



The Development Of A

GANG

By Donald G. Evans
and John Sawdon

In 1998, the Canadian Training Institute (CTI), a national voluntary organization that provides training and consulting services, and undertakes applied research demonstration projects, translated a concern about rising youth violence into a major strategic direction for the organization. In acting upon this, CTI initially field-tested a comprehensive organizational change and community development strategy whose intention was to transform high schools within the Greater Toronto area into places characterized as “safe, respectful and inclusive learning environments.” This project, titled *Beyond the Halls*, emerged in response to rising intruder violence within schools and an increasing number of youth swarmings (a group of youths attacking another youth) throughout the city of Toronto. It was CTI’s experiences in conducting this project that influenced the decision to launch a comprehensive youth gang strategy titled *Breaking the Cycle: A Youth Gang Exit Program*, and a youth ambassador leadership project.

Exit Strategy: *The Youth Ambassador's Leadership and Employment Project*

Beyond the Halls involved multiple strategies in facilitating the transformation of an entire high school community, including incorporating multipartnered planning committees, conducting extensive surveys of students and staff, and creating a vision and action planning process. The surveys, which assessed the school’s culture, and the levels of victimization involving violence in the schools, in the neighborhood surrounding the schools, and in the neighborhoods in which students lived, revealed an alarming rate of bullying, intimidation and threats of violence on the way to and from school. The survey also indicated rising rates of weapons within schools and gang activity both within the schools and the neighborhoods surrounding them. During this time, there was a dramatic increase in gang shootings. More than 100 shootings

occurred during a three-year period in Rexdale and Scarborough, suburbs of Toronto and the location of two high schools with which CTI was partnered. There was also a number of youth deaths attributed to gang activity and the availability of guns.

Situating the Project

In selecting a neighborhood in which to commence an intervention that might improve the life chances of youths, it appeared that the Rexdale environment was a good place to start. This neighborhood had a history of a gang presence, limited economic and employment opportunities, and limited educational and recreational resources for the youths CTI was interested in reaching. The youths who were identified are recent immigrants, belong to visible minority communities and had been

court involved or have had difficulties in school environments. The majority of them face barriers to and may be excluded from meaningful work and higher educational opportunities, and, as future parents, will likely, although unintentionally, pass on these at-risk behaviors to their children, thus perpetuating a cycle that should be broken.

The U.S. Department of Justice, in its 2000 report *Employment and Training for Court Involved Youth*, noted that local labor markets penalize court-/gang-involved youths for not completing school, by not providing stable employment and offering reduced earnings to youths throughout their working lives. One of CTI's goals was to attempt to develop an approach that would intervene positively in this cycle and enhance the life chances of youths who were prepared to leave the local gang structure.

Specific barriers to employment that gang-involved youths in the Rexdale community have were identified as:

- Lack of basic life skills;
- Low educational attainment;
- Poor work force preparation;
- Poor social skills;
- Absence of appropriate peer and adult role models;
- Disjointed service delivery plans and processes;
- Low expectations by self and others;
- Negative peer influences; and
- Negative perceptions by the community and employers.

Making the situation more complex and serious is the fact that the youths CTI wished to target tended

to also present the following characteristics:

- Involvement with drugs on a daily basis;
- Previous history with courts and correctional systems;
- Inadequate self-regulation skills and a history of violence;
- School failures and problems with reading;
- Family conflicts;
- Membership in gangs and exposure to or involvement with guns;
- Exposure to violence either in the home or the community; and
- Unsteady jobs and general lack of employability skills.

Seeking Support

There was no doubt in the minds of the project developers that this was a group of youths requiring attention and that attention would have to be something more than just the usual gang suppression efforts of local law enforcement or the zero-tolerance policies of local school authorities. In responding to these phenomena, CTI submitted a proposal that would lead to the creation of a youth gang strategy. This first stage of funding from the National Crime Prevention Centre (Canada) led to a literature review, resulting in the publication of *A Literature Review on Youth Violence: From Risk to Resilience Utilizing a Developmental Perspective*. In addition, CTI designed two 10-day intensive personal development curricula, one for gang-involved males and a second for gang-involved young females; and an intake and case management process that incor-

