

Community Level Factors and Concerns Over Youth Gangs In First Nations Communities

by

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Introduction

The impact of Aboriginal gangs has become a significant concern in western Canada in recent years including the recruitment of Aboriginal youth living both on and off reserve (Criminal Intelligence Service Canada, 2004; Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson, 2008; Totten, 2009). This paper addresses this issue by presenting the results of a study that examines youth gang concerns in First Nations communities in British Columbia. Specifically, the study compares the experiences of First Nations communities that had concerns about youth gangs with those that did not.

There is limited research on Aboriginal youth gangs in Canada (Mellor, et al., 2005; Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson, 2008; Totten, 2009; Preston, Carr-Stewart, and Bruno, 2012; Sinclair and Grekul, 2012). Most of the published research focuses on youth gangs in the United States. While the challenges facing Aboriginal youth and Aboriginal communities in the two countries may be similar, they are not identical. Thus, in this paper, we refer to the limited Canadian research wherever possible, and supplement it with relevant American studies. We also refer to research on adult Aboriginal gangs in Canada order to provide a more complete picture of the phenomenon.

Gangs are durable groups (3 or more individuals under the Canadian criminal code) that engage in criminal activity (van Gemert et al. 2008). All gangs share these core elements, however, researchers use descriptors to distinguish between different types of gangs. For example, street gangs are the most widely known type of gang. They are distinguished from youth gangs on the basis of the age and activities of their members. Street gangs usually consist of young adults (18 – 30) and some adolescents who have been recruited by older street gang members to carry out various criminal activities such as transporting or selling drugs. They are primarily organized to engage in criminal activity and are often closely related to organized crime groups (Dickson-Gilmore and Whitehead, 2002; Kelly and Caputo, 2005). In contrast, youth gangs include groups of young people that come together in a community or neighbourhood around issues related to status, identity, protection, and power. And while they may engage in criminal activities, this is not the primary purpose of youth gangs (Mathews,

1993). Gangs can be further described by their ethnic make-up (e.g., Aboriginal Gangs) and other factors such as territory/turf, colours, and initiation rituals.

Much of the literature on youth gangs focuses on individual-level variables such as the characteristics of gang-involved youth and the challenges they experience exiting gangs (Dickson-Gilmore and Whitehead, 2002; Green and Kearney, 2003; Grant and Feimer, 2007; Hailer, 2008; Kroes, 2009; Public Safety Canada, 2014). Another important theme addresses the programs and services developed in response to youth gang concerns (Totten, 2009). Here again, the focus is usually on individual level factors such as changing attitudes or behaviour. While contextual or community level variables that may be influencing youth involvement in gangs are recognized, this area has received comparatively little attention in the literature.

In order to address this gap, we designed a study that focussed specifically on community-level factors and their relationship to community concerns about youth gangs. In particular, we looked at how the level of social development in a community influenced youth gang concerns. We define social development in this paper as the nature and extent of social, recreational, educational, cultural and economic (employment) opportunities available to young people in a given community. This definition is informed by an approach known as 'Crime Prevention Through Social Development' (CPSD) (Public Safety Canada, 2014). It has been used extensively in crime prevention programs in Canada and around the world over the past three decades and provides a useful conceptual framework for the current study.

CPSD directs attention to the community-level "root causes" of crime and victimization. In particular, it highlights the relationship between crime and the level of social development in a given community. With respect to gang involvement, the underlying philosophy that has informed CPSD initiatives assumes that young people from more socially developed communities will be less susceptible to gang recruitment. CPSD directs attention toward the impact of the organizational and cultural factors that operate at a community level. Based on this approach, the current study compared the experiences of different communities with respect to the nature and extent of the opportunities they provide for youth, and their experiences and concerns related to youth gangs.

It is important to note that the community-level variables that are the basis of social development are those that are also closely related to risk factors for youth gang involvement in the research literature (National Crime Prevention Centre, 2007a, b). Individual risk factors consider the impact of community-level variables including poverty, racism, social exclusion, dysfunctional families, exposure to violence, and addictions on the likelihood of a young person becoming gang involved (Dickson-Gilmore and Whitehead, 2002; Green and Kearney, 2003; Grant and Feimer, 2007; Hailer, 2008; Kroes, 2009; Public Safety Canada, 2014). Colonialism and its legacy has had a significant impact on Aboriginal communities and left them particularly vulnerable to many of these risk factors in comparison to non-Aboriginal communities (Assembly of First Nations; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). For example, the consequences of colonialism, racism, and residential schools have resulted in much higher levels of poverty among Aboriginal Canadians than the non-Aboriginal population, and poverty levels have persisted over time. Lee (2000) notes that,

On average, 55.6 per cent of Aboriginal people in cities were living in poverty in 1995, compared to 24 per cent of non-Aboriginal people. ... In each city, the poverty rate among Aboriginal people was considerably greater than the rate among non-Aboriginal people (Lee, 2000: 16).

