

SHARING SETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION PRACTICES THAT WORK REAL ME GANG INTERVENTION – PANDEMIC IMPACT

Centre for Newcomers
Calgary, AB

Area of Practice:
Safety and Anti-violence

Video:
https://youtu.be/RSHxUfuD_g0

A Pathways to
Prosperity Project

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**PATHWAYS TO
PROSPERITY**
Promoting Welcoming Communities in Canada



**VOIES VERS LA
PROSPÉRITÉ**
Promouvoir des communautés accueillantes au Canada

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE ORGANIZATION

The Centre for Newcomers, established in 1988, is a non-profit organization located in Calgary, Alberta. The Centre offers training programs and support services that aim to promote the complete integration, cultural diversity, community involvement, and citizenship of newcomers to the area. Its mission is to foster a welcoming environment in Calgary while creating favourable conditions for the success of both newcomers and the receiving community through various initiatives and services.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAM

Name:

Real Me Gang Intervention

Brief Description of the Program Prior to the Pandemic:

The Real Me program is an intervention aimed at helping newcomer youth who are involved, or who are at risk of being involved, in gang activities. Since 2014, the program has provided youth with individualized support to help them reach their highest potential without judging them for their past. In particular, the program helps youth to identify and work towards their goals. It also provides employment and life skills training, academic support, mentoring, culturally-appropriate counseling, and family support. The program also helps youth find pro-social activities that interest them. Participation in the program is voluntary.

Description of the Changes to the Program Since the Pandemic Began:

In response to the challenges posed by the pandemic, the Real Me program undertook several steps to support the needs of the youth and their families. These include the following: 1) transition to remote support, 2) increased counselling and tutoring, 3) conflict resolution through a third-party mediator, and 4) family supports.

During the pandemic, the program had to transition from in-person activities to remote support. Some youth and their parents did not have the necessary apps on their phones, so the program provided laptops and training sessions to teach them how to use these virtual communication tools. While youth and parents welcomed this, some youth expressed a strong desire to also participate in in-person activities. Whenever possible, and in compliance with health guidelines, the program met with the youth in open and outdoor spaces to provide a supportive and engaging environment.

The pandemic also resulted in an increase in mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression. For this reason, the program had to place a larger focus on meeting the mental health needs of the youth and their parents. This was accomplished through referrals to counseling services as well as in-house counselling. In fact, counseling became a high priority resource and more than doubled, overtaking “pro-social” activities as the most requested type of support. Furthermore, to compensate for the reduction in pro-social activities caused by government health restrictions, the program leveraged and expanded its partnership network to identify employment and volunteering opportunities for the youth.

The program also provided additional academic support by relying on more tutors who provided free online tutoring services. Compared to before the pandemic, these tutors spent more time with the youth than before.

Furthermore, the pandemic forced youth and their family members to spend more time at home, which led to more frequent family conflicts and culture clashes between the parents and youth. The program brought in a culturally sensitive third-party mediator to alleviate these conflicts by taking a neutral position. This helped improve family dynamics as well as the mental health of the family.

Additionally, the program provided families with assistance with their basic needs such as housing and finances. To accomplish this, the program built partnerships with other organizations to provide the families with gift cards for basic necessities and access to culturally appropriate food, and to connect them to programs that provide rent subsidies.

Finally, the program expanded its family support services by creating a parent support group and hosting educational workshop sessions. These sessions provided a safe place for parents to discuss their challenges with parenting (e.g., how to monitor the online learning of their children since the start of the pandemic, how to practice self-care) and working with various systems, like the school system.

Goal(s) of the Program Since the Pandemic Began:

The Real Me program's main goal continues to be the provision of intentional identity based and culturally sensitive intervention plans that are trauma informed and seek to discourage gang ideation, discourage criminal behavior, and also help address identity issues that are often common in newcomer youth in Canada.

Target Client Group(s):

The clients of the Real Me program have not changed from those who used the program pre-pandemic. They are first- and second-generation immigrant youth aged 12 to 24 years who are either gang members or who are at high risk of becoming gang members or criminally involved.

Delivery Partners:

The Real Me program is co-delivered with the Calgary Catholic School District, Calgary Board of Education, Programmes Projet Appartenance MCHB/AHS, Calgary Police Service, City of Calgary – Neighbourhood Department, Calgary Young Offender Centre, Calgary Youth Attendance Centre, RCMP K Division – Public Engagement Unit, Office of the Child and Youth Advocate, Alberta Health Services – Youth Substance Use and Mental Health Services, Brenda Juby Consulting, Carya, WGM Psychological Services, Restorative Conversations, RDG Counselling Services, Antyx Community Arts, YMCA of Calgary, Centre for Sexuality, Calgary Home Tutoring, Education Wise, Calgary Bridge Foundation for Youth Guyn Cooper Research Associates, University of Calgary – Faculty of Social Work, Calgary John Howard Society, Elizabeth Fry Society, Shory Law, McMan Youth, Family and Community Services Association, I Can for Kids, Watered Heart Counselling, Action Dignity, Ruth's House, Best Help Family Foundation, Trellis, Cognitive Corner Counselling Services, Urick Manoo Mediation, Mosaic Minds Counselling, Alberta Youth Probation, AQ Outdoors, CIWA, Organization for the Prevention of Violence, and Safe Link Alberta.