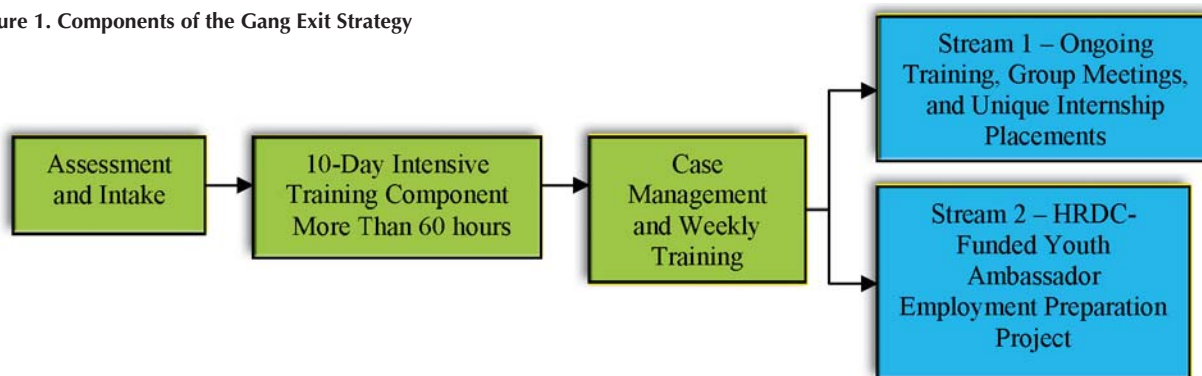
porated a variety of assessment instruments to aid in identifying issues/needs and to evaluate progress throughout the program. Funding also allowed for CTI to become engaged in a community mobilization process that included facilitating a visioning process with police, schools, students, youth-serving agencies, politicians, parks and recreation, Toronto Housing, Toronto Public Health and other city staff. CTI also recruited and facilitated a project advisory committee comprised of interested representatives who had participated in the community visioning process and who wanted to address the issue of gang violence within the Rexdale community. Finally, CTI participated in the City of Toronto's Gang Working Group and the Community and Neighbourhood Services Branch, which launched the Common Cause/Youth Violence Symposium.

The City of Toronto subsequently provided a one-time \$50,000 grant to support the field-testing of the Intensive 10-Day Personal Development Curriculum, a case management follow-up process, and strengthen existing partnerships to acquire support for a comprehensive gang exit project. From December 2002 to July 2003, CTI received 37 referrals to the project and subsequently field-tested the design in the delivery of three 10-day intensive training programs followed by weekly case management sessions.

Scoping Out the Project

During this period, Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) was also approached for funding to conduct a three-year pilot

Figure 1. Components of the Gang Exit Strategy



demonstration project, which is schematically illustrated in Figure 1.

Although the proposal was well-received, HRDC was only prepared to provide financing to actually field-test the Youth Ambassador Leadership Employment Preparation Project. This component, which is actually Stream 2, was designed as a 36-week leadership development employment preparation project.

The initial target groups for this project were young men and/or young women between the ages of 15 and 23, who were gang involved and out of school. The focus of this stream of the comprehensive gang strategy was to facilitate the leadership skills of gang-involved youths who would reach out to other youths in an attempt to prevent them from joining or continuing to participate in gangs.

Starting the Project

Gang violence and the attraction of youths to gang membership is a complex issue requiring multiple partnerships and strategies. In addition to law enforcement sweeps and gang suppression efforts, a comprehensive strategy is needed, which creates community advocacy to facilitate cohesive neighborhoods that are not held hostage by a select few. Equally, society needs to ensure that youths are valued, involved in their communities and receive the skills necessary to either return to school or embark on a vocational career. Many of the youths in the program have multiple failures in their lives, including exposure to community violence. This exposure has led to intrusive symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder. In addressing those issues, CTI, in partnership with the Rexdale community,

is seeking funding for a three-year period to field-test and evaluate a comprehensive gang exit strategy and community mobilization process. Three components and activities comprise the gang exit strategy.

Assessment and Intake. This phase identifies interest and motivation of the participants, the amount of gang involvement and a family social history. Once accepted, the youths are placed on a waiting list until the commencement of the 10-day intensive training session. An orientation to the project is provided to the youths during this phase.

Intensive Training and Personal Development. This phase involves two separate curricula, one for young men and the other for young women. Each curriculum involves up to 60 hours of training. Curriculum topics include anger, aggression, sexism, racism, homophobia and bullying. There is also a strong emphasis on communication and interpersonal skill building. Youths are given a stipend of \$214.50 a week if they attend every day of the course.

