ADDRESSING THE PHENOMENON OF GANGS

The Youth and Street Gangs Project:
History, Basic Principles, and Major Developments of a
Prevention Project Based on Community Social Development

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Abstract: The authors discuss the apparent proliferation of street gangs, noting that society's first reflex is to try to eradicate the phenomenon through repression, which is sometimes necessary when gang activities become truly dangerous, but is insufficient to truly eliminate the problem. They trace the evolution of the Youth and Street Gang Project in three districts of Greater Montréal and analyze the new and instructive information it provides. This innovative project aims to help the communities develop a prevention model, but also makes research an integral part of the process, so the process can be described and analyzed as its various stages unfold. Based on a number of years of data, the authors argue that while the project is designed essentially to prevent the phenomenon of gangs, its ultimate challenge is to find ways to encourage youth to integrate and join their communities, in the same way that they integrate and join gangs.

Although it is not new, the phenomenon of street gangs has been the object of unprecedented attention in Québec and Canada, particularly over the past ten years. During this period, the presence of gangs has become increasingly obvious; in some neighbourhoods, it has reached the point where social and community activities have become almost paralyzed.

How, then, does one describe this phenomenon? Has it greatly increased? Is it a matter of greater visibility? Have our youth changed? Perhaps the answer is a bit of all three. Statistics, with all their faults and qualities, seem to indicate that we are witnessing an increase in the phenomenon, particularly when it comes to gang-related violence. It is also obvious that the media and agents of social control (both formal and informal), as well as the researchers, are paying much greater attention to the issue. Finally, it would appear that youth have also changed. It is no longer rare to hear experienced educators say that they cannot relate to their students, or to have parents admit that they cannot cope with their children any more.

In the face of this apparent proliferation in the number of gangs and the subsequent increased concern on the part of citizens when they feel threatened, the first reflex was to try to eradicate the phenomenon. Attempts were made to nip in the bud the apparently greater and more widespread activity of gangs. An essentially repressive approach was adopted whereby authorities attempted to dismantle gangs by attacking the hard-core elements involved. While taking such action is sometimes necessary, particularly when

gang activities become truly dangerous, it is certainly not sufficient to eliminate the problem. One must understand that the more or less delinquent activity of gangs represents only one facet of their organization. Indeed, behind every gang are gang members, and behind every gang member is a young person, who is, in turn, part of today's so-called changing and difficult to understand youth. It is in the context of these facts and considerations while also enriched by extensive writings (Hébert, Hamel, & Savoie, 1997) and by a survey of present and past youth gang members, as well as street youth interveners working with these youth (Hamel, Fredette, Blais, & Bertot, 1998) that the Youth and Street Gangs Project was conceived. In the following pages, we trace the project's evolution and analyze the new and instructive information it provides.

Although the project has been described as innovative, it was nonetheless inspired by recommendations made by numerous experts in the field. A large number of articles and studies concerning gangs have been produced since the 1980s, but the fallout from the impact of the phenomenon, fanned by media coverage, would appear to have delayed the comprehensive implementation of these recommendations. Indeed, gangs have been the topic of a number of studies since the 1980s, most of which attest to the alarming growth of the phenomenon in North America. As a result, public opinion has been put on alert. One should be cautious when interpreting these studies, since the data they are based on is inevitably affected not only by the incredible diversity of types of gangs and the ways in which they manifest themselves, but also by the methodology used to collect such data. It is difficult to produce a single all-encompassing definition of gangs since they are so dissimilar and constantly change their make-up, modus operandi, and orientation. As a result, studies that analyze the extent of the phenomenon, because they are generally based on different definitions, do not reflect the true picture. In any case, the undeniable discomfort and worry experienced by the general public – and here we include experts, social workers, parents, and former gang members themselves – necessitates that new action be taken in addition to complementary repressive intervention. Therefore, the Youth and Street Gangs Project has been conceived at an opportune moment.

The Youth and Street Gangs Project

The proponents of the Youth and Street Gangs Project propose to combat the phenomenon of gangs through a prevention program based on *community social development*[1]. To this end, community groups were approached in each of the three communities in the Greater Montréal region where pilot projects were underway. For the benefit of their communities, including their youth, it was suggested that they devote their combined strength and expertise to developing a renewed understanding of the phenomenon of gangs as well as a joint action plan to combat the phenomenon. In other words, the Youth and Street Gangs Project is an opportunity to develop and test a social theory based on the principles of empowerment, organization, and cooperation. These principles are considered indispensable ingredients in preventing the formation of gangs and their associated problems, in particular violence and youth crime.

The Youth and Street Gangs Project is not only innovative in terms of the prevention model it aims to help the communities develop, but also in making research an

integral part of the process, so as to describe and analyze the process as its various stages unfold. The Youth and Street Gangs Project team faces the challenge of managing and structuring the research process, which will take the form of a participatory evaluation, while being careful not to influence and direct the process itself. This means that the researchers have to be constantly aware of their actions and of the influence that they can have over the other stakeholders, who generally have never been involved in research in this manner, i.e., as an equal partner concerned with the betterment of society, where gangs would have neither the right nor, better yet, the reason to rule. More often than not, researchers working in this area apply and test preconceived notions that correspond to their own vision. Obviously, while this vision has been developed based on rich and in-depth knowledge, it is nonetheless generic and often out of context. As a result, making practical use of the research becomes difficult, or even impossible, for those working in the field.

