"By Working Together We Can Support Youth":
Observations from a Preliminary Evaluation of the Community
Solution to Gang Violence

by

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Abstract
          The Community Solution to Gang Violence (CSGV) is a community-based initiative in Edmonton, Alberta that currently includes over 30 organizations that work together on a strategic approach to address the issue of gangs and gang violence. This paper describes the collaborative process developed by CSGV and describes the successes and roadblocks that have occurred along the way. Data sources for this preliminary evaluation include project manager records of activities, and interviews and surveys completed by participants. Through the course of evaluating the early stages of CSGV a model for community engagement has emerged. In addition to outlining this model, this preliminary evaluation of CSGV's initial years also provides suggestions for future directions that might be adopted by CSGV representatives. Finally, this evaluation may prove useful to others interested in a collaborative community approach in tackling issues of youth gangs and violence, including researchers who evaluate such initiatives.

Introduction
          On a Sunday in April, 2008 a toddler was struck by gunfire as she sat at her grandfather's dinner table eating. The tragic incident was, it was soon discovered, a direct result of gang warfare on the Hobbema Reserve, a First Nations community less than an hour's drive south of Edmonton. The incident is one of many gang-related acts of violence in Edmonton and surrounding areas, though it attracted national media attention because of the

age and innocence of its victim. The incident renewed interest in finding a 'solution' to gang violence in Hobbema, Edmonton, and across the country. Yet, as researchers have established, gangs have been around for a long time; the historical, economic, political, social, processes that have contributed to their genesis and longevity cannot be addressed in a short period of time. There are no quick fixes.

While gangs are not a new phenomenon, their growing presence in Canada is. Edmonton has attained the not-so auspicious reputation of being one of Canada's gang capitals alongside Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal (Criminal Intelligence Service Saskastchewan 2005). One of the country's leading gang experts, Michael Chettleburgh estimates that the number of active youth gang members in Edmonton in 2002 was about 300 but is likely much higher by now. The Edmonton Police Gang Unit estimates that approximately twenty gangs are operating in the city and surrounding areas, though the exact number is difficult to estimate because of changing dynamics on the street (Edmonton Police Service Gang Report, 2005). Gangs are often associated with cities, but as police officers, youth, and parents will confirm, gangs are not solely a concern for large urban areas; they are active in small towns and rural areas as well. Furthermore, they are not limited to visible minority or specific ethnic groups as a recent police sting that resulted in arrests of many White Boy Posse members in the city proves (Stolte, 2008).

While gangs are certainly not new to Edmonton, recent years have witnessed an increase in reports of gang-related activities. In 2003 in response to the growing demand for "something to be done" about gangs in the city, concerned citizens decided to "do something". Although the Edmonton Police Service (EPS) formed a Gang Unit in 1999 it was apparent to many that a strictly enforcement-based response was not enough. In addition to this reactive-based response, a preventative approach was needed. Over the course of a series of conversations and meetings between representatives from the police and Native Counseling Services of Alberta, "The Community Solution to Gang Violence" (CSGV) was born.

Now, five years later, members of the initiative, government agencies, academics, interested citizens, and observers from other communities want to know if the initiative is working. Our objectives for this paper are fourfold. First we discuss the theoretical and methodological grounding for our preliminary evaluation. Next we provide a brief description of the Community Solution to Gang Violence. Third, we document the development of the initiative, illustrating accomplishments achieved as well as potential weaknesses, as revealed through the voices of

the initiative's participants. Finally, we suggest future directions that the initiative and its evaluation might take.

Evaluation of the Community Collaboration: Theoretical and Methodological Grounding

Community collaboration which is at the heart of the Community Solution to Gang Violence is a challenging undertaking;[1] evaluating such an extensive undertaking is perhaps even more challenging. A gang census to use in yearly comparisons does not exist. The complexity of gang structures also complicates the issue: in our 'counts' do we distinguish between wanna-bes or hangers-on who aren't really part of the gang structure – yet? Perhaps an obvious route to traverse would be to draw on police statistics. But beyond general drawbacks with police statistics (i.e. police only deal with crimes reported to them or discovered by them), official definitions of gangs and their members vary by police force. If we add to this the variability in public perceptions of the 'gang problem', reporting by members of the public, and issues relating to image and funding for police forces, the usefulness of police data for evaluating the effectiveness of an initiative that aims to reduce youth involvement in gangs becomes less than ideal.

