

# SHARING OUR STORY

Lessons Learned from the inREACH Experience







Scars upon scars, tears upon tears.

Proof of my weakness, Proof of every single fear.

Fear of never being understood, Fear of being alone.

Fear of losing myself, Fear of the unknown.

Making the very same mistake, Time and time again.

But that is the difference, Between me now, And me then.

Now I know it's not worth it. The pain will go away.

Not now, not soon. But things will be okay.

I know I'm strong enough to do this, To make it through the day.

I've been strong enough so far, At least that much I can say.

— Jillian



# INTRODUCTION

In September 2009 the National Crime Prevention Centre (NCPC) contributed nearly \$3.8 million to the Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council to create a street gang prevention project, known as inREACH. The program prevents youth in Waterloo Region (13 to 24 years of age) from joining a gang and/or helps them end their gang involvement.

NCPC funding for the inREACH program ended March 31, 2013.

The inREACH program had a positive impact on local youth by:

- helping them identify and achieve personal goals;
- working collaboratively with them to create meaningful activities in their own neighbourhoods; and
- promoting partnerships among community organizations to work together more effectively.

As a result of the inREACH program, there is a greater understanding about the youth gang issue in Waterloo Region and our community is now better equipped to address these challenges.

This document is a summary of “**inREACH: Final Process and Monitoring Evaluation Report**” (2013) as prepared by Mark Pancer, Karen Hayward and Dianne Heise Bennett. The report was written to explain how the inREACH project was delivered and to provide a picture of how the project helped youth, the project partners, the neighbourhoods and the community-at-large.

If you are interested in reading the full report, “**inREACH: Final Process and Monitoring Evaluation Report**”, it is available online at [www.preventingcrime.ca](http://www.preventingcrime.ca)



**Everyone involved in the project was given the opportunity to provide feedback about their experience with inREACH by completing a survey or participating in an interview, or both.**

**It was a challenge to condense the full 140-page evaluation report into this book of “highlights”.**



# PROGRAM THEORY, DESIGN, IMPLEMENTATION

Gangs can be a serious and challenging problem. Research shows that gang involvement is a complex phenomenon influenced by several factors that place youth at risk for participation in gangs, while other factors serve to protect young people from gang involvement.

## How does inREACH work?

inREACH services are delivered in two ways:

**The Community Treatment Team (CTT)** provides a range of supports all within one location to youth actively involved in, associated with, or thinking about joining a gang. Supports might include individual support, addictions counselling, employment training, or housing assistance.

**The Community Mobilization Team (CMT)** works in four identified neighbourhoods to enhance the opportunities and activities for young people in those communities, and to help make those neighbourhoods more youth-friendly places where young people feel a sense of belonging and security.

The inREACH project used a multi-faceted approach in both its Treatment and Community Mobilization components including:

- Dealing with addiction and drug use
- Helping youth develop coping skills
- Engaging youth in school or employment
- Providing youth with opportunities to make decisions
- Engaging youth in activities which spark their interest

The following table identifies key risk and protective factors surrounding gang involvement:

Risk Factors
Alcohol and/or drug use
Poverty
Disengagement from school
Lack of a sense of belonging or esteem
Protective Factors
Coping & problem-solving skills
Engagement in positive activities
Ability to make decisions about their activities and their future
Connection with a positive adult



# COMMUNITY TREATMENT TEAM

## How does the inREACH Community Treatment Team work?

**Community Treatment Services:** Youth may be referred for treatment by community organizations (e.g., schools, social service agencies), police, probation, family and friends, or may self-refer. Youth meet with one of the treatment team workers to share their story and begin discussing their goals for the future. This allows the treatment team worker and the youth to build a rapport while exploring aspects of the youth's life. Many youth expressed a need for housing, employment, support with school, counselling (for substance use, aggression, familial relationships) as well as basic life skills. Youth who might not benefit from the inREACH program were referred to other community agencies by staff to ensure they received appropriate assistance.

## Who were the youth served?

**40%** were confirmed gang members

**66%** had some involvement with the criminal justice system

**33%** lived somewhere other than with their parents (e.g., on their own, with other family members, in foster care/group home, etc.)

**53%** were addicted to drugs and/or alcohol

**86.5%** of those addictions were considered severe or very severe

**50%** indicated they had money to meet their basic needs only "sometimes", "hardly ever", or "not at all"

Many youth also faced additional difficulties such as learning disabilities, attention difficulties, history of neglect and domestic abuse, absence from school, anger and anxiety issues, and stressed/problematic family relationships.

## Were the services appropriate?

"Oh yeah, for sure! They treated me like family. Anything I needed help with. If I had a situation or anything they would be like 'call us and we will tell you what you could do or if you want to talk we will come and pick you up and go for lunch or something.' It's not just like one of the staff, all the staff was like that."