Similarly, Noël and Larocque (2005) point out that while 3.8% of the country's population identified as Aboriginal, 21.7% of these had incomes below Statistics Canada's low-income cut-off after tax. The comparable rate for the non-Aboriginal population was 11.1% (Noël and Larocque, 2005: 5). The Assembly of First Nations (2011: 2) points out that, "one in four children in First Nation communities live in poverty. That's almost double the national average." Overall poverty levels are high for Aboriginal children. Macdonald and Wilson (2013: 12) report that "... Indigenous children suffer a poverty rate of 40% compared to 15% for all other children in the country" and that "... fully half — 50% — of status First Nations children live below the poverty line. This number grows to 62% in Manitoba and 64%

in Saskatchewan.”

Various authors have pointed out that problems related to poverty and social exclusion in Aboriginal communities make their young people vulnerable to youth gang recruitment (Green and Kearney, 2003; Dickson-Gilmore, 2007; Gerkul and LaBoucane-Benson, 2007, 2008). Gangs offer these young people an opportunity to meet needs that are not being met through conventional means. For example, gangs give young people access to power, money, identity, excitement, and a sense of belonging. This can be very compelling for young people from poor communities with little to offer them. When coupled with a youth culture that glamorizes gangster images and behaviour, the allure of gangs can be very powerful.

Early school leaving is another significant risk factor for youth criminality. As a Canadian Council on Learning (2009) report notes,

The relationship between education and crime is most obvious when considering rates of incarceration. Some researchers suggest that education is the second best predictor of incarceration (the best predictor is whether a person has been in jail previously). High school leavers are disproportionately represented among prison populations. For example, in British Columbia, non-graduates represent 34% of the overall population, but they make up 74% of the prison population.

Many Aboriginal youth have very low high school completion rates with the research indicating that 43% of Aboriginal youth have not completed high school nationally (Grekul and LaBoucane-Beson, 2007, 2008). This finding is echoed in a BC Ministry of Education report that noted that in 2002/03, only 46% of Aboriginal students completed grade 12 within six years of grade eight, compared to 82% of non-Aboriginal students (McCreary Centre Society, 2005:19). With considerable investment, there has been an increase in this rate. In 2012-3, the BC Ministry of Education reported this had increased to 60% for Aboriginal students. The Ministry has also created a number of alternate routes to high school graduation (BC Ministry of Education 2013).

While early school leaving is often viewed as an individual level factor, many Aboriginal communities have identified this as a significant issue for their communities (Nafeekh, 2002; Hailer, 2008). In this context, studies have shown that challenges in accessing education have led many students to drop out of school (Nafeekh, 2002; Grant and Feimer, 2007; Gerkul and LaBoucane-Benson, 2007). Further, for many Aboriginal youth, schools are not relevant to either their culture or lived experiences. The legacy of residential schools has left many Aboriginal people distrustful of education and disconnected from it (Public Safety Canada, 2006; National Panel, 2011). To compound this situation, various researchers have pointed out that the school curriculum itself is problematic because it fails to incorporate or reflect the culture, lifestyles, norms, or values of Aboriginal communities (Grant and Feimer, 2007; Hailer, 2008; Kroes, 2008; National Panel, 2011). Many Aboriginal youth find it difficult to reconcile their Aboriginal culture and heritage with the values they encounter in non-Aboriginal schools (Whitbeck, 2002; Green and Kearney, 2003; National Panel 2011; Macdonald and Wilson, 2013). They often feel disconnected and the consequences of not feeling connected to school are considerable.

While many Aboriginal youth are experiencing difficulties related to education, these experiences vary across Aboriginal communities. Some communities have made significant improvements with increasing numbers of Aboriginal youth going to university, getting degrees and pursuing professional careers (Ponting and Voyageur, 2001; National Panel, 2011; BC Ministry of Education, 2013). Their achievements demonstrate that community level action can be effective in addressing early school leaving.

The lack of viable employment opportunities is another community-level risk factor related to the involvement of Aboriginal youth in gangs. While the employment situation varies over time and across provinces, Mendelson (2004) notes that over the decade before the turn of the century, the relative unemployment rates of Aboriginal people remained roughly two and a half times that of the total population. This level of difference has persisted into the 21st century. According to a Statistics Canada report prepared by Luffman and Sussman (2007:1),

In 2001, Aboriginal people made up about 2.7% of Canada's working-age population and about 2.5% of its labour force (see **Appendix**). Of the roughly 652,000 Aboriginal people aged 15 or over, 61% lived in Western Canada. Nationally, they had lower participation and employment rates (60.6% and 49.7% respectively) than non-Aboriginals (66.1% and 61.8%), and a much higher unemployment rate (18.0% versus 6.5%).

Human Resources and Skills Development Canada reported in 2006 that Canada's Aboriginal people had an unemployment rate of 14.8% that was more than double the national average of 6.3%. The gaps have improved in the past decade (Centre for the Study of Living Standards 2012: 11) with employment rates of 55.8% and 62.0% for aboriginal and non-aboriginal Canadians respectively and unemployment rates of 12.9% and 7.3%. However, [i]n the three provinces with the largest Aboriginal population (Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia) and [in] Prince Edward Island, the gaps in the employment, unemployment, and participation rates between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal working age population increased between 2007 and 2011. This was not the case in the six other provinces.