Evaluation of a community based initiative like CSGV therefore requires a more holistic approach. Rather than focus entirely on a "product" based, or summative evaluation (i.e. has the initiative "delivered" on its goal of reducing gang related activities), a "process" based (formative) focus is equally important. The reasons for focusing on the process of this community-based initiative include the fact that it is one of the first of its kind in the country, and may serve as a template for initiatives elsewhere. As such documenting the steps taken by members in the initiative, the trials and tribulations, the successes, the roadblocks, is an important endeavour. Thus, a holistic initiative like CSGV requires a holistic "evaluation", one that is process-based and can tap into activities and results that cannot be quantified in a traditional "scientific" manner.

Typically social scientific research into "practice" involves bringing in an objective researcher/evaluator to measure, document, record observations, and empirically analyze collections of data. The evaluator then provides practitioners with a list of recommendations to improve the functioning of the program. As far as the researcher is concerned, his or her role ends with publication of the results, and the provision, perhaps, of a seminar or two. The assumption is that the recommendations will be taken up and applied non-problematically and appropriately by practitioners, long after the social scientist has metaphorically 'gone home' (Fox 2003: 82).

The theoretical framework underpinning our evaluation is based on a reaction to evaluation strategies which "situate research evidence in a position superior to other forms of knowing" (Fox 2003: 82). Following the lead of Fox and others our goal in the following pages is to "re-privilege the role of the 'practitioners' in generating useful knowledge, without rejecting the skills and perspectives of the 'academic' researcher"(Fox 2003: 82). The principles of participatory action research are particularly useful in this regard.

Participatory research has its intellectual roots in the work of scholars who recognized that traditional research methods are based on inequitable relationships between participants and researchers, with researchers holding the upper hand in the research process (Chen et al. 2007). Rather than researchers dominating the process, participatory research projects to varying degrees counteract such domination by sharing the responsibility and process of evaluation between the researcher and participant; the community being studied in the investigation gets directly involved in the process, in setting the agenda, participating in the data gathering and analysis, and controlling the use of the outcomes (Park 1992). The principles of this approach to research are based on negotiation, consensus, commitment, and collaboration of all involved (Chen et al 2007).

An integral component to participatory research and an initiative like CSGV is the sharing of knowledge. Knowledge transfer is a two-way street. As Fox explains "research and practice need to be seen as differing world-views on the same subject matter; researchers see data while practitioners see people and research data must be translated from the former to the latter world-view before it is recognized as relevant by practitioners" (Fox 2003: 83). For example, CSGV evaluators and researchers conducted a study on Aboriginal gangs. The results of this study, which focused on recruitment and membership in these groups, were published in the form of a government document, aimed primarily at practitioners and policy makers, and also appear in an academic journal (Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson 2007; Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson 2008).

Critics of the approach might protest, drawing on positivistic objectives of reliability and validity. Our goal, however is to document and understand the process that is this community collaborative effort, to help the initiative and its members move forward, and to provide a tool for other communities embarking on a similar project. As Park explains, "in participatory research people who share problems in common decide what problems to tackle and directly get involved in research and social change activities" (Park 2001: 81). The theory and method behind this research

approach are "allied to principles of democracy and in that spirit it is proper to call it research of the people, by the people, and for the people" (Park 1997: 8).

Similar to the left realist criminological tradition there is recognition that official statistics provide only one perspective on crime. A significant outcome of left realism was the adoption of victimization surveys as the data collection instrument of choice. Touted as an effective vehicle for "rational democratic input" into policy-making, victimization surveys, which directly asked citizens to report anonymously on their own victimization experiences, set out to privilege victims' voices and experiences. In a similar vein, the approach used in this paper asks participants in the Community Solution to Gang Violence to voice their concerns and share their experiences. Similar to left realists' use of victimization surveys, our research method provides us with a means of uncovering "real" experiences of those directly involved in an initiative that aims to address youth gang involvement in the city of Edmonton (Young 1992; Dixon 2004).

