

YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON VIOLENCE

THUNDER BAY DISTRICT NORTHWESTERN ONTARIO REGION

(Engaging Children and Youth in Violence Prevention)

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“The best way to solve any problem is to remove its cause” – Martin Luther King Jr.

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CONTEMPORARY FABLE

Upstream / Downstream - *by Ardell*

“It was many years ago that villagers in Downstream recall spotting the first body in a river. Some old timers remember the poor facilities and procedures for managing the rescue. Sometimes, they say, it would take hours to pull just 10 people from the river, and even then only a few would survive.

The number of victims in the river has increased greatly in recent years, and the good folks of Downstream have responded admirably to the challenge. Their rescue system is clearly second to none. Now, most people discovered in the swirling waters are reached within 20 minutes - many in less than 10. Only a small number drown each day before help arrives. This is a big improvement from the way it used to be.

Talk to the people of Downstream, and they'll speak with pride about the new hospital by the edge of the waters, the flotilla of rescue boats ready for service at a moment's notice, comprehensive plans for coordinating all the manpower involved, and the large number of highly trained and dedicated swimmers always ready to risk their lives to save victims from the raging currents. 'Sure it costs a lot', say the Downstreamers. 'What else can decent people do except to provide whatever help and support is necessary when human lives are at stake?'

A few people in Downstream have raised the questions now and again, 'What is happening Upstream? How are these people getting into the river? Why do many of them not know how to swim?' But, most folks show little interest in finding the answers. It seems there's so much to do to help those already in the water that nobody has got time to check how these people are getting in the river in the first place.

That is the way things are in society sometimes.”

Moral: *An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.*

Comments from the Consultations

“Something needs to be done here for the sake of our children”

“There are parents who want to do something for their kids, but cannot get help to get anything going”

“We have kids in grade 3 or 8 years old already smoking and doing drugs”

“Move the Beer Store from the middle of our residential area”

“If some of these youth don’t get help, they will become worse than their parents”

“You have to be here at night to see what really goes on”

“Shoppers are scared to come downtown, and this is affecting businesses”

“The only way we kids get attention is when we cause trouble”

“Native people need help to live in the city”

“This is “Pill Bay”, you can get whatever pills you want”

“Who wants to live in this neighbourhood if you can afford to move to a safer place”

“We are a divided society. No one really cares much about the poor”

“With a Children’s Charter, Thunder Bay can do much better than this for the kids”

CREATING SAFER COMMUNITIES FOR CHILDREN

Introduction:

This report is a summary of a project conducted by the Regional Multicultural Youth Council (RMYC) for Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth. It covers information gathered in the spring and summer of 2008 from surveys, discussions, interviews and focus groups in various locations across Thunder Bay and the region of Northwestern Ontario. The aim was to engage children and youth in dialogue on violence and its effects on their quality of life, and what can be done to make things better. Parents were also consulted on the well-being of their kids and families.

The Youth Council used the questions below developed by the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth to guide the discussions.

1. What caused the youth in your community to become violent?
2. What forms of violence have you witnessed in your community?
3. What is the relationship like between young people and law enforcement?
4. Are there any violence prevention programs available in your community?
 - * Is it working?
 - * And, if so, Why?

Using the above as terms of reference, the RMYC decided to work with schools and engage students as a resource pool based on the rationalization that education is an effective strategy that can serve as a prevention program for youth violence. According to the latest Statistics Canada reports, more than 80 per cent of young offenders have below grade 10 education, and 65 per cent have less than grade 8. 90 percent of offenders in federal institutions have previous convictions; 81 per cent committed a previous violent offence.

With information like this, the RMYC rationalizes that staying in school offers many benefits to the individual, the community, and society. A good education opens doors to more opportunities, a better life, and a brighter future. It enables kids to break away from the cycle of poverty, reduces the numbers of young offenders involved in violence, and risk factors associated with criminal activities.

Creating safer schools where kids feel comfortable to learn can reduce attrition rates and offer recipes for success. And it is in this context that the RMYC partnered with Lakehead Public Schools, Thunder Bay Catholic District School Board, the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council, and ESC de La Verendrye to survey students on school safety, and get their input to create a safe and healthy learning environment.

In addition to having student leaders and selected classes participating in the survey, the Youth Council's Revolution Girl-Style/Girl Power Support Groups at McKellar Park Elementary School, and Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School provided a pool of both pre-teen and teenage students who shared their stories and experiences about violence and personal safety.

From the school surveys, bullying, discrimination, drugs and violence were at the top of the list of students' concerns. To discuss the survey results and come up with recommendations to improve the situation, the RMYC collaborated with the local school boards to host a special forum just before the end of the school year. The Schools Acknowledging Safety Solutions by Youth (SASSY) conference was a great success, and provided valuable information for the Youth Council to work on. The highlights are documented in the summary report which follows below.

More feedback on youth and violence came from discussions at Fort William First Nation, the Friendship Centre, the Multicultural Youth Centre, and other venues where the Youth Council set up information booths during the summer. Over two hundred and fifty youths, mostly students between twelve and eighteen years of age were involved in the consultations. Some street youths also participated in the studies.

In addition to working with students, we also consulted with families in public housing projects, as well as those residing in the Thunder Bay southcore (downtown), which is the area where our Multicultural Youth Centre is located.

The public housing units are run by the city, and occupied by single parents and families on social assistance. Thunder Bay southcore (down-town) has been rundown, and drug addicts, and gangs are a growing problem. All these areas are impoverished, and are regularly in the news due to high incidence of crime and violence.

Last, but not least, the RMYC fulfilled its regional mandate by travelling to Atikokan and Red Lake to consult with both the youth and adults outside the city of Thunder Bay. This enabled us to include a more regional perspective on the issues.

The project was youth-led, and managed by members of the RMYC executive. Teams of youth volunteers organized the activities, facilitated the workshops and focus groups. They also brainstormed ideas to address the situation.

The Multicultural Association of Northwestern Ontario (MANWO) staff provided technical guidance, office support, helped with fundraising, and trained peer facilitators to lead the workshops. MANWO also gathered background information on the Ontario government's throne speech and the terms of reference on safe schools.

The Northern Nishnawbe Education Council offered full use of the Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School. We welcomed this gesture as an opportunity to build bridges and encourage understanding by introducing non-Aboriginal students to a First Nations high school in the city.

Local businesses such as Safeway, and Tim Hortons donated refreshments and snacks. Other potential funders such as the United Way --Youth Scape project were approached and offered to contribute towards specific aspects of the project such as the neighbourhood barbecues.

ENGAGING STUDENTS

A team of RMYC officers and youth members from different backgrounds developed a questionnaire to engage students in the school safety survey. A test run was done at St. Ignatius High School where RMYC President, Martin Zhang attended grade 11.

Feedback from the completed questionnaires required revisions for some questions to make the responses less ambiguous. After the changes, samples were sent to school boards for final review. Once approved, the RMYC had its members and student councils distribute the questionnaires to all high schools, and selected elementary schools in Thunder Bay. More than two hundred questionnaires were completed by student leaders and targeted classes at Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School, McKellar Park School, and Sir Winston Churchill High School.

While students said that they generally feel safe at school, they identified bullying, discrimination, drugs and violence as major issues in all schools. An overwhelming majority felt that not enough is being done to address the problems.

After compiling the results, a special meeting was convened at the Lakehead Public Schools' offices to discuss a plan of action. Mr. Terry Ellwood - Director of Education, Mr. Rowan Seymour - Education Officer, Ms. Robin Laye - Employee Relations Officer, and Mr. Bill Krezonoski--School; Principal, represented the school board. RMYC President - Martin Zhang, Vice President Co-ordination Eugene Lee, Past President (Summer Student Programs Co-ordinator)– Sasha Sky, Past President (Summer Student Fundraising Manager) - Pauline Fogarty, attended the meeting. Moffat Makuto, the Multicultural Youth Centres' volunteer Youth Advisor was also present.

The outcome from the meeting was a decision to host the SASSY Conference with all four boards of education as partners. The school boards helped to promote the forum and selected the student delegates. They also sent administration representatives to the conference to encourage students to come up with solutions to create a safer learning environment. School administration also attended the reporting session at the end of the day to hear the workshop reports and recommendations from the students.

A hundred students attended the SASSY forum. The following is a summary of the deliberations from the forum, and focus groups based on responses to the survey.

Summary of Responses:

Violence:

- * 100% of the students surveyed had seen, witnessed or heard about the following violence-related incidents at school:
 - fights / assaults
 - physical abuse, pushing and shoving
 - verbal abuse, verbal threats and verbal harassment
 - damage or vandalism to the person's property
 - sexual assaults
 - swarming/gang or group beatings
 - Fights between students are the most common form of violence, but there were also verbal threats, weapons and assaults.
 - A majority of the students surveyed said that more incidents of physical violence occurred between students than between students and teachers. But verbal threats and vandalism to teacher's property such as vehicles were more common.

- * 57% of students surveyed had not seen weapons at school, but were aware of lock-downs that were scary to both the students and parents.
- * Violence is likely to occur in hallways, during recess, in classrooms, bathrooms, at sporting events, parking lots and other locations easily accessed from the school. Incidents often occur in areas where there is little or no supervision.
 - * The most common punishments for violence students are aware of are;
 - suspensions
 - talks & calls home
 - extra work to do
 - empty threats
 - presentations
 - police are called and charges laid
- * Most students believe the programs and strategies being used to deal with violence are not working because:
 - Some students do not care what teachers do, or think because their parents will always back them.
 - Some students have an attitude, and do not care about missing school. They take suspensions as time-off to do whatever they want. And since most times, no-one is home to supervise them, all they get is a break from school.
 - The punishments given do not stop violent acts, and some punishments only make things worse as students seek to retaliate
 - There is not enough “shock value” in the talks or discussions for kids to learn from the consequences of their behaviour.
 - Just reacting to violence after it occurs does not address the root causes of the problem. There are usually some underlying issues behind the scenes that precipitate the violent actions.
 - Parents are not usually connecting with their children and serving as role models for character development and the molding of behaviour.

- Students who are angry, stressed out, and use violence to lash out need help, i.e. counseling and anger-management to control their emotions. Suspensions without addressing the issues are not an effective way to help troubled students.
-Some parents are part of the problem why students are violent. Unless these parents also get help, i.e. counseling to recognize what is really happening, or try to become positive role models, not much will be accomplished by just focusing on the student alone
- Some young people feel that the justice system is a joke, because it is often very lenient to young perpetrators of violence. This sends the wrong message to the perpetrators and victims. There should be more serious consequences for students who become repeat violent offenders to protect other students.

Suggestions to deal with Violence:

Students surveyed agree that parenting has the most influence on how children turn out to be. Early childhood experiences, socialization, and the media have an impact on violence and violent behaviour. Other factors such as poverty, lifestyles and neighbourhoods also play an important role, and any strategies to address violence should take them into account. Ideas to deal with violence in schools.

- * Schools should not deal with students exhibiting violent tendencies in isolation of the home environment. Parents should be brought in and must be directly involved in what is going on. Separate and joint meetings should be held to discuss what is going on.
- * Schools should have social workers and counselors in all schools to work with large enrolments of students with complex social problems.
- * Students causing problems should be asked to provide a written profile of themselves to help teachers understand their situation better, so that they can apply appropriate measures to help them.
- * Have peer mediation programs to encourage students to talk things out.

- * There should be different punishments than what is being done now. Something that will stick with offenders, such as interactive punishments (i.e. presentations in class, or to other students involved in similar offenses talking about their incidents; workshops they must actively participate in, assignments community service in facilities or areas focusing on their offence, some form of restitution such as an open apology to the victim).
- * Bring in past victims and perpetrators of violence to talk about their past actions, and the help they needed to make a difference.
- * Create disciplinary committees with students to decide on consequences, or punishments for specific acts of violence, and recommend the course of action.