While the situation is getting marginally better in some provinces, it is not in others. Further, while these statistics show the overall rates of unemployment for Aboriginal people, the situation on reserves is often much more challenging with "unemployment rates in excess of 85% not uncommon on Aboriginal reserves (Canadian Feed the Children: 1)."

The consequences of high levels of unemployment are many and varied. For example, communities with high levels of unemployment are poorer than other communities, and poorer communities are often less able to provide social and recreational opportunities for youth. This is due, in part, to the reality that parents in these communities cannot afford to enrol their children in programs that cost money. The lack of access to social and recreational opportunities can result in various forms of undesirable behaviour including substance abuse and crime (Dickson-Gilmore and Whitehead, 2002; Whitbeck, 2002). Indeed, some studies have reported that some youth have identified boredom as a reason for joining gangs (Hailer, 2008).

The lack of viable economic opportunities makes Aboriginal youth, as a group, especially susceptible to recruitment by highly organized street gangs since the gangs offer access to money and power that are not available to young people through conventional means (Dickson-Gilmore and Whitehead, 2002; Stinchcomb, 2002; FSIN, 2003; Kerr and Marion, 2003; Campbell, 2005; Kelly and Caputo, 2005; Grant and Feimer, 2007; Theriot and Parker, 2007; Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson, 2007, 2008; Hailer, 2008; Linden, 2010).

Young people from communities with limited opportunities often travel to urban areas to find action, excitement or just to hang around. This can often lead to involvement in dangerous or criminal activity (Cureton, 1999; Whitbeck, 2002; PSC, 2006; Dickson-Gilmore, 2007; Hailer, 2008; Totten, 2009) and bring them into contact with gangs who are always on the look out for potential recruits. The literature suggests that unmet needs make youth more susceptible to being recruited into gangs. In an important sense, gangs become surrogate families and pseudo communities for these young people providing them with the structure that most have never had, and allowing them to satisfy personal and emotional needs (Nafekh, 2002; FSIN, 2003; Ferguson and Wormith, 2005; Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson, 2007). Gangs also give their members a sense of purpose (something to do), a sense of belonging, and feelings of empowerment (Stinchcomb, 2002). For Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson (2008), Aboriginal youth gang involvement can be understood as a spontaneous social movement born out of the necessity to survive in a context of oppression and exclusion.

The disruption of Aboriginal cultures and traditions can also play a key role in gang involvement. A strong Aboriginal culture provides Aboriginal youth with a positive sense of identity and a connection to their history (Chandler and Lalonde, 1998). However, some Aboriginal youth come from communities that have lost much of their culture and traditions and, as a result, young people from these communities have little that connects them with their heritage (Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, 2003; Campbell, 2005; Jackson, Bass

and Sharpe, 2005). They are unable to benefit from the positive aspects of their culture and often lack a positive and healthy identity. Gangs are quick to fill this need by offering these young people a sense of belonging and the external trappings (clothing, tattoos and other symbols) that reinforce a gang identity. Young people from communities that have a strong cultural base and that provide opportunities for youth to get involved in cultural practices may be less susceptible to the allure of youth gangs.

In 2003, the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (FSIN) conducted a study in which interviews were completed with Aboriginal youth gang members. The study included the following recommendations: more structured activities; more non-competitive activities; affordable sport activities; cultural camps; traditional pursuits (learning how to hunt, etc.); cultural activities and ceremonies; role models; having adults become good parents; employment opportunities; having access to the basic necessities; and, parental involvement and support (FSIN, 2003). Each of these recommendations points to the nature and extent of the opportunities available to Aboriginal youth in their communities and reflects the focus on social development taken in this study.

Research Design and Methodology

This study was based on a random sample of First Nations communities and a multiple methods research design. A stratified random sample of 21 communities was drawn from a list of all First Nations communities in British Columbia (approximately a 10% sample). Eight substitute communities were also selected at this time. Based on the experience of the research team, several substitutions were made in order to ensure that the final study sample was representative of First Nations communities in the province. Besides replacing one small, remote community with a community in the interior of the province, two communities in the original sample were replaced based on their location in the Lower Mainland near Vancouver. This decision was based on the potential impact that proximity to such a large metropolitan area was likely to have especially in relation to the exposure to gangs. This situation would not be typical of the experiences of the vast majority of First Nations communities in the province since they are not close to a major metropolitan area the size of Vancouver.

The final sample included communities from across the province with populations from just over 100 to 1600 with the majority being in the 250 – 350 range. Some of the sample communities were located close to larger population centres with several actually being on the border of large municipalities. This is the case for many First Nations communities in the province and this increased our confidence in the representativeness of the sample.

