

THE COMMUNITY SOLUTION



The Community Solution to Gang Violence (CSGV) was formed in 2003 when Native Counselling Services of Alberta met with the Edmonton Police Service and proposed a partnership between the two organizations. The city was experiencing an increase in gang activity and gang-related deaths, and the community was beginning to demand that something be done. Since that time, the initiative has grown significantly, and now more than forty different organizations work together to address the issue of gang violence.

TO GANG VIOLENCE



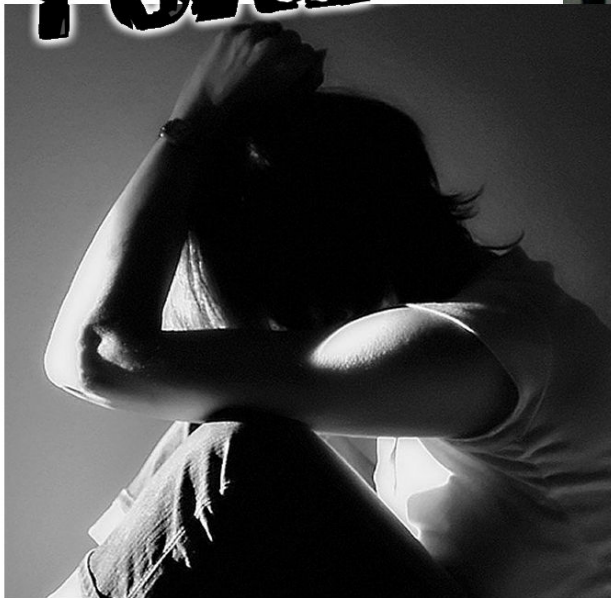
Community Drug Alert recently met with Karen Erickson, the project Manager for CSGV. She tells us that "Our main focus is to engage the community to work together to prevent youth involvement in gangs. No one organization can address the issue alone. The central message of the CSGV is that everyone - young people, parents, families, neighbours, service providers, businesses, funding organizations and government, have a role to play in preventing youth involvement in gangs. We work to give youths a sense of connectedness to the community, and we try to foster supportive and reliable relationships that give them a sense of hope for the future."

What is it about gang activity that appeals to kids. Essentially, they are looking for something that they aren't getting in their lives. There are typically three factors that draw kids into gangs. First off, they are looking for a sense of belonging. Secondly, they are looking for recognition and respect that comes from being part of a group. Lastly, they are looking to develop a sense of personal power, and, frankly, to make a living. If these needs have not been met through family, school or community sources, then they are going to be particularly vulnerable when gang recruiters step in to fill the void. Gangs actively recruit young people who feel disconnected, alienated and lost.



Most of these gangs are involved in dealing drugs, and they have a very hierarchical structure. At the top of the heap are the "food bosses" who might deal in kilos of cocaine. Then come the "crew bosses" who

POWER



deal in ounces of cocaine. At the bottom of the heap are the "dial-a-dopers" who deliver dime bags to individual clients. "This is the job kids typically get recruited for, and it's by far the most dangerous part," says Karen. "They are out on the street where they are exposed to arrest or to retaliation from other gangs who feel they are in the wrong territory." They are kept in by the lure of easy money and by the prospect of rising up the gang hierarchy as they get older. But they are much more likely to end up in prison, or dead from an overdose or a drug deal gone bad!

POSITIVE ACTIVITIES

People often ask why so many youths are drawn to a life of crime. Perhaps a better question is why are so many youths **not** drawn into criminal activity. Karen notes that “the vast majority of young people are engaged in healthy and productive lives. Their success offers a blueprint for the kids who are falling through the cracks. If youths are nurtured and given the opportunity to participate interactively in a positive way, then we can help them to realize there are other choices and other ways to belong. We have to look at how we interact with young people. Parents, community members, teachers, police - we all have to find ways to pull them towards positive activities.”

Edmonton's Human offers an example of an organization that allows youngsters to express themselves through art and drama. Activities like this allow youths to feel involved and meet with some success. The positive vibes they get from this involvement gives them a sense of power and influence over their own lives and lets them become passionate about something. Given the chance, kids will take a positive role model over a negative one any day!