Bullying:

- * Every student surveyed had seen other students being bullied at school, and 69% said that they had personal experiences of being bullied.
- * 69% had seen teachers being bullied at school
- * Many students felt uncomfortable reporting bullying incidents because:
 - they fear of being made fun of
 - they are afraid of being bullied even more
 - they are concern of having a big deal made out of it
 - they see nothing being done about their complaint / report
 - they do not wanting to be labeled as a “tattle tale”,
 - they are not aware of the option of reporting the problem
 - they are not familiar with the complaint procedures
- * Many students are aware of anti-bullying programs in their schools, but feel that they have not been very successful so far. For example punishments, such as detentions and suspensions, have not been able to eliminate the problem.
- * Cyber-bullying is a growing problem, and many students are not aware of what schools are doing to deal with the problem.

Suggestions to deal with Bullying:

The youths felt the bully because they see others do it, enjoy the power and control of being stronger, and like the 'cool' feeling associated with it. Others bully in self-defense, to enhance their self image and status among peers, or to deal with personal issues such as family problems and social circumstances

- * Kids who bully often learn it from parents or peers who do it, or are indifferent to bullying. Schools should organize counselling sessions for the student and parents/ guardians, and provide on-going support to keep problems in check.
- * Teachers should take all forms of bullying seriously, including cyber-bullying. Students should be alerted about the problem, and schools should be proactive and creative about stopping bullying.
- * Schools should train and assign student monitors as peer supervisors to assist teachers in keeping the peace in class, hallways, school grounds and on buses.
- * Schools should develop peer mediation teams to encourage students to talk things out, rather than fight to resolve problems.
- * Have meetings /support groups at school to help victims of bullying cope with their problems in a positive manner and reassure their safety.
- * Victims of bullying must be consulted on how they want to see the issue resolved, and the supports they need to feel safe and comfortable at school
- * With increasing numbers of dysfunctional families, teachers should be trained to assume the role of 'significant others' in the lives of their students, and discuss any character development initiatives to promote social cohesion.
- * Schools should engage students in developing a code of behaviour outlining the consequences of bullying. Punishments should be creative to facilitate learning and discourage perpetrators from doing the same thing again.
- * Teachers who are bullied by students should get the support they need from the school boards so that they can concentrate on teaching

Discrimination:

- * The 69% of students have felt discriminated in their school.
- * The general reasons for the discrimination experienced by students were:
 - Race/culture
 - clothes
 - disability
 - gender
 - family (i.e. traditional, single parent, gay parents/foster parents)
 - status (poor, wealthy)
 - sexuality / sexual orientation
 - accents (way of speaking/language barrier)
 - views and habits,
 - hobbies,
 - age/appearance
 - intelligence / mental health issues
 - weight.
- * Many students said that if they saw an 'obvious' act of discrimination they would report it. The most likely places they go to are the principal, vice-principal, the main office, or a teacher.
- * Students who would not report, gave the following reasons:
 - they think it's scary because it is too formal of a process
 - they do not get any encouragement and support to lodge complaints
 - nothing is ever done about it, because teachers do not take it seriously
 - they will be picked on more, and none will be there to protect them
 - they will be labeled whimpers, and ignored
 - they will get into trouble for reporting their schoolmates
 - the complaint process is not always well publicized and convenient enough for students to use.

- * Many students know about things being done at their schools to deal with discrimination: They include:
 - multicultural programs
 - presentations
 - detentions
 - suspensions
 - calling home
 - talking about discrimination and being more aware of how it occurs.

However, the students also feel that the programs are not as effective as they could be. The reasons given are:

- Some of the teachers do not take the issues seriously
 - Teachers are generally not well trained to deal with discrimination and to implement strategies that counter discrimination.
 - There is a generation gap between teachers and students just as there is a generation gap between parents and their children. It is important that teachers be trained to narrow this gap and learn to communicate better with students from different ages and backgrounds.
 - Some teachers, because of their race, status, gender, background etc. cannot identify with victims of discrimination, and have a hard time understanding what is really going on to connect with alienated, marginalized and racialized victims to make a difference.
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- * Many students feel that schools are often reacting to symptoms of societal issues, and are not getting to the root of the problems and address them.
 - * When discrimination occurs, one's feelings, self esteem, self-confidence, pride, identity, and sense of belonging are affected.
 - * An interesting observation is that none of the high school students from the Catholic District School Board reported being discriminated against based on clothing. Obviously, school uniforms have virtually eliminated this problem.

Suggestions to deal with Discrimination:

The youth attributed most of the discrimination to ignorance and fear of the unknown.

Beliefs, stereotypes, prejudice, hatred, and jealousies learned through socialization or the media also contribute to acts of discrimination. Discrimination creates barriers, and exclusionary practices that deny other people the same access to opportunities and resources others take for granted.

- * Teachers need to be more aware of what is going on around them, and take appropriate action to stop and prevent discrimination. Introducing a simple and formal reporting process such as the Racial Incident Reporting Form to monitor racially motivated incidents should help teachers to be aware of what is happening and force them to act accordingly.
- * Teachers must be trained and provided with resources and supports to prevent, or deal with discrimination. Schools can identify knowledgeable professionals and invite them as guest speakers to sensitize other students.
- * Schools should develop peer mediation teams of students trained to bring perpetrators and victims together to talk about their actions and get the hurtful activities to stop.
- * Schools must talk openly about discrimination to make students aware of the barriers created, and consequences of denying others fair and equal status.
- * Schools should develop effective punishments that incorporate a learning process for the perpetrator. Formal apologies to victims, assignments and essays read in class, or creative in-school activities rather than suspensions should be applied.
- * Schools should engage students to develop leaflets, handouts, and information on discrimination to be included in the student handbook.

Inaction to deal with discrimination lets the perpetrators feel they can get away with it, alienates victims and restricts equal participation in activities.

Drugs:

The students described drugs as:

- something that could hurt you, and affects your state of mind
 - something extremely addictive and controlling
 - make a person feel “good or high” temporarily
 - a costly habit that has many consequences, and can ruin a future
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- * 82% of students surveyed were aware of students using drugs at school.
 - The most common type of drug is marijuana/cannabis/weed. But students had heard of ecstasy, alcohol, acid/LSD, chewing tobacco, cocaine, crack, magic mushrooms, and hash being used. Prescription drugs such as Tylenol 1/2/3, percocets oxycontin, codeine, Morphine, Methadone are growing in popularity. Cigarettes are openly used in schoolyards, and there are crowds of students hanging out in their favourite smoking areas.
 - * 58% of students believe that drugs are a major concern in regards to safety at school. They affect the individual’s mental and physical capabilities, and they could harm themselves and others. Added risks include criminal activities to pay for drugs, violence to collect bad debts or for control of drug territory, as well as dangerous drug dealers and gangs coming to school.
 - * Students in early grade school (grade 3 or 8 years old) are doing drugs and smoking creating young addicts.
 - * Most students are aware of programs such as New Experience Program, treatment facilities such as the Smith Clinic, fines, and incarceration for possession and/or trafficking, and presentations in schools, but the problem seems to be getting worse.
 - * Students acknowledged that there are parents who smoke, drink, and do drugs with their kids. * Drugs like steroids are likely to harm individuals using them than other people.

Suggestions to deal with Drugs:

Drug abuse is a serious public health issue that contributes to impairment, emotional and mental health problems, addictions, criminal activity and violent behaviour. As part of growing up, kids may use drugs to experiment, for the thrill of it, to get high, escape reality, to be cool, cope with issues, fit in, or deal with peer pressure. Some see parents, family members, pop idols, etc using, and feel that it is okay. The one observation made by the youth is that there are more 'synthetic' drugs today aimed at creating addicts for the manufacturers to make money.

- * As educational institutions, schools should be proactive and encourage the creation of anti-drug abuse clubs and support the development of youth-led campaigns to raise awareness of the consequences of drug abuse
- * Teachers should organize class projects during drug awareness week, etc. on drug, alcohol and substance abuse to be presented in class and any materials developed such as posters, poetry, audio-visual etc. should be displayed in hallways or played out to reach all students.
- * Have monitors outside to discourage smoking or make it inconvenient for the youth to smoke on school grounds.
- * Schools should offer support to kids who are using drugs, provide counseling to get treatment, facilitate and fast-track entry into treatment programs, and provide in-school after-care support similar to AA/al-anon programs.
- * Perform random locker searches, and have security guard/police patrols to make sure drugs and weapons are not being brought into school. Visible presence of security officers or sniffer dogs on the grounds will discourage misbehaviour.
- * Engage students in school-alerts similar to Crime Stoppers, and Neighbourhood Watch to clamp-down on drug dealings, and drug abuse in schools.
- * Schools should work with Parent Councils, Student Councils, the Police, health professional and other resource people to arrange presentations and collaborate to develop effective drug-prevention programs.

RELATIONS BETWEEN YOUTH AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

On relationships between young people and law enforcement, the youth we consulted felt that things were generally not very positive. This was primarily the case among minority and racialized youths who feel that they are often picked on, intimidated, harassed, or charged by the police. They also felt that social class played a role in how youths were treated. The belief is that kids with high profile parents, and those from wealthy families and affluent neighbourhoods were treated differently compared to those who were poor. They felt that police officers were more lenient with wealthier kids when it came to using their discretion, whether to issue a warning or lay charges.

The youth said that parenting, and the sensitivity of police officers influence police/youth relations. Poor parenting creates discipline and behavioural problems for the children. A lack of parenting skills is passed on to kids, and they become as bad if not worse. The consequences are obvious – youths joining street gangs in search of family, and engaging in criminal activity—drugs, robberies and prostitution--for income and survival. Involvement in criminal activities do not help to improve relations with police officers.

As we learned in the focus groups, there are parents buying cigarettes for their under-age children, drinking and doing drugs with them. This is one way to ensure that kids do not “rat” on their parents’ bad or illegal habits. Parents giving drugs to their children to sell to friends and supplement their welfare income, bootleg or buying alcohol for under-age kids for commission, reinforce these values to their children. Such activities do not help to build trust with law enforcers.

Such lifestyles at home make it difficult to build positive relations between youth and the police. If parents are involved in illegal activities, and the kids are also participating in the acts, it is unlikely that the children will be encouraged to hang around and play games with law officers. This in-turn undermines the success of local safety initiatives and programs police officers may want to initiate to improve relations.

In addition, if parents have been in trouble with the law, been incarcerated, or associate with friends who have criminal records, relations with police are not always positive. When parents dislike police, put them down, call them names, and show no-respect for law officers, the children are more likely to develop similar attitudes. They learn from their parents, and likewise will disrespect, and not trust officers.

Due to these circumstances, police officers located in our neighbourhood are having a hard time connecting with minors, and recruiting kids to participate in recreational activities they are organizing. Consequently, impoverished kids in the area are not benefit ting from the special programs and initiatives police officers are offering to help build bridges, keep the kids busy and fit, and make the community safer.

On cultural sensitivity, minority and racialized youths feel that some police officers are prejudiced and stereotype them. Such officers are not positive role models, and cannot connect with youths. They showed obvious bias, and a lack of respect for diversity. The RMYC is recommending cultural sensitivity training for officers, and is promoting the HEYouth pamphlet to bridge the gap between disenfranchised kids and law officers. This way they can feel that they are fairly treated, and equally protected by the law.

PREVENTION PROGRAMS ON VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS

The youth were aware of violence prevention initiatives in schools. Some strategies were effective, but were not uniformly applied: For example:

- Some schools such as Westgate have a Natural Helpers Program, others do not
- Some elementary schools have peer mediation, and high schools have none.
- Catholic high schools have school uniforms; public high schools have informal dress codes
- Some schools have surveillance cameras, while others have none
- Catholic High Schools have Aboriginal student counsellors, others did not.

- NNEC has Elders in their schools to talk with the students, and help them to deal with their issues.
- Catholic schools teach Aboriginal languages from elementary to high schools, while the Public school board only teaches the languages in high school.
- Public high schools have full-time counsellors, elementary schools have none
- Some schools have breakfast programs, others do not
- There are special remedial Aboriginal programs run by community agencies in selected schools only, even though all schools need them.
- There are more Aboriginal teachers serving as role models in the Catholic system, compared to the Public system.
- Some schools have run the Roots of Empathy program, while others have not.