Next, telephone interviews were conducted with RCMP officers providing policing services to the 21 sample communities. Interviews were completed for 18 of these communities. We were unable to complete interviews in three communities for a variety of reasons including timing and lack of officer availability. The interview process was undertaken with the support and assistance of the RCMP's Aboriginal Policing Services section in British Columbia that contacted the Detachments, explained the purpose of the project, and asked for assistance and cooperation. In each Detachment, we asked to speak to an officer who was most familiar with the community selected through the sampling process. We were often directed to an Aboriginal Policing officer since these individuals work closely with the First Nations communities in their Detachment areas. This gives us some confidence in the findings since we were able to interview police officers who were knowledgeable about youth issues in the sample communities including issues related to the existence of youth gangs.

The interviews with RCMP officers included a series of questions about the various opportunities available to young people in the communities we were interested in. For example, we asked about social and recreational opportunities as well as available educational resources (schools in the community or nearby). We also discussed cultural opportunities and the possibility for young people in these communities of finding employment close to home. In addition to questions about the nature and extent of these opportunities, we asked whether young people took advantage of the existing opportunities including their level of participation. In this context, we asked if opportunities were available close by, and whether adults in the

community were willing to drive young people so that they could take advantage of existing opportunities. We also asked the officers about community concerns regarding their young people and whether youth gangs were a concern.

Based on the background interviews and with the support of key informants from the Aboriginal Policing Services section of the RCMP in the province, site visits were conducted in communities near the Victoria, Chilliwack, and Williams Lake Detachments. After discussions with the Aboriginal Policing Services section, a decision was made to add the Kamloops Detachment for a site visit. The Kamloops Detachment was added since it could provide an important opportunity to further explore our research questions about communities and youth gang concerns. The key informants in each of the four Detachments arranged for us to visit two First Nations communities nearby: one community with youth gang concerns and one without. One Detachment was able to arrange visits to three communities and we took the opportunity to do so since the additional community had some interesting programs for youth. In this case, one of these three communities had youth gang concerns while the other two did not. Using the strategy outlined above, nine communities were identified and visited for this study.

The key informants were provided with a detailed description of the project and asked to approach community leaders in the selected communities, explain the project, and invite them to participate. This typically included contacting the Chief and other elected officials as well as community elders. If this initial contact was positive, we asked for the names of contact people in the community so that we could follow up and confirm site visit details. During these contacts, the purpose of the site visit was clearly explained as was the process we wished to follow.

In all cases, the community members consulted with their colleagues and all confirmed that we were welcome to visit and that they were willing to participate. Many were pleased about being contacted and looked forward to our arrival since youth-related issues were important to them and their community. These community contacts were asked for their assistance in setting up interviews and focus group sessions with elected officials, elders, service providers, representatives of local business and youth. We wanted to speak with a cross section of community members about the opportunities available for young people in their communities. We asked them how they engaged their youth and what ideas they wanted to share with other communities about this process. We also inquired about community concerns with youth gangs and any steps that had been taken in response to these concerns.

During each site visit, community members were asked what they had done to engage their young people. This general question was followed up with detailed questions about the availability of social, recreational, cultural, educational, and employment opportunities for youth in the community. We asked the participants to reflect on their experiences and tell us what they would recommend to other communities trying to engage their youth. We also asked the site visit participants about the community's concerns regarding youth gangs and what they had done to respond to these concerns.

Each site visit involved a focus group with community leaders (elected officials), community members, service providers, and youth. Where possible, we met with youth separately. Focus groups ranged in size from six to 12 and lasted approximately 2 hours. In total we spoke with 75 people in nine communities. In addition, we spoke with 10 officers who worked in the site visit communities. In two sites, we met with two officers. In the other two sites, we met with three officers. The analysis of the site visit data begins with an exploration of whether youth gangs were a concern in these First Nations communities.

Findings:

Are Youth Gangs A Concern?

It is important to begin by noting that the youth gang activity that was reported during the background interviews with police officers wasn't considered serious. It usually involved only a few individuals or a small number of people who had had ongoing contact with the police. Serious concerns were reported in only one community. In this case, the officer we spoke with

noted that this had to do with the connections that young people from this community had with an adult Aboriginal gang in a nearby urban centre.

Youth gang concerns were reported by police officers in 3 of the 18 sample communities. All three of these communities were located near large urban centres. The respondents reported that a wide variety of social, recreational, cultural, educational, and employment opportunities were available to young people in these communities in part, as a result of their proximity to an urban centre, although these were not necessarily in the community itself. This is an important issue since some young people from First Nations communities might feel uncomfortable or intimidated about going into a nearby town to participate in an organized activity if adult support and supervision isn't provided. In communities with gang concerns, the respondents reported higher levels of apathy and non-engagement than in communities without gang concerns.

Concerns over the existence of youth gangs were influenced by a community's location near an urban centre. Of the nine site visit communities, four had youth gang concerns and five did not. Six of these nine communities were close to an urban centre in which gangs were present. The other three communities were only a short drive away from an urban centre. Importantly, three of the communities with youth gang concerns were *on the periphery of large urban centres and the fourth was a short drive away*. This suggests that location is a contributing factor to youth gang concerns. At S***** the situation was described this way:

It is so easy for youth to grab a bus to the city. They know urban Indian peoples and they can get into trouble. It can be worrisome. There are few gangs, more so now. Hard core gangs, drug dealers – it goes on here as everywhere. The key is how you handle it [as a community].

