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An Approach to Engagement with Youth in Gangs Participatory Action Projects

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Canada

An Approach to Engagement with Youth in Gangs Participatory Action Projects

by

Lisa Armstrong

BA Psychology, Wilfrid Laurier University, 2009

THESIS

Submitted to the Department of Psychology

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for

Masters of Arts

Wilfrid Laurier University

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the process of engaging youth who have been involved with gangs in the context of a local street gang prevention project. A case study of the local project was conducted with interviews with twelve ($N = 12$) participants, most of whom were project staff. Interviews were conducted by the author and two youth co-researchers. Findings illustrate the meaning of youth engagement to the participants, ideal roles for staff members and youth, and the relevance of a youth advisory committee as an outlet for future engagement in this program. Based on these findings a new framework for programs that encourage youth participation is proposed: participatory action projects.

Keywords youth, adolescent, gang, engagement, participation

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An Approach to Engagement with Youth in Gangs Participatory Action Projects

“Youth are going to save the whales by midnight”

(Adrianna, Project Advisory Council Member)

Youth have an amazing potential to enthusiastically pursue and achieve their aspirations, even in a culture that persistently places them in a passive role. Though there are some efforts to move towards creating active roles for youth in their communities, there are other marginalized groups of youth who have yet to experience this shift, including youth who are gang-involved. The goal of this research project was to investigate the engagement process with youth who are or were involved with gangs, it occurred in the context of a local (Waterloo Region, Ontario, Canada) street gang prevention project (inREACH) that is directed collaboratively by five community organizations.

This document begins with a review of the literature that is organized in the following way. First I provide definitions and an analysis of conceptual frameworks of engagement to ground the rest of the review. This is followed by a synthesis of literature regarding youth engagement, social action and recommendations from previous research, with a specific focus on topics of crime, violence and gangs. Following this I discuss gangs and gang membership in Canada and the Waterloo Region, how gangs often transpire as a reaction to social exclusion, and I identify the risk factors that are associated with becoming involved with gangs. After summarizing and analyzing the literature I describe current gang prevention strategies and inREACH (the Waterloo Region street gang prevention project) as the context of my study. I close the literature review with a description of the youth advisory committee for inREACH and my research questions.

Youth Engagement: What is it?

Youth engagement is a concept used to describe young people's participation within organizations and communities. Youth are not often asked to participate in their communities as competent, capable individuals, instead, when youth interact with adults who are not their parents they are typically treated inferiorly as students, clients, or problems to be solved (Checkoway & Montoya, 2005, Comacchio, 2002). Though many interactions between youth and adults still belittle youth, some organizations have begun to engage youth in more active ways by providing them with opportunities to become more involved in the programs, organizations, and communities in their lives (for examples see Finn & Checkoway, 1998).

A popular engagement conceptualization for children and youth is Hart's (1997) ladder of children's participation (Table 1) that ranks the degree of engagement from manipulation to shared decision-making. The first three rungs are classified as tokenism or the impression of engagement when no real interaction occurs, and the remaining rungs represent types of youth engagement. Hart adapted this ladder from Arnstein's (1969) citizen participation ladder (Table 1), which has a more cautious approach to distinguishing participation. Arnstein classifies rungs one and two as non-participation, rungs three, four and five as tokenism and only rungs six, seven and eight as participation. Noticeably, Hart classifies consulting and informing activities as examples of engagement, whereas Arnstein classifies these activities as tokenism. Hart made these changes to create more options for younger children. In his view children deserved the opportunity to participate and needed different supports than adults to achieve that participation. He made it clear that ideal engagement was not necessarily the highest rung, but whatever level was the most beneficial to as many members involved as possible. Though the

Table 1 Ladders of Engagement (Adapted from Hart, 1997 and Arnstein, 1969)

| Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation | Level of Engagement | Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation | Level of Participation |
|---|---------------------|--|------------------------|
| 8 Young people and adults share decision-making | | 8 Citizen control | |
| 7 Young people lead and initiate action | | 7 Delegated power | Participation |
| 6 Adult-initiated, shared decision-making with young people | Participation | 6 Partnership | |
| 5 Young people consulted and informed | | 5 Placation | |
| 4 Young people assigned and informed | | 4 Consultation | Tokenism |
| 3 Young people tokenized | | 3 Informing | |
| 2 Young people are decoration | Tokenism | 2 Therapy | Non-Participation |
| 1 Young people are manipulated | | 1 Manipulation | |

intention of Hart's work to make participation more accessible to younger children is admirable, it also assumes that children require an adapted model Smith (2002) articulates clearly that youth develop in context and that it should be the level of awareness children and youth have of the context that determines their ability to participate, not their age The act of suggesting an alternate framework for youth can limit their participation from reaching more influential levels

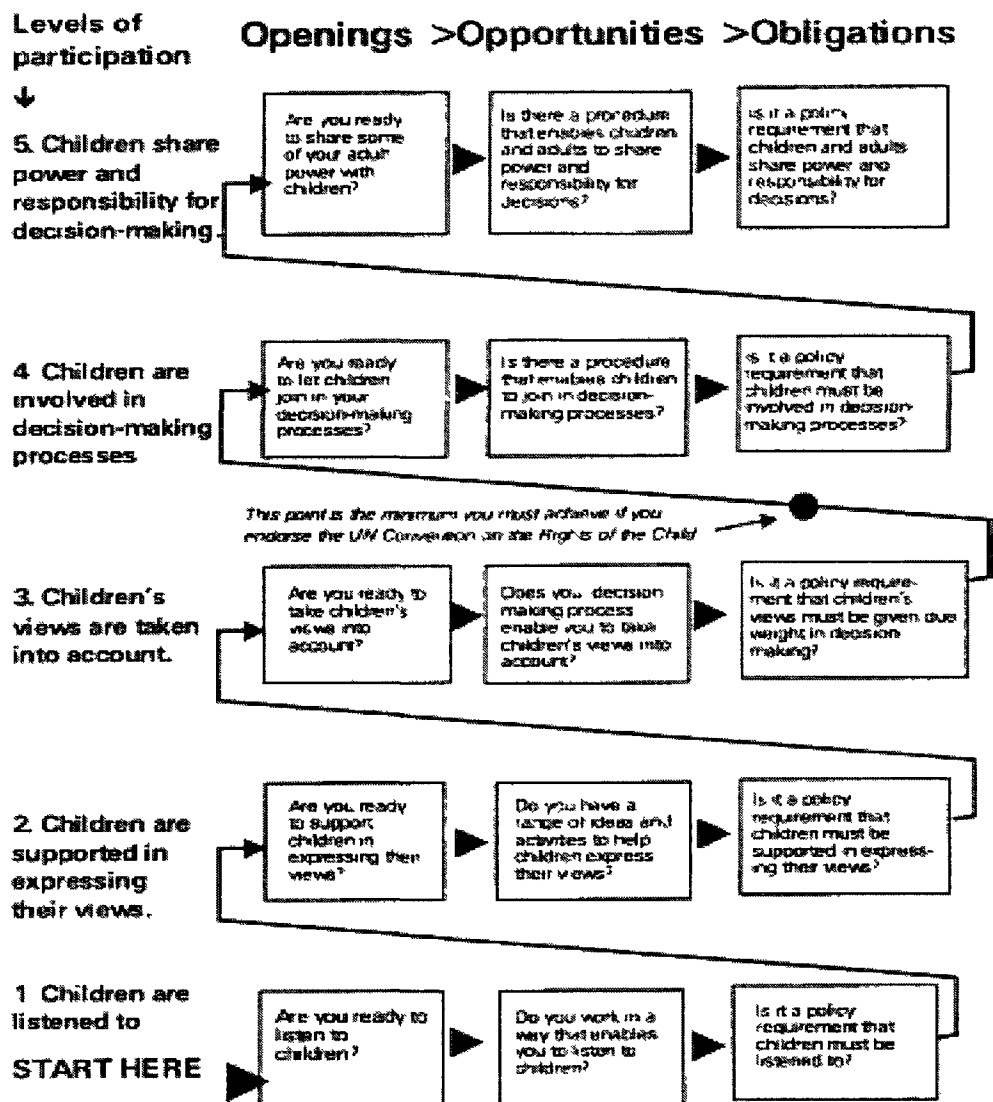
Shier's (2001) pathways to participation model offers another approach to conceptualizing engagement that may address the limitations of Hart's ladder This model (Figure 1) differs in the following ways First, the minimum amount of involvement required to

be considered “participation” by Shier is in between Arnstein and Hart’s minimal involvement (approximately rung 5). Second, each of Shier’s stages is divided into three subjects: openings (readiness), opportunities (concrete opportunities for youth participation), and obligations (policy adaptations for youth). The criteria at each level increase transparency regarding what that level of participation entails. In sum, there are many approaches to defining what engagement and participation means, and often these definitions differ depending on the age of the individuals involved. I have presented these conceptualizing frameworks as a means of focusing the rest of the review and the goals for this study were to better understand engagement, not test any of these theories.

Youth Participation and Social Action

Within the youth engagement field there are different approaches to reaching these levels of participation. Recently in the literature there has been a critique of the potential objectives of youth engagement. For example, the positive youth development perspective (Catalano et al., 2004) focuses on 15 constructs that emphasize individual competencies and beliefs such as social, emotional, behavioural and cognitive competencies, self-determination, self-efficacy, spirituality and pro-social norms. This model has the potential to promote shared decision-making between adults and youth thereby reaching the highest rung of youth participation, however, it has been criticized for not challenging the status quo and not placing enough importance on systems (such as education, justice, and healthcare) that lead to inequality (Evans & Prilleltensky, 2007, Watts & Flanagan, 2007). By challenging systems, youth gain opportunities for political awareness and understanding of social conditions that lead to

Figure 1 Sher's (2001) Pathways to Participation Model



marginalization and exclusion. In other words, there is a need for youth to learn skills that can be used to address societal issues and agitate the status quo instead of perpetuating systems that create oppressive conditions in the first place.

One means of shifting the formation of individual level outcomes to broader awareness and understanding is sociopolitical development, “an understanding of the cultural and political forces that shape one’s status in society” (Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003, p. 185). The ultimate goal of sociopolitical development is liberation, where one accepts that oppression exists and

pursues social action to dismantle it. More recent research has identified moderators of sociopolitical awareness leading to social action (Evans, 2007, Watts & Flanagan, 2007). The first moderator is sense of agency, or the belief that one and one's community is capable of creating change. The second moderator is opportunity to participate in social action. In other words, youth need to believe that their efforts will be successful and they need to have opportunities to participate in order for their sociopolitical awareness to become social action. These moderators help demonstrate how youth engagement, social action and sociopolitical development are interdependent and necessary for engaging marginalized youth.

An example of an alternative theory that has elements of sociopolitical development is social justice youth development theory (SJYDT). Social Justice Youth Development theory is built on the premise that youth face significant systemic barriers such as poverty, racism and sexism and that these factors need to be taken into consideration before youths' actions are analyzed (Ginwright & Cammaroda, 2002). Though other theories have a space for macro system analysis, these issues are placed centrally within the SJYDT approach to youth engagement. Proponents of SJYDT challenge other youth engagement theories to view youth not as assets, but as agents of change (Ginwright & James, 2002). Advocates of SJYDT also support the need to include diverse youth by acknowledging that most youth engagement occurs with White, straight, able-bodied, middle class youth rather than youth of colour, of diverse sexual orientations and of lower socioeconomic status. Overall, SJYDT asserts that it is important to cultivate sociopolitical development when working with youth who experience oppression.

Learning from Previous Research: Benefits and Challenges

Some programs have engaged marginalized youth to become researchers and change agents (Berg, Coman, & Schensul, 2009), to be outreach workers and members of an evaluation team (Chen, Poland & Skinner, 2007) and to develop an HIV prevention plan (Harper & Carver, 1999) Some of these studies have summarized the benefits and challenges of youth engagement based on reviews of theoretical literature or empirical studies, and offered recommendations It should be noted that the benefits and challenges below are similar to the benefits and challenges of civic engagement or engagement with any population, which should come as no surprise because just like adult members of society, youth seek to be seen as valuable, contributing members

Benefits. First, by partnering with youth, researchers have been able to contact previously remote and marginalized populations thereby increasing the number of participants and the diversity of participants (Chen, et al , 2007, Harper & Carver, 1999) By gaining contact with otherwise unreachable groups, more youth can be served Second, youth participation allows young people to gain credibility with community members that may not have considered youths' merits in the past (Harper & Carver, 2007) This increased credibility then leads to more opportunities for youth participation, more connections within their community and a community that better understands its youth Third, when youth partner with adults there is opportunity for a deeper understanding of the issues that programs and policies are trying to address through dialogue with youth resulting in stronger programs and services (Chen, et al , 2007) When open communication and clear decision-making processes are present in partnerships, it can enhance teamwork and reduce unheard voices that occur during group meetings, however, clear opportunities for youth input in decision-making processes need to be evident for everyone

involved. This allows for more transparency by forcing power dynamics to be more explicit. It should also be noted that in order to sustain interest and focus of youth, clear outcomes and benefits for youth need to be identified.

An additional benefit of participation for youth is the sense of community that accompanies it. Evans (2007) found that youth felt more connected to their communities through participating and having influence in various community settings (i.e., empowerment). Evans points out that other research such as Riger (1997) warns about an opposition between the goals of empowerment and community. Riger argues “Finding one's voice, controlling one's resources, becoming empowered may reduce the interdependence that produces a strong sense of community” (p. 289). Her primary concern is whether “empowerment of disenfranchised people and groups simultaneously bring about a greater sense of community and strengthen the ties that hold our society together, or does it promote certain individuals or groups at the expense of others, increasing competitiveness and lack of cohesion?” (p. 290). Evans (2007) found evidence that supports the first scenario, that empowerment and participation make youth feel a strengthened tie to their communities.

Challenges. In order to promote youth engagement, many researchers have identified the challenges they have faced so that measures can be taken to avoid these issues in the future. Some challenges include creating clear boundaries between work life and social life for youth (Harper & Carver, 2007). For example, confidentiality among youth who are working with the project and their friends who could be potential clients is often a challenge. This challenge can be avoided by sharing with youth reasons that confidentiality is important and co-creating confidentiality policies.