Students want any best practices to deal with youth violence should be shared among all schools so that all students benefit. Adequate funding and human resources should be provided to make the programs sustainable and effective.

Community programs such as New Experiences, were good, but were only accessible to students through referrals. Other professional services such as counselling, anger-management, mental health supports and treatment were readily available to kids in the system, than those out. This was more reactive than proactive, because kids could only take advantage of them after they have been in trouble. It also sent the wrong message that you can get more help when you mess up.

Some youths appreciated the activities organized by agencies such as Dilico, Children's Aid, Big Brother/Big Sister, Friendship Centre, Multicultural Centre, Boys and Girls Club, Underground Gym, etc. They groups offered workshops, presentations, sharing circles, recreation, after-school activities, cultural teachings, stay-in -school supports, tutoring, etc, which helped kids to learn, keep busy and stay out of trouble. Unfortunately, the activities were often short-term projects, an this made them less effective.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO SCHOOLS

The following are recommendations from focus groups and brain-storming sessions:

1. Schools should engage students as stakeholders in all aspects of school safety so that they feel part of the solution to problems. Principals and teachers should create advisory committees comprised of monitors selected to represent each home-room class, to complement the work of students councils. They would meet one a month, or in cases of emergency to deal with safety issues that arise.

* *From the document, "Reach Every Student, Energizing Ontario Education," published by the Ontario government last winter (2008), "When students are engaged in their learning and social environment, they are better able to develop the skills and knowledge and grasp the opportunities that can help them reach their full potential, pursue life-long learning, and contribute to a prosperous , cohesive society". Using this statement for reference, we feel that schools should find new ways to consult with students regularly. They should go beyond liaising just with student councils, and create advisory committees comprised of class monitors selected to represent each home-room to ensure that all students have a voice on what bugs them at school. The advisory committees can collaborate with student councils to review complaint processes, evaluate programs, and assess the impact of services and supports to improve the learning environment.*

2. Schools should create mentor/peer support groups where older students help younger ones through their problems. The peers would receive training and orientation to work with individual students or small groups of 3 to 5 younger students, and anything discussed would be completely confidential—unless it involves security risks or harm. The students could meet during lunch on selected days in assigned rooms for 20 minutes, to give the younger people support, advice, and a peer to talk to.

- * *High schools should have peer support groups especially for grade nines to help them deal with transition to high school. Having been seniors in elementary school, adjusting to being a junior and a 'nobody' in high school can be a traumatic experience for some students. Mentoring can also be used for problem students, to help them deal with their issues. Peers can lead by the example and serve as role models.*

- 3. Schools should have a host/orientation program for Aboriginal students from remote reserves coming to study in the city, and new immigrant and refugee youth new to the country. The program would be designed to welcome them to our schools, help to ease culture shock, and assist newcomers and First Nations youths adapt to studying in our large multicultural schools.

- * *The program could be run by senior students with the help of staff advisors and some community partners and volunteers. Responsibilities would include welcoming the new students to the school, and helping them to feel comfortable, deal with culture shock, and offer supports to overcome language barriers so that they can fit in and do well in school.*

- * *Adjusting to a new school and community can create many challenges for newcomer kids who are 'forced' to join their parents when they migrate. Having a peer support group will help them to adapt and ease the transition.*

- 4. School boards should develop simple guidelines for students to report incidents of violence, bullying, vandalism, harassment, racism, drug dealings, and so forth. The complaint procedures should be well-publicized and student-friendly so that its convenient to use. Schools can use the information to monitor what is really happening among the students and whether the situation is improving or the problems are getting worse.

- * From our discussions, many students were not quite aware of how to lodge a complaint. This created situations where not many complaints were made, and this meant that teachers were not well versed about the issues, and thought that things were alright. Publicizing the use of the Harassment complaint process, or introducing the Racial Incident Reporting Form (being promoted by the RMYC) would provide students with the tools to report what is happening, and encourage victims to say how the matter should be resolved. This should also enable schools to keep track of what is really going on.

- 5. School Boards should introduce school uniforms in all high schools to make everyone feel included, foster team spirit, and discourage the stereotypes and labeling that clothes may portray that distract students from focusing on learning. If introducing school uniforms is too complicated and will take time, a formal, simple and inexpensive dress code that incorporates school board colours (e.g. light blue shirt/top, and navy blue or black pants for public schools, or red shirts/ tops and black pants for DFC/NNEC could be introduced by next fall.

- * *At a time in our community when poverty is on the rise, increasing numbers of disadvantaged kids do not need more visible embarrassment about their unfortunate circumstances. The option for schools use their own schools colours would be expensive and inconvenient should students change schools. Student Councils and students advisory committees could help to get input from their home-rooms on the ideal colours for the formal dress code, and select the designs from potential school uniform tenders.*

- * *The RMYC developed a position-paper on school uniforms used by the Catholic School Board to promote the uniform idea to parents. We can share this information with Lakehead Public Schools, and NNEC , and work with student councils to market a formal dress code.*

6. In “Energizing Ontario Education”, the Ontario Government recognizes the impact of social background on academic achievement...“One of the most consistent findings in the educational literature is the strong link between socio-economic status and educational achievement. Poverty matters in education”. It is therefore important for schools to provide the attention and supports required by disadvantaged kids to level the academic playing field.

* *Schools should identify schools with students from impoverished neighborhoods and provide nourishment for needy students so that they do well in class. Since the provincial government acknowledges the impact of poverty on the students’ potential to learn, schools should seek provincial funding for nutritional programs to improve their performance in class, and contribute significantly to creating a safer and healthier learning environment for everyone.*

7. Schools should create and support peer mediation teams to help students work through their differences, talk and listen to each other about what is going really on in their lives, instead of fighting about it.

* *Peer mediation encourages dialogue, talking and listening to settle arguments, ease tensions, and diffuse the potential for violence. Schools should identify potential peer leaders to be trained as mediators. Having a trained ‘jury’ of peers provides a sense of accountability and offers the support both the victims and perpetrators need to heal or learn from their mistakes and move on. This helps to resolve problems without holding grudges, or fear of revenge or retaliation.*

* *The RMYC has been promoting peer mediation and teen courts (peer juries) as a way to engage students in problem solving. The Council has contacts with YouCan, a renowned Canadian group based in Ottawa that can work with school boards to establish peer mediation programs in schools .*

8. School boards should eliminate split grades in elementary schools, and work with the government to implement “smaller class sizes of 20 students or fewer” to give students the attention they need and reduce the risk of dropping out.

* *The Ontario has already stated that: “Small class sizes wil continue to be a priority”. Local school boards should follow up on this commitment, and monitor that classes have 20 or fewer students as stated by the government in the Energizing Ontario Education document (page 13). Smaller class sizes will help to create a safer learning environment by giving teachers more time to supervise students during lunch, breaks, walk in hallways and school grounds, assist students after school, and help with extra curricular activities.*

9. School boards should recruit more male teachers to provide a fatherly image to students given growing numbers of women-headed single parent homes.

* *Many students participating in focus groups said that they find male teachers “less emotional” when it comes to emotional topics like bullying. They felt that it was much easier to approach male teachers and talk to them about it.*

10. School boards should hire teachers that reflect the diversity of student population to better connect and communicate with all students, serve as role models, and be a resource for staff to enhance understanding about cultural and racial issues among their pupils. In Thunder Bay, more Aboriginal teachers must be hired.

* *Students need role models, and benefits are significant if young people can identify with their teachers and connect with them. Therefore it is very important for schools to have teachers who mirror the image of the student population to improve communication, be culturally sensitive, and bridge the cultural and racial gaps, especially among Aboriginal students who have a very high drop -out rate, and face disproportionate criminal records.*

- * *Students want teachers to be more involved in their lives, rather than treating them as just pupils in their care until the bell rings. With many family breakdowns, teachers can serve as inspirational role models. They can become significant others in the student's life, understand their situation, and encourage them to break negative cycles and realize their true potential.*

- 11. School boards should have mandatory orientation courses and cultural sensitivity training for teachers as part of professional development to raise awareness on evolving issues facing all students, including new immigrant and refugee kids, and Aboriginal students from different cultural/racial backgrounds. They must learn about the supports available in the community to make all students feel included.

- * *We believe that teachers want their students to succeed. But they need more than academic training to understand and connect with kids who are not from the mainstream. In our evolving multicultural society, teachers have to deal withy parent expectations that sometimes conflict with the complex social, emotional, mental and physical needs of students. It is only fair that teachers be given additional training and the tools to help students realize their potential.*

- 12. When schools invite guest speakers, or give punishments for bad behaviour, there should be some "shock value" in the presentations and consequences to help drive home messages against bullying, violence, assaults, discrimination, abuse of alcohol and drugs, and so forth. The current ways of dealing with issues does not seem to achieve the desired effects.

- * *Many students are now used to the 'normal routine', and tired of receiving presentations that have no impact on them. They feel that talks made for younger grades do not have the same effect on older students. They feel that using past victims and perpetrators of offenses or crimes who were transformed by the experience have a greater chance of influencing them to chance, or avoid the same mistakes.*

13. Schools should give course credits, special awards, and community hours as incentives to acknowledge and reward peer helpers, team leaders, student tutors and mentors, etc involved in creating a safer learning environment for everyone.

* *Engaging students to create safer schools, is a social justice issue that has tremendous benefits to the individual, the school, community and society. Encouraging students to participate is sharing their skills and talents, as well as volunteering their time should be formally acknowledged as learning experiences that enhance citizenship. We all benefit when we encourage students to be actively involved in transforming activities that make things better for everyone.*

14. Schools should collaborate with community groups by sharing facilities, advice, supervision, and other resources that complement after-school programs in neighbourhoods. This will create partnerships, build on work done in class during the day and extend supports for at-risk youths after-school.

Through collaboration, appreciation of youth issues will be appreciated, and advocacy opportunities will be enhanced to communicate key messages. Sharing facilities will be a cost-saving move for volunteer groups that will help to forge partnerships and broaden the horizons of the youth. Students gain satisfaction from joining groups that impact causes with further reach than their classroom. Global issues are of major concern to young people, especially in our Canadian multicultural society.

Youth-adult partnership can occur after school, especially with government leaders in attendance. We suggest participatory roundtable get-togethers with youth and adults to discuss the safety prevention methods that must be used to create a school environment where everyone feels appreciated and respected.

THUNDER BAY NEIGHBOURHOOD PROFILES

To connect and consult with the wider community, and with kids out of school, the RMYC hosted barbecues with sports games, arts and crafts and music in selected areas across City of Thunder Bay. Families were invited to join in the summer fun, tell their stories, and share experiences about raising kids in these neighbourhoods.

The barbecues provided an opportunity for members of the Youth Council to meet with local residents, connect with the youth, and learn first-hand what is happening around them. This was also a chance to give children and youth a voice to express their concerns, and encourage them, their parents, and other residents to come up with ideas to improve things in the neighbourhood.

The Sites:

The RMYC identified Academy Park, Limbrick Place, Windsor Place and the Thunder Bay Southcore as ideal sites to host the events because of the large concentration of children and youth, and constant media reports on crime and violence. To establish working partnerships in the area, the Youth Council contacted the Neighbourhood Police Offices for support and familiarization with local issues such as potential risks.

A team of Youth Council officers, youth volunteers and students working under the Summer Experience Program co-ordinated the project. The Multicultural Association of Northwestern Ontario (MANWO), the incorporated parent organization of the RMYC provided insurance, trained the team leaders, and supervised the youth. The City's Parks and Recreation Department provided basketballs, soccer balls, and props. Hockey sticks, pucks, nets, tennis balls, materials for face paintings and arts and crafts were purchased. The barbecue and sound system were rented.