The site visit communities confirmed what the police officers reported during the background interviews. That is, community members confirmed that youth gang involvement was neither serious nor widespread in their communities. The site visit communities also confirmed that only a few individuals or a small group was involved in gang-related activities. A participant in S***** stated, "... we had some wannabes and the response was to have a gang workshop. It was an overreaction. It would have been better to spend resources on encouraging youth and to operate programs (Wellness Coordinator)." In some cases, these were disillusioned young people who were attracted to the excitement of being in a gang. In other cases, individuals coming into the community including family members were recruiting young people into gangs. However, we were also told that while this does happen from time to time, it is not common. On S**** Reserve, there were 8 drug houses at one time, all connected to a single individual. These drug houses were viewed as putting youth and others at risk. The community worked with the RCMP to remove one key person from the reserve. It was challenging because "[f]amilies support each other, both good and bad. So they support family members even when they are doing bad things (R*****, Council Member)."

The site visits confirmed that gang involvement was kept low key. That is, individuals involved with gangs do not advertise their activities. They don't wear colours or other gang paraphernalia while in the community. The visibility of gang related activity was often associated with the drug trade including selling drugs, fighting over turf, and assaults related to drug debts. Youth are usually engaged in these activities as a result of their involvement with adult gang members. Some have had problems in the past. On the A***** Reserve, there were three competing gangs present about 8 years previously and the community worked to address the issue. The Education Coordinator reported, "Opportunities were not available for youth. We are making a conscious effort to make that happen. We have recreation now. The gym is open every night, and we have 2 workers in the summer, and a liaison person."

In general, youth crime was not seen as a problem in the site visit communities. Only one of the four communities with youth gang concerns had a problem that they described as serious. In this case, it involved a small group of young people associating with adult gang members from a nearby community.

The background interviews indicated that we needed to distinguish between opportunities available for young people in communities, and the extent to which young people actually took part in these activities. Carole from S**** First Nation reported that “[w]e had a social development program with the YMCA for July and August. I was willing to drive the kids, pick them up, and make lunch for them. Two kids turned up.” All nine of the site visit communities reported having opportunities available for their young people, however, there were proportionately fewer opportunities available in smaller and in less well-resourced communities. On the E***** Reserve, a Council member gave the following description of their situation. “We’re just managing as best we can. We have a high poverty level and don’t have the resources [for programs]. We hate to start and then have to abandon it and them.”

All of the communities reported that providing opportunities is necessary but not sufficient to result in youth participation or engagement. They all agreed that young people need the active support and involvement of adults if they are to take advantage of available opportunities. This meant more than providing funds, equipment, and transportation. It meant adults engaging with youth, speaking with them about issues and behaviour. It meant adults being volunteers and doing fundraising. And for some communities, it meant adults looking at their own negative behaviours and addressing them. A band member in S***** reflected that “[i]nvolving adults is a double-edged sword. Some are very positive role models but many are not positive. The kids do see the positive, but they also see adults who don’t participate and don’t get along (W****, Band member).”

The E***** First Nation had set up a camp for their young people. Children, parents, elders, and healers all attended. On the fourth day of camp, one of the Elders spoke up about the negative behaviour of the young people. This was one of the concerns that had prompted the community to put on the camp. “He told us he’s been watching and saw that kids and parents did the same things. If you want the children to change, first the adults have to change. Can’t say to kids ‘don’t do as I do, do as I say’ (Chief, EFN).”

All nine of the site visit communities were very committed to their children and youth and wanted the best for them. Not all of the communities were able to engage their young people, however, and some found it particularly difficult due to conditions in their community such as adult addictions, poverty, the legacy of residential schools, crumbling infrastructure, and the lack of resources to repair it. “Healing of the community is a good way to start [to help young people]. We are dealing with the legacy of the residential schools, drugs, alcohol, and sexual abuse. It takes a lot to heal but it leads to education and employment opportunities” (Council member, S***** Reserve). These factors contributed to apathy among adults and, as a result, disinterest on the part of their young people.

The communities that were better able to engage their young people were less likely to have concerns over youth gang involvement. These communities typically had a core of adults who were healthy and actively involved in activities for and with youth. These adults reached out to youth-serving agencies and, in particular, to schools. They asked young people about the kinds of activities and opportunities they would like to see in their community. Young people in these communities were encouraged to participate in the planning and running of activities. Our findings suggest that youth can’t do it alone and need adult support. At the same time, adults can’t do it alone and need the involvement of youth. On the E***** Reserve they wanted to help their youth:

Children need a voice and adults need to listen to them. We don’t want to do to them what the Government did to the Band. Here, before, the Chief and Council wanted to help the young people. They decided what to do and failed. Everything they did would go for 2 weeks and then fail. So, finally they designed a program for around here with input from the adults. It also failed. Then they asked the youth what they wanted. They let the young people design it and it lasted longer because they owned it, felt good about it.