Another common challenge for adults and youth when partnering is commitment and burnout. When partnering with marginalized youth who are street involved, experience violence at home, are involved with the law, or experience other extreme living conditions, these challenges are compounded. In order to counterbalance this dilemma, Harper and Carver (2007) allowed an hour of youths' work time to be committed to working with a counsellor. Youth and adults also co-created policies regarding attendance to assure that both the youths' and the organization's needs would be met. In addition to this, the youth were encouraged to have social meetings to revitalize commitment and energy.

A crucial challenge that was identified was the need for appropriate adult collaborators (Chen, et al, 2007, Harper & Carver, 1999). Adults need to be aware of their goals (for example, consultation or partnership) when working with youth, and must be committed to collaborate with youth as equals. Potential responsibilities for adults in youth-adult partnerships include advocating for young people to be put first, creating opportunities for youth, mentoring in an authoritative but reassuring manner, negotiating between young people and the larger community, and having high but achievable standards of youth performance (Hilfinger Messias, Fore, & Parra-Medina, 2005). It is also vital to have adults create opportunities and spaces for youths' voices to be heard (Evans, 2007).

Ageism as a challenge. A pervasive challenge for youth engagement and participation is ageism. Ageism is discrimination against someone because of their age and is most often associated with discrimination against seniors, however, it also applies to younger people. There are many specific forms of ageism such as adultism (a predisposition towards adults) but for the purpose of this study I will use the term ageism to describe discrimination against youth to emphasize the role of the age of the person being discriminated against, not the age of the person

discriminating Ageism, like other forms of discrimination, can occur on an interpersonal level and also at a structural level, where policies and organizations are not inclusive of youth I included ageism in this review for two main reasons, first to bring awareness to the possibility that stakeholders hold ageist beliefs and second to ensure the engagement that occurs in this project challenges ageist ideals

Youth Engagement: Violence, Crime and Gangs

Even though the literature on youth engagement has increased and diversified over the last 10 years, there are still some gaps regarding marginalized youth (Calgary, 2004) A specific area in which youth engagement has been minimal is programming, service provision and research regarding violence and crime Here youth are still seen as problems to be solved instead of partners and stakeholders in understanding violence and crime (Daute & Fine, 2003, Daute, Stern, & Lelutiu-Weinberger, 2003) There is limited research that investigates youth perspectives of crime prevention and even less that engages youth as equal partners in determining how crime prevention should occur In a previous study, I investigated youth perspectives of crime and crime prevention and found that youth have insights about crime in their communities and how it should be handled (Armstrong, Nelson, Pancer & Hasford, 2009) In spite of this limited representation in academic literature, there have been some recommendations based on policy analysis research to make youth engagement concerning violence and crime widespread, such as Zeldin's (2004) work that suggests creating spaces or opportunities for youth in public decision-making is necessary

Zeldin (2004) makes several policy recommendations, four of which are particularly relevant to this work The first is to expand the perception of violence and crime prevention to include youth as partners in reducing crime, not the targets of the project or intervention The

overall purpose of crime and violence prevention should be creating healthy neighbourhoods and trusting neighbours (Zeldin, 2004). The second of Zeldin's recommendations is that policies should be altered to support youth engagement. A wealth of best practices research exists that endorses youth engagement, yet few policies have incorporated this research. The third of Zeldin's recommendations is to strengthen the screening and referral processes of service-providing organizations so that youth who experience violence are diverted from experiencing violence again. The fourth of Zeldin's recommendations is to increase the effort put forth by adults, communities and organizations to engage marginalized youth since they are the ones who have the most to gain from the youth engagement process.

When taken as a whole, it seems that the voices of the youth are completely under-represented in the crime and violence literature. It is these absent voices that we must strive to hear in order to create the best policies and programs that maximize justice. There are few, if any gang prevention programs in the academic literature that seek to partner with gang-involved youth. In general, programs that aim to prevent gangs view gang members as potential *clients* not as potential *partners*. Though there are some practitioners partnering with youth (such as Breaking the Cycle in Toronto, Ontario), there is limited research. For this reason, this research sought to gain an understanding of the process of youth engagement with gang-involved youth. In order to do this we must first become aware of gangs and gang involvement.

Street Gangs

In Canada there is no agreed upon definition of a street gang. Police services, researchers, multiple levels of government, and community organizations all use different definitions. Many of the definitions focus on crime, such as the one given by Gordon (2000) that defines gangs according to their degree of organization relative to three other groups associated with crime.

The first group is criminal businesses that have the highest degree of organization. They are comprised mainly of adults over the age of 25 who engage almost exclusively in economic crime. Street gang members on the other hand, are comprised primarily of people under the age of 30 that come together for profitable crimes (theft, selling drugs), violence and are often connected by a geographical area. Compared to criminal businesses, street gangs are less organized and more conspicuous since the members emphasize being identified as a gang member through their colours and having certain tattoos. Contrary to popular belief, street gangs are rarely affiliated with larger criminal businesses (Gordon, 2000). The least structured group is the wanna-bes that is comprised of young people who participate in criminal and violent behaviour out of a desire to belong.

The literature on gangs often does not distinguish between gang members and “wanna-be” groups so the term “gang member” frequently encompasses both of these groups. Furthermore, there are other definitions of street gangs that focus on the social aspects of gangs and emphasize that gang members spend most of their time socializing, not committing crimes (e.g., Fleisher & Kerinert, 2004). The literature does support the idea that crime is an aspect of gang involvement, but gang membership is not synonymous with criminal activity. Due to incongruent conceptions of gang members and the lack of an agreed upon definition of gang member, in this study I will not base the definition of gang member on personal criminal activity, but on self-identification with a social group. In the context of this project, I will use “gang-involved” as an umbrella term for gang members, wanna-bes and other people that may be closely connected to gangs, such as girl-friends or boy-friends of gang members. This is the same conceptualization inREACH uses and is important for identifying inclusive criteria for

participating in the program. The definition is broad in order to ensure that as many people as possible who are involved with or connected to gangs participate in decisions about inREACH.

Gangs in Context: Canada and the Waterloo Region in Ontario.

In Canada, gang members are typically male between the ages of 16 and 18 (Totten, 2008). The members of gangs generally reflect the ethno-cultural makeup of the communities they originate in, so in the case of Waterloo Region, most members are White. Gang activity is difficult to track and can vary drastically within each province but most of the reported gang activity occurs in British Columbia and Alberta, followed by Quebec and Ontario. The other provinces also have gangs but there is less information available about them.

In the Waterloo Region there are approximately 20 known active gangs whose members are primarily male and under the age of 18 but with self-identifying members as young as 12 years of age (WRPS, 2007, as cited in Region of Waterloo, Social Services, 2008). There are no all-women gangs in the Waterloo Region and there are few women gang members, however there may be women affected by gangs in a peripheral way, such as partners, friends, siblings, etc. These women will be included in the term gang-involved.

Gangs as a Response to Oppression

There are multiple contexts within a youth's life that can be oppressive. When one experiences many marginalizing contexts, the interaction can have a compounding effect. Vigil (2002) proposed that youth who experience these "multiple marginalities" are at a higher risk for gang involvement. Vigil's multiple marginality framework takes macro-historical factors (e.g., racism, social or cultural repression), macro-structural factors (e.g., immigration, and isolated communities), socioeconomic factors (e.g., working class, middle class etc), socio-cultural factors (e.g., men as providers, or wealth as a priority) and socio-psychological factors (e.g., fetal

alcohol spectrum disorder and conduct disorder) into account to describe the experiences of risk factors that can lead to gang involvement. This framework allows us to see the multiple sources of oppression these youth experience and demonstrates locations where interventions can target these sources. It is also adaptable for the different types of experiences diverse youth may encounter.

Although, for example, gangs are identified for the criminality and violence of their members, they rarely form with an aggressive intention. On the contrary, many street gangs develop to meet protective and social needs of youth who are marginalized and cut off from traditional sources of support. Reacting to recruitment tactics of other gangs (for an example see the Redd Alert gang discussed by Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson in 2008) and protecting each other from sexual assault (for an example see the Almighty Queens, an all women gang discussed by Vankatesh in 1999) are two examples of some of the less examined reasons for forming a gang. These examples illustrate that gangs can form in response to a common experience of oppression and even though gang members are associated with crime and violence, there are larger social realities that influence their actions.

Understanding the risk factors that lead to gangs and gang involvement is important before engaging with the population and the research. Awareness of the risk factors allows us to put into perspective the experiences of youth who are gang-involved and understand that gangs may provide a space to meet social needs that current structures are failing to address. As well, understanding more about risk factors can illustrate the complex nature of gang involvement and how this involvement is imbedded within a social, cultural and historical context. Furthermore, we see that youth experience risk differently.

Risk Factors

The many factors that can influence gang involvement can be arranged according to the ecological level they illuminate. The ecological model is made up of multiple embedded levels that describe how an individual's behaviour is influenced by their social environment. The ecological levels relevant to this research are individual and relational influences that illustrate how personal characteristics and relationships may influence gang involvement and the community and societal level influences that illustrate how neighbourhood and societal features can place youth at risk for becoming gang-involved.

Individual and relational level risk factors. At the individual and relational level, there are several risk factors that can increase the likelihood of gang involvement and these factors should be considered within the broader context of the community and societal factors mentioned in the next section. The literature has shown that youth are more likely to be gang-involved if they are young, male and from a single-parent family that is headed by a woman (Freng & Esbenson, 2007). Additional factors that place youth at risk regardless of race or age are lack of parental supervision, witnessing violence as a child, and having parents that have been incarcerated in the past (Sharpe, 2002). Family tradition and increased social status are common justifications for joining a gang (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008), as well as a perceived impression that gang membership will protect one from neighbourhood violence (Peterson, Taylor, & Esbensen, 2004). However, many studies have shown that gang involvement actually increases the risk of victimization and though this risk decreases once youth exit a gang, it does not return to pre-gang levels (Peterson, et al, 2004, Taylor, 2008, Taylor, Freng, Esbensen, & Peterson, 2008).

Community and societal level risk factors. Attempting to understand gang involvement from only the individual and relational level excludes many important contextual factors that have an impact on gangs and gang involvement. One important contextual factor is that gangs are associated with neighbourhood disadvantage (low socioeconomic status) (Tita & Ridgeway, 2007). Some studies interpret low socioeconomic status of neighbourhoods with increased violence (Bellair & McNulty, 2009). Other studies have found that it is not the socioeconomic status of the neighbourhood alone, but the relative difference between residents. In other words, it is income inequality that predicts violence (Kennedy, Kawachi, Prothrow-Stith, Lochner, & Gupta, 1998). It is this distinction that creates a holistic and realistic portrayal of gangs and gang members.

Another environmental factor that influences gangs and gang membership is the job market. First, it should be noted that gang membership is unstable, with youth often participating in gangs for short periods of time between the ages of 16 and 18. This high turn-over rate, coupled with a lack of availability of job opportunities, has been found to encourage gang involvement for youth over 16 (Seals, 2009). In other words, there is a correlation between gangs supplying youth with an income, and youth being eligible for employment and without a job. The argument is that if there were more legitimate jobs, youth would take them instead of joining a gang during these years.

Overall, the process of youth becoming involved with gangs is a complex process that cannot be explained by a single factor or many independent factors. It is the outcome of the synthesis and interaction of many factors that occur within a person and their environment. All of these factors come together to create a youth involved with a gang. In order to prevent gang involvement, an intervention must acknowledge and address this complexity.

Gang Prevention

In an attempt to reduce the negative impacts gangs have on their members (victimization) and their communities (violence), there are many initiatives that aim to decrease gang presence in North America (World Health Organization [WHO], 2002). The current trend in gang prevention involves the collaboration of community organizations to provide comprehensive resources for youth who are gang-involved. These organizations specialize in areas such as youth employment, therapy, addictions, spirituality, recreation and public safety. A popular current approach to gang prevention that has been shown to decrease gang violence is the Comprehensive Gang Intervention Strategy (Totten, 2008). This intervention focuses on creating partnerships between different community agencies and local police to create a “one stop shop” for gang members to visit if they need support and/or decide to leave gangs. A second component is the pulling levers strategy (Braga, 2008). The basis of this strategy is sending a clear message to gang-involved youth that violence will not be tolerated, and, if violence occurs, every possible consequence will be endorsed. Outreach workers are an essential aspect of this program, as they contact gang members to inform them of the potential of increased consequences for violent behaviours and act as a connection to the supports the community agencies are providing.

inREACH. The Waterloo Region Street Gang Prevention Project (inREACH) is based on the Comprehensive Gang Intervention Strategy described above. It is funded (as of September, 2009) through the National Crime Prevention Centre (NCPC) for three years to work towards preventing 13-24 year-old youth from becoming involved with street gangs or trying to exit them. Overall, the aim of the project is to increase community understanding and education of the causes of gangs and gang involvement in the Region. On the project advisory committee

(PAC) there are currently five partner organizations that serve “at-risk” youth in one or more of the following ways: addictions counselling, youth employment, criminal offender outreach, “at-risk” youth outreach, police services and community development. Additional components to this project include community education through presentations and engagement and the creation of a youth advisory committee.

The project consists of three overlapping stages. The first is the community needs assessment to determine how and where gangs are experienced in the Waterloo Region (Region of Waterloo, Social Services, 2008). The second phase is the creation of an intervention during which each of the partnering organizations will hire someone to work specifically with gang-involved youth to provide intense, individualized services. The third phase of the project is community mobilization which aims to boost the resiliency of the targeted neighbourhoods by creating opportunities for youth to become involved in their neighbourhoods through mentorship and recreation. Residents, grassroots organizations and other people will work with inREACH staff members to organize against gang activity by increasing awareness of gangs, decreasing risk factors and increasing protective factors. The aim of the third phase is to increase the capacity of youth and communities to help youth resist gang involvement.

History of collaboration. Each of the organizations involved with inREACH has a history of working collaboratively on the Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council. This council is comprised of approximately 40 organizations (for example, representatives from school boards, police services, mental health services, public health, multicultural services and city planning) that meet monthly to discuss a common interest: preventing crime and creating safe communities. By collaborating they seek to reduce the gaps in services for Waterloo Region regarding crime and together they embark on initiatives and projects such as inREACH. Each of

the partnering organizations with inREACH has been instrumental in supporting and perpetuating the Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council. I mention this to further contextualize inREACH.

