

Defining the Future: Embracing our Girls

A Community-Based Needs Evaluation.

Melfort, Saskatchewan

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Introduction of the Issue

This project was initiated and made possible through the vision and dedication of Helen McPhaden, who is a resident of Melfort, Saskatchewan. Helen has worked with Aboriginal women within Melfort and its surrounding areas for a number of years. Through her work, Helen identified a group of girls in Melfort that appeared to be having a hard time dealing with everyday life. For example, the youths were putting their own and others' mental and physical health at risk by consuming and abusing both alcohol and drugs, engaging in sexual behaviours, not completing their secondary education, and becoming violent both physically and verbally. This project is dedicated to understanding the experiences of some of the girls in Melfort, and to finding ways of creating positive change in their world.

Discussion of Relevant Literature

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory of development is a contextual approach for understanding development through childhood and adolescence. It considers both proximal and distal environmental factors that influence human development. In addition to the individual, it was important in Melfort to consider environmental influences that contribute to shaping the youths' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1986), human behaviour does not exist within a vacuum. Rather, a dyadic relationship exists wherein the environment influences the individual and, in turn, the individual's actions affect the environment. In Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model, the youth is placed in the center of four concentric circles, with each circle representing a different environmental context. The environments closest to the individual exert the greatest influence over the person.

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), there are four major environmental systems that influence a youth's development: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem. The innermost circle is called the microsystem, and it includes individuals in the youth's most immediate environment. Individuals in a youth's microsystem may include parents, teachers, and peers. The second level of influence is the mesosystem and it represents all of the connections between the things found in the microsystem. For example, it may represent the connections between home, school, the neighborhood, and after school programs. The third level is the exosystem. The exosystem is made up of settings that affect the youth, but do not include the youth. For example, the parents' workplace may influence the youth by restricting the amount of time the parent has available to spend with the youth. Finally, the outermost layer is the macrosystem, which represents the values, laws, beliefs, and resources of the culture or society that the youth lives within.

A number of researchers have used Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) ecological theory of development to understand and identify risk factors for adolescent violence and deviancy. Recently, Huebner and Mancini (2003) conducted a study that explored a number of factors that predicted how youths' spent their leisure time. Leisure time activities included participation in after school extracurricular activities, non-school clubs, volunteer work, and church or other religiously related activities. Specifically, Huebner and Mancini were interested in looking at individual factors such as gender, ethnicity, grade level, self-esteem, and academic achievement to determine how a youth spends his or her leisure time. Results indicated that girls tend to experience more leisure constraints than boys because of feeling shy, being self-conscious, or seeking approval from friends. They were also less likely than boys to spend their leisure time in group-oriented activities such as sports. When ethnicity was considered, it was found that as compared to Whites, Black adolescents participated in leisure activities at lower rates. A low self-esteem was also found to be a barrier to participating, as those with higher levels of self-esteem seemed to experience less leisure boredom. Overall, Huebner and Mancini (2003) found that adolescents who participated in structured and/or religious activities and those who spent time with adults were more likely to have positive educational outcomes.

In addition, Huebner and Mancini (2003) also addressed family microsystem factors, including socio-economic factors and marital status. They found that socio-economic status (SES) affected whether or not the teens worked, as well as whether or not they had money to participate in activities. Overall, youths that came from a higher SES background approached new activities in a more confident and adventurous way than their low SES counterparts. Marital status also affected leisure time as youths from single parent families tended to spend less time than their dual-parent counterparts in leisure activities. Adolescents with single parents also had less supervision from adults, and generally had poorer relationships with their parents as compared to

the other adolescents. Furthermore, the presence of parental warmth, reinforcement, and involvement in the community predicted greater youth involvement in positive leisure activities such as recreational sports and volunteering.

Another recent study conducted by Yexley, Borowsky, and Ireland (2002) explored the influence of family in youth development by looking at the correlation between experiences of familial violence and violent adolescent behaviour. Students from grades 6 to 12 were surveyed, and the results suggested that violence within the family was indeed correlated with youth violence. Specifically, a history of family violence in the home was positively correlated with attempted suicide, fighting, and gun carrying by the youths. Those youths that had directly been a victim of violence were more likely to engage in self- and other-directed violence than their counterparts who had witnessed, but were not the direct target of violence.

Tolan, Gorman-Smith, and Henry (2003) conducted a longitudinal study on youth violence using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) framework. Data was collected once per year over six years from males in an inner city. Results from Tolan et. al.'s (2003) study indicated that a number of factors including community structural characteristics (ethnic heterogeneity, concentration of poverty, economic resources, and crime level), neighborhood social processes (neighborliness and extent of neighborhood problems), parenting practices, and peer deviancy were related to the development of violent behaviour among youths. Specifically, in the poorest and most crime-ridden neighborhoods, there was a lower sense of belonging between residents of the neighborhood as well as lower levels of involvement in the community. There was also a positive relationship found between the community structural characteristics and parenting practices. They found that poor parenting led to a greater interest and susceptibility for youths to be involved in deviant or antisocial peer groups, including gangs. Subsequently, involvement in these groups led to a greater likelihood that the youths would engage in antisocial behaviour such as violence.

Herrenkohl, Guo, Kosterman, Hawkins, Catalano, and Smith (2001) also conducted a longitudinal study on early adolescent predictors of youth violence. They also identified a number of factors that are related to the development of youth violence. These factors included, but are not limited to: hyperactivity/low attention and early antisocial behaviour, parental attitudes favorable to violence, low academic performance, involvement with antisocial peers, and low family income, availability to drugs and low neighborhood attachment. Each of these factors was found to contribute to adolescents' violent behaviour. Herrenkohl et al. (2001) suggested that adolescence is a time when peers become a major source of influence in youths' development. In addition to peers, parents play an important role in behaviour management practices. In school, adolescents' risk for violence was associated with academic performance, social interactions in and out of the classroom, and their interest and involvement in extracurricular school activities.