Not only does the method employed by this preliminary evaluation place it within the boundaries of left realism, but the Community Solution to Gang Violence itself is an example of the approach. Dismayed by the failure of a primarily reactive and repressive police response to youth-at-risk and youth gang members to effectively deal with the problem of gang involvement, community members who take the issues seriously have challenged traditional and conservative 'get tough' responses to criminal behaviours. Participants in the initiative have accepted "a pressing social and political need to take the question of crime seriously" (Matthews and Young 1986: 1). Furthermore, in acknowledging the negative impact of crime on community members' lives, participants seek an understanding of the etiology of youth gang involvement, recognizing the important role played by class, race, ethnicity, and gender. Parallels between left realism with its goal of seeking "redress through a discourse guided by socialist principles, but practically deployed in local contexts" (Pavlich 1999) and the Community Solution to Gang Violence with its emphasis on empowering disadvantaged families and youth who turn to gangs to fill a voids left by institutional breakdown, is clear.

Certainly most members of the initiative have not joined with the explicit purpose of joining the left realist camp. They are involved because they want to reduce youth gang involvement in the city and as a corollary of that, gang activities in the area. While left realism has come under attack from a variety of fronts, the philosophy behind it clearly resonates with members of the Community Solution to Gang Violence who have opted for an

alternative to a strictly reactive police effort to target the problem of gang violence. Rather, the acknowledgment of a multi-faceted strategy to deal with youth gang involvement is a recognition on the part of participants and community leaders that 1) universal emancipation is not going to happen overnight 2) something needs to be done in the interim 3) short-term intervention is required, with an attendant focus on addressing the oppression that accompanies structural inequality which in turn contributes to victimization and criminal behaviour (Eisler and Schissel 2004) 4) community collaboration is a first step toward building social structural supports for families and children which can reduce victimization, criminal behaviour, and youth gang involvement.

Critics accuse left realism, and through association, initiatives such as Community Solution to Gang Violence for not being truly critical, for being co-opted by administrative concerns, and for "joining the ranks of those who take a pragmatic, piecemeal, administration approach to the field on behalf of particular interests" (Pavlich 1999: 33). In response participants might respond that when the particular interests are those of at-risk youth who may face a future marred by gang-related violence, criminal records, prison sentences, and/or death, it is worth the effort. We turn now to a description of the focus of this paper: the Community Solution to Gang Violence.

The Community Solution to Gang Violence

The Community Solution to Gang Violence (CSGV) currently includes over thirty organizations who work together on a strategic, community-wide approach to address the issue of gangs and gang violence. Its goal is "to create and sustain a collaborative process to engage and support citizens, agencies, institutions and government to take collective and individual responsibility for working toward a community free of gang violence". The organizational structure of the initiative is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 CSGV Organizational Structure

Organizational Structure of CSGV
Steering Committee A Steering Committee (SC) guides and oversees the development of the collaborative process. In addition the SC accesses resources and provides an organizational framework to support the efforts of the Working Groups. Initially the SC was composed of representatives from the three organizations who initiated the collaborative (Edmonton Police Service, Native Counselling Services of Alberta and Community Services, City of Edmonton.); however this committee continues to expand as the initiative grows.

Working Groups Working Group members are volunteers drawn from a broad range of agencies: youth and family service organizations, corrections, police, crime prevention, education, housing, immigrant and settlement groups. Working Groups develop and implement action plans to address issues of gang violence within one of the four key areas.
• *Community Awareness provides information to the community about the conditions that give rise to gang violence and the action needed to prevent it and raises awareness of the initiative.*
• *Early Intervention provides families with tools and a network of support to create a caring, supportive environment for their children.*
• *The Youth Working Group provides young people with the support to avoid harmful behaviors and engage in the community in positive, healthy ways.*
• *Government and Policy encourages all levels of government and service providers to create policies and programs that address gang violence and positive youth development.*
     Working Groups are aided by a facilitator who supports the group process work and a Chair who provides leadership around the content and direction of the of the theme area. Working Group Chairs sit on the CSGV Steering Committee to ensure connection between the individual groups and the overall initiative.

Secretariat The Secretariat takes primary responsibility for identifying and obtaining funds for the initiative and hires and evaluates the Project Manager.

Project Manager The Project Manager designs and facilitates the collaborative process and ensures linkage and communication between the various components within the initiative and between the initiative and the larger community.

Evaluation Team The Evaluation Team creates the processes and structures to measure the impact of CSGV and produces research to facilitate development of knowledge on gangs, gang prevention, and collaboration.