Youth advisory committee. In an effort to increase youth engagement within the context of inREACH, a YAC (youth advisory committee) was included in the proposal. The YAC has two main purposes. The first is to act as a consulting group for the project advisory committee on issues such as program formation, location and logo design. The second function of the YAC is to create a youth-led component of the program. The YAC was created as an outlet for youth to participate in inREACH as partners, not clients. There is little research that focuses on youth-specific advisory committees. Some researchers have considered citizen participation and policy analysis with mixed outcomes (see Brody, Godschalk & Burby, 2003 or Irvin & Stansbury, 2004).

Meaningfully engaging youth is important for increasing the quality of projects and programs that provide services for youth. Throughout the literature there are many descriptions of approaches, benefits and challenges- ageism is a universal challenge to every youth engagement attempt. One area that the literature has not explored is the process of engaging and partnering with youth who are involved with gangs. There are several Canadian gang prevention projects that are doing this such as Breaking the Cycle in Toronto, Ontario. The goal of this project was to document the process(es) of engagement by seeking to understand what it means to work *with* youth who have been involved in gangs.

Research Questions and Rationale

As mentioned, I am unaware of any academic literature that investigates the process of engagement or partnering with youth who are or have been involved with gangs. The goal of this

research project was to explore this process in the context of a local street gang prevention project. The research questions were a) what does youth engagement mean to the stakeholders of this project? b) What are the stakeholders' experiences with youth engagement? And c) what process(es) is(are) currently being used to engage youth? These research questions and their rationale are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2 Research Questions and Rationale

| Research Question | Rationale |
|--|---|
| 1 What does youth engagement mean to each of the stakeholders in the Street Gang Prevention Project? | By understanding what engagement means to the stakeholders, I will gain an understanding of what youth participation may look like in this project. |
| 2 What are the stakeholders' experiences with youth engagement? (with the YAC specifically and in general) | To understand the current or past experiences the stakeholders have. |
| 3 What process(es) is(are) currently being used/should be used to engage youth with inREACH? | To understand what each person thinks should happen (if anything) to engage youth. |

Method

Community Entry

I have been involved with the Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council, one of the community partners of inREACH since the summer of 2009. I met with the executive director, Christiane Sadeler, to plan to present the results from my undergraduate thesis "The Milieu of Crime: Youth Perspectives of Crime and Crime Prevention" (Armstrong et al., 2009) to members of the organization in September 2009. At the time, I had been looking for work for the remaining part of the summer before I entered my first year of a master's program and Christiane (a graduate of the same program) invited me to come to some of the inREACH meetings as a

form of professional development. At these meetings I met the other project partners who had submitted a grant proposal to the National Crime Prevention Centre (NCPC) and were waiting for a response. At one of these meetings I was invited to conduct a literature review on best practices regarding gang prevention, to conduct a scan of local media coverage of gangs and to create a fact sheet about gangs in Canada. As a group they hired me to complete this research by the end of August 2009. Before I continue, I should point out that prior to the summer of 2009, many different community organizations worked together to create a proposal and, for a variety of reasons, some organizations decided to no longer be involved. In essence, though the people I met were the current project partners, I recognize the work of other individuals and organizations who had contributed to the formation of the grant proposal for the project in which this study was conducted.

In September 2009, I began university graduate studies in a master's of arts program specializing in community psychology and decided to complete the required 200-hour practicum component at the Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council, specifically with the inREACH project. In terms of the progression of the project, in October 2009 the NCPC made the official announcement that inReach would be funded as a result of the proposal submitted in the grant competition. In November 2009, as part of my practicum, I helped organize a community launch to let the entire community learn more about the objectives of inREACH and the current gang culture in the area. By January 2010 I had taken considerable interest in the proposed youth advisory committee (YAC) component of the project. Although the YAC was included in the grant proposal to NCPC, at the meetings I attended, it was not mentioned. When I expressed interest in the YAC, Christiane and I decided that for the rest of my practicum I would plan and implement this component of inREACH. I developed a proposal for the YAC (Appendix A) that

included how it would be formed, who would be eligible to be on the committee, the length and outline of the meetings (Appendix B, originally from the YAC proposal), the invitation for the meeting (Appendix C, originally from the YAC proposal) and other details such as a conceptual framework (Appendix D, originally from the YAC proposal) During this time, the project advisory committee (PAC) and the community treatment team (CTT) were very busy with other issues such as meeting the timelines imposed by the NCPC, moving the project forward in terms of designing the intervention, discussing the location of the project and deciding on the logo and brand

Nevertheless, after some discussion we decided to have a short-term “pre-YAC” to allow youth to participate in the planning process Staff members started to reach out to youth in and out of their current networks and I prepared to facilitate the meetings Six meetings were held and 1 to 6 youth attended each meeting with only one youth attending multiple meetings, staff had hoped that a greater number of youth would participate but speculated that the lower turnout may have been because there was little benefit for the youth to attend the meetings Another potential reason is fear that the police would be present at the meetings, despite reassurance that the police would not be there As new youth were attending each session building on the progress made the previous week was difficult Additionally, staff members encountered many barriers to the program work plan that they had proposed to NCPC particularly in that the timeline was dependent on approval from NCPC These factors added to the difficulty of making plans with youth participants

My stance regarding youth engagement. As this is a qualitative study understanding who I am and how I will impact the research process and outcomes is important As Barker and Pistrang (2005) put it, “given that the person of the researcher influences the conduct of the

inquiry and the interpretations of the data, it becomes important that the researcher discloses relevant personal background, so that the reader can better evaluate the conclusions drawn” (p 207) That being said, I am conducting this research with a community partner, however the statements below reflect my personal perceptions I come to this project as a community psychology student and as a 23-year old White, able bodied woman who has had very limited contact with gangs For the past two and one-half years I have volunteered with one of the partner organizations of inREACH, where I was (and am) a “frontline” staff worker for a youth drop-in centre In this role I met many “at-risk” youth who experience homelessness and observed that they have artistic talents, exhibit a sense of humour and resiliency despite disturbing life histories, and that they struggle with their own desires and expectations of others for them to join “main stream society,” all the while being rejected and judged Listening to these youths’ desires and their frustrations with societal structures is one of the reasons I continue to volunteer with this organization Hearing youths’ harsh and honest evaluations of the circumstances they have experience makes me wonder how can these opinions be heard and acted on

I approach this research as a proponent of youth engagement and believe that youth deserve explicit opportunities to participate in decision-making processes that will affect their lives Throughout my involvement with inREACH I have been concerned that youth, the people this project is trying to serve, are not having input into program development Fortunately, there has always been the intention of creating a YAC, and though the slow course of its development troubles me, having the support of the project members in pursuing this youth committee is reassuring What remains unknown is the amount of power that adults in the program will share with this youth committee As a community psychology student, I use my values as guiding

principles for the way I conduct research. I value participation in community settings and interventions and the collaborative nature of this project drew me to it. Understanding how this organization will incorporate and collaborate with youth is very interesting to me since the current model of collaboration focuses only on service providers.

Research Approach

To place this research approach in context, I describe below the paradigm I aligned myself with as well as my values regarding this study. I approached this project from a critical pragmatist perspective (Patton, 2002), which is to say that I have chosen the methods and design of this study based on the methods that are most practical to address the objectives of this project (understanding youth engagement with youth who are gang-involved). Formally, my epistemology is that knowledge is shaped and formed by power relationships. The power dynamics among the participants and between the participants and me influences how knowledge is created and what is considered knowledge. Similarly, the ontological standpoint that I endorse is neither extremely objective (a single measurable truth or reality exists) nor extremely subjective (there is no shared truth or reality, only individual perspectives). Instead, I situate myself in-between these extremes, regarding reality and truth as something that is experienced differently by everyone, but with real and tangible consequences that are measurable or may be assessed.

Finally, a researcher's values and personal agenda need to be acknowledged and presented within research in order to fully understand the lens through which it is being conducted. For this reason, I have included the above section regarding my position about youth engagement and my values. As a community psychology student I think community interventions should be conducted to promote a balance of a sense of community and

empowerment To achieve this I think collaboration and participation should be promoted for everyone Though some may call this axiological view of including values a bias and thus a detriment to the quality of research, I consider it an unavoidable fact to be identified and understood to have influenced the data, not in a positive or negative way, but a unique way

Participatory action research. Participatory action research (PAR) is a research method that requires researchers to work together with a community to decide the goals, purpose, process and dissemination plan for the study For many community psychologists, this is the ideal research process, however, it is near impossible for students to execute due to the intensive time commitment required (the time is spent building relationships with community members, meetings with community members etc) The PAR process can be summarized as having the following steps community entry, problem definition, data collection, data analysis, and dissemination/evaluation An important aspect of PAR, particularly the relationship-building piece and on-going participation, is that it allows for reciprocity and trust to form This is especially important when working with marginalized populations who may have been disserved by traditional research (Mertens, 2009) I have not used a PAR methodology in this study because of the existing partnership this organization has with a researcher (there is a hired external evaluator for the program) and also due to the time intensive nature of PAR I mention this because as a student of community psychology I am immersed in dialogue pertaining to participatory action research on an almost daily basis and this approach strongly influenced my decisions

Community research. In an attempt to make my thesis research as relevant to the local community as possible, I have been working with inREACH I also recruited two youth who participated in one of the youth advisory committee meetings as co-researchers Since the youth

advisory committee was short lived, I invited these two youth to help with my research I envisioned their role to help with conducting the interviews but when I described the process and asked which steps they would like to participate in, they indicated interest in other steps They contributed to the design of the interview guide and co-conducted the interviews One of the co-researchers continued her involvement by transcribing an interview, discussing the findings and will hopefully continue to be involved with dissemination Co-researchers differ from research assistants because they are insiders to the “phenomenon” being studied, but outsiders to formal education in research processes

While working with the co-researchers I tried to be clear about where there was flexibility in their role and where there was rigidity Open communication was maintained regarding their role throughout their involvement For example, during the interview process we operated as equals, both able to ask probes for each other’s questions After the interviews we would discuss our comfort levels and the interview in general During these discussions I would try to ask open questions and purposefully share my opinion last to prevent my ideas from influencing their ideas Other areas of involvement, such as the written report of my thesis were my responsibility in order to fulfill the thesis requirement, however, the co-researchers will be invited to participate in any additional presentations and publishing that occurs

The continued involvement of co-researchers provides an insider’s perspective and ensures a youth perspective as both of the youth have experienced gang membership Though I chronologically fit in the youth category, I am immersed in an adult culture through university and employment, and often experience adult roles, such as when I volunteer at a homeless youth drop in center where I am on the side of the service providers, not a youth recipient For this

reason, the addition of more youth with different experiences encourages a more rounded perspective

Research Design

I conducted a single case study, which is an in-depth analysis of one unit which may be an individual, organization, community or other group (Patton, 2002) Understanding a single case in-depth allows for the dynamics of the case to be elucidated With this in mind, case study design was chosen because it is very practical as a means of making social science research useful and applicable for participants (Byrne & Ragin, 2009) This was a case study of a street gang prevention project referred to as inREACH I conducted a census of the population of this case study, meaning that everyone involved in designing inREACH was invited to participate

Participants. The participants ($N = 12$) included one member of the YAC¹, the project manager, five members of the community treatment team (CTT) and five members of the project advisory committee (PAC) for a total of thirteen (There would have been thirteen, but one of the audio recordings was corrupt) The participants who are members of the PAC participated in inREACH as representatives of their respective organizations Each of these participants holds a position of power within their organization such as executive director, program manager or inspector (police services) The participants who are members of the CTT have been hired for inREACH as direct service-providers The YAC member was a male youth who participated in one of the YAC meetings To add specificity, no one from the National Crime Prevention Centre, which is the funding agency, was included in the sample

Materials

¹ The interviews occurred a couple of months after the YAC Due to this and the inconsistent living situations of most of the YAC members, it was very difficult to re-establish contact with the youth and recruit them as participants in this study

Qualitative data was obtained via interviews (See Appendix E for interview guides), field notes, “expert discussions” with co-researchers and my practicum journal that consists of unstructured reflections from my experiences with the project. I chose interviews because this tool allows for obtaining an in depth understanding of a research topic (Patton, 2002). The semi-structured interview guides were designed to meet the goal of the study, which is to understand youth engagement with young people who are gang-involved. Specifically there were four topical areas in the interview guide: (1) meaning of youth engagement, (2) role of self and youth, (3) actual experiences with the youth advisory committee, and (4) ideals for youth advisory committee.

The interview guides were initially designed by me, but once the youth co-researchers were invited to participate, the questions were reassessed by the co-researchers and they provided feedback on the questions. In qualitative research the researcher is the main tool of the research (Patton, 2002), so it is important to know that I have taken a masters level qualitative methods class and I have conducted qualitative research throughout my undergraduate degree as a research assistant. I worked closely with my supervisor who listened to the interviews and provided formative feedback. Additionally the co-researchers and I practiced interviewing each other several times before going out “in the field”.

I also kept a thesis journal to ensure continued critical reflections and to document the many conversations the youth and I had about the project. The reflective conversations the co-researchers and I shared have been called “expert discussions” for the rest of this document.

Procedure

Invitation to participate. Invitations (See Appendix F for a sample invitation) were sent to potential participants via emails and personal communication at meetings. The invitations

summarized the purpose of the research and the role of potential participants. Interviews were arranged through email and in-person communication at meetings. Once a meeting time was arranged, I contacted the co-researcher whose schedule was available for the interview to see if they were still available and to give him/her the time and location. Three to five days prior to the interview I sent the interview guide to the participant to allow her/him to make an informed decision about her/his involvement with the study, to provide time for reflecting on the questions, to increase comfort and to add depth to the of the responses. This was also a means of respecting the partnership between the members of inREACH and me. By keeping them as informed as possible about the process, I was aiming to be as transparent and accountable as possible.

