

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This project investigates four programs that received financial support from the Toronto Police Services Board (TPSB): the Youth in Policing Initiative (YIPI); Native Child and Family Services of Toronto's Youth Action; Tropicana Community Services' Success through Aggression Replacement Training (START); and the Youth Association of Academics, Athletics and Character Education (YAAACE). We sought to examine the effectiveness of these initiatives with the goal of understanding:

1. the responsiveness of the initiatives to the needs of youth and the extent to which the stated goals have been achieved;
2. the youths perceptions, experiences, and attitudes towards the police, noting in the case of YIPI, the initial and subsequent perceptions after taking part in this initiative;
3. the level of access and interactions marginalized youth have had with these initiatives, and to police through the initiatives;
4. the impact that these initiatives have had on individuals and communities, as well as on police-community relations within Toronto.

The TPSB's work with communities is, in part, a response to the findings and recommendations set out in a number of reports about youth in Toronto. Indeed, these reports serve as important references, not only for the ongoing activities of the TPSB, but for this report as well.

Recent reports reveal that the lack of social, educational, cultural and economic supports experienced by alienated Toronto youth, particularly those in "priority identified areas," contribute to their sense of hopelessness and despair. Hence the need for programs and initiatives that address their needs, interests and ambitions in order to restore their hope and opportunities (McMurtry & Curling, 2008; Falconer, Edwards & MacKinnon, 2008; City of Toronto and United Way, 2005; United Way, 2004).

Given these reports, it is appropriate and timely to ascertain the effectiveness of TPSB-supported initiatives, particularly examining the approaches and strategies, in programs such as YIPI and initiatives in three other agencies, that prove most effective in addressing the needs of marginalized youth. We explored the perceptions that youth and police have of each other, and the extent to which the TPSB's involvement in these programs have helped to establish or enhance rapport among police, youth, and communities. In this report, we assess the extent to which current and past programs supported by the TPSB have been responsive to the needs of youth, as well as the effects these programs might have had on police-community relations.

Part A of the report focuses on the Youth in Policing initiative (YIPI) and Part B on the experiences of youth in the three TPSB-funded initiatives. YIPI is unique in that it is the only program in our study that operates within and is administered by the Toronto Police Services.

Methodology

With YIPI, our research employed a mixed-methods approach which combined observations, interviews with police officers, YIPI staff, and civilian service members, focus groups with YIPI participants, YIPI participants' journal entries, and a survey which we administered at both the beginning and end of the summer program. Our research was conducted during the spring and summer of 2010. This enabled us to participate in all stages of the program. We were able to attend the information sessions, the interviews, orientation week, site-visits, and graduation. Thus, we were able to develop relationships with both participants and members of the Toronto Police Service to get a fulsome sense of how, and how well, the program worked.

We conducted interviews with YIPI staff members, police officers, and civilian members of the Toronto Police Service and two focus group interviews with YIPI participants. The interviews were guided by two main themes: 1) the placement tasks and experiences in the program and 2) the youth and police of each other and the changes that might have resulted because of their experiences in the YIPI program. In these conversations, participants also talked about their past experiences with police, and the reactions they received from people who knew about their summer employment with Toronto Police Service. Also, we administered a survey to the YIPI participants both at the beginning of the program and at its conclusion. The surveys allowed us ascertain YIPI participants' attitudes towards the police and to note any changes resulting from their participation in the program.

With the community-based programs, our research was combination of focus groups with participating youth, parents, and youth workers, and individual interviews with youth workers. As with YIPI, we spent time at the respective programs observing the youth in their activities. Program leaders told us about their programs' history, their experiences with youth, and about police involvement in the youth programs, noting the successes, challenges and areas for improvement. Focus groups interviews with program participants (youth and parents) yielded information about their experiences in the programs, their perceptions of police, and encounters, if any, they might have had with police in the programs or their community.

