

The cost of providing universal youth mental health services is estimated to be \$200 million, compared with Ontario's current expenditure of \$163 billion on youth incarceration.



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## The Roots of Youth Violence

### Key findings from the 2008 Provincial Commission<sup>1</sup>

**There is an underlying trend to increased youth violence**, which has been masked by the stability of overall crime figures. The report found evidence of:

- increasing concentration of violent crime among younger people;
- increasing frequency of use of guns and knives to settle disputes;
- increasingly public nature of extreme violence;
- growth in prevalence of guns and knives.

**Youth growing up in poverty are at higher risk for becoming involved in violent activities**, particularly when poverty is concentrated within defined geographic areas, and where services and facilities are lacking in those areas for youth.

In 2005, the City of Toronto and United Way identified **13 priority neighbourhoods where poverty is particularly concentrated and there were very few community services**. These neighbourhoods, mostly in the former suburbs, share a common profile:

- high numbers of families living in relative poverty; high numbers of racialized groups and newcomer Canadians
- high numbers of families living in subsidized housing
- high numbers of youth and sole parent families
- an acute lack of nearby community and social services

Within these neighbourhoods, there are some **isolated pockets of extreme poverty and social exclusion that have gained notoriety for violence and criminal gang activity**.

In 2002, a survey of gang-involved youth found them to be **predominantly male (82%), born in Canada (70%), grown up in public housing and from a single parent household**. Members were from a variety of cultural backgrounds with the most common identifying as Black or white. Most street gangs identify with a particular geographic area (territory or turf) and members are generally under the age of 28.

**Youth who are most vulnerable to becoming involved with serious violence include those who:**

- have a deep sense of alienation and low self esteem
- have little empathy for others and suffer from impulsivity
- believe that they are oppressed, held down, unfairly treated and neither belong to nor have a stake in the broader society
- believe that they have no way to be heard through other channels
- have no sense of hope



Youth Participant, PhotoVoice Project, North West Scarborough Youth Centre

## Get Involved!

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**Racism is a critical factor as it creates limits in the ability of racialized groups to fully participate in society**, with particular impact among Aboriginal people and African Canadians. The experience of racism can produce a diminished sense of self-worth and lack of control over one's future, particularly when combined with poverty.

## Key Recommendations

- Focus on "place-based" strategies where poverty is highly concentrated and the roots of violence are deeply entrenched** – use an Index of Relative Disadvantage that allows comparison between very small geographic units of 400 -700 people to precisely assess where the greatest needs lie. Establish floor targets that set a minimum acceptable level of attainment, so that average benchmarks are not achieved by having the best-off counteract those who make no improvement at all.
- Build Neighbourhood Strategic Partnerships** to develop local plans that involve governments, communities and community-serving agencies to improve conditions through policy making and collective program planning delivery
- Establish community hubs in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods**, anchored in school facilities wherever possible, where agencies can provide a network of services, including mental health
- Invest in universal access to children and youth mental health services**, and issue that affects many aspects of the roots: the stability of families and the ability of parents to work and parent, how youth develop with their peers, how they do in school, how they interact with the justice system and their life chances overall
- Assist local residents to take ownership of their community**, form stronger networks of mutual support and involvement and ultimately play a role in its governance.

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1 The **Review of the Roots of Youth Violence Commission** was established in 2007 to identify and analyze underlying causes contributing to youth violence. The Commission published a comprehensive report in November 2008 with recommendations to the Ontario government for building safer, stronger communities.

**Full text is available at <http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/topics/youthandthelaw/roots/index.aspx/english/reports/volume1.pdf>**