be called “reverse paternalism” in which the elderly are held to be incapable and needing treatment like the very young. Both youth and the elderly may



be ill-equipped to be change agents and may encounter severe resistance with the “generation in the middle”. However, the youth and the elderly might find common cause on issues surrounding the generation in the middle and this may make the relationship more plausible for each end of the aging continuum. Braithwaite (2002) advocates for the creation of spaces within the community where young, middle-aged, and older people can get to know each other in order to “build mutual respect, develop cooperative relationships and reignite the norm of human-heartedness” (p. 323).

In any attempt to intervene in the lives of young people, it is essential to reinforce the natural social bonds between young and old, siblings, friends, and others. As Werner and Smith (2001) suggest, these natural social bonds give meaning to one’s life and a reason for commitment and caring. If we look at the work done on resilient families, we find that family protective factors assist individuals in the face of adversity. Key characteristics of resilient families include commitment and emotional support for one another. McCubbin, Patterson, and Thompson (1983) suggest that if parents are not able to provide a warm, affectionate, and cohesive environment, then other kin such as grandparents may step in to provide it. In the literature on intergenerational programming, dramatic results have been achieved in changing attitudes toward the elderly from a diverse group of young people engaged in such programs (Wrenn, Merdinger, Parry, & Miller, 1991; Barton, 1999; Couper, Sheehan, & Thomas, 1991; Bullock & Osborne, 1999; Larkin & Newman, 1997; Ward, 1997; Kuehne, 2003; Meshel & McGlynn, 2004). However, as Hagestad and Uhlenberg (2005) caution:

such intergenerational programs must ensure sustained contact, be of sufficient duration to allow for shared identity, perspective-taking and mutual socialization ...to have school children sing carols in the old people’s home at Christmas time or inviting an old person for one session at the local school to talk about World War II will not do the job of forging personal knowledge and viable ties. (p. 357)

Glass et al. (2004) in their evaluation of an intergenerational program, which was designed to harness the generative potential of senior volunteers to enhance social capital in the community at large, argue that social capital allows for effective collective action “through patterns of pre-existing social relationships characterized by mutual trust, a willingness to provide aid and support, and norms of reciprocity and mutual interdependence” (p. 97). The program was successful primarily due to the community’s ability to find a critical mass of volunteers that could provide a consistent and substantial commitment of time.

While intergenerational programs in the community may not provide a panacea for all of the problems facing youth at risk, it is important to recognize that social context is an important component of success in intervention programs. Farrall (2002) suggests that social circumstances and relationships are the “medium through which change can be achieved” (p. 21).

In an attempt to understand some of the dynamics that would need to be taken into consideration, interviews were conducted with 50 seniors and 50 youth about the potential problems envisioned in attempting to bring together youth at risk and older adults. While these comments reflect concerns that might need to be addressed in designing an intergenerational program for youth and seniors, it is equally important to consider such issues during the actual

implementation of such an initiative. In the interviews that were conducted to draw out issues that might come to the fore for young offenders involved in an intergenerational program, the at-risk youth gave the following comments:

- Youth might not find it interesting, or a waste of time.
- There may not be a commonality between the two groups, an inability to bond.
- Youth might wonder how it would help them: “Will I be expected to talk about my problems?” “Am I being babysat?”
- “Why should I trust the program?” “What will the older adults tell?” (Privacy issues)
- Youth may feel that they were forced into the situation.
- Youth might get attached to the senior and then the senior passes away.
- Youth may fear being judged or rejected by the older adult: “Are they trying to change me?” “Will I be treated like a criminal?” “Will they look down on me?”
- Youth might think seniors are afraid of them.
- Youth need the older adult to be a friend and not an authority figure.
- Will the seniors even try to understand the youth?
- Young people may not have respect for the older adults.