Conducting the interviews. All of the semi-structured interviews were conducted by me, and a co-researcher assisted with four of them. The co-researchers were offered a \$10 honorarium for each participant they interviewed. During the interviewing process the co-researchers Max and Zara² assisted with one interview and three interviews respectively (based on their availability and the availability of the participants). When we interviewed together, we took turns asking questions from the interview guide and were able to probe further whenever one of us felt so inclined. Interviews were 30 to 60 minutes in length and were conducted at locations convenient for participants such as their offices, space on Laurier's university campus and one took place over the phone (I conducted this interview alone). At the time of the interview, I reviewed the consent form (Appendix D) with the participants. All interviews were audio recorded except one with a participant who did not consent to electronic recording but who allowed me to take hand-written notes. Only youth participants were offered an honorarium of a gift card worth \$15 for Shoppers Drugmart. The rationale behind providing an honorarium was

² These are pseudonyms to help maintain the privacy of the co-researchers

that the other individuals in the study were participating during paid work time while the youth offered their own time Table 3 provides a summary of who was interviewed (indicated by a pseudonym) and by whom

Table 3 Data Collection Summary

| Name | Group | Interviewers |
|-----------|-----------------|---------------|
| Giles | Program manager | Lisa |
| Alora | CTT | Lisa and Zara |
| Keith | CTT | Lisa and Zara |
| Nick | CTT | Lisa and Zara |
| Elizabeth | CTT | Lisa and Max |
| Kyle | CTT | Lisa |
| Eli | PAC | Lisa |
| Ellen | PAC | Lisa |
| Armand | YAC | Lisa |
| Casper | PAC | Lisa |
| Adriana | PAC | Lisa |
| Kim | PAC | Lisa |
| Tina | PAC | Lisa * |

*Phone interview

Member check. After I analyzed the data and created a framework, I emailed each of the participants and provided an outline of the findings section with only their personal quotations in the document (Appendix G) The purpose of this email was to allow participants to provide feedback on the framework and to provide permission for the use of quotations

Expert discussions. The expert discussions described earlier were conversations between the co-researchers and me about the project The co-researchers and I had many conversations, but the “expert discussions” occurred in conjunction with two other steps throughout the process one step occurred after each interview in which a co-researcher co-interviewed a participant, and a second step in expert discussions happened after my initial analysis Topics of these discussions included (but were not limited to) if a participant paid more attention to the co-researcher or me, reflections on a participant’s responses and reflections on our experiences The

expert discussions also included feedback on the findings summary I created and the model I proposed. These discussions were unguided and recorded (hand-written) after the conversation occurred. The co-researchers knew I would note the conversations and that they would be permitted to see my notes if requested. Any mention of their involvement in this documents occurred with their consent.

Data analysis. First interviews were transcribed by one of the co-researchers, a volunteer undergraduate student and me, removing any identifying information. I then read the transcripts to gain a full understanding of the interviews. After this, I used Nvivo 8, a software program to help organize the qualitative data. I also uploaded my field notes and my practicum journal into Nvivo to manage these sources of data as well.

The research questions were an implicit part of my thinking and served as convenient categories, but I approached analyzing the transcripts inductively. Using Patton's (2002) method for inductive coding, I started with the cases (i.e., participants' interview transcripts) and searched for emergent codes, instead of searching for information to "answer" the research questions. I used memoing to track my justification for including each code and these codes comprise the codebook. In order to maintain the link of the data to the framework, codes were grouped thematically. I then performed axial coding (looked for the relationships and connections among the themes). Once axial coding was completed and a framework was created, I invited all of the participants and the co-researchers to provide feedback on the framework to ensure that it accurately represented their experiences.

Findings

Although data coding and analysis was emergent, the findings have been summarized for presentation purposes using the three research questions stated above.

Meaning of youth engagement

Participants described engagement as a process that is centred on relationship building or finding genuine connections with youth as opposed to pretending to have something in common or “putting on a front” (Elizabeth)

Youth engagement means finding ways to develop meaningful connections with youth so that they feel a part of the activity or the project, or the community, so that they’re connected to it in a way that doesn’t feel patronizing (Eli)

The other components of relationship building are choice, advising, power sharing and mentoring. Relationship building and choice were described as being important throughout the entire process of engagement, whereas the activities of advising, power sharing and mentoring occurred to varying degrees at different times throughout the relationship.

Relationship building. When describing youth engagement, all of the participants mentioned a relationship-building component in their responses, however, different aspects of relationships building were emphasized. Participants explained that youth have experienced past injustices with different helping organizations and individuals and how these past injustices impact the youths’ ability to establish trusting relationships.

They’ve had negative interactions with different helping agencies. There’s an inherent distrust of people looking to help them (Nick)

I mean it took years to destroy the trust that a lot of these young folks have in adults, in authority, in the people in their lives that were supposed to care for them, you can’t expect to rebuild that in a week or a month or even six months. You can make some great strides in building trust and screw up once and [then] you’re back at less than zero (Tina)

The previous participants make it clear that youth may have experienced injustices in the past with authority. These past experiences will require the staff members of this project to work harder to establish trusting relationships and these processes takes time. The youth participant

summarized how past negative experiences make youth suspicious of adults and how important listening is as a way of symbolizing that their opinions and the youth themselves matter to the project

The only idea is to keep an open mind, that half of these youth are used to people just looking down upon them and figuring their opinion doesn't fucking matter anyway So you're going to have to emphasize the fact that you guys are listening to us, because if nobody else listens to us, we're going to look at you and be like, *yeah you're giving us a say*, [sarcastic tone] are you really giving us a say or are you trying to just fuck with us? Because you're going to have to prove to them that you're not just fucking with them

I How do you prove that?

That will all be in the way you treat them So keep an open mind with people, and when you say you treat them fair, treat them fair That's about the best you can do for them (Armand)

Armand's quote also exemplifies that it is sometimes difficult to articulate exactly what needs to be done Other participants also recognized that listening was a means of demonstrating to the youth that their opinions, ideas, and experiences are valued

[Youth engagement]looks like actually listening to what they [youth] have to say, appreciating their ideas and their uniqueness and not stereotyping them, not painting them all with one brush, recognizing that we're all different and respecting that difference and allowing them to express that difference (Tina)

In addition to discussing past injustices and listening, participants also talked about mutual reciprocation Since the process of engagement involves two or more parties who each bring assets, each person should be accountable to each other This participant describes how important this is

In terms of engaging youth as well, don't make promises you can't deliver on, model behaviour you expect from them, so if you want them to show up on time for meetings, you are there for them and show them that respect as well I mean that's sort of a pet peeve of mine, if you schedule a meeting for 2 00 with a youth and you show up at 2 15 that's just disrespectful to the youth because you wouldn't expect the same thing the other way around, and I see it too often (Nick)

This theme was reiterated through “expert discussions” with one of the youth co-researchers, Zara. She elaborated that to her engagement means working together to meet shared goals, not each person’s own agenda. One way this is done is by respecting each youth’s uniqueness and allowing the relationships to reflect that uniqueness.

It [youth engagement] has to be done in relationship and relationships can’t be one sided, like any relationship what builds connection in one, isn’t necessarily going to build connection in another one, it has to be a unique relationship that is focused on that person as an individual they’re motivated by different things and it’s going to take different kinds of connections. (Eli)

The previous quotes all emphasize how individuals can encourage relationship-building, but policies and common methods of practice (structures) were mentioned as important in this process as well. Creating structures that replicate the youths’ past negative experiences are not conducive to relationship building. This person identifies how some structures can encourage disengagement instead of engagement.

We’re identifying the problem upfront and then I think we have to connect with them [the youth] around the solutions, because if we re-enact the same sort of relationship that they have, at least stereotypically they have with the education system, with their parents, with other adults in their lives, chances are we just push them deeper, or push them further towards that [gangs]. (Eli)

Another participant agreed that the way an organization operates is important for the engagement process. This participant emphasized the need to specifically allocate time for the relationship-building component of the engagement process.

And so one of the challenges of any type of programming for which you receive funding is folks expect results immediately and given that trust can’t be immediate, that has to be understood and there has to be some forgiveness around some of those outcomes and results. It’s going to take time, especially with this population, to get them to trust the folks involved before they’re even really willing to come on board, so it’s a bit unrealistic of them [the funding organization] to expect to have some immediate results to present when trust can take years to establish. (Tina)

Overall the previous participant is communicating the need of time to be allotted for the process of engagement and for this to be understood by all groups involved

Choice. The participants also made it clear that the youth need to be able to have some choice of the degree of participation, as well as the terms of their participation. This quote describes how youth have to determine their participation for example by choosing the services they want to receive

It really needs to be essentially youth-led in terms of letting them decide, sort of pick from a menu of options you know and help them sort of discover what they're own barriers are and, and get them to want to begin that process on their own, rather than just coming into a classroom and we're teaching whatever we feel is right for them for the day (Keith)

The youth who was interviewed also talked about the importance of choosing the activities

If you [other youth] want to do it you're going to show back up, so if you give them a choice in the matter it might help. It will attract more people into coming. Just because they want to have a say. Because if you just tell them they're doing this, they're going to get bored like, most people will. If you let them choose what they get to do, they might be like well fuck you guys [to other gang members] I'm going, I get to do this (Armand)

The previous quote illustrates that choosing activities for other youth to do motivates youth to participate and be involved with different organizations. This quote is also about sharing power and control. Zara qualified this comment during one of our "expert discussions" by noting there is a need for some encouragement for youth to take the first steps toward participating as some youth may not have experienced these types of opportunities in the past.

Advising and sharing opinions. According to the participants, part of youth engagement is creating opportunities for youth to share their opinions and experiences. It is about creating outlets where the youth are viewed as experts and can inform how a project operates. Participants identified two main areas where youth could share their opinions, which are their experience

with gangs and or the operation of inREACH Acting as an “expert” and “providing feedback” was something many participants talked about when defining youth engagement

Some participants want youth to share their opinions about the program so that the program can improve

Outside of program participants, I think the youth have a very important role to play in this project we’re testing out our ideas, our thoughts, our information Youth are going to let us know really quickly whether or not we’re on point [if] we’re completely off base or if we need some tweaking, youth will also have a role in this project not only the informal feedback that we get from the different program pieces or maybe the case management or the group sessions, but they’re also, through the youth advisory council, going to be key in providing feedback to what’s designed but then also to what isn’t designed and what else needs to be in there (Giles)

Few participants described this explicitly as youths’ only role

At the risk of sounding of you know ‘father knows best’ ‘adults are right, and kids are wrong’, I don’t believe that’s true I think adults get it wrong a lot, I know I’ve gotten it wrong, and that’s how it is, but at the same time, I really don’t think partners would be accurate, I like the term, ‘youth advisory’ because they could advise the committee, and the committee could choose whether or not to follow up on the advice, it’s just that simple (Kyle)

Staff participants talked about the importance of letting youth share their opinions so the project is successful

Like I said, we can sit there and come up with all these ideas that we think will engage youth, um but until we vet it in front of youth and they give their feedback really we don’t know um, I can’t tell you what youth will enjoy (Nick)

The adult participants also wanted youth to provide information about what it is like to be in a gang so that, on the one hand the employees can better understand the youth and on the other, the project can benefit from this information This participant describes how she would frame questions to illustrate that the youths’ input is valuable

I’d rather be like, well the Waterloo Regional Police say there’s this many gangs in town, what do you guys think about that, are they way off their rocker, or is this kind of accurate? (Elizabeth)

Ensuring the participants know their opinions are valued will help encourage participation. All of the participants discussed some form of advising as a means of engaging youth.

Power-sharing. This theme describes how the participants talked about power and control. Overall, they emphasized the importance of sharing the power or control the employees have over how events unfold with youth. “I think you show willingness to cede some of your control over the situation” (Tina). This includes acknowledging a power imbalance, the desire to shift the imbalance and to work towards active participation, as well as to ensure structures exist that support power-sharing.

Many participants acknowledged that there is an inherent power imbalance within any relationship they would be building with the youth because of the differences in age, experience and the hierarchical structure of the project.

There will always be that imbalance, there will always be the power imbalance, the economic imbalance, there's so many things that I think that we strive for youth as partners, but to some degree it's not possible. (Ellen)

Not only are their power imbalances within the larger social context such as the economic imbalance mentioned previously, but there are also power imbalances ingrained in the program design.

I think, we can outline what they can be involved, how they can be involved, what the limitations to their involvement are, etc, etc. but let's not try and fool them, to say that at the end of the day we don't call the shots, because we do. (Adriana)

Despite the belief that some imbalance was inevitable, some participants thought there should be a shift in that distribution towards one that is more balanced. This was illustrated in the language used to speak with the youth.

When we think about the imbalance, making a shift to a more balanced approach so when you talk about youth as clients, that really reflects the imbalance but when you talk about them as partners I think that language is better.

and more reflective of that piece (Ellen)

One way that participants described sharing power is through active participation. Participants talked about encouraging and “meaningfully involving” the youth. The participant below described how other organizations and institutions encourage passive participation “empty vessels” whereas the goals of this project are to encourage more active participation where the youth take control over what their participation means.

I think to a certain degree, we’re left with the artefacts of the education system, where the youth have internalized the notion of them being empty vessels and adults are going to tell them what they have to do and when they have to do it, and a lot of the work, to my mind, of youth engagement, engaging with youth, is counter acting that artefact and, and really communicating in a variety of ways to youth that their thoughts and ideas and participation is important, not sacrosanct, because sometimes youth engagement goes the other way, where it’s like you can do no wrong, if you say it, it’s got to be true, but where you engage with youth in a respectful way that respects their positions. Sometimes it challenges their position, sometimes it means being challenged, and us having to think about things in different ways (Eli)

The only youth who participated in the study also had a lot to say about the importance of sharing power and its impact on participation.

If you let youth design part of it or you guys go do this certain days so you let them have plans in the scheduling, and the activities, I think they might be more apt to [participate] because what’s the point in designing this so that we can do this, this day, we can do that, that day, right, and then just not fucking showing up to do it (Armand)

The youth goes on to say,

Well you don’t always want somebody else in charge telling you to do this, telling you to do that. You run into lots of people that are like, I know more about this, I know more about that, I’m sitting there looking at them going, you’re full of shit dude [laughter] (Armand)

The youth also talked about implications of power sharing on youths’ personal well-being.