Finally, Beam, Gil-Rivas, Greenberger, and Chen (2002) also used Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory to conduct a study that addressed both risk and protection factors for youth violence and depressed mood. The researchers arranged the factors they considered into three areas: family, peer, and other extended social network support. Data were collected via a survey from eleventh grade participants. Results showed that problem behaviour (i.e., risk taking, school-related deviance, substance use, status offenses, physical aggression, vandalism, theft and problem behaviour) was positively related to a dismantled family structure, adolescent-parent conflict, negative peer events, and perceived parental and peer sanctions. Similarly, youths who displayed depressive symptomology also had one or more of the following: a family structure that was not intact, a number of negative family events, adolescent-peer conflict, perceived parental and/or sibling depressive symptomology, a number of negative peer events, low childhood peer acceptance, low perceived parental warmth, and low support from significant others (not including parents or peers).

In summary, Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1986) and those who followed his theoretical framework of development recognize there are a number of interconnected environmental systems that work together to influence an individual at any given time. The degree to which each factor influences the individual depends upon its proximity to the individual. For example, peers and nuclear family members would have a high degree of influence because they are, in most cases, in contact with the individual on a regular and frequent basis. To understand youths' behaviours, thoughts, and attitudes, it is very important not only to consider their individual differences (i.e., self-esteem, attitudes, behaviour), but also to consider their context.

Project Focus

This project utilized the framework of Bronfenbrenner (1979) to understand the context of the adolescent girls in Melfort, Saskatchewan. For example, microsystem variables such as the presence or absence of both parents, the importance and influence of peers and peer pressure, and social support in and out of school was explored. Mesosystem variables considered included the connection between school, teachers, police, and the community at large. An exosystem variable was the presence or absence of parents due to job constraints. Finally, socio-economic status, religious tensions, and the laws that apply to the youths were discussed as part of exploring macrosystem elements.

The project was divided into two parts. Part I of the assessment had the youths express their views and opinions via a self-report questionnaire and a focus group. This information was supplemented by a key informant interview with an individual who works closely with the female youths in Melfort. Part II of the assessment focused on the outer levels of influence by exploring community resources available for youths in Melfort. To serve this goal, a community survey was completed, and two community meetings were held to discuss prevention, intervention, and postvention options for youth violence and delinquency.

Part I: Female Youths

The first half of this project focused on understanding the youths' individual identity as well as their environmental experiences of life in Melfort. Data gathering consisted of a survey and a focus group with the youths', and a telephone interview with an individual who had first hand experience with some female youths, their families, and service providers in Melfort was conducted.

Youth Meeting

The youth meeting took place in Melfort, Saskatchewan. Eleven youths participated in data collection. Four youths were eliminated from the analyses because ethical approval to include 13 year olds was not obtained. Therefore, the following data represents the ideas and views of seven girls between the ages of 14 and 17, the majority of which self-identified as being Aboriginal. Besides the participants, attendees at the youth meeting included two community members and two researchers.

Participants gave their informed consent to participate. The first half of the meeting was spent completing a survey, which was developed based on both previous research and specific questions for the purposes of the present study (see [Appendix A](#)). A number of areas were addressed including the youths' present living situation, substance use, self-esteem, and truant behaviour (i.e., skipping school). The second half of meeting was a focus group, which was audio-recorded and transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. The researchers employed a semi-structured interview to address issues such as peer pressure, violence, substance use, and social supports with participants (see [Appendix B](#)).

Key Informant Interview

To supplement the information collected from the youth meeting, a key informant interview was conducted via telephone with an individual who has worked closely with the youths.

A semi-structured interview was used to address specific questions that were not answered in the youth focus group, and it served to obtain an objective perspective on the attitudes and behaviours of the youths (see [Appendix C](#)).

Key Findings

Information collected from the youth meeting and the key informant interview is presented in aggregate form in order to preserve the anonymity of all project participants. Findings are presented in accordance with the environmental spheres introduced by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. Factors that most closely influence the individual are considered first, followed by more global factors in the youths' environment.

Individual. Within the scope of the present study, factors assessed at the individual level of analysis included self-esteem, engagement in negative behaviours (i.e., substance use, school attendance), and youths' attitudes towards others. Participants completed Rosenberg's (1965) global self-esteem scale. There are ten items in the scale, and scores can range from 10 to 40 ($M=25$), with higher scores indicating greater levels of self-esteem. The youths in this project had levels of self-esteem that were slightly above average, with scores ranging from 23 to 33 ($M=27.3$).

It was indicated in the focus group as well as in the key informant interview that a high level of violence was occurring interpersonally among the girls in Melfort. The focus group session also revealed that the youths were accustomed to experiences of violence, and it was evident that some of them were both victims and perpetrators. For example, seeing a group of girls whom she did not like, one youth cited:

“Your first intention is to beat the living snot out of these little witches, and pretty much you wanna leave ‘em for dead. Whatever you’re going to do, that’s your first instinct these days is to fight.”

It was evident that the girls were very angry and they carried that anger around with them to be used as a weapon when they are provoked in any way.

Along with being exposed to and participating in violent acts, the youths indicated that they were engaging in a variety of other self-harming behaviours. Many girls indicated that they presently smoke and have experimented with, or are presently using drugs and alcohol. Six of the seven girls indicated that they currently smoke, and the average length of time that they have smoked was for three years. Similarly, all of the girls indicated that they had used alcohol in the past six months, and the average number of beverages they consumed at once is five, but amounts ranged from 3 to 30 drinks in one sitting or evening. In terms of drug use, marijuana seemed to be the most popular drug, with six of the seven girls indicating that they had used marijuana in the last six months. Five of the girls also indicated that they had used a variety of other illicit drugs including, but not limited to: cocaine, marijuana, 'speed', crystal methadone, 'ecstasy', Ritalin, 'crack', 'acid', and 'hash'.

When asked about the accessibility of common drugs such as marijuana, alcohol, and cigarettes, the girls indicated that they were extremely easy to obtain. To obtain alcohol, one youth said:

"All you do is like go hang around the bar and like just people walking in you just ask them to pull for you."

As for drugs, the girls indicated that:

"It's easier (to get drugs) within the blink of an eye, before you could even look out the window, there would be someone waiting outside right now with a half a 'g' or whatever, it's that easy."

Another girl commented on the accessibility of drugs:

"Yeah like in the four corners of this town there's just certain people like you can walk down the street and someone is going to pull up and say 'hey, you want this?' or whatever, you know? 'Have a sample.' It's like taking, it's like offering candy to little kids."