Communities that did not have gang concerns had stronger connections with their culture and traditions than communities with youth gang concerns. They also had a more positive attitude toward their cultural heritage and, in particular, a strong sense of pride that was picked

up by young people. Communities recognised that building a strong culture was important. The Chief on the S**** Reserve reflected that “[w]e have few traditional people, people are like white people now. Native people were made to feel ashamed and were put in special programs in school and they feel less worthy. We are teaching our language in the Head Start program but we have to keep the culture within the families NOT in the schools.”

Building a positive attitude towards cultural heritage is not a simple matter and depends on how cultural traditions and practices are maintained and passed on. In all of the site visit communities, culture and cultural education were under the control of families, many of which worked hard to pass their culture and traditions on to their children. Communities with more healthy families were, therefore, better able to pass on their cultural traditions and develop a sense of pride in their children.

The S***** First Nation has a strong cultural tradition. Each family has its own elders who provide guidance, advice, and support to all their members. The families had worked during the Residential School era to protect their knowledge by hiding children who were taught the traditional ways. This tradition continues and the “[t]eachings of the Long House, culture and values are much admired. We are trying to stay with them. It is ours.” They integrated drumming into the schools and this helped to engage their youth. They were active in doing events as a community and this allowed them to respond to the challenges they faced.

In all of the communities, the young people had an opportunity to participate with their peers in various cultural activities and practices. However, the real key to success was in having family “buy in.” Families that were willing and able to commit to teaching their children their cultural values and pass on their traditions were more successful in engaging their young people. These communities not only provided opportunities to their youth to participate in cultural activities, but adults in these communities also participated actively in cultural practices and helped to organize activities like “on the land” camps, and teaching young people how to build and race war canoes.

Communities with concerns over youth gangs were also the ones with less capacity to act. They had fewer healthy adults to undertake community activities. They also had fewer resources that could be devoted to providing opportunities for young people. A***** had a concern with gang violence and noted the presence of three gangs (712, CRW, and a third that had split off from 712). S***** was related to many of the gang members and he reported, “... nasty fights with machetes, knives, bats and pipes. Lots of injuries, lots of fights and drinking.” He stated that the band was “... traditionally not strong. We do some stuff with elders and have some strong elders but contact varies. Kids in gangs don’t show up.”

In contrast, on the S**** Reserve, there had been an attempt to establish a gang presence. The local elders were proactive in addressing this challenge. Adults in the community reported the negative activity and the behaviours were publically discussed at band meetings with the parents present. The ability to undertake these kinds of activities suggests that community capacity is an important variable related to youth gang prevention. While building community capacity is not a typical approach to youth gang concerns since prevention programs are usually directed at the young people themselves, devoting attention to community capacity can have positive benefits. Community members recognized that addressing the level of capacity in a community and finding appropriate strategies to build community capacity are required in the long term if communities are going to be able to address issues such as concerns over youth gangs.

Other communities have found that cultural renewal can be an important way for a community to address its problems. E***** Reserve, started a canoe program that combined a, “... cultural, physical, and mental challenge. It makes you stronger. We would go from community to community and each community that hosted would have a feast. We paddled 125 miles with a ground crew. We pulled together. Kids made friends, listened to other’s stories. It gave them pride.” (G.T, Council member)

Though the strategies for developing capacity varied, there was one common element. Community members agreed that solutions must come from within their communities and cannot be imposed from outside.

In all of the site visit communities that had youth gang concerns, adult addictions issues were a challenge. The addictions issues were often related to larger social problems including the legacy of the residential schools, family dysfunction, and violence. In these communities, the lack of healthy adults who were able to take on the responsibility for doing work for the community and its people contributed to problems with youth. R*****, a Council member in the S**** Reserve described the situation this way:

The older people can't communicate well. Adults are not there for the youth. People are aware of youth at risk but the people around them are not able to support them and the outside supports that are there are not culturally appropriate. ... Children end up in care. Parents are dealing with the Residential School legacy. They [the parents] did not learn parenting skills [because they were in the Residential Schools] from their parents like they should have. We try to do outreach. In the 1990s we had a program called 'Families in Motion'. We got grandmothers, parents, [and] guardians together. They learned computer skills. Social Services joined in and assisted adults to up-grade their education. Children did other activities. It started here and Community Services took over and moved it off reserve; we lost the cultural component.

In another community, community members noted that problems with alcohol had to be addressed before the community could heal. In this community, Alcoholics Anonymous provided a means for the community to move forward. They found that getting adults sober was beneficial for young people in the community as well. Several adults in this community expressed the view that they were "... better able to help the kids when we stopped drinking." The program began with 3 people coming to meetings. They now have 20 to 30 people at each meeting (T****, A***** Reserve).