Looking at the responses of the older adults that were interviewed, the following are issues that they identified that might be a problem from the point of view of the young offenders:

- It might be too “uncool” for a youth to be involved with a senior.
- Youth may fear that they will be rejected or judged by the older adults.
- Youth may think that older adults will tell them things that are outdated or old-fashioned.
- Youth may feel that they don’t need help so they won’t be receptive to the program.
- Youth may feel that the seniors won’t be able to hear them (hearing impairment).
- Youth may be concerned about the rules of the program and whether or not the seniors will be disciplining them.
- Concern by youth that the guidance that they are receiving from the older adults is legitimate.
- Youth may be matched up with an older adult that doesn’t suit his or her needs.
- Youth may feel that there is nothing in common: “Will their childhood be comparable to mine?”

### **Involving “High-Risk” Youth in Prevention Programs**

As outlined by Harper and Carver (1999), involving youth at high risk for negative health outcomes in prevention education programs has presented a challenge, which may be due to the sometimes unpredictable and unconventional behaviours in which adolescents engage. Irwin and Millstein (1992) suggest that progression through the developmental stage of adolescence is marked by exploration with diverse occupational, sexual, and ideological roles in an attempt to establish a mature personal identity and subsequent participation in a range of risk behaviours. Peer perceptions and relationships also become paramount during adolescence as youth struggle to achieve autonomy and independence from parental figures. This developmental pathway is further complicated by specific life circumstances, such as displacement from home through

child protection intervention, substance use, school problems, abuse, and a myriad of other social and psychological threats.

In considering what youth need in order to be supported on their journey through adolescence, research has shown that young people need peer support, family and significant other relationships, a sense of belonging to a community that cares, the development of coping skills, and strategies to get ahead in the job market or education sectors. Building on this sense of belonging and community connection, young people can find mutually caring and respectful relationships that will ultimately lead to opportunities for their meaningful involvement. McLaughlin, Irby, and Langman (1994), in citing the commentary of an ex-gang member, stress that young people can “walk around trouble, if there is some place to walk to, and someone to walk with” (page 324).

The resiliency research literature has pointed out the need to provide interventions with young people exposed to risk that focus on developing their assets and resources (Luthar et al., 2000). Assets for an individual that may be particularly critical to develop according to Fergus and Zimmerman (2005, p. 411) are social skills for relating to peers, self-efficacy for health-promoting behaviour, academic skills, and participation in extracurricular and community activities.

Peer helping equips young people (as well as others) with basic skills to offer caring, support, and guidance (Roehlkepartain, 1996). Peer leaders offer several benefits including an enhanced ability to model appropriate behaviours outside the classroom and greater social credibility among students (Doi & DiLorenzo, 1993; Katz, Robisch, & Telch, 1989). Those young people who benefit most from peer education, according to Dryfoos (1990), are the peer educators themselves, possibly because they receive more intensive exposure to the issues than the people they serve.

With well-defined training, peer helpers can learn lifelong skills. Once peer helpers learn to teach and model positive health behaviours, they may continue beyond the program and generalize what they learned to new situations (Finn, 1981). Research has shown that peer programs modified youth’s self-reported attitudes about violent behaviour, improved school discipline, and reduced absenteeism (Powell, Muir-McClain, & Halasyamani, 1996; Tindall, 1995). Through peer interactions, individuals learn critical social skills such as impulse control, communication, creative and critical thinking, and relationship or friendship skills (Kellam, Sheppard, Brown, & Fleming, 1982; Benson, Galbraith, & Espeland, 1998). The Search Institute indicated that youth who engaged in projects and programs to help others on a weekly basis were less likely to report at-risk behaviours (Benson, 1990).

### **Peer Helping Programs for Youth “At Risk”?**

Recruiting youth for peer programs often relies on the quality of the relationship that exists between youth in school and their peer program leader. Recruiting outside of schools requires peer program leaders to establish and demonstrate trust building and relationship enhancing qualities to attract experienced “risky” youth (Carr, 1998; Shiner, 1999). Too often, peer helpers in school-based programs are trained in a way that does not prepare them to engage

in outreach work or to specifically make connections with youth-serving agencies outside of the school. Further, youth out of the mainstream may have had negative experiences with classroom-based learning and are likely to find themselves alienated from such an approach.