Some people never take charge with anything, and that can fuck with them psychologically, so they’ll never stand up for themselves. Now you let them be in

charge and let them show they're not worthless, it might give them a better, positive outlook on themselves (Armand)

Youth advisory committees were brought up as a means of institutionalizing or creating structures of power-sharing and youth engagement

But I'm a pretty strong advocate for youth advisory councils because I think it is a venue that gives them [youth] a pretty strong voice and has credibility and merit in their eyes (Tina)

In terms of structure, programs need to have "platforms" or policies that allow power-sharing to happen, this includes time for the relationship building process previously mentioned, policies that allow youth to participate in the decision making, or allowing their ideas to be "heard" by the organization/program One member identified this need exactly

I think you encourage them and provide platforms for them to display some of their ideas and articulate some of their ideas, you need to create the platforms for them to step up, and if they want to step down let them step down, but if they want to step up then they have that opportunity and in my experience most often they step up Folks just develop an enthusiasm for it and they get, it sounds trite but they enjoy that level of respect and they enjoy being listened to and heard (Eli)

Overall power sharing was identified as necessary between the employees of the project and the youth as well as in formalized structures in the program

Mentoring Mentoring was described as an "advanced" component of inREACH or of the process of youth engagement, something that happened once a relationship had been established between project members and the youth Most of the participants mentioned the importance of sustained involvement with the program on the part of the youth before he/she could become a mentor for other youth This theme captures the importance of youth learning from each other and building relationships with each other Mentoring was seen as important for youth engagement and was often mentioned in conjunction with community outreach, where youth could become spokespeople and role models within the community

I'm hoping that they can learn from one another, because although, the YAC, [has a lot]of purposes, it will [also] provide a support to those youth who are involved in it, so we want some positive role models there, if possible (Ellen)

This staff member adds that youth will have fewer barriers building relationships with other youth because of shared experiences

Well again depending how it unfolds and the degree of involvement I can see that their biggest piece would be mentoring other youth coming in and offering some peer leadership, the kind of been there done that type thing that speaks volumes Often staff can stand up and talk till they're blue in the face and if they hear it from somebody who has lived it and is closer to their own age, it resonates with them (Tina)

Some participants took this one step further with the idea that youth, who represent the project and build relationships with other youth will "facilitate faster trust and lubricate the relationship between the community workers and the new youth" Eli

Mentoring could occur between youth and adults (bi-directionally) and between two youth Community outreach was also seen as a way for youth to be seen as role models for other youth Outreach was only discussed by a few participants as a way for the youth to act as educators of the community about the realities of their experiences and to enrol other youth

Certainly in helping us engage and educate the community, these youth can certainly be partners in that and I think a very powerful and effective partner Like I said in outreach, once we're going back to the communities, talking about the dangers of gangs, they can talk to the kids about that and they can also help identify youth that they think are ready for change (Nick)

In sum, the quote below defines youth engagement in the context of this study well

Youth engagement just really means connecting with youth on some level to me, I don't think it's about engaging them to do something in particular, it's just finding that common ground between yourself and another person, I think ultimately is just about finding that connection and allowing them to decide for themselves whether they want to be involved in whatever you have to offer and helping them to explore whether it be a benefit to them I think they really have to make that decision on their own So, it's not about bribing or coaxing or you know what I mean, I think it has to be done really honestly (Alora)

Experiences with Youth Engagement

Participants talked about the role they intend on having regarding youth engagement in this project. Overall, the community treatment team (CTT) saw their roles as being involved directly with the youth and these roles could be passive or active. Passive meaning they interfered minimally with youth decisions or active in that they took specific steps to influence youth decisions. The words used to describe their roles ranged from facilitator, coach, and advocate, to servant, to a referral role. The PAC's role regarding youth engagement was much different, which is expected since that was the purpose of having two different groups. The PAC participants saw themselves as having no role regarding youth engagement or a distant role. Their main responsibility was to keep the project running smoothly and two PAC members saw their role as advocating for a space for youth within the project.

Overall the PAC's role was that of administration, supporting the CTT, managing the expectations of the funding organization and to a few members, advocating for this collaborative method of creating a program. The PAC saw the day-to-day functioning of the program to be the responsibility of the CTT and program manager.

The project manager saw himself having a similar role to the PAC in the sense that he is responsible for many of the administrative tasks. He also talked about the importance of maintaining the goals of the project through dialogue with youth as a means of youth engagement.

Instead of setting folks up for disappointment, you [staff] know what is doable, so like I said, no, we don't have the power to legalize marijuana, but, we can lobby your local MPP if this is an issue. We can't cancel school, (laughter) but we can look for alternative forms of education or have the group speak to their school trustees around what are the issues in terms of that, that this group is facing or has experienced in your traditional school setting. (Giles)

As you can see, he does not want to shut down ideas, he wants to work with youth within the

confines of the goals of the project to meet their needs and wants. Dialoguing about this and how it will be done is important for learning, gaining trust, transparency, and sharing power.

Recommendations and Hopes for Future Youth Engagement

The participants talked about many different recommendations and hopes for engaging youth as the project moved forward. The participants focused on youth advisory committees in general, the practicalities of youth advisory committees and some cautions from past experiences. Another discussion emerged concerning how to express to youth that their input is valued- the main question was should youth be paid?

Youth advisory committees. Most participants described how a youth advisory committee should be the space for engaging youth. A few participants saw the program participants and youth advisory committee members as the same.

The YAC is really an advisory committee on the group, then the participants can make their own advisory committee, maybe we should think of the, **the group** [vocal emphasis] as the YAC right, rather than as a separate, external kind of advisory body, maybe, we need to think about addressing our participants as youth advisors on the program. I think that would make more sense. (Alora)

The majority saw project participants playing a more passive role and youth advisory committee members playing a more active role. Many of the examples are further illustrations of how the participants described the meaning of youth engagement, as seen below.

I also see their role, as taking a leadership role with the other youth once they've completed the program to do peer mentorship within the program in the same way that other programs have sponsors and that sort of thing, somebody who's gone through the program or somebody who's experienced what you've experienced and is going to try to help you through it and say you know, listen, this is how you can do this, this is how you can deal with this and it's almost like building a family, but a better family. They've tried to create this surrogate family with their gang and we have to try to create those healthy relationships. (Keith)

The previous participant described how the YAC may be an outlet for the mentoring and

leadership component of engagement. Similarly, participant Elizabeth saw the YAC as an outlet for actions like creating a movie. “If we did presentations or if we wanted to do a video for the program or a commercial or anything that they want to be a part of” (Elizabeth)

Participants saw the YAC as an outlet for engagement, especially peer mentoring, but also as an outlet where the adults could mentor the youth.

Ideally you’d have youth involved who really want to be there and are interested in having an impact on the program or on some activity in the community, or in learning how to be involved in a committee and if you want have that experience, you wouldn’t otherwise have the opportunity, that would be really exciting you know, you could have youth who, really didn’t have any of the skills to sit around a meeting and you know follow Roger’s rules or whatever, and they could really learn, I would love them to be able to learn from that, I mean one thing for them to learn from that, [is] for them to learn how to be better advocates for themselves. And how to work collaboratively and understand how systems work and how to have some influence, so I guess, a group of youth who really wanted to be there, and an opportunity for them to learn how to be better advocates for themselves and to have an impact on things that are going on in the community that they’re interested in. (Alora)

Practical suggestions. Most of the comments regarding the ideal YAC centred on practicalities such as the number of youth who should be involved or the age range of the members. There was some discrepancy between study participants. For example, one participant states that YAC members could be from different points in their involvement with the project (but definitely gang-involved).

Youth that are partway through or youth that have quote on quote graduated from, um so that you get that, that full spectrum of ideas and thoughts and people can speak to each sort of point across the continuum of the program and then you get a nice well rounded view point of what’s going on and what’s working and what’s not. (Tina)

Other participants thought it was important to have youth who were not in gangs.

I would hate to see that it would be filled with former gang members, there has to be people who’ve never seen a gang member. I’d like to see a well rounded youth

engagement (Kyle)

Cautions. Participants also made “warning” comments based on their experiences about issues that may come up such as one youth dominating the YAC conversations

Whoever’s leading conversation or whoever’s in the room, needs to be aware of the dynamics of the youth that are there, just so that we can make every effort to give appropriate time to respond from each of the youth that are there, but I also feel that if you got three people in the room and one person’s dominating the conversation and the other two people feel like they just wasted their time, they’re not going to come back, so I think the best way to get people to come back is make sure that they feel that they were heard (Keith)

Another warning was made by participants Eli about “imposing” a YAC

I hope one develops, I’m suspicious of it being imposed, as in saying, it should have a youth advisory council, I’d much rather see leadership rise up from within [the youth, ground up] and as that leadership starts to develop, shape some opportunities for them to guide the project but I don’t believe in this sort of tokenism that just says ok, let’s get six youth and put them all together and maybe something good will come out of it, let’s look for youth who have natural energy for that sort of thing, and then give them opportunity and help them, amplify their voices so that they do get heard and they contribute and I think that will make the project more rich and give it more general integrity (Eli)

Valuing youth input. When the participants were asked what youth engagement should look like the conversation often turned to financial compensation and incentives to participate. One participant was adamant that that was the only way. He notes that the youth who are coming to this project are struggling to meet their basic needs and asking them to volunteer extra time may not be feasible. He also used the analogy of an expert researcher or expert in the field and notes we would pay them. Given this and wanting to conceptualize youths’ role as that of an “expert” why wouldn’t we pay the youth?

But you know when it comes down to [it], are you willing to invest in the expertise of these youth? That’s where they balk, that’s where they’re like ‘oh no we don’t have funds for that’ We pay for expertise everywhere else, I mean you’ll spend \$1200 to send staff on a two day training but you’re not going to spend \$10 an hour to listen to some youth, get feedback on your project that’s for

youth, I just think it's those biases that try to get them for as little as you can
(Nick)

During the "expert conversations" with Zara, she said that when staff members accept that the youth do not need to be paid, they send the message that they do not believe in youth's skills and expertise. Nick summarizes his opinions well when he says that "this information is valuable and it has to be treated that way. [We] say it's valuable but how much do you want to pay for it? Well nothing"

Many other participants thought paying the youth was a good idea but not feasible given the confines of the project. Due to this, they suggested alternatives to financial compensation to express to the youth that their opinions matter.

I would love to see this project move forward with the youth as the experts, because I don't think that we know enough to pretend that we are the experts. I would really love to see this move forward with the participants as co-researchers basically, and I was chatting with (project member) about that, that we don't have anything to attract them to it [the project] in terms of money, and we're totally dependent on them to make this successful, so I'm thinking [we need to know], what can we give to you that you would be interested in that would make it worth while for you to participate and help us. (Alora)

One participant suggested putting youths' ideas into action as a means of expressing to them that their opinions are valued. "I think it's really important and I think it's more reflective, instead of just saying that we do it, or that we value the youth and their input and their skills and their strengths, I think people talk a lot but they don't actually put it into action" (Ellen). Another participant mentioned that by allowing youth to have the expert role, to have that control within the project would be a way of showing the youth that their opinion is valued- it's valued because we listen to it, and may use it.

Table 4 Summary of Findings

| Meaning of youth engagement | Experiences with youth engagement | Future of youth engagement |
|---|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Relationship building <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Past injustices acknowledge past injustices to build trust - Listening to build trust - Mutual reciprocity to work together to create shared meaning of their relationships - Structures policies and practices, time and space specifically for relationships - Choice as many options as possible - Advising youth help with designing the program and informing staff about gang experiences - Power sharing staff members share their power - Mentoring youth mentor other youth and reach out to the community | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Role Members of the community treatment team and project advisory team discuss their potential roles | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Youth advisory councils discussion of purpose these groups - Practical suggestions discussion of membership and roles - Cautions discussion of concerns of youth wellbeing - Valuing youth input discussion of the best approach to expressing to youth the importance of their role |

In sum, participants in this project discussed what youth engagement means to them, the role they perceive as important for them to play in this project and their suggestions for future engagement. The findings can be summarized in Table 4.

Discussion

The goal of this study is to add knowledge to current understandings about youth engagement, particularly within the context of a local street gang prevention project (inREACH) in the Waterloo Region in Ontario, Canada, and to add to literature that focuses on engagement and participation with youth. The research questions and interview guides were designed to

elucidate the many informal conversations I had with project staff throughout my time as a practicum student, prior to the beginning of this research. A result of this study is a snapshot of the initiation of engagement with gang involved youth. The findings above clarify the perspectives of some of the mREACH stakeholders and act as a reference point for future accomplishments. Each of the findings represents an important aspect of the process of engagement for mREACH. Though the worth of details and nuance should not be undervalued, the two findings that are particularly salient are the importance and impact of relationships and the role that structures such as advisory committee can play in the engagement process.

Exploring Youth Engagement: Interpretations, Inclinations and Anticipations

This study's findings answer each of the research questions in varying degrees, with responses relating to the meaning of youth engagement being richest in data. In engaging youth, advising, power-sharing and mentoring may be activities and examples of participation styles to pursue. These findings have components in common with other theories of youth engagement. Ladder models include these levels such as power-sharing and advising components. A novel finding from this study is the need for mentoring as a participation activity in youth engagement.

The thorough analysis by each participant of their own interpretations of youth engagement cumulatively portrays youth engagement as more than levels of participation and activities, it focuses on the process of engagement as vital to its meaning. The emphasis on process, particularly relationship-building and choice, is not clear from previous ladder models. Some critiques and refinements have placed more emphasis on choice and collaboration (see Hart, 2008), but mentoring is not included as participation. One reason for this may be that ladder models dichotomize those with power (adults) and those without power (youth). Mentoring draws attention to shared experiences and also implies that those individuals without

power (or with less power or different power) have something to offer each other. Additionally, the relationship between youth and adults is enriched, rather than being based solely on power dynamics, each member participates as a human being, emphasizing what they have in common. This study finds that the meaning of youth engagement is grounded in two key areas: participation opportunities (including mentoring) and process.

The findings also show that engagement occurs in at least two ways: among individuals and between individuals and organizations. Individuals need to be supportive of engagement and provide opportunities to participate through conversations, actions and other behaviours, but organizations also need to provide policies that allow for these practices. Policies that allocate time for relationship building and programs that allow input are particularly important. For example, employees could be given a certain amount of “flex time” to meet youth at times that are convenient for them. Another example is youth could be given a certain degree of control over the content and manner in which the programs are run. It is important to ensure policies are supporting both the desired outcomes and desired process(es). This is consistent with Shier’s (2001) pathways to participation model that also identifies the need for organizational policies to support engagement.

