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Stakeholder perspectives on risk and  
protective factors**

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# **Immigrant youth and crime: Stakeholder perspectives on risk and protective factors**

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The ease with which immigrant youth and their families integrate into Canadian society has a strong impact on their futures; those who become marginalised during this process risk becoming alienated and, in some cases, may become involved with the criminal justice system. Interviews were conducted with 12 stakeholders who frequently come into contact with immigrant and refugee youth involved in criminal and/or gang activity. Based on the family, individual, peer, school, and community risk and protective factors reported to have an influence on immigrant and refugee youth, recommendations are made for bridging gaps in programming and policy initiatives to support at-risk youth.

Keywords: Immigrant youth, refugee youth, at-risk youth, crime

Canada is a destination for immigrant families from all over the world. Immigrant youth come to Canada with enormous potential to make a significant, positive contribution to the future of their adopted country. In many cases, this potential is realised; in others, it is sadly not. This article reports on the risk and protective factors that are perceived by key stakeholders to influence immigrant youths who eventually become involved in crime, gangs, and violence in Edmonton, Canada. The research project developed from the first author's work with immigrant and refugee families and the second author's research on the criminalization of vulnerable populations.

## Immigrants and crime

Research focusing on the intersections of race, ethnicity, immigration, and crime is politically sensitive, highly controversial, and marginalised in academia (Barnes, 2002). Studies exploring the relationships among these concepts suggest that racial and ethnic minorities, especially visible minorities and those with English or French language difficulties, are disproportionately represented in the Canadian criminal justice system (Heller, 1995; Jiwani, 2002; Roberts, 2002). Furthermore, the public perceives visible minorities and immigrants to be involved in much of the crime committed in Canada, in part due to media representations of racial minorities and crime (Roberts, 2002). However, due to the paucity of research on the relationships between race, ethnicity, immigration, and crime in Canada, little is known about the rate of crime committed by members of racial and ethnic minority groups. Unlike the United States, Canada does not release to the public crime statistics related to race and ethnicity, apart from those of Aboriginal Canadians and federal prison populations; consequently, there has been little research conducted in this area within the Canadian context. Although crime statistics are not readily available, data from the 2002 Canadian Police Survey on Youth Gangs suggest that

a majority of gang members (some 82 percent) are from the so-called visible minorities - African-Canadian, Asian, Hispanic, East Indian and the like. We can assume that many of these youth are first- or second-generation Canadians, the offspring of parents who emigrated to Canada over the past couple of decades. (Chettleburgh, 2005, pp. 29-30)

The cost of crime to society is significant, and some scholars argue that investment in at-risk youth is more cost-effective than other responses, such as punishment or increased funding for police and the justice system (Cohen, 1998). Data compiled by the Rand Corporation in the United States reveal that the cost of incarceration is seven times greater than the promotion of school completion and five times greater than parent training (Waller, 2006). In Canada, the cost to incarcerate a youth for one year is approximately \$100,000 (Clapham, 2008). Despite the current trend toward 'get tough' crime control policies in Canada, Waller argues that key stakeholders (e.g., education, housing, social services, recreation, business, police, justice, neighbourhoods) should focus on addressing the root causes of crime in their communities.

## Theoretical background

Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs provides an intuitively appealing framework for examining the settlement adjustments facing immigrant families (Adler, 1977; Nguyen, 1987). According to Maslow's theory, before individuals can realise their dreams and capabilities, they must first satisfy four sets of needs. The first two sets relate to survival: physiological needs – the *basic* necessities, such as food, water, and sleep; and *safety* needs – safe shelter, stability, and protection from danger. When immigrants

and refugees first arrive in Canada, much of their energy is spent satisfying these survival needs. Social needs must also be met: *belonging* needs –for friends and family to provide love, and the sense of affiliation with a group or community; and *esteem* needs – based on respect and appreciation from self and others for individuals' competence and accomplishments. In addition to satisfying these needs, which are common to all, immigrant and refugee youth must develop linguistic and cultural competence.