## Were the services timely?

"First we had to build a relationship... and then they start really looking into how they can help you."

## Were the youth ultimately satisfied with the service?

"The program was very effective; it changes people."

"There is no other program like it; staff were respectful and helpful."

"They listened and cared... they made me feel better about myself."





# COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION TEAM

## How does the inREACH Community Mobilization Team work?

**Community Mobilization Activities:** Youth Outreach Workers (YOWs) spend time connecting with youth in their neighbourhoods with the goal of building rapport and trust. Once this relationship is formed, YOWs collaborate with youth to gather feedback and information about what activities/programs they would like to see in their community and then create them. Any youth who lives in one of the four neighbourhoods in which the project works is welcome to participate in project activities. The project provides a range of activities which vary from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, based on youth interest. Activities include drop-ins, meal preparation, art, and music. Youth need to arrive on time for the planned activity in order to be able to participate; no fee is required.

## Who were the youth served?

The Community Mobilization Team worked with many youth living in four identified neighbourhoods for the purpose of connecting them with activities in their community and to help them face life challenges which might put them at risk of gang involvement.

The programs reached the youth they were intended to support, successfully engaged them in community activities and provided them with additional supports and services as needed. Nearly all of the youth surveyed said they liked the staff; enjoyed spending time with friends and meeting new people; and appreciated the opportunity to try new things.

## Were the services appropriate?

“Young people know what other young people want...”

“We had some say in what was gonna happen with it...it's like hey – what do you guys want to do? What do you want to see in your community, and what are your personal talents or anything that is special to you that you kind of want to show everybody else?”

## Were the services timely?

“I never waited for anything.”

## Were the youth ultimately satisfied with the service?

“The inREACH staff in general is all just a great group of people that always seem to have a smile on their face and always welcoming. ...we just sort of talk and connect .... we can joke around too or get really serious about other things as well.”



# IMPACTS OF THE PROGRAM

## Personal Growth and Skill Development

Everyone involved in the program agreed that there were many positive changes for youth in terms of learning life skills, building self-confidence and self-esteem, and improving their outlook on life. Youth strongly agreed inREACH allowed them to express their ideas and concerns, while helping them to make good decisions, solve problems, and handle challenges.

## Relationships

All youth interviewed spoke very highly of the inREACH program staff and many described how that particular relationship enhanced their participation and learning in the program and in the community.

Youth indicated:

- They benefitted from access to positive role models (staff);
- They experienced a greater connection to their community;
- They improved their relationships with others, especially with their families;
- They were treated well by staff and were provided with access to people for help with various problems;
- They increased their connection to community activities such as sports and volunteering;
- Some youth talked about the challenges of disassociating from their friendship networks and several mentioned learning to differentiate between “real” and other friends.

## Were the youth ultimately satisfied with the service?

“I get to plan stuff for the community and I get to help out...get more involved in what is happening, so you seem like a leader.”

“They taught me to actually think before I acted... just keeping my cool overall and staying relaxed and not being so stressed out.”

“I ended up being successful in finding full time employment... I knew what I had to do and what I had to wear and how I had to act.”

“... they pretty well helped me with my family. I have a better relationship with my Mom and at the time they were helping me in school, getting me into good programs and stuff. Trying to lead me away from the gangs.”



# IMPACTS OF THE PROGRAM

## Opportunities

inREACH gave youth the opportunity to learn new skills and develop their talents. Young people enjoyed a diverse range of opportunities such as:

- Organizing dinners and dances
- Outings in the community
- Volunteering
- Civic engagement
- Creating art and music
- Guest speakers
- Sharing meals with friends and family members
- Attending employment training
- Photo-voice projects

Many youth also indicated they learned more about other programs and things to do in their community, and about where to go for more help if they needed it.

## Future Outlook

Youth were asked an open ended question about how the inREACH program has benefitted them. Their responses included:

- Improved life skills
- Learning new things
- Meeting new people and making new friends
- Access to caring/supportive adults or people they can go to for support/advice
- Staying out of trouble
- Getting more involved in the community
- Helped with their creativity/talents
- Allowed them the opportunity to gain hours of volunteer service

Youth reported that they felt more positive about their future as a result of their experience with the inREACH program. Many youth also felt that the inREACH program helped them make better choices and taught them how to handle day-to-day challenges.

**Over 95% agreed that their involvement with the inREACH program had helped them move in the direction in life they wanted to go.**

“...they make opportunities for kids like me that could never afford to make something of myself but they made something of me.”

“[inREACH staff] said ‘we will try out some of your recipes you’ve learned’ and it’s actually happened. I got a chance to let people actually try my food at a youth centre.”