The project team was divided into groups responsible for specific tasks such as food preparation, games, promotion and public relations. A check list of materials and supplies that included a First Aid kit was prepared for reference.

The Youth Council's goal was to connect with the people, get them to write down responses to questions, or talk about the issues. It was important to make the children and their parents feel welcome and comfortable to tell us their stories. This ensured that we got the information about the neighbourhood, and ways to make things better.

LIMBRICK PLACE, July 11 & 18, 2008

Two events were held at Limbrick Place. The Vale Community Centre was the venue for a dance for children 12 and under, held on July 11. When the kids entered the hall, and during the course of the dance, they were asked to write or draw on large rolls of paper answers to the following four questions.

1. *What is "cool" about your neighbourhood?, and, What is not so "cool"?*
2. *What are the issues/problems in your community?*
3. *Do you feel safe? Why or why not?*
4. *What can be done?*

Those who could not write, or were concerned about their literacy skills were urged to talk. About thirty kids attended the free dance from 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.

A week later, we hosted a three hour barbeque outside on the Vale Community Centre grounds. Parents were invited to join their children. Hotdogs and juice were served. Activities such as sports, games, face painting, and a graffiti wall for kids to express themselves were also very popular. The "Neighbourhood Quality of Life Profile Sheets" were posted up, and children and their parents were invited to answer the questions.

Over eighty people attended the barbecue, in spite of a police investigation that had a large section of Limbrick cordoned off. By the time we were done, we had given out more than fifteen dozed hot dogs, and went through two large containers of apple and orange juice. Lots of information was written down, and the team also recorded comments by those who wanted to talk about their experiences orally.

The Issues and Comments:

The kids had a lot to say about their experiences at Limbrick Place, nicknamed “The Hood”. On what is “cool” about their neighbourhood, Vale Community Centre was it. This was a safe place for them to hang out, have fun, be entertained, and get support. They liked the recreational activities organized by the Boys and Girls Club at Vale. The computers, facilities for games and trips were very popular. But some people said that the membership fees charged were a barrier to some.

They also liked the play areas, the basketball courts in the neighbourhood, and the play grounds/play-fields at the Kinsmen Northwood Centre across the street.

On what is not so ‘cool’? the list included the same issues they considered as problems:

- Broken glass / Broken Bottles / Litter
- Bullying / Threats / Stalking
- Dirty yards and Unkept homes
- Drugs
- Drunks
- Gangs
- Noise
- Stealing
- Vandalism / Graffiti
- Violence

The above issues made most of the kids not feel safe. The only times they felt safe were when they were in the company of their friends, parents, or an older sibling. What received the most mention were incidents of bullying and too many drunks walking around. Parents commented on the regular drinking parties where children were neglected and left unsupervised to run around neighbourhoods at odd hours.

Many parents who spoke acknowledged that the neighbourhood was facing serious social issues that were having a negative influence on their children. They wanted to move to get away from what was happening, if they could afford it.

On What Can Be Done?, we got the following suggestions:

- X Anti-bullying, drug prevention, crime-prevention and violence prevention presentations, workshops on social issues, self-discipline and good behaviour be to help kids develop lifeskills, and team building games and exercises.
- X Creating an anti-littering program with recycling and garbage cans around the neighbourhood. Litter is contagious and makes the whole area look dirty.
- X Erecting graffiti walls or placing boards in the neighbourhood to encourage creativity, promote youth engagement, and prevent vandalism.
- X Moving people trouble makers such as drunks and drug dealers from the area, and helping residents to maintain their yards and keep their homes clean.
- X Running special activities such as the Girl-Power program the RMYC used to have at Limbrick, talking and listening to the kids about their issues, and working with them to organize their own activities.
- X Training sessions in lifeskills, good manners, discipline, and any other topics that can help to make a difference.
- X Organizing more low-cost recreational activities for children and youth.

Parents who attended the barbecue wanted to know what the Youth Council would be doing with the information we collected. We promised to share it with them.

ACADEMY PARK, August 13, 2008

In spite of a rather cloudy day with a few drizzles, more than sixty people came to the barbecue. The responses were overwhelmingly on the negative side in regards to "What is 'cool', or not so 'cool' about Academy Park?" One positive thing happening was the Urban Aboriginal Strategy Neighbourhood Capacity Building Program operating in the area one day a week. Aboriginal kids really liked participating in the activities.

On 'What is not so cool?', the list included:

- Break-ins
- Drugs & Drunks
- Eggs getting thrown at windows
- Fights / Violence
- Loud noise
- No playgrounds or recreational facilities for youths/teens

On issues in the neighbourhood, the residents raised the following concerns:

- Bad parenting, Poor role models in the home / Kids copying bad habits
- Break-ins / Theft / Robberies
- Discrimination / racism
- Drivers not yielding for pedestrians
- Drug abuse
- Drunks / Drinking at night and sleeping during day
- Gangs / Being stalked
- Getting beat up / Bullying / Violence
- Murder
- Noise, people shouting and yelling at night
- No supervision of kids day or night
- New people in town getting placed in low-come housing

- Native people from reserves are uninformed about issues in community
- People armed or carrying weapons for self-defence
- Poor security. Late response to calls in spite of Neighbourhood Police office
- Stray animals
- Vandalism / Egging windows / Graffiti

On safety, many of the resident said that they feel safe during the day, but not at night.

The kids felt safer in the company of others, as a group, or with an escort , and were afraid of bullies and stalkers. They said it was a tough and rough neighbourhood.

For “What can be done?”, there were many suggestions such as:

- X Anti-bullying, drug prevention, crime-prevention, violence prevention workshops and presentations on social issues the kids want to discuss & learn more about
- X Community programs/activities
- X Counselling services, anger management, parenting, basic hygiene, etc.
- X More awareness programs and support services for new residents
- X More police presence. Regular use of the Police Neighbourhood Office
- X More programs to educate children and parents about cleanliness, safety, etc
- X No drunken people / ban alcohol
- X No littering program with recycling and garbage cans around the area
- X Parenting courses and lifeskills workshops
- X Clean up poorly kept homes and dirty yards
- X Recreational activities for children and youth / arrange bus trips to pools, etc
- X Social classes in schools / working together
- X Support groups, counselling services, out-reach
- X Surveillance cameras / links to Eye in the Sky
- X Volunteer development for community clean up, community pride

Many Academy residents want their neighbourhood to feel safer for children.

WINDSOR PLACE, August 19, 2008

Windsor Place was the last public housing project area the Youth Council hosted a community barbecue. It also proved to be the busiest and most informative because of the experience the youth team had gained from the other events.

On 'What is "cool"?', the Urban Aboriginal Strategy Neighbourhood Capacity Building Program was mentioned as the only positive thing happening in the neighbourhood. Unfortunately, during the summer, the program was available only one day a week .

On 'What is not so "cool"?' the list included the following issues that were also mentioned as problems in the neighbourhood:

On the question: "Do you feel safe in your community? Why? or Why Not?"

Some people said that they felt safe in the company of friends and family. A majority said that they did not feel safe at all in the neighbourhood. Their reasons given are:

- Bad people who don't respect other peoples' children
- Bullies
- Don't feel safe around buildings, scared of being jumped
- Drugs
- Drunks
- Drinking and driving
- Fighting
- Gangs
- Playground not safe for children
- Many prowling the neighbourhood at night
- No police presence
- Lots of traffic at certain spots
- People should watch their kids at playgrounds

On “Issues” in the neighbourhood, the list included the following:

- Alcohol / Drinking and Driving
- Boredom
- Bullying / Cockiness
- Broken Glass / Broken Bottles
- Drugs
- Gangs
- Garbage all over / Littering / Dirty Homes and Dirty Neighbourhood
- Kids removing paving bricks, damaging sidewalks
- Newcomers to Thunder Bay, new to city issues, lack of control
- Noise, People shouting late at night
- No respect, people arguing in public
- People yelling at night / Yelling and swearing from outsiders
- Partying out of hand
- Parents yelling at children unnecessarily / child abuse
- Poverty / Low income / Hungry kids
- Racism / Discrimination / Name calling
- Unsupervised children / poor parenting
- Vandalism
- Violence / Assault

For “What can be Done?” the suggestions were as follows:

- Be nice to each other/ Presentations and workshops on anger and empathy
- Community watch / Neighbourhood watch / Night watch
- Create and support local volunteer programs
- Fix the children’s playground, replace dirty sand, and make it cleaner for kids
- Get people together in groups to address the issues
- Good adults and role models to say NO to gangs
- Help to organize activities for children and their parents

- More affordable housing for low income
- More parental supervision / parenting courses
- More police presence/Call cops when trouble is brewing/More security patrols
- Move alcoholics and drunks out
- Organize a community clean-up to put trash lying around in garbage cans
- Open Forest Park School for community activities for both parents and kids
- People clean-up after themselves / neatness and community pride
- Provide more programs to keep kids busy
- Put up signs/rules for neighbourhood
- Teach people to maintain their homes and yards, have clean home challenge
- Tell trouble makers to cease causing mischief, or move out

The parents who came to the barbecue were very motivated to do something to improve the neighbourhood for the sake of their children.

OBSERVATIONS FROM THE PUBLIC HOUSING SITES

There are many houses and a lot of children all concentrated in one area in public housing projects. The homes are primarily for low income people, and different cultural groups including newcomers to the city live in the neighbourhoods. Racial tensions are common, and this creates potential for conflict among both the children and adults.

Many parents are concerned about the negative influences surrounding their children, which they feel makes them prone to involvement in criminal activities. Having nothing for kids to do increases their chances of getting into trouble, being involved in criminal activities, becoming part of wannabe-youth gangs, or joining real youth street gangs.

The public housing setting is ideal for trying pilot projects with interested parents who want to transform things in their neighbourhoods. We need to capture any enthusiasm to improve situations, and develop local capacity as stakeholders for change.

PATERSON PARK / MCKELLAR / SOUTHCORE: July & August, 2008

The barbecues for the South-core were held at the parking lot next to Paterson Park in front of the McKellar Park Neighbourhood Police Office. Because the location is by our Multicultural Youth Centre, we had the barbecues and kids sports every Friday evening in July and August, from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. On some of the days, the games lasted longer because the kids were having so much fun.

With so many people hanging around Paterson Park all day, we did not publicized the events widely for fear that the crowds would be too big and hard for the youth to handle. In spite of the low publicity, we still had hundreds of people turning out for the barbecue and a lot of kids coming to play games. This kept us busy, and over the summer, we went through nearly two thousand hotdogs.

The southcore barbecues enabled the RMYC to meet and network with the common folk most members of the Youth Council's summer team would not normally associate with. The events attracted many kids, families, seniors, the homeless, and those facing mental and social challenges. There were also many Aboriginal families, some new to the city. Residents from the John Howard House and the Thunder Bay Shelter House located in the neighbourhood also showed up. They were all at their best, stood in line, did not swear or used foul language, joined in the fun, and helped with the clean-up.

On issues of safety, some people said they felt safe during the day, or because they had their "boys" to back them up. Even then, certain places such as the bus terminal, Simpson Street, or the alleys downtown were considered unsafe. There is a beer store in middle of the neighbourhood next to homes, and with several bars surround the area, alcohol is readily available. The problem is very evident in summer when the homeless drink outdoors. A Methadone clinic in the area helps to control illegal drugs, but many pills and medications are on the street, that the area is referred to as "Pill Bay"

A majority of people said that they did not feel safe at night due to:

- Addicts - alcohol and drugs
- Afraid of being jumped, robbed, or assaulted
- Brodie Street bus terminal not safe at night
- crazy people and a lack of self-control associated with the area
- Needles, condoms, littered all over.
- People with serious mental health issues talking to themselves all the time
- Stalkers, sexual assault, being raped
- Young crowds and gangs that come to hang out in the area.