A wide range of these basic and social needs are reflected in studies of immigrant and refugee youth in other cities of Canada. A review of the literature points to multiple variables that affect their adaptation and integration, for example, family support and stability, socio-economic status, physical and mental health, age of arrival, language proficiency, interpersonal skills, social networks, personal resilience, employment opportunities, and housing and neighbourhood, among others (e.g., Anisef & Kilbride, 2003; Carter, Polevnychok, Friesen, & Osborne, 2008; Enns, 2008; Kilbride & Anisef, 2001; MacKay & Tavares, 2005; Murdie, 2008; Ngo & Schleifer, 2005; Taylor, 2005).

One of the most critical factors in a successful transition to Canadian society is education (Anisef & Kilbride, 2003). Upon arrival in Alberta, an increasing number of refugee youth enter school with gaps in their formal education, and the majority of teachers in the province have little or no training in how to adapt curriculum content to accommodate these learners (Alberta Education, 2006). Young newcomers who arrive without English may take only two to three years to acquire basic interpersonal communication skills; however, the cognitive academic language proficiency that is necessary for successful content-based learning takes from five to seven years to develop (Cummins, 2000). ESL children who are older upon arrival face greater linguistic and academic challenges; refugee youth with interrupted schooling and lack of formal education and/or literacy skills in their first language are further disadvantaged. Studies of school drop-out rates of immigrant youth have indicated that 46 to 74% of immigrant youth whose native language is not English fail to complete high school (Derwing, Decorby, Ichikawa, & Jamieson, 1999; Watt & Roessingh, 1994, 2001). The options available to these youth are few, as they have limited linguistic proficiency, intercultural competence, and employment skills. The academic challenges that immigrant children face are often exacerbated by individual, family, peer, and community factors that may leave newcomer youth vulnerable to victimization or recruitment to engage in illegal activities. The subsequent loss of social capital to Canadian society is significant and many of these marginalised youth risk becoming involved in crime, violence, and gang activity (Gordon, 2000; Wortley, 2003; Wortley & Tanner, 2007).

Wortley (2003) has proposed that researchers exploring the intersections of race, ethnicity, immigration, and crime consider four theoretical frameworks to explain these relationships: (1) the *importation model*, which suggests that individuals immigrate to Canada with the intent to commit crime; (2) the *cultural conflict model*, which suggests that newcomers engage in cultural or religious customs and practices that contravene

the Criminal Code of Canada; (3) the *strain/frustration* model, which suggests that some immigrants engage in criminal activity, when faced with underemployment, racism, and poverty, to improve their economic circumstances; and (4) the *bias model*, which holds that some racial-ethnic groups come into disproportionate contact with the justice system because of systemic discrimination and bias on the part of criminal justice professionals. The current study is grounded in the strain/frustration model.

This research addresses the circumstances of disenfranchised immigrant youth who have come into conflict with the law in Edmonton and focuses on factors perceived by key stakeholders to exert an influence on at-risk immigrant youth (between the ages of 12 and 25), particularly on those who eventually become involved in criminal and gang-related activity. The research questions in this study were as follows:

- (1) What crimes are committed by immigrant youth who come into conflict with the justice system?
- (2) Which factors exert a negative influence on at-risk immigrant youth and on those who eventually become involved in crime, gangs, and/or violence?
- (3) Which factors exert a positive influence on young immigrant newcomers?

## **Method**

### *Participants*

Interviews were conducted by the first author with 12 stakeholders in the community who have come into contact with immigrant youth who are involved or at risk of becoming involved with the criminal justice system. Participants worked directly with immigrant youth, both in the community and in the justice system, and included three representatives from social service agencies, four from various community groups, and five from within the criminal justice and forensic mental health systems. They had an average of 9.6 years' experience (Range: 3-16 y, Mean = 10.5 y) working with youth in their current positions; six of the interviewees were themselves immigrants to Canada.

### *Instrument*

A semi-structured interview guide consisting of 25 questions was developed by the researchers. The questions focused on the participants' roles and involvement with immigrant youth; the type of criminal activities committed by the youth with whom they had come into contact; and the risk and protective factors that were perceived to influence immigrant youth and those who eventually become involved in crime, gangs, and violence.