As noted above, young people need the active attention and support of adults to be engaged. Opportunities may be available for them but in the absence of caring and supportive adults, many young people do not participate. The A***** Reserve tried to bring youth together to support each other but it was not successful. CJ, a Band member described the situation this way:

Role models at home are not there and so youth go to others and they are often negative role models. The community had to build self-esteem and work with the older people who abused alcohol to get good role models. But we still had a concern about young people, so we switched to working directly with the young people, to try to intervene and prevent problems and then each group of young people could be role models for the younger kids. Young people are now asking for family members to go into treatment. In 1998 we had about 13 young people from here on the streets in XXXXX. Now we have none (CJ, Band Member).

Respondents in the site visit communities that did not have a concern with youth gangs noted that you need a large number of healthy and engaged adults to support youth in the community. On the S***** Reserve, they had worked hard to build a strong internal structure to support the community. Working with healthy community members, they set up a system where every family had representation on the Band Council. The family representatives then worked with the young people and adults in their families to address problems and concerns.

Site visit communities recognized that they needed to engage young people. All nine were working on doing so. All had developed a range of strategies; some more successful than others. S***** worked with the province and nine other Reserves to increase transition rates to post secondary education, to improve graduation rates, to increase attendance, and to find ways to highlight aboriginal culture in schools. In developing the agreement they met with parents to talk about education. The meetings:

... brought to light the experiences of parents in school, especially the Residential Schools. The parents told them that as a result of their experiences they did not know how to parent, how to help kids with homework. They wanted to be recognized within

the school, for example having Aboriginal art in the schools; they wanted their culture to be acknowledged. They wanted their language and culture taught in school and they wanted more information on how schools work.

School-based programs were seen as an important way to engage youth in the site visit communities. These programs were used to support young people as they attended schools outside of their own communities. These programs typically help the young people integrate into the school environment. For example, the S***** First Nation has a program at school that teaches drumming. The school bought the drums and the students drum every morning. The young people acknowledged the importance of this program but they also wanted to have more First Nations staff in the schools, and they did not like the Language classes being scheduled early in the day. They also wanted more health and wellness programs so that they would know how to take better care of themselves. These programs provided the Aboriginal youth involved with a voice. They also served to educate the wider school population about First Nations culture, making the schools more welcoming and accepting for all students.

In communities that did not have a concern with youth gangs, a key strategy was for adults in the community to pay attention to what was happening with their young people. The S***** First Nation has a school liaison process.

When a teacher or a police officer has a concern about a young person, that's how the community gets involved. They [Teacher/Police] go to the First Nations facilitators who are chosen by the community. They step in when they become aware (H*****, Youth Worker).

In the S**** First Nation, if adults see young people causing problems they will approach the youth and tell them to go home. Issues related to youth causing problems are brought up at council meetings, parents are spoken to, and when warranted, the problem is referred to the police (L***). As a result, they were on top of emerging issues so that when a young person was having problems or there was an emerging drug presence, the community was able to respond quickly.

The S****2 First Nation had been fairly successful with their older youth running a canoeing program. However, this was threatened when a Meth Lab was set up on the Reserve. The community leaders worked to get the drugs out of the community and they were successful in getting the key person off the Reserve. They are now rebuilding their youth program. The canoeing is continuing and they have a drumming group that attracts more than 30 young people each week (R*****, Council member).

In these communities, key individuals such as elders, educators, and service providers get together to act when a particular young person begins exhibiting problem behaviour. They talk with parents and with the young people and encourage them to work with a mentor or spend time with an elder.

When asked how communities who were struggling with issues related to crime, gangs, and other problems responded, we were told:

Healing of the community is a good way to start. The legacy of the residential schools – drugs, alcohol, sexual abuse – takes a lot to heal. ... You will see that in a crisis the community comes together. So there is potential to do this but they have to heal first (N.G., Band councillor)

In these communities, youth were also given an opportunity to participate in decision-making and this was an important way to engage them. These communities had active youth groups that were routinely consulted by community leaders on issues that concerned them. In S**** First Nation, the outreach began with the youth. The Youth Worker, L***, began by talking to young people who, in turn, talked to their parents. This brought the parents into a fundraising initiative for youth activities. They extended this to include a yearly clean up that brings youth and adults together:

We do a community clean up each year and lots of people come. Kids and adults. The Band provides food. It's good for the children to clean up. Often it's litter. It gives them time with Elders. (L***, Youth Worker).

All of the site visit communities also employed a variety of prevention and other programs to reduce crime. These included education and awareness programs, and programs that urge people to report suspicious activity to the police. These were supplemented with programs that provided opportunities for pro-social behaviour. This included recreational and school support programs for youth, and for adults support for addictions, educational upgrading, and importantly building positive connections between parents and the schools. The S**** First Nation described the supports as addressing "... social, educational, recreational, cultural, and employment needs (L***, Youth Worker)."

The police officers we interviewed during the site visits echoed what community members said. The officers in both C***** and A***** noted that with respect to policing, the new focus was on the community and that this meant approaching policing in non-traditional ways. "Communities with strong cultural ties and strong leaders do better... There has been a loss of culture but where there is strong moral sense, strong leadership, and strong family ties, we have lots of success (Officers G*****, C***** Detachment)." The goal is "... to assist communities to be more resistant [to gangs] and the police have to play a supportive role (Officer L*****, A***** Detachment).