Given the above, the stakes for the research project are high; the biggest and most important challenge is, without a doubt, to identify the role and place occupied by research in the processes that are, in fact, the principal goal of the study. This explains why we decided to go into more detail in this article than is normally done when presenting a project. A status report, or even a description of the objectives and general orientation of the Youth and Street Gangs Project, did not seem a sufficient foundation on which to base an analysis. Consequently, we decided to first describe the history and sociological framework that define the research (as well as its theoretical foundation) as influenced by the research team's reference points and training. It was at this juncture that the first signs of the influence of the research itself became apparent, since the results generated during the first analyses not only reflected the approach chosen by the researchers at the outset, but also influenced the recommendations for action and prevention. In addition, since the prevailing context opened the door to the possibility of new financing, the research team had the opportunity to develop the new recommendations presented to the Montreal Urban Community Police Department (SPCUM) into a five-year action plan on street gangs. We will discuss this plan in more detail later on. However, this meant that the team would be required to manage the project launch and promotion. To do so, the team would need to develop a clear message that communicated its vision of the problem, possible solutions, and its role in the process per se. As a result, the research team occupied a unique and influential position within the project – one that we propose to identify and document in this article.

The Origins of the Youth and Street Gangs Project

It is important to remember that a number of years have passed since our first research project was undertaken, resulting in the launch of the Youth and Street Gangs Project, as currently funded by the Departments of Justice Canada and Public Safety Canada (formerly the Solicitor General of Canada). In response to a call for tenders initiated in 1995 by the Montréal Urban Community Police Department (SPCUM)[2], the "Centres de jeunesse de Montréal" (Montréal Youth Centres) (CJM), the "Institut universitaire dans le domaine de la violence chez les jeunes" (An unofficial translation would be University Institute on Violence among Youth), and the "Institut de recherche pour le développement social des jeunes" (An unofficial translation would be Research

Institute for the Social Development of Youth) (IRDS) were given the mandate to carry out an initial study that involved creating an inventory of the existing literature about street gangs. This inventory would be used to help draw up a five-year strategic plan designed to prevent the development of the next generation of criminals in Greater Montréal. Specifically, the SPCUM wanted to know how gangs had been defined in the literature to date. It wanted information on the forms, types, and characteristics of the phenomenon, the way such groups are set up and structured, the desirable and undesirable aspects of gangs from the perspective of youth, the changes in the criminal world linked to the amplification of the phenomenon, and finally, the solutions known to be effective and promising in combatting the phenomenon.

These aspects of the phenomenon of gangs were documented based mainly on the U.S. literature, supplemented by a few articles from Canada and Québec (Hébert, Hamel, & Savoie, 1997). For one of the first times, the phenomenon of gangs was analyzed from a psycho-socio-criminological perspective. This was done in response to a request from the SPCUM, which believed that the adoption of a more broad-scale approach was a necessary part of the overall objective of formulating a process that differed markedly from those undertaken to date in Québec. The objective was to develop viable and effective prevention projects. This type of analysis would probably not have been undertaken if one of the researchers had not been trained as a social worker, and the other as a psychologist.

The same perspective was adopted in conducting a second study, this time in the field. In May 1997, shortly after the first report was tabled, the SPCUM granted a new research mandate to its partners (CJM and IRDS), who in turn invited a researcher from the International Centre on Comparative Criminology (CICC) to join them. Thus, a new research team was formed based on an alliance between psychology, sociology, and criminology.

As part of this second research project, the SPCUM wanted to conduct interviews with former gang members among youth in the Montréal region. Its goal was to verify to what extent the youths' experience within gangs (the phenomenological aspect of their experience) and the measures they recommended to counter the phenomenon (the cognitive aspect) corresponded to the information already gleaned from the literature, as well as the first steps taken to counter the phenomenon. The overall goal was to tease out the aspects that would best apply in the Greater Montréal context, and this time the research was to result in a concrete proposal for a five-year strategic plan based on the body of knowledge accumulated since 1995. Thus, meetings were set up with 31 youth (21 boys and 10 girls, including 23 ex-gang members and 8 active gang members). The objective was to learn about their experience within gangs, the reasons for and results of joining a gang, and their opinions on possible solutions and measures to combat or reduce the phenomenon of gangs. The youth described how and why they joined and, in some cases, left the gang. They also described ways to prevent youth from being tempted by the adventuresome allure of being a gang member, and how to help those who wanted out.

Following this, it was deemed appropriate to supplement the knowledge gained from the literature and the youths' experience with that of 15 key stakeholders from within the police, educational, judicial, social services, and community services sectors. These individuals agreed to participate in a semi-directive interview where they were invited to share their knowledge and perceptions of the experience of youth in gangs, as well as their recommendations on how best to address the issue.