### *Procedures*

Potential participants were identified using chain referral sampling, and representatives were drawn from both within and outside the criminal justice system, to ensure a more balanced perspective. Initial informants were identified by community partners and through involvement in community initiatives addressing youth and criminal justice

issues in Edmonton. Interviews were conducted in the office of the stakeholder or of the researcher, were audio-taped, with the permission of the interviewees, and lasted approximately one to one and a half hours. The digital recordings were transcribed, then analysed using qualitative content analysis procedures, which involved the organization and categorization of interview data, and the identification of common themes.

## Results

### *Criminal activities*

Several patterns emerged in relation to the type, frequency, and severity of criminal activities committed by immigrant youth, as well as their gender and the age at which they were involved in crime. Participants reported that youth were recruited into gangs and involved in illegal activity at ages as low as 10 years, but the majority of criminal activity was estimated to begin around the ages of 13 to 15 and to drop off at about 18 to 20 years when youth transition into adulthood. The most common criminal activities reported (from most to least common) were drug dealing, property crimes, assault, sexual assault, and homicide. Boys were perceived to be more involved in crime - and in more serious crime - than girls at all ages. The participants indicated that all immigrant and refugee groups have some youth who commit crimes, but that the majority of immigrant and refugee youth are not involved in illegal activity; in other words, immigrant and refugee youth were not considered to be in conflict with the law to a greater extent than their Canadian peers. However, refugee youth were perceived to be particularly vulnerable to recruitment by gangs.

### *Risk factors*

The factors that were found to exert a negative influence on immigrant youth were categorised as family, individual, peer, school, and community risk factors.

#### *Family risk factors*

The participants emphasised that adaptation to a new life in Canada can be very stressful. Parents may be so consumed with their own efforts to cope that they don't have the capacity to deal with their children's problems. They may suffer from mental health issues (e.g., PTSD, depression), addiction (e.g., alcohol, drugs, gambling), domestic violence, and/or a sense of powerlessness, hopelessness, and alienation. Disillusionment is not uncommon:

The family... thinks that everything is going to be golden when they get here. They find out quickly that it's not golden, it's rusted.... They are coming into a society that is totally full of money. They want everything. They expect that they should have everything somehow by magic.

Family poverty is also an issue for many newcomers. Some parents may be unemployed; others often hold multiple entry-level jobs in order to provide for their families. Many parents lack marketable skills, recognised foreign credentials, and/or



competence in English, and they live in poverty because of underemployment. As a result, youth may struggle to have their basic needs met, leaving them with poor perceptions of both themselves and their parents: "...[Y]ou know, a lot of [kids] see their family as these losers who work as janitors, taxi drivers." Government- and privately-sponsored refugees face further financial burdens as they struggle to repay the transportation loans made to them when they came to Canada (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2008).

When parents are unable to provide adequately for their children, youth may be expected to supplement the family income. This is difficult for newcomer youth, particularly refugees, who may already be struggling to succeed in school, both academically and socially. Some, faced with this difficult challenge, may be tempted to become involved in more lucrative, illegal activity:

...if there is an expectation or a value within your culture that you're supposed to contribute to the family and the well-being of the family and you see your parents struggling to work, you don't have the right clothes, you're just barely getting by, then when somebody approaches you and offers you \$200 to run this little bag of dope across town, that can be a big incentive... especially when other doors are closed for you.

In some cases, when the parents of immigrant youth are struggling financially, they may even passively support their children's involvement in criminal activity that will help the whole family to get through the next month. One youth worker explained:

...[E]ight out of every 10 kids... that we get out of a gang went in for survival. And it was basic. They didn't have appropriate accommodation. They didn't have food, they didn't have clothes. Their parents couldn't pay the bills. And their parents said 'Okay, just do it part-time'. Sometimes parents okay it because they know they can't [pay their bills] at the end of the month from work.

But this part-time involvement in criminal activity can lead to a career of crime, as illegitimate sources of income become the youth's primary or only source of income.