Data and Method

Our objective in conducting this study was to ensure that the approach and methods chosen are consistent with and reflect the values and core assumptions that exist within the CSGV initiative. This was accomplished in two ways; first the evaluation was approached in a collaborative, inclusive manner to ensure that the many perspectives that exist within the CSGV helped to inform the evaluation strategy. Second, a multi-method research tactic that mirrored CSGV's inclusive approach was employed. Sources of data include the following:

Project Manager Logbook, Emails, Quarterly Reports, Reports. The Project Manager for the initiative keeps track of phone calls, requests for information, calls which she then refers to other agencies, as well as emails. The logbooks and emails provide insight into the daily activities of the project manager as coordinator of the project and liaison to the community, and offer insights into the breadth of the CSGV network, locally, nationally, and internationally. Monthly reports document the meetings and contacts made with interested individuals, community groups or other communities, the activities of the initiative, including those activities of the various working groups, and outline upcoming areas of work.

Working Group Member Surveys. Surveys were administered to Working Group members to attain feedback on their perspective of the initiative and their place within it. Survey items included closed and open ended questions including what they learned about gangs and collaborative practice, the strengths and weaknesses of CSGV, emerging issues that influenced the work of CSGV and some of the opportunities and impediments to advancing the work of CSGV. There are two groups of surveys from Working Group members, a survey administered to 18 participants during the 2006-2007 year, and a survey provided to all members who attended a June 2007 Forum.

Findings: A Model for Community Collaboration

We structure our findings around a model for community collaboration that emerged during the course of this evaluation. Drawing on the work from the Tamarack Institute for Community Engagement (2004) we created the model in Figure 2 to describe the phases CSGV is moving through in the

course of engaging the community to address gang-related issues. We term this evaluation "preliminary" because it is the first for this initiative, but also because we see a significant part of the purpose of evaluation at this point as the documentation of the genesis and early stages of the project. Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the initiative's development, and facilitates our "evaluation".

Gang Issues Emerges, Leadership and Initial Vision Emerges, Explore Issue
We have, earlier in this paper, described, though briefly, the context within which CSGV was created. One of the first events planned by the nascent Steering Committee was a Community Forum, which was an open invitation to community members to participate in a day-long conference on the topic of gangs and the vision the Steering Committee had for CSGV. Over 300 citizens attended.

Collective Vision Emerges: Working Groups Generated Objectives
From here, another Forum was arranged, which solidified the foundations for the Working Groups and the initiative. Working Groups developed the following guiding principles for the initiative and their work within it: 1) We take responsibility, individually and collectively, to create the conditions for a community free of gang violence; 2) We will work collaboratively with others to create a community-wide approach to address the issue of gangs and gang violence; 3) We will build connections and create structures and processes that are culturally competent and inclusive; 4) We will promote active citizenship to create a community free of gangs and gang violence.

Creating Conditions for Success: Knowledge Transfer and the Engaged Network
Sharing Knowledge
In looking back at the early stages of CSGV and in analyzing the data collected for this evaluation, what becomes clear is that CSGV is about two major processes: preventing youth gang involvement and community collaboration. Of course the two are intricately connected, but we realized that our evaluation of CSGV involved both a description of how community members strive to effect change in connection with gangs but also how they actually go about doing this. Integral to these dual objectives are what we term "knowledge transfer" – learning about gangs and gang prevention/ intervention - and sharing that information with each other and secondly establishing an understanding of community collaboration and building a

Figure 2: A Model for Community Collaboration

[Place Figure 2 Here]

network within the community that would facilitate the first objective: change. We start by describing as revealed in our data, the first of these goals: knowledge transfer/sharing.

The forums and working group meetings that are crucial to CSGV have provided a place for people to learn more about gangs particularly how gangs form and operate within the Greater Edmonton area. In the initial development of CSGV, considerable time was spent addressing the following two central questions: Why do young people get involved in gangs? Why don't young people get involved in gangs? It was important for participants to learn about and develop an understanding of the issues they were going to be dealing with and to dispel the stereotypes and media-influenced misperceptions about gangs, gang members, and reasons for their genesis that exist among members of the public.

To address these questions seminars were held for Working Group members to hear of the gang situation first hand from EPS Gang Unit and ex-gang members. Working groups developed case scenarios to show the complexities surrounding the lives of young people who may become vulnerable to gang involvement by weaving the knowledge and experience of service providers together to paint a human picture of the "gang situation." These case scenarios reflected the lives of young people from a variety of backgrounds — Caucasian, immigrant, refugee, Aboriginal, male and female and encouraged discussion among members about the complexity of young people's lives. These case scenarios served several purposes, one of which was to illustrate to members the importance of breaking down stereotypes about the "typical" gang member.