The report, tabled in May 1998 (Hamel, Fredette, Blais, & Bertot, 1998, in collaboration with Cousineau), highlighted a surprising consistency among these three sources of knowledge (the literature, the youth, and the key stakeholders). All this accumulated knowledge formed the basis of the five-year strategic plan – more commonly known today as the Youth and Street Gangs Project – which is the subject of this article.

Theoretical Principles

Our initial research project, one of the few such large-scale attempts to deal with the phenomenon of gangs in Montréal, was aimed at analyzing the complex question of gangs by trying to shed light not only on the violence and criminality of these groups, but also on the experience and satisfaction derived by the youth, as well as the quality of relationships they had with their environment.

This approach inevitably reflected the influence of the theoretical models that inspired us. First of all, one of our reference points was Maslow's (1973, p. 207) theory of human motivation; this theory states that to ensure their survival, balance, and integrity, humans are motivated to struggle continually to meet their basic needs. Maslow identifies five categories of fundamental needs. Psychological needs (basic needs such as eating, protecting oneself from cold and heat) come first. Other types of needs follow, including those related to personal safety and security, the need to associate and belong (social needs), self-love (the need for self-esteem), and the need for self-actualization and realizing one's potential (self-achievement).

Next we adopted Bronfenbrenner's (1979, p. 330) model of social ecology as a basis for action. The social ecology model posits that we should consider not only the individual (with his or her characteristics, personality, and needs), but also the community and, above all, the interaction between the two, which shapes and transforms what is known as social integration or affiliation. This model proposes that the individual and his or her environment (the ecosystem) are in constant interaction and that each influences the direction and development of the other. Furthermore, the ecosystem is in turn driven by the influence of other micro-systems (family, school, work, network of friends), by the quality of the relationships among them, and, in a larger sense, by the influence of beliefs, laws, and policies.

These two models contrast with other theories generally associated with the field of delinquency and most often used by researchers when addressing the issue of gangs. A key theory among the latter is that of social control. This theory holds that when youth

have strong links with conventional institutions, thereby making illegal activities unacceptable, they are less inclined to join gangs and, as a result, are less likely to be subject to the influence of their peers (Elliot, 1979, 1985, 1989, as cited in Covey, Menard, & Franzese, 1992). In the same order of logic, another dominant theory when it comes to explaining the phenomenon of gangs is that of social disorganization (McKinney, 1988). This theory states that the inability of a society to contain and control the deviant behaviour of its members is an indicator of a disorganized society. Such a society provides fertile ground for the development of deviant subcultures, i.e., milieus and micro-systems where delinquency and the resultant illicit activities become a tradition and a way of life (Cohen, 1955; Cloward & Ohlin, 1960). Thus, certain neighbourhoods by their very nature generate gangs, and individuals living there are forced to join regardless of their needs and wishes. The gangs become the law in these milieus (Moore & Garcia, 1978, p. 239; Vigil, 1988, p. 202).

The theory of differential opportunities is also crucial when studying gangs. This theory maintains that in a context where economic and social opportunities are few or non-existent, the most disadvantaged youth believe that they have more to gain from joining gangs than the community at large. These advantages are derived from their status as gang members, as well as from the power, excitement, and pleasure that stem from belonging to a group. Although this is close to the "needs theory", the benefits and opportunities sought by youth do not seem to be seen as essential needs, which would legitimize somewhat the desire to fill them.

Finally, Thornberry (1998), in his work based on the social facilitation model, argues that gangs act as a gateway to criminal activity. To some extent, such groups present opportunities for deviance and delinquency, which is particularly attractive to a certain category of youth who, because of their specific personality and characteristics, are attracted to marginality and the world of gangs.

Although the above comments are no more than a broad-brush overview of the main models generally used to explain the phenomenon of gangs, they nevertheless point to several clear trends. On the one hand, there is no acceptance of the fact that youth may have legitimate reasons, such as stability and adaptation, for joining gangs; this despite the fact, acknowledged notably by LeBlanc (1991) that joining a group is a normal and healthy reflex during adolescence. If youth join gangs, it is because they are grappling with a deviant personality or other personal difficulties that cause them to be particularly attracted to power and easy solutions. Accordingly, such individuals do not have the qualities required to change (or even have a grasp on) their environment, particularly since this environment appears to be relatively immutable, disorganized, incapable of containing violence and crime, and conducive to the emergence of deviant subcultures. It would appear from this overview that the individual and his or her environment do not influence each other or, at the very least, that this relationship is not of great interest to those researchers who adopt the models we have just described.

The hypotheses underlying these theories of delinquency run counter to the premises of the models on which we chose to base our research into the phenomenon of

gangs. Our view is more in tune with constructivist paradigms of the type that inspired sociological studies by Touraine (1992) and Dubet (1994), which hold that members of the human community have the ability to take their lives in hand and to define their own goals in life. These paradigms also assume that people are empowered and can impact the external conditions that affect and influence their course in life, in order to achieve their individual and collective dreams (Dallaire, 1998).