On the issues facing the neighbourhood, (What in not "Cool?") the list included:

- Alcohol abuse / Drunks / Under-age drinking in lane-ways
- Arson
- Beer store, and too many bars and booze-cans in neighbourhood
- Break and Enters
- Chemicals / Prescription drug addicts / Junkies
- Discrimination / Racism / Hate Crimes
- Drug dealers
- Fights, Assaults, Stabbings, Murder
- Gangs
- Graffiti
- Many people with mental health problems
- High cost of living / many people on low incomes
- Homelessness, Some people kicked out of the Shelter have no place to go
- Neglected homes and abandoned buildings
- No structured activities for kids / No safe play areas & playgrounds for children
- Littering
- Poverty / Many people / families cannot live on their incomes and allowances
- Prostitution
- Robberies
- Run-down houses, neglected apartments and buildings

- Rudeness / Bad behaviour
- Unemployment
- Vandalism
- Violence

Some of the issues such as homelessness, alcoholics, drug addicts, poverty, violence, and litter, are very visible in the area. Poor people sleeping in Patterson Park, beggars and pen-handlers on street corners, some right in front of our Youth Centre. Others sell cheap merchandise, pawn stuff, search for cigarette butts to smoke, and search garbage cans for food. Those digging into restaurant garbage sheds rip open bags and cartons, and leave litter everywhere--just as cats and dogs do. Mental health adds to verbal violence, and shouting is common. Some arguments end in physical violence. Other people use alleyways as toilets. Vomit, urine, spit and feces are a common sight behind buildings including our Youth Centre, making it messy, smelly, and a health risk.

Litter is common place. Broken glass, broken beer bottles, needles, used condoms, empty cigarette packaging, cigarette butts, pop cans, coffee cups, candy wrappers, and potato chip packages and lots of flyers are everywhere. The Evergreen United Neighbourhood Trash Bashers have been doing a great job cleaning up the mess in the neighbourhood. The group has also been involved in various community activities including organizing the Neighbourhood Fall Festival, making them something "cool".

Other "Cool" things were the community garden, the John Howard House and Shelter House for the homeless. Community drop-ins mentioned were The Rock and Street

Reach. Youth initiatives included the Underground Gym, Boys and Girls Club in the East End, the Multicultural Youth Centre, Urban Aboriginal Strategy Neighbourhood Capacity Building Program, and Youth Zone at McKellar Park School. The food bank, and the used clothes depots are valued services that add a "coolness" to the area. The swimming pools (Dease and Widnall) are popular with kids.

The Northwest Health Centre, and Community Coalition Unified for the Protection of our Children and Youth (CCUPCY), were known to some for their drug and anti-gang prevention programs. Peacekeepers, the Fort William Neighbourhood Renewal and RiverFest helped to promote the area's positive image. First Nations Organizations and Aboriginal agencies were 'cool' to many people for providing much needed services. St. Joseph's Health Centre, Superior Points, the Methadone Clinic were considered assets to the area, even though there were some concerns about the nature of the clients. City Hall, Volunteer Organizations, Ontario Works Learning Centre, and Victoriaville Centre (Mall) and all the shops in the area were also 'cool'.

Evergreen, a grassroots group operating in the area was also mentioned as a successful example of a volunteer capacity building pilot project working to improve the neighbourhood. The RMYC has been working with Evergreen to engage local youths.

In spite of an impressive list of the "cool" things mentioned, some of the people did not know of the services available. Newer families, transients, youths, and a lot of Aboriginal people were not familiar with some of the 'cool' groups, social service agencies mentioned, and the supports available. Even though City Hall is located in the vicinity, there is a general feeling that the neighbourhood has been abandoned. As more Aboriginal people move into the area, some people are of the opinion that things will get worse. The area will continue to be run down unless our political leaders are willing to invest in remedial programs that empower people to help themselves. The Neighbourhood renewal committee working to change the negative reputation is one group giving people some hope that the area may be saved..

What can be done to improve or change the neighbourhood:?

- Better lighting in alleyways and a bus terminals and bus stops
- Clean up the community
- Communicate more with residents and work together for change
- Consult with the Aboriginal community on their unique needs and help them

- Create positive places for youth
- Give people a chance to speak out about issues
- Have graffiti walls to cut down on vandalism and liven up abandoned buildings
- Help the less fortunate, talk with them to find solutions
- Increase taxes to get better crime prevention and police protection
- Legalize salvia
- Lower gas prices / Lower cost of living
- More activities for kids in the area
- More education / Kids staying in school
- More recreational activities
- More peace-keepers patrolling neighbourhoods
- Move the Beer Store from the middle of the neighbourhood
- Open more drop-ins with counselling sessions
- People acting more mature / self-discipline
- Put more public garbage bins in neighbourhood
- Stop wasting money on more studies, work with groups already doing something
- Support the Multicultural Youth Centre
- The City should fund volunteer groups to do more out-reach work in the area

GIVING ORDINARY PEOPLE A VOICE

Towards the end of the Southside barbecues, the RMYC decided to include another exercise to add to the dialogue. Our youth team was interested to find out what ordinary folks who rarely have opportunities to talk with our community and political leaders would want to say if they had a chance to meet them.

Below is a synopsis of what some of the people wrote down on the paper banners, or verbally told the Youth Council team they would like to tell our Police Chief, Mayor, Ontario Premier and Prime Minister.

Police Chief

- X Cultural sensitivity training and mental health training for police officers
- X Doing a good job to make the community safe
- X Do not to look down upon Aboriginal youths, treat us as equal to everyone
- X Get rid of racist officers
- X Help us to get safe places for the youth to hang out in this City!
- X Not enough officers to do a good job to deal with gangs and protect all people
- X Offices should have more respect towards all people
- X Officers should get educated on cultural aspects of Aboriginal families
- X Police officers should not point guns at people for threats
- X We do not see you around much
- X Where are the Neighbourhood Police Officers when we need them?

Mayor

- X Attract more businesses to Thunder Bay
- X Desperate! Need places for youth to hang out after school and on weekends
- X Do something to clean up our troubled neighbourhoods
- X Go to meet poor people and struggling families in their run-down homes
- X Have a budget dedicated to the Children's Charter
- X Having an Aboriginal Liaison Officer is a big plus for the City
- X Help charities with some of the Casino money
- X If you can find money to repair City Hall, you can spare some cash for the kids
- X Listen to the ordinary people's concerns too
- X Meet with Aboriginal leaders to understand the issues from their side
- X Play areas for kids in the downtown
- X Poor parents/families need help with affordable recreation for the kids
- X Support prevention programs at youth centres to keep kids out of trouble
- X There should be a youth advisory committee (Junior Youth Council) for City Hall
- X We need a community centre in the southcore

X You need to connect with the Aboriginal more, and get to know us better

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Premier

- X Change legislation for First Nations mining rights
- X Expand the Youth Challenge fund to other communities outside Toronto
- X Focus on prevention programs to stop problems getting worse
- X Have more addiction and treatment centres for youths
- X Help families living in poverty , too many hungry kids
- X Imprisoning KI leaders was unjust and unfair
- X Do not close neighbourhood schools
- X Put more money into healthcare
- X Stop downloading services and programs to municipalities
- X Thank you for funding programs for disabled people
- X Use lottery funds to help youth centres keep kids out of trouble
- X We need funding for youth centres to keep kids out of trouble
- X Your idea of opening schools for use by community groups is great!

Prime Minister

- X Canada needs a national youth council for government input & decision-making
- X Do something about gas prices
- X Help single parents and families living in poverty
- X More funding for Aboriginal youths coming into the city to get their education.
- X More money for foreign affairs
- X More Native workers to deal with issues such as the legacy of residential schools
- X Quit taking Canada 's resources and selling them. They belong to Canadians
- X Save the environment, protect Mother Earth.
- X Thanks for apologizing about residential school abuse
- X Twin the Trans-Canada Highway
- X Use taxpayers money wisely
- X We should also spend as much money to fight terrorism in our country

- X You are doing a good job / Good job, bud!
- X Speed up treaty negotiations and land settlements with First Nations

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YOUTH-TO-YOUTH FOCUS GROUPS – THE STORIES

Simpson–Ogden Neighbourhood from the Kids Perspective

Between July 8, and August 15, the RMYC held a series of focus groups to discuss youth concerns in the Ogden - Simpson Street Neighbourhood. Participants were local youths ages 10-13 who live in the area. Even though many Youth Council members who volunteer at the Youth Centre on a regular basis thought that we are familiar with what goes on in the area, we were appalled with the stories we heard.

It was hard to believe that the young people we were talking with were living with such experiences on a daily basis. Compared to some of us, the lives of the kids in their neighbourhood were different and shocking. When we talked and asked questions, some of the responses were very casual. They all talked about what was happening in a rather innocent manner, even though the issues were serious and of grave concern.

This was a youth-to-youth consultation covering many topics. The young people talked about alcohol, drugs, prostitution and violence as everyday problems. They did not feel safe due to drunks prowling around, prostitutes, gangs, drug-dealers walking the streets. They regularly see police cruisers patrolling the streets, but they are usually not quick enough to respond and do something when things happen.

When we asked how they felt about living in the area, one girl responded that: "I live near a beer store and a bar, what can you expect?" And from the look in her eyes, you could feel the disgust of calling this neighbourhood her home. Break and enters, damage to vehicles, and vandalism to property are common as people try to get cash to buy booze, drugs or pills. Corner-stores in the area have been robbed several times. Needles are everywhere posing a health risk to kids playing in the area. This was a conspicuous problem when members of the Youth Council joined the Evergreen

Neighbourhood Trash Bashers on Wednesday evenings to pick up garbage in the lane-ways and side-streets.

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Violence is a major concern. It is not safe for kids to hang outside after dark. There was a consensus among the youths that incidents of stabbing, fights, assaults and other forms of violent acts are on the increase. Gangs, and assaults are common when people drink. There are also cases of murders in the area. This restricts the kids' movements in the area, making them feel like prisoners in their own neighbourhood.

An extreme case of violence was when one youth spoke of a person being pushed off a fourth-floor balcony in their neighbourhood. They watched the body being taken away in a stretcher, presumably dead. They have also seen suicide attempts in the same area, and watched some people threatening or trying to jump off buildings.

The youth were aware of incidents of sexual assaults and girls being harassed by drunks. With all the drinking going on, they said that young girls, or boys for that matter, were very vulnerable to being sexually exploited or raped. The young people we talked with said that they constantly see 'hookers' walking the streets, and being picked up. One girl aged 13 told us that while walking with her mother, men would drive by consistently giving them gestures and trying to pick them up. Similarly, a 13-year-old boy told us of how one woman standing on a street corner openly asked him if he wanted to have some fun.

It is a major concern that these kids are exposed to prostitution on a daily basis. Some kids even hear the cries of some 'hooker' being assaulted in back lanes. Obviously, this is not a safe environment for children, and, really, this is not an ideal area to raise children and subject them to this kind of experience. One just wonders about the long-term impact on the kids growing up surrounded by these negative influences.

For the Youth Council members who are not from the area, it was an eye opener to see the young people speak so casually about the odd things happening in the neighbourhood. Their comments were punctuated by some giggles, as if it was no big deal. This revealed a growing divide of what is 'normal' between the kids from troubles

areas, and those living in the more affluent neighbourhoods. They have no idea of what their peers are exposed to or facing everyday.

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The stories did not end there. When we asked them if they were happy about their situation, there was a resounding NO! This was primarily due to the safety restrictions this imposed on them. For a “wish list” on the changes they would like to see, they had plenty to say. In order for them to feel safe, they want the drunks and junkies taken away, and the beer store moved from the residential area. They wanted the hookers and pimps off the streets. And, they also wanted adults stopped from buying beer for other people too drunk to be served, and doing beer runs for underage kids in the neighbourhood. This is amazing! It shows that anti-drug, and MADD programs are getting through to some kids.

A majority of the youth in the focus groups were in care. Some openly acknowledged that they suffered from Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, or had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. The fact that they may have been taken away from their parents due to alcohol/drug abuse, may have influenced their ideas against addictions. Realizing and acknowledging these issues as problems is a positive beginning for the youth. It is inspiring that even though the things they talked about seem ‘normal’, they felt that what was happening was not right. We should support the youth.