Based upon this research and exploration of best practices, CSGV developed a CSGV Risk and Protective Factor Framework associated with individual characteristics and behaviours of young people and their surroundings— family, school community, services and organizations and social and economic policy. These risk and protective factors provided a framework to help members of CSGV think about the factors that may lead to youth involvement in gangs and the conditions needed to help young people avoid gang involvement. It essentially gave them something concrete to take back to their places of work, to share with colleagues, and to start moving forward with in terms of policy and practice.

The CSGV Project Manager organized the creation of a web site www.csgv.ca, launched in February, 2006, that provides information about CSGV, resources, materials and tools that can be used to support positive youth development and prevent youth involvement in gangs. It provides links to research conducted in Canada and the U.S. and features stories about

youth, told by youth, which change periodically. Initially the website received approximately 4137 visits (55 per day), but by June 2007 showed an average of 48 000 hits per month. Between September and December 2007 the website received a total of 253,409 hits, 20,975 page views and 25,621 unique visits to the website. To provide some perspective in (December 06 the website received 2,400 unique visits while in December 07 we received 9,942 visits) which represents over 300 % increase in use over the year.

The Program Manager receives numerous emails from people concerned about friends who are involved in gangs, girlfriends of gang members who are abused and threatened should they leave the gang lifestyle, pub and bar owners with gang problems, as well as individuals who have been attacked and beaten by alleged gang members. As these contacts reveal, CSGV is growing in influence as a frontline agency to which people turn for guidance, advice and referral to agencies that can help them with gang related issues.

Knowledge About Gangs

There is evidence of a move toward greater understanding of the complexity of young gang involvement and activities including a solution to these issues. For gang researchers, who have spent years investigating the topic, some of these revelations for Working Group members may seem obvious. For a public that is somewhat naïve about gangs, however, these insights are significant. Certainly the fact that members are changing their views on gangs and precursors to involvement indicates that prior to effecting change, education and knowledge transfer is key.

The Working Group member comments as expressed on surveys can be grouped into three themes. First, there is increased understanding about the *types* of youth who join gangs. One respondent points out that "young people from a diverse array of backgrounds become involved in gangs. [It's] not just an issue of poverty or limited to specific ethnic groups." Another adds that there "can be multigenerational involvement with gangs." Related to this theme, a working group member emphatically writes that we "can't use data from U.S studies of gangs to address gang issue in Greater Edmonton Area. We need to build upon our knowledge and understanding of the dynamics, structure and operation of gangs that exist in Greater Edmonton Area"[2] attesting to an increased awareness of the importance of local context to gang development and composition. Also representing this growing understanding of youth at risk and gang formation, another participant has attained, during the course of the past year, a "greater understanding of the dynamics, recruitment strategies and reasons why young people get involved in gangs, names of gangs. Gangs have an appeal to youth because they offer what they

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want but can't get from other sources in society."

The second theme that emerges from the surveys is an increasing knowledge base surrounding *gang organization*. For example, one participant comments: "Gangs are not simply a youth issue but an issue of big business and organized crime that is world wide." Another reports learning how gangs "operate as a criminal network that is fluid and moves across the City of Edmonton, the Greater Edmonton Area, the province and beyond. Not limited to specific geographical areas or neighborhoods. Influences of gangs exist in urban areas, small towns and rural areas of province. Gangs have grown in numbers over the years."

This respondent reports on the importance of youth to gang organization. "[Gangs are] organized in a tightly controlled hierarchy with young people largely at the bottom doing the dangerous and dirty work on the streets." Finally, another group member has "developed greater understanding of the interconnectedness of gangs, drugs and violence."

The third theme that emerges concerns the *prevention* of youth gang involvement. Representative of this theme are the following three comments which highlight what working group members have learned is necessary in order to effect change:

> "Importance of listening to the stories of young people who got involved in gangs, those who left and those who were victims of gang violence."
> "Understand how the preventive approach of CSGV addresses the root causes of youth involvement in gangs."
> "There is no quick fix to the problem. "

Several Working Group participants indicate that their own personal growth, as a result of their involvement in the initiative, has led them to reach out to youth more so than they have in the past. As one respondent states:

> "Personally I have found it beneficial to learn some warning signs for kids being involved in gangs. Learning to communicate with the kids in our neighbourhood, get over the fear and connect with young people."