# IMPACTS OF THE PROGRAM

## Organizations

### Enhanced Collaboration

Interviews with youth, staff, partners and other program stakeholders indicate the inREACH program had an impact on the way community agencies work with one another.

### Greater Awareness of Resources

inREACH enhanced connections among community organizations resulting in greater awareness about the services other agencies provide as well as other resources available in the community. This means youth benefit from more effective referrals when they are in need of assistance.

### Improved Access and More Immediate Services

When community organizations are working together there is improved access to needed and appropriate services that each of the partner organizations could not have provided on their own. The young people served by the project experienced enhanced collaboration in the seamless way that they received the assistance they needed.

## Community Services

The inREACH program had positive impacts on the opinions young people held about others in their community.

The majority of young people also indicated their opinions of adults, police, other youth, businesses and employers in the community also improved.

**Nearly 90% agreed that their participation in inREACH improved their opinion of the opportunities available to them in their communities.**

“I have different places helping me out, not just inREACH but they are all connected and they are all working as a team. Everybody that was helping me just did a really great job.”

“Now that I have been with inREACH I feel like it is okay to give other places a shot because through inREACH I have learned about a whole lot of other different places.”



# IMPACTS OF THE PROGRAM

## Partner Organizations

**One of the key goals of inREACH was to produce systemic change – changes in the way systems and organizations in the community approached the problem of gangs and at-risk youth.**

### **Greater Organizational Awareness**

The presence of the inREACH project produced changes within local agencies and organizations. Partner organizations improved their understanding of each other. One organization, for example, talked about how agency understanding about gangs had increased through their contact with the police, and how police perceptions about ways of dealing with youth had changed, as well, through their involvement with the project.

### **Changed Approach in Working with Young People**

Partner organizations also changed their approach in working with young people, because they recognized a more flexible and youth-centered approach would be more effective in terms of learning what the young people needed and wanted.

### **Use of Social Media**

inREACH made extensive use of social media, including Twitter and Facebook, to connect more effectively with young people and this was an idea taken up by some of the partner organizations as a result of the success experienced.

### **Enhanced Ability to Attract Young People to Programs and Services**

The changes in approach that partner organizations made as a consequence of their involvement with the inREACH program resulted in being able to attract more young people to their services and activities, and being more effective in meeting their needs. This happened particularly in the community centres where the Youth Outreach Workers operated.





## Community

There is broad consensus that the inREACH project had an impact on the community as a whole. Nearly two-thirds of respondents agreed inREACH had increased the community's understanding of the youth gang problem, and that having inREACH has made the region a safer place to be. Half agreed that the gang problem has improved as a result of the inREACH program.

**Nearly 85% of respondents agreed that, as a result of the inREACH program, the community of Waterloo Region was better able to deal with the problem of youth gangs.**

### Changed Perception of Youth

The inREACH program had an impact on the community's perception of young people, particularly "troubled" or "marginalized" youth. inREACH youth planned and hosted a community event that featured artwork and music by the youth. Family members, friends, teachers and community members were invited to attend, and were impressed by the young people's artistic and musical talents, and how articulate they were in making presentations. The visibility of inREACH in the community also served to show community members – even so-called "troubled" youth – could be engaged in a positive way in the community.

### Greater Acceptance of Youth

Parents, as part of a focus group, indicated that they saw a reduction in the presence of drugs in their neighbourhood and there was a greater sense of safety among residents, particularly in the designated neighbourhoods where the Youth Outreach Workers were present as part of the inREACH Community Mobilization Team.

### Greater Safety

Changes were particularly evident in the designated communities in which the Youth Outreach Workers operated as part of the Community Mobilization component of the project. Parents who participated in the parent focus group indicated they saw several changes taking place in their neighbourhoods as a result of inREACH's presence, including a reduction in the presence of drugs, and a greater feeling of safety among neighbourhood residents.

### More Resources

Another positive outcome for communities included the fact inREACH helped bring more resources, improvements and activities to the neighbourhoods. For example, the basketball court at one of the community centres was improved and refurbished as a result of inREACH's advocacy.

### Awareness that Communities Need to Address Gang Issue

A final outcome for communities was an awareness of gangs, and how the marginalization of some young people can pose a risk to communities. Communities need to be aware of this risk and do something about it.



# TEN LESSONS LEARNED

## 1 Invest Time in the Planning Process

A community project such as inREACH needs time to learn what the community needs so that the program can help to build strong relationships with partner organizations and develop the best program possible. Everyone (youth, families, and staff) should be given the time and opportunity to be a part of the planning process.

## 2 Programs Must Be Allowed to Change and Develop

Even with the best planning, based on best practices and solid research, programs have to be allowed to adapt to their local context and the needs and characteristics of those the program is designed to help. Programs must be flexible so they can adapt to the needs of the youth and their environment. Programs should focus on relationships, involve youth in decision-making, have organizations work in partnership, and maintain a strong presence in the community.