The girls in the focus group indicated that the money for the drugs usually came from parents who were giving their child money for recreational activities such as a movie. The youths had a very casual attitude about using drugs, as they indicated use was common for all youths in Melfort. They indicated that drinking alcohol was not necessarily the “cool” thing to do, but it was a common way of “passing the time”. One girl said:

“Everyone drinks on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays. The weekend isn’t even fun anymore because why not drink on the weekdays and then you have your weekend to be hung over and whatever, and go through it all again.”

In terms of the attitudes of the youths, they appeared to distrust authority figures such as teachers and police. Some youths felt that individuals in helping positions were breaching their confidentiality by communicating the private details of their lives to other adults, which made the students distrust authority figures in general. This distrust is a barrier to communication between the youths and adults in Melfort.

Even if adults and community agencies help the youths, the youths may abuse the privileges awarded to them. One youth felt this had happened with the “The Point”, a free facility that is provided to youths as a ‘hang out’ area where they have access to games and other activities. She admitted that

“We basically disrespect what was, what like honestly, they did give us something to do on a Friday night and people neglected that, and which is a pretty sad thing.”

There is also a sense among the youths that police and community development personnel in Melfort do not care about trying to help the youth, and are not open to changes that are necessary to keep the youths interested. In reference to community development personnel, one youth stated:

“They are afraid of change or something, it’s like hello! The world is changing; we are the new generation. If you can’t like take care of like the city, if you can’t take care of the people coming after us, how do you expect us to want to stay here? How

do you expect new business? How do you expect this place to grow if you are not willing to change anything?"

It was suggested that to break down the attitude of mistrust and disrespect towards authority figures, there would need to be a collaborative effort between adults and youths. When given this suggestion, the youths agreed that they would be more likely to abide by the rules and have respect for authority figures if they helped create the rules, and if they helped inform and implement changes within the community.

Nuclear Family. Although it is hard to get a clear picture of each girl's home life, the girls reported that the majority of them live in single parent families. Towards the end of the focus group, the girls were asked to name someone that they considered being a role model. Answers were varied, and some girls indicated that they had a sibling to look up to, but others could not name any person that served as a role model for them. Most often if they did name a role model, they admired that person for being strong and surviving hardships such as violence, drug and/or alcohol abuse, or because they had finished their education (grade 12). For example, some reasons why the youths admired their role model included:

"...(her role model) was all about peace and you know like that is totally me."

"...she's very strong, very independent."

"...she's smart and she finished school and she has two kids..."

"...she's taking good care of herself. She doesn't drink, she's cutting down on smoking, she doesn't do drugs..."

"...he was strong, he, I don't know, like got involved in a gang, and he's trying to get out now. Make himself better, and I don't know. He almost got killed a couple times."

Friends. Friends were cited as being an extremely important part of the girls' sense of belonging and fellowship, as well as a source of entertainment in a town where the youths seemed to be at a loss for positive recreational activities. One girl stated:

“Your friends are like really all you got to do because I mean, Melfort, there’s nothing to do at all so you have your friends, you tell them everything. You do everything with them because there’s nothing else to do, if you don’t have friends guess what? You’re like, you’re alone all the time then you got nothing to do.”

Peer pressure amongst groups of friends seemed to be present, as one girl cited:

“I’m trying to quit doing all of the weed and all that stuff and I mean like some of my friends are cool with it, some of my friends aren’t. When it comes to drinking man, you don’t drink you can go home. You’re a loser. You go home, don’t even come around man. So I mean you gotta drink. That’s the important part I think.”

Some girls felt that they could resist drugs in the presence of their friends, but others could not.

When asked what types of peer pressure the girls faced, they said

“I kinda smoked for a bit but not that much and all my friends, you know, they really got me into like um drugs and uh alcohol and stuff like that.”

There seemed to be difficulty in choosing healthy behaviours in the midst of peer groups that promote negative behaviours such as substance abuse. One girl indicated that she tried to quit using substances and,

“Once you stop things, then you stop hanging out with those friends you did it with, and all of a sudden you are like alone. So you have absolutely nothing to do.”

‘Nothing to do’ seemed to be a common theme that the girls cited as a problem within their community.

Extended Family. Little is known about the situation and history of extended families of the youths in this project. A majority of the girls reported their ethnicity was Aboriginal, where traditionally extended families are very close to one another. Although it was not within the scope of the present study, it would be beneficial to explore the role of the extended family in the youths’ identity and development.

School/Education. The youths indicated that a number of their friends were being asked to leave school due to their delinquent behaviour. When asked about how getting expelled made them feel, the youths reported feelings of hopelessness because they perceived that there were no

alternatives available. The girls noted it was very hard to get a job with no experience or schooling, and that there are no feasible alternative schools to pursue. Also, many of the girls felt that the resources within the school were lacking and that there was a need for teachers to undergo additional training so that their level of education was up to date, and on par with the education that other students from larger centers receive.

Melfort/Community. Many girls agreed that Melfort youths are often labeled as “good” or “bad” based on their family name, or other family members’ previous behaviour. This seemed to be a problem particularly in the schools where teachers may have previously taught other family members. The sentiment was:

“That’s what Melfort is really all about. It’s your name, who your parents are, what kind of person you are, and if you don’t meet up to their standards, then guess what? You don’t matter.”

The theme of feeling uncared for was reiterated in many of the girls’ comments. For example, one girl stated:

“They don’t even care, they really don’t. If, if you’re one of those kids they don’t care.”

In terms of recreation options, the skatepark and “The Point” were cited as the two most popular places to go, but according to the girls, the skatepark has not been maintained and is in need of repair. One girl talked about a ramp falling apart:

“I noticed there was a big crack in it and the one next to it, there’s like this piece that’s just sticking out, like the wood.”

Point of Interest, otherwise known as “The Point” is a facility located in a church basement that provides a free space for youths to hang out. It has different activities available, such as pool tables, foosball tables, movies, and video games. The girls’ biggest complaint about “The Point” was that they could not smoke in the facility, but another youth stated:

“The only problem is it’s in a church, and like, you know, if it wasn’t in a church it would be, could be used actually quite frequently.”