Also indicative of greater knowledge and understanding of the gang phenomenon are these comments, which address political and systemic roadblocks to success. These participants express concern over the:

> "Lack of knowledge about what is needed to get kids out of gangs particularly when there is multi-generational involvement in gangs."
> "Communities' belief that it is the governments responsibility alone to address this issue."

> "Public reactionary response to youth crime that focuses on a 'lock them up for longer' philosophy."
> "Political ideology that changes with the flavour of the week and focus on quick short term solutions and results."

Engaged Network and Collaborative Practice

The second area of learning that has occurred relates to increased understanding of collaborative practice and the importance of making connections with community members and practitioners in an effort increase understanding of the issue and effect change. Participant responses indicate a shift toward greater understanding and trust in collaborative practice. Working Group members refer to the importance of trust when they mention the "importance of compassion for others", and the importance of "open, clear and honest communication between individuals, Working Group, Steering Committee and larger community". This participant says it best: "building of relationships and trust is the glue that holds us together".

Recognizing the diversity in an initiative such as CSGV and the benefits that can accrue from the acceptance of diversity this member focuses on the "importance of respecting, listening to, learning from and working with people from diverse backgrounds with different views to see the big picture. This variety enriches the whole." Respondents allude to the challenges of community collaboration, stressing the importance of teamwork, commitment and patience. The following comments reflect these concerns.

> "We can get support from and draw on the strengths and resources of others to address the issue."
> "By working together we can support youth."
> "Importance of finding the balance between moving forward and getting everybody on board."
> "This is a complex issue that requires big picture view, commitment and time."

Among the active Working Group members who completed surveys, not one expressed a desire to terminate involvement in the initiative. In fact, they unanimously expressed an interest in the next stage of the project; several referred to their excitement in progressing to the next stage in the process. This respondent represents this view: "I think this is just beginning right now. The farther CSGV moves along the more this is going to happen. The more we present tools to agencies who then support their families in gang prevention/intervention, the more we will affect the community"

Respondents do admit to feeling that the process of meeting with Working Groups and helping to move the initiative forward has, at times,

been challenging. When asked whether involvement in CSGV has been beneficial to the community in general this individual reports that "I think it has been beneficial – very tedious at times – but I feel it well worth it especially if it saves a life from being in gangs". The frustration of another individual is revealed in the following comment: "It's taken soooo long as I was involved from the beginning". Building on this sentiment, the one individual who completed the survey, who is no longer involved in the initiative reports he/she has ceased involvement because "nothing has happened and nothing's been done". This respondent sums it up well:

"I think the accomplishments are remarkable. What still needs to occur is greater   communication with other initiatives to allow more leverage or a sense of connecting the dots.[3] There are only a fixed amount of resources and all groups need to work more collaboratively. Having a new staged plan will also help keep the momentum going and allow the group to keep a focus on promoting outcomes within the resources it has."

In addition to these comments, several participants commented on the opportunity to "network and connect with others and partner on fund development".

Finally participants clearly see a future for CSGV and have many ideas about how the initiative should move forward. Survey comments suggest that now that the foundations of collaboration have been laid it is time to use that foundation to incorporate more groups and activities and to 'spread the word' – to community members, community leaders, and funding agencies. As this participant states: "Now that CSGV has good, strong and clear messages [we should] focus on getting the word out (through agencies, through regional contacts, through community festivals and events, through the media)."

Another adds that CSGV members must "connect with and build upon the good work being done by various sectors and groups (list of local groups)", while this one suggests members should "work with street level and front line workers involved in CSGV to find ways to share their experiences and carry the messages of CSGV to the managerial and leadership within their organizations". The following comments confirm this move, or shift toward increasing inclusiveness, publicity and action:

> "[We need to] build on the presentations developed by Early Intervention
> "Group to spread the word on asset development."
> "Since Edmonton is on Treaty Six Territory work with them to spread the word and messages of CSGV (i.e. importance of rites of passage that are culturally relevant)."
> "[We must] build on connections made through the Interfaith

> Education Centre to broaden our value-base and reach into cultural communities."
>
> "Use existing connections and relationships to get community members and residents involved in initiative."
>
> "Look for ways to build connections and relationships with those who are involved in gangs to help them create a path out of gangs."