Knowledge Developed on the Phenomenon of Gangs Within the Framework of our Research

Despite the challenge presented by adopting such an approach, which was inspired by a paradigm rarely applied to the phenomenon of gangs, the outcomes of the initial research carried out through the Youth and Street Gangs Project are strikingly clear. They basically show that beyond the violence and crime, the phenomenon of gangs is associated with another, equally important problem: the fact that youth join gangs to find a way to meet their most basic needs (a sense of belonging, acknowledgement, and validation) – needs that they are unable to meet elsewhere in their environment (family, school, community).

The Personal and Social Characteristics of Youth Who Join Gangs

At the outset, these results help to flesh out the portrait of youth who join gangs, indicating that in addition to their propensity for violence, these youth also stand out because of their isolation, or even exclusion. Apart from their network of friends and acquaintances, they have very few ties and share very few of the values of the institutions around them. Their family ties have been weakened over time by repeated ruptures, and school neither validates nor interests them. Their violence and the risks they seem ready to take in facing death and constantly pushing their limits appear to be the only way they have of validating their existence, i.e., of feeling alive. Prior to joining a gang, none or very few of their life experiences had taught them their true value or given them the opportunity to achieve their dreams.

The Gang Experience

Thus, when one looks at the roots of the violence and criminal acts committed by young gang members, and analyzes the context in which such acts occur, they can be seen in another light. From this perspective, it would appear that they are generally part of a dynamic whereby youth are often forced into this behaviour because it prevents or postpones the breakup of the group, and therefore the loss of ties. These youth are literally intoxicated by the intensity of the relations they develop within these groups, and they are willing to do anything to protect them. Preventing the death of the group is equivalent to protecting their own existence.

It should also be pointed out that violence and crime are not the only activities of young gang members. Even today, and despite the changes that have occurred in terms of issues and vocations, these groups continue to serve as a place for youth to socialize and

to go about building their identity and personality. Moreover, it is acknowledged that the experience of youth in these groups is influenced by the latter's orientation. Indeed, only a small percentage of groups in the world of gangs regularly engage in violence and crime, and these groups have a strong and stable structure designed to allow them to control illegal markets. As for the rest, even in the most criminal groups, the structure and level of organization necessary for their operation means that members occupy different social ranks (leader, peripheral members, and associate members) and play different roles (occasional or specific delinquency, recruitment, enforcement of rules, planning or carrying out of crimes). This being the case, the experience in gangs may not necessarily be linked directly to aggression, but rather to the avoidance of aggression (some youth occupying intermediary positions are able to avoid certain situations or tests) or to the avoidance of its consequences (here one thinks of the young women who prostitute themselves to meet the economic needs of the group, or of the young men who are forced to get involved in turf wars).

Affiliation

With respect to affiliation, the phenomenon of gangs appears first and foremost to be a matter of belonging and identification for youth. One can even state that the main reason youth join a gang is to obtain protection that is not forthcoming from their entourage. And if their judgment concerning their environment is in fact correct, it can only serve to reinforce the negative perception they already have of the world in which they live.

Seen from this perspective, gangs feed on the attraction felt by youth by projecting an image of strength, care, and attention. Moreover, the majority of the youth we met told us that they saw gangs as an opportunity to build a new family. Many described their experience in terms of a true love story, recalling the pleasure they felt in being supported, united, understood, acknowledged, and respected…for the first time!

This forced us to rethink our preconceived notion that the only reason youth joined gangs was because they felt threatened and intimidated; on the contrary, it would appear that in most cases they are won over gradually in a seductive and friendly manner.

Disaffiliation

Similarly, youth recounted their departure from gangs with nostalgia, saying that they still felt a terrible emptiness as a result of the rupture. It is true that leaving a gang can certainly be brutal, since it is generally triggered by a climactic event accompanied by violence and danger through an arrest or an institutional intervention (child welfare). But at this stage, the departure is only physical. Stunned and dazed, these youth must first get their wits about them before completing their disaffiliation process. Some feel empty at this point; they had been so devoted to and dependent on gangs, and had lived such high-intensity experiences (strong emotions, risk-taking, and adventures), that they had completely lost touch with themselves. Indeed, although leaving gangs can cause great disarray, it is not so much because of the fear of reprisals, but rather because it forces these youth to reclaim their sense of self.