## 3 Relationships are Key to Success

The establishment of relationships takes time, and visibility within the community aids in this process. Relationships were clearly critical to project success. Paramount among the relationships built was the relationship between the staff and the youth. Intervention and community mobilization workers should be given the time and flexibility to establish

a presence in the community, and to develop relationships with youth. Without the trust and rapport, youth would not have experienced the successes and benefits they did. Policies to enhance the youth-staff working relationship (e.g., allowing workers to drive youth to appointments) should be implemented whenever it is feasible to do so. The provision of food and the act of preparing meals and eating together also aids tremendously in establishing and strengthening relationships.

## 4 Listen to the Youth and Involve Them in Decision-Making

Listening to the youth was identified as critical. In the planning phase, it is important to ensure there is a broad representation of youth, and the needs and wants of the youth are heard. The message was clear from all staff, partners and youth: **“start where the youth are at”**. Youth should be a part of the planning process for the design of the project. In hiring new staff, careful attention should be paid to their philosophy of working with youth.

## 5 Recognize Youths' Strengths, Skills, Capacities and Interests

This evaluation demonstrated that marginalized youth have considerable strengths, skills and capacities. When given the opportunity, these young people showed a myriad of skills – in public speaking, music, art, sports and other areas. When these skills were allowed to develop, and when youth were asked what their interests and passions were, they experienced many positive





outcomes, including enhanced self-esteem, greater connections to their community, and a desire to work towards a better future. Youth must be given a wide range of opportunities to try new things, develop new skills, and have new experiences. Accomplishments should be celebrated and recognized. Youth must be given the opportunity to develop and demonstrate leadership through planning activities and events, and doing service for their communities.

## **6 Programs Need to be Accessible to Youth**

Many of the youth who are at-risk do not have the money or resources to get involved in education, employment training, recreation and other activities. Even if they want to get involved in such activities, they are often reluctant to do this on their own. Programs and activities need to be free of charge and should be accessible (geographically close). Workers need to go out to where the youth are, rather than expect the youth to come to an office.

## **7 Partnerships and Collaboration Are Important to Project Success**

The collaboration of the partners, and being able to contribute and work with youth in different ways, allowed youth to have access to different services and resources they required and although challenging at times, the collaboration was worth the effort. Frank and open discussion should occur about values, philosophies and approaches to working with marginalized youth. When

you have multiple players at the table those individuals need to be committed to a collaboration, which often means, being flexible and open to new ways of working.

## **8 Evaluation and Monitoring Need to be Appropriate**

Partnership is as important to program evaluation as it is to program development. Project management and staff should be involved in all aspects of any evaluation process set in place and the approach, including measures and methodology to be used, should be negotiated among the researchers and project staff.

## **9 Funders Should Work in Partnership with Stakeholders and Project Personnel**

Partnership is key to the relationship between funders and program personnel. Both parties should be considered equal partners in the funding process. It is also important that funding requirements be negotiated if necessary.

## **10 The Youth Are Worth the Effort**

Everyone reported the inREACH program was worthwhile and necessary, despite some of the challenges they may have faced. Project staff, in particular, supported the resources that were expended for the youth, were well worth the effort.





### **Project Partners**

John Howard Society of  
Waterloo Wellington  
Lutherwood  
ROOF (Reaching Our Outdoor Friends)  
St. Mary's Counselling  
Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council  
Waterloo Regional Police Service  
Waterloo Region District School Board  
Waterloo Catholic District School Board  
House of Friendship  
Kinbridge Community Association  
Mosaic Counselling & Family Services  
Preston Heights Community Group

### **Project Advisory Committee**

Alliance for Children & Youth of Waterloo Region  
Argus Residence for Young People  
Contemporary Art Forum Kitchener & Area  
Crown Attorney's Office  
Family & Children's Services of Waterloo Region  
Interfaith Grand River  
KW Multicultural Centre  
Ministry of Children and Youth Services –  
Youth Justice Services  
National Crime Prevention Centre  
Ray of Hope  
The Working Centre  
YMCA Immigration Settlement Services

The photos used in this publication were taken by inREACH participants as part of a photo voice project. Special thanks to these youth for sharing their talent.



“Tryna change the plan, lookin’ for the right direction,  
Set my sights, higher than the heightz, fightin’ with depression/  
Escaped the gutter solo, I carried all my sorrow,  
They wanna live great but aint lookin’ at tomorrow/  
A bumpy past so I’m feared without a choice,  
I really want better, you can hear it in my voice/  
You gotta leave even if you wanna stay, I know it’s a long road,  
But at least I’m on my way / On my way”

– J.B.



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InREACH Street Gang Prevention

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