Findings from this study have implications for the roles of the adults in the engagement process. Adults identify roles that emphasize the capacities of youth and put adults/service providers in a more supportive, secondary role. This finding may be interpreted as positive in the sense that service providers want to create a safe and supportive atmosphere for youth to explore opportunities. It might also be interpreted as service providers maintaining some power throughout the entire process and never giving it up entirely. These are just two of many potential interpretations and these ones are reflected in Hart (1997) and Arnstein’s (1969)

ladders, where Hart's highest rung is collaboration and Arnstein classifies partnerships as less ideal and citizen control as ideal. What is absent from the findings of the present study is whether young people support this conceptualization of their participating in the decision making process. This is an important area that needs to be explored.

Project service providers accentuate the role of the youth advisory committee. This finding may be due to the "trial" youth advisory committee that occurred before the research interviews were conducted. Adults are dedicated to maintaining a space for youth to explore their desired level of participation. The future of engagement in this project also revolves around valuing youth input and determining how to express the value of youth input. The question of applying a monetary value occurs frequently in community conversations. These findings constitute a snapshot of the participant stakeholders' current standpoint of youth engagement. The timing of this study is helpful because it shows service providers' standpoints and the challenges of initiating youth engagement. In this project the adults are prompting the engagement process and this is dictated by the circumstances, not choice. The current stakeholders have several ideas of how to work with youth.

Process of Relationship Building is the Essence of Engagement

A novel finding is that engaging youth who are involved with gangs demands an enduring, supportive relationship. This means two people connecting with each other on a human level initially and then moving towards agreed upon goals. Conceptualizing youth engagement in this way, in a context of relationship-building, allows each youth to be treated uniquely and implies that there will be one-on-one time with youth and staff. This one-on-one relationship will require its members to determine what roles they feel comfortable with, and this may change over time. Navigating the roles will be a challenge but vital to successful participation, for

example, initially a youth may want less control and over time they may want more. Other youth may have more variable expectations. Changing contexts and youth expectations will also determine who “leads” these and thus influences the degree of power shared. Success in navigation will determine the roles, the degree of power shared and the participation opportunities that will emerge from the relationship.

Mentoring is another form of relationship that is important for engaging youth. This study finds it important for engagement to be based on relationships between adults and youth but also among youth. This gives youth the opportunity to demonstrate their skills to each other, to build positive peer relationships, and to act as brokers between youth who are not involved with the program and the service-providers. Adults suggest that the activity of mentoring occur after a period of time, not initially, and it is the only activity with a time sequence.

To further discuss how the relationship-building process may work based on findings from this study, the analogy of the methodological approach of participatory action research (PAR) is useful. Please note that I did not use PAR as a research methodology and I am using it here as an analogy for a program model. As mentioned earlier, PAR relies on meeting and getting to know the community and their needs, and then research objectives are co-determined. I think this is an appropriate analogy because of the emphasis placed on relationships in the findings. Just as the research process is co-developed to meet community needs, there is potential for a project to co-develop its goals (which programs youth have to complete) to meet youths’ needs. It is neither determined by youth alone nor by service providers alone. The participatory approach also emphasizes the fact that youth will play a more active role in experiencing their program.

As mentioned, in PAR the first step is community entry, where researchers and potential participants meet and get to know each other. Building a strong and trusting foundation is important as many participants of PAR have not been treated justly by researchers in the past. Once the foundation is built, researchers and participants develop the objectives of the research in relationship, the methods and the dissemination strategy by building on everyone's strengths. These strengths are traditionally the researchers' formal training and the participants' knowledge of the context (Patton, 2002).

Centring engagement on relationships could alter the challenges that have been identified by the literature: burnout, ageism and boundaries. Relationships could help minimize the barriers of burnout and ageism by providing a supportive environment and challenging ideas about what youth are capable of achieving, however, this process may increase the challenge of boundary awareness. Emphasizing relationships as part of a process has the potential for both youth and adults to become too personal, resulting in one of the members of the relationship feeling uncomfortable and this could contest the stamina of the relationship. Maintaining clear boundaries and open communication are important for diverting conflicts that could end or negate established rapport. As mentioned in the findings, it is also important to be clear about the constraints of the project and not to imply possibilities that do not exist. Ground rules of the relationship based on all members' comfort levels would need to be established and monitored over time to assure all challenges are managed (just as with a formal adult relationship).

Structures of Engagement

The term "structures of engagement" encompasses policies, common practices and means of operation, rules and other institutional aspects. It also includes tangible opportunities such as employment or increasing employability, sports teams, and the inREACH's youth advisory

committee (YAC) These are limited and traditional examples There is a possibility that youth may have other ideas about how they would like to participate

This finding of the need for structures of engagement is consistent with previous research that suggests there are opportunities for youth to develop individual level skills (see Catalano et al , 2004) Providing many different opportunities allows each youth to determine how s/he would like to participate For example, some youth may want to host or facilitate future programs or others may want to host a “jam night” where youth can showcase their musical abilities Given these examples, youth may select from these opportunities and customize their participation style

Another type of opportunity is one that develops sociopolitical awareness among youth and program staff On this issue, the staff members of inREACH are not currently thinking of types of activities or forms of engagement that highlight the societal or political aspects of gang prevention It may be that the interview questions and probes did not encourage these types of responses or that individuals do not see these activities as a likely possibility That being said, given findings show an absence and an unclear position for or against these types of activities, so there is potential for sociopolitical development in inREACH For example, as there is only the voice of one youth in this study it may be that youth would determine sociopolitical opportunities As mentioned by Evans (2007) as well as Watts and Flanagan (2007), the key mediating factors of sociopolitical development are sense of agency and opportunity for action Without structures that have space for youth participation, such as the youth advisory committee, the process of engagement will be stunted and there will be no sociopolitical development The importance of having this “space” designated for youth is confirmed by Shier’s (2001) pathways to participation model that identifies obligation and opportunity as inextricable from

participation. I suggest that future research specifically address youths' ideas on sociopolitical engagement.

The need to acknowledge past injustices and the barriers youth experience is often thought of on an individual scale, yet there are important structures or policies that need to be in place. For example, the programs need to be flexible to accommodate diverse needs. Another example is the need to create a learning environment where staff members and youth are continually educating themselves on potential barriers and the means to overcome them. This study's findings have implications for proposing that programs offer youth social, emotional, behavioural and cognitive skills which has been previously mentioned in the literature (Catalano et al., 2004), all the while acknowledging the injustices youth experience and providing opportunities to pursue larger community participation. These last two aspects are similar to social justice youth development theory (SJYDT) and yet the social action and challenging status quo components of SJYDT are not found in this study. One reason for this lack of finding may be that these activities may occur later in the project development and implementation phases, taking into account that data collection occurred in the early phase of this project. By adding the YAC as a component of the program, it implies that the goals of this program go beyond the individual level skills mentioned earlier, towards a broader and community level focus. Considering this, the YAC's purpose is inline with the goals of SJYDT.

Recommendations: Participatory Action Project

Participatory action research methods may be informative in shaping recommendations for youth engagement. Borrowing from PAR, I propose some new aspects of youth engagement that may serve as a complementary approach to existing engagement models. I propose conceptualizing community projects as participatory action projects (PAP) as a means of

engaging youth. Just as PAR first builds relationships then mutually navigates the research process, findings from this study suggest that the first step of youth engagement is relationship-building. The main difference is that the overall goal of PAR is to conduct research whereas the goal of a PAP is to meet project goals, for instance, to help youth exit gangs. A PAP has three components: (1) relationship-building, (2) program objectives (in this case, gang prevention), and (3) participatory opportunities. This is not a linear stage model and relationship-building is threaded throughout program objectives and participatory opportunities.

Initial relationship-building. This is a time-intensive component that begins before the beginning of the actual service delivery. Similar to community entry in PAR where researchers first learn as much as possible about the community they are entering, staff members would have to increase their familiarity with the experiences of youth or gangs in the case of inREACH. One method of doing this would be to provide training on this topic area and an original way to do this would be to allow the youth to provide information and training sessions for staff members. Once staff members have this training, it might also be important to consider additional training that focuses on power dynamics in relationships to further sensitize members to the potential challenges of engaging in relationships. After these preparations have occurred, the work of establishing relationships with youth can begin. This initial process will take time, which needs to be anticipated, since staff members will have to meet many youth before they find some that would like to participate.

Program objectives. This aspect would be comparable to the research aspect of PAR, but instead of gathering and analyzing data, youth would determine which skills they want to develop or the resources they would like to utilize. Both members of the relationship would have something to bring to this—the staff member professional skills and the youth their skills and

experiences Together they would embark on reframing what the youth's past experiences mean for his or her future The relationship component that is woven into the program objectives allows both members to reflect on the program itself and both to contribute to its improvement for future youth Without a focus on relationships, this continual improvement and reciprocation (the program provides services and the youth provides active feedback) would likely be given less attention

Implicit in this stage is a form of engagement- by allowing youth to have input into the program design certain expectations are being established The expectations include having their (youths') opinions valued and the expectation that they are supported Participation and program goals cannot be completely mutually exclusive, nor should they be The more meaningful participation that is available to youth, the better for the model

Opportunities for participation This component would be comparable to the "action" and "dissemination" stages of PAR For PAP, it would be an opportunity to outreach and mentor other youth, educate the community, participate in the YAC (dissemination or perpetuation of the program) or it could be to do an "action" for the community or the project such as hosting a music event or a rally against poverty These opportunities are ill defined here because they will be determined by the youth The relationship adds to this aspect the ability to co-develop what success means in the context of the program so evaluations can reflect this Sustaining the relationship throughout allows for consistency and accountability for all involved

PAP is complementary to other models because it allows the different "levels" of engagement to become different options It does not encourage one level of engagement as ideal or expected but instead provides youth the ability to choose their preference In the context of this study, only certain aspects of the ladders are included and activities that are classified as

non-participation would be less likely to be an option. PAP is more complementary to Hart and Shier's conceptualization of engagement because they both include adults or "power holders" throughout the process. Nevertheless, PAP does not address power sharing directly and this would need to be included in practice.

Implications for inREACH

This study has the potential to offer insights and reference points for inREACH. Though the stakeholders of inREACH may have different interpretations of the findings for the project, I offer my views here. The prominent finding of engagement being a process of relationship-building that emerged from this study has implications for program planning for the project. Time will need to be allocated for this process, initially as well as throughout the project, in order to maintain the relationships. The initial relationship-building could include activities such as outreach, by going to the places potential participants enjoy, contacting colleagues or previous clients, or it could include hosting more fun, informal activities on "neutral" ground such as spoken word events. I mention "neutral" ground only because, without a foundation of trust, the notion of a gang prevention program can translate to an arrest in some youths' minds. Having this preliminary time to establish trust allows each person to explain one's intentions. The findings are very clear that the past negative experiences youth have had with organizations and institutions make simple invitations worthless.

As a stakeholder in this project myself, I find it interesting to hear the adult members' perspectives of their roles regarding youth engagement. Members of the community treatment team (CTT) or the staff members that provide services have concrete, active roles in mind, but some project advisory committee members see themselves as not having any role in youth engagement. This is likely because the PAC members only meet monthly and during these

meetings their role is to ensure the project goals are being met, that the funding organization's expectations are being met and addressing any other high level issues. Thus, youth engagement must not be a "high level issue". If this is considered further, it also implies that the youth who are involved with the project do not have a space in these activities. This speaks to the amount of power that is available to be shared with youth.

This snapshot of mREACH also illustrates the struggles participants are experiencing when trying to define what the future of youth engagement in the project will be. Questions by service providers such as "should a YAC be imposed or should participants wait for youth to initiate it?" are plentiful, but once youth are more consistently involved with the project these conversations will finally occur. It is the conversations with youth that will co-define the terms of engagement and potentially bring up different struggles. An interesting facet of engaging youth is that adult service providers will have a rather constant role and change less frequently than groups of youth who enter and leave the program. The relatively temporary time in the program that youth play adds another challenge of how to engage youth knowing that time involvement is different from adult stakeholders. How can power be shared between adults and youths when adults are the only ones who will be in the program long-term and they are held accountable to funding and sponsoring organizations, while youth have shorter-term involvement and lower or no accountability (to funding organizations)? How will project members ensure that the project remains relevant to each new group? Many other questions may be raised about the roles that youth play with each other (such as mentors or peers, something else) as they come into the program and then later exit it.

Limitations

As I discuss the findings, implications and model that emerged from this study, they need to be considered with care. This study does not address potential outcomes of youth engagement. This absence limits the scope of the study and excludes many aspects of the context of relationship building (the early stages, the process(es), the constantly changing context, the outcomes, the different experiences etc.) The scope also does not allow one to delve into the specificity of relationships and the power dynamics that occur within them and how this could impact the engagement process. In REACH participants propose that roles would be navigated but the consequences are not known. The scope is limited, but this snapshot of engagement with youth who are gang-involved provides an important starting point for investigating what this process could and should be.

One goal of this study is to be relevant to community needs and simultaneously meet the expectations of a master's level thesis. These two desires lead to some limitations. First, the data collection phase occurred before the program was officially "open" (it was still in the planning stages). Second, only one youth voice is reported in this study, which parallels a very few number of youth involved currently in the project. Due to this some of the experiences of the staff are limited and required the participants to anticipate the future or discuss hypothetical situations instead of experiences with the program. For example youth may have a different conceptualization of the meaning of engagement and different preferences for the roles of staff members and youth. Co-researchers were involved as interviewers and sounding boards, but the study is not youth centric. The interviews occurred pre-emptively so that I could finish this document within two years (and thus pay less tuition). In this way, the project is designed more to meet my needs than those of the community. Future researchers should employ a longitudinal

design to capture how relationships develop and change over time and to capture how this impacts youth participation

Another potential limit of the study is that having youth co-researchers in the interview situation may have caused some participants to present a stance that is more supportive of youth engagement than if a youth were not present. Further, this potential response-bias is relevant only to community treatment team members because youth researchers were unavailable for other interviews. A comparison between studies that use co-researchers and those that do not would be helpful for illuminating any potential impact on the findings.