The young people want to be involved in positive things. They would like a break from seeing the bad things in their neighbourhood. They would benefit from being exposed to something to help them feel good about themselves. When we asked them what they normally do during the day? They said that they usually go to their favourite summer hangouts such as Dease and Widnall pools (which apparently are being considered for closure). They did not like the ‘splash pads’ the City is promoting as a cheaper alternative because they are for little kids.

They felt that there was not much for teenagers to do in the area. With no play grounds, and no money to go out elsewhere, they relied on Youth Centre for computers, to watch movies, and just hang out with their friends. Those closer to the

East-End went to the Boys and Girls Club. But using the under-pass to get there is very scary.

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Other things they enjoyed and wanted to participate in are: sports, arts and crafts, drama, dance classes, karaoke, guitar hero, summer camps and going on trips. They also liked talking circles and workshops. When we asked them about the issues they would like to discuss, they wanted to learn about drugs and alcohol, bullying, violence, crime, racism, eating disorders, mental health, jobs, good manners, teen sexuality and relationships. Most of the girls in the focus group were part of the RMYC "Girl Power" initiative at McKellar Park Central School. They enjoyed participating in the presentations where they took turns to share what they learned from the issues they researched on computers. This is how many were introduced to the Youth Centre, and have been dropping in regularly.

The youth hoped that the RMYC would find money to keep the Youth Centre open regular hours when schools opened in the fall. Having hung around with us, they wanted to organize after-school activities, and plan recreational events to get friends and other youths involved. Some having problems with school work said they would benefit from reading groups, homework clubs, and some tutoring on difficult subjects.

SPECIAL SUMMER ACTIVITIES AT THE MULTICULTURAL YOUTH CENTRE

During the summer project, the Youth Centre was open from 10:00 a.m. to 10: 00 p.m. Initially, the youth came to use computers, and we were able to put twelve units in service. As more young people dropped in with nothing much to do, we had to find ways to keep them occupied while waiting their turn at computers.

We got the youth to work with the Summer Experience Students to plan their own activities, participate in community events, and do volunteer service. For example, on Mondays, we organized "Active Youth" where the youth walked or jogged around Paterson Park to exercise, promote fitness and good health. With many drunks and pen-handlers around, some people avoided the area. Having youths exercising and

hosting the barbecues in the area was a way to 'claim the Park back' for the use of everyone including kids.

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On Tuesdays we had "Guitar Hero Tournaments". This brought local youths from the neighbourhood to the Youth Centre to collaborate the Youth Council team. The room with the big-screen TV was filled with aspiring 'Thunder Bay Music Idols', and fans.

On day-time Wednesdays, we held "Jamsesh". Youths were invited to bring musical instruments for the jam sessions. A karaoke machine, sound system and musical equipment were rented. Jam sessions were an opportunity for youths to share talents and skills, as well as practice for performances at RMYC barbecues and community festivals. We discovered many talented young musicians in our community.

In the evening, we volunteered with the "Evergreen Trash Bashers: to clean up the Ogden - Simpson neighbourhood. This was also an educational exercise to learn about safety in regards to needles and condoms discarded in the lane-ways. It was only the youth from the Centre who joined the adult volunteers to clean up the neighbourhood. The Youth Council's strategy to use youths to recruit their peers and mobilize them for community service was effective at getting young volunteers.

Thursdays were for Movie Nights. The youth chose the movies to watch. But it was agreed that they would not be too violent, degrading to other people, promoting drugs or other negative lifestyles. The turn out was good as older youths brought their siblings along. The Youth Council fundraised for the popcorn and refreshments.

On Fridays, we had the South-side Community barbecues. These were very popular with both the youth and adults alike. The City's Parking Authority allowed us to use the parking lot after-hours. We got power for the sound system from the McKellar Neighbourhood Police office. Feeding the kids attracted many and encouraged them to actively participate in the games with the Youth Council team. It was sad that after the events—some of the kids were reluctant, or did not want to go home. As one kid told us: "I don't like going home because everyone is drinking. I don't want someone crawling in my bed when I am sleeping". We got to know the kids personally. They

began to confide in us, and with trust established, we were able to talk and provide information on where they could go for help.

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COMMENTS AND ANALYSIS

The children and adults who came to the community barbecues had many stories to share. Parenting was mentioned by many as major problem. Many Aboriginal kids are affected by the inter-generational impacts of residential schools. We heard of parents who party hard and stay up all night. The children are afraid to come home to bed for fear of being assaulted verbally, physically or sexually. The partying parents, sleep most of the day, and the kids cannot stay home so as not to disturb the sleepers. Ironically, some of the drinking parties are to celebrate the return of someone from alcohol or drug treatment, or prison.

Such situations left kids running about outside, unsupervised, and exposed to various risks in the neighbourhood. The children were often hungry and vulnerable to negative influences such as stealing and involvement with gangs. Bullying and violence were common, and kids were carrying knives for self-protection. Unfortunately, the chances of using weapons increase when armed kids get into arguments or are threatened.

The issue of poor parenting creates discipline and behaviour problems for the children. This is a worrisome trend as a lack of parenting skills is passed on to the next generation. Unless there is intervention, and something is done to break the cycle, the kids will become as their parents, if not worse. The consequences are obvious – youths joining street gangs in search of family, and engaging in criminal activity—drugs, robberies and prostitution--for income and survival. Their generation will be more troubled adults and desperate kids who threaten our safety and security because they have nothing to lose.

We also heard stories of parents buying cigarettes for their under-age children, drinking and doing drugs with them. This is one way to ensure that kids do not “rat” on their parents’ bad or illegal habits. Some parents gave drugs to their children to sell to friends and supplement their welfare income. Others regularly bought alcohol for

under-age kids (as runners) for commission, or received free beer for the service. The temptation is a lot for many people to resist if they are on low income or low on cash

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Such lifestyles make it difficult to build positive relations between youth and the police, and undermine the success of local safety initiatives and programs. Police Officers stationed in local neighbourhood offices told us that they were having a hard time recruiting kids to participate in recreational activities they organized. Obviously, if parents are involved in illegal activities, and the kids are also participating or joining in the acts, it is unlikely that the children will be encouraged to hang around and play games with law officers.

Some younger girls working 'the streets' came to the Centre for free donuts donated by Tim Hortons. Many were Aboriginal, victims of sexual abuse, had mental health problems or suffered from addictions. In spite of the risks with their lifestyle, some rationalized that they chose who to sleep with, and got paid. When they were abused, it was rape, and they got nothing but pain. According to Wawatay News (June 17, 2004), up to 75 per cent of sex crimes committed in First Nations communities are against females under the age of 18, 50 per cent of those are younger than 14 years of age, and the incidence of sexual abuse in some communities is as high as 75 to 80 per cent for girls under eight years old. These unfortunate circumstances contribute to creating a pool of young abused women vulnerable to prostitution.

When some of the kids started doing drugs, they got them for free (as sampling). It was fun, and helped them to escape personal problems. Now they are addicted, out of school, and have to sell their bodies to feed the habit. There are sad stories of young girls being forced by boyfriends to sleep with strangers in exchange for drugs, or to settle unpaid drug debts. They were afraid to say no, or leave the abusive relationship for fear of being beaten up, and abused even more. With no safer ways to escape the situation, had very limited options to turn to, many felt trapped, and some contemplated suicide to end it all.

The consequences have profound social implications as many of the young women are already single mothers. The children are often abandoned, and risk having mental health problems due to their parents' alcohol, drug, and substance abuse. This

contributes to an ever increasing number of kids in care and at risk, who end up in correctional facilities.

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Racism was mentioned many times over. The problem is wide spread, and this is why the RMYC posted a code of conduct at the barbecues to make everyone feel welcome, avoid unnecessary tension, and reduce the potential for conflict. The problem is wide-spread, and is mostly polarized between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginals. The issue tends to take an economic status/class' or lifestyle dimensions among some people.

Taking our Centre for example, young people of all backgrounds hangout together and learn to get along. Things change drastically when the same youths go out on to the streets. They avoid drunks, pen-handlers, strangers or anyone making passes at them or bothering them regardless of race, age, or gender. Behaviour and bad habits, rather than race alone, are the main reasons they give for discriminated against other people.

The Youth Council acknowledges the presence of homeless people, those living in poverty, addicts (junkies), and the mentally ill residing in the southcore. The numbers are continually rising, and the new Shelter House is always full and very busy. At the same time, the destitute are becoming more daring, coasting shoppers and begging for money, cigarettes, or food. This has become so common now that it is a normal scene at our Youth Centre. Unfortunately, some of the people seem to be beyond redemption, and do not feel like helping themselves to deal with their issues. They do not seem to care about anything else in life—even their children--except feeding their addiction habits.

Alcohol and drug abuse can lead to violence, robberies, assaults and petty crimes that are rampant in poor neighbourhoods. News and police reports highlight the extent of the problem in the city. As confirmed by the youth who participated in the focus groups, things are deteriorating, and in the south-core, and outsiders from the area are scared to hang around the neighbourhood after dark. Even parents of our Youth Council officers do not want their children to use the Brodie Street Bus Terminal to come to or from the Youth Centre. They give them rides, or insist that alternative transportation be arranged for safety reasons. It confirms a deteriorating perception of

the situation as this was never the case when the Centre first relocated to the southcore.

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Littering is another disgusting problem in poor neighbourhoods. Garbage is everywhere, and what is alarming is the type of litter. Next to flyers, food wrappers, pop cans and coffee cups, are discarded needles. This shows the extent of the drug problem and potential health risks to children. A growing appetite for drugs fuels crime and violence associated with criminal youth gangs, who, unless they are stopped, have the potential to take over and terrorize neighbourhoods. Something needs to be done now to break the cycle and stop passing the negative cycles to future and successive generations.

Last but not least is the problem of poverty. Children are victims of circumstance. Like race, their economic status is not a matter of choice. If the parents are poor, the kids will naturally live in poverty. This is a growing problem in Canada. The number of kids living in poverty in the midst of affluence in our society is increasing, and tends to self-perpetuate. According to Statistics Canada, in 2001, one in six children (1,071,000) experienced poverty. And from what we saw in the neighbourhoods, a majority of the kids are surrounded by poverty. Not addressing this problem puts more kids at risk of joining gangs and being involved in criminal activities for survival.

We are aware that children from poor families, like all other kids, are exposed to same material affluence such as clothes, toys, good food, etc. advertised on television, magazines, radio, flyers, supermarkets and shops. They see their peers with designer clothes, and the latest electronic gadgets. Because they lack money, many resort to crime—selling drugs, stealing, robbery etc. to get what they want.

Boredom and having nothing better to do raises the risk factor among children and youth. Poor kids face barriers to participate in organized sports, various recreational activities, and mainstream entertainment due to a lack of transportation and related costs. As some parents told us, neighbourhood kids lack structured

activities and supervision, and this often results in getting into trouble with the law. This is a great concern as many poor parents are themselves struggling to survive.

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Poor kids are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, and may engage in risky behaviour to survive. Those with physical and mental health problems are often at risk of harming themselves or others. Some kids told us that, the only way they get attention is when they cause problems or get into trouble. Because children and youth cannot vote, there is no incentive for politicians to act on our wishes, unless our parents and other concerned adults champion our cause and use their vote to pressurize action. Unfortunately, many poor families do not exercise their right to vote, thereby failing their kids in this regard. Probably, this is why there is not much action on Thunder Bay Children's Charter.

Rationale for Action:

The RMYC is concerned about the impact of what is happening in the neighbourhoods on the quality of life for children and youth. Many have had horrendous experiences and do not have parents as positive role models. They lack manners and lifeskills to function properly in our society. Their situation is so bad that they do not stand a chance to make it in school. Some have lost hope to cope, and feel that life in 'the system' where their basic needs such as food, shelter, nurturing are met, is much better than at home.