Recommendations for Action and Prevention

These results placed the angst of these youth at the very centre of our attention. Apparently youth join gangs to create ties and to find a sense of belonging that they do not seem to find (or are not able to develop) elsewhere. At the same time, these results reinforced our belief that it is possible to prevent the phenomenon of gangs only by setting in place the conditions required for *youth to join and integrate into their community in the same way they join and integrate into gangs.*

Even before we had met these youth and the key stakeholders involved, the writings of the most respected experts in the field of gangs (Spergel, 1995; Howell, 2000) had already pointed us in this direction. What we have retained from these experts is the great value they place on taking a community-based approach. It is their view that such an approach can target a number of variables at once (youth, their families, schools, and communities) and include a number of possible strategies, the most important of which would be mobilizing the community, social intervention, creating significant opportunities for youth, organizational development, and repression when necessary. They believe that this set of conditions is necessary if one wishes to prevent the phenomenon of gangs. In their view, once such conditions have been brought together and incorporated over a continuum of intervention, the ability exists to create synergy among the various institutions; this synergy, in turn, is indispensable for the true integration of youth into the community. Under these conditions, gangs would appear less attractive.

This is why we based our proposal, which had been presented to the SPCUM in the form of a five-year strategic plan, on the principles of the community development approach (or what we prefer to call the "community **social** development" approach). We prefer this latter terminology because it better highlights the possibilities for change and advancement that we attribute to the approach. These possibilities stem from the empowerment of communities (local or regional) that get organized and take themselves in hand, thereby increasing their chances of developing significant and appropriate solutions. In other words, community social development paves the ways for actions and interventions that are tailor-made, personalized, and coherent. Furthermore, the conditions are perfectly adapted to the complex nature of the phenomenon of gangs and to the objective that must be sought – to encourage the participation of all youth in society.

The initiative that we are proposing draws inspiration in particular from a model of positive social development called Communities That Care (Hawkins & Catalano, 1992). It was developed within the framework of a program that was designed to prevent delinquency and drug abuse, which often go hand in hand. This model proposes a specific frame of reference intended to assist in a concrete process of community mobilization and social development. Moreover, we were undoubtedly guided by the arguments its proponents make with respect to the pertinence – if not the necessity – of creating a positive social environment around youth. Regardless of who they are, this would be a way of satisfying their needs and ensuring that they recognize the opportunity that their

community is offering them to learn, to build their lives, and to effect change. In such an environment, delinquency would in fact tend to lose its vitality, as would all the other associated problems.

Following the lead of the model's designers, we endorse five fundamental objectives that have been proven effective (Hawkins & Catalano, 1992) in contributing to the development of a positive social environment for youth. They include:

1. to encourage links with adults (by identifying individuals and role models);
2. to offer youth real and concrete opportunities to integrate into the community (by giving them responsibilities and having confidence in them);
3. to train youth to develop the necessary skills so that their integration is a success;
4. to recognize their efforts to integrate (reinforcement); and
5. to develop clear values and role models so that youth are truly tempted to adopt them (coherence of messages).

In even more concrete terms, the five-year strategic plan presented in 1998 proposes that pilot projects should be carried out in three communities in the Greater Montréal region. These communities were chosen on the basis of two criteria: firstly, because we knew that they were concerned in different ways by the phenomenon of gangs, and secondly, because they were known for their experience in working collectively. These two ingredients seemed essential, since the main goal was to create – based on the experience of these three communities – a model for preventing the phenomenon of gangs that is built upon the principles of community social development and raises the twofold challenge of cooperation and partnership.

As a result, these communities were chosen based on a certain number of criteria. There was no provision for comparing them to a "control" community, since the objective was not to experiment with a project but to actually build one with each of these pilot communities using their expertise and know-how (which would be identified through a detailed analysis of the processes involved).

Initiatives to Follow Up on the Project

The month following the tabling of the five-year strategic plan, the Department of Justice and the Department of the Solicitor General of Canada launched a $32 million crime prevention program. This program was part of a process initiated in 1994 aimed at implementing the National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention. The National Strategy had three main objectives:

1. to encourage collaboration among key government and non-governmental partners in order to reduce crime and victimization;
2. to help communities develop and implement local solutions to problems that contribute to crime and victimization; and

3. to increase public awareness and support for effective crime prevention measures.

Among the measures adopted to implement the National Strategy, the federal government set up a number of programs for financing innovative projects. One of these programs, the Crime Prevention Investment Fund, was set up to identify and evaluate social development approaches likely to prevent crime. Its first mandate was to collect reliable data on effective or promising ways to reduce risk factors related to crime and victimization.

Given the great similarity between the objectives of the National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention and the recommendations that we had just presented to the SPCUM concerning the prevention of the phenomenon of gangs, the research team felt that it should take action. The Crime Prevention Investment Fund clearly offered a unique opportunity to implement the five-year strategic plan. Indeed, breaking with the often-criticized tradition of short-term funding, the Crime Prevention Investment Fund was open to projects of up to four years in duration. Furthermore, since it was designed above all to facilitate the evaluation of social development approaches, it was up to the research team to take the lead role. It would appear that if this opportunity for financing had not presented itself, the researchers would never have taken such an initiative. They might well have waited for the SPCUM to give the green light to the five-year strategic plan, as it had done for the previous two phases. But the SPCUM had other priorities at that time, particularly linked to the major restructuring it had undertaken with a view to becoming a community police service. On the other hand, the research team could not and would not attempt to go it alone. For one thing, the team wanted to follow the same principles of partnership and collaboration it had been espousing; for another, adhering to these principles was a precondition set by the federal departments concerned when considering any applications for funding.