School-based peer training programs are often driven by subject matter, focusing on teaching peer helpers various facts and information they can share with others. Youth at risk often have a wider range of experiences, many of which will have to be addressed prior to or during the subject matter discussion. This means that the trainer must be able to personalize the content, insure that the training process is relevant to the experience of the peer helpers, and adjust the content to match the needs of the peer helpers. In the past this has meant that peer helping programs have excluded youth engaged in risky behaviour.

Caputo, Weiler, and Green (1997) found four key factors that were important in contributing to the success of peer helper programs for marginalized youth. First, any initiatives that are developed for youth should address both short-term and long-term needs of the young people who are the consumers of the service. It is important to recognize that continuity and dependability may be extremely difficult for some street youth or other young people currently leading a chaotic life. It is essential that the peer helpers be well versed on the importance of confidentiality in dealing with their clients. Further, in dealing with youth as consumers of a peer helping program, it is essential that the leaders are supported for their work. Second, programs must be socially and culturally relevant as well as accessible. Third, there must be the provision of ongoing agency leadership, support, and the necessary structure while maintaining the degree of flexibility required to meet the varying and changing needs of the clients. Staff should be involved in ongoing, consistent follow-up with peer helpers to ensure that peer helpers are given the necessary support. Fourth, it is important to educate the community about these young people to help dispel negative stereotypes and help the community gain a better understanding about who these young people are and their real needs. Misunderstandings and misconceptions can be dealt with through the establishment of a network of support in the broader community.

Prevention programs that have been primarily delivered by peers in the past have not been well researched and of those that have been studied, there was no evidence that programs with peer leaders led to better outcomes than programs of similar content led by adults (Ellickson & Bell, 1990; Tobler, 1992). However, more recent research using meta-analysis by Gottfredson and Wilson (2003) found that programs that involved peers alone were most effective. This was due to the statistical interaction between teacher and peer involvement, suggesting that the benefits that accrue to peer delivery of a program may disappear when the teacher shares the delivery role with the peer.

It is also important to distinguish between what is meant by a peer helping program and those programs that group all high-risk youth together in one classroom with a classroom teacher. It has been found in the evaluation of such programs for at-risk youth that there are unintended harmful iatrogenic effects from this practice. Rather than seeing positive outcomes as a result of such programs, there has been some evidence of the escalation of aggressive and anti-social problem behaviours (Capaldi, Dishion, Stoolmiller, & Yoerger, 2001; Dishion, Eddy, Haas, Li, & Spracklen, 1997; Cho, Hallfros, & Sanchez, 2005). While well intentioned in their design, such programs seem to further alienate the youth that they target and rather than

enhancing life skills, school connectedness, and positive peer associations, the research has shown that they seem to make the situation worse. This may be because the youth are further alienated and categorized as outcasts from a system that has already labelled them as deviant.

### **Practical Application of Peer Helping with Youth at Risk**

A project, *Peer Helpers for Youth In Conflict with the Law: A Training Resource Development Project*, was developed within the nature and scope of the mission and mandate of the National Youth In Care Network (NYICN) which exists to assist marginalized youth, youth in state care, and youth in conflict with the law to find their voices and regain control over their lives through support, skill building, and healing opportunities.

At a Youth Roundtable of the Community Partnership Symposium on Youth Justice Renewal, hosted by the Youth Justice Policy Section of the Department of Justice, Canada, one of the six recommendations made by youth to help policy-makers, service providers, and politicians make decisions that will have a more positive effect on youth crime in Canada was, “to support youth helping youth initiatives” (Hodgson, 2000).

In 1997 a project sponsored by Health Canada as part of Canada’s Drug Strategy explored peer helping programs for marginalized youth, with a particular focus on street involved youth (Caputo et al., 1997). In this work, the term “peer helper” was used as an “umbrella term that covered a range of programs in which young people provide service to other young people”. Further, Caputo et al. (1997) suggested that the work that peer helpers do includes “providing various kinds of personal support such as informal advice, mediation, tutoring, employment and life skills, and information on issues such as public health and personal safety” (p. 8). This analysis provided a compendium of street-related peer helping programs but did not go far enough in terms of other categories of marginalized youth, youth in conflict with the law, or youth in state care.