Society cannot give up on these kids. Many are already in care, as a first step to show that they deserve a second chance for a better life. Using information from the barbecues, best practises learned, and some background research, we have come up with some resolutions the RMYC feels can help to make a difference.

The recommendations below have been directed to Thunder Bay City Council. As the first level of government for all community residents, City Hall should be proactive, and prioritize the issues to act on. Thunder Bay already has a Children's Charter as a blue-print for action to address issues that put kids at risk. With political goodwill, this can be the City's a mandate to enhance the quality of life for children and youth. By promoting the well-being of all kids, the City will also be acting pro-actively to cut down

on delinquency, save the pain and suffering associated with crime and violence, as well as make our community safer.

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CITY HALL

“An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure!”

The RMYC has been privileged to participate in various consultations and research projects for different Ministries, social service agencies on the status of children and youth. We have a wealth of information to cross-reference recommendations below.

1. Thunder Bay City Council should look at issues identified by neighbourhoods in this report critically, and liaise with Thunder Bay Police for guidance to tackle the violence, alcohol and drug abuse. The City should provide resources to ensure Neighbourhood Police Offices are adequately staffed to respond to calls, and help to prevent crime, and liaise with Social Services, and Recreation to develop strategic plans to counter negative social environments that breed problems.

- X *The RMYC is prepared to meet with Councillors interested to get more details on this report and our ideas to improve the situation. The Youth Council can serve as a conduit to build trust between kids and officers in the neighbourhoods. Barbecues and other social events that bring police and youths together can pave ways to hold more initiatives that build bridges, and enable police officers to organize more recreational activities with broader youth involvement.*

2. City Council should build on “cool” things identified in the neighbourhoods, and engage parents and children ready to join hands as stakeholders to create safer, cleaner and better neighbourhoods.

- X *Since most of the people in the impoverished neighbourhoods and housing projects are unlikely to attend ward meetings, Councillors should endeavour to visit them in the neighbourhoods, and seek their ideas for solutions to the problems they face. The RMYC is willing to work with City Hall to host similar*

barbecues, and give Councillors a chance to meet with the people, learn about their plight first-hand, and show that we care for them and their children..

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3. Thunder Bay City Council, District of Thunder Bay Social Services, and the Thunder Bay District Housing Corporation should help to develop the capacity of local volunteers at Academy, Limbrick, and Windsor housing projects, and mobilize residents to act on issues such as developing a code of conduct, helping with enforcement, organizing area clean ups, welcoming new residents, providing home maintenance, orientation, and planning activities for kids, etc.

- X *City Council should support the development of local volunteer groups to oversee welcome receptions, local safety, security, cleanliness, home maintenance, help to organize workshops, recreational activities, etc. The City should invest funds to provide leadership and organizational development training for residents interested to take responsibilities for the well-being of their neighbourhoods. The RMYC is willing to help identify potential candidates to form steering committees in their areas.*

4. Thunder Bay City Council and the Thunder Bay District Housing Corporation should establish alcohol and drug-free public housing units/projects for families wanting to abstain from alcohol and drugs, and those coming from alcohol or drug addictions treatment. This would prevent after-treatment celebrant drinking parties, and protect the kids. Service agencies would be able to focus on providing services, programs and supports that promote sobriety, and enable children and youth to grow up in safer neighbourhoods where they can concentrate on schooling sheltered from the negative influences of addictions.

- X *Having alcoholics and drug addicts in the same areas will make it much easier to concentrate and deliver the social programs, treatment services and supports they desperately need. This will help to prevent problems from expanding to other areas (the rotten potato syndrome), and affecting innocent victims.. In*

addition, police officers, addiction workers , child welfare agencies, counsellors, church groups, etc will be able work with those who need help, and monitor the actions of chronic alcoholics, junkies, bootleggers and drug-dealers on kids

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5. City Council should review the mandate of Youth Zone in the context of Thunder Bay's Children's Charter and current realities. The program should be expanded to needy areas and engage marginalized kids in poor neighbourhoods from being further alienated. Youth Zone should recruit talented young leaders and role models from their respective neighbourhoods and train them to connect and communicate with their peers to promote positive change. The program should include nutrition, lifeskills, cognitive skills, presentations, workshops on manners, character development, risky behaviour, social values and other topics of mutual interest. Incentives such as pizza and snacks must be included to encourage community service and volunteering to promote civic pride.

- X *The RMYC learned from the Ontario Government's 'Review of the Roots of Youth Violence', consultations that hungry kids do not play ball. Just as educators have learned that hungry students do not do well in school, programs such as Pro-Kids are great for kids whose basic needs such as food, shelter etc. are met. Many in impoverished homes cannot take advantage of recreational programs because they are too hungry, and this leaves them vulnerable to risks and street influences. Providing snacks with recreational activities , just as schools offer breakfast, can engage these kids. Once you have them, they can talk about other issues in their lives, the risks and can be engaged to be part of the solution to problems. The RMYC used the barbecues and included games to get to the kids. It enabled us to connect with them, establish trust, and get them to tell us their stories. RMYC would be interested to co-host similar events for Youth Zone to get more youth input.*

6. Thunder Bay City Council should commit a percentage of Casino revenues to promote the Children's Charter, and focus on proactive prevention strategies to break negative cycles. The City should provide financial support to local

charities working in troubled neighbourhoods to initiate youth-led projects targeting disadvantaged kids, and involve them in positive activities that make a difference. Partnering with volunteer groups will expand the delivery of services and provide more programs to needy children and youth at low cost.

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- X *Many local charities doing community service are suffering since the Thunder Bay Casino opened downtown. More time is spent trying to raise funds to maintain services, instead of helping clients. Children and youth are missing out by not getting help they need. Funding from City Hall would show appreciation for the worthwhile services volunteers are dedicating to the well-being of our community. This will go a long way to reach out and benefit more kids.*
7. City Council should work through the newly established office of the Aboriginal Liaison Officer to liaise with the Thunder Bay Aboriginal Inter-Agency Council and convene forums to discuss the over-representation of the homeless, unemployed, addicts, juvenile offenders, youth street gangs, school drop-outs, mental health, etc. among Aboriginal people, and develop strategic plans to tackle the problems.
- X *Statistics Canada reports reveal that: * Aboriginal people represent 3 per cent of adult Canadians but 16 per cent of all federal prisoners (and 43 per cent for the Northwestern Ontario-Prairie region, and about 85 per cent in the Kenora - Thunder Bay area). *30 percent of all children in care are Aboriginal.*More than 80 per cent of young offenders in federal institutions have below grade 10 education; 65 per cent have less than grade 8. * More than 50 per cent of the current population in federal institutions were under the influence of alcohol and drugs when they committed offences that led to their incarceration. * About a quarter of all those incarcerated committed drug-related crimes, and 20 per cent have a history of mental health disorders.* Eight out of ten young offenders have long-standing substance abuse problems. * 80 per cent of offenders enter federal institutions with some type of substance abuse problem, and many have multiple addictions. *Aboriginal gangs and traditional biker gangs are the most prevalent gangs inside institutions, where they pose a serious threat to staff and orderly operation of the facilities. These issues facing the City's growing*

Aboriginal population impacted by the legacy of residential schools need to be discussed and local solutions found to prevent this disturbing trend being perpetuated to next generations..

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8. City Council should initiate and support the development of a “Welcome Wagon” program to welcome Aboriginal people to the City, and provide resources to help them adjust to the urban environment, ease transition into our neighbourhoods, and offer orientation to living in public housing units. Otherwise, the cultural divide with Aboriginal people will get worse, and racial tension will undermine prospects for social stability and economic investment.

X Aboriginal people have the fastest growing population in Thunder Bay. With over ninety First Nations reserves in the region, more Aboriginal people are moving to the city for education, healthcare, employment, and higher quality of life. Some criminals banished from their reserves also end up on city streets. Those new to the city have a hard time adapting to urban life. Therefore, it is imperative that the City formalizes their reception to our community, instead of leaving it to Police officers to act as front-line reception workers.

9. City Council should support the Multicultural Youth Centre as a model youth-led drop-in resource for consultations on youth issues, and a training centre for anti-racist socially-conscious young leaders, and positive role models who can work with peers in local neighbourhoods, and recreation centres to organize activities that enhance the quality of life for all children and our community.

X The RMYC's work has been adversely affected by declining bingo revenues after the Casino opened downtown. Financial assistance from the City's casino funds can help the Centre to open regular hours, run after school activities with proper supervision, and provide proactive youth programs and services. The RMYC can also train peer leaders to engage local youths to organize more accessible after-school activities in local recreation centres and schools.

10. The City should lobby both the federal and provincial governments, the business community as well as fund-raising agencies and foundations for more prevention-oriented funding to support innovative programs targeting children and youth to reduce risk factors and potential problems that have a negative impact on society.

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X *City Council should fight to reverse federal and provincial downloading with convincing arguments for more funding to support prevention initiatives targeting children and youth. We should be proactive about our safety and security, or we will all pay heavily in human pain and suffering, and the high policing, legal, and incarceration costs for increasing numbers of disenfranchised youth with nothing to lose --who engaged in crime and violence, join criminal youth gangs, and perpetuate the cycles of bad parenting, and dysfunctional homes. With a formal apology for the harm done by residential schools , more funding should be provided to municipalities to help growing numbers of abused Aboriginal migrants in our city heal.*

11. City Council should lead join the campaign to improve the reputation of the Ogden/ Simpson/South-core by moving the Beer Store located near the corner of May and Bethune Streets from the high density residential area to an area that allows better monitoring of the 'beer traffic', alcoholics, runners, under-age drinkers who currently hang around the neighbourhood lane-ways for someone to buy them booze.

X *For a safer neighbourhood, and for the sake of children, City Council should negotiate the re-location of the Beer Store to another area. This idea worked when the Liquor Store was moved from Vitoriaville Centre Mall to the Inter-City area. The move got rid of drunks and 'runners' hanging around the mall area.*

COMMENTS

The RMYC is impressed with the enthusiasm and level of involvement among all the children and parents in the housing projects who participated in project. There was, some cynicism by some of the people we met that what they wrote down would not go

anywhere, and nothing will change. We assured them that we would make the issues public, and together, we can put pressure on City Council to do something about the issues raised to make a difference. We also promised to keep them informed, and involve them in any new developments.

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OUTREACH TO THE REGION

To fulfil our regional mandate, the RMYC made field-trips to Red Lake and Atikokan.

Red Lake - July 19-20, 2008

On the weekend of July 19-20, 2008, a team of eight RMYC members travelled to Red Lake to lead workshops for twenty young boys and girls at the Indian Friendship Centre. Madeline Barrett, Ginger Rose Beardy, Pauline Fogarty, Chelsea McKay, Dayna Payment, Valentina Rae and Sasha Sky were joined by Moffat Makuto, on the trip.

The first workshop was for girls. Some were from Red Lake, and others were new arrivals from northern Reserves staying at the emergency shelter. The topics they wanted to talk about were self-esteem and violence. The girls were asked to talk about what makes them feel good. We encouraged them to express their opinions about how they view themselves, and how the community saw them. We asked them to comment about the influence of the media on what they feel is beautiful, cool, or ideal.

Even though the girls were from 6 to 10 years old, it was obvious that the portrayal of women in the media affected them, and how they saw themselves. Body image, dress, and make up were all reflected in their comments. The primary sources of their perception were computers, television and magazines. The ideas about weight and designer clothes created some stress among some of the girls. This had an impact on their relationships with friends and parents. The fact that it was not always easy to afford the expensive clothes created problems for some who felt that they needed special pants, tops, runners and jackets etc. to feel good about themselves, and fit in. At such an early age, the young girls were very fashion-conscious.

The girls also wanted to talk about violence. Many had experienced violence on their reserves and in Red Lake. They were aware of family violence, because some of them were staying at the emergency shelter in Red Lake for safety from their home reserves. For some, this was not the first time to seek shelter from violence.