The first ally of the research team turned out to be the Centres jeunesse de Montréal (Montréal Youth Centres – CJM). In fact, the team was already affiliated with the CJM since they sit on the Board of Directors of the IRDS, along with the Université de Montréal and the Université de Québec à Montréal. The CJM attempted to pave the way for the researchers by putting them in touch with two coordinators working in regions that included two of the communities targeted by the five-year strategic plan. As a result, a contact person from CJM introduced the research team to the Villeray-La Petite Patrie Committee to Prevent Violence, itself a member of the Table de concertation jeunesse (TN – an unofficial translation would be Youth Dialogue Coordinating Committee). The CJM contact person had been a member of both the "Table…" and the "Committee..." for several years and had an excellent reputation in the field.

The first meeting took place at the beginning of 1999, in other words nine months after the five-year strategic plan had been presented to the SPCUM. From then on, members of the research team participated regularly at meetings of the Villeray-La Petite Patrie Committee to Prevent Violence, allowing them to become familiar with their new and future partners. The Committee was told right from the beginning that the research

team wanted to submit a letter of intent to the two federal departments with a view to implementing the five-year strategic plan, and wanted to do so with the support of local groups. The letter was sent in July of the same year, with the support of not only the "Table de concertation jeunesse Villeray-La Petite Patrie", but also that of the "La Petite Patrie CLSC" ("Centre local de santé communautaire") and of PACT de rue, a community group from the same community. Other supporters included the "Centre jeunesse de Montréal" (CJM), Service de police de Montréal (SPM), "Centre international de criminologie comparée" (CICC), and the "Institut de recherche du développement social" (IRDS). Finally, the VISA-Jeunes Committee, part of the "Table de concertation jeunesse de Montréal-Nord", also supported the initiative. Links were established with this second community a month before the letter was sent via a local CLSC community organizer who had been approached by one of the researchers.

Thus, the five-year strategic plan began with the participation of two communities. The third community in Longueil on the south shore of Montréal joined the project during the second year of funding. It met the same criteria as the first two pilot communities, in other words, it had stakeholders that were concerned with the gang phenomenon in their milieu and was known for working in a collaborative fashion.

Funding was officially granted in June 2000. Prior to this, the research team had written an addendum to the letter of intent sent in September 1999, had been authorized to submit an application in January 1999, and had won the commitment of the CJM, SPM, CICC, and IRDS to contribute human resources (along with other partners from the two communities) and material resources that the funding agency wanted to include in the overall budget requested as part of the local contribution.

The Message

June 2000 marked the beginning of an experience whose funding was ensured for four years, at least with respect to the evaluative research process. This process took the form of a participatory evaluation that ran parallel to the research process, since this is the main mandate of the Crime Prevention Investment Fund. Although this was good news for the research team, the community groups were not exactly jumping for joy. Obviously the strength of the project would depend not only on the associated research, but also, and above all, on the energy devoted by the key stakeholders in terms of developing the best activities and creating the best networks of partners. Why, then, was only the research segment funded? This problem, which had already been pointed out by the community groups, led the researchers to set aside a portion of the first draft budget for paying community group representatives to attend committee meetings. But in the view of the funding agency this was not justified; it felt that the pilot communities had been chosen precisely because they already had established networks, which the Youth and Street Gangs Project should simply join.

The researchers then had to come up with another plan to ensure that the project would function smoothly. This took the form of hiring liaison officers. Chosen and appointed by the community groups (in collaboration with the research team, since they

were to be paid out of grant monies), the role of the liaison officers would be to lighten the workload of the respective community groups in the overall process. Accordingly, the liaison agents took charge of tasks related to organizing meetings, and attempted to facilitate the work of the partners by providing support between meetings. They collected information and met with certain partners that had decided not to work with the committee on a regular basis. Their role was also to guide and educate the researchers on certain aspects likely to influence the process, particularly with respect to the culture of collaboration within the community, as well as key historical events. With this in mind, they listened, interpreted, and responded to the concerns of the community groups. They also made presentations to other committees that were concerned with the issue of gangs and with whom it was important to build support – notably the Table de concertation jeunesse – to explain the orientation and progress of the partners' work. On several occasions they even provided research assistance by helping to collect data.

In a context where funding for research is experienced by many as a veritable paradox, this shows how researchers must adapt and attempt to find strategies that, without completely fulfilling the desire of community groups to be acknowledged, at least makes the research process more attractive to them. It is understandable that researchers would want to work closely with these groups; in fact, they have no choice. Let us not forget that this goes to the very heart of the analysis that the research team was mandated to carry out: to chart the evolution of a project initiated by the groups themselves, and carried out based on their expertise and strengths.

With this in mind, the researchers made a point of acting in an open fashion. First of all, they laid their cards on the table as to their understanding of the phenomenon of gangs, as well as their view of the preventive action and approach to be taken in order to address it. Their message was the same as that described above.