As illustrated in the findings, the context that the youths of Melfort live in is important to consider in understanding why they are engaging in violence, substance use, truancy, and other delinquent behaviours. At an individual level, the girls were experiencing moderate levels of self-esteem and many of them are having problems staying in school. Many of the girls were being raised in single parent homes, suggesting that they may not have the parental support that a child coming from a two parent family would have. Further, there seemed to be a lack of positive role models for the girls, as a few of them could not name one individual they looked up to. Those that could name a role model admired the individual for their courage in facing violent or abusive situations. These findings are consistent with previous research that is based on Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) model, which suggest that adolescents who do not have stable and adequate social support at the microsystem level of analysis may be susceptible to engaging in negative behaviours, including violence (Beam et.al., 2002; Herrenkohl et. al., 2001)

In terms of greater community support, the youths possessed an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentality when asked about authority figures in the community. The youths felt that teachers, police, and community leaders did not have their best interest at heart. Instead, they felt that authority figures imposed rules and regulations that were unnecessary in some cases. However, some youths admitted that they too had attitudes towards authorities that were unreasonable. The girls expressed an interest in being included in community decisions that affect them, which they felt would lessen any negative attitudes between community leaders and themselves. These findings are relevant to the outer layers of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) model, where community supports factor in to the youths’ feeling of belonging and support. The lack of support at this level has also been linked with adolescent antisocial and violent behaviour (Tolan et. al., 2003).

Part II: Community Resources

The second half of this project focused on exploring the resources currently in place that are designed to serve the needs of the youths in Melfort. To achieve this goal, data was collected via a survey and two community meetings. The survey asked service providers to indicate what services were in place and working well, as well as their perceptions of gaps in service delivery. The service providers were also asked to indicate how they felt any gaps could be addressed. The first service provider's meeting served as a review of the data collected in the project up to that point, including some key themes from the youth focus group and feedback from all of those who completed the service provider survey. Following the review, there was an open-ended discussion where those who attended brainstormed future initiatives and action plans related to the project. The final service providers meeting focused on the project's goals and data collected to date, as well as a discussion to identify specific resources that are available for the prevention, intervention, and postvention for troubled youths in Melfort.

Survey

A survey was circulated to approximately 28 community agency representatives. The survey was intended to collect information from service providers in Melfort regarding the resources available for troubled youths. Representatives were contacted through an existing community network of professionals. It was emphasized that the meeting would be open to any and all individuals interested in addressing the issue of female youth violence in Melfort.

The return rate for the service provider survey was small (15%); however, the responses were rich with information (see [Appendix D](#)). Those who responded indicated there were a number of services for youths currently available in Melfort such as: outreach workers, a youth center that had various entertainment options such as live bands and group activities, a mentorship program at the high school, and other recreational opportunities such as swimming, bowling, and a movie

theatre. When asked about gaps in service provision, respondents felt that their biggest problem was the lack of collaboration between service providers. Because of lack of communication and collaboration, there were a number of services that overlapped with one another, and other areas, such as drug, alcohol, and parental education were left unaddressed. Overall, the suggestions for improvement focused on a collaborative community approach to educating both the youths and those around them (teachers, parents, community members) about substance use, violence, and mental health concerns.

Service Provider Meeting #1

The focus of the first service provider meeting was to discuss the information that was collected via the survey. Copies of the summarized information from the survey were made available focus group participants. A total of eleven participants representing a number of community groups attended the first community group meeting. Following a presentation of the survey results, common themes of the data gathered were used to initiate group discussion (see [Appendix E](#) for discussion topics and feedback).

The first service provider's meeting revealed that service providers in the community of Melfort believe that there is a need for change, but they are unsure of how to begin. Specifically, many people indicated that service providers are not working collaboratively and as a result, there are duplicate services offered. By not collaborating, communication between service providers is minimal or non-existent, and as a result, a barrier for the client accessing service is created. For example, if a family was seeking help to deal with a number of issues related to violence and abuse, they may be in contact with a number of agencies such as Mental Health or Addictions Services, and perhaps they would receive guidance from other groups such as church leaders. In this case, the service providers involved would not be in contact with one another. It would be helpful in a situation like this if the service providers could meet and collaborate on the best course

of action to meet the needs of the particular family. The service providers felt a sense of frustration that they were trying to do their part in helping, but when the family went to the next agency, they may receive information or advice that is inconsistent with what they already received. The service providers felt that by collaborating, they would address the fragmentation of services, and the best interest of their clients would be preserved more effectively and efficiently.

Service Provider Meeting #2

For the second service provider's meeting, held at Melfort's Salvation Army, e-mail invitations were sent to the 28 organizations that were originally contacted and invited to the first group. The goal was to brainstorm community action plans using the information gathered from the first service provider's meeting. Unfortunately, the turnout for this meeting was minimal, with only six participants attending. The idea of a youth centre was presented by an interested youth (who had attended the youth focus group earlier). The researchers summarized data collected to date. The second half of the meeting was a round table discussion to brainstorm services available and service gaps for the prevention, intervention, and postvention of youth violence (see [Appendix F](#)). It was confirmed that Melfort had a number of existing agencies that cater to intervention and postvention of youth violence, whereas preventative services seemed to be most needed.

A number of ideas were generated to address how preventative measures could be established. It appeared that many parents couldn't afford to register their children in organized sports. As an alternative, the Salvation Army indicated that they were partnering with the leisure centre to offer artwork, hip-hop dancing, and camping activities to any youths interested. It was suggested that a potential youth centre could also establish partnerships with local residents or businesses to have activities such as horse back riding, street hockey leagues, or mentorship programs.

Although there appears to be many services available to youths for intervention and postvention measures around violence, they do not appear to be accessing the resources. There may be perceived racial or religious barriers that prevent individuals from seeking service. For example, there are services that have an Aboriginal focus or a denominational orientation, although their mandate is to serve any and all individuals regardless of race or religion. Individuals who are in need may not be aware that they can access these types of services, or they may be fearful that they will be treated differently if they do not fit in with the prescribed group (i.e., religion or race). Public education was also suggested as a way of opening the doors between service providers and community members. Additional community meetings were thought to allow the promotion of existing services, as well as allowing community members to ask questions in an open environment. Other intervention strategies were suggested, such as a youth centre and a school program that would assist students that are having difficulties in school. It was suggested that these action plans were only possible if a number of individuals (parents, schools, youths, service providers) came together in a collaborative effort towards community change.