Human Resources:

The Real Me program team includes the Centre for Newcomer's Director of Youth Services, the Manager of Youth Programs, as well as 5 case managers, 1 family support worker, 1 volunteer coordinator, 25 volunteers, and members from over 50 partners agencies.

Funding:

The Real Me program is funded by Family and Community Support Services, a joint municipal-provincial funding program, and the Guns, Gangs, Violence and Crime Prevention Fund through the Alberta Justice and Solicitor General and the Ministry of Public Safety & Emergency Services.

KEY FEATURES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THIS BEING A PROMISING PRACTICE

Effective:

The program's effectiveness during the pandemic can be attributed to several key features. One of the most important features is that the staff of the program went above and beyond to continue to provide direct, highly personalized support to the youth and their families. This was despite the challenging circumstances, including the change from in-person to remote interactions and the, at times, reduced staff availability. The program was able to not only maintain the highly personalized support for its current clients, but also to meet the increased demand for its services during a time when depression and anxiety rates were high.

Another important feature is that the program recognized and responded to the needs of its clients as they were dealing with the pandemic. This meant, for example, offering additional mental health support through increased counselling, as well as organizing parent group support sessions and educational workshops for parents. Similarly, the program brought on additional tutors to provide increased academic support to the youth who were often struggling with the transition to online school. The mentoring program also became more creative in that mentors started to use more texting to build connections with the youth, which is something the youth really enjoyed. Finally, the program recognized the hardships that the pandemic placed on the youths' families and found resourceful solutions to help them meet their basic needs (e.g., distribution of gift cards, referrals to rent assistance programs, support to complete application forms to access financial supports, referrals to microloans, government benefits, and food assistance).

Efficient:

The Real Me program is efficient due to its unique family engagement component. The priority is to not only support the youth, but also their families. This way, the program is able to help its clients by targeting various areas of their lives, increasing its chance of having a positive impact on clients' lives. In addition, the program's case workers work collaboratively and provide each other with support. Finally, the Real Me program is housed at the Centre for Newcomers, a large organization that is able to provide administrative support and shares multiple partnerships, making the program even more efficient.

Relevant:

Data on the characteristics of the program participants show that learning disabilities and mental health concerns (i.e., ADHD and anxiety disorders) are increasing among participants, with 47% of new participants having a diagnosed or suspected mental health concern. A large percentage of program participants (82%) also present moderate to severe levels of past trauma during the intake process. Substance use is also prevalent, with 35% of program participants admitting to using drugs, mainly prescription drugs. Furthermore, the average age of participants in the program is decreasing (now 15.2 years old). This trend may indicate that young people are experiencing exposure to crime, violence, and trauma at a younger age, leading them to engage in such behaviors earlier. The program aims to address this need by providing highly individualized support for youth and their families.

Sustainable:

The pandemic highlighted the importance of identity-building activities as youth who lack identity and a sense of belonging are vulnerable to gang ideation and criminal behavior. For this reason, the program plans to introduce new activities that will help young people build their identity and self-esteem while promoting personal interests and connection with their families, culture, and Canadian culture. The program also aims to expand its focus on mental health to meet the increased mental health needs of youth and their parents. To this end, the program has formed new partnerships and strengthened existing ones to provide more comprehensive support to youth and their families. The program has also collaborated more closely with schools, sharing information about its participants' experiences, backgrounds, and behaviors.

Transferable:

In order to successfully replicate this program, partnerships and collaborations with other organizations are essential. These organizations should operate in sectors such as the youth, justice, education, settlement and health sectors. Furthermore, it is also important to provide services with cultural competence and responsiveness.

Innovative and Forward Thinking:

The program uses a client-centered and family-based approach, meeting the youth where they are and adapting to their unique interests and strengths. The program also emphasizes building a team of natural supports, including important people in the youth's lives such as parents, teachers, mentors, and coaches, to create a supportive network for the youth. The program also developed innovative solutions to deal with some of the pandemic related challenges. For example, in order to compensate for the closure of recreational activities, such as swimming pools and gyms, during the pandemic the mentors of the program decided to play educational online games with the youth, which helped to maintain their engagement and learning.

Differs in Definable Ways from Other Similar Practices:

The Real Me program uses a community-focused strategy to promote mental health and prevent crime, with an emphasis on providing family support. The program's staff is highly trained in cultural competence and utilizes culturally responsive methods to ensure effective service delivery.