Other forms of family support for youth may be significantly reduced after arrival in Canada. In some cases, youth may not have any immediate family here at all; they might have an aunt or uncle or pre-existing friends, but these individuals may be unable to provide the guidance that they need. Even those children who do live with their parents may spend very little time with them because their parents are working and/or studying, "so, the kids are raising themselves with the help of the TV". Lack of after-school supervision increases the risk that youth will become involved in crime, gangs, and/or violence:

...we see these drug recruiters or gang recruiters feasting [from] three o'clock to five o'clock... between when the kids exit school and [when] mom and dad get



home for supper.... [The recruiters] come with their flashy cars, taking them out for supper, showing their wads of cash, and, to a young guy, it looks very attractive. The involvement of one relative in criminal or gang activity can easily increase the vulnerability of other members of the family:

When one from the family gets into that sort of crime, the family is more at risk because then the other younger brothers and sisters are likely to follow if the parents don't work hard on them.... We've seen families of five or six losing all of these kids into the street.

As youth acculturate and learn English more quickly, the intergenerational gap widens: "they're often sort of torn in terms of their identity, in terms of where they belong." When youth are caught between cultures with conflicting value systems, the older generation may not know how best to respond. Parents may be afraid of disciplining their children for fear of intervention by social services - "Back home, it's the whole village that looks after a child; here, the neighbour calls the police." In other families, parents or older children may use corporal punishment as a form of discipline. Family breakdown is not uncommon, as shifting roles and other stresses result in growing tension and/or violence.

So you've got a traditional Muslim family... and lo and behold, their daughter - off goes the hijab, on comes the Mac make-up, in comes the conflict -- all of a sudden the family shuns the daughter, and the daughter goes and lives on street corners.

In contrast to their expectations, "...families are struggling with trying to survive... they absolutely lose the power to parent their kids in the way that they would have parented them elsewhere, including refugee camps". Furthermore, those who lack language skills and/or an understanding of Canadian educational and judicial systems are unable to advocate for their children when the latter encounter difficulties.

#### *Individual risk factors*

Pre-migration violence and trauma were reported to be predisposing risk factors for youth involvement in violent and criminal activity in Canada: many youth from refugee camps have witnessed or experienced violence (e.g., rape, murder, torture) and suffer from depression, nightmares, flashbacks, and/or disturbed sleep patterns. Former child soldiers have a particularly difficult time recovering from their experiences. The psychological effects of violence and trauma can also affect other aspects of youth's lives: "People who come from war-torn zones and have post-traumatic stress or anxiety – all their symptoms basically prevent them from learning and adapting." Some immigrant youth also struggle to deal with addiction. Physical health issues are a problem for some youth trying to gain acceptance from peers and entry into social groups.

Additional risk factors that were perceived to have a negative effect on immigrant youth include poor decision-making and interpersonal skills, learning disabilities, risky

behaviours, the use of violence to solve problems, distrust of authorities, lack of personal and cultural identity, and a sense of powerlessness and hopelessness. But culturally sensitive counselling services remain woefully inadequate for these youth as well as for those with personality, attachment, and other disorders; waiting lists are long, and some treatment is accessible only after youth have come into conflict with the law and been sentenced for serious crimes.

#### *Peer risk factors*

Interviewees stated that youth who have difficulty developing social networks, especially outside their own ethnic group, frequently face isolation, exclusion, inter-ethnic conflict, discrimination, and victimisation: "[T]hey're constantly being picked on for no apparent reason." If they spend a lot of time on their own, they can more easily become affiliated with other groups of disenfranchised youth. Association with antisocial peers, however, can lead to violent altercations and crime (e.g., assaults, stabbings, shootings, drug use).

The pressure to conform in order to gain acceptance from peers is great and may also increase vulnerability to involvement in crime. When they compare their economic circumstances with those of more affluent peers, many youth have difficulty distinguishing between wants and needs. Looking a particular way or wearing the 'right' clothing is particularly important for peer acceptance:

You've got to have the outfit, you've got to have the shoes, no matter what you do; otherwise, you're going to be sitting way over there, totally isolated and alienated, which is almost impossible for these young people to face.... That means that you have to make money... prostitution... part-time work... drug-dealing... other illegal activity... you have to fit in.