In the first phase of the project, *Peer Helpers for Youth In Conflict with the Law: A Training Resource Development Project*, a “youth” researcher from the National Youth In Care Network and an “adult” researcher from the Centre for Research on Youth at Risk at St. Thomas University were contracted to explore the concept of peer helping and examine existing models, programs, and theories. This collaborative team facilitated a National Roundtable of experts (youth and adults) to consult on the various findings of the literature and to consider the most appropriate themes and targets for a peer helper resource for marginalized youth, youth in conflict with the law, and/or youth in state care. The work of the experts at the National Roundtable further refined the essential peer helping competencies leading to a set of key principles upon which to base the peer helping curriculum. These principles were: unconditional value, respect, compassion, understanding, confidence, problem solving, being at peace with self, mentorship, and encouragement. The peer helping curriculum was developed by the Centre for Research on Youth at Risk (1998) based on these principles. The curriculum included a number of activities that focused on cognitive behaviour skills for the peer and the peer helper to work on collaboratively. These skills included building self-esteem, decreasing anxiety, communicating effectively, developing relationships with others, and asserting and advocating their rights. A train-the-trainer event for youth across Canada working on or establishing peer helping programs

for youth in conflict with the law was hosted at St. Thomas University by the Centre for Research on Youth at Risk from June 6-9, 2001.

Youth from the National Youth in Care Network are now using this peer helper training curriculum in their local communities to train others to be peer helpers with marginalized youth throughout Canada. The life skills training curriculum combines the research effectiveness of life skills training (Botvin & Griffin, 2005) with a delivery or implementation strategy that is likely to enhance success with hard to reach young people. This program has shown the importance of tapping into members of our community that may have been marginalized at one point in their lives but are now able to connect with other young people, who in turn can use their knowledge and expertise in advocating for themselves and transitioning not only out of the system of state care but also into the wider community. In Hoffman's (2004) study of young people who were impacted by violence, she found that peer assisted violence termination was an area that had received very little research attention in the past. For the young people in her study, participation in social action as part of their recovery from trauma and making the decision to desist from their involvement with a violent lifestyle, shows the value of including youth in this process and is an area that has implications for both research and prevention programs in the future.

Research on recidivism has found that the first several months after release from custody is the period in which there is the highest amount of recidivism. If programs can be designed to promote successful community re-entry with follow-up in a transitional community-based program, there should be a substantial reduction of recidivism and enhanced success. In order to consider what the most appropriate community transitional program may be, it is essential that the strengths and assets of the community be considered. It seems that utilizing the talents and skills of former young offenders as peer helpers in such a transitional program for youth coming out of young offender facilities not only promotes successful community re-entry, thereby potentially reducing recidivism, but also assists the peer helper to further his or her quest for resiliency in a supportive community environment.

### **Conclusion**

Programs aimed at preventing crime have proven most successful when community members come together around a common cause to work at solving problems in their own environment. When programs are designed with the community as a partner, individuals are less likely to feel isolated, respect is developed for other members of the community and their property, and the spirit of the community is enhanced, giving each member a sense of belonging.

We should be careful not to suggest that a program has not been successful if a young person reoffends. While rehabilitative programs are designed with a goal of reducing recidivism, it is essential that other forms of program success are included in the mix and not to totally rely on measures of recidivism to determine success. For most young people, the offending behaviour is part of growing up, of testing the limits, of taking risks, of asserting their independence. It may also be an indication of boredom and the absence of anything useful or meaningful to do. It may be a reflection of that awkward stage of life where one feels grown up but not able to participate fully in the world of adults. Generally, the offences that they commit are relatively minor and

decrease in frequency as they grow older, mature, and find a way to participate in and contribute to society.

We can reduce occasional or temporary offending by young people by helping them deal with the stress associated with the turbulence of adolescence and by finding ways of involving them in useful and meaningful activities. Educational and recreational activities to which all have equal access and which are designed on the basis of the varied needs and interests of young people are important. Access to social services can help some young people and their families deal with problems which may underlie the offending behaviour. Given what we know about the correlation between poverty, mental health, and opportunities, the economic security of young people and their families should also be a priority. These measures are all primary prevention strategies – ways of creating healthier and ultimately safer communities for all.

Hoffman (2004) interviewed young people who had been involved in violence throughout most of their lives. When these youth were asked about prevention, they noted that there were many “partial, poorly supported true prevention efforts” which tended to be built around the “tireless efforts... of a charismatic provider” (p. 223). What was most telling in the young people’s responses was their insistence that the only programs that were of value were ones structured like the Boys and Girls Clubs or Big Brothers and Big Sisters Programs which “do not give up on youth” and, as Hoffman describes, have the longevity of the neighbourhood as a key component. With this being said, one of the policies that was recommended by young people in Hoffman’s study was to “glorify youth workers not movie stars and celebrities” in order to bring about cultural change in policies which affect youth in today’s society.

Mihalic and Irwin (2003) suggest that while there has been a proliferation of “best practice” programs or models for reducing crime, delinquency, and other problem behaviours, very little research has considered the importance of how the programs were implemented. Dubois, Holloway, Valentine, and Cooper (2002) in their meta-analysis of mentoring programs for youth found that those programs which had ongoing monitoring of their implementation were much more successful than those that did not receive such scrutiny. The programs discussed throughout this paper lend themselves well to ongoing evaluation of the implementation process.

G. L. Bowen, Richman, and N. K. Bowen (2000) suggest that factors in the community itself affect resilience through several key community strengths. Communities that have numerous opportunities for participation in community life allow youth an opportunity to learn important skills such as teamwork, group pride, or leadership. Blyth and Roelkepartian (1993) suggest that a strong community should provide avenues to contribute to the welfare of others that can foster an individual’s sense of self-esteem and inner strength. Having opportunities to connect with peers and other adults strengthens opportunities for youth to access a role model, a “friend” or a confidant. The examples of practical application through parent modelling in the schools to prevent bullying and offer alternative forms of communication with children, the intergenerational programming efforts between youth and older adults, and the peer helping curriculum designed for youth in care or custody reflect the importance of a strong community involvement. These suggestions are not “extraordinary” ideas, but may reflect the power of the ordinary as suggested by Benard (2004):

What began as a quest to understand the extraordinary has revealed the power of the ordinary. Resilience does not come from rare and special qualities, but from the everyday magic of ordinary, normative human resources in the minds, brains and bodies of children, in their families and relationships, and in their communities. (p. iv)

Secombe (2002) suggests that it is essential that as a society we gain a broader, systemic view of resiliency. Based on the work of Waller (2001), she argues that risk factors as well as protective factors are cumulative and linked in risk chains. This perspective moves beyond a blaming approach to one that considers the ecological, cultural, and developmental nuances of situations in which people find themselves. As Walsh (1998, p. 12) cautions, it is essential that the concept of resilience not be used in public policy to withhold social support based on a rationale that success or failure is determined by strengths or deficits within individuals and their families. Benard (1991) had warned about this very approach in suggesting that when we create communities, we must be mindful that we show respect and care for youth as individuals so that we work towards building a critical mass of future citizens who will “rescind the mean-spirited, greed-based, control-driven social policies we now have and recreate a social covenant grounded in social and economic justice” (p. 105). In more recent years, she has called for the transformation of all our youth and human services systems through a fundamental change in relationships, beliefs, and power opportunities so that there is a new focus on “human capacities and gifts” as opposed to our present focus on “challenges and problems” (Benard, 2004, p. 10).

In working with the “untapped potential” in all of our communities by providing a safe haven for young and old alike, we are taking a step towards a community that may reflect a covenant based on social justice. This would be a resilient community



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