Case Management Process and Follow-up. The case management phase involves both individual support of participants' goals and plans of action, and an ongoing group meeting for each training group. The process is a means to continue supplementing and reinforcing the 10-day training and to address the ever-changing life circumstances of the youths in the program. An example of issues dealt with in this phase are: housing matters, links with family members, school referrals, coordination with probation and parole officers, attendance at court, drug treatment referrals, and assistance with financial matters such as setting up bank accounts.

Selecting And Developing Leaders

At the end of this process, some youths are selected to participate in the youth ambassador leadership and employment program, which has five components.

Case Management. Every youth in the program develops an individual plan that includes a series of goals and activities to achieve them. The youths meet individually with their case manager to review, revise or engage in actions required to achieve the goals. This is a continuous activity and may include support at court appearances, assistance in school re-entry and assistance in re-establishing family ties or finding adequate housing.

Skills Development. The youth ambassador program days are divided into two sessions. The first session deals with personal development and skill building to facilitate their leadership and employment activities. The second session is the practice and integration of the skills/personal development work.

Practice and Integration. An afternoon in the youth ambassador program is spent practicing and integrating the skills learned in the morning sessions. During this time, the participants work on their community presentations and plan community outreach activities. The youths also work on their personal stories; these stories reflect how they became involved in gangs and why they have chosen to cease involvement with gangs. One afternoon a week is devoted to recreational activity such as basketball at a local gym.

Community Contacts and Outreach. The leadership development part of this program encourages the participants to visit local community centers and other youth services to provide information about the program and to provide opportunities to solicit requests for group presentations.

Community Presentations. The major goals of this program are to create structure; provide an opportunity to acquire skills and knowledge; develop self-confidence via presentations to other youths, adults, parents, the general public, etc.; and encourage and enlist their support in reducing the number of youths join-

Gang violence and the attraction of youths to gang membership is a complex issue requiring multiple partnerships and strategies.

ing gangs. The presentations were intended to assist youths currently involved in gangs to rethink their position and to consider leaving the gangs. Another aspect of the presentations was their value in dispelling the romance of gang membership. To date, the youths involved in making these presentations have covered the following topics: the impact of socialization on violence, prejudice, racism, the myths of gang life, response to bullying, and their own personal experiences or life stories.

The youths seem to be viewing the project as a place to gain self-awareness, and find adult and peer support in their efforts to manage their emotions and identify goals on their way out of the gang. For CTI, the social impacts of the project are equally important.

Social Capital Development

CTI sees the development of local social capital as an important outcome of the effort to reduce violence and gang-related activity in the targeted neighborhood. Social capital consists of networks, norms, relationships, values and, in most cases, informal social control mechanisms that shape the quality of a neighborhood's social interactions. It can be seen in the quality of the relationships between family members, across groups and among different

social classes. Social capital is important because it contributes to a number of beneficial results, including efficient labor markets, improved school achievement, reduced levels of crime and improved health. In other words, communities become safer and healthier when there is enhanced social capital available. The overall community impact that CTI envisions from this project and its subsequent expansion includes:

- Reduced gang membership and involvement;
- Increased participation in the labor force by youths in the project;
- Increased positive contribution in the quality of the community by the youths in the project;
- Increased participation of members of the community in constructing positive solutions to community issues; and
- Improved image and economic development in the Rexdale neighborhood.

In the end, it is hoped that there will be an enhanced capacity of agency partners in the provision of services to high-risk youths who have been difficult to serve. In addition, expectations include the development of a pool of motivated youths who can serve as ambassadors in reaching out to these difficult-to-serve youths.

Staying the Course

Funding is crucial to this endeavor and, as with most demonstration projects, long-term sustainability is a major concern. To date, CTI has been relying on small start-up grants from local government and a larger grant, but has been limited to only the ambassador portion of the effort from HRDC. A more comprehensive strategy has been submitted to the National Crime Prevention Council (Canada) for a three-year funding arrangement. In the meantime, CTI is attempting to find ways to raise funds for the program and to increase the number of partners and alliances in the Rexdale neighborhood in order to continue to develop and expand this effort. Rexdale is a community in need of a concerted effort by both government and non-government agencies if the number of youths dropping out of school and becoming court and gang involved is to be abated. It is important that, having started this project, CTI and other partners stay the course for the long haul. Only then will it be proved that CTI and its partners have made a difference in the lives of these youths and reduced the number of youth homicides in the process.

Donald G. Evans is president and John Sawdon is executive director of the Canadian Training Institute in Toronto.