As well, the researchers told the community groups that they were not approaching them with the idea of implementing a preconceived program. Rather, the role that the research team wanted to play was to provide the groups with resources and infrastructure, and to support them during a process that would enable them to formulate and implement their own action plan. In other words, the research team wanted to support them in formulating and implementing their own action plan by making available the team's resources. The contribution made by the research team took several forms: adoption of a number of strategies designed to ensure the smooth functioning of the process already underway; ongoing and instructive evaluation based on observations recorded as the experience unfolded; ideas concerning the choices to be offered; clarification of the information required to enable the communities to move ahead with their project; and finally, the sharing of knowledge with the stakeholders involved concerning program evaluation.

This process should force those involved neither to set up new projects nor to allocate new resources. Rather, it is a matter of reviewing and exchanging, explaining what has been done in the past, deciding how much of this can be used in an action plan based on a renewed understanding of the phenomenon of gangs, and determining how the

actions or services can be organized. In this way, a program can be hammered out within a coherent, integrated framework that is adapted to the reality of the milieu. Thus, in accordance with the recommendations of the experts, action plans must not only be applied locally, but must also be drawn up and decided upon by local stakeholders. This is because to a great extent these groups create and are aware of their own situation and their own resources better than anyone else. In other words, the researchers encourage these groups to embark on a process rather than to target a specific destination; at the same time, the team members expect to be carried, guided, and influenced in a direction that they would not want to determine on their own. They contribute as much as possible, in the hope that the communities do the same.

This way of proceeding can be explained not only by the fact that the researchers do not see themselves as the only experts involved, but also because of the fear of repeating past errors. For example, by setting themselves up as leaders and experts, researchers in the past may well have evaluated and generated knowledge, but they also neglected to leave a lasting contribution or heritage behind when they left. In such situations, once projects had been completed and hypotheses tested, the only thing left behind were feelings of abuse and abandonment that exacerbated the resentment and suspicion with which research was viewed. In contrast, if the research being proposed in this case was successfully carried out in line with its principles and clearly demonstrated that its hypothesis was well founded, then when the project was completed in 2004, the participating community groups would be strengthened. Furthermore, they would want to continue their struggle to prevent the phenomenon of gangs and would also be capable of guiding other communities wishing to follow the same path.

This context and these reasons were more than sufficient for the researchers to adopt an interactive and participatory approach, despite the fact that it was a new way of operating. It meant that they had almost no concrete examples to guide them, and thus would have to make do with general principles. The challenge would be to integrate these principles into the process without losing sight of their original vocation or their credibility as researchers.

Right from the beginning, the research team announced that the community groups would be called upon throughout the process. They would be asked to participate actively in the project evaluation, by helping to plan the project, build the necessary tools, and interpret the results. In return, the team members hoped that the groups would buy into the research and help them to formulate and structure their ideas, review certain aspects of their process, systematize certain actions, take stock of their action plan, verify to what extent the established objectives were met, and evaluate the impact of their actions. Designed in this way, the research project would help to support and to feed the overall process by encouraging it to develop and unfold, by documenting its phases and outcomes, and by identifying models and benchmarks for other communities that might want to try to prevent the phenomenon of gangs.

Given the size of this challenge, the research team took the initiative of proposing to the communities that another committee be set up. This committee would not be local

in nature. Rather, it would bring together representatives of regional or supra-regional institutions able to provide an overview of the situation and willing to provide their support to the local groups. The members of this committee would be required to respect the initial agreement established with the communities, i.e., that the latter would retain control over the action plans throughout the process, both with respect to their orientation and their implementation. Moreover, one representative from each local action committee would be designated to sit on the regional or supra-regional committee, thereby ensuring consistency.

The regional or supra-regional committee could take a number of actions to fulfill its mandate: implement protocols or policies to encourage the cohesion and coordination of activities at both the local and regional level; contribute a variety of services; help find financing required to implement action plans; and finally, help communities to solve problems that might arise. As well, the members of this committee could question local stakeholders as to the orientation and implementation of their action plan, provide constructive criticism, give their point of view, and even share information about their own projects and experiences.

The committee would not ultimately be formed until later on during the first year of the project – a year that would be devoted essentially to strengthening ties, forming networks, and completing the initial planning phases. In particular, this would involve preparing a status report, developing a common vocabulary, clarifying priorities and objectives, making an inventory of the resources available, and possibly even choosing the change indicators.

In any case, this is what we were able to announce in terms of the subsequent steps, based on our generic understanding of all the stages to be completed. We did so reluctantly, however, because at that time we wanted at all costs to avoid overly influencing the process and the choices adopted by our partners. We did, however, have to respond to the community groups' need to have a concrete illustration of the road ahead, so that they could make an informed decision as to their level of commitment. We were already finding it necessary to compromise when it came to all our cherished principles and theories, and to learn to adapt as quickly and efficiently as possible to community realities.