It appears from these comments that participants in CSGV have benefited from their involvement in terms of increasing their knowledge and understanding of the gang situation and community collaboration. Some of them express frustration with the slow-moving progress of the initiative; many are aware of the struggle for financial support/funding that is required to keep the initiative moving. Nonetheless, their commitment and dedication is apparent from their comments and participation in the Forums and meetings, and in their willingness to take what they've gained from their involvement and implement it in their places of work. In this respect then, we can say that the initiative is experiencing success. Has it reduced gang involvement in the city? This of course, is a much more difficult question to answer.

Survey responses from working group members suggest a shift is occurring both in terms of gang knowledge and awareness but also in members' understanding of the process of community collaboration. Dedication of participants exists, however balancing participation with employment-related duties is a source of stress for working group members. Employer/agency commitment to the initiative, beyond paying lip service by encouraging staff to participate, is also a concern for working group members. Working group members also express dismay at the lack of funding for the initiative.

Despite these frustrations, CSGV has begun the process of effecting change in the form of policy and program development. Changes to school expulsion policies, programs aimed at diverting young people from the criminal justice system by keeping them in the community, and programs that reach refugee and immigrant youth by facilitating their participation in organized sports are examples of the good work CSGV has initiated and/or supported.

Where to go from Here? Action Learning and Change, Renewal, Community Engagement

We suggest, based on the sampling of working group participant comments above, that CSGV is entering the latter stages of the model in

Figure 2. While the cyclical nature of the diagram indicates that these processes are ongoing and feed back into each other, several recent policy and program initiatives facilitated by CSGV provide evidence for the initiative's progression into the latter stages of the model**.**

Youth Gang Intervention Strategy

In March 2008, the city's police chief invited CSGV to a closed door discussion regarding an emerging youth gang issue. He believed that CSGV could provide some guidance and advice to address the issue and help prevent it from escalating into a more serious gang problem. At the end of this meeting CSGV was asked to take a lead role in developing a targeted intervention strategy around the youth involved in the emerging gangs. The fact that the police chief included CSGV working group members, steering committee members and the project manager in this discussion is evidence that the initiative has established a significant community presence in the city and has gained the respect of frontline workers who deal with gang-related issues. CSGV has also begun to "engage community and build community will" as the next scenario illustrates.

"Soccer Story"

A soccer mom knew of a refugee family whose four sons were interested in playing soccer, but the family did not have the resources to support their sons' interests. This mother arranged to have the Soccer League to waive the boys' registration fees; she and her husband helped the family get the sporting equipment for the boys, and offered to drive them to soccer practices and games. The mother contacted CSGV to share her story; the Project Manager in turn arranged a community meeting to open lines of communication between citizens and explore ways in which this approach could be used to help other refugee children and their families.

Public Library Problems

In another instance the Edmonton Public Library called CSGV for advice on how to deal with groups of youth hanging out at the library who were the cause of concern (grafitti and dealing drugs outside the library). The Project Manager met with them and linked them up to an ex-gang member affiliated with the initiative who runs his own "Gang Prevention and Intervention program" and a local school principal to identify strategies and approaches for developing connections and relationships to these youth in a way that would address the issue without kicking them out of the library. One of the results of this was that one of the libraries involved in these discussions

developed a Teen Centre within the library where youth could hang out without being disruptive and the library staff made a conscious effort to develop relationships and get to know the youth as individuals.

These examples illustrate the beginning of the latter stages in the model, which, according to the model, should feed back and increase or change the collective vision, increase community engagement and awareness, and facilitate additional conditions for success, which should then produce more action learning and change. Not clearly apparent in the model are the immeasurable and value-added benefits of the initiative – events or situations whose direct impact on gang prevention is difficult to quantify, but which positively impact on the lives of youth.

Conclusion

CSGV is a living entity, that grows and changes as it moves through the phases described in the Figure above. Outcomes are both immeasurable and measurable. Our evaluation draws on the reasoning and theory behind participatory action research. A project like CSGV which is based in the community, which relies on the participation of community members, is best evaluated by feedback from the very members who comprise it.