They also confirmed that the availability of appropriate social, recreational, cultural, educational, and employment opportunities for youth were important for reducing the likelihood of anti-social behaviour by youth including gang involvement. When asked to compare four communities where she policed, Officer K***** responded that the community with the least problems was the one where the kids were well integrated and where the traditional ways had been maintained. She mentioned the importance of "investing in youth" and noted that the communities that have been able to increase opportunities have seen a positive change.

The police officers saw prevention and engaging youth at an early age as important and in this context, recreation was seen as an effective way of doing this. Officers from the V**** Detachment noted that, "... dealing with them [youth in conflict with the law] is key. We have to work interagency and this is still failing (Officer. L****, V**** Detachment). The focus in the Detachment was youth deemed 'high risk', a group that, not surprisingly, has a multitude of needs. Bands that were seeing success in helping their children and youth had activities for them in the summer and winter. The S***** First Nation had hockey for their youth – ice hockey in the winter and ball hockey in the summer. They organised getting equipment and driving the kids to games and practices. In A*****, the Band had had a community school coordinator who had coordinated activities among the various schools. When funding for this position was lost, they found that the kids became bored and began to get into trouble (Officer L*****, A***** Division).

However, the police officers also noted the need for other kinds of opportunities including those that involve parents and elders working with youth. One of the four reserves S**** "... has been, until recently, more violent than the others. Lots of alcohol but over the past 2 or 3 years, the violence has come way down. ... People took responsibility to do things for their kids (Officer K*****, C***** Detachment)." Adults had an important role in on-reserve crime. Officers reported gang members and drug dealers 'hiding out' on the Reserve and being protected by family members. They found that to make in-roads, they had to identify adults who were "... strong and acting positively and make links with them."

The officers at the A***** Detachment noted that '... the issues are vast and complex. There are issues with inadequate and insufficient housing. We've lost many houses to fires. There are issues with education, especially sending the kids to the city [i.e., off Reserve] for education. And the problems with alcohol and drugs are massive. Officer C*****, sits on the local Crime Reduction Board and noted that they need to have mental health and social assistance at the table to make in-roads. On S*****, the community was bringing youth, adults, and elders together for a variety of events including a community clean up on Earth Day. They also had circles, and the police reported that people were worried about having to face elders and other community members during a circle. This helped to reduce on-Reserve crime. They also reported that positive changes snowballed as communities took

greater pride. This included naming streets after community members who had made a difference.

The police officers also reported that youth participation in cultural activities made a positive contribution to their self-identity and self worth. These officers saw communities that had a strong commitment to their culture and heritage as better able to engage their youth and prevent anti-social behaviour including gang involvement. Officer S***** at the C***** Detachment indicated that, "... strong cultural ties mean strong leaders." All the officers reported that allowing officers to participate in community and cultural events helped build a positive relationship. They did this both while of duty, and in addition to their normal workload.

Conclusions

In this study, we explored youth gang concerns in First Nations communities in British Columbia. In particular, we examined the impact that community-level variables such as the availability of social, recreational, cultural, educational and economic opportunities had on these concerns. This social development approach differs markedly from much of the gang suppression and crime reduction literature since it goes beyond their focus on individual behaviour. The communities we studied did note the importance of the community level risk factors identified in the research literature including poverty, unemployment, loss of culture, lack of resources for recreation, and educational failure. Many of these risk factors were present in the communities we studied and the communities reported that they were working hard to address them. This was seen as an important way of reducing crime generally and minimizing the attraction of gangs for their young people, in particular.

The literature described youth gangs as a serious problem in many communities in Western Canada. Our findings indicated that this was not the case in the communities we studied. Even in the communities in this study that reported being concerned with youth gangs, these were not seen as serious problems. In these cases, youth gang concerns typically involved one or a few individuals who were known to the police or involved with adult gang members in a nearby community. In many cases the adults gang members were related to the youth being recruited into the gang.

Our research confirmed the importance of the availability of social, recreational, cultural, educational, and employment opportunities for youth. Furthermore, study participants linked these community level variables to youth engagement and positive behaviour as well as preventing gang involvement. In each community we visited, we were told about the barriers and challenges that communities face in providing opportunities for young people. We discovered that opportunities were *necessary* but not *sufficient* to address concerns related to youth involvement in dangerous or illegal behaviour including with gangs. Specifically, adult support and involvement with youth was seen as crucial in engaging youth people and having them actually take advantage of opportunities that were available. This finding speaks to the capacity that exists in communities – namely the availability and interest of “healthy” adults to engage with and support their young people. The challenge in many of the communities we visited was related to factors such as the legacy of the residential schools, high levels of unemployment, poverty, and the loss of cultural identity. Cultural identity, in particular, was seen as vital. Communities that had strong cultural and traditional practices reported being much more successful in engaging their young people and minimizing their potential involvement in youth gangs.

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