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When it occurred at home, they said that it was often after drinking. Some had their places to escape, hide, shut out the screams out with hands or fingers in their ears. They also saw violence regularly on television, movies and computer games. They did not like the police, because their encounters with them were often when there was trouble. Police usually came to arrest someone after a fight, or other crimes. Therefore, relations with officers were not good, and they did not like to call them for help, or to report what was going on.

In Red Lake, the girls said that bullying was also a problem. It was common among the youth, and it affected their freedom to walk, play, go places, and their feelings on safety. Many had witnessed family violence

We learned that the Friendship Centre offered many programs for Aboriginal people. It is a safe place for families to seek comfort. There is food and support for adults and children. There are activities for the children during the day, and some programs to help kids learn, keep them busy, and stop them from wondering around the streets.

The Friendship Centre is a place where the kids from different reserves can meet new people and make new friends. They learn, expand their vocabulary, take music classes, do arts and crafts, and other things that are interesting and exciting for them to grow together. In addition to counselling, and cultural activities there are games and exercises for fun, as well as presentations to help them deal with personal issues and problems. They also learn about alcohol and drug abuse, anger management, and to be street-smart. They also talk about bullying and violence, and how to stay safe in the town.

We did some warm-up exercises with them for team-building, and to encourage them to feel comfortable with us. They were shy at first, and got into the games and were

laughing and teasing afterwards. Then we showed them a video about peer-mediation – “Working It Out”. This was to help them learn to talk things out, instead of fighting to settle arguments. We also gave them handouts about ways to handle conflict, and what to do if stopped by the police. They appreciated all the things we did with them.

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After working with the girls, Moffat and Pauline facilitated a workshop with the boys. They were also very young, and wanted to talk about violence. We used the same handouts and watched the same video on peer mediation. Bullying was a big problem in the First Nation communities they came from. Just as we heard from the girls, some families had moved to Red Lake to escape the violence, and wanted their kids to feel safer.

One thing we noticed among the kids is that they were all very hungry. Some said that four crackers is all they had for lunch, and had nothing for breakfast that morning. Poverty is a real problem, and they told us that their parents/guardians were struggling with financial problems. This concerned us about their priorities, because they hardly had much to eat, yet they were all eager to get the expensive designer clothes. From our perspective, we feel that hunger can make them desperate, while the need for nice things makes them vulnerable to exploitation.

Atikokan - August 13:

The out-reach to Atikokan was to participate in a Healthy Lifestyles Cultural-Fest. Ginger Rose Beardy, Alison Bortolon, Morgan Carlton Shubart,, Farisai Makuto, Nyasha Makuto, Dayna Payment, and Sasha Sky went on the trip with Moffat Makuto, who was the driver and chaperon. The event was held at the Atikokan Native Friendship Centre.

Members of the RMYC gave a lively performance of music, poetry, and dance during the community feast. We also gave out handouts about Meth, and the “HEYouth –what to do if stopped by the police”. Moffat took the opportunity to consult with the youth workers about youth violence, relations with police and programs to deal with violence.

The responses were very similar to what we heard in Red Lake. Family violence and bullying were common concerns. Police/youth relations were not cordial. The Friendship offered a variety of programs to advance the well-being of Aboriginal children and families, given the inter-generational impacts of residential schools. Unfortunately, there was not much available in the community for non-Aboriginal kids to do.

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RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE PROVINCIAL ADVOCATE

The RMYC is grateful to the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth for funding for this project. Without the financial support, we would not have been able to reach out and engage a wide cross-section of children and youth who provided the information contained in this report. The funding also enabled us to attract other sponsors and donors to expand the project, and include more schools, and public housing neighbourhoods.

From the experience of involving children and youth and the benefits of youth engagement learned through this project, the RMYC is recommending that:

1. The Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth (OPACY) should continue to support and sponsor community-based initiatives that reach out to children and youth, give them a voice to speak up on issues, and engage them as stakeholders to make a difference.
2. The OPACY must serve as a proactive voice for all youth, especially impoverished, marginalized and alienated youth including youth in care, advocate for their rights, and lobby all levels of governments for resources and supports to reduce risk factors that make kids vulnerable to violence, crime, addictions, gangs, and other negative lifestyles.
3. The OPACY lobby the Provincial government to invest in prevention programs such as daycare, parenting, education, after-school programs, youth centres,

job-creation, cultural teachings, recreation, etc. that help to address root causes of youth violence and crime.

4. The OPACY should explore new ways to network with children and youth across the province, and support local youth-led initiatives that fall within OPACY's mandate.

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CONCLUDING COMMENTS

"If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always gotten" Anthony Robbins

Children and youth are the greatest human resource for the future. But, in order for society to raise ideal citizens, and reap the benefits, we must invest in proactive, prevention-oriented programs, services and supports that enable all kids to feel safe and stay healthy, and get a good education to realize their potential.

The RMYC's is committed to advancing the status of children and youth, and have them protected from harm. This report reveals feelings of neglect, abandonment, helplessness and hopelessness among many children growing up in poor families and impoverished neighbourhoods. The kids are surrounded by physical, emotional, and verbal violence, crime, addictions, gangs, and other negative lifestyles. Many are being raised in dysfunctional homes by parents with no parenting skills. Unless there is intervention to break the cycle, these children will end up the same, if not worse than their parents. And this will only serve to expand social problems, and perpetuate the negative cycles.

To make a difference, society should invest in programs and services that will make kids stay in school, and help them to succeed. This way, they will be able to learn lifeskills, and have more opportunities to gain employment, which, in turn helps to break the cycle of poverty and related negative lifestyles. Investing in stay-in-school programs will enable the young generation to participate in the economic development of our communities, and make meaningful contribution to society.

Given the current statistics where many children are growing up in poverty, there is a need to provide adequate services and supports to level the playing field for impoverished kids. Our society should be proactive, and invest in prevention programs that go to the root causes of problems. It is unfortunate that more youths who get into trouble often say that they like it better in the 'system' because they get more help and support, than when they are out.

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While poor parenting and poverty play a role in putting kids at risk, a lack of on-going operational funding for community-based programs and supports for at-risk-youths undermines the effectiveness of intervention strategies. As we learned during consultations, more can be done to deal with youth crime and violence, as well as help kids caught in negative cycles, if we can reach out in time, and offer positive guidance to steer troubled kids away from potential problems.

We are all aware that well-funded schools do a good job of educating and taking care of the kids during the day. They are constant at providing 'equal' education through the same educators. Inequities, however, exist after school, when well-to-do kids in loving and caring families get the nurturing and supports they need to enhance their well-being. On the other hand, children from impoverished and dysfunctional homes feel abandoned, unloved, are hungry, and often end up on the street to fend for themselves, seek friendships, comfort and entertainment. This makes them prone to joining criminal youth gangs for family and survival.

It can be argued that providing after-school activities for these kids can go a long way to shelter them from the risks of the streets. From the RMYC's perspective, youth centres offer an alternative safe haven for at-risk youths to hang out with peer leaders and positive role models. With the current realities of changing families, and increasing numbers of kids in care, society has to adapt accordingly, and recognize the needs of growing numbers of children that are not being raised in 'traditional' or extended families.

From the successes and the impacts of our youth centre, we feel that such facilities should be funded and supported with regular consistency. Schools are effective at

connecting with kids because they have regular teachers and staff. Youth centres can be equally effective if they have regular youth workers and supervisors running programs after school, They can complement schools by helping kids with homework, providing counselling services and significant others as positive role models, share relevant information to enable youths to make informed decisions and wise choices, and offer activities that alleviate boredom.

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Unfortunately, we have situations where current valuable programs receive projects grants. This disrupts service delivery, and creates high turn overs of staff that undermine bonding with kids, familiarity, and the building of trust children and youth need to connect, open up, and get the help they need. It also disrupts the training and development of young leaders who can serve as positive role models for their peers.

Providing sustainable funding for best practices and youth centres with pro-active after-school programs can keep youths busy, prevent them from getting into trouble, and help them to set and achieve goals Youth centres also play an important role in the rehabilitation of young offenders by giving them safe places to hang out and get exposed to positive peer influence after school—instead of hanging out with the same old acquaintances who may be negative associates exerting negative peer pressure.

The ripple effects are far-reaching when young leaders and role models work with their peers to make a difference. The impact is remarkable when kids are empowered to help each other to deal with social class, racial discrimination, and other barriers that divide us. Youths need their own space to bond, grow, be creative, do fun things together, and brainstorm ideas to deal with issues of common interest.

The Youth Council is always developing teams of young leaders to run the Youth Centre. But, we need our own space to bond, grow, be creative, do fun things together, and brainstorm ideas to deal with issues of mutual concern. Our greatest challenge today, is securing funding to keep the youth drop-in service open. We desperately need funding to run our youth-led programs, as well as cover the Youth Centre's rent and heating expenses during the long cold winters.

Youth are a dependent population with no financial resources of our own to run our activities. We need the capital from adults, governments, businesses, and concerned citizens to support, and sustain our programs and deliver services to our peers.

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The RMYC appreciates the funding received from the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth that enabled us to host barbecues. The information we compiles high-lighted the need to promote the Thunder Bay's Children's Charter, adopted by City Council in 2004. Since the city has no budget committed to the Children's Charter, the RMYC wants to work with City Council to change this situation and, request that financial resources be found to engage kids as stakeholders to implement the tenets of the Charter.

The funds also enabled us to partner with the school boards and host the Schools Acknowledging Safety Solutions by Youth (SASSY) conference. The RMYC has come up with some recommendations we believe will help to make schools safer, so that all students can learn comfortably and do their best.

Last, but not least, we were able to work with the Neighbourhood Police Offices and link with the officers to host the barbecues. We believe that in our small way we are working to build bridges between youth and the police.

The RMYC is committed to working with the Provincial Office for Children and Youth, School Boards, The Police, all levels of governments including City Hall, concerned parents, social service agencies, and community groups committed to advancing the cause of children and youth. By working together, we can make a difference. The safety and security status of our city has a direct impact on the quality of life, business confidence and prospects for prosperity. Kids today are the citizens and taxpayers of tomorrow. Helping them to realize their potential is a worthwhile investment in building united resilient communities for a better and brighter future.

The RMYC is planning to hold a press-conference on November 20 (National Child Day) to release this report, and we are searching for funding to follow-up on the recommendations to get them implemented.

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OPACY BUDGET

Revenue:*

Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth	\$ 10,050.00
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Expenses:

Project Leader Honorarium (4 months @ \$250.00 each)	\$ 1,000.00
1 Youth Team Leader (4 months x \$500.00 each)	2,000.00
4 Youth Team Leader Assistants @ \$500.00 each	2,000.00
Materials & Supplies (Photocopying)	600.00
Travel/Transportation/Out-reach	1 ,350.00
Space Rental / Meeting Facilities	600.00
Equipment Rental, Computers, Fax, Telephone	500.00
Admin Costs/ Planning Sessions	600.00
Focus Groups/Consultations /Amenities/Food & Refreshments	<u>1,400.00</u>

Total:	<u>\$10,050.00</u>
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* The RMYC is grateful for the funding provided by the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth (OPACY).

The OPACY contribution enabled the Youth Council to access other sources of funding to complement activities such the SASSY Conference, barbecues, as well as various summer recreational events at the Youth Centre.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Regional Multicultural Youth Council gratefully acknowledges our sponsors:

- * Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth
- * Safeway - Dawson Road
- * Tim Hortons - Waterloo Street
- * The Multicultural Association of Northwestern Ontario
- * United Way Thunder Bay, YouthScape
- * YES Employment Services

And...members of the Regional Multicultural Youth Council:

Kyle Atatise, Madeline Barrett, Ginger Beardy, Alison Bortolon, Nefry Falla, Pauline Fogarty, Zoe Kawei, Yohann Khani, Chelsea McKay, Nathan Ogden, Dayna Payment, Valentina Rae, Shannon Roundhead, Sasha Sky and Martin Zhang ***...who co-ordinated the project, organized events, and prepared the report.***

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