Recommendations

The following set of recommendations is based data collected for Part I and Part II of this project. These recommendations are not presented based any particular order.

Youth Centre

To address the lack of positive social activities available for youths in Melfort, it is proposed that a youth-run youth centre be created. The centre would require start up funds to secure an appropriate building as well as pay for necessary utilities and any initial equipment such as a pool table. There are presently a number of unoccupied buildings within Melfort that may be available for youths to create a safe positive environment for socializing. The suggestion was that the centre would be created by the youths, for the youths. It was thought that if the centre was created by the youths, they would have a vested interest in maintaining it. The youths would need to be committed to fundraising within the community to keep the centre open, as well as soliciting in-kind contributions from local businesses for supplies such as paint and used furniture. Although the centre would have to be supervised by an adult volunteer, the centre would essentially run by rules set up by the youths. It has been suggested that the centre be non-denominational.

Mentorship Program

Because one of the greatest needs identified in the present evaluation was care, concern, and role models for the young girls in Melfort, it is suggested that the community begin a youth mentorship program. Such mentorship programs exist in larger centres, where volunteers take their paired youth out once a week for relationship building activities. The goals of this type of program are to provide youths with a number of benefits including a positive role model, support, and activities that may be novel to the youth.

Increased Awareness Meetings/Public Forum Discussion Groups

Throughout the current project, it became clear that there is a need for increased awareness about the issues faced by these youths, including use of drugs and alcohol, and engagement in violent activities. To serve this need, it is suggested that relevant speakers who work closely with “at risk” girls be invited to speak at community meetings. The meetings could be held on a regular basis and focus on different issues each session. There should be an open format wherein community members are free to ask any questions they may have in a safe atmosphere. This may serve to promote dialogue between the youths and the adults, and may help to break down any communication barriers that currently exist between these two groups.

Youth Meetings

Similar to community meetings, it is suggested that there be regular public meetings for youths to come together and discuss relevant issues and plans to make changes in their community. These meetings may serve to organize and initiate youth-based changes such as the proposed youth centre. It is suggested that an individual who is knowledgeable about the youths and the community resources be present at meetings to facilitate discussion and be available for comments or suggestions; however, the youths would essentially be responsible for the meetings.

Intramural/Recreational Sports Programs

When asked about sports programs or extracurricular activities, the youths felt that there were not enough activities available free of charge. To address this concern, it is suggested that youths organize a physical activity that does not cost anything. It must be open to any youth interested, and there would have to be an adult volunteer available to assist the youths with carrying out the activities. Suggestions include both indoor and outdoor, season-specific, non-competitive sports teams including soccer, volleyball, basketball, and any other sport that the youths decide they would like to play.

Additional Research

The scope of the present project only allowed for a cross-sectional (one time) look at the issues and services surrounding female youth violence in Melfort. It would be beneficial if future research could explore the history of services offered in Melfort, as well as any plans for future service delivery. In terms of the youths, the researchers were unable to explore the journey of each youth in depth, and how their opinions and attitudes may change over time. Additional research is necessary to gain more in depth information about barriers to accessing and administering existing services in Melfort. This would serve to identify specific gaps in resource availability, as well as how to increase the number of clients in need who access resources.

Timing may be important, as this project was conducted while the youths were out of school for the summer. Summer may be a time where youths feel like they have less 'to do' because of the lack of a structured schedule. Future research could look at the experiences, attitudes, and developmental contexts of youths across several different time periods including childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. One-to-one interviews would also be valuable in obtaining information, as the youths in the present study may not have felt comfortable sharing information among their peers or with the authority figures present.

Other factors for future research to consider include whether or not some of these adolescents have attention or hyperactivity disorders such as attention deficit disorder or fetal alcohol syndrome (or effects) (American Psychiatric Association, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 2000, text revision). These types of disorders may help to explain some of the problems that the adolescents are experiencing at school or in their home environment. Unfortunately the present study did not allow for inquiry into psychological difficulties such as learning disorders.

Limitations

Ethical Considerations

The Behavioural Research Ethics Board at the University of Saskatchewan considers youths below the age of 18 a “vulnerable population”. This distinction limited the project in terms of the types of questions that could be asked. Although the identified community problem was violence, the youths were not asked to recount any violent acts that they had either witnessed or experienced. Similarly, no questions were asked regarding thoughts or attempts at suicide, or any questions relating to sexual involvement. Although such issues may have been informative, the goal of the project was to begin to explore solutions to the violence. However, the key informant confirmed that the youths were involved in many dangerous behaviours and activities.

The participants for the youth focus group were not adults, so it was important to obtain informed and free consent from each participant. Normally, the University of Saskatchewan requires all participants under the age of 18 to have an additional informed consent sheet signed by a legal guardian before participating in any study. However, because of the convenience sampling method employed in the present study, coupled with the fact that many of the youths involved were from unstable home environments, permission to have the youths between 14 and 17 give their own informed consent was obtained. Unfortunately, four participants in the focus group were 13 years of age and their data had to be eliminated from the data set.

Methodological Issues

Focus groups often allow access to rich, descriptive information, such as that derived from the youth focus group. Although the data may not represent the views of all youths in Melfort, it is important to know that these are the views of some youths, and every voice and journey is important. Unfortunately, there were a few factors (listed below) that the researcher could not

control for including interviewer bias, demand characteristics, format, and a cross sectional research design.

There may have been some interviewer bias involved in the present project as the researchers conducting the focus groups were aware of the issues at hand and were able to direct conversation towards those specific issues. Perhaps if people were able to express their views in a less structured format, other important issues may have been brought to light.

For the youth focus group, it is very possible that the youths involved may have felt a need to say things that they believed the researcher(s) wanted to hear. Specifically, many of the youths stated that they had issues with authority figures. Perhaps the researchers may have been seen as being in an authoritative position and responses may have been selective as a result.

The key informant indicated that there are a number of groupings or gangs of girls who may conflict with one another. It may have been possible that members of different groups were present for the youth focus group. If so, participants may not have felt comfortable or safe disclosing personal information in front of people they either don't know or people that are in rival peer groups.