High Client Uptake:

During the pandemic, the program continued to have a high volume of referrals. For example, between April 2021 and March 2022, a total of 83 youth was referred to the program. On average, the program typically provides active support to around 50 youth at a time, while an additional 10 youth are going through the intake process and another 10 are on the waitlist. The pandemic also led to increased interest in the program from schools and school boards. As a result, the program provided more information to schools and made its evaluation data available to school boards so that they could use the information and change how they respond to their youth's needs.

High Client Retention:

Prior to the pandemic, on average, youth remained in the program from one year to a year and a half. However, the impact of the pandemic led to a longer intake process due to the use of virtual communication. In addition, the pandemic also posed challenges in terms of connecting youth with local natural supports. For this reason, the youth tended to stay in the program longer, for up to two

years. The longer stay in the program ensures that, once youth graduate from the program, they are best prepared and equipped with the necessary tools to address any challenges they may face in their lives.

The most challenging period for client retention is the initial engagement and intake phase. This is because some of the youth may not be prepared to address the challenges that the program tackles. Also, some family members may not provide consent for their youth to participate, and some youth may be highly involved in criminal behavior or the justice system, making participation difficult. Of the youth that make it to the team-planning phase, about 80% graduate from the program, with the remaining 20% meeting their set goals and leaving the program prior to graduation. An important aspect contributing to the high retention rates are the monthly wraparound meetings with the youth, their parents and the entire support team involved.

Strong Evidence of Successful Outcomes:

Upon graduating from the Real Me program, youth generally report a reduction in gang ideation and substance use, feeling more grounded in their identity, and improved relationships with their families and/or peers. Furthermore, they tend to be better equipped to pursue personal and academic goals. Youth who received one-on-one academic support from a tutor demonstrated higher school attendance rates and developed better relationships with their teachers and peers at school. Those who participated in counseling services also reported experiencing better relationships with family members, being able to address difficult topics, and learning tools to manage their emotions (i.e., anger) in challenging situations.

The program also helped identify undiagnosed mental health disorders (i.e., oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder, ADHD, anxiety disorders) among youth. This helped parents to become educated on these disorders and to better understand their child's behaviour and adjust their parenting style. Furthermore, parents who accessed counseling services overwhelmingly reported feeling better prepared to manage their child's challenges, past trauma, and their own mental health concerns. Finally, program participants were particularly satisfied with the program's family support services.

PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION STRATEGY

The method used to evaluate the program is a mixed methods approach, collecting quantitative and qualitative data from multiple sources.

In terms of quantitative data, the program uses internal youth questionnaires and standardized mental health assessments (e.g., for mental health disorders, depressive behaviour, screening for childhood trauma or family trauma). It also surveys youth participants to gather data on their involvement in crime, peer support, thoughts on criminal behavior, relationships with adults, and family influence. The program also surveys the mentors to gather information about their interactions with the youth, including the frequency and location of their contact, as well as their general experiences working with the youth.

The qualitative data include surveys and interviews with youth and their families to understand the impact of the program and how it can be improved. It also includes follow-up conversations with graduates to confirm that the natural supports they were connected with are still providing

assistance, or alternatively, to ensure that they have gained the skills to identify and build relationships with natural supports within their community. Additionally, the program seeks feedback from partnership networks through quarterly meetings. During these meetings partners share their observations of the community, identify challenges that newcomer youth may be facing in Calgary, and explore emerging crime prevention approaches that could be more effective. Finally, the program also collects anecdotal statements from mentors that help understand their experiences and identify areas for improvement in their volunteer experience with the program.

In terms of the timing of data collection, the primary point of data collection occurs during the initial intake process during which the youth's personality, home life dynamics, relationships with family, friends, and community, academic performance, behavior in school, legal situation, as well as information about their interests, hobbies, and spirituality is assessed. This thorough assessment is repeated at the one-year mark, and potentially at the two-year mark if the youth remain in the program that long.

Furthermore, the program also has additional check-ins at the six-month mark, during which any changes to the youth's thought processes related to gang involvement or criminal activity are assessed. Finally, the program is designed to have regular monthly check-ins with the youth, their families, and the entire support team involved. These wraparound meetings are very valuable between the more thorough evaluations as they help to set and review objectives, assess any progress, identify needs, and make any adjustments, if required.

The program also works with a third-party evaluator. The evaluator primarily analyzes quantitative data from the internal surveys and anecdotal statements collected by staff, and produces an annual report.

Overall, the evidence gathered provides valuable feedback on the program. For example, the program was able to identify how the pandemic increased participants' need for counseling. It also led to improvements of the mentorship program, as mentors expressed a desire for more organized events and additional mentorship training. Similarly, the positive feedback from parents on the family support engagement sessions led to the development of regular peer support meetings for parents, covering topics such as understanding the needs of newcomer youth with mental health or learning disabilities, managing ADHD in school, safety tips, and interacting with police.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Centre for Newcomers

<https://www.centrefornewcomers.ca>

Real Me Gang Intervention

<https://www.centrefornewcomers.ca/gangintervention>