When conflict arises between peer and cultural practices, peers tend to have a greater influence on youth than parents, because youth spend the majority of their time with their peers at school and in the community.

#### *School risk factors*

Stakeholders in this study cited a number of risk factors in schools, which themselves are under enormous pressure to cope with newcomers; one participant stated: "Education – I think that's where we're failing right from the onset." Problems were noted with the integration of students into mainstream classes, particularly of youth with limited or interrupted formal education, who find it hard to adapt to sitting still in school for six hours a day, struggle to keep up with their Canadian peers, and suffer from feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem if they fail to do so. Participants in the study criticised low teacher-student ratios and the lack of resources and appropriate programming for ESL youth. They noted that many staff have low expectations of newcomers and little or no understanding of the educational, cultural, and family backgrounds that might help them to understand these students. They may be unaware that many parents are unable to assist their children with homework because of their

own limited English language proficiency and lack of familiarity with the education system, and that they may be unable to supervise homework or attend parent-teacher meetings because of work, rather than disinterest in their children's progress. Teachers may also not be aware that some youth work night shifts, resulting in lateness, inattention in class, or uncompleted assignments, and that others may not have access to basic needs (food for lunch, clean clothes, etc.) because of economic hardship. Youth who work part- or full-time in addition to attending school were perceived by stakeholders to make slower academic progress and thus to be at higher risk of dropping out.

In addition to academic, cultural, and linguistic barriers, participants perceived bullying to be a problem for immigrant and refugee youth in many schools, particularly verbal bullying, name-calling, and teasing. Survival skills that some youth developed in refugee camps are neither understood nor tolerated in educational or other community settings. However, engaging in physical violence in response to bullying in schools with zero tolerance policies may result in numerous suspensions and expulsions for immigrant and refugees. Participants stated that these processes and protocols are not well understood by either youth or their parents. They further exclude youth from the school system, leaving them isolated, with no viable alternatives; interviewees stated that teachers in alternative schools are ill prepared to work with ESL students. Once outside the school system, with inadequate education and literacy skills, they become part of an underclass with few employment skills and may end up on the streets. Most do not have the financial means to access further education after the age of 20.

### *Community risk factors*

In addition to the family-related, individual, peer-related, and school-related difficulties experienced by immigrant and refugee youth, interviewees identified a number of community risk factors. For example, within ethno-cultural communities that are not well established in Canada, youth were reported to have access to few role models (especially male and career role models), few leadership roles, and limited community support networks:

It needs to be their own community of people who start to put the support in place and start to recognise that they need to be proactive, but they are not organised enough. They don't have the resources yet because so many of them are struggling to make their own way, working so many jobs, etc.

Many participants also cited a lack of safe and affordable housing as a major community risk factor for families:

[Newcomers] can't... afford to buy a house, let alone... rent a place. So you've got lots of families - sometimes three families - living in an apartment. And they have to do it illegally. They get caught and they are booted out, and they have to do it all over again... that's natural in [home country]. You have everybody stay with you and the whole cultural thing, but you never have enough money.

Deciding where to live can also be a difficult decision for newcomers:

Many of our families, because of their income, are accessing [city] housing... you are in between trying to live where you can afford versus... the neighbourhood where you want to raise your children.

With few options within their means, families may feel compelled to choose subsidised housing, which can create risks for their children:

... it puts them in a place where there is a lot of dysfunction in the community... for a youth to grow up in a neighbourhood where there is a lot of violence, a lot of chaos, a lot of drug dealing, a lot of trouble in general, where you have to watch your back – the dilemma is that in order to survive there, you have to do the same thing as everybody else is doing.

One participant described social housing complexes as "zones of decay for immigrant children". Another declared, "That's probably what leads into a lot of the crimes - living in subsidised housing."