The data collected in the present project only reflect the ideas, attitudes, and feelings of the participants at the present point of time. The individuals involved may have (had) different opinions or viewpoints either before or after the study was carried out. Future research should employ a longitudinal research design to assess changes over time. These changes could include the individuals' attitudes and feelings, as well as changes in policy and community initiative in addressing topics such as female youth violence.

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**Appendix A
Youth Focus Group Questionnaire**

Section A: Demographic Information:

1. I am _____ years old.
2. Place of birth (city, province, country)_____
3. Ethnicity: Caucasian _____
 Aboriginal _____
 Metis _____
 Hispanic _____
 African-Canadian _____
 Asian _____
 Inuit _____
 Other (please specify):_____
4. Last level of education completed:

Grade 1: _____	Grade 7: _____
Grade 2: _____	Grade 8: _____
Grade 3: _____	Grade 9: _____
Grade 4: _____	Grade 10: _____
Grade 5: _____	Grade 11: _____
Grade 6: _____	Grade 12: _____

Other (Please specify): _____

Section B: Please consider each item listed below, and CIRCLE the number which BEST represents your feelings.

1 = Strongly disagree
2 = Disagree
3 = Agree
4 = Strongly agree

- | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 2. All in all, I am inclined to think I am a failure. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 3. I feel I have a number of good qualities. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 4. I feel I do not have much to be proud of. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 5. I am able to do things as well as most other people. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

- D. When you do drink alcoholic beverages, how many drinks do you usually have? (one drink of alcohol would be 1 bottle of beer *or* one small glass of wine *or* 1 oz. of hard liquor)
 _____ drinks (a number please)
- E. On average, how many alcoholic drinks do you consume **per WEEK**?
 None _____ *or* _____ per week (a number please).

Section H: Drug Use

- A. Have you ever smoked marijuana?
 Yes _____ No _____
- B. In the past 6 months, have you smoked marijuana?
 Yes _____ No _____
- C. In the past 6 months, how often have you smoked marijuana?
- a. Every day _____
 - b. 4-6 days per week _____
 - c. 2-3 days per week _____
 - d. Once per week _____
 - e. Once or twice per month _____
 - f. Less than once a month _____
- D. On average how many joints do you smoke per week?
 None _____ or _____ per week (a number please)
- E. Have you ever used any other types of drugs? (eg., hash, crystal meth, cocaine, heroine, speed, ecstasy) Yes _____ No _____

If so, what type(s) of drugs have you used?

How often do you use any of these drugs?

- a. Every day _____
- b. 4-6 days per week _____
- c. 2-3 days per week _____
- d. Once per week _____
- e. Once or twice per month _____
- f. Less than once a month _____

Section I: Additional Questions

A. Please indicate your present living situation (please circle):

- a. with one parent
- b. with both parents
- c. with a grandparent
- d. with another relative (aunt, uncle)
- e. in a foster home
- f. other (please specify): _____

B. Do you have curfews at your house? Yes No

a. What time is your curfew (usually)? _____

b. Do you usually follow this curfew? Yes No

C. Are you presently attending school? Yes No

a. If yes, have you skipped school this year? Yes No

b. On average, how often do you skip school?

i. Every day _____

ii. 2-3 days per week _____

iii. Once per week _____

iv. Once or twice per month _____

v. Less than once a month _____

c. What is the main reason(s) you have skipped school?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

D. Do you currently have a job? Yes No

a. If yes, how long have you been working at this job?

b. Do you like your job? Yes No

i. What do you like or dislike about your job?

Appendix B
Youth Focus Group Agenda/Discussion Topics

1. Introductions of researcher
2. Purpose and goals of the project (explained by researcher)
3. Informed consent
4. Establish rules of the group (respect for others' opinions, confidentiality)
5. Self-report measures administered and completed

*****BREAK*****

6. Brainstorming sessions on:
 - a. The Salvation Army
 - b. Education
 - c. Peers
 - d. Drugs and alcohol
 - e. Jobs/future goals
 - f. Resources needed and available
7. Thanks for participating - give resources if needed

Debriefing

Appendix C
Semi-Structured Key Informant Interview Schedule

How long have you been working with youth at risk in Melfort?

How many girls do you see on a regular basis?

In what capacity do you help the girls?

What are the major issues you think youths in Melfort face?

What kind of risky behaviours do you know of that they are involved in?

What community resources do you see that are helpful to the girls?

What could be improved in the community to meet the needs of this at-risk population?

Can you think of some barriers that are presented from the girl's point of view to accessing services?

Can you think of any barriers the community might face in making services available?

Appendix D

Service Provider Survey and Feedback

What is working well in our community, in terms of services for the young girls?

- Salvation Army has many youth programs that are delivered by young female outreach workers including a street ministry.
- Point of Interest is a Youth Center @ Park Avenue Church which is open to all youth ages 13-17 offering a wide array of activities including live bands, group activities, and a safe hangout.
- Girl Guide Association is active in Melfort offering programming for girls ages 5-18.
- Great facilities such as the Palace Indoor Swimming complex, Bowling alley, Theatre, Golf course, Mini golf, great walking and roller blading trails.
- Mentorship programs at high school MUCC.
- Kelsey Trail Health Region youth volunteer programs and general volunteer programs.
- Band/Music Programs offered through the school.
- Various sport associations such as girls' minor hockey, girls' soccer for girls ages 13-17.
- Kids Sport funds sporting and recreational opportunities for young people of all ages.
- On site Public Health Nurse at MUCC is beneficial and provides preventative approach to education and awareness for young girls.
- Corrections and Public Safety has a worker who comes into the school to link with the girls.
- Some of the churches have youth groups who are helpful with the girls, however, this does not truly reach some girls that have high needs.

What isn't working well – where are the service gaps in our community?