Part A: YIPI

The Youth in Policing Initiative (YIPI) started in 2006 through a partnership between the Toronto Police Service, the Toronto Police Services Board, and the Ministry of Children and Youth Services. Initially a three-year pilot program, its early success prompted the government of Ontario to permanently fund its continuation. YIPI aims to promote youth participation in and exposure to the Toronto Police Service. The guiding premise was that, by providing a meaningful employment opportunity for young people from priority areas, the initiative would enhance the relationship between police and youth, and by extension, police and the communities they serve. The program seeks to promote the Toronto Police Service, and more generally law enforcement, as a potential career choice for marginalized/racialized

young people. The program also operates under the assumption that the experiences the youth gain will result in them creating and maintaining relationships with members of the Toronto Police Service, and that they will, in turn, act as ambassadors for the service in their communities. Our research sought to examine the extent to which YIPI has been effective at accomplishing these goals and to ascertain the impact the program has had on the perceptions, experiences, and attitudes of participating youth.

YIPI participants come from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds that characterize their neighbourhoods, and most chose to apply for the program either to gain meaningful work experience or because they had some degree of interest in policing. Having heard about the program from friends, family members, teachers, guidance counselors, and school resource officers, they believed it was a good opportunity to gain and develop the skills and connections that would help them plan their future careers. For the most part, these youth – from often stigmatized priority areas – were motivated to make the most of every opportunity they either sought or that was made available to them.

The results of our survey at the beginning of the program demonstrated that most YIPI participants had fairly positive views of policing and police officers. Even so, the initial survey and the focus group interviews indicated that many of the youth had very little direct encounters with police and were often intimidated and apprehensive around them. Participants also perceived other youth in their communities as having negative opinions of police and this, combined with some of their own misgivings, led a few of them to go as far as to misrepresent their peers about the nature of their summer employment. By the end of the summer, however, both their familiarity with police and policing, as well as their personal levels of comfort with individual police officers, contributed to a significant change in their perceptions, attitudes, and opinions about the police.

Further, by the end of the program, the youth in our focus groups spoke enthusiastically about the personal relationships they had established with members of the Toronto Police Service and how they have come to realize that police officers are in many ways “nice” people, similar to the other people they encountered in their lives. They repeatedly emphasized the significance of learning that police were like “regular people”. Additionally, YIPI greatly increased the participating youths knowledge of policing and the work in which both officers and civilian members of the Toronto Police Service engage. Despite still believing by the end of the summer that youth in their neighbourhoods had a negative view of policing, these youth revealed an ability and, in many cases, a willingness to act as ambassadors for the Toronto Police Service. They were able to provide friends and family members with information about both YIPI and about policing more broadly. The participating youth reflected positively on their 8-week YIPI experiences and considered even the more mundane aspects of their employment (e.g. filing, cleaning) to have given them both job-specific and life skills.

The officers and civilian members who were in charge of supervising YIPI participants at the various divisions and detachments in Toronto recognized the importance of the program and took very seriously the task of providing the participants with meaningful work experiences. Some officers also displayed a great deal of investment in the success of the program and a

strong desire for it to continue improving. These key informants had many opinions about the program and were very forthcoming both in their praise and criticisms. Many of the informants worried that it was difficult to find enough meaningful work for the participants, and the effort to do so created a lot of additional work for them. There were also varying concerns about the selection of youth in terms of job-readiness, and there were some ambiguous feelings about the requirement that the youth selected must reside or attend school in one of Toronto's priority identified areas. Some of the key informants believed that the program should be open to all youth, and others felt that the focus on priority areas risked stigmatizing certain youth and communities. This was consistent with respondents' assessments that, despite some minor disciplinary issues, the YIPI participants were "good kids".