Throughout the city, community leagues offer a variety of programs, but stakeholders considered many of them inappropriate for or inaccessible to immigrant and refugee youth: "There are a lot of community leagues that have wonderful programs but [they're] fee-based programs. You have to volunteer... there are a lot of barriers built in; also, there are no community centres that are multi-culturally friendly." Other interviewees noted that, despite good programs, activity leaders were not culturally or racially reflective of the population that they were trying to serve; this resulted in low immigrant/refugee participation rates. Overall, stakeholders reported a lack of viable opportunities for young people to engage in after-school programs, sports, culture, the arts, and other worthwhile recreational pursuits in their communities.

#### *Protective Factors*

Participants identified a number of factors that were thought to exert a positive influence on immigrant youth; these, too, were categorised as family, individual, peer, school, and community protective factors.

#### *Family protective factors*

Youth who received moral support from and spent time with parents and/or extended family were perceived to be less vulnerable than those who did not. Likewise, youth who lived in two-parent families or with parents who, because of their financial security, were able to be at home more regularly, were viewed as advantaged. Family-shared faith was also perceived to be an asset; as one participant explained, "Right after school... [e]verybody has to be at home. They have to pray together. So that... connects the family together, it's a big thing for the family survival. Because they stick together and do one thing together."

Another protective factor cited by participants was parents with an educational background who are able to understand the school system and are thus in a better position to provide support and advice to their children: "Even if they don't speak the language, they know about homework, they know that kids need to understand the whole system, that's a huge protective factor because... school is such a big part of the kids' lives."

#### *Individual protective factors*

A number of individual factors were reported to make youth less vulnerable to crime. Immigrant and refugee youth with a sense of cultural identity and belonging were seen to be less at risk than those without. Gender was reported to be a protective factor; females were less likely to be involved in crime, as were youth who had developed a sense of accomplishment and had respect for education. Some youth were considered less vulnerable to crime than others because of their individual strength and resilience:

What we are left with are the ones that have made it through the ten years in the refugee camp, the ones that have made it to immigration, come across the border, [who] are tigers and really have a sense of resiliency.

Others were perceived to have succeeded in Canada and to have avoided temptations to become involved in crime because of their superior decision-making skills:

I think we underestimate the power of choice; a lot of kids – even when they are being pounded on and have terrible nightmares, and have this disorder and that disorder and no stability in their lives – they are still able to make smart choices.

#### *Peer protective factors*

Several stakeholders stated that prosocial inter-cultural peer programs and relationships were protective factors: "It's the same positive peer relationships that all kids need - not just immigrant and refugee kids." One interviewee noted that having prosocial peers can provide healthy alternatives for youth with less desirable associates:

...even if they're involved in a very negative peer group, if they've had experience with a more positive peer group and they... still have friends in that peer group, they could easily move over, and they won't be totally stranded without friends if they were to shift...

#### *School protective factors*

Education was seen as extremely important for immigrant and refugee youth: "Not having [education] is what's creating the push in the other direction, and having it is what would save them." Specific school-based programs that were cited as especially helpful included English as a second language, life skills training, career planning, job search skills, resumé writing, computer training, and employment mentoring.

[Employment programs are] going to persuade a lot of immigrant students to do the right thing instead of walking out of grade 11 or 12 and then getting into drugs or prostitution. They'll know that there are certain ways of getting money out there, decent ways, and also that there are agencies out there that can help them.

The development of positive relationships with caring adults in the school setting, such as ESL or mainstream teachers, counsellors, and School Resource Officers, was also considered to be a protective factor. In some schools, members of ethno-cultural communities offer approved courses designed to help students develop identity and intercultural competence. Here, immigrant youth can begin to make decisions about various aspects of their home and adopted cultures:

...what's good about their own culture, what's not so good, what you like about the Canadian culture, and what's not so good about the Canadian culture that you don't want to adapt to; and then how to combine the best of both cultures. That helps them to get that self-identity piece.

Many schools provide opportunities for newcomer youth to contribute positively to their communities by becoming involved in social justice or other activities that develop their leadership skills and perceptions of self-efficacy. After-school homework clubs provide one-on-one help that is extremely important for many students; newcomer youth who become involved in music, dance, sport, and other such programs also benefit from the development of broader social support networks.