Conclusion

The Youth and Street Gangs Project is designed essentially to prevent the phenomenon of gangs. But the project's ultimate challenge is to find ways to encourage youth to integrate and join their community, in the same way that they integrate and join gangs. This is the project's leitmotif. Our previous research on gang-related literature and our own survey work previously discussed lead us to believe that, in order to deal with the gang phenomenon, the path we chose was the correct one. Thus, our project, which is based on various principles including partnerships, empowerment of individuals and the community, represents the ultimate road to potential success. More broadly, this project was built upon a social development and community foundation.

As these words were written, the project was entering its fifth year. The details of this adventure are included in a report authored by Hamel, Cousineau, and Vézina (2006) in which an in-depth analysis of the three community pilots is presented[3]. More specifically, the report describes the experience of the project's three local action committees whose members joined their efforts to help their communities and youth through research and the development of action plans aimed at dealing with the gang phenomenon.

The report concludes that the local action committees were able to develop and implement coherent action plans that included promising projects that were well adapted to local needs and sufficiently resourced. From this foundation and their solid communications network, the committees even appear to have established an ongoing base of support for their activities. With time, their networks have grown considerably, absorbing new human and financial resources in support and embellishment of their action plans. The most evident sign of success of the "Project Jeunesse et gangs de rue" lies not only in the continued existence of the three local committees but also in their capacity to extend a helping hand to other communities demonstrating an interest in joining the adventure.

Our observations from the early days of the pilot project continue to be valid. Three criteria are required to ensure success in a prevention strategy based on a community social development approach.

The first criterion involves taking the necessary time and resources to realistically evaluate the size and complex nature of the tasks to be accomplished. At the time we tabled the Youth and Street Gangs Project (Project Jeunesse et gangs de rue) evaluation plan, we had already identified a number of aspects that still require documentation in order to have a clear and precise grasp of the size and complex nature of these tasks. They include: (a) the chronology of events, since it is a matter of time, steps to be accomplished, preparation, and implementation; (b) the dynamics among the stakeholders, which must be correlated with their perceptions of the project's evolution, since it is a matter of consensus building (this involves explaining, promoting, and negotiating one's point of view); and (c) the links existing among the stakeholders at the outset, along with the new links they develop (since it is a matter of combining everyone's skills in order to increase the collective capacity to act). Moreover, it is likely that other aspects will prove to be just as important as the project unfolds.

The second criterion has to do with the importance of analyzing the context in which the project is taking place. In the absence of detailed and appropriate information concerning the context, it would be impossible to disseminate or transfer knowledge of any kind whatsoever. The processes, stakeholders, and research components of the project must all be seen in their context. In concrete terms, no one would truly be able to profit from the analysis of the processes without first being aware of the framework, conditions, and limits within which they are to be achieved.

Finally, the third criterion concerns acknowledging the specific nature of participatory evaluation research, and the fact that the research itself is a part of the process that it is describing and that it claims to evaluate. This position imposes an additional task – that of being a stakeholder and a partner in the project – which must not be neglected if the team wishes to give itself the best chance of meeting its objectives. Consequently, since the researchers are obliged to help prepare the very project that they will be observing, describing, and evaluating, they must be doubly rigorous when it comes to their scientific method. With this in mind, we chose to be proactive in assuming this unique position. Rather than trying to reject or avoid it, we decided to integrate it into the analysis as one of the variables that could influence the processes being studied. Roles within the research team were clearly and precisely defined. For example, it was agreed to exclude certain members from the project implementation processes so that they would be free to carry out their analysis.

If it is too early to reach conclusions on the full impact that the project had on Montréal youth street gangs, we can nevertheless conclude that we were successful in establishing a solid, structured, and efficient network for dealing with the gang phenomenon through the adoption of a common vision and new ways to resolve the problem.

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Endnotes

[1] Conseil de la santé et du bien-être du Québec (Québec Council on Health and Welfare) (2001) stated that: "a social development approach means that solutions must necessarily involve the community in a given territory". However, we prefer the term *community social development*. We believe that this term more clearly and unequivocally refers to the essence of what is common to a given social group. Social development covers a number of concepts, including social prevention, mutual assistance, and community development. The definition that we prefer for community social development is quite similar to that given by the Office de la langue française for community development: "The set of processes by which the inhabitants of a country combine their efforts with those of the various levels of government in order to improve the economic, social and cultural situation of communities, to associate these communities with the life of the nation and to enable them to contribute fully to the progress of the country". These processes presuppose two essential ingredients: that the citizens participate actively in efforts undertaken to improve their quality of life, and that these efforts are left…to their own initiative; technical and other services are provided with a view to encouraging and making the initiative, personal efforts and mutual assistance more effective (de Bosquet, 1965, p. 64).

[2] Known today as the City of Montreal Police Department (SVPM), following the municipal mergers.

[3] A guide for inter-sectorial action aimed at preventing the gang phenomenon (Hamel, Cousineau, & Vézina, avec la participation de Léveillé, 2007) was developed in the report. It represents a plain-language version of the report to help those interested in developing similar interventions. It provides tolls that are adaptable to local situations where similar problems and limited resources can be found.