It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which exposure to YIPI participants changed police attitudes about these youth and youth living in particular communities. The officers and civilian service members, however, spoke of the relationships they formed with many of the YIPI participants. Those who had been involved in the program for a number of years revealed that these relationships, formed over the summer, often become ones that are quite meaningful and lasting. Because they cared about both the youth and the program, most of these service members expressed a desire to have a greater amount of input into the operational aspects of the program. They also suggested that the efforts of those who put a significant amount of time and effort into ensuring a positive experience for the youth should receive appropriate recognition.

In sum, YIPI seems to have been successful in fulfilling its objectives. The youth who participate each summer have gained valuable work experience, improved attitudes towards police and policing, and feel positive and confident about their experiences – something they were able to take back to their communities. Youth were able to recognize, develop and pursue some of the career aspirations that attracted them to the program initially. Additionally, the program has facilitated positive and sustained personal relationships between the youth and members of the Toronto Police Service. For a program which was initially met with a great deal of skepticism and resistance from some Toronto Police Service members and some members of the public, this is a remarkable achievement.

Part B: The Community Organizations

Our research with Native Child and Family Services, Tropicana Community Services, and the Youth Association of Academics, Athletics and Character Education similarly set out to examine the degree to which all three of these community-based programs, that received some funding from the Toronto Police Service Board, were successful at providing educational, cultural, and recreational programs for young people. In the process, we also examined how they worked to address or reverse the poor relations between youth and police. Information gathered through individual and focus group interviews with youth workers, agency staff, parents, and the youth in the programs, provided information about the kinds of police involvement in these programs, and the experiences and views of respondents about the police and their involvement.

Our research revealed that many of the youth in these programs tended to be distrustful of the police and viewed them negatively. A number of the youth identified perceived differences among police officers based on gender and race. Women were seen as more friendly and racial minority officers as having to prove their impartiality to their fellow officers by being unfriendly towards youth. Many of the youth expressed concern that they were stereotyped and discriminated against by police because of where they lived or how they dressed. A few youth discussed the distress and frustration they feel when police 'assume the worst' of them and expect delinquent behaviour from them. In general, male youth reported having more personal negative experiences with the police, and female youth showed more hesitation in speaking disparagingly of the police. The youth also expressed concern over the media's mostly negative coverage of their communities, which they hypothesize played a significant role in influencing police attitudes towards them.

Youth workers and parents were very concerned about the poor perceptions that youth and police have of each other, and they were very keen to find ways to facilitate building better relations, mutual understanding, and respect among them. Many of the adult respondents saw misinformation and misperceptions on both sides as responsible for sustaining the problem of young people – especially young men of colour – being regularly stopped and questioned by police. They pointed to the influence of peer group, family, and community members on youth's poor perceptions of the police, but they noted that it is difficult to improve relations when the only interactions that youth have with police is when they see, or are involved in, law-enforcement encounters between community members and the police.

What was clear from the beginning of the research is that community workers, parents, and youth all care deeply about the issue of poor relations between youth and police. Many believed that social and recreational and other exemplary initiatives have the potential to build trust and mutual respect between youth and police insofar as they provide opportunities for cooperative encounters. Everyone we spoke with agreed that the programs that were the best at improving police-youth relations must be long-term, consistent and take place in a youth-friendly setting where police and youth learn to see each other as individuals, rather than as undifferentiated members of an oppositional group.

Rather than sharing in the youths' generally avoidant strategies for dealing with police, the youth workers and parents expressed the desire to have police officers become more involved in community programs with youth, and all said they would welcome police officers into their programs and community centres. Many spoke of successful efforts they had made in working with individual police officers, but in most cases they felt that the lack of long-term and consistent programs meant that what has materialized so far has had a limited impact on a small number of police officers and youth. Several of the program staff members said that when they received the program funding from the TPSB, they expected that this would create a relationship between their programs and the Toronto Police Service, or their community and a number of police officers. Nevertheless, despite the challenges and the fact that they have been unable to establish the kind of relationship they wished to have with the police, respondents remained optimistic about the potential for more programs to improve youth-police relations in their communities, and they were eager to work in partnership with law enforcement members to ensure that more positive relationships develop.