#### *Community protective factors*

Protective factors can also be provided through the activities of faith communities, cultural organisations, and other groups within the community (e.g., Big Brothers Big Sisters, Boys and Girls Clubs). Where parents are often absent, clusters of families can provide a sense of extended family and safe supervision for the children in their communities:

There is this collective service... if you know that one of the parents is going to be home today but that two are at work, then one can come around, supervise those in the family as long as they're in the same neighbourhood, or take them... swimming, or... to play some sports.... If such support is increased..., I believe it will reduce the number of youth falling into crime, just as a result of peer pressure or influence from others.

In some communities, mentors are available to maintain frequent contact with individual youth and help with homework or provide information on such topics as health, nutrition, managing on a reduced income, or communication with teachers or classmates. Mentors show youth "how to get through a day or through a week or through a month without having to panic". As one youth worker explained,



Some people say we babysit. We don't see it as babysitting. We see it as truly walking with them. We're not walking in front of them and they're not walking behind us. We're walking side by side.... To some people, this is a job... To us, it's life..... What they really need is a person - not a program - that has an understanding of that child or youth.... We're doing it on a basketball court - we're not doing it in a boardroom.

And in doing so, dedicated workers such as these are helping youth exit gangs, offering them opportunities for success, and keeping others from becoming involved with drugs and crime.

## **Discussion**

The findings in this qualitative, exploratory study corroborate those from research conducted in other Canadian cities (e.g., Anisef & Kilbride, 2003; MacKay & Tavares, 2005; Ngo & Schleifer, 2005; Taylor, 2005). The family, individual, peer, school, and community risk factors that were perceived to exert a negative influence on immigrant and refugee youth often compound others, leaving some youth with seemingly insurmountable challenges as they strive to adapt to Canadian society. According to key stakeholders, immigrant parents struggle to provide for and supervise their children, while pursuing educational and employment opportunities of their own, which may leave disadvantaged and unsupervised youth vulnerable to involvement in criminal activities and/or recruitment into gangs. The vulnerability of individual youth may be further exacerbated by pre-existing mental health issues and psychological damage resulting from discrimination, victimization, and bullying by peers at school. Unfortunately, teachers are often unaware of the challenges faced by immigrant and refugee students, and the education system itself is ill prepared to meet the complex needs of these students. Isolation and a lack of social support at school and in the wider community mean that immigrant and refugee youth may be left with few options, and antisocial peers involved in drugs, crime, and gangs may be perceived as attractive alternatives.

Although youth face a multitude of challenges upon arrival to Canada, stakeholders identified a number of factors that can protect these youth from becoming involved in crime and violence. Family and community supports, including mentors and role models, can have an enormous affirming influence on immigrant and refugee youth. Programs at school and in the community offer opportunities for the development of relationships with both trusted adults and prosocial peers; these may be invaluable to youth who are struggling to develop a sense of identity and belonging. Finally, and importantly, participants emphasised the role of individual resilience and the capacity of immigrant and refugee youth to succeed in the face of adversity.

The risk and protective factors above also relate to Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs. It is clear from the findings of this research that if immigrant and refugee youth's physiological, safety, belonging, and self-esteem needs are not met, they may seek to



meet these needs through alternative means and, in so doing, may be more susceptible to involvement in crime. Families living in poverty are often unable to meet the physiological and safety needs of their children; at-risk youth who go to school without breakfast or lunch and live in cheap, subsidised housing may be especially vulnerable to the temptations of drugs, gangs, and crime. Youth who lack close relationships to family, school, and community, or who suffer from feelings of inadequacy or failure are easy targets for gangs who promise to fulfill their needs for belonging and self-esteem.