- The biggest gap is in collaboration and communication between agencies.
- A second problem is fragmentation or segmentation of the suggested solutions, and sometimes lack of willingness to collaborate. "It's my turf!" or "It's NOT my turf!" are still issues.
- Lack of a community approach to drug proofing children.
- Lack of a coordinated effort in addressing drug and alcohol related issues.
- Lack of addiction services either through Mental Health and on-site at the high school.
- Lack of Parent support groups for parents parenting children ages 5 to 18 yrs of age.
- Lack of Mental Health services for young girls suffering from mental health issues i.e., Depression.
- Young adolescents both male and female are not attending school on a regular basis.
- Lack of career exploration and educational/career goal setting for young women.
- No common youth centre where ALL youths feel comfortable.
- Lack of 'empowerment' groups available and accessible to all young women.
- Lack of licensed infant day care spaces in the event there is a teen pregnancy.
- Very little support (resources) available to encourage a young mom to return to school.
- There is a breakdown in communication between many service providers in Melfort.
- There is some duplication of services in some areas.
- There is not enough diverse activities to meet the needs of multi – barrier clientele.
- There is too long of a waiting period to obtain adequate support for the youth when they are in crisis.
- There are people who work with the girls, who are not qualified in their roles, which in turn create another barrier not only for the girls, but for the other service providers who must work with that girl.
- There is not enough mentors or positive role models for the youth.
- There could be an alternative school Model developed or replicated, whereby, the youth obtain credits and perhaps skill sets / employment.

- There is not enough cooperation and strategic planning by the community in working with this clientele base.
- There is a rising crime rate and violence with the girls due to the gaps in the services.
- There are not enough trained and experienced resource personnel to work with the girl clientele.

What should we do to fill these service gaps and change our community for the better?

- Community ownership and community collaboration – all agencies, institutions, and individuals need to be involved.
- Support parents through more appropriate education and awareness of issues adolescents face.
- Review the 16-17 year old Child and Family Services legislation regarding where the child may live if he/she chooses not to live at home. Presently young people are being placed with individuals of their choice and provided an allowance when in fact they may be coming from good homes, placing themselves in vulnerable situations and in fact abusing the program. However for those youth who legitimately require family service involvement in the 16-17 year old program, a case plan that addresses the youth's needs from a holistic approach is needed rather than the youth living the lifestyle of their choice while in the program.
- Ensure municipality buys in to youth strategies in order that we may better partner. i.e., for recreational opportunities etc. (free monthly swim nights monthly for ALL kids)
- Engage youth leadership (such as the student council to take on some of the social issues discussed) Youth should be present at various levels of decision making such as interagency, and municipal to have a voice.
- We need to begin the process of affirmative action.
- We need to listen to the girls needs and work from the bottom up to the transition.
- We need to build on existing community assets, and with this comes the ability to change.

What must we do to ensure that these changes occur?

- Melfort has a District Planning Committee that is beginning to take a broader look at these needs/strengths. They will use needs analysis, strengths analysis, etc to examine and formulate a community approach to the issues.
- Lobby provincial government leaders and municipal government (i.e., City Council).
- Work with First Nations Groups.
- We must collaborate and work consistently with other service providers, the girls, and with the members of the community who are interested in bringing about change.
- We must implement an effective course of action.
- We must work as a group towards the desired outcomes by incorporating the needs of the youth and not by negating the girls needs.
- We must follow through on the action plans and not leave them too long to be implemented or this will result in further repercussions.

Please include any additional comments

- I look forward to discussions, but am emphatic in the community approach to addressing the issue, with cooperation and collaboration of many.
- The rationale to help the youth in this community is long overdue. We really need to get moving, because the rest of the world is moving quickly. We are a sleeping dinosaur! If we don't start acting immediately, we will continue in a downward spiral. This will lead to more unhealthy behaviours and unhappiness. It is easy to piece meal off bits of what needs to be done. The reality is we need to look at the whole picture.. girls, boys, families, and the community of Melfort how does it support the people who reside here.

Appendix E

Service Provider Meeting #1: Discussion Topics and Feedback

Service Providers Focus Group Discussion May 17th: What do we do next?

Renita Picton, [Picton Associates Inc.] posed a question to the participants at each of the two focus groups; she asked:

- *“Given what we have learned to date regarding the escalation of violence and substance abuse in our community [among young girls between the ages of 13 and 17 yrs] is this an “agency mandate” issue or is this a “community at large issue?”*
- *“What is the mandate of your community to ensure the safety and well-being of ALL its citizens, youth and others?”*

“What do we want to do [given all this information]?”

1. A “change” in the community is needed.

- We need to “listen” to the youth and hear what they are suggesting and sharing.
- We need to involve the youth in some of the decision-making regarding the community [as it relates to the youth].

2. An integrated and unified approach and partnership between service providers and community individuals.

- Use a team approach to the issues.

3. Create some sort of “Youth Centre”.

- Investigate existing facilities and buildings that are empty and could be suitable for some type of youth activities centre for all youth (secular).

4. Investigate the possibility of some type of “Alternative School”.

- Investigate existing agencies and services already in community to ensure there is no duplication of existing services.
- Investigate other alternative school models (e.g. Academic Express and North Cottage School in Red Deer, AB).
- Develop non-traditional school curriculum which could include, but not be limited to the following:
 - academic classes
 - recreation & hobbies
 - work search skills
 - work experience
 - physical exercise

The participants in the two focus groups were then given an opportunity to voice what they each felt were the main issues and possible “root causes” behind the violence and self-harming behaviours of the youth.

1. **With breakdowns in the family unit, the youth are likely unable to experience a sense of wholeness or a sense of community.**
 - *“If there is no sense of wholeness in one’s own home, how can there be a sense of oneness or wholeness in their community?”*

2. **The youth tend not to feel valued or accepted in their home environment. This can result in the following potential outcomes:**
 - Escalation in violent behaviours
 - Boredom
 - Substance abuse
 - Promiscuity
 - Self-harm (suicide attempts)
 - Self-mutilation
 - Depression
 - Post-traumatic stress (impact of residential schools)
 - Unresolved grief issues
 - All forms of abuse (physical, emotional, sexual)

3. **The youth have not experienced unconditional love and acceptance in their young lives.**
 - We need to assist the youth to create a value of SELF first and this has to start internally.
 - We need to create a safe environment where the youth feel they have a purpose and are worthy of being heard.
 - We need to create an atmosphere of acceptance and hope for the future of our youth.
 - We need to demonstrate through our own actions that diversity and uniqueness is embraced and that together we are much more knowledgeable and effective than we are separate and apart.
 - We need to love and acceptance ourselves first before we can offer this to our youth or anyone else.