Recommendations

The following recommendations surfaced from our research findings with both YIPI and the other community organizations, and include suggestions made by youth, parents, members of the Toronto Police Service (Toronto Police Service), and community workers. Often, despite their varied and at times contrasting experiences, these key informants' reflected comparable ideas about how their programs could be supported, modified, and improved.

Youth in Policing Initiative recommendations:

The Youth in Policing Initiative demonstrates how young people's views of the police can change when programs facilitate sustained exchanges that work towards the development of personal relationships among police and youth, especially those from marginalized communities. These exchanges and relationships among youth and police need to be encouraged. Our research has shown that both YIPI staff and the supervisors of YIPI participants play a pivotal role in achieving this goal; hence, through their collective efforts, supportive mentorship, and suggestions about the program, YIPI can continue to be a rewarding experience for youth, members of the police service, and by extension, Toronto communities. In this regard, the following recommendations are offered for consideration:

- The leadership of TPS should continue to demonstrate and affirm its support of YIPI and its staff, in order to encourage and build widespread support among members of the police service.
- Building on the support among members of the Toronto Police Service, efforts should be made to increase the voluntary participation of officers as well as the satisfaction of those who take on the role of supervising YIPI participants.
- YIPI supervisors should be provided with more opportunities to give input into the operational aspects of the program, and be invited to participate in the development of the program.
- Members of the Toronto Police Service who display an extraordinary degree of commitment to the program and its youth should be formally recognized for their efforts, in order to encourage ongoing participation.

Community Organizations Recommendations:

The funding provided by Toronto Police Services Board to community organizations for programs is highly valued by the organizations. These organizations are ready and willing to build more formal relationships with Toronto police officers. Enhancing the relationship between youth, community and police is one of the many significant goals of TPSB funding. Parents and youth workers have expressed their wish to work more closely with members of the Toronto police, stating that this could perhaps be facilitated if only 1) they would know

who to contact, and 2) more opportunities for connections between police and youth were possible. Given these interests, the following recommendations are offered for consideration:

- The Toronto Police Service should establish more opportunities for cooperative encounters between police and youth. As much as possible, a dedicated liaison person should be made available to facilitate these connections.
- Efforts should be made to facilitate long-term and consistent relationships with officers who can work with youth in building police-youth-community communications.
- The TPSB should improve and facilitate communication between members of the Toronto Police Service and those community programs that receive funding from TPSB by encouraging organizations to report regularly on their activities.
- The intimidating factor of uniforms was noted in most of the interviews, indicating that this is a practice that is worth looking into, especially in terms of facilitating the interactions between police, youth and communities.

Moving Forward:

This research presents an overview of the Youth in Policing Initiative and of three community programs partially funded by the Toronto Police Services Board. YIPI serves as an important initiative that opens up other possibilities for understanding youth-police-school relations. For example, we heard from YIPI participants about the significant role that School Resource Officers (SROs) played in introducing the initiative to students. Unlike with YIPI, where we were able to observe the program in progress and thus note its effectiveness, we were unable to do the same with all of the community programs given that two had been completed years earlier. More and continuing research needs to be undertaken to assess the impact of programs that attempt to enhance the relationships between police and community, and particularly between police and youth.

- Future research on programs that receive funding from the TPSB should, as much as possible, commence with the program in order to fully appraise participants' perceptions, attitudes, and program effectiveness throughout.
- There needs to be research that assesses the long-term impact of YIPI on past participants, their peers, and their communities.
- Insofar as School Resource Officers (SROs) occupy a pivotal position – often as a youth's first sustained police contact – research should be undertaken to document their contributions to building youth-police-school relationships.
- In addition to hearing from youth about their encounters with police, more research is needed with police officers that provide officers' perspectives of their role and interactions with youth.