## **Policy Recommendations**

Four major recommendations for meeting the multi-dimensional needs of at-risk immigrant and refugee youth can be advanced, based on the interviews that were conducted for this study. First, in order to enhance the integration of immigrant and refugee youth and their families into our communities, sustained, adequate funding must be provided for settlement, mental health, and multicultural services (e.g., health brokers, cultural brokers in schools) that facilitate the successful adaptation of newcomers to host communities. Funding to these services has not risen in proportion with the government's increased acceptance of high-needs applicants from refugee camps, although these families often have needs that exceed what conventional settlement programs can provide.

Second, all levels of government must take initiatives to ensure that the socioeconomic circumstances of immigrant families meet their basic needs. Safe, affordable, and appropriate housing is essential for stability; without this, newcomers' health and well-being are at risk. Recognition of foreign credentials would also alleviate poverty and improve labour market integration by allowing immigrants to continue working in their chosen occupations. The government should also absorb resettlement loans to government- and privately-sponsored refugees and dependants; repayment of the principal and interest on overseas medical examinations, processing charges, and transportation to Canada places both financial and psychological stresses on refugee families. The current practice of sponsoring refugees with the highest needs has made this particularly onerous and brings further hardship to this vulnerable population.

Third, communities must also by establish a comprehensive, integrated network of systems to support immigrant and refugee youth and their families; these could be centralised in a local reception centre, with ongoing follow-up and support in school and community settings. Information and advocacy should be provided regarding education, settlement resources, housing, employment, social services, counselling, faith groups, ethno-cultural communities, health services, summer and after-school programs, recreational activities, service clubs, youth agencies, mentoring organizations, police, justice, corporations, and other relevant agencies. Data on evidence-based protective programs and practices should be compiled and made available to schools and other stakeholders. Furthermore, it is crucial that awareness, accessibility, and affordability of further supports available in the community be improved. It is incumbent on all

community partners to evaluate the services that they provide and to ensure that they are culturally sensitive and accessible to both immigrant and refugee youth and their families. Coordination of holistic, inter-agency services for immigrant families will enhance the educational attainment of youth, facilitate their access to meaningful employment, and promote healthy lifestyles.

Finally, because schools have extended contact with youth, the most critical needs of this population should be met there. Initial language, orientation, and cultural support in reception centres are recommended, along with early identification of at-risk youth, using culturally appropriate diagnostic and assessment tools. Effective, evidence-based interventions should follow, along with flexible programs of studies. English is essential for both academic achievement and access to job markets; ESL teachers should be trained specialists, and schools should make a greater effort to value and to address the needs of English language learners. All school staff should receive training in intercultural competence and understand the second language acquisition process, as well as immigrant and refugee youth, their backgrounds, the diversity within their ethnic communities, and the adjustment difficulties experienced by their families. Teachers should receive pre-service and/or in-service education to deliver effective differentiated instruction, and competent K-12 teachers, as well as other staff, should be recruited from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds to provide roles models in the schools. Youth need opportunities to develop positive relationships and to participate in school life; peer ambassador programs that carefully match newcomers with more established immigrants from the same culture can also be very helpful. Responses to discrimination and bullying within the larger school community should be immediate and restorative, in contrast to existing zero tolerance policies, which emphasise exclusion and punishment (Morrison, 2007; Stinchcomb, Bazemore, & Riestenberg, 2006). Goal-setting guidance, career counselling, and improved accessibility to funding for further education should be available to all immigrant and refugee youth. In addition, schools should work closely with ethno-cultural communities on a continuous basis. School-based after-school or weekend programs for family members of all ages should be provided (e.g., intercultural communication skills, cross-cultural parenting, orientation to systems in Canadian society), based on expressed needs and interests.

In sum, in order to establish safe, healthy communities, we need the coordinated efforts of multiple levels of government and diverse sectors of the community. As one stakeholder cautioned,

If you're going to have... immigrant youth come here, you either change our system somewhat to accommodate them, or you're going to face failures. And the cost to society for this is going to be astronomical – it's going to be huge.

If families, schools, and the larger community work together effectively to assist newcomer youth in meeting their basic, safety, and social needs, immigrant and refugee youth will become less vulnerable to victimization and involvement in criminal activity,

will attain more successful academic and employment outcomes, and will ultimately be better able to achieve their potential.

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