One possible reason why the inREACH youth advisory committee meetings that occurred prior to data collection had such low participation rates may be due to a lack of relationship-building. Time was not provided for trust to develop between service providers and youth. An invitation to a gang prevention program from a stranger sounds like a trap to many gang involved youth. That being said, anecdotally most of the youth who attended came because they knew the staff members who invited them from past work or knew the youth who knew the staff members. This further supports the finding that relationships are critical in the process of engaging youth, particularly gang involved youth.

Dissemination and Future Action

In order to share the findings of this study, several dissemination strategies will be used. First, academic articles will be written and submitted for publication by at least myself and my supervisor, the co-researchers and my practicum supervisor will be invited as well. Second, Zara and I will be presenting this study and discussing potential actions that can emerge with the members of inREACH within approximately one month of my graduation. Third, a written

summary will be distributed to community organizations to further distribute this information. In terms of action outcomes of this project, none currently exist.

Personal Reflections

One of the goals of completing a thesis is for students to understand the entire process of research from conceptualization to dissemination. From this process, I have learned how difficult it is to create an interview guide that is clear to every single participant. I experienced unanticipated results and struggled to make sure I did not over-interpret the findings based on my existing relationships with the participants. Though I may design future research projects, the lessons and experiences I have gained from this project will not compare.

I also learned about how difficult the process of recruitment is. Since the YAC meetings were complete by the time I was ready to begin interviews, I anticipated it would be difficult to re-connect with the youth who participated. My experience volunteering with one of the community organizations has taught me that youth can sometimes disappear from social services for months at a time and that their contact information is always changing. I was frustrated that my project about engagement with youth lacked youth voices. After listening to a peer's thesis design, I was inspired to invite the two youth with more permanent contacts to help me with my thesis. For me this helped to take away from the almost entirely adult perspective and allowed me to be sensitive to youth voices. I was very excited when they both agreed and even more excited and surprised by Zara's continued involvement that persists now. Zara and I still meet to give updates on the project and we hope to co-host a workshop or community discussion of some kind with members of the gang prevention project in the near future. Recruiting youth as co-researchers was done with the hope of recruiting other youth research participants. Unfortunately, I did not use the voices of my co-researchers as data, if I had I would have had

three youth in the study. When I began this project, my goal was to maximize the utility of this project, and I hope with these workshops, I will be able to achieve this goal. The guidance and support from Zara and other project members helps make this possible.

There are several standards that are used to measure the success of a thesis: research methods and design, the depth and breadth of the literature review, and the applicability to name a few. For me, knowing that what I am doing is being used and altered by practice is an important standard that I feel I am continuing to work towards. This integration between research and practice is exciting for me, and I hope to be involved in it throughout my career.

Conclusion

The field of youth engagement is developing in theory and practice, but some marginalized groups of youth are still being excluded. Youth who have been involved with gangs are not often engaged for meaningful participation activities, and in response, theories such as social justice youth development theory (SJYDT) have developed. Similar to SJYDT, this study identified the need to identify systemic barriers and sources of marginalization. This study also identified the importance of process, particularly the need for relationships and choice, as well as the need for opportunities for youth to participate. This emphasis adds to current ladder models by showing the need for collaboration with adults throughout participation, and it also delineates the ladder models. Instead of prioritizing different types of engagement, the levels of engagement are portrayed as different options that youth may choose from at any time. Participatory action program (PAP) is a model I proposed to conceptualize this alternate approach. PAP calls attention to the process (relationship building) and integrates engagement goals and program goals. This is an important implication for inREACH as it offers a means for

the project to meet the main goal of helping youth exit gangs and a second goal of increasing youth participation

If projects are going to be successful in meeting their goals (in this case, decreasing gang involvement) and providing meaningful participation, they will require more time to form relationships up front and throughout to maintain them, initial training on marginalization and many opportunities so youth have choices. Realizing these necessities and creating participant-centered programs may result in shifts in expectations of funding organizations. Using PAP has the potential to shift views of youth in gangs from clients to more active partners and to make a significant impact in the way youth engage in projects and in their individual lives.

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Appendix A

Youth Advisory Committee Work Plan

March 22, 2009

Purpose

The main purpose of this youth advisory committee (YAC) is to create an opportunity to gain input from the youth who are likely to be affected by this project. This input allows the project to be created *with* youth so that it will address their most salient needs.

Description

There are two main phases of the YAC with corresponding purposes. The first phase involves youth advising and consulting with the project advisory committee and the community treatment team regarding the development and formation of the project. The second phase begins with the intervention and will involve a youth-led initiative. *It should be noted that since we are seeking youth input regarding the functioning of the program and the YAC itself, this plan is subject to change based on their input.*

Phase one: Youth in phase one will be between the ages of 16-24 and identify as being gang involved, gang involved in the past, or socialize with gang members (friends of gang involved youth, partners of gang involved youth, or siblings of gang involved youth). We chose to expand the inclusion criteria in order to assure that there would be enough interest. There will be 5-10 youth on the YAC and they will meet bi-weekly for an hour and a half beginning April 13th and ending when the intervention begins (around the middle to end of May). This phase will operate similar to a focus group where we will try to understand youth's opinions and perspectives pertaining to the project.

Phase two: Youth who participate in this phase will also be between the ages 16-24, but these youth must have been past participants of the Waterloo Region Street Gang Prevention

Project intervention There will be 5-10 youth on the YAC and they will meet bi-weekly to plan and co-ordinate a youth-led initiative of their choice This initiative must be inclusive to all youth and facilitate pro-social behaviour YAC members will also have opportunities to partner with other youth-led initiatives in the area (WAYVE, KYAC etc) YAC members will also provide feedback and advice regarding the program in general, however we anticipate this to be a less intensive component once the program is running This phase will likely operate similar to a committee with two youth nominated as co-chairs It will be these two youths' responsibility (with support from staff) to set the agenda of the meeting and guide the discussion The length of time a person can be co-chair will be decided by the youth on the committee, but will not exceed one year Similarly, the length of YAC membership will also be decided by the youth

- See YAC Work Plan Appendix B for breakdown of meetings

Recruitment

Phase one: Recruitment of youth for phase one will occur through community treatment team outreach and pre-existing contacts with youth See Appendix C for the description given to direct-service providers to tell interested youth

Phase two: Recruitment for phase two will occur throughout the duration of programming Once youth finish programming they have the option of becoming members of the YAC Youth will be informed of the opportunity throughout programming and encouraged to participate in this leadership opportunity

Resources

The YAC requires the following resources

- Location – in kind
- Pizza money- \$50/ meeting

- Bus tickets - \$16-32/ meeting (2 tickets/5-10 youth)
- Flip chart - \$20
- Markers - \$10
- Honorarium?

Staff involved one to two community treatment team members, project manager intermittently, and one student volunteer

Desired Outcomes

The overall desired outcome of the YAC is to involve youth in the development and implementation of this project in order to provide the youth with valuable leadership/mentorship experiences and to increase the quality of the program. To conceptualize this goal, see Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation in Appendix D. This image depicts the different levels of engagement that can occur when working with youth. During phase one, we would like to reach the fifth rung of the ladder and during phase two we would like to reach the seventh rung. The decision of level of engagement was based on feasibility of involvement given such barriers as project timelines, schedules and coordination. Overall, these levels of engagement were chosen to maximize the mutual benefits experienced from the partnership and minimize any potential frustrations.

Additional outcomes of the YAC in general are opportunities for meaningful participation, increased awareness among youth of the process of creating a program and positive adult-youth relationships/mentorship.

Phase one: Outcomes specific to phase one include increased participation in the programming, and better quality and relevant programming.

Phase two: Outcomes specific to phase two include the creation of a youth-led component that increases leadership, and increases awareness in the community of the program

Appendix B

| Timeline | Activity |
|--|--|
| <i>Phase one</i> | |
| April 13, 2010 | Listen to the experiences of youth, introduce the project, get feedback about the logo |
| Meeting 2 (potentially April 27, 2010) | Get input on programming and location |
| Meeting 3 (May 11, 2010) | Continued input on programming |
| Meeting 4 (May 25, 2010) | Suggestions regarding next phase of the YAC |
| <i>Phase two</i> | |
| Meeting 1 | Get to know each other, discuss purpose, create ground rules |
| Meeting 2 | Brainstorm ideas for youth-led initiative |
| Meeting 3 | Begin planning of initiative |
| <i>Meetings will continue for the length of the project but will be based on decisions made by the youth</i> | |

Appendix C

Originally from YAC work plan proposal

Waterloo Region Street Gang Prevention Project Youth Advisory Committee

We're looking for youth between the ages 16-24 who are gang involved, have been gang involved or are at risk of gang involvement to participate in a youth advisory committee. This includes people who have experienced aspects of gang life either as partners of gang members, as close siblings etc. Keep in mind that there will be a diverse range of youth present at these meetings so only recommend youth who will feel comfortable and excited at the prospect of working in this context.

The purpose of the committee is to advise, consult and inform the formation and development of the Waterloo Region Street Gang Prevention Project. We will be working with youth to determine the best approach for programming, an appropriate logo and brand and other important decisions along the way.

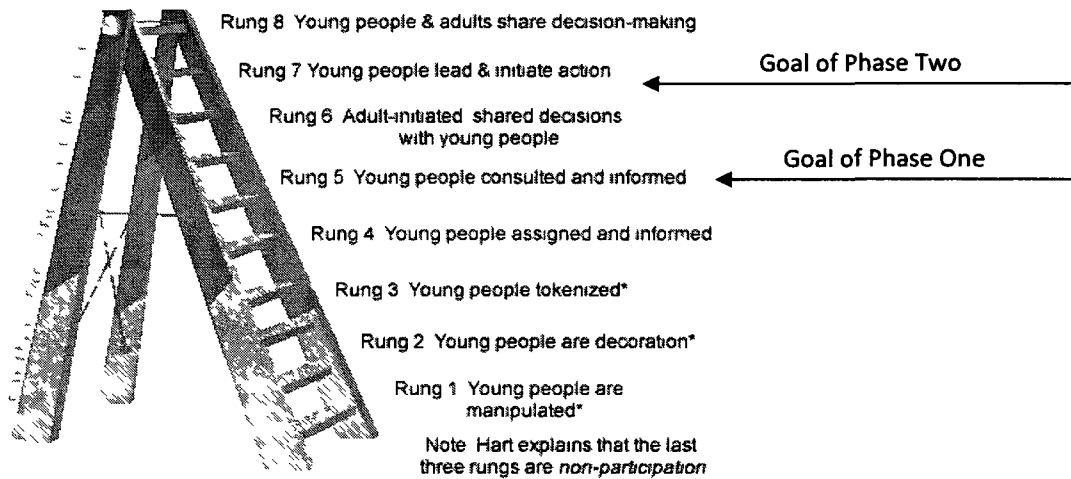
The first meeting is April 13th at 5:30 at the Lutherwood location on 165 King St E. There will be pizza and a lot of interesting people. Please invite anyone you know who might be interested in this project to come!

If you need bus tickets or have any additional questions please feel free to email Lisa at larmstrong37@gmail.com or phone Tom at 519 749 2450 ext 2250.

Appendix D

Originally from YAC work plan proposal

Roger Hart's Ladder of Young People's Participation



Adapted from Hart R (1992) *Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship*
Florence UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre

Appendix E

Adult Interview Guide

Lisa Thank you for volunteering to participate in this study Before we begin I'd like to introduce you to [co-researcher's name] S/he is helping me with this project as a co-researcher S/he has been involved with a gang in the past and is interested in this project I met her/him at one of the YAC meetings As you know, the purpose of this research is to understand the process of involving youth who are gang-involved with the youth advisory committee as part of the Waterloo Region Street Gang Prevention Project This interview should take about one hour and if at any time you need a break or would like to stop the interview, just let me know

Before we start, we need to review the consent form [Consent form reviewed and signed]

What questions do you have before we begin?

Alright, then I'm going to turn on the recorder and let's begin

- 1 [Co-researcher] What does youth engagement mean to you?
 - a How would you define youth engagement?
 - b When you think of youth engagement, what comes to mind?

For this project let's consider youth engagement to mean working with youth as partners in as equal a manner as possible

- 2 [Lisa] Keeping that definition in mind, what role do you think youth should have in this project?
 - a What will their role look like?
 - b Give me an example
- 3 [Co-researcher] What role do you think you should have in engaging youth?
 - a Give me an example
- 4 [Lisa] Were you involved with the YAC that happened in the spring?
 - a If yes, tell me about your role/experiences with the YAC
 - b What are your reflections for the first phase of the YAC?

- c If not, do you have any experience working with youth as partners? Tell me about it What was it like? How does it relate to this project?
- 5 [Co-researcher] Now that the first phase of the YAC has finished what is currently being done to engage youth?
- a What do you think should be done?
- 6 [Lisa] What would an ideal YAC look like to you?
- a Who is involved? How do they come to be involved? What does their involvement look like? When does it end?
- 7 [Co-researcher] Do you have any other ideas you would like to share with us about youth engagement or the YAC?
- [Lisa] Thank you for participating in this interview I'm turning off the recorder now

Youth interview guide

Lisa Thanks for volunteering to participate in this study Before we start I'd like to introduce you to [co-researcher's name] S/he is helping me with this project as a co-researcher S/he has been involved with a gang in the past and is interested in this project I met her/him at one of the YAC meetings The purpose of this research is to understand the how to involve youth who are or were gang-involved with the youth advisory committee as part of the Waterloo Region Street Gang Prevention Project This interview should take about one hour and if at any time you need a break or would like to stop the interview, just let me know

Before we start, we need to review the consent form [Consent form reviewed and signed]

What questions do you have before we begin?

Alright, then I'll turn on the recorder and let's begin

- 1 [Co-researcher] What does youth engagement mean to you?
- a How would you define youth engagement?
 - b When you think of youth engagement, what comes to mind?

For this project let's consider youth engagement to mean working with youth as partners in as equal a way as possible

- 2 [Lisa] What role do you think youth should have in this project?
 - a What should your role look like?
 - b Give me an example
- 3 [Co-researcher] Tell me about your experiences with the YAC that happened this spring
 - a What were the highlights of the meetings?
 - b What were the low points?
 - c What did you find frustrating?
 - d When you were first asked, what did you think was expected of you?
- 4 [Lisa] Do you have any other experience working with adults as partners?
 - a Tell me about that
 - b Give me an example of what it was like
 - c How does it relate to this project?
- 5 [Co-researcher] Now that the first phase of the YAC is over what do you think should happen next?
 - a If you were in charge of creating a YAC for this project what do you think it should be like?
- 6 [Lisa] Do you have any other ideas you would like to share with us about youth engagement or the YAC?