Participants' voices indicate general satisfaction with the initiative and its progress. Increasing representation from youth, ex gang members, and representatives from additional groups in the community requires attention. Work is underway to do this. Positive media publicity on the initiative, but also on positive stories about young people is a focus of future work for the Youth Working Group. Funding is an ongoing issue, but as one participant points out, part of the increased understanding of the issues is recognition by all levels of government that no one organization or level of government possesses sole ownership of the gang problem. Rather, it is a community issue requiring support from all levels – we all bear responsibility.

This evaluation of the CSGV initiative's progress to date will be utilized by the Project Manager, the Working Groups, and Steering Committee to plan future evaluations, to reflect on what's been done, and to constructively learn from past successes and roadblocks. "'Research findings' represent not so much truth about reality, as one 'reified moment' in the ongoing sage of 'practice'(Fox 2003). The ongoing saga of practice in this instance is the Community Solution to Gang Violence. According to Dawson, "practitioners and researchers must work together as part of a 'bottom-up' approach to implementation" (Dawson 1995:202).

This evaluation, a joint effort between practitioners and researchers, is a first step toward the continuation and strengthening of CSGV. Future

evaluations of CSGV should draw on participants' experiences and knowledge, including those of youth, perhaps to an even greater extent. As CSGV participants report learning over the past three years, "there is no quick fix to gang violence or mobilizing the community for action. It takes persistence and patience." So, we argue, does evaluating this type of community collaboration. Because the initiative is at a stage where action learning and change is beginning, it is critical that participants from all levels within the initiative contribute to future evaluations by revisiting CSGV's original objectives, and helping to structure an evaluative framework that both builds on this initial assessment and clearly stipulates the expected outcomes and processes as the initiative enters the renewal stage. Additionally, as is evident from the interview and survey data, the majority of CSGV members are articulate, educated, middle class individuals. Increased efforts to include the voices of individuals representative of other classes, occupations, and positions in the social structure would add to the diversity and benefit the overall effectiveness of the initiative. In the meantime, we offer this preliminary evaluation and description as a tool to carry members into the next stages of both action and evaluation, and to other communities interested in embarking on a similar journey.

Members of CSGV keep going because they believe CSGV has the potential of having an impact on the lives of individual youth, on how parents support their kids, how services build on the assets of youth and how government frames public policy to prevent youth involvement in gangs. It is an initiative fueled by passion and commitment. Such words rarely come up in evaluation reports. Potential, passion and commitment are hard to measure. Nonetheless they are important drivers in initiatives like Community Solution to Gang Violence.

End Notes:

[1] A complex issue like youth gang involvement concerns a range of parties including youth, parents, families, school, communities, businesses, police, criminal justice system personnel, and governments. Bringing community groups and organizations to begin to articulate a solution becomes a challenging and complicated endeavour. This is the contextual setting of Community Solution to Gang Violence and marks the point of departure for the journey of developing a comprehensive and collaborative approach to the issue of gangs. The approach draws from the emerging theory and practice on comprehensive community initiatives that centers on the idea that "multiple and interrelated problems…require multiple and interrelated solutions" (Schorr, L.; 1997). Comprehensive community initiatives, like Community Solution to Gang Violence are marked by the following key features: Comprehensive and broad in scope; Holistic, breaking down silos and linking systems; Multi-sectoral and inclusive, recognizing value of diverse backgrounds, networks and areas of expertise; Developmental and long-term, moving with the pace set by the community; Focus on the assets and resources embedded in communities; Concerned with both process and outcome, building the capacity of the community to make significant improvements around an issue and in the way issues are addressed (Torjman, Sherri; 2006). For more information on community collaboration and its accompanying challenges please see Erikson, Karen, Patti LaBoucane-Benson and Jana Grekul, 2007. "The Community Solution to Gang Violence: A Collaborative Community Process and Evaluation Framework. *Aboriginal Peoples Collection*. Aboriginal Corrections Unit. Cat. No. PS4-50/2007E.
[2] While we recognize the importance of understanding gangs in local context, as this participants points out, we also believe much can be gained from understanding gang issues from other contexts. While gangs differ by jurisdiction, there are also many similarities between and within these groups.
[3] This respondent is referring to other initiatives in the city which focus on specific issues, but whose goals in many ways overlap with those of CSGV. The Project Manager has worked to establish linkages with these other initiatives which include but are not limited to: Safedmonton, Edmonton Regional Crime Prevention network, Edmonton Community Drug Strategy, Prostitute Awareness Action Foundation, Urban Aboriginal Accord

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