BUILDING BRIDGES

A lot of stores located near schools will put up signs saying things like ‘*only two teenagers allowed in the store at one time.*’ How would the public respond if we had signs that said ‘*only two middle-aged women in the store at one time*’ or ‘*only two senior citizens in the store at one time?*’ They would feel outraged and would never stand for this kind of discrimination. But somehow it’s alright to treat youths this way. Karen feels that “while some stores may be impacted by shoplifting, it’s not appropriate to paint all youth with the same brush.”

There has been a lot of media emphasis lately on the issue of youth violence. This serves to raise the fear of youth in general. Karen notes that “when people see teens on the street, they will often cross to the other side. This further increases their sense of separation and disconnectedness. There is a lot of talk about how young people need to change, but not much talk about changing the way **we** interact with youth.”

A town in BC took some very innovative steps to overcome this sense of disconnectedness. On Monday mornings, seniors stop off at the local high school to meet and greet the students. The students, in turn, decided to return the gesture by teaching seniors how to operate their computers. This kind of interaction really helps to build bridges and joins both groups into learning more about the other.



CREATING DIALOGUE

You don't encourage change by simply lecturing at kids. “We need to create a dialogue with youth,” says Karen. “We express our concerns, and let them know the solutions we have in mind. But it can't stop there. That's when we need to talk to them about their own ideas about the type of change that needs to be created. We need to approach them as resources, as part of the solution and not part of the problem. We can do this by designing programs and services that focus on their strengths, rather than just pointing out their problems and deficits.”

What's a good age to start talking to kids about drugs: late teens, early teens? Frankly, it needs to start a lot earlier than that. Karen points out that “the one thing we hear time and time again from kids is how young they were when they were first encouraged to experiment with drugs, or get involved in gang activity. Kids in grade five or grade six are having to make choices about drugs and sexual activities, and it's hard to cope

with this kind of peer pressure if they don't have experience making choices. It's easy to fall into a trap if you have spent your whole life having other people tell you what you should do."

How can we prepare youths for the pressures they are going to face? Kids have to learn how to make decisions by making them! Youngsters need to make choices and understand the consequences of their choices, and these choices need to start as soon as they are old enough to walk and talk. Karen points out that "it may be something as simple as *'what pyjamas do you want to wear tonight?'* or *'what kind of vegetables do you want for dinner?'* Obviously things like bedtime and attending school are not negotiable - but letting them make choices in the areas that **are** negotiable really helps to build up their self-confidence and self-respect. The more empowered and confident kids feel, the more they are able to resist being drawn into negative activities."



THE PRESSURE IS OVERPOWERING,
THE PRESSURE TO IMPRESS,
THE PRESSURE TO STAY IN WITH THE CROWD,
THE PRESSURE TO BE SOMETHING THAT IS NOT ME.

by: 98-keys-99-rooms



STRAIGHT TALK

Gang members are 40 times more likely to die violently than other Canadians. But hearing these kinds of statistics from teachers or police officers doesn't carry a lot of impact for kids. That's why it's important for young people who have actually been caught up in this lifestyle to have the chance to visit schools and youth centres to give kids a straight talk about the reality of gang life. It's not about assigning shame and blame to people - it's about straight facts and straight talk.

Karen feels that “information like this is best presented by former gang members - by young people who have actually been there. They can show the slippery slope that draws youths into gangs, and how kids can deal with a gang’s recruitment tactics. Nobody wakes up in the morning and decides to join a gang on the spur of the moment. They are gradually drawn into the lifestyle. Ultimately, knowledge is power. If you know beforehand how gangs will attempt

to manipulate and intimidate you, then you also know how to protect yourself.”

Presentations like this can teach kids how to resist peer pressure, and how to differentiate between real friends and people who are just trying to use them. They might learn that if they want to keep away from drugs and gangs, they may have to avoid ‘friends’ who are already caught up in this kind of activity.

*My garden of flowers is also my garden of thoughts and dreams
The thoughts grow as freely as the flowers and the dreams are as beautiful*

Abram L Urban



when the moon chase away the sun
and cause my day to run
i will not fear the darkest night
for i know upon the other side is light
lyrics by ben harper

Tell me and I'll forget;
Show me and I may remember;
Involve me and I'll understand.
Chinese Proverb

For more information about what you can do to be part of the solution, contact:

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