[Lisa] Thank you for participating in this interview I'm turning off the recorder now

Appendix F

Invitation for participating in study

Hello *name*,

I'm emailing to invite you to participate in research I am conducting for my master's thesis in collaboration with Waterloo Region Street Gang Prevention Project (SGPP) We are conducting a case study of the SGPP to understand the process of youth engagement with youth who are involved with gangs

As a participant you would participate in one hour long interview with me and will be invited to a follow up meeting once the data has been analyzed (*an approximate date will be provided*)

Participation is completely voluntary and all participation will be confidential We will try to ensure anonymity, but due to the small size of the SGPP this is not guaranteed

If you are interested in participating in my study, please contact me at arms9120@wlu.ca as soon as possible so we can arrange a time to have the interview

Thank you,

Lisa Armstrong

Appendix G

WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY
INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Understanding Engagement with Youth who are Gang-Involved A Case Study
Lisa Armstrong
Advisor Dr Colleen Loomis

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to understand the perspectives of the people involved with the Waterloo Region Street Gang Prevention Project regarding the youth advisory committee. This is a research project of a Wilfrid Laurier University Master's student, Lisa Armstrong, with input from Ms. Christiane Sadler, director of the prevention project and supervision from Dr. Colleen Loomis at the university. [Please note that Christiane will be reading the entire thesis document however will not have access to the raw data.] Lisa Armstrong is the principal researcher for this study and is responsible for all of the data collection and analysis, organizing interviews with each of these stakeholders to gain an understanding of their experiences with this process. Everyone who is currently involved with the Waterloo Region Street Gang Prevention Project is invited to participate in this study, for a total of 16-23 participants.

INFORMATION

This study is focused entirely on the Waterloo Region Street Gang Prevention project and the people involved with this project. You have received an invitation to participate in an individual interview with Lisa Armstrong and potentially a co-researcher, Esperanza or Brandon, which will occur at a location of your choice. After the interview, Lisa will ask to contact you for a one-on-one meeting to hear feedback and advice regarding the main themes and findings from all of the interviews.

The entire amount of time required to commit to the interview is 1 hour. The time required for the follow up session is 30 minutes.

The interviews will be audio recorded using a digital recorder. If you are uncomfortable with this, let the researcher know and she will take written notes.

RISKS

The foreseeable risks of this study surround issues of confidentiality and anonymity. All attempts within our control have been made to assure the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants in this study. However, due to the small sample size and existing relationships between the participants, anonymity cannot be guaranteed. In other words, people may be able to identify participants due to the existing relationships.

Initials: _____

BENEFITS

The anticipated benefits of this research are that the results will be implemented to improve the process and manner of working with youth who are involved with gangs. This has positive implications for the youth advisory committee and the other members of the project team.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Several measures that are being taken to ensure confidentiality including keeping all physical copies of information (consent forms, printed data) in a locked filing cabinet in Colleen Loomis' locked office at Wilfrid Laurier University, and keeping all electronic data (digital interviews, transcripts, analysis etc.) in password protected files on an external hard drive. Note the interviews will be deleted from the audio digital recorders once they have been transferred to the computer where they will be password protected like the rest of the electronic data. Lisa, Colleen, and an undergraduate student research assistant, Danielle Arena, will be the only people who hear the interviews and have access to the data. Danielle Arena will transcribe the data. All of the data will be destroyed by April 30, 2018 by Colleen Loomis.

Anonymity will be protected by removing all identifying information from the transcripts and from published or reported findings.

Please see risks section for concerns regarding confidentiality and anonymity.

COMPENSATION

There will be no compensation for participation.

CONTACT

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, (or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study) you may contact the primary investigator, Lisa Armstrong, at arms9120@wlu.ca or Dr. Colleen Loomis at cloomis@wlu.ca and by phone at 519-884-0710 ext 2858. This project has been reviewed and approved by the University Research Ethics Board. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Dr. Robert Basso, Chair, University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, (519) 884-1970, extension 5225 or rbasso@wlu.ca.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary, you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study, every attempt will be made to remove your data from the study, and have it destroyed. You have the right to omit any question(s)/procedure(s) you choose.

Initials: _____

FEEDBACK AND PUBLICATION

Results from this study will be used for a maters thesis report and a brief Executive Summary for dissemination to community members and organizations. The results may also be submitted to peer-reviewed journals for publication. The results of the research will be available by March 31, 2011.

CONSENT

I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

I agree to participate in the interview for this research.

Yes _____ No _____

I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Yes _____ No _____

I give permission to be contacted for a follow up meeting.

Yes _____ No _____

Preferred contact information _____

I understand and agree that quotes of things that I say may appear in published reports, but only in an anonymous form, so that I cannot be identified as the source of these quotes.

Yes _____ No _____

Participant's signature _____

Date _____

Researcher's signature _____

Date _____

*Informed Consent Letter For Youth Participants*WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY
INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENTUnderstanding Engagement with Youth who are Gang-Involved A Case Study
Lisa Armstrong
Advisor Dr Colleen Loomis**WHAT THE RESEARCH IS ABOUT:**

My name is Lisa Armstrong and I am a Master's Student at Wilfrid Laurier University. For my final thesis project, I am doing interviews with everyone who is involved with running the Waterloo Region Street Gang Prevention Project. Since you have been coming to Youth Advisory Committee meetings and helping guide this project I want your opinion as well. My supervisor for this project is Dr. Colleen Loomis from Wilfrid Laurier University.

My goal is to understand what you think of the Youth Advisory Committee (YAC). I will be asking all of the youth who come to the YAC meetings to meet with me and a co-researcher, Esperanza or Brandon, but it's up to each person to decide if they want to participate. I will also be asking the adults what they think of the YAC and the advice that the YAC has given. To participate in this interview, you must be 16 years of age or older.

Once I have interviewed everyone, I will summarize everyone's ideas and suggestions. At this time I will invite you to see what I've summarized to make sure that it is truthful. You'll be invited for a 30-minute, one-on-one meeting with me to see the summary and give me any last-minute advice. This additional meeting is voluntary and you are under **no obligation** to come.

The interviews will happen with me (Lisa) at a location of your choice. The interviews will last about 1 hour. I would like to audio record the interviews so I can refer to exactly what was said in the interview **but if you are uncomfortable with that let me know and I will not use a recorder.**

Your participation is completely voluntary and you may decide to leave the interview at any time. There will be no hard feelings or punishment of any kind. Choosing not to participate will have **no impact of any kind.**

Initials: _____

WHO SEES THE RESEARCH?

The information you share will be accessible to me, a research assistant named Danielle Arena and Dr Colleen Loomis of Wilfrid Laurier. Danielle Arena will be transcribing the interviews and will have no way of identifying any of the participants. As my supervisor Dr Loomis can see the interviews but she is there only to help me with challenges I have along the way with the paper. She will not be using the interviews in any way. To protect your confidentiality, all of the answers you provide will be stored at the university in a locked cabinet. If the information is electronic, it will be password protected on my computer and an external hard drive.

I will be doing the following things to make sure that Colleen Loomis, Danielle and I are the only people to see the information for this study. I will be keeping all paper copies of information (consent forms, printed data) in a locked filing cabinet in Colleen Loomis' locked office at Wilfrid Laurier University, and keeping all electronic data (digital interviews, transcripts, analysis etc) in password protected files on an external hard drive. Note the interviews will be deleted from the audio digital recorders once they have been transferred to the computer where they will be password protected like the rest of the electronic data. Danielle Arena will transcribe the data. All of the data will be destroyed by April 30, 2018 by Colleen Loomis.

When the project is complete I will be giving a copy of the final paper to Wilfrid Laurier University (it will be about 150 pages long). I will also create a summary of the paper for anyone who wants it. If you would like to see the long or short version just let me know.

I may publish this paper in an academic journal or present this research at a conference.

POSSIBLE RISKS: In all research studies there is a possibility of risk. I believe the risk is very low in this study. I do not believe that you will experience any major risks to your well-being by participating. You might experience some discomfort if a question reminds you of a negative experience you may have had, and you may find yourself becoming upset recalling such experiences. If you get upset because of these experiences please contact the Youth Help Line at (519) 745-9909. These feelings are normal and should be temporary.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS: The benefits of this research is that you will be able to influence how future members of the YAC experience and influence the Waterloo Region Street Gang Prevention Project.

COMPENSATION: For participating in this study you will receive a \$15 gift card for Shoppers Drug Mart. If you decide you do not want to participate at any time you will still receive the \$15 gift card. There are no consequences for not participating.

FEEDBACK: If you would like to know the results of this project, they will be available by March 31, 2011 and I can either email them to you or they will be available at ROOF, John Howard, Lutherwood and St. Mary's.

Initials: _____

CONSENT:

1) PLEASE PRINT YOUR NAME BELOW IF YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN ALL FOUR YAC STAGES:

I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study._

Name: _____

Date: _____

Remember, your answers to questions or what you say in any discussion will be kept confidential I may use an interesting statement you made in my research but will not put your name with it Is this ok?

2) Please sign here if it is ok that I may use a statement you said word-for-word, but will not put your name with it:

3) Please sign here if it is ok that I audio record our interview.

4) Please sign here if it is ok that I contact you for the follow up session

Preferred contact information _____

This study has been approved by Wilfrid Laurier University Research Ethics Board If you have any questions or concerns at any time please email or call any of the following people

Lisa at arms9120@wlu.ca

Dr Colleen Loomis, Lisa's thesis supervisor,

(519)884-0710, ext 2858

cloomis@wlu.ca

Dr Robert Basso, Chair, University Research Ethics Board

(519)884-0710, ext 5225 rbasso@wlu.ca

Appendix H

Example of findings check

Hi _____

Happy new year! I hope you're doing well. I finally have some news about my thesis to share with you. Last summer you participated in an interview with me about youth engagement. I'm in the process of finalizing my findings section and I'd like your feedback. Attached you'll find the outline of this section of my thesis with all quotes except for yours removed (each participant is receiving a similar document). This is an opportunity to let me know

a) what you think of the findings in general

b) if you're comfortable with the quotes I've selected

- please keep in mind that this is from a draft of my findings and the quotes I've included are likely to be the ones in my final draft but there is a chance I will choose more or less of your quotes. IF YOU WOULD LIKE ME TO CHECK WITH YOU AGAIN IF ANYTHING CHANGES PLEASE LET ME KNOW

If you would like to talk about either of the above points or something else entirely (but related to my thesis) please email me! And if you're comfortable with the current format I would like if you could email me as well for confirmation. Please let me know as soon as possible but no later than DATE

Lisa

Meaning of youth engagement

The goal of the first research question was to understand what youth engagement meant to each of the participants. Discovering where the meanings converge and diverge will illuminate

the meaning of youth engagement in the context of this project. Participants were asked what youth engagement means to them and what role they think youth should have in the context of the project. The responses described engagement as a *process* that is centred in relationship building or finding genuine connections with youth (as opposed to pretending to have something in common or “putting on a front”)

Relationship building

trust

listening

Past experiences

reciprocation

individualization

Structures that support YE

“Youth engagement just really means connecting with youth on some level to me, I don’t think it’s about like engaging them to do something in particular, it’s just uh finding that common ground between yourself and another person, I think ultimately is just about finding that connection and um allowing them to decide for themselves whether they want to be involved in whatever you have to offer and helping them to explore whether it be a benefit to them, I think they really have to make that decision on their own. So, it’s not about bribing or coaxing or you know what I mean, I think it has to be done really honestly”CTT1

Advising/sharing opinions

Acting as an “expert” and “providing feedback” was something many participants talked about when defining youth engagement

Few participants saw this as youths ONLY role

Choice

“Allowing them to decide for themselves whether they want to be involved in whatever you have to offer and helping them to explore whether it be a benefit to them, I think they really have to make that decision on their own. So, it’s not about bribing or coaxing or you know what I mean” CTT1

Power sharing

inherent power imbalance

shift in that distribution

The youth also talked about implications of power sharing on youths’ personal well-being

Youth advisory committees were brought up as a means of institutionalizing power sharing and youth engagement

Mentoring

Recommendations and hopes for future youth engagement

“The YAC is really an advisory committee on the group, then the participants can make their own advisory committee, maybe we should think of the, **the group** (emphasis) as the YAC right, rather than as a separate, external kind of advisory body, maybe, we need to think about addressing our participants as youth advisors on the program. I think that would make more sense” CTT1

“Ideally you’d have youth involved who really want to be there and are interested in having an impact on the program or on some activity in the community, or in learning how to be involved in a committee and if you want have that experience, you wouldn’t otherwise have the opportunity, that would be really exciting you know, you could have youth who, really didn’t have any of the skills to sit around a meeting and you know follow Roger’s rules or whatever,

and they could really learn, I would love them to be able to learn from that, I mean one thing for them to learn from that, [is] for them to learn how to be better advocates for themselves And how to work collaboratively and understand how systems work and how to have some influence, so I guess, a group of youth who really wanted to be there, and an opportunity for them to learn how to be better advocates for themselves and to have an impact on things that are going on in the community that they're interested in CTT1

Practicalities

Valuing youth input

“ I would love to see this project move forward with the youth as the experts, because I don't think that we know enough to pretend that we are the experts, like I would really love to see this move forward with the participants as like co-researchers basically, and I was chatting um Anita about that, that we don't have anything, we don't have anything to attract them to it in terms of money, um and we're totally dependent on them to make this successful, so I would, I, my approach, I'm thinking and we haven't discussed this as a team, would be really to be honest about that, like, you guys are the experts, we're trying to develop this program, we're not going to be successful if we can't get your help and your input so, how can, you know what can we give to you, what can we give to you that you would be interested in that would make it worth while for you to participate and help us and especially for that first group of, of youth to say like, ok we would like to some groups, what do you think would be useful, CTT1

Another participant mentioned that by allowing youth to have the expert role, to have that control within the project would be a way of showing the youth that their opinion is valued- it's valued because we listen to it, and may use it