The consultant then facilitated a discussion around the areas of prevention, intervention, and postvention, as it relates to the issue of escalating violence and self-harming behaviours.

Prevention:

- In an “ideal world”, we would be able to prevent all kinds of self-harming behaviours if prevention programs worked as well as we hoped. But, we don’t live in such a world and even though a community might offer all kinds of preventive types of programs and services, this still does not prevent youth (or anyone for that matter) from still participating in self-harming behaviours and activities.
- Melfort has several preventive type programs and services offered via the various non-profit agencies, churches, and other service providers. However there is still a need for services or solutions in the area of intervention, and services for the aftermath.

Intervention:

- The fact that there are identified issues surrounding the escalation in violence and self-harming behaviours among the young girls (and other youth) in Melfort demands some sort of

intervention by the community. There is evidence that this violence has escalated recently and is causing a need for the community at large to intervene. People are responding in various ways, from not even knowing this problem existed to those who say it has been here for quite some time, but many folks have chosen not to address it.

- Is this yet another case of the “NIMBY Syndrome”? [NIMBY: “not in my back yard”].

Postvention:

- In spite of all good efforts to provide preventive services and programs, and to provide adequate, appropriate and need specific intervention, there is still a need for some sort of postvention for those “left behind” or reeling from the consequences of actions of others.
- There is undoubtedly a huge amount of emotion and range of feelings that need to be addressed when a community uncovers or discovers the range of harmful behaviours and activities that have been escalating in their community.
- People are being hurt, both physically and emotionally; residents will be angry, doubtful, fearful, or perhaps simply in shock that “this” could be happening in their quiet community.

Next steps:

- The second phase of this project is to commence the development of a “Community Plan of Action” to address the issues identified by both the target youth group and the community participants.
- Renita Picton [Picton Associates Inc.] will return to Melfort on Monday, June 28th to facilitate a one-day working group session to begin the process of developing this action plan.
- Her intent is to invite the many committed and concerned community residents to come forward and begin the discussions around what this community can do to address these community issues in a collaborative, non-threatening, non-competitive manner. She suggests people come prepared to talk, to listen, and to plan together....wearing their community resident hat (as opposed to wearing one’s “professional” hat).

Appendix F

Service Provider Group Meeting #2: Discussion Topics and Feedback

The following information is based on a framework that considers the preventative, intervening and postvention measures that are necessary to address the issues of violence and abuse. The services available and those that the group felt were missing were based on the themes that were generated from the first group meeting. Themes discussed included bullying, threats of violence, drug and alcohol abuse, promiscuity, gang-related violence, truancy, physical, emotional and sexual abuse, and vandalism.

The group agreed services currently exist that offer prevention type programs for many of the themes identified. There are also other service providers who the group thought could offer more in the way of prevention. These suggestions are also listed.

Services in place:

- NorthEast Crisis Centre
- Elementary schools
 - have bullying programs that teach good relationship skills. There is a need for bullying programs for grade 7 to 12 students.
- Youth groups
- Margarite Riel/Alexander Bremner School
 - public outreach worker.
- Empowerment Centre
- Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP)
 - “DARE”- program designed to address issues related to drugs and alcohol, kids against drinking and driving, school liaison officers.
- Kelsey Trail Health Services; Public health nurse
- Corrections youth worker
- Mentoring Mothers
 - mothers who help mothers with children that are less than 5 years old.
- Addictions Services
 - provides 4 workers for programming, counselling, and an addictions worker that goes to the high school one day per week.
- Alcoholics Anonymous/Al-Anon
- Student Support Centre
 - for kids to get help if they need to catch up. *Problem:* other kids call those who seek help derogatory names such as retards. This type of service should be held off school grounds to combat the stigma of seeking help.
- Correspondence classes
- Department of Community Resources and Employment (DCRE)
 - contract workers are available.

Barriers:

Individual

- Must keep in mind that many youths may have Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Parents

- Many parents are not at home for their children, and parents need to reinforce messages that are given by community agencies/members. There is a need for parenting support.
- Drugs are readily available in the home all of the time as parents are giving substances to their children.
- Parents are often left out of the loop by not being included in school problems. Sometimes they are unaware often of their child being suspended.

School

- The truancy policy at school is if a child skips school they are “rewarded” by being kicked out. There is research from the United States about remain in school programs where there is a get “kicked into school” program whereby children who skip are put into a program where there is strict supervision and discipline. Compared to this program, the regular curriculum and high school atmosphere is appealing.
- Defiance that exists among students. Many are bright but need to be isolated from their peers to excel and do well.
- Teachers slating youths into a certain role or capacity because of their family name/origin.

Community

- It seems that the government-funded agencies collaborate well, but community agencies are often competing for the same funding which may create dissonance.
- Privately funded agencies may give different recommendations. For example, one agency may advise families to try to keep the children in the family, while others feel it is best to remove them while trying to work out problems. There is a need for the agencies to compromise and be able to work together for the benefit of the client(s).
- Government-funded agencies have a collaborative effort of addressing problems. They have wrap-around meetings where different agencies can work on cases together while the family is present. The problem is that the meetings can be intimidating for kids who don't agree with the process. Their individual safety and comfort level needs to be considered in these situations. This is especially true for Aboriginal youths who have trouble speaking as openly in a formal setting in comparison to an informal setting.

Needs/Suggestions:

- Youth groups.
- Alateen.
- Public forum on drugs (i.e., crystal methadone education), alcohol, and gang related activity.
- Tutors for children who are falling behind in school. There seem to be many children who are not at the intellectual level that they are registered. The kids are pushed through grades without obtaining the qualifications in the interest of having them finish.
- Youth centre could house students that have been kicked out during the day. This would help mix up the crowds of youths that attend the youth centre. There is a need for community support. Partnerships should be created to have extra activities such as horseback riding, street hockey leagues, and a mentoring program.
- Research the possibility of implementing a program similar to the “Kicked into School” program where kids are kicked into rather than out of school, however in a very structured environment with support, tutors, and classroom supervisors. The intent is to isolate them from their peers, be given specific tasks, homework and community service.