Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth:
Ontario Youth Against Violence Project

PROJECT REPORT
For the Hamilton "Beat the Streets" Initiative

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YOUTH ENGAGEMENT & ACTION in HAMILTON

BACKGROUND AND METHOD

Through the Ontario Youth Against Violence (OYAV) Project of the Provincial Advocate's Office for Children and Youth, Youth Engagement and Action in Hamilton of the YMCA of Hamilton/Burlington and the Street Youth Planning Collaborative combined forces to investigate violence on the street in June 2008. Focusing on street youth was decided for two reasons, first, the timeliness given the rise and profile of street-youth violence in our community, and second, the lack of information on this critical issue. A truly collaborative community development approach was adopted early on in the process to foster community buy-in and bring a range of strengths and perspectives to the table. This project was, uniquely, not housed in any one agency.

It was decided that engaging and connecting with youth would be a beneficial starting point for this investigation. Two youth leaders, in their early 20s, Anthony Hilliker and Ashlea Clegg, worked together to create and develop surveys and interviewed youth to obtain results. Throughout the process of creating and implementing the survey Jennie Vengris and Mike Des Jardins mentored and assisted Anthony and Ashlea with any difficulties or issues that arose. One of the key strengths of this project was the use of best practices in engaging the youth leaders. Meaningful input from the youth was solicited at every juncture of the project and all meetings and project activities were carried out in a youth friendly way.

Anthony and Ashlea were able to complete 143 surveys. The surveys were completed at The Living Rock (an multi-service, open-access program for street-youth), the Notre Dame House (the only youth emergency shelter in Hamilton), and on the street. The only criteria to complete a survey was age – thirty years and younger. The average age of those surveyed was 21 years old. Upon completion of the surveys, the two youth, the two mentors, and a student got together to generate a preliminary analysis of the findings. This report reflects those key findings.

On August 28th 2008 OYAV partnered with the Street Involved Youth Network to support a “Togetherness Works” barbeque. The aim of this partnership was to bring together youth and community partners. Anthony and Ashlea also used this opportunity to complete several final surveys. Youth that attended this event were also able to enter their name into a draw to win a shopping centre gift certificate.

SURVEY RESULTS

Question 1: How much do you think youth violence is a problem in Hamilton?

Youth were asked to rate this question on a scale from one to ten from violence is not a problem to violence is a huge problem respectively. One quarter of the youth surveyed rated this question with a ten, that violence in Hamilton is a huge problem. Of all youth surveyed the average ranking was that violence is an identifiable and visible problem for the Hamilton community. It is clear the violence is a big concern and reality in the lives of these youth.

Question 2: What forms of youth violence have you seen in Hamilton?

For this question respondents were able to give multiple answers.

The top three forms identified by youth are:

- Beating people up (74)
- Gun violence (70)
- Dangerous weapons (69)

Other concerning areas of violence are:

- Hate based violence (68)
- Bullying (57)
- Sexual violence (52)

Question 3: Why do you think youth become violent?

The most identified reason by youth, with 123 responses, was violence being linked to drug and or alcohol use. The second highest reason was due to being picked on – this is concerning as in the previous question, it is apparent that many youth witness or experience bullying. A lack of family relationships (105) and friends or support networks (94) was another reason contributing to violent behaviour that was voiced by many youth. Repressing frustrations and problems, mental health issues, living on the street or shelter, and the media were also voiced as contributing to violent behaviour.

Question 4: Are there people/places to go that help PREVENT youth violence in Hamilton?

Youth were not provided with choices, they were to identify them on their own. The Living Rock was identified by 59 youth (over a third) as a resource or service. The second most frequent answer was that there no places to go to prevent violence (29). Within these 29 response, Transitional Youth Program was mentioned several times, however as it closed in May 2007, those responses were grouped under this category. These results are very concerning as many youth are not aware of the services and programs that exist within their own community. If youth are not aware of them, they will not access them. Good Shepherd, Notre Dame House and Wesley Centre were identified by 26 youth as places to access to prevent youth violence. Support networks, including friends, family, doctors, social workers, police and so forth was identified by 19 youth. Youth specific organizations, such as Alternatives for Youth and Health Initiatives for Youth Hamilton were also noted.

Question 5: What is the relationship like between youth and law enforcement in Hamilton?

Youth were asked to rate the quality of this relationship on a continuum from one to ten, ranging from terrible to perfect respectively. One third of youth reported their relationship with law enforcement in Hamilton as being terrible. The average answer of all youth surveyed indicated that the relationship between youth and law enforcement was poor at best. This is tragic as this may prevent many from using law enforcement as a resource to prevent youth violence.

Question 6: What would be YOUR solution for youth violence in Hamilton?

Youth were not provided choices for this question, but were asked to develop response of their own. The two most frequent responses to this question were more programs (46) and drop-in centres (41) as a solution to this growing epidemic. Implementing an anger management program was voiced by 24 youth as a solution. Creating education and employment opportunities were also identified (10), as well as providing more free activities and recreation

opportunities (24). Interestingly, despite the youth identifying that their relationship with law enforcement is poor, it was noted that more police would help (12). Unfortunately, 18 respondents reportedly do not believe that there any solutions to stop youth violence in Hamilton.

NEXT STEPS

After the completion of the preliminary analysis the two youth leaders, two mentors, and student discussed several different methods of presenting and delivering the survey results. It was decided that in order to engage youth as well as community partners, a two pronged community strategy was needed. It was decided by the two youth leaders that a pamphlet in the form of a cigarette 'warning label' package displaying the facts and findings from the surveys would be an engaging and youth friendly way to present the findings from the surveys. This pamphlet is expected to be complete by late November.

The OYAV are currently contacting the SYPC to develop a standardized report to be shared with community partners and key stakeholders. This report will include background and method information as well as violence prevention strategies for youth. This report is expected to be complete by mid-December. A distribution strategy of this report will also be developed.

It is also important to note that further community action is required – particularly an awareness campaign and community events. This would require further funding. Consultation around